

## Puerto Rican Superhero Day

By David Lawler

Edward Moran was in love with ice, not water, not ice water, not bone-cold water. He loved ice, and the relationship, the feeling was mutual. Ice loved Edward Moran. Ice on Lexington Avenue, freakishly-hot June morning going into insane-hot June afternoon and early evening, wanted a cool funnel of ice chips flow cold down over his back, but he had to go to work that morning, 7:00 AM shift, seven-to-seven while all his half-brothers and half-sisters were partying, celebrating - cultural heritage and party flags waving; all the little girls and boys jumping up and down, unaware of the various threats.

He was a Junior Accountant, sounded fuzzy and brilliant at the same time, but the Junior was more of junior (or a jr. - even worse, very small title); amounted to doing most of the work while the Senior (read - SENIOR) Accountants impatiently waited for payday, or the midnight of the before-night watching the direct deposit flow dump into their personal checking and savings accounts. Post-Tax-Season clients were never on time, always late, didn't handle receipts, and asked for handouts against their refunds.

He raced to the corner store, bought a seventy-five-cent cup of ice and a bottle of water for dumping over his head if it got too hot. Temperatures were going triple-digit at some point today and the office water cooler was empty - at least until nine the next morning. Nasty Sunday morning working hours, no water, no soda (vending machine was emptied out) and Edward was expected to finish at least five files.

Festivities started early with two young women and one young man arriving at the head of the line outside. Shopkeepers kept their gates down on this holiest of holy Hispanic High Holidays, serving through the tiny bulletproof sliding window, shying away with the money, kept two unlicensed pistols close by, and made absolutely no pretense about loathing their preferred clientele. One man kept a hand on a gun as the other bagged the purchases and watched the register.

Edward Moran wasn't completely Puerto Rican, although how you could be completely anything in this era of genetic swappage was beyond his grasp. He was half-white, in the parlance, some kind of mixed breed, a delicate mutant, an infringement on public space in white button-down dress shirt, average tie, okra khakis and polished shoes, had to work for a living, and hard (because of his color - cold sand skin, and not swarthy, no accent, nothing to say he needed help or a helping hand), too Boricua to be white, too white to be downtrodden, so he'd never get a fair shake.

He opened the gate, unlocked the door, posted the Open for Business sign in the door, sat down, flicked on the computer and prepared the files for client arrivals. An hour later, he was already sweating

and showing stains on his dress-white armpits with beads collecting on the top of his head, drooling down to his nose because the air conditioner was blasting hot air; it took three hours to cool down. He had to keep the hand towels close by so he wouldn't drip on the precious paperwork.

Marcia Rodriguez decided enough was enough; that this year she would not be party to the ritual splashing of these beautiful young women with water, showing taut nipples through rainbow tank-tops, sick of that shit. Big, bulky, tubby-ass ugly mustachioed men with water bottles from opened hydrants, cruising 96th Street, looking for all the young women, saying they're gonna cool them down, spray cold water. The City promised to crack down, but never took immediate action. Too many variables, they'd say, but Marcia caught a gaggle of fat-ass cops laughing their asses off, one of 'em even had a fucking camera.

"Hey you," she screamed, chasing down a small army of twelve-year-olds, "Get the fuck back here, I'm gonna kick your little asses!" They split up and hurtled toward Fifth and the established parade route - and there would be so much to camouflage their efforts. They'd be spraying water all over, one big Wet T-Shirt contest, heh, get a cop buddy to videotape the many gorgeous pairs of breasts. Women, you see, they have boobies, big breast with pancake areola, little breast, mosquito bites, inflamed nipples, inverted psycho nipples, wall-eyed breasts, or the opposite: those cross-eyed titties. Hey, if they don't want their breasties drenched and exposed, why do they walk around in those skimpy tanks and halters?

Marcia grabbed one of the punks by the shoulders, pulled him back into the alley and turned him around - shocked, mystified - seeing it was her little cousin Sammy. She shook him hard, her mouth wide open.

"What are you doing here," she asked. He grinned. "Haven't I taught you anything?"

