



The adults stood around and made small talk. Like the world wasn't ending. It was still 20 years out, the crash that is, but everything starts with a crumble, more like graham crackers in a chubby child's fist than an outdated hotel on the Vegas strip. No calculated explosives, just statistics, as the global South slowly but surely gets hotter and hotter. But this was the Midwest, in the dead of winter. Us kids? We were bundled up in all our hand-me-down layers and shuffled outside. The sky was that odd color of shutter burst, like a dying star, over-bright and shameless and so close to fizzling out into the haze of absolute night. The sky actually gets true dark where we live. Fucking middle of nowhere. Backyard, fence, prairie -- nothing.

The swing set stood like some godforsaken war monument in the barren scruffy grass, aluminum and wobbly and all ours. It was a rocket ship. It was a killer whale, a phantom tollbooth, and a dragon slayer. All whoosh and sway and rickety careening on the end of a very short metal leash. No one could tell us our world was small; no one could tell us that we didn't know shit. There

were no princesses or princes, just dirt-poor farm kids who dug potatoes with our bare hands and knew *The Tempest* backwards and forwards and inside out.

“O brave new world, that has such people in it!” Shakespeare got it. We were in it. All in. The adults had been there for “fuck around” we were there and living in “find out.” We found out real quick. Dirty sneakers riding air currents as we sailed back and forth. I write this now like I knew all these things then. Maybe I did. Somewhere in the back of my brain and stored up in my body like rows of canned goods in the root cellar. Unscrewing their delicious wisdom and passing the jars around. Spicy beets and thick tomato sauce, reminding us how rich we really are. We don’t want to be kings. That’s what got us into this mess in the first place. Kings and Wall Street and those fuckers in a valley made of squishy plastic and omnipresent algorithms.

We’re hoping to make it through the winter. I guess we’ll find out. Not much to talk about, at least not in the small way. The ride and the whirl look different now, but the reason remains the same. We believed with our whole bodies and minds that our collective imagination could see us through. We still do.

Hop onboard; there’s always room for one more.

---



All sorts of things could be hanging from that crane. A dead body. An anvil, a giant birdcage holding 1,000 raucous crows. But no. It was a generator, just a stupid boring generator. Blue sky and a split level house that included half of a finished basement and two trees in the front yard. The real estate agent had called them mature oaks, and my Uncle almost laughed him out of the room. They were spindly little things, and they certainly weren't oaks. The papery trunks gave up the ghost, birches, river, to be specific. My Uncle was looking for a fresh start and flush with cash from a gulf coast oil rig job trudged back up North and bought a house four down from the

one he grew up in. He wouldn't admit he was sentimental, at least not while sober. My Uncle was very drunk when he raised the generator above the house on a bright afternoon three days following the start of school.

It was my 11th-grade year, and I knew I shouldn't have senioritis, but dammit, I did. He was singing sailor shanties even though he hated the ocean. (Spend enough time on an oil rig, and that seems to be the natural conclusion. The earth hates you for what you're doing. You hate it cause, well, it wants to kill you, and you know it's got every right to feel that kinda way.) An empty fifth of whiskey and a dozen Pabst Blue Ribbon cans scattered to the wind, clattering like the wedding bells my Uncle never heard.

"Uncle Roy, come on down from there; you're gonna hurt someone."

My voice was steady even though my hands shook.

"What are you gonna do when the storms come, and the water gets too close, and we all go drowning in our own stupid mess?"

"Uncle Roy, you live in the midwest. Nobodys gonna be drowning any time soon."

"You don't know that."

"You're right, I don't, but maybe it's best to prepare in other ways."

He finally looked down at me from his perch in the crane's weird little driving booth, his hands on the gears. He was crying. Big burly, 6'7", open-carry, Uncle Roy was silently sobbing.

“I know you miss her, Uncle Roy, but you can’t prepare for everything. Car accidents just happen sometimes. She was even wearing her seatbelt.”

He swallowed hard, with an Adam’s apple bobbing that would have made William Tell downright envious.

“The lights went out that night.”

“I know. The other car spun into a power pole, took out a transformer.”

“I don’t want them to go out again, Catherine Elizabeth.” (Aw hell, he used my full name.)

“I know Uncle Roy, I’m real sorry.”

He took his hands off the gears. I clambered up into the booth and just held those big hands in mine till he could catch his breath. I don’t know who snapped this photo, but I’m glad they did. Uncle Roy has been sober ever since.

---



There's a place in North Hollywood that tries to sell itself as Tokyo. Or at least a garden in Tokyo. The Industry loves it. Evan Rachel Wood and a couple of android samurai with Aaron Paul in toe wander along its bridges and spout things about destiny and what it means to be alive and have free will. Or maybe that's the garden on the other side of The 5 in Pasadena? Honestly, it doesn't matter all that much. If you've ever been to North Hollywood, you will find yourself bemused and maybe, just maybe, humored by the idea. North Hollywood is flat and hot and made up mostly of concrete and off-ramps and dollar movie theaters and housing too close together and strip malls slinging donuts and fried prawns.

My grandmother lives in NoHo, a three-story apartment complex with an underground parking garage and an ill-kept pool in the center courtyard. Sometimes, in whatever the thing SoCal calls autumn, in the dead of night, I would slip into the pool with its slick veil of algae and dive for

leaves using a butterfly net. I never saw a butterfly the entire time I was in Los Angeles. Or fireflies, for that matter. Even in the garden styled after famous sprawling spaces in far-off Japan.

