

Mostly Empty Buildings
by Eric Cecil

She wants to know if I work there. I don't. She asks again. No, I say, sorry. She's standing before a kiosk. Its screen is red. It's out of order, she says. She's feverish. And there's no one here, she adds. No one down here. No one upstairs, either.

We're alone.

In here, she says. She's pointing to a doorway behind the kiosk. This door is open. I walk beside her and look in. Six cubicles telescope to a back wall, institutional gray. Porous white tiles hang low. Fluorescent lights hum among them. She steps into the room and under the tiles and the lights and gestures to three black bins hemming the wall. Here, she says. I can return them here, only it won't be in their system.

Their system, I say.

She nods. Scanned. They need to be scanned.

I see some belongings hanging on a rack of hooks: a coat, a sweater, a green hat. A bright sticker adorns one of the colorless partitions. It says something about animals. I don't think we should be in here, I tell her. I ask if she's tried the other kiosk. The one outside. Out of order, she says. Everything is. Nothing works. She's nearly breathless now. But maybe I can find us a scanner. We can scan our books in. I, she says, hesitating. Finger to lips. Thinking. I think I know how.

I'm going up.

I can figure it out, she pleads.

I go anyway. She steps out into the hallway, calling after me: Sir? Her voice falters, fades. As I disappear, she continues speaking to herself. Her elegy is low and grievous from afar.

I round a bend in the staircase and head outside. It was cloudy before. It's windy now. The kind of deep, sweeping wind that foretells a harrowing rain. Fat pearls of it are already snapping around me. A parked car percolates under them. I duck around a corner and follow the slight decline of a concrete walkway. I can see the red screen well before I'm within reach: Out of order.

Back inside, she's still at it. No one, she's saying. Not one person. There's no one here. She's in disbelief. Inconsolable. She's almost twirling.

I head up the stairs again, now venturing into the main room. It feels brighter, bigger than I've ever seen it. It nearly throbs in its stillness. A wide desk, unmanned, circles the center. I've never really looked at it before. I study it now. Two books rest on its curve. A folded newspaper. Some paperclips, padded envelopes. They await an attendant who isn't there. The reference desk, much smaller, is a hollow husk in a far corner. The stairs to the balcony are locked, slats of a gate like ribs before dark and dormant steps. The balcony itself is a mausoleum on stilts. The woman's sonorous voice is an apparition in the floor below, a ghost still grasping for someone, something, anything that will help her turn in her books. But there's only me.

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The lot's deserted. I park in its middle, several yards away from the entrance. Nell has asked why. I've said nothing. We leave the car and cross the empty lot and step into the laddered white of a crosswalk.

The sun is high. It wheelks against a row of glass doors. We pass a set of broad steps leading to a pavilion, shallow and wide. I once sat on those steps, waited for countless rides, meetings, chance encounters. Now Nell and I ascend them, the building's shade leaning over us.

More shadows play over the mall's entryway. A chain-linked gate jails a movie theater to our side. Behind it, on the peeling veneer of a counter, someone's left a handwritten sign. The handwriting is adolescent, looped, feminine, made up in lime-green marker: Tickets \$10. A popcorn machine stands empty and glaucous. Candy displays. Frames on the wall. Open squares pattern a drab olive carpet that trails off and away and around a corner, shuffling aside memories of M., and A., and J., and K. And Z. I think Z. stole money from the place. He worked there. That was years ago.

Nell and I wade through the dark and see sun flooding the doors at the other end of a big hall. The lights here are off, and the effect is as though we're walking in a large grotto, roaming in the vagary between exit and entrance.

We drift there until our path suddenly opens onto another, a well-defined corridor perpendicular to the entrance. It's a main walkway, even larger than ours. Its lights are on. Dim. But on. A department store hulks at one end. Its lights, too, are apparent now. Bare racks twist in a chrome study of autumn. Stray hangers twirl, flitting in a breeze I can't feel from a source I can't see. Maybe there's an exhaust fan. There are no employees. I look at Nell.

You're loving this, she says.

On either side of us, glass partitions are locked, secured, darkened, like aquaria under permanent repair. When I approach the glass, my reflection wavers toward me. But when I lean upon it and fan my hands, when I narrow my eyes against the darkness, I see empty cabinets, stripped walls, bent fixtures corralled into large metal bins. Some are heaped onto industrial rolling carts. Others remain standing, branching up and away from crooked bases. Wires vine from a ceiling gone paisley with stains.

I remove my hands and back away from the glass. These things disappear. Everything does. I do.

