The Story
of
Eddie
and
Maria

by Eddie

On the occasion of our 25th Anniversary

2nd Edition
(with an Addendum on the occasion of our 50th)
Dedicated to
Denise and Lisa,
for posterity,
and to Abuela,
who saw it coming
The Story

PROLOGUE

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EPILOGUE

ADDENDUM
PROLOGUE

This is the story of how we met. I’ve told it to friends and relatives a hundred times before and the reaction is always the same: “They should make a movie of it!” Who knows. If old-fashioned love stories come back one day, maybe they will. But then, who would believe it?
Part I

The Summer Job

What to do next summer. I was in the turmoil of my junior year at CCNY (City College of New York), unsure of where my life was headed. I had dropped out of engineering last fall, amazing all my friends. A solid, straight-A student and Bronx Science graduate just didn’t do that. But in September 1961, I suddenly felt a lack of passion for what I was doing. All my courses were boring and I was damned if I was going to spend the rest of my life doing something I wasn’t excited about.

A semester in liberal arts convinced me that I expected too much. No one I spoke to, which must have been half of New York, had that passion so early. Many said I needed to give it more time. Besides, what else would I do? As a boy I dreamed of being a doctor, but that took money. A career as an artist (my avocation since childhood) seemed far too insecure, and the recent attraction of psychology waned quickly after the Intro course I took that fall.

So in January, it was back to engineering. This was the time to begin looking for summer jobs. Gary Weinberg, a friend and fraternity brother, heard about an international exchange program that found summer jobs in Europe for engineers after their junior year. So we both applied. And in April came the word: Gary got an offer in Norway, and
I got one in Spain. It was in the city of Valencia, at a plant that built diesel engines for large ocean-going ships. Spanish, French or English, they said, were acceptable working languages.

No one knew much about Spain in those days; it seemed the most foreign of foreign countries across the Atlantic. Spain must be like Mexico or Puerto Rico, we thought -- poor and populated by dark-skinned gypsies. Bring your own water, friends advised. And don’t let them know you’re a Jew.

The job description didn’t say much about what I’d be doing, but it didn’t really matter. I was off on the grand adventure, to work in the land of Catholics and the Spanish Inquisition, of bullfights, sun and flamenco.
Spain, 1962. After thirty-six hours I finally arrived in Valencia. I had left New York the day before on a KLM charter flight to Amsterdam carrying eighty U.S. students bound for summer jobs in Europe. I was the only one headed to Spain. Air travel was a big deal then -- a fourteen hour trip across the Atlantic by propeller (jet planes were still a novelty), followed by three more connections via Brussels and Barcelona to finally get to Valencia.

It was nearly midnight that Saturday when I finally arrived. Somehow I never received word about where I was to live, so the plan was to find my way to a student hostel I had read about. But all signs of life at this tiny airport were rapidly closing down as I tried in vain to find a telephone, then learned that the last bus to the city had just left.

In one of those minor miracles that happens just when you need it, a courtly old man appeared out of the blue to ask -- in English! -- if he could be of help. I had been totally unprepared for the lack of English-speaking people at the airport (or anywhere else in Spain, as I would discover), and for the inadequacy of my high school
Spanish. This saintly man was a god-send. He invited me to join his family in the last remaining taxi.

The ride into downtown Valencia was impressive. Bright yellow lights along the highway, with Spanish flags and pictures of Francisco Franco draped everywhere. The Generalísimo had visited here two days earlier and the whole city was decked out to greet him. We arrived at the student hostel on a quiet street near the center of town. The old man emerged from the taxi and loudly clapped his hands twice. Hearing the call, a man in uniform suddenly appeared, carrying a large ring of keys. The “sereno” unlocked the door to the hostel and in I went. They found a bed for me and half an hour later I was asleep.

The next day, two Spanish students at the hostel showed me around Valencia. I loved it. Bright sun, palm trees, dunned beaches, and broad boulevards bustling with people. Located on the Mediterranean coast, this was Spain’s third largest city, home to paella and Valencia oranges. But it was the people I found most fascinating. Everyone I met was amazingly friendly and helpful. That was the way Spaniards were, I was to learn. I also was surprised to discover that nearly all Spaniards were Caucasian and that hardly anybody danced flamenco. New York provincialism was slowly giving way to a broader view of the world. The adventure had begun.
It was the age of Franco, the dictator. Very different from the Spain of today. Eighty dollars a month was an excellent wage. Personal transport was by motor scooter or bicycle. People watched what they said. And good girls didn’t go out at night.

Maria was a good girl.

We met at the “Casa Americana” -- the “American House” -- where she had begun to study English. We were introduced at a party by another Spanish girl I met through people at the U.S. consulate, who steered me to the Casa Americana to find others my age. I had met a number of Spanish girls that way. But Maria was different. She was older (age 22). She was smart, with a curiosity about things that I hadn’t seen in other people. She was charming -- witty and coquettish, a little shy but self-assured, with a girlish smile that lit the room. And she was beautiful. Very, very beautiful.

