

Lou Mathews

Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others

NO MAN KNOWS HIS APOTHEOSIS. CARL JUNG SAID THAT. NO MAN KNOWS his apotheosis, but I know mine. That particular deal went down in the scrubby jungle outside of Rivas. This was in Nicaragua, in 1987. I can tell you the day and even the hour. April 22, 1:00 P.M., the high point of my life.

At noon that day, the producers fired Alec Litwer-Bowen as director. Alec had recommended a two-million-dollar line of credit, to be spent in-country, which made sense. The US Embargo made the usual studio transactions impossible. When Alec arrived in Nicaragua, he handed a million dollars over to the Sandinista government. It would have been a bargain; government support in the form of reliable cars, trucks, gasoline, construction equipment, soldiers, helicopters, boats, soldiers, extras, and rare goods like plywood and other necessities for sets would be worth well beyond that sum. The bonding company, which should never have known about this transaction, got squeezed by the Reagan administration and demanded that the producers shut the movie or fire Alec. They fired Alec, at least that is what we assumed. Alec had disappeared and the studio publicists began cranking up the creative-differences-agree-to-disagree machine. It was quite a concert back in LA; the rumor machine began a bass murmur of overdoses and breakdowns while contracts and legal whistled moral turpitude. Meantime, the studio tried to recruit an A, B, or even C-list director. No one would touch it; the bad juju taint was out on this one. I was right place, right time. I was the writer, I was second-unit assistant director, I'd made a short, I spoke Spanish. Mostly, I was there. They handed me the swagger stick, the metaphorical pith helmet and megaphone. Traditionally, a transition like this would be noted by a newly stenciled parking space and a folding chair with my name on the back: *Dale Davis, Director*.

Three-D was the nickname I was ready to promote, but there was no parking space because there was no road and the chairs were plastic. This was Nicaragua. Sid Newman, the nominal line producer, handed me the contract, an alleged copy of which I hadn't read the night before, and without benefit of agent or lawyer I signed and initialed where Sid pointed, on the back of his Administrative Assistant Kevin. Kevin whirled around when I was done and whisked away the contract, and Sid handed me a whistle. "You should probably have a gun," Sid said, "to get the attention of *this* cast, but, short notice." Now it was on me. Alec was gone.

Alec Litwer-Bowen was one of the only true anarchists I have ever known. Like all

true anarchists, he loved power. Directing was the perfect job for him. Directors need the same organizational skills as generals; making a movie on location is very like a military campaign. Artistes and auteurs don't last long in the jungle.

We were shooting in Nicaragua because that was where Alec wanted to be at that particular moment in history, thumbing his nose at the Reagan administration and the Contra conceit.

We were there to shoot a movie, Alec's conceit, a remake of Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*.

I was the writer. I revered Peckinpah almost as much as Alec did and had no problem cobbling together a script, which we titled *Head-in-Bag*. Alec was coming off a hit, *Clash*, the story of the rise and breakup of that seminal punk band, and every young actor in the business wanted to work with him. We picked Jesse Gallo, suitably dissolute but without it starting to show on film, to play the lead part of Benny. He was as close as we could get, in his age group, to the magnificent Warren Oates, who originated the part and inhabited it still.

I was worried about Jesse. I thought he might go Brando on me when Alec was fired, but he rolled with it, which was sane. It would be his first lead in a studio picture; he enjoyed Nicaragua and the press coverage he was getting there, filming in that supposed combat zone. He also liked me. He'd come out of equity waiver theater in Chicago, a country that revered writers, and it *was* a tasty script.

Our first day, my first day as a director, was in Rivas. We were re-shooting a scene from two weeks before because TACA, the airline shuttling our film to Mexico City, had lost the film. Benny, confronted by gangsters on one side and his pleading girlfriend, Elita, on the other, had climbed a Malinché tree, carrying the head of Alfredo Garcia.

