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Taken Under Fascism, Spain's 'Stolen Babies' Are Learning the Truth

Thousands of Spanish children were taken from hospitals and sold to wealthy Catholic families. This is Ana Belén Pintado's story.

By Nicholas Casey

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On a balmy October day in 2017, Ana Belén Pintado decided to clear out some space in her garage. Her father, Manuel, died in 2010, followed by her mother, Petra, four years later. Their belongings sat gathering dust at her home in Campo de Criptana, a small town in the countryside south of Madrid. As she carefully opened the boxes, she marveled at the objects inside — her childhood dresses, a doll, an old dictionary — each so familiar, reminding her of a life the three of them once shared.

But then she came across some papers she had never seen: medical records from decades ago, including a note from her mother's doctor. Petra Torres, the note said, had been married for eight years. She was 31 years old and had been trying to have a family. But a set of X-rays indicated that she had a uterine anomaly and obstructed fallopian tubes.

In other words, Pintado's mother had been sterile. The diagnosis was dated April 1967, six years before Pintado was born.

Pintado had long believed that the couple who raised her were her biological parents, but there were a few puzzling aspects about her family. She had no brothers or sisters, which was rare in a small, Catholic town like Campo de Criptana — Pintado herself, who was then 44, had three children of her own. There was also an odd incident that happened after her father died: A lawyer handling the estate found some papers that showed she was born with a different last name, but before anyone in the family could have a closer

look, her mother snatched the documents away and refused to speak about them again.

As Pintado sat in her garage, sifting through the papers, she found another document that was just as confounding as the doctor's note. It was a birth certificate, which indicated that her mother had given birth to a girl in the Santa Cristina maternity clinic in Madrid. "Good appearance and vitality, good coloration," a hospital staff member wrote. The paper was dated on Pintado's birthday, July 10, 1973. There was even a room number: 22.

Pintado took a closer look at the birth certificate. She could see that someone had torn off the top third of the paper, leaving a jagged edge behind. Her birth certificate had been tampered with; there had been something here that someone wanted to hide. "I knew this couldn't be my mother," she told me. "And that's when I thought, I might be a stolen baby."

Pintado had long known about the phenomenon of babies stolen from hospitals in Spain. The thefts happened during the end of the regime of Francisco Franco, the right-wing dictator who ruled the country until 1975, and even today the disappearances remain a subject of mystery and debate among scholars. According to the birth mothers, nuns who worked in maternity wards took the infants shortly after they were delivered and told the women, who were often unwed or poor, that their children were stillborn. But the babies were not dead: They had been sold, discreetly, to well-off Catholic parents, many of whom could not have families of their own. Under a pile of forged papers, the adoptive families buried the secret of the crime they committed. The children who were taken were known in Spain simply as the "stolen babies." No one knows exactly how many were kidnapped, but estimates suggest tens of thousands.

The stolen-baby phenomenon was just one part of a national nightmare that began in Spain with Franco's rise to power. A right-wing army commander, Franco was among a group of military officers who plotted to overthrow Spain's government in a 1936 army rebellion, triggering the Spanish Civil War. Overnight, Spain went from an elected democracy to a country in which death squads rounded up and executed leftists and intellectuals. When Franco's Nationalists could not subdue the Basque Country, they called on warplanes from Nazi Germany that flattened the town of Guernica, inspiring the famed painting by Pablo Picasso that bears its name. The ruthlessness was typical of a new brand of authoritarianism that began toppling democracies one by one in Europe in the 1930s. But unlike Adolf Hitler, Franco survived World War II. Spain's regime lived on as an enduring fascist state in the heart of modern Europe.

Pintado this year in Campo de Criptana, a small town south of Madrid. Lydia Metral for The New York Times

As Spain's supreme leader, Franco took the title Caudillo, or "strongman," and soon began stripping away social freedoms within the country. Up to the early 1930s, Spain had been among Europe's most progressive countries, allowing for married couples to divorce and women to seek abortions. Under Franco, those rights were swiftly rescinded. Contraception was outlawed, adultery was criminalized and women lost the right to vote. Newspapers were censored, and many books were banned altogether, including those of Federico García Lorca, Spain's most renowned poet and playwright. (Lorca had already been murdered by Nationalists during the civil war.) Franco's political movement, the Falange, once even published a schedule for housewives outlining times to take children to school, bleach clothes and prepare dinners.

But one of the most lasting abuses of the era was borne by children. In the late 1930s and 1940s, Antonio Vallejo-Nájera, a leading psychiatrist in the regime who was trained in Nazi Germany, promoted the idea of a Marxist "red gene" carried by the children of Franco's left-wing opponents. The gene, he said, might be suppressed by removing children from their mothers and placing them with conservative families. Franco's men soon began the abductions on a large scale. They targeted children orphaned by Franco's firing squads and took newborns belonging to women who had given birth in jail as political prisoners. All were sent to be raised by regime loyalists. The era of the "stolen babies" had begun.

