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## Held Hostage: Ingrid Betancourt's Silent Scream

By Ingrid Betancourt

*While campaigning for resident of Colombia, she was abducted and held hostage for more than six years. In her new book, **Even Silence Has an End**, Ingrid Betancourt measures the distance between fear and freedom.*

I had made my decision to escape. This was my fourth attempt. After my last one the conditions of our captivity had become even more terrible. They had put us in a cage made of wooden boards, with a tin roof. I'd spotted a half-rotten board in one corner, and by pushing hard with my foot, I split it enough to make an opening. In principle, if you could get your skull through the slats, your body would follow. I squeezed through the bars of the fence at Parc Monceau while playing a game as a child. But were the proportions the same for an adult? I was all the more worried because although my companion Clara and I were terribly thin, I had noticed over the past few weeks a sort of swelling of our bodies, probably liquid retention from enforced immobility.

I had spent entire days plotting, preparing in detail the equipment for our expedition, giving importance to stupid things: "I'll have to figure out what to do about the boots. At night we always leave them in the same place, at the entrance to the cage. I'll have to start bringing them inside, so the guards get used to not seeing them anymore when we're asleep.... And we'll have to get hold of a machete. To protect ourselves from wild beasts and to clear our way through the vegetation. It will be almost impossible. They're on their guard. They haven't forgotten that we already managed to steal one when they were setting up the old camp.... Take scissors—they lend them to us from time to time. I have to think about food, too. We have to stock up without their realizing. And it all has to be wrapped in plastic, because we'll have to swim. It can't be too heavy, or we'll have difficulty making headway. And I must take my treasures: I can't possibly leave behind the photos of my children and the keys to my apartment."

I spent the day turning such questions over and over in my mind. Twenty times or more, I thought about our route once we were out of the cage. I tried to calculate all sorts of things: where the river must be, how many days it would take us until we could get help. I imagined the horror of an anaconda attacking us in the water, or an enormous caiman like the one whose red and shining eyes I had seen in the guard's flashlight when we were coming down the river. I saw myself wrestling with a jaguar; the guards had regaled us with a ferocious description. I thought of everything that might possibly frighten me, to prepare myself psychologically and be ready to respond. I had to know how to control my emotions. I'd decided that this time nothing would stop me.

I had given up sleeping, because I realized that my brain worked better in the quiet of the evening. I'd taken note of everything: what time the guards changed watch, where each one stood, who stayed awake, who fell asleep, who would report on the number of times we'd gotten up to pee....

I had also tried to prepare Clara for the effort the escape would require, the precautions to take, the noises we must avoid making. She listened to me in silence, exasperated, and would answer only to refuse or disagree. Our two previous escape attempts had sowed tension between us. We didn't talk much. Stuck together like Siamese twins who have nothing in common, we lived in opposite worlds: She was trying to adapt; I could only think of escape.

I prayed to God to give me the strength to go through with it. "Tonight I shall be free."

From my previous attempts, I had learned that the best moment to slip away was at dusk, the hour when wolves look like dogs. In the jungle this meant precisely 6:15 P.M. During the few minutes while our eyes adjusted to the darkness and before night fell completely, we were all blind. That night, though, the opportune moment came and went and the expected storm had still not broken. The wind was blowing incessantly, but the thunder rumbled far away, and a certain tranquillity had returned to the camp. I touched Clara's arm; it was time to go.

I pulled away from Clara, smoothed my clothes, and lay down next to the hole in the rotten board. I put my head through with encouraging ease, and then my shoulders. I twisted to get my body through, felt stuck, then wriggled nervously to get one of my arms out. Once my arm was clear, I pushed. With the strength of my free hand, digging my nails into the ground, I managed to get my entire upper body out. I edged forward, painfully contorting my hips so that the rest of my body would slide sideways through the opening. At last I was out, and I jumped to my feet. I took two steps so that my companion could get out more easily. I bent down by the opening, calling to Clara so loudly this time that she must have heard me on the far side of the cage.

I stood up and was facing the dense jungle. The torrential rain had finally come. I would be alone outside. I had to be quick, leave right away. I checked to see if the rubber band holding my hair was still in place. I didn't want the guerrillas to find even the tiniest clue to the path I would take. I ran and ran, driven by an uncontrollable panic, avoiding trees instinctively, unable to see or hear or think, forging straight ahead until I was exhausted.

