

# THE TAIGA SYNDROME

*Cristina Rivera Garza*

Translated by  
Suzanne Jill Levine and Aviva Kana



SHEFFIELD - LONDON - NEW YORK

This edition first published in 2019 in the UK by And Other Stories  
Sheffield – London – New York  
www.andotherstories.org

First published as *El mal de la taiga* in 2012 by Tusquets Editores  
Copyright © 2012 by Cristina Rivera Garza

English language translation copyright © Suzanne Jill Levine and Aviva Kana, 2018

First English-language edition published in the USA in 2018 by Dorothy, a  
publishing project.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored  
in a retrieval system, or transported in any form by any means (electronic,  
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written  
permission of the publisher of this book. The right of Cristina Rivera Garza  
to be identified as author of this work and Suzanne Jill Levine and Aviva Kana  
to be identified as the translators of this work has been asserted in accordance  
with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,  
events or places is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-911508-68-7

eBook ISBN: 978-1-911508-69-4

Typesetter: Tetragon, London; Proofreader: Sarah Terry; Graphic Design: Steven  
Marsden. Printed and bound by the CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY.

Cover Image: 'The November Meteors', Étienne Léopold Trouvelot, 1882. Repro-  
duced courtesy of The New York Public Library, Rare Book Division.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book was supported using public funding by Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



## CONTENTS

I: The Same	7
II: The Contract	13
III: Going for Nothing	17
IV: The Promise	19
V: Everything Falls at the Same Rate	23
VI: The Hidden Camera	27
VII: Tongue to Tongue	31
VIII: The Ferocious Wolf	35
IX: There Is a Waterwheel Outside	39
X: Dance Theory	43
XI: The Pool	47
XII: Those Things	53
XIII: <i>L'Enfant sauvage</i>	59
XIV: Placenta	65
XV: Lap Dance	69
XVI: Women Think Only about Sex	77
XVII: An Underwhelming Face	83
XVIII: I Would Be Stopped by the Dark	89
XIX: Cruelty Never Is	91
XX: Something Died Here	95
XXI: The Large Window that Vibrates	99
XXII: A Closed Forest	103
XXIII: Playlist	105

## I: THE SAME

That they had lived there, they told me. In that house, there. And they pointed it out with an apprehension that could easily be mistaken for respect or fear. Their fingers barely peeked out from the cuffs of their heavy black coats. The smell of ash under their arms. Dirty nails. Dry lips. Their eyes, having discreetly moved toward where they were pointing, quickly returned to their original position, gazing straight ahead. “What are you really looking for?” – they asked without daring to say so. And I, who didn’t exactly know, followed their steps like a shadow, back to the village over snow-covered trails.

It wasn’t really a house, I should say first. I would have described what I saw on that morning, at the beginning of autumn, as a shack, maybe not even. A hovel. In any case, it was a habitable structure made from wood, cardboard, and lots of dry branches. It did have a roof, a ridged roof, and a pair of windows covered in thick transparent plastic instead of glass. It had the air of a last refuge. It gave the impression that beyond was only open space,

and the law of the wilderness, and the sky, so blue, so high, above the wild.

I remember the cold. Above all, I remember the cold. I remember my clenched jaw, fists deep in my coat pockets.

They had arrived there, according to my information, at the beginning of winter. I had come to that conclusion because their last communication came from a telegram office in a border town about two hundred kilometers away. The telegram, addressed to the man who had hired me to investigate the case, said briefly and somewhat obliquely that they were never coming back: “WHAT ARE WE LETTING IN WHEN WE SAY GOODBYE?”

I took the case because I have always had an all-consuming weakness for forms of writing no longer in use: radiograms, stenography, telegrams. As soon as I placed my hands on the faded paper, I began to dream. The tips of my fingers skimmed the creases of the paper; the stale smell of age. Something hidden. Who would set out on such a journey? That couple, of course. Out of everyone, only those two. From what place, so far away in space, so far away in time, had this fistful of capital letters been sent? And what were the two of them hoping for? What had they let into their lives? That was what I wanted to know. From the start, that was what I wanted to understand.

The man had made an appointment with me in a café downtown, at four in the afternoon. I had only met him a few nights before, in front of images of a forest or of many forests. Oil paintings, X-rays. Installations.

*The Taiga Syndrome*

“Do you like them?” he had asked me with an accent I wasn’t immediately able to identify.

I told him the truth. I told him yes.

“Do forests intrigue you?” he asked me again, placing a hand on the wall I was leaning against. Where the back of my neck rested.

I turned to look at the painting to my right: oil on wood, wire, resin. A forest within a forest. Something primordial.

“They do intrigue me,” I said, after considering it for a while.

“You don’t seem like the kind of person who would get lost in a forest,” he said as he took me by the elbow and, with a dexterity that was pure elegance, led me from inside the gallery toward the terrace.

“You’re right,” I told him. “Nor do I like being taken by the elbow,” I added.

He laughed, of course. White teeth, Adam’s apple quivering, the hint of a beard.

“Your face says that too,” he said when he returned with two flute glasses.

I remember the toast, the first one. I remember laughing at a face I couldn’t see – mine, which I was imagining so clearly. Its suspicious expression combined with a tacit sense of distance. My brow furrowed, my chin raised. I remember having said: “To the forest or forests.” Glass clinking.

\*

“But you must know about the taiga syndrome, right?” he asked after he had finally stopped laughing, after taking a large sip from the effervescent liquid in his glass. “It seems,” he continued, almost whispering, “that certain inhabitants of the taiga begin to suffer terrible anxiety attacks and make suicidal attempts to escape.” He fell silent, though it seemed like he wanted to continue. “Impossible to do when you’re surrounded by the same terrain for five thousand kilometers,” he concluded with a sigh.

