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“Like a Night with Legs Wide Open”

by José Alcántara Almánzar

*translated by*  
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## Introduction

“**Like a Night with Legs Wide Open**” is a short story by Dominican writer José Alcántara Almánzar. Originally published in the collection titled *La carne estremecida* in 1989, this short story is representative of the themes that characterize Alcántara Almánzar’s short stories, namely, the challenges and anxieties of the stifled Dominican middle class.

**José Alcántara Almánzar** began his writing career in 1973 with the publication of the short story collection titled *Viaje al otro mundo*. He has published over twenty essay and short story collections. His most recent publication is the essay collection *Hijos del Silencio* published by Editorial Isla Negra in 2018. Outside of the Dominican Republic, his work in Spanish has appeared in Bulgaria, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain, and the United States. In 2018, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert published with Cecilia Graña *Where the Dream Ends*, a selection of Alcántara Almánzar’s short stories in English translation. His work has also appeared in French, German, Italian, and Icelandic translations. In addition to several other awards, Alcántara Almánzar was awarded the Premio Anual del Cuento [Annual Short Story Prize] in his country on two occasions: in 1984 for the collection *Las máscaras de la seducción* and in 1990 for *La carne estremecida*. In 2009 he was presented with the *Premio Nacional de Literatura* [National Prize for Literature]. However, despite several awards in the Dominican Republic and a book length translation in English, his work remains largely unknown to readers in the United States.



### **About the translator**

Luis Guzmán Valerio holds a Ph.D. in Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures from The Graduate Center at the City University of New York and an M.A. in Translation from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. He published his first literary translation in the 2008-2009 II issue of *Sargasso: A Journal of Caribbean Literature, Language & Culture*. In the last year, he has published literary translations in *Delos: A Journal of Translation and World Literature*, *BODY Literature*, and *Five:2:ONE*. His creative writing has appeared in *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures*.

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## LIKE A NIGHT WITH LEGS WIDE OPEN

The endless line moved at an exasperatingly slow pace. I thought that only the unwholesomeness of the ads could attract such a crowd to a Bertolucci film, since I found it hard to believe that the cause for all the commotion was an aging Brando and a practically unknown actress who could be his daughter. There were too many people and I was afraid I wouldn't find anywhere to sit. An uncomfortable drizzle was falling and, among all the sweaty bodies bustling to get a ticket, a sticky vapor set in, gluing clothing to skin, forcing many to give up and leave the line cursing.

She was right in front of me, and I was making an effort to maintain a reasonable distance between us, absorbing the pushing and shoving to avoid an embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, miss," I excused myself when I couldn't help colliding into her, "everybody wants to go in at the same time, you see..."

"Don't worry, sir," she said. "It's not the eagerness to see the movie that's causing this mess, but the fear of the approaching downpour."

We looked up at the reddish, thundering sky that announced an angry, imminent downpour. I remained stuck to her body, as though it belonged to me. In a flash of lightning, I had seen her yellow eyes, her upturned nose, her mouth telling me "don't worry, sir," and now she didn't mind the rubbing of my aroused body against hers. "If Elena finds out," I thought, "she'll scratch my eyes out."

"If you like, miss, I'll buy your ticket and you can wait over there." I pointed to the crowded theater lobby. "Tell the usher to let you in, that you'll give him your ticket in a little while."



She left the line and then I could have a better look at her. She was slim, more petite rather than midsize, with beautiful legs and a determined walk. She didn't run from the rain. She walked unhurriedly, pleased to take every step, extremely sure of what she was doing. I lost sight of her as I approached the box office, where the pushing and shoving were unbearable. We all wanted to cram our hands through the box office window. After putting up with a few more shoves, I got the tickets and escaped unharmed from the line.

"Finally!" I said as I shook out my shirt.

She was wearing black: a low-cut sweater and a super tight miniskirt.

"I forgot to give you the money for my..."

"Oh, it's no big deal," I interrupted her, "it's my treat."

She had enormous eyelashes, thin eyebrows with a natural outline, small ears with studded earrings...

"You don't even know my name."

...white, even teeth—somewhat protruding on the top—a face without any makeup on...

"Well, that's easy, you can tell me and that'll be that."

...an evenly sculpted chin, somewhat high cheekbones with slight dimples celebrating a smile.

"Carolina."

She said it with submissive eyes that tried to take refuge behind the brown locks of hair that fell over her forehead and moving a pair of lips that lured you to bite.

"And I accept," she added, "if you'll allow me to get you something to drink."

A large, prominent mole stood out on her slender neck, and she had another, minute one on her chest, very close to her breasts, which rose daringly under the sweater's blackness. Carolina smiled, approaching me with an irresistible naughtiness.

