

Surviving femicide

By Maria Paz Cuevas

This year, forty-nine women have already been killed by their spouses, becoming victims of marital violence. In Punta Arenas, Chile, María Gabriela Alvarado has scarcely escaped their fate. On July 24th, her husband sprayed her with petrol and set her on fire when she was 8 months pregnant. Her tragedy made the first page headlines in newspapers while she was dying. She and her daughter survived. Today, she is telling her story for the first time.

She opened her eyes and she didn't know where she was. María Gabriela Alvarado (21 years old) was lying on a hospital bed, with arms, legs, chest and stomach bandaged. Was she in the regional hospital in Punta Arenas? Was the baby she was expecting born? She felt that she was missing something, and, effortfully, she put her right hand to her head. Her long black hair had been cut. She didn't know that she had been under sedatives and unconscious in the Indisa Clinic in Santiago. Standing by her bed was her uncle, Patricio Mancilla, and his presence there reassured her. He explained that she was safe in the hospital in Santiago and that her daughter, who had been born safe and sound, had been named Milagros (Miracle). María Gabriela was relieved – her daughter was alive – but suddenly she became afraid. 'Carlos, where is Carlos?' she asked. Patricio assured her. Carlos Muñoz (25 years old), her husband, Milagros's father, the man who two weeks before had sprayed her body with petrol and had set her on fire, which burnt 40% of her body, was imprisoned in Punta Arenas.

Having set her dreadful memories in order, María Gabriela starts to cry.

A violent man.

In November 2006, a man knocked on the door of María Gabriela's house in Punta Arenas. It was Carlos Muñoz, a thin carpenter with brown eyes, a friend of her mother's. Carlos Muñoz and María Gabriela spent the night talking. A few weeks later they were expecting a child. 'My family wasn't too happy that I was pregnant again. My daughter, Itiara, was 2 years old at the time, but Carlos told me that he wanted to have another baby and to get married,' says María Gabriela. In February 2007, they moved to live on a parcel belonging to Carlos's grandparents. A few days later, Carlos stopped working and spent all days laying on bed and listening to *villeros* and *reggaeton*. In the evenings, he came home drunk. María Gabriela confronted him. 'We were arguing, he hit me twice and I sat on the bed. I was 4 months pregnant. He threatened me by saying that if I said anything, then he would take care of my family. Since then, Carlos closed the door with the knife in the keyhole. After that night, he locked me in the room in my underwear. He gave me my clothes back when he came home.'

María Gabriela knew that Carlos had been sentenced in August 2006 for having injured his former girlfriend, Gladys Naiman, whom he had disfigured in 78%. Nevertheless, in love with him, María Gabriela believed in Carlos's version, who had to present himself at court regularly for this offense. The truth in this case, according to the prosecutor, Eugenio Campos, was that: 'Carlos had dragged Gladys by force out of his car into an empty house. There, he hit and kicked her in the face. In the hospital, she only said who her attacker was.'

María Gabriela lived in a mix of fear and love. Sometimes she thought that her husband could change, at other times, when she was washing laundry in cold water, she cried. José Cárcamo, Carlos's grandfather, who was a farmer, told her: 'My grandson is ill, you should leave before something bad happens to you.' On April 12th, of the same year María Gabriela found the courage to leave. She moved back to her parents with her daughter. A week later, Carlos came looking for them. 'He said he regretted his actions, promised to change and begged me to forgive him. I wanted to believe him,' she says. All three left for Rio Grande in Argentina, where María Gabriela's maternal grandparents lived, to start a new life, but Carlos's violence soon reappeared. One morning, when Itiara was helping her mother put on her tights, as she was 6 months pregnant, Carlos called to the little girl: 'Itiara, come here, now!' but María Gabriela's grandmother stopped him: 'You have no right to talk to her like that, she's not your daughter.'

María Gabriela remembers that he became hysterical. 'He started yelling and threatening my grandmother with a knife. After that, he went back to Punta Arenas with my and Itiara's documents,' she continues. María Gabriela had to pay a fine to be able to come back to Chile. 'I had enough. On June 13th, we separated. But a week later, when I left Itiara in day care, he came to see me. Like a fool I forgave him once again.' They went back to living together for the third time, but this time in María Gabriela's parents' house. She was 7 months pregnant and she already knew that the child she was expecting would be a girl. She wanted to name her Esmeralda.

In flames.

'I'm going to buy cigarettes. I'll be right back,' Carlos said to his wife before he left on July 23rd last year. María Gabriela, in the last days of her pregnancy, waited for him in the living room. Hours passed and when the contractions started she went looking for Carlos. He was drinking in his Chevrolet Opala. 'He told me to get into the car. I did because I didn't want to argue in front of everyone. He drove off and took me to the Andino hill. There, he pulled me out of the car and hit me in the face and stomach. After that, he put me in the car again and took me some place else.' Carlos drove until they came to a deserted, hidden and dark place. He stopped the car and began to attack his wife once again. In the Chevrolet, he said very seriously: 'I want us to die, all three of us.'

