Susan Kreller: ELECTRIC FISH

Elektrische Fische

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Chapter 1, pp. 7-8

The moon looks like an ear – bent over the dark road and whiter than Avonmore Milk, it's eavesdropping from the sky, and when my mother, in the passenger seat, unexpectedly announces, “Just up ahead is where Velgow starts,” the moon is the only one really listening. Actually, she should be shouting it in excitement, but she sounds as bored as the two Miss Blacks across the street used to, when they'd stand in their driveway and report, in unison, that the only thing they'd had for dinner was lamb stew again.

“Used to” isn't long ago at all.

“Used to” lasted until this morning, approximately up to the moment when the blue taxi parked in front of the house and we had to pile up our Irish life in the boot to move from Dublin to Germany. To Velgow, our mother's hometown, which she hasn't set foot in for twenty years, and her children never have.

Airport, please.

Make it stop, please.

It was still dark when we started out. Our only glimpses of daylight were through the windows of the terminal and the plane. Now it's evening and already dark again. I

can't make out anything bright here, only the moon and the headlights. We've been in Germany only three hours, my mother, my brother and sister, me, and already, everything is all wrong – the landscape and the strange houses, January, the stinky coconut-scented tree air freshener hanging from the mirror, and most of all the side of the road we're driving on. Every few miles I'm on the verge of calling out “Keep left!” to the German grandfather, until just at the last second it occurs to me that I'm not at home, and I keep my mouth shut.
We keep on driving, past “Velgow's just up ahead” and poles strung with sagging power lines, past a yellow sign with black lettering, driving out of the darkness and directly into the darkness. But in spite of the dark, I don't have the feeling that anything bad could happen in this area – it's harmless-looking, not at all dangerous. I can't know yet how wrong I am about that.

The German grandfather's car keeps moving through the empty, bleak evening, everything stays the same. And all at once I envy the Irish emigrants who sailed from Cork to America in the century before last; I envy each one back then who, full of lice and dreams and seasickness, was at the end rewarded with a greeting from the Statue of Liberty. But because Velgow isn't New York, we're greeted only by an old grain silo on which somebody has written lying press and I love Angelina Wuttke. The words “lying press” are sun-faded, but Angelina Wuttke shows up bright red in the glow cast by the headlights – the love for her is still fresh, it seems.

Chapter 1, pp. 10-12

I, Emma, am sitting in the middle and am half sad and half nothing. It's like being underwater, early in the morning at Seapoint with Granda Eamon, who I can freedive with till the waves above start to worry. Sometimes it's good when you're underwater and the others aren't, because otherwise it can drive you mad. He always used to say that, and now in the car, too, it's like I'm experiencing everything underwater: life and the move and the fact that none of us kids actually said Yes and not my father, either, and least of all my Irish grandparents.

Behind us, Velgow has started.

The village where my mother grew up, in a life before our time.

In a life before our life.

She makes a noise that sounds like relief, no clue why, because beyond the windscreen are only fields and scattered houses and this whole bleak evening. I wonder why Aoife doesn't just finally start screaming that she wants to go home or somewhere else, but no, she's sitting quietly beside me, and Dara is silent too, no tears even, because he has disappeared into his mobile phone.

We drive through the village and the German grandfather points to something that must have been a shop once. Over the door is a faded FRUIT VEGETABLES FROZEN FOODS, and he says: “Konsum: shut down.”

“This is only temporary, mind you,” my mother answers, and then follows up by asking how come the street we're driving on is still called Thälmann Street, anyway.

But the grandfather just keeps driving, and after a while he growls: “Kindergarten: shut down.”

Later he points to a big, dirty-red, brick house and says: “Wolfgang Jensen: shut down.”

My mother gives a start and looks at her father. “Shut down? Why? What do you mean?”

“Well, he k - ”

Then he remembers there are children sitting in the backseat. “There's kids back there,” he says. “I'll tell you later.”

Anyone who refers to Dara and me as kids hasn't a clue. Besides, I know exactly what he means.

