

**Authorial Voice as a Censorship Avoidance Tool: Carmen Laforet Found in Translation**

**Madeline Sykes**

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School of Translation and Interpretation  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Ottawa

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**Abstract:** This thesis explores the issue of translating works in which censoring regimes have constrained authors' voices, limiting their discussion of subversive content to a few well-placed clues. It takes as a case Carmen Laforet's "La llamada" (1954), a short story published under Spain's Franco dictatorship. At the time of its publication, a state censorship apparatus inspected all books to ensure they did not challenge the government or its Catholic morality. Laforet accordingly penned a story that superficially appears to validate Church doctrine on women's place in society, with the protagonist repenting her abandonment of the wife/mother role. However, a second and more critical interpretation emerges when the text is examined according to its historical context and the author's attitudes towards Catholicism, her country, and gender roles. The narrative voice explicitly communicating to readers is then echoing that of the regime. The author's voice parrots this discourse but simultaneously expresses dissent towards it through a series of implicatures and communicative clues.

When translating a work that features such a duality of voices, the translator is responsible for ensuring that both the explicit and implicit voice are intelligible to readers with a very different cognitive environment from that of the original readers. According to my evaluation of three possible solutions to this problem—making no adjustments to preserve the narrative, compensating for readers' knowledge gaps through paratext, and inserting communicative clues to the alternative reading into the text through an interventionist translation—the third option proves to be the most effective way of conveying all voices to an average reader. My interventions in the text include straightforward explications on references to the era's oppressive conditions, exaggerations of the story's *tremendista* and traumatic elements that suggest social decay, and manipulations of the heterodiegetic narrative style to distinguish characters' subjective judgments on the protagonist from objective judgments on her.

**Résumé :** Cette thèse examine la question de la traduction des œuvres dans lesquelles la voix de l’auteur se voit restreinte à cause d’un régime exerçant de la censure, ce qui limite sa discussion des thèmes subversifs à quelques indices bien placés. Le roman court « La llamada » (1954) de Carmen Laforet, publié pendant la dictature de Franco en Espagne, lui sert de cas. À l’époque de sa publication, un organe de censure établi par l’État inspectait tous les livres afin de s’assurer qu’ils ne défiaient ni le gouvernement ni ses principes moraux catholiques. Par conséquent, Mme Laforet a écrit une histoire qui, en surface, semble renforcer la doctrine de l’Église en matière de la place des femmes dans la société, la protagoniste se repentant d’avoir abandonné son rôle d’épouse et de mère. Cependant, une deuxième interprétation, plus critique, ressort du texte quand celui-ci est examiné en fonction de son contexte historique ainsi que l’attitude de l’auteure envers le catholicisme, son pays et les rôles de genre. La voix narrative qui s’adresse explicitement aux lecteurs répète donc ce que dit celle du régime. La voix de l’auteure fait écho à cette rhétorique, mais en même temps s’exprime à travers une série d’implicatures et d’indices de communication.

En traduisant une œuvre qui contient une telle dualité de voix, le traducteur doit s’assurer que la voix explicite et la voix implicite sont compréhensibles pour des lecteurs ayant un environnement cognitif bien différent de celui des lecteurs originaux. À travers mon évaluation de trois solutions potentielles à ce problème — l’option de n’apporter aucun ajustement au texte pour garder le récit intact, celle de compenser les lacunes dans les connaissances à l’aide du paratexte et celle d’insérer des indices de communication qui indiquent aux lecteurs l’interprétation alternative du texte en me servant d’une approche de traduction interventionniste — cette dernière option se révèle la plus efficace pour la transmission de toutes les voix à un lecteur normal. Mes interventions dans le texte comprennent des explications simples des

références aux conditions oppressives de l'époque, des amplifications des éléments *tremendistas* et ceux révélant des traumatismes qui évoquent la décadence sociale et des manipulations de la narration hétérodiégétique qui facilitent la distinction entre les jugements subjectifs des personnages et les jugements objectifs en ce qui concerne la protagoniste.

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## 1. Introduction

Censorship is a potent homogenizing force in a national literature. It empowers the state to co-opt all writers working within its borders, regardless of their political stance, and turn their works into tools reinforcing official narratives. Faced with this inescapable coercive force, authors who wish to remain in the country and publish the unpublishable have only one means of resistance: outwitting the censors. They enter into a game: into their texts they sneak a set of references that express their undesirable ideas. These references must be vague enough for the censors to consider them benign but strong enough for the audience to perceive them and be set on the train of thought towards the author's intended message. Conveying this politically sensitive message, then, will inevitably entail playing upon the audience's culturally and historically specific repertoire of knowledge.

For translators, this raises a serious question: what happens when the message is transmitted to a new readership with very different cultural knowledge and experiences? Attempting to compensate for differences may lead to encumbering the target text with translator's notes or the always-controversial alteration of the narrative's content. Not doing so, however, could lead to the author's work being subsumed under the rhetoric of the regime, with any attempts at resistance in the text too obscure for the new reader to grasp. Beyond oversimplifying the work, this could also prove detrimental to the author's status in the target culture, earning them a reputation as a collaborator with a repressive regime. Translators must therefore weigh which is more important: protecting the source text's form or the author's integrity.

It is this issue that I intend to explore in this thesis, using as a case a short story published in Spain during the Francoist dictatorship (1939–1975). “La llamada” (1954), a short story



published in a collection of the same name by Carmen Laforet, reflects the conservative Catholic values that the government's censorial officials expected to see protected in the country's written works. At the same time, the work also alludes to the restrictiveness and poverty (both literal and figurative) of life in the early decades of Francoism. Source- and target-text readers can perceive both these interpretations in much the same way as they draw inferences in verbal communication, as explained in relevance theory. Relevance theory, then, will be the way forward in explaining what implied messages and clues the source text readers would have seen that English-speaking Canadian readers might not, and how this affects the author whose voice readers perceive in the text. Relevance theory as well as a high-level look at the various voices involved in potential translation solutions will also serve as the guide for finding how to make the critical narrative in this story perceptible for the target readers. Against the metric this theoretical scaffolding provides, possible translations without interventions, translations with paratext, and translations with in-text interventions can be measured, the latter ultimately prevailing as having the largest expected impact on the readership.

This project is unashamedly motivated not just by an academic aim but by a moral aim: to preserve the text's value as a testimony of what life was like under a far-right dictatorship. These states imposed a heavy burden of compliance upon their populations, with some bearing far more of it than others. Groups found themselves targeted for their religion, cultural and linguistic identity, sexual orientation, and gender. This particular narrative has much to say about the way in which disproportionate levels of power and control were exerted on women by the Francoist state, severely curtailing their freedoms. Accordingly, the literature on feminist translation strategies constitutes an important guide informing the production of the target text, interventions in it serving to promote the feminist implications of the narrative. Given the recent

resurgence of political ideas uncomfortably close to those reigning when Laforet wrote the story, it is imperative that the public be shown concrete examples of what half the population stands to lose through the rise to power of political forces espousing such ideas.

### ***1.1. Biography of the Author***

Since understanding Laforet's mindset and her experience of Francoist Spain is key to this project, a quick note on the main biographical sources I will be relying on is in order. My principal secondary sources will be the two most regarded biographies of her: Caballé and Rolón-Barada's *Carmen Laforet: Una mujer en fuga* ([2010] 2019) and Johnson's *Carmen Laforet* (1981). The former was developed based on extensive consultation of Laforet's personal documents and interviews with her family and friends; the latter, the first English-language book on Laforet, drew on documentary sources and interviews with Laforet herself. Primary sources have also been invaluable to me, namely her correspondence with authors Ramón J. Sender in *Puedo contar contigo: Correspondencia* (2003) and Elena Fortún in *Carmen Laforet & Elena Fortún: De corazón y alma* (1947–1952) (2017). These published letters feature uncharacteristic moments of candour on her views and life from the notoriously private Laforet. Information from these sources is supplemented by content from academic Raquel Conde Peñalosa (2004) and journalist Inmaculada de la Fuente (2002), further research by Rolón-Barada (2017), and an essay on Laforet by her son Agustín Cerezales (1982).

Born in Barcelona in 1921, Carmen Laforet spent an unorthodox childhood in the Canary Islands. Her father, a prominent architect, marked her early years with what Cerezales (1982, 10) called “un despotismo a veces ilustrado, otras menos”: he was militant in controlling her appetite and insisted she learn to both play the piano and shoot a pistol alongside her brothers. At the same time, he allowed her unlimited access to the family's books and did not view university as

unbecoming of his daughter. Her mother, having trained as a teacher, was similarly instrumental in Laforet's education, but the couple also left an impression on her through their tempestuous marriage: Caballé and Rolón-Barada ([2010] 2019, chap. 1) describe her father as looking down on her mother and singularly talented at upsetting her or sending her into a jealous rage.

Ultimately, her mother died when Laforet was 13, and her father quickly married a woman who was hostile to the Laforet children. Her stepmother having driven a wedge between her and her father, Laforet was left alone to wander the island unsupervised—an uncommon liberty for girls her age that Johnson (1981, 19) says instilled in her “a love of freedom” that lasted her whole life. That desire for freedom ultimately led her to persuade her father to let her go to Barcelona for university in 1939.

Barcelona, still reeling from the just-finished Civil War, would have a profound influence on Laforet's writing career. The Canary Islands had not been a battlefield in the war, so Laforet took in postwar Barcelona “with fresh, curious eyes” (Johnson 1981, 16), recalling in sharp detail the damage, the famine, and the tensions of the period. Tension, in fact, was a defining trait of her stay in the city: she was living with her father's family and recalled feeling imprisoned in their house, her movements tightly controlled and her relatives arguing frequently (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 6). University brought more freedom to come and go as Laforet pleased, and she took advantage. She took up smoking, a habit considered unfeminine in the era (de la Fuente 2002, 50). She socialized freely, once going to the beach and getting a fine for being insufficiently covered (Johnson 1981, 23). She mixed with people of various political persuasions; she herself was apolitical, but she eagerly befriended more ideologically committed people, including Catalan nationalist Conchita Ferrer and Polish refugee Linka Babecka (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 7)—she even accompanied the

latter while she was smuggling other Polish refugees into the city (Rolón-Barada 2017, 122). When Laforet left Barcelona for Madrid after three years, she took with her all of these experiences and later injected them into her first novel, *Nada* (1945). Her best-known work and a leading literary influence of the era, *Nada* recounts protagonist Andrea's stay in her grandmother's poverty- and conflict-stricken Barcelona home. Its bleak style and elements of *tremendista* literature<sup>1</sup> shocked readers who did not expect such subject matter from a young woman (Conde Peñalosa 2004, 81–82), but it also impressed them. Laforet's tale of postwar anguish earned her the first Premio Nadal and a spot in the Spanish literary pantheon.

Readers keen for more of Laforet's work would have to wait six years, however, as the author's personal life intervened. In 1946, she married Manuel Cerezales, a journalist, publisher, and literary critic who had helped her prepare *Nada* for the Premio Nadal. Their first child was born that year, and four more would follow between then and 1957. Motherhood, according to de la Fuente (2002, 91–92), initially prevented her from writing much, though she did not appear to resent this and was affectionate towards her children. To fellow writer Elena Fortún, she admitted she had thought her writing career was over after having her eldest daughter but came to realize “que los hijos de carne y hueso son cosas aparte y que uno, por lo menos yo, no se puede entregar enteramente a ellos” (Laforet and Fortún 2017, 40). Her writing and her parenthood could be reconciled, then, but a new conflict emerged between her and her husband. Cerezales was a conservative *carlista*, and Laforet an unaligned free spirit who once called herself “vagamente socialista, en un sentido humanista” (de la Fuente 2002, 90). Those opposing mindsets would come to clash over Laforet's work, as “Cerezales became Laforet's personal

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<sup>1</sup>*Tremendismo* was a Spanish literary aesthetic from the postwar years that was characterized by the crudeness, violence, and ugliness with which it portrayed society in the time period. A more detailed discussion of it and its impact on this work can be found in section 3.3.

censor” and pushed her to avoid political or taboo topics (Rolón-Barada 2017, 123). This resentment-breeding dynamic coupled with money troubles—both Laforet’s and Cerezales’ incomes were unstable—led to the couple nearly separating in 1950 (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 11). Ultimately, a new novel did emerge from this period: *La isla y los demonios* (1952) recounts a young girl’s experience of the Canary Islands during the Civil War. Though not as critically praised as *Nada*, it similarly portrays the feminine experience of a difficult period for the country—and was produced during a difficult period for Laforet.

While finishing *La isla y los demonios*, Laforet found herself grappling with a new personal problem, one that would define the next years of her work: her relationship to her faith. Though raised Catholic, she had not been particularly religious as an adult. By 1951, though, she had met tennis star and militant Christian Lili Álvarez, and she had begun reading religious writings. Eventually, she had something of an epiphany—to Elena Fortún she wrote in 1952, “Una vida nueva, extraordinaria, infinita me ha abierto sus puertas sin más mérito de mi parte que tener seres extraordinarios y santos a mi alrededor que han rezado por mí” (Laforet and Fortún 2017, 125). Afterwards, her works featured a strong focus on spiritual experiences and Christian ideals. This is true of several of her short stories and collections, including *La llamada* (1954), the collection in which the source text in this thesis was first published. Her most significant work in this period, though, was her novel *La mujer nueva* (1955), which describes the religious conversion and attempt at a new life of a woman named Paulina. Criticized by some for being unrealistic, it nonetheless won over conservative literary figure José María Pemán and the juries of the Premio Menorca and Premio Nacional de Literatura (de la Fuente 2002, 101). Despite Laforet’s outward display of religiosity, however, she did not fall in line with the dogmas of the National Catholic state. Influenced by Álvarez’s bold claims, including her view

of traditional Catholicism as “un cristianismo defectuoso” (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 14), Laforet preferred a more personal, mystical form of worship. Moreover, her son notes that this extreme burst of religiosity was at odds with her independent nature, ultimately coming to an end after seven years when she experienced unexplained abdominal pains and decided the cause was likely that “su organismo protestaba porque se estaba engañando a sí misma” (Cerezales 1982, 24). She did not altogether abandon religion, but as with all things, Laforet allowed herself the freedom to take distance from it when she wished.

In the last phase of her life, the drive for freedom and independence can be said to have been her dominant force. She would publish one more novel, *La insolación* (1963)—its follow-up, *Al volver la esquina* (2004), was published posthumously—as well as several articles and travel pieces, but otherwise she chose to retreat from publishing literary works. Her correspondence with exiled writer Ramón J. Sender suggests that, although she had attempted a few projects, the psychological climate she lived in was taking its toll. In 1966, following a tour in the United States, she told him that she had been unable to write to him because “esto es lo que tiene España: que le aniquila a uno” (Laforet and Sender 2003, 39). In another letter from the same year responding to Sender’s refusal to return until Franco’s death, Laforet summed up the state of her homeland succinctly: “España es horrenda, pero es muy nuestra” (Laforet and Sender 2003, 71). The weariness that can be heard in her comments on Spain may also reflect her view on her marriage, which continued to falter until she and her husband agreed to an unofficial separation in 1970. Cerezales (1982, 27) characterizes the separation as the moment his mother’s “espíritu nómada” came to dominate her life. Certainly, her reflections to Sender in a 1970 letter suggest that the relationship had been a significant constraint: “Ahora tendré más libertad para moverme que durante los últimos veinticuatro años. Y también creo que más libertad de espíritu.

Y también creo que podré trabajar...” (Laforet and Sender 2003, 122). She capitalized on her freedom to travel more extensively but did not ultimately produce more work, as she had hoped. She died in 2004 after developing Alzheimer’s disease, her limited output remaining as a potent testimony to the effects Franco’s dictatorship had on its people and their struggles for freedom within it.

### ***1.2. Source Text: Summary and Reception***

“La llamada” (1954) was one of four novella-length stories in the collection of the same name. This book has been republished multiple times, and the story itself has been republished in collections including *Obras completas* (1957) and *Siete novelas cortas* (2010). For clarity, it is the version in this last book that I will be citing throughout this thesis, as Cerezales (2010, 14) notes that typographical errors have been corrected in this version.

The story unfolds in five chapters that chronicle the journey and ultimate failure of an aspiring actress named Mercedes. Chapter I, set in southern Spain “algún tiempo después de terminada nuestra Guerra civil” (Laforet 2010, 79), follows Don Juan Rosas. An old friend of Mercedes’ uncle, Don Juan is emigrating to the Americas when his boat happens to stop in the city where Mercedes lives, and after stopping at a café and realizing his server is Mercedes’ son, he ventures out to visit her while recalling how she came to be banished from her uncle’s home after trying to run away at age 18 with an alleged theatre impresario, with dreams of becoming an actress. Chapter II describes this meeting with a now-middle-aged Mercedes from Don Juan’s perspective, detailing his horror at finding her living in squalor and unhappily married, still longing for her chance at an acting career. The narrative then switches to Mercedes’ perspective as the visit motivates her to leave her husband and go to Barcelona; there, she intends to pursue acting with support from her late sister’s mother-in-law, Doña Eloísa, who on her wedding day

had offered her words of support should she ever wish to leave her husband. In Chapter III, Mercedes arrives and visits Doña Eloísa at the home of her granddaughter, Lolita, who has taken the elderly woman in; a disapproving Lolita decides Mercedes cannot stay with them, so Mercedes finds a bed in shared accommodations and struggles as she tries to establish herself as an actress, with Doña Eloísa clandestinely assisting her by giving her a watch to pawn. Eventually, a friend arranges for her to debut onstage at a variety show one evening, which Doña Eloísa reluctantly agrees to attend. Chapter IV chronicles the lead-up to the show for both women, with Doña Eloísa convincing Mercedes to give the old woman Mercedes' husband's address so she can write to him on Mercedes' behalf. The pair meet Mercedes' friend and arrive in time for the show, but unfortunately, the reading Mercedes gives is met with jeers from the audience. She flees the stage in tears and tells Doña Eloísa to write to her husband. Chapter V reveals that Mercedes has disappeared after the debut, and Doña Eloísa is distraught until her spiritual director consoles her. Mercedes' son has responded to the letter on his father's behalf indicating that the family misses her and wishes she would return. Mercedes herself arrives one day, revealing that she has become a maid so she can earn the money to return Doña Eloísa's watch to her. Doña Eloísa tells her to forget the watch and use the money to return to her family, revealing what her son wrote about her. The story ends with Mercedes resolved to do just that, apparently at peace with the decision.

The story largely fit well into the artistic and ideological climate when it was released. The censor's report, finalized in March 1953, decreed the work's publication could be authorized without modifications; the censor called it a "Novela corta, sobriamente escrito aunque a veces se complace morbosamente en la descripción de las miserias. No añade nada en calidad a lo



producido por su autora” (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53).<sup>2</sup> The unflattering assessment is similar to what the censor of *Nada* famously wrote of it: “Novela insulsa, sin estilo ni valor literario alguno. [...] Creo que no hay inconveniente en su autorización” (as cited in Abellán 1980, 160). Laforet was capable of making even potentially subversive material like *Nada* seem unthreatening to censors, so she could scarcely be expected to falter with a more overtly moralistic work.

Once the censors were satisfied, the book was published, with a reception that appears to have been generally favourable. Caballé and Rolón-Barada ([2010] 2019, chap. 14) note that the collection was good for Laforet’s literary reputation despite being her lowest selling book. It garnered positive reviews in nationwide newspapers. A *La Vanguardia Española* review that jointly discussed this collection and one by Miguel Delibes praised the lifelike characters and knowing irony in both works, proclaiming these stories to be “entre lo mejor que haya brotado de las plumas de ambos escritores” (Masoliver 1954, 13). In the Madrid edition of *ABC*, another reviewer applauded the collection and “La llamada” in particular, noting that Laforet had combined the “turbio mundo de miseria, angustia y fracas” from *Nada* with “notas de humana ternura y ejemplaridad moral que en obras anteriores no se acusaban en tanto grado,” even if the story’s moral was driven home “algo convencionalmente” (Fernández Almagro 1954, 57). The hint at Laforet’s “ejemplaridad moral” in this last review echoes the sentiment of an article on her that was published in the months before *La llamada*’s release: journalist Josefina Carabias (1954, 3) in the headline called Laforet a “mujer sencilla y cristiana, madre de familia” and went

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<sup>2</sup>This file pertains to a 1953 request by Editorial Rollán to publish the story as part of its “Los novelistas de hoy” collection of books. I have not found evidence of “La llamada” being released by Rollán. Moreover, when publisher Planeta received approval in 1957 to republish the book *La llamada*, the censor’s report referred to file 1322-53 as the relevant prior approval for the work, but the publisher provided the 1954 Destino collection as the manuscript for approval (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 4368-57).’ With insufficient evidence to the contrary, I thus presume 1954 to be the first year of publication for “La llamada.”

on to say she was “un ser completamente distinto a como la gente se la imagina,” not at all the “muchacha existencialista moderna” her first novel would suggest. The message these articles seem to send to the public is that Laforet’s stories were not just technically good; they were ideologically good from the perspective of the powers that be.

Reactions from critics geographically or temporally removed from Francoist Spain tend to follow this conservative interpretation of the narrative. There are few scholarly works analyzing “La llamada,” with *Nada* being the focus of much writing on Laforet. One recent work from the literature, a University of Barcelona dissertation by Ferretti (2013, 215), reads the story as a transformation in which the delusional protagonist is transported “de forma progresiva hacia la lucidez mental” and comes to “rectificar errores cometidos cuando padecía la locura,” errors such as her neglect for the upkeep of herself and her family home. American researcher Hannan (1969, 41) similarly characterizes it as “una llamada a la vida ordinaria, es decir, a la aceptación de los quehaceres y penalidades diarias en la vida familiar de un matrimonio pobre e inculto,” noting that both Mercedes’ vanity and her husband’s cruelty contribute to the unhappiness in the household. These two sources discuss the plot neutrally, passing no aesthetic or moral judgment on it. Meanwhile David (1974), in her thesis for an American university, does not refrain from criticism. She writes that “Laforet tries, and in my opinion fails, to justify the utter waste of the life of a woman as vibrant as Mercedes” whose talent is curtailed by her circumstances, and she derides the author’s “manipulation of the plot in order to produce a result in keeping with the philosophy of the Catholic Church” (David 1974, 23). These works show how the reading of the story that has leapt out to many modern and North American readers is the one the Francoist state would have wanted them to have, one that may prove injurious to Laforet’s reputation.

Two authors, however, show that an alternative reading is available through a close study

of the text. The first is Roberta Johnson (1981) in her landmark book on Laforet. She notes that the story largely reflects “a spirit of Christian charity” consistent with Laforet’s period of intense religiosity (Johnson 1981, 29); beyond this, though, she suggests the presence of a feminist theme in the narrative. To summarize her argument, she writes that the story depicts Mercedes as a woman “sacrificed to family decorum” through her coerced marriage and having to abandon her dreams, while Doña Eloísa “is a prisoner in her granddaughter’s house,” dependent on relatives to support her (Johnson 1981, 120). Interestingly, then, it is the relationship forged between these two women, driven by one subordinated figure’s decision to help another, that drives the plot. Del Mastro (2010, 12) pushes Johnson’s ideas further, arguing that the story puts forth both a Christian message and “one of feminist protest that complements the author’s search for an independent identity prevalent throughout much of her work.” Mercedes, he asserts, is caught in an adolescent quest for identity in which she tries to fulfill her acting dreams despite society’s hostility to her occupying that role (Del Mastro 2010, 15–16). Ultimately, she fails in this quest and must take up the wife/mother role society allows for her; her struggles towards her goal and towards independence are based on limited or illusory chances for her to assert control over her life, as is the case with her leaving for Barcelona only through a gift from Don Juan (Del Mastro 2010, 16). Analyses such as these, which take into consideration the conditions in which the story was produced, complicate the conventional interpretation of “La llamada” and may soften the opinions of readers who initially take it to be a propaganda piece.

### ***1.3. Methodology***

This being a commented translation, my research method involved developing concept systems from existing ideas in the literature and then applying these concept systems to my own practice in translating “La llamada.” Broadly speaking, there were two phases to this work, each

with its own concept system and practical output.

In the first phase, I analyzed the source text to uncover its meaning beyond what was printed on the page. To start, I drew from the concepts of relevance theory as developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995) and applied to translation studies by Gutt ([2000] 2014). The concepts from this theoretical framework, explained in the section that follows, could then assist me in understanding the assumed communication process between the author and the original readers, with Laforet exploiting her personal and cultural experiences during it. This meant that I needed to deepen my knowledge on Laforet and the period she lived in through reading biographies of her (many of which are cited in section 1.1), writings by her, scholarly research on this story and others that contain similar themes and literary techniques, and scholarly research on the Francoist era. I could use the knowledge acquired this way to spot historical realities and ideas alluded to in a close reading of “La llamada,” information that a modern English-speaking Canadian reader would not likely grasp on their own.<sup>3</sup> I could then use this relevance theoretical analysis to develop an overall perspective on the silences that would be produced for the target reader and the distorting impact of these silences on the voice readers would perceive in the work.

With the source text analysis complete, I could begin the second phase, finding translation solutions for the problems identified in the first phase. This involved exploring the literature related to three common approaches on such problems: complete non-intervention by the translator, indirect intervention through comments in paratext, and actively interventionist translation. Insights from this exploration combined with test translations of key passages from “La llamada” would help me to decide the most suitable approach for conveying the text’s

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<sup>3</sup>Note that the choice of an English-speaking Canadian readership is one of convenience. As it is the demographic to which I belong, it is the one I best understand.

subtleties to the target readership, the approach that would most successfully deliver them a translation representing the complex situation of communication in which the text was originally produced. Having made my decision, I was then able to produce a complete relevance-theory-informed translation of “La llamada” fit for a new socio-political climate.

## **2. Key Concepts**

### ***2.1. Censorship in the Francoist Context***

Before I present any discussions on how censorship influenced the text under study, it is necessary to establish what is meant by “censorship” and what it looked like in this context, in the time and place of the text’s production. Within translation studies, various scholars have emphasized various features of censorship in examinations of the subject.<sup>4</sup> Its core characteristic, as described by Merkle et al. (2010, 14), is the “blockage of a cultural product from entry into a cultural space, the elimination of a product from a cultural space or its modification through attenuation or cutting.” This censorial system is established by a powerful entity and forces this entity’s values and beliefs onto the discourse of those over which it has power (Billiani [2007] 2014, 4), producing a “manipulative rewriting” of this discourse (Billiani [2007] 2014, 3). When the entity in question is a political or religious authority, their efforts to enact an apparatus enforcing their discursive rewriting serve to implement and perpetuate a system that fits the image their ideology desires of society (Merkle et al. 2010, 14). More than merely deleting and altering undesirable writings, though, censorship is meant to make those contributing to the discourse and those publishing their works internalize the rules of the system so that they comply

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<sup>4</sup>Several authors have taken a different perspective, informed by Foucauldian and Bourdieusian concepts, to the more traditional one used here in examinations of censorship (see, for example, Kuhiwczak 2011 for an explanation of it compared to the traditional perspective). This perspective provides interesting insights when applied to more ambiguous, less top-down situations of censorial pressure. As Francoist Spain is decidedly an archetypal, top-down example of censorship, however, the most parsimonious conceptual framing is used here.

with its values and beliefs before correction is necessary—the phenomenon known as “self-censorship” (Merkle et al. 2010, 16). Censorship, then, is a system for suppressing ideas viewed as threats by those in power, and it achieves this through both coercing writers and making them complicit.

In Spain, censorship under Franco started before his rule officially began, and it would persist in some form until after his death. His first ban on undesirable publications came in late 1936 (de Lima Grecco 2020, 53), just months after the Spanish Civil War broke out. It was also during the war—specifically in 1938—that the Ley de Prensa was passed: by requiring books, newspapers, and other works to undergo censorial review before publication so “subversive ideas that could breed dissension” could be weeded out, the law laid the foundation for the censorship system of the Franco years (de Lima Grecco 2020, 56). It took time for the censorial apparatus to reach this objective; Abellán (1980, 158–159) notes that in the early postwar years, censors were largely from the intellectual sphere and frequently ruled on works’ literary merit more than their ideological content. This changed by the 1950s, with Gabriel Arias-Salgado in the role of Ministro de Información y Turismo: censorship became an exercise of enforcing conformity with Catholic moral precepts to ensure “la salvación moral de los indefensos lectores” (Abellán 1980, 161). It was a period of “rigidez total” that few authors and publishers dared challenge (Abellán 1980, 151). Gradual relaxing of standards began under Arias-Salgado’s successor, Manuel Fraga, with the passing of the Ley de Prensa e Imprenta in 1966. It was a limited liberalization designed to placate foreign governments. Pre-publication censorship was made optional, but Guijarro González (2017, 141) points out that bypassing censorship to publish controversial materials remained an economic and legal risk for publishers, and Abellán (1980, 152) notes that censors frequently barred passages from works they did review. Nonetheless, it was the beginning of a

slow and fitful opening in the ideological sphere leading up to the formal elimination of censorship under the 1978 constitution. Franco's project of wide-reaching control over Spanish discourse came to an end three years after his death.

Even at its height, censorship in Spain was an ill-defined practice, much to the unease of authors and publishers. A work to be published would, when submitted for review, be scrutinized by at least one censor (called a *lector*). The *lector* would then fill in an *informe de censura* containing seven questions: “1) ¿Ataca al dogma?, 2) ¿a la moral?, 3) ¿a la Iglesia o a sus ministros?, 4) ¿al régimen y a sus instituciones?, 5) ¿a las personas que colaboran o han colaborado con el régimen?, 6) los pasajes censurables ¿califican el contenido total de la obra?, y 7) informe y otras observaciones” (as cited in Abellán 1980, 19). If the *lector* had no concerns pertaining to these criteria, then its publication would be authorized. If they did observe any problematic content, they could issue authorization conditional on that content being deleted or changed—in some instances, they could also ask for content to be added (de Lima Grecco 2020, 65–66)—or they could deny publication outright if the censurable content was too significant. Ensuring a work was in compliance with such broad criteria could prove challenging, however. In fact, Abellán (1980, 88–89) observes that while there were a few consistently untouchable themes (i.e., criticism of the regime and its ideology), interpretations could vary with respect to content on religion; vulgar language; sex, same-sex relationships, abortion, and divorce; and certain political elements that may have fallen out of favour with shifts in power within the regime. Censorial review was notoriously arbitrary in its rulings, and the unpredictability this generated became a form of power the regime held over authors and their publishers (Abellán 1980, 91). It pushed them to self-censor extensively, pre-emptively eliminating anything that might be viewed as censurable in a “denial of their own literary work and themselves” (de Lima

Grecco 2020, 60). Through the lack of clarity on what it was willing to censor, the regime was thus able to enforce a far more extensive adoption of its discourse than would have occurred had writers known precisely what was off limits.

The translation studies literature has extensively detailed the effects of Spain's censorship on translations, providing an insight into how censorship deforms a text. Such information is rarely available for original works, where a lack of accessible drafts often means the full extent of what has been left unsaid due to censorship is only known by the author themselves.

Descriptive and archival research reflects how translators broke with the norm of faithfulness to avoid the taboo topics listed by Abellán (1980). For instance, García-Domínguez, Díaz-Peralta, and Pinero-Pinero (2016) catalogue omissions and lexico-semantic distortions in a 1963 translation of *Claudine à Paris*, finding its translator to have toned down passages that included suggestions of the female protagonist's sexuality, indications of a relationship between two male characters, and a mention of a cross that appears in an explanation of witchcraft. Sullivan and Bandín (2014) consider the treatment of metaphors in three translators' renditions of *Hamlet* produced between 1949 and 1962, determining that all three omitted potentially censurable metaphors, paraphrased them, or substituted them for safer ones. Common targets for these strategies were sexually suggestive figures of speech and those that could be considered blasphemous or pagan. Mainer (2011) examines a collection of translated Robert Burns poems, finding that self-censorship was present in the form of some overtly political poems being omitted, although the collection was able to suggest some of Burns' republican messages through paratextual means—his politically salient works that could be included were grouped together, and an introductory biography subtly cued readers to the poems' meaning. From the untouchable status of the state and the Church to the policing of its citizens' morality and women's especially,



ideological tenets of the Franco regime were routinely imposed onto translations through cuts and contortions, as these and many other scholarly works testify.

Translation studies also provides examples of what happened when a text was not sufficiently bent to the Francoist state's will. One illustrative case can be found in a study of how Nabokov's works fared under Spain's censorship by Guijarro González (2017, 143–145). He notes that only one translation of a Nabokov work—*Camera Obscura*—was authorized before the Ley de Prensa e Imprenta: it was initially denied due to its vulgarity, but after three years of negotiations, the publisher was able to convince the *lectores* to authorize a sanitized, significantly redacted translation meant to promote an anti-divorce moral. A case with a less positive outcome is presented in Hurlley ([2007] 2014, 65–67), who illustrates that while *lectores* were surprisingly lenient with some works in the early postwar, many other texts felt their wrath—including a translated D.H. Lawrence story that was rejected, with particularly censurable passages poking fun at the military, making vaguely sacrilegious comparisons, and marking a character as an insufficiently modest woman. Meanwhile, Gómez Castro (2009) describes how a translation of *Justine* that, having been originally produced for the Latin American market, made no attempt to soften the story's highly sexual contents was consequently barred by the censors until after the reforms under the Ley de Prensa e Imprenta. The book's positive depiction of a woman's sexuality was a particular sticking point. Prior to the semi-softening of its policies, the regime gave translators and writers a stark choice: write only in a way that aligns with the discourse of Franco, or do not write at all.

## ***2.2. Relevance Theory and Implicature***

With the sociopolitical factors that created this case defined, what remains is to find a framework that would fit it, and to do so, I found it necessary to first reflect on what the reader

experiences when they read a censored text. Researchers interested in examining literature from a cognitive perspective have put forth a number of interesting concepts that could go some way towards explaining it. For instance, Abbott's (2015, 104) writing about the "quantum narrativity" of a text, in which its gaps contain multiple diverging possibilities that form "shadow stories" in the reader's mind, speaks somewhat to the interpretive act involved in reading a censored text. Zunshine's (2006, 6) application of "Theory of Mind" to literature to explain how readers engage in "mind-reading" when extrapolating characters' thoughts and feelings from their behaviours similarly reflects the detective work involved in the process. What is missing, however, is an acknowledgment that someone has set this detective work for the readers. Rabinowitz (2015, 88) in describing representations of mind-reading within narratives observes that the mind-reader acts in collaboration with a "mind-writer" who conveys a message they can decipher. To take the liberty of removing this concept from its original context, this mind-reader/mind-writer relationship bears striking similarities to the imperfect flow of information between author and reader of a censored text. Both parts are actors with intention in the exchange, and thus any model describing the phenomenon must account for both.

It is this joint examination of sender and receiver that is gained by adopting relevance theory as a framework for viewing the text. Relevance theory evolved from Grice's (1975, 45) Cooperative Principle for optimal communication in conversations: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." The principle can be broken down into four maxims: that of quantity, or giving the receiver no more and no less information than they need; that of quality, or giving them only information the speaker believes to be true with sufficient justification by evidence; that of relation, or giving them only information relevant to

the current exchange; and that of manner, or giving them information clearly, unambiguously, concisely, and methodically (Grice 1975, 45–46). Relevance theory, as advanced by Sperber and Wilson (1995), starts from a similar presumption that humans must communicate their ideas in a way that the recipient can reasonably be expected to understand given the context. However, they take issue with some of the Gricean maxims, namely the maxim of quality with its presumption of truthfulness, as it poses difficulties when metaphors and loose uses of language are considered (Wilson and Sperber 2006, 619). Instead, they maintain communication is governed by one principle: that of “optimal relevance,” in which the message communicated should provide the receiver the greatest possible contribution to their understanding of the context they are in while requiring the least amount of effort to process (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 158). The information must connect to the receiver’s “cognitive environment,” the collection of perceivable facts that individual can access (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 39). Through the relevance theoretical lens, then, the task of a writer may be recast as one of crafting their desired message in a way that is relevant to their readers—that is, in a way that readers can reasonably be expected to interpret based on the knowledge the writer expects them to have.

Of course, communication is not always optimally relevant. Literature in particular is not a communicative form known for being easily decipherable. Even in the day-to-day conversations upon which relevance theory was based, speakers may judge it situationally appropriate to be indirect in their speech. Such an instance of resorting to suboptimal relevance creates what is known as an “implicature,” defined by Sperber and Wilson (1995, 182) as an “assumption communicated, but not explicitly so.” With implicatures, decoding the speaker’s utterance requires more processing power and more examination of the facts conveyed against the contents of the receiver’s cognitive environment than would be deployed for an explicit

statement. A speaker (or writer) can communicate more or less implicitly in their implicatures. Those that receivers are “strongly encouraged” to interpret—that is, those more obvious to the receivers—are considered strong implicatures, while those that are more obscure and open to alternate interpretations are considered weak implicatures (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 199). To interpret ambiguous statements like implicatures, Wilson and Sperber (2006, 613) advise taking “a path of least effort” in evaluating hypotheses of what the speaker could mean, proceeding from the most to the least readily grasped interpretations until one that seems suitably relevant is reached. Compared to the conversational setting Wilson and Sperber were writing about, literary works tend to entail a longer process of interpretation towards solving weaker implicatures; arguably, the challenge of identifying their implicated themes and messages is part of their appeal. A censored literary work, however, contains more than just implicature for art’s sake: it also includes implicatures of necessity that allow the author to hint at a socio-political message while evading the consequences of that kind of speech. Often, this necessitates weak implicatures, since strong implicatures are too likely to be caught by the censor. With a more optimally relevant approach unavailable, the writer’s task is to use implicatures in a way that makes good use of knowledge in the readers’ cognitive environment, allowing them to still successfully interpret the desired meaning.

