Holy Week

During Holy Week my hometown is a ghost town, with medieval trimmings. Holy Week in León is hot, blistering hot: the pavement is hot, the dust is hot, the car seats are hot, the park benches are hot, even the water out of the tap is hot. Everything in that town is hot during Holy Week. The hair on your head is hot, your thoughts are hot—believe me, Holy Week in León is hot! Look, it's so hot there are practically no cars out in the street. In the center of town there aren't even people—they all go to the sea. I'm talking about the middle class, who live where the streets are paved, where the rich people live, in the center of the town.

You know it's hot when you see the dogs trotting along the edge of the sidewalk exactly where the people walk, because that's where there's a little bit of shade, and even the shade is hot. You also see lots of dogs in the streets, panting along, almost running, with glassy eyes and foaming at the mouth; rabid dogs that run in the street, because people chase them off if they come onto the sidewalk. These dogs just run, pointed straight ahead, never turning, not even to look around—because I guess they'd be even hotter if they turned

to look around. I wonder where they go when they get to the far side of town, those rabid dogs. So that's how hot it is in León.

Everything was shut. The businesses, even the houses were shut up. The only place open was Prío's on the corner of the square in an old colonial house with a double-leaf corner door that always stood wide open. Sometimes a breeze through the trees in the park would cool the air, and it would be less hot. (I want to convince whoever's reading this that León is hot. I'm not making this up: it really is hot.)

Prío's, as I was saying, was a two-story colonial house with outer balconies looking out over the square. Inside were about ten tables with rickety chairs, and I remember he had an old loudspeaker that still had power to be heard all over the park. Though usually nobody was in the park, except for one or two people from the local parish sitting on a bench under a shade tree. Mostly these people had nothing to do but watch the scattered cars go by; at the first distant rumble of a car, before it even turned the corner, they perked up, looking to see who it would be, and when it came in sight they followed it with their eyes until it turned the corner and disappeared and was only a noise again . . . and they were left waiting for the next car, to see who'd be coming in that. For as long as I can remember this has been a great way to kill time during Holy Week in my hometown.

Prío was famous because he played classical records; he also served mouth-watering fresh-fruit sherbets and first-rate "burro's milk" candies, dark sugarcane candies that are very tiny and melt in your mouth.

At sixty Prío was a powerhouse, a short, light-skinned guy whom they accused of being anticlerical because he blasted the songs from *Jesus Christ Superstar* at the highest volume on his speaker. The film had played at the González theater on the far corner of the park, and the little nuns from the La Asunción school (on the third corner of the square) went to see it and stomped out in the middle, complaining that it was heresy

and an insult to the Lord. That's why they were so mad at Prío—because you could hear that music all the way over at their school, where all the girl boarders in León were studying.

Prío was known as "Cap'n" Prío, and he boasted like crazy about how Rubén Darío used to drink beer at his place and how once when he didn't have any money he wrote a poem to pay his bill. Whenever any big shot came in Prío would trot out this poem and shove it under his nose. Prío's in León was more than just a landmark.

The other place you could go during those dismal Holy Weeks in León was to Lezama's pool hall, a half block down from Prío's toward the university—which was totally dead; the only sign of life was on the walls, where the students had painted anti-Somoza slogans—since there was nobody, not a soul left around. And of course Doña Pastora's little bar was shut up tight.

Everybody gathered at Lezama's—people out of the slums, workers, country folk who came in to spend Holy Week with their families in the barrios. Their relatives would put them up so they could take part in the procession of San Benito and the Holy Burial on Good Friday.

Sometimes I think the rich took off for the sea or shut up their houses just to make sure they wouldn't get caught up in that swarming mass of poor people in the processions—decked out in shirts, pants, and skirts of every color you can imagine. The rich, you see, have always set themselves apart.

Sooner or later, to escape the clouds of dust stirred up by the wind in the slums, some of these poor people from the barrios would start trudging toward the center of town, keeping to the shady part of the sidewalk, until they reached the pool hall. By the time you got to Lezama's you were wringing wet, your shoes were coated with dust, and sweaty bits of black dirt would flake off if you rubbed your hands. Though a few looked elsewhere for a bit of fun, inevitably, as if drawn by gravity, everyone ended up at Lezama's.

Lezama's pool hall had about six or seven tables, one of which, the one right by the door, was for games of carambola; that was for the best players. The hall measured about 50 square feet, with one end taken up by the counter. Behind the counter stood Lezama—a fat man whom I never once saw laugh—and two loud-mouthed women who were serving up drinks like robots; there were also two iceboxes bursting with beer and soft drinks, plus an adding machine.

During Holy Week at least 150 people were jam-packed into the hall, and so many bodies just in off the hot street made it very close and stuffy inside. You pushed your way in from the street through a slatted swinging door, just like the ones you see in saloons in cowboy movies. And *bam!* a sweltering blast of heat, even hotter than in the street, hit you right smack in the face. It was like stepping into a steam bath—you felt limp, drowsy, but there was nothing for it, you had no choice: you either stayed where you were in the hot and dusty barrio, contemplating your misery and wallowing in boredom, or you put up with a bit more heat and could play pool, drink ice-cold beer, and best of all, there was not one speck of dust.

The minute you were inside and swallowed up in the stale air you'd start to make out the different tones and variations of the simultaneous *cla pra pra pon pon bom bom* of the pool balls. And sure enough, that *clic* of a scratched shot.

At the first table, like clockwork—Curro. The best player of all. Master of the carambola—banking shots off one, two, three, or four cushions. Concentrated, imperturbable in the racket, with sweat pouring from his arms, his face, and his back, swigging a little beer after every shot, taking on any and all bettors, or swooping down on some unsuspecting pigeon. You better believe we held our breath when Curro solemnly geared up to hit the ball—50 córdobas could be riding on that shot, and in our flat-out broke state, to win or lose 50 or 100 córdobas in one shot was something. Lezama, unsmiling behind the counter, pretended not to be interested, but whenever it was Curro's turn he watched like a hawk out of the corner of his eye.

The roar from the other tables was nonstop, and the voices of the players rose up above the racket of dozens of colliding pool balls: "Do you see that, you've got a perfect shot there; that fifteen is a tough nut to crack!" "Stand back, papa, this is a job for grownups!" "Go ahead, just put the ball in with your hand; you'd like that, eh, chief?" "So you think you've got a shoo-in there. Ha!" "You like picking on babies, don't you?" "Easy now, easy." "Did you like that one, sweetheart?" "Shoot pool, shoot pool." And they set up the tables again.

There were four ceiling fans, but you'd never know it except for the noise. Because no matter how fast they whirled, no matter how they creaked and groaned, you couldn't feel even a puff of cool air. That noise was only good to whirl the jumble of separate sounds into one sticky sound that would hit the walls, bounce off the felt, and finally end up by making you feel even hotter.

