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Written by Eric Lundgren

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THE FACADES

A NOVEL

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For Eleanor

who walks with me through cities

We believe, so to speak, that this great building exists, and then we see, now here, now there, one or another small corner of it.

—WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*

“You can resume your flight whenever you like,” they said to me, “but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude, which does not begin and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes.”

—CALVINO, *Invisible Cities*

THE FACADES

1

I USED TO DRIVE DOWNTOWN EVERY NIGHT, LOOKING FOR MY wife. The rush hour traffic was across the median and I traveled the westbound lane of I-99 without delay or impediment, sure I was going the wrong way. The city assembled itself, scattered lights in the old skyscrapers meandering the night sky like notes on a staff. What could I have hoped to find there? People didn't just disappear, I thought at the time. They left fingerprints, notes, receipts, echoes. If Molly had walked from her opera rehearsal to the corner deli and had not materialized there or returned, she must have left a residue behind. I expressed this view to the authorities after filing the missing person report at Trude's tenth precinct station. "It's not always a Hansel and Gretel type situation, you know," said the detective, a fellow named McCready who was apparently on the late shift alone, surrounded by dim idling computers. Crew-cutted and monobrowed, he looked like a man who repaired machinery with his bare hands. He listened to my story and took notes in his pocket pad, a mere scribe. On his desk, instead of a family picture, was a grainy photograph of

Wittgenstein. The matte frame was inscribed with a misquotation: THE CASE IS EVERYTHING THAT IS THE WORLD. McCready promised to call if anything turned up, but I was in no mood to wait. I set out on my own through the streets, my pockets jammed with plastic evidence bags. I was a student of sidewalks. Tracing Molly's possible steps in widening circles, I returned each night to the Opera House empty-handed, the watchman nodding me in.

This night watchman had been the last to see Molly and became a de facto authority on her disappearance, even though he was "not that perceptive," as he admitted later in interviews. He seemed hardly to notice me as I went in and out. His good eye browsed in my direction, then slumped back into the couch of his cheek.

She was projected outward from my mind, a wavering image across the city. I began the nights as a stalker, then faded to a stumbler, a somnambulist. I rounded every corner with the conviction that she was near, but what I found in those deceptive and winding streets was only a series of dispersed apparitions. The curve of her spine in the shadow of a lamppost. The pattern of her freckles in a smattering of plaster dust. In the winking of a broken traffic signal, the green of her eyes.

You may not have come across our city, which they used to call halfway to everywhere, which is to say nowhere—stranded in the long and level void between the two coasts. As a lifelong resident, I will tell you right away: it is easy to get lost. "Lose yourself in Trude" was the tourist board slogan for a while, but it never caught on. It was too apt. Visitors, attempting to describe their stay in Trude, often resorted to the German term *platzangst*. The city fathers should be blamed for this com-

mon feeling, this anxiety that one is trying, but failing, to cross a vast and endless square. Using Sitte's *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* as their guide, our patriarchs designed a downtown that still looks beautiful on a map, hailed as "the Munich of the Midwest" throughout the late 1890s. The twentieth century was unkind. Grand hotels, windowed with cardboard, still advertised ten-dollar rooms on their outer walls. Decrepit mansions hung on the boulevards, spattered with graffiti. Money, with its gaseous tendencies to rise and escape, drifted to the suburbs of Sherwood Forest and New Arcadia.

I was a prematurely old man wandering the grid, such as it was. Sitte proscribed the 90-degree intersection, so I navigated narrow side lanes and cul-de-sacs. These byways abruptly ended in small plazas with ivy-choked fountains and statues eroded by rain and snow. The statues stood, per Sitte's instruction, in the corners rather than the centers (he determined this by watching where children placed snowmen in their yards). Alleys snaked between buildings, dark arteries of criminal life. If one were to believe the hysterical editorialists of the *Trude Trumpet*, law-breakers infested the city, lurking behind fire escapes and monuments to civic progress. They slept in abandoned buildings under ghost signs for knickerbockers, cobblers, and grain.

