

## Beatriz Guido (Argentina)

Excerpt from

### THE HOUSE OF THE ANGEL

The day of my sisters' first ball I was happy just to watch from my hiding place behind the marble balusters of the second floor.

I can still see them, going down the stairs with strings of pearls across their foreheads, wearing dropped-waist dresses and short underskirts, their lips lightly and surreptitiously painted with colored paper. I was happy not to be a part of the ebb and flow of people that had invaded our gardens and salons, dancing in such a ridiculous fashion, shuffling their feet and clapping hands, as if they were playing pattycake.

I remember feeling that from that evening on my sisters began to grow ever more distant and remote, as if someone had torn them from my side forever. And I was horrified to think that one day I too would dance the Charleston in the arms of one of those men dressed in black, like undertakers or chimneysweeps. "How much better it would be," I thought, "if they wore light colors: sky blues, pinks, like the gentlemen in that film *Indiscreet Wives*."

I sensed that someday I too would be a part of that world that I found myself spying upon from behind the balusters on the second floor.

"I have seen enough," I said to myself, and went up to the room where we kept the trunks. From one of them I pulled out the puppets that I had forgotten at the bottom. They were puppets made of rags and sticks.

I felt that all my gestures that evening were false: I held the puppets against my chest, but I couldn't think of them as being anything but rag and sawdust, and I realized that there was now some-

thing more powerful and enticing that no longer allowed me to bring them to life.

Meanwhile my sisters' ball continued. I wanted to resume my spying on what was transpiring in our salons. For the first time in my life I was drawn to the world of the grown-ups. Yes, I sensed the end of my childhood. And the saddest thing of all was feeling this sense of estrangement from my childhood while I was holding the puppets against my chest. The puppets had been the grand passion of my early years.

So much so that my father himself once took me to see the Trilusa Puppets when they came to Buenos Aires.

Nana dressed me in a white eyelet dress with pink ribbons which I wore over several starched petticoats. We sat, my father and I, behind the rails, on the bleachers. He, giving himself presidential airs, waved to his political cronies as we walked past the Hidalgo Street Committee headquarters. I was thinking of all the things I would have to remember once I was alone in my room that night.

My puppets, as I said, were hand puppets, they had no strings. I used them to dramatize the plots of the pulp romances and dime-store novels I stole from my sisters. They didn't mind, as long as I dramatized stories they had read.

They would sit on the benches in the weapons' room, with Nana as a member of the audience. I had built my little theater in a niche. The best of my dramatizations, one which made my sisters cry disconsolately, was my version of Jorge Isaacs' *María*.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes I had to interrupt my representations because we were overcome by fits of weeping, especially during the scene in which the dying María said farewell to Efrain.

One day Julieta said to me:

"If you do *María* again, I'm not coming."

The puppet that played the role of María was very beautiful. I had made it to resemble me, with hair from my own braids and

eyes the same color as mine. Efrain looked like Julián.

I never invited Vicenta to these dramatizations. Once I started going to the movies, I began to dramatize the plots of the films I had seen, leaving out the love scenes. I didn't dare have the puppets kiss. Once Nana cried, at the end of *Yesterday's Path*:

"Let's have a kiss! Let's have a kiss!"

I couldn't do it. The puppet playing the leading lady was the same one that played the role of María.

But now that evening awaited me. I started to glide through the salons to the imaginary tune of the "Blue Waltz."

It was played by an imaginary orchestra hidden in the terrace that led to the garden. How beautiful were the ivories and opalines in the glass cabinets! I could see myself in the crystal, in the silver goblets, in the porcelains. I became a lady whose image was reflected infinitely on the draperies, on the miniatures, on the ceiling. I saw myself as a woman whose beauty could stop the duel that was to take place at dawn.

I came to see myself, that early evening, as the cause of the duel: two men were fighting for me.

I didn't dare enter the dining room, the setting for the eagerly awaited dinner; the events of that night were to surpass all my daydreams. Suddenly I heard voices arguing. I climbed the stairs and stopped before my parents' bedroom door. For a moment I feared that my mother would have her way. But in the middle of the discussion my father started to hum "Melenita de oro" as she cried dejectedly. So there was no doubt about it: the duel would take place the following morning at dawn, at four o'clock, as I had heard it would. They resumed their argument in whispers, like earlier that morning: but it grew louder and louder until I could hear my mother laughing and crying at the same time.

"This time I will not forgive you."

"The girls will come down to dinner."

"I will never allow that . . ."