Now that Alec was gone, our director of photography, D. W. "Ducky" Doyle, explained his problems with the tree. Alec had loved that tree, insisted on it. Ducky, who saw the world in frames and available light, explained the tree's problem from a cameraman's perspective. It was a problem of framing, because the tree was so wide and unbalanced. The other problem was new, the tree was now in full bloom, filled with bursting orange flowers. On camera, the blooms registered like neon, and everything else in the frame, particularly the actors, looked washed out.

I made my first decision and was thrilled to hear my whim move down the chain of command.

"Lose the Malinché," Ducky called out. Geoff, the second A.D., repeated the command on his bullhorn and the Malinché was lost. We moved on to a smaller and drabber tree, one that was easier for Jesse to climb.

The new tree, a bushy Sapodilla, was in a clearing less than fifty feet from the road, and presented another set of problems. The production had been shadowed by Sandinista officials. This had been helpful, mostly. We faced no landowner's complaints, no demands for compensation by the local villagers. Police officers on motorcycles preceded our buses, garbage bags of córdobas

arrived when per diems had to be paid, but the longer we were in-country, the larger the Sandinista following. We were now shooting on a weekend, and the Commandantes and Senators and Ministers had brought their wives along. They had set up a long line of plastic chairs for the most senior couples, behind the camera, but in front of the crew. The junior officers and their wives, dressed for diplomatic parties—all starched creases, braid, lace, shining fabrics, piled hair, and teetery heels—stood behind them and waited for the filming to commence. I now understood how well Alec had intimidated them. This was the most intrusive they had been.

The crew waited patiently for me to do something, and I made a mistake. I should have gone myself, but I wanted to set up and look at the framing, so I sent our assistant director, Gabriel Hernandez, a respected Mexican veteran who had worked with Peckinpah, to request that our guests move to the opposite side of the clearing, so that the crew might do their work.

I was positioning Jesse on a likely branch, pointing out the foliage that should be trimmed, when the shouting began. I couldn't imagine Gabriel being rude, but he may have been matter-of-fact. A Commandante was being restrained, there was much head-tossing and fluttering hands amongst the wives. Several ministers were yelling at Gabriel and pointing fingers in his face. I had not seen a single Nicaraguan point with a finger the whole time I was there. They'd point with pursed lips, they'd point with their noses, but finger-pointing was unforgivably rude.

I rushed over with Ducky and tried to make sense of it. What the Commandante was continuing to scream was that no Mexican was going to tell him where to stand in his own country, as Los Chingados had been trying to do for years. Maricón Mexicanos were also mentioned, and Chilangos.

"It's that kick-down thing," Ducky said. The Nicaraguan perception was that Mexicans respected Cubans, a bit, Costa Ricans, somewhat. Everyone else in Central America, particularly Nicaraguans, were considered kickable. "We need to apologize," Ducky said, "Don't make them move. We'll move the camera and shoot from the other side." I apologized for the misunderstanding and breach of manners, Gabriel was hustled away, water and snacks were brought, and things settled down.

We set up on the other side, the crew hustling so that we wouldn't lose the light, and nailed it in two takes. Each time I called "Cut," the Sandinistas applauded. We packed up and got the hell out, heading for the coast.

We moved, cast and crew, to San Juan del Sur, a disheveled beach town with unspoiled beaches to the south, where we would film scenes of Benny washing ashore with the head of Alfredo Garcia.

The Sandinista Brass, military and civilian, moved with us. They liked movie-making, and they enjoyed the long pauses between actions, when they had time to talk to unoccupied actors. The actors were charming and interested. The law, established by Alec, was maintained: Anyone with a uniform or an

aide was treated like a producer. Since it was no longer the weekend, they were unaccompanied by their wives, and the drinking started earlier.

