

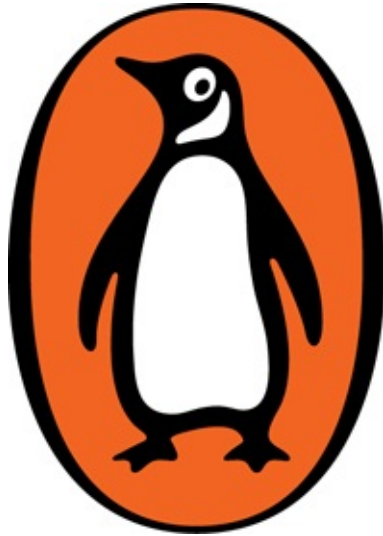


Gabriel García Márquez

'A masterly book' *GUARDIAN*

In Evil
Hour





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in evil hour

Translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa



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Gabriel García Márquez was born in Aracataca, Colombia, in 1927. He studied at the National University of Colombia at Bogotá and later worked as a reporter for the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* and as a foreign correspondent in Rome, Paris, Barcelona, Caracas and New York. He is the author of several novels and collections of stories, including *Eyes of a Blue Dog* (1947), *Leaf Storm* (1955), *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1958), *In Evil Hour* (1962), *Big Mama's Funeral* (1962), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories* (1972), *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), *Strange Pilgrims* (1992), *Of Love and Other Demons* (1994) and *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2005). Many of his books are published by Penguin. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. Gabriel García Márquez died in 2014.

IN EVIL HOUR

‘Márquez weaves together the strands of action, personality and image with impressive skill. A masterly book’ *Guardian*

‘*In Evil Hour* was the book which was to inspire my own career as a novelist. I owe my writing voice to that one book!’ Jim Crace

‘Belongs to the very best of Márquez’s work ... should on no account be missed’ *Financial Times*

‘Underlying the marvellous wit, the inimitable humour and the superbly paced dialogue, there is the author’s own anger, always controlled. A splendid achievement’ *The Times*

‘Márquez writes in this lyrical, magical language that no one else can do’ Salman Rushdie

‘One of this century’s most evocative writers’ Anne Tyler

‘The most important writer of fiction in any language’ Bill Clinton

‘Márquez has insights and sympathies which he can project with the intensity of a reflecting mirror in a bright sun. He dazzles us with powerful effect’ *New Statesman*

‘The vigour and coherence of Márquez’s vision, the brilliance and beauty of his imagery, the narrative tension ... coursing through his pages ... makes it difficult to put down’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘Sentence for sentence, there is hardly another writer in the world so generous with incidental pleasures’ *Independent*

‘Márquez is the master weaver of the real and the conjectured. His descriptive power astounds’ *New Statesman*

‘Underlying the marvellous wit, the inimitable humour and the superbly paced dialogue, there is the author’s own anger, always controlled’ *The Times*

‘Every word and incident counts, everything hangs together, the work is a neatly perfect organism’ *Financial Times*

FATHER ÁNGEL sat up with a solemn effort. He rubbed his eyelids with the bones of his hands, pushed aside the embroidered mosquito netting, and remained sitting on the bare mattress, pensive for an instant, the time indispensable for him to realize that he was alive and to remember the date and its corresponding day on the calendar of saints. Tuesday, October fourth, he thought; and in a low voice he said: "St. Francis of Assisi."

He got dressed without washing and without praying. He was large, ruddy, with the peaceful figure of a domesticated ox, and he moved like an ox, with thick, sad gestures. After attending to the buttoning of his cassock, with the languid attention and the movements with which a harp is tuned, he took down the bar and opened the door to the courtyard. The spikenards in the rain brought back the words of a song to him.

" 'The sea will grow larger with my tears,' " he sighed.

The bedroom was connected to the church by an inside veranda bordered with flowerpots and paved with loose bricks between which the October grass was beginning to grow. Before going into the church, Father Ángel went to the toilet. He urinated abundantly, holding his breath so as not to inhale the intense ammonia smell which brought out tears in him. Then he went out onto the veranda, remembering: "This bark will bear me to your dreams." At the narrow little door of the church he smelled the vapor of the spikenards for the last time.

Inside it smelled bad. There was a long nave, also paved with loose bricks, and with a single door opening on the square. Father Ángel went directly to the bell tower. He saw that the counterweights of the clock were more than a yard above his head and he thought that it was still wound up enough to last a week. The mosquitoes attacked him. He squashed one on the back of his neck with a violent slap and wiped his hand on the bell rope. Then from up above he heard the visceral sound of the complicated mechanical gears and immediately thereafter—dull, deep—the bell tolling five o'clock to his stomach.

He waited until the last resonance died down. Then he grabbed the rope with both hands, wrapped it around his wrists, and made the cracked bronzes ring with peremptory conviction. He had turned sixty-one years of age and the effort of ringing the bells was too strenuous for him, but he had always made the call to mass personally and that exercise strengthened his morale.

Trinidad pushed open the street door while the bells were ringing and went to the corner where she had set the traps for the mice. She found something that brought on repugnance and pleasure in her at the same time: a small massacre.

She opened the first trap, picked up the mouse by the tail with her thumb and forefinger, and threw it into a cardboard box. Father Ángel had just opened the door onto the square.

"Good morning, Father," Trinidad said.

His baritone voice didn't register. The desolate square, the almond trees sleeping in the rain, the village motionless in the inconsolable October dawn, produced in him a feeling of abandonment. But when he grew accustomed to the sound of the rain, he made out, in the rear of the square, clear and somewhat unreal, Pastor's clarinet. Only then did he respond to the good morning.

“Pastor wasn’t with the people serenading,” he said.

“No,” Trinidad confirmed. She approached with the box of dead mice. “It was all guitars.”

“They spent almost two hours on one silly little song,” the priest said. “ ‘The sea will grow larger with my tears.’ Isn’t that how it goes?”

“That’s Pastor’s new song,” she said.

Motionless by the door, the priest experienced an instantaneous fascination. For many years he had heard Pastor’s clarinet as two blocks away he would sit down to practice every day at five o’clock with his stool up against the prop of his dovecote. It was the mechanism of the town functioning with precision: first the five bell tolls of five o’clock; then the first call to mass, and then Pastor’s clarinet in the courtyard of his house, purifying the pigeon-filth-laden air with diaphanous and articulated notes.

