

***DAMNED IF  
SHE DOES***

**EUGENIA RICO**

**TRANSLATION BY ANNA ROSEN GUERCIO**



From the first moment I saw the redhead, I knew she was bad news. It was stormy the day she arrived. It hadn't rained for weeks, but right when Gago's car reached Bramadoiro, the sky cracked open and unleashed a coven of lightning bolts. There was no stopping it, and so the redhead had to step out into the pouring rain. We couldn't tell then how skinny she was, but we saw right away that she was bony and mean, and we all hoped she wouldn't be around for long.

I never should have come back. A person comes back because she's hoping to find something, something she thinks she's lost, and winds up realizing she left it somewhere else - or never knew where it was at all. A person shouldn't go back to places she was happy, and definitely not to places where she suffered.

Now I understand why wasps were necessary.

I should never have come back. The ocean wasn't waiting for me. Neither were the four houses that are still here with their moss-covered roof tiles and the roots of oak trees eating into their foyers. My grandmother wasn't even waiting for me, out at the cemetery. A long time ago they dug up her bones and threw her into a mass grave. And I was too little to stop it. Everyone I once loved is long dead. The tourists haven't found this place yet; no one's fixed the potholes. The wind crashes against the now-dark lighthouse. The chickens are the only ones still roaming the town, and even they seem lost.

I'm lost too.

“Have you ever gotten lost?”

That’s what the woman in the black kerchief asked me, handing me the huge keys to my old house like they might unlock a secret treasure. That’s when I realized she knew the wind.

She looked me over and I was afraid she’d be able to tell.

“They always said your grandmother was a witch.”

I didn’t respond.

“Are you a witch too?”

“There’s no such thing as witches,” I said, looking at her crooked nose and dirty green eyes.

Her gold tooth winked at me. I thought how, if witches existed, they’d look just like her. But that can’t be right. If a woman had supernatural powers, the first thing she’d do is make herself beautiful.

Witches aren’t real. They were deluded, tortured women who ate mushrooms so they could fly in their dreams, or maybe just masturbated with brooms. They committed countless sins: being too poor, too ugly, too pretty. At some point, every woman says she has some witch in her and, at some point, every woman calls another woman a witch.

In other words, all women want to be witches. Secret pride. Insult. Slander.

Maybe that’s why I came back here, to my childhood home, in search of a witch from the past.

“I’m just here to finish my dissertation,” I was saying, but the woman in black had stopped listening.

She was looking out the window like she’d seen something. The only thing I could see through the broken glass were the branches of an old oak tree I used to climb. The air smelled like rain and burnt wood.

Let me tell you about the witch.

Let me tell you about the day I hitched my wagon to hers.

Back then I could never have guessed I'd also end up burned at the stake. That was the day I cried all the tears for the witch that her enemies never cried, and all her friends' tears too. That was the day of the witch.

I raced all through town searching for a piece of linen to shorten the agony of the pyre. It cost me three ducats.

It was the day of the witch. The witch that I would become. The witch that I am.

Selene was born on the night of San Juan, when the bonfires burned brightest. The fire before the fire.

Before the pyre, the pyres. They burned in all four corners of the town to celebrate the triumph of the sun.

Her mother's been screaming for over three days. On the fourth, she lets out an unnatural cry, a cry that dries up the milk her sister needs for her own baby and brings the San Juan festivities in the town square to a screeching halt. The little girl's head suddenly appears, and, at the exact same moment, the skies open up. The rain fell so hard it snuffed out the fires, and the lightning and thunder roared so loud the townspeople scattered in fear, and it was the most awful night of San Juan in the history of mankind. Her aunt told her how thirteen cats began to caterwaul at the windows of the little stone shack where Selene was born. Hearing them, Selene's mother burst into tears. Her



wailing overpowered her child's. The screams frightened the cats and terrified the baby, who bit down on her mother's breast so hard she drew blood. From that moment on, the woman refused to even look at the girl, her own daughter. As the milk ran from her breasts, which were on the verge of bursting open, she asked to hold her sister's baby instead, and began to nurse it. The creature had only been in this world a week and seemed like it wanted to go back to the other side, shriveling up a little more each day like it was drying out from the inside. But it was a boy and Selene was her parents' seventh girl. So her mother ordered that she be allowed to cry until she wore herself out. Death, of course, being the silencer of all cries. Without knowing why, though, her aunt Milagros took pity on the child. Her own breasts now dry, she gave her a rag soaked in goat's milk. So her mother raised Milagros's son and Milagros raised the girl, and their birth was nothing more than an accident of fate. Truth be told, Selene was the spitting image of her aunt, bony with red hair. Before long, the townspeople assumed Selene was her aunt's only child.

