

THE END of the SHERRY



Bruce Berger

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Casebound ISBN 978-1-929355-95-2

ePub ISBN 978-1-5457-2191-9

Paperback ISBN 978-1-929355-99-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013947906

Author's photo by Deb Milligan

Cover design by Laura Tolkow

Interior design by Susan Ramundo

Parts of *The End of the Sherry* have appeared in the following:

The Yale Review, *Traveler's Tales: Spain*, *Mountain Gazette*, *American Way*

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Part I

1

I learned Spanish by immersion, mainly in sherry.

I had always associated that viscous fluid with the lady bridge players who filled our living room on Wednesday afternoons, sippers who called each other's hats *darling* and *cunning* as their nails flamed against my mother's crystal. Andalusia's sherry drinkers, anno 1965, were male, bareheaded and serious. Instead of sitting at folding card tables, they stood tirelessly at a zinc bar in dark trousers and threadbare suit jackets. The sherry they tossed back was not the honey my mother's friends left unfinished, and which I polished off as she showed them to their sedans; it was as astringent as paint thinner, a taste I was acquiring more slowly as I washed down a new language. My German shepherd, drinking beside me from a saucer, preferred beer.

"Why are you living in Spain?" asked the sherry drinker beyond the dog.

The answer required more self-knowledge than I had. "I like it here."

"Nobody comes to live in Puerto Real," said a man to the other side of me.

"That's the perfect reason to do it."

"Foreigners never venture past the campground," he continued, naming the place I was living.

"The campground gets boring," I replied with enthusiasm. Having learned the word for *boring* that very morning, I was pleased to put it to immediate use.

"Is your dog from Spain?" asked the man beyond him.

"No, he was born in the States."

"Then how did he get here?"

"He flew."

The man backed up and looked at the dog sardonically. "Sure, lifting his leg on the clouds."

I was meanwhile monitoring, as best I could, a conversation farther down the bar. "I wonder if he's married," I heard a man say.

"I'm not," I said, leaning forward to answer the question directly.

"A three-eared American with a drunken dog that flies." A new voice. Normally I couldn't follow more than one conversational thread at a time, even in English, but voracity for the new language extended my reach.

"Another round," commanded the man next to the dog.

This conversation in the Bar Central replicated itself several times a week. A couple of months back I had dropped in for the first time, ordering a beer and inflicting that morning's vocabulary on Manolo, the eighteen-year-old bartender. The next morning Manolo, along with his twin brother Luis, a fifteen-year-old companion named Skinny and a forty-five-year-old named Sparkplug, appeared at my tent site to wish me good morning.

I fired my butane burner, borrowed cups from the campers next to me and served instant coffee. We traded sounds for three hours.

The quartet was patient with my stabs at meaning, my ears were tuned to their salvos and we established a few basics. The twins' father owned the Bar Central, school had let out for Skinny, Sparkplug had been idled from the drydock. Drifts of free time washed them daily to my tent, sometimes bearing bread and cheese. We dissected life in the United States, life in Puerto Real, life. Often they lured me afterward to the Bar Central, a kilometer along the railroad tracks that doubled as the perfect dog walk.

The zinc bar, it turned out, was Puerto Real's village green. Swelling the core clientele was a full complement of outsiders, some passing through on business, others in town for supplies. In a hub of compulsive socializing, where every topic had been exhausted, word quickly spread of the foreigner and his alcoholic dog. They could be encountered early afternoons in the Bar Central. I was never allowed to buy a round, for as soon as I signaled to Manolo I was outshouted and viscous gold fell into the narrow, short-stemmed *copa*. The astringency grew on me while facilitating, up to a point, my pronunciation. The repetitive, identity-establishing conversations, forgettable in themselves, consolidated some casual vocabulary and grammar, clichés from which I could eventually branch into more interesting specifics. On this particular occasion the banter had already grown a third ear for me and wings for the dog. "Manolo," said the man who had invited me, "I said a *round*. That's seven sherries plus a beer." He paused. "With a change of saucer."

A young American living among strangers outside a small Andalusian town in 1965, in the twenty-sixth year of Generalísimo Franco's dictatorship, might be considered adventurous—yet I had arrived in that situation quite passively. Rather than initiating my own plans, I had merely selected the more colorful alternative among options generated by others. Even the dog was a kind of inheritance. It was risk by default, by multiple choice, by valor among binaries. I said yes instead of no, then took the consequences.

