

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
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On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his **drenched** courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the baby had a fever all night and they thought it was due to the terrible smell. The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash-gray thing and the sands of the beach, which on March nights shone like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish.

The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away the crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving in 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. Despite trying very hard, he couldn't get up, because he was stopped by his enormous wings.

Frightened, Pelayo ran to get Elisenda, his wife, who was putting cool towels on the sick child, and he took her to the rear of the courtyard. They both looked at the old man in silence. He was dressed like a beggar. There were only a few hairs left on his bald skull and very few teeth in his mouth, and the fact that he looked like a drenched great-grandfather took away any sense of majesty he might have had. His huge wings, like those of a **buzzard** dirty and half-plucked, were hopelessly stuck in the mud.

Pelayo and Elisenda looked at him long and close. Then they dared speak to him, and he answered in an incomprehensible language with a strong sailor's voice. That was how they skipped over the strangeness of the wings and concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. And yet, when they called in a neighbor woman who knew everything about life and death to see him, she just needed to look at him to realize their mistake.

“He's an angel,” she told them. “He must have been coming for your baby. But the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down.”

The next day, everyone in the town knew that a real-life angel was prisoner in Pelayo's house. Against the advice of the wise neighbor woman, for whom angels were like fugitives from some happenings in heaven, they decided not to kill him then and there. Pelayo watched over the old man all afternoon from the kitchen, armed with a club, and before going to bed he dragged him out of the mud and locked him up with the hens in the chicken coop.

In the middle of the night, when the rain stopped, Pelayo and Elisenda were still killing crabs. A short time afterward the child woke up, hungry and without a fever. For a moment, they felt **magnanimous** and decided to put the angel on a raft with fresh water and food for three days and push him out to sea. But when they went out into the courtyard at dawn, they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel,

without the slightest respect, tossing him things to eat through the openings in the wire as if he were a circus animal.

Father Gonzaga, the priest, arrived before seven o'clock, alarmed at the strange news. By that time, other spectators had already arrived and they were making all kinds of guesses concerning the captive's future. A few thought that he should be named mayor of the world. Others felt that he should be promoted to the rank of five-star general in order to win all wars.

But Father Gonzaga, before becoming a priest, had been a carpenter.

Standing by the wire, he asked them to open the door so that he could take a close look at that pitiful man who looked like a huge **decrepit** hen among the fascinated chickens. He was lying in the corner drying his open wings in the sunlight among the fruit peels and breakfast leftovers that the early risers had thrown him. He only lifted his ancient eyes and murmured something in his language when Father Gonzaga went into the chicken coop and said good morning to him in Latin.

The priest then suspected that the old man was not an angel at all. He did not understand Latin, the language of God, or know how to greet a priest. Then he noticed that seen close up he was much too human: he had a disgusting smell of the outdoors, the back side of his wings was strewn with parasites, and his main feathers had been ruined by wind. Nothing about him measured up to the dignity of angels.

Then Father Gonzaga came out of the chicken coop and in a brief sermon warned the curious against the risks of being gullible. He reminded them that the devil had the bad habit of making use of carnival tricks in order to confuse them. He argued that both hawks and airplanes had wings: surely, the old man's wings did not automatically make him an angel. Nevertheless, he promised to write a letter to his bishop in order to get the final **verdict** from the higher authorities.

His carefulness fell on cold hearts. The news of the captive angel spread with such speed that after a few hours the courtyard had the busyness of a marketplace and they had to call in the military 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 like those of the angel. Those who had disfigurements and diseases came in search of health: a poor woman who since childhood has been counting her heartbeats 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 problems. Pelayo and Elisenda were happy with tiredness, 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, confused by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and **sacramental** 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 food that the pilgrims 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 ate nothing but eggplant mush.

His only supernatural characteristic seemed to be patience. Especially during the first days, when the hens pecked at him, searching for the parasites that proliferated in his wings, and even the kindest threw stones at him, trying to get him to stand up so they could see his whole body. The only time they succeeded in getting a reaction was when they burned his side with an iron for **branding** cows, for he had been motionless for so many hours that they thought he was dead. He awoke with a start, ranting in his odd 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 storm of panic that did not seem to be of this world. Although many thought that his reaction had not been one of rage but of pain, from then on they were careful not to annoy him, because most understood that his calmness did not signal contentment but a coming storm.

Father Gonzaga awaited the arrival of a final judgment on the nature of the

captive. But the mail from the Pope showed no sense of urgency. The crowd spent its time finding out if the prisoner had a bellybutton, if his language had any connection with those in the Bible, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin, or whether he wasn't just a Norwegian with wings. Those letters might have come and gone until the end of time if an **opportune** event had not put an end to the priest's suffering.

Those days, among so many other carnival attractions, there arrived in the town the traveling show of the woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents. The price to see her was not only less than that to see the angel, but people were allowed to ask her all sorts of questions and to examine her up and down so that no one would ever doubt the truth of her story. She was a **frightful** tarantula the size of a ram and with a human head. What was most distressing, however, was not her ridiculous shape but the sincere emotion with which she told the details of her misfortune.

While still a child she had sneaked out of her parents' house to go to a dance. While she was coming back through the woods after having danced all night without permission, a thunderclap tore the sky in two and through the crack came the lightning bolt of sulphur that changed her into a spider. Her only food came from the meatballs that charitable souls chose to toss into her mouth. A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth, was bound to be more popular than that of an angel who didn't even talk or look at mortals.

Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain confusion, 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 miracles, which were more like mocking, 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 the bedrooms.

The owners of the house had no reason to feel bad. 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 farm close to town and gave up his job as a prison guard for good, and Elisenda bought some satin boots with high heels and many dresses of bright 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 and burned incense inside it every so often, it was not out of respect to the angel but to drive away the smell 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 adult teeth he'd gone inside the chicken coop to play, where the wires were falling apart.

The angel was just as **standoffish** with him as with the other humans, but he tolerated the child's curiosity with the patience of a dog. They both came down with the chicken pox at the same time. The doctor who took care of the child couldn't resist listening to the angel's heart, and he heard 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, the sun and rain had since caused the collapse of the chicken coop. The angel dragged 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 copied, that he was reproducing himself all through the house, and the exhausted Elisenda shouted that it was awful living in that hell full of angels.

He could barely eat and his eyes had also become so foggy that he kept bumping into walls. All he had left were the bare remnants of his last feathers. Pelayo threw a blanket over him and let him sleep in the shed, and only then did they notice that he had a fever at night and was delirious with the tongue twisters of an old Norwegian. That was one of the few times they became worried, 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. 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 shanties** that he sometimes sang under the stars.

One morning Elisenda was cutting some bunches of onions for lunch when a wind that seemed to come from the high seas blew into the kitchen. Then she went to the window and caught the angel in his first attempts at flight. They were so clumsy that his fingernails cut a ditch in the vegetable patch and he was on the point of knocking the shed down with the awkward flapping that couldn't get a grip on the air. But he did manage to gain altitude.

Elisenda let out a sigh of relief, for herself and for him, when she watched him pass over the last houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of an old bird-of-prey. She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.