

# *BOMB*

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The Night Doctor from "When I Was Mortal"  
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## Javier Marías

Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa

Javier Marías was born in Madrid in 1951. He is the author of several novels, including *All Souls*, *A Heart So White*, *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* and *Dark Back of Time*. He has also written two short-story collections, *While They Were Sleeping* and *When I Was Mortal*, to be published by New Directions in April.

*For LB, in the present,  
And DC, in the past*

NOW THAT I KNOW my friend Claudia is a widow—following her husband's death from natural causes—I keep remembering one particular night in Paris six months ago: I had left at the end of a dinner party for seven in order to accompany one of the guests home—she had no car, but lived close by, fifteen minutes there and fifteen minutes back. She had struck me as a somewhat impetuous, rather nice young woman, an Italian friend of my hostess Claudia, who is also Italian, and in whose Paris flat I was staying for a few days, as I had on other occasions. It was the last night of my trip. The young woman, whose name I cannot now remember, had been invited for my benefit, as well as to add a little variety to the dinner table or, rather, so that the two languages being spoken were more evenly spread.

During the walk, I had to continue muddling through in my fractured Italian, as I had during half the dinner. During the other half, I had muddled through in my even more fractured French, and to tell the truth I was fed up with being unable to express myself correctly to anyone. I felt like compensating for this lack, but there would, I thought, be no chance to do so that night, for

by the time I got back to the flat, my friend Claudia, who spoke fairly convincing Spanish, would already have gone to bed with her ageing giant of a husband, and there would be no opportunity until the following morning to exchange a few well-chosen and clearly enunciated words. I felt the stirring of verbal impulses, but I had to repress them. I switched off during the walk: I allowed my Italian friend's Italian friend to express herself correctly in her own language, and I, against my will and my desire, merely nodded occasionally and said from time to time: "*Certo, certo*," without actually listening to what she said, weary as I was with the wine and worn out by my linguistic efforts. As we walked along, our breath visible in the air, I noticed only that she was talking about our mutual friend, which was, after all, quite normal, since, apart from the dinner party for seven that we had just left, we had nothing much else in common. Or so I thought. "*Ma certo*," I kept saying pointlessly, while she, who must have realized I wasn't listening, continued talking as if to herself or perhaps out of mere politeness. Until suddenly, still talking about Claudia, I heard a sentence which I understood per-

fectly as a sentence, but not its meaning, because I had understood it unwittingly and completely out of context. "*Claudia sarà ancora con il dottore,*" was what I thought her friend said. I didn't take much notice, because we were nearly at her door, and I was anxious to speak my own language again or at least to be alone so that I could think in it.

There was someone waiting in the doorway, and she added: "*Ah no, ecco il dottore,*" or something of the sort. It seems the doctor had come to see her husband, who had been too ill to accompany her to the dinner party. The doctor was a man of my age, almost young, and he turned out to be Spanish. That may have been why we were introduced, albeit briefly (they spoke to each other in French, my compatriot in his unmistakably Spanish accent), and although I would have happily stayed there for a while chatting to him in order to satisfy my longing for some correct verbification, my friend's friend did not invite me in, but instead bade me a hasty good-bye, giving me to understand or saying that Dr. Noguera had been there for some minutes waiting for her. My compatriot the doctor was carrying a black case, like the ones doctors used to have, and he had an old-fashioned face, like someone out of the 1930s: a good-looking man, but gaunt and pale, with the fair, slicked-back hair of a fighter pilot. It occurred to me that there must have been many like him in Paris after the Spanish Civil War, exiled Republican doctors.

When I got back to the apartment, I was surprised to see the light still on in the study, for I had to pass by the door on my way to the guest room. I peered in, assuming that it had been left on by mistake, and was ready to turn it off, when I saw my friend was still up, curled in an armchair, in her nightdress and dressing gown. I had never seen her in her nightdress and dressing gown before, despite, over the years, having stayed at her various apartments each time I went to Paris for a few days: both garments were salmon pink, and very expensive. Although the giant husband she had been married to for six years was very rich, he was also very mean, for reasons of character, nationality or age—a relatively advanced age in comparison with Claudia—and my friend had often complained that he only ever allowed her to buy things to further embellish their large, comfortable apartment, which was, according to her, the only visible manifestation of his wealth. Otherwise, they lived more modestly than they needed to, that is, below their means.

I had had barely anything to do with him, apart from the odd dinner party like the one that night, which are perfect opportunities for not talking to or getting to know anyone that you don't already know. The husband, who answered to the strange and ambiguous name of Hélié (which sounded rather feminine to my ears), I saw as an appendage, the kind of bearable appendage that many still attractive, single or divorced women have a tendency to graft onto themselves when they touch forty or forty-five: a responsible man, usually a good deal older, with whom they share no interests in common and with whom they never laugh, but who is, nevertheless, useful to them in their maintaining a busy social life and organizing dinners for seven as on that particular night. What struck me about Hélié was his size: he was nearly six foot five and fat, especially round the chest, a kind of Cyclopean spinning top poised on two legs so skinny that they looked like one; whenever I passed him in the corridor, he would always sway about and hold out his hands to the walls so as to have something to lean on should he slip; at dinners, of course, he sat at one end of the table because, otherwise, the side on which he was installed would have been filled to capacity by his enormous bulk and would have looked unbalanced, with him sitting alone opposite four guests all crammed together. He spoke only French and, according to Claudia, was a leading light in his field—the law.

