

SLUMLORD

What has Hugo Chávez wrought in Venezuela?

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

On December 11th, Hugo Chávez Frías, Venezuela's flamboyantly radical President, underwent his fourth cancer surgery, and ever since he has languished in a tightly guarded Havana hospital. Only close family members and deputies—and, presumably, the Castro brothers—are allowed to see him. There has been no video of him smiling from a hospital bed, no recording of him cheering on his loyalists. Chávez's officials concede only that he is experiencing "severe respiratory difficulties," despite rumors that he is in an induced coma and on a respirator. Argentina's President, Cristina Kirchner, visited Havana last week, bringing a Bible for Chávez, and though she did not say whether she had seen him, she tweeted afterward, "*Hasta siempre*"—"Until forever." Chávez's partisans insist that he is recovering, and that he even signed a document—a proof of life that was duly exhibited to the press. But Kirchner's message sounded like a final goodbye.

It is fitting that Chávez has come to rest in Cuba, which has long been a second home for him. In November, 1999, Fidel Castro invited him to speak in an august lecture hall at the University of Havana. Chávez, a former paratrooper, had become Venezuela's President only nine months earlier, but he had a rapt audience, including Castro, his younger brother Raúl, and other senior members of Cuba's politburo. Chávez, brimming with expressions of good will toward Cuba, praised Castro and called him "brother." It was impossible to miss the implications of his visit. Ever since the end of Soviet subsidies, eight years earlier, Cuba had been struggling, and Venezuela was rich with oil; Chávez was travelling with a delegation from the national oil company. Even then an expansive talker, Chávez spoke for ninety minutes, and Castro smiled attentively throughout. A man next to me whispered that he had

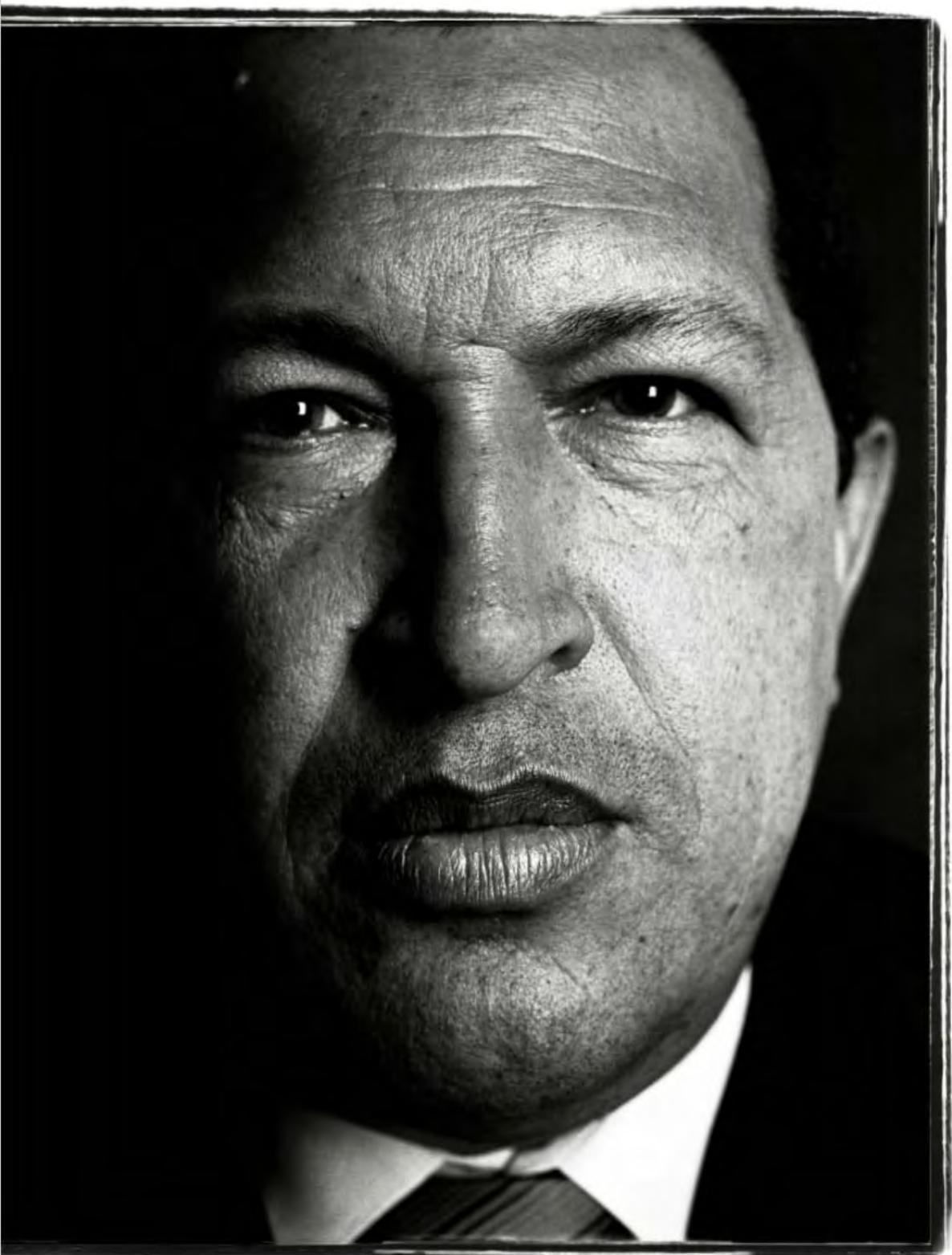
never seen him display such respect for another leader.

That evening, a crowd filled Havana's national stadium for a friendly baseball game between veterans of the two nations' teams. The mood was festive. Chávez pitched and batted for Venezuela, playing all nine innings. Castro, wearing a baseball jacket over fatigues, served as Cuba's coach, and gave his guest a lesson in tactics: as the game went on, he sneaked young ringers onto the field, disguised with fake beards, which they later tore off, eliciting cheers and laughter from the crowd. At the end of the game, Cuba was ahead, five to four, but Chávez declared, "Both Cuba and Venezuela have won. This deepened our friendship."

Before long, Cuba was receiving shipments of low-priced Venezuelan oil, in exchange for the services of Cuban teachers, doctors, and sports instructors, who worked for a huge poverty-alleviation scheme launched by Chávez. Since 2001, tens of thousands of Cuban doctors have provided treatment to Venezuela's poor, and people with eye problems have received care in Cuba, in a program that Chávez called, with typical grandiosity, Misión Milagro.

