

Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear

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Translated by Meghan Forbes

“We’re almost there,” says Zuzana, with her hands on the steering wheel. “See how the landscape has changed?” she continues, when she gets no response.

“What?” Her mother starts, as if caught by surprise. “Oh, yeah,” she adds automatically, but her thoughts linger somewhere else, “we’re still stuck in traffic though.”

“This is nothing,” Zuzana dismisses the words with a wave of her hand. “I mean, you know how it looks in LA. We’ve already been outside the city for a while now.”

Her mother nods distractedly. “Still, it’s bad.”

“What?”

“The traffic.”

“Oh, well... You get used to it.”

“To spending half your life in the car? On the freeway? Not something I’d wanna get used to, that’s for sure...”

“Do you know how many books I’ve read behind the wheel?”

“You read while driving?!”

“I meant audiobooks.”

“If you added up all the time you’ve spent here, you’d have one in preschool and one on the way...”

“I also took a few Spanish lessons on CD.”

“You know Spanish?”

“*No fumo, gracias.*”

“Hm...”

Regarding the Spanish, that was only a half-truth. Zuzana took up these lessons in the car as many times as she promptly gave them up. And with the *no fumo* thing, that was even less true. In the side compartment, she kept a golden pack of her final reserves. A while back she made a pact with herself — every time she was stuck in traffic for half an hour, without having moved six feet, she was allowed to smoke one cigarette. Zuzana had poor judgement when it came to time and space, and she had to refill her stock every week or two.

“Do you wanna try? I can put it on, it’s kinda funny... You just repeat what the lady says...”

“No, that’s okay,” her mother interrupts, keeping her eyes fixed out the window.

Zuzana hated the lessons. But sometimes she would put them on for a bit, like how a person agrees to play the name game out of boredom because there is nothing else with which to pass the time. During the first phrases she always felt like she was in the opening scenes of a Hollywood film. How could she not. She drives past the Hollywood Hills practically every day, sunglasses over her eyes, alone in the car. A flick titled *Young and Single*. Pity that she doesn’t drive a cabriolet.

Zuzana drums with her fingertips on the steering wheel and resists the urge to put on the left or right blinker...

Who would have guessed that her life would turn out this way? Definitely not her. Already in high school she had had a relatively straightforward plan: to find some relatively boring, but above all well-paid job in Prague and probably open her own business. Dedicate herself to that until she was thirty-two, thirty-five at the most. Since by that time she’d want to get pregnant, she’d possibly already need the help of fertility drugs. She’d have two kids, one after the other, in order to prolong her maternity leave. But one would also suffice. And a husband. She’d have a husband. They would live in a village outside of Prague, have a nice little house with a backyard. A pool. A Labrador. A cat. Maybe even a rabbit; kids usually want a pet rabbit.

But instead of all that, she’s here. In the City of Angels. Almost thirty-four. No kids. Divorced. *Divorced without Children*, a bitter comedy, the sequel to *Young and Single*. A total flop at the box office — neither bitter nor comedic enough.

“Hey, look how they are already starting to crop up here,” Zuzana leans towards her mother’s window and gives her a meaningful wink. “Joshua trees, that’s them!”

“I wouldn’t say so,” her mother opens the window, “looks like normal cactuses to me.”

“Mom, can you please close that? Otherwise the A/C is on for nothing.”

“So turn it off, Zuzi, it’s not even that hot. And the fresh air is nice.”

“You mean the smog?”

“I mean the ocean air.”

“Really? You can sense the ocean here?”

“Yes, I can actually sense it in the air. You’re used to it, so you don’t sense it. I do.”

“Okay, but you know we’re in the desert, right?”

“I’m getting hungry.”

“We’re almost there... Hey, let’s put on the radio maybe?”

“Zuzi...”

“Hold on, hold on,” Zuzana bursts out, “Look!” She pops open the glove compartment. “I’ve got supplies — protein bars, chips, chocolate, help yourself...”

“I’m not going to eat chocolate when there’s Chicken Paprikash on the stove...”

“But the stove’s at home, and we’re on our way to the campsite. Here, have a bar, there’s one that tastes like beef jerky...”

“Zuzi...”

“Look, we’ve just passed through the gate to the park. Just desert here, just trees and rocks, see? What do you see?”

