

Tino & Esperanza

Tino and Esperanza were in it for the long haul. Not to say that things didn't come between them. Things come between all of us. Tino and Esperanza got a phone call.

It was a couple of years after they were married. It was when they were trying to have a baby—the first time. It was Esperanza's idea. She said she'd noticed something about her changing. It wasn't an easy thing to notice, she said, and if she hadn't been paying such close attention she wouldn't have noticed a thing at all. She said she was becoming a mother.

“What does that mean?” Tino asked, sitting at the kitchen table figuring out the bills and making out checks. He lifted his head in puzzlement, narrowing his eyes and crowding his eyebrows into a thick bunch.

“I'm talking about a baby Tino. I'm talking about us having a baby. Can't you see my aura changing?”

Esperanza had strong beliefs about auras and karma and fate. When she first met Tino's father, a Filipino doctor, a first generation immigrant, she said he had one of the most distinct auras she had ever seen. She said it was like the sun, that's how she explained it. In Esperanza's eyes, Tino's father carried the sun around on his shoulders and in his hands.

Tino understood none of this. At the time of all this baby talk, he was a poor graduate student studying sociology and, in particular, the census. In Tino's mind, everything about America was buried in a census somewhere, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

But, love being what it is—blinding *and* convincing—Tino believed Esperanza when she told him that his father was carrying around the sun. And so it was with the whole matter of children and motherhood.

“I guess I do see,” he said. “You do seem different.”

“I told you,” she said, widening her arms like wings, throwing back her head and giving herself a spin. “It’s like I’m already two. You can’t imagine how it is. We have to start trying, right away. Do you promise you won’t change your mind?”

But before Tino could answer, the phone rang. Esperanza dropped her arms again to her side and scampered to the cordless. The call was from Leslie, a friend from Champaign when they were undergrads. She had, as Tino could infer, just become engaged and wanted to them to attend an impromptu party that night at her apartment in Chicago.

Esperanza turned to Tino and explained the invitation. “Let’s go,” she paused and waited for Tino’s response. “We can celebrate.”

Tino stopped his calculating again. “Sure,” he said. “It sounds great.”

And with that the two broke off their Saturday afternoon routine and began getting ready to make the short trip into the city. Tino stacked the bills in a pile and Esperanza slipped off her sundress and waltzed into the bedroom to stand in front of the open closet.

The night that Tino and Esperanza were engaged was a hot night in June and they spent it drinking beer, eating Filipino food and making love to the sounds of a George Gershwin album that played over and over. “Rhapsody in Blue” until four in the morning.

Esperanza said that listening to Gershwin made her feel like an American; she was born in Mexico next to the Texas border and grew up traveling between Texas and Illinois, part of a family of migrant workers.

“But you will be an American, Esperanza,” her father told her. “Everyone in my family will be an American.”

The night that she and Tino were engaged, Esperanza laid in bed, Tino’s long black hair draped across her bare stomach and her arms stretched far above her head. “Now,” she had said, “I will be an American bride.”

And on the day they were married, in a loud bustling ceremony inside of a tall ornate Catholic church, Esperanza positively glowed. It was the middle of May. Throngs of dark-skinned immigrants pressed themselves into pews, sweating and smiling and gabbing unendingly during every moment of the long ceremony.

They had come from all over the country and some from the Philippines and some from Mexico, all finding their way into a church in the heart of Skokie, Illinois. And they were all in love with Tino and Esperanza that day.

Tino’s great uncle, the last surviving brother of his Lolo, who had died when Tino was still young, remarked at the reception afterward how the rings shined so brightly on their fingers as they stood at the alter.

“Did you not see?” he asked Tino’s mother in slow speech muddled from a stroke. “The sparkle. It was like they were ringing. Yes?”

And this was true. On the day that they were married, everything shone brightly.

Now, today, Esperanza tugged at the dresses in her closet. She pulled some off of the hangers and dropped them gently onto the bed and some she pushed aside into the end of the closet.

“Maybe we should take the train,” Tino called out from the living room. “I’m don’t really feel like traffic today.”

“The train?” Esperanza said. “What if we stay late? The trains don’t run late. We’ll drive. If you get tired I can drive us home.”

“But the truck is dying. It barely goes anymore.”

“Please, let’s drive. I don’t want to wait around for any trains,” Esperanza said. And that was that.

Esperanza held a long white sleeveless dress against her body and angled herself in front of the mirror. She tilted her head to the side and then threw her dark hair over her shoulder.

Tino walked in from the living room and stood behind her. He watched as she turned her body in front of the mirror. He tucked his shirt into the front of his pants. He studied her naked

back, the strong lines of the muscles beneath her shoulder blades, the little meadow where her spine eased down to her waist.

When he first met her she was a young girl, thirteen only. She arrived for the last couple of months of the eighth grade school year. It was a routine that she had grown accustomed to, spending parts of the year in different schools, losing time, forcing her to take an entire grade over when she was eleven.

He felt mysteriously about her. A stranger with an accent that was different from his parents. A beautiful girl who was mostly alone, mostly walking the halls not saying a word. When he saw her again it was two years later, her father had saved enough money and they bought a big house in Illinois that they shared with her uncle and his family. He spoke to her for the first time a year later, asking her to the Junior Prom.

