

CHAPTER FOUR

LA CALIFORNIA AND THE SALT WORKS

“Can campesinos purchase land?”

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It was after one o'clock when Sinclair called us together.

“We could go in the van and visit the salt works,” he said, “or we could stay where we are and visit the school and other facilities. Sister Elena is planning lunch for our group back at Tierra Blanca. But since I didn't expect us to interview an FMLN combatant, we're running a bit late on our schedule.”

The school was a priority, but after Leonidas's description of the stand-off between Larios and the *campesinos* at the salt works, I needed to see the place. All I could picture was a flat expanse dotted with piles of white salt.

Most of the group elected to stay, including Torreira, charged by the Spanish Club at the University to adopt a Salvadoran elementary school. “They all agreed that I should choose the most needy school,” she said.

Sinclair, McAllister, Sacco, and I drove off in the van with the president of the cooperative, Jose Santos Duran, a stocky *campesino* with a round face, dark mustache, and goatee.

We followed a dirt road south toward the coast, and as we curved past corn fields and through wooded, marshy areas, questions about Leonidas's talk surfaced. For example, how did the leadership handle folks who opted out of the day-to-day grind? I asked Sinclair to put the question to Jose.

"*Campesinos* try to help one another when a member is sick or hurt and not able to work," he answered. "People pick jobs they are suited for, and they earn money for their labor. People who do not work so hard earn less."

"What if someone steals something?"

"If that happened it would be put to a vote, and he could be asked to leave."

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When we pulled up in front of a one-story wood building around 1:30, the community's center of operations for the salt works, half-a-dozen *campesinos* sat on the front porch eating lunch. Window screens, metal drums filled with trash, wheelbarrows, and plastic buckets littered the ground, and to the right in a clearing a pile of salt bags baked in the sun.

Across from the shack, rectangular pools of water, roughly 25 by 75 feet, stretched into the distance almost as far as the eye could see. Ditches carrying sea water from the coast ran alongside pools edged by two-foot-high brick walls. Past the salt works a thin line of bushes and palm trees bordered a grassy area, and beyond rose the dark angular peaks of Usulután. To the south, the sun's reflection off the ocean turned the mid-day sky a pale blue.

"A recent storm damaged the salt works," Jose explained, as we followed him to the ponds. "Retaining walls have to be rebuilt, and the muck in the bottom of the pools cleaned out."

He stopped momentarily by a pool, its flat bottom covered with reddish-brown silt.

“We flood the pools with ocean water, seal them off, and the water is evaporated by the sun. Then we scoop out the salt by hand to be bagged.”

At that point McAllister strolled off with one of the workers, balancing on the brick walls, the two of them making their way across the pools until they were specks in the distance. Meanwhile, Sacco and I walked over to inspect the bags of salt in the clearing by the shack.

Crystals on the ground escaped from the sealed bags looked chunky and cloudy, and larger than the fine, white, processed salt back home. Curious, I popped one in my mouth. It tasted brackish.

When we drove back toward the hacienda, McAllister, in the rear seat, was still talking with his *campesino* friend.

Later I asked him, “Robin, what did you talk about?”

“Oh, nothing much.”

I didn’t believe it. I had read and admired his travel writings, and was sure he was collecting details for an essay on El Salvador.

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Near the hacienda our group was standing with folks from the cooperative in the shade of huge trees bordering a large soccer field where a spirited match, with the spectators shouting encouragement, was underway.

Reid and Willison, invited to play, accepted the challenge, but only after some good-natured ribbing about their general fitness. Still a bit jet-lagged, they nevertheless joined the younger players on the field, intent on trying to put on a good show.

Already late, we waved goodbye to the people under the trees and drove off toward Elena’s for lunch. It was 2:30.

En route, talk about the elementary school dominated the conversation. It turned out that over two hundred children attended six grades with a staff of two teachers in a dilapidated school building with holes in the roof.

“I thought it was a chicken coop,” Torriera said. “It was a small wooden building, without divisions, just a very large room in very bad condition. Many of these children’s mothers, like Teresa who came with us from San Salvador to La California, work in the capital to earn money and only on free days can come home to see their families.”

“What’s their future?” Bertsch asked. “What do these children have to look forward to? I just don’t see much hope for them. They will grow up and experience the same subsistence standard of living as their parents.”

As a footnote, upon her return to the States, Torriera, recommended the Spanish Club adopt the school at La California, and in the following months, *La Hispanidad* raised money to repair the roof, mailed boxes of educational materials, and collected over one hundred pairs of children’s shoes (a requirement for attending classes).

Summing up the overall situation for the farming cooperative, Sinclair said, “Here there is some hope for poor farmers, but only because they benefit from the support of the FMLN.”

But across the country, negotiations between the government and the *campesinos* taking over the farms they had worked on, sometimes for generations, stood at a standstill. Insurgents, filing land claims after the conflict, said they would lay down their weapons when several hundred thousand acres, amounting to roughly 12 percent of El Salvador, were turned over to their families and sympathizers. But facing shortages of money and pressure from wealthy landowners to reclaim their farms, the Cristiani administration was banking on the rebels to scale back demands.