Lezama's was a Tower of Babel, a circus, a madhouse. It was hot, noisy, and reeking with the stink of piss. You came in looking for some fun, and finally you would leave, you would have to leave. Do you see what I'm saying? In León there was nowhere to go. Even the whorehouses were shut. The whores in León have always been superreligious; they were all pretty much God-fearing women. They didn't fuck on Holy Days, let me tell you. Good luck finding a whore on Good Friday in León! They started fucking again on Holy Saturday. All through Holy Week the whores didn't fuck; the bars didn't open; the Chinese restaurants were shut. And to top it all off, you couldn't even play kickball. Because that would be kicking the Good Lord and offending him and so . . . what could you do? You could go to Lezama's. There was no place else.

I remember it was during Holy Week that I joined the Frente Sandinista, right after I graduated from high school. It was around March or April of 1968, after the massacre of January 1967. I was with some friends, I remember, walking down the street on our way to study. It was dawn, really early in the morning, when suddenly, out of nowhere a couple of

sons-of-bitch Guardsmen stopped us in the street and put us up against the wall and the whole bit. That was the day of the massacre of Managua, but we didn't know it was going on, since there was nothing about it on the radio or in the papers.

When I was a little boy, there was a bar in my barrio that belonged to a fat lady who was always beating up on her old man; it was called Dimas's bar. There were always drunken brawls going on in this bar and the Guard would come in and start roughing up the drunks. That was my first impression of the Guard. They would beat up the drunks; they were like savages, bashing them in the face with the butts of their guns. You could see the blood. It left me sick with fear. I was scared of the blood. Blood's horrible when you're little, right? The fact is I was scared shitless of the drunks and the brawls, though I got a kick out of them when the Guard wasn't there, because drunks are hilarious when they're fighting.

I had my first run-in with the Guard when I was a student at the university, but it was not a direct confrontation—I would have died of fright. My dad was bigger than me and I knew the Guard had got the better of him. But that wasn't what made me join the Frente. A lot of things went into it.

First, my dad came from an opposition family; he was an active member of the Conservative Party. I remember one time Agüero came to our barrio and spoke at a meeting from up on top of a table. Agüero was an old, bald-headed guy with a gigantic adam's apple. The next thing I knew my dad was up on the table beside him holding an electric cord with a dangling lightbulb. The light went out and everything got dark. So my dad yelled, "Turn on that light!" and all the neighbors started yelling, "Turn on that light, turn on that light!" I had the feeling I was the son of a very important person, because everybody repeated what he said. And the light came back on.

Next there was my connection with Juan José Quezada. We had known each other since high school, but we weren't really close until we were students together in our first year at the university. Later, we both went on to study law.

Juan José, the son of a doctor who never made any money, was one of those rare personalities. He was very tall but not gawky, and lean and wiry like a foreigner, a German type. He was light, with very fine features, a bit like those classical Greek statues. Curly hair. It wasn't blond, but it wasn't black either; he was definitely a good-looking guy. But his way of dressing was old-fashioned. He always had a special fragrance about him that I think was his brilliantine hair cream. (They sold this stuff smeared on little scraps of paper; it came in red or green or blue and the saleslady would scoop it out for you with a wooden stick.)

Also I remember he was the only one in those days who wore trousers with waist pleats, which was already out of style then (though now it's the John Travolta fashion). And he wore sackcloth slacks, with his shirt hanging out; he only tucked it in on special occasions when we insisted, so he would put on his only other pair of slacks, which were black Dacron and of a really good cut. Of course, since he always wore his shirt out and his slacks were so loose-fitting, you had no idea of the muscular strength of his body until you saw him naked or in his swimsuit.

I admired Juan José for a number of reasons. He was an expert in karate and judo, a killer in karate. You better believe I admired his physical strength, his toughness. Before Juan José left to hijack the Lanica jet, he came by my house to say goodbye, but he never told me why he was leaving. He came over to ask if he could borrow my camera, which he took away with him. I was a bit suspicious, or I should say, I knew he was in the Frente and that something was up, because when he left he said to me, "Okay, Skinny, 'Free Homeland or Death.' " That's what he said. I thought he might want the camera—since he was a bit strange, or you might say a bit crazy—I thought he might want it for something out of the ordinary connected with the Frente. That was the last time I ever saw him or the camera. He hung it around his neck to look more like a tourist when he got on the plane. I found this out be-

cause Federico told me later, and he was with him on the plane. It was Juan José who recruited me into the Frente.

As a kid at the university I had already started to hear things, to listen. I liked what was going on, and I started taking part in demonstrations and assemblies, but not as a member of any student political group. On the one hand, I was attracted by all this because it was against the dictatorship, against Somoza, against the Guard; on the other hand, it was a question of class. I was very conscious of being from a working-class family, so when they talked at the university about injustice, about poverty, I thought of my own barrio, which was a poor barrio.

There were only about six houses on my block; some were of wood and others were made out of mud and whitewashed, like the house where Doña Lupe lived; she was an old lady so we called her Doña Lupita; she was married to Don Candido. When they whitewashed her house, we kids would slide the palms of our hands over the whitewash, then smear our faces. We made such a racket there screwing around smearing our faces that Doña Lupita would come out and chase us with a bull's-hide whip. But she was old and couldn't catch us.

So she went to complain to my mom, who told us we had no sense or judgment and should go straight home and start sprinkling the yard to keep the dust clouds down. Because our street didn't have asphalt or paving stones, in the summer huge dust clouds blew up. And when you were eating, a fine film of dust settled onto your plate; we covered our plates with our hands, but the dust still got through, and when we ate it would grit in our teeth. My mom used to say: "Eat, hurry and eat, or more cinnamon will rain down on your plate."

Of course, you are marked by your background. And the Student Revolutionary Front (Frente Estudiantil Revolucionaria, FER) followed a class line. That was my kind of ball game. The funny thing is that Juan José came along and recruited me for the Frente, and then Edgard Munguía, later

known as El Gato, recruited me for FER, not knowing that Juan José had already recruited me into the Frente.

One day Juan José came to me and said: "Skinny, look . . . uh . . . do you think you might be interested in a greater commitment to the people and to the organization?" Blood of Christ! I thought, I know this shit, I know where this guy is coming from. I knew in my gut, sooner or later this had to happen; I'd heard talk of it I don't know how many times. Especially from the Social Christians, the professors, the fathers who sat down for a heart-to-heart talk with their daughters and sons who were coming to study in León and live in big fashionable houses and eat lunch at Mama Concha's. They would warn their kids to steer clear of politics. Because politics gets you nowhere but into jail or the cemetery. Because politics is for grownups, not half-baked kids with no job and no income. Above all they should not get mixed up with the people in FER or the people in CUUN (Consejo Universitario de la Universidad Nicaragua, The University of Nicaragua Student Council), who were sympathizers of Russia and Fidel Castro. Besides which all communists were atheists. They should keep totally away from CUUN and from FER, because CUUN and FER were manipulated by the Frente, which was full of communists and Russians and Cubans whose sole purpose was to send people into the mountains to be slaughtered like sheep. Get mixed up with CUUN and you were sent straight to FER and from FER straight to the Frente to be packed right off to the mountains. All this raced through my mind.

