

FICTION

WHILE THE WOMEN ARE SLEEPING

BY JAVIER MARÍAS

October 26, 2009



Save this story

For three weeks, I saw them every day, and now I don't know what has become of them. I'll probably never see them again—at least, not her. Summer conversations, and even confidences, rarely lead anywhere.

I nearly always saw them at the beach, where it's difficult to get a good look at

people. Especially so for me, because I'm nearsighted and would rather see everything through a haze than return to Madrid with a kind of white mask on my otherwise perfectly tanned face, and I never wear my contact lenses when I go to the beach or into the sea, where they might be lost forever. Nevertheless, I was tempted to rummage around in the bag in which my wife, Luisa, keeps my glasses case—well, the temptation came from her, really, because she, if I may put it this way, was constantly transmitting to me the more peculiar activities of the more peculiar bathers around us.

“Yes, I can see him, but only vaguely. I can't make out his actual features,” I'd say when she pointed out some character she found particularly amusing. I'd squint in that direction, reluctant to get my glasses out only to have to return them to their hiding place once my curiosity was satisfied. Then one day Luisa, who knows the strangest and most insignificant things and is always surprising me with scraps of useful knowledge, passed me her straw hat and advised me to look through the gaps. And I discovered that by peering through the hat I could see almost as well as if I were wearing contact lenses—better, in fact, although my field of vision was greatly reduced. From that point on, I myself must have seemed like one of the more eccentric beachgoers, since I often had a woman's straw hat, complete with ribbons, clamped to my face while I scanned the length and breadth of the beach near Fornells, where we were staying. Luisa, without a word of complaint or a flicker of annoyance, bought another hat, which she didn't like as much, to shade her face—her fine-featured, open, and as yet unlined face.

One afternoon, we entertained ourselves with the exploits of a small Italian sailor—that is, an insubordinate one-year-old wearing nothing but a sailor's hat, who, as we kept reporting to each other, was going around destroying not only the fortifications built in the sand by his siblings and older cousins but doubtless also some of his progenitors' long-term friendships, and doing so with the same aplomb with which he drank the salt water (he seemed to swallow gallons of the stuff), to the complete indifference of the adults accompanying him. His sailor's hat kept falling off, leaving him completely

naked, lying on the shore like a spurned cupid. Another day, we followed the despot comments and idle comings and goings of a middle-aged Englishman—the island was heaving with English people—who kept up a kind of running commentary on the temperature, the sand, the wind, and the waves, speaking as emphatically and grandiloquently as if he were uttering a series of deep, long-pondered aphorisms. He had the virtue, one that is becoming increasingly rare, of believing that *everything* was important, or, rather, that everything that came from him was unique. He never swam, and when he did wade into the sea, never very far, he did so only in pursuit of one of his offspring so as to photograph him or her. With his stomach—but not his chest—wet from the waves, he would return to the shore, muttering further unforgettable pronouncements, which the wind promptly scattered, and pressing his camera to his ear, as if it were a radio, concerned, apparently, that it might have got splashed, a primitive way, I suppose, of checking that it had come to no harm.

Then one day we saw them. I mean, they came to our attention—well, to Luisa's first and then to mine, through my seeing hat. From then on, they became our favorites, and each morning, without realizing that we were doing so, we'd look for them before choosing a spot. On one occasion, we arrived at the beach before them, but shortly afterward we saw them roar up on a gigantic Harley-Davidson, with him at the handlebars wearing a black helmet, the straps hanging loose, and her clinging to him, her long hair streaming behind her. I think what drove us to seek them out was the fact that they offered us a rare sight, the kind it's always hard to look away from: the spectacle of one human being adoring another. In accordance with the old and still valid rule, it was he, the man, who did the adoring, and she, the woman, who was the appropriately indifferent idol. She was beautiful, indolent, passive, and, by nature, languid. Throughout the three hours a day that we spent at the beach (they stayed longer, perhaps taking their siesta there and, who knows, staying until sunset), she barely moved and was, of course, concerned only with her own beautification. She dozed or was, at any rate, usually lying down, eyes closed, on her front, on her back, on one side, on the

