

A woman in a black swimsuit is floating in blue water, her body oriented vertically. The water has a textured, rippling appearance. The title text is overlaid on the image.

LILIANA'S
INVINCIBLE
SUMMER

*A SISTER'S
SEARCH
FOR JUSTICE*

CRISTINA
RIVERA
GARZA

**LILIANA'S
INVINCIBLE
SUMMER**

A Sister's Search for Justice

**CRISTINA
RIVERA GARZA**



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In the midst of winter I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.

—ALBERT CAMUS

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Acknowledgments

By Cristina Rivera Garza

About the Author

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I

AZCAPOTZALCO

Time heals everything, except wounds.

—CHRIS MARKER, *Sans Soleil*

[here, under this branch, you can speak of love]

The tree is brimming with invisible birds. At first I think it must be an elm tree—it has the same sturdy and solitary trunk supporting the sprawling branches that I recognize from my childhood—but soon, just a couple days later, it is clear that it is an aspen, a foreign species transplanted long ago to this part of Mexico City, an area poor in native vegetation. We sit beneath it, right on the edge of a yellow curb. The sun slowly setting. Across the busy street and behind tall metal gates, gray factory towers stretch upward, and heavy power lines bend, barely horizontal, against the sky. Trailers drive by at great speed, as do taxis and cars. Bicycles. Of all the evening noises, the sound of birds is the most unexpected. I have the impression that if we move beyond the tree's shadow we will not be able to hear them anymore. *Here, under this branch, you can speak of love. // Beyond lies the law, the need, / the trail of force, the preserve of terror. / The fief of punishment. // Beyond here, no.* But we listen to them and in some absurd, perhaps unreasonable, way their repetitive and insistent singing triggers a calm that cannot erase disbelief. Do you think she will come? I ask Sorais as she lights a cigarette. The lawyer? Yes, she. I have never known what to call that movement, when lips pressed together stretch toward one side of the face, dismissing any illusion of symmetry. I'm sure we'll see her soon, she says in response, spitting out a strand of tobacco. In any case, it wouldn't hurt to wait another half hour. Or another hour. Looking at her sideways, hesitantly, I have to admit to myself that I mentioned the lawyer because I wanted to avoid asking her to wait with me. *Supplicate* is the verb. I did not want to beg. I did not want to beg you to wait here with me for a little longer because I don't know if I will be able to, Sorais. Because I don't know what animal I am unleashing deep within. We are now six hours and twenty minutes into a journey that started at noon, in what now seems to have been another city, another geological era, another planet.

[twenty-nine years, three months, two days]

We'd agreed to meet at noon at the place where I was staying. An old house turned into a boutique hotel. A white fence flanked by bougainvillea and vines. An old gravel passageway. Palm trees. Rose bushes. And while I wait for Sorais with some anticipation, I don't take my eyes off the city on the other side of the windows. It welcomes just about everyone, this city. It kills just about anyone too. Lavish and unhealthy at the same time, cumulative, overwhelming. Adjectives are never enough. When Sorais arrives at the house that is to be my home those few autumn days in Mexico City, I don't know if I will be able to.

There are two things I must do today, I tell her right away as we hug and exchange greetings. The aroma of soap in her hair. The moisture of her skin after a hot bath. Her voice, which I have known for years. Well let's go then, she answers immediately, without even asking for more details. It might take all day, I warn her. And it is then that she pauses, looking into my eyes. So where are we going? The intrigue in her voice betrays expectation, not suspicion. I am silent. Sometimes it takes a bit of silence for words to come together on the tip of the tongue and, once there, for them to jump, to take the unimaginable leap. This dive into unknown waters. To the Mexico City Attorney General's Office, near the downtown district. She keeps quiet for a moment now, paying close attention. About two weeks ago, I tell her, on another trip to the capital city, I met up with John Gibler, the journalist who helped me start the process of finding my sister's file. She looks down, and then I know for a fact that she knows. And understands. After a brief search in the newspaper archives, I continue, John found the news just as it was published in *La Prensa* twenty-nine years ago. He managed to contact Tomás Rojas Madrid, the journalist who wrote the four articles that documented the murder of a twenty-year-old architecture student in a surprisingly restrained tone, in language devoid of emotion or sensationalism, succinctly depicting the crime that had alarmed a neighborhood in Azcapotzalco on July 16, 1990. And I came, I continue explaining, to meet the two of them, the two journalists, at the Havana Café, that famed and crowded place, and walked

with them to the building of the Mexico City Attorney General's Office. Because I wanted to file a petition there, I tell her. How does one even formulate such a letter? Where does one learn the protocols for requesting a document of this nature?

