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Building Civil Society in the Context of Long-Term Violence and Displacement:

Lessons from Bogotá, Colombia

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Abstract

The last five years has seen a sharp decline in political violence in Colombia. Former President Alvaro Uribe is credited for ending the widespread kidnappings, extortion and political terrorism of the *Fuerzas Armadas de Revolucion de Colombia* (FARC), and the first two years under President Manuel Miguel Santos look promising. Between 2002 and 2011, the murder rate halved, in large part due to the negotiated disarmament of Colombia's largest paramilitary force: the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). There is new-born optimism in Colombia; a sense of victory. I am reluctant to come to this conclusion. Unfortunately, this sense of victory may be premature.

Colombia's armed conflict has resulted in the second largest internally displaced population in the world behind only Rwanda, and paramilitaries continue to inflict harm and suffering throughout Colombia. Lacking the resources to go anywhere else, many of the displaced migrate to Colombia's urban centers of Santiago de Cali, Medellín, and Bogotá.

Violent crime, poverty and suspicion run rampant in these neighborhoods. Although the political conflict has subsided, decades of political violence have scarred the Colombian consciousness with a tangible sense of fear, paralyzing individual and collective agency, and more broadly, threatening prospects for a stable Colombian democracy. Colombian refugees face a long road of struggle and hardship. It is only recently that we see Colombians beginning to reconstruct civil society. Lingering problems of marginality and unresolved justice remain, however.

The purpose of this thesis is to tell the story of rebuilding civil society in Colombia. The approach, which combines research and narrative, is nontraditional. Part I synthesizes a

combination of field interviews, ethnographic observation, peer reviewed journals, Colombian newspaper articles, as well as other sources. Part II, a novella, follows Paola Vasquez and the cause, and consequence of her displacement. The approach is intended to humanize, for both the author and the reader, the decay and rebirth of civil society in Colombia.

Part I traces the origin and nature of the Colombian internal conflict, arguing that violence is a product of top-down coercion designed to belittle individual and collective agency. Such a process carries the demise of civil society. The gradual rebirth of civil society epitomizes the work of Fundación Laudes Infantis, the organization where I volunteered for six weeks between January and March of 2011. Chapter 2 reviews the organization's methodology, patterns of success, and prospects for long-term gain.

Part II comprises the narrative aspect of my thesis. Chapter 3 is a fictionalized representation of the perpetrators and victims of the May 22, 2006 Jamundí massacre. The chapter follows the lives of ex-Colombian Senator, Alvaro Garcia Romero, currently serving a 40 year jail sentence in Colombia for his involvement in multiple massacres, and protagonist Paola Vasquez, wife of a police officer murdered in Jamundí. Chapter Four follows Vasquez' displacement to Ciudad Bolivar and examines the challenges of marginalization she experiences. She migrates to the outskirts of Bogota, works hard for hardly anything in the informal economy, experiences street violence and family disintegration. Eventually, she is able to connect with Jackie Moreno, founder of the development NGO Laudes Infantis. Gradually, she begins to reestablish her social network, her piece of a civil society.

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Chapter 1: An Introductory Examination of Violence and its Consequences in Colombia.

Top-down violence is synonymous with state building in Latin America. Violence was central to Conquest and continues as a characteristic of state control. “The long-term consequences of violence, repression and arbitrariness are recurrent features of the Latin American political landscape” (Koonings and Krujit 1). Violent conflict over the access to land, the church, and worker’s rights began at the Conquest and continue to the present day in Colombia.

“The modern period of Colombia has been a bloody one marked by almost continuous political violence. The 20th century began in violence as landless peasants, joined by their reformist allies, battled the landowning oligarchies backed by the conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church. These early struggles form the backdrop to today’s civil war in Colombia.” (Bauman 1).

In the spring of 1928, workers of the United Fruit Company near Santa Marta, Colombia, went on strike protesting poor working conditions. The United Fruit Company called on the Colombian military to resolve the problem. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men, women and children were massacred by state forces (Wolf 161); Note the pattern, because at no time in Colombia’s history, has peaceful protest or resistance, not been met with repressive counter-resistance.

The massacre prompted support for the Liberal Party and reform in the following decades, reversed by the assassination in 1948 of the land reform leader Jorge Gaitan, resulting in insurrection in Bogota, and another decade of bloody rural conflict known as “La Violencia,” which would leave close to 200,000 dead before ending in 1958 with an agreement between the

Liberal Party and the Conservative Party to alternate terms in office of the presidency (Hanratty and Meditz).

The Rise and Fall of the FARC

“La Violencia” left a legacy of brutal conflict between the peasant militias and landowner paramilitaries. One of the militias, led by Pedro Antonio Marin (alias Manuel Marulanda) in the Valle de Cauca, about 200 km northeast of Bogota, aligned with the *Partido Comunista de Colombia (PCC)* and became known as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)*, adding “*Ejército del Pueblo*” to their name years later (Dudley and McDermott 1).

In the 1970s and 1980s the FARC began collecting taxes from marijuana and cocoa growers and cocaine laboratories, extorting businesses, and kidnapping for ransom. By the 1990s the government, weakened by the continuing terrorism, had agreed to prisoner swaps and ceded to the FARC areas in southern Colombia nearly the size of Switzerland. In 2002 the FARC kidnapped the Green Party candidates for president and vice president, Ingrid Betancourt and Clara Rojas, who became bargaining chips in continuing negotiations with the government (1).

The rise of the FARC and other leftist guerilla groups early on drew the ire of groups that would decide the fate of Colombia for years: 1) Colombia’s landed interest, 2) drug traffickers, and 3) The United States.

In 1962, Special Forces General William S. Yarborough traveled to Colombia to assess the potential of a communist uprising. Consider the following quote, where he suggests creating informal armies designed to sabotage, through any means necessary, leftist interests.

"A concerted country team effort should be made now to select civilian and military personnel for clandestine training... This structure should be used to pressure toward reforms known to be needed, perform counter-agent and counter-propaganda functions and as necessary execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents. It should be backed by the United States" (Chomsky 69).

In 1965, the Colombian congress passed Decree 3398, authorizing private citizens to organize personal militaries and carry automatic weapons. Diverse elite interest, including cattle ranchers, agribusiness, emerald barons, and narco-traffickers, created or collaborated with private armies to launch a counteroffensive against emerging leftist guerillas (Richani 104).

The largest and most unified paramilitary force was formed by Raul and Jose Castaño, collaborators of the former drug trafficker Pablo Escobar. The private army of the Castaños, which would eventually organize in 1997 into the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)*, targeted FARC and sympathizers, broadly defined to include union representatives, small landowners and indigenous leaders.

Richani emphasizes the cooperation between the military and private armies: "By and large, the military units deployed in areas of conflict forged tacit relations with the local paramilitaries by sharing intelligence and providing logistical support, while the institutional leadership looked the other way"(28). These efforts, combined with the loss of popular support in reaction to the widespread kidnappings, extortion and indiscriminant use of cylinder bombs and land mines, contributed to the decline of the FARC.

Government policy towards the FARC changed from accommodation to confrontation. Alvaro Uribe, who had left the Liberal Party and campaigned for president as an independent

promising to confront and defeat the FARC, was elected and inaugurated in 2002. Uribe, through enhanced cooperation with the United States, reinforced the army, strengthened police intelligence, and created incentives for the FARC to demobilize. The efforts transformed Colombia. Thousands of the FARC guerrillas were demobilized and top leaders have been killed or forced into hiding in Venezuela. In 2008 Betancourt and Rojas, the Green Party candidates kidnapped by the FARC, were rescued and the long-time leader of the FARC, Manuel Marulanda, died of natural causes.

Contracting private armies to defeat the FARC had a tremendous cost. Colombians were caught in the middle of a brutal war. In Country of Bullets: Chronicles of War, Juanita León recounts harrowing stories of AUC brutality. When the Castaño brothers and the AUC invaded the town of Peque, they rounded up 35 villagers to escort the army through a field of landmines (21). According to a report published by the Council on Foreign Relations, since 2003, 31,000 combatants had formally disarmed and confessed to 30,470 murders from 1980 to 2003. Human Rights Watch estimates the number to be far higher, perhaps as much as 150,000 murders (Janish).

The AUC accepted a generous donation package presented by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe in 2002. In exchange for demobilization, AUC members were granted amnesty from prosecution, and reintegration stipends. Relative to the all-out war waged against the FARC, the demobilization is getting away with murder.

In March of 2006, government authorities found a laptop computer belonging to Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, head of the AUC, and known in Colombia by his alias Jorge 40. The laptop contained information on 556 murders, and implicated over 60 Congressmen cooperating with

AUC. The scandal nearly dismantled the Uribe administration, implicating Uribe's foreign minister, chief of staff, commander and chief of the army, 62 members of Congress, including Uribe's own cousin Mario Uribe Escobar, and other top government officials (Lam).

Parapolitics and Unresolved Justice

One of the senators to be convicted of paramilitary cooperation is Alvaro Garcia Romero, senator representing the department of Popayan, south of Cali. The son of wealthy cattle ranchers, Romero represented elitist interest and had no problem engaging in corruption. In 1988, voting on a land reform initiative, Romero was captured by a television camera casting multiple ballots. Although the total number of ballots cast outnumbered Colombian senators, the vote was considered legitimate and the land-reform measure failed. People were afraid of Romero and his connections. He was above the law ("Poder" 1).

Colombian officials, unwilling to open an investigation, did nothing until by chance in 2006 sufficient evidence was secured from the laptop of Jorge 40. The laptop revealed Romero to be the mastermind behind a massacre perpetrated by AUC forces in Macayapo, Colombia. Information found on the laptop revealed coded emails between Romero and Jorge 40 approving the clearing land for paramilitary use, using violent force if necessary. Romero was one of the first to be convicted in the scandal that nearly toppled the Uribe administration.

Coined "el Escandalo Parapolitica" by Colombian newspapers, the interwoven relationship between paramilitary and political forces represents not only a failure of democracy, but a failure of State. One of the state's defining characteristics is a monopoly of force, a trait the Colombian state certainly lacks. "The deployment of violence has become so customary that to a certain extent the Colombian state has ceased to exist in its Weberian quality of the monopolize

of the legitimate use of violence. Violence increasingly appears as an option for a multitude of actors in pursuit of all kind of goals.” (Koonings and Kruijt)

Violence, Displacement and Fear

Colombia’s internal conflict is more than just political factionalism, it is structural oppression. During the internal conflict, both guerilla and paramilitary relied on *sapos*, or paid informants. *Sapos* were social agents who came from within a community, only to turn against it. Hoping to gain favor of armed groups, they betrayed their friends and neighbors, sending names that would later be put on death lists.

