

Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (Coord.)

UNDER THE SHADE OF THE GUAMÚCHIL

Life Stories of Indigenous and Peasant Women in Prison

Incarceration Nations Network

Collection Editor
BAZ DREISINGER

LIVED PLACES
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UNDER THE SHADE OF THE GUAMÚCHIL

Colectiva Editorial
Hermanas en la Sombra



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Images made by imprisoned women / Sumi-e workshop with Pilar Hinojosa

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Under the shade of the guamúchil
Life stories of Indigenous and peasant women in prison



Book & video

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Marisol del Águila, Amatista Lee, Alejandra Reynoso,
Rosa Salazar, Sol Nocturno, Galia Tonella, Leo Zavaleta

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Abstract

This book approaches the experiences of inequity and racism in the Mexican justice system through the voices and writings of thirteen incarcerated women who undertook the task of documenting and writing the stories of fellow indigenous and peasant women who did not have the privileged knowledge of writing. The life-story workshop was held by the publishing collective *Hermanas en la Sombra* in the women's area of the Atlacholoaya prison in Morelos. Such a collective process created new ties of solidarity between indigenous and non-indigenous women, and opened a space in which to reflect together on the machismo and racism that mark Mexican society, and how it impacted on the chain of injustices and exclusions that resulted in the deprivation of their freedom. The book also includes poetry and thoughts written in the creative writing workshops that *Hermanas en la Sombra* held in the same prison.

Key words

1. Violence against women – Mexico.
2. Indigenous Women
3. Domestic violence.
4. Rape – Mexico.
5. Female prisoners Mexico.
6. Women – Legal status, laws, etc. – Mexico.
7. – Life stories.
8. Atlacholoaya Social Rehabilitation Center, Morelos.
9. Racism
10. Feminist writing

General learning objective

Through the life stories written by women in a Mexican prison, the students and general public will understand the importance of racism in the criminalization of Indigenous women, a social phenomenon that is present in all the global prison complexes in the Americas. The criminalization and incarceration of indigenous peoples in Mexico, escalated in the context of the so-called "war on drugs", has created another form of forced dispossession and displacement, as people are placed into prisons far from their families, breaking their ties to their communities, subjecting their bodies to multiple forms of violence. The reading of these life stories will promote an intersectional perspective on the incarceration of Indigenous women, who are subjected to specific forms of violence before, during and after detention, which includes harassment and physical violence, as well as the separation from their children, families and communal context, which for them represents another form of torture.

Specific learning objectives

1. Identify the common themes that emerge across the different life stories presented in the book and analyze the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity in the experiences of imprisonment as described in the text.

2. Evaluate the concept of structural violence through the lens of the life stories shared in the book and analyze how the prison system perpetuates structural violence against Indigenous and peasant women.
3. Examine the role of the State in the incarceration of women, particularly from marginalized communities.
4. Critically assess how the personal narratives in the book challenge dominant discourses on crime and incarceration in Mexico and explore the alternative visions to punitive justice proposed throughout the book.
5. Articulate the role of storytelling in the processes of healing and resistance among incarcerated women and reflect on the personal and collective transformations made possible through the literary workshops described in the text.
6. Evaluate the contribution of participatory and collective writing practices to movements for social justice.

Consider how the book can serve as a critical tool to rethink the prison system and its functions.

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You no longer sing for me at night

Galia Tonella

Guamúchil, shadow of what I was, I do not forget that little girl of deep dreams. I am no longer a leaf carried by the wind. When night falls, unanimous silence shelters my prayer.

How the wind whips! You must be as cold as the one whipping my loneliness.

Guamúchil, you no longer sing for me, the night has been cut short as if cutting sins.

Silhouettes of silent buildings burn, frustrating dreams plundering behind bars, leaving melancholy that concerns prison.

Guamúchil, you turn green for me. The creeping yoke does not annihilate you, so I will turn green one day. You know my sins, and even so, you give me your shade.



Introduction: Stories of exclusion

Rosalva Aída Hernández



The guamúchil is the tree of the corrals and guardian of the roads. For some unknown reason, it likes human presence, as it tends to proliferate where there is frequent traffic of people. In the women's area of the Atlacholoaya Social Readaptation Centre (Cereso) Morelos, the guamúchil is the only green area that allows the imprisoned women to feel close to nature and forget for a moment about the penitentiary context that surrounds them.

Indigenous and rural women have taken ownership of this space where, as one of them explains, "the green of the guamúchil, the birds that nest there, and the laughter of the children that reaches us from the playgrounds make us feel that we are not locked in."

Under the Shade of the Guamúchil tells us about the experience of Indigenous and mestizo women (almost all of rural origin) imprisoned in the women's area of the Cereso[1] Morelos, where around 200 women have been isolated from society by a justice system that sees punishment and imprisonment as a solution to the failure of a social model that, through exclusion and poverty, has contributed to producing criminality.

The second edition of *Bajo la sombra del guamúchil* (*Under the Shade of the Guamúchil*) includes six new stories that were written in a second stage of the Life Stories Workshop under my coordination from 2013 to 2015. Eight years had passed since the first workshop when we did the second edition and ten years, now that we are publishing the English version. In this period, most of the women who participated in the first edition of the book, both those who wrote and those who told their story, have been

released. From being a writing workshop, the group became the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective, which has already published twenty-five books to date (2025).

Four of the Indigenous women who did not know how to read learned to do so and are now writing poetry and short stories, and are participating as co-authors in the different publications of the Collective. Leo Zavaleta, a Me'phaa woman from Guerrero, whose story had been written with Carlota Cadena, learned to write and decided to produce her own book, under the title *Los sueños de una cisne en el pantano* (2016) (*The Dreams of a Swan in the Swamp*). At her request, we changed the previous story to a summary of her new book.[2]

Only one of the participants in the first project was still in prison when we did the second edition in 2015. The others were released, several of them after their judicial files were reviewed. Some of them continue participating and writing now as active members of *Hermanas en la Sombra*. The new members who joined the workshop and those who are already outside have built a group identity as the *Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective*, becoming a reference for all the imprisoned women by proposing new, more sisterly ways of relating to each other and by questioning the racism and sexism of the penitentiary system with their writings.

The second edition, revised and expanded, includes six new stories and the film documentary *Semillas de Guamúchil, Ahora en Libertad* (Guamúchil Seeds, 2016) produced by our *compañera* Carolina Corral, which tells of the life in freedom of some of the participants in the first workshop.

In the workshop, which ran from 2008 to 2010 and from 2013 to 2015, participants took on the task of documenting and writing the stories of fellow Indigenous and peasant prisoners who did not have the privilege of writing. This collective process allowed for the creation of new bonds of solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, and opened a space for reflection on the machismo and racism that mark Mexican society and that influenced the chain of injustices and exclusions which ended up depriving them of their freedom. This double publication (book and video) also includes poems and reflections that were written over the course of these years within the framework of different projects of the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective. This is, therefore, an effort that I carried out jointly with the poets Elena de Hoyos and Marina Ruiz, with the visual anthropologist Carolina Corral, as well as with the visual artist Pilar Hinojosa, together with imprisoned women and writers in training—a task to which we have dedicated more than seven years and which is the fruit of the aforementioned workshops.[3]

During these years, we have learned more from them than we were able to teach them. Our dialogues with each of the imprisoned women forced us to see our own lives through different eyes. We learned that the need to change this discriminatory justice system is urgent not only for the women who have been unjustly imprisoned but for all of us who are outside, for our children, who run the risk of falling into its "clutches" at any moment, since in Mexico, being in prison is almost an "accident" that can happen to anyone. This work is an effort to share and denounce these injustices, and arises not from an "altruistic" initiative to save someone, but from a political conviction that, in order to

save ourselves, we have to denounce, even if it is through limited strategies such as editorials, the injustices that keep thousands of women away from their children and families.

According to the 2013 Census presented by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), there were 16,632 female prisoners in Mexico at that time. Of these, 42% are in prison for drugs related crimes. This trend is repeated among the Indigenous population, where 52% of women have been arrested for crimes against health, such as participation in drug dealing. Indigenous women have become hostages in the war against drug trafficking, because in order to demonstrate its "effectiveness" in the fight against organised crime, the Mexican government is imprisoning people from the most vulnerable sectors: rural women, poor women, many of them Indigenous.

Neoliberal structural reforms have deepened the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples, forcing them to migrate north and, in many cases, to grow or transport illicit substances as a means of survival in the face of the crisis in peasant production. At other times, they are forced to do so by drug traffickers. The stories we share here put these "crimes against health" into context and help us understand the reasons why some chose to break the law or, in the worst cases, remained silent when their husbands or sons became involved in illicit acts.

These stories also show us that the imprisonment of women, uprooting them from of their communities, the abandonment of their children, and the destructuring of family life are not solutions for keeping Indigenous, poor, and rural communities away from the networks of drug trafficking. Nor is it an effective way to

demonstrate that multicultural reforms have made justice more accessible to the country's Indigenous population. Only a social policy that provides economic alternatives to the Mexican countryside, based on the redistribution of wealth and the true recognition of the cultural and political rights of Indigenous peoples, can counteract the advance of drug trafficking in Indigenous and rural lands, keeping peasant women and men away from the networks of organised crime. The stories gathered here are not exceptional; they are merely examples of the many stories of sexual violence, racism, discrimination, and state violence shared by many of the 16,632 women imprisoned in the 604 detention centres in Mexico.

When I first arrived in Atlacholoaya, I was motivated by an academic and political interest in learning about the living conditions of Indigenous women prisoners. Through some personal networks, I managed to get invited to one of the workshops in the "*femenil*" which was run and coordinated by Elena de Hoyos: "Mujer, escribir cambia tu vida"[4]. It had been running for over a year, with 10 to 12 imprisoned women participating, interested in learning to write literary works. Most of the participants had some level of schooling, ranging from primary school to technical studies. None were Indigenous. When I introduced myself and explained my interest in learning about and writing the life stories of Indigenous women in prison, they themselves suggested that I teach them the methodology for preparing life stories, and they could be the ones to interview and write the stories of their fellow Indigenous women.

This was the beginning of a new space for dialogue and collective construction of knowledge, which presented new challenges for me

as an academic and activist. Between 10 and 15 imprisoned women participated in the Life Stories Workshop; the number fluctuated as some were released during the two and a half years the first workshop lasted, while others joined. The formal objective of the workshop was to "train participants in the technique of writing life stories[5] as a literary resource and for reflection on gender inequalities."

The workshop, which was held weekly at first and then biweekly from October 2008 to June 2010, had each participant work on her project to write the life story of a fellow Indigenous prisoner. From 2013 to 2015, we repeated the experience with a new group, following the same process as in the first workshop.

Once a month, the women whose stories were being systematised attended the workshop to listen to the progress and to comment on or question the representations the participants were making of their lives. Several of the participants chose to write their own stories. One Indigenous woman, by the end of the two years, had learned to write and chose to complete the story written by her partner, adding details and nuances to the original version. My intention in this workshop was to facilitate intercultural dialogues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and to promote critical reflection on the chains of ethnic, gender, and class inequalities that led to their confinement.

The participants began to develop their own theories and reflections, which, when integrated into the biographical narrative, took on hybrid and novel forms that went beyond life stories. At the same time, four handcrafted books were published: *Fragmentos de mujer, Mujeres habitando un sueño de libertad, Mareas Cautivas,*

and *Mundos Paralelos intramuros*. Under the auspices of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, the series *Colección Revelación Intramuros* was published, consisting of three volumes of poetry, fiction, and essays.[6]

The various projects promoted by the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective have been a means of sensitising hearts and creating a sisterhood among women of different social classes. One of them said during a writing exercise:

In my small space in the women's area, where the different minds, customs, and convictions of women mingle, it is interesting to take on the challenge of uniting our voices and capturing life stories, freeing them from this place and getting the outside world to know and reflect on the reality lived here. This workshop will make possible the union of women who seek a common goal. It is a means to help each other by being the spokespersons of real stories. Personally, it allows me to live a new experience in the world of writing and to feel proud to support those who have remained silent for a long time. With my writing, I will be the spokesperson for those who dare to tell their story. For illiterate women, this workshop is a way to free their story, to vent their feelings to a listening ear, and to recover the value of being a woman that society has taken away from them.

Through these dialogues, Amatista Lee, a woman of Korean descent who began the workshop with disillusionment and distrust towards the imprisoned women, came to know the reality of Indigenous women through the lives of four imprisoned women—two in the first workshop and two in the second. Morelitos and Flor de Nochebuena, the women whose lives Amatista documented in the

first workshop, were released shortly after their stories of injustice were made known through our book. Sadly, Morelitos, a 70-year-old Nahuatl woman, died a few months after being released due to a gastric ulcer she developed in confinement. In this second edition, Amatista dedicates a poem to her, expressing the bonds of affection that grew between them.

Over these seven years, Amatista gradually opened her heart, transforming from the hard and distant woman of the first months to a supportive and thoughtful companion who enriched our workshops with her views on racism, sexism, and inequality. Carlota Cadena, on the other hand, chose to approach two women from Tlapa, Altagracia and Leo, to whom she offered her pen and friendship. With her ever-ready smile and sense of humour, she made them laugh amid the sad memories stirred up during her interviews. Carlota was always the joy of our workshop, and she infected us with her optimism for life. Both Carlota and her two companions are now rebuilding their lives in freedom.

From these dialogues, Leo learned to write and decided to capture her own story in the form of a book that reflects her new identity, which she herself describes as a "rebirth." "I am someone else," she tells us. "Here I learned not only to write, but to look people in the eye and speak out loud. I no longer want to use a pseudonym, as I had told Carlota at the beginning. I want to use my real name, Leo Zavaleta, and for everyone to know that this is my story."

Another friendship that was consolidated in the workshop was that of Guadalupe Salgado and Luz, a peasant woman from the mountains of Guerrero who was disabled by a stroke. Luz had trouble speaking; Guadalupe learned to understand her and became her

translator. Her babbling, which was unintelligible to us, was transformed into words through Guadalupe Salgado's pen. She reconstructed her story while becoming her friend, nurse, and caregiver, using the skills she had developed caring for her own daughter, who suffered from cerebral palsy. At the end of Luz's story, Guadalupe was released and left Atlacholoaya, but not before telling all of us in the workshop not to forget Luz and to include her in our activities. Luz died in 2014, due to the deterioration of her health. Although she was not responsible for her illness, she decided to remain in seclusion because it was there that she had built a community that welcomed her. She died under the care of Amatista Lee, who took charge of her care after Guadalupe left.

Alejandra Reynoso also learned to write in confinement and decided to tell us the story of a Nahuatl woman whose pseudonym is Perla Negra. Alejandra went from learning vowels to writing poetry in a surprising way, with a sensitivity that is moving. She is a beautiful woman, who has a seductive tenderness. It is almost impossible not to love her immediately when you meet her. Her reflections in our collective space often moved us to tears. She is a woman who has touched the bottom of the abyss to emerge again without resentment. She is love despite the pain, and that is what she shares with us. Alejandra was released after the publication of the first edition and continues writing and giving her testimony at the various cultural events in which the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective participates.

Doña Rosa Salazar was one of those illiterate peasant women who rarely came to the workshop space, except to sell some food. But one day she stood at the door listening to her companions read their texts. She began to visit our workshop, not

only to sell food but to hear what was read there. After several sessions, she told us that she was learning to write and that she would like to attend as a listener, although she could not write her life and was not interested in anyone else writing it. "It hurts a lot to remember the past, you know? I prefer to listen to what others write." Over the last few years, Rosa began to participate more actively in the workshop, giving her opinion on the topics discussed and sometimes writing texts with her reflections. Now free, "Mamá Rosita" welcomes into her home and gives solidarity support to the companions who are released and do not have a home to go to. She also continues to participate actively in the Collective's events.

During the first years of the Collective, the collaboration of Marisol Hernandez del Águila (Águila del Mar) was fundamental. She was an inspiration to all of us, for her love of the written word, but also for her audacity in approaching eroticism and sexuality in her texts, without ever forgetting the sharp criticism of the machismo and sexism that characterise Mexican society. Her story, like her life, breaks with pre-established patterns. She decided to "go free" and, rather than a life story, wrote a story somewhere between erotic and noir literature, which is perhaps the germ of a future novel. Now free, she continues writing and participating in radio programmes and cultural gatherings, and has become part of the cultural community of Cuernavaca.

In the second workshop, María Elena Basave, Sol Nocturno, and Galia Tonella joined, along with Amatista Lee, who became the veteran of the group. Each of them invited an Indigenous and peasant companion to share her story and, as in the first group, networks of friendship were woven that in many cases changed

their lives. The case of Martha Elena Hernández Bermúdez, a Tsotsil peasant woman from Chiapas, and Galia Tonella, a businesswoman, therapist, and writer, is an example of the intercultural dialogues that have been promoted in these years. Martha Elena, now free, currently lives in Galia's house in Cuernavaca, waiting for her friend to be released so they can continue sharing the knowledge they both have about the life and culinary traditions of our country.

All of these women, both those who wrote and those who shared their stories, are survivors of a sexist and racist system that has marked their lives. But none of them has assumed the identity of a "victim." Each one of them, in her own way, has learned to resist and confront the patterns that imprison them inside and outside of prison.

I have to acknowledge the limitations of this type of work, which does not undermine or destabilise the penitentiary system, nor its effects of power over the bodies and minds of female prisoners. I start by recognising these limitations and, based on them, I try to contribute these reflections and actions for the transformation of a corrupt, sexist, and racist justice system, which not only affects the lives of female prisoners, but is a latent threat to me and to all women who are outside. We know that this is a small, limited task, which has been proposed to accompany the processes of critical reflection and the work of denouncing the injustices, racism, and sexism of the penitentiary system by the imprisoned women themselves. We hope that this book-video will be a way of freeing their voices and can contribute, even minimally, to raising awareness in society and improving the living conditions of thousands of women, whose bodies and minds neoliberal states seek to control.

Under the shade of the guamúchil



The stories gathered here are not exceptional; they are merely examples of the myriad stories of sexual violence, racism, discrimination, and state violence shared by many of the 16,632 women imprisoned in the 604 detention centres in Mexico.

1
Flor de Nochebuena: You were born women, resign yourselves

Amatista Lee



I remember very well my first meeting with you; it was that day when they took me up to the dormitory. I was scared; I didn't know what to do. I looked at that cement building, arid and cold: on one side there were two levels, and on the other, three. A staircase with a handrail led me to the cell; at first glance, I couldn't tell how many cells there were or what they were called. I went up the stairs, and there you were, dear friend, looking at me sweetly, with a big smile. You offered to help me with my things on the way to the cell that would be my room.

I clearly remember the calmness that your voice conveyed when you told me, "Don't worry, one day you will be able to leave this place. You can always count on me for whatever you need. If someone bothers you, tell me. I have something for her too…" You laughed, injecting confidence into me. To this day, you have kept your promise, dear Flor de Nochebuena. Thanks to you and your patience with me, I have grown. Like you, I discovered the magic of feeling free behind bars. Writing has been another way for me to escape from this confinement, and today I want to share it with you by telling your story.

Flor de Nochebuena was born in Santa María Soyatla, a Nahuatl community in the state of Puebla. She tells me that she was born there, but later her mother took her to another place, San Miguel Ayotla. She says that she was 15 days old and that she grew up there. She also went to school there, but only until second grade, because her mother became seriously ill. She only heard her father say that while working in the fields, an animal had stung her.

She recounts her childhood memories, telling me: "Later, she was taken to the nearest hospital. One day, my father came to tell

me that my mother's hands were rotting, and the doctor said he wouldn't treat her. They took her back home, where a neighbour began to treat her with herbs until she was cured, but we began to suffer more from hunger since they took us to the neighbour's house. After this illness, I no longer studied because the school was more than half an hour away. The first few days I went, but since I had to go by myself, I was very afraid. I cried all the way. I thought someone was spying on me to rape me. I chose not to go. Later, I began to beg for food from house to house or exchanged work for food for my mother and my little brothers."

She goes on to describe the poverty of her people: "Back in my town, San Miguel Ayotla, in the municipality of Ahuazotepec, Puebla, we had to fetch water to drink. We did it every third day, trying to make sure we had enough so we wouldn't have to go back too soon. The truth is that we had to walk at least an hour and a half to get to the little spring where we got water. In the distance, you could see the plain, arid, dry, and the occasional tree."

Listening to her, I imagine something very similar to the desert, where there is a shortage of water, heat, and predators. "The small spring didn't have much water, and therefore we rationed it to the maximum. You can't imagine what nights were like: mosquitoes would get up your nose, and since the heat didn't allow you to stay covered, what we did was scare them away by collecting dried cow dung and setting it on fire. When the fire went out, the smoke it gave off kept the mosquitoes away from us. The smoke could last all night, depending on the size of the dung, and that way we stayed protected from the annoying mosquitoes. The smoke also lasted because our nights were short, since we had to get up very early, at four in the morning, to make breakfast,

which consisted of some reheated tortillas and tea with leaves, with very little sugar. My mother told us: 'When your father gets paid on Saturday, we'll eat *molito*.' But that was a promise that was rarely kept, because every time it was payday, the boss would say that my dad owed him money and deduct it from his salary; my dad accepted these injustices in order not to lose his job.

"It was also difficult for him to face his boss, because he couldn't read or write and barely spoke Spanish. He could only say hello, say goodbye, and say 'see you tomorrow.' So, he barely made a little money from his work all week. We had to make do with the little we had and console ourselves with the feeling of being united among all the sibilings. Maybe because of frustration at so much injustice, or because of anger he had kept up, or who knows why, he took it out on us, and when he decided he had to beat us, he did it for anything.

"For example, if we took too long to bring lunch to where he worked, we would do very badly. I was only 12 years old, the youngest, and with my sisters Florentina and Evelina, who were 16 and 18, we would set out at six in the morning. The road was long; we walked for about two hours to get to where my father worked. We would accompany him to eat, and we would help him clean the cornfield. I remember that because I was the youngest, my sisters considered my age and they demanded little from me in the field; they let me concentrate on the housework. At 10 o'clock, we were already going back to the house to help my mother with the food, while we walked the whole way for another two hours, and at 12 o'clock, we were arriving with my mother. We were tired, but instead of resting, we had to light the fire to make some food with the few greens that my mother

had collected. We had to hurry to take lunch to my dad again, but this time we had to take the dirty clothes to wash them in the river. 'That's how time went by between coming and going, concentrating on what we had to do, and before we knew it, night fell.

"After work, my father would come home very tired, angry because he had his planting half done, and the next day he had to go back to the same thing. In that mood, he would not tolerate us laughing or whispering. My sisters and I would wait for him to fall asleep so we could talk. In those days, we all lived in a little house made of sticks, with a palm roof. The floor was made of mud and ash, but was always very flat, without stones. There, we all slept in one room, our mats very close to each other. We didn't even have a table to eat on. We ate on the same mat, from a pot near the stove where my mother cooked. Like all the houses in the region, our little house had no windows, only a small doorway through which we entered and left, covered during the day with a sheet. When we had visitors, we would receive them outside, take out our mats, and put them under a small tree. While the adults talked, we would go and make firewood, because we always had firewood in our house. But we didn't receive many visitors, because we didn't have many neighbours; it wasn't a town where we all lived together, but rather there were hamlets scattered in the mountains. The nearest house was half a kilometre away, and there were only about four or six houses in the vicinity. San Miguel Ayotla was a small town, with dirt roads, where all the houses were like ours, made of palm leaves, without running water, electricity, or drainage.

> "We tried to survive by planting seasonal crops, since there was no irrigation, not even swimming holes. There were many *guajes*[7], palm trees and *otate*[8]. During the dry season, people worked crafting *chiquigüites*[9], mats, winnowing fans, and *tanates*. When the rains came, we planted corn, peanuts, and sorghum. Life in our town was difficult; since we didn't even have latrines, we went behind the bushes to do our business. The hardest part came during the rainy season, so we covered ourselves with tarps and tried to always walk with someone because the roads were very dark and scary. Everyone in the town spoke Nahuatl; only a few knew some words of Spanish."

As I listen to her, I reflect a little and say, half-jokingly: I can imagine how you felt; it's like I arrived in another country and couldn't communicate with people because I didn't speak the language. That must have been very difficult. She continues her story, telling me about her childhood memories: "At that time, we only spoke Nahuatl." Very seriously, she tells me that not everything was so bad back in her town. She tells me that there were fiestas, which began in March when the Virgin of the Incarnation is celebrated, and ended in April. There were processions, games, and rodeos.

With a hint of melancholy in her voice, she continues her story: "Those parties were one of the few moments of fun; it was what I liked most about my town. But many people complained because there was not enough money to hold them."

However, the sad memories almost overshadowed those brief moments of happiness, as Flor de Nochebuena describes to

me how difficult it was to live without electricity, without drinking water, without even the smallest things: "We always used a candle to light our way. I didn't like having to walk so far to get water to drink and cook. It was an arid, poor town, controlled by very chauvinistic men who believed that we were their servants; we had to always be at their disposal. They didn't bother to find out if we wanted to have relations with them or not; they just took what they wanted. One of the saddest memories I have from this time was when my mother told us to take some tortillas to the fields, in a place that was very far away. I didn't want to go; I was afraid, as if I had a premonition of something, as if my heart was warning me that I was in some danger. I was 12 years old, and my sister Florentina was 16. She told me, 'Don't be afraid, my sister; I'll go with you.' So I obeyed her command, took my *chiquepextle*[10], and started walking with my sister through the woods. After an hour of walking, we passed by some ravines, and I realised that two men were following us, so I warned my sister. She told me, 'Don't be afraid; we're together; I'm coming with you.'

"But the men caught up with us. They pulled Florentina by her braids and threw her to the ground. I tried to help her, but I could barely move when the other man caught up with me. No matter how much we begged them, they abused us, beat us, and threatened to kill us if we said anything. We were hurt and scared, so as soon as we could, we continued on our way.

> "When we returned home, we were dirty and beaten up, and my daddy was surprised to see us, but we didn't want to tell him anything."



> "We told him a story that we had fallen while trying to cross a ravine. He suspected what had happened, but he could not get a word out of us. We were very afraid that if we told him the truth, he would try to take revenge and our rapists would kill him."

I see the sadness reflected on her face as she recalls this painful episode in her life. I cannot believe what she is telling me. I cannot believe that there are people so evil that they could do so much harm to a girl of only 12 years old. Tears flow from her slanted eyes that bathe her dark complexion. I cannot help but feel angry and helpless. I imagine her alone with her sister,

screaming, asking for help, with no one responding to her call, with no one listening to her lament.

She continues with her story, telling me: "I cried, I cried a lot, my dear. I always dreamed of getting married in white, and at that moment I realised that would never happen." The sobs interrupt her story. I respect her silence, but after a few seconds she continues: "My mother began to suspect that something was wrong with me, and one day she came to ask me if I was okay. I couldn't bear it any longer and I told her everything that had happened. 'Remember,' I told her, 'that day you sent us to take tortillas to the field, that day some men raped me and my sister Florentina.' She hugged me, crying, and said: 'Don't worry, my daughter, we will do you justice, and if no one wants to marry you because of that, you can always be with us.' That night, when my father arrived, he went crazy when he found out, saying that he would look for them to get even. It was as if he had suddenly aged, he looked more tired than usual, and even though he didn't express his feelings, we could tell that what had happened to us hurt him deeply. I, being the youngest, was my parents' favourite, and my rape hurt them more than anything. Time passed, and one afternoon my father called my sister and me and said: 'I've confronted those who raped you and killed one of them, the other will pay for it sooner or later.' I thought at that moment that his revenge would never be able to restore my honour, but if that consoled him, then so be it.

> "Back then, women didn't have an opinion, we just obeyed, so I didn't say anything. In the midst of these difficult experiences, my mother always supported us, advised us, never mistreated us. She would tell us: 'Your

> father is enough, my girls, so I don't want to whip you too.' My father, on the other hand, was very tough. He would say: 'I give the orders and you obey.' When he shouted, we all trembled. Maybe that's why now, if a male shouts at me, I feel very afraid and start to tremble. There was a lot of violence in my family; my parents didn't get along. It even seems like I can still hear my mother's voice telling my father: 'Don't shout at the girls, man, or they'll be very stupid when they grow up,' and my father would answer: 'That's how it has to be, don't you get involved, they were born women, now they have resign themselves.' But the screams were nothing compared to the way he hit my mother. She didn't fight back. She just endured it. When she asked him why he hit her, he would say: 'Women are only good for raising children and taking care of their husbands.' For him, neither we nor our mother had any value. That's how my sisters and I felt."

She takes a break from her story and tries to find in her memory something pleasant that she can share with me to compensate for all the pain and suffering of what she has told me and continues telling me. "But I also have nice memories of my childhood. As a child I loved to ride a donkey, to climb trees. When they sent me to get water, I entertained myself by bathing in the river. How I liked to feel the water on my body. It didn't matter that it was barely six in the morning. Among the nice memories I have from my childhood, there is that time they sent me to take care of the *pípilos* in the mountains. I was about ten years old, I was young, and I didn't know much about it. One day the *pípilos* got away from me, I tried to stop them, and I killed one. I was very scared;

I didn't know what to do. I was sure that my father would beat me up. I had no choice. I had to find an excuse and since sometimes the pigs ate the *pípilos*, I thought: 'I'll pretend that a pig killed him.' I took a regular-sized rock and hit him on the head with it until it came off his body. The idea was to make it look like the pig had done it. I went home with this story and they believed me. But again, because I was up in a guaje tree I didn't pay attention and I lost another one. Like the previous time, I said: 'The hawk took him, Mom.' My mother didn't say anything, but from then on she never sent me to look after the *pípilos* again, because according to her, I killed them.

"Later, when I was older, around the age of 13, I got together with my future husband. I suffered a lot because my mother-in-law didn't love me and, secretly, she beat me, even hitting me with a wooden spoon. I was very young and didn't understand that this wasn't right," Flor de Nochebuena thinks and explains to me that maybe if she had done things better, her mother-in-law would have loved her. She continues her story: "She always shouted: 'I'm going to tell your man to hit you.' I always respected my mother-in-law but she never loved me. But my husband did love me even though they told him that I was very ugly, a black Indian, and ignorant. But with time he began to change with me and he beat me, until I finally went back to live with my parents. Then I realised that I was pregnant. But the baby was not born as a result of so many beatings. One day, I met another boy and I got together with him. I had 15 children, 10 of whom are still alive. The rest died from various causes, since we were very poor and sometimes we didn't have enough food, so we ate tortillas and chiles some days and others, nothing. The older ones endured hunger

frequently. My husband always hit me with everything, and my children too. He said that it had to be that way because he didn't like me looking for bread for my children because I was going to cheat on him with someone else, which never crossed my mind, so we endured hunger. Sometimes I went into the cornfields to get some corn and make tortillas with salt. Later, a sickly girl was born to me. She was never able to walk and she never grew as she should have. My husband said: 'Pray to God that she dies. Why do you want a daughter like that to live?' I answered: 'Until I die, I will watch over my little girl.'

"My children began to grow up and when they asked their father for food, he would drug them. He would take the older ones to the fields so they would help him work. He did this when they wouldn't leave him alone. My children were eight and ten years old. I couldn't say anything because he would beat me up if I wanted to defend the kids. On one occasion I told myself that I didn't care about the beatings anymore and I went to cut grass. They paid me 50 pesos for the whole day; they paid me per day, and with that my children could eat at least beans. I had to cross rivers. One day the water swept me away when I tried to cross a river with my child. I let the current sweep me away, but I didn't let go of my little boy until God wanted me to get stuck in some branches and later, with a lot of work, I was able to get out of the river.

"One afternoon my sister came over and asked me if my husband had any marijuana. I replied: 'I don't know. He'll come back later and I'll ask him.'" 'He'll come back at night.' When my husband was there, he didn't want to give it to her. My sister told me, 'It's just that my son wants a little. You know he's an addict.' I felt

sorry for him and I gave her some that my husband kept. Then the police arrived and told me that I was under arrest for drug dealing. I didn't speak Spanish and I barely understood what the police were saying.

"They told me to say that I sold marijuana to my sister, and I replied to them: 'But I didn't sell it to her, I gave it to her.' I didn't know what they wrote, because they made my statement and when they called me to receive my sentence, they told me that I would spend ten years here. I've been here for six years now. During this time some of my classmates took pity on me and corrected my Spanish. They taught me new words. With the little I learned from them, I have managed to communicate, but I still don't understand what really happened. When I arrived here, some of them made fun of me because I couldn't speak the language. Others hurt me or charged me more, knowing that I didn't know how to do maths. But there were others who fought for my cause.

"Now, more calmly, I embroider my napkins, which I later sell in exchange for things I need. I hope that time will pass and that one day I will be reunited with my children and my sick daughter, whom I miss very much because I have not seen her since I arrived. I hope to God that I find them well and that they still remember me."

This is how Flor de Nochebuena ended her story, a testimony of the many injustices that she has had to endure as a poor, Indigenous woman since she was born. What I learned throughout our many conversations makes me see her and life itself with different eyes. If someone were to ask me why I chose her to tell her story, the answer would be that, from the first moment

I saw her, I knew she had something to teach me. I knew she would be the source to capture, through her story, the story of a small heroine. Her good and bad experiences and the way she has grown as a person with this suffering, have made me think about how an insecure caterpillar becomes a splendid, tenacious, enterprising butterfly, always smiling in the face of adversity. Like the phoenix, she has re-emerged in the face of the adversity of prison, rising again from the ashes. I listen to her and she revives me; in moments of anguish she helps me to renew my strength.

With this letter I would like to thank Flor de Nochebuena for everything we shared, and even if fate separates us one day, the memory of our conversations and her example will always help me to recover the energy that drives me to continue.

A woman with a lot of fear

Rosa Salazar

There was a woman who was very afraid of her husband because he mistreated her psychologically and verbally, and behaved immorally towards her. Her life was full of mistreatment, a lack of affection, and a lack of understanding.

However, she loved him despite the blows; she forgave him and did not listen to his rude words. One day, he gave her a cell phone, but it was only for him to keep an eye on her because he always wanted to know where she was. He got furious if he couldn't find her. In his anger, he would tear her clothes and hurt her; he was a very bad man. She was a very scared woman. She did not value herself; she did not know her worth as a woman. She did not know that she deserved to be loved, not humiliated, to be respected, and to be loving towards herself. She didn't know that she deserved to be cared for, to be talked to, and to be loved. She didn't know this because she was a very fearful woman.

Today I face pain with courage

Amatista Lee

Writing or being part of the Life Stories Workshop has given me the opportunity to uncover memories buried in my mind. Listening to the stories of different companions who have been sharing with me throughout all our time in captivity, I realise how their past had gone unnoticed by me—that is, the reason for their stay in this place. But hearing about the sadness, loneliness, hardships, and other things from the mouths of those whose stories I write about drives me to unearth my own past without fear of ridicule.

Today, I face the pain with courage. Perhaps a year and a half ago, I might have seemed to Elena de Hoyos like an insecure, scared rat, but now I understand that something happens to all of us that leaves us with wounds. Mine are healing little by little. I know in advance that this is a process, perhaps a bit long, but I also know that I am not alone. Thanks to Aída and Elena, I will be able to reach the top.

2
Altagracia: I agreed to do it, despite my fear

Carlota Cadena



This is a very beautiful day, as we are in the month of March. It is the 26th to be exact; it is the beginning of spring, and you can feel it in the air. From early in the morning, the little birds, with their chirping and singing, and their cheerful fluttering, announce to us that something is changing.

Here at the Cereso, these changes in the weather make a real difference in the mood of all of us who are here inside. The splendour of the rising sun reminds me that this is just another day and that I have to get started with my activities.

I decide to go find Altagracia to begin writing her story. She usually sits in the bonding area, where the convicted women go because it is larger. It is behind the Cendi (a small school for the children of the imprisoned women), going down from the dormitory on the left. Somehow, groups have formed inside the prison, and each group chooses a space where they usually sit. Altagracia sits with the village ladies, who look for the shade of the guamúchil tree to sew or do crafts. From the guamúchil tree, you can see the play area where the children go out to have fun, and you can always hear the sounds of the birds. I think that in this small garden, it is the place where we feel the most free.

The green of the trees, the birds that nest in them, and the laughter of the children coming from their play area make us feel like we are not locked in.

I arrive at the bonding area and start looking for my colleague Altagracia. There she is, a fragile figure with a deep look that also reflects enthusiasm. She is doing her knitting work while sitting on a chair, and because of her short stature, her little feet dangle

since if she sits upright they don't reach the floor. When she sees me, she smiles and beckons me to come closer.

She has agreed to share her story with me. I don't know her very well, but in the times we have spoken, she has been very cordial with me. I know that she is Indigenous from Guerrero, that she doesn't know how to write, and this makes me decide to invite her to write her story. We begin with her childhood, and like many women from the countryside, she describes how she became a woman at a very early age by getting married.

The story begins:

> "My name is Altagracia. I am the daughter of Fernanda Pérez and Mr Pantaleón Vargas. I was born in the state of Guerrero. My town is called Tlacotepec, in the municipality of Tlacoapa, where the Tlapanec language is spoken. I grew up with my grandparents. We were three sisters; I was the oldest, and I grew up in the countryside because I looked after the goats, and after tending to them, I would plant vegetables. From the age of eight, I helped in the garden, planting chili peppers, onions, garlic, watermelons, melons, and tobacco. When I was only 11 years old, I had my first boyfriend. He begged me a lot to marry him, and finally, at the age of 13, I agreed to be his wife. I lived very happily for a short time, because he was killed three months after we got married. He died as a victim of my family's problems. I suffered greatly from this loss. One of my aunts, named Avelina, had left her husband, and to get revenge on my family, he decided to steal me to make me his wife.

"The rumour spread in my town, and this made me decide to get married, but I never thought that my decision would cost my husband his life, because as my aunt's husband could not take me by force, he ended up killing him. As is the custom in my town, after my husband died, I spent another two months living with my in-laws, but after a while, I decided to return to my family. First, I returned to my grandparents' house, but I had to earn a living, so I went to work with some uncles. I stayed there for a year, but then I returned to my town. There, I went back to working in my grandparents' garden, and it was while helping them that I met the father of my children. He talked to me for about a year; we were dated, and when I turned 16, we started living together. I had a total of 11 pregnancies, but only 8 children survived. At 17, my first son, Francisco, was born. My husband worked in the fields, and I made pots at home because my mother-in-law made clay dishes and taught me how to make pottery.

