CHAPTER 1 STILL SEEKING EL DORADO

Peru is a beggar sitting on a bench of gold.

—Old Peruvian adage

In the stinging cold just before dawn, Leonor Gonzáles leaves her stone hut on a glacial mountain peak in the Peruvian Andes to trudge up a path and scour rock spills for flecks of gold. Like generations before her, she has teetered under heavy bags of stone, pounded it with a crude hammer, ground it to gravel with her feet, crushed it to a fine sand. On rare, lucky days, she teases out infinitesimally small motes of gold by swirling the grit in a mercury solution. She is only forty-seven, but her teeth are gone. Her face is cooked by a relentless sun, parched by the freezing winds. Her hands are the color of cured meat, the fingers humped and gnarled. She is partially blind. But every day as the sun peeks over the icy promontory of Mount Ananea, she joins the women of La Rinconada, the highest human habitation in the world, to scale the steep escarpment that leads toward the mines, scavenging for all that shines, stuffing stones into the backbreaking rucksack she will lug down-mountain at dusk.

It might be a scene from biblical times, but it is not. Leonor Gonzáles climbed that ridge yesterday during the pallaqueo, the hunt for gold her forebears have undertaken since time immemorial, and she will climb it again tomorrow, doing what she has done since she first accompanied her mother to work at the age of four. Never mind that a Canadian mining company less than thirty miles away is performing the same task more efficiently with hulking, twenty-first-century machinery; or that just beyond Lake Titicaca—the cradle of Inca civilization—Australian, Chinese, and United States corporate giants are investing millions for state-of-the-art equipment to join the Latin American mining bonanza. The business of digging deep into the earth's entrails to wrest glittering treasures has long, abiding roots on this continent and, in many ways, defines the people we Latin Americans have become.

Leonor Gonzáles is the embodiment of "silver, sword, and stone," the triad of this book's title—three obsessions that have held Latin Americans fast for the past millennium. "Silver" is the lust for precious metals; the infatuation that rules

Leonor's life as it has ruled generations before her: a frantic hunt for a prize she cannot use, a substance that is wanted in cities she will never see. The passion for gold and silver is an obsession that burned brightly before Columbus's time, consumed Spain in its relentless conquest of America, drove a cruel system of slavery and colonial exploitation, sparked a bloody revolution, addled the region's stability for centuries, and morphed into Latin America's best hope for the future. Just as Inca and Aztec rulers made silver and gold symbols of their glory, just as sixteenth-century Spain grew rich and powerful as the preeminent purveyor of precious metals, mining remains at the heart of the Latin American promise today. That obsession lives on—the glistening troves extracted and sent away by the boatloads—even though the quarries are finite. Even though the frenzy must end.

Leonor is no less a product of "silver" than she is of the "sword," Latin America's abiding culture of the strongman that accompanies it: the region's proclivity, as Gabriel García Márquez, José Martí, Mario Vargas Llosa, and others have pointed out, to solve problems by unilateral and alarming displays of power. By brutality. By a reliance on muscle, coercion, and an overweening love for dictators and the military: la mano dura, the iron fist. Violence was certainly the easy expedient in the day of the war-loving Moche in AD 800, but it grew more so under the Aztec and Inca Empires, was perfected and institutionalized by Spain under the cruel tutelage of Cortés and Pizarro, and became ingrained during the hellish wars of Latin American independence in the nineteenth century. State terrorism, dictatorships, endless revolutions, Argentina's Dirty War, Peru's Shining Path, Colombia's FARC, Mexico's crime cartels, and twenty-first-century drug wars are its legacies. The sword remains as much a Latin American instrument of authority and power as it ever was five hundred years ago when the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas lamented that the Spanish colonies were "choak'd up with Indian Blood and Gore."

No, Leonor Gonzáles is no stranger to oppression and violence. Her ancestors, people of the altiplano, were conquered and forced into labor by the Incas and then reconquered and enslaved by Spanish conquistadors. For centuries, her people were relocated by force at the whims of the mitmaq—the compulsory labor system that the Inca Empire, and then Spain, demanded of the vanquished. Or they were taken away in the Church's "reductions": massive resettlements of indigenous populations in the ongoing enterprise to save their souls. In the nineteenth century, Leonor's people were herded at sword's point to fight and be sacrificed on opposing sides of the revolution. In the twentieth century, they were driven higher and higher into the snowy reaches of the Andes to escape the wanton massacres of the Shining Path. But even in that airless aerie, eighteen thousand feet above sea level, the sword has continued to be master. Today in the wild, lawless mining town of La Rinconada, where murder and rape are rampant—where human sacrifices are offered to mountain demons and no government police chief dares go—Leonor is as vulnerable to brute force as her

forebears were five hundred years ago.

