

CHAPTER THREE

APOLO AND LEONIDAS

“The army killed my mother, my father, my uncles, and sixteen cousins.”

“I don’t know what this is all about,” Sinclair said, surveying the men outside. “Stay inside the van. I’ll find out what’s going on.”

He opened the door, jumped out, and the men crowded around him. Sinclair is tall. We could see his face above the others, and as he tried to explain yet again who we were and why we were there, the men started to nod their heads.

Then Sinclair slid open the side door of the van. “This is a group of guerrillas who have come to support the cause of the local *campesinos* here,” he said. “Don’t worry. They are friendly. I told them that you do not agree with the policies of your government, and that you have come to support the peace efforts.”

At that point a few of the men ambled off toward the *finca*, which we later learned served as their command center, while others stood or sat in the shade under the trees. One young man – about eighteen years old and dressed in a ragged uniform – studied us as we stepped out of the van, as if he wasn’t sure what to make of us. He was thin and wiry, with a rifle slung over his shoulder and a frown on his face.

Meanwhile Sinclair stood talking to one of the farmers, a broad-faced man with squinting eyes, a thick black mustache and beard, dressed in work pants, a T-shirt with a red FMLN insignia, and wearing a wide-brimmed straw sombrero.

“He says you can walk around behind the *finca* to take a look at the guerrilla encampment,” Sinclair said. “And if you want to, you can check inside the building.”

Palomo's old residence, built on a dirt-filled platform held in place by a three-foot stone wall, consisted of a main floor and a large attic with two dormers. The front windows were shattered, the front wall blackened by smoke, and over the front entrance a crudely painted sign announced "Asoc. Coop. Prod. Agrop. La California." A makeshift awning of straw was propped on wooden poles over the entryway, and next to the door another straw roof covered a stone table and broken chair. Piles of wood, discarded furniture, crates, and plastic pails were strewn along the sides of the house.

Behind the *finca*, about two dozen guerrillas lounged under the trees while others moved in and out of the main building. That was when Sinclair came up with an intriguing idea.

"Would anyone care to talk to the group of *Norte Americanos* about the conflict?" he asked. "It would be an opportunity for a group of international visitors to hear about the war from the perspective of a combatant."

After some discussion, a young man stepped forward, agreeing to talk to us. He led us around the *finca* under a canopy of orange and mango trees filled with squawking birds to a wood-framed structure with picnic tables and a tarp roof.

"These people are teachers and administrators scheduled to be in El Salvador for ten days," Sinclair began. "They have been preparing to meet with the people of El Salvador for the last ten to twelve months. While in the country they will be visiting several communities and the universities. But mainly they have come to learn about the recent history of El Salvador and the current situation, so they can return to the United States and tell their colleagues and students what they learned."

"With the hope of being some assistance in your struggle," Willison added.

The young combatant introduced himself as "Apolo," and said he was the leader of this contingent of men. Jose Ventura described the scene:

We are introduced to a young man, not thirty yet, trim, 5 and ½ feet, maybe 150 lbs. He wears boots, his

pants are ripped, his T-shirt is also not of recent acquisition. The pants are olive-green, the color that many people in this country have worn for many years. He seems not sure of his role today. He does not look people in the eye, his hand grip is not very strong, he is nervous, as a matter of fact he would smoke very much, one cigarette after the other. But he is a very important person as we would later learn. He is the leader, the guerrilla leader, and he was not supposed to be there. In fact, while we were there we heard some airplane engine noise and men from his unit carefully came out to look where the airplane was. As the engine noise got louder and louder, they would disappear, making sure that they would not be observable from the air. Under the densely covered trees, or disappearing into the house, they just did not exist.⁶

— 2 —

Apolo's Story

We are a small group of FMLN and we should be some distance from here. But the government is not complying with the peace accords, so we are here to support this community.

Q) With families, did some children join with the FMLN and others join the government forces?

A) That happened a lot because of forced registration. Others would join the guerrillas. People from the same family didn't see each other. But now after the cease fire, we can see each other without being on opposite sides.

Q) Can you integrate easier with the police forces because of the peace accords?

A) It depends on the guidelines followed and the training of the police force. If the accords are rigidly adhered to, then everyone could join.

Q) Can you tell us a little bit about your personal history?

A) I am from the Department of Morazán. We all saw that there was a real need to join together because of the rich people who controlled the wealth of the country. The poor people tried to make progress little by little, but they did not have any freedom of expression. Only the wealthy. There was no democracy for the poor.

So years ago the people started to protest. The labor unions took to the streets, and the response of the government was to repress these groups. So there were no other options than armed struggle. And that was the case that was shared by so many people, the labor unions and others. We had to fight to survive.

