

Fit *for* Joy

THE HEALING POWER OF BEING YOU

Valeria Teles



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Dedication



To my mother -

She has taught me one of the hardest lessons in life:
that forgiveness and joy are inseparable.

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Introduction: Why Did I Punish Myself?



I went for a run because I had eaten a small, organic, dark chocolate cookie the day before and I felt that I had to punish myself. It was habitual for me to punish myself with strenuous, caloric compensation cardio whenever I felt guilty for enjoying life by eating tasty foods. When I placed first in a fitness competition, my fitness goals went up a notch. Winning the competition was one thing, but people complimenting me for my extra lean body pressured me to stay that way. I couldn't allow myself to look "bigger" again, and "bigger" really meant not seeing my defined ab muscles.

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon just after midday when I went for that run. Cresting a hill in the park, I came across a family outing. The adults were talking and laughing, and the kids were playing with a ball. They had bagels, cakes, sodas, and fried foods set around an improvised table. The family members were all overweight; some were even obese.

Out of breath from the incline of the hill, my body slowed but my thoughts sped up. *Look at them! These people should be ashamed of themselves. All fat, and they come to the park just to eat more fatty foods. They should be exercising, restricting their diets. How irresponsible.*

These judgments were quickly succeeded by a stream of thoughts that sprang up in my mind one after another, like weeds. *I don't like having to run; why did I eat that cookie?*

*I wish I had friends and family to be with right now.
My knee hurts; the brace isn't really helping.
It's too hot.*

I don't like sweating this way; it messes up my hair.

What am I going to eat for dinner? There's nothing delicious to look forward to... I am sick of eating chicken and broccoli. But I have to; I won't be like these overweight people goofing off in the park. In this state of mind, I continued to run.

I worked endlessly to maintain the external appearance of health, but no one would have wanted to look like me if they knew the toxic mindset and true unhappiness that came with the abdominal six pack. My lifestyle lacked life; my body was tired, my mind had no clue it was causing its own suffering, and my heart wasn't there at all.

Had I died after that uphill run, my last wish would have been to trade places with those happy, out-of-shape people in the park. They were closer to what life is all about—love and kindness—even in overweight bodies surrounded by cakes and burgers.

* * * * *

We focus so much on the pursuit of physical and mental health. We take our daily vitamins, eat healthily, exercise, sleep well, do our jobs to fulfill a sense of security and purpose, we search for comfort in romantic love, and travel for fun. We strive for happiness, for the most part, by engaging in pleasurable activities—sex, food, friendships, and future plans. We cultivate these habits to keep ourselves on a “healthy” track. I did so for years, although deep in my heart I doubted it was truly the path to achieve a healthy life as a human being. These unexamined habits seemed more like self-preservation and the perpetuation of established concepts and societal ideals than a real, authentic lifestyle.

Think about the word “healthy.” Conventionally, it means to be well, fit, strong, and in good health. However, I question this definition. I have come to realize that a healthy person has a kind and gentle heart, regardless of his or her physical and mental health. Think of Gandhi and Mother Teresa. They both came close

to death because of failing physical health, but they never stopped loving others. As for mental illness, my question to you is, do you believe a mind caught in the habit of expressing negative emotions is in a healthy state? It's easy to accept physical health as being free of injury or illness, but can we agree to define mental health as a condition of emotional well-being?

Unfortunately, most of us believe negative emotions are normal. Selfishness can give the illusion of success as we achieve materialistic accomplishments while being unkind to ourselves and everyone around us. In reality, behind selfishness lies insecurity, anger, and fear—especially of not having enough or feeling like we are not enough as individuals. Fear and anger trick us into agreeing with destructive ideas and actions simply because they are conventional, and insecurity builds mental barriers for protection. By acting and reacting to irrationality (fear), we reinforce our thinking mind's reality over that of our hearts. Even though these physical and mental states appear healthy to our materialistic perspectives, we must reject the normalization of negative emotions and behaviors like selfishness and fear.

After more than twenty years of participating in the fitness lifestyle, I realized a truth my heart had already mastered: a fit and healthy body comes second to a serene and loving mind. I wrote this book to explore the following questions:

- ① How can we integrate conventional fitness and spirituality?
- ② How do we exercise a healthy and joyful heart, despite a painful past?
- ③ What does it mean to be truly healthy?

I do expect some of you to open this book, skip over the introduction, and start skimming to find exercise and diet tips. You have your own reasons for doing this, and I understand. You are probably enticed by the word “fit” on the cover, even though the word “joy” is bigger.

Yes, you will find exercise tips and diet suggestions here; and yes, they can help you get in shape if that is important to you. However, as a personal trainer, I was shocked to realize that

physical fitness should not have become the priority it became in my life.

In working with clients, it became clear to me that they were forcibly engaging in exercise for reasons other than to supplement their already happy lives and “fit hearts.” They—and I—were using exercise as a form of escape from a reality rooted in the fear of illness and death, in emotional pain, and in the struggle to find happiness and peace.

This was especially obvious to me when I worked with clients who had medical problems. Their lives were inauthentic and stressful, from their work to their personal relationships—again, not all that different from my own. The relationship they had with both exercise and with me as a trainer was hardly healthy. We were causing each other more pain by implementing exercise in our lives out of fear. This turned a potentially enjoyable activity into a torturous experience for all of us.

In *Fit for Joy*, I share how my relationship with the body, exercise, and food changed following a period of major depression. I lost interest in life amidst the most successful moments of my career, despite being in the best shape I had ever been in.

There was a strange inversion: The more I perfected my body, the sadder I became. I was working out well and found incredible success, but no amount of weight lifting lifted my spirit. When I won first prize in a bodybuilding competition, I became dangerously depressed. I had to touch bottom and seek wisdom and direction in order to heal, but I could not resolve this until I found answers within myself. I began to question the meaning of fitness and health, which led me to explore the depths of my own heart.

