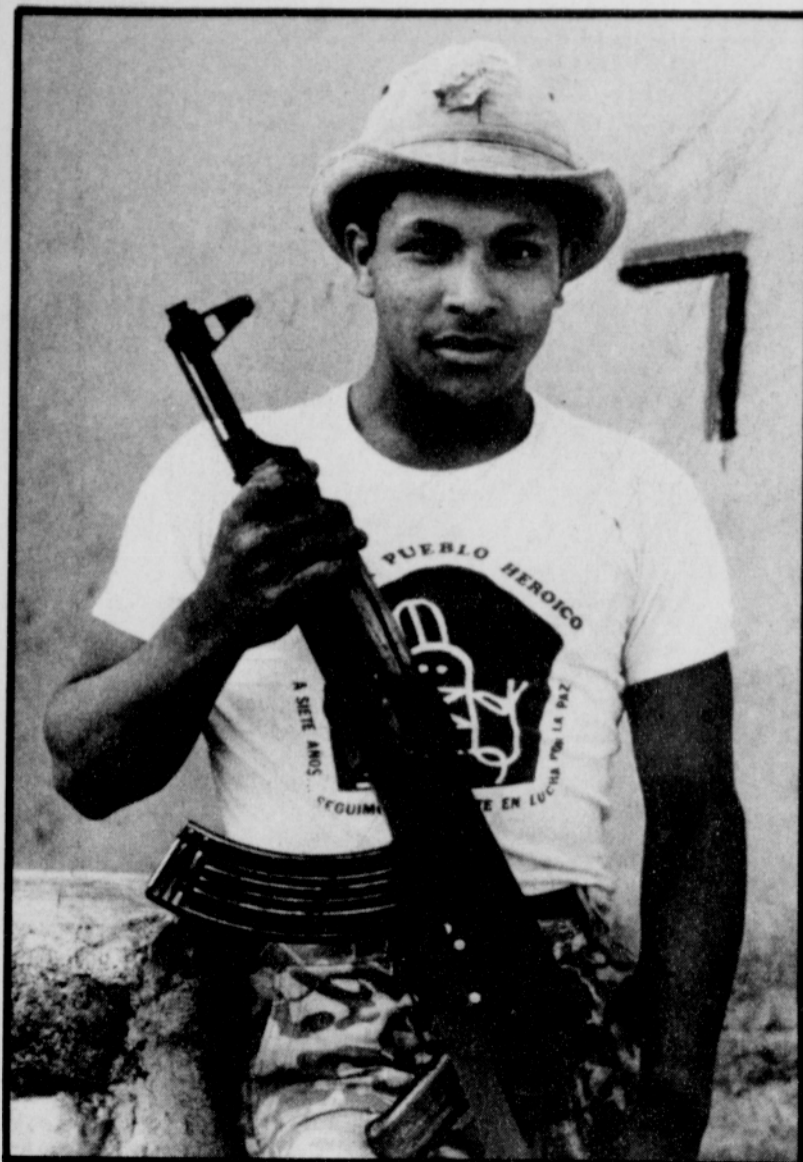




government doesn't allow them to come out until two in the afternoon. If they come out before, they get arrested." He then talks of the need "to be careful who we go with" because of "terrible diseases," and pulls some condoms out of his breast pocket. "I wouldn't want to hurt my wife," he explains. When it gets toward two I mischievously inquire where the "girls" are. "I think your group has scared them away," the Cuban answers with a laugh.

As my plate of shrimp and garlic comes to the banquet table I rejoin the group, telling them of my newly discovered friends. Enrique gets up from the table and briefly confers with the mayor. When he returns he seems testy. "Those are not Cubans," he says, looking at me directly. "Cubans would not talk about our women like that. Those are Puerto Ricans. The mayor told me — those men are from Puerto Rico." What is going on? Is Enrique truly hurt that we have learned that there are still prostitutes in Nicaragua? Is the mayor worried that the known presence of Cubans will offend American visitors? When it comes time for questions, Matthew puts the matter to the test by asking the mayor about prostitution in Corinto. He, in turn, defers to the head of the hospital, the regional medical officer, who answers that, yes, there are still prostitutes in town and that it constitutes a social problem. Nevertheless, he adds, the number is less than one hundred and fifty, some one-fourth of what it had been, and the government is setting up trade schools to retrain the women for productive jobs. Barrie, who has been in conversation with both the mayor and the local representative of the national government, tells me that Corinto was not a stronghold of the Revolution. As a port it fared quite well under Somoza. At first, the mayor told her, people in Corinto resented the fact that goods brought through the port never stayed in the town but always found their way to Managua. But now, the mayor

explained, the mining of the harbor and the attacks on the oil tanks have unified townspeople behind the Revolution and the national government. As we prepare to leave the table we note that a strange, hyperactive redhaired boy, apparently a simpleton, has been invited to consume the banquet leftovers.

