

Rubato

By Michael Parra

The stranger cut in front of him as though Phillip were invisible. He would have preferred to ignore the offense. As a matter of principle, Phillip never conversed with anyone occupied with a cell phone, but the memory of his domineering father bullied him. Stand up for yourself Son! Don't be a sissy. Why can't you be more like your brother Matt?

A cloud of perfumed, auburn hair assaulted his nostrils.

"Excuse me?" Phillip addressed the intruder and punctuated his objection with a loud cough.

She wore a flimsy, black blouse that exposed her midriff, an unfortunate choice for a woman about his age, forty-something. Phillip wouldn't describe her as fit exactly. She was gangly and sharp edged, unwelcome blessings. The woman rocked from one foot to the other, spellbound by her private exchange and the relentless pulse of recorded dance music.

"Well...duh? I could have told you that. Girlfriend, your hair has been fried! No wonder it turned green. I told you not to apply the toner until the base color was set. That shit is POUROUS!"

With one lacquered hand she sipped from a plastic tankard of soda pop. Unintimidated lips encouraged a stiffening straw, red on red.

"Tomorrow? Yeah, I might be able to fix it for you tomorrow. It kind of depends on what happens around here tonight. I'm single, if you know what I mean."

Phillip craned his neck to his left and squinted. The shoe rental line snaked beyond his sight. His feet grew impatient, but forward progress was impeded by a pack of adolescents whose annoying numbers multiplied steadily. He wondered how the boys could possibly bowl. Surely their apparel would become a handicap: long baggy t-shirts, uniformly draped to the knees and blue jeans worn so low that trousers puddled over feet. The young men hollered obscene greetings to one another, as though the words "hello" and "fuck" were synonymous.

The trespasser continued her phone jabbering, so he tapped her on the shoulder. The reddish curls whirled.

"Jesus! I thought you were a cop for a minute there. What? No, not you. Some guy is trying to get my attention. Yeah, kinda cute...in a Republican sort of way, lean, clean cut. Look, hold on a minute. Hello."

Her gaze was alluring. Bottomless, emerald eyes shaded with a palette that rivaled Monet, but Phillip was piqued. He gestured up and down the cue of stalled bowlers.

"Miss, just what do you think you're doing?"

"Oh, is there a line?"

Phillip cocked his head and raised his eyebrows, a look that said, I'm-talking-to-an-idiot. She flicked a backhand, like swatting a fly, and gestured him ahead. He glared until she retreated down the line. Her cell phone never left her ear.

Thanks to the cacophony of the place he was spared subsequent juvenile banter. Marbled balls thundered down upon wooden lanes and cracked an

avalanche of pins. Video games and pinball machines infiltrated side alcoves and waiting areas. Their mechanized sirens and chimes conspired against any hope of winning safe haven. For the fifth time in as many minutes Phillip contemplated leaving. Paul and Michael, the event organizers, hadn't seen him arrive and the twenty-four dollar admission fee was small loss if it meant holding onto his dignity.

Not yet, Phillip admonished himself. Not after driving all the way to Daly City in the rain and then criss-crossing the freeway for half an hour in search of Serra Bowl. The teenagers ahead of him appeared to have reached consensus on a particularly annoying degree of postural slouch. Phillip straightened in protest. Smiling got easier as he procured footwear and roamed the lanes. He had no idea what his team mates might be like, fellow fitness clients he assumed.

Both Paul and Michael were trainers and this gathering was one of a series of social adventures the two convened quarterly as a thank you to their clients. His coach was nowhere to be seen, but Phillip recognized Michael's partner from the Volition Fitness web site. The man's t-shirt was so tight Phillip thought it must restrict his breathing. Muscle attire was he supposed, as essential an advertisement as a business card. The other early arrivals were a surprising assortment of ages and physical condition. One delightful, stout woman reminded Phillip of his grandmother.

"P-h-i-l-l-i-p," Paul printed the nametag in careful, bold blue letters. The trainer was so attentive that his physique became less intimidating as he spoke, "What do you do besides bowl?"

"Oh, hasn't Michael told you about me?"

"Mike? No, we hold everything about our clients in confidence, even the most ordinary details."

"Well, I teach Cultural Anthropology at City College. I've been doing so for a long, long time."

"Oh yeah? You must have just returned to work. I can feel this Back-to-School time of year even though it's been ages since I stepped foot on a campus. How's the new semester going, or did you teach through the summer?"

"I take summers off, though lesson planning and faculty meetings have a way of pilfering the last of it. You aren't alone in that seasonal awareness by the way. We've all been inculcated with the necessity of returning to task, intensifying focus when autumn arrives."

"I guess all those Septembers of buying new notebooks and sharpening pencils leave their mark."

"Hmm, well today's students start their academic year purchasing more software applications than pencils; but I agree that to a great extent we are creatures of habit, products of imprinting if you like..."

Phillip recognized the auburn fragrance before he saw her.