My soul-searching for true awareness and joy took me back to my birthplace: Brazil. There, exploring my childhood, I found the motivations that led me to Miami and New York. Along the way, I left the fitness industry behind and ended up in Paris writing this book. It was in Paris that I discovered the ancient wisdom and inner strength that has helped me throughout my journey.

I will show you how my suffering finally eased and suggest ways for you to find your own path to peace and joy.

In the beginning, I really thought I was listening to my heart by becoming a personal trainer. I wanted to help others achieve a healthy lifestyle. Although my life at that time seemed purposeful and happy, I was just another human being creating escape strategies and external ways to find meaning and peace—not very different from what my clients were doing.

Without a doubt, accomplishments and changes (such as winning first place in a fitness competition, leaving a long and painful marriage by divorcing my husband, and being in love again with someone new) were exciting and made me feel optimistic about life. These were all refreshing events that accompanied the beginning of my personal training career. However, my exciting new life was born out of stale thoughts based on dissatisfaction with a strong need to keep moving forward to justify moments of thrill.

To bring forth the importance of changing habitual patterns of the mind, I've arranged this book into sections. Each section describes a shift in my perspective in relation to physical fitness. Together, these sections encompass the before, during, and after of my continuing search for awareness. This sequence of events can help you see that everything is interconnected. The book begins with my early life experiences, moves into relationships mired in fear and pain, then explores the period in which I took refuge in fitness to ease emotional distress, and eventually leads to my professional involvement in the fitness industry as a professional trainer and competitor. Next, and finally, is the “dance” I had with a period of major depression, which led me into the depths of my own heart and toward solutions that were compatible, in fact drawn from my true spirit and illuminated by my new knowledge.

May the insights I gained help turn your physical existence into an adventure toward a life of serenity, kindness, and joy.



PART ONE

T H E B E G I N N I N G

Chapter 1

Early Trauma Sets the Stage for Later Distortions



The events listed in the passages below occurred from the ages of five to sixteen, and were the catalyst for a greater feeling of love and liberation through forgiveness and compassion. They are based on raw feelings that were attached to the memories of my early life experiences. Through them, I've learned to understand essential points: one is that our past is only a story; second is that we have the power to change our perception of ourselves and life; and third, that holding on to a negative state of mind can cause most of our unhappiness, addictions, and dissatisfaction. The answer was, is, and always will be love and kindness.

HOT PORRIDGE

We had just returned home from church.

“Your brother is hungry! Don't you see that?” she screamed from the other room.

I ran to the kitchen, a place I knew too well for my age.

The baby was crying. I was tense. She came to the kitchen, too. I felt her impatience and my spine seemed to tighten as she watched me.

I looked for the rice flour mix inside the kitchen cabinet. I could barely reach it. I remembered there was milk in the fridge... but where? Top shelf? It seemed to be hiding. I was so scared, I could not think...

It was important that I concentrate. I couldn't spill the milk or drop a spoon. A spilled drop of milk meant lots of salty tears spilling from my eyes, but it could get worse. They could be drops of blood from a painful pinch. Either way, I couldn't make any mistakes.

She was watching me. Her red-rimmed eyes blinked continuously. I tried not to look at her, but my memory was reproducing every blink of her eyes. With it came the sensation that I would become paralyzed any second, or worse, use more rice flour than necessary.

I had done this so many times before, but this day I felt like I didn't know what I was doing. The baby cried louder. In my head, her red-rimmed eyes blinked faster. Her impatient breath grew colder and colder around my spine.

I was afraid, but I could do it. While I was pouring the milk in the pan, I heard Aldo, the stray cat, screech in pain. He flew out the kitchen door just like a ball kicked to the goal on a soccer field. Poor cat. Even a ball would be luckier. At least it had a net to catch it. She was a great player of this kind of game, where the same team won over and over because they always picked a much weaker opponent to play against.

I heard the cat hit the ground hard. By then, I was shaking in fear. My eyes were filled with tears. I hoped the cat was not dead, but I couldn't help him. I couldn't even help myself. I promised I'd check on the cat later.

With shaking hands, I added the rice flour to the milk that was heating on the stovetop. The baby was crying louder and louder.

"Hurry up!" she screamed at me.

The cooking couldn't be hurried. I didn't know what to do. If I turned the flames up higher, it might burn the bottom of the pan. I didn't say anything, and I didn't look back. I felt like I was inside a box being shaken by a giant baby who didn't know how to play with his toys. There was nothing I could do about it. I felt like the

poor cat. The only difference was he was a soccer ball, and I was a doll in a box. Both of us had no choice but to remain in a game we were destined to lose.

The porridge was bubbling, ready. It was very hot. I walked through the kitchen door, carrying it in the pan. I brought another empty pan with me. I looked for the cat, but he was nowhere to be found. I sighed with relief. He must be alive, somewhere far away from here.

I started to transfer the mixture from one pan to the other; I stood by the kitchen door where a fresh wind blew. The porridge needed to cool off before being poured into the baby bottle on the table.

She was looking at me impatiently while holding the baby. Overtaken by fear, I kept trying to cool off the hot food. I could barely breathe.

A few minutes later, I approached her with the pan. Mumbling the words, I asked her if it was cool enough to pour into the baby bottle.

The next thing I knew, I felt a burning sensation all over my face. The baby food had found a destination other than the bottle.

“Is that cool enough for you?” she shouted. “You can’t do anything right. Here, hold the baby.” She gave the crying child to me. “Let me handle it. Look what you’ve done! Now I’ve got to cook another one.”

I could barely see. My baby brother was crying. I was crying.

I ran past the living room, placed the baby on the sofa—he was still too young to roll over—then ran into the bathroom. In the bathroom, I cleaned my face with cold water. I felt the cold water for a few seconds before I looked in the mirror. Then I looked and didn’t recognize my face; it was red and swollen.

