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El navegante dormido (The Sleeping Seafarer) by Abilio Estévez is one of the novels featured in the winter 2011-12 Spanish-language reading group run by And Other Stories.

The Sleeping Seafarer

By Abilio Estévez

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Part One

The Silence of Frozen Lakes

Sincerity is like sleep.

W. H. Auden, *Writing*

Hardwoods

It was an old bungalow on a beach without a name. An old, two-storey bungalow, built, so they said, of Oregon hardwoods. The property, originally, of a rich man from the north, Dr Samuel O. Reefy, a graduate in medicine of Northwestern University, Chicago, born in Cuba City, a small town in south Wisconsin, bordering Iowa and Illinois, in the heart of the Midwest. Then, when the doctor died mysteriously without heirs on the 5th of April 1954, thanks to a generous will, the bungalow passed to the Godínez family, Habaneros from Santiago de las Vegas, a small town in the centre of the province of La Habana.

The characters we will encounter in the course of these pages referred to the house in many different ways. The most commonly used terms were perhaps the bungalow, the house or the big house. The fact is that they were not in the habit of giving it a specific title. The only thing they shared, call the old bungalow what they

would, was their devotion. Whatever the form used, they pronounced the words in the intense, deferential tone used to speak of intimate things, of personal virtues and weaknesses, of the best and even the worst secrets.

And the truth is that, without the big house, without its exceptional geographical location – and, of course, without its history – this narrative would have been different.

Its stubborn presence by the waters of the Gulf made the things that happened and did not happen possible; the happy events and the others, which, as might be expected, were the majority.

The bungalow had survived over sixty years of disasters; countless sunny and rainy days; the constant mortification of the salt; three or four relatively unsuccessful revolutions; a pentarchy; twenty-two presidents, among whom can be counted some who were ephemeral and others tenacious, like the salt.

If the old bungalow succeeded in surviving so many vicissitudes, more than seventy storms ranging from cyclones to *plataneros*, the hurricane winds that brought down the fronds of the banana trees, it was not only due to the benevolent presence of the hillside and the skilful construction of its foundation. The quality of the wood brought from distant forests must also be taken into account.

The bramble track

The bungalow was at the end of a kilometre-and-a-half of terrible track. What in other times, many years before, had been a beautiful avenue, bordered by royal palms, sea grapes, casuarinas, oleanders and even roses, was now abandoned to the grace of God. Little by little, without anyone noticing, as Cuban calamities always occurred, the drive to the house was transformed into a path of white-stemmed brambles.

Those who were most closely involved, the members of the Godínez family, had accepted, even encouraged this gradual deterioration for two important reasons. Firstly, because they knew there was no remedy since, as will become clear, they lacked the means. ‘Everything belongs to the State now,’ Colonel Gardener would announce over and over again with the smile of the powerless and a look that said, ‘If you didn’t believe me then, here it is now: I told you so.’ And he would add with a shrug, ‘Problems without a solution aren’t problems.’

And the second important reason: because in some way they were happy to feel that the terrible track isolated them from a world and a reality they preferred at a distance, as far away as possible from the house and the beach, as if the old avenue were a clear boundary, not now in space, but in time, something that defended them from the upheavals of a history they could not control, and neither could nor wished to understand.

Only the children, who had no choice since the school was in Bauta, had to walk the kilometre-and-a-half to the Baracoa road to catch a bus that had once belonged to the Greyhound Corporation (in the Twenties, that bus must have covered the route from Calgary to Saint Paul, Minnesota). A bus that, like the road, had seen better days and which dropped them at the cool doors of La Campana China restaurant.

The return journey was more pleasant. They usually came back with Juan Milagro in his jeep, a little less old, from the Second World War, which bumped over cracks and potholes, and threw up a column of white dust, dowsing the sea grapes until they were eventually transformed into the flora of some impossible planet.

A cyclone with the name of an actress, a ballerina and an author

It is also just that this narrative begins with a threat, since the story related in it, at times curious and almost always confused, coincides with the moment when a hurricane was showing the first signs of its violence on the shores of La Habana. A very powerful one, it was said. The National Hurricane Centre in Florida had decided to call it Katherine. This, therefore, claims to be the true story of how the whirlwind that seemed to have no end was experienced on that beach. The book opens not only with a photograph, a house and a road, but, in addition, with a cyclone.

1977

An unforgettable, sadly famous year, which was distinguished by its few strokes of good luck and the innumerable misfortunes it brought with it. And the weather was

not the mildest. There were long months without rain, seeming to suggest that the mechanisms which stirred the clouds and made the Earth rotate had ground to a halt. The talk was of cracked ground and scorched plants, whole crops lost as if they had been devastated by blight or sulphurous storms. Until, one fine day, the whims of nature changed and, as is always the case, the opposite suddenly happened: torrential rainstorms that washed away everything in their path.

