

Paula Delgado-Kling

Child Soldiers

an excerpt

LEONOR

I came back home to Colombia hoping to get reacquainted with my country in the most intimate of terms. The story of Leonor's life knocked the wind out of me.

"I don't even want the children we have now," she recalled her father crying out, at the news of her mother's latest pregnancy. Already there were six children in Leonor's family.

Leonor and Leo, the brother she was closest to, crouched in a corner, and Leonor saw that her parents' fighting had more sting than ever. Her father sprung from a wooden chair; one of a few pieces of their furniture besides a floppy table, rusty beds and an ancient gas stove in the corner. The family then lived in the hamlet of Puerto Guzman in one large dusty room, always either too drafty or too stuffy. Puerto Guzman, located in southern Colombia, is a botanist's paradise, lush-green, but isolated, too.

"You're a drunkard, Oliverio," her mother yelled. "You can't hold a job."

"And you're an ugly whore. Si, you're my ugly puta." He cackled, exposing his nearly bare, white gum lines. "You're my angry puta," he taunted, the alcohol making him slur.

Leonor told me, "They always did *that*. You know what I'm saying. In front of all the children."

The local Catholic priest had preached that a large family was a holy family, and her mother had sat in the front pew every Sunday. Leonor was bright-eyed and every so often, she'd find empty bleach bottles in the garbage and her mother on her knees at the parish, pleading forgiveness, "Escusame, Señor, escusame, Todopoderoso," and lighting white candles.

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With time, Leonor learned that because in Puerto Guzman, there was nowhere to go for birth control, her mother often aborted, quietly on her own, by squirting bleach up her vagina. In the days that followed the bleaching, bleeding confirmed the baby was passing.

This time, her mother had been unable to bear self-aborting this baby. Her susurrations were like an insect's drone, and her green eyes crystallized and then locked with Leonor's. A cycle ago, her mother had caught this same doom in her mother's eyes. The three of them, grandmother, mother and daughter, had emerald eyes, likely the seed of a European patron who'd come this way decades ago.

"Mamá, don't cry," Leo's whisper was only for Leonor to hear. The warmth of his breath caressed his younger sister's neck. Leonor clutched his hand. She hugged him, and holding each other, they melted the knots of fear of the rage. Their parents' anger was enough to make them forget their empty stomachs.

Their mother then bolted to the opening in the wall that served as a window. The rain had wet the floor.

Their father released his belt from his pants. "Papá, don't," Leo cried out, and then his cheek stung from receiving the belt's whip.

Their mother looked back at Leonor and Leo, her two youngest. Her hair and face were soaked. She turned around and leaped from the window. There was one of a few buildings that had a second floor. Upstairs, Leonor and Leo heard her wailing, "Por el amor de Dios, ayudame, Diosito." She lay on the street. She had no broken bones and no visible bruises.

Leonor grew up without much parental support, and poverty-struck, without schooling and unemployed. As a teenager, trying to find her place, she joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC, a deadly cocaine-trafficking group on the US State Department's terrorism list.

When she and I met, she'd been out of the FARC for close to two months and she lived in Bogotá, in a home run by Don Enrique and Doña Susana, the husband-wife team who consolidated an NGO so that the government could entrust them to resettle teens after life in the bush.

She had not seen her own mother in close to two years and her social workers insisted she had to get in touch with her.

Leonor asked, "Can't you tell them that I don't ever want to see my mother again?"

I listened. In absence of day care, her mother had tied her and Leo to a bed post before leaving for ten-hour work days. Often, she'd lost her temper and struck her children across the face. And there was the time that Leonor, then thirteen years old and eager to learn, had informed her mother that school was starting the following week.

"Niña, how many times must I tell you the same?" her mother answered. "Mira, por Dios, niña, you're just not meant to have the kind of life of someone who goes to school."

Her mother had dismissed the issue with a shrug.

While living in the government's care, once she was out of the FARC, she was being schooled via computer classes. At that point, she was seventeen years old and could read and write at a third grade level. The computer lab near the government home turned out to be little more than an opportunity for Leonor and the others to surf the web for porn.

"I want to study, forget about the past, get a new family—mine does not love me," she said.

