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12 April 2010

*Model Women: The Nourishing Words of Almudena Grandes*  
Translated into English

by

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## Abstract

### *Model Women: The Nourishing Words of Almudena Grandes* Translated into English

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Although Spanish writer Almudena Grandes' novels have been translated into twenty-one languages in the last two decades, her short stories have unfortunately been left relatively inaccessible for an English-speaking audience. This project brings the story "Malena, una vida hervida" as well as the author's Prologue, both from the collection *Modelos de mujer* (1996), into American English, therefore giving an entire new group of readers the chance to explore how Grandes portrays the themes of love, obsession, body image, and self-empowerment. Accompanying these two texts are a letter, also translated, written to Grandes by fellow Spaniard and writer Eduardo Mendicutti, as well as a translator's introduction, which briefly highlights contemporary translation theory to explain the methodology used to approach the texts and confront the challenges that arose in the process of translation.

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## Table of Contents

Translator's Introduction .....	1
Prologue: Memoirs of a Gypsy Girl .....	10
Malena, A Steamed Life? .....	16
Epilogue .....	43
Works Cited .....	44
Works Consulted .....	45

## Translator's Introduction

Although Almudena Grandes is generally known for her powerful and surprising novels—she considers herself to be primarily a novelist—her shorter works cannot be overlooked as insignificant in the shadow of her more acclaimed publications. From *Model Women*, her book of short stories written between 1989 and 1995, I have selected two sections to translate: the author's prologue and "Malena, A Steamed Life?", coincidentally the only pieces in the collection that contain autobiographical elements. As translator Tess O'Dwyer wrote in her introduction to Giannina Braschi's *Empire of Dreams*, "The only way to know precisely what an author means is to become the author" (xvii). In this case, working with autobiographical texts allowed me to simultaneously assume the role of author, narrator, and protagonist through the voice of just one person, although at different stages of her life, as I translated Grandes' writings into English.

Although the story that lends its name to her collection is not included in this thesis, the title *Model Women* still seems appropriate. In the prologue, Grandes divulges details of her own childhood and of how she became a writer. From a very young age, she looked up to writers spanning two generations of her family tree as role models. Unfortunately, in the very first story she ever penned, the emphasis on shortcomings is apparent. Young Almudena is unable to match her brother's artistic doodles and drawings, so instead she turns to writing about how she feels alienated from her family. Instead of fitting into the model of a perfect child, she identifies herself with an adopted gypsy girl, simply posing as a member of the family. Giving up this desire to fit in later on in her life, Grandes broke away from all expectations with the release of her first



novel, *The Ages of Lulu* (*Las edades de Lulú*, 1989), a shockingly explicit narrative of female sexuality that won the Sonrisa Vertical Prize.

In the short story, Malena deals with the same issue of inadequacy as her creator. She lives her life in the “captivity” of a restrictive diet, and after years of self-denial she eventually becomes nothing more than a hollow, incomplete replica of a woman. Like a model car or airplane, she has managed to make herself beautiful on the outside, something nice to look at, but deep down she’s missing some of the most essential parts— not gears or motors, but rather a sense of self worth, the satisfaction of enjoying the simplest pleasures life has to offer, and even the will to live. Furthermore, the idea of the “model woman” also evokes the image of the idealized standard Malena is struggling to live up to: the rail-thin, gorgeous supermodels whose pictures every woman is forced to stare at in TV commercials, magazines, and billboards, and who we are expected to worship and emulate.

This concept of model women plays an important role in the study and act of translation as well. Today, the vast majority of translators, particularly literary translators, are female. A typical translator is expected to “stay home and be submissive. In fact, he is expected not to be a he at all, but traditionally a she. The translator is a member of a helping profession, someone who nurses poems and stories into another language” (Wechsler, 66). In this way we are often (too often) portrayed as servants or slaves to the original text, and virtually always as inferior to the author. We are seen as reproductive machines, programmed to duplicate a text in a new language, stripped of the human quality of artistic creativity (Simon, 12).

This oversimplified general perception of what translation entails generates unrealistic expectations for translators who feel that they are trapped “in the futile pursuit of a nonexistent perfection” (Weaver, 124). Modern tools like bilingual dictionaries and instant online translators reinforce this misconception by implying that words are equivalent and interchangeable across languages and that computer algorithms can effectively replace human translators. This ideal standard of being able to identically replicate a work of literature using an entirely different code of words, syntax, connotations, and culture makes success unattainable and leaves us grasping for “the best possible failure” in an unfair tangle of high expectations and low appreciation (Wechsler, 54). And if at best we are destined to disappoint, at worst we are charged with horrible crimes. One author threatened his translators, “Death to all who dare rewrite what has been written. Impale them and roast them over a slow fire! Castrate them and cut off their ears!” (Wechsler, 96). Like Malena, staring up at a poster of Twiggy while being told she was still too fat, and twelve-year-old Almudena pouring her heart into her first “masterpiece” hoping to eventually find her place, translators must try to fill the mold set before them as model women.

Instead of focusing on the deficiencies in translation, the work of translators should be compared to that of musicians and actors, interpreting a written work for a new audience (Wechsler, 99). From this perspective, innovative and original solutions to problems can be recognized and appreciated. As composer Maurice Ravel noted, “Creativity is not a matter of inspiration but of choices, of decision-making” (Levine, xiii). Translators are responsible for closely reading their text, understanding the author’s intentions and meaning, then meticulously selecting each word and phrase to best fit the

situation, style, and tone. Although there is often no equivalent, or even approximate, match in the second language, translators must endeavor to parallel the original in the most faithful way possible.

Though it is clear that faithful translations are the best kind, it is hotly debated how to define faithfulness. Versions that are too literal are equally as unfaithful as versions that depart too much from the original. For example, in “Malena, A Steamed Life?” while Andrés was visiting the United States, he met “a big, hulk of a guy” who measured in at 180 centimeters. On the surface, it would seem that this stature could easily be converted into feet and inches, the units expected by an American audience, and that would be that. However, that makes him a measly five-foot ten, towering over most Spaniards but an average Joe by American standards. The question then remains whether as a translator I have the right, or the duty, to inflate the number a bit to help him stand out in a country where basketball players easily surpass seven feet. Similarly, another issue of numbers came up as Malena enjoyed her last moments of freedom before starting the strict diet by polishing off her last indulgent snack, which she claimed to have “wolf[ed] down in twenty-six minutes flat.” In Europe, leisurely meals may last for hours, so a twenty-six minute snack seems like an instant, but in the land of fast food, an entire meal could easily be finished in fifteen or twenty minutes. In both of these cases, small numerical details that don’t significantly influence the plot would draw unintended attention from a reader in the target culture if left unchanged, so I felt it was necessary to make slight adjustments to prevent cultural distinctions from interrupting the flow of the story.

Another cultural disparity becomes evident when teenage Malena attends a party where she and her friends play a game of spin the bottle. The rules of the game used in the story are quite different from the way it is typically played in the United States. However, this does not necessarily justify making changes in the translation. In this instance, I chose to leave the original as it was because the progression of the game is crucial to the development of the plot and because the differences are explicitly stated in the text. The foreign rules do not differ so radically as to confuse the reader. Attempting to adapt the scene to the familiar rules would destroy the essence of this memory, hence it seemed natural to maintain the given structure.

Cultural differences even affect the written form of the literature itself. Throughout the original, Grandes incorporates dialogue directly into the flow of the paragraph, without distinguishing the spoken words from the rest of the text or indicating a change in speakers with the traditional use of punctuation and spacing. This practice is becoming relatively common in contemporary Spanish literature, but remains essentially unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences. The dilemma then lies in deciding to whom I must be loyal: the expectations of my English-speaking audience or the style of the original? Unlike in the previously mentioned situations where the only options were to alter or not to alter, in this case I was able to find a compromise between the two systems. Unwilling to chop the paragraphs into short lines each time the speaker changed and risk shattering the continuity of the section, I instead added the standard quotation marks to denote dialogue, setting off the conversations, but leaving the paragraph structure unchanged.

