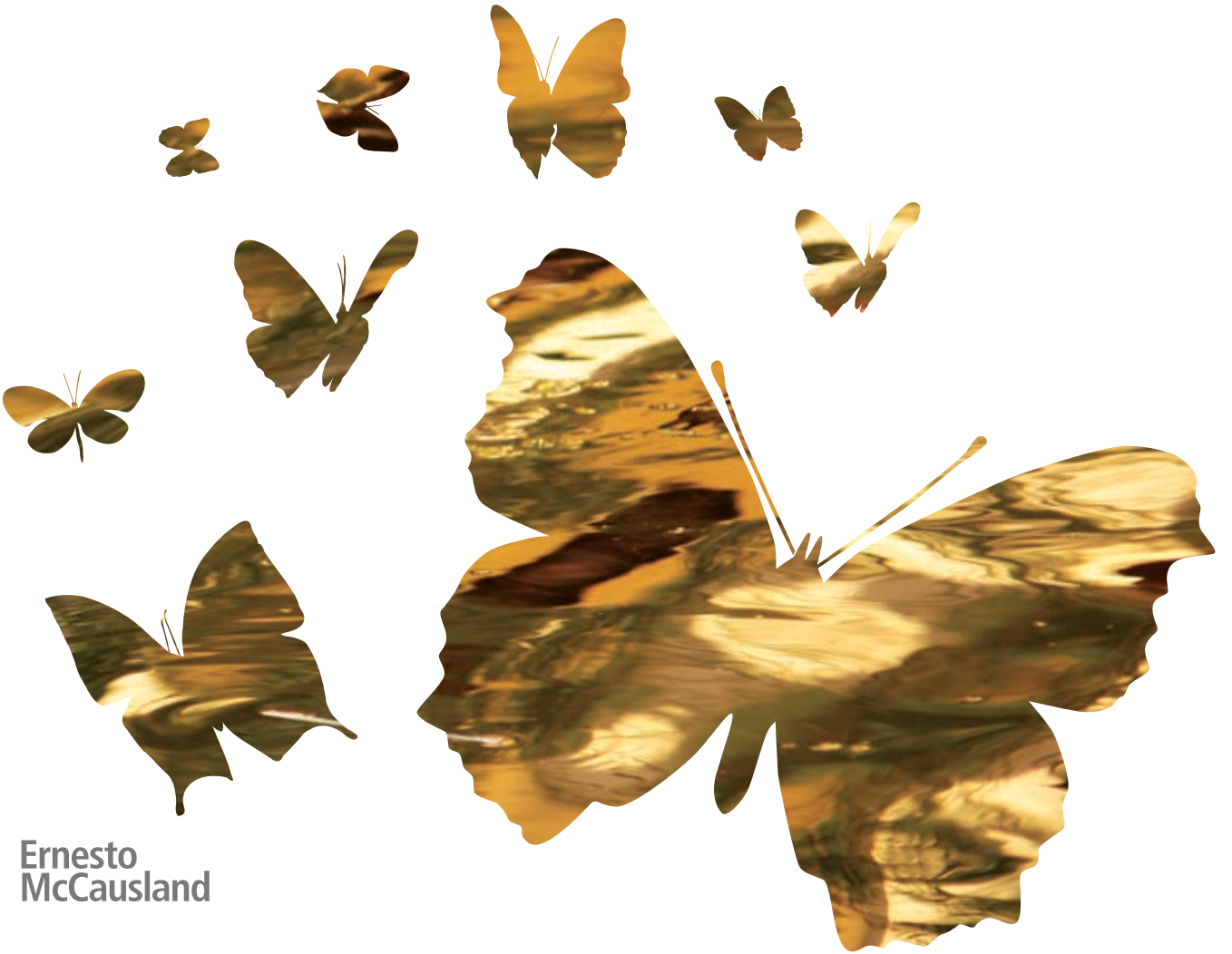
Victories of Peace

Ten Stories of Children Who Defeated War

Small Victories

Ten Stories of Children Who Defeated War



Ernesto McCausland

Small Victories

Ten Stories of Children Who Defeated War

Ernesto McCausland Sojo

Small Victories
Ten Stories of Children Who Defeated War

Colombian Family Welfare Institute
Elvira Forero Hernández
General Director

Editorial Directors
Luz Amparo Guerra - ICBF
Jorge Gallo - OIM

Text
Ernesto McCausland Sojo

Photographs of Children
Andrés Bermúdez

Photograph on Endsheets
María José Botero

Photographs on pages
12, 13, 26, 27, 64, 75, 86, 87, 99, 124, 125
Stock imagery

Translator
Sally Station

Translation Editing
Jenni Prokopy
Orange Grove Media

Graphic Design and Layout
Lina María Botero
Criteria Estudio de Diseño

CTP and Printing
Panamericana Formas e Impresos S.A.

PRINTED IN COLOMBIA
ISBN: 978-958-8469-30-0

INSTITUTO COLOMBIANO DE BIENESTAR FAMILIAR
National Toll-Free number: 01 8000 91 8080
Phone number in Bogotá: (57 1) 437 7630
www.icbf.gov.co

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION - IOM
Phone number in Bogotá: (57 1) 639 7777
www.oim.org.co

Table of Contents

Presentation

Álvaro Uribe Vélez
President of the Republic of Colombia

Small Victories: Ten Stories of Children Who Defeated War, written by Ernesto McCausland Sojo, bears testimony to the cruel effects of terrorism on our children and young people while simultaneously revealing the faith and optimism that provide a glimmer of hope for new generations of Colombians.

Our Government is firm in its military struggle against terrorists rooted in democracy and generously opens the door to a return to the constitutional life of the Nation. We want them completely rehabilitated, studying, reunited with their families; we want to create work opportunities and productive opportunities for them, in order to make them feel warmly welcomed back into society.

We have a right to no more trickery, to the security that will lead us to peace. We must set out, today, with the firm purpose of eradicating the professional assassins acting as terrorists and reclaiming, through demobilization, every child and youth fooled into joining these violent groups. The work being done by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar - ICBF), is therefore essential, in particular their Specialized Care Program that works with demobilized children and adolescents from illegal armed groups. This initiative, which began operating in 1999, has assisted 4252 children and young people by providing care in a family or institutional environment during four phases: identification and diagnosis (2-3 months); intervention (9-12 months); consolidation (6-9 months); and follow-up after release from the program (6 months). The process includes five key areas: health and nutrition, psychosocial, pedagogical, cultural and cohabitation, and strengthening family and social ties.

These generations, victims of terrorist lies, have found in the Program a chance for a productive and meaningful life; they have seen their rights restored and have been able to return to society with a firm and unfailing commitment from the government to welcome them back wholeheartedly. This commitment must continue to be honored through works and not merely good intentions, and these works must provide results.

There are still children and adolescents within these violent groups that have brought so much pain and suffering to the Nation. We urge them to free themselves of the anxiety of a life of violence; we invite them to demobilize so that, very soon, they may be reunited with their families and begin new, peaceful and exciting projects.

The reader will discover in the pages that follow, ten profoundly moving life stories that reconfirm our position with regard to defeating terrorism: a path of strength, free from hate but firm nonetheless.

Introduction

Elvira Forero Hernández
General Director of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute

The revealing content of the texts contained in this book, ***Small Victories: Ten Stories of Children Who Defeated War*** by Ernesto McCausland, lays bare the effects of a distressing practice: forced recruitment of children in Colombia by illegal armed groups.

The Colombian Government, through The Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) and with help, from society and other state institutions, wages a tireless struggle against this horrible reality.

President Álvaro Uribe Vélez's firm decision to create the necessary conditions for the demobilization from these groups of every child and adolescent has focused on the execution of strategies guaranteeing, on the one hand, a process of reestablishing their rights and, on the other, a return to their homes, their lands, so they may become protagonists in a life with a future.

These strategies illustrate the roles of Government and the Armed Forces, as well as the General Welfare System, in the recovery, rehabilitation and resocialization of children whose lives were, one absurd day, so cruelly caught up in situations of this type, which violate Human Rights.

The complex reasons leading children and adolescents to join illegal armed groups are rooted in history, in family, economic, political, social and cultural factors, and even personal choices made at a vital point in their development, while still girls and boys.

The youngsters tell stories of their lives and of the different meanings given to the time spent in an illegal armed group. The meaning and explanation each person gives to these experiences, and the breaking away from them, is

of the utmost importance when returning to a former life, to family and society.

The Specialized Care Program for Demobilized Children and Adolescents has accompanied young people in every aspect of their lives to help them find meaning in civilian life. Each of them has special emotional needs. Narrative and conversational processes help them to build present and future lives.

Once a child or adolescent reaches The Colombian Family Welfare Institute, he or she is welcomed, focusing on emotional stability and the reception and support needed to foster an understanding and acceptance of their new social environment; assessments are made in different areas such as physical and mental health, family recovery, inclusion in the education system, and vocational interests.

Later, working harmoniously in groups with a constant emphasis on the child's perspective, goals are set up focusing on access to and continuance in an educational setting, training in civilian competencies and job skills, and the reconstruction of family ties and social networks.

Psychosocial intervention is constant, ongoing and an integral part of this process, based on individual and emotional needs.

To achieve this goal, a number of active powers and partnerships must come into play: the State, through its institutions, society itself, which must genuinely allow for reentry, and family groups, often requiring direct intervention in areas such as values and rights and responsibilities to ensure that the rights of every child born into a new home are respected from earliest childhood. This is nothing less than the

living application of the principle of shared responsibility, the quickest road to ensuring protection and opportunities for boys and girls so they may grow and develop, healthy and happy. To guarantee these rights is to guarantee the natural and integral development of these children.

The stories and experiences in this book are a tribute to and an acknowledgment of every child and adolescent who, subjected to forced recruitment by these groups, has lived horrific experiences of senseless violence and suffered the worst violation of all his or her rights.

Ernesto McCausland touches a very sensitive nerve. His pen understands clearly that these events speak for themselves and reveal a crude, dramatic and surprising reality, one we can barely imagine for a person this age.

Those of us privileged enough to run through parks, walk down safe paths, play with friends, grow up surrounded by love and study with siblings and colleagues cannot understand or accept how a single child can grow up arbitrarily carrying a gun or a wooden replica on their fragile shoulders, captive, unable to act freely, with no chance to dream or be happy or achieve their goals.

The story of Carmen, protagonist in one of the chronicles, illustrates the harsh reality of those who, as the author puts it, go "went directly –no bridges and no transitions– from childhood to adulthood, from dolls to rifles, without any important pretext to call her own".

Each of these stories has an underlying tone of distress but of hope as well, which fills us with nostalgia for "the Right to Happiness" denied each of these children during the beautiful and essential years of their lives, and with confidence and conviction that their present and future lives shall be covered by the various actions and programs set in motion by the National Government during the past eight years through social investment policies, thanks to a solidification of social cohesion along with Democratic Security.

Ernesto McCausland's document is a renewed invitation from the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar - ICBF), the International Organization for Migration (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones - OIM), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to all Colombians in their role as citizens to help ensure that no another child enters this war. We welcome them all here, in a fraternal setting of love, protection and happiness.

The heroes of these ten heartrending stories, together with the many other young victims of the scourge who have succeeded in rebuilding their lives through a very personal process reconciliation with their own lives, their families and society, have found a place in life and now enjoy open roads and unbridled opportunities. To those who during their passage through the Specialized Care Program for demobilized children and adolescents have become aware of all they can be, do and have; to those who have shown us it is possible to trust institutions, to trust in others, to give and receive respect and love, we are very grateful and continually committed.

one

Carmen

When the nightmare is over

Carmen spent three and a half years as a guerrilla. Today, about to finish her university degree, she struggles to save her son from having to live through what she did.

In a small shantytown apartment, Carmen wakes every morning to gaze at her baby. Still asleep, just a tiny murmur in the early morning heat, the boy transmits a unique feeling of true peace to his mother, a peace she has never known during her 22 years of life. This is the only way to calm the storm and reduce her heartbeat to a normal, placid rhythm, to keep her from sweating between the sheets, as the sun blazes through her tiny window to wipe out the final traces of the nightmare.

The dead have stopped parading through her nights. Her own dead, and those of others. The dead accumulated during three and a half years as a guerrilla member: all the people murdered before her powerless eyes; the dead she watched fall into the brush after being shot by her own AK-47, ghosts in camouflage. She especially remembers a paramilitary enemy. It was either her or him. She had no time to think how the man, that ghost in the foliage, may have also had a mother, sisters, neighbors. No. She thought only how if she were to lose that chance rifle duel, paramilitary law allowed only two possibilities: death in combat, or capture including the usual rituals: collective rape followed by her death and dismemberment.

These are the stories of her adolescence; the dubious life lessons taught her by guerrilla commanders. Carmen went directly –no bridges and

no transitions– from childhood to adulthood, from dolls to rifles, without any important pretext to call her own. At least nothing like hate or resentment, extreme deprivation, child abuse, domestic violence, or a child's story of a dysfunctional home with nowhere else to go.

Carmen, however, grew up in an atmosphere of dignified poverty. She never missed a meal, although certain Decembers there wasn't enough money to buy new clothes for her and her eight brothers and sisters. Her father spent his days in the mines, searching for gold veins to enrich his boss, and came home late at night, worn out from twelve hours of picks and wheelbarrows. He was a quiet man, unlike Carmen's mother, who used the whip to run a strict household and only ventured out on daily visits to the evangelical church.

Carmen's mother was also raised by parents who believed that only a leather strap could correct bad behavior, although punishment occasionally took the form of a religious oath: "God will punish you for that!" She was suspicious by nature and protected her children zealously, like a mother hen. When her brother-in-law visited, dressed in camouflage, she warned him never to show up at their house with a gun. Carmen's only memory of her uncle is that of a man dressed in green, unarmed and smelling strongly of sweat and sunshine. She never knew, or cared, whether he was a paramilitary, a guerrilla or a regular army soldier. He was the only combatant she ever saw before turning thirteen, although rumor had it that the paramilitaries were on their way to wipe out the guerrillas and the army was trying to control it all. The young girl knew nothing of politics and only listened, horrified, to stories of men who dismembered their victims with chainsaws or threw them into the river alive, weighted down with rocks.

But these stories seemed legendary, not of her world, and only crystallized the day she came home from school to find a strange army of men and women camping on the soccer field next to her house. They were paramilitaries. It was impossible not to make friends with some of them, especially after they convinced her mother –using the power of persuasion only a rifle possesses– to cook for them every day. This was Carmen's introduction to the Colombian conflict, which came accompanied by an uncertain ally: Love.

Carmen went directly –no bridges and no transitions– from childhood to adulthood, from dolls to rifles, without any important pretext to call her own.

He was a young soldier and they began to meet secretly at night. The lad valiantly requested permission from Carmen's mother to court her daughter, but his request was met with outrageous opposition. Even after the boy decided, several months later, to leave the "*autodefensas*" and return to his village to work as a messenger, Carmen's mother remained adamant. And so Carmen decided to run away with him. A few weeks later, after reconsidering her decision, coming to the conclusion she wasn't prepared, at age 13, for married life, she sheepishly returned home to find things had changed between her and her mother, who beat Carmen and verbally abused her on several occasions. She even drew blood during one of the frequent beatings with a broomstick. Incited by her friends from church, sickened by rumors around town that Carmen preferred boys' company to that of girls, her mother often became enraged. Carmen seldom talked back, until one day she let slip some mildly insolent retort. It was the worst thing she could have done. "You're about to meet a black dog with fire in his eyes!" declared her mother, who then slapped her harder than ever before, rocketing Carmen's head around, making her see stars and sending her off into an uncertain future.

