

Maria Marcia Carlotta Gonzales-Garcia and the Pearls that Knew Too Much

(A Mildly Suspicious Story
for Curious Children)



by Justin Bogner

A MILDLY SUSPICIOUS STORY FOR CURIOUS CHILDREN

**Maria Marcia Carlotta
Gonzales-Garcia**

and the

**Pearls That Knew
Too Much**

*“The question is not whether you are seen,
but whether you are truly seen—
and whether the seeing changes anything.”*

— Attributed to Maria M. C. Gonzales-Garcia,
though she denies having said it
(on account of being taxidermied)



MARIA MARCIA CARLOTTA
GONZALES-GARCIA

IT IS A CURIOUS feature of museums that the most interesting things are often placed exactly where the largest number of people will fail to notice them. This is not usually the result of a single wicked decision. It is the slow accumulation of many small ones, each made by someone who meant well, or who was tired, or who had been told that “the public prefers things that photograph well.” Over time these small decisions gather like dust in the corners, and before long an entire creature can be moved three inches to the left without anyone raising their voice above a polite whisper.

In one such corner of the Museum of Natural Wonders and Things We’ve Decided Are History stood a glass case containing Maria Marcia Carlotta Gonzales-Garcia. She was a mongoose of excellent posture and one extremely long name. The name had been assembled, piece by piece, by four different humans who had each loved her in their own way and for their own reasons. Maria had come from the naturalist who found her as a kit on a Caribbean island where the sugarcane grew taller than most houses. Marcia had been added by the ship’s captain who carried her across the ocean and discovered she had a talent for staring at maps as though she understood them. Carlotta had been supplied by the museum curator who first looked into her glass eyes and felt, quite unexpectedly, that she was being looked at in return. And Gonzales-Garcia had been insisted upon by Maria herself, or so the story went, on the grounds that every mongoose of serious ambition deserves at least one hyphen.



MARIA MARCIA CARLOTTA
GONZALES-GARCIA

Most visitors who paused at the case said something along the lines of “Aww, look at the cute dead weasel.” They said this because it is easier, and generally safer, to call a thing by the first simple word that arrives in the mouth than to consider whether the thing might have preferred a different word entirely.

Maria, had she been in the habit of sighing, would have sighed at this. She was not a weasel. She was *Herpestes auropunctatus*, which is the sort of name that sounds impressive when spoken correctly and slightly ridiculous when it is not. More importantly, she was not dead. She was, as she preferred to think of it, *strategically preserved*. There is a difference between the two states, though most people do not care to examine it too closely. A pond in winter is still. A book left open on a table is still. Neither of these things has stopped being what it is; it has merely arranged itself to wait. Maria had arranged herself to wait for a very long time.

Around her neck rested a single strand of pearls. They were not, strictly speaking, ordinary pearls. From a distance they looked like the sort of necklace a museum might add to an exhibit to suggest that the animal in question had once belonged to someone who wore pearls. Up close, and when the light chose to cooperate, the pearls gave off a soft, private glow.



MARIA MARCIA CARLOTTA
GONZALES-GARCIA

Each one contained a small rolled-up secret from the life Maria had lived before the case. One remembered the plot involving the missing cheese treaties. Another recalled the suspiciously well-dressed lizards who had tried to pass themselves off as diplomats. A third held the persistent mystery of why the museum gift shop never seemed to have enough postcards featuring small but heroic mammals. These were not the most important secrets the pearls carried, but they were useful for passing the long hours.

The most important secret was this: every creature's story matters, not because every story is loud or beautiful or easy to fit on a postcard, but because a world that loses the habit of listening to its quiet stories eventually loses the ability to tell the difference between what is true and what is merely convenient. The pearls had learned this from Maria. Maria had learned it from watching, which is what strategically preserved mongooses are especially good at doing.

For a long while this arrangement had been enough. Maria stood in her case. The pearls kept their counsel. The museum continued its important work of deciding which things deserved spotlights and which things could be moved, quietly, when no one was paying attention.

Then, one Tuesday, the case was moved three inches to the left.

Three inches does not sound like very much until you consider what three inches can do to a spotlight. The light, which had previously fallen across Maria's face in a way that made her glass eyes appear almost thoughtful, now struck the side of the case at an awkward angle. Visitors began to walk past without slowing down. A junior curator, following instructions that had arrived in a memo from someone higher up, made a note that the mongoose exhibit might benefit from "repositioning within the Small and Slightly Forgettable Rodents wing." The memo did not use the word *forgettable* out loud, of course. It spoke instead of "optimizing visitor flow" and "aligning with current interpretive priorities." These are the sorts of phrases grown-ups use when they do not wish to say that they have decided some stories are less worth the electricity required to light them properly.

Maria noticed. Maria always noticed.



MARIA MARCIA CARLOTTA
GONZALES-GARCIA

At eleven minutes past midnight, when the last school group had been herded into buses and the security guard had begun his nightly negotiation with the vending machine, Maria opened her real eyes. The glass ones the museum had given her remained exactly where they were, round and shining and perfectly still. The real ones, the ones underneath, had been watching the entire time.

