

# MARK BOWDEN

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLER **BLACK HAWK DOWN**

# KILLING PABLO

**THE HUNT FOR  
THE RICHEST,  
MOST POWERFUL  
CRIMINAL  
IN HISTORY**





# KILLING PABLO

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MARK BOWDEN is the bestselling author of *Black Hawk Down*, which was made into a successful film by Ridley Scott, *Finders Keepers*, *Road Work* and *Guests of the Ayatollah*. He is a national correspondent for *Atlantic Monthly*.

'Pablo Escobar was a bona fide James Bond villain. Mark Bowden's thrilling, completely engrossing book brings the man and his bloody times to vivid life. I couldn't put it down.' Howard Marks

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Also by Mark Bowden

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*Black Hawk Down*

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*Road Work*

*Guests of the Ayatollah*



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HISTORY

*MARK BOWDEN*



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Picture credits: Insert page 1: Pablo as he appeared in 1983 (Reuters NewMedia Inc./  
CORBIS). Insert page 2: Map of Colombia (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*); Map of Medellín  
(*The Philadelphia Inquirer*). Insert page 3: Pablo and his wife Maria Victoria in 1983  
(Reuters NewMedia Inc./CORBIS); Pablo embraces his wife, Maria Victoria, and his  
daughter, Manuela (RCN). Insert page 4: President Bush with Colombian president Virgilio  
Barco (AP/World Wide Photos); Morris D. Busby (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*); Luis Galán  
(AP/World Wide Photos); Colombian president César Gaviria (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*).

Insert page 5: A dinner party in the mid-1980s (Mark Bowden); Fernando Galeano  
(AP/World Wide Photos); A view from the comfortable living room of Pablo's suite at La  
Catedral prison (Mark Bowden); DEA agents Steve Murphy and Javier Peña (Mark  
Bowden). Insert page 6: Agent Joe Toft (Tim Dunn, freelance photographer); José  
Rodríguez-Gacha (*El Espectador*); Colonel Hugo Martínez (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*);  
Eduardo Mendoza (AP/World Wide Photos). Insert page 7: An exhibit at the Policía  
Nacional de Colombia's Museum (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*); The third page of a  
handwritten letter (Mark Bowden); The Colombian government and U.S. Embassy printed  
thousands of posters and handbills (RCN); A victim of Los Pepes (RCN). Insert page 8:  
Members of Colonel Martínez's Search Bloc (Mark Bowden); Pablo's grave in Medellín  
(*The Philadelphia Inquirer*).

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# PROLOGUE

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*December 2, 1993*

On the day that Pablo Escobar was killed, his mother, Hermilda, came to the place on foot. She had been ill earlier that day and was visiting a medical clinic when she heard the news. She fainted.

When she revived she came straight to Los Olivos, the neighborhood in south-central Medellín where the reporters on television and radio were saying it had happened. Crowds blocked the streets, so she had to stop the car and walk. Hermilda was stooped and walked stiffly, taking short steps, a tough old woman with gray hair and a bony, concave face and wide glasses that sat slightly askew on her long, straight nose, the same nose as her son's. She wore a dress with a pale floral print, and even taking short steps she walked too fast for her daughter, who was fat. The younger woman struggled to keep pace.

Los Olivos consisted of blocks of irregular two- and three-story row houses with tiny yards and gardens in front, many with squat palm trees that barely reached the roofline. The crowds were held back by police at barricades. Some residents had climbed out on roofs for a better look. There were those who said it was definitely Don Pablo who had been killed and others who said no, the police had shot a man but it was not him, that he had escaped again. Many preferred to believe he had gotten away. Medellín was Pablo's home. It was here he had made his billions and where his money had built big office buildings and apartment complexes, discos and restaurants, and it was here he had created housing for the poor, for people who had squatted in shacks of cardboard and plastic and tin and picked at refuse in the city's garbage heaps with kerchiefs tied across their faces against the stench, looking for anything that could be cleaned up and sold. It was here he had built soccer fields with lights so workers could play at night, and where he had come out to ribbon cuttings and sometimes played in the games himself, already a legend, a chubby man with a mustache and a wide second chin who, everyone agreed, was still pretty fast on his feet. It was here that many believed the police would never catch him, could not catch him, even with their death squads and all their gringo dollars and spy planes and who knew what all else. It was here Pablo had hidden for sixteen months while they searched. He had moved from hideout to hideout among people who, if they recognized him, would never give him up, because it was a place where there were pictures of him in gilded frames on the walls, where prayers were said for him to have a long life and many children, and where (he also knew) those who did not pray for him feared him.