"A year and a half later, I had another daughter, Juana. After another year and a half, María was born. Exactly 18 months later, I had another girl, who died three days after she was born. During this pregnancy, I had a big scare because some men wanted to take my cousin by force. I think that was the reason for my daughter's death, because after the scare, I breastfed her. A year and a half later, my son Gerardo was born, and 18 months later, my daughter Rosalba was born. Then Patricia, Carmela, and a boy named Adelfo were born. My tenth child was called Abel, but he and Adelfo died almost at the same time because they got measles. I remember it with great sadness because they died due to a lack of medical attention, and although I did what I could,

the home remedies did not work. My husband told me that he would not do anything because he did not believe that they would die of measles. And so it was that one died on 2 March, and another on the 3rd.

"A year and a half after the death of those two children, I became pregnant with a boy whom I named Sabino. My baby was barely three months old when I got pregnant again, and my youngest daughter was born, whom I named Natalí. After this birth, we left Guerrero for Cuernavaca and ended up living in Patios de la Estación, in the El Vergel neighbourhood. There, my husband began to work as a bricklayer, but since there were eight children, and including my husband and me, ten members in the family, the money was not enough. I saw that things were going from bad to worse because I had to send my children to school, dress them, and put shoes on them. I started making tamales, *atole*, and bread and went out to sell. I also sent the children to sell tamales to help cover the expenses. I got up at 5 in the morning, and by 10, the bread was already baked.

"After bread, I continued with tamales and *atole*. Life was very hard for everyone in the family. The children started working from a young age, but when my husband saw that I was trying to make a living, he became lazy and lax. There were periods of more than a year when he didn't work, and I was in charge of all the household expenses. I paid for water, electricity, and my children's school fees. It was during this time, when things had become very difficult for the family and we could barely survive by selling bread and tamales, that a woman called Alondra approached me. She had noticed how much I worked and how little I earned, and she told me that she felt sorry for me and that

she was going to help me earn some extra money. She suggested that I sell drugs.

"When I went out to sell my bread, she gave me the drugs. We met in a vacant lot near my house and I never knew where she lived. It seemed easy to me, after so many years of working and suffering shortages and going through so many hardships, so I agreed to do it, even though I was afraid. She convinced me that in this way I would soon get out of poverty. It wasn't hard to convince my husband because he was the most interested in me having another source of income; he realised that with this new business, there was always money in the house, and he needed even less to work. But the saddest thing was that about a month or a month and a half after I had started selling the drugs, the police caught up with me."



I had set up a small shop in my house, where I sold beer, soft drinks, candy, and fireworks. When I was about to sell some

fireworks, the police arrived and arrested my daughter Juana, my husband, and me. My daughter also lived on the same land; she had her little house where she lived with her six children, and she was pregnant.

"I resent the father of my children because he had the opportunity to help my daughter Juana leave, and instead of doing so, he made her case worse with his statements. He didn't stop to think that her children were still very young and that they would miss her very much. He betrayed his own daughter, and instead of defending her, he gave her up. He, who benefited the most from my work, walked free. Instead, my daughter and I were sent to prison.

"Well, I said that he didn't know anything and that he had nothing to do with my business. He was also sick, and I wanted him free because I thought then my children would have the support of their father. But it wasn't as I thought, because from the moment I ended up here, he got busy finishing off what little that I had managed to obtain out there. He did away with the fruit of my labours, with the little store I had worked so hard to set up; he began by selling the dishes, the refrigerator, and the pots I had bought for my business, and he ended up selling even the furniture. Finally, he got rid of the land where my daughter and I had the house. We were left with nothing.

"The good thing is that my daughter Juana was given the minimum sentence of five years. Last year, she was released. The bad thing is that I stayed. I have been in this place for seven years, and they sentenced me to 10 years and 100 days. Every day I think about when will I get out of this place. But despite being in prison,

I thank God because I am 58 years old, and when I arrived here, I did not know how to write. In these years, I have learned many good things; I have learned that I am worth a lot as a person, and this gives me the strength to get ahead with the work I do. Here, I knit, embroider, make napkins, tablecloths, and go to school. I am also learning to do embroidery with ribbon. However, I am very alone because I do not have the support of my family, not as I would like."

A beautiful school

Rosa Salazar

Although I didn't have any education, I have learned here. Although my parents are Indigenous, I want to develop myself and be open. Prison is a beautiful school; I met my fellow prisoners, and I have fond memories of them and my guards. I want to overcome my fears.

I'm not going to cry for anyone, even if my heart breaks, because I'm going to get ahead against all odds. I'm going to prove to myself that no one is going to destroy me because I'm strong and I'm going to get ahead. I've had good teachers. Thanks to them I'm going to fight to succeed in life. Thank God for giving me strength and intelligence. I'm happy to be here in prison because I've seen everything in my life.

3
Morelitos: Their word against mine

Amatista Lee



When I observe your slow walk and fragile-looking figure, I think of all that you had to endure in life. It is this experience that has made you a container of wisdom, and perhaps because of my desire to transport myself to the past—to know you better or simply to acquire a little of that wisdom that you have learned to use over the years—is why I decided to invite you to write your story. I couldn't tell you for sure why, but here I am, trying to make it possible for people to get to know you through this means, Morelitos, perhaps revealing part of your introspection.

I am in Morelitos's cell. Like all our cells, it is a small place, approximately 3 m by 2 m, including the bathroom and bed. The bed is just a concrete slab with a foam rubber mat that serves as a mattress. There is also a small table where she eats, and above it, there is a shelf for her few belongings.

She invites me to sit down and have a glass of water, and begins by telling me that she was born in Huizacotla, in the municipality of Atlixtac, Guerrero. Her parents were also from the same place; they were born and died there. The ranch consisted of a few small houses made of palm leaves and mud, without furniture. She describes her life in this village, saying: "We slept on a mat; we ate on it. We cooked outside on a stove, and in the rainy season, we cooked inside. The ranch was far from the big towns; we were surrounded by hills. When we needed to get supplies, we walked to the town. There we didn't have a doctor or a drainage system, much less electricity or drinking water. To get water, we had to carry it on donkeys if we had animals, and if not, then on foot. It was approximately 30 minutes from the house to the waterhole. Our work consisted of planting corn, squash, and beans; that's what we ate. There were also cattle herders and

goats; others raised chickens. Most of the people in my town speak Nahuatl. Among my fond memories is life on my ranch. It was a quiet life; almost everyone knew each other, and the people were very friendly. However, there were also things that I didn't like and that still remain, for example, the lack of electricity, drinking water, a doctor, a school, street lighting, and some little things that are needed to live well. At that time, we were six members of the family: my father, my mother, my two brothers, my sister, and I. I was the youngest. My mother and I had a close relationship. You could say that because instead of complaining about my gender, she always said, 'It's good that you were a girl, so I'll have someone to talk to without feeling ashamed of some things.' On the other hand, my father was more of a beater, and he yelled at us for anything; he was almost always in a bad mood."

As I listen to her describe her father, I think of my own father and how lucky I was not to have a violent father. In contrast, he would sit me on his lap to sing "Amor chiquito" to me, and I felt like his princess. This was not the case with Morelitos, who tells me about a childhood full of violence. She also says, "My parents were always at each other. When it wasn't the hand of the metate[11], it was his belt that hit my mother's back. Sometimes it was because the sauce needed salt; other, because his food wasn't ready when he asked for it." I interrupt her story and tell her that this also happened in my house. I think this used to be the most common thing among married couples, because exactly the same thing happened with my parents. The difference is that mine fought over money, while we children remained spectators.

Hearing me, Morelitos says, "Yes, but they didn't beat you constantly, and that makes a difference." Then she continues her

story: "I remember when I was little, that I really liked playing in the fields. My girl-cousins and I would make the most of the time we had to run around in the clearings in the fields. The times when they sent us to take care of the goats, we would play; most of the day we spent picking flowers, bathing in the river, or simply lying on our bellies under a tree talking about the kids who lived nearby. I also think those were my best years. But I also have sad memories from my childhood, like not having anything to wear. My poor mother saved the sacks of sugar she found there to make us some little rags to cover our bodies. I never wore shoes, and sometimes stones would get stuck in my feet, or thorns would get embedded in them, so I would sit down to remove the thorns and be able to continue walking.

"I remember very well that I asked my mother how I was born, and she told me, 'Here, there is no way to weigh newborns; we only say if they are chubby or skinny.[13] You were very small, and very skinny, we even feared you wouldn't make it, but thank God you are here, even though the midwife wasn't near. When the pains started in the middle of the night, with no company but my machete, I had to walk for about an hour. We made the return trip on animals.

"A birth was not a reason to celebrate; it only increased work and made food scarce. So, such an event, far from making us happy, made us angry, even worse if a girl was born; they would say, 'Oh, another woman! They only cause trouble; they are not good for anything.' But if a boy was born, the comments were congratulatory for the father. You would hear people say, 'Now you are set, a little boy to help you in the fields and your name will not be lost. I wish only little boys were born.

"However," Morelitos tells me, "My mother was different. She would tell me, 'How good, my daughter, that you were born a woman; this way, I get less tired with housework.' She would hit me sometimes because we were not supposed to answer back at her scolding, whether we were right or not; also for looking at them in the face when they reprimanded us. That always happened with my father. He almost always treated me like someone else in the family. He never showed me affection or spoke to me in any other way. He always told me, 'Why did I have girls?' My father was the one who hit me the most, but there was never anyone to defend me. Never! Not even my mother dared to contradict him, nobody contradicted a man; even less so if he was the head of the family.

"I got along better with my sisters; we talked about a thousand things and almost always played together. Not so with my brothers, they kept their distance because they thought, 'boys don't play with girls; they should only hang out and play with boys; otherwise, they'll become effeminate.' I don't remember well if they fought or not; I didn't pay much attention to them. I remember that one day my sister didn't pay attention and stepped on a baby chicken and killed it. So that they wouldn't notice what had happened, we dug a little hole, buried it with flowers and a cross. When my father arrived, he hit us so much that I still remember it. He said, 'Since no one did it, I'm going to hit you both.' And the thing is, I didn't want to give my sister away. That's why when he asked me who had done it, I said, 'I don't know, Dad.'

I listen to her, and I go back to my own childhood to ask myself: was it worth it to have grown up in a boarding school? Maybe I wasn't beaten, but I always believed that it was best to have my parents

nearby. Morelitos interrupts my thoughts to tell me, "At that time, I only spoke Nahuatl, since it was my first language. Now, in order to survive, I have had to learn to speak Spanish. Between my brothers and me, the treatment was different. For example, my brothers were served more food because my mother thought that they were the ones who worked the hardest, while we girls were only good for raising children. Likewise, when they came home from work, they would go to bed to rest, and the girls had to continue with the chores. The same thing always happened when the boys went to the fields, and we girls rarely did. We usually helped carry water, wash everyone's clothes in the river, and grind nixtamal[12] on the metate to make tortillas. There was no mill in my village, no school, no clinic; that's why we never went to school. We heard our parents say, 'Better to have a stomach half full than a head full of letters.' So, I had no bad or good times as a student, since I never set foot in a school in my life.

"Life on the ranch did not allow for big plans. There, the only thing we thought about was survival. Girls were taught crafts from a young age; boys were almost always taken to the fields, and girls were taught to sell their handmade products. Other times, we were loaded with flowers and vegetables to be sold or exchanged for beans, among other things. Children rarely participated in the town festivals, which were usually done by adults or young people. The town festivals were few because money was scarce; only the saints we thought were most important were celebrated, like 12 December, a celebration that I really liked because dances were held in honour of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and people dressed up as animals, Moors, and some ancestral deities. There were also cowboys. But not everyone could participate in these dances; this

was usually done by drawing lots. We children were taught to respect the eldest boy, and if he shouted at us or attacked us, we couldn't say anything. We complained to our parents; they knew what to do. The treatment between boys and girls was different; the boy was always told that he was the one who was in charge at home, and we were told that we shouldn't talk back to a male and that it's a blessing to have children because otherwise, you're useless. Our religion said that the head of the family is the man. Whenever we could go to church, we went to just one church. There was only one, and it was Catholic.

"When I went to catechism, the nun would tell us: 'It's not good to change husbands; a decent woman only marries once and forever, no matter how her husband turns out. To be good women we have to bear our cross.' At that time, courtship was carried out by blocking a girl's path. If a boy liked a girl, he would spy on her when she left her house and block her path; this happened four or more times until the girl agreed to be his girlfriend. Courtships were only verbal. You could never hold the boyfriend's hand, much less kiss him on the lips! Courtship was just for talking, either secretly or with the consent of the parents. Courtships were not always with plans for marriage. Sometimes, if they didn't understand each other, they would end the relationship.

"I remember my first boyfriend. When he told me we were going to be boyfriend and girlfriend, I felt very happy. He immediately asked me for a gift as a sign of the pact. I gave him one of my earrings, and in exchange, he gave me his handkerchief. Maybe we would still be married today, but the traditions of my town didn't allow it. The man who later became my husband was the one in charge of separating us, all with the excuse that

I couldn't marry a boy from out of town. One day, when there was a dance in my community, he found out who my boyfriend was, and chased him away with others, arguing that outsiders couldn't court girls from the town because the girls were only for those from there. To this day, I still remember him fondly," Morelitos tells me.

She continues her story and, with a bit of sadness, tells me that during her adolescence, no one explained anything about menstruation to her. She describes this first traumatic experience by saying, "The first time I bled, I was very scared. I also felt embarrassed; we were visiting in another ranch where my parents were invited, and I didn't know what to do or why I was bleeding. Since my clothes got stained, my mother discreetly brought me a cloth. Afterwards, we went to a little corner where no one could see us, and she told me how to use it, but without explaining why it happened."

"I can't believe it!" I said to Morelitos. My mother explained it to me before the time came, so when I had my first period, I ran to tell my father, and he went out to buy me pads. There was no need for them to tell me how to use them because I knew the procedure beforehand. Morelitos, blushing a little, took up the subject and said, "You are from the city, but on my ranch, it was a different story. Only Grandma told us not to eat sour or very cold things to avoid cramps, but nothing more."

"I got married shortly after my first period. It was then that I discovered sexual relations. My boyfriend first took me by force; he grabbed me in the countryside. I screamed as I ran, thinking that maybe he would feel sorry for me and stop doing anything

to me, but the more I begged, the angrier he became. Finally, he succeeded. It wasn't pleasant for me. On the contrary, I felt disgusted. Instead of loving him, I hated him. I came to think that this always happened between couples. As a result, I was married. I obeyed the command, but I didn't understand why I had to stay forever with this man who had hurt me if I only wanted to continue being a girl and not a lady with obligations and children.

"My mother never talked to me about what could happen to me or how I should act. At the time, they only discussed poverty and family problems. On the ranch, if a woman had sex before getting married, or had sex but didn't get married, she would remain that way until she was old. At that time, a girl who wasn't a virgin was rejected. If it was known that you had already had sex and hadn't gotten married, you were excluded from the groups of young ladies, and the boys at the dances wouldn't ask you to dance. Generally, a woman who was no longer a virgin and still single only hung out with married men. "What I learned in my town was that a married woman couldn't hang out with others. She must earn respect and save herself only for her husband; otherwise, she is not worthy of hanging out with married women. I think those women are worthless. In my community, there were no recreational activities. We almost always spent our time working in the fields, making hat bands or harvesting flowers,. There weren't many obligations. When the village festivals were held, young people had little participation. One of their roles was to accompany the adults in the prayers, distribute food, and clean up when the festival was over.



"In my town, the differences between men and women were very marked. From a young age, we were educated in different ways, and the rules we had to follow were also different. We were not allowed to be alone with our boyfriends, to give our opinions about household chores, or to decide how many children we wanted to have. This was not the case for boys. They, for example, did what they wanted without having to answer for their actions to their parents, much less to their mothers, and they came home whenever they wanted. They were not censured at all; their actions were not questioned. Decent girls were not supposed to laugh at anyone. Since we wore rebozos, if someone approached us, we would cover our faces with them and crouch down without answering the boy, so he would get tired and go away.

"Community posts were not for boys; you had to be an adult, preferably married, most were filled by men of mature age. Never by young men, and women were not even mentioned because we were only good for raising children and cleaning the house.

If a woman claimed her right to participate or to have a post, she was thrown out of the assembly with insults, laughter, and so on. I got married at the age of 13. I met my husband right there on my ranch; we grew up together. My memories of him are sad because he was very unyielding; he would hit me for anything, arguing that it was my fault. For every girl born, he would reproach me. He said that I was not good even at giving birth. He never contributed to the household expenses, but he did have a wife and children to beat up. I would tell him: 'Here is my back; take it out on me, but leave my children alone.' I always thought about leaving him, but he threatened me, saying: 'If you leave me, I'll kill you or leave you crippled. You're my wife, so put up with it. Besides, who's going to love you? You're no good anymore, and you're full of kids.'

"My poor mother, when she wanted to defend me, would attack him, so sometimes she preferred to pray that he wouldn't hit me so much. When I was 14, my first daughter, Reyna, was born. It was a very beautiful experience for me, partly because I was very young and because I thought that I would no longer feel so alone and that the mistreatment by my husband would be more bearable. The arrival of my other children made my life more bearable. We loved each other very much; they have always been my reason for living, my confidants, my moral support.

> "I remember that one day I got up earlier than usual because my youngest child wanted to eat *guajes*, so we got ready to go get them. I had the idea of inviting one of my cousins, who had a little boy just like mine, so that my son wouldn't feel so alone. We arrived at the *guaje* trees, and immediately the children began to cut

them. Later, we had lunch. Then we returned home. This happened on two occasions. The second time, I took my four children. My daughter always wanted to follow her father, but I never liked it. I am of the idea that I would rather take care of her than have her go with her father."

"Among other things, I let the boys free to do as they pleased, since they had nothing to lose. But I had to take good care of my girl, because she had a lot to lose. I never liked hitting them. From time to time, I would whip them because they didn't obey or because they did wrong, but almost always, I just scolded them.

"But with their father, it was different. He always beat them, sometimes until they fainted. The hope that he would change died because, before and after the birth of my children, my husband remained the same. At home, my little girl helped me with the housework. While I lit the *nixtamal*, she kneaded the dough to make the tortillas. The boys did not do anything because they are men, and housework is for women. I did not make a difference between my children. I love them equally, and I also get along well with them.

"I still remember the day I arrived here. I was 63 years old. It seems like yesterday. A few days before my arrest, I was working to clear a piece of land so I could plant crops later. In the afternoon, I boarded the bus that would take me to Mexico City. How far was it from my mind to think that this would be the last day I would see my hut! I was travelling, but my plan at all times was to return to my village and plant the crops to support myself.

"It was in the middle of the trip when, at about 11 or 12 at night, I don't remember exactly, the driver woke us up and told us to get

off the bus. When we did, I got very scared. There were countless soldiers in front of me. They immediately surrounded us. In the corner of the bus, there were some suitcases, and as I was sitting next to them, they said to me, 'This is yours, right?' I answered no, that I only had a bag with seeds, plums, and some Chinese beans that I was planning to give to my relative. That's how I answered. But they said to me, 'What do you mean, grandma? Don't be funny; you're sitting next to the suitcase.'

"No matter how many explanations I gave, it was their word against mine. Later, they took me to the cells. My things and the supposed cargo did not appear, but they insisted that it was mine. Three days later, they took me to the Cereso, where someone read me a supposed statement that I had made, but I had not said anything, although I spoke Spanish with difficulty. No matter how many attempts I made to make them understand that I had not said most of the things that were written there, they did not believe me and sentenced me to 11 years and 8 or 9 months. My son's reaction was one of tears and helplessness, but he could not do anything for me because he is also in the same circumstances as me. The only visitors here are him and me because no one else comes to see us.

"My arrival at the prison was good, I would say, because my first thought was that they would beat me, but apart from getting up at 6 in the morning to do my chores, everything is fine. The women in the prison are mostly kind to me. I remember the day I got sick; I thought I was going to die. The women in the prison wrote me letters of encouragement. Elena de Hoyos even visited me. When I saw her standing next to me, I didn't recognise her until she spoke to me. I heard the timbre of her extremely sweet

voice. I immediately felt at ease. When I returned, the women in the prison greeted me with hugs and smiles. My moments of joy are when there is a get-together, or when they encourage me by saying, 'You're leaving soon, Morelitos.' Then my face lights up with happiness because I think of my little hut, my son, and the countryside.

"There are very sad moments in this place. For example, for me, Christmas used to be a symbol of family reunion, there on my ranch, even if we were poor, we were together. Here, the women only meet with noisy or conflictive people. Old women like me, and some who don't like such live style, tell us we are bitter, and at the slightest opportunity, they make us victims of mockery and insults.

"There are many activities here, but at my age I can only hope to meet with someone from a religious group. In the mornings or evenings, depending on the person who rents me to embroider their napkins, I hurry to get work done, that's how I get by. When I finish a piece, I know that with what I receive, I'll be able to buy my soap. And so on, until I have the essentials. I think while I embroider: 'With these 20 pesos I will have enough for now.' Here, generally, the women who receive visitors and have a partner in the men's area are the ones who pay other imprisoned women to clean, wash clothes, among other things. Almost always, the poorest, the most downthroden, those of us from the countryside, are humiliated, and even more so if we're Indigenous.

"In this place, there are groups of those with economic possibilities, who are the same ones protected by the Cereso authorities.

"Another group are lesbians, who are mostly conflictive, there is no room among them for the "espantadas" (frightened ones), as they call us. We are from the Indigenous and humble group. Some urban women get together with us; they teach us to do crafts, but they also suffer the consequences of being with us. This is how we see time pass, between embroidery, knitting, and attendance lists, since we lack the financial means to buy the materials that are requested in the different courses."

I have finished the story of Morelitos. In it, I discover situations that I did not understand before, like when I arrived at this prison. My first impression of my companions lead me to compare them to piranhas because I saw how they devoured each other. Someone else called them hyenas because of their marked hypocrisy and lack of values. However, after writing the stories of Morelitos and Flor de Nochebuena, I think that for that small group of people with nobility and honesty, it is worth continuing to try.

Morelitos, writing your story has been an open door for me, allowing me to travel to your past. I even dare to say that you have left in me the legacy of your essence for life, and perhaps I could describe my experience with you in a thousand details. However, on this occasion, with simplicity, allow me to thank you for sharing with me the greatness of your years.

Immortal legacy

Amatista Lee

In memory of Morelitos

I went to your past and navigated through your story; I was able to absorb a little of that impeccable wisdom that is yours. Morelitos, that is how you live in my memory. After your departure, I knew that the gift of your friendship became for us, your *chompis*,[13] an immortal legacy. You have died. Where do you roam? Where do you live? I don't know, but among the captives, your essence remains forever.

4
Leo: A swan's dreams in the swamp

Leo Zavaleta



In the first edition of *Under the Shade of Guamúchil* (2010), Leo Zavaleta wrote her story entitled "Leo: Who said that women have the right to fall in love?" with the support of another woman participating in our Life Stories Workshop, Carlota Cadena.

During her years in prison, Leo Zavaleta learned to write, completed her primary studies, and started high school. It was surprising how Leo developed her own narrative style—fresh, full of images, colours, and sounds that reach us from the mountains of Guerrero. A reflective voice reconstructs the pain and violence of his past from a place of denunciation, but often also from forgiveness.

The story we share here was written entirely by Leo and is a summarised version of her autobiographical book under the same title, which she finished writing when she was free and that was published in 2016 by the Hermanas en la Sombra Publishing Collective.

Since her release, Leo has continued to write amidst the challenges of returning to her family and community as a new woman, one of those women who survived prison, whom she herself describes as: "Roses in captivity, watered by our own tears, fertilized by our own pain […] creative women, women who fight" (Zavaleta, 2013). We give the floor to Leo Zavaleta so that she can share his testimony of injustices and resistance:

"I was born on the 6th of November 1959, in Hacienda Vieja, municipality of Tlacotepec, a mountainous place almost like a jungle where a variety of fruit trees abound. My grandparents spoke Tlapanec, but I never learned it. I come from a large family. My father was a farmer, and my stepmother was dedicated to

pottery and homemaking. Mama Roberta was the other woman, as they say,—the lover. My father, Oscar, was married and had three children with his wife, Margarita. On my mother's side, I am the sixth child, and on my father's side, I am the fourth. I was born out of wedlock, but at the age of one, I went to live with my stepmother. It seemed that I would have a normal life like the humble class, but it was not like that. My father decided to take me with him to his wife, who forgave him and accepted me as her true daughter. She did not have daughters, only sons. From that day on, she was like a real mother to me, whom I lovingly called Mama Mago because I couldn't pronounce her name. Despite that, I was very happy. My stepmother loved me very much; she would be the only maternal figure I would have for the rest of my life. I still remember as if it were yesterday when she would refer to me, saying: 'My beautiful little princess, I am going to give you all the love that your mother has denied you.'

"When I was just seven years old, life, or God, decided to separate me from my father. He went to a party from which he never returned. A murder weapon was waiting for him on his way home, as we say; they blindsided him. At dawn, some men went to tell Mago that my father wanted to see us. When we got there, I saw him lying on the ground. They told me to go see him. He was lying on a mat. I sensed immediately that something bad was happening. My grandmother was already with him, and she brought me over to get his blessing. I was able to see him still alive. His face was peaceful; there were no signs of pain, and he didn't complain. It was incredible. He told me that he loved me very much and recommended that his wife not let me go with my mother. He made her swear that she would do so.

"Days after my father's death, my real mother appeared. I already knew her from the times my dad left me in charge of her. I didn't like her because she was very harsh with me, and there was something about her that I didn't like. That's why, when I saw her, my heart skipped a beat, as if I sensed all the harm that was coming to me with her. I ran to grab onto Mago's skirts. She begged her not to take me from her side, arguing that if she didn't have enough to feed her other children, how could she add another mouth? My mother replied, 'That's what my daughter is for. I'll do with her what I want. Don't get involved,' and with one pull, she yanked me away from Mago's skirts. My grandmother María also intervened, crying; she begged her to leave me with her, but it was all useless. At that moment, the princess's castle shattered, leaving her dreams and hopes behind.

"I hadn't even been living with my new family for a year when I had a nightmare. I dreamed that someone was sticking a stick between my legs. I woke up screaming, 'Mom, Mom!' I saw a shadow running towards where my mother was sleeping. Minutes later, she arrived asking, 'Why are you screaming?' I told her what I had dreamed. She checked my genitals to make sure what had happened. She told me, 'Shut up, nothing happened. Go back to sleep. It was just a nightmare.' She told me not to tell anyone.

"On that occasion, I couldn't keep the secret because I couldn't walk properly. My grandmother asked, 'Why can't you walk?' I told her about my dream in which I thought they had stuck a stick in my genitals. Immediately, with the help of my aunt Rafaela, they checked my blood-stained underwear. While I was pulling them up, my grandmother told me, 'It was just a dream; erase it from your mind.' So I lived in nightmares, not recognising my reality.

"Little by little, I began to erase the dream, but not my subconscious. From that moment on, I began to be very afraid of men, and the image of my father as good and strong was lost in this horizon of nothingness that offered me only nightmares. My constant fear of my mother's blows and screams was forming in me a withdrawn and fearful character. I got used to that life of abuse; there are few occasions when I remember someone defending me from something.

"Sometimes, my mother would lend me to Doña Eulalia to help her with her chores. The lady didn't have a mill, so she would grind the corn with Doña Martina, the mother of a boy named José Manuel. He would help me grind it. She was also teaching me to read, but when my mother realised this, she gave me a hard time. She would say that girls shouldn't waste time playing school. 'The only thing you have to learn is to make tortillas and cook, be a good wife, know how to treat your husband, please him in everything so he doesn't leave you for someone else.' She was an ignorant and close-minded lady. There was no way to change her mind. I hated her; she was so cruel and didn't care about anyone.

"After many years of violence, my only option to leave home was to find a husband. My neighbour Gabriela told me about a guy named Roberto who was her uncle and offered to help me. I think my fear kept me from seeing the evil of that guy, but at that moment my future was being decided. I had no other choice. He was 28 years old, and I was only 13. I thought that at that moment it was the best thing to do. I asked him to come and get me that night, and he did. We walked for almost five hours to get to his community, called Las Pilas, without saying a

word. He only asked twice if I was tired or thirsty. There was no dialogue; he was dry, and my fear didn't allow me to speak.

"Two months after I got together with him, I became pregnant. When I told Roberto, he said he didn't care. I was scared and felt that this child would tie me to living with him forever. He didn't work, was very irresponsible, and liked to drink. This baby would tie me to this man for the rest of my life. Inside, I only wanted to play with a doll, something I never really had. I only knew of dolls because I saw other girls playing. How sad. What could I do?

"My brother-in-law Sebastián paid for the midwife. Roberto had no money and drank more and more. To top it all off, I gave birth to a girl. When they told me, I was very sad; a girl would have the same fate as me. How could I be a better mother if I didn't know? The only thing that was clear to me was that I would undoubtedly be a better mother than my own, my poor daughter.

"When Maríana was four months old, I couldn't stop working in the fields. I had to weed the cornfield. Roberto wouldn't even stop by; I left my daughter with a neighbour. I couldn't take her with me. One day, they told me that my baby had been stung by a scorpion. I ran as fast as I could. I found her still alive, just like my father. Nothing could be done. The health centre was two days away. Maríana died in my arms. I felt like I was dying. My baby was my only company. Roberto didn't give it any importance. He just told me, 'One less mouth to support.'

"A year after this loss, I had my daughter Marina. Unfortunately for me, three months after giving birth to Marina, I was already pregnant again with my third baby. Since there was no way to

protect myself, I kept getting pregnant. My children were born before a year had passed from my last birth; it was impossible for me to separate from this guy, much less tell him that I didn't want sex. He would probably have beaten me to death, and who would care for my baby?

"It happened that one day, while playing cards, Roberto and his brother Sebastián killed some guys from the same village. We had to flee to Cuernavaca, Morelos. Once there, the violence continued. Roberto took his friends to play cards in his room, and since he had no money, he bet on me. So I had to be the pay of those bastards without morals or scruples, just like him. And if I didn't accept, he would beat me until I bled, leave, and not come back for several days—barely enough time for me to recover from the beating. He told me that if I reported him to the police or the neighbours, he would kill my brother. After all, he wouldn't be his first victim. He already knew where he rented. It was very easy for him to hurt me.

"One day, I couldn't take it anymore, and I ran away with my daughter. I went to live with my older brother, who was in Cuernavaca, because my mother didn't want to support me and kicked me out of her house when I looked for her. Living with my brother, I finally had some peace. I started working as a waitress in a restaurant, and all I thought about was taking care of my children. One day, I met a young man from my town again, with whom I used to take care of the goats when we were children. We were very happy to see each other. That day he invited me to dinner, of course, with my brother's permission. We talked non-stop about those times when we shared our hardships and unfulfilled dreams.

"A few months went by, and José Manuel and I continued to go out. We grew up together because as children we were neighbours. He defended me from the children who pulled my hair in my community, and when my mother hit me, he put herbs on my wounds so they would heal. His life was very similar to mine. He was an orphan; his father had died and his mother abandoned him. She let her child be raised by his uncles, who did not want him because he was a bastard.

"After were seeing each other for a while, he asked me to marry him. We both told my brother, who was very pleased because he liked José Manuel very much, and he had known him since he was a child. He hugged us, telling us to be very happy and that we had his full support. It was not the same with José Manuel's family. For them, it was not well regarded that a young man marry a divorced or widowed woman, much less one with children. They were even more shocked when they found out that I was a year older than him: I was 17, and he was 16. They kicked him out of his house, taking away his few belongings.

"He worked in the Tabachines neighbourhood as a labourer for the bricklayers. He rented a small room in the Acapantzingo neighbourhood, where he took me to live with him. We had no utensils, no place to sleep. In the first few days, we lay on cardboard and used bricks as pillows. Despite our poverty, I was happy for the first time. José Manuel was very hard-working; he managed to get a shift as a night watchman. During the day, he worked with the bricklayers, and at night he looked after the construction site so he could earn a little more, but we had less time for eachother. Something had to be sacrificed.

"Shortly after, I became pregnant with my daughter Claudia. My husband was happy, but I felt sad. I didn't want to bring more children into the world if I had nothing to offer them, and even worse if they were girls. I had been led to believe that women were good for nothing, and that's why we had to be mistreated by men. José Manuel told me, 'Don't think like that. Girls are the most beautiful thing in creation. Besides, they're not going to suffer like you anymore. I'm going to give them an education so they can defend themselves from any jerk. I'll teach them that life is beautiful.'

"Later, he got a job at the Federal Electricity Commission, with benefits and social security, and things improved for the whole family. Thanks to my husband's patience, I left the arguments behind and let myself be loved. Our daughter was already a year and a half old; we had to register her. I didn't know that children were registered. That idiot Roberto never did it.

"Seven years of constant happiness went by. My daughter Marina was already in her second year of high school, Claudia in primary school, and my husband continued working at the Federal Electricity Commission. During the day, he helped me with the girls. I made their food and ground the dough in the mill. My husband combed their hair and made tortillas because they didn't like machine-made tortillas, and the tortilla factory was very far away.

"After dropping them off at school, I was able to sleep for a while. I would pick them up in the afternoon after work. We lived a rather complicated life because we didn't have time for ourselves. The only day we were together was when my

husband was resting. We took advantage of that time to go out for walks with the girls and do the shopping. The good thing about that sacrifice was that we soon got a little piece of land. Everything was going great, but we were missing something: a boy child.

"God heard me by sending me my son, José Manuel. Of course, I would name him after his father, a boy. Wow! Finally, the child I had wanted so much arrived. My husband and I were happy. When they brought me up to the floor, he was already waiting for us in the room with a bouquet of roses. There were no words. He waited for the nurse to leave, and we hugged each other, crying. Our joy was complete.

"When Marina got married, the family was getting smaller. Claudia was in high school, José Manuel in primary school, and 15 years of constant happiness had already passed. By then, my husband was no longer working at the Comisión Federal. When his boss died, they replaced all the staff with police officers. With the money from the severance pay, we finished the house. My husband was a bricklayer, and I was his assistant, so the labour didn't cost us anything; we only spent money on the materials. Later, my husband found work in the Burgos neighbourhood, which is a subdivision of good houses. When the work was finished, the boss wanted my husband to continue working with him as a gardener at the house. We were just a married couple with two children. The boss was so happy with my husband's performance that he built us a little house where we lived with my children. Our happiness was abruptly interrupted when I took charge of my nephews. I didn't even know the setback that fate had in store for me.



"It was on 22 December when I received a surprise visit. They told me that my brother had been killed when he was returning from his work in the fields. He had been set upon, just like my father. For a few moments, I relived my father's death. My brother was the person whom I loved the most since he was like a second father to me and also a great friend to my husband. They loved each other like brothers. It was a great loss for me. I was alone again.

"We were always very close. He had only returned to Guerrero four years earlier. Even so, we were very close, and we visited each other two or three times a year. We were always together through thick and thin. He left behind seven family members, four of whom were unregistered. I was so full of pain that I started drinking. Of course, I only did it on the weekends, thinking that I would only drink with my husband and without my children finding out. My husband accompanied me, trying to understand me. From time to time, he told me not to drink anymore: 'You hurt yourself, and you don't achieve anything.'

"I found out that my sister-in-law was not taking care of my nephews. The children lived off what they were given in neighbouring houses. Given this situation, I spoke to my sister-in-law and asked for custody of the children. After finding out about my financial situation and talking to my children to see if they agreed, they gave me the children: Olga, ten years old; Marco Antonio, eight; Alfredo, five; and Jesús, one and a half. The mouths were increasing, and with them, the expenses, again. When I returned home with so many children, it was no longer possible to continue on the little house as caretakers. I got a job in Sumiya, a neighbourhood of wealthy people, where they paid me 1,500 pesos for three days of cleaning the house, the pool, and the garden. The bosses hardly ever came. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I worked doing the washing and ironing in Cuernavaca, and on Saturdays and Sundays at the house where my husband worked. At night, I washed uniforms and checked homework.

"It was chaos for me because I didn't know how to read or write, or how to help them. I remember with sadness how I would check my children's notebooks. When I did, I would put on a look of astonishment and even scold them, saying: 'You have to try harder so that this seven becomes a ten.' They would say: 'Seven? But it's eight. Oh, auntie, you can't see well anymore!' I would laugh. It made me very sad that they knew I couldn't read.

"When my husband wanted to talk to me, I would tell him: 'I'm very tired. I'd rather make you a cuba or a michelada; they come out really good.' He would just shake his head; he kept everything to himself. I never gave it any importance; I was so sure of his love that I would put my hands in the fire for him. I thought he was incapable of deceiving me.

One day, my mother came to my house crying, very repentant and asking my husband for forgiveness, begging us to give her a place to stay because she had been left very alone. I didn't believe her false repentance, but I kept quiet. Why open my old wounds if they were already healed? At least that's what I thought. Since we had a space behind the house, it occurred to me to build a roof there, not wanting to confront her with my husband, as they say, together but not mixed.

"Little by little, I lost myself more and more in alcohol, completely forgetting about my husband. With the arrival of my nephews and my mother, we only saw each other on weekends. When the boss wasn't around, we would go on drunken binges, taking advantage of the fact that the children weren't looking. My mother didn't waste any time turning me against my husband; she would say to me: 'You're an idiot. Why do you think he doesn't say anything to you when you drink? He doesn't even scold you. It's because on the days you don't see him, he'll surely bring other women into the house. You're very trusting, but that's up to you.'

"This was the beginning of a very dark period in my life. Alcoholism took me away from all my loved ones, made me lose my job, and took me from one rehabilitation centre to another without finding a solution to my problem. Because I urinated and vomited blood, I was constantly admitted to hospital to be put on an IV. The doctor told my mother that if I didn't stop drinking, I wouldn't live long. I already knew that, but no matter how hard I tried to stop drinking, I couldn't. To top it off, they diagnosed me with diabetes. My husband no longer lived with me, and my nephew had told me that he had another woman. But despite

this, he continued to pay for my medication. Every two weeks, I went to collect my pension.

