

# Paths

**of Light and Shadow:**  
Stories of migrant children and adolescents

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B837c INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION  
Paths of Light and Shadow: Stories of migrant children and adolescents  
migrants / Ani Brenes, Laura Delgado, Daniela Álvarez Keller. – 1 ed. – San José, Costa Rica :  
Brenes Herrera Ani, Delgado Tenorio Laura, Álvarez Keller Daniela  
International Organization for Migration , 2016.

104 p. : il. ; 22 X 28 cm.

ISBN: 978-9968-542-68-5

1. IMMIGRANT - PERSONAL STORIES. 2. MIGRATION. 3. CHILDREN. I. DELGADO, LAURA. II.  
ALVAREZ KELLER, DANIELA.

III. TITLE. AUTHORS WITH TWO NAMES 1) ANI BRENES HERRERA 2) LAURA DELGADO TENORIO  
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IOM thanks the Social Welfare Secretariat of the Presidency (SBS) of Guatemala, the Salvadoran Institute for Integral Development for Children and Adolescents (ISNA), Casa Alianza in Honduras, Casa del Migrante de Tecún Umán in Guatemala and Sin Fronteras IAP in Mexico, for their invaluable contribution to this effort by collecting stories about the actual experiences of migrant children and adolescents in Mesoamerica.

This publication has been produced in collaboration with the US State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) through the IOM's *Regional Programme to Strengthen Capacities to Protect and Assist Vulnerable Migrants in Mesoamerica*, implemented since 2010.



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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- Prologue ..... **9**
- Alicia ..... **14**
- Nahil ..... **18**
- Eduardo ..... **23**
- Mónica ..... **28**
- Daniela ..... **32**
- Ana ..... **37**
- Lili and Josué ..... **43**
- Sergio ..... **49**

- Álvaro ..... **54**
- Carlos ..... **58**
- Pablo..... **64**
- Maya ..... **69**
- Carolina..... **76**
- Micael ..... **81**
- Lucas..... **88**
- Jorge ..... **92**
- Mosaic..... **100**



**M**igration affects millions of girls and boys around the world. The Central America-Mexico-United States corridor had gained attention, as studies show that the number of children and adolescent migrants recorded there has increased tenfold in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their growing participation, a lack of accurate statistical information exists about the number of minors involved in international migration processes.<sup>2</sup> Among the available data, the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reported that 38,759 children and adolescents were apprehended at its southwestern border in 2013, while from October 2014 the number increased to 68,541. Despite a temporary lapse in the numbers in

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- <sup>1</sup> Regional Study on Children and Migration in Central and North America: Causes, policies, practices and challenges, led by the University of California and the University of Lanús, 2015.
  - <sup>2</sup> Human Rights Council. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. A/HRC, 2011.

early 2015, apprehensions rose 117 per cent by the end of that year. As of March 2016, apprehension numbers reflect seasonal trends observed in prior years.

However, prior to 2012, official data indicates that the great majority (more than 75%) of unaccompanied minors originated from Mexico. This changed in 2014 when nearly 75 per cent of all minors who arrived at the United States' southern border originated from Honduras (28%), Guatemala (24%) and El Salvador (21%), with a substantially reduced portion (only 25%) from Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Concerning gender, despite the higher number of migrant boys than girls, 2014 saw a greater increase in the percentage of girls (140%) than of boys (100%) among apprehensions of children under twelve.

The truth is that behind these figures lie stories and realities, the complexity and particularity of which merit attention. Because the human being – whether girl, boy or adolescent – suffers real trauma, and deserves protection and recognition.

In this context, the IOM's *Regional Programme to Strengthen Capacities to Protect and Assist Vulnerable Migrants in Mesoamerica* has undertaken a series of efforts to improve assistance to and protection of the rights of minors and women migrating in vulnerable conditions, victims of trafficking and sexual violence, refugees and

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**3** Official figures from the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 2014.

asylum-seekers, extra continental migrants, and indigenous and LGBTI migrant populations, among others. Collecting the stories of migrant youth throughout the region is part of IOM's mission to increase visibility of this human calamity and to sensitize and invite reflection on the harsh reality facing these populations. The IOM, through its Regional Mesoamerica Programme (with PRM funds), hopes that this book serves as a tool for building the capacities of government and civil society institutions in the Mesoamerican region. However, more so, it hopes that the tumultuous paths of the sixteen migrant youths illuminated herein, will strengthen readers' commitment to working through the approaches of human rights, gender, diversity, and multiculturalism, thereby enhancing the quality of children's lives and serving their best interests.

Elaboration of this book was made possible by the invaluable collaboration of institutes that serve children and adolescents throughout the Mesoamerican region, as well as by civil society organizations, shelters and centres that care for minors and work in close proximity to the harsh realities they face on a daily basis.

In keeping with the principle of confidentiality, information that could compromise the privacy and safety of the minors whose stories are reconstructed in these pages has been omitted.

**Roeland de Wilde**

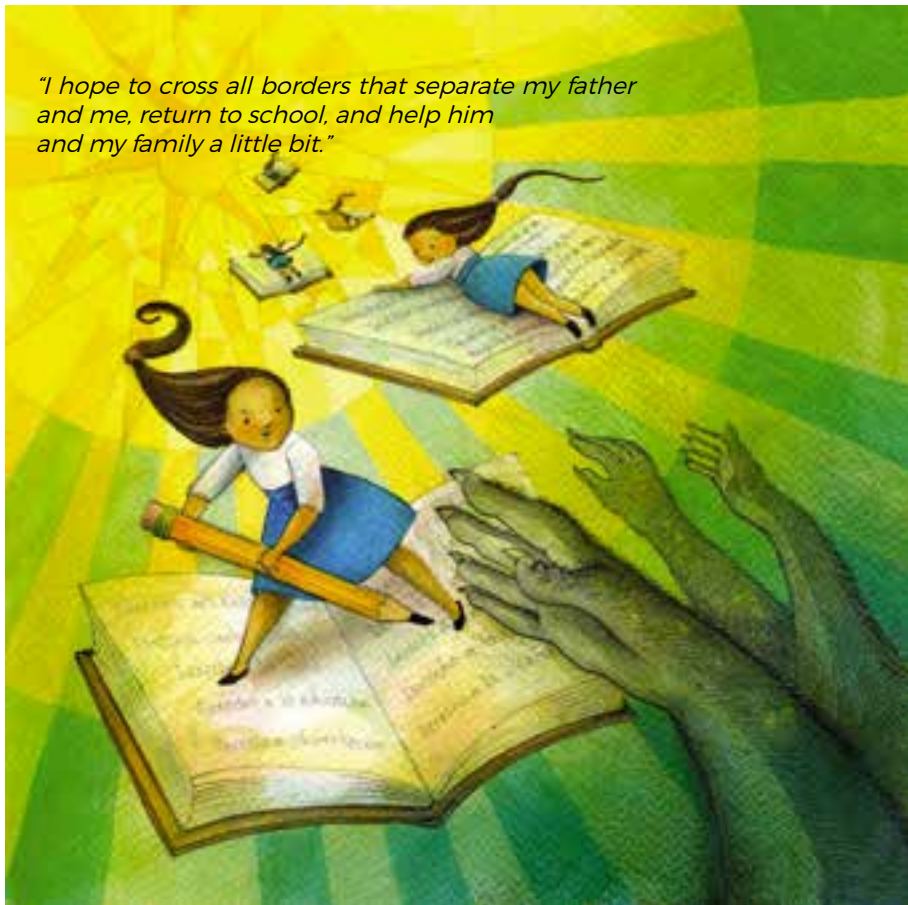
*Chief of Mission, IOM Costa Rica*



# Stories



*"I hope to cross all borders that separate my father and me, return to school, and help him and my family a little bit."*



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## ALICIA

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**S**chool is a sort of dream factory, where happiness and games mingle with hopes for a better life. So it was for Alicia, who built dreams out of friendships, fun and new knowledge. She felt that studying would open future opportunities to help her loved ones.

Like any factory, Alicia knew that her school needed repairs. However, she never imagined that the man who made these would also shatter the dreams she had built with such longing and hope.

*"A neighbour of ours was the repair man at school. One afternoon, at the end of the school day, I found him waiting for me at the exit. He dragged me to a dark, ugly place where he abused me, threatening me to keep it a secret. But I told my dad everything and he looked for the man and reported him. Heartless, he stabbed my dad with a knife and even threatened to kill him".*

To save his life, Alicia's father fled to the United States, hoping to find a better future for him and his family. Meanwhile, Alicia lived anguished by the threats he received.

*"The man who attacked my dad and me continued to harm my family. One of my cousins was abducted for thirteen days and his parents had to pay 15,000 (local currency), to get him back. Then, he did the same with another cousin, warning that he was not fooling around and that I could never escape him. The whole family was in danger. One time I felt brave and filed a complaint against him with the Public Ministry, but this made it worse because he then threatened to kill my family. I didn't know what to do. I had no way out".*

That was when Alicia, driven by fear and the need to find safety, decided to migrate.

*"I want to be with my dad because by living far away, maybe he won't be able to hurt me. I've gotten close to reaching my dad, but have failed, and I'm afraid he will continue going into debt to help me, because each trip costs about USD 6,000".*

While en route to finding her father, Alicia was arrested and deported to her country of origin. Silent during the flight back, she was afraid, distressed, shaken.



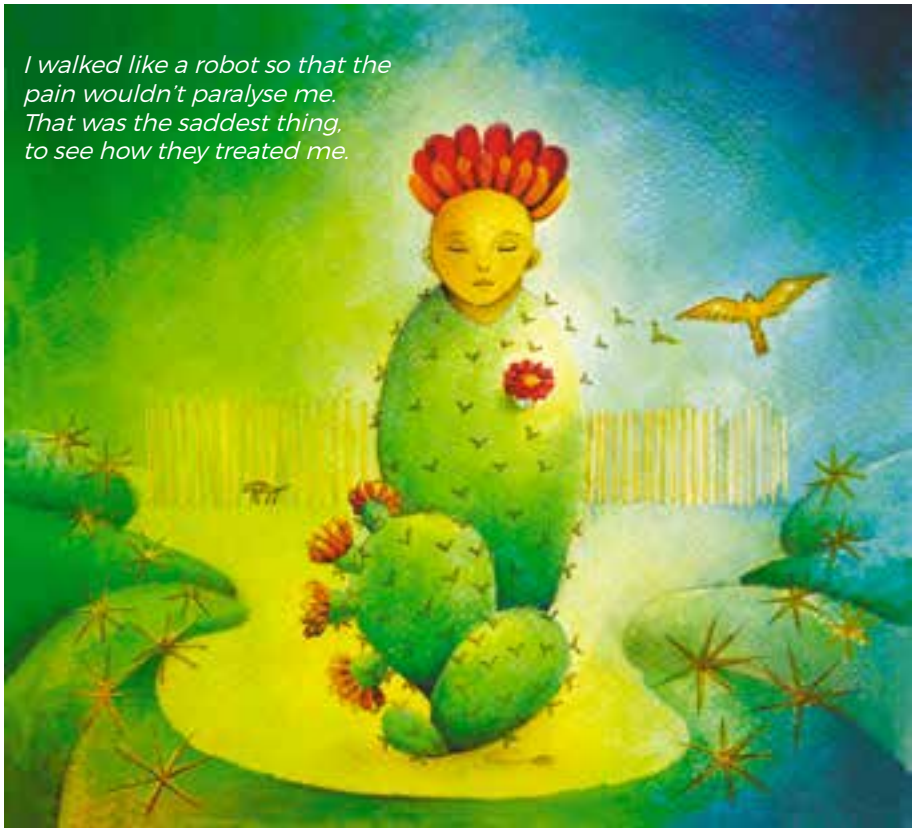
*"I feel cornered and persecuted, constantly frightened by threats and what might happen to me. I don't know how to escape this dark hole in which I find myself. I fled my village because the man who hurt me lives near my family and is still a threat".*

But Alicia is not resigned. At only sixteen, she has managed to create a collage of broken dreams which drives her to try to find her father again.

