



Authoring Justice

Capstone Projects 2025

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Right Livelihood



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Borrowed Motherland. Stories of Migrant Women Rising Families Alone

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It was the fifth day of the fifth month, the year 2015, when Angie [1] arrived in Finland with her husband. A date so precise, so symmetrical, she believed it must mean something: perhaps a sign, a blessing folded into numbers.

Just weeks before arriving in Finland, Angie and her husband were married in Manila. It was a warm celebration, a fairytale wedding, simple and good. Then came the move: her husband's fatherland would be her new home. A new place, a new beginning; nothing she hadn't done before, in other lands, other languages. Starting from zero was a language she already knew, and the move did not frighten her. The plan was simple: find an entry-level job, learn the language, settle in, like any other time. But life here did not unfold the way it had in other places.

When Angie learned she was pregnant, she was living in a crisis shelter in Helsinki, after fleeing a home that had grown dangerous. The country was still a stranger to her, with unfamiliar streets, a language that hadn't settled on her tongue. The workers told her they had booked her an appointment for an abortion. As if they expected her to be grateful, as if it were helpful. Angie stood, confused. She hadn't expected this, and for a moment, she wasn't sure she understood. "No," she said, gently but firmly. This is my child.

[1]The stories in this piece are drawn from real lives. To protect the privacy of the women who shared them, all names and identifying details have been changed.

Other women in the shelter shared similar stories, similar silences. Many accepted one-way tickets home. "At least your family is there," they said. But for Angie, going home as a mother, and yet no more a wife, was not an option. In her hometown, that would have followed her like a shadow. So she chose to stay with the quiet clarity of a woman who knew her choices did not require explaining.

It was night when the contractions began. She was alone. A taxi wasn't an option, not then. So she put on her coat, paused at the door, and walked through the quiet Helsinki dark until the hospital.

Today, that child tells her she needs more time with her best friend and less with her mother. Angie smiles, a softness in her eyes. "It's that time when they start becoming who they are," she says wistfully, even though she has told harder stories without a hint of melancholy. Maybe she's recalling when her baby was small, falling asleep in the most unlikely places. Across the floor or on the highchair, legs flung like tired exclamation marks. And gently, she lifted her into her arms, and brought her to bed, as if moving a sentence to a softer line. Maybe that's what she did too, by staying. By raising her children here. She carried them to a softer place, even if her own feet stayed tired.

There's something magnetic about Angie. Her eyes smile before her lips do. Apologetic is not a word you'd use to describe her, and you will find yourself agreeing with her without knowing why. She got herself a pendant, a silver Kalevalakoru. Someone once told her it was the mark of warriors (quiet ones, perhaps, who carried on without ceremony). She thought that sounded right on her.

Lluisa would not call herself a warrior. Her voice is calm, shaped like a stream threading through stones. Her story comes softly, a carving more than a blow. She speaks from a place of stillness.

She arrived in Helsinki with no intention of laying roots. It was to be a bracket in her life, a chance to study, learn English, experience life somewhere new. But something remained unfinished, a chapter just opening. The pages felt thin and full of promise. Months later, she returned: not because she wanted to write an ending, but as the words kept forming, she felt compelled to write more.

Lluisa was a blossoming artist. She dreamed of a studio, canvases and clay. That dream softened when her children came, and the stability that children thrive in became her art. But still, she paints, captures, sculpts when time permits, her hands still fluent in the language of form and color, as if they never paused.

Finnish nature has become her quiet companion. In the forest, among birch and moss, she finds a home that doesn't ask her to speak a foreign tongue. She feels most herself when she can speak her own language. And yet, there is something quietly grounding in the pull of the sea. She often walks the shore in Kaivopuisto, where the air feels less like distance and more like space. There, among rocks smoothed by waves, she notices names carved by others. People who, in their own way, had wanted to say "I was here." That gesture brings her into brief contact with them, as if they'd waited to be met by a mother searching for a sense of home on a Finnish shore. Her closest name is Wallenius, etched into the stone in 1897. Here especially, people find ways to be near each other, even when no one is speaking.

