

Carolyn Forché

THE COLONEL

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

process of elimination

Mustard? He's the kind of colonel who would keep a bag of dried peach halves around just so he could dump them in front of gullible do-gooders and claim they were the ears of discontents that he had lopped off himself. He's all sadistic-fuck-from-a-banana-republic bark and no bite, unless we're talking fuzzy fruit. Mrs. Peacock, on the other hand, is exactly the kind of old bird who wouldn't think twice about killing a man if she thought his ears would add a little something savory to her peach cobbler. But she also hasn't been able to bear the sight of a pool table ever since she lost her son in that freak nine-ball accident, and the billiard room is where the victim's body was found. Plum, now, is always up for billiards. He's the kind of professor who loves the sound of chalking his own cuestick a little too much—squeak-squeak-squeak—and he passes up easy shots in favor of crazy attempts to put his ball in pockets where it doesn't belong. I can't see him using something as prosaic as a dagger when there's a lead pipe and candlestick available. Ms. White is more the daggerly type, especially where our victim is concerned. She's the kind of woman who would keep on having an affair with a man for years sincerely believing he was just about ready to leave his wife, only to discover he was never married in the first place. Unfortunately, at the time of the murder, she was getting her revenge a different way—in the conservatory with the rope and Mr. Green. This Green being exactly the kind who'd rat out his best friend if it meant the chance to lure the voluptuous and newly vulnerable Ms. White into some sordid tangling lime-pastel-and-pulleys tryst on top of a harpsichord. All of which leaves us with just Miss Scarlet, who is the kind of quiet girl you don't even notice leaving until you look out the window and see that she appears to be stuffing a very large and lumpy suitcase into the trunk of her car. You know, I'm not sure it was such a good idea to have asked her to make us this tea.