

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained (1994)

Javier Mariás

WHEN MY father was the age I am now, I was four going on five, and we had just returned from America after a year in New Haven, Connecticut. My first really clear memories date from then, so much so that, for a while, I saw my father as a typical 1950s American (and I can, when I choose to, still see him like that today): a man with blue eyes, a cleft chin, and tortoiseshell glasses, wearing a hat and a long gabardine overcoat. He was always very erect, almost leaning slightly backwards, with a faint smile on his lips and an invariably optimistic, rather proud expression on his face. I can still see his footsteps in the slippery, perpetual New England snow, quick, impatient steps, which would easily and unintentionally leave us all behind, my mother, me, and my three brothers. In mock despair, my mother would sometimes stop walking, just to make him aware of the gulf opening up between us and that he was in danger of losing us completely. She would stand there, an amused look on her face (like someone fondly observing an incorrigible child), until he returned to our side and tried, always unsuccessfully, to keep pace with our slow childish steps. He arrived everywhere early, propelled by a rare haste, the haste of enthusiasm.

He has lost none of that enthusiasm in what has been almost the whole of my lifetime, nor has he lost the large dose of ingenuousness that might seem inadvisable for anyone hoping to get through life safely. Given that he has now reached the age of eighty, unscathed and with his trust in people intact, I'm obliged to think that such a mixture has, in fact, proved rather successful, or that it's simply a matter of *disposition*. Let's just say it's the disposition of a man prepared to allow himself to be deceived and to run that risk time and again rather than live in a state of perennial suspicion or caution, as if such an attitude were, in itself, far too sterile, especially if its sole aim was that of self-defense. There's a good reason why his motto has always been "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," and it has remained so to this day, despite the many betrayals inevitable in the life of someone like him—for example, when he ended up in prison after the civil war, denounced by a man who had, until then, been his best friend. Yet that still didn't stop him believing in people and allowing himself, if necessary, to be deceived by them. Perhaps that's the only interesting way of dealing with one's fellow man.

I remember my father always working at great speed, although when I was very little I couldn't understand how he could possibly sit so still in front of a machine and spend all those hours in his study, while what I thought of as "real life" was going on outside—namely, playground scuffles, or life with my mother and the maids

and my brothers, and my Cuban grandmother and aunt when they visited: boisterous company, but then childhood is a pretty boisterous affair. On Sunday mornings, he would spend slightly more time with us, although he didn't really know how to deal with children, or perhaps that's just how it seemed when we compared his treatment of us with my mother's intelligent, continuous attentions. We were fascinated by my father's silver automatic pencil, which had four different-colored leads, and on Sundays he would find himself obliged to draw something for us. He wasn't very good, though, and I can remember feeling something akin to pity when I saw him repeating over and over the same three figures, each in a different color: a fish, a cow, and an Indian wearing a turban. Luckily, my older brother, Miguel, revealed an early talent for drawing and could draw all kinds of things magnificently, especially airplanes, perfect down to the last detail.

My father had no family on his side, no grandparents or aunts or uncles or cousins, no one, and at family gatherings he did sometimes feel like something of an intruder. He appeared more at ease with his own intellectual gatherings, the *tertulias* he still holds once a week in his apartment, and these are, I suppose, the rather homely heirs to the famous *tertulias* held at the *Revista de Occidente* and from which I remember him returning sometimes twice in one day. (What, I wonder, has become of all that elastic time, which we have lost entirely?) He was a generous and indefatigable talker, and I've always envied his broad, solid education, of a kind unknown to anyone born under Francoism or indeed since: he read the Spanish philosopher Francisco Suárez in Latin, Aristotle in Greek, Heidegger in German, and, in English and French respectively, his favorites Conan Doyle and Simenon. (He adores detective fiction, and whenever I go to France I make a point of searching out the few Maigret books he hasn't yet read: he never tires of them, and re-reads them continually, as he does Dumas.) Ever since we were children, my brothers and I have been accustomed to having our own walking encyclopedia at home in the form of a father who can respond briefly but satisfactorily to any questions we might have on history, literature, philosophy, art, science, or anything else. My mother was a more reliable consultant on matters linguistic, but she, to my father's great despair, died long ago, and I, having lost my consultant of choice, still turn to him as my personal dictionary whenever I feel unsure about something. As a writer, I owe him a lot, and not just those linguistic consultations.

I don't recall him ever laying a hand on me, and goodness knows I got up to all kinds of mischief as a child. Or per-

haps he did, just once, although that memory is very vague and somewhat questionable. Asked by my mother to intervene after some particularly outrageous prank on my part, he must have spanked me with such a lack of conviction and such good humor that I decided never to behave as badly again simply to avoid placing him in a situation that ran so counter to his nature. He's quite a forceful man, but extremely affable.

Whenever I've lived abroad and been obliged to think of him in retrospect, the predominant image that comes to

mind is always of him sitting reading without his glasses on, so that his blue eyes are clearly visible, and wearing what my mother called his "German face," which, according to her, always appeared whenever he took off his glasses. Sitting in his chair in the evenings, impeccably dressed in suit and tie even if he has no plans to go out, and reading with the same enthusiasm he puts into everything he does—that is how I see and remember him. And I know that while he's reading, he's also thinking, possibly about something he'll write tomorrow. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Retiring

Elk bones everywhere my father texts, from a gulch outside Eagle, Colorado. At seventy, he's begun to hunt

more decisive danger: the rift unjumpable, the trail below a cocked boulder, or copperheads fizzing in slim fissures.

No more meat, he insists. Turns back to roots, dirt-drenched tubers, to marrow. Peels skin off a nightshade.

The doctors would scrutinize every six months. He resists age's crepe, refuses the narrow IV pole. Will walk the edge

of a bluff alone, his life spent catching flies by the wing to loose outside. His one tenderness. How a cat slackens her bite to pass

young toward safer ground. Pauses attack. Somewhere, wasps chew up a fencepost, hock pulp for a nest in his name. One sting will end this

hard hike. But today, mountain lion, after months of stalking black bear. They say rear paws leave clawless prints, easily mistaken for a man's.

—Allison Adair