

Ben Umayam

“ZSHTWEET” Charity

It is still cold here in Valencia. Which is a little bit of a shock. Arriving here, in February, thinking Costa Brava/Blanca, you would think it is not so cold. The Airbnb is cheap enough. Even though it is old. It has high ceilings. Passed down from generation to generation in the old part of town that used to be fashionable during the turn of the 1900s, the 20s but Belle Epoque in style. The generations have moved on, no one wants it, so granny rents it out as an Airbnb. She does not invest a lot in it. The furniture is not antique as advertised. It looks old, very old like it would be left out on the street in the States. And it is very cold. When you turn on one space heater and then another in an adjoining room, the fuse box trips, and the whole place is thrown into darkness. If you plug in the toaster at the same time as a space heater, you are plugged into a cold, dark hell. She tolerates all this, it is economical. She can do a month, her winter break, before heading back to the conservatory in Florida.

Her name is Kirsten. She doesn't know why that is so hard to get. People call her Chris, thinking her name is Christina or something like that. But it is Kirsten, the “r” and the “i” are inverted. She is here on her winter break with Ricardo, an invite to his hometown in Spain, that no one knows about, Valencia. A beautiful place with a central park carved out of the riverbed, the river having been diverted after a flood in the 1950s. It is the home of Calatrava's City of Arts and Sciences. And the Ciutat Vella, the Cathedral, a mosh of styles, the façade is cramped by the bell tower, facing a plaza now being renovated. It used to be a bus central hub crowded and dirty. When the covered chain fence gets taken down, it will be a spanking clean pedestrian space.

They play as a quartet, Ricardo and two other Valencianos from the Conservatorio Municipal. She has enjoyed her stay, as an American abroad. The wine is cheap. The tapas are fabulous. And it is all paid by her cut of the share the quartet makes playing around town. She expects to pay for her return ticket with the money from the next and last few days of her Valenciano visit.

It is after the post-New Year's *rebajas*, the sale days that extend January thru March. They have moved from the upscale shopping center of The Colon to the Plaza de la Virgin, between the Basilica and The Cathedral. Nothing like some sacred music to make the tourists reach into their pockets. This is the B set. Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, lots of Baroque with some pop Leonard Cohen thrown in. "Alleluia" makes for altruistic money in the violin case.

The case is more bills than coins today.

Ricardo calls this the brunch music set, and they are playing "Alleluia. Everyone is playing that this year. The pleasantly melancholy music is pierced with a shrill sound. "ZSHTWEET ZSHTWEET".

It is the cripple. Kirsten has seen her mostly in front of the cathedral. She normally doesn't have a Mardi Gras whistle. She normally isn't blowing it loud, incessantly, irritatingly. Normally she extends a dirty hand, filthy from the street which she uses to project her body on a makeshift wheelchair, plywood on wheels. The warmth of the string quartet is now cold, like the February weather.

Most times she would be tolerated. She is a pathetic sight, this cripple, not just dirty, but visually maimed, deformed. Her legs are underdeveloped. And she appears to be double-jointed. She wraps her too-small legs under her body. She is rolled up like a ball. The quartet dislikes this rabble-rouser. Especially Kirsten who is thinking, "I almost had my airfare in the case today till this cripple came along."

Ricardo stops the set after “Alleluia.” He picks up his cell and calls the police. They proceed into some Bach. Immediately, the whistle piercing starts, syncopated by a police siren.

As the police car parts the sea of tourists, the cripple, Carla, unfurls, and sits on the lip that is the sidewalk ledge. Her deformity almost looks normal, the legs, still too small. But tucked out, they are extended as if taking in the sun for a tan. She looks about normal like this. She pulls out some paper and rolls a joint. It is legal here in Spain, but you can smoke only at a private club with no advertising sign up front, and you must be a member. Her club is the streets, and she lights up.

“*Hola Carla, che pasa?*”. They know her, they are familiar with her presence in and around the cathedral. They converse with her, she smiles, she laughs, they wag a finger, and they talk to Ricardo. Then they leave. Ricardo takes the police's advice and conducts the quartet into another turn at “Ave Maria.” A paying crowd gathers.

