

# Jumping into Love of Life

María Antonieta Osornio Ramírez



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*Jumping into Love of Life*  
María Antonieta Osornio Ramírez  
*English edition by*  
Lisa J. Heller

*Translation by*  
Martha and Laura Creel Galindo

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María Antonieta Osornio Ramírez  
Tel. 01(427) 271 00 44  
tonyosor@hotmail.com

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## INTRODUCTION

*My life might seem exceptional, but it is not. Hundreds, thousands of stories at least as dramatic as mine exist throughout the world, where, confined to a room, hidden within four walls, left on a bed, sofa or sometimes even the floor, disabled people abound. The only difference is that they remain anonymous, while my story has come to light. It is a testimony of what the life of any one of the other hundreds or thousands is like.*

*Sixteen years ago, my life took an inevitable turn when my accident occurred. Had someone told me then everything that I would experience, I would have stated categorically that I couldn't withstand it. Had I been told then that in that new form of life I would encounter deep new meaning, nothing would have sounded more artificial.*

*When I entered the "Autobiographies of Mexican Women" competition, organized by Documentación y Estudios de Mujeres, A.C. [Documentation and Studies about Women Association], my first goal was to win the prize for the financial assistance it would provide. But the prize I won surpassed my expectations: my life and my struggle started to be publicized in many different places, stirring interest in truly understanding how it was possible to be so severely disabled yet happy. Without expecting it, my testimony started to become a vehicle of inspiration. Many people, especially the disabled, sought me out and requested interviews. They wanted me to help them achieve something that to them seemed impossible: to recover their faith and find their way back into society as capable and productive individuals. Ultimately, this was what my story was about.*

*With the support of my two teachers, Marcela Musi and Martha Babb, I started meeting and talking to colleagues. I felt unable to help, since I didn't have professional training at the time: I was simply an individual who*

*had fought ardently for her life and had been given the grace of receiving support and being led by great hearted beings. However, my teachers told me that while I didn't have professional training, I had the most important element: experience. This was true as a first step, but, aided by my teachers, my personal process led me to train as a psychotherapist.*

*Never having planned it, the force of a purpose that surpassed my limited strength began embracing me. One morning, as I sat in my wheelchair, enjoying my garden and the warmth of the sun, I looked at my wheelchair and suddenly realized that I had never looked at it before, plainly acknowledging and accepting that this was my reality. With absolute clarity, certainty and strength, the conviction emerged from my heart that I should devote myself to the service of others who, like me, had lost a major part of their capacity to physically move but whose souls still beat vehemently.*

*Frequently, the limited information available about disabled people prevents us from understanding and being aware of what it means to have to live with no legs, with no arms, without movement. Many people fail to realize that the disabled are human beings marginalized by society and often, tragically, by their own families. People tend to be unaware that disability plunges its victims into deep depression and loss of self-esteem, which is extremely difficult to overcome and leads us to believe we are in the way. Many times we are stuck for years inside a room, because there is, literally, no one who can lift us, and when there is someone who can, the shame of looking ugly, deformed, different, keeps us in hiding. It is difficult for society to understand us. Most average people don't realize that we have special needs, and when they do, they feel uncomfortable having to move aside to let the wheelchair pass, for example, or having to help the disabled somehow. The disabled constantly need to politely and pleasantly ask for help, because we are seldom self-sufficient. In short, the life of disabled people involves dealing with a hostile environment caused by our situation and the world around us.*

*Just as a drop of water becomes a stream, within only a few months of my autobiography's publication, a good part of my day was taken up on the phone, talking to individuals like myself and discovering, together,*



*the possibility of changing their lives. Others came personally to my home, and I met with them as well.*

*It gradually became clear that something more structured than simply phone calls and sporadic meetings was needed. This spontaneous phenomenon needed to be channeled. Some type of organization had to be founded to deal with this urgent need.*

*Martha Babb and I started working on a project with the motto “A Path of Light,” and for every brick we laid, God laid a hundred. A year later, we set up *Fundación Humanista de Ayuda a Discapacitados*,” I.A.P. (Humanist Foundation for Aid to Disabled People), and we opened the first home in Santa Cruz del Monte, Mexico State, with which FHADI went from being a beautiful metaphor to truly providing light to many people who have approached us in the hopes of changing their lives.*

*FHADI provides emotional, spiritual and job training programs to disabled individuals willing to commit themselves to a personal development and growth process. The principle underlying our work is that each one of us is much more than our physical body. We are actually gifted beings with a great capacity to love, and when we get in touch with that reality within our self, we can transcend the attachment to our physical body and see ourselves from another dimension –where we can activate our faith to develop our potentialities– and integrate again into society to work productively, become more independent and improve our quality of life.*

*The environment at FHADI is based on respect, support and love. Its doors are open to everyone who comes, so they can grow and transform their life... and those who give it their all succeed. As (s)he starts to creatively and humanely find life solutions, each individual becomes a poignant testimony, and the years of suffering and captivity remain in the past.*

*All this may sound easy, but our job is to hand shape new hearts, new mindsets, new lives. Since it is work that is carried out from heart to heart, everyone involved reaps immeasurable satisfaction.*

*FHADI first assists disabled individuals with individual and group therapy. It helps them develop a service and quality approach to both human and labor issues, so that they may later join a work team and start*

*earning their own income. Eventually, the very same people who originally came seeking help join our support group and become actively involved in our structure. We thus get to serve more and more people.*

*Perhaps the most difficult part of our job is financially supporting the project, because we rely on funding from sensitive donors who realize the monumentality of being able to transform another human life.*

*Throughout the four years we have been working through good and bad, easy and tough times, with the wind behind us or against the current, our hearts have always sustained the love that underlies our work and that is nourished by what we see happening every day in each of our disabled colleagues.*

*Never, during my parachuting years, could I have imagined that I would get to fly so high or reach the sky so many times from a wheelchair. Not even my best jump compares to the leap I took in my own life and which I now share with so many people who once lived in the darkness of their disability and now move forward along a new path of light, the path that FHADI has led them to.*

### *DEMAC, My Beginning of Serving Others*

*In the beginning, my struggle to overcome my disability was an effort completely centered on myself. I spent many years in a process of survival, physical as well as emotional, spiritual and economic, and there was no room to look beyond my intimate circle.*

*My first encounter with DEMAC was apparently by chance. Gradually I have realized that coincidences do not really exist, but we experience events that lead our life towards a space where, if we dare follow what our heart tells us, we find fulfillment.*

*As time passed, and after participating in the “Autobiographies of Mexican Women” competition, organized by DEMAC, I started to become more fully aware of the dimensions of what it does through its unconditional support of women. In my particular case, when DEMAC published my story, it opened the doors to a new project that has given meaning not only to my*

*life but to that of many other individuals. Mine is one of the many cases that this institution has supported unconditionally, enriching projects of many kinds yet always focusing on women and their world.*

*Amparo Espinosa Rugarcía, DEMAC director, is down-to-earth, highly professional and a woman who is sensitive to the human voice. Every time I have met with her, I have found her to be warm and genuinely interested in me and in the work projects that have brought us together.*

*Publication of this book was supported entirely by DEMAC and is meant to benefit FHADI and therefore many disabled people, individuals who depend on the light from others' hearts to find their way into the realm of dignified, hopeful living.*



# 1

## AWAKENING

I have two birth certificates, each with a different date. According to one, I was born on July 10, 1954, whereas the other one reads July 14 of the same year. I asked my mother why this was many times, and her answer was always that she couldn't remember. I have reached the conclusion that this was actually a sign, because in fact, I was to be born twice. Perhaps what both births have in common is the volcano I've always had deep within me. Since I was little, it bubbled up inside, pushing me to be rebellious, intrepid, reckless, and during my rebirth process, it drove me to find the strength, courage, determination and will to live again and through every moment's effort, helped me become a better human being.

I was born in San Juan del Río, Querétaro, where I lived my first years, as well as at a ranch nearby that my father referred to as "Chinches Bravas" [Brave Bedbugs]. You might think that with three older brothers, I, the only girl and the baby, grew up coddled and pampered, doted on by my brothers and spoiled by my father. The truth is, however, that my brothers went away to school at an early age, and much of my parents' attention went to my brother Jorge, who came down with polio when he was very little. Due to the numerous surgeries he went through, my parents focused their care on him, and I spent a lot of time alone. It is true that I was my father's little girl, though I didn't get to enjoy his company and affection very much during my childhood, while my mother was exceedingly demanding and firm-handed.

My mother claimed that the streets were a place for men, and women should stay home learning how to do womanly tasks. Like it or not, I tried to adapt to her way of thinking, although it in no way resembled my own. So, the days went by, and though they had to be different, each one seemed exactly the same as every other. And the months passed, amidst fresh mountains framed by deep blue skies; the faces at school were the same and games only varied by the seasons of the year. And the years elapsed, learning how to embroider and knit, jumping rope, listening to the Sacred Stories the head nun would read. And so, my childhood was spent, without being able to channel my desire to be like my brothers, who were free to come and go.

Upon completing elementary school, my brother Gilberto convinced my parents to send me to a public middle school for boys and girls. So, along with my teenage years, my passion for sports began: volleyball, basketball and athletics. But no matter how much natural ability I had, my mother had more resolve and refused to let me take part in any of the competitions I was invited to. Little by little this confinement, the beatings, my loneliness and the repression started to feed a desire within me to get away from home.

