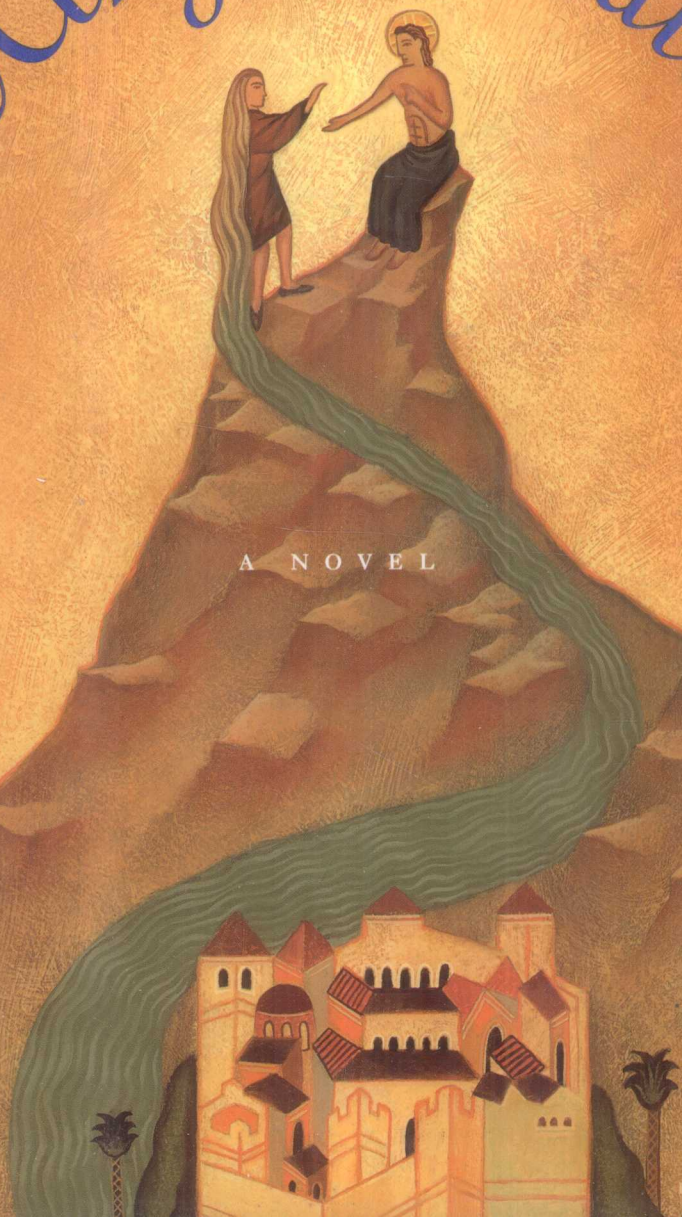


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LAURA RESTREPO

the Angel of Galilea

A NOVEL



DOTY

The
Angel
of Galilea

Laura Restrepo

Translated by Dolores M. Koch



Crown Publishers, Inc. / New York

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Published by Crown Publishers, Inc., 201 East 50th Street, New York, New York 10022. Member of the Crown Publishing Group.

Random House, Inc. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland
www.randomhouse.com

Originally published in Spanish as *Dulce compañía* by Grupo Editorial Norma, in 1995. This English translation was originally published by HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) in 1997.

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Design by Leonard Henderson

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Restrepo, Laura.

[*Dulce compañía*. English]

The angel of Galilea / Laura Restrepo ; translated by Dolores M. Koch.—1st American ed.

I. Koch, Dolores. II. Title.

PQ84I80.28.E7255D8513 1997

863—dc21 98—10704

ISBN 0-609-60326-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First American Edition

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Orifel, Angel of Light

THERE WERE NO WARNING SIGNS OF WHAT WAS ABOUT TO HAPPEN. Or maybe there were, but I was unable to interpret them. In reconstructing the sequence of events, I recall that a few days before it all started, three men raped a crazy woman in the garden in front of my building. It was around then that my neighbor's dog vaulted from a third-story window, landed on the street, and walked away unharmed. And the leper who sells lottery tickets on the corner of 92nd and 15th Streets gave birth to a healthy, beautiful baby. Surely those were signs, among many others, but then again this insane city gives off so many doomsday warnings that no one pays attention anymore. And I live in what is considered a middle-class neighborhood: one can only imagine the number of omens that crop up daily in the shantytowns.

