

## **First Story: *Fly away***

Finally, she made it. On the third try. She made it to the airport. J., 26 years old, escaped from her house. She was kept home by her family in order to marry a man, chosen, of course, by her father.

The wedding ceremony would take place in a few days. In the kitchen, she managed to blend in with the workers hired to prepare the ceremony. The door opened outward, to the street. She walked under a strong sun, blinding her. She left the house. A good old male friend was waiting for her at the bus stop. Pretending he was her husband, he accompanied J., since women are not allowed to travel alone in buses in Saudi Arabia.

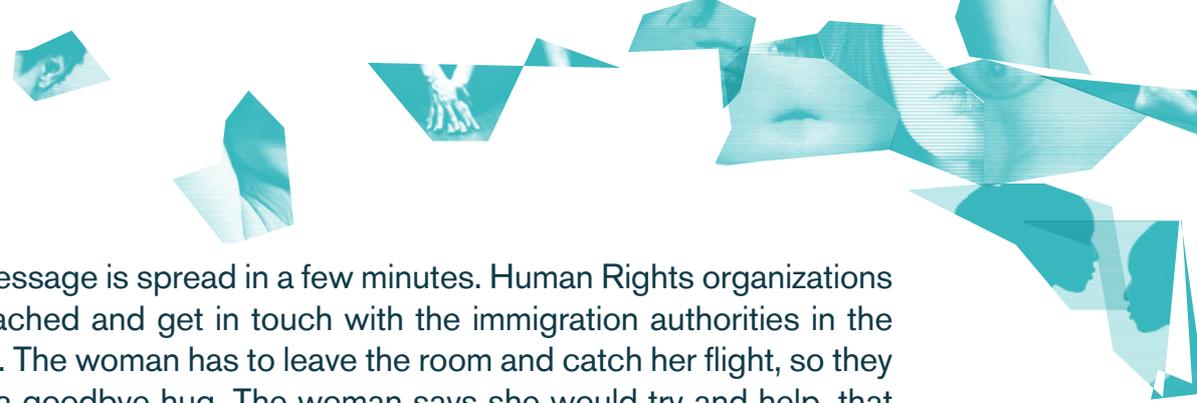
At the airport, she observes his face. She wonders what does it mean for him to have helped her, to have paid for her plane ticket. He could be punished for that. She suddenly feels a weight on her chest, he could be killed.

In the airplane, she longs for the doors to be closed. The pilot wishes all passengers a pleasant flight. The plane takes off and her eyes get wet, tears come out, but let's keep quiet. No need to catch anyone's attention, someone could be suspicious. The view, though, the clouds and the stars and the moon. She left the kingdom of the dead and is reaching for the realm of the living. Calm down, damn, breath.

The plane starts the maneuvers to land for the first layover. This moment of joy over the clouds was maybe the best one of her entire life, she thinks. She now stands in the immigration line, the atmosphere is electric. Suddenly, from within the crowd three figures emerge, three people surround her, three immigrant officers. It's over. They take her passport away, bring her to a sterile room and she's now completely alone.