It's been eight and a half years since then. Carmen, her soul deeply scarred, now moves through the multitudinous big city masses like a fish in water. She studies at the university, guided by a clear academic goal and, stronger still, by her desire to keep her son from ever reaching

the same fork in the road she had to face following that fatal beating. She left the house without clothes or a suitcase, her cheeks still burning, as if driven out by the blow onto an aimless course. In a small village she met a young girl her age who suggested they travel together to the other side of the towering mountains. They walked for three days until they reached a tiny hamlet in the middle of nowhere. They found work there, in the only restaurant in town. At the end of the first week, Carmen had enough money to buy the first change of clothes in her new life. That same week, as if sprung from the undergrowth, guerrillas began to appear out of the mountains. They belonged to the FARC, the ELN, and the ERP, and claimed to be looking for paramilitaries. Soon Carmen heard one of the leaders had been asking about her, suspecting her of being an enemy spy. Carmen had no idea what they were talking about and denied it angrily. Naturally, she fell into conversation with a handful of young female guerrillas hardly able to lift the small rifles they carried. These "little girls" were the first to suggest she should go up into the mountains with the FARC. No one ever thought to speak of ideals. They used vague phrases like "it's great up there" emphasizing the fact she could leave whenever she chose. ELN guerrillas also suggested she go with them, assuring her that the FARC would never release her, but that they would. Soon both groups were vying for her allegiance. Finally one afternoon, after a few beers that weakened her will and threats from one of the commanders, Carmen chose the FARC.

They set off toward a camp that took a week to reach, over steep paths, in freezing temperatures, and through hostile mountain terrain. Little by little she realized she'd been deceived. They handed her a uniform and ordered her to give away the clothes she'd only just purchased. She refused, arguing she'd have nothing to wear the day she decided to leave. But orders were orders. Carmen and another two minors who, like her, had not yet turned fourteen, soon realized they'd never get out. They'd been fooled, forced to join a subversive group whose motivations and fundamental beliefs were incomprehensible to them.

It all happened very gradually, so as not to frighten the three girls who marched along with no help from any drum, toward a war they

didn't understand. They weren't handed a long gun right away, focusing instead on disassembling and reassembling AKs, and were armed only with small revolvers; they weren't asked to stand guard at night, an experience that terrified Carmen, except on rare occasions.

But it became clear to Carmen –as the days passed and the harsh realities of guerrilla life became more apparent and her responsibilities increased– that punishments for opposing orders were severe. She became a brave and responsible guerrilla, yet never flinched from questioning her commanding officers during indoctrination sessions. "You say you're fighting for the people, but then you go into a village and kill people based on some rumor you've heard," she once said to a commander. She was warned to hold her tongue; among guerrillas this type of thing could be misinterpreted. But her combat record and behavior on missions entrusted to her soon quelled any suspicions. She remembers the horror of the day when two young recently recruited boys, less than thirteen years old, were caught trying to escape, and with a gun stolen from the guerrillas. A hasty war council carried out by simple guerrilla soldiers sentenced them to hard labor. But the officer in charge overruled the verdict and ordered the boys shot. Carmen watched it all from a careful distance, and even told one of the boys a white lie when he asked her, from behind his blindfold, if they were going to kill him. A young girl deathly afraid of guns was charged with carrying out the order. She had voted in favor of hard labor and replied she was incapable of performing the execution. She was told that if she didn't kill the boys, she would die. Her death would come at the hands of one of the most vicious guerrillas among the group, a soldier distinguished only by the fact he enjoyed bathing in his victims' blood. The boys were forced to dig their own graves and lie face down in them. After a long wait, under pressure from all sides, the young woman fired several times without looking. The victims were still alive, suffering. With obvious pleasure, the bloodthirsty guerrilla finished the task. The message couldn't be any clearer for anyone toying with the idea of escape.

These deaths, and many others, are the stuff of Carmen's nightmares, the ghosts haunting her subconscious. Now, with the humanist formation she receives through her university

training, she pictures them in some kind of distant pantheon, part of an experience she's managed to survive, but that definitely did take place. Her new life is filled with new friends for whom she has reinvented parts of her past. One of her classmates, when organizing her daughter's Sweet Fifteen party, asked Carmen about her own. Carmen invented a non-existent celebration; in truth, the day she turned fifteen she was punished for a minor transgression and sent off to cut down brush with a machete, her hands covered in blisters.

Having earned a place as a combat nurse and now trusted by her commanding officers, Carmen was free of suspicion. But two years into her life with the guerrillas she began to think about running away. At first it was just an idea that grew inside her mind and in her heart, where she managed to keep it hidden for weeks on end, faced with the justifiable fear of losing her life should her attempt fail. Then she joined the Special Forces, the group that led the attacks. There on the front line, during an attack on a paramilitary base, Carmen felt death closer than ever. A round of machine gun fire exploded so close to her that sand scattered by the bullets

One of her classmates, when organizing her daughter's Sweet Fifteen party, asked Carmen about her own. Carmen invented a non-existent celebration; in truth, the day she turned fifteen she was punished for a minor transgression and sent off to cut down brush with a machete, her hands covered in blisters.

got in her eyes. A few days after this episode, Carmen decided the time had come to run away and she confided in Yelena, another soldier. Yelena accepted and the two girls devised a plan. But there were problems, and they were forced to postpone several times. Around this time, Jairo, a guerrilla who had been detained after falling back into drug abuse, was brought into their camp. Carmen suggested Jairo join them in the escape plan. Yelena suggested the same to Manuel. Meanwhile, Carmen was stricken with malaria and things became even more complicated. The escape plan, however, couldn't wait. Too many people knew about it and this knowledge could prove fatal. And so, in April 2004, still suffering from fever, this sixteen year-old girl led a group of five into the dark and, fortunately, moonless night, out of a camp of two hundred guerrillas.

Today, Carmen swears the hand of providence led her. Right after the plan went into action, a dog began to bark insistently, the group made more noise than they'd planned and one of the would-be deserters never showed up. But nobody realized they'd gone, at least not until they were two kilometers away. The runaways were soon followed and they realized that every time they descended onto the main road, the search party would pick up their trail. They opted for the most arduous alternative, to take to the hills, eating whatever they could find, sleeping like animals in trees, with no water to bathe in. Only a week later did they decide to return to the path, where they immediately ran into a group searching for them. Jairo fell to the ground, a bullet in his head, as Carmen and her companions looked on in horror. The deserters ran every which way amidst a hail of bullets until they finally found a cave to hide in. They spent a week in the cave, eating dried leaves and vermin, until it was safe to come out. Once again they made their way through the mountains until they finally reached a village where they gave themselves up to the authorities at a local military base.

Meanwhile, Carmen was stricken with malaria and things became even more complicated. The escape plan, however, couldn't wait.

The Carmen we know today claims her life is a miracle. In the five years since her escape, she has stuck to the guidelines of the Specialized Attention Program set up by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar - ICBF). During this time, Carmen spent 30 days at a halfway house undergoing processes of identification, psycho-emotional assessment, and skills and health appraisal.

From here she went on to a CAE that offered a variety of classes: Zero Module, focusing on values training and general business skills; Cohabitation Development, where she learned to value the world around her and improve the quality of her life, to improve herself as a person and prove that war can lead to lasting peace; Patio Production, which taught her to make the land produce for her; First Aid and Basic Nursing Skills, something Carmen was familiar with from her time spent with the guerrillas; Mathematics, an elective course she took to reinforce an area in which she felt deficient; Maternal Education, which would stand her in good stead once she became a mother; and Basic and Advanced Computer Science, where she learned to use a computer, a skill she now employs to surf the Internet and prepare her university projects.

Carmen spent a year at the CAE before moving on to the CROJ, an institution designed to accompany young people and provide opportunities for social inclusion and new ties before leaving the Program.

Carmen chose a university career, which entitles her to a monthly stipend that helps support her in the city she now calls home, far from her parents and the region where the guerrillas have declared her a "military target." Her latest class, Integral Beauty, has provided her with an additional income: At home, whenever her studies allow it,

At home, whenever her studies allow it, Carmen provides clients with manicures, pedicures, facials, hairstyles, make-up and many other services.

Carmen provides clients with manicures, pedicures, facials, hairstyles, make-up and many other services. “I hope it continues to grow,” she says.

Nothing has been easy for Carmen in this new life, especially since becoming a single parent. But she has never flagged and her face speaks of a serenity and knowledge possible only through experience. Although she remains in many ways a child, with firm, high cheekbones and dark eyes that reflect a certain innocence, one senses she has lived far beyond her 22 years. She still has the nightmares, rekindled memories of a life she was forced to live, but there’s always a dawn. And she wakes to find a baby breathing softly in the early morning light.

two

Canario

Actor in a New Struggle

Canario hails from one of Colombia's poorest regions, a stepping stone straight into war. Today, theater plays an instrumental role in his return to society.

The person speaking is *Canario*, his deep, uncontrolled voice flying from one story to another as if hopping from tree to tree. Similarly, he darts into the past, vividly recreating his childhood on the banks of the San Carlos River, flittering through legendary short stories of a bloody war before landing back in the present, sailing through wide-open gates that welcome him.

This is the present for a young man who has finished his institutional passage through the CAE and must now face the real world. He leaves behind the turmoil of his demobilization from the armed group to which he belonged, bidding farewell to the newcomer he once was

who found fault with everything; if other recently demobilized soldiers arrived at the Center and were given a pillow, this canary warbled dissonantly, asking why he didn't have one. His song was neither pleasant nor polite; his question belligerent, insinuating he hadn't been given a pillow because some member of the staff had stolen it. The staff would then go to his bed where they'd find his pillow, like everyone else's, the passive symbol of a boy who dared to leave behind a world of savagery, even his AK-47, but who returned to normal life armed with a viper's tongue.

He's left behind the grudges, the endlessly repeated reproaches, in the same way he left behind the war in the mountains, his work as a member of the FARC's Finance Committee, moving millions of pesos over rivers, gullies, ravines and mountains. Now, in his booming talkativeness, C*anario* proudly boasts, puffing up his breast, that on more than one occasion he was left alone with astronomical amounts of cash, bundles of banknotes that shone with their own light inside piles of duffle bags, and never once entertained the idea of saying "to hell with it" and running off with the money, a millionaire. There was even a time when in the middle of a November downpour he found himself alone with a shipment of dollars on the Pan-American Highway, his partners on the mission still miles away. All he would have had to do was stick out his hand, stop a bus, and fly away to paradise. But he didn't. This he emphasizes in his thundering voice, with all the arrogance of a Zulu prince. He simply did not do it.

C*anario* lives on his own now, in an independent residence. Against all odds, he has completed the first step in re-establishing his rights and has begun a new life full of new responsibilities, but a life for which, at least, he is prepared. He's no longer a rebel without a cause, a tiger torn from the jungle. He has learned to take "no" for an answer and has even discovered that ideal place, completely foreign to him, where he can listen.

A few days after leaving the CAE he met a staff member from the Center at a sporting event. She came over to say hello, rather excited, but also very wary of what he might say, of how he might react. But C*anario* simply stated, without any cynicism at all, without arrogance or hesitation, that he missed the CAE, even the

…he found himself alone with a shipment of dollars on the Pan-American Highway (…) All he would have had to do was stick out his hand, stop a bus, and fly away to paradise. But he didn't.

nagging. He said this, and concluded with a mocking smile, as if accepting that the nagging he referred to was actually nothing more than a simple reprimand, the voice of authority he had never known; a reminder to make his bed and close the door on his way out; the same voice that rose vigorously the day C*anario* got into a fistfight with another demobilized combatant over some mundane household argument.

The staff understood then, on the day they saw him walk away with two suitcases and unaccustomed aplomb, that it had been worth it: Canario had finally understood there was a life waiting for him outside, that at 18 he had plenty of time to start working on ideas that only recently had begun to cross his mind: a rural production project, a career as a composer, a well-stocked grocery, countless plays for the theater. And although he claimed he was a bit nervous and feared for his safety on the streets, everyone knew that what he really feared was inside him; he feared entering the unfamiliar world of concrete and carbonic gas.

But he flew onto the streets like an incarnation of his nickname, and the staff watched as he met the challenge head-on, an enormous mahogany shadow disappearing into the distance, with the determination of someone prepared for more, for something other than his marginal Chocó province, the same Chocó, where as a boy he ran between the vast marshy flats and wooden huts of his native San Carlos, where this story began, a far-flung corner of the world where one day a gang known as *Los Benkos* regrettably decided to pay a visit. They were rustlers and stole

any cattle that crossed their path. They didn't seem to care if the cows were skinny or fat, if the bulls were young or old. They took it all, no questions asked, leaving this no man's land in even greater misery. Canario was only seven at the time and all this was part of his world, part of the legend that shocked the village from time to time, of rustlers who came through town rounding up cattle in a cloud of dust amidst the thunder of hooves on sand. That is, until paramilitaries from the Calima Block showed up, offering to rid the region of the rustlers, and fresh blood flowed through the remote hamlet located on the banks of a narrow river filled with muddy water, whose source and destination were unknown.

Once *Los Benkos* had been scared off, and while the cattle ranchers celebrated their peace, the paramilitaries looked for something to do and found it in their imaginations: They devised a war against guerrillas, entirely in keeping with their reason for being, having grown out of the *autodefensas*. Except there were no guerrillas in this region, and so they had to fight an imaginary enemy. C*anario,* 10 years old by this time, watched them swagger onto his family's

Against all odds, he has completed the first step in re-establishing his rights and has begun a new life full of new responsibilities, but a life for which, at least, he is prepared.

small farm early one morning, pull his uncle out of bed, lead him to an improvised gallows on a soccer field, tie him to a crooked beam, and fire 20 shots into him for supposedly being a guerrilla informant. Everyone –C*anario,* his mother, his two younger brothers, his other uncle– all watched in terrified silence, as if their hearts weren't about to burst, and when they finally did move, it was only in response to a categorical threat: They had one hour to get out of town.

And so, leaving their land and most of their belongings behind, they wound up in *Trojas de la Virgen*, where a member of the family put them up. But the long arm of the *autodefensas* stretched all the way to this tiny town and C*anario* was certain that sooner or later they'd appear. The threat grew until children and adults alike were sleeping with their boots at the foot of their beds.

And then it happened. Early one morning, paramilitaries poured into the village and the family flew in terror out of the region, to a neighborhood of displaced persons in a large town, piled into a narrow hut with cardboard walls and a plastic roof. A few days later, C*anario* decided to return to Chocó on his own. There he met a young man who suggested he join the guerrillas, assuring him they'd pay 550,000 pesos per month. Once he'd

Everyone – *Canario*, his mother, his two younger brothers, his other uncle– all watched in terrified silence, as if their hearts weren't about to burst...

joined the guerrillas they told him the truth: "no such thing as a salary here, take it or leave it." C*anario* had only to remember his uncle's death on the playing fields in San Carlos. The memory was motivation enough. And so he decided to become a guerrilla.

His words tumble out even more quickly when telling war stories. Out of this river of words flow lurid passages that C*anario* recounts as if they were children's pranks, adding sound effects, gesticulating eagerly, as if in the middle of some ghastly theatrical presentation. And in this macabre compendium, this tiny Afro-Colombian fragment of the barbaric national tragedy, some moments are more overwhelming than others.

