

The Marine and the girl next door

(A love story)

By: Tony (The Marine) Santiago



December 31, 2008, it is 11:30 PM and I am at Thunderbird Hospital with my wife. She was hospitalized on Christmas Day with double pneumonia and placed in the special care unit. Our children and grandchildren are home waiting for me, but I did not want to leave my wife alone on New Years Day. I wanted to be by her side when the clock struck 12. You see, we have been married for 38 years and I thank God everyday for giving me such a wonderful wife. Even though we have grown old together, I can still remember the first day that I laid my eyes on her.

The year was 1971, our country was still scarred with the racial riots of the 1960s during the Civil Rights movement, political assassinations and the Vietnam War. It seemed as the whole world was a mess when I was discharged from the Marine Corps. I was a native New Yorker, and who had served two tours in Nam. During this time my father (my parents were divorced) had moved to Puerto Rico and founded The Puerto Rico Real Estate Corp., a small business with a big name. When I was asked at Camp Pendleton, where did I plan to go upon my discharge, I had a choice, I could have returned to New York City where I had a job waiting for me in a bank or take a short vacation and visit my dad in Puerto Rico (my mother who had remarried had also moved to the island). I thought about all the horrors of war that I and my fellow men had been through for an ungrateful nation. I thought about how badly and unfair our soldiers were being treated by the media and war protesters. I thought about the discrimination which I had witnessed and been subject to just because I was Puerto Rican. I then decided go to Puerto Rico, not knowing what fate had in store for me.

The day was March 28, when I arrived at San Juan International Airport. Here I was, a young 21 year old Marine in my uniform with a chest full of medals waiting for my father to pick me up. Even though I didn't know much Spanish, since we barely spoke it at home and the island was hot and humid, it felt great to be in the land where my parents were born. I thought to myself "In the United States people could tell me Go Back to Puerto Rico, even though I was born in New York, in Puerto Rico, I figured that no one can be prejudice against me for being Puerto Rican". Well, my father finally arrived and after the required hugging, loaded my bags in his car and took off.

After about an hours ride, we were finally in the town of Bayamon where my father lived. I was busy enjoying the view and as we were getting closer to my father's house, my father suddenly turned to me and said: "See that girl walking over there?" I looked and for a moment I couldn't believe my eyes. There was this beautiful girl, walking alone on the sidewalk, her golden hair so nice and long, her body so perfect, she was wearing an outfit that was called something like "Coolot" which was a short pants that resembled a mini-dress. And when I saw her face, My God! I had never seen such a beautiful face in my life. She was a goddess, I kid you not. You ever hear the 1963 song "Just one look, and I fell in love, love, LOVE" sung by Doris Troy?, well, that's how I felt. Anyway since I was so cool (at least I thought I was), I answered my dad's question: "Yes, she is very pretty". Then my dad said: "She is our next door neighbor" My mind went wild and I thought to myself "WHAT!, Holy S--t". Then I turned to my father and I told him the following: "She is? Well you know what? She is going to be my girlfriend and my wife". My father laughed and said "Tony, you always say that about all the girls" and I answered, "Not this time, this is the one".

The next day I went out to my fathers porch, hoping to get a glimpse of her and there she was on the porch of her house. We looked at each other and you know that saying “I must be in heaven because I just saw a angel looking at me” well it’s true, this was love at first sight. I waved and said “Hi” and she looked at me and smiled and waved then she went inside her house. So I went to the back yard and started shooting some hoops. That is when I realized that someone was checking me out. Yep, some one was behind the window blinds in her house starring and I knew that it just had to be her. Despite the fact that I was and still am a terrible basketball player, I tried my best to impress the stranger checking me out. Soon this little 8 year old boy from the neighborhood called “Peter” came to my door with a note from her. She wanted to know my name, in Spanish! (she didn’t know English). Of course I didn’t waste any time and I sent her a note in return with my name and in turn asked for her name. Peter returned with another note and that is when I found out that her name was “Milagros” which in English means miracle. What a beautiful name, the most beautiful name that I have ever heard.

