

## The Nights that Belonged to Neruda

From the balcony, Areilia watched José at the base of the beach cliffs, enjoying his morning cigarette in the shadow of the crags as he watched the dolphins. The smoke smelled acrid, lessened by her distance and the smell of the incoming storm. La Tormenta had an aroma, one that gave the island a few hours' notice before she'd blow through. The scent made Areilia want to stand in the spray of the surf, a smile on her face.

She watched José run a hand through his sandy-colored hair, fingers slowing at the ends, which brushed the nape of his neck. When he turned, she saw his eyes find her in the doorway and smile, before he threw his cigarette to the sand, guilt evident, and pocketed his lighter with a grin. She released a laugh, scrunching her nose in disapproval. He claimed the expression would be her "mom" face when the time came. He shook out his pipe and jogged to the steps around the front of the house. In minutes, he'd come up behind her and wrapped her in his arms, pressing his nose to her neck.

"You reek, babe," she scolded as he nuzzled her, pushing aside her hair and scratching her with the stubble of his jaw.

"I don't do it often," he mumbled and she laughed.

"Cariño, I do your laundry. Tell me again that you don't smoke every morning."

He sighed into her skin, pulling away slightly to trace her ear with his nose. "I'm making the last payment on the house today," he informed her.

"Already?" she asked, looking back.

"Just in time, right? I told you the dollar to colón difference made this a steal. Also, the lease on my practice is about to expire. Remind me to renew that." He smiled before turning to

take in the palm trees along the crest of the bluffs, swaying in the harsh breeze. His expression changed, lips closing around his smile, and she couldn't read his eyes.

"Looks like it'll be a night for Neruda," he murmured. He squeezed her hand and retreated into the house.

Areilia tossed eggs in a pan while she waited for her student. What had been a Costa Rican girl of eight was now a young woman of twelve, with a greater grasp on the English language than Arei had thought capable of teaching. She had taken on tutoring Josefina to distract and support herself after José had left, and she simply hadn't stopped. She'd wished for a little girl, as clever and vibrant as her student, when she and José became pregnant, shortly before Josita had become a constant facet of her life.

There was a knock on the front door of the split-level bungalow, and Josefina walked in with her paper and books. Areilia took the eggs off the stove, laying out two plates. "Estás temprano, Josita," she commented, returning to the kitchen to wash some dishes. "En inglés, dime, what did you do yesterday?"

"Yesterday, I go to the market with mi mamá to buy Papi's favorite fruit, and Celeste and I go to the waves to swim," she said.

"Y el tiempo pasado?" Areilia asked.

"...went. I went. And we went."

"¡Tienes razón!" Areilia exclaimed. "Would you like to go to the beach and name the things we see?" she asked, moving to the table, and Josefina smiled. The young girl set her books by the door and returned to the bamboo table, shoveling some eggs off of a steaming plate and into her mouth.

“¡Los huevos son deliciosos!” Josefina complimented around a mouthful. Frowning at her student’s impoliteness, Areilia flicked her dishtowel in disapproval. Josephina wiped her mouth, looking confused.

“I’m sorry, señora; ¿Hay alguien más nos une? I thought these were for me,” the young girl apologized.

“No, not for you, for—”

—José, she finished silently, sighing and closing her eyes as she realized her mistake. *José, Josita*, she’d done it again. “Claro que sí, son para ti, pero do not talk with your mouth full. Es de mala educación,” Arei saved, walking to the fridge to pour a glass of milk before bringing the cup back to the table. “And do not rush,” she urged, sitting across from her pupil, “we can wait until you’ve finished.” She smiled, pushing her blunder from her mind.

As he prepared to leave for the day, Areilia walked up to José and pushed his hair behind his ears, touching a kiss to his nose as he bent down. He’d barely sat down at the table to eat before he’d been up again and pulling on his shoes, running late as always. He never for a minute thought of giving up watching the dolphins, even if it meant less of a rush. So Arei made breakfast, though José was the only one she’d want touching the other meals of the day: scrambling eggs was the peak of her culinary potential.

