

B R O K E N**By Martha Batiz****NOW**

“Flight number... to New York, now boarding at gate...” She doesn’t pay attention to the announcements. They don’t speak to her. *“Flight number... to New York, all passengers now boarding at gate...”* New York. An imaginary place, far away—could be on a different planet for all she cares. She’s not traveling anywhere. All she has is this. The present. The sound of that feminine, robotic voice in the background. Noise of people walking, suitcases rolling. Light that is always on, day and night. She’d have lost track of time if it weren’t for the newspaper stands, where she can see the date on the front pages. She tries to avoid the headlines but ends up scanning them every morning. MAN SUES POLICE DEPARTMENT, WANTS RANSOM MONEY BACK. 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL FOUND RAPED AND MURDERED, 159TH VICTIM SO FAR THIS YEAR. LOCAL SOCCER TEAM WINS CHAMPIONSHIP, FANS CELEBRATE BLOCKING MAIN CITY ARTERIES CAUSING CHAOS. NEW LAMBORGHINI CAN RUN AT 350 KM PER HOUR. ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE CITY’S TRENDIEST CLUBS AND HOW TO DRESS FOR THEM.

Every hour of every day feels the same to her, except in the early morning, when the terminal is empty and quiet and she finds it easier to be at peace. The only way to know if it is raining is if there are wet footprints on the tiles, but even that can be tricky as the floor is cleaned constantly with wide, dirty mops like dead dogs.

She has made it her mission to stand guard at arrivals, but she’s happiest when she’s in the departure area. People are more likely to cry. Their tears give her a chance to blend in. To stop feeling so alone.

Remembering Sylvia’s words, she forces herself to believe she’s safe here. She walks from one end of the airport to the other, watching over her shoulder as she pulls the suitcase she took from Sylvia’s house, looking for someone who might want to listen to her. Hour after hour under the interminable white, sometimes blinding light.

BEFORE

They were beautiful, my shoes. A present from my daughter Alma to wear to her high-school graduation ceremony. I bought her a lovely red dress, and she gave me the shoes, and that made her proud. She had been saving up from her weekend job at the market in order to go to college, become a teacher. She dreamed of improving our lives.

“You cannot come to my graduation wearing *chanclas*, Mother,” she said, looking at my flip-flops with contempt. My feet were not used to wearing proper shoes, let alone high heels, and I complained the instant I put them on.

“Come on, *mija*. I look like a fat chicken trying to balance on a cactus.”

Alma laughed. Her laughter soft and fresh, like a shy waterfall.

“They’re not so high!” she reassured me. “You’ll get used to them. You’ll just have to start wearing them now so you’re ready on graduation day.” And she waved her index finger to issue a serious warning, her smile a big ray of sunshine on her face.

I promised I would, and honestly tried, but back then I thought to myself who can work cleaning jobs wearing fancy shoes, screw this. I told her I was wearing them, and did, once. I

decided I would walk very slowly on her big night and then forget about the damned shoes, keep them in a drawer as a nice memory to show my grandchildren: “Your momma insisted on me wearing *theeese* on her graduation night, can you imagine?” And I pictured two or three little faces laughing with me. I played a little imagining their gender, looking for names that would suit them. What would Alma call her children? She had grown up so fast! I knew she wanted to pursue a career and be independent, but I couldn’t wait to hold a little hand in mine again. I always yearned for a large family. Destiny had something else in mind. I hoped it would be different for Alma.

AFTER

You walk everywhere with leaflets, carrying a big sign written on cardboard, showing her picture and asking every single person who crosses your path if they’ve seen her. Some don’t even bother to take a good look, others say the first thing they can think of in order to make you feel better: “I’ve seen her. Do you go to the church around the corner? I think I remember her from last Sunday’s mass.” But you haven’t been to mass since your parents disowned you and the priest said single mothers are not welcome in heaven, so you say thanks and keep searching. You scout your entire neighbourhood, venturing down streets you didn’t even know were there, trying not to twist your ankle or be run over as you walk on uneven dirt roads without sidewalks. The roads of the poor.

