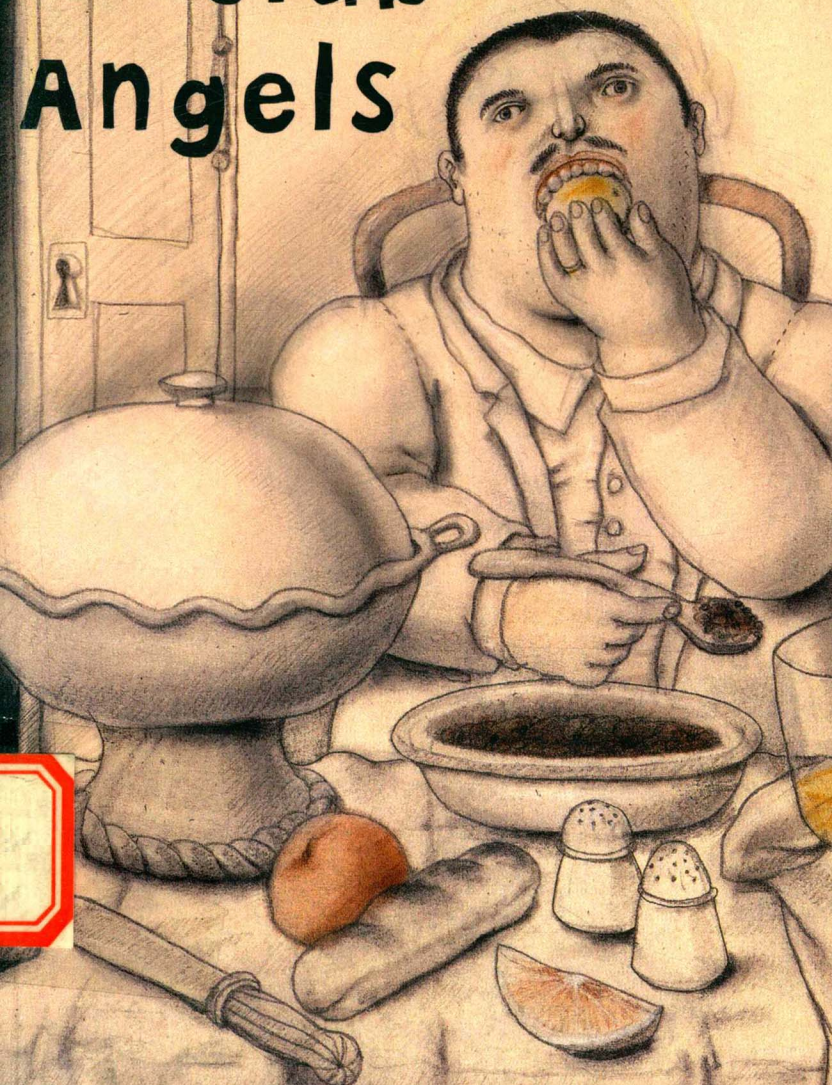


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The Club of Angels



Luis Fernando Verissimo

Translated by Margaret Jull Costa

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**The club
of
Angels**

Translated from the Portuguese by

MARGARET JULL COSTA

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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THE CLUB OF ANGELS

All desire is a desire for death.

A possible Japanese maxim

1 The Meeting



LUCÍDIO IS NOT ONE OF THE DEVIL'S 117 NAMES, nor did I conjure him up from the depths so that he could punish us. When I first mentioned him to the group, someone said: "You're making this up!", but it's not true, I'm innocent – well, as innocent as an author can be. Mystery stories always consist of tedious searches for the guilty party, when it's obvious that there is only one guilty party. Don't bother glancing at the last page of the book, dear reader, for the name is on the cover: it's the author. In this instance, you might suspect that I am rather more than the mere intellectual author of the crimes described within, that my fingers not only tapped out their lugubrious dance over the keys, but also added the poison to the food and interfered rather more in the plot than they should have done. Such suspicions are based on logic, or, rather, on the peculiar logic of mystery stories: if only one person is left

