



THE SHOES AND THE ROPE

She awoke one day without a soul, and she knew it was her soul that she had lost on that first boat. A nun who translated her story for me said, “the people who did this to you are heartless.” And she felt that although her heart was beating, her soul was not there. Those heartless people had taken her soul. Those heartless people she did not know, but also those she did: her family.

When Ángela was 6 years old, they bought her a colourful dress and some see-through pink shoes with a low heel. The shoes were like something out of a fairy tale. At that moment, all she thought about was when she could wear them. Her mother told her, “wait, first we’re going to the hairdresser’s and when you look like a princess, then you can wear your shoes.” She carried her shoes herself in a bag.

At the hairdresser’s, they brushed her hair, put a pink bow in it and put a bit of make-up on her eyes. Ángela remembers feeling like a princess, and also like a grown-up, not like the 6-year-old girl she then was. She also remembers an old lady who kept saying, “Oh God no, don’t do it,” and her mother explaining things that she didn’t understand. Finally, she was allowed to put her shoes on and look at herself in the mirror. She left the hairdresser’s with a big smile on her face.

There were other girls on the small boat, the same as her, dressed like princesses. But some of them were crying and others were not. The boat approached another, enormous boat with a long, thick rope hanging from it. Ángela saw how the rope was tied to one of the girls and pulled up bit by bit. She had no time to think; then it was her turn. They tied her to the rope. She picked up her shoes so they wouldn’t fall into the water, and she hugged them to her, and heard her uncle say:

“Angy, remember, just kisses, give them lots of kisses and they’ll give you the money.”

“Kisses, Uncle? To who? Come with me, I don’t want to, my shoes are going to fall in the sea!”

Two hours later, Ángela got off the boat with the money but with no light in her eyes. She was no longer a princess, and she carried only one shoe in her hand. She said nothing; nobody said anything. On the boat, her uncle spoke to other adults about the house her neighbours were building with the money their children had given them.

When she was 10 (and had a scar on her back from the scratches made by the rope the many times she'd been pulled on to boats), her mother told her that a man on the boat wanted to take her to work in Australia as a housekeeper. That she'd earn lots of money and she could save and send it home. Ángela thought it was a good idea. Better than going on the boat.

Two years passed before the family received any news of Ángela. The police called to tell them they had her. That she'd been brought to them by the Philippine consulate in one of the Arab countries. Ángela tells how she managed to escape the house where she had been forced to work as a prostitute. She slept on the streets for several nights, until one day she heard some people speaking Tagalog and found the courage to ask for help.

“When I met Ángela, she was 16. She greeted me with a beautiful smile, and while telling her story, she mixed in anecdotes that made her laugh. She and my interpreter laughed at how absurd and horrible her story was...Throughout, I listened to her and fell apart. I asked her what she wanted to do in the future, and her response was, “leave the Philippines for another country.

In the meantime, she works as a housekeeper and still lives with her family, as if nothing had ever happened.”