As an unwritten part of the deal, Chávez also acquired an ideology. From the beginning, he was a fervent disciple of Simón Bolívar, Venezuela's liberator and its ultimate national hero; soon after Chávez took office, he renamed the country the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Bolívar was a complicated role model: He was a charismatic freedom fighter, whose bloody campaigns liberated much of South America from colonial Spain. But, even though he admired the American Revolution, he was much more of an autocrat than a democrat. For Chávez, Castro was the Bolívar of modern times—the keeper of the anti-imperialist struggle. In 2005, Chávez announced that, after a

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PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE PYKE

long period of study and reflection, he had decided that socialism was the best way forward for the region. In just a few years, with his oil billions and Castro's guiding hand, Chávez revived the language and the spirit of leftist revolution in Latin America. He would remake Venezuela into what he called, in his speech at the University of Havana, "a sea of happiness and of real social justice and peace." His pronounced goal was to elevate the poor. In Caracas, the country's capital, the results of his fitful campaign are plain to see.

The Spanish colonists who founded Caracas in the sixteenth century situated it carefully: in the mountains, rather than on the nearby Caribbean coast, to protect it from English pirates and marauding Indians. These days, the coast, ten miles away from the city, is accessible by a precipitous highway, which was blasted through the mountains on the orders of the late military dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who dominated the country during the nineteen-fifties. A ruthless and widely hated figure, Pérez Jiménez was overthrown after just six years as President, but he left behind an impressive legacy of public works: government buildings, public housing projects, tunnels, bridges, parks, and highways. For decades after, while much of Latin America chafed under dictatorships, Venezuela was a dynamic and mostly stable democracy. As one of the world's most oil-rich nations, it had a growing middle class, with an impressively high standard of living. It was also a steadfast U.S. ally; the Rockefellers owned oil fields there, as well as vast ranches, where their family members rode horses with Venezuelan friends.

The prospect of a good life in Venezuela attracted hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the rest of Latin America and from Europe, and they helped give Caracas a reputation as one of the region's most attractive and modern cities. It had a splendid university, the Universidad Central de Venezuela, a first-rate modern-art museum, an elegant country club, a string of fine hotels, and exquisite beaches. By the end of the seventies, as Venezuelan women became perennial winners of the Miss Universe Pageant, most other Latin Americans had come to regard the country as a beautiful place for beautiful people. Even its most infamous outlaw, the Marxist terrorist Illich (Car-

los the Jackal) Ramírez Sánchez, was a dandy, with a taste for silk cravats and Johnnie Walker. In 1983, at what may have been the height of Caracas's allure, the first line of its new subway network opened, as did the Teresa Carreño, a world-class theatre complex.

That city is barely perceptible today. After decades of neglect, poverty, corruption, and social upheaval, Caracas has deteriorated beyond all measure. It has one of the highest homicide rates in the world; last year, in a city of three million, an estimated thirty-six hundred people were murdered, or about one every two hours. The murder rate in Venezuela has tripled since Chávez took office. Indeed, violent crime, or the threat of it, is probably Caracas's defining feature, as inescapable as the weather, which is generally glorious, and the traffic, which is awful, with cars clogging the streets for hours every day. Venders wade through the gridlock, hawking toys, insecticides, and bootleg DVDs, while drug addicts wash windshields or juggle for change. Spray-painted graffiti covers façades; trash is piled up on roadsides. The Guaire River, which runs through the heart of the city, is a gray torrent of foul-smelling water. Along its banks live hundreds of homeless indigents, mostly drug addicts and the mentally ill. The wealthier districts of Caracas are fortified enclaves, protected by security walls topped with electrified wire. At gated entrances, armed guards stand watch behind one-way glass.

Caracas is a failed city, and the Tower of David is perhaps the ultimate symbol of that failure. The Tower, a ziggurat of mirrored glass topped by a great vertical shaft, rises forty-five stories above the city. As the main feature of the Confinanzas skyscraper complex, which includes another tower, eighteen stories high, and a high-rise parking garage, it is visible from everywhere in Caracas, which is still mostly a city of modest buildings. The surrounding neighborhood is typical: a hillside grid of one- and two-story homes and businesses, pattering out a few blocks away at the flanks of El Ávila, a jungle-covered mountain that forms a dramatic green wall between Caracas and the Caribbean Sea.

The Tower is named after David Brillembourg, a banker who made a fortune during Venezuela's oil boom, in the seventies. In 1990, Brillembourg

launched the construction of the complex, which he hoped would become Venezuela's answer to Wall Street. But he died in 1993, while it was still under construction, and shortly after his death a banking crisis wiped out a third of the country's financial institutions. The construction, sixty per cent complete, came to a halt, and never resumed.

Seen from a distance, the Tower gives no indication that there is anything wrong with it. Closer up, however, the irregularities in its façade are clearly evident. In places, glass panels are missing and the gaps have been boarded up; elsewhere satellite dishes poke out like toadstools. On the sides, there are no glass panels at all. The whole complex is an unfinished concrete hulk—one in which people are living. Roughly built brick houses, similar to the ones that cover the hillsides around Caracas like scabs, have filled vacant spaces between many of the floors. Only the upper floors are open to the air, like platforms for a great wedding cake. Guillermo Barrios, the dean of architecture at the Universidad Central, told me, "Every regime has its architectural imprimatur, its icon, and I have no doubt that the architectural icon of this regime is the Tower of David. It embodies the urban policy of this regime, which can be defined by confiscation, expropriation, governmental incapacity, and the use of violence." The Tower, built as a marker of Venezuela's eminence, has become the world's tallest slum.

By the time Chávez assumed power, in 1999, the city center was neglected and run-down, and the Tower had fallen into the custody of a federal deposit-insurance agency. When the government attempted to sell it at public auction, in 2001, no one bid; a plan to make the building the mayor's headquarters was abandoned. Finally, one night in October, 2007, several hundred men, women, and children, led by a group of hard-nosed ex-convicts, invaded the Tower and camped out there. A woman who was part of the invasion told me, "We entered as if into a cave, like pigs, all in there together. We opened the gate, and from that day on we've been living here." She was frightened, but she felt that she had no choice. "Everyone was looking for a roof to have over their heads, because no one had anywhere to live. And it was a

solution." Many others wanted the same thing. The leaders of the invasion began selling the right of entry to newcomers, mostly poor people from Caracas's slums, who wanted to leave the muddy hillsides for the city proper.

Today, the Tower is the emblem of a trend of the Chávez era: the "invasion" of unoccupied buildings by large organized groups of squatters, known as *invasores*. Hundreds of buildings have been invaded since the phenomenon began, in 2003: apartment blocks, office towers, warehouses, shopping malls. *Invasores* now occupy some hundred and fifty-five Caracas buildings. The Tower complex houses an estimated three thousand people, filling the shorter tower completely and the taller one as far up as the twenty-eighth floor. Young men with motorbikes operate a *mototaxi* service for residents on high floors, driving them from street level to the tenth floor of the attached parking garage, from which they can ascend by rudimentary concrete stairwells. For those who live above the tenth floor, it is a long way up.

