

Black and White Doesn't Mean Gray

Willy Lizárraga

Back and forth. The ball. Bounce and rebound. Fast because it is against a wall and it'll return everything you throw at it. It'll defeat you no matter what, although it will always leave it up to you to decide when to walk away. I was at that at that point. Actually, I was past that point. My arm and wrist had already given up. I wasn't going to quit, though. This girl at the other end of the wall had been at it when I arrived and was still going strong. I kept eyeing her. She wasn't even sweating. She mixed up her shots with absolute control: forehands, backhands, serves, volleys, always hitting the wall at exactly the same spot, right between the bathroom door and its only window. She wore red shorts and a loose gray t-shirt, ripped at one shoulder. Her tennis shoes were so old they didn't have color anymore. She had an enormous Afro, almost bigger than her, and long, perfectly cylindrical legs. Her socks were super white. Or maybe it just seemed so against her dark skin. Her shoulders were small, like her hips.

Meanwhile, my humiliation kept building up. So I purposefully hit the ball to her side. I wanted to interrupt her, to stop the unstoppable flow of her shots. Maybe I could even talk to her. It was like eight in the morning. We were the only ones in the park. Most of

the tennis players would arrive after nine, the basketball players even later. It was a sunny, windy Saturday. I was still learning how to play in the wind, which is why I had come to this park in the first place. I had discovered it a few days before, hidden away and protected from the wind currents, boasting friendly tennis players talking and laughing next to red and blue coolers filled with beers and sodas, ice cream and watermelon. I had the impression they wouldn't mind letting me play if I asked them.

I didn't know anybody. I was brand new to San Francisco, to America, to living on my own. I rented a room from a Puerto Rican family not too far away from the park. Doris, the mother was light skinned, spoke no English, didn't like Mexicans or Blacks and seemed terribly burdened by an untreatable form of nostalgia. She missed her tropical island as one misses a vital organ, a limb. She also seemed burdened by my "ingenuidad," as she called it. She worried about me getting into fights with "los muchachos del barrio." She urged me to not pay attention to their teasing, to watch out for the low-riders, to stay away from their "rucas."

Earl, her son, spoke little Spanish, was tall, blond and wirily handsome a la Jesus Christ. He was a year older than me and had recently dropped out of high school to be a mechanic. He drove a dark red Chevy Impala, low with a ridiculously tiny wheel and two roaring carburetors—"to fly like a motherfucker," he'd say as if quoting a line from a song by Sly and the Family Stone, his favorite band. He was popular with the girls. Some of them, I noticed, were actually women, professionals with families and kids. He never bragged about it, though. He only talked about cars. Occasionally, he'd grant himself the license to envision his future and say things like "Soon, very soon, I'll open up my own shop and move out of the house. I sure hope my mother can handle it." Then, as if suddenly remembering he was talking to someone who'd just arrived from Peru, which for him was like an ethnic

version of Mars, he'd throw in a few laconic words of wisdom to buttress my urgent American education: "Never refuse a hit (as he passed me a joint). Don't get involved if you see a black man beating a black woman on these streets, okay? Sometimes, though, it's better to fight and get your ass kicked than to run away."

We'd often play handball in the alley behind the house. He said I was "a fucking natural." I didn't really care about playing handball. It was never more for me than a cheap substitute for tennis. But where was Earl, anyway, now that I needed him most, now that his how-to-survive-in-America-for-idiot's advice was a matter of life and death, now that my shamefully hairless tennis ball had bounced, rolled and finally stopped next to the girl with the giant Afro and I was supposed to say something?

Resigned to depend on my most un-American judgment, preparing myself to say the first stupid thing that came to my mind, she suddenly stopped her flow, picked my ball from the floor, hit it back to me and continued playing as if nothing had happened.

I said "thank you," working really hard to make my "th" soft, pliable, the way my English teacher had taught me. She smiled without looking at me, without missing a perfect backhand volley, and I didn't know what to do, except resume my unremarkable duel with the wall. After a few minutes, I turned my head toward her to barely catch the wake of her Afro disappearing behind the wall we'd been sharing.

