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The Cold Through the Gears by Almudena Sánchez

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16-20 minutes

The Quicksand

Ever since Dad was swallowed up by the quicksand somewhere near Morecambe Bay, any surface seemed perilous to us. No piece of earth looked friendly enough or civilized enough to pitch a tent, build a house, rent a basement, or anything else. We were looking for some sort of security, which is the very least one might expect from a piece of land. Mom explained that the Earth's crust had gone awry for some reason. The gravel burned our feet. The floor tiles were too cold. And our shoes had been eaten away by worms. At least that's what my brother Percival used to say.

For that reason as well as a number of others, we traveled around in a station wagon. Sunshades at the windows, a fold-down trunk, mattresses in the back, the sky always inside out. We travelled without a map, destination, or time of arrival. The odometer was rusty. I used to think that normally you'd use a recreational vehicle for this sort of trip, a means of transport

much more suited to the task and not as miserable as a secondhand station wagon.

What might they say when they saw us? A trembling woman at the wheel with two kids in the back seat.

We're running away from the quicksand. That's what Mom said on the phone to Tía Delmi, who was the only person in the family who hadn't lost her memory yet. She remembered really unusual things like the heavenly constellations and a popular cure for afternoon headaches.

Tía Delmi was always talking on the telephone. It was more out of habit than comfort. The times had changed, and yet she remained primitive and intact like a dinosaur fossil. They'd offered her a free course for seniors on how to use the internet, but she'd turned it down. They insisted that she should really sign up because she would meet interesting gentlemen there, but she turned it down. All this progress felt depressing to her. She only liked the telephone with its long, twisty cord. She never needed anyone's assistance to simply unhook the handset, though she did have to get up from the sofa, stretch out her creaking and cracking arm, and then lie back down again afterward.

Meanwhile, we fled. We gave up on all types of land: granite, rock, the impenetrable swamps.

One day of relentless rain, we stopped for a while in the vicinity of the river Thames. It was raining so hard that you couldn't travel, and Percival and I were playing with the scorched remnants of a tire. We found the tire in a bog. Mom

got very nervous during storms, and she shouted:

One more drenching rain! One more for the collection!

She hurled insults at the Devil and the Greek gods. But Percival and I kept playing in the downpour with the leftover bits of tire.

Shall we take it along as a spare?

It was a logical question with no answer. Although illogical questions don't have any answers, either. You learn that quickly, that answers are always deceptive and, if they don't deceive, they wind up morphing into abstract nightmares in which erupting volcanos or rhinoceroses with broken horns make appearances.

Until the storm died down, Mom was walking in circles around a square of inexpertly-cut grass. We dried off, scorched by the sun, and immediately afterward we returned to the station wagon.

The Landscape

Percival and I traveled in the back seat of the station wagon, riding out the lengthy curves in the road. Sometimes we'd fall unconscious and, when we came to, we'd find ourselves in an ever-changing and very different landscape. Mom gave us two pills a day: Dramamine and vitamin C. She had several boxes of the stuff in the glove compartment. She didn't like seeing us woozy, green around the gills, our distress evident all over our faces.

The landscape was like this: there were asbestos cliffs, shadowless plateaus, and mile after mile of cemeteries. All of that at once. As we passed by, we also saw overfed hens, a town with thirty inhabitants, and oak groves. We spent our best days in between magnificent wheat fields and high tension electric towers. *It's already afternoon, Percival. You've gotten car-sick, Katia. Shall I turn off the radio or turn it on?* The news at six. The news at seven. The "Concerto in B-minor" by Oskar Rieding.

Mom was a picture. A pair of eyes reflected in the rearview mirror. Her facial expression rarely changed. At times, her irises gleamed wildly, as if she'd seen a flying spirit. Other times, quite rarely, she let her hair down, and the wind tossed her curls around. It was a marvelous sight. A motion picture still. That agitated hair flew around and then fell back again behind her ears. I could've spent hours and hours just watching the tableau with my mouth hanging open the way little kids' mouths are when they watch things.

Mom's eyes hurt. She said she had a bit of grit under her eyelids. Or a hair, she went on. Or a speck of pollen, or an eyelash coated with mascara. She didn't really know what she had in her eyes. Lately, she'd been losing her way on the road. She said the weather was to blame. And then, Percival would stick his hands in Mom's eyes and Mom would stop the car. And when she stopped it, the landscape stopped moving.

The trees were fleeting.

The Cyclists

Our station wagon didn't have much horsepower to speak of. We saved money on gasoline and traveled in bursts of rapid acceleration. Mom assured us that very soon we would find the perfect spot. And when that happened, we would get out of the car and the trip would be over. It was a promise, a mission. She explained this to us whenever we started to whine because there was a whole world on the other side of the car windows, so big and splendid that, if we opened our eyes wide enough, we could scarcely believe it. Honestly, we almost couldn't believe it. But we had to wait.

