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History for Ambassadors Or Butterflies and Other Chingaderas

For Domingo Luiggi

Behind every semicolon they scent danger. They fear the silence between stanzas. In East as well as West they are certain that when in an intricate context windfall fruit is mentioned (quite incidentally), it's a dig at them... But we writers are indestructible. Rats and blowflies who gnaw at consensus and shit on the newly laundered tablecloth.

-- Günter Grass, *Headbirths or The Germans Are Dying Out*

Prologue

Mahler composed to free the sway of dark feelings. Picasso painted to rid himself of an indigestion of green. Neruda's creatures were born of a long rejection. Kafka wrote to exile the bugs; Vargas-Llosa, to exorcise the demons; Cortázar, to neutralize the nightmares. Exorcism... catharsis... the removal of *alimañas*, of vermin. If to write is to be an exterminator, then I will hunt, expose, and deflate *alimañas*. Get rid of that little pain whether in the chicken coop, in the pit of the stomach or on the behind.

On Amtrak, aided by the romantic spell trains have always held over me, by the motion, or by the three hours to myself, the boil finally burst and overflowed. I had no paper, but the urge to write was as uncontrollable as wretching. A brochure. "For Ages 50 to 74. Guaranteed Life

Insurance. \$1.00 a week. You can't be turned down! No medical exam--no health questions."

Over, below, and between the red and blue promises, around the geriatric smiles, and through the iconic cherub, my scribbles.

The Plot

Actually, the idea was born out of a very small, almost insignificant, incident. A tempest in a teapot. Although, to be honest, it would be more accurate to call it a tempest in a tequila cup. One of those small clay cups with a handle and a floral design on the outside, and a one-ounce capacity. It looks like a toy cup. Little girls can use them for their tea parties. Gringo tourists who want to mimic Mexican machos buy them for drinking tequila. But if it's so small, why bother writing about it? Well, you know what mighty contests rise from trivial things. It's usually the props that start wars, sink ships, inspire epics, and change the course of history, from that luscious red apple that started the whole affair, to Samson's tresses, Salome's veils, Cleopatra's asp, the chalk circle, Celestina's feather mask with a center of dead ants, the glass slipper, the purloined letter, the rape of a lock, the horse traded for a kingdom, all the stolen, embroidered handkerchiefs, the lost keys, the compromising billets-doux. In this particular case, it was the license, the non-existent marriage license. A non-existent marriage license? asks Domingo. How can that...? Yes, I answer, but please remember that this was not just any ordinary marriage license, not even any ordinary non-existent marriage license, but *the* marriage license, the one that could have, probably would have, changed history. At least it would have changed 500 years of Latin American history. After all, if a butterfly stirring the air in Peking...

The Characters

Collar that Dormouse. Behead that Dormouse! Turn that Dormouse out of court! Suppress him! Pinch him! Off with his whiskers!

-- The Queen of Hearts

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

The Ambassador. She wasn't really an Ambassador, but she would be, she would be, never fear, she would be.

The Princess. She was the Ambassador's four-year-old daughter. She was cute. Muy linda. The entire court doted on her.

The Vice Consul. He had official duties. Young. Needed to please. Knew his job was to be the Ambassador's echo.

The Aide-de-camp. Carmen (not Bizet's, don't get excited). But she looked as dark and sultry as the other one.

The Paramour, a.k.a. Toadie. He was Carmen's paramour, not the Ambassador's --hers had been left behind in Europe, once he had fulfilled his procreative duties-- but he occasionally served the Ambassador as escort.

The Knaves. There were two. One carried the Ambassador's crown on a crimson velvet cushion; the other was always blowing three blasts on the trumpet and unrolling the parchment scroll.

The Ladies-in-waiting (gentlewomen, attendants) and their consorts. The ladies we will know as a unit, for they acted as a unit. Their role was to accompany agree, smile agree, knit agree, lunch agree, exalt agree, tea agree, plan agree, party agree, flatter (she that loves to be flattered is

worthy of the flatterer) agree.

The Esquire. Handsome with an Emiliano Zapata mustache he twirled with his left hand. He was new to the Consulate. He wanted to please, but he represented the law and had to observe protocol.

The Cultural Attaché. C'est moi. That is me. That was me. I mean I, us, yo. Soy yo. Fui yo. There was a Vice Cultural Attaché, but he wasn't available much of the time. You can't blame him. He was a busy and important academician. So, the cultural work fell on me. Not that it was an important official position. I was not a bureaucrat of the Mexican Foreign Service. It was a volunteer position. I worked gratis.

