

# Singing in the vowel of “a” – the non-fiction version.\*

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**By Anthony Paul Griffin**

The storm was expected, however the persistent pounding far exceeded the predicted forecast. My trip from Houston became more complicated because of the accumulating waters, causing traffic to snarl throughout the area. An hour trip had now doubled, by the time I arrived in Galveston the water had risen on Broadway, lapping against the car’s doors. Driving was no longer a proper description, inching would be a more apt-term. Cars littered the roadway, somewhat akin to a two-year old child’s boredom - after orderly playing cars

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\* This piece is the non-fiction version of the story, except Billy Paul didn’t bless us with his presence and I’m sure Dolores Huerta was busy convincing others “they could” ... or better stated, ‘Yes we can.’

- then unexpectedly, in one fell swoop, becoming King Kong spewing cars in all direction; such was Mother Nature’s contribution to our plight. Doors open, hoods up, cars occupying every space of a three lane road travelling in a south easterly direction. The sun had escaped from the sky, as if wanting to make it clear she had nothing to do with the mess unfolding before us. Around 51<sup>st</sup> and Broadway, it became clear to me parking in the esplanade and helping the Quintanilla family move equipment and furniture in their restaurant, The Taco House, was a more rational option.

The year was 1981 or 1982; I had been a practicing lawyer for three, maybe four years. Rogelio and Victoria Mancha Quintanilla were immigrant restaurateurs who welcomed me into their restaurant and

insisted I eat. “No money, eat.” Their son, Roy, and I had attended the same law school, not in the same class; one/two years separated us. After getting out of law school, Roy worked with me for a short time as a law clerk. When Roy passed the bar exam, he made a decision to strike out on his own, even though his father did everything in his power to convince him to remain put.

My adopted immigrant father, one possessive of a head of wavy, speckled hair, which complimented the graceful age lines who also participated in his storytelling. He introduced some of his children to me in his stories – long before ever meeting them. Rogelio’s namesake was Roy, as namesakes go Roy was the same but different.

When Roy came to work as a clerk, my office was located at United States National Bank on the fifth floor. Every woman on the floor asked me his name. Their question was followed by whether he

was married - they promptly ignored my response. They saw in Roy the same charm and good looks as the television character, Ricky Ricardo. You know, Lucy’s Ricky. No accent however, just good looks, a swift mind disguised by a deliberate storytelling style, all designed to provide cover for his next observation. Rogelio’s middle son was former military and police officer before going to law school. He stole his Lucy (Betty) from North Carolina, while serving in the military. Roy was possessive of his dad’s body; the difference was merely a lifecycle difference, his being a thirty years earlier body.

The youngest son, Pedo (Pete) worked with Mr. Quintanilla in the restaurant. As I said, Mr. Quintanilla initially introduced his children to me through his stories. He said all of them had worked in the restaurant.

“School, marriages, jobs.” Pete married, but stayed.”

Pete was not as tall as Roy or Mr. Rogelio. He inherited his height from Mrs. Victoria. Not female short (Mrs. Victoria could not have been no taller than 5’0”), but male short, 5’5”/5’6”, if one was generous. He possessed Pancho Villa’s mustache; he played with his mustache when smiling, angry, or thinking.

Mr. Quintanilla generally instructed Pete on what food to bring to the table prior to Pete joining our conversation. Pete always complied with his daddy’s instructions, but not without also serving a dose of commentary. Words designed to dig, pick and annoy – his entrée was a genuine smile, all while he played with his Pancho Villa.

“You should make your own plate, you’re here enough.”

“If you let me I would.”

“Be careful how you talk to me, I’m older than you and remember I’m cooking your food back there.”

We always sat at the unofficial family table, located next to the entryway. The same table their children, and their families, occupied when they visited the restaurant. The same table Roy instructed me to sit when he first introduced me to his parents. The same table his parents welcomed their customers, if they were lucky they too would receive an invitation to share a meal with Mr. and Mrs. Quintanilla.

The entry of the Taco House was atypical of a family diner, circa 1950s/1960s. Sturdy dining chairs with metal bases. Table tops covered with material impermeable to abuse, generally melamine. No intricate Mexican tiles graced the floor, or carpeting. I suspect Mr. Quintanilla’s choice of decor was more in tribute to Mother Nature’s choices than to any particular design or style decision.