I met Serafín when I was nine years old. He was a friend of my brother José Luis and therefore ten years older than me. Serafín was thin, very strong and extremely serious. Even though I didn't like him, I liked his eyes... and I slowly began liking all of him. One day he told my mother that he was going to marry me.

“Come on,” she answered, “She’s just a child.”

“That doesn’t matter, ma’am. I’ll wait until she grows up, and then I’ll marry her.”

And so it was. When I turned 15, Serafín and I became sweethearts, not so much because I wanted to or because I was in love but because of my mother’s advice and because of my unconscious desire to leave home.

“For marriage, Maria Antonieta, it’s best if the man is in love. Love comes later, over time, for the woman. You’ll see my child. This young man loves you a lot, so he’s good for you.”

And, like the ingredients that go into a recipe, Serafín’s love for me blended with my mother’s influence and my resolve to get away from that suffocating situation, no matter what. So, by the time I turned around, the table was set for the marriage, and as in some kind of a strange dream, before I had even turned 16, there I was in a church in San Juan del Río, surrounded by my parents and my girlfriends, all in ankle socks. On my way to church, some people stopped to congratulate me on my First Communion, to which I angrily replied that I was getting married, not going to my First Communion.

Just as I had expected, marriage meant freedom. For the first time, I could do whatever I wanted, come and go without anyone stopping me, play at leisure, run my life as I wished. Compared to my mother’s strictness, marriage responsibilities seemed minor, and going to Mexico City to the small house Serafín had bought, seemed like an exciting adventure to me; and the word fear did not figure in.

Serafín was a hardworking, responsible man. He loved sports, and ever since he was a boy, he’d played them intensely. He was very good with his hands and had the patience to assemble and paint scale models. When he joined the Army, he got interested in parachuting and became one of Mexico’s pioneers. He was a natural at jumping, so with discipline and dedication, he turned into one of the best parachuting instructors. He took great care of his people, and his quality showed in the training of his men. Perhaps the best thing I saw in him, besides his commitment to his work, was the way he loved and was devoted to me, the thoughtful, loving way he incorporated me into his world and his activities. When I realized this, I discovered I was also deeply in love and followed him everywhere, even to the parachuting training sessions he gave religiously in Tequesquitengo every weekend.

Of all the changes in my life during that short period of time, the greatest happened after a year of marriage, when my daughter Mariela was born. I suddenly went from the bike, which I rode up to my 8th month of pregnancy, to a hospital ward, where I experienced the complicated, painful process of labor and delivery.

Mariela brought a rich experience into my life, full of love and joy, and along with that, the difficulties of taking a baby to Tequesquitengo. For the first time I wanted to stay at home and not move. I no longer wanted to go here, there and everywhere but just be stable and calm. But as the saying goes, “The leopard can’t change its spots.”



## WINGS OF FREEDOM

Serafín liked races; he was totally into speed and ran in car and motorcycle competitions. There were often days when I would get on a motorcycle or in the car and challenge him, and I would often beat him, which only fed my boundless fearlessness. Not even being a mother and the responsibility of my baby stopped me. I did, though, have a limit: Serafín's foolhardy flying seemed crazy to me. And I constantly told him so.

"Flying is madness. Parachuting is a sport for crazy people. I can't understand when this obsession took hold of you. And don't expect or even think that I will ever wear a parachute. I go with you on motorcycles and cars, but jump out of a plane like a madwoman? You can count me out of that."

As I went with him to the practices, I was perfectly versed in the theory of technique, and without ever having jumped, I even gave classes myself. Nevertheless, it was inevitable that the day would come when I would take a taste of the exciting, singular emotion of parachuting.

Around that time, the secretary of defense, General Juan Arévalo Gardoqui, ordered a team of 50 female parachutists be formed. According to Serafín, I joined the group out of jealousy. He was right: I would have to be careful with so many women around him. I entered this demanding six-month intensive training program. We had to run 20 kilometers within a certain time, jump from a very high tower, do special ankle and calf exercises, be perfectly familiar with the equipment, learn how to fold a parachute, be

psychologically prepared to jump, learn how to land according to ground type. The difficulty built into military training was meant to prepare us to prevent accidents; amateur parachuters commonly suffered accidents and injuries.

We finally completed the training... though I still didn't want to jump. I still firmly believed that it was a sport for lunatics.

One morning, as I was watching the jumps in a competition in Tequesquitengo, Serafín came up to me.

"You don't want to jump because you're afraid; admit it," he said.

I got so mad I came right back at him with, "Put me down for the next flight."

"Are you really going to jump?"

"Of course, but just this time, to show you I'm not afraid," I told him as I began getting the gear on.

Serafín was shocked.

"Tony's going to jump... Tony's going to jump..." The news spread among all our friends.

Right away, Serafín added my name to the beginners' roster, which meant I would be jumping twice.

Resolutely and bravely, I got into the plane. I knew the first jump produces very strong emotions. You feel the strength of the wind, with the earth way down below. The void pulls you downwards. Some people change their mind in the plane; they lose their momentum and no longer dare to jump. I was not going to be one of them, especially considering how angry I felt.

I got ready by the door, feeling a little scared but also as if I had done this before.

Without hesitating or freezing up, I threw myself out. The instant I jumped, the sensation took me by surprise. I felt elevated toward another world, caressed by the air. Forgetting everything, I experienced a new and wonderful freedom, where my body seemed to expand limitlessly. The wind bathed me all over, and I felt myself

floating, caught up by a completely unique happiness and excitement. I entered a state of joy I had never experienced before.

In that space there is no fear or selfishness, conflicts or jealousy; grudges and human problems dissolve. During the elation of the flight all that exists is the freedom of being oneself in ecstasy... Freedom, rapture, bliss... Had anyone told me that this sensation, so much a part of parachuting, is also a natural human state, I never would have believed it. Though joyful in every sense, my condition as an Earthling had never provided an experience like it. It took me years, a great deal of suffering and spiritual cleansing to be able to permanently transfer that joy of being alive to everyday life without needing an airplane or parachute. But that day, totally oblivious of what life had in store for me, I thought that nothing could ever surpass the experience of jumping.

As I approached the ground, I tried to land in a grassy-looking area... it turned out to be a thorny acacia patch. Not minding the thorns, I cried out joyfully, ecstatically, feeling totally fulfilled. I immediately signed up for the second jump, and just like the first one, it was a well-done jump. I won second place in the beginners' category. I went home with a trophy, which meant nothing compared to the experience I'd had and which would become my life's passion.

Without delay, I started competing, winning and standing out. Every jump provided a singular thrill that lasted for weeks. I lived for Tequesquitengo, to get back into the plane and experience the sensation of jumping.

Just as a parachute blossoms in the sky, my life on earth expanded, encompassing new frontiers. Through Serafin's companionship and intimacy and through our now common interest in parachuting, I ended up falling in love with Serafin more intensely. Our daughter was growing up healthy and lovely, and things improved economically, so we were able to move to a bigger, nicer, more centrally located house. All this inspired me to improve

my jumping. My greatest desire was to fill in every line of my logbook with jumps, as quickly as possible, in order to get better and become a champion.

I existed for parachuting, and parachuting existed for me.

I witnessed some accidents and learned about the fatality of some of them. But I always thought, “How sad, but parachuting must go on.” An accident never seemed to me a reason to stop practicing something so wonderful.

My devotion to jumping was constant, and Serafín tried to please me as much as he could, though sometimes we needed to find other options.

“Serafín, I want to jump this weekend.”

“Honey, we can’t. We can’t afford renting the plane again. Let’s wait until next month; it’s just a week and a half from now.”

“But Serafín, it’s not fair. You jump practically whenever you want, but I only get to jump when we can afford it.”

“Of course, but I’m in the military.”

“So what, can’t I jump with the Army?”

“Oh Tony,” Serafín would laugh, “You come up with such funny ideas!”

“I’m serious; it’s no joke. Smuggle me onto the plane. You’re the instructor, so no one will even notice.”

“Are you out of your mind? Do you know the trouble I’d be in if I let a civilian on the plane? No, it’s way too risky.”

“Okay, so how about if I go in disguise? I put on one of your uniforms, tie up my hair and with the beret, no one will notice.”

I insisted so much that I ended up convincing Serafín, who thoroughly understood how I felt. He lent me a parachuting uniform, a beret, smuggled me onto the plane... and it took off. I kept my head down, so the others wouldn’t pay attention to me. Since everyone on the plane is silent and still, I wasn’t noticed. However, if you could hear emotions, I would have been discovered. I was joyous; my heart beat so hard and with such indescribable

excitement! Now, I would be able to jump whenever I wanted. My dream was gradually coming true. I didn't mind all the physical training and sacrifices I had to make. As long as I could experience the sensation of jumping again, leaving my little daughter with a babysitter was worth it. One day, as I got into the plane in my disguise, Serafin kissed me. The soldiers must've imagined all kinds of things: two soldiers kissing?

Finally, the brigadier general found out about the trick and demanded that Serafin explain my presence among the soldiers. This was absolutely forbidden. So, mustering up all my courage, I went to speak to the general myself and ask his permission to practice. Since he could not grant this permission, I simply asked him to let me jump during a parade inspection, which the secretary of defense was scheduled to attend, so I could try and find a way to present my case to him.