alive at the end, there is your criminal; if two people are left alive, but one is invented, the other one must be the criminal. Lucídio and I are the only survivors of this story, and if I didn't invent him, and as it's highly unlikely that he invented me, he is obviously the guilty one, given that ~~he~~ he was the cook and everyone died, in one way or another, from what they ate. If I invented him, then the guilt falls entirely on me. I cannot even allege that if Lucídio is an invention, then the whole story is an invention, and that there are, therefore, no crimes and no criminals. Fiction is not an extenuating circumstance. Imagination is no excuse. We all have murderous thoughts, but only that monster, the author, sets his crimes down on paper and publishes them. I may not have killed my nine confrères and brothers-in-obsession, but I am guilty of the fiction of having killed them. In order to prove that I am innocent of these terrible crimes, I must convince you that I did not invent Lucídio. I also need to convince you that the story is true in order to prove that I am innocent of having created a fiction. An invented crime is far worse than any real crime. A real crime could, after all, be accidental or the product of a moment of passion, but whoever heard of an unpremeditated fictitious crime?

I can give the time, day, month and place of our first meeting. If you want witnesses, go and ask the people at the wine merchant's. They know me; I spend a small

fortune on wine in their shop every month. Ask them about Dr Daniel, the fat fellow who likes St-Estèphe wines. I'm not, in fact, a doctor, but I am rich, which is why they deferentially call me "Doctor". When he approached me in their Bordeaux section, in February, exactly nine months ago, they must have noticed the contrast between Lucídio and me. He's short and thin, with a head much too big for his body, but he's always very elegantly dressed in suit and tie. I'm tall and stout, I wear a baggy shirt outside my trousers and have even been known to wear espadrilles to the Ducasse de Paris. The people in the shop must have noticed the disparity between us and commented on it. And they will tell you that the place was empty and that we started talking by the Bordeaux and walked around the entire shop together, and that, by the time we had reached the Chilean wines, we were like old friends. They might recall that I bought a Cahors, which I would never normally buy, on his recommendation. And that we left the shop together. We were seen. Lucídio exists. I swear it. Ask at the wine merchant's.

The people at the shop don't know that, afterwards, we went and had a coffee in the shopping mall and sat down to continue our conversation, since we had so many interests in common. Not that we actually got beyond food and drink during that first encounter. [Lucídio moves very discreetly and makes very few gestures. He sits with his

back straight and keeps his head almost perfectly still.) I don't so much sit down on a chair or at a table as moor there. A difficult process, given the scarcity of tug boats. On that day, before settling safely on the chair and calling for the waiter, I managed to knock over a sugar bowl, almost overturn the table and drop the wine. Poor Livia, my girlfriend, says that I'm not aware of how much space I take up, and that this comes from my having been a spoiled, fat child. Something to do with being an only child for whom no one ever set any boundaries. Poor Livia is a psychologist and a nutritionist and has been trying to save me for years now. I'm not so much a lover as a cause. I've had three wives, all three of whom were after my money. Livia isn't after my money. She wants to be the woman who rescues me, which strikes me as a much more self-interested and frightening ambition. Perhaps that is why I resist marrying her, whereas I put up no resistance at all to marrying the others, even though I knew perfectly well that they didn't love me for my belly. We live separately, but she takes care of my apartment and my clothes and tries, in vain, to take care of my diet too. I am convinced that, if she could, she would limit my food intake to the milk from her breasts and to fibre, lots of fibre. I also talk too loudly and too much, another consequence of a childhood without boundaries. Livia has persuaded me that the whole tragedy of my life can be put down to the lack of someone who would tell me: "Daniel, stop it!"

I remember that I did nearly all the talking during that first meeting with Lucídio. I told him about our club. I told him the names of all the members, and Lucídio responded to each name with an “Ah” or an “Hm”, to show that he was impressed. After all, I did cite nine of the best-known families in the state. And, finally, I told him my name, which also impressed him. Or rather, he made some other polite noise, always maintaining the same, tight little smile. Oddly enough, Lucídio never shows his teeth.

Wait, now that I think of it, he said “I know!” When I gave him my full name, Daniel, plus my family name, he said “I know!” Which only proves, you must be thinking, that the meeting was not pure chance. But he might have recognized me from a photograph. Years before, when Ramos was in charge of our lives, we were often mentioned in the press – in the society pages or in specialist food and drink magazines. He might have recognized us from photographs, all ten of us, from photographs and by reputation. We still met once a month for supper. For ten months of the year, from March to December. We ate at a different member’s home each month, and that member was responsible for providing supper. We would be starting a new season in March, and I was in charge of the first supper of the year. But there was a possibility that the season would not even begin. Lucídio asked why.