"It was one day when I was going to collect my pension that my life took a turn for the worse and landed me in Atlacholoaya. It was Friday, 5 December 2008, an unforgettable date for me. I was in the kitchen with my husband when I heard a loud bang. They were breaking the door with a sledgehammer. I saw that the house was surrounded by hooded AFI members.[14] I thought I was hallucinating again, but how was that possible? I hadn't taken anything.

"The blows and tehuacanazos[15] assured me that it was not a hallucination, that it was happening. They did not explain anything to me. I could not put any concrete thoughts together, and I did not understand what was happening. I entered as if into a nightmare, but it was a reality that the blows came to me from all sides. I remember them shouting: 'You fucking kidnappers, where have you taken them?' After the blows, they would say to me: 'Are you going to sing now? Where do you know them from, and what do they do for a living?' 'I don't know them; I don't know what they do for a living. Please stop hitting me'. I kept thinking that this was not happening. My husband shouted: 'Don't hit her anymore; she doesn't know anything.'

"They let me go, but only for a little while. I don't know from where, they got a bottle of alcohol; they changed tactics. They had me blindfolded, so I just listened to them say to each other: 'Take this drink; let's see if you can sing with it.' When they were calmer, they questioned me again: 'Now, boss, we're not going to hit you or give you any more *tehuacan*; we already saw that you don't

like it.' They decided to give me alcohol. One of them said to his partner, 'Give her another drink; they say that children and drunks tell the truth.' But what was I going to say to them if I didn't know anything, and I didn't know them? They came up to me again to say: 'You have to cooperate with us if you don't want us to give you any more *tehuacan*.' 'I've already told you a thousand times that I don't know them.'

"I continued without saying anything. I heard my husband's screams while they tortured him. They put a plastic bag over his head to suffocate him. Everything happened so fast and so slowly that I can't even explain it. After two hours of non-stop beatings, two men who had been arrested hours before us arrived. They asked them, 'Do you know them, you wretches? Speak! If you don't want us to beat you to death.' They shouted, 'No, we don't know them.'

"But nothing mattered; they kept beating us. Many hours went by like this. Around three in the afternoon, they took us out of the house to take us to the SEIDO.[16] I heard my husband pleading, saying that I had nothing to do with it and that they should let me go, and it seemed to me that they would do so. They took off my blindfold and told me, 'Don't move from here.'

"A few minutes later, they came back and put me in a car separate from the others, straight to Mexico City. It was a torturous trip. They forced me to bend over; I couldn't lift my head. Once at SEIDO, the interrogations were endless. It was always the same, and there was never a lawyer present. Around 8 p.m., they took us down a hallway and put us in separate cells: the men on one side and the women on the other. Minutes later, they took me

out of my cell to put me in a room where there was a man about two meters tall; he looked like a gorilla. He closed the door and told me, 'Take off all your clothes.' He looked me up and down. I was shaking with fear, thinking that this man was going to rape me. He gave me a speaker from which the voice of a woman spoke to me, saying: 'I have what you need, a bottle of tequila, the best kind, but first you must tell me, how did you meet the gang? How many other kidnappings have you done?' I replied: 'I don't know anything, I've never met them before', which was the truth. As they could not get anything out of me, he got mad and began insulting me. They would give me a break, minutes later they brought me out again, with different strategies, this time the gorilla took off my clothes. What's going to happen to me? My hands and body trembled. What should I do? I was so nervous I could not even think of praying to God, I did not know if he was going to attack me next. He gave me the speaker again, this time a man's voice said: 'We have your children, how do you like that? No matter how I tried to put things together I could not understand what was happening. I wanted to wake up, it seemed like a bad dream. I fell into a diabetic coma and blacked out. "After three days, I came out of the coma. When I woke up, I was in a hospital bed, handcuffed, and with a mask on my face. I had blood, IVs, a tube in my mouth, and was surrounded by AFI agents. I didn't know if I was in hell or heaven. Tears streamed down my face. One of them, seeing me cry, said to me, 'Cry, mother. I'm sure you had nothing to do with the kidnapping.' He asked me, 'Have you been drinking for a long time?' I couldn't answer, but he said, 'When I talk to you, just move your finger to say yes or no. You were close to death, but you're out of the coma

now. We're forbidden to talk to detainees and give them information. I do this because I too have a family. I also believe in your innocence. Your brother and your daughter, Claudia, are outside, very worried. They've been asking about you, but they won't let them in. It's better that they don't see you in this state. They know you're fine; I'm going to take off the handcuffs so you can rest a little. Your hands are purple. Don't give me away; you've been like this for three days now.'

"But the treatment I received from him only happened on his shift. On the second shift, it was different. He didn't take off my handcuffs and told me that for the crime I was accused of, they would give me at least 70 years in prison, if I was lucky, because they were considering bringing back the death penalty. I didn't know about the others or what was going to happen to me; they didn't release me from hospital until eight days later. From the hospital, they took me to the detention centre with the others, but I couldn't see them either because we were on different floors, only in the afternoons and for five minutes at most. My husband asked permission to talk to me. He was very worried about my health and tried to raise my spirits by explaining what had happened. But what he got was me telling him what he was going to die from. He never tired of asking me for forgiveness: 'I didn't know why they rented the house; it was never my intention to hurt you or my children. You are what I love most in life.'

"After 40 days in detention, they transferred us to the Atlacholoaya prison in Morelos. On 9 January 2009, when we arrived at the first checkpoint, a guard named Alicia took our information, weight, and measurements. Four guards immediately arrived to take us

to the men's area. How could I forget that date? It was very cold. When I arrived at this place, my companions welcomed me with their practical jokes.

"I thought it was all over for me. I had just been in Mexico for a while at the dreaded SEIDO. It was about 4 in the morning. After several hours of walking around the men's area posing for a souvenir photo, I arrived at the admissions area. The guard opened the gate of cell number one for me. It was very dark. The female imprisoned women stood up so I could go to the back, saying to me, 'Hello, welcome to your new home.' I didn't answer them because they were mocking me. I tried to find a bed or a place where I could rest. It was very cold as I've already mentioned. I still feel chilled just remembering it. I finally found a place, very small, because I couldn't fit in it even when I rolled myself up. I lay down on half of my blanket from SEIDO and used the other half to cover myself. Since I couldn't fit, I stuck my head out to stretch out. I didn't realise I was in the bathroom. My fellow imprisoned women got upset and started kicking me, saying I was keeping them awake and that they had already lost sleep. Many of them abused me and wanted me to pay protection money so that nothing would happen to me.

'My God, there are so many things waiting for me in this place,' I thought. The weekend arrived, and with it came the visit. Before lunch, I asked my mother how my case was going and what the lawyer had told her. 'No way, at least one or two years to resolve your case.' 'One or two years? It can't be,' she kept crying. 'Do whatever it takes, sell my house, but get me out of here! I can't stand this place any longer; it's horrible!'

"The visit ended, and I returned to my cell to continue crying. A fellow prisoner nicknamed the Monster hugged me and said, 'Don't cry; everything will be okay.' I was the only one who spoke to her. The others didn't like her because she had burned skin on her face and was big. They knew they couldn't mess with her. She prevented other imprisoned women from continuing to abuse me.

"After a few months, we were enrolled to attend school. I had never been to school before, and I was really excited and begged the assistant principal to let me go. She replied, 'I'm not allowed to let you out of the admissions area before three months have passed. I'm going to make an exception for you; I trust you.' That's when I met teacher Gloria.

"When I entered the classroom, I was shaking with nerves because I had never sat at a desk. I only did it when I went to sign my children's report cards, and that was on rare occasions because my husband always did it. My daughters were embarrassed when I signed their report cards; they preferred it to be their father. They said that my signature looked like a cake—why not? I only put my fingerprint. The teacher welcomed me in a pleasant way. I will never forget that, thanks to her patience and dedication, I learned to read and write quickly. She was very demanding and wouldn't let me leave until I finished my lesson. When she saw that I was getting nervous, she would sit next to me and explain things to me calmly. She would say to me, 'Don't worry, try hard; you'll soon do better.' She also told me, 'Keep your notebooks; that way, you'll notice how your handwriting is improving.'

"In high school, I started writing my life story. I now use the computer. I learned that written language is beautiful and that I can

express what I feel. I will never forget what teacher Gloria did for me. I want to thank her for her dedication, her patience, and, above all, for her love in teaching me that I have value and that I am someone. Nothing is enough to thank teacher Gloria. Thanks to her, I will be able to check my grandchildren's homework without having to lie to them.

"At school, I sat with my cousin Altagracia. She had been there longer. She had come in for a minor crime and was about to finish her sentence. Soon, I would be alone. She told me, 'Don't be afraid. I also came in like you, and look at me: now I'm in high school, and I'm even participating in a book called *Under the Shade of the Guamúchil*. If you want, we can go to my workshop, and I'll introduce you to the other fellow writers.'

"I was very struck by the life stories that were written there. At first, I didn't understand anything because I hadn't learned to read or write, but I decided to take part in the book. A friend who has already been released, Carlota Cadena, did me the favour of writing the first part of my story. After a few months, I learned to read and write, and I finished my part in the book myself. That's why my story was written by four hands. That's how I met Aída Hernández, an anthropologist, and Elena de Hoyos, a poet and sociologist. Months later, I met Marina Ruiz, also a poet and editor—the sweetest girl I have ever met. A girl, because she is the youngest of the three. Because of the great affection I have for them, I call them my three musketeers, my *chompis*, as we say here in prison, my editors, my friends! Those who take me with them to walk to other places without the need to break locks—that's how I feel.

"Little by little, I became immersed in activities. On Monday afternoons, some godmothers of AA came to give talks to people with alcohol problems. The director knew about my illness since it was in my file, and the guards also reported to her that at night I couldn't sleep. I woke up screaming because I had nightmares due to my addiction to alcohol—bathed in sweat and shaking from desperation. For God's sake, I wanted a little drink of liquor to calm my nerves. Those of us who participate in the workshops and go to school don't have time to even think about prison. It's hard to adapt to this place, especially when your family no longer visits you. Women are the most abandoned, either by children, parents, or husbands who deceive them by telling them, 'Take the blame on yourself so I can get you out soon.' The stupid ones do it and never hear from them again. You become filled with hate and resentment until you fall into depression, but it is up to you how you want to live it.

"I want you to know that I will keep the best of this place, where I learned so many things: to read, to write, to dream, to reconnect with my husband, and to be a better woman, mother, and person. Here, I tried to understand my mother, whom for years I blamed for everything. I think I have healed that wound. This is why I dare to share with you all that I am and what I wrote for her, inspired by Ámbar Past's poem 'The Letters That My Mother Never Wrote,' my poem which was published in 2012 in the book *Mareas Cautivas* by the Publishing Collective for Women in Prison (today, Colectiva Editorial Hermanas en la Sombra to which I still belong here outside.

"The myths of prison were disappearing, along with my alcoholism and my defeat as a human being. Today, 30 October 2012, after four years of captivity, growth, and development, I have been acquitted of the charges against me. However, I was not innocent in not having been strong in the face of my brother's death and the blows of life. I was guilty of not valuing my family, of having believed myself a victim of everyone and everything. Today, I am a better person. Today, I am not only acquitted of my charges but I am coming out renewed and stronger. That is why I know that in the face of life's obstacles, a swan can always emerge from a swamp."

I am your daughter

Mother, I am your daughter—the unwanted one, the one who was your shame, who caused you dishonour and condemned you to a life devoid of love, the one who cries out for mercy for you.

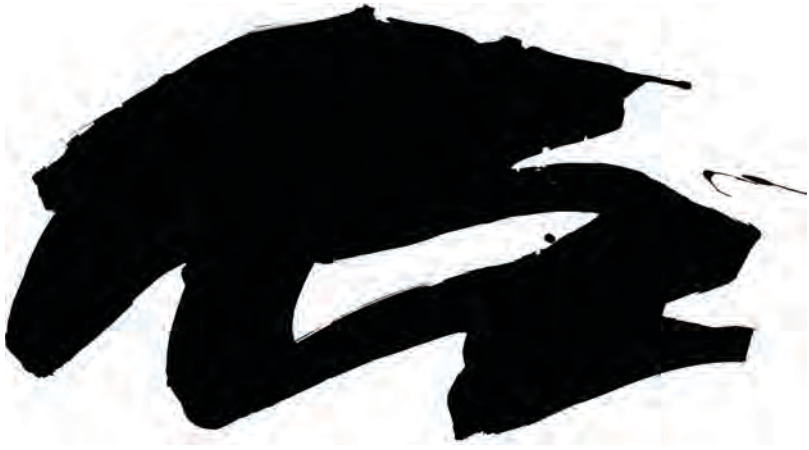
If one day I came to hate you for the beatings I received under any pretext and for the difference between my sisters and me, forgive me. I never knew that you loved me as you were taught: without a hug, without an "I love you."

I have grown up; I already have children and grandchildren. However, my longing continues to hear from your lips: "Daughter, I am your mother, the one who caused you so much pain. There is an empty place in your heart, and I want to fill it."

Day after day, I ask God for you to love me, Mom. I thirst for you; I want to die in peace. Maybe tomorrow will be too late. I love you, Mom, for giving me life and for the opportunity to live.

5
Luz: Watching life go by from a wheelchair

Guadalupe Salgado



I have decided to take on a difficult challenge for this life story project: to tell the story of Luz, my friend and colleague who suffered a series of accidents and illnesses that have left her confined to a wheelchair from which she silently watches the life of the Cereso go by. She has difficulty communicating with the world, but I have learned to understand her and have built a very strong bond with her, which has become an important part of my life. The first time I saw her, with her lost gaze and her contracted body, I couldn't help but feel a little rejection, perhaps fear. I thought that this was not a place for someone like that. How could they keep someone imprisoned who can no longer take care of herself and who does not represent any danger to society? Later I learned that she had no one in the world to take care of her and that was why they had decided to leave her locked up in this place where at least she has the solidarity of some of us.

She is perhaps one of the most helpless of all the imprisoned women. Like many Indigenous and peasant women, she cannot read or write, but apart from that, she has gradually lost her love for life, and little by little the words refuse to come out of her mouth. There are many stories about her. Some say that it was the lack of a man's love that left her bedridden, that she was once a flirtatious, lively woman, who was permanently in love, but that a disappointment stole her energy, and slowly she became the diminished person she is today. Others say it was guilt, that she killed her adopted daughter in complicity with her lover, and that she could not forgive herself. Sometimes she says she killed her lover for raping her daughter, and it was this murder that brought her here. Others

say it was her daughter who died at the hands of her lover. I don't know which among these versions is true, but I have decided to tell her story—the one she tells herself and that she has managed to share with me, with difficulty, through monosyllables and broken conversations over these two years of friendship.

Luz was born in a town called Santa María, where the Tlapanec language was spoken, in the state of Guerrero, on 31 July 1940. She shares her memories of her town with me and describes it as a very beautiful place, full of cedars, plum trees, white and purple guamúchiles. Her childhood is full of beautiful memories that have accompanied her during the 12 years she has been in prison. She tells me that she went to primary school and managed to finish it, but at the age of 13 her parents made her work in the fields. Her family worked planting and selling Chinese beans and squash. The whole family worked in the fields. In this, there was no difference between men and women. She, like her two brothers and two older sisters, helped their parents with the planting. As was the custom in her town, she ran away with a boy at a very young age. She was only 17 when she met Baltazar and fell in love with him. At first, things were going very well between them, but as time went by and she failed to get pregnant, he began to reject her, and little by little he became filled with resentment, taking out his anger through blows and violence. In her village, it was common for men to beat their wives. It was believed that it was a right they had as husbands, so nobody did anything to help her. After two years, Luz could not bear it any longer and abandoned her husband, fleeing to the state of Morelos.



That's how she ended up in Jojutla. At first, she worked as a servant, and when she saw that she could earn a little money—enough to support her parents—she decided to take them out of the town where the fields no longer provided enough to survive, and brought them to live with her. She proudly tells me how she took care of their upkeep. She told the story of how she

learned to dress up like they do in the city, becoming a happy and independent young woman. Looking for new opportunities and greater autonomy, she went to live alone in the Los Arcos neighbourhood in the town of Yautepec, where she started working for a woman named Teresa. It was in this town that her life took an unexpected turn, when a very poor woman, who could not support her daughter, gave her a newborn baby girl. She was happy because she was already 28 and had not managed to have a daughter of her own, so she decided to adopt her, becoming a mother. Around that same time, she met a man who ruined her life—a taxi driver who offered her affection, but who only brought her misfortune. He was a violent and drunk man; he was always drunk. One morning, when she woke up, she found the girl dead. Desperate, she lost control and, in the midst of her pain, she hurt herself by cutting her face. The authorities blamed her for the murder and sentenced her to 30 years in prison.

Since then, her life has been spent in prisons. First, she was in the Atlacomulco prison, where she spent several years. Despite her confinement, Luz remembers these years as a happy time in her life because she had several lovers in the men's prison, and she felt attractive. She didn't wear a uniform and liked to dress up. She learned to knit and embroider and dedicated much of her time to these tasks. However, after 6 years, she was transferred to a very small prison where there were only four cells. There, manual labour was not encouraged, and she had no materials to work with, so she spent hours doing nothing, waiting, not really knowing what to expect.

She gradually sank into depression. She stopped dressing up, and her loves remained a thing of the past. She had already

begun to lose interest in life when she was transferred again, this time to the Atlacholoaya prison. Things got worse there, as she suffered an accident that fractured her leg and made her lose mobility. Nothing was the same in her life. It was increasingly difficult to take care of herself. "At first," she tells me with a kind of resentment, "all my cellmates helped me. The solidarity between us was very strong. We went to prayer together, and they helped me move and get ready, but little by little they left me alone." Now only Juanita, her cellmate, and I take care of her. When I arrived at Atlacholoaya, Luz was already overcome with sadness and lived confined to her wheelchair. First, I became friends with Juanita, and that's how I got to know her. It made me sad to see her so helpless, so I started to help her.

Juanita had been taking care of her for two years, and they had started to experience tensions. She complained that Luz was rude and ungrateful, so I thought it was time for someone else to support her. I started by taking her to and from prayer, and little by little she became more dependent on me. Now I bathe her and groom her. Sometimes she jokes and talks to me very affectionately, but she has gone through very difficult stages. Months ago, she fell again and had new fractures that left her bedridden for several weeks. She could no longer get up or go to the bathroom and again depended on several companions for her hygiene. Now she has gotten up again and is starting to go to prayer in her wheelchair. Despite her depressions and bad moods, she is very affectionate with me. I try to understand her and make her laugh. I joke, I play with her, and I let her tell me things—the fantasies she confuses with her reality. She has spent 15 years of her life locked up in prisons. I imagine how despairing

it must be to spend so much time isolated and slowly losing her abilities and the possibility of taking care of herself, waiting for someone to take pity on her. I bring her food, take her to the bathroom, and help her bathe.

I see her sitting there, ignored, helpless, watching the days go by without hope, watching all her companions pass by her as if she didn't exist. Only a few stop to say hello and give her a smile. Periodically, she breaks her silence to tell me: "See you tomorrow, mommy, may God be with you, sell all your gelatins." I feel the affection and gratitude in the tone of her voice, although she doesn't need to say anything for me to know that she appreciates me and that a bond of friendship has been built between us.

Sisters in the shadow
Elena de Hoyos

Sisters in the shadow
we are a two-sided coin
complementing each other more
and opposing each other less
I will atone for my pain in yours

I enjoy being friends with women villains, the
outliers, those despised
We will laugh together, bursting into laughter,
and break into tears inside
I am a woman who redeems herself
in another woman's gaze.

Every smile is a sincere and trusting caress
I am a woman who welcomes the outcasts
exalts them in their shadow
tracing the stigma with the tips of her fingers
and immerses herself in the pain of the other

We are a two-sided coin
I will atone for my pain in yours
I am a woman who redeems herself
sincerely and trusting
in other women´s gaze

6
Perla Negra: Since I was born, violence has been part of my life

Alejandra Reynoso



Alejandra learned to write in the Atlacholoaya women's prison. She entered the world of writing just three years ago and has found in it an outlet for her emotions, a door to bring out the story of violence that has marked her life and the way in which she built the winding path that finally brought her to this place. Alejandra decided to lose her fear of writing and enrolled in our Life Stories Workshop. Week after week she arrived at the meetings with pages of her notebook filled with small, clear handwriting, which hid her lack of experience in writing. For a whole year, she shared her story with us, the story of Perla Negra:

"Violence has been a part of my life since I was born. My first childhood memories are not of hugs or maternal caresses. I was born in Zacatlán, Puebla, in a Nahuatl community, but I never learned the language because my mother abandoned me when I was just born, leaving me lying near a garbage dump where I was found by the woman who adopted me and whom I always recognised as my mother. When I was five years old, I began to suffer beatings and abuse. I began to see how my mother's husband beat her and kicked her out of the house. Violence affected all of us in my family in different ways.

"My stepfather, apart from not feeding us, kept us all terrified with his violent attacks. He drank every day, and when he came home, we ran and hid under the bed, because if he saw us, he would beat us. But when he came home at night, he would wake us up with blows and screams. This tragedy lasted two years. My poor mother worked washing and ironing. He would lock us up without food until my mother came home from work. Perhaps because she experienced this violence every day, she learned to reproduce it, and when our stepfather left her, she was the one

who began to beat and insult us in the same way he did. The atmosphere of terror in which we lived did not change much. We only lasted five months without a new man in the house. Soon, a new stepfather arrived, and with him came new problems. At first, he was very kind to us, but soon he began to behave the same as the previous one. He told us we were hungry rats, and when my mother was not there because she was working, he insulted us.

"Every weekend he would ask my mother for money, and if she refused to give it to him, he would beat her and take it from her by force. Without my mother's money, there was no way to buy food, and we were starving. My mother cried and said that we had to put up with it because if we said anything to him, he would kill us. Resigned, she would tell us: 'I think this is the best we can do for now. One day we will have a better home than this one, but, thanks to this man, we have a roof over our heads and at least salt tacos to eat, despite suffering so much.'

"With my new stepfather, sexual violence came to my home. That man raped two of my sisters, and after about three months, he raped me too, when I was only seven years old. We were just girls and we didn't know how to defend ourselves. When I told my mother, she didn't believe me. Later I told my grandmother, and she didn't believe me either. They thought I had made it up. It was my grandfather who found me in the hay stack all hurt and took me to the doctor. My hip was dislocated from the rape and the doctors thought it had been my grandfather, but he explained to them that he had found me like that, that he didn't know who had hurt me. There they did tests on my grandfather,

because they thought he had been the one who had abused me, but they realised that it hadn't been like that, because the one who had hurt me had been my stepfather.

"My grandfather spoke to my mother and told her what had happened, but she didn't want to accept it. She said: 'How can you think it was rape? She could have fallen from the scaffolding and the impact opened her hip and hurt her.' But my grandfather told her that it was the doctors who had confirmed that I had been raped. She continued to deny everything, saying that the doctors were making up stories to create problems for her. I didn't say anything because I went into shock. I didn't want to talk or see anyone, not even my grandfather, who I loved so much. I didn't want anyone near me; I felt that anyone who came near me was going to hurt me. When my stepfather tried to do it again, I told my mother and she said that I was making everything up, that I was just a girl, how could I think I would attract her husband. She never wanted to believe me. My 11-year-old brother defended me. He told her that she had to believe my word, but she told him that Bruno (that was the man's name) was incapable of doing something like that.

"I remember very well when my brother told her: 'It's obvious that you love your husband more than your daughter.' Things got worse for me after I accused my stepfather. My mother lost trust in me and ended up kicking me out of her house. I had to go out on the street, and slept for five days on the sidewalk in front of the school. I got food by washing dishes in a store. Later, I met one of my grandmother's sisters. She took me to live in her house, in Temilpa Viejo, in the municipality of Tlaltizapán. She told me that I would have a roof over my head and food

in her house, and that I should behave. She told her husband about me and he said that it was okay, that I could help her wash dishes and sweep the house. When I thought that things were going to start to change for me and that I had finally found a family, I was again faced with more violence, now from my uncles. My great-aunt had five children, ages 12, 16, 18, 22, and 28. My great-uncles were always out and I was in charge of feeding my uncles. But one Sunday, my great-aunt went to church, and I stayed with two of my uncles. One went out and the other stayed at home. He asked me to bring him a glass of water to bed, and as I brought it to him, I started to feel scared. There was something in the air that warned me of danger, but I had promised my aunt that I would behave and help around the house, so I overcame my fears and went into my uncle's room. When I entered, I didn't see him, but I immediately heard the door close, and I started to tremble. He was without pants, and he started to hit me, then he tore my clothes and raped me. After he had me as his, he told me that if I told my uncles, he would hit me again and that they would also kick me out and I would have to be alone on the street again. So, despite my anger and humiliation, I remained silent.

"I was only nine years old and I had already been raped twice. I felt lost, powerless against my uncle's will and violence. I had only started menstruating two months earlier. Unfortunately for me, my body had matured prematurely and a few weeks after the rape, I began to feel nauseated and dizzy. I didn't really know what was happening to me. I told my uncle and he said that there was nothing he could do, that if I wanted, I could continue seeing him in secret. So I decided to leave home. He warned

me: 'You don't know how to do anything, you're going to end up a whore, and the same thing I do to you, many more men will do to.' I left that house and went to live on the street.

"The first week I worked clearing fallow fields, but it was very hard work for me and I fainted in the fields because I didn't eat anything during the day. The following week my boss noticed and took me to his father's office, who was a doctor. He ordered me to have some tests done. On the third day they gave me the results, and my boss read them, because at that time I couldn't read or write. He told me that I was pregnant. He paid me two weeks' salary and told me that under these conditions, I couldn't continue working.

"Even though I was just a little girl, the boss's son had fallen in love with me and proposed to me. I knew that this decision could change my life. I was tired of so much suffering and I wanted a father for my son, but when his father realised his offer, he threatened to kill me and my baby if I dared to marry his son. I was very afraid of losing my baby, so I rejected his offer and walked away from him. I continued to roll through life. Later I met a 28-year-old guy and I got together with him.

"When I was barely nine years old, I was already three months pregnant. I was so alone and had suffered so much in my childhood that I sought in this man the affection that I had not found at home.

"At first he was very affectionate and attentive. I was happy with him. But when he wanted to make me his wife after three days of living together, all the memories of the rapes came back to me and when he started touching me, I started to cry. He told

me I had to put up with it. All the tenderness and affection he had shown me disappeared and the violence started again. I was scared. I didn't want him to touch me, and to defend myself I bit him. He threw me away and I started to bleed a lot. He got scared, ran out to get help, and took me to a midwife. The midwife didn't realise I was pregnant and told him that the bleeding was normal because it was my first time, but that he should take care of me so that I would soon feel better and he could make love to me. He took care of me for a week and then tied me to the bed so he could penetrate me. To keep me from screaming, he tied a handkerchief around my mouth. He did this every day and every night. He had me like a slave. I felt like I couldn't take it anymore. Sadness was consuming me. I was always crying.

"That's how I lived my pregnancy, tied to a bed, suffering his violence every night. Two months before I turned ten, my children Salvador and Mauro were born; they were my first twins, who are the eldest. I felt very ill because my body was too small for two children. I bled a lot. I couldn't take care of the two babies, so my sister Silvia took Mauro, who grew up with her, and I stayed with Salvador. My husband looked after me for two months and then my torment began again. Before Salvador and Mauro were a year old, I became pregnant again with my daughter Giovanna. I was just a little girl and I didn't know what to do. With two small babies and no support from my family, I had no other option but to endure.

"Things got worse. After my daughter was born, my husband started to humiliate me and beat me every day. He slandered me, making up stories that I was cheating on him with several men and that was why he mistreated us. His fantasies served

to justify the violence. His family supported him because they wanted him to leave me, since there was a neighbour who was a friend of theirs and who they thought would be a better wife for him. She had money and was an orphan. She was an only child and that is why her family wanted him to marry her. This woman was also interested in the father of my daughter. She spied on him so she could talk to him.

"Despite the violence and the plans of her parents, we lived together for six years and had four children: Giovanna, Victor Hugo, José Miguel, and Raul (Salvador and Mauro were the product of my first rape). For a while we went to live in Quintana Roo with his father. I thought that things could not get any worse in my life, when my father-in-law began to rape me. When I was alone and my husband went to work, my father-in-law would take me by force. I told my husband, but he did not believe me. He told me that his father was incapable of doing that to me. History seemed to repeat itself. Once again my word was worthless, and the rape was denied by those who were supposed to love and protect me.

"About four months after my father-in-law raped me for the first time, I became pregnant with two more children. They were twins: Victor Hugo and José Miguel, but my children were born sick because of the beatings my husband gave me. One of my children had a tumour in his throat and the other baby had a tumour in his testicles. The boy who had the tumour in his testicles died at three months and the other at five months of age. When my last child died, my husband blamed me for the death of both of them. He started beating me more than before.

"He started drinking every day and we had nothing to eat. He told me that I had to give him money so he could continue drinking with the neighbours.

"I used to work selling firewood, and they paid me 15 pesos a bundle. The woman who bought it from me gave me food because she felt sorry for my children. After my husband took the little money I earned, he confessed to me that his father had raped his sisters when they were children and that his sister Teresa had sued him. Then I thought about suing him too, but she told me that if I did anything against her father, he would kill me. So, instead of having a husband, I had an ogre.

"I thought about running away, but when I was about to do it, my husband told me that he had a job for a month and wanted me to take him his lunch out in the fields. So I stayed the whole month, but I didn't receive a peso of his salary. Finally, I made up my mind, and in order to escape I sold nine pigs for 300 pesos. I packed two changes of clothes for my children Salvador and Giovanna, and myself. We left secretly at four in the morning. I wanted to return to my town, and when I got to the bus terminal, I asked what time the first bus left for Temilpa. Nobody could tell me that because there were no buses for that place. They told me to think about where I wanted to go.

"I was left wondering what I was going to do, where I could go. I didn't know which way to go; I felt completely alone. Someone approached me and said: 'You can go to Puebla or Mexico.' So I asked a lady to do me a favour, to buy me a ticket, and she decided for me. That's how I ended up crossing the border into Belize. When I arrived, I stayed in the terminal for three days and

then I took a job in a food stand I stayed there for three months, but when my boss realised that I was just a girl, taking care of two babies, she decided to take me back to my mother. My mother told me that my husband was worried about me and told him that I was coming back. I was five months pregnant with my son Daniel. When I met him again, the first thing he did was insult me, accuse me of being a whore and said that he couldn't take care of me or my children. So my mother kicked him out and told me that I had to find work to support my children if I wanted to stay and live with her.

"I started washing and ironing other people's clothes, but I earned very little. It was impossible to get another job when I was already pregnant. Then there were problems with my brother, who ended up kicking me out of my mother's house. I took my things and my children and came to live in Cuernavaca with 20 pesos in my pocket; it was only enough for the fare. I arrived at the market. I was already 13 years old, had two small children and another on the way, and I was on the street again, without money and without the support of my family. Once in Cuernavaca, a woman gave me a job in the market washing dishes at a food stand. The first day we ate at the stand, and I no longer worried about food, but my problem was that I didn't have a place to spend the night.

"The lady at the market told three of her clients to get me a room. These guys took me with them down Domingo Diez Avenue. We arrived at a room in a vacant lot and they waited for my children to fall asleep to rape me. When they started touching me, they told me to cooperate in a good way, because they could kill me and rape my daughter. I didn't want my daughter

to go through all the violence and pain that I had experienced, so I cooperated with the three of them, but then they told me that if I wanted to be in that house, I had to become their lover. I couldn't accept a situation like that, not even in the midst of my desperation, so when dawn broke, I took my children and ran away.

"I was back on the street, with no money and far from the market. We walked for half a day and came across a garbage container. We started looking for water and food and ate what we found in the garbage. I could barely walk with my big stomach; I was now seven months pregnant. I don't know how I managed to find my way back to the market, but after a lot of walking, I arrived back at the stand where I worked and told the lady everything that had happened to me. She told me I could stay in the market stand for a few days until I got a room. I stayed for three days and got a room in Acapatzingo.

"I worked for a month. Then I returned to my mother's house when the labour pains began. When I arrived, my mother burst into tears and ran to find me. In her own way, she loved me, and she was in pain because of everything that was happening to me. I told her that it was time for my son to be born. Then she took me to a midwife. The first baby was born, but then the midwife said there was another baby, stuck feet first, and he was dead already. I felt like I was going to die because I no longer had any strength. The midwife was very desperate. She told my mother that she was not responsible for my life because I was already dying, because the baby had his feet bent. My mother washed her hands and told the midwife to get out of the way, that she was going to help me, that she was not going to let me

die, and as best she could, she got my son out. She saved my life. She did everything to bring me back when I fainted. After seeing that I was better, she went to find my husband and told him that I had given birth. But again his response was rejection and violence. He told her that my babies were not his and that they could die as far as he was concerned. My mother slapped him and told him not to look for me ever again, that for him I was dead along with my children.

"These are some of the problems I had to live through which twisted the paths in my life; part of the experiences that led me to be the way I am, a tough woman. Sometimes I want to go back in time to be better than I am. A month after my last son, Daniel, was born, we returned to the city of Cuernavaca to the room I rented. When I arrived, I was surprised to find that my room was empty. I sat on the door frame. My son Salvador asked the neighbours who were working as bricklayers if by chance they had seen who had taken the furniture we had. But they didn't know anything. They felt sorry for us and gave us two blankets. We spent the night. The next day I woke up, got up, and went to the market to buy food and dishes. Eight days later, the owner of the house came to ask if I had returned. The neighbours told her that I was already in the room, but that all my things had been stolen. Mrs Rosa came to see me and asked: 'How are you? Are you okay? What happened? The neighbours told me that someone robbed your house.' 'Yes,' I replied, 'they took everything.' All I could do was work harder and buy furniture again.

"After a month I bought a stove. 20 days later I bought a bed that a neighbour sold me, and so I started to furnish my small room

again. Shortly after I returned, a friend named Arturo, who had been courting me for a while, proposed to me. I met him at work. I didn't remember him well, but he told me that he had known me for two years before, but that I had never paid much attention to him and hadn't gotten to know him much. My distancing was partly because I didn't want my children to suffer what I suffered with my stepfathers. But I also thought that he could help me with the expenses of my children and the house. So, after hesitating a bit, I decided to accept his offer, and we planned the wedding for November.

"We started looking for godparents and preparing ourselves at the Church of Amatitlán. We went to the talks with the priest, and two months later they gave us a receipt that we had to take to the priest for the wedding process. Time passed. I was buying things and preparing everything to get married. When there were 15 days left until I was due to get married, I told Arturo that I was going to visit my family to invite them to my wedding. I left on a Sunday for Tlaltizapán. I arrived at my grandmother's house, hugged her, and asked her: 'How are you?' She answered: 'You're fine, daughter, but your sisters are in bad shape.' I asked her why. 'Because Flor has problems with her husband, and Agustina arrived beaten up and with her children.' 'And where are they?' She answered that they were at my mother's house. I said goodbye: 'Well, I'm leaving now, grandma,' I told her, 'I'm going to see how I can help my sisters.'

"I ran out and enjoyed the fresh wind that caressed my body. I crossed the sports field, the ravine full of vines that made walking difficult. Ten minutes later, I arrived at the *apantle*[17] and sat down for a while. I took off my shoes and put my feet in the

water. I thought about the happy times I had in that place when I was four years old. I used to run all around the *apantle* wall in just my underwear and watched my brothers running, playing tag in the water and sometimes racing each other. There were many of us who came to bathe and stayed to play. I sat there for a while, thinking about my childhood, about the few days of joy I had before violence ended my dreams.

"After this memory, I continued walking and arrived at my mother's house. They were all eating, and I told them that it was better to arrive on time than to be invited. My sister Flor told me: 'Come in, sit down.' I walked in, hugged them very affectionately, and asked them how they were. Agustina told me that they were a little fine. 'Why do you say a little?' 'Because I don't have a job and they pay little here.' I said: 'Let's go to



Cuernavaca. I have a job, and I'll soon stop working because I'm getting married in 15 days.' My sister didn't think twice and told me yes, but that she didn't have the money for the ticket. I told her: 'Don't worry, I have money to get there. Once there you don't have to worry, because I have some savings.'

"We left the next day and when we got back, my children were having dinner. We had dinner and went to bed. On Tuesday, my future husband arrived early and knocked on the door. I went out to open it, and he hugged me and asked me: 'How did it go?' 'Good, my love, but I want to introduce you to my sister Agustina.' He greeted her and said: 'Welcome.' My sister thanked him. He told me: 'Let's go to the market, have lunch, and buy groceries.' 'Yes, honey, if you invite us all, yes.' We got ready and went to the Adolfo López Mateos market. We sat down at a woman's restaurant called La Morena, and a waitress asked us: 'What are you having for lunch?' I have that day so clear in my memory that I can remember in detail what each of us ate. My sister ordered *cecina* and my children enchiladas, my daughter breaded chicken and my fiancé fried mojarra. I ordered steak with onions. Since there were only five tables in the restaurant, we sat at the third one. It had a view in two directions, and on the counter there were four casseroles: one had beans, the second had pork ribs, the third had red mole, and the fourth had rabbit marinade. After we finished lunch, we went down to buy groceries. This happened between eight and ten in the morning. We got to the platforms and my sister asked if there was a bathroom. I told her that the bathrooms were up the stairs, to the right. 'While I go to the bathroom, can you watch my kids?' 'Yes, don't take long.' About five or ten minutes after my sister went to the bathroom, Arturo asked me if it wouldn't bother me if he didn't take me home, because he had to collect the payment for boxes of fruit at the stands, and it was already late and he didn't have time to unload the truck.

"I waited for my sister for two hours and she didn't come back. So I sat my daughter down and told her to hold the boy: 'I'm going

to look for your aunt.' I went to the bathrooms and didn't find her. I came back with the children. I didn't understand what was happening. The wait had been too long and my sister was nowhere to be found, so I decided to go back home. I took a taxi and asked him to take me to Acapatzingo, to the Los Charros neighbourhood. My children and I unloaded the groceries from the taxi with great difficulty because they were heavy and my nephews had fallen asleep, so we struggled a bit to unload the groceries. I opened the door and we went in. I was worried because my sister didn't know Cuernavaca. That day my children didn't go to school; instead, they stayed behind to take care of the children and I went out to the centre hoping to find my sister Agustina.

