

Good evening Lorna,

8 January 2012

As requested,

To whom it may concern,

I have been asked to write a letter and explain what it meant for me coming to the England from a beautiful country ravaged by civil war.

It has proven very difficult to summarise in a letter the full extent that the war had on my life, both physically and especially emotionally.

It was 1973 and I was 16 years old in Santiago Chile.

Chile was such a wonderful country at the time. As well as being aesthetically beautiful, blessed with rich nature and contrasting landscape that gave me a great sense of fulfilment, the people were extremely humble and good natured.

It was truly a place where you felt that you belonged and I could not ever imagine being anywhere else. I had built up a very close group of friends that were like a second family to me and I had a boyfriend called Alvaro, who I loved dearly.

I was doing extremely well in my studies and had excelled academically with the prospect of further education at the University of Chile, with the intention of pursuing a well respected career as an architect.

In the space of one morning I had lost everything. My whole livelihood. 16 years worth of friends, family, irreplaceable sentimental possessions and memories captured in photographs, our family home, all of our money, my education and my dreams of having a career, getting married to my love Alvaro and starting a family together.

It was September 11th 1973 and I awoke as usual in our family home in Santiago. My mother was at work near the palace and my step-father Leo was also working in the vicinity of the palace itself. At 07:00am the military took control of all communications and announced that they were overtaking the government and the country itself.

They had said that in the next three hours, if the President would not step down, they would be bombing the palace. They had directed everyone to make their way home and to remain there until further instruction.

As Santiago is the Capital of Chile, it was also the centre of the conflict and at 11:00am on that morning, I watched the military aircraft fly over our house and begin

dropping bombs on the palace. I remember sobbing inconsolably as I thought of my mother and Leo.

My mother returned home, I was elated, but Leo had gone missing with no means of tracing him, we had presumed he had been killed. The military took to the streets and began shooting anyone who opposed them and a number of innocent people that were caught in the middle.

The people were instructed to stay in their homes under military curfew and if violated, they would be shot. My best friend Angel (17 years old) was shot and killed in the street for being outside as he tried to borrow some bread for his family. I was not even allowed to say goodbye. As the regime went on, every morning there were bodies that lined the river bed from people that had been shot and killed for violating curfew the previous night.

It is still extremely painful to revisit these memories even after 36 years I still find myself crying just thinking about it.

After a period of time, Leo had managed to send a messenger to inform us that he was alive and being held as a prisoner of war in a camp. He was on death row and his life would only be spared if he was granted political asylum from a country that was receiving refugees.

Leo was granted asylum in England and my mother, my sisters and Leo left Chile for England in July 1975. I was left to look after my grandmother, who was becoming unwell and finish my studies and achieve my internationally recognised higher education qualification in formal recognition of my academic merit throughout my life. Times were extremely difficult after my family left and under the military rule. My mother and sisters were thousands of miles away at the other side of the world. After only six months of trying very hard to look after Nan, studying and the complete economic disarray that Chile was facing as a result of the war, I decided that I would leave and come to meet my family, with the prospects of continuing my education in England with their support.

It was very hard to make the decision to leave my Grand-mother, my friends, my biological father and my future husband behind. I had to pack 16 years of my life into a few kilos of luggage, but I braced and consoled myself but reassuring myself that my family would be waiting for me at the other end and that I would hopefully return one day. I later realised that I could not return, as Pinochet had prohibited entry to the country for those who were politically exiled. As a result of this my poor grand-mother passed away in a home, my father died without even knowing about it until years later. All these are awful sentiments that I have to live with every day and the sweet memories that I had of the country and my life before the war, tarnished by the dramatic reality of the time before I left.

I arrived in England with huge hopes of the future in attempt to put the recent past behind me and to pursue my dreams of academic achievement and recognition and the career as an architect.

Unfortunately I was to learn that I was completely disillusioned, as there was not the sort of opportunities and acceptance for ethnic minorities as there are today. It was also extremely difficult as I did not know the language and the cultural differences were vast, although I was extremely grateful to be reunited with my family.

I had to learn to converse and handle myself in a foreign environment with people that were completely different that which used to. It was like being a child in a teenager's body and mind. I went on to learn English as quickly as possible and learn the English way of life in attempt to integrate and be accepted. I worked in wherever I could in order to get by, such as cleaning working and restaurants. I really wanted to embrace the English lifestyle and did everything I could to do so.

Life at home started to tumble a little as we were all suffering the after-effects of what had happened in the world we knew. My step-father was totally traumatised as a result the torture he incurred. His mental health appeared to be affecting his ability to learn a new language and to integrate, coming to terms with his awful experiences, which meant he could not find work and money was extremely scarce. This then put additional stress and pressure on him and the whole family, which meant that our home life as it was in Chile, was never the same again.

I left my family new home in London and abandoned my dreams of academia and career. For a number of years I lived with different friends and worked in any job that was available to me, so my life reverted to a survival day by day. In terms of my personal life, I had and still struggle with relationships to this day. My marriage failed miserably and other relationships followed suit as I believe that cultural differences combined with my fear of losing everything again have scuppered any chance of me ever having what I would have had with Alvaro in Chile.

I have one huge achievement, which is that I have a wonderful son who has made me very proud and I see as my best reward in life. I have my own little grand-daughter now and I at last fill a sense of fulfilment. Regardless of this however, the feeling of never in-acceptance and always being treated differently to the rest is, a daily reminder that I do not belong anywhere.

Accounts by Maria Elena Klug

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Klug'. The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping flourish at the bottom.