

A Far Country

Daniel Mason

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Extract

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In the valley of the village they would one day name Saint Michael in the Cane, the men and women waited, turning the November soil and watching the sky.

Clouds came, following the empty riverbeds on long solitary treks from the coast.

Sometimes it rained. Little green leaves unfurled from the dry branches, and a soft grass bloomed on the floor of the thorn scrub they called the white forest because it was too poor for color. The men and women watched the sky distrustfully then. Sometimes the rain fell so close they could smell it, but if it didn't fall again in that corner of earth, the leaves turned brown and rattled in the wind. That could kill a field, they said: a single rain and then empty skies. It raised your hopes, the land's hopes. They called it green drought and swore at it under their breath. Rain is like a man, said the women, It flatters you with sweet gifts, but it is worse than nothing if it doesn't stay.

When the rains didn't come again, the first plants to die were the grasses. Then the thorn brittled and the cactus

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grayed. In December, on the eve of Saint Lucy's Day, they set out six fragments of salt to divine for drought, and in the morning they counted how many had melted away and how many remained.

Finally, when the earth grew so hot that any rain would only steam back into the sky, they began to get ready. They called it the retreat, as if to settle the backlands was a foolish and unnatural thing in the first place. Most had seen drought before and knew too well the rituals of flight and uncertain return. In the dry fields, they clanged spades against the stone and combed the earth for fragments of manioc. They made calculations, checking their stores of salted meat and the levels of their wells.

As the days passed, they watched the sky, pinning their hopes on distant clouds that vanished suddenly as if bewitched. They broke fragments of dirt from the ground, caressed and crumbled them between their fingers, rolled the warm silt along the dry calluses of their thumbs, tasted it, talked to it. Coaxed, apologized, pleaded. Once a newspaperman from the coast came and wrote: *The sharecroppers know the texture of the land better than they know their own faces.* When the story was read aloud in the drought camps, an old man laughed, Of course! I was born there, I'm too poor for a looking glass, and when was there ever enough water for a still pool?

At dusk, they sat outside their homes and listened to the dry creaking of the thorn. They counted the days since they had last seen the orange armadillos, the hawk that nested in the tall drinking-tree, the night mice that made skittering pilgrimages across the bare yard. They drew thick mud from the wells, pressed and twisted it in handkerchiefs, sucked it or

threw it to the goats. The goats ate the greenest plants first: the jujubes, then the delicate pinnae of the mimosas, then the palm cactus, crushing the spines with their leathery tongues. When they had stripped the lowest branches clear, the animals stood on their hind legs and walked about like they were men. Flocks of birds blackened the sky, fleeing for the coast.

In town, they met at night and talked about when they would leave. The first to go were usually those who had seen drought before, who knew the horror of retreating at the last hour, with the last-goats and the last-flour and the last-hardtack burning in their mouths. Others wanted to go but waited, remembering the long march, the hunger, the drought camps and the cholera, the barren trails where they buried children with their eyes open so they wouldn't get lost on the way to heaven.

Others held out angrily, said, *This is mine*, and stamped their feet on the packed earth. They were the last to leave and the first to return. They were also the most likely to survive, as if they had the gift of estivation: drying up, slowing, sleeping for days, rising only to take little sips of what they could steal from the wells. Like the resurrection plants, with stems like rope and black-burnt leaves, blooming again at the first sign of rain.

They watched the sky and pinned their hopes on wisps of clouds stretching languidly across the blue. They shuttered windows and covered the wells. They watched neighbors leave and listened to rumors of where the government had set up way stations, and where there was disease. They killed the bone-thin zebu cows and then the goats, the animals arching weakly away from the dull blades of the knives. The meat of these last-goats was stringy and dry; in silty water, the women

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made stews from the guts and broth from the hoofs and tendons. They left the healthiest ones for the long march. In the hills, they searched for the last drinking-trees, held their bird-pecked fruit, ate their withered leaves and chewed their tubers until the sweet alkaline juice numbed their mouths. Slowly, the great trees began to die, their roots torn up, their leaves scratching at the dust as the wind swirled them away.