These are not just adventures with duffle bags full of money while working for the Finance Committee, but combat, attacks on villages, mixed feelings, like the afternoon when he and others in his squad crouched next to the river, looking across at the other side, carefully observing a village fete in progress there. People danced unaware in the square; the inspector decorated the school teacher with a medal; the priest called the people in to prayer; children

scrambled joyfully in and out of hiding places; police officers flirted with local girls; Christmas music filled the air. C*anario* recalls how, as he held tightly to his gun, awaiting the orders from his superiors he most definitely did not want to hear, he began to cry silently. All it took was the memory of San Carlos, details from his lost childhood, the starry Christmas skies, for the warrior's eyes to fill with tears. Then the commander's voice shouted "Light up the town!" And the machinery of death sprang into action. Before the furtive tears had finished drying on "*Canario's*" face, they crossed the river and began ripping apart the primitivist scene. People ran in terror. Not a soul was left, only a pile of garlands and streamers that continued to dance in the wind. The police remained entrenched. C*anario* spotted one of them shooting from a sentry box. He took aim from 500 meters and killed him, then took the man's rifle and threw his old AK (with four pieces missing) into the river.

Now, of the roar of bullets and mortars, the shouts of those demanding blood and death, the howls of those dying and the war chants of the victors, nothing remains but the most terrifying of silences, the soul searching, the impetuous roar of the blood-filled jungle. Now, he's betting on peace. As he looks around, C*anario* no longer sees men in camouflage and guns, but hands stretching toward him, professionals whose mission is to explain to him the sacred plan of his new life, the one he chose when he decided to give himself up on a night when the moon waxed and he ran toward the end of his misfortunes.

A commanding officer had sent him on a financial mission, along with Adela, another low-ranking guerrilla. They were carrying a lot of money and soon C*anario* began to notice certain things, details about Adela's behavior, nervous glances, as if she were hiding something. As they made their way through the jungle, his suspicions grew, until in the night void of cicadas C*anario* decided to keep the eyes every soldier has in the back of his head wide open and saw clearly how Adela cocked her gun and prepared to shoot him and take off with the money. But C*anario* –distinguished hero of his own tale– beat her to the punch. He disarmed her after shooting her in the foot. Realizing he'd discovered her plan, she suggested they escape together. It was too late. Her fate had been sealed and a continuation of her life wasn't in the cards. His gun still smoking, C*anario* stuffed three million pesos in his boots and ran down to the highway where a bus picked him up. A few kilometers down the road, the bus's co-pilot noticed his camouflage and asked C*anario* to get off the bus. But C*anario* stuck the barrel of his gun in the man's mouth, making it clear that stepping off the bus meant backing down from his newfound resolve to journey toward peace.

***

All of this, and much more, is now part of a play called "My Experience." The creator of this drama, C*anario,* assures us it was very easy to write, that it took no more than five minutes because the story was already there, trapped like a squawking parrot in a cage inside his mind, a living memory of moments and sequences from his days in the narco-insurgency: Nights at the official airport in Urabá, delivering shipments of cocaine to Mexican pilots; receiving boxes of money and counting it for hours, dollar by dollar, in a room next to the control tower; an entire afternoon in May, the day before an offensive, filling soccer balls with explosives and shrapnel before sewing them up with a needle and thread and burying them until combat began; the kidnapping victim, accused of befriending paramilitaries, who knelt before him, begging him to run away with her; and the moment that still produces a sarcastic chuckle, the beauty pageants at the Eastern Block's Joint Chiefs of Staff headquarters, where contestants –female guerrillas– paraded up and down the catwalk in camouflage amid cheers from their companions in arms. It was during the coronation ceremony at one such pageant that C*anario* wrote the following song entitled "Guerrilla Girl," later recorded by Julian Conrado, the *vallenato* voice of the FARC:

Listen, guerrilla girl,
You who bathe
in the beautiful waters
of this paradise,
this spring,
One day in the mountains
you spied a masked
mockingbird crying
And he saw the guerrilla girl
who had scorned his love.
Guerrilla Girl, you've wounded my soul,
Guerrilla Girl, I long for you so.

After singing an a cappella version of the song he swears it's his favorite, although there are many others, also recorded by Conrado, such as the autobiographical *El Negro* and the humorous *El Animalito*. These songs C*anario* interprets, not necessarily in tune, but with his own special energy, as if trying hard to prove he wasn't only just a well-oiled killing machine in his past life, but a sensitive man as well, who came away from the war with a handful of songs and a few hasty tears.

But he's more interested in theater now, and is studying in hope of one day becoming like "that lady in the red wig I see on TV." Other than this faint recognition of the departed Fanny Mickey, C*anario* is largely unfamiliar with historical and academic references from the world of art that now fascinates him, and he's convinced they're not necessary. He prides himself on being able to create a play in a couple minutes, as was the case with *Contra tanto* and *Mi experiencia*. He was recently motivated by an important event: 600 people attended the opening of his second play and wildly applauded the hooded youths who starred in it. C*anario* had decided to cover his face for security reasons, but was so moved by the warm ovation that he took off his hood. And everyone saw the face of the author of this story of upheaval, bullets and redemption: A giant black man, like a Harlem Globetrotter, smiling like a toddler at the sound of the applause.

But he's more interested in theater now, and is studying in hope of one day becoming like "that lady in the red wig I see on TV."

three

Marly

When the Soul Heals

Marly spent four years and 11 months with the ELN, living amidst the worst war atrocities imaginable. Nursing helped her to cure many, including herself.

Marly belongs to an indigenous people who have kept their traditions alive and celebrate their own carnival at the same time every year. Festivities begin on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday with ancestral dances and music from flutes, drums, rattles and shells. Marly recalls the carnivals of her youth. They were the perfect escape from everything going on at home.

Ever since I can remember, the other children hated me more than almost anyone. I was quarrelsome and envious. I gave back twice what I got. My mother punished me according to tradition, forcing me to kneel on grains of raw corn. If I'd been very bad, she got out a leather cow whip with a knotted tip and hit me hard. Once she accused me before the governor of the village council and he punished me. My aunts and uncles also hit me. They called me "stupid," "silly" and "lazy." The truth is, I was no angel. When my mother wasn't around, I treated my brother very badly. She'd come back and my brother would tell on me. Then my mother would turn around and finish me off.

There is much about Marly that still suggests the girl she was not so long ago: soft, delicate skin, like a freshly opened leaf; her oblique eyes that sparkle and seem to have retained their innocence in spite of the horrors of war; her straight, shining hair. She speaks with the vehemence of a storm and when she speaks of her people, it is with pride.

My father left when I was very young. But he didn't leave us for another woman; he went

with the guerrillas. He'd come home every three weeks, full of secret stories. These were the happiest times of my childhood. My dad indulged me, the opposite of my mom. She tired of my dad's absences and ended up getting together with one of my uncles. Once my mom went to another town to buy some liquor and left me in charge of my younger siblings I'd settled down, after all the beatings they'd given me. While she was gone, my uncle-stepfather took advantage and tried to rape me. When I told my mom, she didn't believe me. So I went to the governor of the village council and he didn't believe me either. He ordered them to give me special baths me so I'd stop being such a liar.

Marly tells her story as if it were something stuck deep in her soul she urgently needed to get rid of. Her words –simple, void of linguistic tricks– gush forth with fierce intensity, as if time were running out. But at the same time as words full of undeniable bitterness tumble out of her mouth, something in them remains strangely sweet, feminine and childlike, in spite of the terrible reproaches.

From the time I was six, I began visiting the guerrilla camps. My dad took me during school vacations. I started to feel a certain affinity for military life. When he had time, my dad played with me and my younger siblings. More than once we had to leave the camp because we heard the Army was close by. One time –I wasn't yet eight– the Army attacked and we had to hurry away, like a bat out of hell. My brothers and sisters and I were like mice scattering through the brush.

Marly belongs to a hard-working people, who work the land and do business in an orderly and dynamic fashion. The Yanacona people were servants to the Incas in Peru, but now, settled in Colombia, have freed themselves from their historical karma to become an independent and deliberate people, who fiercely defend their territory and ancestry. Marly speaks only a few words of quechua but is proud of the lively blood of her ancestors coursing through her veins.

I was only 10 when I left. It was a cold and rainy afternoon. My mom wasn't home and I was taking care of the children. This time, my uncle was rougher when he grabbed me, all the while insulting and hitting me. I managed to get him off me and ran out into the rain. I waited for my mom in a nearby ravine. She didn't believe me this time either. She was like the deaf man who refuses to hear. So I said to her face: "Mom, you're never going to see me again." The next day I got up at four in the morning. I wanted to kill my stepfather and if I didn't it was only because of one simple reason: I didn't have a gun, although I'd already learned to shoot one. I left in search of the FARC guerrillas to see if they'd lend me one, but couldn't find them. So I decided to run away with the ELN, or whoever found me first.

To tell her story, Marly slips out of the present, undoubtedly the most peaceful time in her life. And so, it is this present-day Marly, the more settled and balanced adolescent, who tells of a past full of tempests and atrocities.

It was still dark when I left my house and colder than usual because of the rain the day before. I ran through the flooded ravine looking for the "Elenos." I finally found them, six of them, all wearing their ELN armbands. I told them I wanted to join. They asked me why. I told them I wanted to get back at my uncle-stepfather. They told me they weren't there to settle personal vendettas and that I'd be better at home. I told them "no way," and begged them to take me to their camp. They took me and signed me up

And so, it is this present-day Marly, the more settled and balanced adolescent, who tells of a past full of tempests and atrocities.

and gave me a camouflage uniform and told me to stay a few days to see if I was good for anything. Five days later, while we were bathing in a stream, the Army attacked. I had to run with all my clothes soaking wet.

Undoubtedly, when Marly speaks, her people speak, from the distant colonial enclave of their immense and isolated valley. The Yanacona people used to wear masks during yagé ceremonies in which they communicated with the spirit world, but Catholic missionaries forced them to leave behind their shamanistic rituals and the masks were relegated to ornamental accessories used during carnival to express mockery, rejection and rebellion. Marly's diaphanous face is free of any masks. On the contrary, her face is an open book that tells a tale of infinite cause and effect, all governed by the realities of a distant world.

It didn't take long for them to accept me. The hardest part about my first weeks was making the "quiebrapatas" and then planting them along the paths traveled by my indigenous brothers and sisters. I learned to assemble and disassemble an AK-47 blindfolded, but at first I was terrified of firing it, so they started to serve me soft drinks with gunpowder mixed in for breakfast. My trial came after combat one day. We had captured four paramilitaries. Three of them died after my colleagues tortured them with needles, ripping off their fingernails and beating them violently. The only one left was a big black man about two meters tall. My commander told me either I killed him or I'd die. They made him dig his own grave and insisted I finish him off. All I could do was close my eyes. Then they made me drink his blood mixed with gunpowder. That night, the full moon kept me awake. Over and over again I saw that man begging me to let him live, he had a family...

Marly speaks of especially difficult times in the jungle. But none as bad as the day she learned of her father's fate among the FARC. He'd been arrested and sentenced to long imprisonment. It was what he'd always feared, both for her and himself. Prison was much less serious than death, but she knew it would now be much longer before she had a chance to see the person she loved most in this world.

I decided to study nursing and became a combat medic. I was always protected because I was the one who took cared of the wounded.

Once, they brought me a man whose right leg had just been blown off. I quickly applied a tourniquet and saved him from bleeding to death. There were hard times, but it was better as a nurse because I wasn't so exposed during shooting. I was further from death than the others.

Marly spent four years and 11 months with the armed group. She was captured the same day she lost her love. She had begun a romance with a companion in arms, disobeying orders to break it off and look for someone where the age difference wasn't so great. Although their relationship never went beyond a few stolen kisses on days off, it left a lasting mark on Marly. You hear it in the melancholy sound of her voice when she speaks of it, the day everything went wrong.

That day my companions went off to combat and I heard over the radio that he'd been killed. I ran to where they were fighting and dodged the gunfire to get to where he was. He'd been shot; he was already purple and cold. I wanted to stay and be killed next to him, but my companions made me run. Shots flew all around us. It was very hard. After three years together, we were partners and a couple, although we'd never consummated our love. That only increased the pain I already felt after my father's capture. I said I was going to run away and my companions tied me to a tree. But suddenly we were in combat again. That's when I was wounded.

Although two years have transpired, the index finger on Marly's right hand is living proof of what happened that day. A bullet destroyed the finger and the cure, at a village medical center, wasn't much better. The stitches still remain and she'll soon undergo reconstructive surgery that should improve things considerably. Nevertheless, the finger will always be crooked.

Weeks later, and still overwhelmed by terrible sadness, I was ordered, along with several companions, to collect some extortion money. We hadn't finished our mission when the Army caught us. I managed to escape that night, but they captured me again a few hours later. At first, they sent me to an ICBF (Colombian Family Welfare Institute) halfway house, but it was like being in prison.

A staff member who cared for Marly during the first days of her demobilization has this to say: "Marly's arrival in the Program was marked

I wanted to stay and be killed next to him, but my companions made me run. Shots flew all around us. It was very hard.

by conflicts with the other women and occasional attempts at isolation and victimization. Many times she expressed a desire to leave the Program, and never focused on her studies and training. It wasn't until she began her Nurse's Training that she began to commit to her own personal evolution."

I was sent to the Training Center, where I am now. As soon as I got there, I realized I'd come home. From the moment I met with the psychologist I felt she spoke to me as no one ever had, and then when I saw I'd have a comfortable room and three meals a day, and that I'd also be able to study...

Although she hasn't yet graduated from high school, Marly was able to enroll at a technical nursing school that doesn't require a high school diploma. She's now one of their most brilliant students, in both practical skills and theory. Her war experience puts her at an advantage over her classmates, so much so that her instructors often engage her as an assistant. She can administer injections and is expert at handling patient anxiety. She's already in her second semester. After completing four semesters she hopes to study Advanced Nursing at the university.

Last May I had one of the happiest moments of my life. My mother gave my number to my dad and he called me. He told me he'd just gotten out of prison and had started a new life. We decided to meet and had a very emotional family reunion; I was able to hug him, pamper him, and ask him so many things about my own life. We're now in constant contact. I hope that before long, as soon as I finish my studies, we can set up a project together that includes a drugstore where he can work with my brothers and sisters. That's my dream. And I'm so close to making it come true!

Marly was able to enroll at a technical nursing school that doesn't require a high school diploma. She's now one of their most brilliant students, in both practical skills and theory.

four

Papo

Nameless in an Adult War

Papo joined the guerrillas when he was only eight years old. It took some time before he finally convinced himself it wasn't the life he was born to lead.

The day he officially demobilized, when asked his name, the 14-year-old boy had no idea how to answer. His reasons were not those of most adolescents who demobilize and, as a precautionary measure, choose to give the false name given them by the armed group they had joined. In this case, the boy with the vivacious confused eyes –who had never officially enlisted– had other reasons. He didn't know his real name.

He chose "Papo," the nickname he had adopted with the guerrillas. As for his surnames, he mentioned a vague memory of those of his father and mother, although he gave them in reverse order, first his mother's, then his father's, contrary to Colombian law. And so, after spending half his short life as an anonymous "burner" of bullets in the mountains, a humble soldier in an adult conflict, the young man wound up with a nickname for his official name and reversed surnames.

But this is his name, the one he has taken with him on his new path, so unlike the one that led him into years in the crossfire. He's learned cooking and baking skills, finished his secondary studies, and come to realize that beyond the bullets, beyond the savagery he knew in the mountains, there is a world of human beings ready to welcome him as part of a big family, in spite of the fact that he's lost all contact with his mother and father.