Franco's rule also marked a dramatic turn for the Catholic Church, which allowed its nuns and priests to become partners of the right-wing regime. They commanded the education system, where children were to be instructed in Catholic values, learning to read using the Bible. Franco also ceded oversight of parts of the state-run hospital system to the clergy. Nuns often sat alongside top management at hospitals, helping to select staff and overseeing the budget. But their influence was perhaps strongest in the hospitals' charity floors that took in the poor. There, the nuns were often deployed to encourage single mothers to give their babies up for adoption to married couples.

"The mothers were no longer prisoners, leftists or the wives of leftists," wrote the journalists Jesús Duva and Natalia Junquera in "Stolen Lives," a 2011 book about the kidnappings. "It was no longer about political repression, even though, in many ways, the victims continued to be from the same defeated social classes: poor couples." For a time, the arrangement ran smoothly. But by the 1960s, Franco had opened Spain to tourism and multinational industries, which brought foreigners with more liberal ideologies. The economy also boomed, giving women more independence. Being an unwed mother was no longer as impossible as it once seemed. "The supply of babies began to fall," Soledad Arroyo, a journalist who investigated early accusations, told me. "But it had already

generated a huge black market in the illegal trafficking of babies. What do you do?”

Some nuns — aided by doctors, nurses and midwives — began to abduct babies to meet demand. In certain cases, the nuns still managed to persuade mothers to give up their children willingly, though many say they were coerced into surrendering their newborns. Others say they were sedated in the delivery room and then told, when they woke up, that their babies had died. In reality, the children had been sold to other families.

Franco’s regime was not the only one to use the theft of children as a political weapon. In Argentina, as many as 30,000 people were “disappeared” by a military junta that ruled from 1976 to 1983 and gave their orphaned children to right-wing families, prompting decades of protests and demands that the government investigate. In Spain, people often refer to the Argentine cases as offering a precedent. But unlike Argentina, Spain never established a truth-and-reconciliation commission. In fact, the country did the opposite, passing a broad amnesty law in the years following Franco’s death that absolved members of the regime of most of their past crimes. While those responsible for the abductions were not explicitly granted amnesty, the policy did reflect a consensus that had emerged in post-Franco Spain — to avoid confronting the dark legacy of the dictatorship. The agreement even had a name: the Pact of Forgetting. Spain’s leaders, on both the right and left, espoused the need for peaceful democracy, even if it meant sacrificing popular calls for justice. “Let’s not disturb the graves and hurl bones at one another — let the historians do their job,” said José María Aznar, a former prime minister, in a speech years later.

It’s a sentiment that has endured to this day. Many mass graves belonging to victims of the Nationalists killed during the civil war remain untouched, despite pleas from family members to exhume and identify the bodies. The Valley of the Fallen, a Catholic basilica and paean to the fascist dictatorship, still overlooks the capital. And for the stolen babies of the era, now middle-aged adults like Pintado, there has been no official acknowledgment of what occurred in the hospitals. No apology from the government or church for the kidnappings. And no clear starting point for finding answers. Pintado, like many others, would have to become the detective in the case of her own kidnapping, tasked with hunting for the parents she never knew.

Campo de Criptana offered what felt like an ideal childhood for Pintado. The village lies off a highway running south from Madrid, where the cityscape of the capital gradually gives way to vineyards and wheat fields. On the hill above the town sit giant white windmills from the 16th century, which residents say inspired those in “Don Quixote.” Pintado cherished her memories of the winding streets, of her parents, of the shop that her father had run, the Manuel Pintado Bakery. As a little girl, she liked to play among the

egg boxes he unloaded while her mother sold croissants and madeleines to the customers. Now, as an adult, she realized that she may have never really known her parents at all. They had kept a secret from her, and she was determined to find out who else had known.

She began by approaching a neighbor who had been a close friend of her parents. Armed with the papers from her garage, she and her husband, Jesús Ignacio Monreal, knocked on her door. “I’ve come to find out some things,” Pintado said bluntly after walking inside. “Tell me what happened. Tell me how I was born.”

Campo de Criptana. Lydia Metral for The New York Times

The family friend admitted to having always known about the adoption but said she knew little beyond that. Pintado asked the neighbor to think back, recall whatever she could, even details that didn't seem important. She was with Pintado's parents, the neighbor remembered, the night they brought her home from the hospital. They stood on the street, and the couple showed her the baby's face, which looked like a little angel's. But there had been something strange about the encounter, too. Pintado's father had insisted — his body shaking with anger — that no one should ever tell their new daughter that she was adopted. It was to remain a secret. And so the neighbor didn't bring it up again until Pintado and Monreal asked her that night.

