

Lolita Hernandez

THIS IS OUR SONG FOR TODAY

Years of solitude had taught him that in one's memory, all days tend to be the same, but that there is not a day, not even in jail or in the hospital, which does not bring surprises, which is not a translucent network of minimal surprises.

—from *The Waiting*, Jorge Luis Borges

FIREFLY

When the first engine for the day arrived in front of the man whose job was to put the water pump and front cover on it, he opened his mouth as wide as the great Mississippi River in the days before debris narrowed its flow and out spilled his tenor's tongue in song: *Firefly, ooh ooh firefly*. Clear and mellow like rain drops on an emerald leaf. *Shine your light tonight*. With his goatee aimed at the network of air hoses dangling over his job, he crinkled the chocolate skin over his high cheekbones and squeezed his eyes into a thin, wavy line as if those facial contortions could help propel his song. *Assist the moon and stars in helping us to ease our minds*. A Temptations song he heard on the radio on the way to work followed him from the Clark Street parking lot and escorted him to his station on motor line number one. The song settled in his chest then escaped through his arms the first time they stretched to place a front plate cover on an engine. The song curved his body over the creeping engine as if caressing a microphone: *Firefly ooh ooh firefly*. With his hips swiveling in one direction, his shoulders swaying in another, he eased a cover onto each engine. *Thuupp. Yeah. Golden light of serenity*.

He was so absorbed with the song's mellifluous notes that he didn't notice them slip from his mouth and enter the linkage of the conveyor each time he stepped up to an engine. They snaked to the end of the line, rolled under the surface, and clung to the oily mixture of trash and garbage that travelled the conveyor. They resurfaced at the head of the line for the return trip to his water pump job. At the rate of eighty

contacts with an engine an hour, by mid-morning the entire half-city block of piston line was running like warm grease. Instead of the normal clank, clank, clank, the line flowed with a phlump, phlump, phlump. *Firefly. HmMMM, hmMMM, phlump. HmMMM, hmMMM, phlump.*

His job was located just after the mid-section of the line, past the frantic team of eight noisy young men who installed pistons. He used to be elbow to elbow with them in the middle of the pistons until two weeks prior, when the cover job opened. When he worked pistons he couldn't hear himself think. He hummed blues songs so low and deep that he didn't need words to know what he was saying to himself. He went so deep inside himself that he managed to block out the environment around him. He erased the cussing, the fighting, the drinking.

After shuffling from heavy job to sweaty job in his twelve years at Cadillac, now at thirty he had landed in a spot where low conversational buzzing predominated and he could wear designer jeans to work. He was a world away from the chaos of the densely-peopled piston section at the head of the line. He was now in the middle of nothing but small talk, punctuated by the blips, braaps and wiiirngs of an assortment of bolt-tightening air guns and the incessant clank, clank, clank of the conveyor. At the end of the line the murmur of human conversation blended with the metallic sounds of production and became part of the assembly noise.

HmMMM, hmMMM, phlump. HmMMM, hmMMM, phlump. Musical notes wound themselves around the timing chain, slithered over and around the cam lobes, caressed the crank throws before he sealed them in the engine with the front cover. Those engines were destined to hum and purr once they reached the road. He looked around him and saw the sleepy, contented smiles of the women who worked nearby. Their hands seemed to float from bolt trays to engines to air guns as if in a dream. The engine repair man at the end of the line leaned against his empty bench, nodding with relief at each healthy engine that passed in front of him. The man on the last job lifted each engine from the line with the transfer turnover then waltzed it to its place on a hanging conveyor destined for line two.

To its singer, the notes of the song "Firefly" became a source of power he never knew he could have. He began moving his body as if it were a baton orchestrating all the operations of the line, even those at

its head; he had remote control through the notes riding the links of the conveyor.

He surveyed his territory and spotted the quiet woman whose eyes almost never left the timing chains she installed. That's when he marched a few steps up the line to rouse her, bring her into his choir. He crooned—*Shine your light naturally* and she looked up in confusion as if she had been yanked from another world. He instructed her—Open your mouth in a perfect circle and sing, *Firefly, ooh ooh firefly*. He demonstrated. *Firefly*—It's our song for today. I can teach it to you. She fixed her dark eyes on him and obediently formed her mouth into an "o" but before a note could fall out, the laughter of shyness overtook her. He returned to his job disgusted and quiet, unaware that it was her nature to be embarrassed by direct human contact.

A few engines later he was relieved for first break. Before leaving the line he threw one last bar of song over his shoulder. *I shouldn't have to lie to make it seem all right*. The lady on the timing chain job began her own soft humming. She smiled, amazed that a Monday morning on line number one could begin with a song.

PAJARILLO, PAJARILLO

If she put her ear up to the line after each engine passed her station, she could hear a faint chirp. At first she thought it was one of the many birds who became trapped inside and flew frantically from high in the rafters looking for a way out but, of course, rarely found one. There was no way out up above the lines; only at the edges of the entire floor were there windows. But if a little bird could figure that out by flying low and straight, then it would still have to worry about passing through all the machinery in the cam department or all the lines and washers in the block department. Even if it reached as far as the head line, things were so thick over there who knew what could happen to a little bird. When a bird was no longer seen everyone hoped that it had escaped through the loading dock area, but knew it had become weak and hungry and had fallen into the line and had been carried away by the links in the conveyor to the pit underneath. She figured that at changeover, every year at the beginning of summer when the cleaners removed the sludge build-up under the line, they must see a bushel or two of dead oily birds.

