

Nicaragua, 2002

Juana Mendez, 45

"If I Started To Run, They Would Shoot Me In The Back..."

I am aware that the judge has received several death threats. Still, I jump as we roll up in front of Juana Mendez' home in a leafy suburb of Managua one early Saturday morning. Six heavily armed guards in bulletproof vests stand at their posts, poised, facing our car. They are not unfriendly, just professional. I am on edge though, because I am also aware that history has proven only too often that a death threat in Nicaragua should be taken seriously. In this polarized country torn by conflicts it has been a bad habit for generations to simply eliminate political enemies and other problematic opponents by assassination.

And Juana Mendez is extremely problematic to the tarnished part of the Nicaraguan power-elite. Without going into specific legal detail, she is a judge who has become known in recent years as "the one presiding over the large fraud and corruption cases." Fearless and persistent, she has insisted on following the law to the letter by showing that it also extends to the former untouchables— those previously protected by money or political immunity. The cases, which are as tangled as Latin-American clans, are wildly exposed in the local media, mainly because the implicated belong to the absolute top— the former president *Arnoldo Alemán* and the current president (and proclaimed opponent of corruption) *Enrique Bolanos* being the most famous of the people involved.

The anonymous death threats started when Juana Mendez, 45, and her staff worked the first case against a former liberal tax minister, *Byron Jerez*, who was charged with using tax funds to finance his party's election campaign, among other things. The case unfolded quite surprisingly. The minister was initially indicted, then remanded in custody, and, ultimately was given a sentence. The initial threat emerged, ominous and delivered by phone. They would kill her children first, then her. Since that primary warning, the judge and her family have lived under massive police protection, bodyguards following their every step like shadows. And while it feels a bit awkward meeting a person for the first time under such radical circumstances, the government's willingness to employ these drastic measures in order to ensure that justice prevails is also an encouraging testimony to the gradual empowerment of a fragile Nicaraguan democracy.

Not that Judge Mendez herself seems particularly burdened by the situation. I realize this as she shakes my hand heartily and offers a bright smile that I will be seeing again over the coming days. She is pretty in a very natural way, with quick darting eyes and a charisma as solid as her sturdy figure. She is dressed in what appears to be a casually matched outfit that testifies to the fact that fashion is not one of the judge's main concerns. I am introduced to her three children—the son *Dirianguen*, 22; the daughter *Nikki*, 19; and the six-year-old latecomer *Adriano*. The children, too, seem to have gotten used to the guards who are gesturing friendlyly now that we have been cleared. A couple of these armed men have been selected to accompany us to the countryside where the judge has not only her *finca*, a small farm with a rising number of cattle, but also her roots. As is well known to the Nicaraguan public, Juana Mendez is a farmer's daughter. The judge has emphasized that a trip to *Suzuli*, located north of the coffee capital of *Matagalpa*, is a must, if we intend to get up-close to the "private" Juana. This is where she grew up, a fact evidenced by her country dialect they say around Managua.

Whatever else the public knows about Juana Mendez is referred to me by the interpreter (*Kay*, an American woman married to a Nicaraguan man, a woman whose life makes for a good story itself, but we will leave that for some other time!) during the four-hour ride by cortege (throughout which we sit in one car and Juana and her family in another, and during which I pray that any potential assassin will be able to distinguish between us!). We drive along a newly paved main road that turns into a smaller thoroughfare and finally joins a potholed dirt road that poses a bumpy challenge, even to a four-wheel drive. The landscape is mountainous, lush and rainforest-green, and even as we enter a terrain where vegetation turns into jungle, there are still people about. Noticeably, most are teenagers or children, often travelling on foot, standing in the back of a pick-up truck or riding on a mule. The men are wearing *sombreros*, straw hats with wide brims, their legs stuffed into long dusty leather boots and, without a doubt, they all have the ability to handle both a lasso and a six-shooter. Fascinated, I fill my eyes with these laid-back *gauchos* leaning against primitive pieced-together counters beneath shady canopies, looking as though they own the place while drowsily watching the cars passing by. Being that Juana Mendez, the second oldest of eleven siblings, managed to break out of this macho milieu only makes her story all the more remarkable— and my curiosity greater! How did she do it? How was she able to break away from the tight reins in which the farmers hold their daughters? Well, the interpreter cannot answer that question. Truth be told, she looks forward to learning more herself! Juana Mendez is the kind of woman people talk about. She was, as has been the case with so many others within the Nicaraguan power-elite, an active Sandinista and member of the resistance movement against the corrupt Somoza dynasty that controlled Nicaraguan domestic politics from 1936 until the last Somoza president, *Anastasio Somoza*, was forced to flee from the Sandinista rebels on July 17, 1979. The following year Sandinista agents executed him in Paraguay. The question is: can this avowed Sandinista who has never renounced her past even act as an unpartisan judge? On top of that, her deceased husband was a high-ranking *commandante*, and now the widow lives in a house that the Sandinistas seized from exiled Somoza supporters. Is her real agenda in fact to take revenge on the non-socialist parties who have toppled the old Sandinista, and does she protect her friends, including the rebel leader *Daniel Onega* (president from 1884-1990) who, as time goes by, is beginning to appear just as crooked to the general public as the rest of the politicians? Could she even be Ortega's political puppet? And what is this about her marrying an Italian, the father of her youngest son, who continues to live in Italy and only visits a couple of times a year? Who is the real Juana Mendez? A cynical opportunist? Or a pure-hearted role model?

"She is," the interpreter states, diplomatically, "very much a topic of discussion. Everyone has an opinion about her. But even though many have been skeptical towards her, it seems like she is winning over the opposition. No one believed she dared go after the big fish. They respect her for that. "

It quickly becomes apparent that she is both loved and respected among her closest relatives. When we finally reach her brother's *finca*, located a few kilometers from her own, she is greeted with kisses and hugs by her large family and immediately led into the house, where lunch is already being served. This is a real farmer's lunch, right up Juana's alley — home-baked tortillas, potatoes and chicken. In this group of playing kids, brothers, sisters and sisters-in-law, she is the head of the family and, according to some unspoken agreement, is seated at the end of the table inside the simple living room, where she, after the initial chatter and exchange of news, is left alone. Her brother is the farm bailiff at Juana's *finca*, but she likes to come out and give a hand with the work as often as possible, preferably every weekend.

"Well," she says, chewing the tortilla and giving me her full attention, "what do you want to know?"

"All of it," I reply.

And even-though she laughs and warns me that she talks too much, I am not at all prepared for the kind of epic quality found in her story, told by herself, a narrative characteristic that the great Latin-American writers have often employed, whether it be Isabel Allende or Gabriel Garcia Marquez who are spinning the tale. But that's the way it is. Juana, like many Nicaraguans, is a real storyteller, and I let her speak.

"Bueno," she begins and pushes the plate away. "Then let's start right here! I grew up in this place. Back then there were lots of Indians in the area and I loved being around them. They were incredibly kind and gentle, very tranquil and relaxed. They lived in communion with the earth, were self-sufficient in every way. They even made their own clothes and textiles from homespun cotton. When they ate it was always an extravagant feast with lots of dishes served in bulging bowls, and you just ate directly from them. They didn't use plates or portions; everyone just ate from the same dish. I was always invited to eat with them and I stuffed myself, especially with the sweets—pieces of sugarcane or cakes dripping with honey. It was so delicious! The tribe that I visited consisted of about one hundred members, and one thing I noticed, even as a little girl, was that the women were in charge. *Camilla*, a fantastic woman, was the chief. She had enormous authority, yet she exercised it with generosity and humour. Her warm personality rubbed off on everybody, including me. I was extremely fascinated by her and by the harmonious way of life she and the clan represented. But my mother scolded me; she didn't like that I ran around with the Indians so much - especially not that I ate with them! She was always able to smell it when I had been there, because then I would smell of *armadillo*, that little turtle-like animal we have here. The Indians hunted them, ate their meat and hung the shields on the walls of their mud huts. So, at the Indians' it smelled like *armadillo*. My mother frowned, but I defended my friends. I had an enormous feeling of solidarity with those people, a feeling that remains intact today. They were always good to me. When I was out working the fields and wanted a mango high up in a tree, they'd shoot it down for me with a bow and arrow. And if I was sick, they would bring me fruit. Unfortunately we moved away after a few years, and though I always dreamt of returning to Camilla and her people, I never saw them again. They, too, disappeared from the area as more and more rainforest disappeared, the water vanished, the large roads were paved and the number of **cattle farmers** increased. I have no idea what happened to them, but it is a fact that the culture of the indigenous people's is endangered by development or, at least, has undergone significant change. Even sending the children to school changes everything. Today, they have probably become more or less assimilated.