other, covered in sunscreen, her gleaming arms and legs always fully extended so that no part of her would remain untanned, no fold in her skin, not even her armpits or her groin (or, it goes without saying, her buttocks), because her bikini bottom was minuscule and revealed an area entirely free of hair. Now and then she would raise herself into a sitting position and then spend a long time with her knees drawn up while she painted her nails or, with a small hand mirror, scrutinized herself for blemishes or unwanted hair. It was odd to see her holding the mirror to the most unlikely parts of her body (it must have been a magnifying mirror), not just to her head and shoulders, I mean, but to her elbows, her calves, her hips, her breasts, the insides of her thighs, even her navel. In addition to her tiny bikini, she wore bracelets and various rings, never fewer than eight of the latter covering her fingers. I rarely saw her go into the water. It would be easy to say that she was a conventional beauty, but that would be a poor description—too broad and too vague. Rather, her beauty was unreal, which is to say ideal. It was what children think of as beauty, which is almost always (unless the children are already deviants) an immaculate beauty, unmarked, in repose, docile, gestureless, with very white skin and large breasts, round—or at least not almond-shaped—eyes, and with identical lips, that is, upper and lower lip identical, as if they were both lower lips: the kind of beauty you get in cartoons or in advertisements, and not in just any advertisements but in those you see in pharmacies, deliberately devoid of any hint of sensuality.

Her male companion was what you might call fat, or even obese, and he must have been more than thirty years older than her. Like many bald men, he believed that he could make up for his lack by wearing what hair he had brushed forward, Roman style—which never works—and by cultivating an abundant mustache. He also believed that he could disguise his age, in this particular setting, by wearing a two-tone swimsuit—with the right leg lime green, the left leg purple. The suit was as small as his bulbous body allowed—it was inaccurate to speak of it as having legs, really—and this meant that his movements were always slightly constrained by the ever-present threat of the suit's ripping. For he was in constant, agile motion, video camera in hand.

Whereas his companion remained completely immobile for hours on end, he never ceased circling her, tirelessly filming her. He would stand on tiptoe, bend double, lie on the ground, on his back or his stomach, take pan shots, medium shots, closeups, tracking shots, and panoramic shots, from above and from below, full face, from the side, from behind. He filmed her inert face, her softly rounded shoulders, her voluminous breasts, her rather wide hips, her firm thighs, her far from tiny feet, her carefully painted toenails, her soles, her calves, her hairless groin and armpits. He filmed the beads of sweat provoked by the sun, probably even her pores—although that smooth, uniform skin seemed to have no pores, no folds or bumps, and not a single stretch mark marred her buttocks. The fat man filmed her every day for hours at a time, with few breaks, always recording the same scene: the stillness and tedium of the unreal beauty who accompanied him. He wasn't interested in the sand or the water, which changed color as the day wore on, or the trees or the rocks in the distance, or a kite flying or a boat far off, or other women, the little Italian sailor, the despotic Englishman, or Luisa. He didn't ask the young woman to do anything—to play games, to make an effort, or to pose. He seemed content with making a visual record, day after day, of that naked, statuary figure, of that slow, docile flesh, of that inexpressive face and those closed or, perhaps, fastidious eyes, of a knee bending or a breast tilting or a forefinger slowly removing a speck from a cheek. Where Luisa or I or anyone else saw only repetition and tedium, he must, at every moment, have seen a remarkable spectacle, as multiform, varied, and absorbing as a painting can be when the viewer forgets about the other paintings waiting for him and loses all notion of time, and loses, too, therefore, the habit of looking, which is replaced or supplanted—or, perhaps, excluded—by the capacity to *see*, which is what we almost never do, because it's so at odds with the purely temporal.

They spoke little and only occasionally, in short sentences that never became conversation or dialogue, any hint of which died a natural death, interrupted by the attention that the woman was giving to her body, in which she was utterly absorbed, and by the indirect attention that the man, too, was giving to her body, through his camera lens. In fact, I don't recall his ever stopping to

look at her directly, with his own eyes, with nothing between his eyes and her. In that respect, he was like me, for I, in turn, viewed them either through the veil of my myopia or through my magnifying hat. Of the four of us, only Luisa could see everything without difficulty or mediation. I don't think the woman saw or even looked at anyone; she used her mirror only to scrutinize and inspect, and often put on a pair of extravagant space-age sunglasses.

