

FINDING FREEDOM

Ingrid Betancourt spent six and a half years as a hostage. Three years after her rescue, the best-selling author is ready to share her story.

WORDS ANNE FULLERTON PHOTOS HUGO DE COULOMME

Ingrid Betancourt, 49, was a presidential candidate in the midst of a campaign when on February 23, 2003, her car was stopped at a roadblock on the way to the southern Colombian town of San Vicente. Separated from the other passengers and ordered into a truck by armed soldiers, she knew instantly from the men's rubber boots that they belonged to the left-wing, militant organisation FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia). What she didn't know, was that she and her aide, Clara Rojas, would spend the next six and a half years as their prisoners.

During that time, she lived with the constant threat of violence. She was chained by her neck to a tree, shared a crowded jungle prison with other hostages and marched for days while suffering from hepatitis before finally being rescued by members of the Colombian military in 2008. In a dramatic end to one of the most publicised hostage situations in recent history, government soldiers tricked the rebels into handing over prisoners by infiltrating their communications system and posing as FARC guerillas who were fying the captives to a leader.

Sipping green tea beside a window overlooking Collins Street in Melbourne, Ingrid shows no physical signs of the ordeal she only just survived. But it's clear that there are still aspects of her imprisonment that she prefers not to talk about. "You don't say certain things out of respect for the soul," she has said – even in a book.

Why did you decide to write about your experience instead of trying to put it behind you? The most obvious reason was that my family, my children, want to know. The talking part was, and still is, a little difficult. Sometimes it is impossible to get through the feeling of pain that it brings. When I would tell things to my children or wanted to tell them, I could see in their eyes that they were scared what they were going to find. By writing, I could just talk about all those things without feeling that I was not controlling my emotions or that I was hurting somebody.

The other reason was that I wanted to share what had happened there. I felt I was a witness of historical things that have to be known in order to prevent this from happening again. I think it gave sense to what I suffered perhaps. Once I was free I read so many stupid things because people didn't get what it was to be there. It's easy to criticise, it's easy to point the finger at people, but what would you have done? It was important to explain everything, be very naked in front of what had happened [and] be able to show people in a very honest way what we have gone through.