October 3, 2019. Mexico City.

C. Ernestina Godoy Ramos. Attorney General of Mexico City.

My name is Cristina Rivera Garza, and I am writing to you as a relative of LILIANA RIVERA GARZA, who was murdered on July 16, 1990, in Mexico City (Calle Mimosas 658, Colonia Pasteros, Azcapotzalco Delegation). I am writing to request a full copy of the case file that at the time corresponded to Public Ministry record no. 40/913 / 990-07.

If you need more information, please do not hesitate to contact me at the following address.

Best regards.

There is only a slim chance of recovering the file, I clarify again, after all these years. Twenty-nine, I added, twenty-nine years and three months and two days. I am silent again. Things are so difficult sometimes. But they are supposed to have an answer for me today, I say.

[the younger sister]

We decide to walk. The journey, according to Google, would not take us more than forty-four minutes on foot. And the day is spectacular. So we trek forward. One step after another. A word. Many more. If it weren't for the fact that we are pursuing the record of a murdered young woman, this could be mistaken for any random outing in a touristy city. Avenida Ámsterdam is a legendary street in La Condesa, a Porfirian neighborhood established in 1905

that still boasts its old art deco and art nouveau mansions, now sandwiched between apartment buildings with shiny windows and roof gardens. The neighborhood was also known as the Hippodrome because the avenue along which we walk this morning was, in its origins, the oval track where horses raced against each other. Desperately. It is easy to imagine them: the horseshoes against the loose dirt of the arena, the rattle of their gallop, their glistening skins, the upright manes. Their rosy gums. One after another, those horses. Running as if their life depended on it. Aren't we all? The air from the past lingers, crisp and sharp, full of uproar, against our nostrils while the canopy overhead prevents sunlight from passing through. Still, Avenida Amsterdam remains a must-see. Elongated and paved with bricks, the path is a closed form, a kind of physical villanelle that thwarts the experience of continuity or the feeling of finitude. You always go around, endlessly, inside an oval, after all. You are always a horse running against the past.

The muffled echoes of English or French or Portuguese pass us by, ringing quietly on the sidewalks. But a street vendor surrounded by the pungent aroma of wild marigolds on one of the banks of the Parque México speaks Spanish. And so does the paper collector, singing his old-time tune while dragging a metal cart ever so slowly: papeles viejos, periódicos usados que venda. The construction workers who have borne the weight of the renovations that turned this neighborhood into an oasis for hipsters and young professionals speak languages that come from far away in the highlands or from shanty neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city. If I lived in Mexico I could not afford a home here. But I'm passing through. I take advantage of a research visit at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) to trace the file for investigation 40/913 / 990-07, which contains the arrest warrant issued against Ángel González Ramos for the murder of Liliana Rivera Garza, my sister. My younger sister.

My only sister.

[already exhausted, already fed up, already forever enraged]

It is easy to get used to the beauty of the space. Here, the city boasts its best features. Dogs on leather leashes. Strategically placed traffic circles and limestone fountains. Outdoor cafés. Poplars covered in golden light. We rush forward, and as our breath quickens, the words pour from our lips. There are so many stories we have to tell each other and catch up over. The words echo on the road that draws us from the freshly washed streets of La Condesa: we head toward Avenida Michoacán until we come across Calle Cacahuamilpa, where we turn left, then right into Avenida Yucatán and Eje 2 Sur. Did you hear about the professor accused of harassment who was banned from setting foot on the Iberoamericana campus? Almost immediately, we turn left and then right to find ourselves in Álvaro Obregón. Did you read about the Oaxaca Green Wave manifesto, where they blasted the organizing board of the local book fair as misogynous? A kilometer later, we dart left onto Avenida Cuauhtémoc and enter the Doctores neighborhood: from Dr. Velasco to Dr. Jiménez and, from there, on increasingly narrow streets full of poorly parked cars, to number 56 Calle General Gabriel Hernández. Have you seen *The Joker* yet? The pungent taco stands. The corner stores. The ramshackle balconies. Stray dogs. All these children walking on their own. Is that a hawk in the middle of the sky?

