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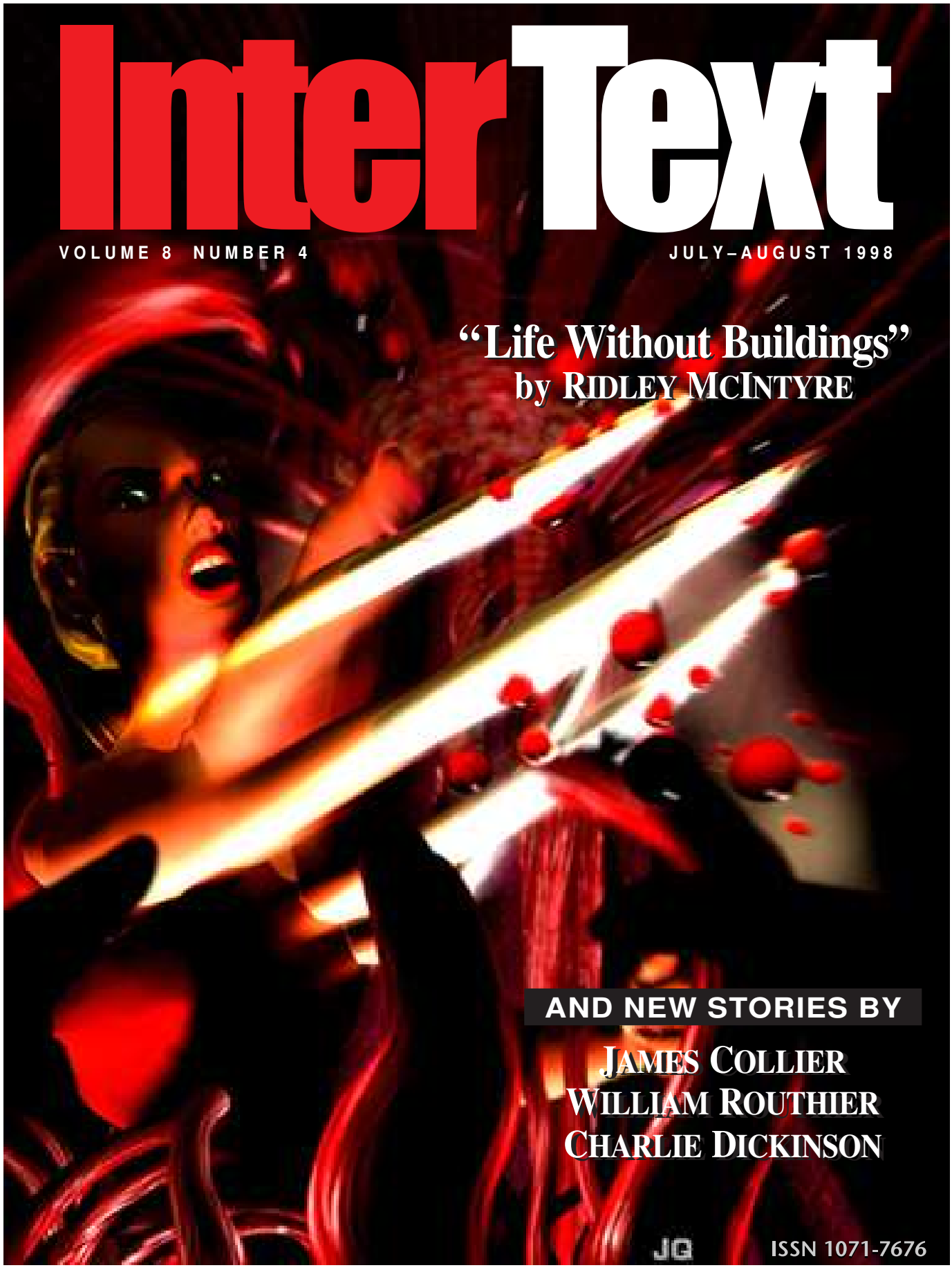

"Life Without Buildings"
by Ridley McIntyre

AND NEW STORIES BY

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William Routhier
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36 Exposures

JAMES COLLIER

Each picture captures a moment of time forever.
But without context, can those images mean anything?

0

I NEVER SAW HER WORK THE BAR BEFORE THAT NIGHT. I was high, drunk, and particularly testy. Some nigger photographer schooled me, showed me what color was all about, and I had to prove I was still a man.

There she was, working the bar, selling the beer, chatting the children. "Who the hell is that?" I asked Juan, a Puerto Rican brother.

"Kim," he says, "And you can forget it, brother. She's out of your league."

"What? I—I wasn't thinking about that," I stammer. Juan laughs. I steel my nerves and go up to the bar.

"Miss Kim," I say after buying a beer, "I'd sure appreciate it if I could take some pictures of you." I show her my book.

She looks at me with them green x-ray eyes. "For a show?" she says.

"For my ego," I say.

She gives me the once-over again. Them eyes, dude, they don't let you hide. She decides I'm harmless, and says "Yeah, man." Some weed, some beer, some Chinese food. Load the film, open up to *f*2.8, and play that funky mind game. But that Miss Kim is a tricky one. She knows all the hocus-pocus tricks—ten times over and more.

1

WHEN I PHOTOGRAPH A WOMAN, IT'S LIKE A SPELL is being cast on me. It's like sex with the eyes as penetration points.

What do I feel? Nervous. Scared at first. There's anticipation. I do a shot of whisky and just shoot. Hands always shake a little. Hard to focus, too.

Then she begins to look at me in a way I like. Yeah. Then I really start looking at her—because before I was only looking at her in glances. I notice the wrinkles, the bruises, the goosebumps. I notice she's breathing funny. Is she turned on too? Can she sense my arousal?

I feel drunk, like we're the only two people in the world. And then the pictures just flow.

3

WHEN I GOT THAT CAMERA IN FRONT OF ME, I'M The Man. Without it, I'm a mess. If it weren't for that camera I wouldn't get laid at all.

I was doing a test with Kim, and about the third roll of film she gets a crazy look in her eyes. And she slowly starts moving closer to me. Suddenly she's kissing me.

She fucked me like I was Picasso or something. And after it was all over I was too afraid to ask—was is it the camera or me?

4

AS I WANDER THE STREETS OF NEW YORK CITY I'm always on the look for subjects. I look for women who are beautiful, yes, but also flawed in some everyday sense. I look for a strength in their eyes. I try to look past the words they speak and imagine who they really are.

And if I see something, I walk up, introduce myself, and see if I can score.

Kim likes to introduce me to her friends as "my photographer." I roll my eyes at that.

6

NEW YORK GIRLS ARE TOUGH, BECAUSE IT SEEMS everybody here is a photographer. But I don't let that stop me from trying to win them over. There ain't nothing like the feeling when you know you got her. When she puts that phone number in your book. When she leaves you that message on your machine: "James, I wanna do pictures!" I can't help but laugh.

9

KIM LIKES TO INTRODUCE ME TO HER FRIENDS AS "my photographer." I roll my eyes at that. But I don't say anything. I must admit I'm sorely tempted to introduce her to someone as, "The model I'm fucking on the side." But I keep my mouth shut. Getting it regular does that to a man.

13

IF THERE IS ONE PERSON I CAN'T DO WITHOUT, IT'S Tracy. He's a makeup artist by day and a drag queen at night. It's strange to say, but he completes me. There are a lot of good makeup artists in New York. And every photographer has to find the one that works for him. From the first time I worked with him, I knew he was mine.

15

TRACY, KIM, AND I WERE HAVING A CELEBRATORY dinner in the Village after a shoot. Par for the course,

Tracy and I are flirting terribly. Kim, getting increasingly annoyed with each double entendre, crankily says: "Why don't you two just fuck already?"

"Kim," I say. "We're just playing, baby…"

"I know about you two," she says coolly.

"Baby, you gonna make yourself sick thinking like that."

"Just fuck him and get it over with."

Tracy is trying hardest to keep from laughing out loud.

"Baby," I say, "I live by a simple rule: I don't fuck nobody with a bigger dick than mine."

Tracy is on the floor. And even Kim has to crack a smile.

19

MARC IS AN OLD PHOTOGRAPHER WHO BLEW HIS shot. He used to be a Name—worked with the best makeup artists, stylists, art directors, photo editors, and models in New York. Now he makes most of his money shooting head shots. And that makes for one bitter man.

I bumped into him on the street in the Flatiron District. As usual, he begins bitching and moaning about how they were out to get him. I nodded and smiled a few minutes, and then looked at my watch.

"Well, pal," I say, "I gotta get going. I've got an appointment."

"Fuck you," Marc says.

"What?" I say.

"All you fuckers are all the same," he mutters. "They're gonna use you up too!"

"I hear you man, but I really gotta go!" I say, running off.