I also thought: Juan José is such a good person, how could he be mixed up in a thing like that? But then, shit! If Juan José's involved it must mean the people back of him aren't so bad! But never mind good or bad, I was scared shitless of getting myself killed. I still had a dim hope that what he was saying wasn't really what I thought. So I asked him, "What are you saying, with CUUN or with FER?" "No," he said, "with the Frente." Then he added a word that made me even more

nervous: "No, hombre, with the Church," which was a code name for the Frente. That was my first major decision. I knew what could happen to me. But since nothing had happened yet . . . You numb yourself, because you don't want to think about that. Because it's better not to. Because if you do think about it your heart pounds, though nobody knows it. And the thought passes, and you're calm again. An inner contradiction is being played out. But as time goes by what you are doing hits you—even, even when you're screwing.

I imagined that if I said yes they would send me to plant bombs. And just a little while ago René Carrión had put a bomb in Pancho Papi's mother's house, and they had murdered him in prison. And then the mountains . . . Remember, the massacre of Pancasán was still very recent. I thought of so many things, and the more my imagination ran wild the more scared I got.

But you'd better believe I was perfectly composed in front of Juan José. I couldn't let him think I was a coward. Still, though I thought of all those things, I also thought of my barrio. Remember, I didn't have any firm political convictions. I wasn't a theoretician, not even a theoretician! Worse, I had serious doubts about whether Marxism was a good thing or a bad thing. Finally, more out of confidence in Juan José than out of any personal conviction, "Sure, hombre," I said, "certainly." It was more or less a question of manhood. What I mean is, I knew what I wanted. I wanted to fight the dictatorship. But I wasn't very sure, and not only that, I had a sort of fear or doubt, or who knows what I felt, about seeing that commitment through to its final consequences.

Political steadfastness came about little by little. Of course, there are compañeros who've had different experiences. But this was my case, this is what happened to me.

Juan José slapped me on the back and grinned. "Good," he said. "Now I'm going to put you in contact with somebody on such and such a day at a certain time. A guy's going to come by the corner opposite the Zaragoza Church, a short guy,

about twenty, you may know him, curly hair, short, combed back, goggle-type glasses with a gold bridge. He's going to say, 'Are you Omar Cabezas?' And I want you to answer, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, the one who went to San Ramón.' "

I went to the spot. And the guy came by and said, "How's it going, Omar?" as if we were old friends. But it was the first time I'd set eyes on him, and I couldn't think of a thing to say. I didn't recognize him because he had changed more than me. He was an old school chum from San Ramón School, from the primary grades. He'd been studying for the priesthood in the seminary in Managua, and later on in Honduras. Then he left the seminary and joined the guerrillas: Leonel Rugama. My first superior in the Frente.

I didn't know for sure it was him until a compañero came by—Manuel Noguera, a friend of mine with a fantastic memory for faces.

He came up, said hello, then turned to Leonel and said, "Hey, what's up, Leonel?" But Leonel had told me his name was Marcial Ocampo. "What do you mean, Leonel?" he shot back. "My name's Marcial." "Now quit shitting me, you're Leonel Rugama. Don't you remember? We were students together at San Ramón!" Holy shit! I thought, It's Leonel Rugama! No doubt about it. I remembered he still owed me 20 pesos for bread. He had been a boarder at San Ramón School, and I lived at home. So he would ask me to buy him 2 pesos of bread from the vendor who came by my house every morning, and he would pay me at the end of the week. It was all done in friendship. Then all of a sudden he was gone from San Ramón, and I never got my 20 pesos.

Leonel always had a single aim, and as he matured this came to be the basic trait of his personality. Leonel would always pose the question of what it meant to be a man—I don't mean in the macho sense, but in the sense of someone who takes on historical responsibility, a commitment to others. Someone who gives everything for the happiness of others. Leonel's guiding star at that time was Comandante Ernesto

Che Guevara, who had been killed only a few months earlier. Leonel based almost all of his political education of me at that time on this one thing—on man's responsibility to raise up others out of poverty and exploitation, and to rise to a higher level on the revolutionary scale. Of course, he also talked to me about historical materialism. I knew a little about it already through some pamphlets I'd read at the university.

Also I remember a political debate at the university. I joined one of the discussion circles that had formed, and Leonel was at the center of the debate. Leonel was Marxist-Leninist and anticlerical. I remember what he said to the group of compañeros that had gathered around to talk. He spoke with a frown: "We have to be like Che . . . be like Che . . . be like Che." His gestures, his mannerisms, his whole way of speaking, all that plus the explosive charge he had inside him, hit me right in the center of the brain: "to be like Che . . . to be like Che . . ." I came away from the university with that phrase running over and over in my mind like a tape recording. I can still see Leonel's gestures, the expression on his face, the determined way he spoke those words. "To be like Che . . . to be like Che." Of course I never imagined the influence it would have on me later, because, in fact, it was only later that I started studying Che. And this touches on something I really want to say, and I'm not in the least ashamed to say it: I know and came to Sandino through Che. Because I think that in Nicaragua in order to be like Che you have to be a Sandinista. There is no other path for the revolution in Nicaragua.

Strength and Numbers

Well, I started working. And from that day on I haven't stopped. You know how I felt then? It was like being a little boy when they take you to school for the first time; it was as if that very day marked the end of your childhood happiness. Because you have to become responsible. Something like that happens when you join the Frente, but on another level, less to do with happiness. Because if you are serious and if, as Che said, the organization you are joining is a revolutionary organization, and the revolution is a real revolution, then you're in to stay—until victory or death. Once you join, and as your work and responsibilities multiply, it's like entering a whirlwind. Inside a spiral, right? Because isn't a spiral just a series of revolutions in an evolutionary sense? And you're in to the hilt—you're totally screwed!—and glad of it. Finding houses for compañeros in the underground, or for meetings, or storing things, or for mail drops; coming up with cars, car repair shops; getting information about who Somoza's informants were spying on houses of girl friends of the Guard. So I started to work, doing everything they asked me to do and everything I thought needed to be done.

At that time there weren't any elaborate underground orga-

nizations, so the work each person did as an individual counted for a tremendous amount in laying the bases for the later advancement of the work. In León the Frente was just Leonel, Juan José, El Gato Munguía, and Camilo. Remember, this was after the defeat of Pancasán. Really, it was a very difficult time. To decide to join the Frente in those days, looking back now with hindsight, was a very extraordinary thing to do, I really believe that.

