THE YEARS OF BLOOD

STORIES *from*
A REPORTING LIFE
in LATIN AMERICA

Alma Guillermoprieto

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AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS/GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

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Introduction

A Reporting Life in Latin America

I was living in Bogotá, Colombia, in November 1988 when news broke that a terrible massacre had occurred in Segovia, a small mining town miles away from just about everywhere but reachable by plane from the city of Medellín. Reports of the massacre took hours to travel to the capital, but then it burst all over the national news. We learned that in just an hour and a half of carnage, dozens of people had been murdered that long weekend. For days after the killings, the newspapers ran pages of photographs of mourners in the pouring rain, grieving over rows of coffins. But for all the scandal and commotion that week, I couldn't find an account in the Bogotá media that would help me understand how such a horror could have taken place.

I was appalled by the story and fascinated, too: the little town hidden somewhere in the crags and valleys of Colombia's rough geography; the fact that entire towns, and stories, and huge crimes could remain so out of view in the capital; the historical inability of ostentatiously well-educated presidents and ministers to take control of their country; the mythical quality of Colombia's history, so steeped in blood. And then there was the horror of the massacre itself, which reportedly was perpetrated by a couple of dozen men, none of whom the security forces could manage to identify.

Of course I had to go. I made my first trip to Segovia in March of the following year, and even then, months after the event, a claustrophobic atmosphere of terror came down on me like a kidnapper's blanket from the moment I left the airport. It felt like there was no oxygen in that hot air, and even though I was visiting under the pretext of writing a story about a local British gold mine, and was met by the manager and toured the mine, the skin all up and down my spine crawled with apprehension every minute of that trip.

I did a few interviews at the mine for a story I eventually wrote for the *Guardian*, and then I went into town—lawless, Wild West territory. People whispered to me that the organizer of the massacre was a man named Fidel Castaño: a cattle rancher, gambler, small-time drug trafficker, and owner of the local cantina, with a sideline smuggling Colombian emeralds into Brazil and Brazilian diamonds into Colombia. A decade earlier, people said, his father had been kidnapped by one of the many guerrilla organizations that plagued Colombia then. The Castaño family had paid a sizable ransom—which the guerrillas accepted, even though the father had already died of a heart attack while in captivity, so that what Fidel Castaño and his family received in exchange for their money was a corpse. Hence, the massacre.

On the night of November 11, while the commander of the local army battalion and his troops slept peacefully—or so they later claimed—masked killers went up and down Segovia's main street checking names off a list, and when they finished their work forty-six people had been murdered. I assume that most of the victims were suspected by Fidel Castaño and his siblings of collaborating with the guerrillas who had abducted their father. The town's suspicion that the killers had included freelancers from the army battalion would prove correct.

One version I heard of why the massacre had taken place so long after the kidnapping is that it had actually been sparked by the election of a young left-wing mayor from a political party allied to the guerrillas and by the guerrillas' recent rustling of an entire truckload of Castaño family cattle headed for market. I talked to the mayor, who was understandably taciturn; and later at some length to her much more simpatico, loquacious bodyguard; got out of town the next morning; then went back a second, even creepier time days afterward and got out faster.

A few weeks later, two colleagues from a major Bogotá newspaper went to do the same story; on their way into town from the airport they were forced out of their taxi, made to kneel in the road, and executed. I never went back, but nine months after the Segovia killings I found out that a handful of men had been arrested and accused of perpetrating the massacre. I learned the name of one of the prisoners and made a visit to a not particularly secure jail on the outskirts of Medellín, where he was being held.

I won't mention his name here; he may be out now, trying to lead a normal life. Perhaps he wasn't involved in the crimes he was accused of. Perhaps he's dead, or he got out and is still taking odd jobs as a hit man. I told him who I was and what I was doing, but I'm not sure how much he understood. His vocabulary was limited, and he seemed a little dim—but live-wire nervous, too; nervous not like someone about to fire a gun at you in a sudden rage but like

someone who expects to have the living daylights beaten out of him at any moment. This anxiety made him eager to talk—not about the murders, which he denied any involvement with—but about his life. He was twenty-six years old, fair-haired, as I recall, and muscular but slight, and he sweated and jiggled throughout our conversation.