Shortly after that, as we drive by a pub called Sea Pint, he doesn't say “shut down”, but grunts a contemptuous “newfangled.” Maybe he means the poster on the door that says Thursdays Yoga Over 50's. The name Sea Pint is totally inappropriate, because it seems you have to drive forever from Velgow to find even a sliver of sea. And when we drive by a bakery called Schwabe's Finest Baked Goods, a corner of my mother's mouth lifts up for the very first time, I can see that from the back. This one uplifted

corner probably contains all the joy she can muster today – happiness about a shop with hard German bread. I can't imagine anything worse.
But then I can.

Chapter 5, pp. 27

Our mother could have warned us.
She should have flown with us back to her parents' every summer so we could have learned how to do this: to be in Velgow.
Maybe then Aoife would still be speaking.
Dara and I both went to Germany on school class trips. I was in Berlin and Hamburg for just a little bit, and Dara even spent two weeks in Hanover. But neither of these trips prepared us for getting along in Velgow and understanding life here. Except for her language and her pointless stories, our mother didn't teach us much, other than to stay out of her way when she was having one of her notorious attacks of homesickness.
We lived in our mother's homesickness.
Especially during these last few years.

Chapter 5, p. 29

At breakfast we listen to Radio MV, a station that plays music which, my mother once whispered, if you could eat it, would taste like tired feet. No idea how that would taste, but anyway, the music sounds like the singers fell asleep during the recording session but just kept on singing.
We no longer have a home. But anytime I complain about anything – about how tiny the rooms are, for instance, or the radio music or the ugly furniture – my mother whispers wearily: “As soon as I have a job we're out of here.” And each time I quickly look out the window, and with my back to her, I bite my lip and don't say: As soon as I have a plan, I'm out of here.

Chapter 6, p. 35

While she spends the rest of the hour talking about all kinds of things that don't concern me, I look out the window and watch the fog creeping over the field and I'm lost here, I'm out of place.

My place is elsewhere.

And when class is over and I go out into the corridor, out of the fog, out of the classroom, I see the boy who was sitting diagonally across the room from me.

He takes a couple of steps in my direction, again clutching the yellow folder where Ethics has been crossed out with a bold marker and replaced, in a boy's scribbled penmanship, by Electric Fish.

There he stands, fidgeting a little, exactly my height, four eyes eye-to-eye, two behind prescription lenses. But the boy doesn't even consider actually using his eyes.

Without looking at me, he whispers: “I, well...”

Then, accidentally, he does look at me and right away I know he heard everything in the schoolyard recently, my whole conversation with Aoife, because he mutters: “And let me know when you need that good plan of yours.”

Chapter 8, pp. 39-41

And now? Now my mother's plan hasn't worked out. Nothing's come up. Nothing but the snow drops in the front gardens of Velgow. They're small and scrawny, but they're blooming in spite of the February cold that seems like it came straight from Siberia, they're even saying that on the telly, and they say it's even reached Ireland. Besides snowdrops and sub-zero temperatures, there's a meat van with chicken leg quarters painted on the sides that stops in front of the Sea Pint once a week. It probably stopped there in January, too, hundred percent chance it did, and there's probably never been a meat van man anywhere who drove such badly painted chicken legs around.

No.

My mother's plan hasn't worked out.

Aoife doesn't speak anymore and she's alone, I still speak and I'm alone, Dara hasn't even found a girlfriend, although that doesn't seem to bother him much. My mother,

too, still looks as if she hasn't yet really understood that she's home again, in her home, and that she's the one person here who ought not to be homesick.

And then there's the boy.

That odd boy from my class.

Black Sabbath, Reunion Tour 1999

His name is Levin. But I don't talk to him anyway. Or rather: he doesn't talk to me. He's been avoiding me for weeks, ever since I told him that it's (thanks a million) really nice of him to have a plan for me (much obliged), honest, and that I'd love to say Yes, but unfortunately I have to say No, because there's no way I can accept his help (don't go to any trouble for me), but thanks, thanks a lot and (in fact I'm fine). Maybe I just should have asked him if he was in his right mind - for sure the result would have been the same - but anyway, ever since our little conversation, Levin hasn't spoken to me anymore.