In fact, the reason we moved was that the region was becoming too overpopulated. In my family we have always needed space. We resent it when others move in too close! But the new place, *El Chile*, was no good. It was swampy, full of snakes and the roads were lousy. That was a real pain for me, because I had just started school! No, it was not a given that a girl attended school. But I was very inspired by an aunt, a rebellious type who didn't want to get married. The only book in our household was the bible, so we used to read that. I *begged* to go to school, because I quickly discovered that I loved learning. Fortunately, both my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather, who lived with us, all realized that this was a good idea. My mother, I believe, thought it was unnecessary, but she gave in. And then, of course, there were a bunch

of uncles and aunts who insisted that a daughter's only use was her housekeeping. And how could she work if she was at school? Their resistance only spurred me on: "I can milk the cow! I can reap the grain! I can drive the cattle!" I said. "I'll do all of it if only you'll let me go to school!" Actually, that was probably the first time I experienced my own strength, acknowledged that I could negotiate to get my way. Because when I proved that I was willing to help both my mother and my father even though I was going to school, the resistance faded. It was only when times were tough or a new baby was being born and my parents couldn't afford tuition that my education was being jeopardized again. But then I promised that I would help out even more— get up in the morning and take care of the baby, anything. So it always turned out that I got to stay in school. It was a wonderful time; in the evening when the work was done I would sit reading and writing by the light of a kerosene lamp until the smoke burned in my eyes.

- Eventually I finished grammar school. The village school had no more classes. And then what? The only thing I wanted to do was continue to study, but even so, the suitors began showing up! Yet there was no way I would stay at home and prepare for a life as a farmer's wife. Once, a grown man who owned his own *finca* even came to propose. My parents received him kindly and that made me so furious that I flew out the backdoor and fled on my horse. I think that was the first time I truly gave thought to my future. I was completely clear about not wanting to get married—in part because I was convinced that I would never find a man as good as my father. And here I would like to insert that, although I support women's equality and do realize that it's difficult for women in a male-dominated world, I am not a feminist if that entails us taking revenge on men! Only because I have known many excellent and wonderful men, including my father. He has always supported me.

Well, on the day that I galloped away on horseback to escape that hick fellow, I sensed once again, that I possessed great inner strength. I had a mind of my own and I knew how to use it. I have had that feeling ever since. I knew that physically I was quite strong— I had no problems standing my ground with the boys. I played baseball with them, raced horses with them and generally behaved just like a boy. For while I helped my mother around the house. My father, at the same time, bestowed a lot of authority on me. Already at the age of eight I was in charge of selling our crops at the market, and despite my youth I understood that after good times there would be bad times. And so, instead of handing over all the profit, I hid some in the attic. Later in the season, when things looked bleak and we had no more money or food, I was able to magically conjure up these savings. This increased the family's respect for me and, once again, imbued me with a sense of power. Both my father and grandfather were cattle dealers and sometimes they were gone for months at a time to wheel and deal. When they were gone my father left me to run the farm. It was my responsibility to make decisions— I could even sell from among the cattle stock, if I deemed it necessary. And the reason I, and not my brother, was left in charge was that I could read and write. He could not. And the more my responsibilities and my self-assurance grew, the more convinced I became that I had to get away before marriage would tie me down. I simply had to continue my education. But how? Then I remembered that two of my cousins went to a Catholic school in town, in Matagalpa. That was where I had to enroll, too. Yet my parents had no idea how to get me into such a fancy school. But then I thought of a plan. Every year at Christmas the priest would visit the village school to catechise some of the kids, so I made sure to enroll in catechism class. When Christmas came, the priest, father Vilchez, visited as usual and I followed him around all day long, until finally he turned around and asked if there was something I wanted. "Yes," I said, "I want to go to the nuns' school..." With the help of the priest I succeeded, though the sisters

were rather reluctant. They thought I was too developed, even though I was merely eleven years old. Anyway, I did get into the Catholic school, and the first two months were fantastic. Then, tragically my father died suddenly. Besides the fact that it was a huge shock and an enormous grief for me, it also meant that the nuns wanted to throw me out of school. Now, you see, my father could no longer pay tuition! I was only allowed to stay if I was willing to work in return for my education. I was, and that was that. Kitchen duty became my job and it was no minor chore, as there were 150 students who needed three meals a day. In addition, we prepared food for the nuns and their fine foreign visitors who, naturally, were served special and exquisite meals. It was tough, I have to say. I was still only eleven years old and had employees much older than me. We got up at four in the morning and began the day by baking bread from hundreds of pounds of flour and then continued to work away until six in the evening. After that I went straight to evening classes. By the way, I also had to tend the vegetable garden, but that was nice, as it sat higher up the mountain, and when I went there late in the evening I could see the stars and the moon....

One of the nuns, sister Antonia, had known my grandfather and took me under her wing. I became like a daughter to her, I think. We had long conversations and she was the one who taught me how hard women's lives can be. Especially if they never learned how to handle men. Because men were very tricky, she emphasized. Sister Antonia felt that it was really important for women to realise their potential and not just let themselves be subjugated. If they allowed themselves to be controlled by men, then they too were to blame when men behaved badly. She also encouraged me to pursue my dreams and in that way contribute to the good life. It was my right, she said. I listened to sister Antonia a lot and became quite attached to her as well, because the three years at Catholic school weren't easy, I have to admit. And it wasn't because of the hard physical labour—I have never had a problem with working hard—and I learned so incredibly much. Rather, it was due to my strained relationship with the nuns. For example, we had numerous conflicts involving religion and what I considered to be their double standard. It was quite obvious that they, despite their apparent piety, discriminated among the students. The children who came from wealthy families had a much easier time than us poor kids of whom they made higher demands. Yet, looking at it from a larger perspective, I am grateful for being hardened so early in life. In a way, it gave me a taste of the kind of life I would come to lead later.

Well, I graduated primary school at the top of my class. Father Vilchez reappeared, and this time he was the one insisting that I go to high school. I ended up getting a scholarship to a prominent Catholic high school, *St. Jose*, where there was no dormitory. The solution was that I'd stay with my aunt. But this aunt was very young and very irresponsible, always running off with some boyfriend, so in reality I had to take care of myself, which caused certain problems. For example, with my one and only school uniform, which I washed by myself, and which often did not have time to dry before school started, and so I would wear a wet uniform to class. I also could not attend mass because I could not afford the obligatory white hat and matching white gloves that the students were required to wear. Yet, if I did not attend mass, I would be dismissed from school. Eventually, my classmates found out that I was on my own, which led to two neighbouring families, whose daughters also attended the school, agreeing to take care of me. Even though they were strangers who had no obligations towards me, they still paid my tuition, bought my uniforms and whatever else I needed. I even moved in with the one family. I was immensely grateful, but at the same time I could not deal with being such a great burden to people who were complete strangers. For that reason, I decided to look for a job in

Costa Rica after my freshman year in high school, and my mother gave me permission to go. I was 15 at the time.

