

## **The beginning**

José (Jos), Karina (Ina), Araceli (Arita), Pedro (Peter) and I always met at lunch at 1:30 pm. The food in the LANGEBIO dining room was never good, but it was what it was. Day after day we got the news of the poor management from the government and, *Jos* was always the target of our mockeries: *Fuckin' Jos, why did you vote for AMLO<sup>1</sup>?*

Ina had also voted for AMLO, but she joined the collective bullying that we did to Jos, and that somehow redeemed her. By 2019 both Ina and Jos had regretted their vote, for good reasons, it wasn't uncommon to see budget cuts, needless and meaningless government positions, custom made laws, cronyism, under-representation in elections, in short, more of the same, more of what we already knew.

In March 2018, many Mexicans voted with the hope that something would change. Unfortunately it was not like that: Meet the new boss, same as the old boss read the song by The Who, which ironically had the title Won't get fooled again.

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1    Andrés Manuel López Obrador, elected president of Mexico in 2018

This trip started on the wrong foot and it had an important political component.

Society, and of course us scientists, had made sure to delegate the scientist to the laboratory and to the office, frequently to the classroom, rarely to administrative positions, but never to politics.

As a consequence, politics was never on my resume, but I do believe that if I repeated my training, I would take political sciences.

When the pandemic started, Jos, Ina and I decided to go on a holiday, naively thinking that we could indulge ourselves *before being locked for 3 weeks...* 3 weeks... boy were we naive, both at the voting polls and when estimating how difficult the pandemic was going to be. By the time we got back from Michoacán, things at the research centre were a bit hazy, none of us were very affected by the pandemic given that we were essentially doing computational biology and we took that opportunity to be hyper-productive, after all, we had to keep our minds busy with something so as not to let ourselves carried away by the tragedy that was plaguing the world.

Around those days, my boss *doc Alfredo* and I had talked about the future, about my future. The *doc* liked my performance and my attitude, so it wasn't very difficult to negotiate a position at the research centre. Of course, I didn't want to have students, much less be a principal investigator, but a core facility position, that was always my goal, my dream job, everything was going well.

In my life there are few dates that I remember to perfection, May 26 2020 is one of them. On May 26 2020, Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced massive budget cuts, mainly affecting education, science, technology, and research. A wise decision from our beloved leader (read with a truckload of sarcasm), because of course, when a still unknown virus hits a country, the sensible thing to do is obviously to keep science at bay.

*Doc Alfredo* is a reliable person, but having massive budget cuts represented many things, including that the position we initially talked about was not safe at all, much less without having signed any contract whatsoever to guarantee such position.

When I heard the news that day, the first thing I thought was: *be better safe than sorry*.

That very same night, I opened my resume, updated it, *pimped it up* and, with so much momentum, I applied for several positions in bioinformatics both in Mexico and abroad.

If it was due to talent, timing, luck, my guardian angel, or all of the above, I'll never know, but 3 applications landed, one in Ensenada, one more in London and one more in Cambridge.

Honour to whom honour deserves, I *pimped up* my resume, but *Jazmin the therapist* was the one who was in charge of preparing me. Before the interviews, I was in a rag of feelings and doubts, I didn't know if I would be able to find a job, I had just broken up with Iveth, I wasn't seeing my family or my friends as often, the pandemic was hitting the world, the world was on fire... everything was hazy and unfavourable.

Jazmin is that girl who takes you by the hand without you noticing, she takes you on to twisted and obscure paths, but they are safe because she knows them. In that therapy session, Jazmin made me cry, she made me laugh, I was absolutely speechless because she cleared up many of my self doubts with an admirable skill.

After the interviews, I was accepted in the three positions. The decision was easy, as my friend Thomas would say: *You don't say no to Cambridge.*

Since 2012 I had the idea to migrate to the United Kingdom, either for a permanent or transitory position, and finally that dream came true and I couldn't be happier about it.

Many people define joy as the absence of sadness, not me. I've always believed that you can be sad and happy at the same time, and I was happy to be able to travel to the UK... but I also couldn't shake the idea that my departure from Mexico wasn't for the right reasons.

I couldn't help but feel like I was running away from the lousy research system we have, let alone the federal and local governments. I could not shake that feeling of sadness thinking that if the pandemic did not exist, if we had a good educational system, if I had not given up on Iveth, if I had endured a little longer, maybe I would still be in Mexico.

It had been months since the last time I saw José, yet I constantly remembered him:

*Fuckin' Jos, why did you vote for AMLO?*

## **The return**

The postdoc life in the UK is not the glamour that we, Latin American people, have made ourselves believe in. The pay is good, yes, but the expenses are high: housing, food, taxes for this and that make the pay goes away relatively quickly.

I wanted to return to Mexico in May 2021, I had so much excitement and momentum, I booked a flight, to tell Dafné and my family about my new life in Europe. I completely forgot that I was living in a more restrictive country, and I completely forgot that there were still travel restrictions in place in the UK.

After the flop of missing my flight; returning to Mexico was not in my immediate plans, but that time served to wait for a better opportunity, gather enough cash to return, and essentially it allowed more time pass so that my family and friends would miss me, and that I could miss them even more.

In June 2022, the University of Cambridge awarded a £1,000 bonus to workers who were tirelessly working even during periods of pandemic restrictions. At Cambridge Bioinformatics Training I worked my hands to the bone with SARS-CoV-2 genomics courses and,

finally I was able to gather enough money to easily return home, without rush or excuses.

Getting the plane home was only the first step, what lied ahead was even more complicated because it implied returning to the country from which I was fleeing, and everything that it represented: people I left behind, a lifestyle that was no longer mine, customs and traditions, food, and a long etcetera.

In July 2022, news about Luz Raquel shook my world and jeopardized my decision to return to Mexico: Luz Raquel was burnt alive, most likely by one of her neighbours. The reason? The neighbour found it disrespectful, inexcusable, and completely inadmissible that Luz Raquel's son, an autistic child, made noises during his episodes of lack of self-control. After receiving death threats from her neighbour, Luz Raquel notified the authorities, which in turn decided, as it was customary, simply to ignore the claims. To the local authorities, to her aggressor and, to society, Luz Raquel was just a number. But for me, Luz Raquel was a breaking point.

The news about her death uncovered many red flags of my country, and that deeply shook me. I went into a depression episode that took me a while to get out of,

things with Isabel weren't going so well (for me), my findings in the laboratory didn't feel significant. Over time I discovered that it was actually just my perception, things were going well with Isabel, the research in *Perkinsus* was going wonderfully, but knowing that my country was on fire, literally, shook me to the point of losing the perception of what was real and what was not.

Would I return to a country where women are killed left and right? To a country where the director of the National Council of Science opposes the use of transgenic organisms in science? To a country where for any amount of money you can bribe authorities and simply get away with your plans no matter how sinister they are? *Of course I would return*

In Mexico people tend to say that *the good ones are majority*, a phrase that I find too simple to say the least, and mostly false. Not doing bad things doesn't immediately make you a good person, and certainly Mexico is full of people who don't do bad things, but from there to being good people, that's a completely different story.



With the above in mind, I wanted to return, to make peace with with my family, with my friends, with the people I hurt, with the country. The so-called *closure*.

Upon reaching foreign lands, wherever they may be, my defences go up and protect me from everything, good and bad. Just as I stopped thinking about Dafné (although not really), I didn't allow myself to miss my country and I genuinely didn't know if I missed the place, if I missed the people, maybe I didn't miss anything, but I needed to confirm.

It annoys me that wherever I go, everyone asks me if I don't miss Mexican food, if I don't miss my lifestyle.

As I said, it's not that I didn't miss it, it's that I didn't allow myself to miss the country, with all that it represents.

When I booked my flight to Mexico, I did it thinking of seeing again my family, my dogs, my friends; entities that were tangible and that occupied a much more privileged place than food and places in my country.

I usually try to choose the right words when communicating, *loving* and *missing* are not interchangeable and I certainly wanted to see my

family and friends much more than I missed them, but I didn't know if I could say the same about my country. Writing about this process is both painful and therapeutic, on the one hand it implies accepting everything bad that is associated with a place and its inhabitants, on the other hand, this collection of stories is a tribute to many people I know from Mexico for whom I feel love and respect, and whom are the protagonists of each story.

*The good ones are majority.* At least in my universe of people this phrase is real.

## **Dancing club**

Victor Flores López was born in Hidalgo on July 28, 1956 in a poor family where all the members of the family had to be jacks-of-all-trades. He had always been the black sheep of the family, but that didn't stop him from being a good person.

In 1964 his family left the state of Hidalgo to settle in Ecatepec in the State of Mexico. Don Herón, the head of the family, always hard-working and charismatic, despite his violent nature, was an important figure in the Santa Clara neighbourhood. My uncles and grandfather built many things: schools, houses, roads, to the extent that Santa Clara belonged to them, so much as they belonged to Santa Clara, despite them coming from a different state.

Irma López Ramírez was born in the state of Mexico on November 10, 1959. Also from a poor family where all the members had to be jacks-of-all-trades. She was the eldest sister and from a very young age she had to mature prematurely and become the unofficial pillar of her family.

Don Rogelio made sure that the girls' childhood was complex, on the one hand he gave them love in the form of emotional attachment, but at the same time

he denied them a fatherly figure, by being absent for long periods of time. People nicknamed Don Rogelio *El dango*, god knows why, and his daughters were consequently *las dangas*.

Despite belonging to a relatively conservative family, Irma could slip away from her father, and Doña Julia would cover up for it, not before telling her to *play with fire, but not to get burnt*.

Victor could always sneak out of his house, despite he knew that the day after, his father would beat him up for sure.

Irma and Victor met in 1975 at a quinceanera<sup>2</sup> party. Dancing was always part of their history and for a long time they were just that: dance floor friends.

In all that time, Ecatepec was very different from what it is today (2023). You could walk quietly at night, violence did not prevail in the streets and you could go out dancing without worrying about what was going to happen, other than what your parents would tell you upon your return.

After 2 years of being boyfriend-girlfriend, Irma and Victor got married on April 23, 1983. By then, Irma had a job at the thermostat factory and Victor a job at the

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2 The latino equivalent of Sweet Sixteen

paper factory. Being a young lower-class couple in the eighties, despite their shortcomings, they still had a long way to go.

When they began to have children in 1984, Irma left her job and Victor became the main provider, but hyperactive as they always were, neither one of them stopped looking for better things, and for that they needed to work very very hard.

For a long time in the eighties and nineties they sold everything, from shoes, clothes, appliances and even corn-based street food, despite the fact that Victor had a good job at the Hoechst factory.

In 2001, Victor was fired from the factory, just a couple of weeks after he himself resigned from a union-leading position. Although the Flores López family did not easily give up, that was an important moment in their lives. On the one hand, the main source of income was temporarily shut, on the other hand they could take a break after working so hard for so many years, but time was not forgiving, Victor, being more than 45 years old, without a formal education with a piece of paper that said *useless technician*, and in the midst of a fragile economy... it was going to be

impossible to get a job that could adequately support the whole family.

Irma and Victor decided that opening a convenience store was the right course of action, and with the store, a new chapter in their lives also opened.

The first months brought enormous changes: they were more than joyful the first day that they sold over 700 pesos of merchandise.

*Seven hundred pesos!!!<sup>3</sup>*

Each of them were shouting, while counting the profits and making mental maths of their potential monthly income, assuming that they continued selling like this. If at that moment someone told them that there would be Christmas eves in which they would sell well over 10,000 pesos of merchandise, they would surely think that it was a joke or at least they would have found it hard to believe.

Working in a convenience store was not an easy task, much less when the 4 people who were working there, had such different and sometimes even incompatible personalities.

Irma was always the pillar of the family, and on more than one occasion her tough character was what kept

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3 Around £32

the family together but at bay. This behaviour was not for free: due to her childhood, her way of relating to people and, the bad example of Victor frequently getting drunk in the nineties with *friends*, Irma did not really believe in friendship. She found it very difficult to believe that her sons had significant friendly relationships and, she herself said that she did not have nor did she want to have friends.

The evolution of Ecatepec did not help in the development of Irma's character, the neighbourhood of Santa Clara gradually became a violent entity besieged by crime. Progress and over population emphasized the imminent changes to which the town was subjected.

The relationship that Victor and Irma have with the neighbourhood of Santa Clara goes beyond emotional attachment, or love and hate; there were stories, tears, hard work, happiness, sadness, and hopes anchored to a house that serves as a fortress in the jungle of Santa Clara.

In the summer of 2018, Victor won a lawsuit against the Mexican Social Security Institute, and was finally granted a pension that would allow the family to stop working at the store. Soon after, Irma also obtained

her pension and for the family, that meant taking a well-deserved rest.

A convenience store is a some kind of little monster that although it protects you from all harm and provides quite well, it is also that type of entity that requires all the attention in the world. In all this time there weren't many opportunities to party or to take vacations, much less to go dancing.

Not having to work at the store any more, and given that they had virtually no more obligations, Irma and Victor could start over, although they didn't quite know where.

Almost by accident they found a *danzón* group to which they quickly signed up and integrated to even more quickly.

