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Historia ordinaria de una Colombia quebrada. Ordinary history of a broken Colombia.

- Les Cousins - Colombie -

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El es inglés y viajaba por Colombia comenzando una carrera de fotógrafo de conflictos y guerras. Ella era joven, atractiva y amistosa. Fueron amantes en una zona dominada por los paramilitares, en Putumayo. Ella le confesó su secreto : era una de las asesinas profesionales de las Autodefensas y también una freelance que mataba por dinero, con más de veinte muertos en su haber.

Por Jason Howe *

[The Independent](#). Londres, 6 de Marzo de 2008.

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Marilyn de Putumayo
(c) Jason P. Howe 2003

Hay un momento en toda relación en que llegan las confidencias. Generalmente son sobre sexo, sobre novios pasados -con algunos olvidos convenientes- y ese tipo de cosa. A veces, el secreto confesado puede hasta cambiar la relación : la honestidad tiene su precio. ¿Y qué pasa si el secreto de tu novia es mucho más oscuro y siniestro que una lista de novios ?

Sentado desnudo en el borde de la cama de un hotel barato y caluroso en el medio de una zona de guerra, productora de drogas, en Colombia, prendí un cigarrillo y me puse a escuchar a la chica a la que acababa de hacerle el amor confesando algo inimaginable.

Yo llevaba unos meses en Colombia, aprendiendo a ser un fotógrafo de prensa. No es que iba a cursos universitarios o hacía retratos en un estudio. Lo que hacía era jugarme en las notas. Estaba en un país con pocos momentos de paz. Por unos cuarenta años, el grupo rebelde marxista FARC -Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia- le había hecho la guerra al gobierno financiándose con secuestros extorsivos e impuestos al tráfico de cocaína. Los escuadrones de la muerte de derecha, conocidos como las Autodefensas, habían aparecido en respuesta a los secuestros de terratenientes y barones de la droga. Bajo el paraguas de las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, estas milicias privadas, estos paras, recibían apoyo secreto del gobierno y los militares para su guerra sucia contra las FARC.

Esta guerra a tres bandas se había cobrado ya más de 200.000 vidas y más de tres millones de personas habían tenido que abandonar sus hogares, amenazados o víctimas de la violencia. Sería una grosera injusticia pensar el conflicto como una guerra por la droga. Sus raíces se hunden en las diferencias económicas y sociales que permean el país, con una enorme clase baja que vive en la pobreza y una ínfima clase alta que tiene el 90 por ciento de la tierra, la industria y los negocios. Mi ambición era conocer y fotografiar a miembros de cada grupo, tratando de explicar el conflicto.

Empecé viajando por zonas del país con una fuerte presencia de las FARC y, tras muchos intentos, convencí a los

rebeldes para que me dejaran entrar a uno de sus campamentos. Después de pasar varios días con ellos, documentar su vida cotidiana y hasta ver un combate con tropas del gobierno, era momento de encontrar a sus enemigos, los paras. Viajé a Putumayo, uno de los centros del narcotráfico y escenario de interminables escaramuzas entre paras y guerrilleros, en el sur colombiano y cerca de la frontera con Ecuador. Me tomó un par de días de ómnibus llegar a Puerto Asís, la capital.

En el camino me puse a hablar con otro pasajero, una hermosa chica colombiana llamada Marilyn que me dijo que volvía de un viaje de compras a la gran ciudad. Le expliqué por qué visitaba el lugar y Marilyn me dijo que tenía amigos en el ejército y los paras, por lo que podría ayudarme. Me invitó a quedarme con su familia, que tenía una tienda y bar junto a la ruta, en las afueras del pueblo. Marilyn era muy atractiva.

Pasé varias semanas con su familia, recorriendo el campo, fotografiando los campos de coca y tratando de hacer contacto con los paras. Marilyn y yo pasábamos largas tardes juntos en su red, tomados de la mano y besándonos a veces, pero nada más. Eventualmente se me acabó el tiempo y el dinero, y tuve que volver a Gran Bretaña. Al despedirnos le prometí que trataría de volver y Marilyn me dijo que ahora yo era "parte de la familia".

