

Leticia: A Nicaraguan Woman's Struggle*

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In the middle of the Sandinista revolution to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship and the continuing struggle against the contras, life for everyday Nicaraguans has gone on, complete with all the frustrations and the pleasures common to most people in contemporary society. Leticia has her ambitions and her problems: difficulties with her husband drive her to make an illegal entry into the United States, but the lure of her family brings her back to Managua. The Sandinista success has meant new opportunities for Leticia and others like her and, also, new hardships for them as they attempt to earn their livelihood.

Leticia's story is told with warmth and humor by Dianne Walta Hart of the Spanish department of Oregon State University. Spanish, linguistics, and adult education are Hart's teaching specialties, while her research since 1984 has concentrated on the oral history of a Nicaraguan family. She has published articles on Nicaraguan women and Sandinista society. Besides serving as executive secretary of the Pacific Northwest Council on Foreign Languages, Hart has found the time to act as adviser to Oregon State's Japanese Traditional Karate Club.

This vignette reveals the balance between personal needs and national goals that Leticia and others maintain in Nicaragua. Her experience adds a human dimension and female perspective to the Sandinista struggle for social justice in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua's crisis is so long, so long . . . we
walk each day so near to hope and to despair.
—Uriel Molina, *Barricada*, Managua, Nicaragua,
August 1986

I would like to discuss with you
how now I live in the catacombs
and how determined I am to kill the hunger
that is killing us
when you discuss this
discuss it long and hard

*Leticia is a pseudonym.

when no one who sows hunger is around
 nor a spy for those who sow hunger
 nor a guard for those who sow hunger.
 —Leonel Rugama, Estelí poet killed at the
 age of twenty in 1970 by Somoza's Guards¹

In July 1979 the Nicaraguan people overthrew the forty-six-year-long dictatorship of the Somoza family and, in its place, established the Sandinista government. In 1981 the U.S. government created a counterrevolutionary group, the *contras*, on Nicaragua's borders in an attempt to overthrow the Sandinistas. I met Leticia and her family in 1983 and began an oral history of them in 1984. They have requested that pseudonyms be used and that minor details be changed because they fear retaliation from the *contras*.

Leticia's story begins in Estelí, Nicaragua, capital of the province of the same name. It is a city of fifty thousand people that has been her home most of her life. In Estelí, she can chat with old friends on the street, describe the histories of families and buildings, go down to the river where her mother used to make her living washing clothes, and stop by the cemetery where a tall tree has grown from a seed the family planted to shade her brother's grave.

Estelí is two hours north of Managua in Nicaragua's hilly tobacco country. The Pan-American highway cuts through the town, bringing with it motorcycles and four-wheel drive vehicles that seem both to bounce and roar on the rough streets. Bordering the lively central park are government buildings, a run-down theater, and vendors selling vegetables. Sloths hang from the park trees and children chase each other around the swings. Sophisticated helicopters drone over the city by day and at night one can hear distant gunfire.

Leticia describes the people in Estelí as nicer, more hospitable, and less prejudiced than other Nicaraguans. They don't gossip and criticize each other, but, at the same time, they know where everyone lives, and they are concerned about their neighbors. They have few luxuries, but they like to dress well, even if only inexpensive fabric is available. The climate is cooler than Managua's, and the people are

¹Leonel Rugama, *The Earth Is a Satellite of the Moon*, trans. Sara Miles, Richard Schaaf, and Nancy Weisberg (Willimantic, CT, 1984), 101.

lighter skinned, not as burned by the sun. Many people have green or blue eyes, and it is said that the women of Estelí are beautiful.

There is another dimension to Estelí, though. Popular tee shirts proclaim Estelí as a *pueblo heroico* for several well-fought reasons. It is one of the towns that most openly defied the Somoza government, causing Estelí to be bombed more than any other city in Nicaragua. Many of the downtown buildings still show the scars of the battles that destroyed most of Estelí's businesses. Out of those battles has come a feeling that the city and its people will never give in, never be defeated. They view themselves as warriors. The young poet and early martyr, Leonel Rugama, came from Estelí, and his attitude represents the spirit of the city. His finest verse, some say, was his profane last words in defiance of Somoza's Guards just before they killed him: "Tell your mother to surrender!"