"I command you to send them down. Don't think for a moment that I will stand by as you turn them into prudes like your-

<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century novel considered a masterpiece of Romantic literature in Latin America.

self. You have done them enough harm already. Are they or are they not my daughters?"

"Never!" my mother insisted.

The argument was so bitter and painful that I started to fear for my mother.

"There are all types of women in your family," he said after a long silence, "from nuns to the other kind . . . Don't try to tell me that María Celia is not having enough fun in Paris for the three of you?"

"And which one did you marry?" my mother said indignantly.

"Neither one of them, unfortunately," he replied, "a pity . . . especially since María José is so beautiful—and has had so many years of abstinence!"

"That's sacrilege!" answered my mother. "You will be damned to hell . . . After this evening . . ."

"No, don't say that word . . . it's a sin. Remember: what God joins on this Earth man can't untie, or something like that. Isn't that the way it is? Why don't you ask Nana, your prime minister? That stupid . . . old . . . ignorant woman."

"You will be damned to hell," my mother continued to scream. "I must consult with Celina! I want a separation! There must be a way, there must be something, something that can be done!"

I thought of my mother and my Aunt Celina—now Sister María José.

Instinctively, I recalled that November night in school.

Our Aunt Celina—Sister María José—would tuck us in at night and give us her blessing, making the sign of the cross on our foreheads with her thumb.

"Sleep in peace, Ana, I am by your side," she used to say to me. "You can always call me if you need me; call me if you're ever afraid at night."

I slept peacefully, thinking that Celina watched over my sleep.

That November night I woke up in a panic; I felt I was choking in the closed room. Everyone else was asleep; I jumped out of bed and peered into the corridor. The moon was traveling through a thick layer of fog and humidity, illuminating the well in the patio like a beam of light; the clock was striking midnight, more slowly than usual. Suddenly I heard gentle and subdued laughter coming from the terrace. I was afraid. It sounded like childish laughter coming from beyond the grave, as if from a children's cemetery. Nonetheless, an overwhelming curiosity made me climb the steep and winding staircase that led to the terrace.

I was so horrified by what I saw that I thought I would faint. The first one I recognized was my Aunt Celina. She was whirling in the center of a ring of women, her shaved head uncovered, and wearing a flowing nightgown, like the others. Then I began to recognize them, one by one. They were spinning like madwomen despite the heat, the humidity, and the moonlight which made the atmosphere seem heavier. Not all of them had shaved heads. One of them—I didn't recognize her—was combing her hair and peering daringly into the solitary street. Another, the youngest of them all, was pouring a transparent liquid onto very thin and delicate wine glasses. I later learned that it was anisette.

The ones dancing in the ring would stop once in a while to drink from exquisite crystal glasses resting on a silver filigree tray.

Sometimes I think that that night never happened and that my Aunt Celina was not among the dancers. However, as I was going down the stairs my nightgown got caught on the rail. I was afraid I would not be able to tear myself away and they would catch me there on their way down.

That night I felt so sad and forsaken that I awakened Julieta; I laid by her side, but it was so hot that I placed my pillow on the floor by her bed and went to sleep. At dawn the first thing I did was to return to the terrace; I expected to find them sprawled on the floor.

The terrace was dark; the flagstones still retained the heat from the previous day, and the silence made the night feel warmer. They called us to Mass. I went down the stairs stealthily and entered the church. They were all there. None of them took communion; their heads were bowed so low that their foreheads touched the prie-dieu. Every once in a while the silence was broken by a muffled and gleeful hiccup.

"You will be damned," my mother continued to scream.

I didn't want to listen any longer and walked slowly down the stairs to my room.

"Oh! If only I had a red dress," I thought, "and a feathered hat like that of my mother's sister, the one who owns a fashion house in Paris. Maybe that would somehow help fulfill my mother's prayers. Everything would be like in the photographs of *La ilustración* or *Cosmopolitán*: two men in white shirts and black pants brandishing their swords; a carriage in the distance and in it a lady, crying behind a black veil, like Mary Astor in *The Son of Zorro*."

I locked myself in my room. The moon shone on the angel's terrace. The curtain would soon rise on the last act of the day. As I looked out on the terrace I remembered that the angel was missing its nose. The anarchists had broken it off with a stone on that First of May.

They were coming down Cuba Street from the north, shuffling their feet to the beat of the "Internationale." The women carried their children in their arms, the men clutched hammers and sickles. The shuffling of their feet resounded in the walls of the house, making it shake as if its foundations were giving way.

"The Antichrist," my mother screamed, kneeling on her prie-dieu.

We stood behind the curtains, very still, so as not to be seen.

