Kidnapped in Colombia

Threat Meets Reality

On Feb. 23, Colombian senator Ingrid Betancourt, 40, became the sixth legislator to be kidnapped by the left-wing guerrilla group known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or the FARC. The rebels claim they won't release the hostages until the government passes a law allowing prisoner exchanges between the FARC and the military. Betancourt, a candidate in Colombia's May 26 presidential election, has made a name for herself as an outspoken foe of corruption. She has been called brave and inspiring by some, a media hound and a naive child of privilege by others. Her celebrity status might have been the reason that the FARC seized her: She's the kind of hostage who attracts media attention. The following is adapted from her book, "Until Death Do Us Part," which was published in December by Ecco Press, an imprint of HarperCollins.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPHER BING FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

DECEMBER 1996: The Christmas vacation begins in a few days; the legislative session is almost over. Even more than usual, I'm rushing back and forth between my office and the legislative assembly. I'm 35 years old, and I've been a member of the assembly for two years.

Toward 3:30 in the afternoon, while I'm talking with someone in my office, my secretary pokes her head in.

"Someone's asking to see you right away, Ingrid. A man."

"Does he have an appointment?"

"No, but he's very insistent."

"All right, tell him I'll see him immediately after this person, but for no more than half an hour."

He comes in: elegant, in his forties, average height, neither handsome nor ugly, so that later on I will be unable to describe or identify him.

"Please sit down."

"Thank you. We've been following your work with the greatest attention, *Doctora*, and we have the highest regard for what you are doing."

We smile at each other. I assume he's going to ask for something, like most of the people who come to see me.

"And that's why I wanted to meet you, *Doctora*. We're very worried about you. Colombia is going through a period of great tension, great violence. One must be careful, very, very careful."

I'm used to this kind of talk. Most of the people I meet share this obsession with danger. Women, in particular, assure me, with genuine affection, that they're praying that nothing happens to me. I tell them that no one can enter the Capitol building without presenting papers. I say this calmly, because I believe that those in power exploit the fear that grips Colombians.

"Don't worry," I tell this man, "I'm surrounded by a discreet but highly effective security apparatus. That said, I'm grateful for your interest in my welfare. But what can I do for you?"

His eyes become a little steelier. "I'd like to know you better, *Doctora*, but the reason I'm here is to warn you. We are extremely concerned."

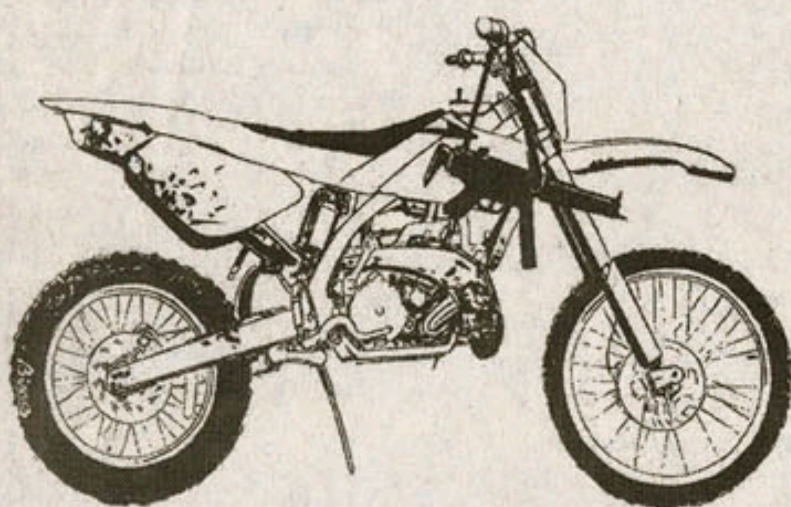
"That's very kind of you, and I'm touched by your concern, but I have very little time, as my secretary must have told you." I look at my watch, making sure he sees me do it.

"You haven't understood me," he continues coldly. "I'm telling you that you must really be careful."

I realize that he's not the kind of visitor I'd imagined, not a citizen in distress, or a bashful admirer, but an emissary.

"What's the message?" I ask, with a slight laugh. "Are you threatening me?"

