

## The Teacher and the Nobel

By Beatriz Parga

Translated by Maria Alexandria Beech

“The woman who taught me to read was a beautiful teacher, very funny, very intelligent, she gave me the desire to go to school just to see her.”

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

*The smell of Guava*

Conversations with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza

“When Gabito reads this, he will remember, perhaps with nostalgia, that happy time in his life, the Montessori where his teacher taught him with so much care, and where he learned and became her best student.”

Rosa Fergusson

The Teacher

### I

#### *An extraordinary universe*

The world rumbled as if an elephant stampede was approaching, shaking the earth beneath the boy's small boots and his grandfather's enormous shiny shoes, a tall old man wearing a beret made out of squared fabric and a white linen suit.

“Grandpa, it's coming... the ground is moving! Look at my feet! Do you feel it?” yelled the boy.

“Yes, Gabito, I feel it... but I'll feel it more if what I have been waiting for such a long time doesn't arrive,” said the old man, looking in the distance, where a metallic giant was arriving enveloped in dense and grey smoke.

Every day, the five year old boy walked with his grandfather to wait for the loud giant that always carried surprises, but never brought what the venerable old man so avidly awaited; he hoped that any day, a miracle would arrive in the mail in the form of his much coveted pension, as a veteran of the Thousand Days War.

The train finally appeared, immense, colossal, covered in thick curtains of smoke. As it neared, the air was consumed with the penetrating odor of burnt oil. The train exhaled like a raging bull before making its presence

known with a loud whistle. Minutes later, it came to a halt with a metallic screech. After, a colorful multitude poured out of its doors, disoriented and anxious to explore a new world.

“More outsiders... nobody invites them, but they keep coming,” complained the visibly angry old man.

The boy, on the other hand, was fascinated with the variety of people who walked off the train: American executives in impeccable white linen suits, adventurous Europeans in search of fortune, loud gypsies in colorful clothes, as well as a permanent caravan of Turkish merchants carrying a precious load of fine silks, tablecloths embroidered in linen, and exotic objects.

“Dad, what a long trip! I thought we’d never arrive. I don’t know why you chose such a remote place,” complained a red-haired young woman wearing a suit that was too heavy for the warm weather.

“Don’t complain my dear daughter. At least there’s money and work here. We’re in the midst of an economic crisis that is taking over the world. Before leaving New York I heard that another bank closed,” said the man, a robust North American with a big moustache, wearing a large-brimmed hat. He was an imposing presence in a double-breasted suit and bow tie. The chain of a pocket watch hung over his chest and a gold monocle rested on his right eye.

Behind the North American were several Europeans with haggard faces.

“Soon you’ll feel at home,” said a Turkish man familiar with the region. “This remote area is great for business. I sell everything from English tableware to Philippine shirts and French perfume. Don’t worry, you’ll have a wonderful time here, and soon you’ll also be my clients,” he predicted with a welcome smile.

The grandfather and his grandson walked along the station, studying the passengers. Suddenly, the boy noticed something in the distance.

“Papaelo, look. The postman is coming,” he said, with a gravity unusual for a boy his age.

“Do you have something for me?” the old man asked.

The man looked over the letters in his hands, over fifty envelopes of varying sizes and colors. Some were scented with rose oil, others were covered with uneven letters. The postman knew what the old man expected, and his response was the same as always.

“I’m sorry, Colonel. I don’t have anything for you.”

The boy had sensed this response on the way to the station, as they walked past the window of the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Her name was Rosa, she lived across from his grandparents' house, and starting Monday, she would be his teacher. The beautiful young teacher often visited his aunts and in the afternoon, she challenged ghosts when she told him stories. Every day on the way to the station, Gabito, the Colonel's beloved grandson, glanced furtively at the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the young woman who looked like the princesses in the fairy tales that his aunts told him.

The old man noticed the boy's gaze, but he never said a word. Instead, he focused on stories about his glorious past in the war, where his courage was rewarded with the rank of colonel. The boy would listen while imagining his heroic grandfather. Every morning before noon, the old man and the boy would take a walk. For a long time, they had worn matching berets made out of checkered fabric, which they coordinated before leaving the house. Some in town wondered where they headed every morning. Only the boy and the old man knew: the old man's coveted pension would arrive one day. The sun had just placed itself high in the sky when the boy saw something that illuminated the distance.

