

## A Memory of a Six-year-old

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I remember it clearly, because my six year old mind never understood why it had to happen to me, why such unfortunate events had to take place in the lives of my family and me. It was back on September, 10, 1996. Back when we used to live on the island of Puerto Rico. My mother turned on the T.V only to reveal the latest news of a storm being forecast for that night. I remember it clearly because my mother's pale face revealed fear, maybe because she was worried about the safety of her children, or maybe because she didn't know what to do next. I looked up at the ceiling and felt the same fear that my mother was feeling. The roof of the house seemed to be very weak. It was one of those roofs made out of dry wall. My mother quickly woke up from her nightmare and, staring into both my eyes and those of my siblings, she said, "Vamonos para la casa de tu abuela, que no nos podemos quedar aqui." (Lets' go to your grandma's house, we cannot stay here.)

And just like that, she changed from an afraid mother, sitting on her living room couch, to a determined mother, rushing to a safe house for the security of her children. It wasn't long before we reached the streets of my childhood, where my grandma welcomed us in and greeted us with kisses. Once inside the house, I saw my grandfather with a big smile which revealed his missing teeth. He had his pants up to his belly button and a cane that he used to walk with, since he was diabetic and had some problems with his legs. I also saw my fat uncle who had finally changed his police uniform for some shorts that reached his knees. And there, right next to him, was the face that I resemble completely. My father's face.

After the reunion and eating a full plate of my grandfather's "arroz con habichuelas" (rice and beans), we went outside to see if the storm had begun to punish the streets as it was foretold in the news. Relieved, we saw a clear sky with a full moon.

Once inside the house, my father set up the mattress where my mother, my little brother, and myself would sleep. The last thing I remember before closing my eyes and drifting to sleep was the barking of my dog, Chucky. My family members laid to rest and erased the fear of the storm from their minds.

I remember my mother screaming my name in the middle of the night saying, "¡Natalia, levántate!" (Wake up!) I opened my eyes slowly, only to see all my family awake, fear covering their faces. It was only when I looked around me that I understood where the fear was coming from. The door was holding what seemed to be an ocean of water that could come tearing in

at any moment. As I looked down, feeling a cold wetness, I realized I was standing in dirty water up to my knees. My family members were staring each other in the faces. We needed a way out. My undeveloped mind did only what any six-year-old mind would do: fear that the end was very near and that it would be impossible to get out of that watery hell. My father looked through the glass door and noticed how Chucky kept swimming for his life. He had no way out because the screen door could only let him inside the house.

Instinctively, my father looked down to my brothers and me and realized he had to save us. He looked up to the closet and thought about placing us in the top shelves, but then he saw the amount of water coming in through every crack of the house. I remember my grandma's terrified voice as she tried to dial the phone, only to find out that all phone lines were down. My uncle, also desperate for safety, grabbed one of his walkie talkies from the Army and called in for a helicopter. That is when my father, desperate for his family's safety, broke the only window that did not have iron bars in the house. With blood streaming down his arm, he grabbed us all one by one to what he thought would be a safe haven. He was wrong.

Outside, the nightmare seemed to get worse. There was water everywhere, covering the whole neighborhood. The strength of the current was so powerful that palm trees swayed under the pressure. Even cars were being dragged from their parking spots and moved with the current of the water. As my family members were all led outside the house, my father talked to my neighbor, who was also a father with a family who needed to find a way out as well. After their brief discussion on what to do next, they decided that the safest way out was to get to a roof.

Once there, my father and my uncle took charge of holding the ladder and helping others join us in our exposed shelter. I remember clearly that my grandfather was trembling with fear, his eyes revealing that he had no hope left. It wasn't until years later that my father told me that my grandfather didn't think he could be saved. He had said to leave him there because he weighed too much, and no one would be able to carry him up the ladder.

Nevertheless, my father did not accept his refusal and, one by one, we all reached the the roof and the miracle of feeling safe for the rest of the night. One specific part of my memory on that roof still comes back to haunt me. I looked into a window and saw a woman stuck in a room. With a broom, she kept trying to push the water out, only to see that double the amount came back. I never found out if that woman had survived, and after the events it seemed unlikely. After the whole night of terror, the following day seemed like an unforgettable nightmare in the aftermath of the storm. The whole neighborhood was a disaster. Mud was all over,

and cars were in places they were not supposed to be. Inside the house of my childhood, there was stains of mud everywhere. The white walls that contained the memories of my life with my grandparents were covered with water stains and destruction. The smell will always remain unforgettable. It was a stench that was mixed with mud, water, and the devastation of my family's belongings. Nothing was rescued from our belongings. The water ruined every single video and picture that my father had collected from my childhood. The only thing that remained was the only thing that mattered. We remained, each one of my family members, with a breath of life.

Also there remained Chucky. To this day, no one can explain how he survived the currents of the water during that entire night. The ending to this tragic but miraculous story is full of irony, because once we went back to my mother's house, the weak roof that everyone thought would fall over our heads was still standing. And every time I think back, I always think that if we had not been there, maybe the outcome for the rest of my family would have been a bad one.

And now here I am. A survivor who carries more than a breath of life. I carry with me the determination of succeeding in life by not letting any bad waters come tearing down my dreams. And even if they do come, I have learned how to fight them. So life for me is a street filled with unexpected roads, each road containing a different destiny for us, and at the end we choose the road that will eventually lead us to that unexpected destiny. And by gathering every piece of memory from my experiences I have learned which roads to choose. And I have become Natalia Correa, a survivor, a warrior, and a person who still has a lot to accomplish in life.