I didn't expect to feel so lonely and aimless without her company. The smoothness of her strokes, the graceful cadence of her body, the steadiness of her legs, her big, round eyes so focused and stern, her carnal, elusive dark lips, her brief, almost condescending smile like a white dove flying superfast across her face, all gone.

Tennis racket in hand, a few hairless tennis balls in a plastic bag, for the next few weeks I would go to Linda Park as early in the morning as I could, hoping to run into her. I had nothing better to do, anyway, nothing that meant anything to me. It was my first semester studying engineering and, so far, I wasn't interested in any of my classes, except English. I particularly enjoyed the theatrical aspect of learning how to create a new persona in a new language, writing with a strange sense of abandon meandering, surreal compositions about my first impressions of San Francisco:

It isn't a city, really. More like a movie set with perfectly domesticated hills. Quaint houses and rushed pedestrians with bad posture. Everybody walks fast because it's chilly and the streets are made only for the weird, the crazy and the homeless. San Francisco is like a bride always in a rush to meet with her prince charming who has just arrived and has plans to leave soon. In San Francisco there are no San Franciscans...

What was most surprising to me was to get rewarded for my "creativity." My compositions had more red corrections than the eye could bear, but Ms. Yamamoto never forgot to stress, "What a keen eye for detail you have! What an unusual way of portraying a city!"

Back at "home," I would tell Doris about Ms. Yamamoto's high opinion of my English compositions. I would also tell her about my San Francisco adventures, my block-by-block discoveries that were the basis for what I wrote as she listened to me as if I were talking about a city from a different planet. I also told her I'd met "this girl in the park." I didn't mention she was black, of course. I told Earl about her, too, also avoiding the black part. I don't know if I had a keen sense for detail, as Ms. Yamamoto claimed, but I did have an acute sense of what is allowed and not allowed in a household. You could say that was the first thing I'd learned in my life. In any case, Earl was truly happy for me and taught me how to drive, and I got my drivers' license so I could borrow his car and have her naked in

my arms in no time, as he'd promised. "Why do you think I drive an Impala, man? It's all that space. We, Americans, like space. Lots of it. Especially girls."

Meanwhile, hoping against hopelessness to run into her again, I kept going to Linda Park, made friends with the other tennis players and never missed a chance to ask them about "the girl with the big Afro."

Doug, the di facto president of the Linda Park Tennis Club and soon to be my best doubles partner, said she was his niece's best friend. "Yeah, they were the stars of their high school's team. They kicked some serious ass, those two. Yeah, I used to coach them, but they really needed no coaching. They know more about tennis than me or anybody in this park." Then he added as if warning me, "Her father, by the way, is sort of a legendary dude. He's one of the few black cops in San Francisco, which means in the entire country. Yeah, he's gotta be one big tough son of a bitch."

Maria, who was French and also liked to partner with me in doubles, said she knew her mother. "She was my daughter's third grade teacher. She's really cool."

"Who?"

"The mother. I only know the mother, Miriam. Good tennis player. Serve and volley type. She's raised Yana all by her herself. Enzoa, the father, was and is too busy being the toughest cop in the world and the biggest Casanova in the city. I can't blame him, though. He's totally outnumbered by racist Irish and Italian homeboys. And talk about handsome. Ooh-la-la."

Benito, better known as "the Fisherman from Manila," the most generous sharing whatever he had in his cooler, limited himself to say, "I see you have good taste, young

man.” Carlos, from Mexico, added, “We all have good taste when it comes to Yana, don’t we?” Which worked as an invitation for everyone to air their opinion about “the girl with the Black Power Afro” as Ludmilla, “the Russian Billie Jean King,” called her.

By the time Yana and I finally met again, it’s fair to say I knew almost too much about her, that is too much to pretend I didn’t, although I’m not sure it was wise of me to boast about it the minute we started talking to each other.

“So you’re a private detective or something?”

