One Half of My Time (2004)

Javier Marías

MAJOR COMMEMORATIVE events tend to coincide with anniversaries marked by round or supposedly significant numbers: twenty-five, fifty, or a hundred years. But in our personal lives, we each have our own way of calculating these things, and I have just realized that the morning of December 24, just gone, marked twenty-six years since the death of my mother. The reason this figure made me stop in my tracks and summon up memories, some of which I will set down here (and I apologize beforehand for writing on so personal a subject, but I'm sure these memories will, in some way, chime with many readers), is that I was then twenty-six, and this strikes me suddenly as both strange and perhaps also unfair, not so much for myself, as for my mother: I have lived as many years in the world without her as with her, and from now on, each day, each month, each year will only add to the time spent without her. I know there's nothing particularly remarkable about this: some people knew their father or mother for even less time, ten years or four or not at all, with one or the other or both parents forever absent, mere recollections of something never experienced or else purely imaginary, or perhaps recounted by someone who knew them when they were not yet parents and could not even dream of becoming parents.

It doesn't matter. The oddness I feel is doubtless because twenty-six years, especially our first twenty-six years, is long enough for you to regard your mother as something as permanent and as natural as the air, someone you take for granted and therefore don't pay too much attention to, whom you find it hard to think of as an autonomous person with a previous life, with her own biography independent of the connection that binds you to her—as if her sole function or mission had been to be a mother to you and your brothers. That's how things tend to be; childhood and adolescence and youth are so slow-moving and self-absorbed that it takes a very long time to see beyond them and to take an interest in the people closest to you, the people who are almost always on your side, ready to lend a helping hand and to be almost oppressively concerned about your perennially vacillating steps. It's only in adulthood that one "liberates" those paternal and maternal figures and begins to see who they are or were, because no one can be reduced to having been merely the progenitor of her offspring and nothing more.

I remember that when I was very little (or perhaps not so very little, for we only really discover death when we're about six years old), I would sometimes wake in the night filled with a sense of dread that my mother had died. This did not happen so often with my father, who, at the time at least, was less of a presence. I suppose I called out just to make sure she wasn't dead, and my mother, who was still a young woman then, would drive away my anxiety with laughter. Her laughter, as well as convincing me that she was safe and alive, also made me feel secure and invulnerable and unafraid. She, however, doubtless felt very afraid for her children, especially since her first child had died aged only three and a half.

My mother's name was Lolita. She was born in Madrid on December 31, 1912 ("Saint Sylvester's Day," according to her)—that is, a few months after the sinking of the *Titanic* and before the beginning of the First World War. When I give those dates it seems incredible to me that my brothers and I should still be here, and not particularly old, either. She was the eldest of seven, although my grandmother Lola, from Havana, actually gave birth to ten children. It was precisely because she had seen her own mother's grief at losing those children that my mother promised herself, when she was still very young, not to get married and not to have children—"I know how much children make you suffer," she said—and her fear, as I mentioned, proved well-founded. She went to school in Madrid, first to the Colegio San Luis de los Franceses, then to the Instituto Beatriz Galindo, before going on to university to study philosophy (not without some opposition from her father), at a time when very few women went to university. Among her teachers were such big names as Ortega y Gasset, Gaos, Morente, Salinas, and Zubiri. Once married, she wrote and published a book, *España como preocupación* ("The Problem of Spain"), for which the writer Azorín wrote a prologue, and which met with a few problems from Franco's censors. Then… we began to be born, and although she still taught the occasional course, I was always aware that she struggled to find time to do her own reading; "she devoted herself to making people," as my father wrote, thus according a higher value to her task than to his of writing books. I don't think he was being insincere when he wrote this, nor was he trying to justify himself. Nor do I think she felt unhappy or frustrated, or would have wanted a different task. I sometimes think that she would not have been entirely convinced by the person I am today, that she might have seen me as "her" failure. Then again, she did make three other people as well, so there's still some chance of success.

One of the things she taught me and on which she insisted—the one I remember most clearly—was this: "You must always treat women well and with respect, because it's very easy to make them unhappy." It is perhaps not a bad moment to repeat this in a country and at the end of a year when so many men have killed so many women. From now on, the time during which she and I did not coincide in the world will continue to grow, but I am still thirteen years younger than she was when she departed. Who knows, perhaps one day I will be much older than she ever was, and will then be able to see her as a young woman or even a girl, with her own entirely independent biography.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

My Son Is Undone by My Hair

I mean he buries his face in it
and breathes it in, holds it with his little hand
like an elephant as I carry him
post-nap, still halfway in a dream.

I mean he asks to brush it, then does
for ten minutes—hours at two—
gently. Says again and again
Mama, I'm doing hair salon.

But watch him find
a hair of mine,
one single hair,
separated from my head.

Watch him lift it like a spider leg
mistaken for a string. See
the realization of what it is
creep across his gaze:

a part of me
no longer part of me
and what
it could mean.

—Alice White