We continue down the path. A center kiosk materializes. It's sleek, rounded, paneled in glass. And it's upon us suddenly, somehow invisible until just before us. Nell points to its lower shelves. They're almost entirely empty. Only three small figurines remain. Childlike. Cherubic. They grin idiotically at us from their displays.

An asterisk-shaped inlay shows in the countertop. Maybe it scanned once. No longer.

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If they're scanned, the woman continues. If they're in the system. Her thought remains incomplete. Her eyes are watery now. Red, searching.

I walk into a back hallway. There's a sign for a workshop. COMMUNITY, the sign shouts. Elderly faces smile. I retreat deeper into the back hallway and see a bathroom, a closet. I try both doors. They're locked.

Hello? I call.

Nothing.

Back to the kiosk. I place a hand over the scanner. Cancer. No. Nothing happens. No lights. No infrared. Only red. Only the screen. Only the woman. Someone's bound to be here, I tell her. She holds out a hand for me. I've already, she says. Wait. I think I know where to scan these. She returns to the room, the cubicles.

I walk to the stairs.

She peeks from the room, hollering. Protesting. I can hear her continue as I enter the main room of the library. Still empty. Still brighter than ever, somehow even more vibrant than just moments before. I can't quite understand it. Maybe an employee is in the restroom. Maybe they're hiding in an office somewhere. Sitting at a table behind a shelf, staring. I walk toward a set of shelves in the back. Spines color, corrugate, section their lengths.

A door opens in the stairway.

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A different stairway. Different place. Nell's there. A jaundiced sun. Ochre sky slants through a window or door somewhere. Either overhead or at my back. I can't tell which. I'm standing at the top floor, peering down the columnar hollow formed by the steps' accordion leaps and antelope bounds. I can see very little at the bottom. Everything's murky. Uncertain. Everything but the topmost stairs. They're hard, marbled, slick with dust and grit.

I turn from them. I'm at Nell's heels. We make our way past a wooden wall beset by opaque windows, bordered by iron trelliswork. The wood here is richly colored, crosscut and sanded and stained into elegance, and as the heat and the sun work on me, I watch the dust mote through streams of fighting light.

I'm tired, Nell says.

So am I. It's been a long trip. A hard day. Warren's indifferent. He's sulking well ahead of us, padding through the soft carpet of a nearby room. We take the opposite path, wandering into what was once an open patio but is now merely a long and dim passageway, its tiled flooring beached with small dunes of sand. Heavy shutters cover a sliding glass door. Through the shutters I can see the narrow strip of a balcony. And the blunt backside of downtown: parking structures, errant palms, stolid and windowless buildings. No traffic. No people.

Three or four chairs sit long and low against the wall behind us. Floral patterns weave along their cushions, which look nonetheless hardened, brittle after years of disuse. I picture dropping into one, watching dust plume, sneezing.

I remember, Nell says, playing in this room when these glass doors were open. When we were kids. Think they put those shutters on after everyone left. Warren, she calls. Warren.

Yeah, he says distantly from the neighboring room.

When did they put these shutters on?

I don't know, he says.

How long has this building been here?

There's a heavy pause.

Fifty years, he says uncertainly. Sixty. I'm not sure when they built it. His steps pad away into yet another room, dunning into the floor's deepest reaches. I can nearly hear the walls swallow him. I can sense the building pulling him around corners, into empty and neglected bedrooms: his parents', his grandparents'. Once vibrant, occupied. Now vacant. Still.

It's quiet when Nell calls for him again. She returns to my side and gestures to the patio. It's been decades since anyone's lived up here. She tells me Warren only comes up here when she visits. And it's like pulling teeth, she says. He doesn't like it here.

I ask why. Or why not. She shrugs. Maybe we should head back downstairs. We're due for dinner soon anyway.

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We keep walking until we come to an abandoned service counter. A canvas overhang is there, marred by shaded curlicues. The letters are gone. Scraped. Or peeled. Only their silhouettes remain.

Karmelkorn, I read aloud. Nell casts me a puzzled look. I point above, to the faded marquee. Like popcorn, I explain, but with different flavors. She nods, places small hands tentatively on the countertop.

Beyond this counter many others fan out into a grand and bright octagon. Center Court. A worn sign suggests the idea. A domed ceiling glows white above. Too white. In its severe fluorescence, everything is pale and spectral. I squint, seeing tendrils of lesser paths, fading off and away into near-dark all around us. Some stretch into oblivion. Others terminate at distantly visible department stores, a few of which, like the one we saw before, are still open, still gleaming. In center court itself, all restaurants are closed, emptied, shuttered. Done.