"The sun's hot today, isn't it? You should put on more sunscreen—you don't want to burn," the fat man would say, pausing in his circular tours of his adored one's body, and when he didn't receive an immediate answer he'd say her name, the way mothers say their children's names: "Inés. Inés."

"Yes, it's definitely hotter than yesterday, but I've put on some S.P.F. ten," Inés replied, reluctantly and barely audibly, while, with a pair of tweezers, she plucked a tiny hair from her chin.

And there the conversation would end.

One day, Luisa—because she and I did have conversations—said, "To be honest, I don't know whether I'd enjoy being filmed like poor Inés. It would make me nervous, although I suppose I'd get used to it in the end if someone was doing it all the time, like the fat man. And then perhaps I'd take as much care of myself as she does, although she probably takes so much care only because she's constantly being filmed and knows she'll see herself later on film—or perhaps just for posterity." Luisa rummaged around in her bag, took out a small mirror, and studied her eyes, which, in the sun, were the color of plums, with iridescent flecks in them. "Then again what kind of posterity would want to waste its time watching those tedious videos? Do you think he films her the rest of the day, too?"

"Probably," I said. "Why limit himself to the beach? I doubt he needs it as an excuse to see her naked."

"I don't think he films her just because she's naked. I bet he does it all the time,

perhaps even when she's sleeping. It's touching, really. He obviously thinks only of her. Poor Inés. Not that she seems to mind."

That night, after we got into our double bed at the hotel, both at once, each on our own side, I lay thinking about the things we'd said, which I've just set down in writing, and, unable to sleep, I spent a long time watching Luisa sleeping, in the dark, with only the moon to light her. "Poor Inés," she had said. Her breathing was very soft, but still audible in the silence of the room, the hotel, and the island. Her body was immobile, apart from her eyelids, beneath which her eyes were doubtless moving about, as though they couldn't get used to not doing at night what they did during the day. Perhaps the fat man is awake, too, I thought, filming the beautiful Inés's perfectly still eyelids, or maybe he is pulling the sheets off her and very carefully arranging her body in different positions to film in her sleep. With her nightgown pushed up, perhaps, or with her legs apart, if she isn't wearing a nightgown or pajamas. Luisa didn't wear a nightgown or pajamas in the summer, but she did wrap the sheet around her like a toga, clasping it to her with both hands, though a shoulder or the nape of her neck would sometimes come uncovered, and then, if I noticed it, I would cover her up again.

I got up and went over to the balcony to kill time until sleep came, and from there, leaning on the balustrade, I looked up at the sky and then down, and that was when I thought I saw the fat man sitting alone by the swimming pool, in the dark, the water reflecting the stars. I didn't recognize him at first, because he didn't have his mustache. His clothes were as ugly and incongruous as his two-tone swimsuit—a baggy shirt, which looked black from my balcony but was probably patterned, and a pair of light-colored slacks that appeared to be a very pale blue, though that was possibly a reflection from the nearly invisible water. On his feet he wore a pair of red moccasins, and his socks (imagine wearing socks on the island) seemed to be the same color as his trousers, but, again, that might have been the effect of the moonlight on the water. He was resting his head on one hand and the corresponding elbow on the arm of a floral-patterned lounge chair. He didn't have his camera with him.

I hadn't realized that they were staying at the same hotel as us, since we had only ever seen them at the beach, to the north of Fornells, in the mornings. He was alone, as motionless as Inés on the beach, although now and then he switched from that drowsy, relaxed pose of head and elbow to another, apparently contrary position, his face buried in his hands, his feet tucked under him, as if he were exhausted or tense or possibly laughing to himself. At one point, he took off a shoe or accidentally dropped it, but he didn't immediately reach out his foot to recover it—he just stayed like that, his stockinged foot on the grass, which gave him a helpless look, at least from my fourth-floor perspective.

I got dressed in the dark, taking care not to make any noise, and checked that Luisa was well wrapped in her sheet-cum-toga. She hadn't woken up when I got out of bed but had somehow sensed my absence in her sleep, for she was lying diagonally now, her legs invading my space. I went down in the elevator, not having checked the time, past the night porter, who was sleeping uncomfortably, his head on the counter, like a future decapitee; I had left my watch upstairs, and everything lay in silence, apart from the slight noise made by my black moccasins. (*I wasn't wearing socks.*) I slid open the glass door that led to the swimming pool and, once I was outside on the grass, closed it again. The fat man raised his head, glanced over at the door, and immediately noticed my presence, although he couldn't identify me in the dim light.

