

And the Living is Easy
By Michael Parra

“David!” Ethan hollered out my open window at his youngest, “Leave that poor cat alone! And Jason, keep your brothers away from the grill. That barbecue is still hot! You hear me?” The careworn father straightened my stack of compact discs with one hand while he scrolled through emails on his Black Berry.

“You’re lucky you never had kids,” he mumbled to Joan, who nodded her head in agreement as she thumbed one of my coffee table books. She finished her Earl Grey with a delicate sip. It was an ironic gesture from a woman who only minutes before had practically inhaled her second helping of cheeseburger, corn on the cob and potato salad.

“When’s Paul getting back?” Joan asked.

I filled her cup and handed her the sugar bowl for the fourth time, though I’m hardly one to count. People in glass houses and that sort of thing...

“Soon,” I ventured, not that I remembered when Paul had left to retrieve his yoga mat. “Find anything interesting in that?” I pointed to the oversized text she held in her hands: Mindfulness - the Awakened Union of Breath, Body and Mind.

“Eh, nothing I haven’t heard before.”

Her claim was credible. Joan might be fat and rusty, but she had experience and expertise on her side: decades of teaching classes, living in an Oregon ashram, trips to India. Joan was the real thing.

Ethan was no slouch himself, though he was a student rather than an instructor. He looked like a yogi or my image of one anyway: thin, loose, and a bit full of himself.

I was the novice in this crowd.

Ethan had pressed me to become a yoga teacher for a long time, ever since he stage managed my amateur dance company. He was a rarity, a stay-at-home Dad. Years ago he worked in Sacramento with an impressive sounding title, assistant something or other to somebody important. Now he was a part-time editor for the Yoga Times. Ethan knew every yoga instructor of significance in the Bay Area.

“Come on Mike,” he used to nudge me, “you’re perfect for it. All those years of ballet and teaching group exercise classes. You’re a natural.”

He hadn’t mentioned my teaching prowess lately. The last couple of times Ethan and I got together, our conversation focused on his circumstances, not mine. Dissatisfaction ran through his chatter like the errant thread of an unraveling tapestry: his three sons, the costly renovation of his home in a scenic and upscale but monotonous suburb of Marin County, and the yawning gulf between him and his high powered, bank executive, wife.

Joan tossed one book and picked up another. She hooked a delinquent ribbon of hair behind an ear. Her formerly auburn curls had grown back straight and grey.

“These are good Michael...pretty heady stuff though. It’s all philosophy, no technique. When are you going to roll up your sleeves and learn the postures?”

I moved from chair to floor so that I could sit closer to her, and spread my legs into a wide, straddle split, almost 180 degrees.

"I think the asana part will come easily to me."

"How about you Joanie?" Ethan asked as he retrieved a Handiwipe from his jeans and disinfected the lip of a beer bottle, "When are you going to get back in front of a class? What's it been...five years, six?"

Joan reached for a napkin and mopped perspiration from her brow. She had overdressed for the unusually balmy San Francisco summer evening. Her thin cardigan couldn't possibly hide her bulk, but she repositioned the fabric with as much grace as she could muster before responding to Ethan's question.

"Actually, next month it'll be eight years since I last taught, eight years since the surgery. I'm thinking about doing something this fall though, maybe just once a week at the Community Center. It's a lovely spot, overlooking the Pacific, especially out on the deck." Joan sagged as she said this, as though the accumulated pounds of what-might-have-been had conspired with age to lodge precisely atop her collarbones.

"How lucky for your neighbors," I said in my best cheerleader voice.

"Which day of the week will you teaching? Maybe I could drive out to Muir Beach after work at the Bay Club."

Ethan nodded enthusiastically, "Yeah, maybe I could come too. I think they have childcare there."

"Hold on guys. Let's just see how it goes later with the four of us. It may take both of your help plus Paul to get me into some of the positions."

Ethan fell back onto my couch so hard he rattled the furniture. Samuel Adams sloshed.

"Hey Buddy, I don't care about wasted beer, but don't you dare spill on my good sofa."

"No worries Mike, I know a thing or two about cleaning up spills." He flourished another Handiwipe and smiled at the open window and the joyous squeals of his young boys. Just then the pitch and volume in the yard drew him to attention.

"John! Put that down! Now! I mean it! Jason, take that bottle from your brother. It's dangerous. Yes, thank you. Now put it away."

This time Ethan grabbed hold of his beer before sinking back into place.

"Can you believe those darn kids? They were spraying the cat with lighter fluid."

"If one of them did that to my cat, I'd have that boy's head on a platter," Joan scolded as she scooped a guacamole loaded corn chip to her lips.

"What?" Ethan snarled.

"Spare the rod, spoil the child," she quoted.

Ethan narrowed his eyes. I interjected before a fight broke out.