"It was Jerry's idea," he said. Marcia's face turned red.

"I'm gonna beat the shit out of him. I don't care if he's my Uncle. He's going down."

"Can I go now," Sammy asked, bored, shaking his arms loosely at his sides.

"Get out of here," she said, letting him go. He ran off. "Don't do it again!"

"I won't," Sammy shouted back. She held out her hands, looked up to Holy Madre, wanted to say "Madre" as loud as she could, gave up. Cursing was worse than defiling and molesting women, and for that she was sorry. She wanted to be cool and calm, but the heat was pouring on, fanning the flames of anger. More male laughter, more water spraying, more terrified girl-screams - she made a mad dash for Lex.

"This is your E-Z form," Edward said, showing Mr. Vasco the photocopy.

"Ain't nothing easy about it," Vasco said, eyeballing the murky print and then fanning himself with it. "Think we get some cool air up in here," he asked. Edward wiped down the sweat on his eyebrows. He

didn't get it - the eyebrows were designed to catch sweat (maybe not specifically sweat, more like bugs and dry dirt, but dry dirt and bugs were not the problem). He got up and opened the front door, stopped it with a red brick, looked at the people marching by. He saw a girl looked like a mermaid, black hair done up in flashy sparkle, painted tattoos on her naked back and sides.

"You gotta work today," asked Vasco, disbelieving. "That sucks."

The mermaid woman was followed by a group of young girls also done up as mermaids and a small band of elderly men with walking bongos, trumpets, and little guitars. Every group was a presentation, with their own performances. Edward got a great view as they passed around his corner and converged on Fifth. Edward looked down the block and saw a group of young men running, frightened, afraid for their lives of the psycho-bitch giving chase, spraying them with bottles of very cold (ice-cubed) water. He got a look at the psycho-bitch - she was a beautiful thing. Long, black hair flowing in the breeze, look of insane, psychotic hatred on her gorgeous face, pink/purple pouty lips downturned. Further down, her breasts bounced up and down in her slim shirt, and he could hear the music of lovers in his head. He moved back up to her face and read her lips as she shouted.

"I'mmmmm...go-nnnn-a...fuhhhhh-ck...yooooouuuuu...uuuuuhhhhhpppp!"

Wow! Fiesty and scrumptious at the same time. She could be eaten and savored like chocolate pudding with a little whipped cream on top, one small bite from a spoon, roll it around in your mouth and let it go down slow. You could tell you were looking at a beautiful woman because she looked great when she was angry - old sayings, really old sayings are often always true, Son. Edward prayed she wasn't a virgin. Please let her be a real woman and not a little girl. The way they're raising them these days, Lord! I'm either a homosexual or a part-time pervert!

Edward stood in their way. He was a brick wall, granted five and three-quarters feet standing in heels, didn't know if that was average height, but he tried to grow a further full inch; he was still a single solitary bowling pin in the sightlines of several heavy balls, and they were rearing down the alley, Marcia behind them. But he didn't know, he didn't know because he was still trying to isolate the sounds.

He was so fixed on gorgeous Marcia and her hair, her hair flowing calm black, lost in those strands, those delicious fibers, wanted to get cut off at the throat, sucking in that hair, the throes of incredible sexual delight. Her breast heaving again, but he was cut off by the surge of muscular men, sharpened odors slicing into his nostrils, and Edward went down, followed by four or five of the men.

"Oh my God," Marcia had time to only mouth, concern replacing anger.

She jumped on the pile, spraying water on them in ice-cold vengeance. They waved and shook, the

weather was too much and already-pert men's nipples hardened like steel pricks. Time to go! Off we go! Party's over! Spoiled sport female can't take the heat! Away! Away! They fled fairly quickly, and Marcia pushed away the final trespasser. He ran away, giggling, while Marcia sorted through the drifts and spare wreckage.

She saw Edward face-up, blood trickling from his nose and mouth, little spurts, little dribbles, didn't look terrible, but he was a sight.

