Walking Through Wars: A Salvadoran Woman Tells Her Story of the Devil and God, Bitterness and Hope

Chapter 1: Guerrillas Come to My School

Our rickety school was a former chicken ranch in the hills above San Salvador. Our homes were either *champas* made of rusty sheet metal or *mesones* of adobe and cardboard. The new principal decided that all us kids in sixth and seventh grades should become revolutionary guerrillas.

“Principal Toad” was our nickname for squat little Dario Rodriguez, *el Director Sapo*. He had recently appeared out of nowhere, and we could see that he was not like us. He came from a middle class family, arriving at school impeccably dressed in a fine shirt and nice trousers with shiny black shoes. Principal Toad had a nervous tic and would stick out his neck and twist his shoulders each time he talked. His gestures were effeminate. His manner was what we called *amantequillado,* a little buttery. He tried hard to be nice to everyone. Exceptionally nice. But we saw through him.

I was just one of the kids, unhappily repeating sixth grade. At twelve years of age, I was younger and much smaller than the thirty other girls and boys in my class. My teacher had flunked me the year before, but I didn’t know why. Señora Villareal had simply said, “Milagros, you are a stupid girl who doesn’t pay attention.”

One afternoon in July 1978, the teachers brought us out to the patio. Only the lower grades sat in their classrooms, peering through the chicken wire. We expected some presentation or event, but Principal Toad appeared with a troop of strangers, some white and some Latino. We were startled to confront this band of brawny, armed men. They looked so big, so dirty. The white men’s skin was burnt by our Salvadoran sun. Or maybe they had tried to tan themselves dark, hoping to be fashionable; I wasn’t sure. They had big beards and mustaches, so I thought they looked old, maybe forty-five or so. All of them wore olive green or camouflage uniforms and carried heavy backpacks. We knew the men were guerrillas because they all had different footwear, from boots to shoes of fine leather; even tennis shoes. Soldiers in the army all wore the same heavy boots.

“We should feel fortunate to have such distinguished people at our school,” said Principal Toad.

We did feel kind of special when the guerrilla soldiers noticed kids like us. We hoped their bags contained candies or cookies, because we were always hungry. But their backpacks were not filled with treats. They held weapons. The strangers had come to teach us the art of loading and unloading guns, from pistols and revolvers to what they called “.70 caliber machine guns.”

My arms were thinner than the gun barrel I took clumsily in my hands. Watching the men, we each handled a weapon “to lose the fear,” they explained. It was so easy to shoot and defend our rights; to avenge the blood of the martyrs, who—like us—were The People.

These visits were a school secret. “Careful! Don’t tell Mamá or Papá!” they said. We did not need that warning because we never talked to our parents. We were Latin American kids of the lower class, and for us, war began in the home. Our mamás and papás worked hard, but showed us little interest or affection. Their job was to give us something to eat. They couldn’t worry about how we *felt* about not having anything to eat. Looking back, I wonder if the guerrillas had studied our culture and took advantage of this lack of communication.

The men came to train us two afternoons a week. The whites were friendly and tried to chat with us in their broken Spanish. I always supposed they were Americans. Now I'm told they were probably Russian military advisors who came through Cuba. To me, they looked and sounded exotic. "How handsome they are!" I remember it so well, the way we kids saw ourselves reflected in their beautiful blue or green eyes. They patted our heads with their big hands. They asked how old we were, where we lived, and who our parents were. "They're interested in me," I thought. The whites seemed to treat us affectionately. Of course, I was impressionable; I was just entering puberty. They may have felt pity, but not compassion.

The Latino guerrillas might have been from Nicaragua. Or maybe they were Salvadorans who came down from the mountains to the east, from the Zona Oriental on the Nicaraguan border. Many were the only survivors of large families who had been massacred, so they joined the guerrillas to make a living. They had a lot of hatred in their hearts for the army and government politicians. The Latino guerrillas treated us kids like automatons. They never looked at us with eyes of pity. "You have to fight to regain your territory," they said. But I thought, "If you're poor, what can you possibly regain?" The whites told the Latinos to treat us a little more humanely.

Now and then the men did bring us candy or cookies. On those days, we hungry kids were happy. We say, *Las penas con pan son buenas*. Sorrows with bread are good. While our teachers called us the children of garbage, these armed men showed a little sympathy while teaching us how to kill. Had they studied how to murder the soul of a child?

One cloudy afternoon the guerrillas brought us to a narrow dirt lane that independent buses sometimes used. All the grades from first to ninth lined up on the two sides of the road. They showed us how to put out *miguelitos*, planks with nails in them, to block the buses. When tires hit the nails, *pum*! They'd explode. There was a little meeting, and then a column of fighters formed up in the middle of the road. We were the human shield—the girls and boys running and walking alongside the guerrillas—until we entered a wooded area. We smiled and talked with these fighters, and with all the innocence in the world we showed them the shanties where we lived.

The revolutionary guerrillas came to our school more than a year before our civil war officially began. But we were already used to violence. Now, as outright war approached, grievous changes came over our lives. Out in the countryside where communication was limited, it was far worse.

I saw my first corpses back in second grade on the road home from school. The bakery delivery boys must have talked about unionizing, so our government's death squads displayed their bloody bodies as a lesson for all us kids to see. Now the sight of bodies became routine. There were corpses on the news, in the river, and on the buses. In our outlying district, we were caught in between the leftist guerrillas, and the right-wing government's army and paramilitary death squads. In the daytime we had the guerrillas training us at school. At night, the police on patrol had the authority to recruit youths for the army. It seemed like a crime to turn thirteen, because each side wanted us as fighters. We didn't know why we were fighting, but we had to fight. If we said no, either side would come at night and kill us.