"You've shaved off your mustache," I said, running my index finger over my upper lip. I was not quite sure that I should be making such a comment. Before he could reply, I had reached his side and sat down on a lounge chair next to him, a striped one. I think that this was the first time I had seen his face without a camera to his eye or a hat to mine. He had an affable face, alert eyes, and his features weren't ugly, simply fat. He struck me as one of those handsome bald men, like the actor Michel Piccoli or the pianist Richter. He looked younger without his mustache, or perhaps it was the red moccasins, one of which still lay upturned on the grass. He must have been at least fifty.

"Oh, it's you. I didn't recognize you at first with your clothes on. We usually

only see each other in our swimming gear. Can't you sleep?"

"No," I said. "The air-conditioning in the room doesn't always help. You're better off out here, I think. Do you mind if I join you for a while?"

"No, of course not. My name's Alberto Viana," and he shook my hand. "I'm from Barcelona."

"I'm from Madrid," I said and told him my name. Then there was a silence, and I wondered whether I should make some trivial remark about the island or about holidays or some other almost equally trivial remark about the activities we had observed on the beach. It was my curiosity about those activities that had led me to his side by the pool—well, that and my insomnia, although I could have continued to struggle with it upstairs or even woken Luisa, but I hadn't. I was speaking almost in a whisper. It was unlikely that anyone could hear us, but the sight of Luisa and of the night porter sound asleep had given me the feeling that if I raised my voice I would disturb their slumber, and my hushed tones immediately infected or influenced the way Viana spoke.

"I've noticed that you're very keen on video cameras," I said after that pause, that hesitation.

"Video cameras?" he said, slightly surprised or as if to gain time. "Ah, I see. No, not really, I'm not a collector. It isn't the camera itself that interests me, although I do use it a lot. It's my girlfriend, whom you've seen, I'm sure. I film only her, nothing else. I don't experiment with it at all. That's fairly obvious, I suppose." And he gave a short laugh, half amused, half embarrassed.

"Yes, of course, my wife and I have both noticed. I think she feels slightly envious of the attention you lavish on your girlfriend. It's very unusual. I don't even have a regular camera. But then we've been married for some time."

"You don't have a camera? Don't you like to be able to remember things?"

Viana asked me this with genuine confusion. As I had suspected, his shirt did have a pattern, a multicolored blend of palm trees and anchors and dolphins

and ships' prows, but nevertheless the predominant color was the black I had seen from above. His trousers and socks still appeared to be pale blue.

"Yes, of course I do, but you can remember things in other ways, don't you think? Memory is a kind of camera, except that we don't always remember what we want to remember or forget what we want to forget."

"What nonsense," Viana said. He was a frank fellow, not at all the reserved type, and he could say what he had said without causing offense. He gave another short laugh. "How can you compare what you can remember with what you can *see*, with what you can see again, just as it happened? With what you can watch over and over, *ad infinitum*, and even freeze? What nonsense," he repeated.

"Yes, you're right," I agreed. "But you're not telling me that you film your girlfriend all the time so that you can remember her later? Is she perhaps an actress? Though she wouldn't have time, would she, given that you appear to film her every day. And if you film her every day there isn't time for what you've shot even to begin to be forgotten or for you to feel the need to recall her in that faithful manner by watching her again on film. Unless you're keeping the films for when you're both old and want to relive your stay here in Minorca hour by hour."

"Oh, I don't keep them all, no, only a few brief fragments, maybe one tape every three or four months. And, no, she isn't an actress. What I do here, and at home, too, is wait a day before I erase the previous day's tape, if you see what I mean. All this time, I've used only two tapes, always the same ones. I use one today, then use another one tomorrow, and then, the day after, I tape over the first one and erase it that way. I won't have time to tape much tomorrow, because we're going back to Barcelona. My holiday's over."

"I see. But then, once you're home, what will you do? Make a montage of everything you've filmed?"