I went to Costa Rica with a girlfriend. We had no money to pay for the trip and so, without a care in the world, we chose to thumb it and, fortunately, caught a ride with two decent long-distance truck drivers who were really shocked to pick up these two naive minors. They helped us cross the border and dropped us off in the nearest town. That first night my girlfriend and I slept in a house that was under construction, but the next morning we saw a sign that read "Hotel Managua" and figured that the owner was probably from Nicaragua, so, cheerfully, we walked in and applied for jobs. My girlfriend got a job there, but the female owner felt that I was overqualified. I was employed by a cattle farmer, but after I had worked there for a little while, the hotel owner saw to it that I went to another town where she knew a school principal. The principal was a woman who welcomed me warmly. The agreement was that I would continue my education in return for babysitting and doing housework during after-school hours. It was a perfect arrangement! I thrived, did well in school and was even elected chairman of the students' council. However, the principal fell ill during my second school year and had to be hospitalised. While she was hospitalised her husband, the father of the house, began to molest me. I tried my best to fight him off and keep him at bay, but he continued. It was a really uncomfortable situation, and when the principal returned from the hospital, I told her about it right away. She understood my predicament and was more sympathetic towards me than towards her husband; still, she had no choice: I needed to leave.

Afterwards, I found a job with an Ecuadorian family, a job that led to an au-pair position with an American pastor who was stationed there on behalf of his church. Living with the pastor and his family was sheer luxury—I had my own room and their standard of living was much higher than anything I had ever known. I continued my education and had a wonderful time. The pastor was a highly respected man and also well read. He really did a lot for me, like teaching me to drive. When I confessed to him my secret wish to become a pilot, he promised to take me for a ride in an airplane. I became very attached to the pastor and his family. Being that he was so well read he had a library with many books, which I began to read. Among them were works by *Mao*, *Che Guevara*, and other popular ideologists at the time. Since the books sat on the pastor's shelves, I had no idea that I wasn't supposed to be reading them. Besides, I had also started reading the family's newspapers and eventually, I came to comprehend what was really happening in Nicaragua. I realised that the country was suffering a great deal under the Somoza regime, yet I already knew that my mother was struggling and was having a hard time feeding her children and herself. And who was to help her? Why wasn't she receiving any support from the government when she was living under such dire circumstances? Bit by bit, I began to understand that a dictator was ruling Nicaragua and was brutally oppressing the opposition. I heard first hand about the repression from a friend who was a member of the Somoza National Guard. He wrote to me about the terrible things he experienced, like throwing guerrilla fighters out of helicopters while they were still alive and making people "disappear." He, who was later killed in war, was deeply shaken and naturally, so was I. I even felt responsible, felt a burning desire to do something about it.

The whole situation made such a deep impression on me that I, now 18, felt that I needed to make some important decisions even as my future looked pretty bright. I had a wonderful boyfriend, a very tall guy, who wanted me to come with him to Venezuela. My other option was to give in to the pastor's wishes and join him and his family when they returned to the US and continue my education in the States, as he had suggested. It was indeed a very

generous offer; still, I knew that I could never accept it. Because what I truly wanted was to become a member of the guerrilla movement, FSLN, *Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional*. My uncle, who was in the National Guard as well, adamantly warned me against it. Like he said, Che Guevara and the old rebel leader Sandino as well as any other revolutionary hero I could think of, all had one thing in common - namely that sooner or later they had fallen. I, on the other hand, had the chance to survive, and thereby help my mother and my siblings.

My uncle's advice made me reconsider. Analysing it, I had to agree with him. The risk of me dying if I joined the guerrillas was, indeed, great. It really would be terrible if my mother were to experience that. To her, I represented *hope*. Hope for a better life. I realised that, yet I knew that it would be too shortsighted to only help my family here and now. It would be better if I could help bring about a long-term solution. While pondering all this I continued reading lots of pertinent literature in order not to appear ignorant if I managed to get in touch with the guerrillas.

My new political awareness was not something I paraded in front of the pastor, who only knew that I wished to go home and visit my mother. Being very positive about this, he had even given me money for the trip and helped me obtain the necessary travel documents. But the night before my departure he came into my room while I was packing and caught a glimpse of the Che Guevara book in my suitcase. The pastor went completely pale. Shaking with anger, he grabbed the book and, beside himself with fury, screamed at me that he had been betrayed, that during all this time he had housed a *communist!* I turned totally cold— to this day I cannot comprehend why I didn't even try to apologize— and explained to him that the difference between his world and mine was that in his world the children were wholesome and protected, while in mine, my brothers and sisters were starving.

"I'm leaving now," I said, "and I'm not coming back." And then I left. I intended to settle down with the guerrillas right away, but they weren't easy to find. So after visiting my mother I went back to Managua, found a job with a Honduran airline company, rented a room and took evening classes at the high school because I was still determined to get my high school diploma. Yet, at that time the political unrest and the anti-Somosa rebellion were on the rise, and I immediately joined the student movement. We protested, went on strike and ended up taking over the school. I was the only girl partaking in this action, which, of course was perceived as a radical provocation, so radical that all of us were arrested. As for me, I was pulled through a window by my hair, while the guys were struck with raffle butts. Subsequently, the police threw us into their van and drove away with us. A young police officer who rode in the car with us was terrified on our behalves. He was certain that we would be executed the minute we arrived at police headquarters. However, we stayed calm and told him not to worry, saying we would soon be released. We had had enough foresight to alert the press prior to the action, hence reporters and photographers would start showing up shortly. Even though we were subjected to humiliations and torture, we could not simply "disappear." They blindfolded me, ordered me down on my knees and threatened to give me a whipping, if I did not tell them everything I knew about the Sandinista. I told the guy interrogating me to go ahead and hit me, knock himself out! I would not tell him anything, since I did not know anything, which was in fact, the truth because, regrettably, as of yet I had not even the slightest contact with the Sandinista. They did not recruit just anybody, and only got in touch with the ones they found suitable after having observed them for a long time.

I was thrown in jail without process and stayed there for three weeks alongside

common criminals. The police had stolen my clothes and my money—I had just gotten paid! And each night they came to my cell and poured buckets of cold water over me while threatening to shoot me. I was blindfolded to prevent me from identifying them in the future. I could not see their faces, but the blindfold sat in such a way that it enabled me to see their shoes. Later, that would save my life! Of course, the intention was to frighten me out of my wits, but I would not give them the satisfaction! Regardless if they tortured me from sunrise to sunset each and every day and demanded that I speak, I would stay strong. And, oddly, deep inside I felt convinced that they were not going to execute me, even as I had no knowledge of the commotion that was taking place outside the prison. The newspapers wrote about us, my boss at the airline company was working hard at trying to get me released, and, all in all, lots of people were showing us tremendous support. After three weeks of keeping us incarcerated, the authorities caved. They released me, but added a warning: "don't think you'll get a *seconda chance*." So I knew someone would be watching me. They were just waiting for an opportunity to take revenge. I had lodgings with a woman whose son was a guerrilla soldier. I only found out about this later, but of course she had secretly protected me the whole time. Upon my return from prison I found that my landlord was away, and in her place was a frightened and unsuspecting relative, who evicted me on the spot. There I was, once again on the street with nothing to my name but a bag full of books and a limited number of personal belongings. Yet, I had barely set foot on the street before I saw a huge limousine sitting by the curb. A strange man was leaning against it, pretending to pay me no mind. But then I noticed his shoes and recognised him right away! My worst tormentor from prison! I managed to run off and hide at the beach. During the day I blended in with the other beachgoers, while at night I found a place to sleep. For four days I hid out at the beach. On the last day I played basketball with a young Brazilian man who knew my story. He had overheard a conversation about me between two police officers, who had said, "Yeah, she is pretty, what a shame we have to kill her!" This was yet another warning that they were merely waiting to get me. After my stay at the beach I returned to the house to retrieve some letters and photographs that I had left behind, but by then the house was already crawling with soldiers. Twenty of them had come in through the roof! They had dragged the maid's son in for interrogation and confiscated all my stuff, including the letters and the photographs. I barely managed to escape and made it to my workplace at the airport, where I told my boss about everything that was going on. He organised a network, which enabled me to constantly stay on the move. After a while I met up with a friend who revealed his identity as a member of the FSLN and told me that he had been assigned to get me out of the country. I had passed the test, so to speak. The Sandinista were ready to accept me and provide me with the proper training.

