

Against the lush backdrop of rural El Salvador at the turn of the century, Claudia Lars' richly evocative memoir is a simple, profound tribute to the folklore, customs, and traditions of a people. It is a lyrical exaltation of her land's beauty, tingling with warm, vibrant imagery. Born to an Irish-Scot father and a Salvadoran mother, Lars takes readers on an enchanting journey that celebrates her dual heritage and, with innocence and charm, the gradual self-awareness of a child who, from a very young age, was endowed with the gifts of a poet.

Land of Childhood was first published in El Salvador in 1950. Newly in its seventeenth edition, it is an award-winning classic that has become a beloved national classic as well as a required reading for students in secondary schools and university classrooms.

Claudia Lars (1899-1974) was a gifted Salvadoran writer whose extensive body of work earned her much critical praise and recognition throughout Latin America. She edited one book of prose and fourteen books of poetry, establishing herself as El Salvador's most distinguished poet.



Land of Childhood

Claudia Lars Translated by Florence Beers Araujo

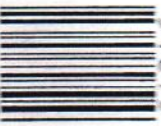
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CLAUDIA LARS

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CHEILES

My father was born in the United States of America, not far from Scranton, Pennsylvania. His friend, Mister Jeffries, was a native of Atlanta, Georgia. The two men had spent their childhood and adolescence in very different environments and, despite their strong friendship, their distinct personalities often placed them on opposing sides.

My father belonged to an adventurous Irish family who had endured poverty and innumerable difficulties. They had hopelessly fought for their island's freedom and had later enthusiastically embraced the democratic ideas of the New World, where they believed they had finally found the promised land. Mister Jeffries, on the other hand, had been raised by a chocolate-colored servant amidst the rich milieu of the southern cotton plantations.

They say Jeffries did not leave his country for any material reasons, but because he longed to know other lands and other peoples. Like Cortés and Pizarro, he probably thought he would find, within the confines of the mysterious tropical jungles, glittering palaces, or perhaps a barefoot Indian princess with the eyes of a gazelle. I am sure that he never would have joined the savage creature in the bonds of matrimony, but I am just as certain that he would have fallen in love with her with all the impetuosity of his passionate heart. Very proper and southern in his speech, he was never afraid of publicly denouncing the Yankees' many sins, and when someone talked about the incredible awakening of Georgia's colored people, of the industries that were replacing the old plantations, of the demands and victories of the working masses, Jeffries would always express his controversial views, shocking and scandalizing people. His outbursts had made him famous.

Mister Jeffries was not tall, but he had the strength of an athlete. His tanned skin, his sharp, vigilant eyes, taut lips, strong arms, and limber legs reminded me of a satiated jaguar. At his side, my father looked like a starving eagle.

Jeffries had married a fine and elegant woman in Costa Rica, but due to his restless nature, he soon separated from his wife and devoted himself to wandering across the Central American isthmus. In Nicaragua, he killed alligators and snakes; in Guatemala, he visited the ancient Mayan ruins and collected idols and

jade beads; in Panama, he participated in a daring imperialistic venture which he related with tremendous pride and enthusiasm; in El Salvador he associated with anti-government groups in the frequent revolutions at the turn of the century; and in Honduras he performed such extraordinary feats that the locals soon began to call him "the general." On one of his cheeks, a stray bullet had left a dark mark, and every scar on his body was testament to his intrepid exploits.

Gracious with the ladies, this exceptional character was also a friend to the neighborhood children and an expert leader of Indians and mestizos. Demanding at times, yet always fair, he never imposed his authority in a cruel manner or got angry without just cause. He vehemently fought for his convictions and honor, and those who contradicted him had to be prepared to suffer the consequences, for Jeffries was a terrible adversary. Nevertheless, his servant professed him great affection, his dog followed him like a shadow, and in cheap cafés or dark taverns, humble patrons often invited him to a drink or a cup of coffee. Like a Spanish aristocrat, he was capable of befriending any boor without losing his status as a gentleman. He was known for mocking many of his fellow Americans and for condemning their insatiable greed, expressing with great emphasis his dislike for such "sharks." However, he would never allow anybody to show contempt for the United States or ridicule one of his compatriots.

"I can insult my mother because I am her son," he would say in a rage, readying his fists for combat, "but I will not let anyone else insult her!"

Ironically, this complex individual would also defend Central American people from American travelers, whose remarks and attitudes greatly exasperated him and provoked him to say terrible things:

"Idiot! They think they can keep these beautiful lands in a cannet! They believe they are John Lloyd Stephens, yet they confuse the ruins of Copán with the city of Tegucigalpa! They are foolish, superimmunized beings, who get dare then after eating a guava, and play prissy games like tennis and golf instead of confronting the dangers of the jungle!"

When Jeffries passed through El Salvador, on his way to another country, he always visited our village and stayed at "the small house." That house was my father's haven, and was arranged according to his preferences. It had a vine-covered veranda, a bright parlor with crammed bookshelves where he would sequester himself to read, draw, or secretly write mystic love poems, and a small patio where several gardenias opened their white and fragrant petals. In the garden, next to the patio, he cultivated his rose-colored cocoa-plum trees, his sweet mangoes, and his mandarin oranges. Since my mother and Grandfather didn't understand English and had no desire to learn, my father usually entertained his

American guests at his cottage where, despite its modest dimensions, he felt they would be more comfortable.

