

## *The Power of Gabriel García Márquez*

Everyone from Clinton to Castro listens to him. But can he help rescue Colombia from left-wing guerrillas and right-wing death squads?

By Jon Lee Anderson  
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WHEN Gabriel García Márquez leaves his apartment in Bogotá, he travels in a customized metallic-gray 1992 Lancia Thema Turbo, a midsize sedan with bulletproof windows and a bombproof chassis. It is driven by Don Chepe, a stocky former guerrilla fighter who has worked for García Márquez for more than twenty years. Several secret-service agents, some times as many as six, follow them in an other vehicle. A nondescript bombproof sedan with a big engine is a reassuring car to have in a country where nearly two hundred people are kidnapped every month, and more than two thousand are murdered. In mid-August, Jaime Garzón, a popular political satirist, was assassinated as he drove to work. A man got off a motorcycle and shot him in the head while he was waiting at a red light. Garzón, like García Márquez, had acted as an intermediary between leftist guerrillas and the government, and he had received death threats from members of right-wing paramilitary organizations who don't want people negotiating with their enemies.

Bogotá sprawls for miles across a drizzly green mountain plateau in the northernmost section of the Andes. Overlooking the city is a long ridge of hills covered with vast, miserable shantytowns full of former peasant farmers and their families who have emigrated there from the countryside. During the last fifteen years, a million and a half Colombians have been displaced from their homes by political violence. Forty per cent of the country is controlled by Marxist guerrilla groups, who are at war with government troops and with right-wing militias that are financed by rich landowners and drug traffickers.

A few months ago, I took a taxi from my hotel in Bogotá to a house in the old colonial district of La Candelaria, in the center of town, where an emerald dealer had invited me to dinner. (Along with coffee, oil, cocaine, and heroin, Colombia is rich in emeralds, and supplies some sixty per cent of the world's market.) My driver stopped the car a hundred feet from the esmeraldero's house, and I got out. As I approached the front door, which was set back from the street and was covered by an archway, I saw two figures loping in my direction. One of them -- a short, wild looking, dirty fellow -- reached me as I was ringing the esmeraldero's bell, but just then the door opened wide and two Alsatian dogs came snarling past me and attacked him. The next day, I told García Márquez about my experience, and he laughed, shaking his head at my folly. No Colombian with any sense would have been on that street at that hour, he said. "It's a good place to get killed." The middle class and the wealthy have long since moved out of the center of Bogotá and settled in the northern suburbs. Even there they live in fear of being robbed or kidnapped by criminal gangs, and those few who can afford it, like García Márquez, have armored cars, bodyguards, or both.

García Márquez and his wife, Mercedes, live in a spacious duplex, two floors of a four-story apartment building with floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over a landscaped park. The apartment is all white -- carpets, sofas, and walls -- and filled with art, including a huge early Botero and a series of exquisite erotic Indian miniatures. The day after I had been saved by the esmeraldero's dogs, the three of us sat around talking in a corner of their vast living room. Several dozen videotapes -- Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* was on top of

the pile -- were stacked next to a TV. Venetian blinds were drawn over the windows, and the room was suffused with a gray light that went well with the faint odor of tobacco from Mercedes's cigarettes. Mercedes, who has been married to García Márquez for forty-one years, is a tall, striking woman with shoulder-length brown hair. She is the granddaughter of an Egyptian immigrant, whose influence seems to show up in her wide cheekbones and her large, penetrating brown eyes. García Márquez is a short, deep-chested man with a careful, almost regal bearing. He is seventy-two. He has soft brown eyes set in a comfortable, lined face. His curly hair is gray, and he has a white mustache and bushy black eyebrows. His hands are beautiful, with long slender fingers. He is an attentive and charming conversationalist, and what Colombians call a *mamagallista* -- a joker.

In the course of several months of talks with me, García Márquez referred to Mercedes constantly, and invariably with proud affection. When he talked about his friendship with Fidel Castro, for instance, he remarked, "Fidel trusts Mercedes even more than he trusts me," and added, "She is the only person I know who can scold him." Another time, he mentioned the name of a mutual acquaintance, and after we had discussed him for a while he said thoughtfully, "Mercedes doesn't want him around anymore," in a way that left me in little doubt that Mercedes would have her way. She is his "link to the earth," a friend says. "She's the practical one, the one who looks after their properties, the Eon at his side. He would be totally lost without her." They have two children: Rodrigo, who lives in Los Angeles and has just written and directed his first feature film; and Gonzalo, who is a graphic designer in Mexico City.

García Márquez has several homes, and although he was Colombia's most famous citizen long before he received the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1982, Bogotá has never been his main residence. He and Mercedes have for many years spent most of their time in Mexico City and part of the year at their other homes, in Cuernavaca, Barcelona, Paris, Havana, Cartagena, and Barranquilla, on the Caribbean coast. Each of them is furnished in the same way -- with white carpets, large glass coffee tables, modern art, a carefully chosen sound system, and an identical Macintosh computer. García Márquez is obsessive about such things. They make it possible for him to work wherever he is. He says that he usually wakes at five o'clock, reads a book until seven, dresses, reads the newspapers, answers his E-mail, and by ten -- "no matter what" -- is at his desk, writing. He stays there until two-thirty, then joins his family for lunch. After lunch, the writing day is over, and the afternoon and evening are devoted to "appointments, family, and friends."

Recently, García Márquez has been working on three novels and two volumes of memoirs, along with occasional pieces of journalism. He began his writing life as a journalist, and his last book, *News of Kidnapping*, which was published in 1996, is in the straightforward, plain-speaking style of his newspaper columns rather than the allusive, "magical" style of the novels and stories. The book reconstructs the kidnappings of ten people in 1990 by Pablo Escobar, the head of the Medellín drug cartel. It is based on long interviews with the surviving victims of the kidnappings, and with those who were involved in the Byzantine negotiations for their release. The central characters, well-connected journalists and politicians, are people who come from the social and professional worlds that García Márquez and Mercedes inhabit. Politics and journalism have taken up much of García Márquez's time since early this year, when he became the majority owner of the weekly news magazine *Cambio*. He bought *Cambio* with his Nobel Prize money, which had been sitting in a Swiss bank for sixteen years. "I swear it's true, I had forgotten about it," he claims. It was Mercedes, he says, who "reminded" him that it was there. *Cambio* kept them in Bogotá when they would normally have been in Mexico or Europe. García Márquez attended editorial meetings and assigned stories and wrote articles that became cover stories. The magazine's circulation went from

fourteen thousand to fifty thousand. "People here in Colombia are very interested in whatever Gabo has to say," says Pilar Calderón, Cambio's managing editor.

"Gabo" is what García Márquez is called by nearly everyone in the Spanish speaking world. That or el maestro, or, in Colombia, Nuestro Nobel, our Nobel Prize winner. One of his friends remarked to me that García Márquez is in many ways El Único Nobel, the only Nobel Laureate, which struck me as fundamentally true, at least in Latin America. Another friend, Enrique Santos Calderón, the editor-in-chief of El Tiempo, Colombia's leading daily newspaper, says that the Nobel Prize was a vindication of Colombian culture. "In a country that's gone to shit, Gabo is a symbol of national pride."

