



TRANSLATORS' RINCON de TRADUCTORES CORNER



“In the Parks, at Dusk” *and* “I Only Think of You”
by Marina Mayoral

translated by
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Introduction

These two short stories, by Marina Mayoral, are part of a collection compiled in the book *Recuerda, cuerpo* [*Remember, body*], Editorial Alfaguara, Madrid, 1998. Editorial Raspabook (from Murcia, Spain) has recently published the book again in 2017. The title is taken from a poem by Konstantino Kavafis in which the Greek poet talks about love, feeling and desire as embodied in the physical memory of the body that has experienced love. All those affects are elegantly re-enacted by Mayoral in her stories with a touch of nostalgia and humour, while inadvertently inscribing the situation of Spanish women in the 1950s with a few masterstrokes.

Marina Mayoral who writes in Spanish and in Galician, is, so far, the author of eighteen novels, several collections of stories and also narratives for young adults. Some of her novels are: *El reloj de la torre*, *Dar la vida y el alma*, *Recóndita armonía*, *Bajo el magnolio* and *Querida amiga*. One of her novels for young readers, *Tristes armas*, has recently seen its 30th edition, and has been translated into English as *Sad Weapons*. Some of her fiction has been translated into Italian, German, Polish, Portuguese and Chinese. Mayoral has been awarded several literary prizes throughout her career and, very recently, the ‘Voz de Libertad’ [Voice of Freedom] Prize given by Pen Club Galicia. She was Professor of Spanish Literature at Universidad Complutense of Madrid till she retired, and her essays on Rosalía de Castro, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Carolina Coronado are widely known as fundamental works of research on classic female writers in Spanish. She is and has been, for several years now, a reputed columnist for several national newspapers. Her literary and critical work can be followed on her official webpage: www.marinamayoral.es.



About the translator

María Socorro Suárez Lafuente is Professor of Literature at the University of Oviedo, Spain. Her interests lie in the field of Contemporary Literature, both in English and Spanish, in Feminism, Postcolonial Theory and the development of the Faust theme. She has published extensively on those fields, both in English and Spanish, has been co-editor of several books and started several editorial lines in Feminist Studies, Postcolonial Writers and Bilingual Chapbooks in Contemporary Literatures. She was President of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies and of the Spanish Association of University Women, and is Fellow of the English Association. She is founding member of the ESSE Gender Studies Network and the European Network of Dialogue Process Facilitators.

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IN THE PARKS, AT DUSK

The President of the Catholic Ladies Association has asked me to write my autobiography. They want to publish it in a small, neat edition, to be distributed among the members of the Association to serve as a model for their daughters in these times of moral decay. The City Council will fund the project—they have passed the proposal unanimously. I am not surprised: almost all members were once in my classes and have fond memories of their old teacher. As I understand it, it will be an homage to my many years of dedication to children and an acknowledgment of my work and merits.

I've thanked the President for the Ladies' initiative and the Council for its generosity, but I made them see the difficulties of the project, the money and the work involved and the small benefit to be derived from them. Who will be interested in the life of a common schoolteacher? And, above all, who will benefit from it?

I have very little to say about my early years. I was a good girl and a serious young woman. My brothers married and left with their wives. Nobody said it explicitly, but it was understood that I would take care of Father and Mother, and Aunt Sabina, who had no means. Not that we were rich, but my father had a moderate pension and we owned the house, which my mother had inherited. Add to that my school teaching salary and we lived easily, although modestly.

When I turned thirty I realized I was a spinster. I wasn't any uglier or more unfriendly than the other young women in the village that did get married. I think that I was just unlucky. The war broke out when I was seventeen, and by the time it ended there were very few men and a lot of women to choose from. I was timid and somehow quiet; I was never saucy, and I believe that was why no man in the village ever noticed me.



Since my job as a school-teacher left me a lot of spare time and my parents could still take care of themselves, I decided to study languages: French first, and then English, Italian, German... Knowing foreign languages was fundamental to my life and helped me to become a fully realized woman and human being.

When I was thirty-three, an age at which so many great men ended their lives, I decided to travel to France on my own, to Paris. I could read French fluently, and I was looking forward to practising my speaking skills and getting to know a city that seemed to me then the centre of the world.

