

Eric Herz-O'Brien
ericherzobrien.com
ericherzobrien@gmail.com

about 900 words

The General in the Company of Space Aliens

by Eric Herz-O'Brien

after Gabriel García Márquez

A banquet was held in the General's honor during the last April of his life, where, despite rare wines, endless music, toasts, cheers, and enough confetti to make you sick, in every face the General saw artifice. The betrayal of the old (who forgot all he'd done for them), the sneering of the young (who didn't care). Derision decorated with curtsies, praise, and rubbed elbows. The General excused himself to the toilet before his ninth dance, which he was neither physically capable of enduring nor pridefully willing to sit out, yet, in a maneuver that no other man of his age could have attempted, unless out of mortal desperation, the General put one foot on the toilet seat and hooked the other by the side of his boot heel gracefully between wall tiles, and escaped out the window. In the rose garden on the west side of the mansion, a retired captain of the guard, sleeping drunkenly on a stone bench, woke to a strange noise and a merciless light, and saw the General

ascending through open air. A hovering craft absorbed him in an easy gulp and, without pause, flew away.

The General was aboard the spaceship ten months. He liked the creatures, even if they all looked the same to him. Although he never figured out how they communicated, they seemed to accept him immediately, and within a few weeks, they would pass him in the corridors without curiosity. That was fine with the General. He had been on his feet for fifty-three years. He had been charming and witty since love's first torments, unable to end even the most insignificant encounter before capturing his partner's admiration (or at least their wonder—he did not allow himself to be forgotten). In the past, he never watched; he was never on the outside; he forced his way to the heart of things. Now he passed his days beside massive windows, sitting cross-legged on the floor, and didn't even wave as galaxies sighed by. He rode through the light of a million million homelands. He saw the birth and the death of unfathomable energies, thinking not of possession or conquest, not thinking at all, and that was good. Twice a day—according to his estimation of time—one of the creatures brought him a sort of biscuit-sized pill, and he found he otherwise did not need to eat, drink, or relieve himself.

He thought he had full run of the ship, until one day he went through a wall that he had assumed was solid, and found a dazzling corridor with branching paths. Elsewhere in the ship, hues were muted, but here their intensity and variety were overwhelming, and he could not help his heart galloping at the childish thought that he might discover a new color. By no visible hand or string, he was yanked backwards through the false wall and thrown to the ground, and a creature floating above him gave a look and a gesture that he couldn't interpret, then sealed the wall behind

itself on its way out, leaving the General to climb to his feet alone. That was when the General realized he had not been chosen for his life's work, he had not been chosen at all: he was a sickly stray who'd wandered in and, out of generosity, but only within the confines of convenience, been fed and been sheltered. He was not an honored guest, he was a pet.

The General raged. He spat on what he thought were wall decorations and wiped snot on what he thought were plants. He tore off his clothes and ran naked through the halls, tunelessly bellowing the lyrics to the world-forgotten songs of his youth. He shouted at the creatures as they passed, and when he was too tired to run anymore, he lay down in the middle of the floor and loudly wept, uncovered, ignoring, and ignored.

The third time he refused to eat his magical biscuit-pill, two creatures held him down and tried to force-feed him. He tried to bite them. In the end, they wrapped him in goo and launched him into space, as alone and vulnerable as he'd ever been, too terrified to appreciate the wonders flying by. After half a day of Orpheal doubts, the General was back in the rose garden from which he'd been stolen, landing noiselessly and on his feet.

Standing there in the dewy sunlight, waiting, for nothing waiting, he was overcome with hopelessness. The pride that had carried him from anonymity to exaltation to scorn trembled and cried out for rest.

Being informed by her second-best maid that, from the top story window, a naked man had been spotted in the garden, and that all the house staff agreed it was the General, though they couldn't say how they knew it, the lady of the house herself ran to meet him, not yet out of her

sleeping clothes, and wrapped him in a blanket. Trying to guide him toward the manor, she asked more out of concern than astonishment, "Your Excellency, where have you been?"

The General answered without having to think.

"I found the damn cheese," he said.