

At 9 in the morning she stopped breathing.

It happened slowly, without surprises. Her last breaths had been almost imperceptible, her chest barely moved, her heart scarcely beat as the blood flowed for the last time through the battered body, finally leaving her in peace.

The daily movement at San Camilo Hospice had started two hours earlier. The volunteers from the Friday morning shift had been arriving since sunrise. On the first floor of the house, in a living room that serves as an infirmary, Socorro were talking, in a calm voice, with nurses Marcela and Delfina.

They were talking about the condition of some of the guests, their feelings, what they said. All nine beds in the house were occupied that day. Florencia, just 21 years old, were walking through the rooms greeting guests.

The other volunteers were preparing breakfast in the kitchen or were carrying out cleaning tasks. Then Camilo, the house cat, began to meow loudly. Socorro stopped paying attention to the conversation, she heard Camilo's inconsolable meow and saw Florencia leave the room with that look she already knew, she sighed.

That August 25 there was a mixed energy flowing in the house. On the one hand, the heaviness of seeing leave someone who shared the house for six months, a very large amount of time considering that the average is only 24 days; on the other, the renewing air provided by the selfless work and love that is lived every day. The volunteers and the nurses spoke in low voices, smiled at each other and hugged, at times fell into a contemplative silence and then calmly resumed their tasks. The house was still working and full of life: mourning was not a physical manifestation but something much more difficult to explain.

Among Monica's things that were being taken to charity, there was a shoe box that in black marker said: "For whoever wants". Socorro checked the records of the coming guests. The bed was already available for the next one who will live his last days here.

The phone rings, she answers and hears a desperate voice that she tries to calm down. The voice on the other side doesn't know what to do with her mother, because they say that the hospital won't treat her anymore, but she's too sick to keep her at home. Socorro knows that a stroke is a difficult case to admit, because those who suffer from it have an uncertain prognosis and Hospice care is for people who are nearing the end of life with clear prognosis (or almost). In any case, Socorro asks her not to worry, because they can't get her out of the hospital, and promises advice and help. She hangs up, informs that she is going to be late and writes on the computer about the appeal that the lady will have to make.

When she finishes writing the email, she puts on her blue scrubs with green pockets, fixes her hair and leaves the room.

At 10:30 a.m. she enters the Hospice greeting everyone she passes. She sits in the kitchen and talks with the nurses and some of the volunteers over their morning coffee:

Carlos's situation is frail, he is a guest who has been here for 18 days, he needs his space and has to be treated carefully to be able to work with him. Claudia also has to be treated with care; she has been overwhelmed with emotions the last few days.

Socorro finishes her quick coffee and with a smile she asks when she gets up:

-Does anyone who has never been to the hospital visiting patients want to join me?

-I have never been and I want to go. Mechi answers raising her hand, she has been a volunteer for eight months.

Before leaving, Socorro stops at the door of one of the rooms. A guest is accompanied by a volunteer next to his bed. He is near death half twisted between dreams, a body that is almost just skin and bones gasping. The marked ribs rise and collapse every three seconds. She sighs and resumes her walk. Going out into the street she meets a man who gets out of a truck. He brings medicines to donate, because his sister-in-law had been a guest. Socorro helps unload a few bags and leaves the man with a volunteer.

On the way to the Vicente López Hospital, Socorro tells Mechi about the patients they are going to visit: Luis Olmedo, a possible guest, and Mr. Calderón, whom they usually accompany but who is not in a position to go to the Hospice (yet). A car passes by, it is one of the first hot days of November and the sun is beating down hard. It's 11:53 a.m.

Socorro has been a volunteer for four years and over time she took on more responsibilities. Today, she coordinates admissions to the home, trains volunteers, assists patients inside and outside the Hospice, is an active participant in conferences on palliative care and always keeps training herself. They usually ask her for her name¹ and she always tells the same story that happened to her one afternoon at the San Fernando hospital:

They enter the oncology ward and approach a sick man on a bare mattress on the floor. He looks at them and plunges back into his thoughts.

