SILENCE ON THE MOUNTAIN

STORIES OF TERROR, BETRAYAL, AND FORGETTING IN GUATEMALA

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Duke University Press Durham & London

2004

THE OWNER

ALL I KNEW when I began was that a house had burned down. And not just any house. This was the house of the *patrón* — the *casa patronal* — on a coffee plantation named La Patria.

I knew it had been an old house with walls of mahogany and a tin roof painted burgundy red — the same color as the processing plant on the ridge behind it, the color of the berries harvested every year from the surrounding mountainside. While not as large as the houses of *patrones* in some of the neighboring plantations, it had possessed a special charm, a "gracious" and "pretty" design, and a spectacular view of the Pacific coast. Stepping up to the porch on a sunny day, looking in through the front door, down the hallway and through the living room, you could see the glittering blue of the distant ocean out the back window. Time had taken its toll: a half-century of rainy seasons had softened the outer walls; termites had colonized the inner ones. Yet the structure had endured. And for the eighty-year-old *patrón* and his wife, it had still been home, the place where they intended to live out their days.

I knew that it was just after Christmas in 1983 that the fire had consumed the house. And I knew it had been set by a group of guerrillas who called themselves the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms — and who were called, by my own government, terrorists.

I knew all this because I had met the owner of La Patria in one of those chance encounters that begin the detours that become your life. It was

1993. I had just finished college and come to Guatemala with what the people at Harvard called a "traveling fellowship" — money to go see the world and possibly do a little good in it. I had spent some weeks working in a Mayan Indian town and begun research for an article on the community's efforts to reclaim its ancestral lands. On a visit to Guatemala City, the friend of a friend gave me the phone number of an American professor whose published works on Guatemala dated back to the 1950s. I called him one evening to get tips for my research, and before I'd even finished introducing myself he invited me to dinner at his home in an affluent neighborhood in the outskirts of the city.

His wife greeted me at the door. With her hazel eyes, snow-white hair, light complexion, and perfect English, I figured that Sara Endler was also from the United States, an academic spouse who had followed her husband to a foreign land. It was only when we had moved on to dessert and a second bottle of wine that I learned otherwise. I was saying something about the disparities between Guatemala's agricultural elite and the workers who generate their wealth when she cleared her throat and said, "I must confess, I own a farm."

"A farm?" I wasn't sure what she meant.

"A coffee plantation."

She told me then how she had recently inherited La Patria from her aging father, Franz Endler, who had abandoned the plantation after the *casa patronal* was burned down in the 1980s. As she spoke, my mind raced back over the evening's conversation, searching for any comments I'd made about plantation owners that could have offended my host. When she paused, I asked a question, hardly suspecting that it would be the first of thousands: "Why was the house burned down?"

The war in Guatemala had been one of the most brutal conflicts in the hemisphere in the twentieth century. By the end of 1983, it had been raging for two decades, with a military government allied with the United States battling a guerrilla movement that was backed by Cuba. The burning of the Endler house was just one of countless acts of destruction in a conflict whose history — at the time I met Sara Endler a decade later — remained largely unwritten.

The army had occupied La Patria, she told me, because it suspected

that the owners were collaborating with the guerrillas — an absurd suspicion given how much her parents abhorred the guerrillas' "communistic" ideas. What *was* true was that they themselves had never been the target of guerrilla violence. In fact, the one time a small party of guerrillas had visited them in La Patria, the Endlers had been surprised, even touched, by the respectful behavior of their uninvited guests. When Sara's mother offered the group coffee and cookies, one of the guerrillas — a young indigenous woman — put aside her machine gun and politely insisted on serving them herself. Before leaving, this same young guerrilla gently patted Sara's father on his knee and said, "Don't be scared, *patroncito*. We will build the new nation together."

Apparently the army was aware that the guerrillas hadn't bothered the Endlers. And so, in the ensuing months, it chose to bother them itself. Troops occupied the plantation, turning it into a temporary military base, building sentry posts, and digging trenches wherever they thought necessary. They even dug a trench through the garden by the house. The Endlers were not pleased by the intrusion, but there was nothing they could do to stop it. When the shooting began, Sara told me, the couple sat in their living room and watched the bullets fly. They didn't scare very easily, she laughed, they never had.

Then a note arrived at the plantation: "We have suffered great losses here due to your collaborating with the army," it said. "When the army leaves, we will burn you down."

And sure enough, less than two weeks after the army pulled out of the plantation, the guerrillas arrived to fulfill their promise. The Endlers had not waited around to see that happen, and only afterward did they learn — from their plantation administrator — what had occurred that day. The first attempt to burn the plantation had failed, he told them. A group of women workers had begged the guerrillas not to harm La Patria: the plantation was their only job, and the *patrón* was a good man, and he should be left alone. At first, the guerrillas ignored the entreaties, but the women persisted, pleading so insistently that the guerrillas finally gave up and left.

Two weeks later, they were back. This time they entered with a lot of gunfire and went straight to the house, broke open the *patrón*'s liquor cabinet, and passed the booze around to the men who were working in the processing plant. "All the stuff in this house belongs to you," they an-

nounced when they had gotten the men good and drunk. "All of it was bought with the sweat off your brows. Have at it!" The workers looted the house, taking pots and pans and other utensils, anything they could make off with. When the cupboards were bare, the fire began.

