more of my time. The same is true for those poor souls who deal on the streets. They'd have to put in a lot more time to earn the same amount of money."

I looked at him and asked if he could confirm a sensation I had while listening to his stories, which was that he despises his clients.

"Yes. I liked them at first, because they gave me what I needed. But over time you look at them and you begin to understand. You realize that you could be one of them. You see yourself from the outside, and you're repulsed. I dislike my clients because they remind me too much of myself, or what I would become if I decided to enjoy myself more. And not only does the idea repulse me, it scares me."

8.

BEAUTY AND THE MONKEY

Evolutionary transformation is fueled by vacuums. The story of drug trafficking in Colombia is one of vacuums, transformations, and capitalism.

Today what was once a vacuum is swarming, like a plot of ground under the entomologist's lens. Swarming with hundreds of microcartels. Armed organizations that give themselves names that sound like local sports teams. Communist guerrillas who increasingly play the paradoxical role of large landowners, of plantation and production managers. Each one develops his own specialty, carves out his own slice of the action: production, distribution, transportation. Each one defends his own little corner of jungle, mountain, coast, or border. It's all disconnected, parceled out, ground up. Today the doses of territory, and the spread of power and alliances, for which blood still flows, seem infinitesimal compared to the heyday of the big cartels.

But if the Colombia of drug trafficking today seems like the land of the Lilliputians to Gulliver, the problem is partly in the eye of the beholder. Or in his mind, rather; in his memory. Eyes see what they expect to see, or they gather in the remains. What they see is based on

what they no longer see. So if there aren't any more big showdowns or massacres, if cartels no longer carry out attacks on presidential candidates or no longer finance presidential elections, if Colombia is no longer a narco-state, and if the big players are all dead or sentenced to life in the United States, you might think the war has been won. Well, maybe not completely won, but at least well on the way to victory.

Or your gaze might get stuck in the past: Since "cocaine" and "Colombia" are still synonymous—a denomination of origin as inherent as Scotch whiskey or Russian caviar—the imagination continues to picture Colombian drug lords as the most powerful, the richest, the most terrifying in the world. But no regular person knows the names of the big traffickers anymore, or of the major organizations operating in Colombia. And yet, despite decades spent battling the Colombian narcos, the market share the country has lost is much less than one might expect in this era of global commerce. This apparent paradox makes it extremely difficult to grasp the current reality, to see its actual dimensions.

The alleged Lilliputians are no longer the absolute lords of cocaine, but it's calculated that Colombia continues to produce around 60 percent of the cocaine consumed worldwide. And coca plants continue to take root in every cultivatable clod of Colombian soil.

How can this be? What does it mean?

The first answer is elementary, the basic principle of capitalism. If demand holds, if, in fact, it continues to grow, it would be absurd to cut off the supply, or even to reduce it significantly.

The second answer is that the decline of the Colombian cartels corresponded to the rise of the Mexican cartels and of all the new, powerful players in the criminal economy. Today the Sinaloa cartel directs the cultivation and production of coca plants, cocaine paste, and cocaine in Colombia just as multinational corporations direct the cultivation and processing of fruit.

But all this does not fully explain what happened in Colombia. It's important to understand, though. Important because Colombia represents a matrix of the criminal economy, and its transformations reveal the full adaptive capacity of a system that has one fixed constant: white powder. Men die, armies disintegrate, but coke remains. This, in short, is the story of Colombia.

In the beginning there was Pablo, Pablo Escobar. Before Pablo, the drug trade was on the rise in Colombia, with its ideal conditions for producing, storing, and transporting cocaine. But it was in the hands of "coke cowboys," who were too weak to impose their own rules and too scattered geographically to impose the law of the strongest. There was a vacuum, and Pablo filled it right away. The first evolutionary step in Colombian drug trafficking began with this ambitious young man, who was determined to become so rich that he'd have more influence than the president. Starting from nothing he accumulated wealth, gained respect, and conceived of the first cocaine distribution network, using small boats and single-engine planes. To safeguard his operation he relied on an old Colombian saying: *plata o plomo*, money or lead. If you were a police officer or a politician, you either accepted his bribe or you were dead. For Pablo, who became Medellín's godfather, the cocaine business was simple: All you had to do was take a walk in the poor barrios and enlist the kids, who were ready to do anything—bribe people here and there, or pay off a friendly banker to help you bring the money you laundered back in. He said as much himself: "Everybody has a price. The important thing is to figure out what it is." The vacuum filled quickly, and the Colombian system became a monopoly, its distribution network extending to the most important points on the American continent. Everything was done in high style: intercontinental flights crammed with cocaine; affable customs officers who let in thousands of containers of flowers full of white powder; submarines for really big shipments; even an ultramodern tunnel that ran from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, Texas, the private property of a millionaire who lived more than twenty-five hundred miles away. Colombia ruled; Pablo

Escobar ruled. And the godfather of Medellín reached an agreement with the godfather of Guadalajara. Mexico looked, learned, pocketed its percentage, and waited its turn.

By the early 1980s Pablo was making half a million dollars a day; he had ten accountants. The Medellín cartel was spending twenty-five hundred dollars a month just on elastic bands to bundle its rolls of cash. This was capitalism at its beginning. Large concentrations of wealthy entrepreneurs were laying down the law and penetrating every fiber of society. It was a conservative capitalism, in which the captains of industry vied with one another in flaunting their power and their wealth, without skimping on gifts for the people. Pablo had four hundred public housing units built, and he opened a spectacular public zoo right on his estate, Hacienda Nápoles. Robin Hood capitalists—unscrupulous, bloodthirsty, ruthless spendthrifts. Capitalists in their infancy, though, at the top of rigid pyramidal structures. They felt like giants and considered themselves the incarnations of a sovereign power they'd earned with money and lead—the only legitimate form of power. Pablo even offered to eliminate all of Colombia's public debt, because the country was already his, because the government of Medellín was stronger and wealthier than that of Bogotá. So if the government caused them any trouble they felt justified in waging a head-on war: car bombs, killings, attacks on enemy politicians and judges. A presidential candidate—the front-runner—was assassinated. But Escobar and his faithful failed to realize that the very thing they believed to be a show of strength was actually their weak spot. A body rots once its head is cut off. When Pablo fell, his organization died, creating another vacuum.

The vacuum Pablo's death created was a warning sign: Colombian drug trafficking had to take another evolutionary step. Like capitalism itself, it had to adapt to changes, incorporate social and economic mutations, free itself of tradition, and cross the threshold of modernity. A new species of narco was ready; in fact, it had already begun to proliferate, colonizing more and more territory. Flanked by powerful natural allies, it didn't have to bleed itself dry in its battle to gain control. Pablo had been a real macho, a striking symbol of untamed sexuality. But now that dominant stereotype was broken, thanks to Hélmer "Pacho" Herrera, one of the bosses of the neohegemonic Cali cartel. Openly gay, Pacho wouldn't have been able to take two steps under Pablo. But for the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers who founded the Cali cartel, business is business, and if a homosexual can pave the way for Mexico, can plant distribution cells right in New York City, then who cares who he sleeps with. Even women were accepted. Medellín's old sayings fell out of use: People stopped saying that all women did was spend money and spoil business. Women knew how to do everything, and they did—from money laundering to important negotiations. "Ambition" was no longer a dirty word.

Another difference: Some of Pablo's associates were practically illiterate; they didn't even know who Gabriel García Márquez was, Colombia's greatest writer then living. They were proud that their power had been born of the people, and they needed to identify with them. Cali bosses, on the other hand, recited verses by Colombian poets and knew what an MBA was worth. The new narcos were capitalists just as Pablo's were, but they were more sophisticated. They were at home among the elite of the New World. They played at being honest businessmen, wore elegant clothes, knew how to behave in high circles, and moved about freely. No more bunkers and deluxe homes hidden away somewhere. The new narcos loved the light of day, because that's where they did their business.

The nature of trafficking changed too. Now you had to guarantee shipments, using fake companies or exploiting those legal channels in which it was easy to pass off illegal goods. And then there were the banks. First the Banco de los Trabajadores, then the First Interamericas Bank of Panama, prestigious and respected credit institutions that the new narcos used to launder money from the United States. The more territory they gained in the legal economy, the more maneuvering room they had to grow their cocaine business. Construction companies, factories, investment firms, radio stations, soccer teams, car dealerships,

shopping centers. The symbol of this new mentality was a chain of American-style drugstores called Drogas la Rebaja, Discount Drugs.

Pablo's pyramid structure—a dinosaur that had been limping along—had been surpassed. Narco-businesses now established "production objectives," actual multiyear plans. The Cali cartel was divided into five strategic sectors: politics, security, finance, legal support, and drug trafficking.

