



MARIELITA AND THE FRIDGE

Marielita arrived in Barcelona on 5 November 2005. She knew little Spanish and no Catalan. She wasn't a *cholita* (a young indigenous girl), but an old woman who couldn't read or write.

She travelled from Bolivia to work for a Spanish family as a housekeeper. Her employers paid for her passage and promised her an employment contract. People in her town envied her for her good fortune.

The family she lived with were respectful towards her; they never shouted or swore at her. But they seemed strange to her. One day, while they were eating with guests, Marielita decided that she didn't want to live there anymore. She put what little she had in a bag and left without saying a word.

Some days later, she came to me and asked me for a favour:

-“Go and speak to my ex-employers; see if they'll pay me the money they owe me.”

-“Why haven't they paid you?” I asked.

-They must be annoyed with me because I left without telling them.

-Why did you leave without telling them?

-I just did, that's all. I waited until they were busy and the door was open.

-But why didn't you wait until they paid you? Why did you leave without saying anything?

-My back hurt and the pain was making me cry. I took 20 euros I found on the table and I left. I slept on the kitchen floor, and Mrs Norma, my friend, told me that it wasn't right, that I should leave.”

Marielita slept on the floor, she didn't have a single day off, they never gave her so much as a euro, she had a large debt to her employers for her passage...It all seemed very strange to me, so I went to talk to her ex-employers.

I was greeted by a very friendly woman, a bit nervous in my presence since she didn't understand why Marielita had asked for help from an intercultural mediator.

I got the money and learnt everything; they didn't pay her so she couldn't send money to Bolivia. They told her that her husband would spend it on beer. “If we didn't pay her, it was so she would save”, the women justified herself.

When she came to get the money, Marielita showed me the place where she had slept: the kitchen floor next to the fridge. She had two blankets, one to put on the floor and the other to cover herself with. She showed me the fridge, and told me that the noise stopped her from sleeping.

I couldn't believe it; that she had slept on the floor seemed to me inhuman, unfair. She thought other immigrants lived the same way.

I told the woman that Marielita sleeping on the floor was the most inhuman thing I'd ever seen. Surprised, she replied, "Why? She's an indigenous woman, that's how they sleep in her country, and in winter, we let her sleep in the living room."

- "On a sofa?" I asked her.

-No, on the rug.

I got angry with the woman; I spoke harshly to her; I told her that Marielita should report her for ill treatment. The woman was outraged, so she clarified her position by telling me that she wasn't cruel; in fact, she was a good Christian for giving a poor indigenous woman a job and a roof over her head.

I left the house feeling very annoyed. Meanwhile, Marielita hid her money in her clothes and said:

"Calm down, I did something too. In the summer, I opened the fridge door so I could sleep in the cool."