Dialogue posed further problems for me in the character of Milagros. In her long, telephone monologues, she communicates using very colloquial, informal language in an almost rambling, stream-of-consciousness style. Translator Gregory Rabassa warns, “A word-for-word technique can often render the translation pallid and ineffective” (11), but in the case of Malena’s friend Milagros, word-for-word, and even phrase-by-phrase, translation results in nonsensical gibberish. So I found it necessary to rebuild her speech from the ground up to match the gossipy fluency of the Spanish. I deliberately picked modern phrases like “getting laid,” “hooking up” and contractions like “gonna” to emphasize that she’s in the know and with-it. This personal, informal language seems even more appropriate in the context of an intimate phone conversation with a close friend. I struggled and pushed myself, endlessly searching for the right joke, the right pickup line, the right insult to make her sound as real and as sassy in English as she did in the Spanish.

Many translation theories focus on the “universals,” “spirit,” or “essence” of a text as central to its understanding, aspects that are common to all languages and absolutely should not be lost in translation. In “Malena, A Steamed Life?” this core revolves around food, which motivates much of the plot, drives the themes of self-control and body image, and pervades the imagery in the story. Subtly reiterating the impact of the diet on her every thought and action, the use of gastronomical language throughout the text embodies Malena’s personal obsession with food. Many of my decisions as a translator were swayed by the desire to let this leitmotif permeate every moment of the narration.

Culturally-specific foods were often the most challenging details to translate. Wherever possible, I tried to maintain the literal flavors of Spain, allowing the characters to eat sardines in tomato sauce, stuffed piquillo peppers, gazpacho, and roast suckling pig, and to snack on condensed milk straight from the can. In only a few cases did I substitute more familiar foods. For example, when Malena sees Andrés for the first time in years, she describes his fingers as “swollen now like North African barnacles.” To any American reader, this image brings to mind a small, round, hard shell that has no connection at all to anything edible; however, in Spain, barnacles refer to long and meaty shellfish, true culinary delicacies. In order to make this comparison of Andrés’ hands to food accessible for my audience, I debated every finger-shaped alternative I could think of, from bratwurst to Twinkies, until I eventually replaced the barnacles with churros. These fried confections fit perfectly because they are of a fitting shape, size, and color for the desired mental image, they originated in Spain, and they are generally well-known in the States, as they are frequently sold at state fairs and baseball games.

In several cases during the editing process, edible images surfaced in places where they were absent in the original. For instance, as Malena scrutinizes herself in the mirror, where she was originally disgusted at the sight of *caderas a punto de derrumbarse* (literally, “hips about to fall down”), she now sees a “permanent muffin top,” ironically marrying her love for food and her perceived physical defects. Later, in the description of Silvia, the tease, switching from *escueta*, meaning “concise” or “small,” to “bite-sized” we can subtly evoke the image of a candy bar that makes all of the boys’ mouths water. By including these new culinary tidbits, we can enrich the text with phrases unavailable to Grandes in the source language. Although critics might claim

that these additions are unfaithful to the original, we are able to compensate for compromises made elsewhere in the text and to follow the advice of the writers Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina who insisted, “Modify me,” and the Chilean Pablo Neruda who instructed his translator, “[D]on’t just translate my poems. I want you to improve them” (Wechsler, 101).

Before I could make any of these discoveries or even start to confront any of the challenges presented by the text, the very first task demanded of me as a translator was to read the text and read it carefully. Although it is often overlooked by those outside of the field, the most basic prerequisite for a good translation is a solid understanding of the text, which can only be achieved by close reading and research. Before setting to work, I had no idea how much I would learn in the process. Not only did I have to learn to appreciate the intricacies of grammar, vocabulary, and culture, but I also had to acquire the necessary background on every single topic mentioned in the text in order to write about it intelligently. A single word can force you to dig deep into a whole wealth of terminology unused by the general public: I consulted a nurse about specific medical procedures and diseases, interrogated a soldier about jargon for rankings and equipment, grilled a chef about recipes and regional usage of ingredients, referenced diet manuals for explanations of metabolic index and dietary restrictions, and browsed clothing catalogues for sewing terms, all in the hopes of getting it right. Surprisingly, the best tools are not bilingual dictionaries and instant translators, but rather monolingual dictionaries, thesauruses, and conversations with native speakers (even other English speakers!).

And now, knowing that I have put in every ounce of thought that I could possibly muster, the only thing left for me to do is to hope. I hope that I have communicated, not

simply transliterated, Grandes' work, and reproduced her stories in a thoughtful way, because "[n]ot only does a translation have to sound like the original, it must be an original" on its own (O'Dwyer, xx). I hope that I have managed to keep the flair of her style and the flavor of Spain, balancing the words, meanings, connotations, context, and culture in coherent, natural English. Most of all, I hope that I have captured the sense of *grandeur* that, faithful to her name, Almudena Grandes kneads into her writing.



## Prologue: Memoirs of a Gypsy Girl\*

I spent the first ten years of my childhood on the poorly-lit third floor of a fairly ordinary building with an enormous hallway. It was a red stain of plain brick, barely interrupted by the white moldings that traced an eyebrow of chipped plaster above each balcony, completing four eyes per floor. It was a typical, almost commonplace, example of the last century's constructions that stamped character, and even personality, into the Madrid neighborhood where the majority of the episodes of my life and my books took place. Short and narrow Calle Churruga begins its life in Barceló Plaza and, almost without realizing it, comes to a dead end at Calle Sagasta, right next to the Glorieta de Bilbao, which for me always has been and always will be the true center of the city. Down by the corner with Apodaca on the dark façade of another ordinary house, but too inconspicuous to catch the eye of any passerby who isn't looking for it, a small plaque identifies the last residence of the poet Manuel Machado.

"He was just as good as his brother," my father would say every Sunday, right before turning the corner toward Calle de Fuencarral and my grandfather's house.

My father is a poet, and his father was one too, and that's why early on I started paying attention to the plaques along the streets and learning poems by heart. The reason behind our obligatory Sunday visits, those appointments of unwavering punctuality, was of the most mundane variety. Father and son came together in front of the television set to watch whichever soccer game Channel One was broadcasting that week, without paying much attention to the quality of the teams about to face off, or their rankings, or

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\* Translated and adapted for this volume.

any other detail that might add or detract interest from the spectacle. They just watched soccer, that's all. And the rest of us had to keep quiet.

In the usual style of the neighborhoods where my parents and I grew up, but bigger, better, more stately than the rest, my grandfather's house could have been the setting for any of Galdós' Madrid novels. In the outer wing, the ample, high-ceilinged bedrooms did not open into any corridor, but instead were interconnected, forming a little chain of shared space. Each of those blind alcoves was euphemistically designated a "study," where it was nearly impossible to impose a uniform silence. To achieve it, the women in my family, who passed the time gossiping in whispers around the kitchen table, banished the children to the dining room and forced us to keep our mouths shut and entertain ourselves with a few sheets of paper and some colored pencils. That's how my literary career began.

Now, whenever I get the feeling that I'm beginning to command some of the tricks of this trade, I might confess that soccer made me a writer, but it would be more precise—more sincere—to say that I began to write because I've never been able to draw. My brother Manuel sketched houses and fences, chimneys and animals, clouds and birds, boys and girls riding horses. I tried to copy him, but I hardly managed an amorphous silhouette of something vaguely cow-shaped, more like a hump above four table legs without the tabletop. So I got bored. And, like all bored kids, I became really annoying. Until one afternoon, someone—my mother, my grandmother, my Aunt Charo, I don't remember anymore—offered me a solution that would turn out to be definitive. From then on, every Sunday, I devoted the game's ninety minutes to writing *the story*. Because I only had one tale to tell, I always wrote the same one.