The widespread reverence that is felt for García Márquez amplified the rumors that began circulating early this summer about a mysterious illness that had overcome him. He was hospitalized for a week in the middle of June, and then he holed up in his apartment in Bogotá. He was said to be undergoing treatment for exhaustion, a nervous breakdown, or leukemia. Seven years ago, a cancerous tumor was removed from one of his lungs, and the rumors about what was wrong with him this time became more and more dire. On July 9th, someone pretending to represent a wire agency sent a phony news flash out through the Internet that he had died in Mexico City the previous evening.

García Márquez says that he began feeling unwell last spring, and became so weak that he was in a state of collapse. He checked into a hospital, and once it was determined what was wrong with him (lymphatic cancer, although this was not acknowledged publicly for several months) he began to receive treatment and to feel stronger. One morning not long after he had returned from the hospital, I walked with him in the park below his apartment. He was dressed in a navy-blue woolen pea-coat, blue sweat pants, and running shoes, and we were followed closely but discreetly by a nurse wearing a white smock, and by Don Chepe, who acts as García Márquez's bodyguard as well as his driver. After we had been walking for a few minutes, three young men who were riding their bicycles on a path at the park's edge recognized García Márquez and called out excitedly, "Maestro, how are you?" He was concentrating on his walking, but he acknowledged them with a slight wave and kept going. I saw that the three men had got off their bicycles and were staring with concern as he moved determinedly along, so I raised my hand and gave them a cheery thumbs-up sign. They smiled gratefully.

A few days later, a friend took me to the home of a prominent left-wing historian who has close ties to the leaders of Colombia's oldest, largest, and most powerful guerrilla organization, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC. Hearing that I had recently been with García Márquez our host asked me, "How is he?" His expression was serious and attentive. When I told him that García Márquez was walking around and coherent but had lost a great deal of weight, his mouth tightened. "They say he has cancer," he said softly. He hoped it wasn't true. "In the terrible state it's in right now, the country could not withstand the weight of such news."

A few years ago, García Márquez likened Colombia's afflictions to a "Biblical holocaust." The country has been engulfed in a complicated civil war for more than half a century, and most of the victims of the violence have been civilians. They are killed by soldiers at roadblocks, taken hostage and tortured by paramilitary death squads, blown up by land mines, shot by drug traffickers because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, massacred because they are thought to sympathize with one side or the other. Last fall, Human Rights Watch issued a chilling appraisal of life in Colombia which concluded, "Violations of international humanitarian law -- the laws of war -- are not abstract concepts in Colombia, but

the grim material of everyday life.... Sometimes, armed men carefully choose their victims from lists. Other times, they simply kill those nearby, to spread fear. Indeed, a willingness to commit atrocities is among the most striking features of Colombia's war."

García Márquez began his life as a writer during the early years of a bloody conflict known as La Violencia, which came to a head on April 9, 1948, when the populist politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated on the street in front of his office in Bogotá. Between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand people, most of them in the countryside, were killed during La Violencia, which lasted roughly until the early sixties. FARC evolved from the homegrown, Soviet-style bolsheviks that were established in the countryside during this period. The other large guerrilla organization, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or E.L.N., entered the fray with Cuban backing and the inspiration of Che Guevara. By the early eighties, when the Medellín and Cali drug cartels had become powerful, and paramilitary armies were at war with both the traffickers and the guerrillas, there were so many possible sources of violence that a victim could quite understandably be confused about who his oppressor was. Early in *News of a Kidnapping*, Maruja Pachón, who has just been captured by armed men as she returned home from work in her chauffeur driven Renault, attempts to figure out the identity of her captors:

Maruja tried to get a good look at the kidnapers, but the light was too dim. She dared to ask a question: "Who are you people?" The man with the two-way radio answered in a quiet voice: "We're from the M19."

A nonsensical reply: The M19, a former guerrilla group, was legal now and campaigning for seats in the Constituency.

"Seriously," said Maruja. "Are you dealers or guerrillas?"

"Guerrillas," said the man in front.

Of course, he was lying. He was one of Pablo Escobar's men, and the kidnapping of Maruja was intended to put pressure on the government to make a deal with the leaders of the drug cartels and agree not to extradite them to the United States, where they would face harsher penalties than they would at home.

The distinction between the activities of the dealers and those of the guerrillas was further blurred after Pablo Escobar was killed and the big drug cartels were broken up in the mid-nineteen-nineties. The drug business is now divided among scores of mini-mafias, the paramilitaries, and the guerrillas themselves. FARC, which is the richest guerrilla organization in Latin America, controls an area where much of the world's cocaine is produced. It is believed to have some fifteen thousand armed fighters, while the E.L.N. has about five thousand. Both groups pay salaries to their combatants, and support themselves with various criminal activities, which include levying taxes on heroin and cocaine producers, kidnapping for ransom, and extorting money from North American and European oil companies to protect their drilling operations and pipelines.

Since Colombia supplies eighty per cent of the cocaine consumed in the United States, and much of the heroin, "narco-guerrillas" have become a big factor in United States drug policy. The Colombian Army says that it needs help to combat the guerrillas, and that quelling the guerrillas would quell the drug trade. Such assistance was suspended in 1996 and 1997 because Ernesto Samper, who was then the President, was accused of having accepted six million dollars in drug money to fund his election campaign. But a new President, Andrés Pastrana, took office last year, and the U.S. was persuaded that he could do what his predecessors had failed to do. Pastrana initiated talks with the guerrillas and ceded them a huge neutral zone that the Army couldn't enter. And he got a big aid package. Last fall,

Congress allocated two hundred and eighty-nine million dollars to the Colombian police and Army, making Colombia the third largest recipient of military aid, after Israel and Egypt. García Márquez who has often referred to himself as "the last optimist in Colombia," has been closely involved in the peace negotiations. He introduced Pastrana to his old friend Fidel Castro, who could facilitate talks with the guerrillas, and he helped restore good relations between Washington and Bogotá. "I won't say that it was Gabo who brought all this about," Bill Richardson, the U.S. Secretary of Energy, said early this summer, "but he was a catalyst." García Márquez was invited by the Clintons to the White House several times, and friends say he believed that he was going to not only carry off the immediate goal of getting some sort of negotiated settlement between the guerrillas and the government but also finally help bring about an improvement in relations between the United States and Cuba. "The U.S. needs Cuba's involvement in the Colombian peace talks, because the Cuban government has the best contacts with the guerrillas," he explained to me. "And Cuba is perfectly situated, only two hours away, so Pastrana can go there overnight and have meetings and come back without anyone knowing anything about it. And the U.S. wants this to happen." Then he smiled in a way that indicated he knew much more than he was telling me, as usual.

