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All Too Few

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## All Too Few

Javier Marías

A FEW OF my female friends are reaching an age when their sons or daughters are beginning to leave home; and since, sometimes, I'm so obtuse that I can only think about and fix on what is there before me—a form of obtuseness, let it be said in my defense, that I believe I share with most of my fellow men and women—I cannot help but reflect on the silent, private sadness “that dare not to speak its name” and with which these mothers confront the emptying of their homes. It's not surprising they keep quiet about it and conceal it. My friends are intelligent and generous women. They know that it's good for their offspring to leave home, whether to get married or something similar, out of a desire for adventure or independence or out of mere impatience to incorporate themselves fully into the world. They know, too, that they're not losing their children, they will simply cease to live with them and, often, cease taking care of them in the more prosaic and everyday ways: they will no longer have to cook for them or take them to the doctor or turn on the washing machine to do their laundry, or put up with their deafening music or their occasional bad manners. They know that their children must now learn things for themselves, take on responsibilities and gain experience; and that if they do linger in the

paternal or maternal home (as happens with ever greater frequency, because of the increasingly high cost of housing and the precarious nature of employment), they, the mothers, would be the first to worry and to encourage and help them find their own territory. So they know that they have no objective reasons to complain or feel sad. And, of course, it cannot escape them that they did exactly the same when they were young, and did so without a twinge of bad conscience.

However, another reason why their discretion doesn't surprise me is that mothers are often the easy target of affectionate derision. Remarks such as “Oh, you know what mothers are like” or “You sound just like my mother” are commonplace, and while they may be affectionate, they're also slightly scornful, in particular comments along the lines of “Mothers are such a drag.” In movies, of course, mothers tend to be shown weeping at the weddings of their “little ones,” out of an excess of sentimentality and a lack of self-control, and are deemed more deserving of gentle mockery than compassion and understanding. When I look at my female friends now, I think their reasons for weeping are far more respectable than mere superficial and rather exhibitionist emotion, because, like it or not, a long period of their

