Singing A Song Of Defiance

This is a story about two women, a song and a struggle. The song is about a bicycle built for two; the struggle is for overdue justice in El Salvador. One woman brought the song to the other woman's struggle. Somehow, it all makes sense.

Karen Ridd made national headlines in November 1989 when she was abducted by El Salvador's notorious Treasury Police. The Winnipeg native was a volunteer with Peace Brigades International, accompanying Salvadorans whose lives were at risk, deterring attacks by virtue of her visibility as a foreigner. Released after twelve hours, Ridd returned to Canada and promptly set out on a speaking tour. She spoke of her experiences in El Salvador, and a woman named Gloria Daysi Alonzo Jaimes.

Daysi worked with unemployed workers, most closely with women. In countries like El Salvador, organizing and teaching people new skills is tantamount to subversion. Recent peace talks between the rightist government and leftist rebels may finally begin to stanch the wounds of a country assaulted by 11 years of a civil war that has claimed 75,000 lives.

In 1989, Daysi was picked up for her work with El Salvador's unemployed. Handcuffed and blindfolded for three days, she was severely beaten around the face, head, spine and abdomen. Pointed fingers ensure that no marks are left, that all damage is internal. Out of sight, but not out of mind. Daysi was raped repeatedly, followed by sessions with the "capucha".

The "capucha" is one of the most common forms of torture in El Salvador. A rubber hood, filled with lime, is placed over a victim's face and tightened around the throat and neck. Forced onto the ground, the victim — picture a woman named Daysi — is beaten on the spine. The beating leaves Daysi gasping for air. Trouble is, there is no air — just a lime-filled hood. When Daysi gulps air she inhales lime, searing and scarring her lungs. Burns around the mouth and nose are other side effects.

This continues until Daysi passes out. Then she is revived by electric shock, or cold water, and the "capucha" is put on again. Daysi endured this process six times before she was transferred to a jail for women, where she was imprisoned for another month.

"I remember the first time that I visited her there," Karen recalls, responding to a letter I'd written, wanting to know more about Daysi. "I was the first visitor that she had had. It was about six days after she had been picked up. When she saw me coming she started to run across the courtyard to meet me. That's how she would normally meet me — or anyone. But this time she couldn't run, and instead fell — crying — in the courtyard. And I lay there, holding her and crying too."

But Daysi also sang. She couldn't carry a tune and didn't always understand the lyrics, but Daysi loved to sing, off-key but undaunted. One of her favourite songs was one Karen had taught her, a classic Karen had learned from her parents: "Daisy". I picture two women — one from Canada, one from El Salvador — singing together, fingers braided, the Salvadoran mouthing the words to a song she learned to love, that she liked to think was somehow written for her.

Daisy, Daisy, tell me your answer do.
I'm half crazy, all for the love of you.
It won't be a stylish marriage,
I can't afford a carriage,
But you'll look sweet,
Upon the seat,
Of a bicycle built for two.

"Daysi sang the song a lot, including when she was in the Treasury Police," Karen writes. "She sang it to keep her spirits up, and to say to those around her that she would not be intimidated, would not be broken."

It's an image that has stayed with me ever since I first heard Daysi's story: a woman, forced to undergo unspeakable torture, bruised and battered, singing a song in a foreign language, singing about bicycles built for two. I picture puzzled guards pacing in their thick-heeled boots, wondering about that woman in the cell, singing a song when she should have been wailing in pain or subdued into silence, half crazy with all that she has lived through. But instead, she sings.

After her release, Daysi returned to work, taking the same risks that landed her in prison in the first place. Then she was "disappeared" for six days, a synonym for the worst type of treatment at the hands of state-sponsored squads. When they found Daysi's body she had been tortured to death.

One of her goals in life had been to come to Canada and do a cross-country speaking tour. So Karen tells her story instead. "I tell her story because I miss her, and mourn for her, and by telling her story keep her close."

Why was she killed? She may have been implicated by a colleague who was pressured (read:tortured) into naming names. "But truly part of the answer must have been her charisma, her energy and spirit, her ability to motivate and inspire others," Karen says. "People like that are dangerous."

In light of El Salvador's blood-stained record on human rights, a United Nations-nominated "truth commission" will investigate a decade of political killings once a ceasefire agreement has been reached. The deaths of thousands of suspected leftists have been widely attributed to death squads and El Salvador's armed forces. But one analyst has wryly noted that "the best you can hope for is a list of the names of the disappeared and known murdered to put on the marble monument to El Salvador's civil war."

Daysi's name may be among those etched in marble. Monuments can never tell the whole story, which is the way architects of terror like it, and all the more reason to tell Daysi's story. "I believe," Karen wrote, "that we should know that the world is filled with such Daysis." And she ends with a perfect allegory.

"My grandfather left my parents a cottage at a lake in Ontario. There daisies grow wild, in the most unlikely of places, struggling out of seemingly impermeable rock. Everywhere. They are cocky, cheeky plants that my father mows down yearly with the lawnmower. And yet every spring, there they are again, tossing their heads, laughingly, in the wind."

A wind that carries distant voices, singing "Daisy" in the dark.

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