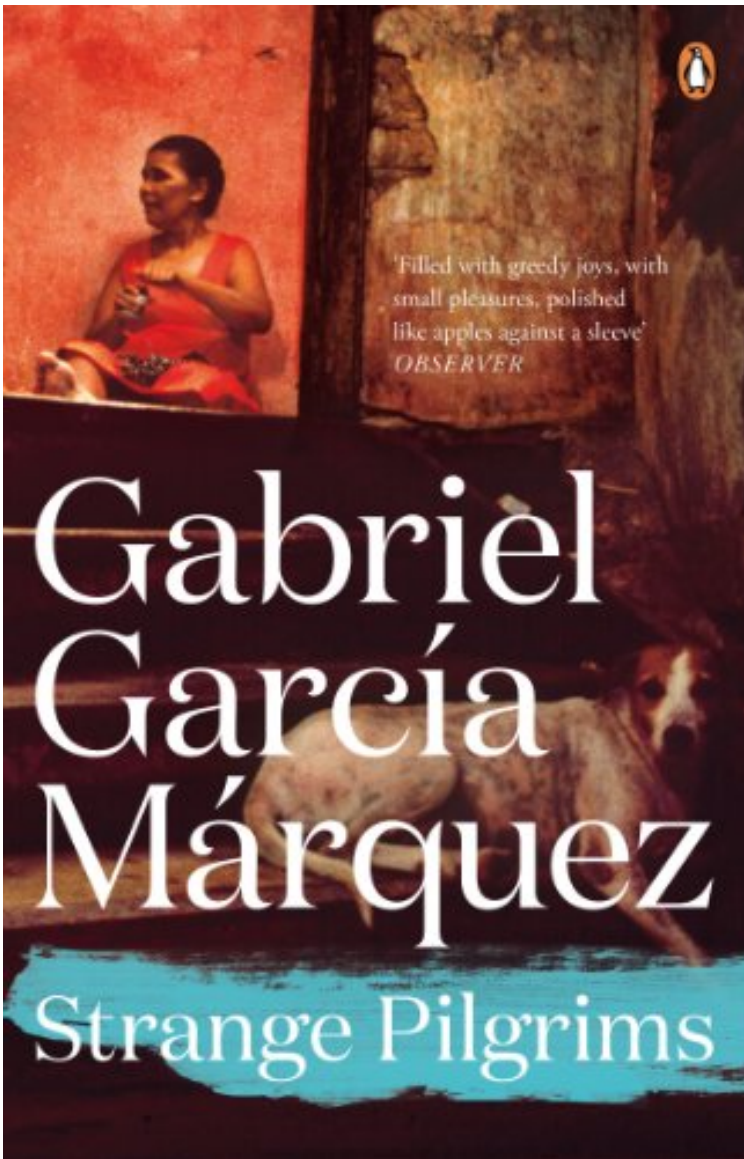


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## Strange Pilgrims



*Par Gabriel Garcia Marquez*  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurStrange Pilgrims is a collection of unforgettable stories about distinctive South American individuals in Europe from the Nobel laureate Gabriel Garca Marquez author of One Hundred Years of Solitude and Love in the Time of Cholera. 'The first thing Senora Prudencia Linero noticed when she reached the port of Naples was that it had the same smell as the port of Riohacha'The twelve stories here tell of Latin Americans adrift in Europe: a bereaved father in Rome for an audience with the Pope carries a box shaped like a cello case; an aging streetwalker waits for death in Barcelona with a dog trained to weep at her grave; a panic-stricken husband takes his wife to a Parisian hospital to treat a cut and never sees her again. Combining terror and nostalgia, surreal comedy and the poetry of the commonplace, Strange Pilgrims

is a triumph of storytelling by our most brilliant writer.' Celebratory and full of strange relish at life's oddness, the stories draw their strength from Marquez's generous feel for character, good and bad, boorish and innocent' William Boyd 'The most important writer of fiction in any language' Bill Clinton 'Often touching, often funny, always unexpected, the experience is as enriching as travel itself' New Statesman