All of the Sandinista cohort, the stuntmen, and most of the crew stayed at the air-conditioned government hotel on the hill above the town, the Barlovento. Most of the cast followed me to the Estrella, a reeling two-story wood and tin-roofed hotel across from the beach. Tennessee Williams would have loved the joint. It was not so much painted as smeared with a copper-based green primer that the owners loved because the paint job had lasted now for two rainy seasons. The owners, Roberto and Alma Huesca, had inflated their rates for the movie-company visit, to thirty thousand córdobas, a little less than three dollars a night. Men slept six to a room on the second floor. The women were lodged downstairs in a chain-linked, chain-locked purdah enclosure. For Roberto and Alma, it was a matter of Catholic propriety and insurance. The wardrobe mistress, Mary Tate, inspected the fence and the locks and announced that she felt “Extremely valued. It’s the first time any of you ponces have shown us the respect we deserve. We deserve to be locked up, we *should* be locked up. We are sexy and dangerous and need to be caged. Just please do not tell me that I cannot drink or smoke in my cage the way that any proper English budgie is allowed.”

That first night, we all went up to the Barlovento for dinner and festivities. The usual poker game had commenced with foot-high stacks of córdobas in front of each player. Two grips, Ducky Doyle, two extras, and Jesse. They were letting Jesse win, as I had instructed and offered to pay for. I wanted him to be in a good mood for the important shot in the morning. Jesse was nodding and beaming, two toppling stacks of bills in front of him. Candles and kerosene lanterns gave a romantic cast to the scene, but it wasn’t by choice. The entire hotel was lit by candles and lanterns. The power had cut off a little after seven. An announcement was made that this was the result of yet another attack by the Contras on power lines. Some of the newly arrived were thrilled. The locals, used to their power company’s on-demand maintenance, were not. The backup generator of the hotel wouldn’t start. Two Sandinista Colonels supervised the attempt. A half hour into the procedure, they’d taken over from the very nervous maintenance crew. One had poured 151-proof rum down the throat of the carburetor, while the other pulled the starter rope. The resulting backfire set the machine ablaze and all watched, exultant, as it burned, helped by thrown copitas of rum, whenever the fire died down.

The ice crisis started around midnight. Most of us were drinking beers by that time, which had stayed reasonably luke-cold in the quiescent refrigerators, but the two colonels who had set the generator on fire had commandeered the bar’s blenders, which they hooked up, with adapters, to car batteries. They were blending and sending pitchers of sweetened rum and fruit drinks to the women of the cast and crew. The drinks were standard—piña coladas, banana, mango, papaya, and guanabana daiquiris—but they were delivered by hand, by the bowing colonels, with titles: *Daiquiri Mi Amor*, *Piña besos*, *Mango-a-go-go!*

By midnight, the bar was out of ice. The colonels had the hotel manager awakened, and the reserves of ice, which had been banked around the fish, shrimp, and shellfish in the big freezer to keep them fresh through the power outage, were confiscated. Most of the actresses left after the second or third batch of slightly shrimpy piña coladas, but the sturdier girls of design, hair, makeup, and wardrobe remained, and by one even the confiscated ice was gone.

The colonels demanded more ice. The hotel manager had wisely driven himself and his family down the hill. One of the colonels remembered the full and operative refrigerator freezer, with the generator that never failed, nearby, at a confiscated Somocista mansion, the love nest of the reviled Anastasio Somoza, not more than twenty kilometers away. They demanded transport. Instantly!

The hotel staff and even the junior officers had scattered by now, even the drunkest having sensed the tidally swelling danger. There was no question of the colonels driving themselves. They were triumphantly drunk and their car batteries had been killed by blenders.

Only Solano remained, loyal Solano. Solano was one of the first taxi drivers that the production company had hired. He was assigned to the production designer, Horacio O'Reilly. Horacio, UCLA-trained but Peruvian-born, understood what it meant to be a Patrón, and the first thing he asked Solano was what would he like from the United States. Solano asked for a typewriter. He wanted to be a writer. George Orwell, Lorca, and Ruben Dario were his heroes. Horacio provided both an electric Smith-Corona and a manual Olivetti for the power outages. Typewriters delivered, Solano awaited Horacio's whim, night and day, until the end of days, to the gates of hell.

Solano, small, meek, dressed in his all-purpose white and silver-striped track suit, was napping on a sofa next to the dining room when the senior Colonel, Onofre Buendia, came roaring in. "My driver is gone!" the Colonel shouted. "I need another driver to get me ice. You!" He pointed to Solano who sat up from the sofa like a mole trapped in the sun. His small fists scrubbed his eyes.

