

## Morning

It's an early March morning and Jinotega is stirring. A summer sun crests the eastern mountains. There are few clouds today and the mists burn off quickly. The sky stretches between the mountain's green summits like a blue, big top circus tent. The morning feels brand new, like something never before seen. I want to be out in it.

At the Colegio Simón Bolívar, children gather on a blacktop outside the one-story classroom buildings. A man in running pants and a khaki baseball cap holds a stopwatch at the other end of the pavement. He orders the children to line up for the 10-meter dash. Teachers gather under the eaves of the exterior corridors sipping coffee and chatting. The boys align themselves on one side and the girls on the other. There are more girls than boys because many boys are out working. More *córdobas* can be made shining shoes than reading books, or so goes the common logic in a city still uncomfortable calling itself a city, the hub of a nation's agriculture and all the farmland traditions that entails.

The man with the whistle directs the girls to take their marks and race forward one by one as he works the stopwatch. The first girl struts to the line, arms restless with the thrill of the spotlight. At the whistle's trill, she races down the course – not too fast; a dignified pace – while the other girls scream to cheer her on. After about nine meters, she runs out of steam and tumbles exhausted into her coach at the finish line. The rest follow. One girl slows in front of the other children, awaiting cheers that don't come. Another enjoys the pose of taking her mark so much that she hesitates before coming out of it.

The boys pay no attention. Instead, they rehearse wrestling moves learned from television, punching and kicking the air with exaggeration. A smaller boy stands back watching. His arms hang useless at his sides. Then his eyes alight and he stretches both arms severely erect in front of him, hands up, palms facing forward. He stares urgently at the others who turn to see. They catch on faster than I that he is casting a spell. His peers retaliate with their own warlock poses, and in an instant, the full-contact wrestling becomes a tense-postured staring contest (thus favoring the wise, smaller child). From across the blacktop, another boy leaps into the circle, flinging his right arm forward, palm turned skyward and middle finger retracted. The dynamic once again re-configures, this time around Spiderman.

Across the street, María Úbeda Santos waters her lawn. It is one of the few lawns in Jinotega and stretches the better part of two meters along the boulevard. Her hand, coarse as sea coral, holds the hose out in front of her hunched frame. She waters every morning, she tells me. Not just to maintain the grass, but also to listen to the clamor of the kids across the way.

“It keeps me young,” she says.

“And on the weekends?” I ask.

“That's when I age.”

The streets fill slowly with leisurely pedestrian traffic. There is no rush hour here. Why rush? Each day unfolds itself in time. Two young men in pinstripe shirts and navy slacks lean beneath the canopy of a corner store dunking *pan dulce* into their coffee and watching the morning pass. Late-arriving schoolchildren march along the sidewalks in white-collared shirts and black-soled shoes, finishing off the last remnants of a green mango or a sweet breakfast roll.

Agosto González García stands in the gated entrance to his Castillian-style home, greeting old friends and neighbors as they go by. His face is spotted, like those of many fair-skinned, elder Nicaraguans who've spent their lives in the tropical sun. Around his neck is a cross on a thin gold chain, reflecting the same sunlight as the silver caps on his front teeth. His is one of the rare upper-

class homes of Jinotega, all of which are shrunk back from the street, at once protective and modest of their wealth. The colorful Spanish tile roof caps the concrete exterior like a Lewis Carroll mushroom, and a garden of colorful hydrangeas and wildflowers adds warmth and vibrancy to the iron-encircled compound. Agosto built the home upon returning to the town of his birth after 12 years in San Francisco, California. He fled there illegally after the war ended in the early 1990s. It was a time, he says, when he felt confused and angry. In San Francisco, the college educated, army-trained medic Agosto found work cleaning carpets for \$6.50 an hour. It was the most money he'd ever made. He worked 14-hour days, six days a week and built a life for himself and his family. He even learned to speak some English.

"Is beautiful, San Francisco," he says. "I only come back with my wife because my children are married."

Now he runs a small café near the Parque Central and spends most days withdrawn from the world inside his home, save for mornings when he stands in the gateway hoping that someone to talk with will pass by.

