

The Best Women's Travel Writing 2008
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Which Side Are You On?

During a civil war, neutrality can be the most difficult and dangerous thing to negotiate.

Chalatenango Province, El Salvador, May 1991. Driving down to Las Vueltas at the end of the day, we met a long column of *compas* walking slowly into the mountains. *Compa* is short for *compañero*, friend, comrade, partner. *Compa* is what the guerrillas in the FMLN called each other, and one of the two ways we talked about them. The other was *los muchachos*, the boys—*our* boys. We never referred to them as soldiers, a term reserved for members of the FAES, the government's army. Beneath the streaks of dirt, the *compas'* faces communicated little. Their halting progress was painful to watch. Several were carrying two rifles.

I put my foot on the brake while they passed us. Only moments earlier I had been laughing with the health promoters, Blanca and Panchita, and the North American nurse, Lisa. We were giddy after nine hours of vaccinating in Tablón and El Portillo, two little communities in the hills

above this town. Now, no one inside the car said a word. I heard the echo of our laughter and the emptiness where the roaring motor and jangling parts of the eight-year-old Toyota Land Cruiser had been. The *compas* did not speak either—not to us, nor each other. Just the slow steady padding of poorly shod feet on dirt and gravel. Watching the men and boys, some as young as nine or ten, it was hard to believe the rumors that the war, now in its twelfth year, would be over by Christmas.

The first rains had finally come, and it felt like we were watching the world turn from brown to green before our eyes. I caught the scent of perfume from a cluster of wild grasses before the odor of sweat and damp leather boots overpowered it. It was a time of growth and re-birth. In my own country it would have been a season of hope. But there was no sign in the *compas*' expressions that these changes would bring anything positive. When the last *compa* had trudged by, Lisa burst out, “¡No es justo! It's not right! They should be in school, or fighting at home with their brothers and sisters!”

I started the car and proceeded into Las Vueltas where I would part company with my three companions. Lisa and I worked together on the Diocesan Health Commission, CODIPSA, but she lived in Las Vueltas where Blanca and Panchita were on the village health team. I had picked up the three women up early that morning.

I wondered if Padre Bernardo, the parish priest, was in town. He was the only person I felt safe asking what was going on with the *compas*. We had met in San José las Flores five years earlier when I was on a small delegation to El Salvador from Cambridge, Massachusetts. The delegation had been our response to a request for accompaniment, the Biblical concept of bearing witness, from the civilian residents of that village. They hoped the presence of internationals would protect them from the violence of their own government. I had seen Bernardo once in the three months since I'd come back to join CODIPSA, and the possibility of running into him made me forget, for a moment, how tired I was.

As soon as we entered the village, I knew something was wrong. No old men were sitting on the wooden benches in front of the small whitewashed church. No women hurried across the dirt path through the plaza balancing basins of cornmeal on their heads and pulling a child in each hand. In fact, there were no children in sight at all, except for the *compas* who were disappearing at a bend in the road behind us. The little plaza in front of the church was empty. I tried to figure out what had happened in the hours we had been gone.

Outside the clinic I stopped the car and waited while my passengers got out. Lisa mumbled something about being tired and walked off in the direction of the mud-brick house and her rented room.

I watched the health promoters, who were about eighteen—just a few years younger than Lisa—head toward the clinic. I saw no trace in their gait that suggested fatigue, nothing to indicate they had spent the entire day checking vaccination records, bribing timid kids with promises of candy, giving them polio drops and sticking needles into them to protect them from diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, and measles. I pulled the car off the narrow dirt road.

As I climbed down, my body complained. I was glad the long day was almost over. I followed Panchita and Blanca to see if anyone in the clinic might want a ride to Chalatenango City, where I shared a little row house with four other diocesan workers.

That morning I had no trouble getting through the *retén*, the military roadblock, one of several that separated the city from the rest of the world. The soldiers on guard had been unusually friendly. They recognized the car and me, although I was surely not as memorable as the car, with its bright blue body and distinctive white trim and homemade roof carrier. I did not anticipate having a problem on the return trip. In fact, I allowed myself the happy thought that I would be resting in my hammock in little more than an hour.

I must have been mesmerized by the empty plaza because I didn't see the slender, almost frail-looking man, until I nearly bumped into him a few paces before the door to the clinic. He

was wearing the black, long-sleeved shirt and black pants I recognized as the uniform of an FMLN *comandante*.

“*Con permiso.*” He excused himself in a voice so soft I had to lean closer to hear. “Would you be willing to take a wounded *compa* up the mountain to join his squadron?”

