

## **Between Two Foothills**

When I glanced over my shoulder as the barman presented a second glass of whiskey, the clock had just struck seven. It had been about two hours since I had the first, having stumbled upon the bar after Victoria decided she preferred to do her shopping on her own. I was entertaining the idea of leaving and finding Victoria when a girl got up from the table where she had been sitting with three other people and came over to me. I turned to see her across the room as if by magnetic attraction. The emerald green gown she was wearing subtly suggested a delicate, yet firm figure. It brushed lightly against her skin, producing a contrast that made her more conspicuous amongst a myriad men far too consumed by stupor to notice her. She pulled the stool next to mine from under the pinewood countertop and brought her left hand toward me, gesturing for help to climb onto it. I silently obliged and took her hand as she stepped up.

Speakeasies were more obscure and murky in Bogotá than they were in the America of Prohibition. They stood mostly to the north of the city centre and lined the busy sidewalks of Thirteenth and Caracas Avenues. The clandestine arms of political parties gathered in the illegal bars of Chapinero, brusquely scribbling the names of their targets onto beer-stained rags of paper. They bellowed at each other, uttering a barrage of epithets, of which only a handful I found intelligible. Construction workers flooded in after six, wearing a thick paste of sweat and concrete dust on their hands and faces. Scarlet women hired from nearby brothels tended to the sore men, who could barely acknowledge them, intoxicated by

tiredness and drunkenness. The room was made a foot lower by the dense fog of smoke from lighted cigars.

I tried to make sense of the girl's presence in such an unpleasant setting. She seemed hopelessly out of her element, an elegant woman surrounded by so many common thugs and assorted undesirables. And yet, she was perfectly poised, confident and comfortable. The paradox perplexed me. "It's the one place where my fiancé won't look for me", she intervened, perceiving my bemusement. "And also the only business that will sell a woman a proper drink without so much as an interjection". I paused for a moment, still gazing at her. She took notice and looked down, holding her hands together and resting them on her lap. A flock of her light auburn hair escaped from behind her ears and fell in front of her face, concealing her demure grin. She wore small pearl earrings that could scarcely be made from the faint, almost porcelain-like tone of her skin. My mind wandered for a second before I could speak again.

"I suppose it's only fair that your next one is on me, miss..."

"Eugenia", she replied without hesitation. "Eugenia Descoteaux". She looked back up and placed the hair covering her face back behind her right ear. I smiled and gestured the barman to produce a glass of gin. Eugenia clutched it unassumingly, resting her elbow on the countertop as she brought it to her mouth. The burn of the gin in her throat forced her back into a restrained, coquettish demeanour. "I must say, your being here is almost as

bewildering as mine", she simpered. I smiled and took a drink of whiskey. "I have things to run away from, as well". She raised her eyebrows. "My sister's shopping and this city's dreadful weather", I added. Eugenia scoffed at my predicament, but maintained her coy attitude, and grinned with only one end of her lips. "A vulgar refuge for such a glamorous problem", she argued. "Why run away from Bogotá's weather? That would mean escaping the comforting cold of the rain, the fog atop the Eastern Hills that engulfs their summits and makes them infinite at the same time. And that earthy smell after it has rained, the humidity of decomposing tree bark... No, you don't run away from places. You run away from people". Eugenia rambled as if nobody was listening. Her tirade rang of lament. It echoed a pain that hovered around her like a miasma. One that she couldn't be sure anyone was aware of but herself.

We sat in an empathetic silence that froze time in the room. The smoke of the cigars trapped the sound waves and asphyxiated them in a dense brume of nicotine and tobacco that blended with the rancid odour of the bricklayers and the hitmen. The mouths of the patrons swung up and down, but produced no sound, as Eugenia and I looked at each other in accidental complicity. I had lost track of time when the people she had been sitting with walked towards us and let her know they were leaving. Eugenia told them to bring the car around and descended from the stool. "I will be here at lunchtime tomorrow", she whispered. "I hope you are too. This place isn't nearly as tasteless in the daytime". She took my hand and held it for a moment. As she let go, she slipped a piece of torn cardboard into my breast pocket. Just as gracefully as she had come towards me a few minutes before, she walked away. I followed suit moments later.