Almost every Saturday, *chicks* arrived on the afternoon train: from San Salvador, from Acajucla, and from the mines located in the eastern part of the small republic. They appeared on the main street of our village, wearing white linen suits, straw hats, and the smiles of contented folk. All day Sunday, they rested on comfortable rocking chairs or hammocks, stuffing fine tobacco in their long amber pipes, and watching the volcano's eruptions.

"The misters are here," Chica would say, as she occupied herself in the big house's kitchen. "There they are, babbling away and sipping that drink they like so much."

For the family servants, "babbling away" was speaking any language other than their deformed Spanish, and the drink the misters seemed to relish was none other than Scotch whiskey mixed with water.

On several occasions, Joe Milner, the same slender vagabond who had accompanied young Patrick on his expeditions through South America, and whom my father regarded with brotherly affection, joined the group of friends at the small house. He was either traveling from Jamaica, or on his way to California, returning from Mexico, or waiting for the ship that would take him to Panama.

"Where is Lady Rowena?" he would cheerfully demand the moment he arrived at our home. "I have wonderful a surprise for her!"

And since I was Lady Rowena—a name Joe Milner had given me in honor of Walter Scott's heroine—he would carefully open his bulging canvas bag and hand me a pair of cowboy pants, a box of candied fruit, a case of colored pencils, and a string of shiny, glass beads. Barely containing their impatience, every member of the household would then gather around him, as Joe distributed lovely, unexpected gifts with the skill and flair of a magician.

"Seeds for *Niña* Teresa's garden!...A recipe book for *Niña* Adela!...A lace doily for *Niña* Mina's dresser!...This doll for Maruca!...This one for her friend Erlinda!...A dictionary for *Niña* Mechel!...Soaps for Juana Morales!...Two fancy combs for Chica!...An apron for Andrea!...A petticoat for Toribial!...A Mexican leather belt for Don Felipe!"

"And...this dress...is for the lady of the house," he would finally say, with a deep bow.

Blushing, my mother would admire a green satin dress with embroidered ruffles and a low-cut, scooped neckline that would have scandalized the neighbors and the ladies of the village, who usually wore simple, cotton dresses. Thus, the luxurious garment would be reserved for special occasions—perhaps for a visit to

the capital, where provincial families who could afford the trip would eagerly crowd into a dismal theater to watch a mediocre presentation of *La Trinitaria*, *Amor, or Rigoleto*.

"And what did you bring for me?" my father would playfully interrupt.

"For you, Pat, something exquisite. Just exactly what you need."

Joe would then offer his friend a small package and, after suspiciously removing several layers of colorful tissue paper, my father would burst out laughing and utter an expletive in English. It was a box of laxatives!

Joe Milner's visits always brought great happiness to the children of the household, whom he amused with entertaining stories and whimsical songs. At night, he would go near a wall and, with his hands' shadows, give life and movement to a variety of amusing little animals. Sometimes, he would tell us the tale of Rip Van Winkle, Sir Walter Raleigh, Pocahontas and Captain Smith's tender adventures, or accounts of how the Pilgrims came to America in the Mayflower. His narratives, however, would distinctly acquire added enthusiasm and vivacity when he recalled Lake Titicaca, "so high, it almost seems like heaven's doorway," the Andes' snowcapped peaks, the majestic city of Lima, "where all women look like flowers," and the river-sea that pulses and glides through the dark jungles of Brazil.

His voice was soft and full of profound scales, and his gaze seemed to contemplate a road of memories. At the time, I knew very little about his character and personal affairs, yet he so impressed my childish sensitivity, that his attractive figure has remained engraved in my memory, with vivid colors and details: his decimer's face, his melancholic eyes, his eloquent rhetoric, his loyal affection, and the thoughtful gifts that suggested we had accompanied him on his voyages throughout foreign lands.

One day, Joe Milner and General Jeffries arrived together at the small house and remained there for several months. They both felt tired and needed a good rest. It was during this particular visit, that Joe, the general, and my father decided to expand and cultivate the small gardenia plantation. They wanted to impress Mister Jenkins and my father's other frequent guests, who were especially fond of the beautiful, white flowers. Using special gardening tools, the three friends began to remove clods, to open new holes, and to build better hedges, fretfully hovering over the baby plants and eagerly anticipating the future crop's sweet perfume. However, along with the first tiny buds, a battalion of *zompobos* also arrived—Central American leaf-cutter ants which, with their tireless pincers, can decimate an entire vine in one single night.

Since back in those days insecticides were unknown in El Salvador, as well as in most countries around the world, farmers had to fight truly difficult battles against an infinity of unrelenting insects. The three gardeners tried a variety of known remedies in a desperate attempt to destroy the importunate pests, but their methods were hopelessly inadequate. They were almost ready to give up, when the general—honoring his nickname—informed his comrades that he had prepared a magic formula that contained everything from sulfur to gunpowder, and could set the very sea on fire. According to the inventor, they could readily eliminate their foe by irrigating the potent mixture into their subterranean homes. Once victory was attained, it would be easy to patent the invention and make a huge profit.

