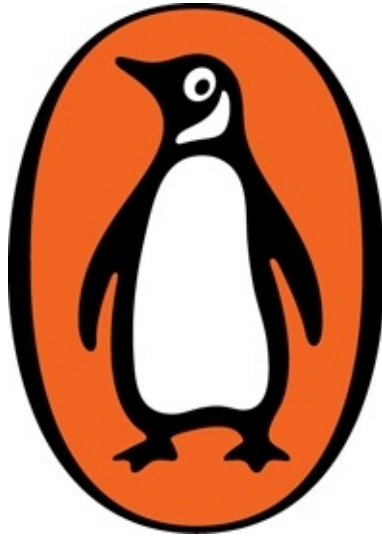




'An imaginative
writer of genius'
GUARDIAN

Gabriel García Márquez

No One Writes to
the Colonel



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Translated by J. S. Bernstein



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Gabriel García Márquez was born in Aracataca, Colombia, in 1927. He studied at the University of Bogotá and later worked as a reporter for the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* and as a foreign correspondent in Rome, Paris, Barcelona, Caracas and New York. He is the author of several novels and collections of stories, including *Eyes of a Blue Dog* (1947), *Leaf Storm* (1955), *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1958), *In Evil Hour* (1962), *Big Mama's Funeral* (1962), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories* (1972), *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), *Strange Pilgrims* (1992), *Of Love and Other Demons* (1994) and *Memories of My Melancholy Whore* (2005). Many of his books are published by Penguin. Gabriel García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. He lives in Mexico City.

NO ONE WRITES TO THE COLONEL

‘A masterly picture of despair and optimism whose vivid alterations seem to characterize so much of Latin American life. He dazzles us with powerful effect’ *New Statesman*

‘Márquez writes in this lyrical, magical language that no one else can do’ Salman Rushdie

‘Of all the living authors known to me, only one is undoubtedly touched by genius: Gabriel García Márquez’ *Sunday Telegraph*

‘The most important writer of fiction in any language’ Bill Clinton

‘An imaginative writer of genius, the topmost pinnacle of an entire generation of Latin American novelists of cathedral-like proportions’ *Guardian*

‘One of this century’s most evocative writers’ Anne Tyler

‘Márquez is a retailer of wonders’ *Sunday Times*

‘Sentence for sentence, there is hardly another writer in the world so generous with incidental pleasures’ *Independent*

The colonel took the top off the coffee can and saw that there was only one little spoonful left. He removed the pot from the fire, poured half the water onto the earthen floor, and scraped the inside of the can with a knife until the last scrapings of the ground coffee, mixed with bits of rust, fell into the pot.

While he was waiting for it to boil, sitting next to the stone fireplace with an attitude of confident and innocent expectation, the colonel experienced the feeling that fungus and poisonous lilies were taking root in his gut. It was October. A difficult morning to get through, even for a man like himself who had survived so many mornings like this one. For nearly sixty years – since the end of the last civil war – the colonel had done nothing else but wait. October was one of the few things which arrived.

His wife raised the mosquito netting when she saw him come into the bedroom with the coffee. The night before she had suffered an asthma attack, and now she was in a drowsy state. But she sat up to take the cup.

‘And you?’ she said.

‘I’ve had mine,’ the colonel lied. ‘There was still a big spoonful left.’

The bells began ringing at that moment. The colonel had forgotten the funeral. While his wife was drinking her coffee, he unhooked the hammock at one end, and rolled it up on the other, behind the door. The woman thought about the dead man.

‘He was born in 1922,’ she said. ‘Exactly a month after our son. April 7th.’

She continued sipping her coffee in the pauses of her gravelly breathing. She was scarcely more than a bit of white on an arched, rigid spine. Her disturbed breathing made her put her questions as assertions. When she finished her coffee, she was still thinking about the dead man.

‘It must be horrible to be buried in October,’ she said. But her husband paid no attention. He opened the window. October had moved in on the patio. Contemplating the vegetation, which was bursting out in intense greens, and the tiny mounds the worms made in the mud, the colonel felt the sinister month again in his intestines.

‘I’m wet through to the bones,’ he said.

‘It’s winter,’ the woman replied. ‘Since it began raining I’ve been telling you to sleep with your socks on.’

‘I’ve been sleeping with them for a week.’

It rained gently but ceaselessly. The colonel would have preferred to wrap himself in a wool blanket and get back into the hammock. But the insistence of the cracked bells reminded him about the funeral. ‘It’s October,’ he whispered, and walked toward the center of the room. Only then did he remember the rooster tied to the leg of the bed. It was a fighting cock.

After taking the cup into the kitchen, he wound the pendulum clock in its carved wooden case in the living room. Unlike the bedroom, which was too narrow for an asthmatic’s breathing, the living room was large, with four sturdy rockers around a little table with a cover and a plaster cat. On the wall

opposite the clock, there was a picture of a woman dressed in tulle, surrounded by cupids in a boat laden with roses.

It was seven-twenty when he finished winding the clock. Then he took the rooster into the kitchen, tied it to a leg of the stove, changed the water in the can, and put a handful of corn next to it. A group of children came in through a hole in the fence. They sat around the rooster, to watch it in silence.

‘Stop looking at that animal,’ said the colonel. ‘Roosters wear out if you look at them so much.’

The children didn’t move. One of them began playing the chords of a popular song on his harmonica. ‘Don’t play that today,’ the colonel told him. ‘There’s been a death in town.’ The child put the instrument in his pants pocket, and the colonel went into the bedroom to dress for the funeral.

Because of his wife’s asthma, his white suit was not pressed. So he had to wear the old black suit which since his marriage he used only on special occasions. It took some effort to find it in the bottom of the trunk, wrapped in newspapers and protected against moths with little balls of naphthalene. Stretched out in bed, the woman was still thinking about the dead man.

‘He must have met Agustín already,’ she said. ‘Maybe he won’t tell him about the situation we’ve been left in since his death.’

‘At this moment they’re probably talking roosters,’ said the colonel.

He found an enormous old umbrella in the trunk. His wife had won it in a raffle held to collect funds for the colonel’s party. That same night they had attended an outdoor show which was not interrupted despite the rain. The colonel, his wife, and their son, Agustín – who was then eight – watched the show until the end, seated under the umbrella. Now Agustín was dead, and the bright satiny material had been eaten away by the moths.

