

HIDDEN IMPACT

By Charles B. Neff

ONE

The forward door of our Atlantic Airlines flight swung out and humidity leaked in off the tropical runway. Managua, Nicaragua, same old oven. At the top of the mobile stairs, my whole body began to sweat.

Overhead a big sign grabbed my attention: The Augusto Sandino International Airport. Now that was a change. In 1972, my last time here, the Somosas, father and sons, were nearing the end of their three and a half decades as dictators of Nicaragua; and Sandino, hero of the rebel Sandinistas, didn't have his name on anything.

I stepped down to the shimmering tarred apron, and mid-afternoon heat rose through my shoes as I walked across. A squat terminal was larger than the one I left thirty-two years ago, and marginally more modern. But it was still Nicaragua, with a few modern touches. Sharp, musty smells hadn't changed, the accumulated mixed odors of human passage. Not a hint of cleansers or disinfectants. I went into the men's room to find there were doors on the stalls now, but most had broken hinges.

Bored khaki-clad customs men gave my large bag and small day pack a cursory check. The immigration officer looked at the photograph in my passport, then at me.

“Señor James Nordberg, resident of Maine, United States?”

“Yes.”

“You plan to stay in Nicaragua how long?”

“Approximately six weeks.”

It was mid June, so my 90-day tourist card was good until the middle of September 2004. I answered no to the firearms, drugs, tobacco, and liquor questions and went on my way. In front of the airport, I climbed into a taxi for the twenty-minute ride into the city center.

Out the window, thrown-together cement structures multiplied, along the road and up the hillsides. The same cluttered hodge-podge of humanity I'd seen lots of places, as people from the country rushed to the big cities for jobs and security. Children were everywhere,

squatting along the road or jumping from bridges into the river, surrounding the car to sell blue plastic bags of water whenever we stopped. Managua had reached a million people, twice as large as when I left. The devastation of the huge 1972 earthquake still showed. Unfilled gaps made the city feel empty, despite its teeming crowds.

I checked into the Hotel del Parque, the same place I used to stay when the Peace Corps held meetings of Volunteers. Most of this hotel had survived the quake, though one part ended in a blank wall, with old entrances cemented over. My room was shabby but clean, large enough to have its own sink, both plusses.

It had been a long day of travel: a drive to Bangor, connecting flights to Boston, Miami and Managua. Give me a decent meal and I'd be ready for a quiet evening and an early turn-in.

I'd only been there a couple of hours, my brain adjusting to Spanish, so I almost didn't register the words in English that reached me from across the open courtyard.

"Hello. Jim Nordberg? Got a minute?"

He had short brown hair receding from his forehead. Medium height, early forties and fit, in a dark blue suit. No shoulder padding, the Ivy League look. His face was creased by a grin of recognition. Strange, because I'd never seen the man before.

His outstretched hand reached me, cheery voice out front.

"Marc Dillon. I've been asked to pass an invitation to you."

I stayed where I was, ignoring the handshake, and he toned down the glad-hand act.

"An old friend wants to invite you to breakfast tomorrow morning. I work for him."

"An old friend?"

My mind sorted through a short list of Nicaraguans who might still have known me. One of the Fuentes family? Unlikely.

"Kris Behr."

Kris Behr? Not good news and definitely no longer a friend.

There we were, back in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, him the rich high school hot shot and scratch golfer; me, an ex-farm boy, new to the city and working for his father's farm equipment business. We didn't seem to have much in common; but after a while at Behr Farm Equipment, we got along better than I expected we would.

Kris was a canny judge of human nature and knew how to talk people into getting what he wanted. By contrast, I was pretty blunt and impatient. But Kris seemed to appreciate how good I was around machinery, and that I didn't need a lot of talk to communicate with the other workers. They trusted me in a way that they never could have trusted the boss's son. For a while there, Kris and I were almost like friends.

I decided to join the Peace Corps, and then Kris did the same. We were together during training; but once in Nicaragua, I went to the countryside and he stayed in Managua. I thought I was in the real Nicaragua while he had just traded one country club for another.

