

As told by his brother
ROBERTO ESCOBAR

ESCOBAR

The Inside Story of Pablo Escobar,
the World's Most Powerful Criminal

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I dedicate this book to God Almighty, as gratitude and to the memory of three extraordinary people: my mother, Hermilda, dedicated to a life of social service as a teacher and a role model citizen in the community; my father, Abel, a good man who showed me the rewards earned by hard work and the values of fighting for what you believe; and finally my brother, Pablo, a good soul with a vision for the future that turned the impossible to possible, who planted in his heart a place for the poor and unprotected—and whose memory today is part of history.

ROBERTO ESCOBAR
October 2008

Foreword

In our world of instant communications it has become relatively simple to become a legend. To be anointed a person has to perform a feat mammoth enough to earn the covers of all the celebrity magazines the same week and dominate twenty-four-hour coverage on cable news for at least several news cycles. One of these nouveau legends can emerge instantly from any field: politics, entertainment, sports, crime, and the bizarre. But in our eat-'em-up media yesterday's legends rapidly become tomorrow's *Dancing with the Stars* contestants.

But Pablo Escobar became a legend the old-fashioned way: He shot his way to the top of the charts. True legends, like that of Pablo Escobar, grow slowly through time and must be nurtured. The stories told about them have to continue to grow in scope and size until reality is simply too small to contain them. They have to burst beyond the borders of time and place and become famous enough to outlive the contemporary journalism of their life. The world has to come to know them on a first-name basis.

Pablo Escobar has joined the list of celebrity criminals, finding his place on the dark side of history with Blackbeard, Jesse James, and Al Capone. Movies about his life will be made, more in an ef-

fort to exploit him than explain him. Pablo Escobar gained infamy as the most successful, most ruthless, and certainly the best known drug trafficker in history, a man who was beloved by the poorest people of Colombia while being despised by the leaders of nations. He has become known as the richest outlaw in history, a man who built neighborhoods while destroying lives, a multibillionaire who was able to evade the armies searching years for him. When I began working on this project I knew very little about Pablo Escobar other than the broad facts that emerged above the clatter: He had become synonymous with Colombian cocaine, which had flooded the United States, and as a result he was listed as one of *Forbes* magazine's ten richest men in the world.

Before beginning my long series of interviews with Pablo's surviving brother, Roberto, I did considerable background research, most of which confirmed what I knew and filled in substantial details. The facts of Pablo Escobar's life are the bricks of legend: Born in 1949 during a period of tremendous violence that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Colombians, he grew up in a lower-middle-class working family. By the early 1970s he had become involved in his first serious crimes, and by the late 1970s he had entered the world of drug trafficking. His genius for organizing enabled him to bring together other traffickers to form what became the Medellín cartel. This came at the perfect time, when affluent Americans fell in love with cocaine. It was Pablo Escobar's cartel that supplied America's habit, and even the countless thousands of tons of coke that were successfully smuggled into America weren't enough to satisfy the demand. Pablo revolutionized the drug trade by creating new methods to smuggle massive amounts of drugs into America and then Europe. The business made Pablo and his partners billionaires. Pablo used many millions of his dollars to aid the poorest people of Colombia, building homes, buying food and medicine, paying school tuition, and in so many different ways becoming their hero.

Meanwhile, his greatest fear, the greatest fear of all the traffickers, was that Colombia would enforce its extradition treaty with the United States and they would end up in an American prison.

In 1982 Pablo entered politics and was elected as an alternate to Congress; perhaps to serve the lower classes of his country as he claimed or perhaps to insulate himself from extradition as an elected official. Although Pablo claimed his money had been earned in real estate, in 1983 Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla accused him of being a drug dealer; for the first time the rumors had become public. When Lara Bonilla was killed in April 1984, Pablo was blamed and his political career ended.

For the first time the extraordinary violence for which the Medellín cartel would become known became part of Colombia's daily life; in 1985 almost 1,700 people were murdered in Medellín, a figure that would continue to grow. Pablo and the leaders of the cartel were forced into hiding for the next few years, at times spending months in the jungles, often escaping just minutes ahead of government forces. In November of 1985 rebels launched a massive attack on the Palace of Justice; hundreds of people died, among them justices of the Supreme Court. Pablo was accused of financing the attack in an effort to destroy all the evidence the government had collected against him, which was stored there. This attack on the government truly shocked Colombia, and people all over the world began learning the name Pablo Escobar.

In 1988 the rival Cali cartel also declared war on Medellín by bombing Pablo's houses. The killings throughout Colombia increased; at night the streets of the large cities were deserted. And still the flood of drugs into America continued growing. Pablo and his close associates, including his brother, Roberto, successfully managed to evade the enemies searching the country for them while he led his private army in battle. But one by one other leaders of the cartel were captured or killed.

By 1989 government officials were being killed and bombs were exploding in the big cities of the nation almost on a daily basis. But the civilized world was stunned once again when a commercial airliner, Avianca flight HK 1803, was bombed and all 107 passengers died. Pablo was blamed for this, adding to his growing reputation as one of history's most brutal criminals. A week later the headquarters of DAS, Colombia's FBI, was destroyed by a massive bomb; 89 people died. The Colombian government's war against Pablo Escobar was joined by American Special Ops teams.

Pablo retaliated by targeting police officers, and within a few months more than 250 policemen were killed. In 1991 the government finally outlawed the extradition treaty, and Pablo, Roberto, and a dozen other men surrendered and were housed in a prison that Pablo built and controlled, a prison known as the Cathedral.

In July 1992, the government attempted to invade the prison and capture the prisoners. While officially it was explained that Pablo was to be moved to a more strict prison, he believed this was an attempt to extradite him to America. Before he could be taken, he escaped into the jungles and the inner cities of Colombia, and the killing began once again.

The legend of Pablo Escobar continued to grow. As the world watched, Pablo Escobar successfully evaded thousands of soldiers from Colombia and America, as well as enemies from Cali and other groups organized to capture or kill him, for more than a year. One man against the organized armies of government. To draw him out some of these forces attacked his family, his friends, anyone who had ever been associated with him. In December 1993, as he tried to force the government to allow his family to leave the country, his hiding place was finally discovered. On December 2, one day after his forty-fourth birthday, he died on a rooftop trying to flee those soldiers who had found him.

Basically, that's the story of Pablo Escobar as it has been written.

But as I began speaking at great length with his brother, Roberto Escobar, who served as the accountant for Pablo's business, and later spoke with many others who knew him at various times of his life, I discovered a slightly different version of that story, the story told in these pages.

