

The Unseen

Withdrawal and the social order of violence
in Guatemala City



Timo Peeters

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in Guatemala City

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Terugtrekking en de sociale orde van geweld
in Guatemala-Stad

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Timo Dagmar Peeters

Doctoral Committee:

Promotors:

Prof.dr. R. van Swaeningen

Prof.dr. R.H.J.M. Staring

Other members:

Prof.dr. G.B.M. Engbersen

Prof.dr. K. Franko

Prof.dr. W.G. Pansters

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So much has happened in the six, almost seven years that span the period of my PhD. One thing that I experienced much more than before is that fieldwork, especially when you are far away from home, is not only about 'being there', as is often suggested in literature, but from an ethnographer's perspective also about 'not being there'. Having a family of your own raises the stakes of fieldwork.

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1. Introducing the Unseen

During my time in Guatemala City, I rented a room in Zone 10. The house was owned by Ester who lived there with her twenty-five-year-old daughter Alicia, the maid Cinthya and two students. The zone, among the more exclusive of the capital's twenty-two sub-divisions,¹ was nicknamed "*La Zona Viva*" (The Lively Zone) due to the pervasiveness of shopping malls, clubs, restaurants and hotels in the area, but its streets, at the same time, showed few signs of being alive. Sidewalks, the unwanted stepchild of almost any elite area in Guatemala City, were of poor quality and had long been abandoned by city planners and affluent residents and visitors alike, and along some streets they were even non-existent. Basically, the only people that used them were the underprivileged workers of the area. And although many of the zone's main roads were clogged with vehicles throughout the day – and thus full of 'lives' – cars in Guatemala City, especially in better-off places, tended to show little of what they carried inside because of a distinct preference among drivers for polarized windows. And what black shaded windows did for cars, security walls did for the many gated communities in the zone. They were measures that came at the cost of the human element in the landscape.

For me, the lively zone was Zone 4, where the immense La Terminal market was situated. Multiple times a week I made it down there, engaging

¹ Although Guatemala City's zones count to twenty-five, Guatemala City has twenty-two zones. For cartographic reasons, Zone 20, 22 and 23 have not been used (Pitán, 2018).

first in a fifteen minute walk from my house to Zone 9 from where I would catch a usually packed smart bus (*Transmetro*) that dropped me off on the outskirts of the market. La Terminal was a world in itself, a jungle of market stalls, alleys and people, though one I usually left untouched. Instead, I stayed in its shadows, walking a few blocks from the bus stop to what was perhaps one of its grimmest corners, a spot I came to know as *El Castillo* (The Castle). It was there that I had befriended a group of street people who had established themselves on a collection of mattresses placed on a scattered pavement under a small rooftop that kept the mattresses dry only on days it did not rain. Many of its dwellers had come from broken and violent homes and were now subjected to what seemed to be the whole array of violence Guatemala City had to offer, while seeking refuge in the inhaling of solvent (paint thinner), the drug of choice at El Castillo. I sometimes imagined the people of El Castillo had fallen right through the cracks of the system onto the sidewalk where they put their mattresses, cracking the concrete as well as their bodies.

From my home in The Lively Zone to the 'dead zone' of El Castillo, it was only a twenty-five minute journey, but they were worlds apart. Parallel worlds that did not touch, at least not unguardedly, until one day I made them do so, albeit not necessarily on purpose. It happened, not without symbolism, on my last day in Guatemala City.

The day started as had many other days. After breakfast, I walked the fifteen minutes to the Transmetro stop to ride the two stops to the La Terminal area. Instead of heading to El Castillo right away, however, I stopped at the food stand on the corner of the street to buy some chicken and tortillas to share with those present at El Castillo. There were only eight of them I spotted while waiting, among which, and I was pleased to see – Joshua and Nicolas. In the preceding weeks, I had taken photos at El Castillo, which I had subsequently printed for those I had caught on camera. And with my fieldwork coming to an end, I had given everybody but teenagers Joshua and Nicolas their pictures; theirs, I would bring that day. Once at El Castillo, I took a seat at one of the mattresses and broke out the food. It was only when I found out that I forgot the photos that a sudden feeling of rush came over me – all the things I still had to do before leaving! I decided to call a taxi, which, I figured out, would be the quickest way to get the pictures to El Castillo. But as I explained this to Joshua and Nicolas, the former suggested the possibility of him and Nicolas

joining me in the taxi. It would save me a ride back and forth to El Castillo, he reasoned, and they would be happy to be dropped off at my house in Zone 10, from where they wanted to walk to a nearby traffic circle to clean car windows at the flash lights; something they usually did closer to El Castillo.

Apparently, Joshua's idea of joining me in the taxi – to which I agreed – led to enthusiasm among all of them. When the taxi arrived at El Castillo, Tomás, fourteen, and one of the youngest at El Castillo, asked me if he could also ride along, which subsequently unleashed a collective run to the taxi that only seconds later was stuffed with four guys in the back and others trying to push their way in; a scene complemented by an uncomfortable driver behind the wheel. Knowing that no taxi driver would take such a crowd of people, I decided to only take Nicolas and Joshua – to be able to hand them the photos – and Tomás, because he had been the first one to ask. And like that, we drove off.

Once on the road, while waiting for a red light, the guys had a good laugh when they spotted Tío (one of the elderly at El Castillo) coming our way, trying to make the best out of his crippled hand and foot as he passed the waiting cars holding up his good hand for a contribution. It led to some banging on the windows by Joshua and Nicolas until Tío's attention was drawn, who agitatedly raised his hand seeing his cheering comrades on the other side of the glass to then continue his way between the cars.

After a twenty minute drive, the taxi stopped in front of the iron gate that gave entrance to my house. And as the four of us stood on the quiet street, I asked the three youngsters inside; something which had occupied my mind from the moment Joshua had proposed to join me in the taxi. Better said, a feeling of shame had come over me at the thought of having to introduce them to my world. A world of relative luxury that not only painfully contrasted with their everyday reality, but also one that I had always kept away from them, while they, in turn, had received me with open arms. What added to my uneasiness with the situation were the possible reactions of my housemates at the sight of having three homeless boys inside their house. People with violence inscribed into their bodies and sometimes, though not this time, enough solvent on their breath to thin paint only by looking at it. They were considerations, however, that did not weigh up against the fact that they were friends whom I was not going to leave on the street waiting. Still, after they agreed to come in, I secretly hoped we would run into an empty house.

When I opened the gate, which gave entrance to a covered concrete front yard that was adorned only by a small office on the left side and some plants in pots to cheer it up, we found Don Guillermo sitting on his knees in the door opening of the house. He helped my landlady Ester with all sorts of chores and now he was cleaning the glass on the front side of the house. Joshua was the first to pass him, producing a polite “*con permiso*” (literally: with permission), as he stepped inside, nodding first to Don Guillermo and then to Alicia and her sister Elena, who were having lunch in the back part of the living room. We passed them as we went up to my room – Joshua, Nicolas and Tomás following my path with a shyness I had seen few traces of on the street. Inside the room, a big bedroom with a private closet room and bathroom attached, they complimented me on my place, which I received with some embarrassment while I handed them the photos. It was a short visit, lasting no longer than ten minutes. We had a quick look at the pictures, Joshua went to the toilet and then we headed back downstairs, passing Alicia and Elena again on our way out. When I went back in after saying goodbye to them, Alicia stopped me.

“Who were they?” she said with a voice serious that sparked into outright anger as she continued without waiting for my answer. “Don’t bring these people in! There are other people living here whom you have to take into account. I have a carpenter that I work with, but I don’t bring him here to the house either.” I told her they were friends whom I believed would never betray my trust; not the criminals people often took them for – but they were words falling on deaf ears. After the brief chat, I decided to call Ester, who was in the United States visiting another daughter. She came to a conclusion similar to the one of Alicia. “You have put everybody in jeopardy,” she said, adding that they did not let the people that collect the trash around the house in either. Afraid that my friends had appropriated a key while inside and would break into the house, or that they would sell the information about what was inside to criminals in exchange for drugs, in a moment of weakness – “friends or no friends,” she said – and probably frightened by the thought of having had three street kids in her house, Ester told me I had to change the locks of the front gate and front door and arrange a new set of keys for everybody in the house. “It is just so that everybody feels safe again,” she said. As a consequence, I spent the rest of the afternoon contacting a locksmith and watching him do the job.

The above silent ‘clash of worlds,’ the bang of which occurred only after Joshua, Nicolas and Tomás left, would have been an uncommon event in nearly every context. “I wouldn’t want them in my house either,” was a typical reaction among listeners in The Netherlands whenever I told the story. And if I am honest, I probably would not have wanted them in my house either if I had not known them, just like I would not want other people in my house without being consulted about it first – although it is only normal that one loses part of this ‘power of disposal’ when sharing a home like I did. The reactions of Alicia and Ester, this is to say, were understandable ones, and I would like to add, especially since it happened in Guatemala City, which is yet another ‘city built by fear,’ as I called a previous book on Quito (Peeters & Hoey, 2017), where fear gets to you in one way or another and provokes what may seem extreme reactions: from always having a security guard (and sometimes two) holding an attack-ready German Shepherd at the gate when you open it to drive out, as was done by someone just around the corner from my house (a bank director, according to Ester), to changing the locks after being visited by street people. And these are just examples from the street where I lived. But it was telling that when I told Doña Gloria, the maid who took over Cinthya’s job at some point, that there had been street people inside the house – expecting to find a listener sympathetic to my side of the story – I literally saw her shiver right in front of me, as she exclaimed that I *really* had to change the locks, to then utter: “Oh it scares me Don Timo, it really scares me.”

Bringing my protagonists to life

The label ‘city built by fear,’ which refers to the strong mark of fear of (violent) crime on people’s daily interaction with each other and the physical environment in which they move around, fits many other cities in Latin America and beyond, yet Guatemala City seemed to represent an extreme case. Two trends stand out in this respect. First, fear of crime was able to root due brutal levels of violent crime in Guatemala City. This should not strike the observer as odd if it was not for the preference social scientists seem to hold for the undercurrents of fear of crime as they ride its popular wave. This has given us important insights. We now know, for instance, that, as I have suggested elsewhere, one “does not need rampant crime for crime to become a problem”

(Peeters & Hoey, 2017, p. 23). In Chile, as Lucía Dammert and Mary Fran Malone (2003) demonstrate, economic, social and political insecurities appear to play a more decisive role behind the widespread fear of crime than crime itself. Criminologist Murray Lee (2007), while focusing on western countries, even builds a case around the premise of fear of crime as an ‘invention’ by researchers and pollsters in the United States in the 1960s that, once out there, became a political tool and a marketing tool, as well as something that “could be experienced as an emotional state” (p. 203). This allowed fear of crime to become self-fulfilling and survive in the face of falling crime rates. Moreover, as others have showed, as much as people want to keep crime and violence at bay, they tend to enjoy the thrill of it (Hayward, 2004; Benson, Fischer & Thomas, 2008). This may explain the immense popularity of ‘if-it-bleeds-it-leads’ papers such as *Nuestro Diario* in Guatemala and *Diario Extra* in Ecuador, and many other such newspapers around the world. But what these kind of debates may convey, however, as Ana Villarreal (2015) rightly notes, is that people should be less afraid of crime. In the case of Guatemala City, which is among the most violent cities in the world, such a message would be questionable, to say the least.

Second, the people of Guatemala City, as the title of this research suggests, were a people largely *unseen* to each other, who preferred withdrawn lifestyles that, where possible, were sealed by security walls and private guards, but also tended to reign without these (Thomas, Lewis O’Neill & Offit, 2011). This observation will make an important strand in this work. But as the visit of Joshua, Nicolas and Tomás to my house already hints upon, the unseen, in the case of the street people, also reverberates in a different way, as they were people that, at least from a public point of view, tended to be largely invisible as individuals, people of flesh and blood, even though they lived out in the open.

The central goal of this dissertation is to describe and understand the lived realities of people from different social classes in Guatemala City, a place that presents its occupants with a context of extreme social inequality and high levels of violent crime. I have chosen to centralize my research around five narratives that each revolve around one person or a small group of related people and their network. The protagonists of these narratives all belonged to a different level of the metropolis’ hierarchical spectrum, ranging from the very bottom of society – the group of street people living together at El Castillo

– to a wealthy family headed by an acquaintance of Ester that, at some point, had two bodyguards at its disposal. Through the form of the narrative, which allows me to stay close to the lived experiences of people, I have tried to bring my protagonists, their physical worlds but also their emotional worlds, to life. To make the unseen seen and also felt, and with that bring the city – or better yet, life in the city – to life. More than anything, I hope to give the reader the idea of being there themselves. I aim to do so in a time that, as eminent criminologist Jock Young (2011) writes, “the distance between the world out there and the academy has become wider and wider” (p. 22).

The distance Young refers to is caused by the current bent toward quantitative methods and positivism within contemporary criminology, which could not be further away from the approach I take in this study and the one Young advocates. But I will comment later on this point. Yet at the same time, and this is left unmentioned by Young, in a criminological world that is mainly focused on western and especially the United States cities (Franko Aas, 2013), there is more distance to notice between the world and the criminological world, if one experiences the former from a place like Guatemala City or any other city in the Global South. Places that should have high priority within a discipline that derives its identity directly from crime are all too often assessed through the lens of western theories and expected to live up to western standards, as if, in the case of almost all of Latin America (including Guatemala), “three hundred years of colonial history and a further two centuries of often disadvantageous dealings with the rest of the globe” did not happen (Centeno & López-Alves, 2000, p. 12). Crucially, this is a problem not constrained to criminology but one that taints the whole of social science (Young, 2014). This has led to characterizations such as ‘failed’ states and cities or ‘failed’ democracies that themselves, to pursue the blame game, fail to see that states (and cities) in Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia are on a distinct trajectory (Centeno & López-Alves, 2000; Arias & Goldstein, 2010; Pearce, 2010). There is only one way to circumvent this western bias and Young himself points us in the right direction in *The Criminological Imagination* (2011), his declaration of love to C. Wright Mills’ ‘sociological imagination’. The latter is framed by Mills (2000 [1959]) as a quality of mind that requires the ethnographer – or anyone else seeking to relate the particular to the universal – to engage in a continuous back and forth between human

biography and history so as to identify their intersections with social structures. History, this is to say, matters, and, as a matter to look into as a researcher, tends to matter even more when a non-western context is the object of study (see also Tilly, 2006).

Mills' sociological imagination offers a frame to now get to the structure of this chapter and the entire work. Acknowledging, like Mills, that "knowledge of the history of a society is often indispensable to its understanding" (p. 150), I will start this chapter with a historical account of Guatemala City in which I trace the roots of violence, inequality and poverty – of power – in the city. I will divide this over four sections in which I work my way from colonial inception to the transformation violence has undergone in Guatemala (and Guatemala City) in recent decades, from a civil war largely driven by military authoritarian forces to a violence more urban in character and diffused into the hands of the many. In the subsequent sections, I will further define the lens of this study by drawing up some more general considerations regarding the workings of violence and the need for coming to a better understanding of these; give a brief introduction of each of my narratives; and end the chapter with some notes on my methodology. History's 'back and forth with biography' begins in the five narratives that follow this chapter, which will all be awarded a chapter. This being said, within these chapters, the narratives stand on themselves in the sense that they reflect on the social class they represent but not so much on the wider society. This, I will save for the last chapter, in which I identify some of the main themes running through the narratives and let the narratives reflect on each other so as to paint a more general picture of how people in Guatemala City give shape and meaning to their lives in the midst of extreme violence and inequality.

Guatemala City: a historical account

Guatemala City, or *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción*, was founded in 1776, in the late colonial period. Yet, to be able to grasp its history, one has to start a little over two hundred fifty years earlier, when Spanish conqueror Pedro de Alvarado ushered in a colonial rule that would stand out for its brutality even for colonial understandings. Critically, by time of setting foot in present-day Guatemala in 1524, Alvarado must have encountered already worn out tribes

given that New World diseases had already killed a third or more of the Maya population in the few years before his arrival (Macleod, 2008). Nevertheless, conquest over the many Maya Kingdoms was hard won.² It took more than half a decade for the Spanish to break the spine of organized resistance, although some of the most inhospitable parts of Guatemala remained contested places that never became fully colonized (Restall & Asselbergs, 2007; Van Oss, 1986).

From the outset, the Spanish Crown's main interest in overseas colonization was to pursue economic control, which in the case of Guatemala, lacking natural resources such as gold and silver, meant to extract as much wealth from the land using *Indios* (Indians) as labor force. To administer the area with relatively limited expenses, the Crown distributed lands and indigenous slaves to conquistadores and Spanish colonizers, many of whom settled in areas they deemed most profitable and that resembled the mother country as much as possible (Lutz & Lovell, 1990). This marked the darkest years of colonial rule. Exposed to the racist whims and harsh treatment of their new masters and, especially, new epidemic outbreaks of smallpox, measles and mumps, the indigenous population saw itself diminished in the first century under Spanish dominion to a shocking six percent of their pre-conquest level of two million (Robinson, 2008). And even though Spanish rule assumed a less oppressive character after the Crown abolished indigenous slavery in the Americas in 1542, which, in practice, meant that the indigenous were placed in varying degrees of servitude, Spanish and ladino oppressors kept relying on terror to subordinate an indigenous population that continued to outnumber them during the colonial period (Martínez Peláez, 2009; Lutz & Lovell, 1990; Figueroa Ibarra, 1991). It meant that the indigenous peoples lived under the continuous threat of humiliation and abuse throughout the colonial period. It is in this light one can read the words of Guatemalan historian Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán about the withdrawn, silenced nature of the indigenous. Guatemalans, he wrote in the seventeenth century, "have the habit of never affirming the things they see and know, because they always respond maybe it's like that, maybe there will be, even if they know that what they

² The Mayan tribes seemed to have little other option than to resist against the Spanish-led forces. Spanish conquerors, as Martínez Peláez (2009, p. 89) argues, did little to hide the fact that the Crown's alternative for the 'fury of war,' the *requerimiento* – which promised "great love and charity" to those who accepted Christianity and the Spanish Crown's legitimate sovereignty over their lands – was an empty promise.

are asked is like that, and they have seen it” (in Zepeda, 2012).³ This coping strategy had its downside as well as it contributed to a certain mysteriousness surrounding the indigenous peoples – David McCreery (1990) speaks about the “ladino nightmare” of the “primeval Indian, fire and machete in hand” (p. 112) – that, as Michael Taussig (1984) argues, easily leads to a situation in which terror becomes a goal in itself.

Guatemala City was founded three years after then capital Santiago de Guatemala (what is now Antigua) was destroyed by earthquakes and it could well be argued that it arose as a most literal manifestation of a city built by fear. To be able to build the new capital, the Spanish Crown mobilized a labor force by bringing in indigenous people to the site where Guatemala City was to be raised. This included the forced movement of entire indigenous villages (Gellert, 1994). They were fearful hands embarking on the job. When Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz visited Guatemala a few years before the foundation of Guatemala City, he wondered why the indigenous never answered questions with an assertive ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ only later to find out that this was because “their single aspiration and their one concern is to avoid punishment” (in Martínez Peláez, 2009, p. 297).⁴

The decision to move the capital to the Valley of La Ermita, a territory situated at an altitude of 1500 meters that was believed to be less prone to earthquakes, had not only been taken for reasons of safety but had also been prompted by symbolism as it relocated the capital from the Indian West to the Ladino (non-Indian) East (Lutz, 1994). As such, it catalyzed the already deep social cleavages in Guatemala. A trend that was only strengthened by the fact that elites, who were drawn to the new capital for it being the seat of political power, were better able to recover from the losses suffered by the earthquakes and the subsequent move than the poor part of the population, which had been largely pressured into moving there. Soon after its inception, Guatemala City had become a place marked by beggars, vagabonds and lepers, with some neighborhoods too dangerous to govern (Gellert, 1994). “The inhabitants of

³ Original quote in Spanish: “*Tienen por costumbre no afirmar jamás las cosas que ven y saben, porque siempre responden quizás es así, quizás habrá, aunque sepan que lo que se les pregunta es así, y lo hayan visto*” [Translation TP].

⁴ Severo Martínez Peláez’s influential work *Patria del Criollo* (Homeland of the Creole) was published in 1970. In 2009, the English version came out, edited by W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz. Because I was not able to get hold of the original (and more extensive) version, it is from this work that I cite.

the suburbs,” as was written in the early nineteenth century, “lived among themselves in a state of perpetual war, not daring to cross the border line of the adjacent neighborhood, unless they were quite brave and did not fear the stabbings of their opponents” (Salazar in Gellert 1994, p. 19).⁵ Meanwhile, there was also another contour of the city I had encountered during my fieldwork starting to take shape from the very start. According to Theodore Caplow (1949, p. 130), both climate and culture had prompted a colonial housing pattern of patio-centered houses that “turned a blank wall or barred window to the street,” this way keeping most activities within these dwellings “completely isolated” from the outside world. Spanish colonial architecture in the capital, that is to say, had been one of withdrawal by design.

Post-colonial Guatemala City

The gradual colonization of the New World, initiated by the Portuguese and Spanish, but then eagerly picked up by, amongst others, the French, British and Dutch, was an inherently violent and oppressive enterprise given its coercive nature and the racist ideology that underpinned it. The fact that Guatemala’s colonial period stood out for its brutality may be due to the labor extensive nature of the colonial edifice and the little value Guatemala held for the Spanish Crown compared to literal gold mines such as Mexico and Peru (Macleod, 2008). As part of this colonial edifice, Guatemala City was founded on soil silenced by terror, fear and violence that would entangle its history with more than two hundred fifty years of brutality that had preceded its foundation. But terror would remain a powerful mechanism of control also in post-colonial Guatemala and Guatemala city after the Creole elite (Guatemalan descendants of the Spanish) proclaimed independence in 1821 “to prevent the consequences that would be terrible in the event that the people [the indigenous] should proclaim it,” as is stated in the Act of Independence of Central America. In 1884, for instance, during the rule of major landowner and coffee planter Justo Rufino Barrios, who, in his own words, ruled with the “*fusta* (whip) as constitution” (in Holden, 2004, p. 52), Nicaraguan journalist Enrique Guzmán wrote that the secret police had more

⁵ Original quote in Spanish: “*Los habitantes de los suburbios vivían entre ellos en un estado de guerra perpetua, sin atreverse a pasar la línea fronteriza de la barriada vecina, a no ser que fuesen bastante esforzados y no temiesen las cuchilladas de sus contrarios*” [Translation TP].

than a hundred spies in Guatemala City, which by then counted around fifty five thousand inhabitants. “It is impossible to find people more reserved than the *chapines* (Guatemalans),” Guzmán stated. “Even the drunks are prudent here” (in Zepeda, 2012).⁶ And they were probably better to remain so for a while, as Rufino Barrios’ coming into power marked the birth of what is called the Liberal Coffee State, which would become the most coercive and intrusive state that Guatemala had seen until then (Smith, 1990a). Until 1944, the country would be under the command of a series of dictators representing a small oligarchy that relied heavily on foreign capital and, perhaps most notably, repressive measures.

At the same time, it was due to this reorientation of the national economy toward the cultivation of coffee within the Liberal Coffee State that Guatemala City long remained a “big village” (Pinto Soria, 1994, p. 85) that bore no significant industrial development. In 1825, about fifty years after its foundation, only 6 percent of the Guatemalan population lived in the capital city and this percentage was about the same more than a century later under the rule of Jorge Ubico (1930-1944), when, according to Piero Gleijeses (1989), “cities and villages were only dots on the immense *finca* (plantation) that was Guatemala” (p. 32). It is safe to say that during Ubico’s rule, more than a century into independence, Guatemala City was still very much a post-colonial city in character; one of modest proportions, built and rebuilt by the hands of the oppressed, with the elite mainly residing in the city center and the poor in the peripheries. But then, what had caused this city to explode into a place whose metropolitan area not only housed an estimated 3.4 million people in 2016 – or one fifth of the total Guatemalan population – but also gave evidence of a much more scattered, yet harnessed, pattern of poor, rich and middle class settlements, with marginal districts spilling down in ravines that crisscrossed the city the way lines mark the palm of a worker’s hand and gated communities popping up in every zone?

⁶Original quote in Spanish: “*Imposible hallar gente más reservada que los chapines. Hasta los borrachos son prudentes aquí*” [Translation TP].

The first push to this populous and chaotic city came after Ubico and his hand-picked successor were ousted in 1944,⁷ which paved the way for Guatemala's first democratic elections. What followed were nine years of social revolution spurred by presidents Juan José Arévalo (1945-1951) and Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954). Industrial development and economic diversification, as part of a bet for a more equitable social, political and economic structure, sparked previously unseen waves of migration towards Guatemala City. The capital, however, was little prepared for this influx of people. New migrants experienced trouble finding a place to live, ending up squatting or renting in deteriorated parts of the city, while as from 1959, massive *asentamientos* (squatter settlements) started to appear in the ravines surrounding the central sector (Gellert, 1994). The central sector, meanwhile, gradually developed into a business and commercial center as the social revolution unfolded, causing the rich to look for new places where they could enjoy their privacy – first, as Gisela Gellert (1994) describes, taking refuge in Zone 9 and 10, where elites had already established themselves, and later in Zone 13, 14 and 15. Middle class people, meanwhile, initially mainly followed the elites, seeking the shadows of new wealthy neighborhoods while also occupying the central sector where the elites had left.

In the early 1950s, as the above shows, Guatemala City burst its post-colonial banks to never return to its planned self. At the same time, the social revolution that had set this in motion would cease to exist not much later. In 1952, Arbenz embarked on a drastic land reform program that included the nationalization of plantations of the United Fruit Company, which had managed to become the country's biggest land owner. The ambitious plan, and perhaps the sheer speed with which Arbenz tried to implement it (Handy, 1991), sparked not only the anger from land owners, middle class students, the Catholic Church and the military, but also the United States amidst concerns about their economic interests and alleged Soviet influences in Guatemalan politics. It inspired a CIA-backed coup in 1954 that caused the overthrow of Arbenz, leading Guatemala to become the first United States intervention under the Cold War banner of fighting communism.

⁷ In 1944, in what is now known as the October revolution, middle class people hit the streets in Guatemala City forcing President Jorge Ubico to resign. The subsequent revolt of young army officers against Ubico's ally and successor General Federico Ponce Vaides led to Guatemala's first democratic elections

The intervention sparked radical nationalism that accelerated into civil war when a group of anti-imperialist military officers, inspired by the Cuban revolution of 1959, started an armed guerrilla movement in 1960 after a failed attempt to overthrow the government. The war would last for thirty-six years and throughout this period, Guatemala City would be a stage for protest and repression and at times blatantly violent⁸ but spared from the worst terror. Meanwhile, substantial industrial development would continue to spur high rates of migration to the capital in the 1960s and 1970s, while new roads and bridges opened up spaces for middle class and lower middle class people in Zones 6, 7, 11, 12 and 18 (Gellert, 1994). Yet from the second part of the 1970s onwards, urbanization towards the capital increasingly turned into a disaster-driven phenomenon, leading poverty and social inequality to become deeper entrenched. Three developments stand out in this respect.

First, the number of poor *colonias* (neighborhoods) in Guatemala City grew explosively in 1976 due to a devastating earthquake that killed around twenty-three thousand people and left many others without a home. It caused massive planned and unplanned squatter settlements to appear on Guatemala City's outskirts even though the city itself was also affected by the shocks (Gellert, 1994; Tobar Estrada, 2007).

Second, waves of poor indigenous people poured into Guatemala City in the early 1980s in response to the military's scorched earth campaigns in the Western Highlands, to which the locus of the fight had shifted in the late 1970s after guerrilla forces had started mobilizing the indigenous people for battle. Between 1981 and 1983 alone, although estimates differ, 100,000 to 150,000 mostly indigenous people are believed to have been killed or disappeared while more than six hundred indigenous villages were swept away from the face of the earth (Torres-Rivas, 2007). Meanwhile, the indigenous who fled to the capital ended up in the city's burgeoning marginal districts where they tried to hide their identity – which in practice meant acting like a ladino – out of fear for reprisal (CEH, 1999; Kurtenbach, 2014).⁹ They were deemed “shadows of war” by Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus (1994).

⁸ Marie-Louise Glebbeek (2003) notes for instance that in October 1982 an estimated eight to ten people disappeared every day.

⁹ Meanwhile, other migrants came to live in the government's model villages where they remained under control of the army or ended up elsewhere in the country, or fled outside the national borders seeking safety in Southern Mexico's UNCR camps or further northwards in the United States.

Third, around the same time indigenous people were fleeing to the capital, as their comrades were being butchered and their villages burned down, economic disadvantages as a result of free market politics and practices started prompting heavy migration to Guatemala City from rural areas.¹⁰ Carol Smith (1990b) highlights, for instance, how economic restructuring of “monumental proportions” (p. 32) of the Western Highlands in the 1980s – which basically boiled down to the introduction of the free market and non-traditional crop, such as strawberries, snow peas and broccoli – had devastating consequences for the access to income, employment, land and food of the indigenous population. At the same time, Smith argues, the restructuring was highly successful in what it aimed at achieving, that is, “reducing the economic and political autonomy of Indian communities” (p. 8) as part of an effort to turn from military coercion to economic control. Meanwhile, employment prospects in Guatemala City and other urban areas tended to be weighed down by rules and practices following the same logic as the ones that caused people to migrate to the city in the first place. For instance, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) acted as a broker between foreign (U.S.) companies and the Guatemalan government by communicating the wishes of the former to the latter, which as Kurt Petersen argues, could be summarized as “no tax, no duties, no unions” (1992 in Jackson, J.T., 2005, p. 215). USAID was also considered to be the main architect – both financially and technically – behind the explosion of the *maquila* (assembly plant) industries that opened on the outskirts of Guatemala City as well as in other strategic points in the country in the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s (Berger, 2006; Hudson & Leidl, 2015). Although quickly developing themselves into an important source for employment (for especially women), the maquila factories came to be known for their poor working conditions and low wages.

In response, many of the new city dwellers end up on the city’s overcrowded and burgeoning marginal outskirts, where they were thrown back on informal livelihood strategies and lacked basic services such as water, sanitation and

¹⁰ The structural adjustment programs created by the IMF and the World Bank forced countries that wanted to borrow money to adopt free-market policies in order to create a more productive environment for transnational capitalism. In the Guatemalan case, non-traditional exports became the primary avenue for the further opening up of the economy. To enhance their creditworthiness, the international financial institutions demanded Guatemala and other debtor states to roll back on state services (Jackson, J.T., 2005), which mainly came at the cost of the social sector in Guatemala (Davis, 2006).

security of tenure. In 1991, UNICEF counted 232 precarious settlements in Guatemala City, inhabited by 702,100 people (Valladares Cerezo, 2003). At the same time, the business sector residing in Guatemala City, or at least part of it, only grew richer with the country's turn to the free market, as it had provided it with a cheap workforce deprived of any bargaining power and thus political power, while adding international legitimacy and popular acceptance to such an outcome (Harvey, 2005). This helped create the dynamics that proved key to new types of violence that would take Guatemala City by storm in postwar times.

Postwar Guatemala City and the new violence

The end of the Cold War as well as the settlements of conflicts in Nicaragua (electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990) and El Salvador (peace accords in 1992) created a more favorable climate for a peace agreement in Guatemala. In 1996, after almost a decade of peace talks that spread over four different governments, negotiations culminated in an accord between the rebel umbrella organization *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG) and the government of President Álvaro Arzú, formally ending thirty-six years of civil war which left a brutal legacy. The Commission of Historical Clarification (CEH, 1999), set up under the peace accords, estimates that over two hundred thousand (mostly Mayan) people had been killed. Ninety-three per cent of human rights violations were subscribed to government forces, with the army being the biggest aggressor. At the same time, the guerrillas were not always the protectors of the poor they claimed to be. Many have highlighted the indigenous people's perilous position of being caught between two unfriendly fires when the attention of the war shifted to the indigenous-dominated highlands.¹¹ In Guatemala, as leading Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas (2007) argues, there “was no civil war, but a war against the civilians” (p. 504).¹²

¹¹ As Carol Smith (1990a) convincingly argues, the rebel solutions regarding the ‘Indian problem’ were never in line with the standpoint of the indigenous themselves; the former seeking their cultural assimilation while indigenous wanted to preserve their own separate cultural identity. And as one study established, most indigenous joined guerrilla ranks not so much out of ideological reasons, but in order to protect themselves and their communities against the atrocities of the army (Davis & Hodson, 1982).

¹² Original quote in Spanish: “*Aquí no hubo guerra civil sino una guerra contra los civiles*” [Translation TP].

To prevent similar things from happening in the future, the twelve accords, which together constituted the peace deal, sought to overturn Guatemala's historical legacy of violence. Aiming at "firm and lasting peace," to borrow words from the last accord, the peace accords promised sweeping social, economic and political reforms. They redefined Guatemala as a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual nation and acknowledged the historical legacy of discrimination and marginalization of the indigenous people in particular. Moreover, they aimed to deepen the democracy to which it had turned with a sigh about ten years earlier after the state-led mass killings and disappearances of the early 1980s had put Guatemala on the verge of becoming an international pariah (Sánchez, 2008; Briscoe & Rodríguez Pellecer, 2010). This push for democratization included the decrease of the army in size and power and the formation of a police force, the National Civil Police (*Policía Nacional Civil*, PNC), dedicated solely to civilian security. And, as I will argue in this section, in which I take up the transformation violence has gone through in postwar Guatemala and Guatemala City, things have indeed changed. But if we let inequality and violence serve as thermometers of the success of these transformations, one can hardly claim that peace has brought much relief to Guatemala and its people.

First of all, neither neoliberalism nor democracy lived up to its promises of reducing inequality levels, allowing huge social cleavages to continue to produce violence and instability in the postwar context.¹³ Indeed, thirty years into democracy, Guatemala is still one of the most unequal countries in the hemisphere. Its illiteracy rate is one of the worst in the region and half of the children under five suffer from chronic malnutrition (UNICEF, 2014). Moreover, it is the only country in Latin America in which the poor have only gotten poorer in the last decade (World Bank, 2014); more than half of the country lives in poverty and the poorest 40 percent of the population only earned 1.50 dollars per day in 2012 – this was 1.60 dollars in 2003 (Deutsche Welle, 2014). 70 percent of the population resorts to informal economic activities

¹³ Deep social inequality is one of the main causes of insecurity in Latin America and the rest of the world (Stewart, 2008). It is no coincidence that Latin America is both the region with the greatest gap between rich and poor in the world and the highest crime rate in the world, although recent developments show that this relationship is far from linear. In the past decade, Latin America saw a decline in economic and social inequality coupled with rising crime rates. This seeming paradox has been attributed to the combination of increasing consumer expectations and tenacious social immobility (stimulating 'aspirational crimes'), and the rapid and chaotic expansion of urban settlements (UNDP, 2013).

in trying to make a living (World Bank, 2014). Meanwhile, reproduction of poverty, instead of the supply of employment or other resources, has also been sparking migration to Guatemala City in postwar times (Ravallion, 2002; Davis, 2006; Tacoli, 2012). Recent research shows that poverty has been increasing rapidly in the Guatemala City metropolitan area (or Guatemala department) with 33.3 percent of the population living in poverty in 2014 (and 5.4 percent in extreme poverty), vis-à-vis 18.6 percent (and 0.5 percent in extreme poverty) in 2006 – still, in a country with 59.3 percent of the population living in poverty in 2014, these were the lowest rates of poverty of any of Guatemala’s twenty-two departments.

Furthermore, violence continued under civilian rule with murder statistics, at times, surpassing civil war levels, while at the same time assuming different styles and manifestations in postwar Guatemala. In short, within the space of a few decades, a civil war catalyzed by political violence has made way for a democracy in which violence is increasingly steered by the compass of more ‘everyday’ causes such as crime, social unrest and private forms of crime control. Violence ‘neoliberalized,’ in the words of Edward F. Fischer and Peter Benson (2006), in reference to the “outsourcing of what the state once took to be its exclusive function, that is, the exercise of coercive force” (p. 93), or ‘democratized,’ as has been argued by Dirk Kruijt and Kees Koonings (1999; see also Koonings & Kruit, 2004; Rodgers, 2006), as it transferred into the hands of a growing number of actors, for a growing number of reasons. If anything democratized in Guatemala and the wider Latin American region, a pessimist might say, it is violence. Moreover, postwar violence has come to particularly concentrate in urban areas. The metropolitan area of Guatemala City, which is estimated to house around 20 percent of the total Guatemalan population, was responsible for around 40 percent of the homicides at a national level, leading to a homicide rate (62.7 in 2016 and 63.3 in 2017, compared to respectively 33 and 31.8 nationally¹⁴) that tends to be only surpassed by departments that hold high strategic value for drug trafficking such as Escuintla, Chiquimula and Zacapa.

¹⁴ The homicide rates of the Guatemala City metropolitan area are derived from Grupo Apoyo Mutuo (2017; 2018). I have calculated the national homicide rates (per 100,000 inhabitants) by dividing the homicide numbers as given by the National Institute of Forensic Science of Guatemala (*Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses*, INACIF) – 5459 in 2016; 5384 in 2017 – by the number of inhabitants in Guatemala as estimated by the National Statistics Institute of Guatemala (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Guatemala*, INE) – 16,548,168 in 2016; 16,924,190 in 2017. The result has been multiplied by 100,000.

Within this context, postwar Guatemala City had turned into a city of many violent faces; a place, like a large number of other Latin American cities, where violence or the threat of it had become a prerequisite for the organization of many of the collectives that made up civil society (Arias & Goldstein, 2010). Clearly, some of these existed more in the public gaze than others. One only had to pick up a newspaper, for instance, to get the sense that Guatemala City had become a city of gangs, or more specifically, of the Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Barrio 18, the two gangs that were believed to be present in nearly all zones of the capital, though mainly in the marginal parts (Prensa Libre, 2015). To understand their presence in Guatemala City, one has to go back to the 1980s and 1990s when tens of thousands of Guatemalans and Salvadorans sought refuge from the violence and dire circumstances in their home countries in Los Angeles. There, they settled in poor areas where they were faced with racism, rejection and poor job prospects, as well as with gang and drug related violence. Marked and trained by war, many young Guatemalans, Salvadorans and also Hondurans ended up becoming soldiers of new wars, joining already existing gangs such as Barrio 18, an originally Mexican gang, or starting new ones such as Mara Salvatrucha 13, while adding brutal violence to the Californian gang culture (Levenson, 2013). But a similar development in the opposite direction was about to be set in motion. U.S. mass deportations in the 1990s of Central American migrants, some of whom came straight out of prison, brought L.A. born gangs to Guatemala City and other cities in Central America's Northern Triangle, where they hybridized with local (gang) culture and traditions (Levenson, 2013). A city of gangs, or *maras* as they are often called, was born.

In contemporary Guatemala City, the *maras* represented the extreme violence that beset the city perhaps as no other violent phenomenon had before. But they also epitomized the brutal deprivation the occupants of the city's poor colonias experienced. Such a scene becomes clear from Deborah T. Levenson's (2013) depiction of gangs in Guatemala City. The average *marero* (gang member), she writes, is killed by the age of twenty-two. And although one might be inclined to believe that such a statistic would deter youth to join a gang, according to Levenson, it is exactly this morbid fact that helps explain the pervasiveness of gangs. Early death, she argues, helps socially neglected youth to beat an adulthood that is doomed to fail, leading to a hedonistic and

fatalistic lifestyle she dubs ‘necroliving’.¹⁵

But Guatemala City, it could equally be argued, was also a city of gated communities. They not only determined the streetscape in the more exclusive areas, where security walls often appeared to be the vertical equivalent of empty streets, but also popped up in many less exclusive parts and, as such, were hard to miss while traversing the city streets. In a context where there was little protection to be expected from the state, gated communities were designed to keep ‘dangerous’ others out, creating new frontlines to be enforced. Perhaps to no surprise, crime served as a prime justification for putting up walls and security guards. At the same time, Teresa Caldeira (2000) convincingly illustrates how the ‘talk of crime’ – the socially constructed narratives about crime that validate spatial segregation – while primarily revolving around crime, also borrows from other anxieties and prejudices regarding, among others, race and class, and is sensitive to processes of social transformation in general. Meanwhile, gated communities also added to the murkiness of Guatemala City’s violent landscape for being one of the flagships of an industry that largely acted outside the law. According to the director of the *Gremial de Empresas de Seguridad Privada* (Trade Association of Private Security Companies) in 2018, there were twenty-three thousand private security guards legally on the job in the country (in October 2018), which in practice meant that they had followed a required forty hour training, while the actual number could lie somewhere between hundred fifty and two hundred thousand – compared to forty thousand police officers (in April 2018) (Chávez, 2019). It is a reality that cannot be separated from the fact that the security guard industry had access to a “limitless supply of workers [...] and so invest[s] little in each guard and constantly seek[s] new recruits” (Dickins de Girón, 2011, pp. 113-114).

Crucially, when taking ‘violent’ collectivities as a lens – a lens that is not farfetched at all – the Guatemala City I encountered was not only a city of gangs and gated communities, but also of, say, vigilantes – the ‘poor man’s private security’ that, in its most extreme form, takes the shape of lynch mobs (Peeters, 2013) – and of narcos. The latter have prevented gangs from gaining

¹⁵ In similar vein, a former gang member notes in a documentary about her life that “death is actually something that we were all aware of, that we would die someday. And we gang members knew that, sooner or later, our number would come up. Dying for our barrio, because that was our motto: if death catches up with you, welcome it” (Dewever-Plana & Fougère, 2012). The fact that she is able to tell her story is little short of a miracle. Bullets with her name on them left her half dead and paralyzed on the street, after her decision to quit gang life created bad blood among her former friends.

foothold in some poor neighborhoods as they deemed gangs bad for business. And when taking the types of violence as a lens, Guatemala City was a city of extortion, homicide, femicide, drug trafficking and robbery – among others. But as will become clear throughout this work, Guatemala City was also none of these characterizations as different types of violence and violent actors tended to cling to different classes, localities and even hours.

As the above shows, after more than thirty years of democracy, the majority of which in so-called peace, have brought Guatemala not much besides what Michael Taussig (1992) would call “terror as usual” (p. 11). Tellingly, every year thousands of Guatemalans expose themselves to the risks of being kidnapped, trafficked, raped, robbed and extorted, as they try to make it to the United States. In fact, from 2000 onwards, Guatemalans, as well as Salvadorans and Hondurans, have been among the fastest growing unauthorized immigrant populations in the United States and after Mexicans, Guatemalans now constitute the biggest group of unauthorized migrants there. From 2014, this constant stream of migrants has come under increased scrutiny of the media, international rights organizations and politicians in the region because of the growing number of unaccompanied minors that make the jump northwards – in 2014, almost 69,000 unaccompanied children were apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol, vis-à-vis 24,000 in 2012 (Hipsman & Meissner, 2015). Data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security shows that the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended around six hundred children from Guatemala City in the first four-and-a-half months of 2014, making it the sixth most common origin for children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras caught by the U.S. Border Patrol (Gordon, 2014).¹⁶ And although reasons for migration are often multifaceted and complex, there seems to be wide consensus about the leading role of poverty, unemployment and insecurity in driving this exodus (see for instance International Crisis Group, 2016; Beltrán, 2017).

Most of the migrants, however, see their ‘American dream’ crushed against the U.S. border with Mexico or one of the many other borders and barriers, both tangible and intangible, the road to a life in the United States presents them with. Barack Obama rightly declared the flow of unaccompanied children from Central America a humanitarian crisis, but this did not stop

¹⁶ San Pedro Sula (Honduras), the most murderous city in world in 2014, was by far the major source for unaccompanied children, with more than 2500 children apprehended by the U.S. border patrol in the same period.

him from beefing-up border controls and pursuing an aggressive deportation policy. His successor Donald Trump, in turn, got himself elected at least in part on the promise to build a ‘big, beautiful’ wall along the border with Mexico. Once president, he actively sought to criminalize the waves of poor Mexican and Central American migrants and downplay the dangers they encounter in their home countries, as part of a quest to render almost all migrants ineligible for asylum in the United States. This also included strong arming Guatemala into what was initially described as a ‘safe third country agreement,’ which came into effect in November 2019. On the base of this agreement, migrants who pass through Guatemala on their way to the United States, among which Salvadorans and Hondurans, are required to apply for protections in Guatemala instead of at the U.S. border. In the face of these events, a more thorough and balanced understanding of what it means to live in a context of extreme violence, poverty and inequality has become increasingly important.

The new violence of the state

But then where does the state stand within Guatemala City’s jumble of violence and violent actors? This will be a major focus within the chapters that follow. However, to understand my respondents’ encounters with the state (or lack of them), I believe some context needs to be sketched up-front. This will also prevent hasty conclusions from being drawn. Taken at face value, the state seemed to have lost control over both the means and the direction of the violence. How else could one explain Guatemala’s “single-digit conviction rate for murder,” to use the words of Philip Alston (United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, 2007, p. 17), which he wrote in the capacity of United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. Guatemala’s poor working criminal justice system brought Alston to the cynical yet oft-quoted observation that “Guatemala is a good place to commit murder, because you will almost certainly get away with it” (p. 17). Indeed, in 2007, the year of Alston’s report, 96 to 98 percent of the murders in Guatemala went without conviction (WOLA, 2015).

But this seeming lack of state control was dictated by more than just impotence. Critically, ties to illicit networks and interest groups were present at all levels of the state in Guatemala. Such was made painfully clear by the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (best

known by its Spanish acronym CICIG), which has supported the Public Ministry since 2007 and opened a full frontal war on the corruption networks that allowed organized crime to operate with impunity, after the appointment of the Colombian Iván Velásquez as the head of CICIG in 2013. According to a CICIG report in 2015, political parties derived most of their financing through corruption, including 25 percent from wealthy elites and businesses and 25 percent from criminal networks; findings that emphasized that criminal networks were increasingly able to compete with the traditional business elites over ‘quotas of power,’ a development that cannot be separated from the growing financial clout at the disposal of criminal networks. CICIG’s renewed focus on these corruption networks, in conjunction with the country’s Public Ministry (MP), however, brought to the surface an unprecedented number of scandals. Most notably, revelations of fraud rings linked to then President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti in April 2015 sparked widespread popular protests and led to their resignation and imprisonment in the months that followed. Baldetti, meanwhile, also faces cocaine trafficking charges in United States, which has requested her extradition. In addition, many other high level officials, political elites and businessmen – people that until then had been untouchable – have been arrested over corruption charges. Furthermore, as the International Crisis Group (2018) calculates, it is largely due to CICIG’s efforts, which also included a number of legal and institutional reforms, that homicides rates in Guatemala have been falling consistently over the last years (from 46.5 in 2010 to 31.8 in 2017¹⁷).

As the above shows, personal gain can be an important driver for crime to become an object of governance. But there may also be other or additional reasons why state agents engage in criminal activities. For example, as the Guatemalan case seems to show, it can serve as a basis for what Jonathan Simon calls the ‘governing through crime’ (2007). At least, this is what comes to mind when assessing the military role in the crime wave that largely coincided with formal peace in Guatemala. It is widely held that soldiers demobilized into various criminal groups after the civil war.¹⁸ Allegedly, twelve

¹⁷ I have calculated the national homicide rates (per 100,000 inhabitants) by dividing the homicide numbers as given by INACIF – 6684 in 2010; 5384 in 2017 – by the number of inhabitants in Guatemala as estimated by INE – 14,361,666 in 2010; 16,924,190 in 2017. The result has been multiplied by 100,000.

¹⁸ It was not only criminal links that provided demobilized soldiers with an occupation in postwar times. Already during the civil war, it was not uncommon for soldiers and police officers to also work as private security guards; private security companies were even deployed by the state for

prominent criminal groups in modern Guatemala have military roots (Briscoe & Rodríguez Pellecer, 2010) although many of the military connections to criminal networks were already established during the war. Because of the shady role of the military in crime and the obvious incapability of the police to tackle it, Jennifer Schirmer (2002) cast doubts on the sincerity of the commitment to demilitarize security in the peace accords, asking if the vacuum authority was not already calculated in as a “golden opportunity to tout the usefulness of the intelligence apparatus – for so long under attack for its repressive uses – and to shore up its public image?” (p. 76). One anonymous military officer is even more articulate in highlighting the conspiring nature of the crime rise, claiming it was caused by military leaders to re-establish power in the postwar era (in Glebbeek, 2003).

But whether spurred by a military scheme or not, Guatemala’s criminal epidemic has allowed the army to remain a substantial powerholder in the postwar era (Schirmer, 2002). Key to this development is the fact that the army to this day, and despite its history of internal friction and brutal performance in the country’s civil war, enjoys considerably more popular support than the police, which is often seen as corrupt and weak.¹⁹ After peace was signed in 1996, President Arzú removed hardline military officers from key positions to be able to subordinate the military to his authority (Ruhl, 2005) but was quick to bring back the army on the streets when the public and the business sector demanded so. Military power became even more evident when Arzú’s successor Alfredo Portillo surrounded himself with high ranking military officials that were believed to be deeply involved in criminal activities. Public confidence in the strength of the army was also reflected in the election of Otto Pérez Molina in 2011, who earned his electoral victory principally to the tough-on-crime image he derived from his background as a former general. During his presidency, he further militarized security and governance in general although boosting the number of police officers at the same time. His successor Jimmy Morales, in turn, a former comedian who capitalized on his anti-establishment credentials during the elections with the little imaginative slogan ‘*Ni corrupto,*

counterinsurgency ends (Argueta, 2010). But as the private security industry boomed in postwar Guatemala, demobilized soldiers were en masse hired by private security companies (Keen, 2004); many of which were owned by former military men as well. Crucially, the security guard industry provided demobilized soldiers and police officers, as well as ex-members of the civil patrol units (PAC’s), the possibility to continue to leave their mark on public security issues.

¹⁹ For example, 50% of the people that participated in a Prensa Libre poll of July/August 2015 expressed their confidence in the military vis-à-vis 26 percent in the police (Velásquez, 2015).

ni ladrón (Neither corrupt, nor a thief), ran for a political party (*Frente de Convergencia Nacional*, FCN–Nación) that came into being after a merge of two parties one of which (FCN) was founded with the main goal to rehabilitate the army and stop the prosecution of retired military officers for their role in the civil war (Hernández, 2015).

At the same time, state officials do not necessarily have to engage in crime themselves to be able to govern through crime, as the political scapegoating in postwar Guatemala of gangs gives evidence to. As Otto Argueta (2016) writes, gangs are used by Guatemalan governments as a means to both justify their inefficiency, distracting people from the social causes that underpin the phenomenon, as well as the broader insecurity, and to show their strength and decisiveness at the same time, as captured gang members are not seldom paraded for the media. In addition, gang violence has become an important political football for right wing politicians in their pursuit for hardline policies. In recent times, however, it is important to note that this scapegoating has been joined by active attempts within the government to downplay the dangers of the maras in Guatemala so as to please United States president Donald Trump in his endeavor to trivialize the risks run by migrants from the Northern Triangle countries in their home countries. This at least seemed to be what the minister of foreign affairs Carlos Raúl Morales was doing when he stated that “the problem with the maras [in Guatemala] is nothing compared to the problems El Salvador and Honduras have” (EFE, 2017) and that nine out of ten Guatemalans migrate for economic reasons, violence thus being only a minor driver of migration.

In his critique on neoliberal reforms and their effect on the European welfare state, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) puts forward a law on the conservation of violence, arguing, “You cannot cheat with the *law of the conservation of violence*: all violence is paid for, and, for example, the structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc., is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence” (p. 40, emphasis in original; see also Bourgois, 2001). There are similar forces and logic in play in Latin America. What may separate the Latin American case from its European counterpart in this respect, however, is that the Latin American state does not seem to want to cheat with the law of the conservation of violence.

Taking into account the above politics of violence and corruption, as well as Latin America's high level of historic violence, Arias and Goldstein (2010) put forward the paradigm of 'violent pluralism,' which largely hinges on the idea that violence in Latin America, instead of representing social deficiency, is the basis on which democratic institutions are founded and a key element in ensuring their maintenance, as well as a mechanism to cope "with the myriad problems that neoliberal democracies have generated" (p. 5). In similar fashion, Jenny Pearce (2010) introduces the concept of 'securitized democracy.' Latin American democracy, she argues, is gradually subjected to a securitizing logic that not only generates direct state violence but also a form of governing through violence that thrives upon violent engagement with violent actors not belonging to the formal state and violence accumulation in general. Instead of trying to contain violence, Pearce notes, "the Latin American state [...] appears to be fostering violent confrontations and the reproductive qualities of violence across space and time" (p. 289). This knowledge helped to give a touch of inevitability to the violence experienced by the protagonists of my narratives and it is against this background that I have tried to describe and understand their lived realities.

Some notes on the workings of violence and the study of violence

Violence and oppression have shaped Guatemalan society the way a sea shapes a coastline, with periods of wild waves carving their way into the land alternated by calmer water whispering the same old song of indifference, deep force and destruction. This turns violence into an obvious focus when studying life in Guatemala City. Yet, at the same time, this is not necessarily a study *on* violence, but an inquiry into the way people deal with the forces that oppress them and try to come to some form of normalcy in their shadows. In a society as battered as Guatemala, with staggering levels of violence, poverty and inequality ever since its colonial inception, everybody lives in the thick of violence in some way: anticipating it, fending it off, engaging in it themselves or dealing with its ghosts. Such will become clear throughout this work.

To be able to capture these pervasive tendencies of violence, it may help to see violence as an oil spill. It is an analogy I borrow from Javier Auyero and María Fernanda Berti's (2015) ethnographic study on an impoverished

Buenos Aires neighborhood with the revealing title 'In harm's way'. Like violence, the authors argue, an oil spill is a "a human-produced form of pollution, the release of crude oil into the environment can come from many sources (a tanker, a drilling rig, an offshore platform), and although it can be controlled by different methods, it can also have quick, devastating effects on the environment and on living beings" (p. 165). The authors then continue: "It is not hard to see why, when collecting and analyzing our data, the image of an oil spill constantly appeared in our minds. Originating in diverse interactions, violence seemed to be seeping through the social fabric, touching the lives of many, including those not directly involved in it" (p. 165). The analogy stands. Violence, as liquid as it is viscous, tends to stick with people and communities in multiple and complex ways, like oil spreads out on the surface of ocean, sticking to the feathers of a bird, poisoning fishes. Unfortunately, Auyero and Berti themselves appear to be only scratching the surface of the polluting tendencies of violence, as they focus on the concrete (but often superficial) linkages between acts of interpersonal violence or as they call it themselves, "the less ambiguous notion of concatenation" (p. 165). By doing this, it seems as if they have tried to contain the spill themselves, which would be the way to go if only we were talking about an actual oil spill.

From an analytical perspective, however, this appears to be too limiting of an exercise. Crucially – and the authors would be the first ones to acknowledge this – violence does not only give "birth to itself" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 1) but also to a wide array of other physical and psychological problems (through which violence may reproduce itself in a direct or less direct way that are harmful in their own right). Violence breeds violence but also fear, distrust and individualism. It calls into question bonds of family, friendship, love and community, as well as the relationship one holds with oneself (Herman, 2001). It "shatters and unravels routine daily existence" (p. 137), as Auyero and Berti argue in line with many others, but, with fear of especially violent crime at the frontlines of the spatial and the social organization of everyday life in contemporary Latin America (and beyond), routinizes at the same time (Peeters & Hoey, 2017). And when people are exposed to it in 'chronic' proportions, it also tends to lead to intensification of spiritual beliefs (Adams, 2012). One could go on and on like this. At the same time, especially as violence diffused in the hands of the many in postwar Guatemala City, it would be a mistake to

treat violence only as a source of affliction. Serving death as much as it serves life and working on different societal levels, the meanings of violence – in any given situation – are plural and its evaluation is in the eye of the beholder. It can be poison or medicine, imposed or chosen, to give power or render powerless – and everything in between and at the same time. Further, what is often swept under the header of structural violence (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2004) – poverty, social exclusion, racism, hunger – tends to have many of the same effects on people.

In this light, it may be perfectly reasonable to argue, as does Torres-Rivas (2017), that the Guatemalan society, “because of its painful rates of extreme poverty or its shameful levels of violence,” has become “a society of sad men and women,” although, as he adds, “perhaps [this is] only in public life, perhaps this changes within the community.”²⁰ His reservation, Torres-Rivas argues in the same article, stems from the fact that “we have studied violence as a phenomenon of asymmetric politics, as a manifestation of collective frustrations. There is not one satisfactory analysis about cases of individual pain.”²¹ It is here that I feel Auyero and Berti have missed an opportunity, though in a different geographical context, and where I see my own contribution to the field of violence, all the more because, and this is rightly raised by Auyero and Berti, “[...] we still know little about the less public and often, though not always, mundane practices and routines that residents under siege devise to prevent violence and protect their loved ones” (p. 138).

Having said that, such a conclusion, however justified as it may be, runs the risk of selling short some remarkable work that has appeared within this field of study and has been an inspiration to this dissertation. Having taken notion of the structure of this work, the observant reader might have already drawn comparisons to Oscar Lewis’ classic *Five families: Mexican case studies in the culture of poverty* (1959), in which he gives a detailed account of a typical day in the life of five Mexican families.²² Indeed, I feel indebted to Five

²⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “Guatemala es genéricamente, una sociedad de hombres y mujeres tristes, quizá solo en la vida pública, tal vez cambia en el seno de la comunidad” [Translation TP].

²¹ Original quote in Spanish: “Hemos estudiado la violencia como fenómeno de la asimetría política, como manifestación de frustraciones colectivas. No hay ningún análisis satisfactorio sobre casos de dolor individual” [Translation TP].

²² The work, and especially Lewis’ theoretical framework – his concept of “culture of poverty” – has been heavily criticized by many for focusing, in the words of Phillipe Bourgois (2003, p. 16), “almost exclusively on the pathology of the intergenerational transmission of destructive values

families, but not just because of the inspiration I took from its structure and, as we will see, the cast of characters in the beginning of each chapter. Like with *In search of respect* (1996), Phillipe Bourgois' ethnographic account on street-level drug dealers in East-Harlem an (New York), and *Death without weeping* (1993), Nancy Scheper-Hughes' ethnography on women in a Brazilian slum, it is the phenomenal eye for detail and vivid writing I admire in *Five families*. All three are works that open up entire worlds through intimate portraits of ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances. Lewis, Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes have been able to do so, I am convinced, not only for being good fieldworkers, but also for being good writers. *Death without weeping*, as the author tells us, "entails a descent into a Brazilian heart of darkness" (p. xiii), which are well chosen words not only because of the grimness of the circumstances within which the book's protagonists carve out a life for themselves, but also because of the literary quality of the work that matches the virtuosity of the much celebrated account on the Congolese heart of darkness by Joseph Conrad.

These works have inspired me not only because of the message they bring across – the fact that they lay bare the everyday violence the main characters of the books are confronted with and make us understand the lives that are led within these contexts – but also because of the way they manage to do this or, better yet, the fact that they manage to do this. Good ethnography, I believe, walks a thin line. For social reality to come across on a page or a screen, for as far as this is possible – anthropological writings are 'fictions', to speak in Clifford Geertz' terms (1973), in which it is impossible to determine what exactly has got lost in the translation of culture onto paper – it should not only be confirmed in its complexity (which speaks to the analytical skills of the ethnographer), but also be written about well enough to not drown

and behaviors among individuals within families," while overlooking the culturally and historically embedded unequal power structures within which these values and behaviors take shape. In consequence, Bourgois and others argue, it shifted the blame for being poor and the hardship that tends to come with it to the poor. One can indeed ask oneself whether Lewis should not have spent more attention to the social structure within which agency operates – or the concept of the culture of poverty for that matter, which, although adorning the subtitle of the book, receives no more than a few lines in the book while being its sole theoretical notion. At the same time, as David Harvey argues quite convincingly, he did so in the later work *La vida* (published in 1967). It is not the poor that take a beating from Lewis' culture of poverty, Harvey argues, but the capitalist modes of production. To be sure, Oscar Lewis himself would have agreed with Harvey and never intended to feed into the discourse of the 'unworthy' poor that is popular among elites in Latin America and beyond, as well as in the White House under the Trump administration (Bourgois, 2003).

the reader into the complexity of social reality as the writer depicts his or her interpretation of it. After all, reading is an act of interpretation too, an interpretation of an interpretation. *Five families*, *In search of respect* and *Death without weeping* all lure the reader into making the effort to understand, to place oneself in different shoes, in different minds and, in the end, to continue reading – and the way they accomplish this is through fine writing; writing that, and this is critical in social science, never takes the foreground, becoming more important than the reality it is supposed to represent. These works remind us of the fact that there is no content without delivery and vice versa. They are the strongest of anti-dotes to a social science that is still largely quantitative in its approach,²³ which is able to capture broad lines and tendencies within societies, and is of critical importance as such, but is limited in understanding them.

Yet at the same time, it is no coincidence that the books of Lewis, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois depict the lives of the underprivileged. It is ethnography's cup of coffee. Indeed, as limited as this still is, most of what we *do* know about the way people try shape and give meaning to their lives in the midst of (structural) violence, we know about those that find themselves at the margins of society. There are obvious reasons for this. First of all, the poor are bearing the greatest brunt of many of the oppressive forces present in societies. In line with this, it is often stated – and with good reason – that the poor are absent in the public debate regarding the issue of citizens' public safety in Latin America and elsewhere, which is then used as an argument to give the poor a voice through ethnography (see for instance Auyero & Berti, 2015; Kilanski & Auyero, 2015). No doubt, there is an important task for ethnography here and for ethnographers alike.

What this might obscure, however, is that there may exist similar or other hardships and sorrows among classes with greater access to the resources celebrated within modern societies. This is well put by Bourdieu (1999), who uses the example of Patrick Süskind's play *The Double Bass* to show that those occupying an inferior position in an elite world, like the double bass player in the orchestra described by Süskind, can suffer marginalization even though they participate and, in a way, belong to that elite world and, I imagine, may be envied for it by outsiders. "The lion's share of ethnographic description,"

²³ At least in the case of criminology (Kleemans, Korf & Staring, 2008; Young, 2011; Jacques, 2014), economics (Lenger, 2019), psychology (Harper, 2008; Biggerstaff, 2012) and to a lesser extent sociology (Schwemmer & Wiczorek, 2020).

Arthur Kleinman (2000) notes, “has dealt with the violence of everyday life almost as if that form of violence were equivalent with the social experience in shantytowns and slums in poor countries or in the poorest inner-city ghettos of wealthy nations. But the *violences* of everyday life also include other kinds of violence in the social order [...]” (p. 228, emphasis in original). To elaborate on this claim, he goes on to describe the story of a middle class North American woman weighed down by the constraints – or violence – of what is popularly called ‘stress,’ as she, like many others, balances between a demanding family life and work life, while failing her own inner needs.

We know still too little about ‘the violences of everyday life,’ to stick with Kleinman’s terminology, to which the bourgeoisie are subjected – and I would like to add, especially in the developing world, where studying poverty seems to have even greater attraction among social scientists. At the same time, it is important to gain more insight on how the so-called ‘championing’ of the system – and its relations to the violence, poverty and inequality that batter so many others – takes shape in everyday lives of people, whether situated in the ‘good’ parts or in the ‘bad’ parts of town. What is safe to say is that it is too reductive to say that the neoliberal democracies of Latin America and beyond only produce ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. One could end up concluding differently, however, when assessing Latin American reality (or any other reality) in the tradition of criminology’s most radical empirical branch, cultural criminology, which, as Martin O’Brien (2005) rightly argues, applies a multidimensional ‘sentimental’ concept of culture to deviant subcultures and a flat ‘indexical’ concept to the alleged conventional society, as it seeks to explain how cultural and criminal processes converge (see Ferrell, 1999). It is important for social science not to fall into this trap of scrutinizing only the poor while oversimplifying those that do not fall under this banner.

The hidden ways of human agency

It leaves no doubt that violence, poverty and other oppressive social forces tend to reverberate in the opportunities and freedom people have to live their lives the way they want to (see for instance Sen, 2010). Mills (2000 [1959]) was right when he wrote that “‘man’s chief danger’ today lies in the unruly forces of contemporary society itself, with its alienating methods of production, its

enveloping techniques of political domination, its international anarchy – in a word, it’s pervasive transformations of the very ‘nature’ of man and the conditions and aims of his life” (p. 13). What tends to be too easily forgotten when focusing on structures of power, however, is that people are active shapers of their own future. Even post-structuralist Michel Foucault at some point admitted that he had placed too much emphasis on the techniques of domination – his concept of ‘docile bodies,’ which act as catalysts for unequal power structures, being perhaps the apex of this emphasis – and too little on what he called the “techniques (or technology) of the self” that “permit individuals to effect a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, or to act in a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on” (Foucault, 1980, cited in Foucault, 1993, p. 203).

Yet, to what extent then, and in what way, are people able to enjoy the freedom to choose their own lives in a context heavily marked by poverty, inequality and violence? The five narratives will all relate to this question yet will bear no clear-cut answers. Crucially, just as social structures impact people’s lives in complicate and volatile ways that, as we have seen in the above, not seldom remain unseen for social scientists – and even for those subjected to their force (Mills, 2000 [1959]) – human agency too works in often hidden ways. And it has an impoverished analytical conception to show for it, as is argued by sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1999) in their theoretical paper *What is agency?* “In the struggle to demonstrate the interpenetration of agency and structure,” the authors write, “many theorists have failed to distinguish agency as an analytical category in its own right – with distinctive theoretical dimensions and temporally variable social manifestations” (pp. 962-963). And where there is theorization, they observe, it is often done so in a too one-sided manner, whether it is the “habitual, repetitive, and taken for granted” view of noted voices such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, the emphasis on “goal seeking and purposivity” within rational choice theory and phenomenology, or the pivotal role attributed to “deliberation and judgement,” as found in for instance certain feminist theories (p. 963). The authors themselves analytically situate agency “within the flow of time” (p. 963) as they give an impetus to a reconceptualization of

the concept that is worth to be mentioned. Human agency, they argue, is “a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (p. 963). This is not to suggest that social actions are always informed by these agentic dimensions in an equal way. In any given action, one or another of these aspects can become the more dominant voice.

At the same time, when assessing the margins of the possibilities people have to act according to their own will, in any context, but especially in a troubled place such as Guatemala City, this study departs from the point of view that one should not be too fixated on actual agency. This is one of the main messages of the groundbreaking work of the anthropologist Michael Jackson. Jackson’s approach, which he calls ‘existential anthropology,’ explores the indeterminacy, strategic variability and experiential variety of lived realities, in response to a contemporary anthropology, in which there is, as he and Albert Piette (2017) explain, “a tendency to shift vitality, power, consciousness, and will from persons to the transpersonal realms of abstract ideas, global forces, historical processes, genetic patterns, social structures, and discursive formations” (p. 4). Pivotal to Jackson’s work is the observation that people are not only driven by a desire for being safe, loved and recognized – among others – but also by a desire to have a sense of governing their own lives.

But then how do people act in the face of extreme duress or distress when all agency seems lost? It is in these situations, Jackson (1998) argues, that their imagination comes to engage in a continuous rethinking and reconstruction of reality in an attempt to come to a *modus vivendi* between what is imposed on them and what they choose to do. “Choosing,” he writes, “or *imagining* that we choose, our lives, is such an imperative aspect of our humanity that even in the face of absolute loss of freedom we will often act as though the situation were still in our hands, that our actions might make a difference, that it is possible to think our way free of the chains that bind us” (p. 30, emphasis in original). It is a notion inspired by play theory, and particularly mastery play (as described by for instance Freud), which enables people to ‘magically’ achieve a sense of control over situations that overwhelm and curb their freedom by transforming the experience of the situation, while the objective situation they

‘master’ stays the same (Jackson, 1998; 2017). As such, it stretches agency to the field of the imagined while it also gives evidence of the fact that, as Jackson (2005) notes, “human wellbeing involves far more than simple adjustment to a given environment, natural or cultural; it involves endless experimentation in how the given world can be lived *decisively*, on one’s own terms” (p. xii, emphasis in original). Taking on such a more existential lens when studying human existence, Jackson (1998) writes, “is to testify to the wealth of life in even the most poverty-stricken and desperate situations. It is to emphasize the *experience* of being in control rather than assuming that control must be first defined objectively as a matter of commanding wealth, possessing power, or manipulating the fate of one’s fellow human beings” (p. 22, emphasis in original).

The above brings me to the methodological connotation I assign to the ‘unseen’ in the title. It refers to having an eye for the hidden, the imagined, the uncanny and the intangible. It appreciates that what is hidden beneath the surface of time, taking the past as part of someone’s “permanent present” (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 4). In line with this, it encapsulates the use of the imagination in situating human biography in history and social structure, as Mills’ sociological imagination requires us to do. But it also alludes to the imagined in the everyday lives of ordinary people who struggle to make an impact on their situation, just as it gestures towards the hidden injuries of violence and inequality, their complex workings onto communities and individuals. To return to the analogy of the oil spill, by focusing on the way violence slips from what is often called ‘the system’ into the personal systems of those subjected to its forces, I have tried to let the oil flow more freely, watch birds fly off with it, follow them to their next destination and, as violence can be as crude as oil can be, watch other birds wither away because of it.

Introducing the narratives

The protagonists of my five narratives did not know each other, yet the single narratives tell a story together about life in Guatemala City. They are a reflection of my quest to search for as good a representation of society in Guatemala City as possible with only a handful of narratives. I did so in the knowledge that this would be a difficult task no matter the number of cases. The issue

of representation, especially when it concerns class, raises many questions and difficulties. Class, in the words of Kwame Anthony Appiah (2019), is “the four-color-map problem of the social sciences” (p. 194), given the many variables that have been attributed to class over time and the uncertainties surrounding definitions and delineations of class identities. Or in the terms of W.B. Gallie (1956), it is an ‘essentially contested concept,’ the use of which gives rise to never-ending disputes while intuitively most of us have an idea of what it encapsulates. It is not my intention to determine my position within this jumble of variables and definitions or to come up with a new definition or operationalization of what constitutes class. At the same time, I believe my research will shed at least some light on this as the narratives all build around themes such as work, housing, education, religion and social relations, which are intimately interwoven with the concept of class.

What follows now is a brief introduction of my five narratives. This allows me to introduce the protagonists of my narratives as well the structure of this research. But I will also use this as an opportunity to determine, for better or for worse, the position of the protagonists of my narratives within the larger society of Guatemala City, using two socio-economic status scales. One applied by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, the National Institute of Statistics (2015), which focuses on levels of extreme poverty and poverty in Guatemala and its different departments, and the other by the Inter-American Development Bank (2019), which divides the Guatemalan population into an extremely poor, a poor, a vulnerable, a middle and an upper segment. I believe this gives the reader something to hold onto with regard to the class positions of the protagonists of my narratives, just as it has given me something to hold onto. Especially since economic capital is the main lens to look at class in Guatemala City and elsewhere – it is why it is not uncommon to speak of the ‘poor class’. And it is also why the five narratives as I present them in this research run from poor to rich. At the same time, economic capital comes with its own set of difficulties if we judge it from a class perspective. For instance, should it be based on income or should other assets such as housing and savings be included into the yardstick that determines one’s socio-economic status? And what about education, which is difficult to bring back to hard currency, especially when one has not been able to capitalize on its fruits yet (for instance, when one is still studying)? How poor or how rich one is, this is

to say, is at least partly in the eye on the beholder. In addition to the theoretical difficulties surrounding class and economic capital, there are practical problems attached to the case of Guatemala City that affect the issue of representation in this research. Crucially, the last population census in Guatemala was in 2002, which means that information regarding the composition of the population of Guatemala City is based on guesswork. These are things to bear in mind as I turn to the introduction of my five narratives.

The first narrative, which is to be found in chapter two, centralizes around Colin, Moisés, Joshua, Thiago and other street people of El Castillo and sheds light on their everyday struggle of surviving on the streets, where violence is as decisive a force as the sun and the rain. Many of them lacked a roof above their head (although some of them did have a house somewhere), spending good part of their daily energy on scraping together the money to feed their appetite for drugs. Meanwhile, the street people were highly dependent on social aid organizations and church groups for needs beyond substance use. I became part of this world, as I got to know them, tagging along with a Christian social worker, who visited El Castillo every Thursday evening to talk them out of inhaling solvents and into the arms of God and to serve them food afterwards. At a later stage, I also teamed up with another organization that worked at El Castillo.

No doubt, the street people of El Castillo were amongst the poorest of poor of Guatemala City. Perhaps, with a few exceptions, they belonged to the 5.4 percent of the population in Guatemala City that lived in extreme poverty and had to get by with less than 5750 quetzals a year (although these are numbers from 2014, see Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2015). This boiled down to a threshold of almost sixteen quetzals a day (or two U.S. dollars, one U.S. dollar being 7.7237 quetzals, on average, in 2014). According to the Inter-American Development Bank, the threshold for extreme poverty in Latin America in 2017 was at 3.1. U.S. dollars a day (Inter-American Development Bank, 2019), the equivalent of almost twenty-three quetzals (one U.S. dollar being 7.3478 quetzals on average in 2017.) It is no surprise that the Inter-American Development Bank applies a higher threshold of extreme poverty, given that living costs, at least in Guatemala, seemed to be on the rise.²⁴

I met Miguel, the main character of my second narrative, or chapter three,

²⁴ In 2000, the threshold of extreme poverty was at 1,911 quetzals a year. Meanwhile, the poverty threshold was at 4,318 quetzals a year. In 2006 the threshold of extreme poverty was at 3,206 quetzals a year, while its poverty equivalent was at 6,574 quetzals (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2015).

about a year and a half after he had fled from the gang ridden neighborhood of Balcón Verde for reasons of extortion. He now rented a small apartment in El Dorado, a large, walled middle class neighborhood, where he lived with his wife María Luisa, daughters Rosa and Yolanda, and son Daniel. And while this place provided his family the safety they longed for, the high costs involved with living there placed a severe strain on Miguel and his family. In response, Miguel tended to work as many hours as possible as a taxi driver, which usually resulted in working sixteen, seventeen hours a day, seven days a week. The sudden and unexpected departure from Balcón Verde had turned life upside down for every member of Miguel's family, but whereas María Luisa and the children had come to see it as a blessing in disguise after a while, Miguel kept longing for his old neighborhood. It resulted in a struggle that called into question his relationship with his wife and children as well as with the world he lived in.

Miguel's family was one of the many families in Guatemala City that struggled to make ends meet on a daily basis. Yet, according to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2015), they did not belong to the 33.3 percent of the Guatemala City population living in poverty, since the poverty threshold was at 10,218 quetzals a year (in 2014 that was, it is likely that this line should be scaled up for 2016 and 2017, the years of my fieldwork, for reasons already mentioned). Miguel, in turn, made four to five thousand quetzals a month driving his taxi and his son added another three thousand quetzals to the family's monthly income. Together they earned around ninety thousand quetzals a year, which, divided among five family members, was an estimated eighteen thousand quetzals a year per family member. Yet in a neighborhood 'above their paygrade,' one needs to ask, what was this money worth? In the case of Miguel's family, it was safe to say that it was hardly enough to pay the bills, although towards the end of my fieldwork María Luisa managed to obtain a job at a local bakery after a year of unemployment. It did not stop Miguel from making extreme working hours and days. If this was not a life in poverty, one could ask, at what cost was it not.

Oscar and his three adult daughters Lucila, Tatiana and Paola, upon which the third narrative, or chapter four, focuses, lived together on the outskirts of Zone 18, in a modest closed condominium by the name of Loma Linda. I first met them six months after Johanna, Oscar's wife and the mother of the three

girls, had died losing a ten year battle against cancer. Oscar, like Miguel, was a taxi driver and made similar long and exhausting days. His daughters ran a small *librería* (stationery store) together in their home, where days passed by without anyone visiting. The world as a babbling brook but one with less peaceful undercurrents, given that it was fear for the dangerous outside world that kept the girls housebound. Their tendency to seclude themselves had only aggravated after their mother's death, who had been their 'center of everything' and used to chaperone them to places situated outside their colonia. Central to this narrative are the ways both Oscar and his daughters were trying to get back to normalcy after the tragic death of Johanna and the many fears that came with this endeavor.

Oscar had an income similar to the one of Miguel, yet was five years away from having paid off his house in a closed condominium, which, according to him, represented a worth of three hundred and fifty thousand quetzals (he had bought it for eighty thousand quetzals in 2003). In better times, the family had made up to two thousand quetzals a month in the *librería* but business went bad during my fieldwork period. In addition, Lucila earned about two thousand quetzals a month with a clothing scheme and Tatiana made some extra money doing women's nails and hair. Like Miguel's family, Oscar and his daughters belonged to what the Inter-American Development Bank would call 'the vulnerable class,' which earned between 5 and 12.4 U.S. dollars a day and constituted 30.6 percent of the Guatemalan population in 2017, according to its estimations. Numbers for Guatemala City were not available, but with levels of poverty in Guatemala City much lower than the national average, it is to be expected that other classes (vulnerable, middle and upper class) were overrepresented in the capital. In Oscar's case, times had been less tense financially since the death of his wife, whose sickness and expensive treatments had forced one of his daughters, Lucila, to quit school and start working. She now had a husband and thus a household of her own. Still, throughout my fieldwork, the family was busy paying off the debts made as a result of Johanna's illness and death.

Gustavo and his daughter Valeria, the protagonists of my fourth narrative, or chapter five, lived in the middle class neighborhood of Flor del Campo in Zone 13. Gustavo and his ex-wife Vania, whom he had separated from, had long been part of *El Verbo* (literally: The Word), a fanatical evangelical sect

seeking to particularly accommodate the rich. *El Verbo* combined a bent for seclusion with a period of remarkable outward political power in the early 1980s when one of its members, Efraín Ríos Montt, assumed the highest office in the country. Ríos Montt's time in office marked the most violent period in the civil war. Years later, Gustavo's devotion to development work brought him to some of the most destitute and war torn places of Guatemala. The Gustavo I met was a man coming to grips with the past, and especially his time at *El Verbo* and everything that had sprung from it, among which, he believed, a failed marriage with Vania. Meanwhile, Valeria had recently moved to her father's place in Guatemala City, leaving behind her mother and two sisters in a town three hours outside of Guatemala City to study at the country's only public university, San Carlos, a place many considered to be lawless territory.

Tellingly, even though Gustavo was without a job during part of my fieldwork, Gustavo and Valeria were able to hold out for some time because of the former's savings. After six months of unemployment, Gustavo landed a job in which he was paid two thousand U.S. dollars a month. He had to provide for three children, though he shared this responsibility with Vania. Meanwhile, he had already paid off his house in a middle class neighborhood, of which he had lost half after his separation with Vania. Gustavo and Valeria represent the middle class of Guatemala City in this study, who according to the Inter-American Development Bank make anywhere in between the 12.4 and 62 U.S. dollars a day and constitute 14.4 percent of the Guatemalan population (Inter-American Development Bank, 2019), although this percentage is likely to be higher in Guatemala City.

Claudina, the main character of my fifth and last narrative, or chapter six, lived together with her five children, two bodyguards and two maids in the walled upper middle class neighborhood of Vista Alegre. It was a postcard picture of success and yet, Claudina felt as if caught in a world that was not hers. Born and raised in the poor neighborhood of El Nacimiento, she had not only seen part of society few of her well-off peers had seen from up close, but she also struggled to be accepted in the exclusive world she now dwelled in – the 'crystal bubble' as I will call it. It is Claudina's life in relation to the crystal bubble and the world it represented that is central to this chapter.

Claudina represents the upper middle class in my selection of cases, though, as was already hinted upon, may not have been the most typical 'rich'

individual to be found in Guatemala City. What added to this was that she seemed to have limited knowledge about what she exactly earned each month. She did not receive a salary but was granted a part of the profit of the motels she managed for her ex-partner. From what could be considered her monthly earnings, he deducted the utilities for the house, the tuition for their children and other costs such as those for the bodyguards and maids. In the “neoliberal dream taken to its maximum splendor,” as one commentator called Guatemala (Porrás in Elías, 2015), where it was not uncommon to measure one’s socio-economic status by the car one drives, the house one possesses and the amount bodyguards one employs, this allowed her to live a life with at least the veneer of affluence and privilege. Yet some months, she claimed, there was little money left for extras.

The five narratives provide the lens through which I will draw up some more general considerations regarding the way people in Guatemala City shape and give meaning to their lives in the midst of extreme violence and inequality. I will devote the seventh and last chapter to this task. The fact that I feel the confidence to do so, despite the difficulties and uncertainties highlighted above, resides in the fact that I was able to draw from a wide range of other cases and experiences outside the five central narratives. For example, besides El Castillo, I also visited multiple other spots where street people gathered on a weekly basis, by tagging along with social aid organizations. Contacts at other organizations working in low-income areas brought me to crime-stricken places such as Chapín, La Limonada and Ciudad Quetzal. Meanwhile, I myself resided in an upper middle class world in which I was able to profit from the network of Ester and that of other acquaintances and friends. Furthermore, I found many teachers, and even two of my cases, in taxi drivers – the “bartenders of the street,” as a friend aptly described them – who were one of the few in Guatemala City whose daily contacts contained people of a variety of social classes and backgrounds.

These and other experiences not only provided me with the context from which I selected my cases, but also helped me to put the cases into perspective after I had selected them. In the end, and perhaps most importantly, I felt all of my cases had stories to tell that were representative for the situation in Guatemala City. Sometimes these stories were typical for the class I had positioned them in. For instance, when it came to the storm tide of violence

the street people experienced and Miguel's flight after being extorted. And in a different way, to Claudina's story of not fitting in. Her rags-to-riches-background turned her into the exception that laid bare the mores of the Guatemala City elite. In other cases, the dominant stories were more class-transcending in nature, while many of their particularities were at the same time related to class. Oscar and his daughters championed the prudence and seclusion so typical for a city built by fear, though did this with the (financial) means and possibilities that were given to them. Gustavo's experiences at El Verbo gave insight in the secluded worlds the highly popular protestant sectarian groups offered (or imposed on) their members and the intersections between organized religion and political power.

Time, now, has almost come to turn to the five cases introduced above. But before doing so, I will highlight a few more considerations regarding the methods I have used in this research. These will reflect my own narrative one could say and I like to believe that, in some ways, I myself was the sixth 'case' in my ethnography. Below, I will start with an experience from my fieldwork that encapsulates some of the difficulties of doing fieldwork in difficult circumstances and gives insight in the way I dealt with these difficulties. This brings us to Chapín, a poor and crime-stricken colonia that bears many of the same problems as Balcón Verde, the neighborhood from which Miguel fled after being extorted. In the two sections that follow afterwards – the last two of this chapter – I will discuss, respectively, the way I navigated access and relationships as an outsider and the responsibilities that rest on an ethnographer while embarking on the kind of project I had set myself to.

Dangerous knowledge

The morning of my second visit to Valentina in Chapín, the colonia had already found its way to me before I left my house. One of Guatemala's biggest newspapers reported on a gruesome incident in the area surrounding Chapín that had taken place the day before, in which a family of three had been murdered, the youngest of which was a three year old boy. It was something that, indirectly, was about to mark my visit to the neighborhood but little did I know when I got into the taxi. I had agreed to meet Valentina at the school in Chapín where she worked giving football training to local youth but as we

headed to Chapín, Valentina texted me to first come to a laboratory just outside the neighborhood where she was taking her pregnant sister. She did not feel too well, Valentina's message read and as I was about to find out, the same thing went for Valentina, who was discussing her high blood pressure with the woman behind the counter when I arrived at the lab. From the lab, Valentina's brother Paco drove us down to the school, into Chapín which turned out to be packed with what seemed an unusual amount of police officers and soldiers. It made for quite the contrast with Valentina's school – a collection of a few concrete-floored barracks and a concrete football court – which was empty when we entered it. We were collecting basketballs and footballs in a storage room for the twenty-something children we were expecting when Valentina's phone rang. "*La Pandilla*" (the gang), she said, sounding a bit worried, as she looked up to me from her phone.

The voice on the other side, as it turned out, belonged to a local gang leader who, in an attempt to stay out of the hands of the security forces in the neighborhood, was planning to escape Chapín via one of the *barrancos* (ravines) that shaped the colonia into an almost island-like place. To reach the ravine, however, he had to cross the sector where Valentina lived, which was a territory unknown to him as it belonged to the rival gang – because of this territorial division, Valentina had to go from one gang turf to another every day to get to work. He therefore wanted information from her about the area and, as he had seen us getting out of the car, also about the police presence we had encountered during our drive through the neighborhood. Valentina told him what she knew, advising him to use google street view (for a map of the territory) and to be "*trucha*" (vigilant, literally: trout), while trying to swallow up the word at the same time as it sounded an awful lot like the name of the enemy gang, La Mara Salvatrucha. The man then wanted to know from Valentina who the "gringo" was he had seen her entering the school with, to which she answered that I – the gringo – was a volunteer at the school. Lastly, he asked her about the whereabouts of someone in the neighborhood that was on the nomination to be killed by the gang – a *narco* (drug trafficker), as Valentina explained to me later. Again, Valentina tried to help him out, explaining him where she had last seen the person in question, her tone of voice careful and submissive instead of her usual bold tongue.

Standing next to Valentina, I had been able to follow the conversation with the gang leader quite well, as the dead quietness of the room and perhaps the settings of Valentina's phone added relief to the voice on the other side. "Did he have something to do with what happened yesterday?" I asked after the call had ended. Valentina nodded. The murdered couple were criminals, she explained. They were the grandparents as well as the caretakers of the boy, to then continue: "It is for the better that they killed the boy too. I know he didn't suffer. It wasn't a stray bullet, they killed him like this," Valentina stretched her arm, pretending to shoot. "One shot. What would a child like that have had in this world? He wouldn't have had anyone anymore. He would have been taken by the government. The child's name was Benjamín. What did this child do except for being born? The fact that I've come to the point of saying this hurts. I couldn't finish the article in the paper either. I thought of my own children. What if it had been them? That's the reason my blood pressure went up and doesn't go down anymore. On the one hand, I am standing here, but on the other hand," Valentina said while taking a step forward, "I am also here." She was a good person, she seemed to be telling me, but to stay alive she saw no other option than to comply with certain requests from the gangs. A few days later, Paco would describe his sister's life in between gang territories as a game of Russian roulette.

