



GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

COLLECTED STORIES



A L B E S T S E L L E R

rich and startling in their matter and confi-
their manner...They are—the word cannot
al.” —JOHN UPDIKE, *THE NEW YORKER*



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Translated from the Spanish by
Gregory Rabassa and J. S. Bernstein



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I
EYES OF A BLUE DOG



Translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa



The Third Resignation



THERE WAS THAT NOISE AGAIN. That cold, cutting, vertical noise that he knew so well now; but it was coming to him now sharp and painful, as if he had become unaccustomed to it overnight.

It was spinning around inside his empty head, dull and biting. A beehive had risen up inside the four walls of his skull. It grew larger and larger with successive spirals, and it beat on him inside, making the stem of his spinal cord quiver with an irregular vibration, out of pitch with the sure rhythm of his body. Something had become unadapted in his human material structure; something that had functioned normally "at other times" and now was hammering at his head from within with dry and hard blows made by the bones of a fleshless, skeletal hand, and it made him remember all the bitter sensations of life. He had the animal impulse to clench his fists

and squeeze his temples, which sprouted blue and purple arteries with the firm pressure of his desperate pain. He would have liked to catch the noise that was piercing the moment with its sharp diamond point between the palms of his sensitive hands. The figure of a domestic cat made his muscles contract when he imagined it chasing through the tormented corners of his hot, fever-torn head. Now he would catch it. No. The noise had slippery fur, almost untouchable. But he was ready to catch it with his well-learned strategy and hold it long and tightly with all the strength of his desperation. He would not permit it to enter through his ear again, to come out through his mouth, through each one of his pores or his eyes, which rolled as it went through and remained blind, looking at the flight of the noise from the depths of the shattered darkness. He would not allow it to break its cut-glass crystals, its ice stars, against the interior wall of his cranium. That was what that noise was like: interminable, like a child beating his head against a concrete wall. Like all hard blows against nature's firm things. But if he could encircle it, isolate it, it would no longer torment him. Go and cut the variable figure from its own shadow. Grab it. Squeeze it, yes, once and for all now. Throw it onto the pavement with all his might and step on it ferociously until he could say, panting, that he had killed the noise that was tormenting him, that was driving him mad, and that was now stretched out on the ground like any ordinary thing, transformed into an integral death.

But it was impossible for him to squeeze his temples. His arms had been shortened on him and were now the limbs of a dwarf: small, chubby, adipose arms. He tried to shake his head. He shook it. The noise then appeared with greater force inside his skull, which had hardened, grown larger, felt itself more strongly attracted by gravity. The noise was heavy and hard. So heavy and hard that once he had caught and destroyed it, he would have the impression that he had plucked the petals off a lead flower.

He had heard the noise with the same insistence "at other

times.” He had heard it, for instance, on the day he had died for the first time. The time—when he saw a corpse—that he realized it was his own corpse. He looked at it and he touched it. He felt himself untouchable, unspatial, nonexistent. He really was a corpse and he could already feel the passage of death on his young and sickly body. The atmosphere had hardened all through the house, as if it had been filled with cement, and in the middle of that block—where objects had remained as when it had been an atmosphere of air—there he was, carefully placed inside a coffin of hard but transparent cement. “That noise” had been in his head that time too. How distant and how cold the soles of his feet had felt there at the other end of the coffin, where they had placed a pillow, because the box was still too big for him and they had to adjust it, adapt the dead body to its new and last garment. They covered him with white and tied a handkerchief around his jaw; mortally handsome.

He was in his coffin, ready to be buried, and yet he knew that he wasn’t dead. That if he tried to get up he could do it so easily. “Spiritually,” at least. But it wasn’t worth the trouble. Better to let himself die right there; die of “death,” which was his illness. It had been some time since the doctor had said to his mother, dryly:

“Madam, your child has a grave illness: he is dead. Nevertheless,” he went on, “we shall do everything possible to keep him alive beyond death. We will succeed in making his organic functions continue through a complex system of autonutrition. Only the motor functions will be different, his spontaneous movements. We shall watch his life through growth, which, too, shall continue on in a normal fashion. It is simply ‘a living death.’ A real and true death . . .”

He remembered the words but in a confused way. Perhaps he had never heard them and it was the creation of his brain as his temperature rose during the crisis of typhoid fever.

While he was sinking into delirium. When he had read the tales of embalmed pharaohs. As his fever rose, he felt himself

to be the protagonist. A kind of emptiness in his life had begun there. From then on he had been unable to distinguish, to remember what events were part of his delirium and what were part of his real life. That was why he doubted now. Perhaps the doctor had never mentioned that strange "living death." It was illogical, paradoxical, simply contradictory. And it made him suspect now that he really was dead. That he had been for eighteen years.

