

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SOLEDAD AND NUEVA ESPERANZA

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*“There are no historians left in El Salvador. They were assassinated during the war. So the history of contemporary El Salvador is to be discovered in the stories of the people.”*

We stopped in front of a nearby shack, and Sinclair explained to a man that our group was expected, and would he tell someone from the leadership council we had arrived, and that we apologized for our lateness. The man walked off, returning minutes later with a pixyish-looking woman with a thin, sharp face, her hair in a pony tail, dressed in a tan skirt, pink blouse, and wearing sandals.

“Soledad recently returned from lecturing in Germany,” Sinclair said, introducing her. “She told about the history of her people and about her experiences in the civil war. She was soliciting aid for the community.”

“There are so many teachers here,” she said, surveying us. “And we don’t have any at all.”

“International visitors to Nueva Esperanza help support the efforts of the people to achieve a new life,” said Sinclair. “Their mission is to relate the history of their recent struggles. Your job is to listen to their stories, to observe as much as you can, then construct your own version of what has happened here in El Salvador, so when you return to the U.S. you can bear witness to the struggles of these people.”

Soledad led us under the trees to the left of the entrance sign to a rectangular one-story bunkhouse. Inside were three square rooms,

roughly fifteen by fifteen feet, with dirt floors and walls of rough planking. The first two rooms, reserved for workers, were furnished with four cots covered with blankets, clothing, and personal belongings. The room at the far end of the bunkhouse, reserved for visitors, held four more cots – one covered with books and clothing, another with mosquito netting, and two more against the end side wall. Soledad instructed us to leave our packs on the empty cots.

“We’ll figure out who will sleep where later,” said Sinclair. “We’re going to another building where some of the community leaders will tell us a little about this place and their personal histories. But before we go there, Soledad has asked if any of you would care for a soda and some fruit.”

With that, Soledad led us to the community canteen where we crowded around a long wooden counter, ordering bananas, sodas, and packets of saltines.

Sinclair had explained earlier that food and lodging expenses had been paid for. “We try to make a generous donation,” he said, “because these people have so little.”

Snacks in hand, we followed Soledad to a large pavilion that held a scattering of desks, chairs, small tables, and benches. Grain sacks marked “*Producto USA*” were piled on a platform at the far end under a banner announcing in large red letters: *Por la Paz y la Vida-Comunidades Unidas* [For Peace and Life, the Communities United]. A white rooster, perched high on top of the sacks, cocked its head from side to side.

We sat in a circle at child-sized desks and were soon joined by a man with long dark hair, a mustache, and small goatee, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. On the T-shirt was the picture of a man’s face which later Sinclair said was a commandant from Nicaragua.

“There are no historians left in El Salvador,” Sinclair said, getting the meeting started. “They were assassinated during the war. So the history of contemporary El Salvador is to be discovered in the stories of the people. Many stories can be told for the first time because the signing of the peace accords diminished the terror of retribution in the minds of the people.”

“It is not our fault, what we say,” Soledad said, “because it is the truth. Your visit gives us courage because it comes from the heart.”

Soon another man arrived and sat next to Soledad, introducing himself as Pilar Martinez. “I’m a member of the community and a construction worker.”

“And I work in the area of internal communications,” Soledad added.

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*Soledad’s Story*

I’ll try to share some of the history of our community, and although you probably wouldn’t get all of the details, with two or three people taking part, maybe we will get much of the story out.

As Juan indicated, we are really happy you are visiting us here to see how we live because we don’t live as people live in San Salvador. And the government is partly to blame for that because in 1980 they scorched us out of our homes. It was a policy back then, a policy of “scorched earth.” That means no living thing survives in that field.

I lived in Chalatenango, and the army came through and burned our house. They came through and burned our crops. When they came, we would leave the house and go hide in the bushes and the mountains. I had a girl who was born underneath a tree while we were fleeing. That happened again and again to us.

And in 1980 there was a massacre at the Sampul River, which you may have heard of. On that day, the army corralled the people and forced them ahead at gunpoint to the mouth of the Sampul River where they committed that great massacre. The River Sampul was right on the border. The Salvadoran Army fired down from one side of the river, and the Honduran Army fired from the other side of the river, and those who didn’t die by being shot were

drowned in the river because it was already flooding because of the rain storms. It was more than a tragedy. On my mother's side we lost fifty family members. Six hundred people died altogether, not to mention another seventy people who died and were never found.