"Ah, fuck you too," Marc yells after me.

Christ, I think. *What an asshole.*

22

ALL KIM CARES ABOUT ARE THE PICTURES.

"Let's do something weird," she'll say. And we do. Once I found a pair of old white skates. Fit her nice. I bought her a sequined tube-top and some boom-boom shorts. We did her makeup slutty, and we took a cab downtown. Shot her squatting in an alley.

Beautiful. Fucking beautiful. That girl's gonna make me famous.

25

I SHOWED MY BOOK TO AN ART DIRECTOR AT A big music magazine. He looked at my work in that art-directorish way—looking at a page for a second, then quickly turning the page, occasionally pausing at an image that struck his fancy.

When he was done, he closed the book slowly, put hands together in front of his face and said: "Your work is very beautiful. But I sense a certain detachment between you and your subject."

"Really?!" I said.

"Yes. We here like to make our subjects accessible to the readers."

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"Well, we like to get people doing everyday things."

"Like?" I said.

"Like someone drinking a big glass of water or eating a hot dog."

"How about pizza? Pizza's pretty accessible," I say.

The art director, sensing I'm being sarcastic, smirks and says simply: "Touché."

Needless to say, I didn't get any work from that guy.

28

A GORGEOUS GIRL, COCAINE SKINNY, GOT ON MY train this morning. She was wearing a funky fur coat, a plaid miniskirt, and knee-high black leather boots. Her hair was wild, her lipstick mussed, and her eyes had bags. And after she sat down, she fell asleep.

I watched her for a bit, my trigger finger getting itchy. She looked so beautiful, despite everything. I wanted to take her picture badly.

But there was my station. And after taking a quick last look, I got off the train and went to work.

30

KIM AND I ARE LAYING IN MY BED LOOKING AT SOME of my photos in a magazine. Kim's jabbering on and on how this is such a great opportunity for us. How the hell did this become us?

36

MY WORK BORES ME. I FEEL LIKE I CAN DO THIS STUFF in my sleep.

When I tell Kim, she shrugs and says "Keep shooting. Something will happen."

I try to take her advice, but I'm going fucking crazy. I can't look at a magazine without a feeling of dread. Every picture I see is like a goddamned knife in my heart. Every picture is so goddamned perfect—how the hell do I compete with that? I shoot for rinky-dink magazines who can't pay me or don't pay me shit. I shoot for art directors who murder my pictures. I shoot people who are absolute nobodies. And I don't love Kim. I never did.

Something's gotta change.

E

I HAVE LEFT A MILLION MESSAGES FROM KIM unanswered.

"James, I got a crazy idea…" *Beep.*

"James, let's have lunch tomorrow." *Beep.*

"Are you there?" *Beep.*

"Come over to my place…" *Beep.*

"James, I need you." *Beep.*

"Are you ignoring me?" *Beep.*

"Pick up the phone, you prick!" *Beep.*

"What's her name, asshole? Look, I know you're there…" *Beep.*

"James, if you didn't want to take pictures of me anymore, you could have just told me." *Beep.*

I know I should call her back. I am seriously considering it, when in walks my first appointment of the day: A dangerous redhead with something I can't put my finger on.

It was beautiful. Fucking beautiful.

JAMES COLLIER

Is a freelance photographer and graphic designer in New York City.

Fun World

WILLIAM ROUTHIER

If magic transforms the world around us, does it matter if it's all an illusion?

TOMMY GOLDIN'S BRIGHT YELLOW PANTS WERE soaked through with drizzling rain. His jeans underneath, glued to his thighs, showed blue-green through the thin yellow. He shivered. Water dropped out of his curly red wig like rain out of a shaken tree. Glancing down the street, Tommy wished for a bus to appear—*Now!* But none did, so he put his hand through the side slit into his jeans pocket and fished out a crumpled twenty, considered the soggy wad on his white gloved palm, then flattened the bill on his polka-dotted chest and carefully rolled it up, pencil size.

He peered through the tiny hole. Nothing but rain.

With the tube upright between thumb and forefinger, he eased a tiny red corner out of it until it blossomed into a large red triangle. A matching white one was tied to its end. Behind that came a blue, a green, a yellow and then a red again.

Tommy undulated the happy garland through the mist like a Chinese dragon, then whip-snapped it once. It disappeared.

He unrolled the twenty, folded it twice and slid it down the side of his big red plastic shoe. There was a trolley stop across the park. The trolleys always ran and the stop had dry cubicles, with benches.

Decisions, decisions.

He flapped past gray trees and cozy invisible squirrels.

Flap. Flap. How many flaps to a trolley stop?

Two hundred and seventy two.

Tommy sat on the bench behind the glass, the gray and the rain outside, still cold, but he wasn't getting wetter.

Jeremy Coombs, the birthday boy, had swung a stuffed raccoon, one of his brand new presents, by the tail all day, following Tommy wherever he went, batting him with it.

"Do more magic!" Jeremy screamed at him.

All the kids laughed when Jeremy hit Tommy with the raccoon.

"Do more magic!" they screamed along with Jeremy.

Tommy only had eighteen tricks. It was usually enough.

"Because you want to be a *clown?"* his father had said when Tommy told him he was dropping out of college. He was a junior at Boston University. A business major.

"Do more magic!" Jeremy screamed at him. Tommy only had eighteen tricks. It was usually enough.

Tommy shrugged at his father and made a quarter float in the air.

"I will not tell people my twenty-one-year-old son wants to be a clown."

Mr. Goldin tromped out of the room.

That was the last time they'd spoken.

Tommy had to agree with his father that there were easier ways to make money than clowning. But if he was careful he could make the twenty last the week. Chicken

legs, hot dogs, a big bag of rice, canned peas and carrots, milk, Cheerios, peanut butter, jelly, bread. All your basic food groups.

Veronica, his roommate, was flexible about the rent, nice enough but sometimes intrusive. It drove her crazy to see him rationing meals the way he did.

"Here, take this," she'd said last night, holding a ten in front of his nose. "Please. Get yourself a decent meal."

"I'll be fine," he said in between crunching bites of his supper, a bowl of dry corn flakes. "I'm doing a party tomorrow. Besides, if I take money when things are tough I'll develop a false sense of security." His tone of voice was quiet but firm.

Veronica said "Whatever," and tromped out of the kitchen.

They were just roommates, weren't sleeping together and didn't intend to. He'd met her his first night as a busboy at the Ninety-Nine restaurant, and at the coffee station she'd confided to him that she needed a roommate, quick. Tommy coincidentally needed a better situation, so the next Friday he checked out of the cheap rooming house where he'd been staying and carried himself and his suitcase over to Veronica's.

He moved in one day before he got fired from the Ninety-Nine for pretending to take out his eyeball, then pushing a pearl onion slowly out from between his lips onto a spoon at a table he was busing. The kids at the table went absolutely bananas but their mother became ill all over her half-finished dinner. He didn't mind being fired—he hadn't planned to stay there long.

That was four months ago. Veronica was still waitressing at the restaurant and reciting an unchanging litany of complaints about it, daily and nightly and in between. Things hadn't been going well at the apartment lately, either. Veronica couldn't understand him wanting to be a clown. Sometimes Tommy couldn't understand it himself. Then he'd juggle for children on the street and it all made sense again. A party like the one today, though, made him wonder.

Still, he had no regrets about becoming a clown. Tommy precociously realized most people couldn't recognize what was valuable until it danced down the street in front of them. That was why he liked magic: it got people's attention. And laughter, because it got to the heart of things. Some people—his father and Veronica—couldn't see how serious he was about fun and wonder.

He took off his rubber nose and breathed easier, wondered why he hadn't before, then swung his head to shake the rain from his wig. The water flew out around him in a circle.

A girl was walking toward the cubicle in the rain without an umbrella, dancing to some music that wasn't there. She wasn't wearing any headphones, as far as he could see. She was dressed all in black except for blue jean cutoffs; black nylons, black paratrooper boots, black leather jacket. Her hair, though, was the same color red as his.

She came up to the door and swung around inside, flopping onto the cold metal bench.

"Whew," she said, pulled her hair straight up, then bent her head forward and drew her hands down along the hair to squeeze the water out. Tommy half-expected it to drip red. She threw her head back and shook it left and right.

"Hey there, clown," she said. Her face was as white as a marble statue's. "When the rain comes, they run and hide their heads. Might as well be dead. I don't mind." She stretched her mouth straight, a red-lipped knife-edge which he guessed was a welcoming smile. "I like the rain. Less regular people."

He assessed her face. It was plain, puffy with the last vestiges of teenage baby fat. The red lipstick and black eyeliner exaggerated her features, but underneath it was the face of any high school girl. Except for the dark circles under her eyes. Tommy managed a smile.

The girl cocked her head, slanting her eyes thin.

