

T R O P I C O

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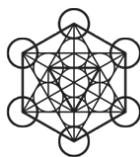
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TROPICO

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TROPIC

THE SEAGULL

You have been married less than a year and you've already had to sell the Cadillac for less than you bought it for. You are on your honeymoon, delayed for the work season, and you've invited all your friends, all your family who are in this country. Of this, then, there are so many photos, and for the ones where all of you want to be in the frame you take bets on whose English will be most understood. One time you wait for 10 minutes for someone to stop in front of the Empress Hotel, but you still can't stop laughing, even when one woman covers the side of her face with her palm and runs. Someone, probably your brother's friend, nicknames the group *Los Fantasmas*—heard yet not seen.

One night in your hotel you wake up before it is light out and it takes a minute before you register screaming. My mother is already awake. She is quicker to register a scream in her sleep, and she is at the window.

You think there will be a woman outside but instead there is a seagull. She is dragging a dead baby bird. My mother says, she sounds so much like a woman, but you do not say anything, even though you know that she is right.

AN INDIRECT APOLOGY

I think by this point we have been fighting for three months, but the day before I leave, you show up at my window with an envelope and food so I decide I will call you while I am there even though I have not forgiven you.

Pablo Neruda wrote with green ink, yes, I already knew that. They had a page of his writing laminated. That I find strange, probably that paper was worth a lot of money and now it is plastic and has been held by babies and strange white men with tropical shirts. His house was five stories, I say, tapering until the top floor, and it's big enough just for a desk and a little window seat. It has windows almost all the way around, so that on every side you can see the city rolling down below you, all those hills. And the ocean? Well yes, and the ocean. I didn't see that house, you say. Everything is sectioned off and they don't let you take pictures, but I took one in his third-floor bathroom when I was by myself. *Bueno, hija, es tu derecho.*

On the train they took out most of the seats to fit as many people on as possible, on the escalators there's a fan with a hose of water pointed at it so it sprays everyone as they come down. Everyone is so hot, and they're coming from work so a lot of them have their eyes closed. *Este país es una mierda*, you say, which means this country is shit, but you are not in this country, you are in my country.

We were on the train and there was a woman with a full cake, like a birthday cake I guess, only it was missing a chunk. Anyway, her son was beside her looking at it and you could tell he had eaten the cake, it was on his face still a little bit. And these two men were there beside them and they took turns roasting him, but he didn't care, it was like he couldn't hear them. The people are like that, you say.

I guess I don't see anyone of yours, not even your brother. But if it bothers you, you don't tell me. Today I saw your name, I say. Oh? It was on the wall in the Museum of Memory, this blown-up newspaper clipping. Why was it there? It was a list of people who were allowed back in the country, it was on the front page in 1982 I think. Ah, missed that memo, you say, but you make sure to laugh so that I know you are still on the line.

YOU HAVE FIVE CHILDREN

five silver points
on the top of your hat
people still ask
if you are
a little commie star
gone grey
no
well
it is for all my children
but you only have four
yes, well
what a long story
this stoplight
is very
short

AN AGENT ON THE BUS IN 1974

What is the period of time that you are able to be on the bus before you start to wonder who else is on the bus? I wonder how many people you look at on the bus, do you even distinguish their separate features? This one has such a small nose, this one's lips are a dark glossy plum colour. Are you at the back of the bus? I imagine you are at the back of the bus and your daughter is beside you on the bus. There are not many people on the bus, I would say there are 40 people on the bus.

Outside it is hot, it is actually so hot that your daughter is not wearing tights at all, even though you are going to church. You don't usually have to take the bus to church but your car had to be sold between jobs, so now you are on the bus. On the bus there is air conditioning, this is fairly new, to have air conditioning on some of the buses. Many people look as though they are in a draft of wind, but it is very still outside. You start to think that you should no longer be on the bus.

Your daughter is shivering but she is doing so aggressively and loudly in a joking way and she is smiling at you; you were very recently very hot, before you got on the bus. But you can see that other people look colder, they have been on this bus for longer, they no longer seem like they have ever been warm.

Across from you there is a man who still looks warm, he even has small sweat marks on the top of his stomach, the fabric is sticking to his skin. He is wearing a very businesslike hat, it is what they call a Borsalino hat, a very old-fashioned hat, but he is a young-looking man. He looks to be your age, maybe older. He is wearing sunglasses. On the bus, people are fanning themselves, even though it is cold. And yet you have not felt the air conditioning once since you got on the bus, and you have been on the bus just as long as the man across from you. You are looking at him but because he is wearing sunglasses you cannot tell whether he sees that you are looking at him. He could be looking at you but because he is wearing sunglasses you cannot tell whether he is looking at you. He looks American, though Americans look just like Canadians. Do you look American? You look more American than you do Canadian; you have heard there are more Spanish people in America.

How many times might the man across from you on the bus have looked at you without you knowing he was looking at you? Maybe he never looked at you once. And you would never know. When you get off the bus you do not know where you are, you do not go to church that day. Your daughter tells you thank you for the ice cream that night, and you do not say anything because you do not remember having bought ice cream that day, but you must have bought ice cream that day.