When the text is translated for a new audience, the new actors introduced into the situation complicate the task of communication and interpretation. After all, Sperber and Wilson (1995, 16) note that in standard two-way communication, when the speaker and receiver are thinking of different contexts in a conversation, a misunderstanding may ensue. A misunderstanding must be all the more likely, then, when the receiver lives in a context completely different to that of the speaker or writer. Gutt ([2000] 2014) addresses this concern in

his book presenting relevance theory as a potential general theory of translation. In particular, he examines how literary translation fits into the relevance theoretical framework, since a standard reproduction of the text's meaning in an optimally relevant manner risks missing the stylistic elements that contribute in subtle ways to the meaning. He argues that such texts contain "communicative clues," or lexical and syntactic elements of style that point readers towards the speaker's intended interpretation of a passage (Gutt [2000] 2014, 134). It is in ensuring the communicative clues from the source text are reproduced in the target, pointing the readers towards the same interpretations, that translators can produce a relevant literary translation (Gutt [2000] 2014, 170). The translator is thus obligated to study the source text carefully to determine what that intended interpretation is according to their best judgment (Gutt [2000] 2014, 172), and they are likewise required to exercise judgment about their readers' needs and expectations of the text (Gutt [2000] 2014, 118). Though it may sound risky, a careful and judicious use of the relevance theoretic approach to literary translation can yield a text that successfully provides the new readership access to all messages, implicit and explicit, in the text.

To my knowledge, relevance theory has not previously been applied to describe instances of censorship, but it has gained a foothold in the translation studies literature as a tool for describing various other challenging texts. Popular topics include translations of texts where the translator is expected to ensure a fairly high degree of relevance to target readers. For instance, Kasprzak (2008) examines strategies for saving readers processing effort in nature writing, which may entail—among other things—adjusting incorrect, ambiguous, and out-of-date information or providing glossaries and explanations to assist readers in grasping culturally specific concepts, all in service of ensuring readers can obtain the factual information they seek from a text without being overtaxed by reading it. Yus (2016), meanwhile, applies relevance

theory to translations of humour, explaining how jokes playing on certain culturally specific references or on a word or phrase with no target language equivalent require a translator to reconstruct the joke in a way that intelligibly delivers the broad meaning with a comparable humorous payoff for readers. Díaz-Pérez (2014) similarly develops an account of translating movie titles that feature puns, which deliver multiple meanings to audiences in a parsimonious and eye-catching fashion; to render them, the translator is forced to deconstruct the inferences involved in the pun and then find a way to effectively reconstruct them for a new cultural context. Besides cases like these, relevance theory has also been used to discuss translations of text types typically governed by more rigid expectations of equivalence. For example, Al-Jarrah, Abu-Dalu, and Obiedat (2018) deploy it when evaluating possible translations of deliberately ambiguous passages in religious texts, finding the best approach to be ensuring readers have sufficient communicative clues to draw the necessary inferences but not necessarily making explicit the implied content. Grzegorzewska (2008), for her part, considers a Polish translation of *Paradise Lost* through a relevance theoretical lens, concluding based on how the Puritan and classical ideas in it were translated for a Catholic audience that the role of ideology has been understudied in the relevance theory literature. What can be seen in this brief selection of the ways translation studies researchers have used relevance theory is that its concepts have significant utility in explaining many kinds of texts where implicature is present, including literary works.

### **2.3. Voice**

Relevance theory offers the tools for spotting text-level phenomena, but what is missing to complete my analysis is a concept describing the high-level effect produced by these phenomena. Such concepts can be found in narratology: after all, considering how censorial

interference affects the author's reputation points towards an examination of how readers come to understand the author through their reading of a text. I have, up to this point, used the word "author" rather liberally, but it is advisable to recall Genette's (1980, 213–214) advisory that the narrator in fiction is not equivalent to a story's author, nor the entity the narrator is addressing the end reader. This point is fleshed out in Chatman's (1978, 151) diagram of an author (the "real author") communicating to their reader (the "real reader") in a narrative: the real author communicates to an implied reader they have imagined will read their narrative via a narrator of their creation that addresses a narratee (whose presence may or may not be evident). The real reader, in consuming the narrative, steps into the implied reader role, committing to "imaginative or 'as if' acceptance" of it even if ultimately, they may personally reject the stance the author expects them to take (Chatman 1978, 150). In entering the situation of communication, though, the real reader creates another entity in the narrative: the implied author, or the image of the author the reader forms through their reading of the narrative (Chatman 1978, 148). It should be noted that the implied author is not identical across the real author's works, nor is this entity a product of what has been written about the real author; as Stockwell (2020, 50) advises, the implied author is a creation specific to the narrative being read based on the stylistic choices and viewpoints exhibited in the text. In other words, real readers of a text like "La llamada" are able to piece together the literary techniques and implied messages in it to construct an implied Carmen Laforet—a persona that may or may not be a fair representation of the real Laforet.

Translated texts add a layer of complexity to narrative models like Chatman's: not only does the real reader not match the cultural-linguistic profile of the original implied reader, but the narrator is also not the creation of the real author alone. Discussions of this issue were pioneered by Schiavi (1996) and Hermans (1996), who developed articles on the translator's place in

narratives in tandem. Hermans (1996) observes that, though readers are often unaware of the fact, there are always two voices present in a translated narrative: the voice of the narrator, closely associated in readers' minds with that of the source text author, and that of the translator. Though the author is not technically present in the text—only the translator's rendition of their voice—the translator's voice generally disappears behind that of the narrator due to expectations that the translator will constrain themselves to accurately rendering the author's words since they “speak in someone else's name” (Hermans 1996, 25). He does point out instances where the reader nonetheless becomes aware of the translator's voice, whether through the translator blatantly speaking for themselves in paratext or through their solutions to linguistic and cultural challenges in the source text making it apparent to readers that the text has been translated (Hermans 1996, 27–28). Schiavi (1996, 3) likewise starts from the point that the translator's voice is present in the discourse of translated texts, “in part standing in for the author's and in part autonomous.” She then examines the repercussions of this presence on Chatman's model, positing that extra steps are introduced to the real author–real reader communication process when the real translator steps into the real (source) reader's role, recognizes what kind of implied reader the author is addressing and the techniques used to reach them, and then recreates this communication for a new implied reader in the target culture (Schiavi 1996, 14–15). In doing so, the real translator generates an “implied translator” for the real target reader to perceive based on their translation and mediation efforts (Schiavi 1996, 15). It may be questioned whether the implied translator is always perceived by that reader given the translator's default tendency to disappear in the narrative, as noted by Hermans (1996). Regardless, in places where the translator's voice can be heard, the real reader may well infer from their detectable decisions an image of an implied translator working alongside the implied author.



Notions of the translator's voice and the impression created by it have found utility in the translation studies literature for describing the particularities of translators who do not comply with expectations of absolute accuracy. For instance, Rivas Carmona (2011) examines Flora Ossette's Spanish translation of Oliver Schreiner's *Woman and Labour*, finding that Ossette made her presence explicit in the text by inserting her own knowledge of the feminist movement into the main text and paratext, simplifying the language, and omitting content she considered less relevant to her implied reader. O'Sullivan (2003) explores a similar didactic dynamic in the translation of children's literature, in which the translator reconstructs the unequal situation of communication between the implied author and the implied reader in the target culture. In doing so, the translator's voice can be detected both in paratextual explanations of culturally unfamiliar concepts and in instances where "the voice of the narrator of the translation" (O'Sullivan 2003, 202; emphasis removed) stands out from that of the source text narrator through adaptations catering to the new implied reader. Wang (2021) explores Howard Goldblatt's translations of Chinese novels, finding the translator's voice to be discernible in the target text's shifts in style, ordering, and ideological perspective to better align with an American target market; the translator's presence in the narrative is further reinforced by paratextual evidence such as interviews with the author confirming changes made and the motivations behind them. Even Hermans (2014, 287–290) makes a return of sorts to the concept in an example of a translator expressing resistance to the source text via paratext: a Calvinist translator undercuts the claims of a Calvinist-turned-Catholic source text author through sarcastic notes in the margin, thus making his own voice visible to make the implied author's sound more foolish. Whether it manifests itself to resist a work or to tailor it for a new readership, the translator's voice has been discerned by researchers in both direct appeals from footnotes and indirect addresses through textual

manipulations.

### **3. Analysis of Implicatures in the Source Text**

#### ***3.1. References to Societal Conditions***

Before I provide my examination of the text and its implied author, it behooves me to point out that the real author of “La llamada” professed to be apolitical, yet the text she created suggests frustrations with the state in which she lived. Laforet was certainly aware of the harshness of the early postwar years in Barcelona, where most of the story takes place, having experienced them herself. She did not directly witness the oft-referenced Civil War, but she was able to absorb an understanding of this, too, from those around her who did, allowing her to imbue her writing with a “sensitivity with which Laforet approaches and establishes the psychological repercussions of the Civil War” (Rolón-Barada 2017, 124). While she did not use that knowledge to campaign for any political figures or measures, she did not appear to possess it uncritically, either. Writing to her friend Ramón J. Sender on his political preferences in 1971, she admits to him, “Yo sé lo que no me gusta en política” (Laforet and Sender 2003, 149). Readers of “La llamada” who are conscious of its context of production can intuit some of those dislikes. Many of the most pointed instances of potential criticism manifest themselves as implicatures pointing towards the poor conditions in the early Francoist state.

Interestingly, the first of these motivated implicatures occurs in the first line of the narrative. The heterodiegetic narrator opens by saying to the narratees, “Este relato comienza con el amanecer sobre un pequeño puerto del sur, algún tiempo después de terminada nuestra guerra civil” (Laforet 2010, 79). The use of the phrase “guerra civil” is provocative. Given that the Francoist state viewed the Second Republic as illegitimate, it preferred to think of the conflict as the army fulfilling an obligation to reimpose legitimate governance. In one of the government’s

publications, the war was referred to as a “tercera Reconquista” or a “Cruzada de Liberación,” while “Guerra Civil” was regarded as their opponents’ language for it (Martínez-Vasseur 2011). It was for this reason that, as Rolón-Barada (2017, 125) states, “guerra civil” was considered a banned phrase by the censors, though they applied this ban inconsistently. According to its censorship record (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 3781-55), Laforet herself would be asked to delete two mentions of the words in her next novel, *La mujer nueva* (1955). Laforet does not just mention the phrase here, though; she has the narrator call it *our* civil war,<sup>5</sup> extending to her Spanish implied readers a sense of collective ownership and, deeper into the train of implicatures, culpability. She then follows up with a description of the port, ending with a brief mention of the ship transporting Don Juan being “conducido por el práctico” (Laforet 2010, 79). The suggestion of a pilot being called upon leaves readers to interpret what kind of danger could be present in the port for this to be necessary. In the manuscript provided to the censors, however, Laforet originally typed that it was because “En el puerto se oxidaban cascos de buques destripados, y se hablaba de minas aún sin explotar,” both leftovers from the war (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53). This metaphor for lingering trauma was crossed out, leaving readers to guess at its existence based on memories of the war at sea. This opening primes readers for a study of the damage done in the war and its enduring effects.

Hints at the economic upheaval of the era constitute a significant portion of the politically salient implicatures that follow. For instance, when speaking with Mercedes’ son, Don Juan remarks with palpable bitterness, “En estos tiempos el ser pobre no es nada extraño. Lo extraño va siendo lo contrario...” (Laforet 2010, 84). He is referring not just to falling wages in the

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<sup>5</sup>Qualifying the war with “nuestra” also marks the narrator as being Spanish themselves, something that may encourage readers to associate them with the implied author, particularly given Laforet’s reputation for borrowing from her own experiences in her writing. Such an association could well have shaped how readers understood Mercedes’ journey throughout the narrative.

country but also, and likely mainly, to dramatic food shortages resulting from autarky. Autarky was a Francoist policy from the first decades after the war centred around reducing foreign imports to promote Spanish self-sufficiency. This plan was, however, “un absolute fracaso” with dire consequences for the population (del Arco Blanco 2006, 243). Shortages of even staples like bread meant that in the 1940s, Spanish citizens were consuming an average of anywhere from 15% to 28.5% fewer calories than they needed daily by officials’ estimates (del Arco Blanco 2006, 251). Ration cards were issued until 1952: cards were divided into three categories based on a person’s social status and occupation, and men were allotted more food than women, children, or seniors (Espín 2022, s. 1. chap. 2). Still, the food that could be bought with ration cards was insufficient, and numerous accounts exist of economic activities slowing or stopping due to workers’ extreme malnourishment (del Arco Blanco 2006, 250). Popular displeasure with the regime for these shortages was present as early as 1939, with women protesting in Málaga over their lack of bread while the government sent Spain’s harvests to Germany (Alía Miranda et al. 2017, 224). Even those ideologically close to the regime grew concerned with the state’s economic mismanagement, as when the Bilbao Chamber of Commerce, despite most employers in the region having been pro-Franco, complained that shortages were not providing workers what they needed to maintain their strength (Cazorla Sánchez 2010, 61). It would hardly be surprising, then, that an otherwise conservative-leaning character like Don Juan (see section 3.2) would criticize the state of affairs. Nor is it surprising that Laforet has drawn readers’ attention to it.

Food, the lack thereof, and the consequences of this lack become a recurring motif in the narrative. Hunger is mentioned frequently by the narrator and the characters. The most striking reference to food in the story, though, comes when Doña Eloísa brings Mercedes home to share

her midmorning snack. This consists of a cup of milk to share between the two of them and “un trozo de pan amarillo, de aquel pan de entonces, que se rompía al caer al suelo” (Laforet 2010, 107). This almost comical description of stale bread made with poor-quality flour came directly from Laforet’s memories in Barcelona: in a letter she wrote to her son, she reminisced about the difficult conditions she experienced in the city, describing a poor diet that featured bread that had to be dropped on the floor to break off portions (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 6). Laforet strengthens the point she makes with the bread and milk when Mercedes objects to the quality of the food in a middle-class house like Lolita’s. Doña Eloísa responds to her that “Tiene que ser así en estos tiempos” (Laforet 2010, 107), driving home that hunger was endemic to the postwar Francoist society. Doña Eloísa also reflects on what such economic turbulence following a difficult war did to its people. Upon seeing Luis refuse to help Mercedes—a blow given that at that time, the family provided a social safety net in absence of government action (Cazorla Sánchez 2010, 70)—she muses that “La gente, después de pasar los terribles años de guerra, se había vuelto así, malhumorada y poco hospitalaria...” (Laforet 2010, 101). People went hungry during the war, and when they found that trauma compounded by continued hunger under a regime that professed to be liberating them, they inevitably turned inward to focus on their own households’ interests as a survival strategy. Laforet and her readers knew this and understood the characters’ food-related trauma, having lived it themselves.

Another sign of lingering damage from the war comes when Mercedes is taking the train to Barcelona. The journey is “incómodo. Casi insufrible” and leaves her dress “manchado de hollín” (Laforet 2010, 96) as a result of war damage the state lacked the funds to fully repair. Having been a strategic target in battle, much of the country’s rail lines and rolling stock were destroyed or in disrepair (Muñoz Fernández 2009, 6). Trains that remained in service were pulled

by notoriously slow old steam locomotives, with old third-class cars like Mercedes' that featured uncomfortable wooden bench seats (Espín 2022, s. 1. chap. 2). Laforet notes that “En aquella época los trenes iban abarrotados” (Laforet 2010, 96); overcrowding was indeed an issue. Among those who would have shared the car with Mercedes as she left her small southern port were Andalusian agricultural workers in the early stages of a migratory wave. According to Tudela Vázquez (2018), these people were escaping low wages and reprisals, if they had supported the Republicans, to earn money and eventually bring their families to Barcelona, and they would often be travelling with an abundance of luggage to start their new lives—which was likely why Mercedes looked out of place with “todo equipaje una cesta” (Laforet 2010, 96). Another major group crowded onto the trains was people, often women, who purchased food in rural areas where supplies were better and smuggled it into the city to sell on the black market (Espín 2022, s. 1. chap. 2). Such activity meant that there were “parejas de la guardia civil que obligatoriamente viajaban en la totalidad de las unidades” to watch over passengers and check their papers, with more officials keeping watch in train stations (Espín 2022, s. 1. chap. 2). From further metaphors for war trauma to reflections of economic upheaval and state control, the brief passage Laforet provides on train travel offers a rich implied commentary on the postwar experience, playing on Spaniards' memories of their own experiences to do so.

The scene on the train also alludes to a key tool for economic survival: the pawn shop. When Laforet notes that Mercedes “casi se quedó helada una noche, aunque aún no era época de frío” (Laforet 2010, 96), she was likely encouraging readers to come upon the weak implicature that she was cold because she had at some prior time sold her coat for extra money—García Blay (2016, 109) notes that such a mention of coldness and pawning warm clothing is common in Laforet. In fact, Laforet revealed to a friend in a 1942 letter that she herself sold her coat (as

cited in Cerezales Laforet 2021, 178). Later on in the narrative, Doña Eloísa encourages Mercedes to deploy this strategy to pay for accommodations with the help of a pocket watch from her, “la única [joya] que guardaba” (Laforet 2010, 109). By mentioning that this watch is her last remaining piece of jewellery, Laforet invites readers to think that she had gotten rid of the rest she owned through the common middle-class strategy of selling jewellery and other valuables to find extra money that could then be spent buying food on the black market (de la Fuente 2002, 46). These glancing references in the story acknowledge for readers that at a time when the state was doing little to help its citizens out of the economic crisis, people had to help themselves out of it with whatever resources they had—whether a luxury of sentimental value or an important piece of clothing deemed not quite essential when desperation struck.

One final detail to note about Mercedes’ trip sheds light on the level of control the state held over its citizens. In describing Mercedes’ preparations for travel, Laforet includes in passing that “Consiguió un salvoconducto” (Laforet 2010, 95). This document provided authorization from officials in a person’s region to travel to another region. As Pérez-Olivares (2020, 68–69) recounts, securing a *salvoconducto* required not just providing personal information but specifying one’s reason for wanting to travel and having guarantors attest to the accuracy of the information provided as well as the applicant’s support for the Francoists. González Martínez and Ortiz Heras (2007, 34) describe such a high barrier to domestic travel as effectively turning individual communities into “un entorno carcelario,” allowing the government to consolidate its ironclad control over the population between the end of the war and 1947, when the requirement for the *salvoconducto* was lifted. The narrator’s reference to the application process is very fleeting, but Spanish readers who had been through it themselves would recognize how much was required for it and how acute a display of state repression it was.

The effects of state interference can also be felt in the elliptical conversation between Mercedes and Don Juan about her marriage. After hearing how her husband had hit her hard enough to knock out her tooth, Don Juan asks her, “¿Cómo te casaste?” She responds, “Por la Iglesia,” an answer that leaves him “desconcertado” (Laforet 2010, 90). When Don Juan asks this question, he creates an implicature for Mercedes to suggest if she had had a civil marriage, there may be a legal loophole for her to exploit. The Second Republic had made civil rather than religious marriage mandatory, as well as authorizing divorce. The Franco regime overturned both of these in 1938 and 1939 respectively, creating a system of mandatory religious marriage for all except non-Catholics and specifically annulling the civil marriages of those the Church considered unable to be married, such as those with previous religious marriages that had not been annulled (Isanta Crusellas 2018, 18). For those with exclusively civil marriages, the new legal framework left their marital status uncertain. Though, as Isanta Crusellas (2018, 18) observes, the state did not wish to dissolve civil marriages that could be valid and Spain’s supreme court ultimately reaffirmed these unions’ validity, serious questions remained in the public discourse and among Canon law experts at the time “La llamada” was published. That year, García Cantero (1954) wrote an article entitled “Las uniones meramente civiles contraídas al amparo de la Ley de 28 de junio de 1932, ¿deben disolverse?” Though he ends up answering this question in the negative, he portrays expert opinions on the matter as genuinely divided, with a figure he describes as renowned in the field—Eduardo Fernández-Regatillo—calling for “*una ley de divorcio en que se declarase disoluble el vínculo meramente civil*” (as cited in García Cantero 1954, 1190). With the knowledge source text readers would have had of the murky legal status of civil marriages, readers are struck by how little freedom a woman like Mercedes has if her only hope to escape a physically abusive marriage is via a legislative oversight. The strong



implicature here thus carries with it another, weaker implicature about the legal barriers the state imposed on women's lives.

Towards the end of the narrative, a brief remark points to the restrictions placed on women through another avenue: societal expectations. In his letter to Doña Eloísa, Mercedes' son expresses a plea on his father's behalf: "le pedía que se acordase de su hija, que ya era una mocita, y «no era decente que estuviese sola en casa, sobre todo por lo que las malas lenguas pudiesen decir»" (Laforet 2010, 129). Mercedes' daughter, as the narrator has informed the readers, is around 15 years of age, and her mother's presence in the house is considered vital, partially to ensure virtue and decorum. This was Laforet's own much-resented experience when she was staying with family in Barcelona at 18; in the above-mentioned letter to her son, she complained, "Por el hecho de ser una mujer joven yo tenía que estar encerrada y no salir nunca" (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 6). The compulsion to ensure young women were kept under control was the same reason Franco increased the age of majority for women to 25, effectively keeping most in their parents' home until they married or joined a convent (Moraga García 2008, 232). More precisely, the expectation that the girl's mother would need to be with her is rooted in the place accorded to mothers in the Francoist ideology. As part of the national Catholicism it espoused, the regime placed a high value on the family and particularly mothers' role within the family; its women's branch, the *Sección Femenina*, promoted a notion of women's duty in line with traditional Catholic conceptions of women's roles (Morcillo Gómez 1999, 52). The model for womanhood being upheld to Spanish girls was Fray Luis de León's *La perfecta casada* (1953): a good Christian woman who devotes herself to her domestic duties with joy (Harvey 2008, 283–284). With Mercedes absent, not only was she not fulfilling this idealized wife/mother role in her household, but she was also not instructing her daughter in how to fulfill

it one day herself. These failings in monitoring her daughter's propriety and in preparing her for motherhood would be serious in the eyes of a culture that emphasized an extremely limited image of womanhood, potentially opening the family up to scorn—the oft-mentioned *qué dirán*. Accordingly, Mercedes' and ultimately her daughter's life choices must be curtailed to protect the family's reputation.

All of the above implicatures operate on two levels. On the one hand, they function as isolated implicatures with varying degrees of strength or weakness, alluding to elements of Spaniards' cognitive environments that they had experienced, witnessed, or heard about. On the other, they also constitute communicative clues. These oblique hints at the problems of postwar Spanish society accumulate throughout the narrative to suggest to the reader an image of a deeply flawed state that traumatizes, polices, and strips choices away from its citizens, all while failing to meet their basic needs. If readers have the knowledge about postwar Spain that is required to recognize them, they can access a much more complex reading of the text than might otherwise appear to them, and they will then form a very different image of the implied author. However, the readership I am translating for lives in a country that is a long-established secular democracy, has not had a major war fought on its soil since 1812, and has certainly struggled with inequality but has faced nowhere near the level of widespread food insecurity that Spain did. The realities Laforet alludes to are very much not a part of these readers' cognitive environments unless they happen to have learned about Francoist Spain at some point in their education or personal research. Unless the translator is mindful of these elements, readers are at risk of misunderstanding the text both in isolated instances and as a whole.

### ***3.2. Implicit Judgments***

The preceding examples represent self-contained instances of criticism; what follows in

the next two subsections are passages that serve as communicative clues. While not overtly critical, they cumulatively function as signposts to readers suggesting that the conservative-sounding narrative they are being told is to be questioned. A notable class of these communicative clues is introduced through the narrative voice Laforet chooses to use. The narrator in “La llamada” is, as previously mentioned, heterodiegetic, recounting events in the third person (with the exception of a couple brief asides in the first person at the beginning of the story) and shifting their focus from character to character. Yet at times, the narrator focuses on one character so intensely that they verge on becoming homodiegetic, adopting that character’s perspective and describing their thoughts without feeling the need to attribute them to that character. In each of these instances, the narrator is essentially producing an unconventional form of what Zunshine (2006, 47) calls a “metarepresentation”: called “a representation of a representation” in linguistic terms, it is a statement that the receiver is presented filtered through another source (e.g., “she told him it would rain” presents the statement that it will rain according to a particular source, “she”). The narrator in this story often delivers the metarepresentational framing specifying the source as an implicature rather than an explicit statement. This has interesting implications in light of the fact that metarepresentations let readers “store certain information/representations ‘under advisement’” (Zunshine 2006, 50), recognizing that the information they convey may be the source’s opinion or an outright lie rather than the objective truth. Oftentimes, the narrator metarepresents the judgments characters in the narrative pass on other characters, especially women characters, leaving the reader to interpret for themselves whether the contents of these judgments are to be taken as the character’s opinion or narrator-sanctioned fact. As will be expanded on below, this seems to be a strategic choice, allowing for a conservative or critical reading of the text.

The first and possibly most impactful source of implied metarepresentations is Don Juan. The narrator chooses to tie themselves closely to his perspective in the first section of the story and part of the second one, only for him to disappear from the text thereafter. It is an unusual approach, one Johnson (1981, 119) accuses of being “unnecessarily complicated.” The most obvious motivation behind this choice is a desire to establish a comparison between Don Juan’s version of events and Mercedes’ that will make it apparent Mercedes does not recall them reliably. Indeed, she has an undeniable habit of exaggerating and distorting events to suit her pre-existing beliefs. Seeing the encounter between these two characters from Don Juan’s perspective before shifting to hers as she recalls it exposes this. That said, Don Juan may not be infallible in his examination of events, either. The reader is cued by the narrator on his first appearance that he appears to be at odds with his surroundings as “un buen burgués del siglo pasado” (Laforet 2010, 80), introducing implicatures about his potentially old-fashioned upper-middle-class values. He also appears somewhat limited in compassion for the poor at times, as when the narrator tells readers that a group of children begging for change was something he merely “aguantó impasible” (Laforet 2010, 81). Moreover, he passes a hasty judgment on his cabinmate, responding to the man with “recelo” upon their first meeting seemingly based only on his large facial scar before softening in his evaluation of him (Laforet 2010, 89). Taken together, these details suggest that Don Juan too has some pre-existing beliefs informing the way he processes his environment.

In this light, Don Juan’s judgments of Mercedes warrant further exploration. He recalls her youth harshly: during her and her sister’s visits, her aunt, it is said, “las mimaba en exceso,” leading her to become “una muchacha muy fogosa y romántica” that spurned potential husbands and longed for an acting career to the point of trying to run away, an event Don Juan blames for

the death of Mercedes' aunt (Laforet 2010, 86). His scorn for her behaviour likely has to do with the persisting view in postwar Spain that being an actress was a morally questionable profession (Espín 2022, s. 1. chap. 6). Mercedes' sister, María Rosa, gets a more positive assessment, one that passes down to her descendants: after noting that she married young and died in a bombing with Don Juan at her side, he muses that “Sus hijos eran excelentes muchachos...” (Laforet 2010, 87). A dichotomy is established here for readers: Mercedes is the bad sister who rejects the role society has allotted for her, while María Rosa is the good sister who accepts it and perpetuates it in her children. This categorization of Mercedes frames Don Juan's encounter with her.

Remarking that “algo terrible había pasado por ella,” he dwells on her decline in appearance: “Era una mujer fondona, descuidada, sin peinar un cabello que ya no era rubio, con las uñas sucias, partidas, y un insoportable olor a cocina que parecía venir de su bata llena de manchas” (Laforet 2010, 90). With her dramatically described unkemptness and her missing tooth, she seems to become “un personaje caricaturesco” with strong elements of the grotesque (Ferretti 2013, 212–213). The state of her hands is mentioned seemingly in contrast to Don Juan's as a reflection of their differing social class and level of refinement. Moreover, the strong cooking smell on her paints a picture of her as an inadequate housewife shirking her duty to maintain cleanliness in her home. Disapproval pervades the rest of the encounter, with perhaps Don Juan's most generous thought coming in the form of a backhanded compliment on her acting ability: “Quizá, en efecto, años atrás tuvo talento” (Laforet 2010, 91). Mercedes is, to him, a failure for not fitting within his parameters for what a woman like her should be.

The values behind Don Juan's judgment, it should be noted, do not appear to be those of Laforet herself. For one thing, Laforet was not a traditional housewife herself in that she paid little attention to her domestic duties; her household had hired help not as “un imperativo

burgués sino un asunto de primera necesidad para que la casa funcionara debidamente” (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 11). She had to do without due to economic hardships at one point in 1950, jokingly describing her efforts as “balbuceos de principiante” in a letter to a friend (Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 11). Besides this, she also expressed ideas unconventional for the time about men’s and women’s roles in the home. In a 1950 column for *Destino*, she responded to an earlier article that questioned whether the female American ambassador to Denmark or her husband was the head of the household by asserting that “Me imagino yo, que, en realidad, en un hogar construido por dos personas igualmente capacitadas para pensar, lo natural es que haya dos cabezas, en lugar de una” (Laforet 1950, 7). This egalitarian outlook had at its root a conviction about men’s and women’s equality. In 1967, she wrote for *La Actualidad Española* that “a lo largo de una vida que tiene ya muchos años a las espaldas, no he visto más diferencias que las fisiológicas entre la mujer y el hombre” (as cited in Cerezales Laforet 2021, 409). Not sharing in Don Juan’s expectations of women’s responsibilities nor living up to them in her own life, Laforet likely did not view him as an unbiased source. She also likely had some sympathy for Mercedes being limited to a housewife role she did not want, though the character certainly has behaviours for which she can be reproached. In this light, Don Juan should be thought of not as the accurate perspective to Mercedes’ distorted one but as the traditionalist viewpoint to Mercedes’ nonconformist one.

Shortly before the narrator leaves Don Juan, he passes judgment on another woman central to the story: Doña Eloísa. He admits that she is someone “en quien nunca se había fijado, aunque la vio mil veces” (Laforet 2010, 93). He has never noticed her, it is suggested to readers, because she is an unremarkable woman: “Nunca había sido guapa, ni lista, ni más o menos buena que mil mujeres de su tipo dedicadas a su casa, a sus hijos, más bien sosainas y silenciosas”

(Laforet 2010, 93). The statement is highly dismissive towards the character, but it also seems to be at least partially refuted by the events that follow. Doña Eloísa displays quite a bit of ingenuity as she formulates strategies to evade society's and her grandchildren's controls in order to help Mercedes. She also proves herself to be uncommonly good, providing Mercedes with help beyond what she could reasonably be expected to give when those around her either refuse to do so or only partially help while taking advantage of the woman. Even prior to the postwar desperation Doña Eloísa believes made everyone turn inwards, she shows a higher level of empathy for Mercedes than those around her. At Mercedes' wedding, when María Rosa callously remarks, "Menos mal que él parece capaz de dominarla" (Laforet 2010, 105), Doña Eloísa feels only horror at the undoubtedly poor outcome of the wedding that awaits. Doña Eloísa is a significant agent in the narrative, but Don Juan's assessment of her reflects how minimized and misunderstood that agency is from a traditional patriarchal point of view.

The conservative understandings of these characters, particularly Mercedes, that are set up in the first two sections are upheld throughout the text by various characters. Lolita, upon her first sight of Mercedes, thinks of her as "aquel eserpento" (Laforet 2010, 98). Dishevelled and covered in coal dust from her journey with badly bleached hair, Mercedes does not look like the class of person Lolita would expect her grandmother to entertain in their home—to the point where she has to conceptualize the woman as something grotesque and frightening. After hearing her story about leaving her husband to start a stage career, Lolita adjusts her language and refers to Mercedes internally as "aquella loca" (Laforet 2010, 100). Mercedes' hyperbolic style likely does little to counter this perception, but fundamentally, the act of leaving was enough to earn her this epithet. In a society where divorce was made illegal and even in cases of abuse, women who left faced "la condena moral por haber roto un matrimonio" (Espín 2022, s. 1. chap. 6), to

do so and also try to pursue acting, whose stigma has already been noted, would have been decidedly against what society would find acceptable for a married woman to do. Unable to comprehend or empathize with her actions, the scandalized Lolita continues to call Mercedes crazy when she mentions her.

Moral condemnation appears to be a common response to Mercedes' choices, as indicated by a passing comment in a dairy bar before the debut. The establishment's owner sizes up Doña Eloísa and Mercedes, respectively, as "Una señora, una anciana respetable, pulquérrima... y, no cabía duda, una fulana de baja estofa..." (Laforet 2010, 121). Mercedes' showy yet worn clothing is read by this stranger as insufficiently modest and thus indicative of sexual impropriety. Interestingly, the intensifier "de baja estrofa" was a late addition to the manuscript, perhaps owing to a feeling that the character needed to appear more obviously worthy of scorn to please censors leery of a woman separated from her husband looking too sympathetic (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53). The comment is brief yet cutting, revealing how Mercedes during her attempted acting career draws an instinctual response of rejection in those around her.

Doña Eloísa, too, is susceptible to the orthodox reading of Mercedes. She thought of her in her youth as "encantadora, llena de vida, algo desquiciada" (Laforet 2010, 105), and when they meet after Mercedes has had some time to establish herself, Doña Eloísa finds her "aún más desquiciada que el día que llegó de su viaje" (Laforet 2010, 106). The old woman feels she cannot refuse to accompany Mercedes to her debut because "Estaba tan loca la desgraciada, que no comprendía las razones que ella le diese para negarse" (Laforet 2010, 114). Eventually, Mercedes' persistence in her hopeless endeavour begins to irritate Doña Eloísa, and negative judgments show through despite her compassion for the woman: she thinks of her laugh as "muy



desagradable” (Laforet 2010, 108). Scoffing to herself at the idea of going to the debut, she intensifies her terminology and calls Mercedes “una perturbada” (Laforet 2010, 113). She reacts with horror to the friend who has been helping Mercedes, describing her as “una mujer monstruosa” for her size as well as her poor living conditions (Laforet 2010, 122), and then, at her most frustrated with Mercedes’ choices, she thinks of her as “una estúpida” (Laforet 2010, 123). By her first glimpse of Mercedes on the stage, she can only think an unkind “Estaba horrible” (Laforet 2010, 124). Though Doña Eloísa is concerned about Mercedes’ wellbeing, she is also mindful of her reputation, and it bothers her that Mercedes will not act to protect it for her own social survival.

Doña Eloísa likewise continues to be thought of in the same patronizing terms with which Don Juan referred to her. Direct quotes from Lolita and the woman’s son express doubts about her mental faculties. Mercedes then echoes this when Doña Eloísa tries to reassure her about her performance after the failed debut, musing that “Aquella viejecita era bien extraña” (Laforet 2010, 125). Later, she imagines Doña Eloísa’s enthusiastic response to her deciding to go home and thinks to herself, “Doña Eloísa era demasiado buena para que uno fuese a desbaratar sus ilusiones explicándole que los milagros no existen...” (Laforet 2010, 132–133). Much as the woman’s son thought her to be one of the “almas simples y tímidas” clinging to faith for want of reason (Laforet 2010, 105), Mercedes regards with gentle condescension Doña Eloísa’s religiosity and what it means for her critical thinking abilities. Doña Eloísa herself thinks little better of them. When debating whether or not to go to the debut, she chooses to call her spiritual director, concluding that “Más sabría el padre de caridad cristiana que una pobre vieja” (Laforet 2010, 114). Of course, part of her deference to him is likely in hopes that he will say no and give her an excuse to do what society expects of her, but her conviction that the priest’s judgment is

to be trusted absolutely reflects how little she trusts her own judgment. It is a stance that seems to harken back to *Sección Femenina* leader Pilar Primo de Rivera's infamous quote: "Las mujeres nunca descubren nada. Les falta, desde luego, el talento creador reservado por Dios para inteligencias varoniles" (as cited in Martín Gaité 1987, 91). She also has a habit of undervaluing herself outside the realm of the intellectual. When she reflects on her good health for her age, she thinks to herself that "Quizá llegase a tatarabuela, por aquel camino... Luisito, el día de mañana pudiera llegar a encontrarse en la obligación de mantenerla. Esto era turbador" (Laforet 2010, 103). Her view of herself in this moment is very instrumental, judging herself unworthy if she is not adequately helping the household and having to be taken care of instead. Doña Eloísa, much like the characters around her and the society in which they live, downplays her value despite readers being able to see how consequential she is.

Throughout the text, the narrator expresses characters' near-systematic denigrations of the two most central women to the plot. Whether they are judged to have neglected their responsibilities as a wife/mother, like Mercedes, or to simply be inferior due to their gender and age, like Doña Eloísa, these characters are shown to readers through the lens of a society that denies their agency and demands their goals be subordinated to those of the state. Since the narrator leaves implicit the metarepresentational structure of these judgments, they present the reader with a choice: those who share this view on women—for example, censors working in service of the Francoist state—could interpret these remarks not as metarepresentations at all but as objective facts stated by an impartial omniscient narrator. Those who wish to question these ideas, however, can intuit that these are metarepresentations produced by characters with their own prejudices and cognitive baggage. They may even detect irony among the weaker implicatures tied to these passages. The statements can nevertheless appear jarring to modern

readers in a society where such views are confined to fringe minorities, potentially causing them to reject the text rather than put the work into analyzing it more deeply. There is a great deal said about the source culture's view of women in these implied judgments, but target readers have to be able to find them to access this information.

