

Granny and the Golden Bridge

By Claribel Alegria

Manuel had an endless store of anecdotes about his crazy grandmother who owned a small hut on a strip of ground half a kilometer from the Golden Bridge.

"She was crazy, but a very active old lady," he grinned reminiscently, "and terribly proud of her huge bridge spanning the Lempa River. 'My little bridge,' she used to call it."

Everybody else in El Salvador called it the "Golden Bridge," because with contractors' kickbacks to high government officials and inflated materials and labor estimates, it had cost the Salvadoran taxpayers three or four times as much as it should have.

Manuel was the leader of the Salvadoran peasant organization, who had been invited to Europe on a speaking tour.

"Why do you say she was crazy?" Luisa asked.

"After the civil war started, the army stationed troop units at either end of the bridge to protect it and to control traffic crossing it. It occurred to Granny that she could make her fortune by cooking for the troops. She'd get up every morning at 4 A.M. to cook beans, make tortillas and prepare a huge kettle of rice. She'd load everything into her handcart and push it down the highway to serve breakfast to the soldiers on the near side. Then she'd push it across the bridge—almost two kilometers, imagine!—to serve the troops on the far side. She'd get back to her hut in time to start preparing their lunch, and off she'd go again, pushing her cart."

"Very energetic, as you say, but she doesn't sound crazy."

"She was crazy," Manuel insisted, "because she only charged them for the cost of the food she cooked, and she didn't earn a penny for all that work."

Patriotic, maybe?" Luisa ventured.

"Maybe," Manuel lifted a shoulder, "but as if that weren't enough, what did it occur to her to do after the *compas* blew up her bridge? She went out and dyed her hair red, that's what."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"There was a surprise attack before they blew up the bridge. The *compas* has to take out the guards at both ends so the demolition team could place the charges. But one of the *compas* was killed in the shootout, and he was carrying a plan of the defensive trenches, the location of the machinegun nests and the exact number of troops on both ends.

"A few days later a market lady warned Granny that the Guards were looking for the woman who cooked for the troops. So the dear old lady bought a packet of henna, a tube of lipstick, and went back to her ranch.

"A pair of Guards showed up the next day, asking for her. Without turning a single red hair, Granny said to them: 'Ah, that must be the old woman I rented this *finca* from last week. She threw a fit when they blew up the bridge, and she told me she was moving to San Vicente to live with her daughter.'

"And who are you?' the Guards asked her.

"Granny drew herself up. 'I'm the respectable owner of a house of pleasure in Suchitoto,' she replied, 'but what with all these subversives shooting up the Guard barracks every other day, I ran out of clients and had to retire. That's the war for you,' she sighed."

The two of them broke out laughing.

"But that's not the end of the story," Manuel continued. "A few weeks later I was visiting a guerrilla camp near the banks of the Lempa, when whom should I see but my redheaded grandmother paddling strongly upstream in a dugout canoe filled with baskets.

"I'm selling *jocotes*, papaya, lemons, sweet oranges, mangoes. Who'll buy from me? she chanted in her street hawker's call.

"Hello, Mama Tancho,' the camp commander called out. Not knowing she was my grandmother, he told me: 'This is the old lady who gave us the plans for the attack on the Golden Bridge.'

"We helped her tie up the canoe under a tree, and she started complaining as soon as she hugged me:

"Ay, Memento,' she sighed, 'these kids are making my life more difficult all the time. Ever since they blew up my bridge, I have to paddle all the way up here every day.'

"The guerrilla chief grinned and asked her: 'And what else have you brought us, Mama Tancho?'

"She removed a layer of mangoes from one of the baskets and started chanting in her streetseller's voice:

"Fragmentation grenades, G-3 cartridges, 81- millimeter mortar rounds. Who'll buy from me?'"