Her mother looks at Zuzana with a look that says she’s had enough and to cut it out, and unfastens her seatbelt.

“What are you doing, Mom? The roads are pretty rough here...”

With a sigh, her mother opens the door.

“Are you crazy? Buckle up!”

And she gets out.

“Mom!”

For a while, it’s completely silent. Zuzana remains motionless, gazing ahead.

Then, she sighs deeply, her shoulders slumping. Her hand feels around in the side compartment and draws out a Marlboro. Smoke unfurls out the rolled-down window, billowing lazily into the hot, late afternoon sky. The air stands still, a hint of smog and ocean in it. Zuzana presses play. “...*vino tinto y una agua. Una copa de vino tinto y una agua.*”

“Una copa de vino tinto,” says Zuzana in a monotone voice and turns the radio off. *“Por favor.”*

She continues to stare ahead — at the closed garage door. And at the flowerpot with the cactus, which her mother had knocked over while making her exit. Sure, it didn’t resemble a Joshua tree, but still, with a little imagination... No, it was a stupid idea to haul it out here. Or to think that this game would work at all. In the rear-view mirror, she spots the old married couple, her favorite neighbors. With dread she realizes that they are coming closer — she opens the door and peeks out at them. They pause a few feet from the car, making a show of maintaining social distance.

“What’s the matter? Your car won’t start?” the neighbor asks with concern.

“No, the car’s fine...”

“Uh huh...” The neighbor nods confusedly. “We thought... since you were sitting there for so long with your mom... that there’s something up with the car...”

“Not with my car, though maybe with my brain...” Zuzana laughs hysterically and immediately feels embarrassed. She tries to put on her most carefree face, but based on the neighbor’s now even more confused expression, it probably actually looks like she is having some kind of spasm. Thankfully, the neighbor doesn’t press the issue, and begins to walk back with his wife to their house. The three wave at each other again. Zuzana shuts the car door. Perhaps she could have told them that it’s some kind of Czech tradition — that you sit in the car and pretend you’re going somewhere, without ever leaving the spot. Ha! A good one, right?

Anyhow, this didn’t go as planned, she must admit that. It was just the first thing that came to her mind... which ordinarily is either the best or worst idea, rarely something in between, and in this case, it happened to be the latter. But she’d meant well. And she even admitted that she was the one who screwed up. That’s exactly what she’d said to her mother when she apologized to her.

But is it her fault that her mother happened to fly from the Czech Republic to see her just before the outbreak of a global pandemic? And how could she be blamed for the fact that they closed the national parks, including the one which, God knows why, her mother had babbled on about continuously since her arrival? She should have taken her there two years ago, when she had visited the last time, but it just hadn’t worked out. This year, her mother insisted that they stay there overnight and camp. Sleep in a tent. Look at the stars. Adventure and romanticism, mother and daughter, two sleeping bags, and the desert.

Zuzana didn’t like the idea at all, but she agreed that they’d make the trip. It’s true that she put it off as long as she could, but she really did have a lot of work on her plate. She hadn’t lied about that... Maybe she did make fictive work calls to wiggle out of her mother’s company a few times, but please — who wouldn’t go a little stir crazy, stuck at home for a

month in quarantine with your own mother? And a few days ago, it was really not her fault. She couldn't just take off without a signal or electricity given she had a Zoom call scheduled with a ten-person team. It just wouldn't have worked.

"You can't take a holiday for once?" Her mother had tossed up her hands. "God knows how long it'll be until I can come here to see you again, and you can't even manage to take a week off?"

"No, Mom, that's really not how it works at my job. The whole time you've been here, I've hardly worked at all anyhow and now I need to catch up."

"Haven't worked? You're constantly on the phone, making calls or dealing with something..."

"Mom, please, I'm taking care of some pretty large contracts. I can't just up and say to my colleagues, *Sorry, my mom wants to go camping, take care of the Japanese account yourselves, bye!*"

"But they'd probably understand, no? That your mama came to see you..."

"You're not the only one who comes to see me! I try to take some vacation days every time someone comes, but I can't give all my time. I'm not on holiday here!"

"And may I ask just who are all these people flying over here to see you?"

"Just people I know..."

"People you know?"

"Yes, people I know. Monika was here, dad, people I know..."

"Dad was here one time."

