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# FORGIVE ME

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*“Pretty girls don’t get cancer!”*



**Written by: M. Patricia Diaz**

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Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”  
Book Proposal  
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Zoe taped the handwritten message on the wall in front of the hospital bed. Emotionally retraced words, black-penned on a blank sheet of paper, visible from any angle of the dark room. Although I wasn’t too religious, nor spiritual back then, in a way, that statement influenced my recovery. It gave me hope, at that time when death, was closer than anyone had expected. I was sixteen, not a child anymore, yet barely an adult.

*Thank you Father – for I am healed!*

“What kind of prayer is that?”

“The kind we believe.”

## Prologue

*October 2016*

Someone knocks at my front door. As I gently open the green and white entrance, a sensation of familiarity takes over my heart and a soft scented morning breeze drifts into my house. My good friend, my confident: A person I’ve longed to converse with for a while. I can’t wait to share my story. It’s been close to my chest for a long time. Partly because of how hard it was to live, and mostly searching the right blend of words.

Her thin frame finds her way to my brown and brick red couch. Making herself comfortable, her tan expression seemed as eager as I, to chat. We had so much to catch up on ...

Before we start, let me give you some context. I was born and raised in Maracaibo, Venezuela. Known by other Venezuelans as Maracuchos, we are infamously outgoing, friendly, and loud. We have a unique mixture of gregariousness, and a tolerated edge in our culture. Our friendliness is reflected in different ways in every layer of our class-structured society. We care; hence we talk about others in our circles. It’s something to do – it doesn’t really have to be fact-based, as long as it’s a good story! And between fact, fiction, and humor, the most important part about our interactions is constant laughter. Knowing this, it’s not hard to picture how an experience like the one I had, traveled the mouth to mouth channels in varying tones, and colors.

Because tragedy and drama can define who we are and, how people remember us, I was graced with some nicknames, some, more endearing than others. Honorable mentions go to “the miracle girl.” Second place for “viva e’ verga,” (alive by a bit), which has a similar connotation as “saved by the bell,” or perhaps even more fitting ... “barely made it!” I was also known by “The Patty Case” [Pronounced Pa-tea] and my story became a talking piece in town, with a plethora of versions, and mystical enhancements. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

Best if we start at the beginning my friend, please hold my hand. Let’s travel through time and space to year 1988 to Maracaibo, Venezuela - My homeland during my high school senior year.

*I was laying in the hospital bed in room 212 on a Thursday afternoon ... gathering my thoughts from a day of tests, visits, nurses, doctors, and priests. The dimmed lights, accentuated the chilly temperature. Practicing a clumsy version of abdominal breathing, I was trying to relax, before falling asleep. Zoe had mentioned earlier that my entire family would be praying for me around 8:00 PM. Not only my family and friends, prayer groups had also agreed to pray at the same time. People in other countries, and others I didn’t know, had all agreed on a universal time to ask for my health. After all, the “C” word was already on the table!*

*Closing my eyes, I heard the whooshing sound of the oxygen pump, and the central AC unit, as it turned off on its own. I could still see Zoe’s prayer.*

*It may have been around that time when my bed starts shaking ...*

Forgive Me – *“Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!”*  
Book Proposal  
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## **PART ONE**

### **Graphite Sketching Youth**

## **Chapter One**

### **High School friends**

Can you imagine a world without cancer? Friend, I dream of the day stories like mine are a far away memory. A part of history we’ll refer to as the cancer-era. I was so young. Nobody that age should ever have to live through chemo. Ever.

“Little Venice. That’s the name the Spaniards gave to the lands where the Indians lived in houses built on stilts. These houses were built on the edge of what today is the Maracaibo Lake – which is the biggest lake on the northern part of South America.”

“Here we go ...” George rolled his eyes and continued sketching a graffiti in his notebook.

As I practiced my presentation during recess, my three best friends listened. The four of us were in our usual sharing mode, facing each other on a round concrete bench that circled a tall thin tree. The tropical breeze vigorously shook the foliage that covered the school’s patio. Andrea appeared to be the only one attentive to the presentation, while George and Frank, in between their doodles, were finding ways to mock the story. Of course, why wouldn’t they?

Paying minimal attention to their taunting coffee and cream facial expressions, I continued. “The legend goes that after several weeks of traveling in the oceans, the colonizers found their memories in that rustic landscape, and named these Venice look-alike lands after the city in Italy back in Europe.”

“Not Africa?” George laughed, opening his oversized mouth, and making fun of my stating the obvious. These two filtered very little of their minds, perhaps the reason we became good friends. A smirk came out of my mouth before I continued.

“Some say that they named it Little Venice out of sarcasm and wit. I however, prefer the more romantic version. As it is a uniquely beautiful indigenous sight with centuries of memories for the natives of these fertile lands.”

Eyebrows went up, and laughs followed shortly after ‘fertile’.

Ignoring them, I continued. “For that reason, I think the Spanish must have named these lands to honor the beauty of the landscapes, and its lovely people.”

George and Frank snickered as I finished the rehearsal.

“You are really going to believe that story?” George asked in between his laughter. A rebel without a cause, and a skeptic, he had to have a different version of how things transpired back then. “Let me help you out, this is what really happened ... and you should say it like this in class!” Tittering, then pausing, he dramatized his version with burlesque gestures, “so ... the Spanish had been at sea for weeks ...”

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

Frank added, “they were drunk and dizzy from the salty wine and the motion of the waves.”