The old lady moved forward purposefully until she and her daughter were stopped by stern men in green uniforms.

"We are family. This is the mother of Pablo Escobar," the daughter explained.

The officers were unmoved.

"Don't you all have mothers?" Hermilda asked.

When word was passed up the ranks that Pablo Escobar's mother and sister had come, they were allowed to pass. With an escort they moved through the flanks of parked cars to where the lights of the ambulances and police vehicles flashed. Television cameras caught them as they approached, and a murmur went through the crowd.

Hermilda crossed the street to a small plot of grass where the body of a young man was sprawled. The man had a hole in the center of his forehead, and his eyes, grown dull and milky, stared blankly at the sky.

"You fools!" Hermilda shouted, and she began to laugh loudly at the police. "You fools! This is not my son! This is not Pablo Escobar! You have killed the wrong man!"

But the soldiers directed the two women to stand aside, and from the roof over the garage they

lowered a body strapped to a stretcher, a fat man in bare feet with blue jeans rolled up at the cuff and a blue pullover shirt, whose round, bearded face was swollen and bloody. He had a full black beard and a bizarre square little mustache with the ends shaved off, like Hitler's.

It was hard to tell at first that it was him. Hermilda gasped and stood over the body silently. Mixed with the pain and anger she felt a sense of relief, and also of dread. She felt relief because now at least the nightmare was over for her son. Dread because she believed his death would unleash still more violence. She wished nothing more now than for it to be finished, especially for her family. Let all the pain and bloodshed die with Pablo.

As she left the place, she pulled her mouth tight to betray no emotion and stopped only long enough to tell a reporter with a microphone, "At least now he is at rest"





# THE RISE OF *EL DOCTOR*

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1948–1989

There was no more exciting place in South America to be in April 1948 than Bogotá, Colombia. Change was in the air, a static charge awaiting direction. No one knew exactly what it would be, only that it was at hand. It was a moment in the life of a nation, perhaps even a continent, when all of history seemed a prelude.

Bogotá was then a city of more than a million that spilled down the side of green mountains into a wide savanna. It was bordered by steep peaks to the north and east, and opened up flat and empty to the south and west. Arriving by air, one would see nothing below for hours but mountains, row upon row of emerald peaks, the highest of them capped white. Light hit the flanks of the undulating ranges at different angles, creating shifting shades of chartreuse, sage, and ivy, all of them cut with red-brown tributaries that gradually merged and widened as they coursed downhill to river valleys so deep in shadow they were almost blue. Then abruptly from these virgin ranges emerged a fully modern metropolis, a great blight of concrete covering most of a wide plain. Most of Bogotá was just two or three stories high, with a preponderance of red brick. From the center north, it had wide landscaped avenues, with museums, classic cathedrals, and graceful old mansions to rival the most elegant urban neighborhoods in the world, but to the south and west were the beginnings of shantytowns where refugees from the ongoing violence in the jungles and mountains sought refuge, employment, and hope and instead found only deadening poverty.

