



Unbound: Escaping the Narcissist

Finding Freedom and
Reclaiming Self-Worth

Hilda Balboa

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By Hilda Balboa

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Author's Note

This story is based on my personal experience of finding the courage to leave a narcissistic relationship. I hope it sheds light on how to recognize narcissistic behaviors and emotional abuse. If you or someone you know is going through a similar situation, remember that you are not alone—there is support and hope for a better life.

To my daughter,

Your strength has been my guiding light through the darkest of times. Your resilience and courage inspire me every day. This book is for you, a testament to the incredible power you hold within. Thank you for being my rock, my hope, and my reason to keep fighting. Together, we have found our way to a brighter future.

With all my love, Mummy

Prologue

Six Dollars and a Sunrise

The coffee was bitter that morning, its acrid scent mingling with the faint aroma of rain through the open window. I drank it anyway, silent, standing barefoot by the kitchen sink, watching the steam curl like a ghostly whisper in the cold air. It was still dark outside. The world was asleep. But inside, something had woken up.

As the king of the castle, his rules had ruled this house for fifteen years—what I wore, who I saw, how loud I laughed, when I could cry. Even my silences had been scripted, each moment a silent scream for freedom. But his castle had finally crumbled.

My daughter's door creaked softly behind her. Fifteen years old, her hair a wild halo from sleep, eyes wide with questions she had stopped asking aloud.

“Is it time?” she whispered.

I nodded once. That was all she needed.

There were no bags, no suitcases. Just two hearts beating fast and six dollars crumpled I had tucked inside my bra like a secret. No destination, only direction: away.

I took one last look at the hallway—the gallery of curated family photos, each frame a facade of happiness, the walls a prison of carefully chosen decor. Then I turned the knob, opened the door, and stepped into the early morning.

The air smelled like rain and freedom.

Chapter 1: A Spark in the Shadows

How We Met

Let us take a step back in time to where it all began.

In the months that followed my escape from a four-year abusive marriage, life felt as if it had been paused—trapped in a space where shadows lingered. I was a single mom, barely holding everything together while raising my two-year-old with the remnants of a broken past. I had taken refuge in my mom's house, a place that, despite its safety, pulsed with an undercurrent of tension—a silent reminder that home could sometimes feel like a holding cell.

Then, on one unremarkable afternoon, I met him. Amid the gray monotony of those days, he appeared like a spark. His confident smile and assured manner made me believe that maybe, just maybe, he was my knight in shining armor. In him, I saw the promise of rescue from the clutches of my lingering despair. I was desperate for a fresh start, for someone who could pull me out of the months of depression I had endured, and he seemed to embody that hope.

I remember the way his words wrapped around my weary heart, a sound so enchanting that it drowned out the daily echo of self-doubt. I clung to every promise he made, convinced that he was destined to heal the scars of my past. In that moment, the idea of a future filled with love and stability felt not only possible but inevitable—a stark contrast to the chaos I had known.

It was the beginning of a journey I didn't fully comprehend then—a journey that would, over the span of fifteen years, morph from the sweetness of hopeful rescue into the bitter lessons of manipulation and control.

The Shattered Illusion of Perfection

Within mere months of our first date, we moved in together. In those early days, he charmed me with his gentle kindness—he was great with my daughter and seemingly perfect with me. Every moment felt like a step toward the fulfillment of the fairytale I desperately craved. I still remember signing the lease for our new apartment—a moment that should have raised alarm bells, but I was too blinded by hope to recognize the warning signs.

It wasn't long before life began to test the fragile dream we were building. Within a few months, he lost his job. Overnight, our newfound sense of stability crumbled, and we had to accept a downgrade into a more modest

living space—a cheaper apartment that would be home to us for the next two years. I became the sole provider—a role I never expected to embrace so suddenly. I carried the weight of this new family of three on my shoulders, while he vowed that finding a job was only a matter of time.

Then came the setbacks that chipped away at what little hope remained: my car was repossessed, and within the following year, his car broke down. The financial strain intensified until we found ourselves trapped in a bind that seemed to tighten around us like a noose. Desperation mingled with frustration, and the cracks in our life began to widen.