"Are you okay," she asked. Edward saw two of her, drifting in and out; two concerned women.

"Yeah," he said. She picked him up by the arm. Strong hands. Her hair curled at wet ends. She helped him back inside where Vasco was hesitating. He took his other arm and together they sat him down at his desk, where he proceeded to shuffle his papers around, still seeing two of everything. By his count, there were two sets of identical twins in the office with him and stacks upon stacks of files everywhere he had looked. "What happened," he asked, feeling his head.

"It was a stampede," Vasco said.

"It was my fault," Marcia said, "I'm sorry."

"Were you chasing them?"

"Yeah, bunch of troublemakers."

"What were they doing?"

"Making trouble," she said, shrugging her shoulders, making Edward aware of her bra; frilly, lacey edges, a cotton haze over the polyester white, not nude, color, and there was some padding over where he would ordinarily see brown or pink nipples. A million thoughts were racing around in his head, and then his vision cleared, and there was one Vasco, and there was one Marcia. "This group I've been tracking all day, spraying water all over the girls, getting rough, touching what they shouldn't touch."

"And you've been taking it upon yourself to correct their behavior?"

"Vigilante," Vasco muttered, giving her the wide stink-eye.

"I like that," Marcia said, smiling, "Behavior Correction. That's what I do!" She put a finger on the desk. "All the ladies get groped, and then they wear these tight shirts, and the boys think they're asking for it. Fuckers," then, "Excuse me," to Vasco, who nodded.

"Youth is wasted on the young," Vasco said, paraphrasing an old saying.

Her ideas were born of hostility and enthusiasm. To simply look the other way was not fair or proper to her sisters; some might even look upon femininity as a curse, something to be endured from the less-civilized of the male population. They were out there, in full force, with their Super Soaker water guns and

their bottles of cold water, all in an attempt to get a flash of boob or visible nipple, whatever worked. Edward knew of those antics. He knew the parade was nothing more than an excuse to leech, but there was nothing he could do about it. He tended to ignore the celebration. He was never invited, being so light and unusual in complexion. He didn't look white, and he didn't look Puerto Rican, couldn't pass for Cuban, couldn't grasp the Dominican - even though the Dominicans tried to pass themselves off as Boricua, they most certainly were not. They were hoarding. There were Cuban Pride Parades and Dominican Days, but nothing could compare to Fifth Avenue and the music and the food. Edward kept his head down, had to wear a shirt and tie, and had to pretend.

"You're still bleeding," Marcia told him, spotting the dribble of fresh blood. She got up right away.

"I'm fine," Edward said. She rushed to his side with a damp napkin; put it to his mouth and his nose. Vasco looked at his watch when the gunshots rang out. Had to be the corner store. Only guns on the block. Nobody else carried, not with cops muscling in.

Cops didn't want anybody carrying guns, not even the guns on the up and up, licensed and all. It was an effort to maintain to control over the population. Even carrying a licensed would require being hauled down to the nearest precinct, filling out forms and having your personal property confiscated until verification came through. There were more shots, bigger shots and people outside ducked and started running.

"Oh shit," Vasco said, picking up his papers and heading for the door.

"What are you doing," Edward asked.

"Get away from the door," Marcia shouted, racing toward him.

"I'll come back tomorrow," Vasco said before running outside.

"Wait," Marcia shouted, then whispering, "Dumb ass," while shaking her head.

"Will he be alright?"

The gunshots came closer and Edward ducked under his desk. He grabbed Marcia's arm, pulled her down with him. He put fingers in his ears. The shot were very loud. Marcia winced but did not protect her own ears.

Edward put his hands to her ears, and then were a smaller series of shots, but they weren't shots, they were pops, cheap little pops.

"Wait," she said, taking his hands away from her ears. She listened further. Another string of cheap little pops out in the street. Her face lit, came close to Edward's face, betraying emotional eyes. "Those are firecrackers! Firecrackers!" She got up and raced to the door, followed by Edward tugging at her arm. It

was thick white and grey smoke, the smell of gun powder and some distant shouting and two sirens. It was the corner store and the madman inside, the madman with the gun. He was howling Arab like Abdul Emir, but with an unlicensed gun, firing but creating mostly panic. Edward saw it in his eyes earlier when he got his water and his cup of seventy-five cent ice, that born on the edge of sadness dot festering on his crazy-diseased iris. Maybe he would remember Edward.