“The music is good,” the priest reacted, “but the lyrics are silly. The words can roll either backward or forward and it won’t make any difference: ‘This bark will bear me to your dreams.’ ”

He turned half around, smiling at his own discovery, and went to light the altar. Trinidad followed him. She was wearing a long white robe with sleeves down to her knuckles and the blue silk sash of a lay order. Her eyes were of an intense black under the merged eyebrows.

“They were around here all night,” the priest said.

“At Margot Ramírez’ place,” said Trinidad distractedly, shaking the dead mice in the box. “But last night there was something better than the serenade.”

The priest stopped and fixed his eyes of silent blue on her.

“What was that?”

“Lampoons,” said Trinidad. And she let out a nervous little laugh.

Three houses beyond, César Montero was dreaming about elephants. He’d seen them at the movies on Sunday. Rain had fallen a half hour before the film was over and now it was continuing in his dream.

César Montero turned the whole weight of his monumental body against the wall while terrified natives fled the herd of elephants. His wife pushed him softly, but neither of them woke up. “We’re leaving,” he murmured, and recovered his initial position. Then he woke up. At that moment the second call to mass sounded.

It was a room with large screened openings. The window on the square, also screened, had a cretonne curtain with yellow flowers. On the small night table there was a portable radio, a lamp, and a clock with a luminous dial. On the other side, against the wall, an enormous wardrobe with mirrored doors. While he was putting on his riding boots, César Montero began to hear Pastor’s clarinet. The raw leather laces were stiffened with mud. He pulled hard on them, drawing them through his closed hand, which was rougher than the leather of the laces. Then he looked for his spurs, but he couldn’t find them under the bed. He went on getting dressed in the dark, trying not to make any noise so as not to awaken his wife. As he was buttoning up his shirt he looked at the time on the clock on the table, then went back to looking for the spurs under the bed. First he searched for them with his hands. Progressively, he got down on all fours and started scratching under the bed. His wife woke up.

“What are you looking for?”

“The spurs.”

“They’re hanging behind the wardrobe,” she said. “You put them there yourself on Saturday.”

She pushed aside the mosquito netting and turned on the light. He stood up, shamefaced. He was monumental, with square, solid shoulders, but his movements were elastic, even when he wore his boots, the soles of which looked like two strips of wood. His health was somewhat barbarous. He seemed of an indefinite age, but the skin on his neck showed that it had gone beyond fifty. He sat on the bed to put on his spurs.

“It’s still raining,” she said, feeling that her aching bones had absorbed the dampness of the night. “I feel like a sponge.”

Small, bony, with a long, sharp nose, she had the quality of not seeming to have finished waking up. She tried to see the rain through the curtain. César Montero finished adjusting his spurs, stood up, and stamped several times on the floor. The house shook with the copper spurs.

“The jaguar gets fat in October,” he said.

But his wife, in ecstasy over Pastor’s melody, didn’t hear him. When she looked at him again he was combing his hair in front of the wardrobe, his legs apart and his head bent over, because he was too tall for the mirrors.

She was following Pastor’s melody in a low voice.

“They were plucking that song all night long,” he said.

“It’s very pretty,” she said.

She untied a ribbon from the headboard of the bed, gathered up her hair at the back of her neck, and sighed, completely awake: “ ‘I’ll stay in your dreams until death.’ ” He paid no attention to her. From a drawer in the wardrobe, where, besides some jewels, there were a small woman’s watch and a fountain pen, he took out a billfold with some money. He extracted four bills and returned the wallet to the same place. Then he put six shotgun shells in his shirt pocket.

“If the rain keeps up, I won’t be back on Saturday,” he said.

When he opened the door to the courtyard, he paused for an instant on the threshold, breathing in the somber smell of October while his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. He was going to close the door, when the alarm clock in the bedroom rang.

His wife leaped out of bed. He remained in suspense, his hand on the knob, until she turned off the alarm. Then he looked at her for the first time, pensively.

“Last night I dreamed about elephants,” he said.

Then he closed the door and went to saddle up the mule.

The rain grew stronger before the third call. A low wind pulled the last rotten leaves off the almond trees on the square. The street lights went out but the houses were still locked. César Montero rode the mule into the kitchen and without dismounting, shouted to his wife to bring him his raincoat. He took off the double-barreled shotgun which he had slung over his shoulder and fastened it horizontally with the saddle straps. His wife appeared in the kitchen with the raincoat.

“Wait for it to clear,” she told him without conviction.

He put the raincoat on silently. Then he looked toward the courtyard.

“It won’t clear until December.”

She accompanied him with her gaze to the other end of the veranda. The rain was pelting the rusty sheets on the roof, but he was going. Spurring the mule, he had to bend over in the saddle so as not to

hit the crossbeam of the door as he went into the courtyard. The drops from the eaves exploded like buckshot on his back. From the main door he shouted without turning his head:

“See you Saturday.”

“See you Saturday,” she said.

The only door on the square that was open was that of the church. César Montero looked up and saw the sky, heavy and low, two feet above his head. He crossed himself and spurred the mule, making it whirl about several times on its hind legs until the animal got a grip on the soapy soil. That was when he saw the piece of paper stuck to the door of his house.

He read it without dismounting. The water had dissolved the colors, but the text, written with a brush in rough printed letters, could still be made out. César Montero brought the mule over to the wall, pulled off the paper, and tore it to bits.

With a slap of the reins he pressed the mule into a short trot, good for many hours. He left the square through a narrow and twisted street with adobe-walled houses whose doors turned out the dregs of sleep when they were opened. He caught the smell of coffee. Only when he left the last houses of the town behind did he turn the mule around and, with the same short and regular trot, return to the square and stop in front of Pastor’s house. There he dismounted, took off the shotgun, and tied the mule to the prop, performing each action in the precise time needed.

The door was unbolted, blocked at the bottom by a giant sea shell. César Montero went into the small shadowy living room. He heard a sharp note and then an expectant silence. He passed by four chairs arranged around a small table with a woolen cloth and a vase with artificial flowers. Finally he stopped in front of the courtyard door, threw back the hood of his raincoat, released the safety catch of the shotgun by feel, and with a calm, almost friendly voice, called:

“Pastor.”

