

COUNTING

An excerpt from *Calypso's Way* (in progress)

Wake
 Feed
 Sticks
 Shots, the old ones still
 Rocks
 Down
 Buoys
 Up
 Hot, for spring
 Check
 Check
 Lock box, for the Lord
 Check

I should say with gratitude about the Lord. It is by his orders that we have access to the land we live on, including the house. We became entitled when I married Carmine. But it's not that simple. In addition, we must pay a weight of combustible material for every square meter. Our number is 1.7 kg. Not much, you might think, until you think about that it's demanded daily. It must be in the box before the sun is overhead. No exact collection hour given, which I believe they do for psychological reasons, like to make our use of our own time into a betting game. Not to mention the game of that there's not enough

growth on our property to fill the quota. Couldn't be enough, even if we knocked down the house, killed all the chickens, uprooted the vegetables, and made every square inch into growing land, contented ourselves to sleeping under the natural canopy. Ha. So instead we must scavenge from the area. Or go begging. Or steal. And keep a locked gate around the house so no one comes in at night to steal from us. We must have a good scale for weighing. Make sure it's accurate. I make sure. But then again, it's not so serious. People find a way. The pressure has less to do with there being not enough, and more to do with being kept in place humming away at a certain pitch: busy and aware of where the power lies.

For example, the Lord wouldn't but he could kick us out of our home at any time, with or without a husband and enough sticks. (I heard about a family that, after agonizing, decided to take their dying mother down the coast for a few days. It had been her dream to see the fished-out bronzes, those towering myth figures with copper lashes. They arranged for someone, a nice neighbour, to come everyday and fill the box. But when they got back, their key didn't work in the lock, and there were lights on inside, the smell of someone else's soup, and sounds of jubilation. Turned out, another family was living in their house, had already moved in, and had dumped all their stuff in the yard. Even though the original family had been paying their tithes through the neighbour! But, who knows, maybe one day the neighbour didn't fill it in time, or didn't put in quite enough. "Knowledge is the privilege of the prosecution," as they say. The family had to go down to city hall and prove—through multiple attestations of acquaintances, well compensated for their accounts, and documents, by chance held on to, of regular sale and appointment—that this was their home and chosen region, and not the other place where they had been for the past five days. The Judge said that if they loved the bronzes so much, why didn't they go get a house from *that* Lord. Then they could go see the bronzes every day. The family went through a long Ordeal, which

“Could be.”

“Two hours?”

“Could be.”

“Four hours?”

“Yup, that sounds realistic.”

“A whole day?”

“That’s a possibility.”

When I storm back to take my place in line, I find the bodies have closed the gap where I was standing, and no one will let me in. I’m not in the mood to get physical, so I go all the way to the end of the line. And lo, like saying the magic words at the entrance to the sacred cave, as soon as I get out the door, down the street, around the corner, back back back to the 50-people-ahead-type end of the line, Charpie starts calling out orders. Did they really keep all these poor folks waiting just to get at me? It’s hard to believe. And yet, when I do get to the counter, she of course refuses our favour.

“Not to worry,” I smile. I saw it coming, and brought the egg cash with me to pay. But that doesn’t stop Jack-O from spitting a ball of phlegm into Fani’s bag before he hands it over.

I pick up sugar, milk, bar soap, hair gel, hair pins, nails, chicken feed, paying cash for everything. I don't understand what things cost. 16 300 73 58 3 9 10. Are these good prices? I don't know, and yet, I feel a shift in myself. Instead of how, in the middle of a favour deal, I would always have to pad the social aspect—be tiptoeing, explaining how sparingly we use the cream, how it has been so long since the last time we bought soap, how Hunni’s been working so hard he needs to eat more loaves, how we go through bandaids fast because the chickens have been tending to scratch at us lately, not ever wanting to seem extravagant or like I’m taking advantage of what’s being given—at least now, with favour gone, I can buy what I want, and don’t have to be polite about it.

...

Those who do not leave a place have a fine knowledge of their terrain, and so small changes stand out. For a normal day, I can’t get anything done. For spring, it’s hot outside. For evening, the wind blows such that it threatens rain, not the fresh spring kind that soaks into the earth, loosens it for growth; but the kind that builds as humid heat, that dumps and rages. This is the type of arrival that I fear and nonetheless bid to arrive. Arrive now so that it can be sooner over, so that the heaviness can be sooner lifted. Nonetheless I dread enduring what comes with the arrival.

I push my entire weight into the door to shut it against the wind.

I run outside when the storm comes, to tie up all the things that could come loose, fly, rip or get carried away by the storm. We wouldn’t want to meet the heavenly morning-after’s cool wet air shot through with sunbeams, parting clouds and lighting up clear dewdrops, only to find that the cloth that catches olives has been lost, the umbrella is ripped and no longer gives shade. It would be too harsh a blow for that to be what we find. So I tie it all down now, even if it means getting soaked in the downpour. Carmine watches me from the top balcony. He has opened one of the doors that I’ve worked so hard to close. He watches me, yells down at me, points out things that I haven’t gotten to yet, “Don’t forget the shovel. Over there.” I want to kill him. But then, where would I be without my husband?