Unlike Angie, Lluisa does not share her story freely. Not because she carries any secret, but because she hopes for a life that doesn't ask her to explain herself, where her children can grow up surrounded by the comfort of things being simple. She doesn't need to be seen as anything other than a mother at the leikkipuisto. She's done everything by the book, learned the language, earned the passport. But in the playgrounds, she still feels the invisible walls.

She has the lingering thought that at the leikkipuisto, conversations rarely cross certain lines, that Finnish mothers orbit the same space, but at different distances. And though she's done everything by the book, no book tells you how to bridge the quiet between mothers.

Angie knows that silence too. Her child longs to play with a friend. Angie asked the friend's mother many times. "Maybe next week," she'd reply. "I'll give you my number next time." But next week never came, and her name never filled the pending a spot among Angie's contacts. A year passed, and the playdate remained a vague possibility. "Maybe she's just a quiet person," Angie says. "Or maybe it's because of me" she wonders aloud, the way someone does when trying to make sense of silence.

Where Angie is from, friendship means visiting each other's homes, cooking, sharing meals. But in Finland, it's different. She speaks of her friend, Sanna, who has been in her life for over a decade. Over the years, Sanna's answers came gently, like the closing of a door without sound, a rain check that never turned sunny. And though more than a decade had passed, she had never seen the inside of Angie's home, nor had Angie stepped into hers. And yet (not often nor deeply, but reliably, like a note slipped under a door that stays closed) Sanna remembers to check in.

There were days, Angie admits, when the walls of her apartment felt like a cage. Days when the children were small and the silence loud, and she thought she might go mad. Some nights all that went wrong in her life pierced through her chest and kept her awake. Some days passed without much more than the hum of the refrigerator and the sound of squeaking toys. Other days, she found herself watching the light move across the room, slow and disinterested, like it had somewhere better to be.

But even then, there were the small things. Her child's breath steady in sleep, steam rising from a mug, small socks to pair.

A window that fogged and cleared, fogged and cleared, without asking anything of her. Those days didn't lift her, but didn't let her go either. And in between long stretches of stillness, Angie held.

Lluisa was lucky. She felt that, at a time when she could barely trust her own voice, she had found a guardian angel, who went by the name of Rabija. Those days, Lluisa had lost track of where she ended and someone else's judgment began. The boundaries had blurred so gradually she barely noticed. But Rabija noticed. And with time, with long conversations and quiet reminders, she helped Lluisa remember the shape of her own self. Not all at once, more like a river reshaping the riverbank. It took two years of slow unfolding for Lluisa to feel herself again. She had once returned to Helsinki because a story felt unfinished, because the words kept forming. But this also became part of the story: the realization that some chapters carry you too far from who you are. And that part of writing more is knowing when to set a book down.

"When you raise your children alone, people always find a way to tell you what you're not doing right" said Angie. That the children should eat better, sleep longer, scream less, sit quiet. That your house is messy and your Finnish broken. Everyone has a measure, but no one ever handed her a word of praise.

So, she began saying it to herself. Not every day, but sometimes, at the end of a working day, when the dishes were done and the apartment finally quiet, she would sit on the edge of her bed and wrap her arms around her own shoulders. She would say, barely loud enough for the words to settle somewhere inside her: "You did well today."

The children had eaten. They had laughed. They had fought and made up. She had paid a bill, answered a message, remembered to buy milk.

There was no script for the life she was building. No model to hold up and say, "like this." She made it up as she went along, stitching mornings to nights, meals to memories, folding small pajamas and haunting memories into the same drawer. And if no one clapped, she didn't wait for applause, but her one hand holding tight the other hand.

From 12 May to 20 July 2025 the Global Campus of Human Rights ran the second edition of its online course called "Authoring Justice". The course focused on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about human rights and social justice issues – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers and affect change around the world. The second iteration included lessons from award-winning authors, activists and publishers, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Kao Kalia Yang, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Shahram Khosravi, Jemma Neville, Casey Gerald, and Joel Rickett.

The cohort of students included human rights experts, journalists, climate activists, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from migration to racial justice, from youth-led social movements to climate advocacy and beyond. The following pages feature a few selected examples of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.

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