Pastor appeared in the frame of the door, screwing off the mouthpiece of the clarinet. He was a thin, straight lad with an incipient line of mustache trimmed with scissors. When he saw César Montero with his heels planted on the earthen floor and the shotgun at waist level pointed at him, Pastor opened his mouth. But he didn’t say anything. He turned pale and smiled. César Montero first firmed his heel against the ground, then the butt, with his elbow, against his hip; then he clenched his teeth and, at the same time, the trigger. The house shook with the explosion, but César Montero didn’t know whether it was before or after the commotion that from the other side of the door he saw Pastor dragging himself with the undulation of a worm along a furrow of tiny bloody feathers.

The mayor had begun to fall asleep at the moment of the shot. He’d spent three sleepless nights in torment because of the pain in his molar. That morning, at the first call to mass, he took his eighth analgesic. The pain gave way. The crackling of the rain on the zinc roof helped him fall asleep, but the molar was still throbbing painlessly while he slept. When he heard the shot he awoke with a leap and grabbed the cartridge belt and revolver that he always left on a chair beside the hammock, within reach of his left hand. But since he could hear only the noise of the drizzle, he thought it had been a nightmare and he felt the pain again.

He had a slight fever. In the mirror he noticed that his cheek was swelling. He opened a jar of mentholated vaseline and rubbed it on the painful part, tight and unshaven. Suddenly he caught the sound of distant voices through the rain. He went out onto the balcony. The residents of the street,

some in their nightclothes, were running toward the square. A boy turned his head toward him, raised his arms, and shouted without stopping:

“César Montero has killed Pastor.”

On the square, César Montero was walking around with his shotgun pointed at the crowd. The mayor recognized him with a little trouble. He took his revolver in his left hand and started forward toward the center of the square. The people made way for him. Out of the poolroom came a policeman holding his rifle, aiming at César Montero. The mayor said to him in a low voice: “Don’t shoot, you animal.” He holstered his revolver, took the rifle away from the policeman, and continued toward the center of the square.

“César Montero,” the mayor shouted, “give me that shotgun.”

César Montero hadn’t seen him until then. With a leap he turned toward him. The mayor tightened his finger on the trigger, but he didn’t fire.

“Come get it,” César Montero shouted.

The mayor was holding the rifle with his left hand and was wiping his eyelids with the right. He calculated every step, his finger tense on the trigger and his eyes fixed on César Montero. Suddenly he stopped and spoke with a friendly cadence:

“Toss the shotgun on the ground, César. Don’t do anything else foolish.”

César Montero drew back. The mayor continued on, his finger tight on the trigger. He didn’t move a single muscle in his body until César Montero lowered the shotgun and dropped it. Then the mayor realized that he was wearing only his pajama bottoms, that he was sweating in the rain, and that his tooth had stopped aching.

The houses opened up. Two policemen armed with rifles ran to the center of the square. The crowd poured in behind them. The policemen leaped in a half turn and shouted, pointing their rifles:

“Back.”

The mayor shouted in a calm voice, not looking at anyone:

“Clear the square.”

The crowd dispersed. The mayor frisked César Montero without making him take off his raincoat. He found four shells in his shirt pocket, and in the back pants pocket a switchblade knife with a bone handle. In another pocket he found a notebook, a ring with three keys, and four one-hundred-peso bills. Impassively, César Montero let himself be searched, his arms open, moving his body only to facilitate the operation. When he was finished, the mayor called the two policemen, gave them the things, and turned César Montero over to them.

“Take him to the second floor of the town hall,” he ordered. “I’m holding you responsible for him.”

César Montero took off the raincoat. He gave it to one of the policemen and walked between them, indifferent to the rain and the perplexity of the people concentrated on the square. The mayor, thoughtfully, watched him go away. Then he turned to the crowd, made a gesture of shooing chickens and shouted:

“Break it up.”

Drying his face with his bare arm, he crossed the square and went into Pastor’s house.

Collapsed in a chair was the dead man’s mother, in the midst of women fanning her with pitiless diligence. The mayor pushed a woman aside. “Give her air,” he said. The woman turned toward him.

“She’d just left for mass,” she said.

“All right,” the mayor said, “but now let her breathe.”

Pastor was on the porch, face down by the dovecote, on a bed of bloody feathers. There was an intense smell of pigeon filth. A group of men were trying to lift the body when the mayor appeared in the doorway.

“Back off,” he said.

The men put the body back down among the feathers, in the same position that they had found it, and withdrew silently. After examining the body, the mayor rolled it over. There was a dispersion of tiny feathers. At waist level there were more feathers, sticking to the still warm and living blood. He pushed them away with his hands. The shirt was torn and the belt buckle broken. Underneath the shirt he saw the disclosed viscera. The wound had stopped bleeding.

“It was with a jaguar gun,” one of the men said.

The mayor stood up. He cleaned off the bloody feathers on a prop of the dovecote, still looking at the corpse. He ended by wiping his hand on his pajama pants and said to the group:

“Don’t move him from there.”

“He’s going to leave him stretched out there,” one of the men said.

“We have to draw up the removal document,” the mayor said.

Inside the house the wailing of the women began. The mayor made his way through the shouts and the suffocating smells that were beginning to cut off the air in the room. At the street door he ran into Father Ángel.

“He’s dead,” the priest exclaimed, perplexed.

“Dead as a pig,” the mayor answered.

The houses around the square were open. The rain had stopped but the heavy sky floated over the roofs without so much as a chink for the sun. Father Ángel held the mayor back by the arm.

“César Montero is a good man,” he said. “This must have been a moment of confusion.”

“I know that,” the mayor said impatiently. “Don’t worry, Father, nothing’s going to happen to him. Go inside; that’s where they need you.”

He went away with a certain haste and ordered the policemen to call off the guard. The crowd, held back behind a line until then, ran toward Pastor’s house. The mayor went into the poolroom, where a policeman was waiting for him with a set of clean clothing: his lieutenant’s uniform.

Ordinarily the establishment wasn’t open at that hour. On that day, before seven o’clock, it was crowded. Around the tables which seated four or against the bar, men were drinking coffee. Most of them still wore their pajama tops and slippers.