A kind of dialogue followed. Solano asked if Don Horacio had ordered this. The Colonel insisted on ice. Solano agreed, nodding, of course, "As long as Don Horacio gives me permission."

"We are leaving," the Colonel shouted. "Fuck that Mexican, Horacio."

"Of course," Solano said, nodding, almost bowing, "as long as Don Horacio says so." The Colonel nudged his pistol against Solano's ear.

I had been sleeping in a booth in the dining room and had awakened to the shout of, ". . . Ice. You!"

By the time I had tottered forward, Solano was on his knees, the Colonel was cocking his .45, the blunt square barrel against Solano's forehead, and I did what I thought needed to be done.

"Solano!" I barked. The Colonel wheeled on me, the .45 was very much alive in his hand. "Solano," I said. "Go and get the car."

The Colonel looked at me, squinting and sideways. "I am the director," I said.

He straightened. "I know who you are. That is not important." But it was, the gun had left Solano's forehead.

"Go and get the Colonel's car," I told Solano.

The Colonel gave me a wobbly smile and his arm dropped. He sat down in one of the springy leather booths and spread like spilled pudding, as though he had just lost many bones. "These people," he said.

"Let me take care of this," I said.

I followed Solano out to the parking area, to his tattered Datsun, and we fled.

We hid the car under a canvas, in a boat shed near the beach, and, with special dispensation, we ourselves hid in the depths of the women's padlocked lower confine of the Estrella. There, surrounded by fragrant, drunken, lightly snoring women on the cots above us, terrified as we were, Solano and I went to sleep. Solano made only one comment, when it seemed we had escaped. "It is as they say." He held up the book he kept in the glove box to read while he waited, George Orwell's *Granja de Animales*. "Some animals are more equal than others."

At dawn, Monday, the Sandinista brass were gone, and so were our superiors from the studio and the line producers. The company assembled and we went to shoot the scenes which turned out to be our last.

A week before, in the still waters of Lake Managua, Alec Litwer-Bolton had shot his last scene. Benny, whirling the bag containing the head of Alfredo Garcia like a blackjack, had knocked out his guard and jumped from the deck of the gangster's yacht into the Pacific Ocean.

A week later, in the ruffled surf of the actual Pacific Ocean, on a wild beach where driftwood etched through a fog, we completed the action. We shot nine takes of Benny, rolling ashore with the head of Alfredo Garcia. Gorgeous stuff. We spent the rest of the day in the jungle on a series of chase shots and gunfire through the trees.

The newly cut road back to San Juan was so rough that most of the cast, who had suffered the drive out, elected to walk the three kilometers back to San Juan along the beach. By the time we got back, at sundown, they'd pulled the plug on the picture.

Sid Newman delegated, which didn't surprise me. Not Sid, but his Administrative Assistant Kevin, met us at the Estrella. He had elaborately organized transport schedules, per diems, plane tickets, waivers, and checks; the checks were handed over once the waivers were signed.

Kevin was a regular little company asshole for a while. He wouldn't talk to me. Said I was a special case and was to sit tight until tomorrow, when Sid would arrive and inform me of my status. As director of a defunct movie. I didn't need Sid to tell me that.

Kevin finally got shifted, when he was persuading Tyrell "Crack Back" Tyler to sign his waiver. Crack Back, before he'd started acting, had been a twelve-year

outside linebacker for the Bears, and Kevin was Chicago born and bred. He worshipped the man.

While Crack Back was signing and initialing where Kevin pointed, Kevin chattered on about what a huge Bears fan he was, and what a Crack Back fan he had been as a kid.

Crack Back signed the last page, guaranteeing that he would not sue any of the twelve named producers, the studio, or the US government, or ever talk about the alleged movie, and looked hard at Kevin. “You from Chicago?” Crack Back stood up.

“Totally,” Kevin said.

“Then why the fuck,” Crack Back wondered, “are you siding with the enemy? We had a good movie to make here. Been a change in persona for me.” Crack Back was cast as a hit man, with gay overtones, the Gig Young part in the original. Kevin wilted. He covered his head and started to rock and sway.

