VII

Leaving for the Mountain

When I left for the mountains my morale was extraordinary. Let's say my batteries were fully charged by everything I've just mentioned. I had an enormous amount of political work behind me, plus the intimate satisfaction of having added my small spark to the great fire that was now glimmering on the horizon of the cities.

That was one of the main things that kept me from thinking of deserting when I first got to the mountains. It's a terrible shock to be plopped suddenly into that environment, especially when you're not prepared for it physically. I'd say we weren't prepared physically or mentally. Even though we'd read *The Diary of Che* and writings on Vietnam and the Chinese Revolution, a whole string of accounts, of works on the guerrilla movements of Latin America and elsewhere, we only had a general idea; we had no sense of the concrete reality. So, when they sent us in, they took us first for a day to a little farm on the outskirts of Matagalpa, a place that belonged to a compañero-collaborator, Argüello Pravio I think it was, who was liberated in the action of December 27. Juan de Dios Muñoz was there to meet us, and he put us in a little shack on the grounds. The car that dropped us off didn't go any far-

ther. Cuqui Carrión was the driver; I was startled to see him behind the wheel. Before leaving León they had brought us together in a house in the San Filipe barrio, in some new student apartments. They took us there in the afternoon. At dawn a red jeep, a Toyota or Nissan, came to pick us up. They knocked on the door; we loaded in our bags and climbed in back, Iván Gutiérrez, Aquiles Reyes Luna, Denis Palma, and me; a chilly morning, about 3:00 A.M. It was my first trip in an underground car and I was really curious to see who'd be driving and all that.

We couldn't sleep that night, waiting for three o'clock to roll around. Who could have slept, with that incredible tension? Babbling on and on, we just stared at each other, speculating on how long it would take us to come to power. Four years, five? Then one by one we ran through our analyses of the entire national and international situation, in support of the case for five years, or ten. Then the knock—a compañero opened the door, and we put our bags in the jeep. I recognized Pedro Aráuz Palacios (whose nickname was Federico) because he got out of the car, then got back in. But the driver stayed behind the wheel and didn't look around. It was dark, and though I think there was a street light on the corner, the light barely reached us; I couldn't recognize the driver, who was wearing a black or a tan jacket, of either cloth or leather, I'm not sure which. He wore a typical worker's cap, like a miner's, and a sort of little towel wrapped around his neck. I didn't want to look at him—that question of compartmentalization—though I really wished I could since I was leaving for the mountains. But that was our training, because it wouldn't have been correct, even if nobody would ever know the difference. It was an inner discipline, a question of self-control.

Later, with the sun coming up—after we'd stopped in Chinandega to drop off one of the compañeros in the underground who was staying there—Federico started talking to the driver. I remember on the highway we had started singing, to keep up our spirits. Not that they were low, absolutely

not! Our morale was fantastic; we knew we were setting out on something that we were sure would triumph. What we didn't know was who among us would live to see that triumph. And as it turned out, some of the people in that car died.

That was the question we were all asking ourselves as we rode along in silence in the jeep, at night, when nobody could see your face, when nobody knew what you were thinking. All those things were a jumble in your mind. You realized this wasn't a movie, like some films when at the end all the actors come on screen in tiny closeups, even the ones who had died. It wouldn't be like that for us; we knew that some of us weren't coming back—and of course we didn't know how long the film was going to last. So we sang. We sang with gusto, but I don't know, it wasn't totally spontaneous. It was as if we were clinging to the words of the song, to the forward thrust of the song, so we wouldn't sink into those ideas.

After a while I noticed that Federico was talking to the driver, then—holy shit!—I recognized him—it was Cuqui Carrión, who's a guerrilla comandante today, and who later took part in the action of December 27. I just about fell over. Because Javier Carrión was a middle-class kid. I knew him because he ran around with Claudia and Guaba, who's the brother of Tito Castillo, the present Minister of Justice. I met them in their apartment in León, where Claudia and I used to go to make love—Cuqui would lend us his apartment. They had a soft, polite way of talking in those days; some of them smoked marijuana. I was getting to know them better; they were starting to get involved in our work. They asked me questions, and instead of studying we spent hours and hours talking. They were middle-class kids with lots of money. Not millionaires maybe, but they had the bucks. Some of them were developing politically. They quit smoking dope just like that and started going to CUUN activities and becoming more serious; but they never lost their cheerfulness, only became more responsible, and studied more, too, which was why I was so surprised. Because, well, I'd been ordered to quit

going to their apartment to be with Claudia; I guessed the Frente was using it for meetings, among other things. And in fact they were. But actually Cuqui was already the underground driver for Pedro Aráuz Palacios and couldn't afford to be compromised, so they yanked him out of CUUN activities, too. I thought: Cuqui's dropping out, he's lost interest, he's given up the fight, or who knows what. So when I saw him there, Cuqui so deeply committed, I was very happy.

Well, it got light, and about 5:30 A.M. we pulled into the little farm on the outskirts of Matagalpa. We spent the whole day there; I remember they cooked us a hen. They came for us at night, I think in a jeep. A jeep or a pickup truck, I'm not sure. We didn't know where we were going, just into the mountains. We drove through Matagalpa and continued on until we came to a blacktop road, which may have been the road to Jinotega. Then we left the blacktop and started down a dirt road. This was the most dangerous part of our trip so far; we were entering zones where traditionally there had been guerrilla activity, and though you didn't see much enemy surveillance—because they hadn't spotted many guerrillas—there were informers everywhere and some enemy roadblocks. But the compañeros had already cleared the zone; what that means is they had sent a vehicle on ahead to check for roadblocks; when it came back, our vehicle would start in.

It was a trip of about three hours by jeep, again at night. We hadn't slept; we hadn't slept the day before, and we started out at night. The road was awful; it was mountain-jungle, with ravines, steep inclines and descents, stretches of rough ground with banks of mud and a few shacks where we could glimpse a fire burning in the stove—there was no electricity. Now and then we met a car coming toward us. All this for us meant plunging deeper into a mystery.

Because we didn't know when we would start to march. We didn't ask questions either; we'd been trained not to. We didn't know if we were going straight into the brush or if we were heading for a house, nothing. Not who would be there, if

they'd have weapons or be in uniform. Our curiosity was killing us, but you reined it in. By that time we had our weapons, our small arms, out in the open. Then all of a sudden we came to a stop. Compañero Juancito (Juan de Dios Muñoz) let out a shrill whistle and a typical north-country campesino appeared. I was more or less familiar with this type, from vacations with my Uncle Victor when I was a little boy. So I knew that face, that type of campesino, which isn't the same as the campesino of León. There's a difference, I really can't say what it is. A small north-country hat and a lousy set of teeth.

It was almost dark; you could hardly see; our headlights were shut off. A half-moon hung low in the sky, but since it was raining and the rain was falling on our jeep and we were getting wet, we didn't appreciate it very much. They wanted us out of the car. We pulled back off the road and all piled out and trooped into a house. Somebody stirred; kids started bawling. It was about eleven at night. A campesino whispered, "Sleep there," on the ground. There were a couple of boards. We loaded our flashlights. We were making some noise and Juancito said, "Ssshhh, quiet." We were barely making a sound, but still he insisted. For us it wasn't noise, yet it was noise, since there were houses in the area, and the least disturbance in a campesino's house at that hour—the sound of a voice that wasn't a campesino voice—could be deadly, because it meant that guerrillas were coming and going, that strange people were arriving in the night. It could mean anything! We didn't realize how the tiniest sound carried, and how dangerous sound could be, any kind of sound, the sound of a blow, a metallic object, a plastic bag, a sack, anything.

Anyway, we switched on our flashlights and looked around for a place to settle down. You had to take the flashlight and shine it up at the ceiling; if you aimed it to the side the light would show through the chinks in the walls of the shack. What's a campesino going to think if he sees the light of four or five flashlights in the neighboring shack when a campesino is lucky if he owns one flashlight? "But compañero, it's just a

flashlight." "Turn it off, turn it off," as if he were talking out of his throat. "Don't keep it on like that. Hold it by the other end." And he explained how you hold a flashlight, by the glass; the only light you want is what filters through your fingers.