“Where are you?!”

I had to hurry. Tears were still rolling down my face. I dried them with a piece of a brown paper bag. There were plenty of brown paper bags in our bathroom; we couldn’t afford soft toilet paper or paper towels. The brown paper was harsh on my skin, but not as harsh as the pain inside.

It was still early in the day, and I had so much work to do before the evening came. There was no time to cry. My tears would have to wait until I went to bed.

MY FAMILY

DARA was my mother. She was the only person in the whole world I endlessly wanted to please. There were no limits. She had all the power over me. Her demands were as sweet as fresh apples taken from a tree. They were golden opportunities that promised hope—delicacies sustaining my sense of existence.

A woman of Portuguese descent, she was the daughter of farmers from Bravo. My grandmother died when Dara was born. My grandfather quickly remarried so his new wife could help him take care of the kids, especially the newborn, Dara.

She was raised by her stepmother and older sisters. I heard she'd had a tough childhood. She constantly moved from house to house, where she was put to work as hard as an adult would have been. She found her way out of moving around by marrying my father. My father was dark-skinned, and he never made much money.

After having kids, Dara felt pressure to work extra hard to raise them. But making money to raise children wasn't the only motivation behind her efforts. Her abusive childhood motivated her to work, both out of fear and to gain love and attention, but it was also very important to her to prove that she could have a nice house, like her sisters.

I remember Dara going to visit one of my rich aunts every week. She had a large, comfortable, and well-furnished home, but my aunt didn't visit our house. I used to ask Dara why, and she would say that her sister was too busy working and taking care of her business and family. Her sisters had married their close relatives to join wealth, and they owned most of the shops in Bravo.

Dara used to work late nights making crocheted bedding and kitchen items to sell. She would save part of the money to increase the size of the house. Her obsession with having a large

and comfortable home blinded her to the fact that a house without love and joy can never become a home.

JORGE was my father. He was short, physically strong, and walked with pride.

Jorge was a man who lived a simple, quiet life. I heard he used to dream about a better life. He aspired to become a professional musician like his older brother. Playing the accordion and singing was a passion that could have turned into gold if his rehearsals didn't start after an empty bottle of *cachaça*, a strong liquor made out of sugarcane. But his true adventures toward a better life began when he met Dara, my mother.

He married her when he was in his thirties. They moved from a small town to the big city of Sao Paulo, which was like the New York of Brazil, and right away my father "placed an order" for a daughter (me). He worked as a helper for a large and fancy resort, which hosted famous people and politicians. It was a beautiful place, surrounded by flowering bushes, rivers, tall trees, and many berry plants. My parents lived there for a while. They were given a place to stay in the back of the resort. Dara spent most of her days not only taking care of the house, but also learning how to swim and drive. For a small town girl, her individualistic interests had something to say about what she really wanted for her life; having children wasn't a wish but a "going with the flow" choice.

So I guess my parents didn't place an order for a baby girl, but rather accepted the package left on their front door. I was born at that beautiful resort, regardless. I remember enjoying fresh, sweet berries from the garden and riding in a boat with my father. My early "memory box" was filled with experiences with my father — not my mother—until a horrible event occurred. I was too young to remember the first tragedy of my life, for which I am grateful, as it would have been a brutal start.

My uncle Francisco, my mother's brother, also worked at the resort and used to live with us. One morning, he was found dead. Weeks after they broke up, my uncle's ex-girlfriend hired a hit man who murdered him as he was leaving for work. My mother said Uncle Francisco loved me dearly. He wouldn't leave the house without saying goodbye to me. Uncle Francisco has lived in my

heart to this day. My mother's words about him turned into memories of love.

As for my father, most of the time I felt he was either trying not to see the world or wishing the world would not see him. For almost my entire life, my father was a mystery to me. His marriage to my mother was tense and felt unnatural. There were many unspoken words between them—especially about racism. My mother was white.

Dara's family didn't speak to Jorge. He was never there for birthdays, holidays, or any other kind of celebration that involved Dara's family. Everyone felt the tension, but no one talked about it.

Jorge didn't speak much. He seemed to be calm and cool all the time. Dara's family situation didn't seem to bother him. The image he presented was of a strong man who didn't owe anything to anyone and lived an anxiety-free life. Yet he seemed distant, and smoked and drank every day.

After we moved from the resort, he worked at a slaughterhouse and also on a plantation, growing food for us. Most of his days were the same. Jorge did what everyone did in his town: made enough money to live in a house, to eat, to buy clothes, and to buy a bike for short trips around town. He married and had children. From a distance, his life was simple and quiet, but when he picked up an accordion to play, he sang sad songs. I always wondered why he accepted his life the way it was if he wasn't happy.

ANA was my little sister. We were born a year and a half apart.

Her rebellious attitude growing up not only got her into all sorts of trouble, it also shaped the way she looked. Her large brown eyes looked even larger when she became angry and frustrated about something. Her eyebrows came together when she found something strange, or didn't understand what others said or did—but the hair was her true trademark. Ana was often so busy bothering those around her that the comb could never find its way to the perfect destination. Ana's frizzy, curly, black hair was what you saw first when you spotted her. Her hair had a life of its own. Even if she hid behind a bush with dozens of black-feathered chickens, her hair would stick out. It grew upward and outward, never downward. It seemed to want to touch the sky and say hello

to the moon. It could have been a good thing, but Ana disliked her hair enough to not care about it.

Ana would find ways to get attention by pestering others. She especially spent time making plans to annoy Dara. One method that usually worked was touching Dara's clothes with dirty hands. Dara would grow angry and get the belt.