Crack Back headed for the shuttle back to Managua. The shuttle driver held open the door. “¡Vamanos!” Crack Back said. That surprised me. The man had lived eight weeks in Nicaragua and learned only one Spanish phrase, “Como se llama, Mama?”

Kevin was stricken. Once he’d collected his last set of signatures and locked them in the hotel safe at the Barlovento, he fell apart. After his fourth Nica Libré, he told me what he knew.

The Reaganistas had sources *very* high up in the Sandinista government. They knew about Alec’s contribution to the local economy before the studio did. The squeeze had started from on high and down low.

A number of tax audits were initiated, some studio tax credits that had gone unquestioned in previous years got questioned. One French director and one English actress, who were scheduled to film the studio’s “quality” picture for the year, were denied visas. Those were some of the sticks.

Then the carrots were held out. Whatever losses the studio might incur for shutting down *Head-In-Bag*—and they would be small, since it was a negative pick-up deal—would be more than offset by the lack of scrutiny on a studio merger that had major antitrust implications.

It seemed like shooting a flea with an elephant gun to me, but things had heated up on the Honduran border. A CIA pilot had been captured with a load of Contra arms when his plane crashed in Nicaragua, and then a nice California kid, Benjamin Lindner, had been killed by the Contras in the small northern village where he taught kids to ride a unicycle and introductory clown and mime. Also, the reporters who had followed us during the shoot were presenting a picture of Nicaragua that was not as threatening as the Reaganista version. They wanted us gone and the memory of us fading. It wouldn’t be hard.

“I’m really sorry,” Kevin said. “I know it would have been a good movie. I can’t believe Crack Back Tyler hates me.”

I nodded. “Maybe I can help there. I’ll tell him it wasn’t your fault. One thing he’d like to know, and so would I, is do you know what happened to the footage we’ve already shot?”

“Oh, man,” Kevin said, “Oh, man. That was fucked up. They refused to pay for processing.” All of our footage had gone to Mexico City to be developed and processed. When the studio refused to pay for processing, Ciné Alianza had exposed and tossed the film. None of us would even have a frame to add to our reels. Nothing we had filmed would exist beyond memory. We’d done theater.

It was a Friday. The seventh of May. Most of the crew, stunts, and production took the first shuttles to Managua. About half the cast and a quarter of the crew stayed on for one last night together in San Juan del Sur. We were banned from the Barlovento. The producers refused to pay the suddenly inflated governmental rates and the Sandinistas weren’t happy with us on a personal and political level. We all shifted to the Estrella, which was exactly the right place to be at that very particular time.

Nobody slept much. Dinner was delivered, serially, from the palapa restaurants on the beach. As fish were unloaded from the boats, they were gutted, scaled, grilled over a wood fire, doused in the surf, grilled on the other side, doused again, and delivered, with black beans, fried plantains, and lime and mango salsa. The fish was charred, flaky and delicious, seasoned only with the ocean. Saffron rice and skewers of shrimp arrived, along with the sympathetic staff of the Barlovento, who still liked us. Someone at a farm well away from town had been informed that Los Yanquis had lost their jobs, which was true, assumed we were hungry, roasted a pig, and carried it to town on a heroic litter, with roasted corn and small, uncharacteristic tamales filled with raisins and citron. Beer arrived in washtubs filled with ice, bottles of Flor de Caña were passed, and the feast was laid out on a thatched tablecloth of banana leaves on the sand. The blenders in the palapa restaurants whirled continually, and pitchers of mango, papaya, pineapple, banana, guava, guanabana, and lime juice arrived. There was no ice, aside from the washtubs, and no one cared.

We moved to the Estrella around two. It was pleasant on the beach, but the wind carried the music away, and we craved closeness, on our last night, and intensity. Nearly thirty people squeezed into a room for six, the largest upstairs dormer room, singing, stomping out the beat on the floor. There was some real talent in that room: three guitars, a mandolin, a saxophone, tambourines, maracas, and bongos.