“Be safe if you’re going to be out there long,” he said as he took his plate over to the sink, empty except for the pan used in breakfast preparation. She watched his back, tracing his silhouette with her eyes as if memorizing it, like he’d disappear if she looked away.

Blinking away the memory of José's retreating figure, Arei and her student browsed the fruit selection at the market. One of Areilia's favorite things about Costa Rica was the peach-like paraguayo, white flesh protecting a pulpy heart of crimson seeds—though she hadn't yet figured out how to eat them properly. Each juicy bite left her sticky from her chin to her elbows.

The market was buzzing like the thunderclouds overhead as customers hastened to make purchases before the sky split. Los vendedores were packing up, folding things away into wooden boxes that both displayed and transported wares. These reminded Arei of metal bins she'd seen near the Seine, like large green dumpsters until the foot traffic picked up and vendors opened tourist shops. She thought she'd return to Europe, envisioning herself as a fluid being drifting across continents. She hadn't thought she'd settle down, but now, without a family or true job to tie her down, the brittle hope that her old life could return dragged heavy like an anchor on the ocean floor, keeping her on the Costa Rican shore. Looking down at Josita as she poked at the bruise in a mango, Areilia thought that some ports were worth an extended stay.

Areilia felt the first drops on the back of her neck and lifted her scarf to shield her head as she accepted change from the vendor.

"Ready, mi niña?" she asked, gathering up her skirt—which seemed to be sprouting patches of darker green in the rain—and Josefina nodded, grabbing her teacher's hand and pulling her in the direction of home as Areilia thanked fate for bringing this sweet one into her life. They jogged as the precipitation picked up, and with a hug, Areilia left Josefina with her mamá before making her way toward her own empty home along the damp gravel road.

She pictured him there, standing under the overhang, water dripping from his blonde-brown hair and into his eyes.

"Haz prisa, mi monada," he called, and she climbed the steps and pecked him on the lips, brushing his bangs from his forehead. His eyes, the green-blue of their ocean, crackled with the storm as he smiled, water clinging to his lashes, and he tipped his head to kiss her cheek, his lips trailing her neck and shoulder.

But her porch, as it came into sight, was empty.

The desire, despite the dampness of the evening, started as a flame—kindled beneath the waist of her skirt—and quickly jumped up within her chest, licking her ribs and constricting her breath, a feeling near hysteria. *The ocean, the ocean.* She hadn't felt the pull in the longest time, the violent crash of the tormented waves that called to her only in storms.

At first it had made him laugh, wondering what she was doing wading into the shallows as it began to rain, but when lightning cracked the sky, she remembered his beautiful features strained, his voice struggling to stay calm while shouting for her to come back.

She did. She always did, and he'd kiss her and laugh, but that tension wouldn't leave his eyes—his desperate confusion, his desire to understand what drew her to step into the ocean with the crests at their roughest. It was a sickness that made her burn until the mist from the churn was upon her skin and she could breathe. She knew it troubled him, but she couldn't explain, so she'd pull Neruda from the shelf and slip it into his lap where he sat in their only armchair, jaw clenched. Her gesture would distract him and he'd open the worn red book to the page where they'd left off, and he'd begin to read out loud. She'd curl up at his feet with her head on his knees, tamed for an evening as the storm thundered outside.

The urge ceased after he left. She'd weathered many storms without him, safely behind the storm door, protected but anxious—but the desire returned now with a fury, and she could feel the steam rising off her arms, her chest, her face. Quickening her pace as the storm clouds

rumbled, she released the bag of paraguayos to the rocky red dirt of the empty lane and slung off the pashmina that had protected her from the rain. *The ocean, the ocean.* The end was in sight.

