

The Magnet

Leslie Haslam

Please note, this work includes content related to state violence.

It is astonishing how a day can start out normal and end up as one of the worst days of your life. It was a hot summer Friday in 2018; my mind recalls it as if it was this morning. I was just eleven years old. I woke up extremely excited because a splendid afternoon was planned ahead of me. My friends and I were going to a country club house for the very first time. One of them had a membership and decided to invite us all. I was so thrilled that I decided to dress up with one of those outfits you save for the right occasion. I was wearing this beautiful white linen skirt with ruffles that made it look delicate; and a gray tank top that fit my body in a way that I loved. I sent a picture to Anna and Maria, my closest friends at the time, and told my mom I was ready to go.

My mom drove me to the country club house, “Terrace Club.” It was perfection, too good to last. Once we entered, luxury surrounded us. The lobby had massive crystal lamps in the ceiling, the comfiest brown sofas we had ever sat on, and black marble stairs which led to the colorful garden. It also had a big swimming pool and a restaurant adjacent to the pool chairs. One of the best features was the bowling alley. We started the evening doing some bowling. I put on the appropriate shoes and teamed up with Anna and Maria. After we finished playing, we walked to the pool and spent most of our time there. Next, we snacked on some crispy ham and cheese sandwiches. I didn’t want to leave, and, if I had known what would happen that night, my feet would have never taken the steps to my mom’s car.



My home country, Nicaragua, is trapped in a cycle of dictatorship. Like a scratched CD stuck on the same track, it seems like the next tune is going to start, when all of a sudden it goes back to the beginning. The same agonizing story, not a grain of hope. Nicaragua started as an independent country in 1838, but this didn’t last long. The characteristic statue located in

Tipitapa makes me recall how well we used to fight for justice as a result of the battle of San Jacinto. General Zelaya ruled the country for 16 dark years after that. The same happened with General Somoza, whose dictatorship lasted 44 years. Now, the story repeats itself. Nicaragua has had the same president since 2007.



The process of moving to my new school was daunting. I had recurrent thoughts of no one wanting to be my friend or even getting to know me. My body was changing, and I didn’t like that. Like oil in water. Always there, but never merging in. I had never felt so alone in my life, physically and mentally. That’s why when I discovered there was a dance club, I didn’t think about it twice. I visited the extracurricular activities office located on the first floor, and the secretary, Claudia, gave me some papers to sign. There I was, doing what I was so scared of. At least I belonged somewhere now. I have always loved to dance. I didn’t know how cruel it could be, how incapable it could make me feel.



As normal, I entered my mom's car. I happily told her all about how much fun I had. "I want to go to Terrace Club again, mom. The bowling is really nice there." All of a sudden, she made a bad turn and a police officer stopped her. The blasting AC suddenly felt cooler. All I could think about at that moment was how I wanted to be anywhere but there. My skin crawled with chills. To say that I was afraid of police officers is an understatement—I was petrified of them. Especially since the beginning of that year when all of the chaos started.



Some years later, everyone started questioning why we had chosen this president. He made endless promises which he never accomplished. The day that really echoes repeatedly in my mind is April 18, 2018. A social security reform was given by the president, which was unfair to current workers and citizens. The entire country was mad at him—young people were protesting on the streets, fighting for fairness. Holding blue and white flags, speaking their truths into megaphones: "Free Nicaragua." That day, 300 students' lives were taken away by anti-riots. Their entire youth was gone. The damage was now done.



The first day of my dance classes had come, and my math class was about to finish. I was consumed by nervousness. I could not stop thinking about it. Was I going to do well? Would I make any friends? This was one of the many times I would impatiently wait for the clock hands to change. The teacher finally said, "Alright guys, class is over." I left the room and went straight into the changing room. The uniform for the class was a white T-shirt and black leggings. I was not feeling comfortable. I didn't like the way my legs looked in leggings, or to be fair, in anything. But for once since the school year started, I was brave.