The *danzón* group was not just a dancing club, it was a group of people sharing time and space, opening up to a couple of strangers they had just met.

In the lives of Irma and Victor, this new episode was perhaps the most satisfying. They found shelter in the *danzón* group, from their daily lives, the news about the pandemic, vaccines, crimes, the economy... all of that disappeared when they got to the dance floor to practise. They found something that was stimulating,



challenging, fun and, above all, that they thoroughly enjoyed.

Irma finally understood the meaning of friendship and she understood what her sons had experienced for so long: emotional connections with people they could trust, tolerate, appreciate, and even love.

Their new family was not only an excuse to continue dancing, as they had done for more than 40 years, and will continue to do as long as they had the will... no, their new family represented a grain of hope to return to live their lives peacefully in a neighbourhood that was once their dance floor.

## **Remigio**

Families from the mid-seventies onwards and well into the nineties were a masterpiece in Mexico, they were the cause and consequence of a prevalent machismo and of its harsh dispute with feminism that began to boil in the sixties worldwide. During those years, it was not uncommon to see big families here and there.

With twenty-three cousins, the Flores López family was quite big and the López Ramírez family was not far behind with 18 cousins. Both families represented different universes with their own customs and traditions.

The family on the Flores López side was always cold on the surface and even inexpressive, pragmatic one may say, but that did not mean that there wasn't any love. Conversely, on the side of the López Ramírez family, there was always verbal communication but love, although present, at least for me felt rather superficial. The deaths of each of the four grandparents marked a turning point in both families, and coincidentally, the cousins began their diaspora that would take them to many places. From the Flores López family, Enrique was the first to take his own path, already living most of his life in the US.

There was little communication with Enrique, but always with an invisible bond of trust. Liliana migrated to the UK and later she returned to Mexico to settle in Colima. Daniela and Gloria settled in the state of Hidalgo, Rosario did so in Mexico City and several cousins were still living in Santa Clara.

On the López Ramírez side of the family, the cousins were equally scattered in the states of Querétaro, Mexico and Mexico City.

Only very few events can unite families, births of new cousins are one of them... the other main event is of course a funeral. All the cousins will have each other for years to come, and we will see each other fall one by one. Sadly, it will be our duty to veil and bury our uncles and aunties when the times come.

One year after the pandemic and with secondary complications, Remigio, father of five, grandfather of eleven, passed away, and with him, many words that could not be said also went away.

The Flores López family doesn't like to leave things half done, what has to be said is said, whether they were good words or not. I don't like the feeling of missing, I have made amends with the people I have lost, and I have told them everything I had to say to

them. Which is not to say that I have forgotten them, for better or for worse, I have a very good memory.

I remember my grandfather Herón serious, always complaining, but hard working. I remember my grandfather Rogelio smiling, joking, singing, enjoying and loving. I remember my grandma Julia very often, I remember her garden, her cigarettes behind my grandpa's back, I remember that she taught me how to prepare pepper cream and I remember her for a thousand other things. As complex as our relationship has been, I remember my grandmother Lupe in her last days as a person who seemed to live in an alternate reality, perhaps voluntarily, perhaps as a consequence of the many things she had experienced. Before Remigio passed away, three of my uncles had died, Heraclio whom I remember as a complicated person living in a chain of abuse... life treated him badly, inadvertently he transmitted that abuse to many people around him, mostly in the form of practical jokes. That didn't mean that we didn't appreciate him, after school, my brother and I spent a lot of time at his candy stand, playing at his house with my now distant cousins Roxana and Paola.

Paco was a special case, he was the uncle that everyone adored and he genuinely did not deserve the life he had. I learnt from him how to work with electrical appliances, I learnt not to be scared of the keyboard, to appreciate Andean folk music; and together with his relationship with Nicho, to appreciate my brother when I needed to appreciate him the most (sorry bro).

Imelda, partly because of the physical distance and partly because of her insufferable daughters, gradually became a shadow of what she once was. From her I learnt to smile at everything and at everyone.

There are goodbyes that hit different, despite all the training that comes from burying your four grandparents, one of your cousins, and three of your uncles. Remigio's death hurt differently, it hurt more, and I knew very well why. As I said before, the affective displays on the Flores Lopez side of the family were absent at least, brief at best, but love was always there.

A relationship with Remigio is like a cactus, you know that it will be there, and that by watering it just enough, it will survive and even thrive. But if you over water or leave it to dry, forget it, your cactus is gone.

Remigio was always present in family affairs, whether for work or for celebrations. Being present in the moment was the water that the cactus needed.

My return to Mexico coincided with Remigio's death anniversary, that day I had a date with Ale, but I chose instead to be with my family. As I said before, I do not like the feeling of missing, but I could not say goodbye to Remigio, as I did to Herón, Rogelio, Julia, Guadalupe, Heraclio, Paco or Imelda.

Although I told Remigio everything that was to be said while he was alive, I owed him a goodbye and I owed that to myself.

Few events can unite families, Remigio's death anniversary was not a cause for celebration but all the cousins were there, at least the ones that mattered.

I talked long and hard with cousin Rosario about her plans, about her son's plans, her future, my future. We found out that her son has a tattoo similar to one of mine, on the same arm. We talked about how her other son is interested in computing. I talked with Daniela about how the neighbourhood has changed; with Gloria about her grandchildren; with Jorge about how his son fighting tirelessly leukaemia.

I haven't seen my cousins for a long time, but I treasure childhood memories with them that would come with me wherever I go.

The Flores López family does not like leaving things half done, and whatever needs to be said will be said. That day I said goodbye to my cousins and let them know how much I love and appreciate them. Not because I don't want to see them again, but because we genuinely don't know what's going to happen. If tomorrow, for whatever reason we are no longer on this earthly plane, we would know silently that we loved each other, that we love each other and that, wherever we go, we will be there.

To my cousins:

I love you very much, thanks for so much, see you one of these days.

To Remigio:

Thank you Uncle, true love goes beyond saying *I love you*, although I learned that with mum and dad, I put it into practice every time you and I crossed paths.

## **Alejandra**

A month before returning to Mexico I started a social experiment. The premise was that going back to Mexico meant seeing people I already knew, whom I already knew how they think, their opinions and reactions. I didn't want to get into a confirmation bias game because otherwise I would only feed the pre-conceptions I had towards my country, both positive and negative.

Visiting Mexico required meeting new people, people who would tell me from their perspective and their experiences, what they had to say about their people, their city, my city.

A dilemma associated with my social experiment is that I didn't know anyone outside of my social circle, nor could I be waving strangers at the airport left and right. *What kind of psychopath does that in the middle of 2022?*

That same dilemma applies to a digital approach too, sending friend requests on Facebook, or following strangers on Twitter were not viable options. Who in their right mind is willing to show themselves on social networks with the intention of having conversations



with perfect strangers? The answer: people who use dating apps.

Many of the problems in Mexico have their origin in the power dynamics that are imposed with our culture. Whether they come from religion, family *values*, traditions, and a long etcetera.

A lot of those power dynamics can be summed up as machismo, but I feel like I'm stating the obvious.

Culturally and even biologically, those who carry XY chromosomes, also carry a pre-loaded attitude of being hyper competitive and an implicit rivalry. Such traits are not stranger to me but they are no less uncomfortable.

Admittedly, I do not enjoy the male company, much less being well aware that a significant part of the problems in Mexico is caused, propitiated and tolerated by people bearing XY chromosomes.

Back to our social experiment, I thought that an interesting approach would be to use Tinder to see Mexico through the eyes of women who were open to conversation, a conversation that was respectful, yet informative and certainly enjoyable.

In my profile I was very clear, I was going to be in Mexico until October 28, I was not looking for a

relationship or a one night stand, I just wanted to make peace with the country.

Kristal was the first to respond, but she clearly didn't read my profile, at some point she told me *you're very good at flirting...* obviously I moved on from that

Alejandra was the next to respond, she joined the experiment and these lines are about her. Ale is a chemist who works in logistics, a cyclist, divorced, pretty woman with excellent conversation skills.

She was the person who told me the hows and whys the country was simultaneously good and bad. Her social cycling club @morras\_cycling\_club promotes cycling for women as a safe space for integration and why not?, to cycle. Ale won the award for The Most Inspiring *Morra* and for a good reason, her mileage, her integrity, her quality as a person are worth admiring. Many women could look up to her and ask themselves: What if I start cycling? Mission accomplished

Ale told me many stories about the big city, and she took me around the Roma-Condesa neighbourhoods, the cradle of invisible privilege in Mexico City. Certainly a desirable place to live, but not so diverse to reflect what is happening in the rest of the city, much less to reflect what is happening in the rest of the country.

We went to eat at a moderately posh restaurant where a homeless person approached us to ask for alms.

We decided to buy a hamburger for her and, apparently we brighten up her day. Ale told me that the risk of having dinner outside, is that you could constantly be interrupted by youngsters selling sweets, people begging for alms and the occasional street performer.

This pushes people to eat inside restaurants, closing their eyes, refusing to see the problems of the big city. *The good ones are majority*, they say. While most certainly eating inside a restaurant to avoid being interrupted by less privileged people was not a bad action itself, it was definitely not a good action either.

Ale never hesitated to give her hamburger to the beggar lady, nor to give fifty pesos to the street guitarist who entertained our pizza and beer. *Ale is one of the good ones*, I thought to myself, and her altruistic work backed up my assessment.

The dynamics of social classes have had important shifts, although negligible in the grand scheme of things. In the 80s Mexico City wasn't as densely populated, crime and homelessness have always been

present, but now in the overpopulated Mexico City of 2022, such issues have more visibility.

The change of scenery has been a constant for me, I grew up in Ecatepec<sup>4</sup> (*I know*), I lived in Mexico City, then in Irapuato<sup>5</sup>, back in Ecatepec and finally in Cambridge, this time I would change scenery again, now going back to Ecatepec, at least temporarily.

After a date in the Roma-Condesa neighbourhood, getting back to Ecatepec required calling an uber, the driver would think it twice before accepting a passenger going to *effing* Ecatepec, and he definitely would be hesitant knowing he'd be in Ecatepec at night. After half an hour, our brave driver arrived, to take me to the finest example of violent town.

On my way home I thought about what happened that day. Ale was a great company. I'm faithful to my principles and the purpose of the experiment was exploring, not to get into a relationship. Ale is a *morra* with whom you can certainly fall in love, but as I said before, that was never my intention.

When you read this, Ale, thank you very much for a great date, for lending me your eyes to see Mexico

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4 More than once, Ecatepec has ranked as a highly dangerous place

5 Irapuato usually ranks as a more dangerous place than Ecatepec

City as the complex labyrinth that it is and for showing me that there is still good people in Mexico.

### **It doesn't matter when you read this**

Mexico sits on three tectonic plates: the North American plate, the Cocos plate, and the Pacific plate. This configuration results in Mexico being a particularly diverse place in orography, vulcanism and, very importantly, in seismic activity.

Since geological records exist, 32 earthquakes with a magnitude greater than 7.5 on the Richter scale have been reported, however, any inhabitant of Mexico City knows that earthquakes of lower magnitude can also leave permanent scars.

For Mexicans, the most memorable earthquake is that of September 19, 1985, of which, after almost forty years, its effects are still felt as if they were aftershocks with a prolonged effect. In 1985, many buildings in Mexico City collapsed, affecting thousands of inhabitants of the big city.

My dad still tells us how he and his brothers went to Mexico City to provide support for the victims. Support in the form of human excavators that could move rubble in order to rescue everyone who could have survived. Many people died, others disappeared and many more were displaced when they lost their homes and had to occupy available spaces in the areas

surrounding Mexico City, some of them doing so, illegally.

Ecatepec went from being the temporary shelter of the victims, to becoming their place of permanent residence, many of the refugees having practically nothing to survive, and even less to restart their lives, turned to a life of crime to endure the tragedy.

Mexico is a country that doesn't stop, and won't stop surprising. As a result of the earthquake of September 19, 1985, every year on the same date a nationwide drill is carried out, in principle to prepare the population in the event of an earthquake, but it really is to commemorate that tragic day.

Most of the inhabitants do not take the drill very seriously, or at least we didn't do it until 2017. On September 19, 2017, just a few hours after the nationwide drill, an earthquake of magnitude 7.5 on the Richter scale literally shook Mexico City to its core. There wasn't as much material damage as in 1985, but that didn't mean the outcome was different, people died, people lost their homes, people disappeared, people showed their most humane side and people brought out their worst selves.

I was in shock, I experienced the earthquake while I was on a sixth floor in the Roma neighbourhood, the sensation is hard to describe, and as much as possible, I wish it was not to be repeated. After making sure that my family and beloved ones were okay, I headed back home.

That night I didn't sleep, I stayed up all night fixing my bike because the next day I needed to provide support to the victims, delivering medicines, food and supplies, just as my father and uncles had done 32 years ago.

*And Mexico continued to surprise*

In 2022, during the flight from the UK to Mexico, I thought that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to visit Mexico City during earthquake season. *There is no such thing*, any scientist would say, but every self-respecting *chilango* knows perfectly well that September is earthquake season. A *chilango* scientist -yours truly- with a geologist brother -another *chilango* scientist- didn't know what to think about it.

