

## CHAPTER ONE

### MIRNA'S WELCOME

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*“I want to give you the welcome of this small country. It is a country that is so interesting because of what is happening right now while you are here.”*

Flight 885's cabin lights dimmed crossing the shoreline of south central El Salvador, San Salvador volcano jutted into the clouds in the distance, and below farmlands fanned out in a green patchwork of squares and rectangles. To the right the Rio Jiboa snaked northward from the Pacific Ocean through the Department of La Paz, and from several thousand feet in the air the land, only a few short months earlier held hostage by a vicious civil war, looked peaceful and prosperous.

As the jet slipped down toward Aeropuerto Internacional an on-board radio crackled and sputtered with names – President Alfredo Cristiani, General René Emilo Ponce, General Mauricio Vargas, and rebel leaders Joaquín Villalobos, Shafic Handel, and Ana Guadalupe Martinez. The names I recognized, but the Spanish commentary was lost on me. Was the cease-fire unraveling? A coup taking place? In the seat next to me a well-dressed Salvadoran woman nervously fingered her rosary.

Then the wheels touched down and the Salvadorans on board broke into applause, laughing, shaking hands, slapping each other on the back. They had come home. But to what? The woman, relieved to be on terra firma, sighed, scooped up her beads, dropped them into her purse, then joined the queue in the

aisle, while outside on the tarmac soldiers with assault rifles scrutinized the disembarking passengers. With the guerrillas demobilizing less than twenty percent of their forces, and rogue elements of the Salvadoran Army and police forces swelling the ranks of the death squads, the soldiers were under orders to provide airport security.

Inside the terminal we waited in lines to pass through Immigration while a trim uniformed woman seated in a glass enclosure motioned for us to step forward one at a time.

“What is the purpose of your stay in El Salvador?”

“I’m with a university delegation, here to study the situation after the signing of the peace accords.”

“I hope you have a pleasant visit,” she said, smiling as she stamped the visa page and handed back the blue booklet.

Downstairs, Minor Sinclair, sporting a black cap with a large white “X” over the brim, was waiting by the baggage terminals, a grin on his face. A guide for several U.S. delegations in El Salvador in the past, he had spent the past week or so in the country making last-minute adjustments to a packed schedule of interviews and community visits.

After locating our luggage we followed Sinclair out to the parking lot where we met our driver, Romero, a compact *campesino* with a round smiling face, a thin moustache, and dark, short-cropped hair.

“We’ll take the old road to the hotel,” Sinclair announced as we piled into the van. “I want you to see some of the countryside. It’s a much better introduction to rural living conditions.”

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Turning off the main highway to San Salvador, we followed a mountain road twisting and climbing through a rugged volcanic terrain of rocky rises and drops covered with dense vegetation. Shacks, cobbled together with sheets of black plastic and corrugated tin roofs, peeked out from under canopies of trees, and barefoot, half-dressed children, mothers in peasant dresses, and men in work

clothes and straw hats, stood in dirt yards along with chickens and pigs, or peered out of doorways as we lumbered by. Along the side of the road women carried bundles of firewood, canisters of water, or baskets of fruits and vegetables, and men, machetes in hand or swinging from belts, walked along herding cows or goats.

"Stop here," Sinclair said by a group of roadside stalls. "Anybody hungry? You have to try a *papusa*."

Instantly, half a dozen women, baskets on their heads or under their arms, hurried across the road, surrounding the van, jostling for position, shouting at us to buy drinks, ices, fruits, and nuts. We purchased snacks, and the women, encouraged by a few sales, shouted louder, thrusting items through the open windows. At that point a light rain interrupted the pleading women and they retreated across the road.

"Check out the *papusas*," Sinclair said, gesturing toward several makeshift shacks while he and Romeo tied a large tarp over the luggage on the roof.

We hurried across the road and ducked under a shed roof where a woman in a flowered print dress and white apron was cooking patties of dough on a large skillet over a fire.

"They're corn tortillas filled with refried beans and cheese," Sinclair explained, joining us.

The woman scooped dough out of a black basin, kneaded it, patted it flat with her palms, and plopped it on the skillet.

"You all should try one," Sinclair said in his Southern drawl. "Get your first taste of an authentic Salvadoran food staple."

