GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

'Brilliant'
SALMAN
RUSHDIE

the scandal of the century

and other writings

The Scandal of the Century

ALSO BY GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories (1968)

One Hundred Years of Solitude (1970)

The Autumn of the Patriarch (1976)

Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories (1978)

In Evil Hour (1979)

Leaf Storm and Other Stories (1979)

Chronicle of a Death Foretold (1982)

The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor (1986)

Clandestine in Chile: The Adventures of Miguel Littín (1987)

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The General in His Labyrinth (1990)

Strange Pilgrims (1993)

Of Love and Other Demons (1995)

News of a Kidnapping (1997)

Living to Tell the Tale (2003)

Memories of My Melancholy Whores (2005)

The Scandal of the Century and Other Writings

Gabriel García Márquez

Translated by Anne McLean
Foreword by Jon Lee Anderson
Edited by Cristóbal Pera

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Foreword

The world recognizes Gabriel García Márquez as an extraordinary novelist—the beloved creator of Colonel Aureliano Buendía and of Macondo, of the epic love between Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza, of the death of Santiago Nasar, and of the colossal, solitary dictator of *The Autumn of the Patriarch.* For all of this, he received the maximum literary recognition possible, a Nobel Prize, and when he did, the Spanish-speaking world rejoiced at the sight of one of their own, "one of the seventeen children of the telegraphist of Aracataca," standing before the Swedish monarchs to receive his distinction.

But García Márquez, or "Gabo"—the affectionate nickname by which he was known in the Hispanic world—was more than a novelist. He is also remembered for having been the friend and confidant of Fidel Castro and Bill Clinton, as well as Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes and his other colleagues of the Boom, and for having been the husband of Mercedes Barcha and the father of two sons, Gonzalo and Rodrigo, and when he died in 2014, multitudes of people thronged to his funeral, which was held in the beautiful palace of Bellas Artes in the capital of Mexico, his longtime country of residence. When Juan Manuel Santos, who was then the president of Colombia, Gabo's birthplace, said that he had been the best Colombian of all time, no one challenged the assertion.

In addition to all of that, Gabo was a journalist. Journalism was, in a sense, his first true love, and, like all first loves, it was the longest lasting. The profession of journalism helped form him as a writer, which is something he recalled forever afterward. His admiration for journalism reached the point where he proclaimed it, on one occasion, with his characteristic generosity, to be "the best job in the world."

Gabo's hyperbole was inspired by a sentiment of genuine respect and affection toward a profession that he made his own at the same time as he took his first steps as a writer. In 1947, his first year at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, Gabo's first short stories were published in the daily newspaper *El Espectador*. He already wanted to become a writer, but had entered law school in order to please his father.

IT WAS NOT LONG, however, before Gabo's academic life was interrupted by political violence. The April 1948 assassination of the charismatic Liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogotá triggered an outbreak of violent public unrest in the Colombian capital lasting several days. During the chaos, which became remembered as "*el Bogotazo,*" Gabo's student residence went up in flames and the university itself was closed indefinitely. It was the beginning of a civil war between the country's two main political parties, the Liberals and their rivals, the Conservatives.

The conflict, which would become known as "*la Violencia,*" would last a decade and cost the lives of some 200,000 people. Colombia would never be the same, and nor would the life of Gabo. To continue his studies, he moved to the city of Cartagena de Indias, on the Caribbean coast, and signed up at the university there. He also began to collaborate with a new local daily paper, *El Universal,* and, before long, gave up his studies altogether to devote himself to writing full-time. He soon began writing articles for *El Heraldo,* a newspaper published in the larger, neighboring city of Barranquilla, and he moved there in 1950. These were happy and formative years for Gabo, in which he was surrounded by other young creative personalities—writers, artists, and

bohemians—with whom he became friends and who together made up the so-called Group of Barranquilla. While living in a flophouse that doubled as a bordello, Gabo eked out a living as a columnist, writing under the nom de plume "Septimus," and he completed his first novella, *Leaf Storm*.

