

Tap, Tap, Tap

It was the summer when I turned ten that Phillipé, an amiable Spanish ghost, took up residence in my closet. At a quarter past ten, father would tuck me in, mother would kiss me good night, and, as soon as the lights were turned off and the room had settled into darkness, I would jump out of bed and bound lightly across the carpeted floor, avoiding from memory the dirty pairs of shirts, socks, shoes, and making my way to the large doorknob that marked the closet door--the only doorknob in the entire apartment that turned clockwise. I would slowly peek into the darkness and shut the door again. It was my signal to Phillipé that the coast was clear.

Tap, tap, tap. A light knocking from the inside of the door.

"Who is it?" I would ask.

Tap, tap, tap. More light knocking.

"It is I."

Tippity tap, tippity tap, tippity tap, TAP. His signal.

"It is I, Phillipé." A resonating, deep voice.

Clockwise again--and there he was. I remember him well--Phillipé, standing tall, his black felt hat with the wide brim cocked slightly to the side. He would stroll briskly into the

room, ignoring me at first, surveying his territory--which was always the same mess--before tilting his head towards me, furrowing his huge brow, surveying me with his deep, dark eyes, twirling his long mustache and feigning deep thought for a few seconds. Then, with a burst of speed, he would stroll towards me, lift me up in his arms and swing me all about, his cavernous black cape billowing behind him.

"It has been too long, *amigo!*"

The entrance ceremony complete, Phillipé and I would get down to business. Our favorite pastime, as I recall it, was board games--chess, checkers, and *Sorry!* were our absolute favorites. For all his swarthy latin charm, Phillipé was a disappointingly poor chess and checkers player, though he managed to eke a win out of me every now and then when playing *Sorry!* He didn't have a very good sense of strategy, but he could talk the night away, spinning tales of his days as a *torero*--a Spanish bullfighter--in the late 18th century. He had a remarkable treasure trove of tales, and we spent countless evenings together, Phillipé and I, with me under the covers and him in a chair by the side of bed, leaning back and waving his arms about wildly as he wove his tapestry of bulls and of bull fights, of romantic encounters and of lost loves, of the Spanish countryside and the smells of the Spanish kitchen. Every night I would struggle to stay awake, to absorb more of this magnificent tale, but every night I would find myself drifting off into a deep sleep, awakening mornings to find my friend gone without a trace, the board games back on the shelves, the closet door shut tight.

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I am sorry to say that outside of these midnight chats with a Spanish ghost named Phillipé I lived a fairly routine life for a 10-year-old urban boy. Mornings, it was mother who would wake

me up at 6:30 am--father having left at 5 am for his Wall Street firm. She would lead me to the dining room table, where she would have a bowl of soggy *Froot Loops* cereal waiting for me. "Be good," was her perfunctory farewell call, which she would bark out to signal her departure as the clock struck 6:45. She worked in a law firm--a corporate law firm--and I would see neither her nor father again until the late evening hours. It was *Nana*, our Spanish maid, a plump, pleasant old thing, who would clean up my cereal and my bowl, help me pack my things and don my school uniform, and wait with me by the bus stop during those frigid morning hours, when the air was so thick with chill that I could see my breath escape through my nostrils.

I entered the 5th grade that fall after turning 10. I had always been a poor student, and found little value in the numbingly boring school day. Our daily schedule consisted of one hour each of math, grammar, computers, history, and the physical sciences, followed by three quarters of an hour of physical education, all taught, with the exception of physical education, by a nasty, uptight hag named Agatha--or *Miss Agatha*, as we were to address her--who appeared to lack a single bone of compassion in her body. Lanky and pale as a ghost, she would trudge into room A18 at precisely 8:30 am every morning, and we were expected to have our math books out and on top of our desks before she even entered. She would talk, talk, talk the day away, *blah, blah, blahing* us into oblivion.

Blah-dee blah, blah-dee blah, blah-dee blah, BLAH. As days and weeks began to blur under the tutelage of Miss Agatha, I became an expert at finding ways to pass the time. Though I had always been something of a daydreamer, Miss Agatha taught me to become positively aloof and reserved. By lunchtime, I had usually come up with ten dozen places I would rather be than in room A18, ten dozen things I would rather be doing, and, by the end of the day, I had forged

for myself a dozen different alternate realities I would rather be in, new parents, teachers, and friends.

