



GABRIEL GARCÍA  
MÁRQUEZ

THE AUTUMN OF  
THE PATRIARCH

*GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ*

# OF THE PATRIARCH

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*Books by Gabriel García Márquez*

*The Autumn of the Patriarch*

*Leaf Storm and Other Stories*

*One Hundred Years of Solitude*

*No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories*

# THE AUTUMN

*Translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa*

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1817



OVER THE WEEKEND the vultures got into the presidential palace by pecking through the screens on the balcony windows and the flapping of their wings stirred up the stagnant time inside, and at dawn on Monday the city awoke out of its lethargy of centuries with the warm, soft breeze of a great man dead and rotting grandeur. Only then did we dare go in without attacking the crumbling walls of reinforced stone, as the more resolute had wished, and without using oxbows to knock the main door off its hinges, as others had proposed, because all that was needed was for someone to give a push and the great armored doors that had resisted the lombards of William Dampier during the building's heroic days gave way. It was

like entering the atmosphere of another age, because the air was thinner in the rubble pits of the vast lair of power, and the silence was more ancient, and things were hard to see in the decrepit light. All across the first courtyard, where the paving stones had given way to the underground thrust of weeds, we saw the disorder of the post of the guard who had fled, the weapons abandoned in their racks, the big, long rough-planked tables with plates containing the leftovers of the Sunday lunch that had been interrupted by panic, in shadows we saw the annex where government house had been, colored fungi and pale irises among the unresolved briefs whose normal course had been slower than the pace of the driest of lives, in the center of the courtyard we saw the baptismal font where more than five generations had been christened with martial sacraments, in the rear we saw the ancient viceregal stable which had been transformed into a coach house, and among the camellias and butterflies we saw the berlin from stirring days, the wagon from the time of the plague, the coach from the year of the comet, the hearse from progress in order, the sleep-walking limousine of the first century of peace, all in good shape under the dusty cobwebs and all painted with the colors of the flag. In the next courtyard, behind an iron grille, were the lunar-dust-covered rosebushes under which the lepers had slept during the great days of the house, and they had proliferated to such a degree in their abandonment that there was scarcely an odorless chink in that atmosphere of roses which mingled with the stench that came to us from the rear of the garden and the stink of the henhouse and the smell of dung and urine ferment of cows and soldiers from the colonial basilica that had been converted into a milking barn. Opening a way through the asphyxiating growth we saw the arches of the

gallery with potted carnations and sprigs of astromelias and pansies where the concubines' quarters had been, and from the variety of domestic leftovers and the quantity of sewing machines we thought it possible that more than a thousand women had lived there with their crews of seven-month runts, we saw the battlefield disorder of the kitchens, clothes rotting in the sun by the wash basins, the open slit trench shared by concubines and soldiers, and in back we saw the Babylonian willows that had been carried alive from Asia Minor in great seagoing hothouses, with their own soil, their sap, and their drizzle, and behind the willows we saw government house, immense and sad, where the vultures were still entering through the chipped blinds. We did not have to knock down the door, as we had thought, for the main door seemed to open by itself with just the push of a voice, so we went up to the main floor along a bare stone stairway where the opera-house carpeting had been torn by the hoofs of the cows, and from the first vestibule on down to the private bedrooms we saw the ruined offices and protocol salons through which the brazen cows wandered, eating the velvet curtains and nibbling at the trim on the chairs, we saw heroic portraits of saints and soldiers thrown to the floor among broken furniture and fresh cow flops, we saw a dining room that had been eaten up by the cows, the music room profaned by the cows' breakage, the domino tables destroyed and the felt on the billiard tables cropped by the cows, abandoned in a corner we saw the wind machine, the one which counterfeited any phenomenon from the four points of the compass so that the people in the house could bear up under their nostalgia for the sea that had gone away, we saw birdcages hanging everywhere, still covered with the sleeping cloths put on some night the week before, and through



