

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### THE BEST SHOP IN THE MOUNTAINS

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*“Our workers have little or no technical training, so we learn from experience. Only two of the workers have any kind of specialized training. So we read about what we are supposed to do, and we learn from the problems that we have overcome.”*

At our first stop, a leather and weaving shop, several women sat at tables, cutting and sewing, surrounded by piles of discarded leather on the floor. One young woman, hunched over a 4x8 foot plywood table, her long hair pulled back and tied with a ribbon, cut the soles of sandals, first tracing the outline of a sole from a pattern, then following the outline by pressing down on the thick leather with the sharpened point of a foot-long knife. Next, the sole in her hand, she trimmed off the excess leather, stopping from time to time to sharpen the blade's cutting edge.

In a cavernous room to the rear of the leather shop weavers scrambled back and forth in front of looms interlacing strands of blue, yellow, red, and orange plastic rope into hammocks, their hands a blur, they worked so fast. One young man in dungarees and a blue work shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, walked along a stretched out hammock with a fist full of yellow strands in his right hand, weaving the plastic into the next layer. In back a woman sat on the floor attaching ropes from the ends of the finished hammocks to steel rings. A skilled person, we were told, could

finish one hammock, selling for 120 colones or roughly \$15, in about four days.

Next we visited the leather goods store overflowing with handbags, belts, riding chaps, and ornate scabbards for machetes. We hadn't purchased machetes yet, so the scabbards could wait, but a colorful hammock would make a fine addition to the yard back home. The woman in charge of the store sat behind a desk, and when asked if she had any for sale pointed to a table in the back piled high with hammocks in different sizes. The right size was no problem, but packing the bulky item for the return trip to Connecticut would be a hassle. Our plan was to donate clothes we didn't need when leaving the country, but even minus the shirts and dungarees left behind, I wasn't sure I could stuff the hammock into my suitcase. But a genuine Salvadoran hammock for \$12? I bought one.

Outside the shop, Willison and Romeo, full of energy and laughing like two kids, chased each other between the parked vehicles. Then Willison stopped and made believe he was a fly fisherman, casting an imaginary rod to hook and reel in the last person in our group lingering in the leather store. At least he and Romeo felt chipper, which could not be said for several of the rest of us fighting stomach cramps becoming more persistent as the morning progressed.

We retraced the way we came, turned right, and pulled up in front of an electric generating facility and behind it a large open-sided carpentry shop, where the high whine of a rip saw and the smell of freshly-cut wood filled the air. Inside, men worked with table saws, lathes, and assorted wood-working tools assembling desks, tables, bureaus, chairs, and coffins.

One worker was fitting the last board to the top of a bureau. The plank, about five feet long, was too wide by roughly an inch, and rather than rip off the extra inch of wood with a table saw, he stood the board on end, eyed it, and hacked a series of cuts with his machete about an inch apart down one side. Next, with the machete, he sliced away the hacked wood, turned the board on its side, and ran a plane over the cut edge. Finally he sighted along the

new edge of the board, and satisfied with the result, replaced it on top of the bureau. A perfect fit.

At our next stop, a clothing factory, women bent over industrial sewing machines on tables covered with heaps of yellow and red fabric and spools of thread. A fashion show was scheduled for that afternoon, and teenage girls were laughing and milling around trying on skirts and dresses and practicing to walk like runway models.

To the rear of the shoe factory, shelves lining the walls were crammed with shoes, sandals, and boots.

“We’re struggling to fill an order for four thousand new boots,” the man in charge said. “The order which is much larger than usual, was accepted so we could move to a higher level of competition. So now everyone is working extra hours to meet our deadline, and we’re not sure if we can finish the order on time.”

He looked stressed, but the workers were churning out boots as if their lives depended on filling that order.

— 2 —

The next to last stop for the morning was the Segundo Montes Bank. At the bottom of the hill under trees in front of the bank an open air market was in session, its tables filled with hats, shirts, dresses, and trinkets. We walked past the tables and around the back to a small office to listen to a presentation by Gloria, coordinator of the community bank’s Loan Department.