"They are furious because of the execution of Zacco and Vanzetti," they said.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Innocents," they told me.

"Tomorrow we will have to lower the blinds and close the shutters. It's going to be a terrible First of May," they replied.

"Who are they?" I asked again.

"Revolutionaries, sinners."

Suddenly they stopped singing as they came to a halt in front of our house. My mother's prayers intensified. The only sound to be heard was the trembling of the rosary beads in her hands.

"We will have to call the police," Nana said, grabbing us abruptly by the arm.

After a few minutes of silence, amid laughter and blasphemies, they climbed over the gate onto the grounds and started to throw stones at the terrace on the lower floor.

It took me a few minutes to realize that they were throwing rocks at the stone angel. I ran in despair to my room but my father stopped me just as I was opening the window.

"You're crazy," he said, holding me against his chest. "They'll go away, don't worry about the angel," he added.

And so they did. The laughter turned into cries and lamentations. The shuffling of their feet resumed and they went away.

I went out on the terrace. The angel had lost its nose and some of its fingers. It was covered with mud and a red liquid; I thought it was blood. I brought a pail of water and, perched on a ladder, started to wash it off. I really thought that it was bleeding; I hadn't seen the tomatoes on the ground.

Nobody paid me any attention when I told them that the angel had lost its nose; they were completely engrossed in the events of the following day.

My father was busy making arrangements for the defense of the Obligado Street Committee headquarters and my mother was worried about the Victoria's Committee.

"It's just like in Mexico!" they said.

"Sinners . . ."

"The Antichrist, the end of the world!"

I looked at myself in the mirror. There was no doubt about it—I could never be the lady in the carriage. I took out my diary and wrote incoherently.

“Tomorrow at dawn there will be a duel on the grounds of our house. It’s eight o’clock in the evening. I am afraid. Julieta will soon come in to tell me that Pablo Aguirre has arrived. I await him; I have reviewed my past life, day by day. I await him; I am no longer afraid. I know this will be the most important night of my life. I am so excited about there being a duel in the house, though I know it is a sin. I will have to go to confession . . . I must think only of him. Perhaps tomorrow he will be dead; but tonight he will dine with us. I will soon go down to dinner.

“I wished I looked like my mother’s sister, the one who lives in Paris; I would like to dress like her: short underskirts, lips slightly colored, strings of pearls on my forehead, like some women I once saw escaping from a house on fire.

“Maybe if I dressed like that to go down to dinner it would be easy for Pablo Aguirre to see that I have thought about him all day. Otherwise, he will think that I’m nothing but a child who doesn’t even know what a duel is. Of course, if I went down dressed like that my mother wouldn’t allow me to sit at the table for an instant. I don’t think that anything can happen to me while I wear clothes like these (Isabel was so right!); there is nevertheless a voice that keeps on repeating to me: this is the most important day of your life.

“Oh! if only he would address just one word to me during dinner . . . I don’t know, I can’t think any more, I am very tired, as tired as if I had spent the day screaming the confession of my sins in the Plaza de las Barrancas, like the Salvation Army people.”

I went down to the garden. Sitting on the balcony that opened to the grounds, the one from which you can see Arcos Street, I awaited the arrival of the afternoon papers. I didn’t dare to buy *Crítica*—which was forbidden in the house—so I timidly asked for *La Razón*. Pablo Aguirre’s photograph was on the front page.

I folded the paper as if I had been caught by Pablo Aguirre himself. And I realized that for the first time in my life I was coming face to face with my own dreams. Pablo Aguirre’s photograph in that afternoon paper showed him with the collar of his overcoat turned up, his arms folded, his hair tousled. I thought someone had printed that photograph in the newspaper on purpose to mock me. The caption underneath it read: “This photograph of Pablo Aguirre was taken at the Cemetery of La Recoleta, the day of the burial of his colleague Peñalosa.” I held the newspaper tightly against my chest. I don’t know what fiendish enticement I thought I saw in those small almond-shaped eyes. Nevertheless, I thought that never again would I be alone; I had chosen a face.

“What are you doing?” Julieta asked, suddenly appearing by my side. “What have you got there?”

How could I explain to Julieta that it wasn’t a mere newspaper I was holding against my chest . . . Nonetheless I replied:

“The paper,” I said, and tried to run away.

But she caught me, and, as she tore the paper from my hands, she saw the photograph and said:

“What a mug!”

That’s how she described the photograph, in such a vulgar and grotesque way.

I took the paper from her and swore never to speak to her again; at least not for the remainder of the day.