One day a *mujercita*, a "little woman," joined our class. Yanira wasn't a child. She had a sexual partner named Rubén, unbeknownst to her family. Rubén was a morning student in the ninth grade, and they were between the ages of seventeen and twenty. One day Yanira told Rubén about the guerrillas who came in the afternoons. He and his friends confronted Principal

Toad. That night, strangers dressed in black with mountaineering gloves visited Rubén's house. They wanted to bring him to justice in their own way, but by sheer luck they didn't find him. That was the last we saw of Rubén. He and Yanira fled to Mexico the next day with barely two hundred *colones*, about twenty dollars, to their name. Within six months of Rubén's departure, his whole family abandoned their home. This was the secret fear we all shared: that if anyone in our families said something, this would happen to us.

Soon after the guerrillas came, a lot of the older lady teachers in our school began to leave. Completely new instructors came out from the capital to our remote shantytown. They looked at the miserable students and the dangerous surroundings and sometimes only stayed for two weeks. Principal Toad brought in teachers who never ever helped us with anything. Most of the men were bad people who took advantage of the girls. We didn't actually learn anything.

Throughout the whole country an exodus began of everyone who had the means to get out. Nearly all the older students disappeared. The families of our vanished schoolmates said nothing until they knew their children were in a safer place. While other families did everything in their power to send their children out of harm's way, my parents did nothing. My neighbors, very dear people to whom I felt close, either died or left that barrio. Little by little it fell to pieces, that dear place I carry in my heart.

I saw the neighborhood men get angry about the things that were happening, but they never spoke the names of political parties. That was dangerous. Everyone said green was better or blue was bad; these were the colors of the parties. The day after an election Mamá was worried, and my father was angry. Some strangers had rummaged through the ballot boxes and thrown out all the ballots in favor of the green party. We knew this because several neighbors had ballot boxes in their care. Since they gave you a salary and a free lunch for bearing this responsibility, what hungry person wouldn't go along?

The situation worsened quickly, and nobody talked politics anymore. The beautiful days became filled with rot, as every road filled up with great *trocas*, big army trucks brimming with soldiers who had rifles ready to shoot. Armored cars passed along our rutted streets at all hours of the day and night. The age-old tranquility of our barrio was lost. In the air you could feel the worry of every person around you.

I feared we'd lose our lives. If only my family had lent me a moment of their time and listened to me. If only I could tell them that the school was preparing me to fight in the war. But nobody wanted to hear my anguish—only God, the Owner of my life.

My classmates and I were children. Some of the others may have had dreams, but I did not. A few kids talked about one day earning their *bachillerato*, their high school diploma, but I didn't even think of that. At home my life was chaotic, and school didn't seem to offer me much hope.

Before this turmoil began, we had acted like children even while living in deep poverty. Two dear friends and I would go to a lovely place, a little mountain covered with trees and flowers. There, in the empty meadows, we'd cast our thoughts to the wind. We'd recite poetry. At the end of every school year, we had to learn by heart one of the poems of Alfredo Espino, the great Salvadoran poet. We'd recite these poems with dramatic gestures, because that's what the teacher wanted. I always loved to be expressive. One year, the poem was "The Eyes of the Oxen."

I have seen them so sad, that it's hard for me to think
Though they be so sad, they never can cry!

Through poetry, my friends and I managed to forget ourselves, as the wind carried away our pain, sadness, and frustration. For me, it was my distress at home, my hunger for food and knowledge. I wished that someone would read to me and explain why some children drank milk, while we drank only coffee and misery. We were souls thirsting for parental love, for someone to listen to our dream that we could be different. We needed parents to believe in us, but the only thing we got was more frustration.

My solace came each October at the end of the school year. I'd recite the poems of Espino and run freely through the fields, communing with whole clouds of splendid white butterflies that migrated through our hills. I'd run and run through the high grass with my dainty little friends. I felt like one of them, flying, looking down at the human beings and their squalor. How beautiful it was to believe that I was the first and the last! That one day soon I'd have wings to lift off from the ground and discover that everything was better where my butterflies flew. I talked to them, but they never stopped their flight to listen. I gave them messages to carry in case they looked upon the face of God.

I had perhaps six years of sending messages, of seeing the butterflies come and go, of flying along with them at the height of my little-girl waist, wings open to the sun and the wind, together forever. Then things changed. Last year when I looked for my butterflies, they didn't seem to hear me anymore. Maybe I no longer spoke their language. Or maybe the butterflies could no longer carry my weight. I was left on the ground to watch them, how clouds of them appeared to those of us who were earthbound. How the sun shone on their lovely white wings—

delicate butterflies massed together but flying away so far that my eyes could no longer see them.

When October arrived in 1978, I dashed out to the open meadows once again. I had learned “Ascension,” another poem by Espino, and I wanted to recite it to the butterflies.

Two wings!... Who might have two wings for flight!...
This afternoon, at the summit, I almost had them.
From here I view the sea, so blue, so deeply asleep,
that if it were not a sea, it would surely be another sky!...

Something very curious happened then, and I still don’t understand why. I went looking for my white butterflies on our little mountain, but they never came back. I knew they migrated and that was their way, but why didn’t they pass through here anymore? I needed them. They were part of my childhood, my innocence. The serenity of the butterflies was replaced by the thunder of bombs falling on nearby hills, and the racket of helicopters flying low. I never again saw my little friends with whom I imagined flying to faraway lands. The butterflies fled to safety while my soul tumbled down into a deepening well.

Had my messages to the Creator all been lost? How could I survive, trapped between the armies of the left and the right? But here I lived, with a drunken father and heedless mother in a hilltop shantytown. Our one-room hovel barely sheltered a family of twelve. Could I ever fly away like the butterflies?