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Gualta

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# Gualta

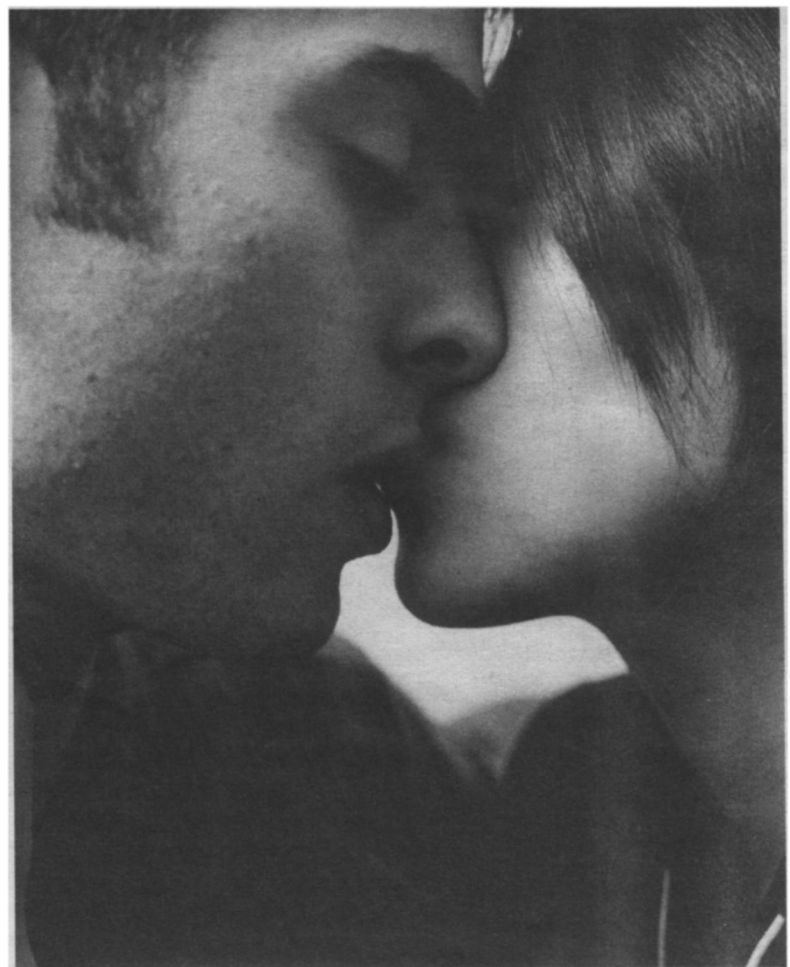
*Javier Marías*

UNTIL I was thirty years old, I lived quietly and virtuously and in accordance with my own biography, and it had never occurred to me that forgotten characters from books read in adolescence might resurface in my life, or even in other people's lives. Of course, I had heard people speak of momentary identity crises provoked by a coincidence of names uncovered in youth (for example, my friend Rafa Zarza doubted his own existence when he was introduced to another Rafa Zarza). But I never expected to find myself transformed into a bloodless William Wilson, or a de-dramatized portrait of Dorian Gray, or a Jekyll whose Hyde was merely another Jekyll.

His name was Xavier de Gualta—a Catalan, as his name indicates—and he worked in the Barcelona office of the same company I worked for. His (highly) responsible position was similar to mine in Madrid, where we met at a supper intended for the dual purpose of business and fraternization, which is why we both arrived there accompanied by our respective wives. Only our first names were interchangeable (my name is Javier Santín), but we coincided in absolutely everything else. I still remember the look of stupefaction on Gualta's face (which was doubtless also on mine) when the headwaiter who brought him to our table stood to one side, allowing him to see my face for the first time. Gualta and I were physically identical, like twins in the cinema, but it wasn't just that: we even made the same gestures at the same time and used the same words (we took the words out of each other's mouths, as the saying goes), and our hands would reach for the bottle of wine (Rhine) or the mineral water (still), or our forehead, or the sugar spoon, or the bread, or the fork beneath the fondue dish, in perfect unison, simultaneously. We narrowly missed colliding. It was as if our heads, which were identical outside, were also

thinking the same thing and at the same time. It was like dining opposite a mirror made flesh. Needless to say, we agreed about everything and—although I tried not to ask too many questions, such as my disgust, my sense of vertigo—our lives, both professional and personal, had run along parallel lines. This extraordinary similarity was, of course, noted and commented on by our wives and by us (“It’s extraordinary,” they said. “Yes, extraordinary,” we said), yet, after our initial amazement, the four of us, somewhat taken aback by this entirely anomalous situation and conscious that we had to think of the good of the company that had brought us together for that supper, ignored the remarkable fact and did our best to behave naturally. We tended to concentrate more on business than on fraternization. Our wives were all that distinguished us from each other (but they are not in fact part of us, just as we are not part of them). Mine, if I may be so vulgar, is a real stunner, whilst Gualta's wife, though distinguished-looking, was a complete nonentity, temporarily embellished and emboldened by the success of her go-getting spouse.