The hurricanes were unrelenting. They started to be felt early, from the beginning of August. No sooner had one dispersed through the Louisiana swamps, than you could be perfectly sure that another was brewing up in the confines of the Atlantic. In language approaching that of terrifying Evangelical preachers, the meteorologists spoke of an exceptionally bad season, characterised by excessive warming of the oceans. The Caribbean islands, from Port-of-Spain to Cuba, the largest, were pounded by high winds and rain. The gusts reached three hundred kilometres per hour, and were capable of blowing away not only trees, animals and boats, but also houses, large buildings and whole villages.

And then the volume of water in the small Antillean rivers increased three or fourfold, and fields were swamped and towns flooded. Haiti, the most long-suffering and needy of the islands, saw almost a thousand people die. It was feared that La Tortuga, refuge of buccaneers and pirates in days gone by, might have disappeared from the shipping charts.

The night sky

Mamina felt a weight on her chest, which she interpreted as an omen (she had more than enough experience, all of it awful, of omens), and mumbled, in the dark cracked voice that escaped from her toothless mouth:

“Hurricanes are like misfortunes.” And after a long moment of thought, she added with a laugh, perhaps to deny the omen any possibility of existence, “They never come in ones.”

It was midnight and the living room clock chimed four times. Andrea, who was standing near Mamina, gave a start. The old, inaccurate clock always startled her. She stopped for a moment, calculated the right time, the number of chimes the clock should have given, and then thought about what Mamina had said, and felt she

understood her, believed she knew what was in Mamina's head and heart, and silently agreed, nodded her agreement, nodded a number of times. It was one of Andrea's mannerisms, to nod repeatedly before speaking, as if she wanted to give greater veracity to what she was about to say. She sighed. She also sighed a lot; life, as she said, if not passed in tears, was passed in sighs. And that sigh was not only an exclamation, but also the testimony of a whole life:

“The problem, my dear, is that in this house we don't need hurricanes to bring misfortune.”

And after two such categorical statements, what more was there to say? They closed their mouths and did not even look at one another. Each of them was hearing again the chimes and the conclusive words the other had uttered.

They were on the porch, deftly roping together the chairs, adjusting them, stringing them between the bars of the window with tight knots, better than those of many sailors. Too many years of hurricanes, knots and cables. Every so often they turned to look suspiciously at the night sky. And they discovered that they were right to be apprehensive.

The sky was dark, red, crossed by dangerous, low clouds, like a flock of giant birds. It was as if those neatly-lined clouds were unsuccessfully trying to stir up the sea. Yet the sea remained calm, with a furtive calm coastal dwellers knew so well. A good-for-nothing, gusty wind was also beginning to blow up. The first winds of the season never stirred the sea grapes or casuarinas, nor did they dissipate the heat, on the contrary, they breathed life into it, the way you breathe life into embers. Who knows where on Earth or in Hell the hot gusts that appeared sporadically 'like the howls of wolves' might be brewing up. Colonel Gardener, who had never in his life seen a wolf, much less heard their howls, always mentioned them when the wind whistled above the ramshackle house.

Just before a hurricane, the heat become unbearable and much more humid. The habitual stink of dead fish oozed from the sea. Since, in that ugly bay, or in that country (which it had occurred to someone to call Cuba), the worst always seemed possible, the hurricanes were preceded by boiling hot drizzle, tiny drops of fire that burned the skin where they hit. Gnats and mosquitoes took almost total possession of the beach, attempting perhaps to make the most of this last moment, as if they knew that when the gusts of violence blew up they too would be carried away.

Mamina repeated:

“I hate hurricanes and misfortunes. See, all the years I’ve lived and I’m still like a child.”

She helped Andrea to tie up the last chair and fetched the kerosene lamp; there had been no electricity for a while. They had lit some small tin lamps and the two or three lanterns left over from the days of abundance. No sooner did a breath of wind blow up than the power cut out. Olivero, with his sad sense of humour that made mild fun of everything, would laugh and say that the cables didn’t exist, that they had been destroyed ages ago, like all the rest, and that the electricity came through the air, like screams, voices and echoes.

“Hurricanes, misfortunes,” repeated Mamina, who still felt a weight on her chest and a strange desire to cry.

“And worst of all,” corroborated Andrea after a number of nods and sighs, “one single hurricane means any number of misfortunes.”

“Don’t start complaining now, it’s not the time for complaints,” responded Colonel Gardener from the darkness in his deep, frightening voice.

Like a ghost, the tall figure without a shadow, carrying a buttonwood staff, came up followed by a cow.