As Pintado's husband listened, he wasn't entirely surprised by the story. Many years ago, Monreal heard rumors that his wife had been adopted, but he never mentioned them — not when they were young and telling each other their life stories, not through years of marriage in which they had three children together. "My own husband," she told me, "he also knew, and he didn't tell me because he thought I knew it already, like it was some kind of intimate secret of mine, and I didn't want to let it out."

Monreal thinks he did bring it up at least once to his wife, after Petra snatched away the inheritance papers. But he didn't push Pintado on it. Monreal tended to avoid confrontations: He grew up in the town, too, and knew the subject of adoptions could be a difficult one. Few places were more traditional than Campo de Criptana, where life centered on religious charities, the *cofradías*, each one with its own meeting hall dedicated to a different figure in the Bible. Both Monreal and Pintado knew that for her Catholic mother, not being able to have a family of her own would have been a source of shame, just one more secret in a town full of them. But hearing the neighbor describe her father's anger, they realized that the truth might be even darker. Her parents weren't acting out of embarrassment. They may have been trying to cover up a crime.

Pintado decided to go to Campo de Criptana's town hall to ask for a copy of her civil registry document, which would include a few more details about her birth. A worker went into the archive and produced a paper, marked with a Spanish coat of arms, that said that Pintado had been registered under a different last name than her parents': Pardo López, the same last name she thought she saw on the inheritance documents that her mother had taken from her. In scratchy handwriting that was hard to make out, the document said that the parents' first names were Miguel and María. Pintado now had documents that essentially said she was born twice: to the woman who raised her — and to this couple she knew nothing about

Manuel and Petra Pintado, the couple who raised Ana Belén. From Ana Belén Pintado

Pintado continued her search, knocking on doors throughout her village, hoping that other people would finally be willing to share what they knew now that both of her parents were gone. A few of her parents' friends had died in recent years, and others claimed ignorance. But one neighbor offered a story Pintado had never heard. When her mother was alive, she and their group of friends would get together on Saturdays. After a few hours, Petra would "let a few things escape," the neighbor said, including a story about the night Pintado was brought home from Madrid. Petra told the group, almost boastfully, that she had been asked by those involved in the adoption to wear a pillow under her dress to appear pregnant when she went to the hospital. She also said that she

had paid a large sum of money for the adoption.

Pintado could barely process what she was hearing. If her mother had pretended to be pregnant, if her birth certificate was forged, if her parents had offered a large payment for her, then they must have known exactly what they were involved in — they had actively played a role in her kidnapping. Her love for them had been built on a shared story that she now knew wasn't true. She could feel her sense of betrayal curdling into anger. "You want to ask them: 'Why have you done this? Why?'" Pintado told me. "I'm not the kind of person who could rob a daughter of another mother."

Sra. D.ª Petra Lucas Torres — Habitación n.º 22

EXAMEN CLINICO DEL RECIEN NACIDO

Modalidad del parto: Cefalico espontáneo — Fecha: 10-VII-73
Sexo: Hembra — Peso: 2.800 grs. — Talla: 45,5 cms. — Pc. 33 cms. — Pt. 32 cms.
Inspección: Buen aspecto y vitalidad, buena coloración.
Cráneo: Normal — Fontanela: 2 x 2 cms.
Cara: Normal — Fosas nasales: Permeables
Cuello: Normal
Tórax: Normal
Aparato respiratorio: Normal
Aparato circulatorio: Normal
Abdomen: Normal
Cordón umbilicar: Normal — ¿Ano permeable? Si
Aparato génito-urinario: Normal
Esqueleto: Normal — Ortolani: Negativo
Sistema nervioso. Tono: Normal
Reflejos del recién nacido: Normales
JUICIO CLINICO: R.N. normal
OBSERVACIONES

Madrid, a 11 de VII de 1973

UJ0194010

Pintado's birth certificate. From Ana Belén Pintado

Back in her garage, among her deceased mother's papers, Pintado found one more clue. Her mother had saved a set of greeting cards from a Catholic nun in Madrid. One showed Joseph and Mary in a Nativity scene; a second portrayed a woman in a gown, holding an

infant. “May your child, who I remember, be an encouragement for you to continue living full of dreams,” it read.

Pintado recalled visiting a nun in Madrid as a child. She remembered the train to the capital, her mother leaving Pintado outside while she delivered an envelope with money. She couldn’t remember the nun’s name. But there it was, signed at the bottom of the card: Sister María Gómez Valbuena. Pintado did an internet search for the name and found scores of allegations of abductions, many of which sounded much like her own. Case after case led to the hospital where she was born.

The first public accusations that babies were being sold in Spain came as early as the 1980s. A cover of a popular women’s magazine ran a headline in 1989 that read: “Baby Trafficking in Madrid — ‘They took my daughter without letting me see her.’” In the pages that followed, a desperate mother told the story of how a doctor named Eduardo Vela tried to get her to sign adoption papers after she came out of anesthesia during childbirth. Her baby, she said, was sold for 380,000 pesetas, the equivalent of several thousand dollars.

