Vive Y Deja Vivir

By Katherine E Seppings

'Vive y deja vivir', is painted on the front of a Nicaraguan bus. It means Live and Let Live. On the walls of homes in the township of Ocotal, one can still see a painted star and the words VIVE SANDINISTAS. Ocotal is poor, the colour of mud brick, the colour of the land. The land is poor yet loved by its people.

The bus conductor leans out of the door to make sure the furniture tied to the roof is secure. Someone is moving house from Ocotal. Double bed, dressing table, the works. How I love the absence of rules. Instead: concern, music, touch, chickens on women's laps, children who board shouting, 'Elote! Elote!' to sell us corn from the fields their fathers till, corn their mothers turn to flour, dried by the sun and cooked over real fires to keep them alive. To keep us all alive.

'No Food and No Drinks Allowed' signs do not exist here. The driver has religious icons dangling from the rear vision mirror. He is a driver who stops when you want to get off, picks you up where you wait, backs up to collect those who run late; someone who asks where you are going and where you have been. Tells you the name of plants that belong here, corrects grammar, sings.

There is a man who carefully lifts the luggage off my back, takes my fare when I am settled into a seat which I must share with as many who need one. There is a blind man who makes his way down to the back of the bus, one hand feeling his way along shoulders as he moves through, the other hand held open, slightly cupped, listening for the eager movement of hands put into pockets to give what they want to give - because they want to give - movement like a sequential flow forming at the front of the bus and ending at the rear, and it is upon me now, to open my heart; this is god's real church, this bus. The way is kindness here. The way is generosity. Because we are all in this together.
We are the people unafraid of a man who cannot see.

We eat beans and rice, eggs, fried bananas and more beans and rice. We bathe and wash our clothes in buckets of water from a well. My friend and I cannot change travellers' cheques or buy bottled water. We long for the freedom of choice assumed as our right in the world from which we came, but here there are limited supplies of everything. Here is the exploitation our western world is dependent on.

Here there are U.S. embargoes.

Here, everyone must sleep with the hum of Malaria-infected mosquitoes while cockroaches fall from a dark brown matted ceiling onto the bed.

In Jinotega, there is a silence that sings of peace. Young men canter horses, bareback, through the streets. Most people walk. Slowly. An old man at the bus station who hands out folded up sheets of toilet paper and collects one cordova for the use buys me a bunch of bananas with his earnings because he thinks I am hungry. Then the banana man comes over to give me more. There are thin men wearing machetes and some who carry guns. Some say there is still fighting in the hills. Some say nearer to the border where the Contras first came in.

Outside Jinotega, three young men sit on an abandoned, beaten-up, rusting army tank on the crest of a hill overlooking spectacular high mountains and deep green valleys sprinkled with wild blue hydrangea and agapanthus. A half burnt-out plane rests on another hilltop surrounded by a randomly terraced graveyard.

It is drizzling rain this morning in the high sierras of northwest Nicaragua. The bus drivers are on strike, so I sit and write in a cafe at the small and pleasant town of Matagalpa, the birthplace of Carlos Fonseca, father of the Sandinista revolution. Few westerners come here. Once or twice a week perhaps, travellers, whose curiosity goes beyond the images of danger, beyond the propaganda of war.

Once there were people hiding in half-lit doorways. Women clutching children against walls of blue, green and red paint flaked back to dry mud and wooden slats. Harsh intruding sunlight. Their men out there pinned to the walls, peering around the corner of their lives. Women with babes in arms, machine guns slung across their shoulders because this was not a war to win but a fight to live, this was bullet-riddled bodies of loved ones lying bleeding in the cobbled streets.

We are humbled and humiliated in the face of basic human life, after death, after the smell of burning has gone and the tears are reabsorbed. Now there is

only the steep mountains, half cleared, covered in long dry grass. The quiet thirst of sandy soil. The missing limbs and blindness. Injuries that pockmark the pavement and street facades.

Now, for me, there is only the language to learn. To see patterns in the clouds and the trees and the gardens. See things, which have been given names that now have meaning.

We wait, amongst flies, for a possible bus to anywhere south. Shoe-shining boys gather at my feet and young girls sell potato crisps or quesidillas. Chilli can be added poured from a Best Brake Fluid plastic bottle made in Texas. A painted Pepsi-Cola sign brightens up the end wall of the bus shelter. Timber shacks layer the scrubby brown hillside.

