



## MIGUEL'S STORY

When I was just a kid, I was taken by the Army in El Salvador and held captive for almost a year. I was 11 when they took me. I was rescued, thanks to my grandmother and a group called Comadres, and when I was released I was close to being 12. My mother had already left. She had her own experiences with the soldiers. That's her story to tell, not mine, but I can tell you she would have been killed so in 1982 she left out of fear.

Once I was rescued, she came to get me and she brought me here. But she never wanted to admit that I was kidnapped during the war. She would say, *No, you were with an uncle* and that's the lie that she wanted to believe until one day when she just started crying, *I know you were not with your uncle. I'm so sorry. I know.* She just kept repeating *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

I try to understand why she did the things she did. She was only 14 when she had me. She was so young, so maybe she did what she had to do. Because here in the US, she married again, a man who was former military, and he didn't want me. So she took me back to El Salvador and said she was going to come back for me but she didn't. She just took off. I ended up living in the streets. It was 1991 and the war wasn't over yet. But finally I managed to come back here, crossing Mexico by myself.

In El Salvador, my family was all involved in the struggle against the government. My Grandma, my mother's mom, had a basket of clothing she would carry on her head for sale and underneath the clothes she would take newspapers magazines, propaganda. And even at age 16, my mother was involved.

My father was with the fishermen's union. The house was full of books, but they were hidden. Only the Bible was on display. And I remember the way men—the union men—would come. They'd come laughing and my father would turn up the

music, playing cumbias very loud, so if the guardia passed, they'd think it was just a bunch of rowdy drunks and not a political meeting. My father didn't want me to hear them. It was mala costumbre to listen in on the grownup conversation. But I heard them talking about Miss Smith, that Miss Smith was coming to stay, and I thought she was probably a mujer alegre, a prostitute, and sure enough, there were no more bedtime stories for me. My father didn't read me about the Trojan Horse anymore. Instead he was spending nights with Miss Smith and I'd hear them making these strange sounds. It was years later when I got my own first Smith-Corona typewriter, I understood. My father was typing up propaganda for the struggle. But after that, he got even more involved and he left.

But anyway, after I made my way back to the US, my mother wasn't very happy with my being back and the guy wasn't happy either. I lived with my mom for like nine months and she kicked me out again. So I was in the streets again here doing all kind of odd jobs, you know, just work work work. I tried going to high school and I dropped out because, first of all, they put me in special ed classes. That's not me. Look, now I have a Masters and a Ph.D. and I've published books, too.

I might have been a dropout, but I got involved in the student movement. I organized the high school walkout in protest against the governor, Pete Wilson and Prop 187. I worked with Gil Cedillo when he was in the State Senate. Then with the help of Ana Deutsch at PTV, she became a mentor to me. She started guiding me. That's when I graduated with an AA—though then they discovered I hadn't graduated high school so I went and took my GED. Now my college degree says 2003 and my high school diploma says 2004. And I transferred to the university and that's when I met and married Sandra.

I remember getting my acceptance to university and at the same time getting my deportation document. When I was in the process of deportation and applying for asylum between 2004 until 2006 I regressed a lot. I had fevers during the night. One of the particular dreams that I had was sleeping with my wife and suddenly I was in the bushes and she was gone and I would hear the helicopter come and then I would see the helicopter, the mouth of the helicopter and I would see it turn into a yellow snake ready to bite me and I would wake up with fevers and Sandra would just grab me and hug me. Any little sound would wake me up, she would try to caress me and I would just—No!

That is always part of the trauma. The fear is there. Then you think *Wait! that's not realistic. Who would want to do anything now?...but then...when I was at college, right around the corner they arrested one of the guys who massacred the six Jesuits and the housekeeper and her daughter, that notorious case during the civil war.*

And when I was working as a director for a security company here, way before I started school, when I started interviewing people to hire as security guards,

there was the CV where they say what they've done, and a couple of times I interviewed ex-military members from El Salvador. So that's the thing in the cosmos of LA—you find actors from both sides of the war and there's a new strand of risk that develops. Then there was the camping trip. I think I'll let Sandra tell you about it.

One of the worst experiences was when I finally got my political asylum and we went to Mexico and I was in the back of the truck. It was in a period of the militarization of Mexico and when we got to—I think it was Sonora, the military men approached us and my body started shaking uncontrollably. My body went and I couldn't understand what the hell was going on. I'd had anxiety attacks before but not like that.

And I don't like silence. With that we always have issues. Even at night I want to hear noise when I go to sleep. Not sudden noise, but I have to hear noise. I like sounds like the rain. That soothes me. When there's complete silence, it just freaks me out. I've never been able to cope or work with that.