He told me the soldiers had attacked his company about a kilometer below the village. “We returned their gunfire and there was a battle,” he said. “The soldiers were supported by mortars launched from Chalate, and a few of the mortars landed in Las Vueltas.”

So that explains the lack of activity on the street, I thought.

“Several of my boys were wounded,” he said.

And that explains why some of the kids moving up the mountain were carrying more than one rifle.

“I want to get all the *compas* into the hills, up to Zapotal, so the army doesn’t attack the village.”

He stood barely taller than my own five-feet-two, and there was a dark smudge across his forehead, as if he had mopped his brow with a dirty rag. Our eyes were on the same level, and I noticed that his were gray. In spite of the inflamed blood

vessels and dark circles, something in his expression made me think of determined resignation, not exhaustion. Dried mud clung to his right sleeve and his once-black boots. The drumming of an invisible woodpecker took the place of my response.

Before I answered the *comandante*, I needed to think about the implications, about possible repercussions to other church workers who often used my car. I was not supposed to carry combatants. Period. I had been given this single directive, along with the vehicle, when I began working with the Diocesan Health Commission of Chalatenango Province three months earlier. It didn't matter whether they were *guerrillas* with the FMLN or soldiers in the Armed Forces of El Salvador, the FAES. The church was supposed to be neutral, and although my car was owned by Aesculapius International Medicine, the non-governmental organization sponsoring my work, it was registered to the Archdiocese in San Salvador.

Neutrality can be a sound ideological principle. Maybe it made sense here in El Salvador. After all, Catholic priests, nuns, lay workers, and parishioners had been targeted by the army. But I wasn't convinced of its practical merits in a civil war. I thought about civilians who had tried to stay out of the conflict only to be accused of helping "the enemy" and murdered by the other side. It had happened to the family of my friend, Magdalena. Her politically neutral cousin was shot and killed outside his village one night by the FMLN, and his

body was left to rot where it fell. It was more than a week before his mother and brothers were able to collect the boy and give him a proper burial. Even though their sympathies were not with the army, they were terrified because it had become routine for relatives to be killed while they gathered a loved one's remains. Magdalena told me that later on they learned that a jealous rival had falsely denounced the boy to the FMLN.

I still had not answered the *comandante*. I sensed the merest displacement of mass as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

The woodpecker persevered with his *tap tap tap*, and the fragrance of sweet grass returned.

It was getting late and I wanted to be in Chalate before dark. I worried that the little diesel left in the tank might not get me there if I took a detour. And what about the consequences of ignoring the church's injunction? There were a million reasons why I should not do what the *comandante* asked. Although they had flashed through my mind in seconds, I felt apologetic, ashamed that I had hesitated too long.

“*Bueno. Sí,*” I said. “I’ll take the *compa* to Zapotal.” My voice came out small and I felt like a little girl.

“I’ll tell them to get him ready,” he said, and we both went into the clinic.

The main room of the cinder block building was empty except for the stench of rubbing alcohol and decomposing flesh and a thin coat of dirt on the concrete floor from mud that had been tracked in. No people, no furniture, no medical equipment or supplies.

In the only other room, a small one to the left of the front door, Blanca was sitting near a young man her age who was lying on his back on a makeshift cot. An attractive woman I had never seen before was standing next to him. She slipped the needle end of a syringe into a protective sheath so quickly that it looked as if she could do it in her sleep. There was something about her pale skin and blue eyes and the way she carried her body that commanded respect. She appeared to be more or less my age—late forties/early fifties—and her silver hair was pulled back into a ponytail. When she saw the *comandante*, she lifted her free hand and brushed away several unruly wisps that had fallen on her face.

She walked to the door with the *comandante*, leaving Blanca to clean and bandage the wounded *compa*’s shoulder. I didn’t hear what the *comandante* said to the doctor, but I recognized a faint German accent when she responded in otherwise perfect Spanish that the *compa* would be ready to travel in a few minutes.

In the meantime, Blanca helped the young man sit up while she wound a whole roll of surgical gauze across his chest, around his back, up under his left armpit, over the shoulder and again under the armpit, and across his chest a second time. She repeated the pattern until all the gauze sponges taped over his wounds were completely covered, but a dark stain started to seep through her handiwork before she managed to thread the *compa's* arms into the sleeves of his torn shirt.

The FMLN doctor supported him to stand. She either judged him steady enough to leave, or simply acquiesced due to the lack of options. With her arm around his waist and her body ready to bear his weight if necessary, doctor and patient walked to my car where she settled him into the passenger's seat. He had a dazed look in his eyes. I thought he might be in shock.