A couple of months ago, in early August, a squad of rightfully enraged feminists congregated in front of the Attorney General's Office, the same white building we are entering now. A teenager had just been raped by members of the local police while they were on patrol. What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now. The chants vary little around the world, rumbling from mouth to mouth, from fist to fist, against a common sky. Anthropologist Rita Segato has reminded us that behind the relentless war against women, which is being waged with equal ferocity inside homes and on public grounds, lies the "mandate of masculinity," which negatively affects women and men alike, albeit in different forms and with different lethal risks. Defined as men's perceived duty to dominate in order to belong to a brotherhood whose main aim is control over women's bodies, the "mandate of masculinity" helps us understand that while violence against women may appear to be sexual, it is, above all, a matter of power. The

domination of female bodies brings a lesson with it: a pedagogy that promotes the normalization of cruelty, which in turn contributes to the perpetuation of the predatory system we know as patriarchy. Femicide is, in this context, a hate crime, one committed against women because they are women. Ten of them take place in Mexico every single day, leaving a trail of heartbreak pierced by impunity and flanked by indignation. While news of femicide has become customary over the years, this rape case sparked a new wave of national outrage. The protesters gathered behind the metal fences of the Attorney General's Office resolutely demanding an audience with the head of the institution and, when only her representative came down to meet them, assuring them that they were doing everything possible to pursue the case, one of the women—already exhausted, already fed up, already forever enraged—threw pink glitter at his head. The gesture, as spectacular as it was innocent, earned the feminist protests a new name: the glitter revolution. These grassroots movements have attracted more and more women, younger women, women who grew up in a city, and a country, that harasses them every step of every day, never leaving them alone or offering respite. Women always about to die. Women dying and yet alive. With handkerchiefs half covering their faces and tattoos on their forearms and shoulders, young as newborn planets, the women claimed the right to live peacefully and safely on this land stained with blood, torn by the spasm of earthquakes, and steeped in violence. They stood up right here, exactly where we stand today. Our feet on their footprints. Their footprints enveloping our feet. Many footprints. More feet. Our feet conforming to the invisible silhouettes of their steps. Their silhouettes opening up to accommodate the soles of our feet. We are them right now and we are others in the future at the same time. We are others, and we are the same as we always have been. Women in search of justice. Exhausted women, yet close together. Fed up women, but bearers of a centuries-old patience. Already and forever enraged.



[0029882]

To enter the Attorney General's Office, you must pass through a security checkpoint, setting down your bags and jackets. Good afternoon. With your permission. Go ahead. We ought to dispose of the water bottles that Sorais bought toward the end of our trek. It is so very hot outside. Look at all this sweat. Later, much obliged, you have to stand in one of the six lines available just to learn which office to contact afterward. The bureaucrats' friendliness is overwhelming. Good afternoon. Please. May I bother you for your ID? I show the officer petition number 23971, addressed to Attorney Ernestina Godoy Ramos, bearing the stamp that indicates it was received on October 3, 2019, at 2:20 P.M. And he produces the record, imprinted with folio number 0029882, where it is noted that my original petition was transferred to three different jurisdictions. Put this red label on your blouse, he instructs us. A scarlet circle. A branding of sorts. My colleague will show you the way, he

says. We take the elevator to the fourth floor and, from there, walk through cramped corridors barely covered by worn linoleum until we are ushered out of the building to reach the emergency stairs, an old metal structure that was once painted white. The creaking of footsteps. The feeling that everything is about to fall apart. There, inside of the building once again, turning to the right, to the end of the corridor, lies the Office of Management Control of the Office of the Attorney General.

The woman who works behind a small glass window stares at her computer screen and, without looking at us, assures us that she is listening. Her very long nails. Hair half black and half blond. One second, please. She enters the folio number into the system and something pops up on the screen that will then come out of the printer. For a few seconds I think that this is the file I am looking for, and my breathing stops short. Will this be the moment? Will I dare to read it all now? Sorais places a hand on my left shoulder. But the document, dated October 16, is just a piece of paper listing the three jurisdictions that may or may not have, or might have once had, the file I am seeking. Do I imagine things or is it true that the woman's eyes are saddened when she informs me, on the other side of her tiny window, as if captive herself, that it will be difficult for me to put my hands on such an old document? If it is not here, it may be in the Concentration Archive. And where is the Concentration Archive? There are many. It depends on the nature of the file. Suddenly, without thinking, I ask if it will be possible for me to reopen the case. Or open a new case? It is the first time I have thought of this possibility. She takes a deep breath. Looks at me again. I am not a lawyer, she says, but I do know that a person cannot be tried for the same crime twice. It is the law. But he was never tried, I say. She lowers her eyes. She stops herself from saying something. Go first to the General Directorate of Police and Criminal Statistics, she says instead. It's right in this building. Go back toward the stairs and turn right; they will be able to explain it to you over there.

[unusual]

The officer we need is in a meeting, but the woman behind the desk and the computer screen may be able to help us. Petition number? A case from 1990, you say? She remembers. Yes, she does. She discussed this petition with her boss a few days ago. The request remains clear in her mind because it is very unusual for someone to search for a document from this long ago. Do you know that? she asks. Know what? That it is even more unusual to actually find it. I turn to her very carefully, with some reserve, wondering if what I hear is a simple comment uttered in haste or if there is something pointed in that short sentence, an undercurrent of reproach. I can't help it. I have to ask myself: Why did it take me so long? So many things happen in thirty years. Death happens, above all. It doesn't stop happening. The deaths of thousands and thousands of women. Their corpses here, around us, barely touching the floor as they linger shoulder to shoulder with us. Behind our backs. In the folds of our hands, when they shake. At the very corners of our lips as we speak. Behind the knees, as they flex. They are here, next to the skin, ingrained in our grief. These are their faces on the posters that cover the lampposts, on the pages of the newspapers, in the reflections on the windows: the look they had before the crime, before revenge or jealousy, before love. Time crowds and contracts. Then it relaxes again. One year. Three years. Eleven years. Fifteen years. Twenty-one. Twenty-nine. I bow my head and look at the perfectly horizontal edge of the desk on which I slide very slowly, with all the parsimony in the world, my fingertip. I have to sigh, defeated. I lift my face again, my chin, my eyebrows. Mountains are said to move this slowly in deep time. I see her: her smooth skin, her straight hair, her very white teeth, the black eyeliner that frames those serene eyes. Have they been forced to take customer service workshops? Or do they know from experience that all of us arrive here heartbroken and guilt-ridden and angry? Her voice, even softer than her skin, instructs us to go down to the second floor, to the Office of the Deputy Attorney General for Decentralized Investigations. There they will be able to tell you something, she says.

[memorial]

Police. Lawyers. Women in high heels. Checkered-apron grandmothers. Victims. We stand shoulder to shoulder in the narrow elevator. Back on the second floor, to the right, awaits the green counter where another employee tells us to go a few steps farther until we reach another small window. In the official memorandum, folio number 0029882, shift / 300/14098/2019, it is established that: *A complete copy of the case file 40/913 / 990-07 is hereby requested. W / N Attached. Instructions of the Deputy Attorney General: It is sent for your attention and follow-up, so that it is resolved in accordance with the applicable law; you must mark a copy to this Deputy Attorney General Office of the attention provided to the present, referring to the corresponding shift number. Mtro. Joel Mendoza Ornelas, Prosecutor's Office Supervising Agent. October 17, 2019.* The employee lets us peek at the document but doesn't hand it to me. I'll do that, he says, as soon as you bring a copy of your official ID. He has uttered these words over and over again, relishing the disbelief and frustration they trigger. I have it right here with me, I say, as I unzip my backpack. Will you make the copy? Of course not, he smirks, can you imagine the number of people who come here on any given day. Go down the stairs and right outside the building, across the street, you will find a photocopier. On the way out we pass by a colorful poster with a date, OCTOBER 4, writ large. And next to it, glued to the wall, a thin, almost translucent sheet of onionskin paper featuring the memorial written in honor of Lesvy Berlin Rivera Osorio, a UNAM student murdered by her boyfriend on May 3, 2017.

Such a seemingly smooth phrase: "student murdered by her boyfriend." Lesvy Berlin Rivera Osorio. It took two years of tireless activism, two years in which Lesvy's mother insistently advocated for a rigorous legal investigation, to be able to write it in one breath. Still in pain, grieving for her daughter, Araceli Osorio Martínez took to the streets, joining many others in their demand for justice. She spoke to the media, often and strongly, denouncing slanderous depictions of her daughter's behavior. She was young. She drank beer every now and then. She liked to hang out with friends. She

was sexually active. So what? Lesvy was no whore, no drunk, no junkie. And even if she were, even if she had been, would that justify her murder? How brave and relentless Araceli Osorio was! She soon contacted human rights organizations across Mexico and forced the attorney general to open a trial. Under the guidance of lawyer Sayuri Herrera, now in charge of the first femicide prosecution office in Mexico City, the predator was found guilty after a highly publicized two-year-long trial and sentenced to forty-five years in prison. Few believed him when he initially argued that Lesvy's death had been self-inflicted. To be more precise, only those used to sheepishly blaming the victim assumed that Lesvy had committed suicide. When the news began to circulate and readers realized that Lesvy had been found hanging from a phone booth on the university campus, the black wire around her neck, it was simply too hard to believe that Lesvy had taken her own life. The verdict, still fresh in the air, has run like a whiplash of electricity through my spine ever since. The news, which brought tears to my eyes, propels me directly into this place, this walk, this promise. Another world is possible, Liliana. Another love. We cross the landing, but I have to jerk Sorais by the elbow in the middle of the next run of stairs. Did you see that? About Lesvy? Yes, I did. Did you see the date? Sorais shakes her head from right to left. Which date? October 4 is the date my sister was born.

Lesvy and Liliana. The sound of the combined *l*'s forces me to put my tongue against my upper teeth, pushing the air around the sides of my mouth. A lateral consonant. Could they have been friends? Could they have partied together, their manes of hair up and down, shiny and wild, in a crowd dancing to cumbia sounds? Could they have run to help each other in the middle of the night in case of asphyxia, strangulation, sudden death? Alveolar lateral approximant consonant. Liliana. Lesvy. They *are*, I correct myself, substituting the present for the past. They are friends.

Everything on this day seems to be an encrypted message. Everything a small Pandora's box from which ghosts, specters, hallucinations arise. Daggers. When we reenter the building with a copy of my ID, a gaping mouth floating on my face, I walk resolutely to the window of the Office of the Deputy Attorney General for Decentralized Investigations, as if a miracle

were about to happen. My eyes full of inexplicable hope. Now you have to go to Public Prosecutor's Office Agency number 22, in Azcapotzalco, the officer says nonchalantly, handing me the document and keeping a copy for his files at the same time. Is he rejoicing at our dismay? Is there a smirk dancing, barely concealed, behind his lack of expression? This is what comes next: we have to cross the entire city to know the rest. I have to warn you, he adds, a bit pensive, compassionate at last. Everyone goes out to eat at three in the afternoon. Are they gone for the day after that? They are expected to be back at 6:00 P.M. Are they? They are. We calculate the amount of time we have. If we hurry, we might be able to catch them right before lunchtime. But they would be hungry, for sure dejected, if we manage to get ahold of them before lunch. Instead of rushing, we prefer to do what they do. We choose to eat.

[a hand waving above the crowd]

The Attorney General's Office is near downtown Mexico City. A sixteen-minute walk will take us to El Cardenal, a restaurant located on the ground floor of a Hilton hotel, just across the Alameda Central and next to the great Palacio de Bellas Artes. Feverish activity sweeps across the crumbling sidewalks, where a steady stream of haggling customers draws the attention of blue-aproned employees who take care of business from behind glass counters, in front of shelves full of tin, plastic, and metal goods. There is so much noise that instead of walking side by side, we move in a single-file line that, at times, becomes a zigzag. Sorais walks ahead of me, saving me the trouble of wrestling with the incoming crowds, and when I look at her back, at the way she skillfully angles her elbows to move her way through rivers of people, I realize I have no idea what she thinks of all this. I've known her for years now, first as her mentor and later as her colleague and friend, but we have hardly ever talked about Liliana, much less about the circumstances of her death. We have examined, in utmost detail, books we've shared, films old and new, the maneuverings of politicians and scam artists. We've burst into

laughter at the unlikeliest of hours, making fun of dubious men or unflinching women, going as far as imitating their movements and voices while sipping coffee or gulping glasses of wine. We've giggled together. Has she been able to glean through my half-formed sentences, the way I have tried so many times to articulate the words, weave the scenes, lace the characters and their intentions, just to give up at the last minute? Does she know, or else, does she imagine? The gap between us grows larger at times, so much so that I am afraid I'll lose sight of her at any moment. Is she here, leading the way, because of solidarity or out of pity? Are you here because you know, Sorais, or because you want to know? I am not so sure I'd make it through the rest of the day left to my own devices, bereft on the street, facing the past, which is always about to happen. It is right then and there that she turns, looking for me among the crowd. That big smile of hers, open as a cloud. Are you coming? she says. It is not a matter of knowledge, either producing or sharing it, I have to admit; it is this hand that, suddenly, abiding by its very own will, motions forward and upward attempting to reach yours. Ecstatic. Under the reddish reflection of the traffic light, people talk about summer. The one that already was, the one to come. Other words are lost between the hunger and midday miasma. Sometimes everything in life, even the body, seems real.

[gastric juices]

Can you enjoy life while you are in pain? The question, which is not new, arises over and over again during that eternity that is mourning. Much is said about guilt, but little about shame. Guilt may usher in a healthy suspicion, even a rational hesitation, about pleasure, joy, company. Shame, on the other hand, is a door firmly locked. Few activities require as much energy, as much attention to detail, as self-hate. Millimetric. Exhausting. All-consuming. Right after Liliana's death, when years were piling on top of each other and it was impossible to even pronounce her name, it became increasingly important to abandon any pursuit that could interrupt the ceaseless dance of