Néstor, let's call him. He worked as a freelance gold miner, he told me, which meant that, with a partner, he would go up a likely-looking hill and pick at the ground with a pickaxe. If they struck pay dirt, he and his partner would take turns guarding the site. On a decent day, the vein would produce a fistful of gold chips that could be exchanged for maybe a week's worth of food and supplies. In this case, Néstor's partner was one of his brothers. One day, after they struck gold, six men came up the hill and killed his brother, while Néstor hid behind a rock, praying for his life.

There was another, younger brother, whom Néstor always referred to as his *hermanito*. This *hermanito* was a junkie, and he hustled small amounts of *basuco*, a kind of crack cocaine, to pay for his habit. At some point—I was trying back then to make sense of Néstor's circling account, and I've been trying now to make sense of my own notes from that long-ago interview—the *hermanito* was blinded by rivals who took his eyes out with a machete. Néstor thought that this *hermanito* may have started selling drugs in an area he didn't know was controlled by a different guerrilla group from the one that killed Fidel Castaño's father. Both groups, in any case, funded their activities largely by patrolling areas where coca leaf was grown and sold to cocaine dealers for export. *Basuco*, the residual product from the manufacturing process, was sold locally, to a new generation of addicts. Whether selling *basuco* outside his turf was the motive or not, one day the guerrillas dragged Néstor's *hermanito* off a suburban bus and shot him to death in front of all the other passengers. Or maybe it was two different *hermanitos*, one blinded and the other shot to death, plus the one killed at the mine . . . who knows. When my allotted hour was up and I closed my notebook, I was so full of Néstor's mumbling despair that I couldn't really think.

But now I can see how Néstor, if someone had come up to him and handed him a machine gun and said, "Let's go shoot some terrorists and here's a little cash," might have said, "Sure, when do we start?" And I can see something also about the man who probably hired him, the small-time trafficker Fidel Castaño, who founded a paramilitary group at this time that, in collusion with much of the army and police and with funding from cattle ranchers and cocaine traffickers, terrorized the countryside and was responsible for a good part of the hundreds of thousands of murders that took place in Colombia between 1988

and 2001. What I understood was this: Colombia has been historically an isolated and poor country and tremendously elitist. Unlike many other Latin American countries, it had never had a revolution or major social reform, and its economy was until recently too small to propel it into true modern-day capitalism, with its accompanying benefits of opportunity and social mobility.

So crime became a principal means, perhaps *the* principal means, of social ascent. Fidel Castaño was a gambler, a cantina owner, and a smuggler, which gave him start-up capital. And then he became a killer and that gave him power, and he took that small allotment—his inheritance and seed money, as it were—and ran with it. First, in collusion with local ranchers, he started a paramilitary group for the *departamento*, or state, of Antioquia and established a pioneering working relationship with the local army garrison. Then he took that model and reproduced it all over northeastern Colombia, until under his brother, Carlos, this paramilitary movement became an army as powerful as the guerrilla forces it waged war against.

The Segovia massacre was among the first and largest of dozens of paramilitary massacres that followed throughout the next quarter century in Colombia, and writing about it was to have been my first effort for the *New Yorker*, but it never ran. Now I think that's because I wasn't able to communicate what lay behind my need to write the story: the fact that prohibitionist US foreign policy with regard to drugs has created a voracious illegal market and led to the violent death of a million or more Latin Americans—men, mostly, and most of them young—in the past fifty years. It all started in the mid-1970s: President Richard Nixon's polls were collapsing; popular despair was on the rise regarding the condition of returning combatants from the United States' adventure in Southeast Asia; Nixon's own disgust with the drug-happy culture of younger Americans fueled the inchoate anger that would bring him down; and the result of the mix was the puritanical, repressive, and carelessly racist War on Drugs. Its designers thought it would be a proxy war: foreigners in foreign lands would exterminate foreigners and so protect the American citizenry, this time not from Communists but from bloodthirsty purveyors of drugs. We know how the war worked out for minority communities within the United States: the devastation it caused in Black communities; the transformation of youth gangs in Latino neighborhoods; the escalating addiction figures in rich and poor white communities, but that is not my subject here.

