

A M E R I C A N S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

S U D D E N L Y T H E P A T H opened up and Carmichael walked out of the jungle. The perpetual green twilight turned into bright afternoon. The ragged kid who'd been guiding him got excited and ran on ahead, leaving Carmichael to stand blinking at the edge of the rebel camp. He waved at the cloud of white flies around his head and tried to look harmless.

They didn't seem to be expecting him. A teenager in orange pants and a plaid shirt was pissing against a tree. He saw Carmichael and zipped himself up and made nervous little half-bows, grinning in embarrassment. Somebody else slapped at a jam box and cut off a scratchy, distorted dub tape in mid-echo.

The silence made the others turn and look. Carmichael smiled and held his hands away from his sides. "*Periodista*," he said. For Christ's sake don't shoot, I might be the *New York Times*.

From where he was he could see maybe thirty or forty guerrillas. Most of them wore a uniform of blue jeans and a khaki shirt. There were a lot of straw cowboy hats and billed caps. A few of them had leather lace-up combat boots, a lot more had Converse All-Stars or Nikes. The rest got by with rubber beach sandals or bare feet.

The clearing was a chaos of green canvas tents, sleeping bags, yellow army blankets thrown over poles, and tin cans. The cans were stacked empty around the tents or filled with water or beans or corn soaking for supper.

"Carla said she would do an interview," he told them. His Spanish wasn't great, strictly California high school, but he'd been in Mexico over a month now and he knew they could understand him if they wanted. A woman in a striped shift stared at him from the shade of a tree, both straps of the dress down, a baby at each breast. Finally a middle-aged guy in a flat Fidelista cap and graying beard took a couple of steps toward him.

"¿Como te llamas?"

"Carmichael. John Carmichael. I work for *Rolling Stone*. The magazine." He took a card out of the front pocket of his hiking shorts.

"I know of them."

"Listen, Carla sent word she'd talk to me. She sent a *correo*." He looked around for the kid but there was no sign of him. The kid was a case. He'd seen his mother raped by the *guardia* a few months back. At least that was how Carmichael read it. The kid was only eight and didn't really understand what was going on. But they killed her when they were done and now all the kid wanted was to be old enough that they'd let him have a rifle. Which would be another year or maybe less, depending on how desperate they got.

The man chewed on the inside of his cheek for a couple of seconds. He didn't seem so much reluctant as nervous. He had a hunted kind of look about him that was making Carmichael nervous too. "Okay, I'll talk to her. My

name is Faustino.”

Carmichael shook hands with him, fingers up, movement style. “¿Cubano?” he asked.

Faustino thought again. “Yes,” he said, finally.

Carmichael nodded to show it was okay with him. Maybe it was a test. The rebels liked to pretend there weren’t any Cubans or Nicaraguans in Mexico, but then Reagan liked to pretend there weren’t any U S troops here either.

Carmichael just wanted the interview. He hadn’t believed he would really get this far, and now if it went sour it was going to break his heart.

“COME WITH ME,” Faustino said. They walked uphill around the edge of the clearing. Through a stand of trees Carmichael watched an instructor in jeans and khaki with six teenage girls. The instructor was trying to get them to run up to a line, drop prone, and fire. They were having to pantomime the rifles and they kept giggling.

Faustino took him to the top of the hill and Carmichael could see the next valley and the mountains to the south, just over the border into Guatemala. The mountains were the violet-brown of old, faded photographs, the color of unreal, untouchable things. It was almost noon but there were shreds of cloud still trailing off the highest peaks.

“Beautiful, no?” Faustino said.

Carmichael nodded. He wanted to take a picture but it was too early to risk pulling out a camera. Later, maybe, if Carla was willing.

Carla sat by herself a few yards away, reading. Carmichael recognized her from the few pictures that had found their way to the States. She was short, a little heavy and round-faced by Hollywood standards, but not unattractive. She had the long nose and high forehead and reddish skin of Mayan ancestry. He squinted and made out that she was reading ex-president Portillo’s novel *Quetzalcoatl*.