"No, this is not a threat. I'm not here to frighten you. You have to realize that you're in danger, that your family is in danger. I'm speaking to you on behalf of people who have already put out a contract on you. They advise you to leave, because the decision has been made. To be perfectly clear, what I'm telling



you, *Doctora*, is that we've already paid the *sicarios*."

Suddenly, I know he's not lying. In Colombia, the word *sicario* makes everything clear. *Sicarios* are young men with motorcycles who live in Colombia's poorest neighborhoods, and they're hired every day—for ridiculously small sums—to kill people.

I've turned a corner. The period of mere intimidation is over. Six months earlier, as I was leaving the Capitol on a cold night in July, shots were fired at my car and that of my bodyguards. No one was hit, and I'd tried to believe that we were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"In short, what you're telling me," I say, "is that you're going to kill me."

"I've come to tell you to leave because steps have been taken." He gets up, holds out his hand, and politely says goodbye.

Now I'm alone in my office, stunned, drained, inert. Whom should I notify? The police? For all I know, my visitor may well be part of the security service, which would explain how he was able to make his way through the building without being stopped. A few seconds pass before I recover my wits and call my secretary.

"Marina, where did that guy come from? How did he get in?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden he was just there, in my office."

"What's his name? Did you get his name, at least?"

"No, I thought he knew you, that he was one of your friends."

Betancourt hastily arranged for her children, Melanie, then 11, and Lorenzo, then 8, to leave the country. The next day, she and her boyfriend (now her husband) took them to New Zealand, where the children's French-born father was living. Betancourt soon returned to Colombia, however, and resumed the anti-corruption campaign that had led to her election in 1994. The following excerpt flashes back to that election, and shows her naivete as she decides to run for Colombia's House of Representatives, as well as her flair for shaking up the establishment and grabbing the public's attention.

JANUARY 1994: The election is only two months away and we don't have a slogan, not a poster. Then I remember a young public relations guy I met when I worked on someone else's campaign. His name was German Medina. I make an appointment with him for the following day.

"I'm going to help you, Ingrid, and we'll talk about money later. But where's your program? I can't do anything without your program."

"It can be summed up in three words: Fight against corruption."

"Okay, but you're a candidate in Bogota, and you need to say what you want for the capital."

"The construction of the subway that we've been waiting to have for half a century, the protection of the air we breathe, which is now among the most polluted on the planet, and a policy to help families and children. But none of that will be possible if corruption absorbs the funds appropriated. Find me something that will symbolize my battle with this disease."

Two days later, German brings over . . . a condom! At once I see how powerful this symbol is, precisely because it's shocking, because no one can be indifferent to it. It's the midst of the AIDS epidemic, and the condom makes the analogy between disease and corruption immediately evident. I'm completely won over. An idea strikes me: I'm going to hand out condoms—on the street. I call everyone in my address book, and say: "Do me a favor. Bring me condoms. I need hundreds, thousands."

I stand at traffic lights and knock on drivers' windows. "My name is Ingrid Betancourt, and I'm a candidate for the legislature. I believe corruption in politics is the equivalent of AIDS. We have to protect our democracy by voting for honest people. Here, I'm giving you this condom so you'll remember me on election day."

My father [a well-known Colombian diplomat who worked for UNESCO in Paris, where Ingrid was raised and educated] soon finds out about the condoms. He phones me, very upset. "One of my friends saw you on the street, Ingrid. You don't have the right to do this to me. My own daughter handing out . . . . It's disgraceful, degrading . . . . I'm ashamed of you, Ingrid!"

After an item about my father's displeasure appears in a widely read newspaper column, I cease to be anonymous; the media rush to cover the daughter of a former minister who dares to hand out "rubbers against corruption." I no longer need to knock on drivers' windows; they roll them down and smile at me.

My mother phones. "It's incredible, but your father is beginning to find this business with the condoms amusing."