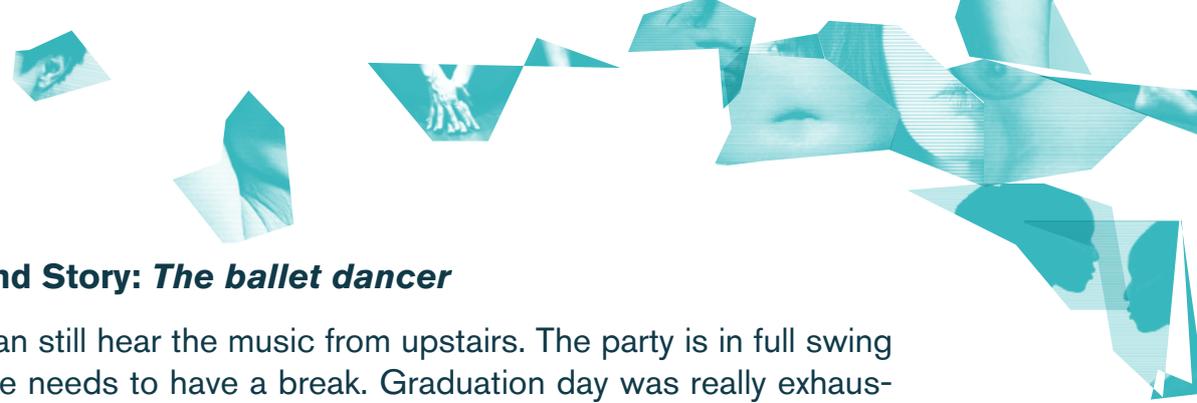
J. knew her family would find out she had run away, but she didn't imagine it would be so soon. After a few hours, a woman enters the room. She looks disoriented, but explains J. she's waiting for her passport too. J. jumps at her, give me your phone, do you have any Internet connection? I need help.

She logs on her Facebook, is her friend back home safe? She tries to reach him for two hours, no success. He might be already arrested or dead. She doesn't have anything else to lose, so she films herself rapidly: help me, I'm trapped, my family will kill me. She posts the video on her Facebook page, let's make it big and public, says the woman who lent her the phone.



The message is spread in a few minutes. Human Rights organizations are reached and get in touch with the immigration authorities in the airport. The woman has to leave the room and catch her flight, so they share a goodbye hug. The woman says she would try and help, that J. can believe she will soon be safe. People would get to know the suffering of women in her country, “people care”, she said. Something would be done.

J. is now hopeful. But when the doors open again, she sees her older brother and older cousin coming in. They spit on her face and violently grab her by the arm. She’s now at the boarding gate again. Let me go to the bathroom, she says, but they won’t let her. As she insists and starts screaming, her brother and cousin knock her violently until she collapses. They manage to put her on a luggage cart and push her to the boarding line. In front of the distraught international crowd gathered in the hall, ready to fly to so many distant places, J. can’t stand it anymore and pees herself in public. Since that day, J. hasn’t posted anything else on Facebook and Human rights organizations have been trying to contact J. without any success.



## **Second Story: *The ballet dancer***

She can still hear the music from upstairs. The party is in full swing but she needs to have a break. Graduation day was really exhausting. L. is 22 years old and, now, a professional ballerina. Her dream since she was 5 years old. But the excitement that has made her mother buy her tickets to watch every ballet presentation in the city throughout her life no longer makes her eyes shine.

From now on, she thought, she doesn't have to pretend to be happy while exposing her body so others can look. L. spots a pair of those suffocating pointe shoes on the ground and, along with several pictures that decorated her bedroom, throws them away. They remind her of her non-believer life. They won't be a distraction during her preys and ablutions anymore.

She goes into her closet and fetches her black silk crêpe. She puts it on, it covers her curves. Her body, so many times soiled by men's gaze, feels right again. Her heartbeat slows down gradually as her right hand merges with a glove, finger after finger. Embraced by the fabric, she closes her eyes and rallies in the company of her Brothers and Sisters.

During the party her mother threw her that day, L. didn't drink anything. She just wanted to leave the house and meet her boyfriend, her prince, as she calls him. She will tell him her past life is over and now she is only his. They will get married soon. He agreed with her decision to finish the ballet school course, since this would be the last thing she would do following her mother's rules. She managed to convince him explaining she knew she owed her mother her own life.

In her new life, her plan is to follow her prince. Only he will see her body. The man she loves and trusts. He promised he would take care of her and give her kids, he promised he would be by her side forever. He will never leave her, that's what she thinks. Unlike all men who divorce their wives. Unlike her father did to her mother. She will never suffer in the hands of a man, that's what she hopes.