The mayor got undressed in front of everyone, half dried himself with the pajama pants, and began to dress in silence, hanging on the comments. When he left the place he was completely informed of the details of the incident.

“Have a care,” he shouted from the door. “Anybody who stirs up the town on me I’ll clap in the poky.”

He went down the stone-paved street without saying hello to anyone but aware of the town’s excited state. He was young, with relaxed movements, and with every step he revealed his aim of making his presence felt.

At seven o'clock the launches that carried cargo and passengers three times a week whistled as they left the pier, with no one paying the attention they did on other days. The mayor went down along the arcade, where the Syrian merchants were beginning to display their colorful wares. Dr. Octavio Giraldo, an ageless physician with a headful of patent leather curls, was watching the launches go down-stream from the door of his office. He, too, was wearing his pajama top and slippers.

"Doctor," the mayor said, "get dressed so you can go perform the autopsy."

The doctor looked at him, intrigued. He revealed a long row of solid white teeth. "So we're doing autopsies now," he said, and added:

"That's great progress, obviously."

The mayor tried to smile, but the sensitivity of his cheek prevented it. He covered his mouth with his hand.

"What's the matter?" the doctor asked.

"A bastardly molar."

Dr. Giraldo seemed disposed to conversation. But the mayor was in a hurry.

At the end of the dock he knocked on the door of a house that had walls of ditch reeds without mud and a palm roof that came down almost to water level. A woman with greenish skin, seven months pregnant, opened for him. She was barefoot. The mayor pushed her to one side and went into the shadowy living room.

"Judge," he called.

Judge Arcadio appeared at the inside door, dragging his clogs. He was wearing drill pants, with no belt, held up under his navel and naked torso.

"Get a body removal form ready," the mayor said.

Judge Arcadio gave a whistle of perplexity.

"Where did you get that novel idea from?"

The mayor followed him slowly into the bedroom. "This is different," he said, opening the window to purify the sleep-laden air. "It's best to do things properly." He wiped the dust from his hands onto his pressed pants and asked, without the slightest indication of sarcasm:

"Do you know what a body removal order is?"

"Of course," the judge said.

The mayor examined his hands at the window. "Get your secretary so he can do what writing there is," he said, again with no veiled intention. Then he turned toward the girl, the palms of his hands held out. There were traces of blood.

"Where can I wash?"

"In the tank," she said.

The mayor went out into the courtyard. The girl looked in the chest for a clean towel and wrapped a cake of scented soap in it.

She went out into the courtyard just as the mayor was returning to the bedroom shaking his hands.

"I was bringing you the soap," she said.

"It's all right this way," the mayor said. He looked at the palms of his hands again. He took the towel and dried himself, pensive, looking at Judge Arcadio.

"He was covered with pigeon feathers," he said.

Sitting on the bed, taking measured sips from a cup of black coffee, he waited until Judge Arcadio finished getting dressed. The girl followed them through the living room.

“Until that molar’s pulled out, the swelling won’t go down,” she said to the mayor.

He pushed Judge Arcadio out into the street, turned to look at her, and touched her bulging belly with his forefinger.

“What about this swelling? When will it go down?”

“Any day now,” she said.

Father Ángel didn’t take his customary evening walk. After the funeral he stopped to chat at a house in the lower part of town and stayed there until dusk. He felt well, in spite of the fact that the prolonged rains ordinarily brought on pain in his spine. When he got home the street lights were on.

Trinidad was watering the flowers on the porch. The priest asked her about the unconsecrated hosts, and she answered that she’d put them on the main altar. The fog of mosquitoes enveloped him when he lighted the lamp in his room. Before closing the door he fumigated the room endlessly with insecticide, sneezing because of the smell. He was sweating when he finished. He changed the black cassock for the white mended one that he wore in private and went to ring the Angelus.

Back in the room, he put a pan on the fire and started frying a piece of meat while he sliced an onion. Then he put everything on a plate where there was a piece of marinated cassava and some cold rice, leftovers from lunch. He took the plate to the table and sat down to eat.

He ate it all at the same time, cutting little pieces of everything and piling them on his fork with the knife. He chewed conscientiously, grinding everything down to the last grain with his silver-capped molars, but with his lips closed. While he did so, he left the knife and fork on the edges of the plate and examined the room with a continuous and perfectly attentive look. Opposite him were the shelves with the thick books of the parish archives. In the corner a wicker rocking chair with a tall back and a cushion sewn on at head level. Behind the rocker there was a screen with a crucifix hanging on it next to a calendar advertising cough medicine. On the other side of the screen was his bedroom.

At the end of his meal, Father Ángel felt asphyxiated. He unwrapped a morsel of guava paste, filled his glass up to the brim with water, and ate the sugary sweet looking at the calendar. Between each mouthful he took a sip of water, without taking his eyes off the calendar. Finally he belched and wiped his lips with his sleeve. For nineteen years he had eaten that way, alone in his study, repeating every movement with scrupulous precision. He’d never felt ashamed of his solitude.

After rosary, Trinidad asked him for money to buy arsenic. The priest refused for the third time, arguing that the traps were sufficient. Trinidad insisted:

“It’s just that the littlest mice steal the cheese and don’t get caught in the traps. That’s why it’s best to poison the cheese.”

The priest admitted to himself that Trinidad was right. But before he could express it, the noisy loudspeaker at the movie theater across the street penetrated the quiet of the church. First it was a dull growl. Then the scratching of the needle on the record and immediately a mambo that started off with a strident trumpet.

“Is there a show tonight?” the priest asked.

Trinidad said there was.

“Do you know what they’re showing?”

“*Tarzan and the Green Goddess*,” Trinidad said. “The same one they couldn’t finish on Sunday because of the rain. Approved for all.”

Father Ángel went to the bottom of the belfry and tolled the bell twelve slow times. Trinidad was puzzled.

“You’re wrong, Father,” she said, waving her hands and with an agitated glow in her eyes. “It’s a movie that’s approved for all. Remember, you didn’t ring the bell once on Sunday.”

“But it’s a lack of consideration for the town,” the priest said, drying the sweat on his neck. And he repeated, panting: “A lack of consideration.”

