

Zoning Out

It is the third of July, tomorrow will be the day that all red blooded Americans blow stuff up, because we're bastards like that. Actually, my source has dried up, this year I have no high explosive skyrockets, no quarter sticks, none of the weapons that make this most American of holidays enjoyable, actually, if it weren't for the explosions, I wouldn't like it at all. Others at the bonfire are having similar difficulties, the Massachusetts State Police have been cracking down on fireworks this year, which means that one has to buy from their relatives at inflated State Police seizure prices. In other words, all anyone has are packets of firecrackers. Mostly we have been dejectedly tossing them into the bonfire, pretending that we aren't losers incapable of affording a good explosion. Amidst this air of defeat my friend Joe has an idea, he doesn't get them often and they normally die of loneliness, but occasionally he has a flash of genius. This, of course, is not one of those occasions, "Hey, Chinese people have fireworks, don't they?"

I reply cautiously, "Well, I believe they invented them, the firecrackers I have here come from China, if that's any help."

"Exactly, mine too. So, if fireworks come from China, Chinese people must have them," in fairness, Joe is well into his third six pack.

"So, you want that we should start stopping Chinese people and asking them for fireworks? This is suburbia, and lilly white suburbia at that. Not many Asians this side of Lowell." I am hoping this will put an end to his train of thought, unfortunately he has freight trains of thought that can be tough to derail.

"Why not just go to Boston and visit Chinatown? There must be lots of places to buy fireworks there." I can already see where this is going, I live in Boston, so I will be volunteered to go on this fruitless quest, on the other hand, I have been in Chinatown for the Chinese New Year celebration, there are fewer explosions in Beirut, who knows, maybe we'll get lucky. The others agree that Joe should go to Chinatown and buy fireworks, they also agree that I should go with him because I "know Boston". Somehow, in a year's residence, I am a certified expert, I don't bother telling them that all I know about Chinatown are the restaurants that the caucasians eat in, *The Golden Palace* and *The Imperial Teahouse*, the theatre that shows all the good Hong Kong movies, *The Pagoda* and the little hole in the wall store where one gets books, records and videos straight from the far east.

Joe has some black coffee to sober up, at least enough to get far enough down the highway to reach Melrose and the orange line, most of the people on the train with us are getting off at *Downtown Crossing*, headed for surrounding bars, or the Tufts stop to hit the theatre district, we get off in the netherworld of *Essex Street*. Joe is confused by the other passengers, who are staring at us in mild disgust, when we are in the station he asks the question, "What's up with the looks?"

"It's the stop we are getting off on, they probably presume we're heading for the *Pussycat Theater*, *The Naked I Cabaret*, or one of the many dirty bookstores down here."

He looks momentarily afraid, "We're in the fuckin' zone? I thought this was Chinatown?"

"Chinatown is one block away, there really isn't any danger, it's not like this is New York," Joe is eighteen, he isn't supposed to be in Boston's combat zone, and it's making him a little paranoid. When we leave the station, Joe gets his first look at Boston's notorious red light district. The sight isn't pretty, neon lights throw their glare on the cracked sidewalks, while newspapers and beer cans clutter the gutters. Gaudy colors predominate this small strip of street side shops, bars and clubs. A middle aged lady with dirty hair and no shoes staggers over to us, "Hey, kid. You gotta cigarette?"

I reply politely, "Sorry, mam. I don't smoke."

"Fuckin' rednecks. You think I'm drunk, doncha? Buncha fuckin' rednecks"

We walk quickly down Essex Street into Chinatown, bypassing the Combat Zone for the moment, we begin wandering the dark winding side streets that are Chinatown, Joe looks over to me, "I have to piss, all that coffee and beer, we have to find a place quickly." We wander onto Oxford Street and find a glowing sign, completely in oriental characters, "That looks like a café, I think."

Joe looks on dubiously, "How can you tell." but there wasn't any place else open, so we walked in. Approaching the place, we found it was indeed a restaurant, as we entered the din grew suddenly silent, the patrons all stared at us, the only white people in the establishment, Joe turns three shades whiter, I calmly ask the man at the counter, "Bathroom?" He simply stares at us, looking to the back, I can see a dingy hallway, any restroom will be back there, "Head to the back, Joe."

"I don't think..."

"Right, don't start now, walk to the back, you're fine." We walk the length of the place, the right hand side is one long counter, with space at the end for the bar and the back kitchen, the left hand side is taken by thirteen booths, an ill omened number, I decide not to relay the information to Joe, as he is superstitious, which combined with his paranoia, means nothing but trouble. As I follow along behind I am somewhat amused, the other patrons are looking at us the way people watch monkeys in a zoo,

we're a curiosity. On the way out, the patrons have started talking amongst themselves again, obviously the curiosity has worn off, I stop to ask the counter man a question, "I am looking for fireworks, know of anyone selling?" He still won't speak to me, though, so we leave.

