

CHAPTER TWO

SR. ELENA AND TIERRA BLANCA

“This is how we get the word out.”

“I am the Mother Superior,” Torriera announced at breakfast the next morning in the hotel dining room. “Does anybody have to take their malaria pills?”

“I have worry dolls for everyone today,” Kempton joked, showing off her earrings.

“That’s fine,” someone quipped, “unless someone cuts your ears off.”

That comment was not far off the mark. It reminded me of a prose poem by Carolyn Forché read by my students. Written in 1978 during events leading up to the war, the poem explained what happened when she was invited to dine at the home of a Salvadoran colonel:

Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man’s legs or cut his hands to lace. . . . I was asked how I enjoyed the country. . . . There was some talk of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it in a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves.⁵

Shocking words, shocking images, met with expressions of disbelief on my students' faces.

The morning schedule called for a stop at Tierra Blanca, a Christian-based farming community in Usulután administered to by a nun from California, to be followed by a visit to Hacienda California, a sprawling farm cooperative currently in the hands of the *campesinos* who took control of lands they had worked on after the owners fled in the early years of the civil war.

"The farm of about twenty-five hundred hectares was run by the Palomo family," said Ventura, who had seen a letter written to Sinclair outlining the cooperative's recent history. "When the family left the farm in 1980, the *campesinos* started to farm the land."

After listening to Mirna the night before, and her hopes for the future of her country, this excursion promised to be an opportunity to test her belief that now, for the first time, people were beginning to feel free to talk about their past history, about how the war affected their lives, and what they thought the future might bring.

Outside the hotel, the morning traffic on Franklin Delano Roosevelt Avenue was again in full swing with a cacophony of noise from honking trucks, buses, cars, motorcycles, and scooters. A red pickup truck careened past with at least twenty kids standing in the back and hanging off the sides waving and laughing.

"There's no school," someone announced.

"They're probably on some kind of excursion."

"The teachers are on strike," said Sinclair. "They're asking for better working conditions and more money. Others think the education of the young people should come first."

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Sinclair asked Romeo to swing past Casa Clementina, a small restaurant in San Salvador, to pick up Teresa, a young mother working as a waitress who needed a ride to Hacienda California.

Then we drove south from San Salvador along the four-lane highway and turned east through LaPaz, El Rosario, and Santiago Nonuaclo.

Near the small village of San Marcos we crossed a one-lane bridge over the Rio Lempe where women standing ankle-deep in the muddy water washed small piles of clothing, dunking items then rubbing them on flat rocks.

About a quarter of a mile past the bridge, Romeo pulled over and parked in front of the San Marcos Market, a collection of shacks and small cinder block buildings.

"Time for a stretch," Sinclair announced. "You can buy sodas and snacks here."

At the first shack a woman, surrounded by family members, held a small child on her lap. The child was sick and Barker, the head of our university nursing program, went to investigate.

"She has a fever," she explained. "She needs attention. This is frustrating, because if the child doesn't get to a hospital, she could grow sicker and die."

We were told that the mortality rate for children under the age of five in El Salvador was roughly four times greater than in the U.S. Sadly, in the case of the small child, Barker's hands were tied.

Back toward the river, power lines ran along the road, and in a fenced in area several cattle grazed, and beyond, set back from the road, was a building with the sign "*Base Militar San Marcos Lempa.*"

"That's for the military personnel maintaining the security of the bridge," Sinclair said. "So it doesn't get blown up. Bridges were prime targets during the war."

By the base two white oxen, a heavy wooden yoke behind their horns, pulled a rickety cart with thick, mud-encrusted wooden wheels onto the road. The driver, a young man in a white T-shirt and dark pants, sat on a wooden box holding two ropes tethered to the oxen in his right hand and a long stick in his left. Behind him a young boy holding onto an upright pole in the cart's platform, stared at us as the rig creaked by, the oxen's hooves clapping on the pavement.

After leaving the market, we drove a short distance down the road, and turned right toward the village of Tierra Blanca, the home since 1988 of Sr. Elena Jaramillo of the Sisters of St. Joseph from Orange, California. We pulled up in front of a white stucco wall with a ramp leading through a large entryway. “*Iglesia Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*” [Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe] was painted in large letters to the left of the entryway along with a life-size portrait of the Virgin, on the other side was a large heart in dark blue with a cross on top.

Romeo steered the van through the entry, parked in the courtyard, and we followed Sinclair inside the community church, where several children sat on benches by the entrance cutting out paper hearts. Nearby a woman recited prayers with another group of children.

White plaster walls, large grill-like windows, and rows of wooden benches faced the sanctuary where an immense wooden cross with a life-sized Christ figure and paintings of the Sacred Heart and the Virgin dominated the rear wall.

We stopped to say a prayer, then Sinclair led us outside to a triangular courtyard where we sat on benches and chairs under shade trees waiting to meet Sr. Elena.

At that point someone brought up Sinclair’s warning about the “primitive conditions” at Nueva Esperanza.

“What about sleeping conditions?”

“You don’t do a lot of turning in a cot.”

“Would there be some sort of shelter?”

“We’re their guests,” Sinclair remarked. “They’ll do their best to accommodate us.”

“When we talked to that mother about where she could take that child,” Barker said, “I wondered if we were going to see the hospital?”

