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## Translator's Preface

*Daniel M. Jaffe*

Jorge Luis Castillo's first-person story explores the narrator's contemplation of his current day, the very nature of his existence. The opening and closing paragraphs of "*La Vida Vulgar*" are full of first-person actions, yet avoid use of the first-person pronoun "*yo*." Such pronoun-verb pattern is normal in Spanish, but not in English where subject pronouns are relied upon more heavily. How to handle this divergence of pronoun usage while preserving the narrative voice in translation?

Initially, I experimented by following the Spanish pattern literally, excluding the English first-person "I" nearly everywhere. As Professor Castillo observed when reading that initial draft, the English felt stilted and more stylized than the Spanish, with the prose style calling greater attention to itself than in the original. Also, I feared that this increased stylization in a first-person voice might imply a certain stylized way of thinking on the protagonist's part, an effect that would distort the characterization and philosophizing, the heart of the story. On the other hand, to follow ordinary English usage and insert "I" before every verb would be to present the protagonist as narcissistic to an extent not suggested by the original, and would, thereby, also be to distort the characterization and story.

As a compromise, I first modified a number of sentence structures so as to provide variety of pronoun usage in English (the possessive "my" instead of the subjective "I"), or even so as to avoid the English need for pronouns at all. Elsewhere, I inserted "I" before many of the translated verbs. In the first paragraph, for example, I translated "*Abro los ojos*," as "My eyes open," not as the more literal "I open my eyes." I translated the later sentence beginning "*No tengo mujer, ni hijos...*" not as "I have no wife, no children..." but simply as "No wife, no children...." And in the second paragraph, "*Voy a la sala*" became "To the living room," rather than "I go to the living room." Hopefully, the English reader will sense the protagonist-narrator in much the same way as does the Spanish reader.

## "Ordinary Life" by Jorge Luis Castillo<sup>1</sup>

*Translated by Daniel M. Jaffe*

My eyes open. I can barely see—before abandoning myself to sleep, I covered my face with a soft old pillow. I set it aside, get up. Morning. My bed's wide and has been empty for some time; so has my house. No wife, no children, no siblings, no real friends; left with a few acquaintances, neighbors on the street who almost never visit and whose company I avoid. My parents disappeared a long time ago. I've been living alone for years already. How many? I can no longer recall.

With more reluctance than patience, I take great care in laying out the quilted bedspread—habit. To the living room. I open the venetians to see the garden; but the sun completely blinds me and I don't get to see either my roses or my geraniums. I half close the blinds again. With curtains and canopies or some colorful parasol, I've tried in vain to protect myself from the California sun whose destructiveness is evident on the faded spines of nearly every volume of my diminishing library and in the cancerous pustule, more pronounced all the time, that shines on the exact center of my bald spot.

In the kitchen. I prepare my breakfast, a genuinely frugal one. Over time I've been losing my taste for fancy spreads. And to think that the good Montaigne reserves delights of good table and drink for a mature age! I sit at the dining room table, eat cereal and milk and a little toast without butter. I chew slowly; a good ten or twelve times for each tiny bite. A large glass, flowery and full of apple juice, helps me swallow the routine phalanx of pills I take for migraines, allergies, cardiac arrhythmia, skin cancer, arthritis, diabetes, and acid reflux. I take them one after another while keeping myself busy leafing through the catalogue from the Musical Heritage Society they still insist on sending me each month; haven't bought anything from them for years. I no longer get the newspaper, don't pay attention to telephone calls, hardly ever switch on the television and it's rare for me to leave the house except to see the doctor a couple times a year and to stock up at the nearest shopping center. Things out in the world couldn't interest me less. I am the world.

Having finished my repast, I wash the dishes in the kitchen sink and put them to dry in the dishrack. I walk to the bathroom to satisfy my physical needs punctually and efficiently before devoting myself to personal grooming. I like to take my time showering, enjoying the lukewarm water gliding down my emaciated body as if it were a miraculous lymph rejuvenator, beneath whose descending touch the arthritis and rheumatism dwelling in my joints and spine disappear. I use a soap whose generous lather and vaguely tropical fragrance remind me inevitably of home. I bid good morning to the nostalgia obliging me to close my eyes and see myself clearly, twenty or thirty years younger, lying face up beneath a lone palm grove on a remote and deserted Caribbean island beach. Even though awake, I emulate sleeping. I don't know if life is a dream; but in my case it is, at least until almost noon.