Aunt Milagros wasn't married, but she was the valley's best midwife, so no one said anything. The girl's real mother was married to a blacksmith, a man who never spoke more than three words together. All anyone ever heard him mutter was, "Where's my dinner?"

When he learned his wife had given birth to a seventh daughter, he didn't even register the town's talk of cats and thunderstorms. He went straight to the tavern and, for the first time in his life, spent all night talking to everyone in sight, telling anyone who'd listen that if they had one more

girl, he'd drown her before she could open her eyes. But he didn't lay a finger on Selene, opting to ignore her existence. He took an interest in his nephew and raised the boy like his own. Which wagging tongues would tell you he was. Over time, he seemed to forget he was Selene's father at all. She forgot it too or maybe she never knew. One day, when the little boys in the village stole her pitcher of milk and Selene had to throw stones at them to get it back, one of them, the sheriff's son, tried to make her cry by saying her uncle the blacksmith was really her father. Selene laughed and laughed, and then she spoke the words her enemies would recall before the Tribunal:

“I'd rather be the devil's daughter.”

They said it was my fault all those people died. They said that and I can't figure out how to make anyone believe me. Now they're all dead and there's no one left to tell the truth. Not even me. Because there's no one left to listen. It is written: He who has ears to hear, let him hear. That's why I'm telling you all this. My last friend in the world. My friend who's more than human.

They've always burned the women they call witches. It's painful for me to explain why... They always lie. They lie about everything, but especially about us. Some say it all began the day I found you. It's the devil himself, they said. You were just a big, black dog, smaller back then, and terrified. I saved your life. In time, you'd save mine. That November day when the meteorite fell, many of us were given a remarkable opportunity. The clearing was full of strangers. You were just one more.

At first it was just her. The cripple came later. Things were never the same after the cripple came. Then one day the cripple disappeared and we started seeing her with the black dog. Some people felt sorry for her, but she didn't fool me. I didn't like her. I couldn't tell you exactly why, but I never liked her one bit. I don't know if I was the first to say it, but I was definitely the first one who knew. The girl was a witch. Like her mother and her grandmother before her. The mother was mulatto. She snared the Galan boy, a good boy just like his father. She looked nothing like the mother, who was a witch until the day she died - and probably afterward too. The mother must have taught her black folks' magic, the same magic she used, because the girl had white, white skin and a black soul. Some things just don't change. We can't change them no matter how hard we try.

It was the worst winter of my life. I walked through the rain, pacing the cliffs that framed the village. The water soaked my eyelashes, the ocean roared, and the downpour danced around me like a coven of crazed witches. The water burned like fire. The grass looked like moss creeping toward the abyss. I stopped at the edge of the cliff. Strange powers in the sky and earth had been unleashed, and their only goal was to destroy me. This was no moment for losing my head. The remains of my lunch lay on the grass where I'd vomited them. And that was far from the worst of it. Men I'd never met were coming to kill me. And I had no idea what to do with my life.

I was in Asturias, walking along the cliffs of destiny, getting older with each passing minute. I was 5'4", and in spite of doing laps at the pool in the Raval, I'd never managed to stretch myself any taller. Ever since I was little I wanted to be an airplane pilot, but, on top of being a woman, I was nearsighted. My face was so covered in freckles, I looked like a polka-dotted giraffe. I was too

short to be a flight attendant and it was clear I wasn't going to grow a single inch more, at least not till I was in my grave. In spite of my childhood dream, I'd never even managed to ride in an airplane. I graduated top of my class in the history department and that was something, but it wasn't enough and it didn't last. I got fired. I won the country's first sexual harassment suit. It was in all the papers: A historic case. But that only made things worse. Every time I tried to get a new job, they'd recognize my name and invent some excuse not to hire me. Now I was about to give them the ultimate excuse.

Stop it, I tell myself, what the hell's wrong with you?

Why did you come back here? Did you think you'd find something different? Something new? Some kind of answer? Because the truth is, there are no answers. And the only thing you can be sure of is that you're getting older every minute. Not even forty and it's already too late for you.

You've returned to the town you should never have returned to, where they don't like you and never did. A town up against the edge, just like your life, armed with the settlement money and a flimsy excuse about your fascination with some witch out of history. I almost feel sorry for you. Where do you think all this is going?

Doesn't the truth about witches scare you? That they were poor women like you, that they wanted to be loved like you do. And, in the end, the only thing waiting for them was the fire.

It happened on Pentecost. At the exact moment they tried to bring Luz Cifer Fuentes's body through the main doors of the Priorio parish church, a lightning bolt struck the cupola. Three people were killed. Luz Cifer's body never would make it into the church and, by express order of the senior parish priest, they buried her without mass or benediction in unconsecrated ground outside the cemetery. Everyone said she was a witch.

When I read this news in the paper, I assumed it was a joke that the paper's interns, having more wit than wages, were playing on their long-suffering readers - Sunday or no. But it was no joke. It was the beginning of the most macabre story I've ever had to live.