Leticia's story, and that of her mother, brother, and sister, started in Estelí in desperate hunger and poverty. Their mother, Dora, lived with five different men in her life. All but one beat her, and all of them abandoned her. Landlords often chased them out of shanty homes, their few possessions on their backs. At the age of six, the children began working fourteen hours a day. They shined shoes, picked tobacco, and sold food door-to-door in an attempt to add to the money Dora made. As hard as they all worked, it often was not enough. "Some days," according to Leticia, "we would wake up in the morning and there was nothing to eat. Sometimes we didn't even have wood to start a fire. Sometimes we'd eat a piece of bread in the morning, with a cup of coffee; that was all until night, when—if my mother had washed and if the clothes had dried and if she had been able to deliver the clothes—we would eat again."

All of them fought, in different ways, to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship that had controlled Nicaragua since the early 1930s. As a teenager, Leticia's brother, Omar, fought for two years in the mountains. Her sister, Marta, was forced to stand for a month in a foot of water in a government prison because she refused to tell Somoza's guardsmen her brother's whereabouts. Leticia, born in 1948 and at least ten years older than her sister and brother, provided a safe house in Managua for Omar, burying his dirty clothes in the backyard, providing him with clean ones, and hiding him, although such actions endangered her three young daughters and husband. A second brother died in the struggle.

Today, Leticia, Marta, and Omar are still committed to the revolution. Leticia volunteers for AMNLAE (the national women's organization) and takes her turn watching over her barrio at night.

Marta and Omar are Sandinistas; she works for AMNLAE, and he is still in the military.

Leticia and her family have been actively involved in the social changes that have taken place in Estelí and in all of Nicaragua since the revolution. As children in prerevolutionary Nicaragua, Leticia and her siblings went to school at night whenever they could find time, because they had to work during the day. Leticia remembers those years with sadness: "A child cannot study without food. When I would pick up a book to study a lesson, I wouldn't remember anything. My head would start to ache. It would feel heavy, and I would have to stop studying." Now children like those of Leticia, Marta, and Omar go to school with full stomachs and go to school during the day. At night the schools are attended by adults.

With a voice in their community, better access to medical care, and better education for their children, Leticia and her family, for the first time, share in the responsibility for their own lives and that of their community. They are proud of Estelí and proud of Nicaragua. They are also happy that the leadership and courage shown by many Nicaraguan women during the struggle has not been forgotten, as evidenced by the laws protecting women and their enforcement by the Sandinistas. Even though the legal status of women has been improved, many old attitudes persist.

The Sandinista government built subsidized housing in the years after Somoza's overthrow, and today Dora and Marta live together in a government-built duplex. It is the first time that either woman has lived in a house where the front door locks. It is also the first time that they do not have to worry that someone will come along and chase them out.

Leticia lives a block away. She is small, quick to cry, and an important member of the family. Within the family, her ninth-grade education is surpassed only by that of her university-educated husband. As a teenager, she took a correspondence course in cosmetology, worked in a SONY store, and met her first boyfriend, an intense young man named Antonio, nine years older than she. When they first met, she did not know that he was already working with the Frente Sandinista. Often he disappeared for days, and she believed that he had another girlfriend. He denied this and told her that he visited a family in Santa Clara. On her fifteenth birthday in 1963, he gave a party for her and presented her with fabric for a dress, white cloth with golden stripes. Although Antonio knew the law required permits for private parties, he did not get one, and Somoza's Guards broke up Leticia's only birthday party. "Soon after that, he asked me if we could have a civil

marriage. I don't know why, but I became afraid and told him that at fifteen, I was too young. I was nervous; my teeth even chattered. It wasn't that I didn't love him because I did. He was my first boyfriend, and I loved him a lot. But he didn't think I loved him." Not long after, Antonio "went to the mountains," that is, he joined the guerrillas. She never saw him again. He became a *comandante*, a national hero, and, upon his death in 1979, an official martyr. In Estelí, there is a barrio named after him.

Leticia went on to a cosmetology school in Managua. She lived with the owner, a woman who fed her *gallo pinto* (beans and rice) three times a day in return for Leticia's working seven days a week. When she finished school, she moved to Matagalpa, not far from Estelí, took out a loan to buy a mirror and a dryer, hired someone to make a table, and placed a sign, *Centro de Belleza Leticia*, outside her apartment. She was twenty years old and in business.