The Colombian government's policy is to return the "rehabilitated" child soldiers to their families, and although Leonor did not wish to return, it wasn't for me to interfere. Unfortunately, what triggered many foot soldiers to voluntarily join FARC ranks will be there when they return home. Many also realize the violence skills they learned in the FARC will advance them in other newly forming gangs also involved in drug trafficking, extortions and killings.

Her FARC adventure began three months before she and I first met, right before she turned seventeen years old, in what she considered another life. She had a friend with paprika-like freckles sprinkled on his cheeks and red hair like the head of a matchstick. When I asked her his name, she told me to call him el pelirojo, the redhead. She knew Redhead would have done

anything for her because every time she was near him, he'd blush. He was not of boyfriend status.

"Llevame. What's it to you? If you bring one more body, the FARC will praise you," she said to Redhead. She knew the FARC had told him to come and join them, via a note they'd slid under his door, what the Redhead thought of as a recruiting slip, and what you and I would call a threat.

A press release from the Colombian Ombudsman's office reported that close to ninety percent of child soldiers voluntarily joined armed groups. Of these, thirty-three percent were attracted by guns, the uniform and the status recognition; another thirty-three percent joined because of poverty; sixteen percent were attracted because they had regular contact with armed groups in areas where they lived; and the last eight percent joined because they were in love with a guerrilla member or sought vengeance due to the loss of a family member. Leonor could have ticked off all these categories.

Leonor froze at the sight of four FARC guards with Uzi machine guns hanging over their chests. Now that she knew where their camp was located, there was no *maybe* to this. "She's with me," Redhead said, his adolescent voice cracking for a moment then echoing across a stream of crystal water that reflected the brown of its mud bed.

One of the guards had a fresh scar on his neck, red with dried blood. Leonor stared at its swelling and he explained it was from shrapnel. "From fifteen days ago," he mentioned casually. He'd been up in northern Colombia, delivering a message, and the *paracos*, the paramilitaries, had caught up to him. Fire was exchanged between them. Leonor thought about how her older brother, Milton, was a paramilitary, and how she was about to join a group that was his enemy. She hated the man Milton had turned out to be. It was because of Milton's acquaintances that Leo was murdered. Her sweet Leo. A vine-shaped "L" for Leonor and Leo was marked on the tattoo at the base of her thumb. She shook her head and the wind unleashed her long hair.

That was when she saw him. Her heart missed a beat. He was so good looking! She had seen this señor somewhere else before, but she could not then recall where. He had a buzz cut, a golden tan. This must be fate, she thought.

His crow-shaped eyes were like onyx almonds. Leonor could barely swallow her own saliva. He waxes in his mid-forties. Tall. With a centipede-like mustache, like Che Guevarra's, and it shone like he'd varnished it.

"Soy el Comandante Tico," he said to her. "The fifth highest commander in this front."

About a minute of silence passed between them while Tico's eyes followed the dents in Leonor's starved-skinny body. He slammed down his AK-47 to shake her cold hand. He ignored Redhead. This was Tico's camp and he was in charge of the twenty people there, mostly women. He, like everyone else in the camp, wore camouflage. The group's emblem was displayed prominently on everyone's left forearm—the letters "F.A.R.C." were embroidered over the yellow, blue and red colors of the Colombian flag. Tico's shirt was too tight for him and his biceps stretched the material.

Leonor took after her older sister, Consuelo, and they were both boy crazy. Years ago, when Consuelo herself had raging hormones, she'd been obsessed with how on TV lovers unleashed their scripted flame for one another. Late one night, under the covers, Consuelo had told Leonor she liked a scruffy and muscular macho hombre from the tavern. You're gross, had been Leonor's reply. Consuelo had described to her little sister how she imagined it would be: Her breasts, swollen though tender. His legs, lean and defined from outdoor work. His broad back from weeding with a steel hoe. Their sweat. Stop it, Consuelo, Leonor had insisted, and Consuelo had laughed. Now it was Leonor who would stun Consuelo with her carnal tales, only Consuelo was also dead.

The last time Leonor saw Consuelo, she'd had pins sticking out from her left eye. Her right eye was missing. Nails and pins also stuck out from under her fingernails. She was muddy. Her thighs were bruised. She'd been found murdered wearing one plastic high-heeled sandal, soiled, and its sole was loose. Prick marks and crusty blood around her ankles showed where Consuelo had been tied with barbed wire. When Leonor remembered, she had trouble breathing.

