

CHAPTER SEVEN

CASA CLEMENTINA AND FR. BLANCHARD

“All across this country, in town after town, people are disappearing, and the army acts with impunity. They are in charge, fomenting fear and repression, and there is little that can be done about it.”

After leaving Neuva Esperanza, our van broke down by the Rio Lempa bridge, which meant hitching a wild ride in the bed of a pickup truck to the airport to meet Tom Trebon, the last of our fellow travelers to join our group. By the time we arrived in mid-afternoon, his flight had landed hours earlier and he was not to be found, so we ended up hiring three cabs to ferry us back to the Alameda Hotel.

Later that evening the schedule called for dinner at Casa Clementina, the restaurant in San Salvador where we picked up Teresa the morning before, where we would meet with Dave Blanchard, the Carmelite priest and friend of Reid.

From the street, a little after seven o'clock, the restaurant was dark and appeared deserted, but inside several men sat at the bar with their backs to us. At the time, I felt uncomfortable, like we happened to be an unwelcome disruption. But it was all in my mind. Once we sat down and ordered drinks, then dined on the standard fare of *arroz con pollo*, I relaxed. Then Blanchard arrived.

The first time I heard Blanchard speak was at an organizational meeting at Sacred Heart University when all of us were trying to figure out whether the trip was feasible and who might participate. I had arrived late, and two men were sitting behind the front desk in the classroom. Minor Sinclair, a tall, dark-haired, fit-looking man, looked to be in his mid-30s. The other, heavyset and disheveled, and dressed in khaki pants, a peasant's shirt and sandals, slouched in the chair next to him. I thought he was a *campesino*, brought along to provide a native's view of his country.

But when it was his turn to speak, Fr. David Blanchard launched into a passionate, articulate overview of his pastoral work at Dolores Medina, a Christian-based cooperative for war refugees in the community of Calle Real outside the capital city of San Salvador. The man I thought was a *campesino* was a priest with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, an accomplished author, lecturer, and friend of Reid.

When he finished his presentation, I went up to ask his advice.

"I'm having serious reservations about this trip," I said. "I have little to offer these people who have gone through so much suffering and I don't even speak their language."

"That's exactly why you should go," he said. "The Salvadorans don't expect anything from people from the outside world. But at this critical time during the peace accords, an international presence is particularly important in El Salvador. It helps keep the army in check."

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At Casa Clementina, with our chairs now set in a circle, Sinclair said, "Let's reflect about what has happened so far. It's good to share ideas, and then we'll hear from Dave about his work at Calle Real."

We talked about Tierra Blanca, Hacienda California, and Nueva Esperanza, and what we thought of their chances for success. Then the *panadaria* project was mentioned. To my surprise, several people said they felt coerced into agreeing to donate money.

“What choice did we have?” Willison asked. “How could I have refused when you asked me with Soledad standing in front of me?”

I had no idea that people felt that way. Donating funds for a roof so the older women could bake bread in inclement weather seemed a no-brainer.

Then others joined Willison.

“We would have preferred to think about it,” they said.

“This needs to be talked about at another time when we meet as a group,” Sinclair said. “Let’s table this topic until the meeting of the last night when everyone has had the chance to reflect on the entire El Salvador experience.”

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“Casa Clementina is part of forty cooperatives,” Blanchard began. “All the profits of this place go to the cooperatives. And especially to support the work of women. We provide work for women of the cooperatives, especially Hacienda California and Nueva Esperanza. This place has been open for three months, and it has been very successful. In fact, we have been full almost every night.”

“Maybe you could fill us in on what is happening in the country now,” said Sinclair.

“El Salvador is a fascist state,” Blanchard said. “The oligarchy controls everything. The government, the law, the military, and the flow of money.”

To make his point, he recounted the story of Nelson Molina Ayala, a young artisan in the carpentry shop at Dolores Medina. “When Nelson was about eight he lost his mother. The army stopped them one day, cut off the mother’s lips, raped her repeatedly, then ran bayonets through her body. Cutting off the lips of the women, was a way of terrorizing the people so they would not collaborate with the popular organizations or the FMLN. The mother and son were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Traumatized, the young boy fled into the mountains, and eventually found his way to Calle Reale several years later. By then, said Blanchard, something miraculous had happened. In his head,

perhaps as a way of dealing with the trauma of his mother's rape and murder, he had created a series of paintings, over 200 of them, which he could describe in detail.

Nicknamed "Gazoo" – "the little runt" – after a character in *The Flintstones*, Nelson suffered from poor eyesight, so Blanchard managed to buy him glasses. Then with his sight restored, and relying on the visions in his head, the young man started painting on wooden crosses and knick-knacks in the carpentry shop, surprising everyone with his artistry.

