

An excerpt from . . .

My Colombian Death

by Matthew Thompson

“BARRIO BOXING”

Medellín, Colombia

The taxi runs quickly down broad boulevards, past orderly rows of houses and plazas with fountains, until we hit the edge of the valley floor and begin a gear-grinding ascent, winding up through steep, dark scrubland where I glimpse youths watching the road from strategic passes. Or maybe they're just enjoying the view of Medellín, which is glorious, the city laid out and lit up below, and the mountain wall opposite glittering with barrios.

The driver at times slows the cab to walking speed to cope with the incline and negotiate switchbacks. Jumbles of houses appear, chaotic conglomerates of corrugated iron, hollow red brick and reinforcing wire splaying from upper levels. Many are without glass in the windows and some don't even have doors. Here and there the earth has been gouged out by mudslides. I thought the driver would be earbashing me about the ill-advised nature of this trip, but he's grimly silent as he works the clutch.

“Enciso el Pinal,” the driver says, as we top a steep ascent onto a ridge which widens out into a small shopping area. Stray dogs prowl and a string of motorbikes buzzes past the cab, each carrying two or three men, all of whom stare at me with no expression whatsoever. “It's a little hot here,” says the driver. “Take care.”

“Matthews!” Diana's been waiting. She jogs over to the taxi holding bags of takeaway food. “Hungry?” We walk to a street which falls steeply towards Medellín, but not steeply enough to prevent a pack of kids from playing soccer.

An empty blue-lit bar sits near the top of the block and a few doors down along the stepping row of connected buildings is a whitewashed wall with *LEBANESE LIQUORS* hand-painted on it in black.

“Congratulations, Diana,” I say.

“Thank you, Matthews.” We step up onto a veranda where there’s a door to a house upstairs and my friend’s shop to the right. Before we go in, Diana points out a hole in the wall where a few bricks have been smashed out. “I sell through the hole late at night.”

Inside the cramped room a battered old refrigerator fills much of the space. Behind it are shelves, some empty and others lined with cigarette half-packs, plastic cups and bottles of rum and *aguardiente*. The walls have been painted with murals of what looks like old heavy metal album-sleeve art. On a plain of pyramids and beneath menacing moons, angry dragons square off against a brooding winged warrior whose sour expression, sharp cheekbones and long hair look very familiar.

“Isn’t that . . .”

“Yes, Matthews,” says Diana, laughing as she sets the food down. “Iván painted it. I think he wants to always watch me.”

She had bought beef and rice dishes for us but realises she forgot avocado, so I volunteer to duck back up the street for one. It feels great being outside alone, striding up the hill and taking in the ragged, splendour of a town stuck to a slope like a wasp’s nest to a wall, and thrilling in the views the slum-dwellers have of their notorious, wonderful city. Every time I relax into somewhere or something new in Colombia, the whole country shifts, as if choosing once again to reveal its uniqueness, its reasons for calling me here.

“My first *gringo* customer,” says an old woman selling fruit from a cart.

“I was told it was very dangerous here.”

“Not so much, now. Before, yes. Always shooting,” she says, flapping a hand in the air. “Now it’s quieter.”

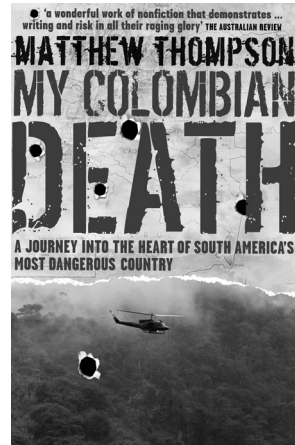
“Why the difference?”

She picks my change out of a cardboard box. “Because two or three years ago the army and the others came and killed so many boys. Then the fighting stopped.”

“The army and the paramilitaries?”

She nods.