Prelude

Once upon a time there was a woman named Leticia —Leticia, if only her name were Patricia. Whenever her name is mentioned, one hears strings of Bernstein's "Maria" in the background, you know, the one from *West Side Story*. Hey, maybe that's what this is, a *West Side Story*, a soap opera, a telenovela. Her name should have been Patricia in remembrance of her cute little nose. She always had trouble with history, and facts confused her, so once she heard in Mr. Morales's class *patrician nose* while sitting in the back of the class admiring herself in her Christian Dior compact, she had forever more associated in her mind patrician nose with small and cute. Her deepest desire had always been to be considered patrician, especially from the moment she saw *The Robe* with Victor Mature and had her first puppy love crush on Richard Burton, the Roman noble who for her epitomized patrician, high class, aristocratic, ruler. Yes, high class, ruling class, and far-away places. Exotic places like Paris, Milan, Rome, London,

Singapore, Miami, Hollywood. Any place, except that tawdry little town where it had been her bad luck to be born.

The Wait

La historia oficial latinoamericana se reduce a un desfile militar de próceres con uniformes recién sacados de la tintorería.

-- Eduardo Galeano, *Memoria del fuego*

After serving her country in several major European cities, she was assigned to the City of Brotherly Love. Used to a large entourage and to a life of music, champagne, elegant women, handsome men, brilliant parties, she was at first disappointed, deeply disappointed, especially because she had thought it was time for a promotion. She had always served with distinction. She had been to all the right places, known all the right people. Could it be because of her daughter? She didn't regret it, no, how could she? But, nevertheless, perhaps if she hadn't? Had her defiance gone too far? The Service knew she had always been free and independent, and it had accepted this. But a daughter without a husband -- was it too much for Mexican society to accept? Philadelphia was, in comparison with her last post, so small-townish, so drab. She would have to wait for her ascension.

In the meantime, she would create her own court. She invites her cohorts, gathers her ladies-in-waiting around her, convenes her courtiers, blows the trumpets, cuts the ribbons. No occasion is ever lost. She never misses an opportunity to send an invitation, open an exhibit, say a few words, grant an interview, put her country's name forward, get her picture in the paper, wear a new dress. An artful intriguer, she knows how to seduce the men. At different moments,

each feels he is the chosen one. Special individual invitations to champagne brunches in her penthouse to say thank you for a job well done. What none of the courtiers realizes is that they are all just dessert, window dressing. The real work is done through her feminine estado mayor, her unofficial cabinet, during those little lunches at Girasole's, for fair is foul, and foul is fair and her ladies speak a language of their own; can read a nod, a shrug, a look, far better than a printed book; convey a libel in a frown, and wink a reputation down. After each meeting, they ask, "When shall we meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

In the meantime, she would play the roles, the roles that had stoked her imagination since childhood. Alone in her penthouse, she pictures herself in various Paris ateliers trying on the clothes and the personalities of her idols.

Some mornings it is Marie Antoinette. She wasn't half bad, and besides, the guillotine stands right next to Boucheron and Dom Perignon as one of the great inventions of French genius. "Let them eat cake," or "Off with their heads." She could say that with feeling in a long, white, Caroline Herrera number. And she would ask the director to make sure that the afternoon sun over the Seine would reflect off the gold braid of her dress. The cost of the braid would not be that much either, what with all the cheap labor available in Taiwan, Manila, Singapore, or in the maquilas of Chihuahua or Monterrey.

Other days it is Carlota. Empress has a better ring than The Honorable, Her Excellency, Her Eminence, Her Majesty, Her Holiness, or even Inquisitor General. The white dress she wears in the portrait that hangs in Chapultepec is gorgeous, as is the crown. The castle itself offers many possibilities, and the carriages, and the parties, oh, the parties she could give at The Castle. To rule over an entire nation, and to have a beautiful husband, a real European prince. And,

besides, Empress is the title that best suits her. But wait, hasn't she heard something about a firing squad at dawn on the Cerro de las Campanas, and Carlota in exile and mad? And wouldn't that be a betrayal of the PRI, of the official, the institutional government party? If Marina's son had only been the legitimate one, there would have been no need to invite Maximiliano and Carlota to rule in Mexico. There would have been no Porfiriato, no blind admiration for everything French, no blind envy of everything American, no Revolution, no million Mexicans killed between 1910 and 1920. No PRI. Wait. Wait! What do you mean no PRI? That's a heresy. Wash your mouth with lejía, with pure lye. Where would Mexico be then? Where would *she* be? Who would tell her what to do, what to say, what to think, what facts to spread, what truths to promote. But, if the flapping of a butterfly's wings...