Well, we were nervous wrecks. Then we heard a noise; there were animals out there—cows. We noticed that Juancito was jumpier than anybody, maybe because he knew who we were—some of the main leaders of the student movement, of FER—and we knew Juancito; and he knew me and the other guy, too, which put some pressure on him. "Go to sleep, we have to start at dawn," was the last thing he said to us that night. The house was right by a road that wound through hills and a valley, with little shacks scattered here and there. We had to start at dawn in order to get through the populated areas, then on into the mountains over local trails and following marks on trees and all that.

Again we couldn't sleep. How could we with that terrible tension, with those weapons we didn't even know how to shoot? I had a huge revolver that rubbed me raw, that son-of-a-bitch gun, and I was superskinny. That damned revolver poked me in all my bones.

About 4:00 A.M. a whisper: "Wake up compañeros, wake up, ssshh!" We opened the thick plastic bags that made so much noise—you have to open them very gently. Five or six plastic bags, *crac, crac*—you could hear it in the road, in the next shack. We lined up everything we had taken out of the bags. Careful with the flashlights, turn the batteries around, because sometimes a flashlight goes on, can light by itself; if you brush against something and catch the switch, the bulb will light. We packed up everything, took our bags, tied rope around them, and started off, about five of us.

And there my Calvary began, the moment I left that house. A new phase began in my physical life, in my beliefs, in the development of my personality, in everything, in maturity, in everything, everything. Because starting at that moment I

began to experience a series of feelings like those any human being in those conditions would feel, from the most beautiful to the most miserable feelings.

The first thing the campesino said was, "Not a sound as we go along." I saw him disappear into a jungly, impassable brush. I said to myself, I wonder what he wants in there? It was impassable, but the campesino didn't come back. And there was that jungly, impassable brush. He never said to wait, but I waited, half-expecting he would come back out. The brush was impassable, but the compa didn't return. "And the compa?" "I don't know, he went in there . . . he hasn't come out." It was like a wall, a giant obstacle. I squinted but couldn't see him. "You don't think he went out the other way while you were standing there?" "But I don't see how anybody could get through . . . no shit, take a look." I went in a little and didn't see him. Could it be possible we were supposed to march in this impassable brush? It can't be, I thought. How could we march in that? It was tough going but I pushed on, moving aside the branches along the way he had gone; I noticed a sort of passage, with the brush all beaten down ahead of me. Brush to the side, brush in back of me—I was deep in brush. So that's what this shit is all about. Have I fucked up? I thought by that time I was lost, he was way ahead of me. But he's heading into the mountains, and we're supposed to be going with him . . . son of a bitch! I started marching faster. But I kept falling; I had my bag over my shoulder, but it kept getting caught on those damn branches and falling off behind.

My name in the Frente was Eugenio. "Wait, Eugenio!" We were making a ridiculous racket. We were all nervous because I'd lost sight of our guide, fuck! He'd gone off and left me. I never thought we would go through there. I thought we would go along a little path. I didn't understand what the mountains were. He went straight into the brush, the dense brush, the bastard. I didn't understand this. And it was dark and damp, and I mean freezing. These were northern moun-

tains, with those shitty little trees, young trees the size of a small house. We weren't yet into the mammoth trees but still in the dense brush that had once been mountain jungle, but which had been cleared and now a new brush was springing up. Scraggly trees, but higher than a shack and with every type of vine you could imagine, lianas with tiny leaves or bigger leaves and grasses of all kinds, everything green, right? You had to wade through green, like when you enter the water and go splashing through water; here you dive into green, into vegetation. Or it's like when you walk and go pushing through wind; here you go crashing through green.

Anyway, the campesino went into the brush and pushed on, deeper and deeper in. And we bitched: "That damn son of a bitch." I was all tangled up, my bag was caught, I yanked it, then fell down with it on top of me and got all wet. I picked it up again, slung it over my shoulder, and right away it was cutting into my neck. When one shoulder got tired, I'd shift the bag to the other. I was trying to climb. But how in hell did that damned idiot get up this hill? I said. How can I climb with this bag if my hands aren't free? I didn't know if I should keep hold of the bag or throw it on ahead of me to climb up. But whoosh! I was sliding back, so it was impossible. Then I took it from underneath and tried to hoist myself up with my hand, and down I went—a major battle to go 30 yards with that bag. That bastard. But I couldn't hear him anywhere. And we jabbered on: "Brother, I don't think he's in there." "Eugenio, Eugenio, you don't know where you're going!" "I don't think he's in there anymore." "Eugenio, do you think he's behind us somewhere?" "No, brother, I'm positive I saw him go in there." "But you, what do you know, I suppose you're used to this brush." "Hombre, it's just that I feel . . ." "Just look, look in." "Aha, it looks like he went through there." You could see big tracks.

And in a while the campesino came back out, pissed off, but very respectful to the city man: "Compañeros, I can hear you yelling all the way over there." That was right; I couldn't see

him, but he could hear us. He could hear us on ahead; he had experience. He could hear the racket, our screams and squabbling. Because right from the start our good humor went down the drain, our good natures. We hadn't gone 200 yards when we were talking to each other in a tone we had never used before, different even from the critical tone of our study groups in the Frente cell. It was more like when you were little and fighting with your kid brother: "Don't bug me, just get out of my way!" And the campesino was back: "Compañeros, you're making way too much racket. And if you don't speed up, it'll be light and the Guard will see us and slaughter us all." So let's get going! We were running, or I should say we were lost and scrambling to keep up with our guide! We were starting to feel the icy chill of the damp, and we marched for about two hours in real misery.

Our hands were a mess of tiny threads of blood, not bleeding much, but you could see the blood. We had been attacked by a sort of poison ivy. That son-of-a-bitch campesino is immune to pain, I thought. First it got on your hands, then you spread it to your face; you didn't know whether to throw down your pack or put up with the terrible itch; two hours of that, uphill and down, and all of a sudden a big surprise—we ran smack into some creeks, little streams, springs of water. But I didn't see them until *bam!* I was right on top of them. "Look, we can cross over here . . ." A creek about a half-yard wide, but when you waded in it was a deep gully.

You can't see in the mountains. Everything is dark at first, until gradually you start seeing like a cat. You start to differentiate among the dark shapes to make out the lay of the land. But at first it all looked the same. We sloshed through the gulleys, almost knee-deep in water. I didn't know whether to stop and dump the water out of my shoes or what. "Brother, the water . . ." "No, brothers, we've got to hurry or we'll be left behind." But it seemed odd to me not to stop and dump out the water. And I would keep reaching down to my damp sock, and I got all caught up in that, obsessed with that as we

went along. Until, finally! we came to a halt. "Is this the camp?" I asked. I hadn't the slightest idea. It seemed as if we had marched for who knows how long; it must have been about three hours nonstop. How far can you march in three hours? I calculated how long it took us to walk from León to Managua on the highway. But that was level and our path was rough, so I figured we had marched about 12 miles.

"Let's stop here; we're going to wait for daybreak." It was already getting light. "Compa, when will we get there?" "Well, at the rate you've been going, if we really speed up, we'll be there in three days." "What?" we said. "Three days to get to the compañeros' first camp?" In fact, it wasn't really a camp but where Silvestre, or Faustino (also known as Valdivia), was. He was there to work in the zone and had a tiny camp where he hid out so he could work in the valley with about three compañeros—he worked with Aurelio Carrasco, and Edwin Cordero was there, and Jorge the baker and two more campesinos. In our group we had Iván Gutiérrez, Aquiles Reyes, and a couple of others. "Son of a bitch, compa," I said to him—you see, I talked to him in the way I knew was best, since I was more educated, to get around him and get information without his realizing. The campesinos are very quick, and on top of that suspicious of city people. I didn't let on, but I wanted to find out when we were going to come out of that hell we were marching through. That poison ivy had just about done me in.