And when Sara's father heard the news, he swore he would never return to La Patria. He did not want to see his home reduced to ashes.

As Sara recounted the burning, I wondered about her earlier choice of words: "I must confess, I own a farm." I hadn't detected any guilt in that confession, just the same hesitancy that appeared in her voice when we had discussed Guatemalan politics during dinner. Why the hesitancy? Could be a sign of timidity, I guessed.

I guessed wrong. This was a woman who in her twenties had learned how to fly airplanes and in her sixties was learning how to run a coffee plantation — a woman who, during the intervening years, had figured out how to hold together a family that included a grandfather who was an ardent anticommunist, a daughter who was a leftist intellectual, and a husband who was denounced as a CIA agent by the Guatemalan left and blacklisted by the right. Sara Endler had managed to maintain a home straddling the fault lines of a country at war, and to build her own life shuttling between two worlds — the United States, where she was a liberal Democrat, and Guatemala, where she was a member of an embattled economic and racial elite.

If she hesitated when she spoke, it wasn't because she was unsure of herself, but because she was confronting a minefield of politically charged meanings. The "confession" that evening was, I realized, a tactic to defuse the revelation about who she was. It was really more like a *concession:* she conceded there was reason to be critical of Guatemalan landowners so that her views would not be written off. She was ready to discuss the world she had inherited with her plantation. She was inviting me to do so.

Why? The answer she gave the landowner friends who questioned her judgment was simple: she had nothing to hide.

THE STUDENT

"SHE'S GOT PLENTY to hide, even if she doesn't know it." That was the view of César Sánchez, who had grown up on a plantation two miles west of La Patria.

I had met César shortly before the dinner at Sara Endler's home. The journalist who introduced us was enamored of him, and it was easy to see why. He was our age, handsome, with a dark complexion and curly black hair. He had a warm smile, which he usually kept hidden behind an ironic grin, and penetrating eyes, which could turn icy in an instant when he talked politics. He was as quick with a structural analysis as with a sarcastic crack, and though he was trained to hide uncertainty, he knew the world still held many secrets from him. He wore glasses and always carried a book or newspaper in one hand, the way the boys where he grew up carried slingshots and the men carried machetes.

César was the son of the plantation bookkeeper, which meant that he had a slightly bigger house and ate better than his friends whose families worked in the fields. It also meant that his parents could afford to send him to a secondary school in the provincial capital and then to the regional branch of the national university. It was there that he came of age as a student in agronomy, the program that had a long tradition of producing political activists. The most celebrated of these was Willy Miranda, the president of the student association who in 1980 stood on a chair in the university lecture hall and exhorted his classmates (César could recite by memory): "We who receive an education paid for by the people have a debt to the people! We who have the power to analyze have

the responsibility to criticize! An agronomist should carry, in one hand, a machete — and, in the other, a machine gun!"

Within weeks, Miranda was dead. As was the most popular agronomy professor at the university, gunned down as he stood at the blackboard teaching a class. As would be dozens of people in agronomy over the coming years. By the time César joined the student association in 1988, the violence had taken its toll, severing the connection between the university and the guerrillas and eroding the optimism that had inspired risk taking among the students. "We weren't as tough as the ones before us," César told me. "We were scared." Which isn't to say they stopped protesting the government, but only that their activities were tame in comparison with those of their predecessors, who had collaborated directly with the *Volcancitos*, or "Little Volcanoes," as they referred, in code, to the guerrillas who operated in the region. "If I had been just a few years older in, say 1982, the guerrillas would have recruited me, and I would have joined," César mused. "And right now I'd probably be a cadaver — just one more anonymous corpse in the sad history of this country."

Instead, he had applied himself to his studies, doing his coursework and developing a proposal for a thesis on the Agrarian Reform of 1952. The Agrarian Reform had been — students like César would tell you — what provoked the United States to overthrow Guatemala's only democratic government and replace it with the military regime that had ruled the country (in various guises) until the 1990s. And agrarian reform remained — they would also tell you — the only viable solution to Guatemala's problems: peace required greater equality, and greater equality required a redistribution of land in the countryside.

Yet for all its importance, not many people in the university knew much about what actually happened in the 1950s. So César proposed to investigate how the reform had affected the coffee-producing region where he had grown up. It was an unorthodox proposal, and when it was rejected, César grew disillusioned with a faculty that, he felt, had been reduced to mediocrity by the repression. But he retained a stubborn attachment to his project: "To understand the war in this country," he told foreigners like me, "you've got to understand what happened during the Agrarian Reform."

César knew a lot about coffee. He had grown up on a plantation, studied the technical aspects of farming in the university, and spent countless

hours thinking about how the plantation system should be reformed. Yet in all these years, he had never spoken to a plantation owner — at least not about anything that had political ramifications, certainly not about the Agrarian Reform or any other controversial aspect of the country's history. Nor had any of his friends from agronomy, not even the ones who had landed jobs on plantations. Such communication was not something they would have even thought to attempt.