In the beginning was the word. And the word became a notebook. And it lived among us.

Before a book there is always a cup of tea.

I opened the notebook and wrote: "Damned If She Does."

I've spent the past three years researching Selene, the midwife, the woman who talked to wolves. Unjustly accused, persecuted and, ultimately, burned at the stake.

The work had given my life meaning. Meaningless meaning, like most people's, but it had kept me going.

Then I forgot all about it. What with the trial, the journalists camped out at my door, the black sunglasses, and talk shows, witch hunts stopped being history and took over my life.

The telephone rang and rang. I thought it'd never stop.

But one day it did. They forgot about me. My friends and enemies both. I could be myself again. I could be alone. To some I was a victim, to others, a scheming



whore. I'd read so much about myself that even I wasn't sure who I was anymore.

Every day I'd read the papers, now that they'd finally stopped obsessing over me. I believed in newsprint, in the truth inscribed there. Speech was carried away by the wind. Books forgotten by time. Some part of me believed that there, captured in the ink that stained my fingers, I might find the key, my life's lost meaning.

"I'd rather be the devil's daughter," I'd written and, writing, I realized that was what Selene had said. Groping my way through the dark, every so often I'd come across an old file, some document in the Provincial Archives, a brief mention in someone's dissertation, and I'd catch a glimpse of Selene. The musty papers were like matches illuminating a tableau. The characters in the midwife's story came to life for a few seconds and were plunged into darkness once more. It was like a secret someone was whispering to me in the dark. Someone struck a match and showed me parts of the story in flashes, but the light lasted only an instant. I kept searching for the key that would clear away my doubts. A candle, a lamp, a baptismal certificate that might shine long and bright enough. Then the whole story, the complete picture, which had always been there, would blaze before me. In the meantime, all I had was glimpses. "I'd rather be the devil's daughter," Selene, the blacksmith's daughter, had said.

I started to think my task was impossible, that a historian's job was even worse than a storyteller's. That there'd never been anything new under the sun, or anyone who could find it.

And then I found the story of Luz Cifer. An impossible name for an impossible story. Witches are a European invention, later exported. The rest of the world knows about witchcraft, but not about witches.

Even if we don't want to believe it, all of Europe is the same. Or at least its small towns are. Sundays are for home improvement and being jealous of your neighbor, weekdays for working and saving up to buy a car bigger than your neighbor's. Saturdays are the only time people go into town or out to the country in the hope of doing something different, being someone different for a day, a few hours. It might be beer, soccer, mushroom hunting. Men go out to the country so they can be different.

And some women go back to the country to hide, to be like the others, hoping no one will notice that they aren't. Because some women have always wanted to be like the rest, but they never can.

The day before they burned her Aunt Milagros at the stake, Selene was up before dawn. It was dark, a cock crew, and she was suddenly terrified that the sun would rise too fast and they'd catch her, even though she knew that cocks sang all through the night. She tiptoed out of the house, past the barn, toward the stable, making sure her careful steps were masked by the noise of the animals, who began to stir in their sleep, already dreading the hand that would soon come to milk them, to steal their eggs, to methodically rob them of everything they'd worked so hard to create. She wanted to buy two *maravedis* worth of linen, but someone told her that wool burned better. She had to save some of the money for the executioner's bribe so that he'd use dry, crackling wood. She'd gathered it herself and carried it on her back to the Inquisition prison, even though it was a half a day's walk. The old spinner, her only friend, told her it was futile. If she didn't bribe the executioner, they'd sell off her good firewood and roast her aunt over damp, green logs that burn too slowly and

suffocate you with black smoke. Prayers might help, but gold definitely would. Selene didn't have any money, but luckily, the day before, the mason's wife had been complaining of a terrible toothache. Milagros was the only one in town who could have helped her; now her tools fell to Selene. Wrenching the tooth out was hard, and enduring the insults and screaming was even harder. But the woman felt better that very afternoon and she called Selene back to give her two *maravedis*: One for pulling her tooth and the other to help her aunt. That's when Selene realized the mason's wife was a good woman. Milagros had overseen her deliveries. With nothing but lard and a steady hand, she'd turned a breech baby back around, giving the woman the only boy she'd ever brought into the world.

With Milagros at their side, not a single one of the women in the village had died in childbirth. Now they were trying to give credit to the devil, but the mason's wife didn't care. Her own mother had died in childbirth, she kept telling Selene, and she was grateful no matter what. She hoped the day would come, praise the Lord or praise Satan, when having a baby didn't mean having to die.

Though Selene was only thirteen, she put her hand on the woman's forehead to see if the abscess had caused a fever, and then told her to hush, that words like those could reach other ears, and from there to the Inquisition's, but the mason's wife had already slipped the money into her hand and was closing the door behind her, crossing herself.