Once outside, they moved behind a black Town Car, livery cab of choice. At least the Town Car had a big ass and you could hide a marching band behind it, so nobody saw. Then the white and grey mix of smoke was flooded with blues and reds. The Bluecoats were coming!

Except Emir was tucked safely, snugly you might say, behind a bulletproof sliding window no bigger than a bathroom window. He was still firing, but maybe he would run out of bullets soon. Edward swore he could hear jihad being declared. He had his fears. His brother was a first responder, September 11th, rushed down to watch the second tower topple. His brother wasn't crushed, but he couldn't breathe without the help of an oxygen cylinder, and the smoke was eerie like a miniature replay, but there wasn't that fiery char, thick smokestack of cooking bodies scented on the air.

"What's he doing," Edward asked.

"He's a fucking racist shit," Marcia said, recharged with pretty-girl anger, exciting Edward like a dog seeing his master with a leash, ready for a walk around the block. "You see him with his guns?"

"No," Edward said, genuinely surprised. The sirens were getting closer. Edward didn't want to say that he heard the blacks and the Hispanics shouting nasty things through the bulletproof sliding window. Things like "fucking terrorist" and "go back to Pakistan".

"You should go talk to him," Marcia said.

"Me? Why?"

"Because he might respect you. Plus you look like you could be Arab. Are you Arab?"

"No, I'm Puerto Rican. My family came over in '58." Marcia smiled easy.

"My family came over in '58 too," she said, "You seem like you might be white."

"Half, on my Dad's side."

"Are you from here?"

"No, we're from Fort Lee."

"Jesus," Marcia said, "You don't even live here?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't like the neighborhood. Too much crime," Edward said. Marcia nodded. She started to stand up.

"Wait a minute. What are you doing," Edward asked.

"I'm gonna go talk to him. Maybe he won't get killed."

"You're gonna get hurt. Let the cops do their job."

"You ain't from around here," she started, "They're gonna kill him anyway. Just for interrupting their break."

"Oh come on," he said, not believing her. She pushed him aside and stood up and then crouched under the cover of the white and grey smoke. Frightened but not showing it. She was braver than Edward, had to be to withstand all the games with the water and the parade. Lips don't lie on her. She was a sexy cat, hunched over and skating the edge of the sidewalk. She held out her hands, showed she had no weapon, even though Emir had his gun, but he stopped when he saw her, looked through the bulletproof window.

"Hey. You gotta stop this right now. Cops are coming. You hear them?"

"All the time, you try to get away with not paying," the Emir shouted.

"I don't do that. Maybe a couple assholes, but you can't help assholes."

"I hate assholes," the Emir shouted, "I hate 'em!"

Edward appeared behind Marcia. He wouldn't dare grab her to get her away from the action, but he glared at the Mad Arab behind the sliding window. She got closer, approached the window.

"Give me the gun and I'll hide it, so you can say there was just firecrackers and nothing else. Just say that, okay?"

"What are you doing," Edward asked her.

"I'm negotiating. This is how you negotiate." They kept their eyes on Emir and his gun and his thoughts.

"Where do you work," he asked her.

"Yankee Stadium."

"Security?"

"Concessions. I do the beer," Marcia said quickly, then turned to the Emir, "Please, you don't have much time."

The Arab was shaking. The gun shaking in his hand. He was weary and ancient by this point, sweat trickling despite the locked-in air conditioning and the security of calming, cooling beverages. Marcia took

another step forward, Edward behind her.