"You still haven't told me your name," she whispered. "What's your name?"

"Emilio."



I hate soft drinks, but I could not refuse her offer, and the first sip of that sickly sweet liquid appealed to me probably because of my thirst. We sat in the back. We still had a few minutes before the film began and the theater looked jam-packed. I was relieved not to see any acquaintances.

“Emilio, we were lucky.”

Her voice made me forget the pushing and shoving in the line, the sweat and water that ran down my body, and the presence of so many people elbowing each other to find a seat.

The tensions the images impressed upon the spectators undulated in the frigid air of the movie theater. There was a heavy, anguished silence. Brando grew in stature as his superb acting unfolded, unsettling the audience with those memorable scenes where he would entrap his lover and make her suffer and rejoice with his brutal onslaughts. Paying careful attention to what was happening on the screen, Carolina did not once look at me. We were quiet during the show, and a few times—without her taking notice—I carefully observed her. I moved my hand over hers in a less than ingenuous way and she didn’t move. The provocations of a spoiled pussycat pulsed in her soft skin. I didn’t need to look at her anymore. Her burning skin was enough. I thought of Elena once again, who must have been waiting for me at home, reading some boring novel and smoking one cigarette after another until she was overcome by sleep.

When the movie was over, the downpour was in full force. We could not see more than three meters from the theater. A crowd prevented the exit of those willing to risk catching a cold.

“The deluge,” Carolina said taking out a handkerchief from her purse.

“You don’t mind going out like this?” I asked as I took her arm.

“No. I like rain.” She passed a handkerchief over her head, looking at me with mischievous eyes that said: “We’re going to do something crazy.”

Suddenly, a blackout left everything in darkness, hastening the stampede of those who were undecided. We crossed the street splashing in the water, letting the furious rain drench us. We held hands, like two kids jumping in the rain on a Friday afternoon. We



found my car on the verge of sinking into the river that formed along the gutter. Once inside, I kissed Carolina with such force that she surely was not expecting it. We kissed without speaking, our wet skin did it for us, crying out with passionate signals. Carolina had spongy lips and an eager, trained mouth that savored mine, looking for a point of equilibrium in its exploration. I felt the heat of her wet body and happily breathed in the last traces of a magnolia fragrance stuck to her skin, with a taste of candied almonds that aroused my greed.

The car windows had fogged up and I thought I was safe from indiscreet glances. From the outside, flashes of light came in from those driving from south to north, navigating the flooded street.

“This city has nothing to envy Venice for,” I said facetiously.

Carolina smiled. I turned the car on, wanting to warm it up so as not to end up stranded in a puddle, while at the same time yielding to those who took pains to flee that mess.

“Can I invite you for a drink someplace quiet?” I proposed, calculating a logical way to escape the confusion, honking, and blinding lights of impatient motorists.

“I think that’s a good idea,” she said naturally.

I lowered the window a little to see the gondolas adrift in their pitiful attempts to maneuver the flooded canal of the street. Carolina dried her bare feet with the handkerchief. I felt the urge to smoke. I looked for my cigarettes thinking that I could really use one, but they were soaked. I threw the useless box onto the back seat, cursing under my breath.

“What did you think of the movie, Carolina?”

“I didn’t understand it,” she confessed shamelessly. “Besides, how pessimistic, especially that horrible ending.”

She was onto something, for sure. I liked her spontaneity, the way she said things without premeditation, and the courage to present herself for what she was, leaving her charms and limitations out in the open.

“How about you, Emilio, did you like it?”





“A lot. Although I agree with you on one point, it was depressing, like the world today.”

We drove a few blocks until we reached Parque Independencia—an enclosed sanctuary that never sleeps—where I thought I would find cigarettes, but didn’t see a single street vendor around and the night-owl cafés had closed their doors to avoid any possible damage from the storm. On Avenida 30 de Marzo, we were finally away from the flooding. I pawed at Carolina’s legs, as she wrung the drops of water out of her hair. She let me pet her, as though she were accustomed to that traffic of caresses. She displayed firm thighs, slippery, compact masses that rubbed up against my daring hand in a game that smelled very predictable. On Avenida 27 de Febrero we stopped at a red light.

“Where are we going?” I perceived a slight impatience in her voice.

Actually, I hadn’t decided what motel we would go to. Surrounded by such establishments, the city offered hiding places for every taste, occasion, and budget. We were at a major intersection. We could go in any direction and every which way we would find shelter and discretion in exchange for a modest sum. I thought of a close, decent hideaway.

“Someplace you’ll like very much,” I said putting my foot on the accelerator when the green light gave us the right of way.

