

THAT NIGHT...

That night –what a paradox-, I learnt about it some years later, the city was embellished. Several ceremonies and wedding parties were celebrated, there was a traditional poetry contest attended by many people from the region, therefore, a great deal of people were enjoying themselves outdoors. You could say that the city was celebrating and looking forward to life.

I was six years old then and lived in a slum which we had been building next to the factory. The municipality had given us the land and had allowed us to build wooden, plastic and metal houses. I was playing with my friends when, suddenly, two gigantic columns of smoke rose up into the sky like geysers gone wild. The north wind was blowing and the fumes returned to our neighbourhood, the railway station, the bus station and the historic city centre.

My father, like many others, had entered the ten o'clock shift. They had been working there for several months because those in the residential area had been fired. These workers had carried out specialised work for some years while the factory was operating at full capacity. Now, it was at a standstill and our parents had to clean the machines and pipes. They were not paid much, but with it we could eat and even have some toys, not many really.

In the midst of such a scorching fog, I could see that people were desperate, they wanted to escape, but the smoke was a demon that entered their brains and prevented them from breathing and they instantly fell down like flies. In my neighbourhood it was all agony, death, screams and despair. I walked towards the railway station, dodging corpses, with a damp cloth on my nose, staggering. I could not see very well, vomited several times and, exhausted, I sat there leaning against a wall

I woke up the next morning and kept wandering around the city, lost, disoriented, as if someone else lived inside me. All of a sudden, two men dressed in white grabbed me by my arms and put me into an ambulance where there were other children my age. We were placed in an orphanage. I never knew anything about my parents or my siblings. I assumed they had passed away, victims of the poisoning.

After some time, an American family became interested in me and I went to live with them in Boston. My foster parents were reputable lawyers and lived in Chestnut Hill. I am living in New York now and I work as a cook in an exclusive restaurant in Long Island. Two days a week Mr Smith comes to have dinner with his family and friends. He is an old little

man, very polite, smartly dressed, always greeting with a smile, a kind smile that comes with maturity. He was the president of the company that owned the chemical plant. He was arrested by the police after the explosion and released on bail a few days later, with an undertaking to appear for court hearings. He was charged with manslaughter for the deaths of 25,000 people and for the serious consequences suffered by 150,000 others. He never showed up and was declared a fugitive. Yesterday, twenty-six years after the catastrophe, the court sentenced the boss and six managers of the plant to six years' imprisonment and to pay 500,000 rupees, about 10,600 dollars. However, in the same verdict they were released after paying the bail set for this purpose.

It is unfair that this gentleman and other top managers involved live as if nothing had happened, when they have sown so much misery and cruelty. The water is still polluted because toxic waste seeps into the ground. The slum is still there. People have to drink, they have no other choice. Polluted water gives them cancer, stomach, liver and kidney disease. Children are still born with hormonal disorders, mental problems and strange illnesses.

I sometimes think that I could put a negligible amount of cyanide –one of the toxic substances released by the explosion- on the plate and, little by little, he would be consumed by the same health problems that the people of my city suffer from. But, eventually, I desist because rancour and revenge are not noble sentiments. I would rather be an honest person and live at ease with myself, even though it is hard to accept. In addition, many years have passed and, for my emotional health, I have to forget.

Today I read in the New York Times that five children were crushed to death by a machine while they were scavenging in a large rubbish dump in Nagpur.

“Stories without Mufflers” (2006 -)