They watched the sky and pinned their hopes on the empty blue of it. Hadn't they heard stories of rain falling from cloudless skies, last-minute interventions by Saint Joseph or Saint Barbara? What of thorn ghosts who could stream tassels of water from the bean trees or open fountains from the cracks in the empty riverbeds? They began to leave candles at the cross-roads and sprinkle cane wine on the lips of their patron saints. They worshipped in tiny chapels filled with carved wooden feet and heads left long ago to pay for wishes granted. While they waited for answers, they rolled their earthen bowls into blankets and tied them with twine. They piled these along with their children onto carts and backs of donkeys with weak knees and dry mouths. The poorer ones carried their blankets on their backs and their children in their arms. Half-empty gourds of water sloshed about their necks.

They watched the sky and finally cursed it, cursed the clouds and the absence of the clouds, the laziness of the clouds, the immoderation of the clouds that refused to leave the coast with its plump women and rich black soil. They rolled their icons of Saint Joseph into the blankets alongside the bowls. They recited invocations and slipped the scripts into twig-thin scapulars around their necks. They chewed their last meals slowly, waiting for each dry lump of manioc to dissolve as if it were the viaticum.

They spent their final nights at home. These were restless nights, and every one of them dreamed of the dust storms. This, they said, meant it was time to go, when the dreams turned dry and the clouds stayed away even in the night. They woke the children before dawn and set out while it was still cool. They calculated how far it was to the coast and how much water remained.

When they spoke of those hours, they said, *We passed hunger*. As if it were a place, an outpost on a lonely road. Other times, they said, *Hunger passed through here*. As if something alive, a pale hoofed creature, who tore through on bristling haunches or ambled out of the white forest with a worn suit and a broken face, a monster or a devil.

Isabel was three when she left and four when she came home, and so her memory was only a child's memory, made of smells and light and the uneven surface of the road. What she remembered was this: the hot taste of the charqui her aunt pushed into her cheek with a dirty thumb when she cried; the difference in the warmth of her mother's body and the radiating heat of the ground; her father's hands, pink-burned and black with the grease of the engine.

She remembered the sky, too, and how she hated it with a child's hate. Her father's hands were pink-burned because the engine seized constantly and the men were too anxious to let the radiator cool. They had been lucky to find a ride on a flatbed and wouldn't be as lucky on the journey home.

What she remembered of the drought camps was: the dark shade of a government tent, the chlorinated smell of the water, novenas of soft sad songs, the sting of vaccination needles, a

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yellow dog that came and nosed her hammock until someone kicked it away.

She couldn't recall the trip home and wondered if it was because she was sick or too tired. They had purchased a spavined horse and a dray from a family that decided to stay on the coast. They rode until a wheel split east of Blackwater. Since there were no nails, they unlatched the horse and loaded it with their bags. The path was filled with families returning to the backlands. Later, she would imagine the camps strung out on the long roads like seeds on a rosary, but she didn't know if this memory was her own or from someone who held her.

For the next three years in Saint Michael, the rains came, the white forest blossomed in patches of olive green and light maroon. Isabel grew up playing with her brother Isaias and with her cousins. When she was older, it was easy to remember herself as one of the tiny girls with thin legs and swollen bellies. Her aunt once teased, *Like little wild animals*. She had no birth certificate, and no vaccination card despite the needles she endured in the camps. She was five when she first stood before a mirror, advancing suspiciously toward the new child with dirt-bannered cheeks and translucent lashes. Until she was baptized by a traveling priest, there was no document to say she was alive. On that day, she fought the soft hand that tried to steady her and brushed tears and well water from her eyes with the heel of her palm. The cursive loops of her name were inscribed in the same church ledger that cradled the name of her mother.

Growing up, she played all day in the dusty plaza before the whitewashed houses and the church. There was an empty fountain built during optimistic times, and a statue that had

long lost all its features to the wind and dust storms. There was no running water in Saint Michael. Some said the statue was the governor, and others said it was a great bandit. The old men said that it had been salvaged from the road to the coast. At Carnival, it wore a hat.

When she was old enough, she attended a one-room schoolhouse at the edge of town. There were twenty or forty children, depending on the season. In the evenings, she walked home alone, or her brother went to fetch her.

They lived in a small house on the plaza. Four hammocks hung in one of the rooms. In the second was a worn sofa, where a visitor slept if there wasn't space to string another hammock. The walls stopped short of the underbelly of the roof. Flower-print sheets hung in the doorways. Spots of light twinkled in the chinks between the roof tiles and speckled her arms. There was a little wooden table with an altar for the Virgin and a half-dozen photos perched at uneven intervals on the walls. Above the couch someone had written, in charcoal, ROBERT S. + MARIA. It was surrounded by a heart, and had been there for as long as she could remember. She didn't know who they were. Outside, the door was chalk-marked "7" by a census taker. Then the "7" had been crossed out and rewritten "4."

