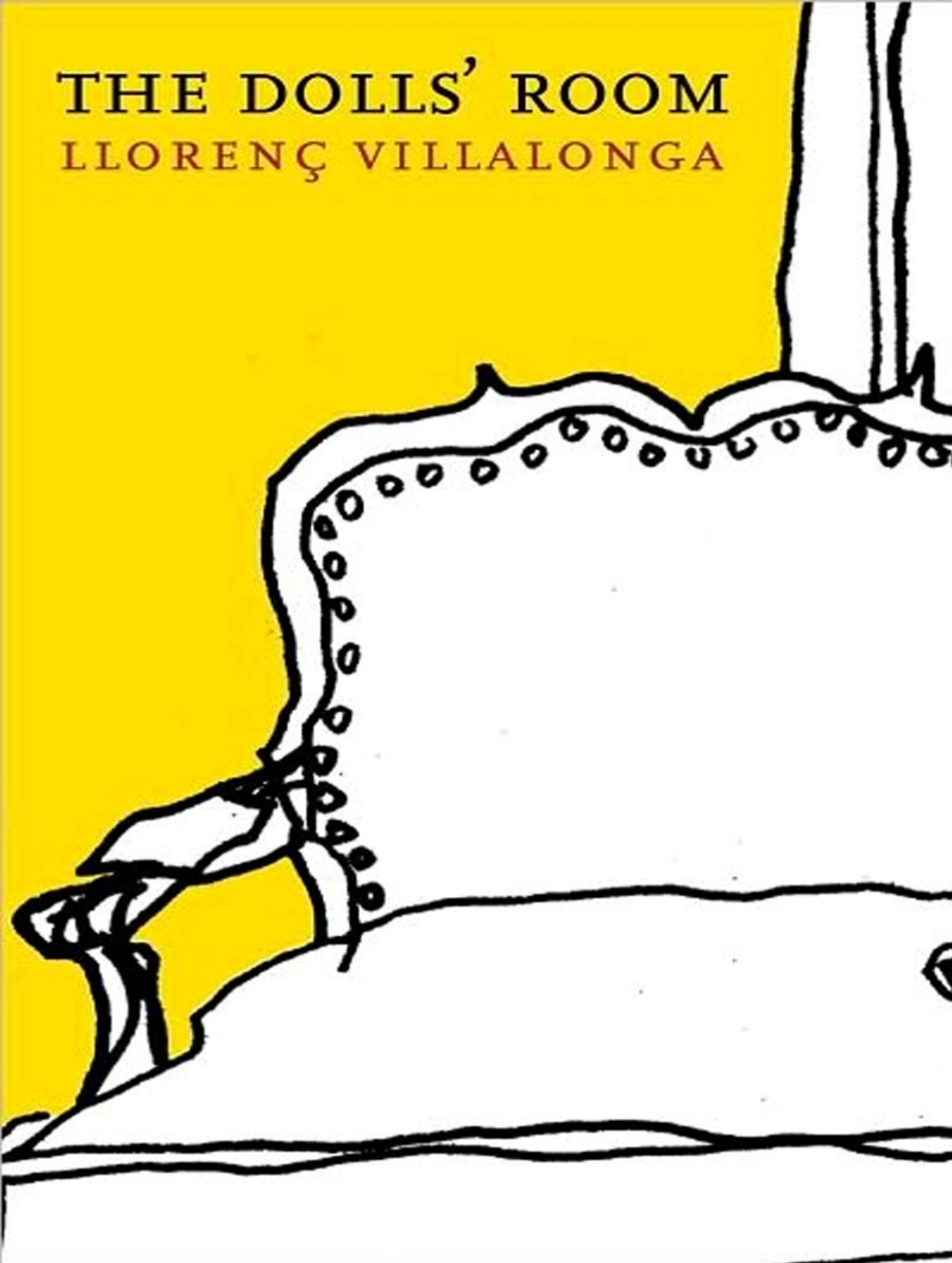


THE DOLLS' ROOM
LLORENÇ VILLALONGA



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TRANSLATED BY DEBORAH BONNER



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THE DOLLS' ROOM

Translator's Foreword

Who could ever be sure of owning
the definitive edition of things
Llorenç Villalonga, *The Dolls' Room*

Llorenç Villalonga once said that *The Dolls' Room* was “the portrait, or, if you wish, the poem of Mallorca. Of a certain Mallorca, that is: mine.” What many agree to be the author's most compelling work was published in both Catalan and Spanish, but essentially belongs to the island, if to anyone, and both languages do.

