



HOLOGRAMS

by Robert James Russell

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CAROLINE'S job that summer was this: to sit at a small fold-out card table at the entrance to the Michigan International Speedway next to a girl named Kelly Pettis, who was a year behind her in school, and answer a big boiled-corn-yellow phone when it rang and give out directions to people who didn't know how to get to the races. She would sit there with an oversized US road atlas. When someone called, it was always a struggle, determining exactly where they were. When she found the place on the map, she'd trace a route with her finger and dictate it back to them once she was certain. They'd hardly ever thank her, but it was satisfying being in control, even of something so miniscule.

In front of Kelly, sat a cardboard box that once housed an old Kenmore microwave, filled with pistols, revolvers, handguns of all sorts. Her job was to take the guns from the owners, write their last name on a hunter-orange tag, then rubber band it to the trigger guard. The system was sloppy, yes, and it was terrifying. Caroline didn't come from a family of gun folk. She didn't know how to handle the weapons, the jingoism that came along with ownership. The first time she handled a gun, she was surprised by its heft, how much more there seemed to be beneath the sheen, the scuffed-black finish. It was a cannonball in the palm of her hand, she thought. A rocket. She always excused herself when the races were over, didn't want to be by the table then, when the owners—usually men—would come back drunk and red-faced, flinging salacious propositions at the girls. “We're underage, dickweed,” Kelly would say, defiantly pushing their gun toward them across the plastic tabletop. “Get lost.”

Caroline hated it—hated confrontation. She hated, too, when her dad would prank call her here, asking her directions from Florida or England or Hawai'i. “Please stop calling,” she'd say, hanging up the receiver slowly. But she learned to love the fold-out table where she worked. She knew what was expected—to answer the belled-ringing phone and give directions to the speedway—and it was easy enough work. Plus, she could sit in the hot

afternoon sun and get a tan, darkening her skin like she thought the boys liked. Before them, the sprawling parking lot sat pockmarked with the glare of sedans and pick-up trucks and older-model SUVs. The table was positioned in the center of a wide-paved path that narrowed as it entered into the speedway. When it was quiet, especially after the race had begun, especially when Kelly would sneak off, Caroline would often scooch her chair out from under the tent, roll up her shorts, put her hair up, sit back. All those cars and yet she felt like she was the only person alive.

Now, in late-July, she was bored. As the last of the crowds wedged into the speedway, she looked at Kelly, her cheerleader's body—toned and long-legged—and her frizzed-out red hair.

“What,” Kelly said. “Why are you looking at me?”

Caroline thought a moment. The two weren't friends at school, had never even talked to one another. Kelly was light years more popular than Caroline. And yet, sitting in proximity like this, a friendship of sorts had blossomed. “I'm bored,” Caroline said.

Kelly turned, then, smiled. “Let's get into trouble, huh?”

“Okay,” Caroline said. “Like, what kind?”

“You know Zach?”

She did know Zach. In June, he'd given Caroline her first alcoholic drink, Faygo lemonade and cheap no-brand vodka. She'd gotten drunk quickly.

It was at a party, of sorts. They were in a sprawling-browned field behind a friend of a friend's house that butted up against a cheap par three golf course. There was a trampoline where a couple Caroline didn't know lay talking about their favorite animals, what super powers they wished they had. No one was home, no one was golfing, and they had no view of the road. It felt so adult, how alone they were, Caroline thought. Zach was manic, alternating telling stories about fights he got in (and won) when he was younger and making whistles out of fallen acorns. He lit a fire in an old Folger's tin, feeding in pieces of scrap paper and dead leaves, telling them to use their imaginations, that they were all around a brilliantly huge bonfire near a lake, a river instead of some cruddy backyard. And while Zach talked to Kelly and some other girl she didn't know, flirted with them by flexing and telling them how fast he could run, Caroline studied his aquiline nose and strawberry blond hair and felt the desire to tussle it.

“What about him?” Caroline asked.

“He told me last week he wants to teach me to shoot. I said I'd take him to third base if he did.”