Bathed, combed and dressed, I've seated myself on the living room sofa; the fabric has lost color but is still comfortable. I rearrange the cushions so my side doesn't hurt, and recline my head. My temples fill with confusing thoughts and feelings; but there's no doubt that a vague dreamy melancholy predominates, one that roves and plunders without managing to affix itself to any precise object or memory, save the most remote in my house and in my childhood, lost paradises in whose remembrance I like to take serene and tranquil delight. Such is my morning ritual. These memories don't necessarily gratify, but I allow them to pass through my mind because it would take more energy and labor to dislodge them from the imagination. Other than that, they are as natural within as the other ailments afflicting me, or, to put it better, as the morning sun that illuminates my living room, or perhaps, as the frosty afternoon winds that blow in the far north, whose polar regions I will never visit.

The living room's bells chime nine o'clock with a profound and lethargic bong. My mind is gradually ridding itself of slumber's haze; my temples are clearing up and finally settling down in the here and now that are the bread of my days. I have another journey ahead. In spite of the fact that options have run out for me, I still retain a certain knack for filling the hours. My fertile imagination has managed to prevent the miseries and limitations imposed by my body from shutting, slowly and one at a time, the doors to the kingdom of fantasy within whose confines I am pleased to

venture around even at my age. Otherwise, the world would seem to me more tedious all the time and I would end up acting as if life were a spectacle not worth the pain of witnessing.

I turn on the radio that I keep on the living room table and always set to the classical station. The music still excites a singular fascination in me. I'm capable of becoming completely absorbed in listening, ecstatic and immersed for hours without any interruption of such harmonious nirvana, thinking only about the present, about the glory of the moment. Schopenhauer was right when he affirmed that music, more than any of the other arts, captures the essence of the will to live. I recognize the melody immediately. It's Puccini's aria: from *La Bohème* or *La Rondine*; I fail to recall. A while back it would have been easy enough for me to verify its origin. I wouldn't have had to do more than climb up to my study on the second floor of the house, and consult the corresponding recording from what then comprised my classical music library, a collection of which I was, at one time, justifiably proud. It no longer exists, however. One by one I sold or gave away those records that had cost me so much work, time, and money to acquire. A few recordings remain that I haven't been able to sell, hardly ten or twelve of the thousands I had. I now content myself with the radio.

I listen with delight to the soprano. She has a sweet silvery voice, with a well-controlled vibrato and knows how to caress phrases, linking them impeccably, with a minimum of *portamento*, to the delicate contours of Puccini's melody, whose name, if I am not mistaken, is *Il bel sogno di Doretta*, from the first act of *La Rondine*. Secrets of vocal technique are not unfamiliar to me, and I could amply expound upon the subject; but the thing that interests me now is the music in and of itself. And in this regard, I can say only that I still like listening to it, abandoning myself to it as if I were a drop of some kind of water that penetrates and dissolves, even if for a mere instant of imprecise duration, in the widest and deepest ocean, only to reconstitute itself and return to being what it was in space and time. Enough said—a sin to spoil the enchantment of the moment, and I resist doing so.

It's the beautiful, the fleeting, the eternal present. My consciousness tries in vain to prepare itself for every miraculous instant marking the inexorable passage of my life. Although I well know that the now into

which I try inserting myself is illusory and that I cease doing so the instant I achieve thought of it, I take pleasure in passing the hours in such paradoxes. During the final years of my life, I have come to prefer the siege of the present to the vain reminiscence of the past. Although I have no other remedy than to live with it and in it, I refuse to cede all the convolutions and interstices of memory to such phantasmagorias.

I was not always this way. There was a period during which—my family dead, my marriages failed and my fortune diminished—memories distressed me to such an extent that I was incapable of confronting them serenely, without fret and tears. I can now accept my losses even knowing they were of no little significance: earth, smoke, dust—my childhood, my family and parents have all come to nothing as have that adolescence of mine chock full of misleading illusions and hopes for a promising future, the love that arrives cloaked in desire (so often the other way around), my father's business dealings that fell into my hands and yielded bankruptcy, two quick marriages ending in divorce due to my infidelities, and multitudes of friendships ending in frauds, betrayals, and disillusionments or, for those who were loyal even upon seeing me without a dime, in a rosary of faraway deaths.

