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Stories 4 Wings

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Resilience

Look Me In The Eyes





My name is John, and I was born with partial deafness, which became almost complete at the age of fifteen. I grew up in a humble family; my parents were good people, but they believed that any disability was a weakness. Numerous financial and survival problems left them no time to deal with the deafness of their youngest of seven children.

My siblings loved me, but they were also busy with their own problems and didn't pay much attention to me, so I felt quite alone. Only Martin, a year older than me, would let me go with him and his friends to wander the streets and play pranks.

Over time, Martin became my interpreter with the rest of my family and the world. He was the only one with a little patience to look me in the eye and try to understand me and to figure out how to make himself understood. We created our own codes, and thanks to him, I was able to survive those years when I was increasingly isolated from the world. At school, I had almost no friends because the class leader took it out on me and made my life miserable. By the time I reached adolescence, I was almost completely deaf and alone.

Due to the lack of support, resources, or interest in what is now known as integration, I left school. At just sixteen, and with an anger with the world magnified by adolescence itself, I gradually became a violent person, and quite naturally, I joined a gang of street criminals; neighborhood kids with many problems and very few tools to overcome them. We all felt like we didn't fit in in one way or another, and that brought us together.

Martin continued studying, constantly trying to convince me not to continue down that path, not to join them, to go back to school, or at least to stay and help out at home, but I felt important within this gang of losers. Little by little, I distanced myself from Martin, and, without realizing it, I was sinking into a hole of silence, rage, and rebellion.

At eighteen, I participated in a more sophisticated robbery than usual, in which we broke into a house in a wealthy neighborhood, where one person was seriously injured. Due to my deafness, it took me longer than expected to react to the police alarm, so I was arrested along with a rookie who had recently joined the gang.



With no means of defending ourselves, we were convicted and imprisoned. I didn't have an interpreter at the trial; my public defender did what he could, but he was unable to reduce the unjustly high sentence imposed on me due to my criminal record and poor communication skills.

After I entered prison, everything got worse. I relived the bullying and abuse I had experienced as a child because of my deafness. It was extremely difficult for me to understand and adapt to the rules. I missed my gang, but above all, I missed Martin terribly. I fell into a deep depression where I no longer had the strength either to be angry. I isolated myself completely, didn't try to communicate with anyone, and spent the day lying in my cot with my eyes closed, listening only to my thoughts, which only served to make everything worse.

I only had one moment of semi-happiness a week when, every Sunday without fail, Martin came to visit me and told me, in our code, the family anecdotes from those days. Sometimes he showed me photos of a birthday or some important event. Some of my other brothers and sisters and my parents visited me from time to time; I appreciated it, but they used to leave very soon because we didn't know how or what to say to each other. Only if they were there with Martin could we have a few moments of what could be considered a conversation.

Months passed, and I got used to being there. I was still sad, lost, and isolated, but at least they didn't bother me anymore, and everyone left me alone. I found myself in a state of tranquility without excitement; I felt a bit like an amoeba, a sleepwalker, without willpower, almost emotionless. In a way, I was like a living dead person.

Until one day, everything changed: I was standing in line for lunch when, a little further ahead, I saw a woman I'd never seen before serving the food. She was a woman, perhaps my mother's age, plump, with very black hair tied back in a bun and covered by a hygienic cap. She served the food slowly, looking into the eyes of those who passed in front of her. She didn't speak, but her mouth never stopped smiling for a moment. When she served the pot of stew, her smile grew wider, and with a nod and a subtle, slow blink, she would say, without speaking, "Enjoy your meal."



When my turn came, the last in line, the stew was gone, and there was nothing left. Then, she looked at me with eyes that said, "I'm sorry," and still smiling, she raised her hand to indicate that I should wait a moment. She went into the kitchen and came out with a plate containing another stew, gave it to me, and put her fingers to her mouth, indicating that it was delicious... For the first time since I'd walked in there, I smiled, touched my chest with one hand, and lowered my head, saying "thank you" in my own way, a concept I rarely used.

At that moment, we realized simultaneously: we were both deaf! She was the first deaf person I'd ever met. I had never even considered that there were other deaf people like me. I had always felt like a rare and unique creature... A thrill in the form of a shiver ran from the small of my back to the top of my head. We both opened our eyes wide, smiled even wider, and reached out to shake hands briefly across the food counter.

I sat down to eat my food from a place where I could see her. I watched her come in and out of the kitchen (I later learned she was the head cook). I saw how she communicated with the rest of her colleagues, how she gestured, and never stopped smiling. She greeted me from a distance. I lowered my eyes, smiling shyly, and continued eating, thinking about what had just happened, questioning my attitude, my anger, my victimhood, my sadness, and my entire life. I had seen, with my own eyes, another deaf person who seemed happy...

From then on, something happened inside me. It was like a "click," an awakening, a realization that if I wanted to change my situation, I had to change my attitude. Yes, I was deaf, but I wasn't the only one in the world. I couldn't hear or speak like the rest of the people around me, but there were many other things I could do. That same afternoon, I asked to meet with the social worker, a young woman who had been trying to meet with me for months, though I had always rejected them. She had some knowledge of sign language (I didn't), so between the universal gestures, her immense effort, my budding enthusiasm, and a piece of paper and pencil, we were able to have the most fruitful conversation I'd had in years.





