BEISBOL

BY RICHARD ELMAN

RICHARD ELMAN went to Central America in 1978, on assignment for Geo magazine. He'd never experienced war. He didn't consider himself brave. He knew, though, that something important was underway there—something he should see. "I didn't want to write about Brooklyn," he says. Elman's innocence was short-lived. Confronted by the dead and dying, and sometimes fearful for his own safety, Elman left Central America with experiences he describes as seminal.

Elman's first book about Central America, published in 1981, was Cocktails at Samoza's, a collection of non-fiction accounts written shortly after the Sandinista victory. Seven years later, Elman has written of Central America again, but this time through fiction. "Beisbol" and "Do You See Any Porters Anywhere?" are two tales drawn from Disco Frito, a short-fiction collection published in October by Gibbs Smith. In a style that is personal and impressionistic, Disco Frito completes Elman's tableau of Central American strife and resiliency. "As a writer, I've always believed our task was to bear witness. If we could," he says, "Disco Frito is a work of fiction by an American writer about Central American realities. It's about Nicaragua as I came to know it between 1978 and 1987—vulnerable to the depredations of powerful enemies and friends.

Elman is the author of more than 20 published books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, including the widely acclaimed novelization Taxi Driver and The Little Lives of the People of Washington County, N.Y., published under the pseudonym John Howard Spyker; other titles include An Education in Blood, The Breadfruit Lotteries, and Lilo's Diary. Elman was Hopwood Professor of Fiction at the University of Michigan during the past academic year, and is a consultant to the provost and visiting professor at SUNY Stony Brook. He was a 1955 SU graduate in English and protégé of the late Donald Dike, whose influence Elman is eager to acknowledge even today.

NICARAGUA, 1978

JUST BELOW BARRIO

Quinta Nina, in some fields bordering Lake Managua, I used to watch the teenage kids playing beisbol. They were prodigious athletes: though their curve balls hung in the wind and they often had to run uphill to reach first base, their energies never flagged. From hovels of cardboard and scrap-wood, where lives were poisoned with the ordures of lakeside sewage and chemical greases, they emerged during the late afternoons to disport themselves in club satins and neon pinstripes: caps the hue of papaya flesh or tomatoes; genuine spiked black shoes on the feet of boys who usually went barefooted.

Everybody in the neighborhood took beisbol very seriously and some made it a habit of the spirit, something as Nica to them as the exotic colors in Ruben Dario's poetry. They had newspaper knowledge of the big leagues in El Norte, were adept at the various major league
styles. This one hit like Clemente, or one-handed flies like a young Willie Mays. They knew how to simulate Mike Marshall’s screwball overhand pitch, and took hook slides in those fields of manure and debris. Some even had the looks of future standouts like Denny Martinez. But they used balls as wilted as ragged vegetables from the Central Market; and the bats pinched their hands when they connected with the ball.

The younger kids, who stood by as a cheering section, seemed to enjoy the games almost as much as the players. They shouted pet names, jeered all errors. Nearby the women of the barrio washed clothes in concrete troughs; and the grown men drank beer and aguardiente and cleaned their weapons (for the Guardia might be coming at any time, even in the middle of the night, to look for weapons.) The scene looked as tranquil as some mid-American meadow in late July: picnicking campesinos, women attending to chores, boys playing ball—except that when the games were over all the boys disappeared. They literally went underground, into an abandoned storm sewer along the lakeshore where they fabricated contact bombs, sand mortar pipes. At night, with thoughts of Clemente and Martinez still in their heads, they snuck out to take part in actions, or to scribble graffiti on municipal walls against the dictatorship and its hated gringo friends.

I can only remember the name of one team from that little summer of 1978: Quenipes. They were all quite small, wore flashy green uniforms, garish with orange pin stripes like melon ends. All of one month of summer I watched those midget champions cavort, and then disappear, perhaps to die. Or they’d arrive without their usual first baseman, with bandaged legs and brows. Once they played a team of grown men from the nearby barrio of Vietnam, and were swamped with homers, but every grounder hit to the infield was scooped up and thrown out by agile hands.

