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Two Stories from *Amantes y enemigos: cuentos de parejas*

by Rosa Montero

translated by
Erin Goodman

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Introduction

Rosa Montero is a Spanish journalist and the author of 19 books. She has won numerous awards for her work, including the National Prize for Spanish Literature (2017), the National Prize for Literary Journalism (1980), and the World Interview Prize (1978). Besides her many novels, essays, short stories, and newspaper articles, she is particularly known for her style as an interviewer, lending a more nuanced and literary form to the genre than the traditional question-and-answer format. She is extremely prolific yet surprisingly few of her novels and short stories have been translated into English. Sometime during the pandemic, I stumbled upon her books on Audible and while I was admittedly extremely late to her game (she had been writing for more than four decades), I quickly made up for lost time. During those solitary months I would take long walks as I listened to her books, many of which she narrates herself, such as *El peligro de estar cuerda* (2022) and *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013). It felt as if she were speaking directly to me, reminding me of our collective human experience.

When I learned that Rosa Montero had been a visiting professor at my alma mater, Wellesley College—albeit 15 years before I was a student there—my admiration for her work suddenly felt personal, and I was delighted at the opportunity to meet her during a March 2023 event at the Observatorio. Following her presentation and thanks to Marta Mateo’s fortuitous intervention, Rosa generously agreed to allow me to translate some of her short stories for *Rincón de Traductores*, provided they come from *Amantes y enemigos: cuentos de parejas* (Lovers and Enemies: Stories about Couples). The collection was originally published in 1998 (Barcelona: Alfaguara) and features 13 stories that explore the complexities of intimate relationships, both romantic and platonic.



Rosa Montero’s oeuvre is known for its depth, complexity, and insight into the human experience; to those qualities I would add her subtle and acute sense of humor which shines through in this collection and had me occasionally laughing out loud as I translated these droll stories. I chose the two stories presented here in English translation for their depiction of everyday life from two different perspectives—in **“La vida fácil”** (translated as “Easy Living”) a young male caregiver assists an older woman during her daily bath and frets over his water-logged watch, and in **“Mi hombre”** (“My Man”) a woman ponders middle-aged married life.

About the translator

Erin Goodman is a Spanish-English translator working across disciplines and genres. From 2019–2021 she was a lead translator for the *New York Times* Opinion Section. Book-length translations include *The Miracle Unfolds* (Song Bridge Press, 2021), a bilingual collection by Cuban poet Juana Rosa Pita, and *Prisoner of Pinochet: My Year in a Chilean Concentration Camp* (University of Wisconsin, 2017), a memoir by former Chilean minister Sergio Bitar. Translations of short stories by Cuban fiction writers Odette Casamayor Cisneros and Jorge Olivera Castillo have been published in *Los Angeles Review*, Australian literary magazine *The Lifted Brow*, and *New England Review*. Erin holds a Certificate in English-Spanish Translation from the University of Massachusetts Boston, an Ed.M. from Harvard University, and a B.A. in International Relations from Wellesley College. She’d like to thank one of her favorite college professors, Carlos Ramos, for introducing her to Spanish history and culture.

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EASY LIVING

That's when I noticed that my watch had gotten wet in the bath, in the hot soapy water, water like a bubble soup because the Old Lady carries the cold of the ages in her bones. There I was, sponge in hand, my hand in the water, the watch on my wrist, and the dial all fogged up and sweating moisture. That's it, I thought—I broke it. And let's just say that the discovery didn't help my mood.

“You have excellent taste, Madam. This is an exquisite model: very sophisticated and elegant,” that cretin from Tiffany's had said after I rejected the tank he was trying to sell me: an automatic, shockproof model (and of course it was waterproof), a gold-plated watch that weighed half a ton.

“Listen,” I explained patiently. “I'm looking for something classic and tasteful, exactly the opposite of that one.” And that's when the guy stuck up his nose and lifted his chin and curled his upper lip, a real uppity Latino asshole.

“You have very good taste, Madam,” said the wretch, although the Old Lady hadn't opened her mouth and I meanwhile was picking up watches and turning them over and asking questions and fumbling with the velvet trays. But the guy looked right through me as if I were made of glass and only addressed the Old Lady. Well, he addressed the Old Lady's pointy hat, the one with the two stiff feathers that crested her crown, as if that was the maximum level of his condescension, as if he couldn't deign to look any lower.

