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Children with Disappeared Parents

In the country of I-Can't-Remember

three steps and I'm lost forever:

One little step this way

Did I take it I can't say.

One little step that way

And oh, fright! how still I stay.

This is a translation of part of a song in the film called *The Official Story* or *La Historia Oficial* in Spanish. One can get a sense of disorientation, as the singer cannot identify with a country and feels a sense of unease because of fear. Such was the climate of Argentina during the Dirty War from 1976 to 1983; a war where the military and police were against political protestors and their relatives even if they were not involved. *The Official Story* takes place during the end of the Dirty War. In the film is an adopted girl named Gaby whose surrogate family has connections with the military and her actual parents were tortured and killed. My purpose of this paper is to analyze different reactions from people who were adopted children who found out their biological parents were disappeared, a term that means they were tortured, killed and not heard from again.

The Dirty War was a campaign of terror waged by the Argentina military against left-wing guerrillas and their sympathizers (real and imagined) (John 332). The military used the

term dirty war as if the enemies were obvious and deserved to be tortured and killed. Even though some people may think that some opponents of the dictatorship deserve this punishment, in my research I have found that many people were undeservedly treated with torture and death. This war would be the “bloodiest and most barbaric” period in Argentina’s history (Donda vii). It would begin on March 24, 1976 when a coup brought into power the triumvirate led by General Jorge Rafael Videla, who banned all political parties. The death toll in 1983 would be unimaginable. Around 30,000 people were killed and/or disappeared!

Detention centers were built that were designed as torture centers for prisoners. Each torture center had at least one fully functional torture room. In them, prisoners would be held naked and blindfolded, tied down to a table or bed, and beaten, electric shocked in sensitive areas, submerged in water to feel as if they are drowning, among other disturbing experiences. Also, some pregnant women would give birth, be drugged, and despite some still being alive, thrown out of a plane over the Atlantic. This act was called a transfer and did not just apply to women. Both men and women would be given Pentothal and thrown out of planes when they were unwanted (“Secret Detention Centers”). Commonly, the babies would be given to military families or those who had sympathetic ties.

The film *The Official Story*, shows the themes during the Dirty War with great clarity. The main characters in the film are Roberto, a wealthy business man with connections to the military; Alicia, a history teacher in secondary school and their adopted daughter Gaby. All of them are upper class citizens. The film focuses the most on Alicia’s quest to find the origin of Gaby. She begins to feel this desire when her best friend Ana, who has just returned from exile, reveals that she had been tortured and violated. Not only that, but she witnesses others being tortured as well and that babies are being sold. Later on in the film, her conversations with the

literature teacher pushes her to look further into who Gaby's biological family is. In their first meeting outside the school, the literature teacher shows her flawed thinking because it does not matter whether the newspaper clippings of the disappeared people are true. The next time they meet, at a café, she ventures further, as she says she wants to know who his people are.

These meetings, and other factors the film portrays, cause us to see a change in Alicia's teaching at the secondary school. The film begins with her at the school annoyed by a student who says that history, more specifically the "official history", is written by assassins but later desires to find the real history or the "hidden history".

Throughout Alicia's transformation that led to efforts finding Gaby's real family, we experience turbulence throughout the film in an indirect way. In *The Official Story*, the spilling of liquids is a symbolic indication of the destruction of the world that Alicia has carefully constructed. One moment occurs as Alicia starts wondering about Gaby; Gaby surprises her and Alicia spills a drink on some photos of Gaby. Perhaps the best example of symbolism occurs during Gaby's birthday party. The idea of a rabbit having a pin stuck in it is a displaced image of torture of her parents, which seems to exist in her subconsciousness. This idea is reinforced when the boys break into her bedroom, playing war games. These war games also represent the life of adults during the Dirty War period. To further add to the unrest, whenever Sara tells Alicia who Gaby really is, we hear machine guns firing due to the games in the background of the shot (Hart 116-123).

After analyzing *The Official Story* and thinking about the reaction Gaby might have had with her biological family at the end of the film if it continued, I wondered about what type of reactions adopted children who had at least one parent disappeared would deal with this

knowledge. Also, I tried to find their stances with the situation. To find this information, I am using a variety of sources, primarily press articles.

When analyzing the stories of these people, one should be aware of some important organizations that have been influential. One such group, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, is a group of mothers whose children disappeared during the dictatorship, who continue to gather and wear white scarves on their heads to find their children. Another important organization is the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a human rights organization that seeks to find the grandchildren stolen and illegally adopted also during this dictatorship. Out of the approximately 500 children kidnapped, 130 have been found. A third important organization is HIJOS, a group that tries to explain to the world what happened during the Dirty War. All of these organization are still active.

Out of all the stories that I've read, I did not find one who had an easy adjustment. Jorgelina Molina Planas, who grew up in Argentina, would be one of the first grandchildren to be identified by the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. She had a rough upbringing. At age four, she had lost her father and had her mother taken away; she lost contact with Menchi, a lady who cooked at her house and looked after her; got attached with one adoptive family but later was adopted by another family, the Sala family. With the Sala family, she never felt comfortable. She felt like she was a replacement for her adoptive mother's failed pregnancy and was renamed as Carolina (García). It took her 26 years to claim her actual identity (Sutterud)! She decided to go with Jorgelina after drawing herself as a baby, looking at her mother. She felt a sensation, as if her mom was calling her Jorgelina and signed her first art work as Jorgelina (García). However, her adoptive father would disown her when she changed her name.