‘Look what’s left of our circus clown’s umbrella,’ said the colonel with one of his old phrases. Above his head a mysterious system of little metal rods opened. ‘The only thing it’s good for now is to count the stars.’

He smiled. But the woman didn’t take the trouble to look at the umbrella. ‘Everything’s that way,’ she whispered. ‘We’re rotting alive.’ And she closed her eyes so she could concentrate on the dead man.

After shaving himself by touch – since he’d lacked a mirror for a long time – the colonel dressed silently. His trousers, almost as tight on his legs as long underwear, closed at the ankles with slip-knotted drawstrings, were held up at the waist by two straps of the same material which passed through two gilt buckles sewn on at kidney height. He didn’t use a belt. His shirt, the color of old Manila paper, and as stiff, fastened with a copper stud which served at the same time to hold the detachable collar. But the detachable collar was torn, so the colonel gave up on the idea of a tie.

He did each thing as if it were a transcendent act. The bones in his hands were covered by taut, translucent skin, with light spots like the skin on his neck. Before he put on his patent-leather shoes, he scraped the dried mud from the stitching. His wife saw him at that moment, dressed as he was on their wedding day. Only then did she notice how much her husband had aged.

‘You look as if you’re dressed for some special event,’ she said.

‘This burial is a special event,’ the colonel said. ‘It’s the first death from natural causes which we’ve had in many years.’

The weather cleared up after nine. The colonel was getting ready to go out when his wife seized hi

by the sleeve of his coat.

‘Comb your hair,’ she said.

He tried to subdue his steel-colored, bristly hair with a bone comb. But it was a useless attempt.

‘I must look like a parrot,’ he said.

The woman examined him. She thought he didn’t. The colonel didn’t look like a parrot. He was a dry man, with solid bones articulated as if with nuts and bolts. Because of the vitality in his eyes, it didn’t seem as if he were preserved in formalin.

‘You’re fine that way,’ she admitted, and added, when her husband was leaving the room: ‘Ask the doctor if we poured boiling water on him in this house.’

They lived at the edge of town, in a house with a palm-thatched roof and walls whose whitewash was flaking off. The humidity kept up but the rain had stopped. The colonel went down toward the plaza along an alley with houses crowded in on each other. As he came out into the main street, he shivered. As far as the eye could see, the town was carpeted with flowers. Seated in their doorways, the women in black were waiting for the funeral.

In the plaza it began to drizzle again. The proprietor of the pool hall saw the colonel from the doorway of his place and shouted to him with open arms: ‘Colonel, wait, and I’ll lend you an umbrella!’

The colonel replied without turning around. ‘Thank you. I’m all right this way.’

The funeral procession hadn’t come out of church yet. The men – dressed in white with black ties – were talking in the low doorway under their umbrellas. One of them saw the colonel jumping between the puddles in the plaza.

‘Get under here, friend!’ he shouted.

He made room under the umbrella.

‘Thanks, friend,’ said the colonel.

But he didn’t accept the invitation. He entered the house directly to give his condolences to the mother of the dead man. The first thing he perceived was the odor of many different flowers. Then the heat rose. The colonel tried to make his way through the crowd which was jammed into the bedroom. But someone put a hand on his back, pushed him toward the back of the room through a gallery of perplexed faces to the spot where – deep and wide open – the nostrils of the dead man were found.

There was the dead man’s mother, shooing the flies away from the coffin with a plaited palm fan. Other women, dressed in black, contemplated the body with the same expression with which one watches the current of a river. All at once a voice started up at the back of the room. The colonel put one woman aside, faced the profile of the dead man’s mother, and put a hand on her shoulder.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said.

She didn’t turn her head. She opened her mouth and let out a howl. The colonel started. He felt himself being pushed against the corpse by a shapeless crowd which broke out in a quavering outcry. He looked for a firm support for his hands but couldn’t find the wall. There were other bodies in its place. Someone said in his ear, slowly, with a very gentle voice, ‘Careful, colonel.’ He spun his head around and was face to face with the dead man. But he didn’t recognize him because he was stiff and dynamic and seemed as disconcerted as he, wrapped in white cloths and with his trumpet in his hands. When the colonel raised his head over the shouts, in search of air, he saw the closed box bouncing toward the door down a slope of flowers which disintegrated against the walls. He perspired. His joint

ached. A moment later he knew he was in the street because the drizzle hurt his eyelids, and someone seized him by the arm and said:

‘Hurry up, friend, I was waiting for you.’

It was Sabas, the godfather of his dead son, the only leader of his party who had escaped political persecution and had continued to live in town. ‘Thanks, friend,’ said the colonel, and walked in silence under the umbrella. The band struck up the funeral march. The colonel noticed the lack of a trumpet, and for the first time was certain that the dead man was dead.

‘Poor man,’ he murmured.

Sabas cleared his throat. He held the umbrella in his left hand, the handle almost at the level of his head, since he was shorter than the colonel. They began to talk when the cortege left the plaza. Sabas turned toward the colonel then, his face disconsolate, and said: ‘Friend, what’s new with the rooster?’

‘He’s still there,’ the colonel replied.

At that moment a shout was heard: ‘Where are they going with that dead man?’

The colonel raised his eyes. He saw the mayor on the balcony of the barracks in an expansive pose. He was dressed in his flannel underwear; his unshaven cheek was swollen. The musicians stopped the march. A moment later the colonel recognized Father Ángel’s voice shouting at the mayor. He made out their dialogue through the drumming of the rain on the umbrella.

‘Well?’ asked Sabas.

‘Well nothing,’ the colonel replied. ‘The burial may not pass in front of the police barracks.’

‘I had forgotten,’ exclaimed Sabas. ‘I always forget that we are under martial law.’

‘But this isn’t a rebellion,’ the colonel said. ‘It’s a poor dead musician.’

The cortege changed direction. In the poor neighborhoods the women watched it pass, biting their nails in silence. But then they came out into the middle of the street and sent up shouts of praise, gratitude, and farewell, as if they believed the dead man was listening to them inside the coffin. The colonel felt ill at the cemetery. When Sabas pushed him toward the wall to make way for the men who were carrying the dead man, he turned his smiling face toward him, but met a rigid countenance.

‘What’s the matter, friend?’ Sabas asked.