*Testimony of Bank Officer*

The bank was one of the first things set up in Segundo Montes. Refugees were awarded some money when they were repatriated, so we asked the people to deposit their money here in the bank, rather than spend it all. Ninety-five percent of the people agreed to deposit their money, and we offer ten percent interest, paid at the end of the year.

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Q) How much money was given to the refugees when they returned to El Salvador?

A) About three hundred and twenty colones for each adult, and one hundred and sixty colones for each child under sixteen. Because the first groups to arrive here did not return under the normal repatriation procedures, they did not receive any monies, so the community shared money with them. The adults in the community gave fifty-eight colones each to the members of the first and second groups.

Q) How does the bank decide on giving loans to people?

A) We evaluate the creditors based on their health, moral virtues, and their ability to repay the loan. Also the person must allow the bank to supervise the project that the money was borrowed for.

The government has not imposed any conditions on our bank, but it hasn't offered any help either. We are considered an internal group, rather than a legal organization. But to our credit, we have not made any loans that have not been fully paid back. Generally we work with the people to work out any problems.

Q) What is the net worth of the bank?

A) About half a million colones [roughly \$62,500].

Their work ethic reminded me of what Sr. Elena had said when talking about the lack of doctors and the need for health care and medicines in her community. They read books, planted medicinal herbs, and taught themselves. In this case, the unofficial bank of Segundo Montes paid ten percent on deposits, with every loan fully repaid with no government supervision.

Next we stopped at a pre-school cooperative in a building surrounded by a six foot wire fence with a large mural on an outside side wall depicting the slain Jesuit Father Montes surrounded by young children. The teachers turned our visit into a celebration, explaining to their charges that we were visitors from the United States, and would they show us we were welcome. With that, the children laughed and clapped and joined in singing us a song.

All in all, the community representative's story about Segundo Montes, shared with us earlier at the pavilion, proved true. The place hummed with activity.

— 3 —

As we stood in front of the open-air market, Sacco was surprised to see Deimas, the war-wounded guerrilla he had met at the plaza in San Salvador on Wednesday night. Deimas recognized Sacco immediately, smiled from ear to ear, embracing him like an old friend.

"We have to get a picture of this," said Sacco, delighted to find Deimas again. "We promised each other we'd look for one another when we got to Segundo Montes."

"Stand next to the road," I said, "and I'll take a picture."

Deimas, wearing Sacco's NYPD cap and standing straight in spite of his leg operation, lined up next to his beaming friend, both talking excitedly in Spanish, trying to make out what the other was saying. I asked McAllister what was going on.

"Deimas is saying that he is in Segundo Montes to help the cooperative any way he can."

It was all we could do to drag Sacco away from his new compatriot when it was time to return to the pavilion to discuss plans for the afternoon trip to Perquín.

"I need to see if I can find a straw hat," Wickwire said to me. "I'm just going to look in this outdoor market and I'll join you later."

"Is it alright if I stay here with Chester?" I asked Sinclair. "He wants to look over the items on the tables."

"It's a good idea," he said. "But stay together."

With that, the others drove up the hill toward the administration pavilion, and the two of us turned toward the market.

Against a pile of multi-colored plastic jugs, a yellow sign, translated from Spanish read, "The best shop in the mountains with the lowest prices."

The first table held stacks of straw hats. Wickwire leaned his canes against the side of the table and started trying on one hat after another.

"I can't find one that fits," he said, laughing. "My head is too big."

Anxious for a sale, the woman rummaged through the stacks, intent on finding one that fit. She'd select one, hand it to Wickwire, and he'd try it on. Then she'd grab another one and hand it over. All were too small.

"I'll buy one of these caps," Wickwire said finally, pointing at the caps with adjustable plastic bands in the back. "I really don't need it," he confided, "but I'll buy it anyway."

"Why?" I asked. "If you don't need it, why buy it?"

"These people have so little," he said. "It doesn't cost that much, and it's very important that they make a sale."