He often boasted about his perfect credit to anyone who would listen. I remember one particular day when I asked him, with trepidation in my voice, if he could use his credit to purchase a car. At that moment, I hoped for a simple solution to ease our daily hardships. Instead, he immediately denied my request, stating that he wasn't the one needing to commute to work and that it was time I figured things out on my own. That request marked a turning point—the beginning of an undercurrent of verbal abuse that gradually permeated our interactions. His words, once filled with promise and care, became sharp reminders of my vulnerability, each one reinforcing the control he was establishing over our lives.

Chapter 2: The Weight of Words

Shattered Illusions

One evening, after a long day at work, I finally arrived home, exhausted from having to rely on a ride. As soon as I stepped through the door, the atmosphere changed. His family was there for dinner and games—a gathering meant to display his charm and control. Instead, it became a stage for his cruelty.

Without warning, he launched into a barrage of insults. In front of everyone, he mocked my choice of outfit and belittled my weight, his words echoing over the clatter of conversation and laughter from his relatives. "Look at what she's wearing. No wonder she's gained so much weight," he sneered. All the while, he boasted about the favors he had done for my daughter that very day, as if every kind gesture could erase the sting of his harsh words about me. I stood there, frozen and wounded, feeling every ounce of my heart sink under the weight of humiliation.

Unable to bear the public shame, I escaped to the sanctuary of my bedroom. I changed my clothes in haste, my mind swirling with self-doubt and sorrow, even as I fought the tears threatening to break free. This was not the first time I'd endured such indignity. Over the years, there had been many similar moments—each one a small cut to my already fragile sense of self. I swallowed my

pain, biting back my protests because I had always believed that if I didn't resort to insults first, I would somehow preserve my own dignity. Yet, every night, as I lay in bed, I cried myself to sleep, the echoes of his words replaying relentlessly in the dark.

Breakthrough

Two years later, the tides began to shift in my favor. I landed a breakthrough—a job that not only paid well but was a testament to all the hard work I had poured into reclaiming my life. With a new career and a boost in confidence, I was determined to leave behind the confines of our stifling home. I found a better place to live and even financed a car—a small victory, a symbol of my newfound independence. Ironically, he had only ever driven that car, his snide comments about my driving echoing as a constant reminder of his control. And yet, instead of celebrating my success, he twisted it to suit his narrative. To anyone who would listen, he recounted how his “encouragement” and his care for my daughter had led to my bright future. My achievements were mere props in his grand story of supposed guidance.

A few months later, buoyed by my success, I decided to celebrate with some friends—a rare night where I allowed myself a taste of freedom. Habit had me asking for permission to go out, an old reflex I couldn't break, and my sister kindly agreed to watch my daughter. He imposed a curfew of 12 midnight—a silent imposition of control even in moments meant for joy.

That night, time slipped away faster than I could have anticipated; I arrived home at 12:15. I knocked on the door, but he refused to answer—he held the only copy of the keys, wielding it as his final barrier. The moment I saw his eyes, the familiar storm of insults began. He berated me for being irresponsible and selfish, scolding me for making him bear the burden of a household while I had dared to enjoy myself. His words were harsh, cruel, and all too predictable.

Left with nowhere to go inside, I was forced to spend the night outside—alone under a cold, indifferent sky. That night, as I sat on the curb with the lingering taste of shame and betrayal, a spark of realization began to grow within me. Each insult, each act of control was another stitch in the fabric that would soon bind him from my life forever.

Control and Betrayal

A few years later, the reins of power tightened even further. He took over every aspect of our shared finances—my debit cards, my access to money, even the responsibility of paying the bills. He justified his actions by insisting that I was simply too scatterbrained with money, that his management was a sign of care rather than control. But every withheld bill, every denied purchase, echoed as another reminder of his relentless domination.

Determined to reclaim some independence and prove my capability, I enrolled in school. I threw myself into my studies and eventually graduated with a bachelor's in

business administration and management—a hard-earned victory that should have been a moment of pride and liberation. The day of my graduation was supposed to be filled with the joy of new beginnings, a celebration of perseverance against all odds. Instead, the day ended in tears.

The graduation ceremony had been long, a testament to the academic journey I had struggled through. But as we left the venue, his hunger—not just for food but for control—seeped into every word he spoke. In the parking lot, his anger erupted. He berated me for not leaving immediately after I received my diploma, accusing me of selfishness for wanting to savor what should have been a milestone of achievement. His voice thundered over the quiet hum of departing cars, turning what should have been a celebration into a moment of public humiliation. Instead of applause and pride, the echo of his anger drowned out my accomplishment.

