

M I C H A E L M C A L L I S T E R

A Death in Nicaragua

We flew into Nicaragua in the middle of the Contra War. The shuttle plane from Costa Rica parked on the tarmac, and we stepped out into a night warm as blood. *It's León, outside of the war zone*, I'd promised my parents. I was fifteen, a sophomore in high school, traveling with an exchange program. We'd landed in Managua, the capital, late at night. We walked across the tarmac to the tiny airport. Inside was fluorescence, officious-looking signs in Spanish (I'd had three weeks of remedial language courses at a neighborhood night school), and Madonna over the loudspeakers: "Papa Don't Preach." Soldiers with guns searched our luggage. We piled into a bus painted with orange and white stripes, and drove to a motel nearby. Down the block lived Daniel Ortega, president of the FSLN, the Sandinistas. Around his house, concrete walls topped with barbed wire, and a guard leaning in a doorway. In the morning I took my last hot shower for twelve days, and we drove for an hour over a two-lane highway riddled with potholes. We swerved for a single cow standing in the center of the road.

They'd set each of us up with families in a barrio outside of downtown, in houses built with labor and materials supplied by the exchange project. We parked in an empty lot behind the row of houses, and a dozen dusty, barefoot children jostled each other outside the bus. The boys gave us thumbs-up signs when we climbed out.

People gathered. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with a red bandana, and then tied it around my neck; it seemed like the thing to do in Central America.

I was sitting on the steps and he was standing in front of me when suddenly he placed both hands on my knees and rested his weight there, and told me another story. I can't for the life of me remember what he said.

He raises a rifle. Aims. His silhouette blocks the stars in the sky.

I traveled to Nicaragua in 1987, with a group of high school students. We were the test cases in a youth exchange program held during the Contra War. We stayed in a barrio in León, the country's second largest city, outside of the war zone. The houses were built from cinderblocks. Dirt floors, cold water, chickens in the courtyard. Toilet paper was a luxury; we brought our own, along with t-shirts and other gifts. The family I stayed with gave me the largest room with the softest bed. They fed me, played me music, and answered all of my near-illegible questions with good humor and kindness.

The barrio was a tight-knit community, and every evening people would gather around their front steps, to talk and to listen to the one radio that the "rich" neighbor across the way owned. We Americans were minor celebrities; it seemed like everyone wanted to meet us. Every person I talked to hated Reagan for funding the Contras, but every American they had met were liberal, peace-lovers such as ourselves, and they treated us well. They'd all lost sons and husbands and friends to the war.

—*Central American*, I tell someone in Algebra class.

—*What*, he says, *you mean like Kansas?*

Every car we pass is a Toyota. Our bus is Belgian; we pull up into an empty lot, where children gather. We step off the bus in the hot sun and they crowd around us. The boys wrestle in the red dust and pose for our pictures. Then someone taps my shoulder, and I turn to find a woman with a shy smile and sleepy eyes, holding my photo, and a letter I'd written. I picked up my suitcase and followed my host mother down a sidewalk that ran through the center of the barrio, and her plastic sandals made a percussive rhythm, snapping against the soles of her feet.

I'm fifteen.

The buildings of León are cracked and blasted by an old war.

An enormous cathedral at the edge of the town square, where street vendors sell soda in plastic bags, and men sleep beside blocks of ice.

Soldiers with guns check our passports. In the afternoons children in white shirts spill from the schools. At night young couples lean together in doorways, against walls, against trees.

A concrete path, lined with palm trees, cut through the center of the villa. Each house faced this center path, with small front yards of beaten earth, where the women dragged out chairs in the evening to sit and talk together. The children raced up and down the path. As dusk fell the chickens in my family's courtyard grew quiet. Across the path lived the barrio's richest family, who turned a radio towards the windows. Voices singing in Spanish drifted down the path, shot through with the far ringing of cathedral bells.

During the bombings they hid under their beds.

Across the central walkway lived an obese man everyone called Pan, or "Bread." He owned the barrio's only television, and watched *Knots Landing* dubbed in Spanish. At night he'd turn his radio towards his windows, and we'd all gather in the evenings to listen to florid love songs and raucous cumbias. The youngest boys would impress us with karate kicks to each other's heads. The older boys asked if we had girlfriends.