"I felt good about it. I felt liberated. Whenever I had a slow day, I would come and see my mother. I would come to leave her a little money. Then I would leave. I liked Estelí, and I wanted to stay there because it was where I was born, but I don't know—[at that time in my life], Estelí brought back a lot of bad memories for me. I felt sad whenever I went to Estelí, probably due to my childhood, due to all the difficulties we went through with my mother. We suffered hunger because my mother was on her own. She has always been on her own. I have always admired her, maybe because I was the eldest and could understand the situation a bit better. She always had to wash and iron to support us; this would make me feel sorry for her. It would make me sad to think of all the things that we went through.

"And then I met Sergio. One day his sister came to my beauty parlor and invited me on an outing to a farm. She and her friends didn't know me and weren't even my friends, but I thought that maybe they liked me, and that's why they invited me. That was not so—there was more to it. Sergio's sister was jealous of her boyfriend. She thought her boyfriend was in love with me. But that was not true. He was a friend of mine because he worked with my roommate. They both worked at PROLASA, a dairy product factory. We were friends, and he would come to visit, but he wasn't in love. She thought he was in love with me, so she came to the beauty parlor. It was part of her plan. Sergio's sister and her friends invited me on the trip so that I could see that she was his girlfriend. I went, but took it very naturally because there wasn't any truth in the rest.

"When I was going to the farm, when I got into the truck that we used for the trip, Sergio was in it. He moved so that I could sit down.

So I sat down beside him, and then we drove off. We started to talk about everything, but nothing related to falling in love and all those things. We went to the farm on the fourteenth of February 1970.

"We spent the day there; we walked and had a party and a *piñata*. The farm was very nice because it had a big river where we went swimming. Then I realized that he had fallen in love with me and I with him. We returned home that same day, at night. He went home to bathe and returned later that night to see me. The girls who had invited me to the party were very happy and became good friends of mine. They were happy because they no longer worried about the boyfriend.

"Sergio started to visit and soon, during the first week of March, they planned another trip to the farm for Holy Week. So we went back again and spent a whole week on the farm. It was during that week that we became engaged. He was just starting his first year at the university; he was twenty-one and I was twenty-two.

"When he told his mother that he wanted to marry me, she said, no, that if he married me, she wouldn't help him with his studies and that he would have to leave her house. He left, and we were married on the fourth of April. We married quietly, without his family knowing. I wrote to my mother and told her all about it—that I had found a man and was going to marry, that I was having only a civil wedding to see if it would work. I hadn't known him for too long, but I was sure that I was in love because I had had another boyfriend before for two years and had never felt so in love with someone as to get married."

During the next few years, Sergio attended the Universidad Autónoma de Nicaragua in Managua while Leticia continued her work as a hairdresser in Matagalpa. They saw each other on weekends. Her first daughter was born on May 22, 1971; three of her four daughters would be born before 1979. Leticia eventually moved to Managua to be with her husband.

After Sergio finished the university, he worked for Sears, Roebuck and Company and later for the Bank of America. Politics did not interest him. Leticia did not tell him that her brothers were working with the Sandinistas in the struggle to overthrow Somoza. Later, she learned that he knew all along but said nothing to her.

One night, when Leticia's brothers had sneaked into Managua and were sleeping at her house, she woke up after hearing a jeep go around the block several times. She worried about her innocent husband and children. She had not meant to endanger them. "The guards stopped in front of my door and got out of the jeep. They kept the jeep running.

I could hear them get their guns ready to shoot. I got up quickly and, without turning on a light, I ran to my brothers. They slept with their clothes on, ready for what might happen. After I warned them, I went to the living room in the dark and knelt on the floor. I asked God to help us, to please not let the guards come to our house. I heard one guard say, as he came closer to us, that he thought people were there, but the other one said that there was no one. They got in their car and left."