Until early this summer, García Márquez was sanguine about the negotiations Pastrana had put in motion. But then he became ill, and in July FARC launched a military offensive from the area that Pastrana had ceded them. It included a raid on Army units on the outskirts of Bogotá, and the peace talks, which had already been postponed, seemed more unlikely. A few days later, Pastrana's minister of defense announced that the U.S. was training and supplying an Anti-Narcotics Battalion of Colombian soldiers. Then he and the chief of the armed forces flew to Washington to ask for five hundred million dollars more in aid. Barry McCaffrey, the director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, who claims that cocaine production in Colombia has doubled in the last four years and that the guerrillas are responsible, urged Congress to appropriate a billion dollars for hardware and military advisers. "This is an emergency situation," he said. "You've got twenty-five thousand people out there with machine guns, mortars, rockets, and land mines."

García Márquez had to cancel one of our meetings in Bogotá because Pastrana and Felipe Gonzáles, the former Spanish Prime Minister, were coming by to see him. Things were stiff at an impasse between the guerrillas and the government, but attempts were being made to put together a regional council of nations to serve as neutral guarantors for future negotiations. "I would really love to see Clinton again right now, but it's not possible in this situation," García Márquez said. He didn't say whether he was referring to the changed politics or his own state of health, or both. But it was the bellicose stance Washington was taking that seemed to trouble him most. "Everything has changed since Kosovo," he said. "The situation in the world has changed totally. With Kosovo, Clinton has found the political legacy he wants to leave behind -- the imperial American model."

Other critics of the Clinton Administration's new policy were conjuring up analogies with Vietnam, and warning of the perils of intervening militarily in a country that is geographically as well as politically complex. Much of Colombia's nearly four hundred and forty thousand square miles is practically inaccessible. Three ranges of the Andes divide it up, and there are vast swaths of forests and plains where no roads have been built. Some parts of the country are controlled by brutal paramilitary units that are in many cases operating in collusion with the Army, which has been accused of gross violations of human rights. In mid-July, the Army, which until recently has been notoriously inefficient, killed two hundred guerrillas in an aerial ambush that was assisted by U.S. satellite intelligence. The first known American military casualties in the narcoguerrilla conflict occurred on July 23rd, when a U.S. reconnaissance plane crashed into a mountain in a major drug-producing area in southern Colombia. Five American soldiers and two Colombian Air Force officers were killed.

In 1993, García Márquez wrote that Washington's "war on drugs" was merely an "instrument for further intervention in Latin America," and he castigated American policymakers for having "impoverished the Castilian tongue" by inventing the term "narcoguerrilla." It permitted the United States, he said, to "demonstrate that drug traffickers and guerrillas were one and the same thing, and they could consequently send troops to Colombia under the pretext of fighting some and imprisoning others." These are not unconventional views in Colombia, where the meddling of gringos is feared and resented. Indeed, the twentieth century began with a U.S. intervention that led to the loss of the isthmus of Panama, which was a province of Colombia. And it has been only ten years since the United States invaded Panama to extradite its de-facto head of state, General Noriega. García Márquez has consistently opposed the extradition of Colombian nationals -- such as Pablo Escobar -- to the United States, and has advocated negotiating with both drug traffickers and guerrillas as the only realistic means of ending, or at least curtailing, the violence in Colombia. "Nobody has taken into account," he wrote in 1990, "to what extent the social and political situation of our great, ill-starred Colombia, with its centuries of rural feudalism, its thirty years of unresolved guerrilla conflicts, its long history of governments which have failed to represent the wishes of the people, has bred the drug traffickers and all that they stand for."

García Márquez's views have enormous weight in Latin America. His prestige is such that he has the trust of both governments and revolutionaries. He was involved in negotiations to end the civil wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and he has often helped gain the release of hostages kidnapped by various factions. "Gabo loves to conspire," his friend María Elvira Samper says, "to do things clandestinely. He likes diplomacy, not politics. He says he is un gran conspirador." But he has come under a good deal of criticism for enjoying his role too much, and for becoming enamored of men in power. Friends who acknowledge that there is some truth to the criticism attribute his susceptibility to the charms of Castro and Clinton in part to the thrill of having come so far from his roots. "Remember," a woman in Bogotá said to me, "Gabo came from un pueblucho de mierda -- a shitty little nothing town -- on the coast, and he could easily have ended up one of those guys selling sunglasses to tourists on the beach." She said this affectionately, and I don't think she meant to be patronizing, but it was the condescending kind of thing that people in Bogotá have always said about people who live on the Caribbean coast.

The place where García Márquez spent his childhood has more of a historical and geographical affinity to the Antilles than to the cold, austere highlands around Bogotá. A few years ago, he commissioned the Colombian architect Rogelio Salmona to build a house in Cartagena, a beautiful sixteenth century coastal city that is still surrounded by stone ramparts. La Casa del Escritor, the House of the Writer, as García Márquez's house is known, is a serried jumble of geometrical squares and oblongs surrounded by a high, cinnamon-colored wall. During the day, a single papayera, a papaya eating songbird, hops about in a cage that dangles over the narrow street in front of the house from an old-fashioned street lamp. From 7 A.M. until 7 P.M., the papayera is under the protective custody of policemen who stand watch with shotguns. They are there, I was told by one of them, to protect the papayera from the dastardly *marías mulatas*, the crows. He assured me that if the bird were to be left alone in the garden even its cage could not protect it.

In the heat of the day, the policemen take advantage of the shade of a neighboring building, the Hotel Santa Clara, which was built in 1617 as a convent but is now a boutique hotel owned by the French Sofitel chain. The convent figures prominently in *Of Love and Other Demons*, a novella García Márquez published in 1994. In the preface, he explains that in 1949, when he was a young reporter in Cartagena, he was assigned to cover the story of the emptying of the convent's crypts. "The gradual collapse of the roof had left its beautiful

chapel exposed to the elements," he wrote, "but three generations of bishops and abbesses and other eminent personages were still buried there." In a niche on the high altar, laborers found the skull of a young girl with a seventy-foot-long "stream of living hair the intense color of copper." The foreman of the construction crew explained that this was not unusual for a two-hundred-year-old skull, but García Márquez "did not think it so trivial a matter, for when I was a boy my grandmother had told me the legend of a little twelve-year-old marquise, with hair that trailed behind her like a bridal train, who had died of rabies caused by a dog bite and was venerated in the towns along the Caribbean coast for the many miracles she had performed. The idea that the tomb might be hers was my news item for the day."

In the novella, which takes place in Cartagena in the eighteenth century, when the city was one of the centers of the Spanish slave trade and a colonial headquarters of the Inquisition, the girl is sent to the convent to be exorcised after she has been abused and driven half mad by inept doctors who mistakenly suspect that she has rabies. Her exorcist, an erudite priest, falls in love with her and is punished for heresy. The bishop takes over the exorcism, and she dies while being tortured by him. The most sympathetic characters in the book, aside from the girl and her tormented lover, are an outcast Jewish doctor with a vast library of forbidden books; two women who are incarcerated for being insane but travel about mysteriously and sometimes invisibly; and a priest who lives among the poor and has a humanist view of the martyred girl's situation. She has been rejected by her melancholic father, the Marquis, and by her mother, a drug-and-sex besotted mestiza, and raised by mulatto and black servants. It is their culture, transplanted African culture, that the Church demonizes and tries to exorcise. Today, the stone walls of the old convent are a chic façade for the hotel, and García Márquez's books are displayed prominently in the lobby gift shop, but by and large the neighborhood has not changed much in the fifty years since García Márquez was writing a column for the local newspaper, *El Universal*. The narrow streets are lined with paving stones and surrounded by red, blue, and yellow tiled houses with corrugated tin roofs. Laundry hangs from carved wooden balconies, children play in the streets, and people wearing undershirts and flip-flops sit in their doorways talking to their neighbors. Cuban son, Puerto Rican salsa, Colombian cumbia, and the tinny accordion wails of vallenato blare from radios. Horse taxis, which are called huelepedos, or "farties," by the locals, clip-clop by, carrying tourists and tainting the air with bouquets of chaff and dung. Although Cartagena is one of Colombia's few "safe" tourist havens, political violence is never far from anyone's mind. At a dinner party there I met a woman whose brother had been kidnapped and buried alive. The brother of our host had joined a paramilitary group and had been killed by guerrillas.

