

It's Not Easy

By Roberto G. Fernández

Studying the intensity of a grimace, the drooping angle for sad eyes, the tensing of the neck muscles to denote strain from using your arms as oars is not an easy task. Imitating the absent-minded look with your eyes lost in the blinding horizon of the sea, the right moment when to lift your arms to wave desperately, the density of the bags under your eyes, and your skin parched and wrinkled like a raisin -- that is art. But the new technologies do facilitate the endeavor. I can zoom into wars, assorted calamities, capsizing and drowning, and analyze the countenance of the victims. I've noticed that the projection of suffering varies with the age and sex of the individual in distress. I'm trying to prepare a compilation of these subtleties, a catalogue of sorts, so I can study them at will with the pressing of a key. Take, for instance, the language of the hands of a displaced elderly person, it is much harder to imitate. I don't know exactly why, but mimicking the movements is much more subtle, yet much more intense and much more dramatic. Sort of like this...

Another trifle that adds to the theatricals of an older face is sea salt. The sun baked salt particles settles on the face, filling in the furrows of time, producing a ghostly facial patina. Seawater is easy to collect in a bucket and then boil to collect the residue, but the onslaught of time is much more difficult to reproduce.

I must say that I've gotten the best pointers from the Cuban rafters. I've learned from that exodus. For instance, the face of desperation and panic when a Coast Guard unit surrounds the fleeing rafters packed in their rickety vessel and forces them into the cutter is priceless. They do fight back, but to no avail. A few jump into the water, but are easily fished from the Straights. There is only so much water one can tread, and then the raft is sunk. The women and old people dumbfounded by their ordeal open their eyes wide, sort of like this... See how I have mastered it.☺ It's hard work. It's not easy. It took me weeks to perfect it. Once inside the cutter, a woman, a protagonist in one of my guiding videos, bites a sailor. He smacks her and she falls, but gets up and bites him again. She is handcuffed while her husband covers his face with his hands. But I'm not interested in the drama itself, but rather in the gesticulations, facial expressions, and movements this display of emotions brings about. I study those because I'm also a displaced person.

She left me in April, a cruel month. She left me after 10 years in which I provided copular bliss. Granted, I have to admit that I did not kiss her that often. She eats chicken and I detest chicken. And let me tell you that just the thought of her lips tasting like chicken wings would derail my affection. She tried everything to reel me in. She even wore a different color wig every night trying to lure me with the idea that I had access to different women. We were not married, but we did buy a house together near the Orlando Executive Airport. It's a beautiful mid-century modern home, which needed plenty of repair work, especially on the copper roof. Of course, I made the down payment because she came to my life penniless and left like a maharaja. She really put me through the wringer. The night she left me in the lurch, when she had nothing else to squeeze, she kissed me on the cheek and said she was going to CVS to buy toilet paper. She never came back.

The days before our rupture, she made a big deal about something that had happened a few weeks before. She certainly has a knack of making a big issue of insignificant trivia. I had met this woman online and in our corresponding, it turned out that she worked in the same building as I do. My ex was staying with her sick brother in Bradenton, so I went out for a couple of drinks with Alicia. We had a few appletinis and after a couple of hours, Alicia was feeling kind of buzzed and needed a ride home. I drove her home and helped her up the stairs to her apartment. I don't remember exactly how it happened, but she awoke the inner hunter in me, my flint tip spear in hand. I spent the night there. It meant nothing to me, but my ex made such a big fuss about it. She discovered one of my text messages to Alicia in which I briefly mentioned how delightful the appletinis were and how sexy her genuine leopard skin panties looked. Luckily, my ex left for her grandparents', Gretchen and Chris, hometown in Minnesota rather hurriedly, and none of our mutual friends have heard from her since. This gave me a chance to present my story; the story of abandonment.

At the beginning of this desertion, I was submerged in immense distress. I was unutterably down in the dumps, not because of her leaving, but rather because I was left with a mortgage to pay, house repairs to make, utilities to pay, subscriptions to PC games, and no one to help me share this burden. All of our friends misinterpreted my gloom. They began to visit me every day, carrying with them gifts like the Magi. They brought delicatessens to eat, front row tickets to sporting events and music concerts, and homemade mango gelato. My benefactors checked on me daily to make sure I was eating properly and doing better. This pattern continued for almost a month. They were so sorry my ex had dumped me for Marco, the hunky Italian cruise ship captain. I had told them the story of my ex, the Italian skipper, their furtive steamy love affair, and the evening I had caught them *in flagranti*. Here is where I would let go of a few unexpected tears. I had resorted to this tale when I sensed they were ready to start weaning me from my perks. It was very upsetting that they would not keep me in their thoughts. Immediately, after my intervention, my ratings went off the chart. I was back in their arms again. I was satisfied.