"I spent the whole afternoon looking for her, but I didn't find her, so I went to look for my fiancé. When I got to his apartment, I let myself in with a key he had given me and found them naked in bed. I couldn't believe it. We were only a few days away from the wedding and he had just met my sister. It was a huge blow to me. My hopes were shattered. There were only two weeks left until the wedding. He begged me and swore that it had been a mistake, but that he still loved me. But I couldn't forgive him. When he begged me, I told him the truth, that I didn't love him and that I was going to marry him for convenience, because he had his own apartment, a good job, and could help me with my children, so they could study. He had betrayed me, but I had also used him because I never loved him. I was only looking for a way out of poverty for myself and my children. I didn't forgive my sister Agustina either. I kicked her out of the house and told her that I didn't want to hear from her again. But her children weren't to blame

and she had no job and nowhere to go, so she asked me to keep her children and I had to accept.

"So I was left without a partner again and now looking after five children, three of mine and two of my sister's, who lived with me for almost two years. I didn't want her children to be running around in the streets like I had been. I was so angry that I burned my trousseau, my dress, and everything I had for the wedding. I had to tell the church, the godparents, and all my friends that the wedding had been cancelled.

"I continued working as a waitress in a restaurant to support my five children. For almost eight years I made my way from restaurant to restaurant, working as a waitress and as a cook, but without falling in love again. It was in one of these restaurants that I met my current partner. He was a very serious, very quiet guy. He would come to eat at the Los Arcos restaurant with all his friends and they could spend up to 5,000 pesos on food and drinks. One day, which was my day off, I went to the restaurant to see a friend. I took my children to enjoy the day, and he was there. He asked me to serve him, but I told him it was my day off. He offered to pay me double if I served him. It was too tempting, because I needed money, so I put on my uniform and served him.

"He introduced himself to me. His name was Luis and he was a bricklayer. I only told him my nickname, which was Mary. I didn't even want to give him my last name. At first I resisted, because he was asking me out, but I told him that I didn't go out with my clients, and so almost three years went by in which he would periodically come to the restaurant to eat and talk to me. Little by little we became friends, and after two years of dating, he

proposed to me. At first I told him no, that my children were young and that I wanted them to grow up and make their own lives before looking for a partner. But then I got pregnant by him and decided to get married.

"He then met my children and he liked them a lot. He told me that they were very good children, very noble. My daughter Giovanna was excited about the wedding, but my son Salvador got jealous. I explained to him that I couldn't handle all the responsibility of the family and that I needed a partner. It was my first marriage. We got married in the Catholic church in his town. I was three months pregnant and he took care of all the wedding preparations. He took me to his town, Zacatlán de las Manzanas. The wedding lasted three days, with brass music and mariachis. His family treated me very well, but they thought I was a *señorita*; they didn't know I had children. They would say to him: 'Luis, you got an A with this young lady,' and *señorita* here and *señorita* there, and there I was with my secret. I felt a little out of place because everyone spoke Nahuatl. My mother-in-law barely spoke Spanish, and my husband's whole family and everyone at the party spoke Nahuatl.

"During my pregnancy we went to his town twice. I had already become fond of him and was very excited about the birth of our son. But on one of the trips, he started flirting with another woman who was on the bus. I was eight months pregnant, and I felt terrible. I got off the bus and took a taxi to another bus station where buses left for Cuernavaca. I got home and locked myself in to cry. When he got home and wanted to talk to me, I ran after him and tried to leave the apartment, but there was trash in the hallway and I slipped and fell down the stairs. I went

into labour early because of the blow, but the baby was stillborn. His body was all purple. The loss of my baby made me very sad for a while, but I already had my other four children, and I also had Antonio, who was my husband and treated my children well. Over time, I got pregnant again and we were filled with hope. I took great care to ensure that what happened to me with my other pregnancy and with the other two children who had died would not happen again. I never imagined that with this baby new sufferings would come into my life.

"My last day of freedom was Thursday, 21 December 2007. I got up very early to prepare lunch and my husband and son's snack. I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, then went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator to see what I could make for breakfast. There were several eggs and I thought about cooking them Mexican style. There was also a package of pork chops, I cooked them with green tomato sauce. We had breakfast, and then my husband went to work and so did my son Salvador. My younger children went to school. Giovanna went to high school and Daniel to elementary school. I stayed home alone, thinking about going to bed for a while, but I had to do all the housework, so I started by picking up the dishes and I washed them. It was a day like any other. I made the beds, dusted the furniture, swept and mopped, and then I went out to sweep the street.

"I finished and sat down for a moment to think about what I was going to make for lunch. Then I took a shower, grabbed a bag, and went to the market. On the way I met one of my sisters and she asked me: 'How are you? Why haven't you come to visit me?' I replied: 'Because I'm very tired from my

pregnancy.' She then said goodbye because she was going to pick up her son, and I went to the market, did the shopping, and returned home to make lunch. I waited for the children, who were about to come home from school. When they arrived, they ran to see me and asked: 'How are you, Mommy? What are we going to eat?' I told them what I had prepared, and we sat down to eat.

"While they were doing their homework, I washed the dishes and put them in the drainer. Then I went to bed for a while because I felt very tired. Two hours later, my son Salvador arrived and my husband arrived. He asked me: 'How is your tummy?' 'Fine, love, but I feel very tired,' I replied. 'Don't get up, rest. The children and I will prepare dinner.' By this time I was eight months and one week pregnant. Half an hour later, we had dinner and then my daughter picked up the dishes from the table and we went to the living room to watch television. We watched a movie, *Ice Age*, and when it was over we went to bed. My husband told me: 'Never leave me, my love, because I am very happy by your side.' And I told him: 'No, my love. I have found happiness in you, and with all this love we have, we have to be strong and wait for this child who is about to be born.' 'Yes, darling,' he replied. Neither he nor I imagined that our happiness was about to end.

"The next day we got up early and together we prepared lunch. I got the kids up so they could eat, get ready, and go to school and work. I told my husband that I had an appointment to check my pregnancy and we left the house together. He went to work and I went to the General Hospital. We took the minibus together; he got off downtown and I got off at the market. I walked to the hospital. I arrived and told the secretary that I had

an appointment with Dr Eva. She told me that the doctor was not there, that another doctor was going to see me, and that I should wait in the waiting room and she would call me.

"I sat for half an hour and then she came out. She told me that the doctor who would be treating me was in the handicapped ward and she took me to her. The doctor told me: 'Put this gown on.' I went to the bathroom, put on the gown, came out, and she told me to lie down but to take off my panties. I took off my underwear, and she examined me, and when she finished, she told me that my baby was going to be born. I told her that it wasn't time yet, that I was three weeks away from turning nine months. The doctor explained to me that maybe I was working a lot and that was why I had gone into labour early. She gave me an injection and told me to walk so that my cervix would open so my baby could be born soon.

"I walked around for an hour, and then the doctor, whose name was Irma, examined me and said: 'It's time for him to be born because he's already crowning.' I was in severe pain. I lay there, but I was worried because I couldn't tell my husband or my children. I told the doctor about my fears and asked if I could talk to my family because I couldn't concentrate on labour. The doctor reassured me by saying: 'Don't worry. I can buy clothes for you and your baby, but please push, because if you don't, your child will die and you don't want that. Please help me.'

"I was in labour for almost two hours. When she was born, the doctor bathed my daughter and then me. When she finished bathing us, she put a gown on me and wrapped the girl in a sheet because she didn't have any clothes. Then she said to me,

'I'm going to the market to eat, and I'll bring you some clothes for your girl. Don't worry. You'll be home this afternoon or evening. I'll pay for a taxi.' When she came back, she brought a little shirt, a jacket, and a pair of pants. She changed my daughter and then she said to me: 'Get up slowly and change. You can go home now.' I left the hospital at six in the evening, and the doctor gave me 100 pesos to buy diapers and painkillers. She sent me to the pharmacy next to the emergency room. I bought three diapers and the painkillers. Afterwards, I walked to a taxi that was parked near the blood bank, and before I got to the taxi, a woman approached me and said, 'Give me the child.' I refused, and seconds later, someone stuck me from behind with a gun and said, 'Don't scream or you'll die.' I remained silent and did as they told me: 'Give me the child and get in the car.' I gave them my little girl and got into the car, where they covered my mouth and tied my hands and feet with duct tape.

"After this, the man got into the car, and the woman got in too. As soon as he started driving, the woman asked him, 'What are we going to do with the lady?' He told her, 'We'll kill her and throw her into a ravine.' I thought about my children and began to think about how I could free my hands. I bent down and carefully removed the duct tape from my mouth, then looked for something to defend myself with. I remembered that I had a nail clipper with a knife in my bag. I took it out and held it in my hands. At about six-thirty, we arrived at a ravine on the side of the road in the Las Palmas neighbourhood.

"The man got out and opened the back door where I was. There he showed me photographs that he had brought of several members of my family. It was only then that I realised that all

of this had been planned in advance and that they had been following me for some time. The man told me that if I didn't obey him in everything, my family would pay dearly. Then he grabbed me by the hair. I attacked him with the nail clippers and then I started screaming for help. When the police arrived, they changed the whole story. They said that the girl was their granddaughter and that I had asked them for a ride, and that when they put me in the car, I tried to take the baby away from them. It was all a lie. I couldn't believe that now they were trying to blame me.

"I told them to look in the records of the Civil Hospital and that there they would find information about my birth and that they could examine me and confirm that I had just given birth. But they did not listen to me. They took me to prison, and the couple kept my baby. They did not do any tests to confirm that I had given birth, and they said that the hospital had no record of my admission. The doctor who treated me did not exist, and there was no trace that I had been in the hospital. I was confused; I could not understand what was happening. It took me a while to understand that they had stolen my daughter from me, that everything was planned so that I would end up here, accused of attempted murder. They sentenced me to seven years in prison."

With pen and paper

Leo Zavaleta

With a pen and a blank page, the collective has given me the freedom to express what I want. With a pen and a blank page, I can go in and out of this place and even travel to other countries. With a pen and a blank page, I can communicate with my children without having to use a phone card, and I can even express what I don't dare to say face to face. How beautiful it is to know how to use a pen and a blank page! I can laugh and cry while I write to my loved ones.

7

Sol: You have just lost everything. May God bless you!

Águila del Mar



As the years go by, hidden glances and memories are observed and come to life in the story of an ordinary woman, named Sol, wife and mother of a family. Aa an unpredictable sea, she captivated her husband's heart with her occurrences. A correct man, dictator of his own truth, in his eagerness to subject her to conservative ideas and create an image of a perfect wife, he forgot that she was the owner of arebellious impulsiveness. Although their ideas and customs were not compatible, it did not prevent them from loving each other the way they did, and I dare say, they loved each other a lot.

Sol did many crazy things in the name of her immense love for her husband. One was to create a chameleon-like image of herself, the complete opposite of his conservative tastes. Her husband had long office days, leaving little time to take a break with Sol.

He deserved a break, a gift that would show him the deep admiration she had for him. She got a small job that allowed her to save enough for her plans. She bought a very provocative lingerie outfit and rented the same hotel room where she had been with him the first time. Everything was ready. A woman with a young body, ready to surrender to love, contemplated her face in front of the mirror. She looked, smiling, dressed in a beautiful black leather outfit for this dream, with make-up for the occasion and a delicious aroma of temptation.

She picked up the phone and dialled his office.

"Sol? Honey, how are you?"
"No! I'm not your wife."
"Oh no? Then who are you?"

"My name is Suzette, and I'm at your service for today, kind of like an escort service. I'll see you in an hour outside your office."

Without saying anything else, Sol hung up, finished the last details of the decor, and prepared to leave.

The time arrived. The man outside the office looked around, walki down the steps, and Suzette surprised him with a hot kiss, whispering in his ear, "I want your nakedness."

"Sol, why did you dress like that? You know I don't like it."

She kissed him and made a sign for silence. "Hey, I already told you that I'm not your wife, and besides, she doesn't know anything, does she?" "Where are we going?" he asked. "Come on, let's take a taxi."

On the way to the hotel, the kisses and caresses continued, causing spasms in their bodies. The air turned to desire. In a whisper, Suzette asked, "Do I look bad?" The man looked her up and down. "No, I love it. Just for me?" "Yes, just for you."

In the hotel hallways, murmurs of love desecrated the silence. Suzette and her lover rubbed their thighs together, touching each other maliciously. They entered the room. She pushed him, throwing him onto the bed. "Did you know that I was in this room for the first time with my wife?" "Yes? How good a lover is your wife?" "The best. She's learning with me, and I with her."

Suzette poured a glass and, giving it to him to drink, asked, "Do you love her?"

"A lot. She's the best, my most precious treasure. She and my daughters."

With kisses, Suzette took control, began to undress, revealing the black lace which covered her most intimate parts. He rubbed her thighs, her breasts, ready to possess her. They made love until they reached exhaustion, he repeating over and over how much he loved her, and she whispering the same for him. It was an unforgettable night for both of them. When he woke up, there was a note on the bed: "I hope we see each other again someday. Suzette."

He arrived home and Sol greeted him with a smile. "Hello, love, how did it go? Did you work all night?" He approached her, hugged her from behind, giving her a kiss on the neck, tears welling up in his eyes. "You're wonderful." "You too. Come on, take a shower, your water is ready. And sit down to have breakfast." "The girls?" "They're sleeping." He peeked into their room and kissed them with a daddy's tenderness. Love was in the air in that room.

Sol kept the memory of Suzette in a drawer. Time passed, and their love grew cold; every torrent froze, and their passion turned to ice. Neither of them knew what had happened. The emperor did not know how to handle his power: new aspirations, a better position, new social relationships, formal dinners, where his wife was a source of pride. She sank into loneliness, yearning for a tender "I love you," a surprise kiss, a flower, a word—just one word for her. But he became full of ambition: more power, more strength. Then came the blows, the insults, and the late arrivals. For each insult, a flower arrangement; for each blow, a jewel, a cell phone, and even a radio so that Sol would have no excuse not to answer and inform him where she was and with whom. She reached the point of trembling with fear and rage at his mere presence.

If something went wrong, everything, absolutely everything, was her fault. They were hurting each other a lot. One day, she found out that he was cheating on her with another woman. Pain and resentment took over her heart. "What did I do wrong?" she asked herself over and over again.

A demon was growing inside her. A very dangerous game began, which would later lead her to fall into a labyrinth that was difficult to escape. During that time, she met another man; she took refuge in him. His caresses and kisses made her feel alive, enduring the silent hell. Living a double life meant deceiving herself twice. She felt an infernal passion, and because of that passion, she went to the extreme of challenging her own husband. Like an animal, she defended herself, her daughters, and her passion: no more blows. Not anymore! Now she was the indifferent one. She had gained extraordinary strength, and through a smile, she transmitted joy that came from her heart and provoked sickly jealousy in her husband.

One day, Sol found her husband caressing Suzette's outfit. His red eyes could not hide the nostalgia of those moments that had been lived. "Leave my things," she said, snatching the underwear from him. He silently left for work.

A call broke Sol's thoughts. From the caller ID, she knew it was him. "What do you want?"

"A long time ago, I met a woman named Suzette."
"And…?"
"I want to see her again."
"But Suzette, she died."

"No! I know she didn't. Tell her I'll wait for her in the park she knows."

Sol understood the message, but she didn't know what to do: be faithful to love or to passion. The faces of her daughters, sad from so much violence, convinced her that perhaps this could represent an opportunity to be a family again. She took out Suzette's outfit, walking nervously, observing it, and thinking about what to do with the impeccable wife or the woman who had come back to life. A message on her cell phone broke the silence: "Hi, darling, I'm thinking of you. Call me when you can. Art."

She couldn't help crying. Sol was tormented. She felt that she was going to be unfaithful to the man she madly desired. She made a decision. She bought everything she needed for the new occasion, complementing it with a garter belt, some sensual stockings, and an elegant corset that made her look more mature and more feminine. Tight trousers and a low-cut blouse incited touching in themselves. A totally different Suzette. She arrived on time for the appointment, looked around, and a man approached, carrying a note in his hand.

"Hello, it's been a long time..."
"Yes, it's been a long time..."
"Do you remember this note?"
"Yes."
"Do you remember what it says?"
"Yes, but we're going to talk about the price of my services."

Bewildered, he asked, "What will be the price for being with you again?"

"Cheap—your wife's freedom. Let her go with her daughters."
"Does she want to leave me?"
"Yes, it would be the best for both. If you let her go, I promise you a night you'll never forget. I think it's the fair payment for my services."
"Okay," he replied, pulling her close to his chest as tears welled up in his eyes. He took her by the arm and said, "I still remember that day, don't you?"
"Yes, I do too."

They sealed the pact with a kiss. He kissed her passionately, and she couldn't hold back any longer. They went to the hotel, to the same room, and upon entering, there were flowers everywhere.

He poured her a drink and said, "Tell me about yourself. Are you married?" "Yes, I have a family. Two girls." "And your husband?" She avoided his gaze and decided not to answer. "I asked you about your husband. Are you happy?" With an angry look, she answered, "No, I'm not happy. I was a long time ago.""Do you love him?""Please don't ask me." He hugged her and, crying, asked her again: "Do you love him? Do you love him?" She couldn't bear the pressure: "Yes. Yes! Now I want to know: does he love me?""What do my eyes tell you?" "I don't know, you tell me: does he love me?" He didn't answer and continued kissing her, and began to make love to her with unbridled passion. She took his cell phone, turned on the camera, and began to speak, saying: "This moment is captured, and every time you see this video you will remember a woman named Suzette." Holding the camera they make love, filming step by step, caresses, kisses, moans.

It seemed like a competition of who was the best.

Sol at times imagined that she was making love to the other man, which made her even more unbridled. She wanted to belong to the other man more than to her own husband. Her head was a hurricane of thoughts: love, hate, passion, deceit, betrayal. He fell asleep. She took out a knife and approached him, but she couldn't kill him; she couldn't. She hid the knife and lay down next to him. She watched him sleep until she fell asleep herself.

He woke up, caressed her, and with a silent voice said, "I still love you, I still love you; you are the love of my life, my Sol." She managed to hear his words; she felt remorse for loving another man. She woke up without saying anything, took a shower, got dressed, and when she left, said, "The moment is over. I hope you liked it; now I want my payment."

He looked at her without saying anything and started to get dressed. They left the hotel, took a taxi, and rode in silence, pensive. They knew that everything had been said.

When they got to the house, he pushed her. They were alone. The girls were sleeping at their grandmother's house. Sol, furious, threw herself at him, blow after blow, draining their already wounded hearts. "You're never going to leave me. Are you listening to me, you fucking bitch? You want to get out, and go with that idiot."

Sol defended herself as best she could from the blows until she fell unconscious. When she woke up, she was on the floor, her body injured; she couldn't move. Sol didn't want to live anymore; she had no strength. Her resentment led her to take pills, trying to poison herself. Even so, destiny is unpredictable and capricious.

Sol opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was the light of a lamp and the murmur of voices. "Are you awake yet? Sol, love, how are you feeling?" She looked at her attacker like an enraged demon filled with rage. "Girls, Mom woke up." "Mommy, what happened to you? Does it hurt?"

She couldn't hold back her tears and, with a broken voice, answered, "Yes, a little, but don't worry, I'm fine." She dried her tears with soft caresses. "Mommy, who hit you?"

Before she could answer, her husband intervened: "Mommy was robbed; thieves beat her up. But don't worry, Mom is fine. She's here with us and she's not going to leave, right, love? We were all worried about you; we didn't know where you were."

She realised that he had already invented a fabulous story. With a sarcastic look, in her mind, she repeated: "Damn, what a good actor you are; you will pay for this, I swear you will pay for this." The concern of her family was evident. "Daughter, what happened to you?" asked her father. "No, I don't want to talk; please don't ask me anything."

Upset, she could not contain herself any longer and burst into tears. He ordered his father-in-law, "Let her rest; I will take care of her. She is not well; her nerves are shattered. Take the girls." When he closed the door, he asked Sol, "Why did you do it, eh?"

She did not answer.

"I asked you why you did it."

She did not answer; she only challenged him with her gaze.

"Do not look at me like that, stupid."

He grabbed her by the hair and neck. "If you insist on leaving, I will put you in jail, or I will kill you myself. Listen to me carefully: you are my wife, do you hear? My wife. Understand, I am a man, and I can do whatever I want. Did you hear that? Now you are going to obey me."

Sol's deep resentment turned into deadly hatred. Days passed, and she madly planned how to make him pay. The best way was to set him up to be beaten, she thought. An increasingly dangerous game. But the chameleon takes different shapes and colours. In front of him, she was a submissive, obedient wife, with the colour of purity and suffering. Behind his back, the enraged demon cried out for revenge; the colour of misfortune. Behind her doubts was her passion for the man she desired. At every moment, she asked herself: What do I really want? Think, Sol, think. Are you sure of what you want to do? What if they go too far and kill him? Are you going to bear his death for the rest of your life? Look at yourself. You no longer have a life of your own. You are a disaster. Your daughters need you.

What to do? God, help me. After much thought, she decided to sue him and went to the Women's Attorney's Office. Sol described her unbearable situation.

Some time ago she had gone to the same Attorney General's Office to report the abuse by her husband, but the official who attended to her told her that she had no conclusive proof of the beatings and infidelity; that nothing could be done, since he was a government worker and the breadwinner of the family; and that she was neither the first nor the last wife to be cheated on and beaten. The law for the protection of women had not yet been reformed. This time they listened to her attentively and

drew up the corresponding report: "With this you can go home and take your daughters. Demand a divorce and child support. You are not obliged to continue to endure more humiliation." Hearing this, Sol felt great relief. Soon I will be free, I will finally have my peace, she thought. Now my story will be different. I will sell my house and go far away with my daughters. We will start over. Sol took her cell phone and called a friend who was very dear to her. "Hello. I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm at the bank. Please pick up my daughters at school and I'll pick them up at your house. Thank you."

Finishing her errand, Sol took a taxi to her friend's house. Her heart and conscience were invaded by feelings, fears, and questions, but also by strong decisions, and she silently decreed: "I can no longer continue with this macabre plan. I have spent money and energy, I have neglected my daughters, and I have not achieved anything, only to do more harm to myself. I do not eat, I do not sleep, waiting for the moment to see it end, and that is not what I really want. I only want my peace, not a double life. I must leave behind passion and love. I must learn to get ahead in the face of a society that hurts with the edge of its criticism. Like many, I will not be the first or the last failure who built her home on foundations of sand, which, when they collapse, reveal the terrible and cruel reality. Where the only thing that matters is the value of being a woman; but I am not even that. I have become a human wreck. I feel sorry for myself. But no more. I will learn to love myself, to value what really has value: my daughters."

When she got to her friend's house, she asked, "Hi. And my daughters?" "Your sister-in-law picked them up and didn't want to let them come with me." At that moment, another friend arrived,

with whose fate her life would be intertwined. She said to her, "Sol, were you late? Didn't you pick up your daughters? How are you doing with your husband? My uncle wants to know if you're still looking or not." "What are you talking about? Looking for what? What are you up to?" the other friend asked. Sol answered confidently, "Don't worry, I don't want anything anymore. I want to go far away with my girls. I already sued him, and he'll give me a divorce whether he likes it or not. I'll sell my house and start a business." "And your love...?" "He has a family, and that's his place. I've dreamed of being with him, but that can never happen, because I don't want to destroy a family like they did with me, with mine. The calls from my husband's lover are becoming more and more blatant and offensive. She dared to insult my daughters. I found out from her about her relationship with him. Let her keep him; they are both the same. He is a scoundrel, and she... Well, I am happy. I am leaving now. I have to prepare food and clean my house. Thank you, friend." As she left for her house, her accomplice caught up with her. "Sol! Wait for me! Do you have a phone card?" "Yes." "Are you going to call?" "I'm going to ask for my exclusive taxi driver." They went to a public telephone. A car stopped. It was Sol's husband.

Sol's friend took the documents and hid them while he said angrily, "What are you doing here? Where were you?" Sol, terrified, didn't know what to say. "Excuse me, I asked your wife for her calling card, and I kept her up." "Shut up, you damned woman. You're her cover, aren't you? And you're going to pay for this. Get in! Get in the car!" "Don't do anything to her. Sol! Sol!" Sol's husband started his car, headed to a lonely alley, stopped, and hit Sol. "Tell me where you were, with your lover, right? Have you had sex with

him yet? Tell me." She defended herself: "Leave me alone, damn it! I've never cheated on you or belonged to another. I'm not a bitch like you." With a punch from his closed fist, he answered, "Shut up! And tell me, why didn't you go get the girls and instead sent your friends?"

He started the car again and headed home. The girls were there, distraught. "Mom! Mom! I don't want Dad to hit you anymore! Don't hit her anymore, Dad!" He, uncontrollably, pulled her by the arm and locked himself in a room with her. "Damned bitch, my daughters are crying because of you. For the last time, I'm going to ask you: where have you been?" "I went to sue you. Go on hitting me so they can really see who you are. You don't know how much I hate you." He, surprised and without saying anything, left the house. He paused thoughtfully for a long time. Sol tried to regain her calm to reassure her daughters. "I promise you that this is the last thing you're going to see. No more hitting; I know it hurts you, you won't see this anymore. Forgive me for allowing this to become hell." But he returned when she was feeding them.

He looked at her defiantly and said, "Sol, come here. Let's talk." "Okay, let's go to the bedroom." "What do you want, Sol? We can't go on like this." "I want to leave, you know that. You and I can't be together. This isn't a family; this isn't life. I want to go away and start my life over again." "With him?" "He's not in my plans. I don't want a relationship right now." After discussing it for hours, they came to a mutual agreement.

"Okay, Sol, go wherever you want, but I will come to see you once a month. For my daughters' sake, I will support you.

And one last condition: you will leave when school is out, during the holidays. Those are my conditions." "Okay, but I don't want you to mistreat me during all this time." The days passed slowly. The two of them were considerate and cordial. He would arrive with surprise gifts for her and the girls. At any time, he would sneak out of work to keep an eye on her and ensure she did not have contact with another man. She had one goal: to continue with her plans and go far away. Although sometimes her lover called her, Sol avoided answering him. Her husband's insecurity was evident; he checked her calls looking for evidence of infidelity. She suddenly felt that things could be fixed. But no, she didn't want to turn back. Her decision had been made, and the date was approaching. The last call Sol received from her husband's lover was one afternoon. "Hello, whore of my husband, how are you? You had me worried. I thought you had died."



"Look," said the lover, "idiot, the one who laughs last..."
"I know... Laughs better. I already know that saying. Listen to me carefully: keep him; he's yours. What else do you want? He's your prize."

"I swear you'll pay for this." Sol, with a mischievous smile, hung up and continued with her chores. At night, when her husband came home from work, she would insistently ask, "How did it go? Where did you go?" Then she had to fulfil her marital obligations like a good wife. Sol believed that keeping him happy, without contradicting him, was the best way to avoid problems. But she didn't realise that her life was about to take a turn. Misfortune was knocking at her door.

One morning, while dropping her daughters off at school, she received a call. "Hello?"

"Mrs Sol?" she heard on the other end.
"Yes, sorry, who's speaking? Who are you?"
"I'm the person who agreed to do the job you want. I need to see you." Sol, without saying anything else, scared, hung up. She went to the house of the friend who was an accomplice in her plan. She knocked on the door.
"Hello, Sol! Why do you look like that?"
"A man just called me, and I don't know who it is."
"Who is he?"
"I don't know. He's the person who's going to do the job for me, but I don't want anything more. And your uncle?"
"He's not here."
"What time is he coming?"
"I don't know. Calm down."

"I can't calm down. I'm scared; his voice is threatening. Please, when your uncle arrives, ask him who that guy is. Talk to him and tell him not to bother me anymore, that I don't want anything."
"Yes, friend. Calm down. When my uncle arrives, I'll talk to him. He already knows that you regretted it."
"I'm leaving because my husband is watching me, and I don't want what you saw that day to happen to me."

Sol continued with her activities. In the afternoon, she received another call:

"Hello?"
"I have to see you. It's urgent."
"Listen, I don't know you."
"Ma'am, I'm a man you don't mess with. I'll wait for you at your friend's house."

When she hung up again, fear invaded Sol. The phone rang again. What did the guy want? He had already called at two o'clock.

"Sol, it's me," the friend said. "I think it was a mistake to look for him. I'm going to tell my uncle."

They were very confused; they didn't know what to do. At dusk, Sol's husband came home:

"How did it go? Well, what did you do? Where did you go?"
"I didn't do anything special. I didn't go out. I'm going to prepare the water for you to bathe."
"Yes, I'm going to see my daughters."

Entering the bedroom, Sol discovered her husband looking through her cell phone and purse.

"What are you doing?"
"Give me your cell phone code."
"No."
"Why not, Sol?"
"Because it's personal."

He threatened her when she refused: "I don't want to argue or hit you. Your lover is still talking to you, right?"

She turned around, but he pulled her and threw her on the bed. He managed to subdue her.

"What are you hiding?"
"Nothing."
"Look at me when I talk to you. Why do you owe money?"
"What? How do you know?"
"I know everything about you. You don't know everything you can find on the internet. All your bank transactions are there. Now just tell me: where and what did you spend that money on?"

Sol owed money, which she had used to find evidence of infidelity and to find people who could beat her husband up. Her thirst for revenge was getting in the way, and she dedicated herself to making mistake after mistake. It seemed that her husband had a pact with the devil since nothing ever happened to him, and no one dared to touch him. In her defence, she said: "I don't ask you for explanations for your withdrawals." Sol explained that she helped her friend pay medical expenses for her sick mother.

"How do you know if it's true that her mother is sick?"

He mocked her. "Look, Mother Sol of Calcutta, I will pay that debt as long as you stop helping your friends. Is that clear?"

A guilty conscience kept her awake all night. In the morning, her friend called her to tell her that some guys were at her house and wanted to see her. Sol went to her house. When she arrived, her friend told her that they were in her uncle's room. One of the guys said to her: "Finally I have the pleasure of meeting you."

"What do you want from me?"
"You know, to do the job."
"Look, right now I don't have any money. I don't want anything anymore, and I don't have anything to pay you. Sorry, thank you. I'm up to my neck in debt."

The guy didn't seem to hear her and started threatening her again. He explained that you didn't play with him and that there was no way to back out. "Since you don't have any money, if we beat him up, you'll have to cure him. What do you think if we kidnap him instead?"

"What do you think? I don't shout it and let us know."

At that moment, Sol was very sorry. She realised that it was an absurd revenge because he was, after all, the father of her daughters. Nostalgia invaded her and led her to reject any deal with the criminal: "The only thing I want is for him to leave us alone. If he wants money, I will get it, but please do not hurt us." The guy reiterated that she had better think about it and that she should know that there were many people offering money for the head of Sol's husband. "More than one person hates that bastard. There must be a reason." The guy threatened her again: "I know who your relatives are, so think about it," he insisted. Sol was terrified and left her friend's house without listening to her. At home, Sol regretted her mistake. She cried over the idiocies that had led her to a very complicated situation.

In the hallway of her house, there is an image of the Lord of Mercy, who, by tradition, stayed nine days in each house and who, by chance, shared Sol's pain at those times. She looked at him carefully and began to pray—the first prayer after a long time of not doing so. When she went to get her daughters, she received another call from the guy, who warned her: "Just to tell you that I have you under surveillance and that you shouldn't try to go to the police or do anything stupid because I will tell my people to go fuck you up." "Please, leave me alone, you damned old man." After hanging up, she felt everyone's eyes on her. She was going crazy. She hurriedly took the girls home, which, at that moment, she felt was the safest place.

After she ate with her daughters, people began to arrive for the prayers—first her father, then her mother-in-law and her neighbours. Her father told her that he seemed strange. Sol told him that she had problems but that he should not worry. "Come home, so we can talk," her father told her. When night came, Sol was waiting for her husband. At times she cried. She remembered many stages of her life and how much it hurt her to lose her mother. She opened the box where her wedding dress was kept, and those beautiful moments came to her mind. She wanted to run away with her girls, but her conscience would not let her rest. She was at a dead end. Her husband arrived and asked her for dinner. They ate in silence. It was a horrible night, without her being able to sleep. The man's words echoed in her head. The next day, she stayed at the door, watching him walk away, and felt a lump in her throat. She continued her routine. After dropping the girls off at school, she received another call from the guy, who met her outside a school without giving

her a chance to refuse. The friend had involved the uncle, the mediator.

Sol took a taxi that dropped her off near the school. She walked to the school. She felt watched and heard someone say to her: "Keep walking. I'll tell you where to stop." "Look, give me time to gather a reasonable amount of money and give it to you in exchange for leaving me alone. But I'm not going to kidnap my husband." "That's what I thought you were going to say, Sol, but the rules of the game are different—mine." At that moment, the guy snatched her belongings—her money, her cell phone, her keys—and hugged her, pointing a knife at her side. "So walk without acting so silly." "Please leave me alone," she begged. "It's too late. If you had accepted, everything would be different." Among the individuals accompanying the criminal was her friend's uncle, who only told her that everything was going to be fine and that she shouldn't worry. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you, but you should cooperate." They took a taxi. Sol was silent, desperate to scream. At that moment, Sol was officially kidnapped.

They arrived at a lonely place—a huge piece of land where there were some caves. The first call to demand ransom came from Sol's cell phone since it contained the phone numbers of her husband, her friends, and family. With loud words from the kidnapper that insulted Sol's husband, he demanded 150,000 pesos for her rescue. When the communication was cut off, Sol was taken to one of the caves and tied to a rock inside. For her, time passed slowly, and the damp cold of the cave numbed her body. There were long moments of complete silence at other times, the murmurs of the kidnappers could be heard. Unexpectedly, one

of the kidnappers untied her: "Sol, I think you're leaving. It seems your husband already has the money. I told you that everything was going to be fine, see? Now I'm going to take you to a phone booth to talk to him because he wants to know that you're alive." They put her in a van, and after several turns, they arrived at a public phone. The man took out a piece of paper and began to dial: "Here is your wife. Talk to her, but don't you dare be smart." Sol begged him to leave with the girls. The man snatched the phone from her and demanded the ransom from her husband. They continued on their way. They covered her with a jacket and a cap to hide her face.

At nightfall, the van was parked near a bus stop. Each of the kidnapper's accomplices went to strategic points, waiting for Sol's husband to arrive. The agreed meeting place was a cemetery on the highway, where he arrived. He parked, got out, and threw a black bag. The kidnapper immediately realised that the police were already involved in the rescue. They decided to flee. They made her throw herself into the van. They reached another public phone. The kidnapper got out to call. After several insults, they managed to reach an agreement with Sol's husband. She was taken to the cave again, and they waited there until dawn. They got back into the van and went to the new place where the ransom would be delivered. There was no one waiting.

Her accomplices watched. The kidnapper said: "Your husband thinks I'm his fool, and he doesn't see the danger he's exposing you to." Sol wondered why he didn't come for her. Dawn came, and the rescue never arrived. During the day, she was taken to a house, but before they arrived, they took care of blindfolding her.

They put her in a room, tied up by her hands and feet, and left her lying on the floor. She spent hours in pain and numbness. All she wanted was for the nightmare to end. One of the kidnappers periodically came in to feed her.

She cried, begging God for this to end soon. She was worried about her daughters and her husband. She longed to see them again, and then she felt something dripping from her private parts. She assumed she was menstruating. That night, the kidnapper entered the room violently. He hit her and said, "Your stupid husband thinks he's so smart. Do you know what he did? He has the whole police looking for you. Doesn't that stupid guy love you even a little bit? Doesn't he know how much danger you're in? He doesn't have all the money—only thirty thousand—and he can't get any more. He thinks I'm stupid, but I'm going to leave him a nice memory with you."

After beating her, he raped her, not caring that she was menstruating. He abused her twice that night. During those moments, Sol felt degraded. She cried and gagged, unable to defend herself. Disgust invaded her senses, and in her mind, she asked God for it to end soon. While the man penetrated her violently, she froze and asked God for her family to be okay. Lying on the floor, she felt violated, her skin impregnated with the smell of her rapist and with hickey marks on her breasts and back, intended to send a message to her husband.

Then there was another rescue attempt. Sol spoke to her husband again. He, in a despotic attitude, made her feel that she was not important to him. The kidnapper ordered Sol to ask her husband for the money, but she simply asked him to flee with the girls. This rebellious attitude cost Sol more beatings. Faced with

failure and desperation, the criminal called her father to press for the ransom. She was taken to an abandoned house under construction, near the house of a woman who was apparently the kidnapper's aunt. He deceived the woman, presenting Sol as the woman he had kidnapped to be his wife.

Sol was under constant surveillance by the rest of the gang. She couldn't talk to anyone. Three days passed. The kidnapper's silence was driving his accomplices crazy. On the fourth day, the kidnappers argued; they had to get something. She was desperate. The ties on her hands and feet were already injuring her. At that moment, the kidnapper came to see her. "Sol, you don't know how sorry I am that your husband doesn't love you. If he loved you, he would have rescued you, but he doesn't care about you. Do you want to go back to your family?" "Yes, please, let me go." "Calm down and listen to me. Your fucking husband has my people, and he already knows who I am. The people they have detained don't know anything about this. There are three women and two men. Your stupid friend turned them in. That idiot is going to pay because there was an agreement. What I want you to do is show up at the Attorney General's Office and report a kidnapping. They may show you pictures of me. You say that I am not the kidnapper; describe someone else. If they show you the people they have detained, you tell the truth—that you do not know them. If you do what I tell you, I promise that I will never bother you again. Does your husband want to find you? Well, I will hand you over to him. If you do not do things as I tell you and by eleven o'clock in the morning my people are not free, I swear that I will kill your family."

The next day, before dawn, Sol was taken to the Attorney General's Office, as agreed. She went to report the incident. While she was giving her statement, there were judicial officers watching her. She was very nervous and felt like her head was going to explode. At that moment, the commander came in, threw some photos at her, and started yelling at her. The judicial officers hit her. "Look, you idiot, I have your fucking accomplices. Your little friend turned you in." Eight judicial officers beat Sol mercilessly and savagely.