THIS ANTHOLOGY FOCUSES ON the unique journalistic legacy of Gabriel García Márquez via a selection of fifty of his articles published between 1950 and 1984. The pieces assembled here were selected by Cristóbal Pera, who worked with Gabo as an editor on his memoirs, culling from the exhaustive collection of Gabo's journalism compiled by Jacques Gilard, the late French Hispanist, for his extraordinary five-volume anthology of Gabo's work published in the 1980s.

The Scandal of the Century takes us from the early writings of the young, unknown Gabo of his Barranquilla days through nearly four decades, into the mid-1980s, when he was a mature, internationally renowned author. Among other things, this anthology reveals Gabo to have been blessed with abundant talent from the start, as well as an easygoing sense of humor, and a writer whose journalism is barely distinguishable from his fiction. Indeed, in his explanation for this selection, Pera tells us that he chose the works that most revealed Gabo as "the storyteller he was," in which "the seams of reality are stretched by his unstoppable narrative impulse."

In "Topic for a Topical Piece," for instance, Gabo writes about the difficulty of finding an appropriate topic with which to begin a piece. "There are those who turn the lack of a topic into a topic for a journalistic piece. The choice is absurd in a world like ours, where things of imperceptible interest are happening." After reviewing a series of curious stories appearing in the newspapers—including one telling of how the daughter of the Spanish dictator, the "Generalissimo" Francisco Franco, was getting married, and that her bridegroom, his future son-in-law, or *yerno,* was already being referred to as "*el Yernissimo,*" and another incident in which some youths were reported as having been burned for playing with "flying saucers," Gabo makes it clear that it

is possible to write an entertaining article, as he has just done, about nothing in particular.

In "An Understandable Mistake," Gabo reveals more than anything else his urge to, as he used to say, "*echar un cuento bien contado*"—spin a good yarn. Adopting a Gothic noir tone, he narrates the circumstances in which a deeply drunk man nearly committed suicide by throwing himself out of his hotel window after seeing fish falling from the sky. In the course of the tale, we see that Gabo has riffed imaginatively on a pair of news items from the city of Cali.

> Cali. April 18. Today, in the early hours of the morning, a stranger jumped out the window of his apartment located on the third floor of a building in the city. The decision seemed to have been due to the nervous excitement produced by alcohol. The injured man is now in the hospital, where his condition does not appear to be serious.

> Cali. April 18. Inhabitants of the capital of the Cauca Valley had an extraordinary surprise today, as they observed in a downtown city street the presence of hundreds of small silvery fish, approximately two inches long, that appeared strewn all over the place.

IN 1954, Gabo returned to Bogotá to work for *El Espectador,* the national newspaper that had published his first short stories. He began by writing movie reviews, but he also penned articles about a wide range of things that caught his interest, everything from popular folklore to his reflections on events that intrigued him. In "Literaturism," he writes of a horrifying murder that occurred in the Colombian interior, in Antioquia. With a tone of admonishment leavened by his customary black humor, Gabo notes, "The news has not earned—at the current exchange rate of the journalistic peso—more than two columns on the regional news page. It is a bloody crime, like any other. With the difference that these days there is nothing extraordinary about it, since as a news item it is too common and as a novel too grue-

some. It would be best to recommend [to] real life [that it] exercise a bit more discretion."

In "The Postman Rings a Thousand Times," Gabo demonstrates once again that it is possible to write an interesting story about nothing very much with an exquisite piece about an address in Bogotá where the letters that never reach their destinations end up.

Gabo earned a national reputation with his dramatic 1955 serial, entitled *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor,* based on his interviews with Luis Alejandro Velasco, a crewman on the Colombian warship ARC *Caldas* and the sole survivor among seven sailors who were thrown overboard when the vessel lurched suddenly to one side. Gabo's story was a huge success. Published in fourteen installments, the series simultaneously broke sales records for *El Espectador* and sparked controversy when it discredited the official account of events, which had blamed the disaster on a nonexistent storm, and asserted that the ship had, in fact, listed because it was overloaded with contraband cargo brought on board by the officers and crew. To extricate Gabo from the public storm, the paper's editor sent him to Europe to report. It was the first time Gabo had been outside of Colombia.