Violence and terror were not done away with, though: *Plata o plomo* was still the order of the day, but while *plata* still flowed freely, *plomo* had to be weighed more carefully, applied more professionally and with more common sense. Before the hit men were youths yanked out of poverty; now they were former or corrupt soldiers. Well-trained mercenaries. Politics became one of the many sectors of society to finance. The money injected into the political system was like an anesthetic: It paralyzed Congress, making it incapable of mounting any threats while conditioning its actions. The last, weak link that tied drug traffickers to their lands was broken as well. To do business the country must be at peace, a fictitious, papier-mâché peace that needs shaking up every now and then—a warning to remind Colombians that those in charge are always there, even if they're unseen. Henry Loaiza Ceballos, alias the Scorpion, was a real pro in this regard. One day in April 1990 he ordered hundreds of campesinos to be chopped to pieces with chain saws: Under the leadership of Father Tiberio de Jesús Fernández Mafla, the Trujillo parish priest, they had organized a march to protest the armed conflict and call for better living conditions in the countryside. Father Tiberio's body was found—hacked to bits—in a bend in the River Cauca. Before death took him he was forced to witness the rape and murder of his niece. Then Scorpion Loaiza had the priest's fingers cut off and forced him to eat them, along with his toes and his genitals. Father Tiberio is buried in a park honoring the Trujillo victims. The inscription on his tomb—something he'd said during his last Easter mass—is prophetic: "If my blood can help a much-needed peace to be born and blossom in Trujillo, I will spill it gladly."

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To their Italian partners, the use of violence in the New World still seemed excessive, but nonetheless, the Italians were quite happy to form a strong connection with Colombia, to get on well with their new suppliers. The Calabrese mafiosi were as tied to their land as the men of Medellín, yet they shared with the new men of Cali the most salient feature of their success: rule and prosper, without making too much noise. Don't challenge official power, but rather use it, drain it, manipulate it. It was as if they'd been traveling the same road together for a while.

The narco-state expanded and flexed its muscles. Rather than kill a presidential candidate it didn't like, it preferred to buy votes to elect one it did. It contaminated every corner of the country, infecting it like a cancer, mutating it in its own image. By now everybody, including the United States and the magistrates who had not been bribed, realized that Cali had become too bloated. Its fall seemed to obey a law of physics: When more growth was no longer possible, it didn't take much to implode, and Mexico, Colombia's North American cousin, started getting in on the action. The narco-state, presided over by the cartel, starts to vacillate, and then unravel.

The end of the Cali cartel was the last real revolution of Colombian drug lord capitalism. And with it went the whole colossal, systemically pervasive structure. It was like a beam of bright light penetrating the dark shadows for the first time, scattering cockroaches in all directions; friends became enemies, every man for himself. Some Cali cartel deserters joined the Norte del Valle cartel, which from the beginning was merely a pale imitation of the one that preceded it. Brutal without being charismatic, greedy without any particular business skills or inventiveness, incapable of keeping internal rivalries at bay, they were so scared of extradition and the betrayal of informers that they became paranoid. But times were different now. Times had changed because capitalism had changed, and the Colombians were the first to realize it.

The rest of the world was optimistic, euphoric even. It was heading toward the new millennium convinced that peace, democracy, and liberty were destined to conquer the globe. President Bill Clinton was reelected in November 1996, and a few months later Labour Party leader Tony Blair—who was convinced that a social democratic agenda must be coupled with greater free markets in order to keep step with modernity—was elected prime minister in the UK. On Wall Street, until early 1997, the Dow Jones Index climbed to levels never seen before, and the NASDAQ—the world's first electronic stock market, which is dedicated to tech stocks such as Microsoft, Yahoo!, Apple, and Google—was up big. What's more, Steve Jobs had just returned to the helm at Apple, confident he would be able to lead the company out of crisis, and, as we all know, he succeeded brilliantly.

In keeping with the spirit of the times, the euphoric West asked for more and more cocaine. Coke was a white stain on all the optimism. And coke was identified with Colombia. It was unacceptable that in this era of creative capitalism and commerce without borders, a nation could be so rich in resources but so oppressed by a criminal monoculture. The Cali cartel had been taken down, the narco-state had been crushed. Marxist guerrillas holed up with their hostages in the jungle or mountains were an anachronism; they no longer had any reason to exist. The superpower that defeated the world communist bloc thought that all it would take to return Colombia to the free world was a concentrated effort.

The United States didn't attach enough importance to what Mexico had become, right under their noses. Or rather, they realized it only in spurts, in individual daily reports that ended up on this or that desk, disjointed alarms about stability and public safety. Blinded by optimism, they couldn't or didn't want to see that what was emerging in Mexico was nothing other than the dark side of that same global capitalism they were proud to have opened every door to, to have loosened every restriction. Their gaze, also, was imprisoned in the past. Working off a borrowed plot, they wanted to write a happy ending for Colombia's story.

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Latin American stories are complicated. They're not like those Hollywood tales where the good are good and the bad are bad. Where if you're successful it's because you deserve it, because you earned it with your talent and your skill that, in the end, are nothing more than the fruit of your moral virtue. So it's easier to understand the transition that takes place in Colombia by tracing two success stories.

The first is the story of a woman. The prettiest and most popular girl in the whole country. The girl who all the men dream of having, the girl who all other girls dream of being. The exclusive model for a lingerie brand and for Colombia's most popular beer. A line of beauty products known all over Latin America named after her. Natalia Paris. A sweet face, golden locks, honey-colored skin. Girlishly petite but with explosive breasts and glutes. Feminine perfection in miniature. Natalia is the one who created a new model of beauty, that same mix of playful naïveté and supersexy seduction that Shakira—also short, blond, and Colombian—established all around the world, thanks to her powerful voice and wild wiggles, but Natalia's star rose first. The other story is about a man who as a boy was saddled with a nickname that doesn't do him justice: El Mono, the Monkey. He doesn't have the grotesque features of a howler or a spider monkey, the most common species in Colombia; at most, his slightly sunken eyes might make you think of a gorilla: There's something frightening in his fixed gaze. His mother is Colombian, his father an Italian who left the town of Sapri to make a better life for himself in the New World. El Mono is named after his father, Salvatore Mancuso, and he fulfilled his father's immigrant dream of integration and success, in his own way.

Both the Beauty and the Monkey were born in cities in the north, the most densely populated and developed part of the country, to families that work hard to achieve the relative ease of the middle class. Natalia's father is a pilot who dies when she was only eight months old, but her mother is a woman of vigorous temperament and principles, and

she's a lawyer, a career that has given her financial autonomy. Salvatore is the second of six children, his father an electrician who, after years of hard work, manages to open first an appliance repair shop, and then an auto repair shop.

Their parents save in order to send them to good schools, which is also a way of keeping them, as much as possible, away from bad company and street violence. Natalia attends a Catholic boarding school, goes to Boston to study, and enrolls in college with the idea of becoming an advertising agent. But in the meantime, her modeling career takes off. While still a teenager she lands her first important contract: Her radiant smile promotes a toothpaste made in the United States. Then she becomes the poster girl for Cristal Oro beer, a sunny presence in a tiny bikini who winks from the walls of houses, in magazines passed from one person to the next at the hairdresser's, on huge billboards along the highway. She is everywhere, admired and recognized in a way that had never happened to a Colombian model before. The most common dream of every attractive girl in Colombia was—and still is—to become a beauty queen. The long lead-up to the Miss Colombia pageant is sheer madness. A circus of glossy magazines lands on the Cartagena de Indias beach, and schoolchildren in Cartagena are given two weeks' vacation. A 24-carat, gold-plated crown with an emerald—the national gem—in the center is placed on the winner's head, and during her year as Miss Colombia she is received by the president of the republic.

But there are also hundreds of minor beauty pageants. Wherever they're held, the aspiring beauty queens are eagerly awaited. The hearts of the people of Colombia swell with the desire to make up for their tough daily lives, to forget the violence, the injustice, and the political scandals that seem as if they will never end. Colombians are a happy people, that vibrant happiness that develops as an antidote to fatalism.

But that's not enough to explain the proliferation of the phenomenon. In Latin America, and in particular in drug-trafficking countries,

beauty pageants are also fairs where thoroughbreds already belonging to a particular stable are paraded. The contest is often fixed from the start: The girl who belongs to the most powerful owner wins. The best present you can give a woman is to buy her a beauty queen's crown, a gift that also makes the prestige of the man who chose her shine. That's how it went for Yovanna Guzmán, who was elected Chica Med when she was with Wílber "Soap" Varela, one of the leaders of the Norte del Valle cartel. But even when that's how it goes, the less fortunate girls can still hope to be noticed by other drug lords who flock to the pageant to choose a new lover, or try their luck in the next pageant.

But Natalia, who did not have to go through anything of the sort in her rise to stardom, suddenly finds herself more envied than Miss Colombia. Her mother would never have allowed her to exhibit herself in a setting where every courteous display of attention is tantamount to a risk. The people who hang around a set are easier to keep an eye on. She goes with Natalia to every appointment, and is her manager and guardian. And she gives her a breast enlargement—two sizes—for her eighteenth birthday, though she never imagines that this further investment in her daughter's already winning image will make her the forerunner of an epidemic that will soon become all the rage. Even girls from the poorest countryside and the most derelict barrios start prostituting themselves in order to scrape together enough money for breast implants—the prerequisite for getting into the good graces of some boss, which is the only chance they have to better themselves. This is the story the Colombian TV series *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (*Without Breasts There Is No Paradise*) tells. Shown all over the world in toned-down versions, the original was based on Gustavo Bolívar Moreno's rigorous reportage about the southwestern department of Putumayo, a traditional coca-growing area.