I ask Diana about this when we sit on her plastic chairs and eat. “It’s the truth,” she says. “Some gangs join the paramilitaries and they are OK. The guerrillas in the barrios and the gangs who didn’t join the paramilitaries were all killed. Now it’s peaceful, because everyone else is dead. It’s fascist.”



There is a trickle of customers, only ever buying a beer or two at a time—fewer than the drinks I’m buying us—and I start to wonder if El Gringo was right. “You live here now? Not at Cristóbal América anymore?”

“I still have a few things there I need to move.” She skids a match down the wall and lights a cigarette.

“You OK here? It’s safe? Got enough business?”

“Not yet.”

“Is it safe?”

“More or less.”

“Maybe you need a gun.”

“I’m a good fighter,” says Diana, leaning forward and punching me in the head. “Ay, Matthews, I’m sorry!” She is horrified, hand on her mouth, standing up fussing over me. She struck above my left eye with more than a little oomph.

“*Tranquilo*. I’m fine,” I say. “But you have a good punch.”

“*Claro*. I’ve had many fights. Want to fight me?”

“Thanks, but no. I’m good just sitting here.”

“Hit me, gay boy,” she says, slapping the top of my head.

“Diana!” I haven’t had such a high-maintenance friend for fifteen years. Since I was her age.

“Yes, Matthews?” She flashes a hand towards the top of my head and when I go to block it she jolts my chin. “Please, for fun. I like to fight.”

There’s no rest in Colombia. “Serious? You want to fight?”

“*Claro*.” She’s in a boxer’s shuffle, ducking and weaving.

“But I’ve eaten too much. I need some coke first.”

“You have coke!” She pulls down the shutter, stamping hard on the bottom rim to drive it to the floor. “I sell through the hole now,” she says.

After a few stiff snorts and a swig to wash it down she tosses off her denim jacket and we circle under Iván’s troubled watch, feeling each other out with feints and probes. Diana has had no training but she’s wilful and reckless and keeps flinging her strong arms at me. I slap and tap most of the punches out of the way, but she just fires up even more and her eyes are electric as she rushes me, shedding control in her lust to knock me flat. I’m pulling my punches and she likes it when I get through, lighting up to feel a fist grazing her ear or chin or darting into her stomach and sides. She curses and dares me to hit her, covers her head and bangs her body into mine in an attempt to jam me back into in a corner, then she pummels with each hand. I send her back with a flurry in her face, and she squeaks and laughs and throws herself into it again.

Suddenly we notice a cluster of male faces peering through the hole in the front wall.

“What’s happening?” says a man with a thin face and bleached hair.

“Nothing. We’re playing,” Diana says. “What do you want? Beer? Rum?”

“I want a beer and I want to drink it inside your store.”

“No, I don’t open the door again tonight.”

“Yes, señorita. These are our streets and we’re patrolling tonight. You’re new, huh? It’s good to meet. Please open the door.”

I’m mouthing ‘no’ and Diana is tugging at her hair and grimacing, but she opens the door and in walk three young men. A fourth pulls the door shut from the outside and stays out there. The man who spoke is about a head shorter than me, and he smacks his hands together as he sizes up us and the room. His two companions, one muscular with a crew cut and the other lean and tall but lost inside an oversized baseball cap and T-shirt, stay still near the door, each keeping a hand tucked into the back of his jeans, just like the bad-news crews of Cartagena.

Diana snaps straight into hostess mode, smiling, pouring beers and handing out cigarettes. I am against a wall, hating this place for only having one door out, one door on the far side of them.

And they’re checking me out, especially the muscular one, who stinks of rum. His filmy eyes flick all over me. “What you doing with her?” he asks.

“Boxing.”

“Yeah?” He looks down at his feet and tries a fighter’s shuffle. “Box with me.”

“No thanks.”

“Box with him, *mono*,” says the bleached one. “He likes you. He likes your blue eyes. Señorita, would your *mono* fight for you?”