Yet Spain’s Pact of Forgetting held. As more accusations emerged that babies had been stolen, the accounts were mostly ignored. The country’s judges, many of them holdovers from the Franco era, refused to take the cases. And while Franco’s regime fell in the 1970s, the hospital system continued to be run by the same nuns for years.

It would take a new prime minister for something to finally change. In 2004, the conservative government was defeated by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, a Socialist who came into office with plans to address the taboos of the past. Zapatero ordered the last remaining statue of Franco in Madrid to be hauled away. Then, at Zapatero’s urging, Spain passed its historical memory law in 2007, which condemned the crimes of the Franco era and recognized its victims for the first time.

A new generation of victims began to emerge — this time led not by the mothers who had lost their babies but by their children, now grown, who were seeking their biological parents. They formed grass-roots organizations like the National Association for Irregular Adoption Victims, which estimated that as many as 15 percent of the adoptions in Spain from 1965 to 1990 were performed without consent of the birth parents. In 2011, the group filed its first lawsuit on behalf of 261 people claiming to be victims of the kidnappings. The filing caused a sensation in the country, leading more to come forward. Within a month, the number of cases had grown to 747.

As the pressure mounted, Zapatero’s attorney general, Cándido Conde-Pumpido Tourón, began his own investigation. He soon discovered a pattern: Though victims had filed

many complaints over the decades, judges had simply archived case after case, citing the statute of limitations. Conde-Pumpido didn't agree with these dismissals and told me recently the state needed to get to the bottom of what happened, then sort out the questions of who was to blame. Officials began actively investigating the kidnappings, and the number of cases ballooned to more than 2,000.

Sister María Gómez Valbuena leaving court in Madrid in 2012. Pedro Armestre

The first suspect to emerge was Vela, the gynecologist who was named in the 1989 article. Officials had interviewed a woman who accused Vela of forging her birth certificate and believed the doctor illegally sold her without her birth mother's consent. Officials were also developing a case around Sister María Gómez Valbuena, the nun Pintado remembered visiting as a child and who had also worked closely with Vela.

Among the potential witnesses who came forward in the case against Sister María was a janitor who had worked in the hospital. When I talked to the janitor, I.M., this spring, she asked that only her initials be published because she feared retaliation for having worked in the clinic. She said Sister María's office in Santa Cristina was located on the second floor, downstairs from the nursery for the newborns, where red and blue cradles sat along the wall. On the fifth floor were charity beds where unwed and poor mothers who required state assistance recovered after giving birth. "I cleaned her office," she said. "I

saw everything."

I.M. started working at the clinic when she was a teenager and remembered Sister María being severe and unrelenting. But it was the nun's behavior toward the unwed women on the charity floor that surprised her the most. Sister María would refer to them as "heathens" and "subversives," sometimes to their faces. Many of the babies had been reported dead, I.M. said, including some she had seen alive in their incubators hours before. There were rumors that the body of at least one newborn was preserved in a refrigerator, though I.M never knew why. (Some I interviewed said that mothers who demanded to see the remains of their children were shown corpses of other babies.)

She also remembered a blue notebook that sat on Sister María's desk in the clinic. Inside were lists of names, many of which I.M. recognized as prospective parents she had seen visiting the nun. They came to the clinic in the morning, always with a check. Sister María would interview them for several hours, and if things went well, the families left with a baby that afternoon. In another column of the notebook, I.M. had also seen numbers marked in pesetas. The amounts didn't seem like donations to her; some of the figures amounted to weeks of wages.

I.M. never told anyone what she saw during those years. She hadn't, she said, because it would have been her word against that of the hospital. "Back then women were nothing," she told me. "You had to submit to your father, then to your husband and then to the state."

The janitor's account was among several similar stories that were appearing in the media as the investigations under Zapatero were underway. David Rodríguez, then a student in Madrid who took his story to local journalists, said that his mother had told him she paid 60,000 pesetas to Sister María when she adopted him. Rodríguez had even met with Sister María, who denied the claims and said she couldn't offer him more information about his adoption because of her faulty memory. In 2011, the nun made similar statements during an interview with Arroyo, the investigative journalist, and said, "Adoptees shouldn't be looking for their biological parents, because they're not going to find them."

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As the search for her mother continued, Pintado realized she needed to look beyond her neighbors in Campo de Criptana if she wanted more answers. In the fall of 2017, she came across an organization called S.O.S. Stolen Babies, a grass-roots group of victims searching for family members, with chapters throughout Spain. Pintado met with a founder of the group, Mari Cruz Rodrigo, who gave birth to her second child in 1980. Five days later, a doctor told her the baby had died of a heart attack in an incubator and refused to let Rodrigo see the body. As the years passed, Rodrigo started to doubt the story.