The colonel sighed. ‘It’s October.’

They returned by the same street. It had cleared. The sky was deep, intensely blue. It won’t rain any more, thought the colonel, and he felt better, but he was still dejected. Sabas interrupted his thoughts.

‘Have a doctor examine you.’

‘I’m not sick,’ the colonel said. ‘The trouble is that in October I feel as if I had animals in my gut.’

Sabas went ‘Ah.’ He said goodbye at the door to his house, a new building, two stories high, with wrought-iron window gratings. The colonel headed for his home, anxious to take off his dress suit. He went out again a moment later to the store on the corner to buy a can of coffee and half a pound of corn for the rooster.

The colonel attended to the rooster in spite of the fact that on Thursday he would have preferred to stay in his hammock. It didn’t clear for several days. During the course of the week, the flora in his belly blossomed. He spent several sleepless nights, tormented by the whistling of the asthmatic woman’s lungs. But October granted a truce on Friday afternoon. Agustín’s companions – workers from the tailor shop, as he had been, and cockfight fanatics – took advantage of the occasion to

examine the rooster. He was in good shape.

The colonel returned to the bedroom when he was left alone in the house with his wife. She had recovered.

‘What do they say?’ she asked.

‘Very enthusiastic,’ the colonel informed her. ‘Everyone is saving their money to bet on the rooster.’

‘I don’t know what they see in such an ugly rooster,’ the woman said. ‘He looks like a freak to me, his head is too tiny for his feet.’

‘They say he’s the best in the district,’ the colonel answered. ‘He’s worth about fifty pesos.’

He was sure that this argument justified his determination to keep the rooster, a legacy from their son who was shot down nine months before at the cockfights for distributing clandestine literature.

‘An expensive illusion,’ she said. ‘When the corn is gone we’ll have to feed him on our own livers.’ The colonel took a good long time to think, while he was looking for his white ducks in the closet.

‘It’s just for a few months,’ he said. ‘We already know that there will be fights in January. Then we can sell him for more.’

The pants needed pressing. The woman stretched them out over the stove with two irons heated over the coals.

‘What’s your hurry to go out?’ she asked.

‘The mail.’

‘I had forgotten that today is Friday,’ she commented, returning to the bedroom. The colonel was dressed but pants-less. She observed his shoes.

‘Those shoes are ready to throw out,’ she said. ‘Keep wearing your patent-leather ones.’

The colonel felt desolate.

‘They look like the shoes of an orphan,’ he protested. ‘Every time I put them on I feel like a fugitive from an asylum.’

‘We are the orphans of our son,’ the woman said.

This time, too, she persuaded him. The colonel walked toward the harbor before the whistles of the launches blew. Patent-leather shoes, beltless white ducks, and the shirt without the detachable collar, closed at the neck with the copper stud. He observed the docking of the launches from the shop of Moses the Syrian. The travelers got off, stiff from eight hours of immobility. The same ones as always: traveling salesmen, and people from the town who had left the preceding week and were returning as usual.

The last one was the mail launch. The colonel saw it dock with an anguished uneasiness. On the roof, tied to the boat’s smokestacks and protected by an oilcloth, he spied the mailbag. Fifteen years of waiting had sharpened his intuition. The rooster had sharpened his anxiety. From the moment the postmaster went on board the launch, untied the bag, and hoisted it up on his shoulder, the colonel kept him in sight.

He followed him through the street parallel to the harbor, a labyrinth of stores and booths with colored merchandise on display. Every time he did it, the colonel experienced an anxiety very different from, but just as oppressive as, fright. The doctor was waiting for the newspapers in the post office.

‘My wife wants me to ask you if we threw boiling water on you at our house,’ the colonel said.

He was a young physician with his skull covered by sleek black hair. There was something unbelievable in the perfection of his dentition. He asked after the health of the asthmatic. The colonel supplied a detailed report without taking his eyes off the postmaster, who was distributing the letters into cubbyholes. His indolent way of moving exasperated the colonel.

The doctor received his mail with the packet of newspapers. He put the pamphlets of medical advertising to one side. Then he scanned his personal letters. Meanwhile the postmaster was handing out mail to those who were present. The colonel watched the compartment which corresponded to his letter in the alphabet. An air-mail letter with blue borders increased his nervous tension.

The doctor broke the seal on the newspapers. He read the lead items while the colonel – his eyes fixed on the little box – waited for the postmaster to stop in front of it. But he didn’t. The doctor interrupted his reading of the newspapers. He looked at the colonel. Then he looked at the postmaster seated in front of the telegraph key, and then again at the colonel.

‘We’re leaving,’ he said.

The postmaster didn’t raise his head.

‘Nothing for the colonel,’ he said.

The colonel felt ashamed.

‘I wasn’t expecting anything,’ he lied. He turned to the doctor with an entirely childish look. ‘No one writes to me.’

They went back in silence. The doctor was concentrating on the newspapers. The colonel with his habitual way of walking which resembled that of a man retracing his steps to look for a lost coin. It was a bright afternoon. The almond trees in the plaza were shedding their last rotted leaves. It had begun to grow dark when they arrived at the door of the doctor’s office.

‘What’s in the news?’ the colonel asked.

The doctor gave him a few newspapers.

‘No one knows,’ he said. ‘It’s hard to read between the lines which the censor lets them print.’

The colonel read the main headlines. International news. At the top, across four columns, a report on the Suez Canal. The front page was almost completely covered by paid funeral announcements.

‘There’s no hope of elections,’ the colonel said.

‘Don’t be naïve, colonel,’ said the doctor. ‘We’re too old now to be waiting for the Messiah.’

The colonel tried to give the newspapers back, but the doctor refused them.

‘Take them home with you,’ he said. ‘You can read them tonight and return them tomorrow.’

A little after seven the bells in the tower rang out the censor’s movie classifications. Father Ángel used this means to announce the moral classification of the film in accordance with the ratings he received every month by mail. The colonel’s wife counted twelve bells.

‘Unfit for everyone,’ she said. ‘It’s been about a year now that the movies are bad for everyone.’

She lowered the mosquito netting and murmured, ‘The world is corrupt.’ But the colonel made no comment. Before lying down, he tied the rooster to the leg of the bed. He locked the house and sprayed some insecticide in the bedroom. Then he put the lamp on the floor, hung his hammock up, and lay down to read the newspapers.