"Hey, you better not be some creepo clown—John Wayne Gacy the second or something. I got mace right here." She slapped her leather jacket pocket, but it was flat.

The girl cupped her nose in her hands and sneezed. Her fingers were stubby, the black polish on the short, bitten fingernails nearly all scraped away.

Tommy reached into his pants slit and extracted a black stick with white ends. He held it horizontally between both gloved palms. The girl noticed and worked her eyes slowly out of her hands, staring with a mixture of childlike curiosity and adult wariness.

He thrust his arms forward. The wand flew out into the air between them—and then wasn't there. In its place, a white handkerchief was gently floating down. The girl's mouth dropped open. Her eyes were wide.

Tommy smiled inwardly, knowing the expression well, having put it on children's faces hundreds and hundreds of times.

She caught the handkerchief in her fingers.

He took out his rubber nose, put it back on over his own, curled his hand around the bulb, uncurled his first finger and pointing at her nose, squeezed. A bicycle horn honked.

"Man…" she said, shaking her head. "This is so weird. Glad I'm not high."

She blew her nose loudly into the handkerchief, then folded it and held it out to him. Tommy frantically waved his gloved hands at it, fingers outspread cartoonishly.

"Oh, okay," she said, sticking it into her jacket. "Cool."

The horn honked again.

"Hey, how about you talk now, okay? Sorry what I said there. The world's fucked, you know? You got to be careful."

He looked down at his shoes, then said hesitantly, "The world's full of magic, if you believe in it mostly."

The girl winced. "Oh, man. What, you gonna give me a pamphlet now? Lemme guess—Clowns for Jesus, right?"

"No. I'm not preaching." He shrugged and looked away, then back at her. "I just decided a while ago to focus on things I liked, instead of things I didn't. So I try to find magic and put what isn't to the side and forget it." He shrugged again.

The girl laughed like leaves rustling in a graveyard.

"Yeah well, there's some things you just can't forget. You know?" She squinted at him. "Well, maybe you don't. Hey, what's your name, anyway? Your real one."

"Tommy."

"Mine's Angie." She wiped her hand on her hip and extended it. "Pleasure's bound to be mine."

Tommy's brow furrowed into a question.

"I'm not the easiest person, I mean. I can be a pain."

"Who says?"

She bent forward, elbows denting her black nylon thighs.

"Who says? You know what that sounds like? Kids. Ha! That's funny. *I* says, that's who says. You *are* different."

Tommy shrugged.

"I hereby declare you *not* some creepo clown." She made a cross in the air with the edge of her hand.

"I never was," he said.

"What'd I just say? You like museums?"

"Sure…"

"Come on, then. Best thing t'do in the world on a rainy day."

Angie ran into the rain, dancing to music that wasn't there, and Tommy followed behind, happily flapping.

THE WOMAN IN THE BLUE SUIT JACKET TAKING tickets called the guard over as Angie scowled. The woman was peering at the card Angie'd given her as if it would reveal some hidden truth if she stared at it long enough. The guard—a rotund, balding man—gave the card a cursory glance.

"Looks okay to me," he said.

"Yeah?" the woman said.

"Your museum doesn't discriminate against redheads, does it?"

The guard looked at Angie. The woman looked at the guard.

"So she gets in? The clown too?"

"Well, it's a preferred membership card. You're Angela O'Connell?"

"Yes," she snarled.

"Got an I.D.?" the guard asked.

She sighed and pulled a card out of her pocket. The guard looked at the tiny picture, then at Angie.

"Hair's different," he said.

"Yours too, probably," she said, and yanked both cards as he handed them back, sticking them in her pocket.

"Okay," he said.

The ticket woman moved back from the turnstile, eyeballing them as they walked through.

"Creeps," she said to the guard when they'd passed.

"Creeps," Angie said to Tommy and danced through the foyer, gaining distance. "Follow me," she yelled.

"Where?" he shouted.

Angie ran into the rain, dancing to music that wasn't there, and Tommy followed behind, happily flapping.

Angie angled the corner akimbo and disappeared. Tommy jogged after her, his flaps echoing loudly off the marble walls.

She was standing at the end of each long room as he came in the opposite, then she was gone. He flapped past Dutch Masters, French Impressionists, disappointing Moderns, Asian Buddhas, Roman friezes, miniature pyramids, and Egyptian statues with serene African faces and jackal heads.

At the end of the Egyptian room, the corridor stopped. He looked left and right, then heard faint humming.

There in the sarcophagus room, Angie was leaning over a mummy case, face beatific, nose pressed to the plexiglass. He flapped across the floor and stood beside her. The mummy's desiccated features stared at him, slack-jawed, frozen in a palsied grimace.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Angie said.

Tommy had an uncle named Norman who'd contracted polio as a child a few years before Dr. Salk discovered the vaccine. Norman lived in a wheelchair at home with his mother, Great Aunt Eddis, a cheery woman who courageously fussed over Norman up until his death at the age of forty-six.

At family gatherings when young Tommy said hello, Norman drooled out of the corners of his mouth, twisting his already-twisted hands in an attempt to shake while desperately trying to mouth a few words Tommy could understand. Then Tommy did tricks for his uncle, who followed each movement with his eyes, carefully, at the conclusion clapping spasmodically, making noises like a seal. Great Aunt Eddis always told Tommy Norman loved his tricks more than anything. Tommy would have liked to think so, but could never tell for sure.

In the grayness of the late day in the windowed museum room, looking down at the mummy's sunken face, Tommy could have sworn it was Norman's.

"I had this uncle who died," he said, his face resting beside Angie's on the glass. He saw their reflections, white faces and red halos. "Do you think people are happy when they're dead?"

"Of course," Angie said. "Who wouldn't be? No pain, no world, no people, no El Supremo Scumbags. Just sleep. Forever."

Angie gazed down enraptured.

"His expression isn't real happy, though," Tommy said. "Probably from having to hold it all those centuries."

"Arf, arf, joke," she said.

"I'm a clown sometimes," he said.

They hung over the case gazing at the whiskered husk.

"Borges," Tommy said suddenly, turning his head to hers.

"Huh?"

"Jorge Luis Borges. My favorite author."

"Mine's Bukowski."

"Oh well," Tommy said. Angie looked at him.

"Um… you were talking about Borges?" she said.

"Oh, yeah. In this one story, Borges says that these people on a planet named Tlön believed that when they dreamed, they were actually living another life someplace else."

"That's cool," she said. "I like that."

"Yeah. But what I was thinking was, what if when you die, if death's just like sleep, what if you go on living another life someplace else, a dream life that's real that happens someplace different than here, someplace where what you want is how it is. A place Uncle Norman could shake my hand."

"Uncle Norman?"

"Yeah. This uncle I had who had polio."

"What's polio?"

"This disease they used to have."

"Oh. And if you got it you couldn't shake hands?"

"His were all twisted up."

"Like Jerry's Kids?"

"Yeah, like that."

Angie pointed her finger down at the mummy's face and ran a circle on the glass.

"So you mean someplace like heaven?"

"No, someplace like Earth, only better. Fun World."

"Fun World. Right," she said. "Yeah, well, as long as there aren't any El Supremo Scumbags there, I'll go."

"So what exactly's an El Supremo Scumbag, anyway?"

She glanced over at him laconically, then pushed away and danced across the room to another display case.

"C'mere, see the baby."

The mummy baby was a miniature of the other, in a little wooden coffin. Angie kissed the glass, leaving a red smear.

OUT IN THE RAIN AGAIN TOMMY BEGAN TO SHIVER at once. Angie ran down the sidewalk to the front of the museum and danced around the statue of the American Indian on the horse with his arms outstretched as if begging for an answer. A young man in a Punchinello suit and jester's cap whizzed by on Rollerblades, giving Tommy the peace symbol as he passed. Tommy honked. The drizzle and cold were regluing his jeans to already raw legs. He was wondering what he should do, what she would do, when she planted both feet square in front of him.

"Hey, Tommy the not-some-creepo clown. You like macaroni and cheese?"

He nodded.

"Cool. Then follow me," she said.

Angie danced and Tommy flapped and the rain drizzled down onto the cold gray world.

"THIS IS IT," SHE SAID, POINTING TO THE BRICK facade of an old warehouse. "C'mon around here."

At the corner of the building they went down a narrow littered alley until Angie stopped at a rusty metal door with the numbers 666 painted in black, took out her key ring, and turned the lock. They stepped into a musty basement lit by a single bulb on a cord and walked past a boiler and some bicycles chained to a pipe. She stopped at a padlocked door framed in two-by-fours, keyed the lock, and with its bar in her mouth, pushed the door inward with both hands.

