

Love that kills

Luz Marina had tear gas sprayed in her eyes. Susana had her hands cut off. Brenda was killed. So far, twelve women have been killed by their partners in 2009. Love stories that turned into crime ones.

Dora Luz Romero

magazine@laprensa.com.ni

She opened her eyes. Her bruised body still hurt and she couldn't move. Susana Zamorán, 25, didn't really know where she was on that day, early December 2007 (she doesn't specify the exact date), when she was lying on a bed in Ernesto Sequeira Blanco Hospital in Bluefields. She didn't remember how she had got there from her home town El Tortuguero in the region of El Lajero. But when she moved her arms and looked at herself, she started to recall what had happened. It was like playing backwards the recording of her life. Sad, cruel and violent. She couldn't deal with the memories and she burst into tears full of helplessness and resignation.

When Susana moved her arms she felt as if she still had her hands, but it was only a reflex. A couple of days before, her partner, José Tomás Díaz, took a machete and cut off both her hands. 'Because of jealousy,' she says. That was how she ended up in the room of Bluefields Hospital. In Nicaragua, the number of women murdered by their partners increases every year. There have been twelve victims so far this year. Some women survive the tragedy, just like Susana. Others, like Brenda Castillo and Luz Marina Ruiz, increase the number of victims. The murderers are not serial killers, they are not insane strangers, nor maniacs. It's the partners and husbands who take those women's lives away. They say it is because of jealousy, anger, feeling of superiority, anything. The fact is that when the sun goes down and the night comes, a lot of women go to bed unaware that they sleep with an enemy.

In 2005 Susana met José Tomás Díaz, a fat and quite serious man in his forties. Sometimes he greeted her as he passed by her house in the El Lajero region. She was twenty years younger and she greeted him back enthusiastically with a smile of complicity. At that time Susana had two children: David Espinoza, 6, and Darwin Granja, 2, with different fathers. She left the father of her first son because his family '*didn't want her*' and the father of her second son left her for another woman. '*I didn't want to have anything to do with men anymore,*' says

Susana very quietly, almost whispering.

But then José Tomás appeared. He was hard-working and affectionate and as she saw so many qualities in him, she decided to give love another chance. *‘I promised myself after my experience that I wouldn’t fall in love with a young man again. And when I looked at him I wondered: maybe this one will love me deeply, as he is so old,’* she recalls. But she was wrong. As soon as José Tomás moved in, she realised his good qualities were an illusion. *‘He didn’t like working. The only thing he did was lying in the hammock. He treated my mother very badly, sold my lands, didn’t let me go out and said that my daughter, Aidalina, was not his child,’* she complains.

Susana went to work the land every morning. She sowed manioc, kidney bean, malanga. She loved riding a horse and feeling free, because when she came back home, she was not free anymore. *‘I couldn’t chat with other women even if I went out to the hallway, because when he came he told them immediately: What are you doing here with my wife? If you want to gossip, do it somewhere I can hear it and don’t take her outside,’* she recounts.

And sometimes it was even worse. *‘When I told him I wanted to go to a party or just for a walk, he was worse. He hit me. How could I think of going out? Never! He went out on his own and came back at dawn and sometimes he wouldn’t come back for a couple of days but nobody could tell him anything. It was just my old mother and me – a woman. What could we do? Nothing,’* she says.

The cases of battered, raped and killed women appear in the media every day. The stories of violence towards women are so frequent that they do not surprise anymore, unless they are as tragic as the case of Brenda Castillo, a 25-year-old girl killed by her ex-boyfriend in April 2008.

Brenda Castillo was about to graduate from the BA studies in Diplomacy and Political Science. She was an independent young woman. She lived alone in her mother’s house in San Sebastian district. Her mother, Tesla Rodríguez had emigrated to Spain with Brenda’s younger brother, Oscar.

Apart from studying, Brenda worked as a sales representative in credit cards distribution. She was a member of the Body of Christ Church, she liked going to the cinema and she was an expert at making friends wherever she went.

Until then, everything in her life seemed to go well. But then she met Antonio Urbina Fonseca, who became her boyfriend and changed the course of her life.