The truth is that this story, with its supernatural echoes, which would so deeply transform my life, began at eight o'clock on a very ordinary Monday morning when, in a lousy

mood, I arrived at the editorial offices of *Somos* magazine, where I worked as a reporter. Feeling certain that my boss was about to give me a particularly loathsome assignment, I'd been dreading this moment all weekend. I was sure he would send me to cover the national beauty pageant that was getting under way in Cartagena. I was younger then, full of energy and ambition, and determined to write about things that mattered, but fate had dealt me a cruel blow, forcing me to earn my living at one of the many popular weekly tabloids.

Of all my assignments at *Somos*, covering the pageant was by far the worst. It was an unnerving task to interview thirty girls with wasp waists and wasp-size brains to match. I also have to admit that their abundant youth and trim figures wounded my pride. Even more painful was having to rhapsodize on Miss Bocayá's Pepsodent smile, Miss Tolima's dubious virginity, and Miss Arauca's preoccupation with poor children. To top it all, the beauty queens tried so hard to project a charming, naive image that they dealt with everyone on a first-name basis, kissing us, swinging their hips, bubbling over with sweetness. They even had a special name for the reporters from *Somos*: "*Sommie*, while you're interviewing me, hold my mirror so I can put on my makeup. Take this down, *Sommie*: My favorite person in the world is Mother Teresa of Calcutta." And there I'd be, standing in front of this splendid five-foot-ten figure, scribbling down streams of nonsense.

No. This year I was going to refuse to cover the pageant, even if it cost me my job. Devouring a bowl of earthworms would be preferable to being called *Sommie* one more time

or doing Miss Cundinamarca the favor of fetching the earrings she left in the dining room. So I entered the editor's office cursing under my breath; unfortunately, I knew only too well that it would be impossible to find another steady job and, therefore, to resign was out of the question.

At the far side of the room I spotted the familiar bottle-green corduroy jacket, and I thought, now the jacket will turn around to reveal, turkey neck and all, none other than my boss who, without greeting me, will bark out orders to pack for Cartagena—and off goes Sommie again, having to swallow her worms whole. The jacket turned around, and the turkey looked at me, but contrary to my expectations, he condescended to wish me good morning, and not a word about Cartagena. Instead he demanded something else, which I did not like any better.

"Get out to the Galilea district right away. An angel's been sighted."

"What angel?"

"Whatever. I need a piece on angels."

Now Colombia happens to be the country in the world with the most miracles per square foot. All virgins descend from Heaven, all Christs shed tears, invisible surgeons perform appendectomies on the faithful, and soothsayers predict winning lottery numbers. This is all routine: we maintain a direct line with the other world, and can only survive as a nation with a daily megadose of superstition. We have always enjoyed an international monopoly on irrational and paranormal events. And yet the editor in chief wanted a piece on angel sightings now—not a month earlier or a

month later—merely because the topic was no longer hot in the United States.

A few months ago, the end-of-millennium and New Age winds had stirred a veritable angelic frenzy in the States. Hundreds of people had claimed to have had contact with one angel or another. Eminent scientists attested to their presence, and even the first lady, moved by the general enthusiasm, sported a brooch of cherub wings on her lapel. As usual, Americans were flogging the topic to the point of exhaustion. Eventually, the first lady dropped her wings and returned to her more classic jewelry, the scientists came back to earth, and the T-shirts printed with plump little Raphaelite angels were put on sale at half price. That signaled that it was now our turn, here in Colombia. We pick up what is already passé in Miami. Astonishing, isn't it, that we journalists spend most of our time warming up topics already cold in the United States.