Roberto spoke with me as both a loving brother and a man desperately trying to correct history. The point he emphasized so many times was that the growing legend of Pablo Escobar was used by other groups to service their own needs, from the traffickers of Cali who were ignored while the focus remained on Pablo Escobar, to the various factions within the government who used the shadows that covered the search for him to settle old feuds and destroy growing opposition, and even by those men who once had worked for him and after being arrested provided information that would reduce their own sentences. It was easy for everyone to blame all the violence, all the killings, on Pablo Escobar. Americans certainly came to believe that Pablo Escobar was perhaps the primary source of the flood of cocaine from Colombia, and that killing or capturing him would end the problem. Few Americans knew the names of anyone outside the Medellín cartel. Obviously that has proved not to be true, as the cocaine tide never receded.

At times it was very difficult for Roberto to accept that the little brother he had protected as a child and loved dearly had become the criminal Pablo Escobar. For legal and security reasons there were people that Roberto could not identify by name and details that he could not reveal, so an occasional name has been changed and some details have been blurred to make them less identifiable, but no less accurate.

From others who knew Pablo well and worked for him or with him I heard stories that often differed from the accepted history and revealed a much more complex Pablo Escobar than I'd learned about through my research.

As with every legend, there are numerous competing stories. While it's sometimes impossible to determine which of these stories is true, there can be absolutely no doubt that Pablo Escobar was the mastermind behind the most successful criminal operation in history, as well as the brutal force behind the years of chaos and violence that plagued Colombia. He was the larger than reality figure vilified and loved by the people of his country.

But this is very much a brother's story.

DAVID FISHER

ESCOBAR

This is the story of my family as I know it to be: More than one and a half centuries ago a woman named Ofelia Gaviria came from Vasco, Spain, to Colombia. She traveled legions of soldiers through the Gulf of Urabá, men intent on taking control of our beautiful lands and precious metals. Ofelia Gaviria was a wealthy woman, a landowner with many Indian slaves, who were well treated. She lived in the town of Murri but often visited nearby towns. But to do so she had to cross several rivers.

It was a time of danger, and a group of Indians from the forests plotted her death. When she reached a certain bridge she was to be captured and pushed into the river, allowing those Indians to regain control of their native lands. But one of her loyal slaves warned her of this attack. This was a brave woman, and instead of avoiding these attackers, she went to them with sacks of gold. Eventually they came to work for her and adopted the surname Gaviria.

Several years later it was these Indians who found an infant in the forest who had been abandoned by his mother. They brought this child to Ofelia, who adopted him and raised him as her own blood. His name was Braulio Gaviria, who grew to be a handsome man and one day would marry a blue-eyed beauty named Ana Rosa Cobaleda Barreneche, herself from Spain. They had five children, and the last of them was Roberto Gaviria, who was to grow and become the grandfather of myself and my brother, Pablo Escobar, who was to become the most famous criminal in the world.

ROBERTO ESCOBAR, 2008

One

IN THE MONTH OF OCTOBER 2006 MY BELOVED MOTHER, Hermilda Gaviria, died. As she wished, she was to be buried next to my brother, the infamous Pablo Escobar Gaviria. The government of our country, Colombia, decided to use this opportunity to take a DNA sample from the body of my brother. The purpose was to prove to the world that the body in this grave was truly that of Pablo Escobar, the man who had risen from the streets to become the most powerful, the most beloved, and the man most despised by the ruling classes of Colombia. There were many people who believed my brother had not truly been killed on a Medellín rooftop by combined forces from America and Colombia in December 1993, but that another body had been substituted and Pablo lived free. Many others had claimed to be his children or a relative and so were entitled to some of the billions of dollars he had earned and hidden. This DNA sample would settle all of these claims.

Here Lies the King once had been inscribed on his tombstone, but the government had ordered it brushed away. Since his death the cemetery Monte Sacro has become a popular place for tourists. Countless thousands have come from around the world to have their

picture taken at the grave of the legendary outlaw Pablo Escobar. Others have come to pray, light candles for his soul, leave written notes for him, or knock on the gravestone for good luck. And some have come to cry. But on the day of my mother's funeral only my family and witnesses from the government and military were there. And when Pablo's grave was opened they were shocked. A large tree had wrapped its roots around the coffin; it was as if long arms from the ground were clutching it tightly. As if it was being claimed.

I think about my brother every day. Pablo Escobar was an extraordinarily simple man: He was brilliant and kindhearted, passionate and violent. He was a man of both poetry and guns. To many people he was a saint, to others he was a monster. I think about him as a young child, lying next to me as we hid beneath our bed while the guerrillas came during the night to kill us all. I think about the drug organization he built and ruled, a business that stretched throughout much of the world and made him one of the richest men on earth. I think about the good things he did with that money for so many people, the neighborhoods he built, the many thousands of people he fed and educated. And, less often, I think about the terrible things for which he was responsible, the killings and the bombings, the deaths of the innocents as well as his enemies and the days of terror that shocked nations. I think about the sweet days and nights we spent with our families and our friends in the spectacular home he built called Napoles, Napoles with its animals and rare birds collected from around the world where even today a herd of rhinoceros runs free, and I think about the hard times we spent together living in the prison he built on a mountaintop and the many escapes into the jungle we made together as the army and the police searched desperately for us. At times our lives were like a dream, and then we lived in a nightmare.

I've never been a man of great emotions. I accept life in all its colors, I accept it all. Once I was a champion bicycle racer, and then a

coach of our national team. I was a successful businessman who employed a hundred workers making bicycles and I owned five stores. It was then my brother asked me to handle the money he was earning from his business. For me, that's how it began. I have a lot of scars from those years, both on my body and my soul. And now I'm almost totally blind, the result of an attempt to kill me while I was in prison by sending me a letter bomb, and I live quietly on a ranch.

My brother will live forever in the history books, and in legend and lore. The greatest criminal in history, they call him. *Forbes* magazine listed him as the seventh richest man in the world, but even they had no concept of his true wealth. Each year we lost 10 percent of our earnings due to water damage, eaten by rodents, or simply misplaced. Robin Hood, the peasants of Colombia called him for the gifts he gave them.

Pablo controlled governments of other countries and set up a social security system for the poor of Colombia, he built submarines to transport cocaine, and he raised an army that waged war against the state and the other cartels. But some of the claims made against him are false. I don't excuse my brother for the terrible violence, but the truth is that he was not responsible for many of the crimes for which he has been blamed.

I was by his side much of the time, but not always. Many of the stories of his life I know to be true because I was with him, while others were told to me. The complete truth died on the rooftop with Pablo. But as I know it, this is the story of Pablo Escobar and the Medellín drug cartel.