"No, you don't see. Artistic videos are one thing, made in order to be filed

away. They get put aside, one cassette every four months or so. The daily tapings are a separate matter. Those get erased every other day.”

It may have been the lateness of the hour, but I still didn’t entirely understand, especially the second part of his explanation. And I wasn’t that interested in the direction the conversation had taken—about artistic videos (that’s what he said) and erased tapes, the day-to-day ones. I considered saying good night and going back up to my room, but I wasn’t sleepy, and I thought that if I did go back I would probably end up waking Luisa just so that she would talk to me.

“But,” I said, “why do you film her every day if you erase it afterward?”

“I film her because she’s going to die,” Viana said. He had stretched out his stockinged foot and dipped his big toe into the water, moving it slowly back and forth, his leg fully extended, for he could only just reach far enough to touch the surface. I fell silent for a few seconds, and then, as I watched him stirring the water, I asked, “Is she ill?”

Viana pursed his lips and ran his hand over his bald head, as if he still had hair and was smoothing it, a gesture from the past. He was thinking. Finally, he spoke again, to answer not my last question but the previous one.

“I film her every day because she’s going to die, and I want to have a record of her last day, of what might be her last day, so that I can really remember it, so that when she’s dead I can see it again as often as I wish, along with the artistic videos. Because I *do* like to remember things.”

“But is she ill?” I asked again.

“No, she’s not ill,” he said, this time without pausing to think. “At least as far as I know. But she’ll die one day. You know that. Everyone knows that. Everyone is going to die, and I want to preserve her image. The last day in anyone’s life is important.”

“Of course,” I said, looking at his foot. “You’re being cautious. She might have an accident, for example.” And I thought (but only briefly) that if Luisa were to die in an accident I wouldn’t have many pictures to remember her by, hardly any images at all. I certainly didn’t have any videos of her. Without thinking, I glanced up at the balcony from which I had observed Viana. There were no lights on anywhere.

Viana was again immersed in thought, although now he had removed his foot from the water and placed it again—with the tip of the sock wet and dark—on the grass. I began to think that he didn’t like the direction the conversation had taken, and again I considered saying good night and going up to my room. Yes, I suddenly wanted to go up to my room and see Luisa, asleep—not dead—wrapped in her sheet, with one shoulder perhaps uncovered. But conversations, once begun, can’t be abandoned just like that. Viana was saying something, not in a whisper now, but as if muttering to himself.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” I asked.

“No, I’m not thinking that she might have an accident,” he replied, his voice suddenly too loud, as if he had miscalculated the shift in tone between talking to himself and talking to someone else.

“Lower your voice,” I said, alarmed, although there was no reason to feel alarmed; it was unlikely that anyone would hear us. I glanced again at the balconies, but they all still lay in darkness. No one had woken up.

Viana was startled by my order and immediately lowered his voice, but he wasn’t startled enough not to continue what he had begun to say.

“I said that I’m not thinking she might have an accident. But she’ll definitely die before me, if you see what I mean.”

“Why are you so sure of that if she isn’t ill? You’re much older. The normal thing would be for you to die before her.”

Viana laughed again and, stretching his leg out farther, dipped his whole stockinged foot into the water and began to move it slowly, heavily around, more heavily than before because now his whole foot—that wide, obese foot—was submerged.

“Normal,” he said, laughing. “Normal,” he repeated. “Nothing is normal between her and me. Or, rather, nothing is normal as regards my relationship with her, and never has been. I’ve known her since she was a child. Don’t you see? I adore her.”

“Yes, I see that. It’s obvious that you adore her. I adore my wife, Luisa, as well,” I added, in order to counter what he clearly considered to be the extraordinary nature of his adoration of Inés. “But we are more or less the same age, so who knows which of us will die first?”

“You adore her? Don’t make me laugh. You don’t even own a camera. You have no interest in remembering her exactly as she was, were you to lose her, or in seeing her again when it will no longer be possible to see her.”

This time, fat Viana’s remark did bother me a little; I found it impertinent. I noticed this because I felt that there was something wounded and involuntary about my ensuing silence, something fearful, too, as if I suddenly no longer dared ask him anything and had no option but to listen to whatever he chose to tell me. It was as if that abrupt, indelicate remark had entirely taken over the conversation. And I realized that my fear came also from his use of the past tense. He had said “exactly as she was” when referring to Luisa, when he should have said “exactly as she is.” I decided to leave him and go back up to my room. I was feeling rather angry. However, after a few seconds Viana continued talking, and by then it was too late not to continue to listen.