"She would never talk to me," he said when I told him about Sara and how she had invited me to visit her plantation and learn more about its history. He was a little bitter that the *gringo* could open doors that were shut to him. But more than that, he was curious to hear what she had told me. He listened attentively as I repeated the story of the burning house. "Of course the guerrillas served the coffee themselves," he interjected. "That's how they make sure the landowners don't poison them!" And later he said, "You don't really believe that the *señoras* in the plantation tried to stop a group of armed guerrillas?" Clearly, he did not.

What he had no trouble believing was that the workers had ransacked the Endlers' house. "Go see the difference between the house of a *patrón* and the houses of his workers, and you'll understand the resentment people feel," he said. "Go find out what happened with their lands after the Agrarian Reform and you'll understand the frustration that fueled the war."

He repeated this challenge whenever I saw him until I realized it was more than a challenge. It was an entreaty. He wanted me to do the study he couldn't do himself.

I had other plans at the time. Yes, I would try writing about Guatemala, but it would be about current events — Mayan communities seeking to reclaim their ancestral lands, young men migrating to the United States — things that mattered to people today. César's war seemed to be yesterday's news; his Agrarian Reform, ancient history. The country's civil war was still going on. But you wouldn't know it from what you saw in the cities or in the tourist spots. There were news reports of peace talks — indefinitely stalled at the time — but no reports of actual fighting. The only guerrillas still around were the aging commanders who wanted to resume negotiations in Mexico City. This war had basically ended — not with a bang, but with a bunch of balding men waiting around for someone to talk to them.

César laughed when I told him this. And then he set about setting me straight. The army had been working for years to minimize reports of guerrilla activity — he explained — covering up its casualties, treating its wounded in hidden hospitals. The aim was to undermine the guerrillas' claim that they were still a force to be reckoned with. "We beat them," the generals insisted, "why should we negotiate?" My own misperception was a testament to the power of their propaganda machine. There was still fighting in the coffee region. And, more important, there were still many people there who cared about the war's outcome.

Then one morning I picked up the paper and found Sara's plantation on the front page. There had actually been a battle. The fighting had begun in the woods outside a municipality named La Igualdad, and spilled over into La Patria and a neighboring plantation named El Progreso. The names on this battlefield — La Igualdad, El Progreso, La Patria — could have come from one of Willy Miranda's speeches: "Equality," "Progress," "Nation." Only here they had lost their meanings, the way that bombed-out houses cease to be homes. La Patria had become a battlefield. Bullets were flying in El Progreso. People were killing each other in La Igualdad. It was as though the propaganda machine had gone haywire.

When I saw César again, we talked more about the violence in the plantations. I had tried to read up on the subject on my own, only to find there was basically nothing to read. There were accounts of the Agrarian Reform (written by foreigners), but these dealt with the rise and fall of the reform government at the national level, not with how the reforms played out in the countryside. And there were accounts of the war in the 1980s, but they focused on how the violence affected Indian communities in the country's highlands to the north. Coffee had been the backbone of the Guatemalan economy, and the plantations had been where millions of people had lived through the major political upheavals of the century. Yet, in the history books, the country's vast coffee region remained a blank space on the map. César insisted I would find remarkable things there. And I figured I shouldn't pass on the opportunity at least to pay a visit.

And so it was that Sara Endler and César Sánchez, two Guatemalans who had never met, together led me to La Igualdad.

THE BATTLEFIELD

LA IGUALDAD WAS A TWO-ROAD TOWN on the side of a mountain in the volcanic chain that ran the length of Guatemala's southern coast. One dirt road climbed up from the coastal city of Coatepeque; the other crawled down from the mountain city of San Marcos. Beginning in very different worlds — the stifling heat of the coast and the cool air of the highlands — the roads plunged into what looked like a tropical forest.

It was a peculiar forest: the canopy had been pruned back and the undergrowth was all of a kind — plants the same size and shape, with the same shiny, dark-green leaves. Beginning at any one plant at the roadside, you could enter the forest and find an identical plant a meter away. Continue in any direction and you would reach another plant, and then another and another. Heading westward, you could travel plant by plant — occasionally hopping a stream or crossing another road, skirting a mill or a cluster of shacks, stopping at the edge of a ravine and continuing where the ground levels off — until you reached Mexico and traveled into the heart of Chiapas. Or you could head eastward — plant by plant — hugging the base of the volcanic chain more or less continuously until you came within sight of the Salvadoran border. And you could pick up again — traveling plant by plant, mile after mile — in large stretches of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and again in Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil. The plant was coffee, and the beans it produced were, after petroleum, the most valuable commodity on the world market.

The two roads converged on a ridge one thousand meters above sea

level. They became paved streets and ran parallel thirty meters apart. Six cross streets connected the two, making five blocks. This was the town of La Igualdad, the urban center of the municipality of the same name.

