

Willy Lizarraga, *Black & White Isn't Necessarily Gray*

Black & White Isn't Necessarily Gray

The Ball. Back and forth. 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 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. She wasn't even sweating. She mixed up her shots with absolute control – forehands, backhands, serves, volleys, always hitting the wall at 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

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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 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. I had discovered it a few days before, hidden away, protected from the wind currents, boasting friendly tennis players talking and laughing next to red and blue coolers filled with beer and soda, ice cream, watermelon, and something totally new to me, guacamole and chips.

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 afflicted by an untreatable form of nostalgia. She missed her tropical island as one misses a vital organ, a limb. She never got tired of warning me about getting

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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, man," as he passed me a joint. "And don't get involved if you see a man beating a woman on these streets, especially if they're black. Sometimes, though, it's better to fight and get your ass kicked than to run away."

Often, Earl and I played 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, which was all I cared to do as an eighteen-year-old, fresh arrival to San Francisco.

In any case, where was Earl 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 dark, 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, then, 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 and barely caught 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, focused, stern, round eyes; 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 as I could, hoping to run into her. I had nothing better to do, anyway.

It was my first semester studying engineering and, so far, I wasn't interested in any of my classes, except English. I enjoyed the theatrical aspect of learning how to create a new persona in a new language; although what I enjoyed the most was writing nonsensical 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, pedestrians in a hurry. Nobody really hangs out on the street. And if they do, they tend to be crazy, homeless or both.

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San Francisco is like a fairy-tale bride, dressed in black, anxious to meet her prince charming, also dressed in black, who has just arrived and will leave soon. In San Francisco there are no San Franciscans.

My compositions had more red corrections than the eye could bear, yet Ms. Florence Chu never forgot to reward me for my "creativity."

"What a keen eye for detail you have! What an unusual way of portraying a city!" She'd write in the margins.

Back at home, I would tell Doris about Ms. Chu's high opinion of my English compositions. I would also tell her about my block-by-block discoveries that were the basis for what I wrote, and she would listen to me as if I were describing a city from a different planet.

I also told her about meeting "this girl in the park." I didn't mention she was black. 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. Chu claimed, but I did have an acute sense of what is allowed and not allowed in a household. In any case, Earl was excited for me. He showed me how to drive and lent me his car to take the driver's license test. He insisted a car was really all I needed to get any girl I wanted.

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"And any time you need it, you know, you can have it, man. Satisfaction guaranteed. It's all that space inside. Americans are crazy about space. Especially girls."

I made friends with a few tennis players at Linda Park and asked them about "the girl with the giant Afro."

Doug, the di facto president of the Linda Park Tennis Club, said she was his niece's best doubles partner

"They were like the stars of their high school's team. I used to coach them, but they really needed no coaching. They know more about tennis than me or anybody in this park." Then, as if warning me, he added, "Her father, by the way, is sort of a famous dude. He's one of the few black detectives in San Francisco, maybe in California. And you know what that means, right? He's gotta be one big, tough son of a bitch."

Maria, who was French and liked to partner with me in doubles, said she knew her mother. "She was my daughter's third grade teacher. Good tennis player. Serve and volley type. She's raised Yanna all by her herself, you know, 'cause the father, well, he's too busy being the toughest cop in the world and the biggest Casanova in town. I can't say I blame him. Talk about handsome. Oooh la la."

Benito, better known as "the Fisherman from Manila," always sharing whatever he had in his cooler, limited himself to say, "I see you have good taste, young man." And Carlos, from Mexico, added, "We all have good taste when it comes to the girl with the Black Power Afro, don't we?" Which worked as an invitation for everyone to air their opinion about her and her promising tennis resumé.

All this to say that by the time Yanna and I finally met again, I knew almost too much about her not to boast about it, which was probably my first unforgivable mistake.

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 more palpable.

"So you're like a private detective or something?"

"Kind of."

"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.

"Did you find out how many boyfriends I've had too?"

"I didn't ask about that."

"Really? Out of shyness, I suppose."

"More like out of respect."