FOR THE NEXT TWO and a half years, Gabo was *El Espectador*'s roving correspondent, traveling to Paris, Italy, and Vienna, and even to some of the countries of Eastern Europe on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Gabo wrote idiosyncratic pieces about whatever caught his interest—everything from a world leader's summit in Geneva to the ostensible squabbles between two Italian movie celebrity actresses. He wrote another serialized story, as he had done with the *Shipwrecked Sailor,* about the mysterious death of a young Italian woman named Wilma Montesi; the mock-tabloid title of this book has also been borrowed from that story, "The Scandal of the Century." Gabo even wrote, hilariously, about London's famous fog. His prose was fresh, and his chronicles were sharp and laden with irony; he was a great "*mamador de gallo,*" as jokesters are known in Colombia, and the loyal fans he had acquired at home were ready to read anything he wrote.

In one of his dispatches, "H.H. Goes on Vacation," Gabo expands artfully on the pope's habitual drive from the Vatican to his palace of Castel Gandolfo, situated on the outskirts of Rome. In Gabo's hands, the journey becomes a suspenseful epic. "The pope went on vacation. This afternoon, at five o'clock sharp, he settled into his own Mercedes, license plate SCV-7, and drove out through the Holy Office gate, to the Castel Gandolfo Palace, twenty miles from Rome. Two gigantic Swiss Guards saluted him at the gate. One of them, the taller and heftier one, is a blond teenager with a flattened nose, like a boxer's nose, the result of a traffic accident."

The story moves on, imbued with dramatic timing thanks to the trick of adding subtitles to the piece, including one about the high temperature of the day: "Ninety-five degrees in the shade" and another, "Accidents along the way," in which Gabo informs us that His Holiness's ten-minute delay in reaching his palace was caused by a truck blocking the way. The pope's eventual arrival is shared in a confiding tone: "No one in Castel Gandolfo noticed which entrance the pope took into his holiday palace. He entered from the west side, into a garden with an avenue bordered by hundred-year-old trees."

WHEN HE RETURNED to Latin America at the end of 1957, Gabo was recruited by a Colombian friend, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, to come and work with him on *Momento,* a magazine published in Caracas, Venezuela. Mendoza had also accompanied Gabo on his journey to the countries of Eastern Europe. Gabo's arrival in Caracas coincided with the onset of a politically convulsive era in Latin America. A short time after he arrived, in January of 1958, came the toppling of the Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. It was the first popular overthrow of a dictator in a period when Latin America was governed almost exclusively by despots. What Gabo lived through in Venezuela's volatile atmosphere over the next year sparked a political awakening in him.

Gabo returned briefly to Barranquilla to marry Mercedes Barcha, a beautiful young woman from the Magdalena River town of Magangué

with whom he had fallen in love several years before, during his Barranquilla period. They returned to Caracas together. When Gabo's friend Mendoza left *Momento* after a disagreement with the magazine's owner, Gabo quit in solidarity and began writing for other publications as a freelancer. Two of his pieces from that time, "Only Twelve Hours to Save Him" and "Caracas Without Water," which are included here, are classics of Gabo's emerging literary style, in which his narration involves a detailed reconstruction of real-life dramas, conveyed with a suspense that is almost Hitchcockian, and focuses on a riddle that is only revealed at the story's end.

IN JANUARY OF 1959, two weeks after Fidel Castro's rebel army overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista and seized power in Cuba, Gabo and Mendoza managed to travel to the island onboard a beat-up old plane that had been flown to Caracas by the triumphant "*barbudos,*" as the bearded rebels were known, to bring journalists back with them. For Gabo, the trip marked the beginning of a relationship with Cuba, and its revolution, that would last the rest of his life. About this first Cuban experience, he wrote memorably in "I Can't Think of Any Title."