We barely knew each other that summer. The language and cultural differences were far too strong and inhibiting for a twenty-year old kid from New York. So we met and spoke only a few times in the library of the Casa Americana, during the early evening hours before dinner, when Spanish girls did their socializing. Most nights I’d
go out with my English-speaking friends from France and Scandinavia, who weren’t tied to that stifling Spanish custom of staying home after supper (which in Spain is about ten o’clock).

Our only time alone was my last night in Valencia, at the end of my eight-week stay. I went to the Casa Americana around eight-thirty to look for her and say goodbye, but she wasn’t there. Just as I was leaving I ran into her coming in. Had I left a minute sooner I would have missed her. We went upstairs and chatted a bit -- as best we could in my pidgin Spanish, which had improved a lot since I arrived, but was still around the level of a six-year-old.

As the witching hour of ten approached I offered to walk her home. Along the way we stopped at an outdoor cafe for a drink -- a cuba libre -- and talked and laughed about who knows what. It was more than just enjoyable, it was intoxicating -- the kind of love-at-first-sight feeling I had never felt before. I didn’t want the night to end. I didn’t want to loose this girl I hardly knew but somehow felt strongly and deeply attracted to.

We approached the door to her apartment building and stood quietly in the lobby. I don’t know which of us felt more awkward. Instinctively but clumsily, I tried to kiss her. She demurred. Kissing was a very serious matter. But her eyes told another story. It seemed the look of love, pained to say good-bye. So we stood there and stared one last stare. We promised each other we’d write. Then we finally parted.
At eight the next morning, my train left Valencia for Granada. It was the first leg of a month-long trip around Spain and up through France on my way back to Amsterdam. But all I could think of was Maria. Quiet tears fell as the train tore me from Valencia. It had been an incredible summer, full of new friends and adventures. But I would never see all these people again. I would never know if Maria was truly the love of my life. Over and over the song from “West Side Story” played in my head: “Maria ... I just met a girl named Maria ... And suddenly that name, will never be the same ...”
Part IV

The Letter

Back in New York, my fourth year of college was beginning. I had sent Maria several postcards during my travels -- from Granada, Madrid, Paris and Amsterdam -- but I had no idea if she’d write back or what she might say. Then in mid-September came her letter. It had been written that last night in Valencia, after she watched from her balcony as I walked away. She spoke of a sadness that overcame her. Of a feeling ... much like my own. Could it be true? Did she really feel the same way I did? Could love really happen that quickly? I grabbed my Spanish dictionary and began writing the first of many letters to come.

The letter-writing went on for nearly four years. Despite the language differences, and her almost illegible handwriting, somehow the chemistry came through. I spoke of trying to return to see her someday, knowing full well how unlikely that was. My savings were exhausted after that summer, and kids from working class families didn’t just pop back to Europe for a vacation. Maria’s situation wasn’t much different. After finishing school, she took a job in her uncle’s fabric store, helping the family. Then at night she studied languages. In those days few women in Spain pursued a career. Traditionally, a woman’s place was in the home.
So a year passed by, and then another, as we filled letter after letter with idle chat about our lives (mostly me) and our thoughts (mostly her). At school and at home I daydreamed about a girl who more and more seemed like an illusion, the stuff of dreams.
Meanwhile, the stuff of reality was keeping me pretty busy. For one, I was heavily involved with two real girls I was dating, but that’s another story. College was finally ending after five long years, which was the norm then for engineering at CCNY. I had applied to several prominent graduate schools and was offered support everywhere. The best offer came from Stanford, which promised a full four-year fellowship with no strings attached. So, California here I come.

After leaving New York the letter-writing tapered off quickly, and within a year had all but ended. At best, I could expect a letter from Spain every month or two since replies took up to two weeks in each direction. But by Christmas 1965 it had been more than six months since I heard from her. It didn’t help that I had changed my address twice since coming to Palo Alto.

That Christmas was especially lonely. My roommate Bill, and most everyone else, had gone home for the holidays. But I had to study for the Ph.D. qualifying exams in early January -- a make or break exam given only once a year. On top of that, a short romance with a girl from Nebraska had just come to an end.
Then, in January 1966, came the Christmas card. It had been mailed to my home address in New York and forwarded by my parents. Inside a tiny little envelope was a small card that simply said: “Merry X-mas. Besos. Mari.”

But it was from England, not Spain. Her last letters had talked about the hope of breaking away from her dead-end life in Valencia. That spark, that desire to see the world, was part of what had made her so different, so alive.

But in Franco’s Spain in 1965 a single woman could not leave the country without her father’s permission -- not until age 25. And to be sure, her father, the stern patriarch, would not hear of her leaving. So when age 25 finally came, Maria did what few of her peers could even imagine -- leaving home to explore the great unknown.

I wanted to write back to her immediately, to find out what had happened. But there was a problem. The handwritten return address on the back of the tiny envelope was illegible. Her normally impenetrable handwriting -- to which I had become accustomed -- was compounded by a water stain that all but obliterated the street name. I stared in vain, trying to force the few discernible letters into a word. But the only thing I could make out was 76 something street. I was stymied.
I remembered that Professor Kruger, one of my faculty advisors at Stanford, had spent the previous year on sabbatical in London. The next day I went to see him. I showed him the envelope and asked if he could recognize the street name. He couldn’t make sense of it either. But he offered to take the envelope home with him that night and look at his detailed street map of London to see if he could find something.