Santa Clara has the curse and the blessing of having a quarry-able limestone hill, a blessing because the hill absorbs most of the tectonic plate movements, and consequently the earthquakes are barely noticeable in the family home. The curse of the hill comes when



people in need of housing, for whatever reason, begin to legally and illegally occupy every available space on the hill. On top of that, the hill also serves as the preferred place for a number of drug deals that are carried out as soon as the growing stain of urbanity disappears, leading to the very few patches of forest on the hill.

The houses located on the hill belong to a different universe. Yes, there is less discrimination among inhabitants, but there is also more poverty, even stray dogs have worse luck on the hill -where they usually die- as compared to stray dogs in the neighbourhood centre, where there's always someone willing to take care of them and even someone willing to adopt them. The accessibility to the houses on the hill is extremely limited, thinking of having a car is impractical. Running water is very scarce in the neighbourhood centre, and it is even more scarce for the houses on the hill.

All in all, this brave-new poverty does not prevent each half-built house from having a subscription TV aerial, because God forbid they can't see the football matches or the soap operas. The same is true for water, it is of course acceptable not to have running

water, but not having coca-cola or beer, is something completely unthinkable.

On September 17, 2022, Sara invited me to her birthday party to go dancing... on September 19.... September 19. Mexico doesn't stop surprising, and this occasion would not be the exception. Against all odds (or rather, in favour of all odds), there was an earthquake of magnitude 7.7 on the Richter scale that once again struck Mexico.

As if the dates repeating wasn't too much of a coincidence, the 2022 earthquake occurred less than 10 minutes apart from the 2017 earthquake. For days every conversation across the country was about the coincidence of dates, times, possible causes and the so-called *earthquake season* and, how lucky we were not to have the amount of damage like we did in 1985, or in 2017.

Since its founding in pre hispanic times, Mexico City has had management and logistics problems. Settling on a lake is not exactly the best idea in the world, much less so is settling in a country that lies in the middle of three tectonic plates. Obviously, our ancestors do not bear responsibility or blame, plate

tectonics are, despite everything, a relatively new discovery.

*Mexico doesn't stop to surprise*

After the 2017 and 2022 earthquakes, millennials and gen-Zs had to take the lead, we took courses in civil protection, first aid, search and rescue, and everything we could learn so that the next earthquake was more manageable. In Mexico, people don't know when the next earthquake will occur, but they know perfectly well that not only one, but several more will come. This thought brings with it a series of ideas that are growing like a snowball, for better and for worse.

Management and logistics problems have remained a constant in Mexico City. It isn't a secret that these problems are associated with multiple factors that operate in harmony to create a recipe for destruction: poor construction works, low-quality construction materials, short planning and development times, real estate agencies that, in order to make money as soon as possible, do whatever is necessary to deliver half baked residential developments to the ever growing population of Mexico City. The extreme competition among construction companies makes labour cheaper,

without necessarily guaranteeing a high quality of the works carried out.

The population in Mexico City is a constantly growing entity, and it grows because Mexico City is that kind of promised land where they tell you that there will be opportunities, jobs, housing and education... none of this is entirely true.

On top of that, the politicians in charge do not hesitate when they allow all of the above to continue happening, because they need to keep the citizens, the president and the construction companies happy, and more importantly, they need to keep their insatiable and unstoppable ambition happy.

*And Mexico will continue surprising*

With each earthquake, good things and bad things happen.

In each disaster the prevailing classism and racism in Mexico come to an end, and to the rhythm of *Cielito Lindo*, upper and lower class, white collar and blue collar, Tories and liberals, they all leave their differences and prejudices behind, doing whatever is necessary to help others, regardless of skin colour. That does not mean that the aftermath is more bitter

than sweet, and that we constantly see unnecessary and hateful facets of both politics and society itself.

After the 2017 earthquake, funds were allocated to the victims, which were diverted by political parties for their electoral campaigns. In 2019 and 2020, as there were no earthquakes, the funds for support in the event of natural disasters were looted by the president to feed his flagship projects, despite the fact that there were still victims of the 2017 earthquake who had not been adequately cared for.

Many people worry about the future, and few things are certain. As long as Mexico remains located between three tectonic plates, we are absolutely sure that there will be earthquakes, and we're also sure that the good side of society will emerge when it is most needed, and we're also sure that politics and society will show their true colours in the aftermath of each earthquake

I dare to say that all of the above could happen on September 19... *doesn't matter when you read this.*

## **Miss Dianolasa**

In 2011 the Department of Genetics and Molecular Biology of the Center for Research and Advanced Studies (CINVESTAV) was going through a period of transition, there were more and more students interested in the projects of the department, but at the same time, the faculty was showing several defects:

- Unprepared professors who were exposed as frauds by invited researchers
- Diversion of funding by corrupt researchers
- Overcrowded classrooms due to a lack of an adequate selective process

The so-called *magic Mexico*

Not everything was that bad, at least not for me, in 2011 *professor Javier* saw me typing commands in my Linux terminal and, he asked me if I was interested in teaching bioinformatics, I said yes without thinking twice.

In the first generation of master's students that I had to teach, there were extremely diverse and memorable characters, with whom I would write several chapters of my life.

Diana and Oto were two of them. Diana used to visit Otoniel during the year they were doing their master's degree.

Between the camaraderie they formed in the classroom and the fact that they shared birthday date, Diana and Oto became good friends despite being very different entities.

Oto and I were lab mates, and in a certain way I also enjoyed Diana's visits, although at the time, Diana and I had different opinions, ideas and attitudes. That didn't matter too much, we had to get our jobs done, Oto and I with our phage genomes, Diana with her micro RNAs.

Around 2014, Oto and I wanted to start an independent project, a project that would allow us to teach bioinformatics in a way that would leave us satisfied. Despite having already taught the bioinformatics course at CINVESTAV for some time, we were still using a syllabus with which we did not necessarily agree, using resources with which we definitely did not agree.

Although we knew how the project would start, we did not know how we would continue it, jokingly we named the initiative *ATGenomics: where your ideas begin*.

In messenger RNAs, ribosomes start to make proteins when they encounter an AUG signal (which comes from the DNA template with ATG sequence). ATG is where the proteins in genes begin, it is where the molecules that make life possible begin.

Sandra and Marco joined the project, but the idea didn't quite materialize, there was pressure to finish our PhD studies, we lacked time because we had three jobs, and we lacked proper business training... the initial project failed miserably.

None of the four people involved knew where we were going, as students, as scientists and, as entrepreneurs. Something was missing, or more precisely, someone.

When the pandemic lockdowns began, the memory of ATGenomics had been left far behind, at least for me it was, nonetheless, the curiosity to generate digital content, tutorials, workshops and whatnot, was always present in my head. As if by some mystical art we could read each other's minds, in 2020 Diana, Oto and I decided to revive ATG from the ashes.

This time it would work because we had what the original ATG lineup (and science in Mexico in general) lacked: A person who coordinates what each member is going to do and how they're going to do it. That was



Diana's initial and permanent role, and without her, ATG would remain in the ashes.

We were growing and getting noticed in other countries, we got the attention of an organization<sup>6</sup> that provide bioinformatics training for women across Latin America.

Upon my return to *Magic Mexico*, Diana and I had planned a workshop in which we introduced Alison as a trainer.

ATG has been growing despite being a side project for the six members, and if it has stayed afloat, it is again thanks to Diana.

In a conversation with *doc Gabriel*, I confirmed that when Oto and I left the institution, bioinformatics started lagging behind. That left us with a bittersweet sensation... to think that no one decided to fill the little void that we left behind.

It certainly feels bad to see our institution plunge into decadence, of course it is not because we have left, we are not (that) arrogant to believe we were the reason for it.

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6 @WBDSL: Women in Bioinformatics and Data Science Latin America

It didn't matter how far we were or how far behind we had left our studies at CINVESTAV, we would continue providing training and support to the students so that they could have a complementary perspective to what they were told in class, in the now decaying research centre.

All these thoughts crossed our minds while Diana and I grabbed our microphones and got ready to do our best to transmit our knowledge (big or small), with joy, emotion, with the taste of Mexico and the taste of ATG.

## **Thela Hun Ginjeet**

Members of the Flores López family are no debutants to the big city, after all, they had spent their entire lives in Ecatepec, the epitome of violent towns.

- Armed robbery? checked
- Scams? checked
- Extortion? checked

Working at the convenience store involved lots of things that went beyond spending fourteen hours a day serving people. It involved being together as a family, but more so as co-workers. It implied that whatever our mood, we always had to smile to the costumers and, we always had to smile to our colleagues.

The context of how complex the dynamics in the store could be included our individual issues, I was deeply in debt, my mum, my dad and my brother were having health issues, my brother and I needed to go to school, our egos were really big at the time, we had self-imposed and inherited expectations, we relied economically on the store, and there was uncertainty about the future.

It was a fortune that we didn't explode that often, deep down each of us knew that we worked better as a team, and as such we needed to swallow our prides.

Antonio wanted to keep working in the store, though he now has a good job as a Geologist. Irma and Victor saw themselves there for longer, despite they live quietly in their retirement. I never really liked the store that much, but I respected and admired it, and to some extent I had esteem for it.

When we closed the store, our lives went through significant changes, mostly for good and perhaps the same could be said about the store. The new owners have it well-stocked and they sell products that we didn't. Of course the neighbours occasionally mention that they missed the familiarity with which we treated them.

Leaving the store behind also meant stopping worrying about plenty of things, no more getting up at 7 am on Saturdays, no more starving ourselves until ungodly hours, in short, there was even time to have family dinner, as we hadn't had done for so many years.

Eventually we also forgot about the hell-hole we lived in. The anxiety associated with deprivation in the town works a bit like an immune system, or like our fight or

flight response: When you are constantly exposed to danger, a new instance of a crime is just that, a crime. Your head is already prepared to be alert, to avoid danger and to move on. And just as it happens with an immune system, if it is not stimulated, it loses defences.

By not depending on the store any more, and with the lockdowns, the family house becomes a fortress that protects us from all evil, crime becomes intangible even when you watch the news daily. You simply close your eyes, and are confident that everything is going to be fine... Or at least that was what Irma and Victor liked to believe, even though they knew it wasn't entirely true.

When I went to see Diana, I took the family car, naively thinking that the traffic in Mexico City would be kind to me. That time I was ten minutes late and instead of going straight home, I decided to catch up with my parents at the dancing club.

My dad didn't look happy, my mum was noticeably in shock, clearly it wasn't because of me being late. They explained to me that, since they didn't have the car at hand, they decided to leave on foot, and unfortunately they witnessed a shooting, in broad daylight, at the

beginning of the week in one of the main streets of Santa Clara. We found out later that the shooting was essentially due to a local drug-dealer not meeting the monthly *sales*, and the solution of course, is simply to kill him.

In the beginning, Santa Clara was only a small town with very few inhabitants, but due to the charms of Mexico City, it began to attract residents from neighbouring states.

Santa Clara had a large influx of residents coming from Mexico City after they lost their homes during the 1985 earthquake.

Industrialisation helped the settlers who arrived to prosper economically, to the extent that it was relatively common for people earning just a little above the minimum wage, to have a small house and support their family without too much problem. Life might not have been easy for them, but it was never particularly difficult.

Whether we like it or not, many Mexicans like to romanticise poverty, to have the nobility associated with belonging to low social strata and not falling into the vices that are traditionally associated with wealthy people.

The overpopulation, the lack of opportunities, the atmosphere of apathy and conformism associated with the fact that Santa Clara was a comfortable place, brought with it, that the inhabitants entered a stage where very few progressed, those who did, did so because they worked really hard, or because they were very lucky, or because they were wrong doers.

Admittedly, I used to believe in the false idea that *poor people were poor because they wanted to*, the evidence I had was overwhelming.

My neighbours had plenty of opportunities to progress, which they let pass by being in the comfort of Santa Clara, preferring to spend the little money they had, on beer and junk food, instead of, I don't know, properly feeding their children.

I now understand that poverty is much more complex than it appears at first glance, and that there are a thousand reasons why people let opportunities of any kind pass by.

On one occasion, while going to the GP, my father told me -while pointing to a busy food stall- that there was the meeting point for the local drug dealers. It was a strange feeling to think about the familiarity with which it was known that the dealers met there, even

knowing that the police passed by, and even more incredible, that they had lunch there regularly, just because.

When I first thought of documenting my visit to Mexico, I thought of including photos in each chapter to finish each story, but for this chapter it would be better to include the song *Thela Hun Ginjeet* by the British band King Crimson included in their 1981 album *Discipline*.

If you don't know that song, stop reading immediately, open *Spotify*, play the *Discipline* and come back in 37 minutes.

I'll wait

In the aforementioned song (which title is an anagram for *heat in the jungle*), Adrian Belew describes his experience when he was trying to film a video documentary about criminal life.