"Mi catha," she slurred. She spit the lock out and Tommy heard it clunk, then she pulled him, pushed the door shut and he was in total darkness. A light switch clicked. Blood shadows enveloped the room. The lamp was on top what he assumed was a kitchen table, a rectangle of plywood resting on four stacks of plastic milk crates. The lamp itself was an art-decoish statue of a woman in a roman toga with her arms held up over her head, hands under the lampshade as if holding the bulb. Tommy guessed the lamp woman was originally all white, but her face had black eyeliner and red lips crudely applied, and the toga dress was magic-marker black. Her white arms were toned red-orange by the bulb, like a moon in eclipse.

The apartment was one large long rectangular room, its walls painted black, with an oval island of gray shag rug sitting in the middle. On one of the long sides against the wall on the floor was a mattress; on the other, a television sat tenuously atop an aluminum stand, its bent

antenna splayed eerily over it. An unlit yellow bulb hung down over the rug on a cord. Above the television, to its left, was a window—four panes on the top, four on the bottom—all painted black except for the top right, which was still clear.

Tommy walked to it, looked out and saw the full moon hanging in a narrow gray slot between high brick walls.

"Make yourself at home," Angie called out, "I'm getting supper. Turn on the TV. It only gets UHF, so no news—just cartoons, the Munsters, Dick Van Dyke, cool stuff like that."

He was sitting on the mattress watching Danny Partridge explain to his mother why he'd sold the tour bus when Angie came in with two plates and plopped them down beside him. In the gray light of the TV screen the food looked like white worms and pennies, until he recognized it—macaroni and cheese with sliced hot dogs.

"I'll get water," she said.

When they finished eating, he put his plate on the floor and watched the Partridge Family sing and sway their way through the closing song, each face beaming cheery good fun.

"I never saw this in black and white before," he said.

"Everything looks cooler black and white, I can almost stand crap like this." Her head bobbed along. "Nice family, huh?"

"I think they should have given the little girl something better to do than just shake a tambourine. I can even believe Danny on bass, but that little girl always ruins it for me."

"Well if Mom Partridge just married an El Supremo Scumbag, he could've thought up something for the little girl to do."

The beaming family kept singing.

"My guess is you want to tell me," Tommy said.

Her finger went across the plate under her knees.

"The El Supremo Scumbag?"

He nodded.

"It's not very nice…"

He shrugged.

"Well what the hell, right?" Angie said, and drew her finger over the plate, then sucked it thoughtfully.

"Okay… well, once upon a time, okay, I was in a happy family too. Mom was good little housewife. Dad was a good Dad. We did everything families do, went to the zoo and the circus…"

Tommy honked.

"…yes, we saw the clowns. I was in Girl Scouts, I did good in school, we had a green yard, we weren't rich but we weren't poor. We were a happy little family. Then, when I got to be about twelve something happened. My dad… changed. Up till then he was just Dad, who loved me more than anything, who bought me toys, gave me Dentyne, said he'd climb the highest mountain and kill the meanest dragon for his one and only little girl, my idol, my best buddy and all that…"

—her lips pulled tight and she looked down and lolled her head side to side—

"…the way I figure it was, the El Supremo Scumbag somehow took the place of my Dad and then waited there behind the mask."

"…crap. So then one day, he decides to peel off his Dad mask. See, all that time there was somebody else hiding behind it, busy getting me ready for what he really wanted, and that somebody was—*ta-da!*—the El Supremo Scumbag of the Universe. But not my Dad, see…"

—she looked up and past the television—

"…the way I figure it was, the El Supremo Scumbag somehow took the place of my Dad and then waited there behind the mask for me to get old enough. What happened to my real Dad, I don't know. But when I got to be twelve, the Scumbag told me he was going to start teaching me something important that everybody had to learn, and it was best he was the one who taught me, since he was my Dad, even though the bastard…"

—her mouth twitched at the corner—

"… wasn't. Anyway, he said over and over it was our secret and not to tell anybody not even Mom, all the crap you've heard before. He taught me pretty slow, I'll say that. Waited for me to bloom to the ripe old age of thirteen-and-a-half before he actually did it to me all the way, so I guess you could say he wasn't a real sicko perv like the ones that do it to babies, just your ordinary Dad perv, even though he wasn't…"

—she sucked in deeply—

"…my Dad. I knew for sure he was fake when he started pretending to be even nicer than my Dad ever…"

—her face was lifeless except for her lips moving—

"…was, so I got this idea I'd pretend, too—pretend I was dead, whenever he did it. I don't know how I thought of that, I just did. Afterwards I'd say to myself, 'Well, you were dead so it doesn't really matter.' Then pretty soon I started acting dead all the time, about everything. For a while there I think I really thought I was dead. I was pretty screwed up…"

—the Partridges were gone from the screen—

"…then when I was around fifteen I told my best friend Cathy Livingston and she freaked. That's when I figured out it was really way wrong. I thought about telling somebody but I didn't think they'd believe me. I had this weird feeling Mom wouldn't, or else she already knew.

Then we had a field trip to the museum from school and I found other people who were dead like me and right away I loved that place, bought a membership with my savings account, started going all the time…"

—a smile threatened the edge of her lips then died—

"…for about a year, then I got thinking, I'm sixteen and a half, what the hell, you know? So I ran away. Found this place nearby, been here a year. I do chores and stuff for Mrs. Spinneli, the old lady who owns the building, I move stuff around for her upstairs. It's all storage rooms. Met her when I was scrounging the alley one day. Wicked lucky. She likes me, for some weird reason. She made me tell her the whole story before she let me move in. Doesn't charge nothin', just chores, even pays me sometimes."

She shrugged and looked at him.

"So now you have mummies," Tommy said, his mouth inverted. A tear fell out his eye, down his white cheek.

"Aww," Angie leaned forward. "Don't cry. Jeez. Here, come on." She wiped his face with the palm of her hand. "Stop, okay. Okay? Please."

He wiped his eyes with her hair. Angie sat back.

"Don't get weird on me, Tommy the not-some-creepo clown." She patted the mattress. "Lay your head. You wanna stay over? You can. I gotta tell you, though, I don't do anything. I mean anything sex-wise. I can't. So don't try, okay? 'Cause it'll just ruin everything. But you can stay. If you want."

"Well, I'd like to take this stuff off first."

"Absolutely," she said, yanked him up and took him to the bathroom.

Back on the mattress, the television off, they lay in near darkness, a long rectangle of moonlight draped over them. Tommy stared upwards. Angie looked at him, her chin on her arm.

"You have a nice face, now that I can see it," she said. She leaned close and put her lips to his ear and whispered, "Even though we're not gonna be having sex, you could give me a baby."

Tommy elbowed himself up. Angie was lying back on the pillow, grinning wickedly.

THE TICKET-TAKER THAT AFTERNOON WAS THE SAME woman who'd first bothered them. This day she wearily waved the now-familiar couple through as Angie brightly flashed her card and Tommy honked his nose. The woman sneered sourly, like always.

It didn't bother Tommy. He was happy today. The last four weeks had been the best, living with Angie in the black apartment, holding each other while they slept, like kids sleeping over.

They loitered in front of the paintings for a while.

"Okay?" she said. Tommy nodded and they went hand in hand to the mummy room.

Angie smiled and made faces at the baby. Tommy stood at her side, arm around her waist.

"Coochie coo," she said, poking the glass. She kissed Tommy on the cheek and danced out of the room. A minute later her head popped into the doorway. Tommy honked a questioning honk. Angie nodded.

From out of his sleeve came a slender propane tube no wider than a hot dog, then a long brass nozzle that he screwed on top. Tommy turned the knob and snapped his fingers. A thin, pointed blue line of flame shot out, yellow at its tip. He moved the yellow point slowly through the casing like a knife carefully through cake. The oval piece finally fell forward onto Tommy's gloved hand and he placed it on the floor, then put the tube away somewhere inside his pants and opened his billowy polka-dot shirt. Gently, he lifted the baby up out of its coffin through the oval hole, lowered it into the child harness strapped on his chest and buttoned the shirt over it.

Angie was standing in the corridor beside a glass case with a model of a pyramid inside, its tiny workers dragging big beige slabs. Tommy took her hand and they strolled proudly through the museum, walking out the turnstiles beaming at the sneering ticket lady.

ANGIE LAY SLEEPING BESIDE HIM ON THE MATTRESS. Tommy lifted a card off the top of the deck. Strange, he was thinking, being there in a room with black walls with her. Strange. Most of the time it didn't seem so, but when it came on him, it came in flashes, like watching a ceiling fan whirr and your eye suddenly catching it mid-spin, stop-action. Not what he'd imagined his adult life was going to be when he was twelve or fifteen. His adult life—that was now.

But strange actually wasn't, if you belonged in it. Strange was all over everybody. Every future came out of a past made of strange.

Pick a card, a future. Change it into another. Pick a past. Make it disappear.