I pass two pool halls on my ten minute walk around Corinto following lunch. Smoky, grungy looking places with raucous laughter — a tough seaport. I wander into the school where the supplies packaged by Portland pupils will be directed. It is even more primitive than the school in Esteli. The dirt flooring of the open courtyard is full of puddles and mud. The classrooms are in alcoves that open up to the central space. Neat signs and posters are taped to the walls. The children are clean, trimly dressed, obedient and attentive. I watch Barrie's introduction to what looks like the equivalent of a fifth grade class. A shy, dark, blackhaired little girl in a white dress and sandals rises in her seat to ask a question: Is it beautiful in California where you come from? Barrie answers that it is, that it is beautiful like Nicaragua, and the questioner seems immensely satisfied. In another alcove a heavy-set woman teacher leads little ones in a ring-around-the-rosie exercise. There is a mathematics regimen in a third class. Larry Preston, who teaches at an experimental secondary school in the Portland public school system, is everywhere taking photos to bring back to his charges. This half hour is clearly the high point of our entire journey for him.

On the ride back to Managua I think of these Corinto children, of their teachers taking on an incredible challenge with hardly any resources to support them, of the education and health officials who must face massive problems in a country where poverty has always been the rule of law, and where naked exploitation was just as ordinary as the brutal heat of the tropical sun in the height of the dry season. And then another thought, one that had been plaguing me for the past several days. What if, I ponder, what if, after all was said and done, what if by some freakish set of events the United States, my country, actually decided to invade and literally blot out all of this? My logic refuses the possibility. I had even approached the Assistant Education Minister at the close of our session and assured him that Reagan would never invade Nicaragua: "His generals won't let him forget Viet Nam," I had confidently proclaimed. Enrique had even told me he agreed: It was "too late" for the U.S. to intervene, he had concluded. Despite my logic, however, the thought persists. Am I torturing myself in a ritual of liberal masochism and self-hate? Am I romanticizing the Nicaraguan Revolution, a struggle, like all great conflicts, that uses its own forms of ruthlessness and power manipulations to accomplish goals set by its leaders? And still, my mind will not let go of this nagging fantasy of outright American invasion. There is only one way out of my mental quagmire. I smile inwardly. "If they thought the country blew apart over Viet Nam," I fantasize, "they ain't seen nothing yet."

Among my tasks in Nicaragua is the running of an errand. I am to deliver some sketches and posters to the parents of a Nicaraguan friend of mine who studies in the United States. Since my Spanish is poor and the family speaks little English, I have invited Barrie to accompany me as translator. My friend's father picks us up at the hotel and drives us to the family home near Carmen Park. It is a beautifully but unpretentiously appointed tile and stucco, classically Spanish structure. There are paintings on the wall, and an open courtyard in which to sip our drinks under the stars. We exchange pleasantries for some time and I convey news of my friend's family and professional life back in the States. While looking at some paintings, we notice our host's law office attached to the residence. Barrie, who is an attorney, asks about his legal reference books. "Most of them were confiscated," we are told. Another attorney in our host's firm was arrested for contra activities. For some time everyone in the company was suspect. But even after the other members were cleared of any disloyalty the firm's law books were taken by the state. Barrie tactfully pursues the direction the conversation has taken. "What do you think of the changes that have come about in Nicaragua?" she asks. Our host is direct. "As far as we are concerned, we have no complaint. We are doing well," he says immediately. "But the poor, the people — they're suffering."