In the north part of the city, far from this squalor, a great meeting was about to convene, the Ninth Inter-American Conference. Foreign ministers from all countries of the hemisphere were there to sign the charter for the Organization of American States, a new coalition sponsored by the United States that was designed to give more voice and prominence to the nations of Central and South America. The city had been spruced up for the event, with street cleanings and trash removal, fresh coats of paint on public buildings, new signage on roadways, and, along the avenues, colorful flags and plantings. Even the shoe-shine men on the street corners wore new uniforms. The officials who attended meetings and parties in this surprisingly urbane capital hoped that the new organization would bring order and respectability to the struggling republics of the region. But the event had also attracted critics, leftist agitators, among them a young Cuban student leader named Fidel Castro. To them the fledgling OAS was a sop, a sellout, an alliance with the gringo imperialists of the north. To idealists who had gathered from all over the region, the postwar world was still up for grabs, a contest between capitalism and communism, or at least socialism, and young rebels like the twenty-one-year-old Castro anticipated a decade of revolution. They would topple the region's calcified feudal aristocracies and establish peace, social justice, and an authentic Pan-American political bloc. They were hip, angry, and smart, and they believed with the certainty of youth that they owned the future. They came to Bogotá to denounce the new organization and had planned a hemispheric conference of their own to coordinate citywide protests. They looked for guidance from one man in particular, an enormously popular forty-nine-year-old Colombian politician named Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.

"I am not a man, I am a people!" was Gaitán's slogan, which he would pronounce dramatically at the end of speeches to bring his ecstatic admirers to their feet. He was of mixed blood, a man with the education and manner of the country's white elite but the squat frame, dark skin, broad face, and coarse black hair of Colombia's lower Indian castes. Gaitán's appearance marked him as an outsider, man of the masses. He could never fully belong to the small, select group of the wealthy and fair-skinned who owned most of the nation's land and natural resources, and who for generations had dominated its government. These families ran the mines, owned the oil, and grew the fruits, coffee, and vegetables that made up the bulk of Colombia's export economy. With the help of technology and capital offered by powerful U.S. corporate investors, they had grown rich selling the nation's great

natural bounty to America and Europe, and they had used those riches to import to Bogotá a sophistication that rivaled the great capitals of the world. Gaitán's skin color marked him as apart from them just as it connected him with the excluded, the others, the masses of Colombian people who were considered inferior, who were locked out of the riches of this export economy and its privileged islands of urban prosperity. But that connection had given Gaitán power. No matter how educated and powerful he became, he was irrevocably tied to those others, whose only option was work in the mines or the fields at subsistence wages, who had no chance for education and opportunity for a better life. They constituted a vast electoral majority.

Times were bad. In the cities it meant inflation and high unemployment, while in the mountain and jungle villages that made up most of Colombia it meant no work, hunger, and starvation. Protests by angry *campesinos*, encouraged and led by Marxist agitators, had grown increasingly violent. The country's Conservative Party leadership and its sponsors, wealthy landowners and miners, had responded with draconian methods. There were massacres and summary executions. Many foresaw this cycle of protest and repression leading to another bloody civil war—the Marxists saw it as the inevitable revolt. But most Colombians were neither Marxists nor oligarchs; they just wanted peace. They wanted change, not war. To them, this was Gaitán's promise. It had made him wildly popular.

In a speech two months earlier before a crowd of one hundred thousand at the Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá, Gaitán had pleaded with the government to restore order, and had urged the great crowd before him to express their outrage and self-control by responding to his oration not with cheers and applause but with silence. He had addressed his remarks directly to President Mariano Ospina.

"We ask that the persecution by the authorities stop," he'd said. "Thus asks this immense multitude. We ask a small but great thing: that our political struggles be governed by the constitution.... Señor President, stop the violence. We want human life to be defended, that is the least a people can ask.... Our flag is in mourning, this silent multitude, this mute cry from our hearts, asks only that you treat us...as you would have us treat you."

Against a backdrop of such explosive forces, the silence of this throng had echoed much more loudly than cheers. Many in the crowd had simply waved white handkerchiefs. At great rallies like these, Gaitán seemed poised to lead Colombia to a lawful, just, peaceful future. He tapped the deepest yearnings of his countrymen.