In later years, I did overseas development work, and he went from congressional aide to a place on the National Security Council. I got in trouble, asked for his help, and he waffled, leaving me hanging. I was out of a job, tried consulting, hated it and went off to Maine to live on my savings, most of them gone by now. Meanwhile, he got even richer as head of his own company.

Coming back to Dillon's expectant face, I had no reason to see Kris again, and sure didn't want to. But if he was here in Managua, chances are I couldn't avoid him. Might as well get it over with.

"Where, what time?"

Dillon dropped the courtesy act completely, voice sharpening.

"Here in the restaurant, 8:30 am. Plenty of time for a chat before you take the plane to La Parada. By the way, I'll be on the same flight."

With that, he left, not bothering to offer his hand again.

If Kris Behr wanted to see me, something important must be on his mind. Otherwise he wouldn't give me the time of day. How did he know I was coming to Nicaragua? Someone must have told him, and that couldn't be an accident.

The compressed air around me felt like a superheated cloud before a tropical storm. Nicaragua was supposed to be peaceful after years of conflict and death. Maybe someone got the peaceful part wrong. I'd hardly arrived for a simple school construction project and already old suspicions were raising their heads again, just when I thought I'd put them to bed for good.

TWO

Best to be presentable for breakfast with Kris. I added a dark blue tie to my chambray shirt and khakis and checked myself in the full-length mirror.

The body had changed the least, lean and tall. There were times when that hadn't been the case; lethargy, drinking, and what I later realized was depression added nearly twenty pounds over the years. But daily running and rowing in Maine took them off. Hair, still full, looked more blond than gray, changing gradually. Crinkles around the eyes and lines on the forehead were maybe fewer than a person would expect in a fifty-one year old.

The eyes were another matter. Mirrors of the soul, my Russian friends liked to say. And how did that soul look? Worldly-wise, but wary? Beaten down? Not quite, though I wondered whether an acute observer would see disappointment below the surface. People used to comment on the optimism in those blue eyes.

Confidence, that old stand-by? Frankly, I didn't know and wished I did. It would be the vital ingredient for any meeting with Kris Behr. Like him or loath him, I had to admit that Kris was undeniably in a position to help me—or hurt me.

He was already seated at a corner table in the restaurant, an adornment to the colonial décor, tan tropical suit and crimson tie matching the brocade of the chairs. I could hear the dining room's old air conditioner grinding out barely cool air.

He rose to greet me, on his face a smile with enough sincerity to get by. He gripped my hand firmly.

“Well, well. So we finally meet again.”

“How are you, Kris?”

I watched as he ordered for both of us. Before finishing, Kris established that our waiter was the son of a man who had served him in this same dining room years before. The man hadn't lost his touch.

Everything else matched. Graying hair, expensively cut. A tanned face that age had treated gently, or was the product of the best care that money could buy. Gray eyes that locked on the object of immediate attention, demanding attention in return.

He got right down to business.

“Let’s dispose of any remaining misunderstandings so I can get to the things I want to talk to you about.”

Kris, always so sure of himself, wanted to clear something up? That was a first.

“We both know you got into some unfortunate trouble in Russia. It was frankly hard to determine how much of what happened was beyond your control and how much was your responsibility.”

How smooth. I thought back to our one telephone conversation ten years ago, and to the many hours I had spent on an old leather couch in a State Department anteroom, waiting to speak to an unavailable Mr. Behr.

I had written a memo, calling attention to the fact that some “new Russians” had been using a contract with the Agency for International Development, my employer, to enrich themselves. Furthermore, they had done so with the help of a US accounting firm on the AID payroll. I was still convinced that Kris knew my facts were right.

Kris was rushing, as if speed could mend fences.

“I got your letter asking for my help. I’m sure you know that. And we did talk, so you had a chance to make your case.”

I saw a flicker of discomfort. Maybe he remembered that it took me five tries and an additional three days of waiting for a callback before he finally picked up the phone.

