



THE STORY OF PANCHO BUENO

by

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I met Pancho Bueno the same night that I met your father. Well, that's not quite true, I had already met your father a few times before, but this was the night I really met him, when we stayed up all night, back in the dark basement he shared with your Tio Mynor (this was before Beatriz was murdered). Pancho Bueno was in the cafe with your father that night, and I came in with a friend, all fresh and breezy and young, just out of our Spanish class, and there they were, the two of them, drinking beer. They were part of the great sweep of young men who had fled Guatemala in the early eighties, and had ended up here, in Toronto. The world was so weird, and they were so traumatized,

but they were righteous, and they had suffered. We breezed into the cafe, and we sat down near them, and we laughed, as 20 year olds do, but we were serious, not silly. Then your father and I saw and recognized each other (he had come once for dinner with his brother to our house of young anarchist-Catholic-rebels) and we pushed the tables together.

Pancho Bueno didn't say much except, well, "bueno", which was how he got his name. He couldn't quite speak, and the horror was deep in his eyes, you could see them, hollow, bottomless, a never-ending reservoir of suffering. It was something we Canadian girls couldn't even begin to reach. Pancho sat there with your dad, and your dad talked, and his English was terrible, and my Spanish was worse, and Pancho nodded, and didn't look at either of us. Your father looked at me, and looked, and we wandered home together, having ditched Pancho and my girlfriend, I don't remember how. After that night, I wasn't sure about your father, but he was sure about me, and he phoned, and then when I ignored him for a week, he lurked outside the church where I worked, not yet in the churchy part, but in the human rights part, in the peace office.

I was so surprised to see your dad outside the church that day, and my heart sank, as he would not be avoided, and then it soared, as we went walking to somewhere or another, and we talked. It was late summer, and the worst of the Toronto heat was gone, the sticky heat, and the fall of 1984 was upon us. Down in Guatemala the worst of the genocidal horrors, the unspeakable days were coming to an end, and the stunned survivors were mostly collapsed in agony, breathing, just breathing, not even crying yet, too loudly. Unspeakable. Except the Coca Cola workers union -- the heroic STECSA, who lost eight top leaders to demonic death, and more into exile, and their labour lawyers, dead, disappeared, exiled. Gone to the murderers. The STECSA workers had occupied the Coca Cola plant in Guatemala City, after the owners tried to shut the whole thing down to finally crush the union. For an entire year they lived in the plant, and they cooked, and cleaned and studied, and even played soccer, but in shifts.

And the whole world through the International Food Workers Organization, supported them out of Geneva, and there was a global boycott. They were there, and the Mutual Support Group, Nineth, Rosario, Hector and the others, searching for their disappeared loved ones, and not shutting up. But other than these two groups, everyone else was paralysed, and the refugees kept flooding north.

And your father, he was a school teacher, present when the guerrillas kidnapped the then-dictator Rios Montt's sister, and then witness to countless deaths on the cotton farm in Tiquisate where he fled after the kidnapping feat could have been linked to him. After all he was a young teacher, just of the right age to be in the guerrillas. His older brothers, law students, had been linked to the now destroyed university students' organization, and they had gone to the morgue to identify the dead after the Spanish Embassy Massacre, and there they couldn't recognize anyone, so charred were all the bodies, except for their friend Polo, because he had borrowed your Tio Erik's jacket the morning of the massacre, and a tip of it was not burned. They had the names of the dead, and they put papers with these names on every body to identify them all, or the black remains would not have been returned to the families, but gone into unmarked graves, xx's, as unknowns.

When I decided to allow your father to court me, we both fell into a hopeless abyss. Stuck together like the world's most powerful magnet, like a burr on an angora sweater. He was at school, learning English, and I was working in the Peace office, and preparing to go to Nicaragua on a coffee harvesting brigade to help the Sandinistas. But I cancelled that, and I barely kept my job, and he barely stayed in school, and I helped him with his homework. He would run from George Brown college over to the Bathurst Street Church, to my office after school, and he would sit with me, and lick stamps, and kiss me, and make me laugh. And at last the work done, I would lock up for the day, and we would walk to the street car, to my place, or the bus to his. On Saturdays we would go to Kensington market, and he taught me how to cook black beans and make home-made tortillas with *masa* that he squashed

into circles under a plate, because of course he couldn't *tortear*.