She looked up every time she heard a chirp, thinking it was an echo from real birds flying above her. Seeing none, she suspected that the chirps arose from the spirits of the birds whose bodies dropped off the conveyor at her section because the sludge had lost its hold on them. They were calling out to her.

No one else heard chirps in the line. She began to sing to them softly *pajarillo, pajarillo; que bonitos ojos tienes* and a bird would answer back with a chirp. Sometimes she jiggled her timing chain over the line because she thought the jingling sounded like their muffled chirping. *Lástima que tengas dueño.*

She worked her eight hours with her head bowed and leaning into the line not to miss any chirps. For this reason she had developed few friends in the factory. No one came to visit her where she worked because she gave the appearance of being a loner or afraid of people. However, her co-workers didn't consider her arrogant because her stooped, rounded shoulders and her bowed head (even when she was away from the line walking to the bathroom or getting a cup of coffee from the machine) made her look humble. Many of them realized that she was just plain shy and also that she didn't speak much English. Her smile, when she cocked her head to respond to a greeting, was wide and toothy.

She had learned the song from her mother who died many years before in her home town of Agualeguas, Mexico. Her mother had sung the same few words (*nada mas*) when washing the dishes or especially when making the tortillitas. *Pajarillo, pajarillo. Que bonitos ojos tienes. Lástima que tengas dueño.* Her mother never tired of singing the same words over and over, but that was a good thing because now it is the only song of her mother's she can remember. She had almost forgotten about it until the first time she heard a chirp in the line.

TURN ME ROUND

An engine block fell off the line one hour before lunch. It jumped off the light blue, oil-stained stand on the conveyor; it thumpa, thumpa, thumpa'd itself from the exact spot programmed for it by the broadcast system; it bugaloosed its way from in between the block in front of it that was scheduled for a green Brougham and the one behind it, slated for a brown Sedan de Ville. It tumbled onto the wooden floorboard of

the even side of the piston section as if refusing that sweet yellow Eldorado waiting for it across the street in final assembly.

The instant before it began its fall from the line all eight of the men who installed pistons converged on the block: the installers of even pistons buzzed on one side, the odds on the other. Some indistinct cackling, snorting, and guffawing emerged from the cluster which began to sound like a barnyard opera. Then in one fluid motion, the group reeled backwards. Someone shouted: *heave ho, muthafucka* and the block flew off the stand.

The way any block sat on the conveyor, it would have to wiggle considerably to escape the specially constructed stand that cradled its top corners. All blocks rode upside down on line number one in order to facilitate piston installation. You could lean against one and it wouldn't budge. You could turn the crank when it was tight and there were four or five pistons in the block and it would stay solid on the conveyor. You could take a big torque wrench or a hammer or a piston tray or anything and knock it against the block and it wouldn't move.

A block was light weight on line one, relatively speaking. It emerged hollow from the washer at the head of the line: a scooped out section for the crank, a tunnel for the cam, eight empty cylinders for the pistons. It became an engine on its way down the line to meet the crank, pistons, timing chain, water pump, crank pulley, oil pump and pan. By the end of the line, a block was an engine, ready to receive the plumbing and electrical parts on lines two and three.

Actually, a block crossed into the realm of engine after the crank and pistons were in place. At the moment the block scheduled for the yellow Eldorado left its stand on the conveyor, it had a crank and four pistons in it. It was caught in the middle of its transformation, half engine, half block.

This is how it happened. First its rear lifted to the left, then the front right bank followed suit and shifted. When the front shifted as it did, the engine block began a tumble that would put the front face down and the left bank straight up in the air.

At the same moment that the engine block touched the side of the line in the first stages of tumble, the woman on the oil pan tightening job, the second to the last station on the line, threw her grey head back, closed her baby blue eyes, lifted her flabby, pale white arms and

belted out in a voice as loud and definite as a backfire, *Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round, turn me round, turn me round.*

It only seemed like her voice rang out in accompaniment of the block's descent. But she had no knowledge at all of events in the piston area. Her station was far enough away so that she could barely see the group there; they neither saw her head bob back and forth in time to the melody nor heard her militant tune. In vain the previous day she had conducted a one woman protest against redistribution of work on the line. An extra stud had trickled down from a station higher up and landed on her job. An agreement between union and management over a week before had doomed her struggle, but she continued it with song under the watchful eye of the foreman who was camping on her job, hoping to intimidate her into silence. He didn't want her to rile the others. *I'm gonna keep on walkin, keep on talkin, til they change this goddam job.*

Next the engine disengaged completely from the stand in a one-hundred-eighty degree flip. For an instant the engine was right side up, front forward precariously supported by the edge of the line and a supply tray of rod nuts attached to it.

