

## Margaret Mackay – In Search of Federico

I stumbled on the craggy stone and a mournful echo warned the tribe of incomers. The intricate stone path trumpeted an early warning system. This was an ancestral legacy. There was no hiding our approach. Only the audacious climb before us into the mysterious Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

The dank rainforest above was dangerous territory. This our bold adventure, and we the protagonists. My old friend Martin was the roaming anthropological expert, I the writer and interpreter. Friends at university who had both developed a taste for the unusual. Travel was our addiction. South America was a world of fascination to us, and Spanish a romantic invitation. We were explorers venturing beyond.

*“We’ll be front page”* Martin wheezed, *“ I can feel it in my bones.”* Martin is a flamboyant academic who adores publicity. My mind embraced warm accolades to a risk-taking journalist. This was a first. We were in search of Colombia’s guerrilla leader, Federico Oscar.

*“ I feel a snake”* I blurted in panic. A rude reminder that we had to survive our encounter. This assignment was built on years of correspondence, and meetings with chance contacts. Then dramatically we were given a signal. The leader would meet us. A human chain had led us from the capital city, Bogotá into this wilderness. Each guide departed wordlessly replaced by another. Martin pestered me with questions to translate for every courier. All of our questions fell unanswered.

This was no easy journey. We were so elated by eventual contact, and the speed of departure we had not considered the hazards of penetrating the jungle. Now I was disoriented by the bewildering expanse of tropical forest. Instructed to clamber up the stone boulders I sensed constant eyes. Human or animal? Fear crept through me. Squirming over a fallen branch leeches relished my exposed forearms. My wet boots pulsed with sugar ants.

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This remote coastal part of Colombia receives no press attention. Monthly kidnappings are a deterrent. Yet we had casually shrugged off the risk in this assignment.

*“This dream of the big scoop, Martin. The odds are against us. Paramilitaries take us for ransom, or cocaine smugglers kill us. If we get past them, will Federico let us go?”*

*“Don’t worry.” Martin voiced breezy confidence: “Federico wants us alive. To tell his story.”*

*“Yeah, well it’s a hell of a trip.”* My natural anxiety reasserted itself. Sinking into rotting vegetation I knew we could disappear. No trace left of a naïve journalist and her partner. Would anyone look for us in the rainforest? Forgotten travellers who joined the traffickers hooked on money. The price of cocaine was highest in England. Africa the trade route. Then to sail innocently through Europe into Portsmouth’s historic docks. Melting into the city port to meet dealers on the streets.

All this lay ahead. Federico was the enigmatic figure pulling us into the jungle. A charismatic presence in the Sierra with his devoted tribe. His crusade far-reaching: to start a revolution across Colombia.

Stories of Federico and his wealthy banking family haunted my thoughts. Influenced by Marxist ideology the economics professor had started a freedom movement. Federico didn’t want to just engage with students, he wanted to transform their lives. Then the killings pushed Federico into decisive action. The military crushed a workers’ protest in Valledupar. Hundreds were brutally shot in the streets. All at once Federico abandoned his inheritance. Abandoned the luxury mansion, the servants, and sports cars, and his role as honoured university teacher. Stealing thirty million pesos from Banco Oscaro, the family-owned bank, he escaped into the Sierra mountains.

*“Federico may be lining his pockets. In cahoots with the drug traffickers” Martin mused. “Nothing altruistic about it.”*

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*“No you’re wrong there. Federico lives like a monk. Pablo Escobar was the drug lord indulging his tastes for drink, women, vintage cars. Remember the giraffes and rhinos shipped from Kenya to fill his personal zoo.”*

*“Well, Pablo played local hero”* Martin argued. *“Housing the poor, protecting his own. I’m just saying Federico may be in the same mould.”*

*“No, I don’t buy it”* I persisted. *“Federico had immense wealth, all the connections. But he surrendered it all.”*

*“O.K. He’s got willpower. But these are the richest terrorists in the world. There’s money in drugs. And what about the list Federico took to use for kidnapping landowners?”*

*“That’s only hearsay. There have never been charges.”*

Martin laughed: *“I suppose Federico already knows the super-rich: his family dynasty.”*

*“Exactly. As a story I can’t beat it.”* I rested against a trunk pausing in the torrential rain. Federico was hero worshipped even though he had not been seen for years. Unseen he had acquired extraordinary powers. So why had he agreed to give us access.

*“Wait, Martin someone’s coming”* I said nervously.

The masked figure spoke: *“Lieutenant Sonia. Follow me. Don’t talk.”*

Martin asked: *“Are you taking us to meet Federico Oscar?”*

*“Silence.”*

Martin sweated under the thick canopy: *“How much further?”*

*“Silence. Walk in my footsteps.”*

We trudged on submissively. Deeper into the gloom as the screech of macaws surged unpredictably. I was out of my depth. Lost in tangled growth. The only route to obey Sonia.