A few years ago, García Márquez established the Foundation for New Ibero-American Journalism in Cartagena. It is run by Jaime Abello Banfi, a former television executive, and is funded by UNESCO and the Inter-American Development Bank, among other organizations. Seasoned journalists are invited to Cartagena to give workshops for young Latin American reporters. García Márquez holds seminars whenever he can. Cartagena has also become his large family's de-facto headquarters. He is the eldest of eleven children, all but one of whom are still alive. His ninety-four-year-old mother and most of his siblings still live along the coast.

García Márquez was born in Aracataca, a down-at-the-heels town a hundred miles inland from Cartagena, on March 6, 1927. He was the first child of Luisa Santiaga Márquez, the daughter of Colonel Nicolás Márquez, a veteran of the War of a Thousand Days, which until the recent conflagration was the most violent and lethal civil war in Colombia's history. It began in 1899 and lasted for roughly three years. The forces of the Liberal and Conservative Parties inflicted hideous suffering on each other, and as many as a hundred thousand people died, out of a population of four million. Colonel Nicolás Márquez was a member of the Liberal Party, the party that started the war and lost it. A two party system has existed in

Colombia since the middle of the nineteenth century, and although there are no absolute distinctions between the two groups, Liberals are traditionally anticlerical and are proponents of social and labor reforms. García Márquez's father, Gabriel Eligio García, was a Conservative, a frustrated medical student who had arrived in Aracataca to take up a salaried post as the town's telegraph operator. The Colonel disapproved of him, primarily for reasons of politics and social standing, but he was indefatigable in pursuit of Luisa. (Their courtship is the basis for the mad love of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza in the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, which García Márquez published in 1985.) Soon after the birth of "Gabito," the boy's parents moved to Ríoacha, a town two hundred miles away, on the coast, and left him to be raised by the Colonel, his wife, and three aunts.

García Márquez's grandfather, who is a recognizable character in much of his fiction, told him stories about killing a man in a duel, about fighting in the civil war, about the massacre of workers by the United Fruit Company the year after Gabito was born. Meanwhile, his aunts and grandmother -- who were from the remote Guajira peninsula, a barren territory where the indigenous inhabitants have managed to maintain much of their culture -- fed him on a steady and disquieting diet of folk tales, ghost stories, and legends of the supernatural. When García Márquez was nine, he went to live with his parents, who were virtual strangers to him. His father had become an itinerant homeopath and pharmacist, and the family moved around for a couple of years before settling in the town of Sucre. He never lived in Aracataca again, but it remained the wellspring of his fictional world, most particularly as Macondo, the home of the Buendía family in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

García Márquez's younger brother Jaime, who is a civil engineer by profession and an obsessive conversationalist by nature, and his wife, Margarita, an architect, offered to take me to Aracataca. They met me at the airport near the somber port city of Santa Marta, where Simón Bolívar died on his final tragic journey into exile an odyssey that García Márquez re-created in 1989 in *The General in His Labyrinth*.

"We have to leave Aracataca by four," Jaime said. If we dallied, we would run the risk of meeting a patrol of guerrillas or paramilitaries. "And when they see you, they'll kidnap you, and there'll be nothing I can do about it." We were stopped at several Army roadblocks as we made our way through a sweltering dull green landscape of acacia trees and thorn bush, but in a couple of hours we were safely in the bleak geometry of the banana plantations that surround Aracataca and are the reason for its existence, just as they were when García Márquez was a child. Jaime told everyone we met that he wanted to be out of Aracataca and on the way back to Santa Marta well before nightfall, and then, with a nod in my direction, he'd quip, "No vaya ser que me pesquen al gringo" -- "God forbid they should snatch the gringo" -- which elicited a chuckle every time.

Aracataca is a town of one-story houses and little shade. A huge billboard emblazoned with García Márquez's likeness has been erected on the outskirts, with a quotation from him painted in large letters: "One day I returned to my home, Aracataca, and I discovered that it is a combination of reality and nostalgia that is the raw material of my work." There are some traditional Caribbean plank houses with high-peaked tin roofs still standing, but most people live in grids of gaudily painted cement-block dwellings. The tall, dusty, bitter-almond trees with big green leaves that ring the central plaza in front of the church are the same trees, Jaime told me, that his brother described in the passage in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that tells of the founding of Macondo:

It was José Arcadio, Buendía who decided during those years that they should plant almond trees instead of acacias on the streets, and who discovered, without ever revealing it, a way to



make them Eve forever. Many years later, when Macondo was a field of wooden houses with zinc roofs, the broken and dusty almond trees still stood on the oldest streets, although no one knew who had planted them.

We had arrived on the final day of the festivities celebrating Colombia's independence from Spain in 1819, and everyone who was not taking a nap had assembled in a garbage-strewn lot at the edge of town, where a rudimentary corraleja, a wooden bullring, had been erected. Wide-eyed groups of adolescent girls in bright dresses strolled arm in arm, flirting with young men. Peasants with straw hats and angular faces stood in the shade of the rickety corraleja gaping at the people milling around and waiting for the bulls to be unloaded from trucks so that the afternoon's corrida could begin. Sweating vendors tended painted boxes on wheels, from which they sold chicharrones (pork rinds), colored shaved ices, and hot corncakes. Jaime stopped at a house and knocked on the door. The door opened and closed again, and a few minutes later a man came out, combing his hair and smiling excitedly. He was the curator of the Casa Museo Gabriel García Márquez, the house where García Márquez was born, which sits on a quiet back street lined with acacia and almond trees. The curator led us through the front of the museum, a small cinderblock bungalow erected by the last owners, into the back yard, where part of the original Márquez family house still stands. All that is left is a two-room, white-painted clapboard shack with a zinc roof

The economy of Aracataca, and of the surrounding region, was dominated by the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International) for most of the early part of this century. The founder of United Fruit, which was based in Boston, began buying land here in 1894, and by the mid-nineteen-twenties the area had become the third largest exporter of bananas in the world. La Fruit, as the company is known to the locals, did not own most of the plantations, but it bought the bananas from growers, controlled the railroad that took them to the port, and managed the distribution of irrigation water. Although the workers were paid by the company and spent their money at the company stores, they did not technically work for United Fruit, and the company did not provide benefits, which was one of the issues that precipitated the 1928 banana strike. The nascent Colombian Communist Party sent representatives to organize the banana workers, many of whom were shot during demonstrations, an event known locally as the Slaughter of '28. Some of García Márquez's earliest memories are of going with his grandfather to the fence around La Fruit's residential compound a few years later to gape in wonderment at the oblivious norteamericanos playing games on clipped lawns. The government suppressed information about the killings, and virtually nothing had been written about them until García Márquez made the incident the culminating event in "One Hundred Years of Solitude," where thousands of workers are machine gunned in the town square and their bodies transported to the coast to be thrown into the sea. A torrential rain sets in for nearly five years, after which no memory of the event exists.