The *comandante* and another *compa* climbed into the back with Panchita and Blanca, who had decided to keep me company. My only concession to the church was to ask my new passengers to put their weapons on the floor. It crossed my mind that they would not see the logic in this request and might think I was overly cautious or out of touch with reality. To my relief, they complied.

I pushed more energy than usual into slamming the rear doors shut and then signaled Panchita to engage the safety

latch from the inside before I took my seat behind the steering wheel. Otherwise, with my luck, the doors would swing open on the bumpy road and the *comandante* would probably fall out.

The *compa's* posture struck me as too straight and rigid. He must have been in a lot of pain, and perhaps he was fighting the urge to cry out. I smelled his blood.

We left the town behind. The car felt crowded although I had often carried twice as many people. The engine groaned and grumbled about the uphill climb, but my passengers said nothing. The rutted road wound past boulders through scrubby fields. With little more than an hour of daylight left, growing shadows speckled the ground. In front of us, white billowy clouds edged in amethyst floated on a peacock-blue canvas. Five minutes after leaving Las Vueltas the road leveled, and I felt everyone relax.

The *comandante* made an announcement for my benefit. "I'm an old friend of Eduardo Alas," he said. That was the Bishop's real name, even though he was always spoken of and addressed by his title, *Monseñor*. I caught the *comandante's* eye in my rear view mirror.

"Sí," he said to my reflection, "we have spent a lot of time together. I know him well. Tell him that Juan Ramos sends his regards."

I aimed a forced smile at the mirror and said, “¡Cómo no! Sure, I’ll tell him.” Although I knew for certain that I was not going to say a thing to the Bishop, because if I did I would have to explain the circumstances to *Monseñor*—like how (in God’s name!) I had run into Juan Ramos!

The drive back to Zapotal felt longer than it had on the way down. Perhaps I was traveling slower than before. Although we had not encountered mudslides earlier in the day, it was prudent to proceed with caution, but this time it seemed like there were twice as many twists and turns. As soon as I saw the *compas* ahead of us, I eased off the gas pedal. The *comandante* was quick to notice.

“Don’t stop here,” he instructed, “Drive past the next hill, and let us off on the other side.”

I had an uncharitable thought about the *comandante* at that moment, since I was anxious to discharge my FMLN passengers, and the presence of *compas* on both sides of the road indicated to me that we had arrived at their destination.

“I don’t want the soldiers to see us getting out of your car,” he added, in a respectful tone of voice.

The *comandante*’s words took my breath away. I became so distracted that I hardly noticed the *compas* getting out of the

car when I stopped on the far side of the hill. During the drive back to Las Vueltas I was sweating a lot more than warranted at that hour.

The last reserves of energy drained from my body while I reviewed it in my head: No, I had not seen the government soldiers. Even after the *comandante's* revelation that they were near enough to see *us*, I still couldn't see *them*. I didn't know they were camped on a hill across the valley, facing the road. But since they were, they must have seen my car during the day. Even if they hadn't seen it going up to Tablón and El Portillo in the morning, they certainly must have noticed it descend from someplace above Zapotal heading toward Las Vueltas when we came back from vaccinating. Then they saw it go up, again. This time only as far as Zapotal, where they also saw the FMLN. Then they saw it go down, again. I felt a new ache enter the hollow in the pit of my stomach.

It had been barely a week since I had gotten a stern scolding-cum-lecture from a good friend, a North American who had been working in El Salvador for several years before I arrived. He was visiting someone at the same hotel in San Salvador where I was meeting with a delegation of teachers from Cambridge. The teachers had not been able to deliver the material aid they had brought for the people in San José las Flores, which had become an official sister city to Cambridge a few months after that visit when I first met Padre Bernardo. Since I often worked in or near Las Flores, I

agreed to take the books, clothes, and medicine.

When we carried the donations to my car, my friend, who had taught me survival skills for working in El Salvador, was standing in the hotel lobby. I was glad to see him, but he seemed reserved. He did not flash his familiar smile when he invited me to meet him the following day. I knew that I had done something wrong, but I wasn't sure what it was.

The next day he scolded me for the scene at the hotel. "Ten women filing through the hotel lobby carrying bags and boxes! Anyone could have been watching." He accused me of having a false sense of security.

