

Life is
linda

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Life is
Linda

YAMILA FAKHOURI & LINDA GUACHARACA





*To my mom:
for giving me a second chance*



FROM COLOMBIA TO THE WAY OF ST. JAMES

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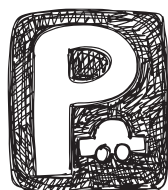
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Part 1



THE BIG BANG

My name is Linda, Linda Guacharaca. There was a time when my appearance provoked terror, disgust, and tears among the Bogotanos people with whom we crossed paths, starting with Marcela, the first person who saw me outside the gas station on that unforgettable February night that changed the course of my life forever.

“What are you doing in the car trunk?” Marcela asked of her friend, huddling next to me.

“I just picked up a stray dog.”

“Oh, such a cute thing to do! But she’s scared.” And then, dimly illuminated by the lights of the Villavicencio-Bogotá road and looking directly at me, she said, “But...how terrifying. That dog sure is ugly!”

Despite the fact that I was a deformed sack of doggy bones covered in dirt, fleas, and ticks at the time, the girl next to me smiled, stroking my head.

“No, she’s not ugly...she’s lovely.”

And that's how I got my name.¹

Nobody knows when I was born or where I come from. There is only one clear event in my dogography, and it is that I was run over by one of those rolling objects that makes a lot of noise, gives off nauseating gases, and has white lights on one side and red lights on the other, breaking my hip and back legs into seven pieces.

After the accident I was left in a corner of the gas station—then my home—where I should have died of starvation. Motionless, my bones broken, I couldn't compete with the other dogs for the scraps of food that people sometimes tossed us. When after many weeks I was able to crawl, the others were very angry to see me. They barked, growled, and attacked me if I got too close...it was only when I started to smell peculiar and to leave bloody stains on the floor that I became the center of attention. Every single male in Meta,² and even those in the neighboring departments, swarmed day and night around my broken hip, inflicting excruciating pain whenever they put their paws on me.

From then on, I disliked crowds.

Experts say I could not have been older than the tender age of twelve months, but if you were to see my gray beard and back,

¹ In Spanish, the word "linda" means "lovely" or "beautiful."

² Meta is a department of Colombia. Its capital is Villavicencio, located 125.5 km southeast of Bogotá.

crooked ever since, you might have believed me to be older than Methuselah.

That night I was lying in a dark corner as usual, far from the rest of the mutts so as not to get into any trouble.

It was one of those extraordinary days on which hordes of rolling objects pulled up to the simple restaurant next door. Then I smelled them: a classic couple of hungry humans (though nowhere near as hungry as I was). She was slender with short black hair, while the boy's fur was blond and frizzy. They chatted and laughed gaily as they disappeared inside the diner. Considering the hour—the lighted sign had long since gone out—they seemed to be the kind of people who squeezed the last drop of activity from the weekend. After a brief time the girl came out, probably intending to stretch her legs before going on her way and disappearing from under my nose forever. This in itself was nothing special...what was quite special was that she was carrying a huge bone in her hand. That's why when she went beyond my doggy companions' range of movement, I took advantage of one of very few opportunities to shove something down my gullet and, making a supercanine effort, flung myself at her to wrench it free.

You can imagine how scared she got.

After that not-so-great initial impression, she looked at me as if she were in front of an apparition. She leaned over me, caressed my back, and noticed how my vertebrae were almost breaking the skin. She placed her hand on my ribs and chest, her fingers slipping between, and I felt her shiver...

She went back to where she had been eating moments before. Seconds later she returned to my side with the largest amount of food I had ever seen: all of their corrientazo³ leftovers. Gently but firmly pushing the other dogs aside, she offered them to me. My eyes could see nothing but that plate and I slammed my snout down on it, gobbling the contents in milliseconds through sheer greed and overwhelming hunger. Then I licked the floor where some grains of rice had fallen until my tongue hurt.

Her friend, who responded to the name Steven, found her next to a row of tractor trailers trying out strategies to get me to stand up.

She called to me, but I was afraid because humans had already hit me so many times and, besides, I barely remembered what it was like to walk on four legs. I could only manage to crawl a few centimeters with my tail between my legs and remain motionless on the asphalt as she approached.

“She’s lame,” he stated, “she can’t stand up.”

Though it should have been obvious to anyone with two eyes in their head, the boy was trying to draw attention to a circumstance that had gone unnoticed by the female human, perhaps due to the impact of my appearance: if I could not walk, I would hardly be able to accompany her around the corner on doggy walkies, and much less to the ends of the earth.

³ The word corrientazo literally means “electric shock.” In this context, however, it refers to a common meal.