The decision to join the Frente had a lot to do, I think, with our practice of compartmentalization, which meant that none of the compañeros knew the details of the organization as a whole. All you knew is what you heard, and the Frente made a lot of noise. We had posters plastered all over the streets, on the walls; we robbed banks, which all the radio stations reported while the whole country hung on the *beep-beep beep-beep-beep* of those famous flashes. With news like that going out to the whole country we saw ourselves as much bigger than we really were through the magnifying glass of publicity. That was beautiful stuff.

I went to Mass in the cathedral of León just to hear what people would be saying in the church lobby after the service—the same sort of thing you'd hear in the stadium before a game. Or on the steps of the building of Letters and Sciences at the university, or in car repair shops, or in the barbershop when the barber was talking to the guy in the chair beside you. And deep down inside you said to yourself, "If they only knew I was in the Frente!"

Now here's something interesting: armed actions of any revolutionary vanguard not only strengthens the masses spiritually and politically, I mean, their effect isn't just outside the organization, but within the ranks, too, raising the fighting spirit of the militants. It's an incredibly delicious thing, and you've got to live it to understand it completely. In secret, in total silence, you know who you are: the vanguard.

All this publicity after hitting the masses bounced back to us, and we had ourselves convinced that the Frente was a real

power! But something happened to me, I don't know if it's ever happened to other compañeros, but sometimes in a skeptical or critical moment, or out of awareness or tough-minded pragmatism, I knew, rationally, that we were only a few people, a minigroup, as the Guard always called us in those days. And the compartmentalization worked as a sort of escape valve to give free play to our dreams and our desires. You see, the compartmentalization allowed you to hang on to a shred of hope. So the whole adventure, the challenge you were taking on would seem lighter, less dangerous, see? The compartmentalization allowed you to live a waking dream and feel that it wasn't a dream at all.

I would venture to say that the majority of the people shared this feeling, and every day we had more supporters. Somoza, after forty-five years of dictatorship, was also a factor that made people cling to that hope. Do you see what I mean? The people and the Frente were thinking along the same lines. But sometimes you came crashing down, when smack in the middle of your daily work, your political action, it hit you that really you were dreaming, really you were only a minigroup. Then right away another feeling came over you, like a reserve force or a faith or something like that: you had the feeling that behind the compartmentalization there existed a whole sea of things, people, plans, and resources that you didn't even know about. Such states of mind, or whatever they were, were our daily bread in those days. And time passed, and slowly but surely the work took shape. Then halfway or totally into the process of the revolutionary struggle, when you were very strong, it was a great satisfaction, an intimate, personal satisfaction, to be, as Modesto would say, one more machete carrier in the revolution.

I want to make you see how sad it was and how much it hurt when just as you were getting into the organization and the work, you realized, shit! no way was the Frente a great power. The Frente was just a few people and probably didn't exist outside of Managua, León, and Estelí where a few, bold

heroic people had taken up the challenge of history and started to work.

As Tomás once said of Carlos Fonseca, we were like ants, like a hammer blow; we were the stubborn ones, the ones born with iron wills. And we carried out robberies and political assassinations that the press reported because they were direct actions against the dictatorship. Acts of an outrageous daring and political heresy in the world of the bourgeois political parties, the Conservative and the Liberal, and also of course the Social Christian and Socialist; the Socialists would label us adventurist and petit bourgeois in assemblies at the university. They would quote paragraphs from that book of Lenin's, *Ultraleftism: An Infantile Disorder of Communism.*

But the point is when the newspapers and radio and television reported the actions of the Frente, we also were impressed by that. Or I was anyway. The compartmentalization and this phenomenon I'm talking about were like the sweetest, most delicious candy. But like most candy, it only lasted a minute. Then the miserable reality hit: you realized there was nobody out there, and you couldn't help but feel a bit afraid when you looked on down the line. I knew this much—many people would have to die for us to advance. How could I not suspect or realize that as long as the struggle wasn't on a mass footing, had not yet become a popular war, those of us living and working would have to share those deaths among ourselves in the near future. Death scared the hell out of us in those days. But no matter how much you risked your life in the legal aboveground work, you risked it one helluva lot more in the underground. I'd say that the less risk we ran of actually getting killed the more we feared death, and vice versa.

You see, you join the Frente because you believe in its political line. In spite of your fear and all the rest you either do it or you don't. But you can't help but be influenced by the fact that you really believe the Frente is capable of overthrowing Somoza, Somoza's National Guard. You really feel that

you've joined up to become one more of those people who are going to kick Somoza out.

And this isn't something that happens when you're only just joining the Frente. Even after six years of aboveground work, when I left for the mountain I went with the idea that the mountain was a tremendous power. We had this myth of the compañeros in the mountains, the mysterious, the unknown, where Modesto was, there at the top. And in the city both the people in the underground and those of us working legally always talked about the mountain as a sort of mythical force. It was where our power was, and our arms and our best men; it was our indestructibility, our guarantee of a future, the ballast that would keep us from going under in the dictatorship; it was our determination to fight to the end, the certainty that life must change, that Somoza must not go on polluting every aspect of existence.

The mountain was our refusal to believe that the Guard was invincible. But sure enough, the reality hit. And you were right on the verge of demoralization when you got into the mountains and found nobody there but Modesto with fifteen other men divided into little groups. Fifteen or who the hell knows how many—what I do know is that there couldn't have been more than twenty guerrillas in the mountains at that time. It made you want to turn right around and go back. Mother-fucking son of a bitch! What is this shit? You are right at the point of saying to yourself, Holy Mother of Christ! this is the worst decision I've ever made in my life. You feel you've started out on something that has no future.

As I've said, the Frente in León was Leonel, Juan José, Edgard Munguía, Camilo, and later on me. There was not even one person in the underground. At least there was Julio Buitrago in Managua, whom you may have heard about. Later I found out there were one or two little urban squads in Managua. I only found out they existed when the Guard killed them and broadcast their names and biographies over the radio. The Guard called the revolutionary activities of the

compañeros their "criminal records." That was when Julio Buitrago was the head of all the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. They say he was a good man; I never had a chance to meet him, but Leonel adored him.

People became very attached to each other in the Frente in those days. El Gato and I, for example, and Leonel, became very close friends. I remember on weekends all the students who weren't from León went home to visit their families. We never had any money, so we always hitchhiked to the sea, and people would stare at us because we looked so broke. I remember we used to like being picked up by wealthy middle-class girls. Being total smart alecks, when we got into the car and the little rich girl would look back at us in the rearview mirror, we would smile and stick out our tongues; then she would blush and look away and not look back again; but pretty soon she would look, and every time she looked, we were right there looking back at her in the rearview mirror. It was sort of a game of glances. We loved looking at their skin and the way they moved their lips. When they put out their hands to signal we got to see their fingernails. Their hands were so pretty; hands like that made you wish they would caress you. And when the windows were rolled down and the wind blew their hair, it fell right in front of us on the back of the seat. We loved looking at their beautiful hair. I remember once Leonel wrote a poem with something in it about being "rabid for your hair."

