

love**reading**.co.uk

If you love reading, you will love the unique services offered by lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**

helping
you choose
your next
book

Memories of My Melancholy Whores

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

1

THE YEAR I turned ninety, I wanted to give myself the gift of a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin. I thought of Rosa Cabarcas, the owner of an illicit house who would inform her good clients when she had a new girl available. I never succumbed to that or to any of her many other lewd temptations, but she did not believe in the purity of my principles. Morality, too, is a question of time, she would say with a malevolent smile, you'll see. She was a little younger than I, and I hadn't heard anything about her for so many years that she very well might have died. But after the first ring I recognized the voice on the phone, and with no preambles I fired at her:

"Today's the day."

She sighed: Ah, my sad scholar, you disappear for twenty years and come back only to ask for the impossible. She regained mastery of her art at once and offered me half a dozen delectable options, but all of them, to be frank, were used. I said no, insisting the girl had to be a virgin and available that very night. She asked in alarm: What are you trying to prove? Nothing, I replied, wounded to the core, I know very well what I can and cannot do. Unmoved, she said that scholars may know it all, but they don't know everything: The only Virgos left in the world are people like you who were born in August. Why didn't you give me more time? Inspiration gives no warnings, I said. But perhaps it can wait, she said, always more knowledgeable than any man, and she asked for just two days to make a thorough investigation of the market. I replied in all seriousness that in an affair such as this, at my age, each hour is like a year. Then it can't be done, she said without the slightest doubt, but it doesn't matter, it's more exciting this way, what the hell, I'll call you in an hour.

I don't have to say so because people can see it from leagues away: I'm ugly, shy, and anachronistic. But by dint of not wanting to be those things I have pretended to be just the opposite. Until today, when I have resolved to tell of my own free will just what I'm like, if only to ease my conscience. I have begun with my unusual call to Rosa Cabarcas because, seen from the



vantage point of today, that was the beginning of a new life at an age when most mortals have already died.

I live in a colonial house, on the sunny side of San Nicolás Park, where I have spent all the days of my life without wife or fortune, where my parents lived and died, and where I have proposed to die alone, in the same bed in which I was born and on a day that I hope will be distant and painless. My father bought the house at public auction at the end of the nineteenth century, rented the ground floor for luxury shops to a consortium of Italians, and reserved for himself the second floor, where he would live in happiness with one of their daughters, Florina de Dios Cargamantos, a notable interpreter of Mozart, a multilingual Garibaldian, and the most beautiful and talented woman who ever lived in the city: my mother.

The house is spacious and bright, with stucco arches and floors tiled in Florentine mosaics, and four glass doors leading to a wraparound balcony where my mother would sit on March nights to sing love arias with other girls, her cousins. From there you can see San Nicolás Park, the cathedral, and the statue of Christopher Columbus, and beyond that the warehouses on the river wharf and the vast horizon of the Great Magdalena River twenty leagues distant from its estuary. The only unpleasant aspect of the house is that the sun keeps changing windows in the course of the day, and all of them have to be closed when you try to take a siesta in the torrid half-light. When I was left on my own, at the age of thirty-two, I moved into what had been my parents' bedroom, opened a doorway between that room and the library, and began to auction off whatever I didn't need to live, which turned out to be almost everything but the books and the Pianola rolls.

For forty years I was the cable editor at El Diario de La Paz, which meant reconstructing and completing in indigenous prose the news of the world that we caught as it flew through sidereal space on shortwaves or in Morse code. Today I scrape by on my pension from that extinct profession, get by even less on the one I receive for having taught Spanish and Latin grammar, earn almost nothing from the Sunday column I've written without flagging for more than half a century, and nothing at all from the music and theater pieces published as a favor to me on the many occasions when notable performers come to town. I have never done anything except write, but I don't possess the vocation or talents of a narrator, have no knowledge at all of the laws of dramatic composition, and if I have embarked upon this enterprise it is because I trust in the light shed by how much I have read in my life. In plain language, I am the end of a line, without merit or brilliance, who would have nothing to leave his descendants if not for the events I am prepared to recount, to the best of my ability, in these memories of my great love.

On my ninetieth birthday I woke, as always, at five in the morning. Since it was Friday, my only obligation was to write the signed column published on Sundays in El Diario de La Paz. My symptoms at dawn were perfect for not feeling happy: my bones had been aching since the small hours, my asshole burned, and thunder threatened a storm after three months of drought. I bathed while the coffee was brewing, drank a large cup sweetened with



honey, had two pieces of cassava bread, and put on the linen coverall I wear in the house.

