

Gilt-Edged Shadows

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Marco watched Yvonne plod up the stairs, like Sisyphus rolling his boulder. Except that the boulder was her belly. She was four months pregnant, but you'd think she was in her last trimester the way she moved.

"Don't wait up for me, honey. I have a big deadline coming up."

He couldn't tell if she nodded, but she fluttered her fingers at him without looking back. He went to his darkroom as soon as she disappeared at the top of the stairs, and turned on the red light above the door like a signal to tell the world to stop.

This wasn't how he had thought it would be, expecting their first child. He'd imagined it as a photo essay, starting with a close-up of his wife's pale hand holding the test wand with the pink lines, and ending—no, not quite ending but fading into the next vignette—with a photo of their newborn son or daughter in her arms as she lay in the hospital, beautifully disheveled as when they finish making love. In between these two shots, there would be nude shots of her waxing belly, like the moon going through its phases.

He slumped on the floor, his back to the door, inhaling the comforting smell of Dektol. A deadline, who was he kidding? The last thing he'd done, or at least the last that brought in even a little money, was that shoot for an advertorial on a fancy new resort inside a golf course five months ago. When he showed up with his Nikon F6, the woman who met him said no wonder they were being charged so much, he was shooting with an heirloom. It had taken every ounce of his self control to keep from bashing her on the head with the camera. Looking back, he should have gone right ahead with it. "Should I charge you more for that too?" he would have asked her when she came to. In the end, she had let him go through with the shoot, only to ask the magazine to send a "pro" to do a retake afterwards. He still got paid, but only after an infuriating lecture by Jake, the art editor. He thumbed through the sheaf of prints Marco had given him before putting them back in the envelope and tossing it on a shelf that held back issues of the magazine. "I

hate to say this, man, but you have to get off your high horse. Call me a cop-out, but film is dead whether you like it or not. Eastman Kodak—that ring a bell?” He went for the kill when Marco didn’t react. “You’re gonna be a dad, man. Get your act together.”

He sprang up, upending his chair, and left without a word. On the lift, he ticked off the other outfits that would still take his work. He ran out of names even before reaching the lobby, six floors down.

When a month passed without a word from Jake or offers from other clients, he found himself comparing digital cameras online in his darkroom and thumbing through volumes on digital photography in the bookshop. He tried to shut out the dissenting voices in his head by zooming in on the technical stuff and processing everything through the lens of what he already knew about film cameras.

He had no intention to advertise his “digital crossover,” as the guy who sold him the EOS 5D Mark II put it. He would rather they keep calling him *Marcosaurus Rex* rather than admit that he’d sold out.

One afternoon, he worked up enough courage to see a guy he’d gone to school with, who had made good taking portraits of babies dressed up as characters from books and movies. Marco scanned the framed images on the wall. He wasn’t surprised by the Harry Potter lookalikes, but it escaped him, seeing a toddler garbed like Hamlet complete with skull, why someone who liked Shakespeare would fall for such kitsch. Of course, he kept these scruples to himself, since he was there to ask for a job.

The guy was clearly surprised when Marco told him why he was there. When he recovered, he apologized and said he already had two assistants, which was all he could use right now. Marco forced a laugh, like he’d only been kidding, but he knew the guy saw through his bluff.

He decided to take a different tack, taking on small assignments from new clients, as much to spare his pride as to hide his discomfort with his new camera. It was like learning to walk again, with prosthetic limbs, after running normally all his life.

He didn’t tell Yvonne anything, wanting to spare her the added worry. How was he to explain the camera, which probably cost more than what they would have to pay for the childbirth? It had used up a large portion of their savings, and he just had to hope that his parents would bail him out when it came time to pay the hospital bills. It added to his sense of ill-preparedness

for fatherhood, counting on someone else to pick up the tab for the birth of his first child.

“YOUR BABY AT nineteen weeks,” the doctor said. Yvonne was having her first ultrasound. She had refused the first time, six weeks into the pregnancy, saying she didn’t want the baby to be exposed to radiation more than necessary. She would rather wait until it was possible to tell its gender, which only mattered, she said, because it would make it a whole lot easier getting the nursery ready and shopping for baby clothes.