*And it's just about New York City, it's about crime in the streets*

While he was filming, a couple of rastafarians in London approached him, thinking that he was a policeman:

*So, suddenly, these two guys appear in front of me  
They stopped*



*Real aggressive*

*Stared at me, you know*

*"W-what's that? What's that on that tape?"*

*"Yeah, what do you got there?"*

After an endless conversation, the rastafarians let him go, Adrian, scared and shaking, went on describing his experience which ends ironically:

*And I thought, "This is a dangerous place" once again, you know*

*Who should appear but two policemen*

That song is undoubtedly one of my favourites, and it is one of the reasons why I wrote this collection of essays.

*This is a dangerous place you know*

Back to the disastrous afternoon in which I arrived ten minutes late to Santa Clara, it was one thing to have a vague idea of how crime works in Mexico, and quite another to witness a murder just meters away. A murder that was the cause and consequence of the prevailing environment of the neighbourhood and the town.

After the scare, all that remained was to trust the *immune system*, the fight or flight response, be alert, avoid danger, move on.

The *danzon* lesson continued for Irma and Victor, partly to take their minds off, partly because the show must go on, and partly because as crude as it sounds, this murder was just another case among the approximately 80 murders that are committed daily in Mexico.

Some neighbours knew the now deceased, maybe he had family, friends, hobbies, maybe he even had a garden in his house... maybe not. Maybe he was a hard drug user, maybe he was your typical alpha male who physically and mentally abused his girlfriend... none of that mattered now.

Tomorrow, someone else would fill his position, sell his merchandise, and perhaps would be better at meeting the monthly sales.

*This is a dangerous place you know*

Weeks later, Irma, Victor and I got ready to visit Antonio in Playa del Carmen, I wanted to see my brother, my best friend. At that time, I was spending a lot of time with Sara, and before the trip I was in her apartment, in the no less dangerous Gustavo A.

Madero delegation. This time I would return to Santa Clara to pack my suitcase, something small, a t-shirt, swimming clothes, shorts.

My mum's incoming call took me by surprise, she, in a noticeably state of shock, interrupted the passionate evening with Sara to tell me not to come home.

Things with the local drug dealers were still hot in Santa Clara, this time they took things further, they flipped over a car, which they used as a barricade in a shoot out that lasted about twenty minutes.

My dad went out to walk the dogs, he barely had reached the corner when the shooting started, in the same place as the previous shooting, probably perpetrated by the same criminals and possibly for the same reasons.

No matter how much I searched for the news about the shooting on social networks and information portals, there was no coverage, just some neighbours talking about the reasons for the shooting.

No one claimed the wrecked car, and no one would do anything to change the situation. I don't know if there were casualties, if so, they would only be part of the eighty-something that accumulate every day.

It saddens me to write about this because although in the big scheme of things, we are insignificantly small, in our micro environments we can be important to our beloved ones, our friends, our students and teachers, and just like that, in the blink of an eye, someone picks up a gun and decides to take someone's life, no matter how important or special the deceased was to someone else.

That time I didn't go home, instead I caught up with my parents at the airport, my mum was still in shock.

Our holiday in Playa del Carmen would be useful to clear our minds, to forget what had happened, to spend some time as a family, to have a beer with my dad and my brother, to smoke a cigarette and to enjoy what Mexico could offer us.

Mexico is a complicated entity, it is horrible, it is the place where more than eighty people are murdered every day, where committing crimes of any kind is relatively easy because the authorities are understandably (but not justifiably) useless at least, corrupt at most.

Mexico is the place where you can forge a PhD thesis and get to occupy positions in the government kissing the right people's arses, where the one who does not

cheat does not progress, where you can witness two shootings in close range in less than three weeks.

Mexico is a complicated entity, it is beautiful, with beaches that simultaneously invite introspection and hard partying, mountains that harbour mystical trails, underground rivers that allow you to swim among stalactites and stalagmites, passing through the same places that our ancestors did.

Mexico is the place where you can find really cool people doing incredible things for healthcare, for economy, science, and education.

Mexico is a jungle, literally and figuratively, and it is in the heat of the jungle that the coolest and most horrible things happen in the country that fascinates me this much.

*Oh it is a dangerous place*

## **Mama Ahidé**

On December 7, 2022, during an interview Jennifer Lawrence made the wild statement that *there were no women in leading roles in action movies*. Immediately many people came out to remind Jennifer Lawrence that there are indeed and have been many women in leading roles such as Linda Hamilton, Sigourney Weaver, and Uma Thurman, to name a few.

Science in Mexico is not too different to Hollywood, there are great women in science, but it seems that we have forgotten that they're there and the reasons for this are difficult to pinpoint and explain.

It is true that there are many people doing science in Mexico, many of them women, but unfortunately, making a big discovery is more and more difficult every day, whatever chromosomes you have.

At the same time, we have a growing gap between the general public and scientists, so it is very hard to find out about the already tiny discoveries, unless you're from the areas where those discoveries are made.

The career of a scientist woman in Mexico is quite difficult, the sexist society in which the country lives leaves women in science in a race full of obstacles:

Institutions preferring to hire men over women, the sociocultural pressure associated with the duties of a scientist that as a woman *must* fulfil -home duties, family duties, partner duties-, the constant bullying and harassment by their colleagues and superiors; and as if that was not enough, the competition they have against other women and even with themselves.

If on top of that we add the inherent difficulty of doing science in Mexico, where there is less and less economical support, and there are more and more inept people in management positions, the visibility of women in science in Mexico becomes very, very small. That being said, my statements are no different from those of Jennifer Lawrence, there have been, there are and there will always be great female scientists in Mexico.

Rosa María Ahidé López Merino was born on December 26, 1945, she studied the career of Chemist, Bacteriologist and Parasitologist at the National School of Biological Sciences<sup>7</sup>. Always talented and *going against the grain*, her professors used to compare her with someone who years ago made a big impression to ENCB -and to this author, by the way- the (in) famous

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7 ENCB

Gabriel Guarneros. Ahidé shone by herself, despite the shadow that was imposed on her by her professors.

Against everything and everyone, Ahidé was gaining a more than recognisable career path in Brucellosis, a zoonotic disease (that can be transmitted from animals to humans) that is quite prevalent in Mexico and worldwide. Due to her talent, she got to study in France learning from the best at that time, the techniques and procedures for the diagnosis, management and research of that little bug, so strange, so malevolent and yet so adorable as it was *Brucella*.

She became so renowned that, if you talked about Brucellosis in Mexico, you had to talk about Ahidé López Merino, if people talked about *Brucella* in Latin America, they talked about Ahidé, and if *Brucella* was mentioned in other places worldwide, her name was often mentioned.

Fame brings with it a number of perks, in Mexico he was authorised to open the first laboratory for diagnosis and surveillance of *Brucella* in what is now known as the National Institute for Diagnosis and Reference Epidemiology.



Fame also brings with it a number of difficulties, ENCB was never a quiet school, for better or for worse, what had to be said was said, and what had to be done was done.

Ahidé worked with BSL3 pathogens, posing a risk to the Laboratory of General Microbiology and to those who worked there. However she could, Ahidé continued doing research on *Brucella* in the department of Microbiology, with restrictions, with obstacles, with all eyes on her, waiting for the first case of brucellosis to appear due to mishandling of biological material.

The achievements in science are smaller and smaller, or so it would seem if we only focused on the objective part of science, the molecules, mechanisms, theories and theorems that explain the world.

But if we read between the lines, and if we begin to take a closer look and also include the subjective part, it is evident that there are scientists who stand out for their great actions, good and bad.

In the autumn of 2003 I heard Roberto saying that *doc Ahidé was like a second mother to him*, at the time I almost burst internally in laughter, but in 2007 I had finally understood what Roberto meant by that, and in

2022 I couldn't agree more with him, *doc Ahidé* had little children scattered here and there.

Roberto started his bio- manufacturing company in the early 2000s, Omar now has a regional diagnostic laboratory in Torreón.

Araceli is a renowned researcher at the National Polytechnic Institute, Francisco Manuel is a microbiologist, physician, entrepreneur and, an excellent human being. José Arturo is a professor at the *polytechnic* and head of the area in one of the most important biological companies in the country. Karellen continues his research career in France and, by the way, she has a fusion food restaurant. Whereas I, I'm just doing what I can working in Cambridge. We have in common that *doc Ahidé* adopted us as her *little Brucellae*, she trained us as scientists and put us on the path to grow as much as we wanted.

The same could be said of many other researchers in Mexico, but I'm very confident and would dare to bet that the majority of graduates of any scientific career in Mexico (and who, of course, have written theses), do not necessarily remember their PIs with love, and I don't mean affection, or respect or admiration, *LOVE*, with all its letters.

Ahidé is one of those few (or many) female scientists in Mexico. Now, retired from research, she lives a quiet life visiting the beaches of La Paz, with the person with whom she shares time and space. The peace of mind that comes with a lifetime of achievement, a clear conscience, a passion for science, and of course a well-deserved pension, is possibly the best reward a scientist can have.

Indeed, Ahidé made numerous findings and contributions to the understanding of brucellosis in Mexico, Latin America and the world; she opened unexplored paths in national epidemiology, but more than that, she served and served as a role model for many of us who were her students at some point.

Jennifer Lawrence had to reconsider her statement, given that indeed, the leading women in action movies have always been there, it just happens that we forgot they were there.

Science in Mexico is not too different to Hollywood, and just as there are actresses like Linda Hamilton, Sigourney Weaver and a long list, in the National System of Researchers of Mexico and in the memory of all her students, there will always be the legacy of Mama Ahidé.

## Vintage 2006

In September 1999 I met Arturo. *Fucking annoying kid*, I thought while listening to his shrill voice in the classroom. At the time I thought *OK, he's just an annoying kid with whom I'll have to share classroom only for two more years...* try the next seven.

Arturo was always a smart boy, good-looking even, and behind a few layers, a great guy. But you don't know all that if you don't give yourself the chance to meet people or, as it was our case, simply let the universe put them in front of you.

He and I began to be friends in 2001, partly because we were the only ones, along with Fernando, who came from the same high school, partly because we discovered that we were very similar in various ways, you know, *what isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us*.

Arturo and I have many stories, stories that are told over and over again every time we see each other, not because there isn't something new to tell, rather because those stories are our core memories, the stories that shaped us.

We always presented together, once, for analytical chemistry class we had to present something about mass spectrometry.

Pragmatic as we were, we split the topics and we made our posters separately, remember that this was before *Power Point* and *Dropbox*.

My handwriting at that time was ugly, but for my posters I made an effort and did my handwriting pretty, no matter how tiresome. Arturo couldn't care less, he wrote the same in his notebook as on his posters. When the time came to present, the entire classroom complimented our talk. Rosalía asked us why we had presented each other's posters... and well, she thought that because I was ugly my handwriting had to be ugly and Arturo, being more handsome, had to have good handwriting. We had fun though, it was all that mattered, and except for a handful of subjects, we enjoyed a lot attending school.

Arturo has been part of my personal development in a very particular way, he taught me not to take things seriously, to accept a *fuck you* with a smile, and to know that the underlying message (however twisted) was that it was his way of showing love.

Being an introvert is not a bad thing, but Arturo brought out the extrovert that lived in me by then, he was my connection to the outside world, which I might not have known otherwise. Through him I met *doc Ahidé*, because of him I did my social service in general microbiology, in short, without Arturo I probably wouldn't be writing all this.

We made a good duo, in the lab we were unstoppable, we coordinated our activities almost symbiotically, in medical bacteriology we always came out first and we did rather well, professor Chela used to to push us to be our best selves, and we delivered, professor Tomás encouraged us, and we came out on top.

As in any dynamic, there were also checkpoints where we didn't always agree, but the perks of having him as a friend were more than not having him around.

We adopted Rosario -Dr. Espinoza Mellado- in 2002 when her friends ditched her, something that to I still don't fully understand. Truth be told, Chayo is that kind of social glue that keeps the gang together.

Chayo, Arturo and I had different personalities, but somehow we made sense, we had a lot of fun talking about music, eating, frolicking, eating, wasting time, eating, playing basketball, eating, *you get the point*.

Uber nerds as we were, even though we didn't have the best grades we always did well in school.

Rosario, a full-fledged rocker nerd was for a long time the head of the classroom. We used to play music during the chemistry lab sessions, despite the expressed annoyance of one or two professors, whom we cordially shut up by showing them how well we worked.

The three of us were very clever in class, our reasoning, discussions, reports and generally good attitude and performance, put us in a quite privileged place, without necessarily being the teachers' pets, as it was the case of Lilia, for instance.

With Rosario things were always more intense, cool things were very cool, but the frictions and disagreements were chaotic, just as with Arturo, it was a thousand times better to have her as a friend than not having her at all.

Claudia was the last to join the group, *posh* girl, rebellious, outspoken, sensitive inside and out. Claudia and I were not the most compatible friends, outspoken and annoying as I was at that moment, she and I were

the perfect recipe for chaos on more than one occasion.

Between our routine and coexistence in the same time and space, and the fact that we learned how to see beyond the surface, we began our journey as a very particular group of outsiders.

When you watch an Adam Sandler film, the immediate question usually arises: *How the hell is that horrible guy dating that girl?* Our friendship with Claudia was similar to an Adam Sandler film, just to clarify, we were the Adam Sandler and she was the girl. Somehow we worked, survival and coexistence aside, we formed a beautiful friendship.