A young boy, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, is dragged fiercely by the neck of his shirt, by an elderly man, to the bus depot from the nearby river. The old man drags him back and forth between the bus shelter and the river bank, the gathering crowd following them back and forth and increasing in numbers. Eventually they all stop at this make-shift court held by elder for victim and accused. Without the language I do not know the details of the trial. A young man with a deep gash in the side of his face, blood still pouring out and splattered on his clothes, awaits the verdict of his attacker. His body maintains a semi slumped posture for the duration of this most serious oration. Justice will be done. The aggressor is shamed before his town. The boys will see, that to become accepted as men, they must control their anger.

The last and only bus to Massaya is packed. An old woman sitting next to me cannot understand me. She smiles a lot instead. An old man with a walleye standing beside her nods in agreement. They get off. A woman with the face and hair and clothes of a Spanish gypsy sits next to me with a baby on her lap and four other children in various positions on the crowded bus. Her husband stands near the door, drunk. I hear disgust in the voices of those around me, for this is the mark of a man of poor character, and they pity the woman and her family. The baby is adorned in a fake gold necklace and bracelet, which appear to be the only sign of family wealth. One of her boys crawls between the standing passengers' legs to beneath our seat and tries to steal my bag. I feel the movement against

my legs and squeeze them tightly together until he gives up. The gypsy woman and I share the journey in silence, passing fleeting events: a horse race, the burning off of dry grass and volcanoes that suddenly appear on the flat horizon.

Now the family is getting off the bus. We pass their small boy out through the window to his father. The woman looks me in the eye, bends down to collect her vegetables; tries to take my bag with one finger hooked around the strap while picking up a bunch of onions. I look down at the bag long enough to let her know that I know. My legs still have a firm grip. I help her with the onions, taking hold of the strap where her finger had been. Our eye contact continues but reveals nothing. For a moment, before she departs, I think I see contempt in the narrowing of an eyelid. We catch eyes again as the bus moves on and she is left standing in the late afternoon heat and dust of the wretched plain, with the evening's meal still to prepare and five urchins she has borne to a man who is drunk. I focus on her beauty, her wild gypsy hair, her fine cheekbones, firm jaw. And sensuous mouth closed tightly, despising her fate. And I think that perhaps if I had more, what I might give, or perhaps if I had less ...

We hitch our way through Nicaragua because of the bus strike. In Massaya there are horse drawn taxis. To Rivas, we share a ride with two local women in the back of a small truck and pass protest roadblocks of burning tyres built like pyres in the middle of the highway.

A horse and cart takes us to San Jorge to view Ometepe, an island of two volcanoes rising like breasts out of Lake Nicaragua. Out of a lake that is still a lake, not part of a shipping canal. Not another Panama. This is still Nicaragua, where a woman washes clothes on a pile of stones on the edge of a lake nurturing two volcanoes while foaming waves crash about her legs.

This is Nicaragua, where the Sandinista's symbol, a figure of a man wearing a hat, slightly stooped but holding a stance of conviction, falls like a shadow on the shabby mud brick and timber walls in streets of now quiet villages. Where people show a warm curiosity to the few foreigners prepared to venture this far south. Here there are cows on the beach and happy dogs. Children who collect shells and giggle when the tide rushes in to wash away their names etched into the sand. Here there are tall thin palms that bow to a sun setting in the west over water,

behind the boats of fishermen, where the last light catches a political FSLN sign painted high on the face of a cliff. This is a place where compromises have been made, but the strength and the pride of the people has not fallen. Here there is courage to fight to keep the land that is theirs.

In the 1980's, 20% of the population left Nicaragua. Many of the people who have left since are women, who left their families behind and walked and got lifts and walked some more, over the San Diego Mountains and across the Rio Grande and into California. In America they can get work as domestic servants and send the dollars home, hoping one day to return to see their children. In the 1990's, 74% of Nicaragua's population is under 30 years old. 46% are under fifteen.

Once there were people hiding in half-lit doorways, clutching children - known to us as Guerillas and Communists. Once there were the media and the military and the politicians who called the counter-revolutionary Contras Freedom Fighters to justify mass slaughter.

Nicaragua is poor and loved by its people. The real thieves have gone elsewhere with their guns to steal other lands. To create other dangerous places. And we wait on the roadside, thumbs out, for a ride to Costa Rica. We've been told it's much safer.