Despite everything, I did not complain.

"Why the Galilea district?" I wanted to know.

"There's a woman from Galilea who comes several days a week to wash clothes for one of my wife's aunts. This woman told her about the angel. So, go out there now and get the story however you can, even if you have to make it up. And take photos, plenty of photos. Next week we'll put it on the cover."

"Can you give me a name, or an address? Any concrete details?"

"Nothing, you'll have to figure it out. What the heck do I know? When you see someone with wings, that's your angel."

Galilea. It must be one of the countless neighborhoods in the south of the city, miserable, overcrowded, devastated by gangs of youths. But its name was Galilea, and ever since I was a child, biblical names have had the power to move me. Every night before I went to bed, until I was twelve or thirteen, my grandfather used to read me a passage from the Old Testament or the Gospels. I listened, mesmerized, without understanding much but lulled by the whirl of his *r*'s, which, as an old Belgian, he could never pronounce well in Spanish.

My grandfather would fall asleep halfway through his recitation, and I, entranced, would then repeat fragments from his evocative reading: Samaria, Galilee, Jacob, Rachel, Wedding at Cana, Sea of Tiberias, Mary Magdalene, Esau, Gethsemane, and the whole litany of names, ancient and mysterious, would waft its way through my bedroom in the darkness. Some words were terrifying and presaged destruction, like Mane, Thecel, and Phares, though I still do not know what they mean; others sounded incredibly harsh, like *noli me tangere*, which was what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection.

Even today, biblical names seem like talismans for me. Though I must admit that despite my grandfather's readings, and my own baptism and Christian upbringing, I was not a practicing Christian, perhaps not even a believer. And that is still the case: I must stress this from the outset so that nobody will be thinking, let alone hoping, that this is the story of a religious conversion.

I confess that when my boss said "Galilea," the word at first

meant nothing to me, perhaps because the annoying way he pronounced the word robbed it of its power. And biblical names were usually relegated to our poorest neighborhoods—Belencito, Siloé, Nazaret—so I didn't give it a second thought.

Twenty minutes later I was in a taxi, heading for Galilea. The driver had never even heard of the place and had to radio for directions.

All I knew about angels was a prayer I used to recite as a child:

Sweet Guardian Angel

My heavenly guide

Hovering, night and day

Gently by my side.

My only contact with angels had been in grade school, at a procession on the thirteenth of May in honor of the Virgin Mary, and it had not turned out well. It so happened that one year, for being such a model student, my best friend, Marie Chris Cortés, had been chosen to be part of the Celestial Legion and had to wear an angel costume with a pair of very real-looking wings, which her mother had made for her out of real feathers. When I saw her, I laughed, and told her she looked more like a chicken than an angel, which was true. It was traditional on that day for each girl to write down on a piece of paper her secret wish to the Immaculate Virgin Mary, which nobody else could read or else it wouldn't come true. These papers were put in an earthen jar and burned so

that the smoke would reach up to Heaven. On this occasion, Marie Chris Cortés, offended by my comment about the chicken, snatched the piece of paper from my hands and read it out loud. And so it was that the whole school found out that I had asked to please one day be able to see our mother superior's shaved head. For some reason, this provoked a sublime indignation in the aforementioned person, which, in my opinion, was totally out of proportion with the offense. As punishment, I was summoned to her private quarters, terrifying enough in itself, and when we were alone, she took off her wimple and showed me her head, which was not shaved but had closely cropped gray hair. She made me touch it and then apologize. I still remember that moment as one of the scariest of my life, although now I think it really wasn't such a big deal. Quite the contrary, for a time it was a real distinction: I was the only girl in the school who had not only seen, but actually touched, the shorn head of a nun—and not just any nun, but the mother superior. To preserve the myth, I swore it was as bald as a billiard ball, and I have never revealed the truth until now.