My family still keeps some of the weekly versions of this story, which was always written in third person even though there I talked more about myself, and more explicitly, than in any other text that I have come to write since. The plot can be summarized in just half a dozen sentences. A middle-class girl (this was an important detail), born in a real house (a house “with a roof and walls,” I described then), was a mere infant when her nanny took her out for a walk in her stroller and inexplicably lost her in the park. When a circus caravan on its way out of the city passed by her, a young Gypsy woman took pity on the baby and took her in to raise her alongside her own children. Years went by and the girl brought up in a circus grew up without suspecting her true origin, until ten or twelve years later, returning to the same city, she managed to get lost of her own accord, just as inexplicably as her nanny had lost her before in that very same park. A very rich and very compassionate, kind lady (who, of course, was her real mother) took pity on her and took her home, adopting her as another daughter. From that day forward, the protagonist of my story suffered the taunting that she wasn’t really her mother’s daughter because they had taken her in from some Gypsies out of the goodness of their hearts, and that’s why her siblings rejected her and even the servants teased her. But true love can open eyelids that time has welded shut, and so, one morning, looking at her with truly affectionate eyes, the mother understood that the Gypsy girl could be none other than her own daughter, lost with so much pain so many years before, and now recovered without anyone realizing it. Such a discovery propelled the plot into an ending that was as happy as it was abrupt. The protagonist says goodbye to the reader by waving her middle finger around left and right, flipping off each one of her house’s inhabitants.

The innocent twists of this lost-and-found tale hold the meaning of my own journey toward writing. Of all the images that I retain from my childhood, none of them moves me as much as the eagerness of this very fat and very dark—too dark—girl, living for nine or ten, maybe eleven years through the unwarranted horror of having been effectively taken in from some Gypsies as an act of charity, while toiling in silence at a large dining room table, quiet and alone in her task of settling accounts with the world. The first thing I ever wrote was a short story, and passion—a faceoff between fear and doubt, justice and love—guided my hand. Because I didn't aim to be first in my class, I didn't want my family's admiration, I didn't ask for praise or advantages or rewards. I only wished to be my mother's true daughter, to sleep soundly at night, to right the world and my destiny once and for all. Since then I write for a living, and passion keeps driving my hand (often even more than I want it to), but I've finished barely a dozen stories in all these years.

Although I never explicitly intended it, I think that this tale and all of my short stories are in one way or another intimately linked to the themes and conflicts that have inspired my previous works, and I trust that this connection lends them an inevitable unity. I have never aspired to conquer an extremely vast literary universe. On the contrary, I prefer to stay in a small, personal world whose boundaries happen to coincide with the precise limits of my memory, and direct my gaze into corners so well-known that they'll never stop surprising me. In "Malena, A Steamed Life?" (1990), the gaze of a lover alters and determines the image that the loved one has of herself, a theme that also governs my first novel *The Ages of Lulu* (*Las edades de Lulú*, 1989) and reappears in my later novels. This first-edition Malena knows the devastating loss of a defining,

adolescent love, at more or less the same age of the protagonist in *Malena es un nombre de tango* (1994). In this way the themes, characters, and worlds constructed in my works are interwoven from the threads of my experiences.

*Model Women*, the title of my book borrowed from another short story, is nothing more than the perfectly generic, almost stereotypical expression that, at first, I constructed as a simple play on words. But in the literary world there is a prevailing principle of sexual discrimination that demands that female writers declare the gender of the characters in their books at every step of the way, while male writers find themselves privileged and inevitably free from doing so. Seeing as this is the case, I would like to clarify once and for all that just as I don't recognize literature by authors from Madrid, tall authors' literature, or black-haired authors' literature, categories that, for the time being, have never threatened me (in spite of the fact that a tall, dark-haired Madrileña can end up with a perspective on the world that is quite different from one formed by a short, blonde Sevillian lady, for example), I believe that women's literature absolutely does not exist. Precisely for that reason, the protagonist of this story is a woman.

It seems intolerable to me that a good portion of women who write tend to settle into a sort of falsely congenial *minoriness* (minor genres, minor plots, characters of minor status, minor ambitions). Yet, it turns out to be much more devastating to realize how, recently when certain types of female writers set out to create "great literature for all time" (the quotation marks are to suggest the stupidity of such a purpose formulated *a priori*), they systematically choose a masculine protagonist, as if the gender of the character could determine the universality of the work although the author is a woman. As if writing from a female point of view would be suspicious in itself. In my opinion,

this kind of attitude justifies the division of literature into two genres that, unfortunately, are not masculine and feminine (which, after all, would be harmless and silly), but instead into literature, plain and simple, and women's literature. Of course I think that the quotation marks should only be added by the reader, and I try to write from my memory, taking into account both my gender and my childhood terrors, the disgust that Brussels sprouts provoke within me, and a myriad of other things beyond my control. And, when I recall the monstrous effort that was demanded of me while writing it, I am hardly able to forgive myself for the lapse into weakness captured in my second novel—when I deliberately chose a masculine point of view only to demonstrate that my literary calling was real. I am sure the next time I choose to write in a man's voice, I will have better reasons for doing so.

Perhaps it will be a long while before I publish more short stories. This one settles my debt with a girl suffering from an identity crisis, who is no longer alone while she eagerly devotes herself to her work at a large dining room table, not even suspecting that she will never finish coming to terms with the world.

Malena, A Steamed Life?

A Partially Autobiographical Story

*December 5, 1949*

Fundamentally, the pleasure of fucking is no greater than that of eating. If there were restrictions on eating like there are on sex, a whole ideology would have emerged, a *passion* for eating, with chivalrous standards. This ecstasy they rave about—the vision, the dreams evoked by a good screw—is nothing more than the pleasure of biting into a loquat or a grape fresh from the vine.

— Cesare Pavese, *The Burning Brand*

This time she didn't want to sit elegantly, not anymore. She collapsed into the chair with a thud and let out a resonant sigh. Worn out, she unscrewed the cap of the fountain pen and traced a little blue line on the skin of her left hand next to the base of her thumb, to make sure it was full of ink, subjecting herself for the last time, she thought, to this absurd childhood habit that she'd never been able to give up. She properly centered the sheet of paper decorated with one of John Tenniel's most famous Alices—Aleister's last gift—and told herself that maybe it would be more sensible to write a letter like this on a regular sheet of plain white paper, but quickly rejected that theory. After all, an un-birthday party seemed like the ideal prelude for a goodbye message like hers. She stole a quick glance out of the corner of her eye at the man who was snoring thunderously on her bed, and she compared the voluminous silhouette

bulging under the sheets to the dead weight of an old, punch-drunk boxer, beyond recovery, flabby and sluggish. She sighed again and began to write:

*Honorable Judge,*

*I, Magdalena Hernández Rodríguez, Spanish citizen, widow, and chemist by profession, at 46 years of age and in full possession of all of my mental and physical faculties, have decided today, May 7, 1990, to voluntarily take my own life, given that it no longer has any meaning for me...*

Less than three months had passed since she had run into him again, when she no longer expected to see him ever again, when she'd already convinced herself that she'd successfully gotten over him, when she almost didn't care about him anymore, just then, at that precise moment, a bearded, fat, and beyond-balding man lunged for her at a party, knocking the wind out of her with a suffocating hug, slobbering all over her face with saliva that reeked of Canary Island cigars, kissing her with such clumsiness that the back of one of her earrings came off and fell to the floor, where someone stepped on it and unintentionally snapped it cleanly in two. "Malena, it's me, Andrés, aren't you glad to see me?" She thought the floor had opened up under her feet, while inside her a little voice fought back bravely, clinging to the last shred of hope. Unsuccessful and growing weaker by the second, the bitter voice whispered, "No, it can't be, there must be a mistake, maybe it's another Andrés, but not him, not her Andrés, it just couldn't be Andrés, there's no way..."