And this is where the nuns return to the story... .Because I went back to Matagalpa to ask my uncle, who was in the civilian forces, to provide me with false identification papers. Reluctantly, he agreed, and while I was walking through Matagalpa I discovered a military jeep trailing me down the street. I forced myself not to panic, though my every instinct told me that this situation was truly dangerous. I looked up the woman who had housed and helped me when I was in school and told her that I was being followed and that someone was trying to kill me. Smart as she was, she quickly thought of a plan. According to her, I needed to be in disguise if I were to have even the slightest chance of making it. So, off came my blue jeans, and in lieu of that look she dolled me up in make up, a dress, high heels and nail extensions, and set my hair in an up-do. The result was amazing - I barely recognised myself! Immediately afterwards I had to leave to go see my uncle again. But he was scared out of his wits, had been close to getting killed and had not been able to obtain the false identification documents for me. Before I left he looked me deep in the eye and said: "I will probably never see you again. And

if I do, I don't know which one of us will be the first to shoot!" "The one that draws the fastest," I replied, completely conscious of the fact that we were on different sides of the fence, despite being family.

After visiting my uncle, I had to go to the bank to make a withdrawal. As I walked out, four jeeps from the Special Forces immediately surrounded me. The soldiers were heavily armed and extremely aggressive. Unsure of whether or not they had the right person— I was still dressed like a bit of a slut— they asked, "Who are you? What's your name?" Lying through my teeth, I gave them some fake name. "I didn't do anything, let me go! I pleaded, and they let me. Yet, it was like a cat and mouse chase - I will never forget it. While I took the first steps— *click, clack*— the streets quickly cleared. People slammed doors and windows, shutting everything down. My heart was beating a mile a minute. The wind caught a piece of paper, and the soldiers, slowly following me in the jeep, kept yelling at me to run. "I can't run in these heels," I said, all the while sensing their riffles at the back of my neck. I knew that if I obeyed and began to run, they would shoot me in the back, subsequently claiming that I had attempted to flee.

All of a sudden, I found myself in front of my old parochial school, and miraculously, the gate was open! It must have been the only place in the entire town of Matagalpa that was not completely closed! I ran in and immediately the principal came rushing, slamming the gate shut behind me. The nuns, quick to comprehend the situation, were frantic. "Did we ever teach you to be a Communist?" they yelled. "I am *not* a Communist!" I answered while the principal went and fetched sister Antonia. She realised right away that there was a great risk that the soldiers would return and ransack the school, and if they found me, I would get shot. Thus, the nuns let me stay the night, and that night we heard gunfire. The war had broken out in Matagalpa, September 1977. Hiding behind a window, I looked out at the street and was shocked to see the soldiers of the National Guard. Their young faces were vacant and void of expression as if they had been drugged. That was, in fact, one of the things that frightened me the most, the soldiers' vacant stares.

The next morning, hiding in the trunk of a nun's car, I rode to the highway and was dropped off. From there I made it into Honduras unscathed and began searching for guerrilla supporters. I found one Nicaraguan family who sent me on to another family who then sent me on to a third. There were lots of young people from northern Nicaragua who had found refuge in Honduras, eager to become members of the FSLN. But the Sandinista were careful and did not quite know what to do with all these enthusiastic youths, so I, too, had to wait awhile before being picked up and placed in a so-called "safe house." At the safe-house I was taught the basics about the FSLN and learned that the group carried out a variety of assignments and consisted of different divisions. Furthermore, I learned about Nicaraguan history, Nicaraguan politics and about the Sandinista's *raison d'etre*. The whole experience was extremely exciting, and I was soon assigned tasks of significant responsibility that I solved satisfactorily — ranging from break-ins at military bases and stealing dynamite to organising meetings among intellectuals or union people. Other jobs consisted in getting supplies or fetching wounded guerrilla soldiers, bringing them to the Honduran border from the Nicaragua side. The house in which we stayed doubled as a weapons arsenal, so it was both extremely *dangerous* and extremely potent to live there. It was cool! I loved it! Numerous influential leaders also visited the house, such as intellectual cadres or high-ranking commandantes. From my perspective, these men were not mere mortals. I was completely fascinated and infatuated by them, especially because they had this charisma that made everyone around them feel special, made

us feel like a chosen few who had been handpicked to carry out these tasks of trust. Nonetheless, I soon realized that there was internal incongruity among the top brass, that they disagreed on many issues. And that I disagreed with some of them as well! For example, in my opinion we should not look to the Soviet Union so much. "We are not going to be atheists like the Russians!" I said, but then they would explain to me their prediction that the United States would not recognize a socialist government and hence it would be imperative for Nicaragua to be in alliance with the Soviet Union. Their argument sounded convincing, so I gave in on that particular point.

But sometimes I would enter into different arguments with them. The biggest one of these revolved around me joining the men in battle. I had trained myself, both physically and mentally, had learned to use weapons, and felt that I was ready to go to the frontline. Refusing my request, they argued that they needed intellectually competent people behind the frontier. They had noticed how I enjoyed reading and learning and that I was interested in how the world worked, jumping at the chance of joining a political discussion. Besides, they felt bad when women were killed in battle. It had a demoralising effect on the men when a woman was killed, because they felt it was their responsibility to protect the women inside the combat factions. In addition, a woman in the division would easily distract the men, as the guerrilla group consisted primarily of males. Everyone would try and get close to her, so, all in all, allowing women at the front was a bad idea.... But this time I was not so easily dissuaded and insisted on demonstrating my martial skills. I separated and assembled firearms, I crossed a deep river while carrying a man on my shoulder and did pretty much all I could in order to prove how strong I was. "And," I said, "I am not going to the front to find a boyfriend, so just relax!" Finally, they voted on the matter—and I lost. I had to stay behind the frontlines, where I did, indeed, have plenty of important assignments. For example, I was responsible for nursing a wounded *commandante*, who would later become the father of my two first children. And I think that will be all for today!"

Juana breaks into one of her bright smiles and gestures slightly with her hands. I object to her abruptly cutting the narrative thread, but have to admit that her cliffhanger is worthy of a writer. The tortilla and the strong coffee, poured by Juana's sister, have long ago turned cold. We have been sitting by the plain table for hours and now mid-afternoon has rolled around, which means that we should seriously start thinking about driving back to Managua; highway robbers and bandits ravage this area, so if we would like to stay alive—and who wouldn't—we ought to be out of here before sunset. Still, Juana is not a farmer for nothing! Surely, we cannot leave without having looked over her land, which includes a few hectares of rainforest of which she is particularly fond. While other farmers have cleared their ground, Juana has chosen to preserve hers. "For my sake and for the sake of nature," she states, as we walk in single file behind her towards the small stream that trickles along the forest floor. High up in the treetops the monkeys roar in anger, *houhouhou*, especially the self-assured male is annoyed at being disturbed by unwelcome intruders. Juana laughs as her youngest son imitates the ape, who immediately and angrily answers back. "I love this place," she says as we reach the brink of the stream. "This is where I relax. I can sit down here for hours, just watching the water float by and listening to the sounds from the forest. Then I forget about all the other stuff."

The fact that Judge Juana Mendez needs to "forget about all the other stuff and clear her head becomes completely obvious to me as we meet her in chambers at the municipal building in Managua Monday morning. Like the queen of a busy anthill, buzzing with folks both inside

and outside— from people peddling water to the defendants and their families who are patiently waiting on endless lines to be let into the courthouse— she works inside her chamber that is protected by a hectic front office, so cramped that the staff is forced to virtually sit in each others' laps. The judge's own office is cramped as well. Each square meter is filled with tall stacks of folders, including files from her famous cases. Actually, I long to hear the next chapter in the story "Juana and the World Revolution," but am soon caught up in this intermezzo in which the young woman takes a giant leap in space and time to become this mature authority figure wearing a stately black satin cloak. She still smiles easily, the sparkle in her eyes remains the same, yet her charisma is somewhat reserved in this place where, above all, Judge Mendez stands for incorruptible strength.

"We have an appointment tonight, right?" I say as we are let into her chambers, reminding her about our access to the "private" Juana. She nods, affirming our agreement. *Si, si!* We do indeed. And then she will tell us the rest of the story, scout's honour! Now that she has reassured me, I can focus on her professional role. What is it like being Judge Mendez?

