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WHY THIS STORY IS WORTH YOUR TIME

↑ By D. P. Snyder, translator

With a futuristic aesthetic and humor that calls to mind Hergé's drawings of Tintin and his friends in "Destination Moon" and social critique that reminds of "The Shape of Things to Come" by H. G. Wells, Almudena Sánchez spirits us off to a dispiriting future in Eclipse (La acústica de los iglús, Caballo de Trova 2016). The air itself is on fire!



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Fortunately, however, with a big enough pile of five euro notes, one can still risk life and limb to travel around the globe on the Funicular, another expensive American invention that appears deluxe but is actually quite perilous and uninhabitable.

Nevertheless, like a couple of Custers at Little Bighorn, our heroes Leonor and Adelino take a last stand against environmental collapse and the disappointments and molecular degradation of old age. In the end, there is truly no place like home and, to quote the Beatles, all you need is love.

THE SHORT STORY PROJECT
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Translated by: D. P. Snyder

That's the way life is:

you push a button, and life turns on.

—Clarice Lispector

Leonora and Adelino were an old-fashioned couple. They had just turned eighty, and they shook with fear when they blew out the candles on their birthday cake. They had begun to suspect that the world was continuously

had begun to suspect that the world was continuously coming apart at the seams around them while they had still not yet fully partaken of its pleasures. With little fame, and less glory. They suspected their hearts needed a radiantly beautiful setting, cool breezes, colored party lanterns, giddiness in the moonlight, and delirious walks at the seaside between golden pools and little groves of trees. In short: a dose of life's abundance. They wanted to travel and they had precious little time left to do so. Just a few days, if their luck held out.

Meanwhile, the world was changing at a rapid pace. The Earth was beginning to turn into an industrial waste swamp.

You'd think old folks ought to be happy.

Leonora and Adelino heard this phrase often at street festivals in the company of friends (and without friends), there amid the fritters, the chamomile tea, and the silk handkerchiefs. It was a phrase that people will continue to say for centuries to come, for no conceivable reason. Anyway, the only thing they yearned for was to travel to some exotic country. They dreamed about it at night.

Greenland, China, or Russia were their favorite potential destinations.

They had made it to eighty dragging along an incomparable dream, a dream they never spoke of out of a fear that some other elderly couple would come along and live their experiences for them. It vexed them to think about what the future had in store. And the waiting itself began to cause them pain. And because it hurt so much, they had to lean on their steel canes and just breathe, because howling was considered weird and

inappropriate. They would stay in that position for a while: silent and half-frozen, their heads resting on the crooks of their canes, until, at last, they would reanimate and their spirits would carry them down the hallway once again.

That was their normal state of affairs. Because when they were young, Leonora and Adelino had never gone on a honeymoon, nor could they leave their village to breathe in some other, softer, lighter air. They didn't even remember why it had turned out like that. It's hard to remember things. Memory carefully blasts everything to smithereens. They wanted to travel far away, to leave their village, Villaseñor de Almeida, and to avoid becoming the sort of old people who have never seen the ocean. Such a long time spent saving up for a trip! They'd filled hundreds of boxes with five-euro notes. Better there than in the bank or in a strongbox. Hiding places are for dreamers.

Since he was young, Adelino had worked as a traffic light repairman. Every day, he would come home half-electrocuted with plugs and differentials hanging around his neck, and Leonora would be there waiting for him with her sad (yet happy) cleaning-lady smile and the boxes of five-euro notes that were always there, waiting. Now, there comes a time when desire starts to make demands and insist on itself. That's what Adelino thought, and for a long while he had preferred not to look too closely at his surroundings. For a long while now,

Leonora had been madly purchasing furniture—a chest of drawers, a display cabinet, a credenza—with drawers of all shapes and sizes, each piece older, dirtier, and more beaten-up than the one before, and all with no other purpose than to be stuffed full of money.

Outside their home, in the cities as well as the countryside, the world had become a pretty miserable hell-hole: every day, the authorities warned about some terrible forest fire, hurricane or epidemic looming on the horizon. You couldn't even go outdoors to buy a bag of rice. On peaceful days, which were both hazy and few, one could travel. Those were the "green flag days" of conditional freedom when the village residents were advised that it was the ideal day, the perfect moment, to grab their suitcases, step lively, and disappear forever. But this required a quick decision on the part of the traveler because for most people trips weren't in the cards. It required a lightning response, one of those snap judgments that permit no deliberation.

The transportation systems weren't working as they should anymore because flammable particulates that spelled death to anyone who had forgotten their mask at home were floating around in the air. Above the clouds, gasses set fire to the motors of the best-made airplanes.