the numerous windows we saw the broad and sleeping animal that was the city, still innocent of the historic Monday that was beginning to come to life, and beyond the city, up to the horizon, we saw the dead craters of harsh moon ash on the endless plain where the sea had been. In that forbidden corner which only a few people of privilege had ever come to know, we smelled the vultures' carnage for the first time, we caught their age-old asthma, their premonitory instinct, and guiding ourselves by the putrefaction of their wing flaps in the reception room we found the wormy shells of the cows, their female animal hindquarters repeated many times in the full-length mirrors, and then we pushed open a side door that connected with an office hidden in the wall, and there we saw him, in his denim uniform without insignia, boots, the gold spur on his left heel, older than all old men and all old animals on land or sea, and he was stretched out on the floor, face down, his right arm bent under his head as a pillow, as he had slept night after night every night of his ever so long life of a solitary despot. Only when we turned him over to look at his face did we realize that it was impossible to recognize him, even though his face had not been pecked away by vultures, because none of us had ever seen him, and even though his profile was on both sides of all coins, on postage stamps, on condom labels, on trusses and scapulars, and even though his engraved picture with the flag across his chest and the dragon of the fatherland was displayed at all times in all places, we knew that they were copies of copies of portraits that had already been considered unfaithful during the time of the comet, when our own parents knew who he was because they had heard tell from theirs, as they had from theirs before them, and from childhood on we grew accustomed to believe that he was alive in the house of power because

someone had seen him light the Chinese lanterns at some festival, someone had told about seeing his sad eyes, his pale lips, his pensive hand waving through the liturgical decorations of the presidential coach, because one Sunday many years ago they had brought him the blind man on the street who for five cents would recite the verses of the forgotten poet Rubén Darío and he had come away happy with the nice wad they had paid him for a recital that had been only for him, even though he had not seen him, of course, not because he was blind, but because no mortal had ever seen him since the days of the black vomit and yet we knew that he was there, we knew it because the world went on, life went on, the mail was delivered, the municipal band played its retreat of silly waltzes on Saturday under the dusty palm trees and the dim street lights of the main square, and other old musicians took the places of the dead musicians in the band. In recent years when human sounds or the singing of birds were no longer heard inside and the armored doors were closed forever, we knew that there was someone in government house because at night lights that looked like a ship's beacons could be seen through the windows of the side that faced the sea, and those who dared go closer could hear a disaster of hoofs and animal sighs from behind the fortified walls, and one January afternoon we had seen a cow contemplating the sunset from the presidential balcony, just imagine, a cow on the balcony of the nation, what an awful thing, what a shitty country, and all sorts of conjectures were made about how it was possible for a cow to get onto a balcony since everybody knew that cows can't climb stairs, and even less carpeted ones, so in the end we never knew if we had really seen it or whether we had been spending an afternoon on the main square and as we strolled along had dreamed that we had seen a cow

on the presidential balcony where nothing had been seen or would ever be seen again for many years until dawn last Friday when the first vultures began to arrive, rising up from where they had always dozed on the cornices of the charity hospital, they came from farther inland, they came in successive waves, out of the horizon of the sea of dust where the sea had been, for a whole day they flew in slow circles over the house of power until a king with bridal feathers and a crimson ruff gave a silent order and that breaking of glass began, that breeze of a great man dead, that in and out of vultures through the windows imaginable only in a house which lacked authority, so we dared go in too and in the deserted sanctuary we found the rubble of grandeur, the body that had been pecked at, the smooth maiden hands with the ring of power on the bone of the third finger, and his whole body was sprouting tiny lichens and parasitic animals from the depths of the sea, especially in the armpits and the groin, and he had the canvas truss on his herniated testicle, which was the only thing that had escaped the vultures in spite of its being the size of an ox kidney, but even then we did not dare believe in his death because it was the second time he had been found in that office, alone and dressed and dead seemingly of natural causes during his sleep, as had been announced a long time ago in the prophetic waters of soothsayers' basins. The first time they found him had been at the beginning of his autumn, the nation was still lively enough for him to feel menaced by death even in the solitude of his bedroom, and still he governed as if he knew he was predestined never to die, for at that time it did not look like a presidential palace but rather a marketplace where a person had to make his way through barefoot orderlies unloading vegetables and chicken cages from donkeys in the corridors, stepping over