In July 1979, after a month of fierce fighting, there was a moment of calm as troops withdrew. Leticia, along with her husband, children, and friends, took advantage of this time to scout for refuge from the battle—someplace outside of Managua. They stopped at a small farm owned by a friend of Sergio's. As they rested, they heard a helicopter above and then watched with horror as it landed next door, at a farm owned by a *comandante* in Somoza's Guard. When they realized that the helicopter was full of guardsmen, they hid under beds and in closets, certain that they would be killed. But instead of coming to look for them, the guardsmen waited for the *comandante* who left his house with the few bags he had packed. The guardsmen loaded the suitcases into the helicopter, the *comandante* got in, and they flew away. At that moment, Leticia knew, without hearing it officially, that the revolution had been successful. Much earlier she had made a red-and-black flag for this victorious moment and had hidden it in her purse. Now she pulled out the flag, ran to their car, and tied it to the antenna. They laughed and cried and began the victory drive into Managua on roads full of people singing, shooting guns, and playing mariachi music to celebrate the triumph of the revolution.

In time, Sergio accepted a government position, so once again Leticia moved her table, dryer, and mirror to a new Centro de Belleza Leticia. This time their move was to Estelí, her hometown. Later, the Sandinista government sent Sergio to study in Cuba for a year. They both considered a divorce during his absence. Leticia thought they had gone their separate ways; her community involvement had become time-consuming. Sergio did not understand and occasionally beat her. She felt that he wanted her to be his slave, not his companion for life. In Cuba, Sergio watched men and women interact and was impressed with how different it was from Nicaragua, how men and women treated each other more as equals. He wrote that it changed his attitude and that he wanted a second chance. She agreed.

In 1981 the U.S.-backed contras began their war against Nicaragua; the battle often touched the lives of Leticia and her family. Omar was usually in the battlefield and often suffered from nightmares and fears.

The stress and war-related anxiety eventually debilitated him for a year, causing the Sandinistas to take away his rifle and relieve him from actual battle responsibilities until his emotional health improved. Marta's work, similar to a paramilitary position, placed her near the war zone where the Sandinista soldiers fought the contras. She was in the border town of Santa Clara in 1984 when U.S. mercenaries from the Alabama-based Civilian-Military Assistance attacked by air and were shot down by the Sandinistas. It seemed never to end. The father of the family in the other side of their duplex was killed fighting the contras. The rumors of children with slit necks, of dead bodies in the river, and of random and senseless contra attacks on civilians added to the tension, as did the low car with a loudspeaker on the top, making its way through the barrio, announcing the latest death of someone from Estelí. They wondered if they would ever have peace.

The symbolic importance of Estelí was not lost on the contras. They attacked it in August 1985, knowing how significant the defeat of Estelí would be. During the attack on the city, Marta was in charge of coordinating the civilian defense of the city's perimeters. Omar sat helplessly immobile in his tiny ramshackle hillside home with a cast on a broken leg, painfully reliving, in an emotional sense, his wartime horrors as he heard the Sandinista helicopters strafe the nearby hills in their attempt to repel the contras. Leticia stood watch over her barrio at night, as she had done once a week since 1979, to protect the area. She made coffee and food for others, when she was not on watch, and worried as Estelí buried ten people in one day. Eight days later, the contras retreated. The people of Estelí felt that once more they had been victorious.

By this time, Leticia had become the emotional center of the family. She had, by everyone's account, assumed the dominant role. She was the one in whom the family members traditionally confided; she, in turn, worried about them and advised them. That she struggled with this responsibility and their confidence in her was evident in her overall sadness.

Leticia and her four-year-old daughter left Nicaragua three months later, in November 1985, leaving behind not only her mother, brother, and sister but also three teenaged daughters and her husband. She had never before been outside Nicaragua had only vague knowledge of the location of the cities and countries that lay ahead of her. She had never seen a map. She said that her reason for leaving was not Nicaragua: "I am convinced that the revolution is for us, for the poor, for those of us who were always marginalized." She added that, as a Nicaraguan, her duty was in her country.

If her duty was in Nicaragua and the reason she left was not Nicaragua, why then did she leave? She left to get away from Sergio. She could no longer tolerate having him come near her. A cousin in Nevada had invited her to the United States and offered to pay her way. A friend had advised her that maybe she would feel better about Sergio if she left for a couple of months. The invitation came at the perfect time.

