

The Artist and the City

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A re-write in English of a short story I wrote in Swedish a few years back. It was meant to be published in an anthology, but the publishing company vanished without a trace before they got as much as a single word published.

Featured fandoms: original creations

Featured pairings:

A.S.S Story codes: gen

Story rating: G

He woke to violent banging on the studio loft's door and rolled out of bed before he was aware enough to realize what he was doing. Sunset shone in through the huge windows, bathing empty vodka bottles and half-full ashtrays in golden light. Haphazardly wrapping himself in the blanket from the bed, Jonathan staggered towards the door.

"Open up!" he heard a familiar voice shout. "I know you're in there, Jonathan!"

Fumbling at the lock, he got the door as open as the security chain would allow.

"What the fuck do you want?", he mumbled, in spite of already knowing perfectly well.

The man outside the door was somewhere in his upper twenties and dressed in a pale blue linen suit. He was fashionably tanned, and his eyes were contact lens green.

"The exhibition starts in three days," he said. "Are you going to have the pictures ready in time or not?"

"Hello, Tom," Jonathan said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Yeah, well, I thought about calling ahead, but I figured if I did you'd be out."

"I'll have the pictures ready in time," he said. "Don't you worry."

Tom looked doubtful. "I need them *before* the exhibition starts," he said. "You know what 'before' means, right?"

"Fuck you too," Jonathan said and closed the door.

By the time he was showered and dressed it was dark outside. Finding nothing but a tin of olives and a dried-up lemon in the fridge, he went out to get some breakfast. More out of habit than hope, he took the camera along. Maybe he'd find something worth shooting, something that wouldn't make him wince when he saw it hanging in Tom's gallery. Four months he'd had to produce four paltry photos, and so far he hadn't been able to produce even one that he could stand. Which wouldn't be so bad, except that he'd been living on an advance from Tom during those months.

Maybe he could get away with developing a blank film and calling it a statement about the emptiness of contemporary art.

He walked down to the convenience store on the corner. The sidewalk was mostly empty, except for the debris the daylight world left behind. The torn-up newspapers, the discarded McDonald's wrappers, the burn-out cigarettes, the washed-out people. The night air was filled with the cloying smell and chaotic symphony of the city, its too large variety of impressions melding to the olfactory and auditory equivalent of murky grey.

While he was in the store, it began to rain. He waited it out, passing the time by browsing cheap German porn magazines and trying to figure out what sort of sad person would buy crap like that. When the rain finally ended and he ventured back out into the city, it was as if it had been transformed.

The dust had been swept away. The debris and garbage washed into formless heaps. The air smelled clear. Even the sound was more pleasant. Entranced, white plastic bag with cereal and milk and vodka all but forgotten in his hand, he took a long way home. Instead of the large street with its cars and bicycles and sidewalks, he turned into an alley and followed it where it led. He turned left when it ended, right after that, left again and again and somewhere along the way he entirely forgot where he was going. The water-clad city held him fast.

It was beautiful.

Arrow-straight dotted lines of streetlights reflected in wet-black tarmac. Rivulets traced undecipherable writing on pale concrete walls. A leaf danced in the wind over an oil-slick rainbow.

He dropped the grocery bag, forgetting it as soon as it left his hand. Suddenly lost in concentration, he readied his camera.

"You know, I really didn't think you'd make it," Tom said. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and designer jeans instead of his usual suit and tie, probably in an effort to look less like a businessman and more like an artist type. Possibly, it fooled the sort of upper middle class cretins that infested the opening night into thinking that they got a bargain when they bought something.

"Well, I promised, didn't I?" Jonathan mumbled. His only effort towards the business side of things, apart from showing up at all, was to wear a clean t-shirt. He didn't like opening nights. He didn't like seeing his pictures treated like merchandise. Intellectually, he knew that it was what kept him with vodka and a roof over his head, but he still didn't like it.

"I guess you did," Tom granted. "They're selling well, too. The two that I put prices on for tonight are already spoken for, and I have very generous offers for the two I wasn't going to sell until much later. I think it's the faces they like."