The exhibition was performed, and just as I had hoped, I landed in front of the secretary and did the formation. Since I was rather petite, I could get the gear off easily. When I took off the helmet, it was obvious I was a woman. I don't know whether it was my sex or my ability that impressed the secretary.

"I want elements such as this in the brigade," the secretary ordered.

"But general, she is not a member of the military," the brigadier general answered.

The secretary approached our formation and asked one of the soldiers, "And why are those boots so big?"

Lucky for me, the soldier in question could not answer, and so, without giving it any thought, I stepped forward, saluted him and answered. "General, these boots are pressurized to absorb the blow from the jump."

I watched his expression, as if he were telling me, "I like it... I like it."

The brigadier general started explaining to the secretary.

“This is the girl who is trying to get permission.”

I interrupted the brigadier general.

“Excuse me, General, please give me a chance. I want to jump and this is the only way I can do it. Give me a chance.”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Serafín, absolutely stunned, not knowing what to do, because I was risking everything right then.

“You know?” the general answered, “Wouldn’t you like to join the Army? I would certainly like to have elements like you.”

And then I went on to state my conditions:

“Provided, General, I don’t neglect my children. I’m a housewife, and I know that belonging to the Army means being available anytime.”

And so, I entered as the Army’s spoiled pet; they let me train, be an instructor and jump, without having to pass inspection every day and exempt from many of the duties that being in the military implied. Thereafter, I represented the Army in every competition and was so successful that I was awarded a medal.

There were very few parachuting women in the beginning, and because of this, many a time I was able to participate in overall, mixed, competitions. I won first place in the National Championship for my great skill in precision jumps. I developed this expertise by watching others jump. I would stand on the landing mark and watch and watch from there. And I asked questions. I was not embarrassed about doing so, no matter how foolish the question might sound, and as a result, great names in parachuting let me in on secrets and techniques that had helped them.

Together with the technique, I developed corporal jumping sensitivity. If I was tense, I couldn’t feel the parachute as well, but when I was relaxed and calm, enjoying the flight, my jumps were magnificent. I put everything into every jump.

As a female Army instructor, I faced major obstacles. Once, when got the chance to train 40 people in Monterrey, I packed,

took my daughter with me and went. As soon as I got there, the jeers and doubts about my training ability started.

“You won’t hear me yelling at you, like you’re used to,” I told them, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ll be doing everything together with you. Give me a chance to teach you what I know, and I ask you to give me the same respect you will get from me.”

I felt a huge responsibility for the safety of my men, so I folded and checked everybody’s gear. An incorrect fold can mean someone’s life. The students would fold their equipment first, and then I took it apart and redid it. In the long run, my ability, persistence, work and, of course, my obstinacy, earned me the respect of my partners, my students and the military world.





## SHADOWS OF DEATH

Ever since I was little, I was very close to my father. I loved him very much, and this childhood closeness and affection grew into a relationship of camaraderie and mutual respect that deepened with time. We always stayed in touch, even after I had my own family and lived in Mexico City. Every step in my development made him proud, and he let me know it.

My father understood my strong, daring character and supported me in everything I undertook. Parachuting was no exception, despite the danger involved, and he shared all my excitement and illusion with me.

As I began excelling, he cheered me on and expressed his profound patriotism when he would say, "It is so good; as a member of the military, you make Mexico stand out." He loved our nation, and I wanted to please him in everything. One day I asked him what would make him feel extremely proud of me.

"I imagine you achieving many things, but for me, the highest triumph would be for you to shake hands with President Miguel de La Madrid, and say to him, "Mister President, through our endeavors we wish to give the best of ourselves, to honor and place the name of Mexico up high. With your unwavering support, we are sure that we will do so and be able to do even more."

One day, my father's dream came true. After receiving a medal and, in fact, shaking hands with the president of Mexico, I repeated every word my father had said, as I had memorized them, sure that the day would come when I would be able to please him.

My father was a strong, fun-loving, polite man. His vitality and especially his understanding and support made me feel very close to him.

About a week before he died, he asked to see me.

“Tony, honey, I’m afraid of your jumping. You are a champion now; you’ve done what you’ve wanted to. It is time now for you to do something else. I don’t know... I wouldn’t like anything to happen to you. I didn’t want to tell you this before, but sometimes I don’t sleep because I’m worried that something might happen to you. Stop parachuting now.”

“No dad; asking me to do that is like asking me to die,” I answered. I felt my father was asking me for something impossible. How can you give up your life’s passion? How could I decide to make the final jump? There was no way that could be.

That same day he told me he had drawn up his will, and he wanted to let me know how everything should be in case he died. Die? To me, nothing could be more remote. I loved him too much to even consider the possibility.

“Don’t be absurd, Dad. Don’t say that even as a joke, because you are not going to die yet. That’s a long way off.”

Anyhow, he insisted on explaining in great detail the way he had arranged the properties and then added, “Even though you’re the youngest, you’re the strongest. So, you’ll be the one to have to arrange everything, comfort them and put things in order.”

That was the first time I ever thought about the possibility that both he and I would die some day. The idea of his death seemed abominable to me. The next week, on December 7, he came to stay overnight at my house in Mexico City. At five the next morning, I knocked on his door to say goodbye. I was going to take my brother to the airport and then attend a breakfast meeting. He was lying in bed under a very thin sheet, and the room was freezing. There were cigarette butts all over the place as if he had been smoking all night long. I said goodbye, and we agreed to meet later.

When I got home in the evening, I was exhausted and was about to lie down to take a rest, when the phone rang. It was my grandmother, who had had lunch with my father. Sobbing, she said, “When your father left, he was feeling very sick. He asked me to call you and have you meet him at the hospital. He was holding his head. I don’t know what he has. Please rush, honey.”

In ten minutes, I was at the Military Hospital. He had arrived some time before and fainted at the entrance. They immediately took him to the emergency room. Without thinking, I ran upstairs to the ward where he was. The first thing I saw was the straight line on the heart monitor... and the characteristic beep those machines make. My father, on a table, jumped at the contact of the electroshocks they were applying to resuscitate him.

They pulled me out as I felt my body collapsing. A doctor came out shortly.

“Are you his relative?”

“I’m his daughter.”

“There was nothing we could do. He suffered a myocardial infarction.”

I was stunned. It was five o’clock, and my father had died at two thirty. A nurse approached me and said, “Miss, you have to fill in the paperwork.”

I started calling the family but couldn’t find anyone. My mother’s phone was busy. My brother wasn’t there. Then, from a faraway place in my mind, I remembered my father’s voice saying, “Any problem you have, no matter how tough, even if it is a death, please, solutions first; you’ll have time to cry later.”

From the moment I heard his voice, I wanted to do as he had said. A quiet rage took hold of me, giving me the strength to do everything that had to be done. I made the funeral arrangements, let the family know, chose a casket, dressed him, cut off a lock of hair as a remembrance. I requested that he be embalmed, to be able to take him to San Juan and give my brothers time to arrive.

All the details were ready. I didn't want to be away from him for even an instant.

The rage was there the whole time. I would get close every now and then, wanting to move him, still doubting he was dead. I couldn't believe it. Finally, when they were taking him to be buried, I stood in front, out of my mind from pain and without shedding a tear, insisted, "Don't touch the casket; nobody is taking him anywhere." I wouldn't listen to reason, and it took several people to tear me away, because I didn't want them to take him away.

Once he was buried, I started crying so much that days, weeks and months went by, and my aching heart would express its pain through tears every single night. My husband was fed up, and even I couldn't understand what was happening to me.

I did what he had requested in his will, and I went even further. I became obsessive about trying to do things the way he would have done them. I wanted to be him.

My life was never the same afterwards. A part of me had died along with my father, though I had stayed on earth, longing to be close to him again.

Ever since then, every jump I made I thought of him. I talked to him while I was flying. "You're close to heaven and should help me, because I'm not happy without you."

Parachuting became a way of getting close to him momentarily by knocking on the door of his eternal resting place and feeling comforted for an instant, only to continue crying for him once I was on the ground again. Years later, I acknowledged I had unconsciously wished to die so I could be with him again.

Despite wanting to do everything he had wanted, I didn't give up parachuting. My life and destiny were written amidst the parachute's silk and strings, and I didn't want to quit.

## 4

### THE FALL

My longtime friends tell me now how arrogant and haughty I was during my parachuting years. I felt I could do anything. There was no obstacle I couldn't overcome or challenge I couldn't undertake. I had everything a woman could wish for. I was constantly flattered. I was beautiful, with long, wavy hair, and I was strong and thin from the strenuous exercise I did. My family was beautiful; by then I had two children, Mariela and Paco, who was six years younger. I had turned from the unbridled girl who had married to break away, into a fearless woman in love with her husband. I quickly had reached major goals, and life smiled at me with every step, or rather, every jump I took.

As a member of the military, I participated in parades and official celebrations. One February 24, we were commissioned to perform a jump during the Flag Day Celebration in Iguala, Guerrero. Serafín, another sergeant and I were the ones chosen to form the national flag in the air, with our green, white and red parachutes. We had practiced the jump with no mishap, and even the fact that the president of Mexico would be there no longer impressed me. That day, my major interest was not the jump but going to the Pan-American Parachuting Championship in Uruapan, Michoacán. In fact, an airplane was waiting for me in Iguala to take me there right after the exhibition.

