

WITH OR WITHOUT YOU

By Robert Vamosi

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KERRY, MY LIVE-IN LOVER, is uncertain about our future. She tells me this in the Addiction/Recovery aisle of Stacey's Bookstore in Cupertino, only sound and picture are not in sync. I see Kerry's lips move. I feel the soft explosion of her breath reverberate with sound. But my lingering image of this moment will forever remain not of her soft skin, not her fabulous blue eyes, nor even her taut mouth whose lingual penetration was all that occupied my free time these last few weeks; it will be of the horror novels just beyond her, their matte black covers oozing blood onto her auburn-red hair while soft Muzak plays "Moonlight Sonata," drowning out the manifold reasons we cannot continue to live together.

"Joe is picking me up," she says, turning to go.

"Joe?"

Early this morning the actress Lauren Rogers died, and with her my first and only real shot at working on a feature film. Now, Kerry decides it's time for her to move out. I loiter about the bookstore in a funk, my mind obsessed with the film, with Kerry.

My beeper sounds.

Coolridge, Coda's director, appears on my remote, the tiny chip-screen I pull from my waistband. She's in L.A., at home. She looks like she needs sleep or at least a good smoke.

"Ron's having the wake at the house tonight," she say. "He expects you down here about eightish for dinner. Howard, he fully intends to finish the film." Her image mail ends abruptly in a burst of colored confetti.

I should be happy that I still have a job, happy that I don't have to buy any of the career manuals I've just leafed through. I am not. I'm still upset. So for my trip down to L.A. tonight, I buy a horror novel, one with metallic blood dribbling down its matte black cover. I buy it because the woman screaming on the cover reminds me of Kerry.

Lauren's death came as no surprise. I remember Coolridge as most livid during those first forty-eight hours after Lauren collapsed in the middle of a scene last January, much more so than Ron, Lauren's husband and Coda's producer. What few shoots we needed to finish principal photography were mostly close-ups and Ron felt we could scrap those of Lauren if it came to that. Coolridge disagreed.

"I'm not going into editing strapped with only a master shot and almost no

choices. Dammit, Lauren was getting good. I want choices.”

So Ron acquiesced.

The following morning I was in the Bay Area to conference with execs from Digitex. Perhaps you know the company. Two years ago they caused a stir with their Marilyn Monroe commercials: the singular way the dead actress, standing over that same New York steam vent she made famous almost forty years ago, turns and invites the home viewer to try her brand of feminine hygiene protection. Had Digitex not won a Cleo that year, the subsequent lawsuits would have buried the company then and there.

So the day after Lauren entered the hospital, I was in a tiny Silicon Valley conference room, watching Digitex’s animation of Lauren Rogers on a twenty-nine-inch Sony. It was good. Having known her on and off the set, I thought they’d captured much of her personality in the forty-second clip.

That’s what Ron wanted to hear. After one long conference call, we had a commitment to go.

That evening I celebrated with Ron and Coolridge over dinner back in L.A.

“Lauren’s responding to medication,” Ron said. He stabbed at his t-bone steak as though it was trying to leap off the plate. “Her prognosis is very good. She’ll be back, they tell me, ready to loop dialogue, in no time.”

“Bullshit — she’s dying,” Coolridge said. “You bastard, you kept that she was HIV positive from everyone. Even me.”

“Patricia, you can’t discriminate just because someone’s a Positive.” Ron smiled. “She’ll be back to work in a few weeks.”

“A few weeks, huh? Then what’s Howard doing moving up to Cupertino?”

Ron, who could have played poker with the best and won, just looked at me as though seeing me for the first time and smiled. “Some insurance work. That’s all.”

Five hours after Coolridge called to say Ron was serious about finishing Coda, I arrive at Ron’s house in L.A. The horror novel I read on the Bullet Train now rides low, just inside my jacket pocket, and Lew Spencer, the agent who receives me at the door, sees it and smiles. He asks if I’m secretly scripting the book for him on spec. When I say I’m not, he just laughs.

“Send it to me when you finish Coda. I have a feeling you’ll be much in demand after Coda.”

Without response, I take a complimentary drink and walk past him, into the living room.

Ron's house overlooks the Los Angeles Basin. It is past sunset, almost night when I arrive, so the City of Angels spread out below, with all its lights, looks about as real as the background of any local TV news set. This is the satellite-shaped house where DePalma lensed part of *Body Double* so I wander around the living room, recreating the moments from the film I once wrote about while doing my undergraduate film studies. I see many old faculty and classmates of mine mingling. I am still surprised to see the ol' boy network alive and well in this town of ego-slashing cutthroats.

Someone taps a glass, and all conversation abruptly ceases.