I couldn't speak Spanish yet, but I understood a bit, and I remember that he used to stop on the street sometimes and use a dime to call his best friend Pancho. He'd be saying, okay, okay, *te llamo* (I'll call you later.) I was hearing, okay, okay, *te amo* (okay, okay I love you) and I was furiously jealous! I didn't know if I liked Pancho. He was so strange.

Your father explained, lowering his voice, as if the murderers could somehow still hear us: this is what happened. Pancho *was* in the guerrillas, in the urban command. They were fighting, and organizing and it was really, really dangerous. A lot of people all over the country were being killed just for looking the wrong way, but he really was a subversive. And they knew it. They knew everything. And so he went into hiding. He still stayed in the city for a while, but not at home. Then they came by the house. He wasn't there so they beat up his mother and father, and took away his brother. His brother was killed in his place.

I looked at Pancho Bueno differently after that. He was only a few years older than me, how had he been able to make those decisions, do those things, live so much in the same amount of years? His dark black eyes, his black hair, his head usually down. He always seemed to be making an effort, and I never once saw him cry, or complain.

The war was still fresh, still hot. Not done. But somehow, in the midst of it, your father and I nearly died of love for one another. We decided to get married, to go back to Vancouver, and right away get married at grandma and grandpa's house. So we did, and our life unfolded together. We came back to Toronto by train, and we both had to look for work, and we found it, and a little third floor apartment, two rooms really, and already I was a month pregnant. We still made black beans and tortillas, and I made pancakes and maple syrup tarts, and I cried once when I tried to make falafels from scratch, and they disintegrated into the hot oil, no matter what I did.

Every minute of every day that we could we spent together, and working for Guatemala. We formed part of the revolutionary folk music group Ixim W'anima, and we helped start the Toronto Guatemala Solidarity Group. Pancho came to everything, to all the concerts, though he wouldn't play anything, and all the meetings, and he hardly ever spoke, but when he did, he always started and ended, and spliced it all through with many *buenos*. We were often together, we three, and I grew to love Pancho, mostly because he tried so hard, and it was hopeless. I don't think I ever saw him happy, and like all those so far away, he ached in dreadful longing for those he loved, and suffered terribly with the knowledge of immense horror, eternally unfolding in unspeakable proportions. And his guilt over his brother's death was an ever-choking presence.

The spring of 1985 was a terrible one in Guatemala. That year the military government of Mejia Victores decided to crush the Mutual Support Group, and they killed Hector, and they killed Rosario, and her brother, and her two year old boy. They ripped the fingernails out of the little boy. We were working furiously, and desperately, and sometimes your father would cry, and mostly he would long to go to the jungle, back to the war, to fight. But I was getting fatter every day, and really, I don't think he could leave me for more than a few hours at a time. He kept getting jobs and then quitting in fury when he felt he was being badly treated. I worked in a church (again) helping refugees find housing, and every day I would take the long subway ride to the end of the line, and then a bus out to Scarborough. One glorious day it snowed so much we stayed in bed forever and ate toast, and on my birthday in April, your father ran to get me breakfast and piled a bunch of presents on top, from my family in Vancouver, and from him. He was so excited. I think that was when he worked in a shoe factory and he came home every night stinking like glue and covered with baby pink and blue fluff from the slippers he was making.

Pancho worked too, I can't remember where.

The summer of 85 was hot and horrible, especially on the subway ride out to Scarborough, and at last I quit, and then in beautiful sunny September, you were born Abel, and we telegraphed Guatemala, and Papa Abel, who worked in the railway office, got the notice first.

The fall of 85 is a blur of new motherhood, diapers and swollen breasts, and colicky baby, and lying on the grass in chilly autumn parks, and falling in love again, three times around. I remember Pancho Bueno trying to hold you Abel, but he didn't bend properly at the elbow, and I think he was afraid of holding something so precious and fragile, and he quickly handed you back. I don't think he thought he could be trusted with life.

I don't want to write about December 10th – 14th here. Sometime I will properly. Those are the dates between when Beatriz was kidnapped, and when her body was identified in the morgue. All I can say now is that that was the end of my youth. The phone rang, your father cried, we lived in numb blur for three days, until we knew, it was true, she was dead. We put the Christmas toys for her boys away, and we had a service where Tio Mynor talked a lot, too loud, too fierce, when we all just wanted to wail and tear things apart.

