

## 1986

### Tony Dajer

“Oh my.”

Sara stopped reading, as she always did when she came to a sentence with bite. Outside, in the New Mexico desert night, an occasional boulder threw itself into my feeble headlights, then rolled away again into shadow.

Mary Lee Settle’s essay, London 1944, was the kind of indulgence we allowed ourselves only when there wasn’t another soul for a hundred miles. Sara leaned against me to stay inside the cone of car-light.

“I lay down behind the safe broad backs of Solo and Saroyan, drank my two weeks’ ration of milk in a room that reeked of gin and cigarettes, and went to sleep deeply for the first time since the buzz bombs had started.” Sara turned the pages briskly, with the same wrist pivot she applied to suturing obstetrical tears. She was back from El Salvador again, come to find me in New Mexico, where I had come to ground after my own year in Nicaragua.

“You’re too skinny,” I’d said.

She’d waved that off. “I’ll eat when my stomach starts working again.”

Long brown hair pulled sharply back, oversized glasses framing hazel eyes that appeared perpetually preoccupied: to someone who didn’t know her, she might have seemed above food and other indulgences. I had thought so when I met her, a few months before we started residency. She was the speaker at a living room fundraiser. We’d had a staircase introduction. You’ve been in Nicaragua? And now? University of Washington? Oh. Then she was gone, up front to speak about her time in the refugee camp, trying to buffer it all behind a smart brown suit. But her hands gave her away. They always did, refusing to stay clasped in front of her, rising to karate-chop a point home and only for a moment allowing themselves to be pressed together prayer-like under her chin. When she finished speaking, a long count passed before the room buzzed again.

Then we were interns, together.

“Nothing makes me happier than pulling on a pair of surgical gloves.” That, or McGrath or Pound or Whitman. But poetry time was short. It was 1983; El Salvador and Nicaragua were aflame, and we had both declared Op-Ed war on Reagan. I spewed; she made it respectable. And there was a little time for Hemingway and wide-bodied bottles of white.

Internship ended on a sailboat in Puget Sound. Everyone else had brought a bathing suit. Not Sara. Nothing for it, though: in she went, leaving a permanent snapshot in my mind of white skirts and running feet suspended over deep blue water.

Two more years of residency pinned her down. The refugee camps kept filling, but we weren't real doctors yet.

Finally we were licensed and accredited and done, though Central America would not be kind to the notion of 'real doctors.'

The car's headlights kept stabbing valiantly into the night. Sara put Mary Lee Settle down.

"You know, I still hear gunfire when I try to sleep. They were strafing San Salvador block by block." Her voice went monotone, but a hand came up in the semi-darkness to help her feel her way. "The helicopter fire was so thick it felt like the air was being blasted into another dimension. A Red Cross worker from the next barrio came running over. 'You must come!' he yelled. 'People are exsanguinating in the streets!'

"I didn't go. What good is a dead doctor? I was right – I know I was. But he gave me his back. Probably would've spit if his mouth hadn't been so dry from fear. All he knows is, I didn't go."

We finally found a motel. On the bed, Sara lay down behind my back and, I think, went to sleep. Deeply, I hoped.