It was then—at the time of his death when he was seven years old—that his mother had had a small coffin made for him out of green wood, a child's coffin, but the doctor had ordered them to make a larger box, a box for a normal adult, because that one there might atrophy growth and he would develop into a deformed dead person or an abnormal living one. Or the detention of growth might impede his realizing that he was getting better. In view of that warning, his mother had a large coffin made for him, one for an adult corpse, and in it she placed three pillows at his feet so that he would fit it properly.

Soon he began to grow inside the box in such a way that every year they would remove some wool from the end pillow so as to give him room for growth. That was how he had spent half his life. Eighteen years. (He was twenty-five now.) And he had reached his normal, definitive height. The carpenter and the doctor had been mistaken in their calculations and had made the coffin two feet too long. They had thought he would have the stature of his father, who had been a half-savage giant. But that was not how it was. The only thing he had inherited from him was his thick beard. A thick, blue beard, which his mother was in the habit of arranging so as to give him a more decent appearance in his coffin. That beard bothered him terribly on hot days.

But there was something that worried him more than "the noise." It was the mice! Even when he was a child nothing in the world had worried him more, had produced more terror in him than mice. And it was precisely those disgusting ani-

mals who had been attracted by the smell of the candles that burned at his feet. They had already gnawed his clothes and he knew that soon they would start gnawing him, eating his body. One day he was able to see them: they were five shiny, slithery mice who had climbed up into the box by the table leg and were devouring him. By the time his mother noticed it there would be nothing left of him except rubble, his hard, cold bones. What produced even more horror in him was not exactly that the mice would eat him. After all, he could go on living with his skeleton. What tormented him was the innate terror he felt toward those small animals. His hair stood on end just thinking about those velvety creatures who ran all over his body, got into the folds of his skin, and brushed his lips with their icy paws. One of them climbed up to his eyelids and tried to gnaw at his cornea. He saw it, large and monstrous, in its desperate effort to bore through his retina. He thought that it was a new death and surrendered completely to the imminence of vertigo.

He remembered that he had reached adulthood. He was twenty-five years old and that meant that he wouldn't grow any more. His features would become firm, serious. But when he was healthy he wouldn't be able to talk about his childhood. He hadn't had any. He had spent it dead.

His mother had taken rigorous care during the time between childhood and puberty. She was concerned about the perfect hygiene of the coffin and the room as a whole. She changed the flowers in the vases frequently and opened the windows every day so that the fresh air could come in. It was with great satisfaction that she examined the metric tape in those days, when after measuring him she would ascertain that he had grown several centimeters. She had the maternal satisfaction of seeing him alive. Still, she took care to avoid the presence of strangers in the house. After all, the existence of a corpse in family quarters over long years was disagreeable and mysterious. She was a woman of abnegation. But soon her optimism began to decline. During the last years, he saw her look

at the metric tape with sadness. Her child was no longer growing. For the past few months the growth had not progressed a single millimeter. His mother knew that now it would be difficult to observe the presence of life in her beloved corpse. She had the fear that one morning she would find him "really" dead, and perhaps because of that on the day in question he was able to observe that she approached his box discreetly and smelled his body. She had fallen into a crisis of pessimism. Of late she had neglected her attentions and no longer took the precaution of carrying the metric tape. She knew that he wasn't going to grow any more.

And he knew that now he was "really" dead. He knew it because of that gentle tranquillity with which his organism had let itself be carried off. Everything had changed unseasonably. The imperceptible beats that only he could perceive had disappeared from his pulse now. He felt heavy, drawn by a reclaiming and potent force toward the primitive substance of the earth. The force of gravity seemed to attract him now with an irrevocable power. He was heavy, like a positive, undeniable corpse. But it was more restful that way. He didn't even have to breathe in order to live his death.

In an imaginary way, without touching himself, one by one he went over his members. There, on a hard pillow, was his head, turned a bit toward the left. He imagined his mouth slightly open because of the narrow strip of cold that filled his throat with hail. He had been chopped down like a twenty-five-year-old tree. Perhaps he had tried to close his mouth. The handkerchief that had held his jaw was loose. He was unable to get himself in place, compose himself, even to strike a pose to look like a decent corpse. His muscles, his members, no longer responded as before, punctual to the call of the nervous system. He was no longer what he had been eighteen years before, a normal child who could move as he wished. He felt his fallen arms, fallen forever, tight against the cushioned sides of the coffin. His stomach hard, like the bark of a walnut tree. And beyond there were his legs, whole, exact, completing

his perfect adult anatomy. His body rested heavily, but peacefully, with no discomfort whatever, as if the world had suddenly stopped and no one would break the silence, as if all the lungs of the earth had ceased breathing so as not to break the soft silence of the air. He felt as happy as a child face up on the thick, cool grass contemplating a high cloud flying off in the afternoon sky. He was happy, even though he knew he was dead, that he would rest forever in the box lined with artificial silk. He had great lucidity. It was not as before, after his first death, in which he felt dull, listless. The four candles they had placed around him, which were replaced every three months, had begun to go out again, just when they would be indispensable. He felt the closeness of the fresh, damp violets his mother had brought that morning. He felt it in the lilies, the roses. But all that terrible reality did not give him any anxiety. Quite the opposite, he was happy there, alone in his solitude. Would he feel fear afterward?