"Rufus isn't my cat. He's so adorable that I pet him even though I'm allergic; but he belongs to the guys next door."

Ethan would not be placated, "Is Paul going to give us class or will we be in Joan's, uh, *DISCIPLINED* hands?"

Joan abandoned the second half of her chip and glared at him long enough to make him reach for his beer again.

"Excuse me," she said standing, "I think I'll step outside and have a smoke. You relax," she added, fanning a palm at Ethan. "Let a woman do the work. *I'LL* check on the children."

"You know Ethan," I told him once Joan trundled out the door, "sometimes you can be a real shit."

"Well, where does she get off telling me how to raise my kids?"

"Ethan, she wasn't telling you..."

"I mean look, she doesn't have any of her own. She's never even been married. She spends all her time lounging on Muir Beach with a box of chocolates."

"That's unfair," I whispered, hoping to quiet him down. The window was wide open. I could hear Joan and the boys tempting Rufus with left over barbecued chicken. "Joan's not lazy, depressed maybe; but she works hard. She designs web sites from home."

"Well she should prop her lab top on the handle bars of a stationary bike once in while."

"She's in pain Ethan. It hurts her knees to exercise."

"We're all in pain Michael. Some of us hide it better than others; but nobody gets off easy. You'd know that if you had kids, so would Joanie. 'Spare the rod' my ass; *SHE'S* the one who needs to show a little self-restraint! Did you see how much she ate?"

"Okay, okay...but you know...there isn't much joy for her these days except food. Ever since the operation and Victor's death, it's just been her, the cat and her work. Her computer became her best companion."

"What was her surgery for?"

"Ovarian cancer...there were complications. She was laid up for a long time."

"Speaking of *LAI*D, when do you think was the last time she got some? You'd think that would be sufficient motivation for a diet."

"Well, after a long enough drought a sameness sets in. You kind of get accustomed to going without."

"Really, how would you know?" he smirked.

"I'm guessing. I bet it's a lot like being married with children."

"Ouch!"

"Anyway, I wish I could think of something important enough to lend her a sense of urgency, a deadline for change. She was a beauty, you know."

"Michael, maybe her glorious past is part of the problem. How are we supposed to compete with our own youth? I think about how I use to love hob knobbing with big time politicians in Sacramento. Man, those were great times. Now...well; all you're left with is the realization that you're not what you once were."

"Tell me about it! The older I get, the better I used to dance. I know Joan longs for a return to teaching, and that she's sensitive to criticism about her

relatively inactive life.” I gathered the empty plates Ethan had stacked. “These days she lives a routine of unfulfilled potential. Can you imagine that?”

Ethan slowly dampened a napkin and patted corn chip crumbs off my coffee table.

“Hey Mike, do you have anything for dessert?”

“Sure, I bought some praline and chocolate ice cream sandwiches. I think they’re in the freezer upstairs. I’ll be right back.”

As I ascended the spiral staircase to the kitchen, I heard the front door close. I rummaged past bags of frozen chicken parts and mini pizzas, touched by Ethan’s heartfelt apology to Joan.

“No worries Ethan,” I could hear the grin in her voice, “but expect to hold some of tonight’s poses a very, very long time.”

“Hey folks,” I hollered as I stomped down the metal stairs, “I know I bought ice cream, but I don’t remem...oh, Joan, you found them.”

“Uh-huh,” she said ready to take another bite, “they’re in the ice chest outside under the table.”

“That’s great. Would you like another?”

Both of them nodded an embarrassed yes. Once outside, I heard Joan lower her voice, so I kept my ear close to the window.

“Ethan,” she said after swallowing, “why do you think Michael has waited so long to get into yoga instruction? He’s over fifty you know.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy isn’t it? I’ve been bugging him to do this forever. I think it’s mostly a matter of money. Teacher certification isn’t cheap, and he’s been burned before...all those years he spent as a starving artist. Poverty got him by the short hairs.”

“Well how about you Ethan? Money isn’t a problem for you. You’ve got a nice set up, all the resources to make a change, or are you happy at home?”

Little David pulled at my shirttails and pointed to Rufus. The cat was darting around the yard in futile pursuit of a green and red hummingbird. The unsuspecting prey was too obsessed with my trumpet vine blossoms to even consider the attention of a predator below. I peeled foil off the individually wrapped dessert sandwiches and parceled them out to the miniature, waving fingers of Ethan’s three sons.

“I don’t know Joanie. I’ve still got connections in the mayor’s office, so I could get back into the game, but now I’ve got my boys. It’s complicated.”