After six years of marriage, it wasn't so much that my friend seemed disillusioned, for she had never shown much enthusiasm anyway, but she seemed incapable of disguising, even in the presence of strangers, the irritation we always feel towards those who are superfluous to us.

"What's wrong? Still awake?" I said, relieved finally to be able to express myself in my own language.

"Yes, I feel really ill. The doctor's coming."

"At this hour?"

"He's a night doctor, he's on call. I often have to get him out at night."

"But what's wrong? You didn't mention anything to me."

Claudia dimmed the lamp that stood by the armchair, as if she wanted the room to be in darkness before she replied, or else did not want me to catch some involuntary expression on her face, for our faces, when they speak, are full of involuntary expressions.

"It's nothing, women's problems. But it really hurts when I get it. The doctor gives me an injection to ease the pain."

"I see. And couldn't Hélié learn to do that for you?"

Claudia gave me an unequivocally wary look and lowered her voice to answer that question, though she hadn't lowered it to answer the others.

He was nearly six foot five  
and fat,  
especially round the chest,  
a kind of Cyclopean spinning top  
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they looked like one . . .

"No, he can't. His hands shake too much, I don't trust him. If he gave me the injection I'm sure it wouldn't do me any good, or else he'd just get all mixed up and inject something else into me, some poison. The doctor they usually send is very nice and, besides, that's what they're there for, to come to people's apartments in the early hours of the morning. He's Spanish by the way. He'll be here any moment."

"A Spanish doctor?"

"Yes, I think he's from Barcelona. I assume he has French nationality, he must have in order to practice here. He's been here for years."

Claudia had changed her hairstyle since I left the apartment to walk her friend home. Maybe she had merely let her hair down prior to going to bed, but it looked to me as if she had done her hair specially, rather than undone it at the end of the day.

"Do you want me to keep you company while you wait or would you rather be alone if you're in pain?" I asked rhetorically since, having found her still up, I wasn't prepared to go off to bed without satisfying my desire to have a chat and a rest from those other abominable languages and from the wine drunk during the evening. Before she had a chance to reply, I added: "Your friend's very nice. She said her husband was ill; the local doctors are in for a busy night."

Claudia hesitated for a few seconds and it seemed to me that she again looked at me warily, but said nothing. Then she said, this time without looking at me:

"Yes, she's got a husband too; he's even more unbearable than mine. Hers is young, though, just a bit older than her, but she's had him for ten years now and he's just as mean. Like me, she doesn't earn very much with her job, and he even rations out the hot water. Once he used his old bath water to water the plants, which died soon after. When they go out together, he won't even buy her a coffee, they each pay for themselves, so that sometimes she goes without and he has a full afternoon tea. She doesn't earn that much, and he's one of those men who thinks that the person who earns less in a marriage is inevitably taking advantage of the other. He's obsessed with it. He monitors all her phone calls, he's fitted the phone with a device that stops her calling anywhere outside of the city, so that if she wants to speak to her family in Italy she has to go to a pay phone and use coins or a card."

"Why doesn't she leave him?"

Claudia didn't reply at once:

"I don't know; for the same reason I don't, although my situation isn't as bad as hers. I suppose it's true that she does earn less, I suppose she does

and I answered awkwardly, perhaps dissuading her from continuing, the exact opposite of what I wanted:

"I see."

The doorbell buzzed feebly, just loud enough to be heard, the way you ring at the door of a house where people are already alerted or expecting you to call.

"It's the night doctor," said Claudia.

"I'll leave you then. Goodnight, and I hope you feel better soon."

We left the study together, she went into the hall and I in the opposite direction, towards the kitchen, where I thought I might read the newspaper for a while before going to bed, for at night the kitchen was the warmest room in the house. Before turning the corner of the corridor that would take me there, though, I paused and looked back towards the front door that Claudia was opening at that very moment, obscuring with her salmon-colored back the figure of the doctor who had just arrived. I heard her say to him in Spanish: "*Buenas noches*," and all I could see, in the doctor's left hand, sticking out from behind my Italian friend's body, was a bag identical to that carried by the other doctor to whom I had been introduced at the door by her friend—also Italian—whose name I can't remember. The doctor must have come by car, I thought.