He read them in chronological order, from the first page to the last, including the advertisements.

At eleven the trumpet blew curfew. The colonel finished his reading a half-hour later, opened the patio door on the impenetrable night, and urinated, besieged by mosquitoes, against the wall studs. His wife was awake when he returned to the bedroom.

‘Nothing about the veterans?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ said the colonel. He put out the lamp before he got into the hammock. ‘In the beginning at least they published the list of the new pensioners. But it’s been about five years since they’ve said anything.’

It rained after midnight. The colonel managed to get to sleep but woke up a moment later, alarmed by his intestines. He discovered a leak in some part of the roof. Wrapped in a wool blanket up to his ears, he tried to find the leak in the darkness. A trickle of cold sweat slipped down his spine. He had a fever. He felt as if he were floating in concentric circles inside a tank of jelly. Someone spoke. The colonel answered from his revolutionist’s cot.

‘Who are you talking to?’ asked his wife.

‘The Englishman disguised as a tiger who appeared at Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s camp,’ the colonel answered. He turned over in his hammock, burning with his fever. ‘It was the Duke of Marlborough.’

The sky was clear at dawn. At the second call for Mass, he jumped from the hammock and installed himself in a confused reality which was agitated by the crowing of the rooster. His head was still spinning in concentric circles. He was nauseous. He went out into the patio and headed for the privy through the barely audible whispers and the dark odors of winter. The inside of the little zinc-roofed wooden compartment was rarefied by the ammonia smell from the privy. When the colonel raised the lid, a triangular cloud of flies rushed out of the pit.

It was a false alarm. Squatting on the platform of unsanded boards, he felt the uneasiness of an urge frustrated. The oppressiveness was substituted by a dull ache in his digestive tract. ‘There’s no doubt,’ he murmured. ‘It’s the same every October.’ And again he assumed his posture of confident and innocent expectation until the fungus in his innards was pacified. Then he returned to the bedroom for the rooster.

‘Last night you were delirious from fever,’ his wife said.

She had begun to straighten up the room, having recovered from a week-long attack. The colonel made an effort to remember.

‘It wasn’t fever,’ he lied. ‘It was the dream about the spider webs again.’

As always happened, the woman emerged from her attack full of nervous energy. In the course of the morning she turned the house upside down. She changed the position of everything, except the clock and the picture of the young girl. She was so thin and sinewy that when she walked about in her cloth slippers and her black dress all buttoned up she seemed as if she had the power of walking through the walls. But before twelve she had regained her bulk, her human weight. In bed she was an empty space. Now, moving among the flowerpots of ferns and begonias, her presence overflowed the house. ‘If Agustín’s year were up, I would start singing,’ she said while she stirred the pot where all the things to eat that the tropical land is capable of producing, cut into pieces, were boiling.

‘If you feel like singing, sing,’ said the colonel. ‘It’s good for your spleen.’

The doctor came after lunch. The colonel and his wife were drinking coffee in the kitchen when he

pushed open the street door and shouted:

‘Everybody dead?’

The colonel got up to welcome him.

‘So it seems, doctor,’ he said, going into the living room. ‘I’ve always said that your clock keeps time with the buzzards.’

The woman went into the bedroom to get ready for the examination. The doctor stayed in the living room with the colonel. In spite of the heat, his immaculate linen suit gave off a smell of freshness. When the woman announced that she was ready, the doctor gave the colonel three sheets of paper in an envelope. He entered the bedroom, saying, ‘That’s what the newspapers didn’t print yesterday.’

The colonel had assumed as much. It was a summary of the events in the country, mimeographed for clandestine circulation. Revelations about the state of armed resistance in the interior of the country. He felt defeated. Ten years of clandestine reports had not taught him that no news was more surprising than next month’s news. He had finished reading when the doctor came back into the living room.

‘This patient is healthier than I am,’ he said. ‘With asthma like that, I could live to be a hundred.’

The colonel glowered at him. He gave him back the envelope without saying a word, but the doctor refused to take it.

‘Pass it on,’ he said in a whisper.

The colonel put the envelope in his pants pocket. The woman came out of the bedroom, saying, ‘One of these days I’ll up and die, and carry you with me, off to hell, doctor.’ The doctor responded silently with the stereotyped enamel of his teeth. He pulled a chair up to the little table and took several jars of free samples out of his bag. The woman went on into the kitchen.

‘Wait and I’ll warm up the coffee.’

‘No, thank you very much,’ said the doctor. He wrote the proper dosage on a prescription pad. ‘I absolutely refuse to give you the chance to poison me.’

She laughed in the kitchen. When he finished writing, the doctor read the prescription aloud, because he knew that no one could decipher his handwriting. The colonel tried to concentrate. Returning from the kitchen, the woman discovered in his face the toll of the previous night.

‘This morning he had a fever,’ she said, pointing at her husband. ‘He spent about two hours talking nonsense about the civil war.’

The colonel started.

‘It wasn’t a fever,’ he insisted, regaining his composure. ‘Furthermore,’ he said, ‘the day I feel sick I’ll throw myself into the garbage can on my own.’

He went into the bedroom to find the newspapers.

‘Thank you for the compliment,’ the doctor said.

They walked together toward the plaza. The air was dry. The tar on the streets had begun to melt from the heat. When the doctor said goodbye, the colonel asked him in a low voice, his teeth clenched. ‘How much do we owe you, doctor?’

‘Nothing, for now,’ the doctor said, and he gave him a pat on the shoulder. ‘I’ll send you a fat bill when the cock wins.’

The colonel went to the tailor shop to take the clandestine letter to Agustín’s companions. It was h

only refuge ever since his co-partisans had been killed or exiled from town and he had been converted into a man with no other occupation than waiting for the mail every Friday.

The afternoon heat stimulated the woman's energy. Seated among the begonias in the veranda next to a box of worn-out clothing, she was again working the eternal miracle of creating new apparel out of nothing. She made collars from sleeves, and cuffs from the backs and square patches, perfect ones although with scraps of different colors. A cicada lodged its whistle in the patio. The sun faded. But she didn't see it go down over the begonias. She raised her head only at dusk when the colonel returned home. Then she clasped her neck with both hands, cracked her knuckles, and said:

'My head is as stiff as a board.'