On a recent trip to Caracas, I asked a taxi-driver to leave me in front of the Tower of David, and he gave me a shocked look. "You're not going in there, are you?" he said. "That's where all the evil in the city comes from!" The Tower has earned notoriety as the city's center of crime, nurtured by press accounts of the place as a haven for thugs, murderers, and kidnappers. For many *caraqueños*, the Tower is a byword for everything that is wrong with their society: a community of invaders living in their midst, controlled by armed gangsters with the tacit acquiescence of the Chávez government.

The boss of the Tower is an ex-criminal turned evangelical pastor named Alexander (El Niño) Daza. An ardent Chávez supporter, he agreed to meet me only after an intermediary assured him that I was politically sound. When I arrived at the Tower's main entrance, women in a security booth with an electronic-controlled gate made me show an I.D. and sign a register, and they allowed me through only because I was Daza's guest. Daza was waiting for me in the atrium, an open-air concrete space between the two main buildings. Deafening music blasted from a pair of large speakers outside the doorway to Daza's "church," a ground-level room where he preached on Sundays; he had reportedly been born again in prison.

A short, stocky man with a boyish face, he was thirty-eight but looked younger.

We sat on a low wall to talk, but, with the speakers blaring, Daza was virtually inaudible. He didn't talk about the Tower, its community, or his role there as an authority figure. Instead, echoing the language of government officials, he complained that the "private media" were always looking for ways to distort the truth, to hurt "the cause of the people," and to "damage Chávez." In the course of reporting on Chávez, I had spent a good deal of time with him over the years, and when I told Daza this he looked cautiously impressed. After a time, he warmed up considerably, pointing out his wife, a pretty young woman named Gina, as she walked past us with a toddler.

Much of the Tower's community life was out of sight, high above us, but some of the lowest-level apartments were in the well of the atrium. There were clothes hanging out to dry on crude balconies, and some satellite dishes. You could also see signs of the prevailing political allegiance. In the recent election, Daza had done what he could to make the Tower of David a base of support for Chávez, and a big red banner in his honor hung overhead.

Daza protested the stories about the Tower as a center of crime and about him as a criminal. He and his people took over something that was "dead" and "gave it life," he said: "We rescued it with the vision of living here in harmony." This was a minority opinion. Guillermo Barrios, the architecture dean, told me, "The Tower of David wasn't a beautiful exam-

ple of self-determination by the people but a violent invasion." He described Daza as a *malandro*—one of the opportunistic thugs who have come to typify street life in Venezuela—in the guise of a pastor. "He is a leader of *invasores* who sells entry to the building—the most savage form of capitalism," he said. "He clothes himself in religiosity, but there is a violent group behind him who allow him to take his actions."

Chávez won reelection in October, and in the weeks afterward the city had an uncertain atmosphere. The President, who is fifty-eight years old, had been receiving treatment for cancer since June, 2011, but he declared himself healthy enough to serve another six-year term. He had waged a hard campaign against his opponent, Henrique Capriles Radonski, an athletic forty-year-old lawyer who represented the center right, and he won by a respectable eleven-point margin. Since his victory speech, though, he had not appeared in public.

In November, one of Chávez's officials told me, "The President is recuperating from the exhausting campaign." A couple of weeks later, Chávez went to Cuba for a medical checkup, and soon after that he returned to Caracas and announced that his doctors had detected new cancer cells. Sitting alongside his Vice-President, Nicolás Maduro, he said, "If anything should happen to me . . . choose Nicolás Maduro."

Chávez once told me that Castro had publicly cautioned him to improve his



"*Clues, Watson? How can I find clues when all I see is germs?*"

security, saying, "Without this man this revolution will be over immediately." In Chávez's view, this placed too much importance on him. But, to the extent that his revolution advanced, it was carried forward by his personality; he made things happen when he was physically present, but his administration was otherwise chaotic, haphazard.

Chávez had solidified his ideological education in prison. He was jailed in 1992, for leading a failed military coup against President Carlos Andrés Pérez. While there, he appealed to Jorge Giordani—a Marxist professor of economics and social planning at the Universidad Central—to give him classes. "The plan was for Chávez to write a thesis on how to turn his Bolivarian movement into a government," Giordani told me in 2001, when he was serving as Chávez's planning minister. He laughed. "He never finished the thesis, though. Whenever I ask him about it, he just tells me, 'That's what we are doing now, putting theory into practice.'"

Giordani showed me plans for one of their revolutionary projects. "We want to get rid of the shantytowns, to repopulate the countryside," he said. So he and Chávez had sent the Army into the undeveloped center of the country, to begin building "self-sustaining agro-industrial communities," or SARAOs, which they believed would grow into small cities. It was a utopian idea, he acknowledged. "But in social planning one moves between utopia and reality." In the end, the SARAOs were shelved, and the shantytowns grew instead. It was typical of Chávez's ad-hoc governance. Once, on the set of "Aló Presidente," his free-form television show, I watched him launch a major program of expropriating huge ranches and handing them over to peasants. He made the announcement with great bonhomie, and followed it by giving play-by-play on a volleyball game.

When I arrived in Caracas in November, I had been away for nearly four years, and the city looked grimier and more beat up than ever. As always, though, it was full of billboards and banners on which the government congratulated itself for various achievements. Giant photographs depicted Chávez affectionately hugging old women and children. Everywhere—on walls, electric poles, and highway bridges—there were

posters left over from the recent campaign. There was graffiti and counter-graffiti, and messes of thrown paint where one party had tried to sabotage the efforts of the other.

Polarization has defined Chávez's era, and little in public life is not bitterly fought over. This extended to the Tower of David: everyone I met had an opinion about it. One journalist friend, Boris Muñoz, told me that the building was run by "empowered lumpen," who controlled the residents with the same violent system that ruled life inside Venezuela's prisons. Guillermo Barrios blamed the takeovers on the government's neglect of the city, and on Chávez himself. "The political discourse that has justified the invasions, the outright thievery, has come out of Chávez's speeches," he said. In 2011, Chávez gave a speech urging Caracas's homeless to take over abandoned warehouses, called *galpones*. "I invite the people," he'd said. "Look for your own *galpón* and tell me where it is. Everyone should go find a *galpón*. Let's go get us a *galpón*! There are a thousand, two thousand abandoned *galpones* in Caracas. Let's go for them! Chávez will expropriate them and put them at the service of the people."

The takeovers of all kinds of buildings had skyrocketed. After a disastrous flood in December, 2010, left an additional hundred thousand people homeless, most of them dislodged from poor hillside barrios, Chávez had commandeered hotels, a country club, and even a shopping mall to house them. For months, several thousand of the *damnificados*, as the homeless are known, lived in city parks and in a tent city outside the Presidential palace of Miraflores. Some were housed inside the palace. The situation was clearly urgent, and, in keeping with his quasi-military style, Chávez declared a new "mission": La Gran Misión Vivienda, or the Great Housing Mission.

