
Short Fiction by Juan José Millás

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Translated from the Spanish by Gabriella Martin

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Eternal Return

Without touching it, I read the note that rested between the windshield wipers of the double-parked car: “I apologize for the inconvenience. I’m in number 25, floor 5, door 11.” Number 25 was right there, next to the Chinese restaurant where I had just eaten, but the elevator was out of order. Who’s going to walk up five floors after Chinese food and beer? I was about to just leave my car and come back for it later when I felt a fit of rage. I never leave my car double-parked, though more due to fear of others than respect for the law, to be honest: in this city you never know who you’re messing with. Nowadays they don’t say something like, “You don’t know who you’re talking to”; they hit you with an iron bar at the base of your skull and then they introduce themselves. This is why I don’t leave my car double-parked—the idea of someone cracking open my skull puts me on edge.

Thus I popped into number 25 and, filled with hatred, began to climb the grubby stairs. They were made of wood and howled with pain every time I stepped on their backs. On the third floor I stopped to rest and, with some surprise, realized that the rage had disappeared. There’s nothing like physical exercise to fuel kindness. I suddenly felt good-natured and I practiced kind-hearted phrases to reprimand the offender: “Hello, sir. Is that your red car double-parked out there? How could you leave it like that? My God, I had to walk up five flights of stairs!”

The fifth floor was an enormous hallway with painted-on door numbers, like the dressing rooms of an old theater. Suspicious, I rang at number 11 and an individual appeared. He made an authoritative silencing gesture before allowing me to speak.

“Come in and wait a moment,” he murmured.

I entered a living room furnished like an old lounge. On the couch lay a young girl in a miniskirt, her eyes closed. The man, who was around fifty years old, sat in a chair, blocking my view of her legs, and began to speak in a monotonous voice. Right away I noticed that he was hypnotizing her and I felt a little violent, as these things had always seemed very private to me. Before long, however, I began to feel sleepy and nodded off. With closed eyes I listened to the man. He said,

BIOS

Juan José Millás

Juan José Millás (1946, Valencia) won the 1990 Premio Nadal. Set extremely short, darkly humorous, isolated feelings, moments, or situations with lightness and irony. He has written several novels, and *articuentos* (his only collection of microstories), and contributes cultural-political commentary. He lives in Valencia and hosts a radio program in Valencia. He has also written a microstory (for example: “Do Mickey Mouse, is the person you’re talking to?”) and a novel, *Desde la sombra*, was recently published.

Gabriella Martin

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“Very well, now imagine you’re going to get in your car, but there is another double-parked car that stops you from leaving. Behind the windshield wipers of the other car you see a note on which the driver indicates where he is. So you look for the door, go in, and you start to walk up the stairs because the elevator doesn’t work. Visualize the space well: the stairs are old and wooden, and they cry as if they’re being killed every time you step on them. At last you arrive at the place the note indicated and a guy like me comes out and tells you to wait because he’s treating a patient. You sit down, and you close your eyes because you’ve gotten very sleepy, and you hear me say, ‘Imagine you’re going to get in your car, but there is another one double-parked...’”

I felt like throwing up the Chinese food because reality was going in circles and circular realities overwhelm me. They drive me crazy. I stopped studying philosophy when we arrived to the lesson on eternal return: I had the impression that the professor was publically narrating my life.

To sum it up, when I awoke, I didn’t vomit, but the man and the girl had disappeared and they had robbed me of everything I had, even my ID. I went down to the street and saw another double-parked car, also with a note, but this time I left without reading it. This happened about a year ago now. The other day I went out with a girl around there and I told her that even though I didn’t use it anymore, that dusty car was mine. She didn’t believe me. They never believe me. That’s all I wanted to say about eternal return, now that Christmas is here once more.