Nothing, no one, remains. Except the loneliness that has chased away all those chimeras. And I don't begrudge it. I prefer to live my remaining days without encumbering my mind with pointless nostalgias of the lost pleasures and squandered wealth of my wayward youth. My drooping shoulders can no longer bear the burden. If anything saddens me in my moments of weakness and variable mood, it's the turns for the better that my life could have taken but that never materialized: women I never wanted or those who didn't know how to love me enough, failed business dealings, dishes never consumed, brews never tasted, unknown cities that these eyes won't see nor soles tread. A life that is always something else, another city, another job, another body and another death. Let others complain of what they have lost; I lament what has never been.

I have turned off the radio to go out to the garden. Mid-day. Bright sun. I return for my hat and full watering can. As always, I inspect the roses and geraniums sown by my own hands in my home's garden. I like being among the flowers. They don't ask for much. Water, fertilizer, occasional pruning. But they give a great deal. Beauty without

complications. Death and regeneration on each withered stalk, on each nascent branch. A terrible shame that neither of my wives had the capacity for such loveliness!

My activities and pastimes could seem insignificant; and those objects, the contemplation of which occupies me for hours — commonplace and ordinary. And that's why I prefer them. Neither the exquisite nor the rare seduces me anymore (my two wives were, in their own times, exceptional beauties and I tired of them as quickly as they of me); likewise the ugly and disagreeable do not please me; I'm not perverse. My most fervent ambition has been to reduce dreams and fantasies of unbridled desire and obstinate nostalgia to the trivial realities of my ordinary existence. With the passage of years, I've become convinced that to seek out beauty in the new is folly. And I've encountered beauty in the attentive, assiduous, and thorough contemplation of those everyday objects that surround my neighborhood, my house, and my garden. I take private, secret pleasure from their immobile or scarcely sentient existence without becoming fond enough of them or pretending to hold onto them when they deteriorate or perish. I'm able to contemplate, and for a time to see myself contemplating, a rose's petals, a stone's contours, a letter-opener's edge, a frying pan's handle, the front door, the sky full of clouds, my well-stocked pantry, the birds on the bower, dogs in the street, poplars along the sidewalk, the butterfly on a flower. Fully aware of the brevity of opportunity, I'm drawn to the inconsequential and the insignificance of each humble inhabitant of the ungraspable now. I devote seconds, minutes, sometimes hours, in contemplation of their presence. Then I continue on my way and fix upon something else. And that's how I live in peace.

I know that human existence is brief and that everything I am, my body, becomes more weak and fragile with each passing day. For its sake I live modestly and scrupulously avoid all kinds of gastronomic and bacchanalian excesses, as well as those of Venus, which don't interest me much any longer and whose strenuous outbursts I could hardly enjoy at my age. The mind can also be fickle at times, variable and oscillating. For the sake of my soul's whims, I adhere to a vigilant and flexible routine directed toward avoiding all that troubles and upsets equanimity of spirit. I don't simply try, like Epicureans of old, to avoid pain. I assume my

sufferings and griefs, incorporating them as naturally as possible into the heap of experiences comprising my daily life. In a certain way, afflictions refashion me in those distressing moments, fortunately infrequent, when things surrounding me lose their everyday aura and seem merely dead objects, inert; in those instances, I cannot permit myself contemplation of them because I dread dispersing my consciousness into the infinite fragmentation of time.

I prepare to set upon my daily afternoon stroll after finishing the lunch I never eat; if there's anything lacking in my sedentary life it's my appetite since I eat little, scarcely drink, and women ceased interesting me many years ago, even before men stopped attracting me. Aside from music, from gardening and from some book or other remaining in my library, my sole other devotion is exercise, my afternoon strolls along sidewalks of the neighborhood in which I live, and I don't think of abandoning them as long as my legs, still strong, support me despite the arthritis afflicting me in winter months or on humid days.

I leave slowly for the street. Stop on the sunny sidewalk and look around. Everything's the same. That's how I like to find it. The development where I live is of the most common and run-of-the-mill sort one could imagine. All the houses are one story with stucco walls and pitched roofs of red tile, lawns so well-mowed and splendorously green they appear artificial. Mine is like all the others, more or less. I don't engage with my neighbors beyond some greeting or occasional "Good day." Nor do I garner attention by my manner of dress. I look like everybody in this calm and quiet suburb: short-sleeved shirts, white or multi-colored; and loose pants, black oxfords, a Panama hat to cover my bald spot, and a cane, seven knots high, that belonged to my father and that I always have with me. Understandable at my age.

