

"The Colombian's evident fascination with Castro demonstrates that literary geniuses are not immune to the blandishments of power." —*The Washington Post*

FIDEL & GABO

A PORTRAIT OF THE LEGENDARY FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN
FIDEL CASTRO AND
GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

★
ÁNGEL ESTEBAN & STÉPHANIE PANICHELLI

THE STORY OF THE CONTROVERSIAL FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN FIDEL CASTRO AND NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ.

Few contemporary writers are more revered by Americans than Gabriel García Márquez, the Nobel Prize-winning author of *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. And few political leaders are more controversial than Fidel Castro. Yet these two seemingly disparate men are close friends.

Fidel and Gabo is a vivid and in-depth look at two of the most influential men of the modern era, their worlds, and the effect their friendship has had on their life and works.

"On the surface their friendship is chummy and literary: Castro drops by Garcia Márquez's Havana mansion—a gift from Castro himself—for endless conversation and critiques his manuscripts. But the authors view the men's bond as corrupt and neurotic: García Márquez, obsessed with power in both his fiction and real life, gets political influence; Castro, in turn, gets cultural prestige and a matchless propagandist. The authors condemn Márquez's public silence over Cuban censorship and human rights violations. Their study tellingly rebukes the Left's propensity for blinding itself to the failings of the Cuban revolution by glamorizing its leaders." —Publishers Weekly

"Esteban and Panichelli frame *Fidel and Gabo* in a recurring muse-like narrative voice. Highly intriguing." —Christian Science Monitor

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FIDEL AND GABO

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INTRODUCTION



ART AND FLIES

WE ARE LOVERS. LOVERS OF CUBA, AND OF GREAT LITERATURE. Cuba was a vast empire's sparkling crown jewel in the sixteenth century, and it has been fiercely coveted from the nineteenth century on. At first, there were the tobacco and sugar crops that were appealing; later, Cuba's spectacular coastline and climate became the draw. Spain did not want to lose it. The United States' relentless efforts to take it never ceased. This is, simply, the history of Cuba. And in the midst of it, a revolution. Not yours, nor mine. But was it really the Cubans' revolution? The years of Soviet-made Lada cars and vodka cast some doubt. And what about now?

This book was born out of more than just love. It also sprang from idleness and admiration, two magic words to the Greeks. Idleness is the opposite of industry. Those who work hard don't catch flies. Contemplation is needed to create art, and idleness and admiration facilitate it. This is also true with science. Only people who are willing to waste a lot of time are capable of truly appreciating, or creating, a work of art. So, this book grew out of a fascination

for two things: Cuba and literature; a place, and the literary works of a Nobel laureate; a charismatic man who has been in power for almost half a century, and his best friend. A commander who now has his own writer. Macondo in Havana. Strolling through Old Havana, down the Malecón or Fifth Avenue, with its nocturnal flowers, is an experience, nothing more. Whoever tries to completely capture it in a single description will fail. In the same way, reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *Love in the Time of Cholera* is an experience. Summarizing it or trying to explain how one feels when reading it is a hopeless task. When we read great literature, or walk idly along a Caribbean beach, attracting flies, we're wasting time, and this enriches us, making us happier, more human.

But fascination has a limit, imposed by circumstance. Fascination without limit is called God. Nothing human is perfect. But nothing is completely imperfect either. Everything in nature possesses admirable qualities, as well as weaknesses, pluses and minuses, heads or tails. In this book you will find, idle reader and fly catcher, the secrets of a friendship as solid as a rock, with all its lights and shadows. We are talking about flesh-and-blood people, not icons or superheroes. We will tell the story of Fidel Castro and Gabriel García Márquez ("Gabo" to his friends), with its highs and lows, like any other *zoon politikon*, as Aristotle would say. A personal, political, and literary friendship. Castro, who for years would not let the Colombian Nobel Prize winner into his inner circle, later would openly accept his conspiring overtures. Gabo, obsessed with power, political bosses, and the highest levels of diplomacy, saw in the Cuban patriarch a model that all of Latin America could follow to one day build its own socialist state, a contented society without class differences, more Rousseau than Marx. Castro, who did not have an intellectual on his island who could serve as a mouthpiece to communicate his revolutionary achievements, found in García Márquez the best candidate for the task to come out of the entire Caribbean region since

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the time of cholera. Gabo, who had always turned down the requests of political parties and leaders in Colombia to serve as minister, ambassador, or presidential candidate, put on his campaign hat to become a politician in his own way: moving within the circles of political power, controlling and directing it, making decisions without pounding his fist on the table, issuing mandates without a scepter in hand, using his fame in his rounds of glittering social obligations, ferrying proposals from one country to another, as the bearded Commander's exclusive ambassador-at-large to the world.