However, in a way, the problem *was* Nicaragua. Danger from the contras to family and friends is omnipresent in the towns far from Managua; it strains relationships like no other stress can. Every day Leticia heard of a sorrow unimagined the day before. And Leticia visibly suffers more than others; she has said, "I am one of those people who is always worrying about what is happening to others." She remembers as a child watching one of Somoza's Guards hit an old man with his rifle butt. She stood on the street corner screaming at the guard, telling him that the old man was a drunk. But the beating continued, and Leticia ran to her house, crying over her inability to help. When she was in Nicaragua, no orphaned child or abandoned mother went unhelped by Leticia. She volunteered for AMNLAE, went to two weekly meetings of her Christian base community where they discussed a practical approach to being Christians, and stood watch over her neighborhood. However, her marital problems, exacerbated by her family responsibilities and the anxieties caused by the last contra attack on Estelí, had become too great.

Sergio and their daughters took her to the Nicaraguan-Honduran border where she joined eight other Nicaraguans, all with Mexican visas but with no intention of staying in Mexico. They rode in a van, mostly in silence, through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. They missed, by a few minutes, a military confrontation in El Salvador. At night they stayed in small hotels or slept in the van.

When they reached the U.S.-Mexican border, they waited until 5:00 A.M. to begin their illegal entry into the United States. Carrying a small suitcase brought from Nicaragua, Leticia and her daughter climbed over a wall and walked through heavy rain, mud, and standing water for one and a half hours until they reached an abandoned house. Later, they made the three-hour trip to Los Angeles in two cars, the men in the trunks and the women and children lying down in the back.

Then the confusion began. When her cousin invited her, he thought she was emigrating. He had no intention of paying for a mere visit. As for her child, Leticia had told someone to ask another person about the advisability of taking her daughter along but had interpreted the

response—"No hay ningún problema"—to mean there would be no charge. As a result of these misunderstandings, Leticia was presented with a bill for \$1,500. She had no money and no way of earning enough to repay this unexpected debt.

Leticia and her daughter moved to Nevada with her cousin where they shared an apartment with other Nicaraguans who had entered illegally. She worked for a few weeks in a factory. Later, they were invited to Oregon by friends and spoke with groups of university students about the Nicaraguan revolution. She said, "I think it was a bad decision [to leave Nicaragua] but it is done. I have analyzed all this and I think that God always has His plans; a leaf on a tree does not move except by His will." She added that maybe what God had wanted her to do was talk with students and tell them about Nicaragua.

Her responsibilities had followed her: "I know that my sister and brother feel that I am their second mother. My mother will be able to die peacefully because she knows she has me. I cannot make decisions about my life . . . because my life doesn't belong to me but to my family."

Leticia and her daughter made their way to Miami where they could easily drop unnoticed into a world of illegal aliens and where, she hoped, she could find employment, earn plane fare back to Nicaragua, and maybe even make a few extra dollars. Although she had friends from Estelí there, Miami was difficult. Everyone spoke Spanish, but, she said, most of them were Cubans who spoke too fast and all the time. Even the Nicaraguans in Miami were always agitated, in a hurry, and running to catch a bus. She got a job cleaning and cooking in the house of a *señora*. Next, she worked with a *señor* whom she accompanied to the docks, greeting incoming tourist ships from Latin American countries and selling perfume, clothes, and souvenirs in her struggle to make enough money for the return ticket. As time went on, she found work in the evenings as an Avon lady, using her stylish good looks to advertise her products and her cosmetology background to sell them. She could keep 50 percent of what she brought in; the first night out, she sold \$300 in Avon products and made \$150 for herself. Finally, the perfect job.

Leticia did not hear very often from Nicaragua, but she did know that Sergio had accepted a promotion and had moved, along with their three teenaged daughters, from Estelí to Managua. She also heard that a niece had been killed by the contras and that a stepsister had died of a stroke. She sensed that even more was wrong. When she telephoned Sergio, he almost always was the first one to suggest

that the call end. He seemed not to be very interested in talking with her, and she wondered if there was another woman. In May, on her thirty-ninth birthday, a friend in Miami called to congratulate her and added that she had heard from a relative that Leticia's husband was going out with another woman, publicly, in front of everyone. No one had told her because they did not want her to worry.

A few weeks later, in June, Leticia called Sergio's Managua office and found out that he had quit his job. When she asked for him, the secretary said, "He no longer works here, but if you wish to leave a message for him, I can ask the driver to take it to him." Leticia asked if the secretary had the address. The answer was, "Not of his house, but I know the address of the woman he lives with." Leticia was stunned. She asked that he call her in Miami: "I wanted the secretary to think everything was normal, that it didn't matter, but that was a lie. I thought that I was dying."