The moon rose above the mountains and cast its cold light on the vast stretch of tarmac that lay largely uninhabited this far north from the centre. I snuggled inside my overcoat and put my hands into the side pockets. The wind seeped in through the seams of the suit. From the top of the mountains to the foothill, and blending seamlessly with the cityscape descended a light fog that scattered the light from the lampposts. Minute specks of glimmering water floated westward like so many bits and pieces of quartz and diamond. I followed the fog down 52nd Street for a few blocks, turning north once again on Thirteenth Avenue towards the store Victoria told me she'd be in. It was one of those traditional clothing stores in Bogotá, set up by a family of Italians who fled in the early years of Mussolini's regime. The store smelled of oak and old varnish, and was dimly lit by lamps scattered across the room and fitted with cloth lampshades. The garments were neatly organised by style and colour in wooden tables and cabinets. Victoria was friends with Rossalina, the eldest daughter of the Leonardis, who routinely invited her for late-night shopping sessions in which they had the entire store to themselves. They drank tea and chatted as they picked blouses, skirts and coats. I entered the store unannounced and found them laughing, sitting opposite each other at the cashier counter. I waved at Rossalina as she smiled at me. Victoria was sitting facing away from me and turned slowly when she saw her friend's half grin.

"Wasn't I supposed to meet you at the bar?", inquired Victoria when she saw me come in. Being my older sister, Victoria was quick to notice the thousand-yard stare on my face. "It was far too loud in there", I drawled. Whether out of understanding or disinterest,

Victoria neglected to ask why I looked nonplussed. Still, the look on her face conveyed a certain sympathy, however condescending. She placed her hand on the back of my head and tilted it towards her, kissing me on the forehead. "Help me get the bags. It's late". Silently, Rossalina walked with us to the front door, kissing both our cheeks as we left.

We walked silently back onto Seventh Avenue and turned left. Victoria felt relieved that she had managed to complete her shopping in one sitting. Her eyes glimmered as she described every item and where it was meant to be worn. After my encounter with Eugenia, Victoria's words amounted to indistinct murmuring. I sheltered further into my coat, ignoring my surroundings as I marched on like an automat. We soon reached Quinta Camacho, where buildings started to make way for undeveloped pastures. Bogotá seemed cleaner, more peaceful here. The streets were quiet. Eucalyptus and pine trees impregnated the damp walls, sidewalks and tarmac with a peaceful aroma that danced about with the wind but refused to leave the neighbourhood. Behind the metal fences, many windows sat uncovered by curtains that were neatly tied to the sides. The window frames thus became screens of sorts, offering the typical nightly scenes of Colombia's capital. Families gathered in their living rooms or dining tables. Fathers and children smiled as the mothers brought snacks or dinner and served them. The picture in Quinta Camacho presented itself as the still of classic Bogotan *costumbrismo*. One that fled the historic centre of the city as it grew darker, noisier and more chaotic. One that was both well-rooted and fragile.

Victoria and I lived in the corner of 69th Street and Tenth Avenue. The façade of the house was blanketed with Japanese ivy. The house itself was built in a style reminiscent of Victorian architecture, as were most homes in the neighbourhood. There was a small elderberry in the front yard, which was separated from the sidewalk by a low brick wall, complete with metal fencing painted white to match the gate and the colonial window grids. Only the windows disrupted the uneven blanket of ivy. There were four of them. Two for each room upstairs, a larger one for the living room and a smaller one for the guest lavatory downstairs. The front door was made from aged oak and featured a small glass opening in the shape of an octagon. We had lived there since we were children and had decided to keep the place after our parents had passed. Neither of us had so much as entertained the idea of moving out before getting married, and I suspected my sister did not want to move out at all.

We entered the house in silence. I placed the bags on the navy armchair by the front door and walked upstairs. Sitting on my bed, I reached into my breast pocket. Out of it and in my hands was the wrinkled piece of cardboard Eugenia had slipped in. On the back, printed in brown ink was "-scoteaux Fotógrafos". The front featured two lines, written hastily in black ink.