Leonora and Adelino had thought it over carefully. And they'd decided that they really couldn't mull it over anymore, that it was too late, that their bodies could no longer withstand the weight of all their wrinkles, and that, though they might be taking the best or the worst step of their lives, by now it was a moot point: at eighty, a person is, for the most part, more dead than alive, and the only way to live intensely is to do it spontaneously and dangerously, without a cane or any other means of support, like two genuine Swiss Family Robinsons. What's more, they knew that the weather conditions were

unfavorable and that they were facing many dangers. If they'd traveled before, when they were thirty years younger, they wouldn't have needed masks, or oxygen tanks, or fire-retardant suits. Those were the days, as they say.

Because normal modes of transportation had become obsolete and were apt to burst into flames in the scorching city air, they had invented THE FUNICULAR, which ran on an armor-plated motor. It was originally a Japanese idea, but the Americans got ahead of the game and built it first, putting a lot of little flags all over the place. It was the invention of the century and the future. Salvation, the power of modernity, a mechanical God that was extraordinary and unrivaled, a historical heritage, an omnipotent monument. It was a technological insect, riddled with buttons and three-dimensional screens. It was all anyone ever talked about on TV. It was higher than any skyscraper and reached the speeds of both light and sound. It occupied a significant portion of the sky, and, fortunately, it went right through Villaseñor de Almeida. You could travel from anywhere to anywhere, navigating around obstacles, non-stop, without service interruptions. All you had to do was press a button.

For Leonora and Adelina, it was a relief to know that, wherever they might be, there would always be a Funicular circling the globe.

Leonora and Adelino's trip caused a great hubbub in Villaseñor de Almeida. At the corner store, at the supermarket, and even more so at the beauty salon—the place where hair and passions meet. No one could believe

place where pain and passions meet. No one could believe that this elderly couple, already on their last legs, was going to take off and travel the world. And the absolutely worst news of all was that they were going to do it by Funicular. It seemed like a bad joke because, although the media worshiped it, the Funicular was still neither advisable, safe, nor even comfortable because there was so little space in it to move around. Each cubicle had only twenty square meters of space and only first-class passengers could enjoy the common areas. From a distance, it appeared unstable and ungainly: a carnival ride. It was still in its test period and the only people who had dared to board it had been professional skydivers, suicide risks, and devotees of high speeds and great heights.

And so Leonora and Adelino emptied all the drawers in their house. The Funicular was to be picking them up the following morning, and, before getting completely carried away, they had to make absolutely sure that they'd saved enough money to buy the tickets. They emptied the furniture slowly, five-euro note by five-euro note, endlessly, like two middle-class panhandlers. And finally, it turned out that, yes indeed, they had saved enough! They had managed it. They would be allowed to do it. They had enough money for two tickets, and what's more, for the really good tickets. After adding up the money many times with the calculator and after a few mistakes — one zero missing, they had added one zero too few to the total — they decided they were ready and they were sure about buying both tickets and finally getting away in that miraculous robot and head off to the limits of the universe.

They left early. Leonora put on her most elegant outfit: a choker and her lucky earrings, which were neck-length pendants and a little heavy, though that didn't matter much in the light of such a consequential event as a Funicular trip. It didn't even bother her that her shoes were making mincemeat out of her heels or that she could barely walk, let alone stand up for long. Nor did it concern her that her stockings were so tight that she had to rip them a little just to stretch her muscles or to do anything else, for that matter. These inconveniences were neither here nor there, given that this was their moment of grit and glory.

The reporters awaited them eagerly. They were all there to cover the story and get a good look at the couple boarding the Funicular, all bent over and dressed up. Almost every house in the village had its windows open to watch them. It was a cold day, one of brittle fog, and it was supposed to rain but it didn't. Leonora and Adelino arrived on time. First the canes, and then they themselves, dragging their suitcases along behind them. The suitcases were made of viscoelastic and the couple was made of flesh and bone—or that's what the two of them thought, anyway. Leonora and Adelino were deeply moved by the sight of the Funicular standing there. It was diaphanous and vast. It reminded them of pirate ships and stories from their childhood. The future and the present were in striking contrast. The Funicular seemed to be a phantom apparition in the village where everything else was filthy. A slice of the future nestled inside a fragment of ancient history. The reporters asked them a few questions, which Leonora and Adelino answered evasively since what they wanted most was to board the Funicular as quickly as possible and leave far,

far behind, their lost years in Villaseñor de Almeida.