The next day he reported that after searching for an hour he still couldn’t be sure, but his best guess was a street called Guilford. So, off went a letter to 76 Guilford St., London.

It worked! Out of the thousands of streets in London, with all those strange English names, Guilford indeed was the one. Against all odds I had found her!
For the first time, we were writing to each other in English. Her broken English, the result of an intensive course in London, was irresistibly witty and flirtatious. I had to see her again.

I hadn’t been home to New York in nearly two years and was planning a trip that summer. Now I also started searching for cheap flights to Europe. Over the past four years, student travel abroad had begun to soar, so I was sure I’d find something I could afford (which wasn’t much). Maria would be returning to Valencia in July for her brother’s wedding, then going back to England in August. But it was critical that we meet somewhere other than Valencia. It would be impossible to have any fun in that stifling environment, under her parents’ thumb.

Finding a cheap flight to Europe proved harder than I thought. Most of the student charters went to points north. Nothing went to Spain. The best deal I could find was a regular Pan Am flight to Lisbon. Maria said she could meet me there in early August, on her way back to England. Everything was set. My dream was about to come true.
Part VIII

The Strike

Nothing like it ever happened before, nor since. In the early summer of 1966, workers at most of the international airlines serving the U.S. went on strike. It was supposed to last just a few days or so -- a scare tactic to get more money as the summer travel season was beginning. But the strike dragged on. By July, most flights to Europe and elsewhere had been deeply curtailed.

Three weeks before my trip the travel agent announced that my flight to Lisbon was canceled. They could still get me to Lisbon, but on a different airline four days later. Quickly, I wrote to Maria informing her of the change. If the strike was settled soon, I’d be on the original flight; if not, on the new one. If anything went wrong we would leave each other messages at the airline desk at the airport, or at the U.S. or Spanish embassies in Lisbon.

The strike continued. The travel agent called again to say there was a flight a day earlier they could get me on. Great! Another letter to Spain to update the plan. (Hard as it is to imagine today, few people in Spain had a phone in those days, so letters were all we had.) A few days later, yet another change. They found a Pan Am flight leaving the same day as the original one. Fantastic! One final letter, just ten days before leaving. It was chancy whether
it would reach her in time, but the backup plans in the earlier letters (I was sure at least two of them would get to her in time) left it clear how we could find each other if anything went wrong.

In early August, I left Palo Alto for New York. After a quick three-day visit with my family I settled into a window seat on the infamous Pan Am Flight No. 1 (“Around the World”), first stop, Lisbon. We were more than an hour late leaving JFK. Impatiently I tried by brute force to lift the plane up and get this trip underway! I really wanted to see that girl.
Part IX

Lost in Lisbon

The irony is that after all the changes in flights and schedules I actually arrived in Lisbon just an hour later than the original plan. Anxiously, I scanned the crowd at the arrival gate hoping she’d be there. After four years I wasn’t even sure I’d recognize her: the several pictures she had sent didn’t look like the same person and none looked like the girl I remembered.

There was no Maria. I checked the airline desk for messages. Nothing. It was likely she didn’t get the last letter. Depending on which letters she did get before leaving Valencia (by train, two days earlier), she could be coming to meet any of three different flights I might have been on over the next four days.

A woman at the airport tourist desk found me a room at a pension in downtown Lisbon. I was too wound up to sleep and immediately went out to find the U.S. and Spanish embassies. It was a nice way to see Lisbon. But again, there were no messages for me. I left word everywhere in case she showed up.

The next morning I took a bus back to the airport to meet another flight I had written about. Again, nothing. Reluctantly, I returned to the city. My next bright idea
was to check with the Lisbon police. Every hotel and rooming house in Europe required you to fill out a card and show your passport when you checked in, and Lisbon was no exception. If she was anywhere in Lisbon, that registration card would lead me to her.

At the top of a long steep hill in the old section of Lisbon, I found the police office that collects those cards. They weren’t particularly friendly, and my not speaking Portuguese didn’t help. I finally found someone patient enough to hear my story, cobbled together in Spanish and English. The officer went upstairs to check their records and came back later, shaking his head. No, they had no record of her. But it takes two days before the cards reach this office, so come back later in the week and try again, they advised.
Part X

My Friends at the Airport

By the end of the week, I knew almost everyone at the Lisbon airport, the U.S. embassy, the Spanish embassy and the Lisbon police office.

After arriving in Lisbon on a Monday morning, I had returned to the airport on Tuesday and Wednesday to meet two other flights I had written about. I checked for messages often enough that everybody soon recognized me. My search for Maria had become a topic of conversation at the airport.

Thursday afternoon I went back to the police office to check again on the hotel registration cards. The two-day waiting period was over. Surely now I’d locate her. But I left empty-handed. Either their filing system misplaced her card or she wasn’t anywhere in Lisbon. I was dejected.