*"I hope to cross all borders that separate my father and me, return to school, and help him and my family a little bit. I know I will get there, where they can't hurt us anymore".*

Alicia is confident that in the north, she will find another dream factory where old broken pieces can be repaired and used to create new dreams full of colour.

*I walked like a robot so that the  
pain wouldn't paralyse me.  
That was the saddest thing,  
to see how they treated me.*



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## NAHIL

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**A**t seventeen, Nahil believes that the world can change. That's a young age still to resign oneself to inequality and stop struggling; he knew that well. He and his family are poor and lack opportunities like many families of his indigenous group. Ethnically, he seemed to have inherited not only the colour of his skin, but also the power to combat injustice.

And so Nahil defended his dream and succeeded in migrating to the United States. Sadly, he left his mother and six siblings to stay with his father there for a little while; but what motivated him, was the desire to find a new life through which he could help his family. At that time, he never could have fathomed the difficulties he would encounter along the way:

*"I was going with a smuggler who treated me well, bought me food and even a cell phone to keep us in communication because we were travelling on different buses. He advised the other migrants*



*and me, that if asked any questions, we should say that we were going to buy merchandise to later sell.*

*Things weren't going so badly until we had to face the feds at checkpoints. There, they made us get off the bus and checked our backpacks with a device to see if we had drugs. They searched us and took what little we had. They threw my phone into a police car and did not give it back. Later, at another checkpoint, we were asked for 1,000 (local currency) each to continue on our way. I ran out of money because for the next leg of the trip they wanted USD 200 a head. Between all of us, we made a coperacha<sup>4</sup> and were able to raise USD 800. With that, they let us go.*

*We continued the adventure and were close to reaching the border, just needing to cross a raging river. We hid in the bushes so that the "migra"<sup>5</sup> wouldn't see us and boarded a boat. But after crossing the river, our guides were unfamiliar with the path and walked in circles until the "mascones"<sup>6</sup> appeared, illuminating us with laser pointers. "Everybody to the ground!" the guide shouted. Some two hours passed, our heads to the ground, hardly breathing. We managed to advance a little, until we reached some reed beds,*

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**4** Slang for a collection of money, contributed by a group people.

**5** Slang for immigration police that patrol the U.S. border.

**6** Slang for people who cause worry or discomfort; in this context, whistleblowers.



*but when we came close to passing, the “moscones” returned. Again I threw myself to the ground and waited, but I saw the light of a lantern, the kind that border patrols carry; so I got up and ran desperately, until I jumped a fence and fell into a field full of cactuses. Their thorns covered my entire body”.*

Nahil’s pain was unbearable. The thorns pierced not only his body, but also his heart and the opportunities of which he dreamed.

*“With no regard for my pain, they dragged me along with them. I walked like a robot so that the pain wouldn’t paralyse me. That was the saddest thing, to see how they treated me, despite what I was feeling. So they took me to the cooler”<sup>7</sup>.*

There, a doctor helped remove the thorns. Nahil’s torn and bloodied hands reflected just a fraction of the wounds he felt in his heart.



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<sup>7</sup> Word used to describe immigration detention centres, parts of which are notoriously cold.

*"When I told them that I was seventeen, they didn't believe me. Others had advised me: 'you had better say that you're older because if not, they will lock you up for more than five months' so I said I was older in order to avoid having to stay there longer".*

At such a young age, Nahil has known not only physical pain, but also the pain of indifference, being misunderstood and mistreated by those who fail to recognize how brave he had been to walk an unknown, dangerous path in pursuit of a better life.

Nahil was deported to his home country. During the flight, he decided that despite everything, he would try again: his scarred hands reminded him of a story he had heard during his journey.

He was told that the cactus which had wounded him was called the plant of life because when its thorns dry up, a new plant is born. He believes his own life will unfold like this, that his seemingly dried up dreams will birth new opportunities, and from these his brave heart will bloom.



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## EDUARDO

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**W**hen opportunities do not appear just around corner, one must garner the courage to find them, just like searching for a hidden treasure.

So with hope and the cool December breeze, thirteen-year-old Eduardo headed to Mexico, accompanied by his uncle. The two left their country to find opportunities abroad, never imagining what awaited them.

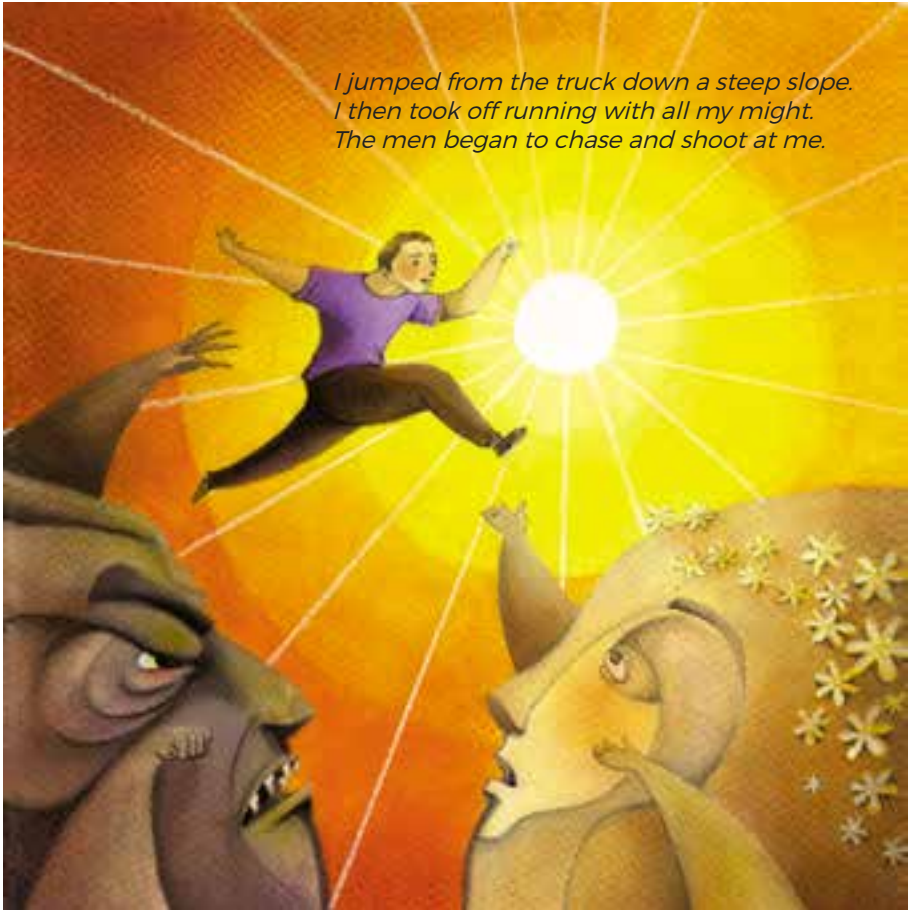
*"When we crossed the border, some men stopped our bus. They made us get off and threw us to the ground as if we were criminals, searching us and taking whatever money we had. Then they brought us to a pick-up truck, which was supposedly official, and took us down a very rough road that was full of shrubs. I was scared to death, but suddenly, without thinking about whether it was a good idea, I jumped from the truck down a steep slope. I then took off running with all my might. The men began to chase and shoot at me. Fear drove me to run faster, until I managed to escape".*

After fleeing the men, who were actually kidnappers, Eduardo came to Migration to seek help. He was alone, knew nothing of his uncle's whereabouts, and was so shaken by the experience that he no longer wanted to continue the journey.

*"I came to Migration on a Friday and stayed there all weekend. They would take me in a house for migrants from my country, but only after having hearings in different courthouses. So before leaving, I had to repeat my story many times. Sometimes I didn't know whether this disaster was really happening to me or if it was just a nightmare from which I would wake disturbed but happy that it was not real".*

On Monday morning, Eduardo had returned to his home country and was placed in a centre for migrants. Just as he was regaining hope, he received devastating news, the kind of news that no one should receive. He learned that the kidnappers were holding his uncle hostage and asking his family USD 3,500 for his release: his hope was extinguished, as he had lost his travel companion. Without finishing the story, Eduardo knew that his family could not raise that much money, and that his uncle had therefore been killed.

*I jumped from the truck down a steep slope.  
I then took off running with all my might.  
The men began to chase and shoot at me.*



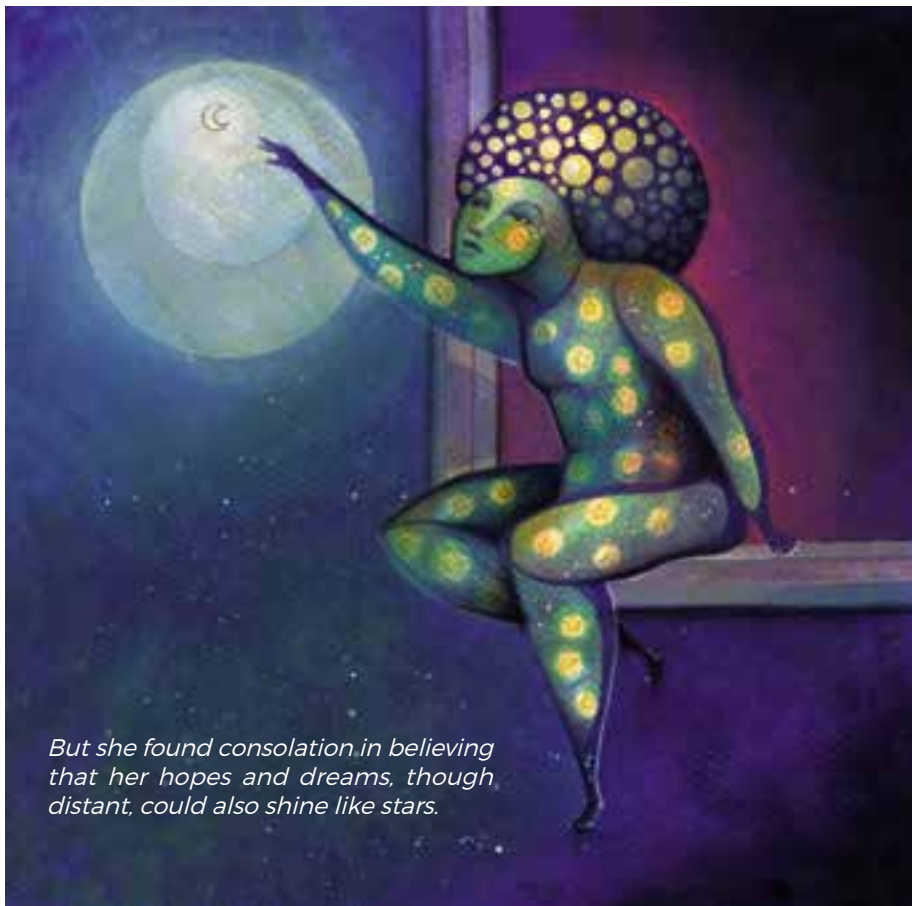
Later, Eduardo learned of the outcome. He felt overwhelming sadness over the conditions of inequality which had caused him so much suffering: his uncle was killed because his family, who could neither read nor write, had struggled to collect 3,500 in local currency, which was of little value, and sent it to the indicated address, hoping to save him. On the contrary, this sum infuriated the captors, and they killed his uncle mercilessly.