The early 2000s were weird times, more than 20 years after our time at ENCB, I missed very few things. The spaces are perhaps more restrictive and at the same time they feel more inclusive. Curricula have changed, our generation was for our benefit, the last to include Physics and Physical chemistry as separate subjects, it was also the last generation in which Biochemistry was a requirement to take Microbiology.

I won't say that *things were better in the past*, our curriculum didn't include Molecular biology, nor did it include a research project. But that didn't stop Arturo



and I to take these subjects in addition to the ones in our curriculum. These days the students have subjects that we would have liked to take, such as Bioethics, courtesy of doc Espinoza Mellado. If we had studied Bioethics, it occurs to me that I don't know, perhaps we wouldn't have had to electrocute chickens through the anus to sacrifice them in the laboratory of veterinary microbiology practices, scatologically true story.

Every group of friends has a story or stories that are told over and over, our group has the story of Lilia.

During our fifth semester, Lilia finished her immunology test very quickly, to the surprise of both the teacher and the rest of the students.

At that time, grades were announced publicly during class, it was a brutal process, the Immunology professors had the *tradition* of announcing the grades from lowest to highest. It was a torture for everyone, if you were called at the beginning, you knew that were done for, and if you were left at the end, the minutes were long until the professor mentioned your name.

For that test, the first name to come out was Lilia's, and everyone was shocked. Could it be that the teacher was giving the grades in descending order?

Could it be that there was no order in the grades? When Lilia picked up the test, the teacher told her that she didn't understand what was going on. Although I never liked Lilia, I reckon she was a bright student, her test results were indeed shocking.

What happened was that she skipped half the test, because Lilia didn't realise that the exam was printed on both sides. Obviously that episode left a profound mark on her for a long time.

In the sixth semester, we took the subject of pathology, in the first partial test, neither Arturo nor I studied properly and we failed miserably.

At that time Arturo and I had a scholarship for which we had to maintain a general average of eight or higher, because of that, we studied for the second test as if our lives depended on it. Our professor explicitly told us that for the second test there wouldn't be any questions related to growth factors, so we knew exactly how far to study. On the day of the test, absolutely determined to recover our average of 8 or higher, Arturo and I finished first and we did very well, I came out first, then Arturo and, minutes later Lilia did.

Arturo and I had our own non-verbal language, a simple look was enough for him to plan a prank in just micro seconds, and for me to follow his lead.

- *Arturo*: How did it go?

- *Vic*: Well, that was easy wasn't it. And how about you, Lilia?

- *Lilia*: Well, yeah it was easy.

- *A*: What did you answer in the growth factor questions?

- *L*: Ahmm... there was nothing about growth factors

- *V*: What type of test did you get?

- *A*: I got type **A**

- *V*: I got type **B**, I put the list of growth factors that we saw in class

- *L*: I had type **A**. There was nothing about growth factors

- *A*: Of course there was, didn't you see? it was printed *at the back of the page*

Lilia dropped her backpack, ran back to the classroom, reaching the professor asking her to let her review her test because she forgot to answer the questions at the back of the page.

The professor barely looked at Lilia, she didn't know what Lilia was talking about. The professor told Lilia that the test was printed on a single page.

Lilia made a fool of herself in front of the class... When she saw us, grabbed her stuff and told us: *you're such idiots*.

In retrospect, we were idiots and our actions were despicable, but the story is not about Lilia, but rather about the connection Arturo and I shared.

There was a similar, but less harmful, friendship with Claudia and Rosario, we used to do homework through *MS messenger*, sharing assignments during breaks, improvising our reports before laboratory sessions.

Soon after we graduated, each of us took different, but not necessarily separate paths. Rosario and I continued our postgraduate studies at the ENCB, Arturo and Claudia chose to work in industry. Little by little we started to drift apart, we had other friendships, love partners, our studies, our jobs and life in general.

Claudia and Arturo now occupy strategic positions in the bio-manufacturing industry in one of the key companies for Mexico. Rosario is a research professor,

and dare I say, one day she will be the director of the ENCB. If someone in the 2000s saw us, doodling on our faces with *sharpies*, eating between classes, pulling pranks on each other left and right, dressing like we did (OMG, how we dressed), I doubt anyone would believe that we are where we are today. And that is a great lesson to learn and one we can extrapolate to many more people in Mexico and in the world.

Most people with a desire to grow become more selective, because we try better foods, better places, better experiences. It is difficult to go back home because you are constantly reminded about how much fun you could be having in your favourite place, eating your favourite meal, having the best company.

Upon my return to Mexico, comparisons were inevitable: here you have this, but not there, *in Mexico the subway is cheap, but not in the UK*. The differences are endless, but there are things that don't change, no matter how selective you become.

I live happily in the UK, but my favourite place is the mountain house of San Miguel Cerezo in the state of Hidalgo, my favourite meal is red pozole, and the best company will always be that quartet of idiots I like to call friends.

There is a popular myth that says that all your cells, neurons included, constantly change their composition and every seven years, at least at the molecular level, we are completely different people.

Like Theseus' ships; Arturo, Rosario, Claudia and I would have undergone three iterations of ourselves throughout all this time.

Sartre said that existence precedes essence. My friends and I, despite being an improved version of what we once were, every time we see each other, go back to be that group of outsiders having fun during classes.

Alejandra told me in our only date that part of personal growth lies in accepting that relationships can be temporary, and friendships are no exception. That doesn't prevent Arturo, Chayo, Claudia and I, to go back to our original but improved version despite being in our third iteration. We can tell the same stories, and laugh at the same jokes, but being different people, better people.

Since the 2000s we have been improving as human beings, and to a large extent our relationship as friends is the cause and consequence of this continuous improvement.

I can confidently say that the four of us have matured wonderfully, just like a good wine.

In line with what Alejandra told me, part of growth lies in accepting that relationships are temporary. If one day, due to our own molecular turnover, we become people who no longer function as friends, we know that we will have enough strength to accept it, to talk about it and even to be able to say goodbye. But as long as that does not happen, we will have a glass of that wine that we fermented in our class of industrial microbiology, that wine that makes us laugh so much, that brings so much joy, that wine that is for us only, that wine, our 2006 vintage wine.

## **Alison**

As a teacher, one of the greatest satisfactions comes when you see your students growing on their own and, eventually see them surpassing you.

Bioinformatics is a fairly young discipline, or at least it was back in 2011 when I started to practice it more seriously. Coincidentally, in 2011 there weren't too many professors in bioinformatics, nor there were many students, so it was relatively easy to find a largely unexplored niche in science in Mexico... in 2011.

In 2020 things had changed a lot, there were already entire majors dedicated to bioinformatics, there were basic, intermediate and advanced courses, taught by universities and companies alike. While it was still unusual to find bioinformaticians in Mexico, there were already more and more specimens of this novel species.

One time, Dafné shared with me a tweet that said in a very petulant tone that *in Mexico you can be the best, but in a foreign country you are just a number*, which is sadly true but with many nuances.



Every year I enrol as an assistant professor in Biochemistry for the subjects of structural analysis of proteins and, *in silico* metabolic control.

When I see the type of questions that the students of University of Cambridge need to answer to pass their exams, I cannot not help but to remember that my biochemistry teachers, María Elena and Queta, taught me well enough to answer the questions asked in Cambridge.

I can say with confidence that a student who has passed biochemistry at ENCB (or at other university in the country), could easily pass the exams applied to students at the University of Cambridge (est. 1209).

Why then, does one have that feeling of being just a number here in the United Kingdom, when in Mexico one could be among the best? Part of the answer lies not in talent, but in opportunities. There's a popular saying that goes: *In the land of the blind, the short-sighted is king*. In Mexico by not having that many bioinformaticians, it is relatively easy to make an effort and be outstanding. In contrast, in Cambridge there is a lot of bioinformaticians, things are ultra competitive, and that's fine, and it's healthy, but only up to a point.

Both in Mexico and in the UK, people are rather colonialists when it comes to science and technology. In both countries it is generally accepted that *things that come from the first world are better*. That's something with which I don't agree, but this story is not about me, or about the UK, the title is Alison, and about Alison we'll talk.

Alison enrolled as a student to the course of genetic variants -the genetic barcode of a human- that we taught at ATG in January 2021. An outstanding student who undoubtedly moved everyone when, at the end of the course, gave us the notes that she took during the live sessions. She considered that the notes could be of help for other students in case they needed to study, and for the teachers in case they wanted to improve the course. In the backstage, Diana and I thought Alison would be a great addition to the team and she really was.

We all know that parents say that they don't have a favourite child, and we all know that they are lying. Alison is not my daughter but I won't deny she is my favourite, partly because of what she did during the course, but also because throughout her stay at ATG, she has shown capacity and leadership, patience and a

well-calibrated moral compass, very much in sync with what ATG stands for. Please note that although she is my favourite, there is no special treatment for her since, unlike a family, ethics must prevail in a company, in addition to the fact that the other members have the same values, with different styles and flavours, but ultimately the same values.

On the day of the *Women in Bioinformatics and Data Science Latin America (WBDSLAL)* workshop, Diana and I had planned for Alison to shine for her audience by teaching them what she had previously learnt in the variant calling course.

She was now on the other side of the classroom, teaching, and her audience received her quite well.

To celebrate, Diana, Alison and I decided to go to a vineyard in Querétaro, undoubtedly the most *whitexican* experience I've ever had, but now I live in Europe, so *whateva*.

At the vineyard we talked for hours about everything and nothing, it was like a meeting of mini-entrepreneurs who were fully immersed in the future of medical-genomic science, if Melania Abreu had been with us -greetings Mel-, it wouldn't have been just any meeting, it would have been *the* meeting.

Despite we had a great time, at the end of our *whitexican* experience, I was left with a rather bittersweet taste regarding Alison, because this woman, as capable and badass as she is, has a defect that many of us suffer from: she has impostor syndrome.

From a very young age, Alison was doing this and that, going on research internships, summers in which she could have been wasting time playing video games... and yet she decided to spend them cultivating her intellect.

In Mexico, it's quite common for someone who knows themselves to be intelligent, to become sooner than later, rather insufferable -greetings to myself of 2009-. That wasn't the case of Alison, with a rather mischievous but helpful personality, she seems to have broken the mould... or rather, her imposter syndrome doesn't allow her to see all the her talent. And that is probably an issue that is worth addressing, even more than the feeling of *being just a number*.

In Mexico, being a scientist is not easy, at least in the biological area we face endless obstacles:

- Not enough resources to train students

- Not enough resources to buy equipment
- Not enough resources to buy reagents or consumables
- When there are resources, they are used to buy equipment and reagents, which spend a lot of time at customs, and on top of that, customs agents don't know how sensitive a reagent can be.

It is not the customs agents' fault, they're only doing their job, they follow orders, they follow outdated protocols and navigate the ocean of corruption that prevails in the customs of Mexico and the world.

When looking for scientific articles in databases, we have to pay exorbitant amounts of money to peruse six to ten pages describing a methodology that we cannot implement without spending an even more exorbitant amount of money on equipment and reagents.

In academics, it is normal to make mistakes, where I work, we have a saying that goes: *Errors are expected, respected, inspected and corrected*).

It could be the same in Mexico, except for the fact that mistakes result in your reagents running low quickly, ordering more reagents could easily take three months

to arrive. If you have already made a mistake, you better not make another, because then, potentially the term is over, and with it, your opportunity to have a significant result, big or small, that reflects the progress of your research project.

Impostor syndrome is not for free, female scientists don't have it any easier, the environment of harassment and violence that they experience every day and that permeates even the most educated sectors, makes the decision of being a scientist literally a race against everything and everyone.

Mexicans are, despite our reputation for being lazy, very versatile, creative and resilient. Scientists are being trained every day however possible, and in turn they can change the world, one step at a time. And we all do the above with less than 1% of the gross domestic product (official figures from the federal government), a percentage that our current president wants to lower at all costs -*Thank you Jos*-.

Alison, with all her talent, drive and dedication, is nothing but a reflection of what is happening all over the country, at a trans generational level: she is not able to see the talent she has. And just like Alison there are and will be many more, accountants,

architects, doctors, psychologists, chemists, and a long etcetera.

Mexico is probably one of the best examples that *in the land of the blind, the short-sighted is king*, again, not because of lack of talent, but because the circumstances in which we live continue to push us to move on, to accept that, and to convince ourselves that, what we do is not relevant, and that there is more talent outside, and that we are never going to achieve the level of science that exists in other places, like in, I don't know, the United Kingdom comes to mind.

We can have that level of science, we already have the talent, we lack support, we need the government (whatever the party) to support science, education, and innovation. Unfortunately, the support from the government is more and more distant, smaller and smaller... in the land of the blind, even the short-sighted cannot see what is becoming more and more invisible.