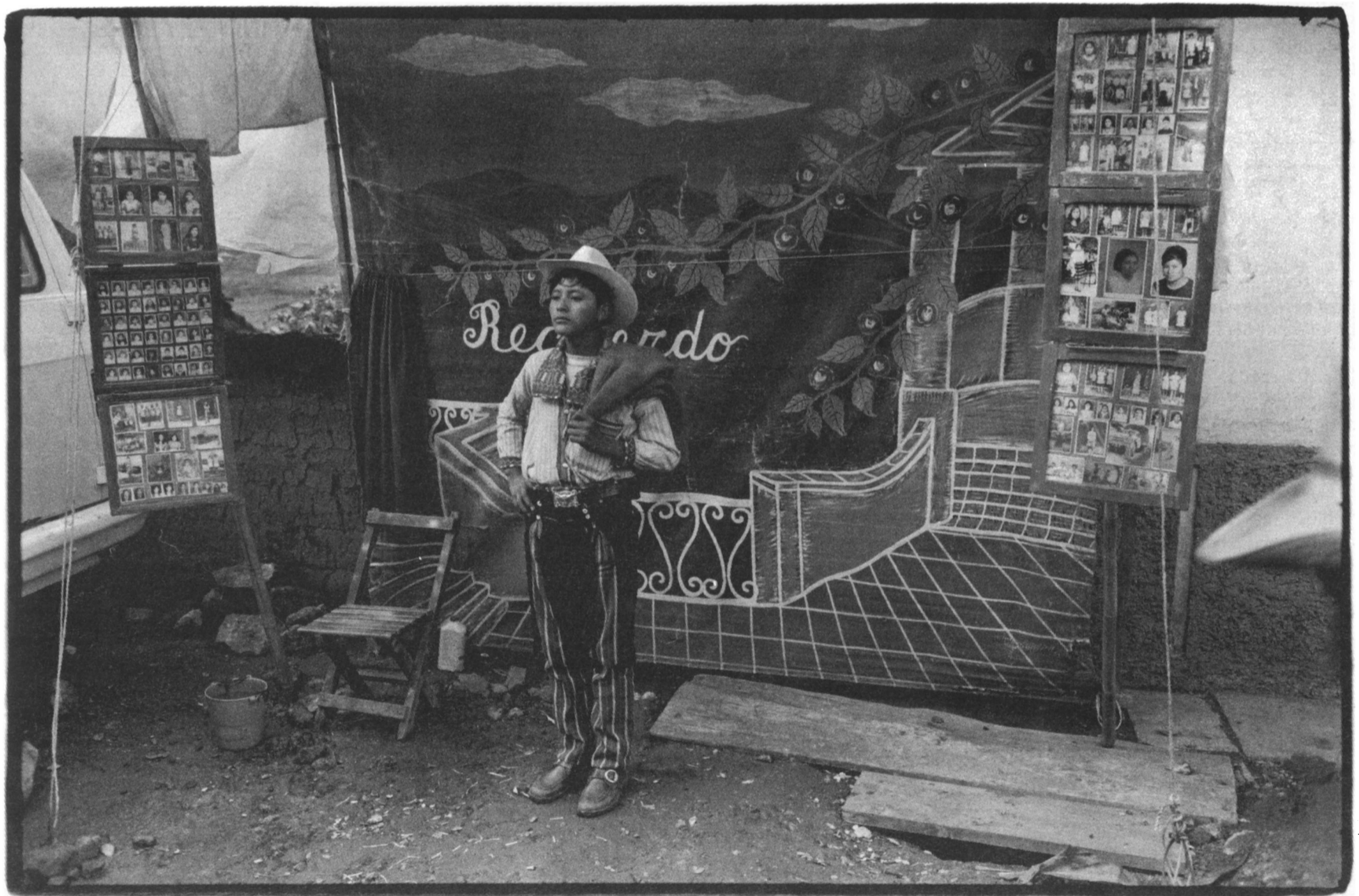
existence is coming to a close, and their life will never be the same. I have so much respect for the pain caused when something ends that I can even understand those who regret—although they will rarely confess or admit to it—the death of a long-time enemy or the resolution of an unsatisfactory situation. Because one can also miss struggle, effort, resistance, habit. Conrad said that the only thing that saved sailors from despair when they went to sea, not to return for a long time, was “soothing routine,” the routine that made them get up each morning during the first few days of the voyage. That's why it's so hard to lose routines, however unsatisfactory.

I can only think of one movie that views such abandoned mothers with sympathy and sensitivity, even though the mother in question is actually the maiden aunt who brought Captain Gregg up after he was orphaned as a child. That captain is the protagonist of one of my all-time favorites, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* by Joseph Mankiewicz. He set sail for the first time at sixteen. When Lucy Muir asks what his aunt did when he ran away to sea, the ghost replies: “Oh, probably thanked heaven there was no one around to fill her house with mongrel puppies and track mud on her carpets.” Lucy Muir remains thoughtful, and the captain asks her what she's thinking. “I'm thinking how lonely she must have felt,” Lucy says, “with her clean carpets.” It's just a detail, but it's the only example I can recall of a fictional character putting herself in the modest place

of those mothers.

And of course all this leads me to remember my own mother when I left home at twenty-three to go and live in another city with a married woman separated from her husband. Naturally, I didn't give a moment's thought then to the sadness I see now in my female friends whose children are going away. Life is really very badly organized: when we're young, we're aware of so little, certainly not of our parents, whom we tend to see as suffocating, intrusive beings, who get in our way and stop us doing what we want to do, almost as a burden. Only much later, once we're over thirty (if we're lucky), can we start to see them as people who were, have been, and are something more than just our parents. Then comes curiosity, and even the desire to make it up to them, to listen to them properly, to look at them clearly, to pay them more attention, to ponder their feelings and anxieties that were not just about us, because we were not always the center of their lives, even though in our youthful vanity it seemed to us that we were. And sometimes this comes too late. I only returned to my mother's house to watch her die, three years later. And now when I see the private sadness of my friends whose children are leaving aged twenty-five or thirty (although, as mothers, my friends still keep alive the memory of all the other years, from zero on), I realize that my mother only had me near her for twenty-three years, and that those twenty-three must have seemed to her all too few. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)



Recuerdo, Huehuetanango, Guatemala, 1975