Entering the town from the highland road, you came upon a bust of Justo Rufino Barrios. In 1871, General Barrios had led a band of insurgents down this route as he crisscrossed the coffee piedmont on his way to the capital. Once in power, Barrios began a political revolution, consisting of legislation and decrees known collectively as the Liberal Reforms, which opened up these lands for cultivation, prompted the migration of peasants from highland communities, and led to the formation of municipalities like La Igualdad throughout the piedmont.

The second street had been paved in 1952 during the second major reform period in modern Guatemalan history. Had the reforms of this era endured, many things might have been different in Guatemala today. For one thing, there might have been a bust of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in the entrance to town. Colonel Arbenz was the charismatic army officer who had helped lead the 1944 revolution establishing a democratic government and who had then won the presidential election of 1950. Once in office, Arbenz surrounded himself with Guatemala's best and brightest and set about the task of transforming the world that the Liberal Reforms had created. Four years later, he was stripped of his office, his power, and even his clothes; he left Guatemala in his underwear, exiled to a life of oblivion. He returned four decades later in a casket.

There was no bust of Arbenz in La Igualdad. And no one seemed to remember that the street on the left, as you go uphill, had once been called the Street of the Revolution.

The south end of town began abruptly: the dirt road became a paved street, lined on both sides by wooden and stucco homes, which were painted green, red, and pale blue, and were packed together tightly at odd angles — the adherence to right-angled architecture relaxed so as not to waste space. The street climbed some two hundred yards, passing a bakery, an inn, a mechanic's shop, the cross streets on the right, and a turnoff on the left to a road that dropped into a gully. It continued climbing past several general stores and a pharmacy, and then leveled off at the town's park. The park consisted of a gazebo surrounded by concrete benches. There was an electronics store with video games on the corner: the sound of Mario Brothers echoed through the park all day and well

into the night. The street then climbed again, another hundred yards, passing more shops, the municipal hall, the Catholic church, and came to an abrupt halt at the northern edge of the ridge. A dirt path dropped to a line of houses and banana trees on the slope running down to a ravine below.

And there, straight ahead, rising out of the ravine and climbing half a mile up the mountainside and into the clouds, was a plantation. Twelve hundred acres of coffee. On a promontory directly across the ravine was a cluster of large yellow buildings: the processing mill, the offices, and the *casa patronal.* Its name was El Progreso, but the workers in the region called it El Infierno, which means "Hell."

The street continued, veering around La Igualdad's elementary school and then merging with the other street just below the bust of Barrios.

My first trip to La Igualdad was on the road up from the coast. Several weeks had passed since the battle, and Sara assured me that there would be no danger now if I paid the plantation a visit. She arranged for me to meet the plantation's administrator, Carlos Rodríguez, in Coatepeque, and together we rode up the mountain on the back of the plantation's pickup truck. Carlos was a relatively recent arrival in La Patria, hired by Sara after the burning to resuscitate the plantation and turn it into a more productive and profitable operation than it had been in her father's day. Carlos was tall and fit and carried himself with the relaxed and confident air of a corporate executive on vacation. He didn't really look like a farmer. Even when he stood in the fields, his boots caked with mud, he managed to keep his clothes neat and trim, his manner urbane. He didn't wear a sombrero, not even a cap. Like César, he had studied agronomy in the national university. And like him, he had been a student activist in his day. But that day had been back in the 1960s, and those politics had been more a stage of youthful rebelliousness than a lifelong commitment. "The university student who's not a Marxist is a fool," he liked to say. "The adult who remains a Marxist is even more of a fool." Carlos spent two or three days a week in La Patria and the rest running a consulting business in the capital and managing his own property.

After two hours, we reached the town, turning off below the park onto a dirt road that dipped into a gully and then climbed for another twenty

minutes up into La Patria. We unloaded in front of the processing plant and carried our bags to the *casa patronal.* The house was a no-frills replacement for what had been destroyed: a concrete floor supporting four adjacent rooms that opened onto a porch. Like all the buildings on the plantation, its walls were painted white, and the roof burgundy red. Carlos handed me a beer from the refrigerator and headed over to the plantation office.

Out on the porch, I sipped the beer and took in the view of Guatemala's Pacific coast, four thousand feet below. Squinting, I could make out the faint outline of the water's edge fifty kilometers southward and, above it, a blurred horizon where ocean blue melded into sky blue. To my left, some hundred kilometers eastward, it was the dark blue of dusk. Westward, the ocean-sky brightened and gave way to a reddish haze where the sun was beginning its descent over Mexico. The view was much too large to take in with one glance. My eyes wandered about the coastal plain: over there, a plume of smoke rose from a sugar refinery; over there, a patch of darkness, a rain shower, made its way inland; over there, a ray of sunlight glinted from a car or truck moving near the border.

Down below, the foothills cast long shadows. In Spanish, they call these hills *la falda,* "the skirt," of the mountain. To me they looked more like long bony fingers clawing at the coastal plain — a death grip frozen in some moment of geo-continental violence long ago and left buckled and broken by centuries of seismic aftershock.