A skillful lawyer and a socialist, he was, in the words of a CIA report prepared years later, "a staunch antagonist of oligarchical rule and a spellbinding orator." He was also a shrewd politician who had turned his populist appeal into real political power. When the OAS conference convened in Bogotá in 1948, Gaitán was not only the people's favorite, he was the head of the Liberal Party, one of the country's two major political organizations. His election as president in 1950 was regarded as a virtual certainty. Yet the Conservative Party government, headed by President Ospina, had left Gaitán off the bipartisan delegation appointed to represent Colombia at the great conference.

Tensions were high in the city. Colombian historian German Arciniegas would later write of "a chilling wind of terror blowing in from the provinces." The day before the conference convened, a mob attacked a car carrying the Ecuadorian delegation, and rumors of terrorist violence seemed confirmed the same day when police caught a worker attempting to plant a bomb in the capital. In the midst of all the hubbub, Gaitán quietly went about his law practice. He knew his moment was still a few years off, and he was prepared to wait. The president's snub had only enhanced his stature among his supporters, as well as among the more radical young leftists gathering to protest, who otherwise might have dismissed Gaitán as a bourgeois liberal with a vision too timid for their ambition. Castro had made an appointment to meet with him.

Gaitán busied himself with defending an army officer accused of murder, and on April 8, the day the conference convened, he won an acquittal. Late the next morning, some journalists and friends

stopped by his office to offer congratulations. They chatted happily, arguing about where to go for lunch and who would pay. Shortly before one o'clock, Gaitán walked down to the street with the small group. He had two hours before the scheduled meeting with Castro.

Leaving the building, the group walked past a fat, dirty, unshaven man who let them pass and then ran to overtake them. The man, Juan Roa, stopped and without a word leveled a handgun. Gaitán briskly turned and started back toward the safety of his office building. Roa began shooting. Gaitán fell with wounds to his head, lungs, and liver, and died within the hour as doctors tried desperately to save him.

Gaitán's murder is where the modern history of Colombia starts. There would be many theories about Roa—that he had been recruited by the CIA or by Gaitán's conservative enemies, or even by Communist extremists who feared that their revolution would be postponed by Gaitán's ascension. In Colombia, murder rarely has a shortage of plausible motives. An independent investigation by officers of Scotland Yard determined that Roa, a frustrated mystic with grandiose delusions, had nursed a grudge against Gaitán and had acted alone; but since he was beaten to death on the spot, his motives died with him. Whatever Roa's purpose, the rounds he fired unleashed chaos. All hope for a peaceful future in Colombia ended. All those brooding forces of change exploded into *El Bogotazo*, a spasm of rioting so intense it left large parts of the capital city ablaze before spreading to other cities. Many policemen, devotees of the slain leader, joined the angry mobs in the streets, as did student revolutionaries like Castro. The leftists donned red armbands and tried to direct the crowds, sensing with excitement that their moment had arrived, but quickly realized that the situation was beyond control. The mobs grew larger and larger, and protest evolved into random destruction, drunkenness, and looting. Ospina called in the army, which in some places fired into the crowds.

Everyone's vision of the future died with Gaitán. The official effort to showcase a new era of stability and cooperation was badly tarnished; the visiting foreign delegations signed the charter and fled the country. The leftists' hopes of igniting South America's new communist era went up in flames. Castro took shelter in the Cuban embassy as the army began hunting down and arresting leftist agitators, who were blamed for the uprising, but even a CIA history of the event would conclude that the leftists were as much victims as everyone else. For Castro, an agency historian wrote, the episode was profoundly disillusioning: "[It] may have influenced his adoption in Cuba in the 1950s of a guerrilla strategy rather than one of revolution through urban disorders."