Reds and greens dominated the color scheme. Mexican candies were always tucked neatly behind the counter. Stark and colorful piñatas hung in the far right corner on the other end of the front counter. The décor reminded me of the metal plates of my grandparents' era – basic white metal plates, baked enamel, with a color trim bordering the edge of the plate – blacks, browns, reds and greens.

The back dining room was considerably larger, an area in which most of the customer's flocked. It was also an area which was incongruent with the smaller dining room. The back room possessed a large circular neon light which dominated the ceiling; dark wood paneling graced the walls. Someone clearly designed the room generations past, playing tribute to Art Deco. Ricky Ricardo could have comfortably fitted his band in this room - the lights, stained and

varnished wood paneling, and coloring all complimented a different time and era.

“I sold tamales in front of the old Galveston Courthouse, not the one standing there now.” Mr. Rogelio fondly lamented. “Some of my best customers remember us from the courthouse.” When Mr. Rogelio expressed his anguish, I saw the same historical anguish of my father's generation, something the lilt in his voice could not hide. I studied his words. I watched him periodically wipe his eyes.

“Roy doesn't understand, things have changed, but they haven't.”

“He does sir.”

“I want him so much to stay with you. If it is money, I will pay for his salary.”

“It is not money sir.”

“He has to fight. He has to fight.”

“He will be okay, sir.”

I gather you appreciate my stopping at 51<sup>st</sup> and Broadway was not out of the

ordinary. My consumption of the Taco House's food and consumption of Mr. and Mrs. Quintanilla's words was a well-worn practice on my part. Mother Nature's behavior on that day was also not out of the ordinary, she had flooded Broadway before. Her presence could never be ignored in this small city surrounded by her waters.

Broadway is the main artery serving Galveston. On a map, Broadway is identified as Highway 87, and like in most small cities in Texas, the road was designed to accept the traffic flowing from the interstate highway, in this case Highway 45. Businesses controlled the western portion; homes were located primarily on the eastern portion of the roadway, albeit barely surviving the commercialization of the roadway over the years.

Flood waters are part of life in Galveston. They served as Mother's Nature reminder of her presence. They also

represent the Gulf of Mexico accepting Mother Nature's invitation to pay a visit. It always seemed to me it never took a lot of persuasion on Mother's Nature's part for the Gulf to accept her invitation.

Roy had been on his own now for a little over a year; his office was next to the restaurant. My intention was to visit with him and help after checking on his father. When I exited the car, the Gulf's waters greeted me, playfully lapping against my knees. The water quaked with every car's movement. A cameraman and a reporter were standing in the middle of the roadway. The reporter and I recognized each other, the reporter having recently reported on a case I had handled in another county.

"Mr. Griffin, you want to comment on the weather conditions?"

I responded in a one word observation, "wet", my comment was accompanied by a wave, and a broad smile.

I continued to tread my way across the roadway to the Taco House's front door. When I entered the building, the water was two to three feet high. Mr. Quintanilla was not present, but his son, Pete was.

"Get those tables and put them over here!"

"What?"

"Move that!"

"Where?"

"We need help in the kitchen!"

"You could say hello!"

"We need more concrete blocks!"

"How many?!!!"

"Say man, if we have to hire more help we will!"

I said nothing to his last dig - I continued to work as fast and hard as I could. We finished securing the restaurant in about thirty to forty five minutes.

"Let's check on Roy."

Pete and I then proceeded next door. We were greeted by Roy, who clearly needed the help. While Roy secured his files and the front of the office, we worked on the heavier objects in the back office; placing desks on top of blocks, then placing chairs on top of the desks. We removed the contents from the metal cabinet, then likewise placing the cabinet on blocks.

Pete's behavior changed little; he continued to bark orders, his words were now in both Spanish and English. Sometime a mixture of the two, but always served with humor.

"Tu eres el hermano flojo, uh!  
[Translation: "You the lazy brother, uh!"]

"Tu tienes que ganar el sustento, uh!"  
[Translation: "You need to earn your keep, uh!"]

