I saw Margarito Duarte, after twenty-two years, on one of the narrow secret streets in Trastevere, and at first I had trouble recognizing him because he spoke halting Spanish and had the appearance of an old Roman. His hair was white and thin, and there was nothing left of the Andean intellectual's solemn manner and funereal clothes with which he had first come to Rome, but in the course of our conversation I began, little by little, to recover him from the treachery of his years and see him again as he had been: secretive, unpredictable and as tenacious as a stonemason. Before the second cup of coffee in one of our bars from the old days, I dared to ask the question that was gnawing inside me.

“What happened with the Saint?”

“The Saint is there,” he answered. “Waiting.”

Only the tenor Rafael Ribero Silva and I could understand the enormous weight of his reply. We knew his drama so well that for years I thought Margarito Duarte was the character in search of an author we novelists wait for all our lives, and if I never allowed him to find me it was because the end of his story seemed unimaginable.

He had come to Rome during that radiant spring when Pius XII suffered from an attack of hiccups that neither the good nor evil ans of physicians and wizards could cure. It was his first time away from Tolima, his village high in the Colombian Andes, a fact that was obvious in the way he slept. He presented himself one morning at our consulate carrying the polished pine box that was the shape and size of a cello case, and he explained the surprising reason for his trip to the consul, who then telephoned his countryman, the tenor Rafael Ribero Silva, asking that he find him a room at the pensione where we both lived. That is how I met him.

Margarito Duarte had not gone beyond primary school, but his vocation for letters had permitted him a broader education through the impassioned reading of everything in print he could lay his hands on. At the age of eighteen, when he was the village clerk, he married a beautiful girl who died not long afterward when she gave birth to their first child, a daughter. Even more beautiful than her mother, she died of essential fever at the age of seven. But the real story of Margarito Duarte began six months before his arrival in Rome, when the construction of a dam required that the cemetery in his village be moved. Margarito, like all the other residents in the region, disinterred the bones of his dead to carry them to the new cemetery. His wife was dust. But in the grave next to hers, the girl was still intact after eleven years. In fact, when they pried the lid off the coffin, they could smell the scent of the fresh cut roses with which she had been buried. Most astonishing of all, however, was that her body had no weight.

Hundreds of the curious, attracted by the resounding news of the miracle, poured into the village. There was no doubt about it. The incorruptibility of the body was an unequivocal sign of sainthood, and even the bishop of the diocese agreed that such a prodigy should be submitted to the judgment of the Vatican. And therefore they took up a public collection so that Margarito Duarte could travel to Rome to do battle for the cause that was no longer his alone or limited to the narrow confines of his village, but had become a national issue.

As he told us his story in the pensione in the peaceful Parioli district, Margarito Duarte removed the padlock and raised the lid of the beautiful trunk. That was how the tenor Ribero Silva and I participated in the miracle. She did not look like the kind of withered mummy seen in so many museums of the world, but like a little girl dressed as a bride who was still sleeping after a long stay underground. Her skin was smooth and warm, and her open eyes were clear and created the unbearable impression that they were looking at us from death. The satin and artificial orange blossoms of her crown had not withstand the rigors of time as well as her skin, but the roses that had been placed in her hands were still alive. And it was in fact true that the weight of the pine case did not change when we removed the body.

Margarito Duarte began his negotiations the day following his arrival, at first with diplomatic assistance that was more compassionate than efficient, and then with every strategy he could think of to circumvent the countless barriers set up by the Vatican. He was always very reserved about the measures he was taking, but we knew they were numerous and to no avail. He communicated with all the religious congregations and humanitarian foundations he could find, and they listened to him with attention but no surprise and promised immediate steps that were never taken. The truth is
that it was not the most propitious time. Everything having to do with the Holy See had been postponed until the Pope overcame the attack of hiccups that proved resistant not only to the most refined techniques of academic medicine, but to every kind of magic remedy sent to him from all over the world.

At last, in the month of July, Pius XII recovered and left for his summer vacation in Castel Gandolfo. Margarito took the Saint to the first weekly audience, hoping he could show her to the Pope, who appeared in the inner courtyard on a balcony so low that Margarito could see his burnished nails and smell his lavender scent. He did not circulate among the tourists who came from around the world to see him, as Margarito had anticipated, but repeated the same statement in six languages and concluded with a general blessing.

After so many delays, Margarito decided to take matters into his own hands, and he delivered a handwritten letter almost sixty pages long to the Secretariat of State but received no reply. He had foreseen this, for the functionary who accepted it with all due formality did not deign to give more than an official glance at the dead girl, and the clerks passing by looked at her with no interest at all. One of them told him that in the previous year they had received more than eight hundred letters requesting sainthood for intact corpses in various places around the world. At last Margarito requested that the weightlessness of the body be verified. The functionary verified it but refused to admit it.

“It must be a case of collective suggestion,” he said.

In his few free hours, and on the dry Sundays of summer, Margarito remained in his room, devouring any book that seemed relevant to his cause. At the end of each month, on his own initiative, he wrote a detailed calculation of his expenses in a composition book, using the exquisite calligraphy of a senior clerk to provide the contributors from his village with strict and up-to-date accounts. Before the year was out he knew the Roman labyrinths as if he had been born there, spoke fluent Italian with as few words as in his Andean Spanish and knew as much as anyone about the process of canonization. But much more time passed before he changed his funereal dress, the vest and magistrate’s hat, which in the Rome of that time were typical of certain secret societies with unconfessable aims. He went out linearly with the case that held the Saint, and sometimes it was late at night when he returned, exhausted and sad but always with a spark of light that filled him with new courage for the next day.
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Gabriel José de la Concordia García Márquez (American Spanish: [ˈɡaβɾjel ˈɡaɾθɾiˈaɾkaɾˈmeɾes] (listen); 6 March 1927 – 17 April 2014) was a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter and journalist, known affectionately as Gabo [ˈɡabo] or Gabito [ɡaˈbito] throughout Latin America. Considered one of the most significant authors of the 20th century and one of the best in the Spanish language, he was awarded the 1972 Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature. Gabriel García Márquez. Issue 128, Fall 1993. I saw Margarito Duarte, after twenty-two years, on one of the narrow secret streets in Trastevere, and at first I had trouble recognizing him because he spoke halting Spanish and had the appearance of an old Roman. Margarito took the Saint to the first weekly audience, hoping he could show her to the Pope, who appeared in the inner courtyard on a balcony so low that Margarito could see his burnished...