'It's always been that way,' the colonel said, but then he saw his wife's body covered all over with scraps of color. 'You look like a magpie,'

'One has to be half a magpie to dress you,' she said. She held out a shirt made of three different colors of material except for the collar and cuffs, which were of the same color. 'At the carnival all you have to do is take off your jacket.'

The six-o'clock bells interrupted her. 'The Angel of the Lord announced unto Mary,' she prayed aloud, heading into the bedroom. The colonel talked to the children who had come to look at the rooster after school. Then he remembered that there was no corn for the next day, and entered the bedroom to ask his wife for money.

'I think there's only fifty cents,' she said.

She kept the money under the mattress, knotted into the corner of a handkerchief. It was the proceeds of Agustín's sewing machine. For nine months, they had spent that money penny by penny, parceling it out between their needs and the rooster's. Now there were only two twenty-cent pieces and a ten-cent piece left.

'Buy a pound of corn,' the woman said. 'With the change, buy tomorrow's coffee and four ounces of cheese.'

'And a golden elephant to hang in the doorway,' the colonel went on. 'The corn alone costs forty-two.'

They thought for a moment. 'The rooster is an animal, and therefore he can wait,' said the woman first. But her husband's expression caused her to reflect. The colonel sat on the bed, his elbows on his knees, jingling the coins in his hands. 'It's not for my sake,' he said after a moment. 'If it depended on me I'd make a rooster stew this very evening. A fifty-peso indigestion would be very good.' He paused to squash a mosquito on his neck. Then his eyes followed his wife around the room.

'What bothers me is that those poor boys are saving up.'

Then she began to think. She turned completely around with the insecticide bomb. The colonel found something unreal in her attitude, as if she were invoking the spirits of the house for a consultation. At last she put the bomb on the little mantel with the prints on it, and fixed her syrup-colored eyes on the syrup-colored eyes of the colonel.

'Buy the corn,' she said. 'God knows how we'll manage.'

'This is the miracle of the multiplying loaves,' the colonel repeated every time they sat down to the table during the following week. With her astonishing capacity for darning, sewing, and mending, she seemed to have discovered the key to sustaining the household economy with no money. October

prolonged its truce. The humidity was replaced by sleepiness. Comforted by the copper sun, the woman devoted three afternoons to her complicated hairdo. 'High Mass has begun,' the colonel said one afternoon when she was getting the knots out of her long blue tresses with a comb which had some teeth missing. The second afternoon, seated in the patio with a white sheet in her lap, she used a finer comb to take out the lice which had proliferated during her attack. Lastly, she washed her hair with lavender water, waited for it to dry, and rolled it up on the nape of her neck in two turns held with a barrette. The colonel waited. At night, sleepless in his hammock, he worried for many hours over the rooster's fate. But on Wednesday they weighed him, and he was in good shape.

That same afternoon, when Agustín's companions left the house counting the imaginary proceeds from the rooster's victory, the colonel also felt in good shape. His wife cut his hair. 'You've taken twenty years off me,' he said, examining his head with his hands. His wife thought her husband was right.

'When I'm well, I can bring back the dead,' she said.

But her conviction lasted for a very few hours. There was no longer anything in the house to sell, except the clock and the picture. Thursday night, at the limit of their resources, the woman showed her anxiety over the situation.

'Don't worry,' the colonel consoled her. 'The mail comes tomorrow.'

The following day he waited for the launches in front of the doctor's office.

'The airplane is a marvelous thing,' the colonel said, his eyes resting on the mailbag. 'They say you can get to Europe in one night.'

'That's right,' the doctor said, fanning himself with an illustrated magazine. The colonel spied the postmaster among a group waiting for the docking to end so they could jump onto the launch. The postmaster jumped first. He received from the captain an envelope sealed with wax. Then he climbed up onto the roof. The mailbag was tied between two oil drums.

'But still it has its dangers,' said the colonel. He lost the postmaster from sight, but saw him again among the colored bottles on the refreshment cart. 'Humanity doesn't progress without paying a price.'

'Even at this stage it's safer than a launch,' the doctor said. 'At twenty thousand feet you fly above the weather.'

'Twenty thousand feet,' the colonel repeated, perplexed, without being able to imagine what the figure meant.

The doctor became interested. He spread out the magazine with both hands until it was absolutely still.

'There's perfect stability,' he said.

But the colonel was hanging on the actions of the postmaster. He saw him consume a frothy pink drink, holding the glass in his left hand. In his right he held the mailbag.

'Also, on the ocean there are ships at anchor in continual contact with night flights,' the doctor went on. 'With so many precautions it's safer than a launch.'

The colonel looked at him.

'Naturally,' he said. 'It must be like a carpet.'

The postmaster came straight toward them. The colonel stepped back, impelled by an irresistible

anxiety, trying to read the name written on the sealed envelope. The postmaster opened the bag. He gave the doctor his packet of newspapers. Then he tore open the envelope with the personal correspondence, checked the correctness of the receipt, and read the addressee's names off the letters. The doctor opened the newspapers.

'Still the problem with Suez,' he said, reading the main headlines. 'The West is losing ground.'

The colonel didn't read the headlines. He made an effort to control his stomach. 'Ever since there's been censorship, the newspapers talk only about Europe,' he said. 'The best thing would be for the Europeans to come over here and for us to go to Europe. That way everybody would know what's happening in his own country.'

'To the Europeans, South America is a man with a mustache, a guitar, and a gun,' the doctor said, laughing over his newspaper. 'They don't understand the problem.'

The postmaster delivered his mail. He put the rest in the bag and closed it again. The doctor got ready to read two personal letters, but before tearing open the envelopes he looked at the colonel. Then he looked at the postmaster.

'Nothing for the colonel?'

The colonel was terrified. The postmaster tossed the bag onto his shoulder, got off the platform, and replied without turning his head: 'No one writes to the colonel.'

Contrary to his habit, he didn't go directly home. He had a cup of coffee at the tailor's while Agustín's companions leafed through the newspapers. He felt cheated. He would have preferred to stay there until the next Friday to keep from having to face his wife that night with empty hands. But when the tailor shop closed, he had to face up to reality. His wife was waiting for him.

'Nothing?' she asked.

'Nothing,' the colonel answered.