However, sometimes Ana's plans to annoy Dara didn't work. One morning, after playing with mud, Ana came straight to Dara for a muddy hug. Dara turned around just in time, looked at Ana, and said, "Hey, Annie, your hair is almost hitting the ceiling. You know that clown's wig on TV? It looks just like that. Go fix it." Dara laughed out loud. She knew this was the only sure way to sabotage Ana's plan.

Ana ran to the bathroom and tapped and pressed her hair down nervously in front of the mirror. It never really worked. Shame took her by the ear back to her room. She moved slowly, keeping close to the walls of the kitchen and living room and looking to the sides to make sure no one could see her. She did a better job of sneaking than any detective who spots an unguarded fugitive buying fruit at a street market.

In her room, she would quietly hold her doll in her lap. She combed the doll's hair, which was perfectly straight, smooth, and long. Ana dressed and undressed her doll many times. The doll had more clothes than she did. Half of Ana's clothes were torn into pieces to make dresses for the doll. This was Ana's pastime when she couldn't annoy Dara. She was not happy playing with her doll. I have a feeling that Ana didn't really want to cause trouble. Deep down, she just wanted a warm hug from Dara. I guess Ana and I had the same wishes with different ways to fulfill them.

THE TOWN

I grew up in an inland town named Bravo, in the state of Bahia in Brazil. Bravo was unlike the coastal towns and cities, which are nestled in next to the blue tropical sea, adorned with flowers, and fringed with waving palm trees. Bravo is not one of Brazil's famous resort places like the Coconut Coast or an exciting center like Sao

Paulo. Bravo is dry most of the year, a parched place where only the people who were born there and cannot dream of leaving remain. It is three hours from the capital, Salvador, and even further from anywhere you might wish to be.

The best that can be said of Bravo is that it is an unpretentious place, and it assumed the loyalty of its native inhabitants. Bravo is not on any tourist maps, and even today, there are no “Recommended Places to Eat” or “Sights to See.”

Its narrow, unpaved streets didn't want to be more than what they were. The vegetation was grateful when seasonal rains revived the landscape. Even the grass, which died before this glorious bath, didn't complain about how hard it was to live; it was simply living the life it was meant to live, neither happy nor unhappy, but alive. In the 1870s, the dry seasons extended for so long that many people starved in this region during great famines.

But even Bravo can look to lusher, more vital places, and my eyes were drawn to the distant mountains that surrounded us. Those mountains were dark green; they smiled at me from a distance. I smiled back. The humble brick houses, most of them unfinished, matched the town's spirit of simplicity and openness. These houses would be painted one day, as the streets would also one day be paved, but no one expected anything too good or too soon. There was a small, garden-like square in the center of town, with some tall trees and flowers. I often walked through there when I needed to run some errands. Couples met there—I saw them as I walked by and wondered what they talked about.

Bravo's dusty roads were still paths for bull-driven carts and carriages, which squeezed between the houses in a cloud of dust. The carriage driver would scream loudly to give directions to the bulls. He wore leather pants and a leather jacket under the fierce sun and whipped the bulls with two dirty ropes. From far off, I could hear the loud creaking of the carriage's dry wooden chassis carrying large bags of beans and corn.

The sound grew louder and louder as the carriage approached our street. It was a bit scary at first, but it always became the attraction of the week. I would rush to the window, covering my eyes with my fingers so as not to be blinded by the dust. I couldn't open

my mouth to laugh or scream either, unless I wanted to have dust for lunch.

I still enjoyed the passing of the giant, creaking carriage, dragged by bulls and whipped by a wild man. Bravo seemed not to care about its bull-driven carriages making loud noises and clouds of dust. It was simply the space that allowed a bull to be a bull and a man to be a wild conductor.

WORK 'N LIGHT

My bedroom was very small with no door and no lights; we used an improvised kerosene lamp.

It was very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter because the roof was made of old tiles with lots of gaps. The nightly ritual before going to bed was always the same. I smashed a bunch of mosquitoes trapped in my old net, and let some lucky ones escape by lifting it. Then, I stitched over new holes to prevent them from coming in to bite us during the night. Even if they didn't get inside the net, their noise and Ana's extra warm hugs kept me from falling asleep sooner than I would have liked. She was too close and too touchy, enough to make me feel uncomfortable. Most of the time, I would send her away but sometimes, her hugs helped me fall asleep, even in scalding hot evenings.

Besides the mosquitoes and Ana's flaming arms, there was another problem I faced at night: the nightmares. They were always the same. It was dark; I was lying in bed and someone was coming toward me. I didn't know who it was, but I knew they were going to harm me. I couldn't move from my bed. I screamed in despair, trying to move. I couldn't. I woke up terrified. It was hard to fall asleep again.

The morning was my best friend. It brought just enough light to chase the darkness of my fears away. The thoughts of my next chore offered comfort. The housework made me smile. There was no fear or sadness anymore when I was working. It all vanished. It felt like listening to a beautiful song during every task. I giggled and smiled very often while I did them.

Work was my other best friend.

WATER CARRIER

Walking the path on my way to the river was such a gift to me. I liked seeing the dust lift around every step I made, as I dragged my worn-out sandals in the soil and swung my old gray bucket. My body had so much space to move; I loved the sensation. The late morning was silent, aside from my own giggling when I suddenly saw an animal cross the road.

I reached the river. I felt unconditional love there. It let me smile as often as I wanted. Before I started filling my bucket with water, I played by swiping my hands from side to side in the water. There were lots of small fish—they were close to the edge and not scared of me. I wondered if they were asking for help. Were they trapped? If so, I understood them.

The river was drying up. It would soon have no life to give to the fish, and it wasn't Mother River's fault. She couldn't give what she didn't have. The river and the fish were a family that stayed together for a while, and then would naturally grow apart.

I could have stayed there all day long playing with the water, but I needed to push the fish and the algae out of the way with my pink, scratched plastic cup and fetch water to fill my thirsty gray bucket. Then I placed a pre-rolled towel upon my head, rounded into a cushion to fit the bucket.