We went through our Motown phase. Chicago Blues phase, Bo Diddley, Otis Redding, then all twenty-six verses of Marty Robbins’ “El Paso.” That took us almost two hours to complete, because every time we blew a verse, Ducky Doyle, our formerly gentle director of photography, made us drink a shot and start over. He became a martinet, dictating beats and pauses with a rolled up *Barricada* newspaper. If you jumped a verse, he whacked you back into time.

Outside on the street, the locals who couldn’t crowd into the room with us clapped and sang along. Around three, while we were singing “Peggy Sue,” everyone started stomping so hard, in unison, that the flaking paint began jumping off the walls; you could feel the floors, and the joists, and the walls and

floors below us, bouncing and shaking.

Kevin, of all people, finally got us to sing his favorite, Bo Diddley's "Who Do You Love?" In his high, reedy, but true tenor, Kevin sang, "I gotta tombstone hand and a graveyard mind / I'm just twenty-two and I don't mind dying." And when we all had swung into the chorus, "Who do you love? Who do you love?" Kevin started to cry. I hoped the moment would stay with him but I didn't think it would and another side of me knew he would get over it fast. He had a future in the business.

At the survivor's breakfast on the beach—fruit, leftover tamales, and, miraculously, coffee—one of the extras, a Bakersfield kid named Sacha Howells, who had been a Quaker volunteer in the north, came up to me, grinning. "You guys should go into the exterminating business."

He'd been staying at a hostel up the street and we'd made so much noise he couldn't sleep. He came down to stand in the street with the rest of the crowd.

"Around three," Sacha said, "when you really got going, that whole building started to sway. It was bouncing before, but then it started to sway. When it started moving side to side, the cucharachas and geckos and snakes started crawling out of the eaves and dropping into the street. When you started on 'Who Do You Love?' the rats started running out the front door and diving out the windows. Look, take a look there." He pointed to a concrete pipe across the street, beside the Estrella. There were a lot of small furry bodies in the shadows there. "If the place don't fall down today," Sacha said, "they can sell it as the only bug-free, rat-free hotel in San Juan del Sur."

Sid Newman arrived that morning, ready for the day in a way we survivors never could be. He got nearly everyone else onto the Last FREE Shuttle to Managua—and that was the way he described it—by four in the afternoon. After that, it was understood, the Decliners—the term he used—were on their own.

Sid had waivers for me to sign, and when I wouldn't he sat and tried to reason. "Look," Sid said, "the studio won't hold any of this against you. It wasn't your fuck up. They just need to know you won't be part of whatever trouble Alec tries to stir up stateside. I can't promise anything, but I think they may have something in mind for you when you get back. And I'll tell you, Alec doesn't have anything good to say about you."

I knew all that was probably true, except the part about the studio having something in mind for me. Alec probably was poor-mouthing me, but I still cared about the movie we didn't get to make and if I got the chance to tell my side of it, I would. I have been accused, in the past, of having an exaggerated sense of justice and fair play. Which meant that I still believed in the concept.

I declined and Sid invoked the magic phrase again. "On your own," Sid said. He handed me my plane tickets, which were for a TACA flight, leaving in a week.

"Can I get an earlier flight?"

Sid smiled and smiled. "You can try. If you got cash. You can't turn these in."

I got the gist. They wanted me in-country, until there wouldn't be any press reception awaiting my arrival. A week would be enough.

Kevin minded me for two days and then handed me off to a low-level Sandinista press officer, a would-be poet named Dionisio. Kevin had been the stable-goat; once I was considered secure, Dionisio was good enough. Neither Sid, nor Kevin, nor any of the Sandinista hierarchy, informed Dionisio as to what I had been doing in-country. He only knew that I was a writer and handled me as a journalist. Dionisio seemed to have the impression that I had just arrived, and gave me the tour. I didn't have the heart to disabuse him. I was pretty numb by then and along for the ride.