Sergio did not return the call. Instead, his sister came to Miami and called Leticia, telling her that Sergio was leaving that week for Mexico. "It was another blow, because I still had the hope that it was a passing thing for him, and that when I returned, everything was going to be normal, as before. I was ready to forgive him because I thought he had done it because I wasn't with him. The majority of Latin men are *machistas*, and they say they cannot be without a woman. But when I heard he was leaving for Mexico, this meant it was serious. He hadn't even called me to tell me that he was going, or that I should come because the children would be alone. I knew I had to hurry and return before I had planned, even though I had hoped to stay a couple of months longer to make money. I called a relative to find out if he had actually left; she said he hadn't, so I asked her to tell him that he should wait for me."

Later that month, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to give \$100 million to the contras. That meant the war against Nicaragua would continue. Leticia, eight months after entering the United States, was finally on her way back to Nicaragua, spurred more by her husband's impending departure to Mexico than by political reasons. She had often worried about various aspects of her return. One was how she would be received after spending so much time in the country that was, in effect, at war with her country. The other problem was her lack of papers. Leticia had entered the United States illegally. If, on paper, she had not entered, how could she leave? No one seemed to know the answer to that question.

Entering Nicaragua and reestablishing her life there, from a political point of view, presented no problems. Oddly enough, neither did

the lack of papers. No one asked for them when she left the United States and, in Nicaragua, the officials asked for no more than the form she filled out on the plane. She must have looked like most Nicaraguans who return from extensive shopping trips abroad because the fourteen boxes she brought back with her caused her no trouble at customs.

The return itself turned out to be the easy part. It was her relationship with Sergio that presented the most difficulty. In his new position in Managua, he had been earning the maximum monthly wages (80,000 córdobas, equal to U.S. \$57) that one could earn from a government job in Nicaragua, but it wasn't enough. In Leticia's absence, the córdoba had lost much of its value; in addition, living in Managua was more expensive than in Estelí.² Even if one could afford it, everything from meat to beans to beauty care products was difficult to find, more so than in the countryside, where the people were more affected by the war and where the government, as a consequence, maintained better food distribution and lower prices.

Nicaragua had changed in the eight months that Leticia had been in the United States. Nicaraguans had begun calling their country the land of "no hay" (there isn't any), so severe were the shortages of beans, corn, and spare parts. Basic goods were to have been available at low prices, but the impact on Nicaragua of the war with the U.S.-backed contras and the effect of the U.S. government embargo, compounded by inefficiency and corruption in the Nicaraguan distribution system, had resulted in frequent shortages. Even one of Nicaragua's newspapers, *El Nuevo Diario*, called Managua's prices exorbitant. At the same time, an "increased flight of the technical-professional sector" was predicted, along with continued labor indiscipline and inflation, already at the astonishingly high level of more than 1,000 percent.³ Nicaraguans lived in what was now being called a "survival economy."

²In August 1983 the exchange rate was 25 córdobas to one U.S. dollar. In August 1984 it was 74 córdobas to a dollar; in August 1985 it was 600; and in August 1986 it was 1,400. The black market paid a thousand more than that.

In Leticia's absence (November 1985 to July 1986), a tortilla went from 10 córdobas to 50 córdobas in Managua. The price of five pounds of beans rose from 16 córdobas to 300. When beans were otherwise unavailable, they could be obtained on the black market at 1,100 córdobas for a 1 lb.-4 oz. bag.

³"Slow Motion toward a Survival Economy," *Envío*, Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, Managua, Nicaragua, 5, no. 63 (September 1986): 14.

The family met Leticia and her daughter at the airport. "We went to the house, talked a lot, and they asked me a lot of questions about what had happened in the United States. I began to tell them how hard life there really is because the majority of the people who go to the United States talk big—how there is everything and how everything is pretty and how much money they make. That is the mistake, to not tell the truth. Because I believe that if all the world knew how it really is, very few people would want to go there. It is not for everyone."

Leticia and Sergio made love that first night but after that he became cool and distant. He accompanied her to Estelí where she went to see her mother and other family members, but he returned early to Managua. She struggled to find the answers. When she asked her daughters about the woman with whom her husband had had the affair, she learned that she was about the same age as Leticia but "shorter and not especially pretty." "Then why," she asked her children, "do you think that your dad went out with her?" "We don't know," they answered, "but you know how men are." The children told her that there were several nights that he did not come home while she was in the United States. Even some weekends. But they added that he checked on them often.