One of these people is Ledis, the coordinator at the CAE where Papo has lived for the last four years. She was the first to welcome him, with a fraternal look in her eyes he had never known before. Papo responded likewise and from that moment became a kind of son to her; a son who, when he made the right choices, was congratulated affectionately, and when he made mistakes, was reprimanded with all the anger and understanding any real mother might show.

His biological mother is a recurring figure in his memory. Her hair was long and light-colored and she spoke harshly. Ever since Papo can remember, she would appear from time to time at the small rural house he shared with his seven brothers and sisters. It might be any time, suddenly –late at night or early in the morning– and then she'd disappear. She was affectionate in her own way, although unlike other mothers in that rural area, all of whom were dedicated homemakers.

Papo's childish mind never thought to wonder about his mother's wanderings until one day, before he'd even turned eight, she stopped coming home. Soon Papo and his siblings found out what had happened: His mother, accompanied by three men, had stolen a pickup truck after threatening the owner with a gun and throwing him into the river. A few kilometers down the road, she was arrested by the police. This is how they found out they were the sons and daughters of an ELN guerrilla commander.

Shortly after he turned eight, Papo decided to follow his mother's example, although not with the same insurgent group, which he considered ragged and undisciplined. And so, at an age when other Colombian children are going to school, playing, and basking in their parents' love, Papo joined the FARC.

The area commander took him in with no reservations. He was given a small revolver instead of the customary rifle, and assigned minor tasks, such as bringing supplies from town used to assemble explosive devices. The camp became his home and visits to his former home were increasingly sporadic, although Papo received news of his brothers and sisters: Three of them had also joined guerrilla groups.

Four years later, when Papo was 12 and already considered himself an adult –carrying an AK-47 rifle nearly as tall as he was– the front caught a soldier from the *autodefensas*,

Shortly after he turned eight, Papo decided to follow his mother's example, although not with the same insurgent group, which he considered ragged and undisciplined.

paramilitary groups that had moved into the region to eradicate the guerrilla groups. Papo recalls the event as if a scene in a movie: A youth not much more than 20, thin and light-haired, stared nervously from the gallows to which his feet and hands had been tied: an enormous rain tree. Papo approached his commanding officer and "asked for it," an expression which among guerrillas means he requested he be allowed to kill the man. The commander laughed loudly, as if the beardless youth had just told the world's funniest joke or announced he was about to play a very naughty prank. The boy insisted, assuring them he was serious.

Finally, the commander assigned the execution to an older soldier, but allowed the boy to participate; after the kidnapped victim had been fatally shot in the face and fallen into the previously prepared grave, the child was ordered to slit open the abdomen with a machete to prevent the body from inflating below ground and calling attention to the grave. Papo carried out his orders to the letter, but from that moment on, even after he demobilized, he would never forget the monstrous bilious stain the act left on his soul.

Papo could barely read or write at the time. He'd joined the guerrillas simply because he never realized there was any other alternative. He'd gone to a rural school, but it was miles away and he only stayed through the second grade. The area where he'd been born and raised, on the slopes of a great mountain range, was under the guerrillas' complete control. Papo and his siblings had never known another authority. He was part of them now, and enjoyed even the tensest moments such as the *pesca milagrosa*, when the guerrillas descended out of the mountains to stop vehicles on the highway in order to kidnap and steal supplies. But the machete violation of a defenseless man now rotting in a mountain grave had shaken Papo, disturbed his sleep, and for the first time, barely an adolescent, he questioned the phrase he had uttered at the time of his initiation into the subversive group: "The only way out of this is death."

Several days later, a young guerrilla sent by another front to the camp arrived with news that two of Papo's brothers had been shot. They had been accused (though the accusation had not been entirely proven) of being army infiltrators. To Papo, perfectly aware of the family's roots in the guerrilla forces, it was inconceivable that his brothers had been involved in any act of treason. Outraged, screaming as if out of his mind, he picked up his gun and announced he was going to wipe out half the camp. The emissary, the bearer of the bad news, managed to stop him and when the commander sent word to find out what all the fuss was about, replied that Papo was upset over his brothers' deaths.

Papo could barely read or write at the time. He'd joined the guerrillas simply because he never realized there was any other alternative.

Things were never the same again. The *autodefensas* grew in power in the area and the guerrillas were eventually trapped in their corner of the mountains. In the middle of the rainy season, Papo and his companions traveled for two weeks to the Venezuelan border where uniformed men loaded five thousand rounds of AK-47 ammunition onto mules the guerrillas then led back to the camp, under a seemingly endless downpour. In Colombia, the Army's presence in the area increased. Papo and his companions felt it one day when they descended the mountain on a *pesca milagrosa* mission, only to be met by gunfire from a helicopter that pursued them back up the mountain. Papo recalls the fear that consumed him as he ran wildly, while a companion tried to calm him by shouting over and over again: "Fire at them and you'll stop being so scared!"

So Papo fired. And ran. And as he scrambled through the brush he spied, a few meters ahead, the full extent of the horrors of war: A soldier from his group had been killed by a bullet through the head.

A few weeks later, still full of bitterness toward the guerrillas after the execution of his two brothers, and determined not to die in the mountains, Papo decided to escape from the camp where he'd spent half his childhood. To avoid having to undertake the dangerous adventure on his own, he invited his close friend, Misael. They decided to flee without their guns, which would make them subject to a lesser punishment if they were caught. Today, Papo isn't so sure this would have been the case; during the six years he spent with the guerrillas, he witnessed a number of executions for desertion, with or without guns.

The escape got off to a bad start. They had planned to scale a tall mountain, which they figured would take three days. Once at the summit, they would descend the other side, no less daunting, as the terrain was steep and dangerous. But a week after they began their journey, the young guerrillas were still disoriented, hidden only a few meters from the camp, and were even able to watch as their companions searched the area for them. In their growing desperation, Misael begged Papo to return with him and give himself up. Papo refused. Finally, they managed

to scale the mountain on the run, without stops, eating only the few provisions they had taken from camp until they reached the summit.

From there, swallowed up in the mountain's immensity, they saw in the distance the village they hoped to reach. It was immediately obvious their descent would prove a major challenge, more so given the fact they would have to ford a wide river and neither of them knew how to swim. They decided to cross the river by hanging from vines overhanging rocks. As Misael swung from one of these vines, it broke and he fell 20 meters onto the enormous white rocks below. Papo went down to help him and quickly realized the boy had damaged his lower spine and would be unable to walk. Semi-conscious as he was, Misael told Papo to keep going without him, that there was no way he could follow, and that Papo should leave immediately since the guerrillas were on their trail. This was the hardest decision Papo ever made in his young life. There on that rock lay his companion in flight like some kind of human sacrifice, flung down at the feet of Fate.

Papo knew that if he meant to reach the bottom of the mountain he would have to cross the river. He threw his boots into the water and jumped in.

"I didn't swim," Papo now explains. "I went straight to the bottom and walked under water."

And so he reached the other shore, barefoot, and continued on his way. Throughout his crazy journey toward the village they'd spotted from high above, he came across indigenous dwellings where families provided him with food, although he wasn't able to replace his shoes. Two weeks after he'd begun his escape, feet bloody and aching, Papo finally reached the village. There, he gave himself up at a small official Colombian Army base.

Four years have gone by since Papo left behind the life he once chose. He's no longer the same adolescent who climbed uphill toward an uncertain future and then appeared before soldiers with a wild look on his face, as if the brush had given birth to a strange childlike creature with bulging eyes, swollen feet and an overwhelming desire for freedom. Although not yet 18, there's an air of discipline about him that seems to signal maturity, a premature adulthood possible only after a childhood of tribulation and adversity. Nevertheless, and in spite of the long

They had planned to scale a tall mountain, which they figured would take three days. Once at the summit, they would descend the other side, no less daunting, as the terrain was steep and dangerous.

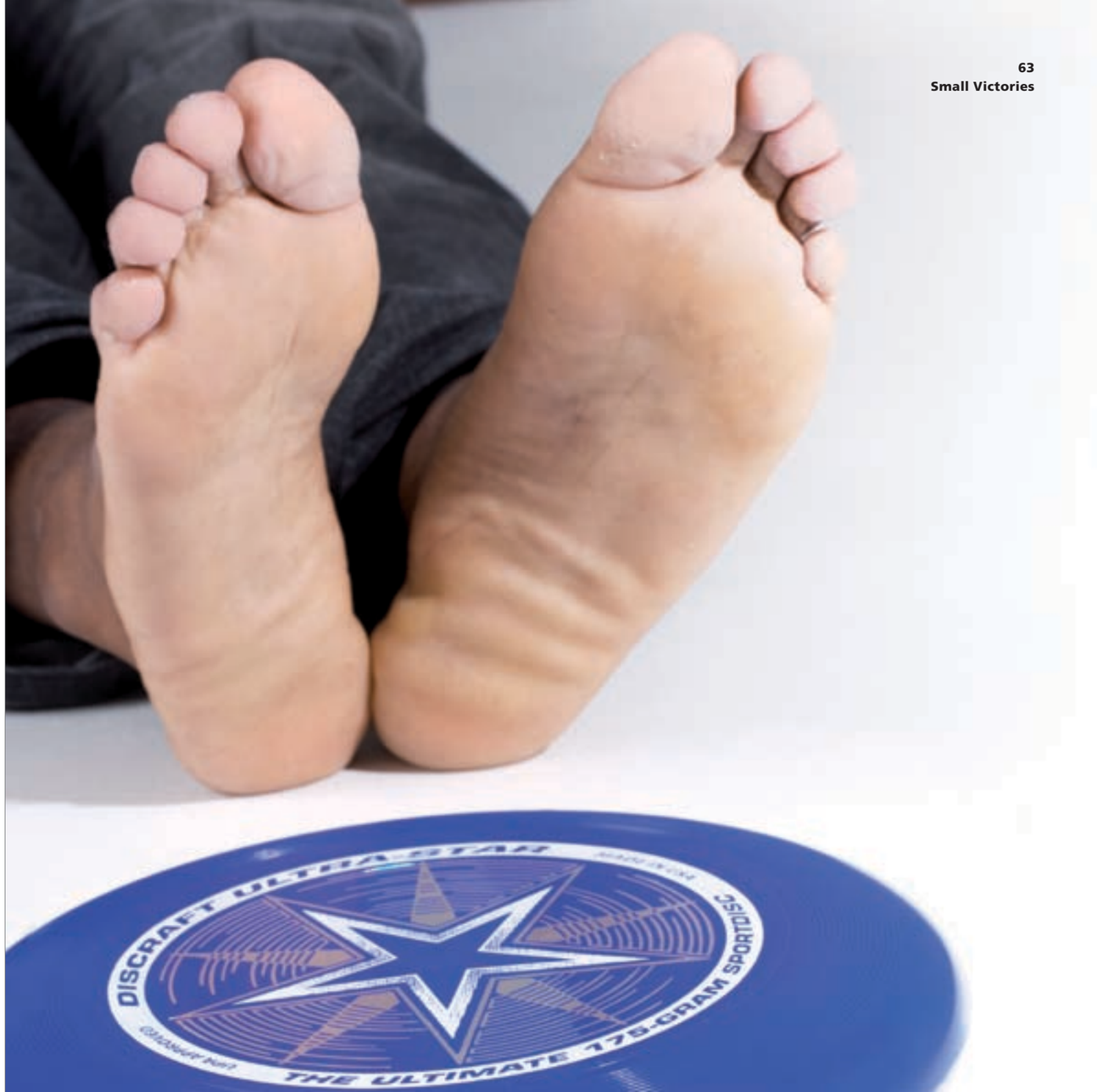
hours spent studying to validate his high school credits and the fact he will soon graduate, his eyes still speak of his longing to see his mother. The search has on occasion turned up unpleasant results. Once, a recently demobilized guerrilla told him his mother and brother had died. This destroyed the boy, until he later learned it wasn't true and that both were still up in the mountains, living the life he had renounced.

Only weeks away from finishing high school, he has never denied his militant past, but this hasn't kept him from making good friends and leading the life of an ordinary adolescent. Only in love did his past get in the way: He fell for a young girl whose mother beat her and locked her away to keep her from seeing "that ex-guerrilla." But generally speaking, he feels society has accepted him, especially those in the neighborhood surrounding the CAE, whose residents are attentive and have never challenged the presence of these demobilized youngsters in the final phase of the rights restoration process.

Because of his good behavior and constant will to overcome his past, Papo was chosen to spend a month in Canada as part of the Agape program set up by Colombian families residing

in Canada. It provides demobilized combatants with a chance to experience a different country, offering alternatives for social interaction and a short stay with a welcoming and supportive family. If things go according to plan, he'll spend a month with a host family in Canada that will treat him as their "adopted" son. Before leaving, he asked Ledis to help him pick out some clothes for the trip, to be paid for by the program. After spending almost all the money, he saw a shirt he really liked but decided he didn't want to arrive at the home of his host family without a gift and instead spent the remaining money on a hand-crafted gift for them. This earned him the praise of Ledis, who now strokes his head and beams at him like a proud mother. Papo returns the smile, a bit embarrassed, however. But behind this smile, behind the eyes that shy from contact, lies undeniable pride.

Because of his good behavior and constant will to overcome his past, Papo was chosen to spend a month in Canada.



five

Yomaira

A New Life For My Baby Boy

Yomaira spent a year and a half among the guerrillas. Today, she assists other demobilized soldiers in their new lives.

Yomaira gets up every morning at four fortyfive in the morning, prepares breakfast for herself and her five-year-old son who she calls "my chick," and at six o'clock on the dot is boarding the first of five buses she'll take that day. Her child will stay with her sister. Before leaving, she takes a few minutes to say goodbye to her "chick;" between hugs and kisses she promises to be home that evening and says Sunday is coming, when they can spend the entire day together.

She's at work before eight o'clock. Eight years after the 18 months she spent as a guerrilla combatant, Yomaira is now an Administrative Assistant at a CROJ. She works with young people who are what she was in 2001, when she decided to leave behind her life in the mountains. She helps them enroll in different courses, assists in the legal processes they must go through, helps them get settled, and counsels them when asked.

Sometimes, she's required to go the extra mile. A while back, the family of a young demobilized man came to notify her that the youth had been rounded up by Army recruiters. Yomaira presented herself as a social worker at the army barracks and spoke with the officer in charge. A few minutes later, the young man was outside.

Many of those she helps share their stories of life up in the mountains, familiar to someone like her, who joined the guerrillas at 15. Her own story began the moment she spoke with a recruiter, who convinced her the ELN "fought for

the people." Without so much as a good-bye to the aging grandparents she had lived with for the past five years, Yomaira set out for the assigned alley, hopped on a motorcycle and drove off without a word to anyone.

Today, in the large house that was once a residence and now houses the CROJ offices, Yomaira is the first face visitors see: A calm and cordial face marked by maturity. No one would ever imagine the things she's been through, her close links to violence, a childhood full of explosions and gunfire.

When she was just five years old, members of a guerrilla group showed up at her house asking her father to put them up. He told them the house was very small but that a few kilometers away there was a house that had been abandoned by doña Clementina. The next day, Yomaira set out to buy milk and walked past the house; it was crawling with local authorities and onlookers. Paramilitary troops had attacked it that morning, massacring the guerrillas inside. Curious, the young girl moved closer. Body parts were strewn all over the house, brains, arms, blood...

Yomaira's face bears few traces of the events of her childhood and adolescence. Nothing in her would make a visitor think she'd been a soldier. Although she dresses simply, she does so with style, projecting the image of an enterprising woman concerned with improving her life. Her day ends at five when she takes another two buses to reach the university where her Social Work courses begin at six-thirty.