When we are back out on the pavement, Joe is somewhat relieved, though still paranoid, "That looked like one of those Chinese mafia hang outs, we were probably the only unarmed people there. What the fuck were you asking him about fireworks for?"

There is no point arguing the matter, "Well, given the clientele, I bet the food was first rate, maybe we should grab a bite? You were the one that thought it a good idea to ask random Chinese people for fireworks" He isn't amused. We browse shop windows, but it's after ten pm, everything is closed, we hear the occasional explosion in the distance, evidence that someone, at least, has fireworks. Near Kneeland street I find a store that sells fireworks, unfortunately it's closed, "Well, had we arrived a few hours ago, we could have bought the fireworks here," as I point to the store.

Joe stares at the storefront, the window covered in Chinese characters and posters featuring attractive Chinese girls and the same unintelligible characters, "How would you know? When did you learn to read Chinese?"

"I haven't, but I have learned to glance at the shelves behind the register, and in this case I see a bunch of firecracker packets, were the store open, I bet we could get even better, presuming they didn't take us for cops and shoot us." We hear another explosion, Joe looks off towards the Zone, "They seem to be coming from the next street over."

"Yes, someone in the Combat Zone has a load of explosives, I am surprised the cops haven't picked him yet."

"Fuckin' pigs would just hog the good stuff themselves," we decide to venture into the zone. As we turn the corner of Washington and Kneeland, I look up the street, smokey light filters out of the bars along the way. Girls dressed in garish colours flit in and out of the doorways. A sign in the doorway of *The Glass Slipper* reads *Be 21 or be gone*. I walk in. The noise is loud, the air smells of tobacco and beer, through the haze naked girls dance bathed in the glow of multicoloured lights. Other girls rub up against the male customers and offer them the privilege of buying drinks for such pretty ladies. The drinks themselves are watered down and overpriced, and the nude girls are supposed to keep the people from noticing the condition of their surroundings. Somebody mentions that some of the dancers deal in drugs and prostitution on the side.

On the sidewalk the dirty bookstores do vigorous business. Nearly all of them have booths where you can watch dirty movies for \$15 a crack. One place, ambiguously named *The First Amendment Bookstore*, advertises a full adult video arcade. Another place has a sign that brazenly advertises *Magazines, books, video tapes, films, rubber and leather goods*. Older men look around nervously before entering. A steady flow of traffic runs down the street. Three girls in a car with Jersey plates look around the Zone and giggle at what they see, an elderly couple drives through without seeing at all. A policeman comes down the sidewalk telling people to keep moving. Professional girls check into the *CB Lounge* and leave five minutes later. "Looks like that's the dispatch station," I nod.

Across the street I can see a man wearing a double breasted white polyester suit coat with pants to match. He has a pink vest with white ruffles. His black felt hat has a pink feather sticking from its leopard skin band. "Must be his conservative night." Joe observes. The man stands in front of a rather sleazy looking greasy spoon that seems to be doing fantastic business. There is a stream of people sweeping in and out of its doors. "Gee they sure must have good food. Look at the number of people in there. I'll bet they have the best hamburgers in the Zone."

"How much you wanna bet they have at least 20 pay phones in there?" I ask.

"Don't forget the saltshakers."

A loud explosion is heard. A cloud of smoke hovers in front of the *Pussycat Lounge*. Joe looks over, "Sounded like another quarter stick. "

"Probably."

The police begin to sweep the people off the sidewalk again, most people patronize the nearest establishment until the police have passed. Hanging out seems to be a big part of the action for the younger crowd. We enter a shop to evade the sweep, if all the dirt were to be swept from this particular shop it would make a great deli, as it is it's just another dirty bookstore. It has a nice looking ceramic tile floor and the walls, from what I could see of them, only needed to be painted something other than yellow to look nice. Inside the shop all the magazines are wrapped in cellophane, no browsing the rule of the night. Magazine shelves dominate the room and the walls above are lined with inflatable rubber people. The shelves in the middle of the room are home to all sorts of perverted playthings. The video booth area is dark and dingy and smells of urine and seminal fluid, far worse than the men's room in North Station. I write a few notes about the place in my little notebook as the counter man looks on and some man pays \$70 for half a dozen magazines.

Back out on the street the overcoat brigade heads for the next showing of the Saturday Night Movie. The film is named *Desert Virgins in Heat*, "Now what the heck is the guy going to do with a bunch of virgins with all that heat?" Joe asks as we glance at the poster.