“Kind of.”

“I see. And what else have you found out about me?”

“I’d rather keep that to myself,” I said as if I had suddenly realized that my best weapon against her was to play it as mysteriously as I could.

We were warming up, feeling each other out the way tennis players do before a match. It was an unusually windless morning, which only made the emotional undercurrents pulling and pushing us in different directions more palpable.

“Did you find out how many boyfriends I’ve had too?”

“I didn’t ask about that.”

“Really? Out of shyness, I suppose.”

“Maybe out of respect.”

“Wow, you’re really serious about this, aren’t you? Would you mind telling me your name for starters?”

“Henry.”

“Bullshit. What’s your real name?”

“Enrique, but Henry’s better. I mean most people don’t know how to say my name.”

“How can you compromise about something so personal? You don’t mess around with your name unless you also want to mess with your identity, you know. Enrique’s got so much more character. You don’t look like a Henry anyway.”

“How do Henrys look?”

“Not like you.”

“Well, you don’t look like a Yana either.”

“I see we have a real battle now.”

The warm up was over. We began to play “for real.” She beat me effortlessly in straight sets. Six-one, six-one. I only got those two solitary points because she let me have them so I wouldn’t feel too embarrassed.

“Now you have to buy me a beer,” she said as she passed me the Gatorade. “But since I don’t drink, you better get me a joint. I’m a pothead when it comes to celebrating.”

“I’m a pothead too,” I said, aware that smoking a few times with Earl didn’t really make me one, but truth is malleable, I thought, especially in wars. And this was the first true war I was confronted with in my life.

Seven in the morning. Once, maybe twice a week, no matter how cold, windy or foggy, we met at Linda Park. After a month or so, I managed to win a set from her. Elated, I ventured to lightly touch her hand as we sat sharing a root beer, which tasted like cough medicine to me. Root beer and cream soda were, by far, the most exotic and not necessarily pleasant flavors I’d tasted in America. In fact, you could say my first giant step toward becoming an American began when root beer didn’t taste so awful anymore. Although if we’re going to talk real acculturation, nothing can compete with playing tennis at Linda Park. Here was

where my uncertain accent, my colossal cultural ignorance, my absolute lack of interest in engineering, the brown hue of my skin, my boisterous teenage immaturity, all of it was at best incidental to the quality and honesty of my game. I don't think I ever expected to feel so welcomed and accepted by strangers, to be ushered into America with so little fuss.

Ironically, Yana preferred to play "before the usual suspects arrive with the beer, the joints, the guacamole and chips and the whole circus," as she liked to say.

"And you like it this way because... you... don't like the other players?"

"Naahh. I'm just not into being a *tennis player* anymore. I don't want tennis to define my identity or rule my life like it did in high school. Now I play only when I feel like it. I got too many other things going on in my life."

"Like what?"

"Like helping the revolution," she said teasingly. "There's serious shit going on out there, you know, shit worth fighting for or against." Then, to make her point clearer or just more all encompassing, she added, "I'm not sure I'm into babysitting, okay? I mean explaining what's going on and taking you by the hand to help you cross the street and all that shit. I'm not sure I'm the right person. You know what I mean?"

"Hey, I've been crossing the streets by my myself with no problem, Yana. I don't need that kind of help."

"I was talking metaphorically, okay? I mean you're a total recent arrival and I'm not sure I can deal with that now. Do you get it?"

I did. And it hurt. At that moment it hurt so much, in fact, I promised never to forgive her. I wasn't asking her to be my chaperone or whatever she wanted to call it. And just when I'd lost any hope for *us*, she mentioned she had just started going to San Francisco State. Suddenly, an entire new universe for us to share opened in front of us and altered, if

not the substance, for sure the tone of our exclusively tennis-oriented affair. It also made me realized how desperately I'd been holding onto to those early morning encounters as one holds on to some floating device in the wake of a shipwreck. And now that tennis was no longer the only common ground between us, maybe, yes, maybe *we* had a chance.