For years now, Latin America has had the highest homicide rate of any region in the world. The figures fluctuate according to time and place, but at different moments in parts of Honduras, El Salvador, Venezuela, parts of Mexico, certain cities in Brazil, some regions of Colombia, and lately even in

Ecuador, that peaceful country, for each 100,000 of their citizens, there have been as many as 83 homicides. According to Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI, National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics), in the eighteen years since then-president Felipe Calderón fatefully involved the army in his country's drug wars, more than a half million of his fellow citizens have died violent, often atrocious deaths. And this figure does not reflect the total damage—the disappeared, the maimed, the traumatized, the orphaned, or the increasing number of families in which poor and frequently unskilled women struggle alone to bring up hard-working, God-fearing children, often by risking everything in order to transport them to safety in the United States.

A younger me must have imagined that Segovia was a story about evil murderers pitted against innocent civilians, and there were certainly plenty of evil men involved: the army and police commanders, Fidel Castaño, guerrilla leaders, drug lords. The most interesting and difficult part of the story was how victims and murderers were locked into one another's fates—the father killed by guerrillas, the father's son murdering other fathers of other sons—until the protagonists of this endless story became like those figures carved inside Chinese ivory spheres, rolling about in an endless struggle with no escape and no winners. Still, the roots of Segovia are planted in what may be judged in time as the United States' most reckless exercise of its immense power in Latin America. I remain deeply grateful to Néstor, who helped me understand this, but at the time I never managed to untangle the story and what it meant to me, so that I could make it understandable for others too.

People sometimes ask me why I like writing stories that can be terribly violent and cruel, and the answer is that of course I don't. This is not what I expected to do with my life. When I started out in journalism in 1978, reporting from Nicaragua about a popular uprising led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front against Anastasio Somoza, it soon became clear that the country was about to rid itself of a dreadful dictator. My colleagues and I who witnessed the Sandinistas' triumph never imagined that forty years later we would be writing about how Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista who was president from 1985 to 1990 and has been president again since 2007, has surpassed Somoza in sheer arbitrary evil. Or about how Ortega's vice president and spouse, Rosario Murillo, has acquired, in addition to great power, all the eccentricities of a dictator's wife—the crazy makeup, the spiritual séances, the crappy poetry readings, the offering of her own daughter for her husband's bed. We couldn't have foreseen that the peace treaty that ended El Salvador's long internal war in 1992 would not end the violence but would lead to criminal gangs springing

up two generations later, in large part made up of the ten thousand young men born in El Salvador of parents who fled the violence for the United States and who were then deported by the Barack Obama administration back to a country they barely remembered, if at all. But I couldn't stop writing just because the stories that turned up weren't the stories that I would have wanted to write. I'd picked up the thread of this story in Segovia, started to understand something about it, and although it definitely wasn't my intention to spend the next twenty-five years watching expanding pools of adolescents murder one another, and watching the drug trade cause not only that disaster but the erosion of civic structures throughout the hemisphere, I could hardly avoid this task: I had ended up with a career in journalism, and I was trying to see my way through the murk.

Ground seeded with the dragon's teeth of illicit drugs and violence is not fertile ground for democracy, and if in the 1980s and 1990s many of us who were then observing events in the region had found reason to hope as dictatorships collapsed and elections became a routine part of political life, we were soon reminded that elections are but the end product of a democratic life. Democracy needs not only a level playing field and elections free of bribes and fear but also equality among its citizens. So it is not surprising that in the most unequal region in the world people systematically deceived by their governments—subjected to security forces that keep only criminals safe, cheated of a decent education, respect, adequate transportation, and tranquility—should feel cynical and desperate when called upon to exercise their vote. In a recent poll by Latinobarómetro, the organization that studies citizen attitudes about democracy and their world, it came out that less than fifty percent of Latin Americans think that democracy is the best form of government. In Mexico, "something more than a third [of the electorate] supports democracy, while another third supports an authoritarian option." Further, 42 percent would support a military government in lieu of a democratic one, "if things should get really difficult." In some countries, the citizens have already voted: for Jair Messias Bolsonaro in Brazil; Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and, endlessly, his clownish successor, Nicolás Maduro; and, of course, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, who has many, many fans throughout the continent, wishing they had someone like him to vote for.