The United Fruit Company cut back production drastically during the Depression of the nineteen thirties, and the market for bananas continued to suffer through the Second World War. Around 1965, La Fruit pulled out of Aracataca permanently. We visited the old company compound, an unkempt smattering of large plantation houses set under mature trees. Jaime found some city officials in an office in one of the buildings. They explained to us, with the wan expressions of those who don't really believe what they are saying, that the municipality of Aracataca has plans to turn the compound into a tourist hotel. Not far away, among the stick palisades and shacks of a recent "invasion," as the occupation of land by squatters is called, some forty families were living in a bare encampment. I asked the officials who the newcomers were, and one of them, a young man, replied, "I don't know, probably desplazados" -- war refugees. He was unsure because no one had inquired.

We got out of Aracataca before four, and as we journeyed back toward the coast, with Margarita driving, Jaime regaled me with stories of a visit he made to New York City with Gabito a few years ago. They had gone to a club to hear Woody Allen play the clarinet, and Gabito had lunch with Henry Kissinger. Jaime, who is an ardent baseball fan, said that he begged off and went alone to see a game at Yankee Stadium. "I almost died of happiness," he said. "When I told Gabito afterward that I had eaten a hot dog at Yankee Stadium, he said he wished he could've been there. I got the impression that maybe his lunch with Kissinger had been a little boring."

When I left Santa Marta, I headed west toward Barranquilla, a city a hundred miles up the coast. The road skirts the edge of a great swamp that, like an inland sea, stretches between the coastal spit of beach and the great meandering delta of the Magdalena River. My driver, a small, piratical-looking man named Hermes, informed me that a particularly fetid looking slum spread out along the road was Ciénaga the site of the banana massacre in 1928. Ciénaga sits smack in the middle of a ruined mangrove swamp that was destroyed by the construction of the road that now bisects it. On the other side of its shacks, the stubble of the old trees protrudes above the surrounding muck like stalagmites. Refuse is strewn everywhere, and raw sewage stands in stagnant pools of water. There is nothing beyond the slum but parched land, white with salt and devoid of life. It was here, Hermes said, where "all of Colombia's evils began, back in the days of La Fruit." Scowling out the window at miserable Ciénaga he hissed. "All the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, all the violence -- everything we're suffering from now comes from here."

When García Márquez was fifteen, he was sent to a public boarding school for gifted students in Zipaquirá a small provincial town near Bogotá. It was his introduction to the somber highlands of Colombia, and to Bogotá's aloof and conservative society. He was lonely and felt out of place, but it was during his years at the school that he discovered his talent for writing and his interest in politics. Several of his teachers were leftists, and he graduated with a Marxist world view. "When I left there," he said years later, "I wanted to be a journalist, I wanted to write novels, and I wanted to do something to bring about a more just society" Photographs of García Márquez at twenty, when he was a student at the University of Bogotá, show a skinny, badly dressed young man. He was studying law to please his father, but he had already begun to neglect his studies in favor of trying to write. The national daily newspaper *El Espectador* published his first short stories, and lauded him as "a new and notable writer." Then, in the spring of 1948, in the rioting that followed the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán the pension where García Márquez lodged was damaged by fire, and he put his books, the original copies of his first stories, and the only copies of his most recent work in a suitcase and tried to take them to the safety of an uncle's apartment. Everything was confiscated by a Gaitanista mob at a barricade. The University of Bogotá shut down, and García Márquez transferred to the University of Cartagena, but he soon abandoned his studies for a reporter's job. A year later, he moved to Barranquilla, where he rented a room in a brothel, wrote a newspaper column, and stayed up nights to work on short stories.

Barranquilla is situated on a promontory between the Magdalena River and the sea. It is a chaotic urban labyrinth of a million people where automobiles careen around donkey carts laden with green fodder grass that has been freshly cut from the marshes outside town. Bright painted kiosks advertise aphrodisiacal foods, and the older residential lanes are lined with flowering shade trees. One of García Márquez's brothers, Luis Enrique, lives there, and he invited me for lunch, along with two of his sisters, Ligia and Aida, a former nun. Luis Enrique is a retired accountant of seventy-one, and resembles his older brother, although he is stockier, and his hair is whiter. Like their father, he is a Conservative. "It's genetic," he says. Luis Enrique is addicted to his computer, and spends his nights surfing the Net. Until recently,

Aida taught theology at a Barranquilla high school where a "Gabriel García Márquez Department" has been created. Ligia lives in Cartagena and helps look after their mother, who is quite frail. Ligia has inherited her grandmother's faith in the supernatural world. She told me she had had a series of "strange dreams" a few years ago in which the figure of Abraham came to her, and she subsequently decided to become a Mormon. It isn't so different from Catholicism, she assured me. "We also believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." After lunch, I offered Ligia and Aida a lift. My driver recognized Aida from her days as a nun, and they began trading stories about a local priest. I heard Aida say, "He performs miracles." The driver said he'd been to a service the day before at which a woman who was possessed became calm after the priest laid hands on her. "It works if you have faith," Aida said. Ligia then told me that all this had been outlined in the Scriptures. When Satan's accomplices were vanquished, she explained, they were left without their bodies, but their spirits lived on. Some of them had become pigs, but the others float around looking for openings in human beings, and when they find a weak person in they go. That is where the priest does battle, getting rid of those Satanic spirits. Aida and the driver nodded in agreement, and it was clear to me that all of them believed literally what Ligia had said. "The world Gabo writes about, the one they call magical realism, is actually real; it's the one we live in," Mirtha Buelvas, a social psychologist in Barranquilla, said to me. I had heard other Colombians say the same thing, but it made more sense in Barranquilla than in Bogotá.

In 1954 García Márquez moved back to Bogotá to write for *El Espectador*. The next year, his first novella, *La Hojarasca* (Leaf Storm) was published, with a modest print run. Around this time, when *La Violencia* was at its height, claiming thousands of lives in the countryside, García Márquez began secretly attending meetings of a Communist Party cell, and was soon summoned to meet the underground leader of Colombia's Communists, who offered to be a source for his stories. He also advised García Márquez to stop going to meetings if he didn't plan to become an active member of the Party. García Márquez took his advice and left, although he has said that he retains a soft spot for "the comrades who were the first colonizers of my political conscience."