The verdant path plummeted and we plunged down into knotted deadwood. A group of youth encircled us. Sonia halted them with a rapid command. With her gun she directed us to a palm frond hut.

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*“Wait”* Sonia growled.

Darkness fell, a final curtain call engulfing us. Hours passed hunched stiffly on the mud floor. The young guards cradled their guns. They patted their lonely toy affectionately.

*“Who are they?”* hissed Martin. *“Rebels or traffickers?”*

*“How do I know? They might be death squads. It doesn’t feel right.”*

The brooding humidity sapped my courage while Martin determined to stay buoyant: *“We’ve just got to keep our nerve. I reckon this is base camp.”*

Martin’s eagerness irritated me: *“It’s impossible to know.”*

I was troubled. This ordeal of waiting under a gun increased my tension. Martin’s anthropological research seemed frivolous. My complacent assumption of journalistic liberty flawed. We didn’t know if Federico Oscar was a leader in the rebel organisation. Whatever his position Federico’s inspiration was remarkable. His influence so threatening that American intelligence dangled a \$50 million dollar reward. Given the prize, we wouldn’t be the first bounty hunters. Murky suspicion clung to us.

My stomach ached from the sticky rice and yucca of our last meal. Federico’s personal crusade no longer appealed. I wanted out of this exclusive. Let another journalist take the credit. The plot was too unpredictable.

Sonia returned and snarled: *“Move. We’re leaving. Hurry.”*

Was another group tracking us? I had no sense of what would happen next. Entangled trees barricaded our path. Sonia’s henchmen brandished machetes. They chopped at limbs sweeping overhead. Our progress slowed. At a silted river inlet we paused. Thirst scraped my throat but I was afraid to drink the sludgy water. We boarded a wooden canoe, and glided deeper into the jungle stronghold.

We watched farmers harvesting their valuable crops beside the river. The rebels guaranteed their safety in return for regular financial tribute. After hours wading the currents we navigated a swamp to land abruptly on shore.

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Through tall reeds we were led up to a high gorge. Silhouetted on a rocky outcrop warriors perched. Martin identified the Guajiros tribe. Dressed in distinctive crimson geometric robes, the legendary tribe respected for their jaguar instincts.

At the centre waited Federico recognisable from tired photos of the radical professor. A tall ascetic frame in camouflage jacket, Federico gestured to the warriors. Spears moved in reverent formation, and led us forward. Martin was fascinated by the Guajiros stealthy puma movement. Power emanated from their imposing physiques.

Federico spoke and his deep voice drew us closer: *“You come to hear my story. I am proud to be Colombian.”*

For days I had rehearsed questions. They seemed irrelevant in this setting. The ceremony obliged me to continue as if this were a daily interview with Martin nudging me on.

*“What made you leave your family?”*

*“I left loved ones. But I was suffocated by relentless acquisition. Circles obsessed by diamonds and plastic surgery. They ignore those in poverty chasing scraps to eat. Children starve in Colombia while there are emeralds and gold in the ground.”*

*“What made you aware of this?”*

*“My students. Slaving as cleaners and guards through the night and scurrying to class the next day. Their meagre wages never cover family needs. I watched them eke out a pitiful existence. Crushed by owners refusing to pay a few derisory pesos.”*

*“So why are you a Wanted Man?”*

Federico’s face creased in disgust: *“I fight corruption. The corruption strangling Colombia. I’m no monster.”*

*“But why join the rebels?”*

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*“Look at my companion, Sonia. She walked barefoot to school. Often the family had no food or money for medicines. She left school to hunt for rotting potatoes on the roadside. In our rich fertile land this is how the poor live. We grant hope.”*

Martin interrupted: *But how can you justify kidnapping?”*

*“The battlefield imposes its own logic. We must break the hold of the military. To defend life.”* Federico raised his fist sharply, and his warriors saluted in response.

*“What about peaceful alternatives?”*

*“For years I tried. But no-one listened. Scoffed at. Now I make a difference.”*

I risked his anger: *“But you’re accused of taking Americans hostage.”*

Federico shot back: *“That’s a lie.”*

*“But the rebels hold prisoners?”*

*“Taking prisoners in war is legitimate. This war is for social justice. The government began this. And the USA joined. What fools! Their military nurture death squads. Americans consume drugs. Yet they think only of cutting the supply. Never the demand.*

*“But you use these drugs.”*

*“No. Never. We honour our code. We achieve sanity of mind.”*

*“I’ve heard of the Guajiros mind control,”* Martin said excitedly *“How do they do it?”*

*“Ah, this is divine knowledge. Ancient wisdom. The mighty Guajiros are sage dwellers in space and time. They harness the power of the elements, and transcend light. Descendants know how to internalise this strength.”*

Martin was electrified: *“How can we study this power?”*

*“The tribe choose who remains. The Guajiros learning grants the power of a magnificent condor. The mind expands and soars above in infinite grace. You*

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*transcend the daily struggle. The Guajiros are stewards living in a parallel world. They will not accept threats to their fragile land.”*

Federico continued as shadows encircled us. His protectors prowled. *“We will talk more.”* Suddenly Federico left us, dissolving into the night.