Queen Isabella? Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have immortal longings in me. The rumored affair with Christopher was of prurient interest. Was it true? Ferdinand was handsome, but why else would a woman sell her jewels to pay for an expedition? Certainly, to play Isabella would mean power, glory, beautiful costumes. Isabella revived the medieval hermandad and placed the Spanish Inquisition under royal control. She was responsible for the expulsion of the Jews, the wrenching of Granada from the Moors, and the discovery of the New World. A smile spreads across her face. If she played Isabella, hers would be the power to scuttle the voyage of discovery, to prevent the colonization, to erase Cortés from the picture, make sure he never appeared in herstory. Oh, but the gnawing doubt. If Cortés had married Marina, Martín Cortés, the first Mexican, the first Latin American, would have been the primogénito, the legitimate one, and the other, the other Martín Cortés, the son of the wife --in her version, divorced, renounced, or never married-- would have been the bastard, el hijo de la chingada, and

then we would see how secure the Spaniards and the rest of the Europeans felt, then we would see who had a problem with chingaderas, who was on the defensive, who shied from analysis and self-criticism.

Oh, but Eva, the original Eva, age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety. The ultimate power trip. The simplicity, the elegance, of the props: a tree, tall, leafy, deep green, graceful, majestic. A snake, long and sensuous. And The Apple. Don't forget the apple. Red, shiny, luscious. But who could design a fig leaf that would disguise her pear shape and compensate for her short legs? And who could play Adam? Robert Taylor, Rosano Brassi, Pedro Armendáriz, or perhaps someone young, one of the young bucks, what's his name, the one in *An Officer and a Gentleman*? Yes, that one. She could demand that Richard Gere play her leading man. He would look good in an Armani loincloth with all the fuchsia, lime green, electric blue, and touches of gold that characterize his designs. Yes, playing Eva would be the ultimate power trip: with only the red apple and her wide, swinging hips, she alone would determine the future of the human race. And, if either Adam or the snake decided to talk, she would impose restrictions, accuse them of negativity, censor them, and issue an edict: No disagreeable word shall ever be uttered in my kingdom.

The strange thing was that Leticia's avatars were all sisters under the skin, or at least under the Givenchy. They were kindred spirits surrounded by the same aura. Regardless of the costume, you could always make out the outline of a crown, a coronet, a miter, or a tricorn hat on top of the strawberry blond curls, and where they dreamed of holding a scepter, you could always make out the handle of a guillotine.

Divertimento

Do you know the Consul from one of the smaller Latin American countries, the one in that building on Chestnut Street? One autumn afternoon, the secretary from the law office across the hall from the Consulate told me *sotto voce* and giggling how several times each afternoon the Consul walks down the hall toot, toot, toot, farting all the way to the bathroom around the corner. She seems unconcerned about anybody hearing her, totally oblivious to the secretary, or the attorneys in that office, or the people in the other suites. When the secretary told me the story, she said she couldn't believe that this very ordinary-looking and obviously coarse woman could be a personage, somebody who was sent here to represent her country, someone who buys designer dresses and goes to receptions and shakes hands with Presidents and Ambassadors. She admitted that she had thought that people in high positions had more dignity and refinement. That poor South Philly secretary will never again believe in the importance of high class, titles, or position. The toot, toot, tooting down the hall has forever ruined all auras for her.

First Act

... invitación a la riña y al trabajo, epígrafe del amor, signo del nacimiento, amenaza y burla, verbo testigo, [] resumen de la historia: santo y seña de México: tu palabra: [] chingada, pirámide de negaciones, teocalli del espanto.

-- Carlos Fuentes, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*

Such as it was, the first act took place one December evening in a suburban house in some eastern city. Let's say Philadelphia to make use of its history and etymology. It was a tempest in a tequila cup. I said that the Indian Princess Malintzín was Cortés's mistress. He named her Doña Marina and treated her with respect. She was his *lengua*, his translator, and she

gave him a son, but when the moment came to marry his Spanish fiancée, he gave Doña Marina to one of his captains, who married her. But the first mestizo, the first Mexican, was the son of the conqueror and his mistress. And we all know what that means. If there was no marriage license, then all Mexicans are ¡unos hijos de la chingada! Sons of the Great Bitch! Leticia turned purple with rage. She knew she had to act, accused me of heresy, and called for an Auto Da Fe in her penthouse. After all, she is the Benefactress of the Arts, and she knows it isn't true that Cortés did not marry Doña Marina. Or if it is true, then it is her duty as a good Mexican, as a member of The Party and as a representative of her country, to deny the truth.