By dawn I was half covered with mud, soaked to the skin, my hands were totally screwed, and we were starved. We had already gone two nights with no sleep and about twenty-four hours with no food; we had no idea, we could never have guessed what was in store for us. Had we known we could have stuffed ourselves with some huge meals before starting out. So we sat down to rest by the bank of a creek about a yard across. "Break out the chow. It's suppertime," the campesino announced. But nobody wanted to eat. Our stomachs were tied in knots. I saw that the campesino had taken out the pow-

dered milk we had brought, the White Lily brand with the green label from the Prolacsa Dairy. He got out a little pail, which was already all dented and banged up, and poured in some sugar, a lot of sugar—when there's sugar they eat things sweet—then he cut a stick, which he used as a stirring spoon, filled the pail to the top with water, and stirred in the milk. Then he drank the whole thing straight down! We just stared, amazed that anybody could drink so much. It was really big, I'm not shitting you, full to the top. And since there was a little milk still in powder form stuck to the bottom, he took his finger, his fingernail, and scraped around the edge and ate that, and was still working to get the last bit out from under his nails with his teeth. Son of a bitch! we said; those poor campesinos don't even drink milk, but he drank it anyway . . . shit!

We started asking questions about the route. "No," he said, "now we're going on a narrow trail, and we'll keep about 20 yards apart. I'll go first." I went right behind him. "Stick close to me," I said; "get too far ahead and I'm lost." So we started marching; we left the brush, passed over a lower ground cover, and came upon another type of brush, different from the first. More a mountain jungle with huge trees, but tangled with all sorts of smaller trees and weeds and grasses and every kind of underbrush you can imagine, so overgrown you couldn't even see the ground. And you couldn't see the sky because the trees were embracing overhead; you couldn't see a thing, only tiny needle holes of blue or white. It started raining before we headed out, and it kept on raining.

I didn't understand why the campesino was so obsessed with our not breaking the brush. "Compa, don't crush the grasses"; "compa, don't snap that branch." At first I thought it was the campesino's love of nature. We, too, theoretically respected nature: we were against all the awful things that had happened in León with the problem of the dust storms, because the whole west had been stripped of trees to grow cotton. But it seemed to me to be overdoing it in the middle of an

ocean of vegetation to be saying, "Compa, don't nick the trees with your machete." And when we were ready to march he would line us up, move us apart a little with his machete, then, using both his machete and his hands, start plumping up the grass where we had sat and smashed it down. He also arranged the leaves; he was acting just like El Gato Munguía, who adored plants and had been brought up to take care of them. But these were the things that could betray us.

Anyway, we started marching about 6:00 A.M., in a drizzling rain, exhausted, I can't tell you how tired from marching. My shoulders were shot to hell, my hands raw from the weight of the bag, which was about 25 pounds. We followed a muddy trail that wound deep into the mountains. Horses had left their hoofprints in the mud, and so many mules and horses had traveled that path, all leaving hoofprints, deep holes in the mud, that between the hoofprints was a sort of higher ground, which was where you walked, like on jagged little waves. In winter it was one big stretch of mud, a mudhole, clayish mud. We would slip and *bam!* you were flat on your ass. You picked yourself up but then your bag was all dirty; as you marched along you tried to clean it off, since it was new and covered with mud. But once you had the mud off your bag, where could you wipe your hands? On a branch? You took another step, teetered, put out your hand, and were drenched with mud all over again.

Then it really started raining. We tramped on through the mud; it was impossible to get a good foothold on the ridge between the hoofprints, besides which the rise was muddy, too. But when you marched in the hoofprints you sank in mud up to your knees. And mud poured in at the top of your rubber boots. Wading through mud . . . with your bag all black from being dropped so many times. Finally you said to yourself, "That son-of-a-bitch bag can just stay dirty!" And that's how you learn that nobody in the guerrillas cleans his bag.

I was carrying a shotgun, the one-shell kind that you break open, clack, and put in the shell. My military equipment con-

sisted of that gun and the revolver that was rubbing me raw. I had already switched it to the other side; my skin was so raw that it burned when I sweated, and sometimes it would jab me in the ribs as I walked. I had a big kerchief where I wrapped my shells, since we still didn't have cartridge belts, and I tied it onto the other part of my belt, the opposite side. So I had my shotgun, my revolver, and a handful of shells in the back pocket of my pants; I held the shotgun in one hand, since it didn't have a sling, and the bag in the other; when I got tired I'd switch the bag, which was heaviest, to my other hand. I still hadn't figured out how in hell I was supposed to march—was I supposed to climb by hoisting myself up with my hands? Sometimes I took my shotgun and bag in one hand and tried to climb with the other. But what happened was I'd come crashing down and land on top of the shells and my ass would hurt even more. The longer you marched the more your body hurt, until it got to the point where you couldn't stand it, it hurt too much, you were raw all over. You tromped on, and the farther you went the more tired you got, until a kind of dizziness came over you. Then suddenly a strange thing happened, which happened to a number of us in exactly the same way: we heard a noise that sounded just like a siren: *eeiiiii eeiiiii eeiiiii* . . . an air-raid siren. But there was no siren.

We tromped on, the campesino in the lead, and that constant battle not to be left behind, to keep moving forward, and again and again you fell down in the mud. Then just like that you forgot all about getting rid of the mud, even off your hands. Then to keep my balance I would ram my shotgun up to the hilt in mud and clog the barrel completely. Or when I was slipping, the gun would pop open and the shell would drop out; so I would have to look for it, pawing through the mud with my hands. But when I found it I couldn't clean it, since everything I had was soaked with mud.

I realized that my shells had slipped out of my kerchief—had been dropping out along the way—because a campesino had found some of them. "Go find those bullets, they could

give us away," the compañero said. "But they're buried in the mud," I protested. "No, compa, you'd better get going." The last thing I wanted to do was turn around and slog back 50 yards through that fucking mudhole, besides which every inch of my body ached and was raw and sore. We had been better off in the brush where we were before. Can you imagine that nightmare of mud, can you imagine how bad it was if I was longing for the brush? Well, we marched all that day. The bag got heavier and heavier, and we would have to rest, one guy every 500 yards, another every 300, another at 200.

In the distance, a campesino cut across the trail: "Adiós! Adiós!" The campesinos knew we weren't natives, that we came from the city. But they played the fool out of fear, so we wouldn't think they had discovered we came from town.

We noticed that our guide was tromping along very easily there ahead of us. He wasn't covered with mud, except for his boots. He pulled out a spotless kerchief and mopped the sweat from his face, while my kerchief was sopping with mud. I had mud on my hair, on my face, everywhere. Before we were marching through brush, now we were marching through mud. When you tried to get a footing on those jagged waves of ground you lost your balance, your bag swung to one side, and *bang!* it knocked you down, because the bag overwhelmed you. Or you manage not to fall, but the bag pulls you backward—*slam!*—or you let go of it and keep from falling but stumble off to the side. One last time I took up my bag and lugged it on. I hoped to God the mud would be level on ahead, but the fact was the trail wound up and down through the mountains, with now and then a deep ravine alongside.

I remember we stopped about four in the afternoon; we were going to sleep, the campesino said. Great, we were stopping to eat and then to sleep. We left the trail and went into the brush, about 500 yards in, which is where we would sleep. All this was new to us. "Now pay attention. We're going to enter the brush scattered out, about every ten yards, so keep about ten yards between each man. But before we start in," he

said, "we're going to march for a while on the shoulder of the path, out of the mud. Pick up your feet like you're riding a bike and try to put your foot in the same place as the guy ahead of you." We left the path and started marching alongside it over a stubbly vegetation. We picked up our feet the way he said, each of us marching in the footprints of the guy ahead. So, anyone coming down the path would only see one set of footprints. When you're going through deep mud your footprints will eventually disappear. But if you're out of the mud on the vegetation, if you don't want to leave tracks and trample down the whole area, you have to march in the steps of the guy ahead of you, with big strides. So you go a fair stretch like that, 300 to 500 yards, up to over a mile; it was rough and very awkward going because the ground was uneven. The topography was rugged as hell. You couldn't do it; physically and mentally it was impossible to do. It was very hard because it was so awkward. Shit, we said, this son of a bitch is too much. But that was survival in the guerrilla war: not being detected.