Postgraduates in Mexico have a phrase of tough love that goes: *The student must be able to carry out with their project, with the advisor, without the advisor, and despite the advisor.*

Science in Mexico, seen through the eyes of Alison, and all the Alisons across many educational institutions, will be the ones that take that phrase to a limit that is painfully difficult to write: *Science in Mexico will progress, with the government, without the government, and -sadly emphatically- despite the government.*



## **Sheriff Flores**

My dad took me to the cottage when I was three years old. Although I currently live in a wonderful place, the cottage will always be my favourite place in the whole world. Many of my happiest memories took place in the cottage, planting potatoes when I was a little boy, building houses with my uncles and cousins, carrying water with Esteban the donkey, running cross-country, doing mountain bike on the hills, and even cutting the most beautiful flower to give it to who at the time was the owner of my heart.

If I had all the money in the world, I would buy the cottage without thinking twice, I would build many rooms for my cousins and, I would try to revive the annual traditions that we had when we were teenagers.

When we were building one of the houses in the cottage, Herón, though he could no longer work, fulfilled the role of supervising that my father and uncles were working properly. Herón said that he could no longer see from afar, however, more than a hundred meters from the construction site, he allowed himself to whistle at the guys telling them that the wall they were building was uneven.

To the annoyance and frustration of the uncles, the wall was indeed, slightly uneven.

Heron's condition was a wake-up call for the uncles, to arrange who would be in charge of taking care of the house and of working the land.

Hugo was the obvious choice, always hard-working, responsible, although sometimes (many times), detached from his close family ties.

Hugo would begin to take care of the house, occupying the role that once belonged to Heron.

Hugo had a different childhood than the rest of the uncles, for starters, his upbringing was in charge of his grandma Juanita, instead of his parents. Despite the rough education that Heron had with all of his children, he never laid a finger on Hugo, but that did not prevent Hugo from having tough experiences, that formed his character, but also left deep marks on him.

One of the stories that is usually told is the one in which Hugo was helping Heron to break stones at the quarry. Hugo's role was to hold the chisel so that Heron could hit said chisel with a very heavy sledge hammer. On that occasion, Heron missed the chisel and instead hit Hugo's hand with the sledge hammer. Unmoved, far from attending to the possible fracture, Heron very

calmly told Hugo: *That's nothing, dying is something.* No one said anything, they knew they had to continue working.

Life in the countryside is way too different from life in the city, everything starts and ends earlier, physical performance is absolutely necessary. The lack of noise, the clean air and the incredible views, make every sacrifice worth it.

My parents taught my brother and I to work hard no matter the occasion, the cottage taught us to work for something where money is not part of the reward.

Hugo, despite having worked for a couple of years at the Hoechst factory, didn't take long to re-adapt to the countryside lifestyle, and like most family members, it was extremely difficult to keep him still. He got involved in administrative activities of the community centre and, he earned the title of sheriff, with it, he earned the respect and admiration of some, and with it, the envy and disdain of others.

Every time we went to work, we all understood that the first thing we had to do was to have breakfast, tamales were always there, along with a mug of coffee, then, off to work until the scheduled day was over. If we had time and energy to spare, we would play

whatever we wanted, the mountain was our playground.

When Hugo was the sheriff, he applied these same rules to both his family and to the community workers. In a short time he was in charge of reviving the Llano Grande Ecological Park in which he managed to secure a budget and manpower to build tables, benches, gazebos, adequate sanitary facilities, a zip line and even an artificial lake.

Many people were happy with what was achieved, and many people resented him deeply, because although life in the country is different from life in the city, the toxic mindset of some inhabitants is the same everywhere.

In Mexico, the highway code indicates that a yellow traffic light is the signal to start braking because the red light comes next, a complete stop. Nevertheless, everyone knows that the yellow light means *ACCELERATE!*, and that the red light is ommissible, and that it is much more convenient to give the traffic officer a bribe so that he does not seize your car. It is also well known that if you play hard to get, pretending to be a law-abiding citizen, the officer will let you go with a warning in the absence of bribery, because

seizing your car is simply too much effort for the police officer. *It's not worth it*, many of them would think.

Ever since its revival, the Llano Grande Ecological Park almost always had visitors and it was strange to think that one person could make the change for it to happen.

The solution had always been simple, it was necessary to change how the money was managed, and Hugo was not one to divert funds: if money comes in for the community centre, the money goes to the community centre. The community members and workers who previously gave in to the diversion of funds were the main detractors of Hugo's administration, that did not matter, Hugo did not care about bad people, good people were his priority and, of course, his main priority was always the ecological park.

It is sad but understandable, albeit not justifiable, to see that the nation's problems lie mainly in systemic corruption just as they say in Mexico: *There is no progress without cheating*. There are three popular phrases in Mexico with which I will never agree:

- *You need to be street-schooled*
- *There is no progress without cheating*
- *The good ones are majority*

This last phrase is widely used by Mexicans to pat themselves on the back when they face many of the problems that afflict us as a nation. The phrase alludes to the false dichotomy of good and evil in people, and many people use the phrase thinking that in Mexico the good townspeople -as the president would call them- represent the majority of the population.

The reality is very different, the dichotomy is false in the sense that not doing bad things doesn't automatically make you a good person. In the same way, not doing good things does not automatically make you a bad person. Paying your taxes, separating your rubbish, and passing your subjects do not necessarily make you a good person; watching TV and slacking all day long, do not make you a bad person either.

The lack of action when facing problems such as violence or poverty makes many of us nothing more than indifferent bystanders who, far from being good or evil, live in that grey area where, although we do not commit crimes, we are not doing much to solve the problems that affect us.

It's not entirely our fault either, if people had more time and resources they would probably be more

involved in altruistic actions, but that's a privilege not all of us can afford.

Given the prevailing lack of action in the community centre, Hugo took the lead more than once so that as a community, at least briefly, people would stop being indifferent bystanders and could do something genuinely good.

On October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, we went to the cottage where, as on other occasions, there was never a shortage of stories about what was happening in the community centre, and Hugo told us in detail one of them, although we needed to get him a bit drunk.

One day very early, Hugo woke up after hearing engines not far from the cottage. Working in the field brings its advantages, among which is being able to distinguish between various types of engines, whether it is a tractor, a truck, a chainsaw, or a motorcycle.

On that occasion it was clear that the engines were motorcycles. Hugo knew that something was not right, those noises couldn't, or rather shouldn't come from the mountain or its surroundings. Promptly, he called the community centre workers, and he told them to load the truck with chainsaws, axes and all tools that

they could use in a possible confrontation, but never firearms.

Him and the workers knew the roads quite well, and they knew where to intercept the bikers. Most of the bikers were sons of powerful people, and most of them didn't have an ounce of respect for the environment.

Several bikers advanced towards the improvised blockade the workers made. The workers did not flinch, they just looked at Hugo and upon a gesture from him, took the chainsaws, axes and other tools out of the truck.

- *Let us through!* The bikers demanded

- *You do not have a permission to pass through this protected area with your motorcycles, even less if you destroy things in your path*

- *The governor already gave us permission*

- *Where's your signed permit?*

- *You don't know who I am. Do you?*

- *Even if you were the president, without a signed permit you won't pass*

The bikers began to rev-up their engines, Hugo turned to the workers and upon a single command, they knew they had to rev-up their chainsaws.

- *Again, you won't pass through here*



One of the bikers tried to convince Hugo, explaining that they had already paid the *organisers*, that some of the bikers came from thousands of miles away to do cross-country motorcycling.

Hugo's decision was firm and, right by all laws: Without a signed permit, the bikers couldn't pass through a protected area.

The bikers left grumbling and threatening the workers, but the workers were happy because they had won this small but significant battle. Hugo was not so happy, he knew that this story would not end there and he had to prepare for what was to come. Indeed, people from the government of the State of Hidalgo came days later, with the full intention of intimidating the sheriff, because of the whining bikers.

With all the arrogance in the world, a lawyer representing the bikers arrived to the ecological park, demanding the sheriff to issue an apology to the bikers, to let them use the ecological reserve and also to compensate them for damages.

Hugo told the lawyer: *Look, I'm not up for a fight, neither with them nor with you. What do you think if you come with me and I show you what happened.* The sheriff took the lawyer to the place where the bikers

passed before they were stopped, and showed him the amount of irreparable damage they had done to the local flora. Beyond the legality of what happened, Hugo asked the lawyer if it seemed fair to him that a group of spoiled brats came to the ecological park without permits or respect, to cause damage to a site that was already affected by human activity in the surrounding areas.

The lawyer gave up on his task, not before paying his respects to the sheriff and the workers at the community centre. They were only defending a fair cause given to the lack of awareness from of the bikers who only wanted to have a few hours of fun.

Hugo was lucky that the lawyer still had his moral compass calibrated, had it been someone else, a court case would have taken place, sponsored by a politician who does not care at all about ecological areas, more than he cares about establishing dominance.

Hugo does not like to tell us all those stories<sup>8</sup>, as noble as they seem on paper, they have a human component that we, myself included, overlook: All these situations imply leaving the permanent status of indifferent bystander. People who act, risk many

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8 That's why we needed to get him a bit drunk

things, in some cases they even risk their lives. In the end, what we remember is only the pretty parts of of their stories.

There are many stories like this one about Sheriff Flores, some of them we know, most of them we don't, but neither the ink nor the admiration that I have for my uncle is enough to finish telling them, at least not the ones that I know.

Eventually we resume having lunch, we finish talking and proceed to our favourite activity: my uncle and I light a cigarette which we smoke in silence.

## Science for them all

Before returning to Mexico, Humberto asked me if I could take some gifts to one of our friends and to his girlfriend, and on my way, bring his camera back. I was thinking of going to Irapuato anyway, so I took the weekend to visit people I love, care and admire. Inadvertently, I had the ideal scenario for the mission that I set myself before returning to Mexico: *to get to know the country again, to see it with fresh eyes and seeing it through someone else's eyes.*

That weekend I was surrounded by female scientists with different backgrounds, ages, and goals, each of them with a unique approach to science. Their names will be withheld out of respect, for safety, and because this story is possibly the most bitter of all

- A: gen-X woman, she is in the manager of the computer facilities of an entire research institute.
- K: Millennial woman, recent PhD graduate providing computing services to clients from various institutions
- L: Millennial woman, recent PhD graduate, continuing her career as a postdoc at the research institute.

- S: Millennial woman, recent PhD graduate, navigating science with a mix of pride and privilege.
- M: gen-Z woman, masters student, idealistic, somewhat spoiled in my opinion, but a good person

Like I said, it's a pretty bitter story. A year before the lockdowns due to the pandemic, Mexico was a pressure cooker with the protests of the women who marched in different cities demanding justice due to the lack of action on the part of the authorities who were more than incompetent to solve cases of sexual harassment and abuse, gender violence and, unfortunately, femicides.

The educational institutions were not strangers to the gender violence that is experienced throughout Mexico, just as they did on the streets, women were doing public demonstrations exposing how, many of the researchers were harassers at best, rapists at worst. The pandemic fell like a glove on Mexico, the demonstrations and complaints ceased due to the lockdowns, and the pandemic also gave a break to the harassers who can operate with impunity in Mexico.

A female researcher from the International Human Genome Research Laboratory<sup>9</sup> filed a legal claim against the researcher Jean Phillipe Vielle Calzada<sup>10</sup> for sexual abuse. Given the evident lack of resolution from the authorities, the LIIGH researcher, along with other victims, decided to resort to a more visible, although less effective, instance: They decided to publish their testimonies in *Science*: a high-impact renowned scientific journal.

The case is quite complex, but at the same time also simple. It's simple because the accuser has repeatedly presented evidence, apprehending the harasser should be an easy job. The case is complex because JPVC has done everything in his power to avoid apprehension. To the outrage of everyone, JPVC has maintained his position as a researcher.

The pressure cooker that has been heating up for decades has been close to exploding in so many times, on that occasion, in a burst of initiative or outright cynicism, JPVC considered it was a good idea to nominate himself as a candidate for general director of the most advanced research centre in Mexico.

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9 LIIGH

10 JPVC

When S and I arrived to Irapuato, we went straight to the seafood restaurant that for A, K and I, was synonymous of good food, good beer and good times. L and M would arrive later.

Earlier I mentioned the false dichotomy between good and evil in which Mexicans live, typically many men also live under the concept that feminism is an antonym of machismo, nothing further from truth. There is not a unified definition of feminism, there are so many variants of feminism that it is impossible to put it in a single box. Machismo is easier to understand, it is based on the idea that women are inferior to men.

For a heterosexual cis man, navigating social circles in 2022 means carrying an invisible but recognisable label before women and society: patriarchal privilege.

I've been raised in a hetero normative and patriarchal environment, like half the population of my age, but gradually I've been getting rid of the characteristics of a hetero-normative caveman, some of them by myself, some with and by Giovanna, some with the help of *Jazmin the psychologist*, and unfortunately some characteristics are still there.

Despite everything the invisible label is still there and that's okay, I've made my peace with it. Any woman who thinks that because I am a man I am a potential rapist has every right to think so, even though I can safely say that I consider myself an ally.

Many men resort to the phrase *not all men are rapists*, and they are right, to which the feminist movement has said: *not all men, but it is always a man*. An argument that nullifies in a very elegant way the counterargument of the aforementioned men.

