

DOLOR HEREDITARIO

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This testimonio began with a visual imprint. I sketched a much simpler version of the image, also titled *Dolor Hereditario*, one night when a sudden sadness came over me. I started crying and what I drew was a pregnant woman with tears streaming down her eyes. At that time, I thought it was a simple release. Later, in looking at the sketch, I saw my mother's story. The painting that resulted was an attempt to interpret the pain and desperation that my mother went through after her body and spirit were violently attacked. The woman, my mother, is amidst a desert, a landscape often associated with death and loneliness. Still, even the desert sustains life. Therefore, the desert also represents my mother, who managed to sustain life and keep her spirit alive despite her loneliness and suffering. The burning in her stomach and the cacti are symbols of rape and pain. Despite the burning in her pregnant body, there is hope represented by a hummingbird, a symbol of love, speaking into my mother's ear. The fetus in the sun represents the survival of my sister, who also fought to remain on this earth. The nopal is behind my mother as a symbol of her past, because it nourishes despite causing pain. The agave is a symbol of the present and future, because despite growing it never sheds its old pencas, its history.

As far as I know, my mother never attempted suicide. However, I imagine that if I had lived the trauma she did, the thought would have crossed my mind more than once. When I speak with my mother, though, I get the impression that her stance is thus: "If I went through so much violence and pain and still managed to survive, then my reason for being on this earth is greater than anything we can

comprehend.” Instead of losing her faith in humanity, she embraces a deep faith, one that I find immeasurable. She is one of the strongest people I know. In my painting of *Dolor Hereditario*, the crack in the earth serves as a reminder that when one woman hurts, we all hurt, and as a result the earth hurts as well.

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At the age of fifteen, my mother had already crossed the border regularly for three years to work for families in San Diego. She stayed with them for months at a time, caring for their children, cooking their meals, and cleaning their homes. By this age, she had already helped raise eleven of her siblings. These adult responsibilities were compounded by her living at home with a stepfather who continuously attempted to molest her and a mother who denies anything ever happened to this very day. My mother's house was a hell, but she had nowhere else to go. Despite this, when she got some time off from work, she would visit her mother. Late in 1963, after a longer time than usual away from home, she had an extra long break and decided to go visit her mother, thinking she would be happy to see her. Instead, her mother seemed irritated. Feeling hurt, my mother decided to leave and go back to work.

Alone, she waited for the bus to cross back to San Diego. An immigration officer stopped her and asked what she was doing. I assume that a girl her age waiting for the bus to cross the border alone was somewhat uncommon and, of course, dangerous. My mother quickly made up a lie and explained that she was waiting for the woman she worked for to pick her up. Seeing how young she was, the officer said he would wait with her until the woman got there. Caught in the lie, she got on the bus back to Tijuana's Centro instead. On the bus, a well-dressed man in his thirties asked permission to sit next to her. He started a conversation with her and began pointing out the obvious, that she looked sad and like she

needed someone to talk to. Eventually, he convinced her to have dinner with him. She wouldn't be alone, he reasoned. She could unburden herself, get some things off her chest, and then he would take her back home right after dinner. They had been on the bus for about ten minutes from the Centro when the man asked if they could get off. He said he needed to stop by a restaurant and to talk to a friend and then they would head over to dinner. She waited at some tables outside while he went in to the restaurant. While she waited, a friend of the man came out and offered her a drink. She declined, but he insisted and eventually brought out a soda for her. She began feeling sick and passed out, which is the last thing my mother remembers from that day.

The next morning she woke up dazed and in pain; she had been beaten and raped. She doesn't know exactly what happened, but believes that she fought back because she could see bruises, including the imprint of the man's ring, on her face. She was alone, locked in the room of a small house near the restaurant where she had been drugged. The man would come and go, raping her as he pleased. Every day someone would come to the house and leave only a burrito for her to eat. On one of those visits, the man feeding my mother left the door unlocked. It's doubtful that he forgot to lock the door and more likely that he took pity on her. As soon as he left, she ran out the door to a neighboring house where a woman was outside hanging clothes to dry. She pleaded with the woman to call the police. She is unsure if the man had been watching her the entire time or if he returned to the house at that very moment. Either way, she had been caught. He ran out of a car, grabbed her and dragged her back into the house. He asked my mother, over and over, what she had told the neighbor. Lying, she swore that she only asked for a glass of water. My mother isn't sure, but suspects that she spent three or four more days in that room.

After that incident, the man moved my mother to a house in a different neighborhood. This house was much larger and surrounded by cinderblock walls with solid, gate-like doors that remained locked. She couldn't see anything outside the property. She remembers washing her underwear by hand and walking out barefoot to line-dry it. Maggots crawled out from below the house and covered the patio. Again, the man would come and go from this house. My mother has often wondered if more victims had been kept in that basement. After about two weeks there, during one of the man's visits, she remembers him sitting at the bottom of the house's stairs with his hands on his face, crying and mumbling to himself. Looking back, she thinks he was on drugs or heavily intoxicated. Being alone for so long, all she thought about was how she could get out. She managed to take apart a pipe from under one of the sinks. She remembers hitting him over the head as hard as she could. He fell over and started bleeding. My mother remembers wanting to vomit, her entire body shaking so that she was hardly able to stand. Her shaking hands barely managed to turn the man's body over. She remembers searching through his jeans' pockets and finding the keys for the house. She managed to run out and spent the night sheltered in the recessed entryway of a business.

