

## SO THAT YOU WILL HEAR ME

Bessy Reyna

There are words we say, and, as soon as they escape our lips, we wish we could vacuum them back. Retrieve them before they can alter reality. But, we are compelled to say them because otherwise the thoughts they express work on us like cavities weakening us from within.

That's why I had to tell Adriana that I was in love with her, because I thought that by saying those words I would begin to understand what was happening to me, because I was already in my early twenties and I had never felt that way about a woman before. "*Creo que me estoy enamorando de tí.*"

From the moment we met, we were inseparable. All of Panama City became our playground. We created a routine: Late afternoons, I picked her up at her job in the office of one of the many newspapers published in the city, then go to dinner or sit at the Boulevard Café, drinking cappuccinos while looking at the profiles of shrimp boats coming back to the docks. Other times, we sipped wine while discussing the latest French or Italian movie we had just seen, or reading Neruda's *Veinte Poemas de Amor* to each other. However, the highlight of our encounters was to put together a picnic basket and drive to a hill in Paitilla, sit on a blanket on the grass, and, while eating, admiring the glorious sunsets spreading reds and oranges over the Pacific Ocean below.

Sounds romantic, but it wasn't. Not really. At first, it was simply two young women enjoying each other's company, savoring a new friendship and admiring the beauty of nature surrounding us.

When Adriana and I first met, she had been living in Rome for several years. Her parents had taken her to Italy on the pretense of a family vacation. When they arrived, she learned that they had secretly rented an apartment for her. Their plotting was out of a romantic novel. They wanted to remove her from the temptation

of a man of whom they disapproved. One week she was living in Panama, and the next she was left behind in Italy, having to quickly adapt to another culture and learn a new language.

No wonder she often used the word *betrayal* when she mentioned her parents. If your parents can betray you like that, who else will be next? "Imagine doing that to your daughter?" she asked me once. The ironic part was that while her parents plotted, Adriana was already planning to break up with the guy. But we lived in a culture where fathers thought they owned and controlled their daughters' destinies. "As long as you live in my house..." was their mantra, selectively applied only to daughters.

Adriana had long black hair, tied behind her back, framing the lovely white skin of her neck. There was a delicacy about her like the ethereal Geishas in the *ukiyo-e* prints I admire. Her dimpled smile and contagious laughter made me forget about everything else going on in my life, a job I hated, mediocre teachers at the university, and a family environment I couldn't wait to get away from.

One day, as we sat side by side on a blanket at Paitilla, I was overwhelmed with the desire to touch her, caress her. It was such an unusual, strange and unsettling sensation that I became uncharacteristically quiet for the rest of the afternoon. I was quiet as I drove her home. She asked if there was something wrong, but I didn't know what to say. How could I convey to her an emotion I couldn't understand? I had never felt embarrassed by my feelings for men before. I had been taught what to expect from an early age, but Adriana was a vortex.

At the beginning of our friendship, we made fun of each other's personalities, laughing at how uncanny it was that we both seemed to take the same photographs, from the same angles, or underlined the same paragraphs in a book we had read.

Before we met, I had never paid attention to horoscopes, but now we read them together because our July birthdays were five days apart. We joked that that was probably the reason for the mirror images we had become. I had never found that kind of

oneness with anyone before. We isolated ourselves from other people while my friends complained about my absence.

Adriana and I created a barrier around ourselves, pretending to be Italian tourists visiting Panama, speaking in Italian, a language I had started to learn the year before. *Sei cattiva. Andiamo?* Adriana taught me how deliciously wicked it is to hide behind a language those around you don't understand.

The afternoon I dared to say "I think I am in love with you," we had been watching one of those beautiful Panamanian sunsets which seemed to change the feel of the city, softening the metal and glass skyscrapers overlooking the bay.

If my words upset her, she didn't show any emotion at first. But, after a short time she asked me to take her home.

It was later when she wouldn't take my calls or see me that I knew I had lost her. Was my expression of love perceived as yet another form of betrayal? The painful cavity I had tried to fill with those words grew large with loneliness and longing.

She left the country.

Decades would pass before I learned that she too had moved to the US, that she'd married, divorced, married again, and had children.

I called her, and after that, we wrote to each other, enjoying retracing our lives and updating our stories. She sent me a recording of a radio interview she conducted with gay activists as if to say "Now I understand."

I listened to her voice, the intensity with which she asked questions, while pretending we were back at the café, or sitting overlooking the ocean, picnicking in Paitilla, and laughing. Her voice talking to me like the day before I said, "*Creo que estoy enamorándome de tí. I think I am falling in love with you.*"

Those words I said, and, as soon as they escaped from my lips, they made me lose her.

*"Ya no la quiero es cierto, pero cuanto la quise. Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído."*

## TATIANA DE LA TIERRA: THE ¿CUÁNDO SUPISTE? INTERVIEW, 9 JUNE 2012

Nivea Castro



Photo Credit: Nivea Castro

I first met Tatiana in 1988 at *El Encuentro Lésbico Feminista* in Cuernavaca, México. Four years later, we met again at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michfest) and thereafter, over the years, we maintained consistent contact. We were friends.

When I started *¿Cuándo Supiste?* a photo-documentary of Latina lesbians in the LGBT equality struggle, ages 50 plus, Tatiana readily agreed to participate. Of course, we were to meet at some point in the future when we had the time, energy, and were both in the same local. No hurry.

In October 2011, she and I were scheduled to go to Bogota, Colombia, for the *Latina Feminista Encuentro*. She offered to show me 'her' Colombia, so we planned a two-week tour before the event. Sadly, Tatiana became gravely ill and could not go. I went alone and met her beautiful friends, Flora and Marta, who graciously welcomed me into their home and allowed me to photograph and interview them for the project.

Although, I worried for Tatiana's health, she had been seriously ill numerous times but always bounded back. I didn't consider the obvious until she called me in April 2012 to share that the cancer had spread body wide. I made plans to visit with her. She asked me to bring recording equipment and get on with the interview. The following is an excerpt of the three-hour conversation we shared less than seven weeks before she passed on.

This is for you, *Suerte Sirena*.  
tu amiguita pio-pio,  
nivea.