Idle contemplator, in these pages you will read about how Fidel was on the brink of his own destruction as he ventured into the political turmoil of Bogotá in 1948, passing close by his future friend in the city streets before they had ever met, and, who knows, maybe even helping him in perhaps the first serious crisis he would face in his life. You will read about a young Colombian journalist's first trips to Cuba to witness the dawn of an equally young Revolution, his work for the press agency launched by Che Guevara, and his run-ins with communists and Cuban exiles. You will see him attempt to slip through the olive-green bars of paradise, efforts that were futile in the sixties and early seventies but very successful after 1975. You will also listen in on Fidel and Gabo's first conversations, when love-at-first-sight quickly blossomed into a strong—and by necessity symbiotic—relationship. You will walk through the Caribbean region's halls of highest political power and watch as control of the Panama Canal changed hands; you'll witness the birth of the Sandinista movement and observe its military development and triumph; and you'll learn about the various components driving socialism internationally in the struggle against capitalism. You'll fly with García Márquez from Spain to France, from Cuba to Colombia, from Panama to Venezuela, from Nicaragua to Europe, and you'll notice that his new friends are almost all powerful heads of state, while intellectuals and writers are increasingly of less interest to

him. You'll understand why he won the Nobel Prize, wholly deserved, at a very young age, and you'll find that in the criteria for receiving the Swedish prize, political character is no less important than literary or aesthetic considerations. You will question those who were behind the maneuverings on his behalf for the prize, and you will figure out why they had such an interest in his winning. Later on, you will visit the mansion that Gabo was given in the best neighborhood in Havana as another prize for his commitment to the Revolution and as a token of his friendship with Castro; and you will chat with people who frequently spent time there. You will look on as the Nobel laureate, along with various artists and Cuban political figures, founded the best film school in all of Latin America; you will stroll its grounds, talk to its directors, and even peek into a classroom as García Márquez conducts a seminar or Steven Spielberg delivers a lecture. Finally, you will discover the statements that García Márquez has made in the press about Cuba and its leader, and the articles in which Castro has publicly acknowledged his relationship with Gabo. You will see them photographed together with their arms around each other, attending the Mass given by the Pope in the Plaza of the Revolution, at Martí's feet. Much of this information comes directly from them: García Márquez has made many statements in interviews and articles about Fidel and his world, Cuban politics and Latin America, and so forth, and Fidel has penned articles on García Márquez and on literature. And we have personally interviewed many of their friends, writers from developing countries, journalists, and European and American politicians. Some of them have given us uncensored anecdotes, lengthy stories, details of demonstrated friendship or reproach, and pointed observations on their personalities. In certain cases, for understandable reasons, some sources have asked to remain anonymous. We have protected their identities, and we have been consistent in all of the notes that accompany the text. We would like to thank all of the people who

were interviewed and supported us, for their invaluable assistance.

In his book *Y talbán* says that the "human" that "a" following pages, y Gabo, who feels "Caribbean," is the describes the island the only times that he is with his friend is getting an unex how he's doing, a occasionally declar gotten on a plane to spend a few ho spending time alo a condition which anywhere on earth stand his friend, th of power than the seems to sometime am so goddamn si

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were interviewed, and all of the people and institutions that have supported us, for their selfless collaboration in our research and for their invaluable assistance.

In his book *Y Dios Entró en la Habana*, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán says that the relationship between Castro and Gabo is so “human” that “a theory of friendship must be considered.” In the following pages, you will see this theory and its history developed. Gabo, who feels “like a foreigner everywhere else except in the Caribbean,” is the happiest man in the world in Cuba, and he describes the island and its leader as “the land of friendship.” And the only times that he really feels completely like himself are when he is with his friends. He confesses that what makes him happiest is getting an unexpected call from a friend, who’s just calling to ask how he’s doing, and he asserts that he writes to be loved. He has occasionally declared that he needs this feeling so much that he has gotten on a plane and traveled to the other side of the globe just to spend a few hours with a friend. Cuba, his house in Havana, and spending time alone with close friends, all relieve him of his fame, a condition which makes it impossible for him to go unrecognized anywhere on earth. He thinks, perhaps as a way to better understand his friend, that “there’s nothing more similar to the solitude of power than the solitude of fame.” A well-deserved fame that he seems to sometimes tire of, especially when he says things like “I am so goddamn sick of ‘García Márquez.’”