One time we marched like that for some 500 or 1,000 yards, sometimes for half a day. It was superawkward; but the moment came when our guide would strike off into the brush, also with giant strides like this, *pam, pam, pam,* into the brush; then the next guy dove in, *pran, pran, pran.* Before long we were back together again in the brush. We didn't want to leave prints either going into or coming out of the brush. So if they were on your trail they couldn't find you. Later the Guard figured out how to follow our tracks. There were campesinos who knew all these tricks, and when campesino-compañeros were arrested, some of them talked. So the Guard learned all these methods. The repression was ferocious; there's no way to describe it. We came up with a thousand ingenious things along this line, but the Guard was always right on top of us.

Fire in the Rain

All day as we went along I kept thinking about the camp; I was spurred on by the thought of the camp, remembering everything they had told me about the mountain. In the city the mountain was a myth, it was a symbol, as I told you before. I wondered what the camps would be like, and what Modesto looked like, how tall would he be, if I had ever met him—all these things. What I mean is the idea of getting to the camp and demystifying, that's the word, demystifying it, once and for all, finally seeing it from the inside, that's what I'd spent almost six years working for day and night, with no Christmas, no Holy Week, no vacations. All because of that mountain. Because of the FSLN, because of that mystery which was growing greater with every passing day. If anything in that hellhole of mud, in that nightmare of mud and raw blisters and exhaustion and discomfort made me happy it was this: finally, on my own two feet, I was approaching it—I was going to see those famous men in person, the guerrillas, people like Che. What would their beards be like, and the battles, and the work with the campesinos? How would they cook? I was going to be in the heart of the Frente Sandinista, in the most hidden, the most virgin part of the Frente, the most secret, the most delicate, the Frente of

Carlos Fonseca and all of that. Carlos: I had never met him, never had a chance to meet him. And all of that propelled me forward.

Maybe it was machismo or wanting to set an example, but I think that more than anything deep down it was a sense of pride, which we all had, that I drew on when I felt tired, or when it seemed I was screwing up the march by being out of shape. Because don't forget where I was coming from—drinking, staying up late, smoking, eating junk, never exercising, then all of a sudden, *bam!* I was right in the middle of something that called for men. Men? Shit! Toughened campesinos! Seeing how useless I felt then on that march after being accustomed to leading student marches on the paved streets of Managua—see what I'm saying, me, the hero of the young girls! Shit! Now I was nothing but a miserable dog. You feel your ideas so deeply, so intimately. Finally, it was not possible that I could fail to come to grips with that environment, but I felt I would never be able to do it. You go through incredibly low moments. You feel absolutely impotent when the first blisters pop out on your feet and your legs are full of sores and raw spots and every step is another spot rubbed raw.

A point comes on the march when it seems that your body and your clothes and everything you are carrying have a single rhythm, one rhythm. As though my heart was beating to the same rhythm as the bullets that were chafing my ass or my legs. Pounding to the same rhythm as the two pocketfuls of bullets. Heart and legs; when you took a step it was as if everything was moving in unison, in unison with your stride, with the bone that was swiveling, with your pistol jabbing you in the crotch. Just think of that jabbing and chafing, how pistol and legs and bullets and blistering shoes and your heart were all pounding, all beating in unison and *bom, bom,* you are marching and your body absorbs all those blows to the skin, and right through your skin, throughout your entire organism as if suddenly a harmony took hold of you, of your whole body, inside and out. And when you put your foot down on the ground, and when you put your foot down once again, it

was as if that thud was in rhythm with the hammering of your heart and the rubbing of your pistol and the chafing of the bullets and the blistering of your feet, right down to the flow of your blood and the flick of your eyes when you were looking where to put your foot. Because when you march you feel so shitty, so tired and miserable and tense from trying not to fall, not to slip, that you keep your eyes glued to the ground to see where to put your foot. So, vision and hearing and heartbeat and blistering blows, the thud of your foot, your pistol rubbing and bullets in back and bullets in front—it's all one blow, one movement, one man marching. Then with blow upon blow coming at you through all those smaller blows, of raw blisters and fatigue and the slap of your bag swinging you to one side, and with the next step to the other side, it's all one rhythm with the rubbing and the beat of your heart.

You are thinking, too, as you march, you are thinking back and images arise from the past, and also images of the mystery you are about to unravel. And you feel you'll unravel it all in one blow, with one heartbeat, one bullet, one blistering pain, one gasping breath. Because your breathing is also in step with the other beats. Though on the outside you see only a man marching, actually that man marching is made up of an incredible number of little beats, blistering beats, lung-beats, heartbeats.

I was horrified to think they might be looking at me, so I busted my balls so the stroke would be an elegant stroke, a martial stroke, a guerrilla stroke, a courageous stroke, a noble, masterful stroke. You might say this was machismo or egoism, this business of being an example, of setting an example. And maybe they weren't looking at me at all. I was so curious to see the compañeros face to face, to know, finally—all this gave me strength, so when we stopped to rest in the middle of the march, in that place I mentioned, there were plenty of mysteries; everything was new. I kept a sharp eye on the campesinos, on everything they did and how they did it so I could do it later myself.

"We're going to cook," they announced. And how were we

going to cook, and where? I thought cooking meant setting up camp, setting things up. It was raining, and where were we going to get the stuff to eat; and what were you going to cook in up there, the cooking pots, where were they? And the stove, the oven, and what in hell were we going to cook?

Anyway, when we were marching along we heard a *gurrr, gurrr, gurrr, hoossss.* We thought it must be wildcats or mountain lions, and on the basis of that I made some rapid calculations: *pra, pra,* three tigers, with five shots, one shot per man . . . we'll bring them down with pistols, son of a bitch! And my rifle up to the butt in mud! Okay, with my revolver then, I'll kill it, *bam, bam,* I'll shoot it and kill it. Because campesinos know what to do when five tigers turn up; campesinos know those things, right? So the compañeros must know how to deal with wildcats.

But the campesino told us, no, those weren't wildcats, they were monkeys, Congo monkeys. The Congo monkey is a son of a bitch, ugly, filthy; the meat is tough, brooother! And it stinks. But if you're hungry it's delicious—monkey soup, which is a broth that simmers for four hours. So the campesino gave the orders: "Let's go shoot a little monkey, okay? Give me the .22, come on, Eugenio, you, Eugenio, come on!" he said. Ah, how fantastic to walk without carrying anything, out of the mountain mud, free of weight; I didn't bring my rifle since it still needed to be cleaned; I had taken out the bullets that were chafing me and had them in my hand. My hands and feet were a mess. I didn't want to walk, but what the hell, I wanted to go along to see what it would be like, and to show him I wasn't worn out.

Then I saw the monkeys, a troop of monkeys, droves of monkeys leaping over the branches, incredibly high, in trees 100 yards high, even higher, and monkeys swinging from branch to branch. They were racing over the treetops. Miles of them, hundreds of miles of monkeys in troops.