Sleight of hand. Magic. Tommy knew tricks.

He turned around the card in his fingers.

King. Father.

He snapped and it disappeared.

The baby was resting quietly beside the bed in the cradle Tommy'd built out of old boards from the basement, a plain little trough angled wider at the top with its bottom curved so the cradle rocked gently at a touch. Painted on the side was a top hat and a wand with white ends.

FROM OUT IN THE INKED NIGHT MOONLIGHT streamed through the one clear windowpane, laying a milky-water square over Angie's quiet face. Sleeping now. Faraway face.

He looked out the window, thinking of the people of Tlön, wondering whether they knew they were dreaming when they lived in their dreams.

Tommy put his head down into the yard of light beside her and closed his eyes. Then he was asleep and they were in a different place, where no monsters hid behind Dad masks, where the rooms had white walls, where she didn't bury her heart with her pain, where their souls liquefied making love, where their baby's face wasn't brown leather and sunken sockets but rosy pink, its bright eyes watching the magic in wonder. And there was Uncle Norman, clapping with both hands, wide straight smile, shouting *Bravo!* each time Tommy did another trick.

WILLIAM ROUTHIER

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Espresso'd

CHARLIE DICKINSON

The quest for human companionship may be ages old, but in all that time, has it been perfected? Hardly.

NELSE LISTS IN THE LEATHER BUCKET SEAT AND sets aside the commuter mug of his usual, a café latte doppio that steams. He takes a cell phone and punches numbers for Espresso'd, the coffee bar he just left.

What's closer to a ten on the start of a day than this? Top-down weather and across fifteen feet of pedestrian walkway from the parked Alfa, behind the glass sheet fronting Espresso'd, something in the form of woman moves with a hypnotic liquidity that's escaped every sculptor who ever lived. She's brushing crumbs, picking up napkins—all that—from tables and counters inside.

Any other morning, Nelse would have already been cubicle-bound to Cirrus Labs. Today, however, one of the other woman employees called her by name: CaraJo.

The revelation snagged him. Why not? Where there's a technology, there's a way.

Nelse wordlessly thanks the gods for this technological gift that now summons CaraJo away from the window. Not that he didn't enjoy the front and side views of CaraJo at her cleaning chores; he simply also appreciates a mathematical aesthetic as she turns away. Her sacral concavity reverse-curves flawlessly to the muscular convexity of her bum as, with divine motion, she goes for the phone on the back wall.

CaraJo comes on the phone with an incredibly up voice. In profile, hand on hip, leaning on the wall, she says she doesn't know any Nelse and doesn't understand why he'd be watching her.

"I'm over here. The Alfa out front. See me?" Nelse straightens up in the bucket seat, certain that taller must be better with CaraJo.

What's closer to a ten on the start of a day than this? Something in the form of woman moves with a hypnotic liquidity.

She swivels her shoulders against the wall and looks right at him, squinting. A bit of a pause. Nelse decides her cheekbones are up there with Lauren Hutton. Finally, she asks, "What's with the sunglasses?" She takes forefinger away from chin. "Are you some albino with red eyes?"

Nelse pulls off the Serengetis. "That better?" CaraJo smiles nonstop and a novel warm glow surprises Nelse, thrills his back.

CaraJo tilts her head up, the cheekbones wondrous in sharper relief, and says she doesn't know that she likes

this, talking on the phone to someone who's watching her. She thinks it's kind of voyeuristic. Nelse loves the up voice, its athletic breathiness. He's got an easy guess on what it might predict for her overall physical appetites.

"I have to talk with you," he says. "Tell me, can you stand another friend in your life?" She plays with errant blonde hair wisping into her eyes. Nelse beams.

A long pause. CaraJo's eyes level at his, then she gazes away. *Sotto voce* (Nelse is sure this woman is a seductress par excellence), she asks how she would know him from an artist's sketch on *America's Most Wanted.* She toes one shoe on the floor.

"You're getting the wrong idea," Nelse says, head forward with the cell phone. "I'm an okay guy. Stop by every morning for a skinny latte before work. I'm a computer programmer and I'm lonely. Have mercy, CaraJo."

How did he get her name, she fires back, suggesting she's not easy and might be as quick as a fighter pilot in blasting guys out of the sky.

"You looked like a CaraJo." Nelse swings the Serengetis by an open stem.

Another pause. CaraJo smooths blonde locks with her free hand and says in rushed words that she'd like to talk more, but it's busy and she needs to get to work.

"Same here," he says. "Be by tomorrow." CaraJo hangs up.

NEXT MORNING, EARLY, NELSE IS BACK. IT'S BEFORE 6:30 and the lights in Espresso'd aren't even on; the place is not open for business, a fact that doesn't faze him. He shifts on the firm bolster of the bucket seat, catching glimpses of CaraJo's blondeness. Gracefully, she darts about, readying things behind the dusky store glass in silence. He could be watching a bright tropical fish circumnavigate an aquarium. On his side of the glass, a handful of coffee addicts artfully ignore each other while keeping their places by the locked door. Nelse can wait on the coffee.

He cradles the cell phone in his left hand, speed-dialing the number he'd just programmed. A quick chat with CaraJo. Who knows? Maybe an advance order.

The impressively slim cell phone stutters out beeps and Nelse yields to maxed-out anticipation: *She's gotta move, pick up the phone on the back wall.*

A female voice, synthesized, comes online: "I'm sorry. The number you reached is not accepting calls from—" A ripe pause and then, "5-5-5-0-9-3-1," which Nelse, shocked, must accept as his number. The other side of the glass, CaraJo floats about her chores, does not miss a beat.

"Please hang up your receiver and feel free to contact our offices during normal business hours for more information. Thank you."

Geez, Louise. Why'd she block my number? He folds the cell phone in two clicks and belt-clips it. She moves now in a fluorescent-lit interior.

Minutes dissolve as he gathers clues. Does she start the shift pulling *barista* duty or working the till? The register's his bet as she—he takes a deep breath—comes to the front door and gives the lock a determined twist. No complete laggard for caffeine shots, he's out of the Alfa, his Pier 1 bag in hand.

Soon enough he's at the register, sliding a skinny latte doppio on the counter. Hands over a five-dollar bill, drops the change—two dollars, some coins—in the tip jar.

"Got something, gonna make your life a lot easier."

"Okay," she replies with forbearance, skepticism.

"You clean up tables—use this. One, two swipes, all it takes." A natural sponge, he explains, from the waters off Madagascar. "Forget those cheesy sponges they make you use here."

"Anything else?" Poised and undeflected, CaraJo glances at the customer to Nelse's right.

"Yeah, when do we get together?"

"Why?"

"Our talk, you know, yesterday. Give it any more thought?"

"Listen, this is work, I'll talk to you in a min." Her fingers dance at the register, ready to rack up the next sale.

Nelse sits down, sips. He has to tell her he wants to bring his camera, photograph her, get that glamour on film. She didn't say no. He feels good, optimistic.

He's right. A few minutes later, CaraJo hurriedly sits beside him saying, "Gotta tell you, first time out with a guy, I only do lunch."

This is no auditory hallucination. These are *true* words. At this moment, he wouldn't think of leaving the table for anyone less than say, Elle MacPherson. "Just a short, quick lunch for me, huh?" He wants to act like his pride is wounded, but he fails. He chuckles at how everything has worked out just as he planned.

"Don't laugh. You're lucky. I used to keep it to coffee breaks, but that, that was too much like work."

This latter admission Nelse takes as proof of her irrepressible humor. And with her looks, what more could he want in a woman? He remembers the camera, the quest to photograph her perfection. "Yeah, a coffee break should be a coffee break. Say, I'll bring my camera, document it all, this lunch will live in my memory forever—"

CaraJo is out of the chair, her eyes agitated at new customers coming in. "Take pictures, do whatever. Remember, I can only fit lunch in my schedule."

Like that, she's back working the till, and Nelse, with no small contentment, turns his coffee cup in small increments and mentally flashes on a scene.

He's drinking in CaraJo's beauty, the two of them outdoors at a round, enamelled metal table, which sprouts a sun umbrella, the Espresso'd logo writ large in white on each of its six dark-olive canvas panels. Both are savoring the delicacies he brought: warm baguette and Brie and salmon paté and caviar—lots of choices—and finishing with in-season strawberry shortcake washed down with Espresso'd coffee, the latter, natch, to claim the table. And Evian water—it would all fit in the wicker basket, china and silverware too.

He gets up, walks over to CaraJo. "Tomorrow," he says.

"Sure, make it one-ish, after the noon-hour rush," she says with a hint of… is it enthusiasm?

His thumb and forefinger meet in the rabbit-eared "O" of an okay sign and he is outbound, commuter mug of skinny latte in hand, sure he's a Nick for the Nineties who's finally found his Nora.