"Papalelo, look! The gypsies! The gypsies are back!" he yelled.

"I see them, Gabito. But lower your voice," said the old man, looking askance at the new arrivals, among them, acrobats, trapeze artists, contortionists, puppeteers, and clowns who descended from the train with fanfare. Gabito smiled with curiosity as he studied a skinny old man who was pulling a rope tied to an old tiger that was missing teeth; other men were holding two monkeys and a two-headed calf.

"Look, Papelo! Look!"

"Gabito, let's not waste more time. Remember you said that this was a very important day," said the Colonel, winking at his grandson with his only seeing eye, through thick sunglasses.

Gabito returned to reality.

"Yes, Papalelo, let's go. Today is a very important day! It's getting late! We're going to see my teacher!"

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Rosa Fergusson glanced out of her window at the main avenue on Aracataca. A moment later, her sisters Isabel and Altagracia joined her to watch newly arrived passers-by. The three young women would scare away monotony by noticing new faces among the outsiders who arrived daily by train.

“How awful! People keep arriving. Not even a pin is going to fit in this town,” worried Isabel, as she hurried her sisters to arrive on time the special event in the town square.

While it was a time of crisis in the global economy and jobs were scarce everywhere, things were different in the town that barely dotted a map, where money flowed from the banana crops and exports of the United Fruit Company, a North American enterprise that arrived in the region a start of the 20th century, turning the modest little hamlet into a thriving town.

Rosa had heard a thousand times that she was the most beautiful woman in Arataca, located near the Caribbean Sea, with zinc roofs that shone beneath blue skies and thumped like drums during rainstorms. It was a fantastical place where spirits rose at night and the shadows of witches were silhouetted in the moonlight, as ghosts came to life with the sudden movement of rocking chairs, where neighbors sat and told tales of ghostly apparitions, goblins, and spooky beings. While the teacher enjoyed the stories that cloaked the night in a mysterious mantle, the ghosts kept Gabito awake as he lay in his rickety, old wooden bed.

The town would be enveloped in silence until sunrise, when everyone would wake up to the sound of crowing roosters and the aroma of recently brewed coffee. Aracataca would come to life again and everything would proceed as normal until before noon, when the earth would tremble in the midst of a noisy stampede, and the huge locomotive would magically appear, roaring over the train track.

Rosa had seen the town grow and knew most of its residents. Considered beautiful and popular throughout the region, she overflowed with joy. Her brown hair cascaded over her back and her slim figure was accented by a white silk gown that her mother and sisters had helped her sew. They were wearing the best clothes in their closet and even new pairs of high heels. Dressed for the special occasion, the mother and three daughters looked like models in a Parisian postcard. A little after noon, they left home, accompanied by their father, Don Pedro Fergusson Christoffel, and their brother Manuel, a serious teenager wearing a suit and tie, especially chosen for special occasion.

A few minutes remained before the event that created a flurry among the townspeople, as they rushed to the crowning of the Queen of the Carnival. In a matter of minutes, the main square filled with men, women and children who circled the scaffold holding the mayor, a tall, thin man with a straight mustache, slicked hair, and angular eyebrows. He greeted them like the experienced politician he was. Their foreheads were covered in sweat, despite the abundance of colorful umbrellas carried by the ladies, giving the scene a picturesque feel. In the midst of the human sea that celebrated its queen, many

children insisted on standing closer to “Miss Rosa,” who would soon become their teacher. Noticeable among them were the town’s most venerated residents, including Colonel Nicolás Márquez and his wife, doña Tranquilina Iguáran, with aunts Elvira, Sara, and Francisca, who held Gabito’s hand; the boy’s innocent look overflowed with pride that Rosa was the center of everyone’s attention.

Rosa had met Gabito soon after he was born, during a break from her studies at La Normal de Santa Marta.