On the road toward Tierra Blanca Sinclair pointed out a house with an adjacent ten foot square concrete pillbox, the same fortification mentioned earlier by Leonidas. During the hostilities, as a safety precaution, Palomo had it built as a National Guard command post. Three feet of the squat building stood above ground level, with gun turret slits cut into the sides.

“The pillbox is attached to the house by an underground passageway,” Sinclair said.

“FMLN” was scrawled on the walls with orange paint, and on the other side of the road two young boys, oblivious to the menacing-looking bunker, played with sticks in the dirt.

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When the front doors to Sr. Elena’s compound swung open, Romeo drove into a courtyard and parked in front of the church. In the open area under trees where we had met Elena earlier, women were preparing our meal, and it was close to three o’clock by the time we sat down to chicken and rice.

“So get used to it!” Sinclair said, laughing.

After we finished, one of the cooks took it upon herself to instruct us on the proper way to clean plastic plates. She motioned for us to follow her to the well area where she picked up a dish, scraped the chicken bones and leftovers into a large plastic pail, then wiped the dish clean with a soapy cloth in one basin, rinsed the dish in a second basin, and set it down to dry. As we washed our dishes and finished cleaning up, she stood nearby eyeing us critically. At that point sounds of strumming guitars wafted across the courtyard, and as we walked toward the music, I glanced back over my shoulder. The woman was rewashing our dishes.

In Elena’s office, Willison and a young girl sat on chairs facing each other, cradling guitars, he strumming background chords, she plucking away on the melody and singing the lyrics.

“I want to get close to the people and immerse myself in the culture,” Willison announced, looking up as we entered the small room. “Hey, that’s what we’re here for. Right?”

In a rear room over a desk hung a framed wall poster of Oscar Mensenor Romero with a group of young girls in white dresses holding banners and flags, with a quote in block letters that read, “*Si me Matan, Resucitaré en el Corazon del Pueblo Salvadoreño*” [“If they kill me, I’ll be reborn in the heart of the Salvadoran people”]. The words referred to Romero’s “spirit of the martyrs” speech in March of 1980, just before his assassination. “As a Christian,” he had said,

“I don’t believe in death, but rather in Resurrection. Martyrdom is a blessing that I don’t believe I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of liberty, and the sign of hope will be a reality.”

Against the rear wall, two locked metal cabinets with glass doors held jars and small plastic containers.

“These are their medications,” Barker said, trying to decipher the labels.

Stacked neatly in rows, the contents of the medications, written in Spanish in a tiny script, remained a mystery.

Invited by Elena to view the medicinal garden she mentioned earlier that morning, we trooped outside, walked past the front of the church to a plot approximately an eighth of an acre in size, guarded by a five-foot concrete block wall topped with barbed wire fencing.

“We have to protect the garden from thieves,” she explained.

Expecting an intricately laid out plot, I was surprised to find what appeared to be a patchwork of grass, bushes, and weeds.

“To the right,” she said, “is the section for the medicinal herbs.”

Surely the leaves of these plants would be vibrant yellows and deep purples and reds. Instead, the shrubs looked scruffy and ordinary, plants you would pass in the woods without giving them a second thought.

The garden tour over, we thanked Elena for hosting the lunch, promised we’d return, and headed south to the community of Neuva Esperanza, bouncing over pot holes and ruts in a dirt road lined on either side by trees and brush, passing women balancing baskets and jugs on their heads, and men with machetes in hand or slung from belts, and small herds of plodding cattle, haunches and ribs showing, tended by boys carrying long sticks.

“The machete is an apt symbol for the Salvadoran struggle,” McAllister commented. “It serves the dual purpose of a farming implement as well as a weapon of defense.”

“Ah, the men are treated as gods,” Torriera countered. “So we let them think so.”

Romeo braked to a stop on a small rise where the dirt road sloped down to a muddy stream. On the other side was the settlement. It was about 4:30.

“I scheduled Nueva Esperanza early in our stay for a number of reasons,” Sinclair explained. “First, so you can experience how the people of a repatriated community live and work while trying to create a viable life in spite of the government’s attempts to undermine their success. Second, to listen to the stories of the community leaders so you can better understand their views about the war, their repatriation from Nicaragua, and the role of the government in their relocation. And finally, so you can witness firsthand the spirit and solidarity of the people as they struggle to survive.”

Since the community’s recent founding, he added, members had constructed temporary housing, dug wells for water, set up a school and infirmary, planted crops, laid out an area for a cattle farm, and worked out a community-based governing structure.

Braced with that information, we hefted our gear and trudged along the dirt road down to a narrow wooden footbridge where we crossed the stream and hiked up the road on the other side to a large signboard that read: “*Bienvenidos a la Comunidad Nueva Esperanza*” [“Welcome to the community of Nueva Esperanza”].

Past the entrance, shacks made with long wooded branches, plastic sheeting sides, and corrugated tin roofs, lay scattered under mango trees on either side of the dirt road.