



# Story of the Female Avenger and the Archangel in the Palace of Sinners

Dear Mr. Writer:

I am moved to write to you not out of admiration but out of pity for your minimal inspiration and limited imagination. In your prose, which is as proper as it is pedestrian, readers never find anything they haven't already read.

This letter offers you the chance to reveal your normally hidden talent, that is, if you have some hidden somewhere. Believe me, you don't need to be a genius to cook up a good story with all the ingredients I'll give you. You may be wondering: Why me and not another? In the first place, someone gave me your address. In the second place, all writers worth their salt are six feet under where the postman doesn't go.





Let's start with the scene: high on a hill, in a white tower that reached the stars, stood the brothel of Comayagua. The church was below. Half the town went to the brothel, the whole town went to mass and the processions. That's how Comayagua yawned its way through history.

In case it's of any use, I'll transcribe a traveler's summation of the attitude of the respectable ladies: *The scandal began here after Independence when close dances hit town. In the times of the Spaniards, people danced apart without touching, the minuet from France, the jota from Aragón. . .*

The brothel belonged to Don Idilio Gallo. The girls worked night and day without a moment's rest. Don Idilio drained their youth to the last drop. When they were bone-dry, he sent them back to the street. I beg you not to spend too many words on this point, dear writer, given your notorious tendency to preach, and do allow Calamity Jane to come on stage right away. After all, while their treatment may have left something to be desired, Don Idilio Gallo's girls didn't have it so bad—compared with the rest of the frogs croaking at the bottom of that hole.

Calamity Jane arrived in bad shape, slumped over the back of her horse Satan. She came from the Far West, chased by the echoes of Apache drums. She crossed the mountains of three countries, guided by the reflections of her diamond ring on rocky canyon walls. Calamity brought along the ring, which disappeared the first night. And she also brought along her well-earned fame of having a mother's heart, a happy trigger finger, an infallible lasso, and marked cards.



The girls took her in without Don Idilio knowing. She slept for a week. When she awoke, she faced him: "The hat," she said.

Instead of uncovering his head, Don Idilio, who wasn't much of a gentleman, pulled his Stetson down to his eyebrows. Calamity drew her Colt and blew it off with one shot.

Continuing to shoot, she kept the hat in the air. When the hat-turned-colander finally came down, Don Idilio Gallo let out a moan and Calamity blew the smoke from her gun. "That's why I didn't stay in Rapid City," she said. "They kill a lot in that shit hole."

Does mentioning the names Colt or Stetson seem superfluous? I'm not surprised. But a professional writer ought to know that in a credible narrative the smallest details matter most. And by the way, I suggest you take into account that Calamity used a Springfield rifle, not a Winchester as some idiots claim.



Let's continue. They played poker. The bets went up as the bottles of Jamaican rum went down, until Don Idilio lost the brothel and everything else. That overbearing pitiless man didn't even blink. He accepted his ruin with the fatalism characteristic of the Gallos, descendants of sen-tries who in earthquakes would sit and wait for the house to fall in on them. Calamity gave him a letter of recommendation for Buffalo Bill's circus.

With nothing else in his pockets, Don Idilio left for Paris. There he put on feathers and dressed up as a redskin chief, posed for profile shots, and died of pneumonia.

The brothel, which had been cold as a hospital and hard as a barracks, became filled up with birds and guitars, plants and colors. From dusk till dawn the girls opened their legs. But during the day, and until the first bells of the Angelus, they opened their ears. Experience gave them the idea. They knew that behind every macho with balls hides a shipwrecked sailor begging for refuge. Their confessional was so successful that it overflowed with multitudes from the enemy city of Tegucigalpa and from everywhere else. On the sides of the hill, long lines of men waited their turn to pour out doubts and secrets and hidden fears, dreams and nightmares. The church couldn't compete. Priests, as you know, only hear the confession of sins, which is what people least need to confess.



Meanwhile, Calamity got busy straightening out her papers with Mr. Government. This woman who had always worn pants put on a skirt. She tucked a Collins bayonet into her garter and money into her undershirt.

"In an envelope," instructed Mr. Government when Calamity slipped him a fistful of hot bills. And by decree the brothel, non-profit cooperative that it was, was exempted from all taxes and new whorehouses were prohibited in the entire national territory.

