

Home Everywhere

A trip, with stories

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Black
Lawrence
Press

Philosophy is really homesickness,
an urge to be at home everywhere.
—Novalis

For my mother

Prologue

Inside a hangar at the lonely airport on the edge of her childhood town there was a small, turquoise-colored plane. It waited there in the shadows, a dragonfly at rest, a cooled moth. One summer the plane emerged, and up she went in this odd creature with her brothers and sisters, battened in for a tour of the checkerboard land. It was Fun Days in Arboleda.

The primitive hand-cranking of the propeller was impressive, and then—the roar. The plane became an activated animal, an insect, a driven intelligence. But minutes after takeoff the sky closed in, the earth seemed to rush up, she felt pressed between the two. The plane circled back and deposited her onto the airstrip, where she wobbled over to the edge and sat down.

She pressed her fingers into the warm, black pebbles melded together in the tarmac. The wind stroked the rattling grass and behind this curtain of sound she heard the plane intone . . . what? An ant wended its way between her fingers and across her hand. She heard the hiss of an August grasshopper, the punctuating snap.

There was the ant's private city of glistening pebbles, the tiny terra firma. There was the abandoned plane with its fragile occupants, high up in the empty sky. The pebbles and the ant and the plane all belonged to the blue-domed world. But only because she had been set down there on that dry land, on that particular day, at that one spot.

I.

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M(r). Butterfly

His real name was something else. It had tones and diphthongs and unaspirated p's. It was piquant and fluttering, the way he pronounced it, his voice guarded, clandestine. Quickly then he reverted to the businesslike "Ron," a created character, clearly. Ron was a combination of police, priest, parent, and pimp.

"Get into the temple," Ron might say, his language pragmatic and unadorned.

Everyone liked him.

It was nearing the end of the millennium, in the waning days of November, the waxing days of December, the darkening days of winter, the holiday season in the Western world. Time to flee the festive hearth and set off for a ten-day trip to a foreign land. (A reprieve of sorts, this bargain tour, from states of longing, aloneness, and relentless cheer.)

When they first shuffled down the chute upon arrival, they arranged their faces to say: *We are well-traveled people and students of culture.* Some made their faces say even more: *I have slept in the rainforest canopy. I have rubbed shoulders with shamans. I don't tour, I trek. I have trekked to places never before seen by the common traveler.*

The tourists knew that they were just tourists.

I have observed factory workers amid the clang of their toil. I have studied the courtship songs of refugees. I have gone right into the homes and made friends for life!

There stood the beaming Ron outside baggage claim, wearing a crisply-laundered white shirt with thin green stripes, a small brass name tag centered neatly on the pocket. His smile, which appeared to be absolutely genuine, was also instantly, guilelessly flirtatious.

"My name is R-O-N," he said, pointing with his left index finger to invisible letters in the air, a large sliver watch glinting on his wrist like a signal mirror.

"Ron!" the tourists responded, a bit precipitately.

"Ah, your English is excellent," he smiled, looking right at each of them, a flicker of irony hovering about his lips. They were made to feel good, in cahoots with Ron. He seemed to be saying: *I know, and you know, and I know you know, and I want you to know I know, and I want you to know I know you know all those clichés. About all those others. Not you.*

"Follow me," Ron chimed, and swaggered away, confident of their attention. They gathered their things and followed him, over skyways, up ramps, and around corners. They followed him to the accompaniment of "Bridge Over Troubled Water," a melancholy, duple-metered rendition strummed on a steel guitar.

(Ron had a fussy, near-prissy physical brio that exuded machismo itself, deconstructed and distilled. That was what some of the tourists noticed. Others simply noticed that his pants fit perfectly.)

Through sliding glass doors, they followed him, waddling stiff-legged after the long flight, elbowing their way out into a steamy, incubator-warm parking garage filled with growling buses waiting in the 4 a.m. neon glare at full, repressed throttle. A quick stab of travel sadness was generally experienced. Or might it be joy? They were here. None of them had been here before. A door had stood open and now it was closed and they were in. Here they were.

The only colors in the gaseous gray were purple clumps of garlands, reminiscent of leis, and the brilliant magenta of the costumes of the lei attendants, languorous, silk-swathed girls accompanied by camera-equipped boys. The sex trade! No, welcome teams. Working the arrivals.

The camera boys wore the same green stripes as Ron, though not so nattily. They stood with the girls at the open doors of the buses, an appropriate number of garlands draped over each girl's arm, brochures and tin buttons arrayed on a tray. Various toxins vied for space in the semi-enclosed area. As each panting, decompressing passenger ambled gratefully toward the steps of his (or her) designated vehicle, a girl lassoed him (or her) with a lei, saying "Welcome, Sir (or Madam)," with a quick fold of the hands to the forehead. Then the girl stood next to this perspiring, sleep-craving stranger, smooth cheek to rumpled cheek in a mini-position of intimacy, while a boy snapped a photo, redeemable later for US \$10.

They wanted to be good sports about this. They wanted to seem unthreatened. They didn't always travel in hordes (they wanted this understood), but so what? They hoped to convey a stance that was not "anti," but "post." *We're beyond being ill at ease.* That was what the well-traveled hoped to convey with their stance, distinguishing themselves from the nervously beaming novices.

Everyone looked at Ron, who was monitoring the proceedings with a white, linen handkerchief kept close to his mouth and nose, presumably to filter the fumes, or maybe to dab sweat from his upper lip. Holding the folded square in place, he guided them into the bus with his free hand, the fingers performing a regular little twirl at the end of his languid arm, the heavy watch winking, the overall effect that of a blessing, a mock blessing, a tinge of carnival, a dancer moonlighting as a doorman.

They wanted to match Ron's dramatic flair. But the tourists weren't there yet. Some tried to duck the photo, others dodged the lei. A woman dropped several packages of peanuts she'd saved from the flight and also her reading glasses, which she retrieved with a pounce. This awkward behavior created a catch in the smoothness of the whole maneuver, the face of her welcome girl became knit with the faintest of frowns.

Ron came to the rescue, lowering his handkerchief and bestowing the moment with a sudden big grin, his teeth showing even and

radiant in this personalized extension of his uniform smile, itself so full of pleasure and professionalism. *He exudes a male animus that an equally-short Norman Mailer would kill for*, a would-be novelist in the group made a mental note to write. *He exudes a soft concern*, thought the would-be novelist's wife. *And total authority*.

"Everything is okay?" Ron tilted his head ever so slightly. The tourists nodded mutely, eyeing the hard holster swivel clip cellphone case he had strapped to his belt, next to a black, collapsible umbrella, as compact as a billy club.

"Get into the bus," he smiled.

They did, with no further struggle.

Floating through the city and toward their beds, the tourists wondered if the cool fingers they'd felt on their arms belonged to the silky girls or to Ron. Faint sensations still lingered of just the barest moments of contact, like moths brushing skin.

Slipping into nodding half-dreams, they became the moths and Ron their captor.

Then Ron and the girls became entangled. He wore shimmering colors; they wore his name tag. Then the tourists were the ones all wrapped up with Ron. He reclaimed his name tag. It said RON. The tourists wore their own tin buttons. These said PARADISE PROMISE. As the bus sighed along, they sank fully to sleep, convinced they had finally arrived.