Christmas of 85 was strange. Your father and I went to Dallas to be with Tio Joel, but with all that had happened we could hardly breathe. We drove around, and walked up and down Jackson St. where the latinos lived, and we ate tacos, and went to second hand stores, and strangely I think the Dallas museum had an exhibition of Classic Maya treasures, so we went, as if everything had not changed entirely, and looked at carved chunks of jade.

Back home in January, the achy dreaminess continued, but strangely, this was also one of the happiest months of my life. Abel, you and I slept and played and nursed and just loved each other, and your father came home (from yet another job working now at the Arte Shoppe, dusting extremely expensive furniture). But a problem was emerging – the family still in Guatemala was not safe, and

someone needed to go and facilitate their flight. None of the sons already out could return -- so I went, in February and part of March of 1986 and it was my first strange trip to Guatemala, with a code to talk to your father, and a bunch of ill-followed rules about how to behave in the war zones. My life continued to turn inside out, and my love affair with your father spread to his parents, his village and the whole damned country. But soon the real trouble would become clear. Mama Cony refused to leave the country without Mynitor, Tio Mynor and Beatriz' son. Trouble was he had been taken by his great uncle, a Colonel, and he lived in the bloody Quiche. We went to the embassy, we did what we could do, and the embassy staff were anxious and terrified to help (they changed the immigration rules for Guatemalan refugees after Beatriz . . . she had been waiting for the visa approval when she was kidnapped for the second time, and this time murdered.) The embassy staff told me to leave the country immediately, and they were willing even to fund the whole family's flight. But I couldn't go, not yet I said -- Mama Cony refused to leave. She just wouldn't. I was so helpless and so frustrated and in tears. So finally I had to give up and come home, but I brought along Tio Vin and Tia Chata, and Gretel, 4, Cinthia, 3, Silvia, 2, Edwincito, 1, and Dorita, 5 months.

Back home your dad had changed jobs again. He had written me a long, long letter, while lying under the bed that he was supposed to be dusting at the furniture store, and then he had a fight with his manager, over-salting the icy side walk, something or another. But your father was ever resourceful, and when he quit a job on Friday, he had another one by Monday. I remember him picking us up at the airport in a cube van, his new work was as a kitchen cabinet installer's helper, and he had borrowed the van, and was really happy. Except there was no child car seat, so we had to pull a Guatemala and drive through the icy March streets, me clinging to the baby. Things were looking up, though, as your dad had a good job, just as my maternity benefits were running out. There was no way on earth I was going to ever leave any of you boys ever with anyone else to raise. We were having too much fun. Then one

day your dad came home with a car! Oh God. A red, cheap, Hyundai Pony. He was so proud. It was every poor Guatemalan boy's dream to have a new car, and there he was.

By this time we had moved, and were living in a little house in little Italy with Tio Erik and his wife and their two sons, little boys. This is where you were born Abram, later on. We had planted a vegetable garden out back, and I was so happy with you Abel, as you grew bigger and your hair grew out into soft brown curls. And you smiled, and babbled, and I wanted to eat you alive, I loved you so much. But down in Guatemala things still churned, and we were working, all of her lovers, somehow to staunch the bleeding, and at least to have her not die unknown to the world. We travelled with Ixim W'anima, that's when you travelled with us and famously slept in the guitar case, Abel. We cooked black beans for crowds in church halls, and we talked, chanted, yelled and sang to anyone who would listen. Pancho was always there, always silent, except when spoken to, and the the responses was, bueno.

Mama Cony's sons in Canada and Texas were getting desperate, however. Communication north-south was extremely limited and possibly monitored. Your father, the youngest of the five brothers, couldn't stand it any more, and one day, in early July, hot July, we were on the front porch, I heard him talking with Pancho. They were deciding something, and Pancho was nodding his head. Your father turned to me, and said, "We're going to Guatemala." "What?" He looked and flicked his eyes at the red car. That's what they were talking about. "Not without us." I said.