Sometimes Sandra stays quiet. She doesn't say anything. And sometimes I felt she didn't want to listen so I did my writing. Sometimes, I'd tell her some of what happened and she'd cry. So I write my books. But there's one thing I haven't done. Ever. I haven't talked to anyone. I have never told anyone—nobody nobody—exactly what happened in those 11 months when I was held captive. I've made up stories trying to avoid that. Much as I try to force myself to write it, I can't. The very specific things, very specific things that they did just fill me with rage. Yeah. So I haven't been able to write that part but I write out the rage. I've filled so many journals. I write and write and write and read and read and read. It's my form of coping.

It was hard when Sandra's family didn't accept me. Material wealth, that's successful in their eyes, you know. Do we have a house yet? No we don't, and in the family's eyes that's failure. But in terms of the relationship between me and my mother-in-law, when she was here for my birthday she said I'm her favorite son-in-law. Twice a month I take her out. I don't like giving gifts because that's nothing but engaging in the material machine, so with my mother-in-law, what I give her is I spend time with her and I listen to her. With my little girls it's the same. I'm not gonna go and spend 50, 80 bucks on something when I know that money can pay for three or four classes of piano. My mother-in-law understands that now.

Sandra has been there when I've had three or four episodes of depression. The worst was summer of 2011. We were coming back from Arizona and I remember we checked the car and everything but suddenly that back tire exploded. I was going 70 miles per hour and it sent my car flipping seven times. I like to listen to classical music and I remember I was listening to Schubert and I remember seeing things flying in the car and I remember saying to myself, *OK, I'm dying* and

I remember just begging with all my heart to die, like *Take my life, just take it, but do not harm my daughters or my wife*. If you saw the car, you would wonder how the hell did anyone survive?

We came to a stop in the car and I looked at Sandra and said *Check the girls* and I remember her telling me they're fine and I said OK and I don't remember anything else. Sandra says I had blood just gushing out and I was in shock. A cop, in civilian clothes, off duty, happened to be behind us so he came to the rescue. It was so bad that I was picked up in a helicopter. I have scars all over but I don't remember anything.

Later in the hospital the doctor comes to me and says *We want to do a CAT scan* so we went ahead with that, my whole body warm in the stupid machine and then she came to me and said, *You know, we really want to have your wife here because we really want to talk to you* and I said *if it's something really bad, I've been through worse, just lay it on me. Am I gonna die? Just tell me*. So she tells me there's something, about an inch big in my brain. They said they hope it's benign and I'm supposed to be checking that thing every six months. I didn't.

I chose not to follow through though Sandra scolds me all the time. She says, *Go to the doctor!* but I am a firm believer in God. I believe that there's a God, whether He/She/It. The energy of the universe. You know what I think? I had a boot on my throat, there's been guns pointed to my head, I've seen my grandma get killed. I mean you know what? If the energy of the universe wants me dead, I could have been dead a long time ago, but apparently the universe doesn't want me dead yet. So I choose not to think about it and I leave it to the energy of the universe.

But somehow, I don't even know why the depression took me. I would go weeks without getting out of bed. I was just quiet and I remember one time Sandra really got upset. She was really upset and she shook me, *Get up! What's wrong with you?* I remember she even cussed me out. She said something like, *You say you love your girls*. And that was it. My girls are my life-support, they are my oxygen—if that is taken away...I love Sandra, and she knows I do but if it wasn't for my girls...After about two months in bed, I got up and I started writing nonstop nonstop.

Each time I fell into a deep depression, I managed to get out. If Sandra hadn't said *Get the hell up!...* She is my backbone. Even now, there's times I turn into a pessimist and think *For what?* Students in Mexico are getting killed, people aren't paying attention to what's going on in society. I start thinking that's just the way it is and it's not going to change. But then I have Sandra next to me saying *You know what? You're being cynical. That isn't you*. I pull that mask down over my face and she pulls it off. *That isn't you*. And that requires patience, it requires a level of emotional intelligence and I tell her I don't understand why she doesn't go back to school. I know she has the capacity to do so many things.

See, I don't accept the patriarchal system and my wife doesn't want to go to school. So this was a battle but now I see it's not her thing. *I know what I want to be*, she says. *What?* She says, *Mom*. So I ask her, *And when they grow up?* and she says then she'll focus on her business. She plans to open her own space for a cultural center. And you know how you can tell when someone doesn't fit into an environment? Well, when I'm with poets and artists, Sandra fits in perfectly. So all right. She has that gift.

She also has a gift of coping with things. I've never seen someone like her. If the world is just collapsing, I'll be the one running like a chicken without a head—*Omigod! The world is falling!* and Sandra will say, *Oh, yes, take your jacket*. So together we cope.

I tell Sandra every day *you're my queen, you're my reina*. I say it all the time: *you're mine and I'm yours*. And I will do everything that is in my power to continue working for this family, my little treasure that no war is ever going to take away from me.

