

*A gang member pondering about injustice in Guatemala*

*La camioneta* was full of people and the air was stuffy. I was thinking about how life had changed so much in the last few years. After being unjustly accused of multiple crimes I committed, I had just been released from prison. I took the first bus that I saw, not knowing where it would take me. I just wanted to get as far away from that place as possible. In a more civilized country probably I would have been sentenced to life imprisonment or the death penalty, but in this country, that didn't seem to matter anymore. The justice system was corrupt and rigged, and I had taken advantage of it. I had no regrets.

**I sit in the seat next to an old man who is sleeping. I wonder what his story is. He looks like he has lived a hard life. I try not to think about my own life too much. It's too depressing. I focus on the people around me and the stories they could tell. However, after all, I want to think about it, I can't help but think about how I got here. It all started 44 years ago...**

As a man who grew up in the streets of Guatemala City, in a suburb near the municipal landfill, I was used to seeing injustice everywhere. I remember when I was a kid, there was a big fire in the landfill and all of the kids in my neighborhood had to help put it out. It was one of the most harrowing experiences of my life. The landfill was our only source of income, and when it burned, we had nothing. My father left us when I was younger, so it was up to my mother to provide for us. She did the best she could, but it was hard.

I had always been a rebellious person, and I quickly realized that the only way to survive in this world was to fight back. I joined a gang when I was thirteen, and quickly rose through the ranks. I was good at what I did, and I was respected by my peers. The first time I killed someone,

I was only fifteen. I remember feeling nothing as I watched the life drain from his eyes, he was a taxi driver who had not paid the extortion. I was just doing what I was told, but it didn't make me feel any better.

**I look around at the other passengers on *la camioneta* and see the same tired, defeated expressions on their faces. We are all just trying to survive in a country that had become a nightmare. I wonder if things would ever get better, or if we were all just doomed to suffer under this corrupt regime forever.**

When I was in jail, I used to read the newspaper every day, hoping for some news of change. But it never came. The country was slipping further and further into darkness, and there seemed to be no hope. I had given up on ever seeing justice done in Guatemala, some years ago I had some hope when an international commission called CICIG came to help clean up the government, even president Otto Perez Molina went to jail he was in the same prison where I was. I remember reading about massive protests in the streets, people were hopeful that finally, change was coming. But it didn't last long, the CICIG was expelled from the country some years after by a comedian who became president, and things went back to the way they were, or even worse.

**I sigh and lean back in my seat as *la camioneta* lumber on. I don't know where I am going, but I don't have anything to go back to. An old lady gets on *la camioneta* and is asking for money, she looks so tired and defeated. I used to give money to beggars all the time when I was younger, but now I just don't have anything to give her. I wished I could help her, but I can't even help myself.**

Life is ironic, I remember when a warden, the national police chief, and a government minister decided to kill some gang members in the prison, they opened the doors and let us out to

what we thought was a massive riot, but it was a massacre, they started to shoot at us and a lot of people died, I was one of the lucky ones who survived.

Some years after, that warden became the president of Guatemala. I was still in prison but heard about it on the radio. I couldn't believe it. The same man who had tried to kill me was now the president of the country, that man was Alejandro Giammattei.

The government of Alejandro Giammattei was just as corrupt as the previous one, maybe even more. Civil society was divided, and there were constant protests in the streets. The country was a mess, and it seemed like there was no hope. Unlike other previous governments, Alejandro Giammattei ensured that the justice system, the Public Ministry, the Government, the Courts of Justice, and the Congress were corrupted by anti-democratic actors. He made sure that justice was just an old memory of good times.

It was the darkest time I have ever lived, I remember when it all began, one prosecutor called Juan Francisco Sandoval, who was in charge of the FECI, tried to charge president Giammattei for corruption. Juan Francisco Sandoval was found dead the next day in his house, with a gunshot in his head, it was ruled as a suicide. Journalists, prosecutors, and judges tried to make justice, but they all faced the same fate, death, exile, or prison. It was the first-time new prisoners weren't gang members, they were honest people who were just trying to do their jobs.

***La camioneta continues its journey and I watch as the scenery passed by. I am lost in thought, thinking about the injustice in this country and how I had ended up in this situation. I had been in jail for years, and now I am finally free, but I have nothing left. My life had been turned upside down and now I don't know where to go from there.***

In my last years of prison, I remember when a young figure, a clear populist, emerged in the country and started to gain popularity, he had a similar speech to Nayib Bukele. He promised to bring change to Guatemala and to end the injustice and corruption that had plagued the country for so long.

However, this man's name was not Nayib Bukele, it was an old friend of mine, a man of the ghetto like me. He wasn't a man prepared for politics, but he was a man who knew how to talk to the people and gain their trust. Perhaps after years of the same people in the government, the population was looking for someone new, someone who could relate to them.

He won the elections and became the new president of Guatemala. He started to implement some changes but quickly realized that the establishment was not going to let him change things too much. He was fighting an uphill battle, and it quickly became clear that he was in over his head. The same forces that had been in power for years were not going to give up their grip easily.

The new president started to become more and more authoritarian, and the country slipped further into darkness. The once-promising change that had been promised quickly turned into more of the same. Perhaps, I thought, things will never change in Guatemala. We were trapped in a cycle of corruption and injustice, and it seemed like there is no way out. The true fault lies not with the people, but with the system itself.

***La camioneta* finally came to a stop, and I get off. I don't know where I am going, but I have to keep moving. I have to find a way to survive in this country that had become a nightmare.**