

Stopover in The War

RICHARD ELMAN

On the road to León, Nicaragua, there's a little village called La Paz Centro. A dusty little place of rutted lanes, a white church, a guard *cuartel* with a sand-bagged porch, and lots of little grocery stores. You can't see much of it from the road. It's in about 300 yards. The highway bears only a road marker, a pottery stand with a backyard kiln, and a couple of thatch-roofed restaurants where they vend *carne asada*, *tacos* and *cacao*.

Coming and going from the great battles I sometimes stopped to eat, or for a refreshment. Under the thatch, in the cool air, among the good smells of the food, was another, easier world. Nobody ever talked about the war, or about politics. If they knew where you had just been, or were going to, the handsome woman, and her daughters, and her old man might nod, with a certain knowingness. But they always went right to work filling your belly as fast and as well as they could. They made you sit at one of their tables, and they offered you a *ron*, or a *cerveza*, if they thought you looked at all pained.

I had been taught by a friend to drink the *cacao* which is made of a ground-up chocolate powder and maize. It's served cool and sweetish, scented with a nuttiness, in pretty wooden round-bottomed gourds, scratched out with decorations, that are made to rest on little coasters so they won't wobble.

The people who owned the place were at least part Indian; and they hadn't ever served too many gringos much aside from certain bottled drinks, or maybe cigarettes or rum, so they seemed pleased with my lack of squeamishness. If, despite the flies, I was willing to risk my stomach on rice and beans, and one of their own *refrescos*, that seemed flattering to them. They got to know all of us after a while, and they called us by various names: "*La Señora Rubia*." "*El*

Richard Elman is writing a book of short vignettes about the Nicaraguan struggle for liberation, from which this article is taken.

Alto." *"El Señor Gasioso."* Always in good fun.

I'm not even sure they knew we were journalists.

The morning after León fell I stopped there on the way back from looking at corpses roast on the streets, which was done as a sanitary precaution, and I had no appetite. It would be another hour before I would get back to Managua. I felt I should take something. But, earlier, in the marketplace of the old city, I had been badly frightened when a Guard patrol, to scare off looters, came around a corner at me firing into the air.

I guess I was just depressed, and hot, and unhappy with myself for not doing more, as if what I did finally mattered, could save lives, win victories, change the face of Nicaragua. Being a member of the press and watching defeat stubbornly snatched from the jaws of victory by the overwhelming arms the United States supplied the Somozas made me angry, with nobody to blame. The people were willing to die. But I was not.

That morning *el patron* of *La Casa Tropica* was totting a double-barreled shotgun in front of the food counter under his thatch-roofed hut; and I noticed another of the hangers-on wearing a sidearm. None of his women seemed about the place, behind the counter, or in the cooking shed open to the air next door. A large scraggly old rooster pecked at the dirt floor. A dog was snoring at the *patron's* feet. Sitting all by himself at a corner table a businessman from Managua, in a suit and tie, ate rice and beans and sipped from a *cerveza*.

The *patron* greeted me, "What do you wish?"

I ordered a *cacao*.

"I can't serve you that," he told me in Spanish, with a shrug.

"You didn't make any?"

"It was impossible," he explained. "The women are afraid to go to the marketplace. . . ."

"Is that why you are armed. . . .?"

"Everybody stays inside," he said. "There are rumors of all kinds. The Guard is castrating young men, they say. Terrible rumors. . . ."

"Do you think it's true?"

He didn't answer and I was sorry for my question. With so much bloodshed and terror everywhere, why should his fears seem irrational?

I said I would have any bottled drink or a *refresco*.

He showed me all his yellow teeth: "No have, you know. There is really very little. . . ."

"I'm sorry to ask. . . ."

"*Hijos de la puta*," said the *patron*.

I started back away from the counter toward the roadway where my car was parked when the man from Managua dropped his fork, and said in that careful English, which is often a gesture of timorous friendliness, "He is ashamed, you know, to offer his rice and beans and it will not do for you to take his lemonade. . . ."

"I would take his lemonade. He need not be ashamed. . . ."

I had been on a special medication all the time in Nicaragua and had no stomach problems—the source of my culinary bravery.

The man from Managua started to tell the *patron* that I was very thirsty, but he insisted he could not serve me anything. It was impossible. It would not be good for me. And there was so very little left for the others.

I felt he was saying he would offer nothing to this gringo—after León—and it was hurtful to me.

I got back inside my rented car and started the engine. I wouldn't try another place. I'd wait until I was back in Managua.

The car lurched forward. Through the rear-view mirror I watched for a gap in the highway traffic and saw a young man from the village in a little shed behind a next-door house washing out some clothes in a galvanized metal bucket.

Then I looked again and saw it was a pretty short-haired woman in jeans. She wore a baseball cap and had dark Indian skin, and she seemed very pleased when I waved to her.

A very flat boyish chest but pretty, and lean. Shapely brown arms. Long fingers.

The *patron* with his shotgun came up to the window of my car and he had with him a frosty bottle of Pepsi and he passed it through the window and insisted he would take no money.

"Here there is no custom for this," he explained. "It is not in favor. Here in La Paz. . . ."

Before I could say a word, he added: "Also we hate the *tanquetes norteamericanos*. . . ."

"The armored cars are British," I explained. "Only the larger Sherman tanks are American. . . ."

"And the rifles? And the rockets? The machine guns. . . .?"

"Yankee or in some cases Israeli. . . ."

"Indeed." He gave me a meaningful glance.

"The Somozas also," I quipped.

"Made in the States," he said with a smirk.

"*Tardes*. . . ."

"*Suerte*. . . ."

The bottle felt cold against the insides of my thighs as I gunned the motor.

"Goddamn son of a bitch fucking bastards," said the *patron*, in English, too.

It wasn't said at me, but was a statement to the air—to which I was asked to give assent.

I spat out the Spanish word for cowards.

"Cock sucky sons of bitches," repeated the *patron*. Some Pepsi fizzed up from the open bottle and dribbled across my lap.

"I could get you a rag," said the *patron*.

"It's not necessary," I said, "many thanks," and drove away.

In Managua I was thirsty again as soon as I walked into the air-conditioned lobby of my hotel and I bought a round of drinks for all my friends in the bar, including, alas, a couple of Central Americans who may have been Government spies. □