I locked myself in my room. I cut the photograph out and pasted it with yellowish glue to a page of my diary. Beneath it I copied the following poem, skipping the verses that didn’t interest me:

Haughtily he walks by, look at that man of mine.

Don’t look at his mouth, it has the power to burn

Don't look into his eyes, they can freeze you to death.  
 When he walks through the plains the river bed trembles,  
 When he walks through the forest shadows become clear-  
 ings,  
 When he walks past them, haughty, firing his gun in jest,  
 The wild beasts huddle under his somber gaze.

He loves a *woman*, he's master of his fate  
 And one Spring day death will catch him unaware  
 crowned with a wreath of vine amid the fruits of the earth.  
 But my *loving* hand, as it rips his finery,  
 rewards his firm courage with a sprout of wings.



Julietta returned to get me. I knew that Julieta's entrance  
 closed a chapter of my life forever, that I could no longer halt the  
 oncoming events.

"He's arrived," she said. "He's in the library; Papa directed  
 us to go downstairs immediately. Why did you hide? I didn't mean  
 to take the paper away from you."

Isabel joined us. I let them go down ahead of me. Our  
 father was at the foot of the stairs; behind him was Aguirre.

"My elder daughters," he said: "Julietta, Isabel—Pablo  
 Aguirre, a brave man," he added in a very pompous tone of voice,  
 "and this is Ana, the youngest."

I raised my eyes to his tie. I didn't have the courage to look  
 further up. My eyes stopped at his chest, as if there had been a big  
 circle drawn around his heart: the target for the duel.

"You'll have to excuse my wife, she will not dine with us."  
 my father said.

But I don't know what strange hope that her presence might  
 forestall events made her come down to the dining room . . .

"I'm glad . . ." whispered my father.

"My wife . . . , Aguirre . . . , a brave man," once again  
 changing the tone of his voice.

He barely nodded his head in greeting. They placed him  
 next to my mother, across the table from me.

"There'll be no reconciliations, I have already sent the sec-  
 onds away," my father said, daring my mother with his eyes.  
 "Doctor Peralta will come at three."

Aguirre seemed not to be listening. He was staring through  
 me as if he couldn't see me.

"You can stand guard by the weapons, and there's the guest  
 room if you want to rest. It doesn't make any sense for you to return  
 to town."

"I think I will rest. My brothers and Alberto Laplacette  
 will be here at two," he replied.

"Don't let that business about the two deaths Esquivel has  
 been responsible for bother you. It's very difficult to die in a duel . .  
 . It's all a myth!"

I could watch him at my leisure during dinner. When he  
 wasn't looking at me, my eyes lingered on his profile and on the tri-  
 angular cut of his beard. His high collar touched the roots of his  
 hair on the nape of his neck. When he wrinkled his brow the lock  
 on his forehead fluttered.

I didn't dare raise my eyes. When I felt his eyes fixed on  
 mine, I looked down. Then I could only see his nervous hands tear-  
 ing breadcrumbs apart.

My father's voice reached me as if from a dream.

"There'll be no reconciliations," my father continued.

"Death doesn't frighten me," Aguirre answered. "It is  
 enough for me to know that others are following my example and  
 that accusations can no longer be made with impunity. A country  
 immersed in shadows abandoned to the derision of those charla-  
 tans," he said incoherently without taking his eyes from me.

I knew then that this was the first person that spoke only to  
 me. I don't know how I managed to remain seated at the table in  
 front of him. Without having to invent time. There, before me, was

a man with a triangular face and small almond-shaped eyes, enveloping me with his voice and his gaze.

My mother asked, "Have you stopped to think that you could be killed?"

My father stared at her.

"In times like these, ma'am, politics is neither an art nor a game. And honor is more important than the thought . . . of death."

"What about your soul? What if you were to kill Esquivel?"  
 "My wife is very sanctimonious, as you can see. I don't know why she turned out that way since there are all types in her family. She's in charge of the girls' education. Of course, it would have been otherwise if they had been boys."

Pablo was not listening. I felt his gaze fixed on mine. I pushed my hair away from my face and smiled at the servant waiting at the table so he could admire my smile. My only fear was that of blushing to the roots of my hair.

How I hated my mother when she said: "The girls may leave the table."

Isabel and Julieta obeyed absentmindedly. I folded my napkin and slowly pulled my chair back; I raised my eyes to his, as he followed my every movement.

"This will be our fifteenth duel; there hasn't been a duel on the grounds in five years," my father continued.

I advanced towards Aguirre; I curtsied slightly without looking at him, and ran out of the room. I reached my bedroom. I undressed. Julieta was already in bed.