NEXT DAY, HE'S AT ESPRESSO'D, PROMPT AS AN electric bill. CaraJo assures him they're on for lunch. She's got the edge of excitement in her voice and Nelse feels at that moment he's the luckiest guy ever born.

Hours later, he's back in the passion-stirring aromas of the store and not seeing CaraJo, he inquires of another woman who cleans tables, an angular woman with a crew cut he finds attractive for some reason lost on him: "CaraJo around?"

"Sure, wait a minute. Oh, there she is—"

CaraJo emerges, really emerges, looking for all the world like a caterpillar seconds post-cocoon. She's got on a billowy, orange-white striped clown suit that's hiding—somehow—the irresistible bod that was CaraJo. Nelse gapes in disbelief.

"Recognize me?" she says, smiling with these outsized red lips on a white face with a red rubber ball of a nose stuck in the middle of it. Nelse is all the more stunned that this oddest person in the room is actually speaking to him. He wants to leave right now, chalk it up as a bad dream, come back tomorrow. Did he have the wrong day?

And worst of all, she asks this in a loud voice, chewing gum the whole time. Nelse stands there like the lamest of lame dates, holding a picnic basket—from which they're sharing lunch? He might as well break bread with a yak for all the companionship potential he sees here.

"Yeah, your nose gave you away," he says, trying to act nonchalant about CaraJo's shocking sartorial feat.

"It's Friday afternoon. I take off early for my public service project at St. John's. Visit kids in the cancer ward. They're in love with me." She says this, jaws flapping away with a real wad of gum. Nelse would bet anything she's lying about the kids with cancer, but would she go and rent a costume just to make him out as a fool? He doesn't really know.

"That's commendable," he says. "Just commendable."

"I try."

He suggests they sit outside at one of the umbrellaed tables. He wants to see CaraJo the way she used to be. He decides if he's going to take pictures, she'd look better without that ridiculous red nose on her face. "Wanna do me a favor?" he asks.

"What's that?"

"Give that nose a rest while we eat. I wanna see the real you, not some bank-robber disguise—"

"Forget it. If this is good enough for my kids, it's good enough for you."

"Recognize me?" she says, smiling with these outsized red lips on a white face with a red rubber ball of a nose stuck in the middle.

The next few minutes at the table are awkward. He has to open the wicker picnic basket that now seems a bit out of place with CaraJo the Clown, who looks more like she wants to eat something from McDonald's, not the herbed pasta salad that he's putting out on faux china plates.

"You went to *so* much trouble," CaraJo says, following with a run of fast chews on her wad of gum like she's about to pull its salivaed pinkness from her mouth and stick it on the plate, which she does. He's almost lost his appetite as he opens and hands her an Evian, an inverted plastic cup hanging on the bottle neck.

Then his PalmPilot starts beeping in his shirt pocket, which he extracts to read, *Ask CaraJo if she wants to go to Art Museum Sunday afternoon,* a reminder he could do without if she's taken to wearing this sexless habit of parachute clothes.

It's really that red bulbous nose that destroys all the beauty he saw in CaraJo. It mocks his attraction to her. He must focus on getting food on the table. She slivers off some of the resilient Brie, attaching it to a cracker. "You did too much. I feel like I'm in *Masterpiece Theatre*, china plates and all."

Nelse wants to say, "Why did I bother?" and instead keeps mum, slathering the pinkish salmon pate—which CaraJo ignores—on a baguette slice, then bites, chews, and swallows with a new dryness in his throat.

Again, Nelse remembers the camera he stuffed in the wicker basket. "Hey, I wanna take your picture." He does a quick checkout of his point-and-shoot.

"Sure. Me eating or not?"

"Doesn't matter," he says, framing CaraJo in the viewfinder, unable to ignore the something in the picture that's really wrong. "Now, one thing, the nose—" His free hand motions, withdrawing a cupped-finger mask from his face, emphatically swiveling his wrist down, and planting his phantom nose flat on the table.

"Try living with it." Her smirk is nearly lost in all the makeup.

"No, I gotta recognize you as you." It's bad enough that she has white smeared all over her face, black matting out those delicate eyebrows, and red burlesquing what he remembered as sexy lips. That plumber's helper of a nose has got to go.

"Sorry. You're gonna have to remember me this way. Take your silly picture."

Nelse's arms feel heavy as if he can't bear holding the camera anymore, can't push the button and take the first picture. Besides, any shot he'd take would only be a prickly reminder that CaraJo was making a joke of his desire for her. She'd be forever ready to leave and tell her fellow workers every last detail of how he reacted when she took out that wad of gum and stuck it to the plate he'd so carefully handed her. For her it's a game where she can break the rules and beat him every time only because he follows the rules like religion.

His PalmPilot starts beeping again. He can't take it out—he's holding the camera and his arms are still sluggish. It keeps beeping. *Okay, it'll quit in a minute, anyway.*

"Can't you shut that off? It drives me ca*ray*zy," she says, laughing.

"Doesn't bother me," he says without apology.

"Here, you need help—" CaraJo reaches toward him, toward his pocket and the electronic marvel that he mail-ordered for $399, no tax to Oregon buyers. *She touches it, she'll drop it, drop it on the ground.*

Then suddenly, his arms alive, the camera on the table, his hand at her face, a deeply satisfying wrench, and the rubber bulb, separate from her nose, bounces on the cement.

Her face is nothing but a shock of disbelief and a naked nose lost in makeup.

He picks up his camera because the CaraJo he dreamt about the last few days is recognizable, sorta. He needs these pictures.

Her face is no-mercies-offered, no-prisoners-taken resolve. She picks up her cup of coffee and flings liquid content, a fact he sees coming through the viewfinder.

The camera lens goes watery, his face stings from the burning liquid, and for humiliation in good measure, he doesn't get off a shot. His white shirt is now splotchy brown, reeks of coffee, and is wet.

CaraJo stands abruptly in her clown suit—before he can even say an angry word—knocks the plastic chair over, wads her napkin, throws it violently at the table, and walks away, leaving no more target than her billowy, striped back slipping inside the glass door for him to hurl an epithet. It's no use. She's inside Espresso'd so quickly, she wouldn't hear him anyway. Wouldn't hear him utter the word "bitch" that stays frozen in his throat.

HE STANDS THERE, CAMERA IN HAND, WIPING HIS face dry with his shirt sleeve that's also wet, not sure what to think; there is so much to think about. Like the fishy aftertaste in his mouth. He drinks what's left of the Evian water in his glass that amazingly was not spilled in the commotion.

He's not sure what to do next. He gives the table one drill of a stare. The circular metal tabletop is a big wasteland of defeat and there is no way he's going to bother with CaraJo anymore. He only wanted a few pictures. Apparently, that was enough to send her over the edge.

Can he help it if she's not comfortable with her looks? Great exterior, but inside… nutso. Away from the table, on the sidewalk, lies the silly rubber nose. He would laugh, except he's afraid tears lurk in his eyes. And there is the question of this mess.

He picks up the plate she'd been using, to put it away in the wicker basket and sees her inside sponging off a table, not using the large sponge he gave her. Which is fine. She can do it the hard way and learn.

She studiously avoids looking his way, giving the table a vigorous rubbing. Of course, she'll have to clean off the sidewalk tables soon. That's routine. Even clean off this table. It's not good for business to let messes like this sit around.

He doesn't put the plate in the wicker basket, just feels its heft. He straightens up, stands a bit taller; his shoulders shift back. He takes a relaxed breath and—intuitive click—knows how to make the best of a bad situation.

Most everything on the table is just food to be thrown away. And the wicker basket, the two plates that look like china but are not, the flatware, the linen napkins—all less than forty dollars at Pier 1. He decides to consider it an expense, an expense he'd spend anyway on his next date with CaraJo, which will never happen now. Why not be rid of it? With its baggage of nutso CaraJo reminders, it's all unclean. Yeah.

He rattles car keys in his pocket.

He walks away from the table, clutching his camera, leaving the mess for babe CaraJo to pick up.

He thinks to sit in his Alfa and, with patient satisfaction, wait for her to clean up the table. Then take a picture of the babe in her clown suit.

She, with her piddling sponge, first having to fill half a trash can with the table leavings. Then perhaps retrieving and reattaching that silly rubber ball.

He, from a safe distance, would snap off shots without comment, circling and kneeling to shoot her from all angles. And the darkroom joy of selecting the best picture. Maybe he'd blow it up and give it a caption: First Date Aftermath.

He fires up the Alfa, deciding against that idea. He's no sadist. Besides, he doesn't have time for waiting games.

He pauses at parking lot's edge, scans with readiness the oncoming traffic for the merge possibilities, and feels oddly giddy at how well he quit his Espresso'd habit.

