



The world has turned full circle. Now it revolves around a car that has just dropped off a Russian hitchhiker.

“I don’t like Almeria,” Ben grumbles from the front passenger seat, aware of the lingering taste of gasoline under his tongue. “My father’s car had an Almeria license plate. I always thought it was crap.”

Ben and Magali are willing captives of the vast desert landscape of Almeria, but their nerve endings remain trapped between the riveted partitions of the restroom at the gas station, the first stop on this journey that began at a place that could have been anywhere on the Costa del Sol. It’s July.

(Although Ben and Magali speak the same language, right now communication between them is faltering.)

After several hours driving parallel to the Mediterranean, passing a succession of Muslim torsos bent in morning prayer (religion wedged between speed bumps and grimy car washes) and the sprawling sea-front mansions flashing past them, they reached the desert and the gas station that they have just left behind: an oasis of asphalt, broken glass, and plastic.

Ben looks at Magali. She is beautiful. He looks at her firm, skinny arms resting on the wheel, the arms of a willowy music conservatory student, and all the while he has the tune of “Woman Driving, Man Sleeping” by Eels ringing in his ears. Through the windshield, the horizon shimmers in the heat, like when a child plucks at water in a glass.

Minutes earlier, at the gas station, Ben had been unnerved by a volley of high-pitched electrical sounds from the loudspeakers: it was as if they heralded the impossible ringtone of a gigantic mobile phone crouching behind a limestone hill, the shadow of some monstrous creature from a *hentai* or *anime* cartoon (the product of his imagination set ablaze by the stifling midday heat of Almeria). The stench of fuel and burning rubber hung in the air as far as the bend in the road where the hitchhiker coolly walked away, haloed in sheer nothingness, as if in a country music video. Because, as Ben instinctively knows, *the one to blame for all this* is the Russian hitchhiker they picked

up back at the traffic circle and just dropped off at some godforsaken place on the map—any map—showing Almeria. (He hadn't even said goodbye when he got out of the car.) What's more, the description of the beach he'd recommended to them was probably a perverse Soviet lie.

First hypothesis: Anyone who is heading for a desert—Magali, Ben, or that hitchhiker—is running away from somewhere else.

The detour just taken by the Renault Mégane, described in such profuse detail by the Russian hitchhiker, is a narrow road leading to the coast. In Ben's mind, it's as if the arid, dusty scrubland it runs through were an extension of the gas station's wheezing machines, barrels, and oil drums, its cables and cans reeking of fuel. It's been years since he has seen any of these old milestones, cement bollards with a red semicircle painted at the top. (These are not the only visual cues on the journey that will remind him of his childhood: his father meeting him every day at the school gates carrying a green plastic bag, the tips of his father's fingernails scorched and stained yellow by his cigarettes.) The cement and asphalt of the road are riddled with cracks. Ben gazes at the piles of sand, gravel, and ballast, the cement mixers, slag heaps, storage drums, gasworks, pumps, and transmission towers as they fly past. The

horizon shifts and changes like a nightmare scripted by some master of destiny in a science fiction movie who unleashes all sorts of insane behavior in the other characters and whom Ben doubtless identifies with the Russian who has just got out of the car: the unfailingly loyal, consummate *garde du corps* of some despicable Hollywood hero. For a moment, Ben wishes he weren't in the vehicle, which he now associates with a bad dream. He wishes he could get out and go back home, he wishes he were sitting in his father's beaten-up Peugeot with its Almeria license plate. If only he could wake up, damn it!

*But Magali . . .*

It had been *her* idea. *She* was the one who had invited him along on this trip. After exchanging a few inconsequential words that had lifted each of them out of their respective states of loneliness, *she* invited him to travel the Spanish coast with her. Anyone watching them now—the Russian hitchhiker, for one—would think, “They’ve quarreled and are not talking to one another.” Or, “They’re a couple of weirdoes who get their kicks by making other people feel uncomfortable. But she’s very attractive, *strangely attractive* to be traveling with an awkward, self-absorbed guy like him. And another thing, that scar on his head . . . It gives his boyish face a more manly look.” But in fact, there is a much simpler,

even prosaic explanation. Ben and Magali don't know each other (even though from the very first day they talked in the park and Magali invited him to join her, Ben has felt as if he has *always* known her: a good enough reason to lie to his father, telling him that he was going on a trip with a few of his buddies. He had reassured him, saying he had all his medication with him, and told him not to worry).