Caroline realized, even before saying the words, what Kelly had in store. “A gun?”

Kelly laughed. “Doy!” She looked around. They were alone. The muffled loudspeaker in the speedway was vomiting out someone’s garbled voice. Fans cheered. Kelly pulled the cardboard gun box close to her and carefully selected a small snub-nosed revolver. She held it up, cocked her head sideways, and read the orange tag. “Think... Mr. Burke will mind?” She ripped off the tag and held the gun in her lap, wrapped her fingers around the grip. She said, smiling, “Just my size.”

After leaving the fold-out table in the care of a voluptuous freshman girl who normally worked concessions, they met Zach—who was working as a custodian at the speedway for the summer—and snuck around the back of the tall barbed-wire fence that circled the speedway, near turn three. The grass was high there, so they could sit in it with only the tops of their heads bobbed up to see the cars, tiny colorful boxes zipping around the oval.

Zach admired the gun. He couldn’t get enough of it. He was between the girls, and Caroline stared at his muscular calves, his tanned thighs sticking out of frayed jean shorts. “Should we rob a bank?” he asked, laughing, twirling the gun.

“Don’t drop it,” Kelly said. “I have to get it back in one piece.”

“Won’t they wonder why the bullets are missing?” Caroline thought about what she’d just said. Her face reddened. “Fired, I mean. Why they’re gone.”

“They’ll be too *fried*. You know this.” Kelly spit at her side. Caroline wondered if this was an odd tic of Kelly’s she’d never noticed before or if she was trying to seem cool. She smiled, thinking about Kelly, Pretty Kelly, the spitting cheerleader. “If they say anything, I’ll tell them they gave it to me like this and they should be more careful. It’ll be fine.”

Zach looked over at Caroline. “Don’t be worried,” he said. He reached out and touched her knee, ran his fingers one after the other over it. She blushed. “I go hunting every year. I know how to handle one of these.”

Caroline swallowed. Zach removed his hand. “Okay,” she said.

Kelly snorted. “You’re red in the face,” she said. “It’s just Zach. Look.” She dropped the long pieces of grass she’d been braiding together, crawled over. She grabbed Zach by the collar and tongue-kissed him. When she pulled away, she smiled and snorted again, moved back to her spot, and began re-braiding the grass. “See? No big deal.”

Zach sighed. “You’re nuts,” he said. He looked at Caroline. “Don’t let her get to you. She’s just fast.”

“Fuck off,” Kelly said.

Zach admired the gun again. Then the belt of the cars’ engines roared like jets—they all sat up, studying the track the cars already having sped past. All summer Caroline had been fixated on how slow the sound moved. She’d often lean back against the very same chain link fence, alone, and let herself be amazed: the cars speeding by strangely silent, the sound following in the wake, crashing over her. Zach lifted the gun and aimed it at the cars, blips now nearing the fourth turn. “So, I took this class at Michigan State fall semester,” he said.

“We know where you go to school,” Kelly said. “I’m going to go to Michigan, by the way.”

“Right. Good luck with that.”

Kelly reached over, slugged him in the arm. Zach shifted, laughed. Caroline watched the gun, followed it, while he moved. She wondered then if it had any kick—if, when fired, Kelly would fly backwards like she’d seen in movies and TV shows and cartoons. Her thighs twitched at the thought of it. She unfolded them from underneath one another and laid them out

straight into the grass. She imagined bracing herself in a wide stance, what it would feel like to absorb the recoil.

“Anyway,” Zach said. He popped open the gun’s cylinder, rolled it along his palm back-forth. “I took this class and we talked about the holographic principle of the universe.” He waited, looked at Caroline. “You know what that is?”

Caroline shook her head no.

“Well, basically, it’s this idea that none of this”—he waved the gun ahead of him, parted the grass—“is real. It’s all a hologram.”

“That’s stupid,” Kelly said.

“*What’s* a hologram?” Caroline asked. She scrunched her face. “Like, I know what a hologram is. But...?”