A los seis meses estaba de vuelta, dispuesto a llegar al fondo del conflicto, aprender lo más posible y tal vez escribir un libro. Viajé a Puerto Asís a quedarme con Marilyn y su familia, pero me esperaba una sorpresa : ella se había unido a las Autodefensas y había entrado en combate en el cercano pueblo de El Tigre. Una amiga que combatía a su lado había caído, muerta, junto a otros 25 paras y al menos 15 guerrilleros. Todos los pobladores de El Tigre habían huido.

El hermano de Marilyn trabajaba ahora en una plantación de coca y llevaba siempre una pistola, que guardaba de noche bajo la almohada. Esto no era demasiado llamativo en un país quebrado por todas las violencias posibles, en el que la suerte, buena o mala, marcaba en qué bando terminaba uno. Pasaron meses, viajé por todo el país por mi proyecto, logré que me prestaran atención, hasta gané un premio internacional y me ofrecieron ir a Irak a documentar la guerra. Pero después de seis meses entre coches bomba y morteros en Bagdad, sólo pensaba en volver a Colombia.

A un año de nuestro primer encuentro, llegué de vuelta a la casa de Marilyn en un vetusto taxi. Me senté a tomar una cerveza helada con su padre mientras esperábamos que volviera "de hacer un mandado". Luego nos fuimos a caminar de la mano con su hijita de cuatro años, Natalie, y nos bañamos en el río. Pude sentir que había un cambio en ella, pero no supe bien qué era.

Le pregunté si las cosas habían cambiado entre nosotros, si mejor no me quedaba en un hotel. Ella me dijo que sí, que sería más fácil para encontrarnos. Esa misma noche vino a comer conmigo, compartimos una botella de vino y comencé a pensar que un año de paciencia por fin tendría resultados. Marilyn se quedó esa noche, en el calor ecuatorial del hotel en el que no andaba el aire acondicionado. Al amanecer, oyendo los primeros autos y los primeros vendedores ambulantes, Marilyn me dijo que tenía algo que decirme.

Fue entonces que me disparó una confesión que me excitó y confundió. Me dijo que en los meses en que estuve en Irak había cambiado de posición en las Autodefensas, se había unido a la milicia urbana y pasado a ser una asesina. Su trabajo era eliminar informantes y traidores. Hasta ahora, me contó, había matado a diez personas en la zona. Prendí un cigarrillo y aspiré fuerte, mientras ella me miraba entre el humo para ver cómo reaccionaba. Curiosamente, inesperadamente, no sentí horror. Los meses que había pasado en Colombia e Irak me habían cambiado. No es que fuera menos sensible a la muerte o el sufrimiento, pero ciertamente era más difícil escandalizarme. La diferencia entre víctima y victimario, rebelde y refugiado, me parecía mucho más un tema de perspectiva.

Siempre me gustó estar con gente que hace cosas, rebeldes y soldados que creían en lo que hacían. Me dejaban frío las reinas de belleza ricas y bien vestidas de los clubes finos de Bogotá. Aunque más tarde me sentiría muy distinto, mi primera reacción a lo que me decía Marylin fue una aceptación que casi tocaba la aprobación. Supongo que si iba a tener una amante en una zona de guerra, ella era de lo más cool.

Al principio, sus visitas a mi hotel, siempre con una pistola, no me ponían nervioso. Creo que no había registrado las consecuencias de lo que Marylin me había contado. Era joven y vivía una gran aventura en la que seguramente ya había llegado al máximo grado de inmersión en este conflicto. La mujer con la que acababa de empezar a hacer el amor regularmente era una asesina por encargo que dejaba en mi mesa de luz su pistola. Yo la veía sacarse el arma del cinturón, quitarse la ropa y entrar en mi cama, y no podía relacionar a esta mujer con los cadáveres que veía en la morgue, con la cabeza rota a escopetazos a quemarropa, como ella me había contado que lo hacía. Yo andaba propulsado por el calor tropical, ron fuerte, cocaína de primera y los brazos de una chica núbil de 22 años, por lo que se me mezclaban la realidad y las fantasías. Era como vivir en una película de Tarantino.