He listened to the doctor and stared at the screen. Where was the baby? The creature that appeared on the monitor looked alien, marsupial. When the doctor zoomed in, they could have been gazing at footage taken by a robot of the surface of the moon. He let his eyes go out of focus while keeping it trained on the screen, trying to make the right sounds in response to the doctor’s chatter. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected to see. A gleam in the darkness, perhaps, like a galaxy or a nebula, anything but this cold triumph of 3D imaging.

But Yvonne was weepy with joy. On the ride home, she kept glancing at the hideous postcard-size printout of their unborn daughter that the doctor had given her to put on the fridge door.

JAKE CALLED HIM later that week, saying he’d heard Marco had gone digital. “Welcome to the dark side, man,” he said. “I got you a great door prize.”

Sham rep, he pronounced it, and it took Marco a moment to realize that, no, he wasn’t offering Marco a scamming job, but one to do a shoot of Angkor Wat.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Let me have a look at my calendar.” And though they both knew there was nothing on his calendar but neat tiles of empty space, Jake, good old Jake, said all right, he would wait for Marco to call back and he hoped it would be a yes.

“Get me some great shots, man,” Jake said when he dropped by the magazine office two weeks later before leaving for Cambodia. “I’m glad you saw the light.”

Yvonne wasn’t thrilled when he told her he would be gone for a week. He was stupid enough to ask if she wanted anything special from Cambodia. “Why, yes,” she said, rattling the dishes in the sink. “Why don’t you get one of those half-naked dancing women from their temples to go in the nursery?”

He was disappointed by Angkor Wat. Perhaps it was the weight of his expectations after seeing it in hundreds of films and photographs. Or it could have been the opposite, the stuff he didn't expect to see because they'd been edited out of those still and moving images he'd seen of the place, like the constant stream of tourists that made it all but impossible to compose a shot without somebody getting into the frame, flashing a peace sign.

Back in the tuktuk, he could only grunt in response as the driver grilled him about what he thought of the monument. Instead, he told him he could choose their next stop.

"Bayon!" the driver announced above the crunch of the tires on gravel. Even from the road, he could see the gargantuan stone heads watching him in dubious welcome. The eyes didn't leave him even as he drew closer to the mouth of the ruins. He remembered reading somewhere that the stone heads were likenesses of the Buddha, but shouldn't the faces look more benevolent if that were the case? He spent two hours in the temple, clicking away.

As soon as he reached the inn that evening, he doused his cramped and sunburned body with cold water scooped with a dried gourd from the massive earthenware jar in the bathroom. *Take a shower the traditional Khmer way*, the sign on the door read. He thought of Yvonne as he splashed more water on himself. What was she doing now, all by herself?

The image of his wife's naked body returned to him, merging with those of the lovely nymphs he had seen on the stone friezes in the ruins. *Apsara*, his guidebook called them. Angels.

"Hogarth's Line of Beauty," he mouthed through a curtain of water. It was one of the first things his grandfather had taught him about photography, when he was fifteen, showing him one of his prints: a woman in profile, naked. The old man traced the sinuous curve of the woman's back sloping towards the gentle overhang of her buttocks, down to her thighs.

She was lit in such a way as to cast her almost completely in darkness, so she was little more than a silver-lined silhouette, a gilt-edged shadow. "Rembrandt, you call this effect," his grandfather said. "You get it by putting the light source directly behind your subject." He was about to protest, but the old man raised his hand. "Somebody tells you not to shoot against the light, you shoot the bastard. And I don't mean with your camera. You get the best images by breaking the rules, boy. Remember that if you remember nothing else I've told you."

He nodded, though he had no idea what his grandfather was talking about. He studied the woman, trying to find a clue who she was. All he knew was that it wasn't his grandmother, and that she was younger, far younger than his grandfather. He desperately wanted to, but didn't have the guts to ask him who the woman was, or if she was the reason his grandma had walked out on their marriage.

He was too drowsy after the shower to do anything other than lie on the bed, his legs propped up on Toblerone-shaped pillows. His body was like a leaden weight, and yet he couldn't sleep, his mind churning with weird visions.

