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Richard Elman

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An Incident in Leon · *Richard Elman*

AT ONE POINT in the Nicaraguan struggle against Somoza his National Guard was able, in the language of a communique, to “recuperate” the ancient city of Leon. The rebels all went underground, or fled, and the people of the City were left without any food or water. When they came into the streets from their battered houses to share their terrors, they told stories to anybody who would listen: of indiscriminate bombings and strafings; of certain young men and boys being rounded up and machine-gunned to death, with their hands fastened behind their backs, by elite killer squads of Guardsmen, and paramilitaries.

All the barricades they had built up before were being demolished now by big orange government bulldozers, and some of us in the press were promised safe conducts by the Guard, if we agreed not to stray too far off the main avenues of the City.

My friends and I returned to the old city with the hope of finding certain of our friends in Leon, people we had met and thought we knew a little and cared about. Food was still scarce everywhere so we brought only what we could buy from the hotel to give as presents to these people to eat: huge whipped cream cakes, and sacher tortes, fruit pies, expensive silver foil chicken box lunches. Laden down, we made our way past all the final road blocks waving our white flags, fearfully cavorted along the cobbled streets, like intrepid Lady Bountifuls, hoping to locate these old friends.

There was a great deal of street life, a milling about. Each greeting was an acknowledgement that one had survived with hope and defiance intact. But occasional sniper fire kept going off in the adjacent barrios, like billiards caroming.

Around the market place, we had also been told, the Guard had taken to shooting into the air to scare off those hungry people who might be looting.

The people in the streets, after we had relieved ourselves of our packages, showed us all the numerous freshly-dug graves in their back yards, and the holes they had dug into back yard adobe walls so that they could communicate one to the other during the bombardments with some degree of safety.

I met very few Somocistas on the streets of Leon that day, or any other day.

A woman on the street told me, “If we ever are victorious I shall learn how to read because *they* will teach us. Then we will be able to read all the things you write about us today, meester.”

Wherever I walked, the slap of my sandals against cobblestone punctuated aimless spatters of distant random gunfire. I felt as if I had wished myself to walk barefooted across a lake of ice. The soles of my feet, and the back of my neck, felt numb, burnt. Bright noonday heat made me slick with my own sweat.

How would it feel, I wondered as I walked, to be picked off by a stray round, or ricochet. Would I know I was dead before the vertigo, the blood?

"Death most quickly singles out him who is afraid of death," Sandino reportedly once told his troops. But so deep was my apprehensiveness that I wandered away from my American friends, as if I was asking to be singled out, and found myself alone, after a while, in the market place.

A number of young girls and older women, in black shawls, rummaged the ashy debris of a store front which had once traded in *aquadiante* and Ron Flor De Cana.

Some had collected as many as twenty or even thirty fire-blackened pint bottles of rum in little piles along the cobblestones. Others stood very still, jiggling bottles inside large black shawls, like eggs, or contact bombs. A few older women were stooping low over the ash heaps. They waded in deeply so that their black shoes and the hems of their skirts had a coating of pumice.

A very pretty teenaged girl stood to one side, guarding a small pile of the bottles she and her friends or mother had liberated.

When I walked nearby she said she would gladly sell me a bottle for 20 cordobas, about \$2.

Like a creature in a Goya painting, her pose was seductive, with a large black mantilla draped across her forehead. She had very soft and rosy full cheeks, as if she'd just rouged them, and the most luxurious thick lashes shadowing big brown eyes. Aside from that heavy black cowl in which she had enveloped her head, she was dressed like any other teenager of our era: in jeans, a polo shirt, and sneakers.

"Listen," she told me, as if hipping me to be as street wise as she, "this is the authentic stuff that only lacks a label because of fire. Be brave, meester."

"No thank you."

"Why not?"

"I am a bit of a weakling when it comes to *aquadiante*."

"You are not the only one," she told me, smirking.

She started to giggle, just like a teenager, and that made my neck unfreeze, momentarily.

She batted her eyelashes.

I realized we were flirting, as on any other street, in any other place in the world.

"O," she told me then, "you don't look like such a weakling to me. Maybe you're just a choosy person. Are you North American?"

"Yes."

"It's important that you came to Leon today," she told me, "because the whole world must bear witness to all this."

It was said with a toss of her head, a little drama, and then she spread out her arms, too, so that the scarf fell backward off her forehead, and then again

she laughed, as if she had experienced such good feeling for me, and it made her feel good, too.

Her gaze, resting on my face, made my cheeks burn a little.

"If I don't buy," I asked her, "what will you do with all these bottles?"

"That's for my mother to decide."

She motioned with her chin at the bent back of a heavy woman in dark clothing who leaned far into one of the ash heaps, sorting noisily.