"You're right, he'd never make it alive. I wonder if anybody reviews these things. Just imagine Siskel and Ebert in overcoats." We leave, if the bookstore was rank with the smell of men, this would be worse. A girl in an expensive looking white dress wearing white nylons and high heeled shoes crosses the street. Somebody from the sidewalk yells, "Hey, honey! How much does it cost?"

"More than you could afford." She flirts in response.

"How much is that? I could use a good hot meal right about now,"

"At least 300. Depends on how much time you want." She goes into a bar called the *Boston Bunnies* and emerges 5 minutes later with her destination in hand.

Watching her hop into a cab I say, "Here's one for you. All the high class girls go into the Bunny bar, while the 15 dollar a trick ones go into the *CB Lounge* to get their assignments."

Joe sardonically observes, "There's a pattern. If we hung around long enough we could figure it out. The girls appear to come back once every 45 minutes to an hour."

On the next block a very drunk man in his early 30's wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap and a Hawaiian shirt wields a baseball bat. He slams the 32 inch Louisville Slugger against the sidewalk for about ten minutes while screaming unintelligible obscenities. The pedestrian traffic beats a 36 inch path around him.

I look over at Joe, "I've got this theory."

"What's that?"

"The theory suggests that violent drunks wielding baseball bats are bad omens from the gods as well as very dangerous."

"No shit." The drunk decided against hanging out and went back to the Pussycat Lounge.

"They're crazy if they let him back in there."

"Don't worry. The bouncer'll knock'im out and toss him in the back alley."

A kid who looked to be in his teens crossed over the street to us and said, "Do either of you guys have a dime?"

"No, but I gotta nickel." His face lit up for a moment and then fell about a foot as I handed him a coin.

"So, whattya guys doin' here?"

"Hanging out."

"Oh. Thanks for the nickel." He walks back across the street toward his friends shaking his head as he goes.

"He meant a dimebag, smart ass."

"I know what he meant. He and his friends over there are looking for dealers. Obviously he suspected us, I feel insulted, he deserved it."

A girl in a fluorescent pink mini dress walks by and crosses the street. She stops in front of the greasy spoon to exchange a few words with our well dressed friend in the hat. Policemen begin marching people along again and one of them stops to exchange pleasantries with polyesterman.

"He sure is popular."

I make the obvious observation, "Probably a civil servant."

Another explosion. Police look up disinterestedly. Some people cheer, some don't even bother to look. Coming down the sidewalk is a middle aged man, he is wearing a dark overcoat and a hat with the brim pulled low. His head is bowed except when he takes time to glance around nervously.

"Excuse me, sir." He glances up nervously. "I'm from The First Church Of Christ Scientist and I was wondering if you'd like some of our pamphlets on the imminent destruction of the human race."

"What the Hell are you talking about?"

“I’m a street missionary for a church founded on the teachings of Freddie Laker and Walter Mondale.”

“I’ll bet you think your little joke is funny, don’t you? When I was your age I would never have done something like that. I don’t know what the Hell they’re teaching you in those schools nowadays.” He leaves in a huff.

The minor bookstores closed down and the even more odious establishments took in the excess. Overcoats leave the Saturday Night Movies and visit bars where the dancers are rumoured to do more than dance. The drunk with the baseball bat returns, only this time his eyes are black, his face is blue, his shirt is open and he is drooling. The 32 inch Louisville Slugger is now only 28 inches long with a jagged end. He slams the pavement for a few minutes and then starts in our direction. “I’m telling you, it’s a bad omen from the gods.”

“As well as extremely dangerous, I know.”

“Excuse me, sir. Would you happen to know the direction to Park Street Station?” I shout to the slugger.

“Ayagommahutyu,” comes the reply. I decide that cowardice is the better part of valour and retreat. The bars and shops finally close down and people flood the street and head for their cars or train stations. Police go about the business of clearing away the pedestrian traffic; the drunk with the bat snuggles up in the gutter and immediately has his toy taken from him by a policeman. Polyester man hops into the back seat of a Lincoln limo containing six girls, one chauffeur and a mini bar and drives off to whatever after hours club that serves as his late night headquarters.

The Saturday night routine was coming to its close and everyone partook of the final ritual of leaving. The younger crowd left slowly with a lot of noise, call girls hopped into fancy cars, and the older men looked about nervously and left quickly. Drunks found a comfortable spot in a gutter or an alley to bed for the night, while the police made sure everything ran smoothly. Since it was time, my friend and I left slowly, but not with a great deal of noise.