

AFTER THE COLONEL

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The cats were poisoned seven days before my grandfather fell from the sky strapped to a faulty parachute. One, Niky, made it to my grandmother's feet, washing them with blood before collapsing. Yuri never came back.

Before the cats, though, it was the chickens. About a month earlier, a plague fell on them like a man out of a clear blue sky. One died, then another, and another, and another still, and in between feathers and pestilence my grandmother asked what it was that was killing them but no one knew, so more chickens died and then the colonel fell from his plane.

My mother told me my grandfather had named both cats: "Yuri after Yuri Gagarin and Niky after Nikita Khrushchev." Niky, unlike Krushchev, was able to bear kittens; she gave birth to seven or so of them right before the colonel's death. But there is no way to be sure of the number—seven, ten—only that every one of them—nine or fifteen—was dead before my grandfather's fall.

Three. I'm keeping count. Cats, chickens, kittens: that's three. Seven days, seven possible kittens, one witch and one prophecy a full month before the colonel.

My grandmother has always been fond of witches, of their cigarette ashes, their tea leaves and Spanish decks, their plastic bowls filled with murky water and promises of prosperity. For this witch, however, there is no fondness left.

The colonel's wife had gone to ask about her sister's cancer and waited for the comfort of witchcraft: life, health, fortune. But when the witch looked into the depths of her eyelids she saw a vertical blur of a man dashing past and into the horizon.

"Your husband will have an accident." She told her.

“No. No, no. You are mistaken, that accident you see,” she corrected, “that accident he’s already had. He’s fine now.”

I want to hunt down the witch herself and ask her, “What else did you see? What else do you know? What other deaths came before, what others after?” But my mother tells me, “dead, dead, she died, she’s dead.” And I knew then, and I know now, that my mother has already tried what I’m trying now, and that there may not be much hope for our efforts, the witch died “not long after, I don’t think, not very long after all of it, she died herself. Cancer maybe.”

There are people who doubt the existence of their own organs and the immediate contents of their memory, but this woman, a stranger to the colonel and his sky, was sure of something: “I’m sorry to tell you *Senora*, but this is another accident, and from this one he does not come out alive,” she said. My grandmother had worn a red dress to see the witch; in the witch’s vision she wore black.

I have to think that she must have also known about my grandmother’s sister, Ana Cristina, who would die one year and one double mastectomy later, under a veil of saggy black skin draped over a flat chest and a broken heart. She must have known and chosen to say nothing of it.

Josefina says there was no blood left in her when she left that day. She says she caught sight of herself in a mirror and that is why she remembers the dress. “All white on red, all white.”

“What other accident?” I ask my mother.

“What?” she says.

“What ‘other’ accident did the witch mean?”

Before the witch, before the cats and the chickens, and right before the colonel’s plane crawled up into the belly of the sky, a cow, a desperate suicidal mess of black and white charged the aircraft from a neighboring pasture moments before takeoff. The colonel swerved the plane, and ended up in a ditch with a broken nose and shattered wings.

The cow is new; I didn't know anything about it until my mother emailed me a few days ago. One day she came home from school to find the colonel lying on the bed, in full uniform, partially blindfolded by a fresh piece of red meat and looking lost in his own home. In those days the colonel led the strike against the newly-formed Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, back when they still called Marquetalia a free republic and before they called Pedro Antonio Marin Marin, Manuel Marulanda the "Sureshot." All this was before that, when the Colonel's only real home was a stretch of sky above the tangled trees of El Tolima.

"If I could count the times I spoke with my father," my mother's emailed me in bright green letters, "I would not need all of one hand." That's less than five if I take the colonel's daughter literally, which I usually do. Less than five. Four, three, two. "You can count the cow among the deaths to precede his." One.