He cranked up reasonableness.

“If I hadn’t intervened, you would have lost your job right then. You’ll just have to believe me on that.”

My immediate thought was that I didn’t believe it then and why should I now? Maybe he sensed that. He went on, working hard to convince me.

“I personally saw to it that the reprimand in your dossier was toned down. It was the best I could do. Rwanda was no paradise, but at least you continued to get a paycheck.”

Grudgingly, I conceded that someone had to have interceded in my case; and it might possibly have been Kris. He apparently thought he had said enough. Without segue, he switched the topic and I got the impression that I was about to find out the real reason why I had been invited to breakfast.

Kris looked at me cautiously. When he began again, I heard hesitation, and sensed—could it be?—embarrassment.

“You know of the plane crash in the late eighties near La Parada?”

La Parada, the village where I had worked in the Peace Corps. Where I was heading again. I’d read about the crash when it happened, and about the discovery of the dead pilot.

He paused long enough for me to give a nod.

“I was with the National Security Council at the time and played a peripheral part in efforts to continue support to the Contras.”

The Contras were counter-revolutionaries who had fought the Sandinistas, and who had been called freedom fighters by conservative Americans. I nodded again, asking myself where all this was going. Kris continued.

“Because we worked in secret, information didn’t always get to the right people and there were too many players making things up as they went along. Someone had to keep track. So I did. I collected messages and documents, and each night I recorded the day’s events in a diary I kept at my home. There wasn’t anything in it for me, this extra work, but I could see that if an inquiry were ever held, we might need a reliable source of facts.”

Don’t give me that. You never do anything without a potential payoff somewhere down the line. Hedging your bets, probably.

“Then I did something stupid. Many times I’ve gone over it in my mind, and I still can find no explanation other than the fact that I was working under extreme time pressure. The alternative explanation is plain old overconfidence. Any way you slice it, I made a mistake.”

I was intrigued and surprised at hearing Kris Behr, the lofty successful Kris Behr, admitting that he’d made a mistake.

He actually sighed. Not loud, but enough so it was audible.

“We arranged a final meeting on a plan to ship the needed equipment by private plane. The CIA provided a pilot and private contractor, Don Hemmings, introduced to me as trustworthy and fully cleared. He was at the meeting. So was a CIA representative and an officer on loan from the Pentagon, who was our informal chief of operations.”

Kris was addressing his right hand, as if his coffee spoon was a microphone. Then he set the spoon on the table and looked firmly at me.

“I wrote my diary in a cheap spiral notebook and usually kept it in a locked drawer. When I was in a hurry, I kept it in a leather binder with similar-looking books on my desk.”

He smiled ruefully.

“That’s where the diary was during our meeting. We moved about my apartment in the course of it. When I sat down afterwards to make notes, I discovered the diary was gone. I looked for it everywhere. I was stunned, then angry, then worried. Worst case scenario, would it find its way to the press? It didn’t occur to me right away that Hemmings might have stolen the diary.”

“And you say Hemmings was hired by the CIA?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Just checking my memory.”

Kris took a sip of coffee and straightened.

“I won’t bore you with what happened. I had to be discreet. By process of elimination, I concluded that Hemmings most likely stole the diary, and probably had it with him when his plane went down.”

He fixed me with a CEO look. He must look like this at the head of a long table surrounded by his staff.

“Okay, that’s it. Where do you fit in? It’s very simple. After the initial rumors died out years ago, there are now new rumors that something might have been found in the plane wreck and someone knows where it is. It could be the diary. Its appearance now could be inconvenient, even damaging to me. If it’s out there, I want you to find that diary, and I want it returned to me. I would expect your full loyalty in giving it only to me. I want exclusively any and all information relating to the diary, its past history and present disposition, how and from whom you got it, and what you had to do to get it. I want none of that information to channel back through Nicaraguan or American private individuals or government representatives, and I certainly don’t want any of it to reach the media. Do you think you can handle that?”

One thing didn’t make sense.