Months passed inside the station wagon.

Percival said that all the other cars got ahead of Mom, that motorcycles got ahead of her, that once even a line of bicyclists got ahead of her.

Where are they going?

The cyclists pedaled on, following a straight line. Percival gave them a round of applause.

I want to be cyclist.

The Games

Percival and I invented games to entertain ourselves. We stuck our hands out the car windows and caught flies. My brother knew better than anybody how to pull the wings off flies. It didn't seem fair to him that this disgusting, black insect had one day acquired the ability to fly. Afterward, he placed all of his flies in a glass jar: the wingless flies and the dead flies.

We also played at holding our breath. But this game didn't last long. One day, Percival almost suffocated playing that game, and Mom had to stop driving for an hour. It was only the second time she'd stopped on the whole trip. That was a memorable stop. We told Tía Delmi, who had been pretty receptive since our trip had begun. She admitted to us that she'd been anxiously awaiting our call and powdering her nose because that day the milkman was dropping by to see her.

The milkman was a fellow from town whom Mom didn't like one bit, and Tía Delmi did. They couldn't agree about it. Although the truth is that his cows' milk was famous all over town. And Tía Delmi was in the habit of buying milk from him, liters of milk, enormous quantities of milk, milk by the ton. Torrents of milk. Whole, skim and two-percent. Goats' milk and soymilk. Powdered milk and lactose-free milk. And once, just once, when he had completely run out of all his milks, she bought a milky rice pudding from him.

The Passenger

It was October. Two months had passed since the beginning of our trip. Two long months. We were bored and sleepy, watching a fixed point on the horizon, when a passenger got into the station wagon. A new face. He was a bearded man, tall and red haired and with worry lines on his forehead. He looked like a farmer. He settled himself into the copilot's seat and threw his suitcase in next to ours, which were now faded and lying open. He wore a cap, a vest, and a black shirt with

drawings of sharks. On the back of his shirt was written: Shark.

Smoking's not allowed in the station wagon, Mom told him. This was the first and only thing she told him. And she started up the station wagon, as if she were piloting a spaceship. It took her a quarter of an hour to get it to work. The new passenger watched us attentively, with piercing eyes. The motor sounded as if it were mooing. There was no way to leave the gas station. One of the employees offered to help us, and Mom spat at his chest. Directly at his heart. I was ashamed to stop anywhere with that godforsaken jalopy, because we had to get it started up again, we always had to get it started up, and it was embarrassing and sad to start up again, starting from zero again just to go absolutely nowhere.

The truth is that the passenger didn't speak, eat, or make funny faces. No clowning around. Neither did he demonstrate any aggressive tendencies. He was extremely strange. We were used to messing around, joking, and also to punishment. We were very accustomed to punishment. Mom's friends either treated us well, or they despised us. And since he did neither, he came off as troubling, serious, and extremely cold, occupying our dad's place with funereal impassivity. That's where Dad should've been, with his unbuttoned jacket, making comments about the news at six, the news at seven.

We proceeded due north along a secondary road and soon we began to notice the cold. The cold through the gears.

The Cold

That afternoon, with the passenger inside the station wagon, we noticed how the arctic cold had become more intense. Stalactites began to form on Percival's fingers and, terribly frightened, he gnawed at them with his teeth. He looked like a beaver. A horrible plant grew inside one of my pockets. Percival fed it his dead flies, which were full of nutrients, and Mom seemed not to notice the microclimate we were carrying around inside.

How is it possible for a plant to grow in a pocket?

We'd been in the station wagon for so long, smelling its odor of gasoline—no doubt there was a leak somewhere—that we started hallucinating and laughing at each other. We were frozen and confused. Too much vitamin C in the body, I told Percival, who exploded in guffaws while chewing on his bits of stalactite.

Tía Delmi was over the moon to tell us that she was moving in with the milkman. How it was high time, she said, after so many suppers together. And how they had made the decision jointly and it was all very romantic. And how, after the move, they would get married, have kids, and how those kids would inherit the milk business. This news enraged Mom, and then something terrible happened: Mom took out a handgun that she kept in the glove compartment, stroked it for a few seconds with her porcelain fingernails that were clinking in the air like glass, and shot at a tree, splitting a branch in two. The branch fell to the ground and right next to it lay a nest full of baby birds, which began chirping like crazy.

Percival got upset about the fallen nest. Even more so about Mom's shooting.