*tomorrow we are leaving for the mountains*

*7837, 90th Street, number 7-71*

The note only accentuated my confusion. Not only was the phrase cryptic and lacking in context, the address made little sense. Whether anything further than 85th Street was actually part of Bogotá was debatable. Streets were no longer numbered according to convention and were paved unevenly, if at all. The lands there had been traditionally distant from the city and were home to the country houses of affluent socialites and politicians. Slowly but surely Bogotá grew towards the north, blurring the borders between itself and the surrounding villages. Soon, the Bogotá savanna would be one of concrete and asphalt, instead of grasslands and woods.

Having been abducted from the world by Eugenia and her note, I took a blanket from the table next to the wardrobe and lay on the bed, still wearing the thousand-yard stare I put on after she left the bar.

When I woke up the next day, the fog had subsided. The sky went from royal blue in the west to a subtle pink in the east, as the sun slowly rose from behind the Andes. Scattered across were a handful of white traces too small to be clouds. It was Friday and the city was brimming with activity. The morning newspaper featured advertising for bullfighting at the Santamaría Bullring, an evening play at the Colón Theatre and a couple of football matches between Bogotá's two main teams and two others from Perú and Costa Rica. I went downstairs and called for Victoria but there was no reply. The clock by the front door read half past eight.

The morning went by slowly as I had breakfast and took a shower. I opened the window opposite my bed to let the wind in before leaving. The white lace curtains twirled around as the air blew in, projecting their faint shadow onto the carpeted floor. I sat on the bed for a while, feeling midway between tired and unsettled. The sun was aiming squarely at the open window, having risen above the mountaintops for a couple of hours. It was a quarter to twelve, and time to return to the bar. Reluctant to walk, I took the keys to Victoria's Ford Coupé and drove east on 70th Street towards Seventh Avenue.

On the way to 52nd Street, the cityscape was remarkably unremarkable. I felt at odds with the normalcy of the children walking home for lunch, the shopkeepers luring pedestrians in and the office workers undoing their top buttons as they laughed amongst themselves. I reached the bar at a quarter past twelve. Bogotá was wearing her finest face and had been for about a week and a half, when the most illustrious members of the Americas' political class had gathered in the capital of Colombia to discuss the way forward for the hemisphere. The choice of venue had struck me as ill-conceived, at best. Colombia had struggled since its inception with its own existence, a country of seemingly incompatible and distant peoples sewn together by the megalomania of Bolívar. Its capital, out of touch with the realities of those in the provinces of Colombia, was no place to hold discussions to promote continental stability. Yet, the city was revelling in a sense of entitlement and glamour.



I arrived at the bar at five past twelve. Indeed, the place looked completely different. Gone were the thugs and bricklayers and the suffocating smoke. Only a few tables were taken by well-to-do businessmen sporting well-tailored suits. The wooden floor was spotless and the light of day revealed the full depth of the establishment. I glanced around and saw Eugenia sitting on the far end of the bar. She wore an off-white blouse and a long navy skirt. Her hair was tied up into a bun. Her face bore a uneasy, impatient expression. No sooner I placed my hand on her shoulder to let her know I'd arrived, she turned and threw herself at me in a relieved embrace. "You really came", she sighed. "You're really here". I held her for a moment, trying to silently reassure her. There was nothing doing.

"We need to leave", she urged. "My car is parked just on 53rd Street", I replied. "Let me bring it around". Eugenia refused hastily. "Wait for me there. I'll drive by and you can follow me". She ran out before I could ask any questions. I went outside into the early afternoon sun and glanced at my wristwatch. Ten to one.

It took Eugenia ten minutes to drive by me in a cream Mercedes 170V. She parked ahead and came to my window. "We are leaving for the mountains, darling", she proclaimed with a hint of resignation. Only now could I question her. "What's in the mountains?". She looked towards Seventh Avenue with sadness. "You don't run away from places", she sputtered. "You run away from people. All the people that are here are not in the mountains". The wind blew on her troubled face. A few strands of hair floated in it as she slowly turned back to look at me and back away towards her car. They reflected the sunlight

ever so slightly, almost distracting me from the sad sketch of a smile on Eugenia's face as she gazed towards the north.