Ron stands atop the kitchen table, an urn in his outstretched hands. He invites a moment of silence as Tibetan monks march out of the bedroom, chanting, wafting the kind of incense which irritates my nose. Someone else sneezes. After this, Ron then relates a few anecdotes about Lauren's struggle to come to peace with death. For a man so close to his wife's mortality, he seems strangely calm this evening. Even jocular.

"She said, at the end, 'Honey, with the kind of films I've made, I'm so used to dying. . . .'"

The music starts again and Coolridge calls me over. At first she wants to know how it's going, so I tell her about Kerry, about Joe. But Coolridge's eyes begin to wander, her attention begins to follow. I ask her about the film, our mutual bond.

"Well," she says, staring me down, "I don't like Digitex's rushes. Oh, don't take it personally. I just don't think this techno-crap can salvage *Coda*."

I nod and look out the window, distracted. Someone has lit fireworks in the Canyon. Red, blue, and yellow fire blossoms peak outside Ron's house. Watching them, I feel further removed from the party. I think of the night a friend and I sneaked aboard the *Queen Mary* in Long Beach, and watched the fireworks intended only for paying guests. So long ago

"Howard," says Coolridge, ending my reverie, "I'm not in control anymore." At first I consider the drink in her hand, the slur to her speech, and quite possibly her sense of balance. Then I realize what she means.

"So file a grievance with the Guild."

"By the time they rule, the film will be out." She watches my eyes widen. "Oh,

yes. Ron still intends to premiere Coda in New York and L.A. by the final week in December. A Golden Globe, if not an Oscar. You can buy the Globes at least.”

I shake my head. “We’re not even close. We’re really pushing the technology up there.”

“This isn’t about technology. For a man who’s just lost his wife of twenty years, Ron hasn’t a care in the world. Least of all technology.”

At that moment I happen to see our host, the film’s producer, good ol’ Ron, atop the piano, doing a jig. He turns and perhaps he sees his director and her assistant. Perhaps because he smiles and waves when I smile back.

“This is about something larger,” Coolridge continues, behind me. “Something more . . . “I turn and find that Coolridge has gone out onto the balcony to vomit.

Back in Cupertino the morning after Lauren Rogers’ wake, I watch the dead actress smile and give her lines on a tiny Sony monitor. Flawlessly. Watching this, I hear Coolridge’s doubts recirculate in my mind.

“It’s too smooth,” I say, slamming down my coffee mug. “Can you . . . ?”

They cannot. Even before I ask, I see their answer. These patient Digitex techs.

Susan, the one with the punk-red hair and the green eyes who’s been putting up with me for the last two months without a protest, utters a single word: “Context.”

J.D., her assistant who also might have been under instruction not to ruffle my feathers, agrees. “Yes. You know, Howard, the Kuleshov effect.”

I lean back in my chair, amazed. For the last two months, I’ve sensed these Digitex employees to be little more than digital hackers, graphic artists who dream only in bytes and hexadecimal beauty. Instead, both have film degrees. Moreover, they might even have a point.

The Kuleshov effect, if I may digress, is when three or more shots —say a baby, a coffin, and a woman crying — are cut together. Did the woman lose her baby? Did the dead husband leave behind a grieving wife and child? Has the woman simply lived and died a sad life? Given the above information, each scenario is plausible. It’s all in the context.

Tomorrow, Ron will arrive with the first cut scene. It will be the first incorporation of live action with our digital recreations. In the morning we’ll know.

That night Coolridge calls. It's a hot evening unusual for the Bay Area. While my small Cupertino apartment has amenities like air conditioning I've chosen to save the Antarctic ozone and simply lie atop my bed in plaid boxers. Coolridge pretends not to notice. She's in town for the screening tomorrow morning staying at the same Howard Johnsons I had, and from the narrow view visible behind her, I further see that it might even be the same room.

"The whole thing is funny," Coolridge says, not at all amused. "I should have realized Coda wasn't my picture from the start. Remember our production schedule?"

I did. We did a master shot for every scene within the first two weeks, and spent the rest of the time doing the cutaways. That's backward. It's expensive.

"Then money's no object," I say.

"Not with the new toys you're playing with." Coolridge spies something on my bed, smiles. "Bordwell and Thompson. Latest edition. I too broke out my copy of Film Art the other day. Mine's a first edition, however."

I nod. I'd gone back to Stacey's and for a "computer bookstore," their film and film-making section is quite good. I'd gone there initially for the Thalmanns' texts on computer graphics, which of course they had. These, now scattered on my bed alongside the tenth edition of Film Art, didn't much interest Coolridge, however.

