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Gabriel García Márquez  
para el nuevo  
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## “The captain is on board” Eszter Vörös (Hungría)

A woman is lying on the floor of a terrace, moving her generous hips up and down, dancing with her whole body, light blue and golden flowers paint her face. A man with a colored headdress is straddling her suggestively while dancing above her. Drums go crazy, just like those who surround them clapping, shouting and constantly moving to the wild sound of the tambores. It is half past nine, beginning of a Wednesday night in January, in the April Moon, the café of Luna Abril. The woman is the queen of the night, in the universe of the Carnival, the captain of the group she belongs to for four years. A group of carnival participants from all walks of life and levels of society, but who all love arts and bohemian lifestyle. They call themselves 'Disfrazate como quieras', that is 'Wear what you want'. They have been partying together for more than 30 years in every January and February in the Carnival season of Barranquilla.

She jumps up, goes on dancing with whoever joins her from the friends, flashing her tattoo on her left shoulder with the contour of the country of Colombia. Before she disappears with a bottle of beer in her hands she looks back to check the mood of the crowd. Apparently she finds it quite all right.

The same face is looking at me across the table of an Italian restaurant in a fancy street of Barranquilla. It is one of her favorites, as she does not like local food and likes the tranquility of the place. No makeup, no chance to see the tattoo and her eyes are more quiet this time.

I order a beer for the pasta, she drinks a glass of red wine “just to be French sometimes”.

It is probably one of those few things that remains from her French identity. Cecile Lavergne first came to Colombia 14 years ago. She was 15 then. An unusual dream that gave her a sign about her destination navigated her first to Bogota. She worked there for months and friends took her to the first carnival of her life, to the Caribbean town of Barranquilla.

“That was the only carnival that I watched from the outside. Since then I am there among those who dance and parade in a comparse” says Cecile. But to join her current group she had to wait some more years since she had other things to do. Like finishing high school. Or going to Afganistan, or working with the victims of cholera in Haiti, or for the victims of violence in Colombia. While working in Colombia for the second time for an NGO, she reported a fraud at a local election that put her into danger and became a target for the paramilitary and the mafia, as she claims. After spending some time in the shelter of France, she returned to some less dangerous fields and now leads the Fútbol con corazón, an association that helps children.

The Luna Abril is full of people listening to the proclamation of the queen, the bando that opens the Carnival officially, at least now for the Disfrazate group. For the big event, when the queen of the Carnival of Barranquilla claims officially that everybody must enjoy every minutes of the carnival people must wait two more days. Important sentences are reinforced by the tambores and the loud approval of the audience. They are all friends who share the

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Carnival experience each year, mainly people from Barranquilla, the city that is known as the happiest city of Colombia.

“I love the people of Barranquilla, they really know how to live. When Joe Arroyo, the famous salsa singer died, I was on the streets of Barranquilla with my camera making a documentary for a French company. Thousands of people went to his funeral. They walked kilometers, both poor and rich, and while they were crying, they were dancing. That is what I like about them.” She was quickly accepted by the locals, partly because Barranquilla has a history of opening its doors to refugees, immigrants no matter which race. During the colonial times it was the only big coastal city that was not taken over by the Spanish and grew from a small village to a grand city by accepting Indians, blacks and those who escaped from others colonial towns.

Cecile on the other hand brought a natural knowledge of Spanish that she learned alone at the age of 10 to be able to communicate a boy she was in love with. She also owns a skill and dances as the locals, although she never learned it. She lives in the neighborhood of the Carnival, Barrio Abajo, a southern, relatively poor district of Barranquilla, full of colorful houses. Here people are always on the streets, should it be a group of drummers or just families sitting in front of their houses from sunset till night. She chose an iconic art deco building, hosting around 40 apartments, home mainly of artists, and the members of her comparse, of her carnival group.

“I live in this part of the city, because it is here where you can feel the spirit of carnival the most during the whole year. But people talk about the Carnival all the time. I had to schedule a project recently and I found out that we had to adjust everything to next year’s carnival even six months in advance. Yesterday I planned my costume for the following year already. It will be a drag queen costume”.

The tambores rumble again, the musicians in white traditional clothes play cumbia, the typical music of Colombia and the Carnival, the African elements of the Caribbean music suddenly amplify and lead the hips of the dancers to a wilder play. The captain appears from one of the halls and becomes the center of the dance and the evening again. This is a role that she likes to play, as she says, in whatever community she appeared, she always wanted to be the captain. But it comes with responsibility. She must take care of organizing the emblematic events of the Carnival season for her group of around 350 people.

Starting in December 7, with the Night of the Candles and finishing with the death of Joselito Carnival the members of the comparse need to face more than 15 events including the big parade, the Battle of Flowers, the most important event of the Carnival, where all comparses can show what they prepared with for months. In fact the number of fiestas are not limited to this 15.

“In Barrio Abajo it is happening all the time. The spirit of Carnival is always there. But it is not unusual. In Colombia there are more than 200 fiestas every year. The difference between our Carnival and the other celebrations might be that here you go through the cycle of life with all the events. At the end Joselito Carnival dies. During this short life people do what they want. No one judges us. People can be what they want to be. They can be free in many senses for those days of chaos“

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Salsa still makes crazy everyone who still has strength to dance in the entrance terrace of The April Moon at 2 am, and here is the time of cumbia again, the very music of the Carnival which deserves to be played live. A middle aged woman comes into the core of the dancing crowd, slowly, but intensively moves her hips left and right, while makes only small steps to turn around. Her right hand reaches towards the January moon. She is a master and gladly teaches those who still need some correction in their movements. Happiness is in the air. Why would not there be? Recently a survey showed that Colombia is the happiest country in the world.

“It is true”, says Cécile. “But not only the happiest, but the most violent country either. You can find violence even in the traditional dances. In the Carnival people love to have costumes with machete or other kind of weapons. I work with children and see them playing every day. Most of the time they play that they fight. But at the same time they want to dance all the time. You can find this controversy in so many fields in the country. Once a French expert of Colombia, who was supposed to be my master in my Phd studies told me, the more you stay in Colombia, the less you understand it. The happiness here is maybe the result of how people set proprieties in life. Almost every family, rich or poor, in some way has something to do with the narcotraffic, the violence. And they know that the situation could change in any minute. So they live for the present. Which makes things so different here. “

It is almost 3am, guests seem to feel like saving some energy for the following day's party and are about to leave. The following fiesta of the Disfrazate group officially is in a week, but until then there is no day that would pass by without something in relation with the big fiesta of the year. The count-down has started, in three weeks there come some days when everybody will be who they want to be. Even if some sell a fridge or other values to have some money to finance their someday-long freedom.

The dance floor is almost empty, ideal state for those who need space for getting wild. The captain is still on board, and surely will not leave the boat until the last friend said good night. A once French girl, now hundred percent Colombian without a citizenship is dancing herself into the Carnival of her life.