In his text, Gabo situated the nascent revolution in the political context of the moment via a genial vignette about the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, whom he had known in Paris when both of them were lodged in the same seedy hotel in the Latin Quarter a few years before:

> [E]ven in the cruelest times of winter, Nicolás Guillén maintained in Paris the very Cuban custom of rising (without a rooster) at the crowing of the first roosters, and of reading the newspapers as he sipped his coffee lulled by the sweet wind of the sugar mills and the counterpoint of guitars in the clamorous dawns of Camagüey. Then he opened the window of his balcony, also as he would in Camagüey, and woke up the whole street by shouting the news from Latin America translated from French into Cuban slang.
>
> [. . .] So one morning Nicolás Guillén opened his window and shouted a single piece of news:

"The man has fallen!"

There was a commotion in the sleeping street because each of us believed the man who had fallen was his. The Argentinians thought it was Juan Domingo Perón, the Paraguayans thought it was Alfredo Stroessner [. . .], the Guatemalans thought it was Castillo Armas, the Dominicans thought it was Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, and the Cubans thought it was Fulgencio Batista. It was Perón, actually. Later, talking about this, Nicolás Guillén painted a distressing panorama of the situation in Cuba for us. "The only thing I see for the future," he concluded, "is a kid who's getting a lot done over in Mexico." He paused like a clairvoyant, and concluded:

"His name is Fidel Castro."

As for his own arrival in Havana at the height of revolutionary fervor, Gabo recalled it the following way:

Before noon we landed between the Babylonian mansions of the richest of the rich of Havana: in the Campo Columbia airport, then baptized with the name Ciudad Libertad, the former Batista fort where a few days earlier Camilo Cienfuegos had camped with his column of astonished peasants. The first impression was rather comical, for we were greeted by members of the former military air force who at the last minute had gone over to the Revolution and were keeping to their barracks while their beards grew enough to look like old revolutionaries.

WITH THE PUBLICATION and spectacular success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* the year 1967 was one of the great milestones in the life of Gabriel García Márquez. From that moment on, Gabo and his family enjoyed economic stability and he was internationally acclaimed, deservedly so, as one of the great novelists of his era. For the next twenty years, Gabo remained at the literary pinnacle, publishing his other great works, such as *The Autumn of the Patriarch* and *Love in*

the Time of Cholera. Much less well known to his millions of readers outside of Latin America, Gabo continued to be a journalist as well, albeit with an increasingly political focus.

The 1970s saw rising political tensions in Latin America ushered in by the Cuban Revolution and the violent counterinsurgency policies introduced by the United States to roll back communism. At this time, García Márquez embarked on a phase of militant journalism. When the socialist Chilean president Salvador Allende was brutally overthrown by General Augusto Pinochet in 1972, for instance, Gabo went so far as to declare that he would not publish another book until the regime had fallen. Although he didn't follow through on that promise, he did begin to express his sympathies with leftist causes more openly from then on.

Together with some Colombian journalist friends, he founded *Alternativa,* a leftist magazine; he wrote articles and columns that were critical of U.S. policies and in favor of Cuba and of Fidel Castro, with whom he also began to develop a close friendship. He wrote a long and flattering article about the Cuban military expedition in Angola and another, included in this volume, entitled "The Sandinista Heist: Chronicle of the Assault on the 'Hog House,'" in which he rendered the circumstances of a mass abduction of Nicaraguan parliamentarians by a group of Sandinista guerrillas as a heroic epic.

In the article "The Cubans Face the Blockade," included in this anthology, Gabo used his narrative skills to make his readers understand the implications of the famous trade embargo—"blockade," to the Cubans—which the United States had imposed against Cuba in 1961. He wrote:

> That night, the first of the blockade, in Cuba there were 482,560 automobiles, 343,300 refrigerators, 549,700 radios, 303,500 television sets, 352,900 electric irons, 286,400 fans, 41,800 washing machines, 3,510,000 wristwatches, sixty-three locomotives, and twelve merchant ships. All these things, except for the wristwatches, which were Swiss, had been made in the United States.
>
> It seems that a certain amount of time had to pass before the

> Cubans realized what those mortal numbers meant to their lives. From the point of view of production, Cuba soon found that it was not actually a distinct country but rather a commercial peninsula of the United States.