Over dinner, Carlos told me about the battle that had made the news. He had not been in the plantation at the time, but he recounted what his employees had told him. How several hundred troops marched up past the house one morning. How land mines planted in the upper reaches of El Progreso prevented them from attacking the guerrillas who had dug into the mountainside there. How bleeding soldiers were carried back down the hill. How the military set up a mortar that night in La Patria and shelled the guerrilla encampment until dawn. How the soldiers marched up again, this time over a thousand strong, and flushed the guerrillas out. How some of the guerrillas fled down through La Patria and had a gun battle near the house before disappearing into the community where the

workers live at the foot of the hill. How the administrator of El Progreso decided not to risk harvesting the coffee in the plantation's upper corner where the land mines were discovered, and how a peasant who decided to risk collecting the berries for himself had his leg blown off.

I awoke the next morning and watched the sunrise on the porch and tried to imagine the events Carlos had described. But there was something about the place — the crisp mountain air, the spirited singing of the birds, the sumptuous colors of the surrounding fields — infusing the hillside with a beauty so intense that it saturated my senses, dulled my imagination. Try as I might, I could not populate the meadow below with soldiers, or fill the air with bullets and screams. Last night's story seemed as fantastic by daylight as something I might have dreamed in my sleep.

Carlos joined me on the porch and — as if reading my thoughts — pointed out a hole that a bullet had blown out of the wall of the processing plant twenty meters away.

After breakfast, Carlos introduced me to the plantation's field master and asked him to show me around the property. The field master was a slight man with a nervous smile and a deferential manner that made me uncomfortable. Our tour began with the processing mill, where he showed me the machines that clean, dry, and sort the coffee beans during the harvest season. Then we mounted horses and set off on a path that climbed through the coffee groves up the hill above the plantation buildings.

When I asked the field master why there were no workers about, he explained that the plantation had to wait for the first rains before starting the next task in the annual cycle. The rains were several weeks late.

As we approached the upper reaches of the plantation, I asked him if this was where the battle occurred. "The battle?" He looked as though he didn't know what I was talking about.

"Yeah, the battle that was in the news, didn't it take place around here?"

"That was in El Progreso."

"But I thought it was here too."

"No. Nothing happened here."

"But Carlos told me . . ." I started to say but decided to let it go.

After an hour making our way through the groves, we came to the cemetery, a clearing on a ridge a few hundred meters below the plantation buildings, a colorful oasis in the sea of green, with a line of palm trees running the perimeter. At the entrance stood a cement cross and below it, inscribed in stone, were the words:

HIER RUHT
FRIEDRICH ENDLER
GEB AM 5 OKTOBER 1869
IN LEHIN
GEST IS 15 MAI 1941

Behind this tombstone was a field of crosses with names like Fuentes, Yoc, Tojil, and Bautista.

As we climbed the ridge above the cemetery, I said to the field master, "I heard that the *casa patronal* was burned down."

"*Sí pues,*" he answered.

"The house did burn down, didn't it?"

"*Sí pues.*"

"And it was the guerrillas who did the burning?"

"*Pues,* that's what they say."

Leading questions wouldn't get me far with this man. "Why was it burned?"

He shrugged and said, "*Saber.*"

Saber is a favorite Guatemalan expression, one that I was to hear time and time again in the coming weeks. It is the infinitive of the verb "to know," but works like the rhetorical question in English "Who knows?"

"Has there been a lot of fighting here in La Igualdad?"

"No." He shook his head and, putting a bit more distance between our horses, added over his shoulder, "Not much happened around here."

Later, I talked with the cook in the *casa patronal.* I was sitting on the porch when she came out to sweep. She wore a colorless skirt and blouse, had her hair pulled back in a single braid, and showed no sign of adornment, not even the gold-starred front tooth that seemed to be the fashion among women in La Igualdad. When she smiled, I saw she had no front teeth at all. (Carlos would later tell me why so many of the women had

the same star on the same tooth. It was common for breastfeeding and poorly nourished mothers to lose front teeth; the "dentist" in La Igualdad only stocked four-tooth prosthetics, with a star on one; when a woman came to him with a tooth missing, he knocked out the others so the prosthetic would fit.)

I tried to strike up a conversation: "Is that the ocean I'm seeing out there?" I pointed to the blue horizon.

She stopped sweeping, looked out at the coast, and shrugged. "It could be."

"Do you go to the beach much?"

"Just once we went." She smiled at the memory. "That was years ago."

We talked a little about the weather, about the rains being late, and then she asked what I was doing here in the plantation. I took the question as my cue. "Well, I was hoping to find out about the history of this place," I explained. "Maybe you could help me a little?"

She didn't speak.

"I was wondering, for example, what happened here during the Agrarian Reform?"

She looked blankly at her broom and said: "*Pues,* I don't know anything about that."

"But was there ever some kind of dispute here over the land in the plantation?"

She shrugged and began sweeping again: "*Pues,* I don't think anything happened here."

Maybe she really didn't know. Maybe she was younger than her toothless face made her look. I changed to a more recent topic, the battle in the news. Again, the blank expression: "*Pues,* everything has been pretty calm here." Her sweeping became more vigorous. My eyes found the bullet hole in the wall.

"But isn't it true the house was burned down?"

"*Pues,* that was a long time ago."

"Why was it burned?"