There have always been writers who have tested the durability and sincerity of friendships. One talented Spanish poet, a colleague of ours at the university, dedicated a book to us, emphasizing ironically that we were “colleagues, and, in spite of that, friends.” The most extreme version of this outlook may have been summed up many years ago by another no less ironic Spanish poet, Enrique Jardiel Poncela, who stated: “The day you dine in absolute solitude, you can say: *I had dinner with a friend.*” The deep mistrust throughout

the history of human relationships is bluntly portrayed in the Castilian saying "Don't have faith in anyone, not even in your father." Gabo, however, believes that friends are forever. And Fidel has shown that, even if in the past his friendships have not lasted, his relationship with his friend from Colombia has taken giant leaps forward as the years have passed. For his part, García Márquez has said that he will not ever return to Cuba if Fidel dies before him. This relationship brings to mind José Martí, who valued friendship even more than love, and believed that friendship was the truest manifestation of love. Here is his verse:

<i>Si dicen que del joyero</i>	<i>If they say from the jewelry chest</i>
<i>Tome la joya mejor,</i>	<i>to choose the most precious stone,</i>
<i>Tomo a un amigo sincero</i>	<i>I would choose a true friend</i>
<i>Y pongo a un lado el amor.</i>	<i>And leave love alone.</i>

This idea didn't originate with the Cuban poet. Medieval philosophers who studied Aristotle defined the love of friendship as the most pure and most valuable form, since it is characterized by giving without expecting anything in return, doing a favor without needing an expression of gratitude, but with the unspoken understanding that makes it an even exchange—friends don't need to ask, or to be asked: they just give. Serrat said it better: "What's mine is yours, what's yours is ours, and what's mine is ours." Fidel, bereft of close friends after the death in 1980 of Celia Sánchez, who was his comrade-in-arms, his secretary, and his lover, found in García Márquez an alter ego, someone he would like to be in another life. Gabo, fascinated by power, with a natural talent for conspiracy, as he freely admits, saw in the Cuban leader an opportunity to develop his political instincts and indulge his obsession. The unbearable lightness of being becomes bearable when friends support each other, like a house of cards. Now let's catch some flies, idle reader, and turn the page.

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PART ONE



LOVE IN SPRINGTIME

CHAPTER ONE



GODS AT PLAY

“GABO AND I WERE BOTH IN BOGOTÁ ON THAT SAD April 9, 1948, when Gaitán was killed. We were the same age, twenty-one years old; we witnessed the same events, we were university students studying the same subject: Law. That’s what we thought anyway. Neither of us knew anything about the other. No one knew who we were, we didn’t even know ourselves.

“Almost a half century later, on the eve of a trip to Birán in the Far East, Gabo and I were talking in Cuba, where I was born on the morning of August 13, 1926. Our meeting had the feel of an intimate family get-together, where old memories are shared and colorful stories told, in a gathering with some of Gabo’s friends and some other comrades of the Revolution.”¹

And so begins the most literary piece that Fidel Castro has ever written, two months into his seventy-sixth year. It is a short article about his best, and perhaps only, friend, Gabriel García Márquez. Two of the most important personalities in twentieth-century

Latin American history were in the same city on one of the worst days that that city, the Colombian capital, had ever experienced since its founding in 1538. Their paths probably crossed, running through the streets in the midst of the chaos, not knowing where they were going or even why they were running. Maybe their eyes met for an instant on a street corner, or maybe they tripped over the same woman struggling to pull herself up off the ground after being knocked down by a boy careening past on a bicycle. The son of the telegraph operator from Aracataca tried to get back to his rented room to at least save manuscripts of the stories he had written the week before. The student from Cuba surmised that it was too late now to meet with the leader Jorge Gaitán again, Colombia's shining hope, the political figure-of-the-moment who had taken a real interest in the problems of Latin American college students; who had met with student representatives to adopt a unified position in the face of the always conflict-ridden relations between the United States of "North" America and the Disunited States of South America.