*El Bogotazo* was eventually quieted in Bogotá and the other large cities, but it lived on throughout untamed Colombia for years, metamorphosing into a nightmarish period of bloodletting so empty of meaning it is called simply *La Violencia*. An estimated two hundred thousand people were killed. Most of the dead were campesinos, incited to violence by appeals to religious fervor, land rights, and a bewildering assortment of local issues. While Castro carried off his revolution in Cuba and the rest of the world squared off in the Cold War, Colombia remained locked in this cabalistic dance with death. Private and public armies terrorized the rural areas. The government fought paramilitaries and guerrillas, industrialists fought unionists, conservative Catholics fought heretical liberals, and *bandidos* took advantage of the free-for-all to plunder. Gaitán's death had unleashed demons that had less to do with the emerging modern world than with Colombia's deeply troubled past.

Colombia is a land that breeds outlaws. It has always been ungovernable, a nation of wild unsullied beauty, steeped in mystery. From the white peaks of the three cordilleras that form its western spine to the triple-canopy equatorial jungle at sea level, it affords many good places to hide. There are corners of Colombia still virtually untouched by man. Some are among the only places left on this thoroughly trampled planet where botanists and biologists can discover and attach their names to new species of plants, insects, birds, reptiles, and even small mammals.

The ancient cultures that flourished here were isolated and stubborn. With soil so rich and a climate

so varied and mild, everything grew, so there was little need for trade or commerce. The land ensnared one like a sweet, tenacious vine. Those who came stayed. It took the Spanish almost two hundred years to subdue just one people, the Tairona, who lived in a lush pocket of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta foothills. European invaders eventually defeated them the only way they could, by killing them all. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Spanish tried without success to rule from neighboring Peru, and in the nineteenth century Simón Bolívar tried to join Colombia with Peru and Venezuela to form a great South American state, Gran Colombia. But even the great liberator could not hold the pieces together.

Ever since Bolívar's death in 1830, Colombia has been proudly democratic, but it has never quite got the hang of peaceful political evolution. Its government is weak, by design and tradition. In vast regions to the south and west, and even in the mountain villages outside the major cities, live communities only lightly touched by nation, government, or law. The sole civilizing influence ever to reach the whole country was the Catholic Church, and that was accomplished only because clever Jesuits grafted their Roman mysteries to ancient rituals and beliefs. Their hope was to grow a hybrid faith, nursing Christianity from pagan roots to a locally flavored version of the One True Faith, but in stubborn Colombia, it was Catholicism that took a detour. It grew into something else, a faith rich with ancestral connection, fatalism, superstition, magic, mystery...and violence.

Violence stalks Colombia like a biblical plague. The nation's two major political factions, the Liberals and Conservatives, fought eight civil wars in the nineteenth century alone over the roles of church and state. Both groups were overwhelmingly Catholic, but the Liberals wanted to keep the priests off the public stage. The worst of these conflicts, which began in 1899 and was called the War of a Thousand Days, left more than one hundred thousand dead and utterly ruined whatever national government and economy existed.

Caught between these two violent forces, the Colombian peasantry learned to fear and distrust both. They found heroes in the outlaws who roamed the Colombian wilderness as violent free agents, defying everyone. During the War of a Thousand Days the most famous was José del Carmen Tejeiro who played upon popular hatred of the warring powers. Tejeiro would not just steal from wealthy landowning enemies; he would punish and humiliate them, forcing them to sign declarations such as "I was whipped fifty times by José del Carmen Tejeiro as retribution for persecuting him." His fame earned him supporters beyond Colombia's borders. Venezuelan dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, sowing little neighborhood instability, presented Tejeiro with a gold-studded carbine.

A half century later, *La Violencia* bred a new colorful menagerie of outlaws, men who went by names like Tarzan, Desquite (Revenge), Tirofijo (Sureshot), Sangrenegra (Blackblood), and Chispas (Sparks). They roamed the countryside, robbing, pillaging, raping, and killing, but because they were allied with none of the major factions, their crimes were seen by many common people as blows struck against power.