They tied her to a chair. Her husband's boss came in and said to her, "Do you know who I am? Answer, you damned bitch". "Yes, my husband's boss." "Look, I have your husband on the line. Don't you want to talk to him? I'll put him through to you. Ask for his forgiveness!" Seeing that Sol didn't react and remained silent, he said, "Here I have your bitch of a wife, and she doesn't want to apologise. She prefers to defend her lover, the kidnapper. I already told her that one of your daughters is kidnapped, but she doesn't want to give him up. As her little friend said, she traded you for an old man."

Sol, hearing these lies, tried to stand up and attack the man. "Liar!" she shouted at him. "Oh, how brave! You really are brave. Did you know that your friend turned you in? She told us everything. What she doesn't know is that she also dug her own grave. I'll make sure that you're sent to prison for many years. Hey, your wife doesn't want to ask for your forgiveness." Her husband's boss put it on speakerphone, and they could hear him saying, "That damned bitch is going to know what I'm capable of." After a tremendous beating, the police forced Sol to sign many pages and took her down to the cells. She was, as they say, highly

recommended[18] in the Attorney General's Office, since her husband had good influence there. They fabricated a statement of about 30 pages, in which she admitted that she was a crazy person. They insulted her, and she felt lost. Over and over again, they told her that she would spend at least ten years in prison. The report that confirmed all the injuries caused by the police was lost. She was isolated, without contact with anyone. She was only allowed to speak for five minutes with her father, who went to see her. He believed the stories they had invented for him: "Daughter, don't cry. Face what you did, and accept it. You have just lost everything. May God bless you". Sol then understood that her family would never forgive her.

Early morning at the Atlacholoaya prison, Morelos, 2 a.m. A van arrived. A huge door opened. Sol came out in handcuffs, along with her friend and three others accused of extortion, kidnapping, criminal association, and rape. When they received her, the guards of the place did not know how dangerous the new arrivals were. A breeze caressed Sol's face as the huge door closed. Freedom was left outside. The captivity began in a place were new comers were processed, completely isolated from the rest of the population. The first visit that Sol received was from her father and her brothers, united in deep pain. It was hard for them to resign themselves to Sol staying in a place like that.

Her father decided to fight to get her out, becoming the victim of corrupt lawyers who would sell out under the power of Sol's husband. It was a war: the necessary divorce, the fight over the properties, the girls. One more hell for Sol and her family. Tears and more tears. A month after Sol was locked up, her husband

had a daughter with the woman from the calls. She took it upon herself to finish destroying Sol. She became the new owner and mistress of Sol's house and her family.

The girls struggled constantly to see their mother. Sol learned to be patient and resigned, enduring the pain of seeing the tired face of her 70-year-old father. She dedicated herself to working and earning a salary far below the value of her work. She became a woman who learned to be scum in a place where the smartest reign and can hurt with the edge of her tongue, like the carnivorous and lying hyenas. She got used to this new place, where the sunsets are always the same. With no place to go and no other option than to walk around the court, she encountered old memories and sensations from outside at each step.

A place where the delinquent men who live next door write dizzying verses. A place where on the third day of meeting a woman, they already want her, a week later they love her, and a month later they would give their lives for her because she is the woman of their life. But at the same time, they send letters to other women.

Sol learned to love the raven men and to avoid their displays of eternal love, maintaining a carnal pact with a scum sentenced to chastity. She also learned from those who had been in there for a century and still believed in God, reaffirming that loyalty is not found in the Cereso dictionaries because it is a censored word. She takes refuge in her notebook and her pen, imagining, making poetry, and writing her own story until the day she can leave this place, carrying a sentence of 12 years and 6 months for a kidnapping of love.

The wronged lover

Águila del Mar

I am the wronged lover of the one who was the love of
my life!
I am the ill-considered by that terrible monster
the double-edged knife: society
I am the weaver of my dreams
the forger of my own destiny
I am the wife of the one who loves me
I am the lover of the one who desires me
I am an outcast daughter, a rebel daughter
a collector of loves
an eternal warrior, a romantic
passionate par excellence
I am the sister of the scattered eagles
each one guarding its own nest
Amazons tempered in fire
I am an eagle, a sister of captive blood
a prisoner with a soul awaiting flight.
They were created in my being born from my soul
I am the mother of the night
I am the mother of the day
a sun girl, a moon girl
a princess in a tale, a fairy in a fable
a divine trinity
because we are one, one spirit
one flesh
I am

To the left of God

Águila del Mar

The feet of the moon stand at my midpoint
Where time is defined
The lioness uncovered her domain
I numbed her so she wouldn't see me leave
I whispered words of love to escape
I married her
I drove her crazy with my sex so she wouldn't feel
my immaculate heartbeats full of desperation
It opened its mouth with sorcerous words of the
ancient man who dominates the Cyclops
I left hand in hand with the holy woman poet
with the trinity of wise women carrying my cross
I came out to the left of GOD
My sun caresses my face, recognising that I gave
birth to her in the womb of Guadalupe
I breathed wind with legs incredulous of walking
reborn in the antichrist of society
completing the three ribs of Adam
I feel no tears
I am drugged without consuming
with contracted viscera
it is not me who comes out
it is the calm of the re-educated storm
I feel that I am dying with the faith of the brother
of the lion of the tribe
he who does not disgust the scum women

and gives the body and blood of the Christ who
believes in me
I left surrounded by my dead servants
who praise God
for the triumph of the chameleon eagle

8
Martha Elena: Prison taught me who I was

Galia Tonella



By chance, I ended up in prison, where I had as a cellmate Martha Elena Hernández Bermúdez, a short woman with a friendly smile. My first encounter with her was marked by our mutual love for coffee. I learned in a very rudimentary way how to prepare it in prison. I make very good coffee given the circumstances, so when I wake up, the first thing I do is heat the water, and at the first boil I add cinnamon, then the coffee. My family brings me every month a combination of *planchuela*, *caracolillo*, and French Illy coffee. The smell of coffee filled our cell when I saw my cellmate start to shed tears, and she told me: "That aroma reminds me of who I am, where I come from." At that moment I knew that Martha Elena and I would share more than a splendid cup of coffee. Thus she began to tell me her wonderful story, which would allow me to get to know the Indigenous world much better. I say with great pride and respect, she allowed me to learn more about my ancestors, to enter a world I didn't know about.

Women who belong to the upper middle class do not identify the Indigenous world in all its splendour. Our knowledge is limited to their crafts and our social interactions with domestic service. Truth be told, this is due to ignorance and a lack of interest, seasoned with stupid prejudices. Life would prove me wrong. This story, woven in two voices, tells of my encounter with the Indigenous world in a space full of limitations, but also of learning:

"My life is very different from all the others I have heard about from my friends," Martha Elena tells me. "I was born in Nuevo Huixtán, in the municipality of Las Margaritas in the state of Chiapas. What can I say about my community? It is not a town, because there is

no market, no church, but there are the Marist Sisters. The force of Catholicism is impressive, it controls the morality and education with which they raise us. We went to live in Nuevo Huixtán in the early 1960s, following the distribution of lands by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. There was no more land to give away in the Highlands of Chiapas, and my father was assigned to that new community. You could say that almost all of the 40 families who lived there were related. Our mother tongue was Tsotsil.

"Today I feel proud of my language, but for a long time I was ashamed of it. I felt that being Indigenous was demeaning, or that is how I was made to feel for a long time. There were no more than 150 inhabitants in that place. It was a paradise, a coffee-growing area next to Nuevo Pacayal. My father and 40 other families founded that community. My father was about 18 years old when he already had his 20-hectare plot of land where he could raise his family. He had married my mother for love. His life was simple. My mother was only 15 years old.

"In the village, women get married very young. The teenage years are unknown, and you go from being a girl to becoming a wife. My grandparents were strict. They taught my father how to work. In those days it was rare to be a man and to be good and responsible with the family, but that was my father. So without thinking much, my father took his wife and went on this adventure, to start a family. My father is a strong man with a penetrating gaze. You can't say no to anything. He is a very fair man. It's a pity that I had to spend 14 years and 1 month in prison to learn who my father was and who I was.

"My mother told me that my father was looking forward to my birth. Maybe he was expecting a boy, not a girl, but he didn't

say anything. He was very quiet and I never saw him yell at my mother. That was unusual, since over there it was customary for men to impose their authority through blows. But my father was the exception to the rule, I would say in everything.

"I know that he was disappointed that I was a female, but I never dared to ask. However, it was obvious, because of the 'customs and habits' in which we were educated, although he broke many parameters. My father sent me to school. We walked 60 minutes and rode 30 minutes. The community where the school was located was called Nuevo Pacayal and children came from different surrounding communities. There were only 10 girls and 100 boys. It was not customary to send girls to school. On the contrary, it was frowned upon. Females were for the home, but my father sent me to school. He even paid something extra so that I stayed there from Monday to Friday. I was six years old, so two years went by. I thought that he did not want to see me at home, maybe because I was a female. I only returned home on weekends. At school they taught in Tsotsil, my mother tongue, but we also had to learn Spanish.

"As there was no market, a van would arrive every month with supplies where we could buy things. It was an event. I loved seeing how they packed so many things. I didn't know how they fit in the van. I thought they were doing a bit of magic.

"Life in the countryside is very hard. My father taught my brothers, Armando, Juan Carlos, Adalberto, Efraín, and Mario. My brother Jorge Luis was the second son. He deserves special mention because he died at the age of three due to my mother's carelessness. He was drowning in the river. They were able to rescue

him, but he was not well. He became very sickly until he died. Of what? No one ever knew. There was no medical care of any kind. The rest of my siblings were boys. There are eight of us in total.

"My father would wake up at 4:30 a.m., wash, and change clothes. He was a clean, starched, well-built man, not very affectionate. My mother would boil water for coffee, and that smell would wake us up. My father always had a very cold demeanour, showing no expression. Maybe that was how he was taught. He would sit at the table to have breakfast and demand that my mother make sure we were all clean and well groomed, so we could go work with him in the fields or help him with chores around the house or be ready to go to the boarding school.

"He was a man respected for his diligence and hard work. He never hit my mother. I believe he treated her with respect. We never heard of him having an affair, attending a party, or engaging in a flirtation with anyone. He was a family man, and his word was respected as much as anyone else's. People went to him for advice. He was a wise and fair man. More than once, his word was law in our community. My grandfather was the same. Both my grandfather and my father belonged to the Council of Elders, but this being a new community, people judged my father to be fair and correct. That is why he was sought out to help solve problems, as if he were an old man. But he spoke little and did not like to be sought out. He would say: 'The ox licks itself well.'

"I was the oldest. I couldn't say anything to my father and even less to my mother. I didn't understand why we had to do always what he said. I got upset with my mother. Her passivity towards my father bothered me. I saw how my mother only accepted

with resignation what my father said. To tell the truth, I was very naughty. I made my mother very nervous when she was at home. She punished me by making me pray out loud in the kitchen so that she would hear me. On one occasion, I was watching a pot on the wood stove and I remembered that my mother said she would make *atole*. This pot had boiling water in it, but I thought the *atole* was already made, so I tried to grab some while I continued praying aloud so that my mother wouldn't suspect me. Then I turned the pot of boiling water over and I burned myself horribly. That day I did see my mother scared. I screamed in pain. They put aloe on me so I wouldn't get blisters, and egg white. In towns like mine there is no doctor. Everything is cured with herbs and, let it be said, almost no one dies or gets sick like they do in the city. Indigenous remedies are wonderful, and to this day I continue to use them with my children.

"A few days later my father told my mother: 'Get Martha Elena's things ready. I'm taking her to study in Comitán with her godmothers Consuelo and Dolina. They are good people.' These two women were my father's godmothers and mine too. I was only eight years old. I begged my mother not to send me away, promising that I would behave. I thought I was being punished for overturning the pot. I knelt down and begged, but it was no use. My father's word was not to be disputed; it was the law.

"I always thought that my father sent me to school to keep me away from his life. I often regarded him with suspicion, even fear. He would just look at me out of the corner of his eye and say: 'Study, my daughter, learn what you can.' So there I went with the godmothers. I grumbled and grumbled. When I arrived, I realised that it was a very big house, and the women were

very serious. They were very uptight, very strict. Consuelo was a seamstress and Dolina was a nurse. They were what are known as spinsters. They had bitterness in their eyes, and if I did something wrong, oh God! It seems that I can still hear them: 'Christ the Blessed Sacrament, Martha Elena, behave like a little lady.'

"I spent three years with them, because I couldn't finish primary school. I was bad at studying. I was lazy. I failed twice, and that's why I was very behind. However, I learned Spanish with them. They were very strict. They taught me to eat with cutlery, to say hello, to say good morning, good afternoon. I couldn't play rough, because that wasn't for girls. I shouldn't cross my leg; I had to sit properly. And after the chores I helped with, they made me embroider, which I didn't like. I wanted to stay in the countryside. I missed my town, feeling free, running with my brothers, swimming in the river, going fishing, taking the mojarras out of the river, climbing trees and eating their fruit, playing, being covered in dirt.

"I remember that I loved going to Miramar lagoon. My father would take us there once a year as a reward. It was a day and a half on horseback. We didn't mind; it was wonderful. The legends of my town are great. They really make a child have an imagination. When you get to Miramar, there is a marimba in the depths and a cave where a big eye comes out. That eye doesn't do anything to you as long as you don't want to play the marimba. It's a big sea serpent that guards the marimba. We swam and wanted to greet the guarding serpent, which I must confess I have never seen. I dreamed of it and befriended it in my dreams, but it was just the reflection of the light that made me see that eye in the cave. My pulse was beating very fast. It was incredible. My brothers felt the

same. We looked after each other. There were always foreigners who spoke Tsotsil more strangely than I did and no one made fun of them. Some threw coins into the water for us to dive, but my father didn't let us do it. He bought us sweets and my mother brought us food. He was very dignified and loved his family.

"Oh, but living with these young ladies, life was very boring. They always told me what to do, how to behave. They wants me to be almost like a statue. I couldn't go far away because they got angry. They didn't talk much to me. I didn't dare to do any mischief and even less leave traces that betrayed my presence. I became a sad and reserved girl. I envied my classmates telling stories about their family. I was completely alone. I finished primary school when I was almost 14 years old. I was excited because I thought I would finally finish studying and return to the village with my brothers. I would hear my mother's screams again, scolding us for dirtying the washed clothes hanging on the stones in the sun. I thought I would fight with my brothers again over the *Marías cookies*. But everything was very different. My father only told me: 'You're done, Martha Elena. Now you're going to San Cristóbal de las Casas with my godmother, Mother Guille.' Once again I was distancing myself from my family, which made me think that he didn't love me, or at least that he didn't want me by his side. 'When I'm a mother, I won't distance myself from my children,' I repeated over and over again. I won't allow them not to grow up together. I couldn't remember my brothers well at that point. With so many years of confinement and separation, what could I expect from life? Mother Guille was the founder of a nursing home in San

Cristóbal de las Casas. It was located opposite the post office in the city.

"Mother Guille decided to leave San Cristóbal. The diocese sent her to manage a hospital in Mexico City. Mother Guille was a very good woman, very reserved. Her room scared me. It wasn't dark; I would say it was rather sparse. Light came in, and it had large windows that looked out onto the garden, and I could see the children playing. There was a bed, and not much else. There were no decorations, and there was a slightly rickety chair, a small wardrobe with her habits and perhaps pyjamas on a simple table, and two creams on her nightstand. And on the wall, a Christ and an image of the Virgin ascending to heaven. I don't know if a nun decides to have children through other people, but she was very loving with everyone. This was a very peculiar clinic that covered the sins of society ladies who had unwanted children and also sick children. Although Mother Guille said there is no thing as an unwanted child, since they are born because they are wanted by God, who is much more important than human will. There were many mentally retarded children, and others with Down's syndrome.

"My duties were varied. Mother Guille insisted that we were a family and that we all had obligations. I had to go to high school in the afternoon. There were ten of us girls or teenagers who worked there with her. Five studied in the morning and five in the afternoon. Those of us who studied in the afternoon helped bathe the children and go to the market. There were doctors and nurses, but we, as older sisters, made sure that the children's hands and nails were clean and cut, and that the bedrooms were clean.

"I never took care of my brothers, but I liked children. They have never bothered me. I would say that I love them. However, I felt infinitely alone. I don't know what to tell you. Among so many people and feeling alone, I missed my family. The day I have a family, I will never separate myself from them. I will always have them with me. I thought that my father did not love me, that he wanted me far away from him. Every day my resentment towards him grew. 'Why me?' I asked myself. 'Why not another one of my brothers?', that's what I thought every day when I went about my routine.

"I was 17 years old in 1986, when I met Raymundo Vélez. He worked in a taco shop and I was so drawn to him. He was tall, handsome, and I could see that he was a hard worker. He came from Michoacán and lived with a relatives, also far from his family. A year later he would become my husband. I left Mother Guille and went to live with my future husband's family. They were from Michoacán. He had also been sent to study. He wanted a better life. He was a good, hard-working boy with a deep loneliness like mine. We both dreamed of having a family. We fell in love and with Mother Guille's approval, we got married in 1987. Our godmother was Doña Catalina. I must say that she is one of the benefactors of Mother Guille's hospital. She took a great liking to me. To this day I am still in contact with her, and I thank life very much for her, because she never doubted that I was innocent, and she never left me.

"We lived in the Mexico City in the Hornos de Tlalpan neighbourhood. With the help of our family and Raymundo's savings, we set up a taco shop with great effort on the main avenue of

Santa Ursula. We continued to support Mother Guille whenever we could. We never forgot about her and her children. I think that knowing that the children were not orphans but rather those who were rejected by their parents, made me think that my parents didn't love me, so I spent many years in jail with the same idea.

"We were doing well. I took after my father and was a hard worker, and Raymundo was a work machine. I have always had a strong character, and why not say it, I am determined, but my husband's intelligence in knowing how to lead and control me has been the best gift that life has given me. We soon opened another taco shop in Tepeximilpa, but I longed to return to the countryside. I didn't want my children to grow up in the city. By then I had two children, Fabiola and Raymundo. My husband and I didn't like the smog or the traffic. I think we wanted the life that, according to me, my father had denied me by sending me out of my community to the city. We looked in the newspaper for information about some land that was for sale in Cuernavaca, in the Obrero Popular neighbourhood, near the airport. There was no electricity or water, but that didn't scare me. The house where I grew up was like that, because when I say 'kitchen,' I'm really referring to a wood-burning stove with athatched roof. The land was partitioned, nothing else. I remembered when my father said that there was nothing in Nuevo Huixtan, only the land partitioned by the agrarian reform. So that was my chance to do what I always dreamed of, to be with my family. I would never abandon them, and we would always be together.

"We bought one lot in cash, with money from selling the taco stands, and the other in instalments. We had a tough time. We didn't have the same income as before. We had to eat and bear the daily expenses. So we couldn't afford both lots and we gave one up. There were too many expenses. The children were starting to go to school. I loved waking up in the countryside; I loved everything around me. Ray got a job at the airport for five months. We had to make a cistern, chipping away at the rock with a pick and shovel. It wasn't hard for us. When you realise a dream, you don't feel the hard work, and we shared the same dream. A bricklayer helped us. We made a big cistern, the septic tank. We met a very kind teacher named Dora. She lent us her land in exchange for taking care of it. We fenced it with barbed wire and *huisache*. We planted corn, beans, and hibiscus. We planted fruit trees. We had already built the bathroom; we had three rooms made from the wood that the Nissan factory discarded in Morelos, from the containers that auto parts come in. We had heavy asbestos sheets for roofing. I had my kitchen, my stove, since I cooked with firewood, just like when I was a child. We collected the stone we built with from nearby. There was a lot, and we had a little cart to collect it.

"Thank God, Ray got a job at Coca Cola, so from the time he arrived at 7 p.m., he worked on the house until nine or ten at night; we got tired but it felt good.. I have always been able to talk to my husband, he is a great man, responsible, hard-working, like my father, except that Ray is much more loving and kind. Maybe loneliness helped him express what he feels. My daughter Dianita was born, the more mischivious of the three, a skinny and funny girl, and the joy of our family.



"The rainy season was wonderful. I remembered the green of my land to which I would not return, because I assumed that my father did not love me. 'Why go back if I did not talk to them? Why look for them if I have already made my family? And that is what counts,' I thought. No one would separate me from them. That was the most important thing. We had what was necessary to be happy, and believe me when I say happy. I do not understand people who are always complaining about what lack and cannot see what they do have: health, healthy food, and a roof over your head. My life was complete. They offered us a plot of land in Santa María Ahuacatitlan. Ray liked it and with part of the liquidation of Coca Cola, we bought it. He had already been offered a job at a gas company. We stopped building to pay for it. Ray was intelligent. If we ever argued, it was because of me. He has always been very calm and sensible.

"I remember one time when we had to go to mass. I was looking for diapers and filling the baby's bottles. He, oblivious to my troubles, sat in the car, honking the horn. I was furious, so I asked him to lend me the car keys for a moment. He said suspiciously: 'Why

do you want them, woman? We're running late.''Give them to me,' I said. I don't know what he thought, but he gave them to me. I angrily threw them into the cistern, which was big, and I told him: 'When you get them out, I'll be ready.' I thought he would have to go in to get them out of the cistern and get wet. It bothered me that he kept laughing, and I went into the house. He didn't say anything to me, but I saw him go in too, and then come out with a piece of string and something else I could not see. It was a magnet with which he got the keys out very quickly and started honking the horn again. We laughed. His ingenuity was wonderful, but the best thing is that he was never angry, I was the one with a temper. He loved his children, a man of integrity, fair and kind.

"One Sunday after we went to mass, Ray had invited two boys to help him build the wall. They had poured a couple of concrete pilars, so they opened some beers. Ray has never been a drinker. His only vice was his family and I still proudly say that it is his only vice, to this day. As we sat outside, a man came in that Ray didn't know well. Maybe he had seen him with his brother, I think from work. He told them that he had just had an accident, that we should help him. He asked for Ray's brother. Ray told him that he didn't live there, but he asked how he could help them. He had his daughter with him, and Ray invited them in, we gave them dinner, and he put the girl to bed. He invited them to stay that night. Ray opened his wallet, handed me a 100 peso bill, and said: 'Go to the pharmacy, woman, and buy some toothbrushes for the man and his daughter.' The little girl immediately started playing with my children. She accompanied us to the store. She looked like a lovely little Japanese girl. I deduced this from her

little eyes and thought that her mother was from the Orient. In the mountains of Chiapas, many Orientals come to sell things from China. They can easily cross the border in a van, so I was not surprised.

"When I returned, the taxi and the man were gone. I asked Ray, and he just told me that they had a lot of problems, that he was a friend of his brother, that we would look after the girl for three days, and that we would get paid for looking after her when he returned. The girl was happy with my children. She played, and she even went to school to accompany me to drop off my children. She never said anything to me; she never even cried or got sad. In fact, when I saw her, she reminded me of myself as a child, so I tried to make her feel good. It never occurred to me to ask her anything. My land was open. I had several gas tanks since we sold them. It was an extra income, since it was difficult for the gas delivery truck to come in regularly, so Ray had tanks and we earned a commission. Many people came in to buy gas, even police officers who lived nearby.

"A week went by, and the holidays arrived. The man came back for the girl, and the girl didn't even want to leave. That's when she told me she had been kidnapped. I said to her that we would go to to the police and she said no, that her kidnappers were the police. She had become fond of my children, and went to say goodbye to them. Then they took her away. I felt strange. I told Ray, but he told me that children make up stories, although I noticed my husband was strange, worried, but he didn't say anything to me. We continued working. My neighbour brought his child to me because his wife had been stung by a scorpion. Since I didn't go out, several women let me take care of their

children. They didn't pay me, but my children played with them and entertained themselves.

"A month went by, it was around 7 p.m. when the police arrived in patrol cars. They went straight through, since there were no doors. They were hooded, with very large weapons that I had never seen before. I was very scared and thought I was going to die. At that moment I got angry with my father again. If he hadn't sent me away from him, I wouldn't be living this. The police yelled at me; they hit whatever was around them to scare me more. I don't know if that was possible. I was petrified. They shouted: 'Where's the money, where are the dollars?' I screamed desperately: 'Look wherever you want. I don't have any money, I swear.' They searched and tore apart what we had worked so hard to build. About half an hour went by. I don't know how much time for sure. I don't know how I was able to stand. Maybe I could because I was trying to calm the children down and make them not be so scared. Suddenly a badly beaten man arrived, someone I had never seen in my life, and they said to him: 'Point to her, it's her.' He shouted: 'Yes, it's her, it's her.' I didn't know what it was about. No matter how hard I tried to piece together what was happening, I couldn't. It was terrible. They took my eldest daughter, who was 11 years old, and they said to me: 'Where's your husband?' I told them: 'He's working.' I didn't understand what was happening. Why didn't Ray come? What was happening?

"One of the men shouted at me: 'Go to jail, you're fucked. You'll spend the rest of your life in jail.' I heard that voice, like an echo. How is it possible if I haven't done anything wrong to go in jail?

"They took me to the detention cells. When they interrogated me, one of them asked me: 'Sing the national anthem.' My voice trembled. I forgot my Spanish, and my mother tongue came out, perhaps as a reflection of the fact that I had not wanted to leave my town. He shouted at me: 'You are Guatemalan or Colombian, right, you unhappy bitch?' I said, haltingly: 'No, I am Indigenous from Chiapas, that's why I have my accent.''Let's see, give me the phone number of someone who knows you, who knows who you are,' they told me. 'Confess. What are you waiting for? Your gang has already confessed. You are the leader, a damned kidnapper.' Where were my children? Were they left alone? What should I do? What are they talking about? They put me in front of 13 other people. I had never before seen the person who accused me in my life. My legs buckled and I knelt down and began to pray. What had I done to deserve this? What had gone through my mind that I couldn't even understand the accusations they were making against me? I tried to refute them and said: 'I am a peasant. We just ran away from the city. We want to care for our family. What sin could that be?'

"My friend Raquel came to see us and they bombarded her with questions. They asked her if we had a luxury truck, if we were rich, how we lived. She said no, that we were poor, hard-working people. The lawyer didn't believe me. She only asked me for money. We told her that we didn't have any, that we were poor. She made us sink more and more. She made fun of my accent.

"Without any further action, they issued me a formal arrest warrant. I was in the lion's jaws, jail. I wondered what I had done to deserve this. Not return to my town? Hate my father? But he

threw me out of his life first. My children, where were those promises of never separating from my children? What would become of them? Fabiola was only 11 years old, Ray 9, and Dianita only 4 years old. What would become of them? How would I look them in the eye? What explanation would I give? How would they understand it?

"Uncle Miguel, a man who shows up every time there are children in this situation, helped us get them into Ministries of Love.[19] My godmother, Doña Catalina, also helped us place them. I remember that there was a chance for them to be adopted and go live in Spain. We would be separated but they would have a better life. I thought about it and believed that it would be for the best, but my daughter Fabiola, a little girl, stood in front of me and her father, and with a character that must be in my Indigenous blood, she said to me: 'Weren't you the one who said that we would be together, that no matter what happened, we would not be separated? You are trying to do the same as your father. I will not allow it; I will take care of my brothers.' I remember that I cried. I was amazed that at her age was stronger than her father and I together. We hugged each other. I would see my children every four months, that was customary, and my husband, only on visiting days, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

"I was so angry, I could not be consoled with anything. Ray told me that his brother knew about the kidnapping, and since we were often babysitting, it was easy for them to do it, to take us the girl. But why didn't the girl say anything? Why didn't she explain to me? *I would have* taken her to the police. The many things I could have done differently crawled and rained in on

me like a waterfall. Why didn't I suspect anything? Ray was the same. It was five years before I was sentenced, which I spent in that prison working like crazy. Ray learned to embroider, to knit, to make bags, so many things. He never stopped. We raised our children. Many groups of different religions went to jail. I wanted to change my religion. I became a Protestant. I was still angry with God. I had followed his precept of helping those in need, and he paid me back with jail. How unfair was that God, who called Himself good, but had taken everything from me. How I wanted to run to the jungle, to Nuevo Huixtán, where nature rules, where my father had taken my life and my family from me.

"In the Protestant community they demanded that I be baptised again in order to remarry. I mentioned it to Ray and he got very angry. He said to me: 'Do you think my vows of love and loyalty are worthless? That my marriage to you is meaningless, for me to remarry? Do you think my love was different when I swore to love you all my life? I did it before God. Whatever his denomination, changing labels will not make it stronger or diminish it.' At that moment I was ashamed of doubting my Ray and even myself, my godmother, Mother Guille, and my other godmother, who never left us.

"I met a cellmate who gave me a job in the kitchen, a strong and wise woman. I worked with her for ten years, until she was released. She left the kitchen to another woman and me. Problems arose with her, so I left her everything without a fight. I will always bless Doña Ricarda, wherever she is. The authorities knew me as a hard worker. They gave me a sewing machine, and Mrs Felipa taught me how to use it. Many authorities gave me work sewing and doing embroidery. The embroidery skills

that I complained about so much to Sisters Consuelo and Dolina often gave me money to pay for my children's education.

"There was a time when I didn't want to go to the men's prison anymore, there was so much work, but once again, Ray, with his great good sense, brought me back to order. He said to me: 'What do you want, to find a dry nest with two withered eggs and a dead bird when you come visit next time? There will always be work, but we only have each other and that is very important, that we never lose our love nor our friendship.' That job made it possible for me to pay for my three children's schooling. Fabiola is a secretary, and she currently works at Sam's. I am the grandmother of a beautiful seven-year-old boy. My Ray is studying in Monterrey to be a public accountant. Diana is still in the Pequeños Hermanos, she is still a minor. She studies music, and she is a mariachi woman. She takes classes at the conservatory. She is very proud of our Indigenous blood. She currently gives violin lessons to the youngest children in the orphanage. She likes to be useful. she loves Mexico. She wants to take our music everywhere. She is the craziest of all and is therefore our joy.

"Even though I have become accustomed to prison life, I was able to continue supporting my family thanks to the fact that Ray is a very good man and I, in my stubbornness to achieve things, have not given up in the face of this adversity. I had been in prison for eight years when one of the men who had pointed me out came up to me and said: 'Please forgive me. I didn't have the courage to face my responsibility.' I was so angry that I wanted to slap him hard, but I didn't. I thought: How could you do this to me and my family? If that man had told the truth, we wouldn't be in this prison. The price of his cowardice was paid with the sweat and

tears of my family. Today, I only ask that God forgive him. I left in silence, without saying anything, although he told me to send my lawyer, that he would testify, whatever it took, that I should understand that the police had tortured him to confess that, and that if he hadn't, they would have killed him. Yes he did the right thing, but too late.

"I have one year and four months left before I can leave. I was never given any benefits. I don't know why. I don't know. I asked for them, but they just refused them, despite my having had impeccable conduct, without any reports. But it was my destiny. I think I still didn't know what I had come to learn.

"They moved a very fancy woman to my cell. I thought to myself: What am I going to do with that woman? I had a small grill where I cooked for my husband. Cooking in prison is a feat, because if you are lucky, and only after many years of good behaviour, you are allowed to have a pot or a frying pan. So to heat something, we steam it. We heat water and put the food in a plastic bag to warm it up, which is better than eating it cold or with congealed fat. To my surprise, that fancy woman liked to cook just like me, although I don't think she was used to discomfort. However, when I saw her sitting on the floor, cutting vegetables with a little piece of tin that we sharpened with a nail file, I was surprised, but I didn't say anything to her.

"Let me explain that cooking in prison is quite an effort. The salsa is usually ground with a mortar and pestle. We grind it in a plastic dish with a plastic bottle filled with sand to weigh it down. It is cumbersome and uncomfortable, but no one can take away our craving for salsa. I saw her cooking for two hours several times, and if someone asked us for food, she would give them what

she had cooked and saved nothing for herself. On one occasion, we made a dish from my country, stuffed squash blossoms and stuffed plantains in tomato sauce. She made the broth like my mother used to make it, as if she had belonged to my race. I tried to make it many times, but she told me: 'The only thing you're missing is cinnamon, Martha.'

"Cooking in prison is very difficult. There are no knives, no kitchen utensils or electrical appliances. I remember that we couldn't get up from exhaustion the next day, but the smell of coffee would do its job. We became friends, and one day she invited me to tell her my story, to write it in a book. Little by little I opened my heart to her. I told her that I hated my father for having sent me to study abroad. It made me so angry that she laughed sarcastically at me. I said to her: 'Why are you laughing?' It's not fair that you laugh at my pain. She got up but still laughed. She said: 'You know, where I belong, the fact that your parents send you away to study is very good. It's a sign that they love you and want the best for you. I was sent to Canada in the freezing cold to learn another language, just like you. And almost all my friends were sent abroad to study.' She said to me, 'Don't you realise that your father just wanted you to be somebody, to study? Well, if they gave you a magic wand now, and you could redo time, you would go back in time, but you wouldn't have Ray or your children, would you change it?' I answered, 'Of course not. My children and Ray are the best I have.' 'So, thank your father that he sent you away to study; otherwise, you wouldn't have them.'

"I burst into tears. How blind I had been, how ridiculous my hatred and resentment. I had not spoken to my father for 20 years. How hard I had been. I had abandoned my mother, my brothers, and

my father because of that stupid and unreasonable resentment. She prompted me and said: 'What are you waiting for? Talk to your father, ask for forgiveness, tell him that you understand now, that you are no longer so dumb, although still stubborn.' It took me several weeks to decide, but finally I did.

"I was able to speak to my mother. At first I was surprised when she told me that she loved me and that my father did too. She told me: 'Your father is still the same. He leaves very early and comes back around 8 or 9 at night. Call him at that time.' That was materially impossible. But I spoke to the psychologist Cristina from the Technical Area and explained my situation. She gave me permission to make the call outside of working hours, so that I could speak to my father. I spoke to him in Tsotsil. I wanted him to realise that I had not forgotten my roots or who I was. I only needed to forgive Ray's brother, because of whom I had lost 14 years of my life, and that unknown man who said he knew me. That has been more difficult, but I have already done it, for my children, for the great love I have for my husband, because despite everything, my family is the most wonderful thing that life has given me.

"I changed my lawyer, an honest and good man, not like those pirates who trade in the pain of others. I managed to reduce a sentence of 33 years to 14 years and 1 month, after the guy confessed."

We finished this story when Martha Elena was already free. We got permission for her to come and visit me. She ended her story by telling me: 'I am free, teaching my children to live without resentment. Leaving prison has been a great life lesson. I have learned that family is the best and that no matter the circumstances, when love is true, it will always flourish and be better.'

So, between coffees, Martha Elena Hernández Bermúdez told me her story. I learned from her the honour and dignity with which a family is kept together. I also learned to cook Chiapas food, to laugh about the eyes of the snake that guarded the marimba, to joke about the eyes of the guards who looked after us like the snake that guards the marimba. I taught her to laugh at nothing at night, until our companions silenced us. How wonderful it is to know that there are good men everywhere, who want the best for their children.

I am currently still in the Atlacholoaya women's prison in Morelos, however, I traded my exquisite coffee for a wonderful coffee from Chiapas, cultivated by the tireless hands of Martha Elena's father. I know that Martha Elena and I will forever be united by a great friendship, seasoned by the aroma of coffee.

Opening windows
Galia Tonella

Where is God? … In the church? Don't make me laugh.

God is here in prison, He is in every mouth, in every step.

There are no windows here … our windows come dressed in blue and red, through them we see the world.

Loneliness raining down everywhere, we would die on the edge of silence, there is no silence anymore.

All the words fit in Elena's mouth, she tears out pieces of the stories and teaches me to write prose and verse that resonates in the ears of those who don't know this world. I don't wallow in failure, because here my angels Marina, Aída, and Elena come dressed in blue and red.

My mother tongue
Martha Elena Bermudez

It's hard to believe that for many years I felt ashamed of speaking my native language, Tsotsil. For those who don't know, it's a language, not a dialect as many people think. I didn't even know the difference between the two.

Today, Mexico celebrates the 20 February, the international day of mother tongues, finally something that integrates us with the respectability of our traditions. Nobody knows how much a word says until you try to translate it into another language. You don't realise how much a single word evokes and brings back. It's as if it flowed into an immense waterfall, such as the famous waterfalls of my native land, Chiapas, that make a constellation of emotions. Languages destroy emotions and turn them into words.

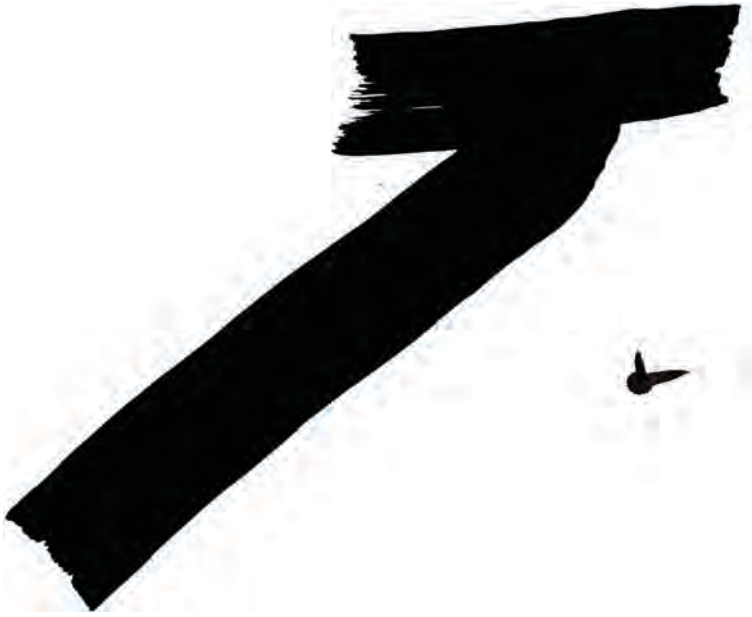
I do not want to discredit other languages, that would never be my intention. On the contrary, I only try to dignify mine. Languages will never spare anything. Words make you shudder; they make your skin crawl, because they say what we feel. How many times I could not find the word in the Spanish language that expressed my emotion. The transformation of the language in my head refused to give in. The Tsotsil flowed in my heart.

How many times have I wished that my husband understood Tsotsil, to tell him in my language how much I loved him! How many times have I lulled my children to sleep with my songs in Tsotsil, the only thing that, according to me, would give them peace at night and allow them to sleep.