The novelty of *il capitano* unfortunately did not last long, and I had to resort to new tactics to bring them around once more. I really love being pampered, don't you? My plan of attack led me to not answering my I-phone, ignoring text messages, and letting the messages on the voice mail accumulate like old memories. The kind robo-lady that told my friends that my mailbox was full was developing a distorting hoarseness from repeating her mantra. This is just a tiny sample of the many similar messages I received during the course of my weeklong campaign.

"Hey, where the hell are you? Fuck, man, are you OK?! Please call or text me when you get this message." Wednesday 11 p.m.

"I hope you're eating and haven't done anything silly. We're worried sick about you!" Friday 6:30 a.m.

"Are you OK? You are getting us very upset." Saturday noon.

They called and called, messaged and messaged, but I didn't budge. Instead, I entertained myself composing waka poems. If I may say so, I am a grand rhymer. Enjoy this:

The flower withered

Her color faded away
On this summer night
She is trash to haul.

On Sunday night, writing my 200th poem, I broke them down. My calculations were right, and I was ready for them. A delegation arrived and began to knock on the front door and windows. Theirs were the rapid knocks of desperados. I grinned in satisfaction. But then, I heard them saying they were going to pry the door open.

I opened the door.

I was wearing my worn out old black judo T-shirt, the one that has a hole over my left nipple, and says: JUDON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE MESSING WITH. I had teased each strand of my long wavy hair a few hours before the gang's landing, carefully messing each strand for that disheveled unkempt look. I hadn't shaved in five days and the premature graying of my beard (not noticeable in my usual shaved state) made me more pathetic. From all those intentionally sleepless nights in which I had set the alarm clock for 3 a.m., the bags under my eyes could have been used as floaters, giving me that *je ne sais quoi* appearance of dashed hopes. I was so thin from my water-only diet that I resembled a liberated victim from a concentration camp. Just before I opened the door I had rubbed all over my forehead and cheeks a generous amount of wet Mediterranean grounded sea salt, which I had placed with a small amount of water in the Pyrex bowl she had left behind, and microwaved to a boil. It was a tribute to the old rafter I'd seen and studied. I was going for that ghostly patina. I looked hideous.

The women in the group hugged me like the prodigal son, and the men stood in silence patting me on my shoulders. I sobbed and used all the resources I had learned from my hours of viewing worldwide calamities, and studying the despair reflected on the rafters' faces when they were caught with their feet wet. I knew my friends felt the guilt of not intervening sooner.

I was back in my number one spot once again.

"I...I just couldn't take it...take it... anymore. She meant everything to...to me!" I stammered in between sobs, and cried on Karen's soft, sexy left shoulder. My tears rolled down her sleeveless tennis shirt.

"We thought you were doing fine," said Lisa, the Californian *mamacita*, her voice cracking, and waiting for Rob, her Canadian prairie home companion, to say something.

"I thought you..." She hesitated. "I thought you were beginning to cope with your new life. Right, Paul?" said Anel as she looked at her husband expecting support for their *mea culpa*.

"Right on! Answered Paul. "Don't you worry about it, buddy. Tomorrow myself and Tony, we're taking you to the Orlando Magic game."

I looked at Paul with the gratefulness of the liberated Parisians in 1944.

"No more sad eyes," Jennifer insisted kindly.

At that moment, it became crystal clear to me how hard it's to maintain a victim's status.

I must confess that now this whole process is turning me into a nervous wreck. The pressure to keep my standing is enormous. There are competing stories always trying to rob the attention from my circle. I'm always searching for ways to improve my performance. Each time they take me to a game, a concert or to a good restaurant, they expect me to entertain them with my never-ending sorrowful stories. This past week they

were especially interested in more tidbits of my ex and her lover. The woman especially enjoyed my description of Marco. Marco Romántico. But, I'm pretty sure that Jennifer's boyfriend enjoyed it too. Yes, tall, lanky, blond, Michigan Tony, the other basketball fan.