"He is young, too young to die," she said, half-asleep.

"Not everyone dies in a duel, some are saved somehow," I replied.

"This one is to the death, I can feel it . . . like Labourdette's . . . , but you were too young then." She knelt down on the floor fingering her rosary beads.

I laid in bed under the ivory-colored mosquito net. I couldn't breathe, I felt I was choking. The bed and the room reeled

dizzily. Only the tulle of the mosquito net remained in place.

"Wouldn't you like to have a dress made of mosquito-net tulle?" I asked Julieta.

"Blessed are thou," she answered, "can't you see that I'm praying? . . . among women; don't interrupt me, I can't stop, and blessed is the . . ."

I knelt on the bed and framed my face with the tulle to make Julieta laugh, but she wouldn't stop praying.

I climbed out of bed from under the tulle and opened the windows. Julieta was mumbling incoherent words between her prayers.

The moonlight etched the profiles of the terrace. In the shadows the angel resembled a bat. I looked out to the park and saw three men come in through the Cuba Street gate. Hidden behind the balusters I heard my father's voice greeting them.

"At last!" he said. "Everything is ready. We will stand guard in the weapons' room."

His voice was drowned by the hooting of an owl. I returned to my room; the shadow of the angel was projected on the terrace window. I think it lulled me to sleep. The sound of the water fountain came through the other window. I barely heard my mother's voice when she opened the door and said, "Pray for him . . . for them," she corrected herself.

Later I heard steps in the guest room. I waited. I carressed the scapulary of Our Lady of Carmen on my chest and jumped out of bed. I opened the door to my room, trying not to awaken Julieta, and glided down the hallway to his room. I knocked. When he didn't answer I told myself that something must have happened to him and opened the door. Aguirre had his back to me, he was looking out on the park. Startled by my entrance, he turned around and approached me with a sure step. As I advanced towards him I opened the collar of my nightgown to take the scapulary out—as if to justify my presence—and standing on tiptoe, I placed it on his neck, pulling it over his head.

"Forgive me," I said, and lied, "my mother sent you this for

your protection.”

“Thank you, thank you very much,” he replied, smiling. I remained nailed to the floor. I couldn’t withdraw. And then it was too late. For an hour I did nothing but defend myself. I couldn’t scream, however. I didn’t even think of screaming. I defended myself desperately, knowing my defeat in advance.

Thus I shortened the time he had left before death.

I rolled on the carpet. I defended myself from behind the solid baroque legs of the bed; I wrapped myself in the brocade bedspreads and waited for him to find me again. When I saw the frames with the yellowed photographs of my family scattered around on the floor and heard Vicenta’s voice definitely lost in the distance, I screamed, as I recalled my mother taking communion the previous morning with us trailing behind. I heard my father’s voice again making the arrangements for the duel. Then I was able to scream without being heard.

It was a cry of pain, of hate and outrage. I got up with difficulty. He remained sprawled on the carpet. I opened and closed the door behind me without looking back. Then I walked slowly to my room and laid in bed to wait.

At four o’clock I heard steps going down the stairs followed by the same steps crushing the dead leaves on the grounds. I clenched my teeth to bolster my wish: his death.

We heard two simultaneous shots . . . Julieta woke up, startled.

“May God protect them,” she said, and I left the room before she could ask me where I was going.

I ran down the stairs like a ghost, as though flying, crossing the park until I reached the duel grounds. I noticed no one around me. I knelt by the body lying on the ground; they had already covered him with a dark cloth. I uncovered the body with one swift stroke only to realize with horror that it was not that of Pablo Aguirre.

My father whispered in my ear, “Have you gone mad? We will speak about this later. And in your nightgown . . .”

Without listening to him I raised my eyes to Aguirre’s. He covered his face with his hands; I don’t know how much hatred he had seen in my eyes.

What happened later is of no importance. Neither were the months that followed that day. Whenever I opened my eyes, during my illness, I could see his tall silhouette leaning against the door frame; he seemed not to dare to come in.

He became inseparable from my father; he was there when my sisters got married, when Nana and my mother died.

But I had lost forever the shadow of the angel on my window, the Plaza de las Barrancas, the park, the gazebo with the wisterias.

I started to inhabit the wasteland that he had opened for me the night of the duel. I would leave my house in the mornings and not return until dusk. I walked through the city, losing myself in the saddest and most remote neighborhoods . . . But every time I turned a corner he was here, waiting for me. I don’t know if he is dead or alive. We could be two ghosts for all I know. We should have died that night; he on the grounds, I on the angel’s terrace.

Now I can go out; they’re waiting for me.