Making the decision to write my story was very difficult because I couldn't find the right words to tell it. My cellmate told me: "It's normal. The same thing happens to me with English. I can talk about my profession, but I can only talk about impossible love in Spanish." So she promised to put my emotions into Spanish, and she had the patience to interpret and feel each word in Tsotsil that I told her so that the people who speak Spanish could feel what I wanted to say. So we deciphered each word until she found me in that Spanish that loved my story. I hope that someone else reads it and can see that it is a pride to speak two languages.

9
Victoria: My grandmother's curse has followed me

María Elena Basave



I have been confined in the Atlacholoaya women's prison, in Morelos, for 11 years. A terrible incident marked my life and brought me to this place. Although I am a nurse, here I discovered my love for art; painting and writing have been a door to freedom for me. I have been discovering myself. I can say that I am now a poet and writer. I have decided to put my pen at the service of another companion to write her story. I invited Victoria to share her life with me, because in the 11 years that we have lived together in this place, I have seen her locked in her silence, generally isolated from others, embroidering hour after hour. I asked myself: What stories does she keep behind her sad look? So began the conversations that gave rise to this story:

"I was born in Cordova, Veracruz, about an hour away from the town where I grew up, called San Rafael Caleria. My town is small, the streets are dirt, up and down. I lived in La Joya, where most of the people were peasants; it was an Indigenous community where Nahuatl was spoken. They grew coffee, sugar cane, mango, banana, orange, guava, pear, and *zapote*, among many other fruits. There was a river about half an hour from my house, called San Rafael. The roof of my house was made of black cardboard, and the house was all made of wooden boards. Since there weren't enough boards, many houses were made of cardboard with dirt patios and dirt floors inside. The kitchen was not inside the houses, but in a small area roofed with cardboard and open on the sides, near the main room.

"In our house we didn't have running water, so we had to carry it from a well to drink and to cook and do chores. I liked the San Rafael festivals, which were the town festivals. There was a fair with fireworksand *castillos*[20]; the town lit up; and we forgot about

our problems. The dancers danced beautifully. I have never in my life seen dancers like those in my town. Men of different ages and children participated. They would dress up as old men, with red satin pants, a white shirt, and a red satin cape; some carried a cane and others, machetes. They played the music themselves with a flute. The food was always delicious: there was mole, tamales, and rice. In my house, however, we didn't have those banquets. We were poor and didn't have the resources.

"Despite these joyful festivities, there were things in the town that I didn't like. Going to the centre of Córdova was dangerous, since the road was more like a narrow lane where only one car could fit coming or going. The driver had to be very attentive, because if he was careless, an accident could happen and they would end in the river at the bottom of the cliff. Because of these dangers, people hardly ever left the town. There were only two buses, and some people riding on bicycles. In my family we are five siblings, three women and two men. I am the oldest and I am currently 29 years old. When I was a child, I had to help my mother take care of my siblings. She worked outside the town and we would wait for her at the bus stop, on the last bus ride. I went with all my little brothers and sisters, and when she arrived, we would go home together. This is a very nice memory I have of my mother, of the happiness it gave me to see her get off the bus and know that she would be with us. She would buy us a bag of twinkies or chocolate cookies and other sweets that we really liked.

"I have few memories of my father, because he died when I was only seven years old. He was killed in my town. But my memories of him are not very happy. I remember how he hit my mother when she was pregnant. He was an alcoholic and when he was

drunk, he became very violent. My grandmother protected us from him and his violence. She often had to hide us so he wouldn't hit us and we wouldn't get scared. My father had a special hatred for me, because my skin was lighter than my brothers'. When he was drunk, he would insult me and shout that I wasn't his daughter, that I was the milkman's daughter. His favourites were two of my brothers, who looked more like him and were very dark-skinned. I felt rejected and I was afraid of him. When he came home drunk, I ran to take refuge with my grandmother and took my brothers with me.

"Maybe it was because of his violent nature that he got into trouble and met a terrible end. One night at about 2 in the morning, some men came knocking on my grandmother's door and told her that they had killed her son. They beat him to death, disfigured his face, and left him in a vegetative state. He lay dying for days and finally died. I never knew who killed him, or why. Those things were not discussed with children. I only suffered the consequences of my mother being widowed at 23, with four children to feed.

"She had to find a job to feed us, and when I was seven years old, I took care of my little brothers and sisters. I became a little housewife. I had to clean the house, cook for them, and take care of them, because my mother worked all day. I looked forward to the weekends, because she stayed with us on Sundays and we often ate meat. Eating meat was a real treat for us, because in the poverty we lived in, it was a luxury. Although now I recognise that my mother sacrificed a lot for us, back then I didn't really understand why she always left us alone. I had little time to build a relationship with her. I don't remember ever talking about myself or her asking me anything.

"It was my maternal grandmother who looked after us and she was a very tough woman. She tried to discipline us by shouting and scolding us, and we didn't let her. I remember that we would answer her by saying: 'You can't order us around or scold us because you don't support us.' We paid a high price for talking back to her because she would get very angry and hit us. The truth is that I grew up with a lot of violence in my house, first the beatings my father gave my mother, then the beatings my grandmother gave us, and we also fought a lot among ourselves and hit each other. I remember that when I was 11 years old, one of my little brothers played a joke on me that reflects a lot of the environment in which we were growing up. He painted his chest with red paint, threw himself on the floor, and put a machete in his armpit, stuck in the ground. When I saw him lying there, I thought that someone had killed him and I started to cry desperately and ask my neighbours for help. Those were our games.

"School was no better than home, because there was also a lot of violence. Teachers used to discipline students by hitting them with a ruler. Even though they were public and free schools, it was not easy to study, because you had to walk a long way to get to school. Buying school supplies and clothes for the four of us was a lot of money for my mother, so I only studied until fifth grade. When I was in third grade and my mother was already widowed, she made a very difficult decision for all of us: she went to work in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. There was little work in Veracruz, and what she earned was not enough to support the four of us. So she decided to emigrate and leave us in the care of my maternal grandmother. It was a very hard year, because my grandmother hit us a lot.



When she came to visit us again, we begged her not to leave, telling her that we did not want to live with our grandmother and continue suffering her beatings. The only option she found was to take us to our other grandmother, my father's mother, and return to work in the north. Things with my paternal grandmother improved, but we still missed our mother badly.

When I turned 14, I asked her to take me with her to the north. My paternal grandmother did not want me to go. She feared for my safety and was afraid that my mother would not know how to take care of me. Against her will, I went with my mother and discovered a totally different world. I had never left my community, and I did not know anything beyond the farmlands of my town. Arriving in Ciudad Juárez was quite an experience. My mother looked for a house where I could work as a maid, and for the first time I had a boss.

"What I had learned taking care of my little brothers helped me get this job. I thought a lot about my little brothers and I wanted to save all the money I earned to send to them so they would be okay. But things didn't go the way I planned. My mother found a boyfriend

and I got very jealous, because she had never had another partner since my father was killed. Her relationship distanced us for a while. I stopped going out with her on Sundays, and a distance was created between us. She would look for me, but I didn't want to see her. It was at that time that I met Gustavo, a boy from the north who I started dating. Unlike my reaction to her finding a partner, my mother took it very well and accepted it. This brought us closer again and the four of us started going out together.

"But things got complicated again when my mother got pregnant and her boyfriend left her. She couldn't continue working when she was heavily pregnant, and we decided to return to Veracruz. We had no other option but to return to my maternal grandmother's house, whom I didn't like, because my paternal grandmother wouldn't take us in after my mother got pregnant again. So we returned to the screams and insults from my grandmother. I was now a teenager, and I couldn't stand her constant scolding and screaming at me.

"One day I couldn't take it anymore and decided to leave home. My mother hadn't given birth to my new little brother yet and things were very difficult financially. My grandmother didn't forgive me for wanting to go and make a life for myself and not take on the care of the whole family. I still remember her words when I told her I was leaving home. Her voice still echoes in my head. She cursed me: 'You're going to be cursed. You'll never make a good life with anyone. You'll never have a stable family.' Her curse has been with me all these years.

"I had no one to turn to and I learned to survive on the streets. I met a group of clowns who put on street shows and asked

for money at the traffic lights. With them I went to the port of Veracruz and saw the sea for the first time. They taught me how to survive on the streets."

As Victoria tells me this, her eyes fill with tears and she says: "To this day I don't know my little sister, because my mother gave birth when I left home, and I never returned. It was when I lived on the street that I met Gerardo, and I started a relationship with him. He took me to his house, and we lived together. Shortly after, I became pregnant. I gave birth to a boy. My life changed completely. Gerardo was no longer the same with me. There was a lot of violence between us. We spent our time fighting, and he was very possessive and jealous, to the point that he would hit me. My in-laws saw everything and didn't get involved at all. On one occasion he hit me badly. My face became swollen from so much hitting. I was tired of the abuse and decided to leave him, so I took my son and left home. I rented a room in the centre of Veracruz. At this time, I met Don Felix, an older man who took pity on me and helped me selflessly. He was a businessman, and he took us with him to sell popsicles around the city. I saw him as a father because he was an older man.

"Time went by and one day we were at a stand downtown selling popsicles, and Gerardo saw us and walked over to where Don Felix and I were. I thought he was going to talk to me, but he didn't. He followed us back without us noticing and found the house where I lived. He introduced himself to Don Felix very kindly and gained his trust. He put on a false face and convinced him to work things out with him and me. We talked, we reached several agreements, and he stayed to live with us.

Over time, he started behaving the same as before. The physical and psychological abuse began. I didn't tell Don Felix anything because I was ashamed. The abuse was becoming more frequent. One day I got angry and kicked him out of the house, but he wouldn't leave. So I decided to leave with my child. I was scared. I had to go somewhere else because I knew that if I stayed close by, he would find me again. I didn't have a penny in my pocket, and with my child in my arms, I didn't know where to go. While I was wandering around the city, I met Gerardo's sister. He had told her his version of things about our relationship. He told her that I wanted to take my son away from him. I tried to explain to her that I was leaving because of the violence I suffered, not to take away his son. She tried to convince me to give her the child, telling me that he would be better off with her, that my son would not lack anything. But I was afraid, since she didn't inspire confidence in me, and I thought that they wanted to take my son away from me forever.

"With nowhere else to go, I went back to my mother and told her what was happening. I never mentioned to her that I didn't plan to stay with them, because I was sure that Gerardo would find me and take the child away from me, since his sister kept insisting that I give him to her. So after a few days of rest, I went to Coscomatepec, in the same state of Veracruz. I arrived in this town without knowing anyone and I didn't have any money. I didn't have anywhere to spend the night and I thought about going to the hospital.

"While I was there, a man approached me and asked what I was doing there, saying that it was already very late and it was very

cold for my son. I confided in him and told him what was happening to me. He told me: 'I know a young man who is also looking for a place to stay. He can help you. Think about your child; it is very cold for him.' The man put me in touch with the young man and asked him if he could help me. He was a truck driver named Jorge Arturo. He was looking for a nice place and thought that the money could be of better use to me and my son and that if I wanted, he would help me. He was passing through. He had gone to deliver a load of tar. He told me not to be suspicious, to do it for my son, to stay in the cabin of the trailer.

"I accepted, because I had no other alternative, and I stayed there with my son. He stayed in the front room. The next day he bought milk and diapers for my son. Every trip he made, my son and I accompanied him. That's how my relationship with him began. He had his last trip here to Cuernavaca. He rented a house, and I became his wife, because we lived like husband and wife. With the economic problems, he began to despair because there was no more money for milk and diapers. I think it weighed on him, because he had enough for his addiction, but not enough to cover expenses. The relationship began to become very stressful; it bothered him when my son cried. By then my son was a year and a half old. He began to feel jealous of my son. He mistreated him, and when I defended him, he directed his violence towards me. One night, on 28 November 2003, he told me to go buy some tacos. Since it was winter and it was very cold, I was going to take my son, but he told me not to take the child, to go alone.

"I entrusted my child to him and left. It only took me 20 minutes. When I returned, my child was crying. The man shouted at me and told me not to grab him, but my child wouldn't stop crying.

He was crying in a lot of pain. I ignored the man and hugged my baby. I will never forget the sad look on my child's face, as if to say, 'Please help me.' I grabbed him and he started vomiting, both from his mouth and nose. I was crying desperately. I didn't know what to do, how to help my child, and I told him, 'Let's take him to the doctor.' He didn't want to, but because of my insistence, we got a taxi and took him to the hospital.

"When the doctor examined my son, he said that nothing could be done because my son had died. The doctor said that we couldn't leave. They called the Public Prosecutor's Office and accused us of murder, and that's how we ended up here. The man was only there for two years and I was given a very long sentence. I've been in prison for 11 years. Later, I found out from the autopsy that they performed on my son that he had died from a rupture of the viscera, as a result of the blows that the man had given him."

It was hard to finish Victoria's story; it was too painful for her to remember her son's death. We ended up talking on the basketball court, looking for some privacy. The heat of the sun burned my skin. At the same time, her story burned me inside. It stirred up so many emotions, I could feel her pain.

I couldn't help but try to console her. I invited her to let out all the pain that was oppressing her chest. Talking about it and sharing it with me could alleviate her suffering a little. I spoke to her, trying to console her: 'Get rid of all that pain that you don't need, that only hurts you. The past is behind you, don't judge yourself.' While I tried to console her, I couldn't help but think about how important communication and family support are. What would have become of Victoria if she had had the support of her family?

Many times, because we do not understand our children, we send them out to the clutches of fate without even thinking that their lives could be destroyed. We look for love wrongly. We think that a man can save us, without recognising that only we can save ourselves.

Victoria's story is the story of a woman who learned the cruel way that she only has herself to create her happiness and that the only love that counts is the one she has for herself. Of course, it's beautiful to be loved, but we have to learn to love ourselves in order to receive what the world offers us. Victoria's story is the story of many of us.

Privileged

María Elena Basave

I am privileged to be in this room where the writing class is being held at this moment, because I can see life from a different perspective, no matter how uncertain the destiny may seem. I see light where there I thought all was darkness; I see roses where I thought all was a desert; I see that fertile land that produces a variety of fruits. I see coal turn into diamonds. I am happy, because I have the privilege of interweaving friendly and emotional ties. It is worth exalting the red-hot poetry that is written here and which moves our hearts and souls. I am a being full of light, unique and special. I am who I want to be. I am a rose of resplendent colours, covered in dew. Around me there are a variety of cheerful and colourful flowers, some a little withered, but with a very firm stem.

Our own books

María Elena Basave

A few years ago, the writers formed a group with some of my mates, publishing their writings in a little book called *Gaceta*, which caught my attention. I thought that this was for brave people, since I didn't have the courage to write and even less to publish. But although something attracted me, I didn't pay it any attention. On one occasion, I wanted to write something very special for my children, using metaphors and I didn't know how. I visited a classmate who attended the writers' circle so she could give me an idea. She very kindly taught me, and I was surprised by the ease with which she did it. I asked: 'How do I use metaphors and write like you?' She told me that thanks to Elena de Hoyos and Aída Hernández, she had learned. I regretted not having attended the workshop before and I longed for them to return one day to continue teaching the writing class. When I found out that they were back, I didn't think twice; it was my chance. With a lot of insecurity and fear, I arrived at the writing workshop ready to learn. I had a lot inside me and I didn't know how to express it. I was afraid of being criticised, but I realised that it doesn't matter, that such worries only exist in one's mind. Writing in the collective has helped me spread my wings to the wind, express what I feel, cleanse my emotions. I express the sufferings that have involuntarily marked my life, and by overcoming obstacles little by little, I overcome adversity. I feel privileged to belong to the group of wise women for whom writing and reading are essential to reflect: to express, learn, and share with

each one of my colleagues and my writing teachers. I want to express my gratitude to Marina Ruiz, Aída Hernández, and Elena de Hoyos. That little seed they planted is beginning to germinate. I am learning to live with my colleagues, to share experiences. I am learning a lot from them. I am slowly healing my wounds. I am learning to know myself better, to have confidence. I realise that when you have the will, everything is possible, because we all have the capacity. In addition, editing our own books means that we are heard by society through our texts, and that others do not judge us without knowing us.

10
María: I am innocent

Galia Tonella



I am innocent
I am not just saying this; I am not shouting it
because I am deprived of my freedom
and condemned to many years in prison.
I am not shouting it because I feel defeated
by of the adversity in prison:
for over 15 years I have never asked for
consideration or mercy
beyond that owed to my human condition
since I did not commit any crime or offence
against those who unjustly accused me.

My cry comes from the pages of my file,
from every line of my trial,
from every paragraph of my conviction.
There lies the profound reason for my innocence
and my integrity,
contradicting the apostolate of the judge
who, due to his own vices or negligence,
was unable to see the truth, to assert it, to
vindicate the law,
to restore the majesty of Justice…
What a shame that it was in the hands
of a parson who should never have been a judge!

María

My encounter with María was surrounded by preconceptions that I had brought with me from my upbringing. This encounter undoubtedly led me to forget many things that I had learned in my life. María allowed me to discover that the reality of things is not found in appearances, but resides in the inner essence.

That short woman with a fragile and seductive appearance would teach me the strength that the spirit of love gives; she would change my shabby concepts of motherhood. Through conversations I penetrated into the invisible world of my friend, giving order to my own values, playing a role perhaps—why not say it—beyond all aesthetics, rejuvenating my ideas. Her tears washed away many stupid pains that I had. I only hope that someone else has the same opportunity to do so.

Confronting the abstract ideas I had about suffering through this story gave my life a conceptual dimension of what many women experience in this Mexico that is unknown to me and to almost all middle-class women. I found a higher world, where negative or sinful narratives fade away, because love, friendship, and loyalty demonstrate the goodness of the spirit.

Thank you, María, for everything you taught me, because you are a woman who incarnated and taught herself to master her spirit, to say enough! Because seeing your smile after 17 years of resignation in prison reminds me that faith is not lost, that one must continue fighting, that your nickname Godmother is well earned, because even without a magic wand, you shelter new women and teach them to live in captivity.

After two years of knowing her, María finally allowed herself to open her heart to me and tell me her story:

"I was born in 1977 in Chacalapa, in the mountains along the cost of the Pacific, north of Acapulco, in the State of Guerrero, a community that belongs to the Municipality of Coyuca de Benítez, but is several hours deep in the mountains, with wonderful rivers, warm tropical jungle green, a small paradise for a visitor. For

me, it was the beginning of the hell that I would have to live. I come from a marriage of love, one of those that have photos and memories of the wedding, where the family approves that you get married. My mother was very much in love with my father, according to what they told me. Since she never told me the true story out of respect for my stepfather, the most important thing was that I was conceived with love. This is strange, since in that town they marry you to whoever asks for you, not to whom you wish to marry. This is a custom that a woman must accept since it is her duty to always obey. To date, I do not know if that custom will change one day.

"I'll start telling you from as far back as I can remember. My life was like that of any six-year-old girl. I played with my grandfather. I sat on his lap to listen to made-up stories, but the ones I enjoyed the most, were the legends of his ancestors. There were scary stories about the *nahuales*,[21] which fascinated me. The stories always had a happy ending, and good triumphed. I was rewarded with sweets. My uncles played with me, and I did not feel the absence of my father. They grew mangoes, seasonal plums, and planted beans and corn, which were sold in the surrounding towns. My mother did housework. She always had time to help me with my homework. Mealtime was wonderful. We joked, talked about my school. It seemed like God had drawn a permanent smile on my face. My mother was a beautiful woman, very young, and I will say that motherhood and the tranquillity that her family offered her made her more beautiful. We were not rich, but we considered ourselves that way, because we went to school, we had shoes and a uniform, and that cost money!

"Our house was made of adobe. The roof was made of black and red cardboard sheets. My grandfather said that the red ones were better, because the bugs were more noticeable. The beds were separated only by sheets or patches of cloth. The dining room was outside, and only if it rained did we bring the table in. Of course, the latrine and the kitchen were also outside. We cooked with firewood. The floor was made of dirt, a low adobe wall with partitions held the griddle, and there was a small roof made of cardboard sheets so that the firewood would not get wet (it had to be dry). We had a radio. My grandfather liked to listen to music. Nothing was lacking. You could say that we were as happy as the people in my grandfather's stories.

"I was in first grade, and when I arrived home one day, it seemed like a normal day. However, how wrong I was. That cruel day would destroy my world.

"My mother was not in the kitchen as usual. She had two boxes already tied together, and she was standing at the entrance of the house with a man I had never seen before. She said to me: 'Come here, *guacha*,[22] come here, I'm going to introduce you to Fausto. From now on he will be your stepfather. Say goodbye to your grandfather and your uncles. We're leaving.'

"I didn't understand what was happening. I knew the man wasn't my father. He wasn't the one I venerated in my memory, and even less the one in the photos where my mother in her white dress looked more like a queen than a bride, and even less the one I had dreamed of until that moment. I thought my father had died. Today I don't know if it's true. I will never really know who my father was, but the look in that man's eyes scared me a

lot. It was worse than the *nahuales* in my grandfather's stories. What could I do? I ran to my grandfather asking him to help me. I didn't want to go. He hugged me, crying, and said: 'You're going to be okay, you'll see.' I clung to his waist as my only bridge of salvation. My uncles yelled at my mother, saying to her horrible things that I didn't understand, but I knew were terrible. They told her that they had already forgiven her once, that there would be no second time, that if she left, she should forget about them. My grandfather lost his calm and said to her: 'You are a slut, you won't change. Why are you doing this? Do you want to kill me with shame?' But my mother didn't seem to be fazed by these claims, she only said to me: 'Hurry up, María, we're leaving. I'm your mother and you're coming with me.' She practically tore me from my grandfather's waist. I didn't know how terrible this event would be in my life, but it would mark me forever. My world was over, and the ordeal of a life full of lies and slander would begin. These would haunt me for the rest of my life.

"I left that house crying, screaming. That's when I felt my mother's first blow, at the scream of that man who demanded that I shut up at all costs. They put me like a beast into the pickup truck. I felt my mother push me. My crying would eventually overcome me and I fell asleep. Several hours passed, almost five, before we reached our destination. It was dark. We arrived at a shack. It had no electricity, and there was no furniture, only a rickety table and some planks that served as chairs. We slept on mats. There I would learn about promiscuity. I was overcome from the exhaustion of crying so much.

"The next morning, I would see more clearly my welcome to hell: Ocotillo, Guerrero. This place, much poorer than Chacalapa,

would be witness to what I would have to live through. That place could not be called a house, much less a home. The worst was yet to come. There was nothing to eat there one day, nor another day either. That man would arrive drowned in drink. The beatings of my mother and me were not long in coming, along with the insults filled with bad words. We didn't even talk about school. I could no longer attend regularly. We were chased away from everywhere. There were times when we slept with a neighbour out of charity and other times on a large rock, with our few belongings. I learned what hunger and cold were; I understood what fear was. I dreamed of going to that heaven where God supposedly was, and so the days, months, and years passed. My hell was growing.

"That man was yelling at my mother and telling her: 'Stop crying, you wretch. You are such and such.' (Out of respect for my mother, I do not want to put in this text what he said). 'You should be grateful that I welcomed you with your brat. I am the laughing stock of this town, and your little daughter doesn't even call me father, the little beggar.' I was indignant and without knowing where, I found the courage to yell at him: 'I will never do it. My father is not like you. I hate you. You will never hear it from my lips.' He got furious, grabbed me by the shoulders and yelled: 'Not even your mother knows who your father is, you stupid brat. I don't know if you are the daughter of a hobbled imbecile or a murderer. Your mother's husband killed his own brother because he thought you were his daughter. Your mother is a fucking bitch -, with no respect.'

"With tears in my eyes, I looked for my mother's gaze to find out if it was true, shouting at her, almost begging her to tell me it

was a lie. My mother went after him, without my being able to find out the truth. I ran to hide under a wooden cot, one of those used in the mountains. That cot was my only shield. I don't know how much I cried, but it was hours. I was grateful that the alcohol had finally defeated that man and I fell asleep. I left my shelter. I would have liked to escape, but where to go? I didn't even know where my uncles or my grandfather lived. I wanted explanations; I wanted the truth. My mother would have to tell me the truth, whatever it was.

"I waited for my stepfather to leave. I wanted to talk to my mother. There was so much anger in me that I don't know how I could face her. I saw this beautiful woman who had turned into a bruised woman, her face deformed by the blows, her eyes swollen from crying, her withered face that had aged in 5 years almost 20, the respect I felt for my mother had ended. My love was turning into pity and I felt very angry, perhaps helpless.

"So, determined to confront this woman, I said to her: 'Why didn't you leave me with my grandfather? What did you bring me here for?' She said to me: 'A good mother doesn't leave her children as if they were dogs.' She stared at me and hit me so hard that I think she took out all her frustration on me. She was a woman who followed the customs and habits she had grown up with: ideas like, the man should be in charge; the woman can't say anything; the woman is worthless if she doesn't have a man by her side. How could I blame her for her ignorance? Even though she tried to change, it was useless. She couldn't get rid of all those taboos she had grown up with, and my whole life would be tattooed with them. I would never get rid of her ignorance and it would be difficult for me to understand

my own as well. That ignorance would haunt me for the rest of my life.

"The next day I woke up covered in blood coming from between my legs. I tried to reason and thought that my mother hadn't hit me there. Could it be that something inside me was broken and the blood was coming from there? How horrible! I was so scared, I was frozen with fear. I didn't know what to do, who to turn to. I overcame my fear and went to see my mother. She looked at me with such sadness and said: 'From today on, your suffering will begin.'

"I was barely 11 years old and I had already been through five years of suffering, hunger, and fear. As if what I was already experiencing wasn't enough, I wondered what does she consider suffering? In an authoritarian tone she told me: 'Today you started being a woman. You can't let any man or boy touch you, not even on your hand, because you'll get a huge lump in your belly.'

"I was afraid of everything. If a boy sat on a bench, I wouldn't sit down. I thought it was enough to make that lump grow in my belly. Everything scared me. That fear was my ally. I learned to overcome it. I didn't know what life had in store for me, but fear would have to stop accompanying me. Despite everything, like any girl, I dreamed of marrying a good, hard-working man who would loved me as much as I would love him. I had the image of my father, although my stepfather always said things that I couldn't understand, and of course, my mother refused to explain them to me.

"I went to the poor rural school we had. I was very shy. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I felt that everyone noticed my suffering,

my frustration, how I lived. I became very introverted. My dreams were limited to that good man I would marry. I would have children and give them a beautiful doll, or a fire truck if they were a boy. They would have several sweets to eat at recess, unlike me, who had such a precarious life. I didn't even have enough for a whole sweet.

"One night while I was sleeping, which was my most beloved escape from the reality I was living, I felt hands caressing me, I was so scared that I woke up screaming. My mother came to see me and said: 'What's wrong with you, what's wrong with you? Are you crazy?' I told her what I had felt. She got angry like I have rarely seen her angry, and she said to me: 'You're lying. There's no one here.' I managed to see the shadow of my stepfather, who didn't say anything. His silence was very strange. I just thought that he wanted that ball to grow in my belly, since he hated me. It scared me a lot. I didn't feel my mother's blows. It was her rage and helplessness that hit me. Now that I understand it, I think she was also terrified by the idea of my stepfather abusing me. I already knew from my friends that the lump in the belly was a child, and I understood that if I didn't get out of there, I would end up sharing a man with my mother, like many in the town.

"As I was walking home from school, a man who had stopped to look at me on several occasions decided to talk to me: 'Come here, get in the car. I'll marry you. You won't want for anything, you won't be hungry anymore, you'll always have something to eat. I'll take care of you. You won't be babysitting children who aren't yours anymore. Your little brothers and sisters aren't your children. Go on, get in.'

"Andrés was a businessman, he had pickup trucks that transported people as passengers and he charged a good amount of money. He had several drivers and several pickup trucks. He had made money, he was respected in the town, and everyone knew him because he had money. In fact, it was an honour that he noticed me. I ignored him, but I knew that this was the only way out of my house, although I think he could read in me that he was my only way out of hell. He was 39 years old, and I was only 12. I was a few months away from turning 13, but I knew that I didn't want to suffer anymore. I needed a different life. Of course, I didn't know that promises are not kept, but I would learn that later.

"I looked at him, I smiled at him, wanting to tell him that I accepted, but I didn't get in the car. I knew that women have only one thing of value, and if you use it, you don't get it back. That was why they insulted and beat my mother so much. I didn't want to live with that. When I got home, that man was already talking to my mother, offering to marry me. My mother didn't ask my opinion; she just said it was for the best. I also read in her eyes the fear that her husband would abuse me. It was a conversation without words, perhaps the most honest I would have with her. My mother wouldn't admit it. That's impossible. Talking about it would be sinful, but ignorance justified enduring it in silence.

"A long time later I would find out that my mother had been the victim of the most terrible slander. My paternal grandmother, Andrea, was a manipulative woman. No woman was good enough for her son. She never loved my mother; she made her life impossible. She wanted another girl for her son, a girl she would never find because of her complexes. She did not waste

any opportunity she had to humiliate my mother. My uncle Carlos, my father's brother, felt sorry for her. He saw the abuse my mother was a victim of and tried to console her like a good man. That's what I was told. But my paternal grandmother's perversity knew no bounds. It was she who began to say that my mother was having an affair with my uncle, so by poisoning my father, she made him suspect my mother.

"What my grandmother never imagined was that my father, in a fit of jealousy, would kill his own brother, and then end up taking care of my grandmother. He didn't go to jail. Crime is often overlooked there, and killing to save your honour is allowed. The family of a victim gets even by killing someone in the family of the aggressor, but if it all happens in the same family, the crime stops there. He didn't go to jail, but his prison was called Andrea, which is my grandmother's name, and I believe without fear of being wrong that this was his worst prison. He never remarried; she held him to her. He has always been by her side. How dearly my father paid for my grandmother's intrigues.

"My mother had lived and continued to live with the burden of being a woman, of her word not having any worth, of not being believed and of being chased away with your daughter in your arms because of suspicion. He must have loved her very much, because he didn't kill her, or me either. Now it was my turn to obey my mother, so I agreed to marry Andrés, although I still dreamed of dolls, of continuing to study, of being a doctor, but for a woman that was impossible. You are hardly allowed to finish primary school.

"A woman has to stay at home; she has no right to an opinion. It is as if we were incomplete beings. My mother gave me away.

I told her: 'Mom, you know, I don't want him.' She replied: 'Don't worry, love comes with the years and living together.' So after 15 days, I was already a married woman. On my wedding night I didn't even know what was waiting for me. That rough but at the same time delicate man, touching my body, fondling it, I thought it was normal. It hurt me a lot. I didn't understand why it was nice to get married if I found it painful and annoying. We could say that it was a legal rape, even though there was no violence. He was a good man. There was a piece of paper involved, which allowed him to do with me what he wanted. My feelings didn't count. I felt violated. I cried, and he laughed at my crying and said: 'In time you will like it and you will be the one to ask for it,' and he continued laughing. I felt helpless. I felt rage. I cried furiously, thinking how dearly I would pay not to be hungry and not to hear my mother's arguments. My body suffered; it learned something new: disgust and repugnance. Those hands touched me. I didn't understand why he enjoyed touching me so much, when it bothered me.

"I got pregnant. The famous ball in my belly started to grow, even though I already knew it was a baby. I just desperately wanted it to be a boy who could set rules, not follow them. As a woman, I felt like an incomplete being. Nobody took me into account; nobody valued me. To tell the truth, it wasn't just me. It was the situation of all the women in the town. Nothing counted. Everything was wrong. What an unfair life. What will we do if our vote doesn't count? How can we be better or assert our rights if when we try to speak, we are beaten? Weak sex, they tell us, but it's quite the opposite. I would like to see a man who could endure so many beatings.

"That baby was born, and I named him Daniel, the father of the church. One day, I read a story about a man who defeated the lions, and that is what the name means. My son would have to face much worse than lions. I hope he can be better, he is a boy. Instead of a toy, I had a doll made of flesh that cried and ate. Everything was fine, I was getting used to Andrés. He treated me well. I didn't complain, until they killed him. Much later I found out that they hadn't assaulted and killed him as I thought. It was his addiction to married women that led to his death. He paid the price, as is customary in the town. Honour is cleansed with blood. His family, like birds of prey, took everything I had that was his. They threw me out on the street without consideration for me or my son.

"How could a 14-year-old girl who still liked sweets and wanted to play, defend herself? I lost everything; I was on the street. Now I was worse off than before. I wasn't the only one who would go hungry. Now there was also this child who was not to blame for anything. I saw him and knew I had to protect him. I wouldn't let him suffer. But the question was, how would I do it? I went to see my mother, and she told me: 'You definitely can't stay here. You're already a woman and you would create a lot of problems with your child.' My mother already had seven children, but she couldn't leave this man, who was the father of her children. I think she was happy, and why not say it, she loved him, so she told me: 'No one will respect you if you don't have a man by your side. They will only make fun of you, and my husband will have to fight for you, so I will send you to your uncles' house. They will have you.' She gave me some coins and crossed me. She gave me the address and told me how to take the bus to the town of

Chacalapa where I would return. So with fond memories of my uncles, and full of hope, I set off.

"I arrived happy to see my uncles. They were already married. My uncle Juan asked his wife to keep me with them. I remember the woman's answer: 'Not a chance. Do you know how many men visit you and what will happen to her here? You will fight for her honour and I will be left a widow with children in order to support her. And what if she turns out like her mother? What will we do? No, don't even think about it. She is a widow; she is no longer worth anything. Let the family of the brat's father help her, and if they didn't do it, maybe it is because they doubt that the kid belongs to the deceased. No, don't even dream about it.'" She kept screaming. I couldn't understand why she doubted that my Daniel belonged to the deceased. I had never had another man. Why did she insult me like that?

My other uncle, Carmen, told me that I could stay there. He has always loved me very much and has been very good to me, but he warned me that I could stay only if I agreed to marry quickly, that he would bring several men to see me and I would have to accept. My grandfather's family was respected; they were men of work and above all, of their word, which is the only thing that counts among men in our town of Chacalapa.

"The parade of men began. I didn't want anyone. What I really wanted was to study, go to school, be someone, support my son, and live in peace. But this only unleashed my uncle's anger: 'What do you mean, you don't like anyone? Look, whoever comes today you have to like, and the truth is I don't care if you don't like him. He will do you the favour of accepting you and your child and

that's why you should be happy. No one wants a used woman anymore. Understand? You're worthless now, so none of your childishness. You're already a woman and, by the way, devalued. Is that clear to you?'

"I didn't say anything to him with words, but my gaze was questioning. Why was I no longer worthy? Why would they do me a favour, if I was still pretty and young? Without my being able to object, they agreed, like someone who sells a cow in three days. The wedding was another rape with papers. This time I already knew who put that ball in my belly. They married me to José. He was again a man with money, a cattleman, and he raised cows and sheep.

"His family had always owned the village butcher shop. He was tall, a mature man, around 40, wholesome, good-looking, determined. Six months went by and everything seemed fine. I asked God not to give me any more children. It was already very difficult. Why were we looking for more problems in life? I saw my son in his crib and I asked myself, what would life have in store for him? How would I be able to protect him? When I didn't know what to do, I looked at the sky, but there were no answers.

"What an irony. My mother used to say that the answer is in heaven, but how would I see it? My husband told me that he would go to Mexico City to buy a shotgun and return soon. That is normal in the village. It is a village that still lives off small game, and I don't know why, but men don't feel like men without a gun. Remember, that it is the only way they have to carry out revenge or cleanse their honour. Many days passed. I was not bothered by his absence. On the contrary, I was happy that he

did not rape me at night, but it had been a long time since he had left, and I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the glances of my father-in-law that undressed me. My mother-in-law did not notice this, or rather she did not want to notice. At night I hugged my son, like a scared girl who hugs her doll, only in this story, I had to protect this doll. I was terrified by the idea of that this man might come in at night to abuse me. How would I protect my son?

"I didn't sleep because I was watching the bedroom door. I spent several months like that. Then one afternoon I asked my father-in-law what was wrong with my husband. Is he's not coming back? Wasn't he worried about his son? Where was he? I bombarded him with questions. He came up to me with that disgusting look he used to give me, touched my cheek with his hand, and said: 'Do you really want to know where he is? Well, if you let me caress you like my son does, I'll tell you. I've looked at you without you seeing me, and I'll do the same to you. You must be feeling the lack of a man, isn't that right?' At the same time he touched my neck. I've never felt so disgusted or repulsed. That was a sin, and I knew it and I had to run away. I would be damned and I had to take care of my child.

"I ran screaming to my mother-in-law. I told her what her husband had said to me, and I was surprised that she believed me: 'Oh, daughter, they are all pigs. I haven't told you where my son is so you wouldn't worry, but it's better that you know. He's in jail, accused of bringing in firearms and marijuana, so I'm going to take you to see him.' She took me to Cuernavaca. I couldn't enter the prison alone, since I was a minor, carrying another minor with me. I entered the prison, and I saw him. I didn't know

how to behave, what to say to him. I just looked at him and burst into tears.

"He tenderly told me: 'Don't worry, I know how to solve this.' I never asked him if he was guilty, perhaps out of fear of the answer, but he was a good and hard-working man. Truth be told, he treated me well. When he told me: 'Go with my mother and wait for me,' I could see on my mother-in-law's face that she didn't like my husband's answer. I would cause her more problems and represented a threat; she would have to be constantly looking after her husband. We went to the prison about five more times, once a month. She was anxious to find someone to leave me with in Cuernavaca. She tried to get me to go with someone to Morelos. She was anxious to get rid of me. I represented a latent rival and my mother-in-law would not allow that.

"My mother-in-law was a woman of strong character. She was in charge (which is rare), and I not only respected her but I also came to admire her. She was strong, she was not beaten, she knew how to assert herself, and she was very decisive. Like many strong women, she was respected in the village, but at the same time she was intensely criticised. Of course, this did not exempt her from her husband cheating on her and coming home drunk, but at least her husband did not insult her and did not hit her like my mother's did. She was tough but honest. In those months she sold some cattle, waited for the harvest, and saved up money. In reality, it was a lot, 4,000 pesos. She told me: 'This is all I am going to give you. You will manage because I will not give you any more. I hope that God enlightens you and you find the solution to your life. A cousin of your husband will be the one to receive you.' So she gave me her blessing. She said to me without

any malice: 'Don't worry, everything will be fine.' I went to the bus stop and bought the ticket that would take me to my destination.