Maria Victoria Uribe elaborates: “The substance of this terror is its indistinctiveness, ambiguity, and confusion; it is a sticky, slippery substance made up on interwoven rumors that circulate before and after the event” (Uribe 91). Once again, we see the effect of violence in turning communities against each other. Out of fear for their own lives, kin turned against kin, and neighbor turned against neighbor. Fear permeated Colombia, and suspicion separated communities. The years of terror and violence were a form of culture war, destroying what held people together, and leaving them without a new structure, alienated, displaced physically, socially, and politically.

Many were forced to give up life in the countryside, hoping for more opportunity and security in Colombia’s cities. According to a 2002 report published by the Consultory on Human Rights and Displacement, (*Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento* or CODHES) 410,000 people were newly displaced in 2002, almost a full percentage point of the total population. By 2009, according to official figures, 2.9 million Colombians had been displaced from their homes due to internal conflict. CODHES estimates

that number to be 5.2 million displaced residents or about 10% of the entire Colombian population. Two million of those displaced have relocated to Greater Bogotá (CODHES). About one fifth of all resident in Bogota are displaced citizens (Martinez 1).

Oftentimes, the Colombian displaced relocate to Ciudad Bolivar, Colombia's largest slum. Situated southwest of downtown, Ciudad Bolivar comprises what most residents of Bogota simply call "El Sur." Bolivar is not a place for the faint of heart, yet for many, it is the only place to go. Homes are built cheap in Ciudad Bolivar. A basic dwelling, a one room shack, usually consisting of 4 walls of stacked, insulated cylinder blocks with and an aluminum sheet over the roof, costs about \$300 (Echanove 3). When individuals and families require more space for business or expanding families, they usually just add floors. This can become quite precarious. Built on the side of mountains, mudslides induced by heavy rains collapsed two such houses in Ciudad Boliver last November, resulting in the death of 4 people ("Deslizamiento" 1).

A report published by la Universidad de Los Andes estimates 1.5 million residents of Ciudad Bolivar live in poverty, and 300,000 in misery (Rueda-Garica). These numbers were calculated using the Basic Needs Indicator (NBI), and determines degrees of poverty by measuring the material of which the house is made, water and sewerage services, the number of people living in the house, etc. Half of all residents of Ciudad Bolivar work in the informal sector. In Colombia, the informal sector is a tricky thing to pinpoint, but jobs may include construction, window-washing, maid services, and other informal, service jobs.

Despite the lack of formal employment, hundreds of thousands of Colombians migrate to Bogotá each year, oftentimes joining family members that previously made the trip. This influx has left these neighborhoods with extremely high densities. The average density of Ciudad

Bolivar is 36,000 residents per square kilometer, far higher than that of Tokyo (20,000 residents per square kilometer) (Rueda-Garcia).

These conditions create a perfect theatre for violence. In a participatory study, Colombians identify multiple forms of violence they experience: These include armed confrontation between guerilla and state troops, between paramilitary and drug traffickers, protection rackets by urban militia, social cleansing operations, political assassinations, organized and petty crime, youth inter-gang warfare, brawls and vendettas (Moser and McIlwaine 4). In Ciudad Bolivar, narrow life options lead teenage boys to the street. Here they form neighborhood gangs, and peddle drugs, the most popular and potent being *bausco*, a cocaine-based product mixed with lead paint and other substances (Isikoff 1). Neighborhood gangs clash with rival gangs, each trying to outdo the other, control the streets and the market.

Neighborhood vigilante groups, called cleansing groups, were formed to counteract the violence of the gangs. Daniel Coates, a fellow volunteer at a community center in Ciudad Bolivar, was told by a local woman he interviewed: “Dead bodies from other barrios and communities appeared, and yeah these boys and everyone began to make social cleansing groups between the communities, and then they began to kill these boys, not just because they stole in the neighborhood but because they also gave a bad image and [a] bad example for our kids and yeah, everything” (Coates 10).

Fleeing violence in the countryside, Colombians arrive in Ciudad Bolivar to find an equally repressive atmosphere of violence and suspicion. There is little if any evidence of the State in Ciudad Bolivar. Of the many sights and sounds I witnessed in Ciudad Bolivar, I rarely heard sirens. Police presence in Ciudad Bolivar is the lowest in the city.

Camillo, a young man I met working in Ciudad Bolivar characterized violence in Ciudad Bolivar as “un ambiente pesado, a heavy atmosphere,” where “uno se siente, como de intranquilidad, un ambiente de que uno no puede estar solo, por lo que hay mucha inseguridad, one feels, like intranquility, an atmosphere that one cannot be alone, because there is a lot of insecurity” (11).

“Nosotros mirabamos fue por detrás de la puerta, y el miedo no nos dejaba salir, we watched from behind the door, and fear did not let us leave,” (12) says another resident of Ciudad Bolivar. One could not feel safe alone, and suspicion impeded feeling safe among others. The long term consequences of violence, especially its arbitrariness and scope, create what Koonings and Kruijt call a “society of fear.” Violence prompts suspicion, and suspicion prompts community disintegration. Community disintegration undermines democracy.

Trust not only eroded between neighbors, but toward politicians. A political tradition thick in indiscriminate violence prompts a prevailing sense of distrust toward politics. Many in Ciudad Bolivar told me politicians were only in it for themselves. Consider the following quote by Ruby, a local volunteer in Bella Flor. As Ruby described, “siempre veian a Bella Flor, o a otros...como que alla son los pobrecitos y podemos ir a conseguir cualquier cantidad de votos si damos cierta cantidad de mercados, they always looked at Bella Flor, or at others...like there are the little poor ones and we can go get whatever number of votes if we give a certain amount of groceries” (13). Politicians never delivered, because they had no respect for their constituents. School renovations, water filtration, and electrical lines were slow to arrive to Ciudad Bolivar, if ever delivered at all. Once people isolate themselves from each other, and the state, progress becomes more and more distant.

Chapter 2: Building Civil Society: A Hybrid Approach

The libertarian CATO institute defines civil society as “fundamentally reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty.” I prefer to use French philosopher Alex de Toqueville theory of civil society, as “that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counter-balance the state... and prevent it from dominating and atomizing the rest of society” (Waissman 25).

Civil society is essentially the art of associating to achieve mutually beneficial goals: “A community’s art of associating, its capacity to act together, may be the single most important factor in its economic development.” According to Daubon, civil society cannot be built artificially: “this capacity cannot be built; it has to grow organically in the political culture of a country” (34). Years of violence that targeted union members, village leaders and leftist interests in general paralyzed and atomized civil society in Colombia. Rather than approach one’s neighbor to form social networks and political coalitions, citizens stayed behind their doors. Protecting oneself through isolation became a tactic. According to Moser and McIlwaine, a “culture of silence” developed in Colombia’s urban communities. While this may prove effective in reducing the risk of bodily harm, it hinders a community’s ability to reach mutually beneficial goals .

I argue, rather than wait for organic civil society to develop, it *is* possible to light its flame. Fundacion Laudes Infantis is just that: A civil society spark.

Fundación Laudes Infantis

There is evidence of this capacity to act together in the midst of the chaos of poverty and violence in Ciudad Bolivar. An example is the Fundación Laudes Infantis, a non-governmental

organization I worked with as a volunteer last year. Before Jackie Moreno founded Fundación Ladues Infantis in 1999, she worked in social services, driving around Ciudad Bolívar trying to bring children to shelters and convince teens to get off the streets. After years of relentless effort, she had yet to see substantial effect. “Communities turned against each other,” she would tell me. “I would get a few kids off the street, only for their friends to convince them to return. I felt like I was not attacking the root of the problem.”

Ciudad Bolívar was expanding and settlements were erected each day, farther and farther from the center of the city. She decided she might have more luck on the outskirts of Ciudad Bolívar, in Bella Flor, a community about half a mile off Bolívar’s main road, over a creek, and up hundreds of stairs. She wanted to build a safe community, based on values of trust and mutual respect. Jackie and her vision arrived here just as the first shacks were erected, and years before running water and electricity would enter the neighborhood. “Eso fue el lugar para nuestro experimento,” she told me. Laudes broke ground in Bella Flor in 1999.

Her first order of business was to create a community center equipped with the most fundamental aspect of the foundation, a communal barter bank, or “El Banco de Trueque.” The goal of the barter bank is to offer goods and services in exchange for work invested into the community. Say for instance, a woman with young children works but cannot afford childhood daycare. In exchange for the foundation’s daycare taking the children in, the mother must devote her Sundays to community work. The idea is that all efforts and expenses of the barter bank are reinvested into the community. A father, who cannot afford to fix a broken pipe in his home, can go to the communal barter bank. In return for Laudes calling and covering the plumber’s expenses, the father must devote a certain number of hours a week with other members in the

community building a soccer field, participating in the community's recycling program, or take a class in value-based fatherhood.

On top this, Laudes organizes theatre groups, workshops taught by members of the community, annual parties (the most popular celebrating Carnival where residents dress up in colorful costumes and celebrate in the streets of their own neighborhood) and support groups. One group that has lasted since its inception is *el Grupo Piloto*, a group of 5 members from the community and three representatives from Laudes responsible for the community's most sensitive issues. If a mother has a son becoming addicted to drugs, they can call members of this group, and they will seek out professional help to come to the community; If an ex-boyfriend knocks on a woman's door in the middle of the night, threatening violence, *el Grupo Piloto* is who they call.

Informalization and a Hybrid Approach

“If one thing stands out with regard to the strategies employed by the urban poor, it is the peaceful and inventive nature of their strategies for daily survival. Poverty is identified largely with the ‘informal sector’, a social and economic complex within the national economy and society. The social and political consequence of this long-term process of informalization and social exclusion is the erosion of the legitimacy of the formal civil, political and public order. It contributes to the emergence of parallel institutions and the ‘privatization’ of public administration.” (Koonings and Druijt, 1999).

Laudes is a hybrid of organic and top-down development. Laudes receives funds from European corporate donors, and the organization would not exist without the initial years of work of Jackie, and the funds and connections she raised. However, in time, the organization has

turned over day to day management to residents in the community, and communities grow closer and closer to self-sufficiency each day. Additionally, the Banco del Trueque ensures that all activity/loans are paid back through community reinvestment.