“That’s in the city of Usulután. It’s a city of ten to twenty thousand people. But it’s not on our schedule.”

“The child doesn’t probably need to see a doctor right now,” she added. “She doesn’t need help until ‘mal grande.’”

By way of introducing the small, trim woman standing next to him with sun-darkened skin and close-cropped gray hair, Sinclair said, “Sister Elena does a tremendous amount of good pastoral work with displaced people at some risk to herself, and with a lot of love.”

“Welcome,” she said. “The community is anxious to have you visit. They are delighted to have visitors because this is how we get the word out. And I’m sure you are wondering what I do here. I’ve been here for five years. Tierra Blanca numbers about six thousand people, with many of the *campesinos* farming the salt works.”

“The salt works?” someone asked.

“Salt water from the ocean runs into concrete patties the workers constructed,” she explained. “The sun evaporates the water, leaving the salt to be collected. But the salt is not being harvested right now because of the rainy season. And there are problems. Certain people are putting pressure on the buyers not to buy the salt, or to buy it at lower prices. For example, salt sells for sixty colones for a one hundred pound sack, and our people could only sell it for fourteen colones. Buyers from Guatemala came about ten times, but because of pressures placed on them not to buy, nothing was sold.”

“We’re talking about raw, unprocessed salt,” said Sinclair. “The farmers want to process it, but that calls for another level of industry.”

“Recently, the workers rented a mill where they hoped to iodize the salt,” said Elena. “But finding buyers remained an issue. It was just one more example of the power of the elites. They could apply pressure anywhere they wanted to stymie the efforts of the *campesinos*. And what better place than to let the farmers do all the work, then apply pressure so they couldn’t sell their product.”

This, she said, was a classic ploy of people in power, the wealthy landowners hiding behind the law and elected officials, to keep the poor in their place while lining their own bank accounts.

“The farmers want to produce shrimp as well,” she added. “So some of the patties are used for that purpose. The workers plant the larva, then in nine months the shrimp can be harvested.”

The bottom line for Elena was to break through the cycle of *campesino* poverty by developing a life-sustaining economy at Tierra Blanca. “I’m working with a group of women, and I’ve explained to them about working together as a collective.”

By now it was getting late and we had to leave for the farming cooperative, but not before we visited a project close to Elena’s heart, her garden.

“I’m working with people on a medicinal garden to make all kinds of medicines,” she said. “We maintain a large medicine chest and sell the medicines. Each person who prepares the medicine makes about fifteen cents on a bottle. Our interest in natural medicines and herbal ingredients grows directly out of the fact that regular healthcare is inaccessible and too expensive. So we contract to have a natural herbal medicine group come out here, and the doctors don’t seem to pooh-pooh the natural medicines.”

Then Elena talked about the health clinic she started at Tierra Blanca.

“There is a clinic that the people can come to. I say, ‘Look, I am not a nurse. But let’s look in the book and see what it says.’ We have the book called *Where There Is No Doctor*, by David Warner, and another book that tells us about fifty plants from Honduras. The book has the names of the medicines, then the names that the native people use, and then the uses of those medicines. Basically, taking care of people’s medical needs becomes a team effort.”

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In this out-of-the-way community of war refugees in Usulután, Elena struck us as a perfect example of someone living out the gospel of administering to the needs of the poor. With her quiet sensibility, her welcoming smile, and a “let’s get to work” way about

her, she had found her life's calling – bringing order and civility into a badly battered world

“Remember how she would walk,” said Bertsch years later, recalling her first impressions of Sr. Elena. “There was a silence. There was a strength about her. When she walked through the community I felt she was almost not touching the ground.”

Also at the time, there was no way for any of us to know that our visit to Tierra Blanca would jump start a long-term relationship with Sr. Elena and the people she served – a relationship that eventually brought her to our campus in Connecticut for an honorary doctorate, and which for years to come would include visits over Spring Break by student delegations who worked on community projects and fell in love with the people, especially the children.

After Sr. Elena extended to us an invitation to return to Tierra Blanca for lunch, we drove to the entrance of the Hacienda California cooperative and discovered a closed barbed wire gate and an armed guard.

“The leadership of La California is supposed to be expecting us,” Sinclair said. “Maybe communications got mixed up.”

He got out of the van and walked over to the guard, explaining who we were. The man must have understood because he nodded, unlocked the gate, and motioned us to pass through.

“There was some trouble here just a while ago,” Sinclair said, climbing back into the van. “It seems the owner arrived with the Hacienda Police to take back his property. This happened when the farmers are trying to buy the land to form a cooperative so they can determine their own destiny. When the contingent of police approached the gate demanding entrance, word spread quickly, and the farmers rushed from working the fields, massing in protest behind the gate. They were carrying machetes, hoes, stones, and whatever else they could get their hands on. It was a classic David versus Goliath match-up. When the two sides faced each other, the battalion of police withdrew to the other side of the road opposite the gate. Tensions mounted, but the farmers refused to budge,

saying they would fight to the death for the land. Eventually, to avoid another massacre, the police left and the workers celebrated their victory.”

Beyond the gate we drove past vast fields stretching into the distance, and finally arrived in front of the farm’s *finca* [house], parking under a grove of trees. Romero shut off the engine and suddenly several men in combat fatigues brandishing rifles surrounded our van.