Because of texts like these, Gabo was widely criticized by conservative media in the United States and Latin America, which branded him, not altogether inaccurately, as a propagandist of the Cuban regime. Some went so far, more unfairly, as to call him Fidel Castro's useful idiot. Gabo was undeterred by these critiques, however, and carried on supporting those causes he believed in, which were on the left, by and large, and definitely included advocacy for Cuba and the region's left-wing causes. Behind the scenes, he also used his political access and Nobel clout to play a diplomatic role in efforts to broker dialogue between the United States and Cuba, as well as between Colombian guerrilla leaders and the government.

TOWARD THE END of the 1990s, Gabo was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer—and although he recovered from that illness, he became weaker in the final decade and a half of his life.

In 1996, before his health problems began, he published the book *News of a Kidnapping,* one of his few in-depth journalistic works, and the only one to become widely known internationally. It is the story of the terrifying ordeal of a group of influential Colombians, most of them journalists, who were taken hostage by Pablo Escobar in an effort to convince the Colombian government to abandon the extradition agreement for narcotraffickers it had signed with the United States.

In 1998, Gabo used part of the money he received from his Nobel Prize to buy *Cambio,* a magazine owned by a friend of his, and to relaunch it with a new team of editors and reporters. In *Cambio* he published some of his last pieces of journalism, including a profile of the singer Shakira, who is from Barranquilla, and another of the Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez. In the end, the magazine didn't

work out, but while it lasted, Gabo greatly enjoyed being immersed, once again, in "the best job in the world."

In 1994, Gabo had launched the Gabriel García Márquez Foundation for New Ibero-American Journalism, with its headquarters in the place he had begun his reporting life all those years before, Cartagena de Indias. Gabo founded it for the purpose of imparting new journalistic techniques and providing encouragement to a new generation of Latin American journalists. In a conversation we had in 1999, he invited me to become one of the teachers at the foundation, enthusiastically describing his vision of a future hemispheric fraternity of reporters and chroniclers as a "mafia of friends" that would not only elevate the standards of Latin America's journalism, but also help to fortify its democracies.

Remarkably, Gabo's vision has come true, with the resulting paradox that one of the most emblematic authors of the Latin American Boom in fiction should also be regarded today as the maximum godfather of a new boom in Latin American journalism. But so it is. In the years that have transpired since its founding, thousands of journalists have attended the foundation's workshops and have competed for the annual awards given out in the Gabriel García Márquez Journalism Prize. Many have attributed their later professional success to their stints with the "Gabo Foundation," as they call it, and some have gone on to write books and found magazines and websites of their own, specializing in long-form journalism and investigative reporting.

After Gabo's death, a law passed by the Colombian congress established that in his beloved Cartagena de Indias, there would be a permanent "Gabo Center," to operate in tandem with his foundation, so that along with his other legacies, his devotion to journalism could be acknowledged and passed on to new generations.

—JON LEE ANDERSON

Editor's Note

To the memory of Carmen Balcells
and Claudio López de Lamadrid

Gabriel García Márquez called journalism "the best job in the world," and he identified more as a journalist than a writer: "I am basically a journalist. All my life I have been a journalist. My books are the books of a journalist, even if it's not so noticeable," he once said.

These fifty journalistic pieces by García Márquez, published between 1950 and 1984, were selected from the hundreds compiled in Jacques Gilard's monumental five-volume collection, *Obra periodística,* in order to provide readers of his fiction a sample of his writings for the newspapers and magazines for whom he worked a great part of his life. He always considered his training as a journalist the foundation of his work in fiction. In many of the writings collected here, readers of his novels and short stories will find a recognizable narrative voice in the making.