In Caracas, a large part of the burden for Misión Vivienda fell on Jorge Rodríguez. A former Vice-President under Chávez, Rodríguez has been the mayor of Libertador, the central part of the city, since 2008. I went to see him one morning at his office in a beautiful colonial building, with balconies and an interior courtyard filled with trees. A slim, friendly man with a shaved head, Rodríguez was dressed in the informal manner of many of Chávez's ministers: a

crisp white guayabera over black jeans and running shoes. His office was dominated by a huge oil painting of Simón Bolívar and overlooked a lovely plaza named after Bolívar, decorated with a large bronze Bolívar statue.

He had not absorbed the extent of Caracas's deterioration until he became mayor, he said. "On my first day on the job, I looked out of the window here and saw a drunk urinating on the statue of Bolívar. I thought to myself, If this is what it's like here, what's the rest of the city like?" Rodríguez said he had gone to see Chávez to discuss the situation. "We decided we were going to fix the city, beginning with the center out. We had to start somewhere."

Rodríguez blamed Caracas's problems on past rulers. Ever since the Spanish built Caracas, its growth had been unplanned—except during the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez. "He had a plan, but then he was overthrown," Rodríguez said. He described the buildup to the present emergency as "a slow-moving earthquake." The poor had once lived in the gullies or on the mountainsides, and then they had moved into the city out of need. The wealthy private sector had stopped investing in the city, and the flooding of 2010 had brought the situation to a crisis.

Countrywide, the housing shortage was three million, and the goal for the year was two hundred and seventy thousand new units, he said. Barrios had told me that, for most of Chávez's tenure, the government built only twenty-five thousand units a year on average, addressing a smaller percentage of the housing need than any Administration since 1959. But Rodríguez assured me that he was well on the way to his goal, saying, "We're building everywhere we can." They still had a long way to go, he conceded. "I barely rest, and am on my feet all day!" He laughed, and pointed to his running shoes.

Rodríguez waved at the plaza and asked if I noticed a difference from my last visit. It was empty, I realized. There were none of the sidewalk venders that had clogged the historic district's pedestrian streets. "We got rid of fifty-seven thousand of them," Rodríguez said. They had been removed to a new covered market at the edge of the downtown. With the President's backing, Rodríguez had also decreed that invasions of buildings would

no longer be tolerated—but that there would be no arbitrary expulsions, either. “There are still one or two attempts a week to take over a building, but we stop them.”

It appeared that the government did not officially approve of the Tower of David invasion, but it had made no attempt to close it down. Was there a tacit understanding to leave things as they were? Rodríguez looked uncomfortable, and said, “The situation at the Tower of David is one that we have to correct, and will have to be dealt with by the government in due course.”

Around the city, there were signs that Chávez had begun to tackle the problems of insufficient public housing and transportation. Rodríguez took me to a site, along Avenida Libertador, where a number of apartment buildings were being thrown up, including several impromptu-looking five-story constructions of brick and steel on stilts. Next to these, roadside slums were being bulldozed, and their residents rehoused. By the sides of several highways were pylons for a new elevated commuter train, bought from China, part of an ambitious plan to ease the city’s traffic and take pressure off its overwhelmed subway system. A cable car had been installed, at vast expense, to ferry passengers up to San Augustín, one of the city’s oldest hillside slums. The cars departed from a gleaming station and moved silently in the air, propelled by huge Austrian-made pulleys. Each car was painted in Bolivarian red—Chávez’s adopted color—and given a name: Sobreranía, Sacrificio, Moral Socialista. Below, garbage spilled down muddy hillsides between warrens of shacks and dirt alleyways. I was told not to get out at the top, so as not to risk getting mugged.

One morning, Daza met me in a weed-covered vacant lot behind the smaller tower. He was overseeing a work crew of four teen-agers and an older man, who were mixing cement in a wheelbarrow and spreading it over an expanse of broken concrete, mud, grass, and rubble. He wore jeans, slip-on suede shoes, and a checkered shirt. The air stunk of raw sewage. Daza explained that he wanted to make a little park, so that families with children could have a secure place to come and play, with piñata parties for birthdays.

The teen-agers on the crew were fool-



Children returning home from school to the Tower of David, the world's tallest slum.

ing around, and Daza barked commands now and then, but otherwise looked on tolerantly. He told me that they were at-risk youths, recommended by their parents. On the work crew, they could be supervised, and, given a stipend of about a hundred dollars a month, they could earn a bit of money for their families. He was supervising them himself, he explained, because his last crew boss had turned out to be irresponsible. “All he did was ride around on his motorbike, creating disorder,” he said.

Daza had ambitious plans for the Tower. He showed me the ground-level garage—a huge space, empty except for a

few broken-down city buses—and explained that it was an important source of revenue: the garage was rented out to bus drivers. Later in the day, it would be full. Near the entrance, where a couple of young men lounged on dirty sofas, Daza planned to have a security door and a guard’s hut built. To one side of the building, where a row of mango trees gave shade, he pointed out an unused space where he wanted to build a day-care center for the children of working mothers. Near the front gate, he hoped to open a café, “where Bolivarian food can be sold at socialist prices.”

As we went along, Daza explained how the building worked. He had a rhythmic,

emphatic way of speaking, like a preacher. "There's no prison regime imposed here," he said. "What there is here is order. And there are no cells here, but homes. Nobody is forced to collaborate here. No one here is a tenant but an inhabitant." Each inhabitant had to pay a monthly fee of a hundred and fifty bolivares (about eight dollars at the black-market exchange rate) to help cover basic maintenance costs, such as the salaries of the cleanup brigade and the work crew. People who couldn't afford to build their dwellings were given financial assistance. The residents were all registered, and every floor had its own representative delegate to attend to problems. If problems couldn't be solved at the floor level, they were taken to a Tower council meeting, which Daza led twice a week. A common problem, he said, a little sourly, was residents' not paying their monthly quota, and it was hard to dissuade tenants from flinging their trash into the courtyard. Transgressors, he said, "are given a warning to appeal to their conscience." There was a disciplinary board, and serial offenders could be kicked out of the building, but there were always those who took liberties.

Daza's version of the Tower's law-enforcement system starkly contrasted with stories I had heard of prison-style executions, of people being mutilated and their body parts thrown off the upper floors. This was the usual punishment for thieves and squealers in Venezuela's prisons, and the custom has crept into Caracas's gangster-run barrios. When I asked about these stories, Daza made the non-committal pursed-lip movement common to Venezuelans. "What we want is to be left to live here," he said. "We live well here. We don't hear gunfights all the time here. Here there're no thugs with pistols in their hands. What there is here is work. What there is here is good people, hardworking people." When I asked Daza how he had become the Tower's *jefe*, or leader, he pursed his lips again, and finally said, "In the beginning, everyone wanted to be the boss. But God got rid of those he wanted to get rid of and left those he wanted to leave."