They both chuckled. George continued, “Then, they find the houses on stilts that were almost falling in the water.” He raised his volume. “Then the Spanish guy cries out: ‘Dude look! We’re in Venice! Hahaha This is Little Venice! Wait, are those people naked?’”

Frank completed the thought, “Then everyone in the ship starts cackling, and celebrating, that they are finally on land, that there are pearls for the grabbing, naked indigenous women to mate, and spices to take back to the queen and the king of Spain.”

“They hit the jackpot and arrived in Paradise!” George emphasized.

They continued to lark about, as their lousy interpretation of history, was in fact, an argument.

“Point taken. But you are generalizing too,” I snapped back.

Shifting to a more serious tone, George said, “Patty, Spanish oppressed the Indians that lived in these lands. No romance in that story.”

I shrugged. *I still love the story. The name, Venezuela, it’s beautiful!*

“That’s really what needs to come through ... your call.” Completed Frank.

George’s long, pale face moved towards his best friend, and Frank’s round, tan features responded with a glance. Then, in between laughter and mischievous eyes, they both sigh as if they were in love “Ah ... Little Venice!”

“Stop it!” I interrupted pretending to be bothered by their silliness. “It’s my presentation, and the history books talk about their nostalgic memories. Not their sarcasm! You won’t ruin my favorite part of our country’s history. Besides, good things have come out, out of how these things happened.”

They laughed even louder.

Annoyed at the apparent immaturity, Andrea intervened “Grow up people! You are not wearing blue uniforms anymore. Guys stop the nonsense. You are so mean ...”

The recess bell interrupted Andrea. It was time to go back to class. We grabbed our books and walked to our one-hour prison-like sentence of monotonous history class. Andrea and I stayed slightly behind. We’d been friends since the fifth grade, and to some, we looked like we could be sisters. A parallelism of life experiences had reinforced our bond through the years. Her cinnamon skin, a shade darker than mine, her dark hair, slightly thicker than mine.

We were required to use uniforms for school and the color of our tops differentiated our grade. Social status, however, was segregated by the brands of clothing our families could afford. Our

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

high-school uniform - cream color tops - made us feel powerful, and frankly look a bit anemic. Well, in my case, and at that time, anemic was accurate.

“Spanish is after History ... yuck! said Andrea with disgust. Two more hours until noon. These were two long hours as we started craving our home cooked lunches. We paced ourselves to class, looking forward to being picked up by our parents in a few hours.

“I’ll take Quirky over Bambaloo any day!” I replied, referring to our *profes* (teachers) by their nicknames, and expressing my preference for literature over history.

Every one of our *profe* had an important contribution in our lives – their legacy preceded them. Hence, our lecturers were assigned a special name that was passed down generation to generation. Although some nicknames were humorous to us, I doubt that our teachers appreciated them with the same enthusiasm. Other nicknames were simply inappropriate and enhanced the natural tension between students and the “wise.” For the most part, and to us, it was a term of endearment.

Since I was the third in my family, there was an unspoken expectation that I had to be as good as my siblings had been. The pressure was always on. After all, Zoe did win second place in the national math competition, and Pedro was simply perfect in everything he pursued.

Andrea and I quickly talked about our weekend plans. A group of friends were riding bikes on Sunday, as usual. As we entered the classroom, and walked towards our assigned seats near the front, she mentioned that she might not make it as she had a commitment with her mom.

“No snoring during my presentation.” I whispered smiling as we both giggled.

We sat on our seats – one behind the other because even our last names were similar.

For the most part, our education was based on Catholic principles. Reluctantly, we had to attend masses frequently to observe religious ceremonies. However, the scratchy sound system of the brown diamond-shaped church, the soothing white noise of the fans, and the echoes that bounced off the walls, made it difficult to understand the lessons of the priest. It was very easy to tune out their voices during mass. In between daydreams and paper airplanes, we paid little attention to the spiritual content that I may have found useful a year later.

### *Random Stop at Gustavo’s House*

Life has an odd way of hinting. If we pay close attention, we may learn a few things. Most of us speed through the nuggets of wisdom that have been beautifully placed in our path. At times, unknowingly, deciding to learn our lessons the hard way.

Tenth grade, our second to last grade in Venezuelan high-school, had started a few months back. During those last two school years, we had an increased sense of independence. Hence, my friends and I hung out more often. Sunday morning bike rides, were the best. The narrow streets

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

were less busy, without the work commuters, nor drivers on edge. Even with less cars to dodge, riding under the Maracaibo sun was almost an extreme sport. The regional slogan, “Tierra del Sol Amada” (The Land Beloved by the Sun), was created for good reasons. When out on our adventures, we were exposed to the city dangers, leaving our parents slightly concerned. To some extent, that was part of the fun!

It was a cloudy morning. The ride to Julian’s home had been an easy one for the five of us. We arrived at our friend’s house to pick Julian up. As we dismounted our bikes, Monica walked over closer to me to chat in private. George went to the front of the house to ring the doorbell.

“Patty, we are really close to Gustavo’s house. I really want to see him. Can we go?” Monica’s large puppy-dog eyes were begging. “If they let me see him, I could stay. Then you guys pick me up on your way back.” She was our good-hearted Tasmanian Devil-like friend. That morning, she’d tucked her looney-toons multicolored hair, under a baseball cap, to protect her pale skin from overexposure to the sun. There was no sun that Sunday, the cap just looked stylish.

“I don’t know Monica, you are going to get us all in trouble.” I was both hesitant and torn. Seeing Monica would make Gustavo happy.