### ***3.3. Thematic Communicative Clues***

A second type of communicative clue in the narrative is also discernible on close study; though clues of this class are more disparate in form than those in the previous section, they can be discerned by their similar effect of developing themes in the narrative that promote an alternative reading of the plot. In essence, these clues further a notion that is suggested in a deletion from the manuscript that would ultimately be sent for censorial review. In the opening of the narrative, the narrator states that this story would not have taken place without Don Juan's arrival at the port: "Podría haberse escrito otra; pero ésta casi estoy segura de que no" (Laforet 2010, 80). The typewritten manuscript qualified the word *otra* with the phrase "quizá aun mas triste" (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53). This phrase was later crossed out, perhaps because of the ramifications of the word *aun*. It suggests that, contrary to many points in the text that seem to laugh at the humbling of Mercedes and rejoice in her return home, the story being told is not meant to be seen as a happy one. As García Blay (2016, 180) observes, the bulk of Laforet's work explores women seeking some form of independence in a society that does not want to give it to them. Quevedo García (2008, 241) echoes this idea, stressing that Laforet centres her narratives around characters searching for "la libertad de elegir un camino, sea en cualquier dirección, aunque a algunos lectores críticos esta dirección les pueda parecer errada o decepcionante." The freedom to determine their own course in life was something Laforet wrote of wanting for her own daughters in a letter to Elena Fortún: "Yo les digo siempre que cuando

sean mayores podrán hacer todo lo que les dé la gana, y que viajarán y que vivirán conmigo o solas, como quieran... [...]. Esto es un engaño, pero por lo menos un engaño esperanzado” (Laforet and Fortún 2017, 43). That last line acknowledges that the level of self-determination she wished for them to have was an aspiration not likely to be fulfilled in the social climate of her day. Certainly, it was one she did not seem to find fulfillment in at this point in her life; Caballé and Rolón-Barada ([2010] 2019, chap. 11) report some sense of disappointment and escapist fantasies being expressed in her letters from early on in her marriage. Mercedes and Doña Eloísa, like her, are women whose life choices are highly constrained. Both show resistance to these constraints in their own way, but both end up more or less back where they began; as Ferretti (2013, 223) points out, an ending indicating a permanent escape from the family home would have been unacceptable not just to censors but to most readers as well. Though this end point is superficially framed as a positive result to a spiritual journey, there is also a profound tragedy in the fact that the best outcome for these women is acquiescence to their circumstances. This theme of unattainable liberty and how characters contend with it is buried in the weaker implicatures, but certain moments in the narrative cue readers to its presence.

The character of Doña Eloísa faces unusual treatment by the narrator: she is given little space to express her decision-making almost in a representation of the disregard society shows for it, but her decisions are nonetheless crucial to the narrative. As a result, certain factors in her decision-making—namely her faith—go unexplored. Her prayer custom, for instance, is to pray to the Virgin Mary “bajo el cuadro de la Virgen de Montserrat,” for whom she keeps a lamp constantly lit (Laforet 2010, 103). Mary is an interceding figure but is often regarded as more than a simple conduit to God for those who pray to her. Vuola (2019, 36) explains that for many communities of women who pray to her, Mary’s intercessory ability arises from her “maternal

power”; Mary as both a human and a mother “understands women’s sorrows and has the power to intervene” with a familiarity that a male deity would not have (Vuola 2019, 1). The care of keeping a lamp lit would suggest a level of emotional connection to the Virgin. Moreover, the sense of female solidarity in this view of Mary is also present in the publications of another religious figure Laforet was known to have read: Teresa de Jesús. In her school days, she had written an essay proclaiming the saint’s *Las moradas* (1588) to be her favourite book “porque me ha hecho pensar más que ningún otro” (as cited in Caballé and Rolón-Barada [2010] 2019, chap. 3), and she seems to have returned to Teresa during her spiritual explorations of the 1950s, visiting convents of Teresa’s Carmelite order (de la Fuente 2002, 99). Of note for these purposes is that Teresa’s writing displays what Bernárdez-Rodal (2017, 349) calls “rasgos protofeministas,” including an emphasis on sisterhood and support in the face of a patriarchal system (Bernárdez-Rodal 2017, 354). Such sisterly support seems to foreshadow the way in which Doña Eloísa will be the main character to meaningfully help Mercedes. Foreshadowing may also be suggested in the posture of the Virgin of Montserrat. She is an apparently passively seated figure—a stance that Kateusz (2019, 10–11) notes developed in contrast to earlier images of Mary active in leading worship as a reflection of culturally desirable behaviour for women—yet in her hand she holds an orb that serves to represent the universe. Doña Eloísa presents a similar contradiction: presented repeatedly as a passive character, she inwardly possesses the compassion for her fellow woman and drive to act on it that are required to help Mercedes through a period of experimentation that could pose a risk to her safety.

The underexploration of Doña Eloísa’s religious convictions continues at her most pivotal point of putting them into practice. After fretting at length and then attempting to outsource her decision to her spiritual director, she learns he cannot be reached and resolves on

the spot, “No hay nada que hacer, Dios mío; Tú quieres que yo resuelva sola” (Laforet 2010, 114). For a character described as having always been “tímida como un pájaro” (Laforet 2010, 100), this decision is surprisingly decisive. Moreover, Del Mastro (2010, 19) observes that the course of action she chooses is far enough outside social acceptability that she can only follow it by breaking a commandment and resorting to subterfuge. Only the terse comment cited about being asked by God to solve things herself stands to provide insight into Doña Eloísa’s mental state at this moment, but for such a significant shift in the character to take place, it can only be assumed that the woman has come to a transformative revelation—perhaps something akin to the author’s own spiritual epiphany. Having, as Mizrahi (2011, 233) suggests, a mystical view “that God is present throughout all of existence, that love underlies and unifies all that is,” Laforet seems to be insinuating that Doña Eloísa has in this moment found this divine and loving presence and has been empowered by it to help her fellow woman in a way that exceeds the boundaries of comfort and convention. Her radical charity is downplayed—perhaps of necessity—but it is vital; it is what allows Mercedes to find comfort and support when she strikes the limits society has imposed on her aspirations. Of course, there is somewhat of a limit imposed on Doña Eloísa’s religious radicalism by the end of the narrative; back in her granddaughter’s home, she finds her relatives scandalized and likely to surveil her more closely in future, taking as their main reassurance the assertion by Father Jiménez that she will never do anything like this again (Del Mastro 2010, 20). Yet shortly afterwards, the means to Doña Eloísa’s ends are validated, to her joy, by what she wanted of Mercedes coming to pass. Hers is a complex rebellion, informed by faith and constrained by social conditions, but it ultimately reflects some hope for survival through solidarity and should not be overlooked.

By contrast, Mercedes’ attempt at rebellion is undeniably more futile, and the strategic

deployment of *tremendista* techniques grants it the pathos the author wishes it to have. A phenomenon mainly of the 1940s—*Nada* is considered one of the premier examples of it along with Camilo José Cela's *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942)—*tremendismo* was a loose literary movement whose diverse practitioners coalesced around depicting “una España gris, sombría, y pesimista” (Tun 2015, 1). Its roots can be seen in realist and existentialist styles as well as grotesque traditions like the *esperpento* of Valle-Inclán. It built an “atmósfera de sordidez” through emphasizing “los rasgos más antiestéticos del ser humano” (García Blay 2016, 62): narratives featured distinctly violent and crude events, often employing colloquial language to heighten their shock value. As Conde Peñalosa (2004, 44) reports, experiences of poverty and marginalization are often highly present in *tremendista* literature as part of efforts to draw attention to the ugliest and most painful parts of life in inhospitable postwar Spain. Characters often find themselves ruled by disordered and primal impulses. In the most extreme cases, they are animalized in an expression of the effects their degrading, dehumanizing living conditions have had— Tun (2015) notes that this animalization is used in Laforet's *Nada*. She does not appear to use it in “La llamada” more than obliquely with some descriptors frequently associated with animals, as with the audience's “carcajadas” (Laforet 2010, 124) that may conjure images of hyenas in readers' minds. “La llamada” also uses *tremendista* stylistic effects only in certain dramatic parts rather than as a uniform aesthetic; this sporadic *tremendismo* was a common approach (Conde Peñalosa 2004, 44). These passages in *tremendista* works like the one under study serve to depict a Spain in decay and the harms it inflicts on its people.

To a state that propagated a myth of itself as a return to an illusory past glory, the challenge that *tremendismo* poses is obvious. While it was not always a conscious protest—after all, her fellow *tremendista* author Cela was quite ideologically close to the regime and worked as

a censor himself—it was undeniably not the image Francoists wanted to project of Spain. Aside from highlighting the failures of the state to secure its citizens' quality of life, *tremendismo* and its preoccupation with the sordid also tended to spotlight people and behaviours not in line with National Catholic values. If such narratives were subversive when penned by a male author, they were even more so when their author was a woman. Conde Peñalosa (2004, 290) asserts that women writers faced an additional layer of censorship in the form of cultural pressures on women minimizing their intellectual abilities while exalting their emotional side and sense of charity. A woman writing something violent or crude would then be a significant transgression. Recall that the *lector* who reviewed “La llamada” wrote with blatant disapproval of how “a veces se complace morbosamente en la descripción de las miserias” (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53). The apparently ghoulish fixation on suffering that the *lector* perceives is almost certainly intensified by their impression that a woman should not write such awful things. Thus the *tremendista* approach Laforet takes becomes a threat twice over to the Francoist belief system.

In Mercedes' story, Laforet finds plenty of suffering to draw out *tremendista* effects. Mercedes herself is quite a *tremendista* protagonist, having become obsessed with an unattainable dream for three decades to the point where she shows some signs of depression and claimed at one point to be contemplating suicide (Laforet 2010, 100). Poverty is also a force for all characters to contend with to some extent. It is acknowledged in Mercedes' home city and on the train, but appears most acutely for those Mercedes finds herself living among in Barcelona. She observes the widespread hunger in the city and muses that “había creído pasar años de miseria... Pero la miseria era esto que pululaba a su alrededor” (Laforet 2010, 110). A hint at the terrible state of the city is provided upon Mercedes' arrival when she thinks that the city “le daba



la impresión de haber crecido, de haberse complicado monstruosamente” (Laforet 2010, 96–97), reflecting in its monstrosity the physical signs of the city’s painful experiences of the civil war and the decade following it as well as suggesting the unwelcome feeling a woman travelling alone would perceive. Past traumas from the war likewise add to the sense of societal unwellness, from mentions of María Rosa’s death and Don Juan’s “queridos fantasmas” (Laforet 2010, 92) to the brief but pathos-filled account of how Mercedes’ friend “encontró muerta a una niña, hija suya, cuando regresaba a su casa, durante la guerra” (Laforet 2010, 111)—the holding back of the revelation that the child was her own daughter was surely intended to strengthen the emotional impact of this line. Of special note are the instances of violence directed at Mercedes. For instance, she recalls that she no longer does recitations on the rocks in her city since “La última vez que hizo esto recibió una pedrada... Unos chiquillos, escondidos, la acechaban” (Laforet 2010, 94). Then, after her peroxide mishap, “El marido se dio a todos los diablos y la golpeó” (Laforet 2010, 96). Both incidents are presented in an interestingly blunt fashion, somewhat reminiscent of the *realismo social* that would dominate Spanish literature in the 1950s (Larraz and Suárez Toledano 2017). Readers have a choice in how they interpret this based on the weak implicatures they retrieve from it: they may feel shocked by the abruptness of it, determining that it compounds the horror of the cruel treatment Mercedes faces. Then again, in a state where the Código Penal stipulated a lower sentence for men guilty of “uxoricidio por causa de honor,” or the killing of a wife caught committing adultery (Moraga García 2008, 241), women’s safety was subsumed to their husbands’ opinions on their conduct. It is then plausible that some source readers, particularly ones sympathetic to this view of women as an extension of their husbands’ reputations, would find the descriptions of violence banal or even comical. Laforet’s professed views on gender equality would make an endorsement of domestic violence

seem unlikely, but the ambiguous presentation of the violence allows it to pass unchallenged by censors. The attacks on Mercedes are then able to contribute along with descriptions of her disordered behaviour and experiences of poverty to a bleak image of the society in which she is attempting to attain independence.

The most *tremendista* passages in the narrative can be found in the account of Mercedes' unsuccessful debut. The scene is initially told from Doña Eloísa's point of view as she takes in the venue, where "Todo era extraordinario" and patrons include "mucha [gente] bien vestida en aquellas mesas... Y mal vestida también" (Laforet 2010, 123). Obliquely, Laforet appears to be contradicting Mercedes' earlier assertion it was "un local respetable" (Laforet 2010, 111) with its unusual ambience and clientele. This is hardly surprising given that the variety show being presented is likely an illegal performance; Abellán (1980, 38) notes that individual performers' acts and costumes had to be approved by censors, and yet Mercedes decides on both with her friend that day. With the suggestion of seediness planted in readers' minds, Doña Eloísa begins to introduce the element of the grotesque with her breathless description of Mercedes: "Estaba horrible. Era horrible su traje. Horrible su cabello quemado a trozos, con las raíces oscuras. Horribles aquellos abalorios que se había puesto..." (Laforet 2010, 124). Contrary to expectations, though, Mercedes' performance does impress the woman; this makes it all the more painful when the rest of the audience responds differently. Seeing only a middle-aged woman outside her proper place, they treat her with ridicule. First they laugh at her, one to the point where "se apretaba el estómago, como si se pusiese enfermo de tanto reír" (Laforet 2010, 124), and then when she persists, they become more overtly cruel, booing and whistling and making crude comments. Since Mercedes has dared transgress social norms, they feel justified in suspending civility towards her. The narrator seems to switch between Mercedes' and Doña

Eloísa's perspectives as they unite in shock at the others. Indeed, Laforet had initially been even more explicit in her manuscript about this, writing that the crowd's laughter left Doña Eloísa "espantada" (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53) rather than the more neutral "asombrada" (Laforet 2010, 124) in the published version. Even with the tonal adjustment, Laforet is clear in conveying that the spectators are giving Mercedes an aggressive warning to get back in line.

Following this dark scene, the tone shifts abruptly in the fifth section towards an unsettlingly optimistic ending. Mercedes, duly humbled, consents to return home upon hearing of her son's letter asking her to do so in what is insinuated to be a miraculous turn of events. No acknowledgement is given of the suspiciously sarcastic tone of this letter, with its asides on how his mother "tenía que tener sus rarezas" (Laforet 2010, 129), and far from acknowledging any abuse on Mercedes' husband's part, the narrator depicts Mercedes thinking of him sympathetically: "Al acostarse aquella noche pensó, con cierta ternura, en su marido, que no podía dormirse, que se encontraba tan solo en la cama..." (Laforet 2010, 132). For readers who have picked up on earlier clues inviting them to sympathize with Mercedes, this ending is hard to take; recall David's (1974) outrage at how unconvincing and clichéd it appears. What she does not consider is that while the narrative pays lip service to traditional values, it may be unconvincing in doing so by design. In her analysis of *Nada*, Mizrahi (2010, 9–10) describes the text's fragmented narration as a stylistic choice meant to convey trauma inflicted on the protagonist by recreating the mindset of someone unable to process her experiences coherently. The sharp break between Mercedes' debut and the start of the next section, some time later, suggests such a breakdown in Mercedes' and Doña Eloísa's ability to process their poorly received attempt at defiance. Both characters, having learned that "a woman's relatively

comfortable existence is only possible through conformity” (Del Mastro 2010, 21), instead latch onto a hope that Mercedes’ return is the best outcome. Moreover Mercedes, who readers now know to harbour genuine acting talent, daydreams that “en una ventana de su casa iba a poner cortinas blancas como las de la galería de Lolita” (Laforet 2010, 132)—in essence, it is suggested she has decided to play a new role more likely to win societal approval, that of Lolita. Whether or not she will succeed in her performance is up for debate. Readers are left to cope with the tensions of this pseudo-happy ending in an embodiment of the unsatisfying endings women under Franco were forced to accept.

The reading of “La llamada” as a morality play celebrating an unbalanced woman’s journey back to her “proper” place is an obvious one, and certainly, the author’s conviction in some of the Christian values associated with it was genuine at the time of the text’s writing, but that does not make this reading the correct one. The elements of the narrative described in this section—from Doña Eloísa’s invisible agency to the *tremendista* signposts of societal corruption bullying Mercedes into accepting her lot in life—generate tensions with this traditionalist narrative arc that make it appear ironic. References to damages inflicted by the Civil War and perpetuated by the inept Francoist state as well as veiled judgments expressing the distorted lens through which women of this era were viewed join with these communicative clues on the theme of women’s unduly constrained choices to transmit a condemnation of Francoist governance and its effects on women specifically. That said, it is not an easy message to detect; it relies on a particular knowledge of Laforet’s mindset and the social conditions under which she lived and worked. Not every source reader had all this knowledge, and it can be foreseen that even fewer target readers will have it given the time and space separating them from Laforet. It is vital for the translator to take on the difficult task of ensuring the message and clues to its presence are

transferred over in the target text: their presence takes the story from a propaganda piece to a pointed testimony of the hardships inherent in life under Franco.

#### **4. Potential Translation Solutions**

##### ***4.1. Non-intervention in the Translation***

Having identified what could pose problems for the translator, I must now turn to what should be done about these problems—and perhaps the most traditional approach to them is to do nothing beyond producing an accurate rendering of what appears on the page. The anti-interventionist stance has been briefly mentioned in section 2.2 when I referred to Al-Jarrah, Abu-Dalu, and Obiedat’s (2018) article applying relevance theory to translating religious texts. Considering the treatment of strategically ambiguous passages “designed to achieve and sustain the speaker’s ideological goal(s),” they argue that translators “should not try to explicate the implicatures of the original text” (Al-Jarrah, Abu-Dalu, and Obiedat 2018, 14; emphasis removed). Rather, they assert that a translator’s job is to ensure the appropriate communicative clues are transferred over to the target text so that target readers can discover the multiple dimensions of meaning in these passages themselves. It should also be noted that Gutt ([2000] 2014, 175) views making implicatures more explicit in contexts such as literary translation as “both unnecessary and undesirable” due to the risk of altering a passage’s intended meaning and the expectation that “it is the audience’s responsibility to make up for” differences between the source and target readers’ cognitive environments. Gutt is perhaps more categorical in stating this view than the former authors, but both coincide in thinking that the translator’s potential interference in the text is undesirable. These authors hold the target reader responsible for reading between the lines to interpret the text’s intended meaning, and the translator needs only to step out of their way and let them do so.

While expecting that readers of literature would be able to figure out some implicatures themselves is reasonable, I contend that blanket statements on translation policy such as the ones above place unrealistic expectations on readers. Al-Jarrah, Abu-Dalu, and Obiedat (2018, 18), for their part, may have overstated their claim that translators should never make ambiguous passages more explicit given that the examples they draw evidence from are cases of wordplay meant to confuse another character in the narrative but not the reader. More importantly, though, they acknowledge that communicative clues are the key to rendering implied meanings intelligible, but they largely ignore the possibility of those clues needing to be adjusted. After all, there is no guarantee that a literal translation will carry over all such messages into a new cultural, social, and political context that gives readers entirely new associations with words and ideas. A translator who takes Gutt's viewpoint and leaves it up to the target reader to make up for differences in context, meanwhile, takes two gambles. The first is that the reader will recognize there is something they do not know that could change their interpretation of the text in order to perform the work of compensating for knowledge gaps in the first place, something that is in no way guaranteed. The second is that the reader will have the time and resources to conduct their own research about the context in which the work was created and the person who wrote it. The average reader consuming a work for pleasure rather than analysis faces clear practical limitations to their ability to research, namely limited free time and a lack of access to many reputable sources behind paywalls. The kind of expectation Gutt expressed could then be seen as a form of "unnecessary processing effort" for the literature reader (Gutt [2000] 2014, 107). Their ability to process the deeper meanings of a complex text should be respected, but not exaggerated beyond what many can do.

This is not to say that there are no circumstances where a translation adhering strictly to

traditional notions of faithfulness would be desirable. Indeed, the utility of this can be seen in a description of one such translation mentioned in Lefevere (1995, 2): the gloss translation, a tool in academic contexts to “check student comprehension of the original.” These translations serve as companions to the source text that the reader can consult when struggling to parse a particularly challenging passage. Not only do these readers expect close alignment between the source and target texts for their purposes, but given that they are studying the literature of the country or time period from whence the source text originated, they likely have some knowledge of the text’s context of production that would help them spot implicatures. They also presumably have some knowledge of the source language, allowing them the opportunity to come up with keywords and search for articles in the source language so that they can acquire the knowledge they do not yet have. Additionally, they more than likely have access to a number of resources for such research through their institution’s library. There is a reader, then, that can meet Gutt’s expectation for target readers, but this is a reader with a special interest in studying the text rather than one looking for entertainment.

To provide insight into what exactly risks being lost in transfer, I will provide a sample translation without interventions for each of the three categories of communicative clue identified in section 3. A complete translation in this approach, deviating from a literal transfer only when necessary to preserve readability, is provided in Appendix A and may serve as a comprehension aid for the source text. Samples of each clue type will be discussed in the order in which they were introduced in section 3:

| Source Text                                                                                  | Target Text                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| — ¿Cómo te casaste?<br>— Por la Iglesia.<br>Don Juan quedó desconcertado. (Laforet 2010, 90) | “How were you married?”<br>“By the Church.”<br>That surprised Don Juan. |

As seen in the table above, the first type of communicative clue, the straightforward

implicature on societal conditions, suffers the most blatantly without intervention. To understand why Don Juan would ask Mercedes how she was married and why “By the Church” would not be the answer he was hoping for, readers must have background knowledge on the changes in the status of civil and religious marriage during this time period and the potential ramifications of these changes. Those who do not have it must, upon recognizing the gap in information preventing them from grasping the dialogue’s implied meaning, go looking for it in other sources. The perceptive reader of this thesis will note that the sources I presented to explain this issue in the previous section were entirely in Spanish. In fact, reliable information on civil and religious marriage in postwar Spain and on several other issues, such as rail transportation and the *salvoconducto*, is scarce to nonexistent in English. Given that the reader who is able to access this Spanish-language content can likely also read the source text, it may be assumed that the majority of readers for a translation of “La llamada” will not be able to do much of this research to make up for differences in their cognitive environments.

| Source Text                                                                                                                                                             | Target Text                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nunca había sido guapa, ni lista, ni más o menos buena que mil mujeres de su tipo dedicadas a su casa, a sus hijos, más bien sosainas y silenciosas. (Laforet 2010, 93) | She’d never been pretty or clever or better or worse than a thousand women of her kind dedicated to their homes and their children, all rather dull and silent. |

The implicit metarepresentation above fares somewhat better than the previous example. As it comes in a paragraph opening with Don Juan trying to recall Doña Eloísa, readers might have an inkling that this line may be a judgment that he has formulated of the character as he remembers her. Even with the connection to his inner monologue, the statement retains an air of truthfulness in the way it is presented to readers, who will have to excavate into the weak implicatures surrounding Don Juan’s mindset if they wish to question it. Given that it will soon be followed by Mercedes’ perspective, which will display exaggerations that lend an impression of reliability to Don Juan’s view in hindsight, readers could be forgiven for letting this judgment



pass uninterrogated.

| Source Text                                                                                                                                  | Target Text                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Con una botella de agua oxigenada se tiñó los cabellos, y se los quemó. El marido se dio a todos los diablos y la golpeó. (Laforet 2010, 96) | She dyed her hair with a bottle of peroxide, burning it in the process. Her husband flew into a rage and hit her. |

The final example, a thematic clue featuring an isolated instance of *tremendismo*, produces an even more debatable non-interventionist translation. As explained in section 3.3, the brevity of the passage leaves readers unsure whether it is intended to increase the shock value of an act most will already find shocking or whether it is being minimized. The fact that the violence against Mercedes is preceded by a blunder on her part risks suggesting to readers that the latter is the case, with Mercedes' mishap and the aggressive response turned into a Punch-and-Judy-esque farce. Readers who form this interpretation may come to interpret the text's implied author as someone who holds reprehensible views on women and domestic violence. Such a conclusion, particularly one reached as early in the text as this passage falls, could push some readers to abandon "La llamada" and potentially avoid other works by Laforet.

From the examples presented, this text would appear not to be conducive to a non-interventionist translation. While there are certainly cases where target readers can be expected to do the work of finding and deciphering implicatures themselves, the difference in cognitive environments between the source and target readers is a stark one. At times, this difference forces target readers to confront blatant gaps that they do not have the means to fill. Other times, it generates gaps too subtle for many to see. Still other times, it produces troubling misconstruals of the source author and her intentions. In a reversal of Gutt's concerns about an interventionist translator skewing the meaning of a work, in this case it is the non-interventionist translator who skews "La llamada" by providing their readers a shallower and less interesting version of it.

#### ***4.2. Paratextual Intervention***

For translators not content to leave the full burden of interpretation on their readers, translation practice offers a second solution: the judicious use of paratext. Defined by Genette (1997, 1–2), paratext denotes the elements surrounding the “more or less long sequence of verbal statements” that make up the text of a work; these elements “present” the text, ultimately serving to promote “a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it.” Broadly, he divides these elements into two categories: peritext consists of elements contained in the work itself, including the title, preface, chapter titles, and notes in the text, while epitext includes elements outside the book that fulfill a similar influential function, including interviews and private communications (Genette 1997, 4–5). Working from Genette’s definitions, Batchelor (2018, 142) comes to a more function-focused definition of paratext as “a consciously crafted threshold for a text” (emphasis removed) that may influence its reception, regardless of the text’s medium, the paratext’s location, or—most relevant to these purposes—the text’s status as original or translated. Paratext may serve a number of purposes, from reflecting on the conditions of communication in the work to providing explanations or elaborations, directing readers’ interpretations of the text or its parts, taking an ideological standpoint on the content, or passing judgment on a work’s value (Batchelor 2018, 160). In the case of translators’ notes, Haroon (2019, 133) observes that there is an additional purpose served, that of promoting the translator’s visibility so they can “[establish] contact with their target readers.” When the translator speaks in their own (or rather, the implied translator’s) voice, they open up a privileged channel of communication with their implied reader where they can discuss the text alongside it. This communication is a potentially potent tool for shaping interpretations of a work. Taivalkoski-Shilov and Koponen (2017) note a potential for paratextual materials to markedly influence how

readers receive a translation of Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité*, with those given a more positive translator's preface struggling less with translation challenges explained in it, while those given a critical review largely internalized its critiques of the solutions to those challenges. Through a parallel discourse in paratext, then, translators can point their readers towards how they want readers to respond to the text with some expectation of their words being taken into account.

One avenue for introducing this discursive presence into the work is among the most common forms of paratext in translations: the translator's preface. One example of this is in Belle (2019), who, in her examination of poems by Horace translated by 17<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic Englishman Thomas Hawkins, finds the translator employs tools such as a preface and brief introduction for each poem to frame Horace's works for the reader in a way that stresses their moral dimension rather than an Epicurean interpretation, popular among Hawkins' contemporaries. Meanwhile, a study by Celotti (2021) of various French translations of Adam Smith demonstrates a pervasive tendency for the translator to make themselves visible through paratextual materials. One, Germain Garnier, uses his preface to explain, apply, and critique Smith's ideas, thus making himself visible not just as a translator but as a fellow economist (Celotti 2021, 142). Both cases provide examples of explicit evaluations or ideological claims, but in some sociopolitical environments, the mere assertion of a work's value can be an ideological act. This is the case in Filanti (2018, 80), who describes how in a 1938 Italian translation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, translator Ada Prospero uses her preface to make a "militant statement of a professional writer (and translator) on the political role of literature (and translation)" by emphasizing the author's unique insights as a Black woman despite the translation being published in an explicitly misogynistic and racist political context. In all cases,

the implied translator announces their presence in order to prime their readers on what the text is to mean to them and what they are to do with it.

Another well-established paratextual device that translators can avail themselves of is the note, whether a footnote, endnote, or marginal note. Such notes provide an opportunity to reframe a text in line with an interpretation readers might not otherwise have perceived. For instance, in a 1942 American edition of La Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, as profiled by Emmenegger, Gallino, and Gorgone (2021, 28–29), the translator paints the author as a moderate and a pacifist in his preface, but his marginal notes in the text itself establish frequent connections between La Boétie's tyrants and Axis political leaders to guide readers towards an interpretation of the text that would paint the American entry into World War II in a favourable light. In other cases, notes can provide readers with additional information while subtly undermining the text. As an example, Valdeón (2014, 10), in his examination of a 1992 retranslation of the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, finds the translator inserts footnotes with historical facts to temper or amend exaggerations in the narrative of Bartolomé de las Casas. Similarly, Piselli and Lupi (2021) demonstrate how, in the Italian translation of counter-revolutionary newspaper the *Mercurio britannico*, the translator makes use of footnotes not just for explanatory or metalinguistic asides, but also to pass judgments and even voice disagreement with the journalist being translated; at times, they also use explanatory or metalinguistic points as a way of evaluating or critiquing an article's contents. Finally, notes can serve as a forum for the translator to openly express opposition to the author and their ideas. As with the combative footnotes signalled in Hermans' (2014) previously mentioned article, Belle (2021) observes in Nicholas Culpeper's translation of the *Pharmacopoeia Londinensis* that Culpeper accompanies the faithfully translated text with annotations that give the reader

additional information on the remedies described alongside criticism of the authors, who he viewed as elitists. Whether they seek to qualify, co-opt, or contradict a passage, a translator can choose to express this intention in the text for the reader to consume and add to their own interpretation of the text.

Having explored its potential for positive impacts, we must now acknowledge that paratext also faces certain distinct limitations inherent in its medium. The most obvious limitation is that readers are not obligated to read the translator's preface or notes; if reading in their leisure time, they may well skip the preface and proceed straight to the narrative, and they may choose to ignore footnotes. This is especially likely if notes are too frequent or too long, as Haroon (2019, 133) points out that such insertions of commentary in the translator's voice risk causing annoyance or being viewed as interruptions in the narrative. If the reader does not wish to process the translator's paratextual contributions, the translator's framing efforts then become futile. Even if readers do read the paratext, there is a risk of the translator's intentions being misconstrued. As the aforementioned study by Taivalkoski-Shilov and Koponen (2017) found a critical paratext to influence readers' views on a translation more than positive to neutral paratexts did, there is a danger that readers could exaggerate any critical stance expressed by a translator. In the context of my particular case, where paratexts should serve to call attention to how the context of production influenced the story told by the narrator, lay readers' habit of collapsing the narrator and implied author into one person may result in the impression that the implied translator is critiquing or arguing with the implied author. Moreover, even the most clearly expressed of paratexts may encounter the pitfall of being discounted as overly partisan. Batchelor (2018, 32) states that paratext can be used for "setting up a critical distance between translator and text," essentially framing the translation as a metarepresentation for readers to

question as directed. Yet rather than directing readers to find fault with the text, this metarepresentational framing may just as easily lead readers to judge the translator a faulty reporter trying to impose their own beliefs onto the work. In order for the translator to communicate successfully through paratext, readers must read, understand, and be open to the interpretation the translator wishes to convey; given that most of the cases mentioned in this section have dealt with non-fiction, it may be speculated whether casual readers will be willing to take on this analytical effort with fiction.

The abstract pros and cons of paratext thus established, we must determine whether or not it is an appropriate strategy in this particular case. The examples featured in section 4.1 will be repeated to test out a translation and appropriate paratextual intervention for each passage, with the non-interventionist translation again provided as a comprehension aid.<sup>6</sup> All paratexts will be in the form of footnotes for simplicity's sake.

| Source Text                                                                                     | Target Text                                                             | Target with Paratext                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| — ¿Cómo te casaste?<br>— Por la Iglesia.<br>Don Juan quedó desconcertado.<br>(Laforet 2010, 90) | “How were you married?”<br>“By the Church.”<br>That surprised Don Juan. | “How were you married?”<br>“By the Church.”<br>That surprised Don Juan. <sup>1</sup><br><br><sup>1</sup> This exchange alludes to the changes surrounding marriage laws in Spain from the Second Republic to the Franco dictatorship and the unintended consequences the changes had. Civil marriages were the only ones legally recognized under the Second Republic, but this (along with the legalization of divorce) was overturned by the Francoists. The legal status of marriages only performed civilly, without a corresponding Catholic ceremony and inscription in the Church's |

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<sup>6</sup> Translations of sample passages were produced to determine the suitability of producing a full translation with paratext. As these samples were unsatisfactory, no such full translation will be provided in the thesis. Moreover, a full translation with paratext would largely be a duplication of the content of Appendix A alongside explanations echoed from section 3, making it inefficient as an illustrative example.

|  |  |                                                                                                 |
|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  | register, was left uncertain when this change was made, with some believing them to be invalid. |
|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The implicature on societal conditions is the type that appears to fare the best when supplemented with paratext. In the example above, the information on civil and religious marriage that is needed to fill in the implicature is presented for readers who choose to consult it. The translator's voice that emerges is informative and not obviously partial, which were it the only type of paratextual intervention present would likely lend an air of trustworthiness to the implied translator that readers formulate. There is, of course, the issue of the note being lengthy, posing a significant interruption to the narrative that certain readers may wish to avoid, but the obvious lack of information in the dialogue creates strong pressure for readers to resort to the paratext in search of an explanation. Not all implicatures in this category are quite so glaring—the one in which the watch is mentioned to be Doña Eloísa's last remaining jewel is a good example of an implicature that looks to be self-explanatory—so success rates may be lower for some notes than for others. That said, parentheticals providing pure factual details can be said to have moderate success in providing readers the communicative clues they need related to the passage.

| Source Text                                                                                                                                                             | Target Text                                                                                                                                                     | Target with Paratext                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nunca había sido guapa, ni lista, ni más o menos buena que mil mujeres de su tipo dedicadas a su casa, a sus hijos, más bien sosainas y silenciosas. (Laforet 2010, 93) | She'd never been pretty or clever or better or worse than a thousand women of her kind dedicated to their homes and their children, all rather dull and silent. | She'd never been pretty or clever or better or worse than a thousand women of her kind dedicated to their homes and their children, all rather dull and silent. <sup>2</sup><br><br><sup>2</sup> Don Juan's reflection on Doña Eloísa is highly reflective of Francoist Spain's adoption of earlier, traditionalist views on women as inferior to and dependent on men. This idea is conveyed in the following quote by Sección Femenina leader Pilar Primo de Rivera: "Las mujeres |

|  |  |                                                                                                                                                       |
|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  | nunca descubren nada. Les falta, desde luego, el talent creador reservado por Dios para inteligencias varoniles” (as cited in Martín Gaité 1987, 91). |
|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Implied metarepresentations, meanwhile, are explained far more awkwardly with paratext. The above case of a judgment from Don Juan draws attention to the judgment and describes the prejudices informing it for readers, but it does so in quite a lengthy format. As mentioned earlier, the fact that the statement makes sense without commentary coupled with its size makes this footnote more liable to be skipped. It should also be noted that this is not the first judgment expressing such prejudices that Don Juan makes, and it is far from being the last of its kind that characters throughout the narrative will make. This presents me with the difficult choice of either repeating the same information over multiple footnotes, fatiguing readers and making them wary of the footnotes regardless of their content, or presenting a synthesis of these judgments and their manifestations in a preface, whose increased separation from the narrative makes the information it contains all the more likely to be forgotten or never read at all. Beyond the limitations of its format, this note presents problems through the tone it strikes. In particular, the translator’s voice clearly drops its pretension of impartiality and espouses a feminist ideological viewpoint. While this kind of position-taking may have been permitted in historical texts like the cases presented by Belle (2021) and Piselli and Lupi (2021), modern readers associate paratext and especially footnotes with scholarly writing, which often adopts a pretense of objectivity.<sup>7</sup> A more activist voice in the paratext may jar with their expectations and cause them to mistrust the implied translator. Moreover, it is unclear whether the translator’s voice has made itself visible to criticize merely the views pervasive in the source culture or the author as

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<sup>7</sup> Though many academics in recent decades have challenged notions of objectivity and adopted openly activist perspectives, the Popperian paradigm for the social sciences and humanities nonetheless remains influential in how many, particularly outside academia, perceive what academics should be.



well for expressing them. That Laforet did not subscribe to them is not mentioned in the note, and it likely could not be without further lengthening the note. There may well be other opportunities to add this information in other notes or a preface, but ambiguity remains in the framing of this passage. Taking stock of the pros and cons arising from this example, I can only conclude that paratext fits neither my intentions nor readers' probable use in supplementing translations of this kind of communicative clue.

| Source Text                                                                                                                                  | Target Text                                                                                                       | Target with Paratext                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Con una botella de agua oxigenada se tiñó los cabellos, y se los quemó. El marido se dio a todos los diablos y la golpeó. (Laforet 2010, 96) | She dyed her hair with a bottle of peroxide, burning it in the process. Her husband flew into a rage and hit her. | <p>She dyed her hair with a bottle of peroxide, burning it in the process. Her husband flew into a rage and hit her.<sup>3</sup></p> <p><sup>3</sup>Instances of violence such as these reflect a literary technique known as <i>tremendismo</i>, which stressed cruelty, crudeness, and depictions of extreme poverty to convey the depravity of life in postwar Spain. Note the tone used by Laforet to describe this incident. The matter-of-fact style allows a “plausible deniability” in how the reader is meant to interpret the actions of Mercedes’ husband: as either a banal, perhaps even comical moment in which an aggrieved spouse expresses his frustration or an abusive act too shocking to need elaboration.</p> |

The final type of communicative clue, the thematic clue exploiting *tremendismo*, faces similar problems. The note needed to explain the technique and its particular use here is, again, a lengthy and quite optional addition supplementing a relatively short sentence. As with the previous example, moreover, *tremendismo* is an element that recurs in the narrative, meaning I must choose between repetitive signposting of these elements to ensure readers recognize them or placing explanations in a preface and hoping readers remember them. It also bears mentioning that while this example is an isolated instance of *tremendismo*, there are other instances that fall

in closer proximity to each other, as occurs surrounding Mercedes' debut, meaning that footnotes are likely to proliferate there and become precisely the interruptions Haroon (2019, 133) warns against at a critical point in the narrative. Tonally, this note is openly partisan in its stance against the regime and its treatment of women, potentially posing the same problems of reputational damage for the implied translator as in the second example. The translator here appears very didactic about the interpretation of the passage the reader is supposed to form, which may make them bristle. One success should be acknowledged: in discussing the tone Laforet employs in a way that suggests it may be employed critically, the note is able to offer some assistance in shaping the reader's conception of the implied author in a favourable direction. Yet practical constraints limit the scope of the advantage gained through the paratext.