Past the ping pong freaks, then (mostly Asian guys striking the ball with extremely twisted styles and martial-art screams), past the soap opera addicts (mostly Black girls crunching popcorn while painting their nails), past the nerds (antisocial, solemn faces and towers of books around them: it was 1971, personal computers were yet to revolutionize the world in general and the world of nerds in particular), past the stoners (pontificating and speculating a la Kerouac mixed with Eldridge Cleaver, Che Guevara with Bob Dylan, Marvin Gay with Allen Ginsberg, Janis Joplin with Joni Mitchell), in fact, right next to them, we found our niche inside the student union's remotest corridors and halls.

Yana usually brought a joint with her, or more typically a friend, Clancy, tall, muscular, kiss-assly devoted to providing her with any amount of pot she needed. There was also Amoura, as tall and physically imposing as Clancy and as committed to meet her demand for pot, but for the most part it was just Clancy, who obviously had a crush on her, although he pretended to be interested in talking only politics—code talk, race-obsessed talk, neo-Colonial lingo with revolutionary attitude. “Important stuff,” she'd say, which I interpreted as her way of making me feel irrelevant, perhaps the main reason now I remember so much the rain (as if it were always raining) and the intimate sense of solace enveloping Yana and me during those few afternoons when it was just the two of us, the

smoke coming out of our mouths, fogging up the tiny slice of gray, wet sky filtering through a tiny window we claimed our own.

“So what’re you gonna do?”

“Don’t know.”

“Well, you obviously need to think of an alternative to engineering, right?”

“Right.”

“How about undeclared, like me.”

“I’m not sure I have that option as a foreign student.”

“Then come to my Malcolm X class. Maybe you’ll like it. Take a La Raza class. You can be an Ethnic Studies major, can’t you?”

“What’s La Raza?”

“You don’t know what La Raza Studies is? Jesus, Henry.”

“And what raza are we talking about?”

“I’m not going to explain that to you, okay? There are things you gotta figure out for yourself. And there are no shortcuts. You gotta pay your dues as an immigrant, you know.”

“I’m not an immigrant.”

“What’re you then?”

“A foreign student. Although, yeah, maybe quitting engineering means becoming an immigrant because I don’t think my parents will approve of that. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you wanna be a politician or something?”

“I don’t know what I wanna be, Henry. Why do you think I’m an undeclared?”

“So you want to study everything?”

“Well, I’m taking photography, Shakespeare, Malcolm X, like I told you, and human sexuality.”

“Why do you to study human sexuality?”

“Because sex and power are indelibly linked and you can find out some interesting shit when you approach sex in relationship to the power structure.”

“Power structure?”

“Yes, Henry, it might sound like Russian to you, but maybe that’s exactly what you need to study next semester jus to catch up with me.”

“And then I can grow an Afro and be part of your Black Power Club...”

“Sorry to tell you this, honey, but you’ll never be part of the club no matter how big an Afro you grow.”

“Not even if I told you my grandmother was black?”

“Not even. You’re just not black enough.”

“You mean I don’t look black.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, when you see me naked, you’ll see my black side.”

“Jesus, Henry, that sounded like some seriously weird come-on line: *when you see me naked...* You got some serious Latin macho chutzpa, brown boy.”

“Chutzpa?”

“Yeah, chutzpa. And no. I’m not fucking explaining what it means.”

Yana lived with Tammy and Marty on a second story flat in a blue Victorian house on Capp Street. “All nice Jewish girls,” she liked to say with a touch of evil.

Tammy was so blond she looked albino. She had tattooed on her right forearm her father's concentration-camp number and couldn't stand even the mention of the word German. She studied "History with a capital H" at USF and worked in a photocopy store in the Castro. Marty was big and solid like a door, had striking blue eyes, Asian features, wanted to be a psychologist and worked as a waitress in an upscale Japanese restaurant with Yana. I could never figure out if Marty got Yana the job or if it was the other way around. Tammy and Marty, by the way, were ostensibly more patient with my cultural ignorance than Yana.