The following Friday he went down to the launches again. And, as on every Friday, he returned home without the longed-for letter. 'We've waited long enough,' his wife told him that night. 'One must have the patience of an ox, as you do, to wait for a letter for fifteen years.' The colonel got into his hammock to read the newspapers.

'We have to wait our turn,' he said. 'Our number is 1823.'

'Since we've been waiting, that number has come up twice in the lottery,' his wife replied.

The colonel read, as usual, from the first page to the last, including the advertisements. But this time he didn't concentrate. During his reading, he thought about his veteran's pension. Nineteen years before, when Congress passed the law, it took him eight years to prove his claim. Then it took him six more years to get himself included on the rolls. That was the last letter the colonel had received.

He finished after curfew sounded. When he went to turn off the lamp, he realized that his wife was awake.

'Do you still have that clipping?'

The woman thought.

'Yes. It must be with the other papers.'

She got out of her mosquito netting and took a wooden chest out of the closet, with a packet of letters arranged by date and held together by a rubber band. She located the advertisement of a law firm which promised quick action on war pensions.

‘We could have spent the money in the time I’ve wasted trying to convince you to change lawyers,’ the woman said, handing her husband the newspaper clipping. ‘We’re not getting anything out of this, putting us away on a shelf as they do with the Indians.’

The colonel read the clipping dated two years before. He put it in the pocket of his jacket which was hanging behind the door.

‘The problem is that to change lawyers you need money.’

‘Not at all,’ the woman said decisively. ‘You write them telling them to discount whatever they want from the pension itself when they collect it. It’s the only way they’ll take the case.’

So Saturday afternoon the colonel went to see his lawyer. He found him stretched out lazily in a hammock. He was a monumental negro, with nothing but two canines in his upper jaw. The lawyer put his feet into a pair of wooden-soled slippers and opened the office window on a dusty pianola with papers stuffed into the compartments where the rolls used to go: clippings from the *Official Gazette*, pasted into old accounting ledgers, and a jumbled collection of accounting bulletins. The keyless pianola did double duty as a desk. The lawyer sat down in a swivel chair. The colonel expressed his uneasiness before revealing the purpose of his visit.

‘I warned you that it would take more than a few days,’ said the lawyer when the colonel paused. He was sweltering in the heat. He adjusted the chair backward and fanned himself with an advertising brochure.

‘My agents write to me frequently, saying not to get impatient.’

‘It’s been that way for fifteen years,’ the colonel answered. ‘This is beginning to sound like the story about the capon.’

The lawyer gave a very graphic description of the administrative ins and outs. The chair was too narrow for his sagging buttocks. ‘Fifteen years ago it was easier,’ he said. ‘Then there was the city’s veterans’ organization, with members of both parties.’ His lungs filled with stifling air and he pronounced the sentence as if he had just invented it: ‘There’s strength in numbers.’

‘There wasn’t in this case,’ the colonel said, realizing his aloneness for the first time. ‘All my comrades died waiting for the mail.’

The lawyer didn’t change his expression.

‘The law was passed too late,’ he said. ‘Not everybody was as lucky as you to be a colonel at the age of twenty. Furthermore, no special allocation was included, so the government has had to make adjustments in the budget.’

Always the same story. Each time the colonel listened to him, he felt a mute resentment. ‘This is not charity,’ he said. ‘It’s not a question of doing us a favor. We broke our backs to save the Republic.’ The lawyer threw up his hands.

‘That’s the way it is,’ he said. ‘Human ingratitude knows no limits.’

The colonel also knew that story. He had begun hearing it the day after the Treaty of Neerlandia, when the government promised travel assistance and indemnities to two hundred revolutionary officers. Camped at the base of the gigantic silk-cotton tree at Neerlandia, a revolutionary battalion, made up in great measure of youths who had left school, waited for three months. Then they went back to their homes by their own means, and they kept on waiting there. Almost sixty years later, the colonel was still waiting.

Excited by these memories, he adopted a transcendental attitude. He rested his right hand on his thigh – mere bone sewed together with nerve tissue – and murmured:

‘Well, I’ve decided to take action.’

The lawyer waited.

‘Such as?’

‘To change lawyers.’

A mother duck, followed by several little ducklings, entered the office. The lawyer sat up to chase them out. ‘As you wish, colonel,’ he said, chasing the animals. ‘It will be just as you wish. If I could work miracles, I wouldn’t be living in this barnyard.’ He put a wooden grille across the patio door and returned to his chair.

‘My son worked all his life,’ said the colonel. ‘My house is mortgaged. That retirement law has been a lifetime pension for lawyers.’

‘Not for me,’ the lawyer protested. ‘Every last cent has gone for my expenses.’

The colonel suffered at the thought that he had been unjust.

‘That’s what I meant,’ he corrected himself. He dried his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. ‘The heat is enough to rust the screws in your head.’

A moment later the lawyer was turning the office upside down looking for the power of attorney. The sun advanced toward the center of the tiny room, which was built of unsanded boards. After looking futilely everywhere, the lawyer got down on all fours, huffing and puffing, and picked up a roll of papers from under the pianola.

‘Here it is.’

He gave the colonel a sheet of paper with a seal on it. ‘I have to write my agents so they can cancel the copies,’ he concluded. The colonel shook the dust off the paper and put it in his shirt pocket.

‘Tear it up yourself,’ the lawyer said.

‘No,’ the colonel answered. ‘These are twenty years of memories.’ And he waited for the lawyer to keep on looking. But the lawyer didn’t. He went to the hammock to wipe off his sweat. From there he looked at the colonel through the shimmering air.

‘I need the documents also,’ the colonel said.

‘Which ones?’

‘The proof of claim.’

The lawyer threw up his hands.

‘Now, that would be impossible, colonel.’

The colonel became alarmed. As Treasurer of the revolution in the district of Macondo, he had undertaken a difficult six-day journey with the funds for the civil war in two trunks roped to the back of a mule. He arrived at the camp of Neerlandia dragging the mule, which was dead from hunger, half an hour before the treaty was signed. Colonel Aureliano Buendía – quarter-master general of the revolutionary forces on the Atlantic coast – held out the receipt for the funds, and included the two trunks in his inventory of the surrender.

‘Those documents have an incalculable value,’ the colonel said. ‘There’s a receipt from Colonel Aureliano Buendía, written in his own hand.’

