

It Is The Hour Of The World You Will Remember

by R. Salvador Reyes

It was the snow, leaves
Of white water veined and
Frozen to crystal. It filled
The dimming air like flocks
Of regret, fell half way between mercy as it coated, caressed
Erased the shapes of things, made it all
In its image.

~

They were almost there. Gate B6. Three seats in coach (one lap child). 45-minute flight over the mountains. 15-minute shuttle to the hotel. One room: two double-beds. One bath: a group affair with 3-year-old, 1-year-old, and 38-year-old momma (40-year-old dad will shower in the morning). Pajamas. Lights out. And at last, sleep. Sweet sleep. It would be theirs so soon. If it weren't for the snow.

Caleb looked at Michele standing with their daughters beside him, imagined them all retreating under the dark snugness of a widely-laid comforter. Then he turned to the attendant behind the desk and asked, "How long?"

The attendant didn't lift her eyes from the monitor. "45 minutes. Maybe an hour. Maybe tomorrow. Waiting on the weather, sir. We'll keep you posted."

"But it's not even snowing here."

"It will be." The attendant pointed her finger toward the window. "Comin' over the mountains right now."

"I can't believe this," Michele sighed. She shifted tiny Alice from her left arm into her right. Sadie grabbed her free hand. "We flew 6 hours to get stuck here? I wish we'd flown direct."

"There wasn't anything direct," said Caleb.

"I know. I just wish."

Caleb glanced into the restaurant across the terminal. Strands of Christmas bulbs sparkled along the edges of the ceiling. Late-day sun blasted the shiny tables, leatherette booths & darkening space with a warm orange light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. A few people huddled over coffee & french fries at the counter near a giant window that looked out on the broad, nearly-empty, gray tarmac where one plane taxied along, its wingtips blinking a hypnotic red & white.

"Everybody's starving," he said. "Let's go over there, sit down, relax, and get something to eat. It's an adventure, right?" He beamed at his girls, all three of them. "Let's make this an adventure, okay?"

~

They ate
Hamburgers, shared fruit cups, milkshakes. It was
Just that kind of magic that evening
Brings on this journey, so far from
Home, in these foreign places
Of somewhere else's time. Giggles
Beget all faith in being. No moment
So whole as your child. Somewhere
Outside of it all. In here. In this
Glowing space.

Out there, snow falls. Things change. Destinations vanish.

~

The rental car would have them there by morning. SUVs are made for snow, he thought, and mountains were made to be conquered. He would not be defeated tonight.

They strapped in the girls, tucked in blankies, and handed out stuffed rabbits. As soon as Caleb turned the key, Michele flipped open her Kindle and its blue glow washed over her fingers. He tapped *Start Trip* on the GPS. An hourglass emptied and filled, again and again, on the display: *No Connection*.

"What the fu—"

"Shhh." Michele glared.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"There's only one way over the mountains anyway. And we have a map. What do you need that for?"

She was right, he thought, and turned onto the frontage road. He could see the exit up ahead; the highway would take them all the way over the mountains to the Interstate. There was a path to follow.

"You're right," he said. "I'm on it."

~

Sometimes it feels like the whole world was born

Just to drive through it in the night. Burnt
Coffee, the music of other days in static, under
The canopy of universe while

The tires whirl in their pretend
Ceaselessness. The population of this place
Is asleep, and you are the sum of all minds, careening
Through the slumbering wind, attached
To everything that follows
You through the time. Immersed
Until there is nothing to forget.

~

The snow, in its unfortunateness, looks like
Itself mostly on any night in the dark on a mountain.
Roads seem like the other. Paths cover and unappear.

~

Caleb and Michele tried not to panic. They knew the girls would be watching them, gauging their fear to calibrate their own. And Michele was confident. They still might shovel out the car. Then backtrack at dawn, find their way to the main road. This was civilization, after all, she thought, we're in the middle of it. Caleb was less optimistic. The night was frozen, vicious, and the snow continued piling up. No phone service. No GPS. How long could they run the heat before emptying the tank? How long could they live in a heatless car in below zero temperatures? How long until anyone knew they were gone?

~

In his sleep he does not
Sleep nor dream, he travels. It was those last hours
Before dawn. Limbo between everywhere. He floats
In it, slipping into each moment
It hides. Your argument in the bedroom, about
The suitcase and all of the things you cannot bring with. Bedtime
Once ago when you would not leave the room with them, just to hear
That song play, again, while closet light sliver warmed shadows and they
Slept. One morning, any morning, when you heard those voices
In the kitchen, before you woke to that long lost day.