Paco and I had stayed in a hotel in Iguala the night before. While I settled in, Serafín went to inspect his platoon. We woke up very early the next morning and got ready for the jump. It was

very strange that I wasn't excited, and that particular morning I didn't want to jump; I had an indescribable, odd feeling. I got into my gear reluctantly and didn't tighten the leg straps well. Yet I only dared to tell Serafín I didn't want to jump when we were in the helicopter from which we would jump. Too late; we were practically at the mark. I, the least romantic woman, asked Serafín to kiss me.

That day, I was also thinking about my father, sadly and nostalgically.

Green, white and red... the three parachuters jumped, making the formation. The parachutes opened, and I, the green one, which was the one on top, hooked my legs to the white one, which, in turn, had hooked to the red one. The Mexican flag could be seen clearly from the ground in the sky, I carried the weight of the other two parachuters with my legs. Applauses could be heard in the distance. I was supposed to be the last one to land but there were crosswinds that started pushing me past the mark I had to land on. From up there, I realized that I was going too fast and would land on the people. So I slowed down too much... The parachute failed, and because my leg straps were loose, the emergency parachute went all the way up to my neck and coming down, it created a wedge.

In a matter of seconds I was on the ground... CRAAACK!... I heard how my bones broke inside. I had made a perfect jump, I had landed right on the mark, a few steps away from the president of Mexico, Miguel de la Madrid and from the secretary of defense, General Juan Arévalo Gardoqui... but I couldn't move. Where's my head... my body? What's going on? I tried to sit up but had a horrible, terrifying sensation: I could only feel my head; nothing else in my body had feeling. What happened? Had my head come off? Had my body been detached? Where's my body? In seconds, everything started moving in slow motion... I couldn't hear anything anymore. A radiant light filled me up, and an in-

describably pleasant sensation ran through my body... divine... but it was only an instant. An extreme pain in my neck pulled me back to the present time and space. I would have liked to scream with all my might, but I couldn't. I could barely breathe. My God, what pain! Serafin bent down toward me, scared.

"I'm dying... I can't move."

I didn't lose consciousness; I could watch the rescue efforts as if it were a movie.

"A stretcher! A stretcher!"

"Don't move her, get away, don't touch her!" Serafin shouted desperately. He very carefully took off my helmet, but then the commander called him to line up. He could no longer be with me, and I found myself in the hands of the ambulance paramedics. As in a whirlwind, I saw my uniform being cut off with scissors and how they removed my jewelry.

"What are they doing to me?"

President de la Madrid ordered that I be transferred to the Military Hospital in Mexico City in his helicopter, and under his recommendation they speeded up my rescue. After the formation, Serafin and Paco were allowed to go with me. My son, who was only four years old, held my hand, afraid. "What's going on?" he seemed to ask me with his eyes. I winked to cheer him up but the pain was so intense that at times I felt I would faint.

In an instant, my life had taken a 180-degree turn, and I was never the same again.

I had suffered a cervical fracture, but the words do not even remotely describe their implications. The result of the fracture was spastic quadriparesia, which in everyday language, means that I lost the movement of my four limbs: all I could move were my eyes and mouth; I was completely immobilized from the neck down.

The next three years were a swirling turmoil that moved my life in every way. I experienced inconsistency firsthand. My life, which had seemed so stable and successful, had completely changed

in an instant. During that time, I fully felt the relativity of time: those three years turned into 30 years of indescribable suffering. I remember many overlapping events, out of order, with no chronology, all forming a maelstrom. I was no longer in charge of my life, and it drifted away like a boat wrecked in a storm that has lost its rudder and floats every which way, about to sink at any time. During those three years, I entered hell, sinking in despair, with very intense physical pain and indescribable emotional suffering.

As soon as I entered the Military Hospital, I was put in intensive care, and it took two weeks until my surgery. It seemed that the presidential referral worried the doctors, and instead of making them act quickly, it slowed them desperately. I could see people coming in and out of my room. My family was inconsolable, Serafin a heartbroken wreck. Sometimes, as if in a dream, I heard familiar voices, while at others, I would see someone's mouth moving but couldn't hear the words.

At last, after two weeks, the doctors decided to operate on my pulverized neck. I was like a chicken with a broken neck, and though it's a grotesque image, I can't find any other as fitting. When they opened my neck, the doctor told me a long time later, liquid spewed out of the incision: it was the spinal medulla spilling out. They took a piece of bone from my hip to rebuild the column and did a bone transplant to hold the neck in place permanently. In theory, I wouldn't be able to move it again after that surgery... nor any other part of my body.

After the surgery, hope of survival depended on 18 kilos of traction. Four screws were attached to my skull and then held a crown in place. From the center of the crown hung the weight that pulled my neck. They drilled the four holes in my skull without anesthesia. It had to be that way, because they needed me to let them know how far they could drill. Two days later, the screws holding the crown came out, and they had to make three more holes and refasten it.



I literally felt my head and brain were being torn off, to the point of fainting from the intensity of pain.

During that first, most critical phase at the hospital, I was close to death several times. I can remember times when the medical staff ran back and forth, saying I had no pulse and trying to resuscitate me. I could not speak or move, my eyes were closed, but I could hear everything and was terrified, imagining the possibility of being declared dead and buried alive. I heard all kinds of comments about me, which I am sure they wouldn't have spoken out loud if the doctors had known that I was aware of everything they said.

Sometimes I had contact with that beautiful bright light I had seen during the accident, and for instants it bathed me with a luscious sensation. I would see my father, reaching out for me and calling me to him. Suddenly, the same acute pain shook me, and my mother's figure appeared holding my daughter and son's hands, Mariela and Paco, and she would say sternly, "Don't turn to look at your father, or you'll never see your children again!"

Sometimes I would see myself surrounded by parachutes of all colors, myself in the middle, flying freely with the pleasure of the wind caressing my body and holding me up like an invisible mattress.

The pain, the agony, the suffering, the medication, my children with fear on their faces, my heartbroken, pained husband; needles and tubes everywhere, faces of despair, tears shed on my bed of agony, encouraging words; doctors and nurses coming in and out, morphine to mitigate the pain... overlapping images of a reality or an irreality –there seemed to be no difference– that smothered me. Day and night merged into one, because there was no respite, no change in the pain, I had to fight every minute. Time had lost its elapsing quality. Hours and days had lost their meaning, because my life had lost its meaning as well, without movement.

The sky, the clouds, the freedom of flight, the indescribable pleasure of parachuting had been replaced by immobility, traction,

the respirator, the IV, the catheter, my pleading to be injected once more to take away the pain... the pain...

There is so much to say about the pain yet at the same time, there's nothing to say about it. Pain is what it is. I don't think there is anyone who could stand it. It is a tyrant that overpowers even the strongest, its staunchest opponents. Pain breaks all the limits of human dignity and forces its victim to grovel, to wallow in one's own unconsciousness. Pain offers no truce; it is relentless, knows no mercy, does not respond to tears... However, once it has passed, it transforms the soul as metal is changed into hardened steel at very high temperatures.

Recovery from such an overwhelming accident is very complicated. The lack of movement atrophied my vital functions, so I was given large amounts of medication which, on one hand were supposed to help me recover but on the other altered my "normal" functions. Normal? What does "normal" mean under the conditions I was in? Physically, I had become a deformed being, as every opening in my body was connected by tubes, hoses and needles that, to a large extent, represented my survival. The Dexamethasone I was on made me puffy, hair had grown on my face and I was covered with acne. I had not seen myself in the mirror, until one day, when a friend came to visit me for the first time. She was so shocked, she ran to the bathroom and threw up. Then, I asked for a mirror. If I had been able to, I think I would have run to the bathroom to throw up, too, because I was truly a monster. How my life had changed! From being the champion, admired, envied, a medal winner, recipient of all kinds of honors, I had become this filthy, stinky rag, whose outlook for life was to be confined to a bed, without any body movement except from the neck upwards.

Each day was a struggle. At times, I assumed I would soon be over it, though at others, on the contrary, I thought that I would die soon and it would all end. Still some other times I panicked

thinking of the possibility of staying like that forever. The fact is that time went by, and I was still alive due to my willpower, but I couldn't move.

Many months after the accident, I started recovering sensibility. The paradox was that while it was a sign of improvement, it meant even more pain. Because I had been in the same position all that time, I had sores and scars, but I didn't feel them. When I started regaining sensibility, I screamed in pain, as if I were burned all over. I couldn't even bear them taking my pressure, because my skin had awakened to a burning sensation all over. Simultaneously, this change gave me hope of being able to walk again.

Weeks went by, and my frame of mind changed again. The decision to live seemed to vanish and was substituted by the pain of my reality, so hard to face and almost impossible to understand. I questioned myself deeply and talked to God. "Why is this happening to me? Jesus Christ was crucified, tortured, but I've been here too many months. Who did I kill? Why am I still alive? Did I hurt anyone for whom I am being punished? God does not exist. He couldn't exist and let me suffer like this." It was useless. No matter what I thought, this was my condition, and it wasn't changing. I spent a lot of time crying, so much that the cleaning lady had to wipe the pool that formed on the floor. Serafin visited frequently and cried by my side. He put pictures of my children on the ceiling, which was my only comfort.