"Hard work! And you need to be able to stand the pressure! In this country, court-news is extremely *hot!* Reporters from the electronic and the print media are stationed here every day, and you can be sure that critical eyes are scrutinizing your professional performance. A conviction must hold up to scrutiny by the press. If you are a good judge, it ultimately comes down to whether or not people feel they have been given a fair trial. The actual ruling is secondary. The judge must be open to all aspects of the case. As county judge I come across all kinds of cases, including criminal cases that carry a maximum penalty of thirty years in prison, civil, fraud, and corruption cases, including money laundering and government theft..."

The phone interrupts Juana who answers briefly in Spanish, hangs up, and lights yet another cigarette. She is not stressed, but definitely more tense than she was in the country. Like a tightly stacked deck of cards, I am thinking.

"I have been a judge since 1999, and each year the number of cases has risen by at least 40 percent. I see this rising number of cases as a result of people once again having faith in the court system, despite the media's criticism. It is really a positive development, although it means I have to work more! Most days I only get to see the sun through these blinds in the window! These days we are seeing more cases involving domestic problems— violence in the family, incest and divorce. The women are beginning to ask the courts for help and protection, for instance, in cases where the fathers are not paying child support. So even the women have confidence in us, and that is definitely encouraging! And this is why it is so important that the judicial system handles the big corruption cases. Because if people don't see us going after the big fish as well as the small ones, their inherent sense of prevailing injustice will only be confirmed. Previously, everyone knew that a powerful man would never go to prison, regardless of the horrible crimes he had committed. It is not like that anymore. And that has definitely strengthened people's belief in justice."

Though I am more than willing to place Juana on a pedestal, I have to say that Juana Mendez did not choose to pursue these big controversial cases.

"No," she laughs. "That was simply a coincidence! I was the only judge who had not gone home that night when the district attorney decided to issue a warrant for the arrest of a high-

ranking person, who they considered to be a flight risk. The warrant had to be signed by a judge, and that judge was me because I was there! Because I had formally issued the warrant, the case was turned over to me. It is as simple as that."

Here I have to add that this initial case became a test by fire for Juana Mendez. A Nicaraguan judge also works as public prosecutor, so it was up to her and her staff—within the ten day limit— to find sufficient evidence against the accused to press charges against him and have a solid case that could be tried in an outside court.

"With such a short time limit and such a complicated case, involving private resale of luxury cars bought with public funds, we had to work extremely fast. We needed to obtain documents, bank statements and witness testimonies, and once we even had to visit a sick man in the hospital. We needed to communicate with the defense in order to keep them posted and assure that we did right by them. My staff worked around the clock - the press was beside itself, and all over Nicaragua people spoke of nothing but the outcome of this case. Would I press charges or drop the whole thing? We barely had time to eat or to provide meals for the employees, who constantly worked overtime. Fortunately, I had just sold a cow and could pay for it out of my own pocket. In the midst of it all, the phone threats began, but I had to ignore them at first. We needed a good grasp of every single detail, and indeed, when the time limit was up late one Friday afternoon, we had enough evidence to go to trial. When I returned home around midnight my house was surrounded by reporters, eagerly awaiting the result. "All of Nicaragua is waiting!" they yelled, yet I needed to collect my thoughts before standing in front of the cameras and announcing my decision to prosecute. So I waited until the next morning. You see, it was very important that the public would know that this was a fair process. Putting a man in prison is never any fun. It is my impression that people understood and accepted my decision. Even the accused and his family have expressed respect for the verdict. If nothing else, they have at least experienced a fair trial."

As mentioned above, this first case has led to a whole complex caseload on which Juana Mendez is currently working. The outcome of these cases is presently unknown, and so are the potential political consequences of possibly convicting former president Aleman and current president Bolanos and lifting their political immunity.

"No one knows where all this will end. From that perspective, the situation is dangerous. That's why I am very conscious about my responsibility. I don't know if you can say I have been brave - only in the sense that I have had the courage to follow the law and allowed it to extend to the ones who deserve it, without concern for their rank. But I also think that I have been gutsy enough to listen to the defense."

All right, I'll give her that. But what about the personal courage it takes to stand up to death threats that have not been annulled to this day?

Juana smoothes her cloak, thinking it over.

"Well, of course it makes an impression when people start calling and threatening you in a very rough and brutal manner: *"If you don't release Byron Jerez within ten days we will begin to kill your kids and then move on to you!"* My strategy was to inform the press that I would hold these people responsible for their acts, people who were obviously used to seeing the funeral processions of their enemies passing by their front door. I reserved my constitutional

right to be alive and reminded them of the Fifth Amendment: Thou shall not kill. I went to the president and voiced my complaint. Subsequently, I was placed under immediate police protection, and every single political leader was quick to condemn these types of methods, while the cardinal, made a public statement that there was absolutely no good reason to harm me! At the same time, various human rights groups both here and abroad stepped up and protested, and even the UN demanded that precautions were taken regarding my personal safety. So this way the threats became a public affair, and when I walk the streets with my children now, I feel protected. I know that everyone is looking out for us. Also, I have dug out my old 3,57 revolver, which I always carry in my purse. The bottom line is that no one can protect you as well as yourself! Still, it is necessary to keep actual bodyguards around— on several occasions violent guerrilla fighters with ties to the Liberal Party have paid visits to my family in the country. I don't know yet if the Liberal Party is behind the threats, but I will most definitely find out! Personally, I am convinced that the threats derive from the political top. Someone is backing those fellows, otherwise they wouldn't dare. So, yes, I am nervous. Especially for my children, for when it comes down to it, no one can really protect them, right? In my opinion, the best way to annoy those guys is to pretend that nothing has happened. To sleep peacefully at night and walk calmly in the streets, simply behaving like a normal family not living in fear."

Several times there has been a knock at the door. The friendly staff in the front office are losing their patience. We catch the hint and get ready to leave.

"I'll see you tonight, right?" I repeat.

"Si!" she says. "Come by my place between seven and eight! I need to get out of here first! Mondays are always horrible, " she says and glances at the piles on her desk.

That they might be, but Juana does not seem the least bit tired when we arrive at her villa after dusk. She gives us a warm and familiar welcome after we have been given the green light, a nod and a *Hola!* by the guards. She has tossed off the judge's attitude along with the satin cloak, and once again she is her old laid back self, dressed in a loose-fitting tunic dress with Egyptian motifs and bare feet inside a pair of thongs. She shows us around the spacious home, which also houses her children and one grandchild (the daughter Niki has been once around the block at an early age, but we leave that story alone also.) The big children are barely noticeable, but the small one, Adriano, has a hard time staying away from his mother who has to buy him off with caramels and soda. And he also gets to sleep in her bed at night, many a career parent's way of compensating for insufficient parent-child contact. ("We did actually fix up his room really nicely in the hope that he would begin to sleep in his own bed, but he still sneaks into our bedroom *every single* night!") Before settling in for our conversation, we get lost in an old photo album documenting the astonishing past. And here she is: Juana the Sandinista dressed in guerrilla uniform. Juana the young mother with the newborn in her arms.

"You were so beautiful!" I exclaim. Juana shrugs. But she really was. She was stunning. Add that to her other qualities, and one can easily imagine the guys getting the tropical hots for her! And that she was handpicked by the very man all the women pined for (according to the interpreter!). By the way, this is his old album. She inherited it. Walter Ferreti was undoubtedly a hunk with a lot of sex appeal and a lot of ladies, a fact proven by numerous pictures that keep popping up - photos of pretty blonds and brunettes whom Juana cannot "quite remember." But now we are jumping ahead in the story, the story that she describes in

brushstrokes of red and black, like a mural painted on the patio where the cicadas stroke their violins and Juana chain smokes in her rocking chair while I drink rum and coke, clinging to her every word. The tale from the finca continues.

"Where were we?" she asks.

"In a safe house in Honduras," I prompt.