Being in this forum with A, K, L, M and S, my logical choice was to listen to everything they had to say, and oh boy was it a roller coaster of emotions. At first we talked about all nonsense that came to mind, the weather, the food, the economy, but we couldn't ignore the elephant in the room:

The gender-violence situation at the research centre was getting worse by the day. Being the most important research centre of Mexico, it serves as a good proxy of what happens in other educational institutions in the country.

A popular Mexican saying regarding love and poverty says that *when money goes out the door, love goes out the window*. This proverb also applies to what



happens in any organization, the research centre was no exception. By having less and less budget, the spaces and working conditions were more and more tense and the sorority between students and researchers can be maimed, even lost.

We are products of our environment, and the unsafe environment that exists in Mexico shapes men and women alike, causing neither to make the best decisions.

For the benefit of many people, including criminals, Mexico has vast natural areas, some of them are barely explored, some are totally unknown.

The job of geologists and surveyors is to explore such areas to obtain information about their composition and exploitation potential. This is perfectly compatible with organised crime using said unexplored areas to operate under the shadows of remote areas.

The presence of crime gangs in remote areas greatly complicates the labour of geologists and surveyors, a zone that today is normally used by and for the students, tomorrow can be plagued with members of organised crime.

During a field trip, MM and Antonio were in an interesting but complex scenario: When they arrived to

the exploration site, volunteers were required to scout the surrounding areas. Antonio promptly volunteered, MM did the same. Antonio told MM that maybe it wasn't such a good idea, to which MM angrily replied that she also deserved an opportunity to explore the field, to not stay at the base site and to do heavy work. MM reasoning was (correctly) that in order to break down barriers and stereotypes, and also to provide equal opportunities, women should be able to participate in all activities that are traditionally the province of men.

Antonio replied (correctly, I think) that it was not an academic, work or gender issue, but rather a safety issue. That comment clearly sounds condescending, but Antonio is not your typical alpha male. He elaborated his response arguing that if there were only men in the scouting crew and they were to find a gang of drug dealers or hitmen, there was the risk of physical violence, a death risk too.

If, on the other hand, there were women in the scouting crew, the risk was much greater and much worse, there was not only the risk of physical violence, but also of sexual violence, and as the rate of femicide in Mexico indicates, it was almost certain that the

women, if not the entire crew, would be killed immediately after the possible encounter with the aggressors. If Antonio's paternalistic attitude (which is not the same as patriarchal) is right or wrong, it's not up to me to discuss, I probably would have done the same.

In the conversation we had in Irapuato, *A* told us that a female researcher, *E*, as a result of the complaints that JPVC had, and the unsafe environment guaranteed by having so many male researchers in the institution, decided not to accept women as master's or doctoral students, with the intention of not exposing them to the unsafe environment that exists in the institute. *E* is a researcher that I admire a lot, it is true that she is a great tutor, it caused me a cognitive dissonance to know that in an effort to protect the students, *E* was denying them an opportunity to develop in science, to show the world that against anything and everything, women can do science in Mexico.

If *E*'s protective attitude (which is not the same as condescending) is right or wrong, it's not up to me to discuss, I don't know what I would have done, but I feel that I would have accepted the girls as students.

The above narrative has a purpose and I hope you have fallen into the trap that perhaps clumsily, I just set for you. In both *E*'s story and *MM* and Antonio's story, we focused on what the victims and their support network do to be relatively safe, instead of paying attention to what really happens: the rapists, the harassers and the organised crime should be the main antagonists of the narrative, not *E*, nor Antonio.

In defence of the reader, I will reiterate that we are the product of our environment, and our environment has taught us to normalise what we experience on a daily basis, the man that dies after a failed robbery, the woman who was raped and murdered, the little boy who was kidnapped for a ransom, the little girls that are sold in rural regions of Mexico... all of them are numbers, faceless people, voiceless people, who add up to a number that the government, far from solving it, is only in charge of sweeping under the rug.

I personally believe that there is a powerful reason why JPVC has not been apprehended and prosecuted as he should be: Someone raised his voice against JPVC, and he knows he is in the spotlight, but he is calm because if he falls, many more would fall with him, men and women alike, People who have

committed equally bad or worse acts, and JPVC knows that he is protected by all that scum that operates in the research centre, men and women alike. How much does JPVC know about the managers? Only he, God and the managers know.

As I said before, the research centre is a good proxy for what happens in all the country's institutions, it is not surprising that the same thing happens in prestigious and low-grade universities in Mexico. So long as there is silence, both in this and in other cases, we will not reach that goal that is as important as it is distant: Science for all.

The cherry on top the cake to this whole story, which is bitter enough, is that during the talk, two of the female scientists didn't think it was such a bad idea that JPVC was the general director of the research centre. Respecting their anonymity, I will not mention who said what, but I did find it interesting to say the least, shocking at most, to hear the voice of a woman supporting a rapist.

I find repulsive the idea of having JPVC as director, for better or for worse I am no longer in that institution, and all I can do is support science in Mexico from my trenches... but it is increasingly difficult to support a

country that seems to be self-destructing... one victim  
at a time, one rapist at a time.

## **The road of the ruins**

In the 90s there was a TV show called *Suddenly Susan* with Brooke Shields starring as Susan. In one of the episodes, Susan is running for a seat on the board of city supervisors, she is also running against the then-professional wrestler Hulk Hogan. Susan believes that Hogan doesn't have an ounce of political knowledge given that he only poses for the cameras while doing wrestling things like growling and smashing things.

Hogan eventually won the election, but to Susan's surprise, Hogan was not only knowledgeable in politics, he also had a lot of good ideas and on top of it, he approached Susan to ask her to collaborate with him, because Susan's ideas seemed great to him. Hogan explained to Susan that the wrestler facade during the campaign, was only an act to get him closer to the people to gain their trust, without the citizens feeling that they were being represented by the stereotypical corrupt politician.

In 2002, when I was finally able to vote in local and federal elections, I was an idealist who believed that politicians in Mexico could be the same as what I saw in *Suddenly Susan*, that is, no matter how ridiculous

they seemed during their campaigns, once in power, they could be good politicians.

Nothing further from reality.

In 2018, 7 million Mexicans voted for Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), not necessarily because he was a good candidate, rather because the parties that had been in power had created a state of desperation, people were tired of the same thing all the time.

The current mexican president started his term with three Pharaonic projects in mind: The Santa Lucía airport, the Dos Bocas refinery and the Maya train, which aims to establish a network of connections in the Yucatan peninsula. AMLO pitched the idea of the Maya train as a means to connect one of the most culturally important regions in Mexico and the world.

AMLO called for elections to approve the project, with 92.3% of votes in favour, the victory was “*overwhelming*” at first sight, reading between the lines we realise now that the election was just a parody given that only less than 3% of registered voters voted.

AMLO had been campaigning for the presidential race since 2006. During his campaign, he always expressed interest in poor people, marginalized people,



indigenous people, and the train was meant to provide support for poor people, or at least that's what he said. AMLO from 2006 might have had the best intentions, and even great projects, but in 2018 AMLO had his own agenda, which advanced unstoppable, driven by the airport, the refinery and the train.

Antonio, the youngest member of the Flores López clan, the one we haven't talked about, is like Neil Peart from the band Rush, at first sight he is always in the background but essential for the development of the band. I've learnt a lot from him, how to be a good person, or trying to be, how to see the world from a more down-to-earth perspective, I've learnt good music from him, good films.

With Dafné I had some regrets, but I am aware and at peace with the fact that her chapter has already closed. With my brother it is different, yes, I do have regrets but at the same time I know that I can rewrite our history for the future, he is my best friend and I will always look for him as much as possible, that chapter still has many pages left to write.

My upbringing was easy because I always let myself carried away by circumstances and I never faced a dilemma where I had to put my convictions before my

personal benefit. Antonio is possibly the opposite, and consequently, despite being my younger brother, I have always thought that when I grow up I want to be like him.

He had to repeat a year in high school, he quit studying for many years, he completed a university degree, and at now he works as a geologist. It sounds easy on paper, but his story implies thinking that at each stage of his life there were checkpoints where he either pleased the family, or met society's expectations, or followed his convictions.

As a consequence, he needed to work different jobs, we can easily add to his CV the trades of shopkeeper, clerk in a seven-eleven, barista in a coffee shop, photographer, artist, blacksmith, and even a music-memorabilia salesman.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Antonio lost his job at the National Geological Service, to later work as a blacksmith with my father, more out of necessity than conviction. In 2022, Antonio returned to work in geology and exploration, conducting risk analysis for the exploration and construction of the Maya train infrastructure... and this is where our two short introductions come together.

When Antonio was assigned to work on section 5 of the Maya train, his mind was in a permanent state of overload, first, due to sizing up the magnitude of the project in which he was involved, and also because he was aware that his work would have consequences for years to come.

In October 2022 we went to visit him in Playa del Carmen, a city that is as Mexican, as I am an astronaut. Antonio took us to many places, including various sections where the Maya train will eventually pass, the spectacle was impressive, defying, beautiful, sad, disappointing, all at the same time. We passed through sections with piles of trunks from all the trees that were cut, we saw coatis (*Nasua nasua*) that without any sign of shyness leaned out to see their visitors in their metallic vehicles.

We saw tarantulas crossing the road as the proverbial chickens would do. To think that in the future the sections we visited would be travelled by a leviathan that would shorten distances, implied an immeasurable confusion.

Antonio took us to the house of Genoveva, the foul-mouthed lady who sold beer to the workers of the Maya train. The house was abandoned, it was planned

to be demolished since it was located just meters away from the tracks. Genoveva mentioned that the government would not replace her house, that instead they would only help her relocate, but all this was in verbal agreements, words to be gone with the wind.

Section 5 of the Maya train passes through a series of regions that had not been explored yet, geologists and their caravan of machines could reveal in the short term the relative risk associated with the construction of the train, in the long run, they could also reveal the presence of pre-Hispanic artefacts and ancient city squares that had not yet been discovered.

After moving through section 5, the exploration crews indeed found remains of pre-Hispanic structures. The National Institute of Anthropology and History had to assess the importance of the pieces they found.

Importance, what a concept.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of importance is closely linked to the scale of values of each involved party. For the INAH, the pieces represented invaluable information, offering a window to the past, allowing a better understanding of the cultures that once flourished in the Yucatan peninsula. For our president, these pieces would not

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represent much, worst-case scenario he would simply discard the pieces, prioritizing the construction of the train, best-case scenario, he would never find out about said pieces... prioritizing the construction of the train.

For the construction crews, these pieces could represent a multifaceted dilemma, challenging their morals, identities, work, and sense of culture. How to get past something that was invaluable to an important federal agency, and at the same time insignificant to another, more important agency?

How strong are your convictions? How much they align to the common good? How much money you make from your convictions? In an ideal world, working with conviction in a job that brings common benefits and that pays well is the dream, but ideal worlds are not real. You either follow your convictions or you pay the rent. You either follow your convictions or you doom the planet. Many people in Mexico opposes the construction of the train, but just as it happens with climate change, individual actions pale in comparison to what people with power can do. The construction of the train was a whim from the most powerful man in

Mexico, your actions are futile, regardless of your convictions.

In many cultures, the phrase: If not me, someone else is going to do it, is as prevalent as it is real, whether it is right or wrong, it is real.

I reckon Antonio usually has a well-calibrated moral compass, but cases like this are complicated even for the most upright person. He could oppose the advance of the exploration and construction crews, but that implied facing two leviathans: the train, and the will of the president. He could also quit his job, but as we mentioned, if he is not in charge of leading the exploration and construction crews, someone else will be.

In the construction areas of section 5, the crews coexist with multiple individuals, locals, natives, visitors, and foreigners who have already settled on the peninsula. A Swiss woman living in Tulum explained that the dilemmas that crews face every day were the same dilemmas experienced by many European construction companies in the early 19th century. However, the construction of trains brought many benefits that have made many cities in Europe iconic.

Antonio told us all of the above, contemplative, the physical and mental exhaustion involved in coordinating the exploration crews was more than evident. Our duty is to carry out high quality works, to minimize the environmental impact in the short term and trust that the rest of the construction teams will make good use of the data we are providing.

Why do we do it like this? Because if we don't, someone else, with less scruples, could do the same job at a lower cost and with lower quality.

The Maya train is scheduled to operate shortly, however the purpose is not to mobilise national users. The sites connected by the train have tourism as their main source of income. AMLO's intentions are essentially beneficial to the country, but they are vastly different to what he says in his daily conferences: The train will connect various cities, but it will not connect communities, it will mobilise tourists, products, and heavy cargo from various companies.

The Mayan train is not a good idea, but it is not a bad idea either, in any case it does not matter, because even if the INAH rules that there are areas of historical or cultural importance; even if the crews determine there are risks in the construction; and even if the

construction companies refused to move forward, two unstoppable leviathans will pass through, for better and for worse.

*It's my duty to do a high-quality job,* says Antonio while he smokes his cigarette, he gives me the rest. In his eyes you can see that this is his own decision, but that it has taken him many hours of reasoning and evaluation.

