August 19, 2007

LIVES

Escape From El Salvador

By DALE MAHARIDGE

I spent the 1980s in the West with job-seeking hobos, in the Deep South with former sharecroppers, in the Steel Belt with downsized workers. If I showed up at your door in those days, your life had been marked by epic tragedy. It’s no exaggeration to say that in writing for newspapers and books I closely witnessed 1,000 shattered lives, which is to say I retain 1,000 demons from that decade.

The year 1984 was especially intense; that was when a photographer named Michael Williamson and I flew to the civil war in El Salvador. We traveled on foot, by canoe, bus, car, with members of the interdenominational underground railroad that contravened U.S. law by smuggling people who were targets of right-wing death squads. One woman we met in El Salvador, who spurned their help, was caught at a roadblock in Mexico. She was never heard from again. Many women captured in Mexico whom I interviewed reported being raped; many men said they were beaten.

We went along on a few smuggling runs. The last was that of a high-risk family. The father had been imprisoned and tortured because, as a medical student, he treated people in refugee camps. His wife bribed a judge to gain his release. We were dropped off in a northern Mexican town and left with “George,” who was slated to make the run. But soon George fell ill and begged off.

The family was stranded. A new roadblock north of town was manned by mean-looking migra agents. We called our boss at The Sacramento Bee for advice. “Figure it out,” he said before hanging up. I looked at the mother holding her infant child, Beatrice. Should we cross the line? Journalistic ethics forbids it. But this wasn’t a hypothetical question. It was stark reality, life or death. Their eyes gave no choice: we became the smugglers.

I charted a route around the checkpoint on dirt roads. We put the family in a rickety panel wagon left by the underground railroad. The map lied — there were no roads. But there was no turning back. I drove up dry streambeds. When the Sierra Madre loomed close, I went left, north, drove by the sun and instinct for trackless miles dodging cactus and strange flora. We made it to a safe house in Nogales, Mexico, 12 tense hours later. Michael went on foot across the border with the family the next day. I took the panel wagon, which finally broke down on the U.S. side.

For years, I had nightmares about that project, others. Many people I met were dead, like the old hobo who taught me how to ride the rails — murdered in his camp. But the fate of most remained a mystery. I had to move on. Over time, the demons came less often to rattle their chains.

Then late one night a few months ago I logged onto e-mail in my Manhattan apartment. A message headlined “ESCAPE FROM EL SALVADOR” in part said:
“You may not remember me, but I have a slight hunch that you will. In 1984 you . . . helped me and my family escape El Salvador, via underground. You may remember me as Beatrice . . . . I would love to hear your side of our journey. I’ve heard my parents’ for years. And if this e-mail is all I have and never get a response . . . please note I will always have a special part for you in my heart.”

So more recently, I was in California, where I live half the year, waiting in a Sacramento coffeehouse to meet Lil Beatriz Calderon-Huezo, 26, nearly a quarter of a century after I last saw her. I was unsettled.

Lil appeared and was instantly disarming, a happy young woman. We melted away an hour learning of our lives. Her family had settled in Michigan, where Lil grew up and became a U.S. citizen. Her mother works for the federal government, and her father is in El Salvador, caring for his elderly mother. Lil had just moved to Sacramento and was headed for college. The next hour was therapy. Lil grew up with anxiety attacks. “I was scared of the dark,” she said of the legacy of her youth. “I still have the TV on when I sleep. I need the noise.”

I admitted that if she had e-mailed a few years earlier, I might not have responded. Actually, I didn’t know until that afternoon that I needed to meet Lil, to see the good end of something from my 1980s. And she needed to fathom how she became an American and to understand why she felt like an outsider.

I noted that so much could have gone wrong — the panel wagon breaking down out in the hot desert, fatal miles from anywhere; being caught. We laughed, the kind of laugh you seldom hear — a from-the-soul laugh that drew odd looks from coffeehouse patrons. I quoted the late folk singer Phil Ochs: “So good to be alive when the eulogy is read.” We high-fived.

_Dale Maharidge, the author of several books, won the 1990 Pulitzer Prize with Michael Williamson for their book “And Their Children After Them.” He teaches journalism at Columbia University._

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company