Valentina was visibly shaken by what she had told me. Unfortunately, my first reaction to her account was, without intending it to be that way, ingrained with moral judgement. "What you just said," I told her, "that the boy is better off dead – you can't say such a thing. It's a child." I thought of my own son as I said it, just as Valentina was maybe still thinking of her son and daughter. "But perhaps she's right, what kind of life would the boy have had there?" I wrote down that evening as I worked on my field notes, lamenting my misplaced first response to Valentina's opening up to me. The brutal killing, as well as Valentina's account, marked the dire circumstances in Chapín, where not granting a gang leader's request could usher in one's own death as well as the deeply entrenched distrust towards the state in such places. In Valentina's reasoning, apparently, if ever there was a safety network in the life of the boy, it was shot to pieces. What was left for him was the Guatemalan state and without anything to hold onto he would have sunk into its misery – a death, or life, more tragic than the violent ending of his life so shortly after it had started.

But the event also brought up important methodological questions. By staying in the room during the conversation (and actively listening, even asking questions afterwards), I had ended up with explosive information that was never meant for my ears. The question that now arose was: what would the gang leader do if he knew, or even had the slightest suspicion, that I had overheard the conversation? It could put Valentina's life at risk as well as my life – after all, he seemed to show little hesitation in ending someone's life, if he indeed had been a shooter in the triple homicide. After our short but intense talk, Valentina disappeared for about half an hour, or so it seemed, without saying anything. And as I appeared to be the only one left in the school, I found myself searching for escape routes if I were to be attacked by the gang – or wasn't this the reason why Valentina had left? I asked myself. The only escape route I could think of was running from the football court where I was standing towards one of the buildings to try to get on the roof (which seemed possible), although I had no clue how to proceed from there. It was something I held in mind when, at some point, the gate opened and a man came walking in my direction. Does he look like someone connected to a gang? I remember thinking as he approached me. He introduced himself, telling me he was a construction worker doing a job at the school – with his heavy built and dirty clothes he certainly looked like a construction worker. I said I was about to play some football with the local youth, trying to tell him as little as possible about my being there, and after we exchanged some superficialities, he went off. Not much later, children started entering and Valentina appeared again, and we embarked on the training as if nothing had happened.

But there was another issue that complicated my position in the neighborhood. What would the gang leader do if he found out I was not only a volunteer at the school, as Valentina had claimed (if I even classified as one after having given one training), but also a researcher? I had visited Chapín one time before, during which I had already introduced myself as a sociologist to residents, which I usually prefer over criminologist due to the unfortunate – and in my case, off-the-mark – associations with the police and police work the latter term tends to inflame (see also Peeters, 2013; Peeters & Hoey, 2017). Again, it seemed something that could potentially put Valentina in danger, for providing inaccurate information and having invited me to the neighborhood, as well as myself.

These were questions that occupied my mind in the days after my visit to Chapín. The case got even more complicated two days later when I met Valentina's brother for a coffee, which turned into a eight hour conversation about his past as a *sicario* (hitman) for a local gang, a recent shooting incident he had been involved in, and the inner demons he was fighting in present time as a result of his violent past. The next day, Valentina called me up to find out what her brother had told me about his past. According to Valentina, he refused to speak about it with anyone, so she was relieved to find out we had spoken about it at such great length (although I gave her no specifics of our conversation). Did Paco provide me with more explosive information, I remember thinking after we had hung up. What if he regretted telling me about his past? Moreover, during our conversation he had set out an ambitious plan for me to get to know Chapín – places he wanted to take me. Did I trust him enough to let him guide me around? I had certainly not trust him enough for him to bring me home after our conversation. Something on which he had insisted – reason for me to get into his car – but which I managed to steer into a different direction, literally, as I took advantage of the fact that we passed a shopping mall where I would be meeting someone else a few hours later. I asked him to drop me off there. And did I trust Valentina enough? They both seemed to have my interests at heart, good people caught in sinister circumstances, but how could I know for sure having only met Valentina and Paco twice? And then how to gauge the potential danger coming from the gang leader?

As these questions ran through my mind, I decided to WhatsApp my promoter Richard Staring, an anthropologist with years of fieldwork experience, with the somewhat undercooled message that I had “something” to discuss with him. A day later we connected through Skype. “This is a Timo I haven't seen before,” he told me after I had told him what had happened. “A Timo that is scared.” It was an observation that caught me off guard a bit. Richard was right, I know now, though at that time I had not been so sure about it. In fact, I denied it, although I can imagine that my somewhat shaky tone of voice gave Richard all the information he needed. Until then, however, I had kept my experiences in Chapín for myself. And even though I had felt uncomfortable with the thought of having to go back to Chapín – I had promised to give another football training the next week – not going back

had not been an option in my mind. Of course, I had to go back, not returning would be the easy way out. And then, wasn't this what being a criminologist in Guatemala City was all about? In my mind it was. Richard, however, opted for me to temporarily not go to Chapín anymore, telling me he was scared too, but for my sake, also adding that certain individuals within the university would want me to come back to the Netherlands would he inform them about my situation. I told him I would think about it, as we agreed to speak again a day later after I had asked Ester (as a Guatemalan) for her opinion on the matter. A day later Ester strongly suggested the same thing as Richard. It caused the idea of not going back to Chapín to gain more traction until it seemed the only sensible, even possible, thing to do also in my mind, which felt as a relief.

But how to tell Valentina and Paco about the change of plans? I decided to tell them that there were other cases that demanded my attention, which was true in the sense that there were many other cases for me to explore, but not the whole version of the story. Should I have instead told them the 'full' truth; that I could not know for sure if they were to be trusted; that I could not gauge the risks attached to my visits to the neighborhood regarding my safety as well as the safety of Valentina and even of Paco; that I did not know if they were the right people to estimate the risks for me as well as for themselves? It is a question I am still not able to answer and, as such, keeps representing an uncomfortable truth to me.

Clearly, the decision I was able to make marked the difference between researcher and respondent; between studying a person, as he or she struggles for being in a certain context, and being that person. From a practical perspective, it was a decision I was able to take relatively easy not just because I was still in the exploratory phase of my fieldwork during which I tried to get into as many cases as possible, to get a taste of the bigger picture. As such, it was a withdrawal whose implications were in no way to be compared with the flights of people like Miguel, who were forced to leave their whole existence behind after being extorted. It 'only' involved fieldwork in a country far away from my home and my family. At the same time, when it came to the dangers I was exposing myself to, I was left without an important sounding board as I did not feel comfortable telling my wife Vivina about things that would complicate my being in Guatemala even further (her being scared; or her asking me to come back). Meanwhile, the fact that my son Otis, who was

only eight months old the first time I went to Guatemala, was waiting for me at home raised the stakes of my fieldwork – the thoughts of him having to grow up without a father, me not being his father, were the most depressive ones during my time in Guatemala City. Fortunately, they were also thoughts I managed to keep from my mind most of the time, helped by the fact that my fieldwork in Guatemala City was by no means always as seemingly dangerous as that one day in Chapín – be that as it may, from a fieldworkers' perspective, fieldwork in a 'faraway' place is never only about 'being there' (Geertz, 1988), as is often suggested in literature, but also about 'not being there', that is, the being away from one's home, family and friends for a period of time.

But my decision to drop the case still left me with the question of what to do with the 'guilty knowledge' I had obtained (Polsky, 1967). After all, I was now aware of a local gang leader who may have been involved in a triple homicide and seemed to have plans to kill someone else. Having said this, what I pose here as a question was never a question to me, nor did I experience it as an ethical dilemma. I decided to not do anything with it. The information I possessed, even if true and unknown to the authorities, was vague at best. I had no names besides the one of Valentina and, even more importantly, it would have been Valentina's life I would put on the line in case I had reported what I had come to know. Not in the least because the police in Chapín and other gang-stricken colonias, as will also become clear in the chapter devoted to Miguel and his family, were often believed to work in collusion with gangs. Who could tell me then the information I would provide the police would not go directly to the gang?

Navigating access and relationships as an outsider

This dissertation is based on eight months of fieldwork in Guatemala City, divided over two periods of four months (from May to September 2016 and from February to June 2017). I had been less than a month in Guatemala City when the above happened. And looking back on it, it stressed the learning-while-doing situation I found myself in, which always characterizes fieldwork – why else bother to go into the field? – but especially when embarking on it as an outsider; a stranger not only to the lives of my respondents, but also, at least as an experience expert, to the force fields in which they led their lives, as

I had neither visited Guatemala City nor Guatemala before. The experience had provided me with a crash course on the complexity of life in some areas of the city, where the lines between doing good and doing bad may become blurred under the pressure of survival, and of doing fieldwork in such places. But as I did not continue my inquiry into the life of Valentina, although I kept in contact with her, I was left with one more question. Would I have been able to prevent my early retreat from the case by leaving the room the moment I found out in what direction the conversation over the phone was heading? Perhaps so, and this would have certainly been the textbook-thing to do in these kind of situations. But at the same time, even though I believe it was curiosity that kept me in the room during the phone call, I probably would have been unaware of certain dangers that may have awaited me in the (near) future had I left the room.

The above is to say, my fieldwork in Chapín, even though I had basically ended it before I had started, allowed me to get into my field, or at least a certain part of it, relatively quickly. But this was not the only thing that contributed to this. First of all, I was able to fall back on the experiences of my research in Quito, where I conducted prolonged fieldwork in a slum area and also did ethnographic research in an elite area (Peeters, 2013; Peeters & Hoey, 2017). Further, I profited from the fact that I am fluent in Spanish. Being able to understand your respondents and to converse with them is a basic requirement for ethnographic research. But when a language is not your native tongue, such as Spanish, in my case, it comes with the additional benefit that people tend to appreciate the fact that you speak it (and have taken the time to learn it). In some cases, I believe this gave me a head start, just as my predilection for Latin American folk singers, such as Mercedes Sosa, Victor Jara and Silvio Rodriguez did. Their songs were known throughout Latin American but, as Guatemalans and other Latin Americans alike tend to think (and not without reason), not in The Netherlands. I have always considered fieldwork to be a form of making friends for a living, which explains the beauty of the work but also the importance of finding some kind of connection with your respondents. In addition to this, I made long days in Guatemala, during which I often went from one respondent to the other, being stuck in traffic in between, and stuck with the obligation of having to write my field notes after a tiring day. Nights, in turn, were short nights of usually only three or

four hours of actual sleep because of the mind that kept processing what it had seen during the day, while the dark also provided me with the quietness I needed to determine my strategy for the next day or the period to come. Sleep deprivation and being exposed to the brutal sun sometimes caused the world to literally spin on me, although the excitement of being in Guatemala City usually kept my mind sharp (at least I hope so) and my feet on the ground. Just as the fact that I had divided my fieldwork into two period of four months did, as this gave me a long 'night' of almost six months during which I was able to get some rest, transcribe my interviews and really come to understand what I had seen during the first fieldwork period, to then start the second fieldwork period with fresh energy and new ideas.

As a starting point, I was also fortunate enough to be able to draw on a few Guatemala City residents I had already gotten to know during a former job at the Conflict Research Unit of a Dutch think tank, Clingendael, as well as on a number of people I had never met in person, but were nevertheless awaiting my arrival as we were connected through a chain of friendships and kinship, which had enabled me to contact them before my fieldwork started. It was how I ended up at Ester's place, but also how I came into contact with Alfredo, a Guatemala City resident who owned a private security organization and under whose guidance I worked as a private security guard on three occasions (a wedding, a business event and a sports event). Once in Guatemala City, I contacted organizations working with street people and others working in low-income areas. And through these people, as well as through other ways, I met many more people in many more places in Guatemala City. Especially in the beginning of my fieldwork, I tried to be all over the place, but as my fieldwork advanced I came to focus more and more on the four families and the group of street people I had singled out as my cases, through which I would be painting a more general portrait of life in Guatemala City.

How then did my being an obvious outsider, as a white man from The Netherlands, reflect on my fieldwork? Or to pose a more popular question: was my outsidersness an advantage or a disadvantage? They are questions that bear no clear-cut answers. There were advantages (some of them listed above), as well as disadvantages. My experience in Chapín shows perhaps the extra risks involved of engaging in 'ethnography at the edge,' to use a term issued by Jeff Ferrell and Mark F. Hamm (1998), when not already having been taught, or disciplined, by everyday life to automatically seek the safest way out in

situations of peril, or to immediately recognize the danger for what it is. This is to say, my relative newness to these kind of situations, even though I had done extensive fieldwork in a Quito slum, may have pushed me over the edge a few times, but it also allowed me to do the things I believed were necessary to get some kind of grip on the city I was studying as well as on the lives of my protagonists, and to make informed decisions about the course of my fieldwork. Having said that, it needs to be stressed again that even though fieldwork in a place like Guatemala City comes with obvious risks, most of the time it did not take place at or over the edge. First of all, and quite obviously, not all my protagonists lived their lives in dangerous, high crime areas. Second, as my experiences in places like El Castillo, Balcón Verde and Chapín show, and especially the things I did not experience in these places, there were obvious advantages I had over occupants of these areas. Not only was I able to stop visiting Chapín relatively easy, and would I have been able to withdraw from other cases as well if that had been necessary, but similarly, I was often able to take taxis where others had to take an unsafe bus and visit dangerous neighborhoods during what my gatekeepers considered to be relatively safe hours while also profiting from other advice they provided me with.

At the same time, many of the above advantages were not so much attached to my being an outsider but much more to my status as an ethnographer. Yet, I believe, there was also an important benefit specifically connected to my outsidership. Guatemala City residents, as will become clear throughout this research, tended to be highly distrustful towards fellow countrymen. But as it became apparent in my contact with my respondents, they seemed to drop part of this wariness towards people from at least some countries they considered to be distinctively different from their own, such as The Netherlands. My not being Guatemalan appeared to thus open doors, literally, and helped me with establishing long-term relationships based on trust with my respondents that created the conditions for them to further open up to me on sometimes delicate topics.

Ethnography, responsibilities and ethics

Fieldwork comes with all sorts of responsibilities for the ethnographer, most of which are held towards the respondents. This is even more the case, one can imagine, when a research centralizes around a limited number of people

whose lives are studied in an in-depth way. I have therefore always informed my respondents about my status as a researcher and the plans I had for my research. Meanwhile, many of the especially longer conversations I held with them were recorded, but only after I had asked them for permission to do so. But if not harming respondents is crucial in any ethnography, it only becomes more imperative in a context where harming someone so easily translates into bringing this person in danger, as the unfinished (or unrealized) case of Valentina already hints upon. This is something that has to be constantly taken into account when doing fieldwork, though, obviously, as ethnographers work towards some kind of reporting – usually a series of articles and/or a book – this responsibility stretches beyond this period.

The pen, as the ethnographer's 'weapon of choice,' is truly a powerful instrument, but it can point in all sorts of directions and become a weapon out of control, victimizing those it is supposed to protect. Consider, for instance, a story told to me by a former police officer in Guatemala City. As a police officer, he had published a photo of him and two gang members who were thinking of leaving the gang in a report on gang prevention in a gang-stricken colonia. According to the officer, the photo came to the attention of the leadership of the gang, who ordered the two gang members on the photo to be killed. One of them was indeed murdered and the other one managed to escape to Costa Rica, after which the gang killed his siblings instead. This, of course, is an extreme example of a publication gone wrong, although in this case by a police officer and not a social scientist, but it was not for nothing that Miguel's mother Esperanza warned me about publishing something about the maras, since this was dangerous, she said. It was a comment she had saved for the parking lot, after we had a long talk in a shopping mall, during which she had not been eager to discuss the maras in her colonia. And it was telling of Esperanza's selflessness that she seemed to be thinking about my safety as she said it, while any writings from my side on the subject could affect her as well, or especially her. To guarantee the safety of my respondents, I have chosen to use pseudonyms in the text where relevant. This particularly regarded first names and surnames, neighborhoods and sometimes also names of other entities that could lead to my respondents. The rule of anonymity did not apply to those who I spoke with in their capacity as, for example, a police chief or a local mayor. They were, however, made fully aware of the fact that what they said could be published.

In addition to this, the ethnographer is also tasked with giving a fair representation of the lives, situations and places under study. It is, of course, what justifies ethnographic research and what gives the ethnographer's writings its power. The form of the narrative I apply in this dissertation, I believe, provides space as perhaps no other form for telling the stories of my protagonists according to the rhythm of their pasts and presences. To understand the social microcosms of my protagonists, and the way they were embedded in the history, culture and political-economic structures represented by Guatemala City, I tried to live their lives with them as much as possible. This included observation, having long 'interview-like' talks and small chitchats, just as it included meeting their families and friends – sometimes with and sometimes without my respondent(s) – and visiting places with them they frequented. This, sometimes, also allowed me to cross-check information. On some occasions, I deliberately took my respondents out of their daily environment, especially when these were places where walls were said to have ears, such as in the gang-ridden Balcón Verde where Miguel's mother and sisters lived, or were non-existing, as with El Castillo, the home of the street people I followed. This way, I was able to let them speak more freely about delicate issues. In the case of Miguel, I also studied his online behaviour and the diaries he had given me for inspection.

Yet at the same time, despite my holistic approach of prolonged participation and method triangulation, it remains my view of the realities of my protagonists I present here. A result not only of eight months of fieldwork, but also of a long road of transcribing and analyzing, and a reflection of my choices and emphasis, both during my fieldwork and afterwards, as I earmarked some things and themes important in the lives of my protagonists and other less prominent or insignificant. To help me analyze over a thousand pages of transcribed interviews and more than five hundred pages of field notes, I have used data analysis software (ATLAS.ti). This, not to "quantify the qualitative" or to "digitalize *verstehen*" (Young, 2011, p. 22, emphasis in original), but to be able to identify themes and bring to the surface the way they are embedded in my data. Further, and I am inclined to say that this is the greatest merit of such a program, it also forced me to read all my material with a careful eye, become acquainted with it in a thorough way, while preventing me from glossing over passages of which I believed (and not always with good reason) to know the content upfront.

But no data analysis software could change the fact that the analysis has been one of my own hand; my presence in the field shaped the reality I have studied and the person I am helped determine the way I looked at it and wrote about it both in my field notes and in my dissertation. I have therefore chosen to not write myself out of the narratives, but instead, incorporate my voice in some instances to help the reader put the realities of my protagonists, as I present them, in perspective. This means that I will reflect on methodological issues also within the different chapters devoted to the narratives. The first narrative is now to come and brings us to where the opening passage of this work brought us, to El Castillo.

2. A Life in Danger

The Street People of El Castillo

Cast of characters

Abel; Barbilla;
Bautista; Chicle; Colin;
Daniel; Dylan; Franco;
Joshua; Nicolas
Marcos; Moisés; Oso;
Paloma; Pato; Sebolero;
Thiago; Tío; Tomás; Wayo;
Yoyo; and others
Joe; Bruno;
Julia; Gabriel; Chris, Ramiro:
Ignacio, Samuel:

The people of El Castillo

Social workers of El Samaritano

Social workers

What was called *El Castillo* (The Castle) was basically a collection of dirty mattresses, worn armchairs and other, more random things circulating on the spot, such as a lost, old and broken baby buggy. It was placed on a cracked concrete pavement, under a shelter roof dressed with razor wire. The latter too small to protect what was displayed below it from the brutal sun and heavy rains that Guatemala City skies harbored. The whole was set against a background of grey iron roll-down shutters that marked the backside of a hotel, although there was nothing from the El Castillo-side that gave away such a purpose. It could easily have been the backside of an empty building. During the day, the line of mattresses and chairs was usually enclosed by cars parked along the street, belonging to people that worked in the area. The street was small and generally quiet, with a few canteens, a barred store and an office building across the street from El Castillo that seemed little occupied. However, one only had to walk down the street to get to the first stores and bustle of the immense La Terminal market.

It is safe to say that El Castillo was not what anyone would picture when thinking of a castle, but then, more things at El Castillo were not what they seemed to be, or perhaps more accurately, not only what they appeared to be. The mattresses, naturally, were used to sleep on, but just as easily served as chairs. And when there was no wood to build a fire for cooking, their stuffing was ripped out to get a fire started and going, which gave a nasty, toxic smell.

The plastic buckets that lied around El Castillo were used to catch rainwater or get water in other ways, which in turn was used for washing and drinking, but they could also serve as stools or as pawns to reserve parking spots. Meanwhile, the plastic bottles that marked the location as much as the mattresses did were used to drink from, but more prominently, to store solvent (paint thinner) in, which was the drug of choice at El Castillo. The fumes of the solvent produced a high, which meant that it was typically inhaled, usually from a *mojón*, a little piece of cloth drained in solvent. Sometimes, by accident, it was drank though when the chemical substance was taken too eagerly straight from the bottle. It would startle even the most fervent user.

The biggest eye-catchers at El Castillo, however, were those that inhabited the place. A group of people is, of course, harder to describe than a collection of inanimate objects, but I will make a first attempt here, one that will be developed further throughout the chapter. To begin with, you had the old guard, such as Marcos, Tío, Chicle, Franco, Bautista, Yoyo, Paloma – one of the few regular women at the spot – and Moisés, the main solvent dealer of the group. I am pretty sure that they were all older than thirty, although age was not always a clear yardstick at El Castillo. When I once asked Marcos how old he was he paused for a second to then tell me he did not know it at that moment. Or to put it in his words, “to tell you the truth, that is something I don’t have in my mind right now.” He later showed me a copy of his identification which said that he was born in 1976, claiming he was the oldest at El Castillo. He might have been right. Among the younger generation were Pato, the other dealer of the group, Colin, Thiago and Abel. They were all around twenty years of age. And there were also minors hanging around at El Castillo, such as Joshua, age fifteen, Nicolas, age fourteen, and Tomás, age twelve. You had the ones that always seemed to be there, Marcos being perhaps the best example of it, and those that wandered in and around El Castillo such as Barbilla and Sebolero, who were never far away due to their dependence on solvent. The fact that El Castillo was a hotspot for solvent made it a coming and going of people looking to get high. But then there were those that visited El Castillo in the more traditional sense of the word, such as Moisés’ wife Mari and their four-year-old daughter Avigail. Moisés combined street life with having a home and a family – hence Mari and Avigail visiting – just like Paloma did, who hit the streets mainly to provide for her seven children at home.

A more arbitrary and unfair distinction I found myself automatically making was between those that I felt could still be saved – as a vague notion of transforming to a more conventional life – and those that seemed too far gone. To the first group I counted Joshua, a smart boy with a clear look on his face that had not been on the streets as long as some of the others, and Nicolas, who looked older than fourteen because of his guts and strong physique. And then there were people I could not see making the transition to a life off the streets anymore, either because they had been on the streets for too long, such as ‘old-timers’ Marcos and Moisés – who both started living on the streets at the age of five – or because their mental and physical state seemed too damaged, which, I guessed, was often also related to excessive drug use. People that, as the Guatemalan social worker Ignacio once said to me, walked in a “lost world.” People such as Domingo, an older man with delusions that walked on crutches after a nasty car accident; Oso, who usually crawled because he could not walk properly anymore; and Abel, a bag of bones that often seemed little responsive to his surroundings. When looking at the fragile build of the latter you wondered how he had managed to survive the streets until so far. The same went for Colin, whose thinness had something elastic due to his light gait and ability to make flips from the pavement onto the mattresses. Abel and Colin were both adults but looked no older than fourteen. When I visited El Castillo there were usually around ten people present, though this number could multiply by four or five at nighttime when they tended to clique together.

There were many more distinctions that could be made, but in the end it was not the differences but the similarities between the people of El Castillo that were most striking and in many ways more alarming. For a large part, this was due to the obvious fact that they were all living on the street. A street that takes, as will become clear throughout this chapter, with very few exceptions. Having said that, it is important to note that the street has things to offer as well. For one, a quick fix kind of escape from a troubled life. Many at El Castillo, if not all, came from broken or violent homes or ran away from other types of violence. The street, in turn, offered them possibilities to make money, to encounter community and love, and to score drugs: all important drivers for why many at El Castillo kept seeking the streets. Some of them oscillated between the home they were born into and the street, a balance that can only

last for so long and, in the end, usually tips to a life on the street. But crucially, the street never offers what it promises. Colin put it so well: “The street seduces you, right. A supposition: you have a woman and she’s your wife, right, and you fall for another woman, you’re tempted, right, and you start to caress her and give in to the temptation until the point that you sin and leave your wife. Isn’t that right? But afterwards, neither your wife nor the other woman wants you anymore. It’s like that... The street is like that, *va vos* (right man).” To understand the lives of the people at El Castillo is to understand the siren song of the street, without losing sight of its grim reality: that it is about survival and that death is always breathing down your neck.

Within such a hostile context, it should come as no surprise that the people of El Castillo also shared a dependence on social aid, of which I, intentionally but also unintentionally, became part. I had teamed up with two of the Christian-oriented social aid organizations that worked at El Castillo. I had gotten to know the place through Ignacio, a quick-to-laugh man with a Napoleonic stature who I often accompanied on his Thursday night visits to El Castillo and four other spots in and around La Terminal, where he talked about God and handed out food. I sometimes also tagged along on two other nights of the week during which he served street people in other parts of the city. In addition to this, Ignacio had founded a school in another marginal area of the capital that offered children with few resources a free education. But as my fieldwork proceeded, I also got increasingly involved with El Samaritano, an organization led by a big, robust Englishman by the name of Joe, whose ties to the people of El Castillo were more profound and versatile. El Samaritano did not give food to the people of El Castillo but tried getting them off the streets in other ways, which included focusing on developing a personal relationship with them. In addition to this, they had other programs directed at helping street children and at risk youth, as well as a mentoring center not too far from El Castillo. But most of the time, I visited the place alone just to sit and talk with them on their mattresses and observe what unfolded in front of my eyes.

Above all, the world that I encountered at El Castillo was a violent one. I will therefore devote a significant part of this chapter – the first five paragraphs – to this matter, examining, respectively, how violence marks the streets the people of El Castillo live on, the relationship they uphold with the authorities, their way of earning money, the relationship they have with their peers, and lastly – lacking walls and gates – the way violence is coped with.

At the same time, the lack of protection against violence is only the most obvious basic need the people of El Castillo were denied on a daily basis. This was first shown to me by a funny and brave young boy named Dylan, who colored my first visits to El Castillo. Looking back at it, it was him who drew me to the case of El Castillo. He always called on me when I came there, wanting to box with me or learn English words. He also got really disappointed in me once after I had skipped two Thursdays on coming to El Castillo. I had let him down and he responded to it by refusing to talk to me that day. The people of El Castillo, I propose in the second part of the chapter – or sixth paragraph (The struggle for visibility) – lived in a reality in which they were only rendered visibility as targets, but not as individuals with needs and desires. I probe into this issue by discussing the role social aid organizations and their members play in their lives. Dylan's part in it will be minimal though as he was taken by the police and put in a state home already during my first fieldwork period. It was not a comforting thought, knowing about the horrible reputation of such places. I never saw him again afterwards. But, throughout my fieldwork, I developed many other meaningful relations at El Castillo. "The door is always open for you," one of them had said to me with no trace of irony after I had first visited El Castillo alone. Door or no door, it was how I had experienced it. Through their friendship, their stories and the time they let me spend with them, I was granted a peek into their violent world.

The violence of the streets

I once had a lengthy conversation with Francisco, who had recently started working as a taxi driver after having spent forty years working for the city's fire department. One of his stories haunted me for a while, as it had haunted him in a much more severe way for over thirty five years. It was a February in 1980, he recalled while we were driving, when he was told by his chief to go to a spot just outside the city, from where he had to follow the orders of the police. When he came there, a police officer was waiting for him and Francisco's colleague alongside the road. He followed the man by car into an empty field full of parked cars without license plates – according to him a sign that they were used by death squads – until they stopped at a small bump in

the landscape, about two meters high, which they had to pass by foot. What was behind it was the cruelest image he would ever see in his life: sixteen children, piled up “as if they were wood.” He could not tell it without softly breaking into tears, trying to look away from me while keeping his eyes on the road. The oldest must have been around thirteen, he thought, but there were also children no older than six or seven. It turned out they were street children seized from La Terminal market and had all received a shot in the head. And as there were no blood trails towards the pile, he reckoned they were probably killed on the spot. “These children?” he had murmured his disbelief. “Don’t worry,” the police officer had said to him. “These children are the thieves of the future. It is better to kill them now than to let them grown up to become...” “But they are children,” Francisco had interrupted him. “Children that would shoot you!” the officer responded agitatedly.

The older ones at El Castillo that were already on the streets during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s had all been violently targeted by state police and para-police units participating in campaigns of social cleansing. Marcos had been beaten up multiple times by them, telling me that “for being blessed” he was still alive. He recalled one time when the police gave him a *capucha* (literally: hood), a torture technique that involved an airtight hood placed over the head, in his case, one rubbed in with *gamezán* (insecticide), so that he would tell on his friends. Nevertheless, it did not make him “sing the melody,” he said. There were times that you could not be “like this, in a group,” Moisés explained while we were standing at El Castillo, “because they would beat you up or shoot you.” A friend of his, thirteen-year-old Nahaman Carmona Lopez, had died in 1990 after being brutally beaten up by four police officers and spending the first thirty two hours in the hospital of San Juan de Dios without being seen by a doctor (Amnesty International, 1991; 1992). It was a rare case in the sense that it led to widespread international indignation and, as a direct result of this, many believed, a just as rare conviction of the police officers. Around the time of Nahaman’s death, similar cases had started to come to the light due to the crusader’s work of aid organization Casa Alianza, which had begun to embark on an unprecedented push to hold police officers accountable for their human rights violations, a move that also turned those that worked for Casa Alianza into targets for social cleansing groups as well (Amnesty International, 1992). At that point, abuses and even killings of street children had already been commonplace for years.

Moisés himself nearly escaped death as a child when he and a few friends were dragged in a car by what he thought were members of a death squad. They were hung from a tree in a nearby park. While they were choking, wriggling and writhing to stay alive, the men had said they would do the same thing to their children in the future, to then cut them loose and beat them up. By then, he already had become acquainted with the viciousness of the street. As a young boy, he told me, he saw two of his friends getting killed after witnessing a man violating a woman in a small street in La Terminal. "And for looking he shot them. It was the saddest thing in my life, to see two *compañeros* (companions) of us, of the street, die. And I started running, 'who can help me? Help! Help!' but as I was little no one paid attention to me." When he returned to his friends, he started crying at the sight of them lying dead on the ground. The residents that had come out to the crime scene then turned on him. "They started to kick me, the people that lived there. They said, 'kid, get out of here,' they kicked me, 'we don't want to see you around there,' they said to me. But really, it was the saddest thing, my remembrance of that moment. They cornered me, they tied me up, they started to kick me, to hit me, a crowd of people, and they left me there." In the end, he was untied by people of a children's home, who brought him to the hospital.

When the younger generation at El Castillo hit the streets they encountered different circumstances. A civil war marked by state-sponsored violence had made way for a situation in which violence diffused into the hands of the masses and gained an increasingly criminal and urban character. Guatemala City had become a city of gangs, organized crime, vigilant justice and security guards. Lacking walls that delimited some sort of private territory, the people of El Castillo seemed vulnerable to almost all kinds of violence and abuse the city had to offer. It was the scars on their bodies, the bullet and knife marks, that showed the multiplicity of dangers they ran every day. Colin, visibly one of the most battered boys, was most prominently marked by a scar left by a breathing tube that was placed in his trachea, just below his chin, after he was stabbed about a dozen times while sleeping at El Castillo. An attack that had adorned his body, along which his neck, with other scars as well. Before it happened, Colin explained to me how two guys had asked him if he wanted go for something to eat. He did not trust them and told them that if they wanted to buy him food they could bring it to him. Not expecting them to return, he

fell asleep to suddenly wake up finding one of the guys wildly stabbing him. They left him for dead. In the public hospital of San Juan de Dios, he almost lost the hand with which he defended himself, he said, if it was not for Joe, who brought him to a private hospital after they wanted to amputate it. Ever since the violent event, he had stopped sleeping at night when on the street. It had left him with the fear, as he put it himself, “that something is going to happen, that I have to watch everything around me, because as I say, perhaps someone is going to see me, that knows me and that is going to hurt me again. Like he did, right.” Instead, Colin mostly slept during the day when he felt safer. Three years after the violent event, just before I came to Guatemala the first time, disaster struck again when he was shot in the back, after a man had opened fire on him and his two friends, one of them being the mother of Marcos’ child. Colin was the only one that survived. The ‘official’ story told by him was that they were begging at traffic lights and a guy had started shooting at them for no reason, but he later said that he blamed the other two for being shot himself, claiming they had been robbing people.

Many others at El Castillo had been shot or stabbed too. Marcos had been in wheelchair for a while after being gunned down by a *marero* (gang member) during a football match. Franco was shot in the head twice, he told me, and took a bullet in his wrist, which went in and out, adding that he himself was shooting as well. And Moisés was shot in his foot from out of a car after he had robbed the wallets of a few women. In response, he had a peculiar way of walking, with a dip and one of his feet swaying to the outside, which in combination with his thin legs and slim posture, gave his gait a light touch, as if he was wading on air. Meanwhile, scars in his neck provided him with daily memories of a knife attack by what he believed were *mareros*. He spent three days in coma, and almost died – a second time – when the wound got infected.

Scars provoked by violent events, however, always run deeper and sometimes physical pain can even provide some sort of relief for the more aching grief slashing the soul. Moisés’ partner Mari had long lived on the streets as well and started to harm herself after her two-year-old son was abducted in Zone 1 ten years ago. She never saw him again. It was scar on scar on her forearms, as if they had welled up from inside her body by lack of tears left to cry. She used her visits to Moisés at El Castillo together with Avigail sometimes also to get high on solvent, a habit she had not been able to shake

off when she started to live in a house. It was a quick fix to the “incredible sadness” she felt. Occasionally, on moments that Mari was too high to get back, she and Avigail even stayed the night at El Castillo. It seemed a matter of waiting for another tragedy in her life. She had already almost lost Avigail once when the latter was two years old and a group of thugs tried to steal her from Moisés’ arms just outside El Castillo. He fought back with everything he had and in the end managed to hold on to her. But for how long? Seeing a cute little girl with two ponytails happily frolicking among dried up cloths drained in solvent scattered over the pavement and surrounded by people high on the same chemical substance, it seemed a matter of time before something bad would happen to her. And then there were the people of the General Prosecutor’s Office (*Procuraduría General de la Nación*, PGN²⁵) – the state institute charged with the protection of the rights of children and adolescents – from whom Mari narrowly escaped already once, when they saw her with Avigail at El Castillo. She had grabbed Avigail and had started running. If the PGN would have gotten their hands on Avigail that day, they would have likely placed her in a state home for at least a while.

Violence and the threat of it kept swarming El Castillo also during my time in Guatemala. At one point, there even seemed to be a serial killer active who was out for street people blood and had made several victims in the surroundings of La Terminal, although, luckily, no one from El Castillo. In September 2016, one man was arrested for at least two killings, after a series of twenty-three assassinations and violations, sixteen of which following a similar pattern (Estrada Tobar, 2016). According to one article, the majority of the victims were found with their pants down (Castañón, 2016). Furthermore, Franco was stabbed in his belly, showing me a big stain of dried up blood on his pants two days after the attack. He was asking people for money when two guys he identified as *mareros* approached him. One of them then stabbed him. Thiago had found him at the gas station near El Castillo covered in blood. He had told him to go the hospital, but as he refused – he did not think it was necessary – they went to the policlinic together. Meanwhile, Jerónimo and Paco, two men that sometimes stopped by El Castillo, were shot in the head at the La Terminal market most likely by members of a protection unit invoked by the vendors of the area. They were called *sicarios* (hired assassins) by the El

²⁵ Similar to the Solicitor General's Office in the United States.

Castillo people, but the group was known to the general public as the *Ángeles Justicieros*, the Angels of Justice. Miraculously, they both survived the attack. There were many stories going around of what happened that day, but most prominent was the version that they had been blacklisted by the sicarios – meaning that they were warned before to never come there again – after they had been suspected of stealing. Something which they had ignored. Or so it seemed. The presence of the sicarios was reason for some people at El Castillo to not visit La Terminal. Paloma did not dare to set a food in the market as her husband, who was imprisoned during my time in Guatemala, was on such a blacklist as well, she told me. And Nicolas, who grew up inside La Terminal and still had a place to sleep there, only sometimes visited La Terminal at night time, when the stalls and many of its stores were closed and the sicarios did not work. His restraint to go there was only temporary though. He had been forced to shave his head because of lice, which, in combination with his tattoos – he believed – made him look like a gang member. It was a dangerous association having the sicarios around.

Crucially, the violence the people of El Castillo experienced was flanked and supported by less bloody, though not necessarily less hurtful, forms of maltreatment. Many of the people at El Castillo complained about being discriminated or humiliated by people. People look at you as if you are “plague-infested,” as Colin put it. Especially while trying to make money on the streets, often by asking people for money, they had to deal with threats and curses being hurled at them: “don’t you have work to do, kid!”; “get out of here or I will kill you!”; “if I see you here again I will shoot you!” Or they were treated as ghosts, Barbilla said, something which was complicated by the fact that they very much depended on the generosity of the outside world, as will be later discussed. And sometimes they were treated as a curiosity, as I found out on two occasions when people stopped from a distance to secretly, or not so secretly, take pictures of us, as if they were taking pictures in a zoo. These were things that happened more often, Mari’s sister Mariela told me, “probably for magazines and stuff like that.”

What may have helped lower the barrier for maltreating the El Castillo people was that many of them were indigenous or, not unlikely, were seen as such anyway for their darker (suntanned) faces and destituteness, characteristics often associated with the indigenous in Guatemala City. Not coincidentally,

this also goes for crime, and gangs in specific (Dickins de Girón, 2011; Camus, 2011). Having said this, few people at El Castillo directly attributed the maltreatment they suffered to their being indigenous or the possibility of being identified with it as such. Only the “*pesados*” (literally: heavy ones), Mari said, referring to the indigenous on the street with traditional clothes and hair style, tended to complain about being discriminated for being indigenous. Few people at El Castillo, however, were so openly indigenous in their appearance. Barbilla, as a seeming exception, wore a necklace and bracelets that were “a Maya thing,” as he put it, but nevertheless believed that no one at El Castillo even knew he was indigenous. He did, however, refrain from wearing traditional earrings. It was because of the police and the mareros, he said. “You put yourself at risk with those. Mareros wear earrings as well. If you wear one here,” pointing to his left ear, “you are a [Mara] Salvatrucha. If you wear one in your right ear or in both you are [Barrio] 18. If the mareros see you like that they could attack you. The same goes for the police, thinking you are marero.”

What strikes out in contemporary Guatemala as it did during the armed conflict years was the low threshold for the use of violence on street people. The streets on which the El Castillo people resided are marked by violence that knows no boundaries, no off-limit targets and no sanctities. And although the state, by far the biggest aggressor during the armed conflict, seemed to have lost control over both the means and the direction of the violence in the country in present times, the present relationship between the state and local authorities, on the one hand, and the people of El Castillo, on the other, is still one marked by violence. For one, because the transformation of violence in the hands of private security, gangs, lynch mobs and other violent non-state actors is intrinsically linked with the operation, or absence, of the state. But in addition to this, whenever the relationship between the people on the street and the authorities got a more face-to-face feel – most prominently when the latter acts in the capacity of a state home or the police – it not infrequently resulted in violence. It is this relationship that will take center stage below.

The violence of the absent state

When I asked El Samaritano social worker Julia on the seventh of March 2017 if she knew where Dylan was, she told me he was in the state home of

Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción (Safe Home Virgin of the Assumption), and then added that she did not know whether she preferred children on the street or in such a home. It seemed a bold claim to me at first, but it did not take long for me to find out just how legitimate her skepticism was. Later that day, a group of at least sixty adolescents escaped the same home Dylan had also been assigned to (Prensa Libre, 2017). Apparently, that night one of the neighbors of the state home had seen girls throwing rocks at the staff and the police while yelling: “Rape us here, in front of everyone. Come here and rape us, then, if you want to do it again!” (Goldman, 2017). In response to the revolt, a group of fifty-two girls had been put under lock in a school room, when, according to an eye-witness, one of the girls lit a mattress on fire. A fire broke out that lasted for twenty-five minutes during which no one had unlocked the girls. Nineteen of them died at the scene, a number which increased to forty-one a year later. It was a tragedy etched with blood in the collective memory of the country. For those already familiar with the situation in the state homes, however, the event could hardly have been a surprise, although its cruelty shocked everybody. In 2013, members of the state facility had been condemned for sexual violence and a year before the fire, the home had been reprimanded by a family-court judge for, amongst other things, “punishments that amounted to torture” (Goldman, 2017). It was a place where, according to the words of one public prosecutor, “everything happened. Homicides, sexual aggressions, mistreatment” (López Vicente, 2016). So much for the ‘Safe Homes’. The state homes were, as Joe put it, “the end of the road for kids that nobody wants, nobody cares about, and so, however they’re treated, no one’s gonna bother.”

Many of the people at El Castillo had spent time in such homes, some of them years, and almost just as many had tried to escape them. This included Colin who managed to escape it once in response to the strict way he was treated there, which included being served horrible food and being locked up and doing exercise as ways of punishment. Life in a state home was extra hard for him because of the fact that the other kids there were much bigger than him. A week after his escape, however, he was brought back to the state facility, after the PGN caught him at El Castillo while he was inhaling solvent with Moisés. He spent a year in the state home in total, to then move back in with his mother, with whom he had a troubled relationship. His experience at the

state facility had made him even more rebellious, he told me. “I wanted to do what I wanted to do,” he said. He managed to stay at home for a month, before he hit the streets again. The fact that the children at El Castillo ran the risk of being sent to such homes also made that many of them tried to hide whenever a police car passed by.

At the same time, the state homes only focused on minors and, as such, many of the people at El Castillo had outgrown their radar. The police, the other prominent face of the system in their daily lives, in turn, were a more constant and continuous factor and source of violence the people on the street had to deal with. As detailed above, the older ones such as Moisés and Marcos received capuchas from the the police or parapolice forces. Moisés, in more recent times, also got robbed by an officer of the National Civil Police (*Policía Nacional Civil*, PNC), who had taken from him three hundred quetzals he claimed to have made with washing cars, telling him that he had stolen it. There were many similar stories. The clearest threat for the people of El Castillo, however, came from the Municipal Police (*Policía Municipal*), an institution steered by the mayor and whose actions towards the street people seemed to reveal the municipality’s agenda towards them. Their job, as the website of the municipality tells us, was “safeguarding that the assets of the city that are part of the people’s daily scenario of life” (Muni Guate, n.d.).²⁶ One of its objectives, it reads, was to “save the public space the informal economy occupies in sectors attractive for their activities in different zones of the city” (Muni Guate, n.d.).²⁷ Joe once tried to explain to me the difference between the two institutions from the perspective of the El Castillo people: “I think most of them would say, if they’re honest, most *Policía Nacional Civil*, PNC, most of those police officers won’t do anything to them, unless someone has done something illegal, then they’ll come, and they’ll be coming heavy handed. The municipality will come in just to annoy them.”

One particular event was mentioned repeatedly by the people of El Castillo when discussing their relationship with the police. It was an early morning in May 2015 when the Municipal Police arrived at El Castillo. They

²⁶ Original quote in Spanish: “servir salvaguardando los bienes de la ciudad que se constituyen en el escenario de la vida cotidiana del vecino capitalino” [Translation TP].

²⁷ Original quote in Spanish: “rescatar el espacio público que la población de la economía informal ocupa diariamente en los sectores atractivos para sus actividades en diferentes zonas de la ciudad” [Translation TP].

were all still sleeping, Colin told me, when they were suddenly being sprayed by a water cannon, with police officers yelling “get up, get up, take your stuff or we will take it!” The Municipal Police had used the water cannon on them more often, sometimes in the middle of a cold night just to make life harder on them, but that morning they had seemed to set their minds on clearing the spot of all that reminded of their presence. On what happened then, I heard different versions. Colin, who seemed to enjoy telling about what appeared to have been a heroic fight from his words, spoke about a fight from eight in the morning until twelve in the afternoon, where the police beat up everybody they could get their hands with sticks while they responded with throwing rocks at the police and their vehicles, breaking the window of one of them. Others like Thiago and Joshua complained about the fact that many of their comrades ran from the police and did not hold their ground. Everybody at El Castillo agreed, however, that there had been violence from both sides after they had refused to leave from El Castillo. This culminated in one of the police officers putting a gun on the head of the then fourteen-year-old Joshua, telling him, as the latter put it himself, “that he was going to kill me.” The same police officer had then threatened another boy, a seventeen-year-old who had lost an eye once after being shot in the head, that he would come back to remove his other eye. In the end, the belongings of the El Castillo people were loaded into a bulldozer to be never returned. The fact that there were so many mattresses at El Castillo by the time I came to Guatemala was mainly due to the fact that the event had received some media attention, which resulted in random people passing by to give them mattresses they did not use anymore and other stuff they thought came in handy.

The eviction was part of a broader array of violent tactics and practices employed by the Municipal Police. More recently, Tío, an older man with a crippled hand and foot, was sprayed with tear gas and beaten up by a female officer at El Castillo after someone had accused him of stealing. Tío, however, assured me that he had not done anything. And, apparently, there was visual evidence supporting his claim of innocence, as someone had filmed the violent event with his phone. It was “without reason,” Bruno of El Samaritano, who had seen the video, told me, to then come back on it: “Without reason, I mean, what happens is that they look for a reason to beat them and remove them.” The bigger plan behind the bullying of the Municipal Police, Joe also believed,

was to completely remove them from there. “Because I don’t think the mayor [Álvaro Arzú] is keen on having [them] in his city, his view of Guatemala City is the view where ‘this is my *finca* (plantation).’ So, you know, it’s that family thing, like ‘this is my finca. I manage my finca, so you do what I tell you to do, and I run it as I want to run it, but it’s all neat and tidy and looks great.’ As we know, when you go to these big farms, and behind all that there’s some pretty horrible things happening. [...] It’s the same here. So he doesn’t want to have people seen in the street, he doesn’t like that idea. So he’s trying to clean things up.”

Bruno and Joe’s comments did not come out of thin air. Because of his bold and confrontational style of ruling, seemingly placing himself above the law, some commentators believed that Mayor Álvaro Arzú saw Guatemala City, or even the country, as his finca (see for instance Marroquín Godoy, 2018 or Escobar, 2018). Entirely in character with this characterization, he did not seem to eschew the use of violence in ‘cleaning’ the city, to stick with Joe’s words. This could also be seen in the Centro Histórico (Historic Center) in Zone 1 where the municipality had teamed-up with other authorities and the private sector not long after Arzú took office as Mayor in 2004. Their plan was to renew the area that had once been the seat of the elite in Guatemala but now had been reduced to a place marked by poverty and violence that had become a key spot for Guatemala City’s informal economy. The revitalization of the area, which as Rodrigo J. Véliz and Kevin Lewis O’Neill (2011, p. 84) argue, resulted in the “the exclusion of certain people and goods from supposedly public places,” also included the forcible displacement of street vendors working in the informal system. A measure with dramatic consequences not only for those selling their merchandise on the streets but also for the many city dwellers that relied on them for affordable products. It led to a battle with many promises broken and multiple violent clashes between alleged street vendors and the authorities over time. This situation took a worrying turn in June 2016 when Arzú called on the authorized vendors of Plaza Amate, a place where former street vendors had been relocated after applying for a license, to violently remove those that sold their products in the area without authorization, saying that his own hands were tied by human rights. “If the Municipal Police would remove them with sticks it is a human rights violation, but if you guys would do it yourselves there would be no problem. So I will give your *leños* (pieces of wood) and vests of the municipality to kick them out of here. You’re going

to help me with this.”²⁸ It was a joke, as Arzú himself declared when he stood in front of a judge for having incited violence on the informal vendors, only showing up at the ninth citation (Juárez, 2017). Arzú won his case, but a few months after the event at Plaza Amate, the anti-riot unit of the Municipal Police violently clashed with street vendors when the former tried to clear another part of the Centro Histórico (Santos, 2017; Prensa Libre, 2016d).²⁹

The municipality’s actions at El Castillo and at Plaza Amate seemed to adhere to the similar logic of removing unwanted elements from the city’s landscape. I tried to get someone from the Municipal Police to talk to me about this issue but when I visited the headquarters of the Municipal Police in the basement of the National Palace in Zone 1, they referred me to the Office of Social Development (*Oficina de Desarrollo Social*). From there I was sent back to the National Palace to the local mayor’s office the moment I asked about the violence between the Municipal Police and the El Castillo people. Five days later, I had an appointment with Alessandra Lossau, a woman in her early thirties who had assumed the position of local mayor in the beginning of 2016. The Municipal Police’s action, she told me, referring to the violent clash in May 2015, had been solicited by the Public Prosecution Service (*Ministerio Público*), because of their “knowledge of loads of illegalities that took place there.” During our conversation, she kept stressing that El Castillo was a “red zone” and “super dangerous,” advising me to talk to the head of the PNC of the zone El Castillo was situated, since “they were the ones that dealt with the theme of the people on the streets,” or at least in theory, they were. The local mayor’s words confused me. Why then had the Municipal Police been so busy keeping after the people of El Castillo? By then, I had already spoken to the head of the PNC of Zone 4 and 9, who claimed that he had yet to receive the first complaint or report concerning the people of El Castillo. He believed that the people living and working near El Castillo were already adapted to the situation since it was a problem that had been going on for years. At the same time, he had only assumed his position three months before I spoke to him.

²⁸ Original quote in Spanish: “Ojo, se nos están metiendo allí otros [vendedores]. Si la Policía Municipal los saca a garrotazos es violación a los Derechos Humanos, pero si lo hacen ustedes mismos allí parte sin novedad. Entonces les voy a dar unos sus leños y unos chalecos de la Muni para que los vayan a sacar a morongazos. Me van a ayudar a mí en eso” (see for instance Prensa Libre, 2016b) [Translation TP].

²⁹ Arzú died in the hospital on 27 April 2018, after he had a heart attack while playing golf with friends.

In any case, the local mayor claimed, the policy of the municipality had not been directed to evict the people of El Castillo. "Legally they have no right to be squatting, because it is a squatter settlement. But we understand how reality works, I mean, if we remove them there, where will they go? One block down the road." Instead, she highlighted the "perfect" work of Joe, claiming that they had helped him with "a lot of things." According to her, supporting private sector programs was perhaps the only possible way for them to work with the people of El Castillo. "Because if we would go to them with our municipal vests, I think they would pull out a gun on us and leave us there. Because they're going to believe that we want to remove them." In addition to this, intervening directly as the local authority would mean that they would have to report on every crime they encountered, because if not, she stressed, the people of the municipality would be the ones going to jail.

Joe, however, spoke less positively about the 'help' he received from the local authorities. In practice, he indeed found himself to be an intermediary between the municipality and those on the streets, but, in contrast to what the local mayor had claimed, not in a positive way: "Most of it has been, I have to intervene, to protect the interests and rights of those on the streets." He had also been called by Joshua immediately after the battle with the police and had chased the police to find them dumping the personal possessions they had just taken from the El Castillo people. Once there, he had photographed the badge of the police officer who had allegedly threatened to shoot Joshua, entering in a verbal fight with him, telling him to do the same thing to him. "Come on!" Perhaps for the greater good, it never got to that point, as the two of them were pulled apart. In the aftermath of the incident, Joe had brought the case to the attention of the British Embassy, the Human Rights Office, the Public Prosecution Service and also of the municipal government. But nothing happened, he told me. He had raised the issue again when the municipality called him about a year before I sat down with him to talk for a project that would involve jobs for the people at El Castillo. "[...] they said, you know, 'we want to work with you, to try to remove the guys of El Castillo, because it's not good for them to be there, it's not good for the image, the mayor doesn't like that. You know, can we get them into jobs? You know, what positive things can we do?' So I said: 'Very happy to engage, but I wanna know that you're dealing with this guy, this guy has got to be... Whether or not he is prosecuted,

but somebody should meet him and say: You need to be retrained, because you can't go around doing this.' And they said: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' but since then nothing has happened." Something may have happened though, without Joe realizing it, as the above incident had also been the last time the Municipal Police had drenched the belongings of the people at El Castillo with a water cannon and tried removing them. "After it happened they didn't say anything to us anymore," Colin told me. "[...] they didn't say anything besides, 'ok guys, don't go out harassing people.'"

The alleged job program for the people at El Castillo the municipality had been talking about did not go as wanted either. El Samaritano had two meetings with the municipality about the project, which, if successful, the municipality claimed, would be expanded to other groups in the city. They had asked Joe and Bruno to talk to them, and especially leaders such as Marcos, to see if they were interested – which they were. The municipality had then promised El Samaritano to come up with more concrete plans but never came back at them. But as Joe had already got Marcos and the others enthusiastic about the plans, it resulted in the kind of broken promise that came at the cost of the trust that he and other El Samaritano workers built with them: "So then I feel, here again is another person or organization that has promised something, but doesn't deliver. It happens over and over again," Joe complained.

In the same period, Joe was invited by the local mayor of La Terminal and Patricia Arzú, the Mayor's wife and founder of what are said to be two first class schools for poor children, to see a property in La Terminal where the municipality wanted to build a huge center, which included a school for street people, telling Joe they wanted him to run it. The plan for the center got cancelled, however, apparently after the local mayor had received a string of death threats in response to it. Curiously, according to Joe, the municipal government had wanted to use the center as a means to attack the prostitution in the area as regulations prohibit such activity in the proximity of a school.

During our conversation, the local mayor was not all that positive about the way aid organizations tried to help the El Castillo people and other groups, sharing a concern that is worth mentioning, although it is outside the reach of my research to get to the bottom of the issue. Part of the problem of the people on the streets, she believed, was that many organizations simply handed them food without expecting anything in return, this way taking away the incentives

of leaving the streets. In fact, El Samaritano was the only organization, she explained to me, which actually tried to get the people of El Castillo off the streets: “But institutions that give them money, that give them food, that give them clothing, it doesn’t work. It’s more harmful than helpful, right,” she said. In response, the local mayor argued, many of them pass on possibilities that could bring about a transformation to a more conventional life. “If there is anyone that knows their rights, it is them. They have it very clear. [...] Yes, they surely know where to go to ask for help, but they are not interested, because they are very well there. They do not have to pay taxes, they do not pay for services, they get food, they get a haircut, they send them money and they give them a lot of other things that also gives them feedback: why would I leave here?”

It was a popular belief voiced more often, one that unjustly portrayed the lives of the people in the streets as a walk in the park. If living on the street was indeed a free choice, as the local mayor seemed to claim, it was one that resembled a “Me and Bobby McGee-ish” type of freedom that equaled a state of having “nothing left to lose,” as the song famously performed by Janis Joplin goes. It was a view that overlooked the troubled lives many at El Castillo had lived before they hit the streets, as well as the myriad of other barriers that prevented them from leading a more conventional life. And it was dangerous as such. One only had to look at the scarred faces and bodies of Colin, Abel or Moisés – if one did not want to look further – to know that street life was no rational choice.

Yet her concerns regarding the counterproductiveness of some aid were shared by the people of El Samaritano. “You got to teach them how to fish, instead of giving them a fish right away,” Bruno once paraphrased a lesson learnt from the Bible, to then add, “I think, well, everybody thinks differently. And other organizations think differently.” He was talking about Ignacio, among others, to whom he had reached out once in an attempt to craft more holistic and synchronized aid for the people of El Castillo and other groups they both worked with. In the process, El Samaritano had built close relationships with Mojoca, which offered street children, amongst other things, the possibility to follow an education. But with Ignacio he had less success. The latter had told him, Bruno said, “that he was more of an action guy than a meeting type of guy.”

Indeed, Ignacio was clearly keen on doing his own thing. When I once sat down with him for a cup of coffee in a luxury shopping mall in Zone 10 – quite a change from the dark streets I usually scoured with him – he told me that “when you have a vision, you cannot let anyone control your vision. [...] I don’t allow anything to divert me from what God has already given me.” It was reason for him for not wanting to work with others, whether social aid organizations or the authorities. The food, he told me as he had told me before, was a means to build trust. He agreed that if it would end there, it would be wrong. His principal job, however, was to get the people on the street to know God and accept God as their savior, which would bring salvation in the afterlife, he believed. As an atheist, of course, I held a different opinion. At the same time, Ignacio added, there were also elderly in the streets that could not provide their own food. “If there would be a home for the elderly where we could bring them, then that would be the final solution, but at least for now we will not let them die,” he said. I understood his point, as I understood Bruno’s and, to a certain extent, the local mayor’s complaint as well. It was in this blend of violence, biases, prejudices and, indeed, the occasional free meal, that people of El Castillo tried to make a living on a daily basis and fulfil, at least, their most basic needs.

The violence of earning

Every Thursday, Ignacio stopped by El Castillo with *atole* (a hot and sweet corn drink), soup and sandwiches. On Friday there was a sister that handed out food and on Saturday there was a truck stopping in the morning that brought soup, tortillas and beverages. Later that day, someone usually stopped by to hand out plates of beans, eggs and cheese, and a coffee. On other days no one came, besides a woman who passed by once every fifteen days to give them food and something to drink or groups that visited on a more irregular base. All of those that stopped by at El Castillo to hand out food did so with a Christian motivation. At the same time, for about five or six quetzals, one could buy a decent meal on the streets. And a cooked meal was even cheaper. They often went looking for ingredients such as potatoes, tomatoes and peppers at La Terminal to make a *caldo* from, as well as for wood to make a fire with. It meant that often only the tortillas had to be bought. To be able to do

so, those present at El Castillo were expected to chip in one or two quetzals if they wanted to join the meal. "From hunger they aren't going to die anymore," Ignacio once told me, explaining me that there were way more organizations today than before to which people on the street could turn to for food. "And they also know where to get clothes right."

But for many, it was not the hunger that was drove them onto the streets every day in search for ways to make money. In a Human Rights Watch report of 1997, it was said that ninety percent of the street children in Guatemala were addicted to chemical inhalants. It was to kill the "pain, hunger and desolation," the report (Human Rights Watch, 1997, p. 9) noted. Given the kind of assembly point El Castillo was, a place where people from the area stopped by to buy solvent, this percentage seemed even higher at El Castillo, where everybody except for Marcos – who restricted himself to alcohol and weed – seemed to be using solvent. Some only limited it to a few times a day, others, such as Abel, gave the impression that they tried to get high as much as possible. Tellingly, Moisés, the major solvent dealer at El Castillo, was the biggest earner of the group, earning three to four hundred quetzals a day, he told me. One could get high for one quetzal, but usually clients ordered for two or three quetzals worth of solvent. Often to then come back later. As a result, he usually had an impressive pile of paper bills and coins at the end of the day. Still, it was not exactly a fortune, he stressed, referring to all the expenses he had. He rented an apartment in a marginal settlement on the road to the town of San Pedro Ayampuc, just outside of Guatemala City, which costed him four hundred quetzals a month, but five to six hundred quetzals if you also included utilities and cable television. He also had to provide for his wife Mari and four-year-old daughter Avigail from it. And then there were the costs for traveling to and from his house, not only for himself but also for his wife and daughter who visited him almost every time he stayed at El Castillo. Moisés himself went home every other day to also spend the night there. It meant that he had to leave his business in the hands of what he called "people of trust" such as Marcos. "But then you lose the profit," he told me. "So it's better to be there yourself."

The coins and one quetzal bills Moisés received in return for solvent often came out of the pockets of people that traversed the area either by foot or by car, as the most common way of earning money at El Castillo was through

begging or cleaning car windows at flash lights. I often passed by Abel when I got off the Transmetro to walk to El Castillo. Sometimes he was asking people for money, sometimes he was just sitting or lying on the street. The visibly handicapped Tío often begged at the flash lights, just as El Chero did, who had lost an eye and an arm in a bombing during the civil war in his native country El Salvador. The latter told me he lived “in a house built by gringos” two, three hours outside of Guatemala City, but came to the capital to be with his “street family” at El Castillo and to work. He had lived a violent life, in which he had moved from El Salvador to the United States, to El Salvador again, and then to Guatemala, where he claimed to have spent sixteen years in prison for murder. He had been in many prisons and was “one of the old ones” in the gang game, he said. By then he had already taking off his shirt to show me the three bullets marks on his tattooed chest. He had changed his life though, he explained. “It doesn’t make sense to rob people,” he said while shaking his belt bag, producing a sound of chinking coins. “Just from the flash lights. You don’t have to rob people, you can just ask them. They will give it to you.” When I ran in to him another time working the flash lights not too far from my house in Zone 10 he told me he made six thousand quetzals a month. Although it seemed an exaggeration – it would mean that he earned almost three times the average monthly income in Guatemala³⁰ – his handicap appeared to work in his advantage while begging for money. Perhaps for obvious reasons. One time at El Castillo, Thiago, Bautista and Colin had everybody laughing when they simulated to be handicapped, folding their fingers in all kinds of seemingly unnatural positions and making funny faces, while pretending to ask people for a quetzal.

The laughs, however, had something bittersweet. A disability may help excite pity while asking for money and open up wallets in response to it, but at the same time added to the marginalities that rendered the people of El Castillo so vulnerable in the public space. Apart from suffering discriminatory remarks, Colin told me he had been threatened a couple of times with a gun while working the flash lights and had stopped responding whenever he was insulted. It was a matter of having a thick skin, Colin explained. It was something he had learned by “sheer blows”. For similar reasons, he did not

³⁰ According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) this was 2131 quetzals in 2016 (see <https://www.ine.gob.gt/>).

approach big pickup cars with blinded windows anymore to ask if they needed a clean. These were cars that Barbilla and Sebolero also avoided while asking for money. They were used by hired assassins, private security guards and the police, they told me. Dangerous people. For Marcos, it had been reason to stop begging or cleaning car windows at all, as he feared being forced in situations where he had to do bad things such as fighting. He explained to me how he was hit once by people in a car while he was begging, after which they told him to “look for a job.” In response, he had dragged one of the guys out of the car and beat him up.

Like many of the people at El Castillo, Marcos seized about any viable opportunity to make money. At one point during my fieldwork, he had a painting job, for which he in the end never got paid, he claimed, and when that finished, he was looking for money to buy the ingredients to make liquid floor cleaner and sell it on the streets. He also sometimes helped the man who watched the cars that were parked in the street of El Castillo. Paloma often begged, but as a woman she told me she was extra vulnerable. “Because always when people help or give something, they want something in return for it. Always. They think that because we are on drugs, because we are on the streets, or because of the hunger that we suffer, that we have to give our body, but it isn’t like that.” I had seen something along these lines happen once at El Castillo when a guy unknown to me tried to give a girl that passed by to buy drugs a wet mojón ‘for free,’ wanting her to lift her shirt for it in return. It agitated Marcos and Joshua, who snarled at him to act normal. “To be strong,” was the only answer to such behavior, Paloma explained. It was perhaps why she provocatively stood before me the first time that I met her, angrily asking me who I was and for what organization I worked. When I told her what I was doing she silenced, but kept looking angrily at me while pointing her finger to her mouth, as a signal that she wanted me to buy her food. Paloma sometimes also sold cigarettes, which she bought for five quetzals a package and sold for double the price. Barbilla worked at the immense garbage dump together with thousands of others, looking for stuff he could sell, one day giving me a little stapler and a plastic miniature soldier. He entered the garbage dump illegally via the *Cementerio General* (General Cemetery), as the authorities only allowed the limited number of twelve hundred *guajeros*, trash-pickers, at the spot (El Periódico, 2018). He also collected cans on the streets to sell them to a local

trader in Zone 1 for three quetzals fifty a pound. Nicolas, in turn, was selling candies in buses. He told me he earned twenty-five quetzals for every nine quetzals he invested, at one point giving me his selling tune, articulated in a way typical for street vendors on the bus, with great speed and without tonal differences as if it was one sentence without commas: "First of all I wish you all a good afternoon the reason why I have got on this bus is to offer you four delicious candies hoping that when I pass your seat you don't look down on me I understand that you are bored and tired of seeing us day after day but this is our way of making an honest living the price is only one quetzal I will pass your seat may God bless you may God be with you where each of you is heading."

Meanwhile, Chicle had a more stable job working at a motor repair store on the corner of El Castillo until he got fired during my second fieldwork period. He had called a colleague and his boss "*mujeres de mercado*" (market women) for constantly talking about him and ridiculing him. In response, his boss had not only fired him, he claimed, but had also given him "an enormous kick" on his leg. He then found a night job similar to the one Colin had, who separated and stored fruit and vegetables at four in the morning at a canteen situated diagonally across from El Castillo. Colin earned fifteen quetzals for it, as well as a place to sleep, be it on the concrete floor of the canteen. He also sometimes accompanied the owner and his right-hand man to La Terminal to buy and carry the ingredients. The job, for which he earned forty quetzals, tired him, especially the carrying of the heavy chickens. In addition to this, he often begged from six to ten at night for which he usually collected around twenty quetzals or thirty, on a good day. Colin spent ten quetzals a day on food. He tried saving his money to be able to rent an apartment, for which, he believed, he needed three hundred quetzals a month. Good intentions aside, he always ended up spending the money the owner of the canteen he worked at kept for him, after which he had to start over again. His financial needs got more pressing when he got a girlfriend at some point although she herself did not want to go as far as calling him her boyfriend when I met her at Mojoca, where they both studied. Call it how you want to call it, the first thing she always said to him when they met, Colin told me, was: "*Hola mi amor*, what did you bring for me?" Having a girlfriend had long been a dear wish of Colin, doubting he could ever get one as many of his comrades at El Castillo had told him that

he was too ugly to get a girlfriend. Buying presents, however, were luxuries that people at El Castillo usually could not afford. Basically, whereas Colin had been begging for a girlfriend before, he was now begging to maintain a girlfriend.

The kind of jobs Chicle and Colin held, one could say, were gates to more formal ones. At the same time, both Ignacio and Joe told me, experience taught them that the combination of street life and holding more formal jobs was not an easy one, to put it mildly. Marcos and some others at El Castillo, Joe explained, had even worked at the municipality once, but had not been able to hold on to the jobs. "[...] turning up every day, working for your money, being there at six, you have to be there at six o'clock, not six fifteen, no, six o'clock. And without any influence of solvent, they just can't do it. They're not employable from that point of view." Ignacio had also arranged jobs in the past for people on the streets, including for some at El Castillo, but saw it go wrong many times. "Because they decided one day to not show up, or they took something that wasn't theirs, or one day they get mad and react badly." It was therefore crucial, Ignacio told me, to first "create the habit of working in them." He hoped to open a car wash any time soon where he would only employ people from the street.

There was of course, also another way for the people of El Castillo to make money on the street, that is, turning to crime and violence themselves. Given the violent lives they had all lived, it was perhaps the most obvious path for them to follow. And in many ways, it was also what the public expected from them. It was only telling that I had to change the locks of the house I lived in after Joshua, Tomás and Nicolas visited my house for less than five minutes. Crucially, the cleaning lady of the house was as shocked as the home owner and her daughters were because of what I did. Although she had not been there when it happened, she panicked when I told her that I had brought three guys from El Castillo to the house. By then, she had already told me about a group of alleged street people close to her home that turned out to be hardcore criminals who, according to her, had deliberately sprayed themselves with urine to keep the police at bay. On multiple occasions she had warned me about going to places such as El Castillo.

Nevertheless, it was hard to gauge the scale of crime and violence produced by the people of El Castillo. The amount of nuisance they caused

to their surroundings, especially in the capacity of urinating and defecating on the streets, was more easily to grasp. As described above, the local mayor painted a grim picture of the criminal activities of the group, but might have had her own agenda when voicing this. The police chief, in turn, had a less alarming outlook on the group's criminal tendencies. Meanwhile, the people of El Castillo were usually more reticent when it came to talking about alleged criminal activities. It was "*ver, oír y callar*," to see, hear and remain silent, at El Castillo, Paloma told me. When talking about their own criminal behavior, almost all of them told me they had committed robbery in the past, which was the sort of crime they were most likely to engage in, but almost just as many told me they had stopped doing that. In a country awash with arms, engaging in a robbery was often a two-way street. Many at El Castillo got shot or stabbed in the process, and everybody seemed to have friends who got murdered while trying to rob someone or committing some other crime. Other events and stories, however, suggested that these criminal activities were less confined to the past than often claimed. Colin once said to me that he did not steal anymore, but Bruno and others at El Samaritano told me on the same day that he was recently hit with a machete on the head when he tried to rob a father and son on the street, after which he had to go to the hospital for stitches. It was an event Colin denied from having taken place. Two months before I left Guatemala, Franco got arrested. According to Joshua he had been caught pickpocketing together with Yoyo, who managed to stay out of the hands of the police – Mari, meanwhile, told me that the police had ran him in for stealing a couple of bottles of cola. Franco, Marcos said, was "*mucho robo*." I did not see him back during my fieldwork and I later learned that he had spent a few months in prison. Meanwhile, Paloma told me she sometimes resorted to stealing when there was a possibility to do so. It was Barbilla, however, who spoke most openly about an attempted robbery he had just committed when I met him and Sebolero one day at a local canteen. Apparently, he almost got shot while doing so, showing me his hands that were still trembling.

That morning, Barbilla told me, he had woken up with a hangover from yesterday's drugs and hunger and wanted to get high. When he spotted two girls walking alone somewhere in Zone 5 not much later, he walked up to them to tell them he wanted their phones and money, "and quickly!" he added, while concealing his hand in his inside pocket as if he had a weapon. "But

they see you all [dirty]... and they feel the bad vibes and it is that vibe that you transmit that scares the women.” It was turning a disadvantage into an advantage. The girls had thrown their belongings – two phones and about three hundred quetzals – on the ground as he had ordered them to, but then started screaming for their father, who immediately responded and came running into their direction. Barbilla noticed he carried a gun on his waist and first tried to apologize, but when he felt that he did not have enough time to grab the girls’ belongings from the street, he got angry and started to insult them. It was then that the father grabbed his pistol. In response, Barbilla threw stones at him to prevent him from shooting and ran for four blocks “with his heart in his hand” to escape him. It was the fourth time that something like this happened to him. He was a skilled robber, Barbilla explained, although he assured me that he had stopped doing it, deeming his morning attempt an unfortunate relapse into an old habit. His decision to stop was motivated by the fact that the guy who had taught him how to rob got murdered. They had long operated as a team, with his friend putting a knife on someone’s throat and Barbilla grabbing the victim’s belongings. Further, Barbilla’s alleged desistance was also inspired by his fear for the high prison sentences one could get for robbery and, more curiously, the language people used towards him while he robbed them. “They tell you to look for a job, they insult you. ‘Look, *huevón* [asshole],’ or other bad words, treating you the way you don’t want to be treated, not even if you asked them to. [...] So to prevent hearing these curses I don’t do anything.”

Whether it was begging, cleaning cars or stealing, getting by on the streets meant putting yourself in the public sphere which, on a ground so fertile to violence and exclusion, automatically rendered you vulnerable to a jumble of violence, mistreatment and violent actors. Meanwhile, by exerting violence themselves, the people of El Castillo added to the violence, also because this not seldom provoked violent reactions and, perhaps even more importantly, confirmed a stigma that stuck on them as gum on the streets. Given the insecurity, unpredictability and hostility of the world the street people found themselves in it was only logical they cliqued together. “We are all suffering the same pain,” El Chero once said to me to denote a greater connection between those on the street. However, as will become clear in the next section, in the face of systemic denigration and oppression, it was seldom solidarity

that reigned among “companions in misfortune,” to paraphrase the words of the Italian writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi (2017 [1986], p. 27), and the people of El Castillo were no exception to this.

The violence of community

The original El Castillo was not founded on the cracked concrete pavement where it was situated during my fieldwork, but just around the corner on an empty plot of land enclosed by maya wire. A group of street people, among which Marcos, Franco and Moisés, had squatted it in the early 2000s and built a house on it with tin and plastic. One that they called El Castillo. They were evicted about five years later, however, after a bank decided to build an office there. But the name had stayed and so did some of the practices that are usually associated with sharing a house. At El Castillo, people sat, slept and ate together, laughed and were bored together, or played games of football or *Chivo* (a dice game) together, to kill the boredom.

And as in any house, to put it like that, there were rules to abide to. At least according to some. Colin told me fighting amongst each other was prohibited. It was the only rule, he told me, to then add that they also were not allowed to make a mess of the beds and to ask people for money close to where they were living. Robbing from each other and robbing near El Castillo was also prohibited, he said. These were rules that were voiced more often and many of them were said to have been established to keep the police of their back. For example, a chief of the Municipal Police had once told Marcos he expected them to keep their spot clean and the beds tidied, explaining to him that people in the neighborhood were complaining about the mess they made. For similar reasons, there were no children allowed at El Castillo, Thiago explained. “Because who is selling drugs to those children? We are, so we are the ones getting in trouble for it.” And then, I was told, there was also a punishment they executed collectively when someone broke the rules – the capucha. It was a style of punishment that some of the elderly had undergone themselves by the hands of death squads. At El Castillo, there were two variants of the capucha according to Thiago, which both involved a poncho that was thrown on someone’s head, after which a group of people attacked the person. The normal capucha involved only the use of fists, but then there was

also the mixed capucha that allowed the executors to also use elbows, legs and other body parts. It was a punishment that followed upon more severe acts of transgression or when someone had already been warned many times.

But as often at El Castillo, things were not always what they first seemed to be. Or in this case, perhaps more as they seemed to be, as only observing the place provided a different picture. The presence of Dylan, Tomás, Joshua and Nicolas, for instance, left no doubt that there were children at El Castillo. And one only needed a first glance to see that the place was not as clean and tidy as the police chief wanted it to be. In fact, to Marcos' great annoyance, he was the only one that sometimes cleaned the pavement, which he did with chlorine powder that he bought in the store just across the street. He also made a habit out of tidying his own spot, just as Moisés did. But they were about the only two. "They don't want to participate," Moisés complained about the others. "They want to live like they have always lived. I do my spot and that's it." He refrained, however, from telling others what to do, also to prevent himself from getting into a fight as it did not take much to provoke one at El Castillo. On one occasion, Colin received a beating from Nicolas while he was standing right next to me, after he had refused to give him the bottle of juice he held in his hand. In the couple of seconds the fight lasted Nicolas had smashed Colin onto the ground and taken him by the throat. It caused the scabby scar tissue from the breathing tube on his neck to start bleeding a bit, I noticed, after Moisés and I jumped in to keep the two apart. I guess, it is what violent incidents tend to do, leave a mark on people. According to Moisés, such fights went from bad to worse sometimes when others started to interfere, either by steering up the wranglers or by joining the fight themselves. It was fights over drugs, he said, that were most common at El Castillo.

In addition to this, stealing from each other, not seldom with force, was commonplace at El Castillo. Robbing someone "is the first thing they do," Nicolas once said to me, referring to his comrades of El Castillo. "Just leave something there, let's say your telephone, and the moment you look away someone else has grabbed it. And who did it? No one knows." One time, Colin told me he was without a cell phone because two guys had sneaked upon him from the back and strangled him until he blacked out. When he woke up about two minutes later, he had lost his cell phone and the twenty or thirty quetzals he had just earned at the flash lights around the corner from where

El Castillo was situated. He had not seen his attackers but had no doubt they were people from El Castillo. A little over a month later he showed me the money he had earned working at the canteen, with which he planned to buy a new cell phone, adding that if “they [at El Castillo] would see him with it [the money], they would take it from him.” He also refused to accept a way too loudly looking notebook I bought for him at La Terminal to write in about his experiences on the street, as he was certain that they would take it from him. “It is better to give it to me next Thursday and I will write in it that Thursday.”

Meanwhile, Colin suffered humiliation by the hands of some of the others at El Castillo because of his battered appearance. It lowered his morale, he told me, and he sometimes lied down crying because of it. The fact that he did not sleep at night when on the streets resulted from everything that had happened to him, most notably being stabbed while sleeping, but also because of the fact that he did not trust his peers at El Castillo enough to let his guard down.

Some others distanced themselves from the group for that reason. “To avoid problems,” as Sebolero said, when I spoke to him and Barbilla in a local canteen. They were often at El Castillo but never mingled in the group, instead loitering around its margins. Sebolero often slept just across the street from El Castillo, close enough to be able to easily buy drugs and to profit from the group’s protection, or its deterrent effect on troublemakers, but far enough away to not get caught in its hassle. Barbilla usually slept at other places, but was a regular at El Castillo because of the solvent he bought there. He had received a capucha once for stealing too close to El Castillo, he told me, but like Sebolero he had seen that they were just as easy given out of boredom or for “wanting to fuck with people.”

During my fieldwork, I witnessed a capucha on a Thursday night when I stopped by at El Castillo together with Ignacio, Samuel and a girl that volunteered that day. As it appeared, she took the fancy of a guy named Guillermo, who started staring and signaling at her during Ignacio’s talk, until the latter interrupted his speech to agitatedly direct him to another spot further away from the girl. Ignacio then continued his talk and afterwards we handed out food and drinks. When we drove away, I looked in the car window to see that a poncho was thrown over Guillermo’s head, after which the others, including twelve-year-old Tomás, jumped on him to loud laughs. “Do you see

that?” I asked Ignacio while the image of the fight was slowly fading away. “*Es calle*” (it’s street), he nodded, voicing one of his signature sayings, which he invoked every time the street showed its violent face. When I sat down with Nicolas once, he told me that the capuchas were also sometimes given on the basis of fake accusations to someone, as a result of feuds between two or more people, or as punishment for not taking part in the execution of a capucha on someone else. Or for robbing someone, he added, especially when people from the outside stopped by to buy drugs. When I asked him about the rules at El Castillo his eyes lit up. “There are no rules. But it would be good to have rules.”

This is not to say that it was all loose sand at El Castillo. More supportive relationships and friendships between people did exist and mainly formed along generational lines. The old guard at El Castillo largely gathered around Marcos – a natural leader according to Joe – whose behavior people tried to emulate and who was looked for in times of crisis. He was the one Paloma slept next to whenever she stayed the night at El Castillo. They were long friends and Paloma trusted him. And together with Moisés, he was also the only one that outsider Barbilla had at least some respect for. “Because [...] they think right and always respect you. You can get high and they wouldn’t take anything from you. The others when you fall asleep with a *pachita* (little bottle) of solvent, they would take it from you.” Often when I came to El Castillo, I would find Marcos with other seniors such as Fabricio, Tío and Paloma separated from younger guys such as Colin, Nicolas and Pato by a few meters. It was because of the fact that Pato drew the wrong kind of attention, Marcos explained to me. “He tells things he shouldn’t tell. Talking about how many people he is going to kill and this and that. Only things like that. And to be with a fool like that as companion, I prefer to separate myself.” Paloma did not like mixing with the youngsters either. “They are a different *rollo* (scene), right. They think everything is a game. When I would go to Nicolas and say, ‘look Nicolas, don’t do that,’ and you, who are you? Go fuck yourself. Don’t tell me anything because it’s my life.’ So they think that you do it to meddle in their life, but it isn’t like that, you do it because you have lived and experienced it: death, jail and hospital, right.” But Paloma was also at constant loggerheads with Mari and her sister, who were friends of her imprisoned husband and suspected her of betraying him every time she talked with a guy. Mari threw a can at her once in my presence when she saw her talking to Chato.

The younger generation, in turn, were not prepared to automatically submit to the authority of the older ones at El Castillo. Tellingly, after Nicolas and Chicle had fought over a mojón, it was the latter that decided to move to a spot a few blocks away. It was because he was fed up there, Chicle told me the day after while adorned with a swollen eye, but also because he did not want things to get out of hand. Meanwhile, Colin complained about the aggressiveness of Marcos. "He wants to be in charge, right man, as in: 'hey, do this or I will hit you and what-have-you-not.' He wants to be in charge, right, while sometimes no one is in charge, no one should order no one around, right? Perhaps when someone asks you something and you want to do it, then you do it, picking up garbage for instance, but not because someone orders you to do so, or because I want you to, you do this and that." Meanwhile, Colin considered Pato to be his best friend. "Because he has looked after me in various fights. When he sees that they're hitting me, he defends me," he explained. Colin, in turn, looked after Pato during the night, above all by staying awake and warning him and others at El Castillo whenever danger came their way. He also woke Pato up when there was someone that wanted to buy drugs from him.

But also in cases where ties were said to be of the friendlier kind, solidarity and loyalty did not automatically thrive. Colin, for instance, often complained about the fact that Pato insulted him and got mad at him whenever he said something back. He also tended to take things by force that did not belong to him. "But when I would take something from him he would be like 'either you pay me or I beat you, either you pay me or I beat you.'" It was because of such ambiguities, Thiago explained to me once, that he could not deem the people at El Castillo his friends. Instead, he spoke of companionship. He had just left the streets to live in a house with his uncle, his uncle's wife, his nine cousins and his grandmother in the town of San José Pinula, not far outside Guatemala City, and had agreed to stop using drugs. Nevertheless, when he sat opposite me that day, I noticed he was high on solvent, which gives a strong, toxic smell that is hard to get rid of. It meant that he had stopped by El Castillo. When I asked him about it, he put most of the blame on the others at El Castillo for his slip: in itself, of course, not a surprising move for a drug addict. He told me that they had offered him the drugs but that he had refused at first. They had kept insisting though, with Pato calling him a

sellout, as if not taking drugs was a form of betrayal. “If they had been friends, they wouldn’t have done that,” Thiago explained to me, “because a friend is not going to offer you drugs. They can be my companions who lived with me in the street, but... that they are my friends, well, they are not my friends. Because I think that a friend does not offer you drugs. And he’s not going to fight you when you’re living together, right. [...] A friend takes care of you, looks after you, talks to you, a lot of things, right. But they *are* my companions, right.”

“The street teaches you to survive and to stand up for yourself,” Nicolas once said to me. Indeed, if anything, life at El Castillo was about survival, which, in the face of such pressing needs was mainly a short term enterprise. In fact, as Joe explained to me, the people on the streets, due to all the traumas they suffered, are “not able, physically able, to think about things in the future. So, you know, they live in this state of hypertension all the time. That means that it’s almost impossible for them to think about the future.” It was only logical that this had direct implications for solidarity, loyalty and friendship, which tend to require long-term relational investments and, at time, personal sacrifices. It made surviving, as Nicolas already suggested, mainly an individual enterprise.

At times, life at El Castillo seemed too much to handle for any individual. How could people survive in such circumstances? It was a question that popped up in my mind sometimes during my fieldwork, to which I will provide three strands here. Later in this chapter, I will highlight the role of social aid organizations in the lives of the street people. But first, in the next section, I will address what I call the need for feeling and not feeling. The need for feeling refers to the moments that were worth living, where life on the streets was actually about life instead of death or one of its associates. The need for not feeling, in turn, plays into the inescapability of tragedy and violence on the streets of Guatemala City as they approached their dwellers from different directions and often with breakneck speed. It tells us that in a world where violence was the norm, it had to be dealt with as such. Lacking the most basic protection, one important way to do this for those at El Castillo was, in a way, to feel less.

The need for feeling and not feeling

It is easy to forget in a world that is, perhaps more than anything else, a violent world that there were also moments of joy or beauty for those dwelling on the streets of Guatemala City. Moments where life was uplifted from its everyday duress and distress or cut out from its violent context. Joshua gave me an almost literal representation of this when he u-turned a conversation with Paloma and myself about the lack of opportunities they experienced towards a more pleasant domain, pointing me to the fact that, despite everything, Guatemala was also a beautiful country. “Look at that,” he told us while framing the view of La Terminal set against a hilly background with his fingers, as if looking at a painting – or to put it in the fortified terms so familiar to a “city of walls” (Caldeira, 2000), as if building a wall around it to protect its beauty from violent surroundings. For him, he explained, getting to enjoy that view every day was one of the upsides of being on the street. “You see those cars driving there?” Paloma said not without melancholy as she was drawn into Joshua’s painting. “There used to be a train riding there. I rode it.”

And there were more of these moments, many of which were valued for the fact that they were shared and lived together with others. The laughs during a game of football or Chivo could be as abundant as the crying during one of Ignacio’s personal prayer sessions. Further, when at El Castillo, people also often ate together and were even expected to do so whenever there was food, although sometimes a small contribution could be asked. It seemed to be the closest thing to a rule at El Castillo. And one that usually encountered little opposition. But whether or not sharing was obligatory, it turned eating into a particularly meaningful event for many. This also became clear when I bought Franco a chicken sandwich once and asked him whether he wanted to eat it right away or down the road at El Castillo, knowing that at El Castillo he would have to give away part of his sandwich. “With my compañeros,” he had answered me as his eyes lit up that revealed the special meaning he assigned to his compañeros and the act of eating together. Such a comment, like El Chero’s reference to the El Castillo people as his ‘street family,’ and even Thiago’s ‘companionship,’ showed the importance of community for the street people and the positive association they had with it. Crucially, these positive interactions were able to exist next to the more violent interactions

among the El Castillo people that were discussed in the previous section. As Joe explained, “We all crave for something, we all crave for human love, affection, community. We all want that. So their best representation of that is something we look at and think: ‘That’s weird, that’s not right, that’s very poor,’ but it’s the best they can do. The best they can do is: ‘Okay, I still steal from you, but I’ll give you a hug. I’ll have sex with you, and then tomorrow I’ll threaten to kill you.’ And it’s just, for us it seems like: ‘I thought you liked each other? I thought, you know, Marcos, you go on with Moisés?’ ‘Yeah of course, he’s a good mate.’ ‘Okay, but didn’t he just call you this, and you then said: ‘I’m gonna f-ing kill you?’ ‘Yeah, but that’s the way we are, you know.’” It is a form of compartmentalization Joe refers to, which at El Castillo catalyzed community, just as it catalyzed violence within that community. It was why Colin could still deem Pato his best friend, even though the latter made a habit out of insulting him and taking things from him. Meanwhile, compartmentalization as a defense mechanism also helped the street people to deal with other hardships and tragedies in the lives.