She was part of the squad that performed the mission: Approach a local rancher, aim a gun at him, and take him up the mountain.

Yomaira's eyes shine when she speaks of the profession she has chosen with conviction and determination; she loves participating in processes designed to improve the welfare of all members of society, studying interpersonal relationships, the positive transformation of collective projects, and applying knowledge to improve daily life. It could be said that her university curriculum is exactly the opposite of her life in the mountains, the combats, executions, and general hatred instilled and scattered among the foliage like fine sand in the wind.

One particular event will remain forever sketched in her memory. It was a kidnapping. She was part of the squad that performed the mission: Approach a local rancher, aim a gun at him, and take him up the mountain. A few months later, Yomaira was taking food to the same prisoner when he asked her in a tired voice, "Honey, I have a daughter your age. You're nothing but a child. What are you doing here? Get out!"

Although this conversation touched her very core, Yomaira never thought of escaping. Demobilization came one day when she was nursing a twisted ankle. One of her companions shouted, "the Army!" and the camp became a living hell. Yomaira ran as best she could for several days, with Army soldiers hot on her heels. After a week, she came to a house close to a village and asked the owner for food; he said he'd give her something to eat if she'd burn her uniform. And so she did. That day, Yomaira gave herself up to the same people who had been chasing her for a week. The village priest acted as mediator. Her mother was proud. Yomaira was taken to the department capital where the Army then delivered her to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute.

The frightened young woman arrived at the CAE in Bucaramanga with three different tattoos on her body, all of them rudimentary and done by her guerrilla companions in the mountains. It was difficult at first to break through the shell of suspicion she'd brought with her from the mountains, but the Family Defender set her at ease, insisting over and over again all she had to do was tell the truth and from that moment on, her life would be that of a young woman responsible for her own actions, master of her destiny. She enrolled in cohabitation and human rights courses and picked up her studies where she'd left them before joining the guerrillas. This CAE, where she remained for three months, was the first of 11 stations in the program through which Yomaira would pass.

Next, she went into another home. She was only there for a month, but recalls something

she learned during this transitional period: In spite of having stumbled in life, in spite of the violence she'd been exposed to, she could do whatever she wanted, as long as she was determined.

From there she moved to another CAE where her reintegration process continued. Here she had her first contact with folk dancing, a pastime she loved and that accompanied her during the long training process.

The next home proved illuminating for Yomaira. She graduated from school, an achievement that merited a special celebration: She spent a year and a half at this home and learned to apply make-up and go out on her first dates. She studied Business Administration, painting and crafts. Here she met John, soon to become the father of her child.

This was a meeting of two wandering souls whose lives had been marked by the monstrosities of war; two people whose tender childhoods had been taken from them at gunpoint and who, now, due to different circumstances, tried to readjust the course of their lives. John had been recruited at the age of eight and during puberty had been seriously injured in combat. The Army

had discovered him unconscious, had saved his life and delivered him to The Colombian Family Welfare Institute. The young man inspired a feeling of solidarity in Yomaira, mixed with compassion, knowing he'd joined the guerrillas at an age when she was still at grammar school.

Together, they were transferred to another home where they were given employment. A famous jewelry designer agreed to hire several demobilized youths; Yomaira was the first among them. She recalls the bus rides to work every day, where little by little she learned to handle silver, making magnificent rings and other jewelry. At the end of her apprenticeship she found she was pregnant.

From this home she and her partner moved to Youth House, where they were given new jobs, this time in *Adpostal's* customer service department. While there, Yomaira studied Mail and Specialized Messenger Services. In the eighth month of her pregnancy she left her job. The child was born without complications. Yomaira speaks of that moment now as the happiest in her life and in the life of her partner.

Yomaira's next move was to a Tutor's Home, where they welcomed her newborn son as well. The family was kind and generous and frequently bought the baby's diapers, allowing John, who continued to work, to visit occasionally. Yomaira spent four months there until the couple was able to find a small apartment and set up their home.

Yomaira recalls this period as one of life's rewards after all they'd been through. Soon John found a better job as a security guard at an automobile manufacturing company. They were now in a better position to raise their child. But misfortune had not yet finished with them.

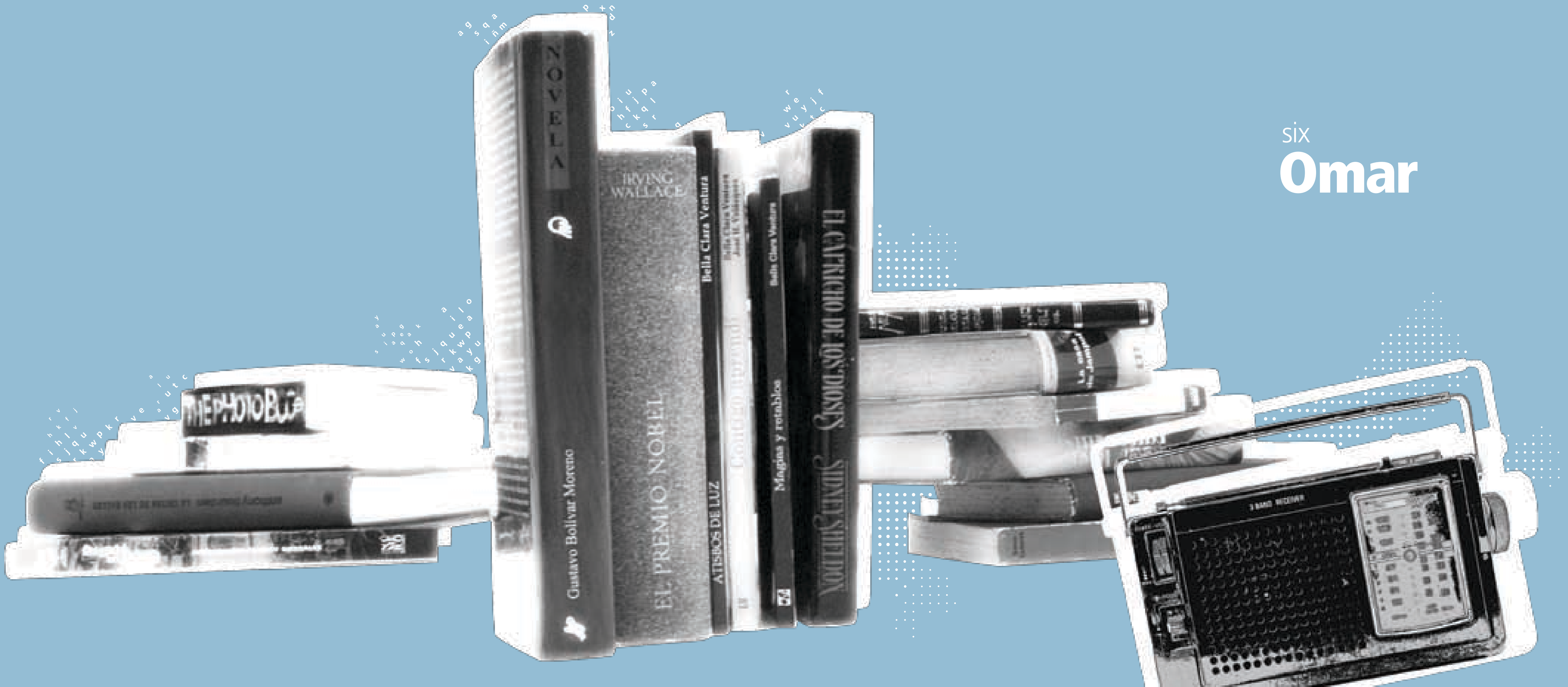
One morning, riding his motorcycle to work, John was hit by a truck and killed instantly. It was as if Yomaira's world had collapsed. But she had support and came to the conclusion that in spite of her overwhelming sorrow, she would have to continue to fight for the sake of her son.

Yomaira finishes class at ten o'clock at night and takes the last of her five daily buses. In spite of the late hour, she's still got twenty-five minutes of travel time ahead of her. By the time she gets home, her "chick" is sleeping. She kisses him in the dark, spends some time on college coursework and around midnight, without having watched any of the TV soaps, she lies down to sleep until the following morning when the cycle repeats, starting at four forty-five in the morning.

But misfortune had not yet finished with them. One morning, riding his motorcycle to work, John was hit by a truck

Weekends are different. Saturday is not as difficult –Yomaira attends university in the morning and then spends the afternoon cleaning the apartment– but at least she's with her boy and until his bedtime, her time is all his.

Sunday is the best day of the week. Mother and son get up late, make breakfast together and spend the day playing. There are sad memories, from the past and more recent present, but Yomaira has learned that her current battles are different and her life is full of reasons why the struggle itself is a victory.


NOVELA
IRVING WALLACE
EL PREMIO NOBEL
Gustavo Bolívar Moreno
Bella Clara Ventura
ATISBOS DE LUZ
Magias y retablos
EL CAPRICHO DE LOS DIOSES
SIDNEY SHELDON

six

Omar

From The Promised Land to the Horrors of War

One day Omar grew tired of his mother's abuse. Later, however, up in the mountains, he decided he would have been better off with her.

He was only 12 when he and his family reached the Promised Land. "The Promised Land," he scoffs, a hint of sarcasm in his voice, after having read all those books. It was no paradise, far from it. It was a small farm on the Colombian plains, with a few sterile and untamable cows and in the middle of it all, the Promised Land's status symbol: A "coquita", or small coca crop.

How many acres of coca plants in a "coquita?" Not many, perhaps. But whatever Omar and his brothers could grow and process, and sell to the FARC guerrillas, would be enough to support the entire family, and the long trek through so many godforsaken corners of Colombia would have been worth it.

Everyone had been enthusiastic about the trip. At the time, Omar's mother had landed a third stepfather for her children, a strong man of few words and very precise orders. But he was nothing like his predecessor, the second stepfather Omar recalls sadly.

He still suffers when he remembers the man. As a boy, Omar had to deliver his stepfather's lunch to him where he worked, at the vil-

lage jail. While the man ate, he suggested acts of perversion to the boy. Omar told his mother several times but she never believed him. She reacted with the same resentment she had always shown her only male child. Once she even struck him with the flat edge of a machete, cutting open his foot.

This was the setting he grew up in: A mother that hit him "with whatever was at hand;" a father he can hardly recognize and who he calls "some guy who never acknowledged I was his son;" a neighborhood in turmoil, besieged by all the illegal armed groups involved in the conflict and by an Army that stormed in occasionally, firing from inside tanks; a group of friends who played soccer together, games that almost always ended in a fight and were full of fierce physical aggressions; a dream –to go to school– which never came true during his childhood.

His mother used to repeat over and over, to make it perfectly clear: "You can't go to school. You have to work and make money."

And so the boy worked all day, like an adult, swinging a machete up on the mountain, doing different chores around the family plot, often in the pouring rain that was common in that far-removed part of Colombia. He bears scars from accidental cuts dating back to those years. One day, while working with a machete, an idea crystallized in his mind. All he'd have to do was bring the blade down on his left wrist and put an end to his misery. But it occurred to him that bleeding to death would be too messy and scandalous, so he thought instead of shooting himself with his stepfather's old shotgun. But he changed his mind, thinking: "And if I survive, what will be left of me?" Then, these desperate days were relieved by a change at home. His mother finally believed his stories of abuse from his stepfather and she decided to leave the man for good.

His mother's third husband arrived on the scene with tales of "the Promised Land," feverish plans that seemed more like hallucinations. He assured them some friends of his on the flatlands had told him there was a farm he could work, and not only did he convince them all, he managed to fill them full of hope and good omens for the long journey ahead.

The trip took nearly two days, most of it over endless plains that stretched out before them for what seemed like forever. Finally they reached

One day, while working with a machete, an idea crystallized in his mind. All he'd have to do was bring the blade down on his left wrist and put an end to his misery.

a town. It would have been hard to miss the gigantic sign hanging in the main square: A tribute to the deceased founder of the FARC guerrillas, Jacobo Arenas.

Omar soon realized that in this region the FARC was much more than a simple presence on signs. The guerrillas moved through town like they owned it, doing as they pleased. That same day a regional commander, alias "Rafaelito," appeared, surrounded by guerrillas. "It was as if the Messiah had arrived," recalls Omar with his usual sarcasm. He rounded up the entire town at a restaurant and gave a speech, boasting about the paramilitaries he'd killed with his own hands and presenting himself as the local "Rambo," fighting for the rights of people in the town. (Today, Omar laughs at the speech, after watching how several months later, in the middle of combat, "Rafaelito" suffered a heart attack that left him permanently weak. "Rambo with a heart attack, just imagine.")

Meanwhile, the family's situation was difficult. They slept piled in a small hut with plastic walls and roof. The stepfather asked after his "promised land" and was told that the current tenant was refusing to give it up, but that the

meanwhile he could have another, inferior, lot. After a few weeks, the stepfather insisted energetically and the guerrillas went with him to talk to the tenant, who told them he had no intention of leaving right away. The guerrillas ordered him out before nightfall.

Now, in that land of longhorn cattle and healthy coca plants, where wildcats and coral snakes abounded, Omar was forced to listen more than ever to his mother's lectures about how he must work. And work he did, in extremely harsh conditions, attempting to tame the fierce cattle, and mistreating his hands in the scraping of the coca leaves, a job he excelled at to the point of processing an extraordinary two "arrobas" (28 pounds) of leaves per day.

One day, sick and tired of the hostilities that permeated his family environment, he decided to put into practice a phrase he'd been taught at the coca lab and that had been running around his brain: "When you get your wings, you learn about life." To "get your wings" meant joining "Rafaelito's" front. He had four thousand pesos in his pocket and left the house with only the clothes on his back, rubber boots and a track suit. The last thing he heard as he closed the door behind him was his mother's cry: "Where are you off to, you bastard?"

Christmas 2001 came and the guerrillas welcomed it with colossal celebrations. The town resembled a gigantic canteen where soldiers drank Buchanan's whisky, ate meat with their bare hands and danced with the prostitutes who moved from town to town, attracted by the coca money. Brawls broke out constantly in different corners of the festivities. Omar recalls that on Christmas Eve, while almost everyone celebrated the arrival of Baby Jesus, a drunken guerrilla shot a villager dead.

Once the holidays were over and the New Year had begun, "Rafaelito" decided it was time to return to the mountain camps and Omar set off on his new life. That night, as he was trying to sleep at the first camp, a veteran female guerrilla slipped into his lean-to and put an end to his innocence.

It's been almost nine years since Omar demobilized officially from the guerrillas. Today, his eight months as a combatant seem like some distant film from his second childhood, a period in his life full of moments buried deep in his memory: Females guerrillas afflicted with

gonorrhea whose lives were threatened if they weren't cured in a few short weeks; robberies among comrades; the day his commanding officers confiscated his tiny battery-powered radio, extinguishing any possibility of indulging in his great passion, news programs; working in the jungle farms, days so long Omar decided he would have been better off with his mother.

Among these hazy memories a group of good friends stands out, including "Memín," a burly and combative *mulatto* who amused his buddies with stories of his grandmother and became Omar's close friend. One day, the company was attacked by a squadron of paramilitaries and –in front of Omar's very eyes– "Memín" took a bullet that killed him instantly. Omar didn't want to leave his friend. He carried him for several hours, drenching himself in the blood that poured from the body. That night, while his colleagues tried to hide from the enemy still searching for them, Omar remembers crying like a baby in front of his friend's slowly decaying body.