Those who want to delve into the subject can find an exciting and erudite explanation of García Márquez's journalism career in the prologues of Gilard's compilation. As Gilard wrote, "García Márquez's journalism was mainly an education for his style, and an apprenticeship toward an original rhetoric." The first works of journalism published as books were the reportage *Relato de un naúfrago* (*The Story of a Ship-*

wrecked Sailor, 1970) and an anthology of articles written in Venezuela, *Cuando era feliz e indocumentado* (*When I Was Happy and Undocumented,* 1973). *Crónicas y reportajes* (*Chronicles and Reportages*), a selection made by the author, was published in 1976 by the Instituto Colombiano de Cultura. A compendium selected by García Márquez's journalist colleagues, *Gabo periodista,* published in 2012 by the Fundación para el Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano and Mexico's Conaculta, also provides a detailed chronology of his career.

Although some of his first fictional stories were written before he worked as a reporter, it was journalism that allowed the young García Márquez to leave his law studies and start writing for *El Universal* in Cartagena and *El Heraldo* in Barranquilla. He later traveled to Europe as a correspondent for *El Espectador* of Bogotá. Upon his return, and thanks to his friend and fellow journalist Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, he continued to write in Venezuela for the magazines *Élite* and *Momento,* until moving to New York City in 1961 as a correspondent for the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina. Later that year he settled in Mexico City with his wife, Mercedes Barcha, and his son Rodrigo, where he published *No One Writes to the Colonel,* began working in screenwriting, and later devoted all his time to writing *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Although his work as a writer would occupy most of his time, he always returned to his passion for journalism. During his lifetime he founded six publications, including *Alternativa* and *Cambio:* "I do not want to be remembered for *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* nor for the Nobel Prize, but for the newspapers," he said.

The Scandal of the Century takes its title from the masterful reportage sent by García Márquez from Rome and published in fourteen consecutive installments in *El Espectador* in September of 1955. In those five words we find a condensed journalistic headline with a touch of literary hyperbole. The subtitle's fantastical and evocative imagery is signature García Márquez: "In Death Wilma Montesi Walks the Earth."

Among the pieces are press releases, news reports, columns, op-eds, features, and profiles. The reader will also find a few literary pieces published concurrently in the press or in literary magazines.

In selecting these writings, I have tried to avoid any academic, stylistic, or historical categorization. As a reader and editor of García Márquez, I have chosen texts that contain a latent narrative tension between journalism and literature, where the seams of reality are stretched by his unstoppable narrative impulse, offering us the chance to once again enjoy the "storyteller" that he was.

In these works, readers will also see the journalistic skills that García Márquez brought to his works of fiction. "But those books have such an amount of research and fact checking, and historical rigor," he said of his novels, "that in fact they are basically great fictional or fantastic reports, but the method of investigation and the way of handling the information and the facts is that of a journalist."

The reader will find journalistic texts from his youth in which the budding narrator tries to find a reason to cross the line into literature, as in the opening story about the president's barber, early snippets of narrations where characters or places that will populate *One Hundred Years of Solitude* begin to appear; a reportage from Rome about a young woman's mysterious death in which the country's political and artistic elites appear to be implicated, where García Márquez attempts a mixture of police procedural and the society pages that brings to mind *La Dolce Vita;* an investigation into trafficking of women from Paris to Latin America that ends with an interrogation; overseas wire dispatches presented as short stories; reflections on his craft, as he does in many of the articles written for *El País* in later years; and dozens of other stories that bring us back the García Márquez we miss.

For this edition, I have worked with Anne McLean to bring to the English translation the same feeling of immediacy of the original, avoiding any notes, as García Márquez advised in his article "Poor Good Translators," included here. Remembering Gregory Rabassa's masterful work on *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* he writes, "He never explains anything in a footnote, which is the least valid and unfortunately most well worn resource of bad translators." The same goes for the decision not to fix some mistaken Italian names or the incorrect lyrics of some Beatles songs. About that, he writes that a text should "pass into the other language just as it was, not only with its virtues,

but also with its defects. It is a duty of loyalty to the reader in the new language." Finally, a paragraph and a half, missing in Gilard's edition from a section titled "A crucial half hour" within "The Scandal of the Century," was restored from the original version found in *Crónicas y reportajes*.