Dionisio showed me the famous volcanoes. We had a voyage on Lake Managua, and he expressed an interest in the freshwater sharks that we didn't see. He was baffled by his superiors' lack of interest in his poetry. On my last day in Nicaragua, we visited Berta Ocampo, the novia de Sandino, which affected Dionisio so strongly that he had to abandon me at a restaurant, *El Volcan*, outside Managua. I took two taxis to the airport, the second after the first dropped a driveshaft near the memorial to the Heroes of the Revolución.

I sat in the shadowed recesses of the airport, on a backless bench in a corrugated iron building that had been built and rebuilt on the architectural principle of lean-to sheds, and waited for my flight to Mexico City, which was now delayed four hours incoming from Mexico City.

The afternoon rains had commenced, drumming like cavalry on the metal roof. The wet season began in late April and the rain came down on schedule—two to five, every afternoon. It was startling, the first time. The taxi I was in had rusted-out floors, and when we hydroplaned into a dip and stalled the water crept up beyond the floors and we had to crouch on the seat until the rain stopped. It was monumental, pounding rain, drops the size of tennis balls with a noise and fury that made you believe in an Old Testament God.

We had arrived in April, to shoot in the dry season. The first day, when we left Managua, the poverty of the place hit you like a fist. In our half-full chartered bus on the road to Granada we passed hundreds of hitchhikers—soldiers, small children, schoolgirls in uniform, women on their way to market with baskets and bundles, well-dressed men and women, some carrying briefcases. The traffic slowed to a crawl as cars stacked up behind overloaded buses and open trucks, smoking and laboring on the slightest grade. Passengers clung to the sides and roofs, bumpers and side mirrors, and hung out the open windows and doors, anyplace they could get a handhold.

It was the dry season and the burning season. Sugar cane, Nicaragua's main crop, was slash-and-burn farming. Everywhere there were fires: fires in the fields, cooking fires inside dark houses, brush fires in gullies, inexplicable fires in ditches along the road and spilling from the shoulder to the roadway.

I thought the rainy season would somehow cleanse all that but it didn't. The sun was always behind those clouds and once the rain had stopped the scent of poverty—woodsmoke, shit, and the dead fish of dead Lake Managua—would return. A fetid atmosphere took the place of the sharp smells of the dry season.

The rain was rolling now, marching over the roof in cadence. At the airport bar, the only patrons, three soldiers with AK-47s propped against the bar, looked up as it reached its crescendo, and then they returned to their beers. It was a true Nicaraguan tableau. The three soldiers, boys really, maybe sixteen, sipped their beers through straws punched into plastic bags. It startled me, the first time I saw this in the market at Masaya. I thought I was seeing boys carrying urine samples, until I saw them drink. After the revolution, the bottling plants shut down while the owners moved to Miami to nurture their portfolios until a sensible government returned. Beer was cheap, bottles were precious, and bartenders automatically poured your purchase into a bag unless you wanted to pay a premium—three times the price of the beer. They were genuinely nice people, Nicaraguans. I hated that some hope had been held out to them by us.

I sat there, in that airport in Managua, surrounded by the odors of rotting fruit and the fungicides they sprayed on incoming passengers, knowing that I was as far away and as exotic as I would ever be. I dreaded boarding the plane, because once I did I would no longer be in-country. I would no longer be even a fired director.

The three boy soldiers had finished their beers and come out into the courtyard behind the terminal. They leaned their AK-47s against the wall and went to the edge of the courtyard to piss on the trunk of a Malinché tree, dropping its orange blossoms on the cobbles. Boys need a target.

The whole time I was in Nicaragua, I tried to get someone to explain to me why this particular tree was called a Malinché. In Florida, in Cuba, in Puerto Rico, in the tropical regions of Mexico, the tree is called a Flamboyán. Only in Nicaragua is it called a Malinché, and no one could explain why. In Mexico, Malinché is a cursed word, the name of the woman who accompanied Hernán Cortés in his conquests.

It would be six more hours before the plane that would take me to Mexico City would arrive, refuel, and turn around. In two more hours I could enjoy the leatherette seats of the Mexico City airport and one-dollar bottles of Bohemia with a glass, and then there would be a four-and-a-half-hour flight on Aeromexico to Los Angeles, all the time knowing that when I touched down I would be just another writer in turn-around.