It is, then, not surprising that I had no friends to speak of. The other children derived a perverted pleasure in taking advantage of my aloof nature, and took turns at figuring out ways to steal my lunch money from where I kept it inside my desk without my noticing it. After going for several weeks without lunch, I asked *Nana* to pack a bag lunch for me--this, I assumed, would force the others to back off. Instead, abandoning their attempts at discretion, they stole my bag lunch, removed the contents one by one, and tossed them back and forth to each other, so that by the time they came hurtling back in my direction they were entirely inedible and I was forced, yet again, to forgo lunch.

Regrettably, there were some children for whom rendering my lunch inedible was insufficient punishment for my aloof nature. These took it upon themselves to find and replace key items in my lunch with items they had discovered, among other places, in their backyards. On more than one occasion, I can recall biting into one of *Nana's* delicious chicken and mayonnaise sandwiches to discover that the chicken had been replaced with earthworms and the mayonnaise replaced with urine. It was not long after that I decided two meals per day would suffice.

Tippity tap, tippity tap, tippity tap, TAP. My meetings with Phillipé became a refreshing respite from the agonizing routine of school. He was the one person in my life I could always count on to be there, at a quarter past ten, wide brim hat, billowing cape, accent and all, fresh with a new batch of tales.

Tippity tap, tippity tap, tippity tap, TAP. As weeks and months began to blur, and frigid fall faded to freezing winter, Phillipé's tales become more wild, more outrageous. Gone were the

tales of *Isabella*, who after rejecting two dozen suitors and giving up on the torturous game of love, managed to find true love among the lowly commoners of the North. These were replaced by longer, epic stories of *Ricardo Fernando Díaz*, who, to avenge the theft of his most prized goat, put all the peasants to the sword and raped their mothers and daughters before putting them to the sword, as well, and crowning himself king. But no matter how outrageous his stories became, I always found myself drifting off into deep slumber.

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It was in early February that I discovered that I could be more productive in my day-dreaming during the school day if I spent time in the bathroom stall. Perhaps it was the sterility of the environment--the white walls, the clean, shiny floors, the *drip, drop, droop* of that light bluish liquid entering the toilet bowl--that helped my mental acuity, but there was certainly something in that well-lit environment that pushed me to new highs, and I resolved to spend at least twenty minutes a day in the rightmost stall, furthest from the exit, staring straight up at the bright fluorescent lighting.

One day in late February, when the mercury crept above freezing for the first time in many, many weeks, such that rain, and not snow, pelted the streets and walkways and roofs, I was sitting in my usual stall, wondering what it would be like to be the last person alive on earth--

Drip, drip, drip. A leaky faucet.

--it wouldn't be very different from life now, would it? I mean, I wouldn't have to wake up at 6:30 every morning, I could sleep in until noon, it would be just like the weekends, Saturday mornings--

Drip, drip, drip. Further leaking.

--although I suppose there would be no one around to make those Saturday morning cartoons, oh, and, who would I get to make my breakfast? Well, I suppose I could keep Nana around for that purpose, yes, I think I would do that, she might prove useful after all, and, really, I can think of far worse people to have around--

Drippity drip, drippity drip, drippity drip, DRIP. *Phillipé.*

"It is I, Phillipé." A resonating, deep voice.

It was, of course, difficult to believe, for I had never once encountered Phillipé outside of my bedroom closet. But I had just heard his voice, just outside my stall, and I was not one to question the reality of what I had heard with my own ears. I tentatively crept off the toilet seat, unlocked the stall door, and opened it half a crack. And, sure enough, there he was, standing tall and proud as always, my friend Phillipé.

Not one to dispense with formalities, he took me in his arms and swung me all about.