Una mañana, Marylin me contó que la noche anterior había convencido a un amigo de que la ayudara a decapitar y desmembrar a una mujer. Esta vez no era una informante : una amiga la había contratado para que liquidara a una amante de su novio. Me contó tan en detalle lo que había hecho, lo hizo tan fríamente, que finalmente caí en la realidad. Mis sentimientos hacia ella comenzaron a cambiar, el romanticismo empezó a apagarse. Ella ya no me parecía una parte legítima de una guerra civil sino que había pasado a ser una asesina freelance, matando por dinero, ni más ni menos.

Aunque todavía la encontraba sexualmente atractiva y quería estar con ella, algo me rebotaba en la cabeza. Eran pensamientos que a otros se les hubieran ocurrido mucho antes pero que al fin se filtraban en mi cerebro. En los últimos meses, la había fotografiado nadando en el río con su hija y leyéndole un cuento antes de dormir. Ultimamente, las imágenes que tomaba de ella se concentraban casi exclusivamente en su otra cara : la estaba reduciendo a una nota, un tema. Le pregunté si estaba lista para dejarme entrevistarla. Se puso una máscara de esquí y, pistola en mano, me dejó hacer un video del reportaje. Comencé preguntando sobre cómo entró a los paramilitares y sobre cómo la convencieron de matar por primera vez. Ella empezó dudando, pero fue ganando velocidad a medida que contaba su historia.

"Cuando maté por primera vez me asusté, tuve miedo. Maté para ver si podía hacerlo. Pero es obligatorio matar, si uno no mata, lo matan. El primero fue muy difícil porque estaba de rodillas, rogando, llorando y pidiendo que no lo mataran por sus hijos. Por eso fue tan difícil. Pero si no lo mataba, otro de los paras me mataba a mí. Después de hacerlo una se queda temblando, no se puede comer ni dormir, ni hablar con nadie. Me encerré en mí misma. Pero con el tiempo una se olvida. Mis superiores me decían que la segunda vez iba a ser más fácil. Pero una sigue temblando."

"La segunda vez resultó un poco más fácil. Es como dicen por aquí, si matas una vez, matas muchas veces. Hay que ir perdiendo el miedo. Ahora sigo matando y no siento nada, todo es normal. Antes me mandaban a matar, era una obligación. Pero desde que dejé la organización lo hago por dinero y nada más."

Marylin y Jason al comienzo de su relación, en Puerto Asís.

Imagen : Jason Howe

"Maté a uno de mis amigos porque si no iban a matarme a mí. Mis amigos me contaron que trabajaban para el otro bando, por lo que eran ellos o yo. Confirmé con las Autodefensas que efectivamente eran guerrilleros y pedí permiso para matarlos. Fue muy doloroso. Fui a su velorio y su entierro. Fue muy difícil ver a su madre llorando, sabiendo que yo era responsable por ese dolor. Pero eran ellos o yo y en las Autodefensas te enseñan que primero hay que cuidarse uno. Hasta ahora, maté a 23 personas."

Fue tremendamente triste escuchar a esta mujer joven e inteligente, tan cercana, hablar así. Marylin era una víctima de circunstancias extremas. Su aburrimiento y su búsqueda de algo que la excitara la había llevado a los paras, que le habían hecho perder todo respeto por la vida humana. Pero sus excusas, o la falta de ellas, me habían sacudido y le dije que ella representaba todo lo que estaba mal en su país. Desde mi lugar privilegiado y externo de observador no podía identificarme con ella, sólo enojarme y juzgarla. No me había funcionado eso de reducirla a una nota, no podía tomar distancia de ella. Por un lado era un deleite todo lo que me había pasado en los últimos meses, por otro había que pagar el precio de llegar al fondo. Había visto y escuchado cosas que me hacían entender a Colombia como nunca antes, pero también me daba cuenta de que yo estaba dañado.

Volvía a Irak y luego pasé a la guerra de Afganistán. Por un año nos mandamos mails con Marylin. Ella me preguntaba dónde andaba y me pedía que no la olvidara. Me contó que lo que yo le había dicho después de la entrevista en video la había sacudido, que nunca nadie le había hablado así, preguntándole por qué hacía lo que hacía. Me dijo que quería empezar de nuevo, pero que las Autodefensas no dejaban a nadie salir del negocio. Al menos con vida.

