

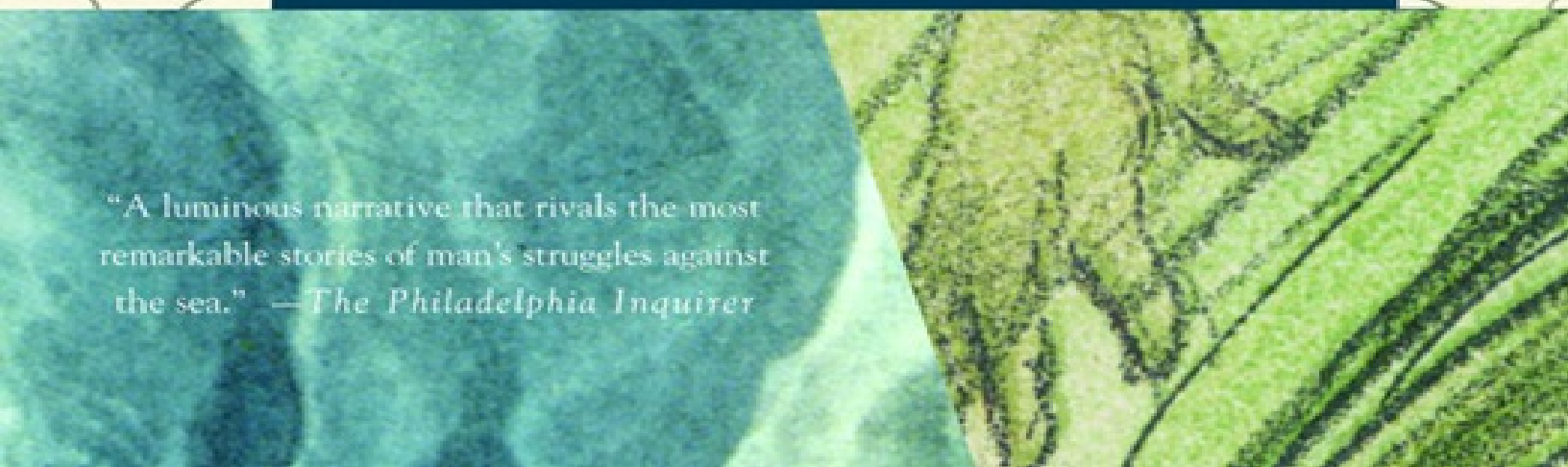


*The Story of a
Shipwrecked
Sailor*



GABRIEL GARCÍA
MÁRQUEZ

Winner of the Nobel Prize



"A luminous narrative that rivals the most remarkable stories of man's struggles against the sea." —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

Gabriel García Márquez

Gabriel García Márquez was born in Colombia in 1927. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982. He is the author of many works of fiction and nonfiction, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, *The General in His Labyrinth*, and *News of a Kidnapping*. He died in 2014.



BOOKS BY GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

Novels

One Hundred Years of Solitude

In Evil Hour

The Autumn of the Patriarch

Vive Sandino

Chronicle of a Death Foretold

Love in the Time of Cholera

The Fragrance of Guava

The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor

The General in His Labyrinth

The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World: A Tale for Children

Of Love and Other Demons

Memories of My Melancholy Whores

Collections

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Leaf Storm and Other Stories

Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories

Collected Stories

Collected Novellas

Strange Pilgrims

Nonfiction

The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor

Clandestine in Chile: The Adventures of Miguel Littín

News of a Kidnapping

A Country for Children

Living to Tell the Tale

The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor

*who drifted on a life raft for ten days
without food or water, was proclaimed a national hero,
kissed by beauty queens, made rich through publicity,
and then spurned by the government
and forgotten for all time*