"While I waited for the bus to leave, I trembled, thinking: 'It's a different city.' I saw myself as a 14-year-old girl, with a baby in my arms, going into a world where I didn't know what the future would hold for me. I saw my son. I loved him, and I felt that he was the only thing that was mine. He was sleeping and trusted me. He was the only one who felt safe with me, since I wasn't. My tears were rolling down my face, when I heard a voice that said to me: 'Don't cry, girl. I can help you. Sell me your child. I'll give you five thousand pesos.' That was a lot of money, and if you add in my mother-in-law's money, I could live well. I had never seen so much money. She took it out of her purse and repeated to me: 'You'll start alone and it will be much easier. Don't you see? They'll accept you, and you won't be devalued and a hindrance.'

"I looked at her, knowing that everything she was telling me was true. It was such a big responsibility. I didn't know what to do with myself, much less with my child. At that moment, my son cried; he was hungry. That made me understand that this child not only trusted me, but needed me. How could I betray him? I would be like all those who had thrown me away to avoid problems. If God exists, he would have to help me, I thought. I turned to look at that woman and said: 'How do you think I would do that? He is my son. I wouldn't sell him to you or anyone else.' I ran onto the bus, because at that moment they were shouting the destination of where I was going, Cuernavaca, Morelos. I thought about my mother who took me with her when I would have liked to stay with my grandfather.

"What if one day my son asks me why I didn't give him to that woman? Maybe he would have a better life than by my side. I hugged Daniel, swearing to myself that I would do everything in my power to ensure he wouldn't suffer like I did. I remembered how my mother told me: 'Children go with their mothers. We are not bitches to abandon them.' She was right. I understood why she didn't leave me with my grandfather. So I was on my way to live with people I had never seen before.

"I arrived at cousin Nélida's house. It was a small house, one of those mass-produced by the government, with all the amenities. It had two rooms: one was for Nélida and her husband, and the other had two sets of bunk beds, where six of us slept: two of her children and two of her brothers. They let me have the bottom bunk, where I slept with my son. Cousin Nélida's life was no different from what I had seen before. It seemed like this was always the case, the abuse from her husband, beatings and insults. I lived with this cousin for several months, visiting my husband every week, until I found out that he had another woman and I stopped visiting him.

"I left my husband's cousin's house and rented a small room. It had no furniture, no bed. There was only my child's crib. I had to give him priority, so I bought everything he needed. I would sleep on the floor, but next to my child. I found work in a house, as a maid. They allowed me to take my child with me for the first few days, but not longer. They paid me 250 pesos a week, which guaranteed my rent and that my son necessities, but I had no one to take care of him. Fortunately, the room was close to where my work was, and I would go out to see him. He stayed alone for three weeks, and then finally I found someone to take

care of him. Three years went by, and at last I was of age with a seven-year-old son. My job was exhausting. I worked for a household of six people. I washed, ironed, and cooked. I came in at 8 in the morning and left at 8 or 9 at night.

"I realised that a man was always waiting for me. He was respectful, and he didn't flirt with me like other guys: 'Let me go with you.' I accepted, because in truth I kept dreaming about that good man who would be my husband. His name was Catalino, and he would walk me home, but he was respectful. I knew he liked me. I told him I was married, that my husband was in jail, and he said he would file for divorce and marry me.

"He told me he was an engineer. He even took me to a construction site at UAEM,[23] and everyone addressed him with great respect. He was also a plastic salesman. He told me he would build me a house, that I would lack for nothing and, above all, what I most wanted to hear, that he would be faithful to me. Because even though we were poor, my son lacked for nothing. Where I worked the people were good, and with what they gave me and what I was able to buy, we were getting by. I knew how to be fine with very little. I came from so much poverty that what little we had seemed like a lot to me, but just like that 11-year-old girl, I continued dreaming of love and a good man.

"Catalino was very persistent, even though I told him I didn't love him. He kept insisting until I agreed to live with him. I didn't love him, and he knew it. He always tried to please me, and he succeeded. He did the divorce paperwork, which was tiring and tedious. I met him in 1995, and I married him in 1998. He gave

me everything. I was already 18 years old, and I was tired of suffering, without knowing that the worst was yet to come. He kept me at home, and I lacked for nothing. He was absent for several days and he covered over his absence with beautiful and expensive gifts for me and my son. Danielito respected him and if he wanted, Catalino would play with him with the toys he had bought him. In a short time, I had become accustomed to living comfortably. He only asked me not to leave the house, to always be there, and he was happy. He was sick with jealousy. He overprotected me, and he didn't let me talk to anyone. He kept me like in a prison.

"The relationship became very difficult because of his jealousy. His care was excessive. He kept me away from all my friends. I could only go out with him. I always believed that he loved me and that his jealousy made him be like that with me. In some way, I have to admit that, not knowing that this was wrong, I was flattered that he loved me so much. From then on, things got worse; my life became a hell with constant scenes of violence due to jealousy,and I ended up leaving him, but I was pregnant with my second child.

"On 1 February 1997, my son Fernando was born, but after a month, Catalino learned that I had recovered and threatened that if I didn't come back to him, he would take my son from me and I would never see him again. I was in his hands, tied to him by my son. That child wasn't to blame for my not having made the right decision. I would try to live in peace. I still believed that Catalino loved me very much and that all those mistakes were because of the love he had for me, so I went back to him; about 40 days passed.

"One day he came to me very nervous, and he said: 'I have a lot of problems, and I don't want them to affect you. I want you to go away for a while with your family.' I asked him: 'What problems?' and he replied: 'Nothing that a woman can solve or understand. Do what I tell you and that's it.' I was recovering from giving birth and from a car accident we'd recently had, so I decided to listen to him, and at the end of May I went to stay with my mother so she could meet her other grandson. I stayed there all of June.

"Shortly before I was due to return, while chasing fireflies with Danielito and my other siblings, I stepped on glass and cut a tendon in my right foot; I had to stay, I was practically disabled. Several months went by and Catalino said nothing about me returning. He sent me money, and when I spoke to him, he told me that he was building a house for me and that when it was ready, he would call me. I was worried because it seemed that he did not want me to return, but it did not bother me much, because the truth is that I was not in love with him. In the world in which I lived, being with a man was almost a necessity, to protect oneself from violence and sexual violation. I naively thought that Catalino would protect me from the violence of other men, without understanding that I was entering another nightmare.

"After four months of living with my mother, Catalino came to see me in August. It was my birthday and he gave me a car, a white Spirit. He told me that we should get married so that we could be a family as God intended, that he loved me. I decided to do it, and we got married in Taxco, Guerrero. He was afraid that I would change my mind once again, but this time my children gave me the courage and I got married. He came back, he sent

me money, and he came to see me periodically, but he didn't stay for long.

"I decided to spend the holidays with my family. I couldn't get in touch with him the whole month of December. I was surprised that he didn't call me to congratulate me for Christmas and New Year. I decided to go back to Morelos and find out what was going on, because I really needed Daniel's papers urgently. He was going to school and I had to take his documents to the school so that his studies would be valid. It was the 4th of January. I thought I would share the traditional rosca de reyes with him, and I would go back to take presents to the children and be with them on the 6th of January for the visit of the three wise kings. When I got home, the house was upside down, and everything had been thrown around. I tried to get in touch with Catalino again, but did not succeed.

"I thought that seeing the we were away, burglars had broken in to rob it. I got scared and I went to a friend's house. I kept trying to contact Catalino, but he still didn't answer. I didn't want Daniel to lose the school year because of those documents. I would go to the house again for the papers. On the 6th of January, I went to the house. I wanted to clean up a bit. I would have to go back to the house anyway, whether I was afraid or not, to pick up the papers. I called Catalino again. Finally, he answered: 'Where are you?' I said, 'In the house. It seems that someone broke in.' He yelled at me very loudly: 'What are you doing there? I told you not to come back. I have problems. What part don't you understand? Get out of there, and come to Jojutla. From there you will go to Guerrero. When I resolve the problems I have, you can come back.' I left the house. I could see a truck with tinted windows.

I felt that the people inside it were watching me, but I didn't see anyone. I didn't give it any importance.

"I arrived in Jojutla to meet Catalino. There was a crossroads at the entrance to the town. We were talking about our children, when some men arrived and stopped us. I felt a blanket being placed over my head and heard a loud voice that said: 'This is as far as Oaxaco goes.' What was going on? I was so scared. Catalino told them, 'She's my wife, and she has nothing to do with it. Let her go. I'll give you 100,000. All I want is that you let her go.' The pleas weren't enough. They put us in the van. They may have followed me or perhaps were watching the house. I don't know. The blindfold didn't let me see well, but I realised it was a police anti-kidnapping group.

"I couldn't even dare to ask who I had married. What would become of my children? I heard that since Catalino insisted on my being releaseed, a man spoke on the phone and said: 'Cata says he will give you 100,000 to release his old lady. She doesn't know anything and you know it.' I imagine the man asked for more money because they told him: 'Is that all your old lady is worth to you? Put in more money.' I was tied hand and foot and blindfolded. They threw me down and the blindfold came loose from my eyes. I heard them say: 'Be careful, the boss is coming.' He approached Catalino and said: 'So you're being too clever … Squeeze his balls and let him see what we're going to do to his old lady.'

"That's how the ordeal began. They would wet me and leave me tied to a chair. They would beat me. Another would give me cocaine or another drug that numbed my mouth and tongue. I didn't know why they didn't rape me. They would put a gun to my head, play Russian roulette, cock the gun, and laugh: 'You're

lucky, this isn't it.' I died I don't know how many times. They laughed sarcastically. I wasn't angry anymore, I was terrified. It was one torture after another. One tried to rape me, another shouted: 'Don't do it. The woman belongs to Oaxaco. Be respectful.' Several days went by. I didn't lose track of time. I knew time was passing to the next day. I knew there were more people in the place because I heard the moans.

"Later I found out that I was being held in a safe house run by the anti-kidnapping police. I heard a man say: 'Kill her. She knows too much, she'll ruin everything for us.' I felt him coming towards me, and I thought my time had come. I wasn't afraid for myself but for my children. Knowing that they were going to kill me was a very good feeling of relief. I couldn't stand the torture anymore. I heard the shot near my head, but it wasn't me. I felt a warm, sticky liquid on my legs. I guess it was blood. A man had died next to me. I didn't know who it was, but I would never forget his blood on my legs.



"They kept torturing my husband. I recognised his voice from afar. They told him he had to sign his statement. At that moment

I knew they were the police. Aren't they supposed to be the good guys? He finally agreed to sign the statement they forced on him, after hours of torture. They took me to the State Attorney General's Office, where they locked me up with four men who threatened to rape me if I didn't sign my statement. I didn't know anything about what was written in the statement. They told me, 'Oaxaco has already declared, so you have to confess your guilt or you die.' I signed it in fear, not even knowing what I was doing. At that moment I was only thinking about saving my life. I had already seen what they were capable of doing. I had already felt a man's blood on my legs.

"That night they took me to a room behind a glass partition so that I could be identified with three other people who were supposed to be with us. I had never seen them before. It seemed they found them by magic. A judicial officer told me: 'You're screwed, mamacita. You're guilty of kidnapping.' I said out loud: 'Sir, what is kidnapping?' They laughed at me, 'Well, my queen, you'll find out. You'll have years to learn about it in prison.' What had I done? I just wanted a better life. Why prison?

"I have been here for 16 years now. Prison is the great market of pleasure and sin. For the first time I saw marijuana, cocaine, pills, and other drugs. Of course, in addition to alcohol and prostitution, this is the mansion of crime, and it welcomes you with open arms, so that you can improve your sins or simply become a martyr.

"When I went to prison, I didn't know what marijuana was. I just thought it was a very bad smelling or very low quality tobacco. The smoke made me sleep like a baby. The problem was that I woke up hungover, very thirsty. I changed cells, but it was

worse. My next neighbour burned a white rock in a cut up soda can and she tried to inhale as much as she could, it was as if she were squeezing the drug. That night I didn't sleep at all. So my options were either sleep with the marijuana or stay awake with the cocaine smoke.

"I had no communication with Catalino. Had he been killed? I didn't know anything. The same policemen who had been his friends, with whom I had seen him do business in the past, were prosecuting him. Would he betray them? I would never know the truth. Later I learned that he was also in jail. I would see him later in the men's prison.

"My children were only 11 months and 7 years old. They were in a village with their grandmother, and I didn't want them to grow up there. I was determined that my son would not grow up with those ideas about women. I wanted him to learn to respect them, not to be just another macho villager. I had been in prison for several days, and I still didn't know what I was accused of. I made arrangements to see Catalino in the men's prison, with the intention of finding out what trouble I had gotten myself into. When I got to see him, he had other visitors, and I found out that he had a wife and children, that he had married me under a false name. Looking him in the eyes I asked him: 'What's going on? Why am I locked up? I'm not a kidnapper. You know I'm innocent. What will become of my children? Do I deserve what you're dragging me through? I may be trusting, guilty of wanting a better life, but never of depriving someone of their freedom.' I looked at him deeply and said, 'Don't ever come looking for me again.' I left bewildered, not knowing how I would deal with this bad trick that fate had in store for me.

"Here I have been paying for 16 years for a crime that I did not commit and that I still do not fully understand. Fortunately for me, my best friend took care of my children and registered the youngest with her last name so that she could put him into a government nursery, because she is a public employee. I am hurt by the distance that has been created with my children. The youngest does not recognise me as a mother and the oldest is always distant.

"I can't say that everything is bad. I have learned many things in prison. I have taken several workshops. I did my primary and secondary school. I have been trying to finish high school for six years, but due to administrative problems it has been impossible. The most common phrase is: 'I am not like the others.' We are all different. There are things that you don't imagine you would be capable of doing. Like living with schizophrenics, sick people, and infected people. This sounds much worse than it really is. I don't know if I am naive, but here you learn to live with it as something normal. You even come to appreciate these people and understand that what they live through is terrifying, if for some reason they don't receive their medication.

"Sometimes I am asked what has kept me from giving up. Without a doubt, it is knowing that someone is waiting for me. A life that depended on chance or destiny would definitely not be worth living. Making decisions does not matter, whether they were good or bad. They were mine. The only meaning of life is to accept the responsibility of living it, and as someone whose name I don't remember says: He who has a why, always finds a how.

"My son Fernando went to the United States. I sent him because a group of drug traffickers tried to recruit him to sell drugs when he was 14. Thanks to life and because he learned the value of the

truth, he told me about it. So I had to send him away and endure the distance between us once again. This destiny that pursues me, also wanted to pursue him, but I will not allow it, because I would rather be far away from him than for him to become someone like his father. We have to learn from our mistakes and be brave to face what we must live. Life in prison is harder because there is no work, because time goes by slowly and we do not advance. I hope this truth reaches someone who believes that a better world is possible and understands what happens in prison with more respect, so that things improve. I continue to trust that one day justice will be done for me."

That's how I finished writing María's story, thankful that typewriters with pages no longer exists, because her tears and mine often did not let us continue. I was fortunate to meet her son and his girlfriend. It makes me so happy to see that, despite everything, María was able to make sure that her sons were not sexist but rather men who believe in a more equal society. Thanks to the love of their mother, they learned to respect other women. Finally, with her sons, a chain of abuse and injustice ends.

From prison she has shown that children can and should be raised in a very different way. I only pray that there are more women like María, so that we can put an end to those traditions that lead us to silent suffering, to prison, or to death.

I'm going far away
Rosa Salazar

Birdsong
makes me feel free
I am like those birds
We listen to their song
I want to sing like them
Thank God
I am free from everything
when I close my eyes
I go far away from here

My pretty girl
Rosa Salazar

Rosa was a pretty girl. She liked to go out with her mother because she told her she was pretty. She was chubby, with braids. Her mother liked to braid her hair. And her grandmother always called her 'my pretty girl'; her father liked her to be chubby. When she was 14 she became thin; she was a size 32. I want to be like I was before, but…

The shade of guamúchil

Galia Tonella

To Laura

Sweet perfume of oblivion,
empty sky implores silent prayers,
never heard trampled desires
hurt your mistreated body

Happiness?
Those who yearn for it are insane—you tell me
Laura, life succumbs to sadness
I will tear away your shame
I understand that the blood of your hand
will always be *under the shade of the guamúchil*

11
Eva: I don't want any more scars

Amatista Lee



We ate under the shade of a ficus tree that had survived cruelty. A silent witness to countless injustices. You, sitting on its roots, with your gaze lost in the longing for a pleasant past, began to tell me between sobs, why you were in this concrete cage. Submissive, absent in yourself. Eva, without wanting it, your apathy terrified me. I fleetingly imagined what could have happened to create that attitude. I breathed deeply and invited you to be free through writing. Here I share your story:

"I was born in Iguala, Guerrero, making my parents happy. I was the only girl after four boys. Well, before that, my mother had a daughter with another man, who was raised by my grandparents. My parents were so happy that they named me after my grandmother. She said not to do it because that name would bring me much suffering. Soon, the euphoria of my birth passed. I began to live in total neglect. From the time I turned age six, my brother began to rape me. He broke my dream of being a virgin until marriage.

"There was no water, sewage, electricity, or schools nearby on the ranch when I was born. When I was very young, we went to live in a community in the Sierra de Guerrero, where I grew up and lived until I got married. I had nine brothers, and I got along better with the next one before me, who was five years older than me. He always defended me from everyone. We played with figurines, ropes, *balero,* sometimes marbles, and sometimes dolls. We took turns playing boys' games and then girls' games.

"We all went to school, but no one finished primary school, because they were hired to cut sugar cane. Only I finished secondary school, because my brothers helped with the expenses.

In my town, the day of San Juan and the day of San Francisco de Asís were celebrated in a big way, with carnivals and fairs, among other things. At first I was spoiled by my father, but as I grew up, my mother began to get along with me, and she still supports me a lot today. My parents seemed to be a good couple, but when they were alone, they were very aggressive. They met at a dance. Later, they decided to get married. My parents never separated. They said that out of respect for the sacred oath before the church, they should stay together until the grave.

"On my ranch there is no courtship. Men simply steal the girls and since they are no longer virgins, the parents do not allow them to return home. They have even killed each other because of this, because they want the same women. Over there, our grandparents say, when people fought, they would be found beaten up in the fields. Some thought this was due to their opponents, but others knew it was the evil one who played with them for fighting.

"There were no roads, only tracks, and our houses were made of *chinami*.[24] We travelled on donkeys or horses; no one had a car. We didn't wear shoes until we were four years old, or sometimes even later. Our parents bought us plastic sandals so they would last a little longer, and in the hot season we went barefoot. Our parents fed us *atole* made of dough without milk, and beans and tortillas. We rarely ate eggs or chicken. We never ate meat. My mother made us clothes from sheets or pieces she took from her petticoats.

"When I was 14, I met a boy. We got along very well. He said he was very fond of me. I had had a girl friend, and we were always

together and we talked about everything. One day, my boyfriend told me that she was getting close to him. I didn't believe that about my friend, much less that she would betray me. but after a while, they got together. Then I met another guy. He begged me to go with him and finally we got together. My parents didn't demand that he marry me because they already knew my brother had abused me. A woman who wasn't a virgin couldn't demand marriage. She was a devalued woman. That's how Omar accepted me. He was good to me and never hit me. He treated me well.



"I was very jealous of him. One day he went to a party and someone told me that he was dancing, so I immediately ran to the place where he was and slapped him, pulling his hair: 'How are you going to leave me with a belly stuck in the house?' I shouted at him. He didn't want to fight me. The next day he took me back to my parents, and he told them that he didn't want to live with me anymore. Months later, I gave birth to a baby girl. My parents took

her away from me, saying: 'You like to go around and be crazy. The girl is going to suffer with you. You are not a good woman. You don't want to settle down and live as God commands.'

"Soon it became known that I was alone again and the boy who had left me for my friend came to me asking for forgiveness. He said he was sorry because she turned out to be a slut. I asked him why wait until now? He only replied that he was waiting for me to become free. I went with him. At his house he introduced me to his seven children, from the oldest to the youngest. I was very surprised, but he begged me so much that I told him I would think about it."

Eva continued to tell me her story through tears, as if the memories were falling on her, making her smaller and smaller. I preferred to pause so as not to cry with her. She began to laugh. Her tears ran down her face full of wrinkles and scars made by suffering. She wiped them away and continued with her story:

"Look, I was already 16 when my daughter's father showed up begging me to come back. I remembered what he had said and I complained to him: 'Didn't you say I'm not the woman for you? You told my parents that you couldn't live with me one more day, and now you want me back?' But he promised me he wouldn't go dancing anymore, that he would spend more time with me. Besides, no one would take me in with a daughter anymore, and if they did, it would just be to make fun of my girl. I thought about it and agreed to go with him. But my parents didn't agree. They beat me up, shouting that I was crazy and that they were never going to give my girl back to me.

"When Omar tried to claim his daughter, my father threatened him and he had to flee to work in the United States. I searched for

him a lot. I asked everyone about him. I begged his mother to tell me where he was, but she didn't want to tell me. She didn't want any more problems for her son. She gave me her blessing, for my daughter and me. I didn't look for him anymore.

"I understood that I wasn't born to be happy, because God wanted it that way.""No, no," I interrupt Eva. "God doesn't want us to suffer. It's the wrong people and the very life we lead. That's why we have these kinds of situations. God made us in his image and likeness, Eva, and it won't always be like this. It's up to us how we want to live". "You think like that," Eva tells me, "because you haven't had to live like me. Look, I continued to obey my parents in everything until the man with the seven children appeared again, to ask me if I had thought about it. I put a lot of conditions to go with him, and he accepted. My parents were against my getting together with him because he already had a lot of children. They said that I was only going to be a servant. But I was stubborn and went with him.

"Time went by, and I got pregnant. My second child was a boy, and then the man abandoned me. And when he wanted to come back, I resisted. I gave birth on my own, and the midwife said I the baby came too soon. Then my baby was taken to the doctor, because the midwife said the child was born with his intestines outside. The doctor said there was negligence. They operated on him, but it didn't go well and he died. I couldn't go to his funeral because I was sick after giving birth. Then the man convinced me to come back and I got pregnant again. Then his first wife came to claim him back and we separated. Later, she gave him back to me and then I continued having more children.

"I realised that he was not the person I thought he was. He didn't want me to scold his children, but he would beat them up tremendously, especially when he came home drunk. Poor kids, they didn't know whether to feel happy when they were with him or with me, because I only threatened to relay their complaints to their father. But when their father came home, he would beat them for no reason. I couldn't get involved in defending them, because he would also give me my share with whatever he had at hand. It didn't matter if it was a machete or a bricklayer's tool.

"Many times I arrived at the hospital with huge cuts on my arms and head. You can see the scars. I am all scarred. That man was evil, and if I took too long to get pregnant, he would say that only mules don't give birth. So to please him, I gave birth. So far, I have seven children, plus the seven he already had. We were in great need, because feeding 14 children was very difficult. I worked as a garbage collector, and I barely made enough to buy beans.

"One day I noticed that his oldest daughter was being sexually abused by him. I asked her, 'What's wrong?' She seemed very strange; she barely spoke and she was not happy anymore. She told me that her father was raping her, and she did not want him to touch her anymore. Little by little she became thinner. She vomited almost everything and had a lot of diarrhea. I did not know what to do, how to stop this situation, I was very afraid of her father and I feared for my own children. Then one afternoon, when I returned from the countryside, I found the girl lying down. I asked what had happened to her; my husband and my other daughter stared at me. I ran inside the house to get some alcohol to bring her back, but she began to have fits. Afterwards she became very still.

"My husband said, 'I don't want you to go around being a gossip. The girl fell because she was already very weak from the typhus she had.' I wanted to go and tell them to bury her with the help of relatives, but her father said, 'Why? They're just going to make fun of us. We'd better do it ourselves.' He started digging in the yard. Then he threw the girl's body in it. I was like nailed to the ground. I thought I would wake up from that nightmare. But I didn't.

"A few months later, the girl who was next in age ran away from home. I went looking for her. When I found her, she told me that her father wanted to rape her like her older sister, but she didn't let him. She also told me that she was very scared because she saw what happened to her sister. She said that her father had wanted to rape her again, and she struggled with him until she escaped and got away. As her sister had refused him, her father hit her on the head with a shovel, making her fall. That was the moment when I arrived. Although she was living with a very old man, she preferred to stay like that rather than suffer like her sister, until death.

"I left my daughter there, but not before advising her to file a complaint. She had seen everything and could testify. She did that, but along with him, they took me in for omission. I am still in jail, but here I am happy because no one hits me, and I eat three times a day. I suffer a lot for my children, who are still in the DIF,[25] and I have not been able to see them. I want to leave here without fear. I do not want any more scars on my body."

Eva's external wounds have healed, but what about her emotional wounds? When I think of the man who marked her body, I am overcome with rage. These kinds of people are worse than animals.

Honor every word
Amatista Lee

I saw my life as a blank slate when I arrived at this fortress. A machine of pain, a cradle of sick minds. Even though they always smile and say that everything is fine. I began filling this blank slate with disappointments, hiding who I am. I used different masks. I escaped from my reality, often saying that everything was perfect. However, my actions showed something different. Little by little I learned to know myself, not yet completely. But I have come out of my shell. Now I seek to honour every word that comes out of my mouth.

Prisons without walls
Amatista Lee

When I saw the pictures and heard the different stories, I couldn't help but feel sorry for the different victims. I had the idea that it could only be called violence if you were beaten or, even worse, if you were a victim of rape. I never imagined that it could happen psychologically, or maybe I didn't notice it could. I wish this would not continue to spread among us. We keep the hope of a possible change. I am grateful for the writing workshop. Through it I discovered that I am valuable, that my torturer will make me suffer as long as I allow it.

Today I understand that prison is not always an enclosure within walls, but that there is also a mental prison, when we allow others to enslave us to their psychological illnesses. Now I know that this is where attitudes of this kind are generated. I hope to continue growing with the most suitable help of our defenders of the cause.

12
Rosalba: The protection of the wrong man

Sol Nocturno



I met Rosalba at the Atlacholoaya women's prison, a cheerful, talkative woman, but with a strong character that surfaced when someone wanted to invade her space or impose things on her. She has the inner strength of someone who is used to fighting to survive. I would almost dare to say that her character reflects her story as a survivor. Taking advantage of her love of conversation, I approached her and invited her to share her story. I was curious to know where that warrior spirit came from, which had sometimes led her to fight with some snitch or to defend with blows and bites some weaker *chompi* who was being abused by someone. That's how we began the dialogue from which this story emerged:

Rosalba is a young woman, 38 years old, and has already been through two marriages, both with violent men, the kind who are used to taking what they want by force and "disciplining" their wives with blows. She has three children from her first marriage: Polet, 10 years old, Ray, 6, and Lalo, 5. She tells me how after her first violent relationship, she separated from the father of her children and married Aristeo, a 41-year-old mechanic who offered her a good life and accepted her children, promising them financial support and affection.

Like many women, Rosalba dreamed of having a nice house and a united family, and at first it seemed like she was achieving it. She lived in a town in Guerrero, in a suburban development, one of those new ones that are starting to be built in all the towns in Mexico and that give rural areas a modernising urban touch.

There she had a nice house. At first things were going very well, until Aristeo started drinking and becoming violent. Shortly after, Rosalba realised that he was also taking drugs and becoming a

beast. He would verbally and physically attack her for anything. Months went by and Rosalba discovered that she had made the wrong choice again and that she was still trapped by violence. He began to lock her up. He would pick up the children from school and do the shopping so that Rosalba would have no reason to leave the house.

Once again, jealousy was chasing her. Aristeo was blinded by his fears; jealousy was taking over his body. She lived in terror. She would not look him in the eyes. Several times she thought of running away, of taking her children far away, but fear paralyzed her. She had many opportunities to flee, but she was afraid that he would find them and kill all four of them. Now she knew that he was capable of murder. She did not fear so much for her life, but for the lives of her three children. After all, they were not his children, and she knew that once drugged and drunk, he would not refrain from hurting them.

She lived locked up within the four walls of her house and also in her silence. She never asked anyone for help. When she decided to marry Aristeo, her family had distanced themselves from her, because they always opposed that union. They sensed that he would not be the good and loving man that Rosalba wanted to see in him. Things got worse when Aristeo began to force her to drink with him. He did not want to drink alone, and he hit her if she did not agree to be in his company.

She developed strategies to avoid becoming an alcoholic. When he served her beer or rum and cola, she would throw them down the drain in the patio when he wasn't paying attention. He got drunk every day and was very violent with Rosalba and everyone around him. She became a slave. She could only go

out with him, and he always watched her. They went everywhere together. Rosalba felt like she couldn't even breathe.

Things reached a point where Rosalba's life was in danger. One night Aristeo came home drunk, with the music turned up loud, and found her sleeping in the living room. She had imagined that he would come home drunk and she didn't want to have to put up with his body and his drunken smell in the bed, so she decided to lie down on the couch. This made him furious and he started yelling at her: "What are you doing here, you----bitch? You should be in our bed." She couldn't take it any longer and replied: "I'm sorry, but I'm fed up with always sleeping with a drunk. The smell of your body makes me dizzy, you disgust me."

Before finishing her sentence, she felt Aristeo's blow to her face. Mad with rage, he could not tolerate his wife raising her voice and rejecting him. He threw her to the ground with such force that she hit her hip and was immobilised. All her weight fell on the right side of her body, causing a fracture. She began to cry in pain. He ordered her to go to the bedroom. "Don't you realise that I can't move? Something broke inside me," she replied. He then took her by the arms and dragged her through the house until he placed her on the bed. He did not care about her cries of pain. She screamed for something to calm the pain: "Do you want a pill? I'm going to give you something that will take away your pain forever," he shouted at her, and took about 50 pills he found in the medicine cabinet and tried to open her mouth and force her to swallow. She clenched her teeth and begged for her life.

He told her angrily: "I prefer you dead than for you to belong to someone else. Then no one will look at you. You will only be

mine. My friends told me that they saw you with someone else. Now you will know what happens to those who cheat on me."

In the midst of her pain, she explained to him that it was all a lie, but he did not listen. Blinded by jealousy, he stuffed the pills into her mouth, hitting her so she would swallow them. When he saw that she was spitting out the pills, he grabbed her by the neck, squeezing and squeezing until Rosalba lost her breath and became weaker. With the little strength she had left, she took the car keys and stuck them in Aristeo's side. It was a fight for her life. He climbed onto her belly to hit her in the face while she tried to protect herself with her hands. When he pulled her, Aristeo noticed a haemorrhage, caused by one of the blows to her stomach. She was bathed in the blood that flowed between her legs. It was not until he saw her almost dying that he stopped, scared by what he had done. He took the car keys and fled, leaving Rosalba dying.

She prayed all night, asking God to allow her to live to take care of her children. Apparently, God heard her, because she managed to survive the night. She woke up covered in blood. The bleeding had decreased, but the blood continued to flow. That's where her daughter Polet found her in the morning, and she cried scared beside the bed: "He hit you again, right? We heard the screams. We were afraid he would kill you."

She tried to calm her down and asked her to walk to school with her little brothers, because she couldn't take them. She kissed them goodbye, pretending that she was fine, but the pain in her hip and belly barely let her speak. The children left, but their faces showed fear and sadness. They knew that their mother was

in danger, but they didn't know how to protect her. The other times that Aristeo had hit her, she had been able to cover up the traces of violence and pretend in front of her children. This time it was impossible. She was immobilised, and the blood was a testimony to the fight to the death that she had experienced the night before. Prostrate in her own bed, she spent the whole morning crying in pain and unable to go to the bathroom, thinking about the dark future that awaited her and her children if she didn't manage to escape from Aristeo.

When the children returned from school, she was still paralyzed. She told her eldest daughter to feed her little brothers and take care of them, promising that she would be better. Then, something almost miraculous happened that afternoon. After months of not hearing from her family, two of her nephews, her sister's sons, Abel and Adrian, arrived at the house. It was no longer possible to deny what had happened; there were too many signs of violence. The two young men knew immediately: "Auntie, that guy hit you, didn't he? Since when have you been like this?"

She didn't answer. She just asked them for help to go to the bathroom. She had been holding it in for hours because she couldn't get out of bed. Her pyjamas were stained with blood and she couldn't sit down. It was a humiliating and painful experience, her nephews trying to sit her on the toilet and she couldn't move. She ended up covered in her own urine. Tears ran down her face. She never imagined that her family would one day find her like this.

Her children changed her with the help of her nephews. They went to get some diapers, thinking that she did not want to

suffer another accident like that. While they helped her, they commented on Aristeo's evilness. How had he been able to hit her and leave her alone, almost dying? She remained silent. It was not possible to give more excuses. She felt ashamed, guilty for having brought her children to this hell. "You have to report Aristeo, aunt. This cannot continue like this." She answered: "But I am afraid that he will do something to my children and to you too."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Aristeo. He had sobered up and was asking for forgiveness. He told them that he didn't think she was so hurt, that he didn't want to hurt her, that he was drunk, the same excuses he always used. He had called an ambulance and would take her to the hospital.

Her nephews were worried. They would have liked to stay and accompany her in the ambulance, but they had a moving truck and were on their way to Mexico when they passed by her house. When they realised that Aristeo's car was not there, they decided to stop and say hello. They didn't pass by often because they wanted to avoid the bad temper of their aunt's husband. They never imagined that they would arrive in time to save her life. Now they had to continue on their way and trust that Aristeo would keep his word and take her to the doctor.

They waited for the ambulance to arrive. They had difficulty lifting her onto the stretcher because her hip was fractured. They feared that Aristeo would harm the children, so the nephews suggested to their mother that they take them with her. Rosalba accepted. She had no one to lean on, and in these conditions she could not look after her children. She arrived at the hospital, screaming in pain and with no company other than her own attacker.

The X-rays revealed the severity of the injury and the violence of the blows. She needed surgery. There was no equipment to keep her immobilised and try to get the bones to heal without surgery. When they started talking about an operation, she realised that they were in a private hospital. She didn't have the money to cover the costs, but she didn't have the brains to think about it either. All she wanted was for the pain to stop. They gave her a very strong drug that kept her unconscious for a long time. When she regained consciousness, Aristeo was gone. She had been in that private hospital for five days. They had operated on her and the bills were astronomical.

He did not return, and she did not know what to do. Her nephews had left the children with Aristeo when they returned from their trip, but he did not look after them. He dropped them off at the hospital and there they were with her, sleeping on the floor and eating from the charity of the doctors and nurses who shared with them the hospital food.

She learned the version of the story that Aristeo had given to the doctors: She had fallen in the bathroom and had hit herself. The doctors decided to believe him despite the bruises on her face.

She preferred to remain silent and not deny his version. She did not want more violence. She was only thinking about how to protect her children. The complicit silence was shared by the medical staff. One more woman who had fallen and had multiple bruises on her body, something common in hospitals in this area.

When it was time to discharge her, the hospital demanded payment for the expenses. She didn't have a penny, and Aristeo was nowhere to be found. She had to hand over her car, a green 2005

Verna, as collateral. She left with the promise to return to pay the 35,000 pesos in a few days.

She had to call her nephews because she didn't have anyone else, and ask them to come to the house for the car papers to leave as collateral. They picked her up at the hospital and gave her the papers. Rosalba was still in a delicate state and had difficulty moving.

Coming home was hell. For four months, she was confined to her bed with braces across her hips and moved slowly to avoid pain and further injury. Her eldest daughter had to feed her by hand, and poor Polet, who was only ten years old, was left in charge of the house, preparing her mother baby food, which she consumed with a straw because she also had a broken neck. Polet took the children to school and helped them with their homework. She bought instant soups on credit, which became their main food.

The little girl was also in charge of bathing her mother with a sponge and a wet towel. Her three children turned her over so Polet could wash her hair. There she was, unable to protect them and dependent on her little children. She couldn't help crying when she saw the affection with which they cared for her. One afternoon she decided to cut off her hair completely to make the task easier for her children. She took the scissors and cut it off little by little, despite the difficulty of having a body that didn't respond and feeling the deep pain that pierced her soul. With each tuft of hair that fell from her head, her dreams and hopes fell away, until she was completely bald.

She spent most of her time sedated by painkillers. She couldn't walk, and the doctors weren't very optimistic about that.

Everything depended on the rehabilitation therapy working and her finding the energy and courage to overcome the pain and teach her body to walk again. It was four long months. At first she stayed bedridden, watching Polet take her place and try to take care of her little brothers as best as possible. One day she decided that she had to keep going for the children and began to do the exercises with great dedication. At first she used a walker, then she was able to use crutches and take her first steps, and little by little she learned to master them. She was walking again and getting her life back on track.



The lesson had been very hard. She had to make the decision to leave Aristeo. Returning home to her parents and asking for their forgiveness was the only option she had. She had no one else. She had to admit in front of them that they were right, that Aristeo was a bad man and that she should never have married him. Little by little she was getting her life back; she found a job,

and took refuge in the love of her children. But Aristeo continued to harass her. He watched her and hid on corners to get in her way when she walked alone. He would not give up so easily.

In her desperation, Rosalba made the decision to ask for help from a very powerful man, the chief of the region, owner of almost half the town. Don Fernando was the law that ruled the region. After thinking about it a lot, she decided that there was no point in filing a complaint for violence with the Public Prosecutor's Office, because they would do nothing and Aristeo would only get angrier and hit her again. She needed to seek help from someone who really had the power to stop him.

It was thus that she found the courage to ask for an audience with Don Fernando. She came before him, terrified by the violence she had experienced, and like a frightened little animal, she explained her situation to him. He did not hesitate for a moment, offering her the permanent protection of his men, who would watch over her house day and night so that Aristeo would not approach her.

Aristeo saw the men watching his house, but under the influence of drugs and alcohol, he worked up the courage to evade the guards and jump over the fence of Rosalba's house one night when she and her children were with her mother. The next morning, she found the door open, the floor and furniture covered in blood. There was so much blood that it looked like a massacre had taken place, but there was no body. Frightened, she called Don Fernando on the phone, who immediately came, accompanied by the local police. It was not clear what had happened there, but given the amount of blood spread throughout the

house, it is most likely that the injured person was dead or dying at that point. Don Fernando asked Rosalba to leave the house and not return for a while, offering her a house in a residential area with a lot of security. Terrified, she accepted the offer and moved in the same day.