“Wait here,” Faustino said, and went over to her. Carmichael couldn’t hear what they said. Faustino gave her the card and she stood up and dusted off the seat of her jeans. Then they both looked up to check the sky and Carmichael’s nervousness came back.

They shook hands and Carmichael introduced himself again. “I don’t understand,” she said. “You are with a rock and roll band?”

“A magazine,” Faustino said. “Very prominent. They have it in all the supermarkets in the United States.”

“Is this what is to become of the revolution? We are to be sold in the supermarkets?”

Apparently Faustino couldn’t tell she was kidding. Before he could break in again Carmichael said, “Rolling Stone sells only the finest revolutions. Nicaraguan, South African, Argentinean...”

He got a smile out of her. “You did an article on my husband,” she said.

“That wasn’t me personally, but yes, we did.” Her husband, Acuario, had been murdered in Mexico City back in December, during the election riots. She’d taken over his guerrilla band during the wave of outrage that followed.

Carmichael took off his backpack and got out a cassette recorder. While he

got the tape rewound and the recorder started he said, "I was afraid I was going to be too late. There's been nothing on the radio for days but reports of you being killed."

"No," she said gently. "You're still in time. Can we sit down? This is going to be painful enough."

SHE WAS A great interview. Carmichael wanted to hug her. During the bus rides and the long walk that brought him up here, he had held on to an image of the story in his mind. Not just the printed article, a headline bled across a two-page spread, the photos here, lots of white space. The story itself. It would explain not only what was happening in Mexico, but the rest of the world too, would make sense of the entire decade. Mexico as microcosm for the struggle of third world visionaries against an outmoded industrial system. They couldn't lose. As she talked it filled out in his mind, perfect, spherical.

Faustino handled the party line in his crisp, Cuban Spanish that was as easy to understand as English. Comrades in a common struggle, destiny of Latin America, that kind of thing.

Carla wanted to kick ass. Carmichael had to keep stopping her, getting her to repeat a word or phrase that got past him. She spoke Veracruzano, the Mexican equivalent of a southern accent, slurred and full of Caribbean slang.

She'd grown up in the village of Boca del Rio, just south of Vera Cruz, where the water in the bay had a permanent oily sheen. By the time school got interesting she had to drop out, going to the fish market in the city with her father, waiting outside the pool hall across the street where he pissed away what little they'd made that morning.

Sometimes she would wander over to *las portales*, the rows of open cafes on the Plaza de Armas where the tourists from the U.S. and Germany and Mexico City sat and drank beer and watched the marimba trios, one man on each end of the wooden xylophone, the third with his fish-shaped guiro and book of songs and prices, all of them in their white or yellow or pale blue guayabera shirts, two or three songs and then down to the next cafe, the tourists pale and drunken and talking loudly to each other in languages she never wanted to learn.

Acuario was a medical student at the Universidad Veracruzana. He drank at *las portales* too, but he did it to observe the enemy. Acuario was in a study group with a priest named Father Antonio who had introduced him to both Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Marx. Once he started talking to Carla he saw it as his sacred duty to raise her consciousness.

He explained to her why she instinctively hated the Northamericans, taught her Marxism-Leninism, and, Carmichael gathered, screwed her brains out in a 90-peso room in the Hotel Santillana across from the fish market.

When Acuario got kicked out of college he took Carla on the road with him. For a while the action was in Villa Hermosa, trying to run off the gringo oil companies. Then one of Acuario's med school friends shot a cop with a stolen handgun and they had to move up into the hills.

Carmichael really liked her. He could see Acuario's clay feet between the lines of her story, but Carla herself seemed like the real thing. A working class

hero, a perennial victim, and best of all a crackpot idealist.

“Acuario believed all that hippie stuff,” she said. “You know? That we are the start of a new age. A turning point, and all that. He wanted a new world where everybody could have enough to eat and clothes to wear and schools to go to and everybody could believe whatever they wanted. He was a lot better than me. I just grew up poor and mean, watching politicians getting fat off people like my father and me. I just wanted to shoot somebody. But Acuario, when he talked about all this stuff, he made me believe it too.”