GABRIEL
GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

Translated from the Spanish by Randolph Hogan

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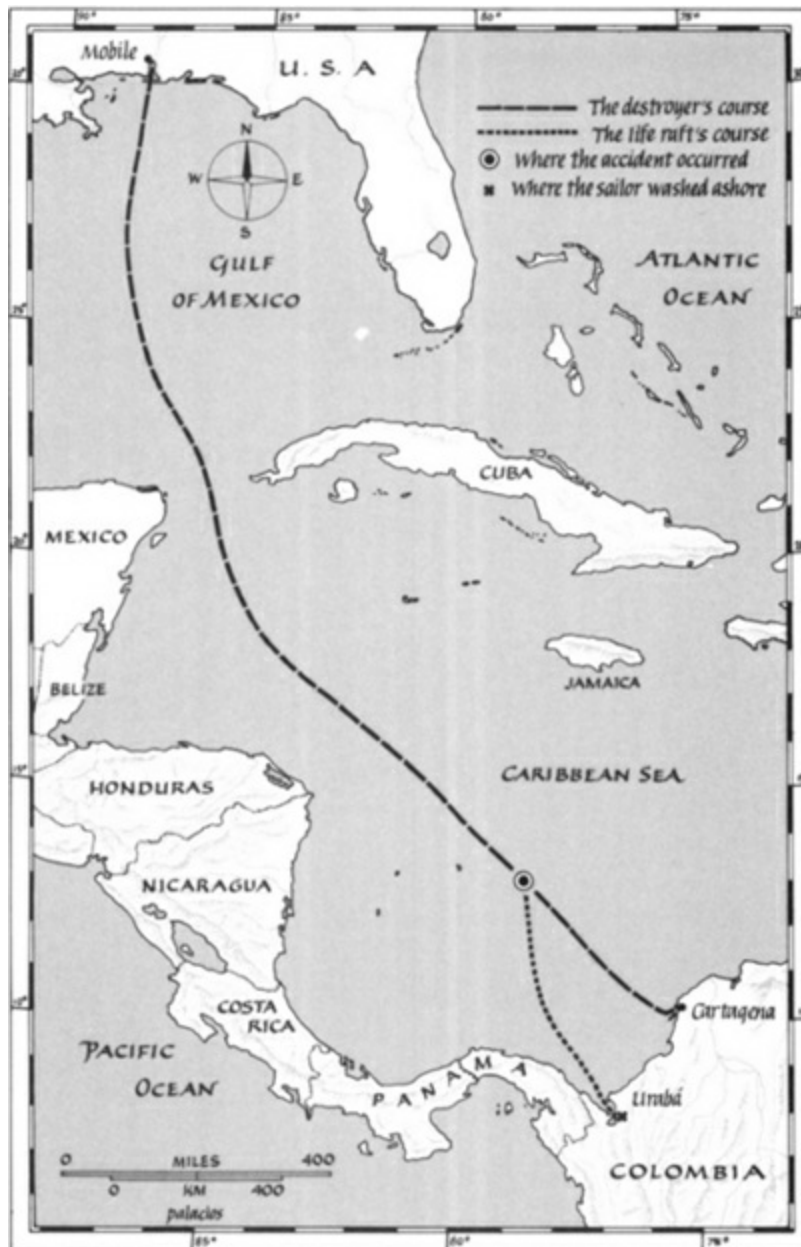
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The Story of This Story

February 28, 1955, brought news that eight crew members of the destroyer *Caldas*, of the Colombian Navy, had fallen overboard and disappeared during a storm in the Caribbean Sea. The ship was traveling from Mobile, Alabama, in the United States, where it had docked for repairs, to the Colombian port of Cartagena, where it arrived two hours after the tragedy. A search for the seamen began immediately, with the cooperation of the U.S. Panama Canal Authority, which performs such functions as military control and other humanitarian deeds in the southern Caribbean. After four days, the search was abandoned and the lost sailors were officially declared dead. A week later, however, one of them turned up half dead on a deserted beach in northern Colombia, having survived ten days without food or water on a drifting life raft. His name was Luis Alejandro Velasco. This book is a journalistic reconstruction of what he told me, as it was published one month after the disaster in the Bogotá daily *El Espectador*.