There are many people who believe that it was Pablo who brought the terrible violence and death to Colombia but that isn't true. My brother and I were born into a civil war between the Conservatives and the Liberals, a period known in Colombia as *La Violencia*. In the decade ending in the mid-1950s peasant guerrilla armies murdered as many as 300,000 innocent people, countless thousands of

them hacked to death with machetes. No one in Colombia was safe from these killers. Those murders were particularly hideous. Bodies were sliced apart and decapitated, throats were slit and tongues were ripped out and laid on the victim's chest, and in what became known as the *Corte Florero*, the Flower Vase Cut, limbs were cut off and then stuck back into the body like a macabre arrangement of flowers.

I will never forget the night the guerrillas came to our house in the town of Titiribu. Our father was a cattle rancher and Pablo and I were born on a cattle ranch that he had inherited from his father near the town of Río Negro, the Black River. We owned as many as eight hundred head of cattle. Our father was about work, hard work, and that was what was expected of us. It was our job to help with the cows. One of those cows, I remember, gave milk from its tail, or so we believed. Actually, an employee would wet down the tail with milk when we weren't looking, then when we came close he would shake it vigorously and spray us with milk. So for a time we believed this magic cow truly gave milk through its tail. Our father loved working on his farm, and our family would have stayed there if the herd had not been diseased. The cows caught a fever and more than five hundred of them died. Eventually my father had to declare bankruptcy and we lost the farm, we lost everything we owned.

My mother was a teacher, a role she loved equal to my father's love of farming, and we moved to Titiribu, where she was hired to teach. She would work in the school all week, and on weekends she would teach the children of poverty to read and write for free. While my father was a man of simple tastes, my mother was beautiful and elegant. She was blue-eyed and blond and had a very white complexion, and even with almost nothing to spend on herself she would always carry herself with great pride. The small wooden house in which we lived had one bedroom, which my brother, a sister, and I shared with our parents. We had two mattresses and one of them would be laid on the floor and the children would sleep on it. We

barely had enough for food and Pablo and I would have to walk almost four hours each day to get to school. We left our house at four o'clock in the morning to be there at the beginning of class. Like so many others of Colombia, we were poor people. Our mother had to sew our school uniforms and often we wore old and torn clothes. Once, to her shame, Pablo was sent home from school because he had no shoes. Her teacher's pay had been spent, so she went to the plaza and took a pair of shoes for him, although when she had her salary she returned and paid for them. In Colombia, poor people have always tried to help each other. But our poverty made an impression on our lives that neither my brother nor I ever forgot.

When I was ten years old—Pablo was seven—I was given my first bicycle. It was a used bicycle that my mother paid for in many payments—and I would ride Pablo and myself to school. Our four-hour trip could be done in an hour. Each day I would challenge myself to get there a little faster; I began to race my friend Roberto Sánchez to school and it was then my love of racing bicycles was born.

It was that same year when the *Chusmeros*, the Mobs, came during the evening to kill us. The area in which we lived was the home of mostly liberals, and the guerrillas believed we shared those beliefs. That wasn't true, my parents had no politics. They wanted only to be left alone to raise their children. They had been warned to leave town or we would be cut into pieces, but there was nowhere safe for us to go. The most we could do was lock our doors at night. We were defenseless, our only weapon was our prayers.

They came to our town in the middle of the night, dragging people out of their houses and killing them. When they reached our house they started banging on the doors with their machetes and screaming that they were going to kill us. My mother was crying and praying to the Baby Jesus of Atocha. She took one of the mattresses and put it under the bed, then told us to lie there silently and covered us with blankets. I heard my father saying, "They're going to kill us,

but we can save the kids.” I held on to Pablo and our sister, Gloria, telling them not to cry, that we would be all right. I remember giving Pablo a baby bottle to calm him down. The door was very strong and the attackers failed to break through it, so they sprayed it with gasoline and set it on fire.

Our lives were saved by the army. When the soldiers knocked on our door and told us we were safe my mother didn’t believe them, even though she eventually opened the door for them. They took all the survivors of the town to the schoolhouse. Our road was illuminated by our burning house. In that strange light I saw bodies lying in the gutters and hanging from the lampposts. The *Chusmeros* had poured gasoline on the bodies and set them on fire, and I will remember forever the smell of burning flesh. I carried Pablo. Pablo held on to me so tightly, as if he would never let go. We had left his baby bottle in the house and he was crying for it. I wanted to go back but my parents would not allow it.

So the killing in Colombia had started long before my brother. Colombia has always been a country of violence. It was part of our heritage.

A year after the attack my parents sent Pablo and me to live with our grandmother in the safety of the city of Medellín. Medellín was the most beautiful place I had ever seen. It is known as “the City of Everlasting Spring.” And its climate was perfect, between 70 and 80 degrees throughout the year. Our grandmother had a large house, and part of it was used as a factory for her business of bottling sauces and spices, which she sold to the supermarkets.

At first the city frightened us. Medellín also is the second most populous city in Colombia. We were children of the country and knew nothing of city life. It was a big shock. We had never seen so many cars before, so many people always in a hurry. Our grandmother was a loving woman, but very stern. Each morning she would make us get up very early and go to church. I remember one morning

after the first week she got sick and told me to take Pablo by myself to church: “You have to pray to God and come back.” Coming out of the church I got confused and we were lost in the city. I didn’t know my grandmother’s address or her phone number. We walked many blocks looking for anything familiar, and then returned to the church to start again. I kept Pablo calm but inside I was scared. My prayers were not being answered. It was six in the evening before we finally found my grandmother’s house.

That was the way our lives began in Medellín. Back in those early days it was impossible to believe that one day Pablo would rule the city and make it known throughout the world as the home of the Medellín drug cartel. Our mother and father eventually moved to Medellín to be with us, but my father would never be comfortable there. He returned to the country and found work on other people’s farms. We would visit him, but we no longer belonged to the country. Medellín had become our city and eventually we would know every street, every alley. And eventually Pablo would die there.

It was on the streets of Medellín that we were formed. We were typical kids from the lower economic level. We built wooden carts from scrap wood and raced down hills. We stuck gum in the doorbells of our neighbors so they would ring continuously, then ran away. We would battle with eggs. We would make our own soccer balls by wrapping old clothes into a ball and putting them inside plastic bags. Pablo was always one of the youngest among us, but even then he was a natural leader. Sometimes, for example, when we were playing soccer in the street the police would come and take away our ball, and make us get out of the street. We weren’t doing anything bad, we were kids playing. But Pablo had the idea that the next time the police came we should throw stones at their patrol car. And that’s what happened.