“That’s great,” Carmichael said. “What about pictures? Can I take your picture?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m no Somoza, I don’t want my picture all over the place. I don’t want a personality cult. What do you think, Faustino?”

Faustino shrugged. “I don’t think it would hurt. Let the Northamericans see us as we are, simple people caught up in a great struggle.”

“Okay, but ask everybody before you take their picture. Some of them have families, where the *guardia* can get to them, you understand?”

“Sure, that’s great,” Carmichael said. He got the Nikon out of the backpack and posed her with the purple mountains behind her.

HE GOT A great shot of the *correo*, the messenger kid who’d brought him up. The kid said Carmichael should call him El Tigre, the jaguar. They all had this passion for the *nom de guerre*, that affordable little touch of glamour. Somebody loaned the kid an M-16 for the picture and just before Carmichael pushed the button he puffed up his chest and scowled. The Nikon was motor driven so Carmichael also got him cracking up afterwards.

There was a teenaged kid who called himself “Rigoberto” after the guy that killed Tacho Somoza senior. He had a paper bag full of Pepsi bottles that he took with him everywhere, hoping to find enough gasoline to make Molotov cocktails.

There was a kid in his twenties with a lot of African blood in him. He had deep brown skin and peppercorn hair that he was trying to tease into dreadlocks. They called him “Righteous.” He was the one with the jam box and the dub tape. His Veracruzano was impenetrable and Carmichael could only smile and nod and take his picture and move on.

There was a 68-year-old man with little islands of whiskers on his wrinkled face. They called him Abuelo, Grandfather. He’d joined after his granddaughter was murdered by the Army.

“How old was she?” Carmichael asked. He had the recorder going again.

“Seventeen. Now what happens to her children? Three girls and two boys, and now they have no mother?”

Carmichael nodded, thinking, Jesus Christ. Five kids at seventeen. Just when he thought he had a handle something else came along and slapped him in the face. It was the kind of thing that went beyond political solutions. What were you going to do when there were seventeen-year-olds all over the country with five kids? How were you going to feed them all? Where were you going to put them?

Easy, he thought. Have a war and kill them all off.

Two men came running out of the jungle. They had three or four rifles apiece slung over their shoulders and they carried a bundled army blanket between them like a stretcher. They spread the blanket out in the middle of the camp. Inside were another half dozen rifles and zip-lock bags full of bullets.

The rifles were Belgian-made FALs. They were clean and efficient looking, with flared pistol grips and short, straight magazines just in front of the trigger guard. On full automatic they could put out about 10 rounds a second. Carmichael had spent a couple of days in the library back in LA just reading up on weapons, from small arms to the Mi-24 Hind helicopter gunships. Supposedly Castro inherited thousands of FALs from Batista in 1959. Then he started getting Kalashnikovs from Russia and didn't need them any more. They tended to show up all over Latin America, wherever there was trouble.

It was like Christmas. Carmichael took a couple of quick pictures and then got out of the way as the whole camp converged on the guns. A short, heavysset man pushed his way through the crowd and started calling the names of the chosen. He did it from memory.

"Who is that?" Carmichael asked the old man.

"Lieutenant Ramos."

"Yeah? Who's he?"

The old man stared off at the mountains for a while. "He's from Mexico." Meaning Mexico City. "He's with the FPML. '*Enlace con este Raul Venceremos*.'" Liaison. The old man sneered when he said it. The FPML, the Popular Front for a Free Mexico, was the most vocal of the dozen or more rebel groups. Their leader called himself Raul Venceremos. The last name meant "we shall be victorious." It was something Che used to say a lot. Venceremos had brought his love of uniforms with him when he defected from the *guardia*.

"There is a radio station," the old man said. "Radio Venceremos."

"Si," Carmichael nodded. "*Lo conozco*." It was still the only reliable information anybody could get out of El Salvador.