Ben begins to feel more anxious as Magali, her forehead beaded with perspiration and tired after driving so many miles, accelerates on a perfectly straight, seemingly endless stretch of road. Or rather, it would be endless if the driver's natural inclinations had anything to do with it. "That Russian devil," thinks Ben. "Until he turned up, everything was fine, but now we are both haunted by him in this place from which there is no return: the desert."

The Almerian desert.

As Ben grips the handle above the side window on his right, the possible implications of the scene burst chaotically on his imagination. Amid the swirling clouds of clay dust and particles of gravel thrown up by the pressure of the four wheels spinning at high speed, and through the sparse clumps of vegetation that could be thyme, anise, or just plain weeds, Ben's burning eyes spot a large, intact dentist's chair in a gently reclining position resting on a rusty metal

base, in amongst the bushes. Its white enamel is made all the more dazzling by its contrast with the two russet-colored rocky outcrops framing the far distance. The imperious noonday sun creates the illusion that the dental lamp is turned on. The frame of the chair is aluminum and, under the leather chair back, an articulated arm is connected to a tiny pipe that delivers water to wash away the patient's blood after an extraction. (Ben remembers a photograph of Marilyn Manson, his large teeth crudely exposed by a dental device consisting of metal rods and bolts, some of them rusty, wearing an SM Nazi leather aviator's helmet.) The object is so powerfully charged with multiple layers of meaning that Ben cannot tear his eyes away from it, even when the dentist's chair has receded into the distance (into what now looks like a field of sunflowers) and he can only watch in the rearview mirror until it finally disappears. He continues to gaze at it until the marine blue of the beach finally looms into view (and he comes to the conclusion that there will always be something causing a gap, an imbalance between her and himself).

Second hypothesis: the desert is, by definition, an arid, uninhabited, strictly impersonal space, perfectly in tune with the deepest levels of the human psyche.

The silhouette of the Russian hitchhiker evaporating in swirling clouds of dust and light was the

last human form they saw through the car windows. But . . . He was right. The beach he had told them about really did exist. Magali is finally driving into a parking area surrounded by a picket fence, a gravel-covered slope that they will have to climb carrying the umbrella and the straw beach bag that are stowed away in the trunk along with Magali's beloved violin.

Magali locks the car with her remote control and walks up the embankment without saying a word.

Ben hates the Russian. Why on earth did they take pity on him back at the gas station? He says the first thing that enters his head to stop her thinking—if that is what she's doing, as he fears—of the darned hitchhiker:

“Do you feel like taking a swim, the first swim of the summer?”

Ben still can't see anything. At first, he thinks there is nobody on the beach, but then he notices a guy of about fifty who looks like a security guard: he is fat, has a moustache, and is smoking in the sun, which increases the sensation of heat in Ben's head. He slyly makes as if to turn round as Magali passes by, but Ben's piercing stare stops him in his tracks. As they start their descent toward the water, a playful little dimple appears at the side of Magali's mouth. In scarcely a few hours, Ben has learnt that she always somehow remains aloof from the world



around her (whether it was this beach in Almeria or the frenzied ducks on the pond where they first met. She was crying. *It was her tears that made him hers.*) Now Magali could not be further from crying; she walks purposefully at first and then races idiotically like a child onto the sand.

“There’s one little thing our friend from the former Soviet Union didn’t tell us, don’t you think, Ben?”

Several seconds go by before he makes the connection between her words and what his eyes can see either side of him on the beach: a profusion of bare buttocks, breasts, and pubic triangles, and a rusty placard indicating that they are on a nudist beach. He notices that the fence is lined with dark canvas to discourage any potential voyeurs from the area. Ben, of course, has never set foot on a nudist beach before. He wonders if Magali . . . But no, he doesn’t dare ask her, fearing as he does the only possible answer.