Lucia Gaviria—Natalia's mother—is always on the lookout. The opportunity that fate has given her daughter must be cultivated fully for as long as it lasts, but it would be a grave error to depend on it. She too had posed for some fashion photo shoots in her youth, but without her

law degree, who knows how she would have managed after she was widowed. You have to keep your head on your shoulders and your feet on the ground, aim for safe and solid goals. That beauty is an ephemeral asset, and that a Colombian woman must use other means to earn and to maintain control over her life, to be the author of her own destiny—of these lessons, Natalia's mother is the best teacher, because she is the perfect model. She has a new partner now, and a second child: a normal family, one that is proud to know that's what they are, especially in this time and place, which is overrun by such unbridled madness.

Colombia is the country of a thousand faces. One minute you're blinded by the sun reflecting off white walls, and the next you're hit with a sunset, the colors of which light the landscape on fire. If Colombia is disorienting, Montería is energized by its contradictions. A city on the banks of the Sinú River, it is the capital of the department of Córdoba. Simple cottages and skyscrapers burst through tropical trees, dozens of different ethnicities are jammed together in an often impossible cohabitation.

Montería is where Salvatore Mancuso Gómez is born and raised, in a house his father builds with his own hands. His sons, even as little boys, tag along when he goes hunting, fascinated by his treasure: a small arsenal they are never allowed to get near. Don Salvador—which, thanks to an error at immigration, is how he is known in the registrar's office—raises his children with a firm hand. To maintain their relative social and economic tranquillity, he sets down strict rules that are beyond question.

But in the end his severity pays off. Monkey's recklessness is limited to his youth, when he is the little boss of the neighborhood, and the other children, in homage to the fuzz that sprouts on his body before any does on theirs, give him that nickname. Or during motocross season in the 1980s, when he wins the national championship and turns

the Bianchi brothers, his Italian compatriots who run a Yamaha dealership in Montería, into sales champions.

Like Natalia's mother, Don Salvador knows that a boy needs gratification, needs such moments of fleeting glory, as long as they don't risk derailing his life. Salvatore is a good son. He finishes high school and goes to study in the United States; if he fails to graduate from the University of Pittsburgh, it's not because he lacks the will to study but because he's too homesick. Especially for Martha, whom he married before he was even eighteen, and little Gianluigi, just a few months old. Don Salvador insists he really wants his tenacious son to build a life for himself in the United States, but he can't help but yield to the reasoning of a young father. Salvatore returns to Colombia, and he and Martha move to Bogotá, so he can finish his studies there.

Once again the second-born son's plans diverge from those of his father, and once again his father will not be able to stop him: Salvatore doesn't want to become an engineer; he wants to become a farmer and animal breeder, a real old-fashioned Colombian. It also seems that he plans to avenge his father, who, after thirty years of sacrifice, had finally managed to buy some land but was forced to sell his beloved *finca* when he refused to give in to the guerrillas' extortions. What can you say to a son who stubbornly wants to finish what you couldn't? That it's too dangerous, too hard? The Mancusos are proud people, and in the end Salvatore takes a degree in agrarian studies, returns to Montería, and settles with his family on the Campamento farm that Martha has just inherited from her father. The soil is rich, the farmhouse a jewel to be treasured. Don Salvador backs the loan his son needs to transform his business into a lucrative, exquisite dream. It means getting up at dawn and toiling as much as—even more than—the campesinos. Putting his father's philosophy into practice is hard work. Two years go by, and the hacienda Campamento arouses the admiration not only of the other farmers but of the guerrilla fighters as well, whose appetites are ravenous.

In the early 1990s, the country where Salvatore is starting to make a

name for himself is like a gangrenous Wild West. For years now it has been impossible to keep track of all the guerrilla violence in the department of Córdoba: extortions; executions; cattle rustling; kidnapping of innocent people, women and children included. The guerrillas take advantage of the lack of political leadership and the inability of the police to control the situation. A decade earlier the farmers and breeders of the department of Antioquia gathered for the first time, in Medellín, to try to find a solution to the problem. The Association of Middle Magdalena Ranchers and Farmers (ACDEGAM) was born. Nothing revolutionary, they were simply acting on a 1965 decree that gave farmers the right to take up arms in self-defense, with the help of the authorities. Soldiers and farmers arm in arm in an all-out war, where what counts is not the monopoly of force that characterizes every modern state but the identification of a common enemy to annihilate. Yet the situation for farmers in Antioquia and Córdoba remained alarming, the worth of their lands and livestock having fallen to one-fifth its previous value.

Salvatore Mancuso knows all this far too well, just as he knows of the acronyms, manpower, and locations of the insurgents. For years he has listened to the stories of oppression and assembled all the examples he could of people confronting those parasitic bandits who fatten on the fruits of honest people's labor. He is ready. If an immigrant electrician, worn down by a lifetime of work, didn't cave, then neither will his son, in the prime of his life and prepared to die for his land and his men. Let them try something, if they dare.

It's just past dawn, the sun's slanting rays speckle the ground ochre. Three shadows, lit from behind, approach Salvatore. Emerging into the light, they take on the appearance of guerrillas. Salvatore grabs his rifle and without thinking twice, points it at them. They tell him that their boss wants to see him, but Salvatore refuses to go with them.

Parrita works on Salvatore's *finca*. He's a sharp kid, barely twelve years old, not afraid of anything. The men tease him, tell him he'll be afraid once he grows up, that Colombia teaches you respect for those who are stronger than you. But Parrita just shrugs his shoulders. He's a

cocky kid, and Salvatore likes him. Salvatore sends for him, gives him a two-way radio, and tells him to follow the three guerrillas, to find their base, and to lie in ambush, awaiting further orders. In the meantime, Salvatore starts organizing; he convinces the colonel of the Junín battalion of Montería to lend him some men and, following Parrita's directions, he flushes out the three guerrillas and kills them.

Salvatore Mancuso has taken his destiny into his own hands. There's no going back now unless he wants to lose everything he has built for himself. Word spreads from farm to farm about the young *haciendero* who defied the terrorist thugs in a way no one had ever dared to do before. Not even Pablo Escobar, who, when the daughter of Don Fabio Ochoa Restrepo, a big horse breeder and primogenitor of a high-ranking criminal family in the Medellín cartel, was kidnapped, founded a group called MAS, Muerte a Secuestradores (Death to Kidnappers) in keeping with his theatrical bent. The most powerful man in Colombia shouted threateningly and loaded the avengers with money and weapons. But an immigrant's son, rather than sending others to do the job, silently took the law into his own hands. Salvatore himself, rather than his farm, became the example to follow. The Montería soldiers get him the permissions he needs to turn his estate into an armed fort and provide him with bodyguards. They're galvanized as well, and start calling Salvatore *cacique*, because he's a chief now, a leader, recognized by the local community. One man in particular bonds like a brother with Salvatore: Major Walter Fratini, vice commander of the battalion that came to his aid during his first retaliation against the guerrillas. They're both of Italian descent, and they share a love of guns and good wine.

Together they devise a military plan. They divide up the region on a map, assigning surveillance and patrol duties for each area. The farmers communicate via radio, so they can report suspicious presences and have military escorts whenever they make a move. Their experiment in self-defense takes off, and Salvatore's prestige grows even more.

But he never loses sight of the larger goal. His work follows him

home every evening. And one evening he gets some bad news: While defending a group of *contras* under attack, Major Fratini's helicopter was shot down, and Fratini was kidnapped by the EPL—the Popular Liberation Army—one of the many Colombian guerrilla groups. His body is found the next day: He'd been tortured to death. Unforgettable images. Images that deepen the ruts in Salvatore Mancuso's path.

The very blond girl who appears on bars of soap and school notebooks all over Colombia has become, now more than ever, a friendly presence in her hometown, offering gaiety and comfort. To the rest of the world it seems that Medellín has lost the one person who had made it famous—Pablo Escobar. But for those who live there, Natalia's shining star attests to all things good and beautiful and eases the anxiety created by the death of Colombia's lord and master. Yes, because if on the one hand there's a sense of relief, on the other there's a sense of fear. Fear of a vacuum. Not of the vacuum itself, but rather of who and how many will step forward to fill it. Pablo Escobar was killed in the same year as Major Fratini, Monkey's fraternal friend. Now that the king is dead, all those who were his enemy can try to elbow their way in. The guerrillas come forward, Cali gains ground, and a vigilante group calling itself Los Pepes, for Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar, or People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar—which seems like a sarcastic response to MAS—puffs out its chest. The rival Cali cartel had bribed Los Pepes to get rid of Escobar, and Los Pepes' members had sown terror primarily in his own fiefdom. Now what will they do, these men trained and equipped for killing? Will they leave? Will they want a slice of territory to manage? The only thing people know for sure is that there's no hoping Los Pepes will simply fade away. Irregular armies don't simply dismantle themselves.