Fittingly, Marty and Tammy (not Yana) were the ones who first took pity on me and suggested I sleep on the couch, in the living room, the nights I was too stoned to walk the ten blocks to my "Puerto Rican Island" at two or three in the morning. That's how my incorporation into the Mission's Jewish Intelligentsia as a token Latin goy began, although I had no idea what intelligentsia, goy or Jewish meant at the time. I was simply genuinely honored to be included—no matter how marginal and often untenable my position in their highly exclusive club felt. Then after a few months of almost uninterrupted living-room camping on my part, the three of them realized that "it made more economic sense" for me to move in and actually pay rent. The house, like a true Victorian relic, was long enough to accommodate the living room inside the dining room.

Two months later, Yana's cousin Jackie and her two Dobermans came to stay with us and that was it. I shamelessly took advantage of her "unexpected" visit and offered my room to Jackie and her dogs. Somehow I trusted that Yana would let me move into her room temporarily. It was a sneaky move on my part, no doubt, but even Yana had to admit that it was timely. By then, as she would say without any awareness of how funny she sounded pretending to be a most prudish California señorita, "The heavy petting between is just getting too out of control, you know."

It was time, yes, to do something about it.

“This is a very temporary arrangement, though, very temporary, okay?” she made that clear from the start.

From the start, too, it was remarkably clear that Jackie was staying with us for a finite but undetermined amount of time. She didn't believe in what she called “the industrial time of clocks and calendars and all that shit.” She also didn't believe “in the future.” In other words, she didn't believe in letting anybody know when was she going to leave as she didn't let Yana or anybody know that she was coming to stay with them (us).

“It won't be for too long, though. So don't get used to my bed, okay? I give her a month at the most. She's gotta be constantly on the move. She's the family gipsy.”

Personally, more than a gipsy, she seemed to me not that different from so many women in their late twenties and early thirties I had seen walking the streets of San Francisco as if stuck in their hippie days, unable or unwilling to move on. Appropriately, she drove a multicolored VW van that reeked of weed and dog breath, and wore only traditional Peruvian-looking skirts and sweaters, one on top of the other, six, seven layers of them, which made sense, I supposed, since she was coming from Oregon and it was January. She also wore a pair of impressive, hardcore hiking boots that, she said, “never got wet.”

Coming from Peru myself, one could think Jackie and I and were destined to strike an instant friendship. Our conceptions and ideas of Peru, however, happened to be so blatantly irreconcilable that I soon discovered I was living not only next door to my most unorthodox sentimental benefactor, the miraculous Gipsy who'd finally made it possible for Yana and me to sleep together, but also to my worst enemy. Yes, I had an enemy who wore how-Peruvian-you-could-be outfits and was in a constant state of shock because I wore jeans, t-shirts and a hoodie. From her perspective, I was a sellout, a traitor to my Peruvian

roots, a moral insult to my culture. From my perspective, she was the queen of cultural appropriation and a very cynical one, although at the time I didn't have the vocabulary to define her in those terms. All I felt at the time was an incommunicable dislike for the way she flaunted all those Peruvian garments and pronounced herself "Jewish-Peruvian," claiming that during an ayahuasca ritual in the outskirts of Portland, "My God, I could see my real aura, and it was totally Peruvian, you know. Totally."

And when I questioned or in some off-hand way made fun of her Peruvian-ness, her favorite response was to express her most outraged contempt toward me, often saying things like, "You know, you have a very confused male aura," which was her way of saying, according to Yana, that I was a total asshole.

She also liked to say I had no appreciation for my culture and made fun of me for adopting Henry as my name. In fact, she believed that my adoption of Henry was no better than her adoption of Peru as her "spiritual country." And I remember one evening screaming at her, "You mean you want me to walk around in a poncho and alpaca hat and speak, if not in Quechua, in Shaman just so you can certify my authenticity?"