The *papusas* smelled inviting, felt warm and soft, and tasted delicious.

Passing into the city, Romero drove up the Boulevard de Los Heroes past a huge soccer stadium, then turned right on Alameda Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a main thoroughfare in the capital. Exhaust fumes hung in the stifling late afternoon heat, Latin music blared from radios and loudspeakers, and cars and pickup trucks

packed with people and hanging off the sides, whizzed past horns honking.

Blocks later we turned right and parked in the entryway of the Alameda Hotel, hoping for a good night's sleep before setting off to visit rural communities in Usulután in the south central part of the country. Inside the lounge was filled with suitcases and packs, plastic covered chairs, and a sofa facing a large TV. To the left, glass doors opened into the *Bar Cavalier* and *La Mansion Restaurant*. It was five o'clock.

"Why don't you get situated in your rooms," Sinclair said. "We'll meet back down here in the lobby at six for supper. That should give us plenty of time for showers and to get your stuff together. There's a place down the street with tables outside and it serves good food. And remember, dress conservatively. You don't want to draw attention to yourselves."

Dominick Sacco, my roommate, and I, lugged our gear up to room 418, which came with two twin beds, a desk, a bureau, a couple of chairs, and a bathroom with shower. A large window overlooked a pool in the rear courtyard, and a tray on the bureau held a pitcher of water and two glasses.

Around six our group trickled down to the lobby.

"It's called a conservative way of dressing. Oh yes!" quipped Maria Torriera, pointing to Lauren Kempton decked out in baggy harem pants decorated with large colorful squares, lines, and circles.

"I told Maria this is my most conservative outfit," she said. "She doesn't believe me."

Hungry after a day of traveling, we trooped out of the hotel, turned right, crossed Franklin Delano Roosevelt Avenue at the end of the block, then walked a short distance to the *Café de Don Pedro*.

"It's noted for its Salvadoran food," Sinclair said, herding us past tables packed with dinner patrons.

On the sidewalk in front of the cafe a young boy carrying a basket filled with bouquets walked back and forth, crying out to the diners to buy his roses. At the same time, an older man hawked postcards.

"It looks like we're going to have music with our meal," said Sacco, gesturing toward two men dressed in Mexican costumes and sombreros, one with an accordion, the other a guitar.

A waitress took orders for drinks and handed us each a menu. I looked over the items in Spanish, and couldn't make any sense out of it. The fact was, in our group Torriera, Ventura, Gradie, and McAllister spoke fluent Spanish; Kempton, Willison, Reid, and Sacco, sticking to basics, could read a bit and manage to make themselves understood; but Barker, Spence, Bertsch, and myself let the others do the talking.

Drinks ordered, along with entrees of *papas*, *empanades*, and *chorizes*, we settled back to enjoy the two men serenading the patrons. Then halfway into the meal, Sinclair stood up saying he had to leave to pick up the speaker for the night's session. "I'll be back in twenty minutes," he said, "so finish eating and take some time to relax."

When Sinclair returned he introduced Mirna Anaya, a short, stocky woman with dark hair, and her daughter Gloria. Mirna, he explained, was a lawyer and wife of Herbert Anaya, one of the founders and former president of the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador [CDHES], assassinated outside his home October 26, 1987. Active in the FMLN, he worked on the committee for the disappeared, was jailed for nine months in 1986, tortured, and was the fourth leader of the Human Rights Commission killed in the 1980s.

"We'll meet back at the hotel," Sinclair announced. "I'll go back with Mirna and her daughter and try to get a room for our orientation meeting. If you want to stay here and enjoy the atmosphere, that's fine. Or you can take a walk, but be sure to stay together. And don't go down any side streets."

The avenue's evening traffic had thinned, and Gradie, McAllister, and I decided to take a short walk. At the time I couldn't help wondering what the people we passed on the sidewalk thought about three *gringos* strolling along. Did they question who we were, or why we were there? I couldn't tell. They seemed to ignore us.

Teenage boys lounging on the corners and in front of stores brought to mind Sinclair's earlier warning about youths on the streets. "They can cause trouble," he had said.

Then as we were walking down the avenue, suddenly Gradie stopped. Ahead of us stood two military personnel with assault rifles.

"I'm not going to walk past men carrying guns," she said.

We looked at her.

"I don't like guns."