"You know what they do," Marcia said. The Arab nodded his head. He was disappointed. Not enough they got the guns, but they got the law and the guys who come in early the next morning with briefcases and paperwork and intent, and they make life difficult for everybody who isn't them, coming down, going up, getting into cars and pretending they fucking care. So much in Marcia's eyes, Edward saw and thought she could care for people other than herself. He thought she was the bravest woman, the most beautiful woman in the whole world. There was a reason he was momentarily stunned when he saw her with the anger on her face chasing the men, knocking him down like the lone bowling pin. Courage was demonstrative. God, but he wanted her.

He wanted that face to greet him forever and ever. What could he do to win her? The Arab slipped the gun through the sliding window. She grabbed it and took Edward by the shoulder.

"Come on! Let's go," she said, just as the cop cars came around the corner, skidding and speeding, knocked over a couple of garbage cans and made an old lady with a shopping cart scream to the top of her lungs. They slipped out, turned a corner to 103rd near the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a thin alley and a cluster of hidden recycling bins.

"What are we doing," Edward asked.

"We're hiding evidence! Aren't you excited?"

"I'm excited, but I think I'm gonna have a heart attack!" Marcia stopped him, put him against the wall.

"Okay, just breathe, okay?"

"Okay." Marcia held the gun like it was a dead rat, by the tip of the tail.

"What's your name again?"

"Edward." He stuck out his hand.

"Can I call you Ed or Eduardo?"

"Never." Marcia laughed briefly, heard more sirens like it was a repeat of 9-11. "What's your name," he asked.

"Marcia Rodriguez," she said, taking his hand and feeling the electric of the moment coalesce in her skin from his, and then she heard the music of lovers, harps and other oddities, until she turned and saw the swatch of musicians passing, one of them carrying a fucking harp. It was love, beautiful love, the music of angels and those chosen to serenade them. It was the parade, getting close, wishing for Fifth Avenue and a brief moment of pride. God love them. God love them all!

Edward saw her face in slow-motion. Her wishing eyes and generous lips, licking along the top of the upper lip, like a jewel encased in her flowing dark hair. God, please let this work. I don't ask for much. I just want to be happy for longer than two seconds, and she could make me happy for the rest of my life. She could make me brave. Edward wanted to be brave.

"Are you okay," she asked him, after a time.

They were sitting behind the recycling bins in the back alley, smelling weeks-old fried chicken bones and stinky dead cabbage smells. They'd need baths before this was all over or a good spray of cold water. He felt that he was pressing toward his time, pressing against his time like an urchin on the Goodwill clock.

"Yeah, that was just," he started then trailed off. She took his hand and stood up.

"Come on," she said.

"Where are we going now?"

The Avenue was packed, no room to sit and absorb, only to stand and accept. Marcia pushed her way to the head of the crowd, hopping slightly and dragging Edward along on his weary way. He was too tired to accept streamers and sparklers. They kept the gun back at the bins in the alley. So much attention, so much fucking police attention devoted to the parade, to the people wanting to celebrate, bring kept under control through unusual fear, nobody was going to care about a spare gun in an alley behind the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Children.

Edward had never fallen in love before, so it was hard for him to understand the pain and the cool of it over his heart. It was enough to kill him, but he refused to die, wanting to burn in the flame a little longer. Marcia gave him a generous smile, took his hand, always taking his hand and leading him. This was how she operated; always lead the men, always, or else they'll try to lead you like a slave, and she was never going to be a slave for any man. There's nothing like a moment. Marcia led him to the edge of the warning line, the firewall of the marchers and the musicians. Marcia wouldn't be happy without a man she could protect. It was weird and almost unseemly. He decided he would wait for her.

Marcia was on double-duty; watching the parade and monitoring the crowd because she knew the cops would simply be gawking at the pretty young ladies like lazy birds looking for food; binoculars in hand, other hand on taser or service pistol. In her mind, they were low on the pole; half-crazed, irresponsible, impetuous, bored and yet they had all the guns, had all the control, and she hated them, distrusted them, questioned the wisdom, and hated the world the way it was. All that separated her from the Blue Boys was Academy training; pieces of paper justifying excessive and enforced racism.