Trinidad understood.

“All you had to do was to have seen that funeral,” the priest said. “All the men fighting for a chance to carry the coffin.”

Then he sent the girl off, closed the door to the deserted square, and put out the lights in the church. On the porch, on his way back to his bedroom, he slapped his forehead, remembering that he’d forgotten to give Trinidad the money for the arsenic. But he’d forgotten about it again before he reached his room.

A short time later, sitting at his desk, he got ready to finish the letter he’d begun the night before. He’d unbuttoned his cassock down to his stomach and was putting the writing pad, the inkwell, and the blotter in order on the desk while he reached in his pockets for his glasses. Then he remembered having left them in the cassock that he’d worn to the funeral and got up to get them. He’d reread what he’d written the night before and started a new paragraph when three knocks sounded on the door.

“Come in.”

It was the manager of the movie house. Small, pale, very clean-shaven, he wore an expression of fatality. He was dressed in white linen, spotless, and was wearing two-toned shoes. Father Ángel signaled him to sit in the wicker rocking chair, but he took a handkerchief out of his pants, unfolded it scrupulously, dusted off the step, and sat down with his legs apart. Father Ángel saw then that it wasn’t a revolver but a flashlight that he wore in his belt.

“What can I do for you?” the priest asked.

“Father,” the manager said, almost breathless, “forgive me for butting into your affairs, but tonight it must have been a mistake.”

The priest nodded his head and waited.

“*Tarzan and the Green Goddess* is a movie approved for all,” the manager went on. “You yourself recognized that on Sunday.”

The priest tried to interrupt him, but the manager raised one hand as a signal that he hadn’t finished yet.

“I’ve accepted the business of the bell,” he said, “because it’s true, there are immoral movies. But there’s nothing wrong with this one. We intended to show it on Saturday for the children’s matinee.”

Father Ángel explained to him then that, indeed, the movie had no moral classification on the list that he received in the mail every month.

“But having a movie today,” he went on, “shows a lack of consideration since there’s been a death in town. That, too, is a part of morality.”

The manager looked at him.

“Last year the police themselves killed a man inside the movies and as soon as they took the body out the show went on,” he exclaimed.

“It’s different now,” the priest said. “The mayor’s a changed man.”

“When they hold elections again the killing will come back,” the manager replied, exasperated. “Always, ever since the town has been a town, the same thing happens.”

“We’ll see,” the priest said.

The manager examined him with a look of grief. When he spoke again, shaking his shirt to ventilate his chest, his voice had acquired a tone of supplication.

“It’s the third movie approved for all that we’ve had this year,” he said. “On Sunday three reels were left because of the rain and there are a lot of people who want to know how it comes out.”

“The bell has already been rung,” the priest said.

The manager let out a sigh of desperation. He waited, looking at the prelate face on and no longer thinking about anything except the intense heat in the study.

“So there’s nothing that can be done?”

Father Ángel shook his head.

The manager slapped his knees and got up.

“All right,” he said. “What can we do.”

He folded his handkerchief again, dried the sweat on his neck, and examined the study with bitter care.

“This place is an inferno,” he said.

The priest accompanied him to the door. He threw the bolt and sat down to finish the letter. After reading it again from the beginning, he completed the interrupted paragraph and stopped to think. At that moment the music from the loudspeaker stopped. “We would like to announce to our distinguished clientele,” an impersonal voice said, “that tonight’s show has been canceled because the establishment also wishes to join the town in mourning.” Father Ángel, smiling, recognized the manager’s voice.

The heat grew more intense. The curate continued writing, with brief pauses to dry his sweat and reread what he had written, until two sheets were filled. He had just signed it when the rain let loose without warning. A vapor of damp earth penetrated the room. Father Ángel addressed the envelope, closed the inkwell, and was ready to fold the letter. But first he read the last paragraph over again. Then he opened the inkwell and wrote a postscript: *It’s raining again. With this winter and the things I’ve told you about, I think that bitter days await us.*

FRIDAY DAWNED warm and dry. Judge Arcadio, who boasted of having made love three times a night ever since he'd made it for the first time, broke the cords of the mosquito netting that morning and fell to the floor with his wife at the supreme moment, wrapped up in the embroidered canopy.

"Leave it the way it is," she murmured. "I'll fix it later."

They arose completely naked from the midst of the confused nebula of the mosquito net. Judge Arcadio went to the chest to get some clean underwear. When he got back his wife was dressed, putting the mosquito netting in order. He passed by without looking at her and sat down on the other side of the bed to put his shoes on, his breathing still heavy from love. She pursued him. She rested her round, tense stomach against his arm and sought his ear with her teeth. He pushed her away softly.

"Leave me alone," he said.

She let out a laugh loaded with good health. She followed her husband to the other side of the room poking her forefingers into his kidneys. "Giddy-ap, donkey," she said. He gave a leap and pushed her hands away. She left him alone and laughed again, but suddenly she became serious and shouted:

"Oh, my God!"

"What is it?" he asked.

"The door was wide open," she shouted. "That's the limit of shamelessness."

She went into the bathroom bursting with laughter.

Judge Arcadio didn't wait for breakfast. Comforted by the mint in his toothpaste, he went out onto the street. There was a copper sun. The Syrians sitting by the doors of their shops were contemplating the peaceful river. As he passed by Dr. Giraldo's office he scratched his nail on the screen of the door and shouted without stopping:

"Doctor, what's the best cure for a headache?"

The physician answered from inside:

"Not having drunk anything the night before."

At the dock a group of women were commenting in loud voices about the contents of a new lampoon nailed up the night before. Since the day had dawned clear and rainless, the women who were by on their way to five o'clock mass had read it and now the whole town was informed. Judge Arcadio didn't stop. He felt like an ox with a ring in his nose being led to the poolroom. There he asked for a cold beer and an aspirin. It had just struck nine but the establishment was already full.

"The whole town has a headache," Judge Arcadio said.

He took the bottle to a table where three men seemed perplexed over their glasses of beer. He sat down in the empty seat.

"Is that mess still going on?" he asked.

"There were four of them this morning."

"The one everybody read," one of the men said, "was the one about Raquel Contreras."