There was one last flight to meet Friday morning. This was the flight arriving four days later, which I wrote to her about when my original flight was canceled. Surely there had been ample time for her to get that letter. This was the flight she would meet.
In my heart I didn’t really believe it either. The plane arrived, the passengers left, and the terminal emptied. No Maria. It was the end of the line.

The only thing I could do now, I thought, was to look for her in England. She had moved from London to Cornwall last spring. I wasn’t sure whether or when she planned to move back to London, but my plane ticket took me home via London, so what the hell. It was worth a try.

The only other idea I had was to send a telegram to her parents in Valencia asking if they knew where she was. This was my desperation move. I had never met them before, and they probably had no idea she was even going to Portugal, much less to meet a guy from America. But at this point I had nothing to lose. By this time I was sure that Maria was a figment of my imagination. The dream of seeing her again (whatever she really looked like) was just that -- a dream.

I sent the telegram from the airport office and they said it would be evening, at the earliest, before I could expect a reply. By now I had seen most of Lisbon, so I stopped by the tourist information desk for ideas on how to spend the afternoon. The two Portuguese girls who worked there -- the ones who found me a room when I arrived -- had become my best friends at the airport. They recommended a trip to the town of Sintra, about twenty miles west of Lisbon, where there was a famous castle worth seeing. So I went home for lunch, then caught the one o’clock train to Sintra.
You could see the castle at the top of the mountain from the train station. But the only way to get there, I was told, was by car or taxi, which cost a fortune. So much for that. I’d just hang around for a while, then get the next train back to Lisbon.

At the other end of the train station was a group of kids talking to a cab driver. It sounded like English. I went over to see. They were a high school group from England on tour with their teacher, headed to the castle. I asked if I could join them. No problem. Two taxis took us up the mountain and for an hour or so we roamed the castle grounds. It was an impressive place and the views from up there were spectacular.

On the way back down, our cab driver bypassed the train station and brought us to the center of town. He pointed straight ahead to a palace of some sort he thought we should visit. It didn’t look too exciting. I looked around and saw a small cafe on the corner with a few tables outside. I suggested we forget the palace and have a drink instead. Everyone agreed.
I’ve often thought about what the odds were of all the events and coincidences that conspired to bring me to that moment. I have no idea how to do such a calculation, nor, I suspect, does any statistician. But the odds had to be something like one in a zillion.

The English students and I sat down at the cafe and started chatting about the English school system. Then someone asked what had brought me to Portugal. I told them it was a long story. Basically, there was a girl I was supposed to meet who I’ve been writing to for four years, but she never showed up and I wasn’t sure whether to give up the chase or go look for her in England.

They were impressed. It wasn’t every day they heard a story like that. They wished me good luck and we raised our glasses to toast my success in finding her.

And then it happened.

As I turned my head and gazed out at the street I noticed two guys and a girl standing on the corner, thirty feet away. But it was only the girl who came into focus.

It was Maria!
I froze. My heart rate must have soared to two hundred. Was it really her? Or was it one of those illusions -- when you think you see someone you know, then they turn around and it really isn't? No. It was her! It was the Maria I remembered!

She was talking with one of the guys while an elderly Portuguese woman looked on. So that’s what happened, the thought flashed across my mind. She gave up on me and found some other guy. I looked away to take a deep breath and make sure this was real.

When I turned back a moment later she was staring at me in wondrous disbelief. She had spotted me. Slowly she came near. “Eddie? Is that you? Eddie?” Her pace quickened as she drew nearer, and I leaped from my chair to meet her. It was a scene straight from the movie where a guy and girl run toward each other in slow motion to dramatize their final embrace. By the time Maria and I embraced we were shouting and jumping wildly, as only exuberant youths can jump and shout. The English school group stared in amazement, dumbfounded. “This is the girl I’ve been looking for!” I exclaimed, “This is the girl!”

Even after the excitement died down it took a while to be sure I wasn't dreaming.
Part XIII
Together

Her side of the story is up to her to tell, but briefly it goes something like this. The only letter she ever got was the very first one, before the airline strike took its toll. Not knowing that my flight had been canceled, she went to the airport that Monday morning to meet me. When I failed to show, she left a message for me at some kiosk, then left. The irony is that if my plane hadn't been delayed an hour in New York I’d have been there just when she was.

She wasn’t registered at any Lisbon hotel because she wasn't staying in Lisbon. While waiting for me at the airport, she was befriended by a tall black Portuguese guy named Carlos, who came to her rescue when I didn’t show up. He told her that the mother of a friend of his had a house in Sintra where she could stay if she wanted to. So along with two Scotsmen she had met on the train to Lisbon (Ian and Dennis, the two guys standing with her on the corner, who had become her protectors) she moved to the countryside house of the Portuguese lady who was standing with them that fateful day.

Maria's parents did indeed know she was in Lisbon (her mother knew the whole story), but of course they had no idea where she was staying. And I never did receive their reply to my telegram.
I don’t know how Maria explained me to her landlady, who already seemed suspicious of this pretty girl and her two “brothers.” But somehow the woman made room for me at her house that night, under her watchful eye.

