A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings

A Tale for Children

On a windy day of rain, they killed a very old man inside the house. He had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were the same.

The grey thing and the sands of the beach, which on March nights glimmered like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish. The light was so weak at noon that it was hard for him to see where he was going and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up.
few teeth in his mouth, and his pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather had taken away any sense of grandeur he might have had. His huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked, were forever entangled in the mud. They looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Eliseneda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar. Then they dared speak to him, and he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor’s voice. That was how they skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. And yet, they called in a neighbor woman who knew everything about life and death to see him, and all she needed was one look to show them their mistake.

“He’s an angel,” she told them. “He must have been coming for the child, but the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down.”

On the following day everyone knew that a flesh-and-blood angel was held captive in Pelayo’s house. Against the judgment of the wise neighbor woman, for whom angels in those times were the fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy, they did not have the heart to club him to death. Pelayo watched over him all afternoon from the kitchen, armed with his bailiff’s club, and before going to bed he dragged him out of the mud and locked him up with the hens in the wire chicken coop. In the middle of the night, when the rain stopped, Pelayo and Eliseneda were still killing crabs. A short time afterward the child woke up without a fever and with a desire to eat. Then they felt magnanimous and decided to put the angel on a raft with fresh water and provisions for three days and leave him to his fate on the high seas. But when they went out into the courtyard with the first light of dawn, they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel, without the slightest reverence, tossing him things to eat through the openings in the wire as if he weren’t a supernatural creature but a circus animal.

Father Gonzaga arrived before seven o’clock, alarmed at the strange news. By that time onlookers less frivolous than those at dawn had already arrived and they were making all kinds of conjectures concerning the captive’s future. The simplest among them thought that he should be named mayor of the world. Others of sterner mind felt that he should be promoted to the rank of five-star general in order to win all wars. Some visionaries hoped that he could be put to study in order to implant on earth a race of winged wise men who could take charge of the universe. But Father Gonzaga, before becoming a priest, had been a robust woodcutter. Standing by the wire, he reviewed his catechism in an instant and asked them to open the door so that he could take a close look at that pitiful man who looked more like a huge decrepit hen among the fascinated chickens. He was lying in a corner drying his open wings in the sunlight among the fruit peels and breakfast leftovers that the early risers had thrown him. Alien to the impertinences of the world, he only lifted his antiquarian eyes and murmured something in his dialect when Father Gonzaga went into the chicken coop and said good morning to him in Latin. The parish priest had his first suspicion of an impostor when he saw that he did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers. Then he noticed that seen close up he was much too human: he had an unbearable smell of the outdoors, the back side of his wings was strewn with parasites and his main feathers had been mistreated by terrestrial winds, and nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels. Then he came out of the chicken coop and in a brief sermon warned the curious
against the risks of being ingenuous. He reminded them that
the devil had the bad habit of making use of carnival tricks in
order to confuse the unwary. He argued that if wings were not
the essential element in determining the difference between
hawk and an airplane, they were even less so in the recognition
of angels. Nevertheless, he promised to write a letter to his
bishop so that the latter would write to his primate so that the
latter would write to the Supreme Pontiff in order to get the
final verdict from the highest courts.

His prudence fell on sterile hearts. The news of the captive
angel spread with such rapidity that after a few hours the cour-
tyard had the bustle of a marketplace and they had to call in
troops with fixed bayonets to disperse the mob that was about
to knock the house down. Elisenda, her spine all twisted from
sweeping up so much marketplace trash, then got the idea of
fencing in the yard and charging five cents admission to see the
angel.

The curious came from far away. A traveling carnival arrived
with a flying acrobat who buzzed over the crowd several times,
but no one paid any attention to him because his wings were
not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bat. The
most unfortunate invalids on earth came in search of health: a
poor woman who since childhood had been counting her heart-
beats and had run out of numbers; a Portuguese man who
couldn’t sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him; a
sleepwalker who got up at night to undo the things he had done
while awake; and many others with less serious ailments. In the
midst of that shipwreck disorder that made the earth tremble,
Pelayo and Elisenda were happy with fatigue, for in less than a
week they had crammed their rooms with money and the line
of pilgrims waiting their turn to enter still reached beyond the
horizon.