They closed the front door and walked down the corridor without seeing me, with Claudia in front, and then I headed for the kitchen. There I sat

YES, she's got a husband too;  
he's even more unbearable than mine.  
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take advantage of him; I suppose they're right, these men who are obsessed with the money they spend or manage to save with their low-earning wives; but that's what marriage is about, everything has its compensations and it all evens out in the end." Claudia dimmed the light still further, so that we were sitting in almost complete darkness. Her nightdress and dressing gown seemed to glow red, an effect of the growing dark. She lowered her voice still further, to the point where it became a furious whisper. "Why do you think I get these pains, why do you think I have to call a doctor out to give me a sedative? It's just as well it only happens on nights when we give dinners or parties, when he's eaten and drunk and enjoyed himself. When he's seen that others have seen me. He thinks about other men and about their eyes, about what others don't know about, but take for granted or assume, and then he wants to make it reality, not just taken for granted or assumed or unknown. Not imaginary. Then it isn't enough for him just to imagine it." She fell silent for a moment and added: "That great lump of a man is sheer torment."

Although our friendship went back a long way, we had never exchanged this kind of confidence. Not that it bothered me, on the contrary, there's nothing I like more than being privy to such revelations. But I wasn't used to it with her, and I may have blushed a little (not that she would have seen me)

down and poured myself a gin (ridiculous, mixing drinks like that) and opened the Spanish paper I had bought that afternoon. It was from the previous day, but for me the news was still fresh.

I heard my friend and the doctor go into the children's room, the children were spending the weekend with other children in someone else's house. The room was immediately opposite the kitchen, on the other side of a broad corridor, so, after a few moments, I moved the chair I was sitting on so that I could just see the door of the room out of the corner of my eye. The door was ajar, they had switched on a very dim light, as dim, I said to myself, as the one that had lit the study while she and I were talking and she was waiting. I couldn't see them, I couldn't hear anything either. I went back to reading my newspaper, but, after a while, I looked up again because I sensed a presence in the doorway of the door that stood ajar. And then I saw the doctor, in profile, holding a syringe in his left hand. I only saw him for an instant, and since he was standing against the light, I couldn't see his face. I noticed he was left-handed: it was that moment when doctors and nurses raise the syringe in the air and press down the plunger, just a little, to make sure that the liquid comes out and there's no danger of any blockage or, more seriously, no danger of injecting air. That's what the nurse, Cayetano,



used to do in my house when I was a child. After performing this action, the doctor stepped forward and again disappeared from my field of vision. Claudia must have been lying down on one of the children's beds, which was probably where the light was coming from, too faint for me but sufficient for the doctor. I assumed he would inject her in the bottom.

I returned to my newspaper and a long time passed, too long, before either she or the Republican doctor were once again framed in the doorway. Then I had the vague feeling that I was being nosy and it occurred to me that perhaps they were actually waiting for me to go to my room in order to come out and say good-bye. It also occurred to me that, immersed as I had been in reading an article about some sporting controversy, they might have quietly slipped out of the room without my noticing. Trying not to make any noise so as at least not to wake old Hélie, who would have been asleep for some time, I got up to go to bed. Before leaving the kitchen with my newspaper under my arm, I switched off the light, and that switching off of the light and my momentary stillness (the moment before taking a first step down the corridor) coincided with the reappearance in the doorway of the two figures, that of my friend Claudia and that of the night doctor. They paused on the threshold, and from my place in the darkness, I saw them peering in my direction, or so I thought. During that moment, what they saw was the extinguished kitchen light, and since I remained motionless, they probably assumed that I had gone off to my room without their noticing. If I allowed them to believe such a thing, if I, in fact, remained there motionless after seeing them, it was because the doctor, again standing against the light, once more raised the syringe in his left hand, and Claudia, in her nightdress and dressing gown, was clinging onto his other arm as if to instill him with courage by her touch or else restore his composure by her breathing. Thus, arm in arm, bound together by what was about to happen, they moved out of the children's room, and I lost sight of them, but I heard the door of the master bedroom opening, the bedroom in which Hélie would be sleeping, and I heard it close. I thought that perhaps, immediately after that, I would hear the doctor's footsteps, he having left Claudia in her room in order to leave the house, now that his medical mission had been fulfilled. But that isn't what happened, the penultimate thing I heard that night was the closing of the master bedroom door, which the night doctor had also entered, very quietly and holding a syringe in his left hand.

With great care (I took off my shoes), I walked down the corridor to my room. I undressed, got into bed and finished reading the newspaper. Before turning out the light, I waited a few seconds and it was in those brief seconds of waiting that I at last heard the front door and Claudia's voice saying good-bye to the doctor in Spanish: "See you in a fortnight then. Goodnight, and thanks." The truth is that I still felt like speaking a little more of my own language on that night on which I had twice missed the opportunity of doing so with my compatriot the doctor.

I was going back to Madrid the following morning. Before leaving, I had time to ask Claudia how she was, and she said she was fine, that the pains had gone. Hélie, on the other hand, was indisposed after the various excesses of the previous night and relayed that he was sorry not to be able to say good-bye to me himself.

I spoke to him on the phone after that (that is, he picked up the phone on one occasion when I called Claudia from Madrid in the months that followed), but the last time I saw him was when I left his apartment that night, after the dinner for seven, to walk the Italian friend, whose name I cannot remember, back to her apartment. Precisely because I cannot remember her name, I do not know if the next time I go to Paris, I will dare to ask Claudia how she is, because now that Hélie is dead, I wouldn't want to run the risk of finding out that perhaps she too has become a widow since my departure.

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