L. believes he has opened her eyes to her faith. She watched all the videos he sent her, listened to all the songs again and again and again. They look forward to leaving the country and joining their Brothers and Sisters. They call him a warrior, a strong man, aware of his duties. Together, they swore allegiance to the State. She knows she might have to die by their side. She looks forward to being able to have her faith tested, she wants to pass the test.



L. was seen for the last time in October 2016. A high school friend warned her mother about her plans to leave France. But it was too late. L. left on the bed a letter she wrote, asking her mother not to look for her. Her mother contacted the police and authorities, but they said it was too dangerous to go after her. Nothing could be done. Her mother didn't lose hope, but L. can no longer be found.



### **Third Story: Face**

Entering a bus that heads downtown R., 38 years old, stares down the bus driver. She has taken this bus for months, but it's the first time she allows the young man – and anyone in the street – to see her face. He slightly grimaces with the view, as she was expecting, but then he smiles. She walks in and decides to sit in the front of the bus, not in the back, as usual. Timidly, she starts to feel pretty again.

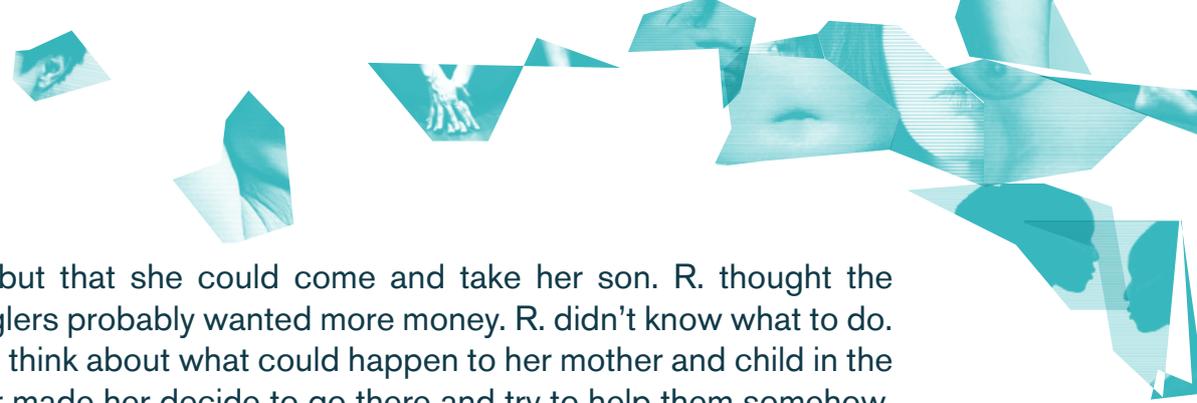
R. heads to the hospital to undergo another session of a series of multiple plastic surgeries she has been submitted to for months to recover her face. Her doctor, a gentle young man, is a volunteer in a program created to help deserters from the North Korean regime getting rid of the painful scars of their past. R. still has a couple of sessions to attend, but the rough path still ahead is nothing compared to the violence she faced in the past. Seven years ago, when she was still living in North Korea, her husband threw acid on her face when she told him she was leaving their house.

To walk the streets with her head up – that was her dream now. She didn't want her son to feel ashamed of her when they would finally meet again. The eight-year-old boy had stayed in North Korea with her mother. R.'s father passed away and her mother decided to bring up R.'s son along with her. In a few days, they would finally be reunited as a family again. So R. gathered and borrowed all the money she could to pay the immigration smugglers.

R. wants to find a better job to pay her debts and give them a better life. Every night, she watches women from North Korea like her telling tragic stories from their miserable lives on talk shows on TV. On screen, they're all dressed up, with tidy hair and some nice make-up on. Some of them even became celebrities. With her deformed face, though, she knew she would never make money on TV, nor have a normal life. She would have to continue working in bad jobs during night shifts, afraid to scare people away if they saw her in the daylight.