“The whole universe. None of this is real.” Zach carefully popped out a single round from the cylinder and studied its brassy glare. “You, me, this grass. Nothing.”

“I don’t...” Caroline stopped herself. She didn’t want to seem like she didn’t know anything.

Zach rechambered the round and closed the cylinder with a click. “Look, it’s like this, right? The universe is made up of information. We

exist in, like, this cosmic soup in outer space. We're just these evolved beings in the soup. And we create this fictional world to deal with our lives."

"But if we're evolved," Kelly said, "why would we *need* to deal with being in the stew?"

"Soup."

"Whatever. Who cares?"

"Who knows? Easier to process data? Like, that's why ghosts are probably just these figments of data." Zach picked at a piece of the worn rubber grip that had cracked loose. "The process gets messed up, we think we see something. It explains a lot, actually, if you think about it."

Caroline didn't think it explained a lot. Now, she had more questions than answers. She tucked her legs back into a pretzel, felt antsy in a way she couldn't articulate.

Zach sniffed, cleared his throat. "All this information bouncing around. Like, a hologram is just light being projected through an object, you know? That's what our bodies are. What we are. Just information and light, and these ideas of our world, our cultures, being projected."

Caroline thought about her mom, the leukemia. If that were true, then the cancer, all those tiny, multiplying cells, had been just information and light, too.

“You know why I think this is stupid?” Kelly said.

“Tell me,” Zach said. “I can’t wait.”

“This seems like some stupid excuse of an idea that people tell themselves so there aren’t any repercussions for their actions. Like, it’s when a guy grabs a girl’s ass, and he says she was wearing too short a skirt or something so she had it coming.” She snorts. “I think not, buddy. I think not.”

“It’s not...” Zach stopped, grew flustered.

“What did you get in the class?” Kelly asked. “Did you even pass it?”

“Yeah, I did,” he said. “You just don’t get it. People can still die... well, like, ideas of them. You know, like a dream. If you die in a dream, you don’t die in real life.”

“You always wake up before you die in dreams.” Caroline bit her lip. She didn’t mean to say it out loud. She was self-conscious, too: her lot in life was to attend community college for a couple years, maybe transfer to

Western or Central. She had to take care of her dad now—how far could she even really go, then?

She felt like she didn't belong here, with them. Like she wasn't good enough. But, as weird as Zach was sounding, as much as she didn't understand this, she liked hearing him talk. Didn't want to stop that.

“Someone I know died in a dream,” Kelly said. “Truth.”

“Doubt it,” Zach said. He pointed to Caroline. “I think she's right. It's impossible.”

“No, this happened to my friend. Fell off a building or something. A mountain? Anyway, hit the ground, but was still *with* it, you know? Woke up later.”

“Uh, who was this?”

“No one you know.”

“Then I think you're full of shit.”

“Who cares,” Kelly said. “Give me the gun.”

Zach handed it over, and Kelly flipped it over. The small barrel glinted polished-black in the afternoon sun. “Careful,” he said.

“You said you'd teach me how to shoot.”

“Probably not a good idea.”

“Pussy,” Kelly said.

“I don’t like that word,” Caroline said. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Zach said standing. “You’re allowed to not like things.”

Kelly snorted, watched Zach stretch. With the gun in hand, she crept toward him, shoved the stubby barrel into the zipper of his jean shorts. He jumped back, but she followed with him, kept it pressed firmly.

“What the hell!” Zach yowled.

“I’m going to blow your dick off,” Kelly said. She was grinning now, laughing. Caroline moved back. She wanted to stand, to run off, but didn’t. She watched the two of them lurch backwards, Zach stumbling, but remaining upright. He tried to swat the gun away, but Kelly replaced it each time, pressed it into him, resilient.

“This isn’t funny,” he said. “Knock it off.”

“Why would it be? Every guy loves his dick, right? Anyway, your dick is a hologram.”

“Not funny. I’m going to…” But Zach stopped talking. He stood still.

Kelly pulled the hammer back slowly. “Like this, right?”