Many of the Tower's residents had led complicated lives, touched by the country's confluence of poverty and crime. In a converted storeroom near Daza's church lived Gregorio Laya, a

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Cicadas bury themselves in small mouths
of the tree's hollow, lie against the bark tongues like amulets,
though it is I who pray I might shake off this skin and be raised
from the ground again. I have nothing
to confess. I don't yet know that I possess
a body built for love. When the wind grazes
its way toward something colder,
you, too, will be changed. One life abrades
another, rough cloth, expostulation.
When I open my mouth, I am like an insect undressing itself.

—Richie Hofmann

buddy of Daza's from prison. Laya worked as a cook in the Presidential kitchen at Miraflores Palace, but in the old days he had been part of a gang of *roleros*—thieves who specialize in expensive watches. He reeled off his favorites: Rolex, Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet. Usually, he and his men waited outside the Teresa Carreño theatre for concertgoers to leave. But one day he went to rob the owner of a health club—"near here, just a few blocks away," he said, pointing past the Tower. He had got the watch, but, as he left, the man pulled out a gun and started firing at him. He'd had "no choice" but to fire back, he said, and he'd shot the owner several times, killing him. Laya was wounded, too, and the police cornered him just a few blocks away. He was given eleven years.

Laya's apartment was a single room, crammed with the essentials of life—like a sailor's cabin or a prison cell, perhaps. There was a big bed and a flat-screen TV, an armoire, a chair, and a clothesline strung across one corner with laundry on it. Laya said he was content. He was lucky to have a job, and was grateful to Daza for finding him a place in the Tower. Every day, he walked by the health club on the way to work, and he thought about how different his life was.

Daza told his own story in similarly redemptive terms. One day, he showed me his church, a large former storeroom,

painted green, with plastic chairs stacked up and a preacher's lectern. Gold cutout paper letters on the wall spelled out Casa de Dios (House of God) and Puerta del Cielo (Heaven's Gate). Daza arranged two chairs and invited me to sit down.

He came from Catia, he said, one of Caracas's most notorious slums. His family was very poor. He was the youngest of several boys; his brothers were much older. He had stayed out of trouble until he was eight, when some older boys stole his bike and gave him a humiliating beating. He described them as *malandros*—thugs—who had terrorized his neighborhood. "I remember watching them as they chased my older brothers," Daza said. "They had guns, and my brothers would run when they chased them, and they shot at them."

"I didn't care if they killed my brothers," he went on. "I resented the way they came home and behaved in front of my mother. They mistreated her, they smoked drugs and spoke badly in front of her. I used to tell them they were cowards, because all they did was bring their enemies to the barrio and then run away when they came."

Daza formed his own gang of kids. "We got ahold of some guns, and then, when I was fifteen, as our first thing, we waited for the leader of those same *malandros* and walked up and"—he made a shooting motion—"we finished him." After that, he became the boss of the whole barrio.

Daza had done two stints in prison, one for five years and another for two. During his second incarceration, for an illegal-gun charge, a policeman-preacher came to the prison and converted him. He emerged “*con el Evangelio*” and had been trying to lead a better life ever since.

For Daza, as for many other residents of Caracas, the prospect of a better life is material as well as spiritual. Chavez's Administration has had mercurial effects on the nation's economy. While his anti-capitalist rhetoric has induced some companies to leave, others have learned to work with the government and have done quite well. Regulations are astonishingly profuse—the mere act of paying for dinner in a restaurant requires showing I.D.—but, perversely, this has encouraged a surge in black-market entrepreneurship. Many doctors and engineers have fled the country; other professionals have flourished. The one constant is the flow of oil money, which brings some people great wealth, and also supports a burgeoning public sector. The poorest Venezuelans are marginally better off these days. And yet, despite Chavez's calls to socialist solidarity, his people want security and nice things as much as they want an equitable society.

One evening, Daza insisted on driving me back to my hotel. He and Gina and I waited outside the Tower as a gleaming green Ford Explorer pulled up, and a driver climbed out and handed him the keys. I got in back, and we set off. As we drove, Daza said, “God blessed me with the car last December.” It seemed that a man had owed him money, and when he was unable to pay him back he had given him the car instead. It was a 2005 model, Daza explained, and it was fine, but now he wanted the 2008—ideally, a white one. By coincidence, we passed a white 2005 Explorer in traffic. Daza murmured his appreciation, admiring the shiny chrome grille in his side-view mirror. Later, we went by a Ford dealership, where a 2012 Explorer sat in an illuminated showroom. “Who knows how much that costs—maybe a half million bolívares!” he exclaimed.

On the expressway, Daza asked where the hotel was and seemed uncertain when I told him the district, Palos Grandes. Had he been there? Yes, of course, he said. I had to point out the exit, however, and direct him from there. As we ap-

proached the hotel, passing gated apartment buildings and exclusive restaurants, he and Gina gazed out of the window in amazement. “People here are really rich, aren't they?” he said. In front of my hotel, he stopped the car in the middle of the street and stared, transfixed, as cars honked and swerved around us.

In many parts of the city, though, it is not the rich but the *malandros* who are ascendant. Caracas is among the world's easiest places to be kidnapped. Thousands of kidnappings occur every year. In November, 2011, the Chilean consul was taken by gunmen, beaten, and shot before being released. That same month, the Washington Nationals catcher Wilson Ramos was kidnapped from his parents' home in Venezuela and held for two days before being rescued. In April, a Costa Rican diplomat was abducted. The next day, the police descended on the Tower of David to search for him, but found only a few guns.

At a dinner party in Caracas, I listened as two couples traded stories about calls they had received from criminals claiming to have abducted their children. In both cases, the voices of children who sounded like theirs came over the phone, crying and begging for help. The calls were false, made by fraudsters, but the episodes, along with increasingly bloody news reports, left them worried about the future. One of the more talked-about crimes while I was in Caracas involved the murder of a taxi-driver, who was beaten, slashed in the face, and shot several times. His killers then ran over his body in his own car, just for fun, before escaping.

Daza never seemed to leave the ground floor of the Tower, and didn't seem to want me to, either. Whenever I suggested going up, he became evasive, and he made excuses when I asked to sit in on a session with the floor delegates. If he demanded an entry fee of each new resident, as had been reported, he wouldn't admit to it. But it seemed likely that he was making a living for himself from the building, possibly from the bus garage. Somehow, he was able to afford a few luxuries; he lived above his church, but he had an apartment elsewhere in the city; he had children from

previous relationships, and they could visit him there safely.

On a couple of occasions, I managed to climb up into the Tower for a look around. At the tenth floor, members of the building's security squad invariably appeared to demand that I identify myself and tell them where I was going. When I mentioned Daza's name, the guards let me go on, but they reappeared every few minutes to keep an eye on me. The residents of the Tower were watchful, and said little as they walked by. On the stairways, many had loads to carry, and moved like mountaineers, with the set expressions of people undergoing an endurance test.