Deciding to live under such conditions is practically a daily exercise of willpower. The decision to live may only last a few minutes, or one day, but the next day you have to start all over and think everything through again. Many, many times I decided to go on living, and many others I thought it was better to die because my life was useless as it was. I felt that I was causing my loved ones more pain and suffering than good and I was becoming a burden.

One day, when my will to live was stronger than my will to die, I told the doctor that I needed to sit up, no matter what. I had

been lying for more than six months and wasn't allowed to change my position due to the risk of worsening the injury.

“Doctor,” I said to the orthopedist who was treating me, “either you do something so that I can sit, or I'll kill myself. Either you sit me up tomorrow, or I'll kill myself tomorrow. You have to come up with something; I can't be like this one more day.”

The doctor was extremely compassionate and believed me, for he had witnessed my struggle. When I had decided I would get better, I got out of the depression to a great extent. And since I began eating, I got much better. I guess he believed that if I was asking this from him, it was because I wanted to go on living. And so, he rigged up a sort of plaster corset for my whole trunk, which attached to my head by rods and would work like the traction. Indeed, the next day they sat me up. The doctor didn't dare leave my side, because he expected a very strong reaction as soon as I was sitting. But the first hour went by... the second... the third, and I felt like I had been born again. Part of my world had come back to me as soon as I looked at it vertically, without the severe limitations imposed by the horizontal position. The plaster jabbed into me everywhere and somehow the pain worsened, but I didn't mind because it was so beautiful to be sitting. Three days went by, and I continued to sit until I fainted from the effort. I didn't care; it was worth it. So, this gigantic step nurtured my hopes of some day walking again.

Undoubtedly, when I lost my movement, other aspects of my perception sharpened. My room was about 20 meters from the stairs, but I listened and could always tell who was approaching, by their footsteps. I recognized the steps of the cleaning lady, of each doctor, each nurse and the daily visitors. For the first time, I began carefully observing every person who came to see me. I watched their movements, stances and facial expressions and saw them with previously unknown clarity. I was not only able to see people's exterior, but, in the process of observing them, static as

I was, I got a feel for their interior as well, their mood and some of their spirit.

At first, important people I had dealt with, like generals and other personalities, visited me. Colleagues and friends came to see me as well. During the first few months a lot of people paraded before my bed. But time did its work, and my condition was no longer a novelty. They gradually stopped coming, and after a few months I was left almost completely alone. My former friends were substituted by the group of hospitalized patients in wheelchairs, the cleaning ladies, the policemen on the various shifts, the doctors –some ugly, others handsome, some of them nice and others obnoxious, nurses in a range of moods. I became part of a new family, but I terribly missed the people and world I had left outside. During the most difficult moments, it felt like everyone had deserted me.

While I was in the hospital, the San Juanico gas plant explosion occurred. From one day to the next, I was surrounded by people in situations as terrible or even worse than mine. There were people of all ages, who had suffered very serious burns; young people whose lives, like mine, had been completely changed through deformity, losing their face or becoming invalids. At times, I felt we were strange beings not of this world: a purgatory of suffering and pain, where we knew not the sins committed nor the outcome of our lives after the misfortune.

I was only left with a few friends, individuals of exceptional quality. I particularly remember Guadalupe and Pilar, two very beautiful sisters, with light eyes, who had been my best friends. They never got tired of visiting me, of encouraging me, of praying for and with me. Once, more than two years after the accident, they got special permission to take me out. They told the doctors we were going on a vacation, but they took me to Ciudad Juárez for a cellular treatment. We did it secretly, or they wouldn't have let me out of the hospital. Guadalupe and Pilar had noticed that I

was severely drugged from all the medication and decided to help me. In Ciudad Juárez, I entered a detox treatment that was just as terrible as what drug addicts undergo. In a way, that's what I was: I lived through sedatives and very strong medications.

The treatment helped me a lot. When I got back to the hospital, I was on practically minimum doses of drugs, had restored sphincter control and could more conscientiously apply myself to my exercises. Had it not been for them, God knows how much more time I would have had to remain in the hospital and in what condition I would have ended up. A huge obstacle had been removed which I couldn't have done by myself at the time.

Today, after almost nine years, Pilar is still my closest friend: unconditional, close, generous. And I miss Guadalupe and am pained by her tragic death. I will forever hold her in my heart with gratitude and love.

*Pilar,*

*Your support, generosity and closeness held me up through the most difficult times. I cherish your friendship as one of the greatest gifts that life has given me and which I enjoy enormously.*

## A HEART IN AGONY

The aspect of my life I am about to tell is the one I most hesitated to open up. It is so easy to make judgments lightly and label people as “good” or “bad”... It’s so easy to point accusingly and so difficult to have the love and understanding to see that we are all fallible human beings and that everyone alive has his or her own maturing process and individual way of evolving, with his or her own difficulties, problematic aspects and character limitations. I think that only if you truly stand in someone else’s shoes can you understand what it means to live through the experiences (s)he has. It is easier to judge others (as inhuman, without a conscience, etc.) and not realize that one day we may be judged for the same thing we are judging.

So, I ask anyone reading my story not to judge the characters as good or bad. I sincerely believe we share a path of evolution, and that is what matters. Through this process, I myself got to see the darkest part of my own soul, for I felt hatred, destructiveness, jealousy, rage, the inability to forgive. I experienced human misery. Who hasn’t experienced it? What human has not been selfish, destructive, jealous? Who has been free of hatred, of a desire to kill, of wishing ill on our neighbor, of not forgiving?

What I will tell you now was part of my process. Out of the pain these events caused me, came the strength and motivation to get myself moving no matter what. Thus, my greatest suffering became the strongest force in my recovery.

In addition to the impact of the accident, the physical suffering I was going through and the emotional pain from being unable to

move, my family's disintegration was one of the events that tore my soul apart. The first six months after my accident, Serafin was in extreme pain. He would come to see me, and his weeping was constant. Nothing comforted him. Some time later, my friends told me how he had suffered from seeing me disabled and that he had vastly changed. He became quiet and sullen and gradually distanced himself.

I understood that my physical situation had disrupted our relationship. I spoke with him about it and offered him his freedom but pointed out that what was most important was that he not neglect our children. Not long after that, I found out that he was seeing another woman, and my heart shattered like a broken glass that is impossible to put back together. I understood that this could happen, but what I couldn't understand was his walking around the hospital with her, instead of maintaining a discreet distance to keep from hurting me.

"Why, if Mexico City is so big, don't you choose somewhere else?" I admonished.

He was furious with me and started recriminating me for things in our past. We started fighting violently.

"Because of you, nobody speaks to me anymore. I hardly have any friends left," he would say angrily and bitterly.

"You can't hide from the truth," I countered. "Everybody saw us together, and they know who you are."

"But they're wrong; they don't know the kind of person you are. You get everyone's attentions, and that isn't right. In fact, you're responsible for what's happening."

I don't know what was more painful, the drilling in my skull when they were adjusting the traction or seeing him with another woman. My blood boiled inside me, and I wished all possible evil upon him. My heart filled up with hatred and resentment, and with that strength, I decided I would move some day, so I could pick up a gun and kill him.



Thereafter, I asked every person who came to visit me to help me move, to move my hands, feet, legs. I had to do it somehow. The effort involved in pulling a leg or arm was like carrying tons of weight. It could take hours to achieve one movement, but I didn't give up. I was obsessed and told myself, "By forcing myself to move, I will have to move." All that mattered to me was doing exercises to achieve my goal; I got help with abdominal exercises, squeezing sponges to open and close my hands, moving buttons or marbles from one side to another; this in particular required a lot of effort. I exercised arms and legs with the help of whoever was there and had neck movements done a hundred or two hundred times. For a person with the degree of injury I had, this was an impossible task. I didn't care about the recuperation prognosis. "By forcing myself to move, I will have to move," I repeated incessantly to myself, and with the anger lodged in my soul, I went on.

God bless my anger, I say now, for it was the greatest strength I felt. Seeing Serafín walk out of my life, my children suffering for me and coping however they could and seeing myself immobile filled me with resolve to achieve what the doctors said I would never be able to do. This unbelievable pain that I couldn't accept, woke me up.

And I returned to my obsession. To move, no matter what. Hours and more hours focused on trying to move a toe by myself. Many times I got into it so much that I nearly felt I had accomplished it.

"I moved it!" I shouted to the nurse. But she would bring me back to reality. No, it wasn't true... It had been my imagination.

Once, at dawn, around three in the morning, I clearly felt a toe on my left foot move.

"I'm moving it!" I cried to the nurse. When she approached in disbelief and saw it was true, she ran out calling for the doctors. "Tony moved a toe! Tony moved a toe!"

Events in the world are so relative. What to one person is totally inconsequential, unconscious and superficial can mean months and years of struggling to someone else. That toe movement required all of my strength, will, courage and constant trying. Moving it took me months of obsessive repetition. For people who have all their faculties in order, it is hard to imagine what it means and what is implied by being motionless. If you tied yourself up for a few hours, you'd understand a little better that handicapped people don't need pity but rather consideration of our limitations which, in turn, make us see, perceive and experience ourselves and life from a different angle.