In the early years of the war the government policy was to exterminate the people who lived in areas where the guerrillas were. There were massacres. And at that point, when we saw what the army did, people began to realize that the FMLN was part of the struggle of the people, and so the FMLN became more powerful. The idea was to force the government to negotiate. Maybe it was more of a bluff, but the FMLN continued to press until the negotiations could be held. And that is where we are now.

There were two of us in the family, and in 1980 we saw the need and joined. After my brother and I collaborated with the FMLN, then the repression hit. The army killed my mother, my father, my uncles, and sixteen cousins. Given that, we had no choice but to confront the army. What happened to my brother and my family happened to so many families. And in many places the government armed forces lost the support of the people.

Q) We are now in the cease fire, but when do you and your people think peace will occur?

A) In the past ten years there has been no liberty or freedom or justice. And now we see this transition period. We feel if the agreements are carried out as they are supposed to be, there will be peace. Peace is where there is real democracy, and where there is freedom.

Q) Did you expect problems with the compliance of the army with the accords?

A) We anticipated this before the agreements were signed. Negotiations started with the former Christian Democrat Napoleon Duarte, but they were not sincere. The same happened with the ARENA policy. They would share dialog, but not negotiate. The truth is, there are two armies in this country.

At first, ARENA did not want to accept that the United Nations had a role in this peace process and the whole issue of a UN presence here. The government was against this. But the FMLN said the UN must be here or nothing will happen. We know that signing the agreements and putting them into practice are two different things.

We foresaw the problems before they arose. There are elements within the military and the wealthy class that would not comply with the accords because it was not in their best interests. The armed forces, for example, did not concentrate in areas where they were supposed to be. They were in twenty areas more than where they should have been. So we hold five areas where we are not supposed to be.

Also the land has traditionally belonged to the very wealthy. And the rich say, "We will not give up our land." This is a big hacienda owned by Joaquín Palomo. People have come here who were displaced by the war and they built small shacks. But the owner says he will not sell the land. We feel he has no choice. He must sell. And so we have an obstacle to the peace.

At issue is that part of the peace agreement about lands in the conflictive zones. We believe these lands should be available for purchase by the people who live there and work the land. But the problem was that if the owners didn't want to sell, then they didn't have to. So the FMLN talked to the owners, and then more people were willing to sell their lands.

Q) What will you do if peace comes to your land?

A) Looking at the basic people of our army, if the agreements were complied with, some would become part of the National Civil Police, some would move into production, others would join the political process as part of the FMLN party. For myself, I would like to study more. So far, I've completed the ninth grade.

When Apolo ended his presentation, we thanked him for talking to us, and as he walked back toward the *finca* we could not believe we had just heard the testimony of a guerrilla leader.

"The behavior of this young man moved me tremendously," Ventura said. "He is a young man in a hurry, driven to do something for his people."

How long the rebels would camp at the *finca* was anybody's guess.

— 3 —

Shortly after Apolo left, five members of the cooperative's leadership council joined us. Dressed in shirts, long pants, and straw hats, the farmers, serious expressions on their faces and speaking in measured tones, introduced themselves and their roles in the cooperative.

"Maybe you could tell us a little about the history of the community," Sinclair began. "But maybe we shouldn't start too far back."

Leonidas, a short, wiry man, with a sun-tanned, angular face and a bushy black mustache, wearing over-sized aviator-style glasses and dressed in a faded work shirt and dark pants, spoke for the group.

Leonidas's Story

Through the 1970s the hacienda had about three thousand employees. People worked together at that point. And the owner of the place, Joachim Palomo, assigned

people to work in different areas. He also had supervisors or overseers. We were paid two colones to work from seven in the morning to four in the afternoon. That would have been about fifty cents a day. We could earn that wage if we were able to finish what we were assigned to do.

For example, we would work in this *finca* here where the plantation house is. There are lots of orange trees here. The daily work assignment would be for one person to dig three holes per day to plant the orange trees a meter wide and a meter deep. But the soil was very hard, and we would dig and work all day and only be able to dig one hole. It would take us three days to earn the wages for one day, because we didn't complete the one day's assignment. So the wages of fifty cents were spread over three days.

I remember in the '70s when we were working here digging these holes, and the mango trees that are still here were here then, too. Sometimes the mangos would be pecked by the birds and they would leave only the shell. Well, one of our workmates was walking by here, and there was one of these mangos on the ground. It really had been pecked to death. There was just a little piece of mango still in the shell. He picked it up and for stealing that mango he was penalized two weeks. He was laid off for two weeks.

When they gave out the payroll that Saturday, they paid the workers the money for the past two weeks, and said publicly, "You've been punished for stealing mangoes and you will be suspended for two weeks' work because everyone knows you don't steal fruit from the hacienda, the big house." The punishment for being laid off for two weeks meant a lot of hunger, because there was no other work.