But we are a people who really believe in God, and that faith has kept us united, and kept us with hope to the point where we are today. And so we saved all the things we could, and then we went to the Red Cross and asked for help. They took us to a refuge in the basement of the Church of San Roche in San Salvador.

When we arrived there we were out of our minds. The army came there when we arrived, and they circled the church, and they cut off all food coming into the church. And there were six hundred people living in the basement of this church. They were sleeping on the floor, and there was a single bathroom in the church that we shared among us. There was no room for us in the church because it was already overcrowded, but we had no other place to go. Finally we were allowed to join the others in the basement.

One morning the toilet flooded and we were in the basement and it caused a tremendous problem and we were trying to clean that up and the military came in and started beating and harassing the people. Three times they forced their entry into the church and captured and disappeared two people.

We lived with a lot of anguish during that time. I lost my father there. He was with us, and he got sick, and the Red Cross came and took him to the veteran's hospital, saying they would bring him back when he was better, and he disappeared. We never saw him again or heard what happened.

In the church, it was always one thing after another. First an epidemic of typhoid, then a measles disaster. We never were able to feel good living in the basement. But one thing we always remembered though was the four North

American church workers, who were actually the four women who were killed on the highway. They helped us whenever they could, and they would get all that they could raise and sneak it through to our community. And another person who was very important and played a very big role was a Jesuit priest, Joachim, who was killed recently. And then of course, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese helped us to get out of that situation.

At the time there was a man from England, a guy named Julian, who helped us to get asylum in Nicaragua. And when we got to Nicaragua as refugees there was a big party. They celebrated our arrival. And we came with just the clothes on our backs.

The Sandinista government in Nicaragua received us very openly. They gave us land to work, and so Salvadorans began to farm. They gave us loans for agriculture, they donated a tractor, they gave us a truck, and we were able to buy small tools for agriculture, and a plow. We had everything there. But we kept asking ourselves, when are we going back to El Salvador? Throughout this whole war it was always when can we go back to El Salvador? There was always the war, but El Salvador was the first thing on our minds.

In 1990 something very strange happened. We were reading a text in Jeremiah, and something jumped off the page, and it said, "They left crying and returned in happiness." And it said in the text, "I will enable you to return to your land now." It was like it was a God-send.

So when we were talking we began to question ourselves again, saying well why don't we go back? We're Salvadorans, and we have a right to go back to our own country. And we began to take the initiative of doing a survey among the Salvadorans in Nicaragua to begin to see if they wanted to go back. And if they wanted to go back, did they want to go back on their own, individually, or did they want to go back in a big group, organized? All of the

people who wanted to go back said, "We want to go back in community."

After we began to make an appeal to the United Nations Commission for Refugees, they said that they would make the appropriate request to the government, the Salvadoran government. What they were saying was the problem was that we had chosen to go to a country where there was a revolution, and because of the revolution we would not be able to return to our country. The accusation was that we belonged to the FMLN, and that's really what the main gist of it was.

We said, "If we belonged to the FMLN we would be there with rifles in the mountains. We wouldn't be in exile with our children."

Then the government changed in Nicaragua, and we went through a whole wave of harassment, of pressure by the new government against the Salvadoran refugees. The elected Chamorro government published a list of the Salvadoran guerrillas who had been nationalized in Nicaragua, with first and last names. And that list was a signal for the death squads from El Salvador that were now in Nicaragua to take care of the problem.

We set up a small office in Nicaragua to help get Salvadorans organized to return. And the Salvadoran officials, the Vice Ministers, General Zepeda and others, came and did a search of our office. But that didn't keep us out. We kept on working. They pretty much kept fooling us for the rest of that year. There was one requirement after another. We couldn't return unless we had purchased land. And there were a number of other kinds of requirements. We began to think, how much is it going to take to get us back, when they had tossed us out like we were human trash? That's why we took over the offices of the High Commission for Refugees. We held the office for two days, and then we took over the Salvadoran Embassy in Nicaragua for two weeks.

Next we had an appointment with the counsel, and we said that we want to go back, and he said, "No problem. I'll have an answer for you." And when he didn't have an answer, we came back and got all our stuff and we moved in there. We brought our cooking equipment and our pots and pans into the courtyard, and we washed and we set a little latrine in the corner, and we just lived there. We said, "We won't take it anymore." And after we set up the latrines in the corner, we did theater about the history of our community. We were clear. We would stay there in the Embassy until they gave us a favorable reply.