So 24 hours later your father and Pancho had quit their jobs, I packed summer baby clothes and diapers, and we were on the road, roaring south, barely stopping, through a night-encased Chicago, endless corn fields of Kansas, dry, hot Texas, where we pulled in at last at Tio Joel's house, to breathe, to sleep. Pancho couldn't drive, he was too nervous, but he sat in the front, because I had to stay in the back with the baby. He was also hopeless with a map, and couldn't tell north from south. But he kept

your father company, though as always he barely talked. South from Texas lay all of Mexico, and we drove on, through Tamaulipas, where we stopped at night at a roadside feria, and ate corn on sticks, and Pancho consented to holding the baby, while we two young lovers slipped into a rickety ferris wheel, and for ten more minutes at least were purely in love, and we kissed and kissed the whole time, lights spangling around us, away from the world of murders and men. I think those ten minutes were made for me to remember divine bliss, and to hold that myself through the times of great trial that were to come.

On again, on again, in Veracruz we sat on a dirty beach for half an hour, and ate *ceviche* out of plastic cups, and later I realized my most terrible mistake. It has been a high-cloudy day, and you had sat in your diapers but no shirt, no sunscreen. Abel, you were sun-burned bright red, and how you howled. Somewhere in Oaxaca, on the isthmus, we were forced to stop that night and take a cheap hotel room, which was full, just full I remember of flying and crawling bugs, huge and small, on both sides of the screened windows, on the lights, walls and door. But there I soothed you at last into a feverish, hot sleep. The next morning we pushed on through Chiapas to Tapachula, on the border.

The problem was that the boys couldn't go into Guatemala. It was still far too dangerous, The army was still stopping people all along the highway, and heaven forbid you should be a young man. And there were ever present *orejas*, snitches listening in and telling stories. There was just no way. So word was to be sent, clandestinely, to Rio Bravo to our family, and to Pancho's family in Guatemala city. They were to come to the central park in Tapachula and meet us there. We would stay there until they came. So we took rooms in the Hotel Fenix and the wait began.

The Hotel Fenix served as our home base for the next two weeks. It was a modest place, high above sleazy, but not yet elegant. They had cultivated beautiful greenery, *cola de quetzal* ferns, orchids, jasmine with tiny bursts of white flowers, that released their pure rich aroma into the evening

air, rushing, exploding bougainvillea in hot pink, purple and orange. In the courtyard there was a birdcage, a large one housing a plain brown bird, not much to look at, a *zentzontle*, but my could she sing. She might have been what we call a mockingbird, but I'm not sure. I'll never forget her dipping, sweet singing at sunrise, at sunset, even though she could no longer fly, I guess I hoped somehow she was still happy to be a bird.

In the rooms there were two huge beds, but we didn't share rooms with Pancho, even though it meant spending a lot more money. And the first morning we went out hopefully to the park. We didn't expect the families to be there yet, but we wanted to make sure. It was hot in Tapachula, but there were big trees in the park, and a lot of children and families and lovers and old men getting their shoes shone, balloon vendors and bubble vendors, and food of every kind. We bought you little leather shoes at the Canada shoe store, and you were weeks away from being able to walk, Abel. The first day was fun, the second a little worrisome, but the third day we called Toronto to see if the family there had heard word of anything and we were told, yes, they were coming up from Rio Bravo that very day . . . go to the border and wait there, your uncles told us. So leaving Pancho we drove the half an hour, through the hot forests, the silent empty cacao groves, to the border, and we waited, looking out along the long, long bridge that marked the difference between Mexico and hell. The other side didn't look any different, but in those jungles the war, or rather the horrors of the after-war still had everyone on edge. I think your father cried, just looking across at Guatemala, and I know he cried when he saw your Mama Cony and Papa Abel coming on a bicycle-taxi. They came back with us of course, to the Hotel Fenix, and we installed them in the other double bed in our room, and we all went out to eat in the restaurant in the plaza, garlic shrimp and steaks with avocado, and we talked there, and in the park, and in the room. They all talked mostly, and I listened, and your father despaired too in trying to convince them to leave Guatemala for good. Not without Mynitor, which seemed fair enough, but impossible.