"That's right," she nods. "So, I was living in this safe house in Honduras, and I was given more and more assignments. Once we had to supply weapons to the guerrilla army, which implied crossing the Nicaraguan border in a rather mountainous area where the path was so small that we could only walk in single file. That's where our package was to be picked up. I'll never forget the image of these men, this long gang of men carrying packs, who walked ten feet apart in the dark and without a word bent down and picked up their weapons without pausing and then continued walking. This convoy brought along a wounded man, namely Walter Ferreti, who was left in our care. I recognised him as one of the "important men." He had made an impression on me, partly because we had had several discussions! For example, once he complained to me about the fact that I taught the students how to disassemble their arms, because they could potentially break them. "I don't know who you are," I retorted. "But if you know more about this than I, then be my guest and take over this class!" I was pretty annoyed with him, though he had been among the few who had voted in favour of my going to the front. And once he brought me a new pair of blue jeans, because he had noticed that mine were getting worn, so he wasn't completely hopeless!

When we returned to Honduras, he demanded that I should be the one caring for him. I followed his orders and gave him my bed, while I slept on an army blanket on the floor. That was okay—he was wounded and besides, he was also my superior. I took care of him, nursed his gunshot wounds, gave him food and water and whatever else nursing implies. Still he complained, mostly about the fact that I sometimes had other assignments away from him. He didn't like it when I attended long meetings and things like that. Then he would tell me off. And if I stayed out longer than I had said I would, he would go completely nuts from fear that something had happened to me.. .We talked a lot, and once he asked me what I was doing that historical day in August of '77 when the Sandinista occupied the Parliament. I told him that I had been in the middle of training when I heard the news on the radio. I was ecstatic. What did I think about the picture of the guerrilla fighter wearing a mask, standing in the presidential office? He asked. The image that had been on the front page of the newspaper? I told him that the picture had made quite an impression on me, which was true, and that I thought this guerrilla fighter was a true hero whom I dreamt about meeting one day. "Well, you've met him, because that was me!" He grinned, and I was so embarrassed! Still, he gave me a detailed description of the deed, and I was all ears! From that day forward, we confided in each other. He told me about his life— about his father and his family, even about his ex-wife! I guess you can say that he exposed himself to me, emotionally speaking, which was highly unusual in such a secretive environment. No one was to know anything about anyone - we used code names and so on. I was surprised and, naturally, proud to become his special confidante. We talked a lot about politics. He predicted that the Great Attack was near, and that when it came we would either conquer Somoza or fall. It was win or lose. I had to be prepared for that.

One morning not long after that conversation, a car came and picked him up. Being a

member of the special command faction, he had to perform an important assignment. He was very moved to say goodbye, and so was I. After all, he was my patient, and his leg was still bad - he could barely walk. And since we both knew that it was soon time, we had no idea if we would ever see each other again.

Shortly after his departure, a doctor arrived with a whole load of medicine. And as a sign of who was behind the shipment, he handed me a special greeting from the sender: one of the pieces of shrapnel that had been removed from Walter's body. This told me that Walter had sent the shipment and that I could trust both the doctor and the medicine. He also wrote me letters and poems about the war and the fight for freedom. He wrote about their deeds, about having lost weight, about how hot it was and about breaking through enemy lines. I was very touched that he had found the time to write to me under such difficult circumstances, especially because I was seeing another guerrilla soldier at the time. I was really fond of him, but he hardly ever wrote to me! Later it turned out that he had indeed written, but the messenger had been wounded, so when the letter finally arrived, it was soaked in blood! Well, even though I was not in love with Walter, because I wasn't yet, I still worried about him. It also became increasingly clear that we were entering the last and decisive phase of the conflict. And suddenly the news came that Somoza had escaped! That meant we had to leave Honduras and organize an evacuation of all the Sandinista who were going back to Managua. I had already stated that I wasn't going to be anyone's secretary, so they took me at my word and assigned me to the task of organizing the transport. Now I met my match, as this was a really difficult operation, especially for someone with no prior experience in the field.

I was dispatched to Léon, which was occupied by the Sandinista. The atmosphere in the city was wonderful— people walked around relaxed and had mixed their military outfits with casual civilian clothes. I was appointed personal assistant to the city's commandant, a woman by the way, *Liticia Herrera*, who had a child by Daniel Ortega. I loved that period of time! My responsibilities included communicating with the media and speaking to journalists, and Liticia and I enjoyed every part of it. One day a telegram came in from Managua telling me to report there immediately. I ignored it, had a good time where I was. But then, just like that, a car came and drove me to the military headquarters in Managua. As I exited the car, I saw my boyfriend whom I had been waiting for in Léon. Now that the war was over I had expected him to come and get me. "Why didn't you come?" I asked, furious, when I saw him. He turned pale and didn't know what to say. I turned my back on him and walked into the building. I was shown into a room where two men began interrogating me in a rather tough tone of voice. They asked me whether I agreed that this guy, Walter Ferreti, who apparently was an acquaintance of mine, was a bureaucrat, a craven coward and so on. "No!" I objected angrily. "I don't agree with that at all! On the contrary, I think Walter Ferreti is a very brave soldier!" Just then Walter stepped out from behind the curtain and his three friends roared with laughter! Of course Walter was behind the telegrams. He was the one who wanted me to come to Managua; and now he tried to persuade me to help him organize the intelligence service. He had been appointed second in command of the National Security Service. I told him I hadn't the slightest clue about intelligence, but he said he knew I had a knack for it. He had always thought well of my judgement when at the safe house we discussed who we could and could not trust. Still, I was somewhat reluctant, in part because Liticia had promised that I could become a pilot! Yet, I agreed to think it over. Then Walter asked if I had a place to stay in Managua. Oddly, I didn't, so he brought me along to the house in which he was staying and in which both male and female combatants lived together in a kind of commune. This was where he began to systematically seduce me! And before long, we were an item. I discovered that he was a man of

many qualities, the kind of qualities that especially women fall for. Furthermore, he provided safety and security for me, protecting me against harassment by the men. Because, I tell you, we women were being harassed! You had to spend so much energy rejecting men who were constantly making passes at you. They were a regular pain in the ass. But if you had a boyfriend, they'd lay off.

In the beginning we moved around a lot, but finally we settled down in this house, and before long Walter suggested: "Let's have some children!" I wasn't sure I was ready to start a family; I was still young with lots of plans for the future. And frankly, I was a bit concerned about Walter's abilities as a husband and a family man, as he had been through two failed marriages and had three children already! He hadn't even divorced the last wife. Yet, he solved that problem on the spot by calling her in Miami and asking her to give him a divorce. Sure, she would like that— the sooner the better! — and he sent her the divorce papers in the mail! Shortly after we had our firstborn, Diriangen. I was so happy! The baby was so beautiful and everyone was exhilarated. There was a perpetual flow of visitors and the house was full of flowers and presents. But in the midst of my joy I was also concerned, because I was just 22 and uncertain whether or not I could handle the situation. Nonetheless, we were so excited about having this baby that we quickly had one more, our daughter Nikki. It felt great being a family and Walter turned out to be a wonderful father, though I have to say it wasn't easy what with all the women who were always crowding around him. He was like honey to bees; all the women were attracted to him, both rebel fighters and bourgeois ladies who thought it was exciting to hang around such a true hero of the revolution. It was difficult for him not to be distracted, and at one point one of his colleagues even came by and asked me to keep my husband busy with the revolution and not waste so much time on all those women! Sometimes I was angry and jealous at him and said that he could just leave me if that was what he wanted. But he wouldn't hear of it. I'm not saying he never sinned, but...."

Juana makes a sudden stop at this unpleasant juncture, but she quickly moves on, letting her jealousy fly, shakes another cigarette from the pack and continues.