Thus, on a beautiful moonlit night, the three friends placed the strange concoction at the mouth of each anthill and, after opening the faucets at the back of the main house, waited for the water to flood their enemies' underground cities through carefully constructed channels. As they triumphantly watched the water slowly disappear into the holes, the weary men finally decided to go to bed, confident they had put an end to their annoying problem.

Grandfather's two nieces lived behind the small house. They spent their lives embroidering, darning, baking pastries, and growing old amidst endless anxieties and pruderies. The two spinsters always carried paper fans decorated with birds and butterflies, and never set foot on the street without a parasol to protect them from the sun. Because they were uncommonly small, they were known around the village as the *Veguita* sisters.

Back in those days, American toilets had not yet appeared in our country, and latrines in well-to-do homes consisted of deep excavations covered with movable lids that served as a seat. Such compartments looked like royal thrones and were located in little adobe huts a short distance from the rest of the house.

The morning after the horticultural experiment, the spinsters' cries stirred the entire neighborhood into an uproar. Still in their nightgowns, the two women frantically interrupted each other as they attempted to explain what had happened:

"We were awakened by a strange smell that seemed to come from there...from the latrine," they breathlessly repeated in a shrill voice. "Prying to all the saints, we lit a lamp, removed the lid, and looked inside. The stench became unbearable, and to our horror, we noticed the hole was filling up with water! An aquatic vein from the volcano has probably reached our house and now everything is flooded and smells of sulfur!"

The three accomplices soon realized that the water that had been pouring into the anthills all night had somehow found its way to the sisters' latrine. Laughing until tears rolled down their cheeks, they closed the faucets and bit their tongues so as not to reveal their secret. Later, they joined the curious crowd and went to visit the flooded house.

"It smells of sulfur," said Joe Milner, wrinkling his nose.

"Yes, it smells of sulfur," agreed my father.

"What we have here is definitely volcanic sulfur," explained the general, with the solemnity of a scientist.

The mayor assured Grandfather that such an unusual occurrence had probably originated in the volcano. The priest, the school principal, the telegraphist, and the rest of the townspeople shared the same opinion. A reporter from the capital wrote a long article about "the mysterious geological phenomenon," and the *Veguita* sisters were delighted to see their name and picture in the newspaper.

Time went by with its trials and tribulations, and one rainy day in August we received news that Joe Milner had died. He died during one of his endless voyages, following a path that ultimately led him to the most beautiful place he had ever visited, taking with him the magic of his words and the twinkle of his deep, blue eyes. Nevertheless, the memory of his marvelous narratives has remained alive and vibrant in a sensitive heart, which now invokes his name and writes upon his footsteps these simple words of love: what a great friend he was!

Mister Jeffries went into seclusion as he grew older, and later took refuge in the home of noble friends. One morning, the general decided to return to his country. He wanted to see his son and his daughters, now married and living in Atlanta; he wanted to enjoy the delicious Georgian cuisine; he wanted to admire the forgotten landscapes; to talk in his own language and with his own people. He would later return to these lands, for he was a tropical bird. He was certain that the winter frosts would aggravate his ailments and his rheumatism. He just wanted to play in the snow for a while, like when he was a little boy.

And the general left at last, full of dreams and projects...He never came back, for the first December snows carried him to his grave. There, in the land of the old cotton plantations, his bones turned into grass and flowers, or perhaps into a tall, majestic tree which, on autumn afternoons, sings a nostalgic song of sunshine.

TALKING WITH MY MOTHER

Upon finishing this book of memories, I want to tell you—my beloved dead mother—words I dared not speak before, but that vibrated in the depths of my secrets like little bubbles of love.

I regret not saying them sooner, for they were yours from my initial efforts at learning the human language. Nonetheless, I know that silence, that guardian of dreams and songs, was never a cause for misunderstandings between us. Weren't you the silent one par excellence? Didn't you always prefer a smile to a verse, or an unshed tear to a promise or an apology?

Your soft, tranquil ways placated my childish, rebellious explosions. You followed the path of my storms with quiet wisdom, perhaps because you suspected I knew how to fly better than some birds. I believe you embodied the land of my first joys, the soil that shared with me its September herbs, its summer flowers, and the roads that led me to safe places. Your mountain of patience reminded me of the mountain of my excursions, veiled in mystery and softly palpitating throughout its verdant recesses.

Your humbleness concealed a miraculous fire that strengthened your natural fragility, keeping it erect and full of virtues. Your constant mindfulness of the clock and your ever-present desire to serve us turned domestic chores into an efficient art. If at times you seemed older than our matriarchs' pictures on the wall, there were times when you magically recaptured inexplicable youth. Oh life, that softly raised me from its deepest roots! Grave now covered by vegetal blankets, where a single patch of lilies tries not to suffer the unfamiliar solitude! And the poem I read to you one afternoon, as you listened to it without a comment, again acquires its sweet simplicity:

*How to retell childhood?
Playing playful games...
My mother's skirt:
That starched field of violets.*