"*Saber.*"

Later I wandered into the plantation garage and struck up a conversation with the driver who had driven us up from Coatepeque and another em-

ployee who was helping him tinker with the car engine. They were talkative — about the car's problems, about the rain being late. But when I asked them about the war, they had no more to say than the field master and the cook: the house was burned down, but otherwise the war had not had much impact in the area, neither the army nor the guerrillas bothered people very much.

Later still, when the sun was setting — an orange fireball over Chiapas — I heard singing coming from somewhere down below. I found the cook in the kitchen and asked her what it was. "A procession," she said. "They're praying for rain."

Together we climbed down the mountainside and joined the line of two dozen peasants, mostly women, with candles in hand, as it wound its way on a path through the coffee groves. A man with a megaphone prayed to *el Señor* that he send rain so that the *patrones* could give the people work. His entreaty was backed by a mumbled chorus of Hail Marys from the women. When he finished praying, five men strummed guitars and the women sang:

Te ofrezco este canto,
mezclado con llanto,
y mi corazón. . . .

The following day I left La Patria with Carlos. He agreed to drop me off in La Soledad, the plantation where César's family lived. We drove into La Igualdad and took the road that headed north toward San Marcos, passing the bust of General Barrios as we left town. We came to a plantation named La Independencia — "Independence" — and there, for the first time, I saw soldiers. They were marching in a line at the side of the road, one soldier every twenty feet. They were very young and looked very serious, with machine guns ready in their hands. They were headed in the direction of El Progreso.

EXHUMATION

THE HOUSES in the plantation La Soledad lined a stretch of road that climbed the spine of a ridge two miles to the west of La Igualdad. We stopped first at the workers' quarters, a row of dismal wooden sheds with chipped and faded white paint. Carlos asked a young man standing in one of the doorways if he knew where César Sánchez lived. The man shook his head and said nothing. We continued. The gravel road became cobblestone as it approached the coffee patio. Carlos asked some men who stood there, dressed in faded green soccer jerseys. They didn't know who he was talking about. We continued past the patio and the processing plant and came to the *casa patronal:* a two-story house, white with green latticed shutters, glass windows, and French door, built to dimensions so much larger than the workers' homes that it seemed designed for a different species. Farther up the ridge was another row of houses, more modest than the *patrón*'s, but not so derelict as the others. Standing in one of the doorways was César.

"So what did you find out?" César asked as soon as the pickup from La Patria disappeared down the road.

"Well," I answered, following him into the house, "seems nothing much happened there. At least, that's what the people told me."

The front part of the front room was a *tienda,* a small store with snacks, soap, toothpaste, and drinks displayed on a shelf behind a counter. The back part of the room had a large bed and an old wooden dresser. César had me drop my bag on the bed. "Do you believe them?"

"No, not entirely. I mean, Sara told me there had been fighting. But

she wasn't actually around the plantation in the years leading up to the burning. Her administrator showed me a bullet hole from a recent battle, but he hadn't witnessed the fighting himself. Everyone who had been there said nothing happened."

César brought me into the back room to meet his parents, who smiled shyly and exchanged amused glances — the sort that might accompany a question like, *What will our son bring home next?* César then suggested we look for a friend of his who could tell me something about the war. We headed out the door, and as we walked down the road toward the coffee patio, he said, "So nothing happened, eh?"

"That's right. And it seems no one has heard of your Agrarian Reform. They seemed evasive when I asked them about the war, but when it came to the Agrarian Reform I really don't think they knew what the hell I was talking about."

César nodded. "Well it's possible La Patria was one of the plantations that wasn't affected by the reform. But there definitely was a lot of fighting up there above La Patria and El Progreso in the early eighties. We used to watch it from over here."

I followed his gaze across the patio, over the line of trees at the other end, to the mountain above La Igualdad. When I had seen it on the way up from Coatepeque, the summit had appeared to have the conical shape of a volcano. From this angle, however, I wasn't so sure: it looked like just another mountain. I wondered how much César was exaggerating.

"If you don't believe me, you know the house burned down. The guerrillas wouldn't have done that without a reason."

We passed the men who hadn't known who César was. "Are you playing today, César?" one of them asked.

Down by the workers' quarters, we climbed the embankment and approached a house where an old man was sitting, his back against the wall, methodically banging a stone tool against the bottom of a pot. *"Buenos días,"* César greeted him. "Is the owner of that pot around?"

The man looked up from his work. "No, *joven*. He went to play football."

We turned back up to the road. "There's a man who could tell you some stories," César said when we were out of earshot. "He comes through once a year to fix the pots. He's been doing that for as long as I can remember. He travels all over San Marcos fixing pots. I bet he's repaired

every pot and pan in every plantation in the area. But," he grinned, *"saber* if he'll talk to you."

"*Saber* if anyone will talk to me. Maybe it's just too soon to try to find out what happened during the war."

César disagreed. "What about the forensic team? They're doing it." He was referring to the team of forensic anthropologists that had begun digging up the clandestine cemeteries that the army had left throughout the highlands during the 1980s.

"That's different," I said.

"Why?"

"Corpses don't lie."

"Neither do memories," he said. "You just have to get people to tell them."