By now another couple has joined us. At their request I play the piano, faking my way through an abruptly edited version of Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine." When I return to the patio the distinct sounds of disco waft through the night. We are close to the Hostel for International Cultural Workers, the place where we drank whisky with Omar Cabezas. "They have a youth dance every Saturday night," our host explains with no hint of emotion in his voice. But I can sense the intrusion on their privacy, the coldness with which he distances himself from the Sandinista "They." We discuss the economic shortages. Barrie asks if the shortages are not a result of the war. Our host answers that the government likes to use the war against the contras as an excuse for its own ineptness. We supported the

Revolution, he continues, warming up to the subject. But now, he says, things really have not changed for the better. He accuses the Sandinistas of trying to impose a Cuban model on Nicaragua. When Barrie responds that the leaders we have spoken with have insisted that Nicaragua must find its own way, my friend's mother answers that the people do not want Cuban communism but the leadership does and is sliding the country into an irreversible path. We could leave if we wanted to, our host says, but he insists that their friends and life are in Nicaragua and they do not want to go abroad. Perhaps things will improve, he offers, but there is no great conviction in his voice.

After awhile my friend's father brings out a pamphlet and gives a copy to Barrie. It is the story of an elderly man who went to the government to complain about the lack of religious instruction in the state schools and was allegedly tortured. Left in a roadside ditch outside Managua, the old man reported that he had been warned to keep quiet or his family would be hurt. In self-protection he issued the pamphlet that we are shown. My friend's mother complains that the Sandinista police watch the neighborhood to check the coming and going of people but do nothing to protect the local residents from being burglarized. She remembers that just after the Revolution in 1979 men came door to door selling refrigerators, televisions, clothing, a piano — goods that had been openly looted during the disturbances. Their cynicism toward the Sandinistas is openly expressed. My friend's father notes that Cabezas was given a law degree by the government without having finished his legal studies. "Politics," he notes. He adds that schoolchildren love the new "political education" program because they spend all their time visiting monuments instead of studying.

The second lawyer in our group, who speaks excellent English, notes that all Nicaraguans are opposed to outside expropriation of the country's natural resources. But all the problems of Latin America are not solely the responsibility of the United States, he admonishes. It is easy to make a scapegoat of the States and not work to resolve the real problems, he says. Without saying so in as many words, he implies that the Sandinistas are frauds, and that they have not the slightest idea as to how to run an economy or a country. As we leave I tell him: "I know you must be wondering why in the world we would ever come here for a trip, but we're curious about the changes that have come to Nicaragua. I'm sorry there are so many problems in your country, but many of us believe that Nicaraguan problems must be solved by Nicaraguans, not by the United States." He seems to heartily agree as we shake hands but I can't tell if he is simply being courteous to guests in his country. My friend's father returns us to the Intercontinental. I notice that he has to detach the door handle on the driver's side of his European sedan to use on the passenger door. For some reason I find the uncomplaining nonchalance and dignity with which he accomplishes this small maneuver to be sadly moving.

Saturday is our last full day in Nicaragua. We visit a sugar mill between Managua and Granada. It is the largest sugar mill in Latin America. As we trudge through ramps and alleys to control rooms and furnaces we learn that the entire mill is run on fuel processed from the mill's own sugar cane. The Russians planned it and the Cubans built it, we are told. When Daniel Ortega was inaugurated, Castro told him that Cuba would forfeit the one hundred and fifty million dollar loan Cuba had advanced for the project. The union leader who is conducting our tour introduces us to one of the workers. He recently returned from fighting at the front, we are told. Two fellow workers who accompanied him failed to survive.

We visit the Spanish colonial town of Granada and take a ride on a launch on the mighty Lake Nicaragua. Larry says he is going to retire to one of the islands we pass by. He is amazed there are no sailboats on the lake. For lunch we stop at an inn outside of Mesaya, the home of the famed Indian market where goods of every kind may be found at free market prices. Seated at a back table, we are serenaded by a band of country musicians for about sixty-seven cents a song (two thousand cordova). We collect enough for five songs and when Enrique joins on percussion, the musicians throw in an added tune free. When the music is over a middleaged man approaches our table. Enrique translates. "Pardon the intrusion," the man begins, "but I heard where you are from and why you are here and I just wanted to extend my hand in appreciation. I don't mean to harrange you — I am just a poor working man — but I just wanted to tell you that we are proud of our Revolution. I am an ignorant man but now my children are learning how to read. Welcome to you, and peace to all people, my friends. I drink to you. Our Revolution has really made a change for the better for us, and we welcome our friends from the north."

Saturday night Enrique has arranged a farewell dinner for us at a cabaret by the

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