

Her parents rarely talked about the war that forced her family to leave Nicaragua. She had to track down an old news photo to understand why

## HELD HOSTAGE BY HISTORY

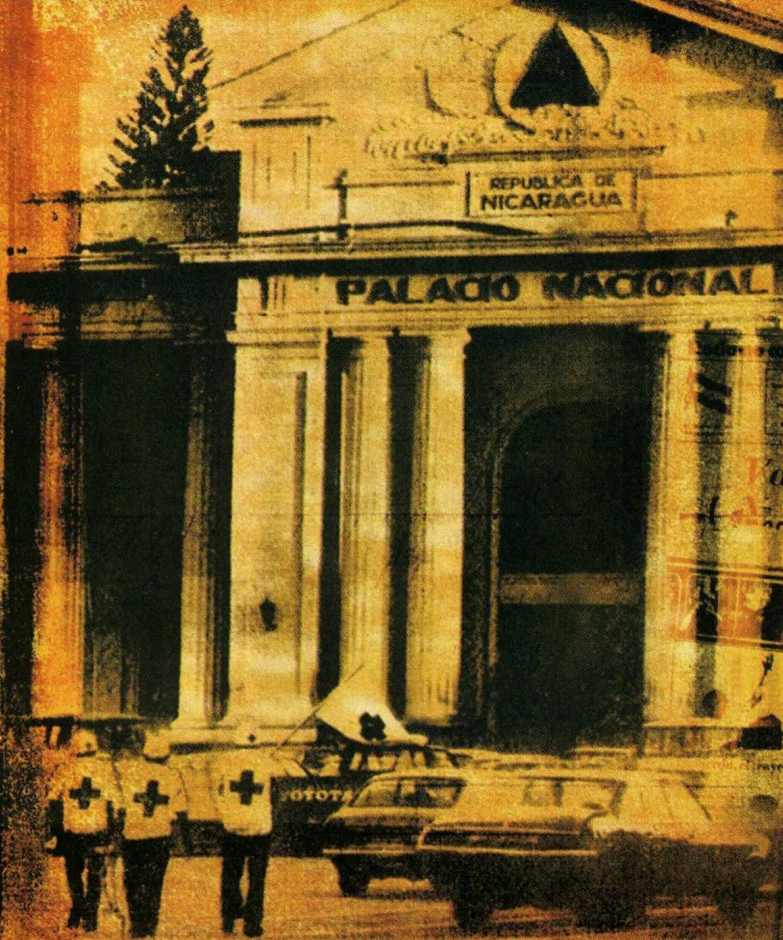
I AM NOT EXACTLY SURE WHEN MY MOTHER FIRST TOLD ME ABOUT THE PHOTO. But I know when I decided to find it: May 2004, after a painful fight with my parents during dinner at a downtown restaurant.

About a month before, I had taken my boyfriend, a straightforward Nebraskan, for his first visit to my family's home country of Nicaragua. I spent the first half of my childhood there—initially in Jinotepe, the highland town where my dad grew up, and then in Managua, the sprawling capital. My family left in 1979, packing just a few suitcases before fleeing Nicaragua's civil war. The country is both where I come from and who I am. I needed Rob,

**Images of Managua in August 1978, clockwise from top left: Red Cross officials approaching the National Palace during the siege; Sandinista guerrillas making Molotov cocktails; guerrillas leaving by bus after the siege; Eden Pastora, "Comandante Zero," on a bus with hostages; front-page headlines from La Prensa; Red Cross workers evacuating hostages.**

By **SANDY M. FERNANDEZ**





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Fuiste a una perversidad

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Del Palacio al Aeropuerto



who was becoming important in my life, to experience it with me. So we rented a Toyota Tercel, weaving from gorgeous, volcanic-sand beaches on the Pacific coast to inland cities still pockmarked with bullet holes from the revolution.

After we returned home, I wrote a travel piece about the trip for *The Washington Post*. I mentioned my parents in the story, and so, to give the facts an extra vetting, I asked them to read the piece. I knew something was wrong when my parents and I got all the way to dessert, and they still had not mentioned it.