I shook my head. Of course memories lie. People repress and distort things, or simply forget them. "Well, even if I could find some people in La Igualdad who would talk, I doubt I'd ever get the full story."

He thought a moment. "The forensics never get the full corpse, do they?" He had a point. What they got was decayed. Sometimes, it had even been mutilated beyond recognition. "But it still tells them something, right?"

We had caught up with the soccer players and walked with them to the soccer field.

Plantation men take soccer seriously, or at least they used to. The game I saw that afternoon wasn't much: graceless hustle, hard tackles, missed shots. But the talk I heard later was of greatness. A group of players gathered in front of the Sánchez house after the game and, with César's prodding, told me about a glorious past. A time when people had cared about their teams. When plantations had hired coaches, provided their men with uniforms and cleats, and given light work to the key players the week before the important games. Some even put professionals on the payroll to beef up the roster. La Soledad had boasted some great teams, and there were plenty of trophies in the *casa patronal* to prove it. When a truck carrying the team back from a tournament in La Igualdad rolled off a bridge, killing two players and crippling several others, the *patrón* visited his men in the hospital and wept at the sight of their broken bodies.

But things had changed since, they told me. Players had aged; some had succumbed to alcohol; some had joined Evangelical churches that prohibited alcohol and sports. The pool of new talent had shrunk as young people moved to the city. And the *patrones* just didn't care what went on in the plantation the way they once had.

Jorge Fuentes was a veteran of that era. As evening settled on the mountainside, we continued the talk of soccer with him, until we were alone and César, lowering his voice a notch, changed the topic. "*Vos*, Jorge," he said. "I was hoping you could tell Daniel a little about the war and what it's been like around here."

Jorge's voice also dropped. "What does he want to know?"

César looked at me. What *did* I want to know? *Whether it was real,* I thought. *Not just the bullets and the burning house, but the popular sentiment that the guerrillas claimed to represent.* "Well, for starters," I said, "I'm curious if there's been much support for the guerrillas in these parts."

Jorge thought a moment. "*Pues*, right now, direct support, not so much. But sympathy, yes. I mean, before, a few years ago, there was a lot of support. When the *cuates* came through, *a la gran puta*, it was a party! Everybody was happy to see them. You remember, César?"

"*Sí pues.* There were a lot of them back then. I remember sitting in my parents' store and counting the *cuates* as they went by up the road. There were more than eighty, and that's counting just the ones we could see."

"What did they do when they came?" I asked.

"They would hold a meeting on the patio, and everyone would come out. They'd talk about the revolution and the Agrarian Reform. They'd find out how the plantation was treating people. Invite people to join them."

"They'd also stock up on food from the stores here," César added. "I remember the first time they came to my parents' store. It was that commander, Chano."

"Ah, that Chano was one tough bastard!" Jorge shook his head with admiration.

"He was my idol growing up. You'd always hear stories about him. He was like our own Che Guevara."

Jorge nodded in agreement but said nothing. Someone was approaching up the road. It was a young boy. We watched him pass, and when we were alone again, I asked Jorge about the house burning in La Patria. He

didn't know much about what had happened, but he had heard that the owners had been collaborating with the army, and so the guerrillas punished them.

"The people I talked to in La Patria said there was never much fighting around there."

Jorge chuckled. "They're lying. There was lots of fighting in that part of La Igualdad. Those plantations are closer to the woods where the guerrillas had their camps. The army went after them many times."

"Was there fighting around here too?"

"Not as much. Some shootouts now and then. There was one in the plantation San Miguel where a commander got killed."

"It wasn't Chano, was it?" César asked.

"No, Chano fell somewhere else. This was somebody else, a doctor, they say, from Xela." I detected another change in Jorge's voice, as if he were shifting gears back into the story-telling mode he had used when we talked about the soccer teams. "The *tío* arrived in the plantation one day with three others, two of them women. They say one of them was his *compañera*. So they arrived, and two of them went to the office and made the bookkeeper show them the books —"

César interjected: "The guerrillas used to visit all plantations to check the books and make sure the workers were being paid."

"The other two went to scout out the plantation. They walked out of the office and turned the corner to the patio and, *puta 'mano*, the patio was full of soldiers! Seems they'd arrived at the same time as the guerrillas, but from the other direction. So the *canches* ran back and told the others and they took off. The commander told the bookkeeper not to say anything till they got away. But the bastard got scared, and he immediately went and told the soldiers. The *cuates* got down the ravine and were climbing the other side when the soldiers arrived and started firing on them. The commander's woman was hit. So he ordered the others to carry her, and he stayed to hold off the soldiers while they got away. He held them off for a few minutes. Just him against the whole platoon of soldiers."

Jorge held an imaginary machine gun in his hands and fired.

"But while he was firing, some of the soldiers got around behind him. They got closer and closer and then — pow! — they nailed him in the back. The captain ordered the rest to stop shooting. He wanted the commander alive. But before they could capture him, the *cuate* took a pill

from his pocket — they always carried pills so they wouldn't be captured — and he swallowed it. The captain grabbed him, 'Don't die, you piece of shit!' But it was too late. So they carried the corpse up to the patio and made all the workers come look at it. The captain yelled at them: 'This is what happens to communists!' Real abusive, that bastard. And then he had the soldiers line up and walk past the corpse. Each one cursed it and kicked it and hacked at it with their machete until it was all cut to pieces."