All weekend long she had brooded over the changes on her job. *Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round.*

Any Friday afternoon, that engine could have been the victim of reefer and bourbon. But that Monday morning it fell for eight reasons lost in the relentless clicking, clacking, clanking, whirring, buzzing, body-bumping-body, sweating, spitting that seemed to be the real business of the piston line.

It was when the engine was in its final stage of falling that the woman who installed the timing chain at a station almost exactly in the center of the line, also heard the strains of melodic resistance. In her left ear there was music, in her right the cacophony from the piston area. Through her body the two unrelated phenomena became one.

So just at the moment that the engine flipped another one-hundred-eighty degrees, bumped against the edge of the tray that had briefly supported it, and landed on the floorboard, the timing chain lady heard *Turn me round, turn me round, turn me round.*

Then the engine crashed, BOODOOM, creating a hole in the floorboard where number six piston installer normally stood. Two men picked

up the engine with their hands and reloaded it singing *heave ho*.

The timing chain lady looked straight ahead at a tray of pistons coming from the second floor on the overhead conveyor and wondered if they would see the inside of an engine that day. To her left the singing lady argued with the foreman who was completely unaware of the fallen engine. To her right, number six installer was dancing around the hole in the floorboard in an effort to load his piston into the engine designated for the brown Sedan de Ville.

JUMBIE JAMBOREE

The woman who checked the piston rings observed the panorama of craziness up and down the line from her subassembly station. She said to herself *Oui foote we making real bacchanal here today* as she lifted number one piston from the tray in front of her. She twirled its rings to check for damage and strained to hear the tinny tinkling of the rings slapping in their grooves. They sounded light and airy next to the thumping and all the jumping up and down from the thin young men behind her. She was always back to back bottom to bottom with the whole piston crew as she shuffled from end to end of her eight-foot zone. That short stretch didn't give her enough exercise to shake off the bowls of *pelau* she brought for lunch each day. So she grew big and *bufootoo*, as they would say in her native Trinidad, and every day found her dancing cheek to cheek with some slim young man shooting the same pistons she had checked. *Oui foote*. These days her arms hung wide by her side not close to her heart, and her breasts nestled in her lap like the three children she left back home when she came to this country to get a job so she could feed them because her husband had left her and gone to another island. She told some of her co-workers—*He went to Cuba. At least that's what they said, but who knows. Men these days travel however they want. Just like these foolish young men run up and down this line when they get a little bit of brown juice in them.*

It wasn't bourbon that possessed them that morning before lunch, before the week had finished waking up, even though an engine jumped off the line as if it already had juice and spark in it. Before long she found herself getting into the swing of things. *This is one jumbie jambo-ree going on here.* And she began singing an old calypso song, her mother's favorite. *Back to back, belly to belly, I don't give a damn, I done dead already.*

Come on, nuh boys, punch it up, punch it up. She danced the trays over the roller conveyor to their destination on the main line. She could feel the rattling from the trays traveling up her arms and the noise from the section behind her pummeling her bones as if she were one big conga drum vibrating in time to the bouncing trays and the piston rhythms. *Pshoop, number one piston in. Pshoop, number four piston in. Pshoop number three piston in. Oui foote. Back to back, belly to belly, in a jumbie jamboree.*

Since she had been at the plant, she had never seen such a commotion. It was as if all of them, that whole section, those shooting pistons, the torque-checkers, the crank man, even she—it was as if all of them were loaded up with cow-itch, a stinging Trinidad plant, and had to dig deep into all parts of their bodies to relieve the itching. It seemed to her that they had scratched and scratched until they reached inside their souls and everything everything was falling off of them: tiredness from the pistons, tiredness from the wiiiirng wiiiirng wiiiirng of the air guns, tiredness from someone always banging on the line and yelling *wake up muthafuckas*.

She wondered why the foreman was nowhere to be seen when the engine fell off the line but told herself *Better for us. Let him keep his tail wherever he is.* And she shuffled her feet and swung her big bottom right to left, *back to back, belly to belly*, shaking off the lonely days without her children and the ache for the sight of bright red anthuriums growing straight out of the ground and the salt breeze of Mayaro hitting her face. *I don't give a damn, I done dead already.*

No matter what ached in any of them, in her opinion, that morning was the most exciting in the history of Cadillac piston installation. It was the first time an engine had fallen off the line. When the two installers grabbed the engine back and front, said *heave ho* and swung it onto its stand, the whole section broke out in raucous applause. The two responsible for replacing the engine bowed low and swept their arms to the floor as if they were courtiers. She bellowed *Come on, boys, let us send this engine down the line in fine style* and they all joined her for a chorus of jumbie jamboree. Their voices were so loud and strong they upped the speed of the line half a cycle. They didn't seem to care one bit because the renegade engine was headed out of their section on its way to the cam, timing chain and front cover stations.

Come on, nuh boys, punch it up, punch it up. Let them all know we here and don't give a damn because we done dead already. She grabbed a piston from her checking tray and held it by both hands above her head, rocking it back and forth as if she were passing the review stand in the Savannah on opening day of Carnival, Port of Spain, Trinidad. Oui foote. Let me hear the chorus. Back to back belly to belly. We don't give a damn, we done dead already, we done dead already, we done dead already.