

Walking Through Wars: Why a Faithful Salvadoran Girl Abandoned Her Home

by Milagros Vela as told to Rita Moran

Part I: The War at Home

Chapter 1: Guerrillas Come to Middle School

One winter afternoon—it didn't rain that day—our squat little Principal Toad appeared at school with a troop of dirty, sunburned strangers. The teachers brought us kids in sixth and seventh grades out to the patio so that only the lower grades sat in their classrooms, peering through the chicken wire. It was July of 1978, and I was unhappily repeating sixth grade. My teacher had simply said, "Milagros, you are a stupid girl who doesn't pay attention."

Our school was a rickety converted chicken ranch, and we were some thirty girls and boys, eleven or twelve years old. We lived in the hills above San Salvador, in hovels that were either *champas* made of rusty sheet metal, or *mesones* of adobe and cardboard. That day we expected perhaps some presentation or event, and were startled to confront this band of brawny, armed men.

Our new principal, Señor Dario Rodriguez, had recently appeared out of nowhere. You could see that he had been a middle-class child. He always wore a dress shirt and nice trousers, shiny black shoes—all his life he was impeccable. His gestures were effeminate; his manner was what we called *amantequillado*, a little buttery—unctuous. However, he had a nervous tic: each time he talked, he would stick out his neck and twist his shoulders. He was little and fat and tried hard to be nice to everyone. Exceptionally nice. We called him Principal Toad. The problem was that Dario Rodriguez wanted all of us kids to become revolutionary guerrillas.

The strangers who came to our school that memorable afternoon looked so big, so dirty. They were white, but burnt by our Salvadoran sun or else tanned too dark—as if tan skin were their goal. Each of them carried a heavy pack on his back. They wore beards and mustaches, and looked maybe forty or forty-five years old. These strange men were very friendly but spoke Spanish only with difficulty. “We should feel fortunate,” said Dario Rodriguez, “to have such distinguished people at our school!”

And in a way, we did feel kind of special—the way the guerrilla soldiers noticed kids like us. No, their bags contained neither candies nor cookies, as we might have wished. In their backpacks were weapons. They came to teach us the art of loading and unloading guns, from pistols and revolvers to 70 caliber machine guns. It was a school secret: “Careful! Don’t tell Mamá or Papá!”

We never could talk to our parents anyway—they wouldn’t listen to us. The guerrillas took advantage of this lack of communication. They had studied our culture—we of the lower class in Latin America—and knew that parents never talked to their children. With poverty comes family disintegration. War thus begins in your home. You see there’s no affection, no understanding. Or if there is, it’s not expressed. Your parents never show you interest or love, so you feel that you’re not important. For them, the problem of poverty is to give you something to eat—not to worry about how you *feel* about not having anything to eat. And if we were happy when the guerrillas did give us candy or cookies, it was because we were always hungry. We say, “*Las penas con pan son buenas.*” Sorrows with bread are good.

My arms were thinner than the gun barrel I took clumsily in my hands, for at twelve years of age I weighed only sixty pounds. Watching the men, we each handled a weapon “to lose the

fear,” they said. It was so easy to shoot, and thus defend our rights and avenge the blood of the martyrs, who—like us—were The People. I remember it so well, the way we saw ourselves reflected in their beautiful blue or green eyes. They treated us affectionately.

The armed men were of two types. The white guerrillas looked at you with pity, but not with compassion. The Latino guerrillas looked at you quite coldly. The Latinos might have been from Nicaragua, or they might have been Salvadorans who came down from the mountains in the Zona Oriental on the Nicaraguan border. They 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 the government politicians. The Latino guerrillas treated us kids like automatons, they never looked at us with eyes of pity. They taught hatred. They said, “You have to fight to regain your territory!” But if you were poor, what could you possibly regain?

The white guerrillas told the Latinos to treat us a little more humanely. They would ask how old you were, where you lived, who were your parents. They patted your head with their big hands. You’d think, “How handsome they are! They’re interested in me!” Day after day, while our teachers called us the children of garbage, these armed men at least gave us a little sympathy, and taught us how to kill in the name of the lowliness of our lives.

Years later I learned that the guerrillas at our school were from the Frente Para la Liberación, a precursor of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). I think our white trainers were Americans, although I’m told that they were more likely Russian military advisors, who would have come through Cuba. They came to train us kids and scope out the environment.

That day, a deluge of visits to our school began. One dark afternoon they forced us to go out and line up in the street. It was just a narrow dirt lane that independent buses rumbled along.

All the grades, from first to ninth, were made to line up on the two sides of the road. The guerrillas showed us how to put out *miguelitos*—planks with nails in them—to stop the flow of buses. When tires hit the nails—*pum!*—they’d explode.

There was a little meeting, then a column of guerrillas formed up in the middle of the road—naturally, in our company. On this walk, we were the human shield—the girls and boys running and walking alongside the guerrilla soldiers—until we entered a wooded area. Of course, we smiled and talked with them. And with all the innocence in the world, we showed them the shanties where we lived.

The guerrillas came to our school when we children were just entering puberty, and they sought to instill in us a terrible hatred. To accomplish this at such a decisive age, they must have studied how to kill the soul of a child. Worse yet, in our outlying district we were caught between the leftist guerrillas on the one hand, and the army and right-wing death squads on the other. How could we survive them both?