Villalonga was bilingual, and there is no doubt that when the novel was in the making, the political barrier between the two languages was a bitter one indeed, with Franco imposing Spanish over the other languages spoken in Spain. Villalonga lived and wrote crossing that line. In addition, he was never a careful stylist; his focus was primarily on theme, on character, and on atmosphere, evoking a lost world. Probably most of his editors in both languages were amused by the author's self-portrait in Don Toni de Bearn when he confides in Joan Mayol, “You will naturally find some oversights in my style and perhaps a few grammatical liberties and transgressions. Be careful when you correct them, Son. [...] I have at times had to sacrifice grammar and morals in exchange for accuracy.” Although his lack of formal education in Catalan may have shown in his writing, the dialect spoken in Mallorca was his mother tongue, and, as the language his characters would actually have spoken, enabled him to develop a broad range of subtle registers; it was also better equipped to convey the natural and cultural setting for *The Dolls' Room*. Villalonga's Spanish, on the other hand, was articulate but somewhat stiff and self-conscious, with the occasional expression borrowed from Catalan.

Villalonga, a man who moved between different worlds and languages, also chose a double title for his novel: *Bearn, or The Dolls' Room*, including both the name of the fictional estate that encapsulates the lost world of Mallorcan rural aristocracy and that of the locked room integral to the novel's plot. While English editions of the novel have used only the second half of its title, in Catalan and Spanish the novel is available as *Bearn o la sala de les nines* and *Bearn o la sala de las muñecas*, respectively, and is generally referred to simply as *Bearn*.

The question as to which version of this novel—the Catalan or the Spanish—was “the original,” is, however, complicated and controversial, and Villalonga was careful to cover his tracks. The first complete manuscript was published in Spanish in 1956, although a first draft seems to have been attempted in Catalan; regardless of which the original language was, the version I chose for my translation in 1986 was the Catalan edition published by Edicions 62, conscientiously edited in conjunction with the author by Josep Antoni Grimalt.

It is likely that Villalonga himself, as mischievous as Don Toni de Bearn, created a maze in which he could watch editors, critics, and translators quarrel in search for a simple explanation. In an interview published shortly after his death, he went so far as to claim that the novel had actually been transcribed from Hebrew, then translated into English, from English to French, and finally into Spanish and Catalan. He found his own form of rebellion against the forces that threatened to pull his work to one side or the other of the politically charged line between the two languages. He wanted *The Dolls' Room* to stand alone, and I certainly believe it is more than capable of holding its ground outside of Mallorca, Catalonia, and Spain.

Els meus ulls ja nó saben

sinó contemplar dies

i sols perduts...

Salvador Espriu

Cementiri de Sinera

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Introduction

Letter from Don Joan Mayol, Chaplain of Bearn, to Don Miquel Gilabert, Secretary to His Eminence the Cardinal Primate of Spain

Bearn, 1890

Dear Miquel,

I do not know whether by the time you receive this letter you will have heard the sad news: the Senyors died nearly two months ago, on the last night of carnival, under rather mysterious circumstances. Since then Bearn has been full of clerks, notaries and creditors drawing up documents and writing out inventories. We have not had a minute's rest. Everyone is concerned with the material possessions of the dead, which in the end will amount to virtually nothing, whereas few stop to say a Paternoster in their memory. Even I, who have been in charge of the house, have not had a single uninterrupted hour, and when night falls and I am left alone, my soul feels so ill at ease that I have no strength left to commend them to God: if it were not for the Mass I say in their memory every morning, I suspect they would have travelled very light to the world beyond. At times like these, the spectacle of human selfishness seems to rule out any possibility of redemption.

Their niece and nephews arrived thirty-eight hours after the tragedy, when the Senyors had already been buried. It had been years since they had last set foot in Bearn. I can assure you, Miquel, that no one was distraught over this double death. Dona Magdalena praised the china in the drawing room and her brothers inquired about the pine forest of Sa Cova, which they assumed had been cut down some time ago. I did not judge it necessary to tell them that although it may not have been cut down, it had been sold and paid for in advance, and I have refused to answer any questions concerning last wishes until we hear from Madrid regarding the last will and testament of the deceased (between you and me, I happen to know that they never drew up a will in their entire lives). They also asked about the Senyora's jewellery and whatever money may have been in the house, but the judge, anticipating their intentions, had locked all the drawers, sparing me from having to offer explanation. At the last minute, their niece wanted to see the dolls' room, which the Senyor never showed to anyone, and believing I was interpreting the wishes of the deceased, I pretended to have lost the key. They were rather taken aback by the time they left, and I have not seen them since.