The government shares the people's concern. The state's major antagonist is dead, but the breeding grounds of conflict are multiplying, which is a problem. A problem for the Colombian people, naturally, but

also for a leadership hoping for an image boost after the demise of the country's most famous antihero. Instead it looks as if civil war might break out again, worse than before. Colombia's presidents, one after another, are aware of the limits of their own power. The best they can do is aim for a balance of forces. They need the counterrevolutionaries to check the guerrillas, but the vigilantes need to be curbed somehow as well. They think they've finally hit on the right strategy with Salvatore Mancuso's approach, which a growing number of *hacienderos* are imitating. Self-defense needs to be legalized further so that even those groups born as armed wings of cartels—the most ferocious and best equipped formations—will be interested in banding together. So, in 1994, a decree is issued to regulate private vigilante groups and their collaboration with the army, extending the military's exclusive use of certain weapons to groups that now call themselves CONVIVIR—Cooperativas de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada, or Special Vigilance and Private Security Services. Mancuso is the head of the Convivir Horizonte, expanding the original cadre by ten or so men armed with pistols, rifles, and machine guns.

Now that he has the full right to do so, Salvatore wants to prove his worth and to avenge the friend who initiated him into the use of weapons. Accompanied by an army battalion he walks in the forest for thirty days, surviving on canned goods so as to avoid lighting a fire and alerting his enemies. In the tract of Cordillera that separates Córdoba from the northern tongue of Antioquia they come upon a mountain. The overhanging rock cliffs terrify the men, many of whom turn back. But, urged on by the Monkey, enough of them make it to the top to make a surprise attack on the region's FARC stronghold. Shooting breaks out, but Salvatore and his men come out alive.

A private army is operating in the same area as Mancuso, the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá, or the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá. The army renamed itself in light of the

law on CONVIVIR forces, so as to legally provide armed protection to farmers and breeders. It belongs to the Castaño brothers, who have a long history of implacable hatred for guerrilla fighters and who were born into money. Wealth is what has defined their lives. The sons of Don Jesús, a breeder so highly regarded as a politician and so convinced of landowners' rights to rule that he was one of the first men whom the FARC came after on his *finca*, in order to teach him a lesson. It seems like centuries have passed since that day thirteen years ago, since that interminable wait, till that moment when the brothers finally knew for sure that, despite the ransom they'd paid, their father would never come home again. The black hole of their existence. They've been at war ever since, a war that—on principle—takes no prisoners. They fought on their own, hiring a hundred or so men willing to do anything. They sent them into the area where Don Jesús had been held hostage and had them kill, impale, and chop to pieces every human being they could find there to teach the people who supported those villains a lesson. They developed a good relationship with Pablo Escobar, and had Carlos, the youngest Castaño brother, join MAS, which educated him in every conceivable method of dirty war.

But then the Castaño brothers broke with Escobar, who, in his megalomaniac paranoia, had had some of their friends killed. Realizing that he planned to have them killed as well, they accepted the invitation of the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers of the Cali cartel and formed Los Pepes. They became the pack of dogs in the hunting party out to get their former ally, whose partners and relatives they murdered. So now they're practically right back where they started: a vigilante group bigger and wealthier than the others.

In the last decade the Castaño brothers have grown even wealthier. The cocaine lords have paid them extremely well. They've also paid their enemies well. The Castaño brothers would have already crushed FARC and all the other communist bastards, would have already destroyed all their support networks, if the guerrillas' anticapitalist insurrection had not been financed by cocaine money. But it costs money to

maintain a permanent war, and that's why the insurgents have entered the drug business as well.

When the Castaño brothers invite Salvatore to join forces, he takes his time in answering. He'd prefer to just carry on as before, knowing, perhaps, of their long-standing ties with drug trafficking. But then one day, on his way home with his wife, his first-born, Gianluigi, and his second son, who is barely two years old, he runs into a roadblock between Montería and his estate: a FARC ambush, a kidnapping attempt. He hides his agitation so as not to scare his children even more, but a few days later he tells Martha that he can't keep going it alone. He agrees to merge with the Castaños. And then, when his first arrest warrant for murder arrives, he leaves Campamento for good. From that day in 1996 he stops being Salvatore Mancuso. Now he is only El Mono, the Monkey, El Cacique, Santander Lozada, Triple Cero, and all his other adopted battle names. He is no longer a rice grower and horse breeder but an underground warlord.

When the Monkey, now about thirty, is making the third decisive move of his life, beautiful Natalia is just over twenty. When her mother sees her in bed, in her knit pajamas and surrounded by her stuffed animals, when she wakes her up to get her ready for school or to take her to a morning meeting and watches her, still sleepy, stumble sulkily to the bathroom, she tells herself that she still seems like a little girl. Because Natalia will always be her little girl, just like for every mother. But also because nature has been kind to Natalia, passing on her mother's genes, giving her a body that resists time. A lighthearted girl, naïve and happy. And this is because Lucia Gaviria knows how to protect her daughter's other nature—her inner nature—from the fangs of time. The money she has earned has made her even more lighthearted, which is as it should be, even though it doesn't always work that way. To the sea of stuffed animals has been added a closet, overflowing with shoes, clothes, creams, perfumes, and some jewelry.

By now Natalia Paris has gotten used to being a star as soon as she steps out her front door. Used to seeing an army of girls who could be

her clones on the streets of Colombia. Used to the paparazzi's flashbulbs around the corner, used to rebuffing advances with a no that is as sweet as it is firm. Not one of the boys she goes out with has ever made her lose her focus, let alone her head.

Lucia Gaviria's fears begin to wane. You can breathe more easily in Medellín now than you could a few years ago. It no longer happens that she has to go to a funeral because her best friend's daughter has been ripped apart by a car bomb and for a while afterward she can't find the courage to call her because her own daughter is still alive. It no longer happens that Natalia asks to go to a disco with her school friends and comes home talking about how shooting broke out when they were on the dance floor. Natalia is still frightened, sure, but not nearly as much now. When you grow up in certain places, you end up adapting to the reality around you. Doña Lucia realizes that bell jars are pathetically fragile.

It's also true that those early days, when sudden success threatened to upset an adolescent's precarious balance, are gone. In fact, Natalia's celebrity was precisely what helped her. A star enjoys less freedom of movement than a normal person. In order to make her life bearable she frequents the same places where, mainly, people learn to pretend not to notice her, to treat her normally.

And so a gray area worms its way into Lucia Gaviria's vigilance. The gym. Keeping in shape is a professional necessity for Natalia, and besides, she really loves physical activity. For the most part she takes classes for women: aerobics and Latin American dance, activities that take the place of evenings at the disco, which, with all the attention she received, had become too exhausting. But now she wants to learn how to scuba dive. Her gym offers a one-week class in Santa Marta, the famous Caribbean tourist city. It's not the tropical fish that frighten Doña Lucia, or the breathing apparatus and tanks. Sea sharks are far less dangerous than land sharks.

It must have been an almost mystical experience to watch Natalia remove her mask and fins and peel off her wet suit with a decisive tug.

And yet she seemed oblivious to the way everyone looked at her. There was a man in the group who had had the same effect on her, though, ever since their first dive. He took off his equipment, stowed it, and then dove off the edge of the dinghy. She wanted to dive in after him, but didn't dare. She waited for him to make a move, even the smallest sign, some joke, or a plea for help. He was already an expert diver, already had his instructor's license, in fact. He'd gotten it in California, where he'd lived for work. The class her gym offered was merely a way for him to get back into his favorite sport.

This is what he tells her a few evenings later when he takes her to a romantic bistro. Medellín is not like Los Angeles, where, to recharge your batteries, you can ride the waves on your surfboard, go running on the beach, or swim out to the horizon and back. "I'm really tied to my family and my city," he says, "but I miss the ocean and being outside."

Natalia is already deeply in love. But now she's convinced that Julio is the most extraordinary man she'll ever meet. She's comfortable pressing against him in the boat, kissing him, or clinging to him in the water. Love is a triumph that must be flaunted.

At first Lucia merely thinks that the vacation did her daughter good. But she soon senses that Natalia's irrepressible happiness can't be simply the positive effect of the Caribbean sun. There's clearly a budding romance. It must be a special sort of crush, though, because, oddly, her daughter doesn't talk to her about it. She feels a pang of anxiety, but represses it immediately. Natalia has always been impulsive, enthusiastic. She's a Leo, a passionate sign, but sooner or later the fire goes out. It's better to wait, to trust her. Lucia thinks she knows her daughter well enough to know that she'll be the one to talk about it first.

And, in fact, Natalia doesn't keep quiet for long. When she tells her mother about Julio, how handsome he is, how athletic, how attentive and elegant, her face lights up so much that her mother has to take a deep breath before she can begin asking questions. She is truly sorry to tumble her off the cloud she's floating on.

"How old is he?"

