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Señora Helen Vélez

Mrs. Helen Velez

En la época en que yo empecé a estudiar era el año 1946. No había otro medio de transporte que las goletas. Mi primer viaje fue en la motonave *Cisne*; yo tenía ocho años. En esa época era de mi abuelo, el señor Jeremías Lynton. Teníamos mal tiempo. La nave iba cargada con cocos y naranjas, y comenzó a llover. Mi mamá dijo: “Boten los cocos al mar”, porque nos íbamos a hundir, y él que no, que la carga no se debía botar.

Al fin se dieron cuenta de que había unas islas cerca a Cartagena y nos acercamos y se fondeó lejitos, pero escapamos del mal tiempo. Al día siguiente por la mañana arrancaron nuevamente y llegamos a Cartagena.

¡Uno se mareaba mucho! Y el olor a copra era tan fuerte que no ayudaba para nada a tu bienestar general.

En otra ocasión íbamos en la goleta *Deliverance* del capitán Alex Rankin. Tenía en la proa una casetita y dos camarotes de cada lado. Abajo iban los cocos y arriba uno ponía unas tablas, encima unos colchones y uno dormía allí. Atrás tenía una puertita. De pronto empezó a brisar fuertemente; las olas eran enormes. En una de esas entró una ola. Íbamos con mi tía Ida, mis hermanos y Vicky. De pronto, ya habían cogido de frente la goleta varias olas, hubo una ola tan grande que se levantó mi colchón. Ya iba, yo que estaba dormida, flotando con el colchón. Por la ventana, una señora vio y me agarró los pies; ella me retuvo pero el colchón se fue.

¡Qué cosa más impresionante ver al capitán luchando con su timón! ¡Inspiraba tanto respeto! El capitán se amarraba al timón y usaba un impermeable negro. Como íbamos tan cerca en esa casetita, veíamos todo y era admirable. Venían esas olas, y a él le caían cosas encima; y él seguía ahí firme. Yo le decía *Blue Shoes* (Zapatos azules). Era de apellido Hooker, de Providencia. Yo me mareaba mucho y él me decía: “No te mueras porque cuando lleguemos a Cartagena, te voy a comprar un par de *blue shoes* (“zapatitos azules”).

Yo le cogí un cariño a ese señor porque era tan bueno. Cogía un periódico y lo mojaba con agua de sal y me lo ponía en el estómago y me decía: “Así no vas a vomitar”. Y te aseguro, no sé si era superstición o qué, pero... ¡me funcionaba! (dice sonriendo).

Peligran nuestras vidas

Otro de mis viajes fue en época de vacaciones de medio año, o sea en julio. La costumbre era quedarnos en Cartagena, pero esa vez las mamás nos consintieron más y accedieron a traernos; viajábamos en la goleta *Persistence*. Un tío mío, Cody Veléz, era el contramaestre. Todo estaba normal y había dos bombas manuales para sacar el agua.

De pronto se vino encima el mal tiempo, y nos perdimos. Empezó a entrar mucha agua por debajo, y las bombas no daban abasto. El agua nos daba ya a las caderas y pedimos “achicar”. Los marineros y nosotras tirando el agua de regreso al mar. Vimos en la madrugada una luz; pensamos que era un barco que nos venía a auxiliar y salimos desesperadas. Yolanda, Vicky y yo salimos a cubierta y amarramos una almohada a un palo y le prendimos fuego. Eso parecía un incendio; las plumas salían volando y se pegaban en la vela. Ellos vieron eso y se acercaron, y nos dimos cuenta que era una motonave más pequeña que la nuestra, llamada *Silvia*, de la familia Gallardo. Entonces, de capitán a capitán, se gritaban. El de la *Silvia* le dijo: “Pásame tus pasajeros”. Éstos eran el señor Macaris y su esposa, y nosotras tres. En medio del gran oleaje bajaron el bote salvavidas y el marinero remó como pudo y nos pasaron al *Silvia*. Para hacer esto, nos amarraron de la cintura y nos lanzaban al aire, así como meciéndonos, y caíamos dentro del otro bote. Para nosotras, lo más doloroso fue que pasaron hasta la brújula, y quedaron solos el capitán y mi tío (no quedaba nadie más a bordo). Nos daba mucha tristeza pues no sabíamos si los volveríamos a ver.

Ya no tenían quien les botara el agua ni tampoco habían vuelto a montar el bote salvavidas; lo llevaban amarrado atrás. Afortunadamente la *Silvia* los reorientó y llegamos a San Andrés. Detrás llegaron ellos; encallaron, pero llegaron. Tu vieron que encallarlo para que no se hundiera.

Tres mamás asustadas

Y el susto de estas tres mamás que van allá hasta el muelle en un botecito. Y nosotras gritando: “acá estamos”. Ellas decían: “Algo pasó porque vienen remolcando el bote salvavidas”. Ellas no podían creer lo que veían. Y “Bull”, tan galante, las llevó y nos recogieron.

“Bull”, que traduce toro, era un personaje que todos apreciábamos. Era un señor muy fuerte. Se puede decir que es el “padre-maestro” de todos los lancheros de la isla. Bueno, al ver el susto de esas tres mamás, “Bull” las llevó al barco en su lancha. Y nosotras les dijimos: “Vamos a buscar al tío Cody que debe estar totalmente emparamado”.

