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How Did You Propose to Mom?

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*My most brilliant achievement was my ability
to persuade my wife to marry me.*
Winston Churchill

The question caught me by surprise when it was uttered by my daughter, who is closing on thirty-five years of age. Had she been seven when she asked, she would have said something like *Kak tea sdyelal prodloyenia mami?* (How did you propose to mama?). But, of course, I did not know Nastya when she was seven; Fran and I adopted her at age ten, after we had been married for nearly two decades.

It was a surprising but valid question, though she was unprepared for my answer: “Actually, I never asked your mother to marry me.” And then, as I had to, I proceeded to explain.

It all started at 4 a.m. on March 28, 1979, when the reactor of Unit 2 of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania experienced a partial meltdown that resulted in the release of radioactive gases and iodine into the environment. Following the accident, there were numerous investigations of the event by federal, state, and local

organizations, with scores of government representatives descending on the plant to look at records and interview the operating utility's personnel.

The law firm at which I was a third-year associate had secured the operating license for Three Mile Island, so our lawyers were dispatched to "the island" to support the utility's response to the investigations. At the time of the accident, I was single and unattached, so I was ordered to move to Middletown, Pennsylvania and live out of motel rooms five days a week – returning to my townhouse in Rockville, Maryland on Friday nights, only to drive back to the plant on Sundays.

The investigations extended through the spring and summer of 1979. I became tired of the travel, the hard work, the boxed lunches, and the fast-food dinners, and was praying to the gods for some relief from the relentless routine.

The gods answered my prayers. Early in the week prior to the Labor Day holiday, I received a call from a younger associate and friend, Susan, who asked me for a favor, presented in the form of an invitation to a holiday party. Susan and her husband were members of a group that rented a summer house in Cape May, New Jersey. The group was getting ready for their traditional Labor Day weekend festivities, and Susan wanted to attend, but had a problem: her husband was away taking courses at a university and she, being from New York City, did not know how or care to drive. Would I drive with her to the beach house, stay there as her guest, and enjoy a three-day vacation?

I had been planning on spending the long weekend doing a mound of laundry and taking care of other household needs, but the invitation to a beach party was irresistible to a man in my condition. I said yes.

We arrived at the Cape May beach house at dinner time, after a ride through the New Jersey pine barrens and a succession of farms and small towns. The house rented by the group was a three-story Victorian structure with vinyl siding and a wide front porch. As Susan and I got there, a reception of sorts was in full swing in the living room; a dozen or so of people in their thirties or early forties were sipping wine or cocktails, eating canapes, and engaging in cacophonous conversations.

A clear female voice seemed to stand out of over the din. I looked across the crowded room and there she was: a short, pretty, blondish woman of my same age, smartly dressed and wearing nice jewelry, talking about something with another, taller woman.

Conversations ceased the moment Susan and I entered the room. All of them, of course knew Susan, but it was my appearance that drew the silence.

I had driven directly from Middletown to Washington DC (about 130 miles) to pick up Susan at the office and had no time to change. I was wearing, therefore, my work outfit: jeans and a striking yellow tee shirt with a radiation warning circle bearing the phrase “Three Mile Island Recovery Team” embossed in large red characters. Susan walked to the middle of the room and announced: “This is my friend Mat Diaz from the law firm. He defends the nukes.”

There was a collective intake of breath and several people took a step away as if I was contagious. The members of the crowd, I was to learn later, were all professionals from New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Most were opposed to nuclear power, and my presence there was as welcome as a fox dropping into a chicken coop.

One of the men, who functioned as the secretary of the house, came to my rescue. He shook my hand and greeted me warmly: “Welcome, Mat. I’m Ted. Have some wine” and pointed in the direction of a table holding bottles of red and white wine, scotch, and vodka.

I made my way to the table, poured myself a glass of red, and headed to where the short, blondish woman was standing, momentarily alone. I proffered my hand to her and said cheerfully: “Hi, I’m Matias but you can call me Mat.” She gave me a wan smile and retorted without enthusiasm: “Hi. I’m Fran.” We made small talk for a minute and then she said “Excuse me” and walked off to rejoin her friend, the tall woman.

I was left not knowing what to do, but luckily Ted announced: “Guys, it’s time for our reservation at The Mad Hatter. Let’s go!” The room quickly emptied and I hastened to join Susan to go have dinner.