The subject of that day's column, of course, was my ninetieth birthday. I never have thought about age as a leak in the roof indicating the quantity of life one has left to live. When I was very young I heard someone say that when people die the lice nesting in their hair escape in terror onto the pillows, to the shame of the family. That was so harsh a warning to me that I let my hair be shorn for school, and the few strands I have left I still wash with the soap you would use on a grateful fleabitten dog. This means, I tell myself now, that ever since I was little my sense of social decency has been more developed than my sense of death.

For months I had anticipated that my birthday column would not be the usual lament for the years that were gone, but just the opposite: a glorification of old age. I began by wondering when I had become aware of being old, and I believe it was only a short time before that day. At the age of forty-two I had gone to see the doctor about a pain in my back that interfered with my breathing. He attributed no importance to it: That kind of pain is natural at your age, he said.

"In that case," I said, "what isn't natural is my age."

The doctor gave me a pitying smile. I see that you're a philosopher, he said. It was the first time I thought about my age in terms of being old, but it didn't take me long to forget about it. I became accustomed to waking every day with a different pain that kept changing location and form as the years passed. At times it seemed to be the clawing of death, and the next day it would disappear. This was when I heard that the first symptom of old age is when you begin to resemble your father. I must be condemned to eternal youth, I thought, because my equine profile will never look like my father's raw Caribbean features or my mother's imperial Roman ones. The truth is that the first changes are so slow they pass almost unnoticed, and you go on seeing yourself as you always were, from the inside, but others observe you from the outside.

In my fifth decade I had begun to imagine what old age was like when I noticed the first lapses of memory. I would turn the house upside down looking for my glasses until I discovered that I had them on, or I'd wear them into the shower, or I'd put on my reading glasses over the ones I used for distance. One day I had breakfast twice because I forgot about the first time, and I learned to recognize the alarm in my friends when they didn't have the courage to tell me I was recounting the same story I had told them a week earlier. By then I had a mental list of faces I knew and another list of the names that went with each one, but at the moment of greeting I didn't always succeed in matching the faces to the names.

My sexual age never worried me because my powers did not depend so much on me as on women, and they know the how and the why when they want to. Today I laugh at the eighty-year-old youngsters who consult the doctor, alarmed by these sudden shocks, not knowing that in your nineties they're worse but don't matter anymore: they are the risks of being alive. On the



other hand, it is a triumph of life that old people lose their memories of inessential things, though memory does not often fail with regard to things that are of real interest to us. Cicero illustrated this with the stroke of a pen: No old man forgets where he has hidden his treasure.

With these reflections, and several others, I had finished a first draft of my column when the August sun exploded among the almond trees in the park, and the riverboat that carried the mail, a week late because of the drought, came bellowing into the port canal. I thought: My ninetieth birthday is arriving. I'll never know why, and don't pretend to, but it was under the magical effect of that devastating evocation that I decided to call Rosa Cabarcas for help in celebrating my birthday with a libertine night. I'd spent years at holy peace with my body, devoting my time to the erratic rereading of my classics and to my private programs of concert music, but my desire that day was so urgent it seemed like a message from God. After the call I couldn't go on writing. I hung the hammock in a corner of the library where the sun doesn't shine in the morning, and I lay down in it, my chest heavy with the anxiety of waiting.

I had been a pampered child, with a mother of many talents who died of consumption at the age of fifty and a formalistic father who never acknowledged an error and died in his widower's bed on the day the Treaty of Neerlandia was signed, putting an end to the War of the Thousand Days and the countless civil wars of the previous century. Peace changed the city in a way that had not been foreseen or desired. A crowd of free women enriched to the point of delirium the old taverns along Calle Anche, which later was known as Camellón Abello, and now is called Paseo Colón, in this city of my soul loved so much by both natives and outsiders for the good character of its people and the purity of its light.

I have never gone to bed with a woman I didn't pay, and the few who weren't in the profession I persuaded, by argument or by force, to take money even if they threw it in the trash. When I was twenty I began to keep a record listing name, age, place, and a brief notation on the circumstances and style of lovemaking. By the time I was fifty there were 514 women with whom I had been at least once. I stopped making the list when my body no longer allowed me to have so many and I could keep track of them without paper. I had my own ethics. I never took part in orgies or in public encounters, and I did not share secrets or recount an adventure of the body or the soul, because from the time I was young I realized that none goes unpunished.

The only unusual relationship was the one I maintained for years with the faithful Damiana. She was almost a girl, Indianlike, strong, rustic, her words few and brusque, who went barefoot so as not to disturb me while I was writing. I remember I was reading *La lozana andaluza*-The Haughty Andalusian Girl- in the hammock in the hallway, when I happened to see her bending over in the laundry room wearing a skirt so short it bared her succulent curves. Overcome by irresistible excitement, I pulled her skirt up in back, pulled her underwear down to her knees, and charged her from behind. Oh, Señor, she said, with a mournful lament, that wasn't made for coming in but for going out. A profound tremor shook her body but she stood firm. Humiliated at having humiliated her, I wanted to pay her twice



what the most expensive women cost at the time, but she would not take a cent, and I had to raise her salary calculated on the basis of one mounting a month, always while she was doing the laundry, and always from the back.