“What you say is very true, but it hardly takes a genius to work that out,” he said. “It’s actually quite difficult to know who will die first. To know that, you have to be a part of it, if you know what I mean. Not to disrupt the order of our dying—that would be impossible—but to be a part of it. Listen, when I

said that I adore Inés, I meant it literally: I adore her. It's not just a turn of phrase, a meaningless, garden-variety expression that you and I can share, for example. What you call 'adoring' has nothing whatever to do with what I call 'adoring.' We share the word because there is no other, but we don't share its meaning. I adore her and have adored her ever since I first met her, and I know that I'll continue to adore her for many years to come. That's why it can't last much longer—because that feeling has been the same inside me for too many years now, unvarying. Soon, it will become unbearable—it already is. And because, one day, it will all become unbearable to me, she will have to die before me, when I can no longer stand my adoration of her. One day, I'll have to kill her, do you see?"

Having said that, Viana lifted his dripping foot out of the water and rested it and its sodden silk sock carefully and distastefully on the grass.

"You'll catch cold," I said. "You'd better take off your sock."

Viana did as I suggested and removed the drenched sock, mechanically, indifferently. For a few seconds, he held it, again distastefully, between two fingers, and then he draped it over the back of his chair, where it began to drip, with the smell of wet cloth. Now he had one bare foot and the other still covered by a pale-blue sock and a rabidly red moccasin. The bare foot was wet, and the covered foot very dry. I found it hard to look away from the former, but perhaps fixing my gaze on something was a way of deceiving my ears, of pretending that what mattered were Viana's feet and not what he had said: that one day he would have to kill Inés.

"What are you saying? Are you crazy?" I didn't want to continue the conversation, but I said precisely the words that obliged him to do so.

"Crazy? What I'm going to tell you now is, in my view, totally logical," Viana replied, and he again smoothed his nonexistent hair. "I've known Inés since she was a child, since she was seven years old. Now she's twenty-three. She's the daughter of a couple who were great friends of mine until five years ago,

but who no longer are, because, as is perfectly normal, they're angry that their eighteen-year-old daughter went off to live with a friend of theirs, and they want nothing more to do with me or, almost, with her. I used to go to my friends' house often, and there I would see Inés, and I adored her. She adored me, too, but in a different way, of course. She couldn't know it at the time but I knew at once, and I decided to prepare myself, to wait the eleven years until she came of age. I didn't want to act in haste and ruin everything, and during the last few months I was the one who had to hold her back. It's what some people call 'fixation,' and I call 'adoration.' I worked out that by the time she was eighteen I would be nearly fifty, and so I took good care of myself, for her sake. I took enormous care of myself, although I couldn't do anything about my weight—your metabolism changes as you get older—or about my baldness. There's still no satisfactory remedy for that, and, as I'm sure you'll agree, a toupee is too undignified. But I spent eleven years going to gyms and eating healthily and having checkups every three months—I have an absolute horror of operations—avoiding other women, avoiding diseases, and, of course, preparing myself mentally: listening to the same records she listened to, learning games, watching TV, children's shows and years of ads. I know all the jingles by heart. As for reading matter, well, you can imagine. First I read comic books, then adventure books, a few romantic novels, the Spanish literature she was studying at school, as well as the Catalan, Manelic and the wolf, and all that. I still read whatever she happens to be reading, American writers, mainly—there are hundreds of them. I've played a lot of tennis and squash, done a bit of skiing, and, on weekends, I've often had to travel to Madrid or San Sebastián just so that she could go to the races, and here we've been to all the fiestas in all the villages to see the horses and their riders. You may also have noticed me riding a motorcycle. And you've seen how I dress, although, of course, in summer anything goes." Viana made an eloquent gesture with his right hand, as if taking in his whole outfit. "Do you see what I'm saying? All these years, I've led a parallel existence—I'm a lawyer, by the way, specializing in divorce. First a childhood existence, then an adolescent one—I was the king of video games—and, since I couldn't go to the movies with her, I'd go on my own to see all those teen movies about thugs and

extraterrestrials. I've led a parallel existence, but one with no continuity, because it's incredibly hard to stay up to date—young people's interests change all the time. You said that you and your wife are about the same age, so your fields of reference must be very similar. It's easy for you. Just imagine if it weren't like that—imagine the long silences there would be in your conversations. And the worst thing would be having to explain everything, every reference, every allusion, every joke about your own past or your own era. Best not to bother. I had a long wait, and, what's more, I had to reject my own past and create, as much as possible, another one that coincided with hers, with what would become her past."