Arei closed her eyes and sprinted that last bit of distance, raindrops sliding over her face until she felt the streams splashing up around her waist when her feet broke the water and connected with smooth, soft mud. As the purr of the surf hit her ears, a natural tranquilizer, so did the invigorating iciness of the water. She caught her breath with a gasp, stumbling deeper until she was in up to her stomach, muscles constricting beneath her skin, then her chest, goose flesh raising everywhere and bringing the soft hair on her arms and legs to stand at attention, stinging as it went. She could see him lie before her, head in her lap like their last night: she felt peace.

*"Tonight I can write the saddest lines,"* he began in Spanish.

"Is that right?" Arei fought the waver in her voice. He didn't return her fragile smile, as she traced the outline of his jaw, but she knew when he did it'd clear their Tormenta and reassure her that a place still existed where they'd weather more storms.

*"Write, for example, 'The night is shattered and the blue stars shiver in the distance,'"* he continued, letting his eyes close as a clap of thunder rumbled about a mile off.

Areilia collected a drop of water from his collar bone with the tip of her index finger. Though this poem wasn't a happy one—*"Love is so short, forgetting is so long"*—she assumed he'd chosen it as it was her favorite.

That night, she'd stood among the crests long enough for the current to grasp her ankles and yank her under.

His green flannel shirt, the one that brought out his eyes, hung over the back of the bathroom door to dry. It was the same shirt he asked her to marry him in, with a different set of Neruda's lines.

*"I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where..."*

*I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you."*

His hair had been long then too as he closed his eyes against the sun, looking just the same as he did now. Areilia bowed her head to kiss his nose, causing his eyes to flutter open, the green of the sea.

That night, abdominal cramps racked her as she stood in the shower, drying off. Her body, not yet showing, had kept their daughter like a secret, but it betrayed her. As she held herself up by the showerhead, blood fled down from between her legs, taking with it their late night whispers of what their daughter would look like and which language they would teach her first. Tears escaped her eyes like drops from the ocean and when José found her and held her, he couldn't help but mutter, "The ocean, the ocean. Why, Arei?"

Rain drops collected on the face floating before her, rolling toward his chin like teardrops. José gazed up at her through the rain, lightning dancing behind her head. "I'll miss her, Arei," he whispered.

The current, as familiar as thoughts of him, grabbed her around the waist and dragged her out to where her toes couldn't touch. She tried to scream but coughed and spluttered as the water rushed in, invading her eyes, ears, nose and throat.

“We have more time,” she said, but the tension of his eyes cradled resignation, and with an epiphany that hit her like a tidal wave, she understood why storms were named after people.

*Parallel.* The words came like a salt strain through the ocean water burning her nostrils, the way it had that night when he, not the current, had held her. *Parallel to the beach.* She struck out her limbs and began a clumsy, strong stroke to her right. She pulled against the current, her skin on fire with adrenaline, and shrugged out of her sarong to lessen the grip of the waves. Her toes scraped sand, and she pushed herself as hard as she could, one desperate stroke after another until her hand touched bottom, grainy particles collecting under her fingernails as she dragged herself to shore. She rolled onto her back on the rain-drenched sand as lightning sparked the clouds and she choked, coughing up the water that had run into her lungs, burning. Tears sprang to her eyes but all she felt was the salt coating her skin, a mineral membrane as if she’d been birthed from the ocean. He had not come for her, as she had known he would not, and he *would* not come for her again. She breathed in. And then out, murmuring one final set of verses.

Closing the door tight, she trudged to their room—her room—and turned to the bookshelf. “*If little by little you stop loving me,*” she whispered, Neruda’s words flowing from memory as she fell back against the bed: “*I shall stop loving you little by little. If suddenly you forget me do not look for me, for I shall have forgotten you.*” She turned to watch the rain through the window, calmer now. “*I want you to know one thing,*” she began again.

On the bookshelf behind her, the spot where Neruda had been was empty.