A moment settled between them. No one knew what to say. The cars approached from the second turn, cleared the third in an explosive burst, moved on.

“I don’t think you’ll do it,” Zach said. “You can’t come back from this.”

It had to be a game, Caroline thought. They had the luxuries of games, kids like Zach and Kelly, kids who had it all laid out for them. Not like her, one of the forgotten. Caroline had jokingly referred to herself this way to Kelly when they started working together that season.

“What,” Kelly asked, only half-listening.

“You know, one of the kids who doesn’t really know where they’ll end up next year. Probably still living at home for a while. You’ll see them around town when everyone is back on the weekends from college.”

Caroline remembered Kelly feigning interest then, some speck of compassion. “Oh, well, buck up! At least you don’t *look* like a townie.”

Kelly laughed, drawing Caroline’s attention to the present again. She was waving the gun, snickering. Zach was mumbling, trying to swat it away but Kelly was too quick. Caroline, now, was looking back at the speedway, the cars. She had to look away. Watching Zach and Kelly squirm, thinking

about all the places they would probably go, the things they'd do, was too much.

She thought about the races. Typically, once they had started, she would excuse herself from the fold-out table and wade through the crowds in the speedway in line for concessions, narrowly missing the drunk stumblings of passers-by as they ate their hot dogs and nachos, had their boorish conversations riddled with epithets, colloquialisms she didn't understand.

Sometimes, Caroline would follow a large family around the concourse, pretending to be a part of their group. She would listen to the children fight and the parents argue about when best to leave to avoid traffic and wondered what their home was like and the sorts of meals they ate. Most of the families paid her no attention—she was a slight girl with a young face, and if they saw her trailing close by they'd just smile, cock their heads, and she'd disappear like some figment. But still, she liked that better than the quiet of her own home, just her and her dad. They didn't fight, rarely talked. He was usually too sad, and she was, too. It had only been a year since her mom died, she had to remind herself. This roiled sadness was okay.

Often Caroline watched the infield, crowded with trailers and campers, the wives and families of the drivers, the newspapermen and those lucky enough to be allowed to join them. It was another world, one far removed from the stench of piss and stale beer and desperation she was confined to. She longed to be in there and had asked to be allowed to work in one of the VIP tents but was told she was too inexperienced for such a job. She held out hope anyway that someone might change their mind, that there would be a chance.

Caroline looked back again at Kelly and Zach, standing still now. She wondered then if maybe this wasn't a game, if Kelly had actually snapped—a summer of having to deal with men explaining things to her, harassing her. No, Caroline told herself. Kelly knew what she was doing. She was given everything, she had an entire family—a whole family—waiting for her at home. This is who she was, doing what she pleased, acting like this life didn't matter. Just some holographic world she could reign over with no repercussions.

Caroline squinted her eyes at the infield. She focused on a woman wearing a crimson sleeveless pantsuit and big sunglasses. From here, from this far away, she looked like a bug with big black eyes and sapling thin limbs. She was in a crowd of people, but looked alone, forgotten. She

looked like she wanted to be somewhere else. Clearly, Caroline figured, the wife of one of the drivers. The woman wiped her forehead dry of sweat, and then proceeded to talk to a young-looking man wearing a tight white t-shirt and a backwards Detroit Tigers baseball hat—the Old English “D” unmistakable. The woman folded her arms along her chest. Caroline did the same while she watched. The woman seemed to be flirting, throwing her head back. Zach and Kelly were only distant echoes now. The cars raced by, thundered. Caroline plugged her ears. The wife never once looked at the track. It was as if the drivers, their cars, the roar, didn’t exist.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert James Russell is the author of the novellas *Mesilla* (Dock Street Press) and *Sea of Trees* (Winter Goose Publishing), and the chapbook *Don't Ask Me to Spell It Out* (WhiskeyPaper Press). He is a founder and managing editor of the literary journals *Midwestern Gothic* (co-founder) and *CHEAP POP* (founder). You can find him online at robertjamesrussell.com.

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