You have been to the police, the hospitals, the government offices, the morgue. My name is Adela Ramírez, my daughter Alma is missing. Seventeen years old, brunette, medium-length wavy hair, skinny, not very tall but very outspoken. People behind desks pretend to care as they scribble down a few notes and promise they’ll look into it. A file has been opened but you know that doesn’t necessarily mean something will be done. So you dress up, wear your new shoes hoping they will summon your child back, hoping that if people see you well dressed they will want to help, take you seriously, give you an appointment with someone higher up. But new shoes or no new shoes, they don’t have time to hear you out again or they tell you useless things like *she’ll come back did you have a fight with her she must have run away all teenagers are like that just be patient perhaps she had a different boyfriend she didn’t tell you about just go home and take care of yourself trust the Lord leave her picture here again we will call you if we hear anything there’s no need for you to come back we’re on it and we’re so sorry* which only proves what you’ve always known: when you’re no one, you’re no one. And so is your child.

You cannot think straight because you don’t sleep. All you do is scream and cry and beg, wishing to hold your child in your arms again. Little things trigger huge storms within your chest. The childhood hairclips shaped as rubber duckies that your little girl, your happy girl wore every day in grade four. A clean, lonely sock sitting on the dresser waiting patiently for its match to reappear. Her pyjamas which still smell like her lavender body lotion and which you dare not wash, hoping life is like a movie and some dog will come and sniff them and lead you to her. But life is not a movie.

You have bills to pay so you keep your evening job cleaning an office in order to be able to go looking for your child during the day, every day, because you know no one else will do it. You can barely eat, forget to shower, wish you could disappear as well. You snap at those who try to comfort you: *Would you be able to calm down?* You ache for your child’s long fingers and dirty plates and mood swings—her driving you crazy with her presence, not her absence. You want to tell her she’s the best thing that ever happened to you, beg her for forgiveness for everything you’ve

ever done wrong. Different scenarios play in your head of how things could have been done differently so that this would've never happened.

You're an open wound oozing despair. You become a sickness.

It's a one-storey home surrounded by a tall wall crowned with broken pieces of glass, a common and cheap way to feel protected against potential intruders. The garage and front doors are made of metal. As they pull into the entrance, Adela notices the sidewalk, narrow and crooked, and feels sorry for a scrawny tree that has managed to survive surrounded by concrete. The house has no windows to be seen from the outside.

Sylvia: You can stay here as long as you want.

Adela (fighting tears): I don't know how to thank you.

Sylvia (getting out of the car to open the garage door): Don't worry.

Adela studies Sylvia's movements. Before getting out of the car and opening up the garage door, she checks her surroundings, makes sure there is nobody on the street. When she's satisfied, she opens up—the garage doors screech—and then returns to the car to bring it inside.

Sylvia: You can never be too careful.

Adela nods. She feels the urge to cry but holds back. Such a clever, brave young woman. The first one to really take an interest in Alma's disappearance. And an important person, too. A journalist.

Sylvia closes up the garage door and then helps Adela bring down her belongings. She was not allowed to take anything except clothes and her daughter's treasures: pictures, crafts, a few books, used make-up, inexpensive jewelry, a half-finished perfume, a doll. Her high-school diploma and final report card, which her friends brought in sealed envelopes that Adela has not had the strength to open. The barely worn high-heeled shoes and the never-worn red dress. It all fits into a couple of boxes and a black garbage bag.

Sylvia (opening the front door, which has three different locks): What they did to you was terribly unfair. We'll fight them, you'll see.

Adela: All I care about is finding my daughter.

Sylvia (pushing the door open and turning on the lights): I know. But for your landlord to kick you out because you couldn't pay the rent, and keep your furniture and other stuff as payment is wrong. Almost criminal under the circumstances.

Adela (following Sylvia into the house): I tried to keep my night job, I really did.

Sylvia (closing the door and turning the key on all three locks): After what you've been through, it's understandable you couldn't. And you shouldn't be expected to, either. This country is fucked up. The world needs to hear about it.

It is a modest but cozy house. Adela thinks it would be cozier if there were not so many stacks of papers on the table in the dining room and the living room, on the sofa and chairs. Sylvia leads Adela down a hallway into a small room with a twin bed and a night-table. There's a small closet and a window that looks into a patio that has no grass or flowers.