I think one factor that helped us was that the Salvadoran Embassy was right next to the Argentinean Embassy and the Columbian Embassy. The other ambassadors who lived in their embassies just couldn't sleep. We were making this noise. It was like we never slept. The ambassadors from the other two embassies would call the Salvadoran ambassador and say, "Can you get these people back to their country?"

We had set up deadline dates in January and February, but that never really happened. March 7th they sent a team to document us with our personal IDs and things. And that's when we left the offices of the embassy because they agreed we would be going back then. So on March 20, 1991, we boarded the planes to come back home. When we got to the terminal they wouldn't even let us go through the passenger terminal. They put us through the cargo terminal because they didn't want the Nicaraguan people to see us leaving.

The Christian-based communities met us at the airport. But the government put on their own kind of show about this. On the way back, as we were driving in, they put up a big banner which said "Welcome Salvadorans to Your Homeland." But behind the banner were five tanks and a squadron of troops. That was the reception we got from them.

These are some reasons why we get these headaches about our government we have here, because of the way they tossed us out of here, and the way we were treated as we tried to come back to our country, and the way we were received.

With that said, Soledad turned to introduce Juan Flores, the man with the commandant's face on his shirt. "We'll ask Juan to tell us what happened once we got here."

"I would like to say that I want you to feel welcome," he said, "because your presence here motivates us as members of the community."

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*Juan Flores's Story*

It wasn't a very easy process, this whole repatriation. Part of the process of returning is having an idea of where you want to go back to. And we would ask the government if we could be located on these lands down here on the coast, exactly where we are now. That was rejected by the government.

So we rented eighty acres of land in southern Usulután. But these lands were very unproductive, arid lands. These were lands which did not allow for any kind of development for the future. We were really worried. We were back and we just didn't see any possibilities, so we formed a commission to look over all the land to see what possibilities there were. And to look at other lands. But they just didn't see anything that looked appropriate. So the commission came to look at lands in this area.

We were aware that refugees from Panama had regained this land here, and we talked to them, and they led us to those who headed up the cooperative. And they gave us the support to come back to these lands here.

So the commission went back to the people and talked about the land here, and how fertile it was, and we seemed to have the support of the cooperatives that held the land, and we explained to the rest of the community that we thought this was the best land for us.

I think it is very important for you to know how we make decisions. That is, before we make a decision, we have to bring it back to the entire community, for the community to decide. And by that means we make a decision or take an action. And that's how we began the movement of people into this area. It was a hidden movement. Three families at once, maybe four families at once. That's why it took nearly a month for the whole community to move over here.

When the first group came through the dirt road from the town of San Marcos Lempa, it was stopped and held by the military. The people were held right there in the middle of the road. They said to us, "There is no way we are going to let you pass, and we're going to get in touch with the United Nations, and you better go back where you came from." They accused us of a land takeover.

That wasn't true. We showed them the document we had from the cooperative that showed the legality of what we were doing, and the support we had to get these lands. But that didn't make any difference. The army told us, "You won't pass any further."

It was a time of anguish. We were in the hot sun on the road with children and babies, and we talked with the head of the command there, and the head officers back in the base, and it just was impossible. We told them, "We just can't take this anymore. We don't have any choice. We are going there, and if anything happens to us, you are responsible." The group was made up mostly of old people and women and children.

So we told the drivers we are going to drive right through the barricades. Me and two others, we started our

trucks and started moving forward. The other drivers were not getting involved in this. Our two vehicles started to move, and the soldiers started throwing anything, big stones, anything, on the road to block our path. And as the soldiers were throwing the rocks, our people just picked them up and threw them back out again. We were a lot more than them, and any rock they could throw on there, we could remove four of them. It was really sort of funny.

The people cleared the road of the barricades, then they formed a human wall on either side of the road to let the vehicles pass through. They were in the road, and when the vehicle came to pass through, the people would open up and then close down again.

We got one vehicle through. Then the second one came and they shot the tires out. So we left that one there. So now we had to use some force to get through. And while all this was happening up at the main entrance at San Marcos Lempa, for four days we had people going in the back way through Tierra Blanca. That gives you some idea of how we got in, how we moved here.