She stretched with the careful movements of someone who has held the same position for a very long while. She straightened her pearls. She flexed her small, clever paws. Then she stepped out of the case and into the Hour of the Preserved.



MARIA MARCIA CALLOTTA
CONILLI-VASCIA

This was the time between midnight and dawn when the museum belonged, briefly, to the exhibits themselves. In other parts of the building, pinned butterflies tested their wings against the glass of their drawers. A taxidermied badger who had once been considered quite common was practicing a new expression in front of a darkened display case. In the Hall of Dramatic Poses, Sir Percival P. Peacock stood beneath his three spotlights, practicing being magnificent even though no one was there to see him. He did this every night. It is what happens to creatures who have been admired for so long that they begin to suspect admiration is the only thing keeping them real.

Maria did not go to the Hall of Dramatic Poses. Not yet. She climbed the grand staircase, her pearls casting small, warm circles of light on each step, and made her way to the secret attic where the things no longer considered interesting enough for the main floors were sent to gather dust and opinions.



Gladys the Galápagos Tortoise was already there, occupying the center of the floor like a boulder that had decided, two centuries earlier, that it had earned the right to take up space. She was two hundred and fourteen years old and still annoyed about 1835, when a young naturalist named Charles had picked her up without asking permission and written things about her in a notebook that later became famous. He had not even spelled her species name correctly on the first attempt. Gladys brought this up often. She felt it was important that the record reflect the full extent of the discourtesy.

Reginald the Raven perched on a dusty trunk nearby. He had been preserved in 1887 after a long career as the unofficial mascot of a London newspaper. He was an excellent listener and a terrible keeper of secrets, and he had a voice like a rusty gate that had attended several seasons of very dramatic theater. He liked to correct people, especially when they were almost but not quite right.

Maria climbed onto a crate, straightened her pearls once more, and spoke.

“Colleagues,” she said. “My case has been moved three inches to the left.”

Gladys blinked slowly. When one is two hundred and fourteen, one does everything slowly, including the reception of alarming news.

“Three inches,” she repeated.

“Deliberate,” said Maria. “I have heard it suggested that I might be more appropriately displayed among the Small and Slightly Forgettable Rodents. I am neither small in the way they mean, nor forgettable, nor, strictly speaking, a rodent.”

“You are quite small,” Reginald observed from his trunk.

“I am compact,” Maria corrected. “There is a difference. Diamonds are compact. So are certain types of explosives. Neither is generally described as forgettable.”

A silence followed, the kind that arrives when several preserved creatures are considering the same unpleasant possibility at once.

“I believe,” Maria said at last, “it is Sir Percival P. Peacock who has been making these suggestions.”

Reginald produced a dramatic gasp. He was very fond of dramatic gasps and practiced them when he thought no one was listening.





To understand Sir Percival, it helps to understand something about how museums, and indeed most institutions, decide what deserves to be seen. Sir Percival had arrived in 1897 as a gift from a wealthy gentleman who believed that the purpose of a natural history museum was to display magnificent things. Sir Percival was magnificent. His tail feathers were an explosion of iridescent blues and greens, each eye-spot catching the light like a small, self-satisfied star. He had been posed at the exact moment of his greatest display, and for more than a century visitors had walked into the Hall of Dramatic Poses and said “Oh!” in the particular tone people use when they have been successfully impressed.

The difficulty was not that Sir Percival was beautiful. The difficulty was that, after one hundred and twenty-nine years of being the creature visitors most wanted to photograph, he had come to believe that beauty and importance were the same thing. He had further concluded that anything which did not command immediate attention was, by definition, less important. This is a conclusion that many beautiful and well-lit creatures eventually reach, especially when no one has ever suggested otherwise.

Sir Percival did not issue orders. He made observations. He mentioned, in passing, that the public seemed to respond more enthusiastically to exhibits that “read well from a distance.” He wondered aloud, during a meeting he had not technically been invited to, whether the museum’s limited resources might be better allocated toward “high-impact” displays. Each comment was delivered with exquisite politeness. Each one resulted, over time, in a little more light for the Hall of Dramatic Poses and a little less light for the quieter corners where creatures like Maria stood waiting to be noticed.

This is how power often works when it does not wish to be recognized as power. It arrives in the form of a suggestion, a re-arrangement, a quiet adjustment to the lighting plan. It moves things three inches at a time and counts on the fact that most people will not notice three inches, and that those who do will be too polite, or too tired, or too small, to say anything about it.

Maria had never been especially interested in being polite when politeness and truth found themselves in disagreement.



SIR PERCIVAL
THE PLACOCK

The confrontation, when it came, took place in the Hall of Dramatic Poses beneath Sir Percival's three carefully positioned spotlights. Maria stood on the polished floor, small and compact and glowing faintly around the neck. Sir Percival looked down at her from his pedestal with the expression of someone who has never been contradicted by anything smaller than himself.