"The group is falling apart. We've lost our pizzazz."

"How long have these meetings been going on?"

"Twenty-one years. Twenty-two this year."

"Always with the same members?"

"Yes. No. One died and was replaced. But there are always ten members."

"Are you all more or less the same age?"

From the tone of his questions, Lucídio might have been making notes on the table. At the time, however, I didn't notice that interrogational tone. I told him everything. I told him the history of the Beef Stew Club. Lucídio only interrupted his otherwise constant, tight-lipped smile to say "Ah" or "Hm".

We were all about the same age. We were all pretty rich, although our fortunes had fluctuated over the past twenty years. They were all inherited fortunes, subject to the inconstancies of our characters and of the market. Mine had survived three disastrous marriages and a life devoted to strange stories, which I collect, and to graceless idleness, but only because my father pays me not to drag any of the family businesses into my destructive orbit. Apart from Ramos, we were all about the same age and from the same social class. And apart from Samuel and Ramos, we had all grown up together. Pedro, Paulo, Saulo, Marcos, Tiago, João, Abel, and me. From almost daily get-togethers in Alberi's bar during adolescence, and Alberi's beef stew with egg

farofa and fried banana which, for years, defined our culinary tastes, we had progressed to weekly suppers at different restaurants, then to monthly meetings in our respective homes. And with time and Ramos' lectures, we had refined our tastes. However, Samuel still insisted that nothing in life could compare with a fried banana.

"Does the host always do the cooking?"

"Not necessarily. He can if he wants, or he can serve up food made by someone else. But he is responsible for the quality of the meal. And of the wines."

"So what happened? I don't understand."

"What do you mean, what happened?"

"The pizzazz. You said you'd lost your pizzazz."

"Oh, right. I think it happened when Ramos died . . . because Ramos was the one who died. He was our organizer. He drew up the statutes, had the headed notepaper and the cards printed. He even designed the club's coat of arms. He took it all very seriously. After he died . . ."

"Of AIDS."

"That's right. Everything changed. The final supper of the season last year was terrible. It was as if we were all sick to death of each other's faces. It took place at the Chocolate Kid's apartment, at Tiago's. The meal was excellent, but the supper ended badly. A fight even broke out amongst the women. And that was the last supper of the year, which is always a special occasion. Around Christmas time. I think that in the last two years since Ramos died . . ."

"You've been losing motivation."

"Yes, motivation, oomph, pizzazz."

"Everything but your hunger."

"Everything but our hunger."

The late-night shoppers were beginning to arrive. We ordered two more coffees. As usual, I filled mine with sugar, spilling some in the saucer. I realized that I was recounting not only the slow disintegration of our group, but also the biography of our hunger, what had happened to it and to us over a period of twenty-one years.

In the beginning, it wasn't just the pleasure of eating, drinking and being together that united us. There was a degree of ostentation as well. Once we had exchanged Alberi's beef stew for finer things, our suppers turned into rituals of power, even though we didn't know it at the time. We could afford to eat and drink well, and so we ate and drank only the best and made a point of being seen and heard exercising that privilege. But it wasn't only that either. We weren't just stupid s.o.b.'s. We were different and, at those noisy celebrations of our shared tastes, we revelled in our friendship and our singularity. We had a greater appreciation of life and its pleasures, and what truly united us was the certainty that our hunger represented all the appetites which the world would, one day, arouse in us. We were so voracious, at the start, that ~~anything~~ less than the world would have been tantamount

to coitus interruptus. We wanted the world, but we ended up as mere city-bound failures, rolling around in our own shit. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Daniel, stop it! We're still in the café in the shopping mall, and I'm sitting opposite Lucídio, pouring my life out onto the table, along with the sugar.