At that meeting, we laid the groundwork for the changes I would make from that moment on: the most urgent thing was to go back to school and learn sign language and lip reading. She made me see that, aside from my disability, I had a lot of resentment and pain inside me that needed to be healed, so she convinced me, not without difficulty, to also attend therapy with the prison psychologist. If I wanted, she could accompany me at first to help me with the interpretation. Therapy helped me a lot to overcome my traumas and complexes, but the best part was that there I discovered what turned out to be a hidden passion and talent for art. As soon as I gained a little self-confidence, I signed up for all the art workshops offered during my years in prison.

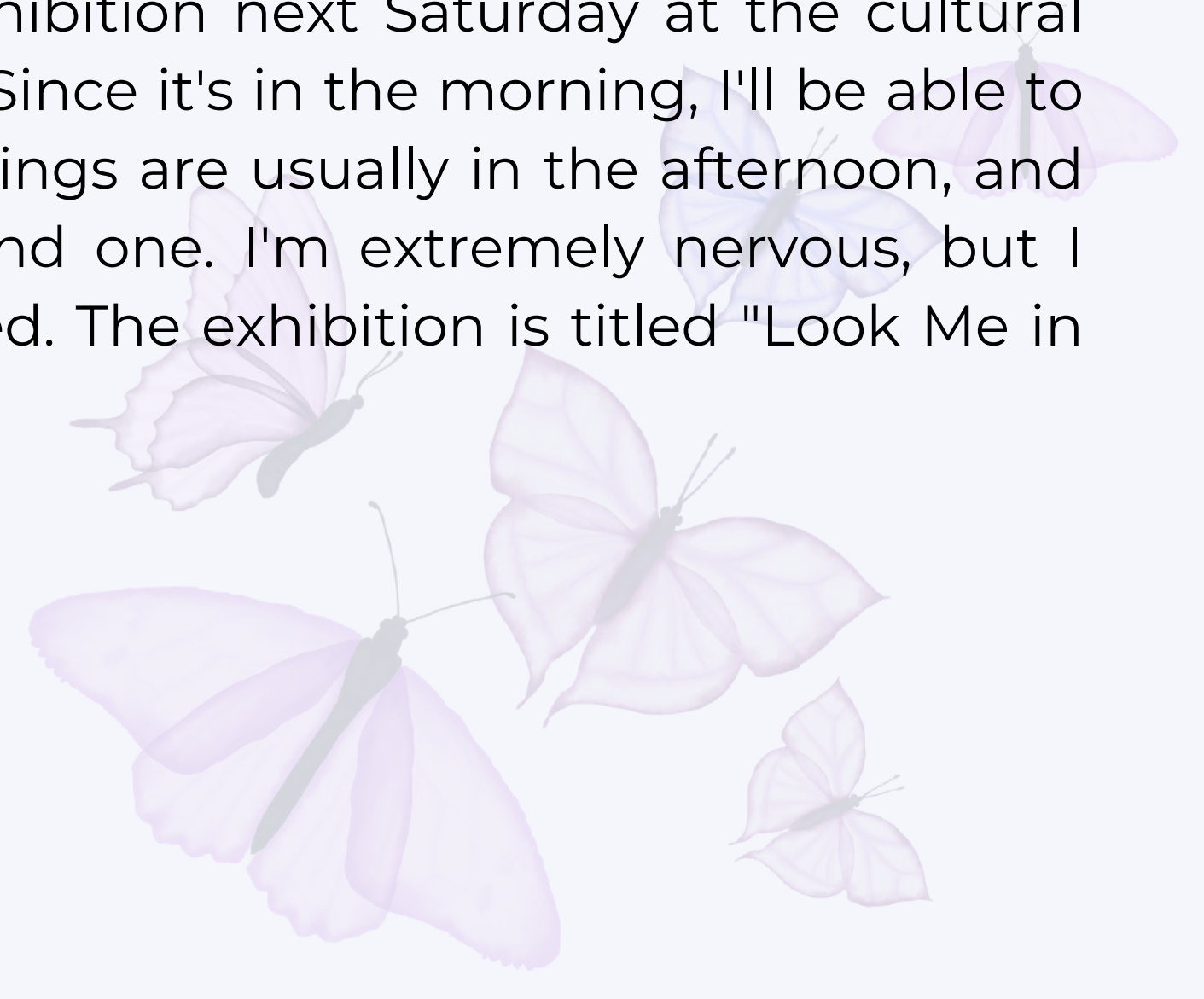
By the time I was given my first permit to be out of prison during the day, I was ready to attend my first class at the arts and crafts school, where I am finishing my ceramics module. My teacher says I have a special sensitivity, that my hands are incredibly skillful, and that my body understands the technique before it goes through my head. That my talent is innate... I only know that when I'm working with clay, I feel good, I feel connected to myself and what I'm doing, I feel free, and I feel at peace. Although I'm still finding my own style, I feel that through my works I'm communicating, I'm expressing what I feel, what I think, or what I'm not even aware of. It's my way of speaking.