These were the streets I walked that May, after Molly left to buy an egg for her throat and did not return. It was an unusually cool month, but this was lost on me. The rain felt wet only. Each night I began at the Opera House, near the corner of Hamsun Avenue and Sinuous Lane, and continued past the sturdy pillars of the Central Library, down the secluded alleys with their old clock shops. Watchmakers squinted at me through their loupes. I occasionally found a sodden poster for one of the

operas my wife had performed in. The posters carried raves from the *Trumpet* (“Molly Norberg is no fat lady . . . stunning!”). They were gashed and faded, and her face was almost made up beyond recognition, but I was already losing the tender image in my memory, so I peeled them from walls and lampposts and stashed them in the trunk of her car.

MOLLY’S VOICE COACH, old Frau Huber, and her whiskery husband lived on the otherwise uninhabited second floor of the Ambassador Hotel. They owned two flats across from each other at the end of the hall and left the doors open, except on the increasingly rare occasions when they gave lessons. The two apartments could barely contain their mountains of sheet music and LPs. Their twin pianos and string instruments stood in progressive stages of disassembly. When I arrived at the Ambassador, the Hubers were playing Beethoven’s Sonata for Four Hands on opposite sides of the hall. It seemed too soon for music. The sonata was discordant. The piano tuner had not been around in a while. Mice clambered from the Ambassador’s cracked drywall and fat feral cats waddled the halls. I had to shake the rusted room service bell to get Frau Huber’s attention. She raised her knobby, arthritic hands from the keyboard as if I’d caught her at something. Her husband’s chords continued minus a melody. She reached back and clapped her trembling hand over mine.

“My poor boy,” she whispered. “You must be hungry.”

She went to the kitchen to make tea, while Herr Huber entered cracking his knuckles and joined me at a table piled with books and scores, where we could barely see each other. A tin of

stale chocolates was produced. Frau Huber had been a maternal figure for Molly, whose own parents had died young, and as I accepted an ancient truffle, it occurred to me that I thought of Frau Huber as Molly's mother, my mother-in-law. Huber had Molly's nose. Her white hair was neatly worked into a circular braid around the back of her skull. She was prone, as Molly was, to walk to the refrigerator, crack open an egg on the counter, and with one swift motion, deposit the yoke down her throat while crushing the shell in her hand. She was a mezzo, like Molly. My wife had probably spent more time with Frau Huber than she had at home in the months preceding her disappearance. Looking at the old woman just then, as steam wheezed from the kettle, was like looking at the future Molly I'd always thought I would see. Her husband sat snug in his vest across the table, still tapping out the Beethoven on the stained oak. As his English was limited and mine was impaired, we didn't make much of a conversational duo.

"There are things music can say that words can't," Frau Huber said, dropping sugar cube after sugar cube into her tea. The morning *Trumpet* was awkwardly placed in the center of the table, its thick inky headline unavoidable: DIVA VANISHES DOWNTOWN. "There are also things music can't say," she added.

"Did you notice anything strange about Molly at her last lesson?" I asked.

"Nothing strange," she said. "You talk like a policeman."

"They come *twice* already!" Herr Huber barked.

"Interrogation makes him nervous," Frau Huber said, pushing the old cookie tin at me. It was etched with a scene of two children, hand in hand, following a narrow path through a dark forest.

* * *

THERE WAS AN old cathedral downtown, a cloister of traditionalists who had run afoul of the local archbishop. Mass had been read in Latin there until the diocese disowned the building and its small congregation. I went in when the weather was bad. It was a dry place to wait it out, though the roof leaked, and a long water stain marred the ceiling mosaic, which depicted the saints and missionaries who had brought the faith to Trude. Gold cherubs and silver doves kept watch over the looted altar. Stained glass windows, broken by tossed rocks, lay in disarray on the floor, like a jigsaw puzzle abandoned by a distracted child. The fragments half spelled out a holy face, a fractured sky. These, too, reminded me of Molly; I collected the stained glass shards in my blazer pockets so that I might later assemble them into a coherent image. I'd once sat in this cathedral and listened to her sing the Brahms Alto Rhapsody under those windows.

I always assumed I was alone there, waiting out the rain. One night, however, a flashlight beam pierced the darkness from high above. It seemed to issue from the organ pipes. A priest, unshaven, in a rumpled cassock pocked with pipe burns, paced along the massive gray cylinders, looking small. "Can I help you find anything?" cried the distant, annoyed voice.

"My name is Norberg," I said. "I'm looking for my wife."

A younger man with long blond hair and a tuxedo shirt emerged in front of the organ pipes. "Your what?" he asked.