“Why me?”

Kris hadn’t expected that. Quickly he replaced fleeting surprise with a judicious nod.

“None of my options are optimal. Let’s just say you’re the best one available right here and now. Besides, I don’t expect you to help me out of good will. I’m prepared to make an offer that should be of interest—or should I say, financial importance?—to you.”

At least he didn't try the old-buddy approach. Must have known it wouldn't wash. But he knew about my almost-empty bank account.

“What's the offer?”

He looked at his watch.

“No time for that now. My assistant, Marc Dillon, will be traveling with you today to La Parada. He'll give you details.”

Okay, so there it was, the upper hand poised to push me around. I didn't want any part of this—involvement with Kris, with the past, with other peoples' schemes. I had signed on to swing a hammer. Nothing more. But that was for me to know. Not him. I'd back out later.

He stood and offered his hand. I saw no reason not to return the perfunctory courtesy. A moment later, he was waving at the waiter, heading out the door to his waiting car.

I moved to the door in time to see the car's dust merge with the early morning haze, promising a scorching day ahead. But I had a cold feeling. Kris Behr had let me down before, so somewhere up ahead there was a good chance I'd crash into something I wouldn't see until too late.

THREE

Dillon, wearing a tan suit, stood by a two-engine yellow Cessna, already fired up. A portly Latino, sweating in a dark suit too heavy for the noon heat, spoke to him in barely decipherable English. As I approached, the Latino looked up and Dillon turned.

“Hello again, Jim. Meet Hector Ibañez from Managua.”

Ibañez mumbled a greeting in English as he extended a beefy, moist hand. I returned the greeting in Spanish.

Dillon continued in English.

“Hector’s traveling with me to look at an investment project in La Parada. Bananas. I want to tell you more about that later, and about how you fit in. We can talk when we get there.”

I told him that was fine with me, and took my bags to the rear of the plane where a handler loaded them into the luggage compartment.

Above the noise of the engines, I could barely make out a conversation in Spanish on the other side of the tail assembly.

“This crate looks like a flying banana.”

“How appropriate.”

Must have been Ibañez and the pilot.

We settled into opposite seats, Dillon and Ibañez facing me. The noise was loud enough to rule out conversation. Dillon worked on a laptop for most of our hour and a half flight. Ibañez pretended to read a newspaper, though I suspected from the new sweat on his face that he was afraid of flying.

When we hit a big air pocket, Ibañez crushed his newspaper in terror. Dillon looked at him briefly before returning to his spreadsheets. For a moment, I thought I saw a glimmer of contempt on his face, but it disappeared so quickly I couldn’t be sure.

They were an odd couple. Dillon’s appearance fit his role as assistant to a wealthy businessman. Ibañez would have looked out of place in any office, except maybe a precinct house. If I had had to bet, I’d have said Ibañez was a cop. So what was he doing with Dillon?

Out the window, I'd watched the city give way to low, flat coastal plains, then rising hills and scraggly forest. Occasionally I made out the Pan American Highway running north and a smaller road that cut west over low mountains. Cramped as the plane cabin was, I was grateful to be spared ten hours in a car over roads that got worse as the journey progressed.

Then we were in thin clouds, descending the eastern slope of the mountains. All I could see was the roof of a forest that was a big green carpet to the side and front of our flight path. Almost imperceptibly the trees became sparser, defining the outer spread of La Parada; then they were gone entirely as a short landing strip jumped up at us. I felt the jolt of first touchdown. Then back up, and a long airborne bounce before we were finally down, rolling fast along a dirt runway. The pilot reversed engines, slowed and taxied back to the other end of the strip.

A knot of figures stood near a rickety airfield shack with walls and roof of rusted metal sheeting. Most were curious villagers. One taller figure, his light hair visible even from the distance, was clearly an outsider, probably the contractor who was going to run our construction project.

At the shack we exited stiffly, stretching and straightening after our confinement. Ibañez walked directly to a sharp-featured, slightly built man in a short-sleeved khaki shirt, his black hair meticulously slicked back. They exchanged curt greetings by a jeep parked near the shack.