The angel was the only one who took no part in his own
act. He spent his time trying to get comfortable in his borrowed
nest, befuddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacra-
mental candles that had been placed along the wire. At first they
tried to make him eat some mothballs, which, according to the
wisdom of the wise neighbor woman, were the food prescribed
for angels. But he turned them down, just as he turned down
the papal luncheons that the penitents brought him, and they never
found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he
was an old man that in the end he ate nothing but eggplant
mush. His only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience. Espe-
cially during the first days, when the hens pecked at him, search-
foring for the stellar parasites that proliferated in his wings, and the
cripples pulled out feathers to touch their defective parts with,
and even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get
him to rise so they could see him standing. The only time they
succeeded in arousing him was when they burned his side with
an iron for branding steers, for he had been motionless for so
many hours that they thought he was dead. He awoke with a
start, ranting in his hermetic language and with tears in his eyes,
and he flapped his wings a couple of times, which brought on a
whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust and a gale of panic
that did not seem to be of this world. Although many thought
that his reaction had been one not of rage but of pain, from then
on they were careful not to annoy him, because the majority
understood that his passivity was not that of a hero taking his
ease but that of a cataclysium in repose.

Father Gonzaga held back the crowd’s frivolity with formu-
las of maidservant inspiration while awaiting the arrival of a final
judgment on the nature of the captive. But the mail from Rome
showed no sense of urgency. They spent their time finding out
if the prisoner had a navel, if his dialect had any connection with
Aramaic, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin, or whether he wasn’t just a Norwegian with wings. Those meager letters might have come and gone until the end of time if a providential event had not put an end to the priest’s tribulations.

It so happened that during those days, among so many other carnival attractions, there arrived in town the traveling show of the woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents. The admission to see her was not only less than the admission to see the angel, but people were permitted to ask her all manner of questions about her absurd state and to examine her up and down so that no one would ever doubt the truth of her horror. She was a frightful tarantula the size of a ram and with the head of a sad maiden. What was most heartrending, however, was not her outlandish shape but the sincere affliction with which she recounted the details of her misfortune. While still practically a child she had sneaked out of her parents’ house to go to a dance, and while she was coming back through the woods after having danced all night without permission, a fearful thunderclap rent the sky in two and through the crack came the lightning-bolt of brimstone that changed her into a spider. Her only nourishment came from the meatballs that charitable souls chose to toss into her mouth. A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals. Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn’t recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn’t get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. Those consolation miracles, which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel’s reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely. That was how Father Gonzaga was cured forever of his insomnia and Pelayo’s courtyard went back to being as empty as during the time it had rained for three days and crabs walked through his bedrooms.

The owners of the house had no reason to lament. With the money they saved they built a two-story mansion with balconies and gardens and high netting so that crabs wouldn’t get in during the winter, and with iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn’t get in. Pelayo also set up a rabbit warren close to town and gave up his job as bailiff for good, and Elisenda bought some satin pumps with high heels and many dresses of iridescent silk, the kind worn on Sunday by the most desirable women in those times. The chicken coop was the only thing that didn’t receive any attention. If they washed it down with creolin and burned tears of myrrh inside it every so often, it was not in homage to the angel but to drive away the dungheap stench that still hung everywhere like a ghost and was turning the new house into an old one. At first, when the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the smell, and before the child got his second teeth he’d gone inside the chicken coop to play, where the wires were falling apart. The angel was no less standoffish with him than with other mortals, but he tolerated the most ingenious infamies with the patience of a dog who had no illusions. They both came down with chicken pox at the same time. The doctor who took care of the child couldn’t resist the temptation to listen to the angel’s heart, and he found so much whistling in the heart and so many sounds in his kidneys that it seemed impossible for him to be alive. What surprised him most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human
organism that he couldn’t understand why other men didn’t have them too.

When the child began school it had been some time since
the sun and rain had caused the collapse of the chicken coop.
The angel went dragging himself about here and there like a
stray dying man. They would drive him out of the bedroom
with a broom and a moment later find him in the kitchen. He
seemed to be in so many places at the same time that they grew
to think that he’d been duplicated, that he was reproducing him-
self all through the house, and the exasperated and unhinged
Elisenda shouted that it was awful living in that hell full of
angels. He could scarcely eat and his antiquarian eyes had also
become so foggy that he went about bumping into posts. All he
had left were the bare cannuae of his last feathers. Pelayo threw
a blanket over him and extended him the charity of letting him
sleep in the shed, and only then did they notice that he had a
temperature at night, and was delirious with the tongue twisters
of an old Norwegian. That was one of the few times they
came alarmed, for they thought he was going to die and not
even the wise neighbor woman had been able to tell them what
to do with dead angels.

And yet he not only survived his worst winter, but seemed
improved with the first sunny days. He remained motionless for
several days in the farthest corner of the courtyard, where no
one would see him, and at the beginning of December some
large, stiff feathers began to grow on his wings, the feathers
of a scarecrow, which looked more like another misfortune of
decrepitude. But he must have known the reason for those
changes, for he was quite careful that no one should notice
them, that no one should hear the sea chanteys that he some-
times sang under the stars. One morning Elisenda was cutting
some bunches of onions for lunch when a wind that seemed to