The rest of that day was a blur of short conversations and fun. Our new friend Carlos came by and drove us all to the beach resort areas of Cascais and Estoril. Later that night we wound up at a club near Estoril, full of young people talking, drinking and dancing. When I asked Maria to dance they were playing Frank Sinatra’s hit song of that summer, “Do-be-do-be-do” (actually called, “Strangers in the Night,” but better known by its catchy refrain.) As we gazed at each other in a dancers’ embrace, the temptation to kiss her was overwhelming. But I remembered that failed attempt on my last night in Valencia years ago, so I decided not to rush it, and let her take the lead. That took only about two seconds more. So, do-be-do-be-do is forever “our song” (though I never did like it very much).

Maria and I returned to Lisbon the next day where she got a room at the place I was staying. The couple of days we spent sightseeing together were carefree and easy. This girl of my dreams was just as warm and witty and cute as I remembered here being — even more so in her irrepressible broken English. I hadn’t been sure what to expect on this trip — the whole idea was just to see her again, and that’s as far as I had thought about it.

But our romance caught fire quickly. We were falling in love, and it started to make me nervous. Spanish girls
were not known for their frivolity. When they got serious it was straight to the altar. But the last thing I was looking for was any kind of commitment. I was still young and happy-go-lucky, with years of school still ahead of me. So I felt especially at ease (and relieved) when she said one day that she could never imagine spending her life away from Spain. Great! The pressure was off. We’d just enjoy each day as it came. It was summer.
We decided to hitch-hike to Sevilla in southern Spain, then return to Lisbon and from there go on to England. Those three weeks on the road zipped by in a flash. The hitch-hiking trip to Sevilla was a wonderful fun-filled adventure. We caught a ride out of Lisbon on a tour bus of Spanish vacationers, and finally made it to Sevilla with a crazy American who was driving there from Paris. Sevilla was enchanting. Picturesque little streets, gypsy flamenco, wine, sun and romance. We loved it.

On the return trip we managed to hitch a ride out of Sevilla in a chauffeur-driven limo belonging to a Spanish Supreme Court Justice (it was the chauffeur who picked us up). Being an official car we had to roll down the windows a few times to salute the national police officers we passed along the road. The last leg of the trip, from Badajoz to Lisbon, was with a bus-load of Midwestern American ministers and their wives, who we met at a gas station. A few hours later we were back in Lisbon.

From Lisbon we flew to London -- Maria’s first trip on an airplane. Her Spanish friend Theresa, and her Irish boyfriend Mike, put us up for two days, and dined us on cabbage and Irish coffee. Then it was off for a new round of hitch-hiking around England: up to Oxford, through Shakespeare country to the lake district, up the western
shore to Loch Lomond in Scotland, across to Edinburgh and finally, after ten or twelve days, back to London via Cambridge and points east. Every day a new adventure. Every day closer to summer’s end.

I had postponed my trip home by more than a week, but now the reality of leaving her was closing in. I could see she felt it too -- she had grown quieter and much less cheerful the past few days. I had never thought about how this dream-come-true might end. We were now deeply in love but unprepared for the consequences. I still had three years of graduate school ahead of me, but with no thesis topic in hand the future looked very uncertain. We had no money and no hope of her coming to the States -- there was a ten-year waiting list on immigration quotas from Spain, I’d been told. As my departure date grew nearer the pains grew deeper and deeper.

Two days before leaving I went out for a long walk alone. I wandered the streets of London all afternoon and evening, weighing the options and searching my soul. It was the scariest time of my life. But the “bottom line” was clear. Despite all the problems, the language differences, religion and culture, she was the love of my life and I wasn’t going to lose her again.

“What would you say if I asked you to marry me?” I said to her later that night. Her eyes began to glow as she suppressed a little smile that soon overpowered the sad, serious face of the last two days. “I don’t know,” she said coyly, “ask me and find out.”
We planned to get married the next summer. By then we could save a little money, and I’d know for sure if I’d have a fellowship to continue at Stanford.

It was mid-September when I finally returned to New York from London. As soon as I arrived I shared the story with my family. There was an uncommon silence around the living room as the shock of my wedding announcement sunk in. My brother and sister sat quietly, grinning at each other. It was my father who spoke up first. “Atta boy!” he said, smiling jovially. “If you love her, go get her!” That was just what I needed to hear.

To my surprise, Mom’s first reaction was much cooler. Besides being stunned by the news, the idea of my marrying a Catholic bothered her more than she cared to admit. Though we were not a religious family, nor was Maria’s, Jews were supposed to marry Jews. Soon after, though, she came around, and sent a warm letter of support to Maria’s parents (who, I later learned, were extremely touched by that letter, written in Ladino, the ancient Spanish of my Sephardic grandparents).

I drove to California with Bob Kessler, a Stanford friend and roommate, who had been visiting family in New
Jersey. It was three days of non-stop driving, towing a small boat that someone paid Bob to lug back, which covered the expense of the trip. Bob and I shared a house in Los Altos with two other friends. When I told them of my plans to get married they thought I was crazy. Most everyone else agreed with them. Marrying a girl from Spain, who I hardly knew, at a time I should be focused on my Ph.D. research, was insane, they thought.

Perhaps. But I knew better.

