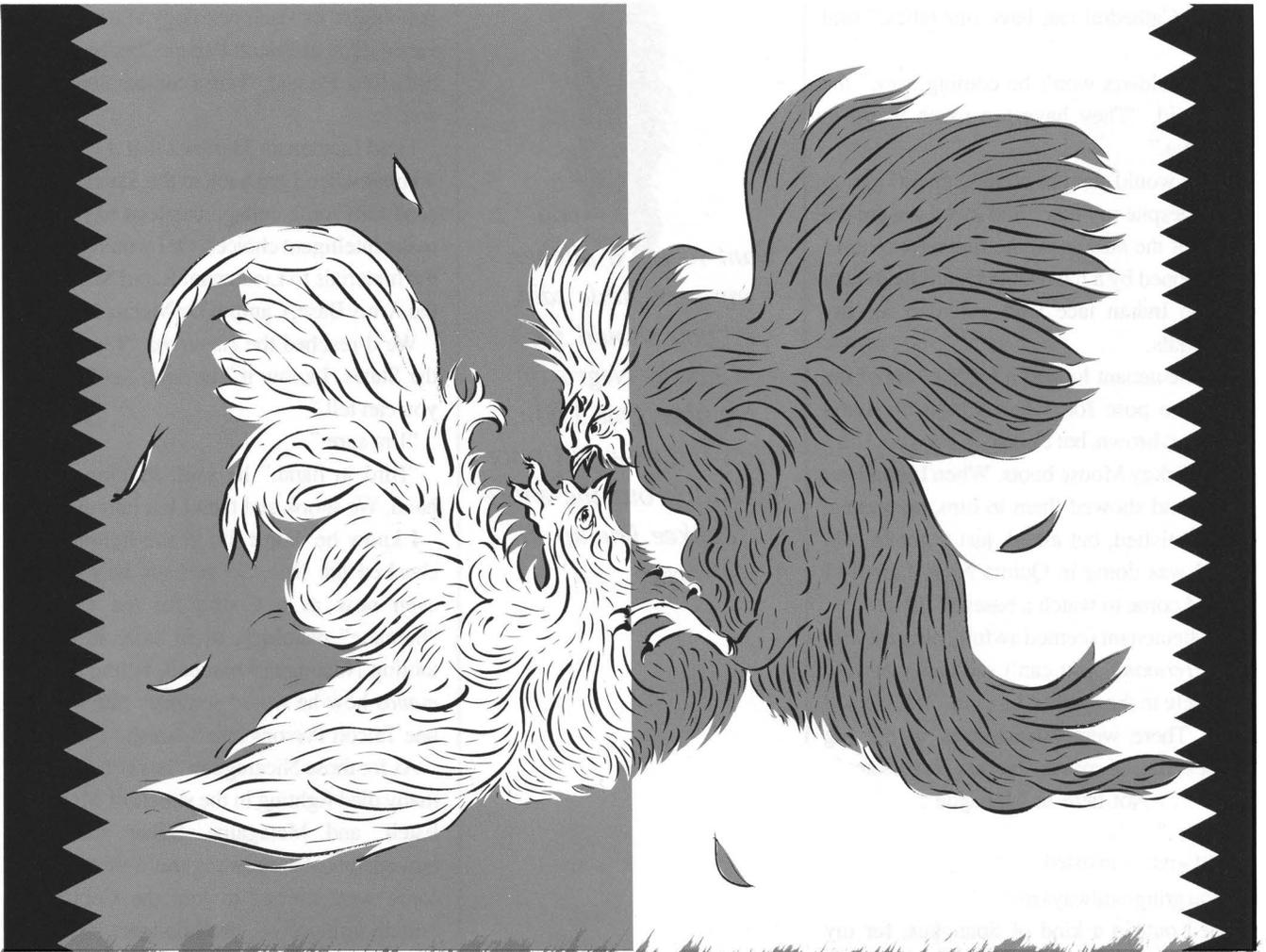


CHRISTOPHER O. PURCELL



DO YOU SEE ANY PORTERS ANYWHERE?

NICARAGUA/HONDURAS, 1984

AT THE *HACIENDA* OUTSIDE Ocatal, after the battle, the Chief of State came to talk to the people. He tried to be consoling even though there were five dead and more wounded.

"We are a nation at war against powerful malevolent forces," he said. "But we have many friends beyond our borders, and the world applauds our courage and determination."