He makes his move into traffic, the car picks up speed smartly, and the rush of strong Italian horses eases him against the leather bucket seat. He has only one question on his mind as he drives back to his place to get a clean, dry shirt: Where is he going for coffee tomorrow?

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Life Without Buildings

RIDLEY MCINTYRE

Sometimes the only right step to take is the one that's the most drastic.

THE CITY OF SHAIM WATCHED ITSELF BLAZING IN the night sky. Clouds of ice particles hung in the air above a suspensor shield, acting like a mirror to its inhabitants; a sky filled with fire and blue neon stars. A city at war.

A lofty old man approached the Café Infiné wearing a longcoat buttoned up to the collar and a tank crewman's suit underneath, padded for the rigors of high-speed chases. His head looked like a pinball set atop a tower block. Slicked back black hair and a toothless grin; a gangster's red tattoo ran over the pits of his eyes and the bridge of his nose. His shadow ran far across the street against the flickering orange glow of a burning brazier.

He sat down at a heavy plastic table and called for iced coffee with a thick milky sound in his voice.

"Do you see me?" he asked. The question was a kind of secret password among the Rebels.

The standard reply came in the form of a soft voice. "I see you."

A young woman with blonde hair tied back with blue cord slid into a chair next to him and placed a sheet of acetate on the table. It was creamy colored and inscribed with a blossom of dark calligraphy. "My name is DeVaughn," she told him. "My friend has given me this to show you. I come here unarmed. I'm here for your poetry."

The Poet with the gangster's red tattoo made a slow nod of his tiny head. He read the work on the acetate without a smile and nodded once more.

"He has never known a life without towers. Nature has a power of its own. Grass is more than a waving ghost in a holovision projection field."

A thickly-furred canhali brought the iced coffee, poured it from a chitinous biologic slushing machine that looked like a centipede with a spout for a mouth. "Anything for your guest, Poet?" the canhali growled and left when the girl shook her head without setting eyes on the creature.

"Your friend tells a beautiful story, DeVaughn," the Poet said at last. That voice like a million creams layered over each other into one smooth syrupy flow.

DeVaughn felt blood rush to her face. "He'd be proud to hear you say so."

The old Poet raised the coffee bottle to his lips and sipped quietly, his brown, liver-spotted fingers quivering as he drank. The bottle made a rattling sound as he put it down. Then he asked her: "Where was your friend born?"

"Rain," she replied. A world so far away from here, yet it was the heart of industry in all known space. The Rain City Corporation was a spider in the stars, its web holding the Confederation of Worlds together. This Confederation was the cause of Shaim's war. The people didn't need the CW, but the CW couldn't survive without Shaim's minerals. Minerals that kept worlds like Rain in profit.

The Poet spoke. "He has never known a life without towers. Nature has a power of its own. Grass is more than a waving ghost in a holovision projection field." He moved his head to look at the awnings of the Café's roof. "It is his duty to see real nature, and to make others see the truth of it. The duty of a true poet."

He kept the writings and etched a rhyme of his own onto the plastic table with a thick-handled knife.

DeVaughn watched him scratch it out and felt the pressure of her own claws under her knuckles, muscles tightening to force them through the slits of skin in her palm then relaxing to let them withdraw. She had a long journey home across the city, across the Blood Line, and she knew she'd need to use those claws before she could get any sleep tonight.

When he finished, the etching read:

BEYOND MY LIFE THE TEARS WILL FLOOD
WASHED AWAY IN A RIVER OF BLOOD

KEVADEC GAZED INTO THE MIRROR AND SMILED HIS yellow-teeth smile. His shock of white hair was growing longer at the back and a soft beard was growing on his pale white face.

"I need some more whisker gel, DeVaughn," he called back into the room.

DeVaughn simply replied, "I noticed."

He turned his head to look at her and saw how tired she looked in the haze of the morning, curled up in a large plastic canhali armchair with her knees brought up to her chin. She looked young and girlish in the gray light. "How did it go with the Poet? Did we get what we wanted?"

She shrugged and nestled herself deeper into the contours of the chair, taking pleasure in its closeness, its claustrophobic confinement. "He said your work was beautiful. And he said you had to confront nature, or something."

Kevadec laughed to himself. "I knew he'd recognize me, the mad old fool. He thinks I should destroy the city. As if it will end the war." His skin had lost color like the light through the old window. His city eyes staring through the far wall.

"What about you?" she asked, breaking the silence. "What do you think?"

"As long as there are Rebels and Confederates and thieves like us? This war will go on for-fucking-ever." A mosquito landed on his thick neck. He turned to the mirror and watched it bite and bleed him before pulling the insect off and squashing the thing between two thick fingers.

"Maybe the Poet is right," he whispered. "I have to open my eyes and find true nature. See life as it really is. This city blinds me."

He gazed out through the plastic window. The city truly did blind him. There were flowering tulip towers as far as the horizon and its reflection blotted out the sky. Everywhere there was city. He knew there were hills far out to the west, but the towers blocked them out. Shaim was everything. There had to be a way to open this dying city, let the fighters see what real beauty was.

"Do you see me, city? I see you."

He shook his head. Thinking like the Poet now. Show us beauty and we'll down our weapons. There was nothing Kevadec could possibly do to stop this war. It had raged for a decade and showed no signs of petering out. He could never stop it. But there were ways of upsetting the balance.

He molded the thought for a few seconds in his mind. It took on the shape of sabotage.

He looked back at DeVaughn, her eyes now closed in sleep. The journey to Café Infiné halfway across the city had stretched her spirit to the edge. He smiled his yellow-teeth smile. With what he had in his mind, she was going to need all the sleep she could get.

The war might go on forever, he thought. But it wouldn't be dull if he could help it.

POLITO'S WAREHOUSE WAS A LIBRARY BEFORE THE rebellion started. It housed a hundred thousand data cubes covering every possible topic of conversation. Daisen, the conglomerate with the monopoly on all the Confederation's extraterrestrial communications managed to save most of the data before the looters arrived. Now, the main building was no more than a scorched husk of concrete, and Polito lived in the cellars with her stacks of merchandise waiting to be moved.

"So what do you need for the job? Like, *exactly."* Polito was preparing the order on her black, fist-sized computer. Rocking back and forth on the legs of her chair, she reminded Kevadec of a delicate bird: so tiny and yet so damned resourceful. She ran nearly the whole of Shaim's black market on both sides of the Blood Line that divided the two factions.

Kevadec ran through the plan in his head and thought of what he would need.

"Two heavy barker guns. Four neural scramblers. A surgeon, and an electric computer to program it. And we'll need plans of some sort. Something with the neural pathways and the power connections. Preferably one fluid and one static contact map."

She nodded in approval as she tapped them in. "The subtle route," she observed with a thin-lipped, wry smile.

"Subtlety's always the best way."

Somewhere in the streets above, a firefight had broken out. The stutter of plasma guns and the unsteady clunking of running panzers across debris-ridden streets filled the empty silence of a cellar crammed with steel boxes.

There was a brief pause before the hand computer displayed the availability of the items he wanted. "The plans are a little hard to come by. The closest thing I can get hold of now is a map of the interior, but that's a common access file. I'll get someone to fuse the information for the fluid contact transmission now, but it'll probably take two days. The other stuff I'll have for you by dawn tomorrow. I'll contact you when the plans are through. Okay?"

She straightened out her stick legs and stood to meet him. Kevadec shook her tiny hand. "Thanks a lot. Oh, and I need some more whisker gel, too."

Polito frowned at the man and slipped the computer back into the pocket of her plastic armor-lined coat. She ignored his last request. "For what it's worth, Daisen and the Confederates are bosom buddies here. You're insane if you go up against them."

He stepped up close to her; his wide gray eyes matching her gaze, his warm breath wet against her porcelain skin.

"Maybe I am," he said. And above them a close explosion shook the cellar walls.

"YOU WANT US TO DO *WHAT?"* DEVAUGHN LAUGHED incredulously. Then she repeated the question again, punching every word slowly. *"You* want *us* to do *what?"*

Kevadec rubbed his tired eyes with a huge hand. "All I'm asking you to do is to help me get into the building. After that, I'll do all the work."

She shook her head, still with that witless smile on her face. "You're insane. Take out a Daisen computer? What with, an antimatter bomb? We'll get caught and we'll be killed. Publicly." Sitting in the canhali armchair, he could see her raising her back to defend herself.

He said simply: "That's the plan, but we won't get caught. It's going to be subtle. Elegant."

DeVaughn leapt out of the chair and left the room, tying her blonde hair back with the blue cord and striding lithely into the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" Kevadec called after her.

Her voice came through the door frame. "Cleaning."

He smiled. In the few years he had known her he had learned only three things about DeVaughn's personality. One of them was that whenever she became too frustrated, she had to clean something. He moved over to the door frame and leaned in.