“You're making an excellent purchase, Madam. This is the most elegant model we have, the most appropriate for a true gentleman.” And the Old Lady still hadn't opened her mouth but she did open her purse and pull out a fistful of dollars like someone shoveling



sand out of a bucket. It's that eccentricity of hers of ignoring the existence of checks and credit cards. The guy spread the bills carefully on the counter and then he put the watch on my wrist with such carelessness that he could have been placing it on a felt arm for the display case. When we got into the limousine, he was still watching from the shop door with his insulting smirk. And I would've stuffed the dollars in his mouth if I hadn't liked the watch so much. But I did like it. Super-thin, finely designed in solid gold with an inlaid crown.

And now it also had a beautiful drop of water inside the dial. The most elegant, sophisticated watch in the world, soaked in dirty soapy water—in old-lady bath broth. I shook my arm and the drop didn't budge. Of course, now that the drop had managed to penetrate the hermetic void, once it had conquered its place in nowhere-land, it had latched on like a leech, ready to suck the life from the elegant, sophisticated timepiece. The Old Lady shifted impatiently in the bathtub.

“What are you doing, Omar? Come, wash my back or I'll get a chill.”

Something like that. Or even worse: “My dear, what are you doing? Be a good boy and rub my back, please, otherwise you know I'll catch a cold and my chest will ache.” That's what she said in her watery, pleading voice, that hundred-year-old little girl's voice that she talks to me with when we're alone. So I picked up the sponge again, the water dripping off the snakeskin watch strap, and rubbed her back—her knolls and hollows and her shoulder blades like airplane wings, and her vertebrae all lined up and protruding like the dorsal scales of a pterodactyl. Just half the span of her back, that's all that's left to wash, and in two spongefuls you'll be done, I told myself.

“Oh, oh, darling, gentler, gentler.”

And I washed her in the front and I washed her from behind, all the while holding her up with one arm so she wouldn't crumple like a rag doll. I've never seen anyone so fragile and so tiny as the Old Lady. When she's naked she's almost subhuman. When she's wearing clothes, it's another story. When she's dressed, she's ageless. Her ancientness is omnipresent and venerable, like a mummy. Who's going to bother calculating how old a mummy is—a millennium more, a millennium less, it doesn't matter. That is precisely what's



astounding about mummies: their triumph over time. Knowing that they have existed infinitely before you were born, and that they will continue to exist infinitely after you die. And the Old Lady, when she's dressed, is a bit scary like that.

When she's naked, on the other hand, almost nothing remains, just a hint of a body floating in the immensity of the bathtub, like one of those oysters that when you open it, you discover that it's all shriveled and sickly and there's nothing more than a tiny bit of mollusk in the porcelain desert of its shell.

“My neck, Omar darling, wash my neck.”

Her neck is no more than a stretch of tangled arteries and veins and tendons, a confusion of exposed pipes. But the worst part isn't her neck, nor her gnarly hands or even her thighs, her calves, or her arms—and by that I mean all the places where people amass flesh and that in her are nothing more than skin and bone, so horrible. No, the worst part is her skin. Her so-soft, cold skin, so delicate to the touch that it seems to be covered in talcum powder, like a baby's bottom. The worst is touching that soft silky skin and at the same time feeling the emaciated skeleton underneath. The contrast is indecent.

“I'm cold, add more hot water.”

I opened the tap and stood up to stretch my legs that ached a bit from kneeling. My watch was definitely broken. The hands hadn't moved a millimeter in the last five minutes. The water must have been boiling because as it came out of the faucet it released little columns of steam. At the other end of the bathtub the Old Lady was splashing awkwardly, ridiculously, like a child. The Old Lady was happy. Not me. Now the water was almost up to her shoulders and truthfully only her head was above the surface, covered with a pink plastic shower cap pulled down to her eyebrows to keep her four remaining white hairs from getting wet. The Old Lady was slapping the water, splashing everywhere, when suddenly she disappeared. She twisted, she set sail, she heeled, maybe she slipped, I don't know. But suddenly she disappeared under the water. For a few moments all I could see was the calm filmy surface and all I could hear was the thunderous water pouring from the tap. And then the Old Lady began to kick and writhe, frantically trying to sit up. Her head appeared and disappeared through the foam and she coughed and huffed and spat and screamed and



swallowed water and the tap kept running and the bathroom was full of steam and I thought about helping her, but I didn't. I stayed very still and the Old Lady kept struggling, such admirable energy! Fighting against the law of gravity and against her own weak body and against the slippery porcelain and that soapy water, of which she must have swallowed half a liter, and flailing her skeletal arms in all directions trying to get a grip. Finally one of her hands caught the side of the bathtub and the Old Lady grabbed on and pulled herself up and started to emerge in a pitiful state and I thought of pushing her, but I didn't. And at that moment someone entered the room and I yelled out, "Who is it?"