“Please, please ...” said Monica, bonding with smiles, looking for complicity.

*How can I not support her?*

Julian opened the door and came out of his house squinting to adjust his vision to the daylight.

“Hey guys. My bike is at the house a block away,” said Julian, almost excusing himself from the group. “Patty, you are the lightest one.” He quickly glanced at me, “eek, you’re all skin and bones! Can I ride your bike, and carry you on the handle-bar?” He asked.

“What? No way!” I replied grabbing my bike and placing my foot on the pedal. “Not nice. I’ve been working out.”

Grabbing the handlebar with his large tan hand, he placed the front wheel in between his legs stopping me from riding away. Smiling, he waited for my reply. He must have just jumped out of bed because his curly, sun kissed hair looked wild and big.

“How much weight have you lost? Look at that tiny muscle!” He wrapped his hand around my biceps, and chuckled. Without waiting for my response, he continued, “it’s really close. Only about a block away. A long one, but close.”

Acknowledging my disapproving expression, Julian continued, “oh, don’t worry, it’ll be fine.” Although he wasn’t convincing, the alternative was that he would not join us as he was the only one without a bicycle.

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

Reluctantly, I agreed. He rode my bike, and I hopped on the handlebars. Tightening my core muscles, I balanced my weight to coordinate with Julian’s strokes. The front wheel and handlebar wobbled until we synchronized. His pedal strokes were slow.

Half a block away, concentrated on stability, I spotted a sandy patch on the ground. Julian may have seen it as well and tried to avoid it by making a sharp right turn with the handlebars. The front wheel of the bike hit the edge of the sandy patch and slid. Julian and I fell off the bike in the opposite side from his turn. The sandy road scraped the shin of my left leg. As I reached for my wound, I noticed blood filling the shallow abrasion.

“Are you okay?” Asked Virginia, jumping off her bike, and reaching out to pick me up from the floor.

Julian laughed nervously and reached out to make sure I was okay. The sight of blood starting to drip from my leg changed his facial expression to concern.

“Darn Julian, I can’t believe you!” I said as I lifted myself off the ground and shook off the sand from my shorts and legs. Julian, my competitor at school, had an assigned seat next to mine. I was the better of the two. However, he would tell you something different.

“Is that revenge for my better math grades?” Smack talk would take the focus off my leg.

“Bah!” Once he saw the injury was minor, he continued to laugh aloud with his wide opened mouth. It wasn’t clear if he laughed at my fall, or at the smack talk. With a sliver of guilt, his amusement ceased, and he asked “Really, are you okay?”

“We are close to Gustavo’s house. Let’s go get you cleaned up” said Virginia with her mom-like tone. Her curls up in a ponytail, her thin, tall frame continued to help get the dirt off my clothes. The concern on her face accentuated her friendly large brown eyes and chubby cheeks.

“Yes, lets hurry!” Monica’s smile was a poem.

*How is it that she always gets what she wants?* It must have been her good-natured crazy heart.

“Ugh fine. I’m okay though. Gosh, good thing Andrea couldn’t make it today. She would be flipping out.” I replied laughing nervously as I looked at my scraped leg.

We walked the rest of the way. The middle-class neighborhood was quiet, and we could hear the leaves moving as the breeze made our walk more pleasant. A soft scent of humidity announcing rain and mixing with freshly brewed coffee aromas. It was warm, and the sun was still tucked away behind the thick, gray clouds.

On our way to Gustavo’s house, Monica gave us an update on her boyfriend. He didn’t go to our high-school, and all the information we had access to was second and third hand. He’d recently been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. The type didn’t really make a difference, cancer was dramatic enough.

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

“The last time I saw him, he was very thin and pale,” said Monica, with sadness in her eyes. “He used to be so athletic when he played football. It’s ... it’s just so hard to get used to the crutches. He wobbles around with one leg. Since the amputation, he’s changed. Now he’s grumpy and grieving a lot. I’m not sure if he’s sad for the leg, for chemo, or for everything.”

Words didn’t come easy as I didn’t know how to help. I just listened and let her say anything she wanted. *How do I help her?*

“You know, his best-friend, Terry, asks about you a lot. I think he has a crush on you.” That was Monica, one moment sad, the next second onto something lighter.

“Oh stop. I’m dating Rafa. Besides, I’ve heard he’s a player.” I replied.

“You never know ... he might just get serious if you give him a chance.” She laughed, ran to Gustavo’s house, and knocked on his door.

Gustavo’s neighbor, a nurse, cleaned my leg, and placed a protective bandage. Monica was the only one allowed to see Gustavo. While she was at Gustavo’s house, his aunt told us that he seemed to be progressing well in his treatment. He was in isolation due to his compromised immune system. On the surface, everything seemed to be under control. *Wouldn’t more social interaction help him get better? Why do they isolate him?* There were some things I didn’t quite understand.

As we heard the update, I felt awkward for Gustavo. The experience he was living seemed so removed from ours. It was very hard for me to relate, as if nothing like that could ever in a million years happen to any one of us. *Poor Gustavo!* We were different. We were healthy. We were all having fun with our bikes. Life was not fair for Gustavo, but it was good to us. Although it may sound shallow, real empathy was simply not there. Don’t get me wrong, I did feel bad for him and for Monica. I felt sorry that he was going through cancer, that he had lost a limb, and temporarily had no hair nor eye lashes. My teenage bliss didn’t let me understand his experience.