Unfortunately, we cracked a window of the police car. We ran, but several of us—including myself and Pablo—were caught and

taken to the police station. To scare us, the captain told us he was going to lock us in jail the whole day. Among us only Pablo spoke back to him. "We didn't do anything bad," he said. "We're tired of these guys taking our ball. Please, we'll pay you back." He was just a little kid, the smallest of us all, but he had no fear of talking directly to the commander.

Many of the friends we made as children would end up in the business with us, among them Jorge Ochoa, who with his brothers built his own organization, and Ernesto Galán, who was very small and very thin. El Mugre, which means "dirt," which was the right name for him. Vaca, the cow, my closest friend, was tall and blond and had intense blue eyes and was the one of us the girls liked the most. When I was bicycle racing Vaca was my strongest supporter; before a race he would steal chickens from the local market and bring the chicken and some oranges to my house because he wanted me to be healthy for the competition. Our very close cousin Gustavo de Jesús Gaviria was the one who eventually started Pablo in the business and became his closest associate. Gustavo's father was a musician who was well known for his serenades, so Gustavo learned to play the guitar and sing so well that when he was eleven years old he won a talent competition on a popular radio station.

For some time I lived with Gustavo and his family. We would ride our bicycles together and one day as we reached a hill we grabbed on to the back of a bus to be pulled up. The driver had a different idea and after gaining speed he put on his brakes—Gustavo and I lost control and we went sailing through an open door into a house. We broke two vases and the lady called the police. But my grandmother paid for the damage and we went laughing into the streets.

We were good kids. We spent much of our time after school together, playing soccer until late at night, going to bullfights, flirting with beautiful young girls from our neighborhood. We all had our

dreams; for me, I never wanted to get off my bicycle. The bicycle represented my freedom and I raced like the wind through the city. I wanted to be a professional bike rider; I wanted to represent Colombia in famous races in South America and Europe. But from our mother we learned the importance of an education. Even when we had nothing she knew we would go to college. For my profession I intended to be an electronics engineer. Mathematics has always been easy for me; I understood the language of numbers and enjoyed doing calculations, often in my head. I have always had the ability to remember numbers without having to write them down, which proved to be extremely important in the business. Pablo too knew what he wanted. Knowing poverty, he wanted to be rich. Even as a very young boy he would tell our mother, "Wait until I grow up, Mommy. I'm going to give you everything. Just wait until I grow up." And as he got older he decided, "When I'm twenty-two years old I want to have a million dollars. If I don't, I'm going to kill myself; I'm going to put a bullet in my head." Pablo had never seen a dollar bill in his life; he didn't know what a dollar bill looked like or how it felt in his hand. But he was determined to have a million dollars. And his other great ambition was equally improbable: He intended to become the president of Colombia.

As I've said, from our father we had learned the importance of hard work. One of the first true jobs that Pablo and I had was making deliveries on our bicycles from a factory where they made dentures to dentists all over Medellín. We'd race from dentist to dentist. I don't remember how much we were paid, but even after giving half of our salary to our mother, for the first time in our lives we had some money in our pockets to spend as we wished. The question was, what did we want the most?

We were teenagers, I was sixteen and Pablo thirteen. So that answer is obvious: girls. Pablo and I knew very little about sex. Our grandmother had a young and beautiful maid that we both admired.

As young men sometimes will do, when she was taking a shower we would put a chair by the window and take turns silently watching her. Once, I remember, when it was Pablo's turn he was standing on the chair when I heard our grandmother approaching. Naturally, I ran. Our grandmother caught Pablo and moved the chair, causing him to fall and break his finger.

But with our salary we decided we wanted to be with a woman. There was a club nearby called the Fifth Avenue Nightclub and we knew that prostitutes worked there. One night Pablo and I put on our best clothes and went to that club. This was it! We chose two beautiful women and paid them. They took us to a room then told us, "Wait." They went into the bathroom and returned carrying soap and hot water and towels. We didn't know what they were going to do, but it didn't seem good. So we got up and left. We practically ran away.

The next day we told the story to our friends, who laughed at us. "Don't be stupid," they told us. "These prostitutes wash you first because they want to make sure you're clean. Then they give you a massage and then have sex with you."

Oh. So Pablo and I saved for another two months before we had enough money to return. And this time neither of us ran away.

As my mother and I had dreamed, eventually I attended the Science and Electronics Academy in Medellín, where I became an electronics engineer. It was there I learned how to build and repair almost any electronic device. Later I was able to use those skills to design sophisticated security systems and even created the electronics for our submarines that carried cocaine to the Bahamas. For my thesis, I remember, I had to build a television set, a radio, and a stereo system from the pieces. While still at this academy I got a job working for the Mora Brothers, a large company that sold and repaired electronic equipment. Although I was one of the youngest workers, I became the head of their technical department.

This job came easily to me, and I took great pride in being the top student in my class. There was nothing beyond my skills, I believed—until the day a customer brought a Russian-made television into the store to be repaired. This I saw as a great challenge. I had never seen a TV like this one but I was sure I could fix it. I worked on it for more than a week but I couldn't solve the problem. Finally I brought it home with me to work on it at night. I pulled it apart and asked the housekeeper to clean the parts, which were covered with dust. As she was doing so she asked suddenly, "Mr. Roberto, what is this needle doing here?"

And that was how our housekeeper fixed the Russian television. Someone had stuck a small needle into a tube, and with all my tremendous expertise I had been unable to see what was right in front of me.

At the same time I was at the academy I enrolled in a second college to study accounting, University Remington. I didn't know exactly what I'd be doing in the future, but I was certain a knowledge of numbers would be helpful to me. The course came easily as the emphasis on numbers made it complementary to engineering. I learned all the systems necessary to run the business I intended to own someday.

While I enjoyed solving the complexities of electronics and the symmetry of numbers, the bicycle was my passion. When I started racing professionally Mora Brothers became my first sponsor. I was a champion racer; in 1966 I was named the second top cyclist in Colombia. I was a member of our national team and represented my country in competitions throughout Latin America, winning races in Ecuador and Panama as well as in Colombia. I was known as El Osito, the Bear, a nickname I earned in our national championships. That race had been held in the rain and as we came into the long, last stretch the streets were caked with mud. I took a bad spill, sliding through the wet clay, covering completely with that mud my face

and my racing number. Near the end of the race I made a strong move and caught up with the leaders, but with my number being obscured the radio commentators couldn't identify me. So they said, we don't know who it is, but he is covered in brown like a bear, El Osito. Eventually I won the race and from that day forward in whatever I did that was my nickname. In fact, in the drug organization no one ever called me Roberto. Pablo was "the boss," "el patrón," sometimes "the doctor," but I was always El Osito.