You Have to Shut Off the Gas

When they were 100 kilometers from Madrid, en route to the beach, the father of the family began to doubt whether or not he had shut off the gas valve. With his gaze fixed on the white serpent that divided the asphalt in half, he ruminated on his last movements through the interior of the house. He had certainly dealt with the water valve; he remembered because when he came out from under the basin he hit his head, and still had a bump, which he now gratefully touched. Thanks to it, he knew that, flood-wise, there would be no problems. Later he had passed through the bedrooms closing the blinds, careful to leave them open just a crack so the dwelling could breathe a bit in the family’s absence. He remembered that those in the youngest child’s room had gotten stuck and he had scratched his finger untangling them. He looked at the wound to confirm that it hadn’t all been a dream and continued the tour. Now it came time for the lighting, whose switch was up high, making it necessary to stand on a footstool. After flipping the switch off, he lost his balance and bit the inside of his bottom lip in the fall. He now touched the electric-flavored injury with the tip of his tongue, and this, too, calmed him.

In truth, those small accidents hadn't been at all accidental. He always intentionally caused them when leaving for vacations to have proof that everything was in order. But goddamn it, he didn't remember shutting off the gas. Without taking his eyes off the traffic, he carefully reviewed his hands in search of a broken nail or any other sign that would by association evoke that moment, but he didn't find it. Surely, it had been left on. Normally nothing happens, but if it produced a leak, no matter how small it was, it would turn the house into a time bomb. It would be enough for someone to ring the doorbell of the house next door, causing the electric current to detonate the accumulated gas and produce a catastrophe. He saw the house exploding to pieces and pulled the car over to the side of the road.

"What's going on?" asked his wife.

"Nothing, I think I heard a noise."

He got out of the car, went around back, opened the trunk to hide himself from the gazes of his wife and children and took several deep breaths, covering his nose and mouth with his hands. This way—he had read about it in a self-help book—instead of air, he inhaled the carbon dioxide exhaled from his lungs and managed to relax temporarily.

"There was a suitcase rolling around," he said when he returned to the wheel.

He started up the engine, calmer, though catastrophes still filled his head, and then the youngest child asked the fated question,

"Are we there yet?"

He tightened his hands around the steering wheel and avoided answering. Instead, he adopted an indifferent tone and turned to his wife,

"Did you remember to shut off the gas?"

"You always do that. Did you forget?"

Her question coincided with that of the child who insisted on finding out how much longer there was to go. As confessing his carelessness would have been humiliating, he turned to the littlest one and said, chewing his words like a rabid dog,

"We're an eternity away. If you want to know what an eternity is, imagine an ant circling round the Earth, always taking the same route. Think of the millions of years that it would take that ant to divide Earth in two pieces. In this moment eternity would have hardly begun."

"So we'll never get there, and we'll never go back?"

“Exactly,” responded the Father, continuing to grind the words as if they were stones, at the same time that he drove the car under a semi truck. Some moments later, in Hell, he realized his eyebrows were scorched and remembered that this was the sign that he had turned off the gas. Such a shame of an accident!

Death on Preciados

I have a sixth sense for identifying detectives, so I knew at once what the woman was. She was inside a neatly parked car on Preciados Street, watching a door out of which people who seemed to work in the building emerged. I was eating some garlic shrimp at the bar of the restaurant Tres Encinas while, with the curiosity of an etymologist, I watched the movements of the passerby through the window. Across the street was an establishment called Bocata World, where workers from the area often have a snack around this time.

The Detective didn't smoke; nor did she read magazines. If you get used to waiting, you no longer need those distractions to stay calm. When I finished my shrimp, the Detective removed a sandwich from the glove compartment and gave it three disinterested nibbles before putting it away. She later uncapped a coffee thermos and took a couple sips. To my surprise, she fell asleep right after. She was very young and this carelessness unsettled me, so I ordered a cup of tea with lemon, lit a cigarette, and decided to relieve her from her door-watching duties. Before long, an individual came out. He was around forty years old, with the knot of his tie at half-mast. I knew he was the one to keep an eye on because I also have a sixth sense for identifying those pursued. He looked from one side of the street to the other without noticing the sleeping detective, even though her car was in front of him, and he began to walk toward Callao; I paid in a hurry and followed him. He entered FNAC, where he bought *Confessions of Saint Augustine* and a tourist guide of Rome. He later went down to the computer section and looked at the prices. I think he had realized that I was following him because he began to give me a few sidelong glances. I said before that I had decided to show solidarity with the woman, but at being discovered I decided to transfer my support to the pursued. So I stood beside him and confessed:

“Be careful, I think they're following you.”

“I know,” he responded with resignation. “The diocese didn't trust me. Sir, are you the Devil?”