First months they went out together were pure romanticism. Antonio visited Brenda at her

house, they talked and went out to eat. *'She was in love with him,'* recalls Vilma López, Brenda's classmate. But after a year, the problems started. *'Brenda wanted to leave him, but then we realised he threatened her,'* says Carolina Castillo, Brenda's aunt, who recalls with trembling voice and tearful eyes that her niece confessed to her several times: *'He is going to kill me. I know it.'*

Time passed by and the loving relationship turned more and more into a vague memory. He hit her, threatened her and, as her aunt assures, *'he raped her'* in November 2007. When Brenda decided to break up, the ending was tragic.

At dawn on April 11th 2008 he came to her house completely drunk and called her shouting. They quarrelled until the morning. At about 7 a.m. Brenda screamed for help to her neighbour, María José. When curious neighbours managed to enter, they saw a horrifying scene. *'They were both covered in blood. He was sitting on her and cutting her throat with a piece of glass.'* says the aunt. She was still conscious when they took her to hospital but then she went into a coma and died 8 days later.

When the victim's family and friends demanded justice, Antonio was sentenced to 16 years of prison.

According to the report published by the United Nations last December, one in three women all over the world has been beaten, sexually coerced or otherwise abused by her partner throughout her life.

Susana Zamorán was one of them.

In mid November 2007, Susana, her husband and her three children set off to visit her mother, Mrs. María Pérez. When they arrived, they found María's 15-year-old grandson and an old friend in the house. They were going to stay there for a couple of days. *'When we arrived on November 27th, my husband got angry because he didn't like it that there was someone else at home.'* says Susana.

That evening the guests cooked an iguana they brought for dinner. Next morning José Tomás got up mad and vociferous. *'He yelled at me a lot but I didn't answer,'* she maintains. Suddenly, he approached her furiously and said: *'Today you will see. You will see who I am.'* Susana was scared and she did not even move, leaning on the wall. José Tomás picked up a machete and right before her mother's and children's eyes rushed to kill her. *'I thought he was going to cut my head off so I just covered myself with my hands,'* says Susana.

There was no time to react. Susana fell on the floor without her hands. Her sons ran away terror-stricken and her mother stood with her eyes wide open and couldn't say a word. When

she finally got her voice back and screamed, the neighbours came and took Susana to Bluefields Hospital. Meanwhile, her nephew followed José Tomás with the machete in his hands for almost three hours. When he caught him, he cut off his arms, but recalling that José Tomás threatened him with death, he killed him without thinking and escaped. They say he was imprisoned for two months but then released.

According to the UN research presented in 2006, women between 15 and 44 are more likely to suffer mutilation or death because of male violence than because of cancer, car accidents or war.

Luz Marina was 42 when she was killed by her husband. They say she begged him several times not to do it. It was February 6th 2008. Juan Bautista Silva, 49, had no pity for the woman with whom he had spent 23 years and had a daughter.

According to the reports, she received a phone call that made Silva furious. She tried to leave in the middle of the argument, but he locked her, sprayed tear gas in her eyes and stabbed her with a knife several times.

The members of the Network of Women Against Violence (*la Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia*) claim that the problem is that men consider themselves as women's owners. '*What we are saying is that women have the fundamental right to life and it is unthinkable that we die at the hands of men who are supposed to love us, to have loved us or whom we trust,*' states Evelyn Flores from the RMCV. As the UN report points out, '*the roots of violence against women lie in historically unequal power relations between men and women, and persistent discrimination against women.*'

Susana Zamorán has a new life. When she lost her hands she left her community and now she lives in Bluefields with her mother and her three children. They make the living thanks to what people give them. In spite of their wretched life, they seem happy. The boys chase each other all over the house and the girl, the youngest of the siblings, keeps on hugging and kissing her mom.

Susana had to learn again to have a bath, dress up, go to the bathroom on her own...

'What have you learnt to do best?'

'I can turn on the stove. I have to put this thing (prosthesis) on to light the matches.'

'What is your life like now?'

'Well, without my hands I can't do much. It is as if my life had ended, but I am glad as I think of what would happen with my children without me. They would suffer a lot more so I am

really thankful to God.'

'And do you have a boyfriend?'

'(she laughs ashamed) Nooo! I'm not going to be with a man anymore. It doesn't even cross my mind. And it makes me sad. Because I wonder who would be as good so as to love a person without hands, who can't do anything anymore?'