"Housekeeping, here to turn down the beds, Sir."

But the Old Lady had already managed to sit up and was grasping the end of the bathtub and howling and coughing at the same time, with her cap all twisted and the plastic sail dripping water down her face. I knelt in the puddle on the floor and set the Old Lady upright and helped her expel everything she'd swallowed, clapping on her back while she whined and choked and widened her tiny eyes.

"I almost drowned, I almost drowned," she lamented when she'd stopped wheezing. "I'm sorry," I told her, "I'm sorry." That's when I glanced up and saw the chambermaid staring at me from the doorframe with a startled look on her face as if she were glaring at her own mother's murderer. The water had started to spill over the side of the tub, burning hot. I turned off the faucet with my left hand because I was holding up the Old Lady with my right. I turned to the girl:

"May I help you with something?"

"No, I... " she stammered. "Did you need anything?"

"No, now please just leave."

I didn't have to say it twice. She disappeared like a shadow and I heard her close the door behind her. The Old Lady was shivering violently despite the scorching water and the room filled with steam like a sauna. I lifted her out of the bathtub, wrapped her in a luxury hotel sized towel, and carried her to the bed, leaving a trail of puddles across the room.



Wrapped up in her white towel like that, like a silkworm in its cocoon, she looked more like a mummy than ever. She was still wearing her pink shower cap. A mummy in a plastic shower cap.

“Call the hotel doctor,” she commanded.

I called.

“Order me a hot toddy.”

I ordered it.

“I’ll get sick. I just know this fright will be the death of me.”

She’s immortal. I sat on the couch to wait for the doctor, the toddy, and the rest of my life. My pants and shirt were soaked and stuck to my skin, freezing and unpleasant. It was getting dark and the room filled with shadows. The Old Lady was barely a whitish bundle on the bed, a moaning mummy with blurry contours. The bathroom door, ajar, cast a rectangular neon light in the shadowy room. I checked the time out of habit and once again discovered my broken watch, its foggy face, the drop of water. The most elegant, sophisticated watch in the world, and it had only lasted me a month. Although, of course, truly elegant men don’t spend their days bathing old ladies. On the other side of the window the city gradually lit up against the backdrop of the dark gray sky. I wouldn’t have cared if I were dead.

“My watch is broken,” I said aloud into the darkness.

It only took the Old Lady a couple of seconds to answer:

“Don’t fret, Omar. I’ll buy you a new one.”



MY MAN

My husband dismembers avocados, so you'll understand why my marriage has failed. I was 19 years old when I met him. Back then I was convinced that the most beautiful day in any girl's life was her wedding day. And every time I saw a bride I would start tearing up like a fool. Now I'm 43 and I haven't gotten divorced because I'm afraid of living alone.

He's a very good man. By that I mean he doesn't hit me, he doesn't gamble away our salaries, he doesn't throw stones at stray cats. Otherwise, he's unbearably selfish. He comes home from the office and plops down on the sofa in front of the TV. I, too, have an office but I get home two hours later and laden like a mule with the groceries. "Some help please?" I implore. "I'm coming," he answers. He never says no outright. But I finish bringing in all the bags and he still hasn't moved his butt from his chair. I go into the living room and shout some insult at him and gesture wildly and break a nail in the process. He doesn't even flinch. So I sit on a kitchen stool and start crying. After a while he appears in his stocking feet. "What's for dinner?" he asks in his most innocent voice. And I take a deep breath, prepared to let out some vicious rant, but he intercepts with a skill born of years of practice. "I know, I'll make you a salad that'll have you licking your fingers," he exclaims with a cheeky expression. It's that salad he loves so much, the one with avocado, walnuts, and apple. That subdues me because I'm an idiot and despite my grumbling I help him take out the plates, the ingredients, and the knives, and I tie his apron strings while he holds out his arms pompously as if he were a doctor about to perform open-heart surgery.