*Extrait Bon Voyage, Mr. President*

He sat on a wooden bench under the yellow leaves in the deserted park, contemplating the dusty swans with both his hands resting on the silver handle of his cane, and thinking about death. On his first visit to Geneva the lake had been calm and clear, and there were tame gulls that would eat out of one's hand, and women for hire who seemed like six-in-the-afternoon phantoms with organdy ruffles and silk parasols. Now the only possible woman he could see was a flower vendor on the deserted pier. It was difficult for him to believe that time could cause so much ruin not only in his life but in the world. He was one more incognito in the city of illustrious incognitos. He wore the dark blue pin-striped suit, brocade vest, and stiff hat of a retired magistrate. He had the arrogant mustache of a musketeer, abundant blue-black hair with romantic waves, a harpist's hands with the widower's wedding band on his left ring finger, and joyful eyes. Only the weariness of his skin betrayed the state of his health. Even so, at the age of seventy-three, his elegance was still notable. That morning, however, he felt beyond the reach of all vanity. The years of glory and power had been left behind forever, and now only the years of his death remained. He had returned to Geneva after two world wars, in search of a definitive answer to a pain that the doctors in Martinique could not identify. He had planned on staying no more than two weeks but had spent almost six in exhausting examinations and inconclusive results, and the end was not yet in sight. They looked for the pain in his liver, his kidneys, his pancreas, his prostate, wherever it was not. Until that bitter Thursday, when he had made an appointment for nine in the morning at the neurology department with the least well-known of the many physicians who had seen him. The office resembled a monk's cell, and the doctor was small and solemn and wore a cast on the broken thumb of his right hand. When the light was turned off, the illuminated X ray of a spinal column appeared on a screen, but he did not recognize it as his own until the doctor used a pointer to indicate the juncture of two vertebrae below his waist. "Your pain is here," he said. For him it was not so simple. His pain was improbable and devious, and sometimes seemed to be in his ribs on the right side and sometimes in his lower abdomen, and often it caught him off guard with a sudden stab in the groin. The doctor listened to him without moving, the pointer motionless on the screen. "That is why it eluded us for so long," he said. "But now we know it is here." Then he placed his forefinger on his own temple and stated with precision: "Although in strictest terms, Mr. President, all pain is here." His clinical style was so dramatic that the final verdict seemed merciful: The President had to submit to a dangerous and inescapable operation. He asked about the margin of risk, and the old physician enveloped him in an indeterminate light. "We could not say with certainty," he answered. Until a short while before, he explained, the risk of fatal accidents was great, and even more so the danger of different kinds of paralysis of varying degrees. But with the medical advances made during the two wars, such fears were things of the past. "Don't worry," the doctor concluded. "Put your affairs in order and then get in touch with us. But don't forget, the sooner the better." It was not a good morning for digesting that piece of bad news, least of all outdoors. He had left the hotel very early, without an overcoat because he saw a brilliant sun through the window, and had walked with measured steps from the Chemin du Beau-Soleil, where the hospital was located, to that refuge for furtive lovers, the Jardin Anglais. He had been there for more than an hour, thinking of nothing but death, when autumn began. The lake became as rough as an angry sea, and an outlaw wind frightened the gulls and made away with the last leaves. The President stood up and, instead of buying a daisy from the flower vendor, he picked one from the public plantings and put it in his buttonhole. She caught him in the act. "Those flowers don't belong to God, Monsieur," she said in vexation. "They're city property." He ignored her and walked away with rapid strides, grasping his cane by the middle of the shaft and twirling it from time to time with a rather libertine air. On the Pont du Mont-Blanc the flags of the Confederation, maddened by the sudden gust of wind, were being lowered with as much speed as possible, and the graceful fountain crowned with foam had been turned off earlier than usual. The President did not recognize his usual cafe on the pier because they had taken down the green awning over the entrance, and the flower-filled terraces of summer had just been closed. Inside the lights burned in the middle of the day, and the string quartet was playing a piece by Mozart full of foreboding. At the counter the President picked up a newspaper from the pile reserved for customers, hung his hat and cane on the rack, put on his gold-rimmed glasses to read at the most isolated table, and only then became aware that autumn had arrived. He began to read the international page, where from time to time he found a rare news item from the Americas,