A few months after her election, Betancourt helped create a legislative commission to investigate links between government officials and the country's drug traffickers, or as she calls them, "the mafia." In February 1995, she and two other commissioners found themselves summoned to a hush-hush meeting with Gilberto Rodriquez and his two brothers, who run the Cali drug cartel. The three brothers reveal that the government, which had taken credit for tracking down and killing drug boss Pablo Escobar, only knew of Escobar's whereabouts because the cartel had provided the information. The conversation turns to allegations about drug money in Colombia's 1994 presidential campaign:

GILBERTO PRETENDS that his honor has been wounded. "*Doctora*," he replies stiffly, "we also have the right, don't we, to have political convictions? Lots of people give money anonymously to this or that candidate; we shouldn't we do the same?"

Someone knocks on the door and we're asked to step into the living room. We hear the sound of footsteps and muffled conversations, and then, through the double frosted-glass doors of the living room, we're stupefied to see that the visitors are policemen in uniform. Are these men really being tracked down by all of the country's police, or is that only a sham?

When we resume our conversation, I say in astonishment:

"You were just saying that you were hounded by the police, but the police seem to get on rather well with you."

"I have good connections," Gilberto says. As we seem stunned to hear this, he continues with a certain tone of self-importance in his voice:

"It is exactly the same with the parliament! Most of your fellow representatives are in our pay."

"What do you mean, most?" I say, thunderstruck.

"About a hundred representatives and more than half of the senators, *Doctora*. Would you like their names?"

Though I don't say anything, he names a dozen legislators. On that note, the meeting comes to an end. Two days later, as agreed, we tell the press what the Rodriquez brothers have revealed to us concerning their involvement in Escobar's liquidation. But we keep to ourselves the main lesson we've drawn from our encounter: the mafia's influence over all the nation's institutions, including the Congress—which makes the laws—and the judicial system and the police, which are charged with enforcing these laws.

This will have an effect on my future thought and action.

In the 1998 presidential campaign, Betancourt supported Andres Pastrana, who won. She then broke with him because, she says, he reneged on a public agreement they had signed—which set down a program for rooting out corruption and reforming the government.

THE FRAGILITY of the "Pastrana method" is already apparent. A former television journalist, the president always seems to attach more important to "media coups" than to serious reflections on the issues.

We immediately saw this in the euphoria following his election, when he made a historic "gesture" toward the FARC, the armed guerrilla group of some 15,000 that has been fighting the government for several decades. In the name of peace, Pastrana granted the FARC nearly 17,000 square miles of national territory. And what commitments did he get in exchange for creating this zone? None whatsoever. This abandonment of sovereignty was made in the vaguest possible way, at the risk of sending the message that the state was ready to weaken itself to get into the good graces of warlords.

It's as if the political leaders and the guerrillas are helping each other to maintain a state of war that suits them but is destroying our country. The guerrilla leaders don't want to be told that the battle they're waging in the name of the people is, paradoxically, strengthening the political class that is the source of people's misery and sustaining the system of corruption under which it flourishes. This is what I have told them. They know what I think, and this allows me to maintain distant but frank relationships with them, without ambiguity.

We first need to decide what kind of peace we are going to seek. Do we want a fake peace imposed by terror? That is what the paramilitaries, the illegal clandestine instrument that flourishes with the Colombian government's permission, are offering us. Do we want a peace that results from the defeat of democracy and the installation of a communist regime? That is what the guerrillas are fighting for. Do we want a peace agreement negotiated by a corrupt regime in order to maintain the status quo and allow a select few to share the privileges? That is what our establishment is trying to preserve.

None of these possibilities will free us from the drug traffic emporium and the violence that accompanies it.

The paramilitary forces are an example of how corruption nurtures violence. Financed by powerful landlords and drug traffickers, and all too frequently trained with the help of high-ranking army officers, these illegal troops are doing what the law forbids our army to do: They carry out massacres, tortures and persecutions. As long as the paramilitaries are allowed to operate, the Colombian government will lack the legitimacy required to discuss peace with anyone.

I have twice been elected with a remarkable number of votes, and today I feel ready to put a stop to corruption. Now that I've arrived at this point, will they kill me, too? My relationship with death is like that of a tightrope walker: We're both doing something dangerous, and we've calculated the risks, but our love of perfection invariably overcomes our fear.

According to polls before her abduction, Betancourt has drawn negligible support in the May 26 presidential election. As of yesterday, she was still being held hostage.