Zuzana's sigh gave away more than if she'd spoken.

"Or more times?" her mother tensed up. Zuzana could feel her look, the one urging her to look back. Some of her mother's looks were almost visceral. Zuzana didn't understand how she did it, but in this moment, she felt like her mother was poking her shoulder.

"He's been here maybe three times."

"Three times?! This is my second time!"

"What kind of argument is that? You're competing with him, or what?"

"No, I'm just upset that you invite him here more often than your mom."

“If it makes you happy, I didn’t invite him. He just called to say he was coming. And he did.”

“He just called... that’s so him. He just calls, and everyone else can go crazy for all he cares.”

Zuzana let the gibe go without comment, and her mother didn’t elaborate. She bought herself peace for a while, but it didn’t make her feel good. Because Zuzana knew that this wasn’t a simple, quiet kind of quiet, but a loud quiet, the type that seeped through the curtains like the stench of a burnt lunch. Their shared space now reeked of it, and it couldn’t be aired out. Her mother was going to give her a piece of her mind, it was going to find its way into their conversations, that much was clear to her.

Her mother had been jealous of her father since forever, and she probably never intended to let that go. It seemed to Zuzana that it was impossible for her mother to bear that she had been closer to him than to her since she was little. Maybe being the only girl out of three kids also played a role in it, as well as being the first-born. And as the oldest of the siblings, she could feel how her mother was the one spoiling their domestic peace. Her non-stop efforts to control everything, her inability to sometimes just let things be.

And that is what, Zuzana thought, tore her parents apart in the end. Her dad simply didn’t have the nerves to deal with the constant stress and pressure. There was a time when Zuzana tried to defend herself against her mother, she even fought against her a little, but she lay down her arms long ago. Now she ignored her mother’s constant nagging and unending salvos of advice as best she could, with the patience of a Zen master. She would never be good enough for her mother, and she’d long ago stopped trying to do anything about it, she stopped letting it get to her.

At least she had her father’s unconditional love. While he was proud of her, proud that his girl from a little speck of nowhere in Central Europe made it to California, her mother only noticed that her daughter had no husband and no kids. In fact, she’d been doling out regular doses of words on this topic the whole time she’d been in LA. One time though Zuzana couldn’t take it anymore, and talked back — she couldn’t always maintain the Zen thing. She retorted that her mother just had to deal with the fact that for some people, having a family wasn’t the goal.

“To have a family should be everyone’s goal,” was her mother’s reply to that.

“Oh yeah? And you managed it with flying colors, huh?”

Of course, Zuzana regretted saying that before the words even came out of her mouth. But what could she do? She couldn’t take them back, and what’s more... what’s more is that she was right! Her parents got a divorce when Zuzana was ten and her brothers six and four. Her mother had been with no one else since, at least no one serious enough to introduce to her kids. Now she can’t wait to have grandchildren, which neither of her sons are up for, and her daughter couldn’t even manage a successful marriage, let alone begetting a new

generation. And her mother might have had something to do with that. Zuzana had always feared becoming as intense of a nag and micro-manager to the point of being unbearable, so much so that if it meant making a scene with her husband like her mother would, she'd rather make no scene at all. She didn't manage him. Didn't pursue him. She definitely wasn't intense. He left her for another.

After that last skirmish with her mom, Zuzana felt guilty and began to organize the delayed excursion right away. It wouldn't be long until she'd be taking her mother to the airport. She thanked God that she managed to negotiate a spot on a repatriation flight with the consulate. Her mother wouldn't have arranged it at all. Maybe she wouldn't have known how, maybe she didn't want to. When they had cancelled her original return flight and the airline announced that it would be another month at a minimum before anyone flew with them anywhere, it seemed to have made her mother's day. She'd commented with the words, "Guess I'm not going anywhere for a while, eh, Zuzi?" And Zuzana's forehead broke out in a sweat.

Now she wanted to carry out her mother's wish in this last little while. She had wanted to take her to the desert today. Only, at the same moment that her mother had just carried all the camping equipment to the front door, Zuzana read a headline that Joshua Tree National Park was being closed until further notice. This time, even her back broke out in a sweat.

"Should we bring a few small pillows?" her mother asked, as Zuzana took in a breath to share the news.