But the guerrillas, having lost 48 men, weren't about to take it lying down. Soon they retaliated. The front brought together several groups of guerrillas and surprised a group of 200 paramilitaries sleeping in a camp. The dead were never officially counted, but Omar insists they were many and that blood flowed throughout the land, driven by an animal-like intensity that nothing and no one could calm. Once the combat was over, another small victory in which, once again, Colombians killed Colombians, Omar arrived back at camp to find his companions engaged in a soccer game. He soon realized the ball they were using was the head of one of the fallen paramilitaries.

And work he did, in extremely harsh conditions, attempting to tame the fierce cattle, and mistreating his hands in the scraping of the coca leaves, a job he excelled at to the point of processing an extraordinary two "arrobas" (28 pounds) of leaves per day.

But it wasn't the group's savagery that moved him to demobilize; it was something that happened during the seventh month of his militancy. A member of the company gave himself up to the Army and started providing information. Soon the camps were easily located and bombings became frequent. The phantom jets laid constant siege. The guerrillas hadn't a moment's peace and were unable to set up camp again. They ran through the jungle like a legion of living dead. Stopping to prepare a hot meal was unthinkable. Omar's body became covered in fungus, the itching unbearable. One particular event was decisive: While running nonstop, facing hunger and physical exhaustion, they met a Commander traveling comfortably in an air-conditioned truck, his lover at his side. Between long pulls on a whisky bottle, he reprimanded them for running from their responsibility.

Omar escaped from the guerrillas on August 12, 2001. He did so in the company of a guerrilla he did not consider one of his best mates, a man they called "*El rolo*," who took the belongings and money of several of his companions with him when he left. They were followed, but the two youths managed to give themselves up to the Army, who finally handed them over to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute.

That was eight years ago, and since then, Omar has taken full advantage of all society offered him. In his new life, following demobilization, he was able to go to school. "That's the part I found most seductive," he says. At first he wanted to study Social Communications at a public university in a large city, but his grade point average wasn't high enough; now he couldn't be happier about the course his life has taken.

Omar is now on his fifth semester of Library Sciences, a career that has turned him into an

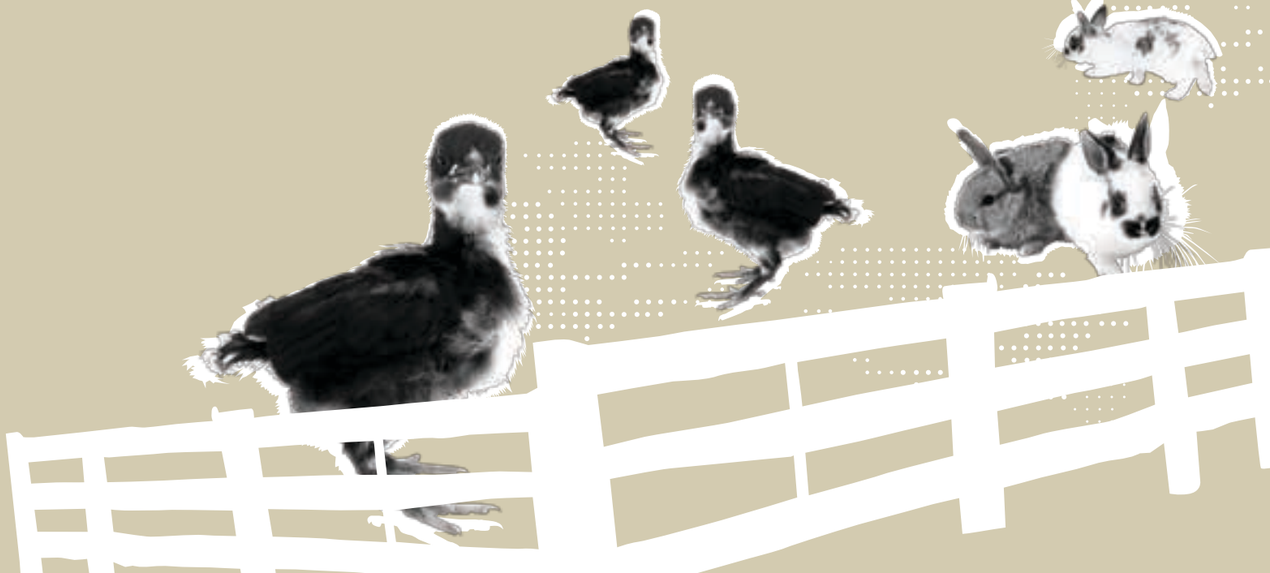
ardent reader, from the moment he began his first Introduction to Literature class taught by Professor Carlos Marío Durán, a man in his mid-30s whose classes are tiny epics and who pushed Omar to read both the classics and contemporary works, a habit he continues to cultivate. Omar feels special admiration for "Old Father Goriot" by Honoré de Balzac, an author he describes as extremely lucid and someone with an expanded sense of reality.

No one at the university imagines the past carried around by this young man with deep blue eyes and a peaceful expression, not even Professor Durán, who considers Omar one of his favorite students. Today, Omar continues to dedicate himself to reading, devouring book after book with an interest his professors find astounding. He has a burning desire, once he graduates, to work at one of the city's major libraries. But what he hopes most is that his readings will prepare him to write his own stories. He's already thought about how he'll write them: They'll be short, very clear, and from the heart. First, he'd like to write about "Memín," the friend whose inert body he carried for hours. Then, later on, he'll write about himself, about the life he once took up into the mountains into an endless war, the same life that today shines with its own light in a university classroom.

Today, Omar continues to dedicate himself to reading, devouring book after book with an interest his professors find astounding.

seven

Leonidas



The Trip that Changed My Life

Because of his academic achievements, Leonidas was chosen to travel to Canada, an experience that filled him with learning.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to hide my amazement that evening. We walked into Trudeau International Airport in Montreal and I felt I was in another world. Me, raised in rural Colombian villages and in isolated neighborhoods in Bogotá, after four years fighting in the mountains. I was walking into that architectural colossus of endless ceilings, crystal walls, and flat screen monitors that shone with their own light in the midst of a futuristic firmament. I was wearing jeans, a brown jacket and the black shoes I'd purchased the day before. I can just imagine how

futuristic I must have looked, with my cheap sunglasses from the San Victorino market in Bogotá. Real futuristic, I'm sure!

It had been three years since I'd surrendered my weapon, and the only weapon I was carrying was an easy smile that never left me. I used it on the Canadian immigration official and I think it made my entry easier. He, of course, had no way of knowing about my past, and I didn't tell him. The officials at the Canadian consulate in Bogotá had known when they issued me a visa, after I submitted the documents required by the Agape Program in which Colombian professionals living in Canada promised to support me during my stay there. It was the trip of a lifetime and I'd earned it through the effort I'd made, beginning two years after I'd demobilized.

If someone were to ask me at what point in my life I began thinking about joining the autodefensas I'd have to go way back into my childhood. I was five years old and had grown up in the countryside with my grandparents. We lived in a clean, orderly town in the center of an enormous plain. Farming had prospered and the inhabitants were kind, honest and hardworking. Rumors began that the guerrillas had arrived. I didn't see them at first, but I heard them, in the distant hills, as they sent out deafening artillery attacks against the Army. I hid under my bed, trying to think about anything at all to block out the horrible sound, the echoes of war that worked their way into my soul.

Until one day, coming home from school, I met death head on. We children heard the shot clearly; it came from the town. We came over a small hill and saw the commotion at don Rober's house. I knew don Rober well. Not only was he was a close friend of my stepfather, but his daughter was also my childhood sweetheart. At the main entrance to the house we saw the body. His forehead had been blown away by a bullet. They'd knocked on the door, and don Rober had asked suspiciously from inside who it was. They kicked open the door and shot him. Everyone in town already knew that don Rober had been condemned to death. The guerrillas had sentenced him, claiming he was an Army collaborator.

My stepfather had also been accused but immediately left town, leaving us for a while to find work in the big city. Three long months of waiting. More deaths; we locked ourselves indoors. The teacher had to go too, closing the school.

It had been three years since I'd surrendered my weapon, and the only weapon I was carrying was an easy smile that never left me.

My stepfather's friends fell like flies, outside and inside the village. One of them was killed and dumped in a sewer. I saw him too, when they carried him back, wrapped in a white sheet.

The move to the big city was hard on my grandmother. We lived in a glum neighborhood, in a tiny house, a different world from the wide-open green spaces of our village. We'd never felt the cold before and that was one of the hardest things. We shivered with it at night. She was always sad, as if imprisoned. We tried to cheer her, but nothing worked. I helped an uncle who sold lemons and empanadas on the city streets. My cousins visited from time to time, telling us how the autodefensas had arrived in town and that the guerrillas were getting their comeuppance. My granny got worse until the pain in her soul passed into her body and she was hospitalized. I was 12 by then. She didn't last long. She died at the hospital.

From the time my grandmother's health started to fail, I was sure that the guerrillas were responsible. They had forced a flowering plant to be transplanted to a place it could never flourish. They'd made her a displaced person in a foreign world. And so, before I'd even finished mourning

my granny's death, I returned to the village and signed up with the autodefensas.

My worst memories are of the training, especially the dismembering class. That's what they called it: Dismembering class. They'd take a prisoner and one of the bosses would show the newcomers, with horrendous practicality, the easiest way to chop it into pieces with an axe, placing one's boot on the neck if necessary. Then, while on patrol duty, a bomb blew up next to me, sending me up into the air; the time we were ambushed and had to run like mad while my boss yelled at me to not go hiding my ass, to make some noise with that thing to frighten the guerrillas.

Then, too, came the "social cleansings" when we roamed the village out of control, killing petty thieves, drug addicts, homosexuals and enemy militia. My problems with the law came after one such mission. A buddy and I were supposed to kill the owner of a farm identified as a guerrilla snitch. The mission was to take place on a hillside. Another hill rose up across from us and I didn't realize we were being watched. I was shirtless, which made me more visible. My buddy shot the man, but he was still alive. So I finished him off, using a short machete to slit his throat. Sometimes I close my eyes and see his dying, pleading expression. The victim's children knew I had been responsible and, a few days later, accused me in front of the authorities. That's how I wound up on trial. If I'd had to be careful before because of my work with the autodefensas, now I'd have to be twice as cautious. The police asked about me around town and even suggested to my commanding officers that they hand me over. I was scared all the time. If I've feared anything at all in life, it's snake bite, a little kid's rage, and jail.

I confess that when the rumors began about the autodefensas demobilizing, I thought I'd use the process simply to clear my name with the law and then join up with the San Jorge block where combatants were better paid. But when the time came, after the ceremony in which I participated with 24 other youths, I saw reason and understood it was time for me to start my life over again. The government would give me a change of clothes and one million seven-hundred fifty pesos in cash. Some of my companions blew it on rum. I understood from the start that I had to hold onto that money, use it for some-

thing worthwhile and make it part of my new chance.

From the start of my new life I knew how to make use of my time. I validated what was left of my studies and was as obedient as possible. I decided to try to forget the resentment I felt about what happened to my grandmother, focusing instead on learning new things, especially cattle ranching, which interested me most. I learned to raise chickens, rabbits, cattle, quail and hogs.

And so when the news came that the CAE was choosing a young person to study agriculture in Canada, I applied and had a real chance. I had prepared myself and was chosen.

As if the effect the airport had on me wasn't enough, Montreal stood outside, a city with towering modern buildings, as well as a beautiful old quarter. The first days were spent getting to know it but then it was time for our lessons. At a small ice cream factory run by a Colombian named Santiago Mallol, I learned to process mangos, limes, sour sop and the other fruit he imported from Colombia. Then we helped to deliver the orders. This helped me get to know the city even better.

I was scared all the time. If I've feared anything at all in life, it's snake bite, a little kid's rage, and jail.

I was there for one week, after which time I entered the university where I took a three-day course on composting and the enormous benefits of this natural substance on soil. I then moved to a farm where all the processes are organic. I learned to work in a greenhouse, transplanting shoots and helping plants to grow. I suggested to the owner that we build a fence for the chickens and he listened. I built it myself. There it stood, a reminder of my unforgettable experience, for both me and them: I'd been to a country I'd never dreamed I'd see; they'd met an ex-combatant from a distant conflict.

I attended a number of academic events as well. At New Scotland University I met young men and women who'd fought in conflicts around the world. They let me speak and I told of my experience. After the event, a journalist sought me out and asked me to tell my story. Many people wanted to take their pictures with me. I saw admiration on their faces.

I can now say that the month I spent in Canada was unforgettable. I was taken to many beautiful places, the zoo, the underground city, Prince Edward Island; I even learned a few words of French. The waitress at one restaurant was very pretty. After she finished waiting on us I said "Merci bo-coo." I must have sounded very funny because she laughed out loud. I was so nervous I left with the salt shaker instead of the bottle of pills I was taking. A few minutes later I returned to the restaurant and the waitress was waiting for me with my pill bottle in her hand.

The most important part of that experience was the way it widened my horizons, gave me confidence and provided foundations for my new life. I'm now getting ready to study psychology, a career I'm really excited about. For a start, I'm working in the parking lot at a tourist attraction. The only thing my bosses object to are the tattoos on my arm. They've asked me to keep them hidden under the sleeve of my uniform.

I have to deal with a lot of different clients, some of them nice, others not so nice. Some get very mad and even insult me when I charge them. They say our rates are too high. But I'm not the same irascible boy I was; I've learned to control myself. I answer them politely and suggest they write a letter to the administration. A few days ago my bosses looked at my record and realized I'd taken basic computer courses. Naturally, they have no idea I fought in the conflict

and I haven't wanted to tell them. They think I put myself through school, with no help from the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), USAID and The International Organization for Migration - IOM. They said I was being underused on the patio and made me a Parking Operator. Now I work in the parking lot office, which is much more comfortable, and I make a better wage.

I can't say I'm the best I can be. I have every intention of continuing my studies and I hope to begin soon. But at least I'm not at war, killing other people, risking my life daily, witnessing horrible atrocities. I fight a different struggle now: Waking every day, going to work, loving my family. It has its own difficulties, but it's my fight. And in the end, it's better to fight for what you want than to fight for what someone else wants.

I fight a different struggle now: Waking every day, going to work, loving my family. It has its own difficulties, but it's my fight. And in the end, it's better to fight for what you want than to fight for what someone else wants.

eight

Maribel

The Girl Who Saw the Elf

Maribel was raised in the coca fields. After demobilizing twice, she finally enjoys her new life to the fullest.

Maribel tells how at noon one day, when she was nine, while bathing in the river with her uncle, a mischievous elf appeared in a nearby field. He was a smiling, playful little man, lit from inside it seemed. The girl wasn't afraid; she stared at him in fascination. Her uncle though, not yet 15, took his rifle and fired at it to scare it away. "He just disappeared, as quickly as he'd come," recalls Maribel now, completely convinced of what she saw.

There, in the wilds, where magical mountain creatures were frightened away in extremely down-to-earth hails of gunfire, Maribel grew up. Ever since then, she remembers listening to the story of her paternal grandfather, murdered by the guerrillas long before she was born. And so she came into the world with a kind of original resentment, a pre-programmed thirst for vengeance nurtured by the adults around her and –years later– by her superiors inside the "Autodefensas" (Paramilitary Group).

Her mother disappeared when she was still a babe in arms, leaving Maribel in the care of her grandparents. Her grandfather was a strong man who farmed a coca plot. He didn't hesitate to physically punish Maribel, or his other grandchildren or younger children, but also had a grandfather's heart, and at night he often gathered them together to tell stories. He was a friend and partner to the paramilitaries that ruled the region and Maribel was used to seeing these men appear at odd hours. Sometimes they'd run in, sweaty and exhausted, after combating guerrillas. Maribel remembers they always said the same thing: They'd won the fight.