"Wow, you're really serious about this, aren't you? Would you mind telling me your name for starters, then?"

"Henry."

"Bullshit. What's your real name?"

"Enrique, but people call me Henry."

"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 like?"

"Not like you."

"Well, you don't look like a Yanna either."

The warm-up was over. We began to play "for real." She beat me effortlessly in straight sets. Six-love, six-one. I only got that solitary point because she let me have it 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, especially in wars. And this one was, as far as I was concerned, the first true war I wanted to be part of.

Seven in the morning. Once, maybe twice, sometimes three times a week, no matter how cold, windy or foggy, Yanna and I 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 medicine to me – taste-wise, though, cream soda had to be the most challenging of all American sodas I tried with Yanna. I was determined to learn the American way, though. And since everything was new to me, I had to taste and see it all to form an informed opinion. Linda Park was, in this sense, where my American education truly began.

I had landed in a place where my South American accent, my colossal cultural ignorance, my absolute lack of interest in engineering, the brown hue of my skin, my boisterous, teenage immaturity didn't matter, at least in comparison to the quality and honesty of my game. In fact, I don't think I ever expected to feel so welcomed and accepted by strangers, to be ushered into a new world with so little fuzz.

Curiously, Yanna preferred to play "before the usual suspects arrive with the beer, the guacamole and chips and the whole circus."

"And this is because... you don't like those guys?"

"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. I got too many other things going on in my life."

"Like what?"

"Like helping the revolution," she said teasingly.

And probably seeing the blank expression on my face, she felt the need to add, "There's serious shit going on out there, you know, shit worth fighting for, not to mention all the shit to fight against."

Then, as if to make sure I wasn't nourishing false expectations about the two of us, she said, "I'm not sure I'm into babysitting, okay? I mean explaining what's going on, taking you by the hand to help you cross the street and all that shit. I'm just not the right person for that, okay?"

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

"I was talking metaphorically, okay? You're a total recent arrival, which is cool, but I don't want to deal with that now. Do you get it?"

I did. And it hurt. In fact, it hurt so much, I promised never to forgive her. Then, just when I'd lost any hope for "us," she mentioned she was going to San Francisco State.

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Unexpectedly, an entire new horizon opened in front of us, altering, if not the substance, certainly the tone of our war.

Thus we went from the tennis courts to past the ping pong freaks, 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 pale-faces, barricading themselves behind towers of books; past the stoners, pontificating a la Kerouac mixed with Eldridge Cleaver, Che Guevara, Bob Dylan, Marvin Gay, Allen Ginsberg, Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell; in fact, right next to them, we found our niche inside the student union's remotest corridors and halls. And now the "we" included a few of Yanna's friends, more typically one 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 demands for pot. For the most part, though, it was just Clancy, who obviously had a crush on her, although he was careful to talk only politics in my presence, code talk, race-obsessed talk, post-Colonial, revolutionary lingo with attitude.

"Important stuff," Yanna would say, which I interpreted as her way of making me feel irrelevant, which might be the reason now I remember so keenly the rain, as if it were always raining in San Francisco State, and the intimate sense of solace enveloping Yanna 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 in "our corner" of the student union.

"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. There are no

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shortcuts. You gotta pay your fucking dues as an immigrant. That's just how it is."

"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?"

"What do you want to be?"

"I don't know, Henry. Why do you think I'm undeclared?"

"You want to study everything, then?"

"Well, I'm taking History of the Russian Revolution, Shakespeare, Malcolm X, like I told you, and Human Sexuality. Does that give you a clue?"

"Human sexuality? Does it mean you actually have sex in class?"

"No, silly. We study sex in relation to power and how they're indelibly linked. It's a really cool class, taught by a woman who just loves to defy the entire power structure."

"Power structure?"

"Yes, Henry, it might sound like Russian to you, but maybe Human Sexuality with Ms. Altena Brown is exactly what you need to study next semester just to catch up with me."

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"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 that club no matter how big an Afro you grow."

"Not even if I told you my grandmother was black?"

"Not even."