That day, in the stark light of disappointment and defiance, I realized that no academic triumph could mask the deep-seated need for freedom.

Chapter 3: Tethered by Control

Echoes of Manipulation

As my career began to soar and new positions demanded extensive travel, the taste of independence was suddenly shadowed by constraints I could never shake. Every business trip, meant to be a step forward, came with strings attached that pulled me back into his control. My sister kindly helped care for my daughter during these times, and despite my hard work and dedication, I found myself constantly turning to him for money—money needed for basic necessities like new clothes and personal expenses that my corporate card wouldn't cover.

There were countless occasions when I set off on these journeys with nothing but old clothes in my suitcase and empty pockets, because he stubbornly refused to spare me a single dime. With each request, he would lash out, insisting that money was tight solely because I, and not he, had let the weight of the family fall squarely on his shoulders. "Money is tight because of you. You've burdened me beyond measure," he claimed, even though I never once stopped him from working.

What should have been moments of professional focus and growth instead turned into relentless episodes of control. The airport, bustling with travelers, felt like a cage as I clung to my phone, tethered to his demands. No

matter how full my schedule became, I was always forced into constant check-ins—calls that began at the very moment I entered the terminal and stretched throughout my day. On several occasions, he even initiated FaceTime calls under the guise of concern, demanding that I show him my hotel room to prove I wasn't straying from our relationship. His accusations of infidelity were as baseless as they were frequent, a stark reminder that even at the height of my career, I was never truly free from his reach.

Revelations in the Final Chapter

During the last five years of our common law marriage—the darkest part of our decade together—the true horrors began to unfold. In the midst of constant belittlement and control, I finally found a spark of empowerment fueled by my achievements. Determined to reclaim my life, I started running twice a day. It wasn't just about shedding the weight I had long been ashamed of, even when he himself was no stranger to his own flaws. Running became my escape, a rebellion against the fairy tale I once believed we were living—a fairy tale that had slowly disintegrated into a painful nightmare.

With each stride, I shed not only physical weight, but also the heavy burden of his incessant criticisms. I lost a significant amount of weight—a transformation that was entirely mine, a testament to the dedication I poured into reinventing myself. Yet, even as I celebrated my victories in silence, he appropriated every one of my

successes as if they were tokens of his own misguided guidance.

The reverberations of our toxic dynamic reached further than I ever imagined. As my daughter entered her preteen years, I noticed an unsettling change in her. The warmth in her voice began to wane, replaced by a subtle but persistent resentment that surfaced every time I came home from work or a business trip. It was as if the venom of his words had seeped into her world. She started echoing his accusations, claiming I cared more about my work and myself than about her—an echo of his own narrative meant to justify his control.

Each of these moments added another layer to the complexity of our lives. While my body and spirit grew stronger, the scars of his manipulation stained the bonds I cherished most. Every run was a silent rebellion, every lost pound a small victory against years of suppression. Yet, those same victories were bittersweet, shadowed by the realization that the damage inflicted by his words extended even to the most precious parts of my life.

In these years, as the empowerment that coursed through me began to light the way forward, I also saw with agonizing clarity how deeply his influence had pierced our family.

The Night of the Intervention

That night remains seared in my memory. I had returned early from an eight-day work trip—cut short because my mom needed knee surgery the very next day—and

expected nothing more than exhaustion and relief to fill the void of my hectic schedule. Instead, I was met by a scene I could barely comprehend: both my narcissistic partner and my daughter gathered in the living room, their expressions hard and accusing, as if orchestrating an intervention.

He launched into a tirade, claiming I had abandoned our family for a frivolous work trip to Hawaii. In his narrative, my professional obligations had been nothing more than an excuse to indulge in reckless fun. The accusations were sharp and relentless, each one aimed at chipping away at the trust and love that had once connected us.

My daughter's eyes filled with tears as she repeated his words, her small voice trembling with betrayal. I will never forget the raw pain in that moment—her innocent heart now carrying the weight of doubts and lies planted deep within by him. It was as if the very foundation of our family was crumbling under the force of his manipulations.