They would have been even more so had they known that in a hideaway in my dressing-table, between two boards, there are two thousand *duros* that the Senyor gave me about six months ago, with specific instructions, as you will soon see. Now that the Senyors have died, you are the only person I truly love and in whom I can confide my trials and tribulations. I need to present you with a matter of conscience. Think about it before you read on: you must take everything I tell you as a confession. If you are not prepared to receive my confidences (which, I must warn you, will disturb and upset your peace of mind), you must certainly burn these pages without reading any further.

You, Miquel, have been and still are my best friend, in the fullest sense of the word. I shall never forget the compassion you showed me when at that moment of anguish immediately after the tragedy I confided in you about that misfortune, not to say that crime, which led me to finally renounce the world forever. I met you exactly a week after the affair concerning Jaume. I, who have had neither parents nor siblings, found in you at first brotherly love, and later that miraculous communion of

judgement which is the greatest gift Our Lord can grant two men. Neither you nor I (*arcades ambo*, as the old rector of the seminary used to say half seriously and half in jest) will forget those conversations under the tree in the main courtyard, discussing Saint Augustine and Descartes. Our minds were opening up simultaneously to the wonder of that spiritual world which, when one succeeds in glimpsing it, constitutes a palpable revelation of the divine presence. The Senyor sometimes used to tell me that when I grew old and looked back upon my life, I would realize that it had lacked one single ingredient, that spicy sauce called the Devil. Those were the kinds of things the Senyor used to say, not expecting them to be taken seriously.

The Senyor had a generous, trusting, and open soul. All his mistakes, which were many, deserve partial forgiveness in the light of his good intentions, his confidence in understanding and his love for nature and all living things. By now his body has turned to dust—that body which he had spared no pleasures—and only his soul remains in the presence of God, his only judge. Let us pray that his mistakes be forgiven.

I must ask your counsel regarding the question raised by this twofold death, and the instructions left by the Senyor, along with the two thousand *duros* I have hidden away. It seems impossible that a man as reckless as he regarding financial matters could have amassed a sum large enough to support an entire family. The effort it must have represented for him (even though we all know that when one of these houses collapses, there is always something left hidden away in some dark corner) makes me understand why the Senyor felt so strongly about the instructions he left me, he who over the years had become removed from so many things. If the judges and the creditors who are studying the settlement of the estate knew that I, once a swineherd and now a poor chaplain with no income other than that earned saying Mass, have so much money hidden away, they would probably think I had stolen it, and, as you can imagine, it would not be inconceivable that they should blame me for the Senyors' unexpected deaths within an hour of each other. And yet these dangers cannot compare with the moral concerns I am now obliged to face.

Before you give me your advice, however, it is important that you have full knowledge of the problem. The love and loyalty that the Senyor inspired in me could distort my judgement. The question is not a simple one, and I feel the need to start from the very beginning. Giving you all the details of that life I loved so deeply, despite its grave errors, has provided a solace for me in my solitude. I must admit that the motive of my story, written in the course of these endless nights, may not be solely the scruples of my conscience, but rather the pleasure of reviving the familiar and venerated figure I have just lost. With him an entire world has disappeared, beginning with these lands that have seen my birth and that will have to be auctioned off because the creditors have already notified us that they do not wish to wait any longer. The Senyor's nephews and niece neither have enough money to pay off the mortgages nor feel any love for Bearn, being used to city life as they are. There might be one last source of hope: they say a relative of the Senyors has arrived from America after having become a millionaire selling cardboard boxes. It seems unbelievable that anyone should become an important personality selling little boxes, but he has introduced himself with much pomp, laden with gold and determined to dazzle all of Mallorca with an electric automobile that has already killed two sheep. On his calling card, below his name, are the words *Cardboard Containers*, which no one quite understood until they realized it referred to those famous boxes. Well, this character—that all I can call him—could, I suppose, purchase the estate, saving it from falling into the hands of strangers. I know that the Senyors would not have been pleased with the man of the Cardboard Containers, and in addition the mother of this capitalist had apparently been separated from her husband—a Bearn who had gone astray—for quite some time when the child was born, and this was the object of many a comment. But the years teach us not to be excessively demanding. To me, halfway down the path of my life, this Cardboard Container Bearn would be nothing but an intruder. Yet there is no question but that a new generation is emerging, which is willing to associate these old

yet there is no question but that a new generation is emerging, which is willing to associate these old lands with the personality of an outsider and will experience the same feelings towards the union of senyor and lands, which it will believe to be deeply rooted, that I felt towards Don Toni as a child. Searching through the archives of the house one would undoubtedly find other similar situations, because reality is only what we make it and derives its continuity from no more than the conventional magic of a name. God, we know, created the World with the Word.