"Well, in any case, I was terribly busy myself. I had begun clearing out the files from Somoza's secret police, an important piece of work, because it could tell us who to watch out for and who could potentially want to infiltrate our organization. We also tried to find out what people thought about us and about the revolution what they did and did not like. After a while, I was transferred to the analysis department, where we decided what to do based on the information we had received and how to follow up on our projected goals. As I said, I was quite absorbed in this work, but it also led to tension between Walter and me. Sometimes I worked around the clock, which left me little time for the family. Walter wanted me to take on a less demanding nine-to-five job, but I refused. If there were anything I wanted, it would be an education! The result of that argument was that in 1985 I began taking high school classes on Saturdays in order to get my diploma. It was extremely taxing to have to study while working at the same time, in part because I had taken over the responsibility of providing for my six younger siblings after my mother had died in 1982. In fact, it was Walter's idea to adopt them. When my mother was ill and sick with worry about what would happen to her children, Walter said that if our revolutionary ideals about "giving the children a better life" were to carry any weight, we had better begin with our own. So when my mother was dying, he reassured her that she could die in peace, because we would take care of the young ones. And young they were! The youngest one, whom she had after having remarried, was only 18 months. Each night we slept with three children in our bed, as our own were young as well. At that time Walter was

chief of police, a pretty demanding position. But I have to say, he was a fantastic father and husband. If the children were sick, he would stay up at night and take care of them, and on the weekends he would wait on me and prepare the most delicious food — he had experience as a chef at a hotel in the United States— which he served to me in bed so that I could stay there and study. The eighties were a difficult time. There were still incidents of armed struggle with the US-backed Contras, and we lived in constant fear of being bombed or invaded by the United States. Therefore we were called in for military exercise at all hours of the day just to make sure we were ready for combat. Back then I was always tired. We got up very early in the mornings, went to work, came home late, and when the children had been put to bed I studied until after midnight. Sometimes I fell asleep atop my books, still dressed in the uniform that I always wore. The advantageous part to this was that I didn't have to change clothes the next morning, but could head directly to work, drop off the youngest children at kindergarten on the way and drink coffee, which the driver would bring for me, in the car! We had become a big family. Every so often Walter's three children from his previous marriages would also stay over, and our doors were always open to anyone in Managua who needed a place to stay - like farmers who came in from the countryside or foreign friends, visitors and acquaintances. It was definitely exciting. We had many interesting discussions and we always had fun, but it wasn't exactly quiet.

Nevertheless, I finally earned my high school diploma in 1987 and was determined to continue my education. Despite a certain measure of resistance from my immediate superior, I forced my employer to let me have a scholarship, enabling me to take a leave of absence and attend law school fulltime. I studied in León, the college town to which Walter had been transferred. The entire family had come along. At first it was great to be back in the city, yet clouds were starting to gather above us. In the fall of 1988 Walter and I were invited to take a study trip to the Soviet Union. We had been there once before and travelled quite a bit around the country. During this particular visit we had many discussions with our Russian friends about the future of Nicaragua in general and about the upcoming free election [the election, which took place February 25th, 1990, was won by an anti-Sandinistic, non-socialistic party coalition, marking the end of the Sandinista era. But we also spoke about the situation in the Soviet Union, because it was quite obvious that the union was falling apart. Big changes were about to take place, changes that would have consequences for Nicaragua as well. In other words, we were already somewhat concerned, and when we heard that the hurricane *Joan* had hit the country and causing significant damage, we disrupted our trip and went home. Back home in Nicaragua, Walter took it upon himself to join the working party set up to aid the hurricane victims. He commuted constantly between León and Managua. And right there on the highway between the two cities, he was involved in a terribly brutal car accident that killed him instantly.

"What?" I gasp. "Walter was *killed*?"

Juana nods, flicks the ashes off her cigarette and moistens her lips.

"It was awful. I was deeply shocked, of course. But I simply had to pull myself together. The purely practical consequences were that I had to move back to Managua with the children, that I was behind in school and had a hard time getting by financially without Walter's pay check. However, everyone helped me out, so we survived on my scholarship and my widow's benefits. I continued studying at the Central American University in Managua where everyone, too, were extremely helpful, and sent the two oldest of my little brothers out to work. I was no

longer able to provide for them, and they had reached an age where they were able to contribute to the household. Yet, when rains it pours— so believe it or not, six months after Walter's passing I was also involved in a car accident, and also on the way to León. I was exhausted, hadn't slept much in months and simply fell asleep at the wheel. When the rescuers dragged me from the car I was unconscious and in such a bad shape that they thought I was dead. However, a highly skilled and untiring doctor at the hospital in León saved my life. What followed was a long and painful recovery period during which I was bound to a wheelchair. Besides, my face was also disfigured, and I still have scars from the accident. It was hard on all of us, but the worst part, from my point of view, was the fact that I missed two semesters of school!

Then in July of 1989 I get a phone call from one of my friends. He tells me that he has an Italian visitor who would really like to meet me. The Italian has heard so much about Walter, is a great admirer of his and would like to meet with his widow in order to learn more. I am still marked by the accident and haven't recovered enough from Walter's passing to be social. On the contrary, I preferred to be alone with my children and wasn't at all ready to entertain company. "But he *looks* like Walter!" my friend insisted. "You *have to* meet him!" I am not sure why, perhaps it was my intuition, but I finally agreed to let this Italian solidarity worker, Roberto, stop by my place. The connection between us was fantastic from the very first moment. We talked and talked! Frankly, I don't know how we managed, because he didn't speak Spanish and I didn't speak Italian. After that first meeting I agreed to go out to dinner with him one of the following days. That, too, was nice, though I was somewhat overwhelmed by his interest, as I felt quite fragile, both physically and emotionally. Yet we continued to meet on several occasions before he went back to Italy. Before his departure he invited me to come to a festival celebrating peace and solidarity, which I refused. I wasn't going anywhere. Yet, when he came home he sent me a plane ticket anyway! My friends here in Managua convinced me to go as a Nicaraguan representative, and though I missed my children and felt cold in the Northern Italian chill, I had to admit that I enjoyed spending time with Roberto again. By the way, he had a beautiful girlfriend, yet the more time he spent with me, the more she began to disappear from the picture. Before the end of my trip he had broken up with her and made it clear that he wanted to be my boyfriend. I thought he was cute, but I wasn't ready for a new relationship. Besides, he was way too young, merely 24, seven years my junior, and I was an experienced woman, to say the least. I went back to Nicaragua, we kept in touch sporadically, but I did nothing to maintain our contact.

Then one day in 1994 he suddenly appeared at my front door! I let him in, not only into my home, but also into my life. At that time, everything was different. I had completed my studies, had a job and bought the farm. My children were bigger and didn't need the same attention, and I, too, was feeling much better. We found each other once again, and once again we discovered that we got along exceptionally well, so since then we have had a long-distance relationship. He remained a resident of Italy and I am here in Nicaragua, so we have only been seeing each other a couple of times a year. We hadn't been going out for very long before I told him that I would like to have one more child. He wasn't thrilled about that! First of all, he didn't feel like living in Nicaragua, and secondly, the thought of having children scared the heck out of him! But when he visited again and insisted that you couldn't have a child in our kind of relationship, I told him that I intended to commit genetic robbery, either towards him or another man, because I wanted that child! "Okay," he gave in. "I agree to play the breeding bull!"

I was alone during the pregnancy, and that was a traumatising experience. First of all, the nineties was a tough time for us ex-Sandinista who now made up the opposition and were

experiencing a lot of resistance and discrimination— for example in terms of the government trying to expropriate our houses; I am also currently running a case involving property rights— yet I also felt as terribly alone as a woman feels who is expecting a baby without the father being present for the duration. I was very busy at work, the farm demanded a lot of attention, and I needed to take care of the family. In fact, I was a single mother! Sometimes, when I was completely exhausted, I fought with Roberto on the phone, because I felt let down and sad that I would be giving birth to our child alone. I was to give birth by caesarean section and was committed to the hospital the night before the scheduled birth. My mood was at zero. But then what happened? At eleven pm that evening Roberto comes walking into the hospital, causing a commotion, because he insisted on visiting me in the room. Oh, I was so happy, so happy! And we had a healthy baby boy, Adriano.