The old man shrugged. "He calls himself for a radio station. What kind of man is that?"

"Abuelo!" Ramos shouted.

"Excuse me."

Carmichael watched the old man trade a single-shot .22 for an FAL so new the barrel was still sticky with oil. When he came back he was smiling wide enough that Carmichael could see all five of his teeth. "Here is my 'liaison.'" The old man shook the rifle happily.

When the FALs were gone Ramos handed out the trade-ins. The kid in the orange pants got the old man's .22. The barrel was held on with silver duct tape, but the kid seemed glad to have it. A gun, any gun, was what made you a real soldier.

CARMICHAEL SHOT ANOTHER roll of film and went to tell Carla goodbye. He shook her hand and said, "I need to get back with the story." If he hurried, he could make it back to the farm where he and "El Tigre" had spent the night before. He didn't want to get caught in the jungle

after dark.

"I understand," Carla said. She was restless again, and Carmichael could tell she was just as happy to see him go. "We want to get the revolution into all the supermarkets while it's still fresh. I'll send a *correo* with you."

"You don't have to," Carmichael said. "I'll be okay."

He waved from the edge of the camp and Carla and the old man and some of the others waved back. Faustino stood with his arms folded, like he was posing for a memorial statue in downtown Havana.

ABOUT TEN MINUTES out of camp he couldn't stand it any more and sat down to take some notes. There was a fine, rapid trembling in his hands. He dug a joint out of his backpack and lit up. With the joint hanging out of the corner of his mouth he covered three pages of yellow legal paper with rough impressions.

"Goddamn," he said. It was good stuff. It was career stuff. It was the kind of stuff that got picked up by AP and UPI and the goddamn *New York Times*. When he got back to Villa Hermosa he was going to buy himself a couple of drinks.

He didn't hear the planes until they were right overhead.

They filled a whole spectrum of sound, from the high whine of their turbines to the roar of their exhaust, the rattling of machine guns somewhere in the middle of it. The sound came in waves, pounding at him until it made his ears ring. Orange tracers made dotted lines from the sky to the rebel camp.

Between the joint and the suddenness of it his brain had fogged. It took long seconds for the message to get through. The planes were attacking Carla's army.

He jumped up and looked frantically around him. A ragged white contrail blossomed out of one of the planes. There was a flash on the horizon and a couple of seconds later the ground shook and finally the sound got to him, a long, shrill scream and then thunder.

Carmichael's best guess was four planes. They moved in spurts across the sky, like toys in the hands of a giant, invisible child, and it was hard to focus on them. He knew what they were, though, Italian SF-260 "Warriors." The Mexican government had bought a dozen of them with borrowed US money specifically to use against the guerrillas.

The ground shook and Carmichael realized he was still standing, exposed, in the middle of the trail. He ducked into the forest, unable to hear the crashing of leaves and branches for the noise of the planes. He huddled behind something that looked like an oak just as a squad of rebels came running down the trail, their faces vacant with terror.

Somebody screamed. A bullet hit just over Carmichael's head, spattering him with bark. The exposed white flesh of the tree was a ragged arrow, pointing at him. Tracers lit the forest like demonic fireflies. He had never realized how powerful a .50 caliber bullet was. They were like small meteors. The ground exploded where they hit.

He curled into a ball against the tree trunk, knees bumping his forehead, staring upside down at the shower of twigs and leaves sifting slowly out of the

trees. The dope or the fear turned a switch in his head and time went out of whack.

The bullets fell around him like slow metal rain. The air turned milky white. A thick fog of dust and humus and wood chips and green, shredded leaves hung motionless around him. The planes and the gunfire had all tangled together and sounded like a waterfall.

Then the bullets turned to water and ran down his back and pooled in his hair.

He sat up. The planes were gone and the pattering in the trees was rain. His legal pad was in one hand, his knapsack in the other. He put the pad away and scrambled to his feet, his bladder suddenly aching so badly that he didn't care if the planes were coming back.