Every day when she rises, Leonor touches a small, gray stone that she keeps on a ledge by her cot, near a faded photograph of her dead husband, Juan Sixto Ochochoque. Every night, before she crawls under a blanket with her children and grandchildren, she touches it again. “His soul rests inside,” she told me when I visited her in her frigid one-room hut, no larger than ten feet squared, where she lives on the lip of a mountain glacier with two sons, two daughters, and two grandchildren. She and Juan, the ruddy-faced miner in the photo, were never actually married; no one in Leonor’s acquaintance has ever taken the Church’s vows. To her, Juan is her husband and the father of her children; and, from the day a mine-shaft collapsed, and his lungs filled with the deadly fumes that killed him, that round, gray stone at the head of her bed has come to represent him even as it represents the whole of Leonor’s spiritual life. Like many indigenous people—from the Rio Grande to the Tierra del Fuego—Leonor accepts Catholic teachings only as they reflect the gods of her ancestors. Virgin Mary is another face for Pachamama, Earth Mother, the ground beneath our feet, from which all bounty springs. God is another word for Apu, the spirit that dwells in mountains, whose energy comes from the sun and lives on in stones. Satan is Supay, a demanding rascal-god who rules death, the underworld, the dark entrails of ground below ground, and needs to be appeased.

Leonor’s stone stands for the third obsession that has held Latin America in its grip for the past thousand years: the region’s fervent adherence to religious institutions, whether they be temples, churches, elaborate cathedrals, or piles of sacred rock. The first order of business when pre-Columbian powers conquered one another a thousand years ago was to pound the others’ gods to rubble. With the arrival of the conquistadors in the Americas, the triumphant monuments of stone erected by the Aztecs and the Incas to honor their gods were often reduced to mere pedestals for mighty cathedrals. The significance was not lost on the conquered. Rock was piled on rock, palaces were built on top of palaces, a church straddled every important indigenous temple or huaca, and religion became a powerful, concrete reminder of who had won the day. Even as time wore on—even as Catholicism became the single most powerful institution in Latin America, even as some of its adherents began to be wooed away by Pentecostalism—Latin Americans have remained a resolutely religious population. They cross themselves when they pass a church. They build shrines in their homes. They carry images of saints in their wallets, talk to their coca leaves, hang crosses from rearview mirrors, fill their pockets with sacred stones.

Leonor is not alone in her thrall to silver, sword, and stone. The majority of Latin Americans are bound to her by no more than a few degrees of separation. Extracting ore in Mexico, Peru, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia has resumed the primacy it had four

hundred years ago, and the business of mining has gone a long way to redefine progress, boost economies, lift people out of poverty, and touch every aspect of the social fabric. Precious minerals pass from rural to urban handlers, from brown hands to white, from poor to rich. The gold that is dug from the rock beneath Leonor's hut fuels an elaborate economy: the seedy beer hall a few steps from her door, the flocks of child prostitutes down-mountain in Putina, the bankers in Lima, geologists in Canada, socialites in Paris, investors in China. It is an industry whose profits ultimately go overseas to Toronto, Denver, London, Shanghai, much as gold once crossed the Atlantic Ocean in Spanish galleons and made its way to Madrid, Amsterdam, and Peking. The general flow of revenue has not changed. It lingers briefly—enough for a beer at the cantina or a fly-bitten shank of goat to hang from the roof beam—and then it goes out. Away. Over there.

The "sword," too, has weathered history, from the keenly honed slate blades that Chimú warriors used to disembowel their enemies, to the crude kitchen knives deployed by Zeta gangsters in the Mexican city of Juárez. A culture of violence persists in Latin America, lurking in shadows, waiting to erupt, threatening the region's fitful progress toward peace and prosperity. The sword has been the ever-ready instrument in this precinct of stark inequalities: as useful in Augusto Pinochet's 1970s Chile, among a largely white, literate population, as in today's blood-soaked streets of Honduras among the illiterate poor. The ten most dangerous cities in the world are all in Latin American countries. Little wonder that the United States has seen a flood of desperate immigrants fleeing Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador. Fear is the engine that drives Latin Americans north.

As for "stone's" purchase on the spirit, there is no question that organized religion has played—and continues to play—a crucial role in these Americas. From the days of the Inca, when the great rulers Pachacutec Inca Yupanqui and Tupac Inca Yupanqui "turned the world" and expanded the empire by conquering vast swaths of South America and forcing the vanquished masses to worship the sun, faith has been a weapon of coercion as well as an instrument for social cohesion. The Aztecs shared the Incas' appetite for conquest as well as a keen appreciation for the uses of religion. But they had a starkly different approach to conversion: they often adopted the deities of the newly conquered with the understanding that someone else's god might have much in common with one's own. Stroll through any Mesoamerican or Andean village, and you will find lively expressions of those ancient beliefs in contemporary art and ritual traditions.