Sylvia (smiling): This will be your room. I hope you're comfortable.

Adela breaks down.

NOW

"In the course of one day the adult heart will beat more than 86,000 times. In one year, more than 31 million times. By age 70, a human heart will have logged upwards of 2.3 billion contractions." Someone left one of those magazines for women on a chair. She picks it up thinking she'll find some distraction looking at the pictures of make-up she'd never wear but would have looked great on Alma. Instead, she finds an article written by a lady whose baby had a heart defect and died a few days after birth. It gets Adela thinking about how lucky that mother was, being able to cuddle her child as he died. Having a grave to visit. She does the count with the calculator on her phone, and finds out that Alma's heart beat around 682 million times up until the last day she saw her. Sylvia's heart stopped at around 1.6 billion.

Large numbers; short lives.

BEFORE

A month before Alma's graduation, she called me to let me know she'd leave the house in the early afternoon and come back for dinner after finishing a last-minute assignment with her classmates. I thought it was odd that she hadn't asked them to come over, which is what they always did. With me gone all day and into the evening at work, they had our small flat to themselves and they liked that.

"Why can't they come over?" I asked.

"It's more convenient this way this time," she stated, trying to appear nonchalant. But her voice gave her away. She was lying.

"Are you going to see Bobby?"

She didn't answer.

"Are you?" I insisted.

She still didn't answer.

"He's a bartender, *mija*. A loser. Why can't you understand?"

"He's not a loser."

I remembered myself at her age, falling in love with her deadbeat father, and my heart sank.

"Do you want to ruin your life like me?"

I didn't mean to say that. It came out wrong.

"So *I* ruined your life?" She replied, bitterly.

I tried to explain to her what I meant but she hung up and didn't pick up again. By the time I came home in the evening she still wasn't there.

AFTER

She was wearing blue jeans, a white T-shirt, the bright yellow sneakers she had just bought at the market the previous weekend. You figure it out after you go through her closet to find out what is missing along with her.

You call her cell phone tirelessly but it goes straight to voicemail. You call her friends but they haven't seen her. You call Bobby at the bar where he works but he says she didn't show up

for their date. He claims to have called her and been sent straight to voicemail. To your surprise, he comes right away to offer you support. He's there when you call the police, helps you make the first flyers you post around the neighbourhood, and spreads the word around in social media.

#Missing

You're hopeful until you see how many other pleas for help like yours are online. Little girls, teenage girls, girls of all ages reported missing, disappeared, kidnapped. Vanished. Boys, too, but mostly girls.

You don't understand: you taught your daughter to be careful, to take good care of herself. She was never out alone once it was dark, she had her phone on herself at all times, she always told you where she was going and with whom. What else could you have done?

If you paid attention to everything the news says you'd never dare leave the house. You cannot stop living your life. Weren't those your words?

But it's the last words you uttered, the last words she heard from you, that kill you.

It's your fault.

NOW

Adela has a routine. At around midnight she lies down on the floor in a faraway corner of the terminal. There are always a few passengers here and there lying around or resting against a wall, waiting for an early flight, so she hasn't found it hard to pretend she's one of them. She ties her suitcase to her wrist to make sure no one steals it while her eyes are closed, and tries to rest until dawn, when she heads to the family washroom and locks herself in. There, she opens up her suitcase and checks that everything is in order.

Sylvia's documents, the ones she took from the secret spot behind the pantry.

Alma's red dress at the very bottom, her baby pictures, her PJ's. The lavender smell of her body has almost faded. Her stomach churns.

Once she goes over her inventory, she gets ready to clean herself and wash her clothes in the sink: top, underwear, and socks only. Drying jeans under the hand dryer is nearly impossible, so she has decided to wear them until her job is done. Her hair is short, easy to wash under the faucet; she doesn't have to spend too much money on toiletries. A shower would be nice, but sponge baths are better than nothing. She avoids looking at herself in the mirror for too long. She has lost weight, has dark circles under her eyes, her hair has gone completely grey. Soon she will have to find herself a job, the money Sylvia left her is running low. But she doesn't want to think about that just yet.

She has a mission.

