



"AS LONG AS NICARAGUA HAS CHILDREN THAT LOVE HER, NICARAGUA WILL BE FREE."

—A.C. SANDINO

We have sought a meeting with Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal, a Jesuit priest and noted Nicaraguan poet. But confirmation for our interview comes through when we are in Matagalpa and today the minister is out of the country. Still, Enrique has arranged another meeting. This evening our bus winds its way to Carmen Park and the Sandinista Hostel for International Cultural Workers. We are ushered into a collective dining room with a long table and welcomed with "Hi, how're ya doin'" by a snappy looking, darkhaired, friendly woman who turns out to be from Los Angeles. A few minutes later a slight but firmly built dark man with a black mustache and army fatigues and boots appears in our midst. The pretty California woman demonstrates the proper salutation: "Mucho gusto, Comandante." We have just met one of the charismatic heroes of the Revolution, Omar Cabezas.

On our way over Steve has briefed the group on Cabezas' account of guerrilla war in the Matagalpa region, "Fire From The Mountains." Cabezas was a middleclass university student in Leon who got caught up in the nationalist revolutionary fervor the seventies. He joined the guerrillas, but as a university intellectual faced severe testing from his comrades. The book describes in grisly detail what the life of a guerrilla is like — the infestation of bugs and disease, the monotonous diet of beans and beans and more beans, the heat and cold, the loneliness, and the constant threat of treachery on the part of those you must trust to survive. Steve notes Cabezas' admission that the only pleasure allowed mountain guerrillas was an occasional private moment in which to masturbate. Barrie, who has stayed up half the previous night reading the book, tells me that there is more: Cabezas had left behind a woman who would bear his baby, but during his stint in the mountains he receives word that she has left him and is with someone else. The man is a romantic, Barrie informs me with a distinct glint of admiration in her eyes, as if the combination of hardnosed guerrilla warrior, brilliant intellectual and sentimental romantic is just too much to bear.

Cabezas is everything Barrie had implied. As he sits at the head of the long table, his dark eyes fix on those he addresses, one by one. He has the soft laugh, even giggle, of a man who is comfortable expressing his most intimate feelings. He is gentle but his well formed shoulders give him an aura of profound strength. His voice is soft but firm, and when he pauses for effect the power of his expression is remorseless. His eyes, however, are what convey the depth and range of his emotions, flashing in assumed anger at one moment, twinkling with an easygoing humor of sensuality in the next. Especially when he is addressing the women. The wide-eyed beauty from L.A. is nearly beside herself. Cabezas is the most sexual being I have encountered in Nicaragua.

He begins with a description of Nicaragua as an exploited colony of North American economic interests. When Cabezas asks Matthew to enter the amounts of money lost to foreign exploitation of Nicaragua's gold, silver, coffee, sugar, bananas, and livestock on his pocket calculator, the little computer does not have the capacity to express the enormous figure. Cabezas talks bitterly of Somoza: "The man was not Nicaraguan," he insists. "He spoke English to his own family." These are touchy subjects for a Nicaraguan nationalist, and Cabezas' eyes are aflame. He talks of the Revolution not as an attempt to imitate the Cubans or Soviets but as a Nicaraguan solution to Nicaraguan problems. Fidel Castro came here a few years ago, Cabezas says, and told us that we do not have to make the same mistakes Cuba did, that we must make our own revolution. And that is what Nicaragua is doing, he states, even if it displeases President Reagan. Cabezas repeats an analysis we have heard several times on the tour: the United States opposes the Nicaraguan Revolution because it threatens to show Latin American people that they can take control of their own lives without direction from the colossus to the north. Cabezas is very calm

at this point, even dispassionate. But I detect a fury at the inability of the United States to take Nicaraguans seriously — to insist that Nicaragua's significance to world events is its role as a proxy for Cuba or the Soviet Union. This, I suspect, lies at the heart of the bitter feelings the Sandinistas have for the powerbrokers in Washington.

When Cabezas asks for questions I present him with two clippings from Portland newspapers. One is a full-page ad in the Portland State University newspaper that I had organized just before Congress' June 1986 vote. "How Can We Combat Terrorism in the Middle East When We Sponsor it in Central America?" the headline read. The copy denounced U.S. aid to the terrorists who were destroying Nicaraguan schools, health clinics and agricultural cooperatives. It was signed by the university's Jewish Student Union. The second clipping was an article I had written for the daily newspaper describing the background to American involvement in Nicaragua. The editors had entitled it "Communist Role in Nicaragua Decried — In 1927."