At last I stopped and looked behind me. I could still see the clearing in the forest, like a phosphorescent light through the trees. When my brain began to work again, I realized that I was automatically retracing my steps. Carefully I went back in my mind, reviewing all my conversations with Clara, reexamining all the instructions we had agreed on. There was one in particular that I remembered, and I seized upon it: If we got lost on the way out, we would meet up at the *chontos* [makeshift latrines]. We had mentioned it once, fleetingly, without really believing we were going to escape.

Fortunately, my sense of direction seemed to be working in the jungle. In the grid of a big city, I could easily get lost, but in the jungle I could find my way. I emerged exactly level with the *chontos*. Of course there was no one. I heard voices. I tried to see what was going on over by the camp. The storm had given way to a biting and persistent drizzle, and now I could hear other sounds, like the commander's loud voice. They must have been very near, because I heard one of them shout that he had already seen me. I

camouflaged myself among the roots of an old tree while praying to the Lord to make me invisible. With each step I repeated, "I am free," and my voice kept me company.

I stood motionless. I saw myself drowning in that liquid mud. I came up with excuses to avoid diving in. With Clara I probably would not have hesitated, but now I was afraid. My terror consisted of a series of pathetic little fears: fear of being soaked again, after I had managed to get warm by walking. Fear of losing my backpack and the meager supplies it contained. Fear of being carried away by the stream. Fear of being alone. Fear of dying carelessly.

These thoughts shamefully exposed to me who I was. Now I understood that I was still an ordinary, second-rate human being. I had not suffered enough to find the rage in my guts. I needed to risk death for freedom. I was a dog who, no matter how beaten up, would still wait for a bone. I looked around anxiously for a hole to hide in. The guards would come to the river, too, and search here more thoroughly than elsewhere. Of course I could go back into the thick of the jungle. But they were already on my heels, and I risked running into them.

Near the river there were mangroves and old rotting trunks, relics of long-ago storms. One tree in particular had a sizable recess on one entire side. The mangrove roots created a barrier all around it, and it seemed to provide the best hiding place. On all fours, then crawling and wriggling, I managed to make my way inside the hollow. I carefully unfolded the big plastic sheet that had been tucked within my boot since my escape and tended to the task of making the cavity of the trunk a safe haven.

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That is when I saw her. Yiseth. One of the guards. She had her back to me. She had arrived at a trot, without her rifle, but with a revolver in her fist. She was wearing a sleeveless vest in camouflage material, but she seemed harmless. She turned around very slowly, and her eyes found mine instantly. She closed them for a second as if to thank the heavens and then walked toward me warily.

Her smile was sad as she extended her hand to help me crawl out of my hiding place. I did as she instructed. She was the one who carefully folded up my plastic sheet and flattened it lengthwise so that I could put it back in my boot. She nodded, and then, satisfied, she addressed me as if I were a child. Her words were strange. She did not use the self-conscious speech of the guards, who were always worried that a comrade might tell on them. At one point she looked at the river and, as if she were talking to herself out loud, her words were full of regret as she confessed that she, too, more than once, had thought of running away. I talked to her then about my children, my need to be with them, how urgent it was for me to go home. She told me about the little baby that she had left with her mother, although he was only a few months old. She was biting her lip, and her black eyes welled with tears. "Leave with me," I said. She took my hands, and her expression turned cold again. "They would find us and kill us." I begged her, squeezing her hands even harder, obliging her to look at me. She refused outright, took up her weapon, and stared at me. "If they see me talking to you, they will kill me. They're not far. Walk ahead of me and listen carefully to what I have to say to you." I obeyed, picking up my things, putting my backpack over my shoulder. She stuck right behind me and whispered, her lips against my ear. "The commander has ordered the men to abuse you. When they get here, they will scream at you, insult you, shove you around. Above all don't

react. Don't say anything. They want to punish you. They're going to take you away.... Only the men will stay with you. We women have to go back to the camp. Do you get it?"

Her words echoed in my brain, empty shells, as if I had lost my Spanish. I was making a great effort to concentrate, trying to go beyond the sounds, but fear had paralyzed my thoughts. I was walking without knowing that I was walking; I was looking at the world as if it were a fish in an aquarium. The young woman's voice came to me distorted, alternately very loud, then inaudible. My head felt like it was being squeezed in a vise. My tongue was covered with a dry paste, stuck to my palate, and my breathing had become deep and heavy. As I was walking, the world was rising and falling to the rhythm of my steps. The resonant beating of my heart filled my inner space, causing my skull to vibrate.