We would get out anywhere along the beach. We hardly ever wore our bathing trunks. The three of us pooled our money, about 20 pesos altogether, and shot off to the Hotel Lacayo or to Uncle Salina's to order a Pepsi each and watch the swarms of rich girls coming in. All of them fantastically good-looking. They all wore shorts—white, red, or blue, or jeans cut off up to the crotch. That would kill me. And it would kill me even more when they turned to walk away. They had long hair or short; dark skin or light. They always went around in groups, and you couldn't decide which one to

look at, they were all so attractive. Some of them came in with horrible sunburns—red, red, lobster-red. El Gato Munguía would say, "There can't be more than a tiny spot of white left on their bodies." And Leonel would shoot back, "Great, all the easier then to hit the spot!" At the end of the afternoon we went back to León, hitchhiking again, each of us to our own house. And the next day, Monday morning, like clockwork at 8:00 A.M., we were in the offices of CUUN, or in the university cafeteria, or in the offices of the Association of Letters and Science, or of Law. But there we were, at work.

The work was very hard since it was just beginning. Being so few we had to work that much harder. The more you worked the more you developed your powers. You started catching on to a whole lot of things, and discovering a whole lot more. You were pressed to develop your ingenuity, to come up with answers, to prepare yourself better. Under those conditions I grew up in a more or less dizzying way and in a little while I was given very serious responsibilities in the UNAN (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Nicaragua, National Autonomous University of Nicaragua) student movement.

First I was in a study circle organized by Leonel. After three months I was putting together study circles in the FER for Leonel and El Gato, under instructions to recruit the best students for the Frente. At one point I had seven study circles going at the same time. By night I was totally exhausted, mentally wasted. I remember the text we used was Marta Harnecker's *Elementary Principles of Historical Materialism.* I knew the whole book by heart, I quoted it so much. At night we worked in the University Club making banners or posters or running off study pamphlets until it got light.

Since we were scared to go home so early in the morning, we slept on top of the ping-pong tables or on mats until dawn. And as more and more days dawned, FER continued to grow. It grew and I realize now that we were also growing as persons. FER was just four persons in the beginning. It wasn't an

organization. It didn't have any structure. It was a sum total of four or five compañeros that thanks to God and the Virgin had speaking ability and could address assemblies. FER at that time, the Frente at that time, in León, was mainly a political line, a just struggle. And because it was just, it was dangerous. And for that very reason, there were so few of us at the beginning.

Through University Doors

In 1970 I spent six months underground. This was after Comandante Julio Buitrago died in a gun battle, when the Guard discovered his safe house in Managua. Compañeras Doris Tijerino and Gloria Campos were with him. Security discovered his hideout and the Guard set up a whole military operation around the house, on a scale never before seen in Nicaragua. They surrounded the house, the block, and with a third circle cordoned off the entire barrio. Julio fought it out with the National Guard. He died alone, after hours of resistance from inside that house. He was one of the greatest of the greats of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, Sandinista Front for National Liberation); one of those who forged the great legend of the invincibility of the Frente Sandinista among the Nicaraguan people. Or I should say the people themselves forged that legend around the Frente. It was a legend based on concrete historical events, and the first of these was Julio Buitrago's heroic battle of July 15, 1969.

The Guard, in a total screw-up, broadcast this battle on television. Sitting in front of the screen at the University Club in León, we could see a huge number of Guardsmen staked out in various spots, in twos or threes, standing behind trees or

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Sandino and the Indians

The main thing was we were achieving our goals in these student struggles. Though we didn't actually get the things we demanded in the way of student rights, what we certainly did was mobilize the students around our political line and around our activists; little by little they were beginning to identify with our activists. And there was also what you might call the phenomenon of students at the base beginning to admire the FER leaders. The harder we worked, the more students came out and were organized into study circles, which were then organized into teams, teams that later became cells of the Frente Sandinista. I can't tell you anything specific—since I didn't have access to much information—about the national structure of the underground at that time. I can't give you the details. But my guess is it was very weak.

What I do know is that order after order came in to find safe houses and cars for the underground. Mainly El Gato Munguía, I, and two or three other compañeros were asked, since we were from León. The other students in FER weren't from León, but came in from other provinces to study; they lived in student rooms and their only friends were other students. Not being natives, they weren't friendly with the

townspeople. But we were, which made it a lot easier for us to find somebody who would lend a car or offer his house. You went to your neighbors, to people you knew in León, and they would help you.

Once, I remember it was Holy Week—another Holy Week—we got a directive saying we shouldn't any of us leave town, I mean none of the main FER leaders who were all in the Frente. We shouldn't leave León; we shouldn't go to the beach, but should sit tight awaiting orders in the CUUN offices. Because a very important task was coming up. And sure enough, a directive came with word that a "gondola" was on its way and had already reached the frontier, or was in Chinandega, or who knows where. It was a group of compañeros who were coming into the country and urgently needed houses. Our orders were to get houses or else. The order read: "Obtain houses, free homeland or death." Which meant no excuses, we couldn't come back until we had a house. The pressure was on—on us and on the compañeros in the underground. Because the gondola had already arrived—was either in Chinandega or on the Honduran border—we headed off, not knowing where, just walking the streets. Sometimes you rack your brain, going over everybody you know in your mind, and you draw a total blank. So we'd just see if we couldn't catch somebody's eye, maybe run into an old friend and have a chance to hit him up for a house. Son of a bitch, I thought, where can I go, where? "Hombre," I said to El Gato Munguía, "wait, there's a way out of this shit." About six doors down from CUUN to the east was a lawyer from the Independent Liberal party, the PLI, Eduardo Coronado, a guy with a working-class background who had his office in the same house where his brother had his dental clinic. "Eduardo, hombre," I said, "I need you to do me an urgent favor. Look, I need a house, for a compañero in the Frente who is passing through town, right?" (If I told him I needed a safe house he'd never do it. You had to say: for a compañero who's just passing through on his way to Managua, who needs a place to stay

for a couple of nights, until they come to pick him up.) But the guy turned me down anyway and sent me to a fellow named Blandino who lived a half-block farther on in a house that was also a funeral parlor. So I put it to him—I knew him. So, "Compa," I said, "uh, I need a favor."