I remember the wolf. I saw him, an enormous wolf, gray against the snow. I saw his jaw: open. His eyes, his paws. I saw the red thread that extended from his tracks and slithered through the snow before momentarily getting lost in the trunk of a fir tree. I saw the fir, so majestic. Then it climbed, the red thread, through the warped branches, through the evergreen pine needles until high above it reached the green branches of another conifer. That was what made me look up at the sky, also gray, filled with thick jumbled clouds. What shade of gray? Ten minutes before a storm gray, of course. I didn’t hear anything, couldn’t hear anything, but I saw that the wolf was preparing to pounce. I saw his saliva, teeth, lips.

“The same,” I repeated, attempting to rein in the threads of the conversation.

“The same,” he said, recognizing my effort. “If you don’t catch them, wrestle them down, like in rugby, they might vanish forever in the immensity of the taiga.”

*The Taiga Syndrome*

“The same,” I repeated. Sometimes seeing is just the confirmation of a fact.

It is difficult to know for sure when a case begins, at what moment one accepts an investigation. I suppose that, although the exchange of information and the negotiation of my contract didn't happen until days later, on a summer afternoon, in the downtown café of a coastal city, the case of the mad couple of the taiga began right there, on the terrace of a gallery where a man with the hint of a thin blond beard had taken me by the elbow without my consent.

## II: THE CONTRACT

He had heard of my work, that's what he said. He already knew about me when he took me by the elbow to cross the gallery and lead me toward the terrace. Had I noticed how dark the sky was that night? Had I known that the artist who painted/installed/sculpted/photocopied forests had told him I was, in fact, a detective?

As we talked, he drank his coffee and looked around. As we talked, he lowered his eyes and placed small cubes of sugar in the dark liquid. A spoon. Circles. Sometimes this is what being nervous looks like.

"It's been a while since I worked," I said. Though what I really wanted to say was: "Don't you know about my many failures?"

The case of the woman who disappeared behind a whirlwind.

The case of the castrated men.

The case of the woman who gave her hand, literally. Without realizing it.

The case of the man who lived inside a whale for years.

The case of the woman who lost a jade ring.

“It’s better this way,” he said, as if he had heard me say something. Then, without missing a beat, he placed a leather briefcase on the table and began to open the lock with his long nervous fingers.

It was then that I saw the telegram, their last written message. There it was, on top of a pile of neatly organized documents: letters, maps, tickets, transcriptions, photocopies, envelopes. Sometimes, everything exists for the first time.

“I haven’t said yes,” I said as I touched the papers. “It’s been a while,” I insisted.

I remember how warm the wind was. The way the white linen curtains announced the proximity of the sea. Above all, I remember the salt. Opening the windows wide. I remember that the salt told us who we were. Or how.

“I lost a woman,” he murmured. “She left with another man,” he added, his voice faraway as if he were struggling to remember language. “They both left, I mean.” Forcing the words out was more physical than emotional, every word a strike ushered viciously from his mouth, every word a lethal blow. “I am terrified they might be like the mad people from the taiga, the ones I mentioned before.” His smile emphasizing that he meant to ridicule them, or worse, himself: “I told you about them, I’m sure you remember.”

\*

*The Taiga Syndrome*

I remember, above all, the shame. The definition (from old English, *scamu*): 1. A painful feeling of humiliation or distress that typically inflames the face, caused by being conscious of behavior – either one’s own or others’ – that is wrong, ridiculous, or foolish. I remember what I saw in his eyes.

“Your wife?” I wanted to know as I touched the documents without daring to read them.

“My wife, exactly,” he answered. “My second wife. The first one died in an accident, years ago,” he said before I could ask.

I looked directly at him, intrigued. I swapped my coffee for a glass of wine. I ordered rye bread, olive oil, balsamic vinegar. I asked for water.

“I am older than I look,” he assured me.

“How old?”

“Older than you might imagine, Miss,” he said.

It always surprised me that he was so formal, but the anachronism had its charm. In fact, it made me treat him more formally as well.

“Sometimes, Sir, you have to let wives go,” I said. “Especially second wives.”

“If that’s what she really wanted,” he interrupted, “would she be sending me messages from everywhere she goes?”

In the photograph he held in front of my eyes the woman seemed happy. Her smile, at least, was enormous. Contagious. Something viral. In fact, it was a series of

images. The photographer had captured, second by second, the way the woman spun on her own axis. Her red dress, opened. Again, her smile. And in the background, the forest.

“So, is she Hansel or Gretel?” I asked, truly curious, still staring at the images.

“Gretel, I suppose.” The man hesitated, taken aback.

“Maybe she is the woodsman or the witch or the woman who wants to get rid of the children in order to have enough to eat,” I said more to myself than to the man who had begun to smile, stupefied.

“This is not a fairy tale, detective,” he said, interrupting me again. “This is a story about being in love.”

“Or being out of love,” I corrected him.

### III: GOING FOR NOTHING

I remember what I meant to tell him in that bustling café whose windows were grazed by the ocean salt, that clingy, inescapable substance that reminds us who we are – or how we are – when we feel it on our skin or tongue. Instead of taking the money from his hand and nodding in agreement, I remember I wanted to tell him that, in the end, no one knows why someone leaves. No one can be sure.

But I took the money and I took the briefcase filled with documents and I told him yes. I would take the case of the mad couple of the taiga. I would solve his riddle. I would say to him, at the end, many days later, when my hair was much longer, that no one ever knows why. That on some days, being out of love looks the same as being in love. But I think I took his money and the briefcase full of documents and agreed because I wanted to come back and tell him that, in the same way, just like being in love, being out of love also ends one day.

*Cristina Rivera Garza*

You go for nothing if you really go that far, that's what someone said in an old song. I remember that I remembered – or might have remembered it.