Almost always when I raced Pablo was with me. He was my assistant. He'd wash my bicycle and prepare my uniform for the next race. And before the race he would kill a pigeon for me. Some people believed that the blood of pigeons provides energy, so Pablo would go to a park and capture a pigeon to give to me. Pablo would also make sure that big groups from our neighborhood would come to the races to cheer for me. In those days, I was his hero.

With the first salary I earned as a member of the national team in 1965 I purchased my first car—a blue German Warburt, and I saved my mother's house. Even with her teacher's salary and the money my father earned working on a farm, she had fallen months behind on the rent and was about to be evicted. It was the proudest day of my life when I was able to pay the overdue balance to the bank as well as several months in advance.

It's very difficult for me to describe the feelings that I experienced during a race, but in a life that has been full of extraordinary events I've never known anything comparable to it. Bicycle racing requires great physical stamina—but also an extreme mental toughness. And when everything is working perfectly in unison, the bicycle, your body, and your mind, the result is a sensation far beyond any kind of conscious thought.

It can be a dangerous sport too, and I was injured badly twice. Once while training I was racing behind a large truck on its way to a construction site. We used to like to do this because the body of

the truck protected the rider behind it from the wind. What I didn't realize was that this truck was carrying pieces of wood. A small piece fell from the back and I couldn't avoid it. When my bike ran over it I lost control and went flying through the air. I landed on my right side and slid a long distance, basically ripping off a layer of skin from my legs, arms, and face. My helmet was cracked, the shoe on my right foot was destroyed, and I was bleeding very badly. They rushed me to the doctor. I hadn't broken any bones but it felt like my whole body was on fire. The doctor told me the therapy was going to be very painful. "Your skin is going to start growing back so you have to keep moving or your body will be very tight." To prevent the whole right side of my body from becoming one great scab I had to work out on a stationary bike for hours every day for more than a month. It was the most painful experience I'd ever gone through—until later.

When I retired as a racer I became the trainer of the team representing Antioquia, the second largest of the thirty-two departments or states that comprise Colombia, and later the trainer and assistant coach of the Colombian national team. While I was working with the national team we competed in Europe and Latin America and won several medals. By that time I was already married—the first of my three marriages—and was the father of two beautiful children, a son, Nicholas, and a daughter, Laura. My wife and I had dated two years and we were married on Halloween night because she was pregnant with Nicholas. We couldn't even afford a car at that time; we took the bus home from the small church in which we were married. Our dream was that someday we would be able to afford a home of our own.

I was a hard worker, and always honest in business. But also clever. To take advantage of the reputation I'd earned as a racer, in 1974 I took the money I'd saved and opened a shop in the beautiful mountaintop city of Manizales to build, sell, and repair bicycles. The El Ositto Corporation I named it—using two ts in the spelling

because a popular Italian manufacturer used two ts in its name. The first thing I did was rent the outside of a large truck, I couldn't afford to rent the truck itself, and put a large advertisement on it. To begin building my business, one day I borrowed the truck and drove it to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, and parked it directly in front of the biggest bicycle factory in the country. I asked to speak to the manager. After introducing myself I pointed to the truck and told him, "That's one of my trucks. I own the whole company." We were expanding, I explained, and we needed a reliable spare parts supplier to build more bicycles. I wanted to talk to them about forming a relationship. Well, naturally he was interested in obtaining my business. Eventually he agreed that I could take a large load of parts with me on credit. "I wish I could," I told him. "I can't because the truck is already full." Of course that wasn't true. I hadn't rented the inside of the truck so I was not permitted to use it. A few days later the manager delivered a truckload of parts to my store in Manizales, and I hired two additional workers and began building more bicycles. These were well-made bikes and because I was assembling them in Colombia I could sell them for substantially less than the bikes shipped from Europe.

But selling them still was difficult. Colombians loved the well-made Italian and Swiss bikes, and didn't want to buy bikes made in our country. I had a hard time getting Ositto bikes into the popular stores. I literally begged the owner of a major store to place a few of my bikes, telling him, "I'm going to sell them to you for much less than the bikes you bring in from Europe."

He refused, saying, "Nobody knows of Ositto bikes in Colombia." But finally he agreed to take five bikes, warning me that if they didn't sell within two weeks I should come and pick them up.

During the next week I sent five friends to the store to buy these bikes. The store owner placed a larger order and soon my bikes began selling to real customers. Eventually I was manufacturing seventeen

different types of bicycles, including racing bikes, cross-country bikes, touring bikes, and even children's bikes. In addition to the factory I opened five stores; I had more than a hundred people working for me. In 1975 I even worked with our government sports minister to convert a soccer field that was not being used into a modern bicycle racing complex, where kids could race for free. I was being very successful on my own, working sixteen hours a day at my business and coaching the team. I owned two apartments and was able to help my mother with her expenses. My future was very promising. And this happened long before Pablo and I got involved in the drug business.

In 1974 Pablo was studying political science at the Universidad de Antiochia. There are many who believe Pablo was an uneducated man who succeeded only through drugs. That simply is not true. Pablo was very smart about many different subjects. He had a true understanding of subjects as different as history and poetry. He could talk easily about world politics and loved to recite the most beautiful poems. At times, Pablo would even surprise me; he spoke several languages and when we were imprisoned in La Catedral, the Cathedral, the fortress he built after we agreed to surrender to the government, he even studied Chinese. At the university he had decided that he would become a criminal lawyer, which would be his path into politics. He still intended to become the president of Colombia. He would often go to the public library to read law books and, when he could afford it, bought used books. It was there that he actually began his political career. Like many students, he would stand up at lunch or on the soccer field and make speeches to anyone who would listen. Pablo was never shy about speaking in public and always had great confidence in his ideas. I only heard him speak a few times, but I remember him saying in a loud and passionate voice, "I want to be president of Colombia, and when I am I'll take 10 percent of the earnings of the richest people to help the poor. With those funds we'll build schools and roads." He also said he wanted

to encourage Japanese and Chinese manufacturers to build factories in Colombia, which would provide jobs for people who desperately needed them.

Pablo had very large dreams, but he had no money to make them come true. He was forced to drop out of the university because he could not pay the necessary fees. When you've grown up poor, as we did, the need to make money is always uppermost in your mind. Maybe it was ordained that eventually Pablo would work outside the law. It was an important part of our family history.