### SANDRA'S STORY

When I met Miguel he was very quiet and I think that's one of the things that really attracted me about him. He was very quiet and very mature, more mature than other guys around. He didn't tell me much about his past and in fact I didn't even know he was Salvadoran. When we met we spoke English and I never thought about his immigration status or anything like that.

Then he met my family. I have one aunt who's into the whole Zapatista thing and reading about the whole revolution, and she likes to listen to *música de protesta*. So they would have conversations, agreeing in some things and in other things disagreeing and my family heard this and thought he was too much of a Red. My aunt is the only one that is more politically aware and you know disagrees with some of the things the government does. The rest of my family is more rightwing. So here I'm coming to the house with Miguel and his different mentality and he wasn't quiet! He was very outspoken and so for a long time they would not accept him.

For me, that was hard because my family has always been very close, so it was a shock when they didn't like him. What do I do? My Mom was like *What did you get yourself into?*

Because, yes, I married him. And then over the years I kept on finding out new things about him. Being married to him is just like an adventure because it's always something new and something different and I'm always learning more. It was only after we got married and I was pregnant that the whole thing started with the deportation and going to court.

Little by little I was finding out things. Earlier, when we were dating, we even went to PTV a couple of times, but I didn't realize he was a client there. He said we were going to see a friend of his who was a writer. So I didn't know.

What he went through—it's a completely different world than the world I knew and that I grew up in. I never knew anything about war. I got here from Mexico when I was seven and I never experienced anything like that. My family never went through that or talked about that. So when I met him, I was constantly learning and it was hard.

It was kind of hard to understand that he was coming from all that, and what he felt. I was always trying to understand what he was feeling. I don't push him. I let him talk to me but if he doesn't tell me, I don't ask. But I started to see things, like in my family we celebrate the 4th of July and that's one thing he will not participate in. Because of the fireworks he would get tense. My family would go and he would stay home. It was hard for me to understand that what happened so long ago is still so...Now I see it brings him memories, so OK, I accept that. Sometimes we would be outside and suddenly a helicopter goes by and suddenly he'd change. I'd be, *It's OK, I understand*.

But back then, especially with the whole deportation and asylum proceedings, every night he would have nightmares and wake up sweating and I'm like *It's OK*. I did notice that every time we would go to sleep and I would hug him, he would remove my arm and I'm like *What's wrong?* and he's like *I can't*, and it's because of things he went through. Any time my hand was getting close, he'd be like *NO*.

I didn't know everything about what he went through but in time I'd hear him talking to someone and I'd be like *You never told me about this*. Maybe he did want to talk to me but I've always been very quiet. Maybe he saw that and thought I was putting up a wall. And it's true, when he was studying for his Masters he said *I finished the book* and I'm like *What book?* and he says *I've been writing a book since I was in college* and I was like *You were?* I remembered him writing about a boy going to school with a backpack but then I never asked. He said, *It took all these years but now I've finished it*. OK, so he hands it over to me. We were sitting outside in the patio and I'm reading and I'm like *I can't read this book*. *I can't*. I mean although it's a novel, it's so very similar to what he went through. With everything I know, I can't read it, even till now, I can't. It brings back everything he has told me and it brings back the times when he couldn't even speak. I just can't read it, it's too strong.

I keep telling him the war is over. But I know...When we were dating, for example. We went camping—I forget where—but that was with my uncle and my aunt and my cousins and also with this guy who was a neighbor of my aunt and they just started talking and then he said to Miguel, *Hey, I'm from El Salvador too*. OK, *what's your last name?* And then the guy is asking *what town? From where?* So

Miguel told him. And this guy smiled and said, *You know. I can kill you right now if I wanted to.* What? It turns out he was a sergeant in the Salvadoran military. Miguel had told me before about his Dad and because of Miguel I knew a little bit about the war and I was afraid. We're kind of in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere and this guy just said this and he had a machete. And he had a gun. He says, *I can kill you right now.* And my uncle said *Nobody's killing nobody.* My uncle worked as an armed security guard so he would always carry his gun going places like that. *Nobody's killing nobody.* We stayed awake in our tent and alert and we left first thing in the morning.

To me it's just it's amazing that although Miguel went through all these things, he has turned out a very good man. With everything he went through, I think anybody would go crazy, but the fact is that he's a very strong person. But sometimes I have to remind him he's not in the military, he's not at war. He's too harsh on himself and sometimes he's too harsh with the girls. He can be very much like the military, like he needs to get things done! Now! and I admire that about him. He has the courage, the tenacity to become someone. I've learned from him so much.