Cabezas used the heading as the pretext for a minor lecture. Your country had invaded Nicaragua several times before Karl Marx was even born, he tells us through a translator, a diminutive woman who had been brought up in Colombia but spoke English as one would a native language. From there he launches into an analysis of Reagan's America. Cabezas tells us that although the new movie "Platoon" may be taking a fresh approach, most of the recent American films on Viet Nam have pretended that the U.S. could win the war if was fought right now. "But what of 'Platoon,'" I ask. He replies that he hasn't ordered a copy for his VCR yet but soon will. "It's a very moving piece of work," I venture. "It has made grown men cry." But it had to be made independently, he counters, because Henry Kissinger is on the board of Universal Pictures and the major studios wouldn't touch it. "But it will win the academy award for best picture," I persist.

After a while Cabezas flashes a hint of a smile and asks if we would care to join him in a glass of whisky. Enrique, who has been serving the Comandante with coffee, lighting his cigarettes and generally acting as an aide de camp, apparently has decided to bring out one of the bottles destined for Corinto, for our distinguished host. Up to now we have been served with tall glasses of iced Coca Cola. Now as the shot glasses make their way around the table, Cabezas dramatically rises and discards his pistol-laden holster and cartridge belt. "Now we can talk off the record," he announces through the translator, "and say whatever the hell we want." He asks everyone at the table to introduce themselves. A group of women from the States who are touring Nicaragua as "people's" clowns elicit Cabezas' curiosity. There are also several blond western Europeans in the room strain-

CONTINUED ON PAGE FOURTEEN

ropes and introduces Larry, our spokesman, to the demonstration organizers. Larry makes a few brief remarks at their request. It feels good to hear the words "Portland, Oregon" on the streets of Managua — to feel our small impact on events. In an ironic aside, a woman approaches me and in Spanish asks me if I would like to play an American black mercenary in a movie being shot that day in Grenada. A Hollywood film crew is in town to do the story of William Walker, the American adventurer who had himself appointed president of Nicaragua in the 1850s and was later gunned down by an all-Central American army. I decline the movie role, but at lunch at the hotel that afternoon Enrique insists that I take over the dining room grand and play some piano. As I begin, the middleaged woman pianist says in Spanish to Enrique: "All the gringos play such beautiful music."

Several of us decide to visit the Museum of the History of the Revolution later that day. I spend most of my thirty minute allotment looking through photographs of the period of American imperialism, 1909 through the Somoza dictatorships of 1934-1979. I see deeds turning over underground mineral rights (gold and silver) to American corporations, political agreements in which Nicaraguan conservatives are assured tenure by U.S. officials, handshakes between the elder Somoza and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The one photo that stays in my head, however, is one of Nicaraguan bishops parading a lit birthday cake to salute an elegantly dressed Somoza sometime in the 1940s. There is something literally obscene about the spiritual leaders of the country humiliating themselves before the dictator in such fashion. The picture sums up a sickening corruption of power, and more than anything, helps me to understand the fury of the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath. I begin to think of the dungeons in the Somoza prison outside Mesaya we visited on our first day in the country.

Later in the afternoon Enrique takes a few of us to the International Store. He has advised us to bring some whisky for the mayor of Corinto, who we are to visit the next day. The International Store accepts only dollars. The Nicaraguan government, like administrations in many socialist countries, uses this outlet to bring in hard foreign currency by selling American consumer items to the international community. Walking through its doors is the mirror image of the passage through the Holiday Inn parking lot in Mexico City. Suddenly you are in a posh department store with music videos and electronic games blaring appliances galore, and fashion jeans, jewelry, and footwear, plus a gourmet food supermarket in the next wing. The only one who feels comfortable at that moment is Enrique, who is looking at some bugspray he thinks he thinks we may need in Corinto. As we leave I confide, "Enrique, that place is really weird." He immediately grasps my meaning. "Someday the people are going to burn that place down," he suddenly says. "The people, they don't like this place." Another contradiction in Nicaragua. I think of the stories Bart has heard from the poor families he has visited of Tomas Borges' daughter driving five or six different Mercedes, of Daniel Ortega's brother controlling the country's private money exchange. Even the children begging for pencils: Are they thirsting for the tools of knowledge or looking for easy commodities to trade on the black market? When Barrie asks a group of boys to write their names with their newly donated pencils, they retreat in embarrassment, shyly admitting that they don't know how.

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