“Life does get convoluted as one ages. I was nineteen when Victor and I met at the ashram. Our routine was pretty much reduced to essentials, the simple life. When we set off on our great, worldly adventure we thought that we had it all figured out. I was a chubby one hundred thirty-three when we arrived in New Delhi. The trip was supposed to be inspirational, but I was nauseous and going to the bathroom all the time. I dropped fifteen pounds the first week. I felt awful but I looked good, well thin anyway. I thought it was the food. It never occurred to me that I might be pregnant. I miscarried on a jam-packed train, half-way to Nepal. Travel didn’t appeal to me much after that. Once you’ve learned to step carefully it’s hard to let go and leap.”

“Yeah, even if life is less than ideal, at least at home you’re no longer afraid.”

“Or alone.”

I stood with my head cocked towards the gaping window and watched the kids tease the cat in the fading light. The garden accent spots had yet to snap on. Only the moon and the glow of the barbecue embers lit the yard.

“I’ll tell you something about getting older Ethan. You start to see the end of your road, the years remaining. No, don’t make a face. It’s not depressing really. It’s just...you think twice about starting something new, or in my case resuming something old. When you’ve got few major undertakings left, you want to be sure that you’re making the best choice. A weird kind of paralysis sets in. It’s like; oh I don’t know...an incapacitating fear of failure.”

“Well that goes double when you’re a parent. You hesitate, or you give new directions only a half-effort.”

“Uh-huh, like exercise or dieting.”

“Or a change of career.”

“Or dating.”

Rufus crouched atop the concrete bench, ignoring the boys and their offerings of ice cream. His white and tan tail twitched in anticipation of the next pass of the hummingbird.

“It makes sense in your case too Ethan. You don’t want to do anything that might upset the life you’ve worked hard to create. I mean even if the present doesn’t quite satisfy...at least it’s familiar. You keep a foot on the path you know, just in case you need to beat a retreat.”

The bird swooshed down and passed so close to Rufus that it almost brushed the cat’s whiskers. The hummer hovered above the barbecue as though showing off its proud plumage in the glow of the coals.

“Well Hell yeah, you have to minimize risk. You could get burned!”

Rufus vaulted into the air, a caramel colored blur that sent his winged prey whizzing away. The ferocious hunter hit the metal hard enough to dislodge the grill and scattered sparks like shooting stars. He bounced more than landed, then ignited like a fire cracker. The cat’s howl and the children’s’ shrieks brought Joan and Ethan running while the terrified, living torch literally blazed a trail through my garden.

I panicked when Rufus raced under the old wooden staircase. My cottage was a Victorian tinderbox, wood siding and lath and plaster construction. The dry twigs of my compost pile could catch like kindling. The whole house would probably burn in minutes.

“No boys! Don’t follow him under there!”

Jason and John were in tears, but little David was clapping his hands as though he were ringside watching a circus act.

Rufus shot out the opposite side of the staircase and paused to release a prolonged, agonized cry. It was a disturbing sound, forlorn and primal. Then he wandered like a processional candle, passing among fortnight lily blades and throwing dancing shadows onto the wall beneath my windows.

“I’ve got him! I’ve got him!” Ethan shouted as Rufus darted under my birdbath, a faux Corinthian column capital with a shallow bowl for a top. If only Ethan had accounted for the rose bushes that I’d planted around the concrete fixture, he might indeed have saved the cat. The Altissimo had wide, flat, red blossoms that one could still see in twilight, but its thorns had become invisible. Ethan squealed louder than Rufus, followed by a string of profanity that must have given his boys an early education in anatomy and human relations.

Joan blocked the cat’s escape by shifting side to side like a football linebacker during a pre-game warm-up.

“I’ve got him pinned Mike! Douse him quick with ice chest water!”

She bent low just as I heaved. I might as well have poured it directly on her head. I missed Rufus completely but drenched my friend. She blinked at me from behind dripping strands of wet hair, or were those tears streaming down her face?

There’s a difference between failing at something and being a failure; but try telling that to someone like Joan, someone who takes to heart every pound regained. Disappointment, like calories, is cumulative. Hope on the other hand demands constant renewal. Sometimes you need a champion, someone willing to meet you at the finish line even if you’re chasing rainbows.

Rufus made a sound that was both whimper and wail, and leapt into my arms. I hugged the poor creature hard, smothering the flame. By the time I put him down he was a smoldering, purring, charcoal smelling fur ball. The gate buzzer sounded. Paul marched into the yard with a big smile and a plastic mat tucked under one arm.

“Hey Guys, I’m back! Let’s get this yoga practice started!”

The six of us simply stood there. Ethan dabbed at his rose thorn wounds with another Handiwipe, surrounded by his weeping children. Joan looked like a loser at a wet t-shirt contest. She greeted Paul with a slight nod and gave her sopping sweater another twist. I was covered in ash and cat hair. All I could do was sneeze.

The cat, whose charred hindquarters were bald but otherwise unharmed, was as ready as Paul to resume his nocturnal routine. He meandered over and head butted the man for attention.

“Rufus! What’s happened to you?”