On my last birthday, my mother wrote an email she did not sign: "There are two details about the cats' deaths that you should know." The email is a four-paragraph list of two memories in a light blue font. Her first memory colors what she's already told me: my grandmother sits in the patio crying over a dying animal on her lap, the animal stirs under her hand, empties itself through the mouth and makes everything red and ripe.

The second memory is something I've never heard before. The soldier assigned to guard the colonel's home takes Niki from my grandmother's lap and wraps the cat in newspapers, rolling her up, crinkling the paper around her until it's soggy and quiet, adds two stones to the package and then drops in the Magdalena River. The soldier, my mother concludes, is an idiot, for he has forgotten to tie the whole thing together with string, and it begins to fall apart before it's even hit the water. The stones are gulped down first, then the cat twirls about, one

second, two, in a whirlpool of water or faulty memory, three seconds, four, then the newspaper follows, five seconds, six, no string at all, none, nine seconds, ten, and then she's gone.

The colonel was replaced by a sub commander who scattered bombs over Marquetalia like marbles. The colonel's wife and three daughters were replaced by the sub commander's wife and three daughters who threw laundry over the taut string in the backyard and green mangoes in the river. They filled the house and they filled the sky and to some, I have to think, it must have been as if he had never left at all.

Fifty days after he had, however, the base commander, chaplain, sub commander and their wives, all in a helicopter, were picked up by a gust of wind or pulled down by a faulty maneuver, and it flipped around, over and into the ground, spinning, twisting, hacking up clods of dirt and roots as it ripped itself open and apart against the earth and her orange trees.

The peasants near the accident claim to have seen the commander crawl out from the crumpled helicopter a charred stump of a pilot. "I killed them, I kill them," they say he screamed as he dug brittle fingers into the earth to pull himself forward. "I killed them, I killed them, I kill them, I killed them," pulling, and tugging behind him broken limbs and ribs over and on the ash of his own flesh.

My mother's emails again: "There is a detail about the cats' deaths that you must know. There was also a dog," a black cocker spaniel named Ninoska. "She was the only one who survived," my mother writes, though, like Lazarus, she was only really saved for later, for a quiet neighborhood and a slice of poisoned meat.

I read the line again, "she was the only one who survived." I've heard it before and I read it again wondering if my mother died in Palanquero, too. And then I wonder about dying more

than once, or twice, or about dying at all, or at least why she keeps writing and saying this sentence, word by word, like a wilted Hail Mary drained of grace.

I know I've asked her why they killed Ninoska, I know I've asked her twice or thrice, insistent and stubborn, as if I believed there was a reason. "Because she barked too much," she types, "at night, or in the day, possibly, like all dogs do. Maybe she was cold."

After the colonel struck the ground, bending his wedding band into an oval, my widowed grandmother took her three daughters and a black cocker spaniel to her father's home in Bogotá. At her father's home, though, no cocker spaniel had ever been allowed inside, and no exceptions were to be made. So maybe, Ninoska was cold and maybe she barked, and maybe it was my mother's grandfather who found her whimpering and shivering with damp whiskers and ribs like loose guitar strings.

"I'll never know if it was true." My mother writes me and I write her back asking what she is referring to. She tells me she doesn't know how she knows about the meat, or the neighbors, or if her grandfather really took the ailing dog to the college of veterinarian medicine in the Universidad Nacional, "to try and save the little dog." Then she tells me that she and her sisters asked for Ninoska, asked their grandfather, asked and asked, about the little dog, for a year, more, for two years, less, and always he told them not to worry, not at all, that the dog was in the university that they were keeping her there until she was all better, until she could come home.

I don't know which lie my mother doesn't know to be true.

I'm told that my great-grandfather, De Leon, the philanderer-philosopher, was "a terrible father and a worse husband, but a wonderful grandfather." He hid my aunt and mother beneath his coat, snuck them into bullfights and invented stories while three pairs of white lace legs dangled over his knee. "He was a

writer,” my grandmother tells me when I visit, “yes he was, a good one, a great one, a philosopher too! You are like him, you get that from him.”

