First Read: Living to Tell the Tale

Note

This non-fiction piece explains the real-life background of writing "Tuesday Siesta." What similarities do you see? How does this non-fiction piece add insight to the story?

Skills Focus

1. As you reread the beginning of this excerpt from the autobiography _Living to Tell the Tale_, compare and contrast it with how Gabriel García Márquez begins his short story “Tuesday Siesta.” How are the details similar in each version of events? How are they different? What does the author emphasize in each version? Highlight textual evidence to support your ideas and write annotations to explain your choices.
   **CA-CCSS:** CA.RI.9-10.1, CA.RI.9-10.3, CA.RI.9-10.7

2. What is the central (or main) idea of this excerpt from _Living to Tell the Tale_? Restate the central idea of the text in one or two sentences, and support your response with specific details from the text.
   **CA-CCSS:** CA.RI.9-10.1, CA.RI.9-10.2

3. In paragraph 10, García Márquez says to his mother, “I feel as if I were the thief.” What makes him feel empathy for the thief? Who else does he empathize with? How might his empathy (sharing of another’s feelings) suggest his purpose for writing about this event? Annotate to explain your ideas. Highlight specific evidence from the text to support your explanation.
   **CA-CCSS:** CA.RI.9-10.1, CA.RI.9-10.6
While the train stood there I had the sensation that we were not altogether alone. But when it pulled away, with an immediate, heart-wrenching blast of its whistle, my mother and I were left forsaken beneath the infernal sun, and all the heavy grief of the town came down on us. But we did not say anything to each other. The old wooden station with its tin roof and running balcony was like a tropical version of the ones we knew from westerns. We crossed the deserted station whose tiles were beginning to crack under the pressure of grass, and we sank into the torpor of siesta as we sought the protection of the almond trees.

Since I was a boy I had despised those inert siestas because we did not know what to do. “Be quiet, we’re sleeping,” the sleepers would murmur without waking. Stores, public offices, and schools closed at twelve and did not open again until a little before three. The interiors of the houses floated in a limbo of lethargy. In some it was so unbearable that people would hang their hammocks in the courtyard or place chairs in the shade of the almond trees and sleep sitting up in the middle of the street. Only the hotel across from the station, with its bar and billiard room, and the telegraph office behind the church remained open. Everything was identical to my memories, but smaller and poorer, and leveled by a windstorm of fatality: the decaying houses themselves, the tin roofs perforated by rust, the levee with its crumbling granite benches and melancholy almond trees, and all of it transfigured by the invisible burning dust that deceived the eye and calcinated the skin. On the other side of the train tracks the private paradise of the banana company, stripped now of its electrified wire fence, was a vast thicket with no palm trees, ruined houses among the poppies, and the rubble of the hospital destroyed by fire. There was not a single door, a crack in a wall, a human trace that did not find a supernatural resonance in me.

My mother held herself very erect as she walked with her light step, almost not
perspiring in her funereal dress, and in absolute silence, but her mortal pallor and sharpened profile revealed what was happening to her on the inside.

When we turned the corner, the dust burned my feet through the weave of my sandals. The feeling of being forsaken became unbearable. Then I saw myself and I saw my mother, just as I saw, when I was a boy, the mother and sister of the thief whom Maria Consuegra had killed with a single shot one week earlier, when he tried to break into her house.

At three in the morning the sound of someone trying to force the street door from the outside had wakened her. She got up without lighting the lamp, felt around in the armoire for an archaic revolver that no one had fired since the War of a Thousand Days, and located in the darkness not only the place where the door was but also the exact height of the lock. Then she aimed the weapon with both hands, closed her eyes, and squeezed the trigger. She had never fired a gun before, but the shot hit its target through the door.

He was the first dead person I had seen. When I passed by at seven in the morning on my way to school, the body was still lying on the sidewalk in a patch of dried blood, the face destroyed by the lead that had shattered its nose and come out one ear. He was wearing a sailor’s T-shirt with colored stripes and ordinary trousers held up by a rope instead of a belt, and he was barefoot. At his side, on the ground, they found the homemade picklock with which he had tried to jimmy the lock.

The town dignitaries came to Maria Consuegra’s house to offer her their condolences for having killed the thief. I went that night with Papalelo, and we found her sitting in an armchair from Manila that looked like an enormous wicker peacock, surrounded by the fervor of her friends who listened to the story she had repeated a thousand times. Everyone agreed with her that she had fired out of sheer fright. It was then that my grandfather asked her if she had heard anything after the shot, and she answered that the first she had heard a great silence, then the metallic sound of the picklock falling
on the cement, and then a faint, anguished voice: “Mother, help me!” Maria Consuegra, it seemed, had not been conscious of this heart-breaking lament until my grandfather asked her the question. Only then did she burst into tears.

This happened on a Monday. On Tuesday of the following week, during siesta, I was playing tops with Luis Carmelo Correa, my oldest friend in life, when we were surprised by the sleepers waking before it was time and looking out the windows. Then we saw in the deserted street a woman dressed in strict mourning and a girl about twelve years old who was carrying a bouquet of faded flowers wrapped in newspaper. They protected themselves from the burning sun with a black umbrella and were quite oblivious to the effrontery of the people who watched them pass by. They were the mother and younger sister of the dead thief, bringing flowers for his grave.

That vision pursued me for many years, like a single dream that the entire town watched through its windows as it passed, until I managed to exorcise it in a story. But the truth is that I did not become aware of the drama of the woman and the girl, or their imperturbable dignity, until the day I went with my mother to sell the house and surprised myself walking down the same deserted street at the same lethal hour.

“I feel as if I were the thief,” I said.

My mother did not understand me. In fact, when we passed the house of Maria Consuegra she did not even glance at the door where you could still see the patched bullet hole in the wood. Years later, recalling that trip with her, I confirmed that she did remember the tragedy but would have given her soul to forget it.

Excerpted from Living to Tell the Tale by Gabriel García Márquez, published by Vintage Books.