A naked woman lies on a hospital bed. He recognizes her from her grandfather's photograph, even though she is screened off by people in scrubs. They hold instruments, the people around her—scalpels, forceps, surgical needles that glint in the cold white light. The woman moans, and it is Yvonne's voice that he hears. The people around her keep working, their faces expressionless. A man slips his arms beneath the sheet tented across the woman's knees and pulls out a long dark coil streaked with blood. The woman beside him holds up a large pair of shears. The umbilical cord, he thinks, heart racing. They are cutting the cord! He jerks forward, straining over the doctor's shoulder to see the baby. It is fully formed, its features etched perfectly on its small face, its back curved gracefully, molded against the concave of its mother's womb. Only, it is lifeless. He staggers backward. Not just lifeless, it is fossilized. Its tiny limbs calcified, mouth puckered in a soundless whimper. Beside it lay the tangled heap of the cord.

Marco sat up bathed in sweat. Yvonne's mobile phone kept ringing. Finally, on his fifteenth try, she picked up, sounding distant and foggy. He spat out the frightening vision, sobbing. "Hush, Marco. I'm fine, I'm okay," she said, her voice soothing. She tried to calm him down, told him it would be silly to cut his trip short and hop on the next flight home. "Look, honey, it was just a bad dream, all right? I'll call you if there's anything."

He confined himself to town the next day, jostling with backpackers down the narrow streets, moving from one quaint cafe that sold strong coffee and warm bagels to another, afraid to be left alone. By the third day, the afterimage of his vision, his dream, whatever it was, had faded enough for him to return to the ruins.

He brought Yvonne three bags of Kampot pepper as a present. He hugged her when she opened the door, then held her at arm's length to inspect her

belly, which seemed to have grown another inch in the mere week he was away.

He immediately called Jake to tell him he was back with the best shots he'd taken in his life, and promised to go down to the magazine office in a couple of days to hand in his work.

"That long?" Jake said. "Just upload them to Dropbox, man."

What would he have given for a snapshot of Jake's face when he handed him the thick manila envelope containing the photos he'd spent two sleepless nights developing and printing in his darkroom. As before, he left without a word. "Fuck you, man," Jake shouted behind him. He knew it was unlikely he would ever hear from him again, and this time, he couldn't care less.

That night, for the first time since coming back from Siem Reap, he could go to bed while Yvonne was still awake. She turned to him, stifling a yawn. "Lithopaedian," she said.

"What?"

"That fossilized baby in your dream—it's called a 'lithopaedian,' I googled it. It happens when there's a secondary abdominal pregnancy and the fetus turns into a stony mass. There was a case in India where a woman carried a lithopaedian inside her for twenty-five years. Being around all those stone ruins made you dream it."

He looked at her precipitous shadow beside him. Yes, let her think that. There was no reason to tell her now what he didn't that time he had called her from Siem Reap: that he hadn't been sleeping, and that what he had seen beside the baby in his waking dream wasn't the umbilical cord but a twisted length of 135mm film torn from its cartridge.

"Good night, honey," he said. But she was already asleep, breathing deeply.

He held out a tentative finger and let it glide over her belly. Halfway down, near her navel, he felt it: something pressing back, just barely. Which part of his unborn daughter was it? Her head, her elbow, her knee? Or her hand, maybe, reaching out for his?

Apsara, he thought. Rolling onto his elbows he brought his lips close to Yvonne's belly and kissed the spot where he had felt it.

IT HAD BEEN drizzling when he took his final shots of the ruins. He had asked the driver to take him to Bayon for the fifth and last time. The little shrine

at the entrance, tended by a shaven-headed nun on his former visits, was abandoned.

Up on the second-floor platform, the massive stone heads watched him, bidding goodbye. He realized then that what he'd taken to be mocking grins on their faces were benevolent smiles worn away by the elements over the centuries.

When his Nikon's exposure counter read 36, he returned to the tuktuk that would take him to the airport. As it pulled away from the temple, he craned his neck for a final glimpse. Instinctively, he lifted the viewfinder to his eyes and pressed the shutter. Sure enough, there was a frame left—just one extra frame before the camera started rewinding, but enough to capture the scene: a shard of sunlight slipping through an open seam in the sky behind the giant stone heads, gilding them.