★ ★ ★

Gabo was born in Aracataca, a small town in the north of Colombia, on March 6, 1927, with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, while his mother bled profusely. Doña Luisa Márquez not only survived the birth, but she would go on to bring ten more children into the world. When the next son was born, Gabito was sent to live with his grandparents, and this proved to be a formative experience that would shape his character, as the future Nobel Prize winner developed an avid interest in the stories of political bosses and strongmen, spending hours with his grandfather, hearing about the amazing feats of the men who fought in the civil wars at the dawn of the century. His grandmother, who spent the days singing to herself in a sort of delirium, was a constant

target for her grandmothers of the wars:

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target for her grandson's questions, always wanting to hear stories of the wars:

"Grandma, who is Mamburu, and what war was he in?"

And, not having the slightest idea, but with an overactive imagination, she replied calmly: "He was a man who fought with your grandfather in the 1,000 Days' War."

As we now know, the Mamburu of the old, popular song (the one that Gabo's grandfather was so fond of singing) is none other than the Duke of Marlborough, and when García Márquez went on to include him as a vibrant character in his novels and stories, he preferred his grandmother's version to the actual truth. That's why Marlborough appears disguised as a tiger, losing all of the Colombian civil wars, alongside Colonel Aureliano Buendía.²

When Gabo was seven years old, Nicolás Márquez took his grandson to number 5 San Pedro Alejandrino, in Santa Marta, where Simón Bolívar, the great liberator of America, had died. The grandfather had already told his grandson about this illustrious figure many times. When he was six, Gabito had gazed upon the image of a dead Bolívar on a calendar his grandfather owned. So, while still young enough to play with toy soldiers, the boy's interest in this and other American leaders grew, characters who would later figure into his novels, stoking his particular fascination with power. He learned to read and write at the Montessori school when he was eight years old, and his teacher, Rosa Elena Ferguson, would be Gabo's first muse, since he thought that the verses she recited in class, "forever embedded in my brain," were a direct manifestation of her striking beauty. At nine years of age, while digging through one of his grandparents' trunks in what would be one of the most pivotal moments of his life, he found an old, tattered

book with yellowed pages. At the time, he didn't know that the book's title was *A Thousand and One Nights*, but he began to read, and he felt positively transformed. He said to himself:

I opened it, and I read that there was a guy who opened up a bottle and out flew a genie in a puff of smoke, and I said, "Wow, this is amazing!" This was more fascinating to me than anything else that had happened in my life up to that point: more than playing, more than painting, more than eating, more than everything, and I didn't lift my nose from the book again.³

Over the next several years, having to support a large number of growing children, the García Márquez family moved often: from Aracataca, to Barranquilla, to Sucre. In 1940, García Márquez returned to Barranquilla to attend the Jesuit school of San Jose, where he wrote his first verses and stories for the magazine *Juventud* ("youth")⁴. Three years later, just before his sixteenth birthday, he had to leave home and find a job to finance his education, since his parents, who by then had eight children, could not afford to feed everyone and also pay for their schooling. He went to Bogotá and felt completely disconsolate in such a faraway, huge, cold city, where no one knew each other and the local customs were so different. He received a scholarship and began studying at the National Boys' School of Zipaquirá, where the bug he had first caught when he opened up *A Thousand and One Nights* quickly replicated inside of him, until it was a chronic, unstoppable virus. He read and wrote diligently, studying all the classics of Spanish literature. He delighted in his teachers' sage knowledge and lived an almost monastic existence, spending many hours poring over his books . . . or staring down at a blank sheet of paper, trying to compose a poem. He fully participated in the school's literary activities,

and in 1944 he went to law school in Bogotá, above sea level, surrounded by a vibrant cultural life. A future Nobel laureate, attending classes, and there. He would read *Metamorphosis*, which prompted him to read García, Quevedo, and his own country. Neruda. Soon after the novel, until he was so strong that

Fidel Castro grew up in the town of Birán, near the island, his childhood plantation in Mañanillo explored the forests. He was five years old when he was six and a half, he went to Cuba, to continue his revolutionary outbreak. years; for when he led workers' strike against the nation! For his final year, his parents enrolled him in school in the country. Future conservative