Finally, my mother folded her hands on the table and said, "Now, I think we should discuss your article."

What followed wasn't pretty. My parents didn't have an issue with the personal information I'd included. Instead, they homed in on a three-sentence recap of the civil war and its aftermath: my description of how the Marxist Sandinista rebels brought down the corrupt government of President Anastasio Somoza, whose family had ruled Nicaragua for more than four decades. A U.S. embargo, economic deprivation and about a dozen years of fighting with the counterrevolutionaries, or "contras," followed.

I grew up in a strongly anti-Sandinista household, and yet as an adult chose to live and work among people who, if they were old enough, had sported "U.S. Out of Central America" stickers on their backpacks. In the travel piece, I

Lots of governments are corrupt, my father snapped back. True, I said, but that's not what I was asking.

"Okay, yes, it was corrupt, it was corrupt," he spit out sarcastically.

The discussion went on like that for a while, them arguing with me, and me amazed and bewildered, not understanding why they were so angry. Then, suddenly, my father was crying, his voice breaking. "We had friends who were killed just for being in the government," he said, pressing his hands together and bringing them up to his face. Across the table from him, my mother's eyes began filling, too.

Suddenly, I couldn't wait to get out of there. I felt cringingly awful to have caused my parents pain — breaking the cardinal rule of immigrant daughterhood — but somehow even worse was that there was nothing I could do to make it better. They weren't hearing me.

Over the next few days, the argument hovered in my mind. I repeated it to Rob; I called friends and told them about it; I found myself remembering it at the gym and at work. One exchange, in particular, kept coming back to me.

"We lived through the war," my mother had said a couple of times.

"Mom," I said, "I was there, too. I lived through it, too."

"But you were little. We lived through it . . ."

## I DON'T THINK I KNEW MY MOTHER HAD BEEN A HOSTAGE AT THE NATIONAL PALACE UNTIL I WAS IN MY THIRTIES.

thought I had successfully avoided pandering to or insulting either side. Apparently, I was wrong.

Your father was in the government and some of our best friends were in the government, my mother said tensely, so when you say it was corrupt, you're saying we were corrupt. And the thing you wrote about how, post-revolution, the U.S. embargo was what caused food shortages — totally wrong, said my father. "It was cliché," he said. "I stopped reading."

I felt completely blindsided. Suddenly, my parents — people who, if staunchly conservative, were also clear-eyed and logical — seemed to have morphed into *Somocista* zealots. I knew both of them had worked for the Somoza government — my mother for the Department of the Interior, my father mostly for the Central Bank — and I certainly hadn't missed the "Support the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters" bumper sticker that decorated our car in the early '80s. But this — the emotion, the antipathy, over a breezy travel article — this felt oversized, crazy. And it felt personal, as though my parents were fending off an attack that I hadn't known I was making.

At a loss, I tried negotiating. What if I just used the word corrupt to describe the Somoza family, instead of the government? Wasn't that okay? Wasn't Somoza corrupt?

I hadn't really heard the end of my mom's point. To me, the war and my family's emigration might as well be a scar across my flesh. They had cost me everything I'd counted on as a kid: my friends, my first language, my country, my sense of the world as safe, benevolent and secure. All that was replaced with a life in which I was an outsider, struggling to learn how to act, what to say, how to be. That experience — the sudden poverty, the stress, the constant ache of loss and, most of all, the feeling of being alone, bobbing in a huge sea — defines me to this day, often in ways I wish weren't so. And yet, to my mother, it seemed the war was not something that had happened to me.

At the restaurant, my father had said that maybe the article was a good thing in that it would finally start us talking about the war. It was something we had never really done. Between my parents and me, the war had never been a topic. It had been a looming emotion, an ominous cloud that we kept from storming by ignoring it. My parents had lost everything coming to the United States, and, over the years, I had internalized their aversion to dwelling on that loss. It was too

**The author's mother, holding cup, and others after their release from the National Palace on August 23, 1978.**





PHOTOGRAPH BY UPI / CORBIS



painful; they were too busy; they wanted to move on. Even after the Sandinistas were voted out in the elections of 1990, and many of my parents' friends started filing paperwork to regain property lost during the war, my family initially resisted. We weren't going back, my father said, so there was no point.