It was a Monday night in March 2017 when Ignacio, Samuel and I arrived at a spot in Zone 3, where the street people that had gathered there greeted us with the unusual message that a man had just overdosed just around the corner and was now lying there dead. It was somebody we knew, they told us, but from their description we could not bring to mind who it was. It was perhaps therefore that Ignacio started his talk quickly upon arriving, as he always did, this time telling about his murdered father and why he refrained from seeking revenge. And all seemed to be forgotten afterwards. We served them food and the usual jokes were cracked while they drank their soup and chewed on the beans and egg sandwiches we brought them. When we drove away about half an hour later there was indeed a man draped over the poorly lit, broken street about twenty meters from where we had been standing, with only a small cloth over his head, and a policeman, who seemed to be alone there, standing motionless next to him. Clearly, life around the man had quickly gone back to its usual grim rhythm.

Similar things had happened at El Castillo too, both Joe and Ignacio told me. Ignacio had once encountered a devastated Chicle just after his girlfriend had been killed. They had prayed together. A week later, however, Ignacio was surprised to find out that he already had a new girlfriend. “So you stopped

crying already?” he had said to him with disbelief. Meanwhile, Joe recalled how, two years before our conversation, he had found a man named Esteban dead when he arrived at El Castillo. “[...] he was just lying there dead. And they were just: ‘Oh yeah, he is dead. [...] But it’s, they don’t show the human emotion you think they would show. It’s just like, ‘Esteban’s dead, does that bother you?’: ‘I didn’t like him much’; ‘he was okay’; ‘he was *buena onda* [cool], but, you know, he’s dead and... Anyway, can we go out for a drink?’ So for most of us, we see death as something that is not natural, it’s not regular, so it’s not part of our normal life. So when it comes, it comes as quite a shock, it’s very sad. Because for them, when it comes it’s something that is very regular, then it’s not as sad as we would think it should be sad. So we try and put on them how we would react, and how they react is that they generally compartmentalize their life. So that was like: ‘That was Esteban. Okay, he was a friend, but he’s gone now. My life needs to carry on.’” According to Joe, it was especially something they picked up as they got older, although, he added, “even for a young child, they see death in a way that we don’t see death.” From this perspective, it was no wonder that Moisés had dubbed the killing of his two friends when he was young the saddest thing in his life. The killing, as well as its violent and humiliating aftermath, had devastated him, but had also hardened the skin under his feet to be able to walk the violent streets that would not cease to be his home in the years to come.

To be sure, there were more tragedies the people on the street had to deal with on a daily basis besides the dying of people around them. Or the suffering of violence, whether or not by the hands of fellow street people. Each at El Castillo had their own drama that ran through multiple facets of their life. Many had children that they did not see anymore or families that did not want them anymore or had never wanted them at all. Sebolero could speak with visible love about his two girls, age two and four, but which he hardly saw because “by sheer law,” he said, he could not stop by the parents of his ex-girlfriend, where they were raised, without bringing something, if only money for diapers. Mauricio told me his biggest pain was that he was not a father for his three children, who lived in a home in Antigua. Barbilla had a family back in the town of Cobán, but as his mother had asked him once for a new traditional dress, costing about a thousand quetzals, he felt he could not return without one. But perhaps more importantly, a return would put his mother

eye in eye with the failed man he had become. And Colin had no contact with his mother at all. He tried getting into contact with his stepfather during my fieldwork, but the latter closed the door on him when he passed by his house together with Bruno of El Samaritano. Not before telling him, however, that he was going to move, without saying him where. According to Colin, it was his stepfather's way of trying to make sure that he would not come back. He also refused to give him the number of his brother when he asked him for it. Meanwhile, Thiago only had a father after a marero had killed his mother when he was fourteen. An attack for which there were two possible explanations, he believed. Either the bullets were meant for him, as the local mara had made it clear to him that he had to join them, something which he had refused. Or they had shot his mother because of a fight she had with a neighbor whose son was a marero. In response, he had fled his neighborhood to end up at El Castillo. And even though he still occasionally had contact with his father, the latter had made it clear to him several times he did not want him, even saying that he would rather have him dead. He also withheld from him family photos on the argument that he did not have a family. And these were only fractions of the problems the people at El Castillo had to deal with on a daily basis. The world of El Castillo, as Moisés once said to me, was one "of violence, of so much sadness, so much egoism, and of so many blows in life." It was a world of violence, sustained by a society that does not catch you when you fall, if it does not push you, as well as by their own failings and impossibilities to break the vicious circle they were caught in.

Crucially, it was not only the accumulation of drama in the lives of the people of El Castillo that, in a crude way, tended to set in motion a defense mechanism thriving on not feeling. Drugs, though more in a quick-fix kind of way, did exactly that. Hence the addiction. Tellingly, Moisés started using solvent again on Mother's day, after he had stopped using it for twenty days, in an attempt to get off drugs. He had lost his mother when she was thirty-five years old. He was eight years old when it happened, but now had the same age as when his mother died. "What a date today," he told me as I sat next to him. He then started talking about the deep-seated sadness he felt, pushing his fingers on his chest in attempt to point out where the pain was located, while tears started rolling down his cheeks. The solvent, he explained, enabled him to endure more. And he was not the only one seeking refuge in drugs at that

moment, as Paloma was sucking on a *mojón* two mattresses next to him, while gazing into nothing. She missed her children whom she had left at home the day before. It was only exemplary for the complicatedness, or viciousness, of the situation of people on the street that drug use was often also an important driver of the everyday drama they faced.

Turning on the waterworks, as I already knew, was no exception in front of social workers or other people that could come in handy as a means to elicit pity or compassion and get something done in response to it. But Moisés' tears, for which he excused himself – saying that “even the realest of men cry” – were of a different, rarer kind. They were moments where sadness found its way to the heart, piercing the thick skin that had developed around it. Moments when pain overwhelmed and overpowered and even drugs could not tame or numb it. Such moments showed not only the depths of their pains, but sometimes also the depths of their loneliness, and with that, the limits of what their surroundings were able to do for them.

This seemed also related to the fact that the El Castillo people usually discouraged each other from placing too much emphasis on their grievances. For instance, whenever Colin got really sad because of all the humiliations and mistreatments he suffered, to the point of crying, the people at El Castillo tended to tell him that, instead of crying, “it was better to drink some beers.” In response, he told me, “I get caught deeper into that circle.”

This was certainly what happened with Thiago, whose inability to stay off the drugs drove him back to a life on the street again. About a month after he had started to live with his uncle, I found him completely wasted on one of the mattresses at El Castillo. He had spent the night there. When I sat next to him, he almost immediately started crying nonstop. “The pain that I feel,” he started, pointing at his heart, “I don't know what it is.” There were only shreds of sentences and phrases coming out of his mouth, his speech blurred by his flood of tears and the solvent. The scene drew some attention from the others, but again, perhaps not the kind one would expect. Wayo tried to talk Thiago into giving him some of the solvent standing in the little bottle in front of us – although I am pretty sure Thiago did not even hear him – with him reaching out to it a couple of times to see how far he could go. And I guess Barbilla tried to sympathize with Thiago as best as he could by telling him that he should not cry as the combination of solvent and crying, he claimed, gave you a sore

throat. It was a very practical way of looking at it. It was clear that Thiago had not got back into the street mode right away, as he kept crying for the days to come. When I looked for Thiago at El Castillo a few days later, Yoyo referred to him as a “crybaby.” “Very emotional this one,” he complained while Thiago was out begging.

There were other reasons besides inurement why letting yourself go as Thiago did, the tears-rolling-down-the-cheeks kind of sobbing for days in a row, was not in compliance with the mores of the street. For one, it might make you vulnerable as it is toughness that is generally asked for on the streets. But perhaps even more importantly, if people like Moisés, Yoyo and Thiago, and many others at El Castillo, would make a habit of opening the gates of their soul to despair, there would be no reason to stop crying.

The struggle for visibility and social organizations

Like the African-Americans in Ralph Ellison’s landmark novel *Invisible man* (2016 [1952]), the group of people at El Castillo was highly visible as a group – not in the least for living out in the open on the street – but invisible as individuals, being denied some of the most basic human needs. The African-American first-person narrator of Ellison’s book attributed his invisibility to a “peculiar disposition of the eyes” (p. 3) with whom he came in contact. “A matter of the construction of their inner eyes” (p. 3), which relegated him to a spot in the shadows that highlighted his presence only by the dark, threatening contours of his body. If at all. In similar fashion, the people of El Castillo seemed sometimes literally invisible. To the outside world, when they were passed by as if they were ghosts, but also to each other.

One time, Wayo, while completely wasted on solvent, vomited on the sidewalk right in front of the rest of the group, after which he started to sweep the little vomit that came out of his mouth in the cracks of the concrete with his fingers. No one in the group paid attention to the peculiar event. As if he was, indeed, invisible, although at the time of the event people at El Castillo were already ignoring him for the fact that he had been constantly harping on for solvent while lacking the money to buy some. Curiously, just before he threw up, Wayo had murmured the rather mysterious set of words “My body isn’t my body”. These were words that stuck with me. At the time of saying it,

I figured Wayo was too far gone to comment upon it. Perhaps he means that the drugs had driven him out of his own body, I remember thinking right away. Without gates and even the walls of a house, the body was one of the few things left for the street people of El Castillo they could withdraw from. With a little help of solvent of course. At the same time, I later realized, in a world as marked by violence, abuse and humiliation, it sometimes appeared as if the bodies of the people of El Castillo were not owned by themselves, but instead, by the public. Bodies with which people could do as they like, as if they were battlegrounds where everything was allowed. They were people, to paraphrase the Dutch poet Jean Pierre Rawie, “that lost more than they ever possessed.”³¹ So much that even their humanness seemed to be at stake. Tellingly, on multiple occasions people at El Castillo had felt the need to stress that they *too* were human (like everybody else). Being rendered inferior, to the point of being considered less than human or even invisible, was arguably one of the greatest pains of those on the street.

It was in this context of being highly visible as a target but invisible as a person of flesh and blood that the personal attention – in the case of El Castillo most prominently given by El Samaritano – not only responded to practical needs, but also to social and spiritual needs of the El Castillo dwellers and, with that, served as a reminder that they were human as anyone else. It is this claim that is central to this paragraph. In discussing this, I will – for reasons earlier mentioned – stay out of the discussion brought to the fore by the local mayor of Zone 4 in this chapter, which revolved around the question whether or not some forms of social work actually contributed to the purpose of getting people off the streets. The same goes for the discussion following upon the well-known claim that the privatization of social aid helps keep a crooked system in place by providing the state a convenient smokescreen to veil its own inability or even unwillingness to tackle certain social problems (see for the Guatemalan case Levenson, 2013; Lewis O’Neill, 2010). And these were not the only possible points of critique attached to the kind of social aid the people of El Castillo received. Perhaps most obviously, by “doing the work the state should do,” as Ignacio phrased it, social aid organizations and their members have themselves committed acts of violence, abuse and corruption similar

³¹ “En wij, die meer verloren dan wij ooit bezaten, [...]” From the poem ‘*October*’ (Rawie, 1979).

to the ones the state is often associated with.³² As important as these issues and debates are, they are outside the scope of my research. I will solely focus upon the role of people such as Ignacio, Joe and also myself (as a researcher and sometimes also as a social worker) in the lives of people at El Castillo. I distinguish three interrelated aspects in which social aid organizations and their members play into the needs of those at El Castillo, that is, the spiritual, the practical and the social.

First, if one accepts the premise that social organizations help strengthening the faith of the people at El Castillo, as they usually aim to do, one could subsequently make the claim that, by playing into their spiritual needs, they help them cope with the myriad of threats they face every day. Crucially, God's presence in the lives of those at El Castillo, it seemed, was felt there where he was needed the most. God was hope, as Barbilla put it: "if you don't have faith, there is no hope. While there is hope, there's faith." Others explained that they derived a form of otherworldly protection from their faith. "I don't have a family, I don't have a mother, who is looking out for me? But there is a God," Moisés said. It was a belief that was voiced more often. Meanwhile, Sebolero boasted a tattoo on his arm saying "God is love." It was only telling of the importance of God in the lives of those at El Castillo that claims upon being human were usually supported by the message that all people were children of God. As Moisés told me, "[...] we are all human and it is not just because we're on the streets that people can discriminate us and humiliate us, after all that we've been through. Instead of offering us a hand, they humiliate. They want to humiliate and they think that we are not worth anything, but for God we are worth a lot. And for people like yourself that offer us their hand, I thank God, I thank you."

It was due to the dire circumstances they lived in that the gospel message usually resonated well in places such as El Castillo. Of course, in a country where 91 percent of the population either identifies itself as Catholic or Protestant (Pew Research Center, 2014), this message was not a new one. And in the case of El Castillo this must have been even more so the case as everybody, as far as I knew, already grew up in places of little hope where intensified spiritual beliefs tended to be part of a daily survival kit. Moreover,

³² See for instance Levenson (2013) on the Pentecostal organization *Rehabilitación de los Marginados* (Rehabilitation of the Marginalized, REMAR).

these were places that were usually also rife with churches. Evangelists should get “bloody where the city is bleeding,” an American social worker living in Guatemala once said to me, and this is what especially Pentecostal Protestants did by founding a multiplicity of small churches in poor areas and bad neighborhoods (Winton, 2004; Lewis O’Neill, 2010). It is within this context that social aid organizations tried to strengthen the faith of the El Castillo people and get them to act upon it. First and foremost, they instilled religious values and attitudes by creating and upholding rituals. For instance, almost every Sunday a pastor stopped by at El Castillo to take those that wanted to join him to church, usually mobilizing about five or six people. From one of these visits, Colin returned with the hope that justice would prevail in the end, after hearing the pastor speak about King Solomon. “Those that humiliate will fall,” Colin had heard the pastor say. “That sentence stuck with me, right. So I say, OK, they’re humiliating me, perhaps it will go on for a while, but when the limit is reached, they will see that I am above them.” Ignacio also always preached at El Castillo before eating, often telling a personal story that echoed biblical lessons. Meanwhile, the food we handed out always went accompanied with a blessing. And in addition to this, many at El Castillo saw the hand of God in the help they received from the social aid organizations, just as Joe and Ignacio did themselves. “God puts people out of nothing,” as Paloma said, “and I have experienced things that I couldn’t believe they were happening. They sometimes even showed up at my door with things for me, and I said, my God, thanks for answering my prayers.”

The influence of the social aid organizations and church groups also manifested itself through the labels many of the El Castillo people applied to their drug use and other vices, which they often referred to as the work of the devil. Although it seemed to work the other way around as well, as Ignacio, and others as well, sometimes used phrases that seemed to come directly from the battleground. “Are you a warrior of God or a warrior of the devil? For who do you want to be a warrior?” Ignacio would sometimes yell to cheer his homeless crowd into God’s corner. At the same time, it was clear that the people at El Castillo, or others on the street, did not live their life according to the precepts laid down in the Bible, to put it mildly. As I overheard Franco saying to three American volunteers once, “my hobbies are: smoking crack, marihuana, cocaine and reading the bible.” It was reason for Colin to not fully

accept God as his savior yet, he told me, knowing he was going to do bad stuff in the future. He also scolded Marcos, one of the most loyal churchgoers, for beating the big drum about his faith. "One moment he's going to church and starts to talk about God and the other moment he's there with his beer and all that, right."

Second, the help offered by the social aid organizations spoke to the practical needs of the street people. There were many fronts on which the El Castillo dwellers were supported by the social aid organizations that surrounded them. They received food, clothes and sometimes also medical assistance. And as noted earlier, organizations such as El Samaritano worked as intermediaries between the street people on the one hand, and the authorities (local and state) and institutions such as potential employers, hospitals and rehab clinics on the other hand. They sometimes also played this part between street people and their families, and between street people themselves. Joe, for instance, usually tried to protect Colin against the others at El Castillo. After Colin's fight with Nicolas, Joe approached the latter to say that Colin was like a son to him and that he should leave him alone, to then joke that he should try it with him, taking of his backpack to get ready for the fight. A fight that of course never took place, but instead was replaced with the two bursting into laughs, after which Joe put an arm around Nicolas' shoulder to tell him again that Colin was like a son to him. Joe also interfered whenever he overheard someone saying "*Rata*" to Colin, a nickname he had been dealt with because of his alleged resemblance to the protagonist rat in the computer-animated Pixar movie *Ratatouille*.

Another crucial task taken on by El Samaritano, which touched directly upon the claim of being treated as a human, or being visible, was to ensure that the people on the street had a legal identity. It was the death of Eva, the then girlfriend of Marcos who died in 2015 without ever having been registered at the National Registry of the People (RENAP), that stressed the need for such a job. And as they could not find her family after her death, the only option was to bury her anonymously at the city's General Cemetery. Moreover, it had not been the first event that inspired El Samaritano to embark on a more thorough identification of those on the streets. When Colin got stabbed twelve times, he was nowhere to be found by the people of El Samaritano, who had passed by all hospitals in the capital without finding him, until they thought

he was dead. When they finally found him weeks later, Colin got mad at first, because of the fact that it had taken them so long for them to visit him. He then had to admit however that he had always used a fake name, something neither El Samaritano nor his compañeros at El Castillo knew. Colin was his “*nombre de batalla*” (battle name), as he said it himself, which coming from the mouth of a boy as twiggy as Colin had something ironic, although his life had been anything but a walk in the park. In any case, it was a name that he much preferred over his real name, Santino. To avoid such situations from happening again and to make sure identity papers did not get lost, he and many others at El Castillo kept their original identity papers at the El Samaritano center and walked around with copies of them. Those who did not have identity papers were helped getting them. Most people at El Castillo had also filled out a form in which El Samaritano asked them, amongst other things, about scars, tattoos and other marks that could help identify them when they themselves could not do so, either because of injury or death, and people that could be contacted in case of emergency.

In addition to this, as relative outsiders to the street game so marked by surviving as well as by interpersonal violence and distrust, the social aid organizations provided the street people with people with whom they could let their guard down, if only for a little bit or a short period of time. It was no coincidence that Joshua asked me if I could go with him to a clinic, after he had unprotected sex with someone about whom it was whispered, he found out later, that she had HIV. He came to me because there were costs involved with a test, but also because he knew I could keep a secret, asking me specifically to not tell it to the other ones. Luckily, the test came out negative, but it was telling that the lady behind the counter of the clinic automatically assumed I was from El Samaritano when we explained to her the purpose of our visit. In similar fashion, I saw many people sobbing in the arms of Ignacio during personal praying sessions in which they entrusted him with secrets they held hidden from their peers on the streets.

Crucially, as a social worker (or a researcher), the requests for help at El Castillo seemed sometimes endless, as the street people usually tried to get as much help as they could from someone. I called Joshua often ‘*Quince de Mayo*’ (Fifteenth of May), which tended to be the first words he said to me whenever I encountered him the first weeks after I got to know him – his way of trying

to make sure I did not forget his birthday and especially, his birthday present. Others tried to reinforce their case by crying. It was something Ignacio had warned me a million times for. “When I am giving,” he explained to me once, “they use me for that and that is the part on which you have to educate them, right.” But then, who could blame them? At the same time, there was a greater message underlying the help of organizations such as El Samaritano: that there was someone in their corner to which to fall back on when needed. They invested in them whereas many others, at best, ignored them. The thought provided some relief, Colin explained to me. Because of everything that happened to him, he never felt calm when out on the streets. It was a life of continuous danger. But because Joe and some others had helped him in the past, he told me, he did feel “a little bit protected.” In response, he had small notes in his wallet with my number and the numbers of Bruno and Julia. Joe’s number, like many others at El Castillo, he knew by heart.

This brings me to the third aspect. Given the mode of operation of some social aid organizations – with an strong emphasis on investing in personal relationships – and the general receptiveness the members of social aid organizations and people on the street showed towards each other, it was only logical that, at least in some cases, the relationship between them developed into friendships and other relations of a more personal kind. In a world marked by rejection – the people at El Castillo all live in a “state of abandonment,” as Joe put it – these personal bonds casted a certain uniqueness to the individuals involved and were therefore of crucial importance. As Moisés told me, “I very much like to have friendship with anyone, after everything that happened to me,” to then repeat it. “Friendship, with anyone.”

This may have also been the reason that Moisés once stressed to the others at El Castillo with increased volume that he was the first one I took out to eat – something I did sometimes to be able to talk more in private with someone. Similarly, in one of his writings, Joe mentioned that Moisés made a habit of telling him every time they saw each other that they go back since Moisés was seven years old. Thiago, in turn, missed no opportunity to call me his “good friend Timo,” although it was only telling that he applied the same label once to a social worker whose name he could not remember, after he was telling me that Joe was at the hospital at the moment of our talk to visit “someone” in the hospital. “Now, what’s his name again?”

Meanwhile, Abel saw Joe as his father. Whenever I took my phone out at El Castillo, he always came walking to me to ask me if he could call Joe with my phone. Something which I always let him do. Joe reflected on these phone calls once when I sat down with him at the El Samaritano center. "So why does he keep phoning me most days? 'Hi dad, what are you doing?' 'I'm doing this. What are you doing?' 'I'm on the streets. Bye.' Does he want to know what I'm doing? No. [...] That I'm thinking of him, you know, that someone's thinking about him, that's what is important."

Upon leaving Guatemala City, I was given presents and reminders that seemed to serve similar purposes. Moisés, for instance, while trying to hold back tears, told me he was going to miss me and asked me to come back once more with my camera so that I could take a photo of only him. "As a memory of me. And you will take it with you to Holland then, right?" He also called me while back in Holland. Nicolas gave me a coin from Nicaragua and one from the US, after which he told me that I should write down the telephone number of his mother, "so you can call me when you are in Holland." He then mentioned the first four numbers out loud and, while looking at the others, whispered the last four in my ear.

At least in the case of Colin, relationships seemed to be subjected to regular testing. I usually came without a bag to El Castillo, but when I brought one once, Colin tried grabbing it out of my hand when we walked to La Terminal together. Later that day, while visiting a supermarket, he grabbed the key from me that belonged to the locker I had just put my backpack in to hold it. On both occasions, it seemed a bit odd to me at first, as I was perfectly capable of carrying the items myself but it started to make more sense to me during a later stage of my fieldwork. When I arrived at El Castillo together with Joe one day, Colin ran to Joe to ask him if he could carry his backpack, which was so heavy that it almost made him tip over. What followed were about ten minutes of huffing and puffing after which he saw himself forced to give it back, nearly collapsing because of the weight resting on his bony shoulders. A few days later, Colin brought the occurrence up himself when he spoke about the trust Joe had in the people of El Castillo. "If you have looked, he gave me his backpack and I didn't touch anything." Colin had also stressed a few times that Joe trusted them with his telephone to back his claim that Joe was a standup guy. "To play and all that. He lends us his things, his games. He

trusts us, he trusts us as if he is our father-in-law, right. Because not everybody lends you his things.”

For Colin to carry a backpack or to use a telephone was, at least in part, about feeling trust and proving he could be trusted at the same time. It was about confirming a special bond, one always in need for confirmation. Although not necessarily as a strategy of gaining trust, I also let the people of El Castillo use my telephone or walk around with my photo camera when I brought it. Just as I did not let Joshua, Nicolas and Tomás wait outside my house to get the photos on my last day in Guatemala City. These were small, but important facets of a relationship built on mutual trust. As Ignacio told me when I met with him on one of my last days in Guatemala, the key part of the fact that I had been able to do the work that I did with the people of El Castillo was that I treated them as humans.

Interestingly, while the relationship between people at El Castillo was characterized by an ambiguity that catalyzed both community and violence within that community, the street people’s behavior towards social workers such as Joe was much more correct in the conventional meaning of the word. For instance, whereas the rule of not stealing among peers at El Castillo only seemed to exist in some people’s heads, if at all, there seemed to be a more compulsory one in play that prohibited stealing from social workers.

Having said this, I experienced a rare transgression of this rule. It was a Wednesday night in March 2017, when I visited El Castillo with Joe and Carolina, a befriended social worker from Honduras. The latter had joined us to clean the moldy feet of some of the people there, first spraying them with a disinfectant to then clean them with wet-wipes and sprinkle them with drying powder. A job that was put on a hold, however, when Joe noticed that a full package of wet-wipes was gone. Clearly agitated but keeping his calm, he told the group that it was the first time they had stolen from him, adding that he would not come back if the wet-wipes were not returned. What followed was a tug-of-war on the backpack of Daniel, whom the group identified as the thief. It resulted in Daniel receiving some blows and kicks, while he was trying to hold on to his possessions. Meanwhile, we were trying to keep the warring parties apart. Things got back to normal when Pato pulled the wet-wipes out of Daniel’s backpack, but flared up again when Daniel noticed that they not only removed the wet-wipes from his backpack, but also his money. Or so he

claimed. “All my money, all my money of the *fería* [holiday].” Daniel shouted, while breaking down in tears at first and then threatening the group he would come back with his family. It did not impress anyone. “Go home to cry,” Colin snapped at him. “Get out of here,” others yelled at him. Before he did so, Daniel walked up to Pato, the one most likely to have stolen his money – if it indeed had been stolen – to buy solvent for a few quetzals. A sign that life had turned to its twisted normal again.

Joe later explained to me that it only was the second time in his life someone from the street had stolen from him. Once, at Plaza Concordia in Zone 1, someone had secretly taken a bottle of cola from him. In response, he had told them he would not come back anymore until they returned what they took from him. After a month, however, he decided to return to the spot, to his alarm finding the guy who stole from him all beaten up. The others then handed over a bottle of cola. They had been holding on to it all the time.

But even as exceptions to a rule, the thefts were showcases of the protection the social workers enjoyed from the people on the street when such was needed, as both the wet-wipes and the bottle of cola were recovered. In similar fashion, even though many warned me about going to places such as El Castillo, I had no doubt that its people would protect me against outside danger whenever it would present itself to me, although I had only seen this tested in cases of relatively little danger – Joshua agitatedly sending away a guy that did not seem to take no for answer when he asked me for money; Colin pulling me away while I was standing too carefreely on a busy road, making sure that I crossed it in one piece. Stories I heard from Joe and Bruno, however, strengthened me in this belief. They also strengthened my belief that there was more than just practical value to the role of social workers in the lives of the people on the street.

As we have seen in the above, by playing into the spiritual, practical and social needs of the people of El Castillo, social aid organizations almost automatically provided a counterbalance to the injustices that degraded them into a state seemingly less than human. Also because, as outsiders and insiders at the same time, the social workers were able to provide the street people things their comrades on the streets could not. At the same time, it is important to note that the help that was offered could never suffice in confronting or repairing the storm tide of violence and injustices that flooded the streets into a place of survival.

And in line with this, expectations between the social workers and those on the streets did not always align. Crucially, social aid was almost by definition limited, as there was always a shortage of time, money and other resources. All social aid organizations had their own visions, agendas and financial backers to report to and more people to serve than just those of El Castillo. And obviously, they consisted of people who had their own social and family lives as well. Ignacio only came once a week, but so did El Samaritano during most of my second fieldwork period since Joe was out of the running due to a back injury and trips to other countries. The latter's presence was greatly missed by many at El Castillo, although they would not speak a bad word about him for it. Meanwhile, El Samaritano's center – not even a ten minute walk from El Castillo – was put out of bounds for the people of El Castillo, as most of them were too old for the mentoring program offered there, which focused on children. And perhaps even more importantly, the people of El Castillo were considered bad examples for the children, as one of the principal goals of the program was preventing at risk children from hitting the streets and using drugs. Meanwhile, one of the El Samaritano workers also told me that allowing them in the center could lead to problems with the neighborhood since this would mean that they would sleep in front of the center, waiting for it to open or gather in front of it. In short, operating within the vacuum left behind by the state, not seldom with close relationships to the people they tried to help, the social workers at El Castillo were *a state and a mate* at the same time, but often falling short at both of them.

Thiago's suicide notes

The tension between what was asked from social workers by the people from El Castillo and what the latter were able to give also became clear during Thiago's relapse into old habits after having spent some time at his uncle's place. The event laid bare his dire needs as well as my impotence and that of El Samaritano's in preventing him from ending up on the streets again. It was an unfortunate development, to say the least, but also one that could have ended up even worse. Or so it seemed.

It is four days after I had encountered Thiago all lost on the mattresses, that I find him in an almost identical state at El Castillo. When I sit next to

him, he starts crying, telling me he disappointed his uncle, his speech thwarted again by drugs and tears. He then asks me if he could call his uncle with my telephone, saying that it would be the first time he would speak to him after he left his house five days before. When I hand it to him he walks away with it to the corner of the street. A few minutes later, he comes back, tears rolling down from his cheeks even more freely as before. He starts blathering incoherently and almost immediately falls asleep when he hits a mattress.

About half an hour later, I am standing with Paloma, who is trying to talk me into giving her money so that she can buy food for her children, when Thiago gets up from his short nap to ask me for a "*pantalón*" (pants) or twenty quetzals to buy one himself. It is about the only thing he can say, too high to come to normal sentences. I explain to him that I cannot go with him to La Terminal today and that I cannot give him the twenty quetzals either because I want to make sure he actually buys pants from it. I promise him to come back tomorrow to go to the market together. My words, however, do not seem to land, as he stares right through me with a dead look in his eyes, while repeating the word "*pantalón*" over and over again, pointing to the dirty one with burning holes he is wearing. I try to stop listening to it as I continue my conversation with Paloma, who tries to bring back the attention to her case by appealing to my feelings, asking me whether I prefer helping Thiago or children. Thiago walks off, but a few minutes later he comes back to stuff a folded note in my hands. "A secret," he murmurs. "Do you want me to open it here or at home?" I ask him. "At home." Not much later he comes back to me with a second note. And while I tuck it away he asks me for the *pantalón* again, to start crying after I give him the same answer I gave him before. "Tomorrow, Tomorrow, I don't want to hear that!" Not much later I leave.

When I come home I empty my pockets, which stick to my leg after having spent the afternoon under the scorching sun, but without having a closer look on what I am releasing myself from. I make a few phone calls, look at some pictures I took while at El Castillo and at some point, which might have been more than an hour after I had come home, I notice the notes lying on my bed, which I completely forgot about. I read them, not knowing in which order Thiago gave them to me:

"I am OK but I want to die," the first note I open says. "I am sad and I feel lonely and in the morning I am not sure if I am going to wake up. Thiago."

Also added to the note were a drawing of what seem to be a teary-eyed face, the words "*perdón familia*" (I am sorry, family) and a little heart. I quickly open the second one, to find words of similar import. "I am OK but thanks to God I am alive but something is happening to me and I don't know what it is. I am sad. I am sorry family. Thiago. I spoke to my uncle and he told me he wants to talk to me in two days but I don't know." On the left sideline it said again: "I am sorry family."

I immediately call a cab, shocked and annoyed with myself for the fact that I had not read the notes right away upon coming home, or even better, already on the way back to my house. I also call Gabriel from El Samaritano to see if he or Bruno, or whoever, could go there as quickly as possible to prevent things from happening that could not be undone. Fifteen long minutes later my taxi arrives. During my stay home it had started to pour down rain, something which had been in the air for some time, and while we traverse the streets on our way to El Castillo the streets fill with water.

Upon arriving at El Castillo, I am relieved to find Thiago standing under a small shelter roof of no more than half a meter, alone, right across from the other guys who are taking cover on the mattresses. He looks sad with a blurry look on his face. I get out of the taxi. "I am sorry that it took me so long to get here," I tell him as I stand next to him. He can hardly speak and keeps inhaling solvent while we stand there, watering his mojón with the little bottle he holds in his other hand. Rain pattering upon our feet.

"What I want," Thiago almost whispers, "is that someone listens to me." He starts telling me he feels bad about himself and about the fact that he has disappointed his uncle. But he is also disappointed, he says, in the people that are supposed to help him. He means El Samaritano, I guess, but it would not surprise me if he meant me as well. If so, I could not blame him, as I often did not have time when he called me in the preceding weeks, inviting me over to his house or trying to meet with me whenever he had something to do in the city. Then Gabriel, a slim and tall guy in his early twenties with heavy-framed glasses marking his face, comes walking towards us. He thanks me for calling and coming to then turn to Thiago with a severe tone: "If you want us to help you, you have to get rid of the drugs." Thiago refuses at first and keeps bringing the mojón he has wrapped in his fist to his mouth, but after a while agrees to put it away to end the stalemate in which the discussion had gotten to. We

then decide to call Thiago's uncle to see if we can drop by to talk. But after we had tried it for a couple of times, without getting a reply, we discuss the idea of Thiago and me taking a taxi to his uncle's house to try our luck. But because of the time I would invest in it, and also the costs involved – 125 quetzals from El Castillo to Thiago's house in San José Pinula and back – Gabriel explains to Thiago that he has to promise to not come back to El Castillo anymore, adding that they had taken him to his uncle's house a couple of times before to find him high on solvent at El Castillo again the day after. Thiago disagrees with Gabriel and just when the discussion threatens to end up in another stalemate, he tells us he wants to stay at El Castillo. Before he leaves, Gabriel takes me apart to tell me that Bruno had told him that Thiago has threatened to kill himself more often. It is a way of seeking attention. "That might be the case," I respond, "but there may come a time when they aren't just words."

"El Samaritano wasn't like that," Thiago grumbles while Gabriel walks off. "There is less attention nowadays. They used to come here three times a week. I had the feeling that I had people looking out for me. When I said to Ramiro that I was dehydrated, he would buy me a *suero* [rehydration solution], he would buy clothing, he would take me to church. They used to let you enter in the center. Nowadays they let you wait outside. They have even refused to give me a glass of water while I was waiting there. When I told Joe about it, he told me that it shouldn't be like that. Joe has always been good to me." He then starts talking to me about the "darkness" in his life. "Sometimes I don't want to live anymore."

I tell him that it is important to keep talking to El Samaritano and that it might be a good idea to arrange a meeting with him, his uncle and El Samaritano. I can attend such a meeting, I explain to him, but cannot play a big role in it, referring to the fact that I would leave Guatemala a little over a week later. "Then you can see my house," he says. The idea brings a smile to his face. "Thanks for the talk, Timo," he tells me after a brief moment of silence. "It gives me peace and tranquility, knowing that someone is standing next to me." When we look down, we see our pants soaked from the knees down. It is time to seek shelter across the street with the others. Not much later, I tell Thiago that I am going back home. "Will you keep the notes as a memory of me?" he asks me. "Of course," I tell him, while thinking they would be grim objects to remember him by. But at the same time, as I realized later, ones that handsomely reflected the tightrope of a life he and others lived at El Castillo.

Death and life

Thiago's alleged suicide notes turned out to be a cry for help, or perhaps more accurately, for being seen, and as such they were the kind of acts not uncommon among the people of El Castillo. During my second fieldwork period, Moisés stuck a knife in his leg in the presence of his daughter Avigail and wife Tita. The plan was to stick it in his stomach, but he somehow decided differently in the heat of the moment. It was an act of desperation, in response to a troubled relationship with Mari – who, according to Moisés, was always mad and did not pay attention neither to him nor their daughter – and a life that did not bring him any joy. He was also saddened by the thought that Avigail was walking a path similar to his. “Things don't change,” he told me, “there is no change, change, how can I explain it, I can't find a single bit of happiness, a routine in which I'm cheerful, in which I'm happy, right.” The world he lived in, he said, was “one of violence, of so much sadness, so much egoism, and of so many blows in life.” For similar reasons, Abel had climbed a high tower near El Castillo in 2016, planning to throw himself off it. He wanted to die, he had told Joe afterwards, something which his surrogate father already knew. It was why he often refused medical treatments when in the hospital (or refused going to the hospital in the first place). Nevertheless, Abel did not jump that day, and the rescue operation was live broadcasted on television. A small success for someone craving – yes, dying – for attention – according to Joe. Abel sometimes also dressed to shock, leaving his genitals exposed, in order to be noticed. And as for me, I went back to The Netherlands after my second fieldwork period in June 2017, knowing that drama would continue to mark lives of the El Castillo people also without my presence. And it did.

Three weeks after I had left Guatemala, Chicle died after being attacked on the streets. Apparently, someone had set his face on fire with solvent. He had been in coma for a week before passing away. And a week after Chicle, Abel died too. At the age of twenty, his organs had given up on him. He died in the hospital after the people of El Samaritano had brought him there for the umpteenth time. I had never talked to him as much as I did with most of the others that were at El Castillo as often as he was, since he was often in his own world. Sometimes he did not even seem to recognize me when I found him lying on the street somewhere. I had a remarkably lucid

conversation with him, however, less than two months before he died. By then, he was already complaining about heavy stomach aches which, in retrospect, may well have been signs that his life was nearing the end. It was his birthday next Sunday, he told me, adding with palpable love for God that “*Diosito*” [literally: little God] was giving him another year. When he told me the date of his birthday I had to tell him that it was a week later. I nevertheless asked him if he had wishes. “A hug will do,” he answered. I knew he was asking me for one right there at that moment, but somehow I could only produce a half-hearted arm around his neck, which – because of my apparent constraint – must have felt as uncomfortable for him as it did for me. Why couldn’t I do that? I remember thinking right away, annoyed with myself. And I was thinking it again after hearing about his death. It would have, of course, made no difference. On the day of his birthday I found him sitting on the street a few blocks from El Castillo when I accompanied Joshua to the clinic. A couple meters from him sat Domingo, who tried sucking the last fumes of solvent out of his bottle. Abel looked as if he was going to die right there on the very spot, a little skeleton with hollow eyes gazing into nothing. I bought him a water, after which Joshua and I continued our way.

It was telling of the contact I had with Abel that only on my last day in Guatemala he told me a little bit about his past. His father was killed because he was a thief, he said, and his mother had separated from him at a young age. He did not have contact with his five brothers and sisters either. Meanwhile, the last time he saw his grandparents was five months before. In the aftermath of his death, I learned from Joe’s writings that his mother had tried getting rid of him a few times before she handed him over to a lady she did not know when he was six years old. It was the last time Abel saw his mother. In his new home, he entered a period of sexual abuse and neglect. It eventually drew him to the streets, the beginning of yet another violent chapter to his life, one that would be interrupted by a few years of horror in a children’s home. Perhaps death, in the end, is the only cure for the saddest of lives.

It was hard not to get pessimistic when looking at the hard-won but easily lost lives of the people of El Castillo, although even in dark places glimmers of hope can be found sometimes. When I spoke to social worker Chris of El Samaritano about a year after my second fieldwork period, he told me Paloma had her seven children taken from her by the PGN. Fortunately,

instead of sending them to a state home, they had put her children in an “amazing” private home, as he put it, and, in contrast to when they were still at home, they were doing very well. Paloma herself kept coming and going at El Castillo. Meanwhile, Thiago had been well on his way to beat the odds by turning his back to the streets. In the last week of my fieldwork he started living with his uncle again to end up back on the streets only a few days later. He did not feel good in his house, he told me, explaining that he was snubbed by everybody there besides his uncle for not financially contributing to the household. He said it with a confident look on his face though, which seemed to indicate that he had made some peace with his situation. Nevertheless, a few weeks later he decided to enter a rehabilitation clinic and for six months he managed to stay there. When he left the clinic, after having completed the program, he moved back into his uncle’s house, but now with the knowledge that there was a job awaiting him helping his brother – a painter – who had come back to Guatemala after having spent some time in the United States. It was a positive cycle his life had gotten into that lasted for another three months, but ended abruptly when his father died after a motorcycle accident. Daily calls from people of El Samaritano did not stop him from doing what he had done for so long when faced with trauma. And not long after the death of his father, Thiago was found back on the street again and back on solvent. At El Castillo, he reunited with Marcos, Moisés, Pato, Colin, Nicolas and other compañeros. The sad conclusion, a year after I had left Guatemala, was that much had happened at El Castillo, but nothing had changed.

3. A Life in Refuge

The Pineda Family

Cast of characters

Miguel, age 53 ³³	the father
María Luisa, age 51	the mother
Daniel, age 28	the only son
Rosa, age 23	elder daughter
Yolanda, age 16	younger daughter
Esperanza	Miguel's mother
Inés	Miguel's sister
Adriana	Miguel's youngest sister
Rafael; Leon; Ramiro	Miguel's friends

³³ As on 11 May 2016, the first day of my fieldwork. This also goes for the other cases where the cast of characters mentions age.

It was seven o'clock on a Friday in August 2014 in Balcón Verde, a marginal colonia almost enclosed by ravines in Guatemala City's most populous district, Zone 18. A quiet evening with barely a soul outside aside from a few soldiers making their rounds in the neighborhood. But as the twilight hit the streets, an unpleasant kind of silence started filling the air. One that revealed a more unsettling truth, the echoes of which became more tangible when you moved away from the boulevard running along the neighborhood's upper part, to the narrower and denser streets of the colonia's lower part. Like many of the capital's marginal areas, Balcón Verde had turned into gang territory after years of state neglect. The lower part, running from Eleventh Street to Fourteenth Street, had become a virtual no-go area ruled by the local branch of a well-known gang in Guatemala City. It was a place where the police hardly showed its face. Since a few years, soldiers had been deployed in the neighborhood to take back the streets from the gang. The measure, however, had yet to bring back public life in the area.

Inside the house of the Pineda family on Thirteenth Street, it was equally quiet. María Luisa was preparing a meal of rice, black beans, eggs and chicken while contemplating her day. She had spent the day at home, where she had a small, improvised store of food and items by catalogue and was now awaiting her husband Miguel and two daughters to come home for dinner. Upstairs, her son Daniel was taking a rest after a day of work. Then, someone knocked on

the door. When María Luisa opened, she saw a young boy she did not know. At first, he asked for her husband Miguel. But when María Luisa told him that he was not at home, the boy handed her a phone to urge her to pick it up.

The voice on the other side introduced himself as one of the “*muchachos* [boys] from here,” which told María Luisa that it was someone from the local gang. He started off about how the mara was hampered by the police in gaining a decent income. Then he told María Luisa that, for being a longtime resident of the neighborhood, they wanted a onetime contribution from her family of fifteen thousand quetzals, the equivalent of almost two thousand dollars. An exorbitant amount of money,³⁴ for which they were given her two days to come up with. María Luisa, who started crying, told the man that both she and her husband were out of work and that there was no way that they could come up with that kind of money. “If you don’t pay,” the voice responded, “we will kill one of your children.” He then began summing up information about where her children went to school and to work, how they got there and at what time. Before he hung up the phone, he told María Luisa to keep the phone on because she would be called again on Sunday for further details on the payment.

When Miguel came back to Balcón Verde later that evening, he first passed by his mother, which was only a door away from his house. Inside, he found his sister Inés sitting at the table, who told him what had happened. Shocked by what he had just heard, Miguel rushed home, where he found his wife upset on the couch. Daniel, much calmer than his mother, told him right away that they should not pay anything but get out of the neighborhood for good. For sure, the money, the three all agreed after things cool down a bit, was too much to come up with and even if they would do so, it would only be an encouragement for the gang to hit them again. Miguel, however, could not stop thinking that there must have been some mistake. Even though extortion of home owners had become increasingly rife in the neighborhood, they were loved in Balcón Verde. Miguel had long been a key player in one of the strongest football teams of the neighborhood and was widely appreciated for his benevolence, always quick with a laugh or a helping hand. On the football field, he was now overshadowed by his two talented daughters and his son who

³⁴ An amount that is greater than half of the nominal gross domestic product per capita, given the fact that this was 3751.6 dollar in 2014 (Banco de Guatemala, 2017).

many considered to be among the best players of Balcón Verde. And perhaps even more importantly, the family felt protected by the neighborhood's gang leader Cesar through the respect they earned on the football field and Miguel's daughters' lifelong friendship with two of his relatives. In addition to this, they had seen Cesar grow up across the street from them and the families knew each other.

Surely, this must all be a big misunderstanding, Miguel tried to convince himself. He decided for the family to wait out the two days to see what would happen. The following day, they spent most of the day at Miguel's mother's place, where his mother prayed for them, telling Miguel that he should place his trust in God. On Sunday, in an attempt to shake off some of the worries, Miguel, María Luisa and their youngest daughter Yolanda decided to go to the football games close by in the neighborhood of La Paz. Going to watch football games was a regular thing for the Pinedas, although football in the area was as marked by violence as everything else. In Balcón Verde they had even stopped organizing matches recently, as it had become too dangerous for people to go out. Football in La Paz, which long boasted one of the best leagues in the city, now only stood out for violent incidents and mediocrity. It did not stop the Pinedas from going, though. And on that particular day, they bought some *granizadas*³⁵ and sat down along the field to let the games pass before their eyes; the drinks, however, unable to wash away the fear for what was about to come.

Miguel was at his mother's place when the phone rang again at seven and María Luisa, who had kept the phone on her all the time, answered. And what Miguel would have deemed impossible only a short while ago became harsh reality, as the voice on the other side of the phone told María Luisa that he would send someone for the money in two hours. What happened then was still a blur for Miguel. First they passed through some horrible moments when Miguel's oldest daughter Rosa, who had not been told about the extortion, was nowhere to be found, as she had secretly gone to her boyfriend on her way to the store. And finally, when Rosa was back again, they left the neighborhood with the little stuff they could take. Leaving behind friends and family and the neighborhood where Miguel and his wife had lived for over forty years. Towards the unknown.

³⁵ Shaved ice that is sold on many street corners in Guatemala City. It is traditionally prepared with syrup and a little bit of fruit.

I met Miguel on the first of June 2016, about a year and a half after their flight from Balcón Verde. He drove a taxi for one of the major companies in Guatemala City and picked me up after I had visited a friend. Miguel immediately struck me as an interesting character, combining catching joviality with a sadness that was just as obvious, wearing his grief on the outside. Physically, he was marked by two front teeth that seemed to dangle in his mouth, attached only by what appeared to me as blackened roots. And as we traversed the city streets, our conversation quickly turned to his extortion and the struggle that followed. The first three days after they left Balcón Verde, he told me, the family had slept on the floor in a small and damp apartment of one of María Luisa's aunts, after which they found a rental house in El Dorado, a large middle class neighborhood protected by gates and guards. Besides walls, doors and windows, the new place had been empty and for almost two months they continued to sleep on the floor – mattresses, like many of their other things, had to be smuggled out of the neighborhood to not alert the gang. Helped by the church of Miguel's mother and sisters with blankets, food and some money, they managed to slowly get back on their feet.

At the time of the extortion, María Luisa sporadically worked for a local NGO, collecting micro credit-related repayments, and she had a small store at home, which she always put up when she had spare time on her hands. Miguel had also been without a regular job, only taxying a stingy old lady now and then, who seemed to have made a sport out of paying him as little as she could. Luckily, Miguel had found the more stable taxi job only weeks after they left Balcón Verde. He was now “married with his job,” as he put it, making around seventeen hours a day, often seven days a week, to be able to keep his family safe and his daughter Yolanda in school. The long and lonely shifts in the taxi, however, also gave plenty of room for a terrible feeling of loss and nostalgia coming to dominate his life. “My neighborhood is always on my mind,” he told me at a later moment.

Miguel's immediate candidness about what had happened to him somewhat surprised me, but as it turned out later, was exemplary for his open way of engaging with people, although as my fieldwork proceeded I was astonished more often by the casualness by which Guatemalans sometimes spoke about their personal experiences with extortion and other horrors. In a country gripped by violence since time immemorial, such stories seemed

to have simply lost much of their shock effect. For the Pinedas, the extortion was only the latest in a series of violent events that affected their lives or those surrounding them. María Luisa had lost her father, who worked as a tuk tuk driver in a town just outside Guatemala City, after he was gunned down by a marero ten years ago for reasons of extortion. The children all had seen friends join the mara and some of them getting killed as a result of it. And in years prior to the family's forced departure from Balcón Verde, friends and also María Luisa's sister had already undergone similar fates.

For Miguel, who was still surrounded by his mother and sisters in Balcón Verde, the extortion may have been the worst thing that could have happened to him. María Luisa and the children, however, were already marked and bruised by violent events prior to the extortion to an extent that the latter, in a way, became a blessing in disguise. And when Miguel and his family left Balcón Verde on that Sunday evening in August, each fled from a different reality and found a different place in El Dorado.

It is these different realities that are central to this chapter, albeit it with a focus on Miguel, for whom the family's flight had the most far-reaching consequences. I will first discuss Miguel's early years in Balcón Verde, after which I will focus on the family's more recent reality in his old neighborhood that gave birth to their extortion. I will then shift to Miguel's many-headed struggle that followed afterwards, which called into question his relationship with his wife and children as well as with the world he lived in. By doing this, I will also shed light on the implications of extortion on everyday life in Guatemala City, a crime highly visible in numbers and statistics, but still largely invisible in the imprint it leaves on those that fall prey to it. Crucially, the story of Miguel and his family is only one of the many stories in Guatemala City and, at the same time, many stories in one.

Balcón Verde

Miguel's mother Esperanza grew up in a small village in the Jutiapa department, a region along the border with El Salvador, known as one of the breadbaskets of Guatemala. When she was fifteen years old, she fell madly in love with a tall and handsome truck driver twice her age that passed by her village now and then. It was a relationship doomed to fail and in an attempt to get him out of

her head, she moved to the capital. But to no avail. They had three children, Miguel being the oldest of which, but would never live together. Instead, Esperanza hauled Miguel and his two sisters to different places around the city until she found a place in Balcón Verde in 1975, profiting from a government program for people with fewer resources. Miguel was eleven by then. And marked by the absence of his father, who had at least fifteen different children with several women and never really looked after the family, he leaned heavily on his mother. According to the latter, he cried whenever she was out to work.

At the age of twelve, Miguel started working to help out his mother with the bills and not much later he dropped out of school. "Miguel has been a special boy from when he was little," his mother recalled. "He would do chores, carry carts with sand and they would pay him for that. And then he wanted to give everything to me. And then I said, 'no son, keep something for yourself as well.' 'No mama, I want to buy everything for you, I want to buy you a pair of shoes for every dress.'" At home he helped his mother with cleaning the house while the older of the two sisters, Inés, did all the cooking.

Even though the family was struggling to make ends meet, Miguel found a home in his new neighborhood. The poor but tight knit community of Balcón Verde was surrounded by green ravines and full of friends to play with. "It was a time of unity, of happiness, of companionship," Miguel recalled his first years in Balcón Verde. "We were playing all these games, besides football of course, games that you play as children. We played in the ravines, games of *cinco* (marbles). There was a river there where we went to. It was all very beautiful." Football, however, was Miguel's biggest passion and it did not take long for him to make a name for himself on the football field.

When the Pineda family came to Balcón Verde, they moved in next to the Veliz family. Their youngest child María Luisa was two years younger than Miguel and when Miguel was fifteen years old they started to go out together. At first, this mainly meant signaling each other through the windows, as María Luisa received a strict upbringing in which there was no place for boyfriends. But when María Luisa's father, a big fan of football, allowed his daughter to become representative of Miguel's team, the two were able to spend more time with each other. "I conquered her with football," he grinned when I spoke them together for the first time. "The whole team wanted her." Meanwhile, Miguel's servitude and willingness to work did not go unnoticed by his father-

in-law, who gave him his first 'real' job as a salesperson, selling everything for inside the house (from mattresses to radios). When Miguel was twenty-four, he married María Luisa and they had three children together: Daniel, who was twenty-eight by the time I first met Miguel; Rosa, age twenty-three; and Yolanda, age sixteen.

In many ways, Miguel married his opposite in María Luisa. Miguel was "someone of heart," in the words of María Luisa, combining a sensitive personality with a long for the social. He had surrounded himself with many friends in Balcón Verde over the years and held close relationships with his sisters and, especially, his mother. The missing of the latter, not having her around every day, would become a nuisance almost larger than life in the aftermath of the extortion. Next to football, his big passion was reading. He preferred "to suffer [as a result of knowledge] over the stupidity of not knowing anything," as he put it himself. María Luisa, in turn, kept herself more on the surface of life. She had almost no contact with her family and, in general, had a much more reserved attitude towards people. And although María Luisa shared Miguel's love for football, she understood little of her husband's desire for knowledge. In fact, she did not like reading at all. "And why would I? Just to give myself a headache?" she tended to reply whenever Miguel confronted her with her alleged indifference. Be that as it may, the almost permanent strained look in her eyes revealed a more worried outlook on life.

The rise of the maras

The poor but lush home Miguel found in Balcón Verde and Zone 18 was already about to be set for another course when he arrived in 1975. In 1976, a devastating earthquake hit Guatemala with an epicenter of about one hundred sixty kilometers outside of the capital. Around twenty-three thousand people died and many more lost their homes. It led to massive unplanned squatter settlements on the outskirts of Guatemala City, including in Zone 18, which had already been designated by the government to temporarily house part of the inflow of people left without a home in the capital (Prensa Libre, 2016c). The scorched earth campaigns of the early 1980s brought further waves of poor indigenous people to Guatemala City as whole villages were being swept away from the face of the earth in what the government had deemed 'guerilla

territory.’ Around the same time, free-market policies started pushing people out of rural areas into urban ones. And they have continued to do so ever since.

But the capital has proven incapable of sustaining this continuous flow of migrants. When I first arrived in Guatemala City in February 2016, Zone 18 was not only the most populous zone of Guatemala City, home to more than three hundred thousand people (Dudley, 2017), but also widely considered to be one of the most dangerous zones of the city (Cabria & Villagrán, 2018). Meanwhile, Balcón Verde was among the most violent places in the area. Like many other marginal places in Zone 18, it had become a place “where you never knew if you would encounter a murder or a shooting around the corner,” as Rosa put it. The ravines, where Miguel used to play as a little boy, were now partly invaded by illegal settlers and those that continued to be ‘green areas’ were often used by the local mara to kill and dump people.

Groups of youngsters identifying themselves as *pandillas* had already existed in Balcón Verde in the early years of Miguel’s life there though they had mainly stood out for hanging out and the occasional fist fight. Gangs in Guatemala, however, gained another character especially during the 1990s when returning migrants from the United States changed the phenomenon into a more toxic, violent and organized enterprise. They went from “gangs to live for” to “gangs to die for” (2013, pp. 53, 77), to put it in Deborah T. Levenson’s terms. Young boys in Balcón Verde, many of whom Miguel and María Luisa had seen growing up, became ruthless criminals, setting themselves to selling drugs and, especially, extorting buses and stores, while claiming to protect the neighborhood against attacks from rival gangs coming from neighboring places. In addition to this, the mara could rely on support from a larger network of residents acting as *banderas* (spies), errand boys and girls, and other type of helpers that sometimes depended on the gang structure for their survival.

And although the mara quickly gained a powerful position in the neighborhood, it did not immediately worry Miguel. “Before it was rare to see someone smoking marihuana in the street. Later, it was different, the neighborhood practically turned into a bulwark of the mareros. But we weren’t scared, because of their leaders, right. [...] Cesar, he practically grew up with us, playing football and all that. At one point, he started liking easy money and became a criminal, right, one of the most vicious and powerful of the

colonia. They ran the neighborhood, they were practically the owners and took control of it. They, for instance, organized the Christmas party, the Holy Week festivities, the football championships, they borrowed money to people, they started a restaurant, they started a place where they sold water.”

The gang’s position in Balcón Verde weakened, however, after a series of arrests. It was a development that Miguel and María Luisa attributed to the ‘iron fist’ of president Otto Pérez Molina, who owed his 2011 electoral victory, principally, on the tough-on-crime image he derived from his background as a former general. Crime, as we know, distracts people from the social issues that underpins it, which means that, especially in war-like places such as Guatemala City, the public tends to increasingly associate good governance with tough-on-crime stances and symptom treatment. During his presidency, Pérez Molina further militarized security and governance in general, while boosting the number of police officers at the same time. Nevertheless, soldiers came to outnumber police officers in many neighborhoods of the capital (Main, 2014; Cabria & Villagrán, 2018).

It was within this context that local gang leader Cesar was imprisoned in 2012, after being held responsible for a shooting in an adjacent neighborhood. And as the gang war between the maras of Balcón Verde and their counterparts of La Dolorosa kept taking its human toll, the mara started bringing in members from outside of Balcón Verde, with less connections to the neighborhood and its residents. Meanwhile, in response to increased killings of bus drivers and assistants, the ordinary ‘red’ buses had stopped running through large parts of zone 18, including the boulevard passing Balcón Verde. They were replaced by the *Transurbano* bus and *Transmetro*, both transit systems in which drivers did not handle cash money, which made them less vulnerable to extortion. For similar reasons of extortion, stores became scarcer in marginal areas, sometimes simply losing their economic viability as the extortion tax weighed too heavy on the owners’ shoulders. In response, the gang in Balcón Verde had to look for other sources of income and started preying on residents other than vendors and store owners, turning the colonia into an increasingly dangerous place for its occupants.

Tellingly, as Paco, a former gang member from Chapín, a notorious neighborhood with many of the same problems as Balcón Verde, once told me: “One has to first realize that no one is safe here. That having said, the best way to stay safe is to become part of a gang yourself.” In addition to becoming a

marero, Paco distinguished four other ways to navigate security (or what would go for it) in his neighborhood. “In the ideal world you would go to the police when you have a problem,” he told me, “but for us this is the last [fifth] option. It can get you killed rapidly.” The police, he claimed, were working together with the gangs, which meant that you ran high risks of being retaliated against when you would tell on someone from a gang to the police. Indeed, criminal infiltration was believed to be rife within the police force (Vásquez, 2015). Paco’s words became even more meaningful to me after I spoke to two former police officers who, independently of each other, told me that in Guatemala City, bad cops, being those that are overtly corrupt and/or abusive, are sent to be stationed in bad neighborhoods as a form of punishment. A system that, of course, would only add fuel to the fires in violence stricken places like Balcón Verde and Chapín. The second and third option, after joining the gang yourself, Paco asserted, was to be a family member or a friend of a marero. “The fourth option,” he continued, “is what we call ‘to not come and to not leave.’ In other words, that you go to work in the morning, come back and then keep to yourself imprisoned in your house until you go back to your work the next morning.” According to Paco, it was what the far majority of people did in the neighborhood.

Paco’s account sheds an interesting light on life in the gang ridden contexts of Guatemala City where the safest option is to be part of or close to the gang. At the same time, this raises some obvious questions. Guatemalan gang life, as we have seen, is predestined to end up in violent death, with the average marero being killed by the age of twenty-two (Levenson, 2013). In addition to this, many gang members end up incarcerated and serving long sentences. Prisons, as Levenson argues, are now “the single most important place for mareros in Guatemalan society” (Levenson, 2013, p. 113). It seems, therefore, too bold of a statement to brand such a lifestyle the best option to keep oneself safe. Paco, however, did not seem too impressed when I confronted him with the contradictory nature of his claim. Instead, he emphasized the risks he believed mareros did not run in comparison to regular residents. “But [as a gang member] you don’t risk being killed by your neighbor. And no one is going to extort you, or kidnap you, or violate someone from your family. *Putá*, how do you think it feels to have a store being visited everyday by someone charging you a tax [extortion money], having a daughter fearing that the gang will snatch her, running the risk of losing your house?”

Remaining silent

Like in Chapín, the police and, to a lesser extent, the army, were not to be trusted in Balcón Verde, or at least seen as such by most of the residents. Gang members openly carried their guns and had turned the neighborhood in a place of “only familiar faces,” as Daniel put it, pointing to the fact that no one from outside Balcón Verde in his right mind visited the place. This long included the police that hardly showed its face in the lower part of the colonia, where the Pinedas lived. “We couldn’t tell them [the mareros] anything,” Rosa said, “fearful as we were we couldn’t go to the police and say: ‘look, they’re killing someone here.’ There were people that did so, but the police practically didn’t enter in the colonia and they didn’t care about what happened there either. ‘It is a colonia of mareros, let them deal with it.’ The last years you did see police and soldiers. But then you had a lot of soldiers and police on one block and on the other block they were killing someone. ‘*Pura fachada*’ (mere window-dressing), as my dad would say.”

Many in the neighborhood suspected the police of working together with the mara. “Just imagine,” María Luisa explained to me, “there was a police station in the colonia and they never did anything. Sometimes they killed people at, let’s say, ten meters from the station and they wouldn’t know anything or do anything. So it makes you think. Why aren’t they doing anything while it’s happening so close to them?” Tellingly, I spoke to three of Miguel’s friends that were also extorted in Balcón Verde and none of them went to the police. Miguel did not either. “The mareros are the first ones to find out when you denunciate,” he explained his choice of not reporting the crime, also knowing that the mareros would not hesitate to do something horrible to him or his family if he would go to the police. To put it in the words of Miguel’s friend Leon, who decided to pay his extorters and stay in the neighborhood: “why put yourself at more risk to go to the police?”

During its heyday, the gang ruled in Balcón Verde with near impunity. Nevertheless, residents and mareros had learned to live together. In practice, people were largely left unbothered, as long as they did not challenge the gang’s authority; it is a life under the yoke of criminal enterprise that is often depicted by the popular phrase of ‘*ver, oír y callar*,’ ‘to see, hear and remain silent.’ However, the arrests of Cesar and other ‘homegrown’ mareros and the

flight or death of others had debilitated the gang and – in combination with the gang’s shifting focus towards extorting home owners in Balcón Verde – upset the equilibrium that it maintained with residents.

But as is often the case, fear proved more persistent than the ones allegedly mastering it and even seemed to tighten its grip on residents as the mara morphed into a less tangible, though arguably more predatory entity. In response, residents tended to increasingly withdraw themselves from public neighborhood life: “Knowing that outside you could run into bad people, you enclosed yourself and only went outside when you had to,” stated María Luisa. It was a line heard more often in the neighborhood. Crucially, with the extortion risk insinuated into the capillaries of everyday life, it was not only direct confrontations with ‘bad people’ or bullets flying around from which residents had to shield themselves in order to prevent themselves from getting hurt. In fact, within an extortion, a personal confrontation with the victim is not even necessary to make people pay (or flee), as contact can be established and maintained through phone calls. Especially those residents that had something extra to spend, ran the risk of becoming a target. “It is a colonia where even having a little more leads people to think that you have money,” according to Miguel, who himself had made good money when he worked in chicken transport in a town an hour outside of Guatemala City; a line of work known for the extra money drivers can make by exaggerating the weight loss of the frozen chickens during transportation. Part of the money the customers ‘officially’ paid for the chickens, which were sold by weight, then went into the drivers’ own pockets. It was something Miguel had also done oftentimes in the three years he held the job. From the extra money, he had bought a second house in Balcón Verde for Daniel to eventually live in the moment he started a family on his own. A move instigated by María Luisa, who wanted to keep her family close to her.

But with extortionists now also targeting regular residents, life in Balcón Verde became increasingly about shielding off potentially harmful information about one’s life to avoid being noticed by the wrong crowd. As concrete cases of extortion hinted at, a good job or a cousin in the United States – where gold could be picked off right from the streets according to a persistent misunderstanding – could serve as triggers for extorters to target you. A new television, Leon once explained to me, had to be smuggled into

the neighborhood so that people would not find out you had the money to buy one. Even maintaining the exterior of one's house became an endeavor many were not willing to undertake. Instead, broken paint on outside walls served as what Ana Villarreal calls 'camouflage' (2015, p. 147), disguising the valuables that were hidden behind it. In practice, it meant that people in Balcón Verde tended to withdraw themselves in little worlds, which often only consisted of a small circle of close family members and, sometimes, friends.

Meanwhile, distrust between people in the neighborhood grew as residents lost sight on both the gang's tentacles in the neighborhood and of each other (as a result of withdrawn lifestyles), turning everyone into a potential danger. The fact that mareros who grew up in the neighborhood were also said to be involved in the extortion of regular residents served as an extra reminder that no one should be trusted. Miguel lost many friends in the process. "They were somber and uncertain times," he said, recalling his last years in Balcón Verde. His beloved neighborhood had turned into a large collection of small worlds that often only touched by the hands of the occasional chat between neighbors restricted to meaningless subjects. If they touched at all. "A good neighbor is someone that minds his own business," said Miguel's mother Esperanza to me. She and her youngest daughter Adriana spent most of their days either at home or in church. Crucially, the latter, as elsewhere in the world, did not only play into people's spiritual needs, but also into their social needs (Appiah, 2019). In communities united by distrust, churches tended to be considered relatively safe areas to connect with others because they are governed on the base of an ethical code. Esperanza even deemed her fellow churchgoers 'family' and had opened her house to them on a weekly basis in the past for church events.

Within the above context, life in Balcón Verde became not only about keeping your mouth shut when something was seen or heard – 'to see, hear and remain silent' – but increasingly about preventing yourself from seeing and hearing, and, in addition to this, from being seen and heard in the first place. It was a lifestyle that María Luisa had long internalized. She always had few friends and, at some point, even stopped talking to people, as far as possible. It was reason, María Luisa told me, for Miguel to call her a "*bruja encuevada*" (caged witch). "That is what he says. 'Witch, go to your cage.' But it is because I am not very communicative. I don't know, maybe it is bad but I have the

feeling that talking to people is asking for problems. Because people are always talking about stuff they shouldn't talk about and perhaps you're just listening, not saying anything, but they see you talk and get ideas. So I prefer to prevent that. I have always been like that. Miguel may make fun of me, but I prefer to be a caged witch. Look, sometimes for saying things or for being seen talking on the corner you get into problems. A lot of people in the neighborhood had to go because of that, for talking about other people. And perhaps those are the same people that talked about us, and what happened, they sacked us."

In many ways, Miguel was unwilling to accept the withdrawn nature of life in Balcón Verde. He detested the moment that they placed a small gate around the entrance of his door. It was María Luisa who pushed it through when the children were still small, in a time that others in the colonia were also trying to increase their level of protection. "She loves keys, padlocks and walls," he tells me while we stare at a photo of his house taken a few years ago. "I hate it, putting up gates. I never wanted to do it, never, because it comes at the expense of space. It is horrible the space that is left here. And this wall right across the street from us wasn't there before either. It used to be only *maya* [wire fence].. and this was a dirt road. Here we had our *chamuscas* [small games of football], as we called them." The gates, of course, were only a taste of the withdrawal that was about to dominate life in Balcón Verde.

At the same time, Miguel was spared of much of the daily affairs in the neighborhood, as he was often out working. For the chicken job, which he lost a few months before he departed from Balcón Verde, he even had to move only to come home sometimes on Sundays. Meanwhile, his days in the neighborhood were often devoted to football and friends. Unlike his mother and sisters, Miguel did not attend church. In fact, he had grown skeptical of organized religion due to the many abuses he had seen, heard and read about that concerned religious leaders and other so-called God fearing people. In an attempt to avoid the jargon of the Church, Miguel preferred to speak about a *Ser Superior* (Supreme Being), instead of God or Jesus.

It was during the get-togethers with friends and acquaintances, however, that Miguel sometimes tended to be too frank about certain aspects of his life, at least to the taste of his mother. "Unfortunately, when he takes his beers, he doesn't go crazy or anything, but he sometimes talks too much, because of the beers. There was a time that he made good money, when he transported

chickens.” And although the family was still in the dark about who had extorted them, María Luisa thought she had heard the voice of a man called Gabriel on the other side of the line during the extortion call. It was someone with whom Miguel had shared some beers a few times.

Family unity

Even though the community in Balcón Verde was falling apart in the years before the extortion, the Pinedas still had each other. In a colonia where broken homes and neglect were the norm, the family stood out for their unity. “It was a horrible neighborhood, a horrible neighborhood,” Miguel told me, “but I tried to let love conquer all that, all that difficult stuff we were surrounded with.” And while he and María Luisa were often away from home working, others in the family made sure that there was always a home to fall back on for the children. Yolanda, if not at school or playing football, spent most of her days at her grandmother’s place watching cartoons and getting spoiled. She also usually cooked for the family. According to Miguel, she was the only one of his children blessed with his servitude. Meanwhile, Rosa was often with her boyfriend while Daniel took on a sort of a father role for his two sisters, to the point where a potential boyfriend of Rosa even came to him, instead of his father, to ask for permission to be with his sister. He laughed when he told me about it.

At the same time, watching out for his sisters in Balcón Verde had made Daniel feel powerless at times. When she was fifteen, Rosa, who was very popular with the boys in the colonia with her pale skin and fierce dark eyes, was harassed by a marero. He sometimes waited for her at the corner of their street and was known to be particularly reckless and unpredictable. Rosa had seen him kill a rival gang member on the football field once. There was not much what Daniel could do about it though, chained by the knowledge that the mara would always respond with extreme violence to residents challenging them. And even when he accompanied her, the mareros would still yell offensive things to her. Fortunately, the ‘rebellious’ marero disappeared from the colonia at some point. According to Rosa, he got sent out of the colonia by Cesar.

But there were more dangers lurking in Balcón Verde. The sisters Sara and Jennifer, relatives of Cesar, had been Rosa and Yolanda's best friends from a young age (and almost of the same age as they were). They were raised by a mother who had always been more interested in partying and men than in her children. The Pinedas, in response, had provided them a home. Sara and Jennifer sometimes came over to eat or to sleep and they kept an eye on them whenever there was an activity outside the colonia. For example, when Sara turned fifteen, Rosa threw her a *quinceanera*,³⁶ after it turned out that her mother had not arranged anything. Around the same time, however, Jennifer started dating a marero from the adjacent colonia La Dolorosa and the sisters began collecting extortion money and doing other jobs for the mara. It was not an unusual path to take for girls in Balcón Verde, according to Yolanda, as the majority of her friends wanted to get involved with a gang member. As a result, Sara and Jennifer slowly distanced themselves from Rosa and Yolanda.

"Danger is always a short step away," Miguel knew. To prevent his children from walking a similar path as Sara and Jennifer, and many others in the colonia, he tried to make sure that they had everything they needed. "It is what I always fought for, so that I could, for instance, say to Rosa: 'look, if you want to eat something, just ask me, don't go with someone just because he can buy you dinner, or because he can take you out. I will help you or take you, or give you the money.' The same goes for Yolanda, 'don't go with someone for a phone, or because he offers you this or that.'"

Football, which enabled his children to spend time outside of the colonia, became another important vehicle for keeping his children safe. Miguel made them go on trips and even paid a football-related journey to Mexico for his son. "I worked like crazy so that they would be training. All three of them, either studying or training. To make sure that they wouldn't spend too much time at home. For Daniel, it was just training, training and training, and for Rosa as well, right. 'Go on play my daughter, have fun and play, get to know people.' I give a lot of value to football, it helped us more than you can imagine. So that they wouldn't be there in that vicious circle of 'ay I like this marero because he has money, because he gives me things.' I always tried to make sure that they weren't dependent on that, right. It was never great luxury, but the normal, right. And therefore I was working like a madman."

³⁶ Quinceanera is a girl's fifteenth birthday celebration. It is a particular important one in Guatemala and other Latin American countries, as it is seen as a girl's coming of age.

The safety and stability of the Pineda home appeared to have paid off, as Daniel, Rosa and Yolanda kept themselves far away from the gang and its lifestyle. Daniel had always felt like a stranger in his own neighborhood, encountering few people in the colonia that shared his taste in rock music, photography and inline skating. In response, he tried to not get caught up too much in the daily affairs of the neighborhood, although for football, of course, he made an exception. His abilities on the field had earned him the respect of Cesar, who had his own football team of mareros in the neighborhood. But because he was a dangerous man, Daniel talked to him as little as possible.

Like their brother, Rosa and Yolanda never felt the temptation to engage with the mara. “I think I am pretty well focused in what I want,” Yolanda once explained to me. “It has been instilled into me by my father, my grandmother, my brother, by everybody. It just never crossed my mind to do something in that direction. I know that it wouldn’t bring me any good. And also because I have never felt alone. It is perhaps therefore that I never looked for something like that.”

At the same time, the obvious truth that one does not control one’s destiny seemed especially valid in crime stricken places such as Balcón Verde. Other girls in the neighborhood were just taken by the gang. Miguel remembers how only a block away a fourteen-year-old girl was forced into a relationship with someone from the mara and ended up pregnant. It had made him nervous when two mareros from outside the colonia started living right across the street from him not long after the incident. At that point, however, he still confined in the alleged protection the family enjoyed from Cesar.

Fleeing the violence

In a 2010 study conducted in a crime-stricken neighborhood of Guatemala City, one hundred thirty-five out of the one hundred seventy children under the age of eleven declared that they had witnessed one or more murders (in Levenson, 2013). Compared to adults, children tend to be disproportionately exposed to violence. There are many reasons for this, both in general as in places such as Balcón Verde, where children face violence of bellicose proportions. It would be outside the purpose of this section, however, to elaborate on this. But to highlight one reason, in a world like Balcón Verde, where danger is always

around the corner, keeping oneself safe required ‘adult’ characteristics such as self-control and discipline. It means that children are at risk simply for being children. “I was always scared, I wish that wasn’t the case,” Rosa recalls, “but sometimes, because you’re young and you want to have fun, you put aside that fear and you just go play.”

Daniel, Rosa and Yolanda all witnessed people being killed. On the football field, it was not uncommon for them to see gang members passing by with people that were about to be killed in the closeby ravine. Some of their former friends joined the gang and turned into killers and, sometimes, multiple killers. On one occasion, a childhood friend from Rosa, who had joined the mara, tortured a woman to death in the middle of the street while her screaming could be heard through the whole neighborhood for hours. No one in the neighborhood did anything. The next day, Rosa recounts how she was playing football with the victim’s cousin, an eight-year-old girl, when they were approached by the marero in question, who then started explaining to the girl in graphic detail how he had killed her aunt, showing her a bloody stick that he claimed to have used on her. Daniel’s boyhood friend Tomás, who also became a marero, once shot a guy through his head right in front of him, according to Daniel, only to show him how tough he had become in his new life. And in an event that would shake the foundations of life of the Pinedas in Balcón Verde, Sara and Jennifer were shot to death in an adjacent neighborhood.

The killing, which occurred two years prior to the extortion, had left deep scars on Rosa and Yolanda. Yolanda had trouble sleeping for months, especially in the beginning seeing the sisters every time she closed her eyes or dreaming that they were still alive – followed, of course, by the rude awakening reality presented her with. Rosa just wanted to vanish from Balcón Verde after losing her best friends. “To be honest, I just couldn’t continue living there, because everything reminded me of them.” And when she came back from her boyfriend on the day of the flight from Balcón Verde, still unsuspecting what was about to come, she could not help but feel relief the moment her father broke the news to her.

Her brother Daniel, in turn, had wanted to leave the neighborhood already long before. He had never felt at home in Balcón Verde. According to Miguel, he thought of himself of being from another level than the people

in the colonia. But his alienation from the neighborhood and its people had increased after there were no more football games and the few friends he had in the neighborhood also left. And then there were the constant worries about his sisters' wellbeing and safety. Numerous times, he had tried to convince his parents of the need to leave the neighborhood, but to no avail.

The extortion, however, had provided him with an unexpected opportunity, one he was not willing to waste. And unlike his sisters, he had been informed about the extortion from the onset. After the first phone call, Miguel, María Luisa and Daniel decided to vote on what to do in case the extorters would come back for the money. Daniel, of course, voted for leaving and had convinced his mother to do the same. According to Miguel, she always held in high regard the opinions of her beloved son, her favorite of the three children. Miguel, in turn, had opted for staying, convinced as he was that it all had been a misunderstanding, but saw himself outnumbered by Daniel and María Luisa.

In contrast to her children, María Luisa did not have instant peace with the family having to leave Balcón Verde. When I first met her in June 2016, she was doing the dishes in the kitchen of her house in El Dorado. She greeted me when I came in with Miguel but did not take part in the conversation about football we had already started before entering. In an attempt to include her into our talk, after having been inside for about ten minutes, I turned myself to her, telling her what Miguel had told me in the car, that she was happy with the family being in El Dorado. And as she leaned on the bar that separated the kitchen from the table we were sitting at, I saw a tear appear in her eye. She then started telling me about her life in Balcón Verde. Months later, Miguel explained to me that it had been a rare tear, although he himself had no recollection of it. "The only time I have seen her cry was when her father died, for ten minutes, in my arms. But then at the funeral she didn't cry." When I asked María Luisa about the tear almost a year after our first meeting, she told me that it had been a tear of rage, sadness and anger. "At that time, it was still impossible for me to talk about it without bursting into tears, it gave me a terrible feeling; one of rage, of sadness, of anger. Because they don't tell you what we have done to them [the extorters] to do this to us."

She, at least in part, blamed the Pérez Molina government for what had happened, as it had thrown itself into arresting all the homegrown mareros

in Balcón Verde, without taking into account that this would bring new ones to the colonia with less connection to the residents. Crucially, the ‘sticks’ of the army were never matched with social programs, the ‘carrots,’ targeting the factors that fed the violence. Indeed, the fact that Guatemala, according to a 2014 World Bank report, had the lowest level of public spending in the world relative to the size of the economy seemed to point at little inclination towards such a costly policy reversal.³⁷ “The state never arrived [in the poor colonias],” a security expert had told me, “only the army; progress didn’t arrive, only the army; security didn’t arrive, only the army.”³⁸ To María Luisa, the arrival of the army and the arrests that followed presented her with a medicine whose side-effects were worse than the disease it was supposed to fight.

That her opinion was not shared by everybody became clear when Pérez Molina’s successor Jimmy Morales decided to withdraw the soldiers from the street. It was a decision that sparked protests in some poor colonias dealing with problems similar to the ones of Balcón Verde, which were also related to the fact that the military enjoyed considerably more popular support than the police (see for instance Patzán, 2017a; Cabria & Villagrán, 2018). Yet, as María Luisa’s account already suggested, even though Guatemala’s murder rates have declined in recent years while the state cracked down on crime and violence, the many examples of repressive approaches in Latin America show that militarized hardline policies rarely provide more structural relief against criminal violence (Peeters, Schulting & Briscoe, 2013).

Time, however, had put things in different perspective for María Luisa. Anger had made place for acceptance and even for relief. “In the long run one starts to see what happened as a blessing, because God knows why we are where we are and why they sacked us, right. Every thing its time, as they say. Every thing has its time. You have to believe that things happen because they

³⁷ According to the World Bank report (2014) public expenditure in Guatemala is constrained by the fact that the country has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world.

³⁸ A few months after the Pineda family fled Balcón Verde, in January 2015, Pérez Molina highlighted the successful efforts of his security forces to debilitate organized crime in the two previous years, dubbing the year to come as “el año de la no violencia” (the year of no violence), while calling up all sectors of society to follow his lead. But as Lorena Escobar from the Guatemala based Association for Research and Social Studies (ASIES) justly observed: “The government called, but didn’t say how. This is where prevention, social programs, dialogue and mediation come in” (in Lara, 2015). It might be no surprise that when January 2015 turned out to be more violent than the first month of the year before, the president was quick to blame this on gangs, claiming they were responsible for over 40 percent of the murders that month (Contreras, 2015).

are meant to happen. If they wouldn't have extorted us, then we would have still been there and perhaps something would have happened with one of the children. They [the mareros] don't have feelings, if they want something, they grab it and no one says anything. And you notice it the moment the damage is already done. So in the long run I thank God because I think it provided us with a way to leave there, something that we would have never initiated ourselves. It was our home, our own home, and we had been living there for so long, with our family close. So you don't want to cut off your roots, right. But things happen for a reason and I thank God for it because perhaps if we still would have been there a tragedy would have occurred. And there is no way to recover from that, right?"

El Dorado

It is the first of March, 2017 – a week after I had come back to Guatemala City for a second fieldwork period, about two and a half years after Miguel left Balcón Verde – when Miguel and I had a long conversation about his old neighborhood. "Just thinking about it brings me to tears," he tells me as tears start coming to his eyes. "I sometimes park my taxi and I start crying. I stop in front of Balcón Verde to drop someone off or I pass by the neighborhood and I get emotional and overwhelmed by pain and sadness. And I cry because I am exaggeratedly sensitive, tears overwhelm me sometimes and I start crying on my own. I talk about it with my sister now and then. With my wife I hardly speak about it. She doesn't like to open herself up. I do though. I tell my sister, look, I have lived so many moments here, this is the place where I fell in love, where I played as a kid, it is the place where my children were born, where they were conceived, where I saw them grow up, my friends, my mother... She is not there anymore to give me a hug. She always used to say 'son, do you want your *platanito*' – she likes plantains. That is all gone. That is what I have lost. And sometimes sadness, nostalgia overwhelm me. I think it is something that I will never get rid of. Never. And sometimes my sister tells me to be strong, that I have to fight for my children and not think about the neighborhood too much. But it is just not possible. You could say that I am in a better place right now, but... I just can't. And it's horrible. I wouldn't wish it on anybody. I know that there are worse things happening in the world, but in the end I think that

all that we have is our moments and our places. That is all that really matters. It is what we take with us when we are not here anymore. Forty years it has been. Forty years, I was eleven when I arrived. And yes, I keep passing by the neighborhood on a regular basis and sometimes I am able to stay strong and keep driving, but sometimes I stop the car and start crying. Just like I am doing right now, crying, asking God why. Why did this happen to me, I haven't been a bad person, or... I don't know. What did I do? I have worked, worked and worked, so that I could support my family. It's something that I can never get rid of I think."

The sudden and unexpected departure from Balcón Verde, of course, ruptured the lives of every member of the Pineda family. Yolanda could not return to her school as the extortionists knew where it was. María Luisa had passed by the school the day after the leave from Balcón Verde to say that her daughter was not going to come back anymore. She had nearly lost it inside the director's office and someone from the school had even given her a massage to calm her down. Luckily, Yolanda's grades had been good enough for her to pass the year and start her school career somewhere else, which had been the plan anyway. Daniel had to quit his job at a store for similar reasons. Rosa, in turn, was no longer at school and had been without a job at the moment of the flight. And then there were the hardships of living without beds, furniture and a stove for months, and the more general insecurity inescapably attached to leaving behind one's life, whatever life that had been.

After a few months in their new neighborhood, the panorama had looked different, especially for María Luisa and the children (who all still lived at their parents' home). Literally, El Dorado was an immense colonia with spacious streets and green intervals, a world of difference from Balcón Verde, where, as Daniel put it, "not a single tree could be found." And even more importantly, the family felt safe in the neighborhood. It was protected by an outside fence, guards and cameras. And there was also the persistent rumor that El Dorado was a 'narco' neighborhood, which many in Guatemala City considered to be a more effective protection against criminal enterprises scouring the streets than the one provided by the police or private security. Daniel even had a friend in the neighborhood whose father was said to be a drug trafficker; something his friend did not debunk when he had asked him about it. Daniel had his eyes set on the colonia from the moment they left Balcón Verde, as he already came

there a lot to play football. Meanwhile, Rosa and Yolanda had quickly made new friends on the football court, where the boys had been impressed by their skills. Both sisters now had boyfriends living in the neighborhood. "Life is beautiful now, really beautiful," Rosa once smiled to me, "it is different air that you breathe here."

Of the three children, Yolanda had perhaps experienced the most difficulties adjusting to her new life. She had left Balcón Verde about two months before turning fifteen. Like many other girls of her age, she had long been dreaming about the perfect Quinceanera and Jennifer had assigned herself to be her *dama*.³⁹ But separated from her colonia and her best friend, the party had not turned out the way she had always pictured it, as only close family members had come to the sober celebration. "They were ugly moments," Yolanda remembers. And although she was happy in El Dorado, she did miss the daily company of her grandmother Esperanza, whom she adored. Her biggest dream was now to buy a house for her grandmother in El Dorado. Unlike Daniel and Rosa, she kept visiting her in Balcón Verde. Visits, she explained, that were always accompanied with feelings of sadness, "because of everything that happened there. It is not the same anymore. We used to be outside, hang around, play hide and seek. And there were a lot of children too. Now there is nobody on the streets anymore. People have enclosed themselves in their homes because of the fear that something will happen. They don't leave, there are no children anymore and there are different people living there. The majority went from there. It is like a different colonia because there is practically nothing left of the place that I knew, there is practically no one left of those that lived there before."

María Luisa had found a more stable job selling credit cards at a bank only a week after the flight from Balcón Verde. She believed she had been able to get the job because of her change of address, as it was whispered that banks and other firms had stopped hiring people from high crime zones like Balcón Verde – a rumour that was confirmed by an experienced job recruiter, who explained that firms in Guatemala work with "maps of red zones" to make sure that they do not hire anyone from these areas, also saying that someone from Zone 18 would not be invited for a job interview at a bank

³⁹ The birthday girl is traditionally supported by a Court of Honor, which usually consists of young women, the *damas*, and young men, the *chambelanes*.

(Coronado, 2019). In March 2016, however, María Luisa was laid off in a wave of redundancies caused by changes in the banking system. In the time that followed, it had proven difficult to get a new job, something she attributed to her age. Meanwhile, she could not put up a store as she would have done in Balcón Verde in times of unemployment for this was prohibited in El Dorado.

Nevertheless, with her children safe and surrounded by what she saw as different kind of people, she had been more relaxed in her new neighborhood. In addition to this, her 'light' way of travelling through life seemed designed exactly for the purpose of dealing with the kind of misfortune the family had to deal with. She did not attach herself to persons nor to things, convinced as she was that, to put it in her own words, "we are here today and tomorrow we can be somewhere else and we have to adapt to that." It was reason for Miguel to sometimes accuse her of having no heart. And in El Dorado it was even easier to escape talking to people for there was usually no one on the streets. "I don't even know the name of the people living next to me. Not even the name!" she tells me while we overlook the quiet street below us from the balcony of their house. She regularly chatted with a lady on her street, but that was only because they were both called out of their homes at the same time by the bell of the tortilla man, who stopped just around the corner of their street in his daily round through the colonia. "But to really talk with people? No." From María Luisa's point of view, that would be asking for trouble.

And then Miguel. The first time I had visited his mother's house in Balcón Verde, two weeks after we had first met in the beginning of June 2016, I had been somewhat surprised when he went almost straight to bed upon entering the place, leaving me in the living room with his mother, sisters and niece. It was still in the afternoon. And wasn't he the one wanting to show me his house, making me sort of his guest? It did not take long for me to find out that Miguel was scraping together moments of sleep in days that were almost entirely devoted to work. He often came home only for a shower or a quick bite.

Life had taken a costly turn for him as he went from owning two homes in Balcón Verde to renting a place for two thousand quetzals a month in a middle class neighborhood. The utilities and the service fee, used for security purposes and the maintenance of the public roads, lawns and gardens, added another fifteen hundred quetzals to the monthly costs of the family.