Footnotes and prefaces go some way towards appeasing a translator's concerns about implicatures lost in transfer, but being a restrained and distinct form of intervention, they naturally have their limitations. In their ideal use with the ideal readers, these tools allow translators to introduce themselves and their interpretation of the text to readers and then draw their attention to particularly important or challenging areas of it. However, the examples presented reflect how actual deployments of paratext can fall short of such ideals. While some readers may appreciate clarifications and contextualizations, those reading for pleasure may find themselves fatigued by long, frequent, or repetitive interruptions to the narrative. Additionally, paratext overtly questioning the story's content may backfire on the translator by shocking readers unaccustomed to seeing it used for critical rather than informative ends, or it may inadvertently harm the author's reputation. Other source texts for non-general readerships may have success with paratext, but in this case, it appears to be an approach that is suitable for letting the translator display her understanding of the text but less so for transmitting that

understanding to the target readers.

#### ***4.3. Interventionist Translation***

The final option under consideration is to step beyond merely framing the translation and directly intervene in the text to make the desired interpretation of it more accessible for readers. Strict literalism is often the default translation strategy in literary translation especially, but as Sedarat (2019, 11) observes, “at times, linguistic and cultural underpinnings of source and target texts necessitate greater editing, and even radically revisionist decisions.” He argues that such cultural and linguistic blocks to a straightforward transfer into the target language invite interesting and innovative solutions. Rather than the translator “arbitrarily inserting” their own work into the source text, as some may accuse them of doing, they can produce carefully crafted recreations informed by a knowledge of the source text’s context of production (Sedarat 2019, 14). Implicatures generated through censorship avoidance can be understood as cultural differences between the autocratic source society with its narrow frame of permitted discourse and the democratic target society that places far fewer constraints on the circulation of ideas. A more provocative but perhaps more fruitful claim is that areas of censorial influence over a work constitute defects in it—that is, areas where the author is forced to falsify or obscure their intentions for reasons not entirely related to artistic effects. In his definition of what constitutes a professional translator, Newmark (1991, 46) notes that any “conflict with the material and the moral facts as known” present in the source text poses a risk of perpetuating misinformation among readers, and thus, the translator has a duty “to correct it or express dissent” either in paratext or directly in the translated text itself. As points of cultural difference, censorship-induced implicatures may be counteracted through creative translation; as contraventions of the facts on the author’s experience of their society, such implicatures must be counteracted.

Interventionist translation is an approach long associated with the furthering of political or ideological goals. This can involve terminological choices being used to convey pointed criticism, as shown by Valdeón (2014, 8) when the translator expands critiques from Bartolomé de las Casas into a broader anti-colonial reproach by rendering “españoles” as “Europeans.” Likewise, Jooker (2021) identifies politically motivated manipulations in two translations of Rousseau’s *Du contrat social*, with both translators inserting intensifiers and playing with modal verbs to render Rousseau’s ideas more forcefully and a 1791 translation making explicit an implicit suggestion of monarchy as tyrannical. Translational decisions can also branch out from terminology in shaping readers’ reception of a work: Tarkka (2021) shows how a retranslation of Zimmermann’s *On National Pride* both adjusted the style of the text for contemporary readers’ sensibilities and employed equivalents that would encourage readers to make connections to the Revolutionary War. Whether to confront historical wrongs, help ideas make a greater impact, or tie a text with clout to a political movement, translators have frequently exercised their agency over the works they translate and the way readers will process them.

Perhaps the most well-known form of activist intervention, however, is feminist translation. Feminist translation strategies encompass a broad range of approaches, from the ethically motivated selection of source texts to paratextual commentary. Among the most notable of these is the translator’s choice to answer Newmark’s call and, as stated in von Flotow’s (1997, 24) pioneering work, “‘correct’ texts that they translate in the name of feminist ‘truths,’” with “truth” here meaning the “moral facts” referred to by Newmark (1991, 46). In other words, feminist translators intervene in the text to amend or undermine elements that impose a patriarchal perspective on the source text. This could take the form of isolated terminological tweaks, as with Suzanne Jill Levine’s amendment of a sentence in a Guillermo Cabrera Infante

work that promoted rape culture with a word showing derision against the *machista* narrator (von Flotow 1997, 26–27). Feminist translation efforts could also be more all-encompassing, as when Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood feminized the syntax of a work to foreground women’s presence in it (von Flotow 1997, 28). Corrections such as these that promote feminist truths have a particular relevance to this case: the Francoist censorial apparatus imposed on writers a discourse embedded in a markedly patriarchal value system—one to which Laforet did not subscribe. A text like the one under study that delves into women’s lives, aspirations, and agency must then be at least somewhat falsified to avoid threatening the regime’s values and consequently being banned. Intervening in the translation can thus push back against both censorial influence and misogynistic value systems, serving to further feminist truths that happen to coincide with the material truths behind the text.

Feminist translators have continued on in the vein of the examples cited by von Flotow, at times expanding their linguistic challenge and pursuing a more intersectional perspective. On the more minor end of the spectrum are interventions described by Mainer (2017) in translations of radical feminist group Rote Zora’s works: quotation marks are used to call into question a term for racialized people that is considered outdated, and nouns are rendered as masculine if associated with the patriarchy or feminine in all other cases. Similarly, Wang, Yu, and Chen (2020) describe how translator Sidney Shapiro rendered classical Chinese novel *Shuihu Zhuan* more palatable for contemporary readers by attenuating its misogyny, exchanging the derisive descriptors largely used to refer to female characters in the source text for neutral ones, reducing the narrator’s critical tone towards their behaviour, and strategically omitting passages. Allam (2018) examines an English translation of Egyptian novel *Professor Hanaa*, often finding the translator strategically uses additions as well as lexical and syntactic manipulations to emphasize

the female protagonist's personal and sexual agency while downplaying those of male characters. In an early example of feminist translation, Muñiz (2018) details a 1917 Spanish production of *A Doll's House* in which the translator deleted or reformulated sexist lines and altered lines to suggest the main character's right to equality in the economic and romantic spheres. Meanwhile, Deborah Smith's translation of *The Vegetarian* provides a recent and high-profile case of feminist translation, one studied within translation studies by Yoon (2021) and outside it by Godley (2021). Yoon (2021) demonstrates how Smith uses additions, omissions, and exaggerated or emphasized lexical choices to strengthen the feminist consciousness and solidarity of the novel's female characters and to highlight the selfishness and cruelty of the male characters who victimize them. Godley (2021) concurs that the sisters' solidarity is reinforced, largely through a rewriting of a pivotal scene between the sisters at the end of the novel, and she points out that an instance where the protagonist's thoughts are allegedly misattributed to her husband serves to reinforce his unreliability as a patriarchal narrator. As the literature reveals, terms, typography, reformulations, omissions, and additions are all part of the feminist translator's toolbox for resisting prejudices that may lie latent in a source text.

Though feminist intervention can have a potent effect on readers' interpretation of the text, the strategy is not without its drawbacks. Most obvious is the risk readers could reject a translation that stretches the notion of equivalence beyond what general audiences often expect. As Godley (2021, 195) notes, Smith's interventionist work generated considerable controversy, with critics cataloguing the target text's perceived errors, both major and minor, in the press and referring to the situation using a hyperbolic "rhetoric of betrayal, conquest, and national disgrace." The case in this thesis involves a different power differential between the source and target cultures, with a work moving from Spain, which arguably has more literary clout, to

English Canada, which has less, while *The Vegetarian* travelled from South Korea to a literary juggernaut, the UK. Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding *The Vegetarian* emphasizes that in order for an interventionist translation to succeed, readers need to understand the translator's alterations to a text are not merely arbitrary or inept. A similar accusation is that feminist translation is "potentially unethical," particularly when content is omitted, which some may argue "comes closer to censorship" (Muñiz 2018, 432). The extensive debates around equivalence in translation studies demonstrate that conceptions of the scope for transformation in translation that is acceptable need not be narrowly defined. Moreover, the question of ethics is a murky one, as translators accused of unethical manipulations could easily claim that it would have been unethical to create a target text that perpetuates harmful beliefs. What can be taken from such critiques of interventions, though, is that nonstandard translations need to be clearly justified to readers, be of obvious value to them, and appear to be productive rather than destructive.

What can also be inferred from these critiques is the crucial role of paratext in framing an interventionist translation. As von Flotow (1997, 25) notes, feminist translators generally accompany their work with paratextual materials, such as prefaces or footnotes, both to highlight the issues being addressed and their solutions and to stress their agency in the task of translation. While the text of the translation remains the main site of resistance, paratext supports the work done in the translation by accounting for the interventions that have been performed and the why behind them. If the reader were to skip the paratextual materials, though, they would still glean at least some of the translator's intended effects from their reading of the text. The appeal of the interventionist translation, then, is that it situates additional information qualifying problematic parts of the text both in and adjacent to the text, allowing readers to choose how much of this

information they wish to consume but ensuring they will necessarily consume some of it.

Before proceeding to a discussion on examples of this translation approach, I must present the caveat that my translation borrows from the feminist translator’s repertoire and undoubtedly shares some values with feminist translation, but it is not a feminist translation in its design. Intersectional feminist critiques of “La llamada” would likely take issue with several aspects of the work, from the denigration of sex workers to judgments of Mercedes’ friend centring around her size. More broadly, the narrator’s treatment of her friend tends to be rather simplistic in casting her as immoral in comparison to Doña Eloísa, not acknowledging that morality is in many ways a privilege of those who can afford it. I have not elected to intervene in these areas because fundamentally, the question I set out to answer was not how a feminist would write this story but how Laforet would write it were she not expected to submit it for censorial review. I found no evidence of her opinion on sex work and little on class, and Caballé and Rolón-Barada ([2010] 2019) suggest her relationship with her own body was at times fraught. Regardless of feminist qualms I may have felt, I thus limited myself to areas where I could adequately argue the presence of implicatures.

For comparison with the two approaches examined earlier, I will once again present the three sample implicatures translated using interventionist techniques. The non-interventionist translation is also included, once again for the reader’s convenience.

| Source Text                                                                                     | Target Text                                                             | Target with Intervention                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| — ¿Cómo te casaste?<br>— Por la Iglesia.<br>Don Juan quedó desconcertado.<br>(Laforet 2010, 90) | “How were you married?”<br>“By the Church.”<br>That surprised Don Juan. | “How were you married?”<br>“By the Church.”<br>That surprised Don Juan.<br>Not a civil “marriage,” then.<br>Unlucky. |

The implicature referencing societal conditions took no small effort to explicitate, but the result is fairly effective. I was able to expand Don Juan’s inner monologue on why the



confirmation Mercedes had a religious marriage would not be the answer he wanted to hear, with scare quotes conveying the notion that civil marriages were thought by some to be invalid. While the reader does not receive as complete an explanation as they would via paratext, they receive enough to fill in the blanks in the same terse style as the dialogue surrounding the addition. More information can always be provided in a translator's preface reflecting on the interventions. The translator's voice, for its part, disappears into the narrative unless the reader has been told where to look for it. Through the silence of the translator's discursive presence, though, the narrator is able to speak a bit more boldly and reveal a fairer, more complete image of the implied author to readers. In this instance, less visibility for the translator is a small price to pay to benefit the reader and the implied author.

| Source Text                                                                                                                                                             | Target Text                                                                                                                                                     | Target with Intervention                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nunca había sido guapa, ni lista, ni más o menos buena que mil mujeres de su tipo dedicadas a su casa, a sus hijos, más bien sosainas y silenciosas. (Laforet 2010, 93) | She'd never been pretty or clever or better or worse than a thousand women of her kind dedicated to their homes and their children, all rather dull and silent. | To his recollection, she'd never been pretty or clever or better or worse than a thousand women of her kind dedicated to their homes and their children, all rather dull and silent. |

The second communicative clue type, the implied metarepresentation, was able to be partially compensated for with minimal intervention. To qualify Don Juan's judgment of Doña Eloísa, the phrase "to his recollection" is added, forcing the character to assume responsibility for his judgment rather than letting it keep its air of potential universality. I did not find it feasible to go further and reference the cultural prejudices influencing this judgment, as such an insertion would have been unwieldy or drawn readers' suspicion. Instead, readers are given the first step in the process of untangling the implicature and left to follow the chains of weaker implicatures onwards to question Don Juan's reliability as a judge of women's character for themselves. The cultural prejudices in question bearing some similarities to ones commonly held

against women in this country during the same era, this should not be an insurmountable task. As a result, this intervention could be said to be less comprehensive than a paratextual intervention but easier to process without breaking the narrative's flow. As above, the translator's voice remains indistinguishable from the narrator's, granting the implied author credit for criticisms Laforet would not have gotten away with making. Such criticisms will require effort on the reader's part to access, but having been pointed towards their potential existence, they have in their cognitive environments the tools needed to access them.

| Source Text                                                                                                                                  | Target Text                                                                                                       | Target with Intervention                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Con una botella de agua oxigenada se tiñó los cabellos, y se los quemó. El marido se dio a todos los diablos y la golpeó. (Laforet 2010, 96) | She dyed her hair with a bottle of peroxide, burning it in the process. Her husband flew into a rage and hit her. | She dyed her hair with a bottle of peroxide, burning it in the process. Her husband flew into a roaring rage. With a deep bellow, he raised his arm and landed a sharp blow on her. |

For the final communicative clue, the thematic clue employing *tremendismo*, I chose to do away with the no-longer-necessary tone of plausible deniability and exaggerate the grotesqueness of the moment through amplifications. I introduced an element of animalization by qualifying Mercedes' husband's anger as "a roaring rage," and I both broke the action into parts to dwell on it and exaggerated it by stressing its painfulness as well as mentioning a shout that likely preceded his angry words to Mercedes. Rather than telling readers what *tremendismo* is and what it is meant to achieve, then, I let them better experience its effects. The clues about the cruelty of society towards women who do not conform to their expected roles are thus planted for the reader to interpret. In terms of tone and the effect produced by it, the prose is less spare than what immediately precedes it but not extremely so and not beyond what Laforet herself uses in more descriptive passages, meaning the translator again steps behind the narrator and lets the implied author assume credit for what is interpreted. A slight heightening of

*tremendista* elements can thus bring readers closer to the actual Laforet in their understanding of the implied author.

The interventionist translation's greatest advantage is its ability to provide readers enough of the information they need to understand the text fully within the narrative itself. With the help of techniques from feminist translation, such as explicitations, terminological adjustments, and occasional additions, target readers can grasp the communicative clues an in-the-know source reader would and in turn enjoy a comparable experience of reading and ruminating on the text. Readers also avoid the pitfall of conceptualizing Laforet as more conservative and complicit with the regime than she was. The interventions were not easy to produce and are by no means without risk of rejection from the reader. A translator's preface, in addition to offering supplementary information on what is only hinted at in the narrative, must then effectively communicate why interventions were necessary and convey the historical facts that will stave off accusations of arbitrariness. Nonetheless, for the potential it holds for the reading experience, an interventionist translation in this case is well worth the risk.

## **5. Target Text Analysis**

My approach to the translation decided, I combined my understanding of the communicative clues in the source text with interventionist translation techniques to produce a target text that adequately delivers them to the target readers. The product of this work can be found in Appendix B. To accompany the translation, this section will fulfill the prefatory role, cataloguing and explaining the interventions I have made.

Before beginning, I should note that not every implicature was judged to need adjusting. Doña Eloísa's musing that "La gente, después de pasar los terribles años de guerra, se había vuelto así, malhumorada y poco hospitalaria..." (Laforet 2010, 101) or the potentially sarcastic

letter from Mercedes' son are two examples of those I judged strong enough for target readers to grasp on their own. Instead, I reserved my efforts for those where the target reader knowingly or unknowingly lacks the cognitive baggage to reach the implied meanings I have described earlier.

### ***5.1. References to Societal Conditions***

My reengineering of communicative clues in the target text begins with the story's references to Civil War trauma. For instance, the audacious opening sentence with its temporal qualifier of "algún tiempo después de terminada nuestra guerra civil" (Laforet 2010, 79) is rendered as "This story begins with the sun rising over a small port in southern Spain, some time after the end of that civil war of ours." The provocation in choosing to call the conflict a civil war is echoed in the target text with the disdainful phrasing "that civil war of ours," and the possessive pronoun *ours* falling at the end of the sentence lends weight to the notions of ownership and guilt over the war that the possessive implies. In the next paragraph, I have taken the opportunity to reinsert the references to "cascos de buques destripados" and "minas aún sin explotar" that were removed from Laforet's typed manuscript (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53), albeit in a compressed form since I suspect the deletion may have been partially motivated by a desire to preserve the focus of the introductory passages rather than purely for political purposes. Instead of inserting a whole paragraph, I converted the final phrase about the pilot driving into a sentence of its own: "At the helm, the pilot guided it smoothly past the war debris, the skeletal remains of sunken ships and the lurking menace of underwater mines, and steered it safely towards the docks." The shipwrecks and mines provide target readers with physical evidence of the way the war damaged and continues to damage the community, challenging the Francoist narrative of the war as just and necessary. Through this short insertion and structural reformulation, I can prime readers to expect in this text a snapshot of the harm

Francoism inflicted on the country from the beginning of its quest to seize power.

Amplifications of Laforet's allusions to economic instability and hunger extend critiques of the regime to its actions during the era when the story takes place. Don Juan's comment that "En estos tiempos el ser pobre no es nada extraño" (Laforet 2010, 84) has been exaggerated as "These days, with this mess the country is in, being poor is nothing unusual." The added idiom of being in a mess not only stresses that the economic problems Spain is facing are widespread but also suggests there is blame to be attributed for it (i.e., the country is *in* a mess because its leadership has *made* a mess). Likewise, Doña Eloísa's remarks on her scarce meal that "Tiene que ser así en estos tiempos" (Laforet 2010, 107) is amplified with a brief allusion to the food shortages under which a well-off family would have so little for a meal: "This is how it has to be these days, with everything so scarce." Their meal, "un trozo de pan amarillo, de aquel pan de entonces, que se rompía al caer al suelo" (Laforet 2010, 107), is also rendered in English in a more intensified manner, as "a slice of mealy, sickly yellow bread—the kind of bread they had back then that would crack when it fell on the floor." Extra adjectives are inserted to ensure readers do not assume its yellowness is golden brownness. Instead, wheat flour shortages meant the bread was likely made with a coarser alternative flour, such as millet. Through these brief additions, the poverty- and starvation-related traumas of the postwar era that can be found in the source text are highlighted for the target readers.

For one particular scene exploring the pains of postwar life, Mercedes' train trip, I chose to add significant amplifications. As explained in section 3.1, train travel in this era was a trying experience, and coupled with the heavy social pressure placed on unhappy wives to remain in the family home, details of the challenges Mercedes would have faced help to communicate to readers how exceptional it would be for Mercedes to make such a journey. Accordingly, I

supplemented the short passage with information I could find about what a third-class train trip would be like, starting with a remark that “She boarded the car and managed to find just enough space on the rough wooden bench seats to sit down” to describe the crowding in the cars and the crudeness of the third-class seats. The sense of overcrowding is further emphasized by adding the adverbial intensifier *always* in “the trains were always jam-packed” and by noting that “all kinds of people taking up all kinds of space were crammed into the third-class car.” Specifically, I take advantage of the comment on how Mercedes travelling with just one piece of luggage was unusual to suggest the kind of people with whom she would contrast: former agricultural workers beginning to leave the south for better earnings in Barcelona, rendered as “Men with everything they owned stuffed into suitcases,” and typical *estraperlistas* (black marketeers), rendered as “women returning from the countryside with suspiciously bulky clothes who kept glancing nervously at the police officers on board.” The presence of police surveilling passengers is then elaborated on when it is reported that “nobody paid any attention to her. Not even the officer who checked her papers, scanning them in stony silence before handing them back and moving on down the car.” The stations likewise see a police presence monitoring the busy platforms for signs of smuggling: “There were just platforms full of hungry passengers, standing stiffly as they waited, watched closely by the Guardia Civil.” Railway stations are not only shown to be crowded with prolonged delays to their departures, as when a *tremendismo*-inspired animal metaphor describes Mercedes during her two transfers as “herded onto the platform with all the other passengers for a very long wait,” but they are also mentioned to have “had their scars” from war damage to the infrastructure. The most notable signs of damaged infrastructure, though, are the cars themselves, said to be “old, scuffed-up survivors of the bombs” to reflect that the rolling stock was largely antiquated and in need of repairs. Moreover, the heavy steam

train moves along the damaged tracks on a “slow and rattling journey northwards,” leaving Mercedes feeling “Shaken to the bone by the car’s movements and still feeling the seat’s slats digging into her legs” after a multi-day journey. The difficult conditions and tight police control over her voyage thus established, I also wanted to remind readers of the potent sense of shock and excitement Mercedes would doubtless be feeling at defying societal pressures to the degree she did. To this end, I supplemented the short sentence describing Mercedes’ emotional state to provide more insight into her frame of mind: “Through the tears and the calm that followed, one thought was constant: she was going.” This thought sums up the goal of the expanded account of the train trip: postwar economic conditions and authoritarian controls make the journey a hard one, but Mercedes persists in spite of them.

Hardships and the way women characters cope with them are also highlighted in additions detailing the role of the pawn shop in Spaniards’ economic wellbeing. When it is mentioned that Mercedes nearly froze on the train, I drew a parallel to the author’s own experience and qualified the statement with “a coat had been an easy luxury to give up when she lived in the south.” Calling an item as essential as a warm coat a “luxury” emphasizes the direness of the choices Mercedes would have had to make, ones that many Spanish people did make, in an attempt to acquire enough food to live. Doña Eloísa is later obliquely revealed to have also made such a choice with her jewellery, as the watch she gives Mercedes is “la única [joya] que guardaba” (Laforet 2010, 109). I chose to rewrite this sentence from a different perspective, describing it not as the only jewel she had left but more explicitly as “the only one she hadn’t yet given away to put a little extra food on the table.” This rephrasing removes ambiguity in what happened to her jewels, leaving it apparent that she gave them over to be sold or pawned, the proceeds almost certainly funding the purchase of food on the black market to

supplement the household's meagre rations. Through these alterations drawing attention to the necessity of the pawn shop, readers are made aware of the kinds of difficult decisions characters had to make to ensure their survival in a state uninterested in protecting it for them.

Instances where the state did choose to act in its citizens' lives—for the purpose of exerting control over them—are also made more visible in the target text. One instance of this, in which the dialogue between Don Juan and Mercedes undergoes an amplification to clarify the consequences of the government's meddling in the legal status of marriages, has been described in section 4.3. Officials' restriction of people's freedom of movement is revealed through an expansion of the brief mention that Mercedes “Consiguió un salvoconducto” (Laforet 2010, 95) for her trip. I developed this three-word statement into a sentence acknowledging the process of securing a *salvoconducto*, who issued it, and what purpose it served: “She applied to the authorities and got a letter of safe-conduct granting her permission to go.” This information defining the *salvoconducto* established, the readers are invited to draw their own conclusions about what kind of state imposes that requirement on its population. Francoist impositions on the public can also be seen in the form of its indirect influence through state-promoted and socially enforced norms depriving young girls like Mercedes' daughter of autonomy. The letter from her son that warns “no era decente que [su hija] estuviese sola en casa, sobre todo por lo que las malas lenguas pudiesen decir” (Laforet 2010, 129). This warning is added to in translation for clarification on what function Mercedes is supposed to perform by not leaving her daughter alone at home: “it isn't proper for her to be alone in the house without her mother to guide her and keep an eye on her.” In other words, Mercedes is meant to surveil her daughter both to prevent her from transgressing and mold her into the wife/mother role prescribed for her. What comes across to readers is how few choices are left available to Spanish women and Spanish



people in general, with the government actively narrowing their scope for choice in many cases as a means of consolidating control.

Individually, each adjustment to strengthen the weaker implicatures in the text provides insights into a single facet of life under Franco. They show a populace still reeling from the aftershocks of the Civil War, impoverished, starving, and struggling to adapt to the stringent legal and social controls imposed on them. People in the story resort to treacherous journeys and desperate pawning of anything that can be construed as an asset to secure their wellbeing. Cumulatively, these adjustments express to target readers the experience of living under a regime of this type: citizens are left unprotected from grave threats to the satisfaction of their basic needs, and they are forcefully constrained in their life choices, a fact particularly true for those like women who are made to bear an especially heavy burden in the state's pursuit of its goals. Bit by bit, my adaptations to the target text seek to tell readers about the heavy consequences of Francoism on the public and women in particular.

### ***5.2. Implicit Judgments***

The next class of communicative clues I chose to strengthen are those conveyed by the narrator through implied metarepresentations. Most significantly, Don Juan is made to take ownership of his judgments. His underestimation of Doña Eloísa is flagged as described in section 4.3, with the framing “To his recollection” attached to it. The dichotomy he establishes between Mercedes and María Rosa—and by extension, her descendants—is undermined in a similar fashion, with a qualification: “Her children were such good kids, he thought to himself...” Acknowledgement that he is the source of this judgment of goodness invites readers to wonder by what metric he would deem them to be good, whether by a virtue like kindness or rather a notion of respectability tied to class. The other side of the dichotomy, Mercedes, is most

impactfully judged by him in their first meeting, when he catalogues all her changes in appearance and apparent failings in personal grooming, concluding that “something terrible had happened to her.” This passage is dense in judgments, and while too many breaks in the development of this descriptive paragraph to flag these judgments as originating from Don Juan would dull the vividness of the imagery it created, I did manage to introduce an element of metarepresentation with paragraph-level framing in the form of an introductory sentence at the start: “Don Juan took in the sight of her.” One aspect of the description in particular, the state of Mercedes’ hands, with “las uñas sucias, partidas” (Laforet 2010, 90), also felt important to draw attention to given how it emphasizes the class divide between Don Juan and both Mercedes and her son. I did not deem it feasible to insert a second metarepresentation into the paragraph, so I had to compensate for it in another way: by drawing attention to it when it is repeated after his visit. Amongst Mercedes’ plans regarding her departure for Barcelona, she decides that “se cuidaría las manos” (Laforet 2010, 95). This rather short thought is amplified in the target text to become “she’d get her hands looking soft and manicured,” making slightly stronger the link between hands and class through references to a manicure, a service generally reserved for those with disposable income, and a mention of softness that would imply erasing the appearance of her hands having ever done significant labour. An easier judgment to frame is that with which Don Juan sums up Mercedes’ recitation, the rather snide “Quizá, en efecto, años atrás tuvo talento” (Laforet 2010, 91). In this case, a simple addition to proclaim that “Indeed, he thought, maybe years ago she’d had talent” is enough to have readers, who have just read in the sentence before that Don Juan admits to enjoying Mercedes’ performance, look to the weaker implicatures attached to the metarepresentation to ask themselves if Don Juan is an unbiased source. In spots like these, they may think back to the way he is described and the way he describes the people

and places around him to reach the conclusion that Don Juan has a set of values typical of his class filtering his perceptions. The interventions to undermine Don Juan's authority as a source are minute in nature but have the potential to significantly alter readings of the text.

Similarly, other characters are not permitted to have their judgments of Mercedes pass unnoticed. Lolita's first impression of Mercedes, that she is an "esperpento" (Laforet 2010, 98), is framed in the translation not just as a judgment but as a retrospective one: "She turned and her eyes widened in mild horror, and then in irritation, when she saw her grandmother being followed by what she would later describe as some grotesque thing." The retrospectivity is introduced because, while Lolita might have noticed Mercedes' unkemptness in the moment, the extremely negative connotation associated with *grotesque* suggests this is a judgment passed later, informed by the negative impression she developed through interacting with Mercedes and hearing of her socially unacceptable decision. In a similar vein, Lolita's active evaluation of Mercedes is inserted into the first instance of Lolita describing her as crazy, with her being referred to not just as "aquella loca" (Laforet 2010, 100) but as "that woman who Lolita could only assume had lost her mind." Both instances point out to readers that Lolita very quickly takes a position on Mercedes that pervades through the rest of her dealings with her, and both are done in a way that adds some stylistic variety to the passages they are inserted into, serving both to draw attention to them and avoid overusing a simpler construction such as "she thought." Like Lolita, the owner of the dairy bar where Doña Eloísa and Mercedes go to talk is also made to admit her agency in the judgment the narrator emits when describing Mercedes as "una fulana de baja estofa" (Laforet 2010, 121). Her characterization of the two women, previously stated as a simple fragment, is introduced in the target text with the clause "She sized them up," strengthening the implicature on her hasty and shallow assessment of Mercedes' modesty. Both

Lolita and the dairy bar owner form highly critical opinions of the character, and specifying to readers the moments where these opinions develop invites reflection on how sound or unsound a basis there was for them.

Doña Eloísa, likewise, does not escape scrutiny in the way she thinks of Mercedes. On occasions where Mercedes is described as crazy from her perspective, this description obtains a qualifier. For instance, Doña Eloísa's recollections of a young Mercedes as being "so full of life and with just a few screws loose" is preceded by the addition "she pictured her as she'd seen her then." Another brief addition clarifies Doña Eloísa's judgment upon their second meeting that she is "aún más desquiciada que el día que llegó de su viaje" (Laforet 2010, 106) by noting that "She seemed to the old woman to be even more unhinged than the day she'd arrived." Similarly, Doña Eloísa's belief that she must go with Mercedes to her debut because "Estaba tan loca la desgraciada, que no comprendía las razones que ella le diese para negarse" (Laforet 2010, 114) is interrupted with attribution: "The poor thing was so out of her mind, thought Doña Eloísa, that she wouldn't understand the reasons she'd give for not going." These quick insertions signal to readers that these judgments belong to a character with her own cognitive baggage from her upbringing, and they become particularly important when Doña Eloísa's frustration with Mercedes starts to show through. For example, she is made to assume responsibility for her displeasure at a mannerism of Mercedes' when it is noted that "That nervous giggle of Mercedes' was quite unpleasant to Doña Eloísa's ears" rather than stating that the laugh is generally unpleasant. Her aghastness at the idea of "her grey hair lending legitimacy to the foolish whims of a disturbed woman" is introduced with the clause "She could scarcely imagine it" for similar reasons. When she truly becomes angry with Mercedes at her friend's apartment, the judgments she passes on her host are tied explicitly to her by observing that "she was

welcomed by a woman who looked positively monstrous to her” and “That woman alone could fill the room with her flesh, she thought.” Her judgment also becomes more explicit when she turns it back on Mercedes, declaring, “Yes, she thought, Mercedes was an idiot.” At the peak of her frustration, when Mercedes has just taken to the stage to perform and Doña Eloísa memorably goes into detail about her appearing to be “horrible,” another added clause introduces the rant: “Doña Eloísa tried to take in the sight.” The framing pushes readers one step closer to interpreting that Mercedes appears horrible to Doña Eloísa and her expectations of what a woman born in her social position should look like. In many ways, Doña Eloísa is the moral heart of the narrative in the efforts she goes to for Mercedes’ aid, but she has her limitations like any other person, and these interventions draw attention to these so the reader can develop a more nuanced appreciation of her.

In her turn, Doña Eloísa also benefits from interventions to undermine some of the judgments against her. Aside from the comment discussed earlier from Don Juan and other remarks already presented as quotations, reflections from Mercedes that patronize her also merit presentation to the readers under advisement. Accordingly, when she thinks after her debut that Doña Eloísa “really was an odd duck” in response to praise that Mercedes discounts, this thought is ended with “she mused” in the target text. Her thought in the second-last paragraph of the text that “Doña Eloísa era demasiado buena para que uno fuese a desbaratar sus ilusiones explicándole que los milagros no existen” (Laforet 2010, 132–133) also obtains a qualifying clause: “Doña Eloísa, she’d say, was too kind for anyone to spoil her fantasies and explain to her that miracles don’t exist...” By making these judgments explicitly subjective, readers realize the profoundness of society’s disrespect for the intellectual abilities of a woman like Doña Eloísa, even from someone like Mercedes who may well have the fullest impression of her capabilities.

The prejudice is so widespread that Doña Eloísa herself has judgments on her own worth that need to be reframed. When she considers the idea of being provided for by her great-grandson “turbador” (Laforet 2010, 103), the target text specifies that it is “an upsetting thought for the old woman,” as she is trained to associate her value with her ability to serve others rather than being served. Moreover, her minimizing of her decision-making ability is made apparent when she decides to ask Father Jiménez what to do about Mercedes: “he’d know more about Christian charity than a poor old woman would, she reasoned.” The addition of these last two words both reflects that Doña Eloísa is trying to reason her way out of responsibility for the difficult choice and points out that she underestimates herself, revealing to readers how widespread the dismissal of women’s agency is that some women even adopt that stance towards themselves. My interventions draw attention to the inherent subjectivity of such views on Doña Eloísa, bringing readers closer to being able to challenge them.

Through explicit metarepresentational framing or compensation when this is not feasible, target readers are able to spot the societal measuring sticks being held up to characters like Mercedes and Doña Eloísa. Sometimes, they serve to demonize the women for their choices, and sometimes, they serve to deny their ability to rationally make choices. In either case, minor interventions to make readers aware that the judgments being passed belong to a particular character rather than the narrator contradict any pretensions to universal truth the statements may have in the source text. They then strengthen implicatures pertaining to the social determinants that would cause them to view Mercedes or Doña Eloísa as they do. As a result, readers are able to reach a deeper understanding of the conditions in which these characters operate and the constraints that limit their actions, helping to counter readings of the text as mere apologism.

### 5.3. *Thematic Communicative Clues*

The final category of communicative clues, those developing the theme of women's lack of autonomy, had to be addressed in disparate ways due to their disparate forms, but recognition of them hinges on one point in the opening paragraphs of the narrative. Laforet's remark that without Don Juan's intervention, this story would not have taken place, but "Podría haberse escrito otra" (Laforet 2010, 80) creates a great deal of implicatures about what kind of other story could have unfolded and what kind of story this one is. It is known from her manuscript, however, that she anticipated other potential stories being "quizá aun mas triste" (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53), meaning that many darker possibilities exist, but the narrative told is nonetheless an unhappy one. Accordingly, I reinserted this remark into the target text, informing readers that "Another [story] could have been written (an even sadder one, no doubt)." Having no need to hedge the claim for a censorial official, as Laforet did, I took the liberty of strengthening it with "no doubt" instead of "perhaps" to make the point stand out for target readers. This cues them to look for the tragic elements of the story, those walls both great and small that stand in the way of Mercedes and Doña Eloísa and highlight the futility of their actions, in constructing their interpretation of it.

Among the elements in need of resistance is the physical representation of the way in which Doña Eloísa is reduced down by those around her to a stereotype of a pious old woman with little complexity to her motivations. This required unpacking the character's decisions as affected by her faith, giving her the space to prove her agency and explore her sense of female solidarity. The significance of her prayer to the Virgin of Montserrat is hinted at in an appositive addition to the description of her prayer routine: "she went and kneeled down on the prie-dieu under the painting of the Virgin of Montserrat—that placid but powerful figure of Mary with the

Christ child in her lap.” Aside from providing a brief explanation of what she is for those not familiar with the Catalonia religious icon, the phrase introduces the idea of Mary as a mother figure providing support for her women followers, and the descriptor “placid but powerful” establishes a parallel between the submissive-looking but authority-holding Virgin and the underestimated Doña Eloísa. In taking space to define the meaning of the saint who centres this character’s faith, readers can have a greater appreciation for the decisions she makes based on that faith.

The point at which she makes her most significant decision, the one to go with Mercedes to her debut despite the risk of negative social fallout from it, merits significant amplification. Rather than leaving untouched the woman’s abrupt conclusion after learning of Father Jiménez’s absence that “No hay nada que hacer, Dios mío; Tú quieres que yo resuelva sola” (Laforet 2010, 114), I have added two paragraphs preceding it that explore what she may have been thinking as she came to that point. In the first, she expresses her fear and insecurity at having to make the decision herself, thinking “What was she supposed to do now, with no one to settle the argument in her head between her mental image of Father Jiménez and that little voice that just wouldn’t be quiet?” She also admits she is deferring to him to avoid making an unpalatable decision when she remarks, “He would’ve said no. He was supposed to say no.” In the second paragraph, she recites prayers to overcome the moment of panic—as likely a guess as any about her mindset given how readers have seen her resort to it in challenging situations before. This allows me an opportunity to further expand on the notion of female solidarity through faith with the assertion that one of her prayers is “to Santa Teresa, who had always been generous in sharing her wisdom with the women in her flock.” Then, I am able to reiterate the notion of the Virgin, like Doña Eloísa, being stronger than she appears when explaining why she also prays to Mary, as the



figure is “strong enough to hold the world in her right hand with perfect grace while cradling the baby Jesus in her lap.” This realization is what leads Doña Eloísa to her decisive resolution to solve the matter herself: “Surely if she could hold the world aloft in one hand, Doña Eloísa could manage this little task.” Following the declaration, I also allow her another extra paragraph to reflect on the break in character that occurs here where she stops subordinating her judgment to what she thinks others expect of her and becomes a decisive actor in driving events. To signal the intensity of the shift, I have borrowed language used in the author’s description of her spiritual awakening in a letter to Elena Fortún: Laforet calls the experience a “transformación radical del ser” as well as “una llamada, una hoguera, un deslumbramiento, una claridad de maravilla,” the fire reference reflecting the intensity of the experience and the oxymoron in combining *deslumbramiento* with *claridad* reflecting its bewildering effect; she also asserts that “Dios me ha cogido por los cabellos y me ha sumergido en su misma Esencia” (Laforet and Fortún 2017, 120). For my exploration of Doña Eloísa’s experience, I borrowed the fire and oxymoron imagery in stating “she felt herself overwhelmed by an indescribable, burning peace,” and then I introduced the idea of submersion and radical transformation: “She felt as though she’d been drowned in the divine spirit and come back different. Reconstructed. And resolved, ready.” I then felt it appropriate to make reference to the minimization she had experienced and directed towards herself in noting that “She may have been a simple-minded, timid old lady, but she was all Mercedes had. Or perhaps she wasn’t those things anymore—she felt so strange...” This notable swell of emotion needed to be addressed at the points shortly afterwards when Doña Eloísa begins to falter, as she does after speaking to her granddaughter, so I added into her moment of hesitation that “the force that had been propelling her along suddenly sputtered,” and I described her praying when at the church: “It was prayer that had given her the celestial push to

get here; maybe she could use it now to call that back to her and show her where to go now.” Likewise, when she experiences something of a resurgence of this energy with Mercedes and finds she “hablaba con una extraña fluidez” (Laforet 2010, 120), I inserted a suggestion of this: “Perhaps she’d gotten some of that fire from earlier back after all.” In making these additions to the target text from deep in the possibilities of the weak implicatures, I resisted the trend towards two-dimensionalizing Doña Eloísa’s inner life, drawing out her sense of solidarity and assertion of autonomy as her principles push her to defy social norms.