Not a word.

Most of the time he looks away, only in the corner of my eye does his looking away stop. In the corner of my eye, he's looking at me, during class, from his seat way in the back of the room, and when I notice it, he quick looks away again. I'd like to explain to him that I still could use his help, a little idea, a snippet of a plan, enlightenment from one of his electric fish. I simply don't know how you get to Ireland without flying. True, you can fly by yourself when you're twelve, but only with your parents' permission - not a good idea.

The only thing I really know is that I want to get back home as soon as possible, even if our house on Cherrygarth has been sold and my mother used the money to pay all the debts. I want to go to Granda Eamon and Nana Catherine, to Dun Laoghaire, a few miles from our old neighborhood. I've no idea what they think of all this. That for the time being, Aoifa, Dara, and me aren't within their reach, no matter how far they stretch their arms out.

When I call Granda Eamon and tell him I can't stand it here anymore and don't have anyone and I'm all by myself, he answers that the O'Briens next door have a dog now, a golden retriever, a splendid animal.

When I say that Aoife has to attend school again even though she's still not speaking, he tells me they're having bacon and cabbage for dinner and that he's looking forward to the next episode of Fair City because he thinks that Robbie and Carol are finally going to get back together.
And when I cry and beg him to come and take me back to Ireland, he pauses briefly, takes a deep breath, and softly says: “Fair enough.”
And then: “I'm sorry, luv. Ye know I can't.”

Chapter 12, pp. 56-57

If you sit next to someone for too long without speaking, and if said someone, digging his feet deeper and deeper into the sand, happens to be a boy that you've thought about again and again, even if it was for only five seconds each time, then eventually it gets embarrassing.
Very embarrassing.
I hear myself breathing too loudly and discover a tiny spot of spinach on my jeans, do something!, I pray to the god of the Baltic Sea and any other god who's on duty, save me! I plea with my heart hammering, and lo and behold, at just this moment Levin's mobile makes its presence known with three guitar notes. Hastily, he pulls it out of his pocket, now breathing a little louder himself, reads a message, and jumps up.
Levin's as thin as dune grass.
His shirt as dark as homesickness.
He stands in front of me, fidgeting, rubbing his hands, brushing the sand off them, wanting to say something, something that for the life of him he can't think of, so he stops trying and just trudges off. But then he halts, stands there with his back to me for a couple of seconds, and turns round again.
Not because he's going to call out a parting goodbye after all.
Nor to say he's sorry for being so impolite.
No, he says something completely different, just one single word, but it's very familiar: “Emma.”
Then he really does walk away, leaving me behind with that warm little feeling you get when someone calls you by your name for the very first time.

Chapter 17, pp. 76-78

Then all of a sudden, Levin's plan is ready and I find out about it in maths class, of all places. It comes as a surprise, even though I haven't stopped thinking of how I can get away from Velgow. To get to Ireland, I have to deal with two seas, and beforehand and in-between, many miles of land and many miles of being on my own. I'm losing hope that I'll be able to manage it. Besides that, somehow I can't bring myself to leave here as long as Aoife is mute, no way.

So now, in the middle of the maths lesson, Levin comes out with his plan and I don't even notice it, at least not at first. I've already got used to the fact that he's avoiding me again; it's only maths I can't get used to, the equations and inequations, the terms and solution sets, and that's why I'm looking out the window at canola-yellow May, something I understand.

The maths teacher, who always seems to be in a bit of muddle, has written an equation on the blackboard, breaking two pieces of chalk in the process. When he turns round, white chalk dust on his dark shirt, he speaks to us as if he were a human textbook, and says in a slow staccato: “Explain your solution strategy. Any volunteers?”

As always, not one hand goes up, and as always, he tells his pathetic joke: “All these hands! Really, how ever will I choose?”

It's supposed to sound off-the-cuff, but it only proves that this teacher of ours had best not change careers to become a television presenter.

And then, look at this.

Then there's a volunteer after all.

