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Surfing in La Libertad, and the Sea of Sorrow

One morning early last year, I drove my daughter to Concord to participate in a statehouse legislative internship program, “Girls Rock the Capitol.” (Because she’s a girl, and she rocks!) We parked on Main Street just before 8, and she went into Bagel Works while I went over to the parking payment kiosk. When it printed out my receipt, I saw the date: March 24, the date in 1980 when Oscar Romero was assassinated.

When I got inside and was seated with my coffee, while Fiona nibbled at a cup of fruit, I asked her whether I’d ever told her about Archbishop Romero of El Salvador. She didn’t think so. So I told her: how he had been a conservative priest and then bishop aligned with the Salvadoran oligarchy but how, soon after he was made archbishop in 1977, his world was turned upside down by the death squad murder of a priest friend who was committed to the cause of the poor. He said “When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought, ‘If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I, too, have to walk the same path.’”

I teared up and almost couldn’t finish the story as I told Fiona of his courage, how for three years he redeemed himself by making the church an agent for authentic justice, how he ordered the army over the radio airwaves “in the name of God, stop the repression,” and how he was gunned down while consecrating the chalice during mass on this day in 1980, and 250,000 people attended his funeral.

Fiona was quiet, then asked “Daddy, what made you the way you are? I mean, I know you spent a bunch of time working for human rights in Guatemala, and that’s where you met Mommy but was there any one thing that changed you, like when Romero saw his friend lying dead?” So I told her this story:

One April afternoon in 1989, I was standing on a dusty roadside south of Acapulco with a pack on my back, sweat in my eyes and my thumb out, trying to get a ride to El Salvador where a friend was working at the national headquarters of a labor union federation.

Finally, a vehicle pulled over, a lime green pickup with a cap on the back and surfboards on the roof. Driving it were two guys about my age from southern California, Gabe and Steve. They were traveling down the Pacific Coast, hitting all the surfing hotspots from Baja to Costa Rica.

As we drove south under that big washed out Mexican sky, we talked and talked, and got to know each other pretty well in a short time, the way you sometimes do when you travel. They told me about all about the magic and mystical allure of surfing, and I ranted about the oppressive US role in the world, how our government was spending a million dollars a day in a country the size of Massachusetts to kill nuns and peasants.

Steve was no older than I was, but he adopted the tone of a patronizingly “patient” older brother trying to save me from making the same mistakes he’d made. When I uttered one more pat

phrase about how we're all connected to one another, he shook his head: "When I'm on my board, man, paddling out past the breakers to catch a wave, *that's* when I feel connected. Don't waste your time with politics, Andy. Nothin' ever changes."

We were together for three days... they took me all the way to La Libertad, an expatriate surfing hangout less than an hour from San Salvador. Imagine this: A whole village of shaggy bronzed surfers living in a convincing version of Paradise while every morning tortured bodies were turning up on roadsides throughout the surrounding countryside. But it had the best righthand pointbreak this side of Hawaii.

I went down to Punta Roca and watched Gabe and Steve, alone on their boards, expertly riding the tossing sea, trying to stay above the turmoil. I saw the attraction of it. But I had a bus to catch, into the capital.

The headquarters of FENASTRAS, the National Federation of Salvadoran Workers, was a large concrete block warehouse off on a quiet side street. You entered through a black metal garage door. Just inside, two aproned women were constantly making pupusas for all the workers who came and went all day to eat and talk politics.

The union hall was a hive of activity, because it was almost May Day, when there'd be a big march to challenge the regime. This was the biggest office of any of the movement organizations, so it was filled with activists from student groups, women's organizations, human rights groups and other labor unions, spreading out sheets on the floor in all corners of the hall and painting slogans and acronyms in big red and black block letters. Well, the march was a success: the banners were beautiful, we were a *sea* of people washing past the M16-brandishing government troops who lined the route, and nobody got shot... that day.

When I got back to New Hampshire, I took a job at the Gap Mountain Bakery in Troy, where I could be with Ann, my baker/ juggler/ massage therapist girlfriend. I slept at Ann's two or three nights a week and camped in Mountain View Cemetery (between the Congdons and the Jarvises) the rest of the time. Life was good and the war in El Salvador seemed far away. I was getting my Salvadoran slideshow together and planned to do some speaking about it, but my New Hampshire life was crowding back in and pushing my recent experience in Central America into the background.

One afternoon, Ann and I locked up the bakery and stopped in the grocery store next door before heading to her house. As Ann went to get a gallon of milk, I flipped through the *Globe*, scanning the headlines. One on page six stopped me cold: "Ten Die in Salvadoran Labor Union Bombing." With my heart in my mouth, I looked at the first line of the story. It was FENASTRAS.

The bomb had been timed to go off during lunch hour, when the maximum number of people would be there. It was placed in a burlap bag just outside the door, so when it exploded, the door had been turned to shrapnel. The first to die were the women who made the pupusas. One of my new friends was scalped by a flying shard of metal, but he lived. The men seated on either side of him were decapitated.

As I read the article, Ann returned from the cooler, saw my face, set down the milk, and gathered me into her arms, and I fell headlong into a sea of human sorrow of which I had only been dimly aware before.

When I finished, Fiona really didn't know what to say. But the truth is that she didn't need to, because she already had the last word. She *is* the last word. Because ten years after those events I'd just related to her took place, a week short of the ten year anniversary of the FENASTRAS bombing, when I was just about able to talk about it without choking up, Fiona was born in the living room of the little apartment Andrea and I were renting in Keene, and my heart busted open again. As I held my daughter for the first time, I was awash in the unfathomable love common to most new parents. But mixed in with it was a feeling that suddenly I had more at stake in the world, and a potential for depths of loss and grief I had never before imagined; I felt soaked again in that salty sea of human sorrow, and in the grip of a new kind of solidarity with all those who have felt inconceivable loss.

That's not a feeling you can stay submerged in all the time, but on my best days I get a splash of it. Sometimes all it takes is the date on a parking receipt.