She warned Pintado that the road ahead would be difficult: Only a dozen of the nearly 400 S.O.S. members had ever found their families. Rodrigo still had no idea if her own child was alive or what his reaction would be when learning the truth. "If I find him, he won't be my son, he will simply be a man who I gave birth to," Rodrigo told me. But Rodrigo encouraged Pintado to continue her search, pointing her to a Madrid government office that had helped S.O.S. members get information on birth mothers through records requests. Pintado was willing to try anything, so while she reached out to that office, she also opted for something that was more of a long shot: writing letters to any families she could find with the surnames Pardo and López.

Pintado at her first communion. From Ana Belén Pintado

López is a common name in Spain (nearly one in every 50 people has that last name), which meant that Pintado would need to write hundreds of thousands of letters if she was to have any chance of finding her mother. But she had sold the family bakery where she had worked much of her life. Her children were older now, and there were suddenly many more hours in the day to fill. No task seemed too futile or inconsequential. What if her mother opened one of the letters? She picked up her pen and wrote to a random family in her rounded, cursive script:

> I am Ana Belén. I am writing because I am looking for my biological family. Just by chance, I have found your name and address. I am a stolen baby. … I'm desperate to find my family and I'm asking you if by any chance in your family there were ever suspicions about this issue. Please write to me even if it's not the case so I can eliminate people as it's been hard work and I've spent a lot of time searching. I'm sorry to bother you and for this coming out of the blue, but at this time, I've got no other leads. Sincerely, Ana Belén

"She was like Don Quixote, and I was like Sancho Panza," Monreal said of his wife. He wanted to do what he could, and started reading drafts and helping her write letters. She wrote to dozens of families, from the suburbs of Madrid to Murcia, a small region on the Mediterranean coast. They even received a few replies. "They said things like: 'Look, this isn't us, but we support you. And if you find them, write to us,'" Pintado said. But no one wrote back claiming to be her mother.

Sometime after sending the first batch of letters, she received a call from someone at the Madrid government office Rodrigo had suggested she contact for possible leads. The official said she had been able to find a first name for her mother in the hospital records. But the name wasn't María, which had been listed on her civil registry document. That name, it would seem, had been forged. Her mother's real name was Pilar.

The official told Pintado that the search also surfaced a place of birth for the mother, a province called Ávila, a short drive west of Madrid. The mother was 23 when Pintado was born. It wasn't much, but Pintado grew hopeful again.

Now she would search for Pilar.

One of the most highly publicized cases working its way through the court system against Sister María involved Purificación Betegón, whose story about the disappearance of her children in 1981 shocked many throughout the country. When I met Betegón, she told me that in those years, she was living with her boyfriend and pregnant with her second child. Before heading to the clinic, Betegón expected that her 2-year-old son would soon have a younger brother or a sister to keep him company.

But when she went into labor, there was a surprise: The doctor informed her that she would be giving birth to twins. Both babies were healthy, she was told. "The orderly said to me, 'Puri, you've given birth to precious children.'" The twins were quickly rushed elsewhere, and Betegón was wheeled into a dark room. When a nurse came in, Betegón asked her: "What am I doing here? I'm not in my room." The nurse didn't answer, instead telling her that Sister María had told her to prepare the twins for adoption. "And I said: 'Who the hell is Sister María?'"

The next day, a friend arrived to check in on her, and Betegón immediately demanded to see the babies in their incubators, leaning on her friend's shoulder as they went to the third floor. It was the first time she had seen her children: They were so tiny, she thought, and shared her fair skin. They were girls, identical, from what Betegón could tell. But again, Betegón was told that the babies were up for adoption. She grew angry and threw herself against the glass that separated her from the incubators.

Purificación Betegón Lydia Metral for The New York Times

Betegón demanded to see Sister María and found her alone in her office. She asked Sister María why she had been told her children were going to be adopted. “And she told me: ‘Well, it’s that you’re young and you already have a child, you haven’t married yet.’ I told her, ‘This is my problem, not yours, and my daughters are my daughters.’ And she said, ‘But they can be with a family.’” Betegón continued to push back. Eventually, Sister María relented, saying there had been a misunderstanding and the adoption would be called off.

That afternoon, a doctor arrived at Betegón’s room to tell her that one of the twins had died. Betegón was shocked. “I started crying because at first, I thought they were telling me the truth,” she said. “Then a few minutes later, the same doctor came down and said the other one had died.” Betegón, no longer believing him, forced her way into the nursery with the incubators, and once again, saw her two daughters. She asked the doctors why she had been told they were dead when they were still clearly alive. A doctor told her that they were brain-dead. “I said, ‘Look, I don’t understand medicine, but as far as I know, a brain-dead person can’t move,’” Betegón said.

She went to Sister María’s office one last time. The nun asked her what names she had chosen for her children. Betegón said she wanted to name them Sherezade and Desiré. “She told me: ‘These aren’t very Catholic names.’”