‘I agree,’ said the lawyer. ‘But those documents have passed through thousands and thousands of

hands, in thousands and thousands of offices, before they reached God knows which department in the War Ministry.'

'No official could fail to notice documents like those,' the colonel said.

'But the officials have changed many times in the last fifteen years,' the lawyer pointed out. 'Just think about it; there have been seven presidents, and each president changed his cabinet at least ten times, and each minister changed his staff at least a hundred times.'

'But nobody could take the documents home,' said the colonel. 'Each new official must have found them in the proper file.'

The lawyer lost his patience.

'And moreover if those papers are removed from the Ministry now, they will have to wait for a new place on the rolls.'

'It doesn't matter,' the colonel said.

'It'll take centuries.'

'It doesn't matter. If you wait for the big things, you can wait for the little ones.'

He took a pad of lined paper, the pen, the inkwell, and a blotter to the little table in the living room, and left the bedroom door open in case he had to ask his wife anything. She was saying her beads.

'What's today's date?'

'October 27th.'

He wrote with a studious neatness, the hand that held the pen resting on the blotter, his spine straight to ease his breathing, as he'd been taught in school. The heat became unbearable in the close living room. A drop of perspiration fell on the letter. The colonel picked it up on the blotter. Then he tried to erase the letters which had smeared but he smudged them. He didn't lose his patience. He wrote an asterisk and noted in the margin, 'acquired rights.' Then he read the whole paragraph.

'When was I put on the rolls?'

The woman didn't interrupt her prayer to think.

'August 12, 1949.'

A moment later it began to rain. The colonel filled a page with large doodlings which were a little childish, the same ones he learned in public school at Manaure. Then he wrote on a second sheet down to the middle, and he signed it.

He read the letter to his wife. She approved each sentence with a nod. When he finished reading, the colonel sealed the envelope and turned off the lamp.

'You could ask someone to type it for you.'

'No,' the colonel answered. 'I'm tired of going around asking favors.'

For half an hour he heard the rain against the palm roof. The town sank into the deluge. After curfew sounded, a leak began somewhere in the house.

'This should have been done a long time ago,' the woman said. 'It's always better to handle things oneself.'

'It's never too late,' the colonel said, paying attention to the leak. 'Maybe all this will be settled when the mortgage on the house falls due.'

'In two years,' the woman said.

He lit the lamp to locate the leak in the living room. He put the rooster's can underneath it and

returned to the bedroom, pursued by the metallic noise of the water in the empty can.

‘It’s possible that to save the interest on the money they’ll settle it before January,’ he said, and he convinced himself. ‘By then, Agustín’s year will be up and we can go to the movies.’

She laughed under her breath. ‘I don’t even remember the cartoons any more,’ she said. ‘They were showing *The Dead Man’s Will*.’

‘Was there a fight?’

‘We never found out. The storm broke just when the ghost tried to rob the girl’s necklace.’

The sound of the rain put them to sleep. The colonel felt a slight queasiness in his intestines. But he wasn’t afraid. He was about to survive another October. He wrapped himself in a wool blanket, and for a moment heard the gravelly breathing of his wife – far away – drifting on another dream. Then he spoke, completely conscious.

The woman woke up.

‘Who are you speaking to?’

‘No one,’ the colonel said. ‘I was thinking that at the Macondo meeting we were right when we told Colonel Aureliano Buendía not to surrender. That’s what started to ruin everything.’

It rained the whole week. The second of November – against the colonel’s wishes – the woman took flowers to Agustín’s grave. She returned from the cemetery and had another attack. It was a hard week. Harder than the four weeks of October which the colonel hadn’t thought he’d survive. The doctor came to see the sick woman, and came out of the room shouting. ‘With asthma like that, I’d be able to bury the whole town!’ But he spoke to the colonel alone and prescribed a special diet.

The colonel also suffered a relapse. He strained for many hours in the privy, in an icy sweat, feeling as if he were rotting and that the flora in his vitals was falling to pieces. ‘It’s winter,’ he repeated to himself patiently. ‘Everything will be different when it stops raining.’ And he really believed it, certain that he would be alive at the moment the letter arrived.

This time it was he who had to repair their household economy. He had to grit his teeth many times to ask for credit in the neighborhood stores. ‘It’s just until next week,’ he would say, without being sure himself that it was true. ‘It’s a little money which should have arrived last Friday.’ When her attack was over, the woman examined him in horror.

‘You’re nothing but skin and bones,’ she said.

‘I’m taking care of myself so I can sell myself,’ the colonel said. ‘I’ve already been hired by a clarinet factory.’

But in reality his hoping for the letter barely sustained him. Exhausted, his bones aching from sleeplessness, he couldn’t attend to his needs and the rooster’s at the same time. In the second half of November, he thought that the animal would die after two days without corn. Then he remembered a handful of beans which he had hung in the chimney in July. He opened the pods and put down a can of dry seeds for the rooster.

‘Come here,’ she said.

‘Just a minute,’ the colonel answered, watching the rooster’s reaction. ‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’

He found his wife trying to sit up in bed. Her ravaged body gave off the aroma of medicinal herbs. She spoke her words, one by one, with calculated precision:

‘Get rid of that rooster right now.’

The colonel had foreseen that moment. He had been waiting for it ever since the afternoon when his son was shot down, and he had decided to keep the rooster. He had had time to think.

‘It’s not worth it now,’ he said. ‘The fight will be in two months and then we’ll be able to sell him at a better price.’

‘It’s not a question of the money,’ the woman said. ‘When the boys come, you’ll tell them to take away and do whatever they feel like with it.’

‘It’s for Agustín,’ the colonel said, advancing his prepared argument. ‘Remember his face when he came to tell us the rooster won.’

The woman, in fact, did think of her son.

‘Those accursed roosters were his downfall!’ she shouted. ‘If he’d stayed home on January 3rd, his evil hour wouldn’t have come.’ She held out a skinny forefinger toward the door and exclaimed: ‘It seems as if I can see him when he left with the rooster under his arm. I warned him not to go looking for trouble at the cockfights, and he smiled and told me: “Shut up; this afternoon we’ll be rolling in money.”’

She fell back exhausted. The colonel pushed her gently toward the pillow. His eyes fell upon other eyes exactly like his own. ‘Try not to move,’ he said, feeling her whistling within his own lungs. The woman fell into a momentary torpor. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her breathing seemed more even.