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Our meeting in Room 409, set up to serve as an introduction to the current situation in El Salvador and scheduled for 7:30 that evening, started closer to nine.

"The eulogy Mirna delivered for her husband in the National Cathedral in San Salvador," Sinclair said, "was one of the most moving speeches I've ever read."

Surrounded by her five children at the altar, Mirna had said:

People of El Salvador, a thousand times heroic!

At this time, so filled with pain and grief by separation from my husband, I thank you for being here. You feel as I do, and as so many of our people who cannot be with us today feel. You gave my husband the opportunity to voice your suffering and your anguish. Without you, he would not have been what he was. He was humble, and you inspired him to give his life for all of us. You gave him courage by your example.

I also thank everyone who has come from outside the country to share in our suffering. I thank you for your demonstration of solidarity with my family and the Human Rights Commission. I want to remind you that our people continue to suffer. They need your support. You must continue to lift up your voices to denounce the oppression. I repeat the call of Archbishop Romero. I plead with those

of you who are members of the security forces. Stop killing your brothers and sisters. We are poor, just like you. Stop this killing!

I do not ask for vengeance against those who assassinated my husband. Herbert never hated them. If he could speak today, he would forgive them. But he would also demand, with the same courage that he always demonstrated, that they stop killing their brothers and sisters.

*A cri de coeur*, Mirna's eulogy begged for healing to begin.

To start the meeting, Sinclair suggested we say a few words about our initial impressions of El Salvador. "Just what strikes you about the country. Anything you have to share."

"When we arrived," began Reid, "I was overwhelmed. Then when the plane landed, all the Salvadorans clapped. I wondered if they were coming back to El Salvador."

"I expected more misery, more signs of the war," Torriera added.

"A little girl was selling peanuts along the road," said Kempton, "and we said no. The little girl sighed. It was such a desolate sadness." Then she asked Mirna, "Could you explain the term *mística*?"

"I think it means 'of the spirit.' It is an energy that comes from the *pueblo*. A sense of the people. Maybe that's what you call *mística*. And that means to work without seeing that things will get better. And that is why the people who are dead are not dead. They are still alive. This is something that helps me to understand the mystery of the Resurrection. People who have died ten years ago or three years ago are still alive. In fact, they are working harder today."

"Herbert told a nun that when he died she would see a rose on her desk. Before she even heard of his death, she saw a rose in a garden. A rose in a garden means death. But the rose goes beyond death. In its essence, it means life. The spiritual power that the people have goes beyond. Maybe it is the sign of the rose that calls

you to something great. To feel the strength of the Salvadoran people. To feel the *mística*.”

Then Mirna talked about how in the early days of the war the women left their children to work for the movement, and how people in First World countries called them irresponsible. “But the situation here was so critical,” she said, “and of such profound crises, that people did things that under normal circumstances would not be possible.”

With that said, she launched into her prepared remarks.

### *Mirna Anaya's Testimony*

I want to give you the welcome of this small country. It is a country that is so interesting because of what is happening right now while you are here. It is a moment in time when we can find out how much political space we have been given by the peace accords. And now is the time to work.

We are a people who have been forced to leave our country. We've met many people, good people. But the right to live in your own country is what brings all of us back. I could live anywhere. But after living for four-and-a-half years outside the country, I've learned a lot.

This is a special time because of the peace accords, but we still have many problems. According to the peace accords, the National Guard and the Treasury Police are supposed to be cut back and disbanded, but the killings still go on. The government movement to set up the National Police, supposed to have started at the end of April, has not started yet. As a result the FMLN has not abolished more than 20 percent of its forces. Both sides were asked to concentrate their men in special zones. The FMLN is in twenty camps, the government forces are in sixty-seven.

The war has ended because there are no military fights at this time. But the death squads are still operating. One nun was decapitated. But that is part of the cost. A special

Truth Commission has been formed to study the military and to tell who killed and who was killed. And that work is very important.

Four point four billion dollars from the U.S. kept the war going. Secretary of State Aronson and Baker saw that they couldn't win the war, so they made some changes. But in this country, there will be no real changes in the power structure. Just in the past eight days, neither the army nor the FMLN has reduced their forces. They have not made any drastic changes. If there was an outbreak tomorrow, both forces would be at full strength.