Jonathan looked up at him. "Faces?" he said. "What faces?"

Tom look back at him with a curious expression. "You know, the faces. The little face in each picture looking straight into the camera. A stroke of genius, if you ask me. Gives the picture a... I don't know, a human element. Makes it more than just a cityscape."

"Oh, those," Jonathan lied. "Yeah, I thought they'd be nice. If you excuse, I think I'll mingle a bit."

He got up without waiting for a reply and headed for the wall where his four pictures, blown up to nearly a square meter each, hung. He carelessly pushed his way between the people enjoying the free wine and snacks, until he got close enough that he could see clearly.

In each picture there was someone looking straight into the camera. In the one taken from the vaulted entrance to an inner yard, there was a girl looking out through a window at him. In the one where he'd climbed up a fire escape ladder and looked down at the passing cars, there was an old bum sitting at the curb of the sidewalk looking straight at him. In the one with the bridge stretching into the darkness, a street-sweeper leaned on his cart and looked at him. In the one with the abandoned playground framed by highways, a little boy sat on a swing, looking into the camera.

None of them had been there when he took the pictures. He was absolutely sure. He'd waited, sometimes for upwards of an hour, to get pictures clinically free of people. Yet they were there.

"I hope you don't mind," someone said from behind him. He spun around. A woman stood there, smiling at him. He guessed that she was closing in on fifty, although plastic surgery made it hard to say. She was dressed in a business dress, and generally didn't look much different from anyone else in the room, except for her strangely deep grey eyes.

"What?" he said.

She smiled at him. "I just couldn't resist it," she said. "It's been so long since anyone looked at me like you did that night."

"Lady," he said. "I think you've had too much to drink."

"I'll be seeing you," she said, and with those words her eyes swirled strangely and turned from concrete grey to unremarkable brown. She looked at him with growing confusion for a few seconds, mumbled something about the ladies room and left. He kept looking at her as she walked away, surprised into speechlessness.

In the days that followed, he found himself unable to forget her. He tried to convince himself that she'd just been an old lady who spent too much time alone, but he couldn't. The way she'd seemed to read his mind, to know exactly what he was thinking and what had been weird about the pictures bothered him. The way her eyes had changed colour unnerved him. There was something very strange going on. He'd like to call it supernatural, but he didn't believe in crap like that.

Not knowing what to do, he took to prowling the city nights. Instead of lounging the days and nights away in his studio, he'd sleep the days away, wake up near sunset and go out soon after. He walked the streets and parks and bridges, looking for faces he didn't know but that seemed to know him. He started to spend a lot of time in bars and nightclubs. He carried his camera everywhere he went.

Late one night, weeks after the exhibition, she appeared to him again. He was sitting in a nightclub, trying to talk a wannabe model into his bed, when her eyes swirled and turned from pale blue to tarmac grey. He sat up straight.

"It's you," he said. "I've been looking for you."

"The old church near Clocktower Park," she said. "Two hours from now, just before the moon rises above the office high-rises. I'll be waiting for you."

Again, her eyes roiled like a stormy sky, turning back into their common blue. Elated, Jonathan half-threw himself across the table and kissed her.

"Thank you," he said, knowing full well that she would have no idea what he was talking about.

"Want to dance?" he said. He had almost two hours to kill.

The old church sat at a corner of the park, lurking between the darkness of the park's trees and bushes and the deep shadow thrown by the office buildings across the street. The pale circles thrown by the streetlights only served to accentuate the darkness.

"Soon," she said, through the mouth of a foul-smelling old bag-lady. "Soon you will see."

The full moon rose above the building, and he saw. The pale moonlight shone down at the church, reflecting off the glass sides of the skyscrapers. It bathed the scene in otherworldly light, transforming the darkness into a bluish magical wonderland.

"It's beautiful," he said, full of wonder.

"Thank you," she said. "I do my best."

He lifted his camera to his face, wildly hoping that even a fraction of the scene's magic would make it through to the film.

"Tomorrow night I'll show you a statue," she said.

"These are fantastic," Tom said, flipping through the pictures Jonathan had given him.