For the less encouraging journey of Mercedes, meanwhile, I opted to embellish the already dramatic narrative style in ways that would accentuate *tremendista* elements of the text. This largely meant accentuating the morbid fixation on “la descripción de las miserias” as signalled by the *lector* (Expedientes de censura literaria, file 1322-53) and making heavy use of the animal comparisons deployed in *Nada* to stress “la falta de facultades humanas como producto de su contexto socio-histórico degradante” (Tun 2015, 1). Accordingly, when Mercedes’ first sight of the ugly and unwelcoming streets of Barcelona “le daba la impresión de haber crecido, de haberse complicado monstruosamente” (Laforet 2010, 96–97), the idea of the city transforming into something monstrous and threatening to a woman travelling alone is expanded upon in the target text: “the place seemed to her to have grown and mutated into something monstrously complex, practically snarling at her through its narrow and unforgiving alleyways.” The observation that “todo el mundo tenía hambre alrededor suyo” (Laforet 2010, 110) is likewise intensified to become “everyone around her was in the depths of starvation,” turning the neutral tone of the comment into an explicit lament of famine conditions. Shortly afterwards, the account from Mercedes’ friend of her daughter’s death in the war is intensified with a description of the sight of the dead child, the friend being said to find “a little girl—her

own daughter—lying dead in front of her, her tiny body broken down in the battles over her home that she'd had nothing to do with.” Intended to highlight both the tragedy and the senselessness of the death, the description of her being “broken down” leaves her cause of death as vague as in the source text so that readers can interpret it literally, suggesting the girl died in a bombing, or figuratively, suggesting poor living conditions during the conflict killed her. Portrayals of violence directly experienced by Mercedes are similarly magnified, as in the passage depicting Mercedes’ husband hitting her that was used as an example in section 4.3. Similarly, her recollection of a group of boys throwing stones at her while she was reciting by the sea is amplified with the shift from a neutral verb, “recibió una pedrada” (Laforet 2010, 94), to one more emphatic about the violence of the action, “she was struck by a rock,” and both the physical pain and psychological impact are hinted at when the appositive description of it as “a blow she could feel stinging for a good while afterwards” is added. Moreover, the perpetrators are no longer merely “Unos chiquillos, escondidos” (Laforet 2010, 94) but are also “cackling like hyenas behind their hands.” The animal comparison in the boys amusing themselves through causing her pain implies that these children, dehumanized by their circumstances, are in turn lashing out at someone whose humanity they deny due to her unconventional actions. The source text handled moments like these with a careful style in which readers could derive horror at societal conditions and the harms they perpetuated; the target text makes sure readers are duly horrified by them.

The key *tremendista* point in the narrative, Mercedes’ debut, was significantly expanded to take the fullest advantage of its potential in shaping interpretations of the text. This began with the insertion of details hinting at the venue’s seediness. Doña Eloísa’s remark on the strangeness of it is preceded by her taking in the “dimly lit sort of cabaret” and then followed by an

elaboration on what precisely is strange about it, mentioning “the furtive doorman staring down the street” and “the decidedly odd mix of people there to see a spectacle or be one.” All of this, from the darkness to the need for a doorman watching for police to the hodgepodge crowd drawn in by an unsanctioned show, is meant to illustrate the perilous legal state of the only place Mercedes could find to perform. Doña Eloísa’s initial reaction of disgust also takes slight amplification, with Mercedes’ dark roots not merely showing but “ashen” and “on full display” to reflect the character’s scandalized tone and her beads not merely worn but “coiled around her neck” in a snakelike image, introducing the first hint of animal instincts that will dominate the scene. These early and mild interventions begin a gradual introduction to the audience’s later descent into open cruelty.

The dark and animal forces in the room erupt with the strengthening of the laughter. No longer just “descaradas” (Laforet 2010, 124), they become so forceful in the target text that they are embodied: “As they grew, they began to transform into something much rawer. In the darkness, Doña Eloísa could almost swear there was some sort of multi-headed, many-voiced creature filling the room.” The beastly personification speaks to the monstrosity of the crowd’s abrupt suspension of civility at the sight of Mercedes, something made explicit in the next line with “All those nicely dressed people in the audience seemed to have lost control of themselves. They were laughing wildly, mouths stretched open, snakelike.” They are so controlled by instinct that the display appears to be physically painful, with their mouths being “stretched open” and the man in the suit not just holding his stomach but “hunching and clutching” it. They emit “roars of laughter”—note the predatory association with *roar*—that “lowered to a rumble” upon Mercedes’ pause. Mercedes also becomes animalized as fearful instincts emerge, leaving her “twitching like a cornered rabbit.” The audience members continue

to display predator-like behaviours, their “howls of laughter” mixed with the “more feral sound” of booing and wolf-whistles coming “First from the drunk ones. Then the others, emboldened,” an added detail emphasizing the debauchery and pack mentality of the spectacle. When insults are shouted, they are “barked.” To exaggerate the insult, I have Doña Eloísa attempt to decipher it: “With all the noise, it was hard to tell what it was. *Whore. Stupid bitch. Lunatic.* The vicious possibilities tortured the old woman.” Aside from the shock value their crassness delivers, the potential insults descend from ones more plausible for a spectator to have said to *lunatic*, something Lolita called Mercedes and Doña Eloísa echoed in labelling her as crazy, planting the suggestion of the old woman feeling remorse for having been even a fraction as unkind towards Mercedes as those around her now. When Mercedes retaliates and they boo harder, the boos are attributed to “the pack” in an extension of the wolf imagery, and their booing is said to be so forceful that “She soon found herself completely overcome again.” To truly encapsulate the violence of the response, an incident is added that would incite Mercedes’ flight: “Something bounced off of the stage. Maybe a stale bread crust. Maybe a wad of paper. Maybe, if her imagination wasn’t running away with her, a rock.” By having someone in the crowd throw a projectile at her in a version of the tomato-throwing trope, I establish a connection with an earlier act of violence, that of the boys throwing rocks at her, to suggest the hopelessness of Mercedes’ quest to find a response other than this aggressive one to her unusual behaviour, thereby reinforcing the tragic interpretation of the narrative. Once Mercedes has given up, the animalistic imagery largely stops, save an acknowledgment that the crowd has “stopped their howling” now that a new performer is on stage. This *tremendista* passage, dense in its ferocious descriptions, comes to a crescendo quickly and then dies off abruptly to give way to the pollyannaistic fifth section, making more undeniable the trauma-induced fracture in the narrative that leads to such a

jarring conclusion.

Beyond stressing the brutality of the way Mercedes is treated, amplification of the debut scene offers an opportunity to allow both characters more space for their inner life. Doña Eloísa's initial reaction of pleasure at Mercedes' performance, for instance, is elaborated upon, her delight said to "[flourish] for one bright second" before "it was soon cut off," the temporal adverb adding to the abruptness already suggested by the verb. The fear in her response that had been reduced to surprise in the editing process (*Expedientes de censura literaria*, file 1322-53) is reinserted into the text, the character being said to be "stunned. Scared, even, by what she saw emerging in the people around her." Doña Eloísa's fright at the scene is echoed in an added inner monologue for Mercedes when she stops the recitation, thinking to herself, "This wasn't right. This wasn't what they were supposed to do. This wasn't what triumph looked like. The thoughts were rushing around Mercedes' mind but seemed to have gotten stuck. She had gotten stuck." Here, she gets to express the clash between her oft-repeated expectations of triumph and reality, the painful realization being the reason she stops. She continues to struggle with it, as evidenced by the terminological choice to have her "glancing anxiously off to the sides" instead of just looking, and begins to confront the possibility of having to return home a failure or support herself through undesirable means in the addition that "She was starting to shake as she began to realize what she had done, what it would mean." As part of her attempts to cope, she gets angry at the situation, and she is able to express that here. When she stops, the narrator explicitly says it is due to "her fear turning into rage," and her attempt at resistance through an insult is explored further with speculation her attack is "something crass about the spectators' apparent childhood in a barn." When it only provokes a worse response from the audience and she leaves, her emotions are injected into the target text: she is reported to have "fled" the stage and "lurched"

rather than simply descending and nearly falling, the adverbial phrase “In her wide-eyed rush” added for an additional exploration of her panicked reaction. The source text then jumps from her near fall to her reaching Doña Eloísa’s table, but the target expands on her steps between the two points: “She caught herself, barely, and stumbled off towards the only sympathetic faces in the room.” This addition lends pathos to Mercedes’ experience, showing her as terrified and seeking out comfort that she cannot find anywhere else. Mercedes and Doña Eloísa are put through a trying experience in this scene, and readers are able to recognize that through the narrator allowing the women’s emotional responses to be named and explored.

Mercedes and Doña Eloísa, distinct though they are, both struggle with expectations of who they ought to be. For Doña Eloísa, those expectations mean having her faith reduced to obedience, with no particular power to interpret it or act on it, and for Mercedes, they mean having her suffering excused as the consequences of her failure to conform. The narrative depicts these characters’ ability to surpass expectations and their inability to do so in their society, representing a rich theme deserving of preservation in the target text. In some cases, this required only small interventions, like terminological shifts or brief added phrases. In some cases, it required heavier interventions to create new images that would render some of the more obscure communicative clues in the text accessible. It was by no means a safe approach, requiring careful study of the source text and cautious recreation of its style in new sections of text. Nonetheless, for the depth of understanding it is able to give readers on the constraints Francoist Spain imposed on the population and on women in particular, this interventionist translation is well worth the effort that went into producing it.

## **6. Conclusion**

Carmen Laforet’s refusal to take sides in political debates made her an easy figure to co-

opt, but her desire for autonomy and views on gender mean she was never aligned with the ideology of the state, even in her seemingly traditionalist writings like “La llamada.” A close study of this text based on evidence of what Laforet believed and what source readers knew of the postwar period reveals a series of implicatures, both strong and weak, that contradict the regime’s grandiose myth of Spain with Franco at the helm. It also yields a series of communicative clues capable of conveying a scream of frustration alongside the hallelujah of the story’s trite ending. Implied judgments demonstrate the rigid social controls that directed what women could do and how they could view themselves, and thematic clues reveal the tragic elements of Mercedes’ and Doña Eloísa’s lives within limitations. When all of these are taken together, an image develops of a very different, less sycophantic implied author than readers otherwise might have interpreted. Knowing these elements are present in the source text is one thing: finding the right way to reproduce them is another. Taking no special effort to ensure the transfer of these elements is clearly insufficient, as many of them end up too weak for target readers to spot. Paratext is of some use in helping readers to find implicatures and clues, but pragmatic and tonal difficulties limit their chances of reaching readers. Direct interventions of the sort deployed in feminist translation, in which the translator’s voice slips clandestinely into the text to promote the truths the translator holds, offer the most potent tool for informing how readers understand both the text and the implied author. Through small adjustments and extensive additions, readers are able to glean more information about the oppressive conditions the characters contend with, the judgments penning them in, and the tragedy of their futile struggles for autonomy. The resulting target text delivers implicatures and communicative clues strong enough to be of service to readers, an implied author emboldened to challenge Francoist dogma, and an invaluable insight into the perils of life during this time period.



There are two caveats to note in discussing the contribution of this work to the translation studies literature, the first being that the solution proposed here is contextually motivated. Deploying interventions in the target text to recreate the implicatures in the source was selected as the right approach for this text and this readership. It is foreseeable that another source text could contain implicatures that would be less successfully rendered through direct interventions, or that the particular set of readers the translator is working for would have a higher level of tolerance for or even interest in reading paratext. I used the theoretical tools available to me to come to a decision about my translation project, and I hope to offer practitioners the tools to come to their own decision about theirs, whether or not that decision is the same as mine.

The second aspect to note is that this approach is not without its practical drawbacks, namely the amount of additional effort it asks of translators. To gain even partial access to the cognitive environment of the source text author and their readership, translators need to do an extensive amount of research. Some areas and authors will have ample literature surrounding them to facilitate the task, but some areas will be more sparsely covered or be difficult to access due to physical or financial limitations. Even in the easiest of cases to research, however, the work that goes into finding and then reconstructing implicatures represents a significant time investment for literary translators, whose compensation for their work is already notoriously modest. In those cases where censorship-induced implicatures will add little insight for target readers, the translator can be forgiven for opting not to commit to this labour-intensive translation style.

There are, however, some likely cases for which the approach may prove fruitful. Most obvious are similar works of Laforet's. The other short stories from the 1950s with strong religious themes and *La mujer nueva*, her novel delving deeper into the themes of "La llamada"

with a mixed critical reception, would likely benefit the most from additional clarity supplied by the translator. The Francoist era doubtless has more examples of works with similar translation challenges worth exploring, as must the many states throughout history that have enacted censorship policies. Between the works that could be enhanced by a translation emphasizing their hidden complexity, the authors who could enjoy a reevaluation of their status, and readers who could better comprehend all the narratives have to offer, a translation based on an archaeology of the implicatures imposed by censorship serves a broad cross-section of parties.

## **Appendix A: Non-interventionist Translation**

### **The Call**

#### **I**

This story begins with the sun rising over a small port in southern Spain, some time after the end of our civil war.

The sea was smooth with a copper glow as the sun began to warm it on the horizon, and there, in a red line, it blended into the sky for a few minutes. Then the light flooded the landscape and turned the water a silvery blue under a sky scarcely clouded in the heat. On the water's surface you could spot some fishing boats floating, motionless, and the silhouette of a steamboat, getting clearer and clearer as it approached the port with the pilot at the helm.

The vessel that was coming in was a cargo ship, and it was headed to a port in the Americas. It was also carrying a few passengers below. These were people in no great hurry to get to the other side of the world, or they'd rather take the long way in exchange for a fairly reasonably priced ticket and the chance to say goodbye to their homeland, making stopovers in unexpected ports like the one they were headed towards.

From the deck, the passengers could clearly see the small city, so bathed in light as the sun's rays gleamed in the houses' window panes that it looked dazzling. All of them wanted to go ashore—even one seventy-odd-year-old man. Very well-dressed and sporting an old-fashioned white beard, he seemed out of place on the boat.

At first glance, that man brought to mind images of a leisurely life led in a house sheltered from the cold by heavy curtains, with an elderly maid wearing canvas shoes and walking silently so as not to disturb his thoughts. He also made you think of big Christmas dinners with him presiding over the table, the patriarch of many children and grandchildren; of

pleasant rides in horse-drawn carriages; and even of good deeds doled out reasonably, accompanied by good advice. That gentleman with his serene, handsome features reminded you of a fine well-to-do gentleman from the nineteenth century. Which contrasted sharply with the eight or ten other passengers, all people stamped with that special hallmark of uprooting and adventure.

If this gentleman in his impeccable dark grey coat—a look that helped him hang onto the remnants of his old distinction as he stood among the other passengers in their summer suits—hadn't been leaning on the handrail of the cargo ship that day, and if he hadn't felt the impulse to get off and get to know the city, this little story would never have been written. Another could have been written, but this one, I'm almost certain, could not have been.

The gentleman's name was Juan Rosas, and in his day he'd been a doctor with a good clientele, but Don Juan had given up the art of medicine years ago. No one else on that ship knew these details, nor did they know the reason why he was travelling to the Americas. Maybe the captain alone knew. But maybe the captain, with all he had on his mind, had forgotten.

Don Juan went ashore after breakfast. With sadness, he studied the dirtiness and the desolation of the streets. He looked on, impassive, as a swarm of scruffy kids gathered around him asking him for change. Eventually he managed to find a little garden, some clean streets, and a café—its terrace dotted with little tables where people could sit facing the sea. Don Juan sat down in a wicker chair by one of those tables, and he lit up a cigar. Then he started to puff on it slowly. He had large, perfect hands. In his youth those hands had been full of masculine beauty, tender and long-fingered. The years had left them unsteady, but they still had their charm.

The bells of a church were ringing. Though it wasn't a holiday, Don Juan wavered between staying here to enjoy his moment of quiet relaxation and answering their call. That day,

by chance, was a special day for the gentleman. It was his birthday. A light smile flitted across his lips when he realized he couldn't remember exactly how old he was turning. Seventy-seven? Or was he seventy-eight? The uncertainty hung over him for a few seconds, and then he took another puff on his cigar. He thought back to his date of birth and did a quick calculation. Only seventy-seven. That call of the church bells started up again and beckoned to him once more. He sat up a little straighter, ready to get up. At that very moment the waiter, who'd been invisible until then, appeared, depriving him of his view of the sea. "What'll it be?"

Don Juan considered telling him right now, nothing, he'd come back a little later, and if the waiter would be so kind as to tell him the shortest way to that church whose bells were ringing so close by—but Don Juan, when he lifted his hazel eyes to answer the waiter, felt like his words had dried up, and he sat for a few seconds in silence. "I'll have a coffee, please."

The gentleman thought he'd seen a ghost in that young waiter. He felt uneasy. The waiter's wide face; his ugly, turned-up, highly distinctive nose; that thick, black hair; and the beady little olive green eyes—his whole face, in short, looked incredibly familiar to Don Juan. *I'll look him over more slowly. When he comes back, I'll get a really good look at him,* he thought.

When the waiter returned, the resemblance Don Juan had spotted in the boy's face didn't vanish; it only grew. He looked a lot like someone who'd, a good many years ago, been a classmate of Don Juan and his close friend his whole life, without envy or professional jealousy or—to be perfectly frank—the friend's aggressive personality souring that relationship. That boy, if his thick-lipped mouth with its low corners were surrounded by a bushy black beard...yes, he'd have been his friend, Carlos Martí himself, brought back to life. "Young man, I'd like to ask you a bit of a personal question."

(That slight raising of his eyebrows—that special, deeply scornful movement of his lips that sometimes earned Carlos the trust and excessive deference of his clients and other times just frightened them...) “Go ahead, sir.”

Don Juan cleared his throat, and his eyes came across the waiter’s hands: they were coarse and hardened, his nails buried into his flesh. Don Juan started to hesitate...there could be no hands more different than this man’s and those of his friend Carlos, who’d been dead for twenty years. “It’s nothing...it will sound ridiculous to you. It’s just that you have an almost staggering resemblance to a person I was very fond of...surely, you’ll never have heard the name Carlos Martí.”

The waiter blushed almost imperceptibly under his tanned skin. “Yes, sir. If you’re talking about a doctor from Barcelona who died a long time ago, I have heard of him: he was my mother’s uncle.”

“But how—I know María Rosa’s children...”

“My mother told me she’s got a sister by that name. Her name’s Mercedes.”

The gentleman’s brow furrowed slightly until his memories grew strong and clear, bringing to him the image of his friend leaving mass on Sundays with two girls in big hats, curly locks spilling out from under them in a cascade down to the girls’ shoulders. They didn’t live with Carlos, those two, but it brightened up his childless marriage having them spend the holidays with him. “Yes, now I remember your mother perfectly; she was very blonde...is she still alive?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your aunt’s dead—you heard? During the war...” Unconsciously Don Juan had started speaking more familiarly to this young man. It seemed impossible for him not to.

“Look, sir, we’ve never had any contact with my mother’s side of the family.”

All of a sudden, the gentleman remembered an old story. Those things didn’t depress him; they seemed to rejuvenate him. He realized in the last few years he’d been feeling very alone, unable to talk to anybody about that life of his that was behind him now. A sudden urge struck him. “I’m just passing through here for a few hours. My ship leaves tonight...I’d really like to be able to say hello to your mom.”

The waiter stared pensively at the metal tray he was holding in his hands; he drummed on it lightly. “Listen, sir,” he said finally. “I don’t think you should go...”

“Why, my boy?”

“My mother, poor woman, is—let’s just say she’s missing a few marbles. Her house, it’s really neglected. It’s not that it matters to me: I don’t live there. I’m a married man...but for your sake. You might not like it.”

“Look, my boy: Carlos Martí, who looked so much like you, was like a brother to me, and my daughter played with your mom many times. These days being poor is nothing unusual. What’s unusual is not being poor.”

With his little olive eyes, the young man looked wryly at the strange man with the white beard. “We’ve always been poor, sir—it’s not that...but if you insist, I’ll give you what you want and tell you the address.”

“Please do, my dear boy. What’s your father’s last name?”

“López—José López. ‘Sergeant,’ that’s how the whole neighbourhood knows him. They call my mother ‘Sergeantess.’”

The old man’s brow darkened.

“I’m telling you this, sir, so you’re not caught off guard. Besides, my father left the army before I was born—so I have no idea why they keep calling him Sergeant...sir, I think you’re not going to like this visit...but it’s up to you.”

When Don Juan was standing up to leave, he gave him the last instruction. “At the address I’ve given you, you’ll find a lumber warehouse. Don’t hesitate: go right in and go through the courtyard. There’s a staircase at the back. Go up it. You’ll find the door straight away.”

“Thanks, my boy.” Don Juan would have liked to hug that taciturn boy. He didn’t dare.

Mercedes Martí’s house was far away. Not very far, because in that small city all the distances were short, but it was as far as it could be from that café where her son worked.

As Don Juan got closer, he realized that this was a poor neighbourhood, but the old man enjoyed walking through there; the houses were clean and whitewashed. Through some of the doors you could see little courtyards brimming with flowers. Never in the city had he seen anything more cheerful. The bright morning light made the sky shine over the alleyways like a blindingly blue canopy.

Dark-haired, half-dressed children were playing everywhere. Sometimes from the sea came a gust of fresh, salty air. Don Juan tried to remember Mercedes Martí and her story more clearly.

Mercedes and her sister, María Rosa, were the daughters of Carlos’ only brother, who’d died very young. Carlos gave his sister-in-law some financial support to pad out her small widow’s pension, and Carlos’ wife, the generous Ana María, loved the girls very much. In fact, she spoiled them too much. She liked to buy them dresses, take them on outings, show them off—after all, the girls were very pretty. Especially Mercedes. Now Don Juan remembered



Mercedes was the prettiest. Slender and blonde, with big green eyes. She looked like a little princess. Ana María was enchanted by her. She ended up bringing the girl to her house for longer and longer stretches of time. She tried to find a good husband for her, but Mercedes was hard to please. María Rosa, meanwhile, got married straight away. True, she was the oldest. She married an assistant to Carlos, a very nice boy...as for Mercedes, Don Juan almost couldn't remember what had happened to her. She was a very passionate, romantic girl. She did very good dramatic readings, and she got her aunt and uncle quite upset all the times she proclaimed she wanted to be a dramatic actress. Things took a pretty bad turn when one day, an eighteen-year-old Mercedes ran away from home. They were lucky enough to find her before, in the clutches of an unscrupulous man calling himself a theatre impresario, she could cross the border...it was a real scandal, and it cost Ana María her life. She'd gotten very sick from the shock of her niece's disappearance. A few months later she died.

As for Mercedes, once they got her back, she never spent another second in her aunt and uncle's home. She was returned to her mother, absolutely forbidden from ever setting foot in that house again. Not even Don Juan ever dared to ask about her. He didn't know how—surely through his daughter, who was a close friend of the other sister, María Rosa—but he came to find out she'd gotten married and gone to live far away.

Little by little, Don Juan had forgotten Mercedes. He'd kept up the family friendship with María Rosa after her aunt and uncle died. María Rosa herself had died as Don Juan tried to treat her—from the wounds she'd suffered in a bombing. Her children were such good kids...

Don Juan stopped in front of a pair of carriage house doors, opened wide to reveal an open courtyard with an arbour. Underneath it were stacks of pine boards. That house didn't look like the other ones in the neighbourhood. It was big, run-down, and practically derelict. But that

courtyard where hens pecked and a big ginger cat stretched out had a special charm and a strong aura of peace to it. When he walked in, Don Juan realized the courtyard was surrounded on the second floor by a sort of hallway, with clothes hanging on the railings and many doors open. It was a tenement house. Don Juan went up the stairs and knocked at the first door in that hallway, as he'd been told. A sudden shyness overpowered him when he realized it was lunchtime. But he couldn't turn back now. He knew he wouldn't be able to return that afternoon, that the urge that had pushed him to visit Mercedes wouldn't return.

It was almost with relief that he saw no one was answering. At other doors a few curious faces had appeared.

“Who are you looking for, old boy?”

Don Juan wasn't used to hearing himself called that. He furrowed his brow. “Is this where Don José López lives?”

There was a silence and a question exchanged in the glances between two or three women. Don Juan felt vaguely annoyed. One of them approached him. “You wouldn't be, by chance, Don Policarpo, the notary from the Calle Alta?”

“No, dear. I'm not from here.”

“Well then...listen, if you're looking for Don José López, ‘Sergeant,’ he lives there, and if you pound good and hard on the door, maybe they'll open it; the wife's a little out to lunch, and sometimes she doesn't want to hear...but as for whether she's home, she sure is. I saw her go in myself a bit ago.”

That helpful woman didn't wait for Don Juan to follow her advice and started to bang on the door herself, as if she wanted to knock it aside, while she hollered, “Mercedes! A visitor!”

One by one, people had been filling up the hallway. Women, children, and even a few men were watching the situation unfold with curiosity.

Two or three minutes later, a small window beside the door opened just a crack. Don Juan could barely glimpse the profile of a woman's face and the glint of a pair of eyes.

"Mercedes, this gentleman is standing here waiting for you."

Then came a full voice, a harmonious and deep-toned call. "I'll be there right away."

Don Juan had completely forgotten that voice.

## II

At around twelve o'clock at night the cargo boat set sail, charting a course for some other ports before it would begin its direct route to the Americas. Don Juan watched the lights of the port grow further away, the modestly shimmering dots of the city growing closer together until in the distance, they looked like a fistful of stars. Suddenly those stars disappeared into the night and Don Juan was cold. Slowly he walked up to his cabin. He shared it with a young man who had a large scar running across his face. On the day Don Juan first met him, that man had filled him with distrust. By now he'd gotten used to his presence, and he thought that by the end of this long journey, he might even go so far as to develop a soft spot for him. The man with the scar hadn't gone to bed yet. Don Juan opened the porthole; the cabin was too hot compared to the air on the deck. He couldn't sleep for quite a while.

He wasn't sure if he'd done the right thing visiting Mercedes. At first she said she didn't remember the gentleman. Then she burst into tears when she found out her uncle and sister had died. "Those two ruined my life, Don Juan, but I don't bear them any ill will."

According to the gentleman's calculations, Mercedes wouldn't have turned fifty yet. Her voice still had a special charm to it, and no one could say she looked especially old for her age.

Her face—at least in the shadowy little shoebox of a room where Don Juan saw her—had almost no wrinkles on it, or maybe none at all...but something terrible had happened to her. That sort of slender, anxious little princess was gone without a trace. She was a hefty, unkempt woman. Her hair was uncombed and no longer blonde, her nails were dirty and split, and her heavily stained housecoat seemed to give off an unbearable cooking odour that overwhelmed the whole room. At one point, Don Juan saw she was missing a tooth. She noticed the gentleman staring. “It was my husband—a smack to the face...”

“What do you mean, my dear?”

“My husband cracked my tooth when we were fighting, and they had to pull it...heh heh! That’s life. That’s what my aunt and uncle drove me to when they forced me to abandon my calling. Don’t you think?”

Don Juan didn’t know what to say. “How were you married?”

“By the Church.”

That surprised Don Juan. “I can hazard a guess, but...”

“Yes—I was beautiful and I was talented, but after my uncle cut us off, my mother and I were dying of hunger, and besides, I’d been locked away, so to speak. My husband was finishing his military service then. He was a fine-looking man. He tricked us—he tricked me. My mother didn’t care; she just wanted to get rid of me and go live with María Rosa...now I remember there was just one person who told me I’d be crazy to go through with the wedding. It was María Rosa’s mother-in-law. But I thought it was out of self-interest, so that her son wouldn’t have to take in my mother, and that made me want to do it more. My fiancé said he had some land around here—and he did; you bet he did...but it all vanished. My mother told me the love would come to me when we had children. We had children, but I didn’t get any love—heh, heh! Love,

what a joke! We can't even look at each other. When I have money and I can get to a theatre, I'll run away to the stage...so he's always being a thorn in my side—because I haven't given up on my passion...and I could still give plenty of actresses a run for their money when I do a reading—want to hear me?"

The question was asked with a touching enthusiasm. Don Juan said yes. Then Mercedes stood up. She opened her arms, and throwing her head back, closed her eyes. Don Juan wanted to cry. He thought he'd lost his ability to get emotional in his old age, but that woman stirred an immense pity in him. In spite of the whistle that sometimes escaped from between her teeth, her voice had an uncommon charm. Indeed, maybe years ago she'd had talent.

Someone knocked on the door. Mercedes didn't take the slightest notice.

"Mom, open up!"

"That must be your daughter," said Don Juan timidly, since it was a young girl's voice.

Mercedes furrowed her brow. Then she shrugged her shoulders, and sure enough, when the door opened, in came a young girl. Around fifteen years old, she was a plain, brash little thing.

"You don't have Dad's lunch ready, do you?" She stopped with a sudden shyness when she spotted Don Juan.

"My daughter...this is Don Juan Roses—a gentleman, as you can see. Something you don't know the first thing about...way back when, Don Juan was like a father to me."

Don Juan didn't protest at the exaggeration. While the girl disappeared into the kitchen in search of some food—which, sure enough, wasn't ready and which Don Juan gathered had to be taken to the girl's father at work—Mercedes regaled him with her story. "She's the last of our

seven...there's just her and the oldest boy left. The others died one by one. God did us that favour..."

Don Juan had seen many things in his life, and he wasn't a man who spooked easily, but the dispassionate way Mercedes talked about her dead children made him shiver. He thought of his own daughter, who was the same age as Mercedes, who'd been brought up with the same principles as her—he even thought they'd gone to the same school—could his daughter talk like that, even after a life like the one Mercedes had led? Don Juan was sure she couldn't. Mercedes didn't ask Don Juan a single question about her old friend Carmen, the gentleman's daughter. So Don Juan didn't tell her she'd been living in the Americas for a good many years. That he was leaving now to die by her side, surrounded by love from her and his grandchildren...Mercedes didn't ask about Don Juan's two sons, either, and so Don Juan didn't tell her they'd died, and so had his grandson Juanito, who was still a boy when the war broke out...Don Juan couldn't talk about his beloved ghosts; instead he listened to a sordid story and a flood of complaints streaming out of that woman's mouth. He consoled her as much as he could and gave her some money. When he was about to leave, suddenly Mercedes asked him about María Rosa's children.

"They don't live in Barcelona—just the one daughter, who's married...oh! You know who's still around? Her mother-in-law."

"Doña Eloísa, the one who was against me getting married?"

"That's her. She lives with Lolita, María Rosa's daughter."

"Give me her address, won't you, Don Juan?"

Don Juan gave it to her with a vague feeling of regret. But what else could he do?

"Doña Eloísa really cared about me..."

"Yes, she's a poor woman—a good woman—but she's not in a position to help you."

“I’m not going to ask her for help. I’ll help *her* if that awful granddaughter isn’t taking proper care of her...”

Don Juan was convinced that Mercedes really had lost her marbles. “No, dear, that won’t be necessary. They live modestly, but they don’t need any help.”

“I won’t even give it to *her*—just to Doña Eloísa...that saint of a woman...”

Now Don Juan, lying in his cabin, started thinking about this Doña Eloísa, who he’d never taken much notice of even though he’d seen her a thousand times. She was tiny and tremendously wrinkled, although she must have been younger than him...she’d shrivelled up and shrunk down over the years, that fine old lady, and nobody had noticed. She’d never been pretty or clever or better or worse than a thousand women of her kind dedicated to their homes and their children, all rather dull and silent. And the poor disturbed Mercedes, who flew into a fit of rage or tears at the memory of her sister, smiled at the mention of this little old lady and called her a saint...

At long last, Don Juan closed his eyes. The sound of the sea lulled him to sleep. Behind his closed eyelids, the memory of the city lights getting further away still remained. In the end they vanished into his dreams.

\*

But the lights of the small city kept shining, reflected in the black, calm sea that sent out to the sleeping households the rhythmic murmur of waves. They kept shining until sunrise, and then once again, when the sun came up, they were replaced by the shining of its rays reflecting on all the windows. Mercedes didn’t sleep a wink all night.

She’d recited that piece so well! She hadn’t recited anything in front of anyone in years. Sure, sometimes, just sometimes, at dusk when there was no one around, she’d go to the city’s

outskirts, and on a rock overlooking the sea, she'd throw open her arms like Berta Singerman in a photo she'd seen. The last time she did that she got hit by a rock. Some boys were hiding, spying on her...since then she hadn't returned.

But that day...what was it Don Juan had said? "Yes, dear, you could still be a success in Barcelona. You're better than a good many actresses out there."

Her husband was asleep beside her, his heavy breathing a sound she knew well. Right next to their bed, their daughter slept in a cot. And around them there was nothing but darkness, heavy air, and the tick-tock of an enormous old alarm clock that would ring at five to wake the man up.

Mercedes longed madly to look at a portrait of herself, one with her in a gown that had a nice neckline, some flowers, and some white crêpe draped around her. She'd been stunning. She still was.

*A good hairdresser, a good masseuse...heh, heh! I've still got plenty of fight left in me...Don Juan told me I still look amazingly young. Poor old man—practically ready to make love to me, forgetting I'm young enough to be his daughter...yes, he really was just about ready to.*

The idea delighted her. Not just Don Juan, but many, many others—if she appeared in fine clothes, doing a reading...she still had that white crêpe and those artificial flowers that adorned her dress in her favourite photo.

Triumph...have them all at her feet. Then reject them, like a queen.

She couldn't keep still. She made a sharp movement and slapped her husband in the face, waking him up. The man gave a start. "Hey! What's going on? What time is it?"



“Nothing...what would you say if I went to see my family in Barcelona? They’ve invited me...”

“What? Yeah, right! Go wherever you want; the further away the better—and don’t bother me.”

*I’m going*, thought Mercedes. *I’m going*.

That simple thought made her heart feel young again and brought her to tears, like a prisoner watching their cell doors being opened. *I’m going*.

She had money. Don Juan had given her enough money. She’d dye her hair, she’d take care of her hands, she’d put on some perfume...she’d triumph. *Doña Eloísa will help me...yes, Doña Eloísa...*

She couldn’t remember very clearly what Doña Eloísa was like, but she was a very good woman. Of that she was sure. She’d intervened many times trying to get her aunt and uncle to forgive her...on her wedding day she’d wept...she would help her.

Throughout the days that followed, Mercedes kept clinging to the memory of the old woman. That memory gave her the nerve to prepare for her trip. She got a letter of safe-conduct. She sewed herself a new dress in secret. She dyed her hair with a bottle of peroxide, burning it in the process. Her husband flew into a rage and hit her. “So you’re going back to your family? Then go be with your family once and for all! For twenty-five years I’ve been listening to that bullshit. Let’s see if one glorious day you’ll finally disappear and leave us in peace.”

Mercedes bought a third-class ticket and left without saying goodbye. She didn’t know why, but she cried heavily when the train pulled out of the station. Later she calmed down.

The trip was uncomfortable. Almost unbearable. At that time the trains were jam-packed, and there was nowhere to eat in the stations. Nobody paid any attention to that woman even

though she looked so strange with her burned, bleached hair and a basket for her only luggage, which she watched over with the utmost care.

She had to transfer trains twice; she almost froze one night even though it wasn't winter yet. When she got to Barcelona, she saw with despair that her new dress was stained with soot, and so were her face and hands. It was eight o'clock in the morning. She felt stiff and shy. She walked into a bar and ordered a coffee.

At first she looked all around, suspicious. She thought that she'd find someone who recognized her—or that someone might interrogate her. No one said anything to her, and she ended up drinking her scalding drink with a strange satisfaction. She couldn't understand why she hadn't worked up the courage, in all those years, to do what she was doing now. She felt free and innocent. Like a schoolgirl on vacation.

She set off on her way a while later. She had to find her niece's house, Doña Eloísa's house. It was very hard to get her bearings in that city she thought she knew so well; the place seemed to her to have grown into something monstrously complex. She sat down on a streetcar with a queenlike air. She'd already forgotten about her blackened face and hands—and she'd gotten the wrong line.

She went around in a thousand circles, she walked, she asked around—finally she found the house. The doorwoman looked at her with suspicion. “You're looking for Doña Eloísa? Oh, well then!”

At the door to the apartment she had to endure the inspection of a maid, who afterwards, with a “Wait here!” closed the door on her and left her waiting there on the landing of the staircase.

A few minutes later the door opened, and in the doorframe appeared a little old lady dressed in black. The old lady had silver hair secured in a bun. Although Mercedes couldn't remember Doña Eloísa's face anymore, she guessed right away that it was her. "But don't you recognize me? Don't you recognize me?"

She threw herself into the old woman's arms before she had time to step back. Doña Eloísa was witnessing something very strange. A woman with burned, reddish hair in a green dress, her face completely covered in smudges and a pair of green eyes shining out. Doña Eloísa was afraid to extricate herself from this impulsive embrace. "My dear...are you sure you're not mistaken? I can't quite remember who you are."

"I'm Mercedes, María Rosa's sister."

"My goodness! Come in."

Mercedes followed the woman down a dark hallway. Then a door opened to reveal a cheerful room and a cheerful enclosed balcony full of windows, where two canaries sang in their cage and flowers opened in their pots. A young woman with a stern face was giving baby food to a one-year-old child, who didn't want to swallow it. She turned and her eyes widened in mild horror, and then in irritation, when she saw her grandmother being followed by that grotesque thing.