The story that he told his grandchildren, as an old man, a professor, a teacher of sociology, was that he knew from the beginning. It was a story they liked to hear. And he liked to tell them too, that on that day, today, he could see a vision of all of their faces while looking along the back of their grandmother, Esperanza. Even on the day he buried her, he told the story one last time, for all who were left of the friends they knew.

“What are you doing back there Tino?” Esperanza asked, eyeing him in the mirror over her shoulder, “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Are you going to wear that?”

“Yes. Why? Don’t you like it? You gave this to me, don’t you remember?”

“I remember. I like it. I think you should wear it.”

Esperanza wore the dress and put up her hair and when they were ready the two of them walked down the back steps of their apartment building to the old Ford pickup that Tino had taken off of his father’s hands a few years before.

The blue rusted truck made a horrible noise when it started and Tino always looked around after turning the key, watching to see who had noticed that it was his truck that sounded as if it was going to get up and die right there in the lot.

He directed the pickup out into the street slowly, grinding it into gear and then noticing Esperanza grimace as she checked her make-up in the side mirror.

“Wait,” she said. “We forgot.”

Tino slowed the car again as they approached the railroad where the trains ran by all day on the Northwest line, shaking and shouting across the parking lot behind their apartment.

“What?” he asked.

“A gift. We need a gift.”

The truck gave a shudder. “Damn,” Tino muttered.

“It’s alright, we’ll just run into town. It won’t take long.”

“No,” said Tino as he put the truck back into neutral. “The truck, it’s stopped.”

Esperanza looked past Tino, out his window and over the tracks where the truck now rested, noiseless and still.

“Well, what? Start it,” she said, raising her voice. “We’re on the tracks Tino, we have to start the truck. Come on.”

By now a few cars behind them were beginning to honk and their drivers were making a racket. Tino turned the key, but nothing.

“Tino,” she said, now in a panic.

Tino gave it a few more goes, but still nothing, nothing but a few clicks. “Damn it. Goddamn it.”

A man in a red sedan pulled around Tino and buzzed ahead. Another man in a pickup drove past, “Goddamn spics! Fix your fuckin’ car!” he hollered. Tino looked up and Esperanza’s jaw drew tight.

“Tino.”

“Shit. Alright,” Tino said and swiveled his head back and forth checking the tracks. “I told you

this would happen. I told you we should take the train.”

“What?!” Esperanza yelled. “I can’t believe this.”

“Get out. We need to get out,” he said, opening his door and stepping down to stand outside of the truck. Esperanza grabbed her purse and stepped outside too.

Tino pulled on the lever to release the hood, then moved around to the front of the truck, prying open the sun-warmed metal and leaning over the engine. A tall, heavy man walked over from the other side of the road and joined Tino in front of the truck.

“Looks like you’ve got a problem,” he said, resting his hand alongside the engine and peering over the dark mess.

“We’ll need to push it,” Tino said. “This isn’t going anywhere. Son of a bitch.”

And that’s when they heard the noise. First a little ring in the tracks themselves and then the ring of the bells at the crossing. Then the lights. Then the gates.

The tall, heavy man stood a moment, amazed, and then turned to Tino, expressionless. Tino rushed behind the truck. “C’mon,” he said to the man. Then he turned to Esperanza, who stood crying at the side of the road. “Esperanza, push!” The man got behind the truck with Tino and leaned his hands into the back bumper.

“Esperanza!”

Esperanza stood and shook her head. “Tino, no! Stop! The train! Come over here—the two of you, stop!” She yelled.

The man turned his head to Tino, “She’s right.” The sound of the approaching train now joined the noise of the dingy crossing gate, the collection of sounds braiding together in a familiar chorus.

“What?” Tino said. “We have to move this, now. Esperanza, help us!” He yelled, but the other man stepped back and then hurried to stand beside Esperanza. “What are you doing?” Tino pleaded.

Tino looked at the two of them standing together, listened as Esperanza yelled for him to move, then stared over at the freight train approaching slowly with its horn blaring wildly. And then he stepped back too, and stood beside Esperanza and the stranger, watching as the train grew louder, moved closer.

“I can’t believe this,” Tino said. “We could’ve moved the Goddamn thing. What were you thinking? We can’t just leave it.”

With the train about a hundred yards away, the three retreated in a rush, moving what they thought would be a safe distance to witness the collision. Cars that had stopped on the other side of the tracks slipped into reverse and backed away from the crossing. People got

out of their vehicles, some wandered out of the parking lot of the apartment building and leered from the edge of the driveway.

Tino and Esperanza stood together with a tall, heavy stranger dressed in jeans and a white undershirt, yelling at each other, Esperanza screaming about fate and Tino yelling about how a pickup truck isn't a heavy car, how it's an easy thing to push. And they watched as a slow moving freight train drove at quarter steam into the broad side of Tino's father's old blue rusting Ford pickup. The crossing bells rang just like they always do.

They didn't make it to the city, but that night Tino and Esperanza drank San Miguels and listened to Gershwin, then devoured each other in the long, late, weighty heat of a Midwestern summer. They named their first child George.