Yes, one of her responsibilities is to promote the culture of her country. And she loves doing that. She loves culture, never tires of saying it. One day she asks who Pacheco is. She has never heard of José Emilio. On another occasion, she wants to know if Elena Poniatowska is anti-priista. Somebody has mentioned that she is against the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. Leticia has seen her name in the papers. Very alert, very interested. Nobody can accuse her of not working hard for her country, of not promoting its culture. Of course, she suspects that Octavio Paz was a malinchista, a foreigner-loving traitor. After all, didn't he say that Mexicans are not strong in self-criticism? The temerity of him! And now, it turns out that she says, that the cultural attaché claims, that Paz even dared to say that Cortés did not marry his Indian mistress, Doña Marina. Imagine! How irresponsible of him. And how irresponsible you are, tú eres, yo soy. That could hurt Mexico's reputation. A Nobel Prize winner a traitor? Yes, the Consul has heard about the prize, but still, you can never be too careful. And now she says, yo digo, that Paz even had the audacity to write all that disgusting stuff about the WORD, La Palabra, the six-letter word, you know. Leticia cannot bring herself to say esa palabra maldita,

that damn, that cursed, that odious word. Paz called it the Mexican word *par excellence* and studied it as a noun, a verb, an adjective, an adverb. Someone else told Leticia that Carlos Fuentes did the same thing in one of his novels. And now the Cultural Attaché has said the WORD in public, at a cultural gathering sponsored by the Consulate. She said CHINGAR! She said it. I said it. I said Chingado, the fucked one. I said el Chingamás, the Father of all Fuckers. I said el Chingaquedito, the quiet fucker. Yo lo dije. Dije chingar, chingado, chingamás, chingaquedito, chingaderas, hijo de la chingada, chinga a tu madre. She said. I said. Yo dije chin, chin, chin. ¡Basta! Enough! If you don't stop sedition, it will spread. The censorious consulette is in a furious passion. She will certainly not allow the word, la palabra, or the lack of a marriage license, to be discussed, or even mentioned, in her presence. Off with the tongue of anyone who dares say it within earshot. Off with her tongue! Oh, off with my tongue! ¡Mi lengua!

Not literature, of course, but she does like the other arts. And she believes in promoting culture. After all, she is the Benefactress of the Arts. She promotes lunches at Girasole's, she promotes dinners at Tequila's, she promotes receptions at the Union League, she promotes fundraisers in her penthouse. Yes, she is a major benefactress of culture. And she is very careful to enclose all the information, including newspaper clippings with her picture, and copies of all the invitations she has sent in the previous 30 days, in her monthly reports. But she will not have anybody disparage her country, not even a Nobel Prize winner, and certainly not that upstart Cultural Attaché who had the gall to give an entire presentation about Octavio Paz and his ideas about the psyche of the Mexican and the Mexican word *par excellence*. The Consul called for an Auto Da Fe in her penthouse.

Intermezzo

En suma, la cuestión del origen es el centro secreto de nuestra ansiedad y angustia.

-- Octavio Paz, "Los hijos de La Malinche," *El Laberinto de la soledad*

Scientists who study chaos postulate that in a system of space-time of cosmic dimensions, predictability is perhaps impossible to achieve. All events --however imperceptibly-- are interrelated. Other people extend Edward Lorenz' butterfly effect, a metaphor for the sensitive dependence on initial conditions, or the rapid translation of tiny differences in input into overwhelming differences in output, which postulates that a butterfly stirring the air in Peking today can transform storm systems next month in New York, to other questions, such as the contingency of history. If the flapping of a butterfly's wings can transform storm systems on the other side of the world, is it preposterous to wonder what effect a marriage certificate might have had? Might it have transformed the psyche of 130 million Mexicans or even of 400 million Latin Americans? My country right or wrong. México lindo y querido, si muero lejos de ti... As American as motherhood and apple pie. Boys don't cry. Los mexicanos no se rajan. Boys will be boys. Blondes have more fun. Jingoism. Cheap patriotism. Domingo calls it *cultureta* and says that the better he knows Mexicans, the more he realizes they are not very different from his Puerto Rican compatriots. Underneath the differences of the various *culturetas*, are all Latin Americans basically insecure about their birth? How about the Dominicans, Panamanians, Cubans, Colombians, Chileans, Argentines, and any of the other bastards of Spain? If Cortés had married Marina, would we all be secure and able to produce, analyze, and enjoy a living culture

which is part of the human culture, instead of desperately trying to hold on to a culture, a crummy little imitation of a culture?

Second Act: Auto-Da-Fe

I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing.