The monkey is like man. Anyway, the .22 and *bam!* That'll bring that monkey down! A huge monkey, no shit, a good

yard or half-yard long, no, about a yard, counting the tail. I could see the monkeys were looking at us just as we were looking at them. I had never tasted monkey or anything like it, but I was never squeamish about food, and besides I came prepared to eat anything. But I wasn't very hungry. We hadn't wanted to eat at all—it hurt us to swallow when we ate—who knows why it hurt to swallow when we started out. What was that? Crack, crack! *Aiiii!* The monkey shrieked when it was hit; we hit it three times, and it finally fell *perrr-bamg*—they come crashing down through the branches. They are very heavy. A monkey can weigh up to 35 pounds; it can even weigh 100 pounds. So the monkey fell. It was the first time I'd ever seen a monkey at close range. There was a monkey near where my grandma lived, a tiny monkey, but it scared me to see it up close, and it was really small. But that was a long time ago. The first time I ever saw a monkey close up, that son-of-a-bitch monkey's face looked like a little old man with a little boy's body, a little old man's face. And we carted it off to our camp.

But what were we going to do with a monkey, where were we going to skin a monkey? How, where, and who was going to skin the monkey, and what seasoning for the monkey? Well, we were all staring, taking it all in. The campesino picked up the monkey, and we carted it off, cutting five platanillo leaves along the way, which are like chagüite leaves; I cut them, *whock whock.* I thought we were going to sleep, to put down our ground covers, but everything was wet, the grass, the jungle. I noticed the campesino was starting to clear a yard or so of brush with his machete: to dig up the dirt, because the dirt on top was very damp, to get down to some drier dirt. "Hey you, go get some stones. In the ravine there are stones." So the boys went to look for stones, and they brought back some that weren't right. "Those stones are no good. Go get some others."

We had finally stopped marching; it was a cheerful moment, our first night as guerrillas. We all felt like guerrillas in

that place. We felt like guerrilla men. I had been in that area before with the Boy Scouts, with Juan José Quezada, but that was different. Now the Guard was there. If the Guard came we'd have to fight them. Can you imagine? Not one of us would have come out alive. Except maybe for the campesino, because he could have run, and he had a decent gun.

"Put down the stones," he said. We got a kettle, and he put in the leaves he had set aside; we started skinning the monkey, *ziip, ziip, ziip,* in the rain. The monkey had worms; we got rid of those, and the skinned monkey looked just like a skinned little boy with no head and the tail chopped off; cut off the hands and the monkey is a little boy. We saw that it really looked like a little boy, but we didn't mention it because we didn't want to seem like squeamish women. He took up the pieces of the monkey's hands, the feet, the legs, the tailbone of the little boy—except that it was a monkey—then he tossed the meat into the pot and poured water over it and a handful of salt. Not washing it, just wiping it off a little. The clear water was tinted pink from the drops of blood, because the monkey had not been wiped clean.

Now for the firewood. But how could we build a fire if that damn wood was wet? The campesino went to get some wood; they know all about how to spot dry wood, dry branches that are still growing, that are wet on the outside but dry inside; and the better the wood the less trouble you have, because hard wood is less porous—the water can't penetrate. He returned with the firewood, peeled off the bark, and the wood was dry. But how were you going to get a fire going? Would you start it with a match? Good luck! Who was going to have a match up there? We were watching everything very closely. It was the first time we'd seen this ritual that later on we became true masters of. The ritual of building a fire in the mountains—the real expert was David Blanco. David Blanco was a genius at fire building. That guy could build you a fire anywhere except in water. In the mud, even by a puddle; he would first get rid of the puddle, then build a fire. He's wet,

everything around is wet, but he builds you a fire. Fire in the mountain is an art. It's harder to get a fire going than to turn on a woman in the mountains.

The campesino cut little pieces of wood, then cut them in two with his machete, *chop, chop.* Then he took one of the pieces and cut it down still more, then did the same thing with the other sticks, cutting them down into smaller and smaller sticks, until finally there was a pile of sawdust and wood chips, a huge pile of wood chips, then larger chips and larger chips up to little pieces of wood. First he piled the wood chips in the center. He had already rigged up a champa, a plastic sheet, a rain cover overhead, to keep the water from screwing us up. He put the wood chips on the shavings, right on top. Then a bit bigger piece, then a bit bigger, with the biggest ones more to the outside, with the wood chips in the center. Then he took a scrap of boot rubber—boot rubber burns if you set a match to it. So he lit a scrap of worn-out boot rubber that he had in his pack. And very gently, so they wouldn't fall apart, he separated the little sticks and in the center set up a very fragile little structure of chips. The chips have to be touching and very dry; they have to exchange very dry kisses there in a mountain of damp wood. This is the driest thing there is for hundreds of miles around. You drop the burning rubber into the center of the wood chips and they catch fire. As the fire starts burning, flames leap up out of the damp, out of the wet. Fire is born and leaps higher and higher; it travels toward the sticks, starts burning the little sticks, then the bigger sticks and bigger sticks until the fire is roaring. You can hardly believe you are seeing a fire. You dry off, you get warm. It's incredible how in the middle of so much dampness, so much rain, in a dripping jungle, fire can appear.

We put the kettle of icy mountain water on the stones, and before long it was boiling. We switched on the radio and started listening to the news. The sound was barely audible; we had brought along a radio antenna which we hung on a tree to get better reception. So there we were around the fire

saying anything that popped into our heads, asking the campesino all sorts of questions. We couldn't stand the suspense any longer: how many men were in there, what were their aliases, what places were we going to go through? About three hours like that, bullshitting and listening to the radio crackling and fading in and out, listening to Radio Corporation when it still "spoke the language of the people."

We listened to the "News at Five." When they realized in the city that we'd all left, it would be an explosion. What leaders would take over? This guy or that guy, did their girl friends know where they had gone? Some of the guys had said they were going to study abroad; others had told their girl friends the truth.

Okay then, the big soup was ready, each of us with his own little pot. We weren't hungry, but how could we not eat when we had gone to so much trouble? Besides, it was hot, and the heat sparked our appetites. We dove in and ate a fantastic meal of monkey. No shit, it was damn good.

IX

Meeting Tello

We left the following day. All traces of the fire and cooking had to be hidden; we dug a hole, threw in the stones, buried the charred bits of wood, ashes, and embers, then threw leaves down and spread them around as if nobody had ever been there. We didn't sleep in our hammocks that night. At dawn we started off through the brush, not through the mud. Another experience, another battle with vines; the bag kept getting caught in the vines. Sometimes you couldn't get through, you had to practically crawl under the brush, dragging your bag—that's tiring.

This time we went another way, which took us to where Evelio (Nelson Suárez) lived, in a place called Las Bayas. I noticed that the campesino stopped about 100 yards back: "Ssshhh," he warned, "nobody make a sound." And he took his machete and rapped it against a tree, *bam, bam, bam.* Then he went off to the little shack about 50 yards away, *bam, bam, bam*—the return signal.

We entered the shack, the kitchen; the kids were in bed; there was a newborn baby. A tiny shack built right out of the brush—of branches and straw with a wood roof. No table, nothing; the bed was built out of the same wood. There was

nothing made of artificial materials, not even any home-crafted items, except for a couple of little plastic glasses. That was where we would sleep; they had already finished supper, but they gave us some tortillas.

About 6:00 A.M. we reached our contact point, where Silvestre was. I don't know what I was expecting from this contact, but it really impressed me. I had a talk with Valdivia there. I'll never forget it—when we reached Valdivia in the morning, there were about five compañeros; you see, Valdivia always met the new people and leapfrogged them on to the other compañeros up ahead. On to René Tejada, about two days' march away. I figured when we reached Silvestre we would find a camp, I'm not sure what I was expecting.

In fact, there was a mountain gorge with a gigantic tree fallen across it; it must have just recently fallen, I thought, because its leaves were still green. And under the fallen tree there was a little space between the ground and the trunk. The trunk was massive, with a whole shitload of branches. And the compas were holed up beneath that giant tree, hidden in the huge branches that were so enormous they could hang their hammocks from them. First the signal, three raps. They answered back and faces popped out, but who were they? The usual curiosity.