One who's probably never, ever raised his hand in maths class.

One whose t-shirt has Megadeth printed on it, and under that a skull in a shirt and tie - almost scary.

Levin's hand going up in maths is so unusual that the others stop doing whatever it is they're busy with: writing notes, talking to the person next to them, doodling.

And then he starts talking.

Only that in his speech, words like multiply and variable don't occur at first. Instead, Levin says: “First of all, you have to get to Belgium somehow, Zeebrugge, that's nine

hours by car, but hitchhiking would be stupid, then the night ferry to Hull, that's the tricky part, but I might have a solution there, and –"

Now the teacher cuts in, shaking his head and saying, "Levin, what is it you're -"

But Levin pays no attention to him and just keeps on speaking, even if his voice does keep cracking, "it's a long crossing, probably all night, takes forever, then by car again, either to Holyhead or Liverpool, that's variable, then one last ferry, but it goes to Dublin, luckily."

Although Levin has emphasized the word variable, our teacher looks less than enthusiastic and demands that he come and see him after class. Someone throws a spitball at Levin, several others snicker, some simply look bewildered, no one notices that one lone heart in the class has suddenly become very light and that one lone person in this class has comprehended Levin's solution strategy.

And Levin's courage.

Chapter 27, pp. 123-124

Levin's plan.

During the first week of summer holidays I go back to Ireland five times a day just by reading the lines Levin has written. Each time, the suntan-lotion smell of the paper gives me a little twinge and I wonder if it's really such a good idea to leave here, but then I read the words that Levin typed and already, I'm gone. The page is densely printed, there are even five footnotes, but what interests me most is the car trip to the ferry in Belgium. Ole's going to drive and Levin's coming along - everything's in the plan, every motorway restaurant we'll stop at, every city we pass, Rostock, Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, Osnabrück, Dortmund, Essen, Düsseldorf, Antwerp, and Ghent.

Then, later, Zeebrugge.

P&O Ferries Zeebrugge.

Goodbye.

Maybe forever.

When I read the plan, I can picture the whole thing, down to the last detail: Levin and I are sitting in the backseat - Ole doesn't even appear in my fantasy, which is maybe a little unkind, but it can't be helped, Ole's just the driver. It's pretty unlikely but still

important for this scenario that he have a convertible - even if I didn't happen to see one the first time I visited, but maybe it was hidden in the back garden, somewhere between discarded aquariums and a pile of old t-shirts with skulls on them.
Anyway, Levin and I are sitting in the backseat of the convertible, listening to the latest hit songs, and every few miles we thrust our arms up into the air and shout for joy, or we yell out the name of a city - one that lies on our route, if possible. And in-between, whenever we happen to have our arms down, we talk, and our thoughts are so profound that the only thing great philosophers would have to do is take notes, as would the occasional hitchhiker we'd pick up, who, in exchange, would then give us some nuggets of wisdom to take with us on our life's journey. One night I even dream about this trip, and it's like a film, so vivid and life-like, with the one tiny and unimportant detail that it's not Ole sitting behind the wheel of the convertible.
It's Bono of U2.
I don't pay any attention to the footnotes on Levin's plan for quite a while. Not until the second week of the summer holidays do I get around to reading them, and then only because I happen to glance at the bottom of the page. Footnote One: And don't forget about the families you see! Footnote Two: Don't be afraid to walk over and join a family. Footnote Three: I recommend that once a week, you practice walking over and joining a family. Footnote Four: Remember the families!
And then there's Footnote Five.
Tiny, inconspicuous, and way down at the bottom it says:
Or you could just forget about the whole thing and stay here.

Chapter 41, p. 181 (book's last paragraph)

So I leave the letter where it is, under my mother's pillow, take a step toward the fire pit, then a few more, until I can almost feel the heat from the flames, until I see the thick cluster of sparks in front of me. Now I'm so near that my cheeks are glowing. I'm here, I could call out, but I don't, because I don't know if it's true. Then they see me, first my mother, then the others, nobody seems surprised, and with one single step and my way-too-big backpack, I join my family.

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