Naturally, it was Andrés. When she had managed to stop his flood of drool that, instead of rewarding her, cruelly punished her for so many years of anticipation, she was able to recognize in that bloated face, ravaged by age (always so ruthless with idiots) a few minor shades of the teenage heartthrob who she had never stopped loving. There, hidden under an unpleasant, graying tangle of whiskers, were his extremely fine lips, barely even there, that she had always wanted to interpret as a sign, an unspoken insinuation of a kinky and experienced lover, those lips whose mere sight once triggered uncontrollable shivers, burning yet icy all at once, in the dead center of her spine. And everything else was there too, the delicate skin under his eyes (that had turned into a series of bags inside bags, inside other bags), his sharp jaw (now the chubby beginning of a flabby double chin), his enormous and bony hands with long fingers (swollen now like thick churros), and his body, his once fragile and adorable body, the sole object of a desire as dark and thick as blood, painful, absolute, fed in solitude over almost thirty years only to dissolve now, in one instant, at the sight of this thick, poorly-cooked sausage that Andrés had turned into, after all.

Still, she flirted with him all evening, trying with utmost determination to capture a wink, to catch a gleam in his eye, clutching at straws with which to reignite that spark, anything to get back that lost feeling of giddiness. She didn't recognize in him anything resembling her eternal love, but she accepted in its place an offer so mundane it was almost sordid—“*Why don't you take me back to your place, and we'll have our last drink in bed?*”—because she thought she owed it to herself, to her betrayed memory. But it was all a complete disaster. Not only did he turn out inadequately kinky and depressingly inexperienced, but even worse, he hardly behaved like a lover. He merely collapsed on

top of her body without even having gotten fully undressed, and waited for her to catch on that he had no intention to conjugate the active participle. Afterwards, he smiled a satisfied smirk, coughed a few times, and fell asleep.

For her, sleep didn't come so easily. Sitting in bed, smoking one cigarette after another, she felt a burning in her gut, all her muscles ached, exhausted by the effort of propelling herself rhythmically upward without any assistance from the rude allegory of a man toward whom, by the dirty tricks of a most unfair destiny, her life now seemed headed. She had waited for Andrés her whole life and now she finally had him sleeping by her side, snoring like an asthmatic hippo. The future didn't seem very promising. Trying to forget about it, every now and then she would lie down, fluff her pillow, turn on her side, then switch to facedown, try the other side, and sit up once more, exasperated, to light her next-to-last cigarette. Until suddenly a smile lit up her face an instant before her body could react. Stark naked and sweaty, she got out of bed, went to the bathroom and, instead of flipping on just one switch, like she always did, she hit all three to turn on as many fierce halogen lights, the merciless fixture above the mirror. She kept her eyes wide open the whole time; there was no longer any reason to look at herself in half-shadows, blinking her indecisive eyelashes in the forgiving, faint peripheral lighting. Now she needed the complete opposite, and not only to see herself well, but to see herself destroyed. And what she saw was exactly that—a wreck. Before her was the aged, flabby body of a forty-six year-old woman, complete with sagging breasts, a bulging stomach, varicose veins down her legs, and her love handles drooping down over her hips like a permanent muffin top. Her smile widened into a forced grin, her right hand

made a fist in the air as she announced out loud, “Tomorrow I’m going to start eating again.”

*When I was fifteen years old, I stopped eating, you know? At the age of fifteen I started ingesting only what was strictly necessary to get by, feeding myself steamed vegetables, steamed meat, steamed fish, steamed life... And it was all for love, how stupid can we women get, isn't that sad? It was that afternoon, I don't know if you'll understand, but that afternoon playing spin the bottle, I thought I would die, I'd die of pain, of disgust, of pure desire for Andrés.*

A honey-colored bottle, that only fifteen minutes earlier had contained 36 ounces of cheap Mahou beer, spun round and round on the cement floor, without ever touching the toes of the twenty or so tanned teenagers sitting in a circle on the floor who watched unblinking, with a certain youthful anxiety on their faces. She was there too, off to one side because she was ashamed to cross her legs Indian style like everybody else, Malena, just turned fifteen, five foot eight inches tall, weighing in at 181 pounds, a real cow. She wore a loose, yellow cotton dress with a little embroidery on the front and gathered under the bust, which her friends found funny because that made it look like a maternity dress. It actually *was* a maternity dress, a last resort, although she would have hanged herself before admitting it to them. She could think of nothing more horrifying than going shopping, nor a greater miracle than finding a skirt in her size. Just a few weeks earlier her mother, a very beautiful woman, had burst into tears when she saw her naked in that extremely hostile environment—a tiny department store dressing room—as she tried to

cram herself into a black bathing suit with underwire and a minimizing waistband, that they had found at last in the back corner of the Corte Inglés women's department—  
SPECIAL OFFER! CHEER UP, LADIES, THERE'S TIME TO TRAVEL DURING THE GOLDEN YEARS. YOUR LIFE STARTS NOW... Her mother wept and Malena watched her without really understanding what was going on, the bathing suit only half on, the straps hanging down at her waist and her tongue sticking out from the effort. "Just look at you, honey," she finally heard, between sobs, "You look like you're forty..."

Later, with asphalt burning under the soles of her espadrilles, when the abrupt loss of air conditioning made the suffocating June air in Madrid even more unbreathable for them both, her mother went back on the offensive with her usual nagging, "Go on a diet, sweetie, you still have plenty of time. After all you're just a child, it'll be much harder to do when you're older, believe me. Please, Malena, let's go see the doctor..." She had pretended not to hear, as usual, but she didn't dare ask for a scoop of her favorite ice cream—chocolate with little chocolate chunks in a chocolate-dipped cone—because the maternal crisis seemed more serious this time. And now there she was, sitting on the floor of Milagros' garage with her legs stretched out, nervously scrutinizing which way the neck of the beer bottle was pointing, a sign that Lady Luck seemed to have fallen head over heels for Andrés that afternoon.

It stopped yet again at his feet, and her heart skipped a beat, because now it was her turn. This time he had to pick her, there was no doubt about it. The rules of the game prohibited kissing the same girl twice, and Andrés had already kissed the other seven girls in the circle, from the prettiest down to the ugliest, with the exception of Milagros, who was his twin brother's girlfriend and there was no way he was going there. So finally

it was her turn, she was the only one left, but nevertheless, without hesitation he chose Silvia for the second time. Someone complained, “But there’s no one else left,” he explained, “Oh, okay, yeah, I guess,” everyone agreed and she didn’t dare say anything, because no one looked at her, no one mentioned her, no one seemed to realize that she was still there, still alone, mute, untouched. Andrés took Silvia by the hand—she was a bite-sized version of a classic tease, whose effortless charm seemed to drive everyone wild—and led her into a corner to kiss her. Malena took advantage of that moment to slip out of sight, and left the garage. She spent all afternoon sitting on a rock and staring at the river, meditating, and when she returned home, long before curfew, she found her mother on the porch, working on the never-ending puzzle. “I’ve decided I’m going on a diet, Mom” was all she said. Her mother smiled, hugged her, and replied softly, “That’s great, honey, that’s just great. You’re going to be so pretty, Malena...”