They gave me the softest bed in the largest room. There were five of them; Elena and Juan, the mother and father, and three girls. In the mornings, Gloria, the oldest daughter, would set a plate of eggs outside my room. The second girl was chubby, they called her *Gorda*. I could make Maria, the youngest girl, dissolve into laughter just by smiling at her. I have a photo of her, sitting against the concrete wall inside the courtyard, giggling, cutting a mango with a knife. In the courtyard lived three chickens, and a small pig tethered to a stake.

A few houses down lived a boy, just a year older than me. I don't remember how we met, only that one night I sat on a set of steps along the concrete path, and he stood in front of me. His name was Alfredo. I was fifteen.

So, I'm fifteen.

It's on a set of concrete steps in Nicaragua.

The image lasts for several minutes.

I'm fifteen, scrawny as a toothpick, dressed in khakis, a white t-shirt, with a red bandana tied around my neck. I tuck my passport into my back pocket; over the week it grows cracked with dried sweat and lined with dirt.

There was a boy, a year older than me, who lived down the street in the small villa where I stayed with the other Americans. I knew very little Spanish, and Alfredo knew no English. We pieced together conversation the best we could, Alfredo often acting out various stories for me – half-imaginary tales of romancing girls,

fighting boys, a treacherous encounter with a penned-up bull. He bragged about the brave way he'd take on the Contras, once he was drafted. He'd stand, facing me, holding an imaginary rifle. It was dark, late, the path empty and quiet. I sat on the steps, watching his mouth move, his white teeth flashing around his words. Then he placed his hands on my knees and leaned his weight against me.

He leans against me. *Diecisiete*, he says, annunciating each syllable. Seventeen. *Ah*, I say, *diecisiete*. He nods. His hands grow warm against my knees. I'm afraid to move, to breathe, not wanting this to end. No boy has ever touched me like this.

No boy had ever touched me like that. *It's different in Latin America*, I told myself. Different between men. No matter. I nodded. Seventeen, he said, and I will go fight.

Fight?

The Contras, he said slowly.

Ah, yes, I said, the Contras.

Yes, he said, then stood up again. His hands left my knees and wrapped around an imaginary rifle, which he raised to his shoulder and aimed. Against the star-shot sky his black silhouette. I hid from him my enormous affection, sitting on those steps; my face calm, my nerves singing.

Our bus was Belgian.

Across the houses was spray-painted: ¡Vive FSLN!

Endless cultural "presentations" in hot, crowded rooms. Please tell your President, leave us in peace. Translated speeches, hours long. Sitting in metal folding chairs in schools and factories. Wiping the sweat from my forehead with a red bandana.

I'd wake in the morning to the sound of chickens in the courtyard. Breakfast waiting outside my door. In the dim, concrete bathroom, cold water running from a pipe into a plastic bucket.

Every night he'd call my name from the path, and I'd join him on the steps. The warm dark night, palm trees rustling above, the radio music drifting from down the block. He knew no English, and I'd had only a few lessons in Spanish. I would pretend to understand fewer words than I did, so that, standing in front of me, he'd place his hands on my knees, and lean in until his face was close to mine, and pronounce his words slowly, annunciating each syllable. A gold crucifix glittered in the hollow of his throat.

The two boys talking quietly on the concrete steps. Palm trees rustling above. A passport curled in a back pocket. Nothing more. Just friends. A gesture between two boys, affection that means different things to each of them.

I have a black and white photograph of the two of us taken the day I left. We're standing beside the Belgian bus, our arms slung across each other's shoulders. I'm fifteen, he's sixteen. I wear a white t-shirt, and a red bandana tied around my neck. I'm an inch taller. A dark line of hair above his lip. Behind us a house built from cinderblocks; across it a spray-painted slogan: *¡Vive FSLN!* We are smiling.

Everyone in the barrio gathers at the bus; all the women are crying. When we pull away everyone waves, he waves. He is not crying. I wait five minutes, till we are out of sight, to cry, along with all the girls, and one or two boys.

Back home I began sneaking out of the house at night. My parents, long divorced, lived a mile apart in south Minneapolis, and each of my bedrooms was on the ground floor. That spring my excursions were brief, a quick trip down the alley and back to smoke a Camel, which my parents and I were pretending I didn't buy. I turned sixteen, and as spring gave way to summer and my nights lengthened, I'd walk a few blocks to Lake Harriet, and lay on the grassy hills above the Rose Gardens. Most nights I'd follow the long slope down to the fountains at the gardens' center, where I'd take off my shoes, roll up my jeans, and wade in a slow circle, my mind returning, again and again, to my family in León. Elena sliced mangos for me in the morning, the rooster strutting around the back yard, Maria giggling and hiding from me behind the battered rocking chair. I believed then that they had treated me better than my own family ever had. I believed that my family *didn't understand me*, which allowed me to break their rules. Soon I snuck out nearly every night that summer, for an hour or two, with my headphones on; a tape of acoustic Chilean music – which rendered me hopelessly nostalgic – on an endless loop.