and he continued reading from back to front until the waitress brought him his daily bottle of Evian water. Following his doctors' orders, he had given up the habit of coffee more than thirty years before, but had said, "If I ever knew for certain that I was going to die, I would drink it again." Perhaps the time had come. "Bring me a coffee too," he ordered in perfect French. And specified without noticing the double meaning, "Italian style, strong enough to wake the dead." He drank it without sugar, in slow sips, and then turned the cup upside down on the saucer so that the coffee grounds, after so many years, would have time to write out his destiny. The recaptured taste rescued him for an instant from his gloomy thoughts. A moment later, as if it were part of the same sorcery, he sensed someone looking at him. He turned the page with a casual gesture, then glanced over the top of his glasses and saw the pale, unshaven man in a sports cap and a jacket lined with sheepskin, who looked away at once so their eyes would not meet. His face was familiar. They had passed each other several times in the hospital lobby, he had seen him on occasion riding a motor scooter on the Promenade du Lac while he was contemplating the swans, but he never felt that he had been recognized.

He did not, however, discount the idea that this was one of the many persecution fantasies of exile. He finished the paper at his leisure, floating on the sumptuous cellos of Brahms, until the pain was stronger than the analgesic of the music. Then he looked at the small gold watch and chain that he carried in his vest pocket and took his two midday tranquilizers with the last swallow of Evian water. Before removing his glasses he deciphered his destiny in the coffee grounds and felt an icy shudder: He saw uncertainty there. At last he paid the bill, left a miser's tip, collected his cane and hat from the rack, and walked out to the street without looking at the man who was looking at him. He moved away with his festive walk, stepping around the beds of flowers devastated by the wind, and thought he was free of the spell. But then he heard steps behind him and came to a halt when he rounded the corner, making a partial turn. The man following him had to stop short to avoid a collision, and his startled eyes looked at him from just a few inches away. "Senor

Presidente," he murmured. "Tell the people who pay you not to get their hopes up," said the President, without losing his smile or the charm of his voice. "My health is perfect." "Nobody knows that better than me," said the man, crushed by the weight of dignity that had fallen upon him. "I work at the hospital." His diction and cadence, and even his timidity, were raw Caribbean. "Don't tell me you're a doctor," said the President. "I wish I could, Senor. I'm an ambulance driver." "I'm sorry," said the President, convinced of his error. "That's a hard job." "Not as hard as yours, Senor." He looked straight at him, leaned on his cane with both hands, and asked with real interest: "Where are you from?" "The Caribbean." "I already knew that," said the President. "But which country?" "The same as you, Senor," the man said, and offered his hand. "My name is Homero Rey." The President interrupted him in astonishment, not letting go of his hand. "Damn," he said. "What a fine name!" Homero relaxed. "It gets better," he said. "Homero Rey de la Casa-I'm Homer King