Dillon hung behind.

"Those guys are in a rush. Let's have our talk after we get settled. Okay? I'll be with Ibañez and that other man, Suarez, in the biggest building in town. Can't miss it. Anyway, I'll let you know."

I agreed, and watched him join the other two and drive off.

A tall figure with lank reddish hair walked toward me, the outsider I saw among the villagers. Seen closer, he looked soft: late forties or early fifties, close to my age. Thin arms, sun-reddened pale skin, about fifteen pounds overweight.

He offered his hand.

"I trust that you're Jim Nordberg. I'm David Porter. Hope the flight wasn't too bad."

I was startled and not at all happy. Porter, the lawyer from St. Paul who ran the La Parada project? The guy I had spoken to on the phone? I'd come all the way down here to

work with a hammer swinger and got a pencil pusher instead? For this I had put out my own money?

“Yeah, I’m Jim. I thought you weren’t coming down here, Dave.”

Porter didn’t pay attention to my tone.

“David, usually. You’re right. That was my intention. But sometimes the best laid plans and all that. The contractor I told you about pulled out at the last minute. So I decided to come myself. Anyway, I hadn’t been down here for three years.”

An explanation, maybe, but not enough to make me feel any better.

“So what have you got lined up for us, Dave?”

Porter smiled and continued neutrally.

“I’ve got a crew of three villagers for the school addition project, and two other volunteers.”

I suppressed a sarcastic rejoinder. What good would it have done?

Porter and I got my bags and he pointed beyond the surrounding trees.

“I hope you don’t mind the walk. We’re supposed to have use of a vehicle, but no one seems to know where it is for the moment.”

A road, little more than one lane wide, led away from the airstrip. Sections of oiled surface alternated with potholes of various sizes. Shoulders were overgrown and branches extended over the road.

I looked at Porter, who was slowing under the weight of my large bag.

“How far is it, anyway? There wasn’t any airstrip then.”

“About a mile.”

We switched bags, moving faster, and soon reached an area where the vegetation receded and the larger trees were gone. I estimated about twenty acres.

Porter nodded at the different-looking terrain.

“Part of one of the old banana plantations. I think it must have been after you left that the smaller local fields were expanded, first by big growers and later, with Soviet aid, by the leftist Sandinista government. Eventually the Sandinistas gave up on this part of the country. You’ll see a lot of empty fields like this in all directions.”

Something else was on my mind.

“Wasn’t it around here somewhere that a plane went down in the late eighties?”

Porter looked left.

“Not right here. More like two kilometers down the main road and back into the forest. I’m told that it caused quite a commotion at the time.”

The airstrip spur met the larger road to Managua that was visible on our left for a hundred yards before it curved into the forest. I was more interested in the view to the right. The road sloped down gently for a quarter of a mile and ended at the village of La Parada. A three-story building at the farther outskirts and a water tower next to it had changed the silhouette I remembered.

“What’s that big building?”

“Originally the headquarters of the banana corporation, then used by the militia or military forces of whoever controlled the region at the time. Mostly it’s been empty over the last few years.”

Beyond those visible additions, the village looked much the same. A huddled cluster of two- and three-room concrete-block houses. A row of small stores sharing common walls along the three-block-long main street. A service station with a number of broken down vehicles scattered behind it. A clinic adjoining the schoolhouse, where signs of the new construction are visible; and, just beyond it, the Catholic church.

Scattered around the village were small fields of stubby local bananas, of stunted corn and yucca. Ramshackle structures for animals stood on a few of the fields.

What struck me most were not minor changes, but simply the fact that the village was still there, an indomitable survivor, looking more, rather than less, like the place I had known before. I was surprised how glad I was to see it. But my eye paused on the new big building and I pictured Dillon, Ibañez and Suarez in it. Especially Suarez. I realized then what his posture and bearing had said to me. If Ibañez was a cop, Suarez was a soldier.