A grievous change was coming about from 1978 to 1980, with the onset of civil war. Suddenly it became a crime to turn thirteen years old. Willy-nilly, you became part of an army—be it for the guerrillas or for the government. You didn’t know why you were fighting, but you had to fight. If you said no, they would come for you at night and kill you.

On one occasion, a *mujercita*, a “little woman,” arrived in 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 the two of them were already of an age between seventeen and twenty. One day, Yanira told him about the guerrillas who came in the afternoons. Accordingly,

he and his friends confronted our tubby little Principal Toad—who was even shorter than the eighth graders.

That night, some strangers visited Rubén’s house. They were dressed in black, with mountaineering gloves. By sheer luck they didn’t find him, since they wanted to bring him to justice in their own way. That was the last we saw of him. He and Yanira fled the country that same day, and went off to suffer in Mexico with barely two hundred *colones*—about twenty dollars—to their name. Within six months of Rubén’s departure, the whole family abandoned their home. This was the secret fear we all shared, that if anyone in our family said something, this would happen to us, too.

Throughout the country, an exodus began of everyone who had the means to get out. Nearly all the older students disappeared from one day to another, until only a few of us were left. The families of our vanished classmates 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, the cradle of my long-ago infancy. Little by little it fell to pieces, that dear place I carried in my heart.

We children wanted to have confidence in our teachers but as time went by and the situation worsened, instead of advising us to get out, our illustrious teachers abandoned us. Over the next two years they would flee our perilous, isolated school and leave us in the hands of much worse teachers—strangers to whom we had absolutely no importance. The new teachers were drunks, or people from distant rural areas who were only half-educated themselves. We were abysmally far behind in our studies.

By the time I reached seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, we would have only two teachers for the three classes. If there wasn't music class, which a volunteer taught twice a week, the third room had a free hour. Unsupervised, we liked to stand at a corner of the school where some boards had fallen, and spy out to see what the neighbors were up to. As you may imagine, we saw all sorts of things: from robbers breaking into houses, to women washing the corpses of dead men. We watched from idleness, and with fearful curiosity.

In second grade, I had seen my first corpses—the bodies of the bakery delivery boys on the road home from school. The government's death squads displayed that lesson for all us kids to see. (I realized much later that those young men must have talked about unionizing.) Now, the sight of bodies became routine. All the time—on the news, in the river, on the buses—there were corpses. Out in the countryside, where communication was limited, it was far worse. At night, the police on patrol had the authority to recruit youths of fifteen or older for the army. Families were distraught, since the war was heating up and our little barrio sat right in between the army and the guerrillas. Day by day our dread increased.

I saw all the neighborhood men get angry about things that were happening, but they never spoke the names of political parties since they said that was dangerous. Everyone said the green was better; that the blue was bad. These were the colors of the parties—but, of course, I didn't understand.

The day after an election found Mamá very worried and Papá very angry. Some men had come along and rummaged through the ballot boxes. They had gleefully thrown out all the ballots in favor of the green party, but still wanted to kill the other parties' candidates. These men were with the party currently in power, with hands that could help you or crush you. We

knew this because several neighbors had ballot boxes in their care. And, since they gave you a salary and a free lunch for bearing this responsibility, what hungry person wouldn't go along?

A point came when the situation seemed to be worsening quickly. Nobody talked politics anymore, much less of the color green. Our life went on, accelerating with such speed that it filled me with surprise and grief. The beautiful days became filled with rot, as every road filled up with great *trocas*—big army trucks brimming with soldiers—who were sitting with rifles ready to shoot. Armored cars passed along our anxious and scabrous streets at all hours of the day and night. As they began their constant patrolling, the age-old tranquility, from one day to the next, was gone.

You could feel it in the air, 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 had realized that the school was preparing us for the loathsome time that would arrive! But no, nobody wanted to hear my anguish, only the Owner of my life.

Changes and more changes. Throughout my childhood, two dear friends and I would go off 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 recited poetry, for at the end of every school year we had to learn by heart one of the poems of Alfredo Espino, the great Salvadoran poet. One year it was "The Eyes of the Oxen," a very sad poem:

I have seen them so sad, that it's hard for me to think

Though they be so sad, they never can cry!...

We would declaim these poems with dramatic gestures—because that's what the teacher wanted—and as for me, I always loved to be expressive. Through poetry, my friends and I

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

My solace would come each October, at the end of the school year, when 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, waist-high in the grass with a crowd of my dainty little friends—imagining I was one of them, ready to fly.

And yet, just last year when I looked for my butterflies, they didn't seem to listen to me anymore. Maybe I no longer spoke their language—or perhaps the butterflies could no longer carry my weight. I was left on the ground to watch them: how the sun shone on their lovely white wings; how clouds of them appeared to those of us on the ground—delicate butterflies massed together but flying away so far that my eyes couldn't see them anymore.

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

*Close the door for me. I feel that a chill
comes over my hands. God knows what's wrong with them...
Don't you notice how sad they come
out there, the winds,
the winds of October?*

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 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. They, too, fled to safety while my soul tumbled down into a deepening well.

I believe that although you may eat only tortillas and beans, if there is peace then it has the best flavor—but the bitterness in my mouth remains.

I believe those days deserve more than just being held in memory. They demand that others come to see how a child's heart breaks into a thousand pieces—when those who want to change the world place weapons in the small hands of beings who are without importance, and otherwise useless to them.

I believe my Creator has spared me so I can narrate this small history, to let others feel the weight that settled on the shoulders of an innocent child.