In Paris, a man kissed me for the first time in my life. It was a strange and distracting experience—*bouleversante*, I thought in my incipient French—but which I cannot recall clearly in spite of the deep trace it left in my spirit.

I saw the man in a café, in the Latin Quarter. I realized he was watching me, and I reddened up to my ears. I pretended to be absorbed in the map of the city, but he came up to my table and offered to be my guide. I hadn't had many opportunities to talk, due to my shyness, so I accepted. We went out of the café together and strolled along the Seine towards the Vert-Galant. Once there, he put his arm around my shoulders while he told me some story about a Templar monk who had been burnt alive. I wasn't listening to his words; I could only hear the mad thumping of my heart. When he pushed me against a bush and then to the ground I got frightened. It was all like a dream. I don't know if it was my tears, or if it was actually hazy, but I remember everything happening in a thick grey fog, everything lonely and silent; I could only hear his breathing, and then my steps running away. I went back to the hotel, concealing as best as I could my torn nylons, dishevelled hair and the blood stains on my clothes. I picked up my luggage and went back to my village immediately.

When I calmed down I realized I had liked it. I remembered with a thrilling pleasure the taste of his mouth, his breath, his violent embrace, and, above all, his yielding. Yes, his yielding: the pressure of his arms and his body against mine, and then his laxity, his sweet abandoning. It was a mixed feeling, exciting and startling, which disturbed my peaceful existence as a schoolteacher in a village with less than 10,000 inhabitants. I knew I



had to feel that again, that life was grey and meaningless if I could not season it, lighten it up, with that pleasure that captivated and transported me to a world I had only glimpsed, but which I could not renounce.

It wasn't an easy step to take. It took me a while to decide to travel again. At the beginning I was satisfied with the mere evocation of what had happened, but after a few months I felt the imperious need to live that experience again.

I went back to Paris, because, with the pretext of practising the language, I could leave my parents and my aunt for a few days with no explanation.

I began to enjoy myself and would get excited already while preparing for the trip, although I was assaulted with fears of not being able to complete it. What if the first time had been mere chance? Maybe no man would ever look at me again with eyes of desire, or pounce on me like a hungry beast. But my fears proved unfounded. I was lucky, or maybe away from the village I developed a dark instinct, a subtle attractiveness that the routine of my job and my timidity annulled while I was at home.

I must say, false modesty aside, that I never had trouble attracting a man during my trips, and I could even allow myself to choose. I realized very soon that to reach the climax of pleasure, total and complete satisfaction, I had to do it with a man of special characteristics. He had to be the type considered more virile, hefty, well-muscled, with a close beard and abundant corporal hair, strong odour and, above all, strong impulses. I felt an indescribable pleasure in being pressed, squeezed, flattened by a powerful body, knowing that it would yield in the end, that it would conform to my own body, and I would drink his breath while he languished in my arms on the wet grass... Because I liked doing it in parks and at dusk. I think that was a small perversion, a mania I kept from that first experience in the Vert-Galant. I can't always have it that way, but when I can, my pleasure is perfect, absolute, and immeasurable.

After the second time, I applied myself to learning English, and after six months I felt ready to make a trip to London. Later it was Rome, then Berlin, Cologne... always to big cities and always after studying the appropriate language.



Those trips not only provided me with all the pleasure I enjoyed in my life, but they allowed me to help others. My school children learnt with me the rudiments of languages that enabled them to stand out in their adult jobs, or, in any case, to emigrate in better conditions. Their contribution to my homage proves that they appreciate what I did for them. And the same can be said for the patience and love with which I attended my parents in their long infirmities and my aunt Sabina in her impatient and debilitated old age. My own sisters-in-law, ashamed of my bearing the whole weight of the family, encouraged me to go on those trips, from which I always came back with renewed vigour.

I am not saying this as an excuse. I know that what I did could seem morally censurable, but this is something between God and myself, and I will not discuss it with anybody else. The only person to whom I partly revealed that need of mine to possess a man from time to time was my confessor, Don Luis, a pure soul, a real saint, who understood that I had to get strength from somewhere to live shut up with three old, sick people and a bunch of rioting kids the whole year. But he could not grasp it completely. He said to me: “Since you cannot go without it, why don’t you do it with some man from the village? There is a chance you might fix it and get married, and then you won’t need to roam God’s erratic world.”