It was still unclear to Leonor which group was responsible for Consuelo's murder. She'd overheard two señoras in the town market say-

ing how that slut who was killed was involved with men from the FARC and men from the paramilitaries.

"You've come to stay," Tico said. The words were meant to be a question but his monotonous voice turned them into a statement. With time, Leonor realized this tone was his way of sounding authoritative.

Smoke evaporated in the air pointing out the camp's belly, where two fires wrapped their blue and purple flames around a burnt black pot and a rusty kettle. Warriors lounged inside six green tents, their plastic tarp walls rustling to the beat of the wind, and under two improvised shelters, the roofs made of dry palm tree leaves held up by four evenly tall sticks.

When she and I talked, there were times that she grew distant, her gaze fixed forward, her palms tucked inside her naked thighs, and I registered how hurt she was, her bare arms and legs puckering into chicken-skin. Within minutes after Leonor had arrived in Tico's camp, two women signaled her to follow them, leading her to a tent where they cornered her on the tarp floor like a dirty rat. It was hot in there and you could smell the under-arm and foot sweat.

"Take off your underwear," she heard one of them demand.

Leonor followed the order. The two women whispered to each other but she could not hear what they were saying. They checked inside her pubic hair, parting strands in the middle to check the skin. The older one smelled Leonor's panties. This older one had long dark hair, which hung loose and below her shoulders, the trademark of an indigenous, so straight, it was as if she'd ironed it.

The younger one then slammed Leonor's legs open. "You have rashes? Itches?" she asked, not looking for conversation but for quick answers. She spoke rapidly, quickly rolling her r's and melting words into each other—"picadurrasrojas?" Her attitude was purposeful and unpleasant. On her engagement finger, she wore a thin ring that was rusting and dying her skin purple. Leonor considered this young woman nice-looking but a little too plain to be beautiful. "Actually, she was on the ugly side,"—Leonor giggled and I sensed rivalry—"mas fea." The woman's short black hair was tied back, in a down-to-business-ponytail, and Leonor thought she was too much of a tomboy. "Ugly, ugly."

"I'm kind of cold," Leonor said to the two women.

But neither of them cared.

"If a girl gets a sex disease, she has to pay a fine which means doing extra strenuous work. You may have a sex disease, you look the type. Then you give it to someone, who gives it to us, and we have to serve out the punishment," the plain-looking, purple-fingered woman, the ugly one, said.

"Then we all have to take a course on how to prevent sex diseases," the older one, with the seemingly ironed-out hair, added. She then injected Leonor's left arm—without warning.

"Ouch." She'd done it quickly but not painlessly.

"There. So no need for abortions," the older woman concluded.

In 2000, around the time that Leonor joined the FARC, abortion (illegal in Catholic-dominated Colombia) was the number one cause of hospital visits in FARC-dominated southern Colombia. In national statistics, abortion was then the second cause of death for all women in Colombia and the third cause of hospital visits. The two women gave Leonor a birth control shot and in some way, Leonor was lucky: Often, young girls in the FARC are given an IUD which can cause sterilization, especially in teenage girls whose uteruses are still growing.

That first night in the FARC, Leonor had so many questions to ask Tico. Who would they kidnap? Will she get to shoot a gun? He had a twitch in his black-crow eyes and it intimidated her. Leonor had never been scared of a man before, except of her paramilitary brother, Milton. She was terrified of Milton.

"What's going to happen . . ." she began asking Tico.

"Chito. Hush."

He took off his camouflage pants and his underwear. With his callused hands, he guided her head down between his legs. She followed the cue. Silently. Tico was the commander and nobody could say no to him. He could do as he pleased. His private parts smelled like rotten pork.

That first night, her body trembled. She was afraid of his every move. Lying there, her legs spread open, her heartbeat growing fainter by the second, breath-stunted, while Tico inspected her.