She stared at me in a way no one had ever stared at me before. After asking his opinion since, after all, he seemed to be the owner of that noisy rolling steel object in which they had arrived, she disappeared back inside the diner to question the owner. To be honest, I didn't understand what "taking the dog away" meant...The owner didn't understand either why she wanted to take away a mongrel in such a deplorable condition.

"It's up to you, *sumercé*.⁴ The dog doesn't belong to anyone, she was very badly crushed by a car a few months ago, and has already had her first heat."

Loaded with this information, the woman who was about to become my mom went back to Steven's side and called out to me:

"Chubby, come here, chubby." (She is very fond of euphemisms.)

At that moment she remembered a maxim about the animal world from a magazine that she had glanced through in a dentist's waiting room some time ago, once she had finished with the *Jet Set* issues.

"When you're in the kennel with the whole litter, pick the one that looks healthy, awake, and comes to you confidently wagging its tail when you call it," it read.

⁴ "Sumercé" literally means "Your mercy." A word that implies respect and courtesy, it is widely used by the people of the departments of Boyacá and Cundinamarca.

I, who was in the dark about the contents of this and other related articles, did not go to her on this occasion either. On the contrary, I hid as best I could inside the restaurant.

In a flash of tenderness and animal solidarity, the owner, seeing a chance for me, handed her another bone. So, frightened as I was, I followed the girl to the vicinity of the “car.” That’s when she grabbed me. In one swift and surprising movement, she hoisted me up and climbed into the back with me.

I cried, cowered, and tried to get away. As the vehicle began to lurch and roar, she held me in her arms while she caressed and spoke softly to me. Finally, seeing that I had no escape, I laid down next to her with my ears flat, and with the most taciturn doggy countenance ever seen from this side of Villavicencio to the Venezuelan border, as I rolled towards a new life, a new destiny.



a WOLF IN THE CAPITAL

That's how I went from spending my days in a paved space of just a couple of square meters to becoming a city dweller or, to make things clearer, an inhabitant of one of the largest metropolises in the world, which also happens to be the capital of my country.

Bogotá was soooo far away...During the endless trip—which lasted more than two hours—I released such stinky and frequent farts that my companion in the back of the truck cab, who endured them from her place in the front line, was perplexed.

“It’s normal,” said the boy, smiling in the rearview mirror, “don’t you ever fart?”

“Yes...but not that much!!!” she exclaimed, fearing she would go bald from such an overdose of methane gas.

I didn’t do it for revenge, but the truth is that I didn’t ask to be taken out of my natural habitat—surrounded by cars, trucks, and dirt—to be released in the middle of the city, specifically in front of the 24-hour Carulla supermarket on Seventh Avenue and 63rd Street.

And why did they take you there, you may be wondering, a hapless mutt bristling from head to toe.

Since they both had the typical fridge contents of a singleton until I showed up, neither kept suitable food for a famished canine carnivore at home. And he insisted that they needed to buy a “leash,” which they could only find there, since it was two o’clock in the morning.

At the door of the supermarket, they engaged in conversation with a man who was as dirty as I was and whose clothes smelled delicious to canine nostrils. He was accompanied by his old, curly-haired little dog—black as night. Quite moved by my appearance, he went to the cart where he kept all of his belongings and spread out before us his medicine cabinet, consisting of several unlabeled bottles. The girl absentmindedly agreed to the alleged de-wormer treatment for dogs. She then disappeared among endless rows of colorful packages and odorless jars.

My improvised street doctor opened my mouth firmly and asked his assistant to pour in a little bit. Gulp, gulp...Steven emptied three quarters of the contents inside my jaws and the gentleman, ignoring Steven’s protests, closed my muzzle and held it tightly until I had swallowed it all and, what’s more, licked my lips.

Why the face! Can’t you see I was really hungry?

The entrance to the San Diego residential complex in La Macarena neighborhood, the last stop on our horrific night odyssey, terrified me: dazzling lights that reflected on the slippery ground;

a huge box that closed in front of my snout and dragged us upwards at the push of a button, shaking just like the car; voices, coupled with looks of astonishment and disbelief from the doormen upon seeing the new companion of the building's newest tenant.

So don't be surprised that as soon as I put my trembling paws in the two-story "apartment" that had a kitchenette, a balcony, and a spectacular view of illuminated Bogotá, I hid under what they called a "sofa," not wanting to come out even for a slice of ham held in front of me. I spent the night unmoving in that corner while the female human suffered an anxiety attack in the upstairs bedroom over what she had just done: brought an unknown, distrustful, frightened, malnourished dog that was unable to move—and much bigger than it looked outdoors—into her space...and into her life.