But what I enjoyed was precisely that anonymity, not knowing the other person, that quick, animal encounter of two bodies that desire each other and fight until one wins. Only that. And when things are not that way, when he insists on talking, on telling me things about his life and asking about mine, then I can’t. The only thing I can do then is sacrifice myself, as with my children and my old people, and let him enjoy himself with no satisfaction on my part.

Don Luis couldn’t understand it, nor did I want to go into details, but it was all quite clear to me, and I had no doubts left after what happened with Eusebio.

One day, when I was about fifty, my parents already gone, Eusebio, from the grocery, who had come back from Germany with some money, came into my house with a silly excuse and cornered me in the hall near the stairs. He panted and jabbered incoherently while he pressed me against his body. He smelled of acrid sweat, and through



the open neck of his shirt I could see a mop of black, glossy hair. I liked it. I always liked to enmesh my fingers in the body hair and feel the wet skin and the throbbing of blood in the neck, in the genitals, in the chest. I sought, as in times before, the source of that violent throb that went from his body into mine and I let myself go. My mouth stuck to his mouth, my hand searched his heart anxiously, and I was about to possess him when, suddenly, Eusebio moved away a little to look me in the face and said: “And don’t worry about Aunt Sabina—we’ll move her in with my mother and both will be contented.” I couldn’t go on. I put the knife back in the pocket of my skirt and refused him. I told him there were people coming, or something of the sort, and I never gave him the opportunity to come close again.

It wasn’t fear that made me act like that. I could have had my satisfaction as in previous times and then say that he had attacked me and I had defended myself. Who would have doubted my word? Who would think of any other motive? But if I couldn’t feel pleasure, why do it? So, I had to go on with my trips, which, I must say, became more difficult, because it is not easy at my age to find a man with the characteristics I require. Some women look for company, tenderness, friendship, intellectual or spiritual understanding, or even some simple physical pleasure you can buy with money. Not me. For me, pleasure means pure and mutual desire, the encounter of two anonymous bodies, a fight and a complete, total possession.

But I am afraid that the Catholic Ladies Association will not understand this, nor will the members of the City Council, or those ex-pupils that have collaborated in my homage. That’s why I told the President that it is much better if they organize a banquet and give me one of those silver trays with the names of all participants engraved on it, and, maybe later, when I am gone, they can publish this remembrance in case it can be of use to somebody.



I ONLY THINK OF YOU

This morning, while I was making our bed, I was thinking how life's full of ups and downs, and how strange people are. We never get to know each other completely and we never appreciate what we have until we lose it. This bed seems to me too big again now, what a nuisance it is to have so much cloth. Mama said so when we bought it: you two are too short for it, and the sheets from the dowry won't be of any use, and it's so expensive.

It was certainly expensive, but we surely made good use of it. I soon realized you liked beds, I mean, women, from the way you looked at me the first time we met. An ex-priest. Mama said: at least he has a good education. But Papa thought you were not to be trusted: a respectable man should not change his mind. What with that way of thinking, the family's rental income getting thinner and thinner, and the obsession that 'good wine needs no bush',¹ we four sisters had reached thirty still unmarried. Of course, it was not only Papa's fault. Marriageable men were scarce in the town, most of them left after finishing their studies or their military service. And we were too timid and somewhat unattractive. Mama used to say: With that little charm you've got you'll be left to dress images of saints.² And Aunt Mercedes, who took it personally, although nobody was thinking of her, answered emphatically: Better to dress saints than to undress drunkards; I don't know why she said that, because Papa was a rigorous teetotaller and, at home, there was no other man to undress.

¹ Translator's note: The Spanish expression 'El buen vino no necesita bandera' has been translated as closely as possible. It is also the equivalent to 'There is no need to gild the lily.'

² Translator's note: 'Quedar para vestir santos' is the Spanish expression for 'To be left on the shelf.' I opted for a literal translation so as to keep the sense of Aunt Mercedes' answer.



When you turned up to teach the boy Latin, I liked the way you looked at my legs and my low neckline. Your eyes entered through the neck of my blouse to my breasts, or went from my knees up my thighs to that precise point where my legs were tenaciously pressed together. You made me nervous and my hands moved unconsciously to where you were looking, and then you smiled as if you were smiling at Mama's comments, and she was quite pleased: That man is neither good looking nor rich, she said, but he is attentive and will make a good husband.