The birth of this boy has meant a more complicated lifestyle. It feels wonderful each time Roberto visits, but each time he leaves it feels awful. Adriano clings to him and misses his father. And now that we have to deal with these death threats that hover above us, Roberto cannot stand the thought of not being here to protect us. He wants us to move to Italy, but there's no way I'll do that. My life is here. Here in Nicaragua, I am accomplishing things. What would I do in Italy? People don't need me like they do here. Our only option is for Roberto to move here. He might be getting used to that idea; it was his idea that we should get married when he visited this year. I liked that, my only problem was I had no time! These big cases have taken up each hour of the day, and the result was a rather provisional wedding. The wedding dress was just a dress I picked from the closet. The food was catered by some of our friends and the guests were whoever happened to be home that Sunday. The honeymoon had to be postponed because I was due in court the next day. We didn't have much of a honeymoon at all! Still, we got married, and we are both happy about that. Despite all of our troubles, we have stayed together for 13 years, all in all, while all around us couples have divorced during that time span. Even though I am waiting for Roberto to get his act together and move here so that we can become a "real" couple," my girlfriends and I have reached the conclusion so far that I am fortunate to have a husband who lives so far away!

Yet, sooner or later I'll probably end up making the decision for him. He speaks Spanish fluently now, Indian-Spanish, like me! And though we have fought about it, I think he realizes that I would be completely out of place in Italy. The way I see it, life there is far too stressed-out and hectic. People seem unhappy, and it's cold! Here life is dynamic and full of purpose. I mean, I don't even have time to go to Italy on *vacation*. Though I miss my husband and sometimes feel afraid that I cannot make him happy because I am so busy, I have to acknowledge that I am at a stage in my life where it's more about others than about me. Yes, it's important that my family can thrive and grow up in a safe environment, but it's also important to be involved in the development of Nicaragua to work for a more modern judicial system, to ensure that justice is carried out and so on. Overall, I think that women have a great future and a great task to solve here in Nicaragua. In this country, the women have become really powerful and really competent. They are truly prepared to take over from the Big Men who have demonstrated that their best ability is to allocate power among themselves and obtain the highest positions. Roughly speaking, men have always shared the spoils. Women are more honest, less selfish and more community-minded. Men always look to make a quick profit, to achieve a lot of financial gain. They drink, hang around with women and are generally good at having a great time. I consider women to be more professionally committed and more hardworking. Yet many of us have a background in the guerrilla movement, and thus we

learned that we had to work twice as hard and be twice as good in order to get the same recognition as the men.

As far as my personal ambitions goes, sure I have some. I started out as a city court judge, and then I was promoted to regional judge. The next step is to be a member of the appellate court, while my ultimate goal is to be appointed to the Supreme Court. Whether or not that's possible is a political question, as the members of the parliament are the ones who appoint Supreme Court judges. These days a woman, *Alba Luz Ramos*, presides over the Supreme Court, which has been a real booster for all of us. We women have become good at networking; we help each other to get ahead. However, it's pretty uncertain whether I'll ever become a Supreme Court judge. As you know, the Sandinista are now a minority, so it's possible that my past is against me. If I don't make it all the way to the top in the judicial system, I'll drop my legal career and take up another profession. Roberto has trouble imagining himself as a cattle farmer, yet I have no problems seeing myself as a future full-time farmer. I'm exciting about raising cattle and am also quite involved in the project of preserving the rainforest.

But sure, I have certainly accomplished my wildest childhood ambitions, and then some. That's what frightens that Italian guy! The fact that I continue to set up goals and then achieve them! Once I have attained an aspiration, I have my eyes set on the next. I understand that this can be difficult for the people around me, yet I don't have much time or much energy left, so I have to act fast. I don't have time to wait around. Of course one's work has to be substantial; one has to be decent and apply high ethics to one's efforts. It's important to me as a judge that I contribute to setting society on the right course, that we put the conflicts and polarisations of the past behind us and focus on looking ahead, creating peace and stability in this country. For that reason, it is so gratifying for me that my work is being respected and that I feel accepted by both my colleagues and the politicians. Even the media, who God knows have been very critical, have acknowledged that no one can accuse me of ideological prejudice when it comes to my job."

Juana puts out another cigarette in the tiny overflowing ashtray. She smokes too much, I point out. Yes, she agrees. She does. And she ought to lose weight as well. The blood pressure is a bit too high, but when would she have time to care for herself? Indeed, I think, when would she?

I linger at the cream-coloured glow in her pearl earrings, which shine in the late night darkness. Compare her life to mine. We are almost the same age; and yet it seems as though she has lived for centuries, fighting more spectacular battles than any one person can handle. Sometimes she must be terribly exhausted, I think. But she sends me another bright smile and shakes cigarette number twelve from the pack. Apparently, that woman's motor still has thousands of miles left in it. The interpreter on the other hand, working overtime, is completely burned out. I gesture to her that we are almost finished. Up to date, so to speak.

-Are you living the life of your dreams?

Juana nods pensively.

"I am; primarily due to the fact that I have always had a margin for personal judgment, perhaps. I have been in charge of all my choices. For example, once, while I was in Honduras

waiting to be accepted by the guerrillas, a talent scout came up to me and asked if I wanted to be a model! I have to admit that I was flattered and actually considered accepting his offer! It was completely absurd! Should I, who was living incognito and underground, suddenly have my face blown up on posters? What kind of life would I have had then, as a model? Fortunately, I realized quickly that only my vanity had been tickled and declined. And, as Roberto says, "You did become famous! Just in a different way!"....

-What do you think your father would say if he could see you today?

"Above all, he would be very surprised! And concerned! He hated politics! And he would probably agree with my brothers-"You're always looking to get involved in something dangerous!"- They say."

-Wouldn 't he be proud?

"Yes, he probably would. His old friends sometimes visit me, take my hand and tell me how proud and happy they are that I have come this far. They also think it must be difficult for me, and sometimes it is. Yet, criticism doesn't bite as much as you'd think. All of us old Sandinistas were taught to exercise critical assessment/self-critique and could be pretty tough on each other as well as on ourselves. So I'm pretty hardened!"

-But you didn 't become a pilot?

Juana laughs and shakes off an annoying mosquito. (Perhaps the very mosquito that causes the dengue infection Juana turns out to have caught this evening, though without being seriously ill...)

"Haha! No, I didn't become a pilot! And good thing I didn't, because almost all the women who got the chance to fly as helicopter pilots died in crashes. It turned out that the helicopters had a defect. So, no, I have no vexations and no regrets. But as far as the future goes, I hope my life will be easier; that I will have more time for myself. Time to read, time to write. I love writing poetry, but I haven't written anything lyrical since being appointed to judge! Mostly, all I have written is my signature! And literature has had to wait all these years. Once I'm finally off work, I cannot stand looking at a piece of paper. But I look forward to once again delving into Balzac, who I love because of his wit and his characterisations. I believe you can meet all the characters of humanity in his writing. And of course I love Marquez, Dostojevskij and all the other great writers."

-But it doesn 't seem like you 'll be reading great novels anytime soon ?

"No, for now I won't have time to relax. I am knee-deep in these big cases, and nobody knows their outcome. I only know that my duty is to work for a Nicaragua of which my children and grandchildren can be proud, a country where people work and create their own values instead of becoming dependent on international aid. A democratic society that won't allow the poison of corruption to permeate everything. The Nicaraguans ought to look at themselves as "vigorous and glorious," vital and wonderful. That is what I am working for."

I turn off the tape recorder. The interpreter breathes relief. Juana offers us something more to drink. Fruit? Chips? I would be happy to sit here all night, sipping rum and coke. But

tomorrow is another day. Especially for Juana on whom so much depends. We embrace and I tell her goodnight and wish her all the best for the future. A future that, despite everything, looks a little brighter on these precarious latitudes once powerful women take it in their hands.

Outside the house we greet the guards with a buenas noches. May they take good care of judge Mendez.

Epilogue: In the spring of 2004, Juana Mendez sentenced former president Arnaldo Aleman to 20 years in house arrest and a ten million-dollar fine for corruption and abuse of office worth 100 million dollars. Aleman's supporters within the Liberal Party claims that the ruling is politically motivated and are now working towards passing more laws that will force Sandinist-appointed judges like Juana Mendez to leave the Nicaraguan judicial system. According to an independent international anti-corruption organization, Arnaldo Aleman is on the top ten list of the most corrupt Heads of State in the world.