

# **99% Darkness**

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## BOGOTÁ

### Chapter 1

We were refugees from Europe. Bogotá might not have been the intended destination when we fled but through the banal workings of fate that's where we ended up. That's where it started.

I had gone to Colombia in the hope of being kidnapped by guerrillas. It seemed the sort of thing that could make life a bit livelier. Unfortunately by the time I arrived the guerrillas were on the back foot and lacked the energy for kidnappings.

So, I didn't really want to be kidnapped. But when the thought passed through my head it had an interesting flavour. You have to understand that nothing had happened for a long time and I wanted it to end. The nothing had included a whole lot of something that had gone nowhere.

In the Bogotá of my dreams every colonial house or building, by order of the *Alcaldia*, has been built with the upper floor overhanging the pavement. This means that one could almost walk around the whole of the Old City without getting wet, despite the persistent rain. In practice it is necessary to cross roads, which run like rivers.

It was with wet feet and damp hair, face turned against the flecks of rain blowing in under the eaves, that I collided with Elise in a darkening street at 6.15pm.

"I'm sorry," she said in English.

"How English," I said. "To apologise when it is my fault."

She laughed. "It must have rubbed off on me when I lived there." She put on a mock frown. "I just hope I don't develop a sudden inexplicable love for the royal family. The English are so weird."

A combination of her expressions, dress, manner, struck me as unusual – she had a confidence about her that seemed all her own. Being English I agreed with her on the weirdness of the English, but was struck by how gently she could make the accusation. I wasn't attracted to her but I was interested in her. Since I couldn't think of another way to detain her I flirted with her a little and invited her for coffee.

Elise Torres was Spanish and had lived in London for three years. I had lived in London for eleven years. We talked about our love of it and our hatred of it, as Londoners do. We talked about the differences between London, Madrid and Bogotá, as travellers do. Then we discovered a mutual interest in the tactics of police in repressing protest.

"At least the police in England don't use weapons," said Elise. "The police in Spain and Colombia use rubber bullets and tear gas a lot more."

I shook my head. "It's true but I'm not sure it's a good thing. To compensate for their lack of weapons the British police have much more training. They're incredibly disciplined."

"True." She had a far-away look in her eyes, apparently remembering some particular scene. "I'd rather face a baton charge from Spanish police than English police. A line of English policeman

is truly terrifying.” She looked at me again. “In Spain the lines often break and you can escape. There’s no escape from the English police. The videos of police attacks from Spain always look worse. But the discipline of the English police pays off.” She grinned a little grimly. “In greater pain for the protesters.” I smiled and sighed in agreement. Our eyes met in a moment of connection that seemed to confirm we had been right to have this coffee together.

Elise - the non-hispanic final ‘e’ is not pronounced – had been involved in what was known as the *Indignados* or 15M movement in Spain. When there had been numbers on the street the police couldn’t do much, she told me. As numbers dropped the police moved in, with their shambolic style compared to the British police, but with more weapons.

I watched her as we talked. She seemed more respectable than me, better socialised. It’s not that I can’t look respectable when I want to be. I’m educated European middle class too. But I have to make an effort. I have lapses and say inappropriate things. I can’t always be bothered to dress well. Elise’s jeans and short-sleeved top were impeccable, smart, while my jeans and t-shirts had holes in them – I had been meaning to do something about it for months. Her dark hair, cut in a bob with locks curling a little onto her neck, looked exactly as it was meant to look, while my hair has always shrugged off intention, partly because my intentions with regard to it are so weak.

“So what are you doing in Bogotá?” I asked.

“I’m helping out at a school. It’s in the south of the city.” She shrugged in a way that said to anyone open to see it that this wasn’t enough, that like me she was bored.

I nodded sympathetically and the boredom yawned between us, a great gaping pit, revealing itself to be what it so often is in Western culture: loneliness. I felt that if I admitted to this too openly or too strongly she might expect me to carry on flirting with her. Reluctant to set up expectations I couldn’t fulfil, I only nodded.

“And you?” she asked.

“A bit of freelance journalism,” I said. “As a British person in Bogotá you either teach English or write it. Either way you are helping everyone to join the great global culture of shallowness.”

She laughed. “English culture has its good points.”