She said that in order to push me and to counterbalance Papa's misgivings and my sisters' jokes: that you crossed your hands like Don José, the dean; whether you were balding or the bare spot on your head was tonsure... Just jealousy. Being single there, in town, with Papa, Mama, four girls, Grandmother Dolores and Aunt Mercedes was unbearable. Any of them would have married you if only to come to Madrid. Me too, but at the beginning it wasn't clear whom you liked. Mama said you were thinking it over, because one could leave priesthood but not a marriage. Aunt Mercedes said—she was always saying annoying things—: He'll marry the dumbest one. And it was me. The others started to talk about your balding and the priestly gestures, but I didn't care. I wasn't in love, I mean, not at the beginning. I was still waiting for my Prince Charming: good-looking, rich, elegant, with experience in life and the wide world. And so were the others. Dreams are for free and if it is only for the asking... But I wanted to leave home and, besides, I liked the way you looked at me, and the way you said: Marry me and you'll know what's what.

What I could not imagine was that you were such a little devil in bed—although you said it was no perversion, that when people are married they may try everything. I've never doubted your word; after all you had been a priest and had learned it all in books written in Latin so as not to scandalize ignorant people. I was ignorant and you taught me all I know, but one of the things that bothers me now is that if you are not married all this might be sinful, and, by entertaining myself in my solitude I may now be sentencing my soul.



That was what was holding me back at the beginning: the fear of doing something bad or ugly. And I was also disturbed by the changes. I like routine; I enjoy knowing beforehand what comes afterwards. But you were restless and used to get bored very quickly; you were always looking for new things: first it was the red light, which reminded me of measles; then you suggested using suspenders, black nylons and high heels. Later it was trying different positions, some of which—and this is not a matter of prudery, Pepe³—would have been unthinkable even for acrobats in the circus. When you came down with lumbago, we moved on to theatre. And finally videos... Oh, Lord! If it were not for the videos I would still have you with me.

You were very patient with me and did everything so well. I remember when you wanted me to tell you whom I was thinking of when we made love. I told you: only of you. And in order to prompt me, you said that sometimes you thought of the cashier in the supermarket, who had tits like melons, or of Sofia Loren; you liked them big, you said, big breasted, but I knew that you also liked me. That was the best in you: that way of looking at me that made me wet.

Sometimes I also thought of someone else. I liked what you did to me, I had a very good time with you but, even Mama said so, you weren't good looking. You were short, rather fat, and bald, that's why sometimes I closed my eyes and saw... I didn't want to tell you whom I saw, because I wanted to keep some secrets to myself and, above all, because I didn't want to make you uneasy. I was very grateful to you, darling, and you were right: my sisters were as wrinkled as raisins, and I, thanks to you, looked as fresh as a daisy, even though some positions gave me sciatica. But all that is of no importance now and I want to tell you: I saw Ben Hur. Ah, Pepe, just imagine! Such a piece of a man! I've never seen anybody like him, neither in the streets nor on the beach, although I keep looking, never, and besides, in Technicolor and half dressed-half nude as a Roman, he was quite a sight. So that's what I was thinking about while we rehearsed positions. When we played theatre I didn't need to think of anybody.

³ Translator's note: In the Spanish language 'Pepe' is a very commonly-used nickname for the name 'José.'



Acting was what I enjoyed most, because in my youth, I never told you that either, I wanted to be an actress. There you are, what an idea, imagine someone telling my father: Don Ataulfo's daughter, a comedian! He'd rather see me dead! But I always liked it and I think I have a talent for it. I loved acting the innocent maid with you: *Please, Don José, don't do that to me...! Oh, don't touch me there...!* I was very good in that role, you must admit. And I also liked the role of the woman who wants and wants not, when you would put on your overalls or that shirt with no sleeves and I would say to you: *You are so strong! Look at those muscles in your arms...!* And then: *Oh, no, no! Please! Let me go, let me go! Oh...!* Modesty apart, I was superb in that role. I was so good at it, that we almost had a serious problem. Now that it's all over I can tell you, and I hope you understand.