The Senyor exerted a sort of fascination over me. Dona Maria Antònia, who was so good, never inspired as much interest in me as that soul torn between God and the Devil; not even now (the very thought of it is chilling) do we know who won the battle. Perhaps this anguish was the basis for the love I have always felt towards him, and this same anguish might also be precisely that sauce which according to the Senyor is the spice of life.

One thing I do not wish to hide from you is that, regarding this moral dilemma, I could only accept a solution that would not be contrary to the Senyor's last wish, and that if an obstacle should arise, I reserve the right to take the matter to Rome. If the Pope himself should deny his consent, I would feel compelled to abide by his decision, yet if that were to happen, I hope and beg of Divine Mercy that death reach me before then to free me of my tribulations.

For your better understanding of the problem, I have divided my exposition of that strange life into three parts, as if it were a novel. The first could be called *Under the Influence of Faust*, and corresponds to the tempestuous period. The second part takes place in the peace of these mountains and could be called (albeit rather ironically, because the peace was more apparent than real) *Peace Reigns in Bearn*. Regarding the third, it consists of an epilogue written shortly afterwards, following a strange and disconcerting visit I recently received.

One last observation is that you must not be shocked at certain frivolities and crude references in my pages. Do bear in mind that I must present the Senyor as he was during his life, and given that I am submitting his character to the judgement of the Church, I can never be faithful enough to the facts, although above all possible misunderstandings there remains God, who constitutes infinite understanding.

Under the Influence of Faus

Since you never came to Bearn, I must explain that it is a mountain estate located near a small village of about four hundred souls also called Bearn. Whether the estate took the name of the village or the village that of the estate remains unknown. Year after year, on the day of Sant Miquel, the patron saint of Bearn, the preacher mentions that these lands have belonged to the Senyors since the Conquest. It may be true, although there are no documents to prove this fact. 'Our lineage', Don Toni said, 'is so old that it can't be dated. It's lost in the darkness of time.' However, the oral tradition that made them respectable and irreproachable has had no official recognition. There is a good reason: the documents are missing. All the Senyors except for Don Toni, who was a francophile, were always quite indifferent as far as erudition was concerned. Even within the past century and a half, one of his great-grandfathers, also called Don Toni, was such a primitive soul that he was the object of many tales of mischief, although they probably exaggerate what he actually did. The old people remember the following rhyme:

*Our Lord Jesus is in Heaven
and in Moorish lands, the heathen.
The Devil lives deep down in Hell
and in Bearn Don Toni dwells.*

The Senyor found it all very amusing. 'At least,' he said, 'he didn't waste any time.' His other ancestors were more sensible. They lived in the country, and either ignored or looked down upon the refinements of city life. The City, in turn, ignored them.

From the village to the estate is about an hour's walk, but due to the mountainous terrain one cannot see the estate until one is practically on top of it. Bearn is thus, figuratively speaking, a lost cause. The land is poor, with only pine and oak growing between jagged rocks. It will soon be thirty-eight years since I came into this world, the son of a labourer and a farm girl. I have no recollection of my parents. I have heard that my mother was very beautiful and had jet-black eyes. When I was seven I was sent to work as a swineherd, but the Senyor decided almost immediately that I was to be sent to school in the City. I can remember it as if it were this very moment. It was a summer afternoon and I had taken the herd over to S'Ull de Sa Font when the Senyors went by. They would spend long periods in the City, and when they returned, my respect, my fear or my embarrassment made me run off and hide every time I saw them. I barely dared to look at them anywhere but in the village church, on the day of Sant Miquel, when they sat in two red velvet-covered chairs next to the altar.

Dona Maria Antònia was very beautiful, and Don Toni, thin, graceful, and rather slight, resembled her despite his ugliness. They were first cousins. Although they almost always smiled, they were imposing because they appeared to be made of a different substance from that of the peasants, something newer and more luminous; not even now could I explain it. The way they dressed undoubtedly had something to do with it, but I do believe it was a less material, almost magical

quality that surrounded the feudal and pastoral name of Bearn, revered every year from the pulpit on the holiday. Usually around Sant Miquel it rains in the mountains, and the history of the old family is as closely associated with the beginning of the cool weather and the joyful green of the first pastures as it is with the deeds of the conquerors in the battlefield.

'Look at that boy, Tonet,' said Dona Maria Antònia. 'Have you noticed his eyes?'

The Senyor stared at me and did not reply. Dona Maria Antònia was lost in thought.

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