"'Cause I don't look black enough?"

"Yup."

"Well, when you see me naked, you'll see my black side."

"Wow, dude, that was 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."

Yanna lived with Tami and Marty on a second story flat in a blue Victorian house on Capp and 17th Street, an area uniquely endowed with "the most colorful whores in town," as Tami would explain to me during the first minutes after we met.

I was impressed by the insouciant, ironic way Tami talked, although I was more impressed by her ultra-blond, albino-Rasta looks, her golden, almost translucent dreads creating an

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intricate, dreamy landscape covering her fine, delicate features.

She looked otherworldly, a look, I figured, she'd worked long and hard to create helped and that se buttressed with long, shapeless, sleeveless black dresses that gave her a Gothic, nineteenth century appearance and the chance to display her father's concentration-camp number tattooed to both arms.

She also wore thick, dark-frame glasses, which provided her with a nerdy, birdy elegance, like a bookish stork or flamingo.

Marty was the opposite, big and solid like a door; her dark, thick, straight Asian hair flowing at all directions all the time, her tanned complexion making her light-blue eyes stand out so much she didn't need to talk.

"My eyes do the talking for me," as she liked to say.

And her silence, yes, was nothing like Yanna's or Tami's. It didn't make you feel uncomfortable. There was no agenda behind it. When she had something to say, she'd just say it with discreet, natural economy, as when she said to me as I was about to leave their house after our first meeting, "Yanna and I work together at this Japanese restaurant, you know. That's how we met. We're the Tokyo Dream girls."

In future visits, I'd learn that, unlike Yanna, Tami and Marty didn't seem to mind the enormity of my cultural ignorance. I'd even say they found me "sort of amusing." Probably for the same reason, they were the ones, certainly not Yanna, who took pity on me, letting me sleep in the guest room whenever I was too stoned, or it was just too late to walk safely the ten blocks or so to my Puerto Rican Island.

That's how I became part of the household. That's how too I found out how it is to feel totally at home away from home, which in practical terms meant that I was sleeping in the guestroom almost every night, which, thanks once again to Tami and Marty, led to my official inclusion as a roommate. As Tami put it with flawless logic, "You might as well start paying rent, dude."

Now, I'm not sure for how long Yanna and I would've remained strictly roommates and kind of platonic lovers, but hardly a month after moving in, Yanna's cousin Jackie and her two Dobermans came to stay with us, and I shamelessly took advantage of the "unexpected" visit to offer my room to Jackie and her dogs.

Somehow I trusted, I suppose, that Yanna would let me move into her room temporarily. It was a sneaky move on my part, but even Yanna had to admit I had an "excellent sense of timing." Or

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better yet, "Might as well admit that the heavy petting is getting ridiculously out of control, right? So let's get the fucking sex out of the way."

Before I moved into her room, though, she wanted me to understand, that this was a very, very, very temporary arrangement, although she had no idea for how long.

"Well, nobody really knows," she explained. "With Jackie, you never know. She says she doesn't believe in clocks and calendars and all that shit."

Then she warned me, in case I was running too ahead of myself, "It won't be for long, though. I assure you. 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."

Interestingly, surreally, and memorably unexpectedly, Jackie would turn to be the most intractable nemesis in my new life. I just had no idea how to deal with someone who, in her radical-hippie posture, believed herself to be "spiritually Peruvian," choosing to wear as uniform exclusively traditional Peruvian skirts and sweaters, one on top of the other, six, seven layers of them, which made sense, I supposed, for someone coming from Oregon and considering it was January.

She also believed she didn't have to wash her clothes, or herself because "that's how people live in the Peruvian highlands, you know." In any case, with Jackie's arrival, "there were too many Peruvians for one household," as Tami liked to say. And to make things even more histrionic, our conceptions and ideas of Peru 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 me to sleep with Yanna, but also my worst enemy.

