

FROM CONTRA *to Christ*

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to the Waslala Christian Brotherhood, where all kinds of sinners saved by grace meet at one common mercy seat. Hoodlums, robbers, criminals, alcoholics, good people and bad, rich and poor, religious and non-religious. Nicas, Ticos, Salvadorans, and gringos. Men, women, and children, young and old. We all found love and forgiveness at the foot of the old, rugged cross. In Jesus we found real peace and love. And we often wash each other's feet.

Thank you, brethren!

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Introduction

“Bu-bu-bu-bu-bang! Bu-bu-bu-bu-bang! Bu-bu-bu-bu-bang!”

Every time Tomás did his little “Bu-bu-bu-bu-bang!” he picked up a chunk of firewood and threw it onto the trailer. Just like a five-year-old playing with toys, Tomás was having fun. Every time he threw another piece of firewood onto the growing pile, he looked to see if my son Jacinto and I were laughing.

Though we definitely felt like laughing, our hearts were sad. Why would a healthy adult with a sound mind act like a five-year-old? There was only one reason: Tomás was drunk.

We had known Tomás García ever since we moved to Waslala in 1995. He and Porfirio Lopez had cut most of the lumber for our houses and church houses. Waslala didn’t have a sawmill, so all the lumber was sawn with chain saws. Porfirio was undisputedly the best chain saw operator in town, and he had taught Tomás the trade.

But Porfirio not only taught Tomás to saw wood, he also taught him to drink. When Tomás was sober, he was a great fellow to be around—a good friend and a good worker. But when he was drunk, he acted like a five-year-old.

After the wind blew over a huge guallabo tree in my river bottom in 2001, I asked Tomás to come cut it up for me. I gave him the scrap lumber for firewood and promised to haul it for him with the mission’s

big Deutz-Allis tractor. The day he cut my lumber, he was sober and his good efficient self. But the next day, when we had planned to haul the scraps, he was drunk, having bought alcohol with the money he had made sawing up my tree.

Over the years I learned to know Tomás better. When we needed lumber cut or a small engine fixed, Tomás was the man for the job. When he was sober, he was very good. But when he was drunk, he was useless. Many times I looked him up and found him drunk. I always went home, job unmentioned, hoping he would be sober the next time around.

In spite of the fact that Tomás was a drunkard, we loved him and prayed for him. And over the years he told us his story. He had grown up a carefree boy from La Lana. Then he entered the war and fought as a Contra guerrilla with thousands of other Nicaraguan men and boys. After the war he dedicated his time to two things—cutting lumber and drinking. The two had to take turns, because he sure couldn't do both at the same time.

But then one day he got tired of his life of sin. Buying his last bottle of whiskey, he vowed, "I am going to drink this bottle, because this is going to be my last one ever!"

And it was!

Tomás found the Lord.

This book tells his story.



Carefree Boy of La Lana

The simple wooden two-story house was perched on the slope right above a creek that splashed its merry way down through the meadow before being swallowed up by the jungle beyond. The muddy trail crossed the creek at the head of the meadow and then climbed the slope, plunging through a deep jag in the bank right under a large chilamate tree. The house stood in the middle of the meadow, proudly sticking its tin roof up into the sky, right between the trail and the gurgling creek.

It was December 1976. Tomás, a carefree eight-year-old, stood daydreaming under the chilamate tree, a slingshot in his right hand and a long stick in the other. The sun was still in hiding, and the morning air was cold. Tomás needed to hurry and bring in the cows. His father, Don Luis García, and his older brothers, Carlos and David, were already sipping tin cups of piping hot coffee in the kitchen and would soon come out to the corral to milk the fifteen cows that Miguel Pastrán, Don Luis's son-in-law, owned.

Hitching up his tattered pants, Tomás stopped daydreaming and ran down the trail, his bare feet slipping and sliding in the mud. He crossed the creek and followed the trail through a thick stand of coffee. He stuck his slingshot into his hip pocket and ran until he burst into the open field beyond the coffee patch.

The sun was finally peeping over the tree-covered mountains surrounding the homestead, its bright rays setting the abundant dewdrops on fire. Tomás smiled, enjoying the gleaming jewels that clung to everything in the field and to the green moss that grew on the tree branches.

Moss. Tomás plunged his hand into a soft cluster of the enchanting miniature forest. The moss was cold to his touch, and the dew drenched his hand. He smiled again and whispered to himself, “*Lana*.”¹

That’s why they called this place La Lana, he thought. *There is so much moss all over the place, it’s no small wonder.*

Miguel’s cows had still not gotten up. They lay contentedly in the dew-drenched grass, chewing their cud. But as Tomás ran in among them shouting, they lurched to their feet and ambled toward the gate and then on through the dark coffee patch where the moss-covered trees kept the sun’s rays at bay. The big red Brahman bull was the last to get up. His huge hump rocked from side to side as he slowly reared up his two thousand pounds and stretched his thick, bulky muscles.

“Take that!” Tomás shouted, giving the tame bull a great whack on his rump. The bull didn’t flinch. He shook his massive, horn-studded head, his long ears slapping against his neck’s thick hide. Then the bull started toward the gate at his own pace, Tomás trailing behind.

Tomás was shivering. The December morning was chilly, probably about fifty degrees. Suddenly a bright idea struck him, and he ran back to where the bull had been lying. The grass was flattened, and nearby a fresh pile of manure steamed in the cool morning air. Tomás flopped into the middle of the bull’s warm nest and curled himself up.

“Just a couple of minutes,” he muttered, his body soaking up the warmth the bull had left behind.

The pleasant feeling of the damp grass, the cozy warmth from the bull’s body, and the tangy smell of fresh dung would have promptly put Tomás to sleep if he had allowed it. But knowing his father would be angry if he dawdled, he jumped up and ran after the cattle, carrying the memory of warmth with him.

1 Moss

The corral was perched a little higher up the hill from the house, just beyond the chilamate tree. The cows plodded through the corral gate in knee-deep mud. Tomás's father and brothers were ready, each with a bucket in one hand, two pieces of rope strung over his shoulders, and a milk stool tied to his waist.

A dozen calves were penned in the corner of the corral. Tomás quickly opened the gate and let three calves out. Hungry for their breakfast, the calves ran, bawling and looking for their mothers. As each found its mother, it promptly fell to. Don Luis and the boys, each following a calf, were soon tying the mama's hind legs together with one of the ropes. Once the cow let her milk down, they tied the calf to its mama's front leg with the other rope and then milked the few liters each cow gave. Tomás ran to the kitchen for his cup of hot coffee.

As soon as he finished his coffee, he ran back out to the corral, just in time to turn out another batch of calves. As the milk buckets filled, Tomás grabbed them and ran to the milk can standing just outside the corral gate. Tomás dumped the milk into the can and galloped back.

For the next hour Tomás kept busy, working the calves and hauling the milk. It kept him on his toes to keep up. That's what Tomás's dad expected. He was a man of few words, but when he talked, he expected people to listen. Especially if he gave orders. Everyone knew to obey Don Luis García. And promptly too.

After the milking, Tomás took the cows out to pasture again. By the time he got back to the farm kitchen, breakfast was ready.

The Pastrán kitchen was always a lively place. Tomás's sister Lily, Miguel Pastrán's wife, was the rightful owner. But everybody knew that in the kitchen, María, Tomás and Lily's mother, ran the show. She was as outgoing as Don Luis was quiet. She talked and laughed and joked enough to keep the place lively. But she also got angry quickly, and Tomás dreaded the lashings he often got from her *tajona*² or her tongue. One was about as bad as the other.

2 Quirt, or riding whip