HE HAD TO GO back to the clearing. There wasn't really any choice. The story had changed under him and he had to see it through.

At first he didn't think anybody was left alive. The ground smoked from w p s, white phosphorus rockets, and the trees were shattered and blackened. The rain turned to steam on the bodies, and the steam had the sharp, acetic acid smell of Carmichael's darkroom back in L A , but mixed with the smells of cordite and burned meat and wet ash.

He didn't realize how light-headed he was until he staggered and nearly went down. He grabbed at a tree and the bark was still hot to the touch. He breathed through his mouth and swallowed the bile that was trying to come up and got out his camera. His fingers were so stiff it took him two minutes to load a fresh roll of film.

He started taking pictures. Most of it was too ugly to be printed, limbs without bodies, jeans soaked purple with blood, faces burnt through to the skull. He shot some of the burns because he knew the government was going to deny using phosphorus and he wanted proof.

He got long shots without a lot of gruesome detail. Then he started on the faces, getting the ones that were relatively intact. He was looking for Carla or Faustino and instead he found Abuelo, the old man. He focused and was about to trip the shutter when the old man opened one eye.

Carmichael lowered the camera. The old man was gut shot. There was blood everywhere. His skin had the same dark, waxy look the corpses had. The rain ran like tears off his face. The two of them stared at each other for about ten years, and then the old man shut his eye again.

Carmichael put the camera away. Somebody started moaning and then the moan turned into a scream. An entire stack of bodies twitched and shook.

I'm in hell, Carmichael thought. One of those bullets hit me and I didn't even know it, and now I'm dead and in hell.

Something crawled out from under the moving stack of bodies. It was Carla. The bodies on top of her had saved her from the rockets, but she'd been shot up pretty badly. Her left foot was a bloody mess that it hurt Carmichael even to look at. How much of the rest of the blood was actually hers he couldn't say.

He took her under the arms and pulled her free. It couldn't do her any

more harm than she was already doing by struggling. She went limp in his hands and he stretched her out on some scraps of tent canvas.

“You came back.”

Carmichael stood up too fast and nearly passed out again. Faustino was staring at him, pale and shaking, holding himself up by the barrel of his rifle.

“Yeah,” Carmichael said. “Are you all right?”

“Some scratches,” Faustino said. The right hip of his jeans was charred through and his shirt was in rags. He was losing his hair, Carmichael noticed. It made him look less intimidating, now that his cap was gone. He knelt next to Carla and started doing professional-looking things, rolling back one eyelid, taking the pulse in her neck.

“Did anybody else make it?” Carmichael asked.

“Some ran away in the forest. We have a rendezvous, in case of something like this. I’ll find them tonight.” He sat up on his heels. “We have to get her out of here. There is a doctor in Ocosingo who is with us. You have to help me carry her there.”

“Me?” Carmichael said.

THE RAIN TRAILED OFF while they improvised a stretcher out of one of the cots. Carmichael wanted to look away while Faustino cut off Carla’s jeans and shirt but he couldn’t seem to do it. She wore stained cotton panties and a heavy duty 1950’s-style brassiere. There were bullet holes in her right arm and her left foot and thigh. Faustino rinsed them and squirted in some Betadine and wrapped them in bandages.

There were three others still alive, but none of them could walk. Faustino gave them morphine. “I will call the Red Cross when we get to Ocosingo,” he said. “Maybe they will get here before the *guardia*.”

Faustino cached most of the undamaged weapons in a tree well away from the clearing. He slung three *FALS* on his back and filled a knapsack with cartridges. Carmichael saw him wince when the butt of one of the rifles touched his hip.

“Unless you want to carry one...?” Faustino offered.

Carmichael shook his head.

ALL THE WAY down the mountain Carmichael asked himself what the fuck he was doing. He wanted to believe it was for the story. His nice, spherical, perfect story that had suddenly exploded over the countryside. If he stayed with Carla maybe he could make sense of it again.