## Ainur

Call me Ainur. It's a name like any other. And I'm from anywhere, though once I imagined I was from here. I've lived many places, too many. Thirty-four days ago I left Barcelona forever - or for a length of time that humans call "forever" - and came back to the coast. In my memories, it was like Paradise. You can't trust your childhood memories.

The cliffs are dark, but not as dark as the black sand beaches. The rocks are white; they shine in the soft earth where the grass looks like moss. The wind blows and the houses seem to bow to let it by. At least that's what it seems like at first. Then you realize they're already bent by the centuries, the damp air, the weight of boredom. Everything is beautiful and painful. As I walk, clouds escape my mouth. Sometimes I can see apocalyptic visions inside them. And, sudden, just before I reach the lighthouse, I see the holes. Holes in the ground spewing

out white shreds of sea. The foam howls. The sea boils. These are saltwater geysers. I'd heard they existed, but never seen them before. They say they lifted a man a hundred meters into the air. They say he fell to earth in pieces so small they spent days collecting him and, in the end, they gave him up to the sea. After all, the sea is sacred.

In my grandmother's land they were called buffoons. Because they snort. Because they bellow. I think they scream. There is a monster hidden in this land that screams to be let out. And, a few seconds later, the wind shifts and the sea quiets. And there is something I miss. With the buffoons there, the landscape frightens me, but without them it makes me sad. At that moment the fog rolls in and the lighthouse lights up. I run toward it. To the lighthouse.

And the man with red gloves races to meet me.

I write for the same reader that lovers do when they  
trace their names in sand at the beach.

Except I write in desert sand.

And that desert is my life.

# *THE NORTHERN VOICE*

EDITORIAL

## No Sign of Ainur

It's been three weeks already since the disappearance of Ainur, the woman who changed Spanish history when she won the country's first harassment suit. Sources close to the missing woman say that she had received death threats. The mayor of Idumea, the man now convicted of sexual and professional harassment, has denied any connection to the alleged threats and insists that he will not rest until the case has been resolved. At the same time, he assured us that his conviction will be overturned: "I'll do whatever it takes. I'll go all the way to the Supreme and the Constitutional Courts, I'll go wherever I have to go and I'll do whatever I have to do to clear my name and to right this wrong committed against my village and my family." Yesterday in Idumea, his village of five thousand, crowds gathered once again in front of the local church council, chanting, "Mayor, Mayor!", "Whore, Whore, Whore!", and "Witch, Witch, Witch!" The protest, which had not been authorized by local authorities, was dispersed without incident.



I'd expected the village to change, that it'd be bigger or smaller; I wasn't prepared for it to be exactly the same. The only difference was the colors. They seemed faded now, ghostly, as if the fog that rolled down the mountains each morning had begun to erase them. That's how she felt: Erased.

She'd won the trial, but when she looked in the mirror, it was like the Tribunal had taken all the shine from her eyes, the sparks that had always turned her small, ugly eyes into lighthouses so she wouldn't get lost in the dark.

Now hers was a face without eyes. She looked inward, like a blind man.

I was poor and when I got money I found that I was still poor. You spend your whole life as rich or as poor as you were as a child.

They gave me money.

To shut me up.

When you have money, the money is like a feather bed. It doesn't change reality, it cushions it. Sometimes the feather bed reaches up the walls, but even then it can't save you from reality, it just makes the voices sound muffled, distant.

And money can't ever erase your memories.

“You make me do things I don’t want to do.”

“Me?”

“Don’t contradict me, I’m not trying to reprimand you, I don’t want to interrogate you, but you keep making me.”

“I haven’t done anything you could reprimand me for.”

“That’s not my understanding of the situation.”

“May I ask what you’re accusing me of?”

“Your coworkers have assured me...”

“What coworkers?”

“I’ve sworn not to reveal their identity.”

“How am I supposed to defend myself if I don’t know what’s being said about me by who?”

“It seems you held an orgy in your office.”

“An orgy?”

“Yes, the premise being that it was to celebrate you finally getting your masters.”

“All I did was buy everyone some Cokes.”

“I’ve heard otherwise. I’m told there was all kinds of alcohol being drunk. And that the party wasn’t confined to the lobby, but spread across the whole executive floor. They tell me that a young woman, whose name I have also ferreted out, took her panties off on top of my desk and, one by one, various coworkers satisfied their baser instincts.”

“You can’t possibly believe that and I can’t imagine you made it up yourself.”

My boss spun the cigar around in his mouth like a screwdriver. It spun in his mouth, which is the detail that messes with my head. I thought his mouth might jump off and fall on the floor at any second.

“You make me believe these things, you make me take disciplinary action, when you and I both know that things could go down very differently. They could still be very different.”