She couldn't be naive. A man like Don Fernando didn't offer help without asking for something in return. She decided to clarify things up front: "Why are you doing all this for us?" He answered: "Since I met you, you caught my attention and I can't deny that I like you. I'm a man of few words and I don't like lies. I have ten women in this town alone and with six of them I have children. I tell each one what I want her for: you, to show off, you, to be the mother of my children, you, to be my lover." "And what do you want from me?" "I like you to be the mother of my children. That's why I've already ordered a bank account to be opened for you, and tomorrow you're going with a driver I trust to collect your credit cards. So don't worry about the financial aspect. You won't lack for anything with me. Feel safe. Being my wife, no one will disrespect you or bother you."

The decision had been made. It was not a consultation. He never asked Rosalba if she agreed. Nobody said no to Don Fernando. He took what he wanted.

I listened to her narration, sensing the future that awaited Rosalba with the village chief. I could not believe that she herself went to look for the new chains that would enslave her. She described to me the mixed emotions she felt when she went to live with Don Fernando. She did not want to investigate what had happened in her house, nor what Aristeo's fate

had been. She preferred not to know. She was not the only one in Don Fernando's life, but she would have economic security, and her children would lack for nothing. She was living a new stage in her life, surrounded by luxuries; her children went to the best schools in the region; and Don Fernando treated her with respect. He never laid a hand on her. He gave her and her children everything they needed. She never asked about his business or his other women.

She now had a luxurious prison. She rarely went out and was always accompanied by bodyguards and her driver. On one of those outings, she found Aristeo, unrecognisable, drunk, worn out, a shadow of the man she had loved. He was screaming for forgiveness, asking for a second chance. The bodyguards took him away and quickly put her in the van. She looked at him sadly. She couldn't believe that she had once been that man's wife.

A few days later, Aristeo's sisters arrived at her house and hugged her after years of not seeing her. It was an unexpected visit. They had come to look for her because their brother had been missing for several days and now they had been called to identify a body with Aristeo's characteristics. Rosalba couldn't believe it. She had only seen him a few days earlier. His sisters had come to look for her because she was still his wife and she had to identify him.

Her sisters-in-law were anguished. Their faces reflected the grief that overwhelmed them, and they prayed to God that it was not their brother. Rosalba took the phone and asked Don Fernando for permission to go to the identification of the body, and he ordered that the driver take her and leave the children with the nanny. She took her bag and went to that horrible place called

SEMEFO.[26] She entered the morgue and found a totally naked body on a steel gurney. She shuddered; she had never seen a lifeless body. Her heartbeat accelerated, adrenaline flooded her entire body, and she was sweating cold. Every step she took to get closer to the corpse was a step of hope. She hoped with all her heart that it was not Aristeo.

At that moment she forgot all the blows she had received and the tears she had shed. She wanted the man she loved so much not to be that cold corpse, who waited inertly for her gaze. Yet it was him, her husband, whom she had once loved and with whom she dreamed of having a family. She cried and cried. She couldn't stop. She didn't want to believe it was him. She approached the corpse and took his hand. She needed to tell him that she had forgiven him: "Despite all the pain you caused me, I never wished you dead. You have to know that I had forgiven you and that I prayed for you, asking God to keep you away from vices."

Aristeo's violence had left her life forever, but now she was in a new prison. Don Fernando was spacing out his visits. Sometimes up to two months would pass without him coming to the village. But his bodyguards were still there, watching her every move. He no longer set foot in Rosalba's house. He sent for her and they met at other houses he owned, or he closed the village hotel completely, so that no one would bother them. Everything was mysterious with him, but she did not dare to ask for fear of bothering him.

During Don Fernando's absence, she lived quietly, caring for her children and enjoying the luxuries of her new home. She rarely went out, and had everything she needed at home. One day,

she began to notice that the presence of the army and the federal police was increasing in the area. She did not give it much importance, and even came to think that the streets would be safer with the security forces in the town.

However, one night, a group of men dressed in black and hooded broke into her house, their uniforms bearing the initials of the AFI. Without presenting any arrest warrant, they held her at gunpoint, threw her to the floor, and began to beat her. She did not understand what was happening. Her whole body hurt and she was terrified. She could hear her children crying, and all she could think about was how to protect them. They shouted at her while they beat her: "Daughter of a---. Tell us where Gordo is and we will let you and your children go." She replied that she did not know who they were talking about, and each denial was followed by a blow.

Almost unconscious, she was taken to Mexico City, where she was held for 80 days. Every day was torture. She knew nothing about her children and feared for their safety. Finally, she was informed that they were in the custody of the DIF of in Mexico City. Later, she learned that she was not the only one detained. During a hearing, she met the other people accused along her: they were men and women she had never seen before. Don Fernando and his bodyguards were not among them. That was when she learned of the charges against her: organised crime.

Rosalba has now been imprisoned for five years in the Atlacholoaya women's prison, Morelos. Her trial is still ongoing, and the sentence keeps being postponed. Everything is uncertain. The separation from her children hurts her body. That

has been her greatest punishment. She never heard from Don Fernando again.

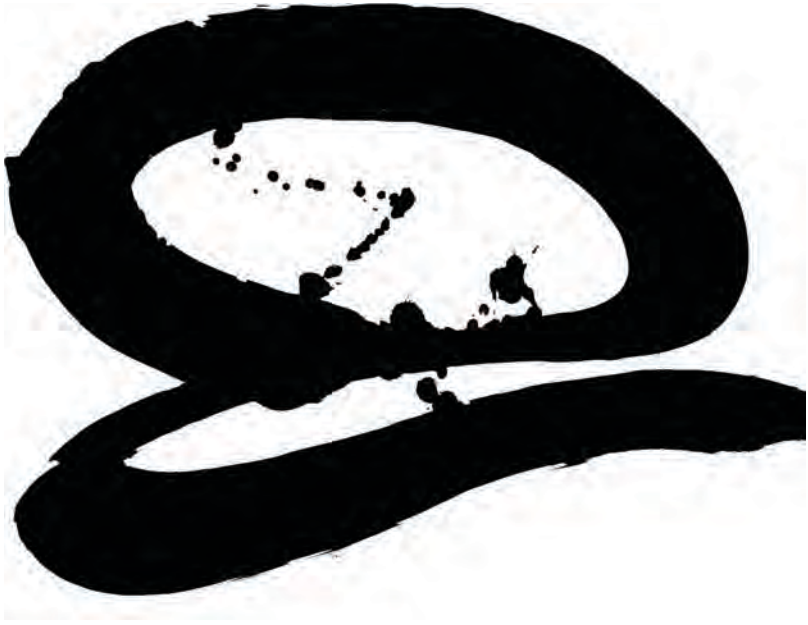
As she tells me her story, she acknowledges her crime: having accepted protection from the wrong man. Fleeing her husband's violence cost her a very high price that she continues to pay, within the walls of Atlacholoaya.

Birth of talent
Sol Nocturno

Lady of beautiful nuances
who births talent
with corpses without dreams
and weevils in the soul
chiselled concrete
from the core of her breast
transforming the finest diamond.

13
Tamar: Waiting for divine forgiveness

Amatista Lee



Tamar's arrival into this world was on the 12th of December, a day that is celebrated in a big way in the town of Yexcla, Guerrero. She says that her mother was already dressed to meet with her relatives for the celebration when she began having contractions, and her grandmother took her to the midwife in that town. Later, her parents were told that a girl had been born. Tamar tells me that their reactions to her birth were very different. Her mother welcomed her happily, forgetting for a moment her discomfort. Her father could not hide his anger. As soon as he found out, he almost had a heart attack from anger, because he was expecting a boy, who would keep the family name, help him, and drink together with him.

Listening to Tamar, I wonder what my life would have been like if my father had thought the same? Maybe I wouldn't have been his spoiled little ball. Nor would I have heard that melodious voice singing to me "*Amor chiquito*," while sitting on his lap. He said that boys are unreliable, and girls are sweet, quiet and grateful. "She'll look after me when I'm old," he said. Tamar resumes her story:

"In my village there is no drinking water. Wells are dug on the land. People go on donkeys to bring water from the springs, a day away. There were no schools for girls either. There was only one that the children attended during the dry season, because the rains made it impossible to travel along the roads in the Sierra. In my village it was not customary to send girls to school, because the town was surrounded by static sentinels covered by weeds.[27] There was no street lighting, no paving on the streets, no drainage, no shops. We ate vegetables, legumes, and seeds. Our family was rather small by the standards of the region. We were seven siblings, of whom five are still alive. Mario, the oldest, drowned in

the well that my grandfather dug so that we could have water. Roberto, the youngest, also drowned in a cistern. They were both three years old. We had no toys. Our grandmother taught us to make some out of clay."

I tell Tamar that my father sometimes made me toys out of tin or wood, too. "Yes," she answers with a glint of nostalgia in her eyes, "I remember that back on the ranch, we hardly had time for games, because there was always something to do, from washing dishes, washing clothes, ironing with a charcoal iron, to carrying water or feeding the animals. At night, the grandparents would start to remember their experiences and we, always attentive, would listen to their stories about the revolution, or how my great-grandfather sold my grandmother, and that in her time my grandmother could not decide how many children she wanted to have, nor could she choose their names.

"While the oil in the jar that served as a lamp was burning, you could hear crickets or some nocturnal lady[28] flying near our hut, with white and brown plumage and deep eyes. For some, it was a bad omen, but we liked to see them and hear them singing hidden in the hollows of the pines. In the morning, at five o'clock, the *nixtamal* was ready to be ground. Many people gathered at the mill, since it was gas-powered; no one had electricity. We returned to make tortillas and later bring food to the men. Our income came from the fields, most of it. We also had some income from the *piloncillo* bread that my grandparents made, which we sold on the street. I later helped sell the bread going door to door to the little houses made of cardboard and sticks. Some were made of adobe with straw and cardboard roofs.

"Once," Tamar tells me mischievously, "I was sent alone to sell bread. I felt very sorry for myself, but I endured it. As I walked, thinking, 'How am I going to sell everything?' I didn't see a stone and tripped on it. All the bread fell to the ground, turning into little rolls. First I started to cry, remembering the beatings my grandfather gave us. He would soak a rope to beat us, and it would even buzz in the air. But I was also happy because I would never have to sell bread by myself again.

"My brothers and I grew up with our grandparents, because the older I got, the more my father hated me. He beat me for everything and all the time. I heard him curse me because I was a female: 'Women are good for nothing,' he would say. If my brothers got involved, he would beat them too. So my mother, fed up with the beatings he gave her and us, left him, but since she couldn't support us, she took us with our grandparents and they did everything to support us. However, it wasn't enough, even though my grandmother worked her butt off making bread and shortbread. She also washed and ironed. My grandfather, for his part, worked the land with my brothers. Each one of us had a role in the house."

I immediately exclaimed: "My God, if that had happened to me, then I wouldn't even think about going with my parents on vacation. Fortunately, chores at the boarding school were for older kids, from the age of 15. The little ones just played and studied. Only if we deserved punishment, did we do chores." Tamar laughs out loud, saying that this is for lazy people: "On a ranch, you have to work hard or rest in peace."

She continues with her story: "When I was eight years old, I already knew how to make and sell bread. I also helped carry

water in medium-sized buckets. My grandfather said that everything was according to our age. I also helped feed the animals and clean the pigpens and corrals. I knew how to make tortillas. As I grew up, I was given heavier chores, like making food and taking it to the fields. When I was nine years old, I already knew how to make tortillas, do the washing and feed those who were in the fields."

I interrupt Tamar, because I can't understand how someone so small could do adult chores. As far as I can remember, at that age I was just being shown how to work the washing machine or hang my clothes. With a bit of emotion, I try to understand how that little girl managed to do what I couldn't. Tamar is pleased with the effect her words have on me and continues her story, so as not to make me feel sorry for her.

"But what I liked most," says Tamar, "was when my grandmother showed me how to make circles with the leftover dirt. She told me that this way the house wouldn't be left without dirt. The circles were made with the dirt left after sweeping. We would add a little water and then make circles with the broom until the little pile of dirt disappeared. Before all that, I made the beds, and my grandmother always checked to see if they were well made. I washed the dishes with lots of bleach and soap to get rid of the dirt.

"One by one, my mother took my brothers to Cuernavaca, Morelos. Later she came for me. When my breasts were barely noticeable, I was already with my mother. I didn't have a home there. She took us to live with my maternal aunt. That was the end of my childhood. There was no more time to play with

mud, or anyone to make us toys. My mother worked all the time to be able to give us a taco. My aunt took it out on us for everything.



"Food began to be scarce. There was a lot more to do. Between her six children and us, the house quickly became full. My aunt hit us a lot. I didn't understand why she treated us like that. When night came, I didn't know if I was very sleepy or tired, because I fell asleep quickly. Many times I thought that the night lasted only a short time, as I had barely gone to bed when my relative would wake me up to start the chores around the house.

"On Thursday afternoons, a van would come to sell buns and sweet bread. We kids would line up to buy our buns, which we would soak in bean soup. That was what we always ate. There was school here, but often we only went there to fall asleep. Sometimes hunger is stronger than the desire to learn. I would fight a lot with my cousins because they had toys and didn't want

to share with me. That was when my aunt would grab me to beat me mercilessly with her belt. My sadness was more than the pain from the blows. I always thought: If my dad had loved her and Mom hadn't left him, then I wouldn't suffer so much from hunger, humiliation, and beatings."

Tamar starts to cry. I get a lump in my throat, but I understand that no one is born with a manual for how to be a good mother or a good child. We only imitate the behaviour of our parents. Some of us do the best we can to be like a good father or mother, but others prefer not to make the effort. I did not have a perfect childhood, but neither did I receive blows or shouts insulting me from my parents. Tamar resumes her story with a hint of nostalgia:

"Look, my friend, one day my mother asked us if we were happy there. We all said what they were doing to us, and my mother, crying, promised us that as soon as she could, we would leave that place. We returned to the ranch. I was already a teenager, and I felt very happy to return to the place where I had been happy, despite all we lacked. I arrived at the ranch and everything seemed very beautiful to me. The same goats, cows, and pigs. Even the dogs looked pretty. Finally I was home.

"Around that time my aunt got sick, and my grandparents took her to my mother's house, but she decided to go to the market first, and then they went to my paternal grandmother's house. As soon as she saw her, she told her that she had death in her eyes. My aunt was very scared because she was almost due to give birth to the daughter she wanted so much. After seven boys, she wanted a girl so much. That afternoon she returned to the

ranch, but she already knew that she was going to die because her daughter died in her belly.

"My aunt did not want to go to the doctor. She was sure that she was not going to get better, so she hurried back with her other children to leave them with her trusted relatives. As soon as she arrived, she began to feel worse. And when night fell, the angel of death came for her. The family accompanied her to her final resting place with the promise of taking care of her small children. I enjoyed the chocolate she had made in the morning. Since she sold bread, they shared it out. I felt as if she had not died yet because I enjoyed her chocolate and the bread made with her own hands. My uncle killed a bull to feed everyone who came, because my aunt was very well loved. On that occasion I was beaten because my grandfather found me dancing with my cousin when his daughter was lying dead. Since she was still alive for me, I did not feel her departure.

"One day my grandparents went out and I was left alone. Suddenly a guy came to talk to me. I trusted him because he was an acquaintance, although my heart warned me of danger. I said to myself, what could happen? He just came to keep me company. Then, when I least expected it, the guy jumped on me. I didn't have time to defend myself. He raped me with blows and insults. Later, my grandparents arrived, and I told them in great detail what that bastard had done to me. They immediately went to file a complaint and the trustee forced me to marry him. I was terrified of living with my attacker, but I had no choice because that guy had gotten me pregnant, and my family didn't want me to be shamed. My ordeal began from that day on. There was no rest for me. Blows rained down

on me all over the place and at all hours. His girlfriends looked at me mockingly, and his parents praised him, telling him that he was a real macho, not like the others who stayed home after work.

"I barely had enough to eat, but since I had learned to bake bread, when I could and had enough money, I made a little to sell so I buy milk for my child. When my son was two months old, my uncle came for me because I had told him how they treated me, but when my mother-in-law heard, she quickly went into the house, and when I went into my little room to get my things together, the baby was no longer there. I went out screaming. I couldn't speak. I was choking on my tears. I asked them about my child, but they didn't even look at me. My uncle grabbed me and told me to leave him, to go to the trustee. But they didn't give him back to me, because they said I wasn't fit as a mother. Later, I was consoled because my uncles told me they would keep a close eye on him.

"Once again, I left the ranch so that the family wouldn't do anything to me. My mother told me, 'Don't worry, daughter, I'll help you get your child back.' With those words and the news that my uncles gave me about my son, I began to accept myself. Later I met a man who dazzled me. He looked well-groomed and spoke like people from the city speak. He told my parents that he was an elementary school teacher, and that Virgilio was his name. That man soon convinced my parents that he was the best thing for me, a failure.

"He didn't marry me because I was no longer worthy. At first everything was going well because I didn't go hungry with this

man. But soon the beatings and insults started. He said that failed women didn't deserve respect or good treatment. So I got pregnant with my daughter, putting up with that man who, despite introducing me to his girlfriends, said: 'You are the one who lives in my house and whose children I register.' When my daughter was born, he didn't want her. He said, who knew if she was his. I always begged him to love her because she was his. But he said that if she had been a boy, maybe he would have loved her, but women are good for nothing.

"My daughter had to pay the consequences of being a female. Her father hit her and yelled at her for everything. When she was four years old, I became pregnant with my son, but out of fear of her father, I didn't say anything, in case he would make me have an abortion, as he tried to do when he found out I was pregnant with my daughter. With that fear, I preferred to leave him and asked my mother for help. She understood me and didn't force me to go back to him. It was better for him. He didn't have to take care of us anymore."

"When my son was born, he didn't even want to meet him. I had to suffer the consequences of having believed in that man, that he was going to make me happy. At the age of ten, my son still couldn't speak well, and my mother went to the other side, to the US, to support me with that problem. Soon the world fell on me. Without my mother and with the economic pressures, I began to drink alone, in the house my mother had left me. A neighbour approached me to offer his help, because my children and I had already gone days without eating. A neighbour named Juan began to give me money to buy food. I saved money to buy alcohol secretly. That way I forgot my sadness.

"Time went by and I fell in love with Juan, because he took care of my children and me. One day he asked me to move in together, and without thinking twice, I agreed. It was two wonderful months, until one afternoon some hooded men appeared, supposedly looking for a thief. I opened the house to them. Once inside, the men began to beat my children and me, shouting: 'Where are the kidnapped people?' They began torturing me, I didn't know what they were talking about.

"They started taking my daughter's clothes off, threatening to rape her. Then it occurred to me that a few days earlier, Juan had told me that if I needed anything, I should go to a house where he worked. So I told the hooded men to take me to that place, because I hoped that, seeing the situation, Juan would help me clear things up.

"The police agreed. When we arrived, they left me in the car with my children. I was very surprised when I saw Juan in handcuffs, with other men. I asked them why they were arresting him and they told me that these were the people they were looking for. They thanked me and brought me to jail. I hope to God that I can leave this place to be reunited with my children and that the nightmare will finally end. I ask God for forgiveness for being so trusting and believing that there are still good people. This man, instead of alleviating my suffering, made it worse. Now my mother doesn't want to talk to me, and my brothers don't visit me. This is how I spend my days in prison, waiting for divine forgiveness and wishing to return to my children. Since they brought me here, I haven't seen them again."

Messengers from other worlds

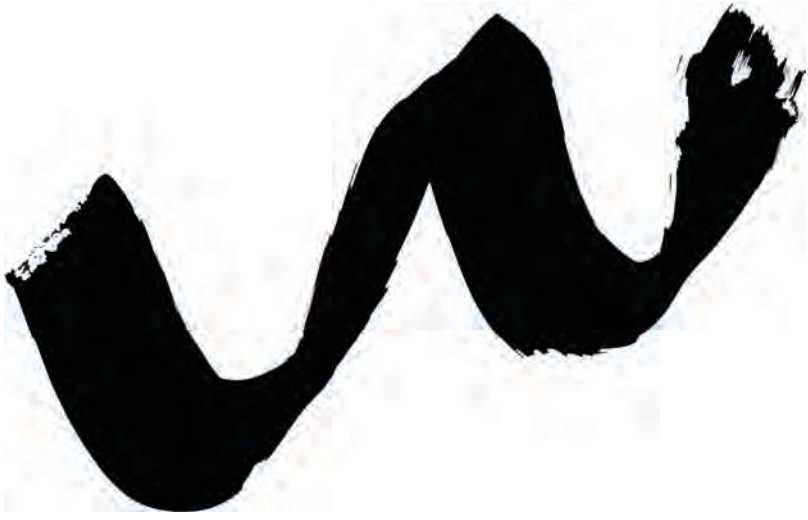
Amatista Lee

I am a caterpillar, by circumstance or by chance of fate I was brought to this jungle where captivity is not spoken of but is felt. I became a monster for society, here the hours and days are the same. From time to time carrier pigeons arrive when they are allowed, Elena, Aída, and Marina, bringing messages from other worlds. Meanwhile, hugs loaded with love and warmth heal my wounds little by little, making little wings sprout on my back, because they taught me to fearlessly express that darkness that tied me to a painful past, bringing light. My little pigeons, my sisters, my mothers, hear my cries: I am not a monster!

14

Epilogue: We remain in the shade of the guamúchil

Elena de Hoyos



From the first time I crossed the threshold of the building that houses the imprisoned women, I was struck by the security measures, the multiple inspections, locks, and searches. Everything indicates that whoever enters, hardly ever leaves. But what continues to impress me every time I go in and out is what they call the entrance curtain, a heavy sliding gate that is distinguished by having a metal sheet cut-out in the shape of a female figure, more than two meters high, on each of its sides. When the gate opens or closes, I watch this figure split and I reflect on how the lives of those who pass through this place also split. The idea that these figures suggest is that the woman who enters will no longer be the same as she was when she crossed this threshold. Society gives this woman a new identity, a stigma.

After eight years, I still fondly remember the opportunity I had to enter the Cereso and the trajectory of writing in penitentiary spaces in these years. I am filled with gratitude for what we have achieved and what is expressed in this book. It is stimulating that the interest in continuing to write has remained and that new imprisoned women have become involved in this task. The excitement of learning new stories is still alive, and the need to continue advancing in the task of building sisterhood in a space that, due to its stressful conditions, represents a challenge, is irresistible.

Reading the stories contained in this book, I cannot help but recognise the courage of the women who dared to tell their story, walking again the paths of pain and helplessness. I firmly believe that if you do not know your story, you are condemned to repeat it. But I also believe that other women, upon learning these stories, will not fail to recognise themselves in them and will reflect

on their own experience and how to find other ways of life that are free of violence.

From the first meeting with each of these women, their eagerness to be seen filled me with emotion. I have been caught by bright eyes and hopeful expressions. The atmosphere of the first meeting is full of expectations and favourable auspices. The looks of sympathy and immediate complicity do not lie.

At the end of 2007, there was no previous work on gender. This gave rise to a lot of enthusiasm: making the invisible visible, talking about things that no one talks about but that we all know. Together we have established the objectives and rules of the workshop: confidentiality, punctuality, and the honouring of the space of the workshop in order to maintain it and make the best use of it.

I was moved by the difficulty and the tears in expressing self-appreciation, from the first moment I became aware of my ability to perceive the great amount of goodness and beauty that exists in that place and of the internal alchemy that occurs when they look into my eyes. Over these years, I have been able to share this emotion with other women on the outside, who have strengthened and extended the work with the imprisoned women.

The enthusiasm has been growing; the intensity of the texts is increasing as they advance in the process of looking at themselves in writing; the imprisoned women have dared to show themselves; and the revelations are shocking, full of strength and joy or pain. The emotion is present.

There are themes that are charged with energy: sexuality, guilt, shame, family, children, divorce. Writing has allowed the internal

judges to give voice, to redefine the situations in which they have felt bad about themselves. "Imprisonment is not a punishment; it is a process of readaptation," some say with hope. There is talk of finding great freedom in prison. Each participant has progressed in exploring herself, and trust has grown among the group; bonds are immediately established. They also begin to discover the reasons for their stay here.

I cannot help but be overwhelmed by the pain and helplessness that led them to be victims and to feel guilty for their own impossibility as women, facing a world hostile to their needs and demands. How can we help them to recover their power and take responsibility for their lives? Often, we women are the ones who allow abuse, but fear is a paralyzing factor. We move as slaves from one patriarchy to another, in relationships based on fear and oppression. When a woman is mistreated and afraid, she becomes an easy victim; she victimises herself. Sometimes, seclusion becomes a way to save oneself from the despair and harm that one causes oneself.

One woman, with a relaxed attitude, says that after being forced into seclusion, nothing worse can happen to her. They tell their story with great sincerity and courage. Able to laugh at themselves, they have a great sense of humour and we all laugh. Other times I have also seen them overshadowed and defeated by uncertainty and despair.

The texts have made us cry and laugh alternately. The participants communicate very deep emotions in a fresh and moving way. They enjoy writing and do so very fluently. They dare to look at themselves as they are and express it. They are able to rescue

the positive from the experience of imprisonment. Some of them seem to be freer inside the prison than outside.

I am overwhelmed by a cascade of conflicting feelings. Sometimes there is fear, a lot of fear of dark forces, of unspeakable evil. There is also an enormous affinity as women. I realise that we are the same, that we have all been in the wrong situations, with the wrong people, at the wrong times, but these women have been captured and imprisoned. I feel useful, productive, excited about the work. I see a great deal of opportunity for my own personal growth along with theirs.

We have constantly talked about the concept of female solidarity and support. We read about female rivalry. The women are thoughtful and optimistic. They tell me about their dreams of having a better life inside, and their enthusiasm is overflowing. The workshop exercises have provoked a deep emotional reaction in some of them, and the writings are increasingly sincere and profound, as is the support in the awareness that comes from writing. We realise that we can, together with them, put into practice many of the initiatives they have in mind, to publish their stories.

Over the years, more and more doors have been opened for us to be inside the prison in a privileged position, that is, to go in and out. I have been working from outside with other women and men, in a project that I have since called "Sisters in the Shadow," which aims to make women in prison visible and to build ties of solidarity with the outside world to link them with the social context from which they were expelled.

Prison life is full of everyday experiences, dreams, fantasies, and nostalgia for the outside world. Writing helps to break them

down, to record the changes, to create emotional catharsis, to deepen learning. Art is a ship in which women who write navigate to escape their confinement and be heard by the outside world; it is a vehicle to achieve a figurative freedom, which is no less real for that. The first time I read the text of a workshop participant at the Cereso outside the prison, I experienced the sensation of being the bearer of a message in a bottle, or better, as if at that moment the imprisoned writer was outside her confinement, sharing her most intimate thoughts, connecting with her pain or celebrating the joy of self-discovery.

Introspection is unavoidable, but so is otherness; coexistence with others, one's peers and, at the same time, such dissimilar companions in exile. "I am not like the others" is a phrase that is often heard; the need to differentiate oneself, to compare oneself, to ignore one's shadow by excluding others, is a constant.

My great dream has been to inspire women in prison to create circles of wise women, where they share experience and knowledge, as well as remedies for heartbreak, abandonment, and fear. This dream has been realised to a large extent thanks to the "Taller Historias de Vida" *(*Life Stories Workshop), led by Aída Hernández, with whom I have built an alliance in the passion to do something, even if it is minimal, to shake off society's indifference to the injustice that is experienced daily in prisons.

When Aída contacted me, my concern was to reach a larger number of imprisoned women, since those who had been initially interested were getting involved in other activities, and although some new ones were coming, the initial workshop was beginning to disintegrate.

Using art as a tool for social inclusion, it was possible to create a Written Culture Programme at the Cereso, which is consolidated through literary workshops with a focus on gender, both for women and men. The publication of a gazette and visits by various personalities from the arts and literature who participated altruistically, through a programme promoted by the Board of Trustees under the name "Culture Links Us," was a window to the outside world where many have built self-esteem and the hope of a better life.

Of the many functions that writing has in confinement, I believe that one of the fundamental ones is the atonement of pain and shame, the transformative alchemy. The encounter with writing represents a channel for the tremendous burden of sorrow and sadness that one carries within to flow. This is evident when women who initially demanded anonymity are now willing to show their identity, proud to contribute to the awareness of other women in situations of violence. Writing is a means of collecting the pieces and putting them back together in the process of writing to ourselves. After the storm comes the calm, the light at the end of the tunnel, reconnecting with dreams and illusions to continue life, even within a penitentiary centre. Writing unites women. We discover ourselves in the eyes of others; we are redeemed by being looked at. As we discover people through their stories, the feeling grows that we could be in their shoes; the implausibility of reality is overwhelming.

Writing represents the washing away of the stigma and the creating of a new identity, redefining the facts in the light of an inner gaze. This takes place from the very centre, enjoying the right to

the written word, building foundations of respectable women, valuable women, capable of expanding their own consciousness and that of others through their writings. These are renewed women who proclaim their greatness as creators of possible realities and masters of their destiny, wise and daring women, who wield the word as an emblem of freedom and self-responsibility.

People who live in prison enjoy, in theory, all their individual guarantees and human rights just as much as any of us. However, the satisfaction of the most basic human needs is in the hands of the judgement and efficiency of the institutions dedicated to guarding these people inside prisons, carrying out the function of social rehabilitation or reintegration, as it is called lately. Women deprived of their freedom experience violence in many ways and to a greater extent than the male population, due to the lack of opportunities to access the exercise of their human rights.

Every time the subject of women in prison is addressed, the lack of information and documentation on the subject is mentioned, as well as the invisibility of these women, not only in society in general but also as a research topic. It is highly valuable to begin to establish a section dedicated to addressing this problem, as is the intention of this book.

Likewise, when we talk about reintegration, this consists of a dynamic process that requires the interaction of the subjects to be reintegrated, which is why it is essential to know their opinions and ideas about the way in which this ritual of temporary separation from society will take place, so that reintegration occurs in an appropriate manner. Looking inside prisons can

offer us information that would allow the design of strategies and actions aimed at achieving improvement in public security and the justice system, for the benefit of society as a whole.

It is important to address issues related to discriminatory practices against female prisoners, their relationship with the outside world, with their family, intimate visits, the provision of medical assistance, the architecture of the facilities, the situation of incarcerated mothers, and educational and work programmes with stereotypical content, in addition to the infantilisation of women by Latin American macho culture, which considers them incapable of defining their own role and destiny. Addressing these issues is essential, not only from an academic research perspective, but also from their own voice, listening to the version of the supposed "defeated enemy" from whom society remains safe.

While knowledge of these aspects provides the context of this violence by omission, and helps to better understand the environment in which it occurs, it also provides elements for establishing penitentiary policies based on a gender perspective. Once sentenced to prison, a woman ceases to be a member of society and loses all the rights linked to that status. Therefore, public opinion also tends to consider that prisoners do not deserve adequate living conditions, which would imply, among many other aspects, medical care, maternity, decent cells, visits, education, decent work, recreation, access to the media and, of course, cultural activities.

Women who have suffered violations of their rights generally do not report them due to ignorance of their rights, fear of losing benefits, or fear of being subject to reprisals or punishment

by the authorities (this fear coincides with the fear reported by women detained or imprisoned in the penal system; reporting means harming their trial, appeal, or personal safety). With the above statements I do not intend to generalise the behaviour of the penitentiary authorities. Just as there is negligent and discriminatory behaviour, there are also people who are aware of the situation of women in prison who manage support, generally from external agencies, to improve living conditions inside the prison, as is the case of Margarita Ríos, then director of the women's area, who improved, to the extent of her possibilities, some aspects. In this journey we have found people who have made our stay within the prison walls easier, such as Lic. Lucio Hernández, coordinator of social reintegration in 2010, who has facilitated our admission procedures and has promoted our initiatives. These details make a big difference in the spirit of those who have to build their home in a prison, since there is someone who "looks out for them."

However, I would dare to say that the less we know about the conditions inside prisons, the more impunity there is for practices of human exploitation. This is why I consider it not only necessary, but also essential, to create spaces for these women to express themselves and break the gag of opprobrium that weighs on their existence.

Under the Shade of the Guamúchil was the first formal book we produced with anthropologist Aída Hernández. When my working relationship with the penitentiary structure through the Patronato was interrupted, having the financial support of a foreign agency gave us complete autonomy. Both the book and the video were produced on a very low budget and with the

generosity of highly talented people who contributed to bringing these stories of silenced women to light.

In addition to the life stories, we wanted to rescue very valuable writings that had been published in the various issues of the gazette *Y ahora qué sigue* (What's next now), as well as art works produced under the auspices of the Institute of Culture. In the second edition, five years later, we took up the most emblematic stories of Indigenous women and reviewed the book in detail to update it with new stories. In addition, a video and radio capsules were produced with the content and interviews.

This interdisciplinary artistic work is carried out in an integrated manner, with the three teams—literature, video and radio—informed of each other's content and progress, so that the final product is consistent and enriched by the experiences of the three teams.

Having collaborated as an editor of both editions is a great satisfaction, since it made possible the dissemination of Aída Hernández's valuable work and the stories of exclusion and violence that women experience in our country, especially in the penitentiary context. Another contribution of this book is that in 2010, when it was first published, there was very little bibliography on women in prison, and it became a reference text in the academic world. Likewise, the voices of women in prison began to appear on the political scene in Morelos.

The relevance of the publication of the second updated edition of the book *Bajo la Sombra del Guamúchil*, lies not only in the editorial product, extremely careful and with an impressive content, but in the process that was involved in making it, from

participating in the project of telling the story of a woman who did not have the possibility of writing it, to the participatory editing process in which not only the authors were involved but also the Indigenous women who shared their story. This activity constitutes for the imprisoned women a reason to be motivated and feel useful. Likewise, ties were established between the different strata of the prison, which although they coexist in the same space, have little interaction.

This event also had favourable consequences for the women whose stories were written, as in the case of Leo Zavaleta, who wanted to learn to write in order to tell her own story and now, in addition to having participated with excellent writings in several of our publications, has written a book telling her story. Leo found in writing a way to regain the strength to continue, despite the multiple adversities that she faced even after having regained her freedom. Likewise, Perla Negra, always willing to keep in touch with the Collective, has participated in other publications and in important forums for women writers and presentations in several states of the republic. Águila del Mar continued writing and, upon leaving prison, she joined Talleres de Escritura identitaria. Now she is finishing high school and participating in a state government job training programme, supported by the networks that her membership in the Collective has provided her.

The reason for producing a second edition, corrected and expanded, of *Bajo la Sombra del Guamúchil* is not to let stories as moving as they are emblematic of gender inequalities fall into oblivion, especially those of Indigenous women like Máxima Pacheco, who is now free, and Morelitos, who died a few months

after leaving prison. We also preserved the story of Luz, who died in prison after almost 20 years, and more than half of that time living with a severe disability. Several of the authors took care of her. Rosita Salazar remains in contact with the Collective, participating in public events, documentaries, and tours, despite her health difficulties. Amatista Lee has continued writing and publishing. In the second edition, Galia Tonella, María Elena Basave, and Sol Nocturno join her.

The experience of publishing the stories that make up this book gave them the certainty that there was nothing in them unworthy of being shown and, not only that, but also the profound meaning that their life experience takes on when shared with other women who see themselves in them.

Under the shade of the guamúchil



Under the Shadow of the Guamúchil tells us about the experience of Indigenous and mestizo women (almost all of rural origin) imprisoned in the women's area of the Cereso Morelos, where around 200 women and 15 children have been isolated from society by a justice system that sees punishment and imprisonment as a solution to the failure of a social model that, through exclusion and poverty, has contributed to producing criminality.

Notes

1. Center for Social Readaptation
2. Leo Zavaleta died from COVID19 in April 2020, her health was affected by the carceral violence and she was not able to survive the illness. For the impact of incarceration in the health of the participants in this book see my article "Muertes prematuras y violencias carcelarias en México. Mujeres indígenas presas y racismo structural" in *Debates Indígenas*. April 2021. https://www.academia.edu/45688066/Muertes_prematuras_y_violencias_carcelarias_en_M%C3%A9xico_mujeres_ind%C3%ADgenas_presas_y_racismo_estructural
3. In my book *Multiple (In) Justices. Indigenous Women, Law and Political Struggle* (University of Arizona Press 2016) I analyze this feminist project and its impact in the lives of all the participants.
4. Based on the methodology developed by Ethel Krauze.
5. Life Stories Workshop program, coordinated by Aida Hernández and registered with the Undersecretariat of Social Rehabilitation of the State of Morelos.
6. Al the publications of Hermanas en la Sombra are of Free Access in our web page https://hermanasenlasombra.org/
7. A tree with edible pods.
8. A local reed used as a building material.
9. As tanates, chiquigüites are a kind of basket made with natural fibers.
10. A of basket made of palm leaf for storing tortillas..
11. Stone pestle used to grind corn.
12. Corn kernels soaked in lime water and ground to make tortilla dough.

13. In prison language, the word "chompis" is used to refer to friends.
14. Federal Investigation Agency.
15. Torture that consists of forcing carbonated mineral water, or Tehuacán, up a person's nose.
16. The Specialized Subprosecutor's Office for the Investigation of Organized Crime (SEIDO) is a department of the Attorney General's Office in Mexico that coordinates federal police forces in the fight against organised crime. Its functions include investigating organised crime activities and bringing legal action against its members.
17. Irrigation canal
18. "highly recommended" is a phrase used to intimidate detainees, meaning that upon arrival at the Cereso or Separos, they will be physically and/or sexually abused.
19. Home for homeless children.
20. Tall structures with elaborate firework displays
21. In Mesoamerican beliefs, it is a kind of witch or supernatural being that has the ability to take animal form. The term refers both to the person who has this ability and to the animal itself that acts as his alter ego or guardian animal.
22. Local word to refer to children.
23. Autonomous University of the State of Morelos.
24. Reed with adobe and palm roof.
25. A decentralised public organisation that takes care of minors who do not have responsible adults to care for them.
26. This is the acronym for the Forensic Medical Service.
27. Habitat of all kinds of animals, from reptiles to beautiful birds of different species.
28. Owl.

Documentary films

Bajo la Sombra del Guamúchil
(Under the Shade of the Guamúchil)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3ZjAFcvspo

Semillas de Guamúchil. Ahora en Libertad
(Seeds of Guamúchil. Now in Freedom)
(with subtitles in English)

https://youtu.be/-JkstldLbMk?si=T_OLWBs8OI--ZIvL

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