*So I finally went to Madrid with mom to see a doctor, a very young endocrinologist who looked at my face with an expression of pity and told me very bluntly, “Listen, sweetheart, the problem is that you’re congenitally overweight. I’m going to put you on a very strict diet. If you follow it to the letter, you will lose weight, and you’ll look great, there’s no doubt about it. But you have to change your mindset and your lifestyle, because it’s not just that you have a negative metabolic index. It’s more like your body essentially lacks a basal metabolism, okay, sugar? So, get used to the idea...”*

The best day of the week was Sunday, because she was allowed to have a ham sandwich and a can of Coca-Cola for lunch, and then for dinner half of a raw tomato with a quarter roasted chicken and an apple. Sundays weren't that bad, not really. But on Tuesdays and Saturdays she could eat only fruit, and for dinner all other nights she had only unsalted steamed vegetables. Even so, she did it, she followed the diet to the letter, not cheating even once, and she lost weight, it was hard to believe, but she was losing weight. Every morning after showering with an anti-cellulite seaweed body wash that saturated her skin with a foul stench, she weighed herself, and every day the needle on the bathroom scale took a little less time to reach the number, every day a little lower. Nobody else realized it, not yet, because she still wore the same clothes, those same maternity dresses, the same post-menopausal bathing suits, but she walked for half an hour every afternoon, despite the brutal sun, to speed up her metabolism. Every night she examined herself naked in front of the mirror, then wrapped herself up in the bright red curtains afterwards, tightening them to her body as if it were an evening gown, to savor a shrinking waistline, a belly that promised to flatten, the breasts that were finally standing out clearly above her stomach, behind which, with just a little more effort, she was able to make out the unfamiliar silhouette of her own stubborn ribs. She did all of this, and dealt with the hunger, which was not unbearable, not yet, because her last feast was still fresh in her mind, her farewell meal: four cinnamon buns, two milk chocolate bars with almonds, a can of sardines in tomato sauce, and half a can of sweetened condensed milk, that ridiculous snack that she had wolfed down in thirteen minutes flat the afternoon before starting the diet, right after Andrés, having just heard the news of her heroic

decision, dropped his bomb on her, “Guess what? I joined the army. Next Monday they’re shipping me down to Ceuta, to the Spanish Sahara, for training...”

*At first I thought that it would be better that way, because when he got out of the service, I would be stunning, splendid, basically model-thin. Because... who could have guessed that he’d go and make such a fool of himself. And it was then, while Andrés was in the hospital, that I began to feel true hunger, a monstrous, horrifying, kind of hunger. It was hell, Your Honor, sheer hell, a torture that no one else could even begin to imagine...*

Model-thin? Well, the truth is, she never looked much like a model. Thin, yes, but always well within the limits of the national meaty stereotype, like that porky Mediterranean Mama in an old olive oil ad. And she realized right away there was nothing she could do, because a year and a half into her torment, when she finally dared to enter the temple of supreme happiness—a boutique presided over by a giant poster of Twiggy—a sophisticated dungeon where, though she thought she had finally escaped it forever, she was condemned to hear the sentence yet again, “Sorry, but we don’t carry your size...”

The pavement on Calle Serrano miraculously held up against the pounding of her footsteps while she dreamed up a cruel death, some drawn-out, painful agony for the size-two plain-Jane clerk, how dared she look at her with pity in her eyes! “Or maybe leprosy,” she mused when the unmistakable aroma of freshly baked croissants stopped her dead in her tracks in the middle of the sidewalk. She turned to the right to find the

very essence of satisfaction displayed in the window of a gourmet pastry shop, from which virtue and sin, heaven and hell, called out to her like evenly matched temptations. “Now I’m going to go in and buy myself a frosted palmera cookie, and I’ll go and enjoy it,” she said to herself, but nothing happened. “What if I go in and buy myself a frosted palmera cookie, and then I go and enjoy it?” she repeated softly, but she did not move. She stood there frozen on the sidewalk, inhaling the aroma of buttered puff pastry fresh out of the oven until the spell faded completely. Then she got on the subway and went straight home, very proud of herself, thinking about Andrés, savoring in advance the sweet victory she would one day taste.

It might have been that same afternoon when Milagros phoned her to share every last detail of the recruit’s plight. “You’re not going to believe this,” she announced at the start, and in fact, Malena did have a hard time accepting it, digesting that idiot’s inconceivable deed.

“Listen to this, Lena, so apparently they took a newbie, stripped him down, tied his arms around a pole, and told him flat out, ‘Okay, stud, we won’t let you go until you get a hard on...’ But since Andrés is a complete dumbass, I don’t care how much you like him, Malena, and even if he’s going to be my brother-in-law, it’s just that, seriously, that boy is a total dumbass, like, it never occurred to him that it might be a bad idea to leave the guy’s shoes on and his feet unbound, so that when he went up to him, the guy kicked him in the stomach with one of those standard-issue boots so hard it knocked him to the floor... but, not all the way to the floor, because he was caught by the handle of a mop digging into his back. So he fell sideways, and his gun went off, and he shot himself in



the chest. Now he's in a hospital on base, half dead. If he gets out, he'll have a long way to go..."

When she hung up the phone, Malena ran down to the street and bought herself a frosted palmera cookie at the corner bakery. She devoured it in three big bites and burst into tears.

*And I don't know why, I don't understand what was going on inside me, but while that idiot went and did every stupid thing imaginable, I got hungrier, but I couldn't eat, I just couldn't, do you understand what I'm saying? Not until he came back, but he wasn't coming back. He was too busy trying to break the Guinness record for the world's stupidest person. It was then that I developed one of my substitute obsessions. It's hard to explain, you probably won't understand, but it made me feel better...*

Andrés did not die. He left the hospital in really bad shape, with an endless physical therapy program ahead of him, but alive. Meanwhile, she had already started assigning a specific taste and scent to everyone she knew, and she made a point to remember exactly which flavor they were each time she ran into them. Her mother tasted like lemon meringue pie; her father like a new pot of beef stew, lightly spiced; her older brother like red bream fish grilled with extra garlic... The illusion was suspended only on Tuesdays and Saturdays at dinnertime, because she had kept up the habit of eating nothing but fruit on those days and, especially in the wintertime when there were only oranges, tangerines, pears, and apples—bananas and grapes are fattening—, because it

was too difficult to chew the cold and boring pulp while surrounded by such a living feast.

She was no longer gaining weight, or if she did, it was very slowly, imperceptibly. She went off to college and her perseverance started to pay off. At first she was surprised, because in her mind she was still a fat, unattractive girl, still a spin-the-bottle virgin, but in time after continually being ogled by men, she eventually got used to being counted among the desirable, gifted students, and some of her classmates began to gossip that she only got good grades because she was pretty. The truth is that she couldn't have cared less about what they said, because the bottom line was that no one could ever say that her hard-earned beauty was worthless.

It better be worth something, a lot actually, because the novelty of being thin was wearing off while her hunger grew ever more intense, and harder and harder to satisfy with the foods allowed, all of which tasted like nothing, as if the flavor had worn off after all those years of constant repetition. She thought about food when she was awake, she dreamed about food while she was sleeping, she saw it, smelled it, yearned for it, worshipped it, all of those marvelous, rich, thick, sweet foods and the sauces, most of all the sauces... For some time the only thing that kept her going was her plan to go to Ceuta and visit Andrés under the thin veil of transient study. *“Malena, girl, use your head!”* Milagros tried to discourage her, *“That’s the best you could come up with? Why would anyone smart enough to study chemistry at Complutense University waste a semester studying at Ceuta, for God’s sake, Ceuta of all places... Come on, not even the biggest moron in Africa would swallow that bullshit excuse, not even my dumbass brother-in-law!”* Nevertheless, Milagros ended up getting her way. When Malena was about to buy

her ticket, Milagros called back to report her that the discomfort Andrés had been feeling since his last surgery was caused by a scalpel left inside his stomach, so he was back in the hospital again, and she threw herself into her studies with the hope of finally getting together with him after finishing her degree. And then to top it all off, Andrés' incision got infected, requiring yet another hospitalization, his third. Malena was studying for her senior year finals by the time he flew out of Ceuta with his medical discharge in hand, swearing never to set foot on African soil again, but still he didn't come back, even then he didn't come back. His father, who was an attorney, paid for a trip to the Caribbean, a much-needed vacation. She needed one too, so she went off to Rome with the rest of her class to celebrate their newly earned diplomas.