One day a man came to take away the settee because I wanted to have it upholstered. He is a young fireman who does this kind of job in his spare time. He arrived, took one of the big armchairs in the living room and pushed it up over his head as if it were a feather. And I said, without thinking: You are so strong! It must have been the tone, because the boy looked at me in surprise, and stood for a few seconds with the armchair in the air, looking at me as if I were a ghost. It was a difficult moment, because it crossed my mind that he was thinking: What's wrong with this fat old lady? It was an embarrassing situation, but it was a challenge too, my love. I had always wanted to be an actress. When my sisters dreamed of clothes or cars, I dreamed of stages and limelight. I even felt envious of the comedians that performed in Main Square! So I took a deep breath and recited the monologue from the beginning at one go: *What a strong back! Look at those muscles in your arms! It's clear that you exercise a lot—*with the right tone, the appropriate gestures, looking at him with great admiration, but from a certain distance, and talking slowly, without rushing. I did so well, Pepe! Not even Sarah Bernard could improve it. The young man left the armchair on the floor and stammered: Is there anybody else in the house? I shook my head no, and everything ran its course to the very end.

I didn't tell you about this then because I didn't think of it as an infidelity, but as a moment of success in my failed career as an actress. I did it so well that the upholstery man started calling in two or three times a week, between five and six, when neither the



maid nor the caretaker were here. I tried to refuse him in the beginning, but when I said my *let me go, let me go or I'll shout!* I was already in the role. My talent blossomed, Pepe, I can tell you with no false modesty: I could have made a career on stage; you should have seen me gathering speed and saying *Go on, go on, please* and the rest. As it happened, we ended up being good friends, because the young man had an impotence problem with his girlfriend and, thanks to me, he solved it and they got married, and he named his first daughter after me out of gratitude.

So I think that was more of a charity job than anything else, because I—and I am not saying this to flatter you, Pepe—I enjoyed doing it with you more than I ever have with anybody else. With the others, I feel the satisfaction of a well-done job, as if I were reciting *What is life? Illusions, a shadow, a fiction*⁴... that, you'll remember, was written in bronze letters on the entrance to the Council House in Brétema. When I was a girl I used to repeat those lines from the landing of the stone stairs, which resembled a theatre stage, and I did so with such feeling that one day the Mayor came out and told my father: You have a real actress at home, Don Ataulfo... And from then on my father forbade me to ever again make an appearance there.

The theatre is now my only consolation, Pepe. No more positions, no more videos; I took a loathing to them, because I think that if that evening you hadn't gone out to rent one, you would still be with me.

When the police called I knew that something bad had happened to you; you had never taken so long in choosing a videotape. They told me to go to the hospital and there they gave me your raincoat, your umbrella, your hat, your broken glasses, the wallet and the porn video. I was told that a car had run you over when you were crossing the street.

I was paid insurance money, even though it was apparently your fault, as the lights were green for cars. I wonder what you were thinking about! Probably of the dinner I would be cooking and the bottle of wine that we would drink between us, and then there would come the video and our games, not worrying about closing doors, or taking care to

⁴ Translator's Note: Well-known lines from Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *La vida es sueño* (1635) [*Life is a Dream*].



speak in whispers, since nobody would come to interrupt, as it was just you and me alone, Pepe, no family, no children, just the two of us, nearing old age, but happy and ready to enjoy what we had... What an inconvenient moment for you to die, when I still have such a long time to live alone!

That's why I am considering what the engineer on floor fifteen has said to me, do you remember him? A tall man with white hair. He's a widower too and has just retired. We met in the supermarket and he started by carrying my bag and now wants us to get married. And I don't know what to do. I would rather not get married, you know, I don't like changes, but I'm getting worried now, because when you're married everything is plain and clear, otherwise it's bad news. And it's the same with the videos; I was very anxious about them and told my confessor. He told me not to worry, that you were my husband and had always come home to watch them with your wife. But if, for instance, I watch a video with Julian, that's the name of the engineer on floor fifteen, and then I die of a heart attack, I might condemn myself, and that's not fair either, I say. So, looking at it from that angle it might be better for me to get married, but then I have a serious problem, because I'll be unfaithful to him in my thoughts. And I don't mean with Ben Hur, which can be easily understood by any man.

So this is what I wanted to tell you, Pepe: how life twists and turns and how strange we people are that we always want what we cannot get. Because when I make love now, with Julian or with the upholstery boy, who has impotence problems again, I play my role and I even enjoy it, but while I am saying to them *Oh, what are you doing to me! Oh, go on, go on, please...!* while I undress them and caress them, I close my eyes and think of you. I only think of you.