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Tattoo

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TATTOO

Angela Klewicki

IT WAS A DAY LIKE ANY OTHER in my new life here in the United States. Like many times before, I was awakened by Bruno, who slapped me in the face. After that rude awakening I got up, put on a jacket, leashed Bruno and Scrubbie, our dogs, and took them to the backyard. When I came back inside I realized that I had all the appropriate clothes from the waist up; however, from my waist down I was only wearing underwear. After noticing, I thought, "No wonder I was a little bit cold." I felt embarrassed and I hope that there were no witnesses. Then, I said to myself, "After all, I did not do it on purpose. It just happened." I laughed and thought, "After all, life is beautiful." Yes, it was. I was a newlywed, living in a new country with my very first job. However, that day all my happiness would be rapidly change to sadness.

I was getting a cup of coffee while listening to the TV news. I went to see the TV screen and immediately I heard the news anchor saying to pay attention to the images because it was not a movie trailer but a real event. I saw an airplane stuck inside a building with a lot of smoke coming out of it. Suddenly, a second airplane crashed into the building next to the first one. They were the twin towers and it was September 11th 2001. I felt surrounded by complete silence and TV images. Then, I heard myself saying "not again," and all the terror and anxiety came back to me one more time. I remembered and felt my past again. On that day, I suffered a series of flashbacks from my life in Peru. Peru, located in the pacific coast of South America, is a country that has struggled with terrorism for almost two decades. There were two main terrorist groups: Shining Path and The Revolutionary Movement of Tupac Amaru **MRTA**. In addition to these two groups was the government with military groups that in some cases operated as death squads. Therefore, growing up in that era was difficult; furthermore, remembering was even harder.

That day in September I was home alone. Dave, my husband, was on jury duty. I tried to reach him but his cell phone was turned off. He had no clue of what was happening. He called me later and asked me not to go to work and to stay at home until he arrived. By the time Dave arrived home, his car was full of groceries, canned soups, crackers and many other non- perishable supplies. I was reminded of the time, back in Peru, when my siblings and I had to form lines from 6 a.m. until 8 or 9 am, when the mobile stores, "subsidized" by the government, opened their doors. We were only allowed to buy one Kg. of sugar, rice, eggs, beans, oats, salt and two bags of powdered milk. This purchase was only allowed one per family. However, my family as any other

family cheated the system. My four siblings and I formed the line and denied being related when we were asked. That was the only way to get access to the supplies, even though we were paying for it. Dave also brought many jugs of water and again, I was reminded of the time when my family and I had to collect water in containers, pots, and anything we could because during daylight we didn't have any; water to cook, to wash, to clean ourselves, or to flush the toilet. Sometimes we had to ration it because water could be unavailable for days. Dave also brought batteries and charcoal, and one more time I was reminded of the candles and oil for the lamps that was a must for us in order to illuminate our house. As well as water, we didn't have electricity for days. Not only that, on Christmas Eve, for many years, Shining Path "celebrated" with the population by blowing up strategic power pylons leaving the whole city in darkness.

During that evening, I called my family in Peru and told my mother what was happening here. She told me that they knew because they were watching it on TV. Her voice was tense and I knew she was worried about me. She told me that they were



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watching people jumping from the towers and another flashback came to me. The images of mass graves, frequently discovered somewhere in the Peruvian country side. As Peruvian TV does not edit images, Peruvians were able to see the discovery of many mass graves and subsequently the recovery of mutilated bodies and the horror of their deaths. We also, were able to hear the accounts of the few survivors, which in most cases were children. I started to cry for both events-my past and my present. All those memories were too much at that moment. I also knew that my mother, with the rest of my family back there, was having the same flashbacks that I had.

That night I talk to my husband and I recounted what I lived and experienced in Peru. Then, I noticed that I had never spoken about these things with anybody, not even with my own family. I realized that everybody in Peru, or at least the people I know, avoids this issue. Perhaps, it is too painful to even mention it. That night I cried for all those memories because I never did before. Perhaps because I was so busy, immediately I reached eighteen years old I got a job, and worked, never allowing myself to cry. I remember and felt again how a shotgun really sounds, how the ground trembles a little bit when a tank rides on the streets, how a teargas bomb affects your body. Most important, the sound and the impact from the car bombs not only on your body but in your soul. Those were the memories brought to me that September 11th.

On that date I understood that experiences become memories that are similar to tattoos. Once it is in your body it never disappears, it is in you, between your skin and your mind. Sometimes hidden and sometimes incredibly present. I have many tattoos on me but three are the most important. First, kissing my mother's forehead every time I left home because I didn't know if I was coming back. Second, my mother's toast on Christmas and New Years Eve she said, "One more year that we are all together." Third, always present in my mind this native child who didn't speak Spanish, only dialect. This child, at four years of age, was able to describe the massacre in which his parents with the rest of the village population were killed. I always wonder what had happened to him. I just found out that The *Peruvian* Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) declared, "Its final tally of victims for the period was 69,280 dead and 43,042 orphans." This is the official result, I am not sure if this number includes the ones that remain missing.

Today, everything seems in peace. I believe that my past and I live in perfect harmony. I am able to remember and talk about without crying too much. I know that what my family and I experienced was bad; however, we considered ourselves lucky (or should I say blessed) because I did not lose anybody during all those years. Because of what happened on September 11th and the feelings and memories that came to me on that day, I try to live one day at a time. Once in a while I get sad for everything that happened in Peru and I always hope that it never happens again. I will not say that I am a better person; real life is not a fairy tale; I just try to be the best I can. That is why, I believe that sometimes something good comes out from something bad. I will finish by saying that I learned to feel compassion and I understand the world in a better way. And although I'm covered with many tatoos, I really believe that after all Yes! Life is beautiful.