I did not see them arrive. One of them circled me, his face red like a little pig's, his blond hair bristling. He held his rifle above his head, arms outstretched, and he was jumping and gesticulating, indulging in a ridiculous, violent war dance. A blow to the ribs made me realize that there was a second man, a short, dark man with powerful shoulders and bowed legs. He had just thrust the barrel of his rifle into the flesh above my hips, and he pretended he was restraining himself from doing it again. He was shouting and spitting, insulting me with crude, absurd words.

I could not see the third man. He pushed me from behind. His laugh was nasty, and his presence seemed to excite the other two. He grabbed my bag and emptied it on the ground, poking through things he knew were precious to me with the toe of his boot. He laughed and crushed them in the mud with his heel, then forced me to pick them up and put them back in my bag. I was on my knees when I saw the flash of a metal object in his hands. That is when I heard the clank of the chain, and I leaped up to face him.

Yiseth had stayed there beside me, holding me firmly by the arm and pushing me forward to walk. The guy who was laughing motioned to her to leave. She shrugged her shoulders, avoided my gaze, and left me there.

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I was tense and absent, my heart pounding. We went forward a few yards. The men were circling me, barking. The clank of the chain became insistent. The guy was playing with it as if to bring it to life, as if it were a snake. I would not let myself make any eye contact. I tried to rise above all this agitation, but my peripheral vision apprehended gestures and movements that made my blood run cold.

I was taller than they were. I held my head straight and high, and my entire body was tense with anger. I knew there was nothing I could do against them, but they were not sure of that. They were the ones who were afraid, more afraid than I was—I could feel it; however, they had hatred on their side, and group pressure.

The man with the chain said my name, over and over, with a familiarity that was meant to be insulting. I had decided that they would not hurt me. Whatever happened, they would not touch the essence of who I was. I had to cling to this fundamental truth. If I could remain inaccessible, I might avoid the worst.

My father's voice spoke to me from very far away, and a single word came to mind, in capital letters. I

repeated it again and again, like a prayer, like a magical incantation that might, perhaps, break the evil spell. *Dignity*. It no longer meant a thing, but saying it repeatedly made me adopt my father's attitude, like a child who copies the expression on an adult's face, smiling or weeping not because he feels joy or pain but because by miming the expressions he sees, he triggers in himself the emotions they are meant to represent.

Through this game of mirrors, without my thoughts having anything to do with it, I understood that I had gone beyond fear, and I murmured, "There are things that are more important than life."

My rage had left me, giving way to an extreme coldness. This was not resignation—far from it, nor was it a headlong flight. I observed myself from within, measuring my strength and resistance not according to my ability to fight back but rather to submit to those blows, like a ship that is battered by the tides yet will not sink.

The man came very close to me and tried to loop the chain quickly around my neck. Instinctively I dodged him and took a step to the side, out of reach. The other two did not dare come forward, but they shouted abuse to encourage him to try again. His pride wounded, he held himself back, gauging the precise moment to attack again. We glanced at each other, and he must have read in my eyes my determination to avoid violence, taking it for insolence. He leaped forward and struck me with the chain, landing a blow to my skull. I collapsed on my knees, the world spinning around me. After the initial blackness, I held my head between my hands and stars appeared in flashes before my eyes, until gradually my eyesight returned to normal. I felt intense pain, compounded by a great sadness that washed over me in successive waves as I registered what had just happened. How could he have done this? I opened my eyes again upon the world, and again my gaze met his. His eyes were bloodshot, his lips distorted by a snarl. He could not bear for me to look at him—he was stripped naked before me. I had caught him looking at me with the horror that his own gestures inspired in him.

He regained his composure and, as if to eradicate all trace of guilt, redoubled his efforts to fasten the chain around my neck. I stubbornly fought off his gestures, each time avoiding physical contact as much as possible. He took hold of himself and, gathering momentum, came at me yet again with the chain, making hoarse grunts to multiply the strength of his blow. I fell down in the darkness, senseless, losing all notion of time. I knew that my body was the object of their violence. I could hear their voices around me echoing loudly.

When I finally managed to sit up, I had the chain around my neck and the man was pulling on it, jerkily, to oblige me to follow him. He was foaming at the mouth as he shouted at me. The way back to the camp seemed very long under the weight of my humiliation and their sarcasm. One in front of me, two others behind, they were loudly exulting in their victory. I did not feel like crying. It wasn't pride. It was just scorn. The cruelty of these men and the pleasure they derived from it had not reached my soul.

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