Colombia is a beautiful country and rich in the gifts of nature, but it is a place where corruption has always been an accepted part of our lives. Our country has always been ruled by a class of wealthy families that did very little to help the poor. There were very few social programs that assisted people in making their lives better. We have a system of laws in Colombia, but we lived by a different set of rules. From the time we were growing up the government was run by corrupt people who made themselves richer while claiming they were starting programs to help the less fortunate live a better life. From the highest offices of the political rulers to the leaders of the military, from the civil servants who controlled the government offices to the policeman on the street, people with even a little power have used it whenever possible for personal gain. The police, for example, were poorly trained, very badly paid, and were not at all respected, so just to survive, many of them accepted bribes to look away from illegal activities. If you wanted to get something done in Colombia and you had the money it was not difficult to get it done. Pablo and I grew up knowing that all the rules were for sale. It was not considered good nor bad, it's just the way it has always been.

In fact, the Colombian journalist Virginia Vallejo, a woman who became a loving part of my brother's life, once said she fell in love with him because "he was the only rich man in Colombia who was generous with the people, in this country where the rich have never given a sandwich to the poor."

I was named after my maternal grandfather, Roberto Gavéria, but it was Pablo more than me who inherited his history. Every family has its story, and the story of the Escobar-Gavéria family began the morning Roberto Gavéria decided to plant bananas in his backyard in the town of Frontino. So the story goes, he discovered a *guaca*, a treasure buried in the ground consisting of several clay pots filled with jewelry and precious stones. No one ever learned the source of these riches. At least, that's the way the story has been passed down to the family.

Rather than revealing his fortune, which would have been dangerous, Roberto slowly and quietly sold the jewelry. Some of the proceeds he used to make loans to other farmers—but he lost that money when they couldn't repay him. Then he bought wild animal furs from the Indians in Chocó and resold them in town. And finally he discovered his true calling: smuggling tobacco and liquor.

Like Al Capone in the United States, Roberto Gavéria was a bootlegger. He bought *tapetusa*, a favorite alcoholic drink of Colombians, directly from the Indians who distilled it and bottled it before it was sold to legal distributors. To bring it directly to his customers without paying the government fees that made it expensive, he would hide the bottles in a sealed coffin, and then hired men to carry it through a town and young women to walk alongside crying. The people of the town would quickly—and very happily, learn what was actually in those wooden boxes. In his hometown of Frontino he sold the *tapetusa* from the living room of his mother's home, hiding it from authorities by draining egg shells with a needle, then refilling them with his liquor. It was a very successful business—until a neighbor informed on him and he was arrested. And that was when the most important lesson was learned: A few days later my grandfather was released without punishment. Although truthfully we don't know all the facts of that situation, I think it is proper to assume that he shared his

profits with those in power. In Colombia, that's the way business has always been done.

It was while Pablo was in college that he started earning money. As with all aspects of his life, many stories have been written that are based in truth but are not completely accurate. It has been accepted, for example, that Pablo began his career in crime by stealing tombstones, blasting off the inscription, and reselling them. In fact, our uncle had a small shop close to the largest cemetery in Medellín from which he engraved and sold marble tombstones. Rather than going in the dark of night and stealing tombstones, Pablo would buy the very old stones from cemetery owners who would remove bodies from the ground many years after the last person came to pay respects. And perhaps sometimes he did take stones from old graves, but most of them he bought legally and took to our uncle's shop to be cleaned and used again. With the money he earned from this business Pablo bought a motorcycle, the first vehicle he ever owned.

It has also been written in many books that Pablo would steal cars. Supposedly, he was so successful in that business that citizens and insurance companies agreed to pay him a fee not to steal the cars they insured, providing him with a list of protected cars. Now, as close as I was to my brother I don't know every detail of his life. At this time of our lives we were living in different cities and some things might have happened that I did not know about. But if he had been stealing cars I would have known about it. And additionally, a few years later when he began transporting kilos of cocaine he bought my used Renault 4 from me—which would not have been necessary if he stole cars. This story became popular in the early 1980s when Pablo decided to run for political office and his opponents began telling stories about his background. In addition to claiming that he was a drug dealer, they said he also was a car thief, a kidnapper for ransom, a brutal killer—and that he had stolen tombstones. Legends are built in many ways, but part of such legends consists of accusa-

tions made by enemies, and often for their own benefit. In America, for example, the stories that are told about the legendary heroes of the West, the famous outlaws like Billy the Kid and Jesse James, are based in truth but much of them are exaggeration. This is true for Pablo as well. In his death, so many people who never even knew him have made claims that just are not true.

But what Pablo did do illegally to make money, just like our grandfather Roberto, was become involved in contraband. The business of contraband means simply bringing goods into the country without paying the required government fees, the duties and taxes, which allows you to sell the goods to people for much less money than they would have to pay in the stores. It's very profitable. While contraband certainly is illegal, because it benefits people and hurts only the government, it has long been an accepted part of the Colombian economy. In fact, when the police caught someone doing contraband without paying their bribes they used to take the merchandise but didn't put any people in jail.

One of the most successful groups of smugglers in Medellín was run by a multimillionaire named Rafael Puente. He earned his fortune bringing cigarettes, electronic equipment, jewelry, watches, and clothing from America, England, and Japan. Shipping containers from these countries arrived in the Panamanian city of Colón, near the end of the canal, and were taken from there to the Colombian city of Turbo on the Gulf of Urabá. There the containers were unloaded and large trailer-trucks carried the merchandise to Medellín for distribution.

As with many parts of Pablo's life, there are different stories about the way he met Rafael. One of the stories is that Pablo and some friends of his were captured by the police protecting Puente's trucks. In the capture supposedly Pablo got shot twice. Instead of letting him die, Puente bailed him out and saved his life. But the real story is that Pablo went to a soccer game to meet up with some associates. At

this game Pablo was formally introduced to Rafael, who immediately took a liking to Pablo and offered him a job as a bodyguard. The story continues that Puente recognized Pablo's potential and decided to teach him the ways of smuggling. "The way to make money is to protect the merchandise for the guy who has the money, and that's who I am."

At first Pablo concentrated only on cigarettes, using connections he had to sell them at the small stores and many flea markets around the city. By doing this successfully Pablo established his credibility with the contraband organization. Eventually Rafael asked him to help solve an expensive problem. The hardworking peasants who unloaded the containers and packed the merchandise in trucks were paid badly. There were about fifty of them and they didn't live much better than slaves. As a result they had absolutely no loyalty to the organization and sometimes stole more than half of the goods from the containers. Rafael offered Pablo 10 percent of the value of the load if he could reduce the theft. Pablo surprised him by turning him down, instead volunteering to supervise a load for nothing to prove his value. That was the agreement they made.