On the other side of the sofa was a kitchen. There was a small raised hearth with an iron trivet and an earthen jar for water. They kept the provisions in a wooden cabinet to hide them from the flies. The table was surrounded by four stools, which her father had carpentered himself. If visitors came and there weren't enough plates, the children waited and watched until the meal was finished before taking their places at the table.

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The back door opened into the thorn scrub, where a path zigzagged through the brush and didn't stop until the mountains. Drying clothes flapped on the branches. Goatskin chaps with hair on the outside hung on the wall, but they were brittle and hadn't been worn since a murrain killed most of the cattle. Outside in the center of the main square was a single telephone, installed by the family of the state phone company when one of its sons was running for governor. The token collector never came, so someone pried open the collection box. From then on, calls were free: the line engaged, the coin dropped out into the caller's hand. A single token sat atop the phone.

In the four hammocks slept Isabel, her brother, her mother and her father, in that order toward the door. They slept so close that they bumped one another when they moved.

Her mother tended the house and a small garden of manioc. A spring ran near Saint Michael, and when the earth wasn't so dry that it took all the water before it reached the surface, she tended a mango tree and a copse of banana trees as well. She had studied at a Marist school on the road to the coast and could read, but Isabel's father didn't know the letters. During the season, he cut sugarcane in the fields that grew along the distant stretches of the spring. Isabel would remember him from this time as a quiet unshaven man who rose long before dawn to eat cornmeal and leftover scraps of salted beef, refried until the strands of gristle curled up like pieces of thread.

Watching him, she learned that the natural state of a person is silence, that speaking only stirs up problems where there weren't problems before.

Her father had sunburned skin and pale green eyes. Her mother's skin was dark, and when she wore her oldest skirts, Isabel could lose her on the road at night.

When it wasn't cane season, her father found work with the construction companies, grading roads or laying pipe, at times going as far as the coast for projects in the state capital. In the cluster of houses about the square also lived her mother's mother and father, her mother's sister, the children of her mother's sister, her grandmother's sister and her children and grandchildren, and dozens of other cousins by blood and by marriage.

On the thresholds of the houses they tossed clay marbles and played jacks with goat knuckles, serrying them in little legions. When they grew tired of the knuckles, they played with the shadows of the knuckles, crouching creatures that unfurled themselves as the sun went down. At dusk, they abandoned them and swarmed the square like a wasps' nest disturbed.

Once, she had three brothers and a sister. The oldest was a young man by the time she was born, with a good job on a bus line. Her sister married a man she met in the drought camps at age fifteen, and returned with him to his home. Since then, she had come to Saint Michael once, with a baby.

They had lost the youngest brother to cholera in the camps. Isabel remembered him only from a photograph taken by an aid worker: a small boy who stood apart from the family, as if he were already getting ready to leave. She thought of this when she heard an old woman say that children who die young know it before anyone else; they behave differently, as if they have already been back and forth to the place they are going. But she always had known what would happen to him, long before she heard the old woman speak.

People said that she and her middle brother Isaias were

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close because they had grown up alone together, but she knew that it began even earlier, before that first retreat. There were very few photos of her family from that time. No one in Saint Michael had a camera. The photos were taken either by a cousin who lived in the state capital or by itinerant photographers, who appeared, like the color green, in the years of rain. They lined up families against the white wall of the church and returned with the prints months later, led house to house by a crowd of children.

In the photos, Isaias and Isabel were always together: a smiling child proudly carrying a baby; a boy dangling a beribboned child upside down during the winter festivals; a young man squashing his nose against a little girl's cheek as she stood on a chair in a borrowed flower girl's dress; the pair of them at night, at the edge of the cobbled square, Isaias with a smile and Isabel wide-eyed, her lips half parted in surprise, her hand raised slightly in the air, as if blindly reaching for him the moment the flash went off. Even in a formal family photograph taken before the first drought, while everyone was solemn, staring at the camera, she was looking at Isaias, a gaze that she recognized in the old women before the statues of the saints. And Isaias, age nine then, looking back.

Once, after a summer carrying crates at the market in Prince Leopold, he treated her to a photograph at a traveling fair. They stood on stools and stuck their heads through holes in a wooden board. There was a painted dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves, a suit, a steamship and the words GONE TO 'FRISCO. It was the first time she'd heard of the sea. In the photograph, her yellow-tinged curls poked out of the hole and fell alongside the black mane of the painted woman. Isaias looked earnest, his jaw set and his lips pinched defiantly. They looked eerily similar, with the same skin, the same color hair,

the same light blue eyes that ran through her family like a jagged vein through a stone. Behind the set, he held his back straight and his hands on his hips.