"Yeah, I know," Jonathan said. He'd spent every night for a week following her around the city, taking pictures in places he'd never have imagined could look that good.

"With these, I can make an exhibition with only your work. That means serious money."

"Neat," Jonathan said, his voice devoid of enthusiasm. "Do I have to be there?"

When the week ended, she'd told him to wait and just vanished. Knowing the futility of looking for her, he'd gone back to haunting bars and nightclubs and drinking the nights away.

"Well, you are getting a bit of a reputation as an eccentric," Tom said. "So I think I can swing a mysterious artist excuse for you. Heck, it might even up the prices a notch or two."

"Swell."

"When can you get me more pictures? No promises or anything, just a ballpark figure so I know how to pace the rumor mill?"

Jonathan sighed. "That depends entirely on when my muse decides to show up again," he said.

He didn't see her again until late June, when summer was at its hottest and the city never slept. His star had climbed steadily over the past couple of months, Tom slowly inching picture after picture onto the market, driving the prices ever higher. To his own great surprise, Jonathan found himself with more money than he could reasonably spend on cigarettes and vodka. He tried throwing parties in his studio, and for a little while it kept him distracted. But he found himself looking into the eyes of the interchangeably pretty model-wannabes and hoping to see them swirl into grey, and losing interest in them when their eyes persisted in staying whatever colour they were. He overheard a rumor that he had turned gay, and later another one that he was doing drugs that had burned out his libido. Neither of them told to his face, of course, no, they were whispered behind his back.

He didn't care. *She* wouldn't, so why should he?

Night after night, he kept his camera constantly within reach. Night after night, he didn't use it. Until, finally, she came back.

He was standing at the bar of a forgettable nightclub, drinking his way through every brand of vodka they had, when a near-anorexic teenager in a much too revealing black dress slid up next to him.

"Will you come to me?" she said. He had already begun to tell her to piss off when he saw her eyes, and the words died in his throat.

"Yes," he said, when he got control of his vocal cords again. "Where? When?"

"The service entrance to the old fort overlooking the harbor," she said. "Right now." And then she was gone.

The fort had been converted to a museum many years ago, and the service entrance was an ugly concrete scar in the hewn-stone wall. A ramp led down to a cargo dock. Broken crates and other debris lay in the corners, and weeds had cracked the tarmac. It smelled of dust and stale urine.

He found her sitting beside the entrance, leaning against the wall. She looked like she might be about fifteen years old, with long black hair, worn-out black clothes and heavy makeup. She was looking out over the sea and throwing gravel at imagined targets.

"You asked me to come," he said.

"I have so many more things for you to see," she said.

He sat down next to her. She smelled like she hadn't had a shower in a very long while.

"Can I ask you something?" he said, and she nodded.

"These people you come to me as," he said, "don't they mind?"

She looked up at him. "This one," she said, "that I'm wearing now, do you think she's happy?"

He shrugged.

"When she was fourteen her mother's boyfriend raped her," she said. "When she was fifteen her mother threw her out. Now she's sixteen, and she's got HIV and Hepatitis C from sharing a needle with girl who died of an overdose last week. It's been ten days since she ate a proper meal, and she doesn't care, because she's going into heroin withdrawal. She'll never be seventeen."

She looked up at him, and the roiling clouds in her eyes were very, very dark.

"When I wear her, she thinks she's dreaming," she said. "She thinks she dreams of the good places in me, the houses of the rich and happy, the gourmet restaurants and the amusement parks. For a few hours, she knows no fear, no hunger and no chemical need. For a little while, she's as close to happy as she knows how to be."

Jonathan sat down next to her. "I see," he said. "I didn't think of that. It's the sort of thing one doesn't like to think about, I guess. You're doing her a favour."

She shook her head. "I'm not doing anyone any favours," she said. "It's just that the deeply unhappy don't want to be in their minds, so it's easy for me to replace them. Her misery and pain is part of what makes me what I am, and I have no desire to change that."

"That's harsh," he said.

"That's life," she said.

She rose.

"Let's go see some parts of me you've never seen before," she said, offering her hand to him. "The hunt flies tonight."