-- Ayatollah Khomeini
February 14, 1989

The Knave of Hearts, as usual, carries the Consul's crown on a crimson velvet cushion. The Knave of Spades raises himself upon tiptoe and blows three blasts on the trumpet. Then he unrolls the parchment scroll. The Vice Consul and the Princess are ornamented with hearts. The courtiers are ornamented all over with diamonds. The ladies-in-waiting, smelling blood and responding to an uncontrollable, ancestral urge, reach down, open the baskets that appear on the floor next to them, take out the red, white, and green skeins and the long bone needles, and start to knit. Some are already relishing the smell of burned flesh, others look forward to the sound of the blade. Where have we seen this before? Is all writing just a repetition? But, wait, there is a difference. Next to the knitting baskets the Aide-de-Camp has placed pitchers of a thick brownish mixture that the ladies pour into clay mugs and sip. Can it be? We move closer and take a whiff. Yes, yes, they are definitely jarros de atole. All afternoon the ladies alternate sips of the corn mush with the frenzied movement of their fingers, and slowly the red, white, and green stripes

grow until, gradually, one is able to make out a cactus, and later, an eagle with a serpent in its mouth, in the center of the white stripe.

The hermandad smiles and nods ostentatiously in agreement with words she has not yet uttered. Of course, they know what she is going to say. The Cultural Attaché boxed her ears. Nothing important, but as we well know, all looks yellow to the jaundiced eye. And if a butterfly stirring the air in Peking...

Heeled, coiffed, and Givenchy clad, resplendent in her full consular regalia, Leticia struts into her living room to preside over the tribunal. A squeaky voice is saying, "What does it all mean?" "Hold your tongue!" says Leticia turning purple. The ladies suspend their knitting. The rest are lying on their faces, and the pattern on their backs is the same as the rest of the pack, she cannot tell whether they are her courtiers or other guests. She orders Toadie to turn them over.

"Consider your verdict," says the Vice Consul.

"Not yet, not yet," whispers the Esquire.

"Herald, read the accusation!" says the Vice Consul.

On this, the Knave of Spades blows three blasts on the trumpet, unrolls the parchment scroll, and reads:

For Alice is a traitor.
She reviled our reputation.
She said Marina was Cortés's woman.
She said there was no marriage license.

"Scandalous!" shout the ladies while their fingers knit even faster.

For Alice is a traitor.
She reviled our reputation.

For Alice is ill spoken and obscene.
She said chingar, with all its conjugations and declensions.

“Scandalous!” echo their consorts.

For Alice is disruptive.
Her rumors are rebellious and seditious.
For we all know they are not true.
For Alice is intrepid and a traitor.

“Collar the traitor. Behead the traitor! Turn the traitor out of court! Suppress her! Pinch her! Off with her tongue!” yells the Consul in her purple fury.

“Consider your verdict,” the Vice Consul says to the jury.

“Not yet, not yet!” the Esquire hastily interrupts. “There’s a great deal to come before that!”

New to the Court, he thinks that they don’t play fairly at all. “They all quarrel so dreadfully,” he reports later, twirling his Emiliano Zapata mustache, “one can’t hear oneself speak --and they don’t seem to have any rules in particular; at least, if there are, nobody attends to them--and you’ve no idea how confusing it is...”

When she does not understand, cuando no entiendo, he tells me, me dice, “My notion is that you have been (before she had this fit) an obstacle that comes between her and ourselves and it.”

“Hush! Hush!” says Toadie in a low hurried tone, looking anxiously over his shoulder as he squeaks.

The Esquire dares to whisper that it isn’t important. The Consul turns crimson with fury, and glaring at the dissenter like a wild beast, screams “Off with his mustache! Off...”

Alice says, yo digo, I say I don’t agree, and the Vice Consul yells, “Let the jury consider

their verdict,” for about the twentieth time this afternoon.

"Stuff and nonsense!" says Alice, say I loudly. "The idea of having the sentence first!"

"Hold your tongue!" says the Consul, turning purple.

"I won't!" says Alice, digo yo. I say?

"Off with her head!" shouts Leticia at the top of her voice, looking at her, mirándome, with fury.

Nobody moves.

"Who cares for you?" says Alice (she has grown to my full size this time). "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"

She's immediately suppressed by the officers of the court. They have a large tricolor canvas bag which ties up at the mouth with red, white, and green strings. Into this they slip the miscreant, head first, and then sit upon her. Through the canvas I can hear someone whisper that there hasn't been a trial. "Hush! Hush!" says Toadie in a low hurried tone, looking anxiously over his shoulder as he squeaks.

Holding with her left hand the crown that keeps slipping over her strawberry blond curls, while blandishing her scepter with her right, in her hoarse purple fury Leticia yells, "No, no! Sentence first--verdict afterwards."