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and in 1944 he wrote his first story. Three years later, Gabo entered law school in Bogotá, a city of 700,000 inhabitants, over 6,500 feet above sea level, similar in many ways to the plains of Spain, with a vibrant cultural life that centered around the downtown cafés. The future Nobel laureate would spend more time at the cafés than attending classes, and he met the most important writers of the day there. He would also discover a few literary jewels: Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which aggravated the bug for literature even more, prompting him to write stories of his own in a frenzy; classics like Garcilaso, Quevedo, Góngora, Lope de Vega, San Juan de la Cruz; and his own contemporaries like the Generation of 1927 and Neruda. Soon after, his interest would focus almost exclusively on the novel, until he came to believe that his vocation for literature was so strong that he should drop out of law school altogether. . . .

★ ★ ★

Fidel Castro grew up in a rural working-class family. In the small town of Birán, near Santiago de Cuba in the far southeast of the island, his childhood playmates were field workers on the sugarcane plantation in Mañacas. Surrounded by nature and animals, Castro explored the forests on horseback, swam in the river, and when he was five years old was enrolled in the small local country school. At six and a half, he was brought to the province's capital, Santiago de Cuba, to continue his studies in a parochial boarding school. His revolutionary outlook can be traced back to those early childhood years; for when he returned to the plantation, he organized a workers' strike against his own father, whom he accused of exploitation! For his final years of high school, because of his high grades, his parents enrolled him in the Jesuit school of Belen in Havana, the best school in the country, where Cuba's aristocracy sent their children. Future conservative political affiliations were often cemented there.

In October 1945, Castro entered the University of Havana to

study Law. It would change his life. He had come from an uneventful, tranquil environment, where the only things that mattered were getting a good education and being a good Christian, and now he found himself in a place where the struggle for survival was what counted. The campus was roughly divided into two rival political groups, which exerted effects on the city as a whole through acts of violence and financial influence: the Revolutionary Socialist Movement (Movimiento Socialista Revolucionario, or MSR), headed by the ex-communist Rolando Masferrer, and the Insurrectionist Revolutionary Union (Unión Insurreccional Revolucionaria, or UIR), led by the ex-anarchist Emilio Tro. Fidel was immediately gripped by political ambition, and his goal was to lead the Federation of University Students (Federación Estudiantil Universitaria, or FEU)—that is, the entity that represented the entire student body—a very coveted position for members of either of the two rival factions. He tried to attract the attention of the leaders of MSR and UIR, aware of the fact that he could not accomplish his objective without the support of some influential group; but by the time he was in his third year, he hadn't moved beyond the position of vice president for the law school's own student council. For the next election, he decided to run for president of the FEU, regardless of his affiliation with either of the two parties. He carefully laid the groundwork. He read many of the works of the great Cuban revolutionary and writer José Martí and took from them a very seductive, powerful philosophy, and also a lengthy compilation of facts to bolster his carefully composed speeches. He also began to act outside of the university, organizing demonstrations against Ramón Grau San Martín's government. "The papers were talking about him," notes his biographer, Volker Skierka, "sometimes in grandiose terms. A charming, talented speaker, young, tall and athletic, dressed handsomely in double-breasted suits and ties, his black hair slicked back, with his classic Greek profile, at twenty-one years old he cut

an impressive figure that others dream about.

But he wasn't. Castro proposed to become the president and he refused, which would have been dramatic fashion. He was involved in the strike of December 1946, and was second in February 1947 as Director of Sports. He was the third shortly after, and was fatally shot outside the university, which identified the student body.

Castro's interest in the island was fueled. He aligned himself with Puerto Rico; he made an attempt to oust the government with the solidarity with students in Cuba and Panama, which led to the countries and states of the United States. To that end, he organized the assemblies of Latin America in Bogotá, in the Colombian capital, at the Inter-American Summit of Foreign Ministers, the Organization of American States, where Washington was the host, and General Marshall was the

Playtime was over. He was in Bogotá on that day.