On the way to their cabin, which was in the head of the ship—that's what the upper part of the Funicular was called—they met people in the common areas. In the conference room, there was a sad man who was trying to get a good look at the sky with an old, out-of-focus, wooden telescope. As the minutes ticked by, his beard grew with remarkable speed.

Adelino felt quite concerned when he saw this and, just in case, he touched his own beard, which was the same as ever: straight and slightly singed. Then it occurred to him that there might be beards that grow faster than usual because of an excess of sorrow.

Next to the sad man was a gray-haired lady who was reading the collected biographies of important historical figures: The Scientific World of Copernicus.

When she saw Leonora and Adelino, the new arrivals, she took her eyes off the book to exclaim:

Oh, it's the oldest people onboard. Welcome.

The Funicular took off, and Leonora and Adelino stood there and watched through the windows as Villaseñor de Almeida disappeared before their eyes and became a blur. For a moment, they were afraid. Everything was so new. They didn't have any understanding of the engineering that went into modern machines, but even so they were there, inside the world's greatest aerial invention, floating among strange beings who read books about Copernicus and viewed the world through darkened telescopes. Just then, the telescope-man who had attracted their attention approached them. He was so sad

that it was painful to look him directly in the eyes. And he asked:

Have you seen the eclipse?

Leonora and Adelino hadn't seen anything. Not even the ocean. And that terribly gloomy man with the starchy gaze was asking them about one of the most spectacular astrological phenomena in the world. Leonora and Adelino didn't dare to answer. So, the telescope-man continued:

I haven't seen it either. But I devote myself to it, every single day.

And off he went. He left them with that brilliant comment vibrating on their lips like an electric shock. Leonora and Adelino stood there feeling as if they had watched a movie halfway through. A ghost movie, fragmented and crazy. The passengers who lived in the Funicular were introverts and people of few words. A band of misanthropes.

Finally, after passing through all the common areas, Leonora and Adelino arrived at their cubicle. A flying cabin. Despite its small size, it felt cozy to them. On the desk, the crew had left them a bouquet of plastic roses and a hand-written welcome card. The card warned them about the possible side-effects that their marriage might suffer when they returned to real life. The windows were

hermetically sealed. They could be closed, but not opened. And on the nightstand, as in all the finest hotels on Earth, there was a Bible and, by strange coincidence, also a dictionary. Leonora looked up the word "eclipse", and it said the following:

Transitory occultation, total or partial, of a star by the interpolation of a heavenly body.

Leonora and Adelino had touchscreens with buttons that were placed at each end of the room so that they could travel. Each button corresponded to a country and within that country, you could visit any city you wished. The buttons branched out into smaller buttons, in case you wanted to visit some small town, like, for example, Villaseñor de Almeida, which itself was marked clearly on the map in green.

Standing there facing each other, Leonora and Adelino contemplated the thickness of the Earth. It was raining there. First, they visited Greenland, and then moved on to China, and later Russia. In a single day, they could visit all three places. The three countries didn't seem all that different. The couple felt they were equal parts astronauts and tourists, but they couldn't get off the Funicular from their cubicle. It wasn't allowed, and if they tried to do it, an alarm would go off immediately and turn their little room into something like a disco, full of fluorescent lights.

The Funicular's living spaces enjoyed catering service and were climate-controlled. Room temperature. It was neither hot nor cold in any country. Leonora and Adelino tried all the special dishes that were on the menu.

Finally, they visited the Sahara Desert. For a minute, they were suffused with a delightful feeling, as if they had conquered the world.

After the tour, Adelino noticed how his beard had grown. Six centimeters in less than an hour. This rapid growth

SIX CENTIMETERS IN LESS THAN AN HOUR. THIS RAPID GROWTH seemed abnormal to him, an inexplicable event. And because of it, he wondered if he might be dreaming or imagining it all. He mentioned it to Leonora, who took a pair of scissors out of her toiletries bag and trimmed off Adelino's excess beard.

What shall we do with the hair since there are no wastebaskets on the ship? And all the bathrooms are public.

Leonora put the piece of Adelino's beard into her purse. It was a temporary measure to avoid leaving it on the floor and letting it scatter all over the place in the zero-gravity of the bedroom. And later, they went out to socialize with the Funicular's other residents. For some reason, in their area, they always ran into the same passengers, like the woman reading *The Scientific World of Copernicus*, who was still on the same page as before. They found her, seated on a rather flashy office chair. She had put her book aside and was forcefully pulling papers out of her handbag. Leonora noted with some surprise that she also had hair inside her purse. A transparent zippered bag full of hairs, just like Leonora had in her purse. But from another man. From another beard. Of another color. And, from the looks of it, younger than Adelino's beard.