"Spline Algorithms. P-curves. Pixel ratio. These aren't film terms," she says. "You're no longer working on a 'film,' Howard. You're making a Saturday morning cartoon."

I say nothing. She is drunk, perhaps nervous about tomorrow morning's screening.

"When I was in film school," she continues, "we shot with Super-8 cameras and used little tape-splice editors. We had impromptu screenings in dark custodial closets in the journalism building late at night. I only got into TV because people I trusted said that I'd one day get into films. Well, look at me. I'm forty and I'm still not making films for a living. You, however, are lucky. There are only a few people in this town who work only in film. Film is an art, remember that. Video . . . is a wasteland."

EIGHT A.M. the next morning, we gather in the Digitex screening room. Coolridge, who joined me for breakfast, now smokes neurotically while Ron, who flew in only moments before, stands behind us in the projection booth. He is supervising the union projectionist's loading of the first intercut sequence of Coda.

The lights dim. The scene, originally shot in front of a New York town house on the New Paramount backlot, lasts a mere two minutes. After, no one breathes.

Was it live or was it Digitex?

Or maybe the Kuleshov effect.

All of Lauren's close-ups in the cut scene were digitally rendered. She never spoke a word of the dialogue in real life. And yet her co-star, an actor very much alive today, seemed more wooden, almost dead on screen when compared with Lauren's simulation. Something's wrong, I think.

"Assuming we correct the loss in image resolution," Ron says, smiling, "audiences won't suspect a thing. We'll have our hit after all."

Coolridge shakes her head. "Holly's one of the best editors working but she needs more freedom. I can't put constraints like this on her choices."

"Nonsense," says Ron, smiling more like a televangelist. "It's like the New York City Street set we used at Paramount — it all looks fine until you turn the corner. Careful editing will keep everyone on the tour."

I say nothing. I can't say I've slid neatly into Coolridge's camp. I can't say, however, that I agree with Ron either. My sympathies do, however, go out to the poor actor upstaged by our glitzy computer graphics.

By noon, both Ron and Coolridge depart again for L.A. I am to stay and continue working with Digitex until further notice. We are to finish in one month.

When I return home, I find that Kerry has called my machine. Several times. The "thing" with Joe didn't work out. She wants to move back, only I'm not convinced. I take my bike out and spend the rest of the day cycling the foothills of Stevens Creek Park, considering. Later, exhausted from my ride, I'm still not convinced.

In replaying Kerry's messages, I notice that she does not say "I was wrong" or "I've reconsidered." She says only that the "thing with Joe" didn't work out and I just now notice the bruise under one eye. Maybe it's only smudged mascara.

Joe has given her forty-eight hours to vacate.

That night I mix a new tape of Kerry at the Digitex studio.

Kerry's longest message lasts less than one minute. I begin with the background, stripping it away. She sits in a kitchen that must be Joe's Santa Clara

address because low flying aircraft into San Jose International garble the sound on two of the four calls. Neutral light, no shadows, I know that the window faces north, the camera south against a midday sun. I isolate her face and have the computer trace her vowels, then certain, telltale diphthongs. From this new database I begin to script a new monologue.

While I'm at it, I clear up her left eye and brighten her overall demeanor. She now smiles like no other, this new talking head of Kerry. She now expresses her unending love for me in no uncertain terms.

"How could I have underestimated your love for me, Howard? These last forty-eight hours have been hell. Please, please take me back. I was wrong."

Using a Quantel Paintbox, I seat her near the pool at the Fairmont Hotel in downtown San Jose. I mix in the sounds and motions of people laughing and splashing into the pool behind her. She's using a cellular phone and near the very end, I have a waiter lean in with a glass of fine Napa Valley Cabernet.

Two hours later, I'm satisfied although the rough cut plays on the monitor in only ragged composites. Along the lower portion of the frame, strings of hexadecimals race, representing colors, sounds, and camera positions not yet rendered. This new message from Kerry lasts one minute twenty. I like the length so I instruct the machine to interpolate the missing frames, to smooth out motion within the frame and to correct for color.

Did I position the sun in front or behind her? Damn. I slip out for coffee while the machine silently contemplates this.

At the reception desk, the same reception desk where Kerry once worked and now a young man has filled in her vacant position, a call comes in for me. It is Coolridge. She sounds satisfied. She's left the production. She's quit Coda.

"My suggestion, kid, is that you do the same," she says. "What we're doing here is sick. It has nothing to do with art or reality. He's taken our creative control and mass-produced a blockbuster that I'll have no part of. Nor should you. It's manipulative."

I think of that when I return to the editing suite to watch a beautifully, albeit artificially, rendered Kerry swear her eternal love. Watching this, I realize Coolridge's point first hand. It is manipulative.