The truth, he suspected, was that he really hadn’t had a choice. There was simply no way to walk away from Faustino and still be able to feel like a human being.

By the time the sun went down he was beyond thinking about anything. He couldn’t see and he kept stumbling over rocks and branches in the trail. But none of it bothered Faustino, who kept leading him on by the stretcher handles.

They took a rest break a little after dark. Carmichael got two bags of trail mix out of his pack and gave one to Faustino.

“What is this?”

“Dried fruit and nuts. It’s good.”

In a few seconds the bag came back. “Animal food,” Faustino said.

Animal? Carmichael thought. Who the fuck are you to call me an animal? He felt his face getting hot. He would have shouted at Faustino but he didn’t have the energy.

Carla started to make noises. Her head was right next to where Carmichael sat. “Oil them,” she was saying. “Keep them oiled. You have to...” Carmichael brushed the hair off her forehead, working by touch in the darkness. He couldn’t see her eyes until she opened them and they glistened faintly.

“Planes...?” she said.

“Gone,” Carmichael told her.

“How many...left...?”

“We don’t know yet. Faustino’s here. Go back to sleep.”

Her breathing changed and her eyes disappeared again. Carmichael said, “Is there any morphine?”

“No,” Faustino said.

“Looked like moonlight,” Carla said. “After the bullets hit.”

“Don’t talk,” Faustino told her.

“Saw men in the jungle. Mayas. Three of them, looking at me. Only the one in the middle wasn’t Maya. He was Northamerican. Quetzalcoatl. It was Quetzalcoatl. They were burning something in a pot, something sour smelling. They had feathers, green feathers, in their hair...”

Right, Carmichael thought. You saw the great white god. He had news for her. There weren’t any more great white gods. They wouldn’t be coming to save her, not this year, not this century.

“She’s asleep,” Faustino said. “We need to get going.”

Carmichael nodded, then realized Faustino couldn’t see him. “Okay,” he said. The trail mix had helped the pain in his stomach, but not the ones in his shoulders and neck. His feet were swollen tight against the sides of his boots and his bare legs and arms itched with mosquito bites. Faustino gave him a drink of water and he felt better for a few seconds. Then he remembered the water would probably give him dysentery and he felt very tired.

“Come on,” Faustino said, and he bent to pick up his end of the stretcher.

AT THE BOTTOM of the hill lights came out of nowhere and pinned them where they stood. “Please,” Carmichael said, squinting. He couldn’t cover his face without letting go of the stretcher. “Don’t shoot.” He couldn’t believe he’d come this far, survived so much, only to die this way. “I’m an American.”

“*Somos todos Americanos*,” a voice said.

“Northamerican,” Carmichael corrected himself. “Journalist.”

“*Calmate*,” Faustino said. “They are *compas*, *compañeros*, you understand? They are with us.”

“Oh.” Somebody took the end of the stretcher out of his hands and his arms cramped immediately, snapping the lines of pain all the way back to his

shoulder blades.

“They will find you a place to sleep,” Faustino said. There was an awkward silence. “We are grateful for your help.”

“It was nothing,” Carmichael said.

“This is true,” Faustino said. “But if you had not helped it would have been less than nothing.”

AKID LED HIM to a shack on the edge of town. It could have been “El Tigre” but he never said anything and it was too dark and Carmichael was too tired to be sure.

They gave him a hammock. He was pretty sure somebody would be sleeping on the floor so he could use it. At the moment he didn’t care.

In the morning he would cobble something together on the portable computer in his knapsack. Not the story he’d wanted to write, but a story with a lot of loose ends and unanswered questions and not much opinion in it. He would find a phone line to send it over and some way to get the film to New York. Then he would get himself back to Villa Hermosa somehow, if he had to walk, and pack his bags and get on a flight home to Los Angeles, where he belonged.

HE WOKE UP once in the middle of the night, sure he’d just heard a gunshot. He listened but there was only the sound of a stranger’s snoring from across the room.

Not for you, he told himself. It may have been for somebody, but it wasn’t for you.

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