"I don't know. Thirty, thirty-five . . ."

"Are you sure he's not married?"

"What are you saying, Mami? He was in Los Angeles, he came back to help his family, I think."

"And what exactly was he doing in Los Angeles?"

"I didn't ask."

"So you have no idea what it is he does, this Julio of yours?"

"Oh, business of some sort. But he's rich, family money. He has a fabulous house and some other properties too, a hotel maybe, or a country estate."

"Maybe. But you don't know how he got rich. Or how his family got rich."

"No, Mami, and I don't care! You can't always think like this, calculating everything all the time, planning. Those things don't matter at all when you're in love!"

Natalia starts to cry and locks herself in her room. Lucia Gaviria stays sitting in the kitchen, devastated. She has an awful feeling; she can barely breathe. To calm down she pours herself a glass of water and finishes up some mindless house chores.

The only question she dares ask the next day is the last name of Natalia's beau. She tries to sound casual, but she knows Natalia's not fooled. With that piece of information she heads to court, as she does every morning. Off to face her tragedy.

Julio César Correa. A drug trafficker. He got his start as a hit man at Pablo Escobar's side. His new last name, which replaces his original one, reflects his status as a killer: Fierro, Julio Fierro. All over Latin America *fierro*—as in Italy, *ferro*—literally meaning "iron," means "gun." In this new era Julio established his independence as a professional killer and got involved directly in the cocaine business, becoming a *traqueto*, a trafficker. Doña Lucia wonders if he went to the United States because of Don Pablo's death, to make himself scarce. But now he's back. Back in time to make Natalia lose her head. She simply won't

listen to reason. She confesses that Julio carries a pistol around town, but then screams: "What's wrong with that, everybody else does!"

Whenever she addresses her mother now, Natalia always shouts.

Doña Lucia establishes peremptory rules and strict curfews, much stricter than when Natalia was under age. But when she's alone, waiting for her daughter to return, Lucia Gaviria takes to brooding and blaming herself. Why did she let her take that damned diving course?

The years pass. Natalia's mother is done in by the war she is fighting in vain. More and more she has long crying fits that are only in part a way of emotionally blackmailing her daughter. Julio tries to soften her up whenever possible, reassure her how deeply in love he is, swears that he will always have the utmost respect for Natalia and those dear to her. And he does seem sincere and polite, quite different from the ugly, vulgar *traquetos* she comes across in court. But Doña Lucia remains coldly courteous. She must resist; she must break their bond.

But her daughter is still as crazy for Julio as she was that very first day. And everything Doña Lucia does—cry, threaten, argue furiously—merely pushes her daughter further away. Further into Julio's arms.

One morning Natalia comes into the kitchen with a frighteningly serious look on her face, her eyes puffy and red. She's been even more nervous lately, and has been sleeping poorly. She doesn't open her mouth until her stepfather, Doña Lucia's companion who has acted as Natalia's father since she was little, arrives.

"Natalia wants to tell you something."

"I'm pregnant, Mami. I'm in my fourth month."

It's a catastrophe, and Lucia Gaviria is the last in the family to know. She doesn't speak to her daughter for a week.

But she doesn't hold out for long. She senses that for the first time in all these years Natalia is frightened as well. She no longer lives in a fairyland. Fairy tales don't exist in Medellín, and Doña Lucia can't abandon her now. So one day she buys her a pair of sneakers, so she'll be more comfortable in the months to come, when the baby in her womb starts to weigh on her. She leaves the box on Natalia's bed with a

note that says "God bless you." They both weep that evening, Natalia in her bedroom, her mother in the living room. But the door is too thin for them not to hear each other's sobs.

Natalia is under contract with Cristal Oro for their new ad campaign, but she'll be in her seventh month by the time the shooting starts. Is Lucia Gaviria supposed to cancel? What excuse can she give them?

She is more furious with Julio than ever, even though he does everything one could expect from a Colombian man. He says he wants to marry Natalia, that having a baby with her is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to him, that everything will be fine. And her daughter goes along with everything he says. But at a certain point, Natalia's happiness no longer seems like the other side of fear. She starts sleeping better, and gradually looks more radiant. Doña Lucia attributes the difference to hormonal changes related to her condition, until her daughter talks with her again.

"It's all resolved, Mami. We're going to go live in the United States soon; we're going to start a new life there!"

A new life? In the United States?

The United States is every drug trafficker's nightmare, so much so that in the 1980s a popular saying among the Colombian narcos was: "Better a tomb in Colombia than a prison cell in the United States." What's more, in 1997 Colombia, backed into a tight corner by the United States, altered its constitution so as to reintroduce extradition. Sometimes her daughter is so naïve she seems stupid.

And yet everything Natalia told her turns out to be true.

Not even a month goes by before Natalia leaves for Florida. All she had to do was pack her suitcase. Julio took care of everything else: the villa on the beach, their visas, all the other paperwork necessary for settling in the United States. Or rather, his new Yankee contacts took care of most of it. They're not cocaine importers, though. In fact, they're the cocaine importers' antagonists par excellence: the Miami DEA.

Julio César Correa is one of the first Colombian narcos to negotiate

something that officially never existed. Precisely because his case is intended to motivate others, he's one of the luckiest ones: not a single day in jail; no more trials hanging over his head for having flooded the streets of North America with cocaine. In exchange for millions of narco-dollars deposited in U.S. coffers and—more important—precious information.

The Miami DEA's undertaking seems like a wild shot. How can the "world's policeman" allow someone guilty of serious crimes under its own jurisdiction have his sentence eliminated?

Beyond that, how would it make contact with a drug lord and propose something of the sort to him? He would be the first to suspect he was being screwed. The contact person might never come back. The DEA's office needs a more sophisticated intermediary.

Baruch Vega is a Colombian fashion photographer living in Miami. He has worked for Armani, Gucci, Valentino, Chanel, Hermès, all the major fashion houses and cosmetics companies. The second of eleven children of a trumpet player from Bogotá who relocated to Bucaramanga, a plateau in the middle of the mountains in northeast Colombia, Baruch won a Kodak competition when he was fifteen. He immortalized a bird as it emerged from a lake with a fish in its beak. But his parents make him study engineering. At the University of Santander he is recruited by the CIA and sent to Chile: Salvador Allende's government is about to fall.

Baruch Vega hates his job. To make his escape he dusts off his skill as a photographer. He arrives in New York in the 1970s and photographs the very first top models, the likes of Lauren Hutton and Christie Brinkley. He manages to get what matters most where he comes from: success, money, and women. Earning them in the United States increases his prestige. Every time Vega goes back to Colombia he shows up with a slew of cover girls. They're his business card. And that's how, in the course of his double career as photographer and undercover agent,

he got to know many of the big Colombian cartel bosses and frequented the homes of important drug lords, such as the Ochoa brothers, Escobar's associates in the Medellín cartel.

His first encounter with Julio Fierro is in a hotel in Cartagena, during the Miss Colombia pageant, not coincidentally. Vega plays his part. He says he knows some DEA agents you could make a deal with. All you have to do is pay: the gringo cops' assistance, plus a percentage for his services.

For a drug lord, if you don't have to pay, it's not credible. The higher the price, the more trustworthy it seems. Baruch Vega is the best guarantee on the bargaining table. What could a man like him, who makes money in an enviable profession, want? More money. A man who risks his life for more money is a man who deserves respect. Respect and trust. As proof of his reliability, Vega organizes trips to Miami with his "private plane," which will later turn out to be paid for by the DEA. The presence onboard of an antidrug agent guarantees that there will be other friendly cops at the airport ready to walk the drug traffickers—several of them on the top of the DEA's most wanted list—through passport control without a visa. Just a little outing—to take their girlfriends to the hottest restaurants, shower them with gifts, and then back home. Next time, their farewell to Colombia and drug trafficking will be final.

Julio Fierro proves to be very useful to Vega and his friends at the DEA, whose initiative makes a qualitative leap. In Panama they organize the first of many big meetings between drug traffickers and antidrug agents. A summit of sorts, or a convention. In fact, that's exactly what they call them. Julio arrives from Florida with Baruch Vega and the men from the DEA. Vega has taken care of everything, down to the last detail. He has filled the plane with the usual bevy of beauties, booked suites at the Intercontinental Hotel; he even makes sure that, after their trying day, they can catch some R&R at just the right club, with agents and drug traffickers emptying champagne bottles together, surrounded by willing women.

But Julio holds the trump card. He takes out a Colombian passport and passes it around to his former rivals and allies. The gringos have given him a new identity and a regular visa. Thanks to the United States, Julio Fierro no longer needs to hope for a tomb in Colombia. His gesture sets off a chain reaction that will change everything. But the big news in Natalia's life is something else: Mariana, born in Miami, is a U.S. citizen.

These negotiations between the DEA and the drug lords—which sound like something right out of a novel—are less unbelievable than they first seem. The situation in Colombia is extremely complicated. The government's credibility is lower than ever, incapable of holding any sway at home or of representing it abroad. In some respects, the United States takes advantage of this weakness. During the last year of President Ernesto Samper Pizano's term, he was under investigation for having been elected through Cali cartel support, and Article 35 of the constitution is altered so as to reintroduce the long-awaited—or feared—policy of extradition. The Colombian president knows he has nothing more to lose.