*La Violencia* eased only when General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla seized power in 1953 and established military dictatorship. He lasted five years before being ousted by more democratic military officers. A national plan was put in place for Liberals and Conservatives to share the government, alternating the presidency every four years. It was a system guaranteed to prevent any real reforms or government-initiated social progress, because any steps taken during one administration could be undone in the next. The famous *bandidos* went on raiding and stealing in the hills, and occasionally made halfhearted attempts to band together. In the end they were not idealists or revolutionaries, just outlaws. Still, a generation of Colombians grew up on their exploits. The *bandidos* were heroes despite themselves to many of the powerless, terrorized, and oppressed poor. The nation both thrilled and mourned as the army of the oligarchs in Bogotá hunted them down, one by one. By the 1960s Colombia had settled into an enforced stasis, with Marxist guerrillas in the hills and jungles (modern

successors to the *bandido* tradition) and a central government increasingly dominated by a small group of rich, elite Bogotá families, powerless to effect change and, anyway, disinclined. The violence, already deeply rooted in the culture, continued, deepened, *twisted*.

Terror became art, a form of psychological warfare with a quasi-religious aesthetic. In Colombia it wasn't enough to hurt or even kill your enemy; there was ritual to be observed. Rape had to be performed in public, before fathers, mothers, husbands, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters. And before you killed a man, you first made him beg, scream, and gag...or first you killed those he most loved before his eyes. To amplify revulsion and fear, victims were horribly mutilated and left on display. Male victims had their genitals stuffed in their mouths; women had their breasts cut off and their wombs stretched over their heads. Children were killed not by accident but slowly, with pleasure. Severed heads were left on pikes along public roadways. Colombian killers perfected signature cuts, distinctive ways of mutilating victims. One gang left its mark by slicing the neck of a victim and then pulling his tongue down his throat and out through the slice, leaving a grotesque "necktie." These horrors seldom directly touched the educated urbanites of Colombia's ruling classes, but the waves of fear widened and reached everywhere. No child raised in Colombia at midcentury was immune to it. Blood flowed like the muddy red waters that rushed down from the mountains. The joke Colombians told was that God had made their land so beautiful, so rich in every natural way, that it was unfair to the rest of the world; He had evened the score by populating it with the most evil race of men.

It was here, in the second year of *La Violencia*, that the greatest outlaw in history, Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria, was born, on December 1, 1949. He grew up with the cruelty and terror alive in the hills around his native Medellín, and absorbed the stories of Desquite, Sangrenegra, and Tirofijo, all of them full-blown legends by the time he was old enough to listen and understand, most of them still alive and on the run. Pablo would outstrip them all by far.

Anyone can be a criminal, but to be an outlaw demands a following. The outlaw stands for something, usually through no effort of his own. No matter how base the actual motives of criminals like those in the Colombian hills, or like the American ones immortalized by Hollywood—Al Capone, Bonnie and Clyde, Jesse James—large numbers of average people rooted for them and followed their bloody exploits with some measure of delight. Their acts, however selfish or senseless, were invested with social meaning. Their crimes and violence were blows struck against distant, oppressive power. Their stealth and cunning in avoiding soldiers and police were celebrated, these being the time-honored tactics of the powerless.

Pablo Escobar would build on these myths. While the other outlaws remained strictly local heroes, meaningful only as symbols, his power would become both international and real. At his peak, he would threaten to usurp the Colombian state. *Forbes* magazine would list him as the seventh-richest man in the world in 1989. His violent reach would make him the most feared terrorist in the world.

His success would owe much to his nation's unique culture and history, indeed to its very soil and climate, with its bountiful harvests of coca and marijuana. But an equal part of it was Pablo himself. Unlike any other outlaw before, he understood the potency of legend. He crafted his and nurtured it. He was a vicious thug, but he had a social conscience. He was a brutal crime boss but also a politician with a genuinely winning personal style that, at least for some, transcended the ugliness of his deeds. He was shrewd and arrogant and rich enough to milk that popularity. He had, in the words of former Colombian president César Gaviria, "a kind of native genius for public relations." At his death, Pablo was mourned by thousands. Crowds rioted when his casket was carried into the streets of his home city of Medellín. People pushed the bearers aside and pried open the lid to touch his cold, stiff face. His gravesite is tended lovingly to this day and remains one of the most popular tourist spots in the city. He stood for something.