Después de un largo silencio, comencé a temer que le hubiera pasado algo. Decidí volver a Puerto Asís a verla. Me tomó un tiempo juntar el coraje de ir a su casa y ver si su familia todavía vivía ahí. Me preguntaba si había realmente comenzado una nueva vida en otro lugar o si, más probable, su vida pasada por fin la había alcanzado. Como yo sabía en qué horrores había andado Marylin, estaba preparado para recibir malas noticias. Lo que no me esperaba era qué confuso iba a ser recibirlas. Su familia se sorprendió, como siempre, de verme de golpe en su puerta. Mis temores se confirmaron al ver a su padre que, con los ojos llenos de lágrimas, me dijo que Marylin estaba muerta. Tenía veinticinco años y dos meses cuando fue secuestrada de su casa y lapidada. Sus captores le habían aplastado la cabeza con una piedra y la habían baleado.

Al día siguiente, su hija de seis años se despertó como huérfana. Sus padres habían perdido al tercer hijo y su hermano estaba tan quebrado que no paraba de llorar y no podía caminar ni hablar. Marylin no fue muerta por alguien del lugar, en venganza por alguno de sus "trabajos" como asesina. La asesinó su propio grupo en una lapidación simbólica que es el castigo para los sapos, como llaman los colombianos a los informantes. Su último novio había sido un soldado, algo conveniente para ambos mientras paras y militares trabajaron juntos en la guerra por el control de los campos de coca del Putumayo, pero suficiente como para que alguien muera cuando esa relación se quebró.

La muerte de Marylin fue algo muy especial para mí, por nuestra intimidad. Fuimos amigos y amantes. Nuestras vidas nunca tuvieron mucho en común, excepto el abrazo de hierro de la guerra civil colombiana. Me costaba hablar, no sabía realmente qué estaba sintiendo. ¿Sentía pena de esa mujer que había tomado tantas vidas y caído por la misma justicia callejera que ella ejercía ? ¿Estaba otra vez conversando con ella sobre cómo cambiar su vida después de hablar conmigo ? ¿Me preguntaba si no tendría que haber hecho más por ella ? ¿Tenía pena de sus padres y su hermosa hijita, que algún día podía descubrir por qué la mataron y entender los horrores que pasaban mientras ella era una beba ? ¿Me acordaba cómo era besarla antes de saber que era una sicaria ? ¿Me imaginaba o trataba de no imaginarme cómo quedó con la cara destrozada por la roca ? En realidad, pensaba, sentía e imaginaba todo eso. Y a la vez sabía que el dolor de su familia era el mismo que ella les había causado a otras muchas familias.

De vuelta en el hotel me quedé fumando y viendo el ventilador dar vueltas, pensando en mis guerras, mi novia muerta y mi situación actual. A la mañana siguiente, bien temprano, fuimos con la madre y la hija de Marylin, ambas de punta en blanco y con flores, a visitarla al cementerio. Su ataúd estaba en un nicho de cemento, justo encima del de su hermana, también muerta en la guerra. Hace mucho que los muertos superaron la capacidad del cementerio. A su lado había otra tumba, mucho más pequeña, de otra hermana muerta a los tres meses por causas naturales. No quería ni imaginar lo que sentía la madre de Marylin abrazada a su nieta y viendo las tumbas de tres de sus hijas. Mi idea de entrar por el Putumayo para fotografiar a los paras ya no parecía tan interesante. Marylin siempre

me había indicado por dónde seguir y me había advertido dónde parar. Quería aprender más sobre su vida y su muerte, pero no quería que me mataran por preguntar a quien no correspondía.

Esa noche, comiendo entre bocinazos y motores, una vecina me contó más de lo que le había pasado a Marilyn. Tomando sopa, me contó que Marilyn había estado con las Autodefensas mucho más tiempo de lo que me había confesado y que en el pueblo todos asumían que había participado en la masacre de 26 personas en El Tigre. Varios de los muertos en esa masacre habían sido decapitados y destripados antes de que los tiraran al río. Esa misma noche saqué pasaje en el primer avión.