One day at lunchtime, while her carefree classmates gorged themselves with *cotechini caldi*—those delicious salamis that you eat warm—in a Piedmontese restaurant at the foot of the Quirinal Hill, she took a seat at an outdoor café in front of Santa Maria Maggiore, which she deemed an appropriately severe setting to order a plain cup of tea, no sugar, to dissolve the packet of gritty protein powder that would constitute her entire food intake for the day. Just then a man—about twenty-five, dark hair—walked over, a man with such fine lips, a large nose, and bony hands, that without a doubt he merited a five-star flavor, duck *magret* with bittersweet plum sauce, at least. He looked Roman, but he was actually Scottish. His name was Aleister. “I don't like Italian food much, either,” he confessed to her with a wink, “Where can I find a good shepherd's pie with mint sauce...?!”

*So, I married him, and what a great idea that was. Why not, since Andrés had nothing better to do than vacation in Cuba and fool around in the New World, I went and married Aleister. At least, I told myself, since the food he likes is absolutely revolting, I won't have any trouble. I wasn't counting on the roasted lamb, or any red meat for that matter, nor had I anticipated Aleister's atrocious accent. He called me Madalena, like those Madalena muffins, and sometimes I started to think that he only did it to embarrass me, because, seriously, giving me an edible name, are you kidding...*

Nevertheless, things started looking up for Malena after she got back from Rome. She found a job in the lab of a multinational prepared food corporation and she kept up a steamy correspondence with her new boyfriend, who seemed to confirm his exquisite flavor all the way from Aberdeen. But the key to her serenity lay in an entirely different discovery, because then, after so many frustrated attempts, misguided guesses, and disheartening failures, Malena had finally found what she'd been looking for: a way to survive.

One afternoon, as she was taking a can of sweetened condensed milk out of the refrigerator, making a snack for her father with disappointment showing on her face, one of her little brothers ran into her and almost knocked her over. Trying to regain her balance, Malena accidentally dipped a finger up to the knuckle into the sweet, pale yellow cream—cold and smooth and thick—and she experienced a delicious sense of bliss. The taste of condensed milk instantly came back to her, the memory of that last fix gulped down on the sly and without remorse flooding her mouth with pleasure. Disconcerted, she took the can up to her room and tried it with her whole hand; she

plunged it into the can up to her wrist and then slowly pulled it back out to watch the drops roll off her fingertips and plop back inside with a muted gurgle. She did this a few times and then, taking care not to spill on her clothes, lifted her soaked hand and completely coated her face. She sat perfectly still for a long time, breathing, feeling, enjoying the forbidden pleasure until her skin started to pull, like when she put on a facial mask. She meticulously washed it off with cold water, and smiled. That night she didn't eat dinner; she wasn't hungry. Instead, she rewarded herself with one and a half gin and tonics.

From then on, Malena attempted to replace the sense of taste with the other four bodily senses. First was touch, the most direct step, a process that developed in various stages, from the simplest feasts—digging her hands into a large bowl of potato salad—to the most elaborate baroque banquets—submerging herself completely naked into a bathtub filled with warm spaghetti heavily coated with butter. Later, when Aleister had moved to Madrid and his inconsiderate side began to show—always insisting on eating at the same restaurant, where he inhaled most of the choice cuts from the fresh roasted lamb all by himself and then helped himself to the garden salad that she usually ordered as her entire meal—the sense of touch was no longer enough, especially when she found out that Andrés had been tried by a revolutionary court in Havana and sentenced to a measly ten years and eight months for conspiring to aid Cuban citizens escaping to Miami. Milagros filled her in over the phone.

“So anyway, Lena, apparently Andrés got involved with a mulatta—on a scale from one to ten, she was an eleven, though I dunno if Andrés can count that high—, and that stubborn pain in the ass just wouldn't let it go, going on about, ‘Oh, it must've hurt

when you fell from heaven, angel, I love you so much, if you take me home with you, I'll show you what heaven on earth is like, I'll get you out of here,' blah, blah, blah, and of course, from the look of things, she just waited for the perfect opportunity until one afternoon she told him, 'Look, baby, tonight go down to such-and-such beach, walk this many miles, and there you'll find a group of people waiting next to a boat. All you gotta do is go up to them, say you're filling in for me, and get so much money from each of them. Once you've got it, come look for me. I'll be waiting for you behind a sand dune, naked and burning with passion...' Well, I'll leave the rest to your imagination. What was waiting behind the dunes was the emigration police, and you know how it ended, ten years behind bars, a pretty steep price just to get laid, and all for nothing, since he never even got any..."

This time she didn't cry when she hung up the phone. She simply made up her mind to marry Aleister. Then she went to the refrigerator and took out an elongated package wrapped in aluminum foil, locked herself in the bathroom with it, and covered her hair with a plastic shower cap. Next, alone in front of the mirror, she finally opened her loot to reveal two big, oniony blood sausages. She squeezed one of them in her right hand, piercing the casing with her fingernail until it broke in several places, oozing a greasy slime of fat and blood that she spread all over her face. A few seconds later, she took off her blouse and repeated the process with the other sausage, squishing it this time with her left hand and spreading its contents across her chest. A tiny piece of white fat clung to one of her nipples. She beamed at it, and then closed her eyes to bask in the surprising and satisfying properties of the smell of pork entrails and sausage filling. A

few minutes later, while she was showering, she decided that her honeymoon would mark the inauguration of the Age of Smell. And so it was.

*Anyway, as I'm sure you already guessed, my marriage was a total disaster. The honeymoon, however, went very well, because we were in Greece, which is a marvelous country, so beautiful, so alive, so fun, and while I was there I was almost happy. They typically spice their food heavily so my nose was already satisfied when I sat down to a plate of grape leaves steamed in a little bit of white wine, they weren't all that bad either, to tell you the truth, but mostly because of the novelty, since I'd never tried them before... Meanwhile Aleister had to make do with ground meat instead of his beloved steaks, since there are no cattle in Greece, ha!, that was the best part, of course I didn't laugh at all, I swear, and of course, he was so hungry that he got into taking passionate afternoon siestas, and he still tasted like duck magret, so he still turned me on, if you know what I mean. But then we came back here and he discovered clam and bean stew, and everything went from bad to worse, until he even began to taste like last week's porridge, and then later his gout flared up and he had to give up eating meat altogether...*

It was a result of Aleister's illness—that terrifying crisis that she would never forget, seeing her husband ashen, stiff, motionless, eyes bulging out of their sockets, hands damp with sweat, and veins about to burst—that Malena's gluttony trumped the sense of hearing. It all started that night, with a pot of clam and bean stew, five pounds of grilled sirloin, and an ambulance, followed by the incredulity of the doctor on duty who, after checking over the numbers on his emergency urinalysis, ordered the test to be

repeated, and then again, and again a fourth time before he was finally convinced it was right, and then the follow-up treatments, one thousand calories per day, a miniscule grilled filet of pale veal every other week, and that's it. At first she was very happy, she wanted to believe that Aleister's diet would save their marriage, but she had it all wrong because, as she finally realized, her husband had never been in love with her. The only possible way to make a strict weight-loss regimen bearable is to do it for love, as Malena knew all too well, and Aleister did not love her. That's why he grew depressed, grey, withdrawn, and gloomy, and finally, unable to do anything just halfway, he became a vegetarian, resigning himself to the diet that would drive him slowly but surely to an irrevocable impotence.