De Leon died of pancreatic cancer about a year after the colonel. In the hospital’s emergency room he twisted and curled and begged them to bring him his kitty, to please, please, please bring *la gatita*, please. This was his nickname for the youngest of my aunts, my mother tells me. They did take *La Gatita* to see him die, my mother remembers, and she remembers this, she tells me, because it was not my mother whom they decided to take, she was no one’s kitty. I’ve asked *La Gatita* already, and she says she has no recollection of this event.

There is a chest in my grandmother’s house they call *El Baul del Muerto*, The Dead Man’s Coffin. Though it wears a half-peeled ID tag addressed to an apartment in Quito—where *La Gatita* now lives—the chest has never left Bogotá. Inside it, between kitchen rags and old sheets, there are half a dozen medals, a uniform or two, the flag that was draped over his coffin and a small leather travel bag with a dark yellow rusted zipper. The Colonel packed it himself forty-six years ago and it has since been opened only twice and always repacked in ritualistic exactitude. All remains as he left it. There is a metal talcum powder container, an orange toothbrush and a tube of Squibb toothpaste, two containers of Yardley shaving cream and aftershave, a Sulton Deodorant Stick and one heavy metal razor that has been slowly bleeding green-brown rust for nearly half a century. I took fifty seven photographs of approximately thirty nine items in the chest, placing ten thousand peso bills next to the silver cufflinks for scale. I put on one of his hats. It’s shrunk several sizes, we suspect; it barely fits my head.

When they disinterred the colonel they put him back just as they had found him, too. The ground in the *Cementerio Central*

is reserved for the freshly dead. In Colombia since the days of The Free Republic of Marquetalia and Pablo Escobar's Hacienda Napoles there are always plenty of freshly dead to bury, so they dig up the old dead to make room for the new, move the dead as if from guest rooms, pack up their bones in little boxes and hand them back to their families—a last discharge—so newer ones can taste, just as briefly, the honor of the massive heroes' grave.

When they tried to pack the colonel up in a metal shoebox however, they found no clean bones to stuff and stack. "Whole, whole, his entire body whole," my grandmother told me, "only his shoes like this." She explained and curled her fingers like spent matches, "only his shoes, like this," his body whole, fleshy and soft, but all of it, just like they left him, "Twisted, like this, see? See?" All of him but his shoes. She put her hands near my face and in vain I looked for twisted leather.

"Yes, like that," my mother agreed when I replicated the motion for her, "just like that," and with fingers curled like springs I looked into her hands for traces of the day when the military dug my grandfather up and my mother tore out of my grandmother's grasp to run through skirts and coats, to catch a glimpse of the colonel in his box. To finally, between knees and elbows, only be able to see a pair of shoes, curled like this, just like this, arthritic fingers, burnt hair.

My mother writes me emails with titles like "The Other Part" and "Other Events." She's trying to fill me in; I'm trying to fill myself. She writes me that that whole week, while the cats were dying, while Josefina de Leon was piling saints and prayer on her colonel, my mother found dozens of black butterflies, everywhere. "Moths?" I ask her.

"No. Black butterflies," shiny, dusty, black rice-paper wings. She found them everywhere, "in the patio, in the house, on the walls," black butterflies everywhere while she heard the gurgled

song of cuckoo bird. She's put an asterisks at the end of that sentence and I follow it down to the end of the page.

“*signs of misfortunes to come.”

When we finished cataloguing the contents of the chest we put everything back exactly like we found it. The only thing we were able to bare throwing away was a heavy bar of moldy soap wrapped in brown paper. My aunt Mirtha is the only one with solid memories of him and she seems of us the least bothered by the disinterment, she was concerned about spores so she chucked in trash and made fun of the old woman for having kept it all these years just as he left it. “As if he was coming back,” my mother says, “complete delusion,” my aunt replies, and then we put it all back just like he left it.