And, to tell the truth, I had never done much to learn about the war on my own. The few times I'd picked up an article or a book, I'd been turned off by the picture it painted of people like those in my family — middle-class or wealthy, who had opposed the revolution and left the country. The heartless aristocrats I read about, who defended their privilege tooth and nail before swanning off to Miami with stolen millions, didn't jibe at all with the reality I'd experienced — the powdered milk we drank because we couldn't afford anything else, our struggle to rebuild.

I wanted to reengage with my parents, but I didn't want to find myself helpless again, feeling guilty, ignorant and somehow aggrieved. What I wanted was something that would bring emotion and fact together, something that would give me a touchstone for understanding my family's tortured history.

I'd begin, I decided, by finding the news photograph of my mother taken on August 23, 1978, during one of the most audacious moments of the Nicaraguan civil war. The

fight; drills teaching my third-grade class how to evacuate if our school was attacked; soldiers carrying automatic weapons. All are oddly bleached of emotion — I remember them, but I don't feel them.

I don't think I knew my mother had been a hostage at the National Palace, or even that such an event had taken place, until I was already in my thirties. I remember her dropping the story on me as an answer to a question about something innocuous, like when she'd started meditating or getting into yoga.

*It was when I was a hostage at the National Palace, she replied. I was sure I was going to die—that was what changed me.*

I remember being shocked, *You never told me about this!* And her being distracted, vague. *Really? I thought you knew.*

*No! No, I didn't!*

It was probably the first time in my life that I had chastised my mother for failing to share family history with me, but it didn't go any further. To me, the unwritten rules in my house always seemed very clear: My parents could bring up the war, but not the two kids. Any questions could lead us somewhere none of us wanted to go.

Her anecdote gave a possible context to one of the free-floating images in my brain, though: a short reel of her, drawn and serious in a white-and-black striped ma-

## COMING TO THE U.S. REVEALED BEWILDERING RULES AND UNEXPECTED FAULT LINES, ANY OF WHICH COULD BETRAY ME.

day before, about a dozen Sandinistas rebels had defied popular wisdom about the invincibility of Somoza's army by taking over the huge downtown Managua building known as the Palacio Nacional, or National Palace, which housed the country's legislature and several ministries. In doing so, they'd taken roughly 1,500 people hostage. My mother, a 31-year-old secretary, had been one of them.

A CHILEAN FRIEND ONCE TOLD ME, apropos of immigrant life, that most of what you learn about your family, you learn from other people. This is true—if you have other people around, and if you're inclined to ask questions.

In my case, I relied on my childhood memories, which are rich, plentiful, detailed. I remember the neighborhood kids I played with, my toys, the lush, overripe smell of the air. My memories of the war, though, are few and flickering. Unrest that had been smoldering for years caught fire in 1978, when Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the editor and owner of the national newspaper *La Prensa* and a frequent Somoza critic, was assassinated. Riots erupted. A national strike was called to try to oust Somoza. Yet from this tense period, I recall only a few moments: the schoolwide memorial service for a teacher accidentally killed in a fire-

ternity gown, being walked to my parents' bedroom in our old house in Managua. At the time of the hostage-taking, she would have been six months pregnant with my younger brother.

In the next few years, my mother would now and then drop other details. Once she mentioned that the day she was released from the National Palace, a news photographer had taken a picture of her. She didn't know about it until her boss showed her the newspaper afterward. It was a close-up of her face, she said, and the caption was something like, "Pregnant woman getting water from the Red Cross." It was an American or European newspaper, foreign. Anyway, she said, she couldn't really remember. She didn't like to.

MY FAMILY LEFT NICARAGUA THE FOLLOWING SUMMER, IN 1979. I was the first to go. Chuck and Puddy Hamlin, an American couple who had befriended my family after moving into our Managua neighborhood, visited my parents one day in May to say they were leaving. Chuck's company had decided to pull him out. Did my parents want to send me out of the country with them, at least until the fighting died down?