"Hey Paul, how the hell are ya? What do ya think of these shoes?" She strutted and twirled before her astonished audience like an maladroit runway model. "Do they make my ass look big? Ha, ha, ha."

"Hi Gail, I'm glad you could make it. Let me introduce you to a new member of our party. Phillip this is..."

“We’ve met.”

“Oh, well, uh, that’s great.” Paul turned to the remainder of the crowd and amplified into his professional personae. “Okay people, gather around. We’ve got to select teams. Let’s get this party started! ”

Phillip shook his head and forced his arms to uncross. We’re not truly choosing teams, he reassured himself, just lane partners. It required effort to drop the familiar, defensive posture of middle school.

Three decades had past since Phillip depended upon his younger sibling for admittance onto sport teams. The more athletic and popular son, his brother Matthew was always among the first chosen and often the neighborhood team captain. He never failed to claim Phillip onto a squad, but salvation came at the price of humiliation. For most of their childhood, Phillip had accepted Matt’s reliable two-thumbs-up gesture and his welcoming slap on the back with both relief and resentment.

These days Matthew was tense, fat and on the verge of divorce, with two angry, pubescent daughters and a failing used car dealership. Matt could keep his preferential relationship with the Old Man.

“Good news Phillip,” Paul walked towards him, “you’re with me and Gail on lane six.” He gave Phillip a wide grin and two thumbs up before slapping him on the back. “Let’s pick out our bowling balls.”

Standing alongside the rack besides Paul gave Phillip a sense of center stage. He shared the limelight and the jostling for place with the star of the show. Good natured shouts of “Hey Paul, how about that pizza?” and “So Buddy, where’s our beer?” flew at them from every side.

“Man, people are in a hurry.” Paul murmured. “What’s the rush? We’re going to be here for a couple of hours.”

“Perhaps you’re witnessing that collective, seasonal acceleration we discussed earlier. Centuries of harvest and survival preparations for impending frost have conditioned humans to hasten activity at this time of year. We experience a familiar and renewed urgency as winter approaches. People become impatient. Time appears to move at a faster pace.”

“How do you reckon? I don’t harvest anything. My biggest winter hardship is maybe having to carry an umbrella. I drive to the grocery store, same as in the summer.”

“Quite so, but communal haste influences everything around you. Our alacrity is scheduled, systematized by hundreds if not thousands of years of adaptation. Even something as obscure as the evolution of our political calendar reflects seasonal quickening. We elect our leaders before winter weather demands crisis governance. Have you noticed that people become somber as well as swift when the temperature drops? Look at something as simple as our entertainment preferences. Summer action films cede to serious cinema. The performing arts commence their seasons in earnest at this time and strategize accordingly. What theater director would program Richard III for a summer Shakespeare in the Park series?”

“Pizza’s here!” Gail pointed toward the adjacent lane where Phillip’s trainer Michael, another walking fitness promotion in a snug tank top, was opening

large, white, cardboard boxes. Gail smirked, one glistening spear poised to her lips.

“Hey boys, don’t forget to wash your hands after touching your balls. You better hurry if you’re hungry.”

Phillip fixed his eyes on the rack, as though the assortment of candy pink, lime green or plum colored orbs demanded his complete concentration. Paul squeezed his shoulder.

“Excuse me folks, I’ll be back in minute. Mike may need my help.”

“Have you selected a ball?” Phillip asked Gail.

“Hell no, I brought my own!” She reached into a leather bag at her feet and withdrew her prize. The ball was of course, red.

“Come on Professor, let’s warm-up.”

Her second throw was a strike. His was a gutter ball.

“Dude, you’re throwing that thing like you’re worried you’re gonna break a nail. Put some muscle into it!”

Phillip hurled the ball with a fury that would have made his father proud. The globe arched through the air and bounced hard before it jumped the gutter boundary and continued its merry way down his neighbor’s lane where it knocked over five pins. The nearby bowler performed an incredulous about face. Paul stood by with an opened box of pizza that mercifully consumed Gail’s attention; the trainer however, had witnessed the blunder.

“Not bad Phillip,” he joked, “...if you’re playing lane seven. How’s the pie Gail?”

“Yummy. The ham and pineapple combo is the best. You guys got something to wash it down?”

“Oh sure, Mike ought to be along any minute with a pitcher of beer. Sound good to you Phillip?”

“Actually, I don’t much care for beer.”

“Well, duh? I could have told you that,” Gail almost spit pepperoni.

The game proceeded at a decent pace despite the need to call Gail back from various male distractions in order to take her turn. She and Paul were evenly matched and Phillip pretended to be fascinated by the food between rounds. He ignored the escalating scores of his lane mates as though they were credit card balances at Christmas.

