

ZAZEN

Ch 30—Tiny Liver Hearts

The day before the war started, Annette accidentally knocked over a metal bookshelf in the basement. She was trying to kick some heavy boxes across the room because she couldn't lift them and one of them got stuck. She got mad and shoved with her foot and the whole shelf came down. I heard the noise from upstairs and ran.

“Annette!” I yelled “Annette!”

When I opened the basement door she was crying. The bookshelf was on its side and medical reference books were everywhere. She was up against the wall in the corner with her arms crossed trying to hold still. As I moved closer, she shivered.

That morning I'd with her to the doctor to look at the Bellyfish. They put us in a dark room and the radiologist coated her belly with clear jelly.

“It helps get better pictures,” she said.

I sat down and looked at the monitor. The picture was gray and pixilated like an old TV.

“Well that's one of their heads,” the radiologist said “They're big babies.”

Annette's face looked blue in the monitor light as she watched the Bellyfish.

“See that Della?” her voice was soft and crackly, “That's her little arm.”

A little starfish arm moving like every direction was forward.

Annette took the bus home and I walked. I looked back at her standing by the bus stop. She's like one of those women on the posters in the Ethiopian Restaurants, the ones the North African tourist bureau puts out, noble and frightening. I could see her throat and fingers wrapped with gold raising her arms and Teff blowing like sand from her clenched fists.

The light changed and I crossed the street, cutting through Redbird Square down to the river. It was Friday and normally it would have been busy but it wasn't. Busses passed half full. Taxis waited in line.

All week they had been showing maps on TV. Newscaster Ken was finally learning how to pronounce the names of smaller nation-states that had long been on the periphery. The stores sold out of water and the city was emptying. I walked to work and counted the vacant houses, all with kitchen lights on, all with the original trim restored.

Mr. Tofu Scramble said when they first took the bars of the windows in Old Honduras there was a big party. They roasted a soy pig and the first 100 through the door got a house. He did anyway. Told me he could live for ten years in Bali off the sale. I told him I hoped he wouldn't have to. He was right about the time to get out, though. It had passed. You could feel it.

When I heard the bookshelf crash, I thought it had finally started. So did Annette. She couldn't stop crying. The impact of the encyclopedias and reference books and that heavy metal shelf, all hitting the cement floor at the same time made the house shake. I thought it was a car bomb going off somewhere nearby. Annette didn't say what she thought it was.

When the shelf went over it hit a hanging lamp that I'd put up to make it seem less like an interrogation chamber down there, mostly because that's where I would be living when the babies came. The lamp was swinging back and forth when I opened the door, which was another reason I thought something else had happened. Annette stared, transfixed. I couldn't get her to look at me.

Later at Sasha's I told him about when I first met her. How she'd scared me because I didn't really know any black people. I only knew how I was supposed to feel about them—Now Della, when you meet a Person Of Color, make sure you look them in the eye and open your palm so they can see that it's only a sugar cube.

"It's like that everywhere in one way or another," Sasha said, "It was the same where I came from. You can live in one valley and think the people the next are a totally different species."

Sasha told me when he was a boy he had a pet rabbit. They moved into a suburb where it was all Ukrainians and the first week he was there some neighborhood boys ripped open its chicken wire cage in the yard and killed it.

"My dad told me it was a dog."

He leaned back against the couch and lit the cigarette he had rolled.

“What did you do when you found out?”

“Nothing,” he said “It’s not really any different, people, dogs, when the thinking is like that. It’s the same isn’t it?”

“How can you sit there, knowing people are like that?”

“They were kids too. I’m sure they’re different now.”

“Yes, but how can you fucking stand to live in this world?”

“I love it with my eyes open. I don’t try to make it okay. It’s not.”

Sasha and I had had sex pretty much the first time we were alone together. Mostly because, given our introduction, it seemed like a stupid line to draw especially on the beach with the Rapture lapping at our feet. I’m sure Grace would have been disappointed. Falling back on cultural norms at the brink of crisis? Oh well. It looked like my lack of commitment to a more subversive sexual orientation was just going to be another way I failed the revolution. I tried to examine it through a critical lens. But I just saw people.

I was at work the next day when the war officially started. There were planes and sirens and traffic jams. It was just after the lunch rush, which was mostly Tempeh Reubens and Carrot-Ginger soup. The new owners were falling all over themselves trying to make friends with the staff, who were working like they’d been pressed. The restaurant was busy because Carrot-Ginger is the only soup we have that isn’t gross and everyone gets real excited about it. One guy calls every day at 11am when the soup goes up to see what it is. When I told him it was Carrot-Ginger he acted like I had found him a kidney match.

The construction on the patio was almost complete. Broken bricks and recycled concrete glued into green resin so that in the rain it would look like river rocks. Chains of colored lanterns dipped across the courtyard and crisscrossed high and off center over where the shed had been.

The siren went off about 3pm and no one knew what to do. There wasn’t a basement. Someone said to get under the tables and stay away from the windows but no one did, not even the person who said it. When the first blast hit, everyone ran. Mitch was standing in the street looking up at

something and pointing. I could see her green eyes staring straight into the sun when the second blast hit. Then I saw her running too.

I ran out the side door and made it into the doorway of a brick building across the street. A bus, trying to veer away from a collapsed wall of an apartment complex, hit a telephone pole and it went down. Sparks shot into the sky as cables snapped and whipped around etching electric meanders in the sky. Some hit water and blue light shot up the poles and across the sidewalks that were wet from an earlier rain.

I crouched in the doorway, pressing myself back into the corner but I could still see the street. There was a large crack as a bolt of white current shot laterally through the air and contacted the metal streetlight on the other end of the block, blowing it to pieces and engulfing a car underneath in lavender flame. Particles oscillated faster and faster as the heat rose and I thought for a second I could see the real shape of things, the radiating blackbodies, incandescent and brilliant, the seamless stream. The Rat Queen shook her fur free of beads and pennies and the Saint with the Black Tears lifted her robe. Thousands of new planets spun out from underneath filling the sky like clouds of fireflies.

Annette says I'm too hard on the world, that I only see one side.

I looked at the smoke and flames but I couldn't find any real hate in me anywhere. Sasha says the world is a violent child none of us will get to see grow up. Reaching inside me, I made the choice.

I decided to love it anyway.