Judge Arcadio swallowed the aspirin and drank his beer from the bottle. The first swallow was distasteful, but then his stomach adjusted and he felt new and without a past.

"What did it say?"

“Foolishness,” the man said. “That the trips she took this year weren’t to get her dentures fitted, as she said, but to get an abortion.”

“They didn’t have to go to the trouble of putting up a lampoon,” Judge Arcadio said. “Everybody was going around saying that.”

Even though the hot sun hurt him in the depths of his eyes when he left the establishment, he didn’t feel the confused queasiness of dawn then. He went directly to the courthouse. His secretary, a skinny old man who was plucking a chicken, received him over the frames of his glasses with a look of incredulity.

“To what do we owe this miracle?”

“We have to get this mess in order,” the judge said.

The secretary went out into the courtyard, dragging his slippers, and he handed the half-plucked chicken over the wall to the cook at the hotel. Eleven months after taking over his post, Judge Arcadio had settled himself at his desk for the first time.

The run-down office was divided into two sections by a wooden railing. In the outer section there was a platform, also of wood, under the picture of Justice blindfolded with a scale in her hand. Inside two old desks facing each other, some shelves with dusty books, and the typewriter. On the wall over the judge’s desk, a copper crucifix. On the wall opposite, a framed lithograph: a smiling, fat, bald man, his chest crossed by the presidential sash, and underneath a gilt inscription: *Peace and Justice*. The lithograph was the only new thing in the office.

The secretary wrapped a handkerchief around his face and began to clean the desks with a duster. “If you don’t cover your nose, you’ll get a coughing attack,” he said. The advice wasn’t taken. Judge Arcadio leaned back in the swivel chair, stretching out his legs to test the springs.

“Will it fall over?” he asked.

The secretary said no with his head. “When they killed Judge Vitela,” he said, “the springs broke, but they’ve been fixed.” Without taking off the kerchief, he went on:

“The mayor himself ordered it fixed when the government changed and special investigators began to appear from all sides.”

“The mayor wants this office to function,” the judge said.

He opened the center drawer, took out a bunch of keys, and went on opening the drawers one by one. They were full of papers. He examined them superficially, picking them up with his forefinger to be sure that there was nothing to attract his attention, and then he closed the drawers and put the items on the desk in order: a glass inkwell with one red and one blue receptacle, and a fountain pen for each receptacle, of the respective color. The ink had dried up.

“The mayor likes you,” the secretary said.

Rocking in his chair, the judge followed him with a somber look as he cleaned the railing. The secretary contemplated him as if he never meant to forget him under that light, at that instant, and in that position, and he said, pointing at him with his finger:

“Just the way you are now, exactly, was how Judge Vitela was when they shot him up.”

The judge touched the pronounced veins on his temples. The headache was coming back.

“I was there,” the secretary went on, pointing to the typewriter, as he went to the other side of the railing. Without interrupting his tale, he leaned on the railing with the duster aimed at Judge Arcadio

like a rifle. He looked like a mail robber in a cowboy movie.

“The three policemen stood like this,” he said. “Judge Vitela just managed to see them and raise his hands, saying very slowly: ‘Don’t kill me.’ But right away the chair went in one direction and he in the other, riddled with lead.”

Judge Arcadio squeezed his skull with his hands. He felt his brain throbbing. The secretary took off his mask and hung the duster behind the door. “And all because when he was drunk he said he was here to guarantee the sanctity of the ballot,” he said. He remained suspended, looking at Judge Arcadio, who doubled over the desk with his hands on his stomach.

“Are you having trouble?”

The judge said he was. He told him about the night before and asked him to go to the poolroom and get an aspirin and two cold beers. When he finished the first beer, Judge Arcadio couldn’t find the slightest trace of remorse in his heart. He was lucid.

The secretary sat in front of the typewriter.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“Nothing,” the judge said.

“Then if you’ll allow me, I’ll go find María and help her pluck the chickens.”

The judge was against it. “This is an office for the administration of justice and not the plucking of chickens,” he said. He examined his underling from top to bottom with an air of pity and added:

“Furthermore, you’ve got to get rid of those slippers and come to the office with shoes on.”

The heat became more intense with the approach of noon. When twelve o’clock struck, Judge Arcadio had consumed a dozen beers. He was floating in memories. With a dreamy anxiety he was talking about a past without privations, with long Sundays of sea and insatiable mulatto women who made love standing up behind the doors of entranceways. “That’s what life was like then,” he said, snapping his thumb against his forefinger at the clamlike stupor of the secretary, who listened without speaking, approving with his head. Judge Arcadio felt dull, but ever more alive in his memories.

When one o’clock sounded in the belfry, the secretary showed signs of impatience.

“The soup’s getting cold,” he said.

The judge wouldn’t let him get up. “A person doesn’t always come across a man of talent in towns like this,” he said, and the secretary thanked him, worn out by the heat, and shifted in his chair. It was an interminable Friday. Under the burning plates of the roof, the two men chatted a half hour more while the town cooked in its siesta stew. On the edge of exhaustion, the secretary then made a reference to the lampoons. Judge Arcadio shrugged his shoulders.

“So you’re following that half-wit stuff too,” he said, using the familiar form for the first time.

The secretary had no desire to go on chatting, debilitated by hunger and suffocation, but he didn’t think the lampoons were foolishness. “We’ve already had the first death,” he said. “If things go on like this we’re going to have a bad time of it.” And he told the story of a town that was wiped out in seven days by lampoons. The inhabitants ended up killing each other off. The survivors dug up the bones of their dead and carried them off to be sure they’d never come back.

The judge listened with an amused expression, slowly unbuttoning his shirt while the other talked. He figured that his secretary was a horror-story fan.

“This is a very simple case out of a detective story,” he said.

The underling shook his head. Judge Arcadio told how he'd belonged to an organization at the university that was dedicated to the solving of police enigmas. Each one of the members would read a mystery novel up to a predetermined clue, and they would get together on Saturdays to unravel the enigma. "I didn't miss a single time," he said. "Of course, I was favored by my knowledge of the classics, which had revealed a logic of life capable of penetrating any mystery." He offered an enigma: a man registers at a hotel at ten at night, goes up to his room, and the next morning the waiter who brings him his coffee finds him dead and rotting in his bed. The autopsy shows that the guest who arrived the night before has been dead for a week.