We're sitting ducks under its violent light.

I was always a sitting duck in center court. Always waiting. For some sort of diversion or in-road. A rescue. I don't know why I'm here now. Why I've brought Nell.

I used to sit at these tables, I begin.

You'd eat here.

No, not usually. My feet scrape the tile. Pestled and aquamarine mosaic. Inlays of natural brick, terra cotta. Sometimes, I say, I'd read a book I bought at a store over there. I nod to a hole in a shadow down the hall. It's flanked by spidery palms, low pots. And then I'd sit here and wait for something to happen. Or someone to find me.

Nell smiles and holds my hand. Surprise. I've found you. She sticks out her tongue, squeezes my arm. We grin in silence. Her eyes play over my shoulder.

Look at that, she says. She's glancing behind me.

It's a high glass partition defining something at the edge of center court.

The train.

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It clatters above on scaffolds, girders. I spend most of the evening avoiding its path. Just walking below it. Or just to its side, roaming downtown. The city looks like it's evacuated, deserted. Like the tide's gone out. Or maybe it's still coming. I hunch into my jacket, aimlessly winding through fallow intersections, and find myself passing shuttered diners, closed cobblers, gated banks. A library. This one's tall and old and majestic. The green crenellations of its roof reach toward the moon as if they would entangle it and disappear it before my eyes. And my eyes only. There are no other people. There's no other movement.

None other than the train's circling, still shaking tight tracks. I eventually ascend a set of neverending stairs and look off to the distance, past the sawed horizon, and see planes gliding overhead. I wait for the length of the tethered cars to pause, for the grinding to cease, the doors to shoulder open. Once I board, the train leads me away from downtown. It drives me through mortared gulleys, over thick and gristled rivers. The sky thins out and away, falling under the tracks, and the light greys of raw rooftops drum past below us. The outskirts.

I watch until the train gradually sinks. Then it plows under earth. And it's black. Buried. Hiding.

It surfaces for air again in a suburb I can't name, arrives at an airport from which I've never flown. It rests. I remain with it, both of us breathing under heated exhaust.

It starts again, and I double back, retracing the same path.

It occurs to me, then: I'm the tide. Maybe I chased the people away from downtown. I laugh to myself. The train pulls through myriad stations, their nicotine lights weak and sickly. There are no passengers leaving. None getting on. The train throttles back toward downtown.

There, the buildings have returned, have risen, have once again formed black walls on either side of the tracks. Faraway tops spire above. Upper floors and penthouses fire like embers. Further down, at eye level, most windows show void, the glass barely winking in the train's lights. The deeper I go, the closer the buildings. The nearer the glass. It telescopes toward me.

Toward us. There's one other person on the train now.

I'm not sure when he got on. And I can't see him very well. But I can see it's a he. I can see a wiry frame. Exposed arms. No jacket. It's cold. But he's fine. He's seated. Facing me. I'm holding a center pole, steadying myself as the carriage rocks on its girders. I pretend not to notice him. Notice the buildings instead. They're slabbing out against a pale moon. The library's still reaching for it. Still missing.

You're not from around here.

The voice is friendly. But loud, vulgar. Bottled.

Can tell by the way you're looking out there, he yells. At those buildings.

I'm sorry? I say.

People from here don't look up.

I nod. Don't look at the skyline.

That's it. He coughs. Locals don't. Not much to see tonight anyway. Holidays and all, he says. Mostly empty buildings. The voice is smiling. The man's jabbing a hand toward the far windows. Everybody's traveling for the holidays.

Right.

You're not traveling.

Not tonight, I tell him.

He stares. Well, anyway, he says. Merry Christmas.

Happy New Year.

He coughs again. Clears his throat. Leans back in his seat. The train's still circling. Suddenly I wish we were already past the outskirts, past the low roofs. Wish we were underground. But we're still spiraling away downtown. We're still taller than most everything. All but the buildings overhead.

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Nell's standing on a wooden bench, reaching over the glass. Her forearm glances off a clock tower. Its second hand dangles. Its spire wobbles. I ask her to be careful. Then I ask her to stop altogether. She laughs. Who's going to stop me? she says.

It's off, I tell her. Or broken. Anyway, there's no point in standing up there.

She's frowning. You got to see this growing up. I want to see it now.