Meanwhile, Yolanda was in her last year of her study of graphic design, the costs of which sometimes mounted up to two thousand quetzals a month due to the expensive material she had to buy for her assignments. If she would pass the year, she planned to apply for the San Carlos University, the country's only public university, meaning that education, at least in theory, would be free. The general idea of the house was that each had to pitch in, but with Yolanda studying and María Luisa without a job, much of the financial burden was placed on the shoulders of Miguel. Also because Rosa, whom Miguel sometimes called *La Loca* (The Crazy One) for her temper, only had a job so often, and whenever she had one, she tended to quickly lose it. When I first met Miguel, Daniel, who had found a job at another store after the flight from Balcón Verde, was the only stable contributor next to Miguel, deducting fourteen hundred quetzals of his monthly salary for bed and board. Miguel earned around four to five thousand quetzals a month, meaning that the shared income was generally inadequate to make it through the month.

Fortunately, Miguel's job at the taxi company offered him the chance to make long days. Drivers were not employed by the company, but rented a company car for twenty-four hours, for which they had to pay a daily quota of four hundred fifty quetzals. It was a tricky arrangement for the drivers, as it meant that they started the day with a minus of four hundred fifty quetzals, an amount that on bad days proved to be a barrier hard to overcome. Also because gas money had to be paid by the drivers themselves. In response, most drivers that I spoke to made days of fifteen or sixteen hours, with very few days off. Many of them suffered from chronic fatigue. Meanwhile, time gone to waste due to car troubles or system failure tended to come at the expense of the drivers.

At the same time, the company provided the drivers a form of safety many other taxi drivers did not have. To get a cab as a customer, one had to call to the company or use their mobile phone app, which was introduced during my second fieldwork period. The dispatch center then divided the rides over the drivers. It was a way of working that was generally considered much safer, both for drivers and customers, than that of the taxis hailed on the street. In addition to this, the kind of taxi Miguel drove had the advantage of not handling much cash, as many customers were people that travelled on the credit their employer had with the taxi company, making them less of a target

for assailants and extortionists. They also did not have a fixed location from where they waited for people in need for a ride. Taxi's that did have one were often forced to pay extortion money to the local crime group. Having said this, if Miguel or one of his colleagues were extorted, they would have all the reason to not report it to the company. Company protocol required drivers to take an unpaid leave of a month in such a case, after which they were given a different car and telephone number. Of course, few drivers were able to afford being without income for a month.

These conditions turned driving a taxi into a stressful job, also because the road in Guatemala was considered a dangerous place where aggression among drivers, violent assaults and accidents were rife. And then there was the physical deterioration that came with the job. Miguel used to have an athletic figure due to the long hours he made on the football field. He had grown a belly though during the long days behind the wheel, one that became visible now and then as many of his shirts were a bit tight around the lower part, causing them to crawl up sometimes when he sat down. The look of it did not seem to bother him. When among friends, he would even rub his bared belly while conversing, something which appeared to give him a strange form of satisfaction. His front teeth, on the other hand, were a constant nuisance. He had ignored his dental problems as more pressing needs demanded both all of his time and money. Being naturally blessed with an exuberant laugh, when he laughed he often tried squeezing his lips together to prevent people from seeing his teeth, sometimes putting a hand to his mouth in a seemingly nonchalant way.

Faced with the absurdity of evil

"Faced with the absurdity of evil, all you can do is write. It is the only thing that keeps you from insanity," wrote Miguel in one of the fourteen notebooks filled with personal notes he had given me for my perusal. The box with notebooks – the result of about twenty-five years of writings, from a period just after the birth of his son to the first months after the extortion – had still been in his former house when his youngest sister Adriana moved into the place (her presence there had been the best way to keep the house in the family given that there were no people interested in buying a house in an extortion-ridden

area). He had asked her to look for the box after I had shown my interest in the diaries. And in the weeks that followed, I devoted some of my evenings working my way through a sea of poems, famous quotes, thoughts about life, political reflection, New Year's resolutions (usually: 'drink less;' 'love my wife') and letters to Miguel's wife, his mother and his 'three jewels,' as he often called his children. I stumbled over his handwriting sometimes, but always enjoyed his sense of language and, also, drama. Meanwhile, the notebooks had given me an interesting peek into his life and mindset. In the immediate aftermath of the extortion, I learned that he had leaned heavily on what he deemed the Supreme Being in seeking a way forward or so it seemed from the multiple messages addressed to it (and sometimes to God). For example, "Tuesday, 7.15 am. A momentous day, I have decided to forget everything and start over for myself and for those I love, of course with the help of prayer and the Supreme Being, discipline and love, and forget everything that has caused so much damage. God will help me."

He had stopped writing a couple of months after the extortion, but picked it up again about a year later, at the end of 2016, after his son had convinced him to get a Facebook account, telling him that there were great pages of poetry to which he could subscribe to. From then on, posting on Facebook became his way of dealing with the long hours in between clients and even more importantly, the feeling of injustice he experiences. He often writes songs of praise for Balcón Verde, addressing his old neighborhood as if it was a person, in an abundant style that also characterized the writings in his diaries: "To hug you is to hug a cloud. I looked for your gaze and found depths of indifference, I looked for you and you were in the habit of forgetfulness, you took my heart, you wrapped it in the handkerchief of bitterness, and the rival of happiness won the battle."

No doubt, the departure from Balcón Verde had turned Miguel's world upside down. In his old neighborhood, he had been loved and respected by many – the type of guy people used to ask about whenever he was out working. And he had been surrounded by his mother and sisters. This had given way to what he deemed a "terrible solitude" in his taxi, where days could pass by without really talking to anyone. And whenever he did have spare time now, he had often no choice but to spend it with his wife. Their marriage, however, had died a lingering death after Miguel had several romances with other women

over the years and had spent most of his time working. It inspired María Luisa to mainly focus on her children, which gave Miguel the feeling that he did not matter to her. Surprisingly, the fact that he had been relegated to his wife ever since they had left Balcón Verde, had brought them closer together and had even brought back some affection between the two – at one point, Miguel read out loud a message to me he received from his wife, “are you coming yet, because I miss you,” to which he had responded, “what happened to you, have you been drinking?”

As much as the renewed rapprochement to his wife had pleased him, it could not prevent him from feeling lost, not in the least because there was also the ‘why-question’ playing in his mind. At times, he blamed his wife for the situation he was in – for he had never wanted to leave Balcón Verde. At times, he blamed himself, considering the extortion a karma-like retribution for his corrupt behavior during his job of transporting chickens. He told me he saw it as only fair that he had lost the house he bought from the extra money, which had cost him thirty thousand quetzals, after being scammed by a cousin who now rented out the place. It was because of the guilt he felt, Miguel explained, that he was so happy with his current job. “It is super hard, but here I don’t have to lie to anyone.” Laying the blame on himself, it seemed a way of thinking aimed at reclaiming a sense of power and agency over his situation. After all, it would not only mean that the extortion could have been prevented – if only he had acted differently – but also that he only had to do good from now on to prevent similar hardships from happening in the future. “There is something outrageous about situations that rob us of the power to act, speak, know, choose, and make a difference,” anthropologist Michael Jackson writes. “So we imagine choosing, and lacerate ourselves with guilt that we chose badly or missed our chance. Even in the most desperate, humbling, and overwhelming situations, people seek imperatively to wrest back control, to reassert the right to govern their own lives, to be complicit in their own fate” (1998, pp. 29-30). But most of the time Miguel struggled with the injustice of what happened, hampered by the fact that he had no certainty in who had done it.

And unlike his children and, in her way, his wife, Miguel had not found a home in El Dorado yet, also because he hardly spent time there. “My family is doing fine, but I can’t forget you my Balcón Verde, I will always love you,” Miguel posted on Facebook in a message that leaves little to the imagination.

“The art of life,” he wrote in one of his journals in the months after the extortion, “is the art of forgetting and of avoiding pain.” If such was the case, life was something he far from mastered. But then, who would in his situation?

Isolation

It was not just Balcón Verde and everything it represented that Miguel was missing. He often had the feeling he was the only one carrying the weight of what he believed should have been a shared struggle to keep the motor of the family running. And even worse, that he was not appreciated for what he was doing. Miguel’s messages to Balcón Verde were as much love letters to his old neighborhood as they were messages to his wife and children to tell them, as Miguel put it, “that I am not doing well, that I am suffering because of their indifference, because of their apathy, because of what I am saying holds no value whatsoever to them. Or perhaps it does, but they don’t act upon it. It’s like a relief, right, to put it out there, palpable, that I am feeling sad, right. And that pain and deception overwhelm me. And that everything piles up.”

And with the daily stress that accompanied his job, Miguel needed little setback on the family front to be put in a state of utter depression and anger. He almost exploded when Yolanda neglected her school work in a week he designated as being spelled by *Santa Muerte* (Sacred Death), with a nod to a visit I had paid a few days earlier to a woman practicing witchcraft. Whether steered by the skeleton hands of a folk saint or not, bad luck had indeed hit Miguel. Three of the cars he had been given that week broke down and one was sent to service, which had cost him precious time during which he had not been able to earn – something he did not blame on the company but on Guatemalans in general, for it was a “habit among all drivers, in this us Guatemalans have ourselves to blame, that we don’t report any defects.” In addition to this, the mobile app system his company had introduced – in response to the arrival of Uber to Guatemala – did not work properly. As a result, Miguel and many other drivers were offered rides in locations often impossible for them to reach. It had led to a financial drought in which he had not made a single dime in seven days of work, even though he had worked almost continuously. He even had to borrow money from the company. Meanwhile, Yolanda had been denied access to her school for not having

paid three hundred quetzals on books, money that Miguel had then given her with a great deal of trouble. He had gotten furious with her when she kept postponing the payment, according to Miguel because she was “going crazy with her boyfriend.” After a couple of days, Miguel had taken the money back from her, because he had to pay the rent.

During this stretch of seven days of no income, Miguel had not allowed himself to eat in the house or sleep in his bed, sometimes dozing off in a chair a bit. He had asked his wife to not wash his clothes, this way punishing himself for not providing. It took a week for his wife to ask him to please lay down and take a rest, which he had done. When he woke up, he had watched a movie and some football on the television, during which his son had made him a dinner and served him a beer. It had made him feel a bit better. In the end, Yolanda did not go to school for twenty days. Miguel believed either his son or his wife had finally come up with the money for the books. He had not asked about it though, disappointed by the fact that his daughter had not bothered to put a little effort in it, while he was going through hell to keep her in school. Despite this, he was generally happy with the way she handled her studies.

Only a week before his collision with Yolanda, Miguel had a quarrel with Rosa after she had lost a job in a clothing warehouse as a store assistant; something Miguel at first ignored, choosing to not even ask her about it as it was the umpteenth time she could not retain a job. The following day, however, he had lost his temper when he found her at home with her boyfriend, hanging around, surrounded by dirty dishes and laundry still to be done. He had scolded her and said that he would not pay anything for her anymore. Rosa had reacted by angrily shouting to him that they wanted her to work but did not want her to study (like her sister did) – according to Miguel, this was not a matter of not wanting but of not being able to, as they lacked the financial means to pay for the study of two children. After the verbal fight with Rosa, Daniel had told Miguel that he himself was also to blame, given the fact that he could not say things the normal way. He always got angry immediately. Miguel had responded to him that he did not understand why his children had such trouble seeing the pressing needs of the house. The next day Rosa had gone away from home to live with a friend, only to return again with all her stuff after five hours.

Meanwhile, Miguel drew hope from the knowledge that the financial burden he carried on his shoulders would probably lessen in the end. The premise had always been that Miguel would reduce his working hours when María Luisa found a job and, even more importantly, when Yolanda would start her study at the San Carlos University, which she wanted to combine with working. Fortunately, María Luisa found work at the bakery in El Dorado at the end of March 2017, a little over a year after she had lost her position at the bank. And although the job did not pay very well, it would nevertheless relieve Miguel a bit financially. Or so he thought. It was not much later that he found out that his wife had agreed with Daniel that he would have to contribute less to the family's livelihood now that she found work. Meanwhile, his son had changed jobs around the same time, telling Miguel he wanted to do so to be able to pay part of Yolanda's study. Weeks after he had changed jobs, however, Miguel was still to receive the extra contribution. Daniel, however, did buy an expensive watch for his girlfriend from his first pay check and came home with a brand new television not much later, a gift from his girlfriend he had said. But Miguel did not believe him. Instead, he was convinced that he had bought it himself. "It is just dad, dad and the dad, right," he explained to me. "So sometimes it is not that you're complaining, it is just that you're getting tired of it. Right. I know that I shouldn't be like this and that there is still much work to be done. But you're just getting tired of it. And you start preferring the solitude. Because I have always had two jobs, for the same reason, or I've went to work outside the city, for the same reason. So that they... They have never looked for or applied for a job so that I wouldn't have to work this much, and would have some time to rest. On the contrary. On the contrary. So now my wife started working and here I'm thinking of getting a little bit of help, and what happens: The television! Sometimes I think to myself that my son acts this way because he hasn't lived what I have lived."

Miguel's children had indeed not been through what he had been through. Nor were they the type of servants of necessity that Miguel had become. At the same time, it became clear to me that Miguel had lost sight of what kinds of lives his children had left behind in Balcón Verde and had during my presence in Guatemala City. The long days in the taxi had estranged him from his children and their lives. And in many ways, the roundabout and theatrical way of communicating with his family through Facebook was exemplary for

the lack of understanding between Miguel and the rest of his family. His son, especially, had alluded to him a couple of times that nobody wanted to read him pouring out his heart on Facebook the way he did. Crucially, unlike their father, the children had found new friends and happiness in El Dorado, something which gave Miguel satisfaction as well and, at times, energy to carry on.

But at the same time the children, in their way, also struggled with their pasts. Perhaps tellingly, none of the children had told their new friends about the reason of their departure from Balcón Verde. When Rosa told her new friends where she came from they had loudly responded, “*a la gran* [oh my god], a neighborhood of mareros, they should all be killed!” Rosa had then decided to not tell them more. In a way, it was exactly this shallowness that she appreciated in her new friends. Both she and Yolanda had trouble bonding with girls after the death of Sara and Jennifer, preferring friendships with boys for the superficiality of the contact. In fact, Rosa had renounced from her job at the clothing warehouse, she told me, because her female manager had wanted to be friends with her. Something she could not respond to, which her manager, in turn, did not take well. She got emotional when telling me that ever since Sara died, she had distanced herself entirely from female friends, afraid of losing something of worth again. Friendships with boys, in contrast, were not that meaningful and much more superficial, “as you don’t have to tell them things.” Miguel did not know about this, nor did he know that it led to Rosa renouncing from her job. Meanwhile, the lack of understanding seemed to work both ways, as both María Luisa and the children declared that there had never been more unity in the family as there had been since they moved to El Dorado.

It was another development, however, that perhaps even better symbolized the wedge that had been driven between Miguel and his family. It was a week after I had come to Guatemala City for the second fieldwork period when Miguel first mentioned to me that he was planning to move back to Balcón Verde. He considered it safe enough to return, thinking that those that extorted him had left the colonia, deriving hope from the fact that there were never any repercussions taken for his flight; neither against himself, as he had always kept visiting the neighborhood, nor against his mother and sisters. He had recently broken the news to María Luisa, pointing out to her that they

had been on a downgrade ever since leaving Balcón Verde. “We don’t have any social life anymore, we don’t go out together, and look at how I have become! I cannot fix my mouth. Look at how I am. And we don’t really make enough money.”

The move would lead to a separation with his family though, as neither María Luisa nor the children were willing to follow him in what they considered a reckless plan. “There is a remedy for everything, except for death,” as María Luisa put it. Meanwhile, María Luisa and the children also received Miguel’s ideas to move to somewhere more affordable (other than Balcón Verde) – and more in line with their socioeconomic position – with little enthusiasm. In the months that followed, the idea of going back to Balcón Verde kept playing in Miguel’s mind, especially boiling up on those moments that he felt most abandoned by his family. “You withdraw into yourself in your world of pain and neglect, or absence. Sometimes, the absence can be so profound, that one starts to think radically, right,” Miguel explained to me his drastic plan. In more cohesive times, the idea of returning tended to fade away into the background.

Absence of presence

Miguel’s forced departure from Balcón Verde and the seemingly isolated struggle that followed had put him in deep crisis. “I learned that I am the center of no universe,” Miguel wrote on Facebook once, with his usual sense of drama. But the fact that Miguel’s extortion did not happen in a vacuum, meant that there were more forces in play eroding life as he once knew it. This became clear once more during the celebration of his fifty-fourth birthday, for which he had invited me as well as a couple of friends from Balcón Verde, three of which had come. On the surface, it was a pleasant gathering between a few old friends, with a lot of reminiscing, sharing stories and even a game of football. These were moments where Miguel felt at home, that came as close as possible to his oft-repeated words “to remember is to re-live.” The run up to the celebration, however, had not been very promising as most of his friends did not respond to Miguel’s phone calls. When Miguel picked me up from my house that day, he thought only Leon was going to come; someone whom I already met twice the year before, the last time of which in his house in

Balcón Verde where we had a beer-fuelled morning and afternoon. After some more phone calls at Miguel's house, two other friends, Ramiro and Rafael, had also decided to attend, the last one only after Miguel's son had called one of Rafael's sons.

Tellingly, of those present, only Leon was still living in Balcón Verde. Ramiro had left Balcón Verde over a decade ago out of fear that his daughters would fall victim to the mareros. He had never returned. Rafael, Miguel's longtime best friend, had also been extorted and had left the neighborhood in response, but only after paying his extorters. The visit he paid to his birthday had pleased Miguel, as it was the first time in two and a half years that the two saw each other. Their relationship had been badly damaged by the fact that his middle son was married to the sister of Gabriel, the man María Luisa thought she had heard on the other side of the line during the extortion call.

Like Miguel and Rafael, Leon had also been extorted. But unlike the others, he had stayed in Balcón Verde, after relatives in the United States had helped him with the payment. His current way of moving through the neighborhood, however, in no way resembled the picture painted in the many stories about football, women and drinking that were reviewed during the birthday celebration. "It's a time in which you shouldn't trust your own shadow," he told me the year before. His trust in people had been shattered by the fact that one of his extorters was a boy whom he had seen growing up, someone he had regularly given food and even a pair of shoes as a young child. It had changed his whole being. "I used to invite everybody, but I don't anymore. Right now, I can see someone dying of hunger and I don't care. I don't care." He was reminded of the extortion every day because of the bullet holes that still marked his door and hall. Memories of shots fired by his extorters to warn him that they were not playing around.

Rafael and Ramiro left before Miguel did, and also Leon's extortion occurred before Miguel's turn was up. No doubt, when Miguel left Balcón Verde, there was only a shadow left of the pleasant place of his childhood. Miguel and his friends all estimated that about half of the old residents had left Balcón Verde for violence-related reasons. The many empty houses in the neighborhood showed not only the pervasiveness of extortion, but also that there were very few people still willing to buy a house in Balcón Verde.

Nevertheless, Miguel longed for his old neighborhood to the point that he actually thought of returning to it, ignoring the possible dangers attached to it. Of course, his mother and sisters were still in Balcón Verde, but during his absence his neighborhood had become almost larger than life itself. In many ways, Miguel had not just left behind his neighborhood, he had left behind his being. And the more isolated he felt, the harder it became to resist the siren song of the past. It did not matter that people kept telling him Balcón Verde was a horrible place full of mareros or that he had to move on after posting another song of praise about his old neighborhood. His home was where his heart was.

Meanwhile, a meaningful experience of Yolanda in Balcón Verde only strengthened him in the right of his suffering. His daughter had asked him permission to play a football match in Balcón Verde, which Miguel had prohibited her after Daniel had urged him to do so. Yolanda, however, had secretly gone. Miguel found out about her disobedience while she was still on the field and had confronted her with it right away, sending her a WhatsApp. He burst into tears when he saw the reply Yolanda sent, just like he burst into tears a day later when he read the message out loud to me: “It was great, a most beautiful feeling, the people, the football, the beloved neighborhood. I felt what I hadn’t felt in a long time. Please don’t take that happiness away from me. Really, it wasn’t something to worry about, we didn’t go alone. It was with the owner of the team, we met with three teams, his wife was also there, a lot of people, all together. It is something fantastic, dad, and God looks after us.”

After the message, he addressed an emotional post on Facebook to Balcón Verde, telling ‘her’, the neighborhood, that he spent the best moments of his life with her, that he longed for her and that he missed her. He then asked for help to forget his beloved Balcón Verde. “I wrote that text because I realized that wherever we are, we are never going to forget it, even if it has been a humble and poor place, and my daughter made me see that I’m not the only one loving everything we experienced there.” In fact, Yolanda’s words strengthened him in the belief that his two other children felt the same way. “Even though my son says that he never liked it there, that he never wanted to live there and what more. But I feel that it is there where they were loved, renowned, where there was a lot warmth. They were idols, if you could put it like that. Because of the football, right. And the whole world... there was

a lot of warmth, a lot of warmth from the people. And in El Dorado this is different. Very different. But perhaps it is because of being old, I don't talk to anyone anymore. I just work, work and work. They are young and have their group of friends, but I feel that these moments are unforgettable, and lasting, and that it's not just me, but that they also feel that these were great moments, moments that mattered. And they are going to get to know the world and realize that the moments they lived there were priceless. And that is why I got emotional and put down that message."

Crucially, in Miguel's longing for the past there was captured a rejection of the present, traces of which could already be found in his last years in Balcón Verde. Miguel could not get used to the increasingly withdrawn nature of neighborhood life. A trait that may have even cost him his life in Balcón Verde. His withdrawal, instead, was one into the imagined past, a withdrawal that became only more profound after he had departed from the neighborhood. In a violently fluid and insecure world, such a withdrawal is one way of creating a sense of belonging and, as such, it provided Miguel with a safe haven in volatile times. In the words he once posted on Facebook, "the memory is the only paradise from which they cannot expel you, moments, music and persons."⁴⁰ And as people are, to a certain extent, administrators of their own memories – in the sense that their memories tend to be only selections of their pasts that are heavily influenced and colored by their present reality – places of the past can easily become safe havens with paradise-like characteristics. A paradise within reach, this was, as it came to be represented by present-day Balcón Verde. Forgotten was the fact that his colonia had already become an each-on-his-own place during his last years there. And that even before, life in Balcón Verde had come with obvious hardships.

When Daniel, his oldest, was about two years old Miguel had even tried to get to the United States once but his American Dream ended when he was stopped and incarcerated about five hundred kilometers into Mexico. It is to this beautification and presentification of the past that the Arab poet Mahmoud Darwish (2011), himself exiled from Palestine as a young boy, refers to in his book *Presence of absence*: "Place does not become a trap as it becomes an image, for memory has enough wit to root place firmly in place

⁴⁰ I later learned it was a quote inspired by the German Romantic writer Jean Paul, "die Erinnerung is das einzige Paradies, woraus wir nicht vertrieben werden können."

and to arrange trees in harmony with the tune of desire. Not because place is in us even when we are not in it, but because hope, the power of the weak, is difficult to barter. There is enough well-being in hope to travel the long distance from the vast non-place to the narrow place” (p. 23).

In Miguel’s case, the presence of absence had also turned into an *absence of presence*. Facebook, again, was used to keep his desired, but imaginative, world alive, often posting memories mentioning specific people from the neighborhood, sometimes referring to specific occurrences: “Nostalgia is like anesthetics, you don’t feel pain but a pleasant sleep. As we grow older what matters isn’t so much how it was what we long for, but rather how you remember it. I am remembering two women that always watched us play, including in Zone 12, with their inseparable jug of lemonade. One is in heaven, Doña Gabriela, and one is Doña Sandra, mama of Julio and other football players, hugs and greetings.” Yet at the same time, his living-in-the-past drew him further away from his wife and children.

Messages of death

As much as nostalgia deveoped into a safe haven for Miguel, it was one that came with risks of its own, as it left him unguarded towards the dangers he chose not to see. After the extortion, Miguel kept opening himself up to what many others in his position would have considered dangerous elements. It was a few days before Mother’s Day when Miguel had taken a day off to pay his mother an early mother’s day visit, knowing that he would not be able to visit her on the day itself. But when it turned out that his mother was not available that day, he decided to take a rest instead. He was home alone, when Gustavo, an old friend from Balcón Verde, called him to have a few beers together. And because Miguel was alone, “with nobody to talk to,” he told him to stop by. They had a couple of drinks together and when María Luisa came home. She had made them some food after which she went to bed. It was after this, however, that the conversation had taken an unpleasant turn. Gustavo told him that he had become friends with Santiago, a known killer from the local mara, who, according to Gustavo, had come back to Balcón Verde. He then said to Miguel that he had heard that Gabriel, as was suspected by María Luisa, had been the one responsible for his extortion.

Miguel's thoughts had started to wander off the moment Gustavo had said he was friends with Santiago. "Right now I'm thinking, why did I bring him to my house?" he told me a few days later. "Because when he came in, he said to me, Miguel, *puta*, this is one hell of a place you have arranged here for yourself." He feared for history to repeat itself. I asked him if he had informed María Luisa on what had happened. He did not. "If I would have told her, she would have said that I am a mule. So it's better to not say anything, right. It is what she said herself, she doesn't want to talk to anyone from the old colonia. She doesn't want to know anything about anybody. She has a lot of fear, right. So perhaps I am a bit naïve or stupid, because I don't understand that people that talk to you like that want to hurt you, right."

With Santiago back in the neighborhood, Miguel thought it was best to stop visiting his mother for a while. The following days, he posted sad messages on Facebook. "It is a very nostalgic melody," referring to a Los Diabolitos song he attached to his words, "but my sadness of separating from you will be an eternal one. I should laugh, it is impossible, you are not here." It was followed by another message: "My colonia.....so close.....so far away."

What Miguel did not know during our conversation, or I for that matter, was that the threat Santiago represented had already receded in a cruel twist of faith. Two days before I spoke to him about his meeting with Gustavo, residents of a neighborhood close to Balcón Verde had beaten to death two assassins that were held responsible for a multiple homicide there. Like many Guatemalans, I had seen videos of the brutal event as they were all over the internet. It was only after a week, however, that Yolanda told him that Santiago was among the ones lynched. It ended a week of despair, be it with a somewhat bitter taste. "It is what the people in power want, that we kill each other," Miguel explained his ambivalence. Still, he had taken it as good news. And with Santiago out of the way, Miguel decided that from then on he would visit his mother at least once a week.

Gustavo's visit seemed to have presented Miguel with a reality check, one saying that the present was simply too troubled, or dangerous, to deny. Nevertheless, Santiago's death, he told me about a week later when I visited his house to pick up his diaries, had put the plan of returning to Balcón Verde back on the table. Still hung up by the fact that Yolanda had excluded herself from her school for twenty days, after which she had failed an English test, he

sounded more convinced than ever about going back to his old neighborhood, though still keeping his options open. “I am going to return. I hope to return. I want to be with my mother, spend time with her,” he told me. “There are things... that I want to do, right. There are dreams to fulfil. I want to be with her [his mother], I don’t know if it’s going to be possible, if it’s going to get concrete, because sometimes, the family, to leave them, I don’t know how they’re going to... Because the last time I told them they had to appreciate and value everything they had, because if they wouldn’t, I would be out of there. I told them that I couldn’t bear their indifference, their apathy, so they’re all trying to do things well now. But sometimes I just feel that I need to do it, that I need to be there [with my mother]. I am not sure if I’m going to follow through, but that is the plan, right. Because I am, like you once said, right, perhaps a very proud person. I don’t want to be a burden to no one. To no one, not to my children, not to my wife. If already now while I am still able to work I sometimes feel disdain and apathy, imagine how it will be after that, right, imagine how it will be when I cannot work that much anymore. So that is what I sometimes visualize, like elephants, right, when they feel that they have become a burden they go their own way into the solitude. I don’t know if you knew that about elephants, that when they feel that they have become a burden, they retire into solitude.”

But as easy as darkness swallows up problems, it can also create them. A week later, Miguel drove me to the town of San José Pinula to visit the pompous Casa de Dios, the church of the Guatemala’s most famous evangelical pastor Cash Luna. These were my last weeks in Guatemala and visiting one of the country’s megachurches, a phenomenon to which Miguel and I share some misgivings, was something I wanted to do before leaving – “I am at the City of God, the church of mister Cash Luna: impressive, marvelous, lavish, magnificent, fantastic, majestic, brilliant, if only it was a school, what we need is education, we occupy the last place in the world in that respect, help me to understand such an atrocity,” Miguel wrote on Facebook while taking a rest on the immense parking lot, waiting for my return from the service. Back home that night, I read that a granizadas vendor had been killed that day in Balcón Verde, while checking the twitter account of Guatemala City’s fire department for an update on the murders in the city. I decided to text Miguel about it. He responded to me quickly saying that he hoped it was not a friend. Fifteen

minutes later he was able to say that it was an indigenous guy of eighteen years old, who was shot for not paying extortion money, only a hundred meters from the police station in Balcón Verde. “It cries blood this damn system,” he ended his message. A few minutes later he let me know that he had decided to go home, to hug his family and to take a couple of beers. “It has been a rough week. Take care of yourself and I will see you in the City of God,” referring to the megachurch we visited earlier that day. “All this deceit is killing us, but what can you do.”

Three days later, I had an appointment with Miguel’s sister Adriana. Miguel picked me up at my house to drive me to Balcón Verde, where we would stop by to get Adriana. He would drop us off in a nearby shopping mall – the same place where Adriana had ‘secretly’ handed over Miguel’s belongings a few times in the aftermath of the extortion – which gave us the freedom to talk about delicate subjects that were dangerous to talk about within the neighborhood. In the car, I asked him about the past couple of days, which geared our conversation automatically to the death of the granizadas vendor in Balcón Verde. Messages like these are “messages of death,” Miguel told me. “It is saying that nothing has changed, for if I was still dreaming of returning. So much evil. Each death is another reason for not going back, or even visiting, or whatever.” “Have you seen it, pappy?” Yolanda had said to him, “and you want to return!” He then told me that Rosa had friends over on Thursday from her graduation year. They had something to eat together and went to the highest part of the colonia afterwards, where they had looked at the stars until two in the morning. On Friday, some friends of Daniel’s work had stopped by the house. “They’re happy, really happy,” he said. “I guess I just have to stay.”

When we arrived at the boulevard of Balcón Verde, Adriana was already waiting for us, and upon entering the car, she started to talk immediately. “Have you heard it?” she asked Miguel while he took off to drive past the string of market stalls alongside the boulevard. “They shot Luis again, you know, Doña Lupita’s son, on the football field. Can you believe it!? It is the third time they tried to kill him and he survived it again.” She then started sharing with us the latest rumors about Santiago’s lynching. “They say that one of them was beheaded.” “I knew him, Santiago,” she told me. “I used to babysit his little sisters. A thin little guy, but extremely dangerous.” But now he is gone. Adriana continued her rather worrying update on recent incidents

in her neighborhood with a story on a woman who had stolen one hundred thousand quetzals from an imprisoned local marero; money she was keeping for him. She had now fled from the capital. “How stupid can you be, bringing your children in danger like that,” she said. “As if they are not going to find her.” Before arriving at the shopping mall, Adriana told us that her neighbor was recently extorted for fifteen thousand quetzals, an amount she was able to come up with being the only granizadas vendor at the La Paz football field. Miguel had bought drinks from her the day he left Balcón Verde, as he had done so many times before.

These were more messages of death for Miguel, but coming out of the mouth of his sister, they lost part of their significance. His departure from Balcón Verde had yielded her a house and he believed that she did not want him to come back – for this would mean she would have to leave the house. It was a house she lived in for free, Miguel believed, as he had agreed with his sister that she would give the rent money to their mother. It was Miguel’s way to help the latter get by. He was convinced, however, that she had abandoned this promise and paid no rent at all. Miguel’s family could not return to Balcón Verde, Adriana told me later when inside the mall waiting for our coffees. It would turn Rosa and Yolanda into “*carne para los lobos*,” meat for the wolves.

The power of the weak

Just before I left Guatemala mid-June 2017, I had a coffee with Miguel in a small café near my house. He told me he had not been feeling too good for some time and that he had rested the last two days. It was his son that urged him to stay home, telling him to not worry about the money. At first, he refused to listen to him, afraid that he could not pay for Yolanda’s tuition fee, but when his mother decided to help with the payment, he cashed in on his two emergency days. He mostly slept during the two days and was treated well by his family. He thought his children finally started to understand that they had to help out. His son had promised Yolanda a “mega” present would she pass her exams and had cooked for her while she was studying – he was “quietly playing the best game of his life being there for his sisters all the time,” he wrote on Facebook later that day.

His wife had also been good to him. They had hugged in the morning when he left the house. At five in the morning he had even gone for a run in the neighborhood, something he had not done for a long time. His work, on the other hand, had started less energetically that day as he had to wait for three hours due to problems with his vehicle. Three hours in which he normally would have made around a hundred quetzals. He thought the company was trying to punish him for taking days off, but could not be bothered too much about it. "When you feel support, it doesn't feel so hard." During his story, I noticed that one of his front teeth was missing, as if the support of his family had helped him to drop some dead weight.

Three days later, Miguel brought me to the airport. We had become friends during my time in Guatemala and it was only natural that we would keep in touch afterwards. Of course I kept following him on Facebook, but we also regularly left voice messages on each other's WhatsApp with updates on our lives. The support he felt from his family, I learned in the months after my departure, incited a series of positive life events. In August, he announced on Facebook that his daughter had passed her final exams. The same day he recorded a message for me: "I know it makes you happy, because you have lived part of our recent reality with us. And now the horizon looks clearer, and with weapons to continue in this adventure of life, this adventure of constructing and understanding that we have to do things well. It is therefore that I share this news that makes me so happy with you. I am moved by life and grateful to it. Since three years, we have been living in anxiety. Today life gives us back incredible moments of love, not of money or of things, but of love and family unity, and of overcoming, right. We have understood that we have to be united as a family and that each of us has to play our part to make it function. You cannot imagine the beautiful family moments we have had. All for one and one for all. I share this with you with a lot of happiness and also with tears, because you have seen me cry, and today I am crying again, but of celebration, right Timo."

Two months later another one of Miguel's wishes got granted when two of his nephews offered to fix his teeth. He had helped their father out a couple of times in the past and now they wanted to return the favor to him. They had told him that he would only have worry about going to the dentist, and not about the rest. "They are balms of hope and of a better tomorrow," he

messed me after he had just had his first session. And even though he was still overwhelmed by grief because of his departure from Balcón Verde, he was determined to demonstrate to the people that forced him out of his house “that evil is always outforced by the good, that evil can never cut the wings of a person who, although with mistakes, hasn’t been a bad person.”

“Hope is the power of the weak,” in the words of the poet Mahmoud Darwish. A sequence of positive life events had provided Miguel hooks to pull himself up from the misery in which he had languished for three years. Years in which hope had often seemed lost. “Sometimes one is brimming over with desperation or with being very pessimistic or very negative, but one feels, really feels the reality and comes to think, there is no hope here,” he once told me in the backyard of my house in Guatemala City.

In any case, if history has taught Guatemala anything, it is that calms after the storm are often shaky and sometimes delusive, something that Miguel was well aware of. During the graduation ceremony of Yolanda, he had enjoyed the “positive vibes” in the room, but at the same time could not help feeling a bit frustrated. “To see [...] so much youth full of vitality and with so many illusions, they don’t deserve politicians like the ones we have, right. Sometimes it is frustrating, the country we give to our children.” Guatemala, he had said to me on another occasion, was “the land of the eternal spring and of the eternal corruption.” After I left Guatemala, friends of Miguel kept fleeing from Balcón Verde. Meanwhile, he himself witnessed a shooting on Independence Day, the fifteenth of September, 2017, in the capital’s old center, Zone 1. He was standing in front of a red light when a man approached the car next to him and took his gun out to shoot at it. When it jammed, the man was picked up by a motorcycle to then open fire at the vehicle one hundred meters away. Two women got hit and were brought to the hospital. It was a cruel coincidence that it was swarming with police officers only three hundred meters from the shooting. Independence Day had brought thousands of Guatemalans to the city’s main square to protest against corruption. The day before, congress had approved legislation to roll back the country’s anticorruption campaign. “Life is fragile and especially in this damn country,” Miguel fulminated after the shooting.

But, apparently, this also went for the newfound unity between Miguel and his family. Almost a year after I had left Guatemala City, I received a voice

message from Miguel starting with the words “the story isn’t over, regarding the horrible thing that happened to us in our neighborhood.” He obviously referred to the extortion. He then told me he had broken with his wife and children and had gone back to Balcón Verde. It was the lack of support he felt that had been the deciding factor but his decision had also been driven by a more general feeling of dissatisfaction after the extortion. “The extortion marked me because things no longer excited me,” he explained. “Work also affected me a lot, only sleeping and working, sleeping and working. Everything came together. I wanted to move to another house, a house more... they opposed, in some way, this affected me too.”

In Balcón Verde, I learned from his message, he had moved in with his mother. Still, his new situation, as he described it to me, did in no way resemble the life he had been missing so dearly. “I’m living locked up in my house, I don’t go out, Timo, because of the same thing, right. The colonia is horrible, but here I am going to find my rest, sleep a lot. I only go out possibly to the movies, I go to the countryside. It is an austere life, austere like you cannot imagine.”

As it seemed, extortion had not only continued to mark neighborhood life in Balcón Verde, but also his life, a mark that had expanded over time as if an oil spill on open water (to return to a metaphor used in the opening chapter), but one with a whimsical course. Such became clear weeks later, when he messaged me that he had reunited with his family. And in the period that followed, his voice messages to me became adorned with compliments directed to his children, while Facebook posts became more positive in tone. During my fieldwork, I had encountered a man on a tightrope in between trauma and recovery, and looking behind and looking forward. And now it seemed as if he was reaching more steady ground. Or to stick with his terms, as if ‘the story’ of the extortion had been pushed to the background a bit. Yet at the time of writing this, in October 2019, it was too soon to tell whether it would remain there or come back with a vengeance some day. In a place like Guatemala City, where violent winds can rise at any moment and catch people off guard, any balance is shaky. It is to this truth Miguel’s story gives evidence.

4. A Life Inside

The Contreras Family

Cast of characters

Oscar, age 43

the father

Johanna † 2016

the mother

Lucila, age 25

the eldest daughter

Tatiana, age 23

the middle daughter

Paola, age 21

the youngest daughter

Mama Jimena

Johanna's mother

It was a bright day, not too hot, with sun and clouds keeping each other in a pleasant balance, when Oscar Contreras parked his green taxi in front of my house in Zone 10. The hour, around eleven o'clock in the morning, was a good time to avoid the worst of traffic, though the trip we were about to undertake to Oscar's house on the outskirts of Zone 18 would have been an endeavor at any time of the day. But as I was about to find out, one with a reward in its last kilometers where the gray of cement buildings gave way to a hilly patchwork scenery of city and countryside and smog to fresher air. Oscar's colonia, Loma Linda, was built on a hill, which meant that you could see it getting closer through the electric wiring that followed the road from a few hundred meters away. We were driving for about forty minutes when we reached the entrance of the colonia where Oscar took out his electronic pass to open the gate while greeting one of the guards sitting behind the window of the security booth. Upon entering, Loma Linda seemed quiet. And before driving to his house, Oscar gave me a small tour of the neighborhood, at one point stopping alongside a ravine, telling me about a legend concerning bottomless lakes that were said to be down in the ravine. Lumbermen used to come there to cut wood for their homes and never returned.

Oscar lived at the end of a small street with similar modest, one-floored houses lined up after each other. His house had an old car parked in front of it, its cream-colored body cracked and rusty, taking about half of the front yard.

When we stepped out of the taxi, I noticed two small dogs awaiting us behind the screen door of the house. Above the door, it said in small broken letters *libería*, which would translate into bookstore or stationery store (*librería*) if the 'r' was not missing. In similar fashion, there was written '*fotocopas*' alongside the right doorpost, which, I assumed, had once been *fotocopias*, photocopies. The store, Oscar had already told me in the car, was a project his wife Johanna had started one and a half years before, but the lettering looked as if it had been there for ages. Perhaps it too had been affected by the turbulent time the family had gone through, as Johanna had died half a year ago after a ten-year battle against cancer, leaving Oscar with his three daughters. The small stationery store I walked into upon entering the house counted three open closets lined against the walls with office supplies, such as notebooks and wrapping-paper. The room in which the store was kept also gave entrance to the bed rooms and the bathroom. In addition to this, there was a computer on a small desk on the right side, which marked the dividing line between the store and the back part of the house. Oscar had constructed the latter in a later stage and it served as a living room while it also contained the kitchen. It had a more airy vibe to it because of the higher lamina roof and the small window that facilitated a pleasant breeze as well as a nice view over the lush green ravine that separated Loma Linda from the marginal colonia of Terrazas del Valle, one that the smallest (and also youngest) sister of the three, Paola, could hardly enjoy, as it was placed relatively high on the wall. I later learned by experience that, because of the lamina, the temperature in the living room tended to reach sweltering levels on hotter days.

Lucila, Tatiana and Paola were sitting on the couch when I entered the living room. Lucila, the oldest of the three sisters, was sitting in the middle and had a baby bump that was hard to miss. When I asked her about it, she told me that she was eight months pregnant with her first child. I was lucky to meet her in her father's house that day, as she spent most of the time in the town of Boca del Monte, a municipality situated just outside Guatemala City, where she lived with her husband and mother-in-law. She had moved out of Loma Linda as the death of her mother, two months into her pregnancy, had affected her health and, also, that of the baby. She even had to skip on her mother's wake, she said, after she had fainted that day and was brought to the hospital. Living in Boca del Monte gave her a bit of distance to all the grief

and memories. She kept visiting her sisters during her pregnancy, however, spending a week in her father's house every two weeks, as she missed them and wanted them to be part of the process of her pregnancy. I also learned that the baby was going to be named Mercedes, something which her mother had decided for her.

After the death of their mother, the three sisters were responsible for the store together, although the main responsibility lied with Paola, being the only sister without a business on the side. Lucila made extra money with a clothing scheme she had taken over from her mother, sending fashionable clothes and shoes she bought in Guatemala City to the city of Escuintla, where, according to Lucila, there were few options when it came to clothing. She did this together with a friend of the family, who lived in Escuintla and was responsible for the selling part of the deal. It meant that Lucila sent clothes at the value of around five thousand quetzals to her by mail every two weeks, usually making a profit somewhere between a thousand and two thousand quetzals per shipment. Tatiana's activities outside the librería were less frequent, as her boyfriend did not want her to work, but every so often she did women's nails and hair, sometimes putting a sign outside her house in Loma Linda to attract customers and sometimes going to Escuintla, where her sister's business companion gathered people for her in want of her service. She charged a hundred quetzals for acrylic nails.

Meanwhile, the librería's lifeline was a primary school that was situated in Loma Linda. Students came to the store for pens and notebooks and the sisters looked up information for them on the computer for their assignments. On good weeks, Paola explained, they could make up to five hundred quetzals in the store. I had been inside for an hour or so that day and did not see one costumer nor did I have the feeling that a costumer was about to enter. The only sound, besides our talking, came from the three quacking birds that were held in a small cage, the occasional bark of a dog and the television that kept playing in the back.

I knew very little about what to expect when first visiting Oscar's house. He was a taxi driver who, like Miguel, worked for one of the biggest taxi companies in Guatemala City – he had done so for eleven years – and I had met him only once before when he brought me to the house of a friend. We had talked a bit about where he lived and the provincial image he painted of it

struck me, as I had come to know Zone 18 as an endless sequence of poor and densely populated colonias. But that was about it. It had only been a fifteen minute ride to my friend's place. Besides, Oscar, a small, stocky guy with dark colored skin and shy look on his face, that matched his soft voice, did not seem to be a very talkative person, although it is company policy for drivers to not embark on conversations themselves, but to wait for the client to start. Nevertheless, our first conversation (in early September, 2016) had made me curious about his neighborhood and when we arrived at my destination that day, I asked him if he could take me there some time, which we did about a week later.

Oscar's taciturn nature, the tranquility of the last kilometers of the road to Loma Linda and the seeming quietness of the colonia may have hinted at what I was about to encounter upon entering the house of the Contreras family. Nevertheless, I had been somewhat taken by surprise by the seeming lack of pace, and stimulus, in the world of Oscar's daughters. Perhaps also because I could not escape the feeling that there was something else to it, something I could not immediately put my finger on. "Is it always this quiet?" I had asked after being inside for half an hour, trying to figure out what it was that I could not bring to a more concrete understanding. Lucila answered that it was usually quiet. There were even days when no one came but there were also moments that it could get really busy. "But then what do you do on days that nobody is coming?" I responded. They cooked, cleaned, chatted, watched television and went grocery shopping when necessary, the sisters listed. Every night, Tatiana and Paola waited with dinner for their father, who usually came home late. And at twelve o'clock in the afternoon, Lucila added, they watched their favorite soap opera *Corazón Indomable*, Untamable Heart, to then start laughing together with her sisters and Oscar. It took me a few moments to realize it was a quarter after twelve, meaning that the show was on at that moment. I had disrupted their daily routine, for which I immediately excused myself – "Ay, perdón." Luckily they were good sports about it. I later thought that it might even had been playing on the television while I was there, but if so, I had most certainly spoiled it for them.

It was not until I was back in the car with Oscar that I gained more insight on what I had felt stirring below the surface while talking to his daughters. Oscar made long days in the taxi, but on Sundays, he told me, he often took

the morning off for a family visit to Johanna at the cemetery and to accompany his daughters to the market in the colonia of El Retiro to do grocery shopping for the next few days. When he did not take them – the sisters usually had to visit the market twice a week – they often went with the three of them, but “only very rarely, when there’s an emergency,” did one of his daughters go by herself. “Because of security, El Retiro has its fame,” Oscar explained. But so did many other neighborhoods in Guatemala City. For instance, in the ravine between Loma Linda and Terrazas del Valle, which you passed when taking a left upon leaving the former, dead bodies had been found. And even though Terrazas del Valle seemed friendlier than many other marginal areas in the city due to its more rural and spacious nature, he reassured me that it also had its little streets “with groups looking for opportunities to commit some kind of crime.”

What Oscar did not tell me that day, however, was that there was another, more feared neighborhood in their surroundings, which you could reach if you would take a right from his colonia. He had only mentioned that Loma Linda was one of the last neighborhoods before the city ended. It took me another visit to the Contreras’ house, six months later, at the beginning of my second fieldwork period, to hear Oscar and his daughters speak about the people of the squatter settlement of Virgen de Fátima, who they held responsible for the assaults at the bus stop in front of their colonia. Virgen de Fátima was an “extremely dangerous and horrible place where you cannot enter as an outsider, right?” Lucila explained to me while seeking confirmation from her father. Oscar nodded. It was no firsthand knowledge though, because neither Oscar nor his daughters had ever turned right in the thirteen years they lived in Loma Linda. They did not know how long it would take to get there, nor did they know what else could be found when you would travel the road they had not travelled yet. In response to this dangerous outside world, life of his daughters was lived mostly inside the house. The world as a babbling brook I had encountered in Oscar’s house that first visit, I began to see, had less peaceful undercurrents. And as I found out during the course of my fieldwork, crime and violence were only the most obvious factors giving the withdrawal of Lucila, Tatiana and Paola a more compelling character, but not the only ones. I will return to this on a later moment. It is the withdrawn lifestyle of especially Oscar’s daughters, and the fears underlying it, that is central to this chapter.

Fearing the outside world

One only had to look at the crime statistics to know that Guatemala City had a frightening street crime problem and it is only logical that its citizens tried to not become part of the statistics themselves by withdrawing themselves from the violent streets. The extremely popular gated communities, as we have seen, derived their prime justification from crime and violence and were tangible expressions of the tendency among citizens to detach oneself from what anthropologist Teresa Caldeira (2000) calls the “traditional quarters” of the city. At the same time, as the case of the Contreras family (and many others) showed, withdrawal as a way of navigating security did not always suffice to keep danger at bay, nor did it provide a safeguard against fearing the violent outside world.

To grasp this, it is important to understand that the Contrerases were only partly able to withdraw themselves from the violent reality awaiting them outside the barriers of their colonia. Like many colonias in Guatemala City, whether poor or rich, Loma Linda was surrounded by marginal areas associated with high levels of crime and violence, as well as by better-off places. The colonia itself only contained a few small stores, which meant that you had to leave the colonia for most things. In the outskirts of the capital, this tended to be quite an undertaking, one that exposed the Contrerases to the perils attached to the neighborhoods they traversed and public streets in general. This was strengthened by the fact that Lucila, Tatiana and Paola did not know how to drive, meaning that they were dependent on public transport when there was nobody around to chauffeur them. They had a few driving lessons from their father in the past, but did not go ahead with it, as Oscar proved far too impatient a teacher. It meant that Oscar’s car, which he had bought fifteen years ago, had become part of the front view of the house, as he himself had little time to drive it. The car, however, seemed set for such a purpose anyway since Oscar did not allow anyone but himself to drive it. He called it *La Baby* (The Baby).

But owning a car was not for everybody in Loma Linda. For this reason, the neighborhood organization had created a stand for tuk tuk drivers inside the colonia. The sisters considered this to be a safer way of travelling than the Transurbano bus, which had a stop right in front of the colonia, because you could hop on a tuk tuk without having to leave the neighborhood. Assaults at

the bus stop, they claimed, were not uncommon. At the same time, the tuk tuks only went as far as El Retiro, a couple of kilometers from Loma Linda. So for destinations further away they often had no choice but to use the Transurbano.

It was due to the inescapability of the dangerous outside world that Lucila, Tatiana and Paola all had personal experiences with crime and violence. And it was no coincidence that Lucila had been victimized the most, as she was the only one of the three sisters that ever had a stable job outside the colonia. She had worked in a shopping mall in the municipality of Mixco for some time. Usually she was brought and picked up by her mother. But when this was not possible she had to travel across the city using public transport. She estimated that she had been robbed twenty times in her life while riding the bus. Often this meant that guys armed with pistols entered the bus, after which you had to hand in your phone and money.

In one incident, however, a guy took the seat next to her and pressed a gun into her waist, while putting the other arm around her neck as if they were lovers. He warned her that he would kill her if she would make as much as a sound. He also told her that they would get out of the bus together at the next bus stop. He then robbed her of her necklace, phone and money. Fortunately, the guy did not force her to get out of the bus when it stopped, instead whispering her that he had already robbed her of everything he wanted, after which he got out alone. The assailant had certainly robbed her of the last little confidence she had of traveling public transport alone. In response to the incident she quit her job. The assault also gave another blow to her already brittle trust in the police, as Lucila was robbed sitting on the first bench while a police officer had been standing close to her. She was sure that he had seen what happened. Nevertheless, he did not intervene.

Paola had suffered something similar while riding the bus together with her sisters already in 2010. It had been a rare moment in which they had to go from school to the house of their grandmother, whom they called Mama Jimena, by themselves, as they were usually picked up by their mother. Paola was sitting in between her sisters when two girls approached her from the back and put a knife on her throat, threatening to kill her. The assailants let her go, but only after they had stolen Lucila's ring, which had belonged to her late aunt. They also searched the sisters' backpacks, which did not contain anything valuable.

Tatiana, in turn, had been harassed by a classmate for some time. He had kept telling her that she was going to be his girlfriend or that she would otherwise suffer the consequences. She had heard rumors that he belonged to a gang of criminals. After she told her mother about it, Johanna had accompanied her daughter to school where she had made very clear to the boy that he had to back off. But to no avail, as he continued intimidating Tatiana. It was reason for the school to expel him. To be sure, however, Tatiana and Paola, who was also attending there, changed schools after they had finished the year. She had not heard from him until a few years later when he suddenly turned up as a tuk tuk driver in her colonia. It resulted in more threats directed at Tatiana. A complicating factor was that upon entering a tuk tuk in Loma Linda one could not know who was going to drive it. *Tuktukeros* usually waited outside their vehicle talking to other drivers until their tuk tuk filled up, knowing that the one that had been waiting the longest was up first. As a result, Tatiana got in his tuk tuk a couple of times. Again, Johanna had gone to talk to him, but like the first time without much success. Not much later, however, he disappeared when he was shot through the head in front of the entrance of the colonia. Tatiana believed he was dead, which – she excused herself from saying so – felt as a relief.

The personal attacks and threats Lucila, Tatiana and Paola had experienced left a large imprint on their lives. At the same time, they did not need to be victimized themselves for reminders on the fact that danger was never far away. During my second fieldwork period in Guatemala, a friend of Tatiana was robbed and raped by four men just in front of the shopping mall of Metro Norte, a place they also frequented.

But with crime and violence being media favorites, events with a personal connotation to it were only fractions of the storm tide of accounts of crime and violence that injected the Contreras and many others in Guatemala City with a daily dose of fear and warnings. The sisters got most of their news from Facebook, where videos of violent incidents in and outside the capital were hard to miss, but they also received and dispersed such videos via WhatsApp. When I met them for a pizza in Lucila's house once, her husband explained to me that you should never leave your car when you are hit from behind, relating it to a video he had seen of a woman in Guatemala City who had done so, after which she had been kidnapped by four men. "You cannot even blow your horn

nowadays as people drive around with guns in their dashboards,” he continued, voicing a belief I had heard more often – for this reason, some motorists only gave ‘little honks’ in traffic, which they produced by gently pushing the horn. Lucila added that she had warned her father about it numerous times. She then drew my attention to the risk of children being kidnapped in Guatemala, knowing that my son and wife were about to visit me. To reinforce her warning, she presented me with an audio file on her phone in which a woman told about a kidnapping she eye-witnessed in a village just outside Guatemala City.

Meanwhile, even though the global reach and pervasiveness of (electronic) mass media had helped globalizing fear as well, it did not help that news reports on crime and violence in Guatemala City were often attached to Zone 18, which was the zone in Guatemala City most stigmatized by violence (Cabria & Villagrán, 2018). Tellingly, Oscar’s clients often reacted frightenedly when he told them he lived there: “¡Uuuyy!”; “Doesn’t it scare you living there?”; “Aren’t you afraid that something will happen to you?”

El Grupito

The violent experiences and stories feeding the feeling of insecurity of Oscar and his daughters were largely connected to the territory outside the barriers of Loma Linda, but they did not restrict to it. Clearly, one of the main ideas behind gated communities was keeping out the danger plaguing the public streets in Guatemala City. But the protection offered by the guard and gates, the family knew, was only relative. Both Oscar and his daughters had seen examples of private security guards and police officers in Guatemala City looking the other way while people were being robbed. It was something that Lucila had experienced first-hand. In response, they had no illusions about the actual protection guards would be willing to provide in case they had to put their own safety at risk. The guards in Loma Linda did not even make a secret out of the fact that they did not intervene whenever they eye-witnessed assaults at the bus stop right in front of the neighborhood, appealing to the fact they occur outside the perimeter they are tasked to protect.

But more worryingly, they had proven equally inactive towards threats coming from within the colonia. Since a few years, there had been a group of youngsters in the neighborhood causing trouble, “*El Grupito*” (The Little

Group) as Oscar used to call them. Usually when he returned from work late at night, they were standing on a corner not too far from his house drinking and listening to loud music. He thought the majority of them came from the gang ridden colonias surrounding Loma Linda and that their parents were tenants that had come to his neighborhood to prevent their children from being recruited by the maras. It was a subject of concern, he told me, as he pointed me to the fact that they dressed like those that “collect extortion money,” clearly sidestepping the word ‘maras’ – something which people in Guatemala City tended to do more often.

To curb the disorderliness they caused, the honorary executive committee of the neighborhood had prohibited the sale of alcohol in the colonia but to no avail. In fact, during my time in Guatemala, El Grupito had become increasingly bold in their actions, as they were believed to be responsible for a number of burglaries in the neighborhood. They had also robbed the people delivering fast food a couple of times, reason enough for many fast food companies to stop delivering to the colonia, although Oscar believed this was also due to the fact that they lived in the outskirts of the capital, which meant that deliverers had to pass through places much more troubled than Loma Linda. The group had been able to do so without being called to order by the guards in the neighborhood. According to Oscar, the guards’ inaction was caused by fear, low salaries and the notion that interventions could easily escalate in a violent way. But one could also not rule out the role of inexperience in the guards’ seeming unwillingness to intervene. Indeed, in a country where the law only required a person to follow a forty hour training to become a security guard, while the far majority of guards worked illegally on the job, it was likely that many of them did not know how to properly intervene (Chávez, 2019).

Clearly, the guards and gates of Loma Linda proved no magic potion against crime and violence, but at the same time the colonia was safeguarded from the extreme type of street crime found in some of the colonias in its surroundings. To put it in the words of Tatiana, “those in the neighborhood [El Grupito] aren’t as dangerous as the mareros.” In response, both Oscar and his daughters felt safer within the barriers of their neighborhood than outside of them. Residents seemed to attribute this relative safety at least in part to the collective protection measures taken as a neighborhood. Tellingly,

the neighborhood committee had upgraded the number of security guards three years before I started my fieldwork, in response to a red cross that was spray painted on the welcome sign outside the gates. In the knowledge that extortionists tended to use such marks to keep track of who had paid their tax and who had not, it was taken as a possible sign that criminals had set their eyes on Loma Linda. It was reason enough for the committee to call in an emergency meeting, where seventy percent of the residents, including Oscar, voted in favor of an increase of the number of security guards in the colonia from five to seven. This had also meant a raise of the monthly fee that residents had to pay from seventy-five quetzals to a hundred quetzals. There were now three guards stationed at the entrance and four making their rounds in the colonia.

In the end, extortionists never made their move on the neighborhood and it remained unclear whether there ever had been a threat or it had been a false alarm. But even if the threat had been real, it would still be a matter of guessing what had prevented the criminals from attacking the colonia. Be that as it may, the decision-making process that preceded the security upgrade did produce an effect on Oscar's feeling of security, as he took it as a sign that the people of Loma Linda were able to organize and make a collective decision when faced with a threat. It did not, however, result in more contact between residents on a day to day basis. As the Mexican anthropologist Rossana Reguillo notes, "What is united by fear, fragments by fear" (2005 in Santillán, 2008). It is a truth applicable to Loma Linda as well as to many other gated communities in Guatemala City and elsewhere (Peeters & Hoey, 2017). It meant that the Contreras family was chiefly dependent on itself in confronting the violent and fear-inducing world discussed so far.

Withdrawal

Surrounded by an environment marked by crime, violence and cautiousness among its citizens, it may come as no surprise that Lucila, Tatiana and Paola moved through life so carefully. Indeed, by shielding themselves from the public fabric of the city, the sisters followed the dominant mode of behavior in Guatemala City. Be that as it may, it was the almost religious precision and perseverance with which they did so that stood out. It was a state of mind that

sought to reduce the world to places they considered to be safe or, at least, familiar territory, as much as possible. Hence their seeming refusal to turn right upon leaving their colonia. In practice, it meant that the sisters only visited a small selection of places.

Caution reigned supreme when they traveled to the market in El Retiro or a shopping mall they frequented. “We never, never, never go out alone,” Lucila told me with great emphasis during one of our first conversations, to take the edge off a bit of what she had just said. “Well, only this last Sunday, because she [Tatiana] was out with her boyfriend and Paola had to help her *abuelita* (granny), the mom of my mom, and I had to go to the market.” She then explained to me how she had gone as fast as she could and that she had made it to the market and back within half an hour. When she came home, her grandmother could not believe her eyes, “*puchica* (damn), my daughter, you’re back already.” “Like a flash,” Oscar laughed while listening to his daughter’s story. The trip had been far from entertaining for Lucila though. There were thirty minutes in which she had experienced, to put it in her words, “total fear, a horrible fear.”

But Lucila’s visit to the market had indeed been an exception. All three of the sisters were terrified of leaving the colonia alone and, in response, tried to prevent doing so at all costs, instead resorting to a very modest form of what could be called ‘caravanning’ (Villarreal, 2015), that is, travelling in company. For Lucila, it had been the first time in her life she went to the market by herself. “And I am already a grown up!” she said, sounding surprised by it herself. “I see girls going to the market alone and all that, but because of what happened to us, it’s better not to.” Clearly, after being violently robbed, Lucila’s house had become her safe refuge even more so than before. Meanwhile, Tatiana had never ever left the neighborhood on her own.

Paola, in turn, went to a school of computer applications every Saturday to obtain her *bachiller* diploma⁴¹, which would pave the way for university next year, and preferred to stay at her aunt’s place after school over going back alone to Loma Linda. In the mornings, Oscar often brought her to school, which was situated on the other side of Zone 18. Afterwards, she went to her aunt in the colonia of La Puntilla, where she had grown up, since it was much closer to her school and accessible by Transmetro. She would then wait until around ten

⁴¹ The equivalent of a high school diploma in the United States.

for Oscar to pick her up and go home together. La Puntilla was a dangerous place, but she felt protected by the fact that two of her uncles, cousins of Oscar, belonged to the local mara. Going back to Loma Linda by herself after school would mean that she first had to take a Transurbano bus to El Retiro and then a tuk tuk that would drop her off in front of her house. She could also take the Transurbano all the way to Loma Linda, but that would only take her to the entrance of the neighborhood. The fact that she suffered from severe asthma made the steep road to her house a tiring one.

Lucila, Tatiana and Paola's deep-seated fears and cautiousness put obvious restrictions on their lives. First of all, it made them dependent on others, as being accompanied not only made them feel safer but also often meant that they could avoid having to take public transport. Lucila's husband and Tatiana's boyfriend, who both had full-time jobs, often accompanied their partners. Lucila, for example, went shopping for clothes once every two weeks in Zone 1, which she always did together with her husband. "I don't go out alone [to Zone 1], because alone, God help. No, it's very dangerous." She sent the clothing to Escuintla by mail because of the danger of assaults on the road to Palín, which you had to pass on your way to Escuintla. On other occasions, Oscar, Mama Jimena or sometimes an uncle took them out. After Johanna's death, Oscar often had to accompany his daughters to the shopping malls, which he detested.

However, just as often there was nobody to chaperone the sisters, which meant that they had to accompany each other when, for example, going to the market. In such circumstances, they were always on high alert. "Right now, whomever approaches you gives you the feeling that he is going to do something to you," Paola said after Lucila had told me about how her little sister was threatened with a knife once. Whenever riding the bus together, the sisters signaled each other if they felt potential danger heading their way. And when walking the public streets, they kept a solid pace. For reasons earlier mentioned, the sisters preferred to take the tuk tuk when going out by themselves.

A few weeks before I left Guatemala for the second time, however, Tatiana told me that this means of transportation had also become unsafe for her after she had come eye to eye with her harasser, whom she had fancied dead, in a tuk tuk in Loma Linda. It meant he had miraculously survived

being shot in the head. “[...] we went to pick up my little niece and I got in. The thing is, it was full, two people can ride in the front and three in the back, so I said to Luci [Lucila] you go in the back and I will go in front. There was nobody to drive it yet. I was relaxed, and I saw him getting in, but I had no idea at what I was looking and then I looked again and he was next to me. ‘*Ay dios*,’ I said, trembling all over, all over! ‘Ale, that’s it, get out, hurry up!’ because I felt bad knowing that he returned and being so close to him. Ay no, who knows what he is going to do with me, I mean, ay, I was thinking a lot of things, but Luci was like ‘no *hombre*, take it easy,’ and we stayed. So I haven’t been taking the tuk tuk a lot because of it. The truth is that it scares me. He looked really scary with his big pants below his waist and one of those huge t-shirts and to see him with his scar and mean face.” In response, she had only gone out with her boyfriend on his motorcycle. “But really, it hasn’t been necessary to leave,” she added, “because sometimes I go with my boyfriend, with my dad, or with my uncle.”

In contrast to his daughters, Oscar did not have the luxury of avoiding dangerous places or situations as a taxi driver. Besides the pick-up location, he had no information when he took on a ride. Once in the car, the client would tell him where he or she would like to go, which sometimes meant that he had to go to places that most people preferred to bypass. It was something with which he had learned to live, though it could still give him an uneasy feeling going to some places: “I pick up someone without knowing beforehand what my destination will be, and when I come and he says to me: ‘I want to go to Chapín.’ Well, at that little moment, I start to get nervous, right. And then we’re heading off my mind starts to work on me. Well, I hope that I will arrive safely and that I will return safely, right. But then during the ride the adrenaline starts to go down a bit. But yes, there is always a certain fear of going to, let’s say, to El Bucaro, or to La Verbena, or to Villa Nueva, right, which is another sector.” To avoid trouble as much as possible, Oscar was part of a WhatsApp group in which colleagues shared information about shootings, accidents and other events that affected the situation on the road. He also kept his daughters informed about his whereabouts via WhatsApp.

At the same time, Oscar was most nervous when his daughters left the house unattended. To him, this was a necessary evil. “Of course I cannot have them locked up and they wouldn’t want to be imprisoned at home. And also,

food doesn't come to the house by itself, they have to go to the market, they have to go to the store. The only thing we try to do is to keep each other posted by using our telephones, 'I am going to the market,' 'Okay, let me know when you're back,' 'We're back dad.' Then, to receive that message that they are back at home is a total relief, to know that they aren't on the streets anymore, right."

Crucially, protection against crime and violence not only amounted to traversing the outside world as safe as possible, or choosing to stay at home, but also in making sure not to bring the danger to your home. Oscar had told Lucila, Tatiana and Paola to be careful with meeting new people. "They could be good people, right," he explained to me as he had probably explained to his daughters, "but they can have family members that are not such good people and they hear the information and are like 'where is that?' That you don't give information that gets you extorted or that they say: look, I like your daughter to be concubine of the mareros, right." He had also impressed this on Paola's mind when she started to go to Saturday school. "I told her to be cautious with the information about who we are, how we live, 'here, I give you friendship' [...]. We also have our famous word that we shouldn't be too *mieloso* (honeyed)."

Oscar himself had few friends. He shared this with many of his colleagues, as the long hours in the taxi tended to leave little room for a social life. But at the same time he considered himself as not being "really the type of having a lot of [friendly] relationships," also because he easily distrusted people. "There are very few who actually seek or support you when the moment arrives that you need them or in time of struggle or stress, or whatever you want to call it. But they do look for you to borrow your money. I believe that it's part of our culture, we like to borrow money or borrow objects and not return them. For example, my next-door neighbor, 'eeeh Don Oscar, could you lend me your hammer?' 'Ah, ok it's fine.' Then two months pass by and the hammer doesn't come back. I have to go to his house and knock on his door, 'look, I am sorry to...' 'Ah, I have no idea where I have put it but I will bring it to you.' These things tend to happen with objects, with money it is even worse."

Perhaps to no surprise, Oscar's daughters did not have exuberant social lives either. Lucila told me she had a lot of friends whom she had met during the different jobs she held, "but to go out and eat something together, now way, only 'hey, how are you doing?' nothing more." Meanwhile, Paola told

me she was not really the type to make friends, although she did have two good friends. One of them lived in Villa Nueva, on the other side of the city, and the other one lived right across the street from her. She had known the latter for ten years. They listened to music together two or three times a week either in her house or her friend's house. Tatiana, in turn, had friends with whom she had gone to school. One of them had even played violin at her mother's funeral because Johanna had fallen in love with her playing once at the graduation ceremony of Tatiana and her peers. She sometimes went with them to shopping malls. "But when I go out with my friends it is to a place that I know and someone would always drop me off," she added.

But most of all, the sisters had each other. Also, because Lucila had moved back to Loma Linda after her delivery, renting a place together with her husband a few streets away from her father and sisters. It had restored the trinity between the sisters. "Either I'm here and they come over to me," Lucila told me, "or I will go to their place. And like that it is, right. The three of us help each other." The three even shared clothes, profiting from the fact that they more or less had the same figure. It meant that if one of them bought a new top, one of the others was expected to look for a new pair of pants or a skirt to go with the top, a circle that used to also include their mother Johanna. It created interdependence among the three sisters, as did the shared fear for crime and violence, be it in a more compelling way.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to put all the crime- and violence-related dangers on one pile. The situation in Loma Linda, as we have seen, was less troubled than in some of the neighborhoods in its surroundings, and the danger of, for instance, El Grupito, which seemed to be the most imminent threat within the colonia's perimeter, was even somewhat trivialized by Lucila. Their presence was reason for her to not go out anymore at ten o'clock at night. "It is better not to mess with them," she said, adding to it, however, that "if you do not mess with them, there is no problem at all." Besides, the group of youngsters only gathered at night time.

Such gradations in danger, however, were hardly reflected in the sisters' range of action, as they preferred to spend their time at home. "If you would ask people if they know us here, few people would say yes," Lucila once told me. "Because we stay inside the house. We don't spend time outside. If we go out, it is only to go to the store or to get tortillas or to the market, but

that is it. Or they know us as the girls from the librería. But that's it. No one could say about us 'ay those girls hang out in the street,' 'they get together with those friends.' No. We stay inside the house." This had also been noticed by the neighbor across the street, the mother of Paola's best friend, who had told Oscar that she admired his daughters for the fact that they always stayed inside the house while he was away – unlike her daughter when she was home alone. It seemed to both mark the particularity and the desirability of the sisters' behavior, although Lucila told me that the daughters of the woman next door to the Contrerases moved through life as protected as they did. Still, Lucila, Tatiana and Paola's extreme interpretation of what was basically the dominant mode of behavior in Guatemala City seemed to suggest that there was more to their houseboundness besides fear of crime and violence.

The walking devil

Given their submissiveness to the alleged danger surrounding them, one would perhaps expect the Contrerases sisters to act in a similar shy way within their own sheltered world. But this was not the case. On the contrary. Whenever I came around, they were outgoing, talkative, giggly and, perhaps with the exception of Paola, loud in conversations. The latter took most after her father with her darker skin and shy glance that went hand in hand with her soft, gooey voice. She was the quietest of the three though she reassured me that she had 'her character' when she got angry. Lucila, perhaps for being the oldest of the three, did most of the talking whenever I addressed a question to the three of them.

It was Tatiana's voice, however, that was most dominant and even feared in the house of the Contreras family. She was known for her short fuse. "Whenever my dad asks her boyfriend if he wants a beer, he turns around to look at her with fear. Do I want that?" Lucila had once tried to explain her sister's dominant character to me, before everybody, including Tatiana, burst into laughter. In response to this, Lucila's husband whispered that he too ended most of his sentences to his wife with "yes, my love." Tatiana also gave the house a bit of a tense feel whenever she was around, Lucila told me in a later moment when we spoke alone. Her grandmother Mama Jimena needed fewer words to describe Tatiana. She is the "*diablo andando*," the walking devil.

She had said it with pride. It was a trait that had been passed on from mother to daughter, just as their mother Johanna had inherited it from Mama Jimena. The latter was extremely dominant herself and sometimes even violent to those around her; abundant were the stories about how she used to give the women working for her, in the *comedor* (canteen) she had, “spatulas right in the head,” to use her own words. People who, at the same time, commended her for having taught them how to work. Strangely enough, Tatiana’s strong character vanished into thin air whenever she had to ride public transport. “Going by bus terrifies me,” she told me. “I’m perhaps the angriest one, but at the same time I’m the one that is most scared of riding the bus.” There were two extremes wrapped up in the same person.

Curiously, it was the angry characters of Mama Jimena and Johanna that had not only laid the foundation for Lucila, Tatiana and Paola’s strong characters, but also for their fearful way of confronting the world. Their withdrawn lifestyle could be considered a mere continuation of the sheltered upbringing they had enjoyed under the yoke of Mama Jimena and their dominant mother Johanna.

Below, I will describe this upbringing, but not before first touching upon the histories of Johanna, Oscar and also Mama Jimena, which had also been marked by restriction and withdrawal. This description will represent a sequence of events that automatically brings us to Johanna’s disease and, in the end, her death about half a year before I first met the family. Getting a sense of the family’s history, I believe, helps us to understand the extremity of the sisters’ withdrawn lifestyle and the way they viewed the outside world. In the last part of this chapter, I will discuss the mark of Johanna’s death on the lives of Oscar and his daughters as I experienced them during my fieldwork. It will bring the focus to withdrawal not as a strategy to keep violent crime and other dangers at bay, but as a social circumstance from which to deal with loss the moment it comes into being. And even though Johanna’s death was not a violent one, in the strict sense of the word, I believe the story of Oscar, Lucila, Tatiana and Paola sheds light on the more general ability of small, withdrawn worlds to deal with tragedy and trauma.

The comedor

Both Oscar (1973) and Johanna (1964) grew up in Zone 6 within a stone's throw from each other, separated only by a road that divided the Nuestra Señora neighborhood, where Johanna lived, from the La Puntilla neighborhood, where Oscar grew up. The area was full of unpaved roads and surrounded by lush, green ravines, used by some residents for the small-scale cultivation of corn and bananas and by youth for discovery and play. There were mainly poor families living in the area. Houses were small and many lacked basic facilities such as stable electricity and water. For drinking water, residents had to turn to one of the public taps in the area. Nevertheless, Oscar told me, the area was *sano* (healthy) and *tranquilo* (quiet), a choice of words used more often by residents or former residents from now gang-ridden neighborhoods whenever they look back upon the past. But even the alleged healthy wind blowing through the streets of Nuestra Señora and La Puntilla could not prevent hardships from occurring behind the front doors of some houses.

At the age of thirteen, Johanna's mother, 'Mama Jimena,' married Jesus, a man almost ten years her senior. It was an arranged marriage against her will and to prevent Mama Jimena from fleeing, Jesus locked her up in the house the first two months of their marriage and kept locking her in sometimes during their marriage. They had six children together, Johanna being the fourth. Jesus was a violent man who often beat Mama Jimena and the children when he came home drunk. According to Mama Jimena, he had even broken the arm of one of his sons once with a piece of wood, after he did not greet him. At the same time, he favored his sons by giving them the better food and possibilities to study, whereas Johanna learned at a young age to take care of her brothers and sisters. When Johanna was about twelve years old, her mother left her father during one of his violent outbursts, grabbing her 'children and a sweater' while he was drunk on the toilet. About two years later, she opened a comedor where Johanna helped out her mother. It was right across the street from where Oscar lived.

Oscar's childhood was marked by the troubled relationship he had with his mother. Oscar's father had left the house when he was nine years old after his parents divorced. He stayed behind with his mother and two younger sisters, although as Oscar recalled, his mother only waited for the divorce to be official to take a new man into the house. The relationship did

not work out and the man moved out again after a few months, just as many other men after him who would come and go. Meanwhile, his mother, a strict evangelical, would rule the house with an iron fist. She sometimes locked her children up in the house when she went out to work, to prevent them from “learning things that wouldn’t bring them any benefit, such as smoking,” as she put it when I spoke to her in Oscar’s parental home in La Puntilla, where she still lived. And while Oscar’s sisters were treated with more delicacy and warmth, the shy Oscar was raised in a tougher way for being a man. “With a boy you cannot be all ‘like this, ay...’ right,” his mother explained to me while sweetening her voice, pretending to caress someone with her hand. It was a truth she had derived from her own upbringing. “For example, my dad always treated the boys in a more rough and crude way. In contrast, the girls, ‘ay my daughter, my little girl,’ right, more loving. So you think that because you have been brought up this way, you yourself should as well... What you also always do is discipline. Sometimes you do it the right way, and sometimes you do it the wrong way, because no one does this, as they say, *estudiado* (with a degree), knowing exactly when you should discipline and when not.”

In response to his harsh upbringing, Oscar tried to escape his house as much as possible. He dropped out of school at the age of twelve and spent most of his days hanging around or playing football in the neighborhood with other youngsters. The group, from which some would join the local mara at a later age, distinguished themselves by their long hair and way of dressing, wearing a cap, a white shirt, blue jeans, white socks and Converse shoes. Rivalries over girls with groups from adjacent marginalized sectors were settled by occasional fist fights and dance battles in local clubs. Just as rivalries with *Los Burgueses* (The Bourgeoisies), youth from wealthier sectors, were. It was a time of what Deborah T. Levenson (2013) calls “the gangs to live for,” which gave its members “a sense of a life-affirming identity and community in the face of social decomposition and the transformation of old communities, yet without disconnecting them from their families and their old communities and without destroying their identities as sons and daughters, friends and neighbors” (p. 72). Oscar left what he called ‘his gang’ when he met Johanna in her mother’s comedor where he sometimes hung out with his friends. They started to go out together, which motivated Oscar to become more serious in life. To win over Johanna and his family-in-law, he started working in a shampoo factory.

Years later, when Lucila, Tatiana and Paola grew up in La Puntilla, the local groups of youngsters had turned into “gangs to die for,” to stick with Levenson’s (2013, p. 77) terms, whose members were identified by tattoos and rivalries were settled with fire arms. Oscar, Johanna and the children lived in a big one-room tenement apartment on the second floor of a building full of “very scandalous people,” as Lucila put it. “Already at six in the morning, the radio would be at its loudest, people that were going out, there was an infinity of rooms there. We lived on the second floor, many rooms that were full, people we didn’t talk to out of fear, right.”

It was an outside world, however, from which Lucila and her sisters were kept far away, as Oscar and Johanna did not allow their children to play outside. Tellingly, Lucila’s first friend, she told me, was her sister Tatiana, who is two years younger than her. In similar fashion, the three went to a school outside the neighborhood, where education was thought to be better and they would not get caught up in La Puntilla’s vicious circle of gangs and violence. After school the girls were picked up by their mother to then change clothes at home and go directly to the comedor of their Mama Jimena, who combined hot-temperedness with a soft spot for her grandchildren, who all loved being in her presence. When you entered the comedor you stepped into the restaurant part, behind which the kitchen was situated, and all the way in the back there was a small room that you entered via the kitchen, where Mama Jimena slept with her second husband. It was in this room where the children spent their days after school, doing homework and watching television. It had no window, causing it to fill up with smoke every day from the tortilla making in the kitchen, which meant they had had red, burning eyes at the end of every day. They started laughing, almost until crying, when they told me about it. Meanwhile, their mother worked at the comedor serving the customers. She lunched together with the children every day. At eight or nine in the evening, Oscar would usually pick his teary-eyed children up and they would go home to eat and sleep.

Only Tatiana would stay at Mama Jimena’s. She had been living with her grandmother and grandfather (who had no children together) since she was two years old, allegedly after she had refused to go with her mother once after having spent the day with her grandmother. And even though Johanna wanted her daughters together in one house, Mama Jimena had not been willing to

let her go. “The big difference with growing up at Mama Jimena’s,” Tatiana explained, “was that my parents were never affectionate towards us. Sometimes I showed them my grades and they were like ‘all right, ok,’ and then they went on with what they were doing. In other words, they were not really showing interest in it. In contrast, my grandfather told me, ‘look abuelita, here are her qualifications, ay my love!’ and this and that, he kissed me, brought me something to eat and stuff like that. My Mama Jimena as well. Perhaps that is the difference. That they did pay attention to you or were like more loving with you than my parents were.”

According to the sisters, Oscar and Johanna’s educational style, which had been mostly steered by the latter, was not only strict, but also hard-hearted. The two showed little affection towards their children and sometimes also physically disciplined them, especially Johanna had been really abusive, Paola recalled. “With whatever she had in her hand she would hit me, or she looked for logs. And she hit me on my legs. My father only hit me on my back, but with his hands.” And even though Johanna had been around most of the time in the comedor, the sisters spent most of their time in Mama Jimena’s little room – just the three of them. “The image that I had of a mother,” Paola told me, “was always that of my oldest sister. She helped me with my homework, she used to always change me when I was little and helped me with my study. She practically did everything. And with my other sister as well, as she was always there with me.”

In 2003, the family, except for Tatiana, moved to Loma Linda. Oscar and Johanna had been looking for another place, as their one-room apartment in La Puntilla lacked privacy. In addition to this, the gang-stricken neighborhood did not provide a safe environment for the sisters to grow up in. Perhaps tellingly, not long after the family left the neighborhood two of Oscar’s cousins with whom he grew up were murdered in separate incidents. One of them right in front of Oscar’s parental house, the other one just around the corner. Oscar’s mother told me the killings had been part of an extortion directed at the boys’ father, who had to close his electronics store. According to Oscar, however, the incidents were related to the fact that his cousins were involved with drug traffickers. “It is hard to get out such a *rollo* [scene] alive.” Killings like that, he explained, were “daily bread” in La Puntilla.

The move to Loma Linda was made possible with the help of Oscar's mother, who had given her son twenty thousand quetzals she had inherited from her father. The house had cost eighty thousand quetzals, which meant that they had to borrow sixty thousand quetzals from the bank to be able to buy it. The move was a step up the social ladder. The neighborhood was founded three years before the family moved in and although it was only protected by two guards, it was free from the type of violence that ended the lives of Oscar's cousins.

Nevertheless, the lifestyles of Lucila, Tatiana and Paola did not change much in their new neighborhood. Johanna kept chauffeuring her children up whenever they had to go somewhere also when Lucila started to work at some point. "And if she couldn't come, she would send my father, even when he was out working. 'Oscarito, go and pick Luci up from her job.'" But also within the barriers of the colonia, the sisters kept leading withdrawn lives.

Crucially, there was more than one's life to lose on the city streets, whether inside or outside the neighborhood, Johanna believed. She did not want her daughters to tarnish their names – and hers – by becoming a sweetheart of some boy. Or even worse, that they would become pregnant at an early age. "She never let us go out," Lucila recalled, "because she said I would like you to be righteous girls, 'I don't want you to be on many lips, that the daughters of Johanna go out with that boy or something like that.' That we wouldn't be like the other girls we see here. For example, there are girls here that come home from school, change their uniform to then hang out with boys, and people talk negatively about them because they kiss with someone, and then go out with someone else, like that." It meant that the sisters were mostly at home whenever they were not in school.

Oscar and Johanna's protective stance towards their children and their reputation had also prevailed when they witnessed a guard in Loma Linda hitting on Tatiana – talking to her, as Oscar put it, "as if she was a really tasty dish" – as they entered the colonia in a tuk tuk. What the guard probably did not know, but was soon to find out, was that her parents were sitting in the same vehicle. They had not said anything when it happened but went to the neighborhood president (head of Loma Linda's honorary executive committee) afterwards to file a complaint against the guard. He was fired as a result. He had tried to make his excuses, Oscar told me, but they did not settle for it. "If one pardons it, they will continue with the same behavior. It's setting

a precedent that they have to respect their profession.”

However, Oscar and Johanna’s watchful eyes could not prevent boys from entering the lives of their daughters. Lucila met her husband in 2010 when they worked together in the same shopping mall. Tatiana got to know her boyfriend already when she was fourteen years old in a colonia nearby where her cousins lived. Boyfriends were in for a rough start though, Oscar explained. “She [Johanna] didn’t hesitate to slam the door in their faces when they were at the door for them. I then had to convince her that it was better to let them in so that we were able to keep an eye on the relationship.”

Tatiana had stayed with her grandmother in Nuestra Señora when her parents and sisters moved to Loma Linda. She joined them about two years later, however, after she finished primary school and went to follow her *basicos* (the equivalent of Middle School in the United States) at a school in a colonia not too far from Loma Linda, which was almost impossible to reach from Mama Jimena’s place during Guatemala City’s car-choked mornings. She fell into a “big depression,” as she put it herself, not being around her grandmother every day.

Unexpectedly, four years later, Mama Jimena also came to Loma Linda, after being extorted in Nuestra Señora. It was something of which Mama Jimena had long thought would not happen to her. Gang members used to make a habit out of eating in her comedor, which earned her the nickname “*abuelita* (granny) of the mareros,” although the mareros themselves called her Mama Jimena. A string of police arrests, however, debilitated the original mara and brought new gang members to the neighborhood.

As a result, Mama Jimena’s friendly ties with the mara were cut and the neighborhood turned into an increasingly dangerous and unpredictable place. Old ladies and little boys were scouring the streets to pass the word to the mareros who had money and who had not. It did not take long for them to also knock on her door. She was taxed for three hundred quetzals a week. She complied for a while, but business was down as people stopped leaving their homes because of the danger awaiting them on the streets. Meanwhile, people that did not pay the fee put on them were getting gunned down in front of her comedor. “So I said perhaps they’re going to kill me as well if don’t give them *pisto* (money). It’s when I went to Loma Linda.” Her grandchildren, of course, were happy to have her in their neighborhood. Tatiana immediately grabbed all of her stuff to move with Mama Jimena, who opened a comedor

in Loma Linda. And like in the old days, the three sisters spent most of their days in their grandmother's comedor. Mama Jimena's stay in Loma Linda, however, proved to be a short one. Two years after she had moved into the neighborhood, her husband died of a brain hemorrhage. It was as much a drama for Mama Jimena as it was for Lucila, Paola and, especially, Tatiana. On top of it, Mama Jimena decided to move out of the neighborhood to live close to her oldest son in Zone 17. An even bigger tragedy was then still to come.

Fighting cancer

Johanna first heard she had cancer in 2006 after a lump was found in her breast during a regular checkup. She died ten years later in January 2016 in the arms of Oscar, surrounded by her three daughters. Her long sickbed had been an emotional as well as a financial rollercoaster. Cancer, Oscar believed, was one of the most expensive diseases to have. The costs for chemo therapy, for instance, were only partly covered by National Cancer Institute (INCAN)⁴², meaning that during the twelve months Johanna had chemo, divided into two periods, the family had to come up with an extra amount between eighteen hundred and two thousand five hundred quetzals every three weeks. Oscar was glad to find out after a while that they were eligible for support from a foundation affiliated to a private hospital in Guatemala, where Johanna's breast was removed during an operation at a scaled-down rate, which still cost somewhere between eight and ten thousand quetzals but would have normally cost somewhere between forty-five and fifty thousand quetzals, Oscar recalled. And that was just for the day of the operation. Johanna also underwent radiation therapy at the same hospital.

Nevertheless, on various occasions the family had to postpone Johanna's treatments until they collected enough money to pay for it – something which had left Oscar with a feeling of guilt that he had not done enough to save her. But what else could he have done? "Medical costs, school fees, costs of the house, it was very hard," Oscar recalled. "We paid one thing, didn't pay for the other. Then my children were calling me that they didn't allow them to enter school because of the tuition fee that wasn't paid. What to do?"

⁴² Instituto Nacional de Cancerología

For the most part, it had been a matter for Oscar of making days as long as possible behind the wheel of his taxi, knowing that it never sufficed, as he usually earned between four and a half thousand and five thousand quetzals a month. Besides the medical costs, which also included medicines and other medical supplies, he had three daughters in school, which cost him almost a thousand quetzals a month. Meanwhile, he had to pay fourteen hundred and fifty quetzals a month to the bank to pay off his mortgage and the fee to the neighborhood committee. And then of course, there was money needed for food and other foreseeable and unforeseeable causes. When Johanna had become too sick to work in 2010, Lucila had to stop in the middle of the last year of her bachiller in medicines to start working and help out with the bills.