When Betegón returned to the incubators, the babies were gone. This time when she asked to see her children, she was taken to a morgue. A doctor pulled out two small bodies. Wrapped in white, they seemed much larger than her daughters. Betegón took a close look at their faces. “They weren’t my children,” she said. She never saw Sister María again.

For years, Betegón thought that even if people believed her story, no one would be held accountable. But decades later, in 2011, she heard about a protest taking place in Madrid, one of the first gatherings of stolen babies, and decided to attend. A representative from one of the victims’ groups took down her information, and a prosecutor from Madrid got in touch with Betegón and asked her to give a deposition. The prosecutor said they were building a case against Sister María. “I am looking forward to the trial so I can look into Sister María’s face,” Betegón told reporters in 2012. She filed her own complaint against Sister María shortly afterward.

Betégon would never see Sister María in court. No one would. In 2013, the nuns of her convent awoke to find Sister María dead at age 87. She was never formally charged, and she never admitted to selling babies. The Catholic Church also never publicly acknowledged what role it played in the kidnappings. But it is widely understood that for decades, certain nuns — empowered by a dictatorship that allowed them to operate with

impunity — had taken it upon themselves to decide who had the right to raise a child and who did not.

The case of Eduardo Vela, the doctor who faced allegations from the 1980s, would fall apart years later, after the court dismissed the charges against him, citing the statute of limitations. (To further complicate matters, the victim later said she had learned that her mother had in fact willingly given her up for adoption. Spain's first recognized stolen baby was not one at all.) Of 2,186 cases under investigation, none resulted in a conviction. Prosecutors told me the problem wasn't that they doubted that the victims were telling the truth but that the cases lacked evidence. The crimes took place decades ago. They pitted one mother's word against that of an elderly nun or doctor. "For someone who is 80 years old, is it right to convict them for something they did when they were 40?" Conde-Pumpido, the former attorney general, asked me.

And so out of desperation, some victims turned to another outlet, one that gave them hope, however slim, that they would be reunited with their biological families. By the 2010s, daytime talk shows had begun dedicating much of their airtime to the stolen-babies scandal. Producers assembled street crews, interviewing witnesses anonymously with voice alteration, or wore hidden cameras as they confronted doctors and nurses at their apartments.

In many ways, these shows were doing the previously unthinkable: publicly addressing the horrors of the Franco era. But they were sensationalizing those horrors too, for the millions of viewers at home. In an early 2011 episode of "El Diario," an afternoon talk show on which guests would air out family conflicts, a presenter introduced Alejandro Alcalde, a middle-aged father who was trying to find the mother of his adopted daughter. As Alcalde shared the details of his life, the camera cut to an unidentified woman backstage, sitting on a white couch, her back turned to the camera. On the bottom of the screen flashed the words: "I'm looking for my daughter, they stole her from me the moment she was born." The father was then shown on a split-screen alongside dramatic footage of a car driving up to the studio. A woman in a white lab coat emerged from the car and pulled out a large envelope containing DNA evidence proving that the mysterious woman on the couch was in fact the mother of the child. The family was reunited as the audience cheered.

The wave of media attention also had some unexpected consequences: Any mother who had a stillborn child now had reason to believe the baby might be alive and well, and simply living with another family. A 2013 segment from "La Mañana," a Spanish morning show, opened with a scene in a cemetery as men with hard hats and hammers cracked open a tomb. Inside was a small white coffin, clearly made for a baby. The reporter, who

stood just outside the tomb, turned to the mother, who was dressed in black. She said that after giving birth, she was told by the hospital that her child was stillborn, but she now suspected that her child was stolen, even though the baby was born in 1992, nearly a decade after the last documented kidnappings. The coffin was not empty, as she had hoped. A DNA test of the remains later confirmed that the baby was her child.

Pintado, like millions of other viewers, had seen the talk shows and had even been contacted by one of them. After her father's death, a producer on "El Diario" called her at home, claiming that she might have had an identical twin. Pintado hung up on the caller. But years later, while searching for her mother and pulling on any thread she could, she went to the studio in person. Producers couldn't find any files on her case. Perhaps they had just been fishing that day, following a dead-end lead. So Pintado decided to go on a talk show herself.

"I'm going to introduce you all to Ana Belén," began the host Viva la Vida in January 2018. The camera zoomed in on Pintado, who was visibly nervous. The host continued: "This is what I believe television is for. This woman is looking for her biological family, and you all are watching from home. Now, we need you to give us any leads or clues so she can realize her dream of finding her family."

Pintado began to tell her story. There was the forged paperwork from after she was born. The visits to Madrid with envelopes of money. Pintado explained that she had learned that the local church had likely helped connect her parents to Sister María. Someone, she said, had even told her that her adopted mother had pretended to stumble into the room where her biological mother had given birth, to see what she looked like, and found the mother grieving. "If anyone is seeing this and recognizes me, well, the truth is I would like to meet them, because I have always been alone," Pintado says, as the screen fades.