While that happened to the worker, at the same time Palomo, who lived in this house, had this tremendously big dog from the United States. When that dog barked, you could hear it up in the town of Tierra Blanca. And when they fed the dog, they would slaughter a calf every

two days to get meat to feed it. The workers, seeing this kind of injustice, began to organize. It started first in the salt works. Workers began to protest and demand that the wages be raised, and the work requirements for the day to be fair, something that we could really do in one day's work.

Then the repression started. Right at the end of this road, you may have seen it coming in, there was a National Guard Post. There were four National Guards there, maintained by Joachim Palomo. They patrolled the whole area mounted on horses with G-3 pistols in their hands.

They came to where we were in the salt works and asked us, "Where are your ID documents?" The people who had been involved in the protest were pulled aside, and written up by the National Guards. And they decided what to do with them. There was no prison for protesting workers. They would capture somebody, take him away, and the person would be "disappeared." This caused panic within our working unit. And so when people were taken away in front of everybody, the fear got to the point where no one would recognize what he had witnessed. No one saw anything because he feared that the same thing could happen to him.

To give you an idea of the fear that the people had and the repression, about a thousand meters from here, maybe a quarter of a mile, there is a well and there was a family that had been "disappeared" by the National Guard, and their bodies thrown down that well. The remains of the family are still at the bottom of the well. To spread more fear, peons working here at the hacienda would be dragged from their houses in the middle of the night and killed and thrown down wells or disappeared. No one would know where they were. We began to see what a massacre this was. The people who were captured never came back. Many of the *campesinos* didn't have any other option but to go to the mountains.

“This,” Sinclair interjected, “is generally a reference to joining the guerrillas.”

And also, groups of *campesinos* would begin to come together, go out in the streets, and protest. In 1980 the *campesinos* had real political power, which they showed that year. One way they showed their power was in marches. Here within the hacienda they went to the stables where they milked the cows and burned and destroyed those stables. There were three stables. One of seven hundred cows of two milkings a day, another of six hundred cows, and another one hundred cows used for regeneration purposes. Those stables were burned to the ground and destroyed. This year was when the army began to mobilize and grow to be a giant army.

Q) How many of the people, all the people, or just a small group of people, were doing this?

A) About half the workers. The other half were dead or had fled to the mountains. Everyone that remained. And so when the army began to mobilize and hold military operations, there was some conflict, some skirmishes between the guerrillas and the army. Joaquín Palomo, at this point, left the hacienda. He couldn't work because there was too much fighting. He couldn't exploit the workers in the same way. Many had left, and those who stayed were organized and would not do the same kind of work. And the other reason was because the war here was in flames, and there was fighting and crossfires, and he couldn't stay here himself.

From 1980 to 1987 was a real hard part of the war. At the end of 1987 we organized for the first time an initial cooperative here. This was really done at the behest and the initiative of a regional federation of cooperatives which, incidentally, was pro-government. The leadership committee of the cooperative was bought and manipulated by Joaquín Palomo. The president of the cooperative obeyed the orders

of Joaquín Palomo. Every member of the cooperative who farmed two acres of corn had to pay four hundred pounds of corn to Joaquín Palomo. And that continued into the next year, 1988.

By 1989 people realized that we had to restructure this cooperative. Everyone who was working then realized how unjust it was to pay any of the little profits that were there to Joaquín Palomo. He would come, bring his big trucks in here, load up with our corn and leave, and at absolutely no cost to himself.

So we realized we had to restructure and we had meetings to set that out. We reformed the *cooperativa* based on formal procedures. And when Joaquín Palomo realized that the *cooperativa* had been restructured and that his representative here at the hacienda was no longer a part of the committee, he turned to other forms of control and repression. He sent one battalion of the army, nine hundred and fifty soldiers, to be based in this whole area.

They were sent here, they said, by the High Command, and that they had orders that we didn't have any rights to live or to work here. They threatened us that they were going to force us out, or they would arrest us and send us to prison. But we held strong and we didn't lose our position.

When they forcibly tried to evict *campesinos* from their homes, we had to respond with our own organization. We organized demonstrations and marches at the Sixth Brigade of the army in San Marcus Lempa to show that we were strong and that we were united. When Palomo realized that the army would not evict us, they began to act on legal cases through the judge there to arrest leaders from the cooperative. There were arrest warrants out for eight members of our leadership council. But this didn't move us. We continued to work.

Then they sent another man, a man named Roberto Larios, the brother of Colonel Larios. He came saying that

he had rented the land from Joaquín Palomo and it was his to use. Then he went to the salt works and worked there for about four months during the dry season.

We didn't like the fact that he was working in the salt works because we felt the salt works were part of the larger cooperative and it belonged to us. We began to think, how can we get him out of there? But it was hard because he was a very wealthy and powerful man. He also continued to have a military presence here. It was like a military detachment of the Coast Guard.