He was right. I was not used to San Salvador. I had spent a total of four days in the city since February, when I started the job in Chalatenango. I felt anonymous in the capital, and because of that I probably did feel more secure than when I was in Chalate. It had felt good to let my guard down at the hotel. I had a passing acquaintance with almost everyone in the delegation, and four of the women were friends of mine. We talked and laughed together in their hotel rooms before putting their donations into my car. What sweet relief from the cloak and dagger life I led in the countryside.

After the meeting with my friend, however, I realized that my frivolity at the hotel the previous day could affect my entry back into Chalate, or my immigration status, or worse, it

could affect the safety of the people with whom I worked.

Every international worker I knew in El Salvador was engaged in legitimate activities—popular education and teacher training, journalism, economic development projects, healthcare, legal aid. Unfortunately, if you were doing this work among the most needy you were under suspicion. Poor people in the countryside or in marginalized communities were, according to the government’s definition, subversives. If the authorities targeted you, it was all over. You were *quemado*, burned, and news of your status spread like wildfire. Someone who got burned became a pariah. It was too dangerous to associate with a burned person because of the intense heat. Getting burned was therefore to be avoided at all costs because you could not continue your work or seek the comfort and support of friends without endangering them. You might as well go home. And since you never knew who might be an informer, you had to watch your back, a posture that I was finding quite difficult to maintain.

Now the *comandante’s* last sentence about the soldiers seeing us repeated in my head. I was so absorbed in considering the consequences of my actions, or to be more precise, the consequences of my actions having been observed by the soldiers, that I almost missed Panchita’s revelation about the *comandante*.

“Juan Ramos used to be a soldier in the Cavalry,” she said.

“You know, with the government.”

She reacted to my expression of surprise by leaning forward across the back of the now-empty passenger’s seat showing me that her usually smiling face could look quite serious, even under a veil of light brown freckles. She pursed her lips, widened her eyes, and nodded her head up and down. She said that Juan Ramos, the *comandante*, had been captured by the FMLN during their 1989 offensive.

“That was while we had this deal with the Red Cross that both sides would periodically turn prisoners over to them. But by the time the Red Cross came to take him back, he had decided not to leave. Instead he made a really dramatic speech about how he wouldn’t fight against his brothers anymore.”

“And he joined the FMLN,” Blanca added, stealing Panchita’s thunder by pre-empting her predictable last line.

Curiouser and curiouser, I thought, and for just a moment I forgot about my own predicament. Now I wished I *could* tell the Bishop, just to see his reaction.

Back in Las Vueltas, I shook hands with Panchita and Blanca—as is the custom in the countryside—although I felt like hugging them. I said goodbye and thanked them for

staying with me while I ferried the *comandante* and the *compas* back to their squadron. I took a rag and a small bucket of water from the clinic and washed the wounded *compa's* blood off the front seat and the inside of the door. Already I missed the easy companionship of the health promoters.

I wiped a smear of blood off my arm, and wondered how long it would take for the *compa's* wounds to clot. I felt sad and angry that I had to consider so many angles before deciding to do the right thing. And still I hadn't thought of everything.

Fatigue ached through my body. I was as ready as I'd ever be for the home stretch. I had been sick with diarrhea and vomiting the night before. It was so violent and sustained that I feared I might be the first cholera case in the country. The epidemic began in Peru and had already reached Nicaragua. For weeks we had been preparing our villages for its imminent arrival. Every health promoter knew the symptoms and protocols, and had been given extra supplies of chlorine to purify drinking water, and salt, sugar, and baking soda to mix up batches of re-hydration drinks. By five in the morning I felt stable, but empty and weak. I decided it was either a passing case of food poisoning or the flu. There was no getting out of vaccinating, however, because there was no way to send word. If I hadn't arrived in Las Vueltas by seven, the health promoters would have worried that I had been

detained or captured by the army.

I took my seat at the wheel. As the engine turned over and caught, I wondered what sort of communication the soldiers on the hill facing Zapotal might have with the soldiers at the *retén* outside the city. I felt like a lamb on her way to be slaughtered. The gas gauge indicated just enough diesel to get me to Chalate.

Before pulling onto the road, I glanced in the rear view mirror. It was a gesture of pure habit, since if a car were coming I would have heard it well before it came into view. The reflection revealed a man running across the plaza at full-speed in my direction. He was clutching a string bag in one hand, a battered straw hat in the other, and a daypack was bouncing wildly on his back. I felt a jolt of joy in my chest when I turned around and the figure became Padre Bernardo. He was waving the hat to get my attention.

When he reached the car, Bernardo said, between gulps of breath, “Susana, what luck! I have to be in San Salvador tonight.”