It was right about then that the first openly fought battles between the Rebels and the Guard took place. I had business elsewhere, saw much that still haunts me. That Sandinista campaign of August-September 1978, though ultimately defeated, brought many of the cities to rubble. When I returned to Quinta Nina in late September, Guardsmen in jeeps patrolled every street corner. I was a little reluctant to show my La Prensa credentials. The game was still in progress, though: Quenipes disporting themselves against a team of Creole Mulattos from the East Coast who’d been transplanted to a nearby barrio and were thought to be politically reliable by the functionaries. They all had very large hands and feet and powerful hams, and I noticed their pitcher was easily overpowering Quenipe batters with his heavy fastballs.

After some time I also was aware my Quenipe team was almost entirely made up of replacements. They wore the same uniforms with the same nicknames sewn across their chests, but these were definitely not the same players, not the same Oscar, and Pepi, and German I’d watched once before. Transfigured, as though I’d bought a ticket to Dodger stadium, only to watch a Little League game, I wondered if there could be any joy in Mudville with all these new replacements on the diamond.

Then I also noticed the two plainclothesmen from the paramilitaries who were spec-tating the game, each with an Uzi machine pistol on a sling dangling into his hand. This new game was being staged more for their benefit, I observed, than for the benefit of the players. I stayed around to watch.

Quenipes were behind 5 to 1 by the time I came along. They barely swung their bats at incoming balls. Aside from an occasional walk to their littlest boys, they went down in order.

In the fifth inning contact bombs exploded down lakeside near the big white Bank of America building. In the silence between bursts men and boys stood about wondering what was about to happen next, and then abruptly they fled from one another and left me standing in an almost empty field.
"The Cathedral can have our relics," said one.
"The soldiers won't be coming now," the other said. "They have too much to do in Managua."

Night would soon be coming on so I got up again, despite my fears, and loped toward the center of the barrio. At the first checkpoint I was stopped by a handsome Guard lieutenant with an Indian face who asked to see my credentials.

The lieutenant looked a lot like one of the boys who pose for Salem ads in the Latin countries: brown, but clean cut. He wore U.S.-issue Mickey Mouse boots. When I found my papers and showed them to him, he seemed easily satisfied, but asked, just to make talk, what I was doing in Quinta Nina. Lamely I said I'd come to watch a baseball game.

The lieutenant seemed awfully pleased with me: "Hermano, you can't see better beisbol anywhere in the world," he said. "Not even in Cuba. There were Nicaraguans in the big leagues. But, of course, the best players are in León. . . . Not here in Managua . . . but in León . . . ."

"I like their spirits," I insisted.
"You gringos always make that mistake," he pointed out, in a kind of Spanglish, for my benefit. "You buy the worst hammocks and you watch the worst beisbol; you are always looking for true grit in a greased pig."

When I asked if I could go now, he seemed reluctant to dismiss me.

"If you want to see a pitcher," my new guide said, "you should see Caballo Negro of Number One León. He's old now but once he struck out the entire Yankee line-up in order. . . ."

Then it suddenly went dark and the lieutenant told his squad to take cover. He also informed me he would drive me out to the main highway.

Thinking we would talk more beisbol, I got into the front seat with him. As soon as we were on the move, the lieutenant assured me he had very little use for the current state of affairs, or old Somoza and his whores. He was learning English "plain as the smile on your face"; and he wanted to go back to school in the States, to study sociology, at UC Berkeley. He wished above all to be a "humane" penologist, or teach penology at a university. He could read Talcott Parsons, but he was just not a Red. He said, "I am a compassionate person."

I told Lieutenant Martinez that if I knew his address when I got back to the States I would send him some college catalogs so he could make intelligent choices. Or I would just send the materials to Lieutenant Raoul Martinez at the Army Base, Campos De Marzo, Managua.

We'd reached the carretera. "I would like the States, I know it," he said, "as I am sure you can tell."
"I'm sure."
"Bird in hand," he said, sticking out his hand. We shook and then I left him there.

I know he didn't die in the fighting; I've checked the lists. So perhaps he's fighting even now as a Contra for the CIA and "humane" penology, or in exile in Miami, touting Nicaraguan baseball, telling his hermanos how he would someday like to translate Talcott Parsons into Spanish.

As for those Nicaraguan "boys of summer," many died fighting in the streets of Managua, Estelí, and Matagalpa. Some are minor bureaucrats of the new regime. Some married, some went abroad to join the Contras, or remain uninvolved, draft dodgers in Miami, Houston, or San Jose, Costa Rica.

Baseball is played as much as ever in Nicaragua.

The warm tropical nights flow through the loins of all of us, even in our sleep, and the next morning we are all just a little older and feeble.