beggar women with famished godchildren who were sleeping in a huddle on the stairs awaiting the miracle of official charity, it was necessary to elude the flow of dirty water from the foul-mouthed concubines who were putting fresh flowers in the vases in the place of nocturnal flowers and swabbing the floor and singing songs of illusory loves to the rhythm of the dry branches that beat rugs on the balconies and all of it in the midst of the uproar of tenured civil servants who found hens laying eggs in desk drawers, and the traffic of whores and soldiers in the toilets, and a tumult of birds, and the fighting of street dogs in the midst of audiences because no one knew who was who or by whom in that palace with open doors in the grand disorder of which it was impossible to locate the government. The man of the house not only participated in that marketplace disaster but he had set it up himself and ruled over it, for as soon as the lights in his bedroom went on, before the cocks began to crow, the reveille of the presidential guard gave the notice of the new day to the nearby Conde barracks, and from there it was repeated for the San Jerónimo base, and from there to the harbor fort, and there it would be repeated in the six successive reveilles that would first awaken the city and then the whole country, while he meditated in the portable latrine trying to stifle with his hands the buzzing in his ears, which was beginning to show itself at that time, and watching the passage of the lights of ships along the fickle topaz sea which in those days of glory was still beneath his window. Every day, ever since he had taken possession of the house, he had supervised the milking in the cow barns to measure with his own hand the quantity of milk that the three presidential wagons would carry to the barracks in the city, in the kitchen he would have a mug of black coffee and some cassava without knowing too well

the direction in which the whimsical winds of the new day would blow him, always attent on the gabbling of the servants, who were the people in the house who spoke the same language as he, whose serious blandishments he respected most, and whose hearts he best deciphered, and a short time before nine o'clock he would take a slow bath in water with boiled leaves in the granite cistern built in the shadow of the almond trees of his private courtyard, and only after eleven o'clock would he manage to overcome the drowsiness of dawn and confront the hazards of reality. Previously, during the occupation by the marines, he would shut himself up in his office to decide the destiny of the nation with the commandant of the forces of the landing and sign all manner of laws and decrees with his thumbprint, for in those days he did not know how to read or write, but when they left him alone with his nation and his power again he did not poison his blood again with the sluggishness of written law, but governed orally and physically, present at every moment and everywhere with a flinty parsimony but also with a diligence inconceivable at his age, besieged by mobs of lepers, blind people and cripples who begged for the salt of health from his hands, and lettered politicians and dauntless adulators who proclaimed him the corrector of earthquakes, eclipses, leap years and other errors of God, dragging his great feet of an elephant walking in the snow all through the house as he resolved problems of state and household matters with the same simplicity with which he gave the order take that door away from here and put it over there for me, they took it away, put it back again for me, they put it back, the clock in the tower should not strike twelve at twelve o'clock but two times so that life would seem longer, the order was carried out, without an instant of hesitation, without a pause, except for the mortal hour

of siesta time when he would take refuge in the shade of the concubines, he would choose one by assault, without undressing her or getting undressed himself, without closing the door, and all through the house one could hear his heartless panting of an urgent spouse, the craving tinkle of his gold spur, his dog whimper, the surprise of the woman who wasted her time at love in trying to get rid of the squalid stares of the seven-month runts, her shouts of get out of here, go play in the courtyard, this isn't for children to see, and it was as if an angel had flown across the skies of the nation, voices were muffled, life came to a halt, everybody remained stone-still with a finger to his lips, not breathing, silence, the general is screwing, but those who knew him best had no faith even in the respite of that sacred moment, for it always seemed that he was in two places at once, they would see him playing dominoes at seven o'clock at night and at the same time he had been seen lighting cow chips to drive the mosquitoes out of the reception room, nor did anyone harbor any illusions until the lights in the last of the windows went out and they heard the noise of the three crossbars, the three locks, the three bolts on the door of the presidential bedroom, and they heard the thump of the body as it collapsed from fatigue onto the stone floor, and the breathing of a decrepit child that grew deeper as the tide rose, until the nocturnal harp of the wind silenced the cicadas and their fiddling and a broad big sea wave swept through the streets of the ancient city of viceroys and buccaneers and poured into government house through all the windows like a tremendous August Saturday that caused barnacles to grow on the mirrors and left the reception room at the mercy of the sharks and it rose higher than the highest levels of prehistoric oceans and overflowed the face of the land and space and time, and