Laudes serves as an institution that at least in a small way, can counter the atomizing paralysis of displacement. The communal barter bank, practical classes, and public space bring people together, take what they have to offer each other (their time, if nothing else), and builds mutual trust and confidence. It empowers people, builds connections after years of violence, displacement, and disconnection. It builds civil society. Today, crime is an afterthought in Bella Flor. People are no longer afraid when they leave their houses in the morning. People know each other.

Laudes is a perfect example of the ‘other face of society’, described in the 1980s by the Peruvian anthropologist Matos Mar, in which the void left by the decline of traditional civil society is filled by “the timid emergence of a variety of micro-entrepreneurial organizations: local and regional chambers of artisans, the institutionalized soup kitchen and other organizations which provide cheap food in the metropolitan slums, all of them bound by dependency to private development organizations, churches and welfare institutions funded by external donor agencies rather than by the local or national authorities.” (Koonings and Kruijt, 1999)

I spent only a few days at the Bella Flor location, devoting the vast majority of time to Laudes’ newest satellite location in Usme. Just as in Bella Flor, Usme operates a communal barter bank designed to empower citizens. It also offers classes in business management, computer systems, physical fitness and nutrition, and English.

The fear of crime in Usme has not subsided to the extent it has in Bella Flor. Neighborhood gangs still operate in Usme (though not to the degree they once had). One day, as I was walking to catch the bus back downtown, I stopped for a little while to kick the soccer ball around with a few kids I knew from the center. Fifteen minutes into the game, a group of twenty-somethings came onto the court, circling the game on their skateboards. Dressed like they were going to a Dead Kennedy's show, they stared at me, asking each other questions: "Porque hay un gringo maricon en Usme. Estas perdido?" It did not take me long to get the hint, and fortunately, a friend from Laudes was walking by, and screamed telling me to come to her. I quickly obliged, as I heard them shout behind me "maricon" and "chocha."

Although crime and insecurity remain, I am confident that the foundation helps make Usme safer and more secure. The foundation is an example of the struggle in Colombia of displaced people to reconnect through informal agencies, to counter the failures of the State and the paralyzing effects of long-term violence, to become empowered. The incentives Laudes offers are too good for many to pass up; the sense of belonging that Laudes enables is too hard to pass up.

Laudes Infantis certainly has its limitations. It is not an absolute grassroots movement, and one could argue it does constitute true organic institution of civil society Daubon described. However, it reflects the hybrid character of the informal sector. Laudes was founded by an outsider, is still dependent on outsiders, but may become in time fully organic and self-sufficient.

No longer do the people of Usme wait for politicians to come in and hand out rice and beans, milk and promises next to the ballot box, only for another candidate to come back four years later and do the same thing. Laudes offers instead a sense of self-empowerment, a sense

that what the people themselves can bring to trade is of value. Just because people are poor and uneducated, does not mean they have nothing to offer a community.

Part II

A Rootless Life

Chapter 3: El Gordo

They called him El Gordo. Alvaro Garcia Romero, Colombian Senator, pulled into his driveway in a black Chevy Suburban sometime in April of 2005. He was followed by an identical car, with men in identical suits carrying identical .35 pistols. The middle Suburban pulled into the garage and the other peeled off and parked in the driveway. Romero's security detail consisted of 8 full-time body guards, in addition to the four that patrolled the grounds. Romero walked into his home with a limp that he carried since a child, a result of osteosarcoma cancer operated on as a child. He walked up the garage staircase, using the handrail for assistance. His wife and young twin boys greeted him as he came up the stairs. "Es Papi!!!" they screamed with jubilation. This was Romero's first time home in a month.

¡Mis hijos! Ven aca de dan su padre un beso." Romero kissed his children on each cheek before greeting his wife. "Maria, I have missed you."

"I have missed you too, *amor*," replied Maria, staring with affection into Romero's eyes. "Dinner is almost ready."

"Perfect because I am starving," he said as he kissed his wife on the cheek. His wife was a beautiful woman he had known since grade school. She wore a tight black shirt and dark jeans

"How is Bogotá?" she asked.

“Cold and cloudy. Nothing like home.” Romero picked up a roll from the table and spread it with butter.

“It’s good to have you back.”

“You have no idea.” Maria walked into the kitchen and poured two Malbecs. “¡Ay! ¡Felipe, Alex, *no se vayan!* We’re sitting down to dinner.”

...

After dinner with his family, Romero was watching an episode of SpongeBob Squarepants with his two sons. Not having changed from his dress shirt, one could see the brown outline of dried sweat as he put his arm around his son Jesus. Romero was a big man, and took up more than half of the brown Argentine leather where he sat. Even a man as corrupt as Romero enjoyed watching Spongebob with his children. He sometimes imagined himself as the characters, living lives unencumbered by stress in a pineapple under the sea. He watched and laughed with his sons, sipping dessert liquor, allowing his mind to unwind.

“Papi, did you like that episode?”

“Yes Felipe, but I’ve seen it a thousand times.”

“Did you like the part where Spongebob and Patrick were in the Rocket ship?”

“Yes...but guess what part I liked even more than that?”

His two sons, who had been keeping their attention focused on the TV, even during the commercial breaks, turned eager eyes to their father. “Which part?” they questioned simultaneously.

“The part where Felipe and Alex stopped watching TV and finished their homework.”

Romero raised himself off the couch and flipped off the TV, smiling at his jocund manipulation.

“Ay, papi. Cinco minutos mas?” Alex pushed.

“No, I told your mother only one episode.” As Romero ushered his sons out of the room, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He took it out and looked at the text message. It was from a number he did not recognize and did not contain a message, only a phone number.

“Run up to your room and finish your work. I will be up in an hour and if everything isn’t done, no TV tomorrow.”

“Noooo papiii,” his children whined.

“Exactly. So finish your work. I’ll read you a story when I come up.”

Felipe and Jesus flashed their father a look of consent, before dashing out of the room and up the stairs. Romero walked to the kitchen sink, finished the rest of his drink, and walked to the back of the house. The heels of his black shoes echoed an asymmetric rhythm against the hardwood floors.

He opened the door and walked towards his desk. He picked up the phone and dialed the number. Ring, ring, answer.

“Gordo, it’s Quarenta.”

“Good evening, Jorge.” Romero cleared his throat and straightened himself up, as one who just realized they were talking business would do. “*Como le puedo ayudar?*”

“The gringo police are taking The Zoo el Lunes.” The Zoo was a pseudonym for a cocaine-refining lab 50 km north of Jamundí, and the gringo police referred to the prestigious *Battalón de Alta Montaña*, an elite, US trained counternarcotic police squad.

“You are certain?” This was not good news for Romero, because it was not good news for the man on the end of the line, Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, department leader of paramilitary death squad *Las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*.

“I would not have said so otherwise,” stated Jorge 40, his alias,

“At what time?” asked Romero.

“0500.”

“What do you propose to do?” Romero reached into a desk drawer and lit a cigarette.

“How well do you know the new police chief?” questioned Jorge 40.

“He is of no use. Gringos got him in their back pocket.” Romero took deep drags on his cigarette.

“That is unfortunate. My man inside says they have a full schedule this week. The Zoo Monday, Pollos Thursday, and La Azteca next Monday.” Pollos and La Azteca were cocaine refining labs each 50, and 115 kilometers from Jamundí respectively.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Romero.

“I need an introduction.”

“To whom?”

“Someone in the army.”

Romero breathed relief. “The army is not a problem. Commandante Gustavo Rojas, the department commander. He and I are on good terms.”

“To what extent?”

“He’s on the payroll.” The Colombian senator had many men on a monthly allowance that bought him in and out of trouble.

“Can you arrange a meet tomorrow? The usual place.”

“At what time?”

“10 in the morning.”

With that, the line went dead. Romero took a deep breath and sat back in his chair. He played back the conversation in his head a few times, made the call to Rojas, and retired to bed.

Paola could not sleep, and for the second time that night, got out of bed to get a glass of water. She shivered as her feet touched the cold tile floor. She wore one of her husband’s shirts, a tattered large black shirt with an image of Donald Duck in the center. As she filled her

glass, she looked at the clock on the stove. It was 3 AM. Paola sighed, wondering if there was a worst time to be up. 3 AM on a goddamn Monday morning.

Paola was in school right now, learning how to be an elementary education teacher while working full time as maid for her husband's boss, commander Jaime Garcia Cachuco. She had another month left in her training, and was looking forward to working in the village school. She lived in Jamundí, a small town 50km south of Santiago de Cali. Tomorrow she would wake up early and clean till the early afternoon. She tried to keep her mind focused on simple tasks, but they inevitably returned to memories of her late brother and father. They were not officially dead, but they had been missing for months and no one was looking for them. The echoes of phone conversations 3 months old ran through her head.

"Paola, you know I cannot run. The community depends on me. I must stay and try to protect them, end of discussion."

"But they were kill you! *Por favor, padre! Para sus nietos.*"

"*No es justo, Paola*, that's not fair Paola." Besides, where am I supposed to go Paola? A man my age...No, I will not run."

Paola started crying.

"Oh, *mi amor*, don't cry. I raised you strong. You know I love you with all my heart. But I must stay. Take care of those children. I loved them deeply Paola. Goodbye."

Those would be the last words Paola spoke to her father, and she rehearsed that conversation in her head multiple times a day, as if someday she would have the very same

conversation again, but make a better argument for him to leave Popayan. Her brother was his father's son, and employed similar resistance, though of a more cutting variety.

"You may come visit me...alone. I cannot talk to with that *cerdo* in your house."

"¡No le llamas un *cerdo*! He is good police. Not corrupt."

"That's great, Paola. But I can't have his *cerdo* friends sneaking around our business. Have you told him what I do?" Paola's brother worked with the guerillas. He was only an accountant, as far as Paola knew.

"He will never know."

"Good. I'm sorry Paola" and Deivid hung up the phone.

...

She decided that doing some sort of chore might clear her mind. She decided to pack her children's and husband's lunches. *Frijoles con garra, pescado frito, arepas and banüelos* for dessert. When she was finished, she set up breakfast that would be eaten in a few hours, and went back to bed. As she crept into the room, he heard her husband say in a sleepy hoarse voice: "It's too early for breakfast, Paola. Come back to bed." Paola obliged, smiling as she tucked herself under her husband's arm. She fell asleep shortly after.

When she woke in the morning Eduardo was finishing the last sip of coffee at the sink. "*Gracias por desayuno. Te amo,*" he said as he gave her a goodbye kiss.

“Cuidate,” she told him as he walked out the door. He seemed more nervous than usual today, and forgot to respond. Today must be a big day.

