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The Image

by J.A. Daniel

Always the image, he tells himself. All meaning resides there. Forget historical context, authorial intent. Irrelevant, elusive at best. He stared at the page again, trying to see in his head the Americans, now two centuries back but as fresh as the breeze from his mountain trek. They rode in a sleigh, not that he ever had, ever would, but it was vivid in his mind's eye. Juan felt the edge of the leather bite into the huge hindquarters of the horse, rip through the rough hair. Yes, cut would be the right word. The man would have a strong arm, the animal would feel his power, the passion he felt for the young woman sitting behind him. If they were to escape, but of course they would not, which is how life went, they needed to hurry. They had to run before their thoughts caught up with them, before the bleak years lying ahead began to follow them like bright ghosts, finally rushing ahead, paralyzing them in the bright beams of promises, duty, old vows, money. The horse speeded up coming into the bend now: *la vuelta, el recodo, la curva*, how to find just the right word, the precise picture, the image. His head throbbed.

He drove up the steep road outside of town, his own town on the dried-up river. A half-hour drive into the freedom of the mountains, away from his tiny rooms crammed with books, windowless. He himself had blocked out the light with bookshelves so as to be alone, untroubled by the noise of the town, young people, his own students frolicking into the dawn, drug addicts crouching in the alleys of the high-rises across the Via Verde on which there was no longer even a memory of green, not a bush or a tree living. However far down the roots plunged, there was no water left. All piped somewhere else.

He was taking the hairpin bends, *los recodos*, driving fast, his small red car hurtling against time. At the top was air he could breathe deeply, opening up his lungs to the sweet scent of pines. Strag-

gly pines to be sure, transplanted from somewhere else, like himself. He was taking the bends like a racecar driver now, *las curvas, los recodos*, ah yes, the image. Along the opposite terraces, lemon trees were in bloom in mid-March.

He too had escaped from somewhere else. The middle of eleven children, parents so hard at work they hardly knew who he was. Brothers and sisters who stayed on to work the played-out land. He continued to escape, turning the wheel sharply to the right, to the left. Books kept their shapes as he intended to keep his. They never lost their images, the rich fabric of the spirit, the vibrant black print. He captured them, devoured them, arranged them on shelves where they blocked out the windows, narrowed already narrow halls.

La curva, he thought, back at his desk. Life and its curves in the road, its twists and turns. He had to work as a waiter in France for five years to save the money for college. He drove the potatoes around in a taxi to find a place where they could be washed and peeled. That was a low point, driving through Paris with sacks of dirty potatoes and a surly driver who laughed at his bad French, his old clothes. But he'd done the impossible, he was the first, the only member of his family to get an education. More than an education, a Ph.D. from Barcelona, a textbook on American Literature, the senior professor in a respected university.

When he went back to visit his mother, now in a home, she still didn't know who he was. She didn't remember such a son. Maybe she guessed, but he couldn't tell. "You are a good man," she said, patting his arm and smiling when he sat in the chair beside her. "God and the Virgin Mother will bless you for visiting an old woman." But when he tried to explain that he was her third son, that she was his mother, she turned back to the TV. In the home they said she was deaf as a stone, but he knew that she had simply stopped listening long



ago. Before she had brought him out of her body, now almost half a century ago, she had stopped her own ears. Five older children had poured from her body without attracting her interest, and five more appeared in the years of his youth. How hard to remember any of it now.

He had closed his eyes and gone out into the dark. It was Tuesday, March 8th, 1966 when he walked up the road and stopped where it curved to the right, his small pack digging into his shoulder, his face pointed to the future. He knew what had happened to Lot's wife and he never looked back. An old man in a truck picked him up and dropped him off at the train station. He opened his eyes after that.

Back to the Americans, the short novel he had agreed to translate. It was money he needed now. If he were to marry Luisa he would need more than a professor's salary. She, with her antiques, her beautiful apartment by the sea, her housekeeper, the close-knit upper-middle-class family with houses in the country. How could he really be part of all that? Even with all of her assurances, he felt uneasy. They quarreled in the kitchen, but not in the bedroom—a good sign. Or maybe not. Maybe in the long run the kitchen is the more important place. Look at all the old people in the cafes, planning their next meal before their morning coffee is done. The ones who still talk that is, the ones who stay alive.

His mother's face came into his mind. So much sex, so many children, but what did it mean? She eats only rice now, refuses most of her meals. Her dark face has turned white in the TV lounge, as though she has been invaded by the fluorescent glow of the screen. And she doesn't remember me at all. I sit next to her like a stranger. I am a stranger. How could she know at fifteen that strangers would grow in her body, fall out bloody and screaming into the world? How could she know we would drink from her breasts and grow bigger than she

ever was, grow huge and ungainly and alien from her blood? His heart went out to his young mother, her black hair tied up on her head as she worked beside his father in the fields, her belly curved and round and heavy in the sun. Do I only imagine, or can I remember myself curved round her breast as she moved, tied in a bundle that felt like part of her body until in the dark cool night she set me down? I remember feeling alone then.

Except for Luisa I've always felt alone, ever since. I try to cook simple food for her,

grilled fish, vegetables, salads, all the things I never ate as a child. I learned more than cleaning potatoes before I left the Paris restaurant. *Paella*, they can keep that. Too much sticky rice with creatures nobody can identify, fish thrown over the sides of the boat into nets, thrown by housewives into rice. We don't have to eat like that. Not with just the two of us and our two salaries.

She laughs at me. I know that. But it's a warm laugh. She laughs when I scold the housekeeper for using too much garlic. "We're not peasants," I tell her. The housekeeper laughs too but her laugh is not so pleasant, and it is better when she is not there. Luisa laughs about my insistence on the primacy of the image, even my questions seem to amuse her. "It's all about time and history," she tells me, but I know how to escape all of that.

"Not so," I tell her seriously, "the meaning is always in the image, the heart is there." *La curva*, the bend in the road from which you can see neither forward nor back, only the curve of her breasts and the heat of the afternoon before you are set down in the cold by a woman who has stopped her ears from hearing your cries, a woman who cannot remember you even when you sit down next to her in the darkened room and stroke the curve of her once warm arm. You leave, you escape, you follow the bends in the road, but the image overtakes you everywhere.

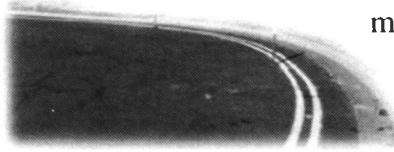


photo by Joel Kendall