What neither the sailor nor I knew when we tried to reconstruct his adventure minute by minute was that our exhaustive digging would lead us to a new adventure that caused a certain stir in the nation and cost him his honor, and could have cost me my skin. At that time Colombia was under the military and social dictatorship of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, whose two most memorable feats were the killing of students in the center of the capital when the Army broke up a peaceful demonstration with bullets, and the assassination by the secret police of an undetermined number of Sunday bullfight fans who had booed the dictator's daughter at the bullring. The press was censored, and the daily problem for opposition newspapers was

finding politically germ-free stories with which to entertain their readers. At *El Espectador*, those in charge of that estimable confectionary work were Guillermo Cano, director; José Salgar, editor-in-chief, and I, staff reporter. None of us was over thirty.

When Luis Alejandro Velasco showed up of his own accord to ask how much we would pay him for his story, we took it for what it was: a rehash. The armed forces had sequestered him for several weeks in a naval hospital, and he had been allowed to talk only with reporters favorable to the regime and with one opposition journalist who had disguised himself as a doctor. His story had been told piecemeal many times, had been pawed over and perverted, and readers seemed fed up with a hero who had rented himself out to advertise watches (because his watch hadn't even slowed down during the storm); who appeared in shoe advertisements (because his shoes were so sturdy that he hadn't been able to tear them apart to eat them); and who had performed many other publicity stunts. He had been decorated, he had made patriotic speeches on radio, he had been displayed on television as an example to future generations, and he had toured the country amid bouquets and fanfares, signing autographs and being kissed by beauty queens. He had amassed a small fortune. If he was now coming to us without our having invited him, after we had tried so hard to reach him earlier, it was likely that he no longer had much to tell, that he was capable of inventing anything for money, and that the government had very clearly defined the limits of what he could say. We sent him away. But on a hunch, Guillermo Cano caught up with him on the stairway, accepted the deal, and placed him in my hands. It was as if he had given me a time bomb.

My first surprise was that this solidly built twenty-year-old, who looked more like a trumpet player than a national hero, had an exceptional instinct for the art of narrative, an astonishing memory and ability to synthesize, and enough uncultivated dignity to be able to laugh at his own heroism. In twenty daily sessions, each lasting six hours, during which I took notes and sprang trick questions on him to expose contradictions, we put together an accurate and concise account of his ten days at sea. It was so detailed and so exciting that

my only concern was finding readers who would believe it. Not solely for that reason but also because it seemed fitting, we agreed that the story would be written in the first person and signed by him. This is the first time my name has appeared in connection with the text.

The second, and more important, surprise occurred during the fourth day of work, when I asked Luis Alejandro Velasco to describe the storm that caused the disaster. Aware that his statement was worth its weight in gold, he answered with a smile, “There was no storm.” It was true: the weather bureau confirmed that it had been another clear and mild February in the Caribbean. The truth, never published until then, was that the ship, tossed violently by the wind in heavy seas, had spilled its ill-secured cargo and the eight sailors overboard. This revelation meant that three serious offenses had been committed: first, it was illegal to transport cargo on a destroyer; second, the overweight prevented the ship from maneuvering to rescue the sailors; and third, the cargo was contraband—refrigerators, television sets, and washing machines. Clearly, the account, like the destroyer, was loaded with an ill-secured moral and political cargo that we hadn’t foreseen.

The story, divided into installments, ran for fourteen consecutive days. At first the government applauded the literary consecration of its hero. Later, when the truth began to emerge, it would have been politically dishonest to halt publication of the series: the paper’s circulation had almost doubled, and readers scrambled in front of the building to buy back issues in order to collect the entire series. The dictatorship, in accordance with a tradition typical of Colombian governments, satisfied itself by patching up the truth with rhetoric: in a solemn statement, it denied that the destroyer had been loaded with contraband goods. Looking for a way to substantiate our charges, we asked Luis Alejandro Velasco for a list of his fellow crewmen who owned cameras. Although many of them were vacationing in various parts of the country, we managed to find them and buy the photographs they had taken during their voyage. One week after the publication of the series, the complete story appeared in a special supplement illustrated with the sailors’ photographs. Behind the