Until that moment, my parents said, they hadn't real-

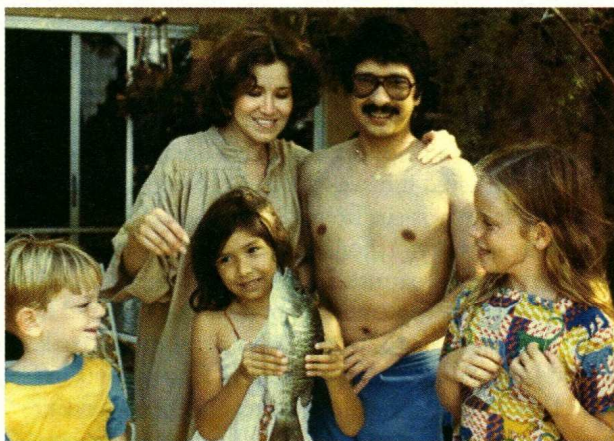
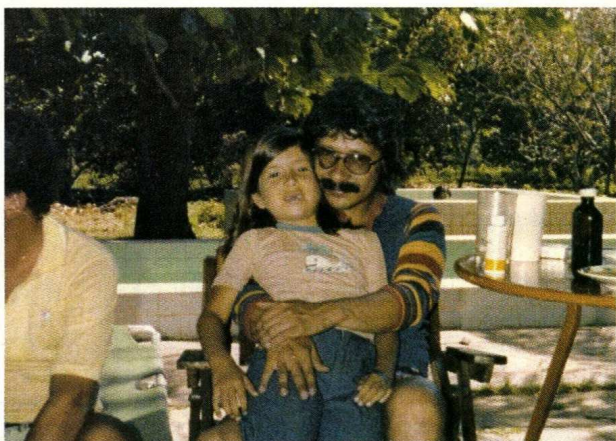


ized how bad things were getting. I left believing I was going to Key West, where the Hamlins were from, for a short summer vacation. Included in my one suitcase: my teddy bear and a T-shirt Puddy had had signed by all my classmates at Managua's American-Nicaraguan School.

A month later, my mother joined us in Key West, bringing along my baby brother and my paternal grandmother. By the middle of July, my father was also in the United States. He'd gone on a work trip to Guatemala, then flown to Miami to see my mother. My parents were

she typing — toiled furiously on the dissertation that would enable him to land a job as an economist in the United States. A few months later, he was offered a position in Washington.

I was aware, even then, that, compared with many other kids in my position, I was lucky. I'd learned English in school, so I didn't have to fight a language barrier. My father had found a job, and we'd already managed to crawl back into the middle class — unlike some people my parents knew, who were working in pizza joints and such.



at a friend's house packed with uncertain Nicaraguans, on July 17, 1979, the day Somoza fled the country. Two days later, the Sandinistas rolled into Managua.

That day, the 19th, was my ninth birthday. With my parents hours away, I spent that birthday sunnily skating around a roller rink in Key West with the Hamlin kids, Robin and Sherman, not knowing how much my life had just changed.

AFTER SOMOZA'S FLIGHT, my father headed to Cornell University, where several years before he had started, but never finished, his PhD. We spent four months in Ithaca, N.Y., while my father and mother — he writing,

**In Nicaragua, clockwise from bottom left, the author with her father; with a baby cousin; the author's parents. Bottom right, the author with her parents and friends Sherman and Robin Hamlin in Key West.**

Still, those early years in the United States were some of the worst in my life. Back home, I had been the queen bee in a neighborhood of boys. I'd played with them, fought with them, terrorized the new kids and generally felt right with my place in the world. But coming to the States revealed bewildering rules and un-

expected fault lines, any one of which could betray me at any moment. On my first day at school in Ithaca, I noticed an exotic animal on the playground and delightedly screamed, "Squirrel!" only to have dozens of unimpressed faces turn to stare at me. When we moved to Rockville, I became the only Hispanic kid at Fallsmead Elementary

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## Nicaragua

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Serve and E.G. stay behind for the open dancing. They are both still keyed up from the rush of the competition. They want to dance, just the two of them, to unwind like spinners who've crossed the finish line and need to walk to cool down. Serve offers his hand, E.G. takes it, and he leads her onto the dance floor for a mid-tempo number. As they dance, Serve gets a leg cramp. E.G., worried, wants to know if he needs to sit down.