Then he starts to peel the avocados, and just to have something to do I rinse the lettuce and chop the onion and cut the apples into little cubes. I watch him out of the corner of my eye and he's still peeling. So I take out the potatoes and wash them and slice them finely, which is how he likes them. I take out the frying pan and drizzle the olive oil, I turn on the burner. First I fry the potatoes until they're browned and then I make a couple of eggs. The oil spits and crackles and as I'm not wearing the apron, my blouse gets stained with grease. I look at him: undaunted, he's still lazily manipulating his avocado. So clumsy, so slow, so useless that rather than cutting a fruit, you'd think he was performing a meticulous autopsy. "You're useless," I growl at him and he looks at me, offended. "And don't look at me like that!" I sputter, exasperated. He furrows his brows and unties his apron ceremoniously and goes sulkily to the living room, where he drops onto the sofa in front of the television and sucks the greenish avocado bits on his fingers. I know that next I'll set the table like I do every night and we'll eat dinner in silence.

The worst part of our failure as a couple is that there are hardly any bigger battles than these sordid domestic conflicts. And it's not that I care so much about doing all the household chores. I don't enjoy doing them, but someone has to. What I really resent is his presence. Because I love cooking for my daughter, for example, although unfortunately she doesn't come visit often; but serving him makes me crazy. Maybe I hate him. Sometimes I can't even stand the way he opens the newspaper and shakes it out before turning the page as if examining a piece of fine fabric. We haven't talked for many years, except to argue.

It wasn't always like this. In the beginning everything was different. He studied line drawing at night and dreamed of becoming an architect. He wanted to be someone. What's more, I believed that he was someone, but he never dared to leave the agency. I don't know when I stopped trusting him, but I know that he disappointed me a long time ago. He wasn't smarter or more hard-working or more capable than I was. And he wasn't stronger, and by that I mean internal strength; for example, he was worthless when we thought our daughter had meningitis. For me to be in love, I need to admire the guy who'll be my man. "You've disappointed me," I've told him many times. And he gets quiet and starts scanning the newspaper.



Of course, maybe I've changed too. Before, life seemed to be full of adventures, and at night while I slept my head was filled with happy images of the two of us with our little daughter, envied by all—him, working at an architecture studio and envied by all; the two of us flying halfway around the world and envied by all. These were still images, like the ones in my childhood stamp album. Later I stopped thinking about those things, because I was always so tired that I'd fall asleep as soon as I lay down. And that's how my youth passed me by. One day you wake up and you say to yourself: so this is what life is about. Not much to speak of.

I was unfaithful twice, both times with colleagues. It was a disaster. I was looking for love in them and unfortunately they were only looking for me. Both men were married. I felt ridiculous. I've gotten more bitter lately. I was a happy person when I was young. He always used to tell me: I love your vitality. Before we were married he used to call me *Tinkerbell*. Now that I think about it, I may also have been a disappointment to him: these days all I do is whine, protest, and mope around.

Sometimes, though, I wake up at dawn and I don't know where I am. Darkness surrounds me, vertigo looms, and I'm alone and defenseless at the mercy of a hostile world. That's when my arm falls on a soft warm back, and the rhythmic sound of familiar breathing reaches my ears like a balm. It's him, sleeping next to me; I recognize his scent, his touch, his warmth. Little by little, the shadows clear and the room starts to take shape around me: the nightstand, the alarm clock, the wall behind us, the grease-stained blouse that I took off last night, draped on the armchair. The certainty of daily life once again triumphs over emptiness. I hug his back and, half asleep, I contemplate how the dawn perches on the roofs of the neighboring houses. And then, only then, do I say to myself: that's my man.



Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner

Disponibles en/available at: <http://cervantesobservatorio.fas.harvard.edu/en/translation-corner>

