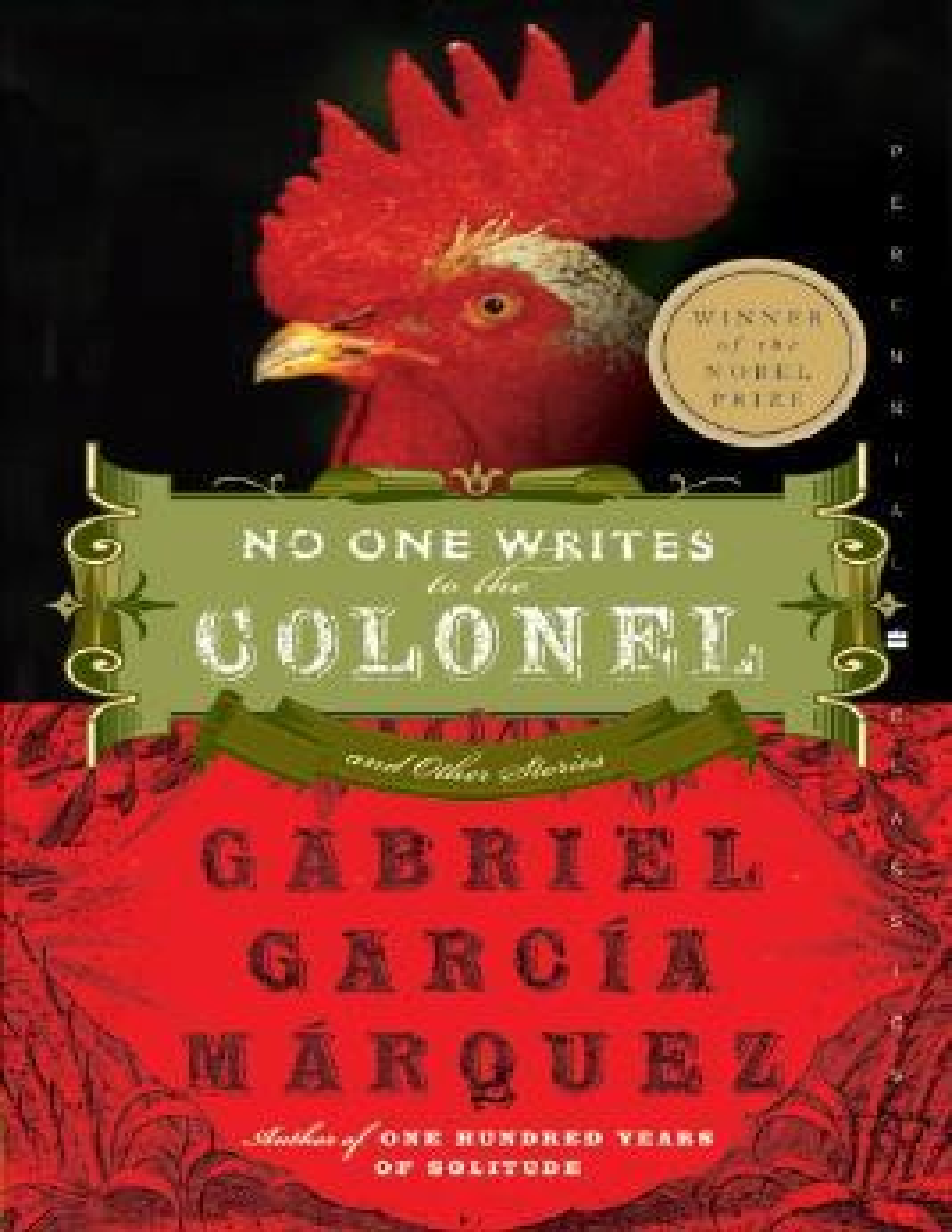
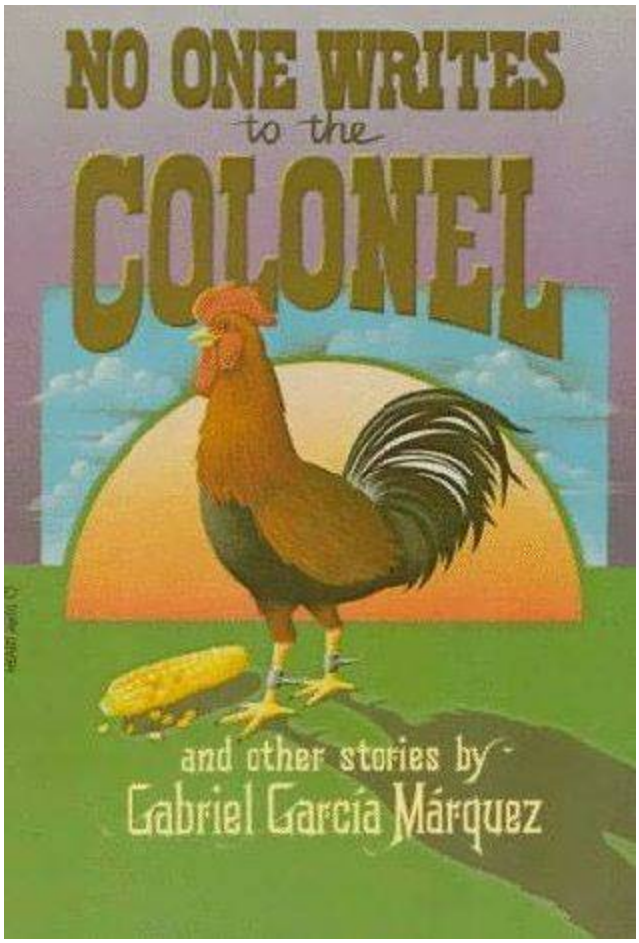

WINNER of the NOBEL PRIZE
NO ONE WRITES to the COLONEL
and Other Stories
GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ
Author of ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE



Gabriel Garcia Marquez
No One Writes to the Colonel

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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.

'l'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.

'lt'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 Agustin 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, Agustin – who was then eight - watched the show until the end, seated under the umbrella. Now Agustin was dead, and the bright satin 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. 'lt'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 him 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 door 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 joints 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 Angel'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.'

'l'm not sick,' the colonel said. 'The trouble is that in October I feel as if l 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. Agustin'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 a 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 cock- fights 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 was 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.