

Electricity

Triggered by Eduardo Galeano, Bocas del Tiempo

by

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DESCRIPTION

An America newcomer to the town of El Bolsón expects certain amenities to be available. They are, but in ways that The Engineer has to demonstrate.

CHARACTERS

- Horacio Tubio
- The Engineer, Bautista Fiolfo

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The inside of a rustic public office in the town of El Bolsón, Argentina. HORACIO, seated, is waiting, waiting—waiting. Waits some more.

Finally, THE ENGINEER comes in—self-important. He fiddles at his desk, arranges some papers, then turns his gaze upon HORACIO, thus giving him permission to approach.

Which HORACIO does.

HORACIO

Good day, señor.

THE ENGINEER

Yes?

HORACIO

I am new in the town.

THE ENGINEER

I know that.

HORACIO

It is your business to know that, of course.

THE ENGINEER

You have bought the house in the valley.

HORACIO

And it is exactly about that house that I am here.

THE ENGINEER

And you are from California.

HORACIO

Well, yes.

THE ENGINEER

The land of actors.

HORACIO

Not everyone there, or who comes from there, is an actor.

THE ENGINEER

That's not the point: are you an actor?

HORACIO

I have been known to act.

THE ENGINEER

Then you are an actor.

HORACIO

You make it sound like I've sinned.

THE ENGINEER

We have actors in El Bolsón—not many. Which I find to be good thing.

HORACIO

What do the actors think about that?

THE ENGINEER

I don't know. It's not part of my duties to know. Land, houses, water, roads—these things are knowable. Like a horizon.

The two of them stand there, not sure where to go in the conversation.

THE ENGINEER

They say you brought a washing machine.

HORACIO

They did, did they.

THE ENGINEER

A computer, fax, television.

HORACIO

They are observant. In fact, it is on the behalf of my artifacts that I come.

THE ENGINEER

You are the servant of your machines.

HORACIO

I am their advocate. Because they are hungry.

THE ENGINEER

They are machines.

HORACIO

But you can appreciate this, as an engineer—they are hungry for electricity.

THE ENGINEER

You don't have electricity in your new house?

HORACIO

My machines would like to run on the flames of candles, but alas, they cannot.

THE ENGINEER

No electricity. Hmm.

THE ENGINEER goes to a cabinet or shelving unit and pulls down a book of maps or drawings—a large heavy book full of carefully drawn schematics that also look like ancient inscriptions.

He opens the book to a page and scans it. Then another page and scans it. This goes on for several more pages and scans. HORACIO is trying not to fidget, but he is from California, after all, and an actor.

Finally, with a heavy thud, THE ENGINEER closes the book of life.

HORACIO

Well?

THE ENGINEER

You have electricity.

HORACIO

No I don't.

THE ENGINEER

You have electricity in that zone.

HORACIO

But not in my house.

THE ENGINEER

You have functioning electricity in that zone.

HORACIO

I admit it functions. It functions in the forest. The trees are happy. Electrified.

THE ENGINEER gives him a cold appraising stare, bites his lip, says nothing.

HORACIO

What?

THE ENGINEER

You know what your problem is?

HORACIO

I did not realize I had a problem.

THE ENGINEER

You do have a problem. You have the problem of arrogance. And with that arrogance, you are not going to achieve anything in life.

THE ENGINEER nods at the door. HORACIO trades a look with him, turns, and goes to leave. As HORACIO turns, THE ENGINEER picks up the map book and turns to put it away. HORACIO, looking over his shoulder, see the back of THE ENGINEER, so instead of leaving, HORACIO turns and lowers himself to his knees. He leans slightly forward and raps his knuckles on the floor, as if knocking on a door. He is thus in this position of humility when THE ENGINEER turns and sees him.

HORACIO

Engineer, you have had the luck of being able to study.

THE ENGINEER

Get up, please.

HORACIO

You have a title and respect.

THE ENGINEER

Get up, you [fool]—

HORACIO

Engineer, please understand my situation.

THE ENGINEER

Please, just get up before—

HORACIO

I would like to learn to take the full measure of the beauty around me. To be part of this life at the foot of the Andes mountains—

THE ENGINEER

Piltriquitron Mountain—

HORACIO

At the left hand of Patagonia—in Río Negro—to wash my clothes and cook my food and light the darkness—

THE ENGINEER

Please, please, get up, just get up.

HORACIO stops talking, but he doesn't get up. THE ENGINEER lets out a long sigh.

THE ENGINEER

Electricity has a way of finding where it needs to be. Today the forest is electrified. Tomorrow—who knows? Even for actors.

HORACIO stands. The two men appraise each other.

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HORACIO's house. On a table is an old Victrola hand-cranked record player. HORACIO is looking it over.

SOUND: The creaking of a bicycle coming up the road.

THE ENGINEER appears at the door, tool case in hand.

HORACIO

Engineer, you made it!