The secretary sat up with a long creaking of joints.

"That means that when he got to the hotel he had already been dead for seven days," the secretary said.

"The story was written twelve years ago," Judge Arcadio said, ignoring the interruption, "but the clue had been given by Heraclitus, five centuries before Christ."

He got ready to reveal it, but the secretary was exasperated. "Never, since the world has been the world, has anyone found out who's putting up the lampoons," he proclaimed with tense aggressiveness. Judge Arcadio contemplated him with twisted eyes.

"I bet you I'll discover him," he said.

"I accept your bet."

Rebeca Asís was suffocating in the hot bedroom of the house opposite, her head sunk in the pillow trying to sleep an impossible siesta. She had smoked leaves stuck to her temples.

"Roberto," she said, addressing her husband, "if you don't open the window we're going to die of the heat."

Roberto Asís opened the window at the moment in which Judge Arcadio was leaving his office.

"Try to sleep," he begged the exuberant woman who was lying with her arms open beneath the canopy of pink embroidery, completely naked under a light nylon nightgown. "I promise you I won't remember anything again."

She let out a sigh.

Roberto Asís, who had spent the night walking about the bedroom, lighting one cigarette with the butt of another, unable to sleep, had been on the point of catching the author of the lampoons that dawn. He'd heard the crackle of the paper in front of his house and the repeated rubbing of hands trying to smooth it on the wall. But he grasped it all too late and the lampoon had been posted. When he opened the window the square was deserted.

From that moment until two in the afternoon, when he promised his wife he wouldn't remember the lampoon again, she'd used every form of persuasion to try to calm him down. Finally she proposed a desperate formula: as the final proof of her innocence, she offered to confess to Father Angel aloud and in the presence of her husband. The very offering of that humiliation had been sufficient. In spite of his confusion, he didn't dare take the next step and he had to give in.

"It's always better to talk things out," she said without opening her eyes. "It would have been a disaster if you'd stayed with your belly all tight."

He fastened the door as he went out. In the spacious shadowed house, completely shut up, he perceived the hum of his mother's electric fan, as she slept her siesta in the house next door. He

poured himself a glass of lemonade from the refrigerator, under the drowsy look of the black cook.

From her cool personal surroundings the woman asked him if he wanted some lunch. He took the cover off the pot. A whole turtle was floating flippers up in the boiling water. For once he didn't shudder at the idea that the animal had been thrown alive into the pot, and that its heart would still be beating when they brought it quartered to the table.

"I'm not hungry," he said, covering the pot. And he added from the door: "The mistress won't have lunch either. She's had a headache all day."

The two houses were connected by a porch with green paving stones from where one could see the wires of the henhouse at the back of the common courtyard. In the part of the porch that belonged to his mother's house there were several birdcages hanging from the eaves and several pots with intensely colored flowers.

From the chaise longue where she had just taken her siesta, his eleven-year-old daughter greeted him with a grumbling greeting. She still had the weave of the linen marked on her cheek.

"It's going on three," he pointed out in a very low voice. And he added melancholically: "Try to keep track of things."

"I dreamed about a glass cat," the child said.

He couldn't repress a slight shudder.

"What was it like?"

"All glass," the girl said, trying to give form to the dream animal with her hands, "like a glass bird but a cat."

He found himself lost, in full sunlight, in a strange city. "Forget about it," he murmured. "Something like that isn't worth the trouble." At that moment he saw his mother in the door of her bedroom and he felt rescued.

"You're feeling better," he asserted.

The widow Asís returned a bitter expression. "Every day I'm getting better and better so I can vote," she complained, making a bun of her abundant iron-colored hair. She went out onto the porch to change the water in the cages.

Roberto Asís dropped onto the chaise longue where his daughter had been sleeping. The back of his neck in his hands, he followed with his withered eyes the bony woman in black who was conversing with the birds in a low voice. They fluttered in the fresh water, sprinkling the woman's face with their happy flapping. When she had finished with the cages, the widow Asís wrapped her son in an aura of uncertainty.

"You had things to do in the woods," she said.

"I didn't go," he said. "I had some things to do here."

"You won't go now till Monday."

With his eyes, he agreed. A black servant, barefoot, crossed the room with the child to take her to school. The widow Asís remained on the porch until they left. Then she motioned to her son and he followed her into the broad bedroom where the fan was humming. She dropped into a broken-down reed rocker beside the fan with an air of extreme weariness. On the whitewashed walls hung photographs of ancient children framed in copper. Roberto Asís stretched out on the sumptuous, regal bed where, decrepit and in a bad humor, some of the children in the photographs, including his own

father last December, had died.

“What’s going on with you?” the widow asked.

“Do you believe what people are saying?” he asked in turn.

“At my age you have to believe everything,” the widow replied. And she asked indolently: “What are they saying?”

“That Rebeca Isabel isn’t my child.”

The widow began to rock slowly. “She’s got the Asís nose,” she said. After thinking a moment, she asked distractedly: “Who says so?” Roberto Asís bit his nails.

“They put up a lampoon.”

Only then did the widow understand that the dark shadows under her son’s eyes weren’t the sediment of long sleeplessness.

“Lampoons are not the people,” she proclaimed.

“But they only tell what people are already saying,” said Roberto Asís, “even if a person doesn’t know.”

She, however, knew everything that the town had said about her family for many years. In a house like hers, full of servants, godchildren, and wards of all ages, it was impossible to lock oneself up in a bedroom without the rumors of the streets reaching even there. The turbulent Asíses, founders of the town when they were nothing but swineherds, seemed to have blood that was sweet for gossip.

“Everything they say isn’t true,” she said, “even though a person might know.”

“Everybody knows that Rosario Montero was going to bed with Pastor,” he said. “His last song was dedicated to her.”

“Everybody said so, but nobody knew for sure,” the widow replied. “On the other hand, now it’s known that the song was for Margot Ramírez. They were going to be married and only they and Pastor’s mother knew it. It would have been better if they hadn’t guarded so jealously the only secret that’s ever been kept in this town.”

Roberto Asís looked at his mother with a dramatic liveliness. “There was a moment this morning when I thought I was going to die,” he said. The widow didn’t seem moved.