only he remained floating face down on the lunar water of his dreams of a solitary drowned man, in his denim private soldier's uniform, his boots, his gold spur, and his right arm folded under his head to serve as a pillow. That simultaneous presence everywhere during the flinty years that preceded his first death, that going up as he went down, that going into ecstasy in the sea while in agony in unsuccessful loves, were not a privilege of his nature, as his adulators proclaimed, or a mass hallucination, as his critics said, but his luck in counting on the complete service and doglike loyalty of Patricio Aragonés, his perfect double, who had been found without anyone's searching for him when they came to him with the news general sir a false presidential coach was driving around to Indian villages doing a prosperous business of impostoring, they had seen the taciturn eyes in the morguelike shadows, they had seen the pale lips, the hand of a sensitive bride with a velvet glove that went along throwing handfuls of salt to sick people kneeling in the street, and behind the coach followed two bogus cavalry officers collecting hard cash for the favor of health, just imagine general sir, what a sacrilege, and he gave no order against the impostor, but asked instead that they bring him secretly to the presidential palace with his head stuck in a burlap bag so that people would not get them mixed up, and then he suffered the humiliation of seeing himself in such a state of equality, God damn it, this man is me, he said, because it really was as if he were, except for the authority of the voice, which the other one never managed to imitate, and for the clearness of the lines on the hand where the life line went along without obstacles all around the base of the thumb, and if he did not have him shot immediately it was not because he was interested in keeping him as his official impostor, that occurred to him

later, but because the illusion that the cipher of his own fate should be written on the hand of an impostor bothered him. When he became convinced of the vanity of that dream Patricio Aragonés had already impassively survived six assassination attempts, had acquired the habit of dragging his feet which had been flattened out with a mallet, his ears buzzed, and his hernia ached at dawn in the winter, and he had learned to take off and put on the golden spur as if the straps were tangled up simply to gain time at audiences muttering God damn it these buckles Flemish blacksmiths make aren't even good for this, and from the jokester and gabbler that he had been when he was a glass-blower in his father's carquaise he became thoughtful and somber and paid no attention to what people were saying to him but scrutinized the shadows of their eyes to guess what they were not saying to him, and he never answered a question without first asking in turn what do you think and from the slothful wastrel he had been in his business as a vendor of miracles, he became diligent to the point of torture and an implacable walker, he became tight-fisted and rapacious, he resigned himself to sleeping on the floor, his clothes on, face down and with no pillow, and he renounced his precocious presumption of an identity of his own and all hereditary vocation for the golden flightiness of simply blowing and making bottles, and he confronted the most terrible risks of power laying cornerstones where the second stone was never to be laid, cutting ribbons in enemy territory and bearing up under so many soft-boiled dreams and so many repressed sighs of impossible illusions as he crowned and did not so much as touch all those ephemeral and unattainable beauty queens, for he had become resigned forever to live a destiny that was not his, even though he did not do it out of greed or conviction but



because he had exchanged his life for his in the lifetime job of official impostor with a nominal salary of fifty pesos a month and the advantage of living like a king without the calamity of being one, what more could you ask? That mix-up of identities reached its high point one night when the wind was long and he found Patricio Aragonés sighing out toward the sea amidst the fragrant vapor of the jasmynes and he asked him with legitimate alarm if they had put wolfbane in the food because he was drifting off as if pierced by evil air, and Patricio Aragonés answered him no general, it's worse than that, on Saturday he had crowned a carnival queen and had danced the first waltz with her and now he couldn't find any exit out of that memory, because she was the most beautiful woman on earth, the kind you never get for yourself general, if you could only see her, but he answered with a sigh of relief and what the hell, this is the kind of trouble a man gets into when he gets all tied up with women, he proposed abducting her as he had done with so many good-looking women who had become his concubines, I'll have her held down by force on the bed with four troopers at her arms and legs while you take care of her with your soup ladle, God damn it, you can take her while she's bulldogged, he told him, even the tightest of them roll around with rage at first and then they beg you don't leave me like this general like a sad rose apple whose seed has fallen off, but Patricio Aragonés didn't want as much as that he wanted more, he wanted them to love him, because this girl is one of those who know where the tune comes from general, you'll see when you get a look at her, so as a formula for relief he pointed out the nocturnal pathways to the rooms of his concubines to him and authorized him to make use of them as if it were he himself, by assault and quickly and with his clothes on, and Patricio