A skinny guy appeared, and I mean skin and bones, with a face that was elongated, and a beard. A hard face, as if he wasn't very enthusiastic about anything, including us. I was a lot more enthusiastic about getting there and meeting the compañeros and incorporating myself than he was to have us there. It was a dry, serious, even tense business on his part. He was a lean guy, with a big nose, wearing a tan shirt and green pants—not a military green; his clothes were civilian—and he wore a leather belt with a pistol. He was not in uniform, but in something that was between military and civilian dress; guerrilla dress you might call it. I think his rifle was a Garand.

Flavio (Edwin Cordero) was there, too; he's now the representative of the MINIT, the Ministry of the Interior, in the

Fourth Region. We called him the Doctor because he'd been studying medicine. A short, stocky guy. I turned over to him a bunch of letters they had sent from the city.

We set about rigging up some cartridge belts for our bullets, trying to halfway equip ourselves since we were heading deeper in. The camps were deep in the massive trees where theoretically the main body of guerrillas was located. By that time we were hungry, but there was no food, except what our collaborator had brought—three pathetic tortillas and a few beans for the lot of us, a little bite for everybody. The hunger was beginning to get to us.

We chatted a bit with Valdivia, who recognized me—at least I think he did, because he asked about the university, how things were going, the university reform, just small talk. I don't know if he knew my brothers, but it came out in our conversation: "You see, brother, I left to join the guerrillas on a Sunday, and the next Wednesday my brother Chema and I were all set to graduate. Emir was in his fourth year of Economics." I told Silvestre that we were four brothers, and I was sure that the others were going to come up, too. "That's right. If the mother gets at least one of her sons back, that's enough," he said. Son of a bitch, did that hit me like a ton of bricks! If only one comes back, if only one . . . You might say I was seeing from a little closer up the real likelihood of what we were thinking about in the jeep. It was out of the question, it was too much to ask that we'd all come out alive. This was not a film, it was not the movies. And the fact is, I was the only one of us who survived.

Well, they fitted us out up there; they equipped us. We recovered from our blisters, and for the first time in three days I took a shit. "I'm going to go shit," I said. "You know how to do it?" he asked. "How?" "Take a machete, dig a hole, shit in the hole, and when you're finished, cover it with dirt and then with leaves, so there's no trace." This is basic security for the guerrilla. "And how do I wipe myself?" "With leaves, you wipe yourself with leaves. You take a handful of leaves and

wipe yourself like that." Fine, that didn't scare me. Off I went with all my sores and blisters—pretty pathetic. I dug a hole, took my shit, then grabbed a couple of leaves. Well, what happened was, I drenched my hand with shit trying to wipe myself; it was impossible. If figured out later that you had to take a huge handful of leaves. I had used just two little leaves and imagined I was going to wipe myself like that! What a mess: my fingernails were full of shit. I dug my nails into the dirt to get rid of it. Then I took more leaves and wiped again. Common sense teaches you, the hard way, that you don't wipe with a few leaves, but with a big handful of leaves.

That night they sent me on to Tello, to René Tejada. We didn't get in that night because of problems on the march. There were two campesinos, veteran marchers. Pedro went in front, with Aurelio Carrasco behind and me in the middle. I carried a pack, right? A pack with huge burlap bags that they put straps on so it could be carried on your back, like the packs in militia practice. Can you imagine, me marching along with Aurelio, with those two expert marchers? I should mention that Pedro, the guy who I told you was in the lead, was one of our top mountain guides. He was our main guide in those days; he had to have been in the mountains longer than anybody; a veteran of Zinica, a son of one of the campesina women of Cuá—there was a song about that. Venancia was his mother.

I felt more comfortable marching. I had my pack and a cartridge belt for the bullets, so that rubbing against my ass was gone. We were off to a good start. I felt sturdier; I had gone through the experience of marching through that hideous brush and mud. I was a little steadier on my feet. The thing is, we had to march at night. We started out with flashlights, always keeping our hand over the glass to block most of the light.

It was my first march alone with those compañeros, those veteran marchers, so I was forced to march better, so as not to be a drag on them. Besides, there was no hope we would stop

and rest because one of them was tired. It was just me, and I had to pour it on, give it all I had. I don't know why, but suddenly it seemed that I was sailing along. The campesino in the lead with me right on his tail, I was marching along right behind him. We slogged through banks of mud and I hardly fell down or slipped or anything. Sometimes I saw a campesino fall, but I was hardly falling at all. Finally my legs were adjusting, were toughening up. I had my weaknesses, that's for sure, and lack of experience, but it wasn't like before.

That was the day we got lost. We got lost. We stopped marching at 4:00 A.M., slept, then got up to head into the mountains. But Pedrito got turned around, and we ended up marching again through the brush. I was getting used to shifting my weight from one foot to the other, and by that time I had a rifle sling, so my hand was free—flashlight in one hand and one hand free. I was getting the hang of the topography, figuring out how to get a footing when I was going downhill or climbing up, how to get over a tree trunk, or underneath, without snagging my pack.

It wasn't long before the chafing started in. But this time it wasn't everywhere as before. Basically it hurt around my waist; my belt was rubbing. It hit me right at those two bones at the base of my legs, the pelvic bones. As I marched along my belt would slip down and start pinching me. You're climbing up and it's slipping down and pinching you, and pretty soon these bones are a mess and bother the shit out of you and your pack is getting heavier. And before long your whole body starts to feel like hell, just as bad as before. Raw all over, every step a blow. Your legs get fatigued; the calves of your legs start to ache.

But finally we got to Tello. He was all alone. At first I didn't know who he was; I realized who he had to be when he told me, not what his name was, but how one of his brothers had died. The story of how David Tejada Peralta died is famous—the Guard murdered him, then threw his body into the Santiago volcano. So we met Tello. Tello wasn't like Valdivia,

but they had one thing in common—their faces, the expression on their faces. Tello was thin and strong, a thin, strong guy, roughly my height or a bit taller, with short, very curly hair, kinky hair, and with fine features and good teeth. He had tiny little eyes and abrupt gestures—very countrified. He had picked up the campesino way of talking. When he talked to you, even though he was from the city, he sounded just like a campesino.

I'm not sure why, but right from the start Tello began to be close to me, to open up a little. We were with him for about three days; we had to wait for the boys who had stayed behind with Silvestre. I was going up to join Rodrigo (Carlos Agüero) in the main camp about fifteen days' march deeper in. We were all supposed to meet where Tello was, to go join up with the main body of guerrillas. I don't remember if it was on the first or second night when Tello invited me to hang my hammock next to his. As we lay talking in our hammocks I realized that he knew who I was, that my name was Omar Cabezas, that I was a student leader, a guy with some political ability. Sometimes you can't say all you want to say to the campesinos; you have to talk on their level. So when I arrived, Tello opened up to me; now he could talk. He had so many memories and ideas and dreams, all sorts of things, doubts and things he wanted to know about, to ask about, certain things that were going on in the city that he had no information about, and so on.

So he started letting out all he had inside him, something he hadn't done with the campesinos because he thought they probably wouldn't understand. Because urban people are more complex, more abstract, more sophisticated, complicated—their feelings, emotions, ways of interpreting things. And Tello started talking about his family, his belief in the guerrilla war. He was depressed. He was a guy who you could see was hardened by the mountain, the shitty food, the rain. But I also sensed that Tello was deeply lonely. Later he told me he had left behind a woman he had loved very much. It made him

very nervous to talk about that. He had rapid-fire gestures; he was very agile, very strong, on the surface a tough, weather-beaten guy. But just scratch that surface and he was capable of crying; you would see how sensitive he really was inside, how tender and human. Tello was a man who was capable of crying out of disappointment. Later René Vivas told me what happened on the march from Tello's camp to Rodrigo's camp. Because of us, Tello cried. Of course he didn't understand that it wasn't possible for us to be any good at that time. But he had wanted us to be much better right from the start. Out of his longing for freedom and for victory, out of his longing to have all that suffering over, or for whatever reason.