“It does.” I hesitated, then, “But I left Britain because it seemed to be getting worse. I mean, I felt like it was a declining civilization. I know every generation feels like that. But I really felt like I hadn’t seen anything new for years.”

“Spain too,” she said. “And the economic decline is worse there.”

“Aren’t we so world-weary.”

The café in which we sat was French-owned and Edith Piaf or someone exactly like her drifted down around us. The rain splattered onto a plastic roof over the courtyard of the old colonial house. The coffee was good. After an hour we ordered beer. Bogotá receded into the distance for the next few hours as we discussed what we had left behind.

Later we left the café together and went to a gig, having discovered a mutual love of electrocumbia. We stood at the back as gig attendees in their early thirties tend to. As we applauded at the end of a song an English teacher I vaguely knew spotted me as he passed through the crowd on his way to the toilets. He greeted me and knew my name. I could not remember his or where I had met him.

"How is your English so good?" he said to Elise over the music, trying to meet her eyes to convey how impressed he was.

"I lived in London for three years. I also had a love affair with English literature. Mary Shelley, GK Chesterton, George Orwell, Iris Murdoch."

"Only an affair?" said the English teacher.

Elise made a face of mock regret. "Yes, we fucked about a lot but went our separate ways when I realized that everything they ever did or said depended on their ownership of property."

My head rushed with something like horror that I wasn't attracted to her.

"Oh come on." The English teacher sounded slightly indignant. "You can't knock Orwell."

"I can and I do," said Elise sweetly. "Once I'd read the Beats I never went back. At least they weren't proprieted."

"That's just...prejudice," said the English teacher.

"Balls," said Elise. It was my turn to admire her use of English idiom. I noticed too how rude she could be while not giving offence. It was something about the tone in which she said it, as though it were natural to be vulgar and a kindness to speak plainly.

"Come on," said the English teacher, turning to me. "Whatever you might say against Orwell's background, he wasn't exactly loyal to his class. He's still a classic right?"

I'd had a few drinks by this time. I made a show of thinking about the question. "Upon much consideration," I said, "And having been a fanboy in the past, and considering all mitigating circumstances: Fuck Orwell." When he rocked his head back in surprise I tried to add some explanation. "In all of his writing where are the weapons?"

Elise high-fived me. The English teacher went to look for someone else to talk to.

"You like the Beats?" I asked.

"Oh not any more. I realized they were all egomaniacal cocks." It sounded even funnier coming from the well-turned-out Elise.

"I didn't mind that so much," I said with a grin. "Unlike the aristocratic writers they had to assert themselves to be heard. I just came to hate their self-romanticisation."

"Really? You thought that was bad?"

"I say I hated it. I mean I loved it. Then I felt cheated by it."

Elise shook her head. "You wanted literature to be true too. We are idiots."

I was drunk enough now to become fully absorbed in the music, washed into it by a pleasure at companionship I had not felt for a long time.

We swapped numbers at the end of the night and I avoided Elise's eyes as I kissed her on the cheek.

It had stopped raining and I walked home instead of taking a taxi. It's a risky thing for a foreigner to do in Bogotá but the need to maintain constant awareness made me feel alive. I loved to be able to look up at night and see the lights of the church floating high above the city. My feet quickly became damp from the puddles left behind by the rain. Bogotá will always make me think of beauty and wet feet.

"Hey *mono! Mono!*" The guy had been searching through bin bags, scattering the contents across the street. By the morning it would be picked up by one of the early-rising city rubbish workers who pace the streets hour after hour.

It would be possible to feel offended by the term *mono*, the Bogotá equivalent of *gringo*, but let people searching rubbish bags get what revenge they can.

“*Mono!*” He rubbed his fingers together in the universal sign of currency and lurched towards me a few steps. I shook my head, thinking too quickly of the body-corroding chemicals he might buy. He lurched another step forward and I automatically assessed his physique. He was a foot shorter than me and so wasted by drug use and malnutrition I could have knocked him down in a moment. He stopped, turned back to his rubbish.

I walked on. The moon came out and I was in a silver city, its old streets pulsing power into my feet with every step. Would I feel the beauty of Bogotá so strongly if it weren't for the horror? I don't mean that poverty highlights beauty, that the contrast is necessary in some decadent sense. I mean that beauty is empty if it ignores the full darkness we inhabit. In Bogotá there is no ignoring the darkness.