We went down there and he was there with all his soldiers. He had a nine millimeter military pistol in his belt, an armed weapon he used to threaten the workers with while they were working. When the people from the cooperative would go out into the ocean and fish, they would catch these minnows and come back with them. Larios would send the army to take those small fish from them and throw them back. The people were really upset because that was going to be their food for the day.

This was part of the confrontation when we were down there, and most of the people were scared and left. All that remained were the thirteen members of our leadership council, Larios, and his military people. We began to say, "This is an injustice which you are doing to our people." They got really angry. We began to discuss this, and argue with the officials of the army who were there. It was a very heated discussion. That day we made the decision that we would not let him work the salt works. In ten days, he came back and met with the cooperative with an agreement to work for Larios for ten colonnes a day.

Larios complained to the Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador, and we were invited to a meeting in the Cathedral. At the meeting, Larios performed very well. He seemed like an angel, but we said to his face all the things he had done to us.

We were supposed to have a second meeting here, but he put an article in the paper saying we had stolen his

workers. Then he started a court case against the thirteen leaders. On January 30th, the day before they signed the peace accords, the military entered the cooperative, looking for the President and Vice President of our committee to force us off the salt works. They said, "Either these two go back to the city with us, or we will force everyone off the salt works." The two men were held twenty-one days in captivity.

Laws in our country are bought and sold with money. Larios bought the judges. All the money we had paid through fees was used against us. We'd seen this before, and we asked for help from the other cooperatives. We organized eight truckloads of *campesinos* and we took over the courthouse and began to negotiate with the judge who was the local Attorney General. The Attorney General agreed to enforce the law if the judge would not. And so with his presence we loaded ourselves back on those big trucks and went to Usulután to the department capital with the Attorney General. And when we were in the chamber of law, we demanded that that judge be removed. And we achieved that. The next day he was removed. The next day we went and we got our two *compañeros* back out of jail.

Since then, as the leadership council, we've been able to rest a little bit because we haven't had the same kinds of problems that we had in the past. Maybe that gives you some idea of what is at issue.

— 4 —

"Would members of the leadership council be willing to accompany us for the rest of our visit to the hacienda?" asked Sinclair. "That might give us a better chance to ask questions about production and how you organized. Is that agreed?"

The council members nodded yes, then Leonidas agreed to answer questions.

Q) When half the men were taken away, and were disappeared, and there was great fear in the cooperative, how did the men then come together and face that fear and begin to work together, without the fear that they too would be taken away?

A) We are talking about two groups of people. Those who fled and those who stayed with panic. Part of the way we overcame the panic is that we said we had to organize and defend ourselves, and when we found the means to defend ourselves, we began to take more courage in order to calm the fear. And part of it was to get a few .22 and .38 caliber pistols. Then people began to develop more connections with the revolutionary organizations and the guerrilla armies who would give them more of a sense of being protected. And that is how the people overcame their terror.

There were also those who left. I was one of those who left. My situation was that my work here in the cooperative was not with machetes to work the land, but I had other kinds of work to do. It was very serious. And when they found out about the work I was doing, the National Guard came to my house and asked questions. I happened to be in San Salvador at the time and realized I was being sought after, so I fled to Honduras. Others were in different situations, like parents with small children, and their option was neither to stay nor to join the guerrilla organization because of their situation. But many left the country. They are the ones who now would be called the “returnees” or the “repatriated” refugees.

Q) What about healthcare here?

A) There is none. The hospital is too far, the nurse too expensive, and no physicians are available. If one gets sick, one dies.

Q) Do you really believe that peace is coming?

A) I'll tell you why I am confident, and that is because we are *campesinos*. In El Salvador, millions of us are

campesinos. We have power. We'll go into the street and demonstrate. We can rely on ourselves and our organization. And that gives me confidence that there will be peace. We think peace is fundamental to being able to develop our communities and to develop our cooperative. It is a fundamental requirement.

The meeting over, we left the picnic tables and walked back toward the *finca*.

"I have never heard anything like this before," Sinclair said, shaking his head in disbelief. "And it is because of the new situation in this country. Before the signing of the accords, the people's fears of reprisals were so great they were unable to talk freely about their experiences and concerns."

Near our van, three guerrillas in combat fatigues, sleeves rolled up, were resting under a tree. I grabbed my camera, and held it out for the men to see, but I couldn't tell from their expressions if they minded having a picture taken. Bivouacked where they were not supposed to be, with no real idea who I was or what might be done with the photo, they must have had second thoughts about the situation.

When I snapped the shutter, the youngest of the three stared directly at the camera, the second guerrilla raised his arm, hiding his face, and the third, his face badly scarred, turned away.