He took her hand, and together they walked into the darkness.

Tom took the first photo out of the folder and put it on the desk before him. It was a night picture, taken in a park he thought he recognized. In the center of it was an ordinary park bench, with a young man sleeping on it. A gravel walkway went past the bench, appearing out of and vanishing into the darkness outside the small oasis of light cast by two lampposts, one on each side of the bench. He was just about to put the picture away when he happened to look a second time at the lampposts. The tops of them looked like heads, twisted metal heads with light shining out of wide-open fanged mouths and darkly glowing eyes. It looked like the lamps were looking at the man on the bench, and he got an unnerving feeling that they were just about to pounce. He looked up at Jonathan.

"What the fuck?" he said.

"Go on," Jonathan said.

The next picture was also a night one. It showed an ambulance, parked outside a shopping mall. Two paramedics were lifting a stretcher into it, a stretcher occupied by young man with a knife sticking out of his chest. It was hard to tell in the multicolored light from the neon advertisements, but it looked like there was a pool of blood on the sidewalk. A few people stood around the rear of the ambulance, apparently friends of the injured man. They were all looking down at him, except for a woman who was looking up at the top of the ambulance with an expression of incredible fear. He looked closer, and there, in the confusing shadows thrown by the ambulance's flashing blue and red lights, something was perched. It was about half as long as the ambulance, pale grey and skeletally thin. It had bat-like wings and a long, thin snout. He couldn't see any eyes, yet it seemed to be looking hungrily at the injured man below.

The next one was of a back yard somewhere, mostly empty except for a set of patio furniture badly in need of a coat of paint, a rusty old motorcycle and some junk too broken to tell what it used to be. On top of the patio table a teenage girl was sitting, her back ramrod straight and her head held high. A fire in an old hubcap next to her gave what little light the scene had. On the half-broken chairs and the ground around the table dozens of children waited. Some sat, some crouched, some he couldn't quite tell what they were doing. They were all dressed in rags and tatters, and didn't look like they'd seen a bath in a good long while. There was something disturbing about the way their attention was fixated on the girl on the table. It didn't look healthy, although he wasn't quite sure who it wasn't healthy for. The photographer had been quite distant, and the darkness made it hard to make out any details on the children.

The next picture was of the same back yard. The girl and the kids had moved, so he guessed it was a little later. It was also taken closer up. The girl had left the table and was straddling the motorcycle. She was looking straight into the camera, and her hand was stretched out in a summoning gesture. The kids crowded around her, and from somewhere they had brought out rollerskates, skateboards and other things to ride. They also seemed to be deformed. His eyes first caught on a boy without eyes, with nothing but smooth skin where his eye sockets should be. As soon as he'd seen the first one, the incongruities jumped out at him. A girl with paws instead of hands. Another girl with goat's legs. A boy with greenish skin and long, thin fangs. Something in the shadows that seemed to have far too many legs. Deformed, all of them. He reached for the next photo, revolted and fascinated at the same time.

The next one was taken by someone sitting at the back of the motorcycle, over the shoulder of the teenage girl. The horizon was nowhere near straight. The motorcycle was moving down a street he knew quite well, there was a decent pub only a block from where the picture was taken. Only he hadn't seen the street from this angle. The motorcycle was clearly moving several meters above the ground, and he could see the kids on their skates and boards and things hovering near the bike. On the ground, maybe twenty or thirty meters in front of the flying horde of malformed children, three teenagers were running for their lives. One of them, a boy, was looking back over his shoulder.

His face held an expression of disbelieving horror. At the edge of the picture, slightly out of focus, he could see the arm of the girl riding the motorcycle, holding a machete ready to strike.

There was something familiar about the boy looking back. He tried to remember what as he took the last picture from the folder.

It was of the back yard again. A large fire had been lit in the middle of it, and the strange children were dancing around it. The teenage girl stood on the far side of the fire, her hands stretched towards the sky and her face painted with blood. Behind her three pikes had been lashed to the motorcycle, and on each pike a human head had been stuck. He recognized one of them as the boy who'd been looking over his shoulder in the picture before.