Initially, the family had also been helped out financially by their church. Despite the fact that Oscar had grown skeptical towards faith and the church after having experiencing the wrath of his highly religious mother, Johanna – who was originally Catholic – had urged them to look for a church together in the beginning of their relationship. They had tried both a Catholic and a Protestant church and they decided to go to the latter, as its younger crowd and devotion through music appealed to Johanna. They also joined the church's praise band where Oscar played bass. The band became a group of friends with whom Oscar and Johanna also spent time outside the church, occasionally visiting swimming pools and concerts together. According to Oscar, it was broken up by the pastor for this reason, as he did not like them to come together for activities unrelated to the church. The church did respond, however, when Johanna got sick. They had organized three different raffles during Johanna's first year of treatment to raise money for her.

It was about a year after Johanna had found out that she was sick, when Oscar heard that there were rumors circulating among church members that they did not spend the money the church raised on treatments, but on things that were not related to Johanna's illness. When they confronted them with the alleged allegations, no one contested. It led to a split from the church after ten years of membership. For Oscar it was, after having experienced his mother's education and Johanna being diagnosed with cancer, yet another affirmation that there was no God.

Johanna, in turn, only became more dedicated to her faith when she got sick and also held on to it after the break with their church. And even though

the family had felt betrayed by the people that spread the rumors about them, it had been Johanna's wish to be laid out in her former church after her death, since she had been part of it for so long and there were still many members that she held dear. The request Oscar made in this respect after Johanna had died, however, was turned down by the pastor. According to Oscar, he had told him that they should have communicated it to him earlier. "As if we knew when she was going to die!" Oscar fulminated. Some of the church members only recently found out about Johanna's death, Lucila added. The pastor had never mentioned it.

The death of Johanna casted a shadow over the lives of Oscar and his daughters. She had been the "center of everything," Tatiana once lamented to me. No doubt, she had been the most dominant person in the sisters' lives, setting not only the rules that were supposed to protect their safety and reputation, but also making sure they lived by them. At the same time, she had left a great deal of the girls' upbringing to Mama Jimena and to her daughters themselves. Meanwhile, all three of the sisters declared that they had missed warmth and affection from her when they grew up. But still, Paola told me after recalling how her mother used to rub her back at night when her asthma got bad, "she had always been there on the most important moments."

In addition to this, the last years of her life she had not worked as much as she had used to, and had stopped entirely at one point, which meant that she spent more time at home together with her daughters. It was this image of Johanna being always there with them that lingered in the minds of her daughters after she had died. And to a certain extent, it seemed as if things had always been this way. Lucila: "My mom always picked us up from school and she was always with us when we were in the comedor, so my mom was always with us. We went to the market with my mom. Also here [in Loma Linda], we went to the bakery with my mom, and to the tienda with her, to the market of El Retiro, everywhere." "Also when she didn't feel good," Tatiana remembered, "she got up to see what she could make us to eat or she went to the market or to wherever. And then when we came, 'girls, let's eat,' and then we ate together at four, in other words, we never separated, we did everything together, and with everything it was like 'look mom, this happened to me, what do I do?' or 'look mom, this happened to me' or 'look mom, how do these clothes look on me?' With my dad this perhaps was less the case, because he wasn't around. So it was more with my mom than with my dad."

Moreover, with death approaching her, Johanna had become softer and more affectionate with her daughters. “Before she wasn’t that affectionate,” Tatiana recalled, “but lastly when she was already sick she became really affectionate towards us, more close to us than that she was.” Paola experienced a similar change within her mother towards the end of her life “It was rare the moments that she told me she loved me. But in the end, when she was already really sick she hugged you and said that she loved you, when she was already going to die. My dad never hugged us.” In a way, Johanna’s illness gave the sisters the loving mother they had always longed for to then take her away from them.

Oscar’s isolation

Lucila, Tatiana and Paola had never been very close to Oscar. They all commended him for being a responsible father, with which they meant that he had always worked hard for his family. But at the same time, they declared that they did not know him very well and that he had never been affectionate with them. The only hugs Lucila ever received from him were during Christmas, she told me. “Tradition,” she added. And while Johanna became closer to her daughters during her long spell of sickness, the overload of work and stress had made Oscar, to use the words of Lucila, “exaggeratedly angry” during this period. It was only natural, however, that Johanna’s death had ushered in a new era in the lives of Oscar and the children. One that was marked by the question of how to proceed in life after the great loss they had suffered.

At least, it proved to be a struggle less dictated by financial considerations. Johanna’s death meant that there was no more money needed for treatments and medicines. Oscar’s monthly recurring expenses now consisted of the fourteen hundred and fifty quetzals for his mortgage, a hundred quetzals that went to the neighborhood committee for security provision and other neighborhood matters, and three hundred quetzals for Paola’s school. With the money he made as a taxi driver and whatever there came from the librería, the family could not lead a life of great luxury, but was able to make ends meet. In principle, Lucila, Tatiana and Paola were supposed to contribute to the family’s livelihood, but Oscar had not been too strict on this point. When I spoke to Tatiana about it, she went from talking to whispering, saying that she

sometimes made five hundred quetzals a week on nails, for which she needed five customers. She did not want Oscar, who was standing close by, to hear it though, as she sometimes did not pay her share after having spent all her money on makeup and shoes. Her father had told them, Tatiana added, that they would be rich if they would sell all their shoes. Nevertheless, there were less tense times ahead for Oscar, being five years away from having paid off his house. It had more than quadrupled in worth, he claimed, as it was now valued at three hundred and fifty thousand quetzals. Not that he had any intention of selling it.

With life being more affordable since Johanna's death, one would perhaps think that Oscar would scale down his extreme working hours a bit. The opposite, however, seemed true. When Johanna was still alive, the sisters explained, it was her dominant voice that made sure Oscar spent time with his family, telling him to come home for lunch or to bring or pick up his daughters. "Now that my mom isn't here," Tatiana lamented, "well, my dad doesn't come home for lunch anymore, he only comes for dinner somewhere in the wee hours." Indeed, Oscar usually came home around midnight to leave again early in the morning. On one occasion, he had worked until three in the morning to then start again at six in the morning on three subsequent days. The day after, he had worked 'only' until ten in the evening, after nearly falling asleep behind the wheel at nine. At the same time, such excesses were not necessarily exceptional among taxi drivers. The system that allowed them to work encouraged drivers to lose themselves in their work and, as was voiced by Oscar and many other drivers, to lose their family. Critically, drivers were not employed by the taxi company but rented a car from it for four hundred quetzals a day while they also had to pay for gas money. It meant that drivers started every day with a debt. As such, it was the hours after they had overcome this threshold where rides, at least instinctively, started to finally mount up, as every quetzal that was made went into the drivers' own pockets. Besides, Oscar added, he felt the need to make the most of the rental period of twenty-four hours, since he had paid for it and drivers did not receive anything in return when they brought the car back earlier.

But according to his daughters, this was only part of the story, as they suspected Oscar of avoiding home because the memories it evoked of Johanna. And they were right, I found out, although I had to confront him with his

daughters' suspicion for him to open up to me on the matter. On days that he rested, Oscar told me, it hurt him to be at home. Every corner reminded him of Johanna. It was an important driver for him to try to make as much hours in his taxi as his body allowed him. "Perhaps in my own mind, I try to get home as late and as tired as possible," he explained. "Perhaps I have been what you can call an egoist to not be there with my daughters, but I try to come as late and as tired as possible so that when I come home I fall asleep right away, so that the thought of sleeping alone doesn't affect me." But no matter how late he returned, Tatiana and Paola would wait for Oscar to come home to have dinner together, which was usually somewhere between eleven o'clock in the evening and one in the morning.

Crucially, according to Lucila, Tatiana and Paola, Oscar's coming home late was part of a broader isolation of Oscar from them after Johanna had died. Whenever he was home he spent most of his time in his room. It was behavior that was rooted in the loveless upbringing he had enjoyed, Lucila thought. "Because that is how he was brought up. Like in a very cold, very... He never received love, neither from his father, nor from his mother. So he picked that up as well. So he hasn't been affectionate with us. And he has been very isolated. When he rests, he doesn't spend time with Paola or Tatiana. We're in the living room watching television and he is alone in his room." Within this context, it is no exaggeration to say that, also after her death, Johanna kept being the more dominant parent of the two. This requires further explanation.

The invisible presence

When I went back to Guatemala City in February 2017, I had brought with me a little soft toy of Miffy, a world-famous rabbit from my hometown Utrecht, for Lucila's baby. What I did not know then, but learned upon my return when Oscar brought me to Lucila's house to meet his daughters, was that the baby had died. Lucila had given birth by caesarean section about a month after we had met. The newborn started crying upon birth as babies are supposed to do and was then put on Lucila's chest for a moment, after which they stitched the incision made on her during delivery. When she woke up from anesthetics, little Maria José had passed away. Cause of death: a cardiac arrest. Or to put in Lucila's words, she died "because she was heavily affected by the death of my

mother.” It was telling that, at least in Lucila’s mind, the baby, while still in the womb, had already Johanna as a reference point. Unfortunately, I never got to meet her. I kept the little rabbit in my backpack that day, not knowing if it was an appropriate thing to give to a mother that had lost her child.

By a coincidence or a stroke of faith, I did, however, get to meet Johanna that day – or at least I was told so. We were sitting around the table talking, when Tatiana suddenly made a startled noise, followed by a restrained giggle of Paola. “My sisters are scared,” Lucila interrupted her own story in a calm way that seemed to suggest that she knew what had frightened them. “The door opened!” Tatiana then exclaimed with seeming disbelief. Lucila, who was sitting with her back to the door, laughed, “she opened the door.” Now everybody started laughing. “It was closed, right?” Tatiana appealed to her older sister. Lucila nodded.

They then explained to me how their mother still opened and closed doors in the house and turned the lights on and off now and then. It was the things that she also did when she was alive, *molestona* (teaser) as she was. By now, Oscar, Lucila, Tatiana and Paola were used to it and it did not scare them as much as it did in the beginning. She also still played with the dogs, who were sometimes seen rolling and playing on the bed where Johanna spent most of her last days, the way they only did with her. And she made her presence felt in other ways as well. Lucila explained that Johanna identified herself with butterflies in the period before her death and that ever since she died there were butterflies everywhere, flapping about in and around the house, in the car and around her grave during family visits. And, as Oscar added, even the roses in front of the house had started to blossom. She had made a mission of them while still alive, but was highly annoyed by the fact that they never bloomed, blaming Oscar for bringing the wrong kind of earth. And now they had appeared in all their splendor. The family took it as yet another sign that Johanna was still around.

Curiously, Johanna did not seem to have lost any of her imperativeness in her invisible appearance. Lucila explained how her mother had smashed a table she did not like in her house in the middle of the night. She had also thrown pots and pans to Oscar’s mother, whom she did not get along with, and even some scissors to her head. A knife that she threw at her feet only just missed and ended straight up into the floor. It was Johanna’s way of scaring

her mother-in-law, the sisters explained, so that she would not visit anymore. Something which she indeed hardly did. And a week after our talk, Johanna, who liked Lucila's hair down, undid the latter's ponytail during a family get-together, scaring her daughter's cousins as it happened right in front of them. Apparently, Johanna was not only still constantly present in the thoughts of Oscar and his daughters, but also in physical acts.

Meanwhile, it was only natural that she was brought up or that conversations geared into her direction in other ways. Frequently, this led to amusing anecdotes. Clearly, she had been a woman with a remarkable strong and self-willed personality. It was to everybody's amusement when Lucila told me the story of Johanna giving a new telephone to Oscar for his birthday, as part of a deal that also provided her with a new phone, to hand him over the bill of the transaction a month later, casually telling him that it should be paid. Or when Lucila, Tatiana and Paola recalled an occasion where she had let everybody wait for an hour in a shopping mall in Villa Nueva, with no one knowing where she had gone, to then turn up all of a sudden waving enthusiastically in their direction, yelling "*patojas!*" (girls), with next to her a boy carrying on a little cart the brand new washing machine she had just bought. These were the type of stories that often ended with one of the daughters saying something in terms of "*aaayyy mi madre*, she was one of a kind." Meanwhile, the family's light and humorous way of reminiscing about their mother worked contagious. After the door incident and a conversation full of anecdotes and laughs about the way Johanna tended to boss everybody around, I blatantly nodded to one of her photos on the wall upon leaving the house, as if saluting a military officer. It became a running gag, with Oscar calling me back once after I had left the house without saluting "the general."

It was not all joke, however, that I started saying goodbye to Johanna upon leaving the house. In a way, I had the feeling that I got to know her during my time in Guatemala, although not as a spirit-like figure that opened doors to reveal her presence. Instead, her invisible hand was much more profound, or visible if you like, in the rigid way Lucila, Tatiana and Paola kept following their mother's rules after her death. We were at Lucila's place and the sisters had just been telling me about their fascination for shoes and clothes when I asked them if they felt more freedom to do as they like now that their mother was not around anymore, referring to her dominant personality. "Perhaps not

because our mother always helped us with choosing clothes to buy,” Lucila reacted. Assuming that she misunderstood my question, I asked it again, explaining to her that I had meant it more generally, although her first answer, I realized later, already answered my question in a way. “Perhaps not,” Tatiana took over from her sister after I had clarified myself, “because we’re used to how she was.” “We have already adapted ourselves to a rhythm you could say, a lifestyle,” Lucila added. Indeed, the sisters had interiorized the rules and restrictions their mother had put on them to an extent that went way beyond the matter of buying clothes, but at the same time, as far as buying clothes. It had kept them inside their house also after the death of their mother. Whenever they did leave the colonia, Lucila, Tatiana and Paola would visit markets or shopping malls they already knew, and they would never choose to go out alone – even the thought of it terrified them.

But at the same time, it was more than fear of violent crime or reputational damage that prevented the individual sisters from confronting the public streets by themselves. It was the fact that they had never learned doing so, or perhaps in the case of Lucila, had unlearned it after she experienced a particular traumatic assault that had turned going outside into an almost impossible task. To put it in the words of the latter, “because our mother didn’t accustom us to go out alone, we cannot go out alone.” And with their mother dead, it now seemed an inability almost irreparable.

What added to this was that the sheltered life the sisters had experienced under the yoke of their dominant mother had not only set boundaries on their ability to act outside their little world, but also on their desire to do so. Tellingly, they acknowledged that they led a highly secluded life but claimed to not feel shut in and showed little interest in the unknown of their immediate surroundings, which was also reflected in the fact that they had never turned right upon leaving their colonia. “It doesn’t draw our attention,” Lucila told me when I asked her about this apparent lack of interest. “We were always with my abuelita and my mom growing up and we always did something inside the house, not outside.” In a way, it was as if the outside world had always only existed by the threat of it. Perhaps you cannot miss what you do not know, although their alleged lack of interest in the outside world might have also been driven by an urge to reclaim a sense of governing their own life, turning an imposed restriction into a product of choice or preference (see also Jackson, 1998).

It was only logical that Lucila, Tatiana and Paola followed their mother's footsteps also in other areas after her death. They ran the *librería* their mother had started and Lucila had taken over her clothing scheme. In similar fashion, when I asked them about their future plans and dreams, I found it hard to determine whether it was their voice or their mother's voice responding to me and to what extent these two even differed. Lucila wanted to go to university, she told me. When I asked her what she wanted to study, she answered that it was her mother's dream that she would pick up on her medicine studies again. "But what about your own dreams?" I responded. "Yes, my dream is to study oncology. After everything that happened with their mother, oncology really draws my attention." I complimented her on the dream. Again, her reaction left me somewhat in the dark if studying medicine really was what she wanted to do. "Yes, it was what my mother always wanted, look my daughter, follow your dreams, right, medicine. It was always her dream."

Similarly, Tatiana told me that her plan was to study architecture, something her mother had wanted for her *bachiller* in graphic design. It was a relatively expensive study, however, and to be able to pay for it Tatiana first wanted to advance as a beautician. She planned to go to beauty school on Saturdays next year. This investment would in the end provide her with the means and tranquility needed to then study architecture at the university. "Because I do want to do that," she stressed. "It is a dream my mother had, and my father as well, so I do want that to become reality, going to university. My mom cried every time I started to make a scale-model, seeing me work on it until late, and my dad as well. It is a dream that I want to realize, but I do think it will be something for the longer term, because I would have to work and study at the same time, since this career is quite expensive."

Of the three sisters, Paola seemed most self-determined in her plans for the future, although it had been her mother that motivated her to finish her *bachiller* to be able to go to university. Paola's wish was to study forensic anthropology, she told me, as she dreamed of going to faraway places to look for dinosaur bones in the sand. To do this, she would have to go to a foreign country though given the fact that it was not offered on any university in Guatemala.⁴³ The thought of doing this all by herself, however, without knowing

⁴³ She seemed to be talking about the wrong study, as digging up dinosaur bones is the work of a paleontologist. Paleontology, indeed, cannot be studied on any university in Guatemala. Forensic anthropology, in turn, with forensic archaeology among its subfields, is applied to legal matters.

anyone, scared her and put a brake, at least for now, on further exploring the option – as would probably the costs involved for studying abroad. She was also fascinated, however, by the idea of working for the National Institute of Forensic Science of Guatemala (INACIF) as an investigator, which had brought her attention to the study of forensic criminology. It would put her face-to-face with the death and despair she now tried to shield herself from so meticulously.

At the same time, not every dream of Johanna turned out to be a viable one. She had ambitious plans with the librería when she started it a year before she died. In the long run, she hoped to hire a space in a shopping mall and focus more on making invitations for weddings and birthday parties. They had checked the prices of a few locations once but they all turned out to be quite expensive, “they rent out in dollars,” Lucila told me. When I spoke to Paola about three months into my second fieldwork period, she confided me that they were not selling anything anymore in the librería. It hardly came as a surprise to me. The fact that there had been no clients the first time I met the three sisters was far from an exception. I kept visiting the place during my second fieldwork period, never seeing a single client in their store. The biggest problem was that they had moved the primary school in Loma Linda to a location outside the colonia, and a new librería had opened right next to it. It also did not help that the children in the neighborhood tended to increasingly have their own computer at home. Three weeks later, when I went by Oscar’s house to accompany the family to Johanna’s grave, I walked right into the living room upon entering the house. They had moved it to the cooler front room the day before. It meant that there was no librería anymore.

When discussing the future dreams of the sisters, the librería was never mentioned. Still, running it had been one of the paths set out by their mother and the fact that it did not work out as planned, contained a dangerous truth. One that was perhaps also reflected in the seeming perseverance with which they had kept the librería open long after the customers had stopped coming. There were other forces in play after Johanna’s death, however, that represented graver threats to the shielded lifestyles of the sisters.

Fear of losing

Not long after I had come back to Guatemala City for my second fieldwork period, I went to La Puntilla with Oscar to talk about his old neighborhood. We had parked the car overlooking a ‘rival’ neighborhood – any closer to it would have put us in danger, Oscar claimed – when he received a WhatsApp message that he, by the look of it, read carefully. When I asked him if he perhaps wanted to make a call, he confided to me that he was seeing a woman, Aitana, adding that it was nothing formal yet. The message came from Lucila, asking him if there was any news on the relational front. His daughters, Oscar then explained, were not happy with him seeing her. A complicating factor was that she lived a two hour drive away from Guatemala City.

The most sensitive issue, however, was the fact that she was a friend of the family, or, perhaps closer to the truth, practically family. Aitana’s mother had worked a long time in the comedor of Mama Jimena, meaning that they had known her from a very young age. Aitana’s sister Jessenia ran the clothing scheme with Lucila. In addition to this, Oscar and Johanna were godparents of one of Aitana’s children. She had two young children of three and nine years old but was alone after the father of the youngest child had left to the United States, where he now lived with another woman. A few months before I arrived in Guatemala, Oscar had told her he liked her. Since that moment, the two had been trying to figure out if there was any romantic potential between them.

When I spoke to Oscar and his daughters a week later, I did not know whether I was supposed to discuss the matter with his daughters or not. I was glad when they brought it up themselves. We were talking about the fear the sisters experienced being out on the public streets, with Lucila saying that they were vulnerable as three women, when I casually mentioned that perhaps what they missed was a brother to protect them. Lucila agreed with me. Paola, however, threw a severe look at Oscar, pointing two of her fingers first at her own eyes and then in the direction of Oscar, this way signaling to him that she was keeping an eye on him. And while Lucila kept talking, Paola continued looking at her father with a stern face. At first, I did not understand what was being messaged in front of me and after Lucila, who had kept talking, told me that the three daughters of their neighbors were raised exactly the way they

were, I decided to again raise the hypothetical point of a brother. “An older brother,” Lucila added. “Exactly,” Tatiana continued with more emphasis, “an older brother, an older one, so that we are clear on that, an *older* one!” Lucila then told me that Oscar had been teasing them about that he was going to make a little boy with Aitana.

The outlook of their father’s possible relationship with Aitana and the idea of a newborn springing from it unleashed all kinds of fears in the three sisters. In response, they tried to mark their territory by setting rules and boundaries for their father and a potential new partner to honor and respect. “For instance, something that I told him when he talked to me about her,” Lucila said later in the conversation, “I said dad, my mom always has to be your presence and your future. I told him, always remember that she was your first wife, an excellent woman, an excellent and wonderful mom, so remind yourself that we have to go and visit her at the cemetery. That shouldn’t change with her [Aitana] in the picture. That she has to be aware that we are going to mention my mom as often as we want. And that shouldn’t make her uncomfortable because my mom will always be our mom and be everything for us. So we tell him that she should be aware that we... that for him and for us my mom will always be number one. She has to know that right. So we should never skip on going to the cemetery. Sometimes we tell him, ‘dad, let’s go to the cemetery,’ but then he’s like ‘Juli [Aitana] doesn’t want to,’ but dad, she knew from the start, really, that this is how it’s going to be.’ Right. That must not change. And we want that she is a good woman to him. Because we want him to have something good, something that brings him benefits and doesn’t damage him. For example, we know that she is a hard worker. We do know that. She’s a good girl, she doesn’t have vices. We all know that. But what we want is that she treats him well. That she treats him well, right. That’s all. What we want is that she’s good to him and good to us, right. Because when he is happy, we are going to be happy. It brings tranquility to us as well.” About two months later, when I sat down with Paola to speak to her alone, I asked her about her fears concerning her father’s advances to Aitana. “To lose him as my dad,” she responded. “That she becomes more important for him than we are. So I told my father, you knew us first and then her. So that we continued to be his priority. I don’t want to lose the affection of my dad.”

By the time I had the one-on-one with Paola, the relationship between Oscar and Aitana, if ever there had been one, had already ended. This, to the disappointment of Oscar. Clearly, he had not been put off by his daughters' objections about him being together with Aitana, telling me he explained to his two youngest daughters, who were most outspoken in their criticism, that "one day they were going to go their way with their partners, and that he too needed someone that caressed him at night, someone to tell his problems to and about how his day went. To come home knowing that someone has cooked for you and things like that." In the weeks that followed the initial conversation I had with the family about Aitana, he had visited her a few times together with his daughters. And even though there had been some bickering between the potential couple, and his daughters continued to be against the relationship, he had told her after having spent the weekend together that he wanted to change his status on Facebook into being in a relationship. Aitana, however, had not wanted this, telling him that this might cause problems between her and the father of her youngest child. Oscar suspected she still had feelings for him. When he asked her what would happen if he would come back from the United States, she could not provide him a straight answer. The message was clear for Oscar.

The daughters did not regret the fact that it did not work out between the two. The fear of losing their father to a new woman, however, was part of a bigger range of fears that became more profound after their mother had died. "My biggest fear is perhaps to be left all alone," Tatiana once told to me, "to be without my sisters and without my father. Or, as we were talking the three of us, that we are left without my Mama Jimena, whom we now see as our mom. This is our biggest fear and my biggest fear is to be left completely alone because I have this fear that they call me and that my Mama Jimena... [That they say] look, Mama Jimena isn't here anymore. Or to be left without my sisters, who are the most precious thing I have in life right now, and my father." The fact that Tatiana had a boyfriend did not dispel these deeply rooted fears. She had shared this with her father, telling him that a partner could never provide her with the natural love that characterized a bond between family members. It was a type of love that was more delicate in many ways, Tatiana explained to me, because "a partner I can perhaps leave and later look for a new one. But sisters and a dad I cannot find somewhere else."

Unfortunately, while the alleged danger of losing her father seemed over for now, Mama Jimena's death had a more immediate and inevitable touch to it. She was in delicate health and both Oscar and his daughters lived with the daily fear that she would die soon. Her life, she said during a visit at her house, had been a very sad one marked by death, having lost five of her six children. Most of them died of cancer. She was now seventy-seven years old and had, as she put it herself, "eight diseases," among which diabetes. And even though Oscar and his daughters did not see her as much as they did when she lived near them in La Puntilla and later Loma Linda, she had continued to play a large role in their lives. Especially Lucila, Tatiana and Paola called her almost every day, asking for her opinion on everyday matters. Mama Jimena gave what Oscar called "*consejos mandatos*," pieces of advice that you had to follow. Or to put it in her own words, my grandchildren "do what I tell them to do. They consult me on everything they're doing and do as I tell them. They fear me."

She was well aware of her importance in the family. When we were talking about it, she asked me if I knew corncobs, to which I nodded. "All right," she continued, "well, I'm the one right up there, the upper one. The little grain on top. It is because of me that all that is family is kept together. At least my grandchildren and all them. If I go bad, all the little grains will go bad. That means that I will have to be strong." I asked her what would happen if she died although she did not let me finish my sentence. "When I die? That is what they tell me. 'Mama Jimena, what are we going to do when you die?' 'What can I do about it,' I tell them. When death comes for you, death comes for you."

Grieving over the death of a mother is, of course, natural and so is the increased fear of losing a father or a grandmother after such an event, whether by death or by way of a new relationship. At the same time, the daughters' fears concerning Aitana and the subsequent claim they put on their father of "not wanting to share him," to use Tatiana's words, as well as the fear of losing Mama Jimena, showed the difficulties of dealing with losses in a small, inwardly focused world. In this respect, it was only telling that the emptiness left behind by Johanna was, in an almost tangible way, filled by herself, as she kept appearing and steering the family life after her death. The sisters' circle only consisted of a very few people that were of crucial importance, not only emotionally, but also practically, serving as their hands and feet in defending

them against an outside world they considered malicious. It made them as dependent on their father and Mama Jimena as they were on each other. Their mother's death, however, had also confronted them with the vulnerability of this little world. It was in this context that Oscar and Mama Jimena, to put it in the words of Paola, became the sisters' 'priorities.' "Because they are the only ones left." In response, they cleaned the house, washed their father's clothes, and Tatiana and Paola waited for him to have dinner, no matter how late he came home. Oscar, in turn, tried to return home as late as possible, coping with the tragedy of Johanna's death in a more isolated manner. Meanwhile, the sisters were constantly companioned by the fear of losing Mama Jimena.

The withdrawal from the daily fabric of the city, as Caldeira (2000) and many others argue, also stimulates fear of crime. It helps to turn the entire outside world into a great unknown that can easily take the shape of a monster of ferocious proportions. As such, withdrawal creates its own need. It is something the story of the Contrerases also testifies to. Their story, however, appears to also point to another irony attached to withdrawal as a way of confronting a world marked by violence and injustice, or any world perhaps. One that revolves around the strategy's seeming counter productivity in the case a person or a family is faced with tragedy, loss, or trauma, or everything together. This came to the fore after the violent robbery Lucila had been subjected to, to which she (or the family) responded by entrenching her withdrawn lifestyle, and with that, her fear for the outside world. But it seemed to also surface after the death of Johanna, which unleashed all kinds of existential fears within the three sisters that, at least in part, appeared to be prompted by their inward focus and a sheer lack of people in their life. A withdrawn lifestyle as led by Oscar and especially his daughters, this is to say, may decrease the chance that one becomes a victim of a violent crime or some other type of danger, but that same strategy might come back to haunt one in the face of adversity.

The road not taken

'A beautiful, young girl leads a reclusive life in the middle of the Mexican countryside. Her life takes an unexpected turn when she by chance meets a rich, handsome man. They fall in love. The girl of humble origins, however, is

hated by her privileged family in law and sees herself forced to flee to Mexico City after having suffered a string of threats and humiliations from their side. In the city, she starts working as a maid but soon rises to become a successful business woman.' This is, clearly, not the life of one of the Contreras sisters, but the plot of their favorite soap opera *Untamable Heart*. Nevertheless, in the light of their lives it is an interesting thought: a tragedy that forcefully ends a sheltered life, but eventually proves to be the seed of a coming-of-age type of change, as a young girl blooms into a woman of the world. Is there something alike waiting for Lucila, Tatiana and Paola? Chances are slim, and as it appeared during my fieldwork, their mother's death was not the type of shell-breaking event, or gate-breaking if you like, that *Untamable Heart* thrives upon. One could even say that the mother's death had made their world smaller, as it had deprived them not only of their mother and with that of one of the few people in their lives, but also of a person that chaperoned them to places situated outside their colonia.

I left Guatemala City, however, knowing that the lives of the Contreras sisters were heading for some major changes. First of all, it became increasingly clear that Mama Jimena was not going to have eternal life. Meanwhile, Oscar's relationship with Aitana may have ended before it started, but it did prove that he was ready for a new woman in his life. And in addition to this, there were also events in the pipeline for the sisters individually, affecting their trinity as sisters as well as their sheltered lifestyles. Just before I left, Tatiana's boyfriend had bought them a house in Las Arenas, a neighborhood of similar status as Loma Linda. And even though the colonia was situated not too far away from where she lived now, on the road towards the denser part of Zone 18, the imminent move would put an outer world between Tatiana and her sisters that none of them dared to travel alone. Meanwhile, Paola was busy finishing her high school to be able to go to university next year.

Like her younger sister, Lucila hoped to go to university, in her case, to get back to studying medicine, which she wanted to combine with a job. She had more immediate issues that had to be dealt with first though. The loss of her child had put a financial strain on her and her husband. The young couple had saved for the costs of the caesarean section and had fully equipped the baby room, but were not prepared for the expenses of the funeral and other costs attached to it. Lucila's husband had been able to pay for all this using

his credit card, but this money now had to be paid back. It was a bitter truth that he spent around sixteen hundred of the twenty-eight hundred quetzals he received every month on taxi costs, as there were no buses back from his work to Loma Linda at night time. In response, the couple was struggling to get by on their joint income, which meant that Lucila had to find a steadier job soon. They were also thinking of getting a loan to buy a car.

At the same time, important changes of lifestyle do not necessarily spring from major events. When Oscar drove me to Loma Linda once, we came to speak again about Virgen de Fátima, the squatter settlement located somewhere in the surroundings of their neighborhood. According to Oscar, it was a colonia mainly consisting of people from the well-known squatter settlement of El Cisne who had fled for reasons of extortion while being packed with the same criminal tendencies that had driven them out of their homes. Both he and his daughters believed that dwellers from Virgen de Fátima were responsible for the assaults at the bus stop just outside Loma Linda. The fact that the squatter settlement seemed to represent a danger of almost mythic proportions in the minds of the Contrerases made me curious about the place and when we reached Loma Linda that day, I asked Oscar if it would be possible to first visit Virgen de Fátima. To my surprise, he agreed without hesitating and instead of turning right to his colonia, he kept going, entering a road he had never traversed before.

This did not mean that the scenery differed much from what we had just seen on our way to Loma Linda although after passing the latter it was safe to say the countryside had gained the upper hand over the urban, as country estates became vaster and settlements scarcer. The only neighborhoods we passed were a couple of small and seemingly middle class neighborhoods that showed not much more than their walled fronts. Meanwhile, mara graffiti on a bus stop we drove by did indeed point at the presence of gangs in the area. After a ten minute drive, Virgen de Fátima emerged in a way that somehow matched the alarming stories of Oscar and his daughters, as the neighborhood dominated its surroundings with its position on a hill surrounded by green lands. To enter it, you had to drive through a gate that seemed without an official security guard, although there was a man standing next to it, who nodded when we passed him. We climbed the steep path upwards and after a few curves we decided to stop. I left the car to look at the view and the

unfolding of the neighborhood, greeted a group of men hanging around near our car, and then I got back in the car to head back to Loma Linda.

To be sure, our visit to Virgen de Fátima was a short one. Too short to have learned anything about the neighborhood. Besides the fact that it seemed calm, its people seemed friendly and we were not robbed or otherwise victimized. On the way back, Oscar said to me that Virgen de Fátima had made him a little bit nervous. He had expected a place with “a lot of mareros on every street corner,” but in the end, he admitted, it turned out to be a marginal neighborhood not much different than any other he had seen, which of course does not mean that potential dangers should be underplayed or underestimated. When I spoke to him a week later, he told me he had given his daughters a fright telling them of our trip. Fear for such places, Oscar explained to me, is often based on stories and not on one’s own experience. He added that the visiting of places he never visited before was one of things he appreciated in the work as a taxi driver. It surprised me hearing those words coming out of his mouth. In the knowledge that life of his daughters was set for some changes, whether they liked it or not, perhaps it would not hurt transmitting some of this apparent enthusiasm for the unknown to them.

A Life after Breaking Away

The Mérida Family

Cast of characters:

Gustavo, age 49	the father
Vania	the mother
Valeria, age 18	the eldest daughter
Luz, age 16	the middle daughter
Camila, age 14	the youngest daughter
Don Benito	Gustavo's father and treasurer of Flor del Campo's neighborhood committee
Don Lázaro	Vice president of Flor del Campo's neighborhood committee

From Gustavo's house in the neighborhood of Flor del Campo, situated pretty much in the center of Guatemala City, Gustavo, his eighteen-year-old daughter Valeria, and I had made our way south to the adjacent city of Villa Nueva, to then pass Amatitlán and, from afar, the village of San Vicente Pacaya. The last part of the road to the Pacaya volcano, which we planned to ascend by foot that day, was a winding path cutting through a lush, green landscape with beautiful views of surrounding mountains that, at some point, presented us with a utility post standing almost in the middle of the road. "Do you see that!?" Gustavo uttered surprise as he lightly swerved to drive around it. "Here you see the state of spatial planning in this land." Staring through the side window, I had hardly paid attention to it and certainly had not attached any immediate deeper thoughts to it. But giving it a quick think, it did not surprise me, as I had found utility posts on the strangest places walking the sidewalks near my house in Zone 10. Just as Gustavo's comment did not surprise me given that he was often uncomplimentary about Guatemala and its people. In fact, minutes before, after I had begun to sound the praises of Guatemalan countryside, comparing the green, mountainous beauty around us with the relatively dull flat lands of my own country, Gustavo told me he would give his left kidney to be from The Netherlands. A joke, I guessed, but one with a serious undertone.

Due to his overtly critical and often cynical stance towards everything that entailed Guatemala, Gustavo deemed himself a Malinche. It was a reference to the Aztec woman who – as the main version of the story goes – betrayed her people by becoming the interpreter and later the lover of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, the man that brought large parts of Mexico under Spanish rule. Apparently, Gustavo considered his criticism a form of treason. But it was something, he assured me, he shared with many Guatemalans.

At the same time, in a country markedly divided by class and security walls, few people seemed to have a more complete picture of life in Guatemala. A scion of a middle class family himself, he had long been part of *El Verbo* (literally: The Word), a fanatical evangelical sect that catered to the wants of the rich and that had combined a strong inward focus with at least one period of remarkable outward political power. Clearly, Gustavo had kept a connection with the better-off in Guatemala after this, given that I first met him and Valeria in my house as part of a low key music group to which Ester, the lady of the house, also belonged. Meanwhile, Gustavo's devotion to development work had brought him to several foreign countries as well as, and in particular, to some of the most destitute and war-torn places of Guatemala.

What he took from these different experiences was a somber outlook on the state of his country and his fellow countrymen, as well as on his own life sometimes. Not that it showed. With his gentle face, tranquil nature and slightly conservative way of dressing, often wearing pastel-colored shirts and trousers, Gustavo gave few signs of what was brewing beneath his surface. Crucially, the disappointments he suffered over the course of time had also made him a wary man, careful not to make the same mistakes again. These fears from an unfinished past added to the more typical crime and violence related fears and restrictions Gustavo experienced in present day Guatemala.

It is these experiences and fears, and how they shaped Gustavo's life, that will be the focus of this chapter. The first part of it will be mainly devoted to Gustavo's time at El Verbo as well as its aftermath, including the long process of breaking with the church. In the third paragraph, I will focus upon Gustavo's way of dealing with crime and violence to then shift focus to Valeria, the eldest of Gustavo's three daughters and the only one that lived at his place during my fieldwork. The other two, Luz and Camila, lived with their mother Carmen

just outside the town of Mazatenango. Carmen and Gustavo had separated in 2013. As a daughter of Gustavo, Valeria gave shape and meaning to her life in a cultural and socioeconomic context largely similar to the one of Gustavo. Her dealing with the insecurity adds another account of middle class life in Guatemala City but also puts her father's way of seeing and handling things in perspective just as Gustavo's account strengthens his daughter's.

El Verbo

In 1979, Gustavo's father Don Benito, a pastor's son, was part of a group that sought to evangelize universities. At one of their weekly gatherings, they watched a movie of the famous American pastor Bill Bright, whose parachurch organization Campus Crusade for Christ was out to spread the gospel around the world. And while it was running, Don Benito suddenly felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in him. He recalled how he fell on the ground and started "crying like a child." From that moment on, Don Benito said, "I was someone else, because I had Christ in me, it wasn't just knowing about Christ, but having Christ in me. That is a big difference." Not long after, he quit his job at the bank where he had worked for twenty-three years to become a pastor at El Verbo, a mission of the California-based ministry Gospel Outreach that helped to rebuild poor neighborhoods in Guatemala City after the devastating earthquake of 1976. In the United States, Gospel Outreach had started as a group of 'Jesus freaks' practicing a primitive form of communal living, but over the years they had unshackled themselves from their flower power to turn into a conservative neo-Pentecostal church embracing pecuniary power (Stoll, 1990; Garrard-Burnett, 2010). In Guatemala, El Verbo sought to particularly accommodate the rich with the promise that right living paid off in actual quetzals. The church's 'prosperity theology' proved a successful one and by the beginning of the 1980s, El Verbo was be one of the biggest neo-Pentecostal churches in Guatemala.

Gustavo was twelve years old when his family joined El Verbo. As a boy from the lower middle class neighborhood of Tres Cruces where no road was yet asphalted and bank employees and civil servants mixed with, as Gustavo put it, "indigenous people that for instance had their own tortilla store," it opened a world that until then had been out of his reach. "It was a church that had just

started. Many that became a member were wealthy families, businessmen who were not very happy with the position of the Catholic Church and that found a good place there to exercise their faith. And it was very interesting. It was a church different from the other churches here in Guatemala, because it was founded by a group of Americans who were half-hippies, because there was a sense of community. One felt comfortable, because somehow the rich people opened up and established bonds of friendship.”

But the opening of the ‘El Verbo-door’ almost automatically entailed the shutting of another behind them in which the outside world was situated. Gustavo went to the *Colegio Verbo*, the school of the church, and participated in church activities after class. Only Saturdays, he and his family would usually spend at home. First, in Tres Cruces and later in the more affluent, middle class neighborhood of Flor del Campo where the family bought a home when Gustavo was fourteen years old. Meanwhile, all of Gustavo’s friends were from El Verbo, as the Mérida household even distanced themselves from their own family. It was a “bubble,” Gustavo said, or “inbreeding,” as he put it in another moment. One that was kept in check by a group of so-called ‘elders,’ of which Don Benito became part after a while. Their sermons and teachings emphasized the importance of obedience and discipline. Parents were told to physically discipline their children with wooden sticks. The elders also had to be consulted in every important decision the church members made in their lives. Whom to marry, what to study, which job to take: the elders’ advice, Gustavo said, was one to be followed as “God spoke through them.” But if so, the Lord had started to do so in an increasingly political way not long after the Mérida family joined El Verbo.

Ríos Montt

When Don Benito experienced his moment of spiritual awakening, he had been in a room with about thirty people. The presence of one of them, Efraín Ríos Montt, had not gone unnoticed. The former general had become a big shot politician after his military career and would probably have made it to president in 1974 if fellow army officers had not cheated him out of what seemed to be a sure win in the elections. And after missing a second nomination from the Christian Democrats three years later, he had sought spiritual refuge

at El Verbo. Perhaps to the surprise of some there, Ríos Montt had proven to be an eager apprentice of the church's dogmas and doctrines. Yet at the same time, as it would turn out, Ríos Montt's evangelical rebirth had not erased his deep-seated ambitions to become president. And to the worry of the elders at El Verbo, they had to read in the newspaper that he considered another go for the highest office in the country in 1982. Not immediately enthusiastic about being dragged into politics, they tried to instill some patience in him, telling him that the Lord had something in store for him.

They proved to be prophetic words. According to Don Benito, he was there with Ríos Montt at Colegio Verbo on 23 March 1982 when young military officers called the former general, who had become director of the school, to take the lead in a coup they had staged in response to fraudulent elections. At first, Ríos Montt was installed as the head of a three-man junta but after he dismissed the other two members, he became Guatemala's first evangelical head of state. And even though Ríos Montt's claim that he had no prior knowledge of the coup seemed unlikely, the elders took him upon his word and deemed the sequence of events that brought him to the presidential palace a reflection of God's will. After all, didn't they themselves predict that something along these lines would happen?

When Ríos Montt assumed office, he did so spiritually submitted to El Verbo. In line with church regulations, he consulted with his spiritual advisers on important decisions – El Verbo elders Francisco Bianchi and Álvaro Contreras.. The latter two, according to the anthropologist David Stoll, exerted a “Rasputin-like influence over the new president” (1990, p. 190). Meanwhile, elders would also join the new head of state in his weekly prayer sessions (Stoll, 1990). But as the guerrilla movement had managed to regain momentum in the late 1970s after mobilizing the indigenous for battle, Ríos Montt was well aware it would take more than prayers to defeat it. A true Christian, he repeatedly said, carried the Bible in one hand and a rifle in the other. Upon seizing power, he therefore intensified the brutal scorched earth campaign his predecessor General Romeo Lucas García had embarked upon in the early 1980s. He also added a second stage to the counterinsurgency campaign that was both aimed at crushing the opposition, as well as at preventing new rebelliousness from surfacing in the future. Under the publicity promise of ‘beans and rifles,’ Ríos Montt greatly expanded the civil patrol system set up

under the Lucas rule, coercing men between the ages of sixteen and sixty into fighting subversives and ‘guarding’ their villages – which included seeking out subversive elements within their own communities – as well as into settling local conflicts and disputes (Davis, 1988).⁴⁴ It did not take long for these tactics to yield success on the battlefield. By 1983, Ríos Montt’s government had routed much of the rebel opposition, which saw its position further weakened because of mismanagement and lack of guns.

But it was an effort that came at great human cost. During the seventeen months of Ríos Montt’s presidency, some 86,000 mostly indigenous people were killed. In addition to this, hundreds of indigenous villages were swept away from the face of the earth. They were actions that, as is now widely acclaimed, were “as much to teach the Indian population a psychological lesson” (Davis, 1988, p. 24), as they were about breaking guerrilla resistance.⁴⁵

Stories that pointed to the occurrence of massacres already trickled down to El Verbo members during Ríos Montt’s rule. In fact, they had been assisting the army handing out food in indigenous communities in the Quiché department, the focus of Ríos Montt’s scorched earth campaign. Meanwhile, El Verbo’s parent organization Gospel Outreach had been raising money to resettle refugees and displaced people in so-called ‘model villages,’ which not only put the indigenous under the authority of the military, but also divided local communities (Stoll, 1990; Davis, 1988; Adams, 1988).

Still, El Verbo members tended to believe, there was no way one of theirs could be authorizing the mass killing of civilians. Media reports that came to such a conclusion were largely explained away as campaigns that smeared their leader (Garrard-Burnett, 2010). And if civilians were being killed on a large scale, it was because of the simple fact that Ríos Montt could not control each and every soldier in an army consisting of twenty thousand soldiers. Or it considered people that had it coming for, as Ríos Montt’s adviser Francisco Bianchi seems to suggest in the following statement: “The guerrillas won over many Indian collaborators. Therefore the Indians were subversive. And how do you fight subversion? Clearly you had to kill Indians because they were

⁴⁴ In their heyday of the mid-1980s, the civil patrol units (PAC’s, *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil*) consisted of almost a million people (in a country of then eight million).

⁴⁵ In 1999, the Commission of Historical Clarification (CEH), which was set up under the peace accords, had come to the conclusion that genocide was committed under the rule of Lucas and Ríos Montt. In 2013, thirty years after he was forced from power, Ríos Montt was found guilty on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. A historical conviction that was later overturned.

collaborating with subversion. And then it would be said that you were killing innocent people. But they weren't innocent. They had sold out to subversion" (in Stoll, 1990, p. 204). Moments before Bianchi issued the above words, Ríos Montt had argued along similar lines saying there were ten people working behind every shooter (Stoll, 1990).

These were words Gustavo did not question. "At that moment, we believed everything our leaders told us. The propaganda against the general and the army, the human rights violations, the massacres, they were all inventions of the leftists, the communists and what not. And what we were told was that this was more of a spiritual issue, a war in which God had put forward the general to save Guatemala from falling into the hands of dark forces. After having been indoctrinated, it is what we believed at that time, because we were part of the church that supported him." With Ríos Montt as head of state, Gustavo found himself in strange proximity to the country's number one, although, for Gustavo, it was not as strange as one might perhaps think. The church community was like a family, he explained, and he had already visited Ríos Montt's house a few times together with his parents and siblings before he became head of state, as part of his father's process of becoming an elder. In addition to this, Ríos Montt had been the director of the school Gustavo attended. In response to all this, Gustavo would continue to see Ríos Montt as a church leader during his time as head of state. It made it strange, Gustavo said, to see him in army uniform during television appearances. Meanwhile, according to Gustavo, Ríos Montt 'the president' turned the national palace into an "extension of the church," where they, for example, had a concert one night, after which they talked about the spiritual war the nation found itself in. Gustavo would also sometimes visit the national palace to study with Ríos Montt's daughter Zury, his friend and classmate. The latter had kept coming to class also during her father's presidency, be it with a set of bodyguards.

In the end, Ríos Montt's rule only lasted for seventeen months. On 8 August 1983, he was deposed by the same army that had put him in power. According to the army high command, they had stepped in to clear the government from "fanatic and aggressive religious groups" that had abused their power and violated "the fundamental principal of separation of church and state" (United Press International, 1983). Clearly, it was easier for the army officers to blame the ousting on the 'religious fanatics' of El Verbo, as

its members were sometimes portrayed in secular media, than to put it on the plate of one of their fellow officers, who still enjoyed considerable popular support. In reality, Ríos Montt's ouster had much more to do with the fact that he had upset the country's business elite with economic policies that in no way matched the successes he gained on the battlefield. And, as historian Virginia Garrard-Burnett (2010) points out, if there had been any religious fanaticism from Ríos Montt that had offended the coup leaders, it had been his "moralistic, church-inspired anticorruption campaign" (pp. 81-82), which had hit the elite right where it hurts: in their wallets.

The fact that El Verbo managed to keep its ranks closed while acting as a spiritual center of power for a Pol-Pot-like dictator, to paraphrase a former foreign minister (Otis, 2018), exemplified its hegemony among members of the church. Indeed, neither the extreme violence that occurred during Ríos Montt's rule nor the public distrust towards them could prompt the Mérida family and many others at El Verbo to question the set of beliefs that had been imprinted in their brains by the elders. It was a world in which Gustavo experienced what he called an "absolute dependence on the leaders."

The arrival and departure of a mentor

For the Mérida family and many other Verbo families, family life came to equal church life. As such, the dependency on the leaders carried with it a tendency to hollow out the families involved. Gustavo, however, felt "as if he wasn't part of his family" already before the Mérida family joined El Verbo. Every year, his parents sent him to his grandmother in the San Marcos department during the holidays. It made him feel as if he had two families, also because the upbringing he enjoyed at his parental home was not a very loving one. His mother, Gustavo explained, was the product of the rigid and sometimes violent education of her military father and, as a result, not very affectionate. His father, meanwhile, carried the burden of a troubled youth himself as he and his siblings were largely left on their own during their childhood, spending most of it outside on the streets. Their approach towards Gustavo contrasted with the way he was treated by his grandmother, who adored her first grandchild. When Gustavo was twelve years old his grandmother died. A dramatic event, which left him with a family that did not feel as his own. Not long after, Don

Benito would experience the spiritual transformation that brought him and his family to El Verbo. What Gustavo did not know at that time, however, was that he was on the eve of a transformation of his own, though in his case, it was a more earthly figure that gave him the deeper sense of belonging he had so longed for.

It must have been only a few months after his grandmother's death that Gustavo met Tom, a United States citizen fifteen years Gustavo's senior who taught classes at El Verbo. "A humble heart," according to Gustavo, who liked to take his students on school trips to indigenous communities to play music with the local population and hand out school supplies. He also took Gustavo and his classmates to Colombia and Ecuador, where they stayed in the church of a Colombian pastor who had previously come to Guatemala to visit Ríos Montt. It was a journey that had been paid for by friends of El Verbo. These were trips, Gustavo explained, beset with the same mysticism as *The Mission*, a movie depicting the transformation of a ruthless Spanish mercenary (Robert de Niro) into a defender of an indigenous tribe during a Jesuit mission in eighteenth-century South America. The movie, which he watched with Tom in 1986, would become a guideline in his life.

But while Gustavo developed a social conscience under Tom's wings, El Verbo kept moving further away from its initial niche of relief work – through which it had gained foothold in Guatemala – to an enterprise almost entirely focused on catering to the rich. According to Gustavo, rich people sometimes even left the church when there were too much poor people among those present. Tom, in turn, was not the type of person El Verbo sought in a leader. "He was an inspiration, a great mentor to many," Gustavo explained, "but he didn't have that Latin mentality of imposing authority over others. He did make it to home leader in the church."⁴⁶ He was a leader that served, that looked after the sheep, he was a good pastor, giving advices, visiting sick people, but that wasn't the leadership the church wanted. The church was more looking for an executive leader that arrived on time; who had this image of authority, of imposing their will upon others." Realizing that he would never become an elder at El Verbo, Tom left Guatemala when Gustavo was eighteen years old, after having lived there for more than ten years. Seeing his mentor leave

⁴⁶ According to Gustavo, an El Verbo leader in charge of a group of people that regularly came together in their homes.

– Gustavo considered himself his disciple while Valeria described him as his “second father” – Gustavo felt as if he was “in the air.”

Tom’s departure was a shock he initially sought to overcome by going to the highland city of Cobán to help found a new El Verbo church, or so was the excuse, Gustavo said. In reality, he left Guatemala City to be away from his family. He would stay there for a year, after which he returned home, asking his family for forgiveness. At home, he would lose himself in a relationship, which failed. And at the age of twenty-five, he got together with Vania, a scion of a family of plantation owners.

Whether it was Gustavo’s visits to the national palace, his friendship with Tom or his relationship with the more affluent Vania, they all reflected the uniqueness of El Verbo as a tight-knit community where families from different social backgrounds adhered to the same truth. But as the church’s preference for the rich already suggests, and in its wake perhaps of Tom’s departure, some divisions within El Verbo could not, or were not meant to be, bridged. For Gustavo, at first, it had only been the vacations in his class that marked the difference in socioeconomic status between peers. While children of people such as Efraín Ríos Montt, Francisco Bianchi and Álvaro Contreras went to Miami for the holidays, Gustavo and his family stayed home. In fact, financially, Don Benito’s income had declined when he left his job at the bank to devote his professional career to El Verbo. The class differences, however, became more profound after Colegio Verbo, when the financially better-off of Gustavo’s class continued their studies in private universities while people like Gustavo saw no other option than to go to the country’s only public university, San Carlos. Still, it would take some more time for Gustavo to see the bigger contours of the kind of enterprise El Verbo had become or had perhaps always been. He had to step outside of the bubble for it.

The deception of belonging

After finishing his study of animal husbandry at the San Carlos University in 1995, Gustavo and Vania moved to Escuintla, where Gustavo had managed to obtain a position on a coffee *finca* (plantation) via a friend at El Verbo. It was a job with a good salary, putting him in charge of the dairy production of the eight hundred cows present there. It was also a job that, in a way, fitted

the tradition of El Verbo as a church that sought to accommodate plantation owners and other wealthy business individuals.

The job did not turn out to be what Gustavo expected, however, as he discovered what he described as the “the other side of the version of the rural reality.” Indigenous seasonal workers that came down from the Guatemalan Highlands with their entire families to pick coffee beans at the plantation were stuffed in a large shack where they had to sleep on the ground. This turned into a place rife with incest and diseases. Each year children died on the finca. At least one girl, Gustavo found out, died because she drank from a bottle of insecticide. These were the type of scenes well-described by the indigenous peasant woman Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. She herself lost an older brother, whom she had never gotten to know, after he got intoxicated from the pesticides they sprayed the coffee plants with, and when she was eight years old, she saw her youngest brother die on a finca because of malnutrition (Menchú, 2009 [1983]). After the two-year-old’s burial, Menchú writes, she, her mother and her brother were even fired by the overseer because they had missed a day of work. They were not paid for previous work either. Such tragedies, Gustavo explained, were the least of worries of those that owned and ran the finca. “Being in charge of the dairy, I noticed they’d rather spend their money on looking after a cow than on bringing a lady to the hospital.” And while managers of the finca flew from one finca to the other with helicopters for the sole purpose of having lunch, people working on the finca were dying from worms and other emergencies because they did not receive medical care.

It was a system Gustavo did not want to be part of. In response, he quit his job in March 1997 – a little over two months after a peace deal had formally ended thirty-six years of civil war in Guatemala – to start working for an NGO, answering the almost magical lure of the poor indigenous villages that had been calling to him ever since he had joined Tom on his field trips. It was a radical decision, in which he lost out on both salary and social status and gave up on an assured career path – reason for Vania, whom he had married in the meantime, and her family to try to talk some sense into Gustavo. But to no avail. Gustavo’s new line of work helped change his outlook on the situation in Guatemala, as it would bring him to the areas that had taken the brunt of the war. This would make him further question El Verbo’s sharp-knifed truths

that had labeled the army as defenders of God's kingdom and the guerrilla movement as the devil's enterprise. "So when I started working for the NGOs I visited the area of Ixil, San Marcos, Huehuetenango, but the whole area of Ixil has been where I learned the most about the reality of the armed conflict. I had the opportunity to work with many ex-combatants, or at least people that were displaced. They didn't take a gun but they had to live in the mountains, eating herbs, they saw their relatives die. They are now living in places together with people they know participated in the kidnapping of their father or their mother, or in some massacre. Many of them were children when they saw how the army arrived, the paramilitaries, taking out all the men at night time, taking them to the football field where they were beheaded. All these stories, well, they helped me to construct my understanding of this parallel reality because here in the city, people had no idea how communities were living in the countryside, what the dynamics were."

From a physical perspective, Gustavo's first job after university already entailed a distancing from El Verbo as the family moved to Escuintla for it. Once there, they would visit the local El Verbo church a few times, but, as described above, there were more fundamental issues starting to drive a wedge between Gustavo and El Verbo. Crucially, this process largely coincided with two other developments within El Verbo that eventually encouraged him to break with the church. First, it turned out that El Verbo leaders were not as irreproachable as Gustavo had long taken them for. Most strikingly, Carlos Ramírez, the principal leader of El Verbo, had had various extramarital affairs. This put the church in crisis, also because it turned out that elders had been long aware of this but had turned a blind eye until it became too obvious to deny.

Second, after Ríos Montt's presidency unleashed the genie of politics at El Verbo, the church started to increasingly move away from the spiritual realm to the political one and with that, Gustavo noticed, from the biblical values and principles they had derived their spiritual authority from. "Everything that the corrupt and dirty politicians were doing, they were doing," Gustavo said. During the presidential elections of 1999, both Francisco Bianchi as well and Alfonso Portillo ran for office. The latter was the candidate for Ríos Montt's party FRG but only because the former general could not run himself due to a constitutional clause that prevented anyone who had taken part in a

military coup from becoming head of state. In the end, Alfonso Portillo won and his administration would become one of the most corrupt in Guatemala's recent history. Within this administration, important positions were held by El Verbo members that, as Gustavo came to know, were involved in all sorts of corrupt affairs. Gustavo also found out that four years later, El Verbo members, among which Zury Ríos, had been among the orchestrators and facilitators of two days of rioting in Guatemala City after Ríos Montt was again denied a registration as a candidate for the presidency. 24 and 25 July 2003 would go down in history as '*Jueves Negro y el Viernes de Luto*' (Black Thursday and Friday of Mourning). Cars and buildings were set on fire, shots were fired at windows, people were being held hostage and a journalist died of what initially seemed to be a heart attack while he was fleeing from a crowd armed with rocks, poles, machetes and guns. A former president of Guatemala's Constitutional Court later declared that his skull had been seriously bruised, deeming it an act of homicide, whether his death was caused directly by the violence or more indirectly (Amnesty International, 2003). Another journalist was almost set on fire after a protester doused him with gasoline (Hemeroteca PL, 2017). The rioting ended only after Ríos Montt called back his supporters.

Dismayed by El Verbo's role in the violent protests, Gustavo decided to break with El Verbo. It was a decision that had been in the works for a long time. And as expected, this almost automatically entailed a rift with the church community, although he was not the only one making the decision to leave. According to Gustavo, many others of his generation broke with El Verbo around the same time, "feeling used and disappointed being part of such a system without having been aware of it." In Gustavo's case, only two or three of his friendships remained. At the same time, ties with many of them had already loosened due to the fact that the family had been living outside Guatemala City for a long time. For Don Benito, however, being an elder at the church, Gustavo's decision was a hard pill to swallow. Still, Gustavo argued, his parents had no other option than to accept it as they could not deny what had happened at El Verbo. "They admitted there was corruption, they admitted the church hadn't been on the sidelines of it and that it had committed errors. It is one of the reasons they didn't reject me. Besides, many of my generation were going through the same. Disappointed."

Separation from Vania

The breach with El Verbo, as well as the journey that had preceded it, also put pressure on Gustavo's marriage. After all, Vania's family, which owned various coffee fincas, was part of the wealthy segment of society towards whom Gustavo had taken an increasingly critical stance. She would therefore never share his altered ideology and, in response, did not immediately agree with Gustavo's plan of leaving El Verbo. "But somehow, as time passed, she did help me," Gustavo said. But El Verbo had also been the bedrock of the world in which they had found each other. And where similarities had reigned between Gustavo and Vania during the early stages of their relationship – embraced by the strong, rhetoric arms of the elders – differences between the two would become increasingly pronounced and caustic over the years, as the family released itself from the yoke of El Verbo and religious fanaticism. And as it turned out, these were differences that had always been there, their different socioeconomic backgrounds being only one of the factors that had made their relationship a rather unusual event.

Most striking were the personality differences between Gustavo and Vania. They were each other's opposites. Gustavo was cautious by nature and an introvert: traits – and he himself was the first one first one to admit it – that contrasted with the typical Latin American man. Vania, meanwhile, sported many characteristics that would fit such a stereotype. "My father is easy going and my mom has a strong character," Valeria once explained to me the difference between her parents to then continue about her mother. "She comes and tells you: 'Why don't you do this?' 'Why haven't you done that?' She is a good person, but she likes to have the baton, the power so to say." These were traits that did not come out of thin air, Don Benito once explained to me. "As the eldest of five sisters, she was raised as if she was the firstborn son of the household. She constructs and deconstructs a house, it's like that. Because she learned to be the son of the family." A story about how Gustavo turned over the wheel to Vania one time in Quetzaltenango when his car got stuck in a narrow street was often told. Apparently, Gustavo did not feel comfortable to continue driving. Vania, in turn, had no problem getting it out of there. Another favorite was a story about how Vania had gotten out of the car a few times to control traffic when it got stuck. "She resolves things," Gustavo said.

It was one of the things attracted him to her. But according to Don Benito, it had been hard for Vania “to honor Gustavo as a husband” because of his gentle personality.

Perhaps in line with her character, Vania had also been more radical in her faith. According to Gustavo, she once burned their daughters’ Disney toys after church leaders claimed that Disney cartoons were satanic and promoting homosexuality. And as normal schools were rife with non-Christian music and other allegedly dangerous practices, she insisted that the children would be homeschooled. Given Vania’s problems with authority, Gustavo explained, this also had the advantage that she would not have to deal with school boards and teachers. Having the children at home also meant that the family could travel along with Gustavo, who had to move from one place to the other within Guatemala for his work. But while Gustavo initially also believed home schooling was the best option to protect his children from harmful influences from the outside – still under the spell of religious zealotry – he started to question this in the aftermath of the family’s breach with El Verbo as he became less fanatic in his beliefs, a trend that would also hit Vania after a while. In response, Gustavo arranged for his children to attend a normal school for a year at some point, to see if they could keep up with their peers. This turned out to be the case. “So it wasn’t all bad,” Gustavo said. It was telling for Vania’s imposing character, Gustavo added not without admiration, that the school board gave in to her demand that her daughters did not have to start at seven in the morning with the rest of the children but at eight so the family could have breakfast together. “She even demanded they should give her a key of the school!”

In the end, it seemed that all that was left between Gustavo and Vania were differences. And in 2013, after seventeen years of marriage, the two separated. In response, Vania and the children moved to the main residence of a former coffee finca that belonged to Vania’s family, in a place just outside the town of Mazatenango. It made the break-up especially difficult for Gustavo, who stayed behind in the house in Flor del Campo where the family had been living since 2007.

But for Valeria, it was not the question of why they separated that remained after the marital smoke had cleared but of why they had ever gotten married. Their marriage, she explained, had not only been a bond between opposite

characters but also a clash of cultures. While her father came from a middle class and Protestant family – pious in their profession – her mother’s family was upper middle class and mostly Catholic. In the Catholic world, Valeria believed, celebration often equaled drinking. The fact that her mother’s family was one of “drinkers, smokers and foul-mouthed people” was an indicator of this mentality. At one birthday celebration, after the rest of the guests had cleared out, Valeria had found the two families separated from each other. They were each at the other end of a long table, with Gustavo’s family discussing the latest sermon of a pastor, while Vania’s sisters were going over their hangover from last night’s drinking. For Valeria, it exemplified their differences. “I think at some point these differences were opening a gap between them [Gustavo and Vania].”

Gustavo, meanwhile, strengthened by the knowledge that many other marriages at El Verbo had also collapsed, considered his broken marriage yet another El Verbo bubble that had been pricked. Crucially, his marriage with Vania had received approval from the elders on multiple occasions. “Their advice was understood as the voice of God, so if you wouldn’t follow it they would not take it well. It stopped being an advice. It was more an instruction, an alignment, and many of the marriages failures, including mine, have much to do with that. Many of the generation that grew up with me in church are now separated. I can easily give you ten cases of people who were in a similar situation, who were serving in some way, as a home leader, or involved in music, and then married someone from church and now they’re not together anymore. They’re divorced, they’re separated, and I think it has a lot to do with the doctrine the authorities preach, that God speaks through them, and that they are the ones who can advise you, tell you what to do. This church functions like that.” The main problem with the marriage advice he and Vania received, Gustavo explained, was that it had been based purely on spiritual considerations. “Everything was spiritualized. They didn’t make more pragmatic judgements, based on common sense, instead they assumed that faith was enough to resolve any situation and that if we both had the same convictions, in theory, everything would be fine. And with their backing we had all the support we needed. While there are many other aspects of a marriage that must be reviewed before making a decision.”

Taking stock

When I met Gustavo, he was a man coming to grips with the past and, especially, his time at El Verbo and everything that had come from it. He once joked that he was thinking of tabulating the costs and benefits of his El Verbo experience. But to make an advance on such an exercise here, it was clear that the fact that he had been cut off from the world for so long – dependent on the single truth of the elders – still cast a shadow on his life.

It was only telling that he attended a church that was El Verbo's opposite in almost everything. After having tried a few churches, Gustavo had found the Mennonite church Los Hermanos in 2008. Even though he had stopped visiting for periods of time in search for more modern churches that were more to the taste of his children, he kept coming back. And from visiting the Sunday service three times, I could understand why. It was an easy-going church, where children played and ran in the aisle during the services, providing the sermons with pleasant noises and where some sang along during the hymns of praise or participated in the group discussions while others were silent or outside to have a chat or a breath of air. A church with no outward signs of luxury, modest in its appearance and also in its utterances, deliberately staying away from proclaiming absolute truths, which were believed to be important drivers of conflict in Guatemala. "We're pacifists until we die," a former pastor of the church told me. In fact, in his quest for spiritual transfiguration in the late 1970s, Ríos Montt had also paid a few visits to Los Hermanos, but, according to a longtime member, stopped coming once he found out about the church's desire for peace over waging war. The former pastor said that, as a military man, Ríos Montt had been discouraged by the lack of hierarchy among church members.

Still recovering from years of religious zealotry, Gustavo told me he enjoyed the ease and inclusiveness of Los Hermanos, just as he enjoyed its diversity. Indeed, there were poor, middle class and rich among the forty or fifty people I encountered there during my visits. In addition to this, Gustavo explained, the people of Los Hermanos stood out for their loyalty toward each other. "I know that it's a church with people on whom you can count when there is a problem, they support you and their friendship doesn't depend on whether you are serving or paying your tithes. And that is something very special that you don't see very often in other churches."

At the same time, El Verbo's footprint was still visible in the way he presented himself at Los Hermanos. Basically, Gustavo kept his distance. Both he and Valeria told me that they were the least active members of Los Hermanos. Many of them got together multiple times a week to have breakfast, discuss faith or engage in social aid projects (or do it all together). Gustavo and Valeria, however, were what the former called "*cadocheros*," people that only came on Sundays, days that not seldom ended at the home of Victor, a wealthy art dealer that liked to invite people over to his house in the woods for food and music after the service – gatherings in which Gustavo liked to pick up the guitar and sing as well. For Gustavo, as much as he enjoyed the services and get-togethers afterwards, this was as far as he wanted to participate in the community, afraid to make the same mistake again of immersing himself into a church community or putting the church or faith above his family. And when Valeria and he felt more like hiking in the mountains on a Sunday, they would just as easily skip on church. "The reality is," Gustavo explained to me, "that all that I have seen has made me a bit skeptical and to a certain extent disappointed in religion." Religion in Guatemala, Gustavo believed, was often driven by intolerance and a preference for separation instead of by genuine faith. As such, it helped produce a status quo in which "the rich live well and they don't care that the working class doesn't enjoy the benefits of the wealth they produce." El Verbo, he now looked back, was a place designed for the rich to feel good. Behind all this, Gustavo suspected, there was the steering hand of the oligarchs and the military. Gustavo also tended to believe, even though he had not studied it in depth, that El Verbo as well as other evangelical churches had been part of a U.S. strategy to, as he put it, "calm and lower the spirits and the effervescence of social discontent" during the armed conflict. It was a belief popular among Latin America's leftists (Simons, 1982). He had heard that founders of El Verbo had contacts within the CIA.

As he made it seem sometimes, Gustavo had seen Guatemala at its worst while he was with El Verbo. But at the same time, he made no secret of the fact that there had been upsides to his time there as well. In fact, while contemplating the overall experience once, he told me he did not know whether it was the negative or the positive of the experience that had the edge. Paradoxically, it had been exactly the daily encounters with the rich, as well as with Tom, he considered to be the positive side of his time at El Verbo. "The

fact of living with people who had more resources made us realize that this world was a little bit broader,” Gustavo told me. “The rich man doesn’t have such a limited vision. There are very simple things, let’s say, there was a boy, son of the founders of the church [El Verbo], they didn’t have so much money but his family did have relations with the *Castillos*, those of the brewery.⁴⁷ And we looked at him, seeing him entering buses, saying: ‘look, I didn’t bring money, but can you drop me off there?’ He would get on buses without paying. He went to the arcades saying ‘that machine has stolen my money,’ and since he was *canchito* (blonde-haired) and had clear eyes and all that, people gave him money to put into the machines. Or he went to Camino Real [a fancy hotel chain] and spoke English and said he was a foreigner who was staying there, and he and my brother went in to eat there. Things like that and you start realizing their mentality is not so narrow. We, on the other hand, were taught the rules. ‘Don’t you cross here, because the place to do so is here.’”

What Gustavo had been able to behold at El Verbo was the art, as he later put it, of “feeling more ownership” over one’s life – one way or the other. But at the same time, the ownership he associated with the lives of the rich had been bolstered by disregard for the law. As such, it had been singled out by Gustavo as an important driver for the unequal power relations in Guatemala, given that such behavior tended to come at the expense of the less privileged in society. To put it differently, Gustavo seemed to admire in a person what he condemned on a societal level. And given the fact that he himself still suffered the consequences of the unhealthy power dynamics he had experienced at El Verbo, which had reduced him to a plaything in the hands of the elders, it seemed a kind of Stockholm syndrome to which so many of the subalterns – of whatever kind – fall prey. It was no coincidence, Valeria said, that it had been a “gringo” who Gustavo had come to see as his second father. Surrounded by wealthy people at El Verbo, she believed, he had come to consider himself superior to the middle class family he had been born into, which culminated in leaving for Cobán after Tom left, while simultaneously developing a major inferiority complex towards the rich. A trait, according to Valeria, he had never been able to shake off.

In the end, Gustavo’s fascination for the rich did not stop him from

⁴⁷ One of the most prominent and powerful families in Guatemala.

acting upon the injustices he encountered at the finca where he worked. But there would be another disappointment waiting for him at his NGO work. First of all, social aid programs he participated in usually proved too big – too much money, too big a reach – to be able to adapt to the micro realities they encountered. But perhaps even more importantly, the intended beneficiaries of the programs, usually indigenous communities, turned out to be as lenient to corruption as the rest of the population. According to Gustavo, there was an “anti-value” with which the Guatemalans were afflicted, as they admired “the thief, the corrupt one, the one that knows how to cheat.” In response to all this, there were few traces left in Gustavo of the youthful amazement he had felt during the trips with Ken or of the romantic image he might have taken from the movie *The Mission* of pure ‘Indians’ yet untouched by the First-world diseases of greed, corruption and individualism.

His own mission, at times, proved a frustrating one, also because he himself had not been able to break away from the broken aid system he had encountered. “I have been working for NGOs for about twenty years,” Gustavo told me. “And the longer I work, the better I understand the expression I once heard from some sociologists who said that there is a term called ‘resigned pragmatism.’ What it means is that after so many situations that one lives, disappointments on moments when you see large investments give poor results. When you see leaders within communities taking advantage of their position and the same communities approving that behavior. I mean, the culture of *caciquismo*⁴⁸ is very strong. People know that someone isn’t the best leader or isn’t good for them, but they themselves encourage and support this type of leadership. I’ve had to deal with situations at the assembly level, and you see that these men are robbing the money because the project was supposed to benefit a large number of people and they are left with very little. Or you give them money to buy purebred cows and they come up with false invoices and are leaving behind poor quality animals. And despite that, when years pass you see that these are the leaders that these communities demand. So when you see these things, when you see that in a lot of projects 60 percent of the budget is spent in meetings and things like that. And you are a part of that, for the trips I made were also paid from that money. In the end, I do not have clean hands in this either.” Gustavo’s resigned pragmatism, as is shown in the above, spoke

⁴⁸ The system revolving around local leaders or chiefs that exert great power on local politics.

to the obvious truth that there were different roles attached to the violence produced by the system that each asked from its carrier to come to terms with.

The perfect storm

But while disappointments from the past lingered on in the present, there would also arise a major problem in Gustavo's life during my fieldwork. When I met Gustavo he was working for a well-known global Christian humanitarian organization. It was a job he liked, where he said he managed to bring about small social changes, opening, among other things, local child protection centers in indigenous communities. At the same time, he maintained a troubled relationship with his manager and as programs he was put in charge of came to an end and overall sponsorship declined, Gustavo was laid off in August 2016. And with his broken marriage still weighing heavily on his mind, he felt like the "perfect storm" had hit him. One that he rode out mainly in his house, also because he was a man of few friends; something which he put on the fact that he considered himself to be "not very social" and "bad at having friends" – traits he believed partly connected to his secluded upbringing as well as on the breach with El Verbo. Watching television, fixing a thing or two in the house and sending out letters of application: there were days, he told me, that he lost his desire to live. He felt like a failure. For one, he did not see himself living the rest of his days alone but there was also the crushed plan of turning half the house into apartments, so that he could live off the rental income.

After their separation, Vania had almost forced him to give her half of the house – a demand to which he had given into, albeit reluctantly as he had paid 90 percent of the seven hundred thousand quetzals they had paid for it, using money from his mother's savings. He could have resolved it the macho way, he said, like most of the other men would have done. However, running away with the money or putting the house on someone else's name – which in Gustavo's book would have been typical macho tactics – was not his style.

Instead, he had taken on a less confrontational stance towards Vania after the break-up. Multiple times he had told her that he wanted to give their marriage another go. Apart from the practical benefits and the fact that they were still not officially divorced, Gustavo believed reconciliation was in their common interest. It would turn them into a better role model

for their children, “an example of people that were able to resolve enormous differences between them.” According to Gustavo, this would be a valuable lesson in a country as divided as Guatemala. Besides, he explained, during their separation he had started to better appreciate Vania’s character and also gained more insight into his own flaws but until now he had not been able to impress Vania with this plea. She had given him “mixed signals,” he told me, but even that seemed a picture too rose-tinted as most of their contact revolved around issues concerning payments and their children. Meanwhile, Gustavo had marked 2017 as the year that he would give his marriage one last fight. If it did not work out, he told me, he would stop trying so that he could move on with his life.

Time would tell that Gustavo and Vania did not get back together in 2017. Fortunately, he had more luck in the job market. In January 2017, after having been without a job for about half a year, Gustavo was able to start a job at an international NGO that aimed at providing education and food security to vulnerable families in Guatemala’s Western Highlands. Gustavo stepped in in the last year of the five year program and spent his days mainly in the office in Santa Cruz de Quiché, from where he supervised the agricultural projects in the region. The job had been a lifesaver for him, literally, perhaps. It paid less than his previous job but with two thousand dollars he still received a good salary for Guatemalan standards – all the more because Gustavo had already paid off his house in 2010, using the money from the “golden handshake” he received after he lost his job of eleven years at an NGO. His recurring expenses, in response, only amounted to seven hundred quetzals a month, the majority of which spent on a tax for home possession. During his period of unemployment, however, it had not been the lack of income that had weighed so heavily upon him, not in the least because he had savings with which he would have been able to hold out for some time more. For Gustavo, it had been his mental health that took the heavier blow, as he spent his days in and around the house pondering his life. In fact, as Gustavo once admitted to me, he did not know how much longer he had been able to carry on.

But what his new job had not been able to save him from was the resigned pragmatism that had so come to dominate his working life. With over forty million dollars for a period of five years, Gustavo explained, he was involved in yet another big program overlooking the different micro realities of the

communities it sought to help, although he had seen some positive results as well. Still, he considered his job to be a case of “dancing with the ugly one.” Given the situation he had been in before he took the job, however, it beat remaining seated. It did mean that Gustavo had to drive to Santa Cruz de Quiché every Monday, where he shared an apartment with a colleague, to return to his home in Flor del Campo on Friday, leaving Valeria home alone in the meantime. To be able to see him do his dance with “the fatty” – as he clarified the above metaphor – with my own eyes, I decided to ride along with him one Monday morning for the three and a half hour drive to Quiché. It turned into a visit that told me little about the nature of his work. One can only tell so much from visiting an office, especially when the more tangible work is done out in the communities. But it told me all the more about the risks he did and did not run in his daily life and the sense of security (or insecurity) he attached to this.

Russian roulette

We sat where Gustavo often sat during lunch breaks. A zig zag route through Santa Cruz de Quiché’s small and crowded market streets had taken us to the covered part of the market where we – Gustavo, two of his colleagues and I – were now looking at four bowls of chicken soup in front of us. And while we embarked upon the food, a typical chat (as Gustavo later would say) ensued between the four of us. Juan, the elder of Gustavo’s two colleagues, told about a judge in the Quiché department that turned to the indigenous authorities instead of to the police when he himself had a justice-related problem he wanted to see resolved. “If even judges don’t believe in the system...” Juan said with a mix of disbelief and obviousness. He then reiterated the words of Iván Velasquez, the chief of the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), who considered Guatemala’s justice system to be designed for immunity to thrive in (see for instance Gramajo, 2017). We went on to discuss the recent flight from prison of a drug kingpin by the nickname of La Patrona and the case of a motorist who ran over thirteen students who were protesting against problems with the educational system. One of them – a fifteen-year-old girl – later died of her injuries. The incident had been dominating the Guatemalan headlines for weeks. The man had sped

off after the incident, which had instantly turned him into the most wanted fugitive of the country until he turned himself in three days later. The tactic of his high profile lawyer, Juan explained us, was now to delay the process until time would free his client from the media's judging eyes. In the end, he believed he would get off with a light sentence. It was simply how things went in Guatemala. Others agreed with him.

Gustavo's younger colleague Fernando then spoke about the week before when he and Gustavo had taken the bus from Quiché to Guatemala City. When a group of marero-looking youngsters entered the bus in San Lucas – a town just outside the capital – they were both sure they were going to be robbed. They were wrong, as it turned out. Entertainment-wise, it was a meager story compared to the one Gustavo subsequently embarked upon, evincing the pervasiveness of assaults in such buses by retelling a story he once read in a newspaper about a gang that was in the process of robbing the passengers of a bus when another gang entered with a similar plan. It resulted in shootout between the two groups inside the bus.

"When do you go back?" Fernando asked me, steering the conversation back to present time. I told him that I planned to take the bus at five the next morning, so that I would have the whole day in Guatemala City. "I wouldn't do that if I was you," Juan interrupted me. "It's dark then so you have the biggest chance of gangs attacking the bus. Take the one at nine o'clock, there is more control then." The kind of control he was talking about, I knew, was always relative. It was common knowledge that all the extraurbano buses in Guatemala were extorted and I had already read that buses from Quiché to Guatemala City had stopped running at least once in 2015 because of the constant attacks launched on them (Figueroa, 2015). Back then, some of the bus drivers had claimed they were paying extortion money to four different criminal groups, all demanding four hundred quetzals a week in exchange for not being attacked. Unfortunately, there was no other way to get back to the capital for me, as Gustavo would stay another four days before going back – something which I could not afford. The fact that I had to take the bus did not rest well with me though. Somewhat to my relief, I still had much of the day in Quiché, a haven of security compared to Guatemala City.

The next morning I reached the bus terminal at about a quarter to nine after a five minute walk from my hotel. As I approached the colorfully dressed-

up bus to the capital, I noticed it had polarized windows on the side, a relief, as I figured the presence of a Western foreigner might turn the bus into an eligible target for criminal groups scouring for buses to attack. Upon entering the bus, I took a seat in the back part, knowing that attacks related to extortion were usually directed at the driver and his assistant, which – to my logic, as well as to Gustavo’s – meant that chances of being hit by a stray bullet would be higher at the front seats. I sat down on the window seat, copying the six people that were already in the bus when I walked in. I felt a bit of cowardice while weighing my options for where to sit, knowing that when problems would occur my staying unharmed could potentially be at some other person’s misfortune. After all, buses on such routes tended to fill up quickly, meaning that if I would not sit at the front part of the bus or along the aisle, someone else had to. And then, of course, there was the little enviable position of the driver of the bus and his assistant. Being a bus driver in Guatemala City had been rather euphemistically, but not without reason, called the most dangerous job in the world by two commentators (Dudley, 2011; Elbein, 2013). In addition to the ‘chairy’ picking, I had prepared myself for the journey by carrying a cheap phone and only a small amount of money in my pocket. Items that I could hand over without too much pain in case robbers would enter the bus. My other (fancier) phone, passport and voice recorder I held hidden below my belt. It was how Gustavo had advised me. He himself always walked around with two phones and in the bus he made sure he had two wallets as well.

When we took off, I was almost immediately reminded of another warning Gustavo had issued to me, as the bus driver turned into a madman descending the steep slopes of the mountains surrounding Santa Cruz de Quiché. And while the bus creaked and squeaked, I was holding on tight to the iron bar attached to the seat in front of me, as were many other people in the bus. They were rides of “pure adrenaline,” as Gustavo had put it. Getting into an accident had been his biggest fear when he took the bus the week before. In fact, during our way to Quiché we had seen a dead body next to the road, with a crowd gathered around it. “Another accident on this road,” Gustavo had said while we passed the scene. He later heard that it had been someone hit by a bus. Apparently, the driver had fallen asleep and hit a car on the other side of the road as his vehicle wandered off. These were not reassuring events. Fortunately,

after three and a half hours, we reached Guatemala City in one piece. It proved to be the calm before the storm, however.

The day after my arrival in Guatemala City, my eyes fell upon an article that was just put online by the newspaper *Prensa Libre* about a driver and his assistant who were shot dead that day in San Lucas on their way from Guatemala City to Quiché (Barrientos & Hernández Mayén, 2017). Apparently, the shooter had gotten into the bus in Guatemala City and had waited until San Lucas to open fire. He then left the bus and stepped into a car that was waiting for him there. The event, the article read, brought the number of people murdered inside a bus in San Lucas to six in one week. I sent Gustavo the link in a WhatsApp message. His response spoke volumes: “Hey Timo. Now you know what it feels like to play Russian roulette.” They were words that would echo in my mind for a while.

Later that day, five assailants riding a bus from Quiché to the capital rose from their seats in the area of Sumpango to clear the other people in the bus of their belongings (Chamalé & Toc, 2017). In response, an armed passenger opened fire on them. About ten to twelve shots later, after what appeared to have been shooting from both sides – for there were two guns found on the spot – four people were left wounded and one person dead. The latter was thought to be one of the assailants. Added to the violent event earlier that day in San Lucas, it meant that three people were killed and four were wounded on the same line I had ridden the day before. A chilling score. My automatic reaction after reading about the latest incident was to send the information to Gustavo again. But as I was typing the message, I decided not to. He already knew about the dangers and seeing them confirmed in such an explosive way, I figured, would perhaps strike unnecessary terror into him. A day later newspapers reported that many of the bus drivers riding the section between Quiché and Guatemala City had stopped working. According to one article, drivers were “tired of living in the uncertainty of going to their work every day without knowing if they would ever return” (Cordero & Barrientos, 2018).

“We live kidnapped,” Gustavo told me. “Really, life in the city is of very bad quality. As children, we could ride the bus, take risks, walk around in the streets at night. [...] Today, it is inconceivable, sending your kids by bus.” Clearly, Gustavo’s most recent bus experience did in no way resemble the ones of his childhood. Or the rides he took in Cobán as an eighteen-year-old, when

he did everything by bus. At the same time, reality had not only changed inside the buses. For example, ever since he started working for NGOs, Gustavo had possessed a car and therefore had not depended on buses as he used to do. In fact, his bus ride from Quiché to the capital had been the first time in years he had ridden such a long distance bus. Usually, he drove his own car to and from Quiché but the week before he had used a vehicle from his work to get back home one that he had to bring back the week after and leave at his work. He had therefore been without a car when he had to make the trip back to Guatemala City at the end of his working week.

It was an interesting concurrence of circumstances, as both the fact that Gustavo had been forced into a position where he had to take a bus and the fact that it had been the first time in years this had happened seemed to be emblematic for his position. As a man who always had relatively well paid jobs, possessed his own car and lived in a middle class neighborhood, he enjoyed certain privileges that protected him against what many would say were the worst of dangers of living in Guatemala City. But at the same time – as it turned out – he was not safeguarded against having to play a game of Russian roulette now and then. He also was not protected from feeling himself constantly exposed to the peril of the city.

Crime and violence

Still, Gustavo's personal experiences with crime and violence were relatively limited in a city where killings turned into cold statistics without many eyebrows being raised. Three times people had broken into his house – once in San Cristobal, twice in Flor del Campo – but that was about it. The first time in Flor, about eight years ago, two ladies had rang the doorbell to tell the cleaning lady they were friends of Vania, who still lived there at that time but, like Gustavo, was not at home. Valeria was though and she had found one of the ladies, who had asked if she could use the bathroom for a moment, in another room, while the other one was downstairs talking to the cleaning lady. In the end, it turned out that they had taken jewels from Vania. The last time, at the end of 2014, people had broken open the door while Gustavo and Valeria were at church. They had taken, among other things, two laptops, Gustavo's

guitar and his amplifier. Gustavo suspected it had been his neighbors that rented Vania's part of the house. They were distant family members of Vania.

Crucially, the break-ins into Gustavo's house in Flor had not come out of thin air as such events had been stubbornly commonplace in the neighborhood. According to Gustavo, there were several reasons for this. First of all, like many better-off places in Guatemala City, Flor del Campo was at least partly surrounded by poor neighborhoods. As a student, Gustavo had visited these colonias for a school assignment that obliged him to teach five people how to read and write. The poor people in small houses, he found out, often boasted huge televisions, which he suspected to be robbed items. He also had evidence that it had been people from one of those adjacent places that had schemed their way into his house and stolen Vania's jewels. These were neighborhoods full of people that did not waste an opportunity to steal something, Gustavo believed. It made life at Flor del Campo a constant risk.

The whole purpose of 'gating' communities, of course, was to shut out such danger. But like most gated communities, Flor del Campo was not completely fenced off (or walled) from the outside world. This was not always necessary either as Guatemala City's craggy natural features sometimes provided neighborhoods with a natural defense against intruders. The ravine that separated Flor from poorer colonias, however, was easily passable. In fact, residents from adjacent neighborhoods had long used it as a gate towards their neighborhoods, first entering Flor through its main entrance to then cross the neighborhood to the ravine. That was, until the neighborhood committee instructed the guards at the entrance to not allow such 'crossers' to enter. Meanwhile, through planting trees in the ravine, the neighborhood committee tried to make it more impassable, seeking the municipality's help in turning it into an ecological park. But according to Gustavo's father Don Benito, who was the treasurer of the committee, it was a time-consuming and unsure process. To begin with, the help from the municipality was very limited, but there was also the occasional obstructionist on the other side of the ravine. When he and vice president Don Lázaro took me on a stroll along the edges of Flor del Campo's territory one day, at one point, we stopped at a collection of scorched trees. They explained that it was the work of a man living across the ravine. He had set the trees on fire in an attempt to amplify his area for maize cultivation. Don Benito seemed only partly joking that day when he said he wanted me to arrange financial help from the Dutch government to

build a wall around his colonia. It was a joke he repeated the year after when we again discussed neighborhood matters.

