

Terezinha Prudencio da Silva

*"My suffering has taught me to respect people.
When I see a child on the streets and that child comes to the door
and I have one roll, I will share it."*

*"I know now that the only way you can grow and learn is by going
through difficulties, through pain, through suffering.
Without these, I wouldn't be the person I am now."*

*"God doesn't want us to suffer but it's through suffering that you learn
and you grow and he helps us carry the burden of suffering."*

-- Terezinha Prudencio da Silva, married to Francisco A.V. Nunes,
"Bacurau", for 22 years.

I came from a poor family. My parents worked in the field, planting, farming. I got married at the age of 13. It was good for a year and then the suffering started. I had six children from this marriage. One baby was born dead so I raised the other five. I also completed my family by raising another daughter. My husband treated me really badly and after nine years, he hit me. At that time, I couldn't take it anymore and after nine years of marriage, we had to separate.

Suffering gets to a point where you cannot take it anymore. I wish that I could have stayed together with my husband and raise my children but there is a moment when you have to stop and say, "I cannot take this anymore." My youngest daughter was two when we separated. My husband didn't help at all. There was a time when I was so poor that I slept on the floor with my children on a very thin piece of fabric. I became almost a cry-baby. I cry a lot. All this pain and suffering has made me very sensitive.

I had to struggle and work really hard to make sure that my children didn't go to bed hungry. When my father and my mother died, I was left alone to care for and raise the children. It was really hard for me to do this alone.

In hindsight, I never would have gotten married when I was so young. I couldn't think ahead. He was my first boyfriend and I didn't know any better. He was 22, I was 13.

Now I'm better prepared. I'm wiser. I'm even prepared to give advice to younger women and tell them not to get married so young. I want to tell them to "Be somebody because your best 'husband' (companion) when you are that young is education, work and being somebody."

I met Bacurau in the colony -- Santa Souza Araujo. I was 22 when I went into the colony. Nowadays they have very good doctors so if a person is diagnosed they live with their families and go on with their lives. This wasn't the case in my time. I was separated from my children. The pain was enormous. Then I met Bacurau and I learned to try to forget all this suffering and all this pain. I learned to be patient. If we didn't have something he would say, "Don't worry, God will provide it. If we don't have it today, God will provide it."

To talk about Bacurau is very good for me. It is a source of happiness. He was a very sweet person. His name is sweet. He was from Manicore, in the Amazon. In this city they have a bird that sings very beautifully and its name is "Bacurau". Someone once asked him, "Augusto, where are you from?" When he answered, they said, "Oh, the land of the Bacoraus. You are a Bacurau." He liked it a lot. He liked it even better than his own name. But at home I called him Augusto.

Bacurau never did anything for money. He did everything out of love. Writing songs, poems, everything came from the heart. It was all out of love.

Bacurau left a lot of memories, a lot of things to be remembered. Every day he was learning new things.

We were married for 22 years, "a lifetime," and we lived in Acre. My life was much better because Bacurau valued me as a woman, as a wife, as a friend. When I was younger and lived with my first husband, I didn't know how to face suffering or go through pain. As you grow through pain, you learn. When I met Bacurau, I learned how to face things and started growing even more, becoming wiser.

I lost my leg and today I forget that I lost it because of Hansen's Disease. I think of it as an accident.

When Bacurau was diagnosed with cancer, it started with headaches and he would sweat a lot and feel nauseous. It was the 9th of December, his birthday. I turned around and kissed him and he was already covered with sweat. It was 1995 and he died in 1997 and struggled against the disease for two years and three days.

When the doctor gave him the diagnosis, he already knew it. He read a lot and he had read this book about a man with cancer. When the doctor told him what he had, he already knew because he recognized the symptoms. It started with a tumor in his lungs and then went to his brain. After the first surgery, the doctor came to me and said, "I don't know if it's worth treating his lungs, because one lung as already been taken by the disease."

Throughout these two years and three days, the hardest moment was when we went to Sao Paulo for his second surgery. He was in a coma for five days. I was told that if I lost control and started crying, they wouldn't let me in to see him. At that moment I raised my eyes to the sky and asked the Father to give me strength.

We tried for two years to control the tumor that was taking over his brain with medication. Then the doctor called me and told me that they should try to operate, otherwise he would go through terrible pain. I thought, "Who am I to say no?"

They could only take half of the tumor out. After the second surgery, he didn't want anymore. He made one request. He wanted to go home. "Don't send me to another hospital." Dr. Eduardo helped and went with him on the plane to Acre. He got home on the 19th of October and died on the 12th of January. All this time he couldn't walk.

Oxygen cost 170 reals per container. We had to ask people to help. We kept him at home until he died. He wanted me to be next to him. I stood by him all the time. I put a mattress on the floor next to the bed. I stayed by him until he died.

The pain was tremendous. The suffering was enormous all this time. But the worst moment was when there was nothing more than medicine could do for him. At that moment my heart was broken. Until that moment I kept my hope that he might recover, that he might live for many years. The pain was enormous.

At Christmas, 18 days before he left, he called me, my daughter and the family to sort of say goodbye to us. He said, "The Lord is welcoming me with his open arms but he's not going to take me today. I'll still be around for a few days. I'm not leaving yet."

On the day he was leaving, we started crying and he said to us, "You have to be strong as I have been. When you move to a new house, you move with happiness. I'm not dying, I'm just moving from this life into a better one."

A part of me has been taken away. I lost my Bacurau. He was the great love of my life and he's gone so I feel that part of me is missing.

Every morning in the beginning of the day and every night before I go to bed, I ask the Father, God, to give me strength. And every night when I go to bed I ask Bacurau, my Augusto, to give me strength.

Bacurau used to say that one day he would leave MORHAN and leave it to other people to run so he could work with kids on the street, the kids sleeping on the street. Maybe if God gives me the strength and the health to do it, maybe I will start a group to start working with these kids, especially where I live.

The work that we do at MORHAN in Acre is very beautiful. We have a program on the radio on Saturdays. Nowadays we can go out and sit and have a drink. We are respected and accepted for the work we are doing. I sometimes forget all the process I have been through with Hansen's Disease.

-- Terezinha Prudencio August da Silva, as told to Anwei Law and translated by Claudia Muller, Salvador, Brazil, 2000.