In that year of crazy prosperity, the archangel arrived. According to tradition, the palace of sinners closed its doors every Friday during Lent. And according to tradition, after Jesus of Nazareth had traveled Calvary Street on the shoulders of pious women, and the last echoes of Passion canticles and Via Crucis prayers had faded, a headless horseman would appear at full gallop from the mouth of the night. The horse would kick the brothel doors, give a few terrifying bucks, and tear off, chased by whirlwinds and puffs of sulfur. Then, according to tradition, one of the wayward sheep would repent and tearfully abandon her lustful ways to begin an honest life.

That Friday, the headless horseman galloped in, blind with fury like every year, but this time the doors were open wide. The black horse went right through the brothel and disappeared in the distance; the horseman rolled onto the ground, knocked into a Tiffany lamp, and crashed against a wall. He woke up in a woman's arms. "Listen, señora," he protested.

"Señorita," Calamity Jane corrected him.

The horseman was an archangel, an elderly dwarf with a red nose and the voice of a child, dressed by God to look like a headless devil and frighten licentious women.

There was lightning and rain all night and the world awoke more luminous than ever. Morning surprised the archangel in the midst of a sitz bath, sitting in a pool of green papaya milk. The poor man had hurt his ass when the rope that lowered him from heaven broke. Beside him, Calamity, mouth open, let him do as he pleased. With honey and cinnamon, the archangel cleansed her tongue soiled by insolent cursing.

Please, I beg you, don't offend me by asking if this really happened. I'm offering it to you so you'll make it happen. I'm not asking you to describe the rain falling the night the archangel arrived: I'm demanding that you get me wet. Make up your mind, Mr. Writer, and for once in your life be the flower that smells rather than the chronicler of the aroma. There's not much pleasure in writing what you live. The challenge is to live what you write. And at your age it's time you learned.

I'll continue. As you know from the available iconography, archangels have no sex but they do have stomachs. If Adam fell for a plain old apple, how was the archangel not to give in? The brothel offered



him the delicacies of its orchard: the golden flesh of the mango, the dizzying breath of the passion fruit, the freshness of the pineapple, the softness of the guanabana and the avocado.

And, as everyone knows, archangels have souls; and a soul needs to confess, even if it doesn't sin. Calamity complained about the Wild West and the archangel complained about Heaven. Chocolate kept them company by day; rum by night. She said that if she owned Wyoming and hell, she would rent out Wyoming and live in hell. And he said that having spent all eternity serving the Lord in Paradise by doing the hardest chores, the Ingrate thanked him by sending him to earth to redeem drunks and whores. She told rude secrets about General Custer and Sheriff Wild Bill Hickok, and he railed against the advisers of the Holiest One. And talking, they discovered they had spent their entire lives alone and hadn't realized it.

Some afternoons Calamity took the archangel out for a walk in the streets of Comayagua in a baby carriage. They walked proudly, impervious to resentment and envy. They were pursued by the evil tongues of anti-imperialists, atheists, and the advocates of virtue and good manners. And there were always skeptics who would elbow each other and ask under their breath: How come Calamity Jane doesn't understand a word of English? What kind of an archangel doesn't have wings or a sword of fire and doesn't know a word of Latin? How come the two of them talk with accents from around here?

I don't know if this happened. I only know that it deserves to have happened.

The rest is the least of it. Time covered all tracks. You might imagine that the archangel had a fine time, life was a lot more fun than salvation. But you might also suppose that in the end Calamity tired of it all. You could suppose that in a palace wallpapered with mirrors that gave away her age she would find no place to hide. Imagine the brothel in its glory, with the National Symphonic Orchestra playing till dawn, and one night Calamity dances the belly dance, naked under a red negligee, and the audience applauds with cackles and sniggers and she fights back the tears. And the next day she leaves. She leaves without saying goodbye, when no one is looking. Her horse Satan kneels down to help her mount. She doesn't go north, back to her origins. She continues the trip south toward her destiny. Someone must have heard the sound of hoofbeats and the whistle. She was whistling. To keep herself company? To get up her courage? You choose.

And the archangel? Did Calamity take him along in her lap? Did he go back to heaven? Did he try? Did he become a man at last, a new *Idilio Gallo*? Don't bother asking. No one could answer, not in Comayagua or in any other town on the planet. Sorry, Mr. Writer, *homo scribere*, you have no choice but to make it up.

Yours,

(Signature illegible)