By the doorway lay a couple of bags filled with his clothes—a silent yet powerful declaration that he was prepared to leave that very night. My daughter's pleas to him to stay, intermingled with her accusations that I was responsible for tearing our family apart, amplified the heartbreak of the situation. Internally, I found myself conflicted: a part of me secretly wished for his departure, yearning for escape from the toxic cycle that had haunted us for so long. But when I looked into my daughter's tear-streaked face, my heart shattered. I couldn't bear to

see her suffer, to have her vulnerable trust shattered any further.

So, in that agonizing moment, I did what I thought necessary to keep us together. I swallowed every hurt, every bruise, and begged him to stay. I took the blame for everything—the stress, the pain, the separation—and promised with a voice hollow yet desperate, that I would do better. I vowed to sacrifice my own needs for the sake of both of us, clinging to the fragile hope that perhaps, by assuming responsibility for his anger, I could shield my daughter from even more harm.

That night, the air was thick with unspoken truths and a desperate plea for stability. I had become the keeper of our fractured family's peace, a role that demanded more from me than I had ever imagined. And in the silence that followed, the echoes of that intervention lingered, a constant reminder of the pain we endured—and the sacrifices made in the name of love.

He Stayed

In the aftermath of that painful night—bags half-packed and accusations echoing through our home—he stayed. Despite the dramatic scene, the threat to leave, and the suffocating tension that weighed on us all, he remained under our roof. In some small, fearful part of me, I had hoped that his departure would finally sever the cycle of manipulation and conflict, but for my daughter's sake, I had begged him to remain. And so, as the slammed door was never opened, a quiet, uneasy truce fell over the household.

Yet, everything had changed. The heartache and distrust that night bred lingered in every interaction. Even the simplest routines—cooking dinner, folding laundry—felt like I was navigating an invisible minefield, terrified one wrong step would detonate his anger and my daughter's resentment. Behind closed doors, I could feel the scorching sting of bitterness grow in me. Where love and loyalty might have lived once, I now found confusion, exhaustion, and a desperate longing for freedom. Nights I spent awake, reliving the confrontation in my mind—hearing my daughter's tearful words asking him to take her with him. The memory of him nearly walking out became both a haunting what-if and a silent regret that he hadn't actually followed through.

But still, he stayed, and I did what I had always done: braced myself for the next eruption, tried my best to ease the tension, and surrendered any sense of personal autonomy. At that point, my primary motivation was to spare my daughter any further heartbreak—even if it meant sacrificing my own.

Chapter 4: Breaking Free

Trapped

I felt as though I had lost my very purpose. The days blurred together in a haze of excessive sleep and endless nights spent crying. In the shadows of my lonely apartment, I contemplated leaving this world—another heart, another life slipping away. The relentless barrage of insults and aggression did not spare even my daughter. His venomous words stretched beyond me, as

he began to deride her eating habits, her unique sense of style, and even her intelligence. Every taunt was a calculated blow meant to break our spirits.

His frequent insults included demeaning phrases like "can't get right" or "f-ups" whenever the dishes weren't washed to his exacting standards. He often belittled me, insisting that I couldn't and wouldn't leave him because I was incapable of surviving without his guidance. He relentlessly shamed me for my previously failed marriage, using it as a weapon to undermine my self-worth. The threats to drop off my daughter with her biological father were a constant source of anxiety and fear. During dinner, he would criticize our eating habits, going so far as to make pig noises, humiliating us and making me feel utterly worthless. The most heartbreaking part is that I believed him.

But the cruelty he so casually inflicted on us eventually sparked something unforeseen. As my daughter grew more aware of his mistreatment—of how his words wounded not just me but her as well—she started to see the truth. The narrative he had carefully crafted unraveled in her ears. Resentment, budding and raw, transformed into rebellion. She began to push back against the unreasonable expectations, the endless accusations. I, too, began to find strength in defending her—a first, tentative step toward breaking free.

There were nights when I could hear her soft, desperate sobs echoing from her room after he had belittled her; nights when I was forbidden from offering her the comfort of my embrace. The sound of her pain was

enough to make my heart break over and over again. Yet, amid the anguish, there was also a glimmer of something new.

There came a brief period when he landed a well-paying job. For three precious months, a taste of freedom emerged. During those fleeting weeks, my daughter and I rediscovered what it meant to be ourselves away from his oppressive grip. We played tennis on sunny afternoons, took long, meandering walks where the breeze seemed to carry away some of our pain, and even spent time together watching movies—small acts of rebellion that rekindled our bond and reminded us of brighter possibilities.