At first, she did not want to be with him, but she did it because she was scared that he would be angry with her. She picked her words, "When he first forced me," she said, and paused, "I was not in love with him." In these words, what I heard was: *At first, he raped me. Then he raped me again, again. Again. I became his sex slave.* Leonor was under the age of eighteen, and under international law, she couldn't have given proper consent. She couldn't leave the FARC even if she'd wanted to. The Rome Statute, which is the instrument that enacted the International Criminal Court, has jurisdiction over such acts of sexual violence—rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, enforced sterilization—all which constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity. If I were to point that out to Leonor, she'd tell me, Gringa, go back and recite your laws from your wood-paneled library.

Soon enough, sex between Leonor and Tico became routine: He looked for her and she complied, tight-lipped. He was the commander, more than twice her age. Under international law, this translates as Tico exercising "ownership" over Leonor. Tico would moan, groan, then fall fast asleep. Leonor caught the young woman, the purple-fingered one, spying, bitter jealous that a teenager, and a whiter one above all, had replaced her.

On the fifth night, Tico and Leonor finally conversed.

"That ghastly scar. What happened to your legs?" he asked.

"I got caught in an electrical fence." She'd always done what Leo did: When she was eight, he dared her to jump on a horse and it bucked her off, thrusting her limbs into the zapping current. Back then, to be accepted by her brothers, she imitated what boys did. As she grew up, she adjusted to new rules: to get men, she knew how to make them feel like she was a trophy.

Tico laughed. "What do you mean on an electrical fence?" Kissing her stomach and taking in her scent. Leonor took care to wash herself in the river everyday since her arrival. Redhead escorted her, his excuse to stare. Leonor was Tico's girl for now and the others had warned *el pelirojo* that it was dangerous to mess with the commander's fling.

Leonor hesitated to continue telling Tico about the fence accident. She was afraid he'd somehow connect her to her family, and especially to Milton.

Tico stopped listening anyway, but Leonor used the opportunity to ask for what she wanted like she'd done with her past lovers. "You know, *si quieres*, you can have someone get me some shampoo for my hair, if you want. And some lotions for my body. Neiva isn't far." Leonor was poor, but she was always proud to be clean. She felt she stank, probably like the other girls, like a blend of vinegar, body fluids and sweat. Her hair was tangled and greasy from the smoke of the cooking fire. One of the chores she'd been assigned was to sit by the fire all day and boil water. "That's if you want me, Tico, to be clean. Just for you." She had cramps and expected her period in several days. She'd observed the other women giving themselves sponge baths. Yet, she couldn't bear to do that; she thought it so uncivilized, so low class. She was used to showering in the room she'd rented just weeks before, under a small drip through a rusty pipe. Running water, nonetheless. Plus, none of the women would share their sponges with her and she hadn't seen any spare ones.

It'd been five days since her arrival and Leonor was still wearing the same flowered dress. It'd once been red with yellow flowers and now it was dirty beyond pattern recognition, but it was the only clothing she had brought.

The next evening, Tico presented her with the shampoo. The night after that, he came into his tent, where she was waiting, and brought her the lotion. He'd sent the redhead boy into town to buy them. Soon, her old confidence returned. She did everything Tico wanted her to do. She perceived the other women were taking note that she'd been crowned queen and Leonor was proud of that. Those were the short hours when then-sixteen-year-old Leonor, thirsty for affection, began to fall for Tico. She thought it was the real thing and even came to call it love.

Leonor tested yes for pregnancy when she arrived at the government home. Days later, a social worker reported in her file that Leonor claimed her underwear was spotted. The runny pen on the smudged page spoke of

it happening while tossing a ball around, amidst an animated game with her new friends. It'd been Tico's baby.

I was stunned by Leonor's looks—the skin on her face was tanned porcelain, neither bumps nor zits, impressive genes considering she was in full puberty bloom, living in a musty run-down dormitory. With the right haircut and an afternoon of shopping, she had the physique to pass for whoever she chose to be.

She always leaned over to kiss me hello on both cheeks.

"Two, that's how your people do it, right?" she asked one afternoon. I laughed.

She wore a lime-green, low-cut, tight-fitting jacket and a matching mini-skirt, a gift from her psychiatrist who found it in a second-hand store. Leonor wore it almost every time I saw her while other girls lounged around in sweats. Sometime later, I glazed the covers of the Colombian press with the photographs of the president's wife in her made-to-measure fuchsia and lime green and purple suits, a Chanel synthetic flower pinned to her breast, the matching shoes, the pearl-teeth smile. It struck me that Leonor was imitating this First Lady. Looking good was important to Leonor.