The hallways were angled to admit light from the wall-to-wall windows at each end of the building, but they were still dim. On the unfinished floors, people had built small homes out of painted cinder block and plaster. Many kept their doors open, for better air flow as much as for sociability, and I could see them busy with everyday life: cooking, cleaning, carrying pails of water, taking showers. Music played here and there. Daza had rigged up a generator-powered water pump, and each floor had a tank, but the water supply ran unpredictably through pipes and rubber hoses.

The Tower has several bodegas, a hair salon, and a couple of ad-hoc day-care centers. On the ninth floor, I visited a small bodega, where Zaida Gomez, a white-haired, garrulous woman in her sixties, lived with her mother, who was ninety-four. She showed me the cubicle next to the shop, where she had settled her mother, a tiny birdlike woman who slept on a bed right next to one of the plate-glass windows. Gomez kept a fan going all the time, because the window made the room baking hot.



Gomez was one of the early pioneers of the Tower, and she told me that, at the beginning, things had been terrible there. The Tower had been ruled by *malandros*, she said, shaking her head; there had been beatings, shootings, killings. But now she was able to leave the door of her shop open, something she had never been able to do in Petare, the slum where she had lived before. Her shop sold everything from soap to soda pop and vegetables, and to bring in supplies she made the journey

up and down nine floors several times a day. It was tiring, she said, but she couldn't afford to pay the *mototaxis*, who charged fifteen bolivares (about eighty cents) for each ride. She had a daughter who helped her, and a grandson.

Gomez was afraid she would be forced to move from the Tower. "This building is too expensive for people like us to be here," she said. One day the authorities would want to take it back. She hoped that the government, which was building housing for the poor on nearby Avenida Libertador, would get around to the Tower, too, and rehouse everyone. "All I want is my own little house and a little patch of land to grow things on—something I can call my own."

Albinson Linares, a Venezuelan reporter who has written about the Tower, described its residents to me as "refugees from an underdeveloped state living in a structure that belongs to the First World." It contains a cross-section of working *caraqueños*: nurses, security men, bus drivers, shopkeepers, and students. There are unemployed people, too, and Daza's circle of evangelical ex-cons. Each floor had its own sociology. The lower floors are largely reserved for older people, who can't make the climb up to the higher levels. Some floors are dominated by family life, and some are occupied mostly by tough-looking young men. One day, a photographer I was travelling with was pulled into an apartment by a pair of men who ques-

tioned him suspiciously. When he mentioned Daza's name, they let him go, but only reluctantly. In the stairwell going down, we saw graffiti that read "*El Niño sapo*"—"El Niño is a squealer." It seemed that Daza had enemies within the Tower.

Some conflict seemed inevitable. Between the entry fees, the maintenance charges, and the rent for the garage, there was a good deal of money to be made as an *invasor*. One afternoon, Daza took me to a restaurant up the street from the Tower, a small, hot place with an open kitchen. Soon after we sat down, three men walked in and hovered by our table menacingly, standing right behind our chairs. Daza arched his eyebrows and stopped talking, until after a few long minutes the men went outside and stood on the curb. Later, Daza told me that the men made a living organizing *invasiones*. "They're professionals," he said. "It's what they do." I asked him if they were enemies. He said no, not exactly, and then murmured that there were few people in life one could trust.

A half hour's drive from the Tower was another *invasión*, El Milagro. It had been founded several years earlier by José Argenis, an ex-con turned pastor, who joined other former inmates and their families to invade a patch of riverside land outside Caracas. It was a scrubby, garbage-strewn area, but it was in a good location: just off the main road, next to a

bus station, and near a narrow bridge, which allowed residents to cross the river on foot or on motorbike. El Milagro was now a community of about ten thousand people, and it was still growing.

Argenis, a charismatic black man with a booming voice, ran a halfway house in El Milagro for former prisoners, who came to him for help in making a transition to the outside world. Venezuela's prisons may be the worst in Latin America. The country's thirty facilities were designed to hold about fifteen thousand inmates but house three times that many. Narcotics are bought and sold openly, and inmates have access to automatic weapons and grenades. In many prisons, the wardens have ceded control to armed gangs run by strongmen called *pranes*—named for the sound, *pran*, that a machete makes when it hits concrete. The *pranes* lead the burgeoning criminal community, both inside the prisons and out; with a woefully corrupt and inefficient Venezuelan police force and judiciary, they provide structure where none exists.

The *pranes* had grown powerful enough to deal directly with the government. Argenis worked as an adviser to Iris Varela, Chávez's recently named prisons minister, whom he was helping to negotiate with the *pranes*. It was an unpaid job "so far," he explained, but it was in his interest to work with her; he was hoping that his halfway-house model could get government funding, and that he could build other facilities across Venezuela.

Argenis had done nine years for homicide, which is how he had come to know Daza. After prison, they had stayed in touch. "When they took the Tower, El Niño was still involved in that world, the underworld," he said. "And there were those who wanted disorder, but he imposed order—the old-fashioned way." He gave me a wised-up look. At one point, Daza had come to him for help. "He came here for six months. He was still officially at the Tower, as its leader, but he stayed here." As Argenis told it, Daza had "come out of prison with problems. There were people who wanted to kill him, and we protected him." He left open the possibility that Daza would return to criminal life. "I think he's hung up his gloves," Argenis said, and smiled wryly. "But he could always fall back into temptation, because we have the need to look after ourselves, you know?"

FROM THE TREASURY OF APRÈS-SEX APERCUS
N°. 2733142



"We really need to have our rugs vacuumed professionally one of these days."

Argenis still had enemies, too. "I killed men. I left others in wheelchairs. I left some men sterile. Just imagine—they're going to hate me their whole lives." When I asked how the culture of *malandros* had become so prevalent, he said that it was because of the prisons. The men inside didn't even try to escape anymore, he explained, because "they have everything they need there, and live as well or better than they did in the streets." The prison economy was booming, with billions of bolivares generated through control of the drug trade. "The prisons are really strong, and they've become much stronger in the last seven or eight years."

Argenis had served time in a prison called Yare, situated amid scrub-covered hills an hour south of Caracas. In 2001, I visited there, and a prison official drove me on a dirt road around the perimeter fence. We stopped, and I saw two tall cellblocks with scores of bullet holes in their façades; where the windows should have been there were jagged holes, and a large group of shirtless, rough-looking men looked down at us. A thick black line of human excrement ran down an exterior wall, and in the yard below was a sea of sludge and garbage several feet deep. "We can't hang around here," the official said. "If we stay too long, they might shoot at us." As we drove off, he explained that there were only six guards at a time inside the prison. The inmates allowed one handpicked guard to come to a certain gate to retrieve dead bodies they left there.