"Cógelo, recogerlo. Necesitas más tacos!"

[Translation: “Pick it up, pick it up. You need more tacos!”]

Pete then screamed in English, “You would think with all the Mexican food you eat, you would learn how to speak Spanish!”

[No translation from Spanish to English needed]

“Boy I ain’t your slave.”

“If you drop this desk on my feet, you will be.”

“I heard Mexico abolished slavery in 1829 and ruled Texans’ conduct was illegal under Mexican law.”

“Texas is not part of Mexico anymore, now raise the desk higher!”

Mother Nature ignored us both, her waters kept rising. Roy screamed from the other room for us to stop playing around and get to work.

“Vagabundo flojo!”

[Translation - he called us lazy bums, with an emphasis on bums]

When we were near finishing, our curiosity told us to check on the weather. I am not sure whether I opened the back door first or Pete did the honor. We were

standing in water. The storm seemed to have abated. We were through doing what we could do to save what we could save. I stood to Pete’s right, our shoulders rubbing against each other. Mother Nature’s sky was calm; the flood waters now gently lapped against the back door. When the door was opened, what we heard could now be seen, the waters slowly flowed in the parking lot, lapping slowly against the building, intermingling with its brethren, an identical species, now taking up residence inside the building.

Mother Nature then asked for our attention. Imagine and direct your attention to top of the television screen, left. From top left she etched a white bolt slowly across the sky. She moved from top left, to the middle, to the bottom. Her movement wasn’t a straight line, but a jagged etching, as if to bring more attention to her artwork. The white bolt was suddenly accompanied

by a loud clap, thunder. I don't know what Pete was doing at the time. I didn't have time to look at him. There was no time to think. Mother Nature had sucker punched us. Her etching was actually rapid, unexpected and powerful. The lightning struck *that thing, that thing*, hanging from the pole - the transformer! The thunder's clap was accompanied by *that thing* exploding, a loud noise and a light show provided by the electrical line flying taking on the appearance of a struggling trout in mid-stream. The display seemed to be within inches of my now distended eyes and mouth. The noise was loud, violently loud. Like a thousand hands clapping in an old country Black church, like my grandmother's screams in the night when listening to Evangelist A. A. Allen, like Mother's Nature's releasing a hearty slap to storm chasers attempting to discover her secrets – that loud.

I now knew what Pete was doing. This Vietnam veteran hardly was reverting to a soldier's role - he was fighting me over the door. We were pushing, screaming, jumping about in the water. Not fake screams, real screams, societal rules be damned. The same unexpected scream one emits when captured by a lover. "Where did that come from?" The same unexpected scream when scared by a younger cousin while playing hide and seek, "You didn't scare me." The same unmanly scream when watching the horror show on a Friday night and not being able to sleep for two days – that scared – all while standing in total darkness because Mother Nature decided to turn out the lights.

There are cultural differences between Southern Black men and Mexican American men. When Mexican American men are scared, frighten or see their maker, they rapidly jump about, screaming in the



vowel of EEEEE - they then pray for their salvation. The searing light, roaring clapping, and intense heat notwithstanding does not take away from the fact Southern Black men, when scared, frightened or when we see our maker, rapidly jump about, while screaming in the vowel of OOOOO - we too pray for our salvation.

So there we were, two little boys, in men bodies, with different doses of melanin ingrained bodies, of different racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds singing not in our culturally unique voices but in a unified voice. We adopted similar bent postures, all while screaming, stammering and putting water in places we earlier were trying to protect from the flood waters, praying for our salvation, even though the both of us would have had to think hard about the last time we graced a church/ parish/ cathedral/ synagogue/ temple/ mosque's doors.

The soul singer Billy Paul began singing "War of the Gods." Dolores Huerta, the activist, began chanting, "Si, se puede." Billy Paul's singing, Dolores Huerta's chanting played homage to the flood waters, which were ushered out by our violent dancing, screaming and jumping. The flood waters participated in the conspiracy to enhance our fright by pulling and tugging at our legs. Lord knows what Mother's Nature was etching on the other side of the door. She then served us with another reminder - another explosion occurred. Pete and I rushed to the door, pressing as hard as we could. We, grown men, leaned against the door, prostrate from the exertion, applying our manly strength, in oh so manly movements.