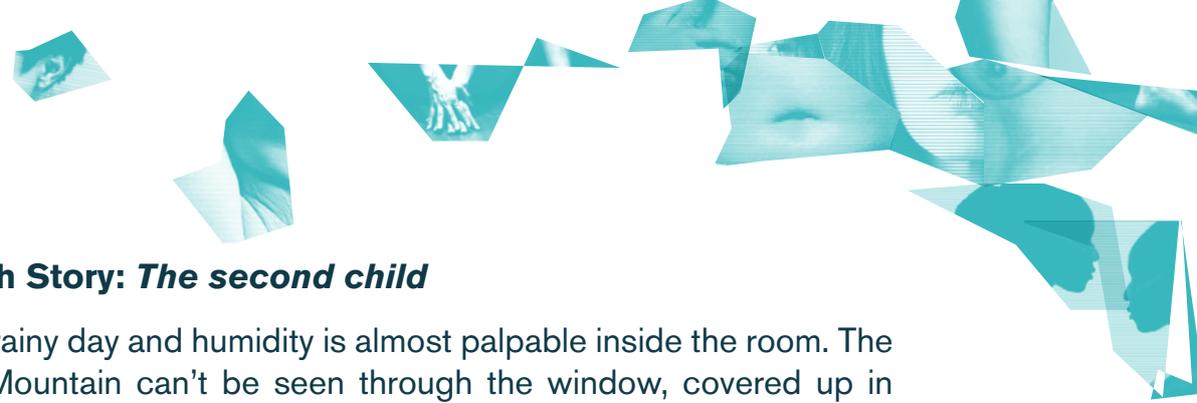
But things would be better, she knew. The bus driver smiled. Since she was heading downtown, she would buy candles and flowers to decorate the house, to prepare it to welcome her mother and son. It's been hard to sleep thinking about her aged mother struggling to finish the path through the mountains. But R. was confident she would make it. And her little brave boy would help her.

That night, though, she received a telephone call saying her mother had been stopped at the border. They told R. her mother couldn't



pass, but that she could come and take her son. R. thought the smugglers probably wanted more money. R. didn't know what to do. Just to think about what could happen to her mother and child in the border made her decide to go there and try to help them somehow.

She took the bus in the middle of the night. She had to hide her face. She didn't know if that would be the last time she would feel like a fugitive. The bus driver, though, could not forget her. When a South Korean Human Rights organization located him, trying to find out about R.'s whereabouts, he remembered her deformed face. But until now, R. has been missing, just like her mother and eight-year-old son.



#### **Fourth Story: *The second child***

It is a rainy day and humidity is almost palpable inside the room. The Jinfo Mountain can't be seen through the window, covered up in thick mist. A new cry of pain breaks through the religious silence of the home. The mother lies on the bed and, following the instructions of her mother-in-law, she lifts her head, contracts her abdomen and pushes it again. The head appears. Her cry turns into a loud groaning, as if she is trying to come out of herself. And finally, with a last push, the whole body is out. It's a boy.

The mother-in-law cuts cautiously the umbilical cord while the baby's father and uncle enter the room. What a beautiful child, how lucky they are to have a boy. They know they can't have another one, the Chinese government would fine them, and they can't afford such an amount of money. Some say families have even lost their homes and jobs. It was a one shot and they succeeded.

The mother-in-law gives the newborn a bath, so his father can hold him. On the bed, the mother breathes deeply and feels she has accomplished her duty. The atmosphere feels relaxing. She barely closed her eyes when a sudden sharp pain strikes her again. Everyone turns their heads at her, as her body gets tense one more time. Labor is not over.