Chávez was imprisoned at Yare for two years after his coup attempt. Although he was kept in a secure area for political prisoners, at one point he reportedly listened helplessly as another inmate was gang-raped, slashed in the throat, and then stabbed to death. In 1994, Chávez was amnestied, and early in his Presidency he promised to help reform the prison system. But, as new crises and causes emerged, the prisons were forgotten; of the twenty-four prisons he promised, only four were built. Last year, there were more than five hundred violent deaths in the system. In August, two gangs at Yare engaged in a four-hour shootout that killed twenty-five inmates and a visitor. Photographs of Geomar and El Trompiz, the two gang chiefs responsible for the massacre, show them posing defiantly with their weapons. El Trompiz was murdered

last January, apparently by his own men.

After Chávez was reelected, he declared a state of emergency in the country's prison system and promised a complete transformation. Still, Argenis suggested, the damage was already done. "This government has been more permissive—previous governments were more repressive," he said. "And so the *cultura malandra* has flourished, and it has gone



out from the prisons to the schools, to the universities, to the streets. It has become the national culture."

The first thing a visitor arriving from the Caracas international airport sees is a slum, perhaps the city's most famous: the 23 de Enero. "El 23," as it is known, was built in the nineteen-fifties as a public housing project by one of Venezuela's greatest architects, Carlos Raúl Villanueva. A complex of eighty buildings, it occupies a huge sloping piece of land at the northern entrance to the city. It was conceived as a vast suburb, roughly divided between four-story apartment buildings and fifteen-story high-rises, interlaced with gardens and pathways.

Today, the green spaces have been overwhelmed by *invasores*. El 23 is effectively a shantytown of a hundred thousand people, studded with Villa-nueva's apartment blocks. The area is a volatile mosaic of self-governing groups that range from those with left-wing pretensions to outright criminals. Many are armed.

One of El 23's emblematic figures was Lina Ron, a militant activist with bleached blond hair and a bombastic manner. Before she died last year, of a stroke, she led anti-imperialist protests, noisy affairs that sometimes turned violent. Chávez tolerated her and her rowdy followers, because she was a passionate supporter of his policies, often appearing alongside him at rallies. In 2001, Chávez suggested to me that he had embraced the far left as a way of preventing a coup like the one that put

him in office. "The truth is we need a revolution here, and if we can't achieve it now it will come later, with another face," he said. "Maybe in the same way as when we came out, one midnight, with guns."

These days, there is probably no other *chavista* as openly radical as Juan Barreto. A fifty-year-old professor at the Universidad Central, Barreto is a loquacious, brilliant, rotund Marxist. He was the *alcalde mayor* of Caracas, supervising all the city's districts, from 2004 to 2008, when many of the *invasiones*—including that of the Tower of David—occurred. In early 2008, I spent some time in his company, and it was clear that he was seen by some squatters downtown as their protector. (Barreto has always said he didn't support *invasiones*, but approved of expropriating unused city properties to help with the housing crisis.) In a typical move, Barreto had infuriated the city's wealthy by threatening to confiscate the Caracas Country Club, where palatial villas and gardens surround an eighteen-hole golf course, on behalf of the people. In the end, the plan was abandoned, apparently on Chávez's orders.

Barreto's outspokenness has made him numerous enemies, and even mainstream *chavistas* see him as a loose cannon, prone to mouth off in public about "arming the people" to defend the revolution. As mayor, he clearly loved being the enfant terrible of Chávez's revolution. He organized a crew of *motorizados*—motorcycle-mounted bodyguards—to travel with him. Among his entourage was a teenaged former contract killer named Cristian, whom he was rehabilitating. He introduced him to me by asking, "Cristian, how many people have you killed?" The boy mumbled, "About sixty, I think," and Barreto cackled with delight.

Once Barreto left office, he went into political limbo, but last year, during Chávez's reelection campaign, he returned to favor. At the head of an informal group of slum-based radical *colectivos*, he had formed a new organization, called Redes—Networks—which joined the campaign. Caracas was plastered with Redes posters, showing Chávez, swollen from steroid treatments, grasping the even more corpulent Barreto in a manly embrace.

I found Barreto living in a gritty Caracas neighborhood called El Cementerio, named for the large cemetery there, where *malandros* hold rituals for their fallen com-



"First, you're gonna dig a hole."

rades. Slums covered the nearby hills. Barreto's house was fronted by a huge iron double door, and a couple of armed security men with Alsatian dogs hung around. Once they had identified me, they waved me in through the carport, where two armored S.U.V.s were parked. Inside was an atrium filled with modern art and sculptures, along with a large aquarium. Barreto was upstairs, in a state-of-the-art kitchen, cooking tamales. Next to the kitchen was a living area, where a group of young men, members of his entourage, sat at a table with laptops. The room was decorated with an erotic painting by Barreto—a topless woman, with a man's hand dropping a strawberry into her mouth—along with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Platinum ("a gift from a friend") and a figure of Brando as Don Corleone.

Barreto explained that he and his *compañeros* were working to turn Redes into a political party. Chávez had lately been showcasing a plan for "twenty-first-century socialism," in which Venezuelan society was to be restructured into *comunas*. Nobody understood exactly what the term meant or how it would be applied, except perhaps Chávez himself, and a heated debate was taking place. Barreto said that he and his followers were concerned that, without pressure from groups like Redes, the plan would be used to "straitjacket" the true revolutionary forces.

To help create an authentic commune, Barreto was working closely with Alexis

Vive, one of the most organized of the armed *colectivos* in El 23. He suggested we drive up to see them. As we got into one of his S.U.V.s—which Barreto said Chávez had lent him—a bodyguard produced a submachine gun, a Belgian P90. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Barreto said, smiling. "It shoots fifty-seven bullets." He said that weapons like this were necessary for self-defense. "It's not that we're against the government. It's that I can't find the means to fully support it." He laughed. "It's like when you have a beautiful woman but you've fallen out of love with her. It's difficult. You still want her, but you don't want her, you know?"

At the headquarters of the Colectivo Alexis Vive, there were murals of Marx, Mao, Castro, and Che Guevara, but, other than a few armed men who lingered at the edges of some nearby buildings, the foot soldiers stayed discreetly out of sight. One of the group's leaders, a young sociology student named Salvador, explained that the *colectivo* controlled about fifty acres, with about ten thousand inhabitants, whom they were trying to form into a self-sustaining Marxist collective. The group was armed for self-defense, he said. Corrupt policemen and members of the Venezuelan national guard were working with groups of *malandros* in El 23, some in areas that bordered their own territory. Barreto argued that the armed contingent was protecting its people against rogue officers. "They haven't been able to come

here since 2008," he said, laughing. "We've gotten into firefights with them."

Corruption in the security forces was a deep-seated problem, Barreto told me—the real source of the country's criminal culture. He had fought it when he was mayor, he said, replacing much of the police force with members of the Tupamaros, an armed group from El 23. The situation, Salvador said, stemmed from Chávez's inability to take on the real criminals: "Chávez hasn't gone against the *malandros* because he believes they can go against him."