María Gabriela was terrified. She stopped feeling the contractions, her face wounds hurt her so much. At midnight, in the middle of this deserted ground, she screamed. She was heard in the only house near this distant place by Lidia Nain, her daughter, Patricia Cárcamo and her son-in-law, Juan Alarcón. 'We saw a couple arguing in a blue car. The woman was screaming. The man got out of the car, took a petrol can out of the trunk, and got in the car at the back seat where his wife was,' remembers Lidia.

At that moment, the car exploded, Carlos sprayed María Gabriela with petrol from the can. He threw a match on her while he was standing outside the car. María Gabriela got out of the car, in flames, and threw herself down to extinguish the fire by rolling on the ground. She was hitting herself on the stomach to put out the flames.

Patricia and Juan ran to save her. 'What the hell have you done! You set your living wife on fire!,' Juan yelled at the torturer. Carlos didn't move. Patricia went home to get some towels and covered María Gabriela with them. When the couple went back to call the police, Carlos took María Gabriela by the arm. He made her walk through the open grounds. They crossed a narrow and badly lit bridge. 'We'll say that it was an accident,

darling. I don't want to go to prison,' Carlos told his wife. María Gabriela, with burnt body and in shock, promised not to denounce him. 'I was afraid that he would throw me to the river and kill us.'

María Gabriela walked more than five hundred meters with her legs, chest, arms and stomach burnt when they arrived to one of Carlos's cousins' house. 'He told her that we had had an accident but when I was alone with his cousin I told her the truth: 'Carlos set me on fire.' When the ambulance came Carlos repeated the story about the accident and got in with María Gabriela. 'I was conscious but the pain stopped me from talking, and he was by my side.' In the Lautaro Navarro Hospital in Punta Arenas, María Gabriela was taken to the urgency. There, they took off her burnt skin with serum. When she lost consciousness, Carlos stood at the end of the stretcher looking her in the eyes.

When the police came to Carlos's house to arrest him, the blue Chevrolet was still burning in the vast ground. Meanwhile, doctor Carlos Tellez did a caesarian on María Gabriela, whose life was in danger. Early in the morning she was transported by a medical plane to Indisa Clinic in Santiago. Unconscious, she did know that her daughter was born save and sound.

Without Milagros.

María Gabriela saw her daughter for the first time when she was one month old when her uncle, Patricio, showed her a black and white photo. Milagros was in Punta Arenas with her maternal grandparents. María Gabriela looked at the photo and was amazed. 'She was beautiful and she looked like me. I was happy she was alive. That picture and my family gave me the strength I needed to recover.'

During two months in the Indisa Clinic, María Gabriela underwent 15 transplant surgeries. On September 30th, she was transported back to Punta Arenas, but she was still hospitalized because of the gravity of her burns. There, her daughter was brought to her and, for the first time, she could hold her in her arms. Nevertheless, even today she cannot be with her daughter. Soon after her birth, the SENAME (Social Services) filed to court for the custody of Milagros. On August 10th, Milagros was placed in a childcare center. On November 23rd this year, the Family Court in Punta Arenas will decide who will obtain custody of the child.

During that time, Carlos Muñoz was detained in the Punta Arenas prison waiting for court's judgment for attempted murder. The expert of the Legal Medical Service had already established that Carlos Muñoz had no mental troubles. It is for this reason that prosecutor Campos was convinced with the 20 years of imprisonment that he had demanded for Carlos.

In the Regional Hospital, at noon on Friday October 5th, an evangelical pastor with white hair enters María Gabriela's room. Lying in her bed in a Mickey Mouse turtleneck, with arms and legs bandaged, María Gabriela watches him in silence. 'I asked God to cure her burns and today, here's how I see her. Alleluia!' he says. And he starts praying. María Gabriela receives her discharge documents and at 3 o'clock she should be in the nursery of the SENAME for a supervised 50 minutes visit of Milagros, but instead, she closes her eyes and prays with the pastor. She gets up slowly and puts on her Lycra suit that she will have to wear for a year to protect the scars. She puts on a sweater and some make-up. She arranges the wig that the public ministry lent her until the time when her hair grows back.

But still today she is afraid. She is afraid of going back home, where she used to live with Carlos, and of losing Milagros. 'I feel like I was reborn. I only need to get Milagros back and I can live in peace with my two daughters.' At 3 o'clock, in a small waiting room in the SENAME center, María Gabriela stretches her arms to hold Milagros who arrives in a wool dress, awake and serene. María Gabriela holds the girl in her arms and whispers in her ear. 'We are alive. We are both alive.'