Pintado was hopeful that someone would call with information; as time passed, no one did. But she wouldn't allow herself to feel discouraged. After she had gone public about the harm that had been done to her, it was as if a switch had been flipped. She would never stop looking for her mother. So she decided to call every journalist she could find.

Over the next months, the story of Pintado's search appeared in numerous print outlets, from La Vanguardia, one of Spain's largest broadsheets, to La Tribuna de Ciudad Real, the province where her town sits. "It was a big fat lie," she said of her childhood to the reporter from the society section of El Economista, a financial publication popular among Spain's elites. Pintado also appeared on podcasts, radio programs and television channels, including one in which a news crew traveled to her home and asked residents what they knew.

The media appearances were starting to take a toll on her relationships within Campo de Criptana. Her parents had many loyal friends, especially her mother, who belonged to several Catholic associations until she died. One day, Pintado was in a grocery store with her daughter when a friend of her mother's sidled up to her. The two exchanged pleasantries at first, but then the friend took a more aggressive tone: "Why do you need to keep looking for your family? You have a family." The question upset Pintado. Yes, her mother and father had given her a good upbringing. "But they have stolen a mother from me, and I can't go along with that," she told the neighbor before walking off.

One evening after returning from another television appearance, Pintado decided to write to a WhatsApp group of her mother's family to get a sense of how they were feeling about her search. "Everyone knows what a mess I'm in right now, and the media have been asking me what my family thinks of this," she wrote. "What should I tell them?"

A cousin was among the first to reply: "Good evening, I have always loved you. Regardless of whether you're adopted, you belong to this family. I think it's great you want to find your biological parents, but I think your adopted parents deserve some respect. Who knows if you were a stolen baby or not, but I'm sure my family could have never known you were stolen."

"I agree," wrote another family member in the group.

"You've gone and said this everywhere, and the least you could have done was approach us," wrote the cousin.

Another family member replied, claiming that Pintado had known about the adoption all along and had even asked her biological parents about it when she was 12. It was a baseless accusation, Pintado said. But the message was clear: Some in her family preferred to believe Pintado was the one who lied, not her parents.

It was starting to feel as if nothing was going to break Pintado's way. The press appearances didn't appear to surface any leads. Her relatives had seemingly turned against her. Then one night in July 2018, she got a phone call that changed everything.

The man on the line wished to remain anonymous, he told Pintado. He had read her story in a local newspaper and was an "intimate friend" of a woman named Pilar Villora García, someone who lost a child around the same time that Pintado was born. Would she like to take down Pilar's number?

Pintado called it right away. "As soon as she picked up, I said, 'I was a stolen baby, and I am looking for my biological mother, and an anonymous person has called me and said that you might be my mother.'" There was a pause on the other end of the line, and she

could hear a commotion in the background, the sound of many people.

“Let me call you back,” an older woman’s voice said. The line cut off.

For a moment, Pintado wasn’t sure what to do. Perhaps the woman felt ambushed. Five minutes passed. Then the phone rang.

“OK,” said the woman, after Pintado picked up. “What are the dates?”

The two women compared notes. The delivery and birth dates matched. The city matched. And the maternity clinic, Santa Cristina, matched as well. Only one thing seemed off: The government office told Pintado that her mother gave birth to her when she was 23, not 24, the age that Pilar remembered. But she was first seen by a gynecologist the year before, which might have been the source of the error. “So my mother, or the woman I believed was my mother, she tells me that was the only thing that didn’t match, and when I had more information, to call her,” Pintado said.

Pintado could feel she was close to solving her case. Months before, when she contacted the Madrid government, they told her they had found only a first name for her biological mother. Now she called them again to see if they had any more information. They said there was, including a full name. The name matched that of the woman she had spoken to.

Pintado called Pilar back right away. “I know who my mother is,” she told her. “And it’s you.”’

Pintado saw her mother for the first time in September 2018, three months after their first phone call. The women decided to meet for dinner in Aranjuez, a city roughly at the halfway point between their homes, an hour’s drive away. Pintado arrived with her husband and children; Pilar came with a friend. “I was on edge, I knew this might be good, it might be bad, I didn’t know what I was going to find,” Pintado told me.

But as the two groups approached each other, Pilar started running toward Pintado. “Do you still not know who your mother is?” Pilar asked Pintado, joking. The two women hugged each other and began to cry. Pilar had a look at Pintado’s children — her grandchildren — and embraced each of them.

Over dinner, Pilar told Pintado her life story. She was born in a small mountain village called Lanzahíta, and her parents took her to live in Madrid at age 12. She met her husband and married young. Pilar had two children: José Luis, whom she named after her husband, in 1968, and Francisco, in 1972. The next year, she was pregnant for a third time, and she wondered if it might be a girl. Perhaps they would name her after her mother, Angela.