Después teníamos que contarles a nuestras mamás que les debíamos dinero a todos los marineros pues habíamos ofrecido pagarles por ayudarnos a “achicar”, sacar (botar), el agua de mar fuera de la goleta.

Es bueno que los chicos del futuro y de hoy día, que no conocen las dificultades que pasaron sus ancestros para poder brindarles un mejor futuro, se enteren de estas cosas. También en la *Silvia* venía el padre Ladislao.

MRS. HELEN VELEZ

I began to study around 1946. The only way we could get in and out of the Islands was on board of a sail vessel or a motored vessel. My first trip was on the motored vessel called "Cisne". It used to belong to my grandfather Mr. Jeremías Lynton. At that time, I was 8 and I remember we had very bad weather and the ship was loaded with coconuts and oranges and it began to rain so my mom said, "Throw the cargo at sea because we are going to sink". But he did not allow it. The cargo was not to be wasted. Finally, they noticed some cays were close to Cartagena so we approached them and we anchored a bit far from them. Yet, we escaped the bad weather and we got to Cartagena the next morning. One would get very dizzy! And the copra odor did not help a bit to your overall well-being. On another voyage on board the "Deliverance", owned by Captain Alex Rankin, its bow had sort of a "tiny house" so to speak with a chamber on each side and a small back door. Underneath, were the coconuts and on top of them, one could lay some wood panels and a mattress and you could sleep there. Suddenly a very strong breeze showed up and I was along with my aunt Ida, my brothers and Vicky. The boat had been punished several times already by the waves and this time a big wave came and lifted up my mattress and carried me away into the ocean while I was sleeping. A lady saw me through the window and she got a hold of me grabbing my feet. She kept me but the mattress was gone. It was very impressive to watch the Captains of that era fighting against the sea, resisting all the waves and things that would fall on top of them. Sometimes they'd even have to tie themselves to the helm and wear a black raincoat because the weather was so bad. Yet, they'd never give up and they stood firmly as if they could be invincible. It caused us a lot of admiration and respect. We could see everything very clearly because we always liked to use that little "house". I remember a Captain I used to call "Blue Shoes". His last name was Hooker and he was from Providence. As I always got seasick, he would say to me, "Don't die because when we get to Cartagena I'm going to get you a pair of blue shoes." I was very fond of him. He was a very good gentleman and would take some newspaper and wet it with salt water and place it on top of my tummy and say, "This way you'll not vomit" and I can assure you... I don't know why but it worked!" says Mrs. Helen smiling.

Our lives are in danger.

On another of my trips during the month of July, we were on vacation and the traditional thing to do was for us to stay. But this time we got lucky and our mothers decided to "spoil" us a bit and bring us back to the Islands. So we were coming back on board of the "Persistence" and an uncle of mine, Cody Velez, was the mate. Everything was normal and the vessel had two manual water pumps to get rid of the excess of water when needed. Suddenly the bad weather overtook us and we got lots of water beginning to come in from underneath, the two pumps were not enough and they were unable to get rid of all of the water. Now the water was up to our hips and we asked the sailors to help us to get rid of the water and at dawn we saw a light and thought it was another ship that could save us so in desperation Yolanda, Vicky and myself went out and standing on top of the deck tied a pillow to a stick and set it on fire! It looked pretty bad, feathers were flying all over the place so the boat came

toward us and it was the motored vessel called “Silvia”, which was a bit smaller than ours. It belonged to the Gallardo family. Then the yelling between Captains began and the “Silvia’s” captain said, “Send me your passengers”. They were Mr. Macaris and his wife and the three of us ladies. In the middle of all these big waves and in sort of a “rocking” motion the crew tied us to a rope and sent us up in the air and we’d fall into the other boat. For us girls the most painful thing was to watch how everything was getting on board the “Silvia”, including the magnetic compass. But, my uncle and the Captain remained on board the “Persistence” no one else. And we felt very sad because we didn’t know if we would ever see them again. They had nobody to give them a hand anymore to get rid of the water. They had no life boat either. It was being towed behind them. Fortunately, the “Silvia” re-oriented them and we got to St. Andrews and they arrived right behind us. They got stuck on the reef but they made it. They had to do it that way so it would not sink.

Three scared Mothers.

These three mothers were scared and at the pier waiting for us and we were screaming ‘Here we are!’ As they were thinking, “Something happened and it doesn’t look good because the life boat is being towed.” They couldn’t believe their eyes! But Bull, who was always so gallant, took them to us and they picked us up. “Bull”, which means “Toro”, was a character that we all used to appreciate a lot. He was very strong and one could say that he was the “ Father-Teacher” of all the “lancheros” meaning the “boatmen” from the Island. Well, when he saw those three mothers all scared he took them on his boat. And we said, “Let’s go and get uncle Cody. He must be soaking wet.” Later, we had to tell our mothers that we owed money to the sailors because we had offered to pay for helping us to get rid of the excess of water inside the vessel. It is good that kids from the future as well as the ones that are present today learn the difficulties that their ancestors had to go through in order to be able to provide them with a better future. On board the “Silvia”, we found Father Ladislao.