I owe a special debt to Carmen Balcells and Claudio López de Lamadrid, who put this project in my hands. I had already worked with García Márquez on his memoirs, and we had spent a lot of time in his house in El Pedregal working on *I'm Not Here to Give a Speech*. As always, my immense gratitude to Mercedes, Rodrigo, and Gonzalo for their suggestions and advice. The legacy of the journalistic work of Gabriel García Márquez continues its journey through the Fundación para el Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano, lead by Jaime Abello, through workshops where hundreds of journalists from around the world have been and still are trained every year. My greatest thanks to Gabo himself, for his confidence and support of my work. And especially for his friendship.

—CRISTÓBAL PERA

The Scandal of the Century

The Presidential Barber

A photograph of His Excellency, President of the Republic, Mariano Ospina Pérez, appeared a few days ago in a government newspaper inaugurating the new direct telephone service between Bogotá and Medellín. The chief executive looks serious and worried in the picture, surrounded by ten or fifteen telephone sets, which seem to be the cause of the president's concentrated, attentive look. I don't think there is any object that gives a clearer impression of a busy man, of a public servant entirely dedicated to finding the solution to complicated dissimilar problems, than this flock of telephones (and I request, parenthetically, applause for the surrealistically corny metaphor) that adorn the presidential image. From the look of the man who's using them, it seems that each receiver might put him in touch with a different one of the many problems of state, and that *el señor presidente* finds himself obliged to spend twelve hours of every day trying to channel them by long distance from his remote head of state's office. However, in spite of this sensation of an incalculably busy man, Señor Ospina Pérez is still, even in the photograph I'm looking at, an appropriately dressed man, the strands of his snowy summit carefully combed, his closely shaved chin soft and smooth, as evidence of the frequency with which the president turns to the intimate and efficient complicity of his barber. And, in fact, this is the question I've posed as I

contemplate the latest photo of the best-shaved leader in the Americas: Who is the palace barber?

Señor Ospina is a cautious, astute, and wary man, who seems to profoundly know the nature of those who serve him. His ministers are men who have his complete trust, whom it is not possible to imagine committing sins against presidential friendship, be they sins of word or thought. The palace chef, if the palace has a chef, must be a functionary of irrevocable ideological conviction, who prepares with exquisite care the stews that a few hours later will serve as a highly nutritious factor for the Republic's first digestion, which must be a good, carefree digestion. Furthermore, given that the opposition's malicious slanders must penetrate as far as the palace kitchen, clandestinely, the president's table will not lack an honest taster. If all this happens with the ministers, the chef, the advisor, how must he be with the barber, the only voting mortal who can allow himself the democratic liberty of caressing the president's chin with the sharpened steel of a razor blade? Besides, who is this influential gentleman to whom every morning Señor Ospina communicates his preoccupations of the previous night, to whom he relates, with meticulous detail, the plot of his nightmares, and who is, after all, an efficient advisor, as all worthy barbers must be?

Often a republic's fate depends more on a single barber than on all its leaders, as in most cases—according to the poet—that of a genius depends on the midwife. Señor Ospina knows it and that's why, perhaps, before going to inaugurate the direct telephone service between Bogotá and Medellín, the head of state, with his eyes closed and legs outstretched, submitted to the pleasure of feeling the cold and ironic contact of the blade very close to his jugular, while a crowded parade of all the complicated problems he'll need to solve during the day marched through his head. It's possible the president would have told his barber that later the same morning he was going to inaugurate a perfect telephone service, an honor to his government. "Who should I call in Medellín?" he must have asked, as he felt the sharp edge on his throat. And the barber, who is a discreet family man, who strolls the city in his free time, must have kept a prudent but significant silence. Because in reality—the barber must have thought—if instead of being

what he was, he were president, he would have attended the inauguration of the telephonic service, would have picked up a receiver, and, visibly preoccupied, would have said in the voice of an efficient public servant, "Operator, connect me to public opinion."