BEFORE

"Mom, why did you call me Alma?"

It was Sunday and I was cooking eggs for breakfast. Alma was sitting at the kitchen table, eating a banana.

"Because from the moment you were born, I knew you were a special soul, and my biggest love."

She wrinkled her nose.

"Do you have to be so corny?"

I laughed.

“I wish you had named me Pamela.”

I stopped paying attention to the eggs and turned around to look at her, genuinely curious and surprised.

“Why?”

She shrugged.

“Dunno. Sounds fancier. And definitely not corny.”

I smiled, served the eggs on our plates, and brought them to the table.

“I didn’t like my name when I was your age, either,” I said, trying to make her feel better.

“Really? Why?” she asked, taking her first bite.

“The song. *Y si Adelita se fuera con otro...* Children at school used to make fun of me,” I lied.

Alma started singing *Adelita* at the top of her lungs. I covered my ears with my hands, and we both burst into laughter.

I didn’t tell her the truth. The real reason why I didn’t like my name. The song talks about a girl whose lover is willing to follow her by train or ship even if she leaves him for someone else, because he cannot live without her. I grew up thinking my name held a promise. Alma’s father used to sing it into my ear when we were together.

Then he left.

AFTER

After the few weeks in which people help you distribute leaflets and hug you when they see you, they go back to their lives, their routine. Their concern turns into pity and then oblivion. You’re part of the country’s gruesome statistics; they avoid you even though they know your face, your name, your child and your story. At first you are enraged. Do they think, deep down, that your girl deserved whatever it was that happened to her? That she went looking for it? Or that it all happened because you were never there? Always working, single mother, no family or close friends to help raise that child, how irresponsible of you. Then you realize they’re only trying to cope. You’ve made it hit too close to home for them. They’re afraid of becoming you.

A decision has to be made, and you choose to continue your search alone. You’ve heard about people doing just that, and have a faint idea of where to start.

After a sleepless night, you leave the house early to take a bus that will take you out of the city. You get off near the highway, then start walking towards the bottom of the hill. It’s going to be a hot day. It hasn’t rained in weeks. All you can hear is the sound of your own steps. The air feels heavy and your mouth dry, but you have to save your water so you just moisten your lips with your tongue. After a few minutes you hear some voices. Female voices. Then you see them. A handful of women walking with long sticks, feeling the ground with them. They all wear hats—you’ll bring one tomorrow, you tell yourself—and colourful handkerchiefs around the neck whose purpose, later on you learn, is to cover the nose and mouth in case someone finds what everyone dreads but is desperately looking for.

These women are well organized and immediately welcome you into their fold. They have given their group a name: “colectivo del monte.”

This is the worst club anyone can belong to.

Mothers of the disappeared.

NOW

Adela cannot believe how unlucky she has been so far finding the kind person Sylvia asked her to look for, but she forces herself to keep trying.

A family of four is coming out the sliding doors. They appear tired but happy. Mother, father, a teenage girl and a young boy. Adela doesn't understand a word they're saying but doesn't mind. She approaches the man without hesitation.

“Perdone, señor, ¿habla español?”

The man and his family look surprised at her boldness. They're looking for someone to help them carry their suitcases. He tries to wave her away with his hand. Adela gives the foreign woman a pleading glance and catches her attention. The teenage girl rolls her eyes. The boy says something that sounds like “can we go, now?”

“No queremos comprar nada.”

He has a heavy accent but evidently speaks the language. Adela looks him in the eyes, pleading.

“Are you a journalist?”

BEFORE

“How was your day?”

That's how Alma and I always greeted one another when we came home. I almost never told her the truth about my days. Cleaning motel rooms is hard work. People are filthy. I found all sorts of disgusting things on the bedsheets: boogers, blood stains, vomit, sweat, semen, pubic hair, nails, fleas. We had a certain amount of time to clean each room, so I did the best I could but developed a chronic repugnance for these places. When Alma asked why we never went on vacations like some of her classmates did, I made up excuses like *the beach is only a couple of hours away we always go there to spend the day when you feel like it we really do not need more than that we don't have much money we must save up for your education* but she kept on insisting, she wanted to go to the Capital, see the big city.