“No fighting, please,” Diana says, lighting the guests’ cigarettes. She has slipped her jacket back on but it remains painfully clear she is the only person here with perfumed skin, long hair and curves to plunder. El Gringo’s warnings about this place were so true it’s a bad joke.

The talker steps around the refrigerator and looks all over, pokes his head in the storage room, plucks a bottle of Medellín Rum off a shelf and runs his fingers across the label. “A copy, yeah? Black market. I know.”

“It’s good,” Diana says.

“Almost as good. Almost. But no problem. I like your store, *chica*. I’m glad you open up here.”

I don’t like the man being over this side talking to her as though there’s no one else here, so I ask what’s happening tonight.

“A man raped a little girl, *mono*.”

“Ay, that’s horrible,” Diana says.

“*Claro*. When we find him we’re going to use knives and make it slow.”

“What does he look like?” Diana asks.

The man shrugs. “We’ll know him when we see him.”

There’s a burst of static outside and the goon waiting out there answers a radio.

“What news?” yells the talker, his hand up for silence.

“Nothing,” the man calls back.

The wiry young boss cruises the room checking out the murals. “Who’s the artist?”

“My boyfriend,” Diana says. “Do you like them?”

“They’re cool.” He blows smoke over a dragon. “*Mono*, you like cocaine?”

“Yeah, do you?”

“If the quality is high. *Señorita*, do you like cocaine?”

“No. I don’t like drugs,” says Diana with total conviction.

“Well then, *mono*, maybe you want to buy.” He nods at the man in the oversized clothes.

Predictability at last. I buy two grams and offer one straight back to the visitors. I didn’t see how it got there but the dealer has a knife in his hand and he flicks it, clicking the blade into place. Diana backs off and my vision’s changing, as if these are the last things I’ll ever see, these stupid, pointless moments, but there’s nothing in it; he just scoops coke with it. He even passes it to me. The bad energy is dispersing and I can taste the beer again. Diana seems more relaxed, too, and I shoot her a smile.

“Let’s go,” says the leader.

“Chao, *amigos*,” Diana says.

“No, no,” he says. “Let’s go with the boxing. Ready, *mono*?”

To my surprise, I am. “Let’s go,” I tell the muscle boy, shaking out my arms and rolling my neck. Diana is wild-eyed but this is fine. I’m indifferent. Maybe I’ll cop a few punches, but I’ll pull mine and this guy is so past it that within a minute or two he’ll be out of puff. Then we’ll clap each other on the back and clink beers. No one gets hurt.

“Play with me like you did with the woman,” says muscle boy, copying my mini-warm up. He’s jumpy as we circle, overreacting if I jiggle a hand or twitch a shoulder. The man’s also stiff—perhaps the bulge in the back of his jeans constrains him.

“Ay, Matthews, be careful.” Diana is fretting, and when I smile to reassure her, muscle-boy shoots a punch at my head. He’s big but slow, and I catch it on the hand and stamp forward with a hook to his cheek. It would have cracked a bone in his face if I’d let it fly home, but I freeze it a centime-

tre out. At least I try to. But with all the booze and lack of practice, my fist keeps going. “Ay!” yells Diana, and the other two guys are standing stiffer.

“Sorry,” I say.

“Blue eyes, beautiful,” says muscle boy, pressing around his eye socket.

“Ha! He likes you, *mono*,” says the leader.

Indeed, he does look filled with a mad love as he surges forward to pound my head. I deflect most of the blows but one over the ear shakes the room. It seems to hurt him almost as much, though. He purses his lips. “Beautiful blue,” he says, making me wonder whose rape hangs in the air.

The hit sobered me and I’m comfortably throwing an inch short. He is distracted by the flurry so close to his face, looking at my hands instead of my eyes, and it gets even easier to mislead him with feints and footwork. I’m living inside his defences, thrashing the air over his ribs and chin and lips and nose and temples. He’s in a storm and he loves it more than Diana, his eyes scared it’s going to end. But it’s tiring, and I back off to breathe.