One Sunday, fifty plastic chairs were set out for services in Daza's church, but only a dozen people showed up, almost all of them women and children. Daza seemed unperturbed. He wore a tie and slacks and black shoes and tested the microphone, singing "Gloria" and "Hallelujah," while a couple of men hustled around the musical equipment—a set of drums, an electric organ, and the huge speakers. A few more women arrived, and knelt to pray before joining the congregation. Daza's *compañera*, Gina, came in with their children, and took out a Bible wrapped in a hot-pink cover.

While the musicians played, Daza sang from the side of the stage, badly but without self-consciousness, and banged on a bongo drum. Eventually, he took the microphone, and began shouting into it rhythmically in a hoarse growl, talking about good and evil. He said, "There are wars in the world, in which the people don't care if children die, if women die, if old people die—all they care about is riches. But in the Bible it says there is only one life and it is this life—the Lord knows of an eternal Life, but only him—and so we must live this one. We must live this life and get good with God."

The service went on for three hours. Women swayed and rocked on their feet, their eyes closed. Daza's voice became a mesmerizing wall of sound. At one point, a young guest preacher named Juan Miguel got up to testify. He was from a poor barrio, he said, the son of an insane father. He had been in prison, and his home had been swept away by the floods of 2010; he lived with thousands of other *damnificados* inside the shopping center that Chávez had expropriated. "We have had tough lives, hard lives, but God has called us to preach his word." His eyes shining, he told Daza, "God has chosen

you and chosen me. God has chosen Venezuela to take *el Evangelio* to the world."

One day, Daza drove me to the nearby state of Miranda to see the slum where he had lived with his ex-wife, and where she still lived. Along the way, he talked, as always, about how God had saved him. He'd left school when he was thirteen, and by fourteen he was in the gang life. During his second stint in prison, he had learned how to read, and the Bible was his first book. "I haven't had preparation like in a university, but I have prepared a lot in God. I used to talk to people offensively, with swear words. *Me salía la innundicia.* But I read somewhere in the Bible—I can't remember where—that bad language corrupts good customs. And when I read that I said, 'Ay, God is talking to me.'

We reached a small cinder-block house on the spine of a steep hill; it overlooked other forested hills, which had been scarred by new *invasiones*. Daza's ex-wife's daughter was there, a plump young woman in her twenties. She seemed happy to see Daza. We sat down in a tiny living room, and Daza began recalling his life with her mother. Although he was then still a criminal, their relationship had been formative for him. She was older, and he felt that she had helped mold him as a man. She had also spoiled him, he said, laughing—cooking and cleaning for him and ironing his clothes.

Daza had run off with other women—"I used to change girlfriends like you change clothes," he had told me—and got them pregnant. He and his ex-wife had fought a lot. Standing up, he acted out a particularly dramatic fight, in which he pinned her back to the wall, pulled out his pistol, and fired it right next to her head. "It was just to scare her," he said, smiling. But she had been holding a knife, and when he fired—"Maybe she thought I was really going to shoot her, or maybe it was just her instinctive reaction"—she had plunged it into his chest. He had staggered out of the house and got himself to a clinic. He was lucky: the knife had missed his heart and other vital organs. The young woman nodded and giggled at the memory. "Afterward, we got together again," Daza said.

In the car, I asked Daza if he regretted anything.

"No," he said.

"What about the men you've killed?"

"Like who?"

"Like that *malandro* you killed when you were fifteen."

Daza was silent. After a minute, he said, "I was ignorant then, and I'm transformed. I feel like a new man, a new person. Those were things one lived in life, and that, well, God allowed, but now I think I'm different."

Daza fell silent again, and then said, "In this life, when you become a leader, your life becomes at risk, because you acquire enemies. Sometimes people think that you're involved in the Mafia and strange things, because of your past. Enemies are always going to try and discredit you. The Devil will try and make sure you remain miserable, to use you for his benefit."

In the end, it was difficult to tell whether El Niño Daza was a *malandro* or a genuine advocate for the poor, or both. What seemed clear was that he was perfectly adapted to life in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, able to gain advantage by every means: working the gaps left by the government, hustling a capitalist enterprise, and negotiating the criminal underworld when necessary. As we left his old neighborhood, the street was crowded with a small political rally. Henrique Capriles, who had run against Chávez in the Presidential elections, was the governor of Miranda, and gubernatorial elections were looming in a few weeks' time. Campaign volunteers in a pickup truck were handing out beer and posters. Daza shrugged. He hoped that the pro-Chávez candidate would win.

Daza remarked that he was considering getting into politics himself. As the head of the Tower of David, he'd got to know some city officials, including some of Chávez's people, and they had urged him to consider running for a city councillor's seat. With the changes being proposed by the government, and the creation of the *comunas*, he hoped the Tower of David could acquire legal status. He'd begun to take some soundings in the building. "People keep saying I should run, and that I have a good chance," he said. "So I'm thinking about it."

In downtown Caracas, about a mile from the Tower of David, a splendid new mausoleum is nearing completion. Chávez ordered it built two years ago, to provide a new resting place for the bones of Simón Bolívar. He had previously had Bolívar's remains disinterred and examined, in the belief that he had been poi-

sioned by his enemies, but the autopsy was inconclusive. Afterward, he called for the new tomb.

The building is a slender white wedge that rises, sail-like, a hundred and seventy feet into the sky. It has reportedly cost a hundred and fifty million dollars to build, and, like everything Chávez has done, it is controversial. The construction was secretive, and the mausoleum, which was scheduled to open December 17th, after several postponements, has yet to be inaugurated. Whenever it is completed, it will become the centerpiece of a run-down corner of the city, next to an old military fortress where Chávez was briefly imprisoned after his coup attempt, and the National Pantheon, a nineteenth-century church where Bolívar's remains are watched over by ornately costumed guards. There are persistent rumors that when Chávez dies he will be interred in the mausoleum alongside Bolívar.

Chávez and his followers, of course, are hoping that his struggle will not be laid to rest with him. In 2001, Chávez told me that it was his fervent wish to bring about a "true revolution" in Venezuela. A few years later, though, his old mentor Jorge Giordani seemed concerned that his protégé was not building for permanent revolution. "I'm also a Quixote," he said. "But one must have one's feet planted firmly on the ground. If we still have oil, we will have a real country in twenty years' time, but we have a lot to do between now and then." Giordani paused, and recited a Venezuelan adage: "If the dog dies, this is over."

Now, as Chávez lies dying, men who call themselves *chavistas* convey his purported wishes to his citizens. In the past months, Venezuelans have had little reliable information about his intentions or the true state of his health, and therefore little say in their own future. For them, Chávez's death represents the end of a long and enthralling performance. They gave him power, in one election after another: they are the victims of their affection for a charismatic man, whom they allowed to become the central character on the Venezuelan stage, at the expense of everything else. After nearly a generation, Chávez leaves his countrymen with many unanswered questions and only one certainty: the revolution that he tried to bring about never really took place. It began with Chávez, and with him, most likely, it will end. ♦