I carried the full bucket to the nearest large rock, where I squatted down in a level position and carefully placed the bucket on top of the towel on my head. At first, it was like being pressed down to the ground by the finger of a giant; but as I stood, everything felt normal.

I learned the technique of water carrying from an old, experienced water-carrier I'd met at the river. It was a lesson she was happy to teach me. She said there weren't many people she could teach those days. They were impatient and would rather carry the bucket of water in their hands.

Walking back home while balancing the bucket was fun. The woman told me that carrying the water on my head would feel much lighter than carrying the water any other way.

She also said something I didn't understand.

“You don’t ever need to learn how to swim. If one day you fall in the water, don’t be afraid. The water will remember you used to carry it on your head. It won’t let you drown, because it wishes to be closer to the sky again through a water-carrier like you.”

THE SUNNY DISHES

It was time for lunch. My stomach couldn’t have been happier.

When I finished lunch, my other job started. I needed to fully concentrate on the task ahead: a sink full of very dirty dishes and a pile of pans with inches of thick food stuck to the bottom. There was a high price to pay if I broke a plate or dropped a spoon on the floor. This couldn’t happen. It was a tough job, but I had to believe that I was tougher.

My feet and hands were large for my size. Maybe they grew longer to help me with all the work. The dry skin of my hands felt like an old woman’s hands and looked like the cracked, dry land of the town. I made a firm agreement with my hands not to drop or break anything, or else the rest of my body would crack, too. It was a serious task. The dirty dishes and pans became the most important mission to accomplish on Earth.

Nothing could distract me from making every plate shine as bright as the sun’s rays coming from the tiny window above my head. It helped me concentrate when I imagined them dry and shining in front of me. The shining dishes were beautiful to my eyes and calming to my mind. I emptied the sink and filled it with enough water to wash the bigger pans first. My hands were touching the water, picking up each dish, swiping every little bit of food with the sponge. I was precise.

At that moment, I was only a dishwasher. I, the sink, and the pile of dirty dishes were one. My mission was to clean them, but by the end I felt they had cleaned me, too. My breathing was lighter and I could smile freely. The water, the sink, the dishes, and the walls around me were occupied enough being themselves—they allowed me to be only the dishwasher.

Before I finished washing the dishes, I heard Dara’s voice. It frightened me.

“Hurry up! You need to sweep the floor next, then take care of Justina. She needs you,” Dara screamed from a distance.

Justina was my grandmother, my father’s mother. I brought a hot lunch and dinner to her every day. She couldn’t cook her own food anymore.

I had to finish cleaning the dishes as quickly as possible without losing my concentration. Anxiety was trying to take over. The vision of shining dishes helped me focus again.

A few minutes later, my mission was accomplished.

THE BUS

I heard Dara call me again. “Hurry up. It’s getting late.”

My heart was racing. I had to find the broom quickly.

It was early afternoon. I was tired already. There was another task of the day I had to do: sweep the floor. The broom was always hiding behind the kitchen door. That day, for some reason, it wasn’t there.

I was scared of the broom. Its bristles brushed away the dust from the floor really well, but its tall, hard body was quite often used to take my smile away. I wished it didn’t have a body, only bristles.

It was time to go outside to look for it.

There it was, by the chicken perch.

I went straight to the front window by one of the bedrooms. I always started there. It had a view of the main road leading out of the town. Buses and cars didn’t come and go frequently, but the wait was worth it. I waited for them a few minutes. I used to day-dream by that window for a while before sweeping the house. When I would see a bus was leaving, my heart jumped with happiness. I imagined myself inside that bus. It was taking me somewhere. I didn’t know the destination, but it didn’t matter. What made me smile was that I also imagined going to meet friends who loved me as I loved them.

“Hurry up.” I heard her voice again.

The bus would disappear on the horizon quickly. It was a sad moment. A happy me was inside that bus, and it was leaving the sad me behind. I sighed.

I started sweeping the living room. It was a small space with a few pieces of old furniture, but there was one thing there that seemed new to me every time I looked at it: a large painting of a woman in water.

The painting was very important to Jorge. He often looked at the woman the same way I looked at the bus out of the window. He must have been imagining himself in that painting somehow. He closed his eyes for a brief moment in front of the painting, then calmly walked away. I took some time there to look at it, too.

The painting was of a woman who stood with a serene look on her face, even though she was in the middle of a stormy ocean. There were many bright stars and a glowing moon above her head. She was tall, beautiful, and had black hair. Her long white gown merged with the water. I didn't know if the water was coming from the woman or if the woman was coming from the water. It was hard to tell.

Her arms were relaxed and open, and she was dropping some seeds. The seeds became white blooming flowers even before they fell in the water. I wondered what kind of seeds they were. They were not the same as the ones I sowed with Jorge. White flowers don't make me hungry as beans do; they make me smile. But what I liked the most about the painting was how calm the woman was, despite being surrounded by the fierce ocean.

I needed to hurry. Justina was waiting for me.

JUSTINA

I was ready for my next mission—taking food to my grandmother, Justina. She lived about ten minutes away. I was leaving the house on Jorge's bike.

Getting the bike to move at first was not easy. It was heavy, and I was already sweating. My little sister, Ana, was on the back seat just for fun. She was adding extra weight I didn't need, which

wasn't so much fun for me. The two bowls of hot food were inside my bag, hanging from the handlebars.

The rusty chain slipped off with my first attempt to move. I asked Ana to step off so I could put it back in place. It took a little while, and my hands were greasy and dark by the time I got the chain back on.

Ana jumped back on the backseat, and I finally got the bike moving properly. The tires moved slowly. There was too much weight, but with my mission in mind, nothing could stop me.