Up and down the streets, workers and storekeepers prepare for the day. Milkmen urge their mules forward heaving tin milk jugs over the agitating stone streets. Fruit vendors set up their stands in what shade they can find and begin peeling and bagging mangos, oranges, watermelon, *jocote*, and pineapples. Young boys stand behind card tables stocked with gum and candies, cream-filled cookies and fruit-flavored lollipops. Since no one buys this early, they talk and tussle among themselves about triumphs on the fútbol fields and defeats in the dating circles. On nearly every corner stands a withered old man in a collared shirt and a cowboy hat, staring nostalgically – or forgetfully – into the streetscape.

Here the world is local. Every neighborhood has a handful of *tiendas* stocked with rice and bean sacks, varying cuts and textures of penny-change breads in plastic jars, cereal and soda pop, milk, cream, sugar, and eggs. It's the immediate needs store where you can send the kids to get that missing ingredient or an after-dinner treat. The owner is your neighbor, often your friend. When you pick up your onions and cabbage you might ask how her mother is feeling, or if he noticed the change in the weather. Sometimes you're low on cash, but they understand and wave their hands and say "mañana." Every neighborhood has a fruit stand, as well, where a young girl sits batting flies away from bins filled with mangos, oranges, tangerines, papayas, bananas, and melons. In the late afternoon, portable grills fill the streets with the smells of sizzling beef and pork. Women in aprons prepare fried *enchiladas*, *papa rellena*, and *taquitos*, all served with a cabbage salad of the kind that every tourist guidebook warns you against eating.

Along the highway and near the market are the tradesmen: carpenters and ironworkers, mechanics and hardware vendors. Their workshops are dark and open to the street. The clang of their profession spills out and melds into the collective orchestra of the town: the blunt toll of hammers on iron, and the sporadic shriek of sparks flying off the sanding belts.

Two bulbous white domes rise from the center of town and crown the great cathedral. Beneath them the pallid face of the church is peaceful in the morning sunlight, dwarfing the narrow spruces that line the sidewalk out front. In the cathedral's shadow, the Parque Central is a den of tranquil morning: trees rise up on trunks thick and gray like the legs of elephants; hedgerows lend a labyrinth feel, and you could get pleasantly lost in here.

On the park's southern perimeter, a line of shoe shiners is at work. One of them is José Miguel, a 9-year-old with a shaved head and a faded red Michael Jordan basketball jersey.<sup>1</sup> A customer steps up and places his boot on the wooden shoeshine box. José Miguel straddles the box and begins to scoop polish with his fingers from a tin he shares with the shiner next to him. *Lustradores*, they're called in Spanish, as in those who make luster. José Miguel wipes black polish around the leather and takes out a rag from the back of his shorts. He works quickly and expertly, coddling every inch of leather in quick bursts of cloth. Next, he brushes the soles down with oil and ultimately brushes the boot surface into a perfect shine.

"How many days do you do this?" I ask.

"Every day," he replies.

"Is it good money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Like 50."<sup>2</sup>

"Is it hard work?"

"No, it's easy."

Peaceful are the barbershops. Inside *Barbería La Colección* there's no one cutting hair when I walk by. The customers sit in chairs set along walls covered with posters of bikini-clad women in seductive poses. They read the sports pages. No one seems concerned about the absence of a barber. I imagine they'll pass a happy day that way. Perhaps around lunchtime someone will make an enchilada run just 10 steps up the street; or purchase oranges from a passing vendor.

The stuttering pace of Jinotega seems to facilitate labeling it a lazy town (some ambitious locals do). But instead it's a town that understands the limitations of hurry. Jinotegans know that you can spend your life running and never get anywhere. So, instead, they hang on to where they are. They hang on to what they know and to what they have. That way they are always somewhere and isn't there a sensibility in that? Is it lazy to sit out in front of your home all day watching the world go by when a few sales of fruit earn you enough to see tomorrow? Like the girls languidly making their way down the course for the 10-meter dash at Colegio Simón Bolívar – what is waiting at the end of the race that could make it worth sprinting for?

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<sup>1</sup> In every country I visited, Michael Jordan was the first NBA star anyone ever brought up (save for Argentina). When I asked people if they watched NBA basketball, they'd say: "I used to. But not since Michael Jordan played."

<sup>2</sup> Fifty córdobas is not quite \$3 (U.S.) per day.