The new academic year began in late September but I couldn’t focus on anything but Maria’s picture. (At last I had one that looked like her!) We wrote to each other nearly every day. After just a month back at Stanford I was climbing the walls. I couldn’t concentrate on any of my courses, much less a thesis topic. I decided that if I was going to get married, why wait till next year? Do it now. Happily, Maria agreed. Great! Now only two things stood in the way: time and money.
Part XVI

The Loan

The next long vacation was Christmas break. Those three weeks would be enough time to get married in Spain (there was no question it would be anywhere else), have a short honeymoon, then return to Palo Alto. The biggest problem was money.

After that summer I was nearly broke and so was Maria. I needed at least a thousand dollars more to make the trip and bring her back with me. I wouldn't think of asking my family for money, so I began looking for ways to mortgage my future. I had heard of forgivable loans for students in return for teaching in poor or rural areas after graduation, but nothing panned out. In 1966, the Vietnam war was still going strong and student loan programs had dried up.

With no obvious prospects, I finally decided to see Dean Wise, the Stanford administrator who oversaw my fellowship. A year earlier he had written a terrific letter to my draft board in New York to justify my student deferment after they suddenly re-classified me 1-A (the first step to getting drafted). Now I was going to ask him for a loan of a thousand dollars so I could go to Spain and get married. I wasn't too optimistic about the outcome.
For about twenty minutes he sat quietly and attentively as I told him my story and showed him Maria’s picture to help make it real. After I finished, he stared at me silently for a long moment, twiddling his glasses.

“Rubin,” he said, “if anyone else at this stage in their career came in here asking for a loan to get married I’d throw them out on their ear! Two years into a Ph.D. program is no time to be getting married -- it’s tough enough as it is. You’re only asking for trouble.” He paused. Then his tone of voice grew friendlier. The hint of a smile crossed his lips. “But I’ve got to admit,” he said, “I’ve never heard such a damned good story in all my years here. So I’m gonna give you the money, and I hope it all works out.”

I was in business!
Part XVII

The Wedding

From there, plans went into high gear. Maria returned to Valencia and began making the rounds of the church-dominated bureaucracy that controlled marriage licenses. In Franco’s Spain in 1966 a simple civil ceremony was impossible -- it was the church or nothing. A U.S. wedding wasn’t possible either: we had to be married before I could even begin immigration procedures. I bit my lip and would do what I had to do.

The church was not well prepared for Maria to marry a Jew. “With all the good-looking young Catholic men right here in Spain why do you want to marry a Jew?” asked the secretary of the archbishop.

To leap all the hurdles I had to receive instruction in the Catholic religion from a U.S. priest, who would then certify that I was kosher. A priest in Palo Alto gave such classes each week, mainly for Catholic couples about to be married. He was a breath of fresh air. An easy-going man in his early forties, he had surprisingly modern and liberal views of religion that often clashed with the doctrinaire teachings of the Vatican. (Fifteen years later he was ex-communicated for those views.) After four sessions with the priest I received my diploma and sent it off to Spain.
Now all that was left to do was to buy a new suit and resolve the dilemma of my parents.

They had decided my father would represent the family at the wedding. He wanted very much to go -- after all, it’s not every day your first born gets married. As much as I wanted him there, it would be better if I went alone. Having to worry about my father, who spoke not a word of Spanish, on top of meeting my in-laws, who spoke not a word of English, would be too much for me. The problem was resolved when Dad found that the only affordable flights required a two-week minimum stay. He didn’t have that much vacation time. My parents decided instead to host a “second wedding” when Maria came to New York.

I arrived in Valencia a few days before our wedding date and met her family for the first time. Her parents and brother were warm and wonderful. They took me in as though they’d known me all my life. Later I began meeting her cousins, aunts and uncles. Fortunately, I had grown up in a fairly large family of roughly a million aunts and uncles. She had two million. They all welcomed me with open arms.

At ten in the morning on Tuesday, December 20th, 1966, we were married.

I went in with no idea what to expect. There were no wedding rehearsals in Spain -- the idea seemed laughable to them -- and my only concern was having to say or repeat something lengthy in Spanish. Maria’s brother Ado
and his wife Pilar, who had just married that summer, assured me that the only thing I’d have to say was “Sí, quiero” (equivalent to “I do”). So I wasn’t expecting anything to happen until well after the priest finished the long monologue he had begun.

He was speaking in Valenciano, the regional dialect, which I didn’t understand at all. I had tuned out and was admiring the stained glass windows. Suddenly there was a long silence and all eyes focused on me as if I was supposed to do something. Ado, my best man, nudged me and whispered something I couldn’t understand. Then the priest’s young assistant came over, took me gently by the elbow, and seemed to be leading me off-stage. Strange customs here, I thought, as I turned around, faced the audience and prepared to walk away.

I could see a combination of laughter and panic on everyone’s face as they motioned for me to go back. The priest had asked me to come to where he was standing to recite after him a series of wedding vows. When he saw I was about to escape, the young assistant grabbed my arm firmly and brought me to the podium. The vows were a blur of incomprehensible Spanish which somehow I imitated adequately. Then Maria did the same.