He recognized him as well as the other two from the evening newspapers a couple of weeks back.

He put the picture down and leaned back in his stuffed office chair, feeling vaguely sick.

"When the police asks, I'll say that I thought it was the damnedest Photoshop job I'd ever seen," he said. "Although I know it's not. Nobody's good enough to have faked these."

"Do you want them or not?" Jonathan said. He looked strangely calm. Too calm. An edge of fear crept into Tom's mind.

"Sure I want them," he said. "I mean, it was the news of the month when they found the bodies of those three. When this hits the tabloids, the price of the pictures is going to seriously skyrocket."

"Good," Jonathan said. "I want people to see this."

"Jonathan...," Tom failed to say.

"I have to ask," he tried again. "I mean, you were gone for over a month, and then you come back with this."

"I didn't kill them," Jonathan said. "She did."

"She?"

"My muse. The city."

"I see," Tom said. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, I guess that's it for now," he went on when he'd had as much of the silence as he could stand. "I'll deposit your share of the sales in your account as usual, unless the police gets in the way."

"Fine," Jonathan said. "I'll be in touch."

Months passed, and Jonathan was nowhere to be found. The police questioned Tom at length, getting none the wiser for their effort. They managed to identify the back yard in the pictures, and found the scorched skulls of the three unlucky youths in the remains of a fire. They went over Jonathan's studio with all the resources of modern forensics, and came up empty. They kept tabs on his bank accounts, but they were never touched. They posted him as wanted, not just locally but all over the country and through Interpol. He remained gone.

As Tom had predicted, the price of the original pictures went astronomical as soon as the tabloids sunk their scandal-hungry teeth into the story. Being at heart a salesman, he milked the attention for all that he could and only finally sold when his gut told him that the attention was beginning to wane. His share of the price was enough to keep the gallery in the black for years, and he started thinking about expanding. He went to all the right parties and talked to all the bright young things coming out of the art colleges. By and by, things returned to normal. Other morbidities paraded across the headlines, and he was mostly forgotten. Summer matured into fall, and fall moved inexorably towards winter.

Darkness had already fallen, and chill winds promised snow as Tom locked up the gallery and headed for home. It was dark, and, since a deceptively warm morning had tricked him into taking a too thin coat, he was hurrying along as fast as he could. He held the thin coat closed as well as he could and tried to will it to keep the wind out. The underground entrance loomed ahead like the mouth of heaven, and was mentally already inside it when he felt someone touch his shoulder. He looked up, and for a few moments he didn't recognize the tanned and bearded man he saw. But only for a few moments.

"Jonathan!" he said.

"Here," Jonathan said and held out a large brown envelope towards him.

He took it. It was thick and heavy, enough so to hold several dozen pictures. "Where have you been?" he asked. "The police are looking for you."

"I know," Jonathan said. "They won't find me. I'm with her."

He was dressed in thin clothes that looked like they'd been patched together from whatever pieces of cloth had been handy. He was dirty, and smelled of dust and dried-up oil.

"Her," Tom said. "Your muse?"

"Right. She wants you to publish those. She wants people to see them. She wants them to know who she really is."

Tom felt the weight of the envelope. "People will ask," he said. "The police will ask. What should I tell them?"

Jonathan shrugged. "Whatever you can get away with."

"I can't pay you," he said. "The police froze your accounts."

"So keep it. I don't need money any more."

Jonathan turned and started to walk away.

"Wait!" Tom said. "Don't you want to know how it goes? Make sure that I really do publish this?"

"You're living *in* her," he heard Jonathan say as he walked into the deeper shadow behind a dumpster.

"She'll know," Jonathan whispered, and Tom couldn't tell from where the whisper came. He was all alone in the street, standing there in his too-thin coat holding the heavy brown envelope. For a few moments, curiosity flared within him and he was tempted to follow Jonathan in behind that dumpster. But then a stronger gust of ice-cold wind

cut through to his bones, and he hastened towards the warmth underground again. But all the way there, and all the rest of his way home, he had the strangest feeling that someone was watching him.

Someone very large, and not very human.