"It has been too long, *amigo!*"

And then we settled down into our old routine. There were, of course, no board games in the bathroom, but I was content to sit on the toilet seat and listen to my friend tell his stories. *Rodrigo Castro Mendez--death, destruction, the crowning of a new king--Hernanda Pena Guzman--rape, pillage and plunder--David Rivera Ramos--deception, deceit, chaos.* Tale after tale after tale flowed from Phillipé, each tale reaching a new level of realism, each tale bordering more and more on the absolutely extraordinary, the horrifically unbelievable, totally engrossing--

Pssssh. A thin stream of urine striking water in the stall next to mine.

And then, as best I can remember:

"Hey, doofbag!" A familiar voice. "Who ya talkin' ta?"

Earthworms and urine.

Silence.

And silence.

Nana's sandwiches.

A zipper.

Phillipé bent down to my ear.

Flushing toilet.

"Shall I dispose of him, señor?" A whisper.

Stall door opening.

Yes. I motioned quietly to Phillipé.

Running water.

Silent as darkness, Phillipé unlocked the stall door and exited into the bathroom. I didn't dare exit the stall, but the next sound I heard was--

A scream. A punch. A groan.

A body striking the floor.

Then silence.

Phillipé--gone. Only the body of a boy on the floor.

* * *

As I am told, I spent many hours in the stall, such that the school day had long since ended by the time the other boy came in and was injured. Miss Agatha, who had come looking for me, found me huddled in the corner of the stall, a look of absolute shock stamped across my

face, staring at the body of the boy on the bathroom floor. Mother and father were brought in to pick me up, and they drove me home, the torrential rain fighting against the onslaught of the car.

* * *

So it was that I found myself home at 6 pm, seated at the dinner table, my parents standing by my side, voices raised and filled with deep anger, shallow concern. They were never home before 8 pm unless there was deep trouble to be waded through. I only recall pieces of what happened next.

"Boy suffered injuries--"

Mother.

"Might have killed him--"

Father.

"If he had hit his head the wrong way--"

And mother

"Might have ourselves with a lawsuit--"

And father.

"Sue us into debt--"

Tap, tap, tap. The rain against the windowpane.

"Need to learn physical restraint--"

"Learn to control your emotions--"

"Agatha suggests a therapist--"

Tap, tap, tap. More rain against the pane.

"Quality of schoolwork abysmal--"

"Need to devote more time to homework--"

"Failing, failing, failing all subjects--"

Tippity tap, tippity tap, tippity tap, TAP. *Phillipé.*

"Phillipé." My voice. Desperation. Which door?

"Who is Phillipé?" Screaming stopped. Looks of concern. Glimmers of pity.

"Phillipé, Phillipé, Phillipé. Find him, find him, find him." More desperation.

"Phillip," my mother addressed me, "who is Phillipé?"

"Phillip, you need to tell us who Phillipé is," father joined in.

I rose from my chair. To the kitchen. Tearing through cabinets. No Phillipé.

The bathroom now. The medicine cabinet. Under the toilet seat, maybe? No Phillipé.

Front door, now. Maybe the balcony. Where else, where else, where else? No Phillipé.

"Phillip, this is really very serious. We're concerned about you!"

"You have to tell us what's going on!"

"We can only help you if you communicate with us!"

Talking and talking and talking and TALK and *blah-dee blah, blah-dee blah, blah-dee blah, and drippity drip, drippity drip, drippity drip, DRIP, tippity tap, tippity tap, tippity tap, TAP.* My room. My room. My room. Closet there. *Phillipé.*

And yes, yes, yes. There he was. Always there. Phillipé.

"It has been too long, *amigo!*"

In his arms.

And Gonzales Castro Flores, and Rodriquez Mendez Munoz--

"Imaginary friend." Whispers in the hallway.

"Projecting himself."

"Projecting his emotions."

--*Ortiz Santiago Cruz, Pena Morales Guzman, Reyes Salazar Ramos*--

"Can be dangerous."

"Unaware of his actions."

"Injuries to others, injuries to self."

--*Aguilar Ruiz Delgado*--

"Phillipé." My voice now.

"Señor?"

"What's on the other side of that door you come through?"

"It's whatever you want it to be, amigo."

"You would take me with you?"

"Of course."

Closet door shutting, locking.

Hand grasping hand.

Then silence.

* * *

I am told I did not emerge from the closet for 24 hours. This I cannot recall. But I do know that, after that day, I never saw Phillipé again.