

Only a Fragrance

Javier Marías

LESS THAN two years ago I wrote an article about signed copies of books turning up in second-hand bookstores, and I concluded by saying, “Fortunately, I haven’t as yet come across a signed copy of one of my own novels in a bookstore, one dedicated to a dear friend that is. All in good time, though, because there is a particular kind of melancholy that life reserves for all of us.” Time, alas, came around sooner than expected, because if you do come across a book in a second-hand bookstore, a book that you signed and dedicated to a particular person, it can mean one of three things: that the person didn’t want it any more, that they were so short of money they had to sell it, or that they have died and their belongings have been dispersed.

I’m basically an optimist, and so I didn’t even consider that third option when, a month or so ago, after a talk I gave, a young man came up to me and handed me a copy of my second novel, published in 1973, and told me that he’d bought it cheap from a bookseller, and that it was signed by me. I duly opened the book, and there, in my slightly more childish, twenty-one-year-old handwriting, I found these words: “For Olga and Erik, my god-

mother and her consort, with much love.” I found this odd, and yet I still didn’t assume the worst, in the firm belief that my family would surely have kept me informed. Yesterday, however, I received another piece of news, again somewhat opaque, but which nonetheless confirmed that third irreversible possibility.

Needless to say, I hardly ever saw my godmother, Olga Navarro, and even as a child, I saw very little of her; indeed, I envied my brothers, whose godparents lived much closer, and were more attentive and more generous when it came to presents. My godparents were Leandro and Olga, the rather literary names of people I rarely saw. My godfather, Leandro, because he lived in Salamanca; my godmother, Olga, because she traveled a lot or maybe because she was just far too pretty. She was born in the Canary Islands, and her sister Alicia had been crowned Miss Europe in some pioneering beauty contest. To be honest, while I envied my brothers their more familiar godparents, I also felt rather proud of mine as being more original, even eccentric. Leandro Hernández de Guevara owned some land and bred bulls, not that I ever saw them, and Olga was

almost a fantasy. She only came to see me now and then, on her return from some trip to Germany or Austria, and then she would bring me the occasional outlandish present—children, after all, want toys, not clothes—such as a Tyrolean hat I never wore, some Tyrolean pants that I did in fact wear a lot because they were so hard-wearing, or a crazy pair of gnome’s slippers, pointy-toed and ankle-length and made of aquamarine velvet. These, at least, had their uses for dressing-up games.

She was a very tall, very elegant woman, fair-haired with pale eyes, and whenever she did visit our apartment, she made her entrance rather like Cruella de Vil, a whirlwind of perfume, fake fur, and scarves, the latter either draped around her neck or worn turban-fashion; she always wore extremely high heels that made her still taller, and endless pencil skirts that emphasized her even more endless legs. She would stride into the room and, in her strong Canary Island accent, demand, “*Dónde está mi ratonsito?*” (“Where’s my little mousikins?”), even though she couldn’t always tell me apart from my brothers. I realize now that I never knew much about her, or even why she was my godmother, although she had, I believe, been at university with my mother.

She worked for the Ministry of Information and Tourism, and as a civil servant she wouldn’t have earned very much. However, she could not bear to be anything less than impeccably dressed, and had learned how to make a particular item of clothing last and last until she could afford to

replace it with something of equally high quality. All her shoes and handbags were made to order, and she always sourced the leather herself. She must have had many suitors, so many that she didn’t get married until fairly late in life, to an older German man, possibly with a Nazi past, who had lived in Spain for some time, and who owned factories in Düsseldorf. Women like her—scatty and frivolous, but affectionate and utterly charming—simply don’t exist anymore.

Erik died years ago, and I would very occasionally go and visit Olga in her apartment in the Recoletos area of Madrid, by which time I was old enough to appreciate her most amusing qualities. She was magnificent even at eighty, and still every bit the 1940s diva. She had no children, and now she must have died so alone that I can’t even be completely sure she’s no longer alive. It’s not easy to find out, and there’s no one I can ask. The book the young man gave me says it all, I suppose. She had always been a giver of unusual gifts, and I remember that when I published my first or second novel, possibly the very novel that has now been restored to me, she wanted to give me a pair of Durán cufflinks. I didn’t wear cufflinks and never have—they’ve always seemed to me the kind of thing fancy rich kids wear—and so I refused them. Now, too late, I regret doing that, because then at least I would have a tangible memento of someone who has left this world leaving barely a trace, only a fragrance. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

