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The insomnia plague: a Gabriel García Márquez story

Abstract “All the great writers have good eyes” is a sentence by V. Nabokov that is very suitable for G.G. Márquez and his One Hundred Years of Solitude. The novel, published in 1967, introduces among many others, the character of little Rebeca, whose frailness and greenish skin revealed hunger “that was older than she was”. The girl, because of a pica syndrome, only liked to eat earth and the cake of whitewash. But her fate appears to be determined by the lethal insomnia plague, whose most fearsome part was not the impossibility of sleeping but its inexorable evolution toward a loss of memory in which the sick person “sinks into a kind of idiocy that had no past”. Rebeca’s lethal insomnia looks quite similar to the “peculiar, fatal disorder of sleep” originally described by Lugaresi et al. in 1986. One Hundred Years of Solitude shows that G.G. Márquez was gifted not only with good eyes, but has the seductive power of changing reality into fantasy, while transforming his visions into reality.

Key words Fatal familial insomnia • Prion disease • Pica • Gabriel García Márquez • Insomnia plague

Gabriel García Márquez, one of a glittering constellation of contemporary Latin American novelists, was born in Aracataca, Colombia, in 1928. In 1982 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Among the several novels and collections of stories he wrote, One Hundred Years of Solitude, first published in 1967, is considered his masterpiece and a classic of the century. In this “hypnotic” history of the Buendías family, reality and fantasy are often indistinguishable so that a Spanish galleon beached in the jungle, a flying carpet, clouds of yellow butterflies announcers of death are as real as guerrilla coups, banana company massacres, and the coming of the steam engine.

Against a background of realistic dreamland, the novel introduces plenty of characters. One of them, Rebeca, acting in the third chapter, is a little girl of unknown origin, who enters into the Buendías’ saga coming from an unheard-of village, with her baggage of a canvas sac “making a clo-cloc-cloc sound, where she carried her parents’ bones” [1]. Her frailness and her greenish skin, “revealed poor health and hunger that were older than she was” [1]. And Rebeca, as it could have happened to undernourished people we have observed all over the world, liked “to eat the damp earth of the courtyard and the cake of whitewash that she picked off the walls with her nails” [1].

To all appearance, Rebeca is described as having “pica”, from the Latin word for “magpie” (“gazza” in Italian: the bird who carries away odd objects). This syndrome refers to compulsive eating of non-nutritive substances such as dirt (geophagia), ice (pagophagia), flaking paint and plaster, and has been ascribed to various disorders including sideropenia rather than anaemia [2]. Interestingly, Rebeca shares her hunger and eating derangement with a real character, an extravagant genius of the past century. During the last two years of his life, the famous painter Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) had developed a pica for terpenes [3]: in fact he attempted to eat his paints and to drink turpentine and kerosene [4].

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Pica was not Rebeca’s only distinctive illness. The girl is depicted in the same third chapter of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in an astonishing stance: “One night about the time that Rebeca was cured of the vice of eating earth” [1], the Indian woman who took care of her saw Rebeca sucking her finger and “with her eyes lighted up in the darkness like those of a cat. Terrified, exhausted by her fate, - she - recognised in those eyes the symptoms of the sickness whose threat had obliged her and her brother to exile themselves forever from an age-old kingdom where they had been prince and princess. It was the insomnia plague... the lethal sickness... that had been scourging their tribe for several years” [1].

The insomnia illness is wholly devastating, according to G.G. Márquez, because its “most fearsome part was not the impossibility of sleeping, but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory” [1] in which the sick person sees: “the recollection of his childhood to be erased from his memory, then the name and the notion of things, and finally the identity of people and even the awareness of his own being, until he sinks into a kind of idiocy that had no past” [1].