They said that he took after his grandfather Boniface, a thin man who wore a watch on each wrist, donned a stained white suit despite the heat, and spent the market days pining for the return of the New State with two other eccentrics and a set of dominos. Boniface played fiddle, and in his youth he had made a name for himself. At a time when schooling was a whim of the large plantation owners who hired them for seasonal labor, he taught himself to read and knew which plants to take for problems of the liver and which to take for problems of the nerves. He knew how to remove a rotten tooth with the tip of a knife and what to give for a snakebite. He was also very handsome, and the town whispered that he was grandfather to many more of the dusty children than was publicly acknowledged. He wore three wedding bands, one for each wife he had survived. From him Isaias learned to play fiddle, and to smile in a way that made girls cover their teeth and trace their bare toes through the sand.

Isaias was born in the public hospital in the nearest city of Prince Leopold. Isabel was born in Saint Michael itself, twenty minutes after her mother's water broke as she crossed the cane fields. It should have been the other way, her mother said, the pensive child born in the yellowed hospital walls, the impetuous little boy clawing his way out into the cane. But they showed their true selves within hours, the boy protesting wildly against the prodding hands of the hospital nurses, the girl uttering a single, startled cry before settling quietly into the arms of her mother, who rose and continued the walk home.

Her mother would often say: Even then, anyone could see

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the difference. At that time when babies won't stop watching your face, that boy stared straight past. Not Isabel—she looked you in the eye and knew what you were thinking, but the boy's eyes were moving the moment he could keep them open.

From an early age, Isaias went alone to walk in the hills. When Isabel was old enough to keep up, he took her with him, on excursions in the high heat or at dawn, dragging her grumbling from the house to see the birds before they hid from the sun. He found her wild cactus fruit and polished the dust from it with his shirt. He made her practice the names of plants. He thrust his hands into the thorns to grab beetles, into the hot mud to scoop up toads, into the cacti to pull out vivid pink flowers that he held for her, as she squinted with one eye and then the other through a scratched watch-repairman's lens he bought at the weekly fair in Prince Leopold. He found fossil fish for her in the eroded sandstone and showed her rock etchings of men and animals. He broke off long leathery pods from the mimosas and rattled them as they walked.

He brought his fiddle. In the shade of a buckthorn, she sat on a bumpy stone and listened to him play. The fiddle had a threnodial cry, as if one could play the sound of creaking floorboards or an animal's wail. On the way back, he told her how he would become famous. It was one of the few times he laughed, and his laughter spread until it shook his whole body. Isabel lived for these moments. She lost herself to imagining his successes and boasted of them to everyone.

When he was older, he borrowed books from a traveling notary. He read to her. Her favorite story was of the Princess of China, whose hair was described as long black sails.

Once, as she ran dusty and barefoot through the house in a pair of underpants, her grandfather Boniface grabbed her arm.

‘Where’s your conspirator?’ he asked. She was four and the word was big and unfamiliar. He brushed dust from her cheek. ‘What is it, little mouse? They don’t teach you anything in school?’

‘Conspirator in what?’ asked her mother, cutting a sliver off a rope of tobacco. ‘I don’t think I understand, either.’

‘What’s not to understand? The boy makes crazy plans and she believes them. He thinks he is a king, and she thinks this is the center of the world.’ He waved a hand. ‘Yes?’

Isabel sneezed and didn’t have an answer. She already knew there were certain questions adults asked children only for the sake of other adults. ‘Wipe your nose,’ said her mother, laughing, ‘and if you see your conspirator, tell him the goats chewed down the clothesline.’ Boniface loosed her arm and she sprang off running into the brush.

At Saint John’s festival, her mother freckled her face with dabs of dark mud. At Carnival she was an angel, then an Indian, then an angel again. Most boys borrowed lipstick and put on their sisters’ dresses. Each year Isaias wore the same oversize coat of ribbons and colored buttons. He brought his fiddle to play along at the edge of the band, where he flirted with the girls who came down from the villages. Isabel trimmed her hair with tinsel, shouted, ‘It’s Carnival!’ and whirled, glinting, as he played.