“The Asíses are jealous,” she said. “That’s been the great misfortune of this house.”

They remained silent for a long time. It was almost four o’clock and the heat was beginning to subside. When Roberto Asís turned off the fan the whole house was awakening, full of female voices and bird flutes.

“Pass me the bottle that’s on the night table,” the widow said.

She took two pills, gray and round like two artificial pearls, and gave the bottle back to her son, saying: “Take two; they’ll help you sleep.” He took them with the water his mother had left in the glass and rested his head on the pillow.

The widow sighed. She maintained a pensive silence. Then, as always, generalizing about the whole town when thinking of the half-dozen families that made up her class, she said:

“The worst part about this town is that the women have to stay home alone while the men go off into the woods.”

Roberto Asís began to fall asleep. The widow observed his unshaven chin, the long nose made of angular cartilage, and thought about her dead husband. Adalberto Asís, too, had known despair. He

was a giant woodsman who had worn a celluloid collar for fifteen minutes in his lifetime so they could take the daguerreotype that survived him on the night table. It was said of him that in that same bedroom he'd murdered a man he found sleeping with his wife, that he'd buried him secretly in the courtyard. The truth was different: Adalberto Asís had, with a shotgun blast, killed a monkey he'd caught masturbating on the bedroom beam with his eyes fixed on his wife while she was changing her clothes. He'd died forty years later without having been able to rectify the legend.

Father Ángel went up the steep stairs with open steps. On the second floor, at the end of a corridor with rifles and cartridge belts hanging on the wall, a policeman was lying on an army cot, reading far up. He was so absorbed in his reading that he didn't notice the presence of the priest until he greeted him. He rolled the magazine and sat up on the cot.

"What are you reading?" Father Ángel asked.

The policeman showed him the magazine.

"Terry and the Pirates."

With a steady look the priest examined the three cells of reinforced concrete, without windows, closed up on the corridor with thick iron bars. In the center cell another policeman was sleeping in his shorts, spread out in a hammock. The others were empty. Father Ángel asked about César Montero.

"He's in there," the policeman said, nodding his head toward a closed door. "It's the commandant's room."

"Can I talk to him?"

"He's incommunicado," the policeman said.

Father Ángel didn't insist. He asked if the prisoner was all right. The policeman answered that he'd been given the best room in the barracks, with good light and running water, but he'd gone twenty-four hours without eating. He'd refused the food the mayor had ordered from the hotel.

"They should have brought him food from home," the priest said.

"He doesn't want them to bother his wife."

As if speaking to himself, the priest murmured: "I'll talk about all this with the mayor." He started to go on toward the end of the corridor, where the mayor had built his armored office.

"He's not there," the policeman said. "He's been home two days with a toothache."

Father Ángel visited him. He was prostrate in a hammock, next to a chair where there was a jar of salt water, a package of painkillers, and the cartridge belt with the revolver. His cheek was still swollen. Father Ángel brought a chair over to the hammock.

"Have it pulled," he said.

The mayor spat a mouthful of salt water into a basin. "That's easy to say," he said, his head still leaning over the basin. Father Ángel understood. He said in a very low voice:

"If you'll authorize me, I'll talk to the dentist." He took a deep breath and ventured to add: "He's a very understanding man."

"Like a mule," the mayor said. "You'd have to break him down with bullets and then we'd be back where we started."

Father Ángel followed him with his eyes to the washstand. The mayor turned on the faucet, put his swollen cheek under the flow of cool water, and held it there for an instant, with an expression of ecstasy. Then he chewed an analgesic tablet and took some water from the spigot, throwing it into his

mouth with his hands.

“Seriously,” the priest insisted, “I can talk to the dentist.”

The mayor made a gesture of impatience.

“Do whatever you want, Father.”

He lay face up in the hammock, his eyes closed, his hands behind his neck, breathing with a wrathful rhythm. The pain began to give way. When he opened his eyes again, Father Ángel was looking at him silently, sitting beside the hammock.

“What brought you over here?” the mayor asked.

“César Montero,” the priest said without any preamble. “The man has to confess.”

“He’s incommunicado,” the mayor said. “Tomorrow, after the preliminary hearing, you can confess to him. He’s got to be sent off on Monday.”

“He’s got forty-eight hours,” the priest said.

“And I’ve had this tooth for two weeks,” said the mayor.

In the dark room the mosquitoes were beginning to buzz. Father Ángel looked out the window and saw an intense pink cloud floating on the river.

“What about the meal problem?” he asked.

The mayor left his hammock to close the balcony door. “I did my duty,” he said. “He doesn’t want to bother his wife or have food sent from the hotel.” He began to spray insecticide around the room. Father Ángel looked in his pocket for a handkerchief so as not to sneeze, but instead of the handkerchief he found a wrinkled letter. “Agh,” he exclaimed, trying to smooth out the letter with his fingers. The mayor interrupted his fumigation. The priest covered his nose, but it was a useless effort; he sneezed twice. “Sneeze, Father,” the mayor said. And he emphasized with a smile:

“We’re living in a democracy.”

Father Ángel also smiled. Showing the sealed envelope, he said: “I forgot to mail this letter.” He found the handkerchief up his sleeve and blew his nose, irritated by the insecticide. He was still thinking about César Montero.

“It’s as if you had him on bread and water,” he said.

“If that’s what he wants,” the mayor said, “we can’t force him to eat.”

“What bothers me most is his conscience,” the priest said.

Without taking his handkerchief away from his nose, he followed the mayor around the room with his eyes until he finished fumigating. “He must be very upset if he thinks he’s going to be poisoned,” he said. The mayor put the spray can on the floor.

“He knows that everybody loved Pastor,” he said.

“César Montero too,” the priest replied.

“But it so happens that it’s Pastor who’s dead.”

The priest contemplated the letter. The light was becoming hazy. “Pastor,” he murmured. “He didn’t have time to confess.” The mayor turned on the light before getting into the hammock.

“I’ll feel better tomorrow,” he said. “You can confess him after the proceedings. Does that suit you?”

Father Ángel agreed. “It’s just for the repose of his conscience,” he repeated. He stood up with a solemn movement. He recommended to the mayor that he not take too many painkillers, and the

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