



I did not see them again by Lillian Bertot

We left at night my husband and I, and we took the boy with us. His father had given me permission, since he knew that in this country the boy didn't have a future. His mother called their relatives in Miami to let them know we had already left. We said goodbye an hour before we set out.

I could still make him out on the shore. How many years I endured, putting up with his put downs and beatings. He was an animal, but had seen nothing wrong with our leaving. I sometimes think he was relieved. One mouth less to feed, I'm talking about the boy, because we had already split up and I had been living with Alberto for the last two years.

This one was different, he treated me well, was a hard worker. Everything he stole from the State's work center, he brought home. He wasn't like my sister's husband who gave everything to that whore of his that he kept, taking it away from his children. Me? Between the kid, who was always hungry, and constantly having to forage for food, I didn't even think about school. I left my job when I gave birth to the boy. I either left him with his father's poisonous old mother, or left him in a child-care center to have God knows what kind of people take care of him, or I raised him myself. Nothing wrong with it, its just hard for us women to shake off the kids.

So much for the literacy campaign, graduating as a pre-school teacher, all to end up stuck at home with the boy, waiting for Alberto to manage as best he could, because in this country where there is no longer anything, no electricity, no water for cleaning up, no soap, no food, no nothing, the only thing one can do is to manage somehow. That's why we decided to leave this hell.

How could I have imagined what happened to us? When we left, we could not see anything. It was a dark night, without a moon, so they could not see us. The sea was calm and we were all so afraid, that the only thing you heard was the sound of the oars in and out of the water.

We were twelve, six men, four women, and two children. We rowed all night. The men would take turns rowing and us women, scared to death as we were, the only thing we could do was huddle up against each other, and hold on to the children.

Josuel knew something about boats and having picked out the North Star, pointed the bow in that direction. We could not find a compass or a map. Sometimes from so much staring at the stars, we would get blinded by their glimmer. There were millions and millions of stars. If it weren't that we were all so afraid, the sky would have seemed as if covered with diamonds. That's what my grandmother used to say when at night, amid the blackouts, we looked at the stars.

From time to time a star fell. Every time I saw one, I wished we would arrive to Miami safely.

It was day already and we shared some of the food we had brought, some bread, some chunks of pork meat we had cooked, the water, and the bananas Alberto's brother had given him. We ate a few bites to leave more for the boys.

When the morning lifted, there was nowhere to take shelter and the sun began to burn with a vengeance. I was burned to a crisp and the boy had a headache. I covered him with whatever I could find, I believe it was a wet rag we brought. I kept covering him and wetting his head.

That's how it was that first day, in a dreamy slumber from the

heat and the sound of the oars. Nobody said much, it was as if we were waiting for a ghost to appear. Night came and we were feeling calmer, they had not seen us leave.

That night was better, we took some sips of water and we even told stories. The men took turns rowing each for two hours, and then rested, so we were able to advance some. The day again was our worst enemy, the sun burned, but the sea continued calm, and at least the Cuban coast guard could not catch us anymore. Now all we had to worry about were the Americans, hopefully they would not spot us before we reached Miami. It would be a pity that after all we had endured, we would end up being sent back to this country.

At night, the breeze picked up and became stronger by midnight. We were not making any strides because with the weight and the wind it had become very hard to row. Also, the men were tired, hungry, and thirsty. The only thing Alberto did was ask me how I was doing, and the boy.

At dawn it was raining and overcast, what we thought was a blessing, because we could collect some water, and we would not burn as much. But, suddenly the weather got worse and the sea got very choppy. The boat was rocking from all sides and we, appalled with fear, all we could do was to hold on any which way we could so as not to go overboard and get plunged in the water. The only thing I could do was to groan and moan in panic as tears came down my cheeks. The boy told me to pray. What I had taught him, "Guardian Angel, sweet company..."

The boat could not take the beating, and flipped over. Holding on to the sinking boat I tied the boy to an inner tube we had brought along. When I yelled to Raquel to give me her boy, I saw her going under with him. Josuel was searching for them like a madman. With such rough seas, we got separated, and the boat began to sink.

There was nothing else to hold on to, except for the oars and the inner tube where I had tied the boy. We took turns holding on to the inner tube to rest, we swam some, we floated, we held on to each other and the last one grabbed on to the tube. Alberto tried to hold me up. But exhaustion won out, I was no longer able to keep up, I looked at the boy's little face, I think I fell asleep, I don't know, because I did not see them ever again.

This story is dedicated to all those mothers who in desperation risk their lives and that of their children to live in freedom.