Across the road from the Rose Gardens was an enormous cemetery, over two hundred acres of rolling hills. One night I found a hole in the fence, and I crawled through and walked among the tombstones and the trees, watching for the headlights of security cars that cruised the graceful, curving roads. Every night I avoided people and cars, kept to shadows and quiet streets, anything to sustain my solitude and the sense of space, freedom, remembering the barrio at night, the tinny music from the radio across the street drifting up towards the rustling palm trees, florid love songs and raucous cambios. Alfredo, who had stood outside my family's cinderblock home and called my name, who'd put his hands on my knees. I could not yet call it by its name – infatuation – and it would be years before I do so. My memories of León were always of those nights, and they breathed in the space and freedom I pursued through the dark streets. I wandered for hours till I grew tired, till my mind played tricks and I imagined that he was with me.

I talked constantly about going back, and I began to save my money. I wrote stories of the trip for my high school paper. I presented slide shows, set to sentimental folk music, to classes and church groups. When it seemed likely that the US would send troops to the Nicaraguan border, I attended an information session on becoming a conscientious objector. I marched in a demonstration against U.S. intervention in Central America, where I was billy-clubbed by riot cops and thrown in the back of a police wagon. I wrote letters to my exchange family and to Alfredo, and they wrote back. My friends tried to understand the intensity of my feelings for Nicaragua, but I could not yet articulate the passion I felt – the passion for another boy.

I climbed out my window at night. I walked until my feet turned hot and flat.

A year passed, I had money saved and was planning my trip. One day a letter arrived for me, the airmail envelope a small kick to my heart, my name drawn in cursive on the front. It was from my Elena. My Spanish had improved over the year, and I began to decipher the formal greetings and news within. Which is to say that it took me a few moments and several re-readings, to understand that...

No, it was a phone call. The letter only makes for a more romantic image. A phone call from the exchange program. “Michael, are you alone? Are you sitting down? Michael, I have bad news. Are you at home alone?”

I crawled out my window...

He’d been drafted the week before. In a truck headed towards the Honduras border he was ambushed by the Contras and killed.

I crawled out my window. I walked through the garden.

I crawled out my window. I walked to the lake.

I walked through the cemetery.

He raises the rifle to his shoulder, his silhouette blocking the star-shot sky. I’m sitting down, I’m home alone. No, I’ll be okay.

I understood the limits of idealism. I felt only despair. I could march with thousands in Washington D.C., but it didn’t matter. I grew to hate the trappings of the activist culture; the bowls of tasteless brown rice in organic cafes and co-ops; the smell of stale incense and patchouli in Socialist bookstores; the gentle, foolish nature of boys with blond dreadlocks. Sentimental folk music. Peace rallies with folding tables displaying obscure newsletters and anarchist bumper stickers curling at the edges. I turned my back on the lost causes of activism; they brought nothing but frustrated pain. There were millions who would counter us with bloodlust and willful ignorance, and they would always win. When I heard “shock and awe,” I pictured the concrete path and the palm trees and the steps where we sat.

The poetry I wrote that year is all fog and bluster, covering true expression. I was fifteen, I was sixteen; I loved, in romantic, adolescent fashion, his city and his country and his language. I loved the generosity of my host family and the easy, gentle forms of physical affection between men. I loved him, or thought I did, and could not say so.

So I'm fifteen.
The image lasts for several minutes.
It's on a set of concrete steps in Nicaragua.
He leans his weight against me.
Seventeen, he says.
I wear a white t-shirt.
He wears a crucifix.
He rests his rifle on my knees.
You mean like Kansas?
During the bombings they hid under their softest bed, in their largest room.
Above us the palm trees are rustling in the wind. I wake to the sound of cathedral bells.
Her plastic sandals snap against the soles of her feet.
The boys wrestle in red dust.
A passport curled in my pocket.
In her lap she holds a mango.
In her lap she holds a knife.

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