“No, I'm a private eye. I just recognize detectives in an instant and I saw one waiting for you to leave through the door on Preciados. It was a woman.”

“And why are you warning me if you aren't the Devil? When my superiors have

decided to follow me, it's because they think it's good for me."

So I realized that he was a priest, although perhaps I should have deduced this before, given his purchases.

"I think they're going to send me to Rome," he added. "That's my life's dream, but beforehand they want to make sure my conduct is impeccable. I used to be a bit of a womanizer."

I volunteered to wake up the Detective to inform her that the only thing he had done during her nap was buy a book by Saint Augustine and a guide to the Holy City. He seemed to appreciate it, so we returned to Preciados together, where we saw a great commotion around the car. Some municipal guards had taken the detective's body from the car and placed it on a blanket on the sidewalk. She wore a miniskirt, and she was dead. After a moment's hesitation, the priest bent over her and gave her the last rites in case her soul was still attached to her lungs.

He then blended into the group of curious onlookers and disappeared from my sight. A policeman took the thermos out of the glove compartment and upon unscrewing the lid to smell its contents, sensed a strong scent of sulfur: the scent of the devil when he vanishes. I understood that the supposed priest was, in reality, Satan, so I wrote at once to tell the Diocese not to send him to Rome. They still haven't written me back.

The Son of the Man in Pajamas

I was on my way back from dinner with some friends when an old man in pajamas ran out in front of my car. I watched him drift away with the same curiosity with which one watches a rat in the metro, though swiftly realized he was not a rat. Bailén Street was deserted at that hour, so a basic, cautionary instinct told me to let him be. As it turns out, my conscience wouldn't stop reminding me that there is still a difference between a rat and a man in pajamas, just as there is between the metro and Bailén Street, although it seems they're trying to fix up the latter.

The point is that I turned the car around and managed to catch up with him at the top of Calle Mayor.

"Is something the matter?"

"I'm having a heart attack. I need a hospital."

I invited him to get in and with his guidance we made it to the Plaza de Cristo Rey, from where we went up a hill that led to a place whose name I did not know, but which was labeled Emergency. Before an off-white hallway swallowed him up

through a swinging door, I asked him if he wanted me to notify any of his relatives.

“Don’t even think about it,” the old man commanded.

I was going to leave, but the thought of doing so made me feel I-don’t-know-what, even though it was already two in the morning and I had to wake up early the next day. In the waiting room there was a coffee machine, so I decided to wait the length of a cup and a cigarette. The walls were tiled white and the people were tiled with pain up to their eyebrows.

“Is the man in pajamas your father?” asked an elderly woman who had seen us come in.

I don’t know why, but even though I placed my tongue and lips in the correct position to say no, a yes came out.

“His heart,” I added with a genuinely pained gesture.

“He’ll recover. My grandson is worse.”

With that, a nurse came out and asked if I was the son of the man in pajamas. I had to say yes to maintain my dignity.

“We’ll give him back to you in a moment; there was just a pocket of gas pressing on his chest.”

After a little while the man came out with a relieved expression on his face and a borrowed robe on over his pajamas. On our way to the car, I saw a telephone booth and realized my wife would be worried. I called her:

“My dad got sick and I had to take him to the emergency room. I’ll still be a while.”

I knew she didn’t believe me—I’ve been an orphan since I was a child, but I hung up before she had time to say anything. When I saw myself inside the car with Dad, he and I alone together after so many years, I felt an unbelievable happiness. He said he wanted to drive around, so I turned off Calle Princesa toward Isaac Peral and headed for Plaza de España. He carried on telling me how everything had changed since I was little. He explained to me that there used to be a nice central walkway on Alberto Aguilera. Suddenly, I remembered having strolled through those avenues by his side; it was on a Sunday morning and he took me to see the Parque del Oeste. I was about to tell him what I had remembered, but I didn’t want to press my luck, as it had been so long since I was so happy.

“Son, let’s take a drive along Gran Vía.”

I was so thrilled that he called me Son that I almost wept. Then I told him I was a

cardiologist and I made him promise me that he would call me any time he had a problem. He still hasn't called me, but next time, when we leave the hospital, the two of us will go together to the Parque del Oeste.