

Intro

Forget about the New York you know. In the next few minutes, you're about to explore a land of invisible treasures, accompanied by people who work hard to make a living out of our trash. They call themselves canners, and they collect empty cans and bottles on the streets. Once their shopping carts are full, they redeem their collection and they get five cents a piece.

This is Francesca Berardi, an Italian journalist who worked with a group of canners for more than a year. I'm sharing intimate details about their stories and some names have been changed to protect their identities. The canners I worked with all go to the same redemption center, Sure We Can, located in the concrete heart of Brooklyn.

Francesca: In the community of canners, Pablo and Violeta are considered one entity. They spend every single hour together, seven days a week. Most of the time they work, Pablo collecting, Violeta counting and sorting. Yet they always seem in a good mood. They joke, laugh and pinch each other, as though they were a young couple. They first met 30 years ago.

In the summer of 1987, Pablo and Violeta are 17 and 18 years old. One evening they see - and like - each other at a party in a small town in the State of Puebla

Ambi: music Joan Sebastian, Y las Mariposas

Pablo: Toda la noche nos pasamos bailando solamente los dos, ya no la dejé para ninguna otra persona sino para mí! [laughs]

[We spent the entire night dancing with each other and I did not leave her anymore... only for myself!]

Francesca: They spent the entire night dancing, and in the following days they were inseparable. A few weeks later, Violeta was pregnant.

Violeta: Tuvimos relaciones a esa edad que teníamos y pues yo tenía miedo porque había quedado embarazada y una tarde que lo vi le dije que es lo que estaba pasando. Vi como que no estaba convencido y así le dejé, yo no le volvía tocar ese tema, no le dije nada.

[We had [sexual] relations at that age and I was scared because I got pregnant. One afternoon I saw him and told him what had happened. It was like he was not convinced so I left it like that and did not talk about it anymore. I didn't say anything.]

Francesca: When Violeta told Pablo that he was going to be a father, he didn't seem that excited. They had just met! And so, proud and scared, Violeta left the village with an aunt. Nine months later, she went back to look for him, bringing their daughter.

Violeta: Pero cuando llegué al pueblo me dijeron: “No, el ya se casó”. Y yo dije: “Tan rápido! Que no esperó nada! [laughs]

[But when I returned to town they said, “he already married,” and I said, “So soon! He didn’t wait at all!”]

Francesca: As soon as she got there, someone told her he'd already married another woman. Violeta left, and soon she found another man. They married and he insisted to raise the baby as his own.

[The next year, Violeta and her husband moved to New York, while the little girl stayed in Mexico with some relatives. She saw her three years later, at the Californian- Mexican border for a short while, before returning to New York. The baby stayed with the relatives in Mexico, and in the meantime, Violeta had other three children with her husband.]

Flash forward to 2010.

[It's morning, Pablo is walking down a street in Bushwick, going to his job as a dishwasher in a pizzeria. At some point he sees a familiar figure collecting bottles and cans on the street.]

Pablo: Si, yo la vi y digo, “es ella!, pero cómo?”. Yo me quedé pensando: “Josefa, haciendo este trabajo? Porque tiene que hacer esto si tiene marido?”

[Yes, I saw her and I thought “is her!, but how?” I thought, “why is Josefa doing that kind of work if she has a husband?”]

Francesca: It's Violeta, no doubt about that. The two of them begin to talk. Pablo tells her that the relationship with his wife, with whom he's had two kids, is on the rocks. Violeta's marriage isn't going well either. A year goes by, and Pablo and Violeta are together again. And they've been together ever since.

Pablo: Tengo una mujer maravillosa

[I have a wonderful wife!]

Francesca: What Pablo loves most about Violeta is the fact that she works hard and is very savvy when it comes to saving money. She started canning in New York in 1989 in order to round out her earnings from working in a textile factory in Williamsburg that later shut down.

Violeta: Había menos gente juntando, usted veía latas por donde quiera. A la botella no se le hacía caso”

[There used to be less people canning. You used to see cans everywhere and bottles got no attention.]

Francesca: There were fewer canners in New York in 1989. Nowadays to be competitive you need to be smart and work hard- the odds are in your favor if you have a partner. So Violeta convinced Pablo to leave his job as a dishwasher and become a canner full time. In the beginning he found disgusting handling trash, and Violeta teases him for that.

Ambi: Pablo and Violeta walking in Williamsburg.

Francesca: You can hear Violeta in the back saying “cuando le daba miedo sacar de la basura,” Here they’re walking the streets of Williamsburg on the Saturday night we canned together. It’s after midnight, and all the bars are packed. A boy relieves himself against a garbage bin next to where Violeta is looking for empty bottles.

Ambi: car honking, sounds from the streets

Francesca: The night is, in Pablo’s words:

Pablo: Una jungla
[A jungle]

Francesca: A jungle. Pablo and Violeta have a car where they unload everything they collect during the night, and so they can accumulate more bottles and cans than can fit in a cart. Together they make about 40,000 dollars a year canning, an amount that’s above average. With these earnings they’ve been able to buy a house for their retirement in Mexico, in the southern part of the state of Puebla.

Violeta: No, no es antigua, una casa normal, común y corriente que son...que uno dice “voy mandar dinero de aqui pa’lla, que me construyan una casa asi y ya. Pues, no te voy a decir que es una super casota grandota, pero tenemos donde estar, donde vivir.

[No, it’s not old, it’s a normal house...you say “ I’m going to send money over so that they can build me a house in such and such way,” and that’s it. It’s not an amazing, enormous house, but we have a place to stay and live.]

Francesca: Pablo and Violeta plan their work and life carefully. Yet sometimes, they let the streets surprise them. This time an unopened can full of Margarita.

Ambi: they find a can full of Margarita de durazno (peach)