"So what is this guy like? Can't imagine her leaving you for that Italian ship-abandoning-type looser," remarked Jennifer in disgust.

I covered my face with my hands like the rafter when he saw his wife being handcuffed. Then I cleared my throat and said, "I saw him once posing as the roofer that was supposed to fix my mid-century's roof. It was the day before hurricane Charley hit the area and the temperature soared to one hundred. He was shirtless." My eyes were watering then, and I looked to the heavens like a fleeing Kosovar praying to Allah that the Serbians wouldn't catch up with him.

"That sure was a hot day," added Tony.

"He was sweating, drops meandering through his hairy chest." I continued, knowing I was torturing the women, and the Michigander.

Tony tried to swallow hard. One could hear his saliva thickening and having a hard time letting it go down the pipe.

"I offered the false roofer a glass of water. I was not afraid of his scowling face and his solid built. I needed to confront this usurper. To know what he was up to, to interrupt their secret *rendezvous*." As I said this, a lonely unexpected tear trickled down to my lips.

"What a Judas she is!" said Anel, quoting from her favorite reality show. And so lazy, she would rather go into a respirator to avoid breathing!

"She is such a floozy! C'mon! For her being a slut is easier than making burgers! I never liked her. The first time I met her, I knew she wasn't trust worthy!" added the Californian *mamacita*, tapping the floor with the left heel of her rhinestone-covered stilettos.

"And there's something you don't know honey bunny," added Rob. "Do you remember the last time we all played board games? Jeopardy to be exact."

"Yes!" cried the chorus.

"Remember when we were passing the bong and we took a break for some munchies after the Daily Double and she went to the kitchen and I to the bathroom to blow my nose from my allergies? Well, guess what, on the way back, we crossed paths in the hall way and she looked at me in a very provocative way. She had the hotsies for me. I'm sure, she favored this Canadian kielbasa," Rob gloated.

When I heard him brag, I felt like punching that filthy mouth and knocking out all those yellowish-greenish teeth. Liar! She would have never looked at any other man. She only had eyes for me. He is such an ass!

Last week, Karen invited me to her parents' Golden Wedding anniversary. All of my support group was going. I was hoping their words of encouragement would soon turn into monetary help with my mortgage, so I accepted. Such is the dauntlessness of hope. On Friday of that week, I was flown to Columbus, Ohio. A big reception was awaiting with a band playing tarantellas, and enough *soppressata* and *salamella* to rival the multiplication of the loaves and fish. I was asked to sit at the presiding table, next to Carmela and Mario. Karen's mother had insisted on it. Later on, when she was piercing my eardrum with her loud comments, she told me that since I could never share a moment like hers in my life because of that ungrateful witch, I should have the opportunity to partake in their love story.

“It’s such a shame that woman left you for a Porto Rican! That must be so painful! A Porto Rican no less!” Carmela remarked dramatically.

“Momma, I told you he was an Italian like us, not a Porto Rican,” intervened Karen.

“Well, he must have been from the South, probably Calabrese. They have no morals,” said the feasted feisty mom. “And now, hush and let me talk. “I do not only wanted you to sit close to us, but also to conduct our toast as a token of appreciation for all you have been through. And after you finish, I want you to tell me and especially Mario how was it that your good-for-nothing high school sweetheart eloped with him after he finished raking your parents’ yard. Tomorrow is Mario’s birthday. It will be our gift to him. Will you do that for us, *o sole mio*?”

I rewarded Karen’s mother with a Mona Lisa glance, my eyes transfixed on the horizon of the ballroom, and wondering where she had heard this new twist to my life. Was I losing track of my tales? Was a scammer ripping them off without my consent? Was my mind meandering in the dark? She caressed my hair, and I reached and poured myself a big glass from the only good bottle of Chianti on that table, chugging it down like a dehydrated rafter.

Now every time my cell’s ripple or harp tones alert me of a call or a new text message, I dread another invitation, a new story needing to be told. If I don’t answer, they will be here in a couple of hours to check on me. My popularity is such that even friends of their friends invite me to their circles to commiserate with me. I’ve been tempted to contact the ex, to beg her to come back, to eat her chicken wings if she wants. I don’t want to play the role of the martyr any longer, but it’s too late. Pencils down...