THE STORIES THAT FOLLOW were reported and written from Latin America and published in this first quarter of the twenty-first century in three magazines whose readership is principally in the United States. Almost all have subsequently been translated into Spanish. It is the third such collection of

stories since 1995, but, naturally, its concerns are different, as the preoccupations of the time have evolved faster than it would have been possible to imagine thirty years ago. The first collection, *The Heart That Bleeds*, edited by my forever missed friend and mentor, the great Robert Gottlieb, brought together stories in the *New Yorker* that appeared in their polished form under the loving guidance of the irreplaceable John Bennet. Violence was the subject of a few—notably, the stories about Colombia, and one about Peru, then in the grasp of a great terror generated by the Shining Path armed movement. Nevertheless, there was, in general, a celebratory spirit running through the book: in South and Central America the great iron weight of dictatorship had recently been lifted, commodity prices were high, and the formalities of electoral democracy were being observed with pride and hope. In Mexico this was the time of the first free trade agreement signed between Mexico and the United States, and the big question tormenting the soul of my compatriots was whether it was possible to remain Mexican while becoming modern.

The second collection, *Looking for History*, consisted of stories written for both the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*. The generous welcome extended to me by Robert Silvers, the *Review*'s towering founding editor, gave me freedom to write more meditatively about the problems of democracy in Latin America, where the twentieth-century free-election festivities had ended, and there were, seemingly, only a few straggler countries left, swilling the leftover bubbly before the hangover kicked in. Drug violence was becoming institutionalized, threadbare education systems were collapsing, and democracy's main product seemed to be corruption. There was, of course, progress as well: Latin American economies have advanced and modernized, health care in many urban centers is almost adequate, and an emerging middle class has taken root. But industry has thrived at the expense of its workers, who do not often receive the kind of salaries conducive to social mobility. Statistically, if you are born poor you and your children are likely to stay that way, and so the great glacier of inequality has kept moving our societies further in the direction of corruption and violence.

Looking for History was full of questions whose answers many of us could not find our way through, the main one being, *how do we change*? After the failure of armed revolutionary movements, after the iron rule of dictatorships determined to achieve progress through order, after the stumbling failure of formal electoral democracy, after we've tried everything in our power and still remained too much the same, how do we change at last?

A few stories in this collection spring from the disbelief felt by some of us born in the mid-twentieth century. We look back on the dreams of change we

failed so resoundingly to achieve and wonder, *What were we thinking*? What was it that guerrilla movements were supposed to achieve? The story about Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo provides no answers but seeks to describe, at least, the lay of that now devastated land.

Equally, the stories from Venezuela and Bolivia chronicle events in places that once filled many people with hope and are now, to varying degrees, disasters. When a peace agreement was signed in El Salvador in 1991, after long years of war between a murderous state and a utopian and harsh guerrilla movement, it was not easy to feel great enthusiasm—the country was physically, financially, and emotionally devastated—but along with many observers at the time I thought that at least, at last, there would be an end to decades of hair-raising violence. After an absence of nearly thirty years I wrote a story born of the shock I felt at what I found when I returned to El Salvador in 2010. More modest hopes surrounded the ascent of Evo Morales, who did not come to power in Bolivia through a utopian armed uprising but in the 2005 presidential election. His downfall was notable because, although his achievements were significant, he suffered from an enduring presidential vice: he could not bring himself to get off that chair.

This book is, then, to a large degree, the story of disillusion and broken futures, an attempt to fix this moment in a continent's history so that, perhaps, readers will find similarities with their own experience of our time and look for paths away from our present dilemma. But if life were always grim it would not be worth living and people everywhere find reasons to celebrate, and love, and contemplate beauty. I am endlessly grateful to my profession for the chance to spend time on stories that do not deal with death but with the great, bubbling-over, defiant life of Latin America, like one I was privileged to report for *National Geographic* magazine, about traditional Bolivian *cholitas* who are the queens of the wrestling ring.

I wish there were more stories in this collection like it. I wish this book did not have this title. I wish that what humor there is did not bite quite so hard. But I have felt the obligation to observe and describe, for the record, the triumph of violence as a form of political expression and the decline of democracy as an aspiration in this twenty-first century. I hope that in the not-too-distant future a much younger writer will be able to report and write the stories of how peace was consolidated throughout these lands.

NOTE

All translations in this volume are mine, unless otherwise noted.