1. RT/TC 001 (2019). “A Letter of Federico García Lorca to his Parents, 1935”. Author: Federico García Lorca (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Letter.
2. RT/TC 002 (2019). “Like a Night with Legs Wide Open”. Author: José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic); Translator: Luis Guzmán Valerio; Genre: Short Story.
3. RT/TC 003 (2019). “In the Parks, at Dusk” and “I Only Think of You”. Author: Marina Mayoral (Spain); Translator: María Socorro Suárez Lafuente; Genre: Short Story.
4. RT/TC 004 (2020). “The Guide through Death” and “The Fat Lady”. Author: Guadalupe Dueñas (Mexico); Translator: Josie Hough; Genre: Short Story.
5. RT/TC 005 (2020). “The Case of the Unfaithful Translator”. Author: José María Merino (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.
6. RT/TC 006 (2020). “The Guerrilla Fighter” and “May as Well Call it Quits”. Author: Albalucía Ángel Marulanda (Colombia); Translator: Daniel Steele Rodríguez; Genre: Short Story.
7. RT/TC 007 (2020). “Miguel Hernández’ Speech to His Companions in the Ocaña Jail”. Author: Miguel Hernández (Spain); Translator: Constance Marina; Genre: Speech.
8. RT/TC 008 (2020). “On the Road to Houmt Souk”. Author: Soledad Puértolas (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
9. RT/TC 009 (2020). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators’ Corner – Volume 1: Compilation 2019-2020*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
10. RT/TC 010 (2020). *Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey* (excerpt). Author: Gustavo Gac-Artigas (Chile); Translator: Andrea G. Labinger; Genre: Chronicle.



11. RT/TC 011 (2020). “A Bad Girl”. Author: Montserrat Ordóñez (Colombia); Translator: Clara Eugenia Ronderos; Genre: Short Story.
12. RT/TC 012 (2020). “Claudia and the Cats”. Author: Ivanna Chapeta (Guatemala); Translator: Lindsay Romanoff Bartlett; Genre: Short Story.
13. RT/TC 013 (2021). *Song of Being and Nonbeing*. Author: Santiago Alba Rico (Spain); Translator: Carolina Finley Hampson; Genre: Poetry.
14. RT/TC 014 (2021). “Christmas Eve in the Hills of Jaruco”. Author: Robert F. Lima Rovira and Robert Lima (Cuba/USA); Translator: Robert lima; Genre: Chronicle.
15. RT/TC 015 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: José Luis García Martín (Spain); Translator: Claudia Quevedo-Webb; Genre: Poetry.
16. RT/TC 016 (2021). *A Manifesto for reading* (excerpt). Author: Irene Vallejo (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Essay.
17. RT/TC 017 (2021). *Parallel 35* (three excerpts) and “The Dead Woman”. Author: Carmen Laforet (Spain); Translator: Roberta Johnson; Genre: Chronicle/Short Story.
18. RT/TC 018 (2021). “Torn Lace” and “Native Plant”. Author: Emilia Pardo Bazán (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
19. RT/TC 019 (2021). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators’ Corner – Volume 2: Compilation 2020-2021*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
20. RT/TC 020 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: Julia Barella (Spain); Translator: Sarah Glenski; Genre: Poetry.
21. RT/TC 021 (2021). *Five Galician Songs*. Author: Emilio Cao (Spain); Translator: Robert Lima; Genre: Poetry.
22. RT/TC 022 (2022). *The KIO Towers*. Author: José Luis Castillo Puche (Spain); Translator: Douglas Edward LaPrade; Genre: Poetry.
23. RT/TC 023 (2022). “One Hundred Cornfields of Solitude”. Author: Melanie Márquez Adams (Ecuador); Translator: Emily Hunsberger; Genre: Chronicle.
24. RT/TC 024 (2022). *Eight Poems*. Author: Luis Alberto de Cuenca (Spain); Translator: Gustavo Pérez Firmat; Genre: Poetry.
25. RT/TC 025 (2022). *Pilgrimage to Santiago (1610)*. Author: Diego de Guzmán (Spain); Translator: George D. Greenia; Genre: Chronicle.



26. RT/TC 026 (2022). *Short stories from* Ábrete sésamo. Author: Clara Eugenia Ronderos (Colombia); Translator: Mary G. Berg; Genre: Short Story.
27. RT/TC 027 (2022). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 3: Compilation 2021-2022*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
28. RT/TC 028 (2022). “Carabanchel Blues”. Author: Lorenzo Silva (Spain); Translator: Kevin Gerry Dunn; Genre: Short Story.
29. RT/TC 029 (2022). Poems from *Under Leonardo's Wing*. Author: Clara Janés (Spain); Translator: Ana M. Osan; Genre: Poetry.
30. RT/TC 030 (2023). Poems from *Hasta que no haya luna*. Author: Alan Smith Soto (Costa Rica/USA); Translator: Katherine Hannula Hill; Genre: Poetry.
31. RT/TC 031 (2023). “Quixote”. Author: Lorenzo Silva (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Essay.