A mature waitress waded through the sea of uniformed youth. She wore the same white and burgundy costume as her younger co-workers but with untucked defiance. Her approach was steady, deliberate, like a cargo ship laden for port, encircled and out maneuvered by sleek pleasure craft. Adrianna her nametag christened her. She came up starboard alongside Phillip with a tray and order pad moored against her waist, and withdrew a pen from between her ear and her long, blonde-gray hair. Phillip guessed her at about age sixty.

“Good evening Sir,” Adrianna said with a thick Bavarian accent and a bemused smile that acknowledged the absurdity of her circumstance. “Can I get you a cocktail?”

“Hey, how about our beer?” Gail shouted as she prepared to roll another strike.

"I'd like a Sprite actually." Phillip replied.

"Certainly Sir, one Sprite coming..."

"What going on with the beer?!" several parched people pleaded.

"Hey Lady," Gail waived Adrianna over, "Who do you have to blow..."

"I'm the cocktail waitress Miss. Your beer pitchers are self-serve. They're waiting for you at the bar. Can I bring you a drink?"

Gail spun around and hollered across the ricochet of balls and pins, "Hey Paul! Our beer is waiting for pick-up at the bar. You want some help?"

Paul shook his head no, gave Gail the two thumbs up signal and slapped his partner Michael on the back. The two vaulted up the steps and disappeared around the corner of the shoe counter, followed at a far more measured pace by Adrianna.

Free of supervision, Phillip managed to bowl his first spare. Then it was Paul's turn, but the trainer was nowhere to be seen. One wordless minute passed while Gail blinked at Phillip from across the console. Paul's name flashed on the overhead display. Three more minutes elapsed and both of them began to fidget.

"You know what?" She said. "Paul may be a while getting that beer. Why don't you bowl his set? You can use the practice."

"I'm sure he'll be along in a jiffy."

"Look," she said rising from her chair, "I didn't come here to spend my night waiting around. If you're not gonna take his turn, I will."

"Gail, he's absent on our behalf. It's not too much to ask us to delay while he secures our beverages."

"Paul didn't ask us to wait."

"That's hardly the point. I'm saying that appropriating Paul's turn is not courteous. It's unfair."

"On come on! We're not stealing. It's just a game. I don't know where you get your notion of fair play Buddy, but sometimes you just have to go for what you want. Stand up for yourself!"

With that Gail reached down, inserted two oily fingers and a thumb into her ball and swaggered to the top of the lane. She readied the ball at nose level and sighted along its crest. With a resolute inhalation she lunged forward and swung the ball behind her in a mighty arc. Phillip barked his objection.

"I think we should wait!"

He watched distain reshape her face. Then with bowling ball and her right arm mid-throw, Gail turned. A retort was already parting her lips. Her pelvis rotated toward him but her knees did not and; with a gruesome pop, her body wrenched right then left. She buckled and plummeted like a felled tree.

Phillip ran to her side where a handful of bystanders were already serenading her with a useless chorus of "Are you alright?"

Obviously she wasn't. The wounded woman's left knee was beginning to match her bowling ball in size and color. Her artfully painted eyelids had pooled into dark bands dribbling down her cheeks.

Adrianna cut through the flotsam of well wishers. She and Phillip draped Gail's arms over their shoulders and dry docked her on a bench. Gail chirped in pain only twice, once when she bore weight on the injured leg in a futile attempt

to assist her rescuers, and again when Phillip emptied his soda ice into a napkin and pressed the cold to her skin. Adrianna wiped mascara streaks from Gail's face, sighed and sailed away.

"God, I hate making a scene." Gail whispered to Phillip. "Really, I mean I know I'm a drama queen, but this is not my style. I can just hear my father now...Don't embarrass me Gail. Why can't you be more like Becky?"

"Becky?"

"Rebecca, my over achieving, younger sister...the Family Scholar. She and Dad are two peas in a pod. He's a dean at Stanford University. I tried to follow in his footsteps." Gail sniffled and repositioned the ice over her inflamed knee.

"Three different colleges, three different majors...I'm not stupid you know. I'm just not cut out for all that academic crap. Oh, sorry, I forgot your line of work."

Phillip scooted his chair closer to replace Gail's soggy napkin. He decided that she was more of a brunette than a red head. Her perfume was a blend of jasmine and some exotic spice. Ginger? She flipped open her cell phone, stabbed a button and pressed the device to her ear.

"Hey, it's Gail. I need your help. I've hurt myself and I need you to come and get me. My knee. Well, duh? I could have told you that. It hurts like a bitch. What the...? Girlfriend, my car is a stick! How the hell am I going to get home? Come on, nobody's gonna see you. Christ, wear a hat! Hello? Hello?"

"Don't worry about it Gail. I'll be happy to drive you."

"Phillip, you don't even know where I live. Walnut Creek, east Bay, it's pretty far."

"It's no trouble at all. We'll wait a little while to bring the swelling down and then take our time getting to the car. I'll pull up to the entrance."

"Gee that's sweet of you. Thanks. I guess I'll have to slow down for a while."

Phillip smiled, "Well, duh? I could have told you that."