The days lounged into each other, and we went for drives, and walks, and we sat in the park in the plaza, and it was wonderful to have grandparents, and you got terribly sick Abel, until a Mexican *curandera* came and healed you of *el ojo*, with an egg, and rue. Every morning we would go out to the plaza for coffee, eggs and beans and tortillas, and Pancho would go out to for his lonely vigil. It was unbearable to watch him. He would sit in the park under the trees, reading, waiting. When the afternoon rains swept down, he'd retreat to a cafe, and drink coffee with sugar until it passed, and then take one last look around the park. Sometimes your father would sit with him. At dusk the trees around the park would fill with nasty black birds, *zanates*, that seemed to be mocking, squawking, fighting. Day after day it got worse, until it was clear: Pancho's parents weren't coming. There was no way to figure out why. Mama Cony, a capable fixer, promised to go to Guatemala City and look in on them. So finally the time came when we had to go back to Canada. We were running out of money, and we couldn't stay forever in the Hotel Fenix, in the humid August heat. So we drove the *viejitos* back to the border, and next morning we began the miserable drive north again. Pancho stopped talking altogether.

Before we went up through Mexico we turned off up and deep into the the black jungle, through the Chiapas mountains to San Cristobal de las Casas, and then down past Comitán to the refugee camps that were scattered throughout the jungle, where your father engaged with religious and refugee leaders. We went right down to visit some of the most distant camps, where some of the 200, 000 Guatemalan refugees who had fled the genocide to relative security in Mexico were struggling to survive. That is where my heart choked with indignation at the human cruelty that had created this situation, and admiration for the women making life work somehow, and that's where I began to cook up the idea of a book about Guatemalan women. And then we rushed north, through Mexico, Villa Hermosa, Veracruz, Tampico, up to Matamoros right on the border. In Matamoros I broke down, I couldn't any more with

the baby in the car driving day and night, so we stopped in a little cheap hotel, it was a horrendous place, where the *mojados* stopped one last time before striking north. It was so smelly, the bed and walls crusted with dirt, and other unspeakable substances, I couldn't sleep anyway, but at least the baby did, and as soon as it was light we drove into the States, Pancho and your father with their Canadian residence papers, no problem. We filled the car with gas, and adding up all of our combined change, we had \$5 US dollars. We bought two jars of baby food for a dollar a piece, and drove north towards Dallas, and the sanctuary of Tio Joel's place. All day on the road, and we were so hot and hungry, and tired and heart-broken, young and already so world-weary. In a shady rest area we stopped to stretch, and drink water from the fountain, and lie down under the leafy trees for a while. While we were there a pick-up truck and trailer pulled up, just full to overflowing with enormous mutant watermelons. I don't know what your father said to the farmer, but he came over to us on the grass grinning with his prize. We had no money left at all, but we did have a giant melon! We had no knife or scooping spoons, so we broke that melon on the rocks, and bit right into the sweet, soft dripping fruit. We ate the whole thing laughing, and fortified we made it the rest of the way to Tio Joel's where we collapsed and then ate black beans and eggs, and drank milk, and coffee and recovered enough for the last days' ride back up the same way, Texas, Kansas, Illinois, Ontario, home in time for your first birthday, Abel, when your Tia Chata made you a fabulous banana-toting monkey piñata, and wonderful stuffed cabbage rolls, battered and fried, and we harvested cucumbers in our Italian garden, and went out to Guelph to pick apples. We carried on in the life of heart-broken exiles. Pancho and your father got new jobs.

A while later El Pancho Bueno somehow managed to find a girlfriend who somehow managed to tolerate his almost total silence. They even had a little girl. Your dad and I saw less of him then, and then we had another baby, and then another. Then we moved to Mexico and then to Guatemala, and

then we left your father and Guatemala, and I brought you boys back to Vancouver. I never talked to Pancho Bueno ever again. But I'll never forget him, sitting under the trees in the park in Tapachula, waiting, waiting, never once displaying despair. Or his fingers and black moustache dripping with watermelon.

Later I heard that his girlfriend had died of cancer. Then Pancho died too. It was never clear to me how he died exactly. It had been decided, somehow, that he was suffering from schizophrenia. But I know it was the black beasts and demons of Guatemala that found him in the end. He was in the hospital time and again. Then one day after just having left the hospital, he fell, right there on the side walk and smashed his head. And from that Pancho Bueno died. I wish, I really wish, I had tried harder now to pay him some special attention, to tell him I was fond of him. Maybe he knew that it didn't matter that he never once spoke to me a full sentence.