Our physical possibilities and achievements have other dimensions and very concrete limits. They force us to make efforts of which average people are unaware. It is not easy to give up walking, running, picking up a spoon and serving your food, dancing, all the natural human movements. It is not easy to accept the permanent need for someone else's help and in addition, have to ask for it constantly in order to carry out all our activities. It is very hard to overcome the embarrassment and shame of having to ask for help to accomplish the basic acts of urinating and defecating.

At that moment, one big toe moving meant everything to me.

The toe movement and the recovery of my skin's sensibility renewed my hopes. So I immediately wrote to my brother José Luis, who was also in the military. He had supported me closely. He wrote to me every day and called me to cheer me on. When he knew I started having some movement, he arranged a trip especially to see me. I will never forget his face when he entered the room. The disappointment on his face affected me to the point that I finally understood that my life would never be the same again.

One day, I dared to ask the doctor about my medical prognosis. He nervously walked around the room, not knowing what to tell me.

“The fact that you are alive and speaking is a miracle in itself,” he told me, not knowing what else to say.

“Doctor, you think I’m never going to move again, but I’m going to prove you wrong. Even if I have to crawl, you’ll see me do it.”

“I’m glad you’re so optimistic, Tony. It’ll help you a lot. I imagine you’ll do it...”

“No doctor, not even you believe what you’re saying,” I interrupted. “You’re saying it, because you don’t want to dishearten me. But you know what? I do believe it, and you’ll see; I’m going to show you.”

From my spontaneous, soulful answer, I realized that I had decided to live. After months and months sunk in a tunnel of suffering and despair, far in the distance, I spotted the tiniest dot of light, but light it was. It was the first time since my accident that I noticed a different tone in my voice, and I found hope inside myself.

It was not, however, easy to stick to such a huge decision. Even though deep down I had made the decision to live no matter what, waves of depression, pain, despair, loneliness, uncertainty and fear still came and went.

The light that had gotten me to fight, move, exercise, do everything I could to overcome my condition seemed, at times, to fade completely out.



## INNOCENT SOULS

My children, 11-year-old Mariela and Paco, four and a half, were hopelessly dragged through the “earthquake” of their mother’s accident. The rhythm of their lives was interrupted, and their swimming lessons, ballet, karate, English, everything I had wanted for them, were replaced with hospital visits and a new loneliness they had to face. Now, they barely had someone to take and pick them up from school.

The hospital room became their second home, and there they played with the nurses, did their homework and sometimes even bathed. They couldn’t always be near me, since they had to stay at home sometimes. One day, Paco, who was in kindergarten at the time, brought me a picture he’d made of his mom: he’d drawn me in bed, with the tubes and traction, surrounded by machines... For him, they were now a part of me. His drawing showed me the crude reality. I decided that even if it were only with my head, which was all I could move, I would help my children develop.

Since that was when I was still being visited by some very influential people, like generals and their wives, I took advantage of their goodwill and managed to get a private telephone installed in my room, which was totally against the rules. I would ask the nurse to dial my home and put the phone to my ear. I began calling my children every day and fulfilling my role as a mother as far as possible. I would ask them about school and if they’d done their homework yet. I asked, demanded and made it clear to them

that the fact that their mother was in the hospital was no excuse for getting bad grades.

Nevertheless, they both changed. Mariela became introverted and Paco developed an explosive character, constantly getting angry and sad. They asked me insistently when I would be back home, and I couldn't give them any hope for the near future. They saw their father arranging my things, and he forbade them from touching or getting near objects related to me. He threatened to hit them if they touched anything. They witnessed moments of him bordering on madness.

One day, Paco entered the room suddenly, screaming.

"Mom, you get up from there right now! When are you going to get up? I want you to move. I don't want to see you like that anymore!" he shouted in anguish and despair. Another day, Mariela came to see me with deep sorrow reflected on her small face, which I knew meant something more... After questioning her insistently, she confessed that she was very afraid that I would die. At school, people said I, her mother, was just a vegetable and that I was surely going to die soon...

What could I tell my children? How could I ease their pain when the reality had no solution? I myself had not been able to relieve my own suffering and couldn't solve theirs either. Each one, in their own way, with their own resources, was doing what (s)he could. Sometimes they were calmer; at others, anguished and despaired, as I was. But I never stopped encouraging them, telling them that I would one day walk out of the hospital. When they left, my heart would break in a million pieces, and they'd almost have to mop up my tears. I couldn't understand why my children had to suffer that way and that they'd changed so much because of me. I blamed and punished myself repeatedly. Because of me, my family had come apart. I had done them irreparable damage. Due to my carelessness, my crazy, reckless ways, my children were suffering. I felt that everything that was happening was due to my irresponsibility.

If that guilt had persisted, I would have surely died. On top of the weight I was already carrying, it was like a tombstone crushing me even more. Had it not been for the therapeutic process that I would experience and through which I slowly learned to see things differently, forgive myself and others, face my reality in a different way, my love for living would have extinguished forever and with it, my own life.

When I was finally able to go home after three years in the hospital, I was very angry. Yes, I had managed to get out of the hospital but not the way I had visualized: walking. Paco and Mariela were very happy with my return, Paco jumped all over me, Mariela looked happier than I'd ever seen her. But I didn't. I felt that I had failed, and now I had to face the toughest of my realities: I would never walk again. My daily effort during those three years, my work to recover movement, my hope to be a "normal" person again had come to an end now that I was home.

Not long after my return, Serafin left for good, and Mariela and Paco devoted themselves to my care. Paco was in charge of turning me over in bed. Since he was still little, he had to run and get up enough momentum to be able to push me over. As a result of his constant effort, he developed a hernia. Mariela washed me and helped me in the bathroom. She, too, ended up hurting her back.

The roles reversed: they were now the mother and I the daughter. They had to mature very fast. In a very short time, they were taking care of their mother and having to do things on their own. That made me try to get out, to fight. I saw how they were taken advantage of because they were doing adult tasks.

Perhaps I have given the impression through what I have written so far that I struggled tirelessly. While that is one of my best qualities, at that time my worst demons also surfaced. I was terribly angry and took it out on my children. I called them useless idiots, I demanded absurd things from them, I pushed them, mistreated them, yelled at them. I didn't let Mariela go to parties. "I'm sorry.

Too bad your mother is like this. You must cope with it, and you can't go." "When I tell you to come, you come immediately." I screamed, frightening them. I would drive them out of my room. "I'm tired and want to sleep, so get out. And you'd better not open the door... You'll be sorry if you open the door, just wait and see." "Idiot, you're going to hurt me, you're so useless." "Don't you answer me; you do what I say and put up with it." "Lift your face up. That's why you do everything wrong, because you don't look up to see..." These are some of the abuses they endured every day. The underlying truth is I didn't want them around. I was so angry that I could not stand them being close to me. When I was alone, at night, I repented and cried, but the next day I did it all over again.

It wasn't long before Paco wanted to go to live with his father, mostly due to this hell.

Mariela stayed with me, and together we started doing better. When she turned 13, I got up my courage, got into the car with her and taught her how to drive. Due to the accident and because I had been a member of the military, I received a pension, but it wasn't enough to support us decently. Thus, it was essential that my daughter learn how to drive so we could get around. In the car, I told her how to change gears and use the pedals. We started by going in and out of the parking lot. Mariela was docile and learned easily. In a week, she drove well and so we went out on the road. Thanks to this, the world opened up to me again.

For many years, Mariela was my hands, my arms, my legs, the conduit that enabled me to start doing what was necessary to progress. She far surpassed her duties as a daughter, and her unconditional support was invaluable to me in helping me to be the person I am today.

*Mariela,*

*Often, as we've looked at each other, I have stated my gratitude and love. I have asked you for forgiveness for everything you directly or indirectly suffered*



*due to my accident, my way of being, my own suffering. Today, in writing, I want you to know how important you are in my life and how grateful I am for the many years of your youth that you devoted to my care. You are now a woman and have made your own life, and I have made mine. However, you were my support and my strength, and you gave me the chance to be able to move again, through you. Thank you, Mariela. You know that I love you with all my heart. God only knows why he gave you such hard tests from such an early age, but the truth is that you have answered with the quality, patience, commitment and love of an exceptional human being.*

*During your life you have given me, besides your generous help, a precious gift: my granddaughter Ana Paola. When I see her, I feel enormous pleasure and holding her in my arms fills me with joy and happiness. Ana Paola has provided my life with the richness of indescribable love.*

*Paco,*

*You have always been very dear to my heart. You always made an effort to help me within your possibilities, and you showed me your love in a thousand ways. From time to time, I still listen to a recording you made for me where you told me about your pain and your love. You have a rebellious character like your mother's, and that is why I think, you will go very far in whatever you want to accomplish, provided you are strong, determined and constant and you persist. Thank you, dear Paco, for your help, your love, your patience. I have not been the sweetest mother, that is true, but you also know that, such as I am, you can count on me at any time.*

*Serafin,*

*I cannot exclude you from my gratitude. I learned a lot with you and loved you with all my heart. Thanks to you I learned how much a man can be loved. You taught me a million things, opened up the world for me, supported me in developing my strength and ability, and I share two children with you. You were the love of my life.*



## MIRACULOUS ANGELS

As people, we have the overwhelming need for existential fulfillment. When we don't achieve it, our development remains latent, like the great pine within an acorn. With adequate water, soil and sunshine, together with the appropriate environment, the acorn can turn into the tree, but if it lacks all of this, it will never be anything more than a small acorn. The same thing happens with human beings. If our existential needs are not met, we stay in very basic phases of development. This is why it is so important to know ourselves, understand who we are and make contact with and relate to other individuals, as well as to know how to ask, how to receive and how to give.