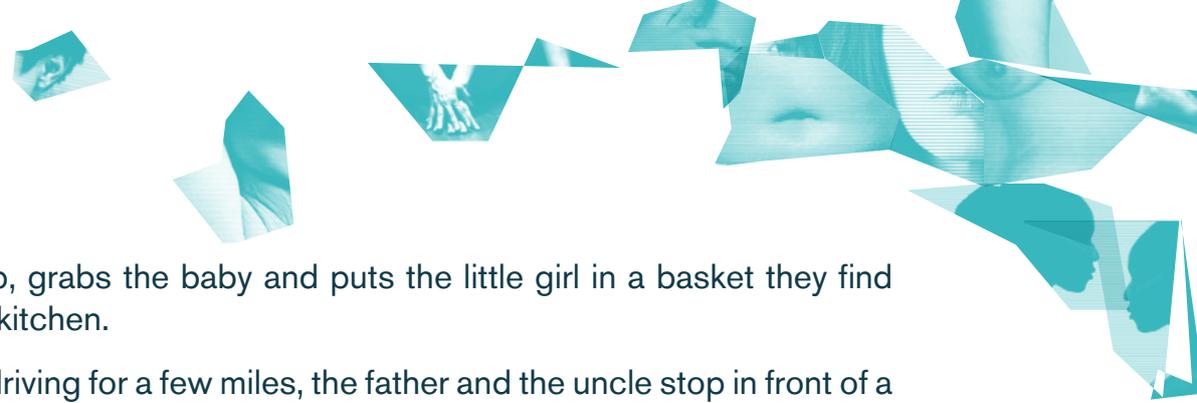
Her mother-in-law rushes to help her delivering again, while the father and the uncle stand still, disoriented. Her new scream fills in the room with apprehension. Frightened, the mother pushes again, even though she hopes she could hold inside whatever is coming out of her.

With a strong determination to exist, the second baby makes her way out, while the audience watches in horror her irreparable entrance into the world. It's a girl.

In a flash, the mother-in-law rapidly cuts the umbilical cord and wraps the baby's fragile body with a white sheet. Her face is covered, but her cries try to go through the fabric. The mother looks desperately at her husband. The world spins around them.

The uncle and the mother-in-law exchange looks. The mother makes a gesture at the babies, she wants to hold them. The mother-in-law looks at the father. She knows what they must do. She gives the boy to the mother and the girl to the father. They leave the room.

On a piece of paper, the father writes her birth time and date. He tries to hold his tears, but the paper gets wet. The uncle comes in

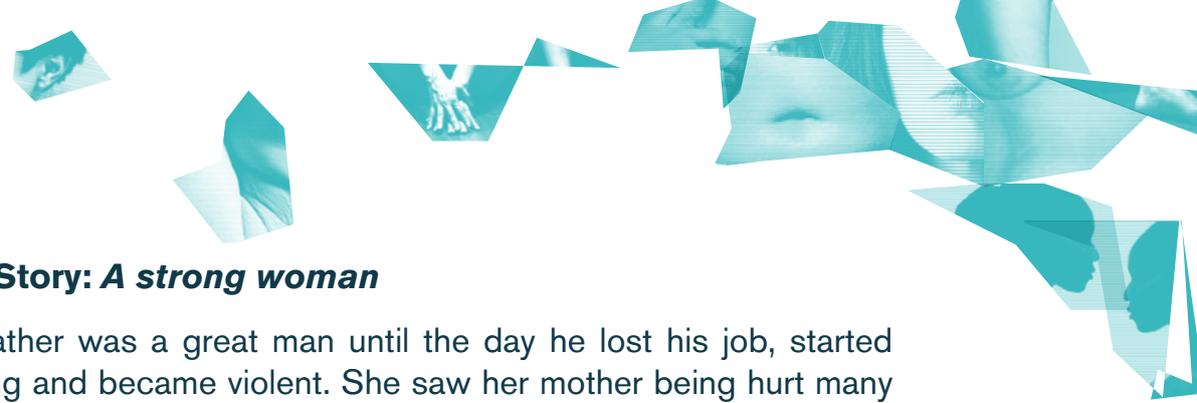


to help, grabs the baby and puts the little girl in a basket they find in the kitchen.