Carla furls back into her ball. “ZSHTWEET, ZSHTWEET”. She joins the coda. Carla tweets louder with glee as the crowd puts their hands in their pockets and gives her their change.

The quartet stops, and the crowd dissipates. “ZSHTEWEET ZSHWEET,” Carla follows the crowd, to the front of the church and positions herself by the doors.

The next day I go through those same doors. They have a mass, on weekdays in the morning starting at 8. You can enter the cathedral at this time. At 10, the doors are closed for paid entry. You pay to go to the Chapel of the Holy Grail. And to visit the cathedral altars, and admire the windows and ceilings. The Holy Grail is that same Monty Python thing. It is an alabaster cup; they say used by the Christ Jesus at his Last Supper. Like other Catholic icons, like the shroud of Turin, it has been tested and appears not to be as old. It has lost a lot of its luster. But if you have faith, you believe. In the past, I remember it encased in gold. Now it appears to be in a glass covering as if to show it is an alabaster cup as if to show it is really the Holy Grail. Again, you to have faith.

I am not faithless. I am here early, not to check out daily mass, but to get in for free. I am cheap. They have finished the restoration of the ceilings above the main altar. It is gloriously blue and is called The Musical Angels and indeed, the ceiling now sings with brilliant hues. Songs are coming to mind when I look to the right, at the chapel of St. Joseph. And there is the crippled girl, Carla, in her improvised wheelchair, a sheet of wood on wheels. The church is pretty much empty, and you can hear her drop her coins into the box to light candles. She drops in at least a dozen coins, they sound heavy like 1, maybe 2 Euro coins, not little Lincolns. They go clunk. And she proceeds to light candles, a dozen of them, the top row of the candle holder. Her offering lights the image of St Joseph, the patron saint of the sick in the darkness of the church.

As with the visitors to the Holy Grail chapel, Carla has faith. She makes her offering, her alms to the father of Jesus, for her blessings, her getting thru the day-to-day, even though she is stuck in an improvised wheelchair. And blows a whistle on those who invade her territory.

She looks at peace. She leaves the chapel, illuminated with her offering, comfortable with her fit into the scheme of things. Peace is easily attained if you have faith.

“Here she comes again, that crippled gal. The one with the Mardi gras whistle,” Kirsten says.

Ricardo has called for the A set. An adagio piece, an andante, some Abel, Albrechtsberger and “Alleueia.” Only now Carla’s “ZSHTWEETS” are cutting things short. Ricardo tells her to move on or he will call the police. Carla laughs and “ZSHTWEETS.”

Kirsten is furious, “What is her problem. Why doesn’t she go back to the front of the church with the other beggars. Why does she have to ruin our set. I am this close to making my airfare back from winter break. She is spoiling it all, spoiling the whole thing. Her with her deformed legs and that whistle.”

Ricardo tries to calm her. Kirsten is incensed. She physically pushes the cripple and says, “What’s the matter with you, you are ruining the end of my vacation. You are ruining my Valencia experience. I will always remember Valencia now as a place with beggars spoiling it all.”

“*Putá, Coño*”. Carla screams at Kristin.

Kirsten has learned from Ricardo the translation of *coño*, the female reproductive part. “That’s so vulgar, but it sounds less vulgar than the English translation, cunt.”

Carla is screaming the word, *coño*. Kirsten screams *coño*. It becomes a chorus of *coños*. In the shadow of the cathedral next to The Virgin of the Desamparados, police sirens join the chorus. An older guy comes by, and tells Ricardo they must leave Carla alone. This is the territory of the cripples seeking alms. Some think of him as a homeless guy. He is not, he is just a disheveled regular churchgoer who puts money into the church box every day.

Ricardo determines, they will go back to the square in front of the upscale shopping area. This place in the shadow of the cathedral, next to the basilica, it is not a good place. He listens and watches this C set. Carla and Kristen still shouting *coño* at each other.