Eduardo could not explain the storm of emotions that ravaged him. Sorrow washed over him and wrung out his heart. He felt such powerlessness over things that could not be reversed. Through his torrent of tears, he resolved to lead his family out of the cycle of oppression and violence that denied them opportunities.

Now, after the storm, finding peace with himself and his past, Eduardo hopes to again begin running after the treasure, which is nothing more than to live a happy life. Perhaps in some ways, the memory of his uncle will help him attain this.







*But she found consolation in believing  
that her hopes and dreams, though  
distant, could also shine like stars.*



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## MÓNICA

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**M**ónica liked clear nights because she could see the stars despite the immense distance that lay between them. She wondered whether such distance separated her from her fulfilling dreams.

It was not easy to hope that her life might change, given all the hardships she had experienced during her short twelve years. But she found consolation in believing that her hopes and dreams, though distant, could also shine like stars.

She was a withdrawn girl. Some rendered her rebellious and ungrateful, but beneath her shell lived a rather innocent, selfless, and honest young woman.

She had little self-confidence; others' opinions greatly influenced her, for better or for worse. She struggled to articulate her own ideals. Like rootless trees, they seemed to have collapsed among the shadows of abandonment and hatred. She lacked the protective embrace of a loved one to assure her that everything would be okay.

Few people actually knew her strength because they overlooked the traumatic experiences she had survived. This led many to believe that she was unlovable, even to her parents.

Abandoned at the age of five, she did not know her roots:

*"I grew up with my mother and many brothers and sisters, even though we had different fathers. My mother always cheated. No husband or partner had ever really loved her and my siblings and me. We had no father figure. There were many men, but no one stayed home to care for us".*

The footprints of pain left wounds that were difficult to heal, but she tried not to be hostile.

Mónica had few memories. They were either faded or derived from stories that she had heard. But with these she scraped together own story of guilt and resentment. One memory was particularly painful, leaving a deep scar.

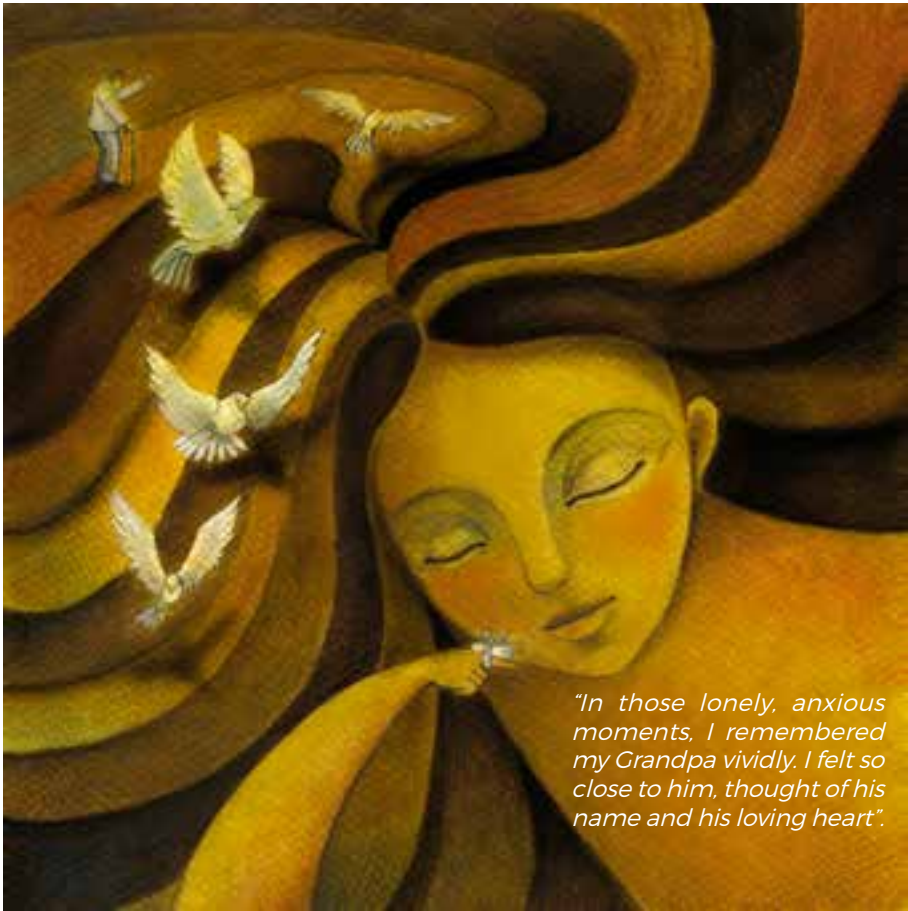
*"Abandoned, I was left to a woman who claimed to be my grandmother ... But that was a lie. She exploited and took advantage of me, also abandoning me".*

After these experiences of rejection, Mónica became homeless, without family, without aspirations. Full of disillusionment and sadness, an ember of hope drove her to migrate. She could not give up.

But as she crossed into the neighbouring northern country, immigration authorities detained her because of her irregular status. Where would she go now?

Mónica has been brave, storing her hopes deep in her heart. They still shine dimly like stars at dawn. Surely, given the right time and place, her dreams someday will shimmer like the night stars, beyond space and time.





*"In those lonely, anxious moments, I remembered my Grandpa vividly. I felt so close to him, thought of his name and his loving heart".*

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## DANIELA

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**S**ome memories surface suddenly, as if delivered by birds. Others reappear shapeless and gray as winter clouds. Some return timeless and nameless, but full of colour and emotion.

Among her recent memories, Daniela recalled her grandfather's neighbourhood, a flowery suburb with trees and bustling shops, where you could run through the streets, it was a community of kind people. She remembered that her grandfather lived in the same country where her father was born, further north; she, on the other hand, was born and raised in the same country as his mother, to the south.

Her mother and father had been together a long time, but things changed when their living situation worsened, making it difficult to support the family:

*"My dad left for the United States to look for a better life. I was so little that I don't remember him. My mom looked for work, but only found something in a bar. My sisters were taken to an orphanage because no one could take care of them. I then went to live with some friends who had also been left to fend for themselves".*

But this was not the life Daniela wanted for herself, and so she dreamt of finding her father, who she only vaguely remembered. She decided to embark on the journey, a dangerous path for a girl of only fifteen.

She did not expect that halfway through, her dream would be cut short because of health problems. Tired, feverish, and asthmatic, she was unable to continue and was detained. In that country, she was brought to a shelter for migrants where she grew lonely and sick, with no one to turn to and no one to claim her.

She did not want to return to her country to be with her mother. A memory then returned to her, full of colour:

*"In those lonely, anxious moments, I remembered my Grandpa vividly. I felt so close to him, thought of his name and his loving heart. The hostel where I was staying helped me search for him, because we were in the country where he lived".*



Guided by her memories, Daniela was taken to visit the place where she thought her grandfather lived. It is said that birds' messages always arrive on time, following the path of memory.

Despite all the time and hardships that had elapsed, her grandfather still lived in that old house, clinging to the thought of his granddaughters returning to him like birds to their nest.

Daniela was then delivered to her grandfather, who received her graciously. With him, she found the love and support she had lacked for so long.

Time passed and so did life. Daniela fell in love. She was enamored with her partner and trusted him completely. He took advantage of her charm and youth. Soon, she became pregnant and he abandoned both her and their daughter. Daniela is a single teenaged mother with her hands full. But her grandfather's home



heart never closed, becoming a refuge for Daniela and her daughter. One of Daniela's sisters was also received there, once she became old enough to leave home.

Daniela feels she is starting anew. The family is growing. She is fighting to make a future for herself, her daughter, her sisters, and her grandfather.

Meanwhile, the birds continue carrying their stories, as one builds a nest in which to store her hopes.



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## ANA

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**L**ittle girls are often called “dollies”, and later, “dolls”. Eventually they are treated like toys, without will or desires. They live to serve others, until one day their self-confidence is completely erased.

“Ana” is a popular name in Latin America, but each Ana is different with her own history. The story of this particular Ana, however, is a reflection of what many other Anas, Marias, Natalias, Lucias and young women of so many names suffer when they are treated like dolls.

With tears in her eyes, Anita recalls what she has lived during her fourteen years, her gaze lost in memories which replay chaotically in her mind.

She was a caring little girl who liked to play, run, study and dream like any other. She was also trusting and believed others, especially her family, with whom of course she felt safe.

She had just turned seven when she was first molested by her uncle, who lived nearby.

*“At first, I would try to defend myself, screaming and calling for help. But he tied my hands and covered my mouth. As time passed, I realized I had no way out, and could do nothing about it. At that point, he didn’t have to tie me down anymore. I told a friend from school about what was happening and she encouraged me to report it and tell my parents. When I did tell them, I never imagined they would scold and blame me for everything. My father started to mistreat me and forbade me to play with my sisters. This hurt me so much. I needed them to protect me. How could they not understand that I didn’t want to be abused? I had tried to stop him! But I couldn’t. Why were they treating me like this?”*

Criticism and scorn filled the house of darkness, as Ana’s light faded little by little. Like a rag doll twisted in a child’s careless grip, she was lifeless. To whom could she turn?

Trust meant nothing to her now as she could not trust her family or even herself, and so unfolded a pattern of violence and abuse.

*“I continued going to school and was already thirteen. One day, some friends invited me to skip*



*school and go on a trip. They insisted until I agreed. It felt good to decide something for myself as if I were embarking on an adventure or pulling a prank.*



*So we started walking, but when the surroundings became increasingly isolated, I realized that something wasn't right. We arrived at a remote house in the village. I was afraid, but didn't know what to do or how to get back. The five of them then abused me. They said they knew that my uncle had already "started" me. I don't know how the school principal heard about what happened, but he told my mom, who again blamed me. Someone reported my case to the Public Ministry and thereafter, I was taken from my family to live in different homes and shelters, where I was continually abused. A group of girls once raped me and no one did anything to defend me. So I fled from those places several times, searching for a way out.*

*I once found a shelter where I felt safe. I wanted to stay there forever, but for some unknown reason, they returned me to my parents".*

After the hard journey, Ana's mother was called to a hearing at which she regained custody of Ana. The return home was painful, full of reprimand and insult. She was overcome with fear and anxiety that she would be abused with impunity again.