The motel—a group of small, individual cabins surrounded by trees—turned out to be more comfortable and discreet than I anticipated. We crossed a wide gate and I turned the window half way down to make out an empty cabin. The rain had tapered off and the breeze cooled the air, providing relief from the oppressive heat. Carolina put her head on my shoulder and her hand nestled itself under my drenched shirt. The cabins looked abandoned, although all the lit-up windows contradicted the supposed solitude of the place. In the back, somewhat hidden among pine trees, we found a vacant cabin. The garage door closed automatically just after I parked the car. We went in and, without giving her time to say anything, I took Carolina by the waist and held her tight against my chest. Our mouths eagerly sought each other out in the darkness. Standing up, still wet, uncomfortable although aroused enough to ignore undesirable details, our eagerness



overcame us. I felt around and pressed a light switch. A lamp came on in a corner of the tiny living room.

In the adjoining bedroom we fell onto the bed—two felines frolicking around before copulation—tearing off the clothes that obstructed our caresses, licking one another, savoring the tastes that flowed from every inch of skin; our bodies welded together in an affectionate yet savage embrace; our noses, caught by the gluttony of smell, became drunk from the sweet-and-sour scents, the fragrances of candied almonds, magnolia water, sweat, drops of rain, saliva, discovering possible secrets, hidden needs, desires that fueled the rhythm of our undulating movements, the balancing act of surrendering and taking, concaving and convexing in a dialogue of affirmations and negations; the supple nakedness that led me to descend from the insatiable mouth to the juicy, hard breasts with large, dark nipples so addicting with every bite, and from there to the elastic region under which the vital organs lay dormant; and from there on to the sinuous labyrinth of intricate folds that we never know in its entirety, portal to the world, carnivorous corolla, dead-end chamber, where I sucked the generous, marinated fluids from Carolina, who asked for more and more and groaned while she held on to the mess of my hair, locking her legs around my back, begging me not to leave her alone at that singular moment; something good was coming; the end was near, the ephemeral triumph just like a shot, violent like the impacts of a blast; and then I rode her, penetrating the mysterious portico that was already mine, bewitched by that inexhaustible fountain that wouldn't stop watering, that wetland where I lost myself, seeing Elena's portrait in her transformed face, responding to my thrusts with Elena's sensual voice, seeking me out with Elena's arms, Elena's distant eyes, her huge eyelashes fluttering with pleasure, the same joyful contraction of Elena's mouth during the supreme moment of pleasure, when in unison Carolina and I identified with each other completely in vital agony.

Carolina, under my sweaty body, appeared melancholic; she breathed serenely, with a slight fatigue stamped on her clear, intensely glowing eyes; her fingers twirled the tousled hair on my head and torso, outlining my lips as they navigated her face in that infinite peace following orgasm. I looked for a comfortable position for her, lying beside



her without losing contact with the warmth of that small, well-formed body I could not stop caressing. The fantasy with Elena worried me, her image and Carolina's blending in delicious circles, invading my clandestine intimacy with her memory.

“What are you thinking about?”

“A drink and a cigarette,” I lied. “It's time we drank something, don't you think?”

“Very good. I'm going to the bathroom first,” she answered.

When she got up, I gazed at her entire body. Seldom had I seen such a shapely figure, almost like Elena's when we were married...

“What would you like to drink?”

...a body without a single excess, nothing out of place: her straight hair cut at her shoulders; her well-proportioned, delicate arms; her back forming an arc that blended into full, sculpted buttocks; round thighs joining legs in flexible articulations that gave her walk that distinctive stride.

“Beer,” she said as she got lost in the bathroom.

Through the intercom, I ordered a cold beer, cigarettes, and matches. I shivered, sneezed, and covered myself with the sheet. From the bathroom, Carolina asked me to join her. I gathered the courage and jumped up ready to please her. There, the change in temperature gave me goose bumps, I sneezed again, and Carolina, making fun of me, splashed water on me so that I would make up my mind once and for all. I loved the warm shower. I held Carolina in my arms and closed my eyes to eternalize that unrepeatable moment, before we began a ritual of suds, bubbles, massages, and renewed explorations.

I was drying off when the bell rang announcing the cigarettes and the drinks.

“Ah, a nice, tall cold one!” I said happily as I opened the bottle.

I filled two glasses, handing one to Carolina, who was walking out of the bathroom wrapped in one towel, using another as a turban on her head. Without taking my eyes off her, I chugged the contents of the glass and then lit a cigarette. I inhaled deep, enjoying the smoke and the sense of well-being that had overtaken me.

“You have an enviable look of happiness on your face,” she said as she sat down on the bed, taking the cigarette from my lips.