As I heard it, he thought he was getting seasoned men, tried and true guerrillas who were used to marching and carrying packs, trained fighters. Then, marching along, one of us burst out, "Okay that's it, we can't go on," and Tello cried, out of disappointment. René Vivas told me that—that he was capable of crying out of disappointment. Tello had an army background, had been a lieutenant in the National Guard and after that had received military training from the Palestinians, who are extremely rigorous. Tello's method of whipping us into shape was brutal. It was a sort of military school along Palestinian lines, extremely tough. His military background was a combination of those two things, which he wanted to pass on to us through a crash course, to us "good-for-nothings" as he called us, fresh from our first year at the University of León, thrust all of a sudden into that unbelievable, unimaginable hell.

Loneliness at the Mountain's Heart

Tello ended up having a big influence on my development. You could say he was one of the guys who influenced me the most in the mountains. Not even Modesto or Rodrigo had as much influence on me as Tello and David Blanco.

In a little while more compañeros arrived, the ones who had stayed behind with Silvestre. And we got together some food, some cornmeal; we were super-loaded down. We dug up some weapons that had been buried there to be taken up into the mountains, and which we could use ourselves. So, laden down like mules with provisions and two weapons apiece, it was a helluva lot harder to march. But off we went, about ten or twelve men, I'm not being exact since I've forgotten the specifics. We were heading for the center of the mountains, about a fifteen-day march. It took us about five days, I think, to reach the camp. You can bet we marched as much in the brush and jungle as we did on trails. It was our first big march.

First we marched one night, then two nights, then a day. We started out this time to march for fifteen days, never running into any houses—only an isolated shack here and

there—through an area that if I'm not mistaken was called El Naranjo, beyond Zinica.

You could say that march was our baptism by fire as guerrillas, as veteran marchers. The ones before had been nothing; we barely got our feet wet on those first marches. For the first time on that march feelings of a very different sort began to surface. About two days out you start to feel you can't go on, that your body won't do it, that your lungs won't cooperate. You feel as if your whole body's shaking. Climbing up and down, up and down, with no end in sight. The only noise you hear is the sound of animals in the brush and the sound of trees crashing down, and the falling rain. You don't see colors, and it's always the same compañeros. You get sick and tired of seeing the same compañeros . . . the same footsteps . . . shit! And when it comes time to fight, I said, are we going to have to turn around and go back and find the Guard? Son of a bitch, turn around and go back the way we came! Then haul our asses all the way back up! With any luck, I thought, the Guard will come up to us, and we'll wipe them all out on the spot. Then we won't have to make an extra trip down.

We started to get hungry from marching, marching all day. The third day we ran out of the tortillas and beans we had brought along; by the fourth day we were down to three spoonfuls of cornmeal three times a day. Being that hungry, we shot monkeys, but only at suppertime. Because we couldn't carry them. Though sometimes we did lug monkey meat that weighed down our packs.

To get rid of some weight I wanted to chuck out all sorts of things. But I couldn't chuck the blanket or I'd freeze, and I slept in the hammock—so I threw out books. I wanted to chuck everything: nail clippers, ball-point pen, paper, even things I needed, to make the pack lighter. Because the longer you march the heavier it gets. You put down your foot, and it's as if you're sinking into the ground under the weight of the pack. Or it makes you slip. You think your tail bone is going to crack under the weight of the pack. They weighed

about 35 pounds each. When we stopped to rest we plopped down on our asses, *pum*. I remember I plopped down once, and a pain shot through my ass. I let out a screech and jumped up; I'd sat on some poor snake. Luckily it wasn't poisonous, but I didn't know that. And when I felt that seething pain in my ass, *ayiiii, mamita!* I took off like a bat out of hell; I didn't even feel my pack, and the snake took off just as fast! We sat down without looking, just anywhere . . . plop. Right on a slope we would decide we wanted cocoa, and we would sit down. Which made Tello furious: "Bunch of drag-ass loafers, bunch of lazy fuck-ups . . ."

I remember when I went underground Camilo Sesto had a song out that was very popular: "Help me change my thorns for roses . . ." Iván Gutiérrez, who was with us, was in love. One day, he began to sing, and suddenly we heard loud cries echoing in the mountains: "Hellp meee . . . !" That poor guy had sat down and was belting out that song toward the city. To his girl friend, calling her to come and help him, or who knows whom he was singing to; it was as if he was calling out to her. Tello didn't get angry that day; he just laughed.

My feet were one big open sore, and on top of that my socks were wet. The march was a constant struggle. We suddenly realized we craved salt, and we started eating more salt than usual. We were getting dehydrated, and the saga of salt began. We took fistfuls of salt; the monkey meat was salted, and we salted it again and tore into that, or dumped salt on our boiled corn.

We also discovered the true value of fire. You're dead if you can't build a fire in the mountains. Not just the fire to cook with, but the spark, the spark to light the fire. If your matches get wet, what do you do? Everything was in plastic bags inside our packs—matches, your notebook, a photo of your kid—all in plastic bags. You discover how valuable fire really is—for drying you out and to cook with, and even for company, because fire is company, too.

Finally, one day, we got to the camp. The same signal,

three raps. Finally I was going to see and unveil the mystery. We went in, and I remember the first person to greet us was a guy about twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, a tall, skinny guy with a powerful physique, stronger than Tello or Silvestre. His face was hard but not bitter, with brownish hair, and he had some very nice blue glasses that looked very expensive. But this man's face was different, with his yellow beard, a yellow beard and a pale face. Blue eyes, brownish hair. He wore olive green and carried an R-15 rifle. He greeted us with a smile, the first smile I'd seen since I'd been in the mountains. Do you know what it's like to go twenty days and never have anybody in command, anybody above you, anybody who knows more than you, who's better than you, look at you with anything but a harsh, hard expression—and then this smile? A smile on a hard face, a prophet's smile. His alias was Rodrigo. I found out later he was Carlos Agüero Echeverría. Military head of the guerrilla war, second in command to Modesto in the mountains.

Other compañeros were there, David Blanco, and others whose names I've forgotten. Entering the camp we saw some green plastic rain covers and some rough beds. It was like a camp, about ten plastic rain covers scattered about, big ones, black and green, and some other rough beds built of wood with bags on top. Some of the rain covers had little tables beside them, made of pacaya branches, which look like bamboo since they're green on the outside. And the kitchen area . . . we saw big kettles with cooking pots. This really was a camp. It looked exactly like a camp. Just as I had always imagined. But I didn't see any people. I thought they must be off somewhere, someplace else, but what the—there wasn't anybody else! Just the people there and those of us just arriving. I was coming to grips with this a little bit at a time. I also knew that Víctor Tirado López was with Filemón Rivera on the other side of the Dariense range, about 350 miles from us. My brother Emir was there. We were in the Isabelia range.

When Rodrigo was given his mail, instead of reading it

right away he called us together. He wanted to talk to us. I guess he must have felt the same way Tello did, though not exactly, I would say. Because really, his situation was different in the sense that there were eight or ten of them who had been together for months, or years, who knows how long, one year, two, but time enough to have told your comrades the complete story of your life. You talk about your longings, your past, your personal history. You talk about your family, you talk over with your compañeros all the things you think are most important. And everybody knows everything that's ever happened to you, and suddenly there's nothing left to tell. Somebody starts talking and you could carry right on for him.

When somebody new or a new group arrived, it was like hitting the jackpot. What a goldmine of information each new guy was! On top of that they refreshed your memory about things, and you could ask about your neighbors, and your compañeros in the student movement, how their work was going, and how the people underground in the city were doing. It was like an inundation of joy, though six months later the same situation was repeated all over again. It was an influx of new things into camp, new ways of seeing, new opinions, new judgments, day and night, new things, new subjects to talk about, new topics you had never hit upon with the others. Six or seven new compañeros in camp was an inundation. And you saw their faces; you still hadn't sorted them all out. They were new, the names were new; what's so-and-so's name there? It was a flood of information, a flood of company, a breaking up of the accumulated loneliness of the camp. The violent eruption of sociability. The shattering of loneliness. You are scattering the solitude; it breaks up, for a few moments it evaporates. Your presence inundates and irrigates the place with company. It's an extraordinary thing. In fact, I was one of those for whom—I've often said this in the guerrilla war—after months of being in, when you've adapted and been transformed into a guerrilla, the hardest thing isn't the nightmare of the trail, or the horrible things about the mountains;

it's not the torture of lack of food or having the enemy always on your track; it's not going around filthy and stinking, or being constantly wet. It's the loneliness. Nothing is as rough as the loneliness.