"No," he recalls telling her. "I'll be all right. I just want to keep dancing."

ONE WEEK AFTER THE COMPETITION, E.G. sends Serve an e-mail with the subject line: "ban." She's been offered a job as director of the National Wildlife Federation's regional office in Atlanta. She hadn't sought the move, but will consider it, she writes in her message. Moving to Atlanta would put her within driving distance of her Southern relatives.

Serve tries to send an encouraging reply but admits he is at a loss for words. The next morning, he e-mails E.G. again: "This year, one thing I am so thankful for is you, and your friendship and your kindness . . . You know when I read 'Atlanta' . . . I realized how deeply I would miss you. Always, I have to keep reminding myself that God is in control, and He's my source of all that I need. Okay, enough pondering . . . You always have a place in my prayers."

"I didn't want to do this over e-mail, but don't want to tell you at a dance either, and don't want you to hear it from anyone else," E.G. writes to Serve on December 8. "I've accepted the Atlanta job. We can talk about it later. I've been crying all morning, but that will pass."

"Strange," Serve writes back, "but I felt a strong sad feeling in my heart earlier this morning."

Six days later the Windows perform at an employee holiday party for Exxon Mobil at the Rio Carbon in Tyson's Corner. E.G. tries joking that her colleagues at the Wildlife Federation would "skin her alive" if they knew she was dancing for the Exxon Mobil executives. But neither she nor Serve feels much like laughing. They figure this will be their last official performance as partners on the dance team. After the team dances, Serve and E.G. look for a quiet spot to sit. The mall adjacent to the hotel is closed and deso-

late. They sit on a bench there for what they will later describe as a wrenching farewell. "It's hard to separate," Serve says. "Hard to close that chapter."

Sitting in the desolate mall, Serve presents E.G. with a Christmas present: a framed photo of them dancing. The photo records a fleeting moment of triumph. Serve holds E.G. aloft. The dance partners beam. Serve placed the photo in a frame emblazoned: "A true friend is one of life's greatest gifts."

ON A COLD DECEMBER NIGHT, red and green Christmas lights are strung around the Chevy Chase Ballroom. Along one wall, would-be dancers sit on benches and folding chairs. They are waiting to ask someone to dance or be asked. They are waiting for their next chance at the romance of a well-executed dance.

Serve is in a familiar position, looking for a new dance partner. He jokes, glumly, about posting a notice that he's holding auditions.

Some of the women the deejay spins are seasonal and lighthearted, but Serve looks stony as he steers one thick-waisted woman around the dance floor. The woman is perfectly proficient in all the expected steps. But she's no Ginger Rogers — and she's no E.G. She's a mere mortal. When she dances, her feet touch the ground.

Serve is struggling, he later says. He's an emotional wreck from saying goodbye to E.G. just a few days before. Yet he keeps on dancing. All around him, other dancers swirl, kick, jump and swirl. Clapped hands lift together. Arms are linked by light touches and the rhythm of the music, men and women move together and apart, together and apart.

In one of the last songs of the evening, Serve can be glimpsed deftly leading a young woman through the happy throng of dancers. The woman, who wears her light brown hair in a ponytail, moves well. She and Serve move well together. As the song ends, Serve grasps the woman in his arms and dips her backward, even so briefly, in the classic finale to the three-minute romance of a dance. They both smile.

April 2006 is a *Washington Post* staff writer. She will be holding questions and comments about this article Monday at 1 p.m. at [washingtonpost.com/lineup](http://washingtonpost.com/lineup).

School to help belt out "America" from "West Side Story" for the spring pageant. ("I like to be in America/Okay by me in America!") Worse, I found it impossible to relate to the ribbon-wearing girls in my fourth-grade class, who made fun of my clothes, my hair, the paper bag lunches I packed myself every morning.