In 1955, he was sent to Europe by *El Espectador* to cover everything from a Big Four summit meeting in Geneva to the Venice Film Festival and an Italian murder scandal. He also visited Poland and Czechoslovakia and spent a few months at an avant-garde film school in Rome before settling down in Paris. When *El Espectador* was closed down by the government, García Márquez cashed in his return plane ticket and stayed on. In Paris, he spent almost all of 1956 writing and rewriting the novella *No One Writes to the Colonel*. Then, in the summer of 1957, he visited Russia and drove through Eastern Europe with a Colombian friend, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza. His dispatches from the trip were later published in Bogotá. as a magazine supplement called "Ninety Days Behind the Iron Curtain," in which García Márquez shows himself to be a sympathetic but not uncritical observer of life in the Soviet Union. After visiting Moscow as a "delegate" to a Communist Party Music Festival, for instance, he wrote:

My definitive impression is that the Soviet phenomenon -- from its most unusual aspects to the simplest ones -- is so complex that it cannot be reduced to propagandistic formulas, neither capitalist nor communist. The Soviets have a different mentality. Things that are of great importance to us aren't to them. And vice-versa. Maybe that was why I didn't fully understand the worries of that tired, parsimonious interpreter resembling Charles Laughton who came to see me off at the border. "We thought all the delegates had left," he said. "But if you want we can send for children to bring you flowers. Shall we?"

Later that year, García Márquez went to Caracas to work with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza on a magazine, *Momento*, just in time for the popular Army uprising that overthrew the Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. That was when, García Márquez says, he first became interested in power. The day of the coup, he went with other reporters to stand outside the door of the room where the Army commanders were haggling over who would be Venezuela's next ruler. "I was just there like all the others, covering the news and hoping the meeting would end quickly so I could go home and go to sleep," he told me. "Suddenly the door opened and a general came out walking backward, his gun drawn and pointing into the room, his boots covered with mud." As he watched, transfixed, García Márquez said, the general crossed the room and, still walking backward and holding his gun out, he went down the stairs and out the front door to the street. Within moments of the general's dramatic exit, a decision was made in the room: Venezuela's new leader would be Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal. "I was amazed that this was how power could be decided," García Márquez said. "At that moment, something happened."

He began thinking about writing a novel about a dictator. "My interest was reconfirmed a year later with my visit to Cuba, of course. Who couldn't have been impressed by that?" He and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza were among the first journalists to arrive in Havana after Castro seized power in 1959. They covered the purge trials that followed the triumph of the revolution. The circus-like atmosphere of the trial of a notorious Army major named Jesús Sosa Blanco, which was held in Havana's sports stadium, and which ended with a guilty verdict and his summary execution, gave García Márquez grist for his future "Latin-American dictator novel" -- *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, which was published sixteen years later, in 1975. The victorious revolution of the Cuban guerrillas quickly replaced the two friends' enthusiasm for Venezuela's more limited "democratic restoration," and within a year they were running the Bogotá office of *Prensa Latina*, the newly formed Cuban news agency, which was headed by Jorge Ricardo Masetti, a young Argentine journalist who had become a protégé of Che Guevara's.

In the meantime, García Márquez had married Mercedes Barcha, the daughter of a pharmacist in Sucre, where his parents lived. By early 1961, they and their newborn first child, Rodrigo, were living in a midtown Manhattan hotel while García Márquez worked at *Prensa Latina*'s New York office. Tensions between the U.S. and Cuba were building, and he received threatening phone calls from angry Cuban exiles. That spring, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs invasion, hard-line pro-Soviet Cuban Communists took over many government posts, and Masetti resigned his position. García Márquez quit in solidarity with him, and he and Mercedes and the baby got on a bus headed south, to explore the world of William Faulkner. They remember seeing signs saying "No dogs or Mexicans allowed." When they reached New Orleans, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza wired them a hundred and twenty dollars, and that got them as far as Mexico City, and, as García Márquez says, they've "never really left."

In 1966, after a yearlong writing stint, García Márquez completed *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. For my benefit, he repeated the well-known story of how Mercedes had to pawn her hair dryer and their electric heater to pay for the postage to mail the finished manuscript -- in two separate lots, because they couldn't afford to mail the whole thing all at once -- to his Argentine publisher, who printed eight thousand copies. They sold out in a week, mostly at newsstands in subway stations in Buenos Aires. Although the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes had written enthusiastically about the book in a literary magazine after he saw some pages in manuscript, and several excerpts had appeared in small journals, and although the Boom in Latin-American fiction -- with work by Fuentes, the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa -- was well under way, the popular response to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was almost unimaginable. The book has by now been translated into more than thirty languages and has sold around thirty million copies. It is the most

famous manifestation of the Boom, and García Márquez is the most celebrated of the prominent Boom writers.

García Márquez likes to claim, with a kind of false modesty, that he is "really a journalist who just happens to write some fiction on the side." He is being only partly disingenuous, since over the years he has churned out hundreds of articles, op-ed pieces, and essays. Most of this work from the seventies and eighties, his most radical period politically, is in the Latin-American tradition of *periodismo militante*, left-wing political journalism. There are reports from the war in Angola and postwar Vietnam, and several scoops on previously secret aspects of Latin America's revolutionary history, thanks to his privileged access to Fidel Castro and a variety of guerrilla leaders. García Márquez's friend Enrique Santos Calderón, says that he has mellowed in recent years, that "he's essentially a Social Democrat now, with a little Communist hidden in his heart." It is probably accurate to say that his politics are a hybrid of residual youthful Marxism, traditional Latin-American anti-imperialism, and Western European-style socialism, but he is often called a leftist extremist, especially by his critics in North America, and especially because of his relationship with Castro.

García Márquez has had a "Cuba problem" since 1971, when the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla was arrested for "counterrevolutionary activity." A group of well-known intellectuals, including Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, wrote a letter to Castro protesting the arrest. Since García Márquez was traveling and out of touch, Plinio took the liberty of adding his name to the petition. Padilla was released from detention but forced to go through a grotesque, Soviet-style public "confession," and the spectacle led many people who had previously endorsed the Castro regime to break with it. A second, public letter of protest was signed by everyone who had signed the first letter, except for Julio Cortázar -- and García Márquez. Then, in 1975, García Márquez went to Cuba, intending to write the book on the revolution. He never published the book, but he wrote a series of articles, and he met and became friends with Castro.

Many years later, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza asked him, for the record, why, just when so many of his friends had distanced themselves from Cuba, he'd decided to support it. García Márquez's reply was both sphinx-like and smug: "Because I have much better and more direct information, and a political maturity that allows me a more serene, patient, and humane comprehension of the reality." What he was alluding to, it seems, was his line of communication with Fidel Castro. In the end, García Márquez did get involved in the Padilla case, and he helped obtain Castro's permission for the poet to leave Cuba in 1980, but his position remains puzzling and unacceptable to many people. Vargas Llosa calls him "Castro's courtesan," and the exiled Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante accuses him of suffering from "totalitarian delirium." "I believe that when Fidel dies, the same thing will happen as when Stalin died," Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza said to me one afternoon in the lobby of my hotel in Bogotá, a few days before he left the country to avoid being murdered by guerrillas who had already sent him a bomb by courier. "We will hear about all the atrocities that happened during his rule. And I don't think it will help Gabo to have been such a friend of his."