Jorge paused, letting the image sink in. "The captain was going to burn the body. But the administrator begged him not to. 'Why do you care?' the captain said to him. 'Are you a communist too?' 'No,' the administrator said. 'It's just that we don't want the guerrillas to come back and punish us after you leave.' The captain finally agreed, and when the army left, the administrator had the body buried in the plantation cemetery."

"Did the guerrillas come back?"

"Yes, or at least one of them did. Every year, on the anniversary of his death, flowers appeared on the grave. Not flowers like you find around here, but those nice flowers they sell in the market in Xela."

It was dark now. A starless night. Clouds must have rolled in while we were talking. There was no movement on the street, but a lantern across the way revealed that the air was full of life: insects of all shapes and sizes fluttered about, and occasionally a bat darted into the light.

"If the guerrillas had so much support, why didn't they win?"

"Things changed," Jorge said. "When the army did what it did in Sacuchum, everything changed."

"Sacuchum Dolores is a community up on top of the mountain," César explained. "Tell him what happened there."

"The army showed up one day and found the women washing green uniforms. And none of the men were home. So the soldiers had the families go inside their houses. They closed the doors and they set the houses on fire. The women and the children and the old people were inside, and they burned with the houses. That was the new law of the land. If the government hadn't done that, the guerrillas would have kept growing. But that was too much. You come home and find nothing — no family, no house — just ashes. That was too much."

That night I had a strange dream: I was out on the soccer field with a group of workers who turned out to be guerrillas. They selected me to be

on their team. I was flattered, though I tried not to show it. Then there was some commotion. "Helicopter!" Everyone started running off the field, seeking cover, and I woke up. It took me a moment to remember where I was — on a bed in the front room of the Sánchez house. Somewhere outside, there was a mechanical thumping sound, like a helicopter in the distance.

When I awoke again, the thumping noise was still there. And now there was another sound: a metallic clink like a muffled bell. I got up, found the front door ajar, and stepped outside. It was just before daybreak. The sky was luminescent, but the world below remained in shadows. The pot-fixer sat on the stoop of the neighbor's house, tapping a pot between his knees. That accounted for one sound. The thumping, which seemed to come from a house farther down the ridge, remained a mystery.

Someone approached on the street, a woman with a pot balanced on her head. *"Buenos días."* It was César's mother. *"Cómo amaneció?"* she asked, stopping in front of the door: how did you wake up?

"Good, thanks, and you?"

"Algo regularcito, gracias a Dios," she said smiling: *not bad, thank the Lord.* She entered the house and returned a moment later with a cup of coffee, then disappeared again inside.

I sat on the bench, sipped the coffee, and thought about what I had learned in La Igualdad. My notes from several interviews consisted of just a few lines, many of which said simply: "Nothing happened." Sara and her administrator told a very different sort of story from César and his friend, but they all agreed that a house had burned down. In light of that single fact, the notes that said nothing seemed to speak volumes.

César was right. A mutilated body could tell a story — one in which the mutilation was a central part. Even obliterated bodies have been known to speak. Like the hollows in the rock of Pompeii, pockets of nothingness, which, when filled with plaster, revealed human figures that the volcano there had buried. Or the silhouettes found on the walls of Hiroshima, pale shadows that had outlasted their human source, revealing the darkness that the atomic bomb had cast upon the surrounding world. Memories, like corpses, can be exhumed. If they come fragmented or incomplete, that is part of their story.

Emptying the sugary remains of the coffee, I came to a decision. I would return to La Patria. I would find out what had caused the house to

be burned. Maybe it *was* yesterday's news. But that news had never been told — at least not in public. And I wanted to find out why not.

I got up from the bench and entered the house to get more coffee. For a moment, the darkness inside reduced the world to its sounds — the metallic tapping, the mechanical thumping. Once my eyes adjusted, I moved slowly past the shadows of the room, opened the door at the other end, and stepped into the kitchen and the warm glow of daylight. The morning sun had just risen above the mountains to the east, and its light streamed in through an open window, catching the curls of smoke that rose from the hearth stove at the center of the room. César's mother stood by the fire, her hands at work in the pot she had carried up the street. Now I knew the source of the thumping sound: an electric mill grinding maize into a golden pulp. The thump-thump was echoed here by the clap-clap of her hands slapping the gold into tortillas. The work, like the day and the year, had a rhythm: deliberate, unhurried, unrelenting.

The open window framed the southern face of the highlands, the chain of volcanoes stretching out of sight to the east. The highest, Santa María, climbed abruptly from the piedmont just a few miles away and culminated in a perfect cone. The symmetry of the peak left no doubt about the mountain's origins. At its base was the dark outline of an immense crater where, not so long ago, the earth had blown open. A column of gray smoke emerged from the crater. As it cleared the shoulder of the volcano, it caught the morning sun and turned red.

PART II

ASHES FELL