Viana paused for a moment, very briefly. Our eyes were accustomed now to the darkness and to the light from the water. We were on an island. I had no watch. Luisa was sleeping and Inés was sleeping, too, each in her own room, lying diagonally across a double bed. Perhaps they missed us in their sleep. Or perhaps not, perhaps they felt relieved.

"But all that effort is over now. It no longer matters. What matters is my adoration, my immutable adoration. So identical to what it was sixteen years ago that I can't see it changing in the near future. And it would be disastrous if it did change. I've been devoted to her for too long now, devoted to her growing up, to her education. I couldn't live any other way. For her, though, it's different. She has fulfilled her childhood dream, her childhood fixation, and five years ago, when she came to live with me, she was as happy as or even happier than I was, because my house had been entirely designed for her. But her character is still developing. She's very dependent on novelty; she's drawn to the outside world; she's looking around to see what else there is and what awaits her beyond me. Don't think I don't understand that. On the contrary. I foresaw that it would happen, but the fact that I understand doesn't help one iota. We all have to lead our own life, and we have only the one life, and the only people who can live life not according to their own desires are those who have no desires—which is the majority, actually. People can say what they like, they can speak of abnegation, sacrifice, generosity, acceptance, and resignation,

but it's all false. The norm is for people to think that they desire whatever comes to them, whatever they achieve along the way or whatever is given to them—they have no preconceived desires. My adoration is excessive. That's what makes it adoration. The length of time I had to wait was excessive, too. And now I continue to wait, but the nature of my waiting has been turned on its head. Before, I was waiting to gain something; now all I can expect is for it to end. Before, I was waiting to be given a gift; now I expect only loss. Before, I was waiting for growth; now I expect decay. Not just mine, you understand, but hers, too, and that's something that I'm not prepared for. You're probably thinking that I'm making too many assumptions, that nothing is entirely foreseeable, just as the order of our dying is unforeseeable, as I said before. And perhaps we will grow old together. But if that were the case, if all those years together did lie ahead of us, my adoration would still lead me to the same situation. Or do you imagine that I could allow my adoration to die? Do you think I could watch her age and deteriorate without resorting to the sole remedy that exists, namely, that she should die first? Do you imagine that, having known her as a seven-year-old (a seven-year-old), I could bear to see Inés in her fifties or even her forties, with no trace of her childhood left? Don't be absurd. It's like asking some particularly long-lived father to celebrate the old age of his own children. Parents refuse to see their children transformed into old people. They hate them. They jump over them, and see only their grandchildren, if they have any. Time is always opposed to what it originated, to what *is*."

Viana buried his face in his hands, as I had seen him do from above. And I saw then that this gesture had nothing to do with suppressed laughter but was evidence of a kind of panic that nevertheless failed to ruffle his serenity. I glanced up at my balcony again and at the other balconies, but all still lay in silence, dark and empty, as if beyond the balconies, beyond the windows and the net curtains, inside the numerous identical rooms, there was no one sleeping—no Luisa, no Inés, no one. He went on speaking, his face still covered.

“That’s why time offers no solution. I would rather kill her than allow my adoration to die, you understand. I would rather kill her than allow her to leave me, than allow my adoration to continue without its object. I can delay it for as long as possible, but it’s only a matter of time. And just in case, you see, I film her every day.”