Mientras veía Puerto Asís empequeñecerse hasta desaparecer, el avión quedó envuelto en una nube. En mi iPod una voz cantaba que "esta ciudad nos vuelve locos y hay que irse". Escribo esto a quince mil kilómetros de distancia en un hotel gélido de Kabul, donde cubro otra guerra interminable y me pregunto qué otra cosa podría haber hecho. ¿Marilyn fue asesinada porque realmente era una informante o porque quería empezar otra vida, como me decía en sus mails ? Quiero creer que fue por eso, quiero creer que logró cambiar, que no era la dura, fría y cruel asesina que me reveló. ¿A quién quiero engañar ?

Traducción de [Página/12](#).

* Jason P. Howe es un notable corresponsal de guerra y el autor de Colombia : Between the Lines, Colombia : entre las líneas. La increíble historia de su romance con Marilyn fue publicada en el diario británico The Independent, junto a un ensayo fotográfico sobre su vida y su muerte. La historia de Jason y Marilyn fue comprada por Hollywood y está en etapa de preproducción para una película de alto presupuesto.

ORDINARY HISTORY OF BROKEN COLOMBIA'I fell in love with a female assassin'

They met on a train and fell in love. Then Jason P Howe discovered that his girlfriend Marilyn was leading a secret double life - as an assassin for right-wing death squads in Colombia's brutal civil war. With their story set to become a major Hollywood film, he recalls an extraordinary, doomed romance.



Marilyn & Jason
(c) Jason P. Howe 2003

by Jason P. Howe
[The Independent](#). London, Thursday, 6 March 2008

There comes a point in every new relationship when your girlfriend wants to share a secret. Usually it's to do with sex - how many other partners she's had (with a few conveniently erased) - that sort of thing. Often, the secret changes the basis of the relationship ; honesty comes with consequences. But what happens if your new girlfriend has a much darker and more sinister secret than having slept around a bit ?

Sitting naked on the edge of the bed in a cheap, sweltering hotel room in the heart of a war-torn, drug-producing region of Colombia, I lit a cigarette and listened as the girl I had just made love with told me a secret dark enough to shake anyone from their postcoital bliss.

I had been in Colombia for a few months to learn how to become a photojournalist. Not by attending some theoretical university course, or taking portraits in a cosy studio, but by pitching myself in at the deep end.

Times of peace have been rare in the country's history. For the past 40 years or so, a Marxist-inspired rebel group known as the Farc (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) have been at war with the government, funding their growing army by kidnapping and extortion, and taxing the illegal cocaine trade. Right-wing death squads known as "self-defence forces" have sprung up as a response to the Farc's kidnapping of wealthy landowners and drug-lords. Under the umbrella of an organisation called the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) these private militias, or paramilitaries (known locally as "paras"), are secretly supported by those high in the government and military, who back their dirty war against the Farc rebels.

This triangular conflict has exacted, and continues to exact, a hefty price from the Colombian people. During the past four decades, over 200,000 have lost their lives and more than three million have been forced from their homes by violence or intimidation. This week, following an incursion by government forces to kill Farc rebels in Ecuador, the conflict was at the centre of a diplomatic crisis involving both nations, together with Hugo Chavez's Venezuela.

To dismiss all this brutality as a simple war over drugs does the Colombian people a gross injustice. Its roots are buried in the economic and social imbalance that permeates the country, a huge working class living in poverty, lining the pockets of a tiny, wealthy upper class who own more than 90 per cent of the land, industry and business. My goal, therefore, was to meet and photograph members of each of the groups involved, and to attempt explain Latin America's 40-year conflict.

I began by travelling to a part of the country with a strong Farc presence, and, after much perseverance, persuaded the rebels to let me live in one of their camps. After documenting their daily lives and being alongside them in a firefight against government troops, it was time to go off in search of their sworn enemies, the paras.

I headed towards the Putumayo, one of the narco-trafficking centres and scene of ongoing skirmishes between Farc and the paras in southern Colombia on the border with Ecuador. It took a couple of days travelling on a local bus to get to the capital, Puerto Asis.

En route, I began talking with a fellow passenger, a beautiful Colombian girl called Marylin who told me she was returning from a clothes-buying trip in one of the big cities. I explained my purpose in visiting the region, and Marylin told me she had friends in both the paramilitaries and the military, so would be able to help. She invited me to stay with her family, who had a roadside store and bar on the outskirts of town. I was attracted to Marylin, but had no idea how close we would become and how our future would unfold.

