

# No One Comes From Joyabaj

By Elisabeth A. Miller

She climbed down from the old, beat up, light blue Toyota pickup, all covered with a fine white dust, dressed in black jeans and her new handmade black cowboy boots from Pastores, all covered with a fine white dust. The three young men unloaded the luggage from the back of the truck, all covered with a fine white dust, and drove off, leaving her and the luggage at the bottom of the steps going up to the lobby doors of the Camino Real Hotel, the only 5 star luxury business class hotel in Guatemala City's small and exclusive tourist zone at that time.

The doorman, who had watched all of this, did not approach. Picking up the first suitcase, she started up the stairs. "*En que puedo servirle senora?*" asked the doorman. How can I help you ma'am? She told him that she had a room reserved for the night. He asked her for her name, Betsy Miller, which was enough for him to know that she was not a Guatemalan, but where was she from? "*De donde viene?*" Without thinking, she replied, "*De Joyabaj.*" "*De Joyabaj? Nadie viene de Joyabaj.*" No one comes from Joyabaj.

The doorman turned and left her there on the steps and went in to check on her reservation. He came out with a bellhop who looked at her, looked at the dust covered luggage, looked at the doorman, and then, reluctantly, picked up the suitcases. At the front desk, she checked in and told the clerk that her boyfriend would be coming in later for his key. "*Su nombre?*" She told the clerk his name, Hombre Ortega, the name of the man who came from Joyabaj but who now resided in what he jokingly called Joyabaj Norte, North Joyabaj, Providence, Rhode Island.

It was New Year, 1996. The civil war in Guatemala had not yet ended. There was a cease fire in place while negotiations were going on, but there were still military check points on the roads, no one went out much at night, and no one went out alone. The conflict went on for 36 years before a political resolution finally brought it to an end in December 1996.

The man who came from Joyabaj had left six years earlier. From his home high in the mountains of El Quiche, a trip of six hours by pickup truck to Guatemala City by any road, he had made his way to Providence by what had already become a well-travelled route. He joined friends and cousins who had settled there. When he arrived, at the age of 22, he found that he could not survive without driving, so he had gotten into a

car and put it into gear for the first time in his life. Now he was proudly driving his own truck back in his own country.

Joyabaj had been completely flattened by the earthquake of 1976. The quake left about 600 people dead in that one town alone. Joyabaj was also the epicenter of some of the worst violence of the civil war, being particularly infamous for the killing in 1980 of the local priest and workers with an aid agency that had arrived in town after the earthquake. After that, all church and aid agency staffs, including the Peace Corps, left town. By 1990, most of the young men of the town had also left. Young men, from teenagers into their 20s, would continue to leave over the following years as each new generation came of age.

In Joyabaj, the extended Ortega family that had stayed behind lived in a row of cement block houses down the length of one dirt street a few blocks from the center of town. One night, when dogs started barking in the distance, and then the family dog took up the barking, a shot was fired into the air in the open patio to scare off whoever had dared go out. A few hours later, the roosters started to crow and people were getting up with the sun to start the work of the day. Chickens pecking in the dirt of the patio would soon be killed to make the soup.

The exodus to Providence had started about 1980, when one man from Joyabaj found the small New England city which offered plentiful unskilled jobs and cheap apartments in rundown tenement houses. Italian and Portuguese immigrants hired and housed the newest arrivals, and Dominicans and Puerto Ricans provided a Spanish speaking neighborhood on the battered south side of town. Although communication with Joyabaj was limited and expensive, word got around, and a community grew in Providence as brother pulled along brother, pulled along cousin, pulled along friend. It would be many years before they pulled along the women too.

Waking up at dawn in Joyabaj, the mountain air at 4500 feet was cold and moist. It was common to sleep in your clothes. The water supply, like the electricity, was not reliable, and hot water was whatever you were able to heat up over the fire in the outside kitchen. People changed clothes only when they bathed, and then everyone whistled and said how nice you looked all cleaned up. The water in the house was held in a *pila* in the patio, one side containing the clean water as it flowed in and the other side being used to wash. The toilet was in a closet off the patio and required buckets of water to be dumped in to make it flush.

Joyabaj was a small, poor, dirty, isolated and bedraggled place, with only a couple of paved streets stretched out along a mountain ridge. Unpaved streets crossed the main road on either side of the plaza, and the population was clustered near the square,

thinning out from block to block as you moved away from the center of town. In the plaza, the only thing that had survived the earthquake was the broken façade of the church, propped up in front of a plain cement block building. There were few businesses or services. Rhode Island inspection stickers were on many of the pickup trucks on the streets, but there were not very many trucks.

Many of the houses in town were only half-built, left unfinished as the money ran out, waiting for the next contribution from the relatives who were living in a self-imposed exile. Some of the emigrants would never see what their hard-earned US dollars had brought to the town they had left behind. With no legal status in the US, going home to Joyabaj meant giving up what they had suffered for in Joyabaj Norte, or risking another journey north. Some would return in chains, deported. Others would return in coffins.

Hombre Ortega had gotten lucky, proof to others that they might, someday, get lucky too. He had Betsy, he had a good job, and he had his apartment in Providence. He had come home to Joyabaj as a permanent resident of the US, visa in his passport to prove it, money in his pockets, gifts filling the old, beat up, light blue Toyota pickup truck that he had sent home ahead of his trip. He had left to take care of the family in Joyabaj, and, now that he was legal, he had come home to look for a wife, even if he did have a girlfriend in Joyabaj Norte.

The people living in town owned, or had been working on, land in the surrounding villages that they had abandoned when it had gotten too dangerous to be in the countryside during the war. Both landowners and share croppers were cash poor, and both groups had sought out shelter in town and opportunities elsewhere. The town and its villages had a majority population of indigenous Maya, with a small class of people Guatemalans call Ladinos, Spanish speakers who dress in a western style, while the Mayans continued to dress in their colorful hand-woven traditional clothes, called *traje*, and speak their own language, called *lengua*.

Hombre Ortega was the youngest of six children in a Ladino family. He had started his life on the family's land in the village of Palibatz, and he was eight at the time of the earthquake. The house was cracked and broken by the quake, but they weren't hurt. His father walked into town and helped with the work of digging people out of the rubble and clearing the debris. After that, he was offered his first paid job doing road construction. He moved the family into a small house that he built in town.

As they left Joyabaj, Hombre wanted Betsy to see where he was born. He wanted her to understand that she could never really be his wife, which she really didn't want to be anyway, did she? They took the dirt road out of town and stopped at the ruined and abandoned house in Palibatz. There they said goodbye to his family who had

followed them, who then turned around and went back to town, crying as they once again had to watch him leave.

Betsy and Hombre continued on in the truck with his brother and nephew, stopping to walk around the ruins at Mixco Viejo, which was being developed for tourism, someday, not very far out of Guatemala City. In the dry season, there was a lot of dust. Once, a new arrival to Rhode Island had stared out of the truck window as they drove him around the state, and finally he had asked, "What have the Americans done with all the dust? Where did they put it?"

Hombre Ortega checked in later at the Camino Real hotel, after visiting with his brother and friends in the city to say goodbye. He would be back, sooner this time than the last time he had left them. After centuries of poverty, oppression and isolation, 35 years of civil war, 20 years of rebuilding after the earthquake, 15 years after murdering and scaring off people who had come in to help, someone finally had come from Joyabaj, someone who had found Providence.