The woman heard us talking about her. She didn't stand up, or even turn around, but showed us her face, dark with blood, from bending over.

"*Venga*," she seemed to bark, upside down, at her daughter, who immediately left me to go toward her.

I could overhear them debating whether or not it was wise to be talking to strangers; and it was just as strange to me, in the midst of so much devastation, to be reminded of such old-fashioned attitudes of some Nicaraguan mothers with their daughters, of eyes batting, and commands, reproaches, in the middle of such a battleground.

"He's just much too old for you, this man," the woman said then; and, suddenly, as if to reproach all of us, came a spackle of automatic weapons, fired quite close by.

"Love of God," shouted another woman, hoarsely, and she ran from those ash heaps for cover, along with all the others, leaving me standing quite alone, next to a pile of bottles.

A woman had dropped a small black and silver paper fan, with a gilded plastic handle. It lay to my left in the gutter, half spread-out, less than ten feet from where I stood, its outermost blades barely touching this sticky stain of grease, or blood, which was being buzzed over by large gold and black and bluish flies.

Even though I wanted to retrieve the fan, I was afraid to move. Stood there adhering to all the empty glare of that street.

My friend Matt had told me never to run when the shooting started. The soldiers would think I was one of the rebels and shoot me down. So when the next volley of shots resounded quite close by I fell down hard against the pavement.

Hot cobblestones pressed against my belly, and chest, and cheeks. Shots came louder, closer. Some people in doorways on both sides of the street were shouting at me in Spanish to find cover, and motioning with their hands. I saw the girl and her mother huddling together in a doorway underneath a shattered Telefunken sign and remained in my exposed place on the street next to the large pile of contraband bottles and a small broken fan, and all I could think was Don't Run. [Please don't run Richard.]

The Guard jeep appeared at the intersection, and there was another volley of shots that slapped against the buildings overhead. They were not using

rubber bullets. A dust of acrid plaster chips drifted downward. A soldier fired off his whole clip like the sound of a cross-cut saw against heavy metal.

There were three soldiers sitting in the jeep, and another standing behind a 50 caliber machine gun that pointed out the rear of the vehicle.

They had propped their weapons skyward, and were just squeezing off round after round and then reloading to fire again, as if to keep all the people they passed on the streets scared.

As they turned our corner and headed down the long flat block on which I was stretched out, I saw the clear flash of a large *aquadiante* bottle in the front seat of the car being raised heavenward. Brakes screeched, and the jeep lurched tipsily forward.

The tires made a sucking sound as they came even closer. I had sprung a slow leak, was wheezing breath. I believed they would surely run right over me, if they did not shoot me, before, or afterwards.

But I had been cautioned, again and again, not to run.

That jeep came bearing down hard at me and, as if to ward off its impact, I began to yell: "*Periodista. Norte Americano periodista. Ayuda me. . .*"

But then I got up on my knees and began to move, rising higher into a crouch and running as fast as I could for the girl and her mother and the cover of their doorway.

No room where they stood so they pushed me sideways as more shots went off, and the people in the next doorway all seemed to reach out to me, at once stepping away from their covers to pull me toward them, until I was by their side, could smell them all and even feel their heat, and the touch of their hands, and bodies, the gussets of their warm breath whenever they spoke to me.

"Don't be afraid. Rest here and don't move. . . ."

A big bomb went off somewhere nearby, rattling windows, and shaking the walls of the building in which we all huddled. But none of us covered.

A stout Indian fellow next to me wagged his finger at my face: "You must not run *ever again* by yourself. You must learn to move with the others when they move. It's a matter of reflexes . . .to watch the others and do as they do. . . ."

More shots went off, as the patrol proceeded down the block, and I asked, "Are they really just firing at the sky?"

"They wish us to remain frightened of them," a woman explained, "but there are not enough of them to patrol every street always. . . ."

"You'll see," the man said, "it's happening already . . . *Mira. . .*"

And at that moment people began to step away from their doorways and were milling about in the streets once more. They were smiling, laughing. Nobody had been hurt. Some scavengers returned to their labor of sorting through the ash heaps, and others began to pile up heavy paving blocks and pieces of wrecked building to construct another new barricade.

When the last of my companions left me to go about their business, I felt a little bereft, abandoned, as if having glimpsed the grace of our common existence I could not be excluded any longer.

I wanted to follow some to their clandestine meeting places, lift cobblestones for more new barricades.

My own shadow surprised me on the sunny street. It was warring with that of a ragged young boy who was standing under my elbow, and pulling at my hand.

Smiling, he inquired would the *periodista* care to see a corpse in a grocery store window?

It had happened last night near the Hospital San Vicente.

Mira periodista venga.