For the moment, that's all the United States can obtain through official channels. Unless they're considered in this new juridical context the "under the counter" meetings the DEA promoted don't make much sense. The concrete threat of extradition with no possible sentence reduction all of a sudden makes the alternative of near impunity in exchange for collaboration and the restitution of large sums of illegal money quite attractive. The DEA's real objective is to corrode the trafficking organizations from within, to use the information obtained to prepare the decisive blow and to foster a climate of suspicion that generates exhausting internal feuds. Giovanni Falcone, the Italian judge killed by the Mafia in 1992, noted that *pentiti*, or criminals turned informers, were the legal weapon the Mafia feared most. In Italy it was possible, albeit with notable resistance, to strictly regulate the way criminals turned informers were handled. But for the United States the

problems are many: Its widespread *Law & Order* culture; its international hegemony, which cannot be openly compromised; the very fact of approaching non-U.S. citizens; and finally, the urgent need to do something to reduce the power of cocaine, which, despite the dismemberment of Colombia's drug-trafficking dinosaurs, continues to grow. The DEA targets every exponent of real power: bosses who still control the old cartels; high-ranking members of rising clans; and narcos for all seasons, such as Julio Fierro. But also members of Mancuso's and the Castaño brothers' Autodefensas, who are becoming an increasingly formidable threat.

After the Cali cartel's fall, paramilitary groups started receiving many more requests for their protection services from emerging groups, such as the Norte del Valle cartel. But their own involvement in drug trafficking is reaching a level of systematic autonomy in direct relation to the increase in their territorial dominance. By now they manage every step, from cultivation to transportation routes to negotiations with buyers. Half the department of Córdoba *cocaleros* are under their control, half under the control of leftist guerrillas. They can now take each other on with the force of two opposing armies. In 1997 the self-defense groups formed a federation, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), or AUC, headed by Carlos Castaño. The Monkey was a cofounder, in command of AUC's largest military formation, the Bloque Catatumbo, which would come to include forty-five hundred men.

The conflict is becoming less of an ideological clash and more of a full-blown war of conquest. Once the outer shells of extreme right nationalism and revolutionary Marxism are removed, events in Colombia prefigure the current postmodern barbarity in Mexico. The AUCs are the "founding fathers" of the Familia Michoacana and the Knights Templar, and they increasingly descend on villages in areas controlled by the guerrillas, wiping out the inhabitants. They use primitive tools, such as machetes and chain saws, to behead and chop peasants to pieces,

but they plan their operations with cold military calculation, flying military planes hundreds of miles to the place of action and then flying out once the killing is done.

The situation has become intolerable. Public opinion no longer buys the rationalization for the killings, which merely repeats the same old story about the victims having supported the guerrillas. The strategy of balancing opposing forces has proven to be a disaster: Just over six months after the AUC is founded, the Colombian constitutional court declares the part of the decree that regulates surveillance and private safety co-ops illegal. Paramilitary groups are supposed to hand over the military weapons they've been issued and to respect human rights.

But it's too late. Carlos Castaño has more than thirty thousand men under his command, and the income from cocaine trafficking is more than enough to supply them with all sorts of military equipment. Declaring them outlaws has only made them more ferocious. In old Hollywood westerns the pistol-carrying hero never turns into a ruthless outlaw. But in the land of coke, that and much worse happens. The Monkey has mutated into one of Colombia's principal strategists of horror.

El Aro is a tiny village of sixty houses, which are more like shacks than homes, with zinc roofs and rotting doors. Compared to his fellow villagers, Marco Aurelio Areiza, who owns two grocer's shops, is a rich man. But because El Aro is in FARC-controlled territory, he also risks his life every day. Because Marco Aurelio also sells food to the guerrillas. He'd be crazy to refuse: Who would ever dream of saying no to armed men who emerge from the forest? In the tormented land of Colombia there's an unwritten law: Collaborate with whoever is holding a gun, regardless of what uniform they're wearing. In fact, Marco Aurelio also collaborates with Salvatore Mancuso's army, which comes and accuses him of supporting the guerrillas. It's a bogus interrogation, because the village and its inhabitants had already been condemned to death days before. El Aro is like a bridgehead, an outpost that must be

conquered in order to get to FARC-controlled areas. Its fate is also meant to serve as a warning to all the other villages.

The 150 men of Mancuso's Bloque Catatumbo torture and kill 17 people, burn down forty-three houses, steal twelve hundred head of cattle, and force 702 villagers to leave their homes. Marco Aurelio is tortured, his body broken. When the police arrive they find his wife, Rosa María Posada, sitting vigil over her husband's body. She doesn't want their children to see his mangled flesh.

Everyone is convinced that drastic change is needed in Colombia. An election campaign is starting up, reigniting the hopes within the country as well as in the White House. One candidate's résumé boasts not only of his defeat in the previous election because of the handful of votes the Cali cartel bought, but of his miraculous survival—he was kidnapped in the late 1980s while running for mayor of Bogotá, a post he held after his liberation. This politician, so unpopular with the drug lords, seems to be just the man to lead the country.

Andrés Pastrana promises pacification and tight collaboration with the United States. When he wins he opens the doors to the Great Alliance for Change, inviting congressmen from all parties to participate. The wave of optimism and grand negotiations has finally reached Colombia.

As promised, the new president negotiates simultaneously with FARC and the United States. That this does not generate immediate opposition in Washington is probably due not so much to the Democratic Clinton administration as to the global receptivity to negotiations. In war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina the 1995 Dayton Accords are put into effect. The peace process between Israel and Palestine is slowly picking up again, in the wake of the Oslo Accords. But the most encouraging example is probably that of the United Kingdom: Opposing governments are successfully negotiating a permanent truce and IRA disarmament. The end of the lengthy and devastating conflict in Northern

Ireland is close at hand. "Peace" is a word that now flows freely from people's lips.

And yet Colombia's ambitious plans will all fail miserably. Because it's not only a question of men with opposing political objectives ruling illegally; those men can be eliminated in various ways. But cocaine dies hard. Pastrana's experiment to allow the guerrillas a demilitarized zone—the so-called distension zone—twice the size of New Jersey—turns out to be an ill-considered risk from the get-go. The FARC does as it pleases in its assigned territory and doesn't even dream of entering upon serious negotiations: It grants no truce; in fact it intensifies its military activity. Kidnappings, whether politically or financially motivated; urban raids; control of cocaine: It's all the same as before. Disappointment beats down the president's popularity. When in 2002 the guerrillas go so far as to hijack a plane—a regularly scheduled flight—to kidnap a senator, Pastrana realizes that the moment has come to declare an end to the peace talks. War breaks out again: The distention zone must be reclaimed immediately. Three days later FARC forces abduct Ingrid Betancourt, a presidential candidate for the Partido Verde Oxígeno in the upcoming elections. Convinced that an armed conflict should not deprive citizens of their fundamental rights, Betancourt wanted to bring her platform to the Colombians in that area. But her captivity will last until July 2, 2008—2,321 days—when she is liberated by the Colombian armed forces.

According to the new president, Álvaro Uribe, the approach to take is that of an iron fist. The state must show its muscle and take back the country. Besides, the world is no longer what it once was. In one day the Twin Towers and the world's optimism collapsed. The only possible response now is war, it seems. In Colombia the war on terror coincides with the war on drugs. There can be no victory without a victory over drug trafficking.

And so, despite their differences, Álvaro Uribe will maintain one of his predecessor's key efforts: Plan Colombia, the major pact with the United States to end the production and sale of cocaine. Pastrana had

announced emphatically, shortly after his election in 1998, that he was negotiating a Marshall Plan for Colombia with the United States. As in postwar Europe, billions of dollars were supposed to pour in to revive the country, help Colombians free it of cocaine, and support those campesinos who agreed to convert their fields back to far less profitable but legal crops. But the actual plan, signed by Bill Clinton in 2000 and reconfirmed by George W. Bush until the end of his term, takes a different direction. A slow and costly social and economic transformation suddenly seems like a utopia. There's not enough money, trust, or consensus. There's not enough time. Funding depends on being able to show results. So everything rests on the quickest option, that of force.

The use of force translates, first of all, into a war on cocaine. Victory will be declared only when not a single leaf of cocaine is left growing in Colombia. Plants are uprooted, fields carpet-bombed with fumigation planes, lands made barren with aggressive weed-killer treatments. From an environmental point of view, the cost is extremely high. The ecosystem of the country's virgin forests is compromised; the ground and aquifers are filled with toxins; Colombia's land is burned or polluted, incapable of producing anything of value in the short term. From a societal point of view, the consequences are equally grave. The peasants, lacking alternatives, abandon the devastated areas en masse and start growing coca in more inaccessible zones. The dispersed cultivation and the displaced campesinos' vulnerability work in the drug lords' favor. What's more, the narcos invest in methods to make the fields more fertile, which allows them to double the number of annual harvests.