One day, Blanchard said, Nelson was walking on a dirt road in the cooperative with his girlfriend when he was stopped by four ex-army men demanding his shoes.

"This could happen anywhere," he said. "All around the world, people demand shoes, money, or a jacket. It happens in East L.A. and it happens in Bridgeport."

Next they pointed to his glasses. "They were aviator-style prescription glasses costing six hundred colones," Blanchard said. "When he refused to take them off, one thug stabbed Nelson, killing him instantly."

Blanchard paused.

"And now we are talking about justice in El Salvador!" he said.

He repeatedly went to the National Police who told him no arrests could be made unless they had orders or a witness. And when Blanchard obtained a judge's order and returned to the police to demand the arrest of the men, he was told to forget it because they didn't pick them up in twenty-four hours.

"I know all four of the men," he said. "And even though I continued to press for their arrest, they went free. The boy was an artist. The glasses reinforced his belief in himself. So he refused to give them up, and he was killed. And the man who killed Gazoo had killed two people before. All of this suggests where the peace accords have left this country. The reality is that nothing has changed. All across this country, in town after town, people are disappearing, and the army acts with impunity. They are in charge, fomenting fear and repression, and there is little that can be done about it."

The Gazoo murder, a nightmare of a story, dug its way into our psyches, prompting me later to write the following prose poem.

A Plea For Justice in El Salvador

We heard your story from a Padre you must have loved.
He told us how you lost your mother that day
In the mountains. He said you were only eight years old,
And when the men in uniforms grabbed your mother,
Throwing her to the ground to rape her, you ran terrified,
The screams of your mother ringing in your ears.
But you must have turned momentarily, when the soldier
With the dreaded Atlacatl insignia on his arm,
Ripped your mother's lips from her face with his knife.

I can understand how that moment, and what happened
Directly after, when the men plunged their bayonets
Into your prostrate mother . . . once . . . twice . . .
three times . . .

Ten times . . . yes, a full twenty-seven times, traumatized you,
Left you without eyes with which to see . . . for years.
I wonder how you knew it was twenty-seven times?
I think it would be important for you to know that,
But how did it happen? Did you creep back
Through the thickets of brush and trees in the darkness
When the army men were off to some new diversion,
To kneel over the lifeless body of your mother,
And count the wounds?

So it is easy to understand how, growing up a refugee
In a strange land, you moved into a separate world of visions –
Of radiant, clear, strong colors, placed ever so carefully
Here and there on those canvases in your mind.

A full two hundred, your Padre said. And every one complete.
 He said you could call up each and every painting,
 Recounting the contents to your startled listeners.
 So I understand. I know how coping with death
 takes many forms.
 But to create two hundred paintings in your head!

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But this is not your whole story. This is only the part
 That tells us who you were when you arrived at the *carpintería*.
 For years, the world had grown dim to your eyes,
 And only in the confines of your mind could you see
 The lines so deeply etched, the reds, yellows,
 Greens and blues, juxtaposed just so.
 Your Padre told us when they realized you couldn't see,
 They went ahead and ordered glasses, in an aviator style.
 I wonder what you must have thought when you placed those
 Miraculous lenses on that first time? We know what happened.
 Padre told us how you took up brush, letting the deep colors
 Drain from your mind over the surfaces of those cards,
 And boxes, and crosses. Explosions of color and design,
 Your talent astonishing the good Padre of the *cooperativa*.

So when you were holding the hand of your girlfriend,
 And you met those four ex-army thugs at dusk on
 that dirt road,
 I think perhaps you must have wondered if your mind
 Was playing tricks on you. It must have thrown you
 Back momentarily to an earlier, darker time,
 That lay hidden beneath all those canvases,
 Back to that fatal mountain scene of years ago.

“I want your shoes,” one said, and so, unwillingly,
 you gave them up, not wishing to create a scene.
 Another said, “I want those glasses,” pointing to the Padre's gift.

You must have known who he was, must have shuddered
 At the terrible knowledge of his reputation among your people.
 And you, thinking to yourself, no . . . these glasses are my life.
 So you said, "no," surrounded by the four ex-combatants,
 Your girlfriend's eyes darkening with fright.
 But what could you have been thinking when you said "no"?
 What moved you to stand and face your tormentors?
 Was it the spirit of Romero? Of Ellecúria and Segundo Montes?
 Was it the spirit of all the war-wounded, saying in solidarity,
 "No!"
 And how did it feel when that cold steel entered your stomach,
 Just before it slashed upward through your heart?
 You must have felt the sharp steel plunge through
 The thin wall of muscle, just before your eyes
 Rolled upward, never to see again, the blood curling
 Past your teeth as you crumbled toward the ground.

