

RUTH TAYLOR

## Downstream is Another Country

THEY DIED IN 1982 in the Yula San Juan River. Both of them. Drowned the same day, maybe only minutes apart. Or so the story goes. Fernando's body washed up, got caught in the branches of a tree slung low over the water. A local farmwife who came down to the river to draw water and carry it the half-mile back to her home discovered him, knew immediately who he was, though at the time, when questioned, she said she didn't know who or what she had found.

The farmwife, María, saw the long white body hanging from the tree's branches, limp and frail as Jesus. Later, she whispered to her neighbours that he must be a saint and prayed for his mother back in Spain. But to the authorities she said he was surely a devil, green camouflage jersey punctured in a dozen places where the bullets hit, teeth ugly and yellow as a burro's, skin turning grey-blue, eyes misted marbles. Fernando Hoyos—renegade Jesuit and renowned commander of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, cherished visitor at many a peasant hovel in western Guatemala—was dead.

At least, that's the way the women in our part of Huehuetenango tell it as they stand in line down at the nixtamal, waiting to grind their corn. And that's what my mother told me, more than a few times, back in the capital after the war had ended, when my wife and I and the kids would visit on a Saturday morning.

People say, too, that María kept a scrap of Fernando's mud-soaked shirt for good luck, tore it right from his body with her teeth. They say the relic lies between two candles María keeps on the windowsill by her bed, just below a water-stained postcard of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The other body, Chepito's, was never recovered, but everyone agrees that he must have gone down at the same time and place as his friend and mentor, striking out with him across the river when a bunch of paramilitaries surprised them on their way back from a scouting mission. People say Chepito's love was so great he would not leave Fernando even when death was closing in.



I saw Chepito only once, a couple of years before his death. He was sitting on a muddy riverbank, dressed in fatigues and rubber boots, wet from head to toe from crossing the water and surrounded by an equally wet unit of some twenty men and women. He sat there blubbing because he'd got the tortillas wet when he crossed, and now the whole unit would have to go without. His tears moved me. It was a rare thing in those times to see even a child acting like a child. Chepito was ten years old at the time.

My unit had just arrived for an important meeting, to strategize our victory. I was eighteen and very green myself. Most of us were, then. I'd spent the last month in the bush, eating corn gruel topped with a dab of margarine three times a day, and three times a day finding a tree a distance from camp to piss all that water out again. But buoyed by the recent triumph of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, by the overwhelming response from the rural population to the guerrilla call to arms, by our own youthful enthusiasm, by the purity of our aims, we shrugged off for the occasion the boredom, the bickering, the fatigue, the eternal grind that had been our fare ever since we took to the mountains to bring the revolution home.

My compañera Lucía and I were arguing about rations.

"You should have given everyone the same amount, whatever their condition or rank," Lucía said.

"There were thirty-two bananas and thirty compas."

"You could have divided them."

Food was serious business in camp and so was equality. Lucía could give her opinion, of course, but I was in charge of provisions.

I said, "Elena and Maritza are pregnant. I gave them the extra bananas—you know, eating for two." Lucía crossed her arms but did not respond. If I came out of this well, she wouldn't call me up at our nightly round of *criticism and self-criticism*, so I added, quoting some Marxist tenet, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

"And what about the sweets?" she demanded. "Why should smokers get sweets if they're getting cigarettes?"

Lucía had passion—for the struggle, for me, for life. Quibbles like ours seemed ridiculous, but we were trying to live the revolution in everything we did, down to the smallest act. It was a luxury of sorts. I see that now. The black cloud of the army offensive had yet to engulf us and place the naked hunger for survival at the centre of our beings.

At night, pressed together in my hammock, our voices bodiless in the black air, we talked about the past, the future, our families, our friends.

“My father didn’t want me to join up,” I told her. “He offered me a plot of land and a house for me and my girl if I would stay.”

“He didn’t want you to get hurt,” Lucía said.