Due to the accident, when I finally got home, I entered a phase of severe isolation. I did not want to see or be seen by anyone. I felt I could not encounter the world with the same gumption I'd had in the past, back when I had been rebellious and bold. Life had beat me in a treacherous way, and apparently my destiny was decided. How could I think of existential fulfillment, of relating to other people, of developing and knowing love, freedom, creativity, when I was a motionless body and a head devoted either to depression or vociferating?

I was very far from imagining that, through relationships, contact with and love from other individuals, my soul, if not my body, could be cured. The miraculous part of it was that, because we are integral beings, as my broken soul healed, my body recovered movement. Obviously, not the movement of a "normal" person

but a degree of movement that had been considered impossible due to the severity of my accident.

The intensity of suffering gave way to deep depression, which led me to spend entire weeks in silence, without speaking, without wanting to move, without even wanting to open my eyes. A deep, dreadful fright invaded me, an unendurable anguish brought on by my inability to accept my reality. I had struggled for such a long time, and my condition hadn't changed. There wasn't even a glimmer of hope of ever being the same as before. It was impossible to think of myself without moving, and it seemed as if my purpose in life had ended. The hope and valor that burned inside me at other times gradually extinguished, leaving nothing but ashes. Thus, three years after the accident, I was alone, immobile, enclosed within four walls, with no hope and a more than three-month depression that made me consider killing myself.

"My children," I thought, will suffer from my absence for a while, but they will eventually move on." I was convinced that the answer to my suffering and that of those around me was death. During my very long hospital stay, all the psychologists and psychiatrists you could possibly imagine tried to cure my depression. If I had to count them, I would say there were around 40 of them. None of these eminent doctors managed to provoke the slightest wish to live or the hope for something other than immobility. At home, with less help, the possibility of moving on seemed even more remote.

Then a miracle took place, and it made my life take a turn that was even more dramatic than the accident itself. And I am not saying that metaphorically but in the most real way I know.

Some neighbors had heard from my mother that I had barely moved or opened my eyes for three months. I was fed by force, and I screamed angrily at anyone who got near me. One of the neighbors convinced me to let two therapists, Martha and Marcela, visit me. What did I care if they came or not? Nothing and

no one could change what was happening to me. I agreed indifferently.

They said they would come on a Tuesday afternoon, and I waited and waited... they never came. "On top of everything, they don't even show up," I thought, clarifying the decision to kill myself.

The next day, when I had forgotten all about them, they knocked at the door. Two elegant and straightforward looking women came in, and their cheerfulness and high spirits drew me in. "We couldn't come yesterday, but I knew that it was today when you needed us more. You're desperate," Martha said. Her words were not merely words; her eyes reflected sweetness and clear love; for the first time since my accident, they touched the bottom of my broken heart and conveyed hope to me. The encounter was so unexpected that it moved me and gave me no space to defend myself. We didn't chat for a long time, but I had never felt the quality of their presence before.

Martha said, "I know, many people whose soul is crippled, but I can see in you that it is only your body that has no movement." Her words deeply impressed me, and as the only handle at the edge of an abyss, I decided not to let go of them and to place myself in their hands as a way of helping myself.

Marcela came each week to talk. I didn't know then that this was called therapy. The name was hardly important. What I did realize was that, by talking to her, little by little my heart started feeling less in pain and alone. Every week I looked forward to seeing her. More than excitement, it was desperation for her company. One day, she said she could not come anymore, that I would have to go to her office. I was filled with rage. "Who does she think she is? How could she possibly ask this of me? Couldn't she see how difficult it was for me to move even from one place to another in my own house?" Also, because I couldn't fully control my sphincters, I felt terribly anxious about having an accident while I was

with her. There was no way that Marcela would change her mind, so despite myself, I emerged from within those four walls. I went to see her weekly, and during those visits, I experienced instants of contentment. Even so, I sometimes called her to tell her that it was difficult for me to go or that I would rather see her some other time that week. With a sweet, calm yet stern voice, Marcela would tell me, “If you don’t come today, Tony, you lose your appointment, and we won’t meet until next week. And if you’re going to be missing appointments, it would be best for you to stop coming altogether. If you’re not committed, drop it.”

I sure was committed! Despite all the obstacles in my way, I managed to attend my weekly appointment with Marcela.

I really can’t explain what happened to me with her, because it is something that is so deep inside me that I can’t see it objectively. You don’t know how you were born but you know you were born. You don’t know how you learned to walk, but you know you did. That is what happened to me with Marcela. My life was transformed with her. My soul silently broke out of the cocoon where it had been enslaved and stretched its wings to find the meaning of life. With Marcela I made the most important jump in my life. I didn’t have to get on a plane or wear a parachute. However, it has been the most beautiful jump, the most valuable and most meaningful one: the jump for the love of life. There was no applause, no medal; yet my soul has been fulfilled and nourished by it.

My inability to walk, run, dance and jump, which had caused me so much pain, lost a lot of its impact when I experienced this inner movement that I could generate myself. Suddenly, I found myself moving in an extraordinary way, and for the second time, my life took a 180-degree turn.

Sometimes I have been asked, “Who is Marcela in your life?” It fills me with emotion to recognize how important she is in my existence. She was and still is the shoulder on which I can shed all my tears and in whom I find company and comfort; the loving and

caring ear that patiently heard my anguish, fears, sadness, pain and the firm hand I held tightly so I could gradually leave that dark and desolate hole I was in. She has been an unwavering gaze, watching me empathically, with understanding and tenderness; a voice that cheered me to go on telling myself, "You can." Marcela was the sweetest company I could have had on the therapeutic path.

Marcela walked with me through my life and allowed me to be me, with no critics, no buts, no limits. For the first time, I had the space I needed to share my pain, sorrow, bitterness, loathing and hopelessness with someone else. No matter what happened, no matter how I was, she was there with me. I started feeling free to make the decisions I wanted and to feel respected. Marcela received all my anger, irritation, frustration and sadness. She took my black soul and waited patiently until I gradually emerged from the dirt, mud and filth my heart had sunk into. With her, it was like trying to let myself fall on a soft mattress, where I could rest before continuing the struggle again. She taught me to open my heart, and that is what made my life begin to change.

Marcela says there are no good therapists, only good therapeutic subjects and that what has been accomplished in my process has been because of me. In a way she is right. I struggled and continue to do what she asks of me in therapy, because I am convinced that working and fighting gets you ahead in life. On the other hand, her humane quality is what has made her an excellent therapist. From the outset, she took a look at my soul in agony, without taking into account the bitter invalid whose life was doomed. She could see the true evolving, developing being in me. She saw the divine God-given essence we all have, called love. She had faith that if I worked, if I fought, this essence would flourish and permeate my life. In other words, she showed me how to build myself up in love, no matter what external conditions existed. Marcela was not always sweet. She used her strength and severity when necessary. It wasn't a matter of being nice to me but rather responding

with what I needed. She sometimes used sweet words, at others stern ones. At times, she just listened, and her eye contact alone calmed me.

Marcela has given me two of the most beautiful gifts a human being can receive. The first one was showing me the way to reconcile with my mother. My relationship with her had been difficult and distant ever since my childhood. We never got along well, and I was always resentful. Through the therapeutic work, I came to terms with that and turned her into one of my greatest loves.

The second great gift was the therapy group I joined and started to work and grow with. Mari Tere, Angeles, Marcela, Paty, Héctor, Francisco, Roberto, Mónica, Coya and Jaime have been an invaluable support in the context of the development group. Though they are not wheelchair bound, they don't look at me as an invalid. We see each other in the group as struggling individuals taking the chance to get to know each other, grow together, support each other and learn how to be better.

*Marcela,*

*I don't have words to thank you for what you have done for me. Only our hearts know all that has happened between us. I think that the best way to show you my gratitude is by constantly working to become a better person, striving to show what I have learned from you. Thank you.*

Slowly, through the therapeutic contact, the heavy curtains of pain began sliding, giving way to a light that illuminated my life. Through the strength of love, my frozen, suffering heart warmed; bitterness, resentment and hatred transformed into understanding and forgiveness; I stopped judging, criticizing, crying over my misfortune, impoverishing my already pained soul, and discovered I could be happy again.

Some people find this kind of language tacky, corny and romantic, and maybe it is in a fictitious context with no experience



behind it. For me, a woman whose life has been extremely painful and difficult, every word I write here is nothing but reality. I am living proof that love moves mountains. Love, initially of myself and then of others, transformed me from a miserable, depressed being into a woman who loves life.

Today I believe in miracles and in God. For a long time, I felt that either God didn't exist or he was not a fair God, because he had abandoned me. I often blamed him for my condition and held him accountable. I didn't feel I had been bad. I hadn't killed or harmed anyone. Yet I felt I had been cruelly and unfairly punished in life. Wasn't God a God of love and life? Why did he make me suffer so? Why was he killing me this way?