had come from an uneventful, by things that mattered were a good Christian, and now he struggle for survival was what divided into two rival political city as a whole through acts of Revolutionary Socialist Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario, or MSR), headed by and the Insurrectionist Revolutionary (Insurrección Revolucionaria, or UIR), Fidel was immediately gripped was to lead the Federation of Estudiantil Universitaria, or the entire student body— of either of the two rival fac- n of the leaders of MSR and not accomplish his objective ial group; but by the time he d beyond the position of vice student council. For the next ent of the FEU, regardless of parties. He carefully laid the orks of the great Cuban revo- ok from them a very seduc- ngthly compilation of facts to es. He also began to act out- onstrations against Ramón e papers were talking about erka, "sometimes in grandiose ough, tall and athletic, dressed and ties, his black hair slicked twenty-one years old he cut

an impressive figure, the type that mothers of marriageable daughters dream about."⁵

But he wasn't just talk. After a meeting with the president, Castro proposed to his fellow activists the possibility of grabbing the president and throwing him from his balcony in an effort to kill him, which would set off the student revolution in a highly dramatic fashion. Around that time, Castro is alleged to have been involved in three actual assassination attempts: the first in December 1946, when a member of UIR was shot in the lung; the second in February 1948, when Manolo Castro, the national Director of Sports, was shot and killed outside a movie theater; and the third shortly thereafter: a police officer, Oscar Fernandez, was fatally shot outside his home; before taking his last breath, he identified the student leader as the trigger man.⁶

Castro's interest in Latin American politics gradually intensified. He aligned himself with a movement for the liberation of Puerto Rico; he traveled to the Dominican Republic in a failed attempt to oust the dictator Rafael Trujillo; and he expressed solidarity with student movements in Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama, which were fighting to end colonialism within their countries and stop the infiltration of imperialism from the United States. To that end, he organized a congress of the student assemblies of Latin America in early 1948, to be held in April of that year in the Colombian capital, coinciding with the Ninth Inter-American Summit of Foreign Affairs Ministers, where the creation of the Organization of American States (OAS) would be decided, and where Washington aimed to thwart the "communist threat" under General Marshall's watchful gaze.

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Playtime was over. The destinies of our two little gods collided in Bogotá on that bloody April 9, 1948. What became known as the

“Bogotazo” riots would claim 3,500 lives over the coming days and over 300,000 more in the subsequent fighting in years to come.⁷ On April 7, Castro met with Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the popular liberal leader of the opposition in Colombia. In spite of his youth, Gaitán had managed to consolidate the party at a time when the country desperately needed someone to put an end to the climate of violence and oligarchy, and no one doubted that he would win the presidency in the next elections. At his meeting with the student representative from Cuba in his office on Seventh Street, the two had liked one another. Gaitán promised to help Castro and his colleagues secure a location to hold their anti-imperialism conference, and to close the proceedings with a massive public demonstration. They planned to meet again two days later, at two o’clock in the afternoon, to finalize the details. Shortly before that, as Fidel and his friends wandered around the neighborhood, waiting for the appointed time, a lone, deranged gunman, Juan Roa Sierra, shot the presidential candidate at point-blank range. As Gaitán stepped out of his office at 14-55 Seventh Street, between Jimenez de Quesada Avenue and Fourteenth Avenue, he was shot three times: in the brain, the lungs, and the liver. Three bullets ended the life of the great hope of Colombia, marked the beginning of one of the darkest eras of the country’s history, and sparked a civil war that would drag on for decades.

At that very moment, in a rooming house for low-income students on Eighth Street, very close to the scene of the assassination, second-year law student Gabriel García Márquez was about to have lunch. His watch read five minutes after one. He knew what had happened immediately. Gabo and his friends ran to where Gaitán had collapsed bleeding on the sidewalk. By the time they got there, Gaitán had already been taken to the Central Clinic, where he would die within a few minutes. Confused by the growing chaos, the students lingered in the area for a little while, trying to make

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sense of the street disturbances erupting around them and the shouts and screaming, growing louder. The city was burning. They decided to go back to their rooming house. As they rounded the corner and crossed their street, they discovered the worst: their house was on fire, too. They couldn't go in and rescue their personal belongings. Clothes, furniture, books, everything would be reduced to ashes. Gabo tried to run into the inferno, but his friends held him back. His desperation stemmed from the imminent loss of his most treasured possessions: the manuscripts of the stories he was writing, especially "The Story of the Faun on the Streetcar," and the pieces that had already been published in *El Espectador*.⁸ Luis Villar Borda, a friend from the literary scene, ran into Gabo at around four o'clock that afternoon at the intersection of Jimenez de Quesada Avenue and Eighth Street. Dasso Saldívar describes the encounter:

Coming upon his friend in such a disoriented state, on the verge of tears, made quite an impression on Villar Borda, since over the past year, seeing him at university functions and lecture halls, Gabriel had never displayed any passion at all for anything political, much less for bipartisan national politics in particular. . . . So, finding him so out of sorts, he said, puzzled,

"Gabriel, I didn't know you were such a Gaitánist!"

