

“IT IS TOO LATE“

by *LOURDES VALLS DE LEON*
UNIV. DE PUERTO RICO
PONCE

Yesterday was Miguel's burial. I hadn't received news from him until that telegram arrived yesterday morning while I was tied up in the warehouse of the shoe factory. The same shoe factory which has been my death in life jail for the last twenty-five years.

It was Mercedes who received the telegram before she left for the market place. She sensed I needed to know about the words enclosed in that telegram; therefore, she rushed to the factory. And, oh, was she right! I had waited such a long time; I had gone through nightmares and chills, waiting to hear from Miguel. Finally, I did receive a message, but only to learn he had died.

Since Mercedes gave me the paper. I've read it more than twenty times, not because I wouldn't trust her words, not that I wouldn't understand the words enclosed in that cold, unexpressive telegram, but because it was the last thing I hoped for at this particular moment.

Miguel had been my one and only true friend, my conscience, my playmate, my confident. Yet, I always envied his outgoing personality, his intelligence, his friendliness, and even his ability to convince all the boys from Villa Olga that he was right. He was not the toughest guy in our neighborhood in Machuelo, but he really was capable of picking more sugar canes from the trucks which passed near by our school. He also won at athletic competences and not to mention his stardom when playing baseball at our special kid made baseball park.

Then we went on to Pujals Intermediate School, and Miguel was sure to be a sort of school hero. Not only he was the teacher's pet but also, the girls' idol.

Sometimes we were penniless to buy a "piragua" or even a "limber" when we walked home from school, but Miguel always managed to receive any of these or even both as long as he would please the girls with his companionship to walk them home.

Crushing that telegram once more within my fingers before I straighten it out to read it again and again, my mind seems to get heavier and heavier just to think that time has flown away so rapidly. "Why did I have to wait so long?" "Now it is too late!"

...And I remember then that when Miguel finally announced his enthusiasm for one of his admirers, I could not be but content to have Miguel feel about life the same way I did. I had always been second to Miguel. No that I wasn't handsome as he was, or intelligent, or even outgoing. Yet, he had a way with things. It seems that he was born with the brightest star to shine upon him. A star which was my entire admiration and devotion.

Until one day, that day he borrowed a car to take his date to "El The Place" on a Friday night. I gave him the \$10.00 I had kept for a long time. The money I had earned by shining shoes every day after school at our "Plaza Las Delicias" in Ponce. I had shone about 85 or 90 pairs of shoes to get that money. Mother had told me that it would be the only way I would accomplish my dream to move to Río Piedras to my uncle's house in order to study at the UPR. "You know, I have always dreamed about being a lawyer". However, dreams are but dreams, and only those who are born with a star upon them will be able to reach that star. Anyway, I didn't hesitate to lend my \$10.00 to Miguel.

He had always criticized my serious philosophical way of living. I studied hard all my life; then, I fell in love during my senior year in high school which led to Miguel's constant witty remarks. This is why I felt so enthusiastic when he decided to pay real attention to a girl. This time it was serious. He wouldn't let Sonia chase him; instead, he would go nuts for her. But Sonia, Mercedes's cousin, was the girl I had been going out with for about two years.

Sonia had struggled all her life to move away from Villa Olga. She also had dreams of being someone, a Home-Economics teacher and she would apply to the UPR that next autumn. All these plans vanished as Miguel loaded her head with dreams of illusions and fictitious ideals. "Why worry about the university, you'll discover money and excitement as we move to New York", he would constantly repeat to Sonia.

"Today I still don't get it." "Why did she change?"

"The things which made me prefer Sonia to Mercedes were her seriousness, her closeness to reality, her everlasting strength to overcome that poverty and lack of identity which most of the time surrounded us.

Then, that same day I lent the \$10.00 to Miguel, I learned I was contributing to my own disillusion. Not only a disillusion, but the

cruel pain of growing up unexpectedly. I learned it was Sonia whom Miguel had fallen for.

"How can people be so inconsiderate; my reason for living during those meaningful years of youth had collapsed.

The days which followed were the grayest days I had ever spent at my poor and humble home in my old "barrio Machuelo". My poor barrio which has been changed into a conglomerate of apartments, hive-like houses with no illusions or identity, full of people with hopeless dreams.

Ironically, it was Tío Julio, the same one who would make it possible for me to apply to the UPR in order to be a lawyer who helped me to come to New York, this cold place which has been my undercover refuge. But, oh, being a lawyer, dreams which haunt me once more. Dreams which have tortured me for twenty-five years since the day I left my beloved "barrio Machuelo" because I was not strong enough to face Sonia and even worse, to face my always admired twin brother Miguel.

Once more I crushed the telegram paper within my tired and callous hands, but this time it would be the last time. I would crush that long waited piece of paper. Nevertheless, the words in it were not the ones I had longed for. I would have preferred to read just three words from my brother "Please come back".

Now it is too late. "Why didn't I dare, why was I such a coward to hide from the truth. Now my mind is dumb, thirsty and curious to know. I who always felt and suffered everything my brother did, but this time I had no way of finding out about the true feelings of my twin brother, Miguel.