"Lolita dear, this is your Aunt Mercedes, who's just arrived."

"*My* aunt? Who?"

"Your mother's only sister."

Lolita wiped her hand on a serviette and then offered it to Mercedes. "Forgive me. I'd never heard of you."

A terrible silence fell. A silence only broken by the birds chirping.

Mercedes had collapsed into a chair in the dining room. It was a very pretty dining room that opened through a sliding door onto the spacious balcony, where Lolita was sitting with her son. It had a pleasant sitting room attached to it, too.

Mercedes looked at the paintings on the walls, the fruit bowl on the sideboard, and the white curtains around the balcony. “My goodness! It’s such a pleasure to be here!”

No one echoed this gleeful quip. Once again a remarkable silence fell over the women, stretching on for at least a minute.

### III

“It was you, Doña Eloísa, who told me, ‘If one day you get to the point where you can’t stand that monster anymore, run away; come and find my open arms. I’ll help you; I’ll protect you...’ For all these years of my life, I’ve thought of those words. And here I am.”

It was lunchtime. The family was at the table. Everyone was looking at Doña Eloísa—*everyone* being Lolita; her husband, a serious young man; and a cute blonde-haired boy of seven, who was looking admiringly at his great-grandma.

Besides this tender gaze, Doña Eloísa was garnering only looks of terrified astonishment. Mercedes was gobbling her food down as she talked. The others kept silent, barely able to eat a bite.

“That’s why when Don Juan Roses came to see me on your behalf, I knew it was destiny. I’ve come determined to get to work, to triumph. You’ll go with me backstage. Your respectability will protect me. Because the theatre can be such a dangerous place for a woman like me...and I don’t want...”

The couple's heads were swivelling back and forth as if they were mechanical figures on a clock, turning as it ticked. The two pairs of eyes were darting from Mercedes' extraordinary face to the old woman's just as astonishing face.

The old woman, who'd been timid as a bird for as long as Lolita could remember, didn't seem surprised at all by the explanation that crazy woman gave. There was even a spark of amusement in her eyes. "So Don Juan went to see you on my behalf?"

"Yes—if it weren't for that, I'd be dead. I was on the brink of taking my own life when he showed up."

Lolita couldn't contain herself. "Is that true? You sent Don Juan, Grandma?"

Her grandmother never lied. Everyone knew that. But for reasons no one could really grasp, the old woman didn't want to tell the truth, either. "My darlings...I'm so old I forget everything. It may well be that since I've thought about Mercedes so often over the years, the idea occurred to Don Juan..."

Now the couple was looking at each other. They must've said an awful lot in a second with just their eyes. The husband seemed to ask a question. The wife answered with a nod of agreement. Then he spoke. "The thing is...Mercedes, you need to think about where you're going to stay. We can't take you in here."

Mercedes sat up. She furrowed her brow. "Doña Eloísa will have the last word on that."

"Mercedes...this house belongs to Luis. He has enough to deal with having me here, the poor thing. But for tonight you can sleep in my bed..."

"No, Gram." It was a decisive no from Lolita; not even that pet name *Gram* at the end could soften it.

"Well then, we'll go this evening and find a little guest house..."

“If Doña Mercedes has any money.”

“I’ve got money.”

“Then there’s nothing left to talk about...and congratulations. We, however, don’t have a cent.”

Luis was furious, Doña Eloísa thought. After living through the brutality of the war years, people were like that now—bad-tempered and not very hospitable...and how nice of Mercedes to show up like this! Don Juan had opened up a lovely can of worms for her going to see her...there was no way Don Juan had told her that she, Eloísa, had—she’d almost never spoken to Don Juan! At least, she’d never spoken to him about Mercedes...

After that unpleasant conversation at lunch, the old woman had to suffer through interrogations and whispered rebukes. The newspaper was pulled out, and Luis flagged a list of rooms for rent at a reasonable rate. Mercedes left to find someplace to live, but the old woman couldn’t go with her. “You stay home, Gram—not at your age! Mercedes will know how to handle herself by now.”

Mercedes did know how. In the middle of the afternoon, she came back for what little luggage she had. The old woman whispered in her ear, “Tomorrow, eight o’clock, at the Church of...”

“What’s that you were saying to that nut of a woman, Gram?”

“Nothing, darling...”

“Is it true? When she got married, did you really tell her to leave her husband? That’s got to be a lie she’s concocted.”

The old woman put on her glasses to sew. “Yes, darling. I think I remember telling her something along those lines...”

“Grandma!”

The old woman blushed. After a while she settled down, and then she raised her eyes and peered over her glasses. She thought her granddaughter looked too stony-faced. “How old are you, my darling?”

“Come on, Gram. You seem to be acting pretty nutty today too. Twenty-seven.”

“Right, so you were two when Mercedes got married...Mercedes was just enchanting back then—and such a fool...”

“But you’ve always been so rational. I can’t believe you’d tell her something like that! And that she’d remember after twenty-five years, and you act like it’s perfectly normal...come on, I think you’re starting to lose it.” Luis was dumbfounded.

“You and Luis are too young. Of course you wouldn’t understand...”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning on going with her backstage...”

The old woman sighed.

“Poor Mercedes...there won’t be a backstage...”

“Obviously not...but she ought to be committed!”

\*

Luisito, the young couple’s oldest child, was pretending to be asleep while he peeked through his blonde eyelashes, watching “Gram”—his great-grandmother, who shared a small bedroom with him.

His parents had bought two identical little cots not too long ago. There was another boy in the house, and the old woman’s bed would be his later on. The old woman knew they were expecting her to die soon, because in these modern times people expect everything, and she even felt vaguely guilty for feeling so strong, so sprightly, so happy to be alive...maybe she’d live to

become a great-great-grandmother at this rate. Luisito could someday find himself stuck providing for her. That was an upsetting thought. The old woman had always been provided for, clothed, and cared for by someone. First, her parents. After she turned seventeen, her husband. Later on, her poor son. Then a grandson. Now, her granddaughter's husband...

"Gram's lucky. She comes from a generation of women who've never done anything...she's never been able to earn a cent."

"You've never earned a cent, Gram?"

"Never, my little darling."

"I'll make money for you when I'm grown up."

The old woman's heart was pumping well, and she still had a mysteriously intact set of teeth that made her look so young when she laughed, even with her wrinkles. Her sunken eyes sparkled, and they were softened by a remarkable set of dark, curly lashes that were perfectly childlike. Nobody noticed these little beauties of Gram's, but they did have a sense that she "had plenty of fight left in her" to last quite some time yet.

Little Luisito liked to watch her every night as she said her prayers. Sometimes Luisito was already asleep, but most of the time he woke up to the scuffle of her felt slippers on the floor, and he saw her in her white nightgown and a thick housecoat as she went and knelt down on the prie-dieu under the painting of the Virgin of Montserrat. There was always an oil lamp burning under the painting of the Virgin, and all through the night that light kept its vigil and fought off the darkness. That night when Doña Eloísa came in, the boy was wide awake. He'd heard his parents say unbelievable things about his gram. They seemed really angry. "Soon we'll end up having to lock her up...did you see how she was leading that lunatic on? She was



going to put her up in this house! Old people practically turn into children. We have to watch her so closely...”

Luisito watched her for a long time, but he couldn’t see anything strange about her. Now, as she prayed to the Virgin, she was the same lovely old lady she always was. True, she was covering her face with her hands, but she always did that, though it made Luisito feel terribly uneasy. It seemed to him that nobody covers their face like that except to cry.

The old woman was pondering the strange ways of Providence. *You’ve put her in my hands, my God. Maybe I can do something for her...at first I didn’t even realize it. I just got scared...*

Doña Eloísa had the humble conviction that God had only ever wanted very small, easy things of her. She’d been a careful steward of modest things she never considered hers, and grand acts of charity had been forbidden for her. Now she couldn’t even put a dime into the church collection plate because her granddaughter often forgot that her gram—as well looked after and respectably dressed as she was—might need some money for a little treat. And her gram never asked for it. She considered herself to be of a very average intelligence, someone who couldn’t serve as a guide to anyone other than through the example of her happiness. And though she’d never been lazy, she thought she’d done very little in her life. As far as she knew, she’d never saved any sinners, and she even suspected that her son, who was quite the skeptic, must’ve often thought when he saw how pious she was that *credulity*—in his words—was for simple-minded, timid souls, for insignificant people like his mother. That had filled her with distress quite often, though she’d never told anyone so. *You brought her to me, my God...and at first I didn’t understand.*

Doña Eloísa had cared for Mercedes when she was a charming child, so full of life and with just a few screws loose. She remembered it clearly: that hasty marriage of hers to some uncouth-looking man horrified her. She knew Mercedes was going into it as if she were issuing a challenge to fate. Even María Rosa, her daughter-in-law, quipped, “Thank heaven he seems like he can keep her under control. But I don’t really trust her not to run away with some violinist when you least expect it.”

The crack about the violinist left its mark on Doña Eloísa. “My dear, promise me that if sometime you’re thinking about doing something crazy, you’ll remember you have an old friend who won’t abandon you...before you do anything, come and talk to me.” Something ridiculous like that was what she’d said to Mercedes on her wedding day. Mercedes answered her haughtily that she was getting married for love and that she was more respectable than a good many holier-than-thou snobs she knew.

Then Mercedes disappeared. She didn’t even come back when her mother died. Nobody ever knew what had become of her marriage or of her life. But every day, Doña Eloísa had included her name in her prayers. And now she’d appeared. *I prayed to you every day for her, and now she comes to me...it’s Your will, Lord, but what can this poor old woman do for some poor demented girl who’s got delusions of grandeur and triumph, as if that will be her way of getting revenge for her whole life?*

The prayer went on. Luisito saw that the old woman really was wiping a few tears from her eyes as she stood up from the prie-dieu. Now she was coming towards him. The boy wasn’t pretending to be asleep. “Did Mama scold you, Gram?”

“No, child.”

“Is it true you’re a little old lady who’s kind of nuts?”

“I don’t know...I think I’m just a bit of a coward.”

\*

Mercedes didn’t show up the next day at the church Doña Eloísa went to every morning, where she’d arranged to meet with her. For a week, Doña Eloísa waited patiently for her. Finally she saw her one morning near the door of her house. She seemed even more unhinged than the day she’d arrived after her trip. She’d gotten thinner. “Doña Eloísa, if you don’t give me ten pesetas, I won’t have a bed to sleep in tonight.”

Doña Eloísa wanted to cross herself, like she did whenever she started on a difficult task, but she held back. “Every day I waited for you at the church...why haven’t you come? Come upstairs with me. We’ll share my snack.”

Lolita wasn’t home, which Doña Eloísa thought was a stroke of luck. At a corner of the dining room table, there was a blue cup on a clean serviette and a slice of yellowish bread—the kind of bread they had back then that would crack when it fell on the floor.

“Bring another cup for the lady, please.”

The maid stood firm. “There’s only that one cup of milk and that slice of bread.”

“That’s why I’m asking you to bring another cup. We’re going to share the milk.”

The milk was bad, but it was hot and comforting. It was carefully divided between the two cups. The old woman said she wasn’t hungry and gave the bread to Mercedes.

“This is how they eat in a fine household? This is how we should eat, poor as we are...”

“This is how it has to be these days. Lolita’s very good at managing the house. If I were in her shoes, I wouldn’t know *what* to do...sometimes it breaks my heart.”

“She’s just stingy.”

“No she isn’t, dear.”

Mercedes recounted her adventures, making Doña Eloísa swear not to tell her grandchildren about them. “Nobody needs to know about these struggles until I’ve triumphed...”

Mercedes didn’t have a regular place to sleep. She’d discovered some rooms for women where you could rest for not much money. A kind woman she’d met would watch over her luggage. She’d gone to the theatre twice, and she’d also applied to join the professional union, since she wanted to work.

“You’re very clever, dear. How did you find out so many things in such a short time?”

“I’m amazed myself...but I know people—hunger sharpens the mind, heh, heh!”

That nervous giggle of Mercedes’ was quite unpleasant. “I can’t give you ten pesetas, my dear, because I don’t have that—but I’ll give you something else...yes, I was thinking about it while we were eating. I’ll give you something else—but you have to promise me you’ll come back and see me. You can’t go on like this, alone, living that terrible life.”

“Terrible? You don’t know what a terrible life is...what was terrible was the life I led at that man’s side.”

“He seemed like a good man—but not for you. Maybe he’s been unhappy too.”

“*Him*? What more could he want than a wife like me? How could you say such a thing to me?”

“Do you have children?”

“Seven of them.”

“My goodness...where did you leave them?”

“Five of them died... The two left are all grown up, and they don’t love me. They took after their father...”

“But don’t you ever think about them?”

Mercedes furrowed her brow. “I don’t, no...I don’t. It’s time now for once in my life to think about me—me, I tell you, me...”

She was having some sort of hysterical fit. Lolita arrived in the middle of it. “Hey! What’s going on?”

“The poor thing,” replied the old woman. “She’s lost five children...”

Lolita was befuddled. “Good God! Well that’s a tragedy...”

She didn’t believe it one bit, and yet, of the thousand things she’d heard from the mouth of her aunt Mercedes, that was one of the few that were absolutely true. Mercedes calmed down right away. She’d developed a bit of a fear of Lolita. There was a pause.

“I can’t ask you to stay for lunch today, Aunt Mercedes.”

“Thank you; I’ve been invited someplace else.”

“I see you’re getting along well...you don’t think you’ll go back to your husband?”

“Never.”

“But after five children...”

Silence.

Doña Eloísa’s heart was pounding. *I’ve prayed to you, my God, and she’s heard me calling...but now...now I don’t know what to do.*

For the time being, the old woman did something practical. Out of Lolita’s sight, she gave Mercedes a heavy pocket watch. It was solid gold and studded with diamonds. An old piece of jewellery—the only one she still had. “Pawn it, my dear, and don’t stop coming to see me.”

“I’ll pay it back and then some when I’m famous.”

And when Mercedes left, Doña Eloísa faced the same old suspicion from her granddaughter. “Alright, I don’t know what kind of secret meeting you were having with

Mercedes in your room, but I'm asking you not to let that woman into my son's bedroom ever again...I don't know if you've noticed, but she's horrendously dirty. I don't know how you can stand to be around her."

"Of course, darling..."

\*

Mercedes was living in strange circumstances, but she was alive. She found a neighbourhood where her appearance didn't surprise anyone and a café where she could stay for hours, sheltered from the street. And some strange people—some strange women who thought her situation was very normal and who encouraged her in her fantasies. She wasn't nuts like her brute of a husband said, like her children and her neighbours said. With the proceeds from the watch she bought an evening gown fifth-hand. She'd gotten advice on the matter from a kind woman. A woman who was a little strange and who also told her to go out looking for men.

"I'm a lady."

"Me too. So what? You're still young."

"I want to be a performer, not a hooker."

"Up to you..."

The truth is that in those circles of shady people, there were few threats to Mercedes' virtue. You could almost say Mercedes didn't appeal to them.

Her friend told her about a place where performers would go up onstage impromptu. There, one night, she could put on that dress she'd bought and go make a name for herself. If people liked her, they might even hire her. That would be a start.

They arranged everything they needed to pull off this plan. Mercedes' heart was pounding like a young girl's. She had hardly any money left now, practically nothing...and

everyone around her was hungry. She'd longed for many things when she was with her husband; she'd thought she was living in poverty all those years...but true poverty was what she saw swarming all around her, and what she found herself embroiled in. For the first time she felt concern for others. She'd shared her money with some other people after she bought herself the dress. She was shaken hearing how that stocky, painted woman she called a friend had come home during the war only to find a little girl—her daughter—dead. Mercedes wanted to cry listening to her. "You don't know what it's like to lose a child."

And it seemed to Mercedes that she didn't. That all those little ones who'd died belonged to somebody else, some unfeeling woman far away. One morning she went to the church Doña Eloísa had told her about, and she waited for her at the door. The old woman felt the same uneasiness and the same perplexed joy as always when she saw her. "My dear...I've been praying for you. Have you run out of money?"

"No, Doña Eloísa. I'm here to ask you for a different kind of favour."

"You'll have breakfast with me, won't you?"

Lately Mercedes had been feeling a new sense of awareness stirring in her. An awareness that prodded her to think of others and be more thoughtful. "I've already eaten, Doña Eloísa, but I'll go with you."

And when they'd sat down in the cheerful dining room and the old woman was crumbling her bread into her milk, Mercedes took advantage of a moment when Lolita was out running errands to deliver the big news. "Tonight I'm making my debut."

The old woman choked. "What?"

"Yes, in a respectable establishment...You have to go with me."

The old woman started to cough so hard she had to be slapped on the back so she could breathe properly again. “Me? At night? I haven’t gone out at night since my late husband died...and I was twenty-five then...”

Lolita came home. “What’s going on, Gram?”

“Nothing, darling; things are going well for Mercedes...this evening she’s going to church with me. The exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is tonight, so we’ll go and give thanks to God...”

“Me?”

“Yes dear. Naturally. We’ll talk about everything then.”

Lolita was a picture of concern.

“So I’ll go then...you don’t need me for anything?”

“No, nothing. What would I need you for?”

And that evening after dark, they met at the church.

#### IV

Doña Eloísa spent the day in a state of terrible worry. She hadn’t felt such strong emotions, such deep bewilderment, in years. Thinking back, the only thing she could remember that was comparable to this feeling—the agitation, the racing heartbeat, the anxiety—was what she went through on her wedding day when she was just a girl.

She couldn’t eat or do her mending or come up with any stories to tell her great-grandson. When her granddaughter looked at her unexpectedly, she blushed. It felt like a horrible weight on her conscience, this request Mercedes had dropped on her to go out with her that night.



She knew the reasonable thing to do was to say no, absolutely not—to be outraged, even. Imagine: her, Doña Eloísa, leading the simplest of lives all her years only to demean herself sneaking off to a nightclub at age seventy—her grey hair lending legitimacy to the foolish whims of a disturbed woman!

She pictured the faces of her grandchildren, the face of her old spiritual director...

She pictured all this because something very deep inside her was pushing her to tell Mercedes yes, she would go with her. A very clear, insistent voice spoke out in the depths of the old woman's soul, explaining to her that by being there that night, she could keep that girl who was in her hands now from making one last wrong turn. She was so out of her mind, the poor thing, that she wouldn't understand the reasons she'd give for not going. She'd feel abandoned like a dog. She'd never come and see Doña Eloísa again, and that last little thread of light that was still tying her to a respectable life would snap and dissolve into the darkness forever. When she imagined the astonished face her spiritual director might make, Doña Eloísa latched onto the idea of consulting him with a burning desperation. If he definitively confirmed what Doña Eloísa was hearing from that forceful little voice saying charity doesn't always have to be a sensible thing, well then...not even a thousand grandchildren or a thousand domestic spats could keep the old woman from fulfilling her duty.

She hesitated for a few seconds before she dialled the number for the monastery where her spiritual director lived. He would say no.

She finally dialled. If Father Jiménez said no, then the answer was no...he'd know more about Christian charity than a poor old woman would. She would do as he said.

All her anxieties quieted down in an instant, and a great peace flooded over her as she dialled that number.

That spiritual state only lasted a few minutes—the minutes that went by before she was informed Father Jiménez wasn't in Barcelona and wouldn't be back until next week. *Nothing else I can do, my God; You want me to solve this myself.*

Lolita was watching her grandmother worrying with a bit of annoyance. *She's getting so absentminded—she hasn't given me a proper answer to anything I've asked her all afternoon. She's never shown any signs her mind was starting to go before this...but Luis is right: we've taken on such a burden bringing her to live here.*

Silently she searched every room for her grandmother, who'd abandoned her sewing a while ago. She found her kneeling at her prie-dieu beneath the painting of the Virgin. *Well then; as long as she's only carrying on with that...*

Once it was dark, the old woman left her room, looking very elegant with her hat on.

"Where are you going, Gram?"

"Church, my darling."

"I thought you were going on some kind of social call. Since you never wear a hat to church and you're not going to a wedding..."

"Yes, darling, but you only live once. If you wanted to come with me..."

"I've got too much to do at home to go out and prove my piety; you know that."

"I've never held that against you...forgive me for being so little help to you today with the sewing..."

Her granddaughter smiled her reluctant smile. It softened her face so much on the rare occasions it appeared. "Don't worry, Gram...you do more than what you can."

And the old woman felt terrible remorse. Not even the divine presence she felt in the Eucharist could soothe her distress. *Tell me something, my God; show me something...I've never*

*known how to solve anything. I've asked You for many things in my long life. Some You gave me, others You didn't; I always accepted Your will...and now, when I'm old, this woman I've prayed for so much comes to me—and I didn't know how to help her, how to guide her, and I don't think I've done any good. And she asks me for this insane favour, and I think the charitable thing to do is to grant her that favour, even if it might upset my grandchildren—even if they might have me locked up...*”

Mercedes found Doña Eloísa kneeling and crying when she got to the church.

Mercedes had spent the day in total euphoria as she rehearsed her reading. She'd tried on her evening gown in her friend's room, in front of that helpful, stocky woman who had such an odd life. Her friend offered to lend her several bracelets and a necklace with glistening glass beads.

Mercedes took some old tulle from the bottom of her basket. “Wouldn't this look good if I wore it like this, covering up my chest a bit?”

“Take that off—you have a lovely chest. Got to show it off.”

“Remember, you may've met me in these circumstances, but I'm a real lady. I've told you: anything for art's sake is fine, but beyond that...if I wanted to cheat on my husband, I'd have had plenty of opportunities to do it in the last twenty-five years. Besides, I've invited a lady I'm related to. A real gentlewoman.”

“Very good. That'll set the right tone...”

“Yes, I want to make my position clear. Strictly art. If one day I come across my husband and children again, I want *them* to be the ones on their knees begging *me* for forgiveness, not the other way around...”

“I didn't know you had children...”

Mercedes had met this woman when they were eating at the same table in a restaurant of very ill repute. She was an older woman with bags under her eyes. Her dress was very pretentious-looking but dirty and ratty. Despite that, she had painted nails, a hat on her head, and a threadbare fur around her neck. She seemed impatient with the poor service. “I don’t know how I put up with such rudeness. This restaurant’s convenient—it’s close to home, after all—but if it weren’t for that...”

“When you’re used to something else...”

This comment from Mercedes earned her affection. When she found she had a listener with a glorious past full of fabulous paramours ruined by her love and of travels on luxurious trains, that affection grew. When she found out Mercedes had left her unsympathetic husband and was on her own, determined to triumph through her own gumption, she immediately took her under her wing. That respectable demeanour Mercedes always brandished like a sort of passport was something she admired, though she thought it naïve. Mercedes told her she had family in Barcelona. “True upper-class people, you know? But I don’t want to depend on them to make my way.”

When Mercedes showed up one day with the old woman’s watch, this friend took charge of pawning it. It brought in a decent amount of money. The truth is she’d sold it. “If you’d pawned it, they’d have given you peanuts—maybe you’ll get it back when you have money.”

Mercedes didn’t like that one bit. “Doña Eloísa deserved better than that...she deserved better...”

“But you could get it back—oh come on! Instead of thanking me...”

Mercedes thanked her by giving her part of the money.

“I’ll take it as my commission,” said the friend in a dignified tone.

She'd already taken another commission in advance. But she didn't tell her that. In any case, she meant it when she said she really wanted to look out for "the poor gal."

"Do you only know that one about the dark swallows? It's always a crowd-pleaser, but it's been done to death."

Mercedes also knew that old poem, "*El tren expreso*." Her friend thought that was a better choice, and she put so much feeling into it.

When the time came for her meeting in the church, Mercedes went to look for the old woman. "I don't know what to wear—I have to go to the church."

Her friend, impressed, gave Mercedes her hat and her fur to cover her arms a bit, since Mercedes' dress was too much of a summer dress. "I think they allow sleeves that go down to your elbow. But you'll be more dressed up like this."

Mercedes shone in her glowing green dress, the same one she'd sewn in her little house far away, the one she'd worn for her journey. The church's lights were on. Mercedes entered with an air of defiance. No one noticed her. Almost unconsciously, she kneeled by the door. They were in the middle of the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

It was a strange, forgotten feeling. Mercedes had very rarely been inside a church since her wedding day. *I don't need to put on a pious show to be more honourable than anyone else, or to have more of a heart than my aunt and uncle, who threw me out of the house just for some girlhood mistake—because I was a performer at heart and they envied me...*

Now she was kneeling, trembling a little. She took advantage of the opportunity to make a timid request. *I don't really believe in You...but if I triumph tonight, I'll have a Mass said.*

This promise made her feel strong inside. She never asked for anything without paying it back...

Some of the lights went out. The sanctuary was closed. Some people were leaving now.

Mercedes searched with her eyes for Doña Eloísa. It was difficult to pick her out among all the ladies dressed in black. Finally, she saw her. As she got closer, she noticed she was crying. The tears were falling so silently down her wrinkled little face that she very well might not have even noticed them. It touched Mercedes' heart underneath her vivid dress. That lady had been indescribably good to her—for no reason at all. And she must've been really unhappy to be crying like that. Living with that nasty granddaughter must be so awful.

Silently, she kneeled beside her. Doña Eloísa seemed to feel her presence because after she dried her eyes with her handkerchief, she turned her face towards her. Mercedes couldn't grasp the shock Doña Eloísa got seeing her in that hat and that fur. For half a minute, the old lady's lips trembled before a welcoming smile could bloom on them. Then she crossed herself and stood up. And the two women went out into the September night.

"Will you come, Doña Eloísa?"

"I don't know, my dear. If we could go someplace we could speak comfortably...but I can't even buy you a coffee—"

"You can't? Don't worry. I've got it."

They went into a dairy bar. They couldn't have made a more outlandish pair. Doña Eloísa was wearing a very modest hat, a light jacket made of fine wool, and a black band around her neck. "Dear...if I'm going with you, it has to be without my grandchildren's permission. They would never understand why I'd want to go out at night. And them coming with me? Absolutely not. You'll understand that if I come, it's because I believe in you..."

"I won't disappoint you. I've seen the best actresses. They're nothing compared to me..."

“It’s not that. Even if you don’t succeed, I believe in you. I believe you’re a good woman, if an unhappy one, who’s trying to find her way, and I want to help you; I want to be here for you through your troubles so you don’t think some selfish old lady, when the time came, didn’t know how to be a Christian and left you all alone...but you’re going to do me a favour in exchange.”

“I will, I swear.”

“You’re going to give me your husband’s address. From what you told me about him, he’s a pretty crude man—kind of a brute, even—but he’s not bad. He loves your children, he works...if he’s laughed at you, if he’s angered you, it’s only because he didn’t understand you—but right now he’ll be worried not knowing where you’ve gone. Maybe he wishes you’d come back...your children will be missing you too. They can’t all have hearts of stone...I know they don’t.”

Doña Eloísa’s words were pouring out surprisingly easily—she was moved to her very core. A bit of her emotion spread to Mercedes. But she shook her head. “I won’t go back...you don’t know what it’s like to feel like you’ve been buried alive for years and years. Coming to believe you must be crazy. Lying down in bed for days at a time to see if death comes.”

The owner of the dairy bar monitored her only two customers of the evening with suspicion. A lady—a well-mannered, respectable old woman...and, no doubt, a low-class hooker...both of them crying.

Suddenly, Mercedes felt cold. For a second, she thought Doña Eloísa was the crazy one. She thought it was a stupid mistake, inviting her to her “debut.” If the old woman didn’t want to go, she wasn’t forcing her to. Now here she was babbling on about her husband and children. What did it matter to her? Then she noticed the wedding ring Doña Eloísa still wore on one of her thin fingers, and the memory of the watch her friend had sold came back to her. That poor

woman was just looking out for her...and she was such a stately old lady! That was the truth. Her friend still didn't believe the story she'd told about coming from a respectable family. That afternoon she'd told her she'd also left a country house, full of amenities and even luxuries, to heed the call of her art. If Doña Eloísa went with her, her friend would believe it.

\*

“Do I have to give you my husband's address for you to go with me?”

“Yes, you do.”

Mercedes gave it to her, and Doña Eloísa felt something like a triumph in that. She didn't know why it was a triumph...she hadn't set her mind to do anything in particular. She felt feverish.

“Now, my dear, I can't go home—they wouldn't let me leave. That's for sure. You're going to call on my behalf and say I've been invited to dinner by some friends, and they should leave the apartment key under the doormat...that's where we leave it for my grandson sometimes.”

Mercedes did as she was told. “That's done. The maid's taken care of it...she didn't really understand at first, but I repeated it for her.”

“May God's will be done!” The old woman's cry came out smothered, like the words of someone condemned to death.

Afterwards, Doña Eloísa found herself caught up in the only adventure she'd ever had that was worth being called that. She walked into an unfamiliar neighbourhood full of dirty alleyways. She went up to a strange, dark old apartment. In a tiny room, a monstrous woman welcomed her. That woman alone could fill the room with her flesh, but there was also a bed with grey sheets, a wardrobe with a mirror, and a sort of dressing table loaded with junk. From



crumpled up nylons to tubes of lipstick, a box of mascara, a monstrously large powder compact, a photo of a man dancing, and even a half-eaten sandwich.

The woman seemed to squeeze herself in a bit so Doña Eloísa and Mercedes could fit. Immediately she started to chat, apologizing for the poor condition of the room. “I haven’t always lived like this...I’m going through the same thing as this girl—It’s luck, fate. Some have a lot; others, not so much. For some life is easy; for others it’s hard.”

Doña Eloísa kept her lips glued shut. She just smiled. She was thinking that the truth was life wasn’t very easy for anyone. Lolita, for instance, would find it easier and cheaper to leave her house dirty and unkempt, and to let the boys be tramps with snot running down their faces, and if Luis got angry, to just lie in bed and think of death like that idiot Mercedes had done for years...

The old woman’s smile hardened. Yes, Mercedes was an idiot, and so was she. She was very sorry she came. And she didn’t dare to say it.

“Life is unfair—so unfair,” the fat woman continued on. “If God existed, He wouldn’t allow this to happen.”

At this, the old woman got angry. She was so unaccustomed to getting angry that the only thing that came out of her was a trembling little voice. “I know one thing... God exists, and misfortune can come in many forms. At our house we went hungry during the war, but the place wasn’t dirty or neglected because my granddaughter is a heroic woman. Her reward is in her clean conscience and her husband’s respect. And there are so many men and so many women like her who make sacrifices—is that unfair? Money isn’t everything: neither is youth or health. I’ve lived a long life and I know that.”

“I’m not trying to pick on you, ma’am. You’re a very good woman; anyone can see that. But I assure you I’m not bad either...ask this girl who in this city has taken her in: your granddaughter or me?”

Doña Eloísa didn’t know how to get out of there. She felt like she was in a nightmare.

“Come on, cheer up. I’ll pour you a little drink.”

Doña Eloísa took the drink and sat down, genuinely feeling her spirits lift. When they arrived at the venue for the “debut,” she was even enjoying herself. There was an orchestra and lots of well-dressed people sitting at the tables...and badly dressed people too. Everything was so unusual. On a platform, the performers were going up to do their act. Almost all of them were singers. They were getting hearty applause. Doña Eloísa started to understand how addictive that applause could be.

When Mercedes went up onto the platform, her heart started to pound madly.

She was horrible. Her dress was horrible. Her hair, all burned to wisps with her dark roots showing, was horrible. Those glass beads she’d put on were horrible...but they applauded for her before she started. She waved. Then she opened her arms and threw her head back, and she began. Doña Eloísa closed her eyes so she wouldn’t see her, only hear her voice. And her voice was pleasant, full. And she was reciting something very sentimental, something Doña Eloísa knew and liked.

*Oh, my goodness, she’s got talent!* This internal cheer from Doña Eloísa was cut off by a few irrepressible guffaws that were erupting at the tables. The old woman opened her eyes, stunned.

Mercedes, almost in a trance, didn’t notice anything and carried on...

The laughs grew stronger and more brazen. A young man in a formal suit was holding his stomach, as if he were making himself sick from laughing so much.

Mercedes, frightened, stopped her reading. The laughs grew lower. Then came the voices. “Keep going! Keep going!”

Mercedes kept going, her voice trembling slightly. But she wasn’t so sure of herself anymore; she was looking off to the sides, she was stumbling on her words...

That scene, that agonizing spectacle Doña Eloísa was watching, was highly amusing from the sound of it. But between the laughs she could hear boos and whistles. Someone yelled something indecent.

Mercedes stopped. She stood with her hands on her hips and hurled an insult at the audience. The boos were deafening.

Mercedes left the stage. She stepped on her skirt. She was about to fall. When she got to the table where the old woman and her friend were waiting for her, she burst into tears, hopeless.

Doña Eloísa was shaking. She looked around her. The audience had already turned their attention to a new performer. Nobody took any notice of them.

Mercedes’ friend managed to calm her down. “That was really dumb of you. You shouldn’t have gotten nervous. You completely ruined it. Come on, don’t cry. Lucky you’re young...”

“Write to my husband, Doña Eloísa...I’m going back...”

The old woman silently held out her handkerchief to that poor, weeping woman. Then she spoke: “Darling...don’t be ridiculous; you don’t have any more reason to go home now than you did before. Those rude people just don’t understand your art; that’s all it was, and nothing more...you shouldn’t give up hope.”

Mercedes listened...that old lady really was an odd duck. “You liked it?”

“Very much, my darling...you’ve got a lot of talent.”

There was no doubt that Doña Eloísa was being serious. She never lied; Mercedes knew Doña Eloísa wasn’t lying...besides, she was contradicting herself. A while ago, she was acting like a lay preacher, and now she was telling her not to get discouraged—that she was an artist. Unfortunately Doña Eloísa seemed to Mercedes to know very little about that subject.

“Now calm down, sip your little glass of cognac, and to bed...”

Mercedes, her elbows on the table, buried her face in her hands. That affectionate suggestion to get some rest filled her with grief and reminded her she didn’t have a bed, other than a rented straw pallet in a room she shared with old beggar women.

Her friend seemed to read her mind. “Tonight you’re coming with me to my room, gal; you need your rest...but before that we’re going to walk this lady home: she probably won’t know how to get back by herself.”

## V

Father Jiménez did a much better job of reassuring Luis and Lolita than the doctor had. The doctor had been called the day after the old woman’s night out; he said she just had a nasty cold and a touch of the blues. When they asked him about the woman’s mental faculties, he seemed very surprised. He said she seemed to him to be completely in her right mind. But that left Lolita and Luis feeling just as worried. A strange feeling of embarrassment kept them from telling the doctor the old lady had gotten home at two in the morning, and what’s more, she refused to say where she’d been. “I’ll only tell that to my confessor, and if he says I must, I’ll tell you too. If not...I only ask you to forgive me for the fright I’ve caused you.”

The old woman didn't leave the house for eight days, and for all that time, the whole family was anxiously waiting for Father Jiménez to get back to his monastery. Finally he came back, and finally he came to see Doña Eloísa. After he'd been alone with her in her room for a good while, he left smiling, a wry little spark dancing in his eyes. "It's nothing, nothing—no need to worry. Doña Eloísa's as sane as you or I. I'm not allowed to tell you where she went that night, but I *can* tell you she went out for altruistic reasons...she performed an act of charity. Maybe it was miscalculated; maybe it was futile...but it was charity nonetheless. Please don't worry so much, and let her go about her normal life; it won't happen again..."

"But it's just—there are things...my little boy told me that the next day, Grandma gave him a letter, with the stamps on and everything, and told him to put it in the mailbox and not to say a word to anyone. And yesterday she got another letter, a really strange one she wouldn't show us, and it made her cry."

"I know, I know...but none of that matters."

So Lolita and Luis had no choice but to settle down and let their curiosity go unsatisfied. The old woman went back to taking communion every day, and her sunny, peaceful expression reappeared. Sometimes, however, she'd let out a sigh, and then her granddaughter would watch her with worry.

The old woman had gotten an answer to the letter she'd sent Mercedes' husband. Her eldest son was writing, since his father, according to the boy, "due to his distress has come down with pneumonia." As Mercedes' son described, everyone wished she would come back, "and it has pained us to remember all the times she threatened to leave us and we didn't listen to her." Her husband understood "that she is doing very well now with her wealthy relatives in Barcelona," but he asked her to think of her daughter, who was just a girl, and "it isn't proper for

her to be alone in the house, especially with what wicked tongues could say.” As for him, he asked her to forgive him for his temper, but “she already knows that the main thing is she never went without,” and he wasn’t a drunk like some other men. And now he realized that when she was gone, “something is missing in the house,” that he wasn’t used to sleeping alone, that “he’s even lost sleep.” They were all awaiting a letter from Mercedes, in her own handwriting. Then they ended with the news that her son’s wife was going to make her a grandmother, and although they’d had their differences, her daughter-in-law also understood “that Mercedes is a lady and she has a right to her eccentricities,” and she wished that “whatever they have, she will be holding the child by the baptismal font.”

This was the letter that had made the old woman cry and weighed on her soul until Father Jiménez forbade her from feeling sad about it. He told her she didn’t need to feel the least bit sorry and it was nonsense to think Mercedes would’ve left her husband because of Doña Eloísa, as the poor old woman in her distress had come to fear. The worst part was there was no way of letting Mercedes know her family’s response, because Mercedes seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth. The old woman didn’t dare speak her name to avoid tipping off Lolita, who with her habitual lack of imagination suspected something at first but ended up not making the connection between her grandmother’s night out and that strange, half-crazy aunt of hers. They weren’t sure how, but Lolita and Luis came to the reassuring conclusion that Doña Eloísa had spent that mysterious night keeping vigil over some dead beggar in the neighbourhood. That was how close to a month went by until one Sunday afternoon. The old woman was alone in the house with her youngest grandson when someone knocked at the door, and there was Mercedes. Her violent green dress was very clean and ironed, her brown roots stretched almost halfway down the length of her hair, and her face was unpainted but apparently well washed.