Her husband was police and reported to the district station 40 minutes north on Rt. 25 in Cali. He was not allowed to say exactly what he did, but she knew her husband was bright, dedicated and one of the few patriots left in Colombia. He was not crooked like other cops. She knew because they were still poor.

She walked down the hall to tell her children that she was going to work until lunch time, that breakfast was on the table, and not to open the door for anybody. “Ok, mami,” Juan mumbled from his bed.

“Do you understand, Andres?” she asked to her older son.

“Si.”

“Bueno.” Paola picked up briefcase, went down the hall, and headed out the door.

28 Hours Earlier

Romero pulled into a gas station 100 km southwest of Santiago de Cali. Generally, the zone was off limits to Colombian citizens, but Romero breezed through the checkpoints. He arrived about 15 minutes before 10. General Guillermo Rojas was there as well, having a coffee and a bañuelo.

“Good morning, Guillermo, did you have any troubles finding the place?”

“No, but it would have been nice if you picked a place closer to the city. The roads are terrible up here.”

“Or maybe you are just a terrible driver?”

“The same bad sense of humor. Now, perhaps you can tell me the reason behind this meeting.”

“Of course, but we are waiting for one more guest.”

“Who?”

“I am only here to introduce him, so I find it appropriate to wait until he arrives.”

“Great, are you going to order something?”

“Do I look like a man that is going to order something,” replied Gordo, resting a hand on his gut while calling the waitress over. “Un cafecito, huevos fritos, tostado y unos mangos. Gracias.”

As Romero finished his order, a modest black Chevy sedan pulled into the dirt parking lot. The man in the passenger seat walked out, wearing a brown silk shirt, slacks and a fedora. He came in and joined the men at the table.

The man was well over 40, probably into his 50's, and walked with self-assurance. He smiled as he approached the table. “Gordo, General Rojas, it's nice to see you both. I hope two have not been waiting long. Allow me to introduce myself....”

Rojas interrupted. "That won't be necessary, Jorge. That beard hides little." Jorge 40, surprised of Rojas' immediate, yet agreeable recognition, reared back and laughed heartily, patting Romero on the back as he sat down.

"Yes, I'm not one for disguises. Luckily the vast majority of Colombia is not as bright as you."

"How flattering." Rojas cleared his throat. "Now what is the business you have with me?"

"I need you to do something very simple. Tomorrow, the Alta Montaña police force will take a lab that is very profitable for me. Now, I am a reasonable man. These gringos, one year they give you guns, the next they take your livelihood. I am going to send a message."

"A message?"

"Yes, a message! To the gringos and to this helpless fucking spineless country!"

Rojas had read dozens of profiles on the man banging his fist on the table across from him. He recognized initial tells of psychopathy. Rojas made sure to keep a still face in front of Quarenta's quick temper. I will have to help him, he thought, one way or another. Some men you can simply not say no to. "Please, tell me more."

"I have something planned for La Alta Montana. There will be no blood on your hands. I should let you know, an offshore bank account has already been set up, untraceable. Should you cooperate, you will be a rich man."

Rojas' demeanor turned from affable confidant to stoic negotiator. "I want a 1.5 million dollar payoff. If that is done, I will order the killing myself. That is the price of doing business with me." Rojas turned cold eyes upon Quarenta.

Pleasantly surprised by how the negotiation was turning out, Jorge smiled and turned to Romero. "Ah, Colombia. The *gringos* could not fix this country if they tried." Facing Rojas, Quarenta continued, "This can be arranged, but I need to know I can trust you. I have to ask, why do you want blood you're your hands?"

"I don't pretend to distinguish between the one who pulls the trigger and the one that orders a killing. The extra money will be distributed to my men. This kind of money will ensure they never speak."

"Good man. Alright, it's a deal." The men got up and shook each other's hands. "You will receive money from Romero tonight. It is always a refreshing pleasure doing business with army men uncorrupted by gringo influence."

Rojas laughed. "The gringos, *¿que chiste, no?* A Godless people preaching prayer."

"To a Godless country," intercepted Romero, smiling.

"Thanks to your fat-ass!" joked Jorge 40. The stiff formality of the negotiation had ended, and the men casually finish their breakfast so as not to arouse suspicion.

As Paola waited for the bus, she looked at the ground. Although she usually smoked at the bus stop in the morning, she found herself in a more jovial mood than usual, and decided against it. She checked her watch. 6:30 am.

BOOM BOOM. BOOM. Bada bada bada. She heard bursts of machine gun fire in the distance. She could not tell exactly where it came from. At least a couple miles away, most likely in the mountains to the south of her. Her chest tightened, fearing her husband was involved. Maybe she would have a cigarette, she thought, but just as she reached for one, the bus came.

She took a seat at the back of the bus, and looked out the window as the sun crept over the mountains to the east. She reached in her pockets for her cell phone to call her husband. No answer. Dammit, she said under her breath. She tried to calm herself, but the momentum of worrisome thoughts overcame her. What was that firing? There hasn't been firing like that in months. Over the ridge in the distance she saw smoke rising.

The police must have hit a lab. Eduardo had said they would be doing that. She put her hand to her chest, tracing her Rosemary beads inside of her shirt. She began the litany: *Dios te salve, Maria / Llena eres de gracia...* She resolved to get off at the next stop, and take the 27 bus the police station to check in on Eduardo.

As Paola's bus got closer and closer to the police station, she sensed something was wrong. Two army jeeps passed quickly beside the bus, and police sirens could be heard everywhere. As the bus hit traffic, more army jeeps continued to speed by using the sidewalks, she decided to get off 10 blocks early and see what was going on herself.

As she turned the corner, the police station was in chaos, men in police and army uniforms scurried in and out. The lump of terror in her chest expanded, and she started running toward the door. A guard put his arms around her, trying to slow her down.

“My husband is in the police, I have to see him,” she pleaded, trying to make her way past.

“What is his name?”

“Eduardo Vasquez.”

The guard hesitated, avoiding Paola’s eyes. “Come with me.”

The policeman led her into the office and escorted her to the chief of police, the man who mere hours ago, hung up Alvaro Garcia Romero.

“¿Señor?”

“¿Que?”

“Aquí hay la esposa de Eduardo Vasquez.”

“Senora, please come in and sit down. Can I offer you something to drink?”

Paola sensed bad news. “Where is my husband?”

The captain closed his eyes and lowered his head for a moment. When he brought his eyes to meet Paola’s they were full of tears. “I am so sorry, Paola. The battalion was ambushed this morning? They knew we were coming. My men did not have a chance.”

Hope escaped Paola. She began to cry hysterically, trying to ask questions at the same time. The words of the captain echoed in her head, and bounced back into anger. They knew they were coming? Who betrayed them? The only question she could pose was: “How could you?”

The captain had no response.

Three Hours Earlier

Eduardo was in car number two. The plan was fairly simple. Raid the laboratory, kill anyone that fires back. As they climbed the hill, his fellow officers were in good spirits.

“You ready to kick some fucking ass?”

“Of course. Stay focused.”

“I know, I’m just saying.” As Guilleromo’s friend finished his sentence, he could see in the distance something burning. “Hey, see that burning up there. Isn’t that where we’re supposed to be going?”

“Where?”

“Up there? To the southwest?” Guillermo pointed in the direction of the smoke, a few kilometers northeast of the car. “Yes, something big is definitely burning up there.”

“The lab?”

“Maybe. That would mean they knew we were coming.” Eduardo turned his head around to signal to the army trucks that flanked them. They weren’t there. Shit. As Eduardo

turned around, a sense of despair filled him, as if he sensed what was about to come into his vision. To his right, a bright flash streaked across the road/

“RPG!” he shouted, but the words barely escaped his lips before it careened into the front SUV. The driver slammed on the breaks of the SUV

“Find cover!”

Eduardo scrambled out of the car, screaming to the others that the bullets were coming from the left ridge ahead. He found cover behind a guardrail.

What the fuck? A fucking RPG? What kind of coke dealers had RPG’s? Bullets pinged against his cover. He took a quick glance to see if anyone else made it out the wreck. He had lost track of the army jeeps that had been following them. In fact, he lost the idea where he even was. He peeked his head out of cover, before a sniper shot whizzed by his head. Jesus. He called in his radio *“Alguien que me puede oir. We’re under fire 3 km south of the Zoo.”*

“Copy that, 2. Backup is on the way. ETA 10 minutes.”

“Copy.” Vasquez realized something was wrong. A mission this big, there was no way backup was 10 minutes away. Bullets flying over his head meant he had no time to argue. Eduardo checked his gun, popped out of his cover, and fired in the direction of where the shots he thought were coming from. A bullet caught him the gut, then another in the chest. Life escaped him in a matter of seconds. The last thoughts that ran through his brain were those of Paola and his children, and disappointment. He would not be there to provide.

Chapter 4: El Desplazamiento

Paola walked out of the double doors to the police station. It was more instinct than decision, and she started walking. The bright morning sun blinded her teary eyes, but she managed to avoid passerbys at the last instant. Few thoughts crossed her mind and she kept her eyes to the pavement. After an unknown amount of time, she bought a coffee from a vendor outside a local soup kitchen. Feeling the hot coffee slide down her throat in her chest, and feeling warm blood circulate to her head, she composed herself. She sat on the curb, and asked the vendor where she was.

“Juanchito”

“Cual son los buses que puede tomar a Jamundi?”

“Eh, da me un un ratito para pensar. Eh, Angel!” Angel, who had been manning the grill, came over. “What buses can you take to Jaimundi?”

“The 15, but you have to transfer at Los Reyes and get on the 29.”

“Thanks,” replied Paola. *“Y un cigarillo suelto, por favor.”*

“It’s on me,” the woman said, as she handed Paola two cigarettes. “It looks like you need it.”

“Thanks.”

Looking out the window on the bus home, she thought of her husband and what she would tell her kids. He was so good with them. She remembered him approaching the front door when he returned from work, seeing him from the corner of her eyes as she prepared

dinner. Hearing the dogs barking outside, the children rushed to the door to greet him. His face lit up in a big smile and he dropped to his knees, kissing his children and swinging them up in his arms. The memory was so fond, and a golden hue enveloped her husband in her daydream. She cried because it was gone forever.

When she returned home, she sat down at the kitchen table and looked at the clock on the ceiling. Two hours would pass before her children came home. She paced around the house. Her eyes swelled with tears watching her boys approach the house. She saw Andres, the older one, turn away from his friends and put out his cigarette and break off from his friends. Juan skipped toward the house, his outsized backpack knocking against the back of his knees. When they walked in the door, both immediately sensed something was wrong, and Paola did not delay the news of their father's death. Juan was hysterical and ran to his mother. Andres walked silently to the room he and his brother shared and pulled the covers over his head.

