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Irwin

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Irwin · *Richard Elman*

"y si he de dar un testimonio sobre mi epoca es este: Fue barbara y primitiva pero poetica"

Ernesto Cardenal
"Managua 6:30 P.M."

("If I had to testify about my age I would say: it was barbarous and primitive but poetic")

IRWIN STOOD INSIDE one of the glass public booths at the crowded noisy airport telephone exchange in Managua and called his "one good friend" in the States "person to person, collect," in California.

"Phil? It's Irwin here. Hey. Long time no speak big buddy. Where am I? Phil you accepted the charges so you know I'm in Managua, just like always, only I gotta get the hell out of here.

"I'm caught right in the middle of it. Thanks buddy. Knew I could count on ya."

As he listened to his long-distance friend go on and on, Irwin's forehead grew very wet, and his grin froze on him.

"Gold? What gold?" Irwin suddenly demanded. "I could never get near any . . . Sure there's gold down here but I never got near any. It's all Somoza's, you dig. Honest I swear. . . ."

Abruptly his whole face fell: "You mean you can't really help?" His jaw seemed to be disintegrating; there were hollows in his cheeks.

Irwin said, "If I stick around they'll kill me. Honest old buddy, either one side or the other. Sure I'll wait . . . You'll call me right back?"

He rattled off the number for the airport telephone exchange and then demanded: "Be sure to call me back now, you hear?"

And when he hung up Irwin saw me and recognized me from the Hotel Intercontinental lobby, and he seemed just very sheepish-looking.

"Trouble?" I asked.

"My only good friend in the world," Irwin declared, "and even he won't help out. Because he says he can't . . . some fucking world," went Irwin. "He wanted me to come down here so we both could get rich and now . . ."

He said no more, as if stuck. Lodged against a clot of solid lucid rage.

I asked Irwin what he planned to do next.

"He's gonna call me back. Said he would. I'll wait and see."

But Irwin didn't wholly believe his friend. He mopped at his tall bald domed head with a colored kerchief and cursed, silently.

On the crown of that large head were many depressions, dents, little scars. Irwin looked as if he had never done anything much except for being battered about by life. He had big, cry baby eyes, and a nasal whine.

We sat down to take some coffee together at the airport cafe, and I asked where he was from.

“Near the Bronx.”

“Where exactly?”

“The Bronx,” he corrected himself, swallowing hard: “Just off the Grand Concourse . . . Grant Avenue . . .”

“I’ve been there.”

“It’s mostly all savages now,” Irwin said.

“Do you really think so? I don’t think so.”

“Honestly,” he shook his head at me, “I don’t want to die down here . . .”

“What were you doing here?” I asked. “Why did you come?”

“You heard.” He shrugged with discouragement. Said, “For once in my life I thought I’d get a little bit ahead of the game. Gold,” went Irwin, “shit,” went Irwin, “there’s plenty of gold here all right but no way to get at it unless you’ve got your own private army, like the Somozas. It’s all swamps and mountains down there, rain forests,” he said, with a malarial shiver, “and full of savages, Somoza people, multinational types. I almost got shot more than once.”

“And now?”

“What do you think? I’m broke.

“And my only friend in the world, who stakes me here, wants me to just stick it out come hell or high water. Shit,” Irwin said. “It doesn’t seem fair. He’s in advertising in LA. That’s a safe business. But down here . . .”

I asked, “How much do you think you would need to get by?”

“It isn’t that,” Irwin shook his head again, “I probably have enough to get back home, but if I go back empty-handed they will probably kill me.”

“Nice friends.”

“He has partners. He’s the only good friend I ever had. I never had any other . . .”

Irwin got up wearily from the table and went slouching off toward the counter to bug the woman about his incoming call.

I followed.

A large class of neatly jacketed, blonde schoolboys stood in a bunch near the Taca counter, and when I passed one asked if I was an American, and when I said I was they all said they were Latter Day Saints and they were flying home on the next flight out to the States because there’d been fighting near their school in the hills above Managua.

I told them I thought that was interesting, but I had to find my friend at the telephone exchange.

Then a boy with pimples told me, “The Nicas are all leaving, just like us. It’s going to be a Revolution. They say Castro is behind it . . .”

“Or in front,” I said, waving to Irwin through a milling mob.

At the telephone exchange I asked him, "Why not leave and go some-
place else? Like Florida . . . until your friend cools . . ."

"I never really like to admit defeat," Irwin said.

"It wasn't really your fault . . ."

"He's my only goddamn friend in the world," Irwin said. "He'll find me
sooner or later."

"How?"

"My goddamn mother would tell him. You know the way things are.
She thinks more of him than of me . . ."

"Why is that?"

"Because he's smart. He gets other people to do his business for him. He
never risks his own life, my friend."

"Irwin, is that you talking or your mother?"

"My mother didn't want me to go down here," he said. "But if I was
gonna go I shoulda come back rich."

"So you went."

"But I got nothing to show for it."

His mouth tightened on him.

He wiped at his long, domed head.

The woman at the counter glanced up from her earphones and said she
had a call for Irwin Goldberger from San Luis Obispo, California, in
Cabinet 3.

Inside the glass booth Irwin shouted HELLO very loudly, and nasally,
into the phone, as if he really was trying to reach across a long distance, and
then he shouted it again: HELLO.

Nobody seemed to be answering.

I started to walk away.

A woman in a pants suit stopped me to ask if I had any dollars to give her
for *cordobas*.

I didn't.

Irwin gesticulated frantically at his long-distance friend from his little
glass booth.

I came closer.

Irwin said, "Don't give me Bluefields. There's nothing in Bluefields but
savages. . . ."

". . . I already told ya," he said, "it's a civil war, a revolution. Can I
help that?"

"Hey don't talk to me like that," Irwin said. "You're my buddy, my
friend."

"Hey," Irwin said, "don't please . . ."

He said, "Aw what the hell. If I could I would . . ."

"You're nuts," he said, "crazy . . ."

He said, "Please don't say things like that to me. I tried. Honest . . ."

A shrapnel of words. Wheedling. Cajoling.

“I told ya goddamnit there’s a war on here . . . and I don’t wanna get myself killed. . .

“Aw don’t be that way . . . ”

As I left I had the feeling that when the Sandinistas march into Managua some months hence, Irwin could still be haggling over the long distance phone with his friend about the gold he had never found in Nicaragua.

And he would probably never go looking for that gold again: Because it was too dangerous; he had too many excuses; and he no longer had a friend in the world to back him.