I wished my pleasure to see him had been simple and uncompromised. I wished that I didn’t feel compelled to provide the priest with a brief summary of the day’s events before he risked riding in my car. I had to suppress my feelings of guilt and confusion in order to tell him about the

vaccination campaign, the wounded *compa*, and the final vehicular ascent and descent of the day. I told him about the encampment of soldiers that was visible to the practiced eye of the FMLN *comandante*, and not to mine.

My litany was of secondary importance to Bernardo, who had been in Las Vueltas during the army's attack. Telling me that his primary need was to get to the capital, he did not hesitate to climb in beside me. The only way to San Salvador was through Chalatenango City. Bernardo would get his lift to the bus that would take him to the capital, and I had a companion on the ride back through the war zone and the roadblock.

After I reassured him that I hadn't been caught in cross fire, Bernardo said, "The army took us by surprise—even the *compas*. The battle lasted about an hour. It's a miracle no one was killed, and no villagers were hurt."

"Some of the *compas* were just children," I said.

"Yes," he said, and let out a sigh.

"Well, can't we do something? I mean, like getting them into civilian communities so they can attend school and have some kind of childhood?"

“They’re orphans,” he said. “The FMLN is all they know—and they do learn to read and write. That’s more than can be said for the kids in some of your villages, isn’t it?”

Bernardo knew that four of my CODIPSA communities were in a remote area of the mountains northwest of Las Vueltas, where the Sumpul River forms the border with Honduras. I was pretty sure the Salvadoran government had never provided educational or medical services to the people living there.

“Juan Ramos sent greetings to the Bishop,” I said.

“Ah, so you know the history.”

“I do, now,” I said. “As if things weren’t already complicated enough in this war—then they go and switch sides!”

There was some small talk about his parishioners and my latrines. After that we didn’t say much. What more would we have said to each other? In Chalatenango in 1991 one had to trust that the person to whom one might tell something had the judgment and strength to be silent even under pressure. Maybe Bernardo trusted me, but he didn’t know me very well, and although I was inclined to trust him, I had already revealed more than I wished had been required when he heard

my initial confession.

A sidelong glance at the man with the reddish-brown beard sitting in my passenger's seat reminded me that he had walked four hours to Las Flores a few days after Christmas 1986, just because he heard there were three *gringos* in town and he was longing to speak his native language. Before we sat down to talk that day I noticed he had blue-green eyes with a particular twinkle that provided a clue about his origins even before I heard his brogue or learned that his given name was Brendan.

I was grateful for the memory. It helped me feel more confident when we got to the *retén*, where the same two young soldiers from the military base in Chalatenango were still on duty. Again they smiled at me, and didn't bother to search the car. Evidently, the soldiers up near Zapotal had not been able to alert the folks at the roadblock about the car and me. Or else they had something else in mind.

When the soldiers asked to see the priest's ID, I was taken aback, but Bernardo managed to put them at ease with a joke I didn't understand. After that we were, as they say, home free. I dropped Bernardo at the bus stop and drove the last few blocks home where I climbed into my hammock without bothering to get undressed.

What happened around Las Vueltas that day weighed me

down. I had violated the neutrality principle of the church and was now driving a marked car. I had no way to prepare for how this fact was going to play itself out, and it would be necessary to admit everything to the next person who asked to borrow it. It was as if the flames were already licking at my feet.

Two nights after returning from the vaccination campaign I had a vivid dream. In the dream I am collecting sheets and towels. While I am doing this, a young man is standing nearby, cautioning me that I should not do what I am planning to do. Then I am on a crowded bus with my laundry in my lap, and the same young man is sitting next to me, telling me to “watch myself.” I look up from my seat, and I see that an armed soldier has gotten on the bus. He is working his way down the aisle, heading right for me.

My sense of inviolability drops away, and yes, my cockiness, which I had not acknowledged until that moment. I turn to the unknown young man in the seat beside me and, although I am aware it might be too late, I apologize for not paying attention to his warnings.

When I awoke, the message sunk in. During the three months I had been working in Chalatenango Province, I had made the transition. I was no longer bearing witness or accompanying other people in their struggle.

I had come to El Salvador because I wanted to do something useful that would benefit the civilians living in this war zone. I knew it would be dangerous, but I still believed in the “safety net” of working for the officially neutral Catholic Church—in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

Like Magdalena’s innocent cousin, my own beliefs and allegiances did not matter. Whether I wanted to or not, I had crossed the line. I had become a part of the struggle. Now I was subject to the same risks and dangers as everyone else.

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