~

In the new light, it was obvious to Caleb that they'd never dig the car out now. He shouldn't have stopped shoveling last night, he thought, he was beginning to fail them. He could not fail them. How had this happened?

"I know what you're thinking," Michele said. She spoke quietly; the girls were still asleep. "It doesn't matter. That's the past now." She reached her small hand across the front seat, through a stream of warm, fluttering air, and squeezed his leg. Above the trees now, the sun glinted off a mirror. "What are we doing?"

Civilization, he thought, Michele had said it last night. It was somewhere here. He had to find it. "I've been thinking since dawn," he said. "I'm going. I need to go."

"Go where?"

"You said it last night. We're somewhere in the middle of all this, I mean, there have to be people. Someone. I can't wait. The heat's almost gone. We won't last another night." His voice raised as he spoke and Sadie shuffled in her car seat.

Caleb and Michele paused, silent, then turned back to look at the girls. Sadie pulled her blanket up to her chin, but didn't open her eyes. Alice, still sleeping too, heaved little breaths between her puckered lips.

"What if someone finds us?" Michele asked, convincing herself.

"What if they don't? We can't just hope. We have to try. I'm going. I shouldn't wait. It wouldn't make any sense to wait."

Michele shook her head, cast her eyes to his.

"I don't want to wake them," he said, not meaning it, but afraid.

"Wake them."

~

I'll bring you
With me, he said.
How? She asked. Here,
He said, and pointed. And
Here, he said, pointing
Again. And her too? Her
Too, he said. Okay
Then, she said. Okay.
Goodbye. Goodbye.

~

At first it didn't seem so crazy. All of this was just—*human*. These are the things we do to survive. Now he walked in the snow, and someday soon he would be filling a basket with groceries for meatballs with pineapples. But it didn't take long for his thoughts to change. The snow was deep and although the skies had cleared, he could only feel that the sun was millions of miles away. Heat had become an idea, a wish, not a thing. The places without drifts revealed only thick bramble and underbrush that said no one had ever walked here. It was maddening. Each hour of wandering fed the panic he couldn't quell. Every creek led only to another or disappeared eventually under the ice. He knew bigger waters flowed somewhere nearby, that they were his beacon, would bring him to a place. But they were phantoms. He was becoming a phantom. He felt it. His weightlessness. Only the thought of them held him down. Here, and here, he thought. It was the only part of him that he imagined was still lit when the rest of him disappeared into each tree's lengthening shadow. He moved his invisible feet because he would not leave them behind here, in these woods, just to vanish too.

But soon what he wanted would not matter. He knew this. He was right, he thought, this was all just human. Humans fail. They die in the cold because they could not get there. Their families die unfound. Buried in the detritus of it all. He could not fail them, he thought. He would walk a hundred miles in the snow, like the immortal probes scouring space, he would fuel an endless journey away from oblivion by the tiniest rays of the sun. He would hoard his life and carry it to a place where it would save them. The forest grew dark and he walked straight at the rising moon, smashing snow beneath his boots, hearing the life of his breath beat against the air in the night. He moved toward it. Nothing ahead of him that he knew. His face, hands and feet long frozen and numb. He wouldn't have known he was there, except that he did.

~

It was
The worst thing. And it
Happened. It was in that
Night. Ice at the edge
Of icy water. Those weary
Legs he cursed for hours. The miles
Behind him. One
Slip. A faltering signal unable
To make its way to existence. An intention
Lost in the flesh. When he knows
He is in the water he knows
It is cold. It is cold
And he is dead. Of all
The things that might've happened, he is
Freezing in these woods this night and it is becoming
True. He will end now, without
Them, but under the same moon.

~

When the night talked
About it later, it said it was
Beautiful. But there is no way to measure
This. So many things
Happened at once, and so many
Not at all. You could say the snow
Was on the ground now, no longer
Part of the sky. He felt
Something that he wished
He knew. He held it
In the part of him that wished to stay.

~

Neurons will flicker near the end, all the machineries of imagination and memory will clamber to fill those cascading, crumbling bridges of the mind. Caleb tried to move his legs, but thought he was reaching into his pocket for a receipt. It was a hidden paper history, the hieroglyphs of a time when there was a world in which he lived. Burgers and milkshakes under colored lights that were close enough to hang in the trees, right here above them. Right here.

~

She remembers
The tiny sun, a giant helicopter whirling
Looming above. And before. She remembers
A place she can't remember. It was
The snow. It wasn't the snow. It was
Someone. A presence. A whole place
Inside this universe,
Magnificent & unrevealed. It is
The hour of the world
You will remember.

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