But one morning while Aleister was making a salad, Malena discovered the pleasant sound of crunching, the unmistakable sound of food. She went closer and stood there, captivated, staring at her husband, who was cutting a handful of little red radishes into translucent slices. That afternoon when she was home alone, she carried out her previously concocted plan to cook a large pot of well-seasoned liver and onions so that she could sink her face in it, inhaling the delicious scent of the dish with her head wrapped in a towel, she wasn't going to miss even a single whiff of the aroma. But later, after eating a tiny piece of meat and throwing the rest in the garbage, she couldn't resist picking up a sharp knife to experiment on a very firm red cabbage. Her ears filled with a magnificent sound able to satisfy her palate, a sensation that became familiar in the following days as she repeated the test, trying out various materials, and she delighted most of all in the dying moans of freshly-baked meringues, salt-crusted fish, and roast



suckling pig under a thick blanket of golden fat, definitely irresistible at the snap of the crunchy skin.

As the years passed she only thought about Andrés once in a while, and absorbed in her own problems—especially the painful task of living with Aleister—she even lost track of how long she had been held captive by the diet. Meanwhile, her body’s cruel rebellion against her appetite grew progressively worse, and it became harder and harder to maintain her figure while eating actual food. Almost without realizing it, she got used to exclusively ingesting the diet crap sold in drug stores: milkshakes that tasted like chalk, soups that tasted like chalk, chocolate protein bars that tasted like chalk, cookies that tasted like chalk... Trying to make up for it, she got deeper into vices, which became more and more perverse and almost always had to take place in the bathroom, because in a very literal sense they were dirty vices. Her favorite was pouring a huge jar of warm chocolate sauce very slowly onto her crotch while she leaned back in the bathtub with her legs spread wide, watching the small, brown stream, molten and gleaming, flow down her skin, spreading warmth upward across her belly, a reminder of the time when Aleister still tasted like duck *magret*.

And she just wanted to get back that flavor, get back Aleister, not to kill him, like he suggested on his deathbed, but the opposite, to give him back a little spark of life, which is why she set up the barbeque again and surprised him with a gift of two pounds of top-shelf Avila pork chops. He was delighted, his face lit up, and he smiled like a satisfied child. “It’s your birthday,” she encouraged him, “Just this once, nothing’s going to happen to you this one time...” Her words turned out to be prophetic, because nothing did happen to him, nothing at all; in fact, he went stiff right after dessert. Malena didn’t

waste many tears on him, nor did she worry much about the news Milagros whispered into her ear during the funeral, just seconds after she threw the first fistful of dirt onto the casket.

“This is big, honey, really big, seriously, next to the huge splash that little Andrés made in Miami, the death of this nobody is child’s play, for really, really small children, seriously... Get a load of this: so this time, as soon as he set foot in the United States, he got involved with a mulatto, yeah, you heard me right, a big hulk of a guy, six and a half feet tall, can’t you picture it! If he hasn’t figured it out by now, really, that boy has issues, Malena, girl, serious issues... Apparently he had some kind of a sexual identity crisis in jail, the big baby, thirty-eight years old and still confused, isn’t that the dumbest thing you’ve ever heard?... So, just like in Havana, he carried on, ‘Oh, but I love you, and I need you, and you’re the first man I’ve ever been with, and if you don’t love me back I’ll kill myself.’ Well, the guy, just like that Cuban chick—you know, it’s hard to believe there are racists in this world considering Andrés’ record, he’ll hook up with anybody... But anyway, ‘Take this little package, honey,’ he told him, ‘put it in your pocket and take it tonight to the corner of such-and-such street and such-and-such avenue, where this red-headed guy will be waiting for you and he’ll give you a wad of cash as soon as you hand it over to him. Once you’ve got the money, come and get me, I’ll be home waiting for you, lifting weights just for you...’ And you can imagine what happened next, right? The police. Special Narcotics Unit. And that’s it, that dumbass love of your life was carrying half a kilo of heroine in that little package. And so he got another ten years of hard labor in a Wisconsin prison, and no, you don’t measure a sentence like that in hours ...

*So I became a thirty-five year-old widow with a great body, but you can see how far that got me. Because I never gave up on Andrés, not even when I heard about the whole mess with the mulatto—Perry was his name, see what I mean, what a tacky name—not then, not ever, it's just, honestly, I couldn't, I couldn't fall in love with anyone else, not even after I met that boy in the grocery store...*

Vicente, who was still a boy when they met as he tagged along with his mother who worked at the checkout on the weekends, stared at her with the same expression he would've had if she'd appeared before him floating in a cloud like the Virgin Mary. Malena repeated her offer, "Wanna earn fifty bucks?" He nodded automatically, moving his head up and down as if someone had stretched out a spring hooked to the edge of his willpower. "Then sit down and eat," she commanded, taking her place at the head of the overflowing table, covered with dish after dish of piping-hot food. The skinny sixteen-year-old boy with a handsome face and the predictable aroma of undersalted roast peanuts, looked at her apprehensively before sitting down and picking up a fork. "Do I have to finish it all?" he asked half an hour later, after having devoured a tossed salad, a large helping of paella, half a roasted chicken, and two wedges of pound cake. She, who had been slowly nibbling on a slice of whole wheat toast, smiled broadly at him and shook her head no. She was full. Watching him eat, simply being there looking at him, had satisfied her more deeply than she had anticipated. She went over to him and held out the fifty-dollar bill. "Thank you very much," she said, "Watching you eat did me some good." "I don't have to do anything else?" he asked in disbelief. "No, that's all. If you want to, we can do this again on Friday."

He came back on Friday, and on Monday, and on Wednesday, and Malena got used to eating through his mouth three times a week, got used to nourishing herself through him, and to having fun while doing it. So used to it, in fact, that at some point she gave up all her diet foods—several varieties of edible chalk, all frozen, steeped, or steamed—, and merely sat still, just observing him, her chin resting on her hands, her elbows propped up on the table, her lips parted in a smile of real satisfaction. She realized Vicente was caught off guard by this change in posture, and sensed his uneasiness as he gave her that strange look again. “What’s wrong?” she asked him one day when the tension clogged the air. “Nothing,” he answered with a shrug, but she pressed him until she got the truth. “I don’t want to offend you,” he began, “promise me you won’t get offended, please, tell me you won’t, because the last thing I want to do is make you mad... It’s just that,” he finally murmured, stammering, “I...I thought that you might be masturbating while you watched me eat, you know...? I know it sounds really weird, but there are people *that* weird around here, and that sort of thing doesn’t bother me, I swear, I think that everyone is free to do whatever they want... So, I’d gotten used to the idea, but now.... now I saw you had your hands above the table this whole time and...” “It doesn’t matter,” Malena answered him gently, “I pay you to eat for me, not to understand me.”