It was during this rare interlude of light that the seeds of an escape plan were sown. We began to dream of a way out, a path toward reclaiming the freedom that had been so ruthlessly stolen from us. One day, burdened by despair yet desperate for change, I reached out to a dear friend. Her words became my guiding star. She advised me to open a separate bank account—one that was secret from his prying eyes. With trembling hands and a steeling heart, I started transferring a mere twenty dollars from each paycheck into that hidden account, hoping against hope that he wouldn't notice. When he finally did, I deflected with an excuse: a rise in our life insurance premium.

But as with all moments of hope, the reprieve was short-lived. He sensed the change. In a fit of rage and wounded pride, he quit his job—declaring it beneath his intelligence—and launched a new campaign of

monitoring. His accusations grew more paranoid. He began to claim that we were conspiring against him. Soon, his control seeped into every corner of our lives. Essentials, even those as mundane as food, became weapons of control. Our groceries were limited to what he allowed—frozen meals carefully selected to suit his preferences. He even kept a meticulous watch over our supplies of toilet paper, and when the sanitary napkins ran out too quickly, he demanded explanations. Shampoo and conditioner became luxuries rationed as if we were living through a siege.

Every restriction, every covert scolding, served as a reminder of the all-encompassing grasp he had on our lives. Yet, amidst the mounting limitations and his oppressive surveillance, a small but resilient flame of rebellion burned within me. Every dollar hidden away, every act of defiance on my daughter's part, was a testament to our yearning for liberation. Though the nights were long and the pain deep, I held onto the hope that one day, these embers would blaze into a fire strong enough to light our path out of this dark, confining house.

The Escape (With Only Six Dollars in My Pocket)

Despite exhausting the few savings I'd carefully stashed away—using it for basics he refused to provide—my resolve remained unbroken.

One evening, we went to visit his best friend—a girl, which was acceptable for him. This was a place where he always took the opportunity to brag and gloat about how

much he did for our family and to point out how lazy I was. As he was telling a story about how he had convinced me to book a flight to Dallas because he was too tired to always drive places, I accidentally blurted out, "I've offered to drive several times, but you don't let me." I could see the steam rise from his face as he became enraged. But as he always hid the cruel side of him from his friend, he calmly looked at me and said, "Of course I decline because you'll kill us with your driving skills." I said nothing more and nodded in acknowledgment.

The rest of the evening, I sat in the living room in silence, a feeling of impending doom settling over me. I knew it wasn't over. As we said our goodbyes and drove home, he looked at me in disgust and started with what I was already too familiar with—the insults and accusations of lying to his friend about him. He balled his hand tightly into a fist and punched my arm as hard as he could. He then laughed and said, "I'm sure that hurt you as much as it hurt me." I turned and looked out the car window, sobbing in pain, and did not dare to look at him. He continued the insults until we got home.

I texted my daughter goodnight and jumped in the shower, where I finally let out a loud cry that I could no longer contain. The water mingled with my tears, washing away the physical pain but not the emotional scars. That night, as I stood under the stream, I decided I had had enough. The resolve to escape solidified within me, and I began putting my escape plan into action.

The moment had finally come for me to seize the future my daughter and I deserved. I confided in my sister about everything: the endless insults, the financial stranglehold, the recent physical abuse and the urgency of escape. She responded with immediate, unwavering support. We agreed that early Saturday morning offered our best chance. My daughter, fully on board, packed a small overnight bag on Friday night, and we waited, hearts pounding, for the right moment.

He stumbled in late that Friday, having been out to dinner with a friend. The second he walked into the bedroom and saw me awake; I could practically feel the tension crackle. He must have sensed the shift—my steady gaze, my resolute silence—for he questioned me at once. Summoning all my courage, I let slip the words that had been lodged in my chest for years: “I’m not happy anymore and I’m leaving.”

He looked stunned. Then came the barrage of insults, spiraling into an hour-long tirade—accusations, belittling comments, cruel attempts to claw back control. I stayed silent, watching the clock inch toward dawn, each tick fueling my determination to break free. By 3 a.m., his fury had consumed him, and he stormed out, declaring he’d spend the remainder of the night at a friend’s and warned me to be home when he returned. The instant the door slammed, I leapt into action, heart hammering. This was it.