One Week Later.

A week had passed since the death of her husband, and Paola sat in bed, thinking of their upcoming move. Without her husband employed by a special police force, there were many problems. First and foremost, she had to secure the safety of her family. Without a husband employed by the police, nothing stood between Paola's connections to the guerillas, and her children. For the last week, she could not sleep, fearing those fateful knocks on the door. Next, there was no money. She was released from her job over rumors of her family connection to the guerillas.

Bogotá was the best option. She had a cousin there. They would disappear into anonymity for a while. She told her children her decision a few days ago. By now, Juan had forgiven her mother's decision, initially upset for having to leave his friends. Andres was different: quiet and bitter. When Paola told him they were leaving for Bogotá, all he said was: "What time?"

She had a cousin in Bogotá that she had called a few days ago asking if they could stay with him for a little while as she got her family established in the city. His name is Guillermo, a big, gentle man, who ran a neighborhood pharmacy in San Francisco, Ciudad Bolivar. "*La familia es la familia,*" he had said, "*claro que si.*"

Guillermo's brother, Emilio, volunteered to take Paola and her sons to Bogotá. He would come by tomorrow evening, and they would drive through the night to Bogota. The last time they were in Bogotá was to celebrate Guillermo opening a drug store in Ciudad Bolivar. She remembered going out with her siblings in Bogotá, drinking aguardiente and dancing salsa at Quiebra Canto. That was a nice trip, thought Paola. Everyone together, laughing and celebrating the whole time. That seemed like ages ago.

Paola sat in the front seat, and rested her head against the window. Emilio was chain smoking and talking politics. "The whole damn country; Not a single politician, *ni un negocio ni un reporte; todos tienen la plata sucia.* There is no sense of responsibility. For the mean time, *yo digo, que se vayan todos!*" Paola was not really listening, catching glimpses of the opaque outlines of trees and vines. "¿Paola?"

Silence.

“Ah, it’s no use. You are in no mood to talk about these things, and you have reason. I will shut up.”

The drive continued, continued, and continued. Up route 25, through the sticky night air of banana country, across the Magdalena, and through the fog of the Andes. They drove through the night, stopping at a roadside breakfast shop to grab a few *arepas*. They drove into Bogota from on Carrera 4, coming into Bogotá from the East. Making a wrong turn, the family found themselves on the Septima downtown. They took this through Chapinero, La Candelaria, and eventually to the base of Ciudad Bolivar, San Francisco, arriving shortly before midnight.

Her cousin came out to greet the family, taking her into his arms. “Oh, Paola, I am sorry for everything.” Guillermo picked up a bag, and a sleeping Juan from the back. “It’s up here. Not much, eh?” gesturing to his 2nd floor apartment. “I might add a floor soon though.”

“You can do that?” Paola was exhausted, but it was great to see her cousin

“Of course, people do it here all the time. The whole neighborhood looks like shit, but it’s the cheapest way to do it!” he smiled at Paola, before turning his attention to his brother.

“Ah, and my baby brother, Jesus! *Que tal, carnal?*” They embraced, before Guillermo reeled back. “¡Ay! You smell like shit baby bro! How much are you smoking.”

“More than I should. It’s good to see you, Guillermo.”

“Of course, I’ve got dinner laid out. Shall we?”

Guillermo ushered his new tenants into his home. They ate dinner, and went to bed.

The next morning, while they were eating breakfast, Jesus took some time to discuss ground rules for living in San Francisco. “Jesus, Andres, a couple rules for living in Bogotá. When you get off the bus, come straight home. Do not talk to the kids who hang out outside the bus stop. All they cause is trouble. Now, for you guys to live here, you’re going to have to help me out at my shop. For the most part, you are going to run prescriptions to my different customers. The two of you are going to do this together. You have to look after each other, you understand me? Stick to the main streets, do not cut across parks, unless there are a lot of children playing there.”

“Can we play in the parks?” Juan asked.

Paola chimed in, “Only if me or your uncle is with you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he responded.

“Are we going to get paid for our work?” Andres took a cigarette out of his pocket.

“Andres! Your uncle is giving us a place to stay and food to eat. Now you ask for more! And put that cigarette away!”

“It’s okay, Paola. The boy is old enough. You will get some spending money, I’ll make sure of that.”

“Guillermo?” Paola questioned.

“Paola, it is my decision. Besides, they should learn to work for money. We all must. *Me entiendes?*”

“Si.”

“Ok, good. Now Paola. I really cannot afford to employ you at my store full time. There is simply not enough to do. Some of my patrons clean office buildings. I could ask around to see if they know of anything. Would that interest you?”

“*Todo me interesa ahora*”

“*Vale*, I will ask if they know of any openings. I’ve got to go downstairs and open up the shop. You have a lot of paperwork to do. You have to register yourselves at Metrovivienda. There you can get a card to make you eligible for the neighborhood *comedor*. Your children can eat for free, there, and you can eat a full lunch there everyday for 800 pesos.”

“I’ll head out after this coffee.”

January and February are the nicest months in Bogotá. The mornings are spectacular. The sun rises east over the Monserrate mountains, basking the ancient monastery in dawn’s golden light, before climbing above the mountains and illuminating all of Bogotá. Sundays in Bogotá are splendid. All of Bogotá descends on bicycles to “La Septima.” Families ride at a leisurely pace before stopping at a park to have lunch. Crowds are large and laughter is everywhere.

Paola, Juan and Guillermo got up early their 4th Sunday in Bogotá to visit the Monserrate monastery, a 17th century monastery at the top of Monserrate Mountain. Guillermo knew a man that worked there and could get the group free lift tickets. They took the 57 bus to the

*Transmilenio*¹, and the *Transmilenio* to La Candelaria. They walked through the Candelaria, stopping at a weekend market to buy fruit for a picnic. Juan insisted on getting *pitayas* a delicious and savory fruit, yet also the most expensive. Paola agreed, wanting to reward Juan for agreeing to come along. Guillermo met his friend outside the front gate, and returned with three lift tickets. “Vamos!” As the gondola climbed, their view of Bogotá expanded until they could see every point of the city. Guillermo read the guidebook aloud to Juan, who was on his shoulder. Juan pointed to the north of the city and screamed “Mira, mira! I can see our house from here!”

Guillermo laughed, guiding Juan’s arm to the opposite direction. “Whoa, Juanchico, you think we’re made of money? That’s where Juanes lives! No, we’re all the way over there in Ciudad Bolivar.” Paola laughed at her son’s folly, and took in the view for herself. She followed the direction of Juan’s outstretched hand to Ciudad Bolivar, and what she saw stirred a sense of melancholy in her. The rolling hills south of the city were one big slum, which stretched farther than she could see. It was like staring at a massive wave from a distance. Crooked house upon crooked house gave the illusion that the whole neighborhood was wobbling. It looked so alien to her. “That is my new home,” she said quietly, reflecting on her first month of living in Bogotá.

Paola had spent the lion’s share of her first two weeks in government office waiting rooms. There seemed to a lengthy, bureaucratic process for everything short of waking up in the morning. First she had to register her family as Bogotá citizens, which required multiple trips to the Metrovivienda office in North Bogotá. After she was a registered citizen of the city, she had to register with the Office of Displaced Persons, to receive a monthly living stipend.

¹ The Transmilenio is bus rapid transit system opened to the public in 2000.

After this, she had to enroll her children in school. She would go to the offices early in the morning, wait in line for at least an hour, only to be told she was actually at the wrong location, or she did not have enough proper forms of identification. By the end of the month, though, she had enrolled her children in school, registered as a citizen of Bogota, and signed up for the *Bogotá Sin Hambre* program.

Employment was difficult to find. Months passed before anything opened up. She did, however, manage to contribute. Every night, she prepared batches of pastries, a skill she had learned from her mother, that were sold along Guillermo's regular stock of medication and cigarettes. Guillermo's pharmacy was one of two stores in the neighborhood called Felix Rx, founded in Ciudad Bolivar by Guillermo's friend, Felix Cano. Guillermo could not afford to pay for Pharmaceutical school, so Felix had to sign and fill every prescription. That was what was supposed to happen, anyway. By this point, Guillermo had mastered Felix' signature, and never got prescriptions wrong. If the government showed up, which it almost never did, Felix was always a call away, arriving with bribe in hand. Many things are done informally in Ciudad Bolivar.

Paola stayed up late most nights. She could not toss and turn because she shared a bed with Juan. She passed the time staring at the ceiling, haunted by a sensation that things were not going well. Her life was not supposed to be like this, she caught herself saying. Each day proved more difficult to get out of bed than the last.

Paola took the first job offered: a part time cleaning position at a chic apartment rented by an American security contractor and his wife. Paola found the job through a friend of her late husband, who got in touch with Paola knowing she was in Bogotá.

The apartment was one of the nicest things she had ever seen: Glass exterior walls, mahogany dining room table, white plush carpets, baize leather sofas, and spectacular white linen. She worked alongside an older live-in maid, Ingrid². Paola came in Monday through Wednesday. She was there around 8:30, and usually left around 4:00. Paola pressed the possibility of more hours, but she was rejected each time by the live-in maid. "I'm sorry, but the more you work, the less I am needed. 25 hours a week. That is the maximum time I have available." The senior maid held sway in this apartment. Mostly because she knew how to cook American dishes and look like she was busy.

Each morning Paola had to wake up at 5:30, get the house in order for the day, catch a bus that took her to the local Transmilenio station, take the Transmilenio to the 93rd street stop, then walk, or take another bus the remaining twenty blocks to the apartment building. The commute alone took two hours. She worked on an hourly wage of \$2,500 pesos per hour (\$2 dollars per/hour), and \$62,500 pesos a week. Just getting to and from work cost Paola about \$4,000 pesos. As the new maid, she was charged with tasks Ingrid would rather not do. She scrubbed bathrooms, cleaned dishes and waxed floors. She enjoyed the work, but it was hardly enough to move out of Guillermo's home.

She did not have to pay rent, because her cousin owned the pharmacy outright. It took about \$200,000 pesos per month to feed her family, and \$100,000 in utilities, and another

² Ingrid, a name of Nordic origin, is one of the most popular women's names in Colombia.

\$50,000 in miscellaneous spending, not to mention the money she wished to save for moving to another neighborhood.