His first day in Turbo, Pablo served a lunch of seafood and wine to the workers and told them, "I'm here to represent the boss. I'm not going to make trouble for you, but I need you to work with me. If the merchandise continues to disappear your work is going to end and my work is going to end." Then he made them an offer. "I'm going to give you half of my salary forever if you work with me. But this time if we show the boss that you don't take anything, I promise when I come back in two weeks to take care of you guys."

There are some stories that Pablo threatened these men if they stole from the load. Many people believe that Pablo was successful in his operations only because people were afraid of him. That's not true. Pablo knew that profits generated more loyalty than fear. People who did business with Pablo and were honest made a lot of

money; only those people who cheated him, stole from him, threatened him, or betrayed him suffered at his hands. Anyone who knows how tough the workers of Turbo are, and understands the way they live and their pride, would know that they did not cooperate out of fear. This was long before Pablo had established his reputation for terror and he couldn't fight them on his own. In fact, it was because of his offer to pay these people a fair salary that most of them who had already taken merchandise from the containers even returned what they had stolen.

Pablo led the convoy of five or six trailers in a jeep. As was expected of him, he made the required payments to policemen in the small towns and on the roads along the way. After the contraband was delivered to warehouses in Medellín, Pablo told Rafael, "The problem was the guys running this for you didn't care about your workers. They didn't even pay them on time. By being fair with these guys I delivered the whole load to you." Puente was delighted—probably until Pablo told him his own offer to continue the business. "You said I could do it for 10 percent," he said. "I want 50 percent."

I wasn't there, but I could imagine how Rafael responded. I know he wasn't used to having his workers make such large demands from him. Pablo told me he asked, "Are you crazy?"

"I think it's fair," Pablo said back. "Sometimes you've been losing more than half the products. This way you'll be getting it all, and even by giving me 50 percent you'll be making more money because nobody will be stealing anything."

Puente said 50 percent was too much—they settled for 40 percent. It proved to be a beneficial deal for him as well as Pablo. Eventually Pablo expanded the business, adding products like washers and dryers, which then were not common in Colombia—to his deliveries. Pablo became a true partner in the contraband business, supervising loads from their delivery in Panama to the warehouses in Medellín. He became an expert at moving goods through the country. To se-

cure the money he was paid, he built *caletas*, hiding places or safes, in the walls of his house in which he kept tens of thousands of dollars. They were protected with electronic doors that only he knew how to open.

Pablo developed a strong relationship with the workers in Turbo. He kept his word and gave half of his cut to the workers, who became the first people to bestow on him the title by which he became very well known, *el patrón*, the boss. He also gained the trust of the citizens of the towns his convoys had to pass through, winning their allegiance by paying them in cash and merchandise.

My brother was making a huge amount of money. Usually they ran two loads a month and Pablo could earn as much as \$120,000 from each of them. And so he was able to achieve his teenage vow that he would become a millionaire by the time he was twenty-two. It's very difficult to explain to anyone who has not experienced it, the incredible feelings you have of being rich after you've grown up with having very little. Most people have some dreams come true, but suddenly Pablo was in a situation where he could pay for more than all his dreams. The first things he did was make a down payment on a house for our mother, he bought a car for himself, he bought a taxicab for our cousin, and for me he bought a very expensive titanium bicycle from Italy, a bicycle that weighed so little I could pick it up with two fingers. One day I went with him and some of our friends to an outdoor food market; we filled up a truck with lettuce and meat and fish and took it to the poorest neighborhood in Medellín. There was a large garbage dump where the rejects from the city were thrown and these people survived by picking through this mountain of trash for food or clothing that could be repaired and worn or goods that might be cleaned and sold. We went there and Pablo handed out this food. The people loved him for it. That was the type of thing he would often do with his money. Pablo would eventually do many terrible things, but he never forgot the poor peo-

ple, and they loved him for it. And even until today they remember him and celebrate his life.

One other thing we did was take our entire family to Disney World in Orlando, Florida. We were about twenty people, including our mother, sisters, and my children. I don't remember all the rides we rode on, or other places we visited, although we did go to a dog show, but I remember the joy we shared. For my family this was one of the first of our many dreams that came true. Before the nightmares, of course. When we were growing up, like most Colombians, we had greatly admired the United States. But once we finally got here it seemed even more amazing than we had imagined. Everything we saw seemed so big and so beautiful, all of the people seemed to be so successful. And Disney World, I remember that it was so clean and so well organized. And most of all I remember how much fun we had and how free of worries we were.

Pablo worked in the contraband business for almost three years. During that time he earned more money than any of us had thought possible—except Pablo, of course—and to save it he had to open a lot of different bank accounts, many of them in assumed names. At that time our government paid little attention to the amount of money Colombians had in banks. No one tracked it. No one had a legal right to ask any questions about where money came from. Eventually Pablo asked me to manage this money. It was my job to make payments to all his employees, deposit the money in banks and other secure places, and to begin making smart investments. This was the time I first became the accountant.

Generally Pablo and I would meet once or twice a week. With my encouragement we eventually began investing the money in real estate, buying land and buildings and financing construction. This was something Pablo would do for the rest of his life. At one time, for example, he owned as many as four hundred farms throughout the country. I used the real estate deals to protect Pablo's money. If

his contraband business should be discovered the government had the right to take the money he had earned from it, so I created a new set of books to prove he had earned his money from real estate. For example, if we sold an apartment for \$50,000, in those books the sale was recorded as \$90,000. In this way we were able to create very complicated paths that were impossible to follow to the source. I don't remember precisely how much money Pablo earned in the three years he worked in the contraband business, but in addition to becoming a wealthy man himself, he improved the lives of many people who worked with him.

It was during this time that we got guns for the first time. Pablo was given his gun by the contraband boss known as El Padrino. And Pablo gave me the first gun I owned as a birthday present, a Colt, in a gift bag along with a nice suit, tie, and shoes. "You need it," he said. "You're carrying around a lot of money. You gotta be careful, you gotta protect yourself." Growing up on the farm we had fired a gun at birds, but we didn't really know how to use it. Certainly, I didn't. A friend of Pablo's, a captain in the police, helped me get a permit to carry it. I was not comfortable with it, I hid it from my wife, but Pablo was right. I carried around a lot of cash. I had to be able to protect myself. Fortunately, at that time I never needed it.

Had his involvement in contraband continued anything might have happened. It's possible he would have used his profits to go directly into politics. He might have done special things. But the business ended suddenly. What happened was that a corrupt police official with whom he had been doing business betrayed him. This high-ranking member of the police force had been on Pablo's payroll for several years, being well paid to facilitate passage of goods through his region. But when he was transferred to another city he knew he would lose these payments, so to gain favor with his bosses he told them everything he knew about Pablo's business. Their plan was to intercept the next convoy. That would be worth a fortune to them.