One of the reasons to end the war was because of the business community. They were saying that the war must end. During the last ten years, the business community went to hell. But still a lot of people made a lot of money during the war. Especially the military. They now have enormous pension funds set up for themselves. The army is still the strongest power in the country. So if the officers have to go away, then they feel it has to be made worth their while.

The five armies of the FMLN have developed themselves into a political party, and they held an open demonstration ten days ago. Just a few years ago, to speak of peace was considered subversive. And with the ability to speak out comes a lot more support from the people. Such talk was suppressed for so long, and now the people can come forth and talk about the war.

A negotiated settlement. That's what people call it. But both sides will have to give in, and the social struggle will be very strong.

When she finished, Sinclair outlined our upcoming schedule, and our plan to visit the community of Hacienda California the next day.

"You are going to a community that is one of the most important examples of what is happening here," she said. "I got to

know these people in 1977 through the work of my husband Herbert. He worked with the people, selling their homes in Chalatenango when they left for Nicaragua. And now these people are returning to El Salvador.”

Finally she mentioned the upcoming celebration at the Gerardo Barrios Plaza in front of the National Cathedral for the FMLN war-wounded returning from Cuba.

“We’ll all be there. For the leadership of Hacienda California to be able to go to the rally is a new experience for us. Just a short while ago these people could have been killed for attending such a thing.”

She ended the meeting by saying, “We are going to be a land of tremendous conflict.”

Before leaving the room Sinclair reminded us to ready our gear for the next day. “Everybody pack so you are carrying only one bag. Just bring whatever you will need for an overnight,” he said. “Expect this to be primitive.”

Primitive or not, it didn’t matter. As Eilene Bertsch had said earlier, “I felt like I wanted to do anything to make this trip happen.”

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Four months after we left the country, the Brigada Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez death squad, intent on saving their country from domestic and foreign meddlers, issued the following communiqué on October 22, translated by the Christian Urgent Action Network on El Salvador [CUANES]:

*Death to the Terrorists*

Since the signing of the nefarious and unconstitutional Mexico accords with the terrorists of the FMLN, inconceivable acts have occurred in our beloved country, and if we don’t stop it once and for all, lamentably we would not be responding as men, but as children.

The situation is already intolerable to know that as a product of this accord with the terrorists our glorious armed forces will be cleansed, our National Guard dissolved, the terrorists will keep our land and are also controlling the new PNC [National Civil Police].

The country has been invaded by pseudo-communists foreigners the white pestilence of ONUSAL [UN Observer Mission, El Salvador]. If things continue like this, in 1994 the red and green communists will take power and this we will not allow to happen. El Salvador is for the Salvadorans and we must defend and struggle for all or nothing. For all the above reasons, the patriots organized in the commandos' Brigada Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez communicate the following:

Come October 31 we will proceed to accomplish a death sentence on all the terrorists – Joaquín Villalobos, the Turkish assassin Shafik Handal, Ana Guadalupe Martinez, Jorge Melendez, Salvador Samayoa, Facundo Guardado, Jose Alberto Ramos, Chano Guevara, Leo Cabrales, Fidel Fecinos, Eduardo Sanchez, Marco Jiminez, Nidia Diaz, Francisco Jovel, Leonel Gonzales, Salvador Gurra, and all the other terrorists responsible for the tragedy our country is living.

And also we state that the white pestilence of ONUSAL must leave, and so too the foreign journalists that have invaded our country. All the national journalists, the traitorous politicians, the front organizations, and all those who collaborate with the terrorists. All those must accept the consequences from the liberating national justice.<sup>3</sup>

Two months later Mirna herself and her children came under attack. The February 1993 issue of *Centroamérica* ran the story under this headline: "Five Killed, Mirna Anaya Attacked."

Mirna Perla de Anaya, vice-president and former general coordinator of the Central American Human

Rights Commission (CODEHUCA), was attacked by gunmen while traveling with her family in El Salvador on January 3. After stopping the Anaya vehicle with a red, police-type light, six masked men fired a dozen times, wounding Miguel Ernesto Anaya (age 15) in his right side.

Anaya's assailants fit the description of members of a government anti-drug unit who attacked a resident of "Ciudadela Guillermo Ungo," a repopulated village, at the end of December.<sup>4</sup>