I began by saying no to the Chicago suburb where I grew up, a childhood I thought of as boredom under the elms. I took refuge in the family Steinway, waiting impatiently for the teacher who showed up once a week to teach me classical music and memorizing his assignments as soon as he was out the door, whether I liked them or not. I filled the time between lessons by playing by ear all the pop standards and concerto themes from my parents' huge stack of 78 RPMs, and when I referred to the teacher's demonstrations beyond sight of the keys, he told me I had an unusual quality called perfect pitch. I trailed my half-brother to Yale. For grad school I picked Berkeley, the most scenic acceptance. My father died of complications from chain-smoking, leaving me an inheritance it seemed immoral to live on, and I resolved to become a professor of literature—but when artists I met on Cannery Row, in Monterey, suggested I drop out and move in with them, I did so. It sounded livelier. And when a newcomer to Cannery Row proposed we spend a year driving around the Mediterranean, I said, why not? Generating nothing myself, selecting among what turned up, I found that every choice swept me further afield, toward the distant, the bohemian, the romantic, the disruption I craved.

Patrick, the newcomer, was a revelation. A year older than I, full of red-haired bravado, he docked his sailboat in the weeds of the tumbledown we rented. Soon he and I and his one-year-old German shepherd, Og—the name was short for dog—were taking

trips in his forty-dollar Nash to Big Sur, to the Mojave Desert and finally, for three ecstatic weeks, to New York. We threw down sleeping bags by railroad tracks and cornfields, reveled in silos, in salt flats, in eastern tunnels and western casinos, the road blossoming fore and vanishing aft in a careening demonstration of the Now. Og seemed as drunk on it as ourselves, stampeding cows, biting snow, raving at Yellowstone bears, expressing his gratitude in toothmarks all over our forearms. As asphalt sang underwheel I read aloud from *The Day on Fire*, a novelized life of Rimbaud whose cover displayed a hallucinatory, Van Gogh-like sun. That sulfurous star was the icon of our future.

If a jaunt across our own drab country could summon such splendor, what might not ensue if we raged like Rimbaud across the continent that had inspired his and so many other illuminations? I had seen Europe only with collegemates, guidebook in hand, and Patrick had ventured no farther abroad than Tijuana. And why confine ourselves to Europe? Rimbaud had ventured, if disastrously, to Africa. We could avoid his mistakes. *Why not drive around the Mediterranean?* Citroën was selling a car called the Deux Chevaux for \$966, new from the factory, with a year's worth of insurance and an offer to buy it back within the year for \$100 less than purchase price. In the inflated currency of 1965, yearlong use of a new car for \$100 was unheard of. We couldn't afford *not* to buy it. This inspiration of Patrick's reduced itself to a handy next move and I answered with my reckless yes.

I drove Patrick to Norfolk, Virginia, where he boarded a German freighter, then sent back dazzling letters from Paris, where he found work in a hotel to replace the unemployment insurance he had been drawing ever since I met him. Og's crossing required a certificate of health and a powerful injection before take-off. I lured him into a cage and delivered him to a flight to Chicago, where he was loaded into a Lufthansa baggage compartment to Stuttgart, then transferred by the International Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to the last leg of his trip to Paris. Patrick drove to Orly Field to receive Og in the new Deux Chevaux, and as he waited for Og to clear customs, some begging children talked him out of his last francs. When Patrick was presented with the cage, a customs official demanded a fee equal to half of Og's entire fare. Patrick protested that he didn't have a single *sou*. For an awful moment it appeared that Og had flown a continent and an ocean, only to fail by a distance of five feet. Then an attendant who overheard the altercation remarked that he had seen Patrick give his last money to some children. The customs official smiled, waived the fee, and Og was cleared into France. Patrick opened the cage door. Og sprang out, leapt on him with a joyful yelp, then fell back in a narcotic stupor.

As the date for my own departure loomed, the enormity of what I was doing finally caught up with me. I was casting my future to a new continent, a drifting companion and a dog. Was this what I should be doing with my life? Would said life survive it? I was particularly worried about the Mediterranean's African side. I couldn't even name the countries in order, but I knew that Algeria had recently won its independence from France after one of the most savage wars in recent history, and that we pale Anglos would be floating through it with French plates. Who knows what went on in the countries to either side, whatever they were? I envisioned a male population in robes, perfect for concealing weapons. Had I said yes one time too many?