Then Leonora approached her and showed the woman the hair she had in her purse, too. She touched it with her hands, and the hairs slipped between her fingers.

Afterward, they began to fly around the Funicular's conference room like wild birds. The two women looked at each other with the mutual understanding of people who share the same problem. The lady with the handbag remarked in an agreeable voice:

It's my husband's. If you like, we can swap.

The woman's husband was the man with the telescope and he was at one of the glass observation windows with the telescope pressed to his eye.

The eclipse is almost here, he whispered. Almost!

The Copernican woman was carrying the sad man's beard there, in her gray bag. That shipwrecked thing, vacuum-packed. Leonora was repulsed by it, although she also carried Adelino's beard in her bag and it was made of the same kind of biological stuff. But, of course, Adelino was her husband.

Aren't there any wastebaskets in the Funicular?

The lady told Leonora that, no, there were no wastebaskets anywhere. That she could throw her husband's extra beard into the toilet if she wished, but she would regret it, because if she did that, if she dared to do such a thing, Adelino's beard would start growing faster and faster, until one day it would become fluffy and unmanageable.

The only thing we can do is to exchange beards, she insisted.

Leonora tried to understand the concept. But she was unable to, no matter how many questions she asked. It was as if the woman were in control of the whole situation.

Exchanges are beneficial to personal relationships, she reminded her.

And she we went back to reading her Copernicus book. That eternal first page, on which was visible the portrait of Copernicus drawn in charcoal. One of the few that

of Copernicus drawn in charcoal. One of the few that exist of the scientist, Leonora thought. And with that awful, disdainful expression.

Leonora walked away. She didn't want to hear the strange sentence about beard exchanges again. She was tired of games, eccentricities, and galactic theories.

Adelino was in the other room, playing with the telescope of the sad man, who seemed to be dissolving with grief. The more he looked through the telescope, the thinner he became. Judging from their expressions, it seemed as if the two men were getting along well. While her husband entertained himself, Leonora went into the lavatory and threw Adelino's beard into the toilet, which sucked the hairs down hungrily. Problem solved, Leonora thought. No need to concern ourselves further with this matter, she said out loud. But when she returned to the conference room, she found Adelino there, trying to walk around with a two-meter long, phantasmal beard. He was sighing and had tears in his eyes.

But what's happening to me? Is it because of the eclipse? Does the eclipse change the rate of hair growth?

Leonora told him to forget about the eclipse, and she took him by the arm and guided him back to their living quarters. There, she cut off his extra beard growth, starting on the right side and finishing on the left, which

was a lot, a great quantity, two meters'-worth of beard, and she told him about the woman who was also carrying her husband's beard around in her purse.

She's carrying around more than I am. An entire bush.

Suddenly, they realized something. That life on the Funicular was all about this: trying to keep beards from growing (all of them sad, weak, and listless), pushing buttons, and waiting around until an eclipse happened. They had figured it out in less than two days. It was a life that reminded them of another life. Because in Villaseñor de Almeida, they also lived like that with the only difference being that Leonora did not carry Adelino's beard around in her purse. And it had been some time since anyone had been able to observe an eclipse there. Beauty had a price: one had to imagine it with eyes shut. Too much light pollution in the atmosphere.

Leonora's purse was full to overflowing with Adelino's beard, hairs of all sizes, colors, and textures. She no longer knew where her possessions were, where her makeup kit was. And she didn't feel like traveling anymore. They'd seen it all from way up high: a lake with glassy fish, volcanic paradises, and broken pyramids. They should have taken more precautions. This trip, Leonora informed Adelino, was not just any trip. And the two of them had known it from the start. They'd talked it over, they'd taken the challenge, and, nevertheless, they couldn't control the odd things that kept popping up in that astronomical Funicular. Everyone batted around like wandering stars or meditative sleepwalkers there, accustomed by now to the mysteries of the cosmos and the revolutionary growth of beards.

Leonora looked at the green button that could take them back to Villaseñor de Almeida, to a more normal, a much more normal, life. She made sure to stare at the button in such a way that Adelino would notice that she was staring at it, that she was looking there and nowhere else, and

that, more than a look, it was a question:

Shall we go home?

Just when they were going to push the button to leave the Funicular behind, a deep voice announced it on the PA system: the eclipse had come. It was happening. Leonora and Adelino hugged each other, without knowing whether it was from fear or wonderment. You either know these things or you don't, there's no in-between.

But in reality, it didn't matter, because they hadn't hugged, caressed, or made each other blush for decades and that alone was an achievement. For once, time and space were working in their favor.

They found themselves at the exact right moment in the presence of the perfect show.

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