III

"This is what happens in El Salvador," the good Padre said,
 his eyes scanning our group. "Yes, this is the reality of
 the peace accords." And the Padre's story is not over yet.
 Only the part about the boy's death.
 But perhaps, gentle reader, you do not want to hear
 About the Padre's frantic attempts to see justice done.
 "There's a killer free in our midst," he said. "And we have
 No idea who he will kill next. We only know
 He's killed before, and surely, he will kill again."

And what to make of the remarks of the *policía*?
 "Padre, you have no witnesses," they said. Repeatedly,
 to the Padre's pleas for justice, he was told,
 "It didn't happen. You have no proof."
 No . . . no proof. Only the body of a poor
 Salvadoran artist from your *carpintería*,
 And the colors that spun from his visionary brushes.

“You have to realize,” Blanchard said, “the peace accords brought great happiness to the people of El Salvador. There was such a feeling of exhilaration. They rang the church bell continuously. People were laughing and crying in joy. A new dawn was about to be created in El Salvador. But now, months later,” he cautioned, “the reality has set in. We are living in extremely dangerous times. This period right now is more dangerous than any other time in recent memory. There is the illusion of well-being in the land, but the reality can be found in the story of the young artist from my church. That’s how the army operates. The National Police get their orders from the military. They are in control of the country, and the result is the people have no recourse.”

As far as Blanchard was concerned, by June of 1992 the integration of the police agencies and the guerrilla insurgents into a new policing and control apparatus had not adhered to the stipulations of the accords.

“The three police agencies have taken new names, are still together, maintain the same strength, and live in the same barracks,” he said.

With Blanchard and Reid deep in conversation, I slipped out of Casa Clementina and walked across the road to Blanchard’s pick-up. He had said he would give us a ride back to the hotel, and while I stood in the dark by his truck, I couldn’t get the Gazoo story out of my mind.

Moments later, Reid joined me. “It sounds worse than ever now,” he said.

“That was some story.”

“Maria Teresa was talking before. She heard a report on the radio that three people had just disappeared.”

“It seems Blanchard has come out in the open over this case about the boy,” I said. “He could be targeted by the death squads.”

I was reminded of a story Blanchard told during one of his campus visits in the spring about a visiting priest from Europe

working at Dolores Medina. The priest had asked Blanchard's permission to attend a peace rally in San Salvador before the signing of the accords. He said he thought about it, then told the priest it was too risky. The army had spies. They took pictures at peace rallies, marking people for retribution. A priest at the rally could be traced. The cooperative could suffer severe consequences.

But now, with the killing of the *carpentería* apprentice and with the promise of the accords in question, it seemed Blanchard had left caution behind and was speaking out openly against the army and the justice system.

Standing with Reid by the vehicle, waiting to be ferried back to the hotel, I got myself in such a state that I wasn't sure it was safe to ride with Blanchard. But at that moment, he appeared, jumped into the truck, turned on the ignition, and started wrestling with the gear shift.

"This truck is badly in need of repairs," he sighed, grinding into reverse. "But it's not a priority at this time."

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Back the Alameda, Sacco was talking about what happened when the rest of the group left the restaurant.

"When we were getting into the cabs, three teenagers came up to us and started speaking rapid Spanish," he said. "I couldn't understand what they were saying."

"They were asking directions," McAllister said.

"This was very odd," said Sacco. "Natives asking *gringos* about whereabouts. I had to usher Louise into the vehicles, since she seemed to think it was just quaint and they were being conversational."

Sacco was sure the boys were assessing the possibility of pulling off a robbery.

In the hotel lounge, Blanchard was holding court surrounded by our group, talking about a start-up factory which he hoped would be fully operational in two years. Run entirely by the women

in his cooperative, the plan was to produce hospital smocks and apparel on a profit margin with dividends going to workers based on productivity.

“Fifty percent of the profits would be applied to factory expansion,” he said. “I’m looking for worldwide distribution to provide economic stability for the people.”

But, like the situation at the La California salt works, the project faced problems.

“Wealthy people control much of what happens economically in the country,” he said, “and they are not happy with any sort of competition. In fact, one contractor who monopolizes parts of the industry is very difficult to do business with.”

Then Blanchard talked about a project somewhere out in the country, hampered with graft and corruption siphoning off international funds.

“It’s a ditch digging effort,” he said, “and tons of money have been allocated for the project. But nothing is happening. The project exists on paper, and the money is disappearing. I knew a member of the State Department, and I told him I would take him to look at the project. The U.S. official said that wasn’t necessary. Also it wasn’t allowed because of where the project was taking place. But I persisted, and so we drove out to the site. Nothing was there. The official couldn’t believe what he saw.”

This fascinated Ventura, who barraged Blanchard with questions. But it was getting late, it had been a long day, I was tired, and when the comments started running into one another and I had no idea what they were talking about, it was time to bail out.