On a hot afternoon, as the girl walked to the refreshing shade of an almond tree that grew in front of her house, Rosa heard about Luisa’s recent delivery. Luisa was the Colonel’s eldest daughter. Ecstatic with the news, Rosa rushed to congratulate the young mother. She would always say that her first moment with the baby impacted her deeply, and as the years passed, the impact would be mutual.

The crowd cheered as everyone chanted, “Rosa, Rosa, Rosa”, until the air erupted with the roar of accordions, guacharacas, and clarinets, accompanied by the beat of the local band’s drums. The mayor picked up the crown which was resting on a table covered in a celestial white cloth and solemnly placed it on the pretty girl’s head; she smiled majestically, as the center of everyone’s gaze.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. All of you who live in this progressive town know me. I’m Florido Pérez, mayor of Aracataca. The town’s only mayor during the past two decades. Today, I’m here with you for a great celebration: the coronation of the Queen of the Carnival. Our stunning representative of the beautiful women of this region, Rosa Fergusson, is a source of pride for everyone, and today, we’re crowning her for the second time as the sovereign queen of the event that we enjoy so much. Viva Rosa Ferguson! Viva el carnaval!”

The audience celebrated with enthusiasm. The applause seemed to never end. The queen made a soft gesture with her hand.

“As the symbol of the beauty of the women of this region, I’m both humbled and proud to receive this crown. It’s a great honor. I’d also like to take advantage of this opportunity to ask you to enroll your children at the Montessori of Aracataca, which will be opening its doors on Monday. Children, don’t disappoint me. I hope to see you in class, since I’ll be your teacher,” she said excitedly.

“Besides being our queen, Rosa is the most beautiful teacher in the world,” the mayor interrupted her.

The crowd burst into applause and started singing a popular song which began the festivities. At a short distance from the stage and brimming with

pride, Rosa wiped away her sweat with a lace handkerchief while she looked at the jubilation, as her sisters approached her to embrace the new Queen of the Carnival.

The band continued to play while the sky covered itself with a grey shroud, thick like smoke. “It’s going to rain,” the mayor forecast. Undaunted, the townspeople began to chant: “Let it rain, let it rain, it’s time to dance, may it rain so we can have fun.” The rain didn’t wait, falling in large drops mischievously on the crowd, which didn’t budge. Happy and drenched, they danced for hours until their clothes dried over their merry bodies which stopped only to drink white rum and lemonade, or to eat pork rinds and corn patties which some vendors brought on platters and which the partygoers devoured until the early morning.

Of medium height and sturdy posture, the Queen of the Carnival had a smile that could make a flower blossom in the desert; and she was highly confident. She knew that the crown on her head signified a great responsibility: she represented the beauty and virtue of the women in her region. Since this was the second time she was crowned, she understood the duties of her role; so she smiled, showered affection upon the children and elderly, kept a distance from the men who wanted to court her, and again, danced until the soles of her heels were worn.

## II

### *The teacher is everything*

Rosa woke up with the first crow of the roosters. She longed to sleep a couple more hours, but she faced a hard day of work. The darkness of night was slowly being pushed away by a weak flickering light as she walked down the corridor towards the backyard. She walked briefly into a small wooden structure where the toilet was, and then bathed in the small adjacent space. Upon entering, she removed the silk robe she was wearing and hung it on an enormous hook behind the narrow door.

As if by ritual, she approached the basin and slowly poured water over her skin. As always, the water was cold and refreshing, and at the early hour, it briefly left her breathless. After, she wiped a sponge over her body. The white soap foam softly slid off. Seemingly, nothing could interrupt this intimate and refreshing moment, but as often happened, a small buzzing brought her back to reality. Zap!, was the sound of her hand as she killed a mosquito. Miffed by the tiny visitor that interrupted her daily routine, she quickly dried herself with a white towel which was imbued with her fragrant aroma of lavender and chamomile soap.

Minutes later, the young teacher was dressed in a long blue skirt and white blouse. From the kitchen wafted a smooth aroma of coffee, prepared by Domitila, a giddy and hardworking woman who had been the cook for years and was considered a part of the family.

“*Señorita*, don’t you leave without drinking your coffee,” she said.