The restaurant was a few blocks away and on the way there I had time to ask Susan: “Who is that short woman wearing a black pantsuit?”

“That’s Fran. She has been a member of the beach house for several years, but I don’t know her all that well. She joined through her friend Alice, the tall dark hair lady I mentioned to you in the ride from DC.” I had asked Susan as we drove to New Jersey whether there were any single women that I might find interesting. Susan said: “Well, there is Alice, who is nice, but I think she may be seeing someone.” Susan had never mentioned Fran.

At the restaurant, they had reserved a long table for us. People grabbed seats in proximity to their friends. I was at the far end of the table, next to Ted. Susan found a seat across from Fran and eased herself there.

I had a flash of inspiration and called over to Susan: “Do you mind if we trade seats? I’m sitting close to this fan and I feel like I may be coming down with a cold already.” Susan grinned good naturedly and got up, chuckling something about those capricious Latins.

I sat across the table from Fran through what turned out to be an interminable dinner. The food was slow in coming and I tried to make conversation with Fran. It was soon apparent that she was not interested in talking to me, but spent the night chatting with the people on both sides of her. I felt like Pepe Le Pew, the skunk in the cartoons who tries in vain, time and again, to entice a female cat that wants nothing to do with him. All I learned after some desultory exchanges was that Fran was a psychotherapist, lived in an apartment in Alexandria, Virginia, and was originally from the New York City and the upper New Jersey area. Slim pickings for so much effort.

I was dead tired by the time I dropped myself into one of the spare bedroom cots and tried to doze off, but felt a little angry and frustrated. I really liked Fran, but I could have been a Martian for all the attention I got from her. I suspected that she was confused by my heavy accent and turned off by my occupation, neither of which I could do much about. I was still turning over the problem in my mind when I was finally overcome by sleep.

The following morning, Saturday, the beach house routine was to grab a quick breakfast and head for the ocean, hoping to reach our destination before the shore got too crowded. The group had discovered a nice, secluded beach behind a broad white building with a slanted red roof topped by a huge cross. Susan explained to me that the building was a retreat house for some religious order, and the beach it fronted was called “the Nun’s Beach” by the locals. It was relatively deserted, particularly in comparison with the main Cape May beach, over a mile away.

I had been lent a large towel, and I positioned myself next to Fran, who was wearing a blue blouse and shorts and was seated on a beach chair reading a novel. She seemed intent on ignoring me, so I figured I would have to make a move to catch her attention.

“Say, Fran” I asked innocently, “you are a psychotherapist, right?”

“Yes,” she replied somewhat curtly.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“What do you do when you see your patients?”

We were talking about her work, so she assumed a serious, professional air, and tried to explain things to me in a few words:

“Well, we generally talk. I mostly listen, and try to guide the conversation to the areas where the client is experiencing problems. By talking about his or her issues, I try to get the client to better understand the issues, and start learning how to deal with them.”

“So, people pay money to talk to you so you can help them deal with their problems.”

Fran sighed and replied:

“That’s kind of simple minded, but yes, that’s what happens.”

I assumed a puzzled air and retorted, as if surprised:

“For my life, I can’t understand why people would pay money to third parties to help them with their issues instead of dealing with the problems themselves.” The casual putdown of psychotherapy was a canard, for I had great respect for the mental health professions, but I was being provocative.

Fran's expression changed into a mixture of pity and annoyance. She said nothing, but it became clear that she was paying full attention to me now. I suspect she took me for a poor ignorant soul needing guidance instead of an arrogant hired gun.

Another tradition of the beach house was to have a big dinner on Saturday night, that one or more of the members would cook. This weekend was Fran's turn, and she had chosen to make pasta with shrimp and vegetables, a dish that met the approval of the other female guests as it was seen as slenderizing. The recipe called for generous amounts of vegetables and, since there were going to be over a dozen people at the table, its preparation required cutting up four pounds of carrots and zucchini into matchstick slices.

I heard Fran lamenting that just getting the carrots and zucchini cut would take a lot of time, so she would not be able to return to the beach in the afternoon as many of the other guests were getting ready to do. I went into the kitchen and made an extravagant offer. "You go take a nap, read, or pay another visit to the Nun's Beach. I will cut up the vegetables for you." She was incredulous at first, but realizing that my offer was serious, she consented. "Let me watch you cut up a couple of carrots to make sure you do it right." I was unfazed; I put on an apron, found a large bowl and a sharp kitchen knife, and set to work.

It was tedious, time-consuming work, but by mid-afternoon I had filled the bowl with one-inch pieces of green and orange raw vegetables and announced to Fran, who was sitting on the porch reading her novel: "*Madame est servie.*" She looked up from her book, smiled, and for the first time regarded me with something other than annoyance.

The dinner was a success, everyone complimented Fran for the fine meal she had prepared, and she acknowledged my help.

By the time I had to get back home on Monday, Fran and I had spent some time chatting and doing the Sunday Times crossword puzzle together, and had parted company in good terms.

As I dropped Susan at her home, she asked the inevitable question: “Did you have a good time?”

“Better than I expected,” I replied.

Weeks later the detail at Three Mile Island concluded and I returned to my office in Washington and my townhouse in Rockville. I was at work one day when Jim, a partner at the firm for whom I had done a couple of projects in my pre-nuclear days, came to my office to tell me he was holding a party to celebrate his moving into a new condominium he had just purchased. “I want it to be special, so I’m making it a costume party. Do you want to come?”

I was not really interested, but out of politeness I replied. “Let me think about it.”

“Please do, and let me know. By the way, the party will be strictly for couples, no stag crashers allowed. So, round up one of those *señoritas* with whom you hang out and bring her along.”

I was not hanging out with anyone those days, but Jim’s invitation gave me an idea: call the elusive woman I had met in Cape May and see if I could get her to come with me. So, I called Fran.

She would likely have turned down my invitation but, by a stroke of luck, she knew Jim. He was also a member of the beach house, although he had been away during the Labor Day weekend. The fact that it was Jim’s party persuaded her to consider coming. “I know Christie, Jim’s girlfriend. She is a very sweet girl and I would enjoy catching up with her,” said Fran.

Striking while the iron was hot, I made attendance to the party a fait accompli. “Look, the affair is in two weeks, and we would need to rent costumes. How about you and I go this weekend to a rental place to see if we can find something to wear, preferably matching outfits?”

“OK” she agreed.

I pressed on: “Maybe we can go Saturday afternoon and get a bite together afterwards?”

“OK,” she repeated, but I detected doubt in her voice.

“You have to move very gingerly with this woman” I told myself.

Finding costumes to rent proved more difficult than we had anticipated. We had to comb through three shops, for Fran was very picky about getting an outfit that was not ridiculous and did not make her “look fat.” At the end, we found what proved an ideal costume for the pair of us. I got a wide rim sombrero, a satin sash, and a red cape, so I would go dressed as a toreador. Fran rented a white blouse with flowers sewn in, a ruffled, black skirt that cascaded to the floor, a sash that matched mine, a hairnet, and an oversized fan. Looking at ourselves in the mirror at the shop, we thought we looked perfectly matched.

The party was a real success, and everyone complimented us on the costumes. I was not much of a dancer and neither was Fran, so we spent most of the time talking to one another or to other guests. We both drank too much, and when I took Fran home, she was almost falling asleep. As I dropped her off at her apartment, I inquired: “Did you enjoy yourself?” “Yes, I did” she replied with some effort, in an uncharacteristic drawl.

“Do you want us to do something next weekend, maybe go to the movies and have dinner?”

There was again that hesitation, the reluctance to commit that always kept me on tenterhooks. “Call me midweek and let’s talk about it.”

Our friendship developed slowly over the next couple of months. My efforts to gain Fran’s good graces showed signs of progress, but her reticence kept making me uneasy. It was then that I decided to hold a small Christmas Eve dinner, inviting her and a couple of my closest friends to attend. I made a point of letting everyone know I would do the cooking, in another effort to impress Fran.

Except for the bakery-bought bread, I prepared the entire dinner myself. Lasagna, which I had learned to bake following Betty Crocker’s instructions; a three-cheese Caesar salad; and the only dessert I knew how to make, condensed milk *dulce de leche*. To play it safe, I kept refilling the glasses with my favorite Rioja, hoping the alcohol would dull the guests’ discerning taste buds.

Over coffee, everyone praised me wildly. Fran, who was herself a wonderful cook, acknowledged that she was surprised that I had it in me to prepare such a meal. Little did she know that this was would end up being my last foray into the culinary arena.