“He said we’d never win.” I slipped my hands under her shirt, separating the fabric from her moist skin.

“What did your mother say?”

“She gave me fifty dollars for emergencies.”

Lucía found my lips with her fingers and snuggled closer. “She knew she couldn’t stop you.” She kissed me, and I felt the breath of her smile. “My guess is you take after your mother.”

Before we broke camp and the different units set out for their fronts, I gave each of them their rations. Though I never told Lucía, Chepito got a double share of sweets.

I didn’t think about Chepito again until we received notice of his death. It was headline news: the army had bagged a member of the rebel high command, a major victory. And we knew that along with Fernando, they had taken down a child, an Ixil orphan who wouldn’t have been at the guerrilla’s side if the army hadn’t executed his parents and left him nowhere else to turn. Fernando had taught Chepito Spanish and how to read and write, taught him, too, about a world, not yet built, far better than the one he’d known. We’d armed Chepito and given him military training. We never sent him into combat, but we couldn’t guarantee his safety or that of anyone else in Guatemala. The only safe place was outside the country.

I was in a camp near a village in the Cuchumatanes built on a slope so steep the farmers had to strap themselves to the side of the mountain to work the land. They grew potatoes and a little corn. For most of the year, it was all they had to eat. We’d been working with the villagers as we usually did, visiting with their leaders, helping resolve problems they had, and, of course, recruiting them. There were dozens more like this village, and they were all working with us.

Our plan was to liberate the region, and we came very close to it, too. But the army was catching up: our bases in the city were crumbling, hundreds of activists and cadres had disappeared, their tortured and mutilated bodies sometimes reappearing, sometimes not. Others, a few of our own leaders among them, had hightailed it for Nicaragua. The army was mowing the population down; the hatred was deep, visceral, murderous. We were afraid.

One morning, I was cleaning my M-2, an old clunker from the Second World War, when a woman arrived out of breath, tearing at the undergrowth as she tried to pull herself through the bush and into the camp. Her skirt was muddy, her face streaked with sweat and soot. “Please!” Her

voice was dry. The woman was followed by others, children, too, all dressed in the bright red blouses and wrap-around skirts of their Mam village. I saw their faces—distorted masks of pain. The women were crying in Mam: “The men. Save them.”

Adrián, our commander, went to meet them, a translator at his side. But the women were streaming in growing numbers through the camp, like a great red wound, hands clasped, imploring. One of them reached for the AK of a *compa* who’d left it leaning against a tree, and a tussle started. That’s when Adrián gave the order to move out. To retreat.

I confronted the young woman before me. She was trying to grab at my shirt, but as I moved away, she fell against me and wrapped one arm around my leg. I pulled to free myself, gently at first, and then with more force. “Fight!” she said. I knew the army was on its way. I knew we could not defend her or her man. That if we did, every one of us would die. I had my orders: preserve the fighting force. With no fighting force there would be no revolution, ever. As I began to drag her across the ground, I could see my comrades moving, packing up, rushing past the Mam villagers, pulling back the women’s arms like branches blocking a path. Panic was rising in my chest. My gun felt cold and useless in my hand. I wrenched my leg free. The young woman looked up at me, shocked, black eyes wide but piercing, and then she lowered her face into the mud.

We broke camp. Some of the women went with us, some returned to the village. I learned later how the army had called out the men, lined them up and started shooting. When they were done, they’d herded anyone else they found into the chapel and set it on fire.

We regrouped at a spot just the other side of the border with Mexico. All Guatemala was in chaos. Thousands of families had fled to Mexico, thousands to the jungle, thousands more were dead. Our own forces were scattered. I’d been given new orders, a new assignment. I wondered where Lucía was.

My relationship with Lucía had lasted, though we were not always together. When she got pregnant she decided to abort, but we’d also talked about having a child one day, when the future was not so uncertain. From time to time, I’d receive a letter from her through the rebel messenger system.