Now, Paola stood on a bench in the gardens of Monserrate. Paola did not like heights, or the sight of Ciudad Bolivar from Monserrate, so she sat with her back to a brick ivy wall, over which one could see the city. She closed her eyes, and concentrated on the sound of birds around her. She was far enough into the gardens that the sounds of tourists' ruffling feet and foreign voices did not disturb her. Life is not all bad, she thought. As long as I can get a few moments of happiness, I will be ok. She started to pray, but she could not finish. I can rely on no one but myself, she thought, as she walked back to join Juan and Guillermo.

Earlier that morning, as soon as the family left home, Andres got out of bed. After slipping on the clothes he had worn yesterday, he walked across the floor to his uncle's room. In the drawer was about \$20,000 pesos, about \$10.00. He took it, walked down the steps, and over to the park. He bought a gram of marijuana from a kid on the corner. His head was groggy from hangover, and he was looking forward to getting high. Andres didn't like stealing from his family, but that did not stop him from doing it.

Last night, he went with a friend, Carlos, to a club downtown, and it was his door he was knocking on. He hadn't realized how expensive drinks were downtown, and he was out of money after drinking two beers. *No importa*, said his friend. They lifted a wallet off some German tourist, and they paid for drinks the rest of the night courtesy of Paul Meyer of Munich, who would go back to Germany and tell his friends he had a great time, but that he was robbed. His friends would gasp and say they would never go to Colombia.

Carlos lived with his mother, an addict who Andres heard from the room as Carlos walked out the door. "Cigarillos," she screamed from her spot on the couch.

"Get your own damn cigarettes," yelled Carlos as he walked out. "Lazy bitch," he said to Andres, "I have to do everything in this fucking house. Alright, you get weed?"

"Yea I got it, want to toké up?"

"Not yet. We're going to a friend of mine's house. I told him I'm bringing you."

"Who is he?"

"He's a dealer, *tiene la plata.*"

"Ok." Andres asked nothing more. His head was foggy from bitterness and substance.

The two walked through San Francisco. There was very little traffic, and the two walked in the middle of the road, smoking cigarettes and kicking trash. It was a brilliant day in Bogotá. Sundays were a day of peace in Ciudad Bolívar. Families, couples and friends, walked side by side, some stopping for an ice cream, others for a drink.

Just after arriving at the dealer's house, Andres lost track of time. He drank beer, smoked weed, and did lines of cocaine. "*Es pura,*" the dealer assured them. "*De Medellín.*" Andres nodded, hardly listening, his mind having retreated to a numb oblivion

Paola sat at the kitchen table. The family had returned from Monseratte hours ago, and there was still no sign of Andres. She wore one of her husband's old shirts. She took her nostrils

to collar and took a deep whiff. The smell of her husband was gone. Juan, the little one, came into the room. "Where is Andres?"

"He is not home yet. Go back to bed Juan." Juan's face was tight with worry.

"Estoy estresado por Andres."

I'm stressed out for Andres. Paola chuckled at the child's words. 6 years old, and he was already *estresado*. "Come here, Juan." The child walked over to his mother, and Paola picked him up and put him in his lap. He would usually protest such motherly affection, but his older brother was not around.

"Do you think he is ok, mami?"

Paola was wondering the same thing all night, last night, and what seemed like most nights she could remember. She did not want Juan to lose calm. "Of course, Juan," she assured him. "You know your older brother."

"He's been acting differently, mami."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's tired all the time. He doesn't want to play *fútbol* with me. He doesn't do his school work. He made some new friends that I don't like."

Paola, just then connected the dots. The red eyes, slurred words, increased appetite. She decided to keep her new information to herself. His little brother can know if he tells him. "Come Juan. It is time for bed. You can sleep with me if you'd like."

“Yea! I have to get my *Ronaldo*,” the name of his stuffed bear named after the soccer superstar.

“Ok, but hurry up.” Juan curled up beside his mother for the night. Both enjoyed the others warmth. It was getting colder outside and it started to rain. With one son beside her, Paola fell asleep after an hour or so, only to be awakened at 4:00 in the morning by the sound of her son, and his new friends, drunk in kitchen. She came into the kitchen, to a group of three boys passing around a bottle of aguardiente.

“She wasn’t just fat! *Pero enorme!*” The boys had just returned from a club, and were dissecting the night.

“Not as fat as your fat ass.”

“Who cares if I’m fat, one day I’m going to rule this whole fucking city.” This was the dealer. For a small time neighborhood peddler, he had developed quite the ego.

“Only if you can do it from your mother’s house,” snickered Andres.

“Putá!” Carlos, at this point furiously drunk, kicked a chair in the kitchen. He was upset about the most recent soccer match. Earlier that day, the boys watched Chelsea beat Barcelona. Both had been cheering for Barcelona, and brooding over liquor had not cleared their tempers.

Paola interrupted. “¡Ay! Do you all know what time it is?”

Andres looked at his mother, knowing this was not a time to argue. "I'll show my friends out," ushering his friends follow him to the door. Carlos was late to get the signal, momentarily hypnotized by the figure under Paola's well worn night gown. Andres took him by the arm, leading him down the steps to the street.

When Andres came up to his mother, she told him sternly: "We need to talk."

"We can talk in the morning," Andres said.

"When you are able to remember?" Paola asked agitatedly.

Andres returned Paola's cold stare. "I'm going to bed." As Andres closed the door to the bedroom they all shared, Guillermo came out from his room.

"Rough night?" Guillermo asked.

Paola started crying. Guillermo came to comfort her, but she could not shake the feeling that her family was falling apart. She had to get out of the neighborhood.

Guillermo comforted Paola, massaging her shoulders. "Teenagers, Paola, they are difficult."

"I am so sorry bringing my trouble to you," Paola managed, under stifled tears.

Guillermo quickly dismissed the statement. "No! Paola, we are family. Do not be ridiculous. We will get through this together. Besides, Paola, *tengo buenas noticias*. I may have found a job for you."

"*Cuenta me.*"

“So a customer of mine at the pharmacy runs this *marcilla* cart. She usually works nights outside clubs. La Zona Libre is where she gets the most customers. Anyway, she told me the other day she is too old to work nights. She still works days, but is looking for someone to take over the night shifts.” La Zona Libre is a colloquial term for a four block radius inside the Venecia neighborhood of Southern Bogotá. It is the only zone in Bogotá where prostitution is legal. Small drug transactions are generally tolerated in this area as well.

“La zona libre? Es un poco peligroso, no?”

The question took Guillermo by surprise. “Yes, I’m sorry Paola, but where do you think we live?” Guillermo’s face was worn, and it was difficult to distinguish between dimple and wrinkle. Paola stared at Guillermo, and felt sorry for both of them. “I am sorry, I do not want to make you sad, Paola. It is certainly dangerous, yes. But there are certain tricks one can do.” Guillermo’s mood perked up. “The woman lives just up the street. La Zona Libre is always crowded, a very public place. From what I heard, she keeps the grill down there in storage. From cigarettes and sausage alone, she pulls in about 200,000 pesos a night!”

Paola thought of the number; \$140,000 pesos more than what she made cleaning for a week. Guillermo was right, and she needed the money. “That is good money. When can I start?”

“Tonight. The woman lives up the street. She said if you were interested, to come by for lunch. This is good, Paola. Once you start working full time, you can start to look a little farther ahead into the future. She would give the instructions of how to operate the cart, you know, the practical things.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you so much, Guillermo.”

“Before you walk up there. I am sure she will tell you this, but, la Zona Libre is not a joke.” Guillermo turned around a chair and straddled it. “You will need to protect yourself. I think I’ve got a can of pepper spray in the back. Let’s see if I can find it.” Guillermo walked into the room, returning with the small canister. “Here you go. I wrote down her address on the kitchen table. I’m going to sleep for a few hours before I open up the shop. *Suerte.*”

A few hours later, after she had walked Juan to school, Paola walked around the neighborhood looking for Andres, to no avail. Paola walked up the street of her cousin’s house to the address he had written down the slip of paper she carried in her hand. An older woman with a bent back opened the door, named Carla. After spending the last twenty years of her life grilling hot dogs in the street, she could afford to spend the last years of her life in peace and quiet, away from the chaotic bustling of downtown Bogotá. She spent the day listening to instructions from Carla: “Now, Paola. This neighborhood is dangerous, but it is safest on the main strip. There are police roadblocks, and if anything serious starts to happen, they usually come in and break it up. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, the most dangerous time is when things start winding down. The men come out of the strip club, sex in their eyes. You are a pretty girl, and many men will ask you for the night. Now, I don’t care what your answer is when the cart is locked up in storage, but when you are working, the answer is always ‘No.’”

Paola, embarrassed that she would even think of her as a prostitute, retorted “No, I would never. I am a mother!”

“Oh, you are a mother!” mocked Carla. “It worries me Guillermo would send someone so naïve. Of course you are a mother. The hookers are mothers, too. That is why they are hookers. Work is work, Paola.”

Paola was silent, regretting her impulsive judgment. She listened to Carla closely for the rest of the afternoon.

La Zona Libre

Paola stood off the curb across from “La Piscina” the largest strip club in Bogotá. Drunk, rowdy men with sex-crazed eyes, just as Carla said, came out of the club, lighting cigarettes and hailing cabs. Scantly clothed workingwomen walked out of the clubs, bouncers hailing cabs for them. Just as one taxi left, another one pulled up, dropping off women returning from the apartment, home or hotel of paying customers. Prostitution wasn’t the only vice in *La Zona Libre*; the smell of marijuana filled the air and vials of white powder exchanged hands. Paola, however, did not notice most of this. Business was going too well. “*Marcilla con areppas*,” she yelled, for what seemed like the thousandth time. “*Marcillas con areppas*.” Drunk men, attracted by the smell of blood sausage came over, fumbling with their wallets to pay Paola. Most came from the business district, and overpaid Paola and drunkenly spilled their attraction. “You should be working in there!” motioning to the strip clubs. *¿Que hace afuera?*” Paola smiled. The work was more fun than she anticipated, and she was making good money. She had already taken in about \$100,000 pesos. At the rate she was going, she’d be able to feed her

family for the next week. Besides, another few hours, and the buses would be running and she could go home and sleep.

"Cuanto por la noche?" The man's question caught Paola lost in thought.

"Marcilla o pollo?" Sausage or chicken, Paola responded.

"Voseo." Paola recognised the man's dialect through the informal "voseo" tense. They were from the same area of Colombia, and there was something familiar about this man.

"Como?" The man looked at Paola with still eyes. Paola continued: "I'm sorry, I don't do that. I am new to Bogotá. I just sell food."