After a long and mysterious silence, Mercedes made a big announcement. She'd gotten herself a job as a maid-of-all-work in a modest household where they treated her just fine.

At first, the old woman didn't realize a miracle had happened, because people always think miracles are complicated, spectacular things. But little by little, as Mercedes was talking, the old woman realized maybe she wasn't so far off the mark in thinking Divine Providence had had a big hand in this matter, and she, Doña Eloísa, may've been its humble instrument.

The day after her "debut," after Mercedes spent the night in that nightmare room with her portly friend, she got angry with her. "She told me she wasn't going to have me living there for free for the rest of my life, and she suggested I do things no lady can accept...we fought and she ended up keeping all my things, except this dress—it was the only thing I had on when I left there..."

Mercedes spent the whole morning roaming the streets, but her head was clearer than it had ever been in her life. She started thinking and thinking...the things the old woman had said about her granddaughter Lolita the night before were swirling around in her head. She thought, for the first time, that if in all those years of her marriage she'd been so miserable, maybe a bit of the blame fell on her too. She hadn't managed to find joy in her children. She hadn't thought of anyone else but herself. She'd been in a daze. "But now I've lived. I've realized what real misery is. And that I'm not the only one suffering; other people are too...I don't know how to say this, Doña Eloísa: it feels like I've become a different person..."

Doña Eloísa looked at her. She watched her speaking slowly, not playing up her story, not lying...she was, indeed, a different woman.

Mercedes had one big regret. The old woman's watch, which she wouldn't get back now. "That was what gave me the idea to become a maid...listen, you know I was brought up in silk

diapers—There are many things I might do, but stealing from someone who's been good to me...no, that I don't do. You'll never be sorry you helped Mercedes. I'm working. Cent by cent I'll save that money, Doña Eloísa..."

The old woman started to cry. Mercedes thought she must've been upset she'd lost her jewellery. But Doña Eloísa, between sobs, was laughing like a blessed fool.

Mercedes didn't really understand what the old woman said to her that afternoon, because the poor lady, in her emotional state, was talking a little incoherently. She was saying things about a call from God reaching Mercedes' heart, something that sounded insane to Mercedes, but she didn't dare argue. Then she showed Mercedes the letter from her son. "Think it over...they don't know what you've been through. God knows I didn't lie in my letter, but I didn't tell them anything either...they think you're doing very well and if you come back, it'll be out of pure love. If everything you've told me is true, and just as you've started a new life here you're willing to start one back home, then you're saved. You know now that they love you...forget about the watch; it was my gift to you—I've never given anyone a better gift in my life. Think about getting together the money to buy your ticket home, to clean yourself up a bit, to pick up a little present for your daughter...don't you feel happier just thinking about it?"

Mercedes felt deeply peaceful, and yes, happy—it was as if she'd been very sick and then some strong medicine had cured her. Suddenly, everything looked so natural to her, so simple, so clear...she even thought the old woman was waving her hands too wildly. Of the two of them, she was the calm one. She felt stronger knowing that.

She was a little late getting back to the house where she was working, and her mistress scolded her curtly. She didn't say a word in reply. She didn't talk about her rich relatives or her satin diapers. Nothing. Silence.



When she went to bed that night, she thought about her husband with a touch of tenderness—how he couldn't sleep, how he felt so alone in the bed...who'd have thought?

She remembered the string of inhospitable beds she'd slept in. This one she was lying in now was uncomfortable compared to the wide double bed she and her husband shared. "It's only for a little while—just a little while," she murmured.

A wide, sunny path in her life was opening before her. She didn't think it was the same path she'd followed to the brink of madness. She didn't think much of anything about it.

She was half-asleep when she had a thought that felt truly joyful to her: *There's nothing like travelling to make you realize things, to get to know what life is.*

And later on an idea came to her: in one of the windows at her house, she'd hang white curtains like the ones around Lolita's balcony.

If she could've seen Doña Eloísa at her prie-dieu, wordlessly shouting a joyful hallelujah to God, Mercedes would've smiled knowingly. Doña Eloísa was too kind for anyone to spoil her fantasies and explain to her that miracles don't exist...she'd been a little out of her mind. Then she'd suffered horribly, and she'd gotten better. The journey had been something like one of those treatments they give insane people that either kills them or cures them.

That's what Mercedes would've thought. And if she'd explained that to Doña Eloísa, the old lady would've nodded—and then gone on giving thanks to God just as enthusiastically. Because Doña Eloísa and Mercedes had a different idea of what a miracle is. That's all.

## Appendix B: Interventionist Translation

Note: Interventions in the text are indicated with highlighting.

### The Call

#### I

This story begins with the sun rising over a small port in southern Spain, some time after the end of **that civil war of ours**.

The sea was smooth with a copper glow as the sun began to warm it on the horizon, and there, in a red line, it blended into the sky for a few minutes. Then the light flooded the landscape and turned the water a silvery blue under a sky scarcely clouded in the heat. On the water's surface you could spot some fishing boats floating, motionless, and the silhouette of a steamboat, getting clearer and clearer as it approached the port. **At the helm, the pilot guided it smoothly past the war debris, the skeletal remains of sunken ships and the lurking menace of underwater mines, and steered it safely towards the docks.**

The vessel that was coming in was a cargo ship, and it was headed to a port in the Americas. It was also carrying a few passengers below. These were people in no great hurry to get to the other side of the world, or they'd rather take the long way in exchange for a fairly reasonably priced ticket and the chance to say goodbye to their homeland, making stopovers in unexpected ports like the one they were headed towards.

From the deck, the passengers could clearly see the small city, so bathed in light as the sun's rays gleamed in the houses' window panes that it looked dazzling. All of them wanted to go ashore—even one seventy-odd-year-old man. Very well-dressed and sporting an old-fashioned white beard, he seemed out of place on the boat.

At first glance, that man brought to mind images of a leisurely life led in a house sheltered from the cold by heavy curtains, with an elderly maid wearing canvas shoes and walking silently so as not to disturb his thoughts. He also made you think of big Christmas dinners with him presiding over the table, the patriarch of many children and grandchildren; of pleasant rides in horse-drawn carriages; and even of good deeds doled out reasonably, accompanied by good advice. That gentleman with his serene, handsome features reminded you of a fine well-to-do gentleman from the nineteenth century. Which contrasted sharply with the eight or ten other passengers, all people stamped with that special hallmark of uprooting and adventure.

If this gentleman in his impeccable dark grey coat—a look that helped him hang onto the remnants of his old distinction as he stood among the other passengers in their summer suits—hadn't been leaning on the handrail of the cargo ship that day, and if he hadn't felt the impulse to get off and get to know the city, this little story would never have been written. Another could have been written (an even sadder one, no doubt), but this one, I'm almost certain, could not have been.

The gentleman's name was Juan Rosas, and in his day he'd been a doctor with a good clientele, but Don Juan had given up the art of medicine years ago. No one else on that ship knew these details, nor did they know the reason why he was travelling to the Americas. Maybe the captain alone knew. But maybe the captain, with all he had on his mind, had forgotten.

Don Juan went ashore after breakfast. With sadness, he studied the dirtiness and the desolation of the streets. He looked on, impassive, as a swarm of scruffy kids gathered around him asking him for change. Eventually he managed to find a little garden, some clean streets, and a café—its terrace dotted with little tables where people could sit facing the sea. Don Juan sat

down in a wicker chair by one of those tables, and he lit up a cigar. Then he started to puff on it slowly. He had large, perfect hands. In his youth those hands had been full of masculine beauty, tender and long-fingered. The years had left them unsteady, but they still had their charm.

The bells of a church were ringing. Though it wasn't a holiday, Don Juan wavered between staying here to enjoy his moment of quiet relaxation and answering their call. That day, by chance, was a special day for the gentleman. It was his birthday. A light smile flitted across his lips when he realized he couldn't remember exactly how old he was turning. Seventy-seven? Or was he seventy-eight? The uncertainty hung over him for a few seconds, and then he took another puff on his cigar. He thought back to his date of birth and did a quick calculation. Only seventy-seven. That call of the church bells started up again and beckoned to him once more. He sat up a little straighter, ready to get up. At that very moment the waiter, who'd been invisible until then, appeared, depriving him of his view of the sea. "What'll it be?"

Don Juan considered telling him right now, nothing, he'd come back a little later, and if the waiter would be so kind as to tell him the shortest way to that church whose bells were ringing so close by—but Don Juan, when he lifted his hazel eyes to answer the waiter, felt like his words had dried up, and he sat for a few seconds in silence. "I'll have a coffee, please."

The gentleman thought he'd seen a ghost in that young waiter. He felt uneasy. The waiter's wide face; his ugly, turned-up, highly distinctive nose; that thick, black hair; and the beady little olive green eyes—his whole face, in short, looked incredibly familiar to Don Juan. *I'll look him over more slowly. When he comes back, I'll get a really good look at him,* he thought.

When the waiter returned, the resemblance Don Juan had spotted in the boy's face didn't vanish; it only grew. He looked a lot like someone who'd, a good many years ago, been a

classmate of Don Juan and his close friend his whole life, without envy or professional jealousy or—to be perfectly frank—the friend’s aggressive personality souring that relationship. That boy, if his thick-lipped mouth with its low corners were surrounded by a bushy black beard...yes, he’d have been his friend, Carlos Martí himself, brought back to life. “Young man, I’d like to ask you a bit of a personal question.”

(That slight raising of his eyebrows—that special, deeply scornful movement of his lips that sometimes earned Carlos the trust and excessive deference of his clients and other times just frightened them...) “Go ahead, sir.”

Don Juan cleared his throat, and his eyes came across the waiter’s hands: they were coarse and hardened, his nails buried into his flesh. Don Juan started to hesitate...there could be no hands more different than this man’s and those of his friend Carlos, who’d been dead for twenty years. “It’s nothing...it will sound ridiculous to you. It’s just that you have an almost staggering resemblance to a person I was very fond of...surely, you’ll never have heard the name Carlos Martí.”

The waiter blushed almost imperceptibly under his tanned skin. “Yes, sir. If you’re talking about a doctor from Barcelona who died a long time ago, I have heard of him: he was my mother’s uncle.”

“But how—I know María Rosa’s children...”

“My mother told me she’s got a sister by that name. Her name’s Mercedes.”

The gentleman’s brow furrowed slightly until his memories grew strong and clear, bringing to him the image of his friend leaving mass on Sundays with two girls in big hats, curly locks spilling out from under them in a cascade down to the girls’ shoulders. They didn’t live with Carlos, those two, but it brightened up his childless marriage having them spend the

holidays with him. “Yes, now I remember your mother perfectly; she was very blonde...is she still alive?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your aunt’s dead—you heard? During the war...” Unconsciously Don Juan had started speaking more familiarly to this young man. It seemed impossible for him not to.

“Look, sir, we’ve never had any contact with my mother’s side of the family.”

All of a sudden, the gentleman remembered an old story. Those things didn’t depress him; they seemed to rejuvenate him. He realized in the last few years he’d been feeling very alone, unable to talk to anybody about that life of his that was behind him now. A sudden urge struck him. “I’m just passing through here for a few hours. My ship leaves tonight...I’d really like to be able to say hello to your mom.”

The waiter stared pensively at the metal tray he was holding in his hands; he drummed on it lightly. “Listen, sir,” he said finally. “I don’t think you should go...”

“Why, my boy?”

“My mother, poor woman, is—let’s just say she’s missing a few marbles. Her house, it’s really neglected. It’s not that it matters to me: I don’t live there. I’m a married man...but for your sake. You might not like it.”

“Look, my boy: Carlos Martí, who looked so much like you, was like a brother to me, and my daughter played with your mom many times. These days, with this mess the country is in, being poor is nothing unusual. What’s unusual is not being poor.”

With his little olive eyes, the young man looked wryly at the strange man with the white beard. “We’ve always been poor, sir—it’s not that...but if you insist, I’ll give you what you want and tell you the address.”

“Please do, my dear boy. What’s your father’s last name?”

“López—José López. ‘Sergeant,’ that’s how the whole neighbourhood knows him. They call my mother ‘Sergeantess.’”

The old man’s brow darkened.

“I’m telling you this, sir, so you’re not caught off guard. Besides, my father left the army before I was born—so I have no idea why they keep calling him Sergeant...sir, I think you’re not going to like this visit...but it’s up to you.”

When Don Juan was standing up to leave, he gave him the last instruction. “At the address I’ve given you, you’ll find a lumber warehouse. Don’t hesitate: go right in and go through the courtyard. There’s a staircase at the back. Go up it. You’ll find the door straight away.”

“Thanks, my boy.” Don Juan would have liked to hug that taciturn boy. He didn’t dare.

Mercedes Martí’s house was far away. Not very far, because in that small city all the distances were short, but it was as far as it could be from that café where her son worked.

As Don Juan got closer, he realized that this was a poor neighbourhood, but the old man enjoyed walking through there; the houses were clean and whitewashed. Through some of the doors you could see little courtyards brimming with flowers. Never in the city had he seen anything more cheerful. The bright morning light made the sky shine over the alleyways like a blindingly blue canopy.

Dark-haired, half-dressed children were playing everywhere. Sometimes from the sea came a gust of fresh, salty air. Don Juan tried to remember Mercedes Martí and her story more clearly.

Mercedes and her sister, María Rosa, were the daughters of Carlos' only brother, who'd died very young. Carlos gave his sister-in-law some financial support to pad out her small widow's pension, and Carlos' wife, the generous Ana María, loved the girls very much. In fact, she spoiled them too much. She liked to buy them dresses, take them on outings, show them off—after all, the girls were very pretty. Especially Mercedes. Now Don Juan remembered Mercedes was the prettiest. Slender and blonde, with big green eyes. She looked like a little princess. Ana María was enchanted by her. She ended up bringing the girl to her house for longer and longer stretches of time. She tried to find a good husband for her, but Mercedes was hard to please. María Rosa, meanwhile, got married straight away. True, she was the oldest. She married an assistant to Carlos, a very nice boy...as for Mercedes, Don Juan almost couldn't remember what had happened to her. She was a very passionate, romantic girl. She did very good dramatic readings, and she got her aunt and uncle quite upset all the times she proclaimed she wanted to be a dramatic actress. Things took a pretty bad turn when one day, an eighteen-year-old Mercedes ran away from home. They were lucky enough to find her before, in the clutches of an unscrupulous man calling himself a theatre impresario, she could cross the border...it was a real scandal, and it cost Ana María her life. She'd gotten very sick from the shock of her niece's disappearance. A few months later she died.

As for Mercedes, once they got her back, she never spent another second in her aunt and uncle's home. She was returned to her mother, absolutely forbidden from ever setting foot in that house again. Not even Don Juan ever dared to ask about her. He didn't know how—surely through his daughter, who was a close friend of the other sister, María Rosa—but he came to find out she'd gotten married and gone to live far away.



Little by little, Don Juan had forgotten Mercedes. He'd kept up the family friendship with María Rosa after her aunt and uncle died. María Rosa herself had died as Don Juan tried to treat her—from the wounds she'd suffered in a bombing. Her children were such good kids, **he thought to himself...**

Don Juan stopped in front of a pair of carriage house doors, opened wide to reveal an open courtyard with an arbour. Underneath it were stacks of pine boards. That house didn't look like the other ones in the neighbourhood. It was big, run-down, and practically derelict. But that courtyard where hens pecked and a big ginger cat stretched out had a special charm and a strong aura of peace to it. When he walked in, Don Juan realized the courtyard was surrounded on the second floor by a sort of hallway, with clothes hanging on the railings and many doors open. It was a tenement house. Don Juan went up the stairs and knocked at the first door in that hallway, as he'd been told. A sudden shyness overpowered him when he realized it was lunchtime. But he couldn't turn back now. He knew he wouldn't be able to return that afternoon, that the urge that had pushed him to visit Mercedes wouldn't return.

It was almost with relief that he saw no one was answering. At other doors a few curious faces had appeared.

“Who are you looking for, old boy?”

Don Juan wasn't used to hearing himself called that. He furrowed his brow. “Is this where Don José López lives?”

There was a silence and a question exchanged in the glances between two or three women. Don Juan felt vaguely annoyed. One of them approached him. “You wouldn't be, by chance, Don Policarpo, the notary from the Calle Alta?”

“No, dear. I'm not from here.”

“Well then...listen, if you’re looking for Don José López, ‘Sergeant,’ he lives there, and if you pound good and hard on the door, maybe they’ll open it; the wife’s a little out to lunch, and sometimes she doesn’t want to hear...but as for whether she’s home, she sure is. I saw her go in myself a bit ago.”

That helpful woman didn’t wait for Don Juan to follow her advice and started to bang on the door herself, as if she wanted to knock it aside, while she hollered, “Mercedes! A visitor!”

One by one, people had been filling up the hallway. Women, children, and even a few men were watching the situation unfold with curiosity.

Two or three minutes later, a small window beside the door opened just a crack. Don Juan could barely glimpse the profile of a woman’s face and the glint of a pair of eyes.

“Mercedes, this gentleman is standing here waiting for you.”

Then came a full voice, a harmonious and deep-toned call. “I’ll be there right away.”

Don Juan had completely forgotten that voice.

## II

At around twelve o’clock at night the cargo boat set sail, charting a course for some other ports before it would begin its direct route to the Americas. Don Juan watched the lights of the port grow further away, the modestly shimmering dots of the city growing closer together until in the distance, they looked like a fistful of stars. Suddenly those stars disappeared into the night and Don Juan was cold. Slowly he walked up to his cabin. He shared it with a young man who had a large scar running across his face. On the day Don Juan first met him, that man had filled him with distrust. By now he’d gotten used to his presence, and he thought that by the end of this long journey, he might even go so far as to develop a soft spot for him. The man with the scar

hadn't gone to bed yet. Don Juan opened the porthole; the cabin was too hot compared to the air on the deck. He couldn't sleep for quite a while.

He wasn't sure if he'd done the right thing visiting Mercedes. At first she said she didn't remember the gentleman. Then she burst into tears when she found out her uncle and sister had died. "Those two ruined my life, Don Juan, but I don't bear them any ill will."

Don Juan took in the sight of her. According to the gentleman's calculations, Mercedes wouldn't have turned fifty yet. Her voice still had a special charm to it, and no one could say she looked especially old for her age. Her face—at least in the shadowy little shoebox of a room where Don Juan saw her—had almost no wrinkles on it, or maybe none at all...but something terrible had happened to her. That sort of slender, anxious little princess was gone without a trace. She was a hefty, unkempt woman. Her hair was uncombed and no longer blonde, her nails were dirty and split, and her heavily stained housecoat seemed to give off an unbearable cooking odour that overwhelmed the whole room. At one point, Don Juan saw she was missing a tooth. She noticed the gentleman staring. "It was my husband—a smack to the face..."

"What do you mean, my dear?"

"My husband cracked my tooth when we were fighting, and they had to pull it...heh heh! That's life. That's what my aunt and uncle drove me to when they forced me to abandon my calling. Don't you think?"

Don Juan didn't know what to say. "How were you married?"

"By the Church."

That surprised Don Juan. Not a civil "marriage," then. Unlucky. "I can hazard a guess, but..."

“Yes—I was beautiful and I was talented, but after my uncle cut us off, my mother and I were dying of hunger, and besides, I’d been locked away, so to speak. My husband was finishing his military service then. He was a fine-looking man. He tricked us—he tricked me. My mother didn’t care; she just wanted to get rid of me and go live with María Rosa...now I remember there was just one person who told me I’d be crazy to go through with the wedding. It was María Rosa’s mother-in-law. But I thought it was out of self-interest, so that her son wouldn’t have to take in my mother, and that made me want to do it more. My fiancé said he had some land around here—and he did; you bet he did...but it all vanished. My mother told me the love would come to me when we had children. We had children, but I didn’t get any love—heh, heh! Love, what a joke! We can’t even look at each other. When I have money and I can get to a theatre, I’ll run away to the stage...so he’s always being a thorn in my side—because I haven’t given up on my passion...and I could still give plenty of actresses a run for their money when I do a reading—want to hear me?”

The question was asked with a touching enthusiasm. Don Juan said yes. Then Mercedes stood up. She opened her arms, and throwing her head back, closed her eyes. Don Juan wanted to cry. He thought he’d lost his ability to get emotional in his old age, but that woman stirred an immense pity in him. In spite of the whistle that sometimes escaped from between her teeth, her voice had an uncommon charm. Indeed, **he thought**, maybe years ago she’d had talent.

Someone knocked on the door. Mercedes didn’t take the slightest notice.

“Mom, open up!”

“That must be your daughter,” said Don Juan timidly, since it was a young girl’s voice.

Mercedes furrowed her brow. Then she shrugged her shoulders, and sure enough, when the door opened, in came a young girl. Around fifteen years old, she was a plain, brash little thing.

“You don’t have Dad’s lunch ready, do you?” She stopped with a sudden shyness when she spotted Don Juan.

“My daughter...this is Don Juan Roses—a gentleman, as you can see. Something you don’t know the first thing about...way back when, Don Juan was like a father to me.”

Don Juan didn’t protest at the exaggeration. While the girl disappeared into the kitchen in search of some food—which, sure enough, wasn’t ready and which Don Juan gathered had to be taken to the girl’s father at work—Mercedes regaled him with her story. “She’s the last of our seven...there’s just her and the oldest boy left. The others died one by one. God did us that favour...”

Don Juan had seen many things in his life, and he wasn’t a man who spooked easily, but the dispassionate way Mercedes talked about her dead children made him shiver. He thought of his own daughter, who was the same age as Mercedes, who’d been brought up with the same principles as her—he even thought they’d gone to the same school—could his daughter talk like that, even after a life like the one Mercedes had led? Don Juan was sure she couldn’t. Mercedes didn’t ask Don Juan a single question about her old friend Carmen, the gentleman’s daughter. So Don Juan didn’t tell her she’d been living in the Americas for a good many years. That he was leaving now to die by her side, surrounded by love from her and his grandchildren...Mercedes didn’t ask about Don Juan’s two sons, either, and so Don Juan didn’t tell her they’d died, and so had his grandson Juanito, who was still a boy when the war broke out...Don Juan couldn’t talk about his beloved ghosts; instead he listened to a sordid story and a flood of complaints

streaming out of that woman's mouth. He consoled her as much as he could and gave her some money. When he was about to leave, suddenly Mercedes asked him about María Rosa's children.

"They don't live in Barcelona—just the one daughter, who's married...oh! You know who's still around? Her mother-in-law."

"Doña Eloísa, the one who was against me getting married?"

"That's her. She lives with Lolita, María Rosa's daughter."

"Give me her address, won't you, Don Juan?"

Don Juan gave it to her with a vague feeling of regret. But what else could he do?

"Doña Eloísa really cared about me..."

"Yes, she's a poor woman—a good woman—but she's not in a position to help you."

"I'm not going to ask her for help. I'll help *her* if that awful granddaughter isn't taking proper care of her..."

Don Juan was convinced that Mercedes really had lost her marbles. "No, dear, that won't be necessary. They live modestly, but they don't need any help."

"I won't even give it to *her*—just to Doña Eloísa...that saint of a woman..."

Now Don Juan, lying in his cabin, started thinking about this Doña Eloísa, who he'd never taken much notice of even though he'd seen her a thousand times. She was tiny and tremendously wrinkled, although she must have been younger than him...she'd shrivelled up and shrunk down over the years, that fine old lady, and nobody had noticed. To his recollection, she'd never been pretty or clever or better or worse than a thousand women of her kind dedicated to their homes and their children, all rather dull and silent. And the poor disturbed Mercedes, who flew into a fit of rage or tears at the memory of her sister, smiled at the mention of this little old lady and called her a saint...

At long last, Don Juan closed his eyes. The sound of the sea lulled him to sleep. Behind his closed eyelids, the memory of the city lights getting further away still remained. In the end they vanished into his dreams.

\*

But the lights of the small city kept shining, reflected in the black, calm sea that sent out to the sleeping households the rhythmic murmur of waves. They kept shining until sunrise, and then once again, when the sun came up, they were replaced by the shining of its rays reflecting on all the windows. Mercedes didn't sleep a wink all night.

She'd recited that piece so well! She hadn't recited anything in front of anyone in years. Sure, sometimes, just sometimes, at dusk when there was no one around, she'd go to the city's outskirts, and on a rock overlooking the sea, she'd throw open her arms like Berta Singerman in a photo she'd seen. The last time she did that she **was struck** by a rock, **a blow she could feel stinging for a good while afterwards**. Some boys were hiding, spying on her, **cackling like hyenas behind their hands**...since then she hadn't returned.

But that day...what was it Don Juan had said? "Yes, dear, you could still be a success in Barcelona. You're better than a good many actresses out there."

Her husband was asleep beside her, his heavy breathing a sound she knew well. Right next to their bed, their daughter slept in a cot. And around them there was nothing but darkness, heavy air, and the tick-tock of an enormous old alarm clock that would ring at five to wake the man up.

Mercedes longed madly to look at a portrait of herself, one with her in a gown that had a nice neckline, some flowers, and some white crêpe draped around her. She'd been stunning. She still was.

*A good hairdresser, a good masseuse...heh, heh! I've still got plenty of fight left in me...Don Juan told me I still look amazingly young. Poor old man—practically ready to make love to me, forgetting I'm young enough to be his daughter...yes, he really was just about ready to.*

The idea delighted her. Not just Don Juan, but many, many others—if she appeared in fine clothes, doing a reading...she still had that white crêpe and those artificial flowers that adorned her dress in her favourite photo.

Triumph...have them all at her feet. Then reject them, like a queen.

She couldn't keep still. She made a sharp movement and slapped her husband in the face, waking him up. The man gave a start. "Hey! What's going on? What time is it?"

"Nothing...what would you say if I went to see my family in Barcelona? They've invited me..."

"What? Yeah, right! Go wherever you want; the further away the better—and don't bother me."

*I'm going*, thought Mercedes. *I'm going*.

That simple thought made her heart feel young again and brought her to tears, like a prisoner watching their cell doors being opened. *I'm going*.

She had money. Don Juan had given her enough money. She'd dye her hair, she'd **get her hands looking soft and manicured**, she'd put on some perfume...she'd triumph. *Doña Eloísa will help me...yes, Doña Eloísa...*

She couldn't remember very clearly what Doña Eloísa was like, but she was a very good woman. Of that she was sure. She'd intervened many times trying to get her aunt and uncle to forgive her...on her wedding day she'd wept...she would help her.



Throughout the days that followed, Mercedes kept clinging to the memory of the old woman. That memory gave her the nerve to prepare for her trip. She applied to the authorities and got a letter of safe-conduct granting her permission to go. She sewed herself a new dress in secret. She dyed her hair with a bottle of peroxide, burning it in the process. Her husband flew into a roaring rage. With a deep bellow, he raised his arm and landed a sharp blow on her. “So you’re going back to your family? Then go be with your family once and for all! For twenty-five years I’ve been listening to that bullshit. Let’s see if one glorious day you’ll finally disappear and leave us in peace.”

Mercedes bought a third-class ticket and left without saying goodbye. She boarded the car and managed to find just enough space on the rough wooden bench seats to sit down. She didn’t know why, but she cried heavily when the train pulled out of the station, starting its slow and rattling journey northwards. Later she calmed down. Through the tears and the calm that followed, one thought was constant: she was going.

The trip was uncomfortable. Almost unbearable. The cars and the steam engine dragging them along were old, scuffed-up survivors of the bombs. The stations where they stopped had their scars as well. And there was nowhere to eat there. There were just platforms full of hungry passengers, standing stiffly as they waited, watched closely by the Guardia Civil.

At that time the trains were always jam-packed, and this one was no exception. Men with everything they owned stuffed into suitcases, women returning from the countryside with suspiciously bulky clothes who kept glancing nervously at the police officers on board—all kinds of people taking up all kinds of space were crammed into the third-class car. Next to them, that woman on her own looked so strange with her burned, bleached hair and a basket for her only luggage, which she watched over with the utmost care. Still, nobody paid any attention to

her. Not even the officer who checked her papers, scanning them in stony silence before handing them back and moving on down the car.

She had to transfer trains twice, herded onto the platform with all the other passengers for a very long wait. She almost froze one night even though it wasn't winter yet—a coat had been an easy luxury to give up when she lived in the south. When she got to Barcelona, she saw with despair that her new dress was stained with soot, and so were her face and hands. It was eight o'clock in the morning. Shaken to the bone by the car's movements and still feeling the seat's slats digging into her legs, she staggered out of the station uneasily. She felt stiff and shy. She walked into a bar and ordered a coffee.

At first she looked all around, suspicious. She thought that she'd find someone who recognized her—or that someone might interrogate her. No one said anything to her, and she ended up drinking her scalding drink with a strange satisfaction. She couldn't understand why she hadn't worked up the courage, in all those years, to do what she was doing now. She felt free and innocent. Like a schoolgirl on vacation.

She set off on her way a while later. She had to find her niece's house, Doña Eloísa's house. It was very hard to get her bearings in that city she thought she knew so well; the place seemed to her to have grown and mutated into something monstrously complex, practically snarling at her through its narrow and unforgiving alleyways. She sat down on a streetcar with a queenlike air. She'd already forgotten about her blackened face and hands—and she'd gotten the wrong line.

She went around in a thousand circles, she walked, she asked around—finally she found the house. The doorwoman looked at her with suspicion. “You're looking for Doña Eloísa? Oh, well then!”

At the door to the apartment she had to endure the inspection of a maid, who afterwards, with a “Wait here!” closed the door on her and left her waiting there on the landing of the staircase.

A few minutes later the door opened, and in the doorframe appeared a little old lady dressed in black. The old lady had silver hair secured in a bun. Although Mercedes couldn’t remember Doña Eloísa’s face anymore, she guessed right away that it was her. “But don’t you recognize me? Don’t you recognize me?”

She threw herself into the old woman’s arms before she had time to step back. Doña Eloísa was witnessing something very strange. A woman with burned, reddish hair in a green dress, her face completely covered in smudges and a pair of green eyes shining out. Doña Eloísa was afraid to extricate herself from this impulsive embrace. “My dear...are you sure you’re not mistaken? I can’t quite remember who you are.”

“I’m Mercedes, María Rosa’s sister.”

“My goodness! Come in.”

Mercedes followed the woman down a dark hallway. Then a door opened to reveal a cheerful room and a cheerful enclosed balcony full of windows, where two canaries sang in their cage and flowers opened in their pots. A young woman with a stern face was giving baby food to a one-year-old child, who didn’t want to swallow it. She turned and her eyes widened in mild horror, and then in irritation, when she saw her grandmother being followed by **what she would later describe as some** grotesque thing.

“Lolita dear, this is your Aunt Mercedes, who’s just arrived.”

“My aunt? Who?”

“Your mother’s only sister.”

Lolita wiped her hand on a serviette and then offered it to Mercedes. “Forgive me. I’d never heard of you.”

A terrible silence fell. A silence only broken by the birds chirping.

Mercedes had collapsed into a chair in the dining room. It was a very pretty dining room that opened through a sliding door onto the spacious balcony, where Lolita was sitting with her son. It had a pleasant sitting room attached to it, too.

Mercedes looked at the paintings on the walls, the fruit bowl on the sideboard, and the white curtains around the balcony. “My goodness! It’s such a pleasure to be here!”

No one echoed this gleeful quip. Once again a remarkable silence fell over the women, stretching on for at least a minute.

### III

“It was you, Doña Eloísa, who told me, ‘If one day you get to the point where you can’t stand that monster anymore, run away; come and find my open arms. I’ll help you; I’ll protect you...’ For all these years of my life, I’ve thought of those words. And here I am.”

It was lunchtime. The family was at the table. Everyone was looking at Doña Eloísa—*everyone* being Lolita; her husband, a serious young man; and a cute blonde-haired boy of seven, who was looking admiringly at his great-grandma.

Besides this tender gaze, Doña Eloísa was garnering only looks of terrified astonishment. Mercedes was gobbling her food down as she talked. The others kept silent, barely able to eat a bite.

“That’s why when Don Juan Roses came to see me on your behalf, I knew it was destiny. I’ve come determined to get to work, to triumph. You’ll go with me backstage. Your

respectability will protect me. Because the theatre can be such a dangerous place for a woman like me...and I don't want..."

The couple's heads were swivelling back and forth as if they were mechanical figures on a clock, turning as it ticked. The two pairs of eyes were darting from Mercedes' extraordinary face to the old woman's just as astonishing face.

The old woman, who'd been timid as a bird for as long as Lolita could remember, didn't seem surprised at all by the explanation given by that woman who Lolita could only assume had lost her mind. There was even a spark of amusement in Doña Eloísa's eyes. "So Don Juan went to see you on my behalf?"

"Yes—if it weren't for that, I'd be dead. I was on the brink of taking my own life when he showed up."

Lolita couldn't contain herself. "Is that true? You sent Don Juan, Grandma?"

Her grandmother never lied. Everyone knew that. But for reasons no one could really grasp, the old woman didn't want to tell the truth, either. "My darlings...I'm so old I forget everything. It may well be that since I've thought about Mercedes so often over the years, the idea occurred to Don Juan..."

Now the couple was looking at each other. They must've said an awful lot in a second with just their eyes. The husband seemed to ask a question. The wife answered with a nod of agreement. Then he spoke. "The thing is...Mercedes, you need to think about where you're going to stay. We can't take you in here."

Mercedes sat up. She furrowed her brow. "Doña Eloísa will have the last word on that."

"Mercedes...this house belongs to Luis. He has enough to deal with having me here, the poor thing. But for tonight you can sleep in my bed..."

“No, Gram.” It was a decisive no from Lolita; not even that pet name *Gram* at the end could soften it.

“Well then, we’ll go this evening and find a little guest house...”

“If Doña Mercedes has any money.”

“I’ve got money.”

“Then there’s nothing left to talk about...and congratulations. We, however, don’t have a cent.”

Luis was furious, Doña Eloísa thought. After living through the brutality of the war years, people were like that now—bad-tempered and not very hospitable...and how nice of Mercedes to show up like this! Don Juan had opened up a lovely can of worms for her going to see her...there was no way Don Juan had told her that she, Eloísa, had—she’d almost never spoken to Don Juan! At least, she’d never spoken to him about Mercedes...

After that unpleasant conversation at lunch, the old woman had to suffer through interrogations and whispered rebukes. The newspaper was pulled out, and Luis flagged a list of rooms for rent at a reasonable rate. Mercedes left to find someplace to live, but the old woman couldn’t go with her. “You stay home, Gram—not at your age! Mercedes will know how to handle herself by now.”

Mercedes did know how. In the middle of the afternoon, she came back for what little luggage she had. The old woman whispered in her ear, “Tomorrow, eight o’clock, at the Church of...”

“What’s that you were saying to that nut of a woman, Gram?”

“Nothing, darling...”

“Is it true? When she got married, did you really tell her to leave her husband? That’s got to be a lie she’s concocted.”

The old woman put on her glasses to sew. “Yes, darling. I think I remember telling her something along those lines...”

“Grandma!”

The old woman blushed. After a while she settled down, and then she raised her eyes and peered over her glasses. She thought her granddaughter looked too stony-faced. “How old are you, my darling?”

“Come on, Gram. You seem to be acting pretty nutty today too. Twenty-seven.”

“Right, so you were two when Mercedes got married...Mercedes was just enchanting back then—and such a fool...”

“But you’ve always been so rational. I can’t believe you’d tell her something like that! And that she’d remember after twenty-five years, and you act like it’s perfectly normal...come on, I think you’re starting to lose it.” Luis was dumbfounded.

“You and Luis are too young. Of course you wouldn’t understand...”

“Don’t tell me you’re planning on going with her backstage...”

The old woman sighed.

“Poor Mercedes...there won’t be a backstage...”

“Obviously not...but she ought to be committed!”

\*

Luisito, the young couple’s oldest child, was pretending to be asleep while he peeked through his blonde eyelashes, watching “Gram”—his great-grandmother, who shared a small bedroom with him.

His parents had bought two identical little cots not too long ago. There was another boy in the house, and the old woman's bed would be his later on. The old woman knew they were expecting her to die soon, because in these modern times people expect everything, and she even felt vaguely guilty for feeling so strong, so sprightly, so happy to be alive...maybe she'd live to become a great-great-grandmother at this rate. Luisito could someday find himself stuck providing for her. That was an upsetting thought for the old woman. She had always been provided for, clothed, and cared for by someone. First, her parents. After she turned seventeen, her husband. Later on, her poor son. Then a grandson. Now, her granddaughter's husband...

"Gram's lucky. She comes from a generation of women who've never done anything...she's never been able to earn a cent."

"You've never earned a cent, Gram?"

"Never, my little darling."

"I'll make money for you when I'm grown up."

The old woman's heart was pumping well, and she still had a mysteriously intact set of teeth that made her look so young when she laughed, even with her wrinkles. Her sunken eyes sparkled, and they were softened by a remarkable set of dark, curly lashes that were perfectly childlike. Nobody noticed these little beauties of Gram's, but they did have a sense that she "had plenty of fight left in her" to last quite some time yet.

Little Luisito liked to watch her every night as she said her prayers. Sometimes Luisito was already asleep, but most of the time he woke up to the scuffle of her felt slippers on the floor, and he saw her in her white nightgown and a thick housecoat as she went and kneeled down on the prie-dieu under the painting of the Virgin of Montserrat—that placid but powerful figure of Mary with the Christ child in her lap. There was always an oil lamp burning under the



painting of the Virgin, and all through the night that light kept its vigil and fought off the darkness. That night when Doña Eloísa came in, the boy was wide awake. He'd heard his parents say unbelievable things about his gram. They seemed really angry. "Soon we'll end up having to lock her up...did you see how she was leading that lunatic on? She was going to put her up in this house! Old people practically turn into children. We have to watch her so closely..."

Luisito watched her for a long time, but he couldn't see anything strange about her. Now, as she prayed to the Virgin, she was the same lovely old lady she always was. True, she was covering her face with her hands, but she always did that, though it made Luisito feel terribly uneasy. It seemed to him that nobody covers their face like that except to cry.