Through my conversion and contact with other people who also suffer, hate, love, struggle and live, I have learned to see God. It is so true that his ways are mysterious and we don't always understand them. But when time passes and a cycle comes to its close, things clear up and we start to understand. I am absolutely sure that had I not lived through everything I am telling here, I wouldn't have learned to feel thankful and happy as I open my eyes every morning. I wouldn't have known faith nor would I appreciate life as I do now. Love would still be just a pretty word for romantic occasions and not the rod upon which I lean my entire existence. Paradoxically, I had to lose all bodily movement to discover that of my soul. But such is the nature of life: paradox. And that is why it is so difficult to delve into, understand and make peace with it.

I'm definitely not trying to say that I have reached a sublime state. I still have some very tough days when I relapse, finding it so hard to accept my reality. Some days I don't feel like doing the daily exercises; on others I worry about everyday circumstances: my children, money... Sometimes I'm sad, sometimes I get depressed. However, despite these changing moods, I do what I have to do, I set my sights on being the woman I have decided to be and I practice the values by which I want to live now. I am

committed to living honestly and lovingly, and I try to do so every single day.

Today I can say that being alive, for me, is flying. In a calm state, I concentrate, evoke a particular beautiful moment and am now able to feel it intensely, more intensely, in fact, than when I was parachuting. I feel full of happiness and, as strange as it may sound, in constant motion. When I am in the therapy group, with these people who are so dear to my heart, I feel overwhelmed with love. To me, all of this is a miracle.

While Marcela has been a miraculous angel for me, so has Martha. I have said very little about Martha, because the work she has done with me is indescribable. Martha's specialty is conducting intensive three-day therapy groups in which a person's soul may be changed forever, because she works to act as a channel for individuals to contact their inner self.

I don't dare tell what I have experienced with Martha; they are things which you can only believe when you have had or witnessed them. Therapy is a very concrete thing for her, and that is how I have experienced it; the physical result after an intensive three-day session was that my body recovered considerable movement: my legs, body, neck, arms and hands have more sensibility now, and my soul enjoys priceless freedom.

It is amazing the way Martha "speaks" to my body. If she says, "Give me your hand," I give it to her. My hand effortlessly reaches out to her with a movement I am usually unable to make.

During a recent weekly session, Martha gave me a special meditation practice. She asked me to prepare myself internally through daily repetition of a mantra, so that in an upcoming group a month later, we enter a new level of work. As I chant the mantra, she told me, my body will enter a state of vibration that spontaneously awakens the self. I do everything Martha says, without hesitation. While I do not necessarily understand at the time, I know that next month, the experience will be the explanation.

## FLYING WITHOUT WINGS

When a person has all her faculties and the enormous blessing of a healthy body, it is so easy to move, walk, go from one place to another. The body is our vehicle for physical fulfillment, and it is taken for granted that it is there, to serve us at any time. It is available to us like a car parked at the door so that all you need to do is get in and drive. We seldom stop to think how difficult and complicated life would be if we didn't have this magnificent vehicle that God has provided us with while we live on earth.

For people like myself, with physical impairments, the meaning of the body and its movement is radically different, as is the meaning of what we can achieve in our daily life. What a normal person does in one minute may very well take us one or two hours to achieve, or we may not be able to achieve it at all... However, these impairments do not mean we cannot have a physically and spiritually fulfilling life of accomplishments, happiness and success.

In my daily life, there are few things I can do all by myself. Starting with getting out of bed, bathing and dressing to managing transportation and a thousand other things that are done unconsciously when there is no impairment, for me require another person's help, asking for everything I need and struggling in a special way. It means investing precious time, which I would often like to put toward other plans. Every single day, Lydia, who has been close to me for many years, assists me.

*Lydia,*

*Thanks to you, many of my activities are smoother. You have been with me through good and bad times, my sicknesses and joys. You never turned your back on me, even when I couldn't afford to pay to you. When your daughter Claudia was born, you let me get close to her, as a second mother, and to help you see her through, offering her an education, affection and care. Seeing Claudia's development is a treasure in my life, because I think of her as an adopted child and am proud of her fine personality and dedication to her studies. Thank you, Lydia, for your generosity.*

To me, every day is a struggle, an effort. I have to be constantly alert, avoid falling into lazy apathy and always push myself to do what I have to do. In this aspect, my life is no different from anyone else's. Each one of us has our own obstacles, limitations, struggles and degree of passivity that keeps us from moving and against which we have to struggle. I have discovered that the secret to overcoming obstacles is accepting them and persevering. Then, success can result from the acceptance, perseverance and effort.

From Martha and Marcela I learned to welcome everything that happened to me: pain, sadness, laziness, happiness and pleasure. I have learned to welcome life without separating good and bad, beautiful and ugly, pleasure and displeasure. Welcoming it all, I have also learned that everything passes. There is no situation or pain that can last forever, because life is change, evolution, development. I practice this every day, and it has given me enormous strength, which is called freedom.

Is a woman destined to live in a wheelchair talking about freedom? The struggle and love of life have taught me that freedom is much more than having healthy arms and legs. It lives within our heart and gets exercised constantly, through the choices we make: how do I wish to live this day? Happy or sad, angry or joyful, satisfied or bitter? Who do I want to be at this moment in

my life? What plans am I going to carry out? As I have already pointed out, life is a paradox.

What I mean is that although my immobility and the wheelchair represent a limitation, they are not insurmountable obstacles, internally or externally, because I have been able to achieve things that are important to me. Among the first accomplishments that meant the most to me, are being able to sit up and taking a piece of food into my mouth. It meant recovering my human dignity. Later, with time and recuperation, I aspired to the type of success “normal” people tend to have.

As I have said, I got a stipend from the Army, but it wasn't enough to support myself and my small house. I needed more income and came up with the idea of setting up a Christmas bazaar in my house, since a lot of people came to see me and they could buy things. And that's what I did. I bought gift items and then sold them among family and friends. I am not someone who likes sales, so I had to break down a lot of barriers before I dared sell. I felt like I was asking for charity and that people only bought from me out of pity. I gradually managed to alter that attitude and learned that selling, like everything you do in life, must be done enthusiastically.

I decided to venture into the infamous Tepito district to buy merchandise. The first times were hellish. Going through the streets and crowds of people in a wheelchair, being insulted and stared at like a freak was very difficult. Twice, I was almost hit by a bus. As I would leave there crying, exasperated, sometimes even wet from not being able to go to the bathroom, I would tell myself I would never come back. But the sales were very good, and I was meeting goals. So I'd pull myself together and go back there every week until the locals got to know me and I was treated differently. Then, they'd spread the word to let me through, whistling and shouting “wheelchaaairr!”... With the money from the first bazaar, I had another floor built on the house, with enough space to do

my exercises. I call it a “simple penthouse” that enables me to stay in good shape.

With the earnings from the next year’s bazaar I paid the deposit on a brand new Tsuru. My daughter Mariela and I started going to San Juan del Río every week. We would fill the trunk with gift items and either stop in front of the church in San Juan to sell them or go door to door. Once we had enough money, I paid for French, Italian and other language classes for Mariela. We even saved up enough for her to go on a cruise.

We continued working and sacrificing, and the next goal was to buy a Blazer van, which I recently finished paying off.

I needed to solve the issue of moving about the house, because I wasted a lot of time going up and down the stairs. I had this dream of one day building a new house adapted to my needs, and the first step was buying a small piece of land in San Juan.

I spent two years getting a loan to build the house. I had no idea how difficult it is to build. In time, I realized how complicated it is and how many obstacles pop up along the way. Several times during the building process, it seemed impossible to finish and I felt like giving up. I would sit in a corner, cry despairingly and decide to quit. But after two or three weeks, my mood would change and I’d resume my efforts. In a year and a half I actually finished my fully-wheelchair-accessible house. It is a small, simple, very pretty house with a tile roof. It has two bedrooms, a dining room, living room, kitchen and a gym adapted to my needs. There is not a single step, and the wheelchair fits everywhere. On the outside, I put up a sign that says “Tony’s House,” because I built the house for myself.

My goal now is to buy an automatic van adapted for me to drive myself.

Like everyone else, I have suffered from the financial crisis. Sometimes I don’t sell anything, not even making enough for food. But I always figure something out.

One of my greatest satisfactions is being economically self-supporting. I feel great strength, because I prove to myself that I can. And though I am physically impaired, I have the elements to fight, survive and accomplish what I set out to do. The things that are the most difficult for me are the ones I value the most and that make me the happiest.

I am now considering the possibility of fighting for the rights of people in wheelchairs. In fact, writing my story is the first step in making people aware of the real drama of those who have lost the ability to move due to an accident or other circumstance in life. Not many people understand the hardships of wheelchair-bound individuals. Few are aware of the struggle it represents for someone to accept living in a wheelchair and dare to go out into a world hostile to our needs. Upon losing hope of integrating and living a relatively normal life, the number of suicides among people with this limitation is very high.

I hope that just as I have overcome obstacles and rebuilt my life, I can help others do the same. I believe that the deepest level of human fulfillment lies in serving others. Only when we are able to put our own problems aside and leave the limited world where ego is at the center, can we find the most profound sense of our own existence, and for that, all you need is the will to do it.

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