García Márquez's defenders point to the fact that he has used his good offices with Castro to secure the freedom of a number of political prisoners in Cuba over the years, and that he does so quietly and without seeking publicity. When I pressed him, García Márquez confirmed that he had helped people leave the island, and he alluded to one "operation" that had resulted in the departure of "more than two thousand people" from Cuba. "I know just how far I can go with Fidel. Sometimes he says no. Sometimes later he comes and tells me I was right." He said that it gave him pleasure to help people, and implied that it was often just as well that they leave, from Castro's point of view. "I sometimes go to Miami," he said, "although not often, and I have stayed at the homes of people I've helped get out. Really prominent gusanos"

-- the word Castro uses for the Miami exiles -- "and they call up their friends and we have big parties. Their kids ask me to sign books for them. Sometimes the people who come to see me are the same people who have denounced me. But in private they show me a different face." Enrique Santos Calderón says that "Gabo knows perfectly well what the Cuban government is, he has no illusions about that reality, but Fidel is his friend. And he has decided to live with the contradictions."

García Márquez has a house in Siboney, the section of Havana where rich Cubans were building their homes in the late fifties. A little farther on, the city ends abruptly, and there is a long, green, and listless countryside of sugarcane and wattle-and-daub ranchitos and thorny cattle-grazing fields. García Márquez's house, which was given to him by Castro, is one of several carefully maintained mansions with lush gardens which line a boulevard that curves up gently from the beaches and old yacht clubs. His house and those of most of his neighbors are what are called "protocol houses," homes made available to distinguished foreign guests. All the houses were seized by the government after their owners fled Cuba. Fidel Castro himself is said to live very near García Márquez in a house that is concealed behind a dense, high screen of trees, and up a lane where street signs and armed police tell you that you are going the wrong way. When I mentioned the mystery of Castro's residence to García Márquez, and how odd I found it that nobody in Cuba knew where the Jefe Máximo lived, he nodded and confessed that he didn't know, either. I was dumbstruck by this, because I had always assumed, like most Cubans, that he is the ultimate Castro insider. But García Márquez says that he has never even asked him, "so as not to know something that I might accidentally tell later." During our conversations, García Márquez frequently referred to his own trustworthiness in this regard. "Because he knows I am not going to betray the things he has confided in me, I am perhaps the one person Fidel can trust most in the world," he said. "And, you know, Fidel is really desconfiado -- mistrustful. Only recently he has begun to change a bit, and become less security conscious. Sometimes now he'll call and say, 'I'm coming over' or that sort of thing. He never used to. He always imagines the telephones are bugged by the Yanquis, the C.I.A. And he is probably right to worry. He keeps his private life immensely private. He has never introduced me to his wife, for example, or even mentioned her to me. I met her once because one day in Fidel's jet she came up and introduced herself. I don't know that it is true, but people say that Fidel hasn't even introduced Raúl" -- his brother -- "to his wife! What is private for him is the most private of private. . . . I think I know Fidel better than a lot of people, and I consider him a real friend, but who is Fidel the private man? What is Fidel himself really like? Nobody knows."

García Márquez reminded me of a photograph taken during the Pope's visit to Cuba, in January, 1998. It was taken during the Pope's sermon in La Plaza de la Revolución, and it shows García Márquez in the front row, seated next to Castro. He was also present, he says, when Fidel heard that the three top U.S. television networks were pulling out their anchors because of breaking news about a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky "Fidel was furious," he recalled. "He said, 'Those damned Yanquis always fuck up everything!'" After that first high-profile appearance, García Márquez said, he decided to preserve his "independence," and stay away from public ceremonies. He watched everything on TV, and after a few days he deduced that despite outward appearances of harmony between the two leaders there must have been some "private disagreement" between them. He told Fidel that he wouldn't do the piece he was supposed to write about the visit until Fidel "confessed" to whatever it was he and the Pope had disagreed on. "Fidel's response," says García Márquez "was to ask me to do him a favor with the Americans. He said if that turned out well he'd tell me what I wanted to know. So I did the favor -- some messages -- and they turned out well,

but when I said 'O.K., so what happened with the Pope?' Fidel waved me off, saying, 'Oh, I'll tell you later. Anyway, it's not important the way you think'" García Márquez shrugged. There was, he said, a handful of historical secrets that he had waited years for Fidel to tell him, but he had come to the conclusion that Fidel was going to take them with him to his grave. "And you know why?" he said. "Because Fidel isn't like the rest of us. He thinks he has all the time in the world. Death just isn't part of his plans."

The first political leader to whom García Márquez became both a friend and a confidant was General Omar Torrijos, who seized power in Panama in 1969. Torrijos was not a Marxist, but he admired Tito and Castro, and he supported the Cuban-backed guerrilla insurgencies in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. García Márquez had criticized him during an interview, and Torrijos wanted to persuade him that he was a well-intentioned leader and, above all, a Panamanian nationalist. García Márquez says that he and Torrijos became friends after their first meeting turned into a three-day drinking binge. They remained close until Torrijos' death, in a plane crash, in 1981. García Márquez lovingly describes how the moody, lonely Torrijos would stay up drinking whiskey all night, and then, when he wanted sex in the morning, would summon one of six different women he had "on permanent call." He also recalls with pride how Torrijos -- who rarely read a book -- had read and liked *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. "He told me he thought it was my best book, and I asked him why he thought so. He leaned over to me and said, 'Because it's true; we're all like that.'"

Torrijos was also a friend of Graham Greene, and he supplied both writers with Panamanian diplomatic passports so that they could be present for the official signing of the Panama Canal Treaty in Washington in 1977. García Márquez says that both of them were on a U.S. Immigration blacklist at the time because of their Marxist affinities, and they were particularly pleased to get a twenty-one gun salute when they got off the plane at Andrews Air Force Base -- again, completely drunk. Somewhere, García Márquez told me, he still has a photograph of himself with Torrijos taken on the night of the Canal Treaty signing. It shows the two of them sitting together on the floor of the Panamanian Embassy, "totally plastered." García Márquez's relationship with the people in power in Colombia has had its ups and downs. In 1981, when he returned to Bogotá, from a trip to Cuba and Panama, he got wind of a plan to arrest him and charge him with having links to the M19 guerrillas, a group that specialized in urban violence. He and Mercedes sought asylum in the Mexican Embassy and were whisked out of the country. The flight into exile by the acclaimed author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* became a public-relations disaster for Colombia, particularly since García Márquez was soon thereafter summoned to Paris, awarded the Légion d'Honneur by his friend President Mitterrand, and then went to Stockholm where he received the Nobel Prize. One of the first actions of the new Colombian President, Belisario Betancur, who took office the same year, was to invite García Márquez to return home under his official protection. Betancur several times offered García Márquez senior ministerial positions and ambassadorships to Madrid and Paris, but he always refused. "He likes to be near power," Betancur observes, "but not to possess it for himself."