The old woman was pondering the strange ways of Providence. *You've put her in my hands, my God. Maybe I can do something for her...at first I didn't even realize it. I just got scared...*

Doña Eloísa had the humble conviction that God had only ever wanted very small, easy things of her. She'd been a careful steward of modest things she never considered hers, and grand acts of charity had been forbidden for her. Now she couldn't even put a dime into the church collection plate because her granddaughter often forgot that her gram—as well looked after and respectably dressed as she was—might need some money for a little treat. And her gram never asked for it. She considered herself to be of a very average intelligence, someone who couldn't serve as a guide to anyone other than through the example of her happiness. And though she'd never been lazy, she thought she'd done very little in her life. As far as she knew, she'd never saved any sinners, and she even suspected that her son, who was quite the skeptic, must've often thought when he saw how pious she was that *credulity*—in his words—was for simple-minded, timid souls, for insignificant people like his mother. That had filled her with

distress quite often, though she'd never told anyone so. *You brought her to me, my God...and at first I didn't understand.*

Doña Eloísa had cared for Mercedes when she was a charming child—she pictured her as she'd seen her then, so full of life and with just a few screws loose. She remembered it clearly: that hasty marriage of hers to some uncouth-looking man horrified her. She knew Mercedes was going into it as if she were issuing a challenge to fate. Even María Rosa, her daughter-in-law, quipped, "Thank heaven he seems like he can keep her under control. But I don't really trust her not to run away with some violinist when you least expect it."

The crack about the violinist left its mark on Doña Eloísa. "My dear, promise me that if sometime you're thinking about doing something crazy, you'll remember you have an old friend who won't abandon you...before you do anything, come and talk to me." Something ridiculous like that was what she'd said to Mercedes on her wedding day. Mercedes answered her haughtily that she was getting married for love and that she was more respectable than a good many holier-than-thou snobs she knew.

Then Mercedes disappeared. She didn't even come back when her mother died. Nobody ever knew what had become of her marriage or of her life. But every day, Doña Eloísa had included her name in her prayers. And now she'd appeared. *I prayed to you every day for her, and now she comes to me...it's Your will, Lord, but what can this poor old woman do for some poor demented girl who's got delusions of grandeur and triumph, as if that will be her way of getting revenge for her whole life?*

The prayer went on. Luisito saw that the old woman really was wiping a few tears from her eyes as she stood up from the prie-dieu. Now she was coming towards him. The boy wasn't pretending to be asleep. "Did Mama scold you, Gram?"

“No, child.”

“Is it true you’re a little old lady who’s kind of nuts?”

“I don’t know...I think I’m just a bit of a coward.”

\*

Mercedes didn’t show up the next day at the church Doña Eloísa went to every morning, where she’d arranged to meet with her. For a week, Doña Eloísa waited patiently for her. Finally she saw her one morning near the door of her house. She seemed **to the old woman to be** even more unhinged than the day she’d arrived after her trip. She’d gotten thinner. “Doña Eloísa, if you don’t give me ten pesetas, I won’t have a bed to sleep in tonight.”

Doña Eloísa wanted to cross herself, like she did whenever she started on a difficult task, but she held back. “Every day I waited for you at the church...why haven’t you come? Come upstairs with me. We’ll share my snack.”

Lolita wasn’t home, which Doña Eloísa thought was a stroke of luck. At a corner of the dining room table, there was a blue cup on a clean serviette and a slice of **mealy, sickly yellow bread**—the kind of bread they had back then that would crack when it fell on the floor.

“Bring another cup for the lady, please.”

The maid stood firm. “There’s only that one cup of milk and that slice of bread.”

“That’s why I’m asking you to bring another cup. We’re going to share the milk.”

The milk was bad, but it was hot and comforting. It was carefully divided between the two cups. The old woman said she wasn’t hungry and gave the bread to Mercedes.

“This is how they eat in a fine household? This is how we should eat, poor as we are...”

“This is how it has to be these days, with everything so scarce. Lolita’s very good at managing the house. If I were in her shoes, I wouldn’t know *what* to do...sometimes it breaks my heart.”

“She’s just stingy.”

“No she isn’t, dear.”

Mercedes recounted her adventures, making Doña Eloísa swear not to tell her grandchildren about them. “Nobody needs to know about these struggles until I’ve triumphed...”

Mercedes didn’t have a regular place to sleep. She’d discovered some rooms for women where you could rest for not much money. A kind woman she’d met would watch over her luggage. She’d gone to the theatre twice, and she’d also applied to join the professional union, since she wanted to work.

“You’re very clever, dear. How did you find out so many things in such a short time?”

“I’m amazed myself...but I know people—hunger sharpens the mind, heh, heh!”

That nervous giggle of Mercedes’ was quite unpleasant to Doña Eloísa’s ears. “I can’t give you ten pesetas, my dear, because I don’t have that—but I’ll give you something else...yes, I was thinking about it while we were eating. I’ll give you something else—but you have to promise me you’ll come back and see me. You can’t go on like this, alone, living that terrible life.”

“Terrible? You don’t know what a terrible life is...what was terrible was the life I led at that man’s side.”

“He seemed like a good man—but not for you. Maybe he’s been unhappy too.”

“*Him*? What more could he want than a wife like me? How could you say such a thing to me?”

“Do you have children?”

“Seven of them.”

“My goodness...where did you leave them?”

“Five of them died... The two left are all grown up, and they don’t love me. They took after their father...”

“But don’t you ever think about them?”

Mercedes furrowed her brow. “I don’t, no...I don’t. It’s time now for once in my life to think about me—me, I tell you, me...”

She was having some sort of hysterical fit. Lolita arrived in the middle of it. “Hey! What’s going on?”

“The poor thing,” replied the old woman. “She’s lost five children...”

Lolita was befuddled. “Good God! Well that’s a tragedy...”

She didn’t believe it one bit, and yet, of the thousand things she’d heard from the mouth of her aunt Mercedes, that was one of the few that were absolutely true. Mercedes calmed down right away. She’d developed a bit of a fear of Lolita. There was a pause.

“I can’t ask you to stay for lunch today, Aunt Mercedes.”

“Thank you; I’ve been invited someplace else.”

“I see you’re getting along well...you don’t think you’ll go back to your husband?”

“Never.”

“But after five children...”

Silence.

Doña Eloísa’s heart was pounding. *I’ve prayed to you, my God, and she’s heard me calling...but now...now I don’t know what to do.*

For the time being, the old woman did something practical. Out of Lolita's sight, she gave Mercedes a heavy pocket watch. It was solid gold and studded with diamonds. An old piece of jewellery—the only one she hadn't yet given away to put a little extra food on the table.

“Pawn it, my dear, and don't stop coming to see me.”

“I'll pay it back and then some when I'm famous.”

And when Mercedes left, Doña Eloísa faced the same old suspicion from her granddaughter. “Alright, I don't know what kind of secret meeting you were having with Mercedes in your room, but I'm asking you not to let that woman into my son's bedroom ever again...I don't know if you've noticed, but she's horrendously dirty. I don't know how you can stand to be around her.”

“Of course, darling...”

\*

Mercedes was living in strange circumstances, but she was alive. She found a neighbourhood where her appearance didn't surprise anyone and a café where she could stay for hours, sheltered from the street. And some strange people—some strange women who thought her situation was very normal and who encouraged her in her fantasies. She wasn't nuts like her brute of a husband said, like her children and her neighbours said. With the proceeds from the watch she bought an evening gown fifth-hand. She'd gotten advice on the matter from a kind woman. A woman who was a little strange and who also told her to go out looking for men.

“I'm a lady.”

“Me too. So what? You're still young.”

“I want to be a performer, not a hooker.”

“Up to you...”

The truth is that in those circles of shady people, there were few threats to Mercedes' virtue. You could almost say Mercedes didn't appeal to them.

Her friend told her about a place where performers would go up onstage impromptu. There, one night, she could put on that dress she'd bought and go make a name for herself. If people liked her, they might even hire her. That would be a start.

They arranged everything they needed to pull off this plan. Mercedes' heart was pounding like a young girl's. She had hardly any money left now, practically nothing...and everyone around her was **in the depths of starvation**. She'd longed for many things when she was with her husband; she'd thought she was living in poverty all those years...but true poverty was what she saw swarming all around her, and what she found herself embroiled in. For the first time she felt concern for others. She'd shared her money with some other people after she bought herself the dress. She was shaken hearing how that stocky, painted woman she called a friend had come home during the war only to find a little girl—her **own daughter—lying dead in front of her, her tiny body broken down in the battles over her home that she'd had nothing to do with**. Mercedes wanted to cry listening to her. "You don't know what it's like to lose a child."

And it seemed to Mercedes that she didn't. That all those little ones who'd died belonged to somebody else, some unfeeling woman far away. One morning she went to the church Doña Eloísa had told her about, and she waited for her at the door. The old woman felt the same uneasiness and the same perplexed joy as always when she saw her. "My dear...I've been praying for you. Have you run out of money?"

"No, Doña Eloísa. I'm here to ask you for a different kind of favour."

"You'll have breakfast with me, won't you?"

Lately Mercedes had been feeling a new sense of awareness stirring in her. An awareness that prodded her to think of others and be more thoughtful. “I’ve already eaten, Doña Eloísa, but I’ll go with you.”

And when they’d sat down in the cheerful dining room and the old woman was crumbling her bread into her milk, Mercedes took advantage of a moment when Lolita was out running errands to deliver the big news. “Tonight I’m making my debut.”

The old woman choked. “What?”

“Yes, in a respectable establishment... You have to go with me.”

The old woman started to cough so hard she had to be slapped on the back so she could breathe properly again. “Me? At night? I haven’t gone out at night since my late husband died...and I was twenty-five then...”

Lolita came home. “What’s going on, Gram?”

“Nothing, darling; things are going well for Mercedes...this evening she’s going to church with me. The exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is tonight, so we’ll go and give thanks to God...”

“Me?”

“Yes dear. Naturally. We’ll talk about everything then.”

Lolita was a picture of concern.

“So I’ll go then...you don’t need me for anything?”

“No, nothing. What would I need you for?”

And that evening after dark, they met at the church.

#### IV



Doña Eloísa spent the day in a state of terrible worry. She hadn't felt such strong emotions, such deep bewilderment, in years. Thinking back, the only thing she could remember that was comparable to this feeling—the agitation, the racing heartbeat, the anxiety—was what she went through on her wedding day when she was just a girl.

She couldn't eat or do her mending or come up with any stories to tell her great-grandson. When her granddaughter looked at her unexpectedly, she blushed. It felt like a horrible weight on her conscience, this request Mercedes had dropped on her to go out with her that night.

She knew the reasonable thing to do was to say no, absolutely not—to be outraged, even. **She could scarcely imagine it:** her, Doña Eloísa, leading the simplest of lives all her years only to demean herself sneaking off to a nightclub at age seventy—her grey hair lending legitimacy to the foolish whims of a disturbed woman!

She pictured the faces of her grandchildren, the face of her old spiritual director...

She pictured all this because something very deep inside her was pushing her to tell Mercedes yes, she would go with her. A very clear, insistent voice spoke out in the depths of the old woman's soul, explaining to her that by being there that night, she could keep that girl who was in her hands now from making one last wrong turn. **The poor thing was so out of her mind,** **thought Doña Eloísa,** that she wouldn't understand the reasons she'd give for not going. She'd feel abandoned like a dog. She'd never come and see Doña Eloísa again, and that last little thread of light that was still tying her to a respectable life would snap and dissolve into the darkness forever.

When she imagined the astonished face her spiritual director might make, Doña Eloísa latched onto the idea of consulting him with a burning desperation. If he definitively confirmed

what Doña Eloísa was hearing from that forceful little voice saying charity doesn't always have to be a sensible thing, well then...not even a thousand grandchildren or a thousand domestic spats could keep the old woman from fulfilling her duty.

She hesitated for a few seconds before she dialled the number for the monastery where her spiritual director lived. He would say no.

She finally dialled. If Father Jiménez said no, then the answer was no...he'd know more about Christian charity than a poor old woman would, **she reasoned**. She would do as he said.

All her anxieties quieted down in an instant, and a great peace flooded over her as she dialled that number.

That spiritual state only lasted a few minutes—the minutes that went by before she was informed Father Jiménez wasn't in Barcelona and wouldn't be back until next week.

**Those words filled her with a sharp pang of fear. He would've said no. He was supposed to say no. What was she supposed to do now, with no one to settle the argument in her head between her mental image of Father Jiménez and that little voice that just wouldn't be quiet?**

**She took a deep breath and willed herself to settle down. Though it felt like a woefully inadequate solution at the moment, she did what she always did to soothe her soul: she said some quick prayers on the spot. First to Santa Teresa, who had always been generous in sharing her wisdom with the women in her flock. Then to the Virgin, strong enough to hold the world in her right hand with perfect grace while cradling the baby Jesus in her lap. Surely if she could hold the world aloft in one hand, Doña Eloísa could manage this little task.** *Nothing else I can do, my God; You want me to solve this myself.*

**As soon as she had that decided thought, she felt herself overwhelmed by an indescribable, burning peace. She felt as though she'd been drowned in the divine spirit and**

come back different. Reconstructed. And resolved, ready. She may have been a simple-minded, timid old lady, but she was all Mercedes had. Or perhaps she wasn't those things anymore—she felt so strange...

Lolita was watching her grandmother worrying with a bit of annoyance. *She's getting so absentminded—she hasn't given me a proper answer to anything I've asked her all afternoon. She's never shown any signs her mind was starting to go before this...but Luis is right: we've taken on such a burden bringing her to live here.*

Silently she searched every room for her grandmother, who'd abandoned her sewing a while ago. She found her kneeling at her prie-dieu beneath the painting of the Virgin. *Well then; as long as she's only carrying on with that...*

Once it was dark, the old woman left her room, looking very elegant with her hat on.

"Where are you going, Gram?"

"Church, my darling."

"I thought you were going on some kind of social call. Since you never wear a hat to church and you're not going to a wedding..."

"Yes, darling, but you only live once. If you wanted to come with me..."

"I've got too much to do at home to go out and prove my piety; you know that."

"I've never held that against you...forgive me for being so little help to you today with the sewing..."

Her granddaughter smiled her reluctant smile. It softened her face so much on the rare occasions it appeared. "Don't worry, Gram...you do more than what you can."

And at that, the force that had been propelling her along suddenly sputtered, and the old woman felt terrible remorse. Not even the divine presence she felt in the Eucharist could soothe

her distress. She knelt down to pray. It was prayer that had given her the celestial push to get here; maybe she could use it now to call that back to her and show her where to go now. *Tell me something, my God; show me something...I've never known how to solve anything. I've asked You for many things in my long life. Some You gave me, others You didn't; I always accepted Your will...and now, when I'm old, this woman I've prayed for so much comes to me—and I didn't know how to help her, how to guide her, and I don't think I've done any good. And she asks me for this insane favour, and I think the charitable thing to do is to grant her that favour, even if it might upset my grandchildren—even if they might have me locked up...*

Mercedes found Doña Eloísa kneeling and crying when she got to the church.

Mercedes had spent the day in total euphoria as she rehearsed her reading. She'd tried on her evening gown in her friend's room, in front of that helpful, stocky woman who had such an odd life. Her friend offered to lend her several bracelets and a necklace with glistening glass beads.

Mercedes took some old tulle from the bottom of her basket. "Wouldn't this look good if I wore it like this, covering up my chest a bit?"

"Take that off—you have a lovely chest. Got to show it off."

"Remember, you may've met me in these circumstances, but I'm a real lady. I've told you: anything for art's sake is fine, but beyond that...if I wanted to cheat on my husband, I'd have had plenty of opportunities to do it in the last twenty-five years. Besides, I've invited a lady I'm related to. A real gentlewoman."

"Very good. That'll set the right tone..."

“Yes, I want to make my position clear. Strictly art. If one day I come across my husband and children again, I want *them* to be the ones on their knees begging *me* for forgiveness, not the other way around...”

“I didn’t know you had children...”

Mercedes had met this woman when they were eating at the same table in a restaurant of very ill repute. She was an older woman with bags under her eyes. Her dress was very pretentious-looking but dirty and ratty. Despite that, she had painted nails, a hat on her head, and a threadbare fur around her neck. She seemed impatient with the poor service. “I don’t know how I put up with such rudeness. This restaurant’s convenient—it’s close to home, after all—but if it weren’t for that...”

“When you’re used to something else...”

This comment from Mercedes earned her affection. When she found she had a listener with a glorious past full of fabulous paramours ruined by her love and of travels on luxurious trains, that affection grew. When she found out Mercedes had left her unsympathetic husband and was on her own, determined to triumph through her own gumption, she immediately took her under her wing. That respectable demeanour Mercedes always brandished like a sort of passport was something she admired, though she thought it naïve. Mercedes told her she had family in Barcelona. “True upper-class people, you know? But I don’t want to depend on them to make my way.”

When Mercedes showed up one day with the old woman’s watch, this friend took charge of pawning it. It brought in a decent amount of money. The truth is she’d sold it. “If you’d pawned it, they’d have given you peanuts—maybe you’ll get it back when you have money.”

Mercedes didn't like that one bit. "Doña Eloísa deserved better than that...she deserved better..."

"But you could get it back—oh come on! Instead of thanking me..."

Mercedes thanked her by giving her part of the money.

"I'll take it as my commission," said the friend in a dignified tone.

She'd already taken another commission in advance. But she didn't tell her that. In any case, she meant it when she said she really wanted to look out for "the poor gal."

"Do you only know that one about the dark swallows? It's always a crowd-pleaser, but it's been done to death."

Mercedes also knew that old poem, "*El tren expreso*." Her friend thought that was a better choice, and she put so much feeling into it.

When the time came for her meeting in the church, Mercedes went to look for the old woman. "I don't know what to wear—I have to go to the church."

Her friend, impressed, gave Mercedes her hat and her fur to cover her arms a bit, since Mercedes' dress was too much of a summer dress. "I think they allow sleeves that go down to your elbow. But you'll be more dressed up like this."

Mercedes shone in her glowing green dress, the same one she'd sewn in her little house far away, the one she'd worn for her journey. The church's lights were on. Mercedes entered with an air of defiance. No one noticed her. Almost unconsciously, she kneeled by the door. They were in the middle of the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

It was a strange, forgotten feeling. Mercedes had very rarely been inside a church since her wedding day. *I don't need to put on a pious show to be more honourable than anyone else,*

*or to have more of a heart than my aunt and uncle, who threw me out of the house just for some girlhood mistake—because I was a performer at heart and they envied me...*

Now she was kneeling, trembling a little. She took advantage of the opportunity to make a timid request. *I don't really believe in You...but if I triumph tonight, I'll have a Mass said.*

This promise made her feel strong inside. She never asked for anything without paying it back...

Some of the lights went out. The sanctuary was closed. Some people were leaving now.

Mercedes searched with her eyes for Doña Eloísa. It was difficult to pick her out among all the ladies dressed in black. Finally, she saw her. As she got closer, she noticed she was crying. The tears were falling so silently down her wrinkled little face that she very well might not have even noticed them. It touched Mercedes' heart underneath her vivid dress. That lady had been indescribably good to her—for no reason at all. And she must've been really unhappy to be crying like that. Living with that nasty granddaughter must be so awful.

Silently, she kneeled beside her. Doña Eloísa seemed to feel her presence because after she dried her eyes with her handkerchief, she turned her face towards her. Mercedes couldn't grasp the shock Doña Eloísa got seeing her in that hat and that fur. For half a minute, the old lady's lips trembled before a welcoming smile could bloom on them. Then she crossed herself and stood up. And the two women went out into the September night.

"Will you come, Doña Eloísa?"

"I don't know, my dear. If we could go someplace we could speak comfortably...but I can't even buy you a coffee—"

"You can't? Don't worry. I've got it."

They went into a dairy bar. They couldn't have made a more outlandish pair. Doña Eloísa was wearing a very modest hat, a light jacket made of fine wool, and a black band around her neck. "Dear...if I'm going with you, it has to be without my grandchildren's permission. They would never understand why I'd want to go out at night. And them coming with me? Absolutely not. You'll understand that if I come, it's because I believe in you..."

"I won't disappoint you. I've seen the best actresses. They're nothing compared to me..."

"It's not that. Even if you don't succeed, I believe in you. I believe you're a good woman, if an unhappy one, who's trying to find her way, and I want to help you; I want to be here for you through your troubles so you don't think some selfish old lady, when the time came, didn't know how to be a Christian and left you all alone...but you're going to do me a favour in exchange."

"I will, I swear."

"You're going to give me your husband's address. From what you told me about him, he's a pretty crude man—kind of a brute, even—but he's not bad. He loves your children, he works...if he's laughed at you, if he's angered you, it's only because he didn't understand you—but right now he'll be worried not knowing where you've gone. Maybe he wishes you'd come back...your children will be missing you too. They can't all have hearts of stone...I know they don't."

Doña Eloísa's words were pouring out surprisingly easily—she was moved to her very core. Perhaps she'd gotten some of that fire from earlier back after all. A bit of her emotion spread to Mercedes. But she shook her head. "I won't go back...you don't know what it's like to feel like you've been buried alive for years and years. Coming to believe you must be crazy. Lying down in bed for days at a time to see if death comes."



The owner of the dairy bar monitored her only two customers of the evening with suspicion. **She sized them up:** a lady—a well-mannered, respectable old woman...and, no doubt, a low-class hooker...both of them crying.

Suddenly, Mercedes felt cold. For a second, she thought Doña Eloísa was the crazy one. She thought it was a stupid mistake, inviting her to her “debut.” If the old woman didn’t want to go, she wasn’t forcing her to. Now here she was babbling on about her husband and children. What did it matter to her? Then she noticed the wedding ring Doña Eloísa still wore on one of her thin fingers, and the memory of the watch her friend had sold came back to her. That poor woman was just looking out for her...and she was such a stately old lady! That was the truth. Her friend still didn’t believe the story she’d told about coming from a respectable family. That afternoon she’d told her she’d also left a country house, full of amenities and even luxuries, to heed the call of her art. If Doña Eloísa went with her, her friend would believe it.

\*

“Do I have to give you my husband’s address for you to go with me?”

“Yes, you do.”

Mercedes gave it to her, and Doña Eloísa felt something like a triumph in that. She didn’t know why it was a triumph...she hadn’t set her mind to do anything in particular. She felt feverish.

“Now, my dear, I can’t go home—they wouldn’t let me leave. That’s for sure. You’re going to call on my behalf and say I’ve been invited to dinner by some friends, and they should leave the apartment key under the doormat...that’s where we leave it for my grandson sometimes.”

Mercedes did as she was told. “That’s done. The maid’s taken care of it...she didn’t really understand at first, but I repeated it for her.”

“May God’s will be done!” The old woman’s cry came out smothered, like the words of someone condemned to death.

Afterwards, Doña Eloísa found herself caught up in the only adventure she’d ever had that was worth being called that. She walked into an unfamiliar neighbourhood full of dirty alleyways. She went up to a strange, dark old apartment. In a tiny room, **she was welcomed by a woman who looked positively monstrous to her**. That woman alone could fill the room with her flesh, **she thought**, but there was also a bed with grey sheets, a wardrobe with a mirror, and a sort of dressing table loaded with junk. From crumpled up nylons to tubes of lipstick, a box of mascara, a monstrously large powder compact, a photo of a man dancing, and even a half-eaten sandwich.

The woman seemed to squeeze herself in a bit so Doña Eloísa and Mercedes could fit. Immediately she started to chat, apologizing for the poor condition of the room. “I haven’t always lived like this...I’m going through the same thing as this girl—It’s luck, fate. Some have a lot; others, not so much. For some life is easy; for others it’s hard.”

Doña Eloísa kept her lips glued shut. She just smiled. She was thinking that the truth was life wasn’t very easy for anyone. Lolita, for instance, would find it easier and cheaper to leave her house dirty and unkempt, and to let the boys be tramps with snot running down their faces, and if Luis got angry, to just lie in bed and think of death like that idiot Mercedes had done for years...

The old woman’s smile hardened. Yes, **she thought**, Mercedes was an idiot, and so was she. She was very sorry she came. And she didn’t dare to say it.

“Life is unfair—so unfair,” the fat woman continued on. “If God existed, He wouldn’t allow this to happen.”

At this, the old woman got angry. She was so unaccustomed to getting angry that the only thing that came out of her was a trembling little voice. “I know one thing... God exists, and misfortune can come in many forms. At our house we went hungry during the war, but the place wasn’t dirty or neglected because my granddaughter is a heroic woman. Her reward is in her clean conscience and her husband’s respect. And there are so many men and so many women like her who make sacrifices—is that unfair? Money isn’t everything: neither is youth or health. I’ve lived a long life and I know that.”

“I’m not trying to pick on you, ma’am. You’re a very good woman; anyone can see that. But I assure you I’m not bad either...ask this girl who in this city has taken her in: your granddaughter or me?”

Doña Eloísa didn’t know how to get out of there. She felt like she was in a nightmare.

“Come on, cheer up. I’ll pour you a little drink.”

Doña Eloísa took the drink and sat down, genuinely feeling her spirits lift. When they arrived at the venue for the “debut,” she was even enjoying herself. There was an orchestra and lots of well-dressed people sitting at the tables...and badly dressed people too. As she took in the dimly lit sort of cabaret, she thought to herself that everything about it was so unusual—from the furtive doorman staring down the street to the decidedly odd mix of people there to see a spectacle or be one. On a platform, the performers were going up to do their acts. Almost all of them were singers. They were getting hearty applause. Doña Eloísa started to understand how addictive that applause could be.

When Mercedes went up onto the platform, her heart started to pound madly.

Doña Eloísa tried to take in the sight: she was horrible. Her dress was horrible. Her hair, all burned to wisps with her dark, ashen roots on full display, was horrible. Those glass beads coiled around her neck were horrible...but they applauded for her before she started. She waved. Then she opened her arms and threw her head back, and she began. Doña Eloísa closed her eyes so she wouldn't see her, only hear her voice. And her voice was pleasant, full. And she was reciting something very sentimental, something Doña Eloísa knew and liked.

*Oh, my goodness, she's got talent!* This internal cheer from Doña Eloísa flourished for one bright second, but it was soon cut off by a few irrepressible guffaws that were erupting at the tables. The old woman opened her eyes, stunned. Scared, even, by what she saw emerging in the people around her.

Mercedes, almost in a trance, didn't notice anything and carried on...

The laughs grew stronger. As they grew, they began to transform into something much rawer. In the darkness, Doña Eloísa could almost swear there was some sort of multi-headed, many-voiced creature filling the room. All those nicely dressed people in the audience seemed to have lost control of themselves. They were laughing wildly, mouths stretched open, snakelike. A young man in a formal suit was hunching and clutching his stomach, as if he were making himself sick from laughing so much.

Mercedes, frightened, stopped her reading. This wasn't right. This wasn't what they were supposed to do. This wasn't what triumph looked like. The thoughts were rushing around Mercedes' mind but seemed to have gotten stuck. She had gotten stuck.

The roars of laughter lowered to a rumble. Then came the voices. "Keep going! Keep going!"

Mercedes kept going, her voice trembling slightly. But she wasn't so sure of herself anymore; she was glancing anxiously off to the sides. She was stumbling on her words. She was starting to shake as she began to realize what she had done, what it would mean...

That scene, that agonizing spectacle Doña Eloísa was watching, with Mercedes twitching like a cornered rabbit, was highly amusing to the rest of the room from the sound of it. But in amongst the howls of laughter she could hear a more feral sound: boos and whistles. First from the drunk ones. Then the others, emboldened. Someone barked something indecent. With all the noise, it was hard to tell what it was. *Whore. Stupid bitch. Lunatic.* The vicious possibilities tortured the old woman.

Mercedes stopped, her fear turning into rage. She stood with her hands on her hips and hurled an insult at the audience, something crass about the spectators' apparent childhood in a barn. The boos from the pack were deafening. She soon found herself completely overcome again. Something bounced off of the stage. Maybe a stale bread crust. Maybe a wad of paper. Maybe, if her imagination wasn't running away with her, a rock.

Mercedes fled the stage. In her wide-eyed rush she stepped on her skirt. She lurched, about to fall. She caught herself, barely, and stumbled off towards the only sympathetic faces in the room. When she got to the table where the old woman and her friend were waiting for her, she burst into tears, hopeless.

Doña Eloísa was shaking. She looked around her. The audience had already stopped their howling and turned their attention to a new performer. Nobody took any notice of them.

Mercedes' friend managed to calm her down. "That was really dumb of you. You shouldn't have gotten nervous. You completely ruined it. Come on, don't cry. Lucky you're young..."

“Write to my husband, Doña Eloísa...I’m going back...”

The old woman silently held out her handkerchief to that poor, weeping woman. Then she spoke: “Darling...don’t be ridiculous; you don’t have any more reason to go home now than you did before. Those rude people just don’t understand your art; that’s all it was, and nothing more...you shouldn’t give up hope.”

Mercedes listened...that old lady really was an odd duck, she mused. “You liked it?”

“Very much, my darling...you’ve got a lot of talent.”

There was no doubt that Doña Eloísa was being serious. She never lied; Mercedes knew Doña Eloísa wasn’t lying...besides, she was contradicting herself. A while ago, she was acting like a lay preacher, and now she was telling her not to get discouraged—that she was an artist. Unfortunately Doña Eloísa seemed to Mercedes to know very little about that subject.

“Now calm down, sip your little glass of cognac, and to bed...”

Mercedes, her elbows on the table, buried her face in her hands. That affectionate suggestion to get some rest filled her with grief and reminded her she didn’t have a bed, other than a rented straw pallet in a room she shared with old beggar women.

Her friend seemed to read her mind. “Tonight you’re coming with me to my room, gal; you need your rest...but before that we’re going to walk this lady home: she probably won’t know how to get back by herself.”

## V

Father Jiménez did a much better job of reassuring Luis and Lolita than the doctor had. The doctor had been called the day after the old woman’s night out; he said she just had a nasty cold and a touch of the blues. When they asked him about the woman’s mental faculties, he seemed very surprised. He said she seemed to him to be completely in her right mind. But that

left Lolita and Luis feeling just as worried. A strange feeling of embarrassment kept them from telling the doctor the old lady had gotten home at two in the morning, and what's more, she refused to say where she'd been. "I'll only tell that to my confessor, and if he says I must, I'll tell you too. If not...I only ask you to forgive me for the fright I've caused you."

The old woman didn't leave the house for eight days, and for all that time, the whole family was anxiously waiting for Father Jiménez to get back to his monastery. Finally he came back, and finally he came to see Doña Eloísa. After he'd been alone with her in her room for a good while, he left smiling, a wry little spark dancing in his eyes. "It's nothing, nothing—no need to worry. Doña Eloísa's as sane as you or I. I'm not allowed to tell you where she went that night, but I *can* tell you she went out for altruistic reasons ...she performed an act of charity. Maybe it was miscalculated; maybe it was futile...but it was charity nonetheless. Please don't worry so much, and let her go about her normal life; it won't happen again..."

"But it's just—there are things...my little boy told me that the next day, Grandma gave him a letter, with the stamps on and everything, and told him to put it in the mailbox and not to say a word to anyone. And yesterday she got another letter, a really strange one she wouldn't show us, and it made her cry."

"I know, I know...but none of that matters."

So Lolita and Luis had no choice but to settle down and let their curiosity go unsatisfied. The old woman went back to taking communion every day, and her sunny, peaceful expression reappeared. Sometimes, however, she'd let out a sigh, and then her granddaughter would watch her with worry.

The old woman had gotten an answer to the letter she'd sent Mercedes' husband. Her eldest son was writing, since his father, according to the boy, "due to his distress has come down

with pneumonia.” As Mercedes’ son described, everyone wished she would come back, “and it has pained us to remember all the times she threatened to leave us and we didn’t listen to her.” Her husband understood “that she is doing very well now with her wealthy relatives in Barcelona,” but he asked her to think of her daughter, who was just a girl, and “it isn’t proper for her to be alone in the house without her mother to guide her and keep an eye on her, especially with what wicked tongues could say.” As for him, he asked her to forgive him for his temper, but “she already knows that the main thing is she never went without,” and he wasn’t a drunk like some other men. And now he realized that when she was gone, “something is missing in the house,” that he wasn’t used to sleeping alone, that “he’s even lost sleep.” They were all awaiting a letter from Mercedes, in her own handwriting. Then they ended with the news that her son’s wife was going to make her a grandmother, and although they’d had their differences, her daughter-in-law also understood “that Mercedes is a lady and she has a right to her eccentricities,” and she wished that “whatever they have, she will be holding the child by the baptismal font.”

This was the letter that had made the old woman cry and weighed on her soul until Father Jiménez forbade her from feeling sad about it. He told her she didn’t need to feel the least bit sorry and it was nonsense to think Mercedes would’ve left her husband because of Doña Eloísa, as the poor old woman in her distress had come to fear. The worst part was there was no way of letting Mercedes know her family’s response, because Mercedes seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth. The old woman didn’t dare speak her name to avoid tipping off Lolita, who with her habitual lack of imagination suspected something at first but ended up not making the connection between her grandmother’s night out and that strange, half-crazy aunt of hers. They weren’t sure how, but Lolita and Luis came to the reassuring conclusion that Doña Eloísa had



spent that mysterious night keeping vigil over some dead beggar in the neighbourhood. That was how close to a month went by until one Sunday afternoon. The old woman was alone in the house with her youngest grandson when someone knocked at the door, and there was Mercedes. Her violent green dress was very clean and ironed, her brown roots stretched almost halfway down the length of her hair, and her face was unpainted but apparently well washed.

After a long and mysterious silence, Mercedes made a big announcement. She'd gotten herself a job as a maid-of-all-work in a modest household where they treated her just fine.

At first, the old woman didn't realize a miracle had happened, because people always think miracles are complicated, spectacular things. But little by little, as Mercedes was talking, the old woman realized maybe she wasn't so far off the mark in thinking Divine Providence had had a big hand in this matter, and she, Doña Eloísa, may've been its humble instrument.

The day after her "debut," after Mercedes spent the night in that nightmare room with her portly friend, she got angry with her. "She told me she wasn't going to have me living there for free for the rest of my life, and she suggested I do things no lady can accept...we fought and she ended up keeping all my things, except this dress—it was the only thing I had on when I left there..."

Mercedes spent the whole morning roaming the streets, but her head was clearer than it had ever been in her life. She started thinking and thinking...the things the old woman had said about her granddaughter Lolita the night before were swirling around in her head. She thought, for the first time, that if in all those years of her marriage she'd been so miserable, maybe a bit of the blame fell on her too. She hadn't managed to find joy in her children. She hadn't thought of anyone else but herself. She'd been in a daze. "But now I've lived. I've realized what real misery

is. And that I'm not the only one suffering; other people are too...I don't know how to say this, Doña Eloísa: it feels like I've become a different person..."

Doña Eloísa looked at her. She watched her speaking slowly, not playing up her story, not lying...she was, indeed, a different woman.

Mercedes had one big regret. The old woman's watch, which she wouldn't get back now. "That was what gave me the idea to become a maid...listen, you know I was brought up in silk diapers—There are many things I might do, but stealing from someone who's been good to me...no, that I don't do. You'll never be sorry you helped Mercedes. I'm working. Cent by cent I'll save that money, Doña Eloísa..."

The old woman started to cry. Mercedes thought she must've been upset she'd lost her jewellery. But Doña Eloísa, between sobs, was laughing like a blessed fool.

Mercedes didn't really understand what the old woman said to her that afternoon, because the poor lady, in her emotional state, was talking a little incoherently. She was saying things about a call from God reaching Mercedes' heart, something that sounded insane to Mercedes, but she didn't dare argue. Then she showed Mercedes the letter from her son. "Think it over...they don't know what you've been through. God knows I didn't lie in my letter, but I didn't tell them anything either...they think you're doing very well and if you come back, it'll be out of pure love. If everything you've told me is true, and just as you've started a new life here you're willing to start one back home, then you're saved. You know now that they love you...forget about the watch; it was my gift to you—I've never given anyone a better gift in my life. Think about getting together the money to buy your ticket home, to clean yourself up a bit, to pick up a little present for your daughter...don't you feel happier just thinking about it?"

Mercedes felt deeply peaceful, and yes, happy—it was as if she'd been very sick and then some strong medicine had cured her. Suddenly, everything looked so natural to her, so simple, so clear...she even thought the old woman was waving her hands too wildly. Of the two of them, she was the calm one. She felt stronger knowing that.

She was a little late getting back to the house where she was working, and her mistress scolded her curtly. She didn't say a word in reply. She didn't talk about her rich relatives or her satin diapers. Nothing. Silence.

When she went to bed that night, she thought about her husband with a touch of tenderness—how he couldn't sleep, how he felt so alone in the bed...who'd have thought?

She remembered the string of inhospitable beds she'd slept in. This one she was lying in now was uncomfortable compared to the wide double bed she and her husband shared. "It's only for a little while—just a little while," she murmured.

A wide, sunny path in her life was opening before her. She didn't think it was the same path she'd followed to the brink of madness. She didn't think much of anything about it.

She was half-asleep when she had a thought that felt truly joyful to her: *There's nothing like travelling to make you realize things, to get to know what life is.*

And later on an idea came to her: in one of the windows at her house, she'd hang white curtains like the ones around Lolita's balcony.

If she could've seen Doña Eloísa at her prie-dieu, wordlessly shouting a joyful hallelujah to God, Mercedes would've smiled knowingly. Doña Eloísa, **she'd say**, was too kind for anyone to spoil her fantasies and explain to her that miracles don't exist...she'd been a little out of her mind. Then she'd suffered horribly, and she'd gotten better. The journey had been something like one of those treatments they give insane people that either kills them or cures them.

That's what Mercedes would've thought. And if she'd explained that to Doña Eloísa, the old lady would've nodded—and then gone on giving thanks to God just as enthusiastically.

Because Doña Eloísa and Mercedes had a different idea of what a miracle is. That's all.

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