March 16, 1950, *El Heraldo,* Barranquilla

Topic for a Topical Piece

There are those who turn the lack of a topic into a topic for a journalistic piece. The choice is absurd in a world like ours, where things of incalculable interest are happening. Someone who thinks of sitting down to write about nothing need only flip casually through the day's newspaper to make the initial problem turn into its exact opposite: how to know which topic to choose out of the many on offer. See, for example, the front page of your average newspaper. "Two children burned while playing with flying saucers." Light a cigarette. Look over, very carefully, the scrambled alphabet of the Underwood and begin with the most attractive letter. Think—once you've read the information—of the painful loss of prestige flying saucers have just suffered. Remember the number of articles that have been written about them, since they appeared for the first time—almost two years ago, somewhere around Arkansas—until now, when they've turned into simple yet dangerous children's toys. Consider the situation of the poor little flying saucers, who, like ghosts, get no respect from humanity despite their elevated category of interplanetary element. Light another cigarette and consider, finally, that it's a useless topic due to its excessive speed.

Then read the international news. "Brazil will not have a surplus of coffee at its disposal this year." Ask yourself, "Who could care about

this?" And carry on reading. "The problem of the Mares settlers is not a simple legal case." "El Carare, a great surprise." Read the editorials. In each adjective, find the fingerprint of the implacable censor. All, in reality, of undeniable interest. But none seem like an appropriate topic. What to do? The most logical thing: look at the comic strips. Pancho cannot leave his house. Tío Barbas attends a pistol duel to the death. Clark Kent has to fight against Superman and vice versa. Tarzan becomes a dealer in skulls. Avivato stole, as usual, a string of fish. Penny attends a philosophy class. How awful! And now what: the society page. Two who are getting married when life is so expensive and the climate so hot. Generalísimo Franco's daughter marries a gentleman who will henceforth be known as none other than the dictator's "son-in-lawísimo." One dies and seven are born. Light another cigarette. Think that you're getting to the end of the newspaper and still haven't decided on a topic. Remember your wife, the scene of children waiting, starving to death, and who will continue dying indefinitely as long as there's no appropriate topic. It's terrible! We're starting to get sentimental. No! There are still the movie ads. Ah, but yesterday we wrote about cinema. After this, the flood!

Light another cigarette and discover—with horror—that it was the last one in the pack. And the last match! Night is falling and the hands of the clock turn, turn, turn, performing the dance of the hours (Caliban). And now what? Throw in the towel like a mediocre boxer? Journalism is the profession that most resembles boxing, with the advantage that the typewriter always wins and the disadvantage that you're not allowed to throw in the towel. We'd be left with no *Jirafa* column. Great, so many will applaud the idea. However, you once heard a phrase that is now affected and worn out from use and abuse: "It's never too late to make a good start." That is, starting is the difficult part. We begin, then, now without cigarettes, without matches, to find a topic. We write a first sentence: "There are those who turn the lack of a topic into a topic for a journalistic piece." The choice is absurd . . . but so damn easy! Isn't it?

April 11, 1950, *El Heraldo,* Barranquilla

An Understandable Mistake

It was Tuesday in Cali. The gentleman, for whom the weekend was a murky timeless period—three days without trace—had been decorously and obstinately raising glass after glass until midnight on Monday. On Tuesday morning, when he opened his eyes and felt his room was completely full of a giant headache, the gentleman believed that he had only been partying the night before and was waking up on Sunday morning. He didn't remember anything. However, he felt a dignified regret over some mortal sin he might have committed, without knowing exactly to which of the seven his regret might correspond. It was just a regret. A lone, unconditional, rabidly independent, and incorruptibly anarchist regret.

The only thing the gentleman knew for sure was that he was in Cali. At least—he must have thought—while that building that stood outside his window was the Hotel Alférez Real and while no one proved to him mathematically that the building had been moved to another city on Saturday night, he could rest assured he was in Cali. When he opened his eyes all the way, the headache that was filling the room sat down beside his bed. Someone called the gentleman by his name, but he did not turn to look. He simply thought that someone, in the next room, was calling a person who was a complete stranger to him. The left side of the gap began on Saturday evening. The other