‘It’s because of the situation we’re in,’ she said. ‘It’s a sin to take the food out of our mouths to give it to a rooster.’

The colonel wiped her forehead with the sheet.

‘Nobody dies in three months.’

‘And what do we eat in the meantime?’ the woman asked.

‘I don’t know,’ the colonel said. ‘But if we were going to die of hunger, we would have died already.’

The rooster was very much alive next to the empty can. When he saw the colonel, he emitted an almost human, guttural monologue and tossed his head back. He gave him a smile of complicity:

‘Life is tough, pal.’

The colonel went into the street. He wandered about the town during the siesta, without thinking about anything, without even trying to convince himself that his problem had no solution. He walked through forgotten streets until he found he was exhausted. Then he returned to the house. The woman heard him come in and called him into the bedroom.

‘What?’

She replied without looking at him.

‘We can sell the clock.’

The colonel had thought of that. ‘I’m sure Alvaro will give you forty pesos right on the spot,’ said the woman. ‘Think how quickly he bought the sewing machine.’

She was referring to the tailor whom Agustín had worked for.

‘I could speak to him in the morning,’ admitted the colonel.

‘None of that “speak to him in the morning,”’ she insisted. ‘Take the clock to him this minute. You put it on the counter and you tell him, “Alvaro, I’ve brought this clock for you to buy from me.” He’ll

understand immediately.'

The colonel felt ashamed.

'It's like walking around with the Holy Sepulcher,' he protested. 'If they see me in the street with a showpiece like that, Rafael Escalona will put me into one of his songs.'

But this time, too, his wife convinced him. She herself took down the clock, wrapped it in newspaper, and put it into his arms. 'Don't come back here without the forty pesos,' she said. The colonel went off to the tailor's with the package under his arm. He found Agustín's companions sitting in the doorway.

One of them offered him a seat. 'Thanks,' he said. 'I can't stay.' Alvaro came out of the shop. A piece of wet duck hung on a wire stretched between two hooks in the hall. He was a boy with a hard, angular body and wild eyes. He also invited him to sit down. The colonel felt comforted. He leaned the stool against the door-jamb and sat down to wait until Alvaro was alone to propose his deal. Suddenly, he realized that he was surrounded by expressionless faces.

'I'm not interrupting?' he said.

They said he wasn't. One of them leaned toward him. He said in a barely audible voice: 'Agustín wrote.'

The colonel observed the deserted street.

'What does he say?'

'The same as always.'

They gave him the clandestine sheet of paper. The colonel put it in his pants pocket. Then he kept silent, drumming on the package, until he realized that someone had noticed it. He stopped in suspense.

'What have you got there, colonel?'

The colonel avoided Hernán's penetrating green eyes.

'Nothing,' he lied. 'I'm taking my clock to the German to have him fix it for me.'

'Don't be silly, colonel,' said Hernán, trying to take the package. 'Wait and I'll look at it.'

The colonel held back. He didn't say anything, but his eyelids turned purple. The others insisted.

'Let him, colonel. He knows mechanical things.'

'I just don't want to bother him.'

'Bother, it's no bother,' Hernán argued. He seized the clock. 'The German will get ten pesos out of you and it'll be the same as it is now.'

Hernán went into the tailor shop with the clock. Alvaro was sewing on a machine. At the back, beneath a guitar hanging on a nail, a girl was sewing buttons on. There was a sign tacked up over the guitar: 'TALKING POLITICS FORBIDDEN.' Outside, the colonel felt as if his body were superfluous. He rested his feet on the rail of the stool.

'Goddamn it, colonel.'

He was startled. 'No need to swear,' he said.

Alfonso adjusted his eyeglasses on his nose to examine the colonel's shoes.

'It's because of your shoes,' he said. 'You've got on some goddamn new shoes.'

'But you can say that without swearing,' the colonel said, and showed the soles of his patent-leather shoes. 'These monstrosities are forty years old, and it's the first time they've ever heard anyone

swear.'

'All done,' shouted Hernán, inside, just as the clock's bell rang. In the neighboring house, a woman pounded on the partition; she shouted: 'Let that guitar alone! Agustín's year isn't up yet.'

Someone guffawed.

'It's a clock.'

Hernán came out with the package.

'It wasn't anything,' he said. 'If you like I'll go home with you to level it.'

The colonel refused his offer.

'How much do I owe you?'

'Don't worry about it, colonel,' replied Hernán, taking his place in the group. 'In January, the rooster will pay for it.'

The colonel now found the chance he was looking for.

'I'll make you a deal,' he said.

'What?'

'I'll give you the rooster.' He examined the circle of faces. 'I'll give the rooster to all of you.'

Hernán looked at him in confusion.

'I'm too old now for that,' the colonel continued. He gave his voice a convincing severity. 'It's too much responsibility for me. For days now I've had the impression that the animal is dying.'

'Don't worry about it, colonel,' Alfonso said. 'The trouble is that the rooster is molting now. He's got a fever in his quills.'

'He'll be better next month,' Hernán said.

'I don't want him anyway,' the colonel said.

Hernán's pupils bore into his.

'Realize how things are, colonel,' he insisted. 'The main thing is for you to be the one who puts Agustín's rooster into the ring.'

The colonel thought about it. 'I realize,' he said. 'That's why I've kept him until now.' He clenched his teeth, and felt he could go on: 'The trouble is there are still two months.'

Hernán was the one who understood.

'If it's only because of that, there's no problem,' he said.

And he proposed his formula. The other accepted. At dusk, when he entered the house with the package under his arm, his wife was chagrined.

'Nothing?' she asked.

'Nothing,' the colonel answered. 'But now it doesn't matter. The boys will take over feeding the rooster.'

'Wait and I'll lend you an umbrella, friend.'

Sabas opened a cupboard in the office wall. He uncovered a jumbled interior: riding boots piled up, stirrups and reins, and an aluminum pail full of riding spurs. Hanging from the upper part, half a dozen umbrellas and a lady's parasol. The colonel was thinking of the debris from some catastrophe.

'Thanks, friend,' the colonel said, leaning on the window. 'I prefer to wait for it to clear.' Sabas didn't close the cupboard. He settled down at the desk within range of the electric fan. Then he took a little hypodermic syringe wrapped in cotton out of the drawer. The colonel observed the grayish

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