"I will give you 200,000 for the night, Paola," the man offered. The man standing in front of Paola was none other than a drunk, General Gustavo Rojas. He had gained some weight since he had met Romero months ago in Popayán.

Did he just say my name? Paola's mind started racing. He was stocky, thinning hair. He wore a leather jacket, jeans, and a gold cross. She looked him up and down, not seeing anything particularly revealing about the man that would give her hint as to how he knew her.

"I'm sorry, I don't do that kind of stuff."

"I know your family, Paola. *Son gente sucia*, they are dirty people."

Paola's chest tightened, realizing she was in very real danger. Who was this man. Military? Paramilitary? She had to get out of there. "I'm sorry, *señor*," she said, "I don't know what you are talking about."

“Your brother is alive, Paola. It won’t be long until we get him and his dirty guerilla friends. The man reached his hand and pinched Paola at her waist, before taking out his wallet. He paid for his *marcilla*, overpaying by 90,000 pesos, perhaps hinting that he was paying for more than just blood sausage. “Thanks for la *marcilla*. I’ll be back soon.”

As soon as the man walked back into the club, Paola started to pack things up. \$400,000 pesos. She pocketed the \$100,000 from the man, knowing she would have to split \$300,000 with Carla. She ran the numbers in her head: \$100,000 plus \$150,000 makes \$250,000 pesos, That would be enough to feed her family for the next few weeks, and start put at least a quarter in savings for a new house. She threw out the sausage already on the grill, stored the uncooked ones in a cooler, cleaned off the grill, pulled down the umbrella, and wheeled the cart down the street for storage. Rojas was smoking cigarettes outside La Piscina as she packed up. Hopefully, she could lose him while she locked the grill up in storage, and slip out the back door and be on her way.

Rojas had become well acquainted with the activities of Paola’s brother, Deivid. His battalion was in charge of rooting out guerilla activities in the department of Popayán. Of course, that was before this whole damn investigation. He shouldn’t have gotten his men involved with Romero. That had been a mistake, and it had led him to where he was today: In Bogotá, testifying to his role in the Jamundí massacre. He rationalized his actions by arguing that what he had done was in behalf of Colombia. These narco police were interfering with his guerilla operations. He was not getting the funding he used to. Why should gringo police be

trained to do a job he was great at? Rojas prided himself on being the best guerilla-killer in Colombia. How fortunate he had run into Paola, that bitch.

Paola dragged the cart into storage, and locked it up as she had been instructed, put all loose items into her backpack, and slipped out the backdoor. The man was nowhere to be seen, and she advanced out from the alley.

Rojas waited at the end of the alley for Paola's approach. He jumped out, grasping Paola's mouth to suppress her scream. She struggled mightily, "There is no sense in struggle." The feigned statement of reassurance had the opposite effect on Paola, desperately lashing her hands behind her. She caught his face with his hands and scratched with all her might.

"*Putá,*" he cried, momentarily letting go of her. Paola began to make a run for it but the man grabbed the handle at the top of her backpack, sending Paola to the ground, striking Paola at her side. She keeled over. Why is this happening to me? I have to get out of here. She thought of her children, just as she received a kick from the man's boot in the stomach. He kicked her again, hearing the man call her and her family lousy bitches as she gradually lost a grip on consciousness.

"Women no longer understand their place. Bogota is a tough city, *puta*. I am only trying to teach you a lesson. Too bad your brother isn't here to watch."

The alarm at 2:30 in the morning is dreadful sound. Jackie turned over in bed, flicking the switch. She lay back onto her back took a deep breath, exhaling quickly to charge her body for the day. Her partner would be over in thirty minutes with the van. This was the time of night

when teens were most desperate, walking home drunk, high, and alone. This was the time when she had most success convincing them to go to a shelter for a meal.

She got out of bed and turned on the coffee she had prepared the night before. While she waited she had some cereal, and checked her email. She finished an email that she had drafted the afternoon before to her boss at IDHES, government office where she worked as a social worker. It was a 2 week notice of her resignation. Spending the last 9 years with IDHES had been both rewarding, and extremely frustrating. Her job as a public social worker sent her to the most dangerous areas of the city. She was robbed, on average, about once a month. After the first couple muggings, she learned to not carry much cash on her, now carrying everything in a slip tucked into her sock. A new email from her mother in Madrid awaited her, containing pictures of a recent family trip to Ibiza. "Why don't you join us for our next trip?" a caption read at the bottom of picture of her family under a red and orange sky. She sighed, finished the rest of her coffee and waited. Outside it was chilly, cloudy and drizzling. She lived with her partner in small loft in the La Candelaria district, who worked as a secretary at Banco de Colombia's downtown office. Her cell phone buzzed on the table.

"I'm outside," said Lucenny.

"I will be right down," replied Jackie.

Lucenny was dependable. They would be in this business a long time. "Did you tell the office?"

"Aurita enseno la carta de noticia, I just sent in my resignation letter." Raised outside of Madrid, her Spanish lisp revealed itself on the word 'noticia.' *"Noteethsia."*

"I sent mine as well. I hope you are certain about all this."

"It is a little late to ask that question, don't you think?" The women laughed together. Yes, they would be working together for a long time.

"Take carrerra 15. I want to drive around la zona libre?"

Lucenny nodded a sign of reluctant content. "Ay, why do we do this to ourselves?"

"Because others won't."

As they drove towards la zona libre, Jackie turned on the light above the dashboard. The stoplights flashed yellow, as they drove across Carrera 7, one of the busiest intersections during the day, now vacant.

"Have you been in touch with Santander?" asked Lucenny. Jackie's father was a high ranking executive at Santander, one of the largest international banks in world, based in Madrid.

"Yes, they have agreed to cover start-up costs. They like the idea. They'll most likely send someone over within the first few months."

"And you think we can have things up and running by then?"

"With hard work, I'm positive. Lucenny, you seem to have more doubts than usual. Is everything alright?"

“For the most part. I am not immune from doubt like you, Jackie.”

Jackie laughed. “That’s what you think I am? Immune from doubt? I have plenty of doubt. I just try to not let my mind get carried away with it. This will work Lucenny. And if it doesn’t, well” Jackie paused, slightly longer than she had intended. “It will work.” Just then, Jackie saw a woman struggling with a man at a bus stop on the other side of the street.

“Ay, Lucenny, make a U-turn up here. A woman is in trouble over there.”

The white van wheeled around at the upcoming intersection, quickly gaining speed as it came out of the turn. Jackie reached into the glovebox. “Do you have your pepper spray?”

“Yes.”

The van pulled up to see the man, dressed in a suit, forcing Paola’s jeans off. Jackie stepped out, and without saying anything, ran over to the man and sprayed pepper spray into his face?”

“What the fuck? My eyes. Jesus Christ. Dumb bitch.” Jackie saw the man reach for a gun in his pocket, ducked to the left to avoid the first shot. Lucenny ran up behind the man and jumped on his back, grabbing his neck. “Get the gun!” Jackie wasted no time, ducking to avoid his next three shots, and kicking the gun out of his hand. Lucenny was thrown off the man, and kicked the ground looking for his gun.

“I’ve got your gun, scumbag, and you’ll be lucky if I don’t shoot you in the fucking face.”

The assertive words, delivered with real hatred froze the man. Paola was coughing on the ground. “Are you alright?” The words seemed distant, but Paola managed an “*Pienso que si*”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes, I think so.” Paola lifted herself up, feeling an intense pain her stomach and breasts, where she had been kicked.

“What kind of man beats a woman, then kicks her while she is on the ground. You deserve to die, but I have no intention to make tonight my first murder. Go back to the cunt you crawled out of. Señora, please get in the van. We’ll take you home. Lucenny start the car and open the front door for me.” Lucenny walked a barely conscious Paola to the van, opened the side and passenger seat door. Jackie kept the gun on the man the whole time, backing up in the door Lucenny had opened for her. “Drive.”

...

Paola kept trying to say thank you, but her throat was stiff and tears ran down her face.

“Who was that man?” Lucenny asked.

I don’t know.” The words choked out of her mouth.

“Where do you live?”

“En Ciudad Bolivar. San Francisco, Carrea 27.”

“Ok, we’re heading that direction, anyway.”

“Thank you so much. You put your lives at risk.” The words that came out of Paola’s mouth did not feel like her own. She was still in shock.

Lucenny looked at Jackie, “That’s true, but it’s what we do.”

“Pull over at this grate so I can get rid of this gun.” Jackie rolled down the window and tossed the gun into the gutter.

“Who are you?”

“We’re social workers for the government,” replied Jackie. We try to help get people off the street. Usually it’s just talking and nothing more. Tonight was very unusual.”

“Our closest call yet, that’s for sure,” chimed in Lucenny.

“Welll, I thank you, *con todo mi corazon*. I have children. I don’t know what they would have done. It’s just me.” The tears started s

“So that wasn’t a boyfriend?”

“No.” Paola did not feel like talking about the close call from her past, and looked out the window. A few minutes passed by, gradually awakening to her surroundings. “What am I going to do?” Paola voiced out loud. “Tonight was my first time working that job and I almost got killed.

An idea surfaced in Jackie’s mind. “Listen, what’s your name?”

“Paola Vasquez?”

“Paola Vasquez, Lucenny and I are trying to start a project in Bella Flor. Are you familiar with that neighborhood?”

“All the way at the top of Bolivar?”

“Yes,” Jackie chuckled, “all the way up there. It is a community building project. The pay is not great, but it is good work. We can talk details if you are interested later. But for now, I will give you my cell phone number. Please call me tomorrow if you are feeling up to it.” The van pulled up beside the pharmacy.

“Here is my home. I will do that, Jackie. And once again, thanks so much for your help. I don’t know how I can repay you.”

“Just give me a call tomorrow. Goodnight.”

Paola woke up late the next morning. Her children were already at school, or at least they weren’t home. She got up and dialed the number Jackie gave her, and she agreed to come the community’s first workshop that night. She spent the day flipping through the classifieds, and stopped by the bank to open a savings account. Unfortunately, all the banks she went to required half the money she had to be dedicated to the minimum savings option.

Paola arrived at the workshop. A PowerPoint was up on the screen entitled “Auto-Formación.” Jackie started the presentation.

“Hello everyone. First a little background on me. I am a Spaniard, but have been living in Colombia since I went to La Universidad de los Andes. After graduation, I got a job working for IDHES as a psychiatrist. I worked on issues of spousal abuse, poverty-induced stress and depression, as well recovering victims of violence. First off I went to go around the room with a simple question. Are you happy?”