A few days later, Fran and I made a cameo appearance at some friends’ New Year’s party and stayed long enough to watch as the ball dropped at midnight in Times Square. 1979 had been a good year, but it was time to move on. 1980 beckoned.

The most important event of that holiday season was still to come. On Sunday, January 20, Fran held a Super Bowl watching dinner to which I was invited, together with her two favorite friends – a couple in which the wife had been Fran’s sole confidant during those years in when both were freshly divorced.

Nobody was interested in the game, and we engaged in animated conversation as the Rams were getting beaten by Pittsburgh. At halftime, Fran served a delicious meal featuring one of her specialties, chicken and ham pillows, which we devoured. Fran was, however, a very messy cook, so that while they repaired to the living room to chat, I volunteered to do the dishes and put everything away, a mighty enterprise that consumed nearly half an hour. Unbeknown to me, while they watched me work the two women gave me high marks for my domestic talents, as willingness to clean the kitchen after a meal is apparently a rare, but highly appreciated, trait in a man.

The game was over but both couples stayed on, sipping the high alcohol grappa that I had brought as my contribution to the dinner. As the night progressed, we all became a little woozy and incoherent. Close to midnight, Fran's friends took their leave – fortunately, their home was only a short drive away.

I hugged Fran. We kissed. We held each other in our arms. We kissed again.

I yawned. “It’s going to be hard for me to drive all the way back to Rockville, forty minutes away...”

“No need to do that. Stay the night” replied Fran.

That night she confided in me for the first time. “I have had bad luck with men. The one I married was a rascal who cheated on me and, after our divorce, failed to pay my alimony, leaving me penniless at a time in which I was struggling through graduate school. Other men I have known since my divorce have been vain and shifty. The weekend we met I had just broken up with a guy who cared only about his fancy boat. I was wanting so much to spend the three-

day holiday away from men, relaxing and talking to my female friends, but you had to barge in and spoil everything.” She smiled ruefully.

“Well, haven’t I proved that I am different?” I asked.

“The jury is still out on that, but for the moment you are OK.”

From that day on, I started to move in with Fran in small, deliberate increments. For a couple of weeks, I was coming in Saturday afternoon and returning to my townhouse Sunday night. Then, I would come in on Saturday and stay the weekend, going to work directly from her apartment. Later, I took to coming to her place Friday after work and not leaving until Monday.

Then I figured it would no longer be too startling if I declared: “This is silly. Why don’t I just move my stuff over here and go to my townhouse only occasionally?” I held my breath, fearing her rebuff.

She smiled knowingly. “You are sneaky, aren’t you?”

By the late spring I was feeling comfortably settled in Fran’s apartment when she surprised me with a new thought. “Listen, this place is too cramped for two people. We need to move to better quarters.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s buy a house.”

It took me a few seconds to let that thought sink in, then I shouted: “Yes! Let’s do it! Let’s start looking at houses!”

From that point on, things fell into place with surprising speed. I put my townhouse on the market and got two offers right away, one above the asking price. We finalized that sale by

late summer. Meanwhile, after some looking, we found a nice house whose owners were divorcing and were eager to go separate ways. We moved rapidly on the purchase and, by the end of 1980, closed on the property as “tenants by the entirety.” We had become partners in more ways than one.

We got our first dog early the following year. It was a middle-aged yappy ball of black fur that we rescued out of the animal shelter. Choo, as the previous owners had named her, lived contentedly with us as her new family except for occasional forays into the neighbors’ home to beg brazenly at their table during their meals. She provided entertainment and a sense of completeness to our household.

Fran spent the next year fixing up, redecorating, and otherwise improving the new home. Her task was done by mid-1982 (although, as I had come to realize, she was never done with her projects). At that point, we started talking about our summer vacation, in which we had agreed to go to the West Coast to visit a cousin of hers who owned a home in Carmel. Midway through our planning discussions, Fran stared at me and said:

“I have an idea. Let’s get married and make the trip west our honeymoon.”

I was floored. For a person who had approached each move forward in our relationship with such trepidation, this was an astonishing thing for Fran to suggest. I asked:

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

She gave a wide smile. “We took the big step when we decided to buy this house together a year and a half ago. Getting married is minor compared to that. Plus, my mother keeps asking when you are going to make an honest woman out of me.”

We married on October 24, 1982, and lived happily for forty years thereafter. I never asked for her hand in marriage, but this did not matter. We were sufficiently in love that that such a request would have not been needed.

END