

EL SALVADOR—THE SAVIOR

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I remember the thick bulletproof windows—one-inch chunks of Plexiglas tightly affixed to each passenger window. The heat was stifling, the type of heat that only allows short suffocating breaths to escape, barely returning with any satisfaction. I was eight years old, riding in a 1977 four-door Ford Maverick. My father was driving and next to him sat his blue-eyed driver, his Uzi machine gun strapped against his chest. My mom, Rafi, and I sat in back. Being the only child passenger, I sat in the middle, my thighs damp with sweat, making my undersides slide atop the pleather interior.

It was El Salvador, it was 1984, it was summer, it was hot, and our mission was clear—we were on a quest to find the craftsman and vendor of ornate wicker furniture. My father had been stationed for one year as a military advisor to the Salvadoran Army during their civil war. We saw him once a month during his weekend visits to our house in Ft. Clayton, Panama.

I had just gotten over the chicken pox, having transmitted them to my older brother, who remained at my father's house watching taped recordings of Magnum P.I. and the A-Team. We had been traveling for over an hour from the capital city of San Salvador to a town on the outskirts of Sonsonate—close to the Guatemalan border. The car's air conditioner was notoriously unreliable—blasting cool air one moment, only to abruptly transition to the pummeling outdoor heat. The Plexiglas forbade us from lowering the windows—the car was a vintage furnace on American-made wheels in a country we were helping to implode. My dad's best friend, Rafi, ever the

jovial and extreme optimist, kept telling me to think of icebergs and piraguas covered in Eagle's condensed milk.

I remember the heat, the short breaths that couldn't quite satiate relief. I remember this white wicker rocking chair, the last of the set that we bought so many years ago in El Salvador. This wicker rocker, with its battered paint and remaining brittle wisps of cane backing, like dried strips of crisp straw. And as I sit on my Alabama porch contemplating whether I should repaint it once more or finally toss it to the curb, my heart aches for just a moment. My thoughts wander to that summer in 1984 ... the heat, the thick Plexiglas, and the wicker furniture. The summer where I almost gained a sister. I remember playing with a beautiful toddler with sun-kissed wavy hair, an anomaly amongst the adults with mostly indigenous features. I don't remember how long it was before my mother and I went looking for her and her mother days later. I remember walking on a red mud hillside to an abode sustained by rusted corrugated metal sheets—the indoor ground was earth, the beds cocooned hammocks. Neither the girl nor the mother could be found, illusions of a sister evaporating like moist humid heat.

I remember the thought of this toddler sister slipping away, being quickly replaced by a three x three photograph of a newborn infant girl. She epitomized native indigeneity, with onyx hair that was fuzzy and spiked. She had hair in her ears though, this is what Pápi said...case firmly closed on gaining a sister. I never knew how the toddler or infant in the photo materialized—only that my parents were going to adopt una nena, though this never came to fruition. And that hair in one's ears was a deterrent to a loving family.

Sometimes I wonder if a latent fire deep within me was ignited that summer. The same flame that didn't deter me the first time I looked at my own

Ethiopian daughter's fiercely determined and knowing gaze staring back at me in a snapshot sent by my adoption agency. It was those deep brown eyes, ojos that defied her sixteen months on earth, ojos that seemingly dared me to adopt her that solidified my embodiment of single motherhood by choice. No matter had she had hair in her ears, the universe was pulling me toward her, toward the burning embers of motherhood that were dimly ignited the summer of 1984 and that could no longer be smothered.