The worst thing, though, was not the resemblance itself (after all, other people have learned to live with it). Until then, I had never seen myself. I mean, a photo immobilizes us, and in the mirror we always see ourselves the other way round (for example, I always part my hair on the right, like Cary Grant, but in the mirror I am someone who parts his hair on the left, like Clark Gable); and, since I am not famous and have never been interested in movie cameras, I had never seen myself on television or on video either. In Gualta, therefore, I saw myself for the first time, talking, moving, gesticulating, pausing, laughing, in profile, wiping my mouth with my napkin, and scratching my nose. It was my first real experience of myself as object, something which is normally enjoyed





only by the famous or by those with a video camera to play with.

And I hated myself. That is, I hated Gualta, who was identical to me. That smooth Catalan not only struck me as entirely lacking in charm (although my wife—who is gorgeous—said to me later at home, I imagine merely to flatter me, that she had found him attractive), he seemed affected, prissy, overbearing in his views, mannered in his gestures, full of his own charisma (mercantile charisma, I mean), openly right-wing in his views (we both, of course, voted for the same party), pretentious in his choice of vocabulary, and unscrupulous in matters of business. We were even official supporters of the most conservative football clubs in our respective cities: he of Español and I of Atlético. I saw myself in Gualta and in Gualta I saw an utterly repellent individual, capable of anything, potential firing squad material. As I say, I unhesitatingly hated myself.

And it was from that night—without even informing my wife of my intentions—that I began to change. Not only had I discovered that in the city of Barcelona there existed a being identical to myself whom I detested, I was afraid too that, in each and every sphere of life, at each and every moment of the day, that being would think, do, and say exactly the same as me. I knew that we had the same office hours, that he lived alone, without children, with his wife, exactly like me. There was nothing to stop him living my life. I thought: “Everything I do, every step I take, every hand I shake, every word I say, every letter I dictate, every thought I have, every kiss I give my wife, will be being done, taken, shaken, said, dictated, had, given by Gualta to *his* wife. This can’t go on.”

After that unfortunate encounter, I knew that we would meet again four months later, at the big party being given to celebrate the fifth anniversary of our company, American in origin, being set up in Spain. And during that time, I applied myself to the task of modifying my appearance: I cultivated a moustache, which took a long while to grow; sometimes, instead of a tie, I would wear an elegant cravat; I started smoking (English cigarettes); and I even tried to disguise my receding hairline with a discreet Japanese hair implant (the kind of self-conscious, effeminate thing that neither Gualta nor my former self would ever have allowed himself to do). As for my behavior, I spoke more robustly, I avoided expressions such as “horizontal integration” or “package deal dynamics” once so dear to Gualta and myself; I stopped pouring wine for ladies during supper; I stopped helping them on with their coats; I would utter the occasional swear word.

Four months later, at that Barcelona celebration, I met a Gualta who was sporting a stunted moustache and who appeared to have more hair than I remembered; he was chain-smoking John Players and, instead of a tie, he was wearing a bow tie; he kept slapping his thighs when he laughed, digging people with his elbow, and exclaiming frequently: “Bloody hell!” I found him just as hateful as before. That night, I too was wearing a bow tie.

It was from then on that the process of change in my own abominable person really took off. I conscientiously sought out everything that an excessively suave, smooth, serious, sententious man like Gualta (he was also very devout) could never have brought himself to do, and at times and in places when it was most unlikely that Gualta, in Barcelona, would be devoting his time and space to committing the same excesses as me. I began arriving late at work and leaving early, making coarse remarks to the secretaries; I would fly into a rage at the slightest thing and frequently insult the staff who worked for me; and I would even make mistakes, never very serious ones, but which a man like Gualta, however—so punctilious, such a perfectionist—would never have made. And that was just my work. As for my wife, whom I always treated with extreme respect and veneration (until I turned thirty), I managed, gradually, subtly, to persuade her not only to have sex at odd times and in unsuitable places (“I bet Gualta is never this daring,” I thought one night as we lay together—in some haste—on the roof of a newspaper kiosk in Calle Príncipe de Vergara), but also to engage in sexual deviations that only months before, in the unlikely event of our ever actually having heard of them (through someone else, of course), we would have described as sexual humiliations or sexual atrocities. We committed unnatural acts, that beautiful woman and I.