Now they are on the beach, surrounded by naked bodies, and he calculates without looking at Magali—whose shadow on the sand has come to a halt—how long it’s been since he last immersed himself in the sea. While he is thinking, without looking at her, he can sense, he can *feel* as if it were engraved on his retina, Magali’s translucent naked form stretched out on a cotton towel. He prefers to gaze at the shoreline,

focusing on the gradations of amber that are finally interrupted by the ribbon of foam on the sand. Seen in the light of the bloody prism suspended in the vault of the heavens, the sea takes on a rusty, reddish hue, as if the father of Venus had just had his testicles cut off and cast into the waves. Never once looking at Magali, he walks toward the swirling sea. His penis is as before: icy cold, motionless, timid. The heat has built up in his head and now he bathes, performing an ablution that is half running away, half initiation rite. He opens his eyes and looks at the beach through a wet gaze like that of a crocodile placidly gliding along in the water; the legs and arms of the people strolling, sleeping, or reading on the beach, oblivious of the heat, seem to multiply in the distance. The water is very cold, but not cold enough to cool the ball of fire that is lodged behind his eyes. He shuts them, but he forgets to shut his mouth as he ducks beneath the water, and the sea salt that enters through his bodily orifices traces in his mind a network of roots connecting him to a primeval aquatic world: a world suspended between nothingness and life. Flooded with all these sensations, prompted by the petrified taste of salt, a channel carved by fire in his DNA chain forges a path through the waves: there is saliva on his tongue and he feels hungry. The feeling is located not in his

stomach, but a little higher, near his windpipe, where the particles of salt slowly penetrate and finally quell the hunger, drowning out any new thoughts.

*From there, gently rocked by the waves, the child can see his mother: she has got up from her folding chair in the shade of an umbrella bearing an ad for non-alcoholic beer. Her hair falls over one side of her still pale but very beautiful face. With the eye that is not shaded by her hair, she looks up and down the long beach as she adjusts her flowered bikini top edged with petals. She is a long way from him, but the child knows that she is watching him; he knows that his mother is about to head in his direction. Next to the chair she has left vacant, there is another empty chair with rusty-looking legs that are sunk firmly into the sand. She paddles in the water and waves to him. His mother is carrying a small shiny package wrapped in carelessly crumpled tin foil, proof that somebody has taken a peep at its contents, decided they didn't want it, and wrapped it up again. The child remembers a multi-grain roll filled with several slices of salami. His mother smiles as she hands him the sandwich and his whole being is flooded with salt and sea. She turns round, and, instead of sitting down again, continues walking at an unhurried pace; when the child looks up from his afternoon snack, the two chairs are empty.*

Somebody has opened Ben's eyelids to talk to him. It is Magali. She has removed her full, dry lips from Ben's. He can feel fingers—soft delicate

fingertips—holding his eyelashes and opening his eyes so that the light floods in. It is so dazzling that his first reaction is to turn his face to one side and shelter his eyes from the sun. His momentary blindness contrasts with the perfect, absolute clarity of his auditory perception. He can tell exactly where the voices around him are coming from. The light. The light is white, Ben thinks to himself. And she has chosen me. From somewhere behind his head, which is resting on the soft sand, he can hear the crackling sound of an old walkie-talkie, but over and above all the other sounds he can hear Magali's voice, saying there's no need to worry.

Somebody is saying that it might be a case of sunstroke or stomach cramps.

Ben reflects that he has never felt better. His back feels cool, a feeling that spreads through his body and finally puts out the ball of fire in his head. In fact, he feels neither hot nor cold—the two sensations cancel each other out—and he keeps his eyes shut. He has forgotten about his naked body and the tiara-shaped scar on the top of his head, his skin has turned to sand; he is aware of the water around him and the singular, silent presence of Magali.

They start to talk, but Ben doesn't open his eyes. He is lying face up. He is aware of her moving to his right. As Magali tells him what has happened, their

feet intertwine and the sand slides softly over the top of Ben's foot. She is saying that they'll spend the night at the nearest campground so that he can get as much rest as possible.

The journey has only just begun, this very instant. And the Russian, Malaga, the gas station: they're the lumpy vomit spewed out through the cracks in this broken world.

All the while he has been gently nodding; a soft breeze caresses his chest, his abdomen and (he is reminded of it by a quiver caused by the nearness of Magali) his anemic-looking penis. But I feel fine, says Ben, shakily, and he opens his eyes to see hers looking at him. He sits up, and what he now sees (Magali's pure white body) is exactly as he had imagined it would be.

*(I must phone my father, he's going to feel lonely while I'm away, Ben thinks, closing his eyes once more; the world turns full circle again, and Magali's back slides into the water.)*

Final hypothesis: Our souls are empty, but they need movement.