There are so many things. He comes from a world that I didn't know existed. Completely different from the way my family lives. Even, I don't know if I ever mentioned it to Miguel. When I met his Mom, their relationship was not a mother and son relationship. She didn't even come to our wedding, so when we got married the first few years it was hard for me to call her *suegra*, which is mother-in-law, because it's like if you don't know your son that well how can I relate to you that well as my *suegra*? Now I know more about her story and what she went through, it helps me understand her, not that she has told me anything, but I'm learning through Miguel.

The first years of our marriage were hard getting used to his customs and the way he is and the fact that he didn't really have a family. For me, though, the hardest thing was my family not accepting him. So what do I do? It took me a while to accept that he's my husband and if I want to make a life with him, I need to be with him. Now I'm at the point where I don't care. You don't like him? It's *your* problem.

But with the whole family issue and not getting along, the thing that really affected me was not so much the cousins and the uncles and the aunts, but it was my Mom. It really mattered to me that Miguel and my mother get along. Really I can care less about the rest but if those guys don't get along, I'm stuck and I'm not happy. There were times when I thought let's just give up, but that hurt so much inside. And Miguel kept trying, and now they get along.

The family, they were always asking why does he have to keep going to school? Yeah, 'cause he was always in school. All those years, and I have three little ones. I'd see he would make time for us but he always had something to do every day

and even after all this time, it's just the way he is. I'm OK with that because he has proved his main priority is his family and he will do anything for his family. It took me years to accept that he is who he is. He can't stay still.

Except when he has a depression. The worst was in 2011. He was always very tired and just tired and wanting to go to sleep and I thought maybe it's just he needed a break. It was lack of sleep and he was always stressed out because of school so we decided to take a break and on the road, we had the terrible accident.

But it was a good thing because while he was in the hospital, they did a CAT scan and found something in his brain. Maybe it's benign. I hope it's benign. But that's how we found out the cause of those symptoms. If we hadn't had that accident, we would never have found out what's going on. So I want him to follow up with the doctor, but for now he doesn't want to go.

That summer was very tough. We were really not getting along because of his depression. It was hard for him but it was hard for me too because not only did I have to deal with his depression but I had three little ones and they needed my attention too. He was always in bed. Just lying there for weeks. At times I would ignore it. I'd think, *don't let it get to you* and I would leave him alone. I'd just let him be. I was so busy with the girls. It's almost like having triplets because they're so close in age and at times it would get me upset because he wasn't there for us. But I would try not to let it consume me. I would stay away from him until I would see that he was more OK. Then I would come in and we'd talk a little. I would try to tell him it's OK, try to relax. But that summer was very hard.

So yeah, we've been through really harsh times as a couple. I've come to understand when he's depressed, it's not like he wants that. Until I understood that I was like *here we go again*.

I have a lot of patience. Even my Mom says that and even Miguel says it. But too much patience isn't good. Finally it was to the point where I told him *You need to get up*. I told him, *Get up. I can't anymore. Enough is enough! I've had enough!* I don't remember everything I said but I do remember I told him, *You've been through worse and this is just another phase of your life and you just need to deal with it. Think about your girls!*

And I guess that did it. Because I think in our marriage what really has helped him a lot is his daughters. Having little ones—there's the motivation to let the darkness go.

And our girls have it more easy than what he had growing up, and even me comparing my childhood to his. I had it easy too, you know. It makes you appreciate what you have. So I know there's going to be a time when we need to talk to the girls to help them understand what happened to Miguel and to



understand that the life we have is a privilege that not every kid has.

As for me, after high school I thought of going to acting school which I did and then that was that because I got married and I thought I don't have time for this. Ever since my life has changed having kids. I've been busy with the girls and moving from place to place while Miguel was in school. He wants me to go back to school, but that's not me. Someday when the girls are grown, I'd like to start a venue, a cultural center. That's what I'd like to do. I love being around that environment. In Mexico, my family had friends that were singers so every time there was a family reunion there was so much singing. And my Dad's dad was a musician, a mariachi. That's what I'd like to be part of.

But another thing that really took me a while... at first when we used to have all those gatherings with Miguel's friends, I wouldn't feel comfortable. I always had this in mind: *I'm with this person who went through a lot and he's here and he's succeeded. I always look at him and think gosh, he has accomplished so much and here I am and I haven't accomplished anything.* Then I would wonder what his colleagues think. When they say *What does your wife do? Oh, she's just a stay-at-home mom.* I would feel out of place because all these people are doing something with their lives and I haven't even finished school. It took me a while to reflect on that, that it was my decision. I have to accept who I am and who I decided to be. It's true, I started having kids very young, but I love my girls. What do I want to be? I want to be their Mom.

So now Miguel and I are married for 13 years. And we plan to stay married. We talk about it all the time. He says, *How are you going to be when you get old? You're gonna be all grouchy like the Grinch.* Then he says, *I'll grab you with my cane.*

That's when I say, *I'll take my wheelchair and run you over!*

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