*So, here I am, forty-six years old, with the world’s biggest idiot in my bed, and a little white slip of paper that the doctor gave me this afternoon that says, more or less, that my metabolism changed years ago and that’s why, even though I’ve been eating like a pig for the past three months, I’ve barely put on seven pounds. How about that? Sounds*

*great, right? My whole life I've been suffering for this, and that's why I'm going to kill myself, Your Honor, tonight I am killing myself, I just can't take it any more, I swear on the graves of all my ancestors that I will kill myself.*

At that moment, Andrés woke up and lay there looking at her. “Nice nap, right, cupcake?” he greeted her simply. Then he burped a few times and asked how everything had gone at the clinic. Malena answered vaguely, “Hmm, fine.” She didn’t feel like getting into it and explaining just then, because the doctor’s appointment had been a sheer nightmare. Even though she had actually been expecting something much worse, some kind of fatal illness, cancer or something, because it just didn’t make sense, she just couldn’t understand what had happened recently. Since she’d started hooking up with Andrés, she ate everything or, more accurately, not everything, only high-calorie foods in mammoth quantities, but she’d hardly gained any weight, just 6 pounds 8.8 ounces. She still fit into the same clothes, everything was exactly the same, it was unbelievable. And then the doctor brought up the metabolic change nonsense, and she burst into tears like a little kid, because now there was no chance to get back at Andrés, or at herself...

While he showered, Malena signed the letter, slid it into an envelope, put it in a drawer, and vaguely postponed her death until later that night, without setting a specific time. It didn’t really matter, when they got back from Milagros’ party would be fine, whenever, after all it wasn’t that complicated, a piece of rope tied to the ceiling lamp, a little hop, and there you have it. She went into the bathroom, always powerfully lit now, and got ready, fussing over every square inch, keeping in mind that this would be her final public appearance. The truth is that she felt absolutely stunning, which annoyed her,

and then on top of that Andrés gaped and said, “You look great!” when he laid eyes on her in her long dress with navy blue sequins and her hair swept up, which made it even worse, the most annoying setback for anyone about to commit suicide. The compliments only multiplied at the party, which turned out to be really dull, making her feel a little better. While Andrés waited for a turn at the pool table, she got ready to plunder the buffet—which, by the way, she found heartbreakingly sparse for her last meal—and she was almost finished loading her plate when from behind her a delicate, masculine voice whispered a familiar phrase, “You’re so lucky to be able to eat whatever you want without gaining weight...” Malena turned around slowly and came face to face with an exact replica of the Andrés that she still loved and could never get: a young man with a fragile and adorable body, and extremely fine lips, barely even there, as an unspoken insinuation of a kinky and experienced lover, a promise that was enough to trigger uncontrollable shivers, burning yet icy all at once, in the dead center of her spine. He was dressed all in white, just like the other Andrés, the Andrés lost on that afternoon of kisses and tears, the brown bottle spinning endlessly on the cement floor.

“You must be Andresito, Milagos’ oldest son, the one who was studying in England, am I right?” she purred in a soft voice while her knees shook as if they’d turned to jello. “That’s me,” he confirmed, “and you must be Malena, my uncle’s girlfriend, right?” She nodded back, took his arm, and led him to a corner, her feet barely touching the ground, the thrill melting her body into a weightless shadow, as light as a ghost. They stayed together all evening. She hardly spoke. He told her all about himself, how he’d just arrived, how he’d changed his mind about going to the university and instead transferred to the School of Dramatic Arts, how he wanted to be an actor but couldn’t

find work, how he couldn't eat because he put on weight really easily and in the movie business fat people never make it big, plus he needed to feel like he was in shape, no, he didn't have a girlfriend, well, actually, he wasn't into girls at all... Malena listened to all of this without batting an eye; she couldn't care less. She just stared at him and smiled, touched him and smiled. It had been years since she had been this happy. "Honestly, I'm pretty bored," he said at the end as a kind of conclusion. She thought for a second, glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, lowered her gaze, hesitated once again, kept on hesitating, glanced at him again, then finally made up her mind. "Wanna do something crazy?" she asked in a hoarse voice, her eyes sparkling. He was puzzled and didn't know how to answer. "Do you like to sin?" she went on after a moment, taking him firmly by the arm. Finally, he admitted that yes, he did.

So Malena dragged him out into the street, put him in her car, and brought him back to her house, not pausing to answer a single one of his questions. She unlocked the door and, after hinting that he should go into the bathroom and get undressed to save time, she shut herself in the kitchen and emptied the refrigerator, which for the past three months had been kept fully stocked with a variety of foods, ready to serve after a quick trip to the microwave. A few minutes later, she met her guest in the bathroom, carrying a tray piled high with so many containers covered with plastic wrap, she had trouble balancing it on the sink. Andresito was perched on a corner of the bathtub, still fully dressed, and completely weirded out. "What are you going to do to me?" he asked apprehensively, "I already told you I'm not into girls." "I'm not a girl, you idiot," she answered, "I am... what you might call a ripe woman, and I'm only going to feed you, so take your clothes off and get in the bathtub. Hurry up."

Malena stripped down too. She put on a large plastic bib and tied another around Andrés' neck, and straddling over him, she started with some piquillo peppers stuffed with hake, "Okay, sweetie, open your mouth for Mommy..." She cut the smooth red skin with the side of the fork, delicately maneuvered to skewer a little piece of pepper and a good amount of stuffing in its tines, dunked it into the sauce, and finally put it in his open mouth, then dabbed his smooth lips with the edge of a napkin, preparing to repeat the process after offering him a sip of wine. She didn't eat, she didn't need to, she had her fill just looking at him, just drinking in his smile. He became more and more relaxed and more flushed at the same time, his face grew sweaty, and his cheeks began to burn while he accepted everything she put into his mouth: a creamy asparagus empanada, a cup of gazpacho, a quiche lorraine, a piece of baked sea bass, steaming fried shrimp, a tiny sausage wrapped in flaky dough, a cold roasted chicken breast, a few lamb meatballs with extra sauce, so much that it dribbled out of the corners of his mouth and stained his chest below the bib, but it didn't matter. He ate happily, and all of a sudden everything came into focus for her. She decided not to kill herself, that she would never commit suicide, and that the first thing that she was going to do was leave Andrés without looking back, and then while she still had teeth live her life to the fullest until the very end. Absorbed in such thoughts, she let a spoonful of sauce, destined to accompany a bite of venison in her guest's mouth, spill onto his body, but he hardly looked at her anymore because he couldn't. Exhausted from the effort, his eyelids drooped, his lips were puffy, and the skin of his cheeks was ghostly, almost transparent. She apologized for her clumsiness, but he didn't answer. It was then, when she twisted around to refill the spoon with more red currant sauce, that warmth radiated across her belly and she feasted her eyes on the tray



as if in a trance because the chocolate sauce was waiting there, still untouched—they hadn't gotten to dessert yet—but her body burned, burned with pleasure, burned from deep within, and at that moment she understood. She studied Andresito, who rocked back and forth imperceptibly—dead tired, his jaw distorted, the skin on his stomach taut, on the verge of exploding, his legs slack—but moving nonetheless towards her, inside of her. Only then, when she could still think clearly, she wondered what her unexpected lover tasted like, what his delicious flavor was, and while she made up her mind to take over, riding him gently, taking care not to hurt him, she leaned down and kissed him, and although the true feast had only just begun, she was unable to find in his mouth any flavor other than his saliva.

## Epilogue

## A Letter to Almodena Grandes

My dearest,

This marriage is getting between us. I mean, your marriage, of course. Don't get me wrong, you shouldn't feel guilty, the only guilty one here is me. I *still* don't have a husband, I don't have any children, although I do have a house that's not so much a home as the place where I write and sleep. It's true, I do have a few godchildren, the kids of some old flames of mine (whom I luckily never married, because luckily back then that kind of love—or whatever it was—couldn't have ended in a wedding) but then again, a godchild only annoys you on Christmas and birthdays. I also don't know how to cook—not even fried eggs, I'm not talking about stuffed calamari or anything fancy—I don't even know how to mix a drink, or how to be a good host, so basically I have nothing to offer you, I'm completely inexperienced in everything conjugal, paternal, maternal, culinary, and every other partnership provided by a marriage, children, and a real home. I'm a total wreck...

Endless kisses,

Eduardo Mendicutti

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