*Because if I don't do my job, someone else will, and by doing it faster or cheaper, they might not do it right.*



## **Nonantzin**

The Maldives are an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, they are coral based islands, with an average elevation of 1.5 meters above sea level. Climate change and rising sea levels will make the islands uninhabitable in a relatively short period of time, and the Maldives will eventually be engulfed by the rising sea. The thought of an entire nation literally banishing from earth is inevitably sad.

The rest of the countries have the choice of not fighting climate change and ironically remain submerged in the seas of bureaucracy of our environmental policies. The Maldives have no choice, they either fight climate change or disappear. When the Maldives become uninhabitable, an exodus will begin, and over time the identity of the Maldivians will be incorporated into the identities of the nations hosting the refugees.

The indigenous peoples of Mexico constantly suffer discrimination that pushes them to settle in their own communities where they gradually adopt new technologies, customs and products, but their traditions prevail over the years through oral communication and sometimes in written form.

Although it is hard for us to accept it, historically civilizations had come and gone, leaving a legacy at the expense of the benevolence of the conquerors that allow the preservation of what they consider worth preserving.

In many cases, conquerors maintain the legacy of the fallen, because getting rid of the artefacts and structures implies a futile effort. Spaniards, built their cities on top of Mexica cities, because they could, however, demolishing the ceremonial centres of Teotihuacan, Chichén Itzá or Palenque, was simply too much effort, and even worse, it meant very little, or no reward at all.

It is difficult to think how the languages of the indigenous tribes of Mexico have shown so much resilience, and even today, there are language learning centres that have courses in náhuatl and mayan.

I always admired pre- hispanic cultures for their buildings, their hieroglyphics, their astronomical and mathematical systems, but in my limited knowledge, those cultures were a thing of the past.

Just as conquerors decide which fragments of a culture's legacy will remain, they also decide which

aspects of a culture will be tainted. As a simple example, pulque was a relatively popular drink, but beer producers spread the misconception that opossum dung was used to produce pulque. Nobody wants opossum excrement in their drink, even if it's a false rumour, the winners of this funny battle were of course the beer producers.

If we go further back, the Spanish conquerors ensured that we perpetuated the idea that the inhabitants of pre-hispanic Mexico were barbaric tribes, always with the reasonable doubt that they might have been indeed barbaric tribes. Legend has it that the original recipe for pozole included human flesh, which was obtained from criminals and war prisoners, captured by one of the most fearsome civilizations of pre-hispanic Mexico: the Mexicas. Unless we can travel back in time, we can't check whether or not the original pozole recipe included humans.

Currently there are hundreds of indigenous tribes in Mexico, and there is an incessant struggle by locals and foreigners to maintain the main characteristics of these cultures: their traditions and their languages.

Just as I always admired pre- hispanic cultures, I was also at peace with the fact that these cultures were a thing of the past.

*Preserve the language, preserve the mythology, preserve the folklore, preserve the knowledge... the traditions, those are a completely different story.*

The main conflict that I have, and will have, with the perpetuation of pre- hispanic cultures is that many of their traditions can be outdated at least, and harmful at most.

Sara invited me to a cultural demonstration at the Center for Foreign Languages of the National Polytechnic Institute<sup>12</sup>. In the exhibition there would be food, poetry, singing, literature and pre- hispanic dances, presented by the language centre students. We were going to cheer for Sabina, an african american woman with polyphyletic roots. She still struggled with Spanish and she was learning Náhuatl. She decided to present the following poem:

Oh mother, when I die	<i>Nonantzin</i>	<i>ihcuac</i>
bury me next to your	<i>nimiquiz,</i>	
bonfire	<i>motlecuilpan xinechtoca</i>	

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and when you go to make	<i>huan cuac tiaz titlaxcal</i>
tortillas	<i>chihuaz,</i>
there you can cry for me	<i>ompa nopampa xichoca.</i>
and if someone would ask	<i>Huan tla acah mitztlah</i>
you	<i>tlaniz:</i>
- Madam, why are you	<i>-Zoapille, ¿tleca tichoca?</i>
crying?	
tell them that the logs are	<i>xiquilhui xoxouhqui in</i>
humid	<i>cuahuitl,</i>
and the smoke is making	<i>techochcti ica popoca.</i>
you cry	
Indeed a beautiful poem.	

At the end of the recital, the gastronomic demonstration and the dance session, we returned to Sara's apartment. I enjoyed the cultural event, but I also kept in mind that in other parts of the country, there would be individuals speaking the same languages, eating the same meals, performing the same dances.

Those same individuals would be selling underage women; they would be giving away their daughters in arranged marriages, where the grooms-men have the right, if not the obligation, to have non-consensual sex with the brides, who in many cases were under the

age of consent. These same individuals are the ones who live in towns where it is perfectly normal to kill your neighbour, in retaliation because the neighbour previously killed one of your kin.

Those same individuals are the ones who live in places where the police has no jurisdiction, and instead, a council of citizens (adult males) serve justice as they see fit.

The Maldives have no choice, eventually their legacy would literally be washed away by the sea. In Mexico things are different, we fight to keep our cultures alive, and that's okay, the wealth these cultures bring in the form of languages, literature, mythology, folklore, music and food is immeasurably rich.

Nevertheless, keeping our cultures alive also implies keeping the traditions, good and bad, alive, ultimately, cultural identity is an inseparable mix of traditions, languages, art, mythology and folklore.

Gradually the indigenous peoples have been adopting more equitable policies: in Ocottequila women are now exercising their right to vote, not without earning discrimination in their own community, as well as a few death threats.

Perhaps in Mexico we can learn how to integrate the languages of indigenous cultures, knowing and disseminating their beliefs, without this meaning perpetuating the traditions that are harmful to those who have no voice, no vote, and no visibility.

Even at a distance, the logs in my bonfire are still very green, and if you ask me, thinking about the things that happen in Mexico has made me cry on more than one occasion.

## **Home is nowhere**

I've never liked the feeling of missing, it is too complex and complicated for me. Remigio, Paco, Heraclio, Imelda, Herón, Julia, Rogelio and Guadalupe were part of my life, I always remember them and always with a smile, for all their legacy, good and bad. I dream of them, I speak to them in my dreams, and I embrace them as much as possible.

At the end of my short visit to Mexico, I completed my mission of getting to meet again my country, my people, my city, my family and, why not? even old romances.

That didn't mean I didn't *missed* the UK, my home, my space, my bikes, my forest, my city, my friends. But I know too well that it is all temporary.

Cambridge has an interesting effect on people, most of the inhabitants of Cambridge silently acknowledge the effect is there: Everything here is temporary, your undergrad studies, your postgrad studies, your postdoctoral contract, even your new startup.

People you get to know today, in five years time, will be at the other side of the world doing science, art, architecture, economics and a very long etcetera.



Jan will depart to Czech in Summer of 2023, Girish will be go to Newcastle by September 2023, Sara, Thomas, Qionggiong, Scott, Ludek, all of them are my current family, but they will eventually go their own way, farewells will be inevitable, and no matter how much we pretend they won't, they'll be emotional and some of them will be sad.

My house, my forest, my bikes, my friends, all of that will be different in five years time... or maybe not.

The temporary contracts, the market volatility, the demand and supply for bioinformaticians, climate crisis, housing crisis, the lack of a stable romantic relationship, and my inability to settle, they turn every place into a temporary home, a home you can love, a home you can be grateful for, and as much as possible, a home to which you can pay retribution.

Based on the tone of the stories in this collection, you may think that Mexico is a country for which I have more negative feelings than positive ones, to some extent that is not false, but I reckon, for better and for worse, that Mexico has no equal.

When I was a kid, I was extremely happy and extroverted, no one could shut me up, I was always talking, singing, whistling, and asking our local butcher

for fried pork skin. Long gone are the days where I could say I was fully happy.

In Mexico, from a very young age, we feed ourselves the idea that being rich is better than being poor, no matter how much mexican people romanticise poverty. My mum never wanted my brother and I to be part of the Santa Clara neighbourhood, ever since we were kids she taught us, albeit in an unorthodox way, that we needed to be outstanding no matter what, and that my friends can lead you to dangerous ways.

In 1995, mum sent me to Mexico City to study secondary school. Studying outside the state of Mexico was a symbol of progress, of not being stagnant. No one told me though, that the posh kids at school in Mexico City would discriminate against me for my skin colour, for being fat, for being short, for my musical taste. No one told me that one bad day, I would be sexually assaulted by a 13 year old boy...

In high school, having restarted my life, I decided not to be the victim this time, but I didn't know other way of living, Mexico City is a jungle, kill or be killed. I was the prey for a long time, and this time it was going to be me the hunter. Regrettably, I participated in the

collective bullying that we did to an undeserving student.

In university everything things changed, but being introverted was not a trait I acquired for free, I knew I didn't want to interact with people out of fear of getting hurt, or worse, out of fear of hurting someone.

Even though I was a good student, my impostor syndrome was born and raised during university, participating in class, answering questions in lectures and, being active in lab sessions, all of that made my teachers to have high expectations. It became common that my teachers told me at the end of the semester that *they were expecting more from me*. Even today, I'm still afraid of letting people down, though I know well that I can work hard not to let them down.

Arturo, Chayo, Claudia, among others, made sure that my wounds healed during our time in uni, but many more wounds also opened, they were usually associated to power dynamics, colonialism, sexism, and all the -isms you can think of.

In our school there was always a prevailing classism, speaking with certain accent, wearing certain clothes, consuming certain products, all those things could put

you in the radar. No one wanted to be the odd one out, and we did all we could not to be poor, to speak better, to eat better, even when that meant getting money from god knows where.

When I started my masters degree, I was the worst possible version of myself, I was a bright student, who in order to progress academically and professionally would overstep on anyone, making them feel miserable by publicly and privately exposing their deficiencies.

Ironically, that was the time when I was my most ignorant self, and when I didn't have any achievements to brag about. I was simply an arrogant prick.

In 2009 I had the first turning point in my life, one that led me to steer in the right direction. Professor Pablo Vinuesa Fleischmann<sup>13</sup> opened the first latin american workshop on molecular evolution, for two weeks, biologists of all across latin-America were in the classroom from 9:00 to 19:00 to learn about bioinformatics, evolution, programming and applications of genetics in model and non-model organisms.

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13 Born and raised in Canary Islands

*Professor Vinuesa* organised the workshop for free, without asking for anything in return, not even attribution for his academic effort, all of that in, and for, a country that wasn't his. Professor Vinuesa opened his doors to people from the entire continent, telling them: *This is what I know, it might be useful for you, it may be worth learning, take it, it's yours now.*

That time, my life did a full 180, *professor Vinuesa* indirectly taught me that being a good person was a good idea, and even better was to be a good person without expecting retribution.

By the time I finished my masters, I wanted to go to the US thinking that I could get into University of Pittsburgh.

I got rejected from Ohio State University, University of Pittsburgh and Texas A&M, morally and emotionally broken, I started my PhD in CINVESTAV Zacatenco, where I had my second turning point, also leading me to steer in the right direction.

One time I ran into César, a student that wasn't known for being the sharpest pencil in the box. When I saw him, I couldn't help but to think of César: *what a*

loser<sup>14</sup>. When we met, I asked him how he was doing. He replied quietly that he was trying to construct a genomic library from phage DNA, and that he had to finish in two weeks time, give or take. For my masters project, I also had tried to construct a genomic library from phage DNA, repeatedly and miserably failing in doing so.

When César told me his plan, arrogantly I was thinking: *If I, who am a thousand times better than you, was not able to construct a genomic library in two years. What chances do **you** really have to finish in two weeks?*

To my dismay, César actually constructed his genomic library, shutting my mouth, making me see how arrogant and ignorant I was being.

César taught me that I was just another prick, a product of the mindset that many mexicans have: being outstanding, no matter how incompetent you truly are, no matter how many people you overstep on your way.

Ever since then, I wanted to change my ways, to be a better person, and I still want to be better, even though I know it's a long, albeit rewarding, path. Those

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14 Keep in mind that there were still traces of the scumbag I used to be then

who know me after 2013 would know that the human scum that I was in 2009 is long gone. I keep a single picture of myself in 2009 as a friendly reminder of the person I don't want to be.

Based on the tone of the stories in this collection, you may think that I was fleeing from Mexico, from its culture, from its defects, its stagnation. Truth is, I was fleeing from myself, from what I was, and from what I no longer wanted to be. It is easy to play the victim of circumstances, and to some extent I was, but there's always the option of, I don't know, being a good person, no matter where you are<sup>15</sup>.

When I returned to Mexico, I didn't want to make amends with my family, my friends, people I hurt, or the country itself... I wanted to make amends with myself.

The so called, *closure*.

I'm grateful for living in the UK, for my city, my forest, my friends, my bikes, my achievements, my failures, my sad moments, and my happy moments, all of them make my stay here a very rewarding experience.

But I'm more grateful for being born and raised in Mexico, for my family, my friends, my past loves, my

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15 Being like *professor Vinuesa*

achievements, my failures, my sad moments and my happy moments, because all of them made me who I am now, someone of whom I am not that embarrassed. Today, I live, laugh and cry here ... but home is nowhere.