That feeling of loneliness is indescribable. And we had plenty of it. The lack of company, the lack of a whole series of things that traditionally the city man is used to having right at hand, to sharing his life with. Loneliness is starting to forget the sounds of cars, the longing at night for electric lights, the longing for colors, because the mountain dresses only in green or dark colors. Nature is green, but what about orange? There's no dark blue, no baby blue, no purple, no lilac and none of those modern colors. Longing for your favorite songs, longing for a woman, longing for sex. Longing to see your family, your mother, your brothers, your compañeros from school. Missing and wanting to see your teachers and the workers and the people in your neighborhood; missing the city buses, the scorching city heat, the dust; not being able to go to the movies. You long for the company of all those things, but you can't have them; it's a loneliness forced on you against your will. You can't leave the guerrilla war. Because you've come to fight, which has been the great decision of your life.

That isolation, that loneliness, is the worst, the hardest thing; it's what hits you the hardest. The loneliness of not being able to kiss anybody, of knowing what it is for a human being not to be able to caress something, the loneliness of never being smiled at, never being touched. Even the animals caress each other: the poisonous snakes caress each other, the wild boars, the little birds; fish in the river caress each other. But we couldn't; we were strictly male, and we couldn't say affectionate things.

So that loneliness—that lack of being petted and fussed over and loved, with nobody to shower you with affection and nobody to shower with affection—that is harder, that stings you more than always being wet and being hungry, than always having to go get firewood, and battling the vines to keep

from dropping the firewood and having to pick it up all over again, and wiping your ass with leaves. Nothing was more terrible, for me anyway, than the infinite loneliness of our lives. And the worst of it was, we didn't know how long we would have to go on like that. It led to a kind of forced accommodation. We had to do without the past, without caresses, smiles, colors, the company of a sherbet, of a cigarette, or of sugar, because there was no sugar. A year without tasting sugar; you gradually resign yourself.

On the other hand, you march a short way and fall down; though you're a tried and true marcher you fall about thirty times; nobody ever notices. You cook with hardly any sanitation; you hardly ever wash. Or if you wash it's without soap. Eating is the main thing to look forward to, even though you know it's the same old shit: a handful of ground red corn with salt, a chunk of monkey meat with no seasoning at all, or three spoonfuls of plain cornmeal, or a teaspoon of powdered milk. And as hungry as you are, you have to go do political work with the campesinos. And you go, and get wet, and are shivering with cold and hunger, with no caresses, no laughter, nobody to hug and kiss, and the mud and the darkness of the night, and everybody by 7:00 P.M. lying in their hammocks, each thinking his separate thoughts.

But gradually you are mastering the environment, learning to march. Your legs are getting stronger. You learn how to swing a machete. And as time passes your hair starts to get long. I sprouted a mustache in the mountains. Washing so little roughens your skin. Over long periods of time your cuts and scratches heal and new ones come to take their place, until your hands and your arms are a different color. Callouses form on your hands. And you belch right in front of everybody. You wash out your clothes, you train; and the Guard; and no news from the city; and the repression in the city. It's as if very gradually this mass of men was becoming one more element, a few more creatures of the mountain—intelligent, yes, but like animals, and even worse, like inhibited animals.

This, in a way, was what helped to forge in each of us the steel that was needed to overthrow the dictatorship. Our skin was weathering, the look in our eyes hardening, our eyesight sharpening, our sense of smell keener. Our reflexes—we moved like animals. Our thoughts were hardening, our hearing was more acute, we were starting to take on the same hardness as the jungle, the hardness of animals; we were growing a half-human half-animal hide. We were like men without souls. We were tree trunks, snakes, wild boars, fleet as deer, dangerous as cobras, fierce as mountain lions in heat. And so a spirit was forged that enabled us to endure all the mental and physical hardship. We were developing granite wills in the face of the environment.

To say that the FSLN vanguard was solid was not an idle word. The Frente Sandinista was developing, through action—in city, country, and mountain—a spirit of iron, a spirit of steel, a contingent of men bound with a granite solidity, a nucleus of men that was morally and mentally indestructible, and capable of mobilizing the entire society against the dictatorship. A society in different stages of its development. Because, as the Christians say, we denied our very selves.

Still, and this is another mysterious, contradictory thing, though we were extremely tough and hardened, we were tender, in spite of that hard look in our eyes; if you just grazed the surface of our eyes the pupil would spin, and you would see another kind of expression. That is, we were hard inside and out, but we were also very tender, very gentle; we were very loving, too. We had a sort of gruff affection; it was as if we had stored up all the affection that we couldn't express to each other as we would to a child or a mother or a woman. It was all stored up, accumulated, until we had a well of tenderness, of affection, within us. As if the lack of sugar had created a great inner sweetness, which made it possible for us to be touched to the quick, to make our hearts bleed for the injustices we saw.

We were tough, hardened men, yet Henry Ruiz was capa-

ble of giving up his blanket when he came across a shack where he saw a little boy sleeping without covers. He gave it up knowing that it wouldn't solve the problem and that he was our leader and would be left in the mountains with no blanket. We transformed our loneliness into a brotherhood among us; we treated each other gruffly, but actually we loved each other with a deep love, with a great male tenderness. We were a group of men in a single embrace, as brothers, a group of men bound by a permanent kiss. We loved each other with blood, with rage—but it was a brotherly love, a fraternal love. I remember on one march a compañero came across a baby bird in its nest and carried it with him for six days. One of the compañeros farther down the mountain had mentioned that his mother loved little birds, so since he was going to take mail down to the city, he took that opportunity to take the bird with him, to go six days with a tender little bird. Savages like us, battling the vines, fording rivers, marching six miles through rivers, over stones, trying to keep from falling—to save that little bird. Watching out for your pack and thinking how any minute the Guard might come, and death, all of that, with the little bird; battling the environment, sleeping with the little bird. To take it to the compañero so he could give it to his mom. When the compañero received the little bird he just stared; they embraced, and I'm sure he didn't cry. Because he couldn't cry anymore or refused to. It's like that song of Carlos Mejía Godoy's about us always having a clear look in our eyes. There was no selfishness among us.

As if the mountain and the mud, the mud, and also the rain and the loneliness, as if all these things were cleansing us of a bunch of bourgeois defects, a whole series of vices; we learned to be humble, because you alone are not worth shit up there. You learn to be simple; you learn to value principles. You learn to appreciate the strictly human values that of necessity emerge in that environment. And little by little all our faults faded out.

That was why we said that the genesis of the new man was

in the FSLN. The new man began to be born with fungus infections and with his feet oozing worms; the new man began to be born with loneliness and eaten alive by mosquitos; he began to be born stinking. That's the outer part, because inside, by dint of violent shocks day after day, the new man was being born with the freshness of the mountains. A man—it might seem incredible—but an open, unegotistical man, no longer petty—a tender man who sacrifices himself for others, a man who gives everything for others, who suffers when others suffer and who also laughs when others laugh. The new man began to be born and to acquire a whole series of values, discovering these values, and cherishing them and cultivating them in his inner self. You always cultivated that tenderness in the mountains. I took care not to lose my capacity for that beauty. The new man was born in the mountains, as others were born in the underground in the city, as the guerrilla was born in the brush.

The beginning and end of everything is what leaves its mark on the man, what influences him the most. Military training was the start; it was decisive, because there you began to receive a directed knowledge, information systemized so you could assimilate it; that training had a great bearing on our subsequent conduct, development, and way of being.