One way she finds purpose in life is through art, used as a medium to help the search for grandchildren without knowledge of their real relatives and raise awareness of the Dirty War. In one interesting art work, she contrasts Carolina and Jorgelina. She portrays Carolina as neat, careful, square, linear and on the other hand, Jorgelina as a burst of color, with movement, strength, curved lines and colors at maximum saturation. This is a good representation of her transformation (García). Even though she has had the transformation, she still had trauma with child separation and needed years of therapy to deal with it.

Another person who has disappeared parents is Guillermo Pérez Roisinblit, the grandson of the vice president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Guillermo is also from Argentina. At first, he was reluctant to accept that he was the son of the disappeared. However, eventually he took his real name but still keeps in touch with his adoptive mother (Sutterud). But the situation with his adoptive father Francisco Gómez is broken. Gomez has a 12-year jail sentence and has said "Someday I'm going to leave, and that day I'm going to put a bullet in your forehead to you, your sister and your grandmothers." He was sentenced in 2016. Guillermo does not feel love but outrage that he could possibly be released from jail on house arrest. He has further stated it would be easy for Gómez to get a gun. Part of his story can be found in the bibliography and translated to English if desired: (*Su apropiador está por quedar libre y amenazó con matarlo*).

The president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Estela Carlotto, had an experience very close to her heart as well by finding Ignacio Montoya, her grandson who has disappeared parents. She begged God that she would be able to find her grandson in her lifetime. Her wish came true in the summer of 2014! Even though he says there was some background noise because he did not look like his parents, Ignacio had a golden childhood. He excelled in

school, studied music in Buenos Aires and came back home to teach music. He felt strong love from his parents. The news of his adoption came on his birthday from his wife. It was a tearful moment.

Even though his parents were not honest that he was not their biological son, he does not hate them but rather has anger toward the military. He believes his adoptive parents were tricked and should not be condemned. He is appreciative of the efforts that his adoptive parents made to raise him. This is shown by him not changing his name to Guido, the name his biological mother wanted him to be called (learned by surviving prisoners). However, he has agreed his name to include Carlotto; his name is Ignacio Montoya Carlotto. Despite knowing about the horrible treatment his parents received as protestors, he refuses to cry about it and wonder what could have been. Instead he focuses on his happy childhood with a mother and father (Goñi).

Argentinian Victoria Donda, a human rights advocate and legislator in Argentina, also a child of disappeared parents, has struggled with her identity as Jorgelina and Guillermo. She wrote an autobiography *My Name is Victoria*, where the reader can get a sense of her internal fight. The book begins by talking about the biological parents of Analía (her former name at the time). Her father José and mother María were involved with helping a group against the Dirty War dictatorship called the Montoneros. We later read about José's brother, Adolfo Donda, who achieved a high rank in the military, and was so cruel that he would later have José and María tortured and killed. Later on, we get the story of Victoria as a young girl up to the day she is tested for a match with her real parents. We read about her young days and then we see her become more open-minded, caused by various figures such as her history teacher.

Another key moment in her autobiography is that her adoptive father Raúl does not outright reject her whenever he learns that she is part of leftist group, even though his father used

to be in the military and views the disappearances as necessary. He would make sure there were enough chairs whenever her protest group would organize an event. Victoria's situation with adoptive parents seems to be better than Jorgelina and Guillermo's. It appears she still has love for both her parents as she tries to integrate them into her identity. She writes "After facing a newly revealed truth, or a lie that had been unmasked, I had to gradually learn to internalize a new history, a new family, and a new past. Throughout that process, I repeatedly found myself unable to move forward, rejecting what had seemed valid to me before, and even at times rejecting myself (Donda et. al 196)." But she further states that she can't deny that her adoptive parents are a part of her and "... I am no less Analía than I am Victoria (Donda 197)."

The Dirty War was a dark time in Argentina. We get a sense of it in the film *The Official Story* without seeing actual violence until the end of it. Innocent people, such as those in the press articles, represent Gaby in the film. Even though we do not see her reaction when she realized that Roberto and Alicia are not her biological parents, she would probably have some challenge to adjust too. I cannot imagine having an adoptive parent disowning me; not only would it be difficult to find that he or she is not my real parent, but to be harshly rejected would be salt into the wound as in the case of Jorgelina. It would be a nightmare to know my adoptive father could soon be able to shoot me as in the case of Guillermo. Victoria seems to have a better relationship with her adoptive parents as she can include them in her life though she has other struggles too. Ignacio may have the best situation; his parents seem to be nice and he seems strong enough to avoid tears.

Just by being strong, all four children with disappeared parents are inspiring. Their stories should not be in "a country of I-Can't-Remember" but remembered in our minds.

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