Ever since she was a child, she had fantasized about having a quadruped, an inseparable companion to escort her on all her adventures. Even in adulthood she sometimes found herself dreaming of walking the Camino de Santiago,⁵ a very famous pilgrimage in her country called Spain, in the company of a canine. However, what kept the scenes of her favorite childhood books at bay was too great. She had chosen a nomadic life. Solitude guaranteed her the freedom to go wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Under normal circumstances, she would never have taken on the commitment to take care of one of my fellow canine beings, and she did not think

⁵ The Way of Saint James.

it acceptable to borrow one to do the Camino. Nor would just any shelter have given one to her, alone, inexperienced with dogs, with the least routine-based life on earth. Truly irresponsible.

From her bed she tried to contact her friend for support in that moment of intense anguish before falling asleep. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, she turned off her cell phone and fell into a restful, albeit light sleep since she was alert to me downstairs. He didn't sniff out the missed calls until he reached his lair. That we had played shortly before at the supermarket door was still vivid in his brain, so he thought she was calling in a panic because I had either died of intoxication or was convulsing. The poor guy spent the rest of the night surfing the internet, reading about the effects of a purgative overdose.

Being a true survivor, I passed that test of fate once again, though she spent weeks wondering and speculating about the unusual whitish color and pasty texture of my poop...



CIVIL STATUS? ADOPTED

I had no choice but to stir...I was peeing myself!!!!
I timidly crawled out from behind the green fabric sofa visible in the dawning daylight and began to pace around the room in exploratory circles. The girl heard the soft thump of my nails against the floor and jumped out of bed. She searched for the famous “leash” among all the junk she had scattered on the floor while I made a vast puddle in a corner: doggy nature has its limits. Then she took me out of the house as quickly as pawssible in case the ejection of doggy waste continued.

It was six in the morning and the first time we walked together through Bogotá. Don't believe our image matched the one in everyone's head, of a human with a plastic bag in one hand, and a dog trotting proudly by her side, wagging its tail, on the other. Rather, we were a troubled young woman accompanied by a trembling skeletal pooch crawling along the walls and seeking refuge between her legs as an early morning cab drove by.

It took us more than an hour to walk four blocks, since I lay down on the ground every few steps...We were not in a hurry either, as the door over which the “Veterinarian” sign was swinging was still taking a long time to open, so we waited two more hours sitting on the sidewalk, enjoying the sun on our snouts and the hustle and bustle of the La Perseverancia neighborhood.

You won't believe it, but as soon as I set paw in the city, I started to become famous. Everyone who passed by was interested in my story. Those who were homeless, like me, exclaimed in admiration:

“So ugly and so bony...but you're loved!”

The “veterinarian” put me on a cold silver topped table and, as he listened attentively to my heartbeat and talked to me, my companion's eyes got bigger and her heart got smaller, to the point that she had to take several deep breaths to keep from bursting into tears.

“Anyone would understand if you didn't want to take care of an animal in this condition. You can rid yourself of this problem as fast as you came in here with a quick injection...and she wouldn't suffer.”

Are you thinking I gave her a pleading and pitiful look in order to dissuade her when I heard that? Well, no. I kept my eyes fixed on the floor, as I always did when a human looked at me, while trying to climb down from such an uncomfortable place and hide.

The idea crossed her brain, along with a powerful sense of unreality. Then the same impulse that led her to put me in the car without thinking twice about what she was doing manifested itself in

the form of a single tear and a single syllable: “No.” And then, because she is, above all, a lady: “Thank you, let’s see how we manage.”

So it was that the first step towards my “officialization” was taken. My existence and the bond with the girl I had met only a few hours ago were recorded in my first veterinary file:

Patient name: Linda

Breed: Mongrel

Color: Black

Owner’s name: a series of guttural sounds I had never heard before.

How dizzying for both of us, who had led such a free life until then! She would become responsible for a living being in a matter of seconds and I would have to adapt to an unfamiliar environment and rules...but in exchange I would have a home!

We returned home loaded with dog medicines and grooming products only to return immediately to the vet. (This is cinematographic license because it actually took us several hours.) My aversion to water was greater than my shyness, my pain, and the desire to please my new mom, who felt incapable of bathing an animal that squirmed and howled like a wild beast.

Can’t you see that I had already endured many storms out in the open without being able to take shelter?

The vet removed tons of dirt, grime and ticks off me, to the point that, when she came back to pick me up, my mom didn’t recognize me. That’s why they had to make a new file for me:

Patient name: Linda

Breed: Mongrel

Color: Gold.