For what, exactly, isn't easy to understand without knowing Colombia and his life and times. Pablo

too, was a creature of his time and place. He was a complex, contradictory, and ultimately very dangerous man, in large part because of his genius for manipulating public opinion. But this same crowd-pleasing quality was also his weakness, the thing that eventually brought him down. A man of lesser ambition might still be alive, rich, powerful, and living well and openly in Medellín. But Pablo wasn't content to be just rich and powerful. He wanted to be admired. He wanted to be respected. He wanted to be loved.

When he was a small boy, his mother, Hermilda, the real shaping influence in his life, made a vow before a statue in her home village of Frontino, in the rural northwest part of the Colombian *departamento*, or state, of Antioquia. The statue, an icon, was of the child Jesus of Atocha. Hermilda Gaviria was a schoolteacher, an ambitious, educated, and unusually capable woman for that time and place, who had married Abel de Jesús Escobar, a self-sufficient cattle farmer. Pablo was their second son, and she had already borne Abel a daughter. They would eventually have four more children. But Hermilda was cursed with powerlessness. For all her learning and drive, she knew that the fates of her ambition and her family were out of her hands. She knew this not just in some abstract, spiritual way, the way religious men and women accept the final authority of God. This was Colombia in the 1950s. The horror of *La Violencia* was everywhere. Unlike the relatively secure cities, in villages like Frontino and the one where Hermilda and Abel now lived, Rionegro, violent and terrible death was commonplace. The Escobars were not revolutionaries; they were staunchly middle class. To the extent that they had political leanings, they were allied with local Conservative landowners, which made them targets for the Liberal armies and insurrectionists who roamed the hills. Hermilda sought protection and solace from the child Jesus of Atocha with the urgency of a young wife and mother adrift in a sea of terror. In her prayers she vowed something concrete and grand. Someday, she said, she would build a chapel for Jesus of Atocha if God spared her family from the Liberals. Pablo would build that chapel.

Pablo did not grow up poor, as he and his hired publicists would sometimes later claim. Rionegro was not yet a suburb of Medellín, but a collection of relatively prosperous cattle farms in the outlying districts. Abel owned a house, twelve hectares, and six cows when Pablo was born, and he tended adjacent land that he had sold to a well-known local Conservative politician. The house had no electricity but did have running water. For rural Colombia, this would qualify as upper middle class, and conditions improved when they moved to Envigado, a village on the outskirts of Medellín, a thriving city that was rapidly creeping up the green slopes of the mountains around it. Hermilda was not just a schoolteacher but a founder of Envigado's elementary school. When they moved there, Abel gave up his farming to work as a neighborhood watchman. Hermilda was an important person in the community, someone well-known to parents and children alike. So even as schoolchildren, Pablo and his brothers and sisters were special. Pablo did well in his classes, as his mother no doubt expected, and he loved to play soccer. He was well dressed and, as his chubby frame attested, well fed. Escobar liked fast food, movies, and popular music—American, Mexican, and Brazilian.

While there was still violence in Colombia, even as he entered his teens, the raging terror of *La Violencia* gradually eased. Abel and Hermilda Escobar emerged from it all to create a comfortable life for themselves and their seven children. But just as the prosperity of the fifties in the United States bred a restless, rebellious generation of children, so Pablo and his contemporaries in Medellín had their own way of tuning in, turning on, and dropping out. A hippielike, nihilistic, countrywide youth movement called *Nadaismo* had its origins right in Envigado, where its founder, the intellectual Fernando Gonzáles, had written his manifesto "The Right to Disobey." Banned by the church, barely tolerated by authorities, the *Nadaistas*—the "nothingists"—lampooned their elders in song, dressed and behaved outrageously, and expressed their disdain for the established order in the established way of the sixties: they smoked dope.



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