

The Struggles of the Refugee.

"Britain, I am here without choice"

Tita's story

– when seeking asylum means saving your life

Tita has two lives, and would like to combine them, but it's a struggle. A doctor from Bolivia, where she enjoyed a life of comparative comfort and wealth, in Britain she's a refugee, battling to master a new language and gain the qualifications that will allow her to practise medicine again.

Her fight to re-establish her professional standing following the torture and intimidation that brought her working life to an abrupt, numbing halt is by no means uncommon. Many other professionals forced to flee their country of origin through no fault of their own have to live in vastly reduced circumstances, their skills and talents going unrecognised until they have proved themselves all over again. The scepticism they are met with, and the rebuffs they endure, give the lie to the portrayal of asylum seekers as "bogus" claimants simply after a better way of life.

"Finding a good job at home was no problem," says Tita, aged 30. "I had a good standard of living but it became impossible to stay. Leaving behind everything that I had strived for and achieved involved destroying part of my life. No one does that voluntarily. I had no choice."

At home, Tita was the family extrovert, with a mind of her own. As a young doctor, she eschewed a settled career path, opting instead to use her skills as an emergency surgeon in poverty hit areas in the north of the country as an outreach worker for international charities such as the Catholic Relief Service and *Medecins sans Frontieres*.

Three years later she returned home to work in the city of her parents, but her extensive travels had raised suspicions and she found herself the target of men she believes were part of an organised crime gang with links to the government.

Three times she was abducted off the street and subjected to grave abuse while being interrogated. "They knew everything about my life and job. They accused me of being involved in trafficking because of my movements in the north. But I didn't know what they were talking about - drugs? Weapons? I just didn't know anything!"

She was beaten, tortured with electricity and threatened with death if she did not reveal all she knew. It was a threat she was in little doubt would be carried out. On one occasion, as she lay bound and blindfolded, a man being held prisoner with her said their abductors had removed all his fingertips so that he could not be identified after he was killed. A little later he was taken away and Tita heard gun shots.

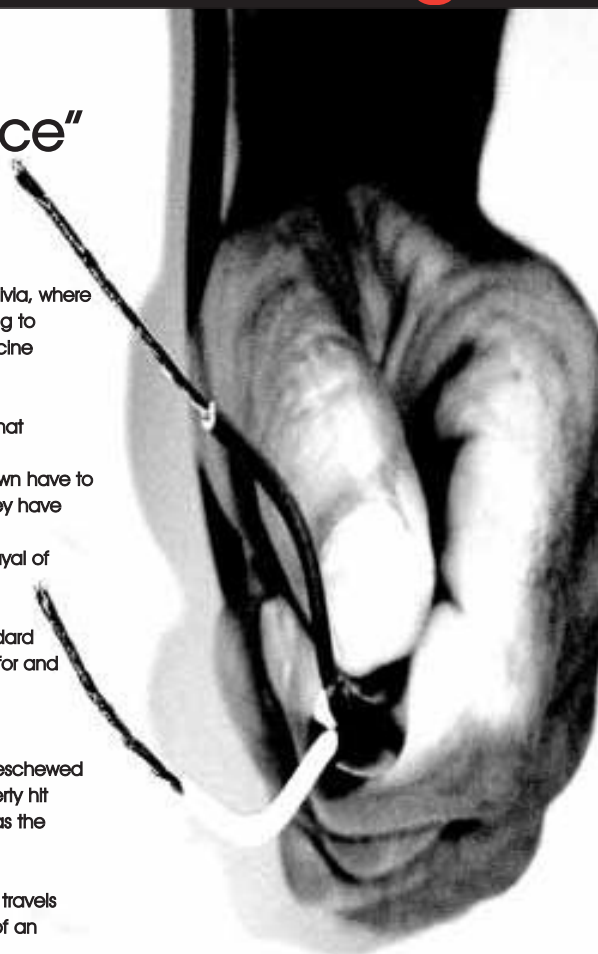
After each abduction, Tita was eventually freed. At first, she believes, the gang wanted to see with whom she made contact. The third time she was snatched, it was to kill her. She heard the order for her death, but later, as she was being driven away, the men began arguing and once again, she was given her freedom.

Soon afterwards she was chased and shot at, and Tita, with the help of a friendly doctor, fled the country. She was unsure where to go, working simply on the premise that she should get as far away as quickly as possible, she took the first flight to Europe.

On October 2, 1998 Tita arrived at Heathrow, telling immigration officials that she needed help - "human rights help". A charity at the airport gave her accommodation over her first weekend in the UK, and a doctor who called to check her wounds told her about the Medical Foundation, where she was able to draw extensively on a range of services.

A case worker helped her come to terms with her experiences, and deal with the practicalities of exile. She also received psychotherapy, an immigration lawyer was found who specialised in cases from Latin America, and a forensic medical report on her injuries was supplied to help her case for asylum. Finally, in September 2000, she was granted full refugee status.

Tita was worried that she would not be considered for asylum because her home country is technically a democracy but, like many impoverished and corrupted countries, being a democracy does not mean that human rights are necessarily safeguarded.



"It is not easy being an asylum seeker," she says, recalling the embarrassment she felt on entering the Post Office every Tuesday to collect her benefit. "I would think I am young, I'm able to work, there are jobs I could do, I was ashamed to be there. But I had just one thought - to study hard and learning English so I could work again as a surgeon."

Devoting herself to study, she took classes in beginner-level English during the day, and intermediate level classes simultaneously at night. Later she began a special language course for doctors and in March 2001 got the marks she needed to be recognised by the General Medical Council. Now she has two examinations to pass in order to start work as a senior house officer at a hospital. "I'm going to pass them," she says. "Luckily I am still young, I can do it."

There are friends that Tita has never told that she is a refugee, so uncertain is she of the reaction it might provoke. "Asylum seekers come here out of necessity. They come because they are in fear in their own country. Somehow that fact often gets overlooked," she says.

Anglavi and Tita's story published with kind permission of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture - www.torturecare.org.uk.