The fact is I really couldn't compete with her in Peruvian-ness. In her own unique way, she was more Peruvian than all Peruvians put together. But what perhaps was the most challenging aspect of her to live with was that she had nothing but spite for me because I wore mostly tennis shorts, t-shirts and, when it was extremely cold and wet, a hoodie. 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, but at the time I didn't have the vocabulary or the cross-cultural expertise to define her in those terms. All I felt at the time was an incommunicable dislike for the way she flaunted her Peruvian garments and her "Peruvian soul," which she'd apparently discovered during an

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ayahuasca ritual in the outskirts of Portland under the guidance of "the sexiest Peruvian shaman I'd ever met."

Now, of all the things that she disliked of me, I'd say my name had to be number one. She fervently believed that her adoption of Peru as her "spiritual country" paled, (in cultural appropriation terms, in comparison to having adopted Henry as a name. And I remember one night, one of the last ones of her visit, both of us screaming at each other, and me yelling her, "You mean you want me to walk around wearing a poncho and a funny Cuzco hat, and speak, if not in Quechua, in Shaman just so you can certify my authenticity?"

And all this while I could hear Yanna giggling at her room. My intractable dilemma with Jackie was "funny" to her. And she wanted no part in it. As she'd put it, "I'm not mediating between you two, okay? You have to learn to deal with your Peruvian shit just like I've to learn to deal with my Black-Jewish-American shit."

To her credit, though, she didn't mind consoling me with stories about how Jackie, in previous visits, had driven Marty and Tami "up the wall, so please don't feel bad about it."

Not surprisingly, during our first times together in Yanna's waterbed, our naked bodies next to each other, Jackie as a

subject of conversation was quite a handy distraction from acknowledging the magnitude of the intimate awkwardness we were experiencing. I mean it was pathetic how physically estranged from each other we seemed, how foolish we appeared now that we were free to act upon our desire, yet as if by having postponed sex for so long, we had unwittingly created such enormous expectations that, no matter what, sex was now doomed to be nothing but a fiasco.

"Well, at least 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 of my family, but she's, by far, the most out there. 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 junior high."

"How does she make a living?"

I could feel Yanna's physical caution. I could smell it on her acrid, metallic breath, on the tension emanating from her pelvis, in the way she remained close but not too close to me.

"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 want them to do that. She's amazing with animals."

"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, even though we're closer in age. We never got along. I think she's a bit of a racist. 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, if that makes you feel any better."

"Really?"

"Yeah, my mother's white, almost blond. She looks like my grandfather, who I never met. I only heard stories about him. He was English or of English descent, something like that."

"So she passes for white?"

"Is that how you say it?"

"Yeah, passing. What is it in Spanish?"

"I don't think there is a word for it."

"That's funny. It was very popular to pass here up until ten years ago or so. Passing is like the opposite of minstrelsy."

"What's that?"

"That's when singers, white and black, used to paint their faces black to make fun of black people. Some people say rock'n roll and most American pop music is a form of minstrelsy."

"Well, my mother would kill herself before painting her face black. She's dedicated her life to be as white as she can. She's even ashamed of her big butt."

"What's her name?"

"America."

"Really?"

"Yeah, although most people call her Ameriquita. It's interesting, you know, how only now that I'm this far away from her and my family I'm beginning to see what an unusual name she has and what an unusual woman she is. Like I'm learning to look at her as a person, independent of me. And I don't think I would've been able to do that by myself. I mean having met you and Tami and Marty really helps. You are the opposite of ashamed of who you are. I mean I've never thought I'd be in a situation where I'd like to be more Black than I am."

Our faces were almost touching. My hand couldn't resist caressing her compact, wiry, shoulders. Then my hand went up her long, solid, ductile neck, the perfect tower for carrying her enormous Afro with outmost elegance.

Yanna was now leaning on her side, her head on the pillow, her Afro transformed into a perfect, dark halo framing her face.

I moved my hand, rather tentatively, from her shoulder to her back and then her inner thigh. She didn't push it back. She didn't look at me as if to warn me, as if to stop me, like so

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many times in the past. Quite the contrary, her round, dark eyes commanded me to go further as she grabbed my ass with absolute impunity and pressed it hard against her.