There were 10 women, and 2 men in the meeting, all were quiet, a woman in her early 20's spoke up. "I have too many things to worry about, to worry if I am happy."

"Ok," Jackie replied, direction the conversation. "Do people agree with this statement?"
A consensus of nods around the room.

"Ok, so what do we worry about?"

The same woman who answered the first question again raised a point. "Keeping the house clean for my husband. Putting food on the table." More nods of agreement.

Now, a man in the back with a worn leather jacket and boots responded. "I worry that I don't provide enough for my family."

The man next to him, apparently friends, nudged him in the side. "Well of course you worry about that Jose, you spend your days on the bottle."

"Ey, man. You know I'm trying to get sober."

The man laughed. "Yea, friend. Trying real hard...just yesterday I saw you stumbling home at 1 in the morning."

Jackie interrupted. "Hey! This is no time for bickering. What about you, what do you worry about?"

"Me?" The man attempted to put on a face of confidence, but seeing truth in Jackie's face prompted truth in this response. "I worry for my daughter. She's pregnant, and living with her boyfriend. I kicked her out of the house."

Answers started to pour out. Paola volunteered: "I worry that I'll die in this city, and won't get to see my children grow up."

"I worry that I'll die dirt-poor," one of men offered.

"I worry about rape," a woman whispered.

"Me too," said another.

"Yes, especially when I am coming home from work late at night. The gangs who hang out at the bus stops. They give me looks."

"Did you hear what happened to that woman last week? Taken into an alley at 9 in the morning. Raped and stabbed."

"Horrible!"

"Why did no one call the police?" Jackie asked the question on purpose, knowing full well what the response would entail.

"La Polica! Don't talk to me about the police. Self-serving little *cerdos*, if you ask me."

"A friend of mine called the police when her son was beat up by the gangs last week. You know how long it took them to get there!? Forever! They never came!"

Grumblings of agreement circled the room. "I'm not surprised." Jackie decided to touch on one more subject before arriving at her final point.

"And the politicians? Do they do anything to help?"

Half the group laughed; another half angrily shook their heads. "*La politica es una broma.*" Politics is a joke in Colombia.

"They are worse than the police!"

"They pay their salaries!"

"Siempre engañando la gente," all they do is trick the people.

Jackie once again halted conversation. "So what is to be done? How can this be resolved?"

"Politicians can deliver on their promises." Nods.

"Politicians will never deliver on their promises," Jackie stated matter-of-factly. "But what can *we*, the people in this room, do to improve the neighborhood." Once again, silence.

"The problem, I believe," started Jackie "comes down to trust. We are so afraid of rape, violence, and deceit that we have isolated ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"How many of you, when get home, lock the door and stay inside?"

"It is dangerous out there."

"What if you knew everyone in the neighborhood?" asked Jackie

Silence.

Jackie smiled. Exactly the response she was looking for. "I would like to tell everyone here today about a project Luncenny and I are trying to start. We are trying to build a more closely knit group of people here in Bella Flor. We have the funds to break ground in Bella Flor, but before we made our decision we wanted to hear feedback from the community."

"Break ground on what?"

"Un centro comunitario. Lucenny had an idea. We will call it "El Banco de Trueque, the barter bank. The barter bank will be a place of exchange. For example, if you are not home after school, and you would like to make sure your children are productive, we can take them in to our daycare center, free of charge?"

"Totalmente gratis? What is in it for you?"

"There is nothing in it for me, but there is a catch. The catch is that, in exchange for taking your son into our daycare, you will have to devote a certain number of hours a week to community development projects?"

"Like what?"

"Whatever you have to offer the community. If you are good with pipes and plumbing, you can around the community fixing leaks. If you are good with computers, you can help community members learn to use windows. If you are good with your hands, you can help build a neighborhood park. The premise of this organization, is that through cooperation, the people of Bella Flor will come to know and trust each other. Neighbors will invest themselves into the

neighborhood. No longer will we be forced to deal with gangs and violence on our own. The community will be there to help out.”

Chatter spread throughout the room. Jackie sensed excitement in many, and reluctance in a few. She continued. “Now, the most important message I want to get across is that *everyone* must invest themselves in this project. It is my idea, sure, and I will work very hard to get this project off the ground. But starting now, each one of you, if you agree to help, will play an equal part in this project. Who is with us?”

Her question was met with a few moments of silence, before Paola responded. “I was training to be an educator before I moved to Bogotá. I could help teach or tutor.”

“Perfect. Who else has something to contribute? Anything that you can help with. And I mean it. Anything.”

“My husband is a carpenter. I help with the finishing. We could help making tables and chairs.”

“That’s great! What we need right now are book cases for the library. Can you guys do that?”

“Of course.”

“Who else?” Momentum started to pick up in the classroom.

“I can help cook food for parties.” “I’m good with my hands.” “I can teach music lessons.” Each member of the group said something, each statement spurring side

conversation. Jackie smiled. People are getting to know each other, she thought. She did notice Paola, however, remained reserved. She sat in her chair with a distant look on her face. When her eyes met others, she offered a smile, and a reassuring phrase, but Jackie sensed sadness in her. Perhaps it was about what happened last night? Perhaps it is something deeper? She resolved to approach her after the meeting. She could certainly use someone with educational background.

Jackie stood up once again to address the group. "I'm so glad to see everyone smiling. Did you notice a change of mood from the beginning of the meeting to now? We're beginning to get to know each other. Now, picture a community of this atmosphere, where people know each other. Where one is not afraid to spend nights outside, conversing to each other about their days."

"Many of you have been through hardship. This country, Colombia, has been a grand bitch to many of us." Laughs of agreement. "But together, and only together, can we rebuild. This neighborhood, this country, one community at a time. There will be many workshops like this. Next time, invite your husbands, wives and children. The more people that come, the faster we can get started."

The meeting ended. Paola walked out the door as Jackie was chatting with another woman about recent news of a neighborhood killing. Damn, she thought, I lost my opportunity. As she escorted the woman out of the meeting place, she saw Paola sitting on the steps of the church, smoking a cigarette. Although Jackie had quit smoking, she used the opportunity to bum a cigarette and start a conversation.

“So when did you move to Bogota?”

“About three months ago.”

“Displaced?” Paola nodded. Jackie was a woman accustomed to pushing boundaries, and she pressed on. “Did you lose anyone close?”

“Everyone except my children.” Jackie put her arm around her.

“Thank you for helping me last night. Can’t say I’m too happy to be alive right now.”

“What else troubles you?”

“My oldest son, my baby.” Paola started to cry. She thought of him now. She imagined him accepting a joint, or even worse a needle, from another street kid. “I have nothing to give him, and now he’s on the streets. Doesn’t go to school. I kicked him out of the house. This city! It will eat him alive. He’s not like that! Oh, Jackie, what should I do? What should I do!”

Jackie was thinking of possible options, but first asked a couple investigatory questions?

“Where does he hang out?”

“I don’t know. I’ve seen him at Parque de Paz.”

“Well, our first move is to get him off the streets. Normally, I would say it is best to wait for him to return on his own will. Things are always easier that way. If they are pulled off the street, they will resent us. It must be his decision to return. What does he care about?”

“His little brother.”

“Is he with him?”

“No, the little one is at home.”

“How is he taking this?”

“Poorly, I suppose. He is very quiet. He works very hard in school. He told me he wants to make a lot of money to buy me a new house.”

Paola chuckled to lighten the mood. “Good. How about this? You, and your youngest son begin working for the foundation immediately. I want you to move out of your cousin’s home, and come live in Bella Flor.”

“I’m not sure I can afford to move right now.”

“Of course you can. I’ve been buying property in Bella Flor for the foundation for the last few years. I have plenty of spaces you could make a temporary home.”

“But how will this get my son off the street?”

“In a month, maybe less, he will come to know the real nature of the streets here. They can be fun for a teenager, getting high and starting fights. But it is almost the end of February. It will soon be cold in Bogotá. The key is to make contact when he is at his worst. Kids will always try to come back home. It is just a matter of letting back in, and having the support so he never leaves again.”

Paola felt her throat tighten. It had been a long time since she had someone on her side for support. She tried to say thank you, but her jaw contorted from emotion. She hugged Jackie, crying into her sweatshirt.

“It is alright, sweetheart,” Jackie consoled her. Paola composed herself. Jackie started back at her. “Now, no more tears. We have a lot of work to do. Bring your son back tomorrow after school, and we will get started.”

Epilogue

Paola would eventually settle down in Usme, Bogotá. She and her two boys would sleep in the same bed for the next four years. She would never move from Usme, Bogotá, but that was alright, because Usme would become a fine place to live. The shacks were still shacks, and the schools weren't much better. However, her children would receive after school tutoring and part time employment as they grew up. Jackie made Andres the webmaster of the organization, introducing him for the first time to the world of computers and the internet. The responsibility was good for him, and he would go on to study programming at La Universidad de Bogotá.

As for Alvaro Garcia Romero, he was convicted November 18, 2007 for organizing the massacre of Macayepo and other paramilitary cooperation. He is currently serving a forty year jail sentence.

And to conclude, I would like to thank all the wonderful people in Usme who welcomed me into their lives. It was amazing.

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Academic Vita

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Education

Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College

Graduating May 2012

Paterno Fellows Recipient

Majors: International Politics (BA), Latin American Studies (BA)

Awards: Dean's List 2008-2012

Study Abroad: Spain (Summer 2009), Argentina (Spring 2011)

Spanish Conversational Fluency

Work Experience

Teach for America

Corps member

Starting May 2012

Selected from a highly competitive applicant pool of 46,000 college graduates and professionals nationwide.

Participate in 5-week intensive training program in Phoenix to develop the skills, knowledge and discipline required to be an effective teacher from the first day of school onwards.

Simultaneously teach summer school in public and charter schools in the Phoenix metro area under the supervision of experienced Teach for America staff.

Engage in professional development activities organized through 'learning teams.' Include seminars, discussion groups and workshops designed to provide maximum instruction, feedback and reflection.

Fundación Laudes Infantis

Teacher

January-March 2011, Bogotá, Colombia

Taught English language and American history in 30, and 35 person class respectfully.

Constructed goal-oriented, incentive-based, classroom. Graduated 96% of students.

Tutored struggling students in social studies, math and biology in community library after school.

Extracurricular Activities

Co-founder, Dance to Fight Cancer

September 2009- Present

Co-founded an independent student organization to raise money toward THON, the largest student-run philanthropy in the world, dedicated to the fight against pediatric cancer.

Brother, Phi Sigma Pi National Honors Fraternity

September 2009- Present