Since we've been here, the government has come by and officials from the Institute of Agrarian Transformation. They said they were very worried about us, that they were concerned about our health, that the conditions were not very suitable back here, and they would really like to take us to better lands. But we said, "We don't want your support to move from here. All the communities around here support us, and we like it here. We are not moving from this place."

When they couldn't get us out of here by tricking us, they tried to persuade the people by sending the military, the army back here. So the military, who were initially bad, came here and this time they were very friendly, making friends with the young people, distributing candy to the children, and *piñatas*, and playing games. It was based on this scheme they had.

We said, "Okay, let's clarify this. If you want to help us, we'd like your help, but not in the way that you want to give it. If you really want to help us, then look at the problems that affect our community. The military won't let us leave. There's a roadblock right up here at the corner. Remove the roadblock if you want to do something to help us. They won't let food come into the community. So if you really want to help, get rid of that roadblock."

Also they wouldn't let construction materials pass through. Medicines. Anything for the community, they would hold up at the roadblock. "If you want to help us, don't bring back little candies and *piñatas*." So we asked them to leave and take their sweets with them, because their presence here threatened our security.

So they agreed to set up a meeting with the officials of the army. It was a pretty heated discussion. We were insisting that they leave, and they were insisting that they wanted to stay and live with us and be with us. And while we were talking, a lot of people from the community started to gather.

When all the community gathered, we asked them, "Should the military stay with us?" "No!" the people shouted. "The military should leave!" When they shouted that, all the soldiers hung their heads. So this was some of what happened.

The third thing they did when they weren't able to break our spirit with the military action was they brought in another group of people. You saw them there at the corner. The New Dawn. They are made up of paramilitary people, soldiers who have been recently released, ex-soldiers, and death squad people. The idea was for this other group to be in conflict or confrontation with us, which would enable them to set up a military base right where they needed it.

Then there was another community right next door to us. They said part of the agreements of the peace accords was that there wouldn't be these kinds of actions, and that

we had to leave by February 1st. As proof of that, as they were standing there, there was a U.S. military adviser with them who was living in the middle of their community.

Ten times we walked down the road, and they stopped us, and asked us, “What is your name? Where are you going? What are you doing? What is your business?” Thanks to God, with the agreement signed between the government and the FMLN, things relaxed, and we have been able to travel the country much more freely.

This shows what they tried to do, to isolate our community. They denied permission of the international delegations to visit us, saying that they really needed a Military Safe Combat pass. We said, “That’s not fair. These people entered the country legally, and have a right to go wherever they can, as long as they obey the law. So they have the right to come visit us.”

This was just another form of breaking down the barriers. We had to meet with the head of the Sixth Brigade in Usulután and get him to sign an agreement that the internationals could come back and visit us. It has just been one incident after another here. It was an attempt to isolate us from everyone else. Even the United Nations High Command for Refugees, which was supposed to have some relationship with us because we are repatriated refugees, backed off and didn’t do anything for us for a period of time.

But we feel good now. We have made a lot of progress, but it’s been a tremendous struggle. People from other countries have been in solidarity with us, pressing to open up so many possibilities, and we’ve had a lot of help within the community. So we are grateful, not only for you, but for all the people on the outside who have worked to support us all this time.

“The government,” added Soledad, “has not given us a nickel, not even a split nickel, to help with any of the construction or any of the other projects. The work we have done here is our own hard

work, with international support to pay for the materials. We are just thankful for you because in some ways you represent that. No matter how many millions of dollars the government has received from your country and from other countries, it never goes to the poor. It goes to maybe their own people, but to the poor? No matter how much you gave, it wouldn't come back."

Then she added, "You might also be interested in knowing a little bit about how we organized, the projects that we have going on, and how we designed the work here."

"Why don't we save this for the morning," Sinclair said. "They talked about dinner at six. And it's past six. And we may need a few minutes to walk around and hang out. It's getting dark."

As the meeting broke up I overheard Bertsch talking to Sinclair.

"I wonder if you would ask Soledad something. When she was talking about the four nuns . . ." she began. She wanted to know if Soledad knew Ita Ford, one of the Maryknoll nuns raped and killed by the Salvadoran National Guardsmen on October 3, 1980.

Sinclair asked Soledad.

"She was with us," said Soledad. "She was one who meant a lot to us."

I caught up with Bertsch as she walked out of the pavilion. "Eilene, did you know any of the nuns?"

"Ita Ford was a college schoolmate," she said, her voice shaking. "I knew her and her brother."