-Good morning, are you José Solitario²?

-Yes, as you see me.

-We are Ángeles and Socorro³.

José looks up and gaze at them.

-Are you kidding me? He answers.

¹ In Spanish, Socorro means "help, aid, assistance, relief".

² In Spanish, Lonely Jose

³ Angels and Help

There are five beds on each side of the room. Some patients sleep, others stare blankly at the ceiling or talk to each other. The man in bed 205 sees the two women in blue scrubs enter the room and approach the back where he is. He's about to greet them when they stop by the bed next to his. He watches them look at the sleeping patient, as if embracing him with their eyes, they don't say anything and for a few seconds they don't even move until one of them turns her head towards him.

-Hi, How are you doing? Do you know if he is Luis Olmedo?

He explains that indeed the man is Luis, that he is totally lost and tries to escape every time he wakes up. Luis lies in a fetal position, underneath him there is a mattress protector and his wrists are tied with gauze to the bed rails.

-What's your name? How do you feel?

So-so, he says. His name is Diego.

-Nice to meet you Diego, what happened to you?

He is waiting for supplies to arrive so that they can operate on his leg, which has been completely destroyed, and he cannot see his daughters and is alone. As they talk, they hear the troubled breathing of Luis who still doesn't wake up.

That same afternoon, after Socorro and Mechi return from the hospital, Diego would be part of the Hospice record and would begin to be accompanied and assisted by the volunteers.

2:00 p.m., the little storm that brings the shift change renews the energy of the house. Those who arrive greet the ones who are leaving, the nurses go down to the kitchen to have lunch and the anecdotes from the street are intertwined with those from inside the house. Socorro talks to everyone, drinks another glass of water, heats up some soup left over from the house lunch, and sits at the kitchen table. For a moment, everything seems to go silent inside her, the spoon goes up and down, and her eyes are fixed on the void. But that infinite peace only lasts a few moments.

Volunteers gather in the kitchen to discuss about the different tasks of the day, also about the talk that will be given over the weekend on Hospice care for the community and she, like an informal teacher, recommends everyone a reading for the week: Dignity therapy, by Chochinov. Everyone writes on their cell phones: CHO-CHI-NOV with a final V.

3:20 p.m. Time to return to life outside as everyone else. Pick up her children from school, wait for her husband Nacho to come back from work, read a good book and rest. Tomorrow will be another day at San Camilo Hospice.

She opened her eyes slowly, blinking several times trying to adjust to the excess of light. There were some traces of dreams that were painted on the white walls of the room: such as a sunny day, with those crystal-clear and light blue skies, she saying goodbye calmly. Among those dreams that intertwined in that incredibly white room, she saw her mother appear speaking through tears. At

first, Socorro didn't understand her, she wanted to speak but stopped when she felt something strange about her mouth.

-You had an accident, you were in a coma... Pilar passed away.

-I know mom, don't worry. Pilar is doing very well.

Her mother burst into tears

Memories surfaced as she gradually perceived her body:

A gray and rainy day on a dirt road near Mar del Sur, fields on both sides of the road, the sky completely overcast . . . Her left eye bothered her . . . his sons Agustín and Marcos in the back seat, Nacho driving, Pilar on her chest nursing . . . Her shoulder didn't feel right . . . January 8, tomorrow was Agustín's birthday . . . A stabbing pain in the hip and legs . . . a car ahead making a U-turn, Nacho trying to stop . . . she felt an enormous pressure in her chest as she breathed.

There would be two years of recovery and surgeries left to try to be like as it used to be, but it was never going to be like it had been.

There would be two years of self-reflection and thoughts left to grow and change. Two years of realizing that death was really part of life and that this experience she had would lead her, much later, to be one of the few people who promote and carry out hospice care. Two years of mental, physical and spiritual processes to be able to readjust her speech, her walk and, above all, her soul.

San Camilo Hospice, November 2018

Iván Deiana

www.proyectohuespedes.com