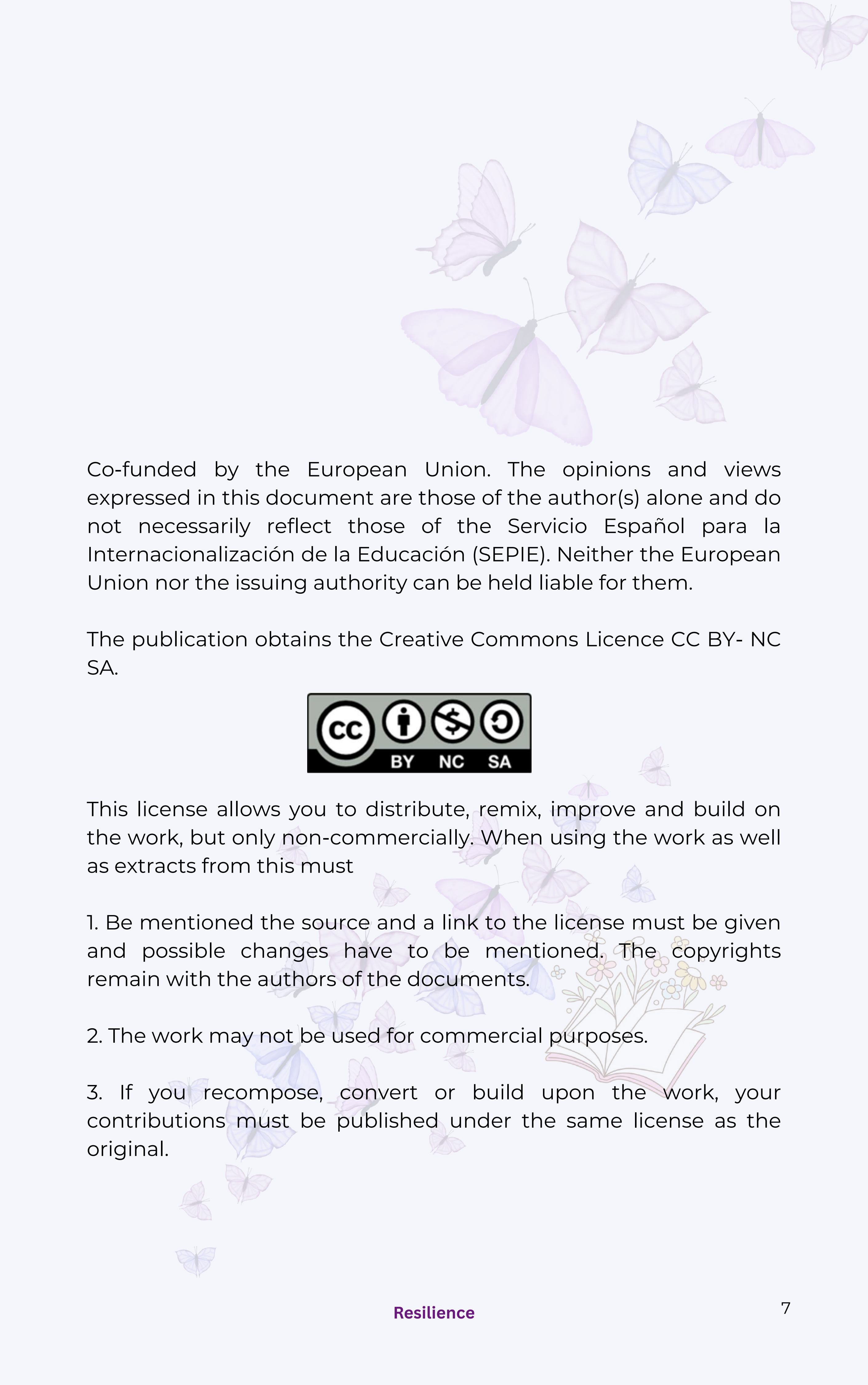
My friend Cris, the cook, still works at the prison, but I don't see her much anymore because she doesn't usually work the night shift, which is when I'm there. She loves my pieces and always goes to the school exhibitions to see them. She says she understands me and that she expresses herself through food; that cooking is her art and her way of communicating with the world.

My brother Martin also learned sign language and has worked hard to teach the basics to my parents and two of my sisters. He also volunteers for our city's deaf association and has been in charge of going around schools to "detect" children with hearing loss who aren't being cared for so that what happened to me doesn't happen to them. This year Martin is graduating in law; he will be the first university graduate in my family.



I'm opening my first solo exhibition next Saturday at the cultural center in my neighborhood. Since it's in the morning, I'll be able to attend, since almost all openings are usually in the afternoon, and I've never been able to attend one. I'm extremely nervous, but I have to admit I'm very excited. The exhibition is titled "Look Me in the Eyes."





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