In the swift, brutal arithmetic of immigrant kids everywhere, I quickly figured out the basic tenets of my new existence: (1) Terrible things could happen anytime, and (2) I was on my own. Weirdness — in dress, in lunch food, in anything — wouldn't help me. The only way to stay safe was to keep my head down and blend in with the crowd. When the son of one of my parents' friends landed in my class, I watched him move silent and alone around the room — not at all the jocular little kid I'd known from home — and avoided him studiously. It would be years — college, really — until I felt any other way.

WHATEVER THE WAR IN NICARAGUA MAY MEAN TO ME, for most people in the United States these days, it is a distant memory, if it is one at all.

In an archive at The Post, photos from the conflict are bundled into four thick, crinkled manila folders, still marked up with wax pencil where the editors cropped them in the '70s and early '80s. Opening up the folders gave me a strange twinge of recognition. There were the military uniforms, the distinctly Nicaraguan faces, the devastation, death and ruin. Among the images of the palace takeover: a group of Red Cross workers waving a white flag, a handicapped woman being led out, a wounded guerrilla on a stretcher, still holding his weapon. The most famous was the picture taken after Somoza capitulated, freeing 59 political prisoners and providing the rebels with \$500,000 and safe passage out of the country. The photo showed "Comandante Zero" — Eden Pastora, who led the raid — triumphantly waving his gun above his head before boarding a plane.

I was amazed, too, when I read more recent articles about those days. The dates and facts cited were often wrong. One story concerned Dora Maria Tellez, who, as "Comandante Two," served under Pas-



tora in the raid. In 2004, she was invited to teach a class on Third World politics and ethics at Harvard Divinity School. When the U.S. State Department denied her a visa for having participated in “terrorist” activities, controversy erupted.

“We never made attacks against civilians, not in the history of Sandinismo,” the Chicago Tribune quoted her as saying. She called being at the palace “a great honor,” adding that, “No one was hurt, not one hostage.”

Of course, that’s not true. Most of the hostages at the palace were civilians, and the day my mother was released, La Prensa reported five people dead. Fourteen others were reported wounded.

It’s as if the war has started melting away, its facts becoming blurred. In a way, this feels like the days when my family first came to the United States. The revolution was on the news then, but not everyone was paying attention.

paternal grandmother was detained at the airport on a visit back, her passport taken away; my maternal grandfather was taken into custody for salvaging a few belongings from our abandoned house. Even for our friends who had joined the Sandinistas, things were tough: The country was suffering terrible shortages of food and basic necessities.

For my parents, I realize now, the American perception of what was going on in Nicaragua must have been even worse than it was for me. My father is an

And I’d lie. I realized this recently when I dropped an e-mail to my high school boyfriend, Alex, asking him what he remembered me saying about Nicaragua while we were dating.

“I remember you talking a good bit about your family’s experience,” he wrote back. “You would get mightily upset at anyone who suggested that the U.S. not assist the contras. You would also get upset if anyone suggested that the Sandinistas were a just and proper regime. I remember you telling me the story of when you escaped from Managua. The Sandinistas were looking specifically for you since you were a U.S. citizen.”

I don’t recognize the right-wing teenager that Alex described. Clearly, I was repeating the views I’d heard at home. Now, as my parents have noted, my grown-up politics are far more progres-



**Former guerrilla commander Edén Pastora during a 1998 visit to the National Palace, where he led a siege 20 years before.**

**AS REAGAN MADE CENTRAL AMERICA HIS LAST STAND AGAINST COMMUNISM, I DREADED BEING ASKED WHERE I WAS FROM.**

I remember going to a pizza restaurant on Rockville Pike with my family soon after we arrived in the area, in 1980. The hostess, a husky, cheerful blonde, told us it would be a few minutes until we could be seated. “Where y’all from?” she asked.

“Nicaragua,” answered my dad jauntily.

“Wow,” she said slowly. “I don’t even know where that is.”

