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## A House of Cards

Bernard Epps

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*Bernard Epps*

## A HOUSE OF CARDS

The streets were deserted. Buildings huddled together for warmth in the night, stared down at their hollow aisles where street lamps stood lonely, each haloed in a greenish mist. A derelict shuffled sullenly sleepward. The traffic light turned from red to green to orange to red to green . . . blind commands to the naked street.

A prowl car stood patiently at the curb and two cops in a diner gestured with the counterman. Light spilled from the restaurant window and lay absent-mindedly on the sidewalk, a soiled yellow puddle. A young man came and stepped carefully around the puddle. He strolled with his hand in the side-pockets of his coat and stared around at the empty night.

The light on the corner turned from green to orange to red . . . .

A cat leaped across the street and disappeared into an alley beside the Amusement Park. The startled silence closed down again behind it like a blanket. The Park was as silent as the moon.

The man stared at his reflection in the window of the ticket office; winked at himself.

Red . . . to green . . . to orange . . . .

A girl came, walking with her hands behind her and dangling a brown purse. She wore toreador pants, a gray sweater and their reflections met in the glass.

Hello, he said to the window.

Hello, said she.

The cat tiptoed from the alley, looked both ways and hurried back across the street.

What are we doing here, he said.

A fragment of moon climbed the east.

The rest of the world is asleep, she said.

The rest of the world is dead, said he.

They joined hands and ducked under the turnstile. Funland, it said.

They looked at the Penny Arcade and all the machines had their backs turned. They looked at the Haunted House and there was a plaster witch riding a broom. There was a shooting range (15 shots a

quarter) and a place to fish for bottles. Every Throw Wins a Prize. Thrills. Chills. Ride a Rocket Ship. Loop the Loop. Crack the Whip. The Octopus. All were silent and deserted, alone and idle in the night.

They came to the Merry-Go-Round and she climbed up and sat astride a painted horse. He sat beside her and they joined hands again. His horse was green and had only one eye and the tip of its nose was broken.

They listened hard for the music.

They sat a long time in silence and the vacant world was like a blanket around them. They looked up at the blind night sky but the sky did not look back.

He sighed and jumped and lifted her down beside him and they wandered on in the naked park.

In the shadow of the roller coaster he turned and kissed her and she hugged him and closed her eyes. His hands moved down her back and crushed her until he could feel the bones beneath the warmth of her skin and her heart beat against his own.

The moon climbed.

They moved on to the Caterpillar and the Hall of Mirrors and the Tunnel of Love. There were a plastic cherub and two painted hearts.

They walked hand-in-hand between the side shows. The Strongest Man in the World, it said. The Tattooed Fat Lady, it said. Lola, the Snake Girl. Wild Man of Borneo. Wonder of the Age. Paint was cracking from the walls and all the ticket windows were closed.

They came to a cage where monkeys were kept. She peered eagerly through the bars but the cage was empty.

There aren't any monkeys, she said.

There never were, said he.

A torn patch appeared in the sky. Dawn was creeping in. It began chasing dust along the pavement. A poster on one of the walls flapped wearily. Elect James (Big Jim) Blaire, it said.

He dropped her hand and they looked at each other sadly. She smiled and lifted her shoulders.

Goodbye, she said.

Goodbye, said he.

He turned and walked away. The light turned from orange to red to green and the Amusement Park settled down with the rustling dawn. Once or twice they looked back and waved.

A gull screamed and the silence collapsed all at once and shattered in a million pieces.