Strolling on the sidewalk a couple blocks up to a charming copse of trees that remains not far from my house. Sometimes, I'm accompanied by one or another of the few books I keep, and I sit and give it a re-read on whichever bench they had the courtesy to position in the shade of a Chinese elm, just in front of which, at another time, stood a pool of potable water and where now stands a pond where all kinds of birds and insects have taken refuge. Sometimes I bring a bag of stale bread with me or some other foodstuff trifle and amuse myself by feeding the ducks and gulls

congregating there. At other times, I laboriously climb up a small hill situated at the park's edge and sit on a rock so as to give my thoughts free rein.

Of late, I've been inclined to reflect upon the novel I could have written had I dedicated myself to *belles lettres*, a brief impulse I experienced but did not heed so many years ago, never imagining I would end my days alone, in a California town, living on the meager savings I succeeded in putting aside in my name before the unexpected downturn of the economy and before my not always prudent management led to bankruptcy of the business inherited from my father. I had enrolled at Harvard Business School in compliance with my father's wishes and in continuance of the Ferranti family tradition, all businessmen for several generations, when I became infected by the measles of literature: skimming books about commerce and management in front of the expressionist paintings hanging on the walls of the Busch-Reisinger Museum or the antique Byzantines and Hundustanis reunited in the Sackler, I decided to take English and French literature classes with Harry Levin and Hispanic-American literature with Raimundo Lida, in addition to attending some concerts performed by the Boston Symphony under the baton of Charles Munch.

Although it's clear my artistic aspirations did not extend beyond a caprice that did not take long to fade, the project remained in my imagination, the impulse to assemble a narrative that would deal with absolutely nothing except its own unbearable vacuity and that would, in a manner never actually to reach fruition, reflect the joyful and bewildering existence of my student years or, even better, of my gilded age as chief executive of a brokerage firm in the heart of Wall Street amid lucrative speculations on securities exchanges, indisputable heir to my father's wealth, envied playboy, stuffed to the gills with all those fineries, pleasures and perversions arriving on my doorstep or falling into my lap merely for having a full bank account, a bar full of drinks, a well-stocked cupboard, a well-endowed crotch and a spirit predisposed to squander, with both hands—reputation, fortune, and youth. The fact that I never even attempted to start it is not reason for sorrow, but rather pretext for another sterile meditation, admittedly serene and pleasant, about what my life could have been, but will never be, since we are all mortals.

I walk back to my house at twilight. A weighty moment, pregnant with possibilities for an edifying philosophical reflection befitting maestro Kempis: *Vanitas est longam vitam optare, et de bona vita modicum curare*. I'm devoted, nevertheless, to contemplating how, among the elms and eucalyptus of the park where I find myself, flocks of crows and vultures congregate, and a solitary horned owl will sing all night long as I listen from my room until sleep finally takes me down. *Sicut nubes, quasi naves, velut umbra*, all vanishes in the present moment, of whose constant and completely ungraspable unfolding I am impotent witness. I vegetate like a plant with a thick and formidable trunk, now twisted by the years, and with outstretched branches, yet without flowers or fruit. And I admit joyfully, perhaps resentfully, that I feel absolutely no remorse in imagining myself dead tomorrow without having done anything extraordinary in this transitory world.

In my house, now in darkness, I eat my frugal supper of Campbell's chicken soup with my usual toast, my banana and my yogurt, which I sprinkle with two handfuls of strawberries and cereal. Dishes into the sink—done cleaning the kitchen. With water from the bathroom washbasin, I carefully and methodically clean my face and teeth. Opening the iron medicine chest in front of the sink, I take out a small bottle bursting with pills. I take the usual dose: two or three tablets with another glass of water to get to sleep and feel its soporific effect right away. A fatigue gradually takes hold of my numb limbs as I make for my bedroom, willing to drift to sleep on yet another night of my life.

Slowly I enter my bedroom. I undress lethargically, my extremities already numbed by the dose of sleeping pills, softly singing *Il bel sogno di Doretta* under my breath. I place all my clothing inside the wardrobe I have facing the bed, pull back the quilted bedspread with care and lie down slowly, flat on my back, in my ample bed. I stare at the ceiling. All around me is calm. The surrounding darkness assumes gentle forms and the shadows of things hang over my head like a compassionate cloak that one day will be shroud. At last I am able to close my eyes.

#### Note

1. From the short story collection *La Vida Vulgar*, by Jorge Luis Castillo (San Juan: Isla Negra, 2004).