Edward was jumping up and down, clapping his hands hearing one of the old march songs, a man

with double bongos, walking and slapping. Behind a dark woman on a float blowing kisses was a quartet of short trumpets and a trombone with a bowl-shaped mute. There were mustachioed men with bunches of roses, passing them out to the women, all the girls. The girls danced in place. The men clapped their hands.

The Politician-of-the-Moment (read: token Boricua) with his silly white man's business suit alongside the Mayor, and a couple of Black men in suits, constituents, waving and getting boos (sending the message that White America couldn't tell anybody apart who didn't look like them - bad idea). The Mayor had invisible ear-plugs pretended not to hear the music, the cacophony of instant tension and firepower.

Marcia was like a shark-spotter at high tide, sifting through schools of mackerel and snapper, finding the Great White. She felt the moderately strong hand of Edward pull her by the shoulder. She turned to look at him, knew it was him. She could see the touch before it occurred. He was dancing and he took her by the torso, a protective hand, another on her shoulder.

"You're enjoying yourself," Marcia shouted over the trumpets.

"The last time I danced was at my brother's wedding!"

"What kind of wedding?"

"Half and half, and when we got past all the Maroon 5, the lights came down and we danced like this!" He led her into a modified tango. Just then, one of the mustachioed tuxedo men handed her a rose, clapped his hands and watched Marcia and Edward.

"What if we get splashed," she asked him, clutching his hand.

"Then we get splashed. Big deal."

"It is a big deal. It's the objectification of Puerto Rican women everywhere. You should defend me. You should be by my side, Eduardo!"

"I think you're beautiful," he told her. She stopped and stared into his eyes. The mermaid girls and their den mother came by. Marcia looked down at one of the little girls. The girl bore an uncanny and altogether creepy resemblance to her as a girl. Long, dark flowing hair caught in a high breeze. She smiled and ran off to join her group.

"You think I'm beautiful?" Edward nodded, put her hand on his heart. "See that's what I'm talking about. You're objectifying me."

"Yes. I know." She looked down and skipped her feet.

"Okay," she said. She leapt in his arms and planted a long kiss on his lips and hugged him hard. Nice lips, he thought, not flat but puffy and soft cushion, felt so good, so sweet. "Adventure is often good for romance."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. I know this for a fact, Eduardo." She kissed him again.

They walked back to the alley behind the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. They walked hand-in-hand. Her fingers held him soft, brushed against his knuckle with her thumb. Together they took the gun. He lifted a bin, while she removed the unlicensed weapon. He put the gun under his shirt in the back of his pants.

"You're gonna give back the gun?"

"He needs it more than I do," Marcia said.

"Guns only cause problems."

"Yeah well, we don't have superheroes," she said.

"Yet," he added. She smiled at him.

Later, the fuss had died down. The locals had convinced the cops it was just a bunch of playful kids and adults lighting off loud (very loud) firecrackers and causing general mischief, but the cars kept going around in circles, monitoring (or gawking, depending on your point-of-view). He opened the door to his Junior Accountant desk and they stood at the door, looking in. Nothing had been touched. Too much chaos to care.

"You want to go out with me some time," Edward asked her.

She smiled and said, "Yes," all with her dreamy dark eyes, loving to hear his words. Even his murky coloring was wearing her down. She was used to him by now. Him and his suit and his straight-as-a-ruler hair, and his bundles of nerves. He set about cleaning his desk, getting it ready for another appointment. Outside, there were screams and shrieks. They saw a girl run by, soaked to the bone and then the loud, impertinent shouts of young men. Marcia looked concerned. She turned to Edward.

"I have to go," she said, sticking out her chest.

Edward rushed up to her with worry in his eyes. He said, "I know." She took his face in her hands and kissed him hard on his lips, his heart skipping a beat, becoming flushed. She tickled him with her kiss. With that, she ran off into the swarm of parade goers, chasing after the boys and their bottles of water. Edward ran to the door to watch her go.

Marcia stopped and turned around. She saw Edward looking after her. She smiled, bowed and then blew him a kiss. Edward waved and Marcia was off again. She didn't see it but he blew her a kiss as well.