The result is that after years of a literal scorched-earth policy, Colombian cocaine still represents more than half of all the cocaine consumed worldwide.

The other part of Plan Colombia's use of force is directed toward individual criminals. The U.S. military bolsters the Colombian army's actions against drug lords and narco-terrorism: logistics, arms and equipment, special forces, intelligence, training. On the eve of the attack on the Twin Towers, AUCs were included on the White House's

blacklist of terrorist organizations, but that wasn't enough to ruin long-standing good relations with the Colombian military machine, let alone with part of the political and economic establishment. President Uribe, who is respected by the paramilitaries, negotiates the demobilization and disarmament of the Autodefensas, but the success is merely superficial. Most groups have no intention of laying down their arms, or of renouncing drug trafficking, and they continue controlling the cocaine business and spreading terror under new names.

Even though it led to significant disarmament and killed off the primary FARC leaders, one after another, the brutal war against the guerrillas was not able to get to the root of the problem either. Today FARC still has nine thousand members and ELN—Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army), Colombia's second-largest guerrilla army—three thousand, but more important, they still control a conspicuous part of the cocaine production, having become increasingly involved in processing in addition to cultivation. While it's true that Plan Colombia, with its use of military force, helped to weaken FARC, paradoxically, precisely because of the fragmentation and dislocation of cocaine cultivation, their role as one of the major players in Colombian drug trafficking was confirmed.

In short, if Colombia today is no longer the extremely dangerous country it was ten or twenty years ago, international antidrug policies in South America can take the credit only if one also accepts that, in part thanks to those policies, the conflict was shifted farther north, to Mexico.

But to better understand what exactly went wrong, you have to go back to those confusing times of transition, torn between hope and uncertainty, times in which the fates of the Beauty and the Monkey collided.

Natalia is living happily in Miami, taking care of her newborn baby girl. Her only sadness is that her mother keeps trying to convince her to

leave her husband. She takes little interest in what Julio does or why; every now and then he has to leave suddenly for some trip. Now he too deals with the big fish of the drug world who are floating to the surface, in order to negotiate a surrender with the United States, especially since a coordinated DEA and Colombian police investigation resulted in the biggest roundup since the days of the narco-state—thirty or so arrests, including that of Fabio Ochoa, an important, historic member of the Medellín cartel, who was trafficking in cocaine with his new partners. The investigation's code name, Operation Millennium, says a lot about the exemplary value assigned to it. The United States is already looking to the future, to Plan Colombia's ratification. Encouraged by the extradition agreement and the collaboration with the new Colombian presidential administration of Andrés Pastrana, they've sent a signal they want everyone to hear, even the Mexican traffickers, whom the antidrug agency has begun to recognize as a growing threat. In fact, the operation also involves Mexican authorities. And it is then that the arrest warrant for Armando Valencia, alias Maradona, is issued. Maradona, who, together with Alejandro Bernal, a Colombian from Medellín who had been like a brother to Amado Carrillo Fuentes, the Lord of the Skies, was managing a new and important cocaine import alliance.

The evil must be eliminated at its source, in other words, in Colombia. This is the fundamental error at the base of the United States' efforts. You can rip up a plant, but you can't uproot the desire for well-being that leads to addiction, any more than you can eradicate greed. Cocaine is the fruit not of the earth but of man.

But the United States, convinced that the war on cocaine is the same as the war on Colombian cartels, waves an initial victory flag. Fabio Ochoa is the big trophy, flaunted on the front page, but there were other bosses in their sights too who'd escaped capture by a hair's breadth. How was that possible? The DEA's office that coordinated Operation Millennium is not in touch with the group in Miami. Nevertheless, Baruch Vega is contacted to find out if there are any moles working for the drug lords. The ubiquitous photographer sets up a

meeting on neutral ground in Central America with his new informers: one is Julio Fierro and the other an AUC member who trafficked for Carlos Castaño.

The official policy of the stick is complemented by the unofficial policy of the carrot. There's a line of people interested in understanding how the Narcotics Traffickers Rehabilitation Program, as the Miami DEA agents called it, not without some bureaucratic irony, works. At the same time, the certainty that more and more prominent figures are turning traitors sows discord among the traffickers, in particular within the Norte del Valle cartel and in the tight ranks of the Autodefensas.

Right at the peak of this feverish, underground agitation, Natalia Paris receives a fabulous offer. She's invited to be a special guest on Colombiamoda, the most important fashion event in the country. She dons a little white number that could be a wedding dress if not for the enormous silk wings on the back. A crown of flowers graces her flowing hair. She's twenty-eight and has a daughter who is learning to walk, but she still looks like a young girl. Her hazel eyes roam the audience as if to embrace these Colombians who had welcomed her back so warmly, but in truth she's searching for one person in particular. Julio had promised to join her there so she wouldn't have to endure other men's longing gazes on her own. They also planned on taking advantage of his clandestine return to have Mariana baptized. But Julio Correa, aka Fierro, has vanished into thin air.

Natalia spends months at the public prosecutor's, between interrogations and attempts to identify her husband in the photos of dead bodies, sometimes mere masses of butchered flesh, that they place before her. But in vain. Each time it's not him she feels a moment of relief, an absurd, stabbing hope. It's obvious by now that he's been kidnapped, but he might still be alive. She has to keep hoping, praying, hugging her child, casting out every negative thought about what the child's father may have suffered.

Julio César Correa's properties in Colombia are sequestered. Natalia Paris's U.S. visa is revoked. Her ad contracts are canceled. It's the end.

Her mother had warned her, she who knows all too well what it means to end up alone with an eight-month-old baby girl. Doña Lucia was right after all.

It's at that point that Natalia discovers her own maternal instinct. She has to act; she can't lose heart. Shortly before her world collapsed she had launched her own suntan lotion. Now she travels the country promoting it, signing autographs, making deals to get it on supermarket shelves. It's the first step in her comeback. Little by little she reclaims her position, which she still holds to this day: an icon in Colombia and a sex symbol throughout Latin America. But starting with that moment, she also became her own person. A businesswoman who knows she must manage the passing of time. She has a fit if someone draws attention to her age, and the older she gets the younger she claims to be. Her body is her business, and she can't risk obsolescence.

Julio Fierro's body has never been found.

The mystery of his disappearance gave rise to a sea of inferences about who could have eliminated him. Suspicion fell primarily on the Norte del Valle cartel because it had a terrible reputation and because it was one of the United States' main targets, with whom Julio was collaborating. Only very recently has the truth regarding his death surfaced.

According to the revelations of various AUC collaborators, once it was learned that Fierro was in Colombia, Carlos Castaño, El Mono, and a boss named Daniel Mejía, known as Danielito, decided to get together. At the end of their meeting Castaño gave orders to abduct the traitor from his hiding place near Medellín and take him by helicopter to somewhere in the department of Córdoba. There he was tortured, for various purposes, including to get him to hand over some of his property to his kidnappers. When he was finally killed (some say with a chain saw, after having been brought back to Medellín), Danielito had the job of dealing with the body. Danielito was not a casual choice.

Daniel Mejía belonged to the military bloc in the area. More important, however, he was also charged with putting into effect the Autodefensas' new method of concealing the number of murders that could be ascribed to them. Despite the ceaseless killings, the AUCs still had a reputation as authentic Colombian patriots rather than simple criminals devoid of any scruples. The spokesman for the Autodefensas' honor was Carlos Castaño. Every time someone branded his men narcos, he would fly into a rage and respond with indignant denials. Obviously he denied all the rest too. "We have never killed innocent people. We are only out to get the guerrillas, not people whose ideas are different than ours. We do not use chain saws."

This was not just cynical hypocrisy. As often happens with authoritarian individuals, Carlos Castaño lived in a parallel universe manipulated to satisfy his whims, and he did his best to defend it from anything that contradicted it. What rankled him most was to be accused of conniving with narco-trafficking. That may seem strange, because his brothers had almost always rounded out their earnings with cocaine. But that was precisely what provided the foundation for his house of lies: Coke was merely the means, not the end—the same justification the insurgents used.

And yet the increasing force of his organization blew like a gale-force wind against that unrealistic construction. In some regions it was becoming impossible to distinguish between narcos and paramilitaries. The area around Medellín was one such region. Daniel Mejía was now the right-hand man of the bloodthirsty Don Berna, who, in grabbing up the remains of Escobar's empire, had joined with the AUCs, to his clear advantage. Danielito was slotted to take over as boss of the new cartel Oficina de Envigado, or Office of Envigado. Together they killed, as in any drug war, in order to subjugate people by terror and to eliminate competition.

It was urgent that all be kept hidden, so a new method was devised. Danielito set to work building crematoriums. Up to twenty bodies a week would be burned in them. According to some former AUC sol-

diers, even Julio Fierro was incinerated in one of those ovens. And, a fitting twist, Daniel Mejía himself ended up in one, after being killed by the other ex-paramilitary with whom he had assumed command of the Office of Envigado.