She also recalls how the commanders took a particular interest in children. They'd ask them directly if they were victims of abuse and demanded that parents sent their children to the village school. On one occasion, when their grandfather didn't have the money to pay for books and school supplies, the paramilitaries bought them for the children.

When Maribel turned nine, her mother made a surprise visit to the farm. She had a new husband, a much older man. In spite of her resentment toward the distant mother who'd abandoned her, the young girl tried to convince herself that reconciliation was possible, and she did her best. She even surprised herself, once calling her mamita. But soon her resentment returned: Maribel's mother punished her for some minor prank with a machete blow to her finger. The girl shouted at her mother that she was leaving with the autodefensas, although she didn't dare. Not yet, in any case.

The fact that a mother had made her 10-year-old daughter bleed did not go unnoticed in that small village. "Chombo," a 20-something combatant, scolded the mother for using violence on her daughter. This was enough to calm

The experience, besides initiating her into the horrifying rituals of violence, convinced her she would never get "crossed," a custom practiced by indigenous sorcerers and very popular among combatants in the region. "The day I die, I die, and that's that," she thought.

the mother's aggressions, but a few days later something happened that Maribel felt was the last straw: After her stepfather tried repeatedly to fondle her, Maribel told her mother, who defended the stepfather, even becoming jealous of her own daughter to the point of cutting off all the girl's hair so they wouldn't look so much alike. Maribel then did what she'd been thinking about: Along with a girl cousin her age, she joined the ruling armed group in the region. She'd only just turned 10.

Maribel's Paramilitary camp training at the Lago Azul lasted nine months, at the end of which the two girls were subjected to a final exam: They had to kill a vulture, tear its head off, collect the blood in a glass and drink it down; then gunpowder was blown into their eyes, causing an irritation that had to be treated immediately with lemon juice if the girls were to recover their vision. Although she vomited during the first trial, Maribel passed both tests.

Shortly afterward, the group captured a guerrilla fighter. The prisoner was adamant: He was cruzado, or "crossed," protected by magic, and no conventional means of murder would work on him. Maribel tells how, in fact, the man didn't even fall to the ground after being shot several times. They then attacked him with a machete, which didn't affect him either. Maribel was ordered to cut off his feet and she carried out her orders exactly, but the man remained alive. The victim himself asked them to kill him with blows from the huge pestle used to grind corn. And so they did, and the immortal being finally fell.

It was clear to her bosses that Maribel "showed promise." The experience, besides initiating her into the horrifying rituals of violence, convinced her she would never get "crossed," a custom practiced by indigenous sorcerers and very popular among combatants in the region. "The day I die, I die, and that's that," she thought.

The young girl was under no obligation to take part in her first combat, but she looked forward to it. Vengeance had been inscribed in her genetic code and she wanted to confront those who had killed the distant grandfather who had become a kind of shadow hanging over her life. And so, the day she was told she would fight a local FARC front, she prepared herself with genuine enthusiasm, allowing them to inject

her with the dose of coca everyone received to make them stronger in combat. Maribel fired her weapon, like the rest of her companions, and was unharmed and lived to punish her enemies, but "Chombo," the man who had defended her from maternal violence, died in combat.

As time whipped by and war continued to rage in the mountains, Maribel went from childhood to womanhood. She was a hardened and audacious veteran among the paramilitaries, which earned her the nickname "rattlesnake tiger." At 14, she fell in love with the son of a local drug trafficker. This young romance changed the course of her life.

After combat one day she went into town with her commanding officer to dance and drink at a place called "Leave your machete at home, we'll give it to you!" She met her boyfriend there; he was dancing with a local prostitute. Maribel approached them. The boy left the place and the women had it out. "Go work somewhere else," the woman told Maribel. Realizing she'd just been called a whore, Maribel asked her commander for permission to kill the woman. She was given a categorical "no." They continued to argue and the woman called her a langaruta, a beanpole, and Maribel argued her case again with her boss, who had had a few drinks, and told her to do as she pleased. And so Maribel aimed her gun at the woman, took her out down to the river and put a bullet into her before dumping her body into the water. It was one o'clock in the morning.

Accused of using violence outside the war, Maribel was put on trial. As punishment, she was ordered to join the squadron in charge of "social cleansing" missions consisting of the indiscriminate execution of drug addicts, petty thieves and guerrilla militia. Once her mission was complete, she returned to camp where her bosses had a new mission for her.

A young combatant had escaped and was staying at the Family Welfare Youth Home. Maribel was to present herself to the home, pass herself off as a demobilized soldier, and kill him. The first part of her mission was successful: Maribel found the place, located her objective, and prepared herself for the execution. But, as part of the institutional process, she was required to attend conversations with a psychologist in which she told the story of her life. She recounted the story of her maternal grandfather, but no longer saw

it as a reason for hate and violence, but as food for thought. She thought about the young man she had been sent to kill, how he was a human being who would some day have grandchildren, like her own grandfather. She realized she was about to repeat history, just like those who had deprived her of her grandfather. And she ended up confessing the truth.

As an urgent safety measure, Maribel was immediately transferred to another city where she began her reinsertion into civilian life. She learned cooking and baking skills at a CAE. Meanwhile, the group she had belonged to collectively surrendered their weapons as part of the process included in the government's 2005 Justice and Peace Law aimed at demobilizing the AUC (Paramilitary Group). The young girl picked up her studies where she'd left them and learned to use a tool she didn't even know existed: a computer.

While the autodefensas demobilized, rumors abounded of a faction that had remained in the mountains, operating under the pseudonym "Águilas Negras", or "Black Eagles". Maribel heard about it at the CAE through a colleague, who said the new organization paid better and was more active in military operations. This man was not just another demobilized soldier. Later she found out he was an infiltrated recruiter whose mission was to "recover" as many possible combatants as possible and lead them to the Eagles' nest. After several minor disciplinary problems and given the vulnerability of her childlike mind, Maribel allowed herself to be convinced.

The "Black Eagles" were, in fact, more active, which in the world of violence means they were even more blood-thirsty than their predecessors. Most of the combatants were familiar faces to Maribel, members of the AUC who had "hidden out" for a while before returning to the savagery. More than 600 of them in the region had orders to refrain from killing the enemy in order to later torture them horribly, chopping them into small pieces. Maribel, now 14, began thinking about the path her life had taken and finally buckled under the weight of the final question: "What am I doing here?"

She escaped again, this time in the company of a friend on guard duty. Her plan included a Suzuki 100 motorbike. They fled in the early morning light like a couple bats out of hell and drove halfway across the country to the city. They drove for seven hours, stopping only to refuel until they reached Bogotá, a city neither of

They fled in the early morning light like a couple bats out of hell and drove halfway across the country to the city. They drove for seven hours, stopping only to refuel until they reached Bogotá.

them had ever seen, and gave themselves up at the first police station they found. And so, after two stints with the autodefensas, Maribel began her transition in the Colombian Family Welfare Institute Specialized Care Program.

She has spent two years in family homes, tutor's homes, and in a Specialized Care Center. A number of professionals have helped her in many areas, but Maribel mentions one in particular. She refers to him simply as "John," a young psychologist with whom she spent many long sessions.

"First, he made me laugh," says Maribel. "Then he made me cry."

In other words, John broke the ice at first with jokes and lighthearted remarks. Then he made her confront her own reality and moved her toward reconciliation with her past. He told Maribel that her mother had been very young when she'd left her and urged Maribel to forgive her. He also made her see that she too had caused a lot of damage during her time with the Paramilitary forces, stressing the fact that only by forgiving others would she find peace within herself. Today, Maribel has made significant advances in controlling her anger and enjoys an excellent relationship with her mother.

Since demobilizing, she's taken classes in human rights, sexual and reproductive health and first aid. She's also learned about rap music, photography, theater and video. While studying video she worked with a group of demobilized youths on a documentary called "Windowless Labyrinths," whose main conclusion, says Maribel, is that "you don't need to be part of an armed group to be somebody."

Maribel is about to finish her Graphic Design studies, having learned to work with specialized programs such as Photoshop, In Design and Corel Draw to prepare for a job in advertising. She now lives in a foster home where she's found a home, including a foster mother who showers her with hugs and urges her to continue her process.

Maribel is not a tender young girl. The suspicion in her eyes and her tall, lean figure seem to suggest she is ready to spring up and take off running. She doesn't seem particularly proud of any lofty achievements as a demobilized soldier and often smiles acerbically after partially implying some bit of sarcasm. At the same time, she is overwhelmingly looking forward to her future, and to the challenges of civilian life. This shines in her eyes, as if she were ready to take on the entire world.

Maribel spent half her life believing her uncle had wiped out that elf one afternoon. But the elf only disappeared, perhaps to allow this girl time enough for the things she had to experience. Today she is certain the elf will come back to her. And there's no longer anyone around to scare him away. On the contrary, she's waiting for him with open arms.

...she worked with a group of demobilized youths on a documentary called "Windowless Labyrinths," whose main conclusion, says Maribel, is that "you don't need to be part of an armed group to be somebody."

nine

Byron

A Family Matter

Byron was born and raised in the shadow of the FARC. It took a huge effort and many tears to break the cycle.

In that rural settlement, cloudy and wide as an angel-less sky, the two young siblings were inseparable, a little boy sparrow and a little girl sparrow fluttering about all day, in and out of the fields, never playing all-boy or all-girl games. If other children wanted to play, they'd have to play with both of them. Aside from being siblings, they were the best of friends. Byron was a year younger than Angela, but they treated each other as if there were no age difference.

They were bound by chronological circumstances, but more so by loneliness. Their father had abandoned them only two months after Byron's birth, leaving them in the care of their mother. Like a birthmark, they were destined

to stick to each other. The world was a dangerous place, their mother warned them; they had nothing but each other. They'd have to learn to take care of one another. Which is why, the day a group of older children, in the middle of a soccer game, tried to insult Byron, saying he hadn't the faintest idea how to kick a ball, the young girl fought alongside him like any boy. She scratched and bit as if defending her own life before they flew down the hill together in a terrible downpour. That night, as they tried to sleep, rocked by the dubious lullaby of thunder and rain on the zinc roof above their heads, and while she tried to calm his fears by making up stories, little Byron became convinced his sister was his angel.

Theirs was no common childhood full of angelic promises and toys. In Colombia's mountainous central region, the government was not the law; daily decisions were made by the men and women dressed in fatigues who strode through the village like they owned it. They locked up petty thieves, should any dare show up in town, and boundary disputes were resolved in a five-minute audience with the guerrilla commander.

That night, as they tried to sleep, rocked by the dubious lullaby of thunder and rain on the zinc roof above their heads, and while she tried to calm his fears by making up stories, little Byron became convinced his sister was his angel.

Byron can't remember when he saw them for the first time. They were always there. His memories of them are as old as his baby bottle; four of his closest family members belonged to their ranks. His father was politically active in the Communist Party and collaborated with them in many ways, providing political support, as an ideological consultant, and even as their messenger. Two of his mother's brothers and his father's sister were active combatants. Clad in camouflage, they had weather-beaten skin and showed up for visits with their guns out in the open, for all to see. Byron remembers his uncle seated at the table, drinking coffee and discussing family matters with his mother, resting the butt of his AK-47 rifle on the floor in front of him like an ordinary walking stick.

And it was normal for mother and children to vacation in different FARC camps. This was the most natural thing in the world for Byron. It didn't seem illegal or like anything he needed to hide. They just climbed on a ladder bus, and later into a jeep, before finally riding mules to their final vacation destination. Children there slept in "cambuches", ate what the guerrillas ate, and took the weaponry for granted.

On one of these vacations, on their way to the guerrilla camp when Byron was just eight years old, mother and children reached the village where they were to transfer to an inter-municipal bus. The bus wasn't scheduled to leave for several hours and the family decided to pass the time visiting a former neighbor who lived on the outskirts of town. To avoid carrying it, they left their luggage at the home of a friend in town, across from the village square. As soon as they began their walk, a violent guerrilla attack broke out. Byron recalls walking past the police station just as a bomb exploded outside it, killing one officer. The mother and children ran out of town and soon heard a military helicopter overhead that began to pepper the road they walked along with machine gun fire. They took refuge in an abandoned house until the sounds of combat had died down. When they reached their friend's house, they discovered the man murdered, his freshly slain body lying on the living room floor. They picked up their bags and flew out of town as if they'd seen the devil.

That was Byron's childhood. It took him years to realize that normal children didn't

spend their vacation at a guerrilla camp and that the law of the land was not the mountain army; a government with official armed forces actually existed. Byron, the child, knew nothing more than insurrection, and weapons were a familiar sight, to the point where one of the favorite games played with his inseparable companion Angela on vacation was to take the bullets out of a rifle and put them back in.

The paths of these two siblings, however, were destined to split. It happened when Byron turned 12: Angela decided to remain faithful to the family tradition and joined the guerrillas. Overwhelmed with sadness, Byron asked his mother to send him to an uncle's house in Cartagena. And so she did. It was hard enough for the young boy to leave his peaceful mountain village for the big city, seething and hectic, where he was to help out in his uncle's market stall. But harder still was Angela's absence—they had never before been apart.

Some time later, Byron returned to his village to follow the path that had already marked his life from birth: He joined the FARC, a different commando group than his sister's, but part of the same front. Soon he was able to visit her and the two siblings experienced, in a clandestine mountain camp, what was perhaps the happiest time in their lives.

Byron recalls lying awake all night, looking up at the starry sky and catching up on each other's lives. By this time Angela, in spite of her young age, was a seasoned guerrilla with combat experience and knowledge of land mine placement and other daily tasks. She told him about her life with the rebels, how she had enrolled, motivated by her love for a guerrilla named Estiven, and the problems she had at first because of her rebellious nature. When on long marches with her companions she felt tired, she would simply refuse to walk any farther, and the entire group would have to wait for her. If anyone complained, she reminded them that their commander was her uncle.

On one occasion, a mid-level officer caught her playing with her AK-47, using it as a cane. This merited many nights on guard duty. Then her uncle decided she was a bad example for the troops and sent her home. A while later, she approached the commander at a different front and asked to be reinstated. The commander accepted with the condition that she curb her

rebellious attitude and obey. So there she was, part of the organization, with numerous combats under her belt, and visiting with her little brother. As dawn broke, Angela begged Byron to take a different road, to study and do something positive with his life and, finally, she made him promise to take care of their mother.

When Byron returned to his camp, things weren't the same, and even before his first month as a guerrilla was up, before ever having fought in combat or carried out a dangerous mission, he decided to demobilize. He didn't have to escape, as in so many other cases of demobilization. He simply marched home. There he found his mother seriously ill with heart disease.

Mother and son were forced to move to the capital where she could receive the medical attention she needed. But although the big city proved the solution to the mother's heart problems, it became a monster that would soon eat up this young boy only recently out of childhood. After a friend gave him an infusion of marijuana, Byron started taking drugs and they soon became a problem. Shortly thereafter, Byron and his mother returned to their village, where Byron was reunited with childhood friends who told him about a government program that helped former guerrillas return to society. A few days later, a psychologist from The Colombian Family Welfare Institute visited Byron, who felt that someone was actually concerned about him. A new Byron was born, a young man convinced he had to leave war behind, become a useful person to society, and keep his promise to his sister.

He heard little from Angela, who at least called their grandmother every four months and told her vague stories of her adventures with the guerrillas. Until one day the calls stopped. And time went by, full of agonizing uncertainty for Byron. The call finally came: A former guerrilla companion notified him that Angela had died on August 28, 2008.