These traumatic experiences eventually led her to become a prostitute, which somehow allowed her to escape reality. Anyway, for a long time, she had felt that her body didn't belong to her anymore.

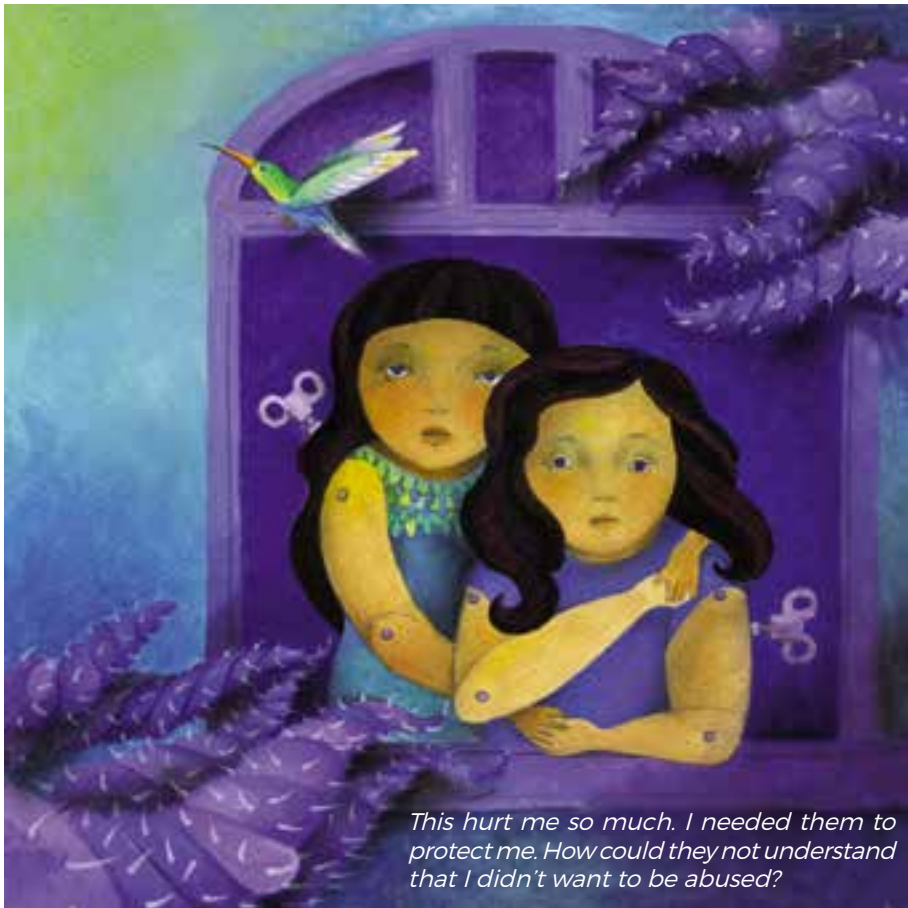
That was when Ana garnered her little remaining strength and tried to change her life. She threw a few belongings and a notebook for writing about her journey, into a small backpack. Migrating was her means to escape, to start a new life far from her past. When the sun burned her face and her feet blistered, she closed her and told herself she could do it.

The thought of being returned home frightened her; but it was this thought that gave her the strength to continue.

During her journey, she was detained, deported, and sent to a home for sexually abused women. She did not want to stay there and managed to escape. She tried her luck migrating again, now more confident than ever that a prosperous future awaited her in the north.

But life took her on a different path. Again, she was deported, taken to a shelter for migrants, and returned to her family.

Ana now lives with her aunt in a city far away, where she has resolved to start over, return to school, and find dignified work someday.



*This hurt me so much. I needed them to protect me. How could they not understand that I didn't want to be abused?*

In her voice, echoes the desire to recover and rediscover herself, reclaim her body and her life, to piece together her broken dreams.



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## LILI AND JOSUÉ

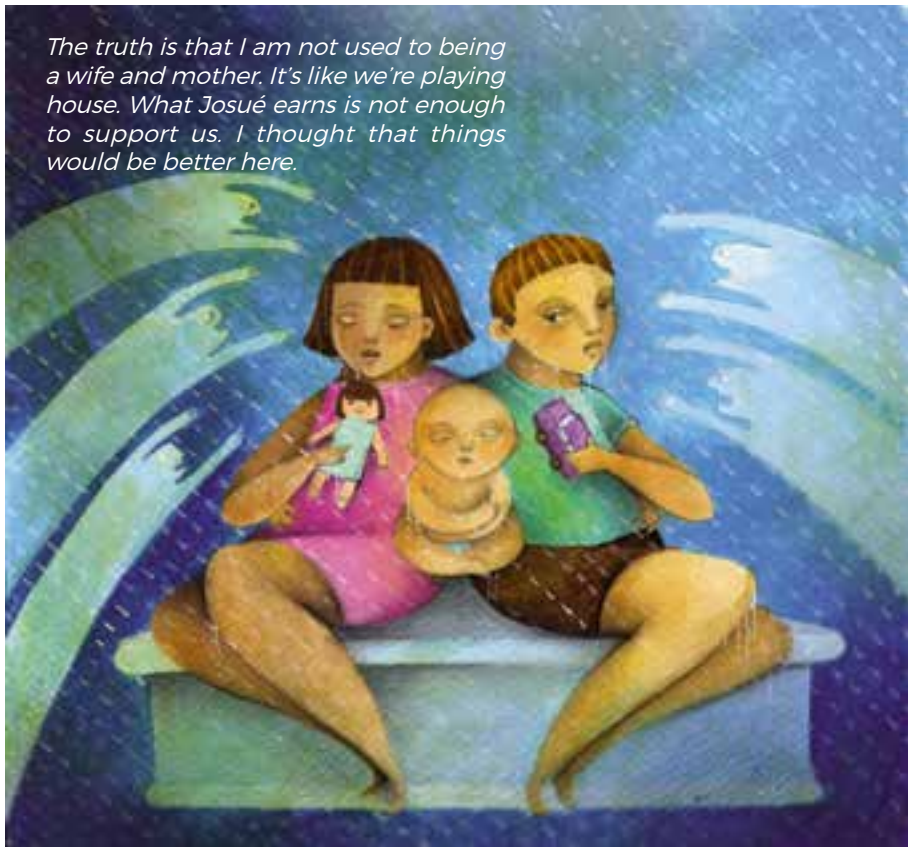
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**E**ven before being born, baby girls are given dolls dressed in pink, their bodies sensuous. Meanwhile, boys are taught to love cars and drive fast as a sign of boldness. But no one ever tells children that they can be whoever they want to be, that they can play and have fun together, that they can study, grow, and change the world together. No one tells girls that who they see in the mirror is beautiful and perfect as she is. No one tells boys to release their tears when sadness and despair overtake them.

The world has also prohibited discussion of sex and pleasure – from preventing unwanted teen pregnancy in order to first pursue one’s dreams, to deciding when the time is right to start a family.

This is the landscape of Lili and Josué’s story. She is fifteen, and he, eighteen. They are a couple, best friends. Their daughter, Noelia is six months old. Some time ago, they began migrating in order to escape poverty and search for better lives. So they crossed the border and

*The truth is that I am not used to being a wife and mother. It's like we're playing house. What Josué earns is not enough to support us. I thought that things would be better here.*





reached their destination – where Josué’s mother also lived.



He worked nights from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m., more than twelve-hour shifts, washing cars. It was an effort, but he did it gladly, because when he waxed the cars, he thought of those he had admired in magazines. His salary was only 200 pesos a day, little to bring home. True, he sometimes felt desperate, but he had been taught that as the man of the family, he must be strong, despite his emotions. This thought burdened him every day. The situation for Lili was likewise difficult.

*“The truth is that I am not used to being a wife and mother. It’s like we’re playing house. What Josué earns is not enough to support us. I thought that things would be better here, – but that is not the case”.*

A friend of Lili’s, who was around her same age, suggested she get a night job with good pay. For this, she decided to leave Noelia with a neighbour, who she would pay some change; anyway, they would make enough. Lili looked in the mirror and felt like a showcase doll.

*“So I worked as a prostitute on the streets of Tapachula twice a week, taking up to three clients a night at 150 pesos each.*



*I had to earn money somehow, as we weren't making ends meet.*

*One day while working on the street, Migration arrested me because I had no documents. The neighbour who took care of Noelia, seeing that I did not come home, gave her to my mother-in-law who returned her to Josué.*

*While detained, I managed to speak with Josué, but I did not tell him the truth. Can you imagine how horrible it would have been for him to know what I was doing? I said I had been arrested while running errands and that Noelia was with our neighbour in the meantime”.*

Josué never knew the truth. During her detainment she knew that as a minor, she would be returned to her home country - but that's what she really wanted, to be with her mother and bring little Noelia with her and start over. Despite the sadness she would feel being far away from Josué for some time, she hoped he would understand.

*“In the coming months, I am going to live with my mom and daughter in my home country. I'm going to go back. The truth is that I need my mom to protect and care for me. I don't know if Josué will think of returning to be with us. I believe that things will get better though, for my daughter too. I hope that she never has to experience the same hardships I did”.*

Lili and her little daughter returned to their country of origin, hoping to someday reunite with Josué, to become the family that in games, they had dreamed of being.

*"If I could fix the world - my world - I would look for a family who I want to live with, who would want to live with me, where I could find love and support."*

Someone to  
SALVE  
me



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## SERGIO

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**A**t first glance, you might get the wrong idea about Sergio, even consider him dangerous. But pay attention. His tattooed body tells a story. The shocking first impression he emits is merely a defence against the twisted world. He avoids your gaze for fear that his eyes will tell the story of his broken, vulnerable heart, which actually seeks love.

This harsh façade shields his wounds to prevent further pain.

And behind it, dwell sixteen years of fighting in solitude, but with conviction, to recreate some semblance of a life out of its shattered pieces.

*"I loved my dad. He was seventy when he met my mom after his first wife died. She was just fifteen and belonged to the Mara-18 gang. That's how my mom got pregnant with me. I lived with them until I was four, but they separated and my mom brought me to live with her. Being away from my dad hurt me a lot. I missed him and I think he missed me too. We kept in touch until he died of old age".*

Sergio's mother was young with many problems that she felt incapable of resolving, leading her to alcoholism. She was unable to care for Sergio as a result, and he resented her greatly for this.

A storm of uncontrollable emotions welled within him. He used drugs to numb his suffering, just as his mother had done with alcohol.

But Sergio wanted to transform his reality and discover a new landscape, so he decided to migrate. But the path did not unfold as he had anticipated.

Loneliness and fear drove him to commit crimes along the way. After mugging a woman, he was imprisoned for two years in a neighbouring country. He was ashamed and this fueled him to strive and change his life.

Upon being released from prison, Sergio was repatriated and taken to a centre for migrants. Given his past, the workers there helped him locate relatives with whom he could live as an alternative to being institutionalized. But the prospects were not promising.

His mother had no records, but as an alcoholic, was not an ideal guardian anyway. Sergio also had several half brothers and sisters through his father.

They first contacted a sister who was around fifty-years-old, but she rejected him as the son of her father's second relationship, which she rendered illegitimate.

A brother was then located in the United States. He remembered Sergio fondly, because he reminded him of his father, who had promised to take care of him.

But since he could not bring Sergio to the United States, the brother arranged for his son – Sergio's nephew, who lived in the same country – to take him in. This seemed like a positive move.

*"At first, everything seemed like a dream come true. It was as if my dad was watching over me from heaven and had arranged a home and a family for me. But it was too good to be true. The family began mistreating and blaming me for everything, rubbing salt in my wounds, until they threatened to kick me out. I couldn't take it anymore. Soon*



*I realized that the family was only taking care of me because my brother was sending them money from the United States. I meant nothing to them”.*

Fleeing rejection and contempt, Sergio migrated again, clinging to hope for a better future. He managed to cross the northern border, but while wandering the streets, was again returned to his country and the centre for migrants which he had recently left.

No relatives were willing to support him this time, so he was institutionalized again.

Behind his forbidding mask, is a teenager grappling with sadness and abandonment every day. He just wants to belong to a family, have a job. His tattoos recount a story that no one could fully comprehend. Maybe with his inner strength, Sergio can write new chapters that lead to a happy ending.



*“If I could fix the world – my world – I would look for a family who I want to live with, who would want to live with me, where I could find love and support. I would also like to work so I could have money for things”.*



With strength and perseverance, Sergio molds his future like the crafts he later learned to make as an immigrant striving to build his life in a new country.



*"As the oldest son, I feel responsible  
for finding a job and supporting  
my family.  
No more tears, no more sadness at  
home. I will make it!"*

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## ÁLVARO

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**L**ike butterflies seeking the sun's warmth, children migrate north, dreaming of a blue sky to shelter them as they fly. Many succeed; some become disoriented and must rest before retaking the path; others succumb to predators along the way. This is Álvaro's story.

*"I am fourteen years old. We lived in the countryside between rivers, my five younger brothers and sister, my mom, dad and me. I am the oldest. My dad got a disease called diabetes, so working in the field became very dangerous because if he got cut or hurt, he wouldn't be able to heal. My mom had to stay home and take care of him. That's when we became poor, and I, as the oldest, had to leave home to look for work. Sometimes I found something, but sometimes I didn't, and as a kid, I didn't get always paid what I should. We barely made enough to eat and take care of dad".*

Remembering his family triggers tears. He had migrated out of love for them.

*“One day, two Hondurans travelling to the United States passed through my village. They said there would be good work opportunities there and that they would be able to support their families. I thought this was my chance to get ahead. These guys gave me confidence and I felt they could protect me. I also thought they knew what they were doing, because if we got stopped, they told me to say that we were travelling separately”.*

And so Álvaro joined them. Along the way, they stopped at a shelter for migrants. Álvaro felt as if he had stopped in the middle of an unfamiliar path with no signs. Where was he? Where was he going?

An uncle of his had gone to the United States, but his family had never received news of him.

At the shelter, people spoke of the journey’s dangers. They said that his companions could be accused of trafficking Álvaro, as he was a minor. But he felt prepared for anything.

To the south he saw his family, for whom he felt responsible. To the north, lay an unknown destination enshrouded in clouds.

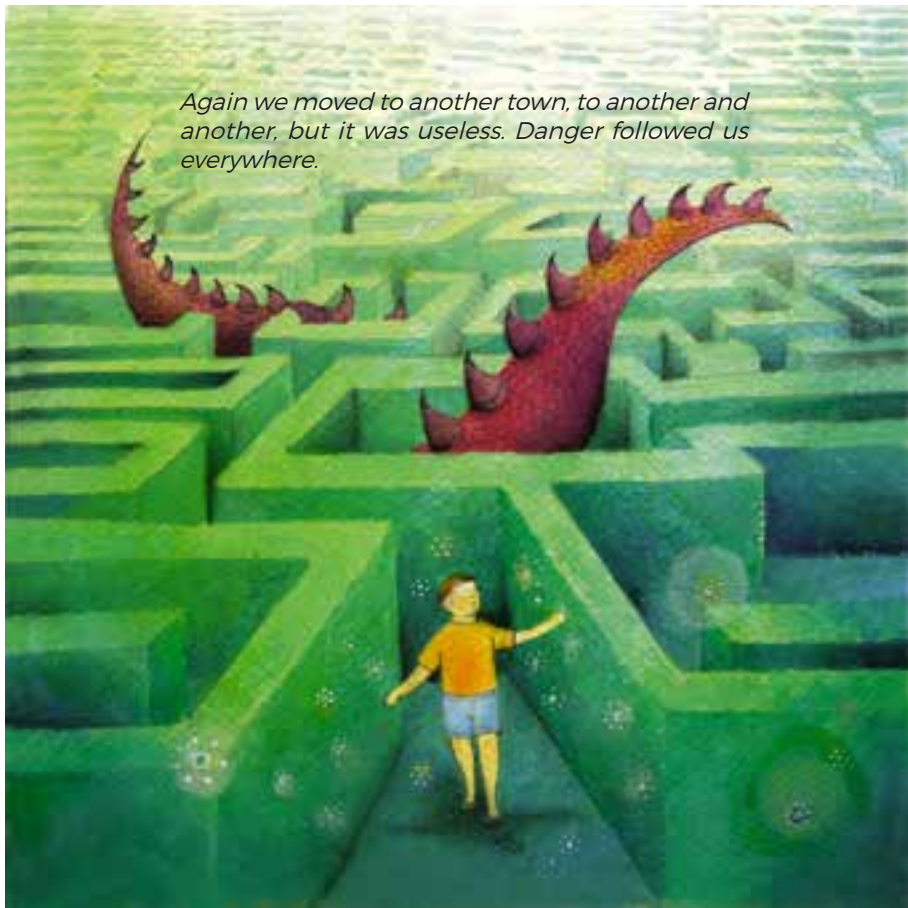
He would not allow himself to return home empty-handed.

*"As the oldest son, I feel responsible for finding a job and supporting my family. No more tears, no more sadness at home. I will make it!"*

Álvaro decided to continue on his uncertain path. As butterflies endure storms along their route, he feels he is approaching the hardest part. But the memory of his family strengthens him. Throughout the journey, he hopes to spread his wings and soar.



*Again we moved to another town, to another and another, but it was useless. Danger followed us everywhere.*



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## CARLOS

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**H**ow can one tell Carlos to go back, that the journey is too dangerous, when at home, he meets violence everywhere and fears for his and his family's lives?

*"When my dad headed north two years ago, he convinced my mom to go too so that they could work hard and later bring my sixteen-year old sister, Julia, and me with them. They left us with our grandparents and soon began sending money so that we could continue school and get everything we needed".*

His eyes filled with tears as painful memories began to smother those of happiness.

*"Some gang members realized that they were sending us remittances and began threatening my grandfather to give them money. He did, thinking that would avoid problems. This went on for two months. We thought they would stop bothering us. But things got worse. It wasn't enough for them; they wanted me to join the*

*gang. One of the gang members fell in love with my sister and that was the worst. We had no way out. We told my parents, and they said we should move to a different neighbourhood where we would be safe”.*

When open paths turn dangerous, it's easy to despair.

*“We rented a house in a town further north, but that didn't help because it was just as dangerous there. People didn't know us. Maybe that's why criminals began to chase us, until one day, they beat my grandfather. Who beats a grandfather?”*

*Again we moved to another town, to another and another, but it was useless. Danger followed us everywhere. On the phone, Mom and Dad kept insisting that we move, but where, if everywhere was dangerous? Living far away, they didn't understand how things were in our country. So I decided to go and tell them in person, to make them understand. I told Julia, my sister, what I was going to do, but kept it a secret until before I left so as not to anguish my grandparents who had been so good to us”.*

Carlos had many doubts; he didn't understand certain aspects of his life. But he thought he could lead his family out of their increasingly vulnerable situation. He recalled a book of mental exercises that his teachers once gave him. In one, he had to make his way out of a labyrinth that contained a monster. Carlos felt as if he was in that



maze. Only now, the gauntlets and monsters were many. He then realized that help would not simply appear out of nowhere. He had to go get it, and in doing so, face the unknown.

He began the journey with nothing but a small backpack. He managed to reach the first border with a group of adults and another teenager. Everyone seemed violent.

One of the men recognized Carlos, knew his family and where they lived. That was enough for Carlos to realize he was in danger. But like fireflies illuminating his path, a light appeared to him in that dark moment.

*“One of the women realized what was happening and advised me to separate from the group. Under the pretext of buying something to eat, we stayed behind and lost them. She said goodbye, gave me some money, and continued on her way. I walked a long time, not knowing where I was going. I was dirty, tired and hungry. Now in a new country, I was growing desperate and began asking people for money in a town park. But a cop told me to leave. A man then looked around, approached me, and asked what had happened.*



*I imagined that he was my uncle coming to rescue me, that everything was okay, and I began to cry. He gave me money and paid for a motor cab<sup>8</sup> to take me to a place where I could get help”.*

The man had sent him to a shelter for migrants. There, he found the support and assistance he needed. But Carlos was convinced this was just a stop along the way. Having overcome so many obstacles, nothing could stop him now.

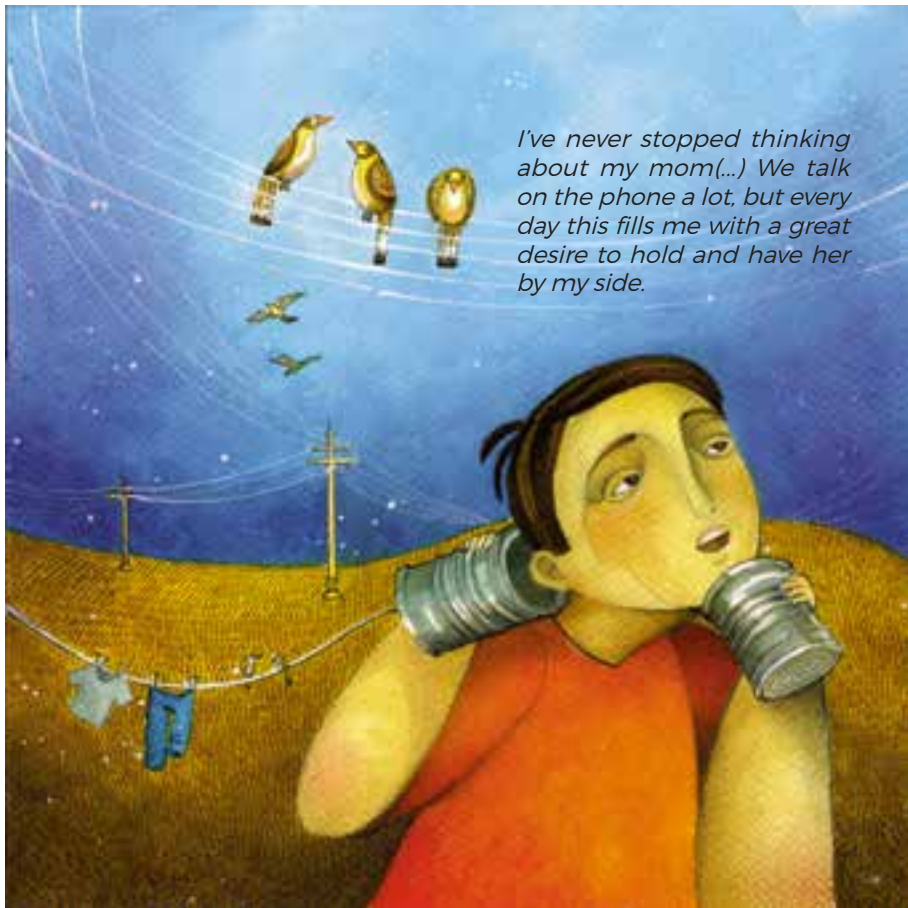


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**8** A mode of transportation with three wheels.

*"If other children have done it, why can't I? I am so close to reaching my mom and dad. For now, it's better that they don't know where I am so that I am not sent back to my sister and grandparents. I want to tell them how it is our country in person. I'm halfway there. From here it will be easier".*

What path has he taken in the midst of so much darkness? Is he any closer to exiting this labyrinth?



*I've never stopped thinking about my mom(...) We talk on the phone a lot, but every day this fills me with a great desire to hold and have her by my side.*

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## PABLO

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**P**hone calls can diminish distance when a loved one's voice is heard from far away. However, they cannot replace the immediacy of an embrace or time spent together.

Pablo talked to his mom on the phone often. Her name is Elisa. She had migrated to the United States when he just was eight months old, leaving him with his grandparents. Elisa wanted to give her son the best opportunities, but she knew that single mothers like herself faced many obstacles, especially in her country.

Pablo barely remembered his mother. The few memories he had were construed through stories his grandparents told him, photographs, and countless phone calls. He was a well-behaved child with many friends. He loved and respected his grandparents, who treated him like a son from the moment they began caring for him. Upon turning seventeen and finishing the ninth grade, he grew tired of longing for his mother and decided to build his own image of her. He abruptly left home, determined to make the journey north.

*"My grandparents love and care for me. I know they go to great lengths to feed and clothe me with my mom's remittances".*

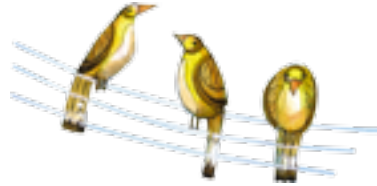
But Pablo wanted to know his mother, to embrace the brave woman who had migrated to give her son a better future.

*"I've never stopped thinking about my mom, even though she left when I was very little. Though I barely remember her, I know she has always cared for me and sent money from the United States to support me. She knows that I'm safe with my grandma and grandpa, that they love and care for me always. We talk on the phone a lot, but every day this fills me with a great desire to hold and have her by my side. My younger friend Daniel was in the same situation until last year. He left school and with almost no money and made the trip north. He is now with her mother, as I want to be with mine".*

Pablo arrived at a shelter for migrants after travelling a considerable distance. Tears flowed as he thought of his mother and the space that still separated them.

He was confused and felt wrong to have left home without warning, aware that his grandparents were concerned about him. But in his heart he felt called to reunite with his mother and this armed him with the strength to conquer the distance between them.

At the shelter, workers helped him to call his mother. Fighting tears and retaliation, she told him to go back to his grandparents, who were anxious, having not known his whereabouts for several



days. Elisa convinced him to return but promised to come for him soon, after completing some immigration paperwork that would enable her to travel without delays: “Soon, son,” she said.

Pablo started back with the gift of his mother’s promise. Despite the path reversing, he felt his mother drawing closer to him. He had no doubts.

*“Hearing Mom’s voice again gave me hope. I miss my grandparents, the meals they make me, their hugs! They must be making coffee right now. I want to go home and prepare for mom’s return. I know it will happen, she promised it would, and in my heart, I feel it will be fulfilled”.*

Elisa is proud of Pablo for being a good student and more than that, a good person. She understands his decision: years ago, she left him out of love; the same love that now led him back to her.



She also wants to hold him and make a future together, but she wants to do it right so as not waste the years of sacrifice. The time will come. For now, she feels happy and reassured that Pablo is back at home with his grandparents, in school.

During her last call to the migrant shelter, she thanked them for supporting her son.

Because of everything he has survived, Pablo appreciates what he has even more, and is grateful to have found his way home.

He and his mom pine for the day when everyday life together will replace their phone calls.



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## MAYA

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**H**er heart beats full of hope, willing to take risks for those she loves. Malice and deceit were yet unknown to her. This is why Maya trusted a friend's brother, who her friend said, would provide the help she needed to achieve her goals.

*"My parents married young and had a big family – I have four brothers and six sisters. We are poor, but have always been very united as a family. I am seventeen, and my dad and my mom are around forty. Though young, they have worked hard for our family and always loved my siblings and me.*

*To ease the burden a little, I had lived with an aunt who cares for me and helps me study. But I always thought that maybe someday I would be able to do something to improve our lives. Many people said that travelling to the United States was a good opportunity to do that. Dad told me not to worry, that the most important thing was that we loved each other and were happy, but his answer didn't satisfy me. I wanted to give them something better.*

*My best friend knew of my intentions and suggested I speak with her 41-year-old brother, José, who was also thinking of undertaking the journey northward and who could accompany me so that I wouldn't have to travel alone. I thought that going with someone who could protect me was a good idea.*

*I kept my plan a secret, telling only my boyfriend when I was going to leave. With tears in his eyes, he begged me to stay, saying that it wasn't the right path. I cried too because I love him, but it was already decided so I said goodbye. I left at dawn with a heavy heat and little luggage. I went secretly into the city, with this man I barely knew but trusted. At night, I called my aunt who, crying, begged me to come back. Without further explanation, I hung up. I was in so much pain that I couldn't continue to conversation. The decision was already made”.*

Maya and José crossed the country without any major setbacks. They each contributed money to the trip and everything seemed to be going smoothly. But at the first border crossing, money became scarce, so they shared a room.



*The next morning, he threatened me to keep it a secret and said we would continue the journey together.*

She never could have imagined his intentions nor the nightmare that was about to unfold.

First there was insinuation, then discussion, then wrangling, threats, and pleas violently silenced. Maya was terrified. One moment she had found companionship and protection in this man, and the next, he had become a rapist. She was devastated.



He slept peacefully, remorseless. Maya could not believe what had happened. Haunted by images, she wept all night, unable to sleep.

She felt abused, like an unwanted object. Her capacity to think, feel, and decide had been obliterated.

*"The next morning, he threatened me to keep it a secret and said we would continue the journey together. I felt sick. I couldn't eat, but he forced me until I did. As we walked to the city, I thought only of where he could have hidden the money. If I managed to find it, I could escape to where he could no longer hurt me".*

At nightfall, the horror story was repeated. Arming herself with strength, she said she would return to her country. This infuriated him.

*“Don’t even think about going back”, he yelled. ‘I have my reasons for leaving the village and I wouldn’t give a second thought to killing you. I’ve killed many times, and I’m not going to go back to get caught. I could kill my own sister for having suggested to bring you; your boyfriend too, just like that I could solve all of these problems,’ he said. At that moment I was more afraid than ever.*

*As we ran out of money, he forced me to sell my shoes and other things. He threatened to sell me one night, if I did not sell my stuff. I did my best, and luckily I succeeded”.*

Time passed amidst anxiety and fear. The nightmare continued every day and night and Maya could find no way out.

After having no money or food for several days, they reached a lodging house for migrants. During the entrance interview, José gave false information and lied about his nationality.

Again, he threatened Maya to remain silent. She obeyed out of fear. But other migrants noticed that something was wrong. Jose’s abusive power over Maya had become obvious.

Another youth at the lodge furtively advised Maya to speak with someone in private. Somewhere in her battered heart, she valued this advice and looked for someone with whom to talk. After weeks of abuse, Maya was hopeful that her suffering would end.

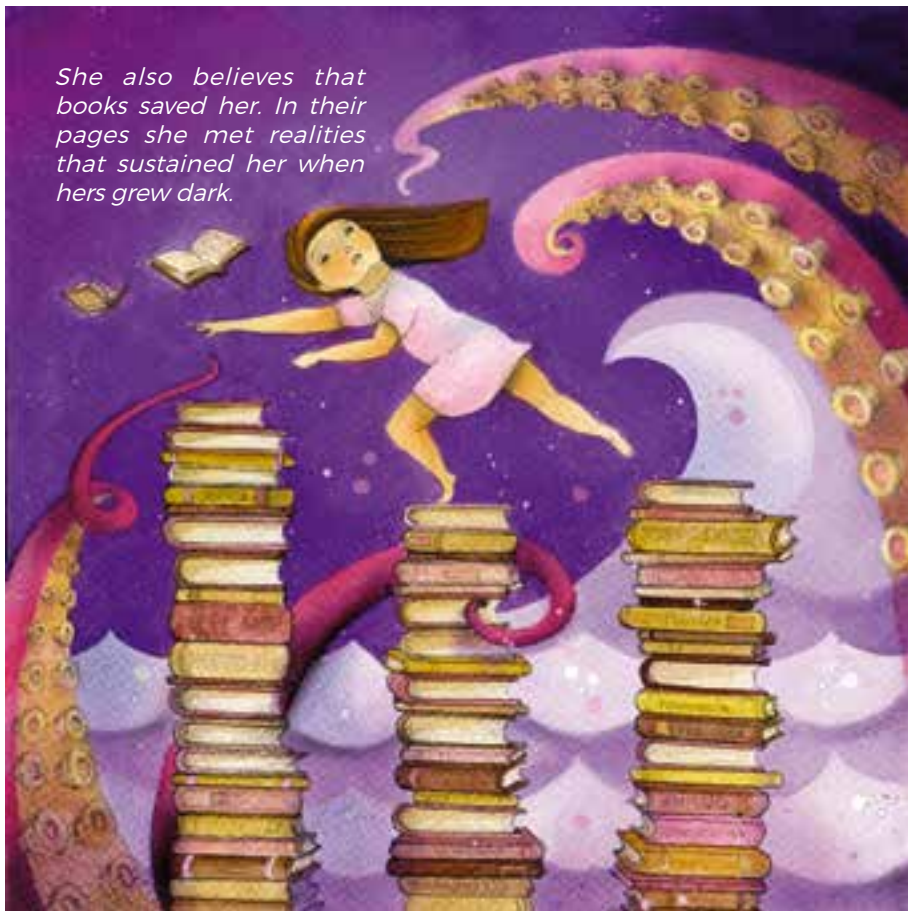
*“He was thrown out of the shelter. I stayed and got counselling. I felt safe there, and could even call home. What had seemed impossible before was finally happening. I was so excited to hear my family’s voices. They never stopped loving and worrying about me. At the shelter I felt motivated to file a legal complaint about what had happened, but was still too afraid to go through with it. I know that he calls asking for me and I know his intentions”.*

After weeping and sharing embraces for having found help, Maya made her way home. Two months later, she called those who had assisted her at the shelter to express her gratitude for everything they had done.

Like a bird released from its cage, Maya returned freely to the world she knew. Her wounds will heal with time and she will regain self-confidence. She is convinced that no sum of money can replace the love and security she feels with her own family.



*She also believes that books saved her. In their pages she met realities that sustained her when hers grew dark.*





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## CAROLINA

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**C**arolina loved to read. Books invited her to imagine, opened her to new worlds and realities.

*"I like to study. Books are the treasures that shape my dreams."*

Throughout her sixteen years, she excelled academically. She was smart and sure of herself.

*"I was a good student and this seemed to bother some of my classmates, who started to harass me. I endured this for a long time. When I couldn't take it anymore, I reported them to the school principal, who expelled them for a week."*

Carolina hoped that the mistreatment would end with this punishment; however an avalanche of retribution ensued.

The aggressors were the girlfriends of gang members. A few weeks after the expulsion, the gang raped Carolina. This happened on several occasions, accompanied by threats to kill her and her family if she told anyone. She nearly died during the last rape, but was released on the condition that she left the village that day.

In desperation, Carolina turned to her family.



*"I had to tell my mom everything. Her only solution was for the whole family to move to my grandmother's house on the other side of the city. A month and a half after living there, we discovered that I was pregnant. Since my family is Christian, they did not want me to have an abortion on religious principles, but my anxiety and depression were so strong that I miscarried at five months. Afterwards, I was taken to get psychiatric help. I cried constantly and could not sleep. I wanted to be alone behind locked doors, or with my mom. I was so afraid of being attacked again."*

Carolina's family decided to immigrate to United States to start over, far from danger. This seemed to them, the best option.

While migrating north across two countries, they encountered criminals who mistakenly thought that they had relatives in the United States. In pursuit of money, the bandits kidnapped, threatened, and extorted them. Carolina and her family managed to escape them. Hungry, tired and broke, they were delivered to Migration.

They were deported to their home country, where, despite multiple attempts to settle in different places with relatives, poverty, unemployment, and gang threats prevented them again and again from stabilizing. They eventually returned to the grandmother's house, exhausted by constant suffering and upheaval.

There, a civil society organization supported Carolina's and her siblings' education, so that their parents had one less worry and could work to cover other needs.



Carolina gradually overcame the incredible suffering she has endured. Her aspirations did not die along the way. On the contrary, she believes that surviving trauma has strengthened her. She also believes that books saved her. In their pages she met realities that sustained her when hers grew dark. Now, she reopens them to awaken dormant dreams, using their words to create the story of herself.



*"I want to be a lawyer and have a good job in order to support my family. I have already forgiven the gang. Although I still live in fear, my family and I will move on."*

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## MICAEL

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**W**indows are magical in a child's eyes, for they reveal the world: vast oceans seemingly infinite; birds flying in summer skies.

Nine-year-old Micael delights in looking out the window, because this conjures distant memories of life on his native island.

They unfold like scenes, always in the same order. He remembers his father, Jimmy, fixing bikes in the evenings. How he loved to watch him and ask a thousand questions: "What is a screw? What does it do? Why is the chain all oily?" He remembers his father smiling at him.

He also remembers his mother, Marie, so vividly that he can almost hear her loud laugh. She was usually busy and concerned about money, but she always made time for Micael, or "Mica", as she called him.



Mica also remembers when things at home changed. It started when one day, his father, who was a friend to everyone in the village, was brutally beaten in the street. Mica didn't know who had done it, nor why.

He was too young to understand that it was about politics, a coup d'état, the opposition, much less, that his father had been assaulted for identifying with a political party.

*"After that, things happened that I didn't understand. Dad was attacked with words and beatings. He lost his job. Our evenings with the bikes ended then too. Sometimes there was nothing to eat. My parents argued a lot. One night, they cried for a long time, the time my dad said he was leaving. Why was my dad abandoning us like this?"*

Jimmy could not get Marie to believe him: if he stayed on the island, the whole family would be at risk. He had to leave urgently. He would seek asylum in another country and once established, arrange for she and Mica to join him. Thanks to a friend, he got a visa and left.

After a process of several years, Jimmy gained refugee status.

*"I remember that mom and I spent a lot of time without dad. At some point, I thought I would never see him again. When I heard mom crying at night, I realized she felt we had been abandoned too, but every night she assured me that someday we would all be together again".*

One day, while Marie and Mica were shopping, two strange men pushed them. When she told Jimmy about this, he knew they were in danger. He then fulfilled his promise of reuniting the family.

Marie and Mica moved to Jimmy's country of asylum. Their reunification was joyful as they sought to make up for lost time. Despite missing their homeland, things were calmer now.

Then a second son, Miguel was born, and with his arrival came renewed hope for a better life. However, this baby's light was darkened by disease. After undergoing several tests, it was discovered that Miguel had HIV.

The family was shocked; Marie and Jimmy were also HIV-positive. She felt betrayed and called Jimmie a cheater to justify the diagnosis. Her trust



*Mica then discovered windows as a means of escape. Climbing though, he wanted to leave everything that was inside and try to change his life.*





was broken. Jimmy did not take the news well either; he became physically violent toward Marie and Mica.

The reunification for which they had longed, had created a void between them.

Mica then discovered windows as a means of escape. Climbing though, he wanted to leave everything that was inside and try to change his life.

Mica responded to his family problems the only way he could. He stopped going to school and would play outside all day, mostly with the older kids. The police brought him home every time. Their visits became increasingly frequent, and Jimmy violently punished Mica in return.

*“Mom and dad fought every day. There were no more smiles at home. Mom was always alone and silent. Dad beat us. They yelled and blamed each other for my behaviour. Mom was always housebound because she didn’t speak Spanish. She tried to learn, but had a hard time. I spoke the same language as her, our native language, but didn’t want to, because I couldn’t make friends here in that language. Anyway, Mom didn’t talk to me. She must have been really lonely, because Dad didn’t speak to her in our native language either”.*

Suddenly, Micael stopped making memories of home. As much as he tried, his memories then belonged to a new home: the institution that removed him from his violent family-life and took him in.

A civil society organization entered Mica into a foster home. He was the first foreign child accepted there. The transition was difficult at first. He did not understand the rules, why he was there, or where his parents were. Despite all their troubles, he missed them.

Confusion and sadness consumed him. He had trouble relating to other children, and sometimes acted violently out of frustration, as he had learned to do at home.

With time and the support of those at the foster home, he became friendlier, more outgoing, and able to approach other kids without fear. He came to understand the rules where he lived and gradually got used to his new life.

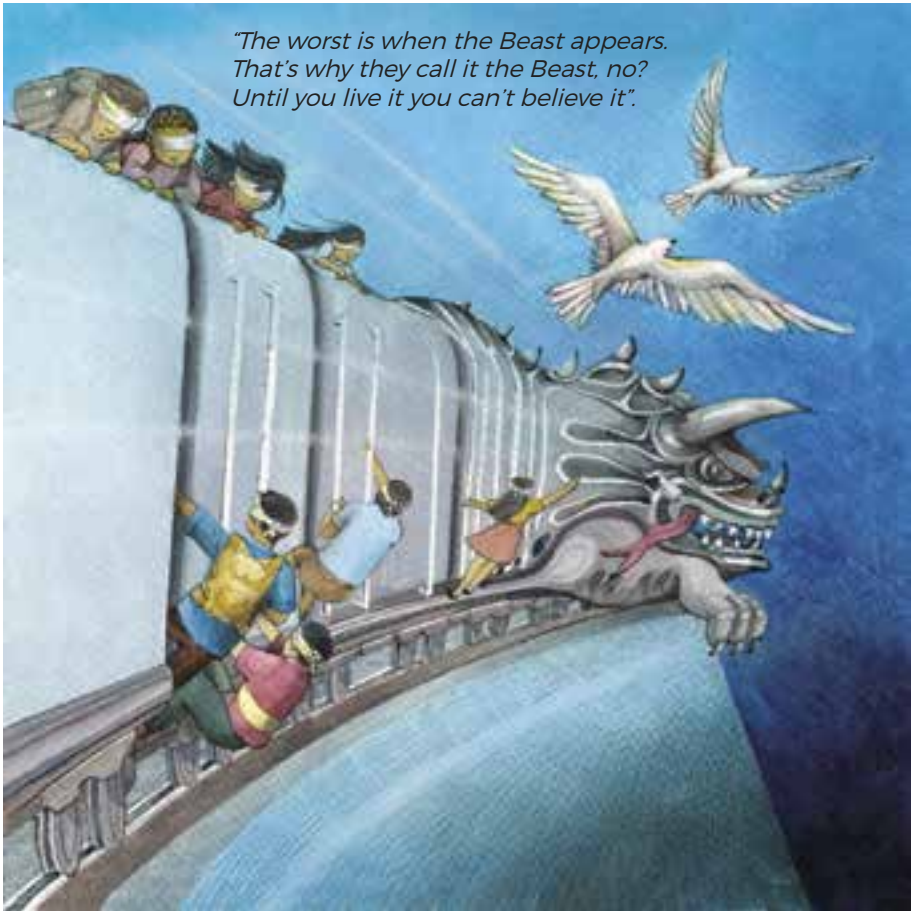
*"I learned to love the people who took care of us. I made friends; I've learned a lot. When I received a United Nations certificate from my teacher, saying 'honour roll'; I didn't understand at first. But then I realized I had gotten it for always doing my best and liking to learn. My mom never stopped visiting me and that helped me a lot too I think. We learned to get along better, to play, to laugh, to talk, because we missed each other with the separation, and always hoped to be together again soon. Dad also visited me, which*

*made us both been so happy. He asked my forgiveness for hitting and being angry with me so many times. I understand that he was confused and desperate, and I think he missed our afternoons repairing bikes as much as I did”.*

Mica no longer uses windows to escape. Instead, he looks out at the sky and the birds that soar upward like his dreams.



*"The worst is when the Beast appears.  
That's why they call it the Beast, no?  
Until you live it you can't believe it".*



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## LUCAS

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**E**veryone has the right to dream, as they do the right to have a family and their basic needs met. When one is continually denied opportunities, he looks in every direction for a light, a guide.

During his seventeen years, the closest thing Lucas had to a family was his gang. In them he took refuge; they had shaped his identity. However, over time they became a source of fatal danger.

Out of necessity and fear, Lucas migrated. He wanted to escape the death threats, find work, and pursue his dreams. Somehow, he managed to pay the smugglers USD 4000 to help him cross the border.

*“So much had happened that I couldn’t find another way out. Migrating was my only option and I hadn’t given it much thought. With a change of clothes and the last USD 25 I had left, I began my adventure towards the border. The first part had been easy, so I thought the last stretch would be too. But money runs out as does strength. Crossing the border by river, hiding in the bushes to avoid borders patrols, this is not for the weak”.*

Crossing paths of light and shadow, these adventures can turn perilous.

*"The worst is when the Beast appears. That's why they call it the Beast, no? Until you live it you can't believe it. I used to think it was just a train that travelled from country to country, like any other. But once it arrives, you sense that fear, violence, and death are boarding with you. Meanwhile, someone clings to the stairs, another climbs onto the roof. I was among the bold ones to ride the Beast. But I was lucky. Despite witnessing terror and walking close to death, I did not lose my life or any part of my body".*

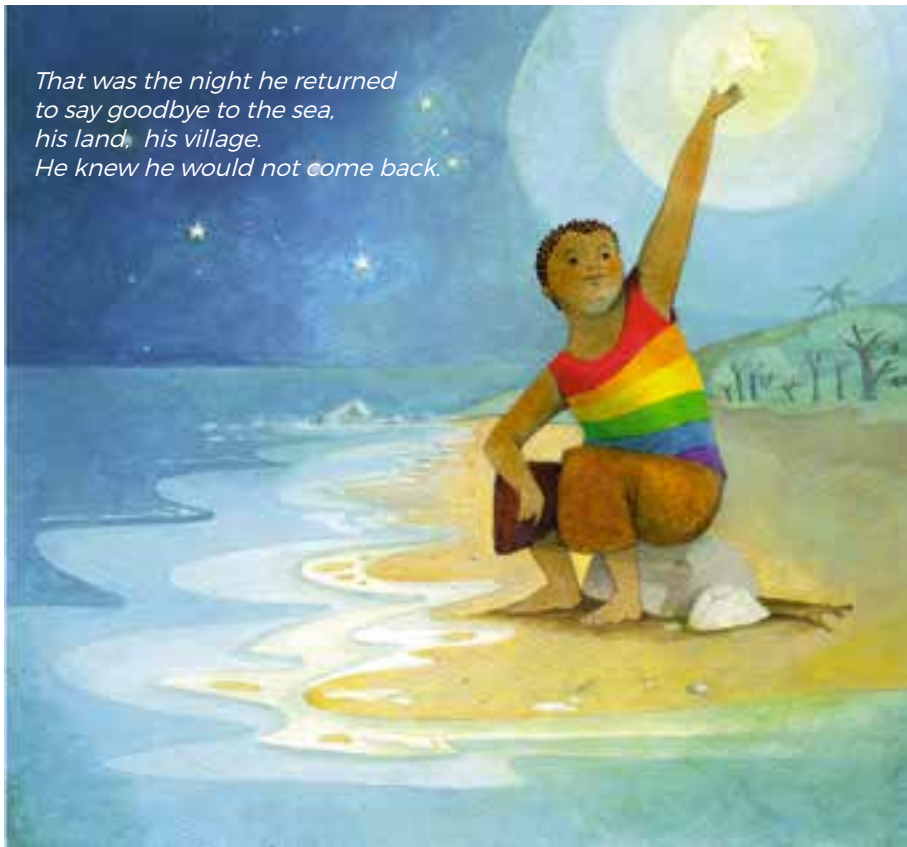
But Lucas did not reach his destination. After riding the Beast, he stayed in a transit country, trying to make money so he could continue his journey. At first, churches and charitable individuals helped him. Then he got a job selling juice but was only paid USD 5 a day. While working one day he was arrested and sent to a centre for migrants.

*"After spending eight months there, I was taken to my country's consulate and sent home. Until that day, I had never been on an airplane. I never imagined my first time would be like this. I was not going where I wanted, but well... despite everything, I have never surrendered my dream of reaching the United States. The thought still fills my mind. I don't know if I'm trying my luck. I don't know what awaits me, but I can't stay here. I can't even dream here. Bring on the Beast because I won't give up! I survived it once, so why not try again?"*



That Lucas dares to challenge the Beast is revealing of his innocence. In the end, he is just a child who needs a family to support and love him. He needs to fight for his right to dream.

*That was the night he returned  
to say goodbye to the sea,  
his land, his village.  
He knew he would not come back.*





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## JORGE

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**A** cloudless night embraced the sea, whose waves crashed rhythmically against the shore. Jorge sat on a rock, thinking. He gazed at nothing in particular, could see nothing in the dark. He heard only the waves' fury. After breaking violently, the current brushed him gently.

The Northern Triangle's Atlantic coast made him nostalgic. There was his land, his people, and the sea he had known for sixteen years, to which he was saying goodbye. His tears, salty as the sea, fell wetting the sand.

He said goodbye to the sea because there was no one else to leave. His family had estranged him long ago, he couldn't remember when, and the villagers wouldn't even look at him. What did it matter? He would go far away, where nobody knew him and he could start over.

His dark body fell to rest on the sand. He felt alone but safe. He recalled:

*"I was happy at home with Mom, Dad, and my brothers and sisters. My family worked informally. We barely made ends meet, but that didn't matter to me. I loved studying and going to high school. I felt like any other boy my age, I had friends, I had fun. Why did everything have to change so much? Why couldn't they accept me?"*

One day, Jorge decided to tell his family the truth. He didn't know how they would react, was overwhelmed just thinking about it. But he would not live in hiding any longer, he didn't have to, and even though he feared being oppressed, he felt there was nothing wrong with the way he was. One day, in front of his mother, father, and brothers and sisters, he raised his voice and said: "I like men".

A toxic silence filled the room, as if someone had died. This was the reaction he expected from a religious family such as his. A few moments later, everyone's mouths open and their gazes full of judgement, his father declared: "You are the shame of this family. You can't live here anymore...leave."

And so began his familial exile. He braced himself for what was to come. Things got harder. He began living on the streets, sometimes sleeping at a neighbour's house.

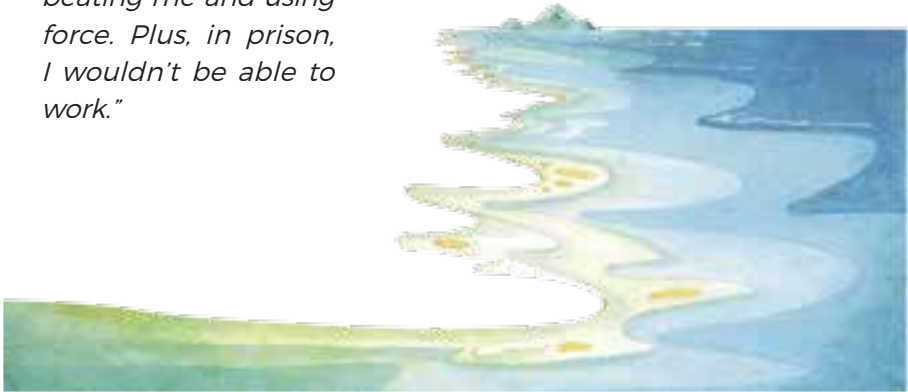
Hope surfaced when he found work as a waiter for a few months. His only payment was food and a place to sleep, but that was enough for him. However, the situation again deteriorated when the

restaurant owners got him drunk regularly so that they could sell his body as extra income.

He felt as if the waves had spat him up against the corals, he was crushed. So he went to the capital, where he lived on the street for six months. He sold his body to both men and women in order to survive.

Though he detested this sort of living, it was practically dignified compared to what the municipal police – yes, the officials who supposedly work to protect and defend people – forced him to do:

*“They harassed me and made me satisfy them...sexually. If I refused, they threatened to arrest me. And being locked up in a cell would be worse, because ... they would abuse me there too, beating me and using force. Plus, in prison, I wouldn't be able to work.”*





One day, a man approached him with an offer to work for his company and took him to a luxurious hotel. Jorge was not accustomed to such opulent places, and suspected that something strange was going on.

That night, some men violently threatened and forced him to have sex with other adolescents while filming it. They were making child pornography. He was nauseous and angry for several days afterwards. How could the world

be so sick? He never knew the other boys, but saw fear in their eyes, the same had felt since being kicked out of home. He knew they didn't understand why they were brought there. Some were even younger than him.

Jorge did not want to suffer persecution for being gay. So without hesitation, he sought the support that was at hand. While working one day, a team of street workers from a non-governmental organization reached out and gave him information on his human rights. Jorge told them what had happened at the hotel and asked for help.

The workers took him to a shelter where he could safely eat, bathe, and sleep. They also helped him to file a complaint with the authorities. After considering his case, the prosecution granted him protected-person status and placed him in a special centre.

While this status offered him some protection, Jorge had to leave the centre because in practice, the institution could not guarantee any security measure for his life.

For fear of being assaulted or killed, Jorge decided to leave his country. That was the night he returned to say good-bye to the sea, his land, his village. He knew he would not come back. Amidst uncertainty over a future that could bring him happiness as well as misfortune, his smile shone like the stars. He was hopeful but had few alternatives. He would go as a “wetback”.<sup>9</sup>

When he reached the other country, he called the organization which had previously supported him to tell them what he had done. They advised him to seek asylum through the country’s authorities and helped him obtain the documentation he needed to apply for refugee status. Only after their conversation did he realize the great insecurity in which he had been living. Yet the danger which had driven him to flee his country now protected him from being deported. His path was finally lit.

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<sup>9</sup> Popular term for irregular or undocumented migrant.

*"I thought of taking my own life at one point. But not anymore. I'm not afraid. I thank this country for so much. I have even been allowed me to study pastry-making. Someday I'll have a bake sale! I have a job which allows me to live. I have even fallen in love and broken up, but that's part of love. It's hard to say this, but nobody knows me here. I feel freer to fulfill my dreams".*

Far from his village, Jorge hopes to be accepted as a refugee. Though he can no longer watch the waves lapping against the shore at night, like the ocean air, he now breathes freely. Although he still faces discrimination, it does not compare to the oppression he suffered at home. Now he is free to be himself.







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## “OTHER FOOTPRINTS”

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*“Utopia is on the horizon.*

*I move two steps closer; it moves two steps away.*

*I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further.*

*So what’s the point of utopia?*

*The point is this: to keep walking”.*

**Eduardo Galeano**

The following excerpts come from the stories of children and adolescents that could not be included in full, but which we believe are important to share.



*We are poor (...) I often find my mother crying because she has nothing to give us to eat. **14-year-old.***

.....

*We are going because we do not want our baby to suffer what we have suffered. **15-year-old indigenous couple with a four-month-old baby.***

.....

*I didn't do all of the housework, so my mother stripped and hung me from a tree by my legs. She cut off a branch and hit me with it. My stepfather also abused me. That is why I brought my little brother and sister, ages nine and eight, here. We're going to go to a place where we will be okay. **13-year-old girl.***

.....

*Many bullets were shot near my house. I was afraid. **3-year-old.***

.....



*My dad was hunted down and killed because he did not pay the gang. **10-year-old.***

*I am traveling north with my nine- and ten-year-old*



brothers. We are looking for our father. After our mom died, there is no one to take care of us. We have nowhere to live. **15-year-old.**

.....

They detained me with other people from Central America. They didn't let us leave or give us enough food. Sometimes they let us out to play soccer. Nobody helped us. The police were always watching us. **17-year-old.**

.....

We crossed the river in a raft. **17-year-old.**

.....

I've been in this shelter for a year. They won't let me go. I just want to find my three-year-old son. When he was one, his father left me and brought him to the United States. I'm sad that he won't remember me. But I am strong. I am from the Mara Salvatrucha<sup>10</sup> and nobody is going to stop me. **14-year-old.**

.....

After spending a few days there, I was in contact with "Los Zetas"<sup>11</sup>, who trained me to steal from other migrants. **17-year-old.**

.....

If I could take something out of my country it would be violence, weapons, and death. **9- and 11-year-old children.**

.....

I really want to return; go back to school; feel the warmth of my country and taste its delicious food, see the colours of my city. **10-year-old.**



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**10** The name of a gang.

**11** The name of a drug cartel.



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