I then did what any red blooded American of Puerto Rican descent would have done in my place. I took a crash course in Spanish. I started by reading a Spanish bible and watching Spanish T.V. If something came up that I didn’t understand I would ask my dad. I found out that she was seventeen, she had just recently celebrated her seventeenth birthday that March 25th. You remember that song by the Beatles “She was just seventeen, and you know what I mean, the way she looked was beyond compare”? Well, I think that they had her in their mind when they wrote it, plus we were both born on March, I took that as a good sign.

Now let me tell you, in New York I was the type of guy who would go up to any girl, put my arm around her and end up going out with her. But, in her case she made the first move by sending me notes and I felt like a wimp, so a week later I finally asked her for a date. I didn’t dare go to her house because she was an only daughter and her father didn’t strike me as the friendly type, so we decided to go separately and meet at my mother’s house in Levittown in the nearby town of Toa Baja. I arrived first and waited for her at the bus stop. After she arrived we walked together and talked. I introduced her to my family and we went with my sister Greta and her boyfriend to this place called Isla de Cabra. (Goat Island, romantic isn’t it?) Once we were there, I whispered to my sister to get lost and then finally I was alone with the girl who would turn out to be the love of my life. We talked for a while, she had the most amazing smile and when I looked into her beautiful eyes it was as if we were the only two people in the world. Yes, it was like that song made popular by the Flamingos “I only have eyes for you”. Then we kissed and I told myself “Oh my God, I am in love and I barely know her”. I knew then that I was going to marry this girl and spend the rest of my life with her. I asked her to be my girlfriend right there and then. Do you know what she answered? She said yes!



Milagros and Tony Santiago

We would call each other everyday and talk for hours, plus she would tell her parents that she was going to visit a friend and we would see each other secretly. During this time we agreed to be completely honest with each other and we told each other all of the details of each others live, both the good and the bad. We promised to always be faithful and if one of us fell out of love we promised that we would break up before double crossing each other with some one else.

By May, Milagros' mother finally allowed me to visit her at her house as long as her father was not there. Her mother was really nice and even felt sorry for me because I was so skinny. That worked out to my favor because I was invited (when her father wasn't there) for dinner almost everyday. Then one day, I asked Milagros to marry me. I told her that I was very serious about this and that if she married me it would be until death do us part. You see, my parents divorced when I was a child and I didn't want any children that we may have in the future to go through what I did. I also promised that I would find a job at a bank (I was unemployed) and go to college. You know what? She said yes! Then she told her mom. I thought for sure that she was going to kill me or something, but to my surprise she became happy as hell. The father did not know.

June arrived and I decided to ask her father for his daughters hand in marriage. Now picture this: Milagros was seventeen and an only daughter. We had only known each other for only three and a half months. We were planning on getting married in August, exactly five months after we first met. When I went to her house Milagros and her mother told me that the father was in the driveway cutting open a coconut. They promised that they were going to be behind me when I went in there to talk to him and I said "Let's go". I quietly walked up to him and said "Mr. Rivera, I would like to talk to you" He had this huge machete in his hand and was hacking away at this poor coconut like it was his worse enemy. He looked mean and didn't even look up to me when he asked "What do you want to talk about?" I took a deep breath and said "I would like your daughter's hand in marriage". He just kept hacking away and asked "When?" That is when I looked around and realized that I was all alone with a man with a machete in his hand. Milagros and her mother were nowhere in sight. I told myself "Oh man, this is it! This is the end of the road, this is where I die" and then I answered "In August". He then took one great swing at the poor coconut and said "O.K.". I couldn't believe it, I got out of there as fast as I could (No, I didn't pee on myself) before he changed his mind and mistook me for the coconut.

Needless to say, we were married that August and now thirty seven years later we have three wonderful children, two sons Antonio and Jose, a daughter Nilda and two beautiful granddaughters Isabel and Nina. My wife is fine now, she is out of the hospital, but every time that I look at her, my partner, my best friend, the love of my life, I think about the tune sung by the Everly Brothers which goes "God Bless the day I found you, I want to stay around you, now and forever, let it be me". Happy Valentines Day to all.