I got used to giving a description — it’s in Central America, a few countries below Mexico. But as the ’80s went on, and President Ronald Reagan made Central America his last stand against Communism, I started dreading being asked where I was from. Suddenly, the follow-up questions — When did you leave? Why did you leave? Which side were you on? — always seemed to come with the implication that my family had done something wrong. At the same time, I overheard snatches of dinner table conversation about people in Nicaragua being jailed or killed. My

extremely law-abiding, cautious person: If he has 12 items going through a 10-items-or-less grocery line, he’ll make me go through the line separately and claim two. He crosses only at crosswalks. Until the revolution, he had led a successful middle-class life — got a good job at the Central Bank, went to graduate school on a scholarship, worked his way up. He was shocked when he first came to Washington and discovered that because he’d worked for the Somoza government, many institutions — even those he’d worked with while in Nicaragua — wouldn’t hire him.

For me, the problem was social, not professional. I felt my family had suffered a tragedy, and I resented being fingered as the bad guy on top of it all. So when asked which side we’d been on, I’d stress that my family had been on both sides — my college-age cousin Mario, for example, had died fighting for the Sandinistas in Jinotepe. His body was never found.

My first magazine job, to my parents’ quiet chagrin, was at feminist Ms. (At least I’m not my cousin, who works for a Democratic congressman.) I can’t imagine, now, denying the legitimacy of the Sandinista government. I can’t imagine arguing for the contras as a moral right.

But I see something deeper in the story Alex recalled of soldiers searching for me in Managua, which was completely fake. I think I wanted to give the first boy I ever loved a reason for all the pain he sensed at my house, to explain why I owned this pain. Lacking any solid facts, I invented some.

THE FEW CLUES I HAD about my mother’s picture meant I would have to cast a very wide net. It would have been snapped either August 23 or 24 and printed in a foreign newspaper — something major enough to end up in Managua. But I’d looked through reams of papers — the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Independent, Guardian — and



found nothing.

One Saturday in late October, I headed to the periodicals room at the Library of Congress to search again. In an issue of *La Prensa*, I had read an article about how the hostage-taking had been a front-page story in Spain, so I wanted to check out a microfilm of *El Pais*.

And there, in the August 25, 1978, issue, was my mother. The picture wasn't what I'd imagined. In my mind, it had been front page, huge and tightly focused on her. In reality, it was a playing-card-size square on page two. She is in profile, wearing the black-and-white striped maternity dress I remember and standing in line behind another mother-to-be. The caption reads, "Pregnant women after being freed." Both are drinking glasses of water. On the blurry, scratched microfilm, it looked like Mom was holding her cup up to her mouth with both hands, like a child, and something about the loose gather of hair at the nape of her neck and her feet-together, stomach-forward stance made her look vulnerable to me.

Amid the whirl of the ma-

I was drinking water."

She was describing exactly what I had imagined. Had she put that thought in my head? I did a few more searches afterward but was never able to find the picture she described. And in the end, I had



My mother told me that she was at her desk when shots and screaming broke out around noon. A dozen or so guerrillas had entered the building from doors in the east and west wings, disguised in army cadet uniforms. My mother's boss, José Antonio Mora, the minister of the interior, was holding a closed-door meeting, so whoever could scrambled into my mother's small office and barred the door. They stayed there until a hand jangled the knob and a voice ordered them to come out.

"They said if we didn't, they would throw a grenade in," she said. "So we came out, like this, hands up," with a machine gun pointed at us. "And to have your hands up like that, that's really a feeling."

The hostages were lined up in two rows in Mora's office — the first in front of the windows, to serve as a human shield in case of a counterattack, and the other farther back. Included among them, undetected, was a nephew of Somoza's. My mom was in the back, next to one of the young guerrillas who was

**The author in 1994 during her first trip back to Managua.**

**"I WANT TO TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED AT THE NATIONAL PALACE," I SAID. AND FOR THE FIRST TIME, WE DID.**

chines in the dark back corner of the periodicals room, I said, "Oh, my God," and realized that I had actually stopped expecting to find this photograph.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I took the photocopy of the page to my parents' house in Potomac. I wondered if showing it to my mother would make her more amenable to talking. But once again, my parents' response surprised me

"That's not the right picture," my mother said. "It was" — she made a tight frame around her face with her fingers — "a close-up, just of my face, like this, and

what I'd been looking for — finding the photo in *El Pais* already felt like a miracle.