That morning, without anywhere to go or anyone to turn to, she went to the police and filed her report, her *declaración*. They didn't believe her. She swore she wasn't lying and pleaded with them to go back to the house, where she would show them where the man's dead body was. The police still didn't believe her, but took her back to the house to look anyway. When they walked inside, the house was completely empty. My mom's strike was not enough to kill the man, but in her panic she didn't know what had happened. All she knew was that the man was bleeding and hadn't moved. The police officers chuckled and thought she was funny, making up such crazy stories for attention. Things went from bad to

worse. Instead of helping her, they took her back to the police car and raped her. They threatened to leave her in jail if she said anything and assured her that no one would believe her after all the “lies” she had told.

After the hell she had been through, she thought the police would help and protect her. Instead, going to them made everything worse. Rather than letting her go, they took her back to the station and incarcerated her. They couldn't release her because she had confessed to killing a man. Not having anyone else to turn to, she called her mother, despite the rejection she had shown. Her mother never came.

My mother was in jail for about a week, when a man came to the station and got my mom released. To this day, she doesn't know who the man was, why he helped her, or how he knew she was there. With nowhere else to go, she once again went back to her mother's house. And, once again, she was turned away. Her mother would not allow her to stay there. She tried to go back to work in San Diego, but was only allowed to stay for two weeks because her female employer had decided to let her go due to the length of time she had been “missing.” She said she needed someone reliable. Eventually my mother found some friends to live with. Shortly after, she began feeling sick and found out she was pregnant. She decided the best thing to do was have an abortion. Being so young, my mom didn't know what the medical procedure entailed. She was put to sleep and when she awoke was told that the procedure had been successfully performed. She later found out that the procedure had not been performed at all and that she was still pregnant.

My mother eventually married a man who agreed to accept the baby, my oldest sister, as his own child. In November of 1964, my mom underwent a C-section. She lost a large amount of blood during the surgery. She was anemic, underweight, and continued to suffer so much from the trauma that she fell into a coma. Yet,

despite all the complications, both my mother and my sister survived.

The man my mother married was verbally and physically abusive. She had another daughter with him and was pregnant with my brother when she filed for a divorce. She later met my father and remarried, and this marriage came with its own ups and downs.

It wasn't until her late twenties that my oldest sister found out that my mother's first husband wasn't her father. To make matters worse, the news didn't come from my mother but from another family member. At that time, my mother could not bear to relive her story. She feared retelling it and being misunderstood or not believed at all. So she held on to her secret. My sister went on a search for a man that was not really her father.

I am still not sure what the turning point was for my mother, what it was that made her decide her story needed to be told. Maybe it was my careless ways with boys that made her feel the need to speak so that I would be more cautious. Maybe it was my sister's persistence at building a relationship with her "real" father. Whatever it was, my mother finally reached a level of peace and she no longer felt ashamed of telling her story.

I still remember that day so vividly. I was fifteen or sixteen and had been causing my mother some trouble by coming home late and lying a lot. We were probably at the most difficult point in our relationship. She kept saying we needed to talk about something serious. In my selfish mind, I thought I was in trouble and so I avoided her. I had no idea my mom wanted to talk to me about her life, to tell me her story. She eventually sat me down and with tears in her eyes told me everything. It was at this point in my life that I began to see my mom as

a woman and not just as my mother. She is a woman with a painful past and a long story to tell. From that point forward, I began to understand so many other things. Why my mother was so overprotective. Why she seemed so distrusting of men. Why my sister always got more attention than any of my other siblings. Even simple things made more sense, like why as kids we couldn't run around the house naked.

My mother still hasn't told everybody her story. Among those select few she has told, we only know the small pieces that she selectively unburdened from the larger frame of her life story. Perhaps there is still some shame, fear of being misunderstood or fear that there won't be the care and compassion she hopes for. My mother's family only knows bits of the story, hearsay mostly. My two sisters and I are the only ones who know the full event of what happened and some of the more private details. My oldest sister chooses not to believe my mother and still claims a man she doesn't know very well as her father. In a way, I understand. Still, my mother affirms she wants her story to be told. When she speaks of it, I still see pain in her eyes. Perhaps that is why she prefers that I write her story as opposed to her telling it directly.

What I wish, though, is that my sister could provide the understanding that my mother needs, however small, however she might express it, even behind closed doors. I wish she could acknowledge the sacrifices my mother made for her, for all of us. Because I can say with certainty that half of my mother's life has in some way or another revolved around my sister; my mother carries the burden of guilt, what I see as an unnecessary guilt, to provide for her eldest daughter what that man took away so many years ago. However, he did not just take from my mother, but from all of us. In the hindsight of knowing her story, I can see how the majority of my mother's life has been dictated by these events and how,

as her children, we have all been affected by them. We are who we are in part because of the events of her trauma and survival and in one form or another we have inherited some of my mother's pain. My hope is that we can reach a point where instead of passing it on further, we can begin to heal and ensure that all of my mother's sacrifices were not in vain.