After driving for a few miles, the father and the uncle stop in front of a small building on the main road. A sign reads: "Baby Abandonment Centre". They know it's the only way. This second child, this girl, is a curse.

It is now cold inside the house. Still lying on the bed, the mother, with her eyes wide open, breastfeeds the baby. The father will come back soon, says the mother-in-law. They should celebrate their new son.

The mother closes her eyes, and feeling the milk that weeps out of her breast she whispers to herself the name of her daughter. It would be S. But now the mother will never know anything about her.



## **Fifth Story: A strong woman**

M.'s father was a great man until the day he lost his job, started drinking and became violent. She saw her mother being hurt many times. M. promised herself she would never let a man beat her up. She would become a strong woman, no matter what.

The boys from the gang, holding guns and telling people what to do around the neighborhood, had the power she wanted to have. They could make justice to men who abused women, if they wanted to. They could protect her. They were young, brave and soon they became her family.

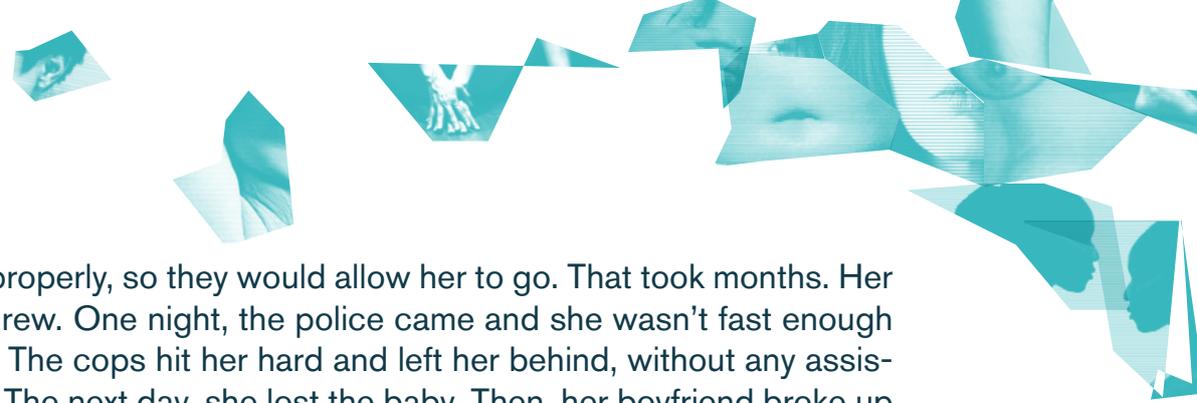
Now, almost ten years had passed by since M. joined the group. She is now 22 years old. She doesn't know how the gang will react to the news, but she knows she must talk to them. They are throwing a party, maybe they will be more relaxed, she thinks. The loud music is probably disturbing the neighbors, but nobody dares to complain. M. climbs the steps to reach the slum in a little town in the North of Brazil, praying for her plan to work.

At the entrance of the house, there are two boys she has never met, around 10 or 11 years old, holding guns bigger than themselves. Unfriendly they ask her what she is doing there. She says their boss was expecting her. She could have showed the tattoos she has with names of old friends from the gang who died. She could have explained how these tattoos protected her the many times she was in prison. But she doesn't want to provoke any strong reactions. They are too young – as young as she was when she decided to join the group. And now, they have the guns.

M. always knew she would have to sell drugs, steal, deal with corrupted policemen. She had to kill many times. She had to witness them raping a woman, the wife of a rival. She had to kill this woman, to prove she was one of them. M. remembers the woman begged for her life, saying she had three kids. But M. did it anyway, she killed that young mother because she was not as fragile as her, she could do anything. Just like those boys.

M. fell in love many times with boys from the gang. Some of them died, killed by the police, others left her. But during a party in the neighborhood, she met a boy who wasn't part of the gang. He was studying, he wanted to have a good job. They fell in love and he said he would take her out of that life.

M. got pregnant and decided to leave the gang. But she still had debts to pay, "jobs" to pursue - she needed to finish her time with



them properly, so they would allow her to go. That took months. Her belly grew. One night, the police came and she wasn't fast enough to run. The cops hit her hard and left her behind, without any assistance. The next day, she lost the baby. Then, her boyfriend broke up with her and left the town.

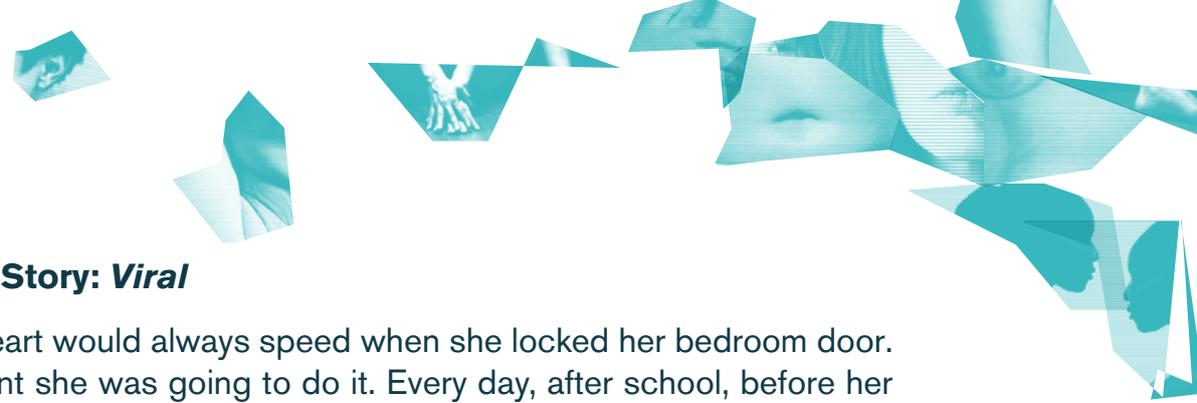
M. spent days in the hospital and her mother managed to take her to her uncle's house, in another town, a few hours away. M. cried for weeks, certain God was punishing her for all the bad things she had done. After seven months, her uncle found her a job and she decided to take it. But to start a new life she had to ask for the permission of the gang leaders first. They were her family, she should not betray them. She wanted them to understand and let her go.

That's why she came back now. In her street, some neighbors welcome her. The party isn't for her, but she feels as if it is. Everything will work out well. She is just some steps away from a new life. She enters the party.

M. walks around looking for her friends but what she sees most are new faces. New soldiers. The boss is an old partner and a friend. They had so many stories together. He is happy to see her, they have drinks together but he is disappointed to listen she wants to leave the gang. He feels like giving her a goodbye hug – and that's when she feels a sharp pain.

A scream is heard. Then, shots. The party is over.

Some say they took her to the top of the slum hill, others say she fled with the gang boss. Rumor has it they were old lovers and she decided to stay and hide from her mother. Some neighbors swear they see her walking around at night. The police would never seek for her. M. was never found by her mother.



## **Sixth Story: *Viral***

Her heart would always speed when she locked her bedroom door. It meant she was going to do it. Every day, after school, before her parents got home, G., 16 years old, would be home alone for around two hours. It was always like a small ceremony for her.