The town's roads were dusty and dry. The houses along the way were as sad and poor as the people in them. Everyone moved slowly on the streets—not much different from the bike. It could have been the scalding sun embracing them a bit too tightly. I encountered the same scene every time I took food to Justina.

I wondered if it would be different if I were to ride the bike on my own, without the extra weight and without a destination. I was often tense and in a hurry. Would everything around me look happier? Would I be smiling? I thought so. Just me, the bike, the dusty roads, and the wind on my face, nowhere to arrive or to go back to. It would be nice not to have a mission to accomplish, at least for a moment.

Justina was in her eighties. She was a small, grumpy lady. Her sunburned, dark, indigenous skin showed a lifetime of outdoor labor. The sun seemed to have kissed her for years in the fields. I was sure she had let the cool shade of the trees wait for her in vain. I'd heard she had fought for basic survival when she was a girl.

She lived alone and smoked pipe tobacco that she made herself. Her husband had died long ago, while she was still young— young enough to have married again, but she'd decided to be on her own instead.

Justina didn't talk much. When she did, she complained or said things I hardly understood. It was either about those parts of her past that she still remembered or because of a recent offense, though Justina always looked a bit sweeter when I arrived with her food.

I smiled while I watched her eat the hot meal. She tried to hide the shadow of a smile that struggled to come to life from the

pleasure she felt as she ate. Her body was trying to speak, but her mind was still complaining about everything. The thoughts in her head didn't leave her alone for a moment.

Ana was bored and sat close by, pretending to play with an old straw hat lying on the floor. She asked me to hurry up Justina's meal, but I wouldn't do that. I waited patiently. When I came alone, Justina relaxed more. We had strange conversations.

I listened to her complain about everything and made my own silent comments. She grumbled about the house, the past, the stray cats that visited her place at night, the dogs crossing the street, the heat, and on and on. She even complained about the tobacco smoke coming out of her own mouth. Her anger intensified when the smoke made a cloud in front of her eyes so she couldn't see anything. Her hands swung back and forth as she tried to clear her vision.

I often asked myself, "Does she realize that she is making the smoke that is clouding her vision?" I can't help her with the smoke, because she will always make more. I wish I could help her stop making smoke.

Justina's tiny house was a bit scary, but I grew used to it. It was made of mud, not cement or bricks. It felt like the walls and the roof could fall at any time. It was dark, too. There were only a few pieces of furniture, and every single piece was covered with dust and spider webs. Everything smelled like tobacco smoke. I didn't know why she had an old stove—she didn't cook—but I guess she needed it to make her coffee and light up her tobacco pipe.

Visiting Justina inspired mixed feelings in me. Watching her eat made me happy, but I was saddened by listening to her complain about things she could change.

I waited until she finished eating, then put the empty containers back in the plastic bag and said goodbye. She never said goodbye to me. Farewells seemed to be tough on her. I wondered why. Maybe what she really wanted was to be around others, but they made her sad, so she chose to be alone. I wondered if it was better to be alone than to be around others and feel sad.

I believed Justina only regretted her decision to be alone when visitors came. We reminded her that she could have allowed a

little joy into her life by being among others, even if they were a sad bunch.

Leaving Justina was a melancholic departure—a cold moment under a hot, clear, sunny sky.

On the way back, the streets and the houses were still sad; Ana was still heavy in the backseat.

But there were heavier things I would rather not carry.

WORKING FOR A HUG

It was late afternoon, and I was tired. It had been a long day, but there was still some corn shucking to do.

Before I started that task, I asked Dara, “Can I have a hug?” My tearful voice echoed through the room.

“Go do your work. I have a lot of things to do. I need to ensure you have a house, a bed, food, and clothes,” she replied sternly.

“But you can still hug me,” I insisted. I was afraid my request would be denied once again.

Dara mumbled and moved away, shaking her head as if I were asking for something that was not possible.

I would do the work without her hug. Maybe after I was done, she would reward me.

While shucking the corn, I watched from a distance as Dara hugged my cousin, who was about my age. Dara could see me looking at her from across the room. *What have I done wrong not to deserve a hug like my cousin?* I thought to myself. *I know she is prettier than me, but she doesn't work as hard as I do for Dara.*

Before I got back to my work, tears started to fall. I couldn't control them. They ran from my cheeks to my flowery dress. The flowers on my dress distracted me for a moment. They were so colorful. I could see them smiling at me.

I felt a bit better. I stopped crying and got back to my work.

Later that day, when the work was done, I went to sleep without my hug. But as long as I had work to do the next day, there would be lots of hugs to dream about.

JUST LOOK UP

It was getting late. The kitchen was clean—we'd had dinner not long before.

Everyone was already in bed when I quietly exited the kitchen into the dark. I took a few careful steps, hardly able to see where my feet were going, but I had done this so many times that my body would be guided by the clear purpose of my heart. It wanted a moment to itself. It was time to visit my "alley family."

That particular day, I had been very busy; my body ached and my mind wondered when all this would be over.

The alley I headed to was dark and muddy, but it didn't scare me. It was a narrow, tight passage alongside the house. It was the only place I could really be alone at the time. I was going there to have an unusual conversation.

I tried to fit my small body along the cracked, rough wall. There was a crooked metal fence on the other side, and I had to be careful not to get hurt.

Between the wall and the fence, I felt comfortable. The narrow strip of dry land close to the wall just barely accommodated my feet. I breathed and said to myself, *Just look up*.

When I looked up, I forgot where I was, who I was, where I had been, or where I needed to go. The view was one of silent magic.

A feeling of happiness and comfort arose in me right away. The sky, the moon, and the stars felt like a real family to me. I often asked myself, why couldn't I be up there with them? I really would have liked that.

There was no answer to my question, but I could feel that the stars were listening to me.

A VOTE FOR A TOOTH

It was Saturday morning—a street market day. This was when small farmers and vendors came from the mountains to the town to sell goods—mostly food.