In an Army attack on the camp, Angela took a shot to her left shoulder and ran, wounded, trying to escape, only to fall into a river a few meters ahead of her. She fought the current but, unable to move her arm, her efforts were in vain.

"I've always thought it was a horrible way to die," says Byron. "I think the best death would be a shot to the head or to simply fade away without feeling any pain or despair."

Angela begged Byron to take a different road, to study and do something positive with his life and, finally, she made him promise to take care of their mother.

Byron has hung onto the photos from the day Angela's body was released by the Attorney General's Office. It lies on the wet mud, tangled in the vines growing along the riverbank. Next to it lies the AK-47 and a bundle of food and personal belongings. The wound on her shoulder looks fresh. Angela's eyes are open, as if their blue depths were focusing on the sky above, like a little girl who died in her cradle, peacefully. Whenever he feels depressed, Byron looks at the pictures. As crude as they are, he says they calm him and make him feel better.

***

Byron is a young man with big eyes and long, straight hair. Although he has only just reached adulthood, his face shows obvious traces of all he has lived through, of a life that forced him to grow up quickly. In his young life he has already fought drug addiction and even spent time among a group that practiced satanic rituals. He's survived it all and has taken on the responsibility of his ailing mother, who has undergone two surgeries to date. Given the delicate condition of

her heart, Byron has chosen not to tell her of his sister's death. But Byron is convinced that deep down, she senses the truth.

The courses he's taken, the ongoing support from the Program, and the vision he now has of studying a university career have made him a different young man, able to free himself from the cruelty of war, from the gaping grimace of loss and despair that made him invisible to society. He now walks the city streets, head held high, a proud young man released from a fate of marginality. He feels that in spite of his terrible recollections, in spite of the tortured memory of his sister, a fire has begun to burn in his heart: He can accomplish nothing through destruction, by seeking vengeance. On the contrary, Byron knows the finest tribute he can pay his sister is to build a new life for himself and for his family. This is his motivation, the force that has made him into an impassioned young man driven by a desire to build a home with his girlfriend and settle into university studies.

While finishing his high school diploma, Byron was elected to the student council. Soon after, two teachers, members of the school's Board of Directors, told him it was inappropriate for a student in his position to wear his hair long and ordered him to cut it. But this young man, rebellious in spite of the institutional life he now leads, angrily refused, arguing that the importance of the position entrusted him by his classmates had nothing to do with the length of his hair.

In his young life he has already fought drug addiction and even spent time among a group that practiced satanic rituals.

Even while recalling his family's harshest moments, Byron will often finish his recollections with a quick smile that seems more a defense mechanism than an expression of humor, perhaps a way of warding off the evil memories. He is a consummate rock and heavy metal fan, as evidenced by the electric guitar charm he wears on a chain around his neck and his t-shirts bearing the names of groups such as "Creator" and "System of a Down."

At his young age, he speaks knowledgeably of current events, especially politics, a gift he has perfected through his experience as a program host at a student radio station. He has read Marx and says he agrees with Marxist ideals, although he doesn't think Colombian guerrillas have developed them, another sign of their "irrationality." He questions the methods of traditional political parties and those of the

Even while recalling his family's harshest moments, Byron will often finish his recollections with a quick smile that seems more a defense mechanism than an expression of humor, perhaps a way of warding off the evil memories.

government, claiming that if the money invested in the war were instead spent on education, this would be a different country. He speaks of a "reformed communism" and wishes he had the power to change the country.

In his new life, Byron enjoys more than anything his work with the school theater group, and one play in particular. It's the story of a family in which the father sells drugs, one of the sisters is a prostitute, one brother is a transvestite on the streets and another is mentally retarded. The star of the show, the only family member to go to school, meets a young man at college who insists on meeting her family. Ashamed, the young girl engages her mother to help present the family as a "normal" household. But the mentally retarded brother, escaping from the room in which he had been locked, manages to escape and reveal the truth. When Byron explains the moral of the story, in his own special way, his eyes light up: "Truth above all, man."

He has read Marx and says he agrees with Marxist ideals, although he doesn't think Colombian guerrillas have developed them, another sign of their "irrationality."

ten

Dayro

The Baker's Smile

Dayro was an enterprising child. But only since leaving the war has he been able to demonstrate that his enterprising spirit knows no bounds.

The smell of freshly baked bread rises from a tiny shop and permeates the entire block. Inside, a young couple takes care of business. The husband remains in the back, in a boiling-hot room, absorbed by the bustling business of baking bread. His wife, who couldn't be older that 16, takes care of customers, whose numbers increase as the aroma drifts through the streets of the small town. It happens every time, in the early morning hours, when the "pan campesino" (country-style bread), the leading product at this small bakery –the only place in town to sell it– comes out of the oven.

In spite of his young age, the baker knows the secret of this product. Dayro learned to make pan campesino in one of the many courses he took. The key is to add just the right amount of yeast and under no circumstances allow the cheese to burn, and the cheese has to come from the nearby town of Cañaveral.

Thirty months ago, the only thing Dayro knew about bread was how to eat it and he never suspected all the fuss its fabrication required. He could barely read and write. At 17, as part of the Northern Block of the AUC (Paramilitary Group), he had only studied up to third grade, before getting mixed up in a war that led him to some of the most horrific moments of his life. But the year 2006 blew in new winds, and rumors of imminent demobilization and arms surrender flew among combatants. Dayro will never forget the day a group of veteran paramilitaries from the Urabá province visited the camp. They spoke adamantly of disarmament, something they

claimed was just around the corner. Dayro asked them what was to become of all the combatants, skilled only in war. The eldest among the men answered: "Learn to make bread. A bakery is a good business."

Dayro remembers the day he demobilized as a series of lines: A line for his background check, a line to get his citizen ID, a line to apply for government aid, and finally a huge military formation on the tiny village square near the city of Valledupar. Many speeches were made. And when the voices on the center stage finally died down, Dayro realized the war was over and, because he was still a minor, he was left in the care of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute.

The harsh war in which he never knew a moment's calm was over for Dayro. He'd joined the rural autodefensas at the age of 14. His home life was not responsible for leading him into war; he had suffered no serious abuse or family violence, no exposure to armed groups. He was a normal child of parents who had separated, although he had always been wise beyond his years. At 13 he looked for a piece of land he could exploit and was lucky enough to find it; the woman who owned the lot needed someone to

At 17, as part of the Northern Block of the AUC (Paramilitary Group), he had only studied up to third grade, before getting mixed up in a war that led him to some of the most horrific moments of his life.

protect it for her from the massive invasion of squatters pouring into the region. Dayro set up a garden and built a huge outbuilding that slowly filled with poultry.

The legend of an enterprising 13-year-old capable of maintaining his own parcel of land piqued the interest of one of the town's inhabitants, an elderly man from the Valle del Cauca region who soon began visiting the boy. Admiring the boy's mettle, the old man decided to reward him, inviting him on a trip to the western part of the country. Dayro accepted, leaving his land and poultry in his brother-in-law's care. He underestimated terribly the voracity of his relative, however, and weeks later, when Dayro returned from his trip, he found his brother-in-law had eaten almost all the birds, serving them with the vegetables grown on the land. Ruined, and with no other options at 14, Dayro sought out the autodefensas, recently arrived in the region.

His training lasted three months, at the end of which the commanding officers considered the company ready for a dangerous mission. Guerrillas had moved into the vast territory in the southern Guajira province between the Perijá and Sierra Nevada mountain ranges. The autodefensas considered the forceful retaking of this area vital; it was an extremely important route leading to Venezuela. Although they had no experience whatsoever, the young men were sent on the mission.

Dayro knew the operation was doomed from the time he was given his commission. Cylinder bombs rained down from the Pintado Mountain above, killing several youths. Dayro, who was with the second group, right behind the shock troops, remembers seeing a lot of bodies, including that of a commander who traveled with a bloodhound. The guerrillas had replaced the commander's head for that of his dog, and placed the commander's head on the dog's body.

While seeking protection behind an ant cave, Dayro watched as one of his companions stood and prepared to fire his weapon and immediately took a bullet in the forehead. Dayro will never forget it. The young man stared at him stiffly and managed to gently wipe at his forehead, as if a mosquito had just bitten him, before toppling over. Dayro tried to run but heard the unmistakable sound of a cylinder bomb approaching its target. It was like a small helicopter whose propeller makes a sound like an empty

tube. He saw the bomb drop in front of his eyes and resigned himself to the fatal explosion. But the cylinder didn't explode; it "stuck," as they say in war slang. Dayro took off running again and was able to save himself. Few moments are as horrific to him, especially the penetrating odor of gunpowder that hung in the air. It was one of the worst defeats in the history of the AUC: 38 men lost their lives.

From that point on, there were numerous combats and campaigns, tough times for an adolescent who –without realizing it– had chosen war as his only path in life. But then something happened that really shook him up. Dayro's stepfather was accused of collaborating with the guerrillas. His execution was to take place in front of the boy. Dayro agonized over whether or not to come to his stepfather's defense but already knew, through experience, that sticking his neck out in favor of a condemned man could cost him his own life. His stepfather knew it as well and didn't dare say anything to reveal the bond between them. He only looked the boy in the eye, as if hoping some miracle might come of it. Dayro thought of his mother and wanted to scream. But he remained quiet. A few seconds later, right in front of the stepson's eyes, the man was given the coup de grace.

The winds of demobilization came as a welcome change, the ideal foil for the hardships of war, from which the only possible escape until then had been death or imprisonment. From then on, in the March heat of the village known as La Mesa, Dayro set about his own redemption. He worked quickly, as if life had something in store for him and he had little time to go after it.

Eighteen months later, after passing through a Transitional Home and a CAE, after completing his processing at the "CROJ" (Youth Reference and Opportunities Center), and taking as many courses as time would allow, Dayro felt the time had come to present his production proposal to the Alta Consejería para la Reintegración: It was time for his business, his bakery.

The official proposal, over 100 pages long, is kept in a carefully bound and organized notebook. To apply for eight million pesos in aid, the applicant would have to certify at least 650 hours of preparation. Dayro has accumulated over 1,000 hours. The SENA certificates tell the story: 30 hours of Cakes, another 30 of Cheese Products, 30 more of Pastry, 40 hours of Basic

Bread-Making, 200 of Enterprising Mindset and Starting a Business, and another 100 hours of Reinstatement in Civilian Life.

There are also certificates from a Family Compensation Fund, a 200-hour Bakery course and another Small Business Seminar that lasted 100 hours. He also has his High School diploma, achieved after validating eight years of school in a single year.

And he holds a practical certificate, worth an additional 400 hours, which Dayro spent working in an accredited bakery in the nation's capital. Don Emilio, the owner of that bakery, not only gave the boy an opportunity after learning he had been with an armed group; he also gave him some good advice and the day Dayro graduated from high school, don Emilio surprised the boy by showing up with his whole family. "During his time here his behavior has been outstanding; he showed interest in his assignments and progressed rapidly," states the practical certificate signed by the Head of Personnel at don Emilio's bakery.

One of the psychologists who accompanied Dayro during his process states the following in the psycho-social evaluation included in the proposal: "This young man shows great initiative and a predisposition toward taking action, improving results and creating opportunities."

But besides the diplomas and certificates included in the proposal defining the overwhelming achievements of a young man who, only two years ago, was semi-illiterate and fired a rifle up in the mountains, the financial calculations consigned in the project speak for themselves; Dayro prepared them himself on Excel spreadsheets. They include tables titled "Initial Investment," "Expenses and Salaries," "Cost of Raw Materials," "Production Capacity," and "Sales Plan," each projected over a 12-month period and including details such as the number of mojicones, guava paste roscones, bread rolls and "cascara" breads the bakery will sell every month. The proposal also includes a description of each of the machines Dayro will need to purchase for his business: A double-headed rolling machine, a six-shelf oven with two separate temperature settings, a 36-blade dough chunker, a dough mixer, a four-tier storage cart...

The proposal was approved with no objections by each of the various institutions and Dayro has begun his new life. He's there, starting married life as well with the younger sister of a demobilized colleague. At the beginning of 2009 they had their first daughter, a child who spends her time between the two rooms of the bakery while her parents take care of business, now more than just the bakery; in recent weeks, Dayro purchased a cooler and they now sell soft drinks as well as milk and other staples like eggs, rice and milk products.

The winds of demobilization came as a welcome change, the ideal foil for the hardships of war, from which the only possible escape until then had been death or imprisonment.

It hasn't been easy. Once, the blade on the dough chunker broke in the middle of a mix using six pounds of flour and Dayro had to open the machine while his wife quickly removed the dough to keep it from going to waste. Armed with a screwdriver and plenty of patience, he worked tirelessly until he'd fixed the machine himself, with no need for a technician. His budding business has several unconditional allies: don Emilio, who provided him with practical experience, and rather than fear competition, sent one of his expert bakers to consult with Dayro and correct any production errors. Dayro has also received economic aid from the Asociación "Tejido Humano" and USAID –who provided complementary aid in setting up the business– and from a credit union run by the "CROJ" (Youth Reference

and Opportunities Center) that provided funds for a computer used to run his small business.

Today, following the initial phases of his rights restoration process, Dayro is an active beneficiary of the CROJ and participates wholeheartedly in a variety of both academic and recreational activities. Besides throwing his heart and soul into his business, he takes time to study Market Technology at the SENA, which he hopes to apply to growing his business. He has little time to rest and although his life is wildly hectic, he always has a smile on his face, almost an innocent smile, as if he didn't know all he knows. His supervisors all agree: Dayro refuses to play the victim and –on the contrary– takes responsibility for his life by making timely decisions.

Every morning at dawn, from inside his tiny bakery, the same aroma makes its way into the neighborhood. Demonstrating his business sense, Dayro had already foreseen in his proposal that "the bakery will open to the public at six in the morning, offering freshly baked bread, to attract customers who enjoy the smell and taste of fresh bread for their first meal of the day: breakfast." The tempting smell makes his client base grow daily. Freshly baked "campesino" bread, soft on the palate, has replaced the odor of gunpowder that colored his tragic moments.

...“the bakery will open to the public at six in the morning, offering freshly baked bread, to attract customers who enjoy the smell and taste of fresh bread for their first meal of the day: breakfast.”

This book was printed
in the month of june,
2010 at Panamericana
Formas e Impresos in
Bogotá, Colombia.

Libertad y Orden
República de Colombia

USAID
DEL PUEBLO DE LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMÉRICA

OIM Organización Internacional para las Migraciones

BIENESTAR FAMILIAR

Derecho a la felicidad

The revealing texts contained in this book ***Victories of Peace: Ten Stories of Children Who Defeated War*** by Ernesto McCausland, lay bare the dolorous practice of forced recruitment of children in Colombia by illegal armed groups.

The Colombian government, through its Colombian Institute for Family Welfare and other state agencies, wages a tireless struggle against this horrible reality with support from Colombian society.

With this publication, the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) once again invite all Colombians, in their role as citizens, to help ensure that not another child is drawn into war. Instead, we welcome these children into a fraternal setting of love, protection and happiness.

The heroes of these ten moving stories, along with the many other boys and girls fallen victim to this evil, have rebuilt their lives and through a personal process of reconciliation with themselves, their families and society and have found a place in life, a path to follow and opportunities for free and unfettered choice. To each of them, who in their passage through the Specialized Care Program for Demobilized Youths has become aware of what they can be, do and have; to those who have proven to us that it is possible to trust in one another, to love and respect and to earn love and respect, we are truly grateful and hope to repay our debt through a constant commitment to our institutions.

ELVIRA FORERO HERNÁNDEZ
General Director of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare