

FRESH EYES

When abandonment is not a option

*Cuando el abandono no es una opción*Ángel Navarro¹, Rosa Pérez²

I have been living with Javier for 7 years. We keep each other company, not only out of necessity, but because we feel a deep affection for each other. I can't say who takes care of whom, but what I do know is that I would give my life for him. And that's not just a figure of speech, it's what I would instinctively do if someone tried to hurt him. I can't bear to be apart from him. I have never done it willingly. In these 7 years only on 2 occasions have we separated and I still haven't quite figured out what happened. Maybe if I could understand what happened I would feel less anguish every time he leaves. Maybe in that notebook in which Javier writes every night, a kind of diary impregnated with a mixture of his smell and the ink of his fountain pen, is the answer.

"You are my only family, my partner, my friend. You give me strength to get up every morning and live a new day. I wish I had more health, because I lack that, but I have you."

Javier is an old man. It doesn't matter to me. But that's what he says about himself: he calls himself "old". "I'm an old man," "look what this old fool has done," he tells me. It's true that he is walking slower and slower. When we go out for a walk, I stand next to him and walk at his pace. I couldn't bear for him to fall down because of me, for trying to go faster than his tired legs can carry him. In his home I have shelter and nourishment, everything I need, I have him. I am always by his side, and when he calls me, it takes me seconds to get to him, to transmit my affection, which is unconditional. I think he knows that I will never leave him and I think he would never leave me.

We only separated for health reasons. When he is sick he chokes, he is short of breath. Sometimes he recovers at home, but sometimes they take him to the hospital. And I can't accompany him there. I don't meet the conditions, it seems. I don't understand, because I would be willing to sleep on the floor to be by his side. At home I have a soft bed that I love, but I don't need any comfort when it comes to being with him. If I can't eat I don't mind either. In fact, the times he's been taken away in the ambulance and I've had to go somewhere else, I've barely eaten. I'm overcome with such a sense of sadness that I'm not even hungry.

I just think that I may never see him again. I think if that happened I would let myself die. I know some people have done that, they have waited indefinitely without eating or drinking until death came upon them. And it's not that I have suicidal intentions, far from it. I love my life and the life I lead with Javier, but I don't know if I could bear his absence. In the end, after leaving the hospital, he has always come looking for me.

The problem has always been with those who wear the uniform, the people who take him in the ambulance, those who didn't know what to do with me. And the strange thing is that this was not foreseen, because my story with Javier is not unique. In Spain alone there are 7 million of us, although there are fewer of us who live with a single person¹. On the other hand, I don't know why they don't let me go to the hospital, when many of us go into hospitals and even work in them, helping children and adults to recover²⁻⁴.

I understand that some people think that we may transmit some disease, but it has been demonstrated that if we have our check-ups and are up to date with our vaccinations, the risk is low or non-existent⁵. There are chairs that study how we can help society as a whole^{6,7}. Even SEMES (Spanish Society of Emergency Medicine) has created a working group to deal with the problems that affect us.

I know that one of the things that concerns emergency professionals is whether we will get in their way when they try to help our colleagues, like Javier for example. They are concerned about how we will behave. They're also concerned about whether someone can take care of us. If we are left home alone, the question is that if our partner is going to be in the hospital for many days, what will we do in the meantime. I would tell them not to worry, that most of us are peaceful and good-natured, that we just want our friend and companion to be well. Maybe it would be good for them to know something more about us, with that they would know how to act.

Nowadays everything is based on protocols. It seems logical that what we need to do is to be included in these protocols, to think about us. Moreover, fortunately, for some time now, the criminal code has included mis-

Author affiliation: ¹Health Emergency Technician, Barcelona, Spain. ²Emergency and Emergency Nurse, Barcelona, Spain.

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Corresponding author: Rosa Pérez Losa. C/Marina, 332, 3-2. 08025 Barcelona, Spain.

E-mail: rosaperezlosa@gmail.com

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treatment of us as a crime. Therefore, it should be taken into account that if we are left without care, abandoned, it could be considered a crime⁸. I have never had any problems with the emergency professionals. I know they want the best for Javier and that's why I try not to bother them when they come to pick him up. What happens is that I can't help trying to get into the ambulance with him. The ambulance professionals always treat me well. They usually pat me and give me reassuring words. But I don't pay much attention to them because I try not to let Javier out of my sight. I think that if the emergency personnel had some instructions on what to do with us when something happens to our colleagues, it would surely make their job easier. Just as Javier has his patient records that they can refer to, there could be some procedure where they can refer to what to do if we are on our own.

And something could happen to us, too. We can have an accident when we travel with them by car, for example. If this happens and Javier has to be taken to the hospital by ambulance, what happens to me? who takes care of me? who takes me to get my injuries treated and where? who is in charge of picking me up so I don't cause another accident? who will take care of me until Javier recovers and comes to pick me up? and not less important, who will inform Javier while he is in the hospital of my condition and where I am? Because, knowing him, I know that he will be more worried about me than about him and this may worsen his condition and it will take him longer to recover. I know that in other countries, such as the Netherlands, there are specific ambulances to transport us when we become ill or have an accident⁹. If this is the case, why don't our emergency professionals have protocols, trained personnel and adapted transport to take us to another place for the necessary time until our colleagues recover from the pathologies they may suffer, since we cannot go with them to the hospital?

It is not only in the Netherlands that they are concerned about this issue. In Murcia there is a similar service called AMAR¹⁰, which we know a lot about. The service is free and is run on a voluntary basis. On their website they say that they pick us up when "they are in a situation of helplessness, either because the family suffers a traffic accident and they are injured or temporarily limited to take care (...), or because the person lives alone and must be transferred to the hospital or is temporarily unable to care (...)"¹⁰.

This service covers an absolutely real need, since it is not only about our welfare, but also about the possibility that the patient refuses to be treated or transferred until he/she has the guarantee that we will be well cared for. Loyalty is not only between us and our colleagues, but also between them and us, and sometimes they would rather refuse care than leave us alone.

Of loyalty, love, care, we know a lot. Of medicine, of emergencies, of protocols, we understand nothing. Others understand more than we do. We do not know how to read or write, we do not know how to speak,

although we make ourselves understood and we are the ones who listen best, even though we only understand part of what is said to us. Therefore, we just want to ask to be taken into account, to consider the possibility of being transferred like our colleagues if there is no other way, or that the Murcia initiative be generalized, that emergency professionals be trained. Although they put good will, but not all of them know how to treat us. All we want is not to abandon our colleagues and not to be abandoned. Javier would never abandon me of his own free will. I wouldn't abandon him either. The only thing I think about when he gets sick is that he recovers as soon as possible and that he shows up at home again and that, when he crosses the threshold of the door, I hear his voice saying to me: "I'll never give up on you":

-Hello boy, did you miss me? I missed you too. Come on, I'm as good as new. I'll take the leash and take you for a walk, the doctor told me it's good for me.

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