On the night that Ramos decided to formalize the foundation of the Beef Stew Club – named in honour of our past lives as ignorant gourmands – Marcos, Saulo and myself had just set up our public relations agency, once, that is, I had persuaded my father that my days of idleness were over and that I deserved some financial backing, or at least several years' worth of allowances in advance, in order for me to start my own business. We were full of plans. In no time at all, we would be the stars of the PR world. Marcos with his artistic talents, me with my writing skills and Saulo with his gift for getting on with people, for selling things and for creative flimflam. Paulo had been elected city councillor. He had liberal views which sat uneasily with his bank balance and with having us as friends – he used to call us all damn reactionaries – but he was very bright. We were sure that, within the constraints of the time, he would enjoy a brilliant political career, greatly helped by the fact that he had a brother high up in the national security police. Tiago was beginning to make a name for himself as an architect. Pedro had finally taken

over the running of the family firm, after spending a year in Europe with Mara (with whom we were all in love), on a honeymoon that lasted many moons, despite his family's repeated calls for him to come home. João, our clever João, who taught us to invest in the stock market and was our supplier of cigars and jokes, began to earn "obscene" amounts of money, to use Samuel's word. Abel, our kind, sensitive Jesuit, who specialized in grilled meat and fish, had recently left his father's legal practice to open his own. Like Pedro, he too had just got married. At the time, his sense of euphoria was a mixture of the guilt he felt at having broken free from his father's domination, his enthusiasm for the new practice, and the sexual shock of marriage to Norinha. Unbeknown to him, she had already slept with two other members of the group, and had even come on to Samuel once. Abel was the one who would occasionally interrupt our self-celebrations by exclaiming: "Magic moment, everyone, magic moment!", thereby, of course, ruining the magic of the moment. Samuel thought that this need for constant epiphanies was a remnant of Abel's religious past.

Samuel. The best and the worst of us. The one who ate the most, but never got fat. The one who loved us most and most insulted us, and whose favourite word was "bastard" which he used to describe everyone, from the waiter ("Oh, Monsieur Bastard!") to the Pope ("His Bastardness"). He

was the most lucid and the most obsessive of us all; he was the last to die, this month, right before my eyes, and the one who suffered the most painful death. And finally, there was Ramos, who convinced us that our hunger was not just physical hunger, that we were enlightened beings, that our voracity was the voracity of a generation, or, at the very least, that we weren't just utter bastards. Ramos – “our Holy Bastard” as Samuel called him – always gave the speeches at our meetings. Everything had started with him. He was the one who had brought a certain solemnity to our ordinary suppers and had formed the club out of “the ten people who are sitting around this table, and only these ten”, until death or women did us part. Then he dipped chunks of bread in the wine so that we would all chew together and swallow together, as if making a holy vow of loyalty. It was a ceremony whose eucharistic references Abel found most moving.

In the beginning, Ramos was the only true gourmet of the group. He catechized us and imposed order and style on our hunger. He convinced us that the Beef Stew Club's first act should be finally to renounce Alberi's beef stew as a parameter of gastronomic quality. There was some resistance to this. For years afterwards, whenever he wanted to annoy Ramos, Samuel would defend the virtues of the fried banana. But Samuel would eat anything. And, we suspected, anyone. Ramos taught us that we were

practising a unique art, and that gastronomy was a cultural pleasure like no other, for no other brought with it the same philosophical challenge by which appreciation demanded the destruction of the thing appreciated and where veneration and consumption were one; no other art could equal eating as an example of the sensory perception of an art, any art, with the one exception, he thought, of actually stroking Michelangelo's David's butt. He had lived for some years in Paris, and the trips to Europe were his idea, with visits to famous restaurants and vineyards, which he himself organized with, according to Samuel, "typical poovy meticulousness". And he was the one who warned us that the moment we allowed women to join the club, everything would go wrong. It had to be those ten people and only those ten, otherwise the charm would be lost and so would we. He really was something of a prophet.

I don't know why I told all this to someone I barely knew. Perhaps because I had never before had such an attentive listener. Lucídio sat utterly still, his hands folded on the table, like a neat parcel which he only unwrapped in order to take another sip of coffee. The tight-lipped smile never left his face. It was getting late. I needed to go home and phone Livia, who worries about my lone visits to the shopping mall. I lived close enough to walk there and back, and she used to say that, given my lumbering bulk, the only reason