I could hear Yana laughing at me from her room. My duel with Jackie was "funny" to her and she didn't want any part on it. "I'm not mediating between you two, guys, okay?" To her credit, though, she was nothing short of understanding of my "Peruvian nightmare." Her favorite way of consoling me was to tell me about how her cousin had driven Marty and Tammy "up the wall, you know. So don't take it personally, please. Just consider yourself lucky you're not her brother or cousin, okay?"

It wasn't her default mode, but she could be awfully sweet, which was all I expected in our first night in bed together—all tucked in because it was winter and the Jewish Intelligentsia didn't believe in spending money in heating—while we talked about her cousin

Jackie with great detail probably because it was the perfect distraction from our “accumulated sexual repression,” as we lied naked next to each other. Let’s blame, why not?, our combined, cruelly postponed sexual desire for how awkward we felt in bed together. After so much postponement, our biggest fear was that sex could only turn out to be a fiasco, “a disaster of orgasmic proportions.” So anything to keep us distracted from the fact that now was the time to go for it any distraction was more than welcomed, especially talking about cousin Jackie.

“I guess now you know a bit more about my Jewish side of the family.”

“You mean you got more cousins like her?”

“I got plenty of colorful characters from both sides, really. But she’s, by far, one of the most out there. I mean I don’t think she’s lived a regular life, meaning pay rent, have a job, go to school and that kind of stuff since probably high school.”

“How does she make a living?”

I could feel Yana’s physical caution. Maybe I should say I could smell it on her breath, on her body and the tension emanating from her pelvis, in the way she stayed close but not too close.

“She trains dogs. She’s like a dog whisperer or something. Don’t you see how well behaved those dogs are? They don’t even breathe if she doesn’t tell them to. She’s amazing with animals. She’s always been that way.”

“And your mother is...”

“My mother is her mother’s younger sister. Jackie has a younger sister, Beatriz. I don’t know her that well, despite the fact that we’re closer in age. We just never got along. I think she’s a bit of a racist, to tell you the truth. She’s like ashamed to have a black cousin. She would never say it to my face, of course.”

“Well, my mother’s ashamed of her black mother. I don’t know if that makes you feel any better.”

“Why?”

“Well, my mother’s white, almost blond. She came out looking like my grandfather, who I never met. I only heard stories about him. Apparently he was Irish or English.”

“So she passed for white.”

“Is that how you say it?”

“Yeah, passing. That’s the term in English. What is it in Spanish?”

“I don’t think there is one.”

“That’s funny. Anyway, it was very popular to pass here up until ten years ago or so. I think the Civil Right Movement sort of change that. Maybe not. Historically, anyway, passing is like the other side of minstrel.”

“Minstrel?”

“That’s when singers, white and black, used to paint their faces black to make fun of black people. It was big until the fifties, I think. Some people say rock’n roll is a form of minstrel. Actually, most of American pop music can be seen as a form of minstrel.”

“Well, all I can say is that my mother dedicated her life to be as white as she can. Shit, my mother’s even ashamed of her big butt. I mean the only time you’d suspect she’s not really white is when she dances. She can really shake that booty.”

“What’s her name?”

“My mother’s?”

“Yes, silly, who else?”

“America.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. A-mé-ri-ca. And it’s funny how only now I’m beginning to see what an unusual name she has and what an unusual woman she is. Like I’m looking at her not as my mom, just a person, and it’s kind of creepy. Maybe it’s helped to hear you talk about all this race and cultural stuff. Maybe it’s also because for the first time I’m around people who aren’t ashamed of being Black or Jewish or whatever they happen to be... I mean I’ve never thought I’d be in a situation where I’d like to be more Black than I am, for example.”

Our faces were almost touching. My hand couldn’t resist caressing her shoulders, compact, wiry, melting perfectly into the defined triceps; then my hand going up her neck: long, solid, flexible, which was probably why she carried her enormous Afro so elegantly. And now she was leaning on the pillow, looking at me as if for the first time, and I moved my hand from her shoulder, to her back and then her inner thigh. And she didn’t push me back. Her hands, actually, grabbed my ass with total impunity and pressed it hard against her.