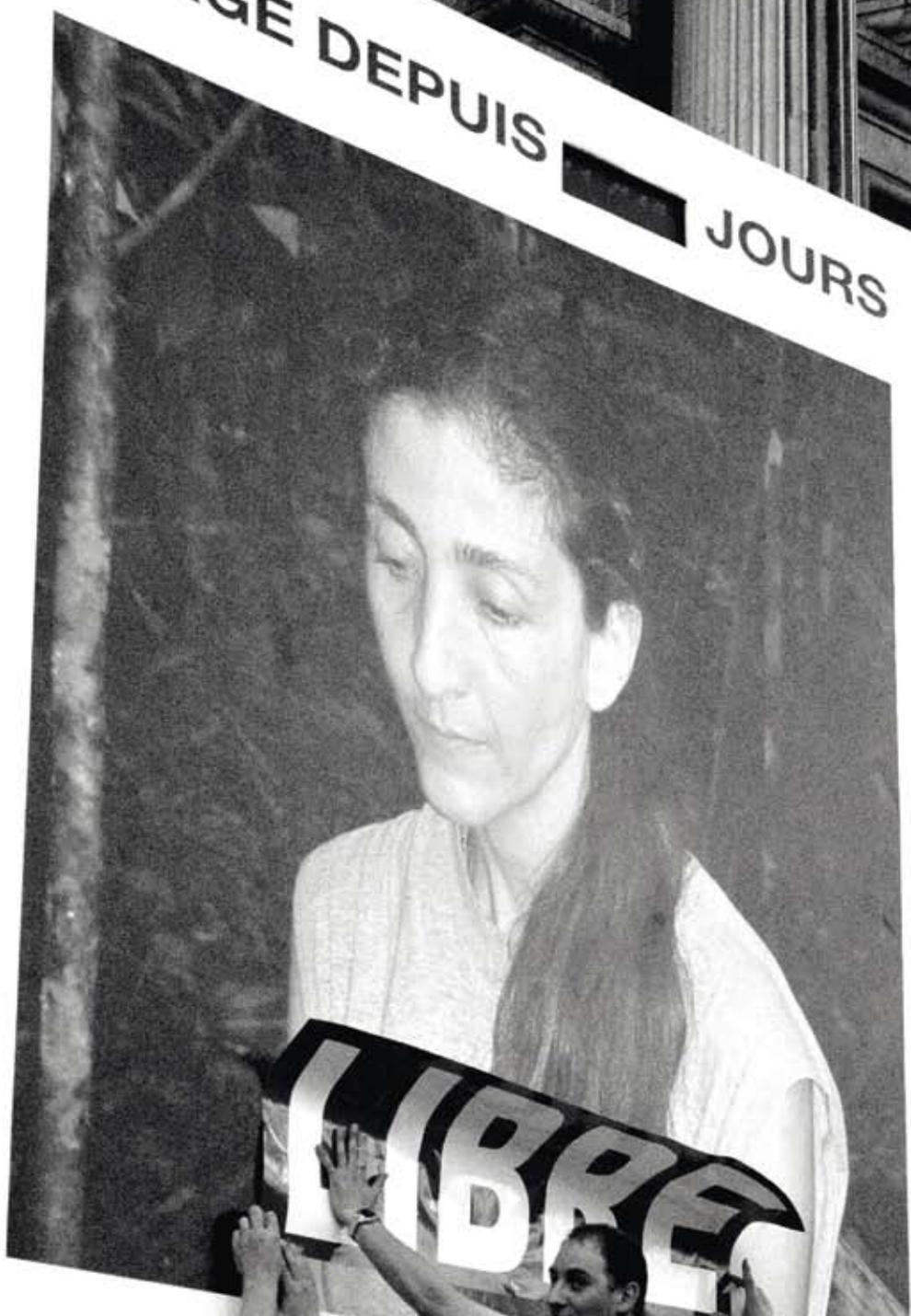
You've said that since your release you really appreciate the little things. Can you give an example? Buying stockings. I think those things are nice. To be able to choose what you wear or how to express your personality. Choosing what you will have for breakfast, using perfume, having dessert. We are in a society where people look at you if you have desserts like, "Oh, you shouldn't. You can have it once a week but not all the time". So I have dessert. To be free, that's the thing. To just be free and do whatever you think will bring comfort.

I remember one of the first pleasures that I had was to share clothes with my daughter, because when I came back I didn't have anything to wear. It was great to see who she had become as a woman, and seeing that we have the same size, that she likes the same things I like. I said, "Oh, I love this. Can I wear this?" It was very childish, very nice.

Your children were teenagers when you were taken hostage and you came back to grown adults. What was that like? It was like a reward. One of the things that tortured me in the jungle was thinking what would be the repercussions of this [kidnapping] on who they were? I was thinking that they could become bitter, or frightened, or scared, or thirsty for revenge, or unable to love. You don't know what can happen in the brain of someone, we're very fragile. I was amazed to see that they had transformed into incredible, positive, free-minded, audacious adults. Sometimes it's hard. The transition for a mum of their child into an adult comes naturally, but for me it wasn't. I had no transition.

