On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross the courtyard and throw them into the sea. They thought the smell was making the baby sick. The sky was dark when Pelayo was coming back to the house. He could just see something moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He went very close and saw that it was a very old man, lying face down. The man’s enormous wings were stuck in the mud. A

Frightened, Pelayo ran to get his wife Elisenda. They both looked at the fallen body. He was dressed like a ragpicker. There were only a few hairs left on his head, and there were very few teeth in his mouth. His wings were covered in mud. Pelayo and Elisenda looked closely at him for a long time. When they finally spoke, he answered in a language they couldn’t understand. So they ignored the wings and decided that he had probably come from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. Still, they called in a neighbor who knew everything to see him. After one look, she could show them their mistake. B

“He’s an angel,” she told them. “He must have been coming for the child, but he is so old that the rain knocked him down.” C

The next day everyone knew that an angel was in Pelayo’s house. Against the judgment of the wise neighbor, they did not
have the heart to club him to death. That night, before going to bed, Pelayo dragged the old man out of the mud and locked him in the chicken coop. In the middle of the night, the child woke up without a fever. Then Pelayo and Elisenda felt generous. They decided to put the angel on a raft on the ocean with enough fresh water and food to last three days. But in the morning, they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop. People were tossing the angel things to eat as if he were a circus animal.  

Father Gonzaga arrived before seven o’clock. By that time, onlookers were making all kinds of guesses about the prisoner’s future. Some people thought that he should be named mayor of the world or a five-star general. Father Gonzaga entered the chicken coop to look closely at the pitiful man.  

The old man was lying in a corner drying his wings in the sunlight. He lifted his ancient eyes and murmured something when Father Gonzaga said good morning to him in Latin. The priest believed that the angel was a fake when he saw that the old man did not understand Latin. Then the priest noticed that the old man smelled of the outdoors. His feathers had been damaged by winds, and nothing about him seemed at all like an angel. Father Gonzaga left the chicken coop and warned the people not to be too trusting. He reminded them that the devil often used tricks to confuse people. He argued that wings were not enough to recognize an angel. Still, he promised to write a letter to his bishop. The bishop would send the letter up the chain of command all the way to the Pope.  

The priest’s warnings had little effect. The news of the angel spread so quickly that in a few hours the courtyard was as busy as a marketplace. Elisenda then got the idea of fencing in the yard and charging people five cents each to see the angel. Curious people came from far away. The most unfortunate and sick people on earth came in search of health. There was a man who couldn’t sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him. There was a sleepwalker who got up at night to undo the things he had done while awake. And there were many others with less serious problems. Pelayo and Elisenda were happy. In less than a week
they had filled their rooms with money and the line of visitors still went on and on. D

The angel was the only one who took no part. He spent his time trying to get comfortable. At first they tried to make him eat mothballs, which the wise neighbor said were angel food. But he turned them down, just as he turned down the lunches that people brought him. They never found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he was an old man, but he ate nothing but eggplant mush. His only angelic virtue seemed to be patience. The hens pecked at him, and injured visitors pulled out feathers to touch their broken limbs with. Even kind people threw stones at him, trying to get him to stand up. Once they even burned his side with an iron. He awoke with a start, ranting in his mysterious language. E F With tears in his eyes, he flapped
his wings a couple of times. That brought on a whirlwind of dust and made everyone panic. From then on people were careful not to annoy him. Most understood that he was a disaster waiting to happen. 

Father Gonzaga waited for a final judgment about the prisoner. But the mail from Rome showed no sign of hurrying. They had many questions. Did the prisoner have a belly button? Did his language have any connection with Aramaic? Might he just be a Norwegian with wings? The letters might have come and gone forever, but a fortunate event put an end to the priest’s difficulties.

A woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents arrived in town. The admission to see her was less than the admission to see the angel. And people could ask her all kinds of questions and examine her up and down. She was a tarantula the size of a ram with the head of a sad girl. In a heartbreaking way, she told her sad story. A sight like that, with such a fearful lesson, was sure to defeat an angel who barely looked at people. Besides, the angel’s miracles showed a certain strangeness. A blind man didn’t get back his sight but grew three new teeth. A paralyzed man didn’t walk but almost won the lottery. 

Such miracles had already ruined the angel’s reputation. Then the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely.

The owners of the house had no reason to be sad. With the money they saved they built a mansion with balconies and gardens and iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn’t get in. Pelayo gave up his job, and Elisenda bought satin high-heeled shoes and silk dresses. The chicken coop was the only thing that didn’t receive any attention. If they washed it every so often, it was not out of respect to the angel. It was to drive away the terrible smell that still hung everywhere. When the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the

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1. Aramaic was a Middle Eastern language spoken by Jesus and his followers.
smell. Soon the child went inside the chicken coop to play. The angel was as standoffish with him as with other mortals, but he tolerated insults with the patience of a dog. They both got chickenpox at the same time. The doctor who took care of the child couldn’t resist the temptation to listen to the angel’s heart. He found so much whistling there that it seemed impossible that he was alive. What surprised the doctor most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural that he couldn’t understand why other men didn’t have them too.

By the time the child began school, the chicken coop had collapsed. The angel now dragged himself around like a dying man. He could scarcely eat. His eyes were so foggy that he bumped into things, and all his feathers were gone. Pelayo threw a blanket over him and let him sleep in the shed. Only then did they notice that he had a fever. They became alarmed, for they thought he was going to die. Not even the wise neighbor knew what to do with dead angels.

And yet he survived the winter, and seemed improved with the first sunny days. At the beginning of December some large, stiff feathers began to grow on his wings. He must have known the reason for the changes. He carefully made sure that no one noticed them. One morning a strong wind blew into the kitchen. Elisenda went to the window and saw the angel clumsily trying to fly. He managed to take off. Elisenda let out a sigh of relief when she saw him pass over the last houses. She kept watching until she couldn’t see him. Then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot over the sea.