THE ENGINEER

I said I would come. I wouldn't want the actor to be too long in the dark.

THE ENGINEER sees the Victrola, and it's clear he is interested in the machine.

HORACIO

Would you like something to drink? I would offer maté, but, alas, I have no way to heat my water quickly, so I have, in essence, only water to offer you. Or a warm beer.

THE ENGINEER

Nothing, thank you. What year is that, if I may ask?

HORACIO

1914. Victor Victrola IX.

THE ENGINEER

The Victor Victorola IX.

HORACIO

But in bringing it here I think I damaged something—perhaps the coilspring—do you know the machine?

THE ENGINEER

Where is your circuit-box?

HORACIO

I have a circuit box?

THE ENGINEER

Haven't you noticed the wires—looping out like a spider's web from your roof?

HORACIO

I assumed—

THE ENGINEER

What?

HORACIO

I'm not sure what I assumed, now that you mention it.

THE ENGINEER

Instead of investigating, you came straight to me to complain. California and actors. The kitchen?

HORACIO

Back there.

THE ENGINEER disappears. A few moments of silence.

SOUND: A loud "click," like a large switch being thrown.

A light comes on.

SOUND: A general humming sound.

THE ENGINEER comes back. HORACIO wants to say "thank you" but isn't quite sure how to do so, looking as stupid as he does.

In any case, THE ENGINEER saves him the embarrassment by pulling up a chair to the Victrola.

THE ENGINEER

May I?

HORACIO

Of course.

THE ENGINEER puts down his tool kit next to him and inspects the machine, carefully opening it up, looking at the mechanism, nodding his head, poking around. He goes to his kit, pulls out a small screwdriver, and tightens something inside. Without looking at HORACIO, he speaks to him as he does this.

THE ENGINEER

My name is Bautista Fiolfo.

HORACIO

Thank you for electrifying my house, Señor Fiolfo.

THE ENGINEER

Thank you, Señor Tubio.

HORACIO

Right—it is your business to know my name.

THE ENGINEER continues to tinker.

THE ENGINEER

My great-grandfather—I knew him, he was still alive—an oil-man before they created the state-run business in 1922. He would take his Victor Victrola with him wherever he went—didn't need electricity to run it. Comodoro Rivadavia, Caleta Olivia, General Mosconi, Plaza Huincul—it didn't matter where, he'd play his music and drill for oil and be a happy man.

THE ENGINEER sits back, puts down his tool, and gives the hand-crank a few turns. The turntable spins without complaint.

HORACIO

Do you know what he liked to listen to?

THE ENGINEER

Oh, I don't know. By the time I knew him, his beloved machine has grown rusted, just like him. I made it run again, but all of his records were gone—broken, flown away.

HORACIO

Are you in a hurry?

THE ENGINEER

Do you have something worthwhile to keep me here?

HORACIO

I'll heat the water for the maté—I have some alfajores—and I have something worthwhile for you.

THE ENGINEER nods yes, and HORACIO moves into the kitchen for the water, then into some other room, then back into the living room, a booklet of seven 78 RPMs in his hand, which he hands to THE ENGINEER.

HORACIO

He might have listened to these. 1921. I think it is the first acoustic recording of Beethoven's 9th. 14 sides. From Berlin.

THE ENGINEER is only half-listening to HORACIO as he slides one of the discs out of its sleeve and holds it up to the light.

THE ENGINEER

I have never heard it, I am sorry to say.

HORACIO

Here, let me.

HORACIO takes the disc and places it on the turntable. He turns the crank several times to get the machine running, then lowers the stylus to the surface.

SOUND: It begins with the thin sound that would have come from the actual record but then morphs into a lush full-throated version of the opening of the choral section of the 4th Movement.

For three minutes or so, they listen to this wonderful music. THE ENGINEER has his head buried in his hands. THE ENGINEER makes a gesture, and HORACIO lifts the stylus from the record. Silence invades.

THE ENGINEER stares at the machine, then looks at *HORACIO*, then puts his tools away and gets ready to go.

HORACIO

I've got the water on the boil.

THE ENGINEER

I need to go back.

THE ENGINEER turns and heads toward the door, followed by *HORACIO*.

At the door, *THE ENGINEER* turns back.

THE ENGINEER

That—that—that is electricity that I did not know existed in the world.

HORACIO

You're welcome to come back. You're welcome to attend with your great-grandfather.

THE ENGINEER

I have to go. Thank you.

THE ENGINEER leaves.

SOUND: The creaking bicycle going away.

SOUND: The whistle of a teapot.

HORACIO runs back into the kitchen.

SOUND: The whistling dies away.

HORACIO returns. He puts the disc back into its sleeve. He pauses, then puts the discs inside the machine, closes the Victrola's lid, puts on a light jacket and, with a little difficulty, picks up and cradles the Victrola. Getting his balance, he heads out the door.