“My parents have left for Mexico. Our village is gone.”

And I’d write, too: “Maybe you can get reassigned, or I could. We could work together.”

One day a member of the high command arrived in camp to brief us on the latest news and the latest decisions. There was talk of negotiations.

After the meeting Adrián took me aside. “Lucía fell in an ambush. Everyone in the commando was killed.” He unfolded the official letter and passed it to me. Adrián told me that Lucía fought back before they executed her, that she managed to grab the captain’s gun and turn it on him before another soldier reacted and sent three bullets into her brain. “She died fighting,” he said. Then he asked me if I wanted to go with him to deliver the news to her parents. I said I would.

I took the time Adrián offered me and spent a week with Lucía’s parents in a refugee camp near San Cristóbal in Chiapas. While I was there, I helped her mother plant a güisquilar and some squash in the small patch of ground behind their house. As I worked, I thought about Lucía—her bravery, her confidence—and I thought about the story Adrián had told me, what it meant and what I was supposed to do with it.

I knew it was a story like so many others told in wartime. A story like the one about Fernando and Chepito. After all, how would Adrián know exactly how Lucía died and whether or not she fought back? None of her party survived. If an army captain had indeed died there, there’d be a record of it, I suppose. But how would Adrián know she had anything to do with his death? Her story, I decided, was like all the others, the sort that superiors tell recruits to give them courage, to make the sacrifice of young blood seem worthwhile, to keep alive the illusion of a distant victory: Right will out if we all act like our brave and fallen compañeros.

But perhaps what they told me was true and I am the one who is trying to twist her death to my purposes, looking for an explanation in her story of why I am still here.

I am still here, in Guatemala. I have a wife and two children and a house and a job. We survive in a sorely imperfect country that has buried too many dead.

The war recedes gradually; even the deepest wounds begin to close. Memory and pain tie us to a past that, while brutal, we do not wish to forget. There are those who recite their sorrow daily, like a catechism, so that it will not desert them once and for all. Others say little, but listen and ruminate and build a fortress of pain inside themselves, where no one is allowed to go. I think about Chepito, the boy who gave his life for the revolution that never came.

His death disturbs me, seems like a mistake, even in a world with no design greater than the one we force on it. I imagine his body, carried downstream, across the border into Mexico, where nobody would know him or be looking for him or hold among their keepsakes, as Fernando’s sister does, a photograph of the boy in military fatigues grasping a rifle that looks like a pop-gun.

And then, for comfort I suppose, I begin to imagine a different ending for Chepito, that he didn't follow his hero into that river, that the army's guns didn't cut him down. I imagine that he saw Fernando fall and with him, saw his revolution, armed resistance, the struggle, evaporate.



He is gazing at the river, at the exact spot where Fernando disappeared, and I see him turn, drop his tiny pistol and start a slow jog away. Away. He remembers he must hide and fumbles for the compass in his pocket to guide him. Perhaps he takes shelter with María and her family. A boy who comes to them, like Moses, from the river. He sleeps. He wakes. He wakes in a new world that is still at war, but it is no longer his war. He will survive.

Because he is only twelve years old. He knows injustice, feels it keenly, but can he project a future and set about building it, consciously choosing life or death, self-sacrifice or survival, to make it come true? A twelve-year-old couldn't, could he? He couldn't know what a revolution is or why we should want one, except as it is embodied in Fernando, the man he loved and who, surely, in his mad-saint and visionary way, loved him. Wasn't it love, pure and simple, that led Chepito into the river?

Chepito, of course, like the thousands of other children who died in this war, is silent on these and all my other questions.

And in spite of them, or because of them, I keep my alternate ending, and I offer it to my own children—before I pull the cotton blanket up under their chins and tuck it in, before I kiss each forehead and turn out the light. Chepito and his adoptive mother María, happily oblivious to the grinding gears of history, content to tell each other stories of saints who float in rivers, boys who appear from nowhere, talismans that bring good fortune.