“I’m a man who’s easy to please.”

Her pampered, feline eyes lit up. I noticed the flaming curiosity that burned in her pupils, her rose-apple colored cheeks, her upturned nose, her half-open mouth seeking me out again.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a lawyer.” She looked unconvinced. “You can take this, in case you need my professional services some day.”

I looked for my wallet, took out a business card, and handed it to her, inwardly regretting having made such a blunder. By revealing my identity, I was destroying the fascination with things forbidden.

“I’m a secretary, but I don’t have a card.” Her smile accented her dimples.

I was afraid we would start getting personal and I tried to avoid it. I put out my cigarette, I kissed Carolina, and we drank more beer. We went back to the caresses, the dissolute contacts that made our fire burn: mouth against mouth, lips and whispers on the ears; her eyelids half-open; her hands wrapped around my back; my traveling hands finding comfort in the warmth and softness, passing from one contour to another with the laziness of a silkworm; again the image of Elena, her light body riding my torso with words of ecstasy, Elena’s groaning, her disheveled hair, her sweaty skin, her yearning breath, Elena’s lustfulness; my body weighing down on hers, searching for the entrance; a voluntary prisoner submitting himself with pleasure to Carolina or Elena, two, three, four times, in ceremonies that were so similar and yet so different.

I must have fallen asleep during one of those pauses that followed each gorging session, when we would drown ourselves in beer and cigarettes to tone up our desires. Carolina had vanished and an emptiness hit me in the stomach when I saw my wallet open on top of the night table. But I found everything there: money, cards, driver’s license. I leaned my aching head against the pillow and then I saw her note, written in small letters on a napkin:



*Emilio:*

*I had a divine time, thanks for everything. I promise to call you later to know if you got home okay.*

*Carolina.*

She had vanished without any questions or demands, without taking anything. Perhaps, like me, she had found in the adventure of an anonymous night some compensation for the life without incentives of those of us who inhabit this hydra-headed city. It was three thirty. I got dressed—the taste of Carolina still in my mouth, her persistent scent in my nose—paid the bill, and returned to the now rainless streets, where streams of muddy water still flowed; to dark, solitary avenues; to the air’s fleeting clarity as Saturday began; to enjoy that clear sky that almost made me believe in happiness, had it not been for the sleepless little girl with a dirty face who offered me a bouquet of withered carnations for one peso at the intersection of two major thoroughfares.

I drove aimlessly, overtaken by the illusion of that chance encounter. It must have been five when I arrived home. I took off my shoes so as not to awaken Elena and, with the ease of a blind man who knows his own world of darkness like the back of his hand, I walked to our bedroom, lay down, covered myself with part of the sheet. In the yard, a drainpipe dripped monotonously and soporifically; frogs croaked in the wet grass and potted plants; and the dog sniffed around celebrating the break of dawn. Elena gave off a delicate scent of candied almonds. The sheets smelled like essence of magnolias. Elena’s warm hands began to seek me out instinctively. They encircled my neck. Elena’s legs trapped my body like two pincers. Now it was Carolina who assailed me with an embrace that I received without resistance in the morning’s complicity, letting Elena hug me with her eager hands and heavy breathing, biting my ears, squeezing my throat, tying my body down with the sheet, getting on top of me, covering my face with the pillow, cutting off my access to air, asphyxiating me...

“Emilio, what’s the matter?” Elena woke me up. “Are you having a nightmare?”



I opened my eyes, sat up, agitated and sweaty. Elena turned on the small lamp on her night table and her sleepy face appeared. She asked me if I wanted a glass of water. She passed a tender hand over my forehead.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, “go back to sleep, don’t worry.”

“You ate too much,” she said without noticing the time and went back to sleep as though she had not woken up.

I was confused, with the lively scenes of a very long orgy still bubbling over in my mind, a fleeting illusion, a discharge of my imagination. I got up, and noticing my absolute nakedness, I put on my bathrobe, lit a cigarette, and went to the window like a sleepwalker, reconstructing the episodes in my dream. In the yard, the drainpipe brought with it rainwater and nocturnal mirages. The frogs croaked in their damp corners. The dog reenacted his eternal role of night-watch. I stood in front of the window for a long time, smoking, absorbed by the dawn light, going over things in my head. The phone rang. I ran to my night table and picked up the receiver...

“Who is it?” asked Elena half asleep, still submerged in slumber.

“No one,” I said, hanging up. “They dialed the wrong number.”

I disconnected the phone. I sank, disturbed, into my pillow, with the thought of Carolina harassing me, Carolina’s voice buzzing in my ears, her very clear presence between Elena and me, among those blankets that gave off an unmistakable scent of magnolias and candied almonds.