Then Gabriel replied, his voice breaking, "No, what are you talking about, it's that *my stories burned!*"⁹

Gabo made one last desperate attempt: to save the typewriter that must have still been at the pawn shop. He had recently left it there as a guarantee, to get some cash to pay off some debts and bills. Seeing how Seventh Street and its cross streets were engulfed in flames, his brother Luis Enrique and he had the same premonition. Gabo recalls in his memoirs:

Enraged crowds, armed with machetes and all kinds of sharp tools looted from hardware stores, destroyed the shops on Seventh Street and its cross-streets and set them on fire, with the help of mounted police. One look was enough to convince us that the situation was out of control. My brother read my mind when he shouted:

“Shit, the typewriter!”

We ran to the pawn shop, which was still intact, with the iron gates locked up tight, but the typewriter wasn't where it always had been. We weren't worried, assuming that we could get it back after all this was over, not having realized yet that that terrible disaster would never be over.¹⁰

Fidel Castro, Alfredo Guevara, and the rest of the student delegates who had left their hotel to meet with the liberal leader watched people running by, shouting “They killed Gaitán!” Thirty-three years later, Fidel recounted in an interview with Arturo Alape the things that struck him most about those days: crowds of furious, indignant people running around, committing acts of violence with total abandon. They smashed windows, looted stores, destroyed public and private property. The mob reached the plaza in front of Parliament; hundreds of people crowded in front of the door, while a man futilely tried to address the throng from a balcony. The police could not contain the mob, which broke into the government building and proceeded to destroy everything in its path, heaving desks and chairs out of the windows. Fidel instinctively joined up with the group of insurrectionists running through the streets, one more revolutionary; he dashed into the third division police headquarters, making off with a shotgun, fourteen bullets, boots, and a police captain's hat before heading out to war.¹¹ Eventually, Castro came to the conclusion that this was not a revolution, but a riot. When he joined his friends again, he learned

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that the police were looking for him because it was the Cuban *communists* who had provoked Gaitán's death and the insurrection.¹² In light of the situation, they decided to go to the Cuban embassy and stay there, to avoid any further trouble in the midst of the increasingly chaotic uprising.

A few years ago, together with his close friend Gabriel García Márquez, the Cuban leader recounted the dramatic twists and turns of those unforgettable, hair-raising days. Both have stated on numerous occasions that their friendship began for literary reasons. Fate coincided with history on April 9, 1948; a typewriter, a simple machine made of metal and plastic that can transport you to heaven through transcendent writings inspired by the muses, was the catalyst of their union—if not in actual terms, at least in an imagined, fantastic, magical way, as *real* things often are in the Caribbean. Fidel recalls this conversation with Gabo:

While I stood there watching, perplexed, the people dragged the assassin through the streets, mobs set fire to shops, offices, movie theaters, and apartment buildings. Some people were hauling around pianos and armoires on wheels. Someone shattered glass. Others defaced signs and marquees. The most vocal unleashed their frustration by shouting from the street corners, garden terraces, and smoky buildings. One man vented his fury by attacking a typewriter, beating it, and then to save himself the laborious effort, he threw it up into the air, and it smashed to bits when it hit the pavement.

As I spoke, Gabo listened, probably confirming to himself the certainty that in Latin America and the Caribbean, writers don't have to make very much up, because reality is more interesting than anything you could imagine, and maybe the challenge is to make that incredible reality

believable. As I was finishing telling my story, I knew that Gabo had been there too, and the coincidence was very telling, maybe we had run through the same streets and witnessed the same harrowing events, which had made me just one more character in that suddenly roiling mob. I asked the question with my usual dispassionate curiosity:

“And what were you doing during the Bogotazo?”

And he, calmly, entrenched within his vibrant, provocative, exceptional imagination, answered simply, smiling, ingenious with his natural use of metaphor:

“Fidel, I was that man with the typewriter.”¹³

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