It didn't help that the date of my departure was February 1, in the depth of winter, and I was flying Icelandic. It was hardly a day on fire. When we stopped to refuel in Keflavik, the airline's home airport, all passengers were hustled out of the plane, through a wintry blast and into a waiting room, where an attendant pointed out a window to a sapling nearly bent over double. It had recently been acquired and was, he alleged, the town's only tree. Not only did I pity it; I identified with it, even though I flew to my fate voluntarily. Patrick, spotting me as I stepped from the plane toward tarmac in Luxembourg, greeted me with a shake of the hair he hadn't cut since he'd left. Soon he was grabbing my battered suitcase, my sleeping bag and my typewriter, and was leading me to what appeared to be a tiny Quonset hut on wheels. Og sprang up deliriously and planted toothmarks on my wrist.

We settled in the car and Patrick poured cheap Bordeaux into two ceramic cups. Sheet metal enveloped us claustrophobically. "Welcome to our drunken boat," he said, invoking Rimbaud's best known poem.

"It looks more like an iron lung." I had christened it.

We clinked to adventures in the Eastern Hemisphere. As he had during bursts of highway euphoria in the States, he lit a cigarette and placed it in my mouth. I knew that cigarettes had hastened my father's death, but I also appreciated that Patrick wanted to share this dizziness with me: it seemed somehow of a piece with the wine, his disorienting hair, the new terrain.

"They're Gauloises," he said, catching my scowl of surprise. "Dark tobacco." We drove off.

"The car has four gears forward," explained Patrick, his hand on a bulb that projected from a dashboard that suggested a more elementary phase of the industrial revolution. Accelerating, braking for lights, he pushed, twisted and pulled the knob with commanding turns of the wrist. The gears growled in protest. "You have to insist," he declared. Og, braced on widely spaced paws behind us, thrust his head between us; collisions with his nose had turned the rearview mirror opaque. Whenever we dipped for potholes, Og floundered to regain his balance. "Why is this car so bouncy?" I asked.

"The front and back suspensions are attached to each other," said Patrick. "That way, there are only two coil springs instead of the usual four." Seeing my glaze, he added, "Suspension. It's a Citroën specialty."

Barely over the French border, tough veal in our bellies, I announced I needed to put my jetlag to bed. Patrick pulled onto a country lane, the car bobbed across a field like a jeep without shocks, and we stopped at a large bare tree. I watched in astonishment as he lifted out the driver and passenger seats and set them next to the car. They stood converted into rickety, low-slung lawn chairs, which he heaped with our bags. "There isn't room for our stuff and us too in the Lung," he said. "Og will let us know if anyone's coming."

Once outside, even in semi-darkness I could appreciate that our miniature delivery van had ill-matched halves, a barrel-vault hold and a smaller vehicle's two-seat snub-nosed cab; with its headlights bulging from the fenders like eyes on stalks, the effect was of a hermit crab leaving too tight a shell. The back doors swung open on the storage space, just in front of which lay the sunken rectangle where the seats had been. This odd

configuration proved ideal, for Patrick and I filled the storage area side by side with our feet hanging into the pit of the seats, while Og lay crosswise from door to door, a perfect puzzle piece, his head by the accelerator. It would have been cozy if it weren't so cold.

The sheet metal appeared continuous, but as I lay shivering in my sleeping bag, comatose but awake, I became aware that large cracks gaped between pieces of metal that had been loosely riveted together. The wind gathered strength, screeching desolately through the tree, and insinuated its way into this flesh-packed interior. This car hasn't been welded together, I thought bitterly; it's been stapled.

That night set the pattern, for cold continued as we worked our way southward. We bought a blanket that reeked of the petroleum it was no doubt made of, and named it Evinrude. It turned out to be unequal to the task but we persisted in adding its weight and fumes to the stew of dog and smoke. A better investment was a little blue Camping Gaz burner so we could have instant coffee when we woke up shivering.

We had high hopes for the town of Arles, whose heat radiated from Van Gogh's sunstruck paintings of sunflowers, wheatfields and other golden objects, but winter tore across its Roman arena, which we visited like the tourists we were. We drove on to the Mediterranean, a dark and horizonless blur heaving with whitecaps. It silently occurred to me that it would have been simpler to remain in the States and drive around Lake Huron.

We stood face to face with our plan to make our way around this thing. We had deliberately avoided the summer months because of North Africa's fabled heat, but we hadn't considered the other extreme. We were in no hurry to execute our ill-informed plans. Our immediate need was to get warm and our instinct was still to head toward the sun. "Which is farther south?" I asked, "the pimple of Gibraltar or the toe of the Italian boot?"