Often a producer will retain the final cut of a film in exchange for someone's directorial freedom on the set. Changing a film's ending can be expensive — often rehiring cast and crew and possibly going on location -but sometimes the change is necessary, successful, as with Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction*. So what Digitex has created is a producer's ultimate toy -a relatively inexpensive way of manipulating an

actor or a director's vision long after principal photography's completed.

It is a, producer's way of having the final word.

Without hesitation, I queue up Kerry's original phone message and relearn that the "thing" with Joe isn't working out. I decide then and there that neither is this animation stuff. Reality may not be perfect but I kind of like it that way, and when I get home, I see that Ron has called. He wants to do lunch in L.A., tomorrow. Great. I decide to go, if only to hear what he has to say.

"All progress, " Ron quotes to me, "is the result of people who took unpopular positions.' Adlai Stevenson once said that and I happen to believe it's true."

We're standing at Pink's on La Brea Avenue and Melrose, chewing dogs and swigging Israeli root beer. If this is his idea of networking with my generation, he's missed the point. Behind us passes a cherry-red convertible of cool dudes and hot babes, the rumble of their THX-mastered downbeat sounding like the Big One.

Ron, holding a shriveled frankfurter that is oozing relish and mustard precariously near his Pierre Cardin tie, looks ridiculous in his Gucci suit, a speck of conservatism amid the casual dress of Hollywood mid-afternoon. "We can't fight change, can we, Howard?" He's pointing the hot dog at me now.

"So what did Lauren think of change?" I ask.

"Her last picture was a dud. Do you think she wanted Fools' Night Out to be her last picture? Would you?"

I restate my question. "So what did Lauren think of spline algorithms generating her best and final performance?"

He looks away. "She wanted to keep working until the end. She wanted no one to suspect she was ill until the last moment."

"So I take it you kept your holdings in Digitex a secret from her."

His eyes flare. "What makes you think I even have any interest in that company?"

"Because, according to the current Digitex prospectus, you purchased controlling shares of stock about the time the Monroe commercial hit. It was a gamble — I'll credit you that — but to use it on your wife"

He rests against a plastic chair. He is unable to speak, unable to take his eyes off me. I feel their pressure, their force upon me.

I no longer care what he thinks of me because I am now certain of my opinion of him.

“I was going to offer you directorial credit on Coda,” he says, softly.

I should be flattered. The credits you see on the screen are often not in reality the names of those who made the film. They are the names the unions and guilds feel most deserve the credit. In an eye blink, all of Coolridge’s hard work fades into blackness. Instead, for those same five full seconds, it is my name that is luminescent on the silver screen as director before sound and picture both fade in over a faux New York street scene

“No.” My decision is firm, though my voice is not. I start to walk away from him, my bravado quivering, failing me now. “No way.”

“Then you’ll never work in this town again.”

“Actually,” I call out, “I have yet to work in this town. But I get your drift.”

My Cupertino landlady insists I’ll find more work in the Bay Area. Actually, she doesn’t want to screen new tenants. But all the action is truly in LA-LA land, so I tell her I’m moving back. Reluctantly, she posts the FOR RENT sign in the courtyard.

I return to my apartment with empty boxes from Safeway and find a message from Coolridge waiting on my machine. She says ever since news of her resignation surfaced, she’s gotten hot. She says there are at least three development deals on her desk, and one is in the Bay Area. Whichever one she chooses, she still wants me as her right hand man. A call following hers, from Lew Spencer, confirms it. I save both recordings for future reference, then start packing.

It is mid-afternoon when I finish, when I get a call from Kerry. She’s a mess, somewhat hysterical, and she needs to know what I’ve decided: if she can move back, or whether she should make other arrangements. I say, hey, no problems, no hard feelings. I’ll leave the key under the front mat. Yeah, I add, if you’ll just give me another half hour, I’ll even meet you at Stacey’s Bookstore down the street and after we can go play video games in the shopping mall next door. At this she smiles, happy and oblivious to the fact that in another half hour I plan to be traveling south along I-5 toward L.A. I have no intention of staying in Cupertino any longer than I have to. I have no real intention of ever seeing Kerry again. Her fantasy, not mine.

Reality, it may not always be perfect, but I kind of like it that way.

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Robert Vamosi attended Clarion West Writers Workshop last summer. He is a graduate of Northwestern University with a double major in Film and English Literature. While in college he received an arts grant that allowed him to write, co-produce and co-direct an original 16mm film, "The Contender," which was later nominated for several student film awards. Now he works in a technical bookstore in Silicon Valley. His fiction previously appeared in *Amazing Stories*. "With or Without You" marks his first sale to *F&SF*.