Six Dollars and a Sunrise

The coffee was bitter that morning, but I drank it anyway, silent, standing barefoot by the kitchen sink, watching the steam curl like breath in cold air. It was still dark outside. The world was asleep. But inside, something had woken up.

As the king of the castle, his rules had ruled this house for fifteen years—what I wore, who I saw, how loud I laughed, when I could cry. Even my silences had been scripted. But his castle had finally crumbled.

My daughter's door creaked softly behind her. Fifteen years old, hair tangled from sleep, eyes wide with questions she had stopped asking out loud.

“Is it time?” she whispered.

I nodded once. That was all she needed.

There were no bags, no suitcases. Just two hearts beating fast and six-dollars crumpled I had tucked inside my bra like a secret. No destination, only direction: away.

At 5 a.m., my mother and sister arrived with coffee and breakfast. They carried tired smiles and arms ready to help. Though they listened to my story with sadness in their eyes, neither seemed the least bit surprised. They

had seen the flickers of his controlling behavior long ago but admitted they'd been too afraid to speak up, worried I might pull away.

In the solemn morning light, with the car idling out front and the hope that he wouldn't return before we left, my heart thrummed with both fear and fierce resolve. I felt a swell of gratitude as my sister's arms encircled me and my mom's gentle reassurance offered a final push.

Together, in those last minutes before sunrise, we forged our path toward freedom—one small step at a time, built on trust, determination, and the realization that our love for each other was far stronger than the illusion that had held us captive. Then, hand in hand with my daughter, I stepped across that threshold, knowing we would never look back.

Epilogue

In the quiet light of a new dawn, my daughter and I sat together on the bare floors of our modest new home. The simplicity of our surroundings felt like a blank canvas—a space where every scar, every sorrow, could finally be washed away by our laughter and tears of joy. Even though I knew that this wasn't the end and there were plenty of hurdles to overcome, we had stepped into this new chapter with hearts full of cautious hope. The oppressive weight of the past had been lifted, replaced by the thrilling freedom of possibilities yet to be discovered.

We shared stories of our dreams, half-whispered promises to ourselves and each other, as the early sun painted golden streaks across the floor. Each burst of laughter was a small rebellion against the darkness we had once known, and every tear we shed was proof of the courage that had allowed us to break free. In that intimate, unadorned moment, surrounded by the honest austerity of our fresh start, our souls found a rhythm—a bittersweet, liberating harmony that spoke of healing, resilience, and the undeniable joy of reclaiming our lives.

This is not the end, but the beginning of a new chapter.

The memoir serves not only as a personal catharsis but also as a beacon of hope and guidance for others facing similar circumstances. It underscores the importance of recognizing narcissistic behavior, the courage it takes to leave, and the vital role of support networks in reclaiming one's life.

If you or someone you care about is facing a similar situation, please don't hesitate to speak up—even when some voices remain unheard. Remember, you shouldn't have to endure abuse in silence.

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline (US):** 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) | thehotline.org
- **For emergencies:** call 911 (in the U.S.) or your local emergency number.
- **International Resources:** Visit the International Directory of Domestic Violence Agencies to find help worldwide.

You're not alone. Help and support are out there—reach out today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hilda Balboa is a passionate advocate for survivors of narcissistic abuse and emotional trauma. Drawing from her own harrowing experiences, Hilda is dedicating her life to raising awareness about the insidious nature of narcissistic relationships and providing support to those seeking to reclaim their lives. Her memoir, *Unbound: Escaping the Narcissist*, is a powerful testament to her resilience and courage, offering readers a beacon of hope and practical guidance.

Hilda earned her MBA and is currently pursuing a doctorate in Christian Leadership, furthering her commitment to guiding and supporting others.

Beyond her professional achievements, Hilda finds solace and expression in painting. Throughout her journey, art has been a therapeutic outlet, allowing her to cope with the emotional turmoil and convey her experiences through creativity. Her love for painting is a testament to her resilience and ability to find beauty amidst adversity.

Hilda enjoys spending time with her daughter, who has been her guiding light and source of strength throughout their journey. Together, they have built a new life filled with hope, resilience, and the promise of a brighter future.