García Márquez denies, of course, that he has an obsession with power. "It's not my fascination with power," he said to me. "It's the fascination those who are powerful have with me. It's they who seek me out, and confide in me." When I repeated this to one of García Márquez's closest friends in Bogotá, he laughed and rolled his eyes. "Well, he would say that, but it's also true. Latin-American Presidents all want to be his friend, but he also wants to be theirs. As long as I've known him, he's always had this desire to be around power. Gabo loves Presidents. My wife likes to tease him by saying that even a vice-minister gives him a hard-on."

Many of García Márquez's newspaper and magazine articles have been anecdotal descriptions of his tête-à-têtes with the powerful, and, indeed, they are often soft or, at any rate, seem so in comparison with both his brilliantly conceived fiction and his shrewd political analyses. But García Márquez's journalism presents a problem on many fronts for his admirers. Graham Greene, for instance, once wrote that he had a penchant for getting "his facts wrong." One of García Márquez's close friends, a Colombian journalist, laughed out loud as he recalled how Gabo once wrote that Yanqui pilots who had posed as stuntmen for an air circus to get into Chile flew the planes that bombed La Moneda palace during Pinochet's overthrow of Salvadore Allende. "It's the novelist in him, adjusting reality to fit his imagination," he explained.

Curiously, given that García Márquez's own journalism is so heavily influenced by his political views, Cambio takes no discernibly consistent editorial position. It is rather self-consciously middle of the road, with a large number of life-style features, and it has even published articles that express views that are loathsome to García Márquez. For instance, a recent editorial endorsed U.S. assistance to fight the guerrillas. Cambio's managing editor, Pilar Calderón, explained that she and García Márquez and the five other owner-editors want to secure a market niche with the urban middle class. "We also want to recover the tradition of storytelling," Calderón said. "We don't just want to tell the news. And, happily, Gabo is here to help us in that." The most recent article García Márquez wrote, just before becoming ill, was a profile of Shakira, a twenty-two year old Colombian pop star.

Several of García Márquez's friends told me that he gets enormous pleasure just from spending time with young editors and reporters. They remind him of his youth, and he revels in the camaraderie and the edgy urgency of the newsroom. He is the paterfamilias, as he is in Cartagena, at his journalism foundation. The sheer joy of that seems enough, at least for the moment. "The one thing we all agree on is that we are for peace," he said to me when I pressed him about why Cambio was not more editorially rigorous. "The main thing is to end the war and build the country back up again. Afterward, we can figure out what our views are."

One night late in July, I attended the forty-sixth birthday party of a friend of mine, Darío Villamizar. He and his wife, Amparo, who is pregnant with their first child, live in an apartment on the fifth floor of a building in an old-fashioned, middle-class neighborhood that spreads for several blocks over the lower flanks of Monserrate, a steep, verdant mountain that rises above the center of Bogotá. The satirist Jaime Garzón lived in the same neighborhood, only two streets away, and before he was murdered last month he and the Villamizars often bumped into one another on the street or at the local bakery.

Darío is a lanky, soft-spoken, fair-haired man who works as a political analyst and writer. Amparo is petite and dark. She is the daughter of a prominent former Liberal Party senator, and she works for a government agency that is in charge of the "social reinsertion" of former guerrillas. Over the last decade, thousands of people who belonged to guerrilla organizations or militias have been persuaded to lay down their arms and rejoin civilian life. Darío was a member of the M19 guerrilla group, which voluntarily disarmed in 1990. Both he and Amparo are involved in grass-roots peace and reconciliation efforts. He has never spoken to me in detail about what he did when he was a guerrilla. He says only that he was involved with "propaganda and international activities -- political relations," -- and that the first thing he did after the amnesty was to buy a bathrobe. "For me, it was the best way to return to normal life. I had this notion of una bata de señor -- a gentleman's robe. The bathrobe seemed to me to be the ultimate symbol of tranquillity, an end to all the anguish. I still wear it." The payoff for the M19's demobilization was political legitimacy and, for a short time, real popularity as a political party. Some of its former members have become mayors,



congressmen, and even senators. But, because it didn't achieve lasting power, the M19 is considered a failure by many guerrillas who are still in the field. Nevertheless, the transition that Dario and his friends made from gun-toting revolutionaries to peace-loving middle-class professionals is one of the few success stories in Colombia's recent history.

The party was an intimate affair. A dozen middle-aged men and women, most of them also former members of the M19, gathered in the Villarnizars' small living room, which is decorated with Colombian, Nicaraguan, and Cuban contemporary art. At one point, Dario leaned over to me and whispered, "Practically the entire surviving comando superior -- the directorate of the M19 -- is in this room tonight." Vera Grabe, who was the only woman among the leaders of the group, was immediately identifiable because of her frizzy reddish-blond hair. Otty Patiño, one of the founders of M19, has gone bald and is much fatter than he was as a guerrilla. The guests sat on chairs that were pressed together in the little room, drinking Cuban añejo rum and Tennessee bourbon, and getting more and more animated as the night wore on. One former guerrilla told the story of how the comando superior had posed as nuns and priests and convinced the keepers of a rural monastery that they were there to have a "spiritual retreat," when in fact they were conducting a planning session. The man, who was pretty drunk, giggled and peppered his story with the expletive *hijoeputa* -- son of a whore -- every few seconds, and the other guests laughed with pleasure, as if they were characters in "The Big Chill," recalling their youth.

Unlike FARC, which has traditionally represented the rural peasantry, the M19 drew many of its recruits from university students and the urban middle class. It specialized in dramatic actions, like the theft in 1974 of Simón Bolívar's sword from a museum in Bogotá and gained international notoriety in 1980 when it held a group of ambassadors hostage for sixty-one days in the embassy of the Dominican Republic. In 1985, during an impasse in negotiations with the government of President Belisario Betancur, M19 guerrillas seized the Palace of justice and held the entire Colombian Supreme Court hostage. The Army responded by destroying the building. More than a hundred people were killed, including eleven justices and thirty-five guerrillas. Hundreds more of the M19's members were killed by right-wing death squads over the next few years.

The situation today is more complex than it was in 1990. There are more people fighting, and with better equipment. More blood has been shed, and more is at stake. Darío is guardedly optimistic about the chances for a renewal of Pastrana's peace process, but he also fears that there will be more war. The increased aid from the United States has made the Army feel triumphant for the first time in years, and it is going to want more military victories, which it can achieve with the new Super Hueys and high-tech weaponry and advisers. On the other hand, beefing up the Army could force the guerrillas to reconsider their options and make them more inclined to negotiate with the government. That is the optimistic -- perhaps overly so -- view.

Gabriel García Márquez has been absent from the dialogue about the war for several weeks now. In August, he quietly left Colombia for his home in Mexico, and then went to Los Angeles, where his son Rodrigo lives and works, and where he was briefly hospitalized and treated. He has returned to Mexico City, which his brother Jaime says is "a better emotional climate" for his recuperation. Darío says that he and many other Colombians feel his absence strongly. "Right now we need someone with great moral and spiritual authority," he told me on the phone from Bogotá in mid-September. "Gabo is the one person who could go out and stand between the two sides shooting at one another and say 'No more,' and everyone would listen. If he could play that role, it would be a tremendous thing for Colombia.

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