Roy rushed into the room screaming, probably expecting to see serious injury or death. I'm sure his heart and mind expected as much, our involuntary compelled noise

served as his siren's call. When he covered the short distance from the front of the office to the rear he instead found two panting men who quickly release their hold on the door.

“What happened? What's wrong?!”

When I begin to talk, I couldn't. My mind and tongue were frozen in thought, I pointed and stuttered instead. I looked for help from Pete. The real Pancho Villa's name was José Doroteo Arango Arámbula – or by his pseudonym Francisco Villa or his nickname Pancho Villa – he was one of Mexico's most revolutionary generals.

I didn't know the real Pancho Villa, but read about him in a Mexican history course in college. Mi Pedro, like I, was not the real Pancho Villa. He was bent over with one hand on his knee, the other behind his back. He too possessed my stammer, a half-laugh, half-cry. Somehow we had bridged the gap and created a cultural bond, we now longer sang in our culturally distinct

vowels. No “ooooooooo(s)” or “eeeeeeee(s)” - we were singing in a common tongue, a universal language, singing in the vowel of “a”. The more we tried to explain our behavior, the more we failed. All that came forth was our common song. We pointed toward the door, jumped about wildly, all while speaking in an imperceptible, common tongue.

AAAAAAAAA!!!!!!

Instead of Mother Nature providing support for our behavior - a demonstration of her strength - she was now quiet, silent. The flood waters no longer rushed nor pushed, they converted to still waters, making a steady retreat back to the bay, the Gulf, the sea. Seemingly, Mother Nature rescinded her invitation; her flood waters understood, their reaction was seemingly immediate.

Roy bent his spine in a backward motion, looking around the room as if he

was flexing. He then bent forward, firmly holding onto both knees. He lowered himself in the water and started laughing. A Ricky Ricardo laugh. We were his Lucy, standing in the middle of room with proverbial pie in our face.

“Shoot, you weren’t here, Pete said, half-seriously, half-laughing. Pete’s words only made Roy’s reaction worst. Roy now corrected his posture, and began pointing at the door while mimicking our behavior - all while singing in the vowel of “a”.

I tried next, “What you laughing at ...”, even though I realized Mother Nature’s power reduced us to little brown hued boys screaming in utter and unabated fear. No proper conjugation, no proper English and hardly proper Spanish.

I can’t lie, I probably did scream for my Mamma. I know I heard Pete screamed for his - “Victoria Mancha Quintanilla, mammeeee” - he used her whole name. I

swear. Ricky Ricardo was enjoying this all too much. Ricky didn’t care whether he was wet, whether anything else needed saving. He kept repeating total nonsense about having to tell others. Mi Pancho came to his senses, grabbed his mustache, and practically fell over laughing.

When I hit the street to escape effectuate my escape, good old Ricky followed, laughing and thanking me all at the same time.

“*Griff*, thanks!”

“No problem, man, anytime!”

Old Ricky’s behavior was uncalled for, I personally I didn’t give a wit what he thought of our bravery. I waved without looking because I knew I had to restrain my body. I admit I smiled while walking, under no circumstances was I willing to let Ricky Ricardo see my smile. He would only be encouraged to run and tell Fred and Ethel Mertz. I just knew he was. I just knew he

was. I just knew. When I entered the car, I screamed as loud and as hard as I could in laughter.

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As time's grace whiten and thinned my hair, sprinkled mi Pancho's mustache with the same hue, mi Pancho and I made sure we told our story of bravery to others of our kind, men. Men who boldly professed their bravery in our presence – “no matter what, under all circumstances, not I ...” We normally prefaced the beginning of the story with the same words, “Are you sure?”

Like a good dance partner, one slid a little to the left; allowing the other to do the honors.

“You, please.”

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

“Okay, here goes. ...”

Mother Nature taught us there was no need for us to one-up the other. We had been brought to our knees by fright, all while pushing, pushing, pushing and uttering total nonsense and gibberish. We waddled amongst her waters, literally and figuratively. She understood, we understood – Ricky Ricardo be damned.