Today, although various Amerindian, African, Asian, and European faiths are practiced in Latin America, the region remains firmly stamped with the one Spain imposed on it more than five hundred years ago. It is adamantly Catholic. A full 40 percent of all the world's Catholics reside here, and, as a result, a strong bond unites the

believers, from Montevideo, Uruguay, to Monterrey, Mexico. Indeed Simón Bolívar, who liberated six South American republics, imagined the Spanish-speaking, Catholic nations of those Americas as a potentially powerful unified force in the greater world. The Spanish Crown may have worked mightily to keep its colonies from communicating, trading, or establishing human concord, but it joined them forever when it led them to the feet of Jesus. In the end, Bolívar was never able to fashion a strong Pan-American union from the diverse, restless population of Spanish-speaking Christians that he liberated. But the Church today remains, as it was in Bolívar's time, the most trusted institution in all of Latin America.

This is a book about three components of Latin American society that have shaped it for a thousand years. It does not pretend to be a definitive, comprehensive history. Rather, it is meant to cast light on the legacy of the Latin American people and on three elements of our past that may suggest something about our future. Certainly there are other obsessions we share that make for a brighter portrait of the region: our infatuation with art, for instance; our enthusiasm for music, our culinary passions, our love of rhetoric. The Spanish language that flows from the pens of Latin Americans has produced one of the most strikingly original literatures of our time. There are also few regional traits that shine more brightly than our fidelity to family or our propensity for human warmth. But none of these, in my view, has moved populations, marked the landscape, and written history as forcefully as Latin America's fixations on mining, or its romance with brute force, or religion.

These obsessions are not tidy strands that can be addressed as independent narratives. Their histories over the course of the past one thousand years have clashed, overlapped, become intricately intertwined, just as gold, faith, and fear are tightly woven skeins in the life of Leonor Gonzáles. But Latin America's inclinations to religion and violence, along with its stubborn adherence to an ancient form of extractive commerce that doesn't necessarily lead to lasting development, have fascinated me for years. I believe the history of these inclinations can tell us much about who we Latin Americans are. And we are, as a historian once said, "a continent made to undermine conventional truths," a region unto ourselves, unlike any other, where theories or doctrines fashioned elsewhere seldom have purchase. I also believe that, for all the years I have spent following the ways and warps of this skeined history, it cannot possibly tell the whole story.

How do you explain a hemisphere and its people? It's an impossible task, really, made more complicated by five hundred years of skewed historical record. All the same, I am convinced that there is a commonality—a concrete character, if you will—that emerges from the Spanish American experience. I am also convinced that this character is a direct product of the momentous confrontation between two worlds. We are defined by a grudging tolerance born of this experience. There is no northern equivalent.

In Latin America, we may not always know exactly what breed we represent, but we do know that we are more bound to this “New World” than we are to the “Old.” After centuries of unrestrained mixing, we are more brown than white, more black or Indian than some might think. But, since raw political power has been held stubbornly by every anxious generation of “whites” since First Contact, a true reckoning of our identity has always been a tenuous proposition. Call it what you will, but the enduring presence of indigenous history in Latin America—quite unlike its counterpart in the North—suggests there is a very different explanation here. I offer mine in all humility in hopes of relaying something of the perspective it has given me.

Although my father’s family has had roots in Peru for almost five hundred years, my grandmother Rosa Cisneros y Cisneros de Arana was a great enthusiast of all things Spanish. She often spoke to me of Spain’s custom of sending sons into different walks of life as a way of building the pillars of a robust society. One son, as the logic went, would be a man of the world (a lawyer, politician, or businessman); the second, a military man; the third, a priest. The first would ensure prosperity by having a hand in the nation’s power and wealth; the second would maintain the peace by serving his country as a soldier; the third would throw open the gates to heaven by teaching us the way to God. I never saw reference to this custom made in history books, although I heard of it again and again as I traveled the countries of Latin America. In time, I saw that a banker, a general, and a bishop were indeed pillars of our shared society; they were precisely what kept the oligarchy, genders, and races in the rigid caste system that Spain had created in the first place. That triumvirate of sovereignty—of princes, soldiers, and high priests—had held for the Incas, Muíscas, Mayans, and Aztecs as well. In many cases, a supreme ruler was expected to be all three. Call it what you will, but the formula of triangulated control has worked for centuries in the Americas of the South. It allowed ancient cultures to expand and conquer. It allowed colonizers a firm lock on the pockets, fists, and souls of the colonized. For all Latin America’s gifts to the world—for all the storied civilizations of our past—the region continues to be ruled by what has always held sway here. By silver, sword, and stone.