We drove west on 53rd Street and turned north on Fourteenth Avenue, which led onto the main motorway out of the city. There was little indication of what Eugenia intended to do or where she was going. Tall oaks and weeping willows guarded the motorway as it curved away from the Andes and deep into the savanna. Bogotá dissolved into green with each passing mile and Eugenia kept driving north. I followed her for about an hour and a half, going past the town of Guasca and towards Suesca. Her driving matched the calm of the mountains as they opened up either side of the road and gave shape to the sweeping plains in which Bogotá was located, but it was far from the urgency and confusion that her words bore before we departed.

Just outside Suesca, Eugenia's driving became erratic. She made a hard right on the edge of the village and went off road onto a strip of natural sandstone cliffs that rose from the earth as if it had been broken in half by the hands of God. I struggled to keep up as she gained speed and the dust from the dirt made it hard to predict her path. Eugenia sped her car inches away from the edge of the cliffs and steered frantically from side to side like she had lost control of it. I could hardly make the Mercedes from behind the cloud of brown dust in front of me, and fought off the pressure building up in my chest as I grew increasingly distressed.

The dust suddenly settled. The Mercedes was nowhere to be seen. I stopped the car and got off to see some faint particles of dirt lead down from the edge of the cliff. I felt an almost electric shock as I ran to see Eugenia's car splattered onto the train tracks that ran along the side of the hills. The roof had collapsed into the body. A light trail of smoke emanated from the crushed bonnet. The shattered glass scintillated as the passing clouds obscured and revealed the sun, casting the shadow of the rocks onto the car. The faces of ancient indigenous monarchs could almost be made from the features of the rocks, guarding the wreck like it was one of them. I rushed back to the car and drove down the cliffs onto the main road. By the time I turned towards the train tracks, a crowd of farmers had gathered. An ambulance from the Suesca Municipal Hospital sped by and into the tracks. The farmers shouted at it with urgency. "She's dead!"

A piercing pain stabbed my chest and twisted it. I turned the car sharply back south.

I drove recklessly towards the city, slaloming in and out of the stalled cars in front of me. The oncoming lane was jammed with traffic. Something had happened in Bogotá. I took Eugenia's torn cardboard out of my pocket. 90th Street, number 7-71. Eugenia had lured me to her suicide outside of the city knowing that something would be awfully wrong when I returned. She had planned for it. She expected me to drive to 90th Street. The weight in my heart was gone. I turned out of the motorway and into one of the unpaved roads that led to Seventh Avenue towards 90th Street. There were plumes of black smoke coming from the south. Bogotá was on fire.

Number 7-71 was an estate like so many in the outskirts of the city. The gates had been locked with chains, and nobody was guarding them from the outside. Adjacent to them was a lamppost with a special miniature gamewell. It had a wooden enclosure and a metal lid, embossed with concentric lines and eagle's wings. There was a combination lock above the design. I entered the number 7837. A dry metallic click opened the gamewell. Inside was an unmarked envelope. I put it into my jacket just as a lorry drove by. On the back of it were men carrying Colombian flags and rifles. They were shouting, red with fury. "They have murdered the Republic! Death to the Conservative rats!". Two more went by, each with a payload of irate mercenaries driving towards the city centre where the fires raged and the smoke blackened the sky. Night had fallen upon Bogotá. I glanced south towards the city centre. A thrum of revolt was almost palpable. The distant, stifled shouting of a country whose ignited wick had reached its inevitable, explosive end. People continued to flood in from the northern territories.

The scene grew darker and gorier as I went further south. Tram cars, buses and private vehicles lay ablaze and turned over on the streets. Policemen and soliders took cover behind them, taking indiscriminate aim at the hordes of wrathful citizens that were laying waste in each and every block of the city. Burned, beaten and lacerated bodies were peppered on the sidewalks and the asphalt. Some revolvers would unleash their ire upon the dead with the stocks of their rifles, a cathartic punt or even a *coup de grâce*. Something had caused the collective anger of Colombia to boil over. I was dazzled by the reach and the volume of the violence. The virulence of it. The disease that had lived latent within its host for little more

than a century had finally become symptomatic. A switch had been irreversibly flipped. I had to make sure Victoria was safe.