Completely ignorant of the lessons this kid was facing, we all quickly shifted our attention back to our bikes, and our day ahead. Monica stayed behind. Bike rides with her friends were the perfect cover-up, as her mom didn’t let her have a boyfriend. She seemed to be so in love with Gustavo that paid little attention to grown-up guidance. This was one secret we were all willing to keep with some pride.

You know, when I look back, I wonder if there was anything else I could have done. Perhaps I could have been a better friend. It still feels like my missed opportunity to be there for Gustavo, or even support Monica a bit better.

During the time my wound was cleaned and bandaged, Julian picked up his bike from his home. Paying little attention to nature’s warnings, we got ready to resume our city tour. As we picked our bikes up from the front porch, Virginia got nervous.

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

“I’m so scared. We are going to get in trouble,” she started to cry.

“It’ll be fine. We’ll ride and then pick her up. Just don’t say anything.” I replied.

“I’m just worried,” it was hard to understand Virginia in between her sobbing. “She is so attached to him, and what if he ...,” she couldn’t finish her sentence. Tears poured down her cheeks.

“Virginia! You are crying. Why are you crying?” asked George.

“She’s just worried for Monica,” I jumped in answering for her.

“No, no ... no crying. Happy, smiles, bikes, bikes.” George had a way of making us laugh and feel better.

It worked. Once Virginia cleared her face, we all hopped on our bikes, and started to ride through the neighborhood, and then into the almost empty two-lane highway.

A few miles away, large drops started to quickly fall from the sky. A few seconds later, a tropical storm hit us by surprise. There was no place to get cover, and we were in the middle of *Milagro Avenue* (Miracle Avenue). We rode as fast as we could against the wind, against the water pouring down on us, and against the rivers of brown water gushing towards the drains.

“I’m soaked! Where can we go?” Yelled Virginia.

“My house is not far, but my mom will kill me. I’m going to get grounded for life, if she sees me like this!” yelled George.

The electric jolt from lighting hitting the ground, made us jump and scream. My heart raced. The guys made fun of us.

“We’re three miles away from anyone’s else’ house.” Said Julian as he wiped the water off his large face with his thin matching hands.

“We’re closer to the Lago Hotel. We can go there and wait for the rain to stop.” I projected my voice, so it would carry through the loud water noise. “We can call our parents from the pay phones.” The Lago Hotel was almost a second home for me, as my mom had a membership at their gym. Then I thought about Monica staying behind and started to worry. *Shoot! Monica will be the only one with dry clothes. Ugh, secrets ...*

“Good luck to us getting a phone line. It’s pouring! Those analog lines won’t be working.” Replied Julian.

Digital phones lines were the new communications technology. Not all regions in town had gone digital yet. The old analog system was slow, and sometimes we had to wait long periods of time to get access to a line. It was worse when it rained.

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

We pedaled ourselves to the Hotel, and during the journey the storm receded. A few of us headed towards the pool area to sit by the iconic three-canon monument of the *Batalla Naval del Lago de Maracaibo* (Naval Battle of Maracaibo Lake). The monument was built on the shore and was one of our favorite hang-out spots. The view of the lake was usually spectacular after a strong storm. The peeping rays of sun, that smelled like wet soil and fresh rain, were quickly drying our soaked skins. The others, stayed behind, watching the bikes, and waiting for the sound of an available line to call their families on the payphones, vintage even back then.

“Patty! Isn’t that your mom’s husband, Eduardo?” asked Virginia as we walked outside towards the pool area. A tall man, with dark skin and short, tight, brown curls, was walking in our direction.

“Oh no! Don’t say anything about the fall ... nor Monica,” I whispered barely moving my lips.

“Don’t be silly ... oh, Monica!” said Virginia. The storm seemed to have temporarily washed away her concern for Moni.

“Just don’t – we’re not that close. He’ll go and tell my mom that I was riding my bike, with a bandage on my leg. Monica is in the bathroom, okay?”

Part of me wanted to have good feelings towards Eduardo. Every time I saw his face, I couldn’t help seeing my father’s broken heart from the divorce. I never allowed myself to laugh too much nor have too much fun around someone who had caused despair in my once united family. Although, admittedly, the unity may have been my unfulfilled private dream. Regardless of how I felt, I had to be cordial out of respect for my mother.

As time passed, my family remembered this encounter, especially my mom, with a smidge of regret. We all ignored my pale face, and my very thin frame. After all, I was so active. What could have been wrong, with an adolescent, tumbling her way to adulthood?

## Chapter Two

### 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Love

What’s a story without love? Before we move forward, let’s take another step back to right before 10<sup>th</sup> grade started.

We met August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1987 during a vacation trip with my mom to North Carolina. He later said that he noticed me and ‘my stone washed jeans’ at the Miami airport waiting area. I was also wearing a light blue vertical striped top, but he didn’t comment much on the blouse. At that time, my hair was silky, and my face still looked healthy.

It was warm and crowded in the airplane. As I sat down next to mom and my little brother on our lane, I grabbed my pink diary to start writing. Then, I looked up and saw his light brown hair and large blue eyes passing through the aisle as he made his way to his assigned seat. His smile and confident stride made my world halt as he walked by me. Thick lips and large front teeth, smiled and made me forget about the dread I was feeling because our vacation was ending. Another school year was about to start.

The American Airlines flight was headed back to Maracaibo. Looking towards the back of the plane, I quickly scanned the seats to find out where he was sitting. His smile was about 6 rows from us – the plane wasn’t full. He was looking straight at me waiting for me to turn around. Embarrassed and excited, I smiled back. With my heart racing and my palms sweating, I quickly turned again to face forward. *He is so cute!* As my friends would say – in my eyes.

“Ladies, and gentleman, the Captain has turned on the fasten seat belt sign. If you haven’t already done so, please stow your carry-on luggage underneath the seat in front of you, or in an overhead bin. Please take your seat ...”

While the stewardess demonstrated the flight instructions, my mind was taking off towards teenage crush land. The emotional rush started on the ground and intensified as the plane gained speed to take off. Once in the air, the plane dipped a few times due to ocean turbulence. It felt just like the bolt going on inside of me. Once I got myself together, I turned to look back again, and he moved his hand inviting me to go back to talk with him. I agreed and replied “wait” with my hand.

A bathroom break was the perfect excuse. Mom didn’t buy it. She’d noticed the earlier interaction, and replied with a mischievous smile, squinting her brown eyes “uhum.” Like a good Venezuelan, she was looking her sharpest for travels. A perfectly combed brown hair framed her pale, full oval face. Turning to look at me, grinning at my blushed cheeks she softly said, “be careful.”

Rafael and I met in the back of the plane and sat on the empty seats. Time passed by very quickly as we talked during the entire flight.

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

“Hi. I’m Orocumu Camu” said Rafael introducing himself with his made-up persona. Then smiling he said “Rafael.” I introduced myself as well and then he asked where I lived.

“Maracaibo. I was traveling with my mom for fun. This was my birthday present” I replied. “And you?”

“My brother lives in Atlanta and I’m coming back from a visit.”

Rafael was checking every single detail on my face with warm interest. I must have been doing the same because I could remember him vividly for the next few weeks.

“Is that your mom over there?”

“Yes, and my little brother John.” I answered pointing at the little boy with dark brown, curly hair, and large smile with a dimple in his cheek. He was turned around in his seat trying to find his big sister.

Rafael chuckled. “Where do you go to school? Let me guess ...you must be a sifri-girl from ...”

Rejecting his premature judgement, I quickly replied: “No. San Vicente de Paul School – the best!” I smiled. Getting mixed up with those girls that went to all-girl schools was not cool at all – we thought some of them were a bit full of themselves. The term we used was sifrinás – selfish, self-centered, stuck up, materialistic people with questionable values and motives. Looking back, that was a terrible generalization. We didn’t know any better back then.

“Beg to differ. Los Robles would be the best” He said defending his years of schooling and his family’s all men traditions.

“That’s an all-boy school. How boring!” A childish “yuck” expression may have followed.

“Oh, we had fun” he laughed with a far-away mischievous reminiscing look.

“Had? When did you graduate?”

“I’m in my first year of medical school. General studies.”

*Oh my, he is too old for me!* Someone my father would not approve. He was already an adult going to college and I was still a minor. Dad had already opposed me dating – or I should say holding hands with – my friend Leonardo way back in middle-school.

“It must be nice to be out of high-school.”

“Eh, it’s okay. Over-rated. You ever go to Creolle club? I’ve never seen you there. I would have noticed you.” He changed the subject perhaps avoiding the age difference conversation. The Creole club was Rafael’s social club where he hung out afternoons and weekends. It was a mid

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

to high or well-off social class club with a very nice pool, tennis court and large rooms for receptions and formal dining.

“Not really. I’ve been there. We aren’t members.” Was I out of his social league, or did he even care?

“We should go someday,” said Rafa with a flirtatious smile.

We had so much fun during the flight, that we exchanged phone numbers. He said he would call me to go out and do something fun. And I could not wait to see him again. After our plane landed in Maracaibo, I didn’t hear from him for a few weeks.

### *Our First Date*

During the first week after we met, every time the phone rang, I’d get butterflies in my stomach with the anticipation that it could be Rafa. After a few weeks passed by, I’d forgotten he said he would call.

One afternoon, the phone rang. Immersed in the book I was reading, I dismissed my curiosity. A few seconds later, Pedro yelled.

“Paaaattyyyyyyy! Phone!” My brother placed the speaker of the gray phone on the table.

Jumping off my bed, I ran to the phone, and then paused. Trying to be aloof, I asked my brother who it was. He replied: “Rafael Andres.” Butterflies started flying out of control in my stomach once he pronounced his name. *He called me!* I took a deep breath and trying to sound calm, I greeted him.

“Hi. How are you?” asked Rafael with a friendly, and sexy tone.

“I’m good. How have you been?” I replied still trying not to sound too eager. I suppose we were both wanting to sound interested yet keep our cool.

“I’ve been busy lately with mom and dad.” He paused and then continued “Hey, I’m calling you to see if you’d like to get together this Friday” He asked. “Maybe we can catch a movie or something.”

Thus far, my father, brother or sister had chaperoned me with my guy friends. Especially with Leonardo way before Rafael came in the picture. “That sounds fun, and I want to go but, I have to ask my dad”, I replied hoping he would not think I was too young for him. “What are we watching? I have to say where we are going.”

“We have time to figure that out. I’d pick you up around 6:00”

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

Convincing my father was a work of art, as I’d never been alone in a car with a guy that I liked. Finally, he allowed me to go out with him with a 10:00 PM curfew. That is, after giving my father his last name, his parent’s names, and all the required family information.

The expectation of the date prolonged every second of that week. The hours seemed like decades – I could not wait. *What am I going to wear? How will I say hello? What will we talk about?* I daydreamed the entire week about every possible detail of our first date. My class note books filled up with “I love Rafa,” and “Rafa + Patty,” graffiti, palm trees, hearts, and clouds.

Nothing beats that first love – at times blind, clumsy, and immature. One that we cherish for life partly because of the lessons we learned together.

Friday evening, Rafael picked me up at the door in my apartment. He was late and seemed embarrassed. We didn’t have the convenience of the cell phones back then, so I had been anxiously waiting for an hour. The pit at the bottom of my stomach getting heavier by the second while my au-natural makeup was blending with the moisture in my face.

Pedro welcomed him in, and he sat on the love seat near the door. Freshening up my face and my lipstick, I checked in the mirror to make sure I looked good. As I walked out of my room and into the living room, we both checked each other out. *Just like I remember him.* My heart was racing, and my adrenaline-filled body was trembling with excitement. The more I tried to not show it, the clumsier I may have seemed. He was wearing stone washed jeans, a white shirt loosely tucked in and matching brown belt and shoes. We both leaned over slightly invading our spaces and kissed on the right cheek as is customary in Venezuela. The fragrance of his perfume smeared on my face.

Still embarrassed about the time, he suggested that we go to the Creole Club where we would have dinner with his parents. *I am going to meet his parents!* On our way to the club, Rafael warned me that his mom was very strict, and that she would notice how I used my silverware, and my general table manners. The informality of my upbringing, with strong masculine influence, became irrelevant in that one conversation. Although I was grateful for the coaching, I wondered how much I would have to change of myself to fit in his family.

He showed me the traditional Spanish way to make sure there were no raised eyebrows. For him, it was important to have some sort of parental consent. He also appeared to be aware that the bar was raised to European standards, and that it was difficult to reach in our town. The more formal Colombian influence in my family came in handy that night.

We all met at the entrance of the formal dining room. The lights were dim, and the temperature was very low. My black skirt and light blue tucked in long sleeve top were not going to keep me warm during what seemed to be a very cold dining experience. Rafa’s parents were waiting for us at the lobby of the restaurant. It was hard to miss her large elevator eyes capturing every detail of my attire. Aware of my simplicity, I greeted them politely. *Am I dressed appropriately?* Then, Rafa’s father, a thin, white-haired, friendly gentleman showed us the way to our table.

Forgive Me – *“Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!”*

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

The awkward initial small talk set the tone for the evening. We ordered our meals and as expected, the service was exquisitely timed, and flawless.

“So, Patricia, I heard you met my son on the flight back from Miami,” said Rafael’s mom as she was cutting through her piece of lean chicken breast. It was unavoidable to notice that her ring and pinky fingers were lifted as she elegantly sliced her poultry.

“Yes ma’am. My mother, little brother, and I went on a trip to North Carolina. Rafael and I met on the airplane,” I replied politely. She took the bite size chicken breast piece to her mouth with her left hand while her three fingers of her right hand held her knife.

A thin and short body frame, with pale skin, and long features; this petit woman exuded class and elegance in every move. After swallowing, and pausing, she continued the conversation. “Yes, I hear. He was visiting his brother in Atlanta. Carmelo Enrique went to school in Gainesville, FL and now works for an important technology corporation.” She explained as she continued working on piecing her poultry with mushroom sauce, scalloped potatoes, and steamed vegetables.

“Oh, now Ellen, you are boring her with the stories” interrupted Rafael’s father. A very kind and humorous man. The father-son resemblance, both in looks and personality, was very noticeable.

“She is not bored Carmelo. We are having a conversation.” She said talking back to her husband, and then quickly turned to look at me with her pronounced large caramel eyes. Continuing with her interrogation, this time digging a bit deeper. “So, what do your parents do?” That didn’t take too long. I noticed her hair didn’t move as she moved her face – short-hair styled to perfection. Not one strand out of place. I’d never met anyone so polished.

“Both of my parents are professors at the University, ma’am. My father is a Chemist and my mother a Biologist.” I wondered if she would overlook the known dysfunction in my family, over the obvious academic accomplishments. The cold in the room was chilling my bones.

“Oh, impressive. You must be wanting to become a scientist as well, then,” she continued.

“Actually, I don’t quite know yet. I do like chemistry classes. The test for college aptitude show that I am better suited in business.” I answered, trying not to come across insecure of my vocation and interest.

“Patricia, you have plenty of time to decide. How is your meal, dear?” interjected Mr. Carmelo. Relieved that he had noticed my discomfort, I appreciated that he had the kindness to help me get out of the awkward interrogation.

“It’s delicious, thank you.” I replied looking at the last pieces of the medium-well fillet mignon on my plate and, savoring the earthiness of the beef blended with just the right amount of salt. It was perfectly cooked just how I liked it.

Forgive Me – *“Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!”*

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

“They have a very good chef at the club. Rafael Andres ...” interrupted Mrs. Ellen “have you taken Patricia around the club?”

“After dinner, mom,” he answered. “By the way, when are you guys leaving to Caracas?”

“Oh, the trip ... yes, we have to pack the kitchen and send the boxes.” And then she continued “Patricia, did Rafael Andres tell you we are moving to Caracas? We have an apartment there and we are all moving.” She emphasized ‘all’ to make it clear that her son was moving as well. “I can’t stand the heat in Maracaibo. Besides, I have many friends in Las Mercedes in Caracas. We have breakfast and tea parties all the time. The tea biscuits are divine! My social life is certainly much more active there.”

Rafael leaned over next to me and whispered in my ear “Do you want to walk around the club?” rescuing me from more parental talk and etiquette. His mother might have touched a sore topic.

“Sure,” I nodded “May I be excused?”

“Rafael Andres, you haven’t finished your meal. Don’t you want dessert?” Something about how she asked each question made me feel like I was doing something not quite to her liking.

“No, we want to go chat a while, mom. I’ll see you guys at home”

“You kids go and have fun then. Rafael, don’t be home late” Mrs. Ellen emphasized her message with her piercing eyes.

“It was a pleasure to meet you Patricia.” Said Mr. Carmelo with a big smile, softening the unspoken tension in the air.

Rafael lightly held my hand as he led me outside of the club. I was relieved by the contrasting warm temperature outside, and the warmth in Rafa’s hand. As we walked outside, Rafael greeted everyone – friends, workers, parents, acquaintances. He was social and popular, and he also treated everyone with a lot of respect. We walked at a slow pace while he pointed out his favorite tennis court, the pool, and the café that had the best tequenos (fried cheese-sticks rolled in dough) in town. It’s mostly about the experience ... one dip in herb sauce, one bite of tequeno, and one long steaming cheesy string. Rafa showed me the places that were special to him, including the wooden bench where he kissed his first teenage crush.

Time passed very quickly, and we had to drive back home. It turned out to be a short date – long enough to want more. We honored my curfew – which was the first sign that he was interested in seeing me again. He parked the car and asked me to wait. Walked over to my door, opened it, and held my hand to help me out of his red corolla. Holding my hand, he walked me to the door of my apartment. My heart raced again as he leaned forward and emphasized a long tender goodbye kiss on my cheek. Then he pulled back looked at me and leaning forward again gave me a soft, tender good-bye hug. His right hand softly pressed the center of my back. His arms felt safe and warm. Closing my eyes, I hugged him connecting with his heart for that very brief embrace.

Forgive Me – “*Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!*”

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

Before leaving he asked me out again on Saturday. My father had met him and had taken a liking to Rafa. Dad gave me permission to go out with him again to finally catch that movie. This time, he picked me up, on time. It was a joy to share a movie and to have a very informal dinner with Rafael. Through his thoughtful details, he made me feel very special. After the movies, we drove around town and held hands in his car. Everything seemed new as I dipped my toes in the magical waters of love.

“Patty, I’m going to Atlanta on Monday to visit my brother.” He said breaking a long silence. “Before I go, I ... I, want you and I to be very good friends.” Although he said friends, the flirtation in his eyes suggested a different kind of closeness.

“I want that too, Rafael,” I smiled back, assuring him that I was as interested as he was.

He kept driving. And then he said: “and that’s it?”

Catching me off guard by the question, I asked what he meant.

At the next traffic light, he stopped the car on the red. He turned my face to face his and pulled me towards him. I was trembling. He said something, I think. Not hearing what he was saying, I saw his lips coming towards mine. He kissed me so delicate, so careful, so quiet. His thick lips were chapped from sun dehydration. My heart was beating fast. *I am so attracted to this man!*

Honk, honk!! The car behind us flickered its head lights. The stoplight had turned green and we were still trapped in our moment. After a sexy smile, he grabbed the steering wheel and the stick shift to start the car in motion again. My heart was still pounding out of my chest, and I had a smile on my face that I could not control. I rested on the passenger seat and took a deep breath to calm myself and bring my heart-rate back to normal.

It was a relatively happy life ... one that many would dream of having. I had everything a teenage young lady would wish for: great friends, a loving boyfriend, good education, and lots of fun parties. At times and, despite a rough start having divorced parents, I felt like I was on top of the world. There was nothing that could stop me from smiling and from loving life. I often felt the adrenaline one feels when going down on a roller coaster – all you can do is laugh and scream with joy. Unfortunately, the story was just about to turn around ...

### **Chapter Three**

#### **An Angel Departs**

The last two years of our high-school years felt like fast-tracked lessons of life and death. Although I was thin during tenth grade, there were no noticeable signs in my body. Occasional drops in energy mostly due to poor choices in food – dairy was never a friend. At the start of the year though, I felt physically okay and mentally focused.

Andrea’s family moved to an apartment in Los Olivos – A neighborhood with condos and tall apartment buildings. Our large play space now reduced to a smaller red, white and black decorated room. We had spent the night at her house because we were going to join her boyfriend and family in the mountains that were part of the Andes formation. Our trip had just gotten canceled because there was a problem with the home in which we were going to stay. Andrea had had a tantrum earlier that day as, understandably, she wanted to go meet up with her beau. The phone rang, and she went to pick it up thinking it was Rafael – yes, even our boyfriends had the same name.

“Hello? Who is it?” said Andrea. She was already upset so I didn’t make much of the snappy tone she was using with the person she was talking to. “He’s on a trip. Why? What the ... what? No.” Then she hung the receiver with force.

“She said Rafael is dead” said Andrea in disbelief and still with a snappy tone.

Andrea’s mom Yoli and I looked at each other. “What?”

“That’s what Molly said. She said Rafael is dead. Mom, call someone. Please someone call people. Tell me this is not true.” Andrea started talking frantically and in disbelief. We already suspected that Molly, the girl who had called didn’t like her, so this might have been a terrible joke to play. There may have been some connection between Molly and Rafael’s family. I don’t have those details. Somehow, she seemed to know something Andrea didn’t know. Yoli immediately got on the phone – she shared nothing. We imagine that our parents talked and shortly after, Yoli – with a serious stone face – drove us to my house. During the drive, Andrea’s mom didn’t say a word. There was a deafening silence during those 20-minute. We could hear the sound of the changing gears, we felt the jolts of the velocity and the wind anxiously blowing inside her yellow jeep. My mind and my body in shock.

Once gathered in the small living room of my apartment the story was confirmed. October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1987, Andrea’s boyfriend passed away in a motorcycle accident. He was the light of every party, a caring and loving brother, an exemplary son, the best guy friend for many of us and the dear boyfriend to my best friend. It was the first-time death had hit us so close, so unexpected and, so painfully hard.

Rafael had gone on a regular weekend trip to the Mountains with his family and some friends. Very familiar with the area, he felt comfortable and grabbed his motorcycle one night and didn’t wear his glasses. His tan face, chocolate hair and thin small mouth matched his malfunctioning dark eyes. Without his thick glasses, and even during the day-time, he could barely see. He

Forgive Me – *“Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!”*

Book Proposal

By M. Patricia Diaz

missed his turn on the curvy road and drove his chunky athletic body straight into the abyss. Rafael broke his neck and died at impact. He was found the next afternoon by the rescue squad – almost without a scar – far down from the main road.

He physically departed from earth that day leaving us all with the great void of his cheerful presence and his light-hearted spirit. The fragility of life shocked us all with disbelief and denial. We would never see him again. Ever.

It was as if I was watching a movie and things were happening around me. A paralyzing disconcerting shock of separation once again manifesting itself in my life. Standing still, I didn’t know what to do. My good friend had just passed away and, at the same time, Andrea was suffering an unbearable pain. She lost her love in this terrible and unexpected accident. I had never seen her so desperate and so inconsolable.

“No!” She yelled with desperation. “Let’s go and see him. He is still alive. Where is Rafael?” “No! I know he’s still alive ... I know he’s alive! Patty, tell them ... he’s alive!” She yelled and desperately wandered all over my apartment, perhaps trying to find answers, while she cried herself to exhaustion.

It may have been my father who grabbed her to calm her down. My subconscious may have protected me with selective amnesia of some of the painful details of this weekend. Only after conversations with friends and Andrea, have we been able to piece the events. However, for the longest time, these days remained untouched in the past. No one wanted to re-live that again. Ever.

That night we stayed at Andrea’s house. The following day, she woke up and sat down on her bed. I was still half asleep. She was perky eyed and awake. A deep void still in my stomach

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“I want pancakes”, she replied as she quickly got out of bed.

We were making pancakes for Andrea with Yoli when the phone rang. Andrea picked it up hopeful she would hear Rafael’s voice in the other side of the receiver. Instead, it was his mom with information about the funeral. Loosing someone so close feels so surreal. It’s like they are still there but you can’t really see them. His scent was still in some items Andrea kept, his laughter was still a melody replaying in our minds, and his body was still the vase where his generous spirit had manifested his life.

We mourned his death and celebrated his life at the funeral home. All of us were there, Virginia, Monica, the twins, Lili (our other friend), and of course Andrea. Once we arrived, Andrea went straight to speak with Rafael’s parent who were also inconsolable. Somehow, they found it in themselves to reassure her that he had not suffered any pain during his transition to heaven. While Andrea was sharing time with the parents, we all shared stories and anecdote about our experiences with Rafael.

Forgive Me – “Pretty Girls don’t get Cancer!”

Book Proposal

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The image of one of the last pictures we took together kept repeating itself in my mind.

*“Patty let’s take a picture together” said Rafael one day during recess. His blue top contrasted with our cream – he was a bit younger than us. He stood right next to me, in between Andrea and I and, humorously grabbed me by the waist and then said: “Can you imagine if you and I have children?” Andrea smiled understanding her boyfriend’s playfulness and rolled her eyes. He continued “We would get an ass of a child!” And then laughed at his silly joke and started dancing an 80’s version of in-place hip hop. He emphasized his humor by moving his oversized butt uncontrollably. That was Rafael ... always laughing, always making people smile, always living life on the edge.*

That first trimester of 10<sup>th</sup> grade was academically my worst. I lost my passion for studying and my boyfriend Rafael Andres, became my one and only interest. With his help and a good dose of parental nagging I was able to do better on my second monthly exams. Andrea however, didn’t recover all year. The emotional pain was too strong and problems in her life became unbearable. She unfortunately flunked the year. Helplessly, I felt there was nothing I could do about it – I didn’t know how to help Andrea. My best friend had lost her grade and next year we were going to be in different classrooms and someone else would be sitting on her chair.

During the next months, my relationship with Rafael kept evolving and we became very close to one another. We often got together and supported each other in our dreams and aspirations. Because of this closeness and, in part to get away from some of the pain of losing a friend, most of my interests revolved around hanging out with him. And although I had no visible signs of disease, the corrosive effect of sadness was slowly creeping into my mind.

I turned 16 that November. Some of the people I cared about could not be there physically for my special day. The concept of ‘being there spiritually’ was foreign at this point in my life, hence, I let their absence get to me too much. I was so hurt that I even wrote about my loneliness on some journaling I practiced back then. My sister and my brother were both in Caracas for different reasons. Rafael Andres was also in Caracas attending some family matters. Our late friend Rafael was in heaven. Some very good friends didn’t show up nor call me – as they usually had on every one of my birthday celebrations. It was an unusually lonesome birthday that year. I was feeling gray and not so loved. Maybe we were all dealing with our losses and no one wanted to talk about it anymore. And instead, we slowly started to separate.