The officer gave my mom a ticket. I wish that is where the story finished. He started asking her where she was going, where she came from, and the question everyone was terrified to answer: what are your political views? My mom is a really smart woman; I know she tried her best. I admire her, trying to be calm to help her daughter settle down. At this point, I was already crying. I didn't sense that anything good could happen next, and I was correct. The officer was uncontrollable—he was yelling at my mom, making her feel inferior with his words and filming her without permission. "You know nothing," he kept saying. My mom was yelling too. As courageous as she is, she could not sit there and do nothing about being mistreated. Next, the worst part came. He asked us to step out of the car. He was going to take it away.



Being outside of your own house was a danger. The president was making Nicaragua feel like an ongoing battle. We were all scared. Kids stopped going to school for months. I was taking online classes and watching the news at the same time. Listening once again to the painful line: "30 people were killed by the police in a protest this morning." The country was a disaster. Nothing was sacred anymore. They were tormenting Nicaraguans, at schools, at catholic churches, at national patrimonies. Every day, hundreds of people went out to the streets, now fighting for the students. Risking their own lives, knowing what could happen next. Their own bodies being hurt.



I remember entering the big blue room. All around me there were talented and thin girls. I wished I was one of them. They all had their groups; no one was looking for a new friend. And suddenly, the dance teacher walked in—a 5' 3" middle-aged woman. I could see through her glasses; her eyes

were not gentle. It was difficult to be calm. My nerves started to rise again. She had a big bun in her hair which did not move for any reason in the world. The dance club I was in was called “Folklore,” the national Nicaraguan dance. Something I had never done in my life. The teacher started to follow up a choreography that the entire class had been working on for almost two weeks. Unexpectedly, the words came out of her mouth: “Leslie, take a space in the choreography. This is your test to see if you can be in this group.”



My hands started to shake violently; the tears would not stop coming out of my eyes. My mom asked me to go sit by the gas station nearby, to calm myself while she was begging them not to take her car. When I entered the gas station, a lady that worked there that night asked me if everything was okay. I told her all about my night while she found some water for me. I’ll always remember the words she told me: “It is unbelievable how these monsters destroy a poor child’s life. They abuse their power, the same power they once didn’t have.”



It was somewhat comforting knowing that the whole world was aware of Nicaragua’s conflict: at least someone could help us one day. Eventually, even that was not possible. The president was now threatening journalists and writers who said anything negative about him. Now, not only our lives were taken, but our voice too. Imagine being afraid to speak in your own country, your home. Not being able to express how you feel. That is the danger of power.



I felt stuck like the roots of a tree. Not a single muscle in my body wanted to move. But I had come all the way through here; I needed to do this. Not for anyone, but for me. I owed it to myself if I wanted to survive in this new world. I grabbed some courage

and stepped into this big circle of girls. The music started, loud and clear. But my steps were not clear. My eyes were looking everywhere, trying to keep up with the dance. But I just could not do it. I did not know it. Out of nowhere, the music stopped. The teacher stood in the middle of the circle and looked me directly in the eye. My body was there physically, but I wanted to disappear. I could not take the humiliation. She yelled at me, “You are messing up the whole dance! Please get out, I don’t think this class is for you.”

I grabbed my bag, left the room and sat on the nearest bench I could find. Tears streamed down my sweaty cheeks. My heart was beating so fast I could hear it. I could not believe that my instincts were right again, that the worst that could happen became a reality. I physically gave up; I rested my head on my legs. I could not stop crying. The whole group I was trying to be friends with saw that, how could I ever see them again?

As life goes, you always find good people. No matter how cloudy the day seems to be. A girl named Sofia, who is now my best friend, gave me words of hope. She told me how the teacher misuses her power and makes her students feel miserable, but that it was worth it to keep trying. Some years later, I was dancing in the national theater with my dearest friends for the last time in my senior year.



Power and authority work like magnets. They draw people into them. When someone exploits others with their authority, we feel useless, impotent, drawn by that evil power.

I hope I never become one of those magnets. The ones that kill, the ones that yell, the ones that hurt. I dream of having power, or maybe not. My personality is built with parts of kind and malicious power. Yet, I am sure that I want to use it to draw people together. Not to create fights—not to create shadow.