The problem was that these guys were old, and I was just a kid. I'm thirty-four; this was in '70, '71. I would have been twenty, twenty-one. What I'm saying is that for them to get mixed up with a kid like me in this sort of thing—it would be irresponsible for somebody old to go along with what I wanted, right? These were old men who were used to getting involved in conspiracies of the old, conspiracies of Conservatives or Liberals, conspiracies that took place in the aisles of fancy cinemas or in the stately mansions of León. To get mixed up with a kid, a rebellious student, a notorious activist, for an old man like that to agree to put somebody in his house—it was a difficult thing. He told me there was no room. "But compañero," I said, "that doesn't matter. Look, in the daytime we can put him in a casket and put another casket on top, and he can spend the day like that. The compañeros are very disciplined," I told him. "Okay," he said, "but what if somebody wants to buy the casket?" "Just tell him it's sold," I answered. But the old guy wouldn't go along with it. "Look," he said, "I know somebody who will give you a hand. Another member of PLI, a Subtiavan."

So I went to meet Tomás Perez. When I explained what we needed, I could see he wanted to help, but his house wasn't really suitable. I went to see it. "Brother," he said, "I'd do it gladly, but in this house there just isn't room." (I should tell you who was coming in the gondola I'm talking about: Tomás, Modesto, Oscár Turcios, Juan José Quezada, José Dolores Valdivia, René Tejada [whose nickname was Tello]—the very cream, our top people! The whole group that had just been in Cuba, and I think even Vietnam.) So the compañero had to say no, but he told me he knew a guy he was positive could do it; he would guarantee it; we would go

find him right away. But the guy wasn't home; he was marching in a funeral procession in Subtiava. We went to the cemetery. "Look," Perez said, "I'm not going to go with you to talk to him, because I'd be compromised. If he says no, he's going to think I'm in the Frente and I'll be screwed. I'll point him out, then you get his attention and take him aside."

We had already started very discreetly to mix in with the crowd of mourners. "That's him," he said and pointed to a particular guy. So I went up and stood beside the guy as he was talking to a group of people. I tapped him on the shoulder and winked, and he saw I wanted to talk to him. I wasn't a friend of his, but he knew me, I was so notorious in León. "Brother," I said, "I want to talk to you about something very sensitive." "Sure," he replied, "gladly." We hung back behind the others. "Brother," I said, "a compa is coming." The important thing then was for him to make up his mind. At that point it didn't matter whether it was for one compañero or two or for one night or three days; the important thing was for him to agree, to make that decision. So I laid it all out and he said, "Gladly, compañero, of course." A Subtiavan by the name of Magno Beruis.

What a relief! I struck out on foot for the University Club and, no shit, it was far—block after block. I came in wringing wet. "Find anything?" I asked the compa. "Zero, brother." "Well, I have! I've got a house." "Is it clean?" "No, brother, it's not, but it's a house." "Where is it?" "In Subtiava." "Fantastic! Let's get going."

That was it. But they didn't come. The people from Chinandega didn't come, and the man was left waiting. When I went by to tell him they weren't coming, he just said, "Fine. You let me know when to expect them so I can be ready." He'd already talked to his wife; her mother and brothers lived right next door, so he had told her that a friend of his was coming from Managua, a guy who'd run off with a young girl and was being hounded by her relatives, who wanted him to get married.

By the time the gondola got in we had another house. I had run into Joaquín—Joaquín Solís Piura, who is Vice Minister of Health today. He just got back from Europe, from Switzerland, where he had done a postgraduate degree. He was CUUN president during the student massacre of July 23 in '58. So I put it to him. He'd never met me but he had checked up on the new leaders, so he knew who I was. Anyway, I ran into him, he came through immediately.

So when the gondola arrived, we had two houses, and from then on the Subtiavan was our collaborator. But the men in the gondola were just passing through on their way to Managua. So I started to do political work with this man.

His shack was on a dusty road in Subtiava, an outlying barrio, a barrio of Indians. The Subtiavan Indians were there even before there was a León, even before the Spanish Conquest. The shack was isolated, about 30 yards away from the next house, which belonged to a guy we recruited later on. The yard was huge, like a big empty lot. I suggested we should study, that he should talk to his brother and get some people together to study—not mentioning the Frente, but saying it was university students, coming into the barrio to do consciousness raising. But the house was tiny and uncomfortable—overrun with kids, and his wife always there cooking, making *vaho* day and night, which she sold on the street. We couldn't study there. So he sprinkled the yard, and right by the door we rigged up a board, which hung from the roof; we attached an extension cord with a lightbulb, about a 50-watt light I guess, and we set out five, six, maybe seven chairs that he had rounded up somehow—he was a natural leader. It was just a preliminary effort, a sort of shot in the dark that would later on bear important fruits, as you will see. So the guy invited five or six people, right? I went there about three times. We started out with the Communist Manifesto, and I became friends with the people who came, all Indians. Some were farmworkers, one a taxi driver, others were quarrymen or connected with fishing, or worked tiny farms in the barrio.

Subtiava is on the outskirts of León, toward Poneloya and the sea.

You could see when I talked that they were taking it all in with their eyes; it was as if their eyes were refracting my words to their brains; who can say what the process was, but the thing is they were listening, listening, listening. The ideas would travel from their brains to their eyes, and by the look in their eyes I knew their world was turning upside down. Their heads were being turned around; every moment they were discovering an incredible number of things. But it was all happening too fast, you could see that in their eyes too. They were filled with enthusiasm and so we recruited more people.

But I was so notorious, we decided I should stay away. First, because it was a safe house that was going to be used again. Second, because sometimes the neighbors came by and looked into the yard and there we were, five or six guys under the lightbulb and me, a notorious student with a pamphlet, all sitting on little chairs or benches or three-legged stools. So FER, or the Frente through FER, appointed somebody else to do the work in that barrio. Iván Montenegro Báez was put in charge, "Fat Man" Montenegro, who by that time was a lot more mature.

Our work in Subtiava took off like wildfire, but very quietly and out of the light. And we started presenting the image of Sandino in Subtiava. The Indians had a leader, a historical figure, who more than any other was representative of their people: Adiac. We presented Sandino as an incarnation of Adiac, then Adiac as an incarnation of Sandino, but Sandino in the light of the Communist Manifesto, see? So from shack to shack, from Indian to Indian, ideas were circulating: Adiac . . . Sandino . . . class struggle . . . vanguard . . . FSLN.

Gradually a whole movement was born in Subtiava. Here I want to make you see how these things were interrelated. We started penetrating other barrios in León, through the relatives of Subtiavans who had moved there when they got married or for whatever reason. We set about recruiting these

relatives and this was how we made our initial contacts with the Subtiavans in other barrios. I'm talking about La Providencia, Reparto Vigil. There was a time when FER was going to organize a special branch to deal with the barrios. Now our influence was not just in the high schools; we had grown not just in the university; FER was beginning to have a real presence in the barrios.

Since it was always the Frente behind FER, when the work in the barrios reached a certain level the Frente said, "Fine, now FER can forget it. The underground network of the Frente will take over from here."