"My dear mongoose," he said in a voice like syrup that has decided it is too good for pancakes, "I am simply thinking of the collection as a whole. We cannot shine a spotlight on every little creature with a backstory and a string of costume jewellery."

"These are real pearls," Maria said.

"The point," Sir Percival continued, fluffing until he resembled a chandelier experiencing strong opinions, "is that the public does not need to know every little secret. Some things are best curated. We cannot have visitors asking inconvenient questions about why certain exhibits receive better lighting than others."

"So you are saying some stories are more important than others."

"I am saying some stories are prettier," Sir Percival replied. "And the pretty stories are the ones people remember. That is not an opinion, darling. That is simply how the world works."

Maria took one step forward. She was very small. He was very large. But she had something he did not: she had been wrong before, and she had survived being wrong, and she had learned the difference between the volume of a voice and the weight of what it says.

"Pretty is lovely," she said. "True is better. Pretty asks to be admired. True asks to be understood. One of those is a gift you give yourself. The other is a gift you give to everyone who comes after you."

She told him, then, about the exhibits that had once stood in the Hall of Dramatic Poses before his arrival. The ones that had been moved, and moved again, and finally sent to the attic, and then quietly removed from the records altogether. She spoke of the creatures whose stories had been judged insufficiently magnificent

and had therefore been allowed to fade. Sir Percival's feathers ruffled, though not in display.

"That is ancient history," he said.

"History," Maria answered, "is what this museum is supposed to be for."



SIR PERCIVAL
THE PLACOCK

At that moment Gladys arrived. She had been making her way down the corridor for the better part of an hour, because when one weighs three hundred pounds and has been carrying a grievance since 1835, one does not hurry. She positioned herself behind Sir Percival's pedestal and leaned. Reginald, from the rafters, provided extremely loud moral support.

"TRUTH!" he shouted.

"JUSTICE!"

"ADEQUATE POSTCARDS FOR ALL SPECIES!"



SIR PERCIVAL
THE PEACOCK



The pearls blazed. Maria angled them so that every photon from Sir Percival's three spotlights was caught and scattered across the hall in a thousand sharp, dancing points of light. The reflected light played across Sir Percival's own tail feathers, and for the first time in more than a century those feathers appeared to shimmer with something that was not quite certainty.

A peacock standing alone in a room full of light is still just a bird. A museum full of stories—every story, not only the loudest ones—is something else entirely.

Sir Percival looked at the light. He looked at Maria. He looked at Gladys, who had not moved and showed no intention of moving. For the first time in a very long while, he had nothing to say.

When it was over, he had retreated to his corner of the hall. Not defeated, exactly. Something more complicated. He had begun, in a small and private way, to wonder whether there might be a difference between being looked at and being seen.



By the time the first grey light of Wednesday crept through the high windows, Maria's case stood once again in its proper position. A new plaque had appeared during the night. It read, in small, precise letters:

Maria Marcia Carlotta Gonzales-Garcia

*Strategically Preserved Mongoose of Mystery
and Excellent Posture*

“Every story deserves good lighting.”



MAGGICHIHAL GAKKETA
GONTIAI FRASCA

The first visitor of the day was a small girl with very serious eyes and a notebook. She stood in front of the case for a long time. She did not say “Aww.” She did not tap the glass. She simply looked—the slow, careful kind of looking that most people forget how to do somewhere between childhood and the first time they are told to be reasonable.

Then she wrote something in her notebook and walked away.

The security guard, passing with his newly acquired pretzels, glanced at the case and could have sworn the pearls were glowing. But that was impossible.

Wasn’t it?



If you should ever find yourself in a museum, and if you should notice that a certain exhibit has been moved three inches to the left, or that the light no longer falls quite where it used to, you may wish to consider who decided that three inches was the correct distance. You may also wish to ask, politely but with excellent posture, whether the stories that have been moved are the ones that were truly less important, or simply the ones that made someone uncomfortable by continuing to exist.

Maria Marcia Carlotta Gonzales-Garcia approves of such questions. She is still watching. Her pearls, as always, are keeping their own counsel. And somewhere in the museum, in a corner that has recently been returned to its proper light, a small, strategically preserved mongoose is waiting for the next person who knows how to look.

The End

(Or at least, that is the version recorded in the official ledgers. Other versions may exist in the places where the dust has not yet been told what it is allowed to remember.)

A Note from Maria, for the Especially Curious

If a grown-up ever tells you “That’s just how things are,” you have full permission to ask who decided how things are, and whether they moved anything three inches while no one was watching. If they tell you that some stories are simply more important than others, you may ask: more important to whom, and what happened to the stories they decided were not?

These questions are small tools. They do not require loud voices or impressive feathers. They require only that you ask them honestly, stubbornly, and while maintaining excellent posture. Used regularly, they have been known to shift entire institutions by approximately three inches at a time.

Maria is watching.
She approves this message.