The disappointment in her mother's eyes was visceral. Zuzana felt it like a punch to the gut. She expected her mother to take offense or to yell at her — that it would be this moment when that ignored stench from the reeking curtains would make itself present again. But none of that happened. Her mother just sadly shrugged her shoulders — *what can you do* — and went to make Chicken Paprikash.

Zuzana felt paralyzed. But then something occurred to her. An old memory suddenly sprang to mind. She had been around eight at the time, and it was a few days before a planned vacation to Croatia. It was to be the first family vacation abroad and Zuzana was looking forward to it terribly. Finally, they could go to the sea, which up to that point had never been possible. First, because of the regime. Her parents had not managed to get travel permits, and they didn't have enough money to pay someone off for them. Later, it wasn't possible because they were waiting for the boys to be a bit older, so that the vacation would be manageable for everyone. This was the year though that they could finally go!

It was a sweltering summer, August. Her parents had already managed to get the time off from work, and Zuzana a new bathing suit. Yellow with polka dots. But then Marek broke his leg when he fell from a swing. The whole family waited for him at the ER while they put his cast on, and then everyone filed out to the car in a disconcerted silence. They all knew that there was no going to the seaside now, and everyone was quiet the whole way home. Even the tearful Marek.

Then her dad turned off the engine — Zuzana would say that they sat there in that quiet in front of the garage for a good five minutes, but maybe it was actually just a few seconds. One of her parents, probably her dad, suggested they make the trip to the sea anyhow. Here and now. And then each of them started to say what they saw outside the car. In the end it was great fun, everyone was laughing, they saw boats and seagulls and octopi and whales with straw hats on their heads and palm trees with cherries. Once inside, they hopped into the bathtub in their bathing suits, the water lukewarm and salty with table salt. Except little Marek — the poor wiped-out thing fell asleep. Dad made waves.

Recalling this, Zuzana had thought that she could make it up to her mom now in the same way, that she'd also remember that nice family moment they once had and forgive Zuzana. At any rate, what else was there to do in that moment? *If we can't go to Joshua Tree, Joshua Tree will come to us.* But it hadn't quite worked.

Zuzana lights another cigarette. She somehow can't go inside.

Eva is sitting at the kitchen table, eating Chicken Paprikash. Her grandmother's recipe. At least as far as she could find the right ingredients here. If she'd decided to make dumplings, she'd have had an even bigger problem. She doesn't understand the way the flour is divided by its purpose, which makes no sense to her. At home she simply buys coarse, semi-coarse, or fine grain flour, and she knows what to do with it. She doesn't need someone to write that on the package. There are a lot of other things she doesn't understand, all those dumbed-down labels and instructions. All those people who look to be talking to themselves, as they gesticulate and shout on the sidewalk with their hands-free buds in their ears. To hold a telephone to one's ear was now apparently a great burden.

In the end, Eva thinks, it's a good thing that she can go home and Zuzana can have a break from her. She values her dad's visits more anyhow — he simply calls to say he's coming, and he comes. And her daughter thinks her a total idiot who doesn't see through the fact that some of those terribly important work calls are simply made up so that she doesn't have to spend time with her mother, or God forbid, talk to her.

Maybe it really is that hard to spend time with her. Just like it was so awfully hard for Karel, who would go out at every possible opportunity. To see his friends. And to see women. He also thought Eva was an idiot. How she cried at home, how she begged him, how she yelled — none of it did any good. Maybe she loved him too much, and that was her mistake. Plus, she was jealous. Of his friends and the women, of course, but she was also jealous of her children. When he finally did show up at home, he would shower the kids with attention, bring them games and sweets, spend an adventurous afternoon with them, and disappear again. On a "business trip." Eva is allergic to the phrase, and every time she hears it, even in the context of an actual business trip, she gets a bitter taste in her mouth.

She had always wished that Zuzana would find a nice man and be happy, so that she wouldn't have to go through all that. Not that Karel wasn't good, he was, for a long time he was... It was a good thing, she thought, that Zuzana saw what was what so early on. She'd hardly been with that Bobby of hers for a few years, when he also ended up leaving her for someone else. She felt sad for Zuzana. Her concern was sincere, but her daughter swatted it away like an annoying mosquito, so that she couldn't speak with her about it at all. It was impossible. Zuzana just wouldn't let her in.