But there were more weak spots in the protection against intruders. During my second fieldwork period, two break-ins occurred in Flor in a short period of time, the latter of which involved an old woman who was tied down together with her maid while the attackers emptied her house. In both cases, as in many cases before, the assailants had been able to seize their chance without being noticed by a team of four security guards that was always present in the neighborhood. Already during my first fieldwork period, Don Benito had said to me they wanted to increase the number of security guards. This, however, would entail a raise of the monthly fee they asked residents to pay. The problem was that they already had great trouble collecting the current fee of 125 quetzals. "People here do everything to avoid paying their contribution," Don Lázaro had told me. And there was not a great deal the committee could do to pressure them into paying. Residents that did not contribute had to open the barrier at the entrance themselves, which meant that they had to get out of the car; "they will feel it in the winter," Don Benito had uttered with a smile. But that was about it – some other neighborhood committees, I noticed, tried to push residents towards paying through a method of naming and shaming, putting up a blacklist at the entrance of the neighborhood with names of those that were behind on their payments. Meanwhile, the apparent lack of enthusiasm among residents to add to the common good of the neighborhood seemed also reflected in the neighborhood committee itself. The board of committee consisted of a president, a vice president, a treasurer, a secretary and three vocales. But according to Don Benito and Don Lázaro, they were the only ones, together with the president and one vocal, that were actually putting effort in it.

But it seemed not just a lack of quantity that hampered the work of the security guards. One time, when I visited Flor together with Ester to have breakfast at Gustavo's place, the guard that let us in seemed drunk. When I mentioned it to Valeria she knew exactly about whom I was talking, as she herself had suspected him of being drunk on the job a few times as well. Perhaps more surprisingly – given the fact he was at least partly responsible for hiring them – Don Benito did not think much of the security guards either. When we discussed the latest break-in in the neighborhood, he did not rule

out the possibility that the assailants had been acquaintances of the security guards. His hands were tied though, he explained to me: “We would have liked to fire them, but if we would fire them, who do we contract? Other *Mafioso*, because they are *Mafioso*.” The company they hired, he said, was a corrupt one that paid their employees below minimum wage and no benefits and did not provide the neighborhood committee with the right bills either. The committee had tried two other companies before, but they had proven to be even worse than the one they had right now. According to Don Benito, the lack of financial means forced them to shop among Guatemala’s mass of informal private security companies. Because “[...] if we would go to the people and say that we wanted to hire Golan,⁴⁹ which would mean that we had to duplicate the quota, everybody would say: ‘Why so expensive?!’ It’s a vicious circle.” Not much later I learned that the residents of Flor del Campo had abandoned their trust in Don Benito and the rest of the board, holding their failure to prevent the break-ins against them. It would take another year, however, before a new committee took over.

Because of the proximity of alleged bad neighborhoods, the porosity of the communal security measures and the break-ins he had already suffered, Gustavo had taken some additional security measures himself. Like many other people in Flor del Campo – at least, that was what stickers on the gates told me – he had an alarm installed in his house. In addition to this, Don Benito came over to his place every morning to read the paper so that there was someone present there. And security had also been the main reason behind the fact that Gustavo regularly had a cleaning lady coming over. He wanted his neighbors and other people to notice that there was movement in the house. He therefore asked the cleaning lady to put on music while she was working. For similar reasons, Gustavo refrained from making long trips during holiday breaks even though he had the financial means to do so. Meanwhile, the fact that he had built friendly relations with the neighbors on one side had at least partly been the result of an attempt to create a “network of support,” as he called it himself, although Valeria later told me there hardly had been any contact with them after the separation of her parents. The common denominator of the measures, Gustavo told me, was that they were all principally driven by his fear that people would enter his house again and steal things of value.

⁴⁹ One of the major private security companies in Guatemala.

At the same time, Gustavo was well aware that things could get violent really quick in Guatemala City. It was why he got nervous every time he got stuck in traffic there. Three times he had seen fellow drivers getting robbed at gun point, with motorcycles stopping at both sides of the car and passengers handing over their belongings without protesting. For both attacker and victim, these were well-tried methods, though where the former was trying to make easy money, the latter was simply trying to stay alive.

This was a code of conduct Ester did not follow on one occasion during my fieldwork period when she backed her car after two motorists flaunted their pistols to her. Fortunately, the move threw them off, but she was left with the aftermath of a frightening experience that, as she put it herself, had made her feel “naked,” as if she had been stripped of her dignity. Gustavo attributed it to more than just luck that he had been spared from such an experience until now. When he bought his car, he had deliberately desisted from getting a popular brand such as Toyota, instead opting for an old and simple (though charming) Nissan four wheel drive, which, he believed, made him into less of a target. The fact that Ester drove an old van when she suffered the attempted robbery showed, however, that it was not a full-proof strategy. And Gustavo would be the first one to acknowledge this. “I always feel exposed,” he told me, “while I’m driving, when I’m home at night, but I also understand that even if one would have had more resources... you always have to learn to live with a margin of risk.” The risks he was talking about were the risks of living in a city where violence was rampant and individualism and withdrawal reigned. It was what Gustavo so appreciated about life he encountered in Santa Cruz de Quiché: people still knew each other.

The situation in the capital, at the same time, was also a reflection of a broader culture that enabled such circumstances to thrive. All in all, Gustavo seemed to expect little good from his fellow citizens. It turned Guatemala, and especially Guatemala City, into unsolid ground for him, where a certain level of suspicion towards others was key in maintaining one’s safety or so Gustavo believed. He knew cases of homeowners in his neighborhood that had been involved in acts of stealing from fellow residents, and he himself had once caught a lady who was about to load his ladder into her car, which he had briefly left unattended in front of his house. “But they don’t ask, they don’t ring the bell. I’m not sure if it is typical for the Latino, or for the Spanish. But

therefore I tell you, in some indigenous communities there is still the respect of not appropriating what isn't yours." Ester would later argue along similar lines, using the famous words of one of Mexico's national heroes and former presidents Benito Juárez: "Respect for the rights of others is peace."⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Gustavo could not refrain from comparing the situation in Guatemala with the experiences he had in Europe and one in particular. Once he rode a bicycle through a neighborhood somewhere in Austria, seeing money lying on the doorsteps of the different houses. He imagined the residents had left it there to pay for some kind of service. The fact that such a system existed – and, especially, that no one robbed the money – made a big impression on him. Things would have been different in Guatemala, Gustavo believed, if they had not been colonized by Spain, but by a Western European country instead. "For me, the Spanish crown was about extraction, was about taking advantage and extracting all the wealth," Gustavo explained. "I'm not a connoisseur of history but I think that if it had been another country that had conquered us, we would have probably been less corrupt, there would have probably been better development and there would have been more equity. It's an idea, I don't have much support for it."

At the same time, despite the alleged historical embeddedness of Guatemala's insecurity and its pervasiveness in contemporary society, Gustavo's fears were still very much rooted in what he had seen or experienced himself in relation to crime and violence. It was why he feared break-ins, being attacked in his car or getting caught in a bus accident more than he feared being assaulted in a bus. In fact, in the city, he sometimes even took the red buses – where violent attacks were as rife as within the extraurbano buses – for the sole purpose of the experience. It did not scare him. "As a child I got on buses alone. Now it's different, but I still like to do it now and then to listen to the stories, to see the people, the vendors. And what I do, as I already told you, I have an old cell phone and I am willing to hand it over in case I get assaulted. It's like having a plan B always. Open to what is the reality that you have to live. I do not know, maybe I've been very confident." These were acts of nostalgia for a bygone past, longings for a simpler life. But they were also acts of confidence and perhaps even of overconfidence, as Gustavo himself also seemed to imply. And as such, they marked his middle class status. After all,

⁵⁰ "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz."

contrary to the often poor people that had no other option than to ride the red buses on a daily basis, he had never seen an assault in a bus or someone being killed. “If that would have been the case,” he said, “maybe I would have another attitude and another reaction.”

No doubt, Gustavo shared his inexperience with the more violent type of crimes with many others in Guatemala City that were able to stay away from the more dangerous modes of public transport and violent colonias. It was no surprise, therefore, that he also shared it with Valeria and his other daughters. But as research shows, such a track record by no means excludes people from experiencing a heightened sense of insecurity (see for the Latin American context for instance Caldeira, 2000; Dammert & Malone, 2003). It did, however, to a certain extent, in the case of Valeria. A slim and fine featured girl with twinkling eyes that, however radiating, could not prevent introversion, even secretiveness, from predominating both her appearance and character. A girl that took after her father. Having said that, even more than Gustavo she took confidence out of the knowledge that, until now, she had been able to remain relatively untouched by death and despair. Crucially, and perhaps unusually, the fact that she had seen her fair share of crime and violence during her family’s travels around the country, only strengthened her in this feeling.

Valeria

In March 2011, when Valeria was thirteen, her family moved to a little village close to the Mexican border where Valeria would live a very tense year. It was so-called ‘narco territory,’ which was palpable through the murders that occurred regularly (one time just around the corner from their house) and the stories about decapitations and other gruesome acts that echoed around. But also through the ease with which a local pastor could speak about someone being “very nice, though a bit *matón* [murderous].” Upon arriving there, the Mérida family was welcomed by some people of the local El Verbo church, who explained to them that they would have to drive with the windows open for the next few days and be transparent and open in their attitude towards people without being uncareful. It was a way for the village to get to know them and to not raise suspicion. Meanwhile, men from humble origins with

a surplus of money, bodyguards and fancy cars left little doubt about who was in charge there.

A couple of years later, in her mother's place on the finca outside of Mazatenango – the place where she lived before moving in with her father – she also experienced some tense moments. The house was quiet, Valeria explained, but could be eerie at times due to its relative openness, with only a gate of bushes and a front door of thin wood protecting the family from the outside world. It made for scary nights sometimes when they heard people outside and the dogs inside were barking. It was a matter of waiting until the voices disappeared, each in their own room. In the morning, they would then ask each other if they too had heard the noises, which was usually the case. At school, in Mazatenango, Valeria found a reality dowsed with corruption and narco trafficking. Some of her friends had fathers whom she knew were narcos. The fact that they turned out to be friendly people left her with an inner conflict. After all, in church she was told that narco trafficking was a sin. But sin or no sin, during Valeria's time in Mazatenango the city was startled by violent incidents that seemed related to narco trafficking. In March 2015, two local journalists who reported on acts of corruption in the municipality were killed in an act believed to be ordered by a Guatemalan congressman (CICIG, 2018). Meanwhile, Valeria herself was lucky she did not go one night when a friend had asked her to come over to her house, as the girl's father got riddled with bullets that evening within a stone's throw from his house. The whole family had heard the shots and he died in the arms of one of his sons. It was said that he had trouble with some Colombians. During the wake, which Valeria did not attend as her mother had forbidden her, people had entered the room to open fire again.

In Flor del Campo, she felt strengthened by the fact that even though she had been scared sometimes when living without the typical security walls and guards, nothing had ever happened to her. So why would something happen now while she lived in a guarded neighborhood and in a house surrounded by a solid gate? Of course, she was aware of the fact that people could easily enter Flor through the ravine, which started right across the street from where they were living. And she also knew that the security provided by the guards in the neighborhood caused insecurity at the same time. In fact, she had even been present in the house when the two ladies overwhelmed the cleaning lady

and stole her mother's jewelry. Whereas Gustavo had taken this as a sign of vulnerability, Valeria saw it as something that could have been and should have been prevented. "It was carelessness of the employee," she said. "She didn't have enough intelligence to... I mean, it's common sense not to let others in, it's something that can be avoided. It was not that we were vulnerable but it was a mistake of ourselves." It was a way of reasoning that marked her feeling of safety as well as her confidence. One that was also inspired, she believed, by the fact that she had her grandparents living close to her but it was also a confidence that reeked of carelessness, or so the more fearful people would think. For example, even though Valeria was often home alone, she usually did not turn on the alarm when she went to bed, and she also made a habit of leaving the front door unlocked, knowing there was still a gate to rely on. It was something she blamed on her absent-mindedness, but even so, it was a trait she allowed to exist.

But of course, Valeria's life did not restrict itself to her colonia. She had come to Guatemala City to study pharmacy at the San Carlos University. To many, studying at the oldest and only public university of Guatemala equaled looking for trouble. San Carlos was popularly seen as a hub of corruption, a university of drunks and lazy people, and lawless territory. "It is not education," voiced one of Ester's friends. This was an even more extreme opinion that was not uncommon among the better-off in Guatemala City. Still, even though Valeria had the financial means to go to a private university – although she would have needed a scholarship for the more exclusive ones – she preferred to go to San Carlos. It was close to her home and free of the kind of the stifling competition she thought she would find at private universities. And perhaps even more importantly, despite its bad reputation, San Carlos was still the most renowned university of Guatemala, whose performance often outranked those of the private universities (see for instance Webometrics, 2018). In addition to this, many people had told her that San Carlos was also the best place to study pharmacy so San Carlos she chose. It meant that she would have to keep herself safe in a place believed to be full of hazards. But, as is often the case in Guatemala City, Valeria's socioeconomic position and confident nature helped her to keep certain dangers and fears at bay.

San Carlos University had long been an important catalyst for social change in Guatemala. For example, groups of students participated in the

overthrow of dictator of Manuel Estrada Cabrera in 1920 and took part in what is now known as the October revolution of 1944 when people hit the streets in Guatemala City forcing President Jorge Ubico to resign. San Carlos students and teachers had also been at the forefront of the guerrilla movements, providing them with fighters as well as with strategic and intellectual support (Kruijt, 2008; Garrard-Burnett, 2010). Within this context, state-sponsored death squads had turned San Carlos into a dumping ground for the mutilated bodies of kidnapped students in the 1970s and early 1980s. It was a legacy one could not miss when entering the university where every wall seemed to be dressed up with face paintings, names and quotes of martyrs that lost their lives at the hands of the death squads, and other more general slogans of social activism. “Whoever graduates from this faculty with the desire to make money, is another mercenary. Who graduates from this faculty with the desire to help their Guatemalan brothers, is a real *sancarlista* [San Carlos student],” it said on the hallway of Valeria’s faculty building.

But there was a less revolutionary reality hidden beneath the spray painted veneer of social justice and activism, the root of which was planted in the 1985 constitution that granted the university a say in, amongst other things, the appointment of judges of the highest courts in Guatemala as well as of the country’s Chief Public Prosecutor (Solis Miranda, 2017). It turned San Carlos into a political gold mine and, at least from the year 2000 onwards, gave way to the co-optation of the university by what many commentators deemed ‘mafia groups’ (see for instance González, 2015; Shetemul, 2017; Solis Miranda, 2017).⁵¹

⁵¹ Change may have been in the air during my fieldwork though. Within the perverse power structure of the university, the University Student Association (AEU) played a key role. During my second fieldwork period, a collection of faculties were in the midst of organizing general elections in order to reclaim the AEU for student and academic purposes. The latter’s cloud had been able to prevent elections from happening ever since 2000 when one of the two parties in the race dropped out a day before the election, complaining about irregularities as well as about intimidation and threats coming from the other camp (Centro de Medios Independientes, 2015). The president of the engineering faculty’s student association, who was supporting new elections, explained to me that the AEU had been trying to put asleep the activist spirit of the students by giving them “bread and circuses,” that is, beer and parties. It was their task now to help relive this spirit among San Carlos students. But the current AEU was also a fearsome opponent to take upon, as its representatives not only tended to be powerful, but sometimes also notoriously violent. The student leader told me his predecessor had received death threats over the phone. “Poison was injected in San Carlos,” he said, “and now it is transmitting poison.”

No doubt, what happened at San Carlos was what often happened in Guatemala when power was to be divided. And, entirely in style, this also translated into unsafety on the ground. When Valeria started at San Carlos, the assaults that had been plaguing the campus for years had largely shifted to the entrances of the university. This was a development that may well have been inspired by a series of events where people at San Carlos had taken matters into their own hands. During my fieldwork, the theft of cars was especially rife. According to the chief of security at San Carlos, up to eight vehicles a day were stolen in the years preceding 2017 (Patzán, 2017c). In response to an event where students had beaten up and undressed an alleged thief to then hang him from a tree and turn him over to the police, he said he only had seventy-six people at his disposal, while three hundred were needed to keep the area safe. Perhaps tellingly, Valeria told me she had never seen a security guard at San Carlos, though later that afternoon we passed one when she gave me a tour around the campus. A complicating factor was that the police (and the army) were not supposed to enter San Carlos without permission of the academic authorities or a court order. It was a direct result of the university's autonomous status, which followed a long tradition in Latin America seeking to promote academic freedom (Lemoyne, 1985; Kruijt, 2008). Nevertheless, according to the university's chief of security, they did cooperate with the police at times (Patzán, 2017c).

Valeria herself considered the security situation at San Carlos identical to the lawless streets surrounding the campus. After all, the fact that San Carlos was a public university meant that everybody – but the police and the army – was allowed to enter, making its population a blend of students, vendors and beggars. Nothing had ever happened to her, but she knew about various violations and other crimes that had occurred at San Carlos. During our walk over the campus, Valeria told me she had even heard a group of mareros had entered one of the buildings that year to demand a financial contribution from the students present there. Meanwhile, she said, students tended to add to the lawlessness by taking matters into their own hands and other practices speaking to the same mentality. The boot- and sombrero-wearing agriculture students, for instance, had long boasted the habit of shooting their pistols into the air outside their faculty, despite the fact that there was a kindergarten situated close by. A custom that only recently was put to halt.

The forty days of Lent preceding Easter, however, were the most notorious at San Carlos. It was when hooded students, the *encapuchados* (literally: hooded ones), started taking possession of the campus under the responsibility of the University Student Association (AEU), making their public appearances for the *Huelga de Dolores* (Strike of Pains).⁵² The latter was a satiric manifestation dating back to 1898 when it was called into being by San Carlos students to denounce abuses of power. But as the AEU got coopted by corrupt interest groups in more recent times and San Carlos slid into a milch cow for the powerful, the *encapuchados* seemed to use the *huelga* for personal benefits, extorting local businesses on university grounds and obliging students into paying a fee at the entrance (Centro de Medios Independientes, 2015). Crucially, participants in the *huelga*, and especially its organizers, had started wearing hoods at the end of the 1950s because of the state repression they encountered. But now the hoods provided its masters with the anonymity that enabled them to, basically, do as they like. Many believed that a large portion of the *encapuchados* were not even students. Others commented that some of the criminals in the ranks of the *encapuchados* were able to make it throughout the year with what they made before Easter.

Meanwhile, the AEU and the *encapuchados* were also known for their violent and intimidating responses to alleged criminals and other people transgressing their moral code, also outside the period of Lent. One time, Valeria showed me a video of a group, largely hooded, AEU members beating their bats and throwing punches on a man just outside the gates of the university – an event that took place in May 2013. Apparently, the man on the video – a San Carlos student – had been asking for money at one of the entrances of the university together with two other students, who had also been wounded in the event. Their aim that day, one of the targeted students later declared, had been to collect enough money to bail out five other San Carlos students who had vandalized a government building in an act of political activism. According to then secretary of the AEU Guillermo Prera, however, they had been part of an armed group that had been extorting the university community (Centro de Medios Independientes, 2015; T13, 2013). It was only telling for the violent reputation of the AEU, however, that Prera

⁵² Its full name is: *Huelga de Todos los Dolores del Pueblo de Guatemala* (Strike for all the Pain of the People of Guatemala).

himself had killed a taxi driver only two months earlier, a crime for which he was found guilty later that year but was able to escape prison time after paying two hundred and twenty thousand quetzals to the victim's family. He and his following had also gained a reputation at San Carlos by showing off their pistols on campus and in the many bars surrounding it. Another videotaped event, which took place in February 2016, showed the hesitant action of the security guards at San Carlos, who were incapable of preventing a group of encapuchados and seemingly regular students from undressing and beating up an alleged assailant, standing by helplessly at some points (Prensa Libre, 2016a). "No one tells them [the encapuchados] anything," Valeria said, "no one can intervene, because they are the law and people don't even know who they are. I think the police can enter. Supposedly they can't, but in the end I do think they can intervene, but no, they don't interfere."

But then, Valeria did not hold a high opinion of the police in general. The first thing she thought of when she saw a pickup truck of the National Civil Police, she told me, was that they were looking for someone to extort. She had once been in the car with her mother when a police officer had asked them for a bribe, telling them that the alternative was a higher fine for not bringing car papers. Her mother had bluffed her way out of it but her father had experienced at least one similar event in which he had given into the police's extortion.

In this context, Valeria felt largely on her own at San Carlos when it came to her security. About the only thing she and her classmates could do, Valeria explained, was to form what she called tribes. "So you have someone to ask for help when something happens." It meant that they often went in little groups to the bathroom and together with the whole class of about sixty students when they had to go somewhere further away. It seemed no clear-cut strategy, as Valeria had also once said to me that the general device in Guatemala when you witnessed a (potentially) violent event was to back off. Meanwhile, one of her classmates had a bodyguard, who always waited for her outside the classroom and followed her around on the campus. Such an exuberant security measure was a rarity at San Carlos and it always raised similar questions among onlookers. 'And this guy, what is he doing here?' 'Why is there someone here with a bodyguard wearing a bulletproof vest?' There was

something funny about it, Valeria said, though the answer to these questions was less amusing, as she was the daughter of a judge who had suffered multiple attacks on her family.

There were more forces at play though that seemed to protect Valeria from some of the dangers San Carlos had to offer. Being a fulltime student, Valeria's classes started in the morning and usually ended in the afternoon. Apart from the presence of fellow students, the mornings and early afternoons at San Carlos were generally quiet, which allowed Valeria to sometimes move around alone on the campus. It was around four or five in the afternoon that the more dangerous hustle and bustle began at San Carlos, as vendors, part-time students and, sometimes, people with bad intentions took over the campus and its surroundings. In addition to this, Valeria explained, the faculty of pharmacy was "less intimidating" than some of the others faculties on the campus, given the fact that it usually attracted a more select group of people. First of all, even though studying at San Carlos was free, one needed a certain economic capacity to make the sometimes costly investments in laboratory materials the study required. In similar fashion, people had to be in the position to be able to fully focus on their study, as pharmacy was generally known to be a difficult study. Valeria herself usually came back from San Carlos in the afternoon and sometimes had to study until twelve at night or one in the morning to be able to finish her assignments. Tellingly, her classmates that worked along with their study did not make it past the first year. Still, Valeria's class was a mix of people from different social backgrounds. She had fellow students from poorer neighborhoods – some of whom had trouble with coming up with ten quetzals for a school project – as well as classmates who went on holiday trips to Germany or whose families owned fincas in El Salvador.

And as it turned out, these realities and backgrounds were hard to shake off once at San Carlos. According to Valeria, it was not uncommon at San Carlos that girls received proposals from teachers to improve their grade in exchange for sex. Nevertheless, it was only her poorer classmates that had received such offers. This seemed logical, perhaps, when considering the fact that they generally received lower grades than their richer peers. It was something which seemed hard to separate from the fact that their marginality came with all sorts of personal problems. But in addition to this, Valeria believed

that teachers were well aware who they could approach for such matters and who not. Their pick for the already troubled and thick-skinned students was a calculated one, knowing that their indecent proposal would only add to the everyday violence they had already experienced. This meant the classroom was a *classroom* as much as any other place in Guatemala City. "Like this," Valeria said, "everybody continues with their normal life here at San Carlos."

As for Valeria, she found herself somewhere in the middle of the socioeconomic spectrum of her class. She could get along with both her poorer and her wealthier classmates, perhaps, as she reasoned herself, because she came from a family with a father and mother coming from different social classes. But her middle class status also showed in other areas. For example, she did not possess her own car like some of her peers but rode along every morning with someone from her neighborhood who also studied at San Carlos, though at a different faculty. And as they were done at different times, Valeria usually took the Transmetro back, which brought her right to the entrance of her neighborhood. "A lot of people wouldn't dream of doing that," she realized. "It would be putting yourself in a lion's mouth." But even though she usually travelled with her laptop, it did not scare her. The truth was that the Transmetro was generally considered to be a safe mode of transportation and it was how Valeria experienced it. She had never even heard of someone getting robbed in such a bus. And as such, it was a different experience from the red buses that some of her classmates had to take to and from San Carlos. "It is waiting for your turn that something happens to you in these buses, because it will happen to you." They also sometimes came in late because of bus drivers that had been killed and other drivers that were protesting in response to it.

Crucially, Valeria's feeling of security, whether at home, at San Carlos or in the Transmetro, heavily rested upon the fact that she had never been assaulted. She was often on her own in Guatemala City, given that Gustavo was usually in Santa Cruz de Quiché during the week. The latter told me he was thinking of buying Valeria a car soon so she could drive to the university. At the same time, even though he knew it entailed a small risk, he was glad she was getting to know the reality of taking the Transmetro. He did not want his daughter to grow up overprotected. The fact that she was often exposed to the dangers attached to being alone in the house in Flor, however, did worry him. He was therefore looking for a job closer to her. It showed the footprint of the

break-ins he had suffered. Meanwhile, the fact that being home alone did not worry Valeria, showed her confidence.

Remoteness of the mountains

The American poet Wallace Stevens once described Guatemalans as “men remoter than mountains.”⁵³ It is characterization that stands out until this day, considering, for instance, their widely shared desire for withdrawal behind walls of mountainous impermeability (a wanting that, of course, is by no means unique to the people of Guatemala). In Gustavo’s case, however, there were no walls of draconian size surrounding his house or neighborhood, although he was no stranger to security walls and alarms either. But as is often the case with Guatemalans, Gustavo’s remoteness, or withdrawal, played out on other fronts as well. He was a man who stayed on the surface of things, who did not allow himself to be led astray by uncertain adventures, whether it was nosediving into a church community, with the risk of hitting the bottom, or going on long holidays, with the risk of returning to an emptied house. Crucially, it was fear, not lack of ambition, which predominated this reserve. The more self-determined lives, Gustavo had learned, were preserved for the affluent in Guatemala. He envied their skill of bending things to their will, something he himself – in a country that evoked in him feelings of suspicion rather than pride – had not been able to make his own or at least not entirely. There were people in Guatemala, of course, much more oppressed than he was. He once wrote a song of comfort for “the little [Mayan] girl of his country,” to paraphrase the title,⁵⁴ who, as the text goes, “walks barefoot towards the future, who stays at home to serve.” His journey had taken him to the hierarchical highs and lows of Guatemalan society and had made him well aware of what he had never ceased to be: a middle class citizen in a highly divided world where wealth, power and safety divided along class lines.

But it was not just superficiality to which Gustavo had sought refuge. Unshackled from the stringent bonds and parenting techniques of El Verbo, Gustavo had become an affectionate father. One that kept stroking Luz, his middle daughter, on the head while we watched The Mission together after

⁵³ From the 1942 poem ‘Arrival at the Waldorf.’

⁵⁴ The song is called “*La niña pequeña de mi país*” [The little girl of my country].

she had come over to his place for a couple of days. But also one that was always together with Valeria during the weekends, although Valeria said that it was she who adapted to her Gustavo's plans. Indeed, even when her study did not allow her to visit church one Sunday, she went along for the ride to then stay behind in the car on the parking lot and wait for her father – and myself that day – to return, while doing some school work in the meantime.

Apart from investing in family life, Gustavo found joy, and a certain profundity, in making and writing music, a passion that had been sparked by Tom and his music-ridden field trips. Perhaps music was the only excitement from those trips that had been able to stand the test of time in Gustavo's life, given that Tom had left Guatemala and indigenous villages had lost much of their romantic touch. Nevertheless, there was still magic to be found in escaping the city (the cars, the people, the buzz), Gustavo believed, as he sought, aptly, the remoteness of the mountains. It was a passion he shared with his daughters. One that turned him into a different person.

Gustavo loved hiking in the mountains, he explained, "because it is pushing yourself to the limit and continuing because it is the only thing you can do, because there is often no way back." It was throwing caution to the winds, although this was hardly necessary for the Pacaya, the volcano I ascended with Gustavo and Valeria – and not even to the top. It was known to be a relatively easy climb and Gustavo had climbed it about sixty times before. "There was a time I went almost every week," he told me while we drove towards it. And he and Valeria had climbed many other volcanos in Guatemala as well. That day, however, there was an unpleasant surprise awaiting us at the entrance of the park. For the first time in Gustavo's life, park rangers did not only demand an entrance fee, but also insisted that we led a guide accompany us. These were park regulations, they told us, and as I learned from a later visit to the official webpage of the place, they were right (Parque Nacional "Volcán de Pacaya y Laguna de Calderas", 2017). Nevertheless, Gustavo refused to accept (and pay for) one. Agitatedly, he told them it was his right as a Guatemalan citizen to be able to move freely in a national park and by forcing a guide upon him – or refusing him the entrance if he did not accept one – they were violating one of his most basic rights. In response, the park rangers took out the regulations book to show him they were only following the rules, but Gustavo, clearly, had no intention of giving in. In the end, seemingly overwhelmed by Gustavo's

firm stance – as was I – and his alleged knowledge of the law, they decided to let us pass, but not without having us tailed by a man on a horse. He swayed off after a kilometer of two, when the lush, green surroundings gave way to a dark and dusty lava landscape and roaring sounds of an active volcano started to seize the wind. In a world he deemed free from the dividing lines that so constrained his daily existence, Gustavo seemed a man perfectly in control.

A Life in a Crystal Cage

The Tirado Family

Cast of characters

Claudina, age 47	the mother
Leonel, age 32	elder son
Gérman, age 25	younger son
Isabel, age 22	eldest daughter
Cristina, age 18	middle daughter
Anabél, age 12	youngest daughter
Pedro	Claudina's ex-partner and father of her four youngest children
Marta	Claudina's friend

To someone hearing '*Carretera a El Salvador*' (Road to El Salvador) for the first time, the name may suggest no good, El Salvador being one of the most violent countries in the world.⁵⁵ That same person may be surprised to find out that the Road to El Salvador, at least when one stayed within the metropolitan boundaries of the capital, cuts through a world of remarkable luxury. But then, it was not necessarily El Salvador that came to mind when the name of the *carretera* echoed among a Guatemalan audience. In contemporary Guatemala City, the Carretera a El Salvador had become synonym for wealth and abundancy, giving entrance to some of its most prestigious residential areas; not that it always showed from the notoriously busy road, as many of them were hidden behind trees or situated above or below the road as it carved its way into a hilly landscape.

One of those elite neighborhoods kept out of public sight was Vista Alegre. Given the exclusivity of the place, it took more than a drive up the Carretera a El Salvador alone to be able to have a peek inside. To enter as a visitor one needed a code that, once dialed, set off a call to the house the code referred to. It was then up to the answerer of the call whether that person was let inside or not. A procedure taking place under the watchful eyes of the two security guards stationed at each of the two entrances. Once inside, a visitor

⁵⁵ El Salvador's homicide rate of 105.44 and 82.84 per 100,000 in respectively 2015 and 2016 was the highest in the world for countries not in open war (UNODC, 2017).

could run into more guards – there were always two of them making their rounds – as he could run into gardeners maintaining the neighborhood’s green spaces. A rarer view, I noticed during my visits, would be the sight of a resident. Vista Alegre was not the walking-type of neighborhood. The empty streets and their mirror image, the high walls shielding the individual houses from unwelcome eyes, gave the neighborhood the kind of “post-apocalyptic” feel I had encountered more often in Latin America’s better-off neighborhoods (Peeters & Hoey, 2017, p. 143).

Claudina lived behind one of those high walls, together with her five children, two bodyguards and two maids. Their house sported a great view over the city and a wooden floor as shiny as the big, glass cabinet in the living room that displayed crystal glasses and other decorative items. It was further adorned with reproductions of classical Roman busts and statues, and paintings of Anabél, Claudina’s youngest daughter of thirteen who took painting classes alongside her weekly French and violin classes.

A house hidden behind a high gate in a neighborhood wielding communal gates, security guards and cameras: defense line upon defense line aimed at securing the area. According to Ines, a wealthy business owner from Spanish descent with whom I connected through Ester, people’s number one priority in life was living in the kind of safe haven Claudina resided in. “I have employees that want to move to Carretera a El Salvador because it’s safe,” she said. “And they are saving to live in a safe place. I mean, that is the purpose of the Guatemalan. From wherever you are, to move to a safe place. It’s much easier in a poorer zone to get involved in gangs. Because you have the contacts, because you cannot afford private security, because you cannot protect yourself. Many people abandon their houses, leave behind their houses to go to the villages. I mean, I’m not the only one that wants to live, all of Guatemala wants to live. And all of Guatemala struggles to be somewhere else. This is your goal, to be in a safe place. What happens is that because of the problems, the economic situation of the country, not everybody can leave from where they are.”

Ines’ claim, delivered with a bravado and surety I encountered more often among Guatemala’s well-off, was a bold one. Nevertheless, it was hard denying the fact that crime and the fear bearing its name had become decisive factors in both the spatial and the social organization of everyday life in Guatemala

City. Crucially, the desire for withdrawal and fortification was widely shared among city dwellers. Many more modest colonias in Guatemala City now also hid behind fences, barriers and private guards. And there were many others waiting for permission from the municipality to close-off their colonia (Muñoz Palala, 2016). A trend, of course, by no means unique to Guatemala, Latin America or even the Global South. According to Ines, however, it was only the privately secured communities in the more privileged areas of the city that had grown into hallmarks of safety – places with Northern star-like attraction she dubbed “crystal bubbles.” She lived in a crystal bubble, she told me, just as I did and the far majority of others residing in places such as Zone 10, Zone 14, Zone 15, Zone 16 and Carretera a El Salvador. As a doctorate student with an employer appreciating my security and, in consequence, a budget for housing, it may have been only logical that I ended up living in one of the better-off zones of the city. The same could be said about Ines who inherited the successful business she ran from her father. The fact that Claudina, with whom I also came into contact through Ester, was also residing in a crystal bubble, however, was far less logical.

Claudina was born in 1970 in the marginal colonia of El Nacimiento, where she grew up in a home without a father, who had left the family before she was born. Her mother worked in the military and was only home eight days a month. This meant that Claudina, as her mother’s eldest child and only daughter, had to take care for her three brothers from when she was ten years old. A few years later, Claudina had to drop out of school to start working low-paid jobs in the city’s *maquila* (assembly plant) industry. She had her first child, Leonel, when she was sixteen with a man ten years her senior. It was a relationship “without good memories,” as she put it herself. Not only did he beat her, but he also refused to support her with the care for their son, which for Claudina came on top of the care for her three brothers.

At the age of eighteen, Claudina, who by then had moved to another marginal area of Zone 12, met Pedro. It marked the beginning of her way out of poverty. Pedro’s father owned a restaurant and a few other businesses not too far from El Nacimiento and had given his son a modest motel to start his own career. In the years to come, he would open many more across Guatemala. When Claudina was twenty-five, she moved to a residential neighborhood in the Carretera a El Salvador area where she rented a house with Pedro and

her three children, two of them – Gérman and Isabel – she had with Pedro. Claudina stayed home to care for them. In the years to follow, the couple would have two more children – Cristina and Anabél – and, at some point, about nine years before I met her, Claudina would buy a house in Vista Alegre.

In 2010, after being together for twenty-four years, Pedro and she broke up. They were never married. Claudina stayed in their house in Vista Alegre with the children and started working again not long after the break-up, managing a few of Pedro's motels, which, to put it short, were places where people tended to go for a few hours to be with their lover or a prostitute. It was a job that Claudia was still doing throughout the course of my fieldwork. But more on that later.

Considering the claim of Ines, Claudina's life, after the many hardships and disappointments she had to endure in the first part of her life, seemed one with a fairytale kind of turn. After all, against all odds, she had managed to end up in the place where everybody wanted to be, the crystal bubble. But reality, as Claudina's story once more shows, does not always live up to expectations. It is Claudina's life in relation to the crystal bubble and the world it represented that is central to this chapter. I will continue to use the term 'crystal bubble' in this chapter when discussing the type of place Vista Alegre exemplified. First of all, because the 'crystal' handsomely encapsulates the attraction of such places in contemporary Guatemala while the 'bubble' captures the inhabitants' attempt to detach themselves from all that is public. But, perhaps even more interestingly, in a time of bursting speculative bubbles, the term also hints upon a more vulnerable, or unintended, side of the fortification these places lean on.

Crystal bubble as a safe haven

The whole of Guatemala struggles to be somewhere else, until, if we follow Ines' enthusiasm, one is able to settle down in one of Guatemala City's crystal bubbles. Following such a reasoning, the latter may sound like places with paradise-like features. And, to be sure, they may be for some people. Having said this, I will devote a good part of this section to take some of the radiance of the crystal. There are different angles from which to approach such an endeavor, from assessing the role of high class, gated neighborhoods in society – as I will

do in the last chapter – to focusing on the experiences of the dwellers of these places. It is to the latter, microcosmic approach, I now turn as I aim to look critically at the objective level of safety the crystal bubble is able to provide its residents. I will do this by first sketching three points, which will each be related to Claudina's situation and sometimes to the situation of other people belonging to Guatemala City's upper middle class. I will then shift focus towards Claudina's view on the securitization that marked her world and the crime and fears it responded to. This will bring forth a fourth point regarding the ability of crystal bubbles to play into the security needs of their residents.

The first point I would like to make is that daily life for elites in Guatemala City tended to take place in different physical spaces that were not always situated within what Ines marked as the crystal bubble. Crucially, in a mid-sized city like Guatemala City with a relatively small number of wealthy citizens – compared to larger Latin American cities such as São Paulo or Mexico City – the urban elite could not fully retreat from public life for the simple reason that gated communities were not extensive enough to be fully self-sustainable (Thomas et al., 2011). Instead, the urban elite, when outside their heavily protected homes, tended to move across the city from one privately protected space ('elite' bars, restaurants, shopping malls, etc.) to another, which automatically and perforce led to a more permeable relation with the urban poor than often desired. "Segregation," as Kedron Thomas, Kevin Lewis O'Neill and Thomas Offit (2011) argue, "is more of an ideology than a lived reality in Guatemala City" (p. 3).

This certainly went for Claudina, who had to regularly visit a neighborhood known to be a hotspot for drugs, for this was where one of the motels she managed was situated. When I visited the motel together with Claudina one day, we ran into a vendor of *shucos* (Guatemalan hotdogs), who, according to Claudina, also ran a more lucrative business selling drugs as part of a criminal group that ruled the area. He greeted Claudina with a friendly kiss on the cheek. After the brief encounter, which further involved a chat about the opening hours of his shuco stand, Claudina told me she had recently asked him about the status of the security in the colonia. She had done so in response to an assault that had been directed against the other manager of the motel she ran. To Claudina's relief, he had assured her she had nothing to worry about, for she was a "hard-working lady," unlike the other manager, he had said, whom he considered to be conceited.

But, as the above already suggests, there was another danger Claudina exposed herself to when visiting her motels – or, basically, any other locations outside her colonia: danger in the act of moving, carried by a network of asphalt and sand that branched off like veins in a body. The road, for this is what I'm talking about, was the Achilles heel of many elites who attempted to live a life as secure as possible and another unsafe arena for the poor to tread on a daily basis.⁵⁶ The road was a place rife with aggression among drivers, violent assaults and accidents, and as such, a necessary evil also for Claudina. She spent much of her day in the car commuting between her home, Colegio Gran Bretaña (the school of her youngest daughter), her motels and the stores that supplied the motels. Bringing together people of different social backgrounds, the road was unlike any other place in the city. Having said that, people entered it – and how else could it be – unequally equipped. Bus drivers and passengers may have been among the most vulnerable users of the road. Claudina, no doubt, belonged to the better protected users. She usually drove a crossover with polarized side windows, telling me she had refrained from polarizing the windscreen as well. She had trouble seeing through dark windows due to her contact lenses. She would know, given that she also owned a big, black pickup truck with a polarized windscreen.

Second, just like different spaces attract different dangers, individuals and the world they represent do so too, shaping the spaces they occupy and vice versa. The fact that the better-off tend to have money (among other assets) not only turned them into lucrative targets but also into targets that were relatively hard to hit, whether on the road or in their homes, as money often translated into securitization. This, in turn, helped attract a certain type of crime and criminal to the spaces they inhabited.⁵⁷ To be sure, this did not happen in a

⁵⁶ The insecurity on the road seemed also one of the reasons Guatemalan elites didn't shy away from travelling by helicopter. In fact, it is often mentioned that Guatemala is among the countries with the highest number of private helicopters per capita, or is even topping this list (Lowenthal, 2009; Tomei, 2014; Barrantes Castegnaro, 2016). Although I could not find convincing evidence for these claims, living in Zone 10, I imagined it to be true, as the sound of helicopters flying overhead grew into a signature characteristic to me. Strangely enough, this occurred to me driving in the crime-ridden colonia of Chapín, when a blaring police car behind us, for which we tried to make way, prompted my gatekeeper Valentina to say that sirens were "the music of the neighborhood." If such is the case, I remember thinking as Valentina's words reverberated in my mind, the sound of helicopters is the tune easily caught in one's head in Guatemala City's more privileged areas.

⁵⁷ One could, of course, also reason the other way around. To give an example, the road attracts criminals looking to profit, say, from the fact that it is relatively hard to protect yourself against an assault on the road due to its design and function in the urban system, but the users, likewise, make that road what it is and co-determine its criminogenic potential.

vacuum, as both space and inhabitant shape and are shaped by formal and informal structures of political, economic and social power – the dynamics of which are in constant flow. This also means that what is a threat today might be less of a threat tomorrow, objectively, that is. Again, whether it will also been felt as less of a threat by people depends on more than just the ‘realness’ of the threat.

For the elites in Guatemala City insecurity may have never felt more profound than in the 1990s, when criminal groups embarked on a kidnapping spree targeting prominent Guatemalans (Schirmer, 2002; Castañón, 2015). This certainly went for Claudina. She recalled receiving a postcard by mail one day in the early 1990s with a warning that they were going to kidnap Claudina and Pedro’s eldest son Gérman – she was not sure anymore whether or not they had asked for money; she was sure, however, that they never paid in response to the threat. The card was signed with the initials J.J., which, Claudina as well as many other Guatemalans knew, was short for *Jaguar Justiciero*, Avenging Jaguar (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 1995). J.J. was a death squad, as we now know, linked to the military, that would later claim the murder of bishop and human rights champion Juan Jose Gerardi Conedera (killed in 1998). It was this postcard that prompted Claudina and her partner Pedro to employ bodyguards, in a time during which many other elites also decided to increase their security level as crime levels rose while the police proved unable to curb them. This caused the private security industry to burgeon (Keen, 2004; Argueta, 2010).

Fortunately, the threat of a kidnapping directed towards Claudina and her family never materialized. And with kidnapping rates in Guatemala being remarkably lower today than in the 1990s or around 2010, the chances of falling prey to such a crime has diminished in present time.⁵⁸ This was a success, at least in part, attributed to the *Comando Antisecuestro* (Anti-kidnapping Commando) of the National Police (PNC), a police unit whose effectiveness contrasts with the poor overall performance of the National Police. It made the commando’s professionalism bittersweet. Also because it seemed hard to detach from the fact that kidnapping as a crime relatively often affected the

⁵⁸ According to official numbers (see Castañón, 2015), there were 233 cases of kidnapping in 1996 in Guatemala and 148 in 1997. In 1998 this number declined to 61 to stay below 100 until 2009, when it rose to 198 (compared to 23 the year before). From then on, the number of kidnappings fell again. In 2014, there were 45 cases registered (compared to 85 in 2012 and 50 in 2013).

rich and powerful, although an alternative explanation for the downgrade of the kidnapping business is that criminal groups have stopped kidnapping only to shift their attention to extortion (Tabory, 2015).

Don Dagoberto, a wealthy business man and a scion of a well-known family in Guatemala, added another illustration to the fact that each world attracted its own danger. Being a business man in Guatemala – he told me one day when I met him in a lunch room with a bodyguard standing by the door – almost automatically puts you on the radar of extorters and kidnappers. In response, he did not only employ what could be considered the usual protection measures for people of his class (armored cars, bodyguards), but also had his own investigation unit. This, he believed, deterred criminals from targeting him, as it showed his capacity to deal with problems when such tactics were needed. Criminal groups, he explained, usually attack the most vulnerable. The poor were in the line of fire and to a much lesser extent people like himself.

But it was not just crime he had to “free himself from,” Don Dagoberto told me. He had recently found out his main business rival, one of the most powerful companies in Guatemala, was spying on his employees and threatening his clients with repercussions if they continued their business with him. “These are things business men have to deal with on a daily basis,” he said. But it seemed the threats had not stopped there. I had first got to know Don Dagoberto while working as a security guard at his daughter’s wedding – a job offered to me by my friend Alfredo, who owned the private security company that arranged Don Dagoberto’s security. During the day of the wedding, I had long chats with Carlos, one of his two bodyguards. He told me that at some point during the party, which was attended by over five hundred guests, Don Dagoberto had ordered him to stay a little bit close to him, telling him that “not all people here are friends.” According to Carlos, he had been referring to his business rival, who had also made an appearance at the party. In a later conversation, Carlos, whose long career as a bodyguard had involved working for some of the most powerful and well-known families in Guatemala, said Don Dagoberto had received personal threats from his competitor, suggesting they had been death threats, to then tell me he did not know a single business man in Guatemala that had not received the kind of threats Don Dagoberto was now receiving. In business, he explained, “you either instill fear or let fear be instilled upon you.”

To be sure, even though fear of crime was present among all strata of the population, inhabitants of Guatemala City were not equally confronted with crime and violence. The more privileged zones, especially within the boundaries of the different gated communities, tended to be safe havens compared to the more marginal areas of the city, and its inhabitants, usually, as Don Dagoberto already suggested, led safer lives than their poorer counterparts. But what the above illustrates is that there were dangers lurking also for elites in their everyday lives, some tailored to, say, their socioeconomic position or radius of action, and others more random by nature. But then, weren't security measures employed to keep these dangers at bay? Yes, they were. All the security measures in the world, however, could not change the simple fact that no security strategy could ever be watertight.

The fact that security is always relative is the third point I would like to raise here. To take the example of Vista Alegre. There was no doubt that it was a safe neighborhood, especially for Guatemalan understandings. But, as Claudina stated, this had not stopped a criminal group from successfully breaking into a house in the colonia, tying down the old lady that lived there to then empty her house. Apparently, they had misled the guards at the entrance by pretending they were a group of workers assigned to a job inside the neighborhood. In response to the event, which according to Claudina occurred in 2015, the neighborhood committee had increased the number of security guards and cameras in the colonia. This, however, could not alter the fact that security could never be guaranteed. A bodyguard – to take one of the most exuberant forms of private security – most likely is not prepared to risk his life for the people he is supposed to protect. Or so Alfredo told me, who himself provided bodyguards to several clients. “Because they will look out for themselves first. Because they have their children, they have their family, and they do not earn enough to put their lives at risk for you as a client. It is very likely that they will not be able to defend you against a real attack, a real threat.”

Much more than hundred percent security, Alfredo explained to me, he provided people a feeling of security. It was why my presence at the wedding as a private guard came in handy, as it gave his company an international feel by which he hoped to impress Don Dagoberto and other potential clients and enhance their feeling of security at the same time. Claudina seemed to

be conscious of the fact that private security did not (and could not) always live up to its promises when she told me she did not know if the bodyguards they employed were going to hold their ground at the moment of a kidnapping or an assault. “You can’t tell, because it hasn’t happened to us, and I hope it will not happen to us.” Another important issue affecting the objective level of security providers were able to deliver – raised by Alfredo and a number of other security professionals I spoke to – revolved around the quality of their material and service, which seemed to vary widely in a country where the majority of private security guards worked without the lawfully required training and certification.

Claudina’s fearlessness

Despite the pervasiveness of crime and fear of crime in Guatemala City and the inherent weaknesses to any collective or individual strategy seeking to curb them, Claudina seemed relatively little focused on, or domesticated by, security issues. Sure, she lived in a well-secured neighborhood and house, her family even employing two bodyguards when I met Claudina in 2016, but at the same time, she spoke slightly about the abundance of individual security measures that marked her life and the lives of the people around her.

To give an example, according to Claudina, bodyguards – which seemed to be in swing among elites – were just as much status symbols, employed for impressing other people with one’s importance and financial abilities as they were measures taken for safety reasons. This was a trend also observed by Caldeira (2000), whose ‘aesthetics of security’ testifies to the entering of security measures into the “discourse of taste,” which, in turn, paves the way for them to become status symbols. Similarly, Alfredo told me there had been a time, around 2006, when Roberto Arzú – the son of former president and Guatemala City mayor Álvaro Arzú – turned having an Israeli bodyguard into a fashionable item associated with his playboy lifestyle. And why wouldn’t they turn them into fashionable items? The brouhaha surrounding the issue of security made sense in a society as distrustful, violent and neoliberal as Guatemala. Bodyguards and other visible security measures provided people with the possibility to distinguish oneself from others – to step out of anonymity – without (necessarily) making oneself vulnerable from a security

perspective. They are emblems of strength, one could easily argue, although, as emblems of wealth at the same time, they may also put you on the radar of the wrong kind of people.

Claudina was similarly critical towards the fact that her family too had bodyguards although they were principally meant for the four children she had with Pedro, as he was the one paying for them. When she was still together with him, Claudina told me, she used to have a personal bodyguard as well, but as she stressed, he had been nothing short of an expense, one that was always sleeping in the car, while she was driving. "That is what we call security then," she sardonically remarked. It did not bother her that she had to do without a bodyguard now. On the contrary, she felt that she was "born to walk alone." But her children, Claudina claimed, did not need them either: "You can't say that my children are all over the place. My son spends all day working. What does the bodyguard do? Tell me, what does he do? He's in the car all day. My son works from eight to five in the afternoon. So what does the bodyguard do in this time? What does he do? He's sitting in the car. Or standing there. And my son goes to the gym from six to eight at night. That is the only movement he has from which you can say that something might happen or that they will come for the car or something like that. My daughter, who is twenty-two years old, who has a driver [bodyguard], well, maybe he helps her because there is no parking spot at the university or it's too far away for her to walk. OK, then the driver comes in handy. But my daughter goes to university from seven to twelve. What does the bodyguard do from seven to twelve? He's in the car as well. And from one to seven at night my daughter works, and my daughter works close to here [Vista Alegre]."

To be sure, Claudina's aversion towards the securitization surrounding her was not just talk. During my second fieldwork period, I found out that the bodyguard Santiago, who was primarily assigned to her son Germán, was no longer working for the family. Apparently, he and Claudina had an unpleasant conversation about money that Claudina thought she had left in the car but could not find anymore. When she asked Santiago about it, he had been rude to her, wrongly assuming, according to Claudina, that she was accusing him of theft. When her son reprimanded him for it, telling him to show respect to his mother, he had been rude to him as well. In response, Germán had told him to leave the house, where he had been living for three years, and to

go to his father to pick up his final paycheck. And as Gérman felt he did not really need a bodyguard, also because he spent much time abroad in other Central American countries and Mexico for his work at a lease company, he had not asked his father for a replacement. It was a decision primarily taken by Gérman, but one that seemed to reflect his mother's stance on the matter.

But there was something more obvious setting Claudina apart from her wealthy peers and their taste for leading heavily secured lives. Bodyguards, big robust cars and secured neighborhoods were measures seeking to prevent uninvited people from entering a physical space that people claimed for themselves or for a select group of people. These were measures aimed at constraining the movement of others. For a security strategy to be successful, however, it was only logical one had to constrain one's own movement as well, which basically came down to avoiding dangerous places. After all, why shield yourself from danger and look for it at the same time? Navigating security, by definition, was a matter of propping up boundaries for others as well as for yourself. Yet, visiting popular, low-income areas – places by and large associated with danger in Guatemala City – was exactly what Claudina liked doing. She did her shopping for the motels she ran at La Terminal. She enjoyed eating the Salvadorian street food of *pupusas* at a popular canteen just outside El Guarda, the market where your stolen items tended to end up. She went to church in Guatemala's City's tumbled down historic center once a week to pray and she regularly visited people she called friends in the poor neighborhoods of Campo Claro (Mixco) and Cerrito del Carmen.

Crucially, Claudina's critical stance on the way elites handled their security and her own habit of seeking the marginal areas of the city did not develop in isolation. She was caught in the wrong world, she explained to me the first day we met as we sat across from each other in her house in Vista Alegre: "I have friends that live in Mixco, Campo Claro, in Cerrito del Carmen, and I go and they [other friends] tell me: 'look, they might kill you, something is going to happen to you.' Look, today I went to a girl who I like to help, and where does she live? In Cerrito del Carmen; 'uuyyy, the horror! they are going to kill you. Woman, what are you doing there? That is not for you, those places!' But it is my world, I grew up in that, you understand me. I didn't grew up in this, right, I didn't grew up in this. I grew up there. You see girls walking without shoes, in the mud, in the water, running – that was me; that was my life. That is my life. That is my world, this isn't. I'm honest with you, this isn't my world."

Consequently, Claudina regularly took her children to towns such as Tecpán, San Lucas Sacatepéquez and Cobán; these were places rich of indigenous folklore but poor of means. They had also visited homes for children with disabilities a few times to hand out toys. It was Claudina's way of showing them the world she had been born into and teaching them to put themselves in the shoes of the less fortunate; without putting her children in an uncomfortable position that is, as the children preferred to avoid the dangerous marginal areas of the capital.

Claudina herself was a stranger to such fears, she claimed. "Because, as I told you, here in the colonia [Vista Alegre] it happened, they went in, they tied up the people and they emptied the house. And it's a private colonia, so, what can we expect from a Nacimiento, a Cerrito del Carmen, a Campo Claro? I know that I can get into a problem, I have my hot-tempered character, I can get very angry. Someone could have a gun without me knowing it and kill me while I'm in Zone 10. And I could witness a shooting in Zone 2 of Mixco without anything happening to me, you understand. There could be a shootout at night without anything happening to me, and I could be in zone 10 – where supposedly nothing will happen to me because it's an exclusive sector and all that – and get killed there, by a madman. So I'm not afraid, it's the truth, I'm not afraid. I feel free, very secure about myself and I have faith in God." Or as she said on another occasion: "Look, my turn can come up at any time. If somebody has it in for me here in Zone 10 who has a gun, he's going to kill me, if that person catches me in Zone 1, in Cerrito del Carmen, it's going to happen to me."

Not so fearless after all?

The above words, in which Claudina claims to derive the confidence to visit bad neighborhoods from her belief that life is unpredictable and uncontrollable represented a truth I did not question for a long time: Claudina, the fearless woman from El Nacimiento, who was averse to the exaggerated security measures surrounding her, who laughed at her fellow residents competing with each other over the number of bodyguards they employed, who, I figured, would have got rid of the bodyguards if it had not been for the fact that her ex-partner Pedro paid for them. It took a two and a half hour drive from

Claudina's house to my house, well into my second fieldwork period – eight kilometers marked by sheer congestion – to bring out a different Claudina. The immediate reason for this was a story about one of her daughters' friends, who had been forced to stop by another driver whom she had cut off on the road, after which she almost got assaulted. "So that it why we sometimes think," Claudina stressed, "that it is better to go out with security. It's better to go out with your bodyguard, because you can't tell anymore, you know. [...] It is the very insecurity that prompts us to take drastic measures."

Claudina's words seemed almost a confession to me. One that gave evidence of a fear that, as I learned while the conversation continued, had marked her life ever since they had received the letter signed by Jaguar Justiciero. From that moment, Claudina told me, she had been terrified that one of her children would get kidnapped. Only in more recent times, this fear had been drowned out a bit by the fear that an assault on the road would end up in the rape of one of her daughters, or worse. It did not help, Claudina said, that both her daughters had very "robable" cars. "It is a fear that is always there with you. One lives with this fear when you start having children and you see that crime instead of decreases, only increases, more rape. I read the newspapers and see they raped a three-year-old boy, raped by his father; that I-don't-know-who raped a five-year-old girl. And then I'm thinking, if they don't have mercy with such a small creature, a five-year-old girl, how are they going to have mercy with a twenty-year-old girl? So because of all that you are so traumatized and, putting it in God's hands, you say: 'all right then, in the name of God, I hope it goes well, be careful my daughter, and if they ask you something, money or something else, give it and don't worry about it. Give it, give it.'"

Crucially, just as Claudina's fear for kidnapping had been fed by something she had experienced herself, her fear for an assault on the road was also backed by personal experiences. There were moments such as these, Claudina told me while we drove the Carretera a El Salvador in a walking pace, that she had the feeling she could be attacked at any moment – also because she had the bad habit of being on her phone behind the wheel. The feeling was strongest in Zone 9 where she had witnessed various assaults. Fortunately, she had never experienced one herself. But she was aggressively yelled at by a taxi driver three or four months ago. What the taxi driver in question did not know was that

bodyguard Felix – who was “*mero loco*” (downright crazy), as Claudina put it – was sitting behind her. Felix had let it happen at first but when the man cut off Claudina at the flashlights, he had responded by opening the window to stick his gun out, after which the taxi driver had sped off. It was exactly because of such aggressive people on the road Claudina wanted Felix to be around her daughters when they left the colonia. Knowing that he accompanied them, she said, gave her tranquility. Apparently, Felix’ reaction had not been uncommon for bodyguards in such situations, as her son had experienced a similar event. Like Felix, bodyguard Santiago had responded to a driver bothering his client by opening the window to show his gun. Leonel and Gérman were willing targets for abusive drivers, Claudina said, because of the fact that they looked good and dressed well. But at the same time, Claudina believed that, compared to her daughters, her sons were better able to stand up for themselves.

The assaults and aggression on the road, the daily deaths among taxi drivers and bus drivers and the fact that people were killing “anywhere and at any time without caring” were reflections of a system, Claudina told me, that had lost its credibility. And they were also drivers of a sense of disillusionment that had settled over Guatemalans. One that also fed on what Claudina deemed the “shamelessness” and “cynicism” of former president Otto Pérez Molina and vice president Roxana Baldetti – who had been feasting on helicopters and luxurious houses while the people in Guatemala were “dying of hunger” – and on the incompetence of sitting president Jimmy Morales, who, Claudina said, allowed “himself to be ordered around by the people behind him.” It had not always been this dangerous in Guatemala City, Claudina claimed. “Fifteen years ago, you were still able to walk on the streets freely, something people aren’t able to do anymore. Today you see people killing. We don’t have control anymore.” When I told her that homicide rates in Guatemala had fallen quite dramatically since 2010, she shrugged her shoulders. They were false statistics, she believed, drawn up for the appearance of the country. Interestingly, Ester did not believe me either when I confronted her with the same downward trend: “you read the statistics,” she responded, “I read the paper.”

Claudina’s deeply entrenched fears and her dependence on Felix to somewhat curb them contrasted with the image of the fearless woman I had long taken her for. In similar fashion, her own use of Felix and the latter’s seemingly exaggerated response to the abusive driver, which she had not

condemned, contrasted with the image of the woman who had never stopped being the girl from El Nacimiento.

Still, in retrospect, her ‘coming out’ had made sense to me and not just because I had spoken to two of Claudina’s daughters before the relevant ride from Claudina’s house to mine, during which they had told me they hardly left the neighborhood without Felix accompanying them. Claudina’s view on the elite world she found herself, I came to see, was not only colored by personal preferences connected to her past but also by the way people in the elite world looked at her. Many of her elite peers also felt that Claudina was caught in the wrong world, *their world*, while they could not prevent her from entering it, or at least certain parts of it. As we know, the rush to gated communities and private schools could be characterized as a search for homogeneity (Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2003), although such places may also be used as instruments to climb the social ladder (Peeters & Hoey, 2017). However, unlike, say, private clubs, which often have a variety of means at their disposal to regulate membership and guard their exclusivity, one could buy oneself into a neighborhood like Vista Alegre or a school like Colegio Gran Bretaña where nouveau riche and old money mingled.

This brings me to the fourth point I want to highlight regarding the self-limiting aspect of securitization through places such as Vista Alegre: intruders, whether ones considered a threat to security in the more narrow sense of the term or those deemed undesired for other reasons, sometimes cannot be stopped from coming in formally authorized. Claudina herself may be considered a showcase of this. What Claudina’s fearless frontstage had been saying all the time, I realized, and what will be subject of analysis throughout the rest of the chapter, was that it was not the radicalness of the securitization Claudina resisted against, but the elite world this trend represented. One that, as I will show in the next section, had given her the cold shoulder.

The crystal bubble as an exclusive place

I first came into contact with Claudina through Ester. The fact that Ester had given me Claudina’s number to call had come as a surprise to the latter. The last time she spoke with Ester, she said, was about four years ago when she had taken in Ester’s daughter Elena, who was one of Isabel’s best friends. This

happened after Ester had kicked her out of the house because of an argument they had. Apparently, Elena had not called her mother to say where she was, which Claudina had told her to do multiple times. And when Ester finally got hold of her daughter, she took it out on Claudina, who had hung up the phone while Ester was busy berating her.

Because of this occurrence, my phone call had been an unusual event, but then, as Claudina might have guessed, it had an unusual cause to it. After having talked to former firefighter Francisco for the first time (during my first fieldwork period), I had been struck by his recollection of the execution of sixteen street children by what seemed to have been a state-sponsored death squad in the early 1980s, as discussed in an earlier chapter. The spot where the children were killed, a green pasture back then, was now the scene of an upper middle class neighborhood by the name of Bello Campo. Not the kind of “guilty landscape” Dutch artist Armando painted – the woods and grasslands that had been the stage of horrible events to which they had responded by evolving as if nothing had happened (“heartless, witless nature,” to speak in A. E. Housman’s terms⁵⁹). But still, the term came to my mind as I listened to Francisco’s story. It was why I felt the urge to dig deeper into the case and asked Ester, who seemed to know about anyone (her core business was networking, she always said), if she had any contacts there. It was when the name of Claudina came up. Of course, when Claudina and I met for the first time it became quickly clear to me, while driving to Vista Alegre, that she did not live in Bello Campo but in a neighborhood adjacent to it. So much for Claudina’s connection to Bello Campo and the story almost literally buried under it. And when Francisco and I one day tried our luck at Bello Campo and were refused entrance by a guard, so much for me probing into the case.

I never told Claudina about the horrific event that had brought me to her. It had remained embedded in my memory, in a haunting kind of way; how would it be for someone living in the proximity of where the event had occurred? Someone with five children herself? My phone call, I figured, had been strange enough in itself, and perhaps even painful, as it was made possible by a woman whose last words to Claudina had not only been unpleasant, but, as I found out, also carried a more sinister undertone. When I recalled the

⁵⁹ “For nature, heartless, witless nature / Will neither care nor know / What stranger’s feet may find the meadow / And trespass there and go,” from the poem ‘*Last poems: XL*’ (Holden & Holden, 2014).

event with Ester, she told me she had not been happy with the fact that her daughter had ended up at Claudina's place that day. Not only did she believe that Elena, in principal, should have gone to her father instead – something which you can hardly put on Claudina – but she also disagreed with Elena and Isabel's friendship. Claudina's children, she said, were “not the kind of kids you want your kids to be going with.” Isabel, for instance, was more boy-crazy than her daughter. And whereas Ester's daughters went to college for their degree, Claudina's daughters, according to Ester, did so in the hope that it would gain them a husband. In addition to this, Claudina's family had a lot of shady money coming from the businesses they owned, which Ester referred to as “brothels.” They had even dared to put one in the holy village of Esquipulas, she fulminated. “It's like: Come on, give me a break. I mean, you're going on a pilgrimage and you have this motel?! I mean, there are a thousand more places in Guatemala to put a motel!”

New rich such as Claudina, lacking an education, knew how to spend and spoil their children, Ester said – mansions and bodyguards. It was the kind of opulence, however, she did not want to expose her children to. Especially, she explained, because the houses they lived in were rented. “It's a facade. I mean, they pay high rent. If you want to live in the house, just buy it! I mean, if you have the money, why don't you buy it?” Colegio Gran Bretaña did not want them either, Ester told me. Isabel had never been accepted back at Colegio Gran Bretaña after repeatedly failing a course and had been forced her to leave. And it would only be a matter of time, Ester assured me, that the same thing would happen with her younger sister, adding that the school was not able to kick her out right now because of the fact that she was a good student.

Meanwhile, the fact that Claudina did not go to university herself, Ester believed, meant that she could never be a good example for her children. And there were other things about Claudina and her family that bothered Ester. For one thing, they were not “practicing Christians,” she said, which casted doubts on the integrity of her principles or whether she had any. And in addition to this, Ester explained, Claudina lacked the guts to divorce her husband and be financially independent, though this did not stop her from complaining to her about him having another wife whenever the two had met.

At the same time, she emphasized that she did not know Claudina well. Their daughters had been in the same class at Colegio Gran Bretaña, which

meant that their paths had sometimes crossed, but Ester and the other mothers had always kept Claudina out of their group. “You know her more than I do now,” she said, “because you met with her a few times more. And you see how she comes from a very humble village or something. But she didn’t grow up here, so she doesn’t have friends here. Not even the friends from her school, like the friends of the moms of Elena. We were always in activities together, but Claudina was also like... she also does not feel like part of the group. She *is* not part of the group, because she didn’t grow up here, she does not have like the same... a lot of the moms worked, we either had our husbands or didn’t have our husbands. But when you know your husband has another woman, and like, you don’t want her in the group. The daddy never showed up to any activities of his daughter, ever.”

Ester’s account on Claudina contained some factual errors: Claudina and her ex-partner were never married; the house she lived in was not rented; Claudina did identify herself as a practicing Christian. Nevertheless, Ester’s words represented a sentiment Claudina had long picked up on at Colegio Gran Bretaña. “They are people that exclude, fake people,” Claudina said, “when there is something from school where parents could go to, I don’t go. If you have a degree, you’re someone, if not, ‘*ay* no, don’t get involved with her.’” And if you did not have money, she added, you were also not accepted. It was a world, according to her, where parents told their children to shy away from peers with brown eyes and darker skin, and invite over those with blue eyes.

Crucially, Claudina’s daughters told stories similar to the ones of Claudina. At Colegio Gran Bretaña, they explained, it was all about your last name, the amount of money you represented, the kind of car you had and the number of bodyguards you had waiting for you on the parking lot. A boy who always came to school by taxi, Cristina said, was laughed at behind his back, until people found out his father actually owned the taxi company. Anabél, who until last year was picked up from school by bodyguard Felix, did not want her classmates to know she had been taking the school bus back home lately, as Felix had to bring Cristina to the Valle University around the same time. She also told me that she had been excluded from a group of friend in her class, which included a scion of one of Guatemala’s most powerful families. According to Anabél, this had been instigated by the mothers of her presumed friends who had told their children not to associate with her. That having said,

a powerful last name did not necessarily set you free from bullying, I learned from Don Dagoberto. His children attended the exclusive Colegio America at a time in which he was running for vice president, in a bid that included someone who was highly unpopular among the urban upper middle class. This, he told me, translated into the bullying of his children at school, causing one of his daughters to stay down a class.⁶⁰

Given the secluded nature of upper class life in Guatemala City, the parents' interference in their spouses' friendships seemed a logical consequence of the fact that children – for being children – did not always automatically apply the strict threshold of their parents when it came to the people they allowed in their world. As such, children could be weak spots in a defense that served the purposes of security, exclusivity and predictability. This was also the conclusion I drew from a story told to me by an acquaintance living in a wealthy residential area not too far from the Carretera a El Salvador. He once explained to me that his fourteen-year-old son, by playing with the children of his street, found out much more about the residents of his neighborhood than he did. One time, his son went home with a boy with whom he played football and found five machine guns hanging on the wall of the garage where they parked their bicycles. Added to the big Hummer and the BMW the owner of the property sported, and the eighteen employees he had working in and around his house, my friend suspected it to be the home of a narco.

According to Claudina, there was indeed the need to exercise a certain level of cautiousness in Guatemala. The Guatemalan, she stated, “doesn’t like to see beautiful eyes in other people’s faces.” In response, inviting people over to your house from outside your inner circle entailed the risk of them going over your possessions with envy, with all its consequences: the probing into your personal life, the gossip – “Damn, this one has money! Where does she get it from and what does she do? With whom does she live?” Claudina’s children did come home with friends all the time but they were usually people they had known for a longtime, with whom Claudina had no problem at all. Meanwhile, Claudina herself lacked good friends, telling me she was not a “people person” and that she had always preferred to “walk alone.” It meant that she usually never had people over at her house. She had made an exception for me, she

⁶⁰ It is in public school, Goffman (1990) states – but he could as well been talking about private ones – where children tend to first learn about stigmas they carry.

said – she drove me to her house the first time we met – because of the fact that I was not Guatemalan. “You are not a threat, because your culture is different, right, your education is different, right, you understand me. Like you said it yourself, you don’t come from a *barrio* in Mixco, Antigua, with this thing, with this evil in your heart, ‘let’s see what I can find to use against her tomorrow.’ You don’t come with this evil towards me. You come from a different country, a country, let’s say, more civilized, more developed than ours.”

As Ester already implied, a school such as Colegio Gran Bretaña was not only a place for students to connect, but also for parents. It was a relatively safe place, as it provided safeguards that the outside world did not provide. First and foremost, the people came from families wealthy enough to be able to come up with the high tuition fee.⁶¹ In addition to this, the information parents could obtain through their children about their classmates and their families, as well as the powerful echo of some of the students’ family names, often gave the process of connecting the predictability necessary for parties involved to let their guard down. But when Ester and other parents saw themselves confronted with people such as Claudina, who were born poor and had no higher education, guards tended to be put up.

Meanwhile, similar tendencies seemed to be at play in Vista Alegre. According to Claudina, it was a neighborhood full of arrogant and abusive people. People who felt superior to other people for the sole fact that they had money. Again, just as in Colegio Gran Bretaña, Claudina seemed to find herself at the bottom of the hierarchical spectrum. “There’s competition here,” she said to me. “You understand me, it’s what we have here. That man has more than me, or I have more than him: I will compete with him. If he has more bodyguards: ‘wow, that man has money.’ ‘This Mr. Palacios? Oh, he’s a great man, you have to respect him. Doña Claudina... But who is Claudina? Claudina who? Who? Who? What does she have? Who is she?’ Because if I have a business, if I have money: ‘ah yes, of course, Doña Claudina, the lady.’ But if they see ‘aaah, she has a motel, who cares what it is.’”

At the same time, Claudina had gotten to know many of the people in Vista Alegre, at least by appearance, during neighborhood gatherings where residents were asked to vote on neighborhood matters or the neighborhood

⁶¹ According to Ester, the monthly tuition fee was five thousand quetzals. Claudina believed the fee was much lower, though she did not know the exact amount. The website of the Colegio Gran Bretaña did not include this information.

committee gave insight into its expenditure. But she ignored most of her fellow residents, exchanging only in the most basic conversation – ‘hi’ ‘how are you?’ ‘Have a nice day’ – with only four of them and that was where the conversation ended. Nevertheless, Claudina’s meager contribution to the social cohesion in the neighborhood, if there was any, seemed far from exceptional. “People here are very *cerrada* (closed),” Claudina said. “It’s each and every one in his own world.”

According to Claudina, the world of Vista Alegre was the world of her children. However true that may have been – after all, they were born into it – they lived their lives in Vista Alegre as isolated from the rest of the colonia as their mother and, most likely, as most of the other residents did. In fact, after nine years in the neighborhood, both Anabél and Cristina had no clue, not even a face, when it came to who their neighbors were. Anabél knew the girl living two houses next to them but that was only because they went to the same school. Meanwhile, the fact that they sometimes walked the dogs in the neighborhood had not rendered them any new contacts or awareness about who their fellow residents were, as they were walks in which they usually encountered no one but people driving their cars from behind polarized windows.

Colegio Gran Bretaña wasn’t Claudina’s world; Vista Alegre wasn’t Claudina’s world; and the world these exclusive places represented wasn’t the one Claudina identified herself with. It is worth repeating this, as Claudina kept saying it to me every time a chance to do so arose, just as she kept calling popular, low-income places ‘her world,’ putting emphasis on the same differentness that others used against her. It was a dealing with stigma that noted sociologist Erving Goffman (1990) classified as ‘militancy’. A stigmatized individual, Goffman reminds us, is no different than others in the sense that he or she is “trained first of all in others’ views of persons like himself [or herself]” (p. 160). And when in the presence of the other, this individual has a particular reason to resist being considered a lesser person. This means that a stigmatized individual tends to be more inclined to the kind of role playing Claudina engaged in, where one shifts between seemingly contrasting roles, although ‘normals’ tend to be no strangers to such behavior either (Sandberg, 2010).

Claudina's vocal rejection of the securitization that surrounded her followed upon the rejection she had received from the elite world and was a way of setting herself apart from it. As such, it had also become vital to her claim of still being that same girl from El Nacimiento. The same went for the actual visiting of these places. It was the only way to keep the girl alive, both for herself and others. But as much as these visits helped Claudina to keep her narrative going, they also showed the transformation she had gone through since she had left Zone 12 at the age of twenty-five.

Cerrito del Carmen

From the beginning on, Claudina wanted to take me to the marginal colonia of Cerrito del Carmen in Zone 1 to meet her friend Marta. It was a plan that was sparked by her belief that I liked going to dangerous places – something she had derived from hearing me speak with enthusiasm about my visits to Chapín, Balcón Verde, El Castillo and other locations most Guatemalans preferred to keep away from. And although it was never the danger that attracted me in such places, I gladly accepted Claudina's invitation one day for a tour of the neighborhood by Marta. The latter, Claudina told me during our ride to Cerrito del Carmen, was the mother of Clara, one of her former maids and someone she had particularly liked. After Clara stopped working for her, Claudina had kept contact with Marta. They had gone out for a drink a few times but most of the time Claudina just passed by her home to drop off clothes and other things she thought she could use.

Marta, as I found out after we had parked the car, lived on a little plot shielded by lamina plates that prevented the outside world from seeing a collection of little shacks that were surrounded by broken and dissected cars and garbage scattered all over the terrain. One of these shacks belonged to Martha and the other two to family members. It was a sight that provided for an interesting seek-and-find picture, in which there was also a small, limping, scrappy-looking, one-eyed dog by the name of Bruno to discover. A biter dog Marta warned me, after he had sneaked through the gate with us as we left for a stroll towards a small, hill-shaped park situated a few blocks from Marta's home. The park had a well-known seventeenth century Catholic church standing atop, the Cerrito del Carmen, that had given name to the

colonia later built around it. But like Zone 1, once the seat of the powerful in Guatemala, it slid into decay over the years. Cerrito del Carmen had become known for its prostitution and drug dealing as much as for its idyllic church (Gellert, 1994).

The route to the park, though only a few blocks, turned out to be a challenging one. On a few occasions, Marta crossed from one side to the other side of the road, trying to keep us from passing at too close of a distance little groups of youngsters she said belonged to the local *mara*. And right before the park entrance, Bruno, who had run ahead of us, had become involved in a standoff with two frightening looking dogs that had the edge on him in both size and muscle. If Marta's plan had been to guide us through the neighborhood unnoticed, it had failed almost before it started, as swings from Bruno and his conspiring opponents were accompanied by heavy and aggressive barking. It was a situation so explosive that no one – not us, not the seeming owners of the other dogs – dared to properly intervene although the bravest attempt was made by Claudina. It was only after the two heavier dogs backed off, acknowledging the superiority of Bruno, whose scars were all memories of past fights, that we were able to continue our way. The event caused the seeming discomfort to grow on Marta. She sometimes whispered – putting her hand in front of her mouth to conceal her words – and sometimes uttered small talk with a loud voice to show our surroundings we were no threat of any kind, as she identified prostitutes, pushers and *banderas* (spies for the *mara*) among the few people present in the park.

Without any interference, however, we were able to reach the church, which was empty when Marta and I entered it, leaving Claudina waiting outside. And as we sat down next to each other on one of the wooden benches, Marta started talking to me, whispering again, while gazing to the front as if we were not conversing at all. "What do you do for a living," I asked Marta, while taking in the interior of the church. "You don't want to know," she said. "It's something bad." I told her it was her choice whether she wanted to tell me about it or not – by then I already knew Marta used to have a tailoring workshop that she had to close after being extorted for a weekly five thousand quetzals; an amount she did not even make in a week. "It's witchcraft," Marta said. We kept staring to the front, while we talked about it, although I think it was on a later moment she told me she also deployed it to protect people

targeted by extortionists, evoking the protection of *Santa Muerte* in their favor. And as mareros themselves often also worshipped the skeleton folk saint – whom Marta referred to as *La Niña* (The Girl) – they now feared Marta ‘The Witch,’ something that until now had kept her own business free from extortion.

We left the church the moment a middle aged man sat down a few rows in front of us. According to Marta, he headed the drug business in the neighborhood. Once outside the church, Marta uttered an exaggeratedly loud “so that was the church, isn’t it a beautiful park?” in my direction for eavesdroppers to hear, although there was no one besides Claudina and a man selling *atole* (a hot and sweet corn drink) outside the church. Then Claudina approached us to ask if we wanted an atole, pulling out a one hundred quetzal bill from her purse. I passed, as did Marta who had told me the vendor was part of criminal enterprise that dominated the park while I walked to the man to buy Claudina the five quetzal drink with some small change I had in my pocket.

With the atole, we walked off to sit down on a bench a little down the road. “People here are keeping an eye on us,” Marta said. This included, she added, the man that was making a call diagonally across from us at that moment. “I’m not afraid,” Claudina responded, putting up a firm voice, “not even for death.” It was only because I sat right next to Marta that I heard her murmur: “Yeah, but you don’t have to live her.” Marta then told us with her signature whisper that eleven people had been killed in the neighborhood last week, among which four prostitutes. Three of the homicides had been settlements among criminals.

After Claudina finished her atole, we decided to head back to Marta’s house. Near the exit of the park, a large, black SUV came slowly driving in our direction to then stop right next to us in what seemed to be a warning, as the car almost became an animate object itself, a threatening one, giving no clue who or what was behind the polarized windows. We continued our way as if it did not happen, first leaving the car behind us and then the park, with Marta going back and forth from whispering to speaking loud again. When we entered the sandy road that led to her house, I asked Marta about the car that, in my mind, had just tried to tell us something. The car, Marta answered, belonged to the police. They came to the neighborhood to distribute drugs to

the pushers. She then told me she worried about our safety just as she worried about her own safety. "Life here," she said, "is one of constant fear."

When we arrived at Marta's gate, Claudina, who had been either behind us or in front of us during our walk and missed large parts of our conversation, said she wanted to leave. I told her I had to go to the toilet, which, just like Marta's house, was situated at the backside of the terrain in a little cabin. Marta walked me to it, apologizing for what I was about to see: a loose toilet bowl covering a hole in the ground, unconnected to any sewer. When I left it, Marta, who had been waiting outside for me, asked me to come inside her house. I entered what turned out to be a one-room house with no windows and, after it had broken down, no light – reason for Marta to ask Claudina to lend her five thousand quetzals, which the latter had refused, afraid that she would never get the money back. It would have been pitch black inside if it had not been for the candles adorning the four small altars positioned in the corners of her house. I recognized the one of Santa Muerte by the image of a skeleton wearing a long robe, and the one of Maximón – a liquor drinking, cigar smoking and womanizing folk saint invoked for fertility, prosperity and wealth – in front of which Marta had put eight cigars to keep him satisfied. We talked about her business and our visit to the park until I realized we had been in there for about half an hour. When I walked outside, I caught Claudina talking to Marta's brother who lived in the house right next to the gate. We said goodbye to Marta and her family and left.

The whole trip to Cerrito del Carmen had appeared a scene out of a movie to me: the whispering behind the hand; the talking in the church without looking at each other; the fact that the park seemed to contain only shady figures; the extreme violence Marta made mention of – the seeming exaggeration of this all. But to play with that thought a bit (and leave myself out of it), the scene contained two contrasting characters, as is often the case in movies. On the one hand, there was Marta, a poor and somewhat shabbily dressed lady with an enigmatic look in her eyes and a caution that seemed to verge on paranoia. On the other hand, there was the heavily perfumed and neatly dressed Claudina, who had made it seem as if fear of whatever kind was a stranger to her. The latter prided herself for still being the same poor girl she once was, but it had not showed during the visit. "Did you see her pulling out that hundred quetzal bill?" Marta uttered to me while in her house. "As if she was saying: 'rob me!'"

But not only did Claudina seem to lack a street smartness, her alleged fearlessness, as Marta had already implied, had appeared a bit out of place, even rude perhaps. This did not stop Claudina from reiterating her bold claim during our ride back. “Fear of what?” Claudina responded, after I told her it had been interesting to experience some of the fear people like Marta experienced on a daily basis. “Tell me, fear of what? Fear of God. *Fear of God*. If you’re not doing anything wrong, nothing bad will come on your way. If you’re doing bad things, bad things will happen to you.” “But what about children that die violent deaths?” I said in an attempt to point out the apparent flaws of her reasoning – after all, wasn’t Guatemala full of injustices? “But as a retaliation towards someone,” Claudina answered. “Innocent people die, that is for sure. But is it to hurt someone as a father. It is to hurt someone, they’re bad people and to hurt them, they kill a son.”

What I did not know at the time of our conversation was that Claudina’s trust in karma, which she hung on the Bible’s “what you reap is what you sow,” was not as rock-steady as she wanted me to believe at first. It would still take two months for the more fearful Claudina to present herself to me. It was a Claudina that not only passed through anxious moments whenever her daughters went out without being accompanied by Felix, but also admitted that she would “die from a nervous breakdown” – fearing for her own life and, especially, those of her children – would she be living in Campo Claro (where she sometimes visited a friend). Recognizing the hyperbole for what it was, it seemed a moment of realistic self-reflection to me.

Still, the fact that she had made a habit out of visiting these places implied that her fearlessness was not all pretense, although her alleged trust in Karma seemed to contrast with her purported belief in the uncontrollability of life, especially since Claudina had both singled them out as the inspiration for her fearlessness. On closer study, however, both ultimate truths seemed mantras she chanted both for the outside world to hear, in support of her claim of being the girl from El Nacimiento, and for herself to hear and to believe if only repeated often enough. These mantras were what allowed her to visit places, such as Cerrito del Carmen, in spite of their dangers. It was unclear to me whether this was a matter of the mind playing tricks on her or the other way around. Whatever the case, the dangers of these places had exposed themselves to Claudina multiple times.

In Cerrito del Carmen, for instance, three separate killings had occurred while Claudina was visiting Marta. In all three events, she had heard the shots, as they were fired close to Marta's place. In addition to this, one of her tires had been slashed once when she had parked her car in front of where Marta lived. According to the latter, it had been a police way of telling Claudina she should not come there anymore but Claudina herself believed it to be the work of neighborhood residents who envied Marta for having someone with money visiting her. Claudina had also been stopped by the police one night, around midnight, just around the corner of Marta's house. They had asked her what she had been doing there, to then tell her that it was no time to visit a place like Cerrito del Carmen. According to Claudina, they had stopped her because she had driven her big, black pickup truck with polarized windows. "So they must have said: 'what is this van doing here? Is it coming to sell drugs or to leave or pick up something?'" That was the problem."

But Cerrito del Carmen had proven itself to be an unsafe place also during our visit although it was only afterwards that we gained more insight into the risks we had exposed ourselves to. Three days later, I came across an alarming news article that appeared that day about a "chain of homicides" that had occurred in Cerrito del Carmen, putting Marta's paranoia-like fear in a different light (Méndez, 2017). Apparently, seven people had been killed in the surroundings of the park in a period of twenty days, the last two – two transgenders gunned down by two men on a motorcycle – only hours after we had left, in a spot just around the corner from where Marta lived (Méndez, 2017; Patzán, 2017b). The violent streak, the article mentioned, was thought to be the result of fighting over control of the illicit activities in the neighborhood, signaling a possible power shift or more regular fighting between gangs (Méndez, 2017).

After reading it, I immediately whatsapped the article to Claudina, who seemed somewhat surprised – as was I – about the extreme violence Cerrito del Carmen had staged. "I don't want you to visit these very dangerous places anymore," she messaged me. What Claudina would not tell me (I heard it from Marta several weeks later when she, Claudina and I had lunch together) was that Marta had called her a day after the above WhatsApp conversation in response to a series of police raids in the neighborhood to verify that I was not a police informant. Something which, if true, would most likely have put

her in grave danger. She had also told Claudina a local crime figure had paid her a visit to ask her who “that gringo” was she was seen with and what he had been doing in the neighborhood. Marta had told her I had been interested in the history of Cerrito del Carmen, to which the woman had responded, or so Marta told me: “ah, that’s weird, usually gringos do not come here, nor are they interested in what happens here.” After the brief chat, the woman had left and Marta had not heard anything from her since then. The reason Claudina had not told me about it, she said, was that she did not want to scare me. And besides, she added, “you’re not doing anything wrong, so nothing bad will happen to you.”

Crucially, putting her faith in the hands of ultimate truths such as karma and, in its wake, downplaying the risks attached to places of known danger, was not the only factor that enabled Claudina to go to neighborhoods such as Cerrito del Carmen. As much as Claudina claimed Cerrito del Carmen and places alike to be her world, it was a world she only visited now and then (when she wanted to visit it) and, as already established, whenever she did so she was better equipped than those residing in these areas. It was only telling that the owner of a pupusas place just outside El Guarda, which was set up and deconstructed every night on the same street corner, called Claudina’s car a Ferrari, saying it was better to park it on the other side of the road if we wanted to eat there, for the street would fill up quickly with people waiting in-line to be served. And it did. I must have seen over a hundred people ordering pupusas in the half hour we spent on the terrace eating that evening, but it seemed we were the only ones that had arrived there by car. Most likely, some people there could not afford a car. It was an ambiance that turned the nice and decent car Claudina drove into a Ferrari. Similarly, when I accompanied Claudina to La Terminal once, we visited a store on the outskirts of the gigantic market, which meant that we were able to park the car right in front of it. Both in El Guarda and La Terminal, it was in and out at will – a way of traversing these worlds the poor were not able to do.

