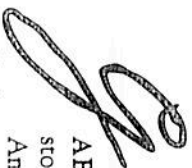


A Very Old Man with
Enormous Wings
A Tale for Children

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ



ABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ (1928-), a master storyteller from Colombia and the most famous Latin American writer, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982 “for his novels and short stories, in which the fantastic and realistic are combined in a richly composed world of imagination.” He is best known for his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), the first Latin American book to become an international bestseller, and for his more recent novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). His other works include short stories, published in a complete collection in 1975, followed by editions of *Collected Stories* in 1984 and 1999 and a fictional biography of Simón Bolívar, *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989).

García Márquez was born into a poor family in Arcataca, a small town on the Caribbean coast of Colombia that he has immortalized in his fiction as the town of Macondo. His mother left him to be reared by his grandparents. With a university education in journalism and law, García Márquez became a journalist and a foreign correspondent. His first short story was published in 1947; his first novella, *Leaf Storm*, was published in 1955. In the early 1960s he settled in Mexico City, where he continues to keep his primary residence.

García Márquez is fond of saying that nothing interesting has happened to him since he left his grandmother’s home. Her legacy of Caribbean-Colombian folklore infuses his fiction with an exuberance and an acceptance of wonder as part of reality. It is the source of his magic realism—which considers both the real and the fantastic, the believable and the incredible, to be part of one coherent and inseparable whole. In his words:

It always amuses me that the biggest praise for my work comes for the imagination while the truth is that there’s not



so much marketplace trash, then got the idea of fencing in the yard and charging five cents admission to see the angel.

The curious came from far away. A travelling carnival arrived with a flying acrobat who buzzed over the crowd several times, but no one paid any attention to him because his wings were not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bar. The most unfortunate invalids on earth came in search of health: a poor woman who since childhood had been counting her heartbeats and had run out of numbers; a Portuguese man who couldn't sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him; a sleepwalker who got up at night to undo the things he had done while awake; and many others with less serious ailments. In the midst of that shipwreck disorder that made the earth tremble, Pelayo and Elisenda were happy with fatigue, for in less than a week they had crammed their rooms with money and the line of pilgrims waiting their turn to enter still reached beyond the horizon.

The angel was the only one who took no part in his own act. He spent his time trying to get comfortable in his borrowed nest, betiddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacramental candles that had been placed along the wire. At first they tried to make him eat some mothballs, which, according to the wisdom of the wise neighbor woman, were the food prescribed for angels. But he turned them down, just as he turned down the papal lunches⁴ that the penitents brought him, and they never found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he was an old man that in the end he ate nothing but eggplant mush. His only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience. Especially during the first days, when the hens pecked at him, searching for the stellar parasites that proliferated in his wings, and the cripples pulled out feathers to touch their defective parts with, and even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing. The only time they succeeded in arousing him was when they burned his side with an iron for branding steers, for he had been motionless for so many hours that they thought he was dead. He awoke with a start, ranting in his hermetic language and with tears in his eyes, and he flapped his wings a couple of times, which brought on a whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust and a gale of panic that did not seem to be of this world. Although many thought that his reaction had been one not of rage but of pain, from then on they were careful not to annoy him, because the majority understood that his passivity was not that of a hero taking his ease but that of a cataclysm in repose.

Father Gonzaga held back the crowd's frivolity with formulas of maidservant inspiration while awaiting the arrival of a final judgment on the nature of the captive. But the mail from Rome⁵ showed no sense of urgency. They spent their time finding out if the prisoner had a navel, if his dialect had any connection with Aramaic, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin,⁶ or whether he wasn't

⁴ papal lunches: Lunches blessed by or required by the pope.

⁵ Rome: Location of the Vatican, the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church.

⁶ navel . . . head of a pin: Various tests to determine whether the angel is genuine. A navel would indicate the angel was human because he had been connected by an umbilical cord to his mother. Aramaic was the dialect spoken by Jesus Christ and his disciples. A question debated by medieval Christian theologians was how many angels could fit on the head of a pin.

just a Norwegian with wings. Those meager letters might have come and gone until the end of time if a providential event had not put an end to the priest's tribulations.

It so happened that during those days, among so many carnival attractions, there arrived in town the travelling show of the woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents. The admission to see her was not only less than the admission to see the angel, but people were permitted to ask her all manner of questions about her absurd state and to examine her up and down so that no one would ever doubt the truth of her horror. She was a frightful tarantula the size of a ram and with the head of a sad maiden. What was most heartrending, however, was not her outlandish shape but the sincere affliction with which she recounted the details of her misfortune. While still practically a child she had sneaked out of her parents' house to go to a dance, and while she was coming back through the woods after having danced all night without permission, a fearful thunderclap rent the sky in two and through the crack came the lightning bolt of brimstone that changed her into a spider. Her only nourishment came from the meatballs that charitable souls chose to toss into her mouth. A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely dignified to look at mortals. Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn't recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. Those consolation miracles, which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel's reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely. That was how Father Gonzaga was cured forever of his insomnia and Pelayo's courtyard went back to being as empty as during the time it had rained for three days and crabs walked through the bedrooms.

The owners of the house had no reason to lament. With the money they saved they built a two-story mansion with balconies and gardens and high netting so that crabs wouldn't get in during the winter and with iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in. Pelayo also set up a rabbit warren close to town and gave up his job as bailiff for good, and Elisenda bought some satin pumps with high heels and many dresses of iridescent silk, the kind worn on Sunday by the most desirable women in those times. The chicken coop was the only thing that didn't receive any attention. If they washed it down with creolin and burned tears of myrrh⁷ inside it every so often, it was not in homage to the angel but to drive away the dungheap stench that still hung everywhere like a ghost and was turning the new house into an old one. At first, when the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the smell, and before the child got his second teeth he'd gone inside the chicken coop to play, where the wires were falling part. The angel was no less standoffish with him than with other mortals, but he tolerated the most ingenious infamies with the patience of a dog who had no illusions. They both came down with the chicken pox at the same time. The

⁷ creolin . . . myrrh: Creolin is a disinfectant. Myrrh is a kind of incense.