What did you do to preserve your sanity as a hostage? When I began seeing attitudes in my companions that were not normal, I thought, "This could lead us to schizophrenia". Once I had that warning, I tried to protect myself as much as I could. I couldn't change what we were subject to but what I could change was the way I was dealing with those things. One of the things I decided was that I had to be very adamant in not participating in some things. For example, they would tell us that we had to respond with numbers, and I would think, "No, I am not going to be a number. I am a person, and I have a name, and I am a human being. I will respond with my name." Sometimes the reaction was hard to cope with, but that was something that would protect me. On one occasion they had killed some monkeys because there was nothing to eat. I had had this very tender relationship with a little monkey before and I couldn't just accept eating a monkey. Whenever that meal came to me, I

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refused and tried to convince my fellow hostages by saying, "We cannot eat that food. Those are an endangered species, we have to protect them". I remember one of my fellow captives said, "Look, the only endangered species here is us. Leave us alone!" So there were those kinds of reactions. Sometimes it was sad, sometimes it was very funny. But I was fighting for what I believed was the right thing to do.

Did you have a routine? Oh, yes. The only thing the guards would order us to do was march. That wasn't a choice. But when we were in the camp, we were bored. I would work out a lot to be fit, and, of course, always thinking that I needed to be strong in order to escape. I had the bible with me, so that was something important. It helped me a lot to meditate – not as a religious kind of thing, but it was spiritual. I would think of everything that had happened during the day, the smallest things. I would think, "this was the wrong reaction", or, "next time I should not answer this way". It helped me a lot in just focusing on being a better person, or trying to be.

What did you discover about yourself? All the little things that we don't like. The pettiness, the selfishness. For example, you have only one pair of pants and you wear them every day. Of course, you need a needle to fix them. Somebody asks for a needle and you just don't say you have one. The situation brought out all the bad, but it brought out some of the good too. I had people around me who were just amazing and that would give example. I think that as time went on, all of us were changing. The reactions we had in the first few years of abduction were not the same reactions that we had at the end. We were learning to be better people I think.

Can you give an example of a time when someone served as a role model for you? I had a confrontation with the guards because I had been recaptured [after escaping]. They wanted to put a chain around my neck. They were stronger and they were five guys against me, so they put the chain around my neck. One of my companions came to me and said, "You know, Ingrid, keep your energy for the moment. Don't give them the pleasure of humiliating you. Just know when is the time to fight and when is the time to cope with it". There were other moments where we had been brought to this prison in the middle of the jungle and we were facing a space problem. We were forced to sleep in a very small space with people we didn't know and we were frightened of how that was going to be on a daily basis. Other prisoners came and I remember thinking, oh my God, how? We don't have enough space! There was this guy who said, "We are going to figure out how. We have to welcome everybody". And I realised that yes, even though it was going to be even more difficult we had to welcome them. Those things were important.

The families of hostages could broadcast messages on the radio. What was it like when you first heard your mother's voice? It was incredible. She had this way of talking, of broadcasting her message to me like she was on the phone. Sometimes, she would say things that would embarrass me! I would think, "is she forgetting that everyone can hear?" She would drop information, for example about my husband, that I didn't want people to know.

Did you appreciate that frankness sometimes? Oh yes, especially knowing that she never knew if I was hearing. She did it for the entire time [I was in captivity] and she would still be sending messages if I was there. When she would travel, she would manage with the time zones to find out when she would have to call. She told me not too long ago, "Two years before your freedom, I had these journalists come into my apartment and say, 'Yolanda, do you know we have information that Ingrid has been executed?'" My mum said, "No, that's not true. You can tell me otherwise but I know she's alive."

Occasionally, some of the guards could be quite kind to you. Could you reconcile that with what they had done? We're human beings you see. I never lost the thought that in front of me, I had human beings. Those guys were brainwashed, and they had rifles, and I was considered their enemy, but I was very outspoken. Whatever I would say, I had a reaction, whether good or bad. One of the things that comforts me about mankind is that there's always something good about the person you have in front of you and your task is to find how you get there. I think the tool we have for succeeding in that purpose is words. Words are magical. We have to find a way to talk to people.

What's next for you? I want to get back to study. I would like to spend some time in college again. It's something I was dreaming of doing in the jungle so I think the time has come. I think I would like to study theology. You have to use your time to enrich yourself. 🌱

Even Silence Has an End is out July 26, 2011.