By this time Pablo's convoys included as many as forty trucks. One thing about my brother, he always had luck. Usually he drove in his jeep in front of the trucks. But on this trip he decided he was going to stop for lunch in a nice restaurant. He told the drivers to keep going and eventually he would catch up and make the payoffs to the local police in towns along the route. At that time the police trusted Pablo so there should have been no problem with this. But while Pablo was eating, under orders from superiors, the police stopped the convoy and seized thirty-seven of the trucks. One of the three drivers who got away called Pablo and told him what had happened. "Tell the drivers not to say anything to anyone," Pablo said.

Rafael accepted the loss. "Forget about the trucks," he said. "Just come back to Medellín."

There was nothing Pablo could do to save the merchandise. Instead of driving the jeep back to the city he took a public bus, which allowed him to get past the police who were waiting for him. Alongside the road he saw the thirty-seven captured trucks. Eventually Pablo hired lawyers and paid officials to get the drivers released. Their defense was that there was no proof they knew they were transporting contraband. They were just simple truck drivers. Eventually all the drivers were released. But for Pablo, this was the end of the contraband business. And the beginning of the life that made him infamous.

Today the cocaine business is a well-established part of the world culture. Everybody knows about it. Storms of cocaine use have rolled over countries like the United States. Because of Pablo and the Medellín and Cali cartels Colombia has become known mostly for the export of cocaine. But when Pablo started working in the cocaine business it was not that way at all. In the United States cocaine was not considered a big problem; in fact, most people didn't know very much about it at all. While in Colombia we knew much about cocaine, primarily because the paste from which it is made came from our region, the distribution business had not

spread much beyond our borders. The cocaine we made was mostly sold and used in our country. No one was sending cocaine from Colombia to the United States. No one was earning a billion dollars' profit from it.

Once cocaine had been widely and freely used in America. A small amount was part of the original Coca-Cola and some cigarettes; it could be bought in drugstores. The first laws were passed against it in America in 1914, when people were told it made black people in the South crazy and caused them to attack white women. But mostly the police left people who used cocaine alone. Only in 1970 did the American government make it a so-called controlled substance, which caused the police to start making arrests for selling it and using it. Doing this made it more dangerous for dealers and more difficult for users to find it, which made it more expensive to buy. And much more profitable to sell.

Cocaine comes from the leaf of the coca plant, which grows best in the jungles of Peru, but also in Bolivia, Colombia, and Ecuador. It was everywhere in the mountains and jungles of Peru long before people started growing it to sell. The Indians have used it for medicine and chewed it for energy for all of known history. It was 150 years ago, in 1859, that a German scientist discovered a way to bring out from those leaves the exact white substance that made people feel so good. The base. He named it cocaine. Other people began adding it to many different products. It was only much later that people understood its dangers, that it was like a magnet, that once you were attracted to it you couldn't easily get free of it.

Neither Pablo nor I ever used cocaine when we were growing up. As we got older occasionally Pablo liked to smoke marijuana. He had a saying: "I love marijuana because it relaxes me—and it can't be bad because it comes from the earth."

Pablo did not tell me he had decided to become involved in the cocaine business. He just told me that contraband was getting too

dangerous, that it required too much traveling and there were too many people involved, so he was going to do something different. In fact, I don't think transporting cocaine was something he had carefully been planning for a long time or even gave much consideration. Certainly he didn't think that this was going to become his life and he would become the biggest cocaine dealer in the world. I think the opportunity was there and Pablo recognized it. This was simply an easier way to make money than contraband. It was possible to make more money with a single load that one person could transport in a car than with all the merchandise in forty trucks. At that time Pablo was one of the few who brought the cocaine from Peru to Colombia, and then to the United States. But the other people doing it almost never transported more than a few kilos—a kilo is 2.2 pounds—at a time. There was a good profit to be made and it wasn't too difficult or too dangerous. There was no such thing then as a drug cartel, instead there were just some people who were bigger in the business. One of the most successful and most ruthless was a woman from Medellín that everybody knew about named Griselda Blanco, who was called the Black Widow because three of her husbands had died. Eventually she had moved to the United States and ran her business in Miami. So it took almost nothing to get started in the business except some money and some guts, and the chances of rewards were high.

The idea to do the business came originally from a man known as Cucaracho, the Roach, who asked Pablo and our cousin Gustavo Gavía to go with him to Peru to arrange a deal. Gustavo's father was our uncle who owned the shop that produced tombstones. Pablo and Gustavo were especially close and would stay that way until Gustavo was kicked to death by the police in front of his residence in 1990. In the drug organization Pablo built, Gustavo was the closest to him at the top. Gustavo was a partner; the two of them started the business together on this trip. He was a great

guy—funny, smart, and very clever. His official job before the business was as an English teacher in a lower school. The two of them spent a great amount of time together, and both of them were passionate about soccer and racing cars. Later, when they could easily afford it, they would often race against each other in anything that moved fast, from cars to Jet Skis.

In Peru, Cucaracho introduced Pablo and Gustavo to people who would sell them the cocaine paste, the base, which would be refined into something pure. Returning with this paste to Medellín required driving through three countries, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. To complete this trip in each country Pablo purchased yellow Renault 4s—one of them from me—and put the correct national license plate on each one. I still remember the license plate of my car, LK7272. He drove the first car to the Ecuador border and transferred his package. He drove the second car across Ecuador to the border with Colombia and again changed the package. And then he drove it to its final destination, the neighborhood Belén situated in Medellín where he had prepared a “kitchen,” it was called, to make the drugs.

The Renaults were specially prepared to secret the package. The design of this car had very large wheel wells, meaning there was a lot of empty space right inside the fenders above the front wheels. A stash was made above the wheel on the passenger side to hold the package. On this first trip, and the many that followed, Pablo and Gustavo had to pass through police checkpoints. The police always approached the car on the driver’s side, away from the drugs. Sometimes they would search the whole inside of the car, but never under the chassis. On his very first trip Pablo bought one kilo of the paste, which cost about \$60.

To build his market, after the paste had been converted to cocaine, Pablo gave some of it to about ten people to try. Almost all of them liked it better than marijuana. They found out that when they were drinking they could take cocaine and it would calm them

down. It also gave them energy. Most of them wanted to use it again and asked Pablo for more, and eventually they shared it with other people and this is how Pablo found his customers. I know Pablo never used it because he didn't like it.

And this was how Pablo Escobar began in the cocaine business.