Having fled from Seventh Avenue at the corner of 72nd Street, I had to slip past the mobs' outposts to reach the house. I found Victoria barricaded inside with Mr. and Mrs. Roberto Schlesinger, our next door neighbours. "They killed Gaitán", she sobbed. "The Liberals are wreaking havoc. They are calling for a revolution". I held her in awe. "They did what?". My father's old radio was on. The Liberals had taken over several stations and frequencies.

*"Attention, attention, Liberal forces! Latest news with you! The Conservatives and the government of Ospina Pérez have killed Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who fell by the door to his office, shot by a policeman. To arms! Charge! Take to the streets with clubs, stones shotguns or whatever is at hand. Break into the hardware stores and take the dynamite, the gunpowder, the tools, the machetes!"*

With each twist of the dial came an equally incensed report. Victoria looked at the radio in paralysed dread. "They will not stop until the whole country lies in ruin", she gasped before clutching her head with her hands and breaking into anguished weeping. Mrs. Schlesinger ran to her side and held her, overcome with fear all the same. I rushed upstairs into my room and examined the envelope Eugenia had led me to. Hesitating for a moment, I opened it. A flush gold ring fell onto my lap. There was a resting place for what should have been a small diamond. On the inside of the band, an inscription read 'JRS-ED'. It was

Eugenia's engagement ring. I set it aside and found a handwritten letter, impeccably folded and sealed with a blue ribbon.

*"Juan,*

*I remember when I first read you Wilson's poems. You were delighted to hear such authenticity in a world where word has been weighed down by ornaments that distort its meaning and conceal it. You said poets and politicians use the same tools of deception. I could not have imagined how close those words were to home.*

*Do you remember the first line I read you, Juan? 'Once I could hold you and the world reflected back at me'? I held you through your bouts of fury and the fairy tales that you made up to keep yourself prone and innocent of your own demise.*

*I can hold you no longer. The world no longer reflects back at me from the glimmer in your eyes. I see in them despair and misled anger. And now you have proven you have the will to translate anger into violence. I cannot wake up in this world that you created. The fire will die out, the dead will be buried, but the bullet wounds of that one man will be the bullet wounds of this country. You brought the night and I shall sleep.*

*May God have mercy on you, because the people of Colombia will not.*

*Eugenia.*

*9 April 1948”*

The pieces started to go together. “Victoria, who did this? Who killed Gaitán?”, I shouted. The radio broke in again before she could answer.

*“Attention Liberal revolutionary forces! Our people have avenged the death of Dr. Gaitán. The Conservative Policeman Juan Roa Sierra has been punished by virtue of the Divine Providence. The people are now marching towards the Presidential Palace with the body of the murderer! Ospina Pérez cannot run away from the historic responsibility of this cowardly crime. Charge, people! Charge towards Bolívar Square and bring down the Conservative tyrants!”*

I felt a streak cold crash down my spine. Juan Roa Sierra. “He brought the night”, I gasped. Eugenia knew. She knew Colombia would end that day, burdened by the weight of its own existence. I wasn’t shaken by the riots, the dead bodies on the streets, the sense that the Republic had died. I was shaken by the actions of the only person that knew and was brave enough to do the only logical thing after being given the fatal gift of clairvoyance.

Nobody slept in Bogotá that night. The fires raged for three days, and spread like a pathogen across the country. There was no football that weekend. No bullfighting. No plays

in any theatre. There was just the night. The crossfire between rogue Liberal snipers and clueless soldiers who had been issued conflicting orders. The night that brought with it the death of a country born with an incurable disease. When daylight came back, Bogotá lay in ruin, burned and shattered by its own people. And so did all of us, even the ones who had escaped the carnage with life, limb and property unscathed.

Eugenia knew. She wanted to leave Bogotá as she had learned to love it. The trams, the crowded buses. The wide avenues and narrow streets of the city centre. The people with *ruanas* and straw hats selling fruit and cheese from the north. The thin veneer of peace and harmony that hid the putrid undercurrents of political hatred and fracture. She knew what would happen and wanted to be preserved on the right side of story. The side where it hadn't ended. The side with her hair floating in the wind and the murky speakeasies. The side with tangible fog. The side Juan Roa Sierra took from Bogotá and Colombia.

On the third day, the fires had subsided and the crossfires had stopped. The reconstruction of Bogotá would start, but no amount of brick and mortar would cauterise the wounds of a country shot four times at point-blank.