As best I can recall, in all those vows we never did say the words, "Sí, quiero."
Part XVIII

Waiting for Immigration

A
fter the ceremony there was a festive luncheon reception at the Hotel Victoria Palace in Valencia. Later that afternoon we flew off for a one-week honeymoon in Mallorca and Ibiza. Just before New Year’s we returned to Valencia for another round of family visits, then spent New Year’s Eve with her parents (the custom in Spain is to gulp down twelve grapes as the clock strikes twelve). After that, three more days of eating and drinking with relatives. I had never eaten so much in my life.

Now it was time to leave. For me, the hardest part of getting married in Spain was not being able to bring Maria back to the U.S. with me. I had checked several times with U.S. immigration offices in London, New York and San Francisco and to my dismay I always got the same story: we had to first be married; then it would take two to three months, including checks at every place she lived the past five years, before they could issue a “green card” allowing her to enter the U.S. as a permanent resident.

On the trip home, I took an early plane to Madrid so I could stop at the U.S. embassy before heading to New York. The people at the embassy were surprisingly helpful. I showed them our marriage certificate and the official translation and asked if anything could be done to
speed up Maria’s paperwork. The head of the immigration section astounded me when he said he could cut the red tape and save a lot of time if I’d just pay for a twelve dollar phone call to the U.S. clearinghouse in Italy that handled immigration paperwork. In less than half an hour he did what I had been told would take two months to do. “Your wife should be able to join you in two or three weeks,” he said. “It’s too bad you didn’t come here on your way to Valencia. I probably could have arranged the paperwork in time for her to go back with you.”

I was overjoyed and angry at the same time. I always suspected that the bureaucratic “party line” could be expedited if only I found the right person. Here at last he was! I was glad I stopped in Madrid.

Back in California, I tried to concentrate on school once again, but it was hopeless. Maria would be coming by ship to New York. It was much cheaper than flying since there was no limit on luggage (planes to the U.S. allowed only twenty kilos, and excess baggage costs were exorbitant). A ship sailed from Spain at the beginning of each month. If there were no new surprises she’d be on the February sailing.

The new surprise came in her next letter. She was sick with tonsillitis and had to spend a week in bed. Things were behind schedule. She was making embroidered sheets and pillow cases and needed to know the size of U.S. beds. And there was still no word from the U.S. embassy in Madrid. With less than two weeks left to the
next boat, I began resigning myself to another month without her.

A week later everything looked brighter. She was feeling better. The embassy wrote telling her to come to Madrid to finalize the green card. If everything worked out, there would still be time to catch the February departure. But it would be extremely tight. She would send me a telegram if she made it. Otherwise it would be another long month.

For three days before the sailing I called the Western Union office in Palo Alto two or three times a day to ask if there was a telegram for me. They assured me they’d call my home or the office as soon as anything came. But by Saturday afternoon there was still no telegram. The boat sailed on Sunday, so I’d have heard from her by now if she had made it. My hope of seeing her soon was dashed.

That Saturday night I went out with some friends who tried hard to console me. Just as I got home, a little after midnight, the phone rang. It was Bill Thomson, my buddy and former roommate. “Hey, Rubin,” he said, “do you speak any Spanish?” “What do you need?” I asked. “Well, I got this telegram for you we found under the door. But it’s in Spanish. I can’t make out a word!”

It was Maria’s telegram, the one I had been waiting for. Despite all my calls to them, the idiots at Western Union somehow delivered it to the old address I had a year ago. Finding no one home they just stuck it under the door. If Bill hadn’t still been living there after he got married, I
never would have received the telegram. Maria would have arrived in New York alone and forlorn in the dead of winter. (Just thinking about it still makes my blood boil.)

I telephoned my parents the next morning to say she was on her way. Now I had just a week to find us a home.

February was the worst time of the year to be looking, but after three days I found a nice unfurnished apartment in Palo Alto. My roommates donated a bed from the house we were living in, and through the Stanford bulletin board I found a kitchen table, a desk and a sofa, whose only defect was a large hole in the middle seat, which I simply covered with a towel. There was just enough time left to fly to New York the day before she arrived.
The USS Constitution anchored at Pier 57 in lower Manhattan at 8 am Monday morning, the week after Valentine’s Day. It was cold as hell. My brother Billy drove me down to meet her. By 10 am the temperature had climbed from five degrees to about eight, as we paced the enormous arrival hall still waiting for passengers to disembark. Gradually people began to filter out, pushing large orange carts heaped with luggage. More waiting as my eyes scanned the arrival hall like a lighthouse beacon. Three hours and still no Maria. I suppressed the thought that something else had gone wrong.

Suddenly in the far dark corner of the hall I spotted her. A porter at her side pushed the luggage cart. Excitedly, I alerted my brother, who wanted to get it all on film. She saw me as I broke past the barricade, and in another one of those classic scenes, we ran toward each other in slow motion until at last I had her in my arms. Trumpets blared and fireworks lit the sky! Our six weeks apart had seemed like an eternity.