"All I ask for is clothes," she said. Leonor had briefly worked selling groceries in an outdoor market and waitressing in a small restaurant. "When I had a job, I was able to buy myself my things. I'm ashamed not to have proper clothes. When they legally cleared us of any wrongdoing and sent us here, they told us they were going to give us clothes. But it's not like how they said it would be."

"I have to tell you something," she added. "The other girls over there in the FARC were not girly, like you and me."

She flipped her long hair from front to back. She'd mastered the hair flirting and I smelled her herbal shampoo. Don Enrique and Doña Susana encouraged the teens to do their hair anyway they wanted because that was promoting their individuality, as opposed to the FARC where it was all about the collective. Leonor's hair was beautifully highlighted and it must have taken effort to maintain it. Often, she wore it in an elaborate French bun.

"I would like to have my hair down to my hips," she said. "I would like another shampoo—this one gives me dandruff. I already told Doña Susana but it's been over a month. When I was in jail, before they brought me here, gringos brought me shampoo. Here, we get nothing."

Was she asking me for Head and Shoulders?

She certainly was a girly girl. It was hard for me to picture her, back in her pre-Bogotá life, with a grimy face and ragged clothes, how she said she'd grown up. She understood she could be poor but she could also be clean, and she learned people's attitude toward her depended on how composed she was. Her beauty was her way to survival and to social mobility. In the world of high school cheerleading, Leonor would have been socially agile and conniving enough to win any popularity contest, and so in "our" setting, I found myself wanting to show off to others in the home that Leonor liked *me*.

She insinuated disgust for her mother's filth-layered fingernails, and she looked down on her parents as field-hand *campesinos*. Leonor wanted to be the type of woman featured in magazines, in *Vanidades* or *Cosmopolitan*, in hip-hugging dresses, in boob-spilling tops. In heels and mini-skirts.

Tico carried bundles of money in his pocket. Leonor had never seen so much, there were millions, maybe billions of pesos.

"Come with me. We need to collect some debts," Tico said. He uncovered a motorcycle out of the bush.

She rode behind him, and under the candescence of the noon sun, Leonor felt herself thawing. The heat of the motor warmed her ankles and the sweat of their bodies glued them to one another. She'd seen the intense glances from every girl in the camp, and by the fiery attitude in which they treated her, Leonor was proud that they envied her. Why else would they throw her food at her so it spills? She said to them, "It's not my fault that Tico worships me."

After a half an hour, Tico turned off the motor at the entrance to a campesino hut that reminded her of one of her childhood homes. A weed-thin man came out.

The campesino tipped his straw hat, a symbol of respect. "Don Tico, como esta?"

"You got the stuff?"

"Si, mi patron."

"Someone will come get it tomorrow. In the early morning."

The old man nodded, and stared at the ground. "Si, su merced." He reminded Leonor of her father, toothless and wrinkled. There was submission in his face and in his body language.

Leonor guessed Tico was in charge of drug sales, of buying coca leaves cheaply from campesino producers, like this old man, and re-selling it to the traffickers who mix it with chemicals and export it abroad. Tico and Leonor climbed back on the motorcycle and she was thrilled to sense he was happy. It was likely Tico paid the old man about fifty-three cents per pound of coca leaves. Once processed, addicts in North America and Europe buy it for thousands of dollars. In 2000, when Leonor was with Tico riding on his motorbike, the street price of a gram of cocaine was \$161.

"Now that is capitalism," Tico said.

Leonor dug her knees into the motorcycle saddle. Men like Tico, with guns that say obey-or-die, take on extra meaning for girls like Leonor, who see them as the authority figures and the sought-after rich boyfriends. Tico smelled like cologne and she liked that because she thought it classy. She wrapped her arms tighter than ever around his waist. As they rode on, the wind toasted her face, bronzed her bare arms, and set her long hair free. The worn-in handle of Tico's machine gun poked into her stomach, its barrel faced upward, as if it were ready to puncture the sky. Leonor closed her eyes, allowing the world to worship her.