But there was a more fundamental way Claudina managed to stay on the surface of the allegedly dangerous neighborhoods she visited. Crucially, Claudina’s distrust toward the arrogant and abusive people of Colegio Gran Bretaña and Vista Alegre also drew from a more general distrust towards people while adding to it at the same time. Claudina, as she put it herself, did

not easily give herself to people, irrespective of their socioeconomic status. Life had taught her to be reserved, she told me. Ergo, Claudina had been a bit annoyed with me after I had spent about half an hour inside Marta's house, leaving her on her own outside. I explained to her that Marta's altars had aroused my curiosity, causing me to lose track of time. "What altars?" Claudina responded with a sudden upset voice. "Something bad?" I had said too much, I realized, as I had automatically – but wrongly – assumed Claudina knew about Marta's candlelit practices. In fact, during the several years the two had known each other, Claudina told me she had always stayed close to the front gate when visiting Marta's house, besides the few times she had to go to the toilet. These were visits she spoke about with visible disgust. Marta's toilet was the only thing in Cerrito del Carmen she did fear, she laughed. It was emblematic for their shallow relationship. "More than everything," Claudina explained, "it is: 'How are you?'; 'How's your daughter?'; 'Lorenita, how have you been?'; 'Take this, I've brought you clothes'; 'look at these shoes, perhaps you like them'; or 'look here, these are clothes that belonged to my daughter, perhaps your daughter likes them.' Like that, right." During my absence, Claudina said, she had spent half an hour answering questions Marta's brother fired at her, with short and meaningless responses. "He was asking about you," she told me, to then reproduce the kind of conversation she had with him: "[Marta's brother:] 'and this guy, where does he come from? Does he live with you? Are you together?' [Claudina:] 'No, he's working' [Marta's brother:] 'And have you gone here, and have you gone there?' [Claudina:] 'No, we're going.' I mean, that is how I am. I didn't have to answer his questions. Only: 'yes'; 'no'; 'we're going.'"

What the above shows is that Claudina, while identifying herself with colonias such as Cerrito del Carmen and Campo Claro, did not run the same (grave) risks as those that lived in these places. This was only part of the truth, however. Her otherness, while only detectable with some prior knowledge in the elite world, was much more visible in the marginal places she visited. Her body language, the way she dressed, the way she talked, the car she drove: Claudina had most likely been an openly lucrative target that day in Cerrito del Carmen even without her enthusiastically pulling out the hundred quetzal bill in front of the atole stand. Something that also went for me, of course. The slashing of her tire was only a small reminder of the possible consequences

attached to the fact that she stood out in more marginal areas of town. Climbing Guatemala's notoriously gluey social ladder was hard, but so was, in a way, descending it. Short and superficial – it may have been the only way for Claudina to visit these places without attracting the kind of attention that would, to put it mildly, take the fun out of it. It was a conclusion, however, Claudina did not necessarily agree with.

Already the first day we met, Claudina told me she would not mind moving to a marginal area of the capital. "It is more cheerful, I mean, it is more cheerful, the world of, what shall I say, a colonia like Nacimiento. Here [Vista Alegre] for example, if I want to go for an ice-cream, I have to go to Paiz [a supermarket]. In the colonias, as we call them, if I want to eat my ice-cream I go to a store close by, to the store on the corner, 'let's go, let's walk together,' and we're going, you understand me. But I don't know, this isn't my world. My life is Zone 12, my barrio, my colonia. This is my children's, because they have grown up in this, this world is theirs. What is sure is that it wouldn't affect me if you tell me 'look, let's go live in Mixco and rent a place there. That would be just fine, because that is my environment. That is my environment. Here I have to live in the world of my children, what they are living, you understand me.'" These were words that gave evidence of a beautification of the past. After all, Claudina's life in Zone 12 had been far from cheerful. But the above account also seemed to contain a beautification of the present. During Claudina's absence, El Nacimiento had become one of the most crime-stricken colonias of the capital. Not the kind of place people, including residents, associated with going out for an ice-cream together.

But just as Claudina's fears did not stop her from being fearless, her awareness of the dangers attached to some of the poor neighborhoods she visited and the changes they had went through did not stop her from projecting qualities onto them that had turned the El Nacimiento of her youth, at least in retrospect, into a place of happiness. It was a world that still existed today, she reassured me, because of the simple fact that she wanted it to exist. "You make your world as you want it to be. This happy world, you make it yourself, Timo, you make your own happy world, you make your own sad world, you make your own criminal world if you want it to be criminal: you make your own world as you want it to be." Therefore, why not 'imagine' Vista Alegre into a happy place? Indeed. If life in Vista Alegre and the world it represented had

shown her anything, it was that one needed more than positive thinking to prevent hardship from marking your life. What this nostalgic line of thinking did seem to provide her with, however, was an escape route, a refuge – if only a virtual one – in a time she seemed desperate for one.

Claudina's shadow

We were driving through Zone 1 on our way to her church, inside of which Claudina lit a candle and placed a bouquet every Wednesday hoping it would gain her new business opportunities, when we passed 18 Calle (18 street), or “Sodom and Gomorrah,” as Claudina called it. The street people it housed, she explained, turned it into an “ugly” place at night. One of poverty, prostitution and crime. By coincidence, I had spoken about 18 Calle a few days before at El Castillo with Moisés’ sister-in-law Glenda, who had been part of 18 Calle’s street people population for a long time. It was a place more vicious than El Castillo, Glenda had told me, rife with rape, stabbings and assaults among street people. “What shall I say to you, Timo,” Claudina uttered after I had shared Glenda’s story with her, “you don’t have to go to a place so poor to see a situation so precarious in a person. You already understand me. Because the truth is, you don’t need to... Let’s take me as an example, you do not need to go to know a person in such a bad situation, to such a bad place, to say: ‘this is the place where the troubled live,’ that is, emotionally, because in my case I can tell you I live well, but emotionally I’m very bad. But I try to fight to survive, to get ahead, to not let the problems of life overshadow me, you understand me, I mean... And I give strength and courage to my daughters so that they fight, fight, fight and get ahead and that they do not stop fighting.” Born poor and with no higher education, Claudina’s persona was a tainted one in the type of elite world she found herself in. This was the shadow side of Claudina’s seeming rags to riches story. The story untold to poor boys and girls hoping one day to leave behind the concrete alleys or sandy paths for a mansion somewhere along Carretera a El Salvador.

Still, it had not been the social exclusion she had to endure occupying her mind that day when she mentioned her precarious situation to me, but instead, problems revolving around the man with whom she had once entered the so-called crystal bubble. She had been separated from Pedro for six years

after having been together for twenty-four years. It had been a relationship with a clear division of roles. Basically, Claudina was to stay at home to run the household, which meant that there had been no room for her longtime wish to study and pursue a professional career as a doctor – she had always pictured herself in her white coat attending patients in a hospital. ‘Who will care for the children then?’ Pedro typically responded whenever she had mentioned aspirations in this direction. At times during their relationship, Claudina said, she had felt like a cook, as she was expected to cook not only for her family, but also for the personnel – which, at lunch, usually included the four bodyguards the family employed – and have everything shipshape when Pedro came home. It was not the life she had dreamt of, although it had its upsides as well – life had been “good in quotation marks,” as Claudina put it. Most importantly, it had allowed her to fully focus on her children and create a safe and loving home for them. As a young girl, she had dreamt of having a lot of children and “love them a lot.” It was the one dream she had managed to accomplish. Would she die today, she told me, she would do so with the knowledge that she would “leave behind good children.”

The separation from Pedro, who had been adulterous throughout their relationship and, in the end, left her for someone else, had weighed heavily upon her. Much more than the falling apart of her relationship, however, it had been the falling apart of her social identity she had experienced as traumatic, as she was forced to start working after the break-up with Pedro and give up what defined her old life. “Because I was very much the staying home kind of person,” Claudina explained, “with my daughters, cooking for them, making them pies, waiting for them. I was so accustomed that my daughters would leave and I would stay at home, to see what I would make for lunch or prepare for dessert. Or I would bring one of them to school and stay there. That was my world: my house, my daughters. But as a result of many things, I have to go out, like I said, to go to the motels, to come and go, to be there, to deal with people. I left my daughters, I no longer have lunch with them because now they have different hours, and I am out to work, as they say, to make a living.”

But this had not been the only traumatic turn of the story. Despite the fact that Claudina had felt freer to make her own decisions after her separation from Pedro, the latter had managed to exercise a considerable amount of control over her. In fact, the shadow he cast over her life was so profound

and omnipresent that she referred to him as “my shadow” or “my sombrero.” Crucially, with no diplomas and little work experience, Claudina had seen no other option than to start working for him after the two had split up, as it had provided her a way to stay in the house with her children. The financial construction that Pedro came up with, however, did not involve a salary for Claudina, but granted her a part of the profit from which he deducted the utilities for the house, the tuition for their children and other costs such as those for the bodyguards. Some months this meant there was money left for her to spend on other things than keeping her household going, but on other months there was not. In practice, it meant that the ‘extras’ in Claudina’s life, such as new shoes and a gym subscription, were paid for by her sons. The thought that after a relationship of twenty-four years she was now “*una trabajadora más*” (just another employee) was a saddening and frustrating one. “One without a salary,” she sardonically laughed. If only they had been married, she said, she would have fought for what she believed should have come her way – something for herself; something, as she put it, “to be able to say: ‘this is mine and no one is going to take it from me.’” The arrangement between Pedro and her felt even more unjust because of the fact that his two other women – he had three families he maintained – had seen motels transferred to their names. She was even managing one of the motels owned by the lady for whom Pedro had left her. It seemed a cruel twist of life.

Meanwhile, she had to consult with Pedro every time a decision had to be made that transcended the everyday. This did not confine itself to the work environment as she lived in the house he had paid and was still paying for, while he had put it on the name of her children. As a result, she felt little room to maneuver. According to Claudina, she could not change the garden or the house without asking him for permission first. She had also wanted to sell the large pick-up truck she drove, a car she considered to be hers, until she found out she would have to give the money to him as he was the one who had once bought it. The fact that he was paying for the house also meant that she was not allowed to invite over a boyfriend to the house or to the businesses she ran for him. It would be a “total lack of respect,” he had told her, Claudina said. And if she would do so, Pedro had warned her that he would stop paying for the house. Her new boyfriend could then start paying for it, he had uttered. There was a malicious plan behind this all, Claudina believed. “He’s a very

possessive person. He wants everything for himself and doesn't want anyone to touch it, no one, nothing. So, [he is] my sombrero I say." During my second fieldwork period, the situation between Pedro and her had gotten even more complicated, as Claudina told me he had stopped talking to her because he had heard someone had fallen in love with her. He had come to see her as his enemy, Claudina said. She now believed Felix was spying on her on behalf of Pedro, passing on whenever she or her children came home late.

"There's no getting away from this shadow," Claudina told me. At least, not in Guatemala. During my fieldwork, Claudina kept playing with the thought of going to the United States. She had already wanted to move there after the separation from Pedro, considering the safety and well-being of her children, but her daughters had been less enthusiastic about her plan as it meant they would have to leave behind their friends. So she had stayed. In more recent times, she had again felt the urge to leave the country, though this time – even though Claudina believed crime had only worsened over the years – it was primarily Pedro she sought to escape from. Moreover, it would only be for a month, as it had become nearly impossible to obtain U.S. citizenship at the time and she did not want to lose her visa by overstaying. Still she hoped it would give her some time-off from the daily malady she experienced in Guatemala. She had a brother in Atlanta with whom she could stay – he had once joked that he would find her someone to marry with right away. Her children were older now, so she believed she could leave them for a while.

Claudina's plan to go the United States, however, did not materialize during my fieldwork and it would not for (at least) the year to come. Interestingly, according to wealthy business owner Ines and her personal trainer, who joined our conversation after a while that day in the Ines' home, taking refuge in the United States had always been a move right out of the 'crystal bubble playbook.' Elites, they said, always make sure they have a place to run to when things, for whatever reasons, get out of hand in Guatemala, which also means they never confine their investments to Guatemala only (see also Garrard-Burnett, 2010). Capital is even more fearful than people is what was told to me by someone who had been vice-minister under Álvaro Colom (2008-2012). For many of them, the United States represented the refuge of choice. But as migration laws in the United States toughened in more recent times, this had become an uncertain escape route also for elites. Of course,

there were not only elites in Guatemala seeking their salvation in a flight up north. Still, in the case of Claudina, who had repeatedly brought up that she would not mind moving to a marginal area, it was telling she singled out the United States as a refuge instead of El Nacimiento or a similar kind of place.

Crystal cage

*"When sadness falls over me,
The world stops existing,
I look back and search among my memories,*

*To find the girl that I was,
And something of all that I lost,
I look back and search among my memories."*⁶²

Even though these words must have left Claudina's lips many times, they were not hers, at least not originally, as they belonged to '*Entre mis recuerdos*' (Among my memories), a song by the Spanish singer Luz Casal. It was the one song Claudina identified herself with and it was not hard to see why. In the face of exclusion and other hardship, she had clung to finding the girl she once was and the world she once left. It was a world in which she had been one of the many girls wanting to move up the social ladder instead of the seemingly only one looking for a way down.

At the same time, much had changed since Claudina left Zone 12 more than two decades ago. Violence in postwar Guatemala urbanized and gained an increasingly criminal character, turning places like El Nacimiento into petri dishes for crime and violence. In consequence, the El Nacimiento as Claudina knew it did not exist anymore. In addition to this, Claudina herself – and how else could it be – had also changed, depending on the amenities attached to her new social status perhaps more than she wanted to admit. Searching the depths of memory, this is to say, may have been the only way left for Claudina to find her poorer self again. This was a lonely exercise, also because there were parts of Claudina's past she did not need reminders of. It was why she

⁶² Original lyrics in Spanish: "*Cuando la pena cae sobre mí / El mundo deja ya de existir / Miro hacia atrás y busco entre mis recuerdos / Para encontrar la niña que fui / Y algo de todo lo que perdí / Miro hacia atrás y busco entre mis recuerdos*" (Translation TP).

often did not like “*profundizar*” (going in depth) about her past with me, or with anyone, and yet another reason for keeping people at a certain distance. Thinking about what was done to her, she said, filled her with feelings of rage and sadness, or gave her the feeling she had been defeated. “And I don’t like that,” she stressed.

Crucially, weighing on today’s problems were future ones. Claudina found some relief in the thought that she would not be forced out of her house, as it was owned by her children and she did not think they would want her to leave it. But still, it would become an increasingly empty house, given that it was only a matter of time, Claudina believed, before her children would move out and start having families of their own. Meanwhile, not only did Pedro stand in the way of finding a new partner, but Claudina also believed that, at the age of forty-seven, she had already passed the age of dating – that part of her life was a “*cuestión olvidada*” (forgotten matter), she cited another song.⁶³ And what would happen to her job after the last one of her children leaves the house and Pedro does not need her to look after their children anymore? These were thoughts running through Claudina’s mind, depressing ones stressing the injustices she had to suffer. “I deserve to be peaceful at this point in my life, but he [Pedro] doesn’t let me be.”

The similarities between Claudina’s life in the poor colonias of Zone 12 and life in the crystal bubbles of the Carretera a El Salvador – by the looks of it two worlds apart – were striking. Though the latter place reflected Claudina’s social climb, she had never been able to shrug off the exclusion and powerlessness so often associated with being poor in countries as unequal, violent and unjust as Guatemala. In fact, the biggest difference between her life before and her life today, Claudina said, was that even though her youth had been “sad and hard,” deep down inside she had been happy, because she had hopes for a better life. She did not anymore. “As a girl,” she told me one day while we were driving through El Nacimiento, passing her old house, the homes of two former boyfriends and the market where she used to go to every day as a young girl, “the truth is, I had more hopes and dreams than I have now. Now I have a lot of problems. Before I had nothing, I was a girl that didn’t have anything but a lot of dreams, what shall I say, about life, about what to have and what to do, having in mind a beautiful future and all that.” It was

⁶³ *Cuestión olvidada*, a song most famously performed by the Mexican band Los Tigres del Norte.

a bitter truth. Who would have thought that the crystal bubble turned out to be a crystal cage? And who would have thought that the humble colonia she once dreamed of leaving turned out to be a paradise? Or at least in retrospect, born in exile, out of nostalgia. A paradise lost, if it was not for her memory. “When sadness falls over me,” I picture Claudina singing as I write this, “the world stops existing, I look back and search among my memories, to find the girl that I was, and something of all that I lost, I look back and search among my memories.”

7. Uncovering the Unseen

In the previous chapters I have told the stories of Moisés, Abel, Colin and other street people from El Castillo; Miguel, María Luisa and their children Daniel, Rosa and Yolanda of the Pineda family; Oscar and his daughters Lucila, Tatiana and Paola of the Contreras family; Gustavo and Valeria of the Mérida family; and Claudina of the Tirado family. From poor to rich, each case represents a different social class within Guatemala City's hierarchical spectrum. It is a division that does not hide itself in the city, as groups of street people exist alongside poor colonias typically diving into steep ravines and gated communities of all kinds. Yet as the latter phenomenon already hints upon, the stories I have told here are peeks into worlds that try hard to remain hidden. They are portraits of people unseen. Such is the case because being unseen, through withdrawal, is the principal response to the versatility of dangers, uncertainties and anxieties Guatemala City residents tend to live with on a daily basis.

In this last chapter, I will identify some of the main themes running through the narratives and let the narratives reflect on each other so as to paint a more general picture of how people in Guatemala City give shape and meaning to their lives in the midst of extreme violence and inequality. I will do so dividing the chapter into three parts. The first part is devoted to laying bare the social order of the everyday violence my respondents encountered in their lives. To do justice to the way they experienced this, I switch angles from

which to approach the matter of violence along the way. From highlighting, respectively, the relationship between the state and my respondents to elaborating on the different forms of violence my respondents experienced and discussing the way they imagined their social existence and looked into the future. I will start the first part with a short comparison of two of my cases, which serves as an introduction for the themes that I will address. In the second part of the chapter, I take up what I believe were the most important ways of coping – both socially and psychologically – with the forms of everyday violence as identified in the first part, this way coming up with a social order of coping with violence. Like with the first part, I will start the second part with a comparison of two cases, different ones, to introduce my main themes. The division between everyday violence and coping mechanisms on which the first two parts are based, however, is an artificial one, invoked for the matter of clarity but doing no justice to the complex ways the two are interwoven. I will expose this convenient fiction in the third part in which I paint a more holistic picture of life in Guatemala City. Below, I will introduce the first part of this chapter by positioning the El Castillo people and Claudina, who were both situated at a different pole of the metropolis’s hierarchical spectrum, in relation to each other.

The social order of violence: the cases of El Castillo and Claudina

“You don’t have to go to a place so poor to see a situation so precarious in a person.” These were words that Claudina uttered to me when we drove pass 18 Calle in Guatemala City’s Zone 1, referring to the street people that lived there as well as to her own poor wellbeing. It was one of the rare moments where I felt that my two most extreme cases, or at least what they represented (as I was following a different group of street people), touched each other in a more concrete way. And not only because Claudina described her own situation by referring to the situation of the street people, but also because she spoke of a vulnerability that seemed to go right through walls, bodyguards and luxury, as if she was as out in the open as the street people were.

At the same time, it was hard to imagine Claudina’s misery being in the same league as the suffering of the street people. Take my experiences at El Castillo the day before my conversation with Claudina, when I came to

know that Mari and Moisés' four-year-old daughter Avigail had almost been kidnapped from Moisés' arms once. Fortunately, Moisés had been able to fight off the attackers, but the event was exemplary for the fact that nothing was off-limits on the street. In fact, Mari had already lost her first child by abduction. The story was told to me by Mari's sister, who also said that Avigail – who lived in a house together with Mari and Moisés if he was not on the streets – sometimes spent the night at El Castillo whenever her mother was too high on solvent to make the journey back home. What would the future hold for Avigail? It was something that passed my mind every time I found her at El Castillo.

The day before was also the day when I heard Wayo murmur that his body wasn't his body, after which he threw up in front of the whole group, with no one even giving him the slightest attention. At that point, the group was already ignoring him because he had been droning on for solvent without having any money to buy some, and they continued to do so, even as he started to sweep the little bit of vomit he had in him into the cracks of the concrete pavement right in front of the others. The street people bore resemblances to Ralph Ellison's 'invisible man', being highly visible to the outside world as a group yet invisible, sometimes literally, as individuals. People of flesh and blood with the right to being treated as such. It was arguably the biggest pain of those on the streets. It was only telling that, especially in the beginning of my fieldwork, they sometimes felt the need to stress to me that they *too* were people. They were invisible to the state, often experiencing either neglect or its violent hand. The elders at El Castillo had all lost friends in the 1980s and 1990s by the hands of state-sponsored death squads and in present time, bullying and beatings mainly by the hands of the Municipal Police where still part and parcel of street life. They were invisible to the outside world, not seldom violently attacked, discriminated, humiliated or treated as ghosts while they were begging or cleaning car windows to sponsor their drug addiction. And in a way, they were invisible to each other too as companionship existed alongside fights over drugs, stealing from each other and violent punishments they subjected each other to for breaking the rules or, as it seemed, out of boredom or "wanting to fuck with someone." The world of El Castillo, to put it in Moisés' words, was one "of violence, of so much sadness, so much egoism, and of so many blows in life."

How was the misery of Claudina, who lived together with her five children, two bodyguards and two maids in a mansion in the walled upper middle class neighborhood of Vista Alegre compare with this? To be sure, Claudina never said that her problems were as big as the ones the El Castillo people were faced with - and they weren't. Yet as she said it herself, she was pretty miserable. At the moment of speaking, Claudina had her ex-partner Pedro in mind, who according to her still tried to dominate her after they had separated - reason for her to call him her "shadow" or "sombbrero". Crucially, after the two had split up, she had seen no other option than to start working for him in one of his motels given that it had provided her a way to stay in the house with her children. Lacking diplomas and work experience, what else could she have done?

By the time I met her, six years after the separation, she ran a few motels for Pedro, but did this without gaining a fixed income. Instead, she was granted a part of the profit from which he deducted the utilities for the house, the tuition for their children and other costs such as those for the bodyguards. Some months, this meant that there was no money left to spend on other things than keeping her household going. At least to a certain extent, this turned Claudina into a servant of necessity as many others in Guatemala City's informal economy, though, admittedly, few of them were able to sustain the kind of lifestyle Claudina had. What added to her frustration was the fact that she felt that she had deserved a better arrangement after a relationship of twenty-four years in which Pedro had continuously betrayed her with other women and finally left her for someone else

Claudina's social suffering, however, did not confine itself to Pedro and her work situation. She found herself in an environment where she was almost daily reminded of having an inferior status. Born poor, with little formal education and associated with the 'dirty' motel-business, she was shunned by the other mothers at the school of her daughters and looked down upon in her neighborhood Vista Alegre. The exclusive world of these places, which I-called the crystal bubble (after one of the friends of my landlady Ester), turned out to be a crystal cage for Claudina. It was why she kept stressing that she lived in the world of her children, her world being the one of El Nacimiento, the poor colonia she grew up in.

In addition to this, there was the ever-present fear of violent crime. Claudina spent much of her day in the car commuting between her home, the school of her youngest daughter, her motels and the stores that supplied the motels. The road was a particularly dangerous place in Guatemala City, rife with aggression among drivers, violent assaults and accidents, and Claudina had seen various people getting violently robbed in front of her eyes. It was an assault on the road of one of her daughters, however, that she feared the most, also because she was afraid that it would end up in them being raped. It did not help that both her daughters had very “robable cars,” as Claudina put it. “It is a fear that is always there with you,” she said.

The social suffering, the exclusion, the insecurity – according to Claudina, they were reflections of a corrupt system that had lost its credibility among Guatemalans. But they were also ills that had their origin in ‘The Guatemalan’ as a people, Claudina believed. A certain level of cautiousness was always necessary in Guatemala, she said, because Guatemalans begrudged each other’s successes. It was within this context that Claudina’s problems had come to represent a kind of hopelessness that found little comfort in the walls, bodyguards and luxury she saw herself surrounded with.

In the shadow of the state

What kind of relationship between state and citizen did the violence and neglect the El Castillo people experienced from the hands of the state attest to? And what did the fact that Claudina lived in a ‘wall-defined’ community, like many others in Guatemala City, say about the relationship between state and citizen? And to what mood among Guatemala City residents gave Claudina’s pessimism, even cynicism, towards the state evidence of? I believe there is a common answer to these questions, or better yet, that the answers to these questions have a common reference point. On a macro level, this reference point would be what a growing group of scholars now call something along the lines of ‘violent’ or ‘securitized’ democracy: the idea that Latin American democracy is gradually subjected to a securitizing logic that not only generates direct state violence but also a form of governing through violence that thrives upon violent engagement with violent actors not belonging to the formal state as well as on violence accumulation in general (Arias & Goldstein, 2010;

Pearce, 2010). Violence may have been diffused and put in the hands of the masses, this line of thinking tells us, but this does not necessarily mean that it gives evidence to a system out of control. It is an important insight, but also one that can hardly capture the feel of what it is to live in such a system on a daily basis.

It is for this reason that I try to come up with a more grounded characterization of the way the Guatemalan state materialized in the everyday lives of my respondents in this section. I do so, and here is the common ground between the answers to the three questions raised above, by arguing that people in Guatemala City live in *the shadow of the state*. It is a choice of words used before by other social scientists for different reasons and in different contexts. The phrase has been perhaps most famously used by the British sociologist Ralph Miliband (2011 [1969]) who opened his classic *The state in capitalist society* saying that “more than ever before men now live in the shadow of the state” (p. 3). The state Miliband referred to is a strong state that is above all a force that helps the ruling economic class to prevail but at the same time an agent that mitigates “the form and content of class domination in many areas of civil society” (p. 194). The latter characteristic, Miliband writes, is the price to pay for big business to guarantee its dominance, not in the least because it also helps to explain why the state is still widely viewed by the people as a “servant of society” (p. 194). In the case of Guatemala City, however, the metaphor of the shadow captures a different feel that derives its meaning from two associations that are often attributed to the shadow: the shadow as a place of *negativity* and the shadow as a place of *poor sight*.

The shadow as a place of negativity represents the feel of the first aspect I would like to highlight here, that is, the pessimistic, even cynic, mood among Guatemala City residents regarding the state and its functioning. Guatemala City residents found each other in a widely shared dark outlook on everything the state encapsulated. When I started my fieldwork in May 2016, images of former president Otto Pérez Molina and vice president Roxana Baldetti slipping each other helicopters, mansions and other outrageously expensive presents had been inscribed into the collective memory of a people already marked by corruption, poverty, inequality and violence. It brought the public

trust in Guatemala's political and authoritative institutions to a historical low.⁶⁴ Basically, any one of the "particular institutions which, together, constitute its [the state's] reality, and which interact as part of what may be called the state system" (Miliband, 2011 [1969], p. 48) was deemed incompetent at best. As my friend Alfredo, who owned a private security company, had said, "you don't have to be a scientist to know what is going on here. Politicians are stealing money and monopolies like Cemento Progreso [a large cement company owned by a powerful family] are paying them under the table." Critically, such reasoning – with whom few people would disagree in Guatemala City – gave evidence of a wider, Gramscian view of the state; one sensitive to the intertwining of state and civil society, picturing the former as a "privileged site of both power and struggle" (Trouillot, 2001, p. 127) instead of a mere set of institutions. In a way, corruption and other malpractices involving the state tended to be nothing short than expected and as such lost much of their power to shock people. Deeply entrenched as they were, whenever corruption and malpractices came to light, they added to the heaviness of the heart of the Guatemalan people, if at all, but could not let it skip a beat. And if they did manage to do so, it was because of the "shameless" proportions and the "cynicism" involved, to use Claudina's words on the fraud rings of the Pérez Molina government, or because it affected a person in a more direct way, either as a victim or because of another personal connection to an event. For Gustavo, for instance, state corruption under the Portillo government (2000–2004) had particularly hurt him since it involved a large number of members of El Verbo, the neo-Pentecostalist church he had been a part of for decades.

The shadow as a place of poor sight represents two different 'state of beings'. On the one hand, it refers to the tendency and ability of at least part of the population 'to keep the state in the dark' about their everyday lives and activities. This signals a form of agency – people that were able to shield themselves from state interference, as they cashed in on gates, guards and other assets. For people like Gustavo and Claudina, as well as for other more privileged residents of Guatemala City, the formal state did not necessarily

⁶⁴ A July/August 2015 opinion poll of the newspaper *Prensa Libre* (Velásquez, 2015) singled out the president – Pérez Molina was still in place – as the institution with the lowest public confidence (11 percent), followed by congressional deputies (12 percent) and political parties (13 percent). The low public confidence in the judiciary (25 percent), the police (26 percent) and the mayors (36 percent) signalled a wider crisis, although such numbers were not uncommon, just like the fact that CICIG had the highest rate of approval (66 percent) did.

materialize in everyday life beyond the above described scandals mostly because they were in a position to avoid contact with state agents and, in some case, let the state apparatus work for them.

On the other hand, the shadow and its association with poor sight captures the feel of the status quo between the mainly the poor and a largely absent state with violent tendencies, in which barriers for state institutions and agents to avert their gaze – and fail to see and “acknowledge what should be right before their eyes” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 272) – or engage in blatant violence or shady constructions were lowered. Here, poor sight marks lack of agency: people that found themselves subjected to state sponsored violence and other treatments that ‘could not stand the light of day’ (in this case, agency shifts towards state agents that were able to act without having to render account for their actions). It means that compared to their more privileged counterparts, the poor found themselves in a more murky kind of shadow in which, as I will explain below, they experienced the state’s averted gaze, its violent hand and/or acts of criminal collusion by the hands of the state and its agents (see also Kilanski & Auyero, 2015).

Let us start with the state’s averted gaze the poor were subjected to. To emphasize the tangible feel of this averted gaze and the fact that, I believe, both state agents and citizens were aware of the neglect involved with it, I would like to argue that the state’s averted gaze takes shape through what I call ‘acts of absence’. In the case of the El Castillo people, for instance, a local mayor told me that the municipality only worked with them through supporting private sector programs. According to her, this was about the only possible way to help them as she believed that the people of El Castillo would get violent on her and her colleagues would they show up there wearing their municipal vests. Although the danger of being on the ground for state agents should not be taken too lightly in a place like Guatemala City, the local mayor’s narrative seemed perfectly fit to blur a state’s (or municipal’s) neglect. Perhaps tellingly, despite her predilection for working through the private sector, the local mayor criticized the majority of the NGOs working with street people for taking away their incentives of leaving the streets, simply handing them food without expecting anything in return. El Samaritano, the NGO closest to the people of El Castillo, shared this critique though not her characterization of street life as an easy ride. According to the local mayor, El Samaritano was

the only organization that actually tried to get the people of El Castillo off the streets and therefore the one the municipality supported. Joe, El Samaritano's director, however, spoke less positively about the 'help' he received from the local authorities. In practice, he found himself to be an intermediary between the municipality and the street people, his job being the protection of the latter's rights and, especially, physical integrity. Operating within the vacuum left behind by the state, some of the more involved social workers like Joe were *a state and a mate* at the same time, while, inevitably, falling short at both of them.

The state's averted gaze could also manifest itself through a variation of it, that is, the state's repressive gaze. Especially in high crime places such as Guatemala City, hardline and repressive approaches tend to play into people's ideas of good governance – as crime is known to create its own shadow, distracting people from the social issues that underpins it – while they prove unable to bring structural relief against criminal violence (Peeters et al., 2013). In this light, it was not farfetched at all that María Luisa blamed 'Iron Fist' Pérez Molina for being extorted. He had clamped down on gang structures through in-and-out police raids and had brought in the army without having eye for the fact that this helped shift the gang's focus towards extorting home owners, as homegrown gang members were captured and replaced with *mareros* with no prior connection to the neighborhood. Just as it was to be expected that president Morales' decision to withdraw the soldiers from the street sparked protests in some poor colonias dealing with problems similar to the ones of Balcón Verde – which were also motivated by the fact that the military enjoyed considerably more popular support than the police.⁶⁵ Still, it was repression without follow-up, in the sense that the 'sticks' of the army were never matched with social programs, the 'carrots,' targeting the factors that fed the violence. As one security expert had put it, "The state never arrived [in the poor colonias], only the army. Progress didn't arrive, only the army. Security didn't arrive, only the army." This not only reflected badly in the streets but also in prisons which were dealing with an over capacity of 280 percent while almost half of the prisoners were waiting for trial, often for long periods (CIEN, 2014a). In addition to this, hardline approaches tended to be

⁶⁵ For example, 50 percent of the people that participated in a Prensa Libre poll of July/August 2015 expressed their confidence in the military vis-à-vis 26 percent in the police (Velásquez, 2015).

coupled with other types of abuse and legal and extralegal violence that only stimulated the victimhood and marginality of those already caught in socially and economically deprived conditions.

The above brings me to the state presence that materialized in the lives of the poor through acts of violence. In postwar Guatemala, extrajudicial killings, by the police, especially of gang members, have flared up at times (Ranum, 2011; Samayoa, 2011). One of Daniel's friends had also become victim of social cleansing, or so Miguel believed, as he first disappeared to be found dead later with his hands cut off. Street people, as we have seen, had been subjected to similar campaigns and, in contemporary times, to bullying and beatings. On the streets, but also in state-run homes for orphaned, abandoned and abused minors. It was out of fear for being brought to such a place that minors at El Castillo hid themselves whenever the police passed by. The grim reality of these places reached national spotlight on the seventh of March 2017 when forty girls died in a fire while being locked up in a room. Meanwhile, it was telling for the 'shadowy' workings of the system that allowed state violence to exist that Joe proved unable to hold a policeman to account who had put a gun to the head of fourteen-year-old Joshua during a clash between the police and some of the people of El Castillo. From the latter side, this had included throwing rocks at the police.

Lastly, state presence manifested itself through acts of corruption and conjunction between state agents and criminals. In Balcón Verde, the police was widely suspected to work in collusion with the gang. It was telling for the corrupt image of the police, however, that few of my respondents there had actually seen police officers cooperate with the maras or engage in corrupt behavior differently. Instead, their suspicions mainly rested on, again, acts of absence. The police was corrupt, Miguel's wife María Luisa said, because the mara killed people just outside the police station without the police doing anything. Such reasoning seemed plausible, not only because corruption within the police force was known to be rife but also because, as two former police officers had told me independently of each other, overtly corrupt and abusive cops in Guatemala City were sent to bad neighborhoods as way of punishment. At the same time, even though corruption seemed to have been the standard, it would be a mistake to automatically explain police absence in such terms, or corruption solely in terms of financial gain or a 'cultural'

swing towards such behavior. Crucially, the police in Balcón Verde and other such places tended to not only be badly equipped but also outnumbered in comparison to the criminals they were supposed to disarm. One could readily believe, this is to say, that they were as scared for maras and other criminal groups as many of the residents were. And as the footage of the lynching of a gang leader from Balcón Verde in an adjacent neighborhood showed – and images of many other lynchings in Latin America – police officers could also stand by inactively while ‘ordinary’ residents had a go at the alleged criminals the police was believed to serve.

As I have argued in the above, people in Guatemala City resided in the shadow of the state, a choice of words that refers to a widely shared dark outlook among Guatemala City residents on the state and what it encapsulated as well as to a high degree of invisibility between state and citizen and vice versa (the shadow as a place of poor sight). Of course, this meant different things in different contexts. In general, the middle and upper middle class were the most effective in shutting out the state from their everyday lives. At the same time, it could be argued that the state presence in poor neighborhoods hardly brought more interaction between state forces and the occupants of these places. For many people in these places the state was mostly present in its absence, as they resided in a shadow that was both imposed and sought – in some ways, the state was as unseen as the people were. But as the case of the street people shows, those that did reside in the state’s gaze usually experienced little beyond its violent hand.

Each world its violence

The stories of El Castillo and Claudina teach us much about violence in Guatemala City. The first story stands out by the severity of the violence, exclusion and poverty involved. Guatemala City is known to be a violent place, but the ugliness of this can only be understood if we assess violence and social suffering on the ground. El Castillo was ‘a world of violence,’ as Moisés had put it. Meanwhile, Claudina’s story asks us not to close our eyes to the violence that is experienced by others than the poor. Indeed, the world of driving rotable cars and wealth, or being associated with it, came with different types of risks. But Claudina also experienced a type of seclusion and powerlessness

that is usually associated with the poor. Her story in combination with what we have seen at El Castillo shows us that each world has its violence.

Now this may not be a particular noteworthy conclusion. In fact, I believe that with some logical thinking one could have come to this conclusion without having done any fieldwork. Yet at the same time, there is little attention within ethnographic research for violence suffered by others than the poor (see Kleinman, 2000). As understandable as this may be, this has led to simplistic, zero-sum divisions that make it almost seem as if violence can only be 'rightfully' experienced by the poor. Neoliberalism as a system of winners and losers, gated communities as highly controlled, socially homogeneous areas that allow residents to surround themselves with what they consider to be good (a misunderstanding on which I will come back): they are images that leave little room for nuance. The following section should be read against this background as it poses a counterforce to this dominant narrative by elaborating on the claim that each world has its violence. This claim is based on two assumptions. First, violence tends to stick to class, which means that the worlds I am talking about here are predominately class-defined. Second, violence can be experienced in different roles and from different forms of involvement.

To begin, violence has a strong nose for class. Above all this means that violence and social suffering tend to be at its most alarming in places marked by poverty. Pointing to the fact that twenty-first century violence concentrates in poor, urban dwellings, Dennis Rodgers, Jo Beall and Ravi Kanbur (2012) state that these have turned into places where violence "has arguably become *the* defining feature of life" (p. 15, emphasis in original). Looking at El Castillo but also at Balcón Verde, there is much to say for such a stance. In fact, Moisés' 'world of violence' even seemed to go a step further, as it gave evidence of a world that was nothing *but* violence. Inevitably in such a world, violence did not only befall the street people from the outside world, but was sometimes also exercised upon the outside world (especially through robbery) as well as upon each other. It was the casualness with which the seeming opposites of companionship and violence merged into a normal way of living at El Castillo, and the inescapability of violence that followed from it, that turned a violent world into a world of violence. Balcón Verde, in turn, was a world reigned by fear where one or two extortion calls were enough to force people into giving

up everything they had worked for and where half of the old residents were said to have left because of the violence.⁶⁶ The magnitude of especially the extortion problem seemed impossible to exaggerate though little represented by official numbers – for instance, the fact that there had been an average of twenty-two extortion-related reports to the police a day in 2017 (García, 2018) – given the fact that there was massive underreporting (CIEN, 2014b). Instead, the pervasiveness and intrusiveness of extortion was better reflected in police campaigns bearing inferno names such as ‘Rescue of the South,’ ‘Rescuing Guate,’ and ‘Guate is ours’ (Pocasangre, 2016) – thus picturing places rife with extortion as worlds that have to be rescued – and the fact that extortion continued, and even seemed to increase, in spite of these campaigns and the many arrests they produced. But Rodgers’ description also seemed to ring true for life in Chapín, where Valentina tried to stay alive doing favors for two different gangs, as she had to go from one gang turf to another every day to get to work – a life her brother described as “Russian roulette”. And for the bus drivers in Guatemala, who were often extorted by multiple groups and went to “work every day without knowing if they would ever return” (Cordero & Barrientos, 2018). Perhaps it even for went for life in Loma Linda. This may have been a relatively safe place (although one could also build a case saying it was not), but it had danger lurking outside its barriers. Lucila may have been overstating when she estimated that she had been robbed twenty times while riding the bus from her neighborhood to work, but even half of that number would still be a lot!

Compared to their poorer counterparts, the more privileged zones, especially within the perimeters of a closed condominium, tended to be safe havens and their inhabitants usually led relatively safe lives. But this did not mean that violent threats dropped linearly as one’s socioeconomic status rose. Just as there were dangers that more eagerly popped up in lower classes, there

⁶⁶ Compared to other violent crimes like robbery and kidnapping, extortion was less dependent on actual violence. Contact with the victim was often established and maintained through phone calls and even a personal confrontation with the target was not always necessary to make a person pay (or flee). At the same time, with the many extortion-related killings in mind, residents that were subjected to extortion seemed to have few other options than to pay up or to flee. But it was fear that did the work, much more than the extorter. It explained the suitability of *mareros* for the job, being the “sum of all fears” (Argueta, 2016), but also why there were many ‘copycat’ extorters around falsely claiming to be part of a street gang to scare people into paying (Muñoz Palala, 2016; Paola Martínez, 2018).

were dangers that specifically attached to higher classes (or specific economic activities within these classes). Crucially, money is one of the assets criminals tend to follow, which turned better-off citizens into lucrative targets, though at the same time also into targets that were hard to hit given that money often translated into securitization. This helped attracting a certain type of crime and criminal to their profile. Claudina, for instance, had long been terrified that one of her children would get kidnapped after they had received a postcard in the early 1990s signed by a death squad that, which as rose to the surface later, had been tied to the military. It was a typical fear within wealthier circles, although after the number of kidnappings reduced significantly over the last years, it seemed to have lost some of its acuteness – as it did with Claudina. Meanwhile, within business – as I learned from a bodyguard who had worked for some of the most prominent businessmen in Guatemala – business rivals were feared as much as criminals were. Being a businessman in Guatemala meant you either instilled fear upon your rivals “or let fear be instilled upon you.”

At the same time, it would be an easy mistake to present the worlds of ‘poor’, ‘middle class’ and ‘rich’ as separated universes with dangers that, as such, were automatically different in nature. There were class-transcending dangers, this is to say, often attached to places where classes intermingled, although it needs to be said that violence kept sticking to class also in these places. The road, which Claudina feared more than anything, was one such place that brought together people from all strata of the population. On the one hand, traffic tended to be as clogged for the poor as for the rich and it was during these moments of being stuck in traffic that Gustavo and Claudina had seen various people getting violently robbed in front of their eyes. On the other hand, people entered the road unequally equipped. Bus drivers and passengers, for instance, may have been among the most vulnerable users of the road. Consider the number of times Oscar’s daughter Lucila had been robbed in the bus or the game of “Russian roulette,” in Gustavo’s words, I had once played (and many others played every day) by taking the bus back from the town of Santa Cruz de Quiché to the capital after visiting Gustavo’s office. Valeria’s classroom at the San Carlos University was another example of a class-transcending place that turned out to be a *classroom* as much as any other place, as professors directed their indecent proposals – better grades

in exchange for sex – only to poor students, according to Valeria, because professors knew that these proposals would only add to the usual violence they experienced in their lives and were thus less likely to shock them. It improved the chances of success, while it lowered the risks of students reporting them to school authorities.

Violence, as we have seen, tends to stick to class and also in places where classes come together. Having said this, it is important to stress that class violence is not always as clear-cut as pictured above. I will give three reasons for this.

The first one we have already addressed: The concept of class is a ‘messy’ one, economic capital being only one of its determinants, and therefore so is class violence. This was showcased by Claudina, who may have fitted the postcard image of the city’s elite with her mansion, cars and bodyguards, but at the same time was not the most representative scion of the upper middle class I positioned her in, given the fact that she was born poor, had enjoyed little formal education and was associated with the ‘dirty’ motel-business. As a result of these latter characteristics, she experienced a kind of exclusion and powerlessness untypical for the Guatemala City elite.

Second, the class-defined worlds of the central notion of this section are dynamic and prone to contextual change. One could say that Miguel even switched worlds after his extortion if we judge it from the type of violence he experienced. It was not hard to see how he had gone from one struggle, keeping his family safe in a dangerous neighborhood, to another, keeping his family in a safer neighborhood ‘above his paygrade’. Like many others in Guatemala City he had been forced to make a decision that, if we oversimplify it for the sake of the argument, boiled down to choosing between two evils. The first one was staying. This would have saved him from having to bear the costs of losing his house to start over somewhere else but would not have changed his security problem. The second option was leaving, which was the safer option but also resulted in more poverty, a result known as a waterbed effect. Indeed, places like Guatemala City, where security is not for the public good (and thus tends to come with costs), are fertile grounds for situations where people see themselves forced to make radical choices between ‘package deals’ of more security and more poverty, on the one hand, and less security and less poverty, on the other hand. Miguel went for the first option. To be able to make ends

meet, he worked days of sixteen and seventeen hours, often seven days a week as a taxi driver, also because María Luisa was without a job during a large part of my fieldwork. It did not help that drivers had to submit themselves to a system that carried everything in it for them to lose themselves in their work (and to lose their family), as they were forced to make long days to overcome the threshold caused by the rent of the car. It was life on a treadmill, running to try to stay in place. Still, it was hardly enough to put food on the table and pay for the rent and his daughter Yolanda's tuition fee.

Third, violence does not only follow class but also other characteristics, identities and tendencies, which, as we have seen in the above, may also interact with class. I have singled out class as being especially relevant if we look at violence in Guatemala City, but I could have also built a case around, for instance, gender. Indeed, in a country with one of the highest rates of femicide in the world⁶⁷, it was not without reason that Claudina, who also had two sons, especially worried about the safety of her daughters while on the road. Meanwhile, Claudina's habit of visiting poor areas in the city brought dangers to her world that were untypical for people who, like Claudina, were able to avoid these places.

In the above, we have established that the central claim of this section, each world its violence, needs to be understood from a class perspective, that is, if we take into account some limitations and peculiarities attached to class as a determinant for violence. But there is a second ground rule I would like to attach to this claim. To be able to understand the imprint violence can have on a person, a family or a society, this research shows that we also have to take into account that violence and social suffering can be experienced in different roles and from different forms of involvement – from victim to perpetrator and from protector to bystander and everything in between. They are roles that each ask from its carrier to come to terms with them. Let's take Gustavo's struggle with his work for NGO's as an example. He had made good money and had also been able to travel around the world and within Guatemala. He had obtained a privileged position in almost any part of the world and especially in poor country like Guatemala. But it was also a line of work that had brought him

⁶⁷ According to a much-cited 2012 report by Small Arms Survey, Guatemala is experiencing epidemic levels of gender-based violence with the highest femicide rate in the world after El Salvador and Jamaica. Often, female homicides are preceded by sexual abuse (Colussi, 2014; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2011).

eye to eye with the corruption of the system and had even made him part of the system's reproduction as he, in the end, felt that he did little more than keep things as they were. It was something that wore heavily on him, not only because of his own actions (or inaction) but also because of the poor's seeming preference for corrupt leaders, which had propelled his critical stance towards everything that entailed Guatemala. Taking a job at an NGO once had been an act of resistance for Gustavo but over time this fighting spirit had made place for what he called "resigned pragmatism," which signaled the acceptance of corruption and the playing along with it – his arms too short to fight a system, he believed, deeply etched into a people. Unequal power structures thriving on violence and other injustices tend to come accompanied with discourses stressing their justness and securing their reproduction, but as Gustavo's case shows, these do not always suffice to ease one's mind.

As has become clear in this section, given the nature of insecurity of especially poor parts of Guatemala City, there were many people caught in worlds defined by violence. But the poor were not the only ones affected by the violence. Indeed, there were dangers that specifically attached to higher classes, while other violent threats, at least to some extent, were more class-transcending by nature as they connected to spaces where classes intermingled. Each world its violence, this is to say, which rings even more true when we take into account the fact that there were many roles attached to violence. Even those who were not directly targeted by the violence had to find its way with the ills the system produced.

'The talk of the Guatemalan' and the crisis of hope

"The universe of crime (or of transgression or of accusations of misbehavior) offers a fertile context in which stereotypes circulate and social discrimination is shaped, not only in São Paulo but everywhere," writes Teresa Caldeira (2000, p. 2) in her influential study on fear, crime and segregation in São Paulo. No doubt, the story of the street people of El Castillo, who represented much of what was considered undesirable by large parts of the population, attested to this truth, but so did Claudina's story. For one, because she was looked down upon in the crystal bubble she found herself in but also because she herself did not shy down from making strong claims about what she deemed

‘the Guatemalan’. And crucially, most of my respondents shared her somber outlook on Guatemalans. Basically, the Guatemalan did not seem to trust the Guatemalan. I will elaborate on this trend in this section to then put it in the context of the crisis of hope the street people, Claudina and many others in Guatemala City experienced.

As prudent as Guatemalans tended to be in choosing their words, they often did not hide their depreciation for the Guatemalan as a people. Gustavo even seemed to think his criticism leaned towards treason as he called himself a Malinche, after the Aztec woman who – as the popular version of the story goes – betrayed her people by becoming the interpreter and later the lover of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, the man that brought large parts of Mexico under Spanish rule. Gustavo spoke of an anti-value with which the Guatemalans were afflicted, as they admired “the thief, the corrupt one, the one that knows how to cheat,” but also claimed that the Guatemalan had the habit of stealing from each other. Others came to similar essentialist characterizations of the Guatemalan as a thief, as unreliable, as begrudging. “The problem with Guatemala,” as a popular saying goes that was voiced to me a couple of times, “is that it contains Guatemalans.” Or as one lawyer phrased it: “In this country, if we put all the assassins, thieves and corrupt in jail... Who will close the door?”⁶⁸ (in Dewever-Plana, 2012, p. 142). These were characterizations that represented the type of generic talk that, as Kwame Anthony Appiah (2019) explains, encourages people not only to accept it – given that people are more likely to accept generics when they give them reasons for concern – but also to consider its subject “a kind of people” (p. 51). Who knows, in contrast to what Bernardo Arévalo de León observed in 1998, there might be *Guatemalidad* (a Guatemalan national identity) after all.

‘The talk of the Guatemalan,’ to put it in ‘Caldeiran’ terms, was at once a form of blaming the other as well as a critique on the self that gave evidence of what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic violence’ (2000). The latter term refers to the mechanisms of symbolic domination that help reproduce social hierarchies by causing people to misrecognize the violence that is exercised upon them as something they have themselves to blame for. The talk of the Guatemalan created the kind of confusion Escher’s famous lithograph of a waterfall

⁶⁸ Original text: “En este país, si metemos a todos los asesinos, ladrones y corruptos en la cárcel... ¿Quién cerrará la puerta?” [Translation TP]

creates, as he pictured it as a perpetual motion machine that supplies itself with water, creating the illusion that a waterfall can exist without fresh water constantly being supplied for. It portrays violence - or crime, or transgression, or misbehavior - as if it is wired in the DNA of the Guatemalans. As if Guatemalans are inherently violent. As if the violence can be understood without taking into account the system within which it thrives - the extreme social inequality, the poverty, the corruption, the centuries of colonialism and disadvantageous dealings with the Global North, and so on. As such, it legitimizes social inequalities, or at least distracts attention from them, this way allowing them to persist.

Somewhat paradoxically, the talk of the Guatemalan was able to exist alongside what Caldeira calls the 'talk of crime,' that is, the socially constructed narratives about crime that primarily revolve around crime but also borrow from other anxieties and prejudices regarding, among others, race and class. The talk of crime, Caldeira (2000) writes, "simplistically divides the world into good and evil and criminalizes certain categories," while it also "[...] stimulates the seclusion of some social groups in fortified and private enclaves" (p. 2). No doubt, the talk of crime did all that in Guatemala City as well. The talk of the Guatemalan, however, in a way helped correct the simplistic picture the talk of crime provided for as it placed all Guatemalans in the dock, though not all to the same extent of course. In Guatemala City, the talk of crime played a crucial role in justifying the walls around so-called communities and the deployment of private guards. The talk of the Guatemalan, however, helped to make sure that even in gated communities the 'dangerous' outside world people tried to protect themselves from often began by one's neighbor.

But the implications of the cynical view Guatemalans tended to hold on fellow countrymen fanned out beyond the realm of security, also because it combined with a cynical stance towards the state. It was fuel to what I believe was a crisis of hope in Guatemala City. A crisis of hope rooting in the accumulation of problems many people saw themselves faced with in the presence, but also in a lack of 'confidence about the future' - as hope is often explained (see for instance Hage, 2003). How to believe things are going to get better when all that surrounds you - institutions, people - are not to be trusted? It gave an air of inescapability and inevitability to problems in the

lives of my respondents and other people in Guatemala City.

The crisis of hope, for example, was reflected in the fact that Miguel could not help feeling a bit frustrated during his daughter's graduation ceremony, as it had presented him with a room of graduates "full of vitality and with so many illusions," who, he believed, deserved different politicians and a different country. "One feels, really feels the reality and comes to think, there is no hope here," he had once told me. Meanwhile, Moisés' 'world of violence' and Gustavo's 'resigned pragmatism' also testified to this crisis-like scarcity of hope just as Claudina's dream of leaving the country did or Barbilla's dream of becoming a legal citizen in the United States and marry there. In fact, in a recent poll, over one out of four Guatemalans declared that they played with the thoughts of migrating to another country, mostly to the United States (Lapop, 2019). This is in spite of the dangerous journey they often have to undertake to get there, the hostile discourse towards migrants in the contemporary United States and the sheer impossibility of obtaining a visa. Miguel had even tried to get to the U.S. once, in civil war times, only to be stopped and incarcerated about five hundred kilometers into Mexico. The crisis of hope was also reflected in the fact Guatemala, together with El Salvador, had become the country with the lowest support for democracy in Latin America (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018). And it was an important factor in the violent way some youngsters in grim neighborhoods tried to wrestle away from what they experienced as pre-destined and depressing futures by joining a gang, not in spite of the fact that many gang members die at a young age, but because of it (Levenson, 2013).

But of course, societies distribute hope unequally (Hage, 2003), especially in a highly unequal country like Guatemala. For example, a wealthy businessman and scion of a well-known and powerful family told me he felt himself "*una persona realizada*," a realized person, who had already fulfilled "all the expectations he had as a person." Ester was born in the United States as a daughter of an American mother and a Guatemalan father, as a result of which she had U.S. citizenship but nevertheless preferred to live in Guatemala, where she grew up. "Guatemala," she explained, "has the best weather, the friendliest people, the prettiest landscapes, you can see. It has the contrasts of everything. We have the Atlantic, the Pacific, the cold, the hot, the mountains, the plateau, the violence, the very friendly people. It's part of the folklore." Clearly, the fact that she was able to enjoy the contrasts, or at least gloss over the dark side of

the contrasts – the violence – marked her privileged position.

Until now this chapter has been devoted to identifying the different types of violence my respondents experienced in their everyday lives to be able to come up with a social order of violence. It is, as we have seen, violence that works as an oil spill, marking not only people's pasts, but also the prospects they hold for the future and the view they hold on society at large and the people it is made up of. What follows now are the different ways my respondents coped with the violence and pressure of everyday life. There are many of such mechanisms and it would be a foolish mistake to claim that these were the only go-to mechanisms for people in Guatemala City (or claim that this list was exhaustive for my respondents). With the below I do, however, intend to uncover some of the patterns and logic behind the coping mechanisms used by my respondents, this way placing them in the larger context of violence and coping with it in Guatemala City.

Like with the first part, I will introduce the themes I address in this second part of the chapter by means of a comparison of two of my cases. For the first part I took my two most extreme cases to look for the similarities (and from there on to the differences). For the introduction of the second part, I will apply the opposite strategy and take the two cases that in many ways were closest to each other, Miguel and Oscar. They were both taxi driver for the same company, which meant that they both made long days and had more or less the same income. They were both fathers of three children. And both Miguel and Oscar had been through a traumatic experience in the recent past, respectively the flight from Balcón Verde and the death of Carmen. Meanwhile, Miguel and Oscar lived in more or less similar neighborhoods if we judge them from their class status. What I will highlight, however, at least in first instance, are the immense differences between, on the one hand, Miguel and, on the other hand, Oscar and his daughters in dealing with the pressures, anxieties and insecurities everyday life presented them with, to then come to the mechanisms that bind at least some of these differences.

The social order of coping with violence: the cases of Miguel and Oscar

When Wallace Stevens denoted the Guatemalans 'men remoter than mountains' he most certainly did not have someone like Miguel in mind.

Miguel combined a catching joviality and an exuberant laugh with a way of expressing his grief that was similarly exuberant, “*himmelhoch jauchzend, zum tode betrübt*” (now shouting in triumph, now sunk in despair⁶⁹), as Goethe once captured the romantic soul. Thoughts about the life he had before his extortion could bring him to tears almost out of nothing. He often cried in my presence while discussing his old neighborhood, missing his mother who still lived there and the injustice of what had happened to him even though he sometimes blamed it on himself, picturing the extortion a moral retribution for a corruption scheme he had been involved in. He could also break into tears when talking about the lack of support he felt from María Luisa and the children. And it was for everybody to hear, as he almost daily published emotional posts on Facebook that were at once love letters to his old neighborhood and messages to María Luisa and the children about the pain and the deception he felt – much to the exhaustion and perhaps also embarrassment of his María Luisa and the children. This mutual dissatisfaction signaled a broader schism between Miguel and his family after the extortion; María Luisa, Daniel, Rosa, and Alanis considering the extortion a blessing in disguise – safe at last! – while Miguel tried all he could do to not let go of his old neighborhood and his old life. “The memory,” as he once wrote on Facebook, “is the only paradise from which they cannot expel you, moments, music and persons.”

But Miguel’s remarkable openness did not confine itself to emotional frankness. What truly set him apart from the large majority was his refusal to play along with the reserved and withdrawn way people in Guatemala City tended to interact with each other. It was only telling that he had told me about the extortion already the first time I met him just as it was telling that he kept inviting old acquaintances from Balcón Verde over to his house in El Dorado. Already when still living in Balcón Verde, he had detested the securitization that had come to hold sway among neighborhood residents. Meanwhile, his mother believed Miguel had brought the extortion at least partly on himself as he had the habit of getting a little bit too talkative about things he should not talk about – like his financial situation – whenever he had a few drinks too much. Either way, it was a bitter truth that Miguel ended up seeking protection in a gated community.

How different a person was Oscar, a taciturn man whose knack of

⁶⁹ Translation by Anna Swanwick (in Goethe, 2020).

seclusion seemed to know few barriers – a choice of words, of course, a bit curious as his life, and especially that of his grown up daughters, was all about barriers. Lucila, Tatiana and Paola spent most of their time inside the house they shared with Oscar. Almost by rule, the three sisters only left the neighborhood when chaperoned by their father, uncle, Tatiana's boyfriend or Lucila's husband. And if no other option, in each other's company. But never careless. Instead, keeping a solid pace when walking the public streets and signaling each other the moment a potential danger headed their way when riding the bus, avoiding danger wherever possible. In the thirteen years they had lived in Loma Linda, Lucila, Tatiana, Paola and Oscar had never taken the road to the right when leaving the colonia. The reason was that it was the road to an allegedly dangerous neighborhood of which they knew very little besides it being dangerous. It was a lifestyle prompted as much by a deep seated fear for the violence of the outside world as by custom. The three sisters were product of an upbringing dominated by their grandmother Mama Jimena and mother Carmen, who died half a year before I met the family, and as such had never known any differently. Meanwhile, Oscar told his daughters to not be too "honeyed" when it came to meeting new people and sharing personal information. In a way, and perhaps to no surprise, the neighborhood matched the family's carefulness; because of its gates and guards, but also because it saw itself positioned in the outskirts of Guatemala City, away from the crowds and the buzz, though, as the case of Oscar and his daughter shows, close enough to feel the city's violent potential.

Withdrawal and the other

If the central message of the introduction of the first part, devoted to the stories of the street people and Claudina, was that each world had its violence, the central message of the stories of Miguel and Oscar was that each world had its walls – sometimes physical, sometimes metaphorical – to withdraw behind. I will identify three forms of withdrawal in this second part of the chapter, which are each awarded a section. I do so in the knowledge that one of the more radical forms of withdrawal, leaving the country to seek hopes somewhere else, has already been touched upon. The section that now follows is devoted to the most prominent form of withdrawal, the pervasive tendency

among Guatemala City residents to withdraw from the ‘dangerous’ other, which found excellent ambassadors in Oscar and his daughters. Guatemala City was yet another city built by fear in which the pervasive fear of (violent) crime largely determined people’s daily interaction with each other and shaped the physical environment in which they moved around. It was a fear that primarily revolved around crime, but also borrowed from other anxieties and prejudices regarding, among others, race and class, and, as we have seen, the Guatemalan as a people. And in the light of the previous part, it was a fear that was reflected in the scarcity of hope in Guatemala City, that is, if we follow Spinoza’s idea of hope as an interplay of fear and desire, in which desire comes to dominate over fear (see Hage, 2003). And it was also a fear that helped raise walls and other frontlines to be enforced in the city. It was only telling that, apart from the people of El Castillo, all of my respondents, including Miguel, lived in a gated community – a ‘fortified’ way of living that exemplified the tendency to withdraw from the other perhaps as no other phenomenon. It is why I will start with assessing gated community life in Guatemala City to then discuss the withdrawn nature of life outside these places both for gated community residents and people living in nongated places. I will end with the implications of this for what constituted city life and the way people connected with each other within this wary context.

But let me first pause to emphasize the particular theoretical importance of giving a fair representation of gated community life in Guatemala City, as I believe literature on the matter often erroneously paints gated communities as islands little affected by the stream that surrounds them. Consider, for instance, Katja Franko Aas’ (2013) claim that “members of gated communities can control and exclude people from their communities, and crucially, exclude themselves from city life as well” (p. 73). Or Setha Low’s (2003) depiction of gated communities as an embodiment of social splitting – in this case, the oversimplification and dichotomization of a fluid and insecure world – saying that “the walls and gates of the community reflect this splitting physically as well as metaphorically, with ‘good’ people (the good part of us) inside, and the ‘bad’ remaining outside” (p. 139). Or the many characterizations of gated communities as ‘socially homogenous’ without this at least being problematized (see for instance Blakely & Snyder, 1997; Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2003) – a social homogeneity that, as Caldeira (1996) justly points out, could never be achieved

without control and surveillance. In the first part, I have drawn attention to what I have called ‘the talk of the Guatemalan’ which, at least in the case of Guatemala City, made it difficult to come to “a sense of the ‘we’” (Heller, 2000 [1928]) in gated communities (as well as in other places). But there were more reasons why this was the case and why gated community life, in Guatemala City and elsewhere, is often not as controlled as perhaps promised by their advertising brochures. It brings us to the style of inclusion and exclusion gated communities lean on.

First, the control Franko Aas speaks about is principally directed towards outsiders not belonging to the neighborhood but there are few possibilities at hand for, say, a neighborhood committee (and even less for individual residents) to master the process of inclusion and control the way outsiders were able to become insiders, that is, residents. In fact, all that one’s presence in a certain neighborhood reveals is one’s capacity to buy or rent a place there, which may or may not necessarily place you in the same financial league as the other residents, but does not distinguish between old money, *nouveau riche*, plantation owners, narcos and politicians – to name but some of the tastes available in the more exclusive neighborhoods. Claudina, because of her background and work, was a showcase of the fact that the undesired may come in formally authorized in a place like Vista Alegre. Meanwhile, in Loma Linda a group of young residents were held responsible for a number of burglaries and robberies in the neighborhood. The group’s presence, Oscar believed, was a consequence of the fact that some home owners had not rent out their places to “people of trust,” but instead to people from gang ridden colonias who came to Loma Linda to prevent their children from being recruited by the *maras*.

Second, the style of exclusion these neighborhoods typically enjoyed went accompanied with obvious flaws. To begin with, few gated communities were completely fenced (or walled) off from the outside world, which added to the importance of security guards. The latter, however, were often poorly paid and poorly educated, also because there were many illegal private security companies around offering their services. In addition to this, it was reasonable to believe that few private security guards, whether employed by a formal or an informal company, were willing to put their life on the line while on the job. In Loma Linda, the neighborhood committee changed private security companies towards the end of my fieldwork, according to Oscar, because of

their inaction towards the group of youngsters, which he believed was caused by both fear and low salaries. Such incapacity, of course, had also consequences for the extent to which they were able to protect the community against threats coming from the outside. This became painfully clear in Gustavo's neighborhood of Flor del Campo, which suffered two break-ins during my fieldwork that went unnoticed by a team of four security guards. Don Benito, the treasurer of the neighborhood committee, was the first to put the blame on what he had deemed the "Mafioso" of the company they hired, but rendered himself powerless as few residents were willing to pay a higher quota to be able to hire a formal company. Crucially, gated communities came in all shapes and sizes, from lower-middle class colonias with no 'extra' protection measures other than a gate and a few guards (if at all) to highly protected neighborhoods where no corner was free from camera control. But whatever the protection level, the control Franko Aas speaks high of was never absolute. Having said this, it is important to note that the gated communities my protagonists lived in all seemed relatively successful in keeping out the danger. For example, Loma Linda and El Dorado (where Miguel and his family lived) were safer places than many of the crime-ridden (and nongated) colonias they were surrounded by.

The above is not to say that social splitting held no sway among gated community residents in Guatemala City as a way of dealing with anxiety and fear. It is to say, however, that it led to a less dualistic picture of good and bad. For Oscar's family and many other gated community residents, the collective security measures that came with being a resident only represented "the first line of defense but not the last" (Peeters & Hoey, 2017, p. 185). Indeed, the streets of El Dorado, Loma Linda, Flor del Campo and Vista Alegre were not homes to vibrant community lives. And the more exclusive the neighborhood, the more individual houses themselves tended to be protected by gates, guards and other individual security measures. In Vista Alegre, houses were shielded off from the streets with gates that revealed little of what was hidden behind them. Residents typically traversed the streets of the neighborhood from behind the polarized windows of their cars. In consequence, Claudina's children had no clue about who was living next to them.

Crucially, while distrust among gated community residents tended to disturb community life in its more conventional understanding, it did not

necessarily stop them from living in each other's gaze. Carmen had not only security in mind keeping Lucila, Tatiana and Paola housebound, but also the family's reputation in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, even though it was each and every one in his own world in Vista Alegre, residents kept seeking each other to confirm their identities. Such became clear from the competition over individual security measures between residents that Claudina gave account of. It was the kind of 'aesthetization of security' Caldeira (2000) describes in the context of São Paulo and a type of arms race that seemed almost inevitable in a violent-stricken country that almost religiously adhered to the logic of the market. Bodyguards and other visible security measures provided people with a way of distinguishing themselves from others without it necessarily coming at the cost of one's security. At the same time, the glamorization of measures based on at least the threat of violence added to the climate that bred violence, and as such, were not completely different from the narcocorridos of the drug lords or the "drugs, painful rites of loyalty and annihilating the other gang" (Levenson, 2013, p. 91) that have come to replace the typical capitalist status attributes such as expensive consumer goods within Guatemala City gangs. They represent a greed for violence that "reflects the greed for brands and becomes a brand in itself" (Vulliamy, 2011). If the aesthetization of security tells us anything, it is that violence was not a collapse of the social order, it was the social order.

As has become clear, people within gated communities tended to be separated by fear and distrust, both for the outside world as well as for each other. Yet at the same time, it is important to note that they were often also held together by fear (see also Villarreal, 2015). These magnetic qualities of fear, attracting other fearful people on the one end, while fighting back others on the other end – and keeping fear alive in the process – were clearly seen in Loma Linda after a perceived threat of extortion provoked a swift and uniform answer from neighborhood residents, leading to an upgrade of the number of security guards in the neighborhood (and a raise of the monthly quota). For reasons unknown to the residents, the extortion never materialized, but the decision-making process that preceded the security upgrade did produce an effect on at least Oscar's feeling of security, as he took it as a sign that people in the neighborhood were able to act as one man when faced with a shared threat. It did not, however, result in more contact between them on a day to day basis. Like within the lynch mobs I had once studied in a marginal barrio of Quito,

the people of Loma Linda were, to speak in Rossana Reguillo's terms (2005 in Santillán, 2008), both united and fragmented by fear.

Gated community life, as we have seen, was about constraining the movement of others (through fortification) as well as of oneself. This was no different outside the neighborhood. The cars of the better-off tended to be 'forts on wheels,' as they preferred travelling in big SUVs with polarized windows, while, in some cases, being accompanied by bodyguards. So much became clear working as a security guard at a high class wedding, after I had been stationed at the entrance gate of the coffee plantation that hosted the party as part of a group of four guards that checked passengers for identification and guns (the latter by asking them if they carried any). It was a rather boring exercise, given that I was standing on the passenger side of the cars, seeing nothing but big cars with polarized windows – and myself in their reflection. And as it struck me they all looked the same, it did not take long for me to devote my attention to counting the cars that entered, keeping track of whether or not they were SUVs and whether or not they had polarized side windows. From the 153 cars that passed by, my untrained eyes classified 116 cars as SUVs and counted 147 cars with polarized side windows. What I could not see, but what was told to me by my colleagues, was that there had also been cars with only bodyguards inside, as some of the guests drove "*con cola*" (with tail), meaning that they had one or more cars accompanying them on the road. Other invitees, no doubt, had bodyguards riding along within them. It was also how Claudina preferred her daughters to travel. But of course these were protection measures only available to a very few. Oscar's daughters engaged in a modest version of what is sometimes called 'caravanning' (Villarreal, 2015) by never leaving the colonia alone. Logically, these measures were usually matched by a radius of action in recognition of the perceived dangers of the outside world. The fact that Oscar and his daughters had never turned right upon leaving their colonia was an extreme example of this.

Earlier in this section, we established that gated communities were not as detached from city life as often suggested in scholarship. The shared logic of withdrawal behind seeking the protection of a gated community and security strategies people deploy outside their neighborhoods as well as the sheer popularity of these measures among Guatemala City dwellers and the multiple rewards they provide their protagonists with – protection and status –

hints upon a perhaps more fundamental critique against such a portrayal. The question that arises is: What is city life? In many ways, the withdrawn lifestyle represented by gated communities *was* city life instead of an exclusion from it as argued by Franko Aas and others.

In fact, the intensity of the will to withdraw may have been even more extreme among residents of crime ridden (and nongated) places like Balcón Verde, the majority of which kept themselves ‘imprisoned’ in their homes, as an ex-gang member from Chapín, a colonia suffering many of the same problems as Balcón Verde, had told me. And what walls did for the (somewhat) better-off, ‘camouflage’ did for the poor (Villarreal, 2015). Almost by definition, people in Balcón Verde and colonias alike left the exterior of their homes unmaintained, for a freshly painted house would transmit the message that the residents had a little extra to spend, which could have disastrous consequences with extortionists around. In similar vein, people did not easily open up their homes to others, showing what they possessed, and often preferred not telling about having a good job or having a family member in the U.S., the latter of which, for outsiders, was almost automatically presumed to be a go-to source for financial help when in need. With extortionists targeting regular residents, life in Balcón Verde had become increasingly about not drawing attention to oneself. Meanwhile, life outside the colonia, say, in a bus towards work, not seldom required the same tactics as life required within the colonia.

Richard Sennett (1977) famously defined the city as “a human settlement where strangers are likely to meet” (p. 41). At first sight, it seems a definition less applicable to the case of Guatemala City where strangers, as we have seen in the above, tried hard not to meet each other. What else was the point of living in a gated community? Yet, according to Zygmunt Bauman (2000, p. 94), what Sennett actually meant was that when strangers met in the city, they were likely to separate from each other as strangers. This does seem to apply to Guatemala City, though, obviously, cannot be understood by solely focusing on geographical forms of withdrawal designed to create or maintain spatial division between people. It is therefore that I now turn to the way strangers tended to enter into contact with each other in Guatemala City, which could also be explained in terms of geography if we, like Erving Goffman (1972), consider information a “territory of the self” (p. 63).

Crucially, the withdrawn lifestyle of Guatemala City residents was not

only about avoiding contact but also about not showing too much of yourself when entering into some form of contact - to not be too 'honeyed'. Especially in the poorer areas, whenever people deflected from this silent agreement of staying on the surface of each other's lives, telling you more than they should about their personal lives or things going on in the neighborhood, it was a matter of hearing and remaining silent. Life in places like Balcón Verde or El Castillo, as residents liked to state, was about "*ver, oír y callar*," to see, hear and remain silent - although in practice, it increasingly appeared to be about preventing yourself from seeing and hearing, and, to add to this, from being seen and heard in the first place. The interpersonal reticence among Guatemala City residents was also reflected in the distinction some of my respondents made between *amigo* (friend) and *amigo-amigo* (friend-friend); the former referring to bonds that did not go beyond the occasional 'Hi, how are you?' and the latter representing the scarcer breed of friends you share more personal details with.

In addition, staying out of trouble seemed not only about what people told about themselves or about other people or things to others, but also about the way they delivered it. Being polite to outsiders has been a long established coping stratagem of the indigenous in Guatemala (Green, 1999), but the widespread and frequent use of phrases such as "*con permiso*" (with your permission), "*no tenga pena*" (don't worry) and "*siempre a sus órdenes*" (always at your service) in Guatemala City seemed to point to a similar tendency of avoiding problems through politeness. Such a strategy could also be recognized in the habit of some taxi drivers to only give 'little honks' instead of pressing the car horn completely, this way avoiding aggressive reactions from fellow passengers on the road.

The deeply entrenched distrust with which Guatemala City residents viewed their fellow countrymen encumbered entering in social bonds with extra insecurity and difficulties, as it entailed giving up "some of the boundaries and barriers that ordinarily separate them" (Goffman, 1972, p. 83). But then how, in such a context, did people connect on a deeper, more personal, level? To a greater extent than in many other, less troubled, contexts, I believe, they did so in collectivities of what I would like to call 'predictable respectability,' which, in their most extreme form, are settings ordered by respectable values that are secured by the regulation of membership and the physical control of

the geographical areas of gathering. It was not uncommon for Guatemalans, for instance, to have few friends outside family members, who many considered to be the safest bet for a social life. The apex of predictable respectability, however, at least for its members, were private clubs, which often provided its members a highly secured place full of families that have been tied to each other for generations. Crucially, they were able to do what gated communities could not do, that is, regulate membership, this way providing their usually wealthy members a “second home,” as one of my friends called his *Club Alemán* (German Club), to which only people with German roots were allowed (see also Peeters & Hoey, 2017). This is also the reason why I have reserved the term gated communities for places of residence and refrained from automatically putting it under the umbrella of terms such as ‘fortified enclaves’, which Caldeira (1996) denotes as “[...] privatized, enclosed and monitored spaces of residence, consumption, leisure and work” (p. 303).

Further, churches, as elsewhere in the world, were known places of connection, as they played both into people’s spiritual needs and into their social needs, offering them a community governed on the base of an ethical code, this way taking away some of the distrust that usually prevented people from connecting. Consider, for instance, Miguel’s mother who, on the one hand, believed that good neighbors were the ones that minded their own business, and on the other hand, considered her fellow churchgoers to be family, to whom she had opened her house on a weekly basis in the past for church gatherings. More than any other collectivity perhaps, churches were able to offer their members a world. Especially in their more radical manifestations, they provided members, in the words of Anthony Giddens (1991), “clear-cut answers as to what to do in an era which has abandoned final authorities” (p. 142), while expecting them to almost fully integrate into church life (Torres-Rivas, 1980).

But the withdrawal from the outside world that often came with joining a radical religious church or group, as with every withdrawal, tended to not only blind those on the outside – there are two sides to a wall. Gustavo had long been part of the once powerful neo-Pentecostal sect of El Verbo, which had counted Efraín Ríos Montt among its members during his period as head of state in the early 1980s. It was life in a “bubble,” as Gustavo had experienced it, with the leadership keeping a tight grip over the community

and the personal lives of the individual members. The political corruption and violence of El Verbo members, but also the extramarital affairs of El Verbo's chief leader in Guatemala, which had been long condoned by other El Verbo leaders, finally encouraged Gustavo to break with the sect. But Gustavo also counted his broken marriage among the remnants of his El Verbo past, as his marriage with Vania had been forged under the spiritual guidance of the El Verbo leaders. According to Gustavo, they had been blind to the differences in character between Gustavo and Vania as well as to their cultural differences, with the former coming from a middle class and Protestant family and the latter from an upper middle class and mostly Catholic family. These were differences that drove a wedge between them during their marriage, until it collapsed.

The city built by fear, as we have seen, promotes values of separation and exclusion and not of the richness of strangers (Peeters & Hoey, 2017). But it did not only change the interaction between people, but also people themselves, or at least, how they viewed themselves. Like within the 'hard living' blue collar families of Joseph T. Howell (1973), in a working class neighborhood of Washington, D.C., many of my respondents classified themselves as loners. María Luisa said she preferred being "a caged witch," a name Miguel had made up for her as she rather not talk to people other than direct family members. Oscar told me he was not "really the type of having a lot of [friendly] relationships." Gustavo saw himself as "not very social" and "bad at having friends." And Claudina said she was not a "people person" and preferred "to walk alone." Some of their children described themselves along similar lines. At least in some cases, these characteristics were directly linked to the secluded environment they grew up in. Oscar's mother, for instance, blamed her son's timid nature partly on her overprotected education. Gustavo, in turn, believed his alleged lack of socialness had much to do with the way he had been raised and his time in the secluded world of El Verbo. And of course, it was only logical that growing up in a world that teaches people "much more to separate than to connect," to use the words of French philosopher Edgar Morin (2005, p. 9), had direct consequences for one's capacity and possibilities to connect – people lose the art of connecting, so to speak (Peeters & Hoey, 2017). My respondents did not frame their small social circles as unfortunate outcomes of having to connect in an environment marked by distrust and withdrawal,

and as such, as something they would like to see changed, but, instead, as an outcome of their personalities and, as it seemed, personal preferences shaped in this environment. The individualization of everyday life, this is to say, was supported by an individualized logic, although one that might have also been driven by an urge to reclaim control in an environment that gave people little room for making an impact on their lives, as it turned what seems an imposed restriction into a product of choice or preference.

To stop this inquiry into my respondents' withdrawn lifestyles here would present a too uniform and perhaps radical picture of what I had encountered. Crucially, not all of them were always able or willing to play by the rules of what entailed a withdrawn lifestyle. Miguel was an example of this. And so was Claudina, who like Miguel longed for the tight-knittedness of her old communities and acted upon these feelings of nostalgia by, among others, visiting the places represented by her nostalgia, which were not seldom places associated with violent crime. Their nostalgia will be the focus of the next section. It was out of nostalgia, too, that Gustavo sometimes liked to take the dangerous 'red' buses, which he also took as a young boy, in a time when they were still safe. He had also abstained from buying Valeria a car for her to be able to drive to university until recently, as he did not want his daughter to grow up overprotected. Meanwhile, some of the street people were said to actually go at great lengths to be seen by an outside world that rendered them invisible.

Further, compared to adults, children seemed less prepared to subdue themselves to the disciplined logic of withdrawal – basically, for being children. When still in Balcón Verde, playing football was part of the daily routine for Miguel's children despite the fact that it was a scary enterprise, as the football court had been a notoriously dangerous place. Meanwhile, a mother from Colonia Fatima, another marginalized colonia in Zone 18, complained to me that her daughter could not resist wearing her good clothes when outside even though it exposed her to an increased risk of being robbed. Indeed, the relative carelessness of children was one of the reasons behind the fact that they tended to be disproportionately hit by violence in places such as Balcón Verde. Logically, the same quality turned children into weak spots in family-wide strategies of withdrawal. It was why parents at the exclusive Colegio Gran

Bretaña liked meddling in their children friendships, as Claudina's youngest daughter experienced when she was excluded from a group of friends.

What the above shows is some of the boundaries of the people's will to withdrawal and its tension with other needs and desires. Such a message could also be read into the words of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of Grupo Cayalá, the company behind an entire private city in the making on the outskirts of the capital (Ciudad Cayalá), which, until now, not only lacked some amenities to be fully self-sustainable, but, interestingly, also enough people willing to buy into the idea, which was a costly endeavor as the cheapest apartment was on the market for more than seventy times the average year income (Ruiz-Goiriena, 2013). But according to the CFO, the hesitation to buy was not a matter of not wanting, but of not understanding, and as such he believed it would be a matter of time for the idea to gain traction among elites in Guatemala City. His words gave an interesting peak into the role of the market behind the push of gated life and perhaps a peek into a future even more defined by the search for control within living environments and, as a result, by seclusion and segregation. "It is not so easy to sell, right," the CFO said, "because everything I'm telling you, I have to tell them in ten minutes. Everything we talk about. They have to understand that they're not buying a house, but that they're buying the environment, right, a property and a planned environment that is worth more than a house in a condominium where the environment is out of control; where one doesn't know what is going to happen in the surrounding area. Here in Cayalá, we do control the whole area. [...] So the demand is not very high because people still don't understand, you have to explain to them what the benefits are of living in Cayalá, because it's expensive. Explain why it is expensive. It's like, say, a telephone. You want a telephone to call and to save your contacts. But then you have to explain to them that this isn't a normal phone, with this you can also take pictures, you can also see your mail. Then they say 'aaah.' [...] And just like the cellphone today... fifteen, twenty years ago the cellphone wasn't indispensable. You had people that used beepers, the cellphone was seen as something for the rich, or only for people of the government. 'I don't need a cellphone.' But today, if you tell people you don't have a cellphone, they'd be like 'what?!' So that is what is happening today. Today you want to buy in Cayalá, but it's so expensive, so

[you say], 'I don't need to live in a well-organized place.' In fifteen years, we'll see. We'll see what you think."

As we have seen, there is a strong case to be made in Guatemala City to say that the withdrawn lifestyle represented by gated communities was city life instead of a detachment from it, as is often argued in scholarship. Gated communities tended to be as permeated by fear and distrust as many nongated communities were. Moreover, the withdrawn lifestyle characterized by the gated community also left a strong mark on the lives of the often poor people residing in places without the protection of gates, who were to a greater extent dependent on small, routinized chitchats and other less tangible measures of withdrawal to keep others at a distance. Meanwhile, people of all classes preferred seeking deeper connections with others mostly within collectivities of respectable predictability such as the family, churches and – within wealthier circles – private clubs. But the above also shows the limits to withdrawal, as people, and especially children, were not always willing to play by its rules.

Withdrawal and nostalgia

The move to El Dorado was a choice for security for Miguel and his family yet it pushed Miguel into a life of grim economic insecurity where he did little else than work, often without being able to make ends meet. In addition to this, it was also a life where he felt reduced to a nobody. He did not feel appreciation from María Luisa and the children for the mountains he tried to move for them. How different had life been for Miguel in Balcón Verde where he had felt himself loved and respected by his family and friends. In El Dorado, few people even knew of his existence. It brought Miguel to a kind of withdrawal that ran along temporal lines instead of along geographical and relational lines, as he sought the psychological refuge of nostalgic memory. It is a coping mechanism that brings us to the uprooted of Guatemala City, those who, like Miguel and also like Claudina, do not feel "at home" (Weil, 1952, p. 72) in the worlds they live in, not being able to firmly root in one's place in the world and one's sense of the self. In this section, which centralizes around the cases of Miguel and Claudina, I will describe the workings of nostalgia as a counterweight against the force of the now but also its trappings.

Above all, nostalgic remembrance facilitated Miguel and Claudina a sense

of belonging in volatile and hostile times. One that represented “a yearning for a different time,” to use Svetlana Boym’s (2001, p. xv) words, though took the shape of the longing of a place. It was a distortion seen more often, which seemed hard to separate from the fact that people often identify themselves along spatial lines in the face of uncertainty – a tendency, as psychologist R.D. Laing (1965) writes, that perhaps “goes some way to account for the frequently pre-eminent importance to the person of being *seen*” (p. 109, emphasis in original). In the cases of both Miguel and Claudina, this spatialization of nostalgia was helped by the clear break they had both experienced from one place to another, which had then come to contrast – in Miguel’s case probably more immediately than in Claudina’s case. Still, Claudina kept stressing to me that she lived in the world of her children, full of arrogant people valuing others for their level of education and the weight of their last name. Her world was the one of El Nacimiento, the poor colonia of her youth where she had spent her years of “youth, happiness, hope, dreams.” But then, how did places of the past like Balcón Verde and El Nacimiento become safe havens in time present? I will give three reasons:

First, nostalgic remembrance typically involves representations of the past unshackled from their contradictions, injustices and ills, as it takes what Avishai Margalit (2011) calls “a free ride on memory” (p. 80; see also DaSilva & Faught, 1982; Pickering & Keightley, 2006; Boym, 2001). As such, it represented the kind of essentialism that often holds sway among beleaguered individuals (Young, 1999). Crucially, compared to the many tormentors the presence tends to hold, especially in a place like Guatemala City, there are few forces out there that could stop someone from beautifying his past. To reiterate Miguel’s words on Facebook, “the memory is the only paradise from which they cannot expel you [...]” Hearing Miguel’s passionate accounts on Balcón Verde, it was easily forgotten that the colonia had always been a poor neighborhood and that the breakdown of social cohesion had started long before Miguel saw himself forced to leave there. Meanwhile, Claudina’s youth in El Nacimiento had been one full of hardship and in what seemed a moment less determined by nostalgia, she told me the biggest difference between her youth and her life today was that before there had still been hope for a better life, which there was not anymore. In other words, both Balcón Verde and El Nacimiento had become paradises only in retrospect.

Second, within the kind of nostalgia as experienced by Miguel and Claudina, beautification did not restrict itself to a bygone past, but was also projected upon a specific place or area in time present. In fact, and this gave their nostalgia its particular twist, they were places within reach, needing no time travelling or long, perilous journeys – as is often with refugees in strange countries – but a twenty minute drive. Miguel played with the thought of going back to Balcón Verde just as Claudina sometimes claimed that she would not mind moving to a marginal area of the capital, which she believed would provide her with a more cheerful place compared to the exclusive neighborhood she now lived in. Both of them visited these places on a regular basis. It provided them a seeming way out of real life, but one based on a confusion between the “imaginary,” beautified home and the “actual home” (Boym, 2001, p. xvi). Balcón Verde and El Nacimiento were in no ways the poor but cohesive neighborhoods they seemed to have once been, but had both developed into particularly violent neighborhoods where it tended to be each on his own. The fact that Claudina was aware of this, or so she said, did not stop her from accrediting contemporary El Nacimiento the qualities that had made the place of her youth a cheerful place, at least in retrospect. The El Nacimiento of her youth still existed, she had said, because she wanted it to exist.