She looked up at him, a rag clutched tight in her white-knuckle hand. "So how will this 'subtle plan' work?"

The more he talked about it, the more she wondered if going insane wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"The Shaim Daisen Building holds the main communications computer for the whole planet. We cross the connections in the computer and the communications net will go haywire. All I'm doing is giving the Rebels a chance. Polito's agreed to provide a diversion. I've got all the equipment we need to get inside. We're two of the best thieves in Shaim. What are the odds we'll get caught? It's just like a normal break-in."

Kevadec casually told her the whole theory from start to finish, and, as she cleaned the kitchen, she listened to his every word. The more he talked about it, the more she wondered if going insane wasn't such a bad idea after all.

THE CITY BURNED ACROSS THE BLACK SKY. SHADOWS like empty pockets in the reflection.

DeVaughn and Kevadec scaled the walls of the Shaim Daisen Building; Kevadec with a set of strap-on climbing claws, DeVaughn with her implants, which included talons that extended through the balls of her feet. She was lithe like a cat up a tree, the claws digging hard into the rock of the tower.

Kevadec was struggling to keep up with her. The soft plastic of the climbing claws burned his wrists and he thought for a moment that gravity might drag him from the wall, leaving his hands and feet behind, stuck to the plascrete by five tungsten steel spikes. He had been through this feeling so many times, and burst enough blisters in his years, to know that wouldn't happen. He was strong enough to hold on, and it was his great strength that allowed him to follow her anywhere, even up this sheer wall.

Both of them could feel the hard plastic of the barker guns pressing their chests. The magnetic accelerator pistols were loaded with shock rounds that delivered a capacitated neural overload on impact. Designed by the Rain City Corporation for Daisen's intelligence agents,

they had a reputation for being silent and utterly effective. Kevadec used them because in his line of work he couldn't afford to make a single noise.

She used two of the neural scramblers to disable the screamer nerves on the bioplastic windows and climbed inside. The orange fire glow of the sky cut slices through the air, dissecting a laboratory filled with tiny biologic, insect-like workers, connected by an array of thin tentacles of moving flesh to the bark-textured walls. Stepping into the laboratory was like landing on another planet.

DeVaughn looked at her partner. Behind his head, the insects were using sections of their dead to build new and better versions of themselves. Biologic machines had their own form of evolution.

He handed her a tiny soft contact lens and she placed it in her right eye.

The room made sense with the contact map on. She could see the order in the chaos of the room, as if before it was all out of focus and jumbled and now it was a landscape of branches and life. "Not quite what I expected," she whispered. Her eyes constantly refocused until she was used to the outlines displayed across her retina.

"I agree. This is one of the recycling workshops. We need to move in further." Kevadec's contact map was more sophisticated than his partner's. The plastic in the lens was fused with a crystalline formula that reacted to the precise frequency transmissions that Polito's people had organized to display a map over his vision based on his position within the building.

The rest of the building was like a living thing inverted. The rough, bark-like walls had a spongy, corkish feel when DeVaughn pushed her hand against them. Skinny gray tentacles writhed along the edges and corners of the dark corridors, emerging from soft, wet holes in the walls only to slide into others further along. They moved downward, along sloping passageways that were never meant to be used. The air smelled greasy, the way Kevadec imagined a swamp would smell. It was a silent void. Polito's diversion had taken away what little human security the building had. Alone in an artificial swamp.

The place the broad-shouldered man was looking for wasn't so much a room as a huge chamber. DeVaughn stopped short as she entered to take in the whole vision. The center of the room was a giant gray column of flesh encased in a transparent plastic cylindrical shield that ran from the corky floor to the dark shadows of the high ceiling. Tentacles wound around each other in tight ropes running from more orifices in the walls across the floor to the central column. She took care not to step on the nerve cords as she followed him inside.

Kevadec allowed himself a few seconds to take in the majestic wonder of the Daisen Computer before setting to work. The contact map melted out of deck plan mode and a schematic diagram of the neural pathways and trunks faded into his vision.

They moved according to the plan. The remaining two neural scramblers were fitted to the tactical trunks, two ropes of spiral gray flesh that writhed along the floor like sidewinder snakes until they felt each other's heat and then slithered back in the opposite direction. Once the scramblers were activated, the tentacles froze. Buckled and paralyzed, as if they had knuckled a nerve and dug in.

"Pass me the surgeon."

DeVaughn took a small plastic bag from out of her pocket and handed the thing to him. He opened the seal and let the small insect crawl out onto his huge palm. He jacked a microfiber lead that extended from an electric computer he had taped to his wrist into the creature and taught the surgeon to cut the pre-programmed points he wanted and cross-fiber the nerves.

"Feel nervous?" she asked him.

He nodded. "Never done this before. Hope it works." The surgeon worked like a leaf-cutter ant, slicing the muscle and nerves and pulling the fresh endings together with strong, chitinous mandibles. Then it sealed them together with its own bioactive spittle.

As he stood, Kevadec shivered. The silence roared in his ears. The chamber's temperature seemed to drop by tens of degrees. He turned to his partner and watched as she was frozen by the change.

DeVaughn felt thigh muscles spasm in warning, but she was too late. Ropes of fibrous nerves wrapped around her calves and caught her knees, fixing her in place.

More tentacles writhed out from the walls, coiling in around her shoulders, wrapping her arms and legs in muscle-bound data nerve, grabbing her up from the corky floor and pulling her back into the wall. She fought to grab the barker gun from her jacket, but the tentacles were too tight, tugging at her arms. She saw Kevadec wrapped in the same way, pressed against the plastic shield of the Daisen computer, and she froze in awe.

Kevadec smiled. His voice had become the liquid tones of the Poet, washing over her.

"Your friend can tell a truly beautiful story now, DeVaughn. Before I was blind and senseless. But I could hear the call. Now I see and feel everything. As if I have gained the universe and retained my soul. I see you, DeVaughn. Do you see me?"

DeVaughn didn't know how to react. His face had become contorted into a parody of the Poet's, the skin was stretched out into parchment, the features lost in the expanding smile. Yet the voice was so joyful, like the soft waters of a river, flowing; she could bathe in his noise. She closed her eyes and imagined the man as he was before. And listened to him as he was now. The combination was fantastic. Tears were swelling in her eyes.

"Beyond my life the tears will flood. Washed away in a river of blood," DeVaughn whispered. The tentacle ropes relaxed from her arms and face and carried her down to the floor; keeping some grip on her waist, refusing to let go completely. The floor was shaking beneath her feet.

"Here it comes," he said.

As he spoke, the pressure in her head became intense. Her ears filled with air and her skull burned with pressure. She opened her eyes and Kevadec was gone. The ceiling was caving in. Water dropped from the sky as if a plug had just been pulled, and she was stood under it all, waiting for the force to smash her to the ground.

Cracks widened and grew like liquid lightning across the sky. And light shone in, sun rays slipstreaming the racing tears as they rushed into the chamber. The Daisen computer in the center lost to the fluid strength of the fall.

She fought to activate the muscles that drew out the climbing claws from her palms and soles and threw herself into a panicked frenzy, tearing at the tentacles around her waist until she was free. Running through the blinding cascade; but it was hopeless. The water smashed DeVaughn against the bark-like walls and the light faded into wet, murky darkness.

"MY GOD," SHE SAID TO HERSELF. "IT'S GONE."

DeVaughn was on a lonely hill, her eyes squinting with the harsh sunlight as she watched the water pour through the remnants of the lost city. Kevadec's surgery had confused the computer so that the suspensor shield deactivated. All the ice that mirrored the war, having built up for nearly a year, fell on the city like a vertical tidal wave, melting as it dropped, crushing everything in its path. The force of nature was indeed strong.

Watching the devastation from the hill where she had washed up with the debris of the Daisen computer and countless pieces of plastic dispensable war machines, she was the only one left to see the truth of it the way the Poet wanted.

But DeVaughn was no Poet. She knew this planet and all it was now was a lifeless, lonely scrap heap. Somewhere in that was a beautiful story to tell, but Kevadec was no longer around to scribble it onto acetate.

Then she shook her head in realization. Of course, he didn't have to be there to describe it. It had already been described. "It's fucking beautiful, Kevadec. True poetry. And you wrote it."

Before she stood, DeVaughn took piece of snapped plastic armor and scraped away letters in the soaked dirt of the hill. Her last message to the ghost of Shaim as she stepped over the hill into the wilderness was one sentence long.

I SEE YOU.

RIDLEY MCINTYRE

Was born in London, but now lives in New Jersey with his fiancée. He has been writing SF since the age of 8, but took a brief hiatus in 1997 while exploring the potential of growing up. He plans to do this with grace, having many tales to tell other people's grandchildren.

C'mon—have a heart. Even *artichokes* have them.