But getting back to *Somos* and the article I had to write: the motives for selecting the angel story seemed despicable. In spite of that, my mood had improved. After all, even this was preferable to having to ask Miss Antioquia her views on extramarital relationships.

Submerged in the slow polluted sea of buses, cars, and beggars in the irregular streets of this chaotic city, we took an hour and a half to drive from north to south. Then we arrived at the poor neighborhoods on the mountainside and

continued until the streets disappeared. It had started raining, and the taxi driver announced:

"This is as far as I can go. You'll have to walk from here."

"All right."

"Are you sure you want me to leave you here? You'll get wet."

"Which way do I go?"

He answered with a vague gesture toward the invisible mountain peak.

"Up."

No wonder there are angels there, I thought. It's practically in heaven.

For a long stretch I walked uphill in the rain. This Galilea was a frightful place. Above it, the rugged mountain rose like a wall; on either side grew a tangled mass of woodland vegetation; below, a dense, spongy haze filled the ravine so completely that it was impossible to see all the way down.

The houses in Galilea were precariously perched one on top of the other, clawing into the eroded, slippery hillside. Rainwater rushed down the steep alleys, forming little streams. The heart of the neighborhood was a swampy square with an arch on either side indicating that, in better weather, it was a soccer field. If a ball got away, it would roll on and on, and not stop until it reached Bolívar Square.

There was nobody on the streets, not even thieves. Not a voice could be heard behind the closed doors. The one ubiquitous presence was the rain, a nasty freezing rain that fell on me with the impersonal and relentless rhythm of a machine. Where were the people? They had probably left for less vile

places. And what about the angel? Better forget it. If he had come down to earth and landed here, he must have fled back at once.

I felt an urgent need to go to the bathroom, to return home, take a hot shower, have a cup of tea, call my magazine and resign. I had reached a state of total desperation.

But how to get back, by which unimaginable taxi or bus, considering that I had crossed the frontier of the world and was now high above at the border of the great beyond?

I walked to the church, recently and meticulously painted banana yellow, its doors and trim in gleaming brown. Oversized and flashy, and with a pair of spiky steeples, it looked like a freshly baked Gothic cake. It was also closed, so I rang the bell at the rectory next door. No answer. I rang again, longer, banged at the door with my fist, until an old man's voice yelled from the other side of the door:

"There's nothing! Nothing!"

I had been taken for a beggar. I banged again, more insistently, and again heard the voice inside.

"Go away, there's nothing!"

"All I want is information!"

"There isn't any information either."

"How can that be? Come on!" I was now indignant and ready to kick the door, but it finally opened, and the voice acquired the body of a priest, old but not ancient, with glasses, nicotine-stained teeth, several days' stubble, and a soup bowl in his hand. His head was not round but shaped in straight lines, like a polygon, and I imagined it could produce only obtuse ideas.

From inside the house came the stench of an inveterate smoker's den.

"Father, I am here because I was told about an angel," I said, trying to press myself under the eaves for some relief from the rain.

Annoyed, he mumbled that he didn't know anything about an angel. Pieces of carrots were floating in his soup and, through his glasses, his impatient eyes told me that his lunch was getting cold. But I persisted.

"I was told that an angel—"

"No! No! What's this about angels? I'm telling you there is no angel!" the old man reprimanded me, and ended by saying that if I really wanted to praise the Lord and listen to his true word, I should come back and attend the five o'clock mass.

I figured the old guy was a bit loony, but since I desperately had to use the toilet, I had no choice.

"Excuse me, Father, could I use your bathroom?"

He considered the question for a moment, perhaps trying to figure out an excuse to say no, but then stepped aside to let me in. "Through the corridor in the yard, all the way to the back," he grumbled.

His home was an almost empty room with a door to the street and another to the yard. It seemed as if no one else had visited for years. Only some plastic flowers in a jar, barely visible under a coat of dust, suggested a possible feminine presence long ago.

"You are soaked, my child, take your coat off."

“Don’t worry, Father, it’s all right.”

“No, it’s not all right. You’re dripping on my floor.”