The net captured leaves at the scratchy bottom of the pool, and I would scope them out onto the broken tiles, a languish pile of moldering detritus. The pool tiles were still warm from the heat that had baked them; the unforgiving California sun taking cues from The Industry never seems to take time off. My grandmother asked me to assist her with setting up a dating profile. I couldn't help but think of the pile of leaves, fishing for beauty amidst so much murk. She chose a photo of her in the garden.

"Gran, it's out of focus."

"No, it's not."

"No one can see your face."

"Well, it's not my best quality anyhow."

"Gran, this is silly."

"Do you want to help me or not?"

I didn't really, which is selfish, I know. But having set up at least half a dozen dating profiles for myself, I knew this photo wouldn't cut it. My grandmother stared at the profile after I finished typing pithy sentences about her likes and dislikes, hobbies, and how well-traveled she is. There was a wistful look in her pale blue eyes, green foliage reflecting back in them off of the small digital device in her hand.



“Your grandfather loved that garden.”

He did. And then I knew. The photo was perfect. My pile of leaves was beautiful. My grandmother knows her shit. And Tokyo can exist in North Hollywood.

---



My Father built that building. But he doesn't like to talk about it. He'd huff and say, “That was a long time ago, and I designed it, I didn't build a damn thing. Do I look like someone who wields a hammer?”

His rumpled consternation perplexed me. His freshly pressed denim chore coat and matching trousers gave off a vague air of working-class energy, but his hands were too clean.



I was always enamored with my Father's fingernails, the elegant, clean curve, never a chip or scratch to be found. Sometimes his fingers would be stained with ink or the smudge of charcoal pencil, whatever he used to scribble his latest blueprint or amended sketch. But he never let anyone see.

My Father was intensely private. No witnesses to his sweat, tears or taking a piss. For a long time, I was convinced my Father was a robot. But who builds a Robot Dad? There were giant warrior mechs and Godzilla-like metal reptiles in my comic books and scratchy VHS bootlegs of 80s Japanese anime, but never Robot Dads.

The three-tiered structure with its organized windows and sculptured topiary sat, a semi-colon at the edge of the gentle slope of the hill, like some affable wood and concrete guardian. What it was guarding, I couldn't tell you. It did feel like something my Father would conceive. My Father would claim buildings, but even that, just barely, and he rarely claimed his actual offspring. In his estimation, we were failed projects. My twin sister and I. My Father didn't like twos. He said it was a structurally weak number.

"What, would you have preferred triplets?" I spat in his direction across the table once during his customary afternoon tea. He glanced over his wire rimmed bifocals, arched his terrifying and bushy left eyebrow, and went back to his typewriter. That stupid fucking typewriter. Even to this day, I wish it was mine.

My Mother doesn't even acknowledge my Father's existence. My Mother's hands are rough; my Mother does work. My Father is an architect, my Mother is a builder. My Father designed us to spec. Selected our genetics to be optimized in the womb; he wanted dark eyes, straight hair, and perfect teeth.

He got his wish. My Mother wanted children with backbone and grit. She did the labor, almost 48 hours of it, and we emerged, bloody and crying into a world my Father thought was still far too messy. He puttered and designed, she built and cultivated.

Here, while the waters are rising and the sky's ablaze, I know who will survive. Robot Dads be damned.

---



It's not a quick operation. We all have fourteen years to think about it. The public section of the surgery takes place around the Great Pyre, reeking of metallic ozone and leftover party favors. Some folks consider it a fountain, others an ephemeral tower of sorts, to me it feels like a tunnel,

a twist of intestines turned inside out - gushing sick and sentiment. There's a whole hell of a lot of chanting, tongue-tied nattering, swirls of rough fabric, charged breath and tangled limbs. The private section takes place underground which only seems fitting, in a sterile room carved out of an old mining shaft that was rumored long ago to contain salt pillars the size of Lot's Wife. This room is where our born-insides are born-again--borne-away to be composted, replaced by the fuel that keeps our people from being swallowed absolutely whole by the unrelenting cold.

Once the fuel is embedded inside of us and every hair on our bodies shaved off, our old clothes were stripped away and replaced with heavy rubber slick suits we emerge, dirty, whirling pin pricks of light in the coal black darkness and we do our damn jobs. We keep our people warm. Sometimes this means wrapping up a weather bent and wrinkled elder with gnarly bone chill no normal heat could touch or splitting a vein to ooze, release and rekindle the spent embers of the communal beacon that feeds the domicile cooking stoves and geothermal pumps.

Living with fire inside of you, coursing along arterial highways and backstreet capillaries, pulsing behind your eyeballs, searing the nerves of your hands and feet, you start to go a little mad. It's not unexpected, they give all us Fire Bellies about five good years before we either burn out solo or are traded to another Clave. There's a certain level of madness that's tolerated as long as we keep doing the work, messy, dirty, brutal, boiling work. But mostly we are here for war, as weapons, rallying points or bargaining chips. Whatever physical manifestation, the damn thing functions, and we function like currency.

So when myself, all four gaunt limbs, knobby elbows and heavy brows and the three other Fire Bellies from our Clave were called up to the Tortoise House it wasn't a surprise. We were pissed but we weren't surprised. The trade was a shit deal and we knew it and we knew they knew it and we knew they were doing it on purpose. Pawns amid the irritating, dismal, rock-and-a-hard-place shuffle. Mortal coils and all that. Standing shoulder to shoulder, embers blazing from the inside, our guts eating away all the shadows in the low slung, oblong cement hut, we swallowed hard and tasted sulfur. It figures. Offspring of Soot and Crisis. Really, how many sparks does it take to start a war? But I guess the real question is, how much do we all have to burn to end one?

---