Balancing on his two canes, he pulled out his wallet and paid for the cap. "This will make a good present," he added, smiling at the woman.

Stones and roots covered the ground by the tables, and I worried about him tripping, but he didn't hesitate for a moment, walking slowly, picking his way through the market.

"I need to find something for my wife," I said.

That's all Wickwire needed to hear. He walked over to a woman sitting at a nearby table, explained I was looking for a present for my wife, and she immediately got up, collected an assortment of shirts and dresses, then dropped the heap on the table in front of me. As I flipped through the clothes, looking for something that might catch my eye, the woman stood next to me, waiting expectantly.

"The idea is to buy something, anything," he said. "I don't like to spend their time and not make some small purchase."

When I couldn't make up my mind, Wickwire picked up what looked like a toy purse, handed it to the woman, and paid for it.

The sky was beginning to cloud over when we arrived shortly after noon at the administration area on top of the hill. In the pavilion two cameramen were busy videotaping a meeting of men and women seated at the picnic tables.

“It’s an FMLN meeting,” Wickwire said.

A white station wagon with the words “*Naciones Unidad*” [United Nations] under the side windows pulled up and two women got out and walked toward the pavilion.

“That is Ana Guadalupe Martinez,” Wickwire whispered, motioning to one of them, a short, round-faced woman dressed in faded jeans, a large white T-shirt, and white sneakers. At the time her name meant nothing to me.

Martinez smiled when she recognized Wickwire, they greeted each other, then moved off to a table to talk in private. At one point I overheard Wickwire say, “We are in solidarity in total.”

The other woman, who wore combat boots, green pants, and a white shirt, and looked to be in her late teens or early twenties, joined the on-going conversations at the tables. I could not stop looking at her. She was beautiful.

Later I asked Wickwire, “Who is Ana Guadalupe Martinez?”

“She is a famous guerrilla commander,” he said, “a member of the central command of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, and the author of the book *Clandestine Cells*. She wrote about her experiences when captured by the Salvadoran Army, and it is one of the most important books to come out of the war. Ana Martinez surfaced after the cease fire and became one of the chief negotiators of the rebel leaders for the peace plan.”

“Would you mind me asking what you were talking to her about?”

“We were talking about the National University, and I was asking her why Fabio Castillo doesn’t have the support of many of the professors. You have to understand that the FMLN think of the university as their alma mater. Also she feels that Christiani is the one who is blocking the money. She said that she is still concerned about the legal system and getting it implemented. And then there

are the problems with the National Guard and the Hacienda Police. Basically, a lot of things that should be happening under the peace accords are not, as far as she is concerned.”

With the FMLN group deep in conversation, we sat at separate tables, ate lunch, and Sinclair explained the possibilities for our afternoon trip to Perquín.

“There are two places we could visit,” he said. “The first was a guerrilla stronghold during the war, and the other is a village that managed to survive the war intact. The second place sells native goods. Also two women will be accompanying us to Perquín.”

Did he mean Ana Martinez and the young woman? I hoped so.

“I haven’t been able to visit these areas before, but now since the peace accords are in effect it’s relatively safe to travel there.”

He paused looking around the table. “So how many of you are in favor of visiting the guerrilla stronghold?”

Several of us raised our hands.

“How about the village and its market?”

Again we raised our hands.

At that point the overhead clouds opened up and sheets of rain pelted the tile roof.

“This would be a good time for all of you to spend some unstructured time by yourselves,” Sinclair said. “Some spiritual time to try put things into some kind of perspective.”

— 5 —

With that in mind and the rain taking the edge off the midday heat, some of us drifted off to write in journals while others sat and talked over the possibilities for afternoon’s trip.

Meanwhile the young guerrilla with Martinez was looking at Willison.

“She’s checking you out.”

Then Reid walked over to where I was sitting. “Ralph, I need to talk to you,” he said, motioning me to follow him to another table.

“What would you think about not going to Perquín this afternoon?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It seems some of the women are not so sure that going to Perquín is a good idea. They would rather go back to the hotel in San Salvador.”

“What did you say?”