Alma was such a bright student that, when she was about to turn fifteen, I started considering granting her wish for her and organizing a short trip. I went to a travel agency, got some brochures which I hid at the very bottom of my purse and studied when Alma was not around. Finally, I made up my mind, chose an itinerary, and was ready to book it as a surprise for her. I was in a very good mood that day, humming a Shakira song that played on the radio all the time.

When I entered the last room I was supposed to clean before lunch, I immediately knew something was wrong. The red stain on the bed was too large. I didn't dare inspect what was there. Called the manager instead.

The police came.

An ambulance was not necessary. A girl—if only she had been allowed to be born.

After the officers finished taking everyone's testimony, they took the bedding as evidence and the room was left empty. The mattress was stained, the blood had seeped in. I watched as the manager and the security guard turned it over, then I was asked to get the room ready for the next guest.

“How was your day?” Alma asked me that evening when I came home.

I broke down as I held her tight against my chest. The next morning, I tore the brochures into little pieces.

No sleeping away from home for us.

AFTER

Like every day for the past few weeks, you comb through the thirsty soil as it eagerly drinks up the thick drops of sweat falling off your forehead. The mothers decided to search the hill from the bottom up. You're already close to the top so your stick seems heavier now than before. It's sunny. The heat makes your clothes stick to your skin. You've been told what to look for if there's no smell to guide you. Swarms of flies. Cigarette butts. Food wrappers. Empty beer bottles. Cans. Anything that is a sign of human presence in this ungrateful landscape might be a sign.

All of a sudden, a scream pierces the air. The voice stabs you in the stomach and you cannot move. You're paralyzed in fear. It's only when you see the rest of the mothers heading to where the scream came from that you react and start walking. Your feet feel impossibly heavy. Your knees are shaky.

"Cover your mouth with the handkerchief!" someone warns you. As you approach the group, the stench hits you. A woman is bent over, crying. The others are standing next to her, trying to comfort her, teary as well.

"That's my son's shoe!" she says, pointing to the ground.

You take a look. There's a white something showing through the dirt... How does she know it's his shoe, you wonder. Then again, you'd immediately recognize your daughter's sneakers. Or wouldn't you?

"Don't touch anything. I'll call the cops" someone says, and you stand still. Who knows how many more bodies are here. Who knows what you're standing on, what's waiting for you. What if Alma's there? The thought makes you dizzy.

It seems like hours until the Forensic team arrives. They cordon off the area, make you walk away. You watch from a distance as they dig. You refuse to go home. You refuse to eat or drink. You're just standing there, under the sun, your heart barely beating.

You wake up at the hospital. You don't know her yet, but Sylvia is sitting by your side. She offers you water and introduces herself gently. She wants to hear your story, but when you try to talk you find no words inside you, just wails.

Adela is preparing Sylvia's favourite dish when the phone rings. She runs from the kitchen to the landline in the hallway.

Sylvia (picking up the phone): Hello?

Man (muffled, angry voice): Listen to me, you cunt! Tell that bitch that we warned her to be quiet, but she fucked up real bad.

Adela: Who is this?

Gunshots are heard in the distance. Adela drops the phone, hunkers down and covers her ears, shaking.

NOW

Adela feels like she has hit the jackpot. The man she intercepted is a journalist and his expression softens as she explains herself. He seems interested in hearing her story now. As he translates for his family, they all appear to warm up to her.

A geyser has erupted inside Adela's mouth. They move the luggage to the side, look for a spot to sit down away from the crowd.

Trying as best as she can not to break down, she tells them about Alma's disappearance. About how her clothes were found on the body of another girl and no one could offer an explanation as to how that could happen, other than "they sometimes do that in order to confuse the police." She talks about Sylvia and her investigation into the disappearance of dozens of people leading all the way up to a drug cartel linked to the governor and the chief of police. The man's gaze lets her know he believes her. The woman hugs her.

As Adela hears the robotic female voice in the background announcing flight departures, footsteps of people coming and going, roller suitcases grinding past her, she feels something like relief. After weeks of leaping from memory to memory, trying to hold the pieces of her shattered life together, she is finally heading somewhere else.