I held up an opera poster—one of the more realistic ones, in which my wife's face could be discerned behind the cosmetics. The priest shined his flashlight over Molly's pale and freckled cheeks, her snub nose. I'd once started counting her freckles

with pedantic slowness, one by one, until she'd pushed me away in a blizzard of white teeth and red curls.

"Oh my," he said, peering down. "*She was your wife?*"

"Is. Is my wife."

"She sang for us once," said the younger man. "I was the music minister then."

"I know. I was in the pews listening."

"Mr. Norbert," the priest called, apparently deafened by standing too close to organ pipes, "did you see the brick rustlers outside?"

"Stop being paranoid," the music minister snapped.

I shuffled the glass in my blazer pockets. "No." Only a few feet from me, a stone angel wing fell from far above and smashed to grit on the back of a pew.

"These bricks are very valuable on the black market," the priest said. "You didn't see anyone?"

"I saw some guys out there," I said. "I think they were just cooling their heels."

"Better not think about it," the music minister said. "Your wife came here very often before she . . . before the . . . did you know that?"

"No."

The music minister's face was hairless, and I wondered if he shaved with stained glass. "Yes, she used to come in at night, much like you do now."

"I like the building," I said.

"She seemed . . . did you notice this, Father? She seemed to take a special interest in our eunuchs."

"Your eunuchs?"

"I think they're well done, don't you?" The music minister

took the priest's flashlight and shined it on the chubby, sexless figures chiseled in high relief above a transept arch. They floated in the rafters, lips parted, delighting in their buoyant, chubby flesh. "Of course, so many things are well done in this cathedral, it's almost impossible to know where to look. The problem of the baroque. Since the diocese abandoned us, we try to look at the bright side. Perhaps if the cathedral loses some of its beauties, like the windows and the mosaic, visitors in the future will not find it so . . . so *excessive*."

"Why do they want *our* bricks?" asked the priest. "Aren't there enough vacant brick buildings around here? Do they want them to be blessed?"

"And that *voice*." The music minister spread his arms, as if to embrace the organ pipes, as if only such an improbable embrace could capture the power and range of Molly's singing. "My God, what a voice she had."

MY FINAL ENCOUNTER was the kind that keeps most people away from downtown Trude at night. I was walking back to the car, parked in the plaza at Sinuous Lane and Dead Mayor Boulevard. I had stopped to examine an evocative piece of vandalism. Some part time provocateur, some nocturnal sower of unease and distress, had upended the golden triangle of a pedestrian crossing sign. The stick figure, so resolute in his forward stride, his whole body arched toward its destination, now was a man in free fall, his limbs four useless black slabs. I admired the vandal's work until I felt the point of a knife graze my spine. The knifepoint was soon followed by a weirdly calming hand on my shoulder, to hold me in place, and I was momentarily uncertain whether

to tense up or relax. It had been a while since I'd been touched. "I'm going to take your wallet," said the high tenor voice behind me. "Okay, great!" I replied, ruefully recalling the sum of cash my employer had given me to "tide me over" for the weekend. The lump was removed. I listened to the thug count bills with the swift, satisfied stroke of a pulp novelist turning manuscript pages. He had lowered the knife, so I turned to face him. His scrawniness was mitigated by a puffy white down coat. His cheeks looked like cutting boards, scuffed and hard. After pocketing the cash he evaluated me. "Christ, what happened to you, man?" he asked. I did not reply. He flipped the wallet in my direction. "Thank you!" I said. I did not tell my assailant that he reminded me of my son, who suffered from a skin condition, and who had been home alone each and every night of my search. Every night I wandered, pursuing my private and degraded film of Molly through the streets, Kyle had been completely alone.

I lingered in that plaza long after the marshmallow of the thug's coat had dissolved into the alley's dark. My only company was the bronze statue of Mayor Trudenhauser, after whom our city had been named. As the story went, he'd truncated the name of our town from Trudenhauser to Trude following a series of public and private failures in the late 1890s that left him listless and afraid. He cast a plump shadow on the cobblestones. Smoking my last cigarette, I realized that these nighttime expeditions had to end, that I was not going to find anything here, that I had to start driving home instead of downtown after work. Beside me, the bronze mayor contemplated the unmoving hands of his giant pocket watch. His heavy eyes, flecked with rust and rain, looked almost human.