I spent the next few weeks living with her family, making trips out into the countryside to photograph the coca fields and to meet the paramilitaries. Marylin and I spent long afternoons lying together in a hammock. We held hands and kissed occasionally, but it went no further. Eventually, my time and funds ran out and I had to return to England. As I said goodbye, I promised to do my best to return and Marylin told me I was now "part of the family".

Six months later, I was back, determined to explore this conflict fully, learn as much as I could and maybe publish a book. I made my way back to Puerto Asis with the intention of spending some time with Marylin and her family. But I was in for some surprises : Marylin told me that she had joined the AUC and had been active in combat in the nearby

village of El Tigre. Another female friend who had been fighting at her side had been killed, along with 25 other paramilitary fighters and at least 15 rebels. When the combat ceased, the entire population of the village fled. Marylin's brother was now working on a coca plantation and carried a pistol that he slept with under his pillow. I didn't find it particularly shocking. This was, after all, a country torn apart by every type of violence. Only luck, or lack of it, dictated which side you were on.

Months passed. I travelled around the country developing my project. The results received positive attention, including a prize in an international competition, and it was suggested that I go to Iraq to document the war there. And so I did. But, after six months living with the daily car bombings and rocket attacks in Baghdad, I was hankering to return to Colombia.

A year after our first meeting, I arrived back at Marylin's home in a battered taxi. I sat and drank an ice-cold beer with her father while waiting for her to return from an "errand". I then walked hand-in-hand with her and her four-year-old daughter, Natalie, down the rutted cart track to a tree-shaded river behind her house. With her daughter splashing around near the bank we waded, arm in arm, into the deeper, cooler water. I felt there was a change in the atmosphere, but I couldn't exactly put my finger on what I was sensing.

I asked Marylin if things would be different between us if I stayed at a hotel in the town rather than with her family. She agreed that it might make it easier for us to be together, so I found myself a room. That evening, she came for dinner. We ate on the balcony and, as we shared a bottle of wine and listened to the chorus of insects, I began to think that the year of groundwork I had put in was about to pay off. Marylin stayed the night.

Puerto Asis, Marylin's home town sits a degree or two above the equator. Air-conditioning was an expensive extra and I was broke. The tiny hotel room was stifling, and, as we lay curled in the sweat-soaked sheets, with the shouts of street vendors and the rumble of early morning traffic drifting in through the balcony window, Marylin said she had something to tell me.

She then hit me with a confession that would both thrill and confuse me. She explained that in the months that I had been away in Iraq her role within the AUC had changed ; she had joined the urban militia and become an assassin. Her job was now to eliminate informers and traitors. So far, she told me, she had killed at least 10 people in the area. I lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, Marylin looked at me through the smoke as I exhaled, waiting to see how I would respond to what she had just told me.

Strangely, her confession did not have the impact one would expect ; I did not recoil in horror. The months I had spent in Colombia and in Iraq surrounded by violence had altered my perspective. I don't think that I had become immune to death or suffering but I had certainly become less easily shocked. The difference between victim and victor, rebel and refugee, often felt like only a matter of perspective.

I had always enjoyed the company of the "doers", the rebels and the soldiers who were out risking their lives for causes I supposed they believed in. I was left cold by the wealthy, well-dressed beauty queens who inhabited the upmarket clubs of Bogota. Although I would later feel very differently, my initial reaction to Marylin's words were an acceptance that may even have bordered on approval. I guess I felt that as war-zone lovers go, she was pretty "cool".

In the beginning, her visits to my hotel room - usually armed with a pistol - did not disturb me greatly. At first, I don't think the real implications of what Marylin was doing had filtered through the surreal haze. I was young and living out a great adventure. This was surely the closest I would ever get to someone who was truly and totally involved and immersed in this conflict. The woman I had only recently begun sleeping with was a hired killer and there was a gun

on my bedside table.

Watching her take the pistol from her belt, unbutton her jeans and slip into bed I somehow couldn't quite equate the woman in my arms with the bodies I had seen in the local morgue, their heads shattered by gunshots at close range, murders she confessed to having committed. High on a combination of the heady tropical climate, local rum, grade A cocaine and in the arms of nubile 22-year-old, fantasy and reality became blurred. It felt like I was living in a Quentin Tarantino movie.