A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER, I sat down to interview my parents yet again. It was my brother's birthday, but he and my mother had miscommunicated, and we wouldn't be seeing him that day. Mom was prickly, disturbed.

"What is it I need to say?" she snapped at me, sitting down on the white couch in their living room.

"I want to talk about what happened at the National Palace," I said. And for the first time, we did.

guarding them.

"I was angry," she said. "I kept asking him: What did they want? What were their demands? Because I knew that if they were asking that Somoza step down, we were dead, because Somoza wasn't going to go."

Finally, a co-worker who was holding my mother's hand gave it a gentle squeeze. *Please be quiet.* And she was.

The real targets of the takeover, the members of Congress, were being held in their assembly hall. The guerrillas were threatening to start executing them unless demands were met. Negoti-



ations with Somoza had already begun. My father, who was by then acting economics minister, reported in to Somoza's bunker during the takeover. He said Somoza's plan was always negotiation — never confrontation. But he was worried that a false move could result in my mother's death.

My mother stood in Mora's office for hours, contemplating what would happen. Managua is on an unstable geological fault line — the same one that had caused the country's disastrous earthquake in 1972, which razed the downtown and killed my mother's two younger sisters. By coincidence, at 7 that night, a strong tremor shook the building. To my mother, this seemed a sign.

"I was sure I was going to die, but I came to peace with it," she said. "I thought, if I died, well, the baby would die with me. Your father, he would remarry. The biggest regret was leaving you — you would have to grow up without me."

Finally, in the middle of the night, the secretaries were moved from their spot to the assembly hall. For my mother, this was the worst moment.

"That day, a young lieutenant had come to see the minister," she said. "But [he] was running behind," she said. "I kept his schedule, I knew that there was a chance he wouldn't have time to meet. I could have told the lieutenant to leave, to reschedule for another day. But I thought I'd be able to fit him in. I told him to take a seat and wait. So he was there when the Sandinistas came."

He was shot point-blank, my mother was told later. His body lay there until shortly before the secretaries were brought past that very spot.

"There was so much blood," my mother said. "So much blood."

And she began to cry, huge sobs ripping out of her for a routine decision she'd made almost 30 years earlier.

MY MOTHER'S MEMORY was that she was held for two nights, but the record shows it was only one. The next day, the Sandinistas released approximately 300 people, according to news reports, mostly children and those with health issues, including pregnant women. Someone gave my mother a ride to Somoza's bunker, she said, where she found my father. Stoic until then, she finally broke down.

Neither she nor my father remembered where I was all that time. For that, I had to ask Puddy Hamlin. The Hamlins had come to our house to collect me "for a sleepover," she said, as soon as they heard what had happened at the palace. They took me home the next day, when they learned my mother had been released. Apparently, I never knew what was happening.

After hearing my mother's story, I checked it against the record. What she described was all in La Prensa: the earthquake, the move from the office to the hallway and, most important, the young soldier. The newspaper even recorded the secretaries' keening grief when they saw the blood.

I still had some questions I wanted my parents to answer. At the end of November, I called them to set up another interview. They were going out of town, and on the night I'd planned for us to get together, they had committed to dinner with some longtime friends from Nicaragua. Did I want to come along? my mother asked. I agreed.

We went to a French restaurant in Georgetown. When my parents' friends arrived, they exclaimed over me and asked about my recent engagement to Rob.

Seeing my parents with their old friends that night was seeing my parents released. They had a quickness, a lightness, I hadn't seen since I had begun asking about the war. And I could feel how much this other couple cared for me because I was my parents' daughter. It came to me then that these were four people who had survived things I couldn't even imagine and had still been able to pick themselves up and rebuild, to the point where 25 years later they could find themselves poking fun at one another in a Georgetown restaurant.

At the end of the night, my mother asked if I wanted to go home with her and Dad, so I could ask my questions. I declined. I'd lost any further desire to drag her or my father into the past. Cast against what they'd endured, my petty resentments about having them recognize my side of the war, my suffering, seemed self-centered, more suited to the child I'd been than the adult I've become. The biggest gift I could give them was to let it go.

**Sandy M. Fernandez is a Magazine editor.**

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