People wept, and cried out names of the

dead who were laid out under tarps, like produce, in the principal square, awaiting burial later in the day.

Across the way, I stood next to Prudhomme, who was actually making notes on a small pad with a little mechanical pencil.

"Is any of this new to you?" I asked.

"Not really," he confessed.

I asked why he bothered to make notes.

"He is, after all, the Chief of State," Prudhomme said, "and those are corpses . . . whether new to me or not."

His eyes were very watery.

Afterwards he dragged me up past the security guard toward the man himself. "Ask him a question," Prudhomme demanded. I had no questions. "You ask," I said.

Prudhomme waved at the man and caught his glance. "It's good that you came," he said.

The Chief of State waved back.

"That's no question," I said.

"I haven't any questions to ask," he said flatly.

Two days later near Paradise, Honduras, we listened to a similar speech from Calero to a bunch of new Contra recruits, mostly kids it seemed, from the East Coast.

He's a heavy-set man with a saturnine smile, and I could not say his speech was any less affecting than Ortega's. Well fed himself, he fed all those puny kids, sweating inside heaving green fatigues, words: that the time was coming when Nicaragua was going to be liberated and freedom was going to be restored. Later they were served beans and G.I. rations.

Again Prudhomme took notes and before I could ask why he told me. "In order to put some distance between myself and pathos," he said. "One side or the other. It's always like that when people are dying. . . ."

There were the remains of a *fiesta* in the next village and we walked about among the stalls and watched a cockfight. Prudhomme put some money down on a large fellow with white feathers. Before we knew it he was a mess of blood. Lifeless, a rag.

A one-eyed man told us we should bet on Dario, his cock, next, because he fed him special marijuana seeds and the bird was "crazy in a good way when it comes to cocks."

We walked on.

"Don't you think," my friend asked when we stopped to buy Cokes, "that people who live like this have wars like this?"

"Europe and America are still pretty blood-thirsty," I said.

"Drink your Coke," he said. "It's getting late."

On the plane back to Managua we sat next to an Asian businessman who called himself Micky. He said he sold commercial fishing equipment for a Singapore trading firm.

Prudhomme asked, "What sort of equipment?"

"For catching fish," Micky said.

"What sort of fish?" I asked.

"Typical fish." He was a thin man, impeccably dressed in a dark rayon suit, a white shirt, a red tie, as though preparing to go on

Well fed himself, the Chief of State fed all those puny kids words: that the time was coming when Nicaragua was going to be liberated and freedom was going to be restored. Later they were served beans and G.I. rations.



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TV. The frames of his eyeglasses were thick dark tortoise shell.

"Do you plan to sell your typical fishing equipment in Managua?" Prudhomme asked.

The man grinned.

"Not at all," he said. "Our company also has this sideline. . . ."

"What sort of sideline?" Prudhomme asked.

"Typical sideline," he said.

Prudhomme asked, "You don't wish to specify?"

Micky replied, "Weaponry. . . . It's all very state-of-the-art."

He asked who we worked for. "We are *pomps funebres*," Prudhomme said, "a sort of joint undertaking."

Micky turned to me. "Does your journalist friend always tell such bad jokes?"

"Sometimes he just chases yellowtail," I said.

When our plane landed Micky was met by another Oriental wearing a *guayabera*, who helped him pass quickly through customs.

Prudhomme waved goodbye. "*Vaya con Visa*, Micky," he called after them.

Our bags were examined by a former police officer. Prudhomme said, "I thought you were living in Miami."

"You're thinking of a different policeman," the man said when he put a chalk mark on my typewriter case.

There was a brisk trade for dollars nearby. People were moving about; somebody had just arrived in the VIP Lounge. I told the customs man I thought he was lucky they hadn't made him the porter.

All of a sudden, he put his hands on his hips and hollered at me: "Do you see any porters anywhere?" His face was full of sweat. "If you see any porters anywhere," he said, "you should help yourselves." He stamped his foot.

We took a cab into town. A couple of lorries passed us full of militia moving north.

"Typical lorries?" Prudhomme said.

"Typical," our driver said.

He then asked if we would pay him in dollars. "Typical fish." I asked. "Typical!" Prudhomme laughed.

Prudhomme paid the driver. I took the bags.

A buzzard flung its wings at the dead blue sky above us.