Mamina and Andrea forgot about the ill omens, the grandiloquent phrases, and had the urge to burst out laughing. The Colonel had come from the charcoal hut. He had closed it up as best he could, trying to ensure that the buttonwood for the kilns would stay as dry as possible, although he was certain that it was a waste of effort, that if the hurricane that was on its way was as bad as they said, no God existed that could protect the hut. At least *Mamito*, the cow, would be safe, she’d have her place among the people, that was why she gave them food, but not without risk, of course.

The Colonel urged the animal up the steps that separated the house from the reef and lead her the length of the porch into the living room. Man and cow stopped there, as if they had lost their way. Andrea brought up a lamp. Mamina moved some of the furniture aside, cleared a path, and the Colonel conducted the beast to the maid’s bathroom behind the kitchen, was now used for storing junk. The chickens were in there too. The animals scarcely fitted in the old bathroom, they couldn’t move, but at least they were safe from the storm.

“She’s restless,” observed the Colonel, “you know what that means: if the cow’s restless, the bad weather...”

“She’s uncomfortable, poor beast,” said Andrea with a sigh, but lacking any desire to make fun.

“And what do you expect? That I leave her in the charcoal hut? If I leave her there, you’ll find her a thousand miles away tomorrow, in the middle of Alabama.” He passed his big mitts, enormous blackened paws, over his head and pointed an admonitory finger at Andrea. “Perhaps the poor cow might even be happier in Alabama. Nat King Cole was born there.”

Andrea did not reply. She didn’t even look at him. She wasn’t in the mood for jokes that weren’t jokes and which would only lead to a discussion she was not up to. Neither was she ready to play along with him, not even to pretend to, hiding herself behind the mask of a smile. Followed by her three cats, she walked away, unconsciously counting the hoof prints of mud, charcoal dust and damp sand the cow had left on the living room floor. She sighed again and nodded several times. Once again she was assailed by a desire that had been coming over her a lot recently, the desire to be far away from the house and the bay. Not just a distance in space, but also in time.

“If I were to come back in another life...” she muttered, so quietly that no one heard.

She and Mamina then went from window to window, checking they had been secured with iron bars. On their way, they checked on everyone.

Mino was in his armchair, he was asleep, they could hear his heavy sleeper’s breath. Vicenta de Paúl’s door couldn’t be opened as she was in the habit of sleeping with it locked. They didn’t see Valeria either, but heard her lethargic respiration from under the mosquito net, and a few words that could only have come from a different world. Worried about the children, Andrea even went up to Dr Reefy’s old observatory, where Jafet and Mute Chatty slept, also protected by their respective nets.

Mamina was concerned about Olivero:

“He should have moved over here tonight, that shack is dangerous, so close to the beach. One of these fine days he’s going to wake up in the middle of the sea.”

Andrea didn’t think that there was any reason to be too worried yet, after all, the Met Office man had said, that very night, that the hurricane wasn’t expected right away.

“And not just because the Met Office man says so, you can see it in the sky, in the sea, so many years living on this beach must be good for something. The hurricane isn’t cooked yet. It’s slow, and everyone knows the slow ones are the worst. It’ll be a couple of days yet, probably three, and it might even change course towards the Bahamas, or the Yucatan peninsula, with the grace of God. And may God forgive me for wishing bad things on others, it’s not the bad for others but the good for myself and my family, we’ve suffered enough.”

They returned to the kitchen, where everything was in order. They had collected enough water for a week, and there was no lack of rice, eggs and beans because the Colonel might have a bad mouth, but when it came to managing, really managing, he could work miracles.

“Tomorrow’s another day,” said Mamina as they were bolting the doors.

“Yes, another day. That’s the only true thing you can say without fear every night, as long as the world’s the way it is and there are hurricanes,” and Andrea sighed and nodded her head decidedly.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” replied the Colonel in his deep voice. “The way we’re going, one night we’ll be saying ‘Tomorrow won’t be another day.’” And he firmly closed the door of the old bathroom where he had hidden the chickens and the cow. “And what’s she called?”

“Who?”

“The hurricane, who else?”

Mamina still felt the weight, the ill omen, on her chest as she went up the stairs, step by step.

“This ninety-year-old body has had enough.”

“Ninety-one-year-old.”

“Thank you.”

María de Megara, her dog, was following her, dragging her teats along the floor. *María de Megara*, her poor German shepherd, as old, deaf, blind and tired as her owner.

Andrea wiped the mud prints *Mamito*, the cow, had left on the wood of the living room floor.

“It’s all the same what name they give this hurricane, and all the other to come, hurricanes are like misfortunes and it doesn’t matter what they’re called.”

Then came the wind, the howls of the wolves. And the yellow-faced finches, waking up, fluttering their wings beneath the blankets that covered their cages.

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