"Then one day," according to Leticia, "I went to Estelí again, to see my mother and that very day, he went with the woman, when I wasn't here. I had reached a limit; I couldn't stand it anymore—I couldn't bear the humiliation. I packed his bags and asked him to leave. I told him that even though I was a woman, I still had dignity."

She and Sergio argued. She accused him of leaving her for the other woman. He denied it, saying that he did not love the woman; he loved Leticia. Besides, the woman had two children and under no circumstances would he remake his life with a woman who had two children when he had four of his own he could no longer support on his salary. He was leaving to find work and to have time to think. And maybe, or so thought Leticia, to get even. She had left, and now he would.

Sergio planned to leave with his brother, starting out from Managua on an August evening. He was going to take his university diploma and other papers with him, hoping to get a position in Mexico for which his degree in business administration had prepared him. Other members of the family wondered if he intended to enter illegally the United States, much as Leticia did. She said no, that since she had told him how hard life is in the United States, his goal was to stay in Mexico. Since 1979 he had supported the revolution and worked

for it; but he, unlike the others in Leticia's family, had not actually fought for it. Politics had never interested him and still did not.

Leticia had no definite plans. The children had to stay in Managua to finish the school year. Maybe she could leave them with Sergio's sister and return to Estelí. Certainly when the school year finished in early December, they would return. But how to support her family? The beauty shop that she left in Estelí had been poorly managed in her absence and no longer existed. Maybe she could set up a beauty shop in her house, but it would not be easy. In the years following 1979, the government purchased beauty products and distributed them to beauty salons. As the economic situation worsened, the government was unable to continue this, and salon owners had to find a way to purchase beauty products out of the country, a feat that was easier for owners of large salons than it was for Leticia. The products she had brought back with her would not last long. She knew life would improve if she could just get back to Estelí, if only for the ease with which she could get beans and rice.

Dora, Marta, and Omar still live in Estelí, and Leticia still considers it home. She is more comfortable there than she is in Managua or Miami. During her eight months in the United States, people in Estelí often asked about her and then commented that she would never return. Such remarks for a family committed to the revolution provided many awkward moments.

Estelí was also the home of the man who had driven Leticia and her daughter in his van to the United States and who supported himself by making such trips. She still owed him \$1,500. He had called her in Miami, and she told him that she was working and would repay him when she could. A concern of hers had always been that he would damage her reputation by telling people in her hometown that she had not paid. Later, when she ran into him on a Nicaraguan street, she assured him that she had come back only to attend to family problems and that when she returned to the United States, even though she had no intention of doing so, she would earn the money to pay him. Repaying U.S. \$1,500 when one makes córdobas would take a lifetime, and he understood that. A few weeks later, as he attempted to leave Nicaragua for Mexico by plane, this time taking several young draft evaders with him instead of people from Estelí, he was arrested and put in prison. As a result, the debt was not a problem, at least not for the moment, and Leticia's reputation and credit in Estelí remained intact.

In the month that she had been back, Leticia's visits to her mother's house had been brief. She appeared to be distracted when she did

come to Estelí and often spent her time with other friends and relatives. She hadn't even had lunch with Dora, Marta, or Omar. To them, she seemed changed by her experience in the United States, and her absence had affected their attitude toward her. They knew that she was having trouble with her husband because he had not tried to keep his infidelity a secret. Such problems, though, did not make her family more sympathetic. Marta, commenting on Leticia's behavior of the past year, said that a woman can always get another man, but she has just one mother. Dora, who is slowly succumbing to heart failure, feels abandoned by the very daughter who earlier had shouldered the worries of the entire family.

Leticia's problems are not separate or isolated from those of her country. The inability of her husband to support his family on his managerial wage, the strains that long separations bring, and the fear of death and loss that come with war—while striving to retain the improvements they have made in Nicaragua and to ensure a better future for Nicaragua's children—have affected Leticia and all those around her. Each day Leticia walks close to hope and to despair along with her country. The struggle continues. As the epitaph of Estelí's martyred poet, Leonel Rugama, reads:

Leonel Rugama
rejoiced in the promised land
in the hardest month of the planting
with no choice but the struggle
very near death
but nowhere near
the end.