And they started transferring cadres from FER to work in the barrios in direct contact with the Frente. They started setting up committees to try to get electricity, or water, or whatever was needed. And sure enough, very slowly the barrios began to develop, and local leaders began to emerge. So eventually there weren't so many students coming in. Only a coordinator. And more and more leaders emerged from the masses and started developing their skills. We put the leaders of the different barrios in contact with each other, and the movement of the barrios was born.

It was a fine thing to see, a very beautiful thing.

Fire in the Barrios

When I left for the mountains I knew they could kill me. But there's one thing that impressed me deeply and always filled me with satisfaction. You see, I always repeated a thing I'd been saying since 1974: if the Guard kills me they'll have to spray my face with bullets to get rid of the smile on my dead face. That was my vow. Because it seemed to me by that time I'd already done so much damage to the Guard, so much damage to the enemy, so much damage to imperialism that killing me would be a small thing compared to what I'd already done to them.

When I left for the mountains I knew the Frente was behind me, as Frente, as a front. I wasn't going alone. I knew when I left Subtiava a whole generation of students was behind me, but more important—and here I may be guilty of lack of modesty—a generation of students that in some way bore the seal of my own combat.

This was the student movement that later spread throughout the country. For the students we recruited in León went back to their own provinces and initiated work in the barrios. They were the first contacts of the regional underground of the FSLN.

So as I was saying, I left for the mountains with absolute

confidence. Not that I'd come out alive—but confident of victory. Mainly because I felt that Subtiava was behind me. And when I left for the mountains, *Subtiava*, that was power.

In 1972 or '73 we had our first mass demonstrations. Before that only students demonstrated. Never people from the barrios. I remember once we called a demonstration, I can't remember now what it was for, but it brought together two currents, one from the university, the other from Subtiava. We had the capacity to mobilize masses in Subtiava, but in this march it was mainly people we'd already recruited in the other barrios, the small committees. Like all the mobilizations in Subtiava, this one was impressive. One long street runs from Subtiava to the cathedral. We were all to come together in the park in front of the cathedral, the students marching from the university to the park, the Subtiavans from Subtiava.

We had discovered the Indian origins of the Subtiavans and encouraged these as a strength; we tried to transpose the old ancestral struggles of Adiac, their ancient chief. And to remind them how they'd been dispossessed, humiliated. How both Liberals and Conservatives had bullied them and ripped off their lands. How Sandino had rebelled, just as Adiac had rebelled. And then there was the question of the bourgeois classes having all the power.

Before the Subtiavans started marching, they beat their atabales—you know what an atabal is? It's a drum, a kettledrum. So the local committees went all through the barrios beating their drums: *barangan-bangarán . . . barangan-bangarán.* It's a muted, serious sound; it's not cheerful, but it's not sad either; it's a tense sound: *barangan-bangarán-barangan-bangarán-barangan-bangarán.* They didn't look to the sides but only marched straight ahead, *barangan-bangarán-barangan-bangarán.* And people looked out from the vacant lots, over thorny hedges, or out of their houses. And behind the drums came people chanting, "Seven tonight in the plaza, seven tonight in the plaza." People knew, being Sandinistas, this was a directive. So off they went to the plaza. Then, after a brief

rally, they headed down the Calle Real, which is the street that goes all the way to the Central Square, the famous Calle Real. So at the head of the Subtiavans, the drums. First the drums, and behind the drums the leaders, and behind the leaders all the Indians. And the first leader was the man I met at the funeral, Magno Beruis.

So, when you saw the Subtiavans on the march, hearing their drums in the lead—*barangan-bangarán-barangan-bangarán*—you saw the stony face of the Indian, with coarse, straight hair, not smiling much. A serious face, not sad, and not bitter either, but grave, with a repressed rage that was just beginning to surface. And you felt a unity in the beat of the drums, a unity of rhythm and face, or of rhythm and step, or of step, rhythm, and face. I don't know what went into that unity, but you saw the Indians, with their Indian faces, marching and shouting slogans, but not in the rowdy tone of the students, who were screwing around, making up catchy phrases. The Indians' slogans were simpler. An Indian would call out, "Which way do we go?" And they all shouted back, "The way of Sandino!" All serious and looking straight ahead, and with gravity. This instilled respect and began to frighten the bourgeoisie. For this was the Indian awakening. The rebellious Indian going back to Sandino and projecting Sandino forward with greater historical depth, forward into the struggle against an exploitative class society. So when you saw hundreds of Indians on the march, all serious—women, children; old, heavy, stocky, tall; rough, strong men—you imagined it wasn't just a Subtiavan march, but a march of Indians that encompassed all of Latin America: the Bolivian Indian, the Peruvian Indian, the Chilean Indian, the Indians of the copper and tin mines, and of the rubber plantations. I realized at that moment they were marching not only in the Calle Real but over all of Latin America, over the Andes, over history, over the future, with a firm, solid step.

So when I left for the mountains I knew they could kill me. But I also knew that this march of Indians was a march of

Latin American Indians, a march of Indians against colonialism, a march of Indians against imperialism, a march of Indians that could mark the end, or the beginning of the end, of the exploitation of our peoples.

So let them kill me! It wouldn't matter, not one fucking bit! Because I knew that Subtiava was behind me.

Subtiava was a permanent bonfire. Because remember, by this time we had discovered fire. Along the line I mentioned earlier about always coming up with new protests and agitational ideas to keep up morale—let's say we were in the ascendancy; the fire was rising. I don't mean political fire, though that too was rising; I mean fire as an element of nature. We started out having demonstrations with candles. Then we got the idea: for every student a torch of pitch pine. But pitch pine was very hard to get hold of since it only grew in the north of the country. We saw that every time we marched with candles the people were curious. So we held a demonstration, early, with small pitch-pine branches. And people came, because the pine torches caught their attention. Everybody knows those processions of the Middle Ages: a few old hooded monks weaving their way through the dark passageway of a castle? Well, in the barrios, in the dark streets, with a row of houses on one side and a row of houses on the other side, it was like the corridor of a medieval castle. Can you imagine, hundreds and hundreds of points of light, the pitch-pine torches flaming in the streets, and us jumping over puddles, climbing up over gulleys, over the rough cobblestones of the bumpy streets of León?

But we found it was too hard to get pitch pine and decided it would be better to build fires in every barrio. We agreed on bonfires since we'd already seen how fire attracts people, since it lights up your face in the dark. People are fascinated by flames; they stand watching the flames, but they are also listening. They are listening, and their eyes and their minds travel from the fire to the words, from the words to the mouth, from the fire to the speaker's mouth. We discovered that very subtle cycle.