At one time I thought these bed-inspired accounts would serve as a good foundation for a narration of the miseries of my misguided life, and the title came to me out of the blue: *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. My public life, on the other hand, was lacking in interest: both parents dead, a bachelor without a future, a mediocre journalist who had been a finalist four times in the Poetic Competition, the Juegos Florales, of Cartagena de Indias, and a favorite of caricaturists because of my exemplary ugliness. In short, a wasted life off to a bad start beginning on the afternoon my mother led me by the hand when I was nineteen years old to see if *El Diario de La Paz* would publish a chronicle of school life that I had written in my Spanish and rhetoric class. It was published on Sunday with an encouraging introduction by the editor. Years later, when I learned that my mother had paid for its publication and for the seven that followed, it was too late for me to be embarrassed, because my weekly column was flying on its own wings and I was a cable editor and music critic as well.

After I obtained my bachillerato with a diploma ranked excellent, I began teaching classes in Spanish and Latin at three different public secondary schools at the same time. I was a poor teacher, with no training, no vocation, and no pity at all for those poor children who attended school as the easiest way to escape the tyranny of their parents. The only thing I could do for them was to keep them subject to the terror of my wooden ruler so that at least they would take away with them my favorite poem: *O Fabio, O sorrow, what you see now, these fields of desolation, gloomy hills, were once the famous fair Italica*. Only as an old man did I happen to learn the nasty name the students called me behind my back: Professor Gloomy Hills.

This was all that life gave me, and I have never done anything to obtain more. I ate lunch alone between classes, and at six in the evening I would go to the editorial offices of the paper to hunt for signals from sidereal space. At eleven, when the edition closed, my real life began. I slept in the red-light district, the Barrio Chino, two or three times a week, and with such a variety of companions that I was twice crowned client of the year. After supper at the nearby Café Roma I would choose a brothel at random and slip in through the back door. I did this because it amused me to, but in the end it became part of my work thanks to the careless speech of political bigwigs who would tell state secrets to their lovers for the night, never thinking they were overheard by public opinion through the cardboard partitions. By this means, of course, I also learned that they attributed my inconsolable bachelorhood to a nocturnal pederasty satisfied by orphan boys on the Calle del Crimen. I had the good fortune to forget this, among other sound reasons because I also heard the positive things said about me, which I appreciated for their true value.

I never had intimate friends, and the few who came close are in New York. By which I mean they're dead, because that's where I suppose condemned souls go in order not to endure the truth of their past lives. Since my retirement I have had little to do except take my pieces to the paper on



Friday afternoons or fulfill other obligations that have a certain significance: concerts at Bellas Artes, painting exhibitions at the Centro Artístico, of which I am a founding member, an occasional civic conference at the Society for Public Improvement, or an important event like Fábregas's engagement at the Teatro Apolo. As a young man I would go to the open-air movie theaters, where we could be surprised by a lunar eclipse or by a case of double pneumonia from a downpour gone astray. But what interested me more than films were the little birds of the night who would go to bed with you for the price of a ticket, or at no cost, or on credit. Movies are not my genre. The obscene cult of Shirley Temple was the final straw.

My only travels were four trips to the Juegos Florales in Cartagena de Indias, before I was thirty, and a bad night aboard a motor launch, when I was invited by Sacramento Montiel to the inauguration of one of her brothels in Santa Marta. As for my domestic life, I don't eat very much and am easy to please. When Damiana grew old she stopped cooking for me, and since then my only regular meal has been a potato omelet at the Café Roma after the paper closes.

And so, on the eve of my ninetieth birthday, I had no lunch and could not concentrate on reading as I waited to hear from Rosa Cabarcas. The cicadas were chirruping as loud as they could in the two o'clock heat, and the sun's journey past the open windows forced me to move the hammock three times. It always seemed to me that my birthday fell at the hottest time of the year, and I had learned to tolerate it, but my mood that day made this difficult. At four o'clock I tried to calm my spirit with Johann Sebastian Bach's six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello in the definitive performance by Don Pablo Casals. I consider them the most accomplished pieces in all of music, but instead of soothing me as usual they left me in an even worse state of prostration. I fell asleep during the second, which I think lags somewhat, and in my sleep I confused the cello's lament with that of a melancholy ship that was leaving. At almost the same time the telephone woke me, and the rusted voice of Rosa Cabarcas brought me back to life. You have a fool's luck, she said. I found a little thing even better than what you wanted, but there's one drawback: she just turned fourteen. I don't mind changing diapers, I said as a joke, not understanding her motives. I'm not worried about you, she said, but who's going to pay me for three years in jail?