People milling around. Colorful fruits and vegetables, ice cream stands, chickens and pigs for sale or trade, and birds singing in cages. This was also a day I worked less.

But this specific Saturday was different. Besides the street market, politicians were also promoting their election campaigns, and I was going to the dentist. Everything seemed related.

The town appeared to have been showered with paper rain. On these papers, I saw older men wearing serious clothes—black and white suits—and trying to smile while holding a stiff pose. These were the politicians on their election campaigns.

The songs they played were not fun. I heard the same songs over and over all day long. They were so loud I couldn't hear the birds anymore. Often, I caught myself singing along to these songs I didn't like. I wondered how it was possible to do something you didn't want to, and only realize it when you were already in the middle of it.

A few weeks before, my mother had made an awful deal. An adult family member told Dara my tooth was not good and that it should be fixed. Dara took me to a dentist. I got really scared by the noise the machine made and ran away from the place.

Later, one of the campaigning politicians sent some people to talk to Dara and they offered another option to fix my tooth. They said it would be fast and painless, that I wouldn't even hear any noise from the machine. All I had to do was close my eyes for a few seconds, and the bad tooth would be gone. And even better, the treatment was free!

Dara was very happy, and it meant a lot to me to see her happy. The politician's people wrote something on a sheet and Dara signed it. I was scared, but to see Dara smile I would do anything.

It was about noon. I walked alone across town, holding a small piece of paper with a long number written on it in my hand. Dara had given me directions. She told me to give the piece of paper to the dentist when I got there.

I understood it all, except for one question I kept asking myself, *Why am I walking alone to this place?* But even if I had an answer to my question, it wouldn't matter. Fear was destined to be my only companion that day.

I was as scared as I'd been before, with the first dentist and his noisy machine. But I'd made a promise, so instead of running away from what scared me, I walked toward it.

As I walked through the town, I felt there was nothing that could change the voice of fear in my head. The crowded, festive, and colorful streets didn't distract my thoughts. I wished I could catch myself singing that annoying song. For once, I wouldn't have minded.

It didn't take long to get to the dentist's office. I opened a red door and entered a tiny room. The lighting was dim and there were a few broken chairs. The place seemed to need more fixing than my tooth. An old lady sat behind a table.

That table is probably from my school. I sit behind one just like it, I thought. I crossed the room in front of the lady to sit in the back. There was another door behind her where the dentist worked.

The woman had frizzy gray hair and used glasses. She didn't smile at anyone. Her teeth probably needed fixing, too. I hoped she had an alley like mine. The sky family would make her smile freely, as much as I did. They didn't mind anyone with bad teeth. I had tested this out.

My thoughts strayed from fear for a moment while I thought about how the sky made me feel.

When my attention returned, the woman was looking at me. She was holding a pen and a sheet of paper. She asked my name. I gave her the paper in my hand, and she sent me back to my seat. It didn't take long before I heard another child scream.

What would happen to me there? The last sound I wanted to hear was my own name. I knew the lady would say it when it was my turn. Why did I have a name, anyway? I didn't need one. The sound of my name always scared me to the bone, especially at home. I guess it could have been worse. If I didn't have a name, people around me would use something else to frighten me. They did anyway, but at least the fear warned me before I felt the pain on my body.

A moment later, the woman looked at me again. Our eyes met, but we didn't say anything to each other. Why was I not running away from this place like before? This was so much worse than the first dentist I was taken to.

I know the reason: I'd made a promise to my mother. I gave her my word, so I had to stay until the end.

The lady called my name. I wasn't sure how I was going to get inside the other room. My legs were like jelly, my stomach hurt, and I was probably pale as a ghost. I couldn't speak a word. But I managed to get up from the chair and walk slowly toward the other room. The dentist, a tall man who didn't seem to notice how frightened I was, asked me sit on a strange high chair. It was scalding hot outside, as always, but all of a sudden, I felt very cold. My body was shaking. The tall man looked calm and cool. He didn't know I was about to pass out from fear.

He probably thought I was a strong and courageous girl to come alone for a tooth extraction. So I acted like there was nothing to be scared of. *Since nobody believed in my fear, why should I?*

This thought calmed me. Then I heard some metallic noises coming from behind the chair I was sitting in. There was also a strange smell in the air. This was not going to be fun, but I was prepared to be strong.

The combination of the smell, his silence, and the fearful thoughts trying to take me over again made me think of one word: torture.

What have I done? I asked myself. *I made a promise*, I answered. But I didn't know I would feel like a mosquito trapped in a bed net.

The dentist started to walk toward me, holding a large needle in his hands. He said nothing. My body was still shaking. It was getting colder and colder in there.

Then, instead of asking the dentist what he was going to do to me, I started a strange interrogation. "How old are you? Do you like working here? Did you buy some fresh fruit at the street market today?" I asked one question after another.

His only answer was, "Open your mouth wide, young lady."

At that point, I knew I was in serious trouble. He didn't want to talk and I couldn't talk. I had no choice but to pretend I didn't mind not knowing what was about to happen.

He came closer and closer. The warmth of his body made me feel like I was inside of a tight box. There was a sharp, brief pain that crossed my mouth to the back of my head. I couldn't do anything. *It has to end at some point.* This was the only thought in my mind.

Soon, my whole mouth felt heavy. Everything had been numbed—my gums, my lips, my fears, my thoughts, my body, my whole life. There was no other feeling left but surrender.

It wasn't over. Minutes later, he returned with a larger instrument. I was already paralyzed, but I wished my thoughts were paralyzed, too.

He asked me to open my mouth again. I heard a muffled sound that reminded me of a piece of glass being smashed, as if the glass had been wrapped up in a cloth and soaked in water so the sound didn't get too loud. There was no pain, but the numbness was its own kind of discomfort.