Mom was a good shot and was good-looking with the gun in her hands. Too good-looking. She looked as if she'd jumped out of one of those modern Westerns Dad used to like so much. The passenger (whom everybody now called Shark) continued to say nothing. He was imperturbable. He was unimpressed by Mom's fiery temperament. Perhaps he was already familiar with her ways. And he looked on the outside just like he was on the inside: a silent shark.

The Ground

We drank water all the time, and we ate fruit: three cans of tinned fruit a day. Our routine worked very well. We didn't miss the prayer hour, or the hour for stretching. Nevertheless, the station wagon began to make ghostly noises, diabolic noises, until it stopped working entirely. Mom tried to force it to start, stepped hard on the gas, turned the motor on and off, banged the dashboard, and even spoke to the station wagon as if it were a human being, with more tenderness than we ourselves had ever heard:

Come on, sweetheart, you can do it.

But the station wagon couldn't do it anymore. Nor could we do it anymore. Not even passenger Shark could do it anymore (even though he'd not spent much time in the coach of darkness). Shark got out of the car to push it and get it off the highway. Mom stayed inside. She kept a close watch on her

handgun and sang psalms. She was getting nervous. We saw that right away. The truth is that we didn't know what we were going to do to get the station wagon going again. Especially since nobody traveled on that highway, not a tractor, nor even a single, solitary horse.

The stalactites kept growing on Percival's fingers.

Finally, Shark managed to push the station wagon into a vacant field. He was sweaty and the station wagon filled up with his body heat when he got back in and sat down. Mom didn't put her handgun away and she stroked it now and again, like a warning signal. We all exchanged looks. Our trip on wheels had come to an end on this unremarkable expanse, nothing special. An ordinary sort of place, far away from everything. There was no vegetation, not even a single decorative geranium. Mom didn't appear to know what to do. I wondered if this were the perfect place that Mom had spoken so often about, the dream place, the place that was right for us. She was hanging on tight to her handgun, and when she got like that we didn't approach her. We thought it best not to ask questions.

The Fear

The situation was very weird. We found ourselves—Percival, Shark, and I—menaced by an out-of-control woman who was brimming with hate and aiming a handgun at the horizon.

A handgun that she had used on previous occasions.

We had gotten out of the station wagon to get some fresh air. I

tried not to look Mom in the eye. You shouldn't meet the gaze of wild animals. And I started to feel like this situation was very much like a kidnapping. If it wasn't a kidnapping, if what was happening wasn't that a mother had kidnapped her two kids and a stranger, then what was it? What could it possibly be? A family reunion? A surprise party? At that moment I wished with all my heart that Shark might be a good person, the type of person who makes everything turn out alright in the end, without mishaps.

But after several hours, the only thing that Mom had done was shoot a whole lot of times into the ground, over and over into the ground, deeply into the ground, with her hard-set jaw and her lips pressed together. Like an outlaw. She shot into the ground and made it tremble, and the ground sometimes split open, and sometimes the bullets ricocheted off rocks, and sometimes they didn't, shooting instead up toward the vast, almighty sky of another planet, whose atmosphere became cloudy for a few seconds and then cleared up again.

I thought about the cyclical insistence of sunsets.

Although Mom was a pretty good shot, I was afraid that she would shoot herself in the foot. Her motions were anarchic and circular. A little gust of wind is all it would've taken for the arm holding the handgun to veer in a different direction and cause some damage. The momentary attack of madness lasted a few minutes. There were no casualties, we were all in one piece. Mom ran out of bullets and strength at the same time. Then she flung the handgun down onto the machine-gunned earth, which, according to Percival, was full of seeds.

Shark took off running. As fast as he could. He disappeared into the deserted nothingness that was all that was available in that wasteland. He didn't even dare to retrieve his suitcase. He took off, with an empty stomach and holding his breath. Only his shark-shirt shimmered off in the distance, like a sort of goodbye, like an unforgettable flag.

The Call

Together, Mom and I helped Percival walk: one foot after another, one foot after another, across the sand and the landscape's dark symmetry. We groped our way along while explaining to him that that's how this ground is: tricky, it cracks open easily. The kind of land that with even a little bit of rain starts to fill up with potholes.

And we accompanied and urged him on, with the violent sweetness—the incomprehensible desperation—of those who forge on.

Not much time had passed when the first evening bell rang, nor had it begun to rain yet. It was Mom's telephone and the nearly inaudible, though terribly familiar, voice of Tía Delmi.

She informed us that she would come to pick us up in twenty minutes.

We warned her that the wasteland bore no distinguishing features. That we could offer no reference points, no coordinates, not even the least description of the place. That we had become invisible and camouflaged in the blackness of the night. But she repeated that we should stay right where we

were, that those deserted places are quickly found.

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