In a kind of “cinematographic” presentation of reality, the eyes of Rebeca are “lighted up” in a way that does not feature the neurological familial fatal insomnia (FFI). However, the girl’s lethal insomnia looks quite similar to the “peculiar, fatal disorder of sleep”, with dream-like status, tremor, and myoclonus originally described in an Italian family by Lugaresi, Gambetti and their collaborators in 1986 [5]. FFI is an autosomal dominant prion disease [6] associated with the haplotype D178N,129M of the gene coding for the prion protein. Insomnia is an early symptom and is usually followed by dysautonomia, myoclonic jerks, dystarhria and ataxia. Memory loss is common even “in the absence of a global decline in intellectual function” [7]. Thalamic atrophy with a peculiar involvement of anterolateral and mediodorsal thalamic nuclei is the pathological hallmark of the disease. Creutzfeldt-Jakob and Gerstmann-Scheinker diseases are among the differential diagnoses to be considered [7].

Diseases and death are an integral and inescapable part of life. No wonder if masterpieces of literature contain comprehensive representation of sickness and artistic expression becomes a privileged means of representing the human condition. Before Márquez, other outstanding novelists unveiled the universe of infirmity.

A grim and violent French novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, written by A. Dumas père in 1846, presented the character of M. Noirtier de Villefort who, surviving a stroke, had become tetraplegic and mute while still preserving full sentient consciousness. This was the first description of a typical locked-in patient [8, 9], 29 years prior to the medical picture drawn by M. Darolles in 1875 [7, 8], and 120 years before the precise definition of the syndrome made by Plum and Posner in 1966 [9]. The same theme was introduced again by another French writer, Emile Zola who, in his early novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1868) described another typical locked-in character [8,10].

Other authors aimed at underlining the multiform, often anguishing, nature of reality. This was the case of L. Pirandello with his short story “La Toccatina” (“The Little Touch”), published in 1906, in which the author described a patient affected by polyglottal aphasia [11], and represented the capacity of man to adjust to life and to keep it within his grasp in any possible way.

This sort of singular connection between literature and neurology may even offer a glimpse on Leo Tolstoy’s private life. Indeed, in his immortal novel *Anna Karenina*, published as a serial between 1875 and 1877, Tolstoy based the portrait of Nikolai Levin, a bizarre character always inappropriate in society parties, on the behavioural abnormalities of his own brother Dmitry [12]. Nikolai Levin was shown as suffering from Tourette’s syndrome [12]. Gilles de la Tourette’s exemplary account of the syndrome that now bears his name, did not appear until 1885 [13]. In fact, the first patient clearly suffering from the disorder was described in 1825 by Jean Itard [12, 13], the same author who in 1806 wrote *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* [14] about the attempt to educate a “wolf-boy”. This novel is a classic of French literature and an example of experimental pedagogy.

“All the great writers have good eyes” [15], and all of them strive, in spite of obstacles, to get at the truth. But they do not use one method in depicting their truth. They can act as fine photographers or fascinate their readers with writings suspended in a sort of reverie.

We ignore how Gabriel García Márquez could have imagined the disorders he portrayed in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or from where or whom he had had the knowledge of them. Knowing whether Rebeca’s fatal illness is a purely fantastic description, or whether the insomnia plague is part of a legend handed down by South American Indian tribes, is a question outside the aim of this paper. We only call attention to the seductive power of Márquez’ gift of changing reality into fantasy, while transforming his visions into neurology.

**Sommario** “I grandi scrittori devono avere occhi buoni”: È una frase di V. Nabokov particolarmente vera nel caso di G.G. Márquez e di “Cent’anni di Solitudine”. Il romanzo, pubblicato nel 1967, contiene tra i tanti il personaggio della piccola Rebeca: fragile, dal colorito verdastro, già affamata ancora prima di nascere, che è affetta da “pica” e mangia solo terra e calcinacci che stacca dei muri. Ma il destino della bambina appare piuttosto caratterizzato dalla “pestes dell’insonnia”, una malattia che priva le persone della capacità di dormire e di ogni ricordo fino a ridurle ad “una sorta di idiozia senza passato”. La malattia “fatale” di Rebeca appare molto simile all’insonnia fatale familiare che Lugaresi e coautori hanno descritto nel 1986. “Cent’anni di Solitudine” dimostra quindi che Márquez non è dotato solo di buoni occhi, ma possiede il grande dono di saper trasformare la realtà in sogno, le sue visioni in realtà.