After three months, I awaited with impatience a further encounter with Gualta, confident that now he would be very different from me. However, the occasion did not arise and, finally, one weekend, I decided to go to Barcelona myself with the intention of watching his house in order to discover—albeit from afar—any possible changes in his person or in his personality. Or, rather, to confirm the efficacy of the changes I had made to myself.

For eighteen hours (spread over Saturday and Sunday) I took refuge in a café from which I could watch Gualta’s house, and there I waited for him to come out. He did not appear, however, and, just when I was wondering whether I should return defeated to Madrid or go up to his apartment, even if I risked possibly bumping into him, I suddenly saw his nonentity of a wife come out of the front door. She was rather carelessly dressed, as if her spouse’s success were no longer sufficient to embellish her artificially or as if its effect did not extend to weekends. On the other hand, though, it seemed to me, as she walked past the darkened glass concealing me, that she was somehow more provocative than the woman I had seen at the supper in Madrid and at the party in Barcelona. The reason was very simple and it was enough to make me realize that I had not been as original as I thought nor had the measures I had taken been wise: the look on her face was that of a salacious, sexually dissolute woman. Though very different, she had the same slight (and very attractive) squint, the same troubling, clouded gaze as my own stunner of a wife.

I returned to Madrid convinced that the reason Gualta had not left his apartment all weekend was because that same weekend he had traveled to Madrid and had spent hours sitting in La Orotava, the café opposite my own

house, waiting for me to leave, which I had not done because I was in Barcelona watching his house which he had not left because he was in Madrid watching mine. There was no escape.

I made a few further, by now rather half-hearted, attempts. Minor details to complete the transformation, like becoming an official supporter of Real Madrid, in the belief that no supporter of Español would ever be allowed into Barça; or else I would order anisette or aniseed liqueur—drinks I find repugnant—in some dingy bar on the outskirts, sure that a man of Gualta’s refined tastes would not be prepared to make such sacrifices; I also started insulting the Pope in public, certain that my rival, a fervent Catholic, would never go that far. In fact, I wasn’t sure of anything and I think that now I never will be. A year and a half after I first met Gualta, my fast-track career in the company for which I still work has come to an abrupt halt, and I await my dismissal (with severance pay, of course) any week now. A little while ago, without any explanation, my wife—either because she had grown weary of perversion or else, on the contrary, because my fantasies no longer sufficed and she needed to go in search of fresh dissipations—left me. Will Gualta’s nonentity of a wife have done the same? Is his position in the company as precarious as mine? I will never know, because, as I said, I now prefer not to. For the moment has arrived when, if I did arrange to meet Gualta, two things could happen, both equally terrifying, at least, more terrifying than uncertainty: I could find a man utterly different from the one I first met and identical to the current me (scruffy, demoralized, shiftless, boorish, a blasphemer and a pervert) whom I will, however, possibly find just as awful as the Xavier de Gualta I met the first time. As regards the other possibility, that is even worse: I might find the same Gualta I first met, unchanged: impassive, courteous, boastful, elegant, devout, and successful. And if that were the case, I would have to ask myself with a bitterness I could not bear, why, of the two of us, was I the one to abandon and renounce my own biography? □

*(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)*

## The Carpenter’s Left Hand Complains

We two were brothers then in all we made  
or did, each of us took his equal part,  
mine the palm hanging closest to the heart,  
his the mind’s speed, the thumb that turns the blade  
that carves the apple: killers when we played  
hockey, wringing the puck like a black dart;  
but lovers when we learned the practiced art  
of bra-strap solving and the flanking raid

against the undefended rear. But now,  
caught in a tradesman’s patient life, I’m used  
only as his blunt helper, clamp or brace—  
forever in harm’s way, by hammer-blow  
or chisel-slip my fingers, gouged and bruised,  
have grown too coarse to stroke a lover’s face.

—Peter Spagnuolo