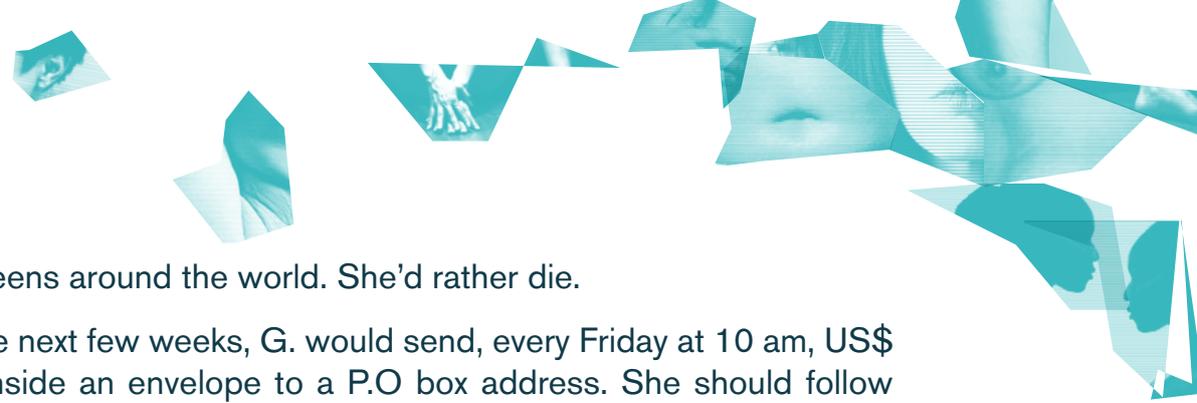
First, she took a shower, then she put on the delicate lingerie she had bought online. She put some music on and prepared her small set. Some light but not too much, a couple of pillows on the bed, and then she cleaned the background, taking out pictures of friends from the wall. Finally, she would open her laptop.

She would always blush a bit when the little light of her webcam turned green. Curving smoothly to the rhythm of the music, she would reveal some parts of her body. A bit of the shoulder, then the hips, belly button. But the true rush of adrenaline would come when the electronic sound effect started. Metal bells ringing: it meant her audience was there.

Anonymous men, connected to her live show, sent her virtual tokens. They were enjoying her show and wanted her to keep going on. She knew she could have turned tokens into real money, but she didn't really care. She was too young to manage a personal bank account anyway. All she wanted was to feel sexy and to play around. It was a way to feel more confident and attractive. Much more than with any boy she had dated before. Those were immature kids, anyway.

One afternoon, after preparing her set, G. opened her laptop and noticed she had received a strange e-mail from an anonymous source. A video was attached and the message said: "Follow the instructions or you're screwed". She opened the attached file and for a moment did not feel her legs. The video showed one of her live shows: completely naked, she danced in her bedroom. In the end, in a clumsy montage, her Facebook profile picture showed her face, with a word written on it: "slut."

Her heart raced. After the initial shock, fear and desperation took her over, but she breathed, trying to calm down. Who were those people? What did they want? She remembered the words a teacher used during a seminar. "Sextortion", or was it "Cyber Bullying"? "Revenge Porn"? The right thing to do would be to call the police, or her parents, or some teacher from school. But how would she deal with the shame? Mom, dad, her best friend Lila, the school, the whole town. And even worse: the Internet. Everyone would watch her dance. Her naked body would go viral and be shared in millions



of screens around the world. She'd rather die.

For the next few weeks, G. would send, every Friday at 10 am, US\$ 300 inside an envelope to a P.O box address. She should follow the instructions closely, or else they would release the video to her family and friends. They knew their names, they had hacked their emails and Facebook accounts. They could do it with only one click.

When G. ran out of her savings, she stole from her mother's purse. She wouldn't talk to anyone anything; she would barely leave her room. She lost 15 pounds, she was now pale and fragile. She missed tests at school, her grades dropped. She shut all her social media accounts and slowly lost contact with the world.

On a Thursday morning, she tried to get cash from her father's card in a gas station ATM but was stopped by an employee. He asked her some questions and G. got confused. The security cameras showed her running away. She didn't go to school that day. She knew she wouldn't have the US\$300 to put inside the 9th envelope.

An assistant from her school called that night. G. had been missing classes but the school did not receive any notices from her parents. They'd been busy and tired from work, but they knew something was wrong with G. Maybe we need to talk to her, they thought. From downstairs, her parents called their daughter's name. But G. wouldn't answer anymore.