“Hit me,” he says, or mouths. I don’t know if I heard it or just saw his lips move.

“This is love,” says the leader, jabbing a finger into the sniggering dealer.

“Hit him, man, he wants it.”

He jolts as I rip him in the side and slam a right into his stomach. He puts his hands on his knees, gasps, and then looks at me through clear eyes for the first time.

“Again. Harder!” yells the leader.

“No,” I say, stepping back and resting against the refrigerator. “Enough.”

After the men and I share the rest of the gram, I suggest to Diana she stay at Cristóbal América tonight, and offer to pay her cab fare. She nods dumbly.

“Need a taxi?” says the leader. He points to the dealer. “He has a taxi.”

“But you’re busy. You’re looking for the child rapist.”

The leader shrugs. “*Mañana*.”

The radio man is leaning over the veranda smoking a cigarette and talking to a pair of little boys when we come out. The leader dismisses him and directs us to a stock-standard yellow cab.

Diana bunches herself against the cab door, squeezing her legs over and staring out the window, as if she doesn’t want anything to do with me, or the leader, who is relentless in his flattery and small talk. “You OK?” I ask.

“Yes, Matthews,” she says, withdrawing even further. I would love to give her more room, but the muscle boy is beside me in the small sedan, one arm behind my head, thighs splayed wide.

Diana steps out to let me through when we reach the Hostel Odeon.

“Don’t go with them,” I say, grinning and taking her arm. “Bad idea.” She is angry, but doesn’t do anything when I lean back to the goons and hand them the fare, telling them Diana doesn’t need a ride. The leader looks to her for a response but she’s in her own world, arms folded.

“See you soon, *chica*,” he says, and they’re gone.

“Diana, you OK?”

“No more, Matthews!”

“No more what?”

“No more drugs. No more liquor. Too much. Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay!” she says.

“You want to sit down for as minute before you get a taxi?”

“No.”

“Taxi?”

“No.” She turns and strides towards Bolivar Park, which the hotel staff warned me could be unsafe at night.

“Diana, what are you doing?”

She ignores me, turning out of sight at the end of the block. I jog up after her and see she’s heading for 55th Street, parallel to the hotel, which the staff said was *always* unsafe at night, and which El Gringo calls ‘Homicide Alley’. She turns into it.

I skip around into the uncluttered, lonely grey street, where there’s no activity but for Diana’s brisk walk towards a man waiting dead still and silent at the far end of the block. He sees me running and shifts, looking around and then back at me, a hand busy under his shirt. My hands are busy, too; they’re up so he can see them, shaking with my heart, which beats so hard I can feel it in my throat. I wave to Diana and sing out her name like I’m calling a toddler. Don’t shoot me, don’t shoot me, don’t shoot me, don’t shoot me, is the chant in my head, and I’m sure that if it hadn’t been a *gringo* who came bolting around the corner, this guy would have pulled his piece and shot me.

“Matthews! What are you doing?” Diana says as I catch up to her. I wave and shrug to the man ahead to indicate that we’re having a domestic in his alley but what can I do. “It’s very dangerous here, let’s go.”

“I want to buy marijuana.”

“What?” The man is still agitated, glancing around in every direction and then looking back at us. “You told me no more drugs.”

“Yes, but tonight I need marijuana to sleep, or after all this cocaine I go home and think for hours and hours about my horrible life. No, Matthews. I need marijuana.”

“Your life isn’t terrible. You have a shop and Iván and friends, and you’re smart and independent and attractive.”

“No, Matthews. It’s horrible. My business is in the slums, and Iván and I fight all the time, and I’m fat and stupid. Horrible.”

“Diana,” I say, taking her arms. “Listen to me . . . ”

“Hey.” It’s the man. “What do you want?”

“Marijuana, señor.” Diana pushes my hands off.

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