One morning, Marilyn told me that the previous night she had persuaded a friend to help her decapitate and dismember a woman she had been contracted to kill. This was no informer, but, rather, a friend of hers who paid her to kill her boyfriend's other girlfriend. She described so graphically what had happened, with so little feeling, that at last reality kicked in. I found my feelings about her changing. The romantic light started to fade fast. She no longer seemed to be a legitimate part of a civil conflict but had evolved into a freelance killer, taking life in exchange for money - no more, no less.

Although I still found her sexually attractive and wanted to be with her, something else was ricocheting around in my brain. Some of the thoughts that would have occurred to anyone else much earlier were, now, at last, beginning to filter through.

Over the past year, I had photographed her swimming in the river with her daughter and reading bedtime stories. Now, the images I was recording concentrated almost entirely on the other side of her life. I was, with thoughts of self-preservation in mind, reducing her to "subject".

I asked Marilyn if she would be prepared to let me interview her about her life and what she had become involved in. Wearing a balaclava and brandishing a pistol, she permitted me to video our conversation.

I began by asking her how she had first become involved with the paramilitaries and why she decided to join them. How she had been persuaded to kill her first victim and how she felt about it. She started hesitantly, but gathered confidence as her story unfolded.

"When I killed the first person, I was afraid, I was scared. I killed the first person just to see if I could. But there is an obligation to kill. If you don't, they kill you. That's why the first was very hard, because the person I killed was kneeling down begging, crying and saying, 'Don't kill me. I have children.' That's why it was difficult and sad. But if you don't kill that person, someone else from the AUC will kill you. After the killing, you keep trembling. You can't eat or talk to anyone. I was at home, but I kept imagining the person begging not to be killed. I shut myself inside, but with time I forgot everything. The superiors always say, 'Don't worry, that was just the first time. When you kill the second one, it will all be OK.' But you keep trembling.

"The second time is only a bit easier, but as they say here, 'If you can kill one, you can kill many more.'

"You have to lose the fear. Now I am still killing and nothing happens. I feel normal. Before, I had an obligation to kill, I was sent to kill. But once I left the organisation, I was not obligated. I now only do the job for money.

"Yes [I killed one of my friends], because they were going to kill me. They told me to take care because they worked for the other side and had connections with the guerrillas. And so it was my life or theirs. So I asked permission to do it, which [the AUC] gave me. [The AUC] investigated and it came out positive that [my friends] worked for the guerrillas, so I killed them. It was very painful for me. I was at the burial and at the vigil. It hurt me to see his mother

crying, knowing I was the one guilty of having caused that. But it's your life and you're taught in the [AUC] school : First you, then the others. In total, I have killed 23 people."

An incredible sadness washed over me as I listened to this intelligent young woman, who I had become so close to, talk of her life. Marylin was an extreme victim of circumstance. Her boredom and quest for excitement had brought her into contact with the paramilitaries, who had brainwashed her and left her with no respect for human life. Not her own, not even her family's.

But her excuses, or lack of them, riled me and I told her she represented everything that was wrong with the country. From my privileged and ultimately unqualified position as an outsider I found it impossible to identify with her, only to be angry, upset and judgemental.

Reducing her to a "subject" had not worked, I did not seem able to be detached and objective or able to put my own feelings aside. I had travelled too far beyond that point. While on one level I relished the intensity of what I was experiencing, there was a price to be paid for getting in so deep and it was high. I realised that the things I had seen and heard in the last couple of months were incredible. Through them, my passion for Colombia had grown and my understanding of what was happening in this much misunderstood country had broadened. But I felt that I had lost something and been damaged by them, too.

I returned to Iraq and then moved on to covering the war in Afghanistan. Over the course of a year, Marylin and I exchanged emails periodically. They mainly involved her asking me where I was and asking me not to forget her. She told me that the things I had said to her after her interview had had a big impact. No one had spoken to her like that, really questioned her about what she was doing with her life. She told me that she did want to make a new beginning, but that she knew the AUC do not let their members leave, at least not alive.

After a long period of silence, I began to fear something had happened. So I decided that I would return to Puerto Asis to learn the truth.

