

# And If I Were Susana San Juan... (Fragment\*)

Susana Pagano



It's no accident that Susana San Juan and I have the same name; I myself was the inspiration for the character. Nor is it a coincidence that his name is Juan. He came to my house one day dragging those melancholic eyes behind him like a soul in Purgatory dragging its sins. "I brought you a present," he said. He left a hardback book on the dining room table, a book that was unopened, a new one. He knows I like new books; old books are full of odors from a past that has nothing to do with me. Juan's gift was like a penetration into my own reality, an infiltration into the raw ingredients of my flesh and my soul. He left without a word, leaving me alone with his creation and my memories, memories that I was not yet aware of. I read the novel for the first time in a state of something like hypnosis, where the person holding the book in her hands was not me but her, Susana San Juan. A Susana San Juan in ecstasy as she

read her reflection in me, Susana, the character whose power over the man who idolizes her goes far beyond limits, frontiers and material goods. A power she does not know she possesses.

I wept more than my eyes would allow and I possessed it. I made each word, each character and each situation mine. Juan only looked at me with a smile every time I reread his book. He didn't say a word; he just observed me and stroked my hair. Susana San Juan, melancholic and obsessed with memories, could only be me: the reflection of myself in the mirror of a printed book.

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Ask the living, because the dead no longer respond, they become deaf fools; ask the living Susana, even if they don't answer you either, but never ask the dead; they're idiots, with their pale blue stares that only those who love the cold



have, with their mouths stretched by iron rods to simulate a smile, a smile they never wore when they were alive.

You were born in a town in the Bajío region; then you came here, to the capital, where everyone rushes around, and nobody has time to stop and look at your wood-coloured eyes. But no one ever told you why you ended up in a world half in ruins, empty of souls and plagued with noisy people.

Ask them to tell you who your grandmother is, that octogenarian relic whose eyes observe you afraid to ask who you are and what you're doing in her house eating her chocolates. Sitting in the same armchair smoking a long, reeking pipe, that's how you remember her ever since you were a child. She doesn't appear in your parents' wedding photos; somebody said she spent a quarter of a century in a lunatic asylum, where your grandfather sent her to be locked up. But you've no idea why; you never ask too many questions; maybe you're not really interested in finding out too much and you don't believe your grandfather could have been so

bad. After all, he bought you sweets and watched the cartoons with you.

Ask them how your mother and father met, when their first kiss was and if they ever loved each other. But, above all, ask why you were born and who said you'd be happy in your life and with them.

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You're burning me up Juan; you're draping me with your flames, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. Do you really think I'm so insensitive? It's hurting me and killing me, can't you see? You were here watching me; you didn't say anything but the silent words that came out of your eyes. Then you left and I felt angry; I felt angry because you'd left like you always do, without saying a word. But you're still here; I can still feel your eyes watching me, and I can still touch your smell as it floats through the air. You can't get away from me, even if you leave me every day. I kept your essence but you stole mine, and that's why I'm just half of myself. I've got you but I haven't got myself.

That's why I spent a whole week in bed. The seven nights with fever seemed never-ending, with cold sweats all over my body and my throat so dry I could hardly breathe. I thought of Susana San Juan a lot. It's a shame you couldn't come to pay me a visit, I'd have felt better if I'd only seen you...

My mother is a strange woman too, she never stops telling me I'm in the way and I'm nothing but a nuisance in her life. I think she says those things because I'm not married. But when I'm ill she never leaves my side. Maybe that's why I fall ill so often. Sometimes

I tell her to go away, to leave me alone, but she never does. She spent the entire week in a rocking chair that creaks and reminds me of horror films. She told me things or read me the newspaper every day.

Then I asked her to read me your



novel out loud, very loud so I could hear it properly and not miss a thing. She didn't mind doing it, but she didn't understand a word. She thought it was funny that Susana San Juan was called Susana like me, but she didn't like the character. She said she was crazy, but I don't agree....

All my mother remembers about my grandmother was when she got told off for eating chocolates behind other people's backs. She was seven when a strange man and a strange woman dressed in white arrived. That's why my mother has never dressed in white, not even the day she got married.

They were the ones who took my grandmother away. I was a little girl when she came back home, a small pile of rags and a gaze more in the past than in the present.

"She wasn't really crazy, but your grandfather hated her and that was the only way he could get rid of her and have all the lovers he wanted."

"My grandfather was a good man, he bought me sweets and took me to the park."

"He loved you. I don't know why."

"I loved him too. He was a good man."

"You've always been stupid, Susana."

"Uncle Jaime says my grandmother banged her head against the wall and wet her pants. I think she really must have been crazy."

"Don't be crude, Susana."

"And she got drunk just about every day. What does delirium tremens mean?"

"Jaime just talks rubbish. He's stupid."

"Yes, everyone's stupid. Am I stupid, too, Mother?"

My temperature went down instead of up. I wanted to stay ill so that I could sleep forever like Susana San Juan and so that my mother would be there telling me stories and reading your book and your stories to me. But I felt better each day. All I wanted was to keep on dreaming of you and my grandfather and the character you created, the character that's really me.

The last night I was ill my grandmother entered the room. I felt the smell of her pipe wedged into my nose. I hate the smell of her pipe be-

cause it reminds me of my grandfather. My grandfather smoked a pipe too, and my grandfather's dead.

"Are you sick again, Susana?"

"Yes."

"Temperature?"

"Yes, can't you see?"

"You need a man, Susana."

"I've already got one, grandmother. His name's Juan."

"He'll leave you for another. They all leave for another, or others." I was enveloped in the smell of her pipe and then a vacuum. I felt calmer and thought that I should have smashed the clay sun over her head.

The next day my temperature was back to normal. ■■

Translation: *Michael Charles Smith*

#### NOTE

\* Fragments taken from Susana Pagano's novel *Si yo fuera Susana San Juan...* (Mexico City: Conaculta/Fondo Editorial Tierra Adentro, 1998).