Pilar first visited the clinic in April of that year to see an obstetrician. She didn’t remember seeing a nun there, but her hospital file indicates that Sister María most likely noticed Pilar: In handwriting that closely matches the letters the nun sent to Pintado’s family, the word “charity” is written in Spanish — referring to the area in the hospital where the nun supposedly selected her targets.

On July 9, 1973, Pilar felt contractions and returned to Santa Cristina. It was an easy birth with no complications. She even remembers holding her baby for a brief moment. But then the baby was taken away and someone came to put an anesthesia mask over Pilar’s face. She cried when this happened; it was as though she knew something terrible was coming. When she woke up again, a doctor and nurse told her the baby was stillborn. The hospital would handle the paperwork and the burial. It never occurred to her that they had lied.

Pilar had never gone searching for her daughter because she had thought there was no daughter to look for. Now, she was sitting right there, a grown woman with a family and an entire life story that Pilar was only starting to know.

As Pilar talked, Pintado noticed how similar they seemed. They both had green eyes. Pilar was also animated like Pintado, jumping from one story to the next. As she let her mother catch her breath, Pintado began to tell her own story, about Campo de Criptana and the couple who had raised her. She talked about the search that began in her garage and led to her neighbors and television studios, a journey which now seemed to have reached its conclusion, that night, at that dinner table.

Pintado and her birth mother, Pilar Villora García. Lydia Metral for The New York Times

The visits continued. Pilar came down to Campo de Criptana to celebrate the feast day of the Virgin of Pilar, for whom she was named. Pintado traveled to Madrid to meet her biological father, who she learned was battling cancer. The two women eventually took a DNA test, which confirmed what they already knew. Pintado, who once told television viewers she had always felt alone, now had two siblings. One of them worked in southern Spain during the weekdays, and when he and Pintado realized her town was a short detour from his weekend commute home, he started stopping in Campo de Criptana. Pintado would make him sandwiches, and they ate them together, trading stories about their childhoods.

Pintado accomplished what almost no one in her position had managed to do: She found her family. Her happiness was palpable. At a time when so many people she knew were losing their parents to old age — when she herself had lost the people who raised her — she gained two parents.

And yet, for all her relief, some small part of Pintado couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. That despite all that she had gained, despite all the blanks that were filled, there was still something that she needed. It's as if the energy she had put into the search — the letters she wrote by hand, the calls she made to journalists, the hours she spent telling people her story, the doors she knocked on and the uncomfortable conversations she had — needed to be redirected toward something else: an acknowledgment that she had been robbed of her birth parents. She needed someone to tell her that what happened was wrong. She needed an apology. She needed, she realized, for someone to be punished.

Pintado continued to search. This time, she was looking for a man named José María Castillo Díaz, the doctor who delivered her and signed the paperwork. Pintado hired a lawyer and, in January 2019, filed a case against Castillo Díaz in a criminal court in Madrid. A judge accepted the case, and Castillo Díaz was ordered to appear at a hearing where he confirmed that his name was on the paperwork. But then in March of last year, Castillo Díaz died. The news left Pintado devastated. "The whole world needs to know the facts," she told me. "I found my mother, my father, my brothers — in record time — and we get on great, we talk every day sometimes. But I need justice."

Laura Figueiredo, one of Pintado's close friends, said she understood her dilemma and has even spoken to her about it. "I've told her, 'You have your mother and your father, why keep going after the others in court?'" Figueiredo said. "I said: 'Forget about it, just enjoy what you have. Finish the chapter, close the book.'"

This summer, Pintado was back at home in Campo de Criptana. It was a hot Saturday

morning, and she and Monreal were preparing for a large family lunch. Her children chopped vegetables, and Monreal lit the grill downstairs. If there was a rift between Pintado and her neighbors, it seemed to be mending, even if slowly; a local baker making the rounds through the town stopped by for a bread delivery and a quick chat, and so did several women who lived across the street.

When lunch was ready, Pintado and Monreal sat at the table as their children served food. The couple talked about when they were young and spent long evenings under the windmills that sit above the town. At one point, there was a bar in one of them. Even in a place as traditional as Campo de Criptana, things could change, Monreal said.

Pintado was thinking about her mother again. She had hired a new lawyer, she said, who was asking for more documents in the case. "There are going to be some names on those papers that we're getting," she told Monreal. "I'm sure of it."

"But what if those people are 100 years old?" her husband asked.

"We have the name of a midwife now," she said.

"But is she responsible for anything?" Monreal said.

He tried changing the subject. Pintado's birthday was coming up and Pilar would be taking the train to spend the weekend with them. During Pintado's search for her mother, her birthday felt more like the anniversary of her kidnapping. But now there was cause to celebrate. Monreal said he was planning a surprise.

Pintado smiled, thinking about her mother. "We lost 45 years, and you can't get those back," she said. "But when I see my mother now, it's like looking at a girl with new shoes. She tells everyone she sees in the street, 'They stole my daughter, but now we've found each other.'"

Additional reporting by Leire Ariz Sarasketa.

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