It took me some time to pluck up the courage to drive out to her home to see if she and her family were still around. I wondered if she had perhaps made the break and left to begin a new life or whether, more likely, her past had caught up with her. Given the dreadful things that I already knew she had been involved in, I was at least somewhat prepared for bad news. What I was not ready for was how confusing it was going to be to hear it.

Her family showed their normal surprise at finding me at their front door. All my fears were confirmed as her father, his eyes welling with tears, told me that Marylin was dead. She was 25 years and two months old when she was kidnapped from her home and stoned to death. Her abductors crushed her head with rocks and then shot her.

The next morning, her now six-year-old daughter, Natalie, awoke as an orphan, Marylin's parents had lost a third daughter and her brother so overcome with grief that he was unable to walk, talk, or even feed himself. Marylin was not killed by some local seeking revenge for one of the many deaths that had occurred at her hands during her time as an assassin. She was murdered by her own group in a symbolic stoning for being a sapo ("frog"), which is what Colombians call informers.

Her most recent boyfriend was a government soldier, convenient enough when the paramilitaries and the military were working side-by-side in their war to wrest control of the coca fields of Putumayo from the Farc, but enough to get her killed when that relationship soured and her pillow talk continued.

Marylin's death had a special significance for me, because I, too, had shared some of that pillow talk. We had been friends and then lovers. Our lives never had much in common ; except that Colombia's dirty little war had both of us locked into its fatal grip. I found it difficult to speak ; I wasn't actually sure what I was feeling.

Was I feeling sorry that a young woman, who had deliberately taken the lives of other human beings, had received the same kind of street-corner justice she had been responsible for handing out ? Was I reliving the conversations we had about changing her life and the emails I received from her thanking me and saying she needed to talk more about how she could get out of the mess she was in ? Was I wishing I had done more to help her ? Was I feeling sorry for her parents and her beautiful daughter, who one day would want an explanation as to why her mother was killed and, maybe, discover the horrors that occurred while she was a sleeping baby ? Was I remembering what it was like to kiss her in those days before I had any clue she was an assassin ? Was I trying to imagine, or perhaps trying not to imagine, what she looked like after her head had been destroyed with stones and rocks ?

In truth, I was thinking, feeling and imagining all of these things. At the same time, though, I knew that whatever pain her family was feeling, she had caused this same pain to others many times over.

Back in my hotel room I let out the longest of breaths, lit a cigarette and stared at the ceiling fan. The whirling blades churned together my memories of the wars I'd been in, my ex-girlfriend and my current situation.

Early next morning, together with Marylin's mother and Natalie, both wearing their best dresses and carrying flowers, I went to see where Marylin body had been laid to rest. Her coffin was in a concrete box, resting on top of the tomb of her sister, who had also been killed by the conflict. The number of bodies demanding burial had long ago outstripped the space available. Alongside lay a much smaller tomb ; the remains of another of her sisters, who'd died of natural causes aged three months. I could not imagine how Marylin's mother felt holding the hand of her granddaughter, looking over the graves of all three of her daughters.

My plan for travelling deeper into Putumayo to photograph the paramilitaries no longer seemed such a good idea. Marylin had always pointed me in the right direction and warned me when pushing further was not a good idea. I wanted to learn more about her life and death, but didn't want to get killed for asking the wrong questions of the wrong people.

That night, eating dinner against a background of revving motorbikes and honking trucks, another local told me more of what had happened to Marylin. Between mouthfuls of soup, the woman told me that Marylin had been involved with the AUC a lot longer than she had admitted to me, and that it was commonly believed in the town that she was involved in the massacre of 26 villagers in El Tigre. Many of the victims were decapitated and disembowelled before being thrown into a river. I booked a seat on the next available flight out.

As I watched Puerto Asis disappear below me, the plane was enveloped by cloud. On my iPod, someone was singing "this city's made us crazy and we must get out".

As I sit typing this, nearly 9,000 miles away in a freezing, dark hotel room in Kabul, Afghanistan, covering yet another never-ending conflict, I wonder whether it could have ever ended any differently. Was Marylin really killed because she was an informer or because, as she indicated in her emails, she did really want to leave the AUC and start a new life ?

This is what I want to believe. I want to believe that she had a change of heart. I want to believe that she wasn't the cold, heartless, evil killer she appeared to be. But who am I trying to fool ?