of His House." A wintry knife-thrust caught them unprotected in the middle of the street. The President shivered down to his bones and knew that without an overcoat he could not walk the two blocks to the cheap restaurant where he usually ate. "Have you had lunch?" he asked. "I never have lunch," said Homero. "I eat one meal at night in my house." "Make an exception for today," he said, using all his charm. "Let me take you to lunch." He led him by the arm to the restaurant across the street, its name in gilt on the awning: Le Boeuf Couronne. The interior was narrow and warm, and there seemed to be no empty tables. Homero Rey, surprised that no one recognized the President, walked to the back to request assistance. "Is he an acting president?" the owner asked. "No," said Homero. "Overthrown." The owner smiled in approval. "For them," he said, "I always have a special table." He led them to an isolated table in the rear of the room, where they could talk as much as they liked. The President thanked him. "Not everyone recognizes as you do the dignity of exile," he said. The specialty of the house was charcoal-broiled ribs of beef. The President and his guest glanced around and saw the great roasted slabs edged in tender fat on the other tables. "It's magnificent meat," murmured the President. "But I'm not allowed to eat it." He looked at Homero with a roguish eye and changed his tone. "In fact, I'm not allowed to eat anything." "You're not allowed to have coffee either," said

Homero, "but you drink it anyway." "You found that out?" said the President. "But today was just an exception on an exceptional day." Coffee was not the only exception he made that day. He also ordered charcoal-broiled ribs of beef and a fresh vegetable salad with a simple splash of olive oil for dressing. His guest ordered the same, and half a carafe of red wine. While they were waiting for the meat, Homero took a wallet with no money and many papers out of his jacket pocket, and showed a faded photograph to the President, who recognized himself in shirtsleeves, a few pounds lighter and with intense black hair and mustache, surrounded by a crowd of young men standing on tiptoe to be seen. In a single glance he recognized the place, he recognized the emblems of an abominable election campaign, he recognized the

wretched date. "It's shocking!" he murmured. "I've always said one ages faster in photographs than in real life." And he returned the picture with a gesture of finality. "I remember it very well," he said. "It was thousands of years ago, in the cockpit at San Cristobal de las Casas." "That's my town," said Homero, and he pointed to himself in the group. "This is me." "The President recognized him. "You were a baby!" "Almost," said Homero. "I was with you for the whole southern campaign as a leader of the university brigades." "The President anticipated his reproach. "I, of course, did not even notice you," he said. "Not at all, you were very nice," said Homero. "But there were so many of us there's no way you could remember." "And afterward?" "You know that better than anybody," said Homero. "After the military coup, the miracle is that we're both here, ready to eat half a cow. Not many were as lucky. "Just then their food was brought to the table. The President tied his napkin around his neck, like an infant's bib, and was aware of his guest's silent surprise. "If I didn't do this I'd ruin a tie at every meal," he said. Before he began, he tasted the meat for seasoning, approved with a satisfied gesture, and returned to his subject. "What I can't understand," he said, "is why you didn't approach me earlier, instead of tracking me like a bloodhound." Homero said that he had recognized him from the time he saw him go into the hospital through a door reserved for very special cases. It was in the middle of summer, and he was wearing a three-piece linen suit from the Antilles, with black and white shoes, a daisy in his lapel, and his beautiful hair blowing in the wind. Homero learned that he was alone in Geneva, with no one to help him, for the President knew by heart the city where he had completed his law studies. The hospital administration, at his request, took the internal measures necessary to guarantee his absolute incognito. That very night Homero and his wife agreed to communicate with him. And yet for five weeks he had followed him, waiting for a propitious moment, and perhaps would not have been capable of speaking if the President had not confronted him. "I'm glad I did, although the truth is, it doesn't bother me at all to be alone." "It's not right." "Why?" asked the President with sincerity. "The greatest victory of my life has been having everyone forget me." "We remember you more than you imagine," said Homero, not hiding his emotion. "It's a joy to see you like this, young and healthy." "And yet," he said without melodrama, "everything indicates that I'll die very soon." "Your chances of recovery are very good," said Homero. The President gave a start of surprise but did not lose his sense of humor. "Damn!" he exclaimed. "Has medical confidentiality been abolished in beautiful Switzerland?" "Revue de presse Celebratory and full of strange relish at life's oddness. The stories draw their strength from Marquez's generous feel for character, good and bad, boorish and innocent (William Boyd)