It didn't take long to see my tooth, lying in a tray by my side. I tasted blood. My tongue was searching for my tooth uncontrollably. She had lost part of her family. There was nothing I could do to comfort her. She wouldn't stop searching for it, the way a mother hen searches for her chicks who have died and had their bodies taken away from the roost.

The dentist's silence was now my silence. He had accomplished his mission. As for me, for the first time, I didn't have one, except to endure and overcome deep fear. I guess I did a good job of that.

For the next few hours, my mouth felt detached from the rest of my body—a strange sensation I yearned for once the pain arrived to spend a sleepless night with me.

The mosquitos trapped inside my bed net celebrated my absence. My alley family would wait for me in vain that night.

A SUNDAY MASS

Sunday morning. Dara, Ana, and I were climbing the steps to get to church. Each step I took felt lighter and lighter. The song that was playing inside the place made me feel different.

We reached the top. A woman wearing a red dress entered church, distracting all of us. After crossing the large door, the air seemed limited. It didn't allow me to breathe much of it. My whole body became sort of numbed, just like my mouth at the dentist. I couldn't be what I thought I was; a simple human being with healthy lungs that kept me alive. It was as if the air asked me not

to breathe it. The music asked me not to move with it. The silence demanded more silence, and the image of a man on a cross demanded that I stop thinking.

We found a place to sit. I felt strangely fine. My body couldn't move because it was seated. When I was walking toward the bench, it felt like I was not supposed to be moving, although I had to.

The man wearing a long, white dress started to talk. Why did he speak in a melancholic voice? I didn't understand anything he said. Dara was next me—she seemed to understand everything. She held a booklet in her hands. She was reading the man's words there.

The place commanded silence, but my thoughts couldn't be silenced. They kept changing by the second with every image, smell, or sound I heard.

On my left side, there was a boy. A fly was sitting on his forehead. The man in the white dress was saying something I should have been listening to, but as long as that fly sat on the boy's head, my thoughts were with him. It felt to me like a problem to solve. How could I chase the fly away from his forehead without moving or talking? I didn't know.

The boy was more paralyzed than my mouth after all the injections. Didn't he feel something unusual on top of his skin?

That bothered me so much. I was getting impatient and uncomfortable. I heard someone whispering something from the front seat.

“Look at her. Doesn't she know this is the house of God?”

Was she talking to me? I hoped not. I was quiet. She couldn't be listening to my thoughts. Even my breath was shallow and controlled.

The whisper continued. “How can she wear a red dress to Church? This is the house of Jesus. She will burn in hell.”

I didn't know what was wrong with the color red. I liked it. What did “burn in hell” mean? Red reminded me of fire. It was painful to be burned. But I did enjoy corn on the cob grilled on the bonfire. I liked the color red, and I liked the fire. I wondered what hell had to do with any of that. A bonfire that grilled women in

red? What about people who whispered in Church about women in red? Would they be burned too? It all sounded too complicated for me.

I tried to stretch my neck to look at Ana, who was sitting next to Dara on the other side, but I couldn't see her.

A familiar smell traveled to my nose. It grabbed my attention. I recognized the smell very well. My father drank *cachaça* all the time.

I looked behind me. There was a man with grey hair wearing a black hat sitting close to me. He was looking down. He was either trying to fall asleep or he was sleep-talking. The man was nodding his head with every word the man with the melancholic voice said. He was repeating the words. He seemed to understand and agree with everything too, just like Dara.

Did they really understand the words of the man in white? Or did they just repeat them because it was all they could do?

I preferred to remain in my thoughts rather than to repeat words I didn't understand.

The mass was about to end. I knew because some people were forming a line to get closer to the man upfront. Dara got up and went up front too.

The music picked up. It was happier than the music that was playing at the start. The man was giving everyone something. He was putting it directly in their mouths. It was small and white—a circular, biscuit-like something. It might have been a candy, perhaps a sweet treat. I would have liked one, but I didn't see children going there. The solemn way the people acted when they bit the biscuit made me realize it was something sacred, perhaps a magical biscuit?

The music played louder and happier. I wanted to get up and dance.

It was not going to happen. There was a feeling of melancholy everywhere. After eating one of those white biscuits everyone walked extra slow and looked sadder than before. How come? Happy music and a biscuit should make anyone cheerful. I didn't understand the place.

I looked to my left. The boy still looked like a stone. The fly had found a permanent home on his forehead. I had to do something.

There was a brochure next to me, the one my mother was reading. She had left it on her seat to get a biscuit. That was it.

I started to fan myself as fast as I could. I pretended my left side was warmer than my right. The boy looked at me, oblivious, and the fly went away.

Whew—it was a relief that made me happy. He would never know he had a fly on his forehead during the entire mass, and that the left side of my face hadn't been overly warm at all.

The fly would find another forehead to rest on, no doubt. Too bad I wouldn't be there to fan it away again.

The mass ended. Dara, Ana, and I slowly stood and walked toward the large front door.

There were many other smaller doors on the sides of the Church, and I wondered why everyone left by the main front door, which was crowded, and exiting through any of those side doors might lead us where we want to be.

That Sunday, I returned home to experience another outburst of violence: My mother shouted and slapped me. Again, I was “too slow,” a disobedient girl. I did not move fast enough for her, and whatever I did, I made mistakes. What did I do this time? Set the table? Carry another plate of food?

The plate fell to the floor of its own volition. My hands were trembling. I was crying before my mother even screamed and slapped my face and called me names. And deep in my heart was a more profound sadness: My mother had gone to Church; she had prayed; she had sung. She had even taken the sacred biscuit. But she had not changed a bit.

That was when I realized that just as they had all crowded together to exit from the one main door, most people emerged from Church exactly the same as they went in. My mother followed the crowd. Did she believe the man in the white dress? Did she hear messages of love and kindness? Apparently not. She was the same furious mother, and I was the same sad, wounded girl.