Martin was intoxicated by this encounter. *“These Guajiros warriors are masters of their kingdom. Just think what it will mean, if we learn mind control.”*

Martin made extensive notes of the Guajiros appearance and their patterned weaving of red and black coral snakes. These snakes rarely moved but one bite was fatal. Martin babbled feverishly about the Guajiros heritage and their natural sources. He repeated tales of aromatic elixirs. A slush of aquatic river plants and minerals that the sprawling caymans regurgitate from muddy pools. Was this the Guajiros source of power?

Martin yearned to unlock the secret of mental balance. A conquest for strength of mind. Freedom from life wrestling despondency and depression. The Guajiros mental state for endurance. Martin talked on in the darkness.

I was far from serenity. Terrified by the sounds of the rainforest and fearful of death in my hammock. The warriors could dispose of us in an instant. I imagined Martin suffocated beneath thick moss. I dozed and thrashed against crafted rope. I dreamt of jumbled vines turning into a vivid plumed serpent. At dawn the siren of the forest woke me. Horned birds smothered their victims' screams. I sensed sorcery. In willing ignorance we had stepped into a trap.

Federico emerged in the camp and towered over us. He spoke with dignity:

*“This is paradise on Earth. A treasure chest of tropical fruits, emeralds and orchids. Yet Colombians starve under a controlling elite. I work to liberate Colombians. But a lifetime is short.”*

Federico pointed at me. *“This is how you contribute.”*

I was startled: *“What can we do?”*

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*“Here am I. In the Sierra. They tried to arrest me in Ecuador. You know the price on my head. But the faithful secured my escape. I no longer travel freely. You, in contrast, have access to academic institutions, human rights organisations. You can show what is happening. With international pressure remove the President from power.”*

*“Senor, you overestimate our reach.”* I was disconcerted. *“Yes, our story will be sensational but then .. I ..”*

My words faded. Our self-interest exposed. Martin and I were merely seeking fame and publicity.

Federico smiled grimly: *“Well then, imagine what lies within your reach. Let the revolution begin. You must bring change, or I will instruct the Guajiros to end your time.”*

Martin was shocked: *“But what do you want us to do?”*

*“Liberate our freedom fighters. Five hundred kept in shameful captivity. Release them, and in exchange hostages can go.”*

*“But those hostages vanished years ago. So did that woman ... what was her name – I can’t remember. The presidential candidate. No-one believes they’re still alive.”*

*“We have Betancourt. She’s alive.”*

*“We’ll need some sort of proof.”*

*“Trust me”,* Federico responded calmly *“My word is enough.”*

We had entered a labyrinth forced to tread the torturous path. Jolted by this turn, how I longed for an unfinished story. To break off the narrative and leave it behind. I could picture justifying to my editor a return without a character story. This seemed the choice: follow Federico, or join the hostages.

Even Martin’s optimism dimmed: *“What then?”*

*“Once the swap is done you return home. It’s over.”*

It would never end. Decades of conflict were a way of life in Colombia. No end in sight. Nor any incentive for the opponents to end the struggle. I struggled

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to breathe in this seething human jungle. My journalistic arrogance plainly exposed. I had thought myself separate, and somehow superior to this conflict. Now I was on the frontline where borders were invisible.

The Sierra de Santa Marta leaves a mark of where the Guajiros stole our spirit. Martin was no longer jubilant of his research knowledge. There will be no special reports of discovery. This story will not be published. That is the irony. There is too much risk of pursuit, if our names get out. Martin and I blundered into chaos convinced of our intelligent insight.

Federico, the divine leader, has melted far into the Sierra. There is no footprint to follow. The Guajiros are protecting him. Evermore the chosen one.

Today we heard the President is granting us an audience to discuss our findings in the Sierra. The ambassador and general of the armed forces will attend. We have one hour to put our case for prisoner exchange. We contacted politicians and families of the hostages. We must appease the invincible spirits. Federico conducts the movement of the protagonists. His authority dominates our preparations.

We are virtual hostages of that jungle. Watched by eyes that follow us, stalking us like prey. The poisonous serpent of my dream delivered a fatal bite. In our search we had been bitten. Federico remains beyond reach.