When Isaias was thirteen and she was six, her father said it was time for him to leave school and join the men in the sugarcane fields.

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He went on longer walks, alone. At night, she heard him arguing. 'Let me go to the coast,' he said. 'And what are you going to do there?' her father asked. 'Play fiddle.' 'And be a beggar your entire life?' 'Not a beggar. In the cities you can make a living in music.' 'That's a lie.' 'It isn't a lie, I promise. I can play in the markets, or in a band. There are many ways.'

In the morning, she awoke to Isaias climbing out of his hammock. She rose quietly and stood behind the sheet that hung in the doorway. She watched his hunched back as he ate in silence.

He worked for the next three years cutting cane with the older men. He walked the half hour to the fields in the darkness and returned to sleep in the early evening. To protect against the sharp leaves, he wore patched leather shoes and three shirts, ash-stained, stiff with dried sweat, buttoned to his neck to keep out the spiders. He wrapped his ankles and torn elbows with rags. Fragments of cane fiber specked his clothes and hair. In the cane fields the men were joined by others brought in by flatbeds. At lunch they sat in the clearings and ate from dented tins.

Once he cut his hand. The foreman made the driver wait until the end of the day to take him to a clinic. Isabel came along. There they learned the nurse had gone home, and so they slept on a wooden bench until she came back in the morning. The nurse poked at the wound worriedly and stitched it with wide, looping bites. The next night Isaias began to shiver. By the morning, the wound had swollen at the stitches like an overstuffed sausage, and when he made a fist, one of the threads tore through the flesh. He spent the next week at a little hospital in Prince Leopold.

He asked for Isabel to stay with him. In the next bed was an

old woman whose breath rattled like the withered pods they twisted off the trees. Cockroaches fell off the walls under their own weight. Since Isaias was so thin, there was space in the bed, and the nurses let Isabel sleep there. Outside a window, they could see a pair of thrushes dash along a stretch of hot earth. They argued about whether a bird's feathers were warm or cold. 'Warm from the sun, cold from the wind,' said Isaias, and this question occupied Isabel for a long time.

The hospital had no food; he sent her into the city to buy cornmeal, which he cooked on a stovetop shared by the patients. As he swatted at the flies that gathered on the crusted dressing on his hand, he told her he was afraid he would never play the fiddle again. When he could close his fist, he returned to work.

During this time Isabel went to school and began to help her mother, taking care of a baby left behind by a cousin who had gone to work in the city. She learned to carry the baby with its legs scissored around her waist and to recognize the meaning of its cries. She helped her aunt sell bananas at a weekly market in the mountains. She grated manioc, pulled the ticks from the ears of the yelping dogs, balanced bags of laundry on her head when she walked to the stream. Her hands became callused. She could break a heavy piece of manioc in two.

When she was seven, a new teacher came from the coast, a spirited young woman who read poetry about the struggle of farmers and poor working people. Isabel did not understand all of the poems, but the teacher came regularly. Alongside the other children, squirming on the crowded splintery benches, she learned to read.

One day when the cane was flowering, her mother sent her

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to find her brother. It was afternoon and still hot. As she followed the empty road along the fields, she thought how she would ask him to cut pieces for her and how only God could have invented a plant that killed both thirst and hunger. The flatbeds had parked a long way down the road. She decided to take a shortcut through the cane. Her bare feet skidded on the gravel as she descended the sharp slope from the road.

As she threaded her way through the narrow passages, she sang. A rustle startled her. A snake, she thought: last year, a boy had died after being bitten. They found him in the cane fields two days after he had disappeared. They hadn't let any of the children see him.

The leaves stirred at her feet and then the rustling moved away. The canebrake was the same in all directions; the sun was almost directly overhead. She picked a faint path along one of the rows. When this was crowded out by the other stalks, she dropped to her knees and crawled. The cane was blue at its base. The air was sweet and, save the rustling, very quiet. It seemed that she was following a path, but when she looked back she saw only an unbroken wall of cane. Her eyes hurt from the shifting of the stalks. Once, she thought she saw a shadow of a person. She stopped and strained her eyes to see and then continued on. Many times, she wanted to shout *Isa-ias*, but told herself not to be scared. She entered a burn. Soon she heard someone cutting cane and singing, and walked through the black skeletal stalks and into a small clearing, where she saw her brother. He wore thick gloves and a handkerchief draped beneath his hat, gray with soot. His back was bent and his head was down. She followed the rhythmic motion as he embraced the cane with one arm and swung his knife.