At any rate, it's around the time of Julio's abduction and murder that Carlos Castaño's unease begins to wear away at him. Without ever attending any of the meetings Baruch Vega organized, those circlings of the wagons, he contacted the Miami lawyer involved in the DEA negotiations, the same lawyer who later will defend El Mono. He too now has a young wife and a baby girl, born with a rare genetic disease. The only hope for treatment is in the United States.

Carlos Castaño wants to save his family, but at what cost? On September 10, 2001, he bore the shame of being identified as the head of a terroristic organization by a country he had always greatly admired. Terrorist and drug trafficker. He must remove that unbearable blot, from himself and his Autodefensas. So, in early 2002, he summons a hundred or so commanders from every corner of the country. He prepares his remarks carefully and is counting on his prestige and charisma. After what happened in New York and Washington, the Yankees will hunt us down like rats. We can't keep on killing. We can't keep on trafficking cocaine. It's the only way to safeguard our association's honor and survival.

The silence that greets his words is not that of dumbstruck approval. The commander in chief realizes that many of them have no intention of following his path. A defeat so humiliating that he steps down from running the AUCs. Carlos Castaño is like a wounded jaguar in the Colombian jungle now. He lashes out left, right, and center; he resorts to the Internet to expose his former underlings, giving first and last names and declaring that they are "irresponsibly involved in drug-trafficking activities" and adding that "the penetration of drug trafficking in some self-defense groups is unbearable and is known to the U.S. and Colombian intelligence agencies."

A time bomb, a deadly threat.

He declares that from now on he wants to dedicate himself to his family, but he's lying. Or rather, he's telling only half the truth, for the great Carlos Castaño does not stoop to lying. The Miami lawyer comes to see him more often. He's negotiating his surrender, his betrayal.

In April 2004 Carlos Castaño disappears. Legends circulate regarding his whereabouts, the foreign destination where he took refuge in order to make a new life for himself, as well as speculations about who could have wanted to eliminate him. His remains weren't found until two and a half years later, in the most banal of places. He was buried on the Las Tangas *finca* where he and his brother Fidel had launched the first paramilitary counterrevolutionary group. That *finca* was the beginning and the end for Carlos Castaño. His death warrant had been issued by none other than his brother Vicente.

Carlos Castaño's exit favors the further rise of El Mono. Not only is he second in command of the Autodefensas, he's also the most clear-headed, the most capable. He doesn't seem rattled in the least by the extradition request that now hangs over his head too. He doesn't let himself be infected by the poisonous rage with which, after their commander's resignation, many other bosses spit on the name of Carlos Castaño. It's important to stay cool headed, to remember the larger picture, the organization and his men. This means not hiding problems but resolving them in other ways.

El Mono is the one who opens negotiations with the Uribe administration. He sends his spiritual adviser, the bishop of Montería, who has known him since he was a boy, to initiate contact and to serve as ambassador. The first agreement is reached in July 2003. The AUCs will demobilize completely, cease all hostilities, and cooperate with investigations. In return, the Colombian government will offer huge legal concessions. Many pending cases are dismissed, most of the investigations of AUC members are dropped, and sentences for crimes such as drug trafficking and human rights violations, for which one normally risks life in jail, are reduced to a mere few years.

El Mono is also an excellent press officer. A few days after the

agreement is reached he grants *Semana*, Colombia's most important weekly, an interview, during which he explains why the AUCs agreed to negotiate only now: "For the first time a government is trying to strengthen democracy and state institutions. We have always demanded the presence of the state, called it to responsibility. We have wielded guns because the state failed in its responsibility. It was up to us to step in, to take its place in the various regions we controlled and where we acted as the de facto authorities."

He's also astute in handling the delicate topic of drug trafficking. He doesn't try to deny it but insists that his men do nothing more than collect protection money on cocaine, just like everyone else. In truth, even in this he's a much more ambitious and able leader. His Italian origins, greatly looked down upon at first, turn out to be useful to him. Mancuso oversees negotiations with the Calabrians, the biggest and most trustworthy buyers on the Colombian market since the days of Don Pablo Escobar.

So for the moment everything seems the same as before. Better, in fact. After years of living in hiding Salvatore can now return to Martha and his children, the youngest of whom don't even recognize him. But Salvatore has trouble recognizing Gianluigi, who is all grown up and soon to make him a grandfather. He's even received in parliament, where, dressed in a dark suit and red tie with diagonal white stripes—the picture of Italian elegance—he pleads the historic role of the Autodefensas.

El Mono chooses a place under his control on the border of Venezuela for himself and the men under his direct command to turn over their weapons. It is a solemn, moving moment and sets the tone for his speech: "My soul awash with humility, I ask forgiveness of the people of Colombia, I ask forgiveness of the countries of this world, including the United States, if I have offended them by my actions or omissions. I ask forgiveness of every mother and of all those whom I have made suffer. I take responsibility for my role as leader, for what I could have done better, for what I could have done and did not do, errors surely

caused by my limitations as a human being and by my lack of a calling for war."

Then, nearly two years later, he has his bodyguards accompany him to the police station in Montería, to turn himself in. In the meantime, some of the legal benefits of negotiating with the government are declared unconstitutional, but El Mono is not afraid of Colombia's law or its prisons. In fact, he still leads his troops and manages his affairs from within the maximum security prison in Itagüí, almost on a par with Escobar during his years of imprisonment.

Even so, the AUCs officially disband. Some—including mere narcos who pass themselves off as military bosses—turn themselves in, still hoping to benefit from the agreements. The others, the paramilitaries and narcos feeling orphaned by the big cartel, regroup into different organizations: Águilas Negras, or Black Eagles, headed by the fratricidal Vicente Castaño; Oficina de Envigado; Ejército Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista de Colombia (ERPAC); Rastrojos; Urabeños; Paisas. They join forces and they break apart—the only element unifying them is cocaine. A new Colombia is being born, the ferocious land of Lilliput. The days of El Mono are coming to an end.

The defendant Salvatore Mancuso Gómez shows up clean-shaven and wearing a pinstripe suit fit for a wedding or business meeting. It's January 15, 2007. Sitting in front of a prosecutor, with a microphone and tape recorder in front of him, he takes out a laptop, places it on the table, and turns it on. He starts to read. The room fills with names, rattled off one after another, with professional detachment. When he is done, he has listed at least three hundred names, in strict chronological order: the homicides for which he takes personal responsibility, either as killer or commander, some of which he'd already been absolved for.

Bewilderment in the courtroom. Why did he do it?

Why, after getting away with so much, reveal the massacres he ordered or helped plan?

La Granja: July 1996
Pichilín: December 1996
Mapiripán: July 1997
El Aro: October 1997
La Gabarra: three raids, May–August 1999
El Salado: February 2000
Tibú: April 2000

In all these attacks, the defendant Mancuso Gómez declares, we were not alone. High-ranking members of the military provided logistical support and entire units of soldiers. And there were political representatives—such as Senator Mario Uribe Escobar—whose support never wavered.

Why is he doing this? Why him, a man of his intelligence, with his leadership skills? That's what many of the people he named are wondering. Then he is extradited to the United States, a move that weakens his voice in Colombia but that does not silence it completely.

From now on, no one is spared.

Colombia's high circles did business and collaborated with the paramilitary organizations. Lawyers, politicians, police officers, army generals: some to profit from the cocaine market, some to insure votes and support. And that's not all. According to Mancuso's deposition, the oil business, the drinks industry, the wood industry, transportation companies, and multinational banana corporations also had ties to the Autodefensas. All—with no exceptions—paid huge sums of money to the paramilitaries in exchange for protection and the possibility of continuing to work in the area. For years the AUCs had a hand in every step of the process.

Mancuso appears on *60 Minutes*. Then the spotlights are turned off and the prisoner is led back to his cell inside the maximum security prison in Warsaw, Virginia. Colombian as well as U.S. justice awaits him. It is highly likely that he will spend the rest of his life behind bars.

8.

THE TREE IS THE WORLD

The tree is the world. The tree is the genealogy of families linked by dynastic relations and sealed in blood. The tree is knowledge.

But the tree is also real. In the story handed down in 'ndrangheta lore it is an oak tree on the island of Favignana, but the tree I encountered is in Calabria, a hearty chestnut with green leaves, though its massive gray trunk is as cracked and as concave as a grotto. At Christmastime that natural grotto often hosts a nativity scene, with the Three Kings who have arrived from the East and the Archangel Gabriel watching over all from above, perched on a surface root. For centuries, as storms raged in the mountains, this tree offered shelter to sheep and dogs and donkeys, who could at least stick their front paws and big heads in, and even to humans: shepherds, hunters, and brigands. That's what I was thinking as I crouched in its hollow, breathing in the smell of musk and earth, of resin and stagnant water. This tree has always been here, in this gorge near the crest of Aspromonte. Men came later, and they took on the tree's form and its meanings.

The 'ndrangheta tree covers nearly the whole world. Though not as mythologized as Sicily's Cosa Nostra, in part because it is much more