“Some of the women would rather go back to the hotel in San Salvador.”

“Why?”

“They don’t feel well enough to make the trip, so I’m just taking an informal survey of the group to see how people feel about the afternoon. Did you want to go to Perquín?”

“That’s what we came here for. Yes, I want to go very much.”

“I’ll have to talk to the others to see what they think.”

Called together, we sat in a circle on the left side of the pavilion away from the FMLN meeting, and just as we sat down, two young boys grabbed Wickwire’s crutches and ran off with them. Pretending they had broken legs, they hobbled around on the crutches, laughing and having a grand time.

“That’s really not a good idea,” Wickwire said, worried they might hurt themselves.

The children did not want to give up the crutches, but finally were told they had to stop.

“Several people have voiced reservations about traveling to Perquín this afternoon,” said Reid, addressing the group. “I thought it would be a good idea to come together to discuss the issues, to see if we could arrive at a consensus about what to do. Why don’t we go around the circle and give each person a chance to speak. Then we can take a vote if necessary.”

“You mean as soon as anyone gets dirt under their fingernails, we have to turn back?” someone asked.

“This is ridiculous,” said another. “We all knew what we were getting into. We knew this wasn’t going to be an easy trip. We’re feeling sick too, but we still want to see Perquín.”

No one had slept well. And several of us suffered from stomach cramps and frayed nerves. But the men, except Ventura, wanted to continue. Bertsch remained undecided. The rest of the women

avored returning to San Salvador, saying we would not be seeing anything new in Perquín.

“We have two vans,” I said, hoping a compromise might be worked out. “If some people want to return to the hotel, why can’t they go back, and the rest of us take the other van to Perquín?”

“That’s not possible,” Sinclair said. “We are a group, and we can’t split up. It’s not good for the group, and it’s not safe.”

As much as anyone, Sinclair had been looking forward to visiting Perquín, but under the circumstances we had to turn back.

“Ok,” he said. “We’ll leave shortly as soon as I explain to our hosts that we’ve decided not to travel to Perquín, and that we’ll not be staying over another night.”

Hoping to salvage the group spirit, Sinclair said he could arrange a visit to the San Salvador bazaar the next day, an enormous market where everything imaginable was for sale.

But even with Sinclair’s suggestion in mind, we left the pavilion walking toward the vans, the women in one group, the men in the other, avoiding talking. Group cohesion was in tatters.

“How do you feel about not going to Perquín?” I asked Willison.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he snapped.

In the parking area the young woman accompanying Ana Martinez was standing by the driver’s side of our van, asking when we were leaving for Perquín. When told our plans had changed, she looked disappointed.

Meanwhile, a photographer was taking pictures of Martinez and a guerrilla *compadre* in camouflage fatigues and combat boots. Both stood next to the white *Naciones Unidas* vehicle, smiling. I thought Martinez looked happy and healthy, and not at all what a war-torn guerrilla commander might be expected to look like.

Back at the dorm, I managed to create my own ruckus when I walked over to my pack under the cot by the door, knelt down, unzipped the top, and started rearranging my clothes.

“Yaaaiii!” I screamed.

“What are you yelling about?” Sacco asked. Reid and McAllister looked at me like I was nuts.

“My hands! They’re on fire!”

I didn’t know what was happening. I held them to my face, expecting to see reddish blotches. I saw nothing. I looked closer. Then I saw them. Ants. So tiny they were almost invisible. Scurrying all over my hands.

“Fire ants!” I yelled.

I started shaking my hands to get rid of them, but the burning continued. I peered into my pack. Ants were swarming around in the clothes. I ran out the door, rubbing and shaking my hands until the burning dissipated.

Returning inside, I grabbed each article of clothing, raced back out the door and shook it outside. Back inside, I left the clothing on top of the cot, then grabbed the next piece. Finally, with the pack empty, I shook it outside as well, thinking I’d have to recheck the clothing at the hotel.

“You left your pack open,” commented Sinclair. “Did you have any food in there?”

“Some cheese and snack bars.”

“That’s what attracted them.”