Third, nostalgia offered a way to engage with others. Indeed, as identity is negotiated in dialogue with others, it is in collective memory that nostalgia hid its true strength as a counterweight to the force of the now. In a country with, in Miguel’s words, “an endless number of dramas,” and as such, an endless number of before and afters, nostalgia seemed to run wide. It was dubbed the “Red Zone blues” by Katherine Saunders-Hastings (2018) in her take on nostalgia in one of the marginal areas of Guatemala City’s Zone 18, where Balcón Verde was also situated. Remarkably so, Saunders-Hastings examines “the place of nostalgia in residents’ accounts of spiraling insecurity and gang violence” (p. 1) without elaborating on the way residents experienced nostalgia collectively, in interaction with each other. After his departure from Balcón Verde, Miguel’s get-togethers with friends were rare, but whenever he did meet one of his old friends, conversations tended to quickly spiral into reminiscing and telling tall tales. It seemed Miguel at his best, where his oft-repeated words, “to remember is to re-live,” rang true more than ever. Further,

he tried keeping his old world alive by writing about it on Facebook, drawing other people into the remembrance of times and events they experienced together. Meanwhile, Claudina's visits to poor colonias brought her to the few acquaintances she had, but she also regularly took her children to poor places to show them the world she had been born into and still identified with and to make them aware of their fortunate positions. Compared to Miguel, she better succeeded integrating nostalgia into family life. At the same time, Claudina's nostalgia was invoked by a dealing with stigma that Erving Goffman classified as 'militancy' (1990), as she put emphasis on the same differentness that others used against her. Therefore, it did little too bridge the gap between her and fellow elites.

As the above shows, nostalgic worlds tend to be beautiful and safe and even though they belong to the past – or better yet, the imagined past – their siren song may also be used to draw in others. But nostalgia, as also became clear in the lives of Miguel and Claudina, hid its weaknesses in its strengths. First of all, nostalgia was not only at its most powerful at the interface of individual and collective remembrance, but also at its most vulnerable. Crucially, with its emphasis on loss, nostalgia tends to come with or develop into a critique of the present (see for instance DaSilva & Faught, 1982). In Miguel's case, nostalgia represented a more general critique on the seclusion and individualism of the city built by fear, but Miguel's nostalgic Facebook writings were also ways to show his family his dissatisfaction with their alleged lack of appreciation. They were cries of resistance, but also cries for help. The same went for his claim of wanting to move back to Balcón Verde, which especially played up at moments when he felt least supported. It was "radical thinking," as he had called it himself, that in the end only drove him further away from his family, deeper into his past. It turned the presence of absence, his longing for his old life, into an absence of presence that rendered him further isolated.

Further, the beautification upon which nostalgia was built not only held a promise, but also a potential disillusionment, especially when nostalgia translated into a push for restoration of the past and the patching up of memory gaps, to speak in Boym's terms. As is often highlighted, it is the type of lifeline that brings nationalist strongmen – say, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro or Hungary's Victor Orbán – to the seat of power. To be sure, Miguel engaged in a more modest kind of restorative nostalgia that lacked any form of political

ambitions. But there were dangers nevertheless. Blinded by the light of a beautified past and disillusioned with the way his family treated him, Miguel pushed through with the idea of going back to Balcón Verde. It meant breaking with his family only to find out that there was nothing left of his old colonia and to later return to his family after a period of family infighting, emotional austerity and being locked up in his house. It was a move that glossed over the threat that had made him leave his old colonia in the first place. Fortunately, it ended without him paying the highest price for it.

And equally important, it was not only a neighborhood that changed during one's absence, but, inevitably so, oneself as well. This became especially clear in the case of Claudina, who had left the poor area of the city more than twenty years ago. In her years of absence, she had grown accustomed to the amenities attached to her new social status more than she wanted to admit. Moreover, our visit to the poor colonia of Cerrito del Carmen seemed to show that time had robbed her of the street smartness necessary to stay out of trouble in such a place, flipping out a hundred quetzal bill to buy a drink in a park with a questionable reputation. Basically, she was a 'rich woman' in any marginalized neighborhood she visited, which came with obvious risks. In Cerrito del Carmen, it seemed our out-of-placeness had been worthy of a warning in the shape of a black SUV with polarized windows that stopped next to us, as it appeared for no other reason than to intimidate us. According to the local Marta, it carried crooked police officers who led the drug business in the area. Claudina, this is to say, had experienced the kind of social mobility that burned bridges, which meant that there would never be a safe way back for her.

But the beautification of the past also casted a perhaps more ordinary shadow on the lives of Miguel and Claudina. Almost by definition, nostalgia gives evidence of relative deprivation over time as it highlights loss, a "regret for what time has brought" (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 920). It is therefore, at best, bittersweet. In line with this, nostalgia is not always 'mobilized' as a strategy to deal with overwhelming uncertainty, as seems sometimes suggested in scholarship (see for instance Boym, 2001; Saunders-Hastings, 2018), but may also come without asking. In Miguel's case, nostalgia invaded him sometimes, without him wanting it. It could bring him to tears out of nothing. These were moments when he realized his neighborhood was, as he had said it,

“so close and yet so far away.” Such remembrance was going back to a beloved place while realizing it did not exist anymore. The following words of the Arab poet Mahmoud Darwish (2011), himself exiled from Palestine as a young boy, could have been written by Miguel or Claudina. “To long,” he writes, “means not to find joy in anything here, except shyly. If I were there, you say, if I were there, my laughter would be heartier and my speech clearer” (p. 23).

As we have seen, the psychological refuge offered by nostalgia resides somewhere in between a withdrawal into time and a withdrawal into the imagination. It is able to offer its protagonists a sense of belonging in times of uncertainty; a place, often with a geographical connotation, shielded from the force of the now by means of the beautifying power of the imagination. As such, it was part of the arsenal through which people tried to govern their own life, or imagined themselves doing so, in the face of limited or absent agency. But at the same time, in those cases where people did not manage to draw in others through nostalgic remembrance, it could also further isolate people. Moreover, dependent as it was on the imagination – both with regard to the place people were nostalgic about and with the way they viewed themselves – nostalgia could also lead to disillusionment when becoming a driver for the restoration of the past.

Withdrawal, the body and the need for not feeling

So far, I have identified two forms of withdrawal, one that runs along relational and often geographical lines and one that runs along temporal and imaginative lines. Oscar and his daughters embodied the first form, just as Miguel’s wife María Luisa and his mother did. Meanwhile, Miguel embodied the second form as he sought salvation in a beautified past. These were hardly tactics the street people of El Castillo could succumb to though. Basically, they lacked walls, even the ones of a house, and were too busy surviving, living in the moment, to let their actions be informed by nostalgic remembrance, if even there were thoughts of such kind (see also Emirbayer & Mische, 1999). At the same time, they lived in worlds of inescapable insecurity. They were unrooted instead of uprooted, lacking what Giddens (1991) understands as “basic trust,” which an individual acquires in his early childhood in dialogue with its caretakers and works as a “protective cocoon” that “allows the individual to sustain hope and

courage in the face of whatever debilitating circumstances she or he might later confront” (pp. 39-40). In response to this, and this will be central to this section, the street people engaged in a different kind of withdrawal, which I present here as a withdrawal from the body, one answering to what I call the need for not feeling. Like the other two forms of withdrawal, it responds to a lack of control over one’s fate, but it is less ambitious in nature as it does not seek to wrest back control and change the objective situation – not in intent and not in practice – but instead seeks to only change the experience. I came across different forms of withdrawal from the body at El Castillo, which I will now discuss.

The first one, however, I introduce with great caution, as it is largely based on Wayo’s phrase “My body isn’t my body,” which he murmured in a state of extreme intoxication, at a moment when the others at El Castillo were ignoring him for the fact that he had been constantly harping on for solvent without having the money to buy some. Wayo’s rather mysterious observation was followed by him throwing up in front of the others without anyone even paying the slightest attention to it. It drew my attention to disembodiment as one of the final outposts of withdrawal and the apex of the need for not feeling. But then how to interpret Wayo’s words? Did he indeed have an out-of-body experience, a moment where his body was not *his* body anymore? And if so, what then had caused it? They are questions impossible to answer, also because I estimated Wayo too far gone to be approachable at that moment.

Be that as it may, I believe the possibility of disembodiment is worth giving a thought. After all, possessing little more than their bodies, what was left for the people of El Castillo but their bodies to withdraw from? Moreover, there seemed to be plenty of explanations possible for such a reaction in this case. In a world of violence, where being rendered invisible was among the most penetrating acts of violence, Wayo, for instance could have left his body because his apparent state of invisibility had denied him the assurance of being a “real live person” (Laing, 1965, p. 119; see also Herman, 2001) as may occur with the ontologically insecure or chronically traumatized in some instances. Or his apparent state of invisibility could have sparked a more functional disassociation in the way prisoners in Nazi concentration camps sometimes disassociated from their body, as it seemed, to be able to withstand the atrocities they were subjected to (Giddens, 1991). And just before he uttered the words, he had been away from El Castillo for about ten or twenty minutes to get

money to buy drugs, as was rather aggressively suggested to him by Joshua and others who were fed up with his behavior. Who knows what had happened to him in the time he had left? And of course, the event could have simply been the result of his substance use at the moment, which seemed a factor in any of the explanations, whether Wayo had ‘left’ his body or not.

But Wayo’s words struck me for different reasons as well. From a metaphorical stance, they could also be explained as signaling a complete lack of agency, of being in control of his fate and, indeed, his body. At that moment, it appeared to be as if the hunger for drugs had taken over Wayo’s will and his actions, as was often the case with him and others at El Castillo (and many other drug addicts around the world). The street people’s addiction added to their daily struggle of making an impact on their situation. But even without taking their drug dependency into account, it sometimes seemed as if the people of El Castillo did not own their own bodies, given that others did with them as they wanted. As if their bodies were public property, part of the streets as the roads and the signposts were.

As the above may have already suggested, the street people’s drug use is the second form of withdrawal from the body I would like to introduce here. The inhaling of solvent not only helped the street people with suppressing their hunger, but also with numbing aliveness – their being-in-the-world – this way taking some of the edges of their constant state of alertness and the stream of adversities they had to deal with. In this light, it was no coincidence that Moisés started inhaling solvent again on Mother’s Day after having stopped for twenty days. It was a day of sadness for him, as memories of his late mother came to his mind. But it was also not a coincidence that people were often robbed when passed out, given that their bodies turned into lifeless shells up for grabs for people with bad intentions. According to Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas (1980, p. 559), writing in times of civil war, doing drugs, ordinary crime and other forms of what he deems personal disorganization – which always stems from social disorganization, he argued – were one of the three escape doors from “the misery and the despair” with which millions of Guatemalans were faced, next to joining one of the many religious groups in Guatemala and the collective resistance of politics and (trade) union. Guatemalan Nobel prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899-1974) was even more selective in his options, as he is believed to be the author of the well-known phrase “*en Guatemala sólo borracho se puede vivir*,” in Guatemala you

can only live being drunk (Barrios Carrillo, 2017). And one is also reminded here of Robert K. Merton's typology of modes of individual adaptation within culture-bearing societies, the excessive inhaling of solvent being among the adaptive activities described as "retreatism," which represents "the rejection of cultural norms and institutional means" that turn its protagonists into people who are "*in* society but not of *it*" (1968, p. 207, emphasis in original). My point here, however, is that the retreatism (to stick with Merton's terms) as pursued by the people of El Castillo through their drug use not so much entailed a withdrawal from cultural norms and institutional means but much more so a withdrawal, at least in part, from their body.

Crucially, as the above already hints upon, diluting a violent reality with solvent made it easier to swallow, for a brief moment, but in the end it made it even more violent and toxic. And this was not only because chances of being robbed seemed at its highest when they were high or because one's drug addiction added an often all engulfing pressure to life in times of sobriety that, as we have seen, can set in motion risky behavior in order to get money and added another force acting upon their possibility to choose their own lives. But also because it was over drugs that many fights among people at El Castillo started. Meanwhile, inhaling solvent is associated with a whole list of damaging health effects, among which nervous system disorders. The death of twenty-year-old Abel, as a result of organ failure, seemed hard to separate from his excessive use of solvent. It marked the dead end road drugs, and to a lesser extent alcohol, presented its users at El Castillo with. In Primo Levi's (2017 [1986]) terms, describing the hybridity of prison-functionary in the Nazi annihilation camps, the groups "armature" was "at the same time its most disquieting feature" (p. 31).

The most radical form of withdrawal from the body, and the last one I am highlighting here, was no doubt the answering to one's desire for death. Moisés told me he had been on the verge of committing suicide a few times in his life and during my fieldwork he had stuck a knife in his leg in front of his wife and daughter. He had wanted to stick it in his stomach but had somehow changed direction in the heat of the moment – he did not know why. Thiago, in turn, had given me two notes one day, which I only opened after I had left El Castillo, in which he announced his suicide, although, fortunately, he did not push through on the idea. In the end, it seemed a cry for being seen, for having someone standing next to him. Meanwhile, Abel had seemed more

persistent in his death wish, often refusing help and resisting going to the hospital whenever the people of El Samaritano wanted to take him there. He had longer said that he wanted to be dead, and it seemed he had been using solvent to speed up this process, among other reasons. He had welcomed death, in a manner perhaps not entirely different than the way gang members in Guatemala City, according to Levenson (2013), were drawn to their own early deaths, as it salvaged them from an adult life doomed to fail.

At the same time, it needs to be stressed that the need for not feeling to which the above forms of withdrawal answered not only ventilated itself through withdrawal. It was also reflected in the for the outside world schizophrenic relationships between street people, in which friendship, abuse, recognition and humiliation were able to exist next to each other. Survival tends to be a short-term enterprise, while friendship, solidarity and loyalty in their conventional meanings usually require long-term interpersonal investments. At El Castillo, these became easily thwarted by the needs of the moments, and in this jumble of giving and taking it was a thick skin that allowed people to get on with each other, to not take things too personally. In similar vein, the need for not feeling drove the compartmentalization of emotions they engaged in, which entailed them to deal with loss and tragedy by getting on with things, as the pressures of the moment demanded from them.

As I have tried to make clear in the above, more than the other forms of withdrawal discussed until now, the withdrawal from the body accepts the violence, anxieties, grief and loss it responds to as a given. It is escapism without fleeing, often focusing on the control of pain while the damage is being done, and as such, it emphasizes the destituteness of those that rely on it. Moreover, at least in the case of drug use among street people, the coping mechanism takes the shape of a violence inflicted on an already battered self. Yet, at the same time, drug use and other forms of withdrawal acting upon the need for not feeling may prevent people from being consummated by either grief or a constant state of high alertness, or both.

Karma, fate and faith

The injustice of the extortion Miguel experienced seemed apparent. Yet still, he tried to tell himself that the extortion had been a moral retribution for the corrupt behavior he had engaged in during a job transporting chickens. It was

a way of 'karmic reasoning' that at the surface may seem a form of self-torment, but in fact served a self-protecting purpose. But then how did this work? In this section, I will provide an answer to this question as I discuss karma, fate and faith as ways through which some of my respondents tried to get a grip on their lives not by moving away from something, as is done in withdrawal, but through ascribing higher rules to life and adhering to them. I will start with posing another question to introduce Claudina's use of both karma and fate.

How to protect yourself as an elite when visiting a dangerous neighborhood? It is a question most Guatemala City elites would answer with a counterquestion: why would I go there? In the case of Claudina, however, it was a viable thing to ask given that she had the untypical habit of visiting people living in places associated with poverty and high rates of crime and violence. The importance of these visits for her were hard to exaggerate, as she had few social contacts outside her 'poor' acquaintances and, perhaps even more importantly, the visits were central to her claim of still being the girl from El Nacimiento, and as such, to her identity. Of course, her socioeconomic situation allowed her to travel by car and choose the hour of her visits, this way averting some of the dangers usually attached to life in these places. But still, she had to take risks many elites would not dare to take. Or so I believed. Claudina herself downplayed the dangers involved in these trips, as she put faith in the karmic logic of "What you reap is what you sow," from which she derived that bad things - say, being murdered - only happened to bad people. And as she did good in life, she reasoned, she had nothing to worry about. It was a way of reasoning that gave her a sense of control in an environment that seemed out of control.

At the same time, she was very selective in applying the rules of karma to her own situation. Crucially, she did not apply it to the hardships she experienced in her own life. For example, she had a hard time dealing with the continued control her ex-partner Pedro managed to exert over her life, which she felt she did not deserve.

In addition to this, there had also been moments when Claudina dismissed the risks of visiting dangerous areas by stressing that one's turn to die can come up at any time, everywhere. So why not visit dangerous areas? It was a logic that seemed at odds with the sense of control she derived from the karmic logic described above; one that bore resemblances to the popular proverb '*Cuándo*

te toca ni aunque te quites y cuando no te toca ni aunque te pongas,’ which loses much of its rhythm and explanatory power translated into English, but would be something along the lines of: ‘When it’s your turn, it’s your turn, even if you step aside, and when it’s not your turn, even if you stand in front [it’s not your turn].’ It was a belief whose logic in Guatemala City was often sought for matters of life and death in their relation to violence. To reproduce a parable two people had told me separately from each other: “a man, knowing death was looking for him, tried to escape him by shaving off his hair. Death, then, unable to find his target, responds by taking the life of a seemingly random person, a bald man, who happens to be where he is, as he has to take someone’s life.” It was, of course, the person he was looking for. The message: when it is your time, it is your time, and there is nothing you can do about it, neither to delay it, nor to speed it up. A less radical enhancement of ‘*Cuando te toca*’ came from María Luisa, who in a conversation about her being in the relatively safe environment of her new neighborhood, compared to the unsafety of Balcón Verde, told me: “*Cuándo te toca ni aunque te quites y cuando no te toca ni aunque te pongas*, but then [when you die] it hasn’t been because one was looking for it walking in dangerous zones” – in other words, when it is your turn, it is your turn, but you do not want to push it.

Given the fact that it was hard denying the extreme violence in some of the places Claudina liked visiting, one could readily believe Claudina sometimes invoked the above beliefs when deciding to engage in another one of her visits. Most human action, however, as Michael Jackson (2005) points out, is unreflective. Beliefs and ideas, this is to say, often do not steer our actions upfront but are instead “outcomes of an activity, or retrospective abridgements of it, that help us come to terms with what has already taken place” (p. xv).

It brings us to Miguel’s retrospective use of karma to make sense of the extortion and all that had come from it, which included losing the house in Balcón Verde that he had bought for his son to live in. He had bought the second house with the ‘corruption money’ he had made, so it was only justified, he argued, that he had lost it. It seemed obvious to me that he preferred to lay the blame on himself instead of being haunted by the injustice of what happened to him. “Guilt,” as psychologist Judith Lewis Herman (2001) writes, “may be understood as an attempt to draw some useful lesson from disaster and to regain some sense of power and control. To imagine that one could have

done better may be more tolerable than to face the reality of utter helplessness” (p. 53-54). The fact that Oscar felt guilty about his wife’s death, feeling that he could have done more, may also be explained from this angle. In Miguel’s case, clinging to the laws of karma also came with another benefit, as it promised him to be free of similar hardships in the future if only he would do good.

As the above seems to suggest, in times of uncertainty and distress, it is the firm hands of the all-encompassing laws and truths, which, in this case, stress either complete agency or complete lack of it, whose hand we search to lead us through the storm, and who are able to withstand the storm themselves. Yet, when such is needed, we may let them exist next to each other, or allow them to be valid only for specific situations. However, in a world as structurally unjust as Guatemala City, they can hardly live up to their promises. Miguel kept struggling with the injustice of what had happened to him and despite her self-proclaimed good behavior, Claudina had not been able to avert bad things from happening to her.

The trust Claudina put in karma and fate could not be separated from her faith in God. They were both laws one could draw from the bible – in fact, Claudina described karma as the main ingredient of her faith. But she also went to church every Wednesday to pray for success in business. Miguel, in turn, may have also been influenced by his faith applying the law of justice upon his own situation. In his diary writings, after the extortion, he repeatedly turns to what he called the “*Ser Superior*” (Supreme Being) to ask for help to be able to go on with his life – to be able to forget, as he mentioned a few times. Meanwhile, the street people too tended to feel the presence of God in their lives where he was most needed. God, as they declared, was hope, love, protection, and provided them with the assertion that they too were human, “children of God,” like everybody else. It showed the versatility of faith, especially in times of hardship.

At the same time, in a country awash with social injustice, one’s faith was also easily put to the test. Trauma, for instance, of which I believe there is plenty in Guatemala, tends to put everything in doubt, among which one’s faith in a divine order (Herman, 2001). Meanwhile, the fact that the church had always been an important instrument through which social hierarchies were reproduced – from the Catholic Church acting as a powerbroker between the authorities and the Indian villages during the colonial period to the

'blaming-the-poor-for-being-poor' doctrine of the neo-Pentecostalist church in present-day Guatemala – sometimes badly reflected upon people's faith. An important reason for Miguel to speak about a Supreme Being, instead of God, was to avoid the jargon of the church, which he associated with hypocrisy and dangerous rigidity. Meanwhile, Gustavo had grown skeptical of religion due to his experience at El Verbo. Oscar's skepticism towards religion and the existence of God, in turn, had been fed by his little loving, but highly religious mother, as well as by Carmen's lost battle against cancer and the unjust way they had been treated by their church and fellow church members during her illness.

As we have seen in the previous, the tendency to withdraw among Guatemala City residents or resort to the logics of karma or fate often rested on a desire for gaining some kind of control over life. The latter is an existential imperative just as, say, being loved and recognized is and its importance for humanity is stressed by the fact that people in Guatemala City and elsewhere tend to resort to imagining control in situations where things are out of their hands (Jackson, 1998). The walls of gated communities were embodiments of social splitting, which builds upon an oversimplified representation of reality, though it did not provide residents of these places in Guatemala City with the kind of black-and-white picture as found in other studies. Nostalgia often came as a double-edged sword that misleadingly attracted believers towards its shiniest side. And the all-encompassing nature of karmic logic made it perfectly fit for selective use. Self-deception, as John Searle (1992) writes, is a "pervasive psychological phenomenon" (p. 147). Indeed, as suspicious people were towards the other when seeking control over their lives, so easily they fooled themselves in this process. In Guatemala City and elsewhere that is.

Bringing out the unseen

The aim of this work is to describe and understand the realities of people from different social classes in Guatemala City as they are lived in a context of extreme social inequality and high levels of violent crime. So where to begin such an endeavor? In the empirical chapters assigned to my different cases, I have tried to let the narratives run according to the rhythm of my protagonists' pasts and presences to be able to capture the feel of their lives.

In this chapter, until now, I have identified the main themes of this research and drawn up some of the resemblances and differences between the different cases and social classes they represent, hereby building on a division between the forms of everyday violence my protagonists encountered and the social and psychological mechanisms they used to cope with these forces. Here, I would like to come to a bigger, more holistic picture of life in Guatemala City. Not without paradox, I will start taking this up by lumping again the everyday violence and coping mechanisms to draw the attention to – and I have briefly introduced this before – the convenient fiction of this division, which, as I will explain now in three points, ignores the fact that the two are interwoven in multiple ways.

First of all, in worlds so full of violence, violence easily becomes the go-to source for coping with violence. The predilection among Guatemala City residents to fall back on private forms of security provision, which existed both within and outside the sphere of the law and both within poorer settings and more privileged ones, was a reflection of this. This was, perhaps first and foremost, driven by the fact that people lived in what I portrayed as the shadow of the state, where they enjoyed little protection from the state or government support of any other kind and, especially in more marginalized settings, state forces were not seldom among the violent actors people sought protection against. But as the aesthetization of security testifies to, it was also driven by a widely accepted greed for violence that turned violence into a brand and the industry surrounding it into business as usual.

Here I would also like to point to the fact that especially in contexts where violence runs wild, the latter, if we look at it from a micro perspective, can also contain some of its own damage by way of what I would like to call ‘collateral repair’. This became particularly clear in Balcón Verde. Due to the extreme violence of their world, the colonia’s local mara seemed to suffer from what could be deemed a ‘short memory’. Many saw the fact that Miguel’s friend Leon had paid his extorters, which enabled him to stay in Balcón Verde, as an invitation to more extortion. After all, the payment showed he was good for it. Yet perhaps also to his own surprise, a year and a half after the event he had still not been subjected to a second extortion. This he attributed to the fact that his two extorters were not around any more: one of them was killed and the other one fled the neighborhood out of fear from meeting with the same faith. Miguel’s belief that he was able to make a safe return to Balcón Verde

was based on similar arguments and the fact that he had done so without being killed – be it for a short period of time – may have proved him right. Meanwhile, the lynching of Santiago, a marero whose wrath Miguel had come to fear a few days before Santiago's violent death (and with good reasons), may have saved him from a lot of problems.

Second, the coping with violence, also when it does not boil down to the use of direct, physical violence or the threat of it, can add to a climate that breeds violence. It is with this in mind that UN-Habitat Executive Director Joan Clos sounded the alarm bell over the proliferation of gated communities around the world, which she saw as “an expression of increased inequality and an increased uneasiness in accepting diversity” (in Provost, 2014). Gated communities, as I concluded in an earlier work on two neighborhoods in Quito, help turn cities into classrooms for segregation (Peeters & Hoey, 2017), although with such a characterization the question arises: if not in a gated community, where else to turn to for protection in a notoriously violent city such as Guatemala City?

Third, the coping with violence can also turn into an enterprise with violent tendencies directed towards the self, a medicine worse than the disease it is supposed to fight, and stand in the way of human flourishing. The drug use of the El Castillo people was perhaps the most poignant example of coping with the violence, anxieties and pressures of everyday life among my respondents. But, as we have seen, the withdrawn lifestyle exemplified by gates, polarized windows and bodyguards, paradoxically, may also increase the fear of the dangerous ‘other,’ and as such, be considered both a cause and an effect of the feeling of insecurity. Crucially, these measures not only constrained the movement of others but also of oneself. There are two sides to a wall raised to keep the outside world at bay, one that keeps outsiders out and one that helps determine the margins of life for those that seek protection from it. In addition to this, as the narrative of the Contreras family shows, a withdrawn lifestyle might backfire upon a person when he or she is hit by trauma. Where violence is pervasive, this is to say, coping with it tends to become more easily a violence in itself, either impinged on the other or on the self, or both.

The above brings me to another observation. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned that there was a strong case to be made to consider violence the defining characteristic of poor neighborhoods in Guatemala City, following an observation made by Rodgers, Beall and Kanbur (2012). Such was the case, I

explained, because the poor were on the recipient side of most of the violence. But as the blurring of lines between violence and coping with it in both poor and more privileged settings reveals, as well as the fact that each world had its own violence suggest, one could make a case of violence being one of the defining characteristics of life in general in Guatemala City. It spread out over society like an oil spill. Such, of course, would be a bitter conclusion to end a study on life in Guatemala City.

Fortunately, there is also reason to argue against such a characterization along the lines of violence. Crucially, the above not only shows the obvious truth that opportunity is never distributed equally, but also that life is not an “either/or” (Hage, 2003, p. 12) or a ‘have or have-not’ thing. No doubt, the more privileged were better equipped to handle the pressures produced by the system, but, as we have seen, their lives inevitably took in some of the violence of what is usually associated with the poor and, as such, the exclusive lifestyle represented by the one far end also hid something of the extreme of the other end. Yet, this was also true the other way around, as people were often able to find some kind of normalcy associated with more stable conditions in situations of extreme duress and distress. In part, this was a matter of “seeking an *illutio* elsewhere” (Jackson, M., 2005, p. xxv). Withdrawal, to take what has become perhaps the central theme of this work, was not only a moving away from something, but also a moving towards something else, a step into church or a walk down memory lane. This was also propelled by the fact that people in Guatemala City and elsewhere, when unable to change the objective situation that overwhelms and curbs their freedom, tend to seek to transform the experience of the situation instead to gain a sense of control over their fates. It explains how habits could turn into preferences when the former had not been born out of choice, how one could find some sort of salvage in laying the blame on oneself after being extorted and how one could believe in karma unless it involved one’s own troubles – to name but a few examples. This is to say, societies are producers of hope, as Hage (2003) points out, but so are people, although in some cases this can come at the cost of the other – for instance, when it comes to the process of creating an ‘other,’ which helps order a fluid and insecure world for the one while it paves the way for the social exclusion of the other.

It is, I believe, to this ‘knack for life’ Eric Hobsbawm (1995) testifies when discussing what he calls the “short twentieth century” (ranging from 1914 to 1991), which he deemed the most murderous century in human history. As he writes, “since this century has taught us, and continues to teach us, that human beings can learn to live under the most brutalized and theoretically intolerable conditions, it is not easy to grasp the extent of the, unfortunately accelerating, return to what our nineteenth-century ancestors would have called the standards of barbarism” (p. 13). The old adage “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 571) is as relevant today as it was almost a century ago when it was first written down and seems to only gain extra importance in situations of duress and distress. As such, it may not be a coincidence that one of the greatest magic realist writers, Nobel Prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias, is a Guatemalan, or that the style of fiction, which injects the real with the magic, originates from Latin America, a region that “has specialized in losing ever since those remote times when Renaissance Europeans ventured across the ocean and buried their teeth in the throats of the Indian civilizations” (Galeano, 2009 [1973], p. 1). The term magic realism, one begins to see, might not be as great a paradox as it might seem at first sight. “The work of a novelist is to make the invisible visible with words,” Asturias wrote (see Albaigès Olivart, 1997, p. 58).⁷⁰ Putting it like this, the work of a social scientist does not differ greatly from that of a novelist: it is to explore beyond the appearance of things. It entails staying alert to the hidden injuries of violence, fear and inequality, and the myriad of ways people seek to wrest away from the knife-sharp edges of these social forces. And in lifestyles marked by withdrawal, it is about having an eye for the shadows of those that are not there, the people for whom one wants to remain unseen – it is to turn the unseen into something seen.

⁷⁰ Original quote in Spanish: “*El trabajo del novelista es hacer visible lo invisible con palabras*” [Translation TP].

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Dutch summary (Nederlandse Samenvatting)

Dit proefschrift draait om een groep daklozen en vier gezinnen. Vijf casussen, alle behorende tot een andere sociale klasse. Van arm naar rijk waren dat: (1) een groep daklozen die, geholpen door sociale hulpverlening, het hoofd boven water probeerden te houden in een wereld van geweld en verslaving; (2) Miguel en zijn gezin, die vanwege een afpersing gevlucht waren uit Balcón Verde, een beruchte wijk van de stad, en hun leven weer probeerden op te pakken in een gated community; (3) Oscar en zijn dochters die, zeker in het geval van de laatsten, er bijna een kluizenaarsbestaan op na hielden; (4) Gustavo, die in het verleden had behoord tot een machtige evangelische sekte en nu samen met zijn dochter Valeria — en zijn twee andere dochters wat meer op afstand — zijn leven weer probeerde op te pakken; en tot slot (5) Claudina, die met haar vijf kinderen een villa bewoonde aan de chique Carretera a El Salvador, maar ooit in een arme wijk geboren was.

Tezamen zijn zij ‘de ongeziene’ die ik portreter in mijn proefschrift, een typering die ik tot titel van mijn proefschrift heb verheven, omdat ‘ongezien zijn’, door middel van terugtrekking, het belangrijkste antwoord is op de verscheidenheid aan gevaren, onzekerheden en angsten waar inwoners van Guatemala-Stad dagelijks mee leven. Hoe gaven deze mensen hun leven vorm en betekenis in een context van geweld en ongelijkheid? En wat was de invloed van sociale klasse hierop? Het zijn de vragen waarmee ik vertrok naar Guatemala-Stad, voor acht maanden veldwerk verdeeld over twee periodes.

Wat nu volgt, is een korte samenvatting. Een belangrijk doel in mijn proefschrift is geweest om de werelden van mijn respondenten door gedetailleerde beschrijvingen van zowel belangrijke levensgebeurtenissen als van het alledaagse bestaansritme tot leven te wekken. De kracht zit hem in de uitgebreide beschrijvingen en het spreekt voor zich dat deze moeilijk samen te vatten zijn. Niettemin is het mogelijk en zinvol om de belangrijke thema's van de narratieven die zijn gewijd aan de casussen te identificeren en aan de hand daarvan de narratieven op elkaar te laten reflecteren. Dit levert een thematische driedeling op: het geweld waar mijn respondenten mee te maken kregen, de wijze waarop zij hiermee omgingen en de verwevenheid van deze twee zaken. Ik loop ze in deze volgorde na.

Het geweld

Het eerste gedeelte is gewijd aan het blootleggen van de sociale orde van het alledaagse geweld dat mijn respondenten in hun leven tegenkwamen. Om recht te doen aan de manier waarop zij dit hebben ervaren, wissel ik gaandeweg van invalshoek om de kwestie van geweld te benaderen. Ik begin met het beschrijven van de relatie tussen de staat en mijn respondenten. Daarna bespreek ik de verschillende vormen van geweld die mijn respondenten ervoeren. Tot slot ga ik in op de afkeuring waarmee veel van mijn respondenten keken naar wat zij vaak ‘de Guatemalteek’ noemden.

In de schaduw van de staat

Als het gaat om geweld in Guatemala-Stad – en op veel andere plekken is dit niet anders – is de staat als geweldsactor niet weg te denken. In de twintig jaar na de burgeroorlog (1960-1996), waarin meer dan tweehonderdduizend doden vielen, bleef geweld onverminderd bestaan in Guatemala, maar veranderde wel het type geweld dat zich daar manifesteerde. Waar geweld tijdens de burgeroorlog nog met name een staatsaangelegenheid was (CEH, 1999), ‘democratiseerde’ (Kruijt & Koonings, 1999) het geweld in vreedstijd, in de zin van dat het in handen kwam van een steeds grotere groep aan actoren en gebruikt werd voor een steeds grotere verscheidenheid aan redenen. Guatemala-Stad, als we het vanuit geweld bekijken, werd een stad van onder meer gangs, gated communities en lynchmenigtes. Dit wil echter niet zeggen dat de staat hier niet een vorm van controle op uitoefent. Guatemala en ander Latijns-Amerikaanse landen, zo redeneert een groeiende groep wetenschappers, zijn wat je ‘gewelddadige’ (Arias & Goldstein, 2010) of ‘gesecuritiseerde’ (Pearce, 2010) democratieën zou kunnen noemen, waarbij de democratie wordt onderworpen aan een ‘geharnaste’ veiligheidslogica die niet alleen direct staatsgeweld voortbrengt, maar ook een vorm van regeren door middel van geweld die zowel gedijt op relaties met gewelddadige, niet tot de formele staat behorende actoren als op geweldsaccumulatie in het algemeen.

Bovenstaande inzichten zijn cruciaal als we het geweld in Guatemala-Stad willen begrijpen, maar vinden naar mijn mening weinig aansluiting bij wat het betekent om in een dergelijk systeem te leven en de belangrijke rol die de staat hier in speelt. Om de van geweld doortrokken verhouding tussen

burger en staat te kunnen duiden, en daarbij de verbeelding aan te spreken, beargumenteer ik dat mensen in Guatemala-Stad in ‘de schaduw van de staat’ leven, een typering die berust op twee aan schaduw toe te schrijven associaties.

Ik doel hierbij allereerst op de connotatie van somberte die aan de schaduw kleeft. Vanuit deze betekenis gezien, verwijst het leven in de schaduw van de staat naar de pessimistische, zelfs cynische stemming onder de inwoners van Guatemala-Stad ten aanzien van de staat en het functioneren ervan. Corruptie en andere wanpraktijken waren schering en inslag in de regering en het leger, die samenspannen met de economische elite van het land, en konden, wanneer deze aan het licht kwamen, nog maar weinig mensen choqueren. En als dit wel gebeurde dan was dat vanwege de “schaamteloze” proporties en het “cynisme” dat ermee gemoeid ging, om Claudina's woorden te gebruiken aangaande de corruptie van president Pérez Molina (die hem uiteindelijk in 2015 het presidentschap kostte). Of omdat deze de persoon in kwestie op een meer directe manier troffen, hetzij als slachtoffer, hetzij vanwege een andere persoonlijke band met een gebeurtenis. Dat Gustavo zich gekwetst voelde door de staatscorruptie onder de regering van Portillo (2000-2004), kwam met name omdat hier een groot aantal leden van El Verbo bij waren betrokken, de evangelische sekte waar hij decennialang deel van uitmaakte.

Daarnaast bouwt de gekozen typering voort op de ruimte die de schaduw geeft om dingen aan het zicht te onttrekken en, soms, om dingen te doen ‘die het daglicht niet kunnen verdragen’. Dit verwijst aan de ene kant naar de neiging en het vermogen van ten minste een deel van de bevolking om de staat in het ongewisse te laten over hun dagelijks leven en activiteiten. Dit duidt op een vorm van handelingsvrijheid. Voor mensen als Gustavo en Claudina, maar ook voor andere meer bevoorrechte bewoners van Guatemala-Stad, manifesteerde de formele staat zich doorgaans niet buiten de hierboven beschreven schandalen en/of gevallen waarin ze het staatsapparaat in hun voordeel konden laten werken.

Aan de andere kant verwijst het verborgene en het heimelijke van het leven in de schaduw van de staat naar het feit dat een deel van de bevolking – en dan verplaatsen we ons naar het armere deel van mijn respondenten en van Guatemala-Stad – zich overgeleverd weet aan de grillen van de staat. Het leven in de schaduw van de staat geeft hier het gevoel weer van de status-quo tussen aan de ene kant de bewoners van arme zones van de stad en aan de andere kant

de grotendeels afwezige staat met gewelddadige neigingen. De autonomie om te handelen die de schaduw hier biedt ligt hier bij staatsactoren en/of actoren die, vaak op basis van duistere constructies, met hen onder een hoedje spelen of op een andere manier vrij spel weten te krijgen. De mensen van El Castillo, bijvoorbeeld, waren slachtoffer van wat ik 'daden van afwezigheid' noem, waarbij de gemeente de verwaarlozing van de mensen van El Castillo probeerde te verbloemen aan de hand van een mooi, maar weinig steekhoudend verhaal over indirecte steun via hulpverleningsorganisaties (omdat het zelf bezoeken van El Castillo te gevaarlijk zou zijn voor gemeenteamtbenaren). Tegelijkertijd waren ze slachtoffer van pesterijen, bedreigingen en mishandelingen door de politie.

Elke wereld zijn geweld

Het is verleidelijk om bij het lezen van de bovenstaande paragraaf een tweedeling aan te brengen: zij die geweld en ander sociaal lijden ervaren en zij die het niet ervaren. Het zou een observatie zijn die past in het discours dat in meer zogenaamd 'kritische' hoeken vastkleeft aan het neoliberalisme. Dit laatste zou een systeem van 'winnaars' en 'verliezers' zijn, een beschrijving die aan de ene kant krachtig is omdat deze rekenschap geeft van het feit dat het neoliberalisme zorgt voor toenemende ongelijkheid, maar aan de andere kant te simplistisch van aard is, niet in de laatste plaats omdat deze blind is voor geweld en ander sociaal lijden dat ervaren wordt binnen andere klassen dan de arme. Een vergelijkbare tendens vinden we terug in etnografisch onderzoek, waarin over het algemeen weinig oog is voor het geweld dat de middenklasse en rijke klasse raakt (zie ook Kleinman, 2000). Dat is zonde, want het staat een meer genuanceerd verhaal over de werking en de verschijningsvormen van geweld in de weg. Ik betoog in dit proefschrift dat de realiteit minder zwart-wit is en zich beter laat vangen in de boodschap dat elke 'wereld' in Guatemala-Stad zijn geweld heeft. Deze stelling is gebaseerd op twee aannames die centraal staan in deze paragraaf. Ten eerste, geweld is in belangrijke mate klassebepaald. Ten tweede, geweld is iets dat ervaren kan worden vanuit verschillende rollen en vormen van betrokkenheid. We bespreken ze hieronder.

De rol van klasse bij geweld en de wijze waarop dit zich manifesteert is allereerst terug te zien in het feit dat geweld en sociaal lijden het meest alarmerend zijn op plekken die worden gekenmerkt door armoede. Wijzend

op het feit dat geweld in de eenentwintigste eeuw zich met name concentreert in arme stadswijken, stellen Rodgers, Beall en Kanbur dat deze laatste zijn veranderd in plaatsen waar geweld misschien wel verworden is tot “*het* bepalende kenmerk van het leven” (2012, p. 15, nadruk in origineel). Dit lijkt ook het geval te zijn in El Castillo. Tekenend in dit verband zijn de woorden van El Castillo-bewoner Moisés, die vertelde dat hij leefde in een wereld “van geweld, van zoveel verdriet, zoveel egoïsme en van zoveel tegenslagen in het leven” – woorden die ook van toepassing leken op het leven van veel andere El Castillo-bewoners. In een dergelijke wereld is het onvermijdelijk dat El Castillo-bewoners niet alleen lijdend voorwerp van geweld waren, maar ook zelf geweld gebruikten. In veel gevallen betrof dit geweld gericht op andere El Castillo-bewoners, van uit de hand gelopen pesterijen tot berovingen. Het was de vanzelfsprekendheid waarmee de schijnbare tegenpolen van kameraadschap en geweld samensmolten tot een ‘normale’ manier van leven in El Castillo, en de onontkoombaarheid van het geweld die hieruit voortvloeide, die maakte dat een gewelddadige wereld veranderde in een wereld van geweld. Ook Balcón Verde werd in hoge mate gedefinieerd door het geweld dat zich daar voordeed. Zo zou volgens bewoners de helft van de bewoners vertrokken zijn vanwege het geweld (en met name de afpersingen).

Vergeleken met hun armere tegenhangers, waren de meer bevoorrechte delen van Guatemala-Stad, vooral binnen de grenzen van een gated community, over het algemeen veilige havens en leidden hun bewoners meestal een relatief veilig leven. Dat betekent niet dat er een simpel verband is tussen geweld en klasse. Net zoals er gevaren waren die gretig opdoken binnen armere klassen, waren er gevaren die meer specifiek verbonden waren aan rijkere klassen (of specifieke economische activiteiten binnen deze klassen). Een belangrijke factor hierbij is dat geld verdienen vaak een van de belangrijkste motieven achter het plegen van criminaliteit is. Het maakt welgestelde burgers tot lucratieve doelwitten, die – omdat het hebben van geld in Guatemala-Stad zich vaak rechtstreeks vertaalt in het opkrikken van beveiliging – tegelijkertijd moeilijk te raken zijn. Dit in ogenschouw genomen is het niet verwonderlijk dat de criminele groepen die zich richtten op ontvoeringen van rijke en/of machtige Guatemalteken in de jaren negentig van de vorige eeuw zelf ook vaak machtige connecties hadden. Claudina is lange tijd doodsbang geweest dat een van haar kinderen zou worden ontvoerd, nadat ze begin jaren negentig

een ansichtkaart had ontvangen met daarop het bericht dat haar zoon ontvoerd zou worden. De boodschap was ondertekend door een doodseskader dat, zoals later bleek, aan het leger verbonden was.

Tegelijkertijd zou het een gemakkelijke vergissing zijn om de werelden van de arme klasse, middenklasse en rijke klassen te presenteren als gescheiden universums met gevaren die automatisch verschillend van aard waren. Er waren gevaren verbonden aan plekken waar verschillende klassen samenkwamen, hoewel het moet worden gezegd dat geweld ook op deze plekken vaak hardnekkig aan klasse bleef kleven. Om de openbare weg als voorbeeld van zo'n plek te nemen, aan de ene kant was het verkeer in Guatemala-Stad voor iedereen even chaotisch en verstopt, en het is daarom niet verwonderlijk dat ook Gustavo en Claudina getuige waren geweest van verschillende gewelddadige berovingen op de weg. Aan de andere kant gingen mensen ongelijk uitgerust de weg op. Claudina's kinderen reden volgens haar in zeer 'roofbare' (lees 'mooie') auto's, maar werden tijdens autoritten tegelijkertijd vaak vergezeld door een lijfwacht. Buschauffeurs en -passagiers behoorden tot de meest kwetsbare weggebruikers. Vanwege het risico op onder meer beroving en schietpartijen, omschreef Gustavo de busrit die ik maakte van zijn werk in Quiché naar Guatemala-Stad als 'Russisch roulette'.

De relatie tussen klasse en geweld is niet eenvoudig, zo betoog ik hierboven, omdat geld (en het hebben ervan) aan de ene kant ingezet kan worden voor het bieden van bescherming tegen geweld en aan de andere kant ook bepaalde vormen van geweld en criminaliteit aantrekt. Maar er zijn nog meer factoren die klassegeweld tot een complex fenomeen maken. Ik noem er twee.

Ten eerste is klasse een notoir 'rommelig' concept (Appiah, 2019), waarvan economisch kapitaal slechts een van de bepalende factoren is. Dat dit ook gevolgen heeft voor mogelijk geweld dat wordt ervaren, blijkt bijvoorbeeld uit de situatie van Claudina. Met haar villa, auto's en lijfwachten voldeed zij aan de ene kant aan wat je het ansichtkaartbeeld van de elite zou kunnen noemen, maar aan de andere kant was zij verre van een representatieve telg van de rijke klasse waarin ik haar – al dan niet terecht – plaatste. In tegenstelling tot veel andere 'rijken' was ze arm geboren en had ze weinig onderwijs genoten. Daarnaast was ze manager van een aantal motels, een branche die geassocieerd werd met prostitutie. Als gevolg hiervan ervoer ze type uitsluiting

en machteloosheid dat doorgaans gekoppeld werd aan (en ervaren werd door) het armere deel van de bevolking.

Ten tweede zijn de door klasse gedefinieerde werelden zoals die gepresenteerd worden in deze paragraaf dynamisch en vatbaar voor contextuele verandering. Als we het beoordelen op basis van het soort geweld dat Miguel ervoer, zouden we kunnen stellen dat zijn wereld veranderde na zijn vlucht uit Balcón Verde. Waar hij eerst vooral bezig was geweest met het veilig houden van zijn gezin in een gevaarlijke wijk, bestond zijn dagelijkse strijd na de afpersing vooral uit de opgave om genoeg geld te verdienen om zijn gezin in een veilige wijk te kunnen houden.

Tot slot is het belangrijk te benadrukken dat geweld niet alleen klasse volgt, maar ook andere kenmerken, identiteiten en tendensen, die ook kunnen interacteren met klasse. Ik heb klasse als bijzonder relevant aangemerkt als we kijken naar geweld in Guatemala-Stad, maar ik had ook een zaak kunnen bouwen rond bijvoorbeeld gender. Inderdaad, in een land met een van de hoogste percentages vrouwenmoord ter wereld, was het niet zonder reden dat Oscar zich zo druk kon maken om de veiligheid van zijn dochters en dat deze laatsten er zo een teruggetrokken leven op na hielden.

In het bovenstaande hebben we vastgesteld dat de centrale claim van deze paragraaf, elke wereld zijn geweld, allereerst moet worden begrepen vanuit een klasseperspectief. Er is een tweede aanname waarop ik deze stelling heb gebaseerd, namelijk dat geweld ervaren kan worden vanuit verschillende rollen en/of vormen van betrokkenheid: van slachtoffer tot dader en van beschermer tot omstander, en alles daartussenin. Neem Gustavo's werk voor verschillende NGO's. Dit had hem veel goeds gebracht – waaronder een relatief goed salaris en vele reizen – maar had hem ook oog in oog had gebracht met de corruptie van het systeem in Guatemala. Het was iets dat hem zwaar viel. Allereerst omdat hij het gevoel had dat hij hier medeplichtig aan was – hij deed in zijn werk naar eigen zeggen niet veel meer dan de dingen te laten zoals ze waren. Maar daarnaast stoorde het hem dat de arme Guatemalteken waarop de programma's zich doorgaans richtten een voorkeur leken te hebben voor corrupte leiders, hetgeen het bestrijden van corruptie en het verbeteren van hun positie vrijwel onmogelijk maakte, en ook zijn beeld ten aanzien van zijn landgenoten negatief beïnvloedde. Het voorbeeld van Gustavo laat zien dat ook degenen die niet direct geraakt worden door de kwalen van het systeem, hier hun weg mee moeten leren vinden.

De talk of the Guatemalan

Het ‘universum van criminaliteit’ biedt vruchtbare grond aan stereotypering en discriminatie, zo weten we uit het werk van Caldeira (2000). Aan de hand van haar concept ‘*talk of crime*’ – de sociaal geconstrueerde verhalen over criminaliteit die voornamelijk draaien om criminaliteit, maar ook beïnvloed worden door angsten en vooroordelen ten aanzien van onder meer ras en klasse – laat zij zien hoe criminaliteit gebruikt wordt om machtsverhoudingen in stand te houden of te verscherpen. Het leidt tot een discours dat de wereld verdeeld wordt in goed en kwaad en dat daarmee legitimiteit geeft aan het optrekken van muren en het aanbrengen van andere scheidslijnen. Caldeira kwam tot deze inzichten in een studie over São Paulo, maar het leidt geen twijfel dat ze ook van grote waarde zijn voor andere plekken, waaronder Guatemala-Stad. In deze paragraaf plaats ik een discours naast de *talk of crime*, dat de scheidslijnen die deze laatste aanbrengt zowel versterkt als corrigeert. Het betreft een discours dat ik in ‘Calderiaanse’ termen heb omschreven als de ‘*talk of the Guatemalan*’, dat wil zeggen de verhalen van Guatemalteken waarin zij hun afkeuring van en wantrouwen ten aanzien van ‘de Guatemalteek’ tentoonspreiden.

Veel van mijn respondenten bleken uitermate kritisch op wat zij vaak bestempelde als ‘de Guatemalteek’. Gustavo was hier het uitgesproken voorbeeld van. Hij sprak over een “anti-waarde” waarmee de Guatemalteek was behept, omdat ze “de dief, de corrupte en de bedrieger” bewonderden, en beweerde ook dat Guatemalteken de gewoonte hadden om van elkaar te stelen. Anderen kwamen tot soortgelijke essentialistische karakterisering van de Guatemalteek als dief, als onbetrouwbaar en als afgunstig. Het betrof hier het type generieke beweringen dat, zoals Appiah (2019) uitlegt, mensen aanmoedigt het niet alleen te accepteren – aangezien mensen geneigd zijn eerder generalisaties te accepteren als deze hen redenen tot bezorgdheid geven – maar ook om het onderwerp ervan als ‘een soort’ te beschouwen met een gedeelde essentie.

De *talk of the Guatemalan* omvat zowel een sneer naar ‘de ander’ als een vorm van zelfkritiek die blijkt geeft van wat Bourdieu (2000) ‘symbolisch geweld’ noemt. De laatste term verwijst naar de mechanismen van symbolische overheersing die helpen bij het reproduceren van sociale hiërarchieën door ervoor te zorgen dat mensen het geweld dat op hen wordt uitgeoefend,

onterecht gaan beschouwen als iets dat ze aan zichzelf te danken hebben. De *talk of the Guatemalan* zorgde voor het soort verwarring dat we ook zien bij Eschers beroemde litho van een waterval, waarin deze wordt afgebeeld als een perpetuum mobile die zichzelf van water voorziet, waardoor de illusie ontstaat dat een waterval kan bestaan zonder dat er constant nieuw water wordt aangevoerd. Deze portretteert geweld – of misdaad, of overtreding, of wangedrag – alsof dit in het DNA van de Guatemalteek is verankerd. Alsof Guatemalteken van nature gewelddadig zijn. Alsof het geweld dat het land teistert kan worden begrepen zonder rekening te houden met het systeem waarin het gedijt – de extreme sociale ongelijkheid, de armoede, de corruptie, de eeuwen van kolonialisme, en de geopolitieke en economische dominantie van het westen. Als zodanig legitimeert deze sociale ongelijkheden, of leidt het op zijn minst de aandacht ervan af, waardoor ze kunnen blijven bestaan.

Enigszins paradoxaal kon de *talk of the Guatemalan* bestaan naast Caldeira's *talk of crime*. Waar de laatste leidt tot criminalisering van een bepaald deel van de bevolking, plaatst de *talk of the Guatemalan* iedereen in het verdachtenbankje. Het is daarmee zowel een correctie op het simplistische onderscheid van de *talk of crime* als een katalysator voor nog meer muren en segregatie.

De omgang met geweld

De centrale boodschap van het eerste gedeelte, zo kunnen we stellen, is dat elke wereld zijn geweld had. In het nu volgende deel richt ik me op de wijze waarop mijn respondenten omgingen met geweld en de druk van het dagelijks leven. Er zijn veel van dergelijke mechanismen en het zou een misvatting zijn om te beweren dat de mechanismen die nu volgen op enige manier uitputtend waren voor mijn respondenten, laat staan voor de bewoners van Guatemala-Stad. Met het onderstaande wil ik echter enkele van de patronen en logica tonen achter de copingmechanismen die door mijn respondenten werden aangewend om deze daarmee in een bredere context te plaatsen van geweld en omgaan met geweld in Guatemala-Stad. Het thema dat deze mechanismen bindt is terugtrekking, waarvan ik drie vormen onderscheid. De paragraaf die nu volgt, is gewijd aan de meest prominente vorm van terugtrekking, de alomtegenwoordige neiging onder inwoners van Guatemala-Stad om zich terug te trekken van 'de gevaarlijke ander'.

Terugtrekking en ‘de gevaarlijke ander’

De terugtrekking van de gevaarlijke ander brengt ons allereerst naar zijn meest typische verschijning, te weten de wereld van muren, hekken, camera's en bewakers die zich samengepakt weten in de gated community. Over gated communities is veel geschreven. Deze zouden bewoners de mogelijkheid geven om de instroom van mensen te controleren, ongewenste personen uit te sluiten en, belangrijk, zichzelf uit te sluiten van stadsleven (Franko Aas, 2013). Wat er overblijft, vanuit het oogpunt van de bewoners, zijn goede mensen binnen de muren en de slechten daarbuiten. Om deze reden zouden gated communities volgens Low (2003) een belichaming zijn van ‘*social splitting*’, waarmee ze doelt op de oversimplificatie en dichotomisering van een vloeibare en onzekere wereld.

De bovenstaande redenatie is prettig, want ordelijk, maar een die de werkelijkheid – in ieder geval in de Guatemalteekse en ik durf te zeggen Latijns-Amerikaanse context – te zwart-wit voorstelt. De controle die kan worden uitgeoefend door bewoners is namelijk verre van absoluut. Allereerst richt deze zich met name op mensen die niet in de wijken wonen. Er is echter weinig wat bewoners kunnen doen om te voorkomen dat iemand, wie dat ook moge zijn, een huis koopt of, in sommige gevallen, huurt in een gated community. Claudina leek een voorbeeld van zo'n ‘ongewenste’ insider, iemand die, zo gaf ze zelf aan, vanwege haar achtergrond met een zekere minachting bekeken werd door andere bewoners.

Daarnaast waren de beschermingsmaatregelen doorgaans niet waterdicht. Gated communities werden in de regel beschermd door mensen met minimale training en lage lonen die vaak net zo bang waren voor de criminelen tegen wie zij bescherming moesten bieden als de bewoners. Waarom zouden zij hun leven wagen voor andermans veiligheid? Ook zijn maar weinig gated communities volledig ‘omhekt’ of ommuurd. Binnen deze context is het niet verwonderlijk dat er tijdens mijn veldwerkperiode twee keer met succes ingebroken werd in Flor del Campo, de wijk waar Gustavo en Valeria woonden. Of dat er in Loma Linda, de wijk van Oscar en zijn gezin, een groepje jonge wijkbewoners actief was die zich schuldig maakten aan overvallen en inbraken zonder dat private security guards ingrepen of, zo vermoedde Oscar, durfden in te grijpen.

Het bovenstaande wil niet zeggen dat het proces van social splitting geen invloed had onder de gated community-bewoners in Guatemala-Stad als een

manier om met angst en angst om te gaan, maar wel dat het tot een minder dualistisch beeld leidde van goed en slecht. De muur om een gated community is, als we van buiten naar binnen redeneren, de eerste defensielijn, niet de laatste (Peeters & Hoey, 2017). De gevaarlijke buitenwereld – zo laten ook de muren om de individuele huizen in chique wijken als Vista Alegre zien – begint bij de buurman. Als er iets is dat de bewoners van gated communities bindt, is het angst voor de buitenwereld, maar diezelfde angst maakt ook dat het hier een zeer instrumentele verbinding gaat die niet zozeer getuigt van sociale cohesie als wel van een gedeeld belang op het gebied van bescherming en beveiliging.

De terugtrekking waar de gated community symbool voor staat, blijft voor bewoners van dergelijke wijken natuurlijk niet beperkt tot de gated community als beschermingsmaatregel. Het leven daarbuiten speelde zich vaak langs zelfde lijnen af. De overdaad aan SUV's met geblindeerde ruiten die ik als security guard telde tijdens het binnenlaten van de gasten; de lijfwachten van Claudina en haar familie; het feit dat de volwassen dochters van Oscar nooit alleen de wijk verlieten: het waren alle maatregelen bedoeld om te beschermen en, vaak, af te schermen.

De vraag die zich opdringt is: *Wat is stadsleven?* In veel opzichten is de teruggetrokken levensstijl niet een uitsluiting van het stadsleven, zoals vaak wordt beweerd, maar simpelweg het stadsleven. Dit wordt ook duidelijk als we naar het leven kijken van mensen die niet in een gated community wonen. Bewoners van met bendes bezaaide wijken sloten zich vaak 'hermetisch' op in hun huis, zoals een voormalig bendelid mij vertelde. En daar waar het terugtrekken achter de muren van een huis niet volstond, zocht men vaak heil in wat wel 'camouflage' (Villarreal, 2015) wordt genoemd. Een voorbeeld hiervan vonden we in Balcón Verde waar veel bewoners ervoor kozen om het schilderwerk van de buitenmuren te verwaarlozen om niet de indruk te wekken dat er in het huis iets te halen viel. Het leven in de wijk was er voornamelijk op gericht geen aandacht te trekken. 'Zien, horen en je mond houden,' zoals een in door geweld geteisterde gebieden bekende slogan luidt, maar veel meer nog: 'Niet zien, niet horen en je mond houden.'

Een andere vraag die zich aandient in deze context van wantrouwen, uitsluiting en terugtrekking is: Hoe traden mensen in contact met elkaar? Een belangrijke factor in met name de armere wijken was dat onvrijwillig of ongepland contact met anderen niet altijd uitgesloten kon worden. Het

is daarom ook dat voorzichtigheid geboden was. Het teruggetrokken leven van met name mensen in marginale wijken was er niet alleen op gericht om contacten vermijden, maar ook op het vermijden van te openhartig contact. Het was tekenend in dit verband dat verschillende respondenten een onderscheid maakten tussen een ‘vriend(in)’ – zijnde iemand tegen wie je ‘hoi’ zegt als je elkaar tegenkomt – en een ‘vriend(in)-vriend(in)’, iemand met wie je het type persoonlijke details deelt, die je, wanneer zo iemand kwaad wil, tegelijkertijd kwetsbaar kunnen maken voor bijvoorbeeld afpersing.

Deze laatste categorie vrienden en kennissen, waarmee een dieper contact nagestreefd werd, zochten mensen vaak – en ik geloof vaker dan in minder beladen contexten – in collectiviteiten van wat je ‘verwachte respectabiliteit’ zou kunnen noemen. In hun meest extreme vorm waren dit collectiviteiten die een hoge mate van voorspelbaarheid met zich meebrachten doordat er op een niet vrijblijvende manier getracht werd te leven naar bepaalde waarden en normen, hierbij geholpen door gereguleerd lidmaatschap en fysieke beveiliging van plekken van samenkomst. Het toppunt van voorspelbare respectabiliteit waren privéclubs, die hun leden vaak een sterk beveiligde plek boden vol families die al generaties lang met elkaar verbonden waren. Cruciaal was dat ze in staat waren om te doen wat gated communities niet konden doen, namelijk het lidmaatschap reguleren, waardoor ze hun doorgaans rijke leden een ‘tweede thuis’ konden geven.

Het is nu tijd om te wijzen op twee belangrijke eigenschappen van terugtrekking en de wijze waarop hier vorm aan wordt gegeven in Guatemala-Stad. Ik doel hierbij allereerst op het feit dat er bij terugtrekking niet alleen iets aan het zicht van de buitenwereld onttrokken wordt, maar ook aan het zicht van degene die zich terugtrekt – een muur, om het populair te zeggen, heeft twee kanten. Gustavo leefde lange tijd in de ‘bubbel’ van de pinkstergemeente El Verbo, waarbij de leiding de gemeenschap en het persoonlijke leven van de individuele leden stevig in de greep hield. Uiteindelijk brak hij met de sekte, maar Gustavo rekende zijn gebroken huwelijk tot de overblijfselen van zijn El Verbo-verleden, aangezien zijn huwelijk met Vania was gesmeed onder de spirituele leiding van de El Verbo-leiders. Volgens Gustavo waren ze blind geweest voor de verschillen in karakter tussen Gustavo en Vania, evenals voor hun culturele verschillen, waarbij de eerste uit een middenklasse en protestants gezin kwam en de laatste uit een hogere middenklasse en grotendeels katholiek

gezin.

Daarnaast verdient het vermelding dat wijdverspreide neiging tot terugtrekking niet alleen de interactie tussen mensen veranderde, maar ook de mensen zelf, of in ieder geval hoe ze naar zichzelf keken. Mijn respondenten beschouwden hun vaak kleine sociale kringen niet als onfortuinlijke resultaten van het moeten verbinden in een omgeving die wordt gekenmerkt door wantrouwen en terugtrekking – en als zodanig, als iets dat ze graag veranderd zouden zien – maar in plaats daarvan als resultaat van hun persoonlijkheid, die vaak als weinig sociaal werd omschreven, en hieraan verbonden persoonlijke voorkeuren. Het betekent dat de individualisering van het dagelijks leven werd ondersteund door een geïndividualiseerde logica. Deze manier van redeneren lijkt echter vooral te wijzen op een drang naar controle over het leven in een omgeving die hier weinig ruimte toe gaf, aangezien het een grotendeels opgelegde beperking verandert in een product van keuze of voorkeur.

Ik begon dit betoog over terugtrekking ten aanzien van de ‘gevaarlijke ander’ met een waarschuwing dat men dit niet te zwart-wit moet zien, hierbij doelend op de controle die uitgeoefend wordt door gated-communitybewoners, die allesbehalve absoluut is. Nu dreig ik me met bovenstaand verhaal schuldig te maken aan een eenzelfde fout, doordat ik hiermee een te uniform en radicaal beeld geef van de teruggetrokken levensstijlen van mijn respondenten. Het beeld verdient dan ook een nuance, met name omdat niet iedereen altijd in staat of bereid was om zich te gedragen naar de regels van een teruggetrokken levensstijl. Miguel en Claudina verlangden allebei naar de hechtheid van de wijk waar ze vandaan kwamen en bezochten deze plek ook, ondanks dat beide wijken bekend stonden als gevaarlijk. Ondertussen werd gezegd dat sommige bewoners van El Castillo er echt alles aan deden om gezien te worden door een buitenwereld die hen onzichtbaar maakte. Verder leken kinderen, in vergelijking met volwassenen, minder bereid om zich te onderwerpen aan de gedisciplineerde logica van terugtrekking – in feite omdat ze kinderen waren. In deze context was het niet verwonderlijk dat ouders van het exclusieve Colegio Gran Bretaña zich graag mengden in de vriendschappen van hun kinderen, zoals Claudina's jongste dochter ervoer toen ze werd uitgesloten van een groep vrienden.

Terugtrekking en nostalgie

“When any society – family, community or nation – offers no hope, provides no care, and actively blocks certain people from participation in it, these people withdraw their investment and interest from it, and seek an illuso elsewhere,” schrijft antropoloog Jackson (2005, p. xxv). Het is een waarheid, zo zagen we in het voorgaande, die wordt weerspiegeld in de wijdverbreide neiging van bewoners van Guatemala-Stad om de bescherming te zoeken van muren en bewakers. Deze vorm van terugtrekking volgt geografische en relationele lijnen, maar terugtrekking kan ook vorm krijgen langs tijdslijnen, zoals de verhalen van Claudina en Miguel laten zien. Beiden zochten de psychologische toevlucht van het nostalgisch herinneren als tegenwicht voor de problemen van het heden. Dit copingmechanisme staat centraal in deze paragraaf en brengt ons naar de ‘ontwortelden’ van Guatemala-Stad, zij die zich niet thuis voelen in de wereld waarin ze leven (Weil, 1952).

Nostalgische herinnering gaf Miguel en Claudina in onzekere en vijandige tijden een gevoel van geworteld zijn. Deze vertegenwoordigde, om de woorden van Boym (2001, p. xv) te gebruiken, een “verlangen naar een andere tijd”, maar nam de vorm aan van het verlangen naar een andere plaats. Saillant detail daarbij was dat de plekken waarnaar Miguel en Claudina naar verlangden op geen enkele manier meer de arme maar hechte wijken waren die ze ooit leken te zijn geweest. Zowel El Nacimiento (Claudina) als Balcón Verde (Miguel) hadden zich ontwikkeld tot bijzonder gewelddadige wijken, waar het ieder voor zich was. Het feit dat Claudina hiervan op de hoogte was, weerhield haar er niet van om de hedendaagse El Nacimiento kwaliteiten toe te kennen die de plek van haar jeugd, althans in retrospect, tot een fijne plek hadden gemaakt. Dit roept de vraag op: hoe kan het dat Miguel en Claudina gevaarlijke wijken als Balcón Verde en El Nacimiento als veilige havens gingen beschouwen? Daar kunnen drie redenen voor genoemd worden:

Ten eerste omvat nostalgische herinnering vaak voorstellingen van het verleden die losgekoppeld zijn van hun tegenstrijdigheden, onrechtvaardigheden en kwalen. Als zodanig vertegenwoordigt nostalgie het soort essentialisme dat vaak heerst onder in de verdrukking geraakte individuen (Young, 1999). Cruciaal hier is dat er weinig krachten zijn die iemand ervan kunnen weerhouden zijn verleden te verfraaien. Om MIGUELS woorden op Facebook te herhalen: “De herinnering is het enige paradijs waaruit ze je niet

kunnen verdrijven [...].”

Ten tweede beperkte de verfraaiing van het soort nostalgie zoals die door Miguel en Claudina werd ervaren zich niet tot een vervlogen verleden, maar werd deze ook geprojecteerd op specifieke plekken in de huidige tijd, plekken binnen handbereik. Bezoeken aan deze plekken boden Miguel en Claudina een schijnbare uitweg uit het echte leven, die gebaseerd was op een verwarring tussen het “denkbeeldige”, verfraaide huis en het “echte huis” (Boym, 2001, p. xvi).

Ten derde bood nostalgie Miguel en Claudina een manier om zich tot anderen te verhouden. Doordat identiteit wordt onderhandeld in dialoog met anderen, was het in het collectieve geheugen dat nostalgie zijn ware kracht verborg als tegenwicht tegen de kracht van het nu. Miguel probeerde zijn oude wereld levend te houden door erover te schrijven op Facebook en andere mensen te betrekken bij de herinnering aan tijden en gebeurtenissen die ze samen hadden meegemaakt. Claudina's bezoeken aan arme wijken brachten haar naar de weinige kennissen die ze had. Ze nam haar kinderen ook regelmatig mee naar plekken die getekend werden door armoede; dit om hen de wereld te laten zien waarin ze geboren was en waarmee ze zich nog steeds identificeerde, en daarnaast om hen bewust te maken van de luxe waarin ze opgroeiden. In vergelijking met Miguel slaagde ze er beter in om nostalgie in het gezinsleven te integreren. Tegelijkertijd was Claudina's nostalgie een reactie op de wijze waarop ze zich behandeld voelde in de wereld waarin ze leefde, waarbij ze de nadruk legde op dezelfde andersheid die anderen tegen haar gebruikten – iets wat Goffman classificeerde als ‘militantie’ (1990). Haar wereld, zo stelde ze keer op keer, was de wereld van El Nacimiento en niet die van de rijke wijk waarin ze woonde.

Zoals het bovenstaande laat zien, zijn nostalgische werelden vaak mooi en veilig, en hoewel ze tot het verleden behoren – of beter nog, het ingebeelde verleden – kan hun sirenenzang ook worden gebruikt om anderen naar zich toe te trekken. Maar nostalgie bevat ook valkuilen, waarvan ik er drie beschrijf.

Allereerst is nostalgie niet alleen het krachtigst op het grensvlak van individuele en collectieve herinnering, maar ook op haar kwetsbaarst. Cruciaal is dat nostalgie, met zijn nadruk op verlies, de neiging heeft om samen te gaan met of zich te ontwikkelen tot een kritiek op het heden (zie bijvoorbeeld DaSilva & Faught, 1982). Miguels nostalgische Facebook-berichten waren in

sommige gevallen bedoeld voor zijn vrouw en kinderen, om zijn ongenoegen kenbaar te maken over hun vermeende gebrek aan waardering voor hem en voor het werk dat hij voor hen verrichtte. Ook vertelde hij hun soms dat hij terug wilde naar Balcón Verde, wetende dat zijn vrouw en kinderen onder geen beding met hem mee zouden gaan. Het was een vorm van ‘radicaal denken’, zoals hij het zelf had genoemd, die maakte dat hij uiteindelijk alleen maar verder wegdreef van zijn gezin, dieper in zijn verleden. Het veranderde de ‘aanwezigheid van afwezigheid’, zijn verlangen naar zijn oude leven, in een ‘afwezigheid van aanwezigheid’, waardoor hij verder geïsoleerd raakte.

Verder gaat de verfraaiing van het verleden waarop nostalgie is gebouwd niet alleen gepaard met een belofte, maar ook met een potentiële desillusie, vooral wanneer nostalgie zich vertaalt in een drang naar herstel van het verleden. Miguel zette uiteindelijk door met het idee om terug te gaan naar Balcón Verde, terwijl zijn gezin achterbleef. In Balcón Verde kwam hij erachter dat er niets meer over was van zijn oude wijk. Vanwege het gevaar dat daar voor hem dreigde – hij was immers niet voor niets gevlucht – was hij genooddaakt vooral binnen te blijven. Na een moeilijke en eenzame tijd keerde hij terug naar zijn gezin. En even belangrijk, niet alleen een wijk verandert tijdens iemands afwezigheid, maar ook de persoon die afwezig is. Dit werd vooral duidelijk in het geval van Claudina, die meer dan twintig jaar geleden het arme deel van de stad had verlaten. In haar jaren van afwezigheid was ze meer gewend geraakt aan de voorzieningen die aan haar nieuwe sociale status verbonden waren dan dat ze zelf wilde toegeven. Ook leek ons bezoek aan de door criminaliteit geteisterde wijk Cerrito del Carmen aan te tonen dat de tijd haar had beroofd van de straatwijsheid die nodig was om op zo'n plek uit de problemen te blijven.

Tot slot wierp de hang naar nostalgie bij Miguel en Claudina ook een meer alledaagse schaduw op hun leven. Bijna per definitie geeft nostalgie blijk van relatieve deprivatie die ervaren wordt ten aanzien van het verleden, omdat het verlies benadrukt, een “spijt voor wat de tijd heeft gebracht” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 920). Deze is daarom op zijn best bitterzoet. Daarbij wordt nostalgie niet altijd gemobiliseerd als een strategie om met onzekerheid om te gaan, zoals soms in de wetenschap wordt gesuggereerd (zie bijvoorbeeld Boym, 2001; Saunders-Hastings, 2018), maar kan deze ook komen zonder dat iemand hier om vraagt. De volgende woorden van de Arabische dichter Mahmoud Darwish (2011, p. 23), die zelf als jonge jongen uit Palestina werd

verbannen, zouden door Miguel of Claudina geschreven kunnen zijn. “*To long,*” schrijft hij, “*means not to find joy in anything here, except shyly. If I were there, you say, if I where there, my laughter would be heartier and my speech clearer.*”

Terugtrekking en het lichaam

Tot dusverre heb ik twee vormen van terugtrekking geïdentificeerd, een die langs relationele en vaak geografische lijnen loopt en een die langs ‘imaginaire’ tijdslijnen loopt. Oscar en zijn dochters belichaamden de eerste vorm, net als Miguels vrouw María Luisa en zijn moeder. Miguel en Claudina, die hun heil zochten in een verfraaid verleden, stonden symbool voor de tweede vorm. Dit waren echter nauwelijks tactieken die de bewoners van El Castillo konden aanwenden. In wezen hadden ze geen muren, zelfs niet die van een huis, en waren ze te druk met overleven om hun acties te laten sturen door nostalgische herinnering, als er al dergelijke herinneringen waren (zie ook Emirbayer & Mische, 1999). De mensen van El Castillo leefden in werelden van onontkoombare onzekerheid. Zij waren niet ontworteld, zoals Miguel en Claudina, maar behoorden eerder tot de ‘nooit-gewortelden’, mensen die door het leven gaan zonder wat Giddens (1991, p. 39-40) opvat als ‘basisvertrouwen’, dat een individu in zijn vroege jeugd verwerft in dialoog met zijn verzorgers en werkt als een “beschermende cocon” die het individu “in staat stelt hoop en moed te behouden” ten tijde van moeilijke omstandigheden. Als reactie hierop, en dit zal in deze paragraaf centraal staan, zochten de mensen van El Castillo toevlucht in een ander soort terugtrekking, die ik omschreven heb als ‘terugtrekking uit het lichaam,’ een copingmechanisme dat beantwoordt aan wat ik ‘de behoefte om niet te voelen’ noem. Deze vorm van terugtrekking reageert, net als de twee voorgaande vormen, op een door mensen ervaren gebrek aan controle over het eigen lot, maar is minder ambitieus van aard, omdat deze niet probeert de controle terug te winnen en de objectieve situatie te veranderen – noch in opzet noch in de praktijk – maar in plaats daarvan alleen de ervaring probeert te veranderen. Bij El Castillo kwam ik drie verschillende varianten van terugtrekking uit het lichaam tegen, die ik in deze paragraaf zal bespreken.

De eerste, echter, introduceer ik met grote voorzichtigheid, omdat deze grotendeels gebaseerd is op de nogal mysterieuze zin “Mijn lichaam is mijn

lichaam niet,” die een van de mensen van El Castillo, Wayo, mompelde in een staat van extreme bedwelming, vlak voordat hij overgaf ten overstaan van de andere aanwezigen zonder dat iemand er ook maar de minste aandacht aan schonk. Belangrijk daarbij te vermelden is dat Wayo op dat moment al genegeerd werd door de rest van de groep omdat hij al een tijd, en tot irritatie van velen, om gratis drugs aan het zeuren was. Het bracht me op het idee van lichamelijke uittreding als een van de laatste buitenposten van terugtrekking. Maar had Wayo inderdaad een uittredingservaring, een moment waarop zijn lichaam niet meer zijn lichaam was? En zo ja, wat had deze dan veroorzaakt? Het zijn vragen waarop ik geen sluitend antwoord kan geven, niet in de laatste plaats omdat Wayo ten tijde van het uitspreken van de woorden te ver heen was om benaderbaar te zijn.

Hoe het ook zij, ik geloof dat de mogelijkheid van uittreding de moeite waard is om over na te denken. Immers, wat anders hadden de bewoners van El Castillo dan hun lichaam om zich uit terug te trekken? Bovendien leken er in dit geval een aantal verklaringen mogelijk voor een dergelijke reactie. In El Castillo's wereld van geweld, waar onzichtbaar worden gemaakt als een van de meest indringende gewelddaden ervaren werd, is het mogelijk dat Wayo zijn lichaam verliet omdat zijn schijnbare staat van onzichtbaarheid hem de zekerheid had ontzegd een “*real live person*” (Laing, 1965, p. 119; zie ook Herman, 2001) te zijn, zoals kan gebeuren bij bijvoorbeeld chronisch getraumatiseerde personen. Maar het had hier ook om een meer functionele dissociatie kunnen gaan, zoals soms plaatsvond bij gevangenen in naziconcentratiekampen, naar het leek om op deze manier de gruweldaden te kunnen weerstaan waaraan ze werden onderworpen (Giddens, 1991). En net voordat hij de woorden uitte, was hij ongeveer tien of twintig minuten weggeweest van El Castillo om geld bij elkaar te sprokkelen om verfverdunder (de meest gebruikte drug in El Castillo) te kopen, zoals hem nogal agressief werd voorgesteld door Joshua en anderen. Wie weet wat er met hem is gebeurd in de tijd dat hij weg was geweest. En natuurlijk kan de gebeurtenis gewoon het gevolg zijn van zijn middelengebruik op dat moment, wat een factor leek in elk van de verklaringen, of Wayo zijn lichaam nu had ‘verlaten’ of niet.

Maar Wayo's woorden troffen me ook om een andere reden. Ze zouden ook kunnen worden uitgelegd als een teken van een compleet gebrek aan keuzevrijheid: aan controle over zijn situatie en, inderdaad, zijn lichaam. Op

dat moment leek het alsof de honger naar drugs Wayo's wil en zijn acties had overgenomen, zoals vaak het geval was met hem en anderen in El Castillo (en vele andere drugsverslaafden over de hele wereld). Hun verslaving droeg bij aan hun dagelijkse strijd om invloed uit te oefenen op hun situatie. Maar zelfs zonder rekening te houden met hun drugsverslaving, leek het soms alsof de mensen van El Castillo geen eigenaar waren van hun lichaam, aangezien anderen ermee deden wat ze wilden en ook geweld binnen de groep gemeengoed was.

Zoals het bovenstaande misschien al suggereert, is het drugsgebruik van de bewoners van El Castillo de tweede vorm van terugtrekking uit het lichaam die ik onderscheid. Het inademen van verfverdunder hielp de mensen van de straat niet alleen met het onderdrukken van honger, maar ook met het verdoven van het 'in-de-wereld-zijn'. Het gaf momenten van ontspanning – van niet voelen – in een wereld die vroeg om een constante staat van alertheid en bestond uit een aaneenschakeling van tegenslagen. Merton's (1968) typologie van vormen van individuele aanpassing op het gebrek aan kansen is hier relevant, waarbij drugsgebruik valt onder wat hij *retreatism* (terugtrekking) noemt, wat bij hem staat voor het afwijzen van cultureel gedefinieerde doelen en van de geïnstitutionaliseerde middelen om tot die doelen te geraken. Mijn punt hier is echter dat het drugsgebruik van de mensen van El Castillo, en terugtrekking in het verlengde hiervan, niet zozeer betrekking heeft op culturele normen en institutionele middelen (en de afwijzing hiervan), maar veel meer op het lichaam en het niet voelen van de alledaagse stress en pijn. Tegelijkertijd kon drugsgebruik nooit structurele verlichting brengen en maakte het de problemen van El Castillo-bewoners alleen maar groter.

De derde en laatste vorm van terugtrekking uit het lichaam die ik wil belichten was tevens de meest radicale en bestond uit wat ik voorzichtig omschrijf als het gevolg geven aan het verlangen naar de dood. Moisés vertelde me dat hij een paar keer in zijn leven op het punt had gestaan om zelfmoord te plegen. Tijdens mijn veldwerkperiode stak hij een mes in zijn been in het bijzijn van zijn vrouw en dochter. Hij had het in zijn maag willen steken, maar veranderde op het moment suprême van koers – hij wist niet waarom. Ook Thiago leek met zelfmoordgedachten te spelen. Ondertussen was het Abel die het meest bereid leek te handelen naar zijn doodswens, die hij regelmatig uitsprak. Hij stierf vlak na mijn veldwerk aan orgaanfalen. Tijdens mijn veldwerk weigerde hij vaak hulp, ook wanneer hulpverleners hem naar

het ziekenhuis wilde brengen. Hij had de dood verwelkomd op een manier die misschien niet geheel anders was dan de manier waarop bendeleden in Guatemala-Stad volgens Levenson (2013) worden aangetrokken door hun eigen vroege dood, omdat deze hen redt van een volwassen leven dat gedoemd is te mislukken.

De verwevenheid van geweld en omgang met geweld

Het doel van dit proefschrift is gelegen in het beschrijven en het begrijpen van de wijze waarop mensen uit verschillende sociale klassen in Guatemala-Stad hun leven vorm en betekenis geven in een context van geweld en ongelijkheid. In de empirische hoofdstukken heb ik hieraan gehoor gegeven door deze te laten lopen op het ritme van het heden en het verleden van mijn respondenten. In deze samenvatting heb ik eerst de vormen van alledaags geweld die mijn respondenten tegenkwamen besproken en daarna de sociale en psychologische mechanismen die ze gebruikten om deze krachten tegemoet te treden. In deze laatste paragraaf kom ik tot een groter, meer holistisch beeld van het leven in Guatemala-Stad. Ik doe dit door allereerst aandacht te vestigen op de fictie van bovenstaand onderscheid, dat weliswaar een vorm van duidelijkheid aanbrengt in de analyse van het materiaal dat ik verzameld heb, maar geen recht doet aan de complexe manier waarop de twee met elkaar verweven zijn. Ik beschrijf deze verwevenheid aan de hand van drie punten.

Ten eerste, in werelden die zo vol geweld zijn, wordt geweld relatief vaak beantwoord met geweld. Dit wordt weerspiegeld in de voorliefde van de inwoners van Guatemala-Stad om terug te vallen op particuliere vormen van beveiliging – die zich bevinden in het legale circuit, het illegale circuit en het grijze gebied daartussen. Een belangrijke oorzaak hiervan was gelegen in het feit dat mensen leefden in wat ik heb omschreven als de schaduw van de staat, waar ze weinig bescherming en steun genoten van de staat, en soms, vooral in meer gemarginaliseerde omgevingen, overgeleverd waren aan de gewelddadige grillen van de staat.

Ten tweede kan het omgaan met geweld, ook als het niet neerkomt op het gebruik van direct, fysiek geweld of de dreiging daarmee, bijdragen aan een klimaat waarin geweld floreert. Om deze reden luidde Joan Clos, uitvoerend directeur van UN-Habitat, de alarmbel over de wereldwijde toename van gated

communities, die zij zag als “een uitdrukking van toegenomen ongelijkheid en een toegenomen onbehagen bij het accepteren van diversiteit” (Provost, 2014). Tegelijkertijd rijst met een dergelijke constatering de vraag: als het niet in een gated community is, waar kun je dan anders terecht voor bescherming in een gewelddadige plek als Guatemala-Stad?

Ten derde kunnen er ook gewelddadige impulsen uitgaan van de mechanismen die ingezet worden als reactie op ervaren geweld of de dreiging hiervan. Als zodanig kunnen deze menselijke bloei in de weg staan en soms zelfs medicijnen blijken die meer schade aanrichten dan de ziekte die ze zouden moeten bestrijden. Het drugsgebruik van de bewoners van El Castillo was hier misschien wel het meest schrijnende voorbeeld van. Daarnaast hebben we gezien dat de teruggetrokken levensstijl die wordt geïllustreerd door muren, gepolariseerde autoramen en lijfwachten ook de angst voor de gevaarlijke ander kan vergroten, waardoor deze niet alleen een gevolg is van het gevoel van onveiligheid maar ook een oorzaak. Cruciaal was dat deze maatregelen niet alleen de beweging van anderen beperkten, maar ook van degenen die ze aanwendden. Een beveiligingsmuur heeft twee kanten, een die buitenstaanders buiten houdt en een ander die helpt de marges van het leven te bepalen voor degenen die de bescherming van de muur zoeken.

Het bovenstaande brengt me bij een andere observatie. Eerder vermeldde ik dat er goede argumenten waren om geweld te beschouwen als het bepalende kenmerk van arme wijken in Guatemala-Stad, naar aanleiding van een uitspraak van Rodgers, Beall en Kanbur (2012). Dat was het geval omdat het grootste deel van het geweld ten deel viel aan de arme klasse. Maar zoals blijkt uit het vervagen van de scheidslijnen tussen geweld en het omgaan met geweld in zowel arme als meer bevoorrechte omgevingen, evenals het feit dat elke wereld zijn eigen geweld had, zou men ook kunnen stellen dat geweld een van de bepalende kenmerken van ieders leven in Guatemala-Stad is.

Gelukkig is er ook reden om tegen een dergelijke karakterisering te pleiten. Het proefschrift laat zien dat zelfs mensen in situaties van extreme dreiging en nood vaak in staat waren om iets van normaliteit te vinden in hun omstandigheden. Een belangrijk gegeven daarbij is dat mensen hun heil in veel gevallen ergens anders proberen te zoeken wanneer situaties weinig hoop bieden. Terugtrekken, om het centrale thema van dit werk te nemen, bestond niet alleen uit het afstand nemen van iets, maar ook uit een beweging naar iets anders: een gang naar de kerk of een stap terug in het verleden. Dit werd ook

veroorzaakt door het feit dat mensen in Guatemala-Stad en elders, wanneer ze niet in staat zijn om de objectieve situatie die hun vrijheid beknecht te veranderen, de neiging hebben om de ervaring van de situatie te transformeren om op deze manier een gevoel van controle over hun lot te krijgen. Het maakte dat gewoonten die niet uit eigen keuze waren geboren konden veranderen in voorkeuren en dat notoir gevaarlijke wijken konden fungeren als veilige havens. Het oude adagium “*If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences*” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 571), zo kunnen we concluderen, is tegenwoordig nog net zo relevant is als bijna een eeuw geleden toen het voor het eerst werd opgeschreven en wint alleen maar aan relevantie in situaties van dreiging en nood.

About the Author

Timo Peeters has a Master's degree in criminal law as well as in criminology, which he both obtained at the Utrecht University. Before starting his PhD, he worked i.a. as a junior lecturer at Utrecht University's criminology department and as a research fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. Much of his research has taken place in Latin America. For his master thesis, he studied lynchings and other forms of vigilantism in a marginalized neighborhood of Quito, for which the Dutch Society of Criminology (NVC) awarded him first prize for best MA thesis in criminology. He went back to Quito together with photographer Phelim Hoey to study and portrait everyday life in a marginalized neighborhood and a wealthy gated community; a project they financed through crowdfunding. Timo has presented his research at multiple international and national conferences. He currently works as a researcher at the Verwey-Jonker Institute.

Portfolio

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Appendix: Map of Guatemala



Source: United Nations (2004). Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/guatemal.pdf>