Fine. I lean on the glass, looking past the miniature pines, the small gray depot, the footlong highrises. The track snakes through them and turns an unseen bend. This train doesn't go underground. It disappears among the rungs of rotund silos instead. Thimble haybales. Tiny livestock. I can see the coal hatch between their ranks. The caboose. Red. Immobile. Further down, the case elbows into a sharp curve, and the glass folds onto itself, distorting everything therein.

My reflection's there. Also distorted. But I can still see the likeness. The vague features. A face. Its look is certain and injurious. Severe. Disappointed. Its stare stays with me until I drop my hands and avert my eyes. Then the look is gone.

Beyond the glass, beyond the miniature depot and the empty counters and center court, a shadow moves, beetling off into an obscure path. It drifts into a tight corridor angling away from the

main hall. The echoes of its steps hit me suddenly, as if they've been there all along and I've only now heard them.

Nell's eyes are narrowed. You hear that?

Yeah. I cock my head down the hall. I saw something.

There's someone else here, she says, her voice a sharp whisper. She's grinning again.

I don't say anything. I pull my hands away from the display. B&N RAIL. EST. 1884. I thought we were alone in here. That this place was empty.

Nell giggles. You're never totally alone. And no building is totally empty. Only some are mostly empty.

We shouldn't be here.

She brushes this aside. If they'd meant for us to stay away, she says, then they should've locked the doors.

Not here, I say. Not the mall. But here.

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Warren, she calls again. Still there's no answer. I picture Warren standing in a shaded room, opening the drawer of a leaning desk. There's some sun. But more dust. A mattress, hived, plush, blue. It's quiet.

Let's go see what he's doing, she says.

I tell her to go ahead. I want to have a look around, I say.

OK. But stay close. They're expecting us soon. She offers a parting smile. Her touch lingers on my arm. Fingers glide down its length and hold my hand and release it. Then she's off and around the corner of the patio, her heels chipping over the tile and brushing onto thin carpet. I'm still looking at the edge of downtown.

There's no train here. No cars, either. But there are garages. Plenty. I know everyone drives. I know everything's open and new and bright. The signs all blind neon. The sky's piss-yellow or

navy or black, and the ground is gray or white or red with sand. The sand finds its way on you or in you or through you. Through buildings. Empty or otherwise.

I kneel and pinch neutral grit between thumb and forefinger. I stand. Rub its dust off hands, hands on pants. I hear Nell and Warren murmuring and laughing somewhere off to the left, behind more walls, more plaster and glass and wood. More sand. I head to the right.

Into what would've been the kitchen. Two chairs are bottomed up on a small formica table. A gas stove slants away from a far wall. It's cockeyed, as if having turned to greet me. More sun angles in through a window above it. It carves the air. The air is old here. Everywhere. As if every breath is a memory in a photograph held by someone else in some other time.

Hey, Nell calls. Come see these photos. I tilt my head and imagine, now, what Nell and Warren have found. Maybe pictures of Warren's folks, preening and laughing at a cocktail party, or of Nell and Warren themselves: impossibly young, dimpled, surrounded by other cousins, by aunts, uncles, untold scores of family and friends. They lose themselves to their memories, and as they keep calling to me, giggling, I lose myself in the upper floors of Warren's childhood home.

In the dining room, he hollers. Guest bedroom, shouts Nell. Over here. No, here. And I keep walking around corners, I keep padding over carpet and tile, determined, dazed. But I can't find them. I can never find them.

A dark figure blurs down the hall. I see it just in my periphery. I call after Nell. For Warren. But there's no response. I race through the kitchen and charge into a derelict parlor. A desk is open. Photos are piled. Disturbed. Strewn on the floor. Old records. Upended books. Dentures grinning on a vanity. The mirror's going to verdigris. It's a slab of shale now, fragile and forlorn, and their laughter continues, hissing, hectoring. I turn from it to see the dark figure again. It flashes from the hall and onto the stairway.

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There's a commotion there. The door swinging. Slamming. Footsteps, deep and leaden. The woman is fully hysterical now. She's hollering. Crying. But where the cries were first heavy with distress, they're now weightless, now relieved.

He's here, she exults. She's jubilant. Oh, she says, he's here.

I don't know who he is. But he's here. And he's silent. And as I stand by the shelf of books upstairs, my eyes pinned to the top of the winding staircase, he's merely a shadow: unseen, unsaying.

She appeals to him again. You've no idea, she says, how lonesome it was in here. How confusing. Her voice becomes furtive. A low whisper. She confides to him. I think, she says, hesitating again. I think there's a man upstairs.