Who can say? It was hard to think about the moment when the hammer would pound the nails into the green wood and the coffin would creak under its certain hope of becoming a tree once more. His body, drawn now with greater force by the imperative of the earth, would remain tilted in a damp, claylike, soft depth and up there, four cubic yards above, the gravediggers' last blows would grow faint. No. He wouldn't feel fear there either. That would be the prolongation of his death, the most natural prolongation of his new state.

Not even a degree of heat would be left in his body, his medulla would have frozen forever and little ice stars would penetrate as deep as the marrow of his bones. How well he would grow used to his new life as a dead man! One day, however, he will feel his solid armor fall apart, and when he tries to name, review, each one of his members, he won't find them. He will feel that he doesn't have any definitive, exact form, and he will know with resignation that he has lost his perfect twenty-five-year-old anatomy and has been changed into a handful of shapeless dust, with no geometric definition.

The biblical dust of death. Perhaps then he will feel a slight nostalgia, the nostalgia of not being a formal, anatomical corpse, but, rather, an imaginary, abstract corpse, assembled only in the hazy memory of his kin. He will know then that he will rise up the capillary vessels of an apple tree and awaken, bitten by the hunger of a child on some autumn day. He will know—and that did sadden him—that he has lost his unity: that he is no longer even an ordinary dead man, a common corpse.

He had spent that last night in the solitary company of his own corpse.

But with the new day, with the penetration of the first rays of the lukewarm sun through the open window, he felt his skin softening. He observed it for a moment. Quiet, rigid. He let the air run over his body. There was no doubt about it: the “smell” was there. During the night the corpse rot had begun to have its effects. His organism had begun to decompose, rot, like the bodies of all dead people. The “smell” was undoubtedly, unmistakably, the smell of gamy meat, disappearing and then reappearing, more penetrating. His body was decomposing with the heat of the previous night. Yes. He was rotting. Within a few hours his mother would come to change the flowers and the stench of decomposed flesh would hit her from the threshold. Then they would take him away to sleep his second death among the other dead.

But suddenly fear struck him in the back like a dagger. Fear! Such a deep word, so meaningful! Now he really was afraid, with a true, “physical” fear. What was its cause? He understood perfectly and it made his flesh creep: he probably wasn’t dead. They’d put him there, in that box, which now seemed so perfectly soft, so cushioned, so terribly comfortable, and the phantom of fear opened the window of reality to him: They were going to bury him alive!

He couldn’t be dead because he had an exact awareness of everything: of the life that was spinning and murmuring about him. Of the warm smell of heliotrope that came in

through the open window and mingled with the other "smell." He was quite aware of the slow dripping of the water in the cistern. Of the cricket that had stayed in the corner and was still chirping, thinking that early morning was still there.

Everything denied his death. Everything except the "smell." But how could he know that the smell was his? Maybe his mother had forgotten to change the water in the vases the day before and the stems were rotting. Or maybe the mouse which the cat had dragged into his room had decomposed with the heat. No. The "smell" couldn't be coming from his body.

A few moments before he had been happy with his death, because he had thought he was dead. Because a dead man can be happy with his irremediable situation. But a living person can't resign himself to being buried alive. Yet his members wouldn't respond to his call. He couldn't express himself and that was what caused his terror, the greatest terror of his life and of his death. They were going to bury him alive. He might be able to feel, be aware of the moment they nailed up the box. He would feel the emptiness of the body suspended across the shoulders of friends as his anguish and desperation grew with every step of the procession.

He will try to rise up in vain, to call with all his weakened forces, to pound inside the dark and narrow coffin so that they will know that he is still alive, that they are going to bury him alive. It would be useless. Even there his members would not respond to that urgent and last call of his nervous system.

He heard sounds in the next room. Could he have been asleep? Could all that life of a dead man have been a nightmare? But the sound of the dishes didn't go on. He became sad and maybe he was annoyed because of it. He would have wanted all the dishes in the world to break in one single crash right there beside him, to be awakened by an outside cause since his own will had failed.

But no. It wasn't a dream. He was sure that if it had been a dream his last intent to return to reality wouldn't have failed.