So, great, we said, we'll build bonfires on all the street corners. And we did just that. Besides, it was a helluva lot easier to come up with firewood, old planks from the shacks, or we would buy a little. In the barrios people cook with wood, so there are always a few houses selling wood. Five pesos will get you a couple of sticks about a yard or a half yard long. "Rally with bonfire today," we used to say. Then our activists came, five or ten students from the university at the beginning, in the summer, because in the winter it rained. We hauled along a gallon of kerosene, sprinkled the firewood, and lit roaring fires in the dark barrios. Then we started chanting around the fire: "People, unite, people unite!" Or we shouted slogans for a particular cause like, "Free Chico Ramírez and Efraín Nortalwalton!" The bonfires really started taking off about that time, during the campaign to free Chico Ramírez, who's a guerrilla comandante today, and Efraín Nortalwalton, who was a prof from El Salvador.

We noticed that the minute we lighted fires in those dark barrios people would hop right over the hedges bordering the dirt road; they came out of their yards, or over hilly, wooded pastures; through wooden gates, or over barbed wire that sometimes marked the property line of a little shack. Coming out of doors or on their way down the street; the thing is, people poured out from every nook and cranny of the barrio; cutting between houses or across yards, off streets and street corners, they started gathering on the corner, a safe distance back from our activists.

People were gathering. We called to them to move in closer, and the little kids were the first to come up, the five- or six-year-olds. They were the first to start yelling. And they yelled right along with us. We could hear that our voices were louder, the chorus was bigger. But we knew it was just those kids. Right from the start we underestimated those kids; we didn't think they were important. Though yes, we felt a little bit of company; we weren't so alone, so totally isolated. At least those little kids were with us, were a little company.

Before long some worker would come up, a union man, al-

ready halfway into it. The unions were weak, tiny unions of León, little groups of craftsmen. Or maybe a woman with a stall in the open-air market, a very militant sector. Or some student who lived stuck away in the barrio. We started shouting in unison. As a few more, then a few more joined in, the others drew in closer, and more and more people gathered. And always the people stood watching the fire and watching us. We started talking. And when we talked we tried to look people right in the eye, as if to imprint what we were saying right on their brains. But it wasn't just that: since we didn't have any structures to work through to contact the people, to study with them, to convince them, persuade them, to lead them to rebel—in those few minutes, when we had this contact through the element of fire—we had to use every ounce of our persuasive power. And more and more people came, and more people and more. And the wood burned down, and we sent for more wood. And more and more sticks went up in flames. And the people went on listening, listening.

We built those bonfires again and again and again. Before long the local people were helping you sprinkle kerosene and set up little twig houses, little towers out of kindling wood to get the fire to light. And we went on building fires, and more and more people gathered; a whole lot of wood went up in smoke. Pretty soon the people had firewood ready, carting wood from their houses, or if they had old tires they brought those, or wood thrown out in the yard. And when our kerosene ran out, and we couldn't get the fire going because the wood was green, they gave us more kerosene.

Well, bonfires began popping up in all the barrios. And little by little they came to stand for subversion. Fire took on this subversive character because everybody in the opposition, all the anti-Somoza people and all the pro-Sandinistas, clung together around the flames. So the bonfire was a sign of subversion, a symbol of political agitation, of revolutionary ideas brought by the students into the barrios. The bonfires were the enemy of the Guard. The Guard hated the bonfires be-

cause they brought people together. Fire incites, integrates, unites; because fire gives you courage; because fire makes you feel more protected, stronger. As if the flames were a kind of company.

Really, the bonfires were growing. They became an open defiance, a public conspiracy. The bonfire became a cry, a political slogan, a slogan that gathered strength as the bonfires multiplied and as the masses closed ranks around our leaders, defined themselves and grew in numbers. And there were ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty, fifty, a hundred bonfires all over the city. But the best thing was that as the organization developed, and the work in the barrios expanded to the point where the Frente said, "Fine, we'll take over from here," the best thing was that by that time the students weren't building the fires anymore; the people were building their own fires. In the daytime they were exploited and at night they rebelled. They worked all day and protested and shouted at night. And the bonfires did not consume those cries; it gave them life.

So, when I left for the mountains, it wasn't just the march of Indians I had behind me, but also a chain of fires, a spreading of fires in all the barrios. An unleashing of conspiracy and of rebellion. A people in flames that later became a people in arms, but which started as a people in flames.

What I'm saying is, I didn't go into the mountains alone; I went with a tremendous sense of being accompanied. At first, sure, we were alone, as I said; we were shouting by ourselves, with only that swarm of kids. At that moment we felt a vast loneliness; our only company was the memory of our dead, which gave us enormous life. It cost us a lot to reach the people.

The problem was, we didn't have any organic ties; we still didn't have any ideological or political ties to the people. Because the message we had for the people carried with it danger, expectation, strangeness, and fear. We had to be very persuasive. I discovered something then—I mean a personal political discovery; I'm not talking about figuring out that

water boils if you heat it—I discovered that language identifies. I discovered for myself how language communicates.

Looking out over the faces of the people, I saw the workers in their caps. They didn't nod yes and they didn't nod no; fat women with aprons on who didn't laugh but didn't frown either; their faces were impenetrable somehow, impersonal. More than once we had the feeling we weren't getting anywhere, that the people didn't understand, that it didn't matter to them at all. And dammit you wanted to pick up a stick and beat what you were saying right into their brains. But you couldn't.

At the beginning that lack of communication was a block. And on top of that the Guard might come and start harassing them, or harassing us, or all of us together. I remember once when I was talking, a couple of swearwords slipped out; then ha, ha, ha! people smiled when I swore, and looked at each other. No doubt about it, they were communicating with each other; they were chuckling, but chuckling about something I'd said. I realized I was getting through to them. This is important, because it dawned on me then that a swearword or a crude word used in the right way can be explosive, very sharp politically. It's one thing to go into a barrio and start lecturing about the current historical juncture. It's something else to start talking about how the rich with their fat investments are off whoring in Europe, see? Because the people start to identify with that viewpoint. They start to discover their own identity, because we helped them become conscious of their situation.

This war, then, cost us not only thousands of bullets, thousands of fires, thousands of dead sons; but millions of swearwords went into it, too. Swearwords that were a blend of rage, hate, hope, determination. Millions and millions of flesh-and-blood swearwords: "son of a bitch" had a political meaning, and so did "mother-fucker."

Because of all this I'll say it again: when I left for the mountains I knew I wasn't going alone. I went with the feeling that thousands of Subtiavans were with me, and thousands of workers from the barrios of León, and thousands of bonfires. What I mean is, I went with the collective defiance that had spread throughout the masses; I went with millions of swearwords that represented all the hatred and aspirations of the masses. Swearwords that were political, because people said things like: "Where are the poor people heading?" "To power, to power!" "Where are the rich people heading?" "To the shit pile, to the shit pile!" I'm talking about a huge pile of shit that had moved beyond the outlying barrios and was starting to dirty the bourgeoisie.

So I left for the mountains with boundless faith. And it wasn't just the romantic glow of that march I was telling you about, but this: behind that march was a whole political experience, an organizational experience, an experience of struggle, in this case in the streets. The masses were being mobilized.