Eva gets up from the table and scrapes the rest of her uneaten meal into the garbage bin.

Zuzana tosses her cigarette butt out the window. Just before exiting the car, her gaze falls to the side view mirror. It reminds her of a conversation she had with her mother in the car right after she'd picked her up from the airport.

"What in the world is that nonsense?" her mother pointed to something in front of her.

"What?"

"That inscription."

"What inscription?"

"That there, on the mirror."

"Like, you want me to translate it? It means..."

"I know what it says. I can translate it just fine. But I don't understand why it's there. The person who sold you the car had it engraved?"

"What? No! Why would they engrave something like that? It was already there."

"How was it already there?"

"It just was. Like how you have side view mirrors when you buy a car, you also have this inscription on those side view mirrors."

"So Volvo dealerships here insist on that?"

"No, you don't get it. It's on every car."

"What? For God's sake, why?"

"How should I know, I guess for safety reasons."

“Objects in mirror are closer than they appear? I thought maybe some philosopher had sold you this car.”

“Philosopher?”

“Or a fool.”

Zuzana goes back inside. Her mother is just loading the dishwasher and asks Zuzana if she wants some dinner. Zuzana politely declines and takes a bottle of wine out of the fridge. When she takes it and a glass into the living room, she expects to receive an admonition that she ought to eat first if she wants to drink alcohol, but nothing of the sort occurs. She is surprised at herself that all of a sudden, she misses such a remark. She settles onto the couch, and though she turns on the TV, she just stares at the wall. She chuckles to herself at the idea of asking her mother if she wants to play the name game.

The door to the living room opens and Zuzana turns to her mother — maybe she couldn't help herself and has come to restore order to life? But her mother just takes a seat next to Zuzana without a word and puts beside her glass a second empty one. Zuzana gives her a pour. After a moment of silence — a normal, quiet kind of quiet — Zuzana takes a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket and offers one to her mother. She looks at it for a while, and Zuzana notices how at first she purposefully shuts her mouth, then half parts her lips, as though she wants to say something, but in the end — again without a word — draws out a cigarette and places it between her lips. Zuzana lights them both, leans back into the couch, and rests her feet on the table. Her mother does the same.

“I still don't understand why you kept going on about Joshua Tree...”

Her mother shrugs her shoulders. “U2.”

“U2?”

“Yeah, because of U2.”

“Like, the band?”

“Their album from '87, *Joshua Tree*.”

“That's when I was born!”

“Oh, really?” Her mother feigns surprise.

“And that's why you wanted to go?”

“I thought there was something so nice and symbolic about it,” her mother says, taking a sip. “Back then it was impossible to get that album. In Czechoslovakia, you couldn’t get anything from the West, you know. But me and your dad, we had it.”

“How come?”

“Your dad scored it from someone who’d recorded it onto a cassette. Stop laughing — he paid a lot of money for it at the time. We would listen to it on the tape deck over and over again.”

“On the tape deck!”

“Don’t you remember how you erased the cassette? I thought I was gonna rip you a new one...”

“I erased it?”

“Yeah, you taped over it with something godawful on the radio...”

“Jesus Christ...”

“Yeah. Joshua Tree went to hell...” her mother says, and gives a little cough.

“So then you got a new one, right?”

“Of course we didn’t.”

“Why not?”

Her mother shrugs and brushes ash off her thigh. “Because everything was different by then... with me and your dad. I came to associate it with a time there was no going back to. I didn’t want to be reminded of that time anymore.”

Zuzana just quietly observes her mother for a while. Then she rises and reaches for the ashtray, placing it in front of them on the coffee table. She stubs out her cigarette.

“So let’s have Joshua Tree now then, what do you say?”

“Please, nothing can get me back in that car again...”

“To hell with that. Go get more wine, I’m taking you to a concert.”

When Eva returns with a bottle of white, Zuzana pulls up YouTube and puts on a thirty-year-old recording from a U2 concert tour. And when she peeks at her mother’s expression after a few songs, she can tell that this was one of those better first ideas she’s come up with — that this had turned out pretty well. She relaxes into the couch and suddenly

remembers the cactus, which she forgot to bring back inside with her, the poor thing now lolling about on driveway, where it will stay until the morning. She remembers her neighbors and the side view mirror.

“What?” her mother turns to her. “What are you laughing at?”