I apologized and tried to wipe the puddle dry with a tissue I found in my pocket. I took off my raincoat and hung it on the wall, on the nail that he had indicated.

I crossed to an inner yard where several drains converged, and as I walked along the corridor lined with plantless planters, containing only dried-up soil and cigarette butts, I thought that the priest’s bristly beard must be quite rough, like porcupine quills. For a moment I tried to imagine how I would fend him off if he tried to touch me.

Though no stranger had ever assaulted me, at times I had somewhat paranoid thoughts of how I would prevent an attack. This time my irrationality annoyed me: How could I think such nonsense, when it was obvious that the poor old man only wanted to be left to eat his soup in peace?

Except for a small pile of half-washed socks in the bathtub, the bathroom was pretty clean. But I did not sit on the toilet; since early childhood I had been trained in the acrobatics of peeing standing up when not at home, without touching the toilet or wetting my pants. The door had no lock, so I held it shut with my arm extended, in case someone (but, my God, who?) were to try to open it. That’s why I feel that a woman’s psyche is at times twisted: we have been made to believe that all the bad things in the world are threatening us, trying to get between our legs.

There was no mirror in the bathroom. I missed it, because I find it reassuring to inspect my image. There was a shelf

with only one object on it: a toothbrush with yellow bristles stained from overuse, which involuntarily connected me to the intimate loneliness of the surly man who lived there.

When I got back to the room, he was sitting on the cot, devoted to his soup, his face so close to the bowl that the steam was fogging his glasses.

"So there is no angel." This was my last attempt.

"The angel, the angel, there we go again with the angel! Doesn't it occur to anyone that he might be an envoy from the underworld, huh? And what if the unmentionable is using some cunning to drag the ignorant masses to their damnation? Hasn't this occurred to you?"

"So you think this angel might be a demon?"

"I already told you. Come to the five o'clock mass! Today is the day. I will publicly unmask the heretics in this neighborhood, who are of the same stripe as the old ones: Dionysius the pseudo Areopagite, Adalbert the Hermit"—his priestly zeal was making him shake. "They are even greater sinners, these ones from Galilea, than Simon the Magician, who falsely asserted that the world was made out of the same stuff as the angels. Let today's apostates tremble before anathema! They better not play with fire, huh? Because they'll get burned! But don't make me go on. Enough! I don't want to say anything ahead of time!" Here he paused to catch his breath and wipe his mouth with a handkerchief. "Come to the five o'clock mass if you want to understand."

"All right, I'll be there, Father. Good-bye, and thank you for letting me use your bathroom."

"Oh, no. Now that you are here, you can't leave without

having some soup. Because it is true that he who eats alone dies alone, and I don't want to die alone. It's bad enough to have lived all my life without companionship."

"No, Father, don't trouble yourself." I tried to dissuade him, neither wishing to deprive him of his only pleasure nor wanting to have to taste those shipwrecked carrots in the gray broth. But to no avail: he walked up to the pot and filled a bowl to the brim, then pulled a squashed packet of Lucky Strikes from his cassock and lit one at the stove.

"How come you live so alone, Father? Don't your parishioners keep you company?"

"They don't like me. Perhaps because when I came to these hills I was already old and bitter and didn't feel any great impulse to make them love me. But don't make me talk after lunch; it is bad for digestion and does not contribute to an orderly train of thought."

In silence, then, I ate and he smoked, if silence is the word for the sequence of noises and crackling sounds the old man let loose while savoring the stinking smoke of his cigarette. The soup tasted better than it looked, my stomach welcomed the hot liquid, and I appreciated my host's rough generosity. He had meanwhile fallen asleep sitting on his cot, the lit butt between his yellow fingers and his polygon head hanging at an impossible angle.

I took the cigarette from his hand, stubbed it out in one of the planters, washed his dish and mine in the bathroom washstand, left a note that read "God bless you, at five I'll be at your mass," and again walked out into the raging wind and rain. But I didn't mind anymore, now that I was sure I would