“Haven’t you ever considered killing yourself?” I blurted out. I had been listening to him not because I wanted to but because I could do nothing else. I felt that the best way of not taking part in the conversation was to say nothing, to behave as if I were the mere repository of his confidences, without offering any objections or advice, without refuting or agreeing or being shocked. My eyes felt itchy. I wished that Luisa’s sheets would slide off her and wake her up, that she would notice my absence and, like me, go out onto the balcony, that she would see me down below, by the swimming pool, in the feeble glow cast by the moon on the water, and summon me upstairs. I’ll have to read the newspapers closely from now on, I thought, as I sat listening to him. Each time there’s a headline about a woman who has died at the hands of a man, I’ll have to read the whole article until I find their names. What a drag. Now I’ll always fear that Inés is the dead woman and Viana the man who killed her. Although it might all be lies, everything he’s telling me, here on this island, while the women are sleeping.

“Kill myself? That wouldn’t be right,” Viana answered, removing his hands from his face. He looked at me with an expression more of amusement than of surprise, or so it seemed in the darkness.

“It would be even less right for you to kill Inés just so that you can continue to adore her on tape once she’s dead.”

“No, you haven’t understood. It would be right for me to kill her for the reasons I’ve explained. No one willingly gives up his way of life if he has a fairly good idea of how he wants to live it, and I do, which is unusual. And—how can I put it?—murder is a very male practice, just as execution is, but not suicide, which is as common among women as it is among men. Earlier, I

mentioned that Inés has a glimmering of what lies beyond me, but beyond me there is nothing. For her, at least, there is nothing. She may not realize it yet, but she should. If I were to kill myself, that wouldn't be the case, and beyond me there must be nothing, do you see?"

Viana's foot appeared to have dried off, but the sock on the back of the lounge chair was still dripping rapidly onto the grass. I could almost feel its dampness on my own shod feet. I could imagine what it would be like to put that wet sock on. I took off my left shoe so as to scratch the sole of that foot with the black moccasin on my right foot.

"Why are you telling me all this? Aren't you afraid I'll report you? Or talk to Inés in the morning?"

Viana laced his fingers behind his neck and leaned back in his lounge chair, and his bald head touched the wet sock. He reacted at once and sat up again, as you do when a fly brushes your skin. He put on the red moccasin that he had taken off some time before, when I was still standing on our balcony, and this somehow dissipated any air of helplessness he might have had, and it occurred to me suddenly that the conversation might end.

"You can't report intentions," he said. "We leave for Barcelona tomorrow. You and I will never see each other again. We leave early—there'll be no time to go to the beach. Tomorrow, you'll have forgotten all about this. You won't want to remember. You won't take it seriously. You won't try to find out anything. You won't even tell your wife what we talked about—why worry her?—because deep down you don't want to believe me. You'll manage, don't worry." Viana hesitated, then went on, "You may not think so, but if you were to warn Inés you would simply accelerate the process, and I would have to kill her tomorrow, do you understand?" He hesitated again, looked up at the sky, at the moon, and down at the water, then repeated that gesture of panic, covering his face, and continued speaking. "And who's to say that you would be able to speak to her tomorrow? Who's to say that I didn't kill her already—tonight, before coming down here? Who's to say that she isn't already dead and that's

why I'm talking to you now? Anyone can die at any moment. We've known this since we were children. You left your own wife sleeping, but how do you know that she hasn't died while you've been down here talking to me? Perhaps she's dying right now. How do you know that Inés didn't die, at my hands—and that's why I shaved off my mustache—before you came down, before I came down? Or Inés *and* your wife? How do you know that both of them haven't died while they were sleeping?"

I didn't believe him. Inés's ideal beauty was resting, her eight rings on the bedside table, her voluminous breasts safely under the sheets, her breathing regular, her identical lips half open like a child's, her hairless pubis leaving a slight stain, that strange nocturnal secretion women make. Luisa was asleep, I had seen her, her fine-featured, open, and as yet unlined face, her restless eyes moving beneath her eyelids, as if they couldn't get used to not doing at night what they did during the day—unlike Inés's eyes, which were probably quite still now, during the sleep she needed to maintain her immutable beauty. Both were sleeping—that's why they hadn't come out onto their balconies. Luisa hadn't died in my absence, however long it had been. Instinctively, I glanced up toward the rooms, toward my balcony and toward all the balconies, and on one of them I saw a figure wrapped in a sheet toga and heard it call to me twice, say my name, as mothers say their children's names. I stood up. But on Inés's balcony, whichever it was, there was no one. ♦

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Margaret Jull Costa.)

Published in the print edition of the November 2, 2009, issue.