Her eight days at sea had taken their toll. She was seasick most of the time, and her thin suede coat was no match for the New York winter. We whisked her into the car and home to some chicken soup and in-laws. My
family instantly adored her, and she them. They spent most of the week around the kitchen table, getting to know each other.

By week’s end there was color back in her face as we prepared for the “second wedding.” In the week since I called to say she was coming, my mother managed to organize the type of reception that ordinarily gets planned a year in advance. Invitations and phone calls went out to everyone and everyone could make it. She hired a hall, a band and a caterer in less time than it takes most people to think about it (later, this became known as a New York minute).

That Saturday night, all my aunts and uncles, cousins and neighbors, friends and distant relatives poured out of their cubby holes for a grand night of eating, drinking, dancing and kibitzing in the time-honored tradition of Jewish weddings. Now I really felt married.
Part XX

The Land of Her Ancestors

I had left Stanford for a week in the middle of classes and it was time to go back. Thanks to student discounts the airfares weren’t too bad. The day after the reception we flew off to California.

One of Maria’s uncles tried to console her mother shortly after our wedding, as their only daughter was about to leave home for a far-off land. At least, he said (referring to California) she was going back to the land that Spaniards had founded more than two hundred years ago. She would be in the land of her ancestors.

A restaurant on El Camino Real -- the old Spanish road -- was our first stop after arriving in Palo Alto. My now former roommates, Bob and Jerry, came with Jerry's girlfriend Kit to pick us up at the airport. In their enthusiasm to come greet us they hadn’t thought to leave enough space in their small car for all the luggage we brought, so the ride back was like one of those circus cars packed with twenty-five clowns. Fun.

From the venerable House of Pancakes we all went back to our apartment where everything was just like I left it except -- surprise! -- a big black oven-type barbecue standing in the middle of the living room with a large
white ribbon around it. It was a gift from everyone in the department at Stanford. We’d never seen anything like it. It had to be the most memorable wedding present we received.

In the refrigerator we found a bottle of champagne that the elves also had left for us. We drank a toast with our friends who had done all this, and soon afterwards they left.

It had been a long and exciting day, but we were tired and ready for bed. Maria cast one last look around her new home. She spied the blue towel I had strategically left on the couch and moved it to discover the hole with a spring poking through. She looked at me and smiled that magic smile as I feigned surprised at the damage. “It’s OK,” she said. She could patch up the hole with a piece of the frill that adorned the base of the sofa.

I lifted her up into my arms and carried her across the bedroom threshold, and we began to live happily ever after.

- THE END -
EPILOGUE

On July 11th, 1969, Denise was born, just in time to see the first man walk on the moon. A month later, I finished my Ph.D. and became a professor at Carnegie Mellon University.

Lisa joined us two years later in Pittsburgh on July 22nd, 1971. We hoped she’d arrive well before Abuela had to return to Spain, but she simply wouldn’t be rushed.

The next year, in 1972, I finished paying off the loan from Stanford. It was the best investment they ever made. Later that year Maria’s parents got their first telephone.

In 1975, Franco died. Spain began the successful transition to a democracy that transformed the face of the country into a modern European state.

In March 1985, after sixteen years, we sold the Volkswagen and bought a fancy new Toyota. A month later, Maria became a U.S. citizen. That summer, on our way back from Spain, we went through U.S. Customs for the first time together.

- FIN -
ADDENDUM
(for 2nd Edition)

After writing this story in 1992, I blinked my eyes and it was suddenly summer again ... 24 years later.

On August 1st, 2016, Maria and I returned to Sintra to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our historic encounter. I had been there ten years earlier during a trip to Lisbon, but this was Maria's first time back since that day we met fifty years ago.

Things had changed a bit in fifty years.

If I had to spot her on that street corner today it never would have happened. Crowds of tourists everywhere. Traffic jams galore. And the corner cafe had grown into a big fancy restaurant (the Café Paris) whose food counters and awnings blocked a clear view of that corner across the street.

After spotting Maria there fifty years ago the biggest worry now was losing her in the crowd!

But it was a joyous return to the place where time began. This time it was a family affair, with Denise and Lisa and grandson Leo at our side. They took most of the pictures, save for a "selfie" taken by the owner of the cafe,
who had looked at us curiously as we celebrated that fateful encounter.

And the hand of fate clearly was still with us. It began, ignominiously, with a three-hour delay of our flight to Lisbon due to a strike by airline baggage handlers -- a reminder of the summer-long airline strike that started the whole adventure.

We drove to Sintra in the early afternoon and finally found a parking spot along a winding road on a hilltop above the town. To our surprise, the nearest street funneled us down directly to the center of Sintra ... exactly to the historic corner we had gone there to find. At the bottom of the hill, right where Maria stood fifty years ago, we looked upon the Café Paris, where I had sat telling my story to that group of English students.

As we walked down the narrow cobblestone street towards town, I knew the gods were with us the moment I heard the music emanating from a small outdoor restaurant. A guitar player seated on the restaurant patio was strumming a medley of mellow tunes. Just as we passed by, the song he was playing was ... “Do-be-do-be-do” -- our song from that first kiss, fifty years earlier.

What are the odds?

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Sintra, 1966

Sintra, 2016