"I haven't a clue," said Patrick. "Let's check."

He pulled out our map of Europe. I fished for an envelope and laid its edge parallel to a latitude line. "Gibraltar wins," I said.

"I don't care if we go around the Mediterranean clockwise or counterclockwise," said Patrick.

"Then counterclockwise it is."

Having driven south to reach the Mediterranean, we turned right.

I looked more seriously at the map and there leapt out a name from my childhood imagination: Carcassonne. One Christmas my grandmother had given me Richard Halliburton's *Book of Marvels*, a round-the-globe compilation of black-and-white photos with an adventure-questing text, and I had been swept away by the mere possibility of this walled citadel in southern France. In the flesh a mere two hours later, the crenellated walls and roofs like witches' hats were so faithful to the book that in the depth of February they were still in black-and-white. We dove into a café.

As soon as we had ordered coffee, my spirits revived, for I spotted an upright piano. Here was relief from piano withdrawal, as well as an opportunity to speak the French I had studied for six years. I asked the waitress whether I could play.

“Certainly. We’d love it.”

I got through some Debussy. There was a bit of applause, and the man at the nearest table asked if I knew any songs. I ran through some Gershwin. “How about ‘The Marseillaise’?” called a woman from across the room. I belted it out.

“Can you play ‘The Communist Internationale’?” shouted another patron. I had learned the tune from a socialist college roommate and gave it equal treatment.

“Can you play ‘The Star Spangled Banner’?” asked the man who had wanted popular songs. When I finished it, another customer shouted, “Play the last two songs again!” Beers arrived for me and Patrick. I felt my spirit thawing.

“What is the politics of those people?” wondered Patrick when we were back on the road.

“None,” I replied. “They just like patriotic songs.” Musical requests, a new language—this was living.

When we reached the Spanish border the next morning, I felt linguistically deprived. I’d put my French to use exactly once, and now it was behind us. Outside the car, all was Spanish. I had tried to learn that language at home during my sixteenth summer, treating a first-year grammar as a do-it-yourself manual, and all that remained were good morning, thank you and the numbers. When we reached Barcelona, I resumed my studies with a second-year grammar book, the only one for sale.

I later wondered what was in the preceding volume, for this seemed adequate for beginners with its verbs in all the tenses, its arcana about the two forms of the verb ‘to be,’ *ser* and *estar*. Which should I attempt to conjugate for the waiter? “*Es bueno*,” I said, pointing to that night’s flan.

“*Claro*,” he snapped back. “*Aquí la comida está buena*.”

Along with the slight rebuke for stating the obvious where all the food was good, I noted the corrected grammar. Patrick, who thought anything worth saying could be communicated by gesture, suggested I cut the pedantry. Dismissing Patrick, I inflicted Spanish on all targets as we pressed southwest along the coast.

One night, just after we had gotten to sleep on a turn-off over the sea, there was a growl from under the dashboard and our tight quarters were speared by two beams of light. “*Buenas noches*,” said two loud voices. Og was up now, scrambling to stand on Evinrude, which was draped over our legs, and barking in a lathered fury. I could see the gleam of flashlights on two black patent leather hats: these were the *Guardia Civil*, Franco’s feared police.

“*Turistas*,” I yelled, authentically rolling the *r*. My heart was pounding, but even this was an opportunity.

“*No se pueden quedar aqui*,” one of them yelled back, and I quite understood.

“*Nos vamos*,” I yelled.

“*Buenas noches*,” each of them pronounced again, louder this time.

“*Buenas noches*,” I replied, pleased to complete the exchange even though it meant

moving on in the night.

In Almeria, a gaunt old man who had seen our French plates asked in French where we were headed.

“Around the Mediterranean,” I replied.

He grew wide-eyed with horror. “A grave error. *C’est impossible.*” He drew a flattened hand along his gullet and made a clicking sound. “Arabs!”

Lit courses had pointed this figure out. In *Julius Caesar* he is the soothsayer who cries, “Beware the ides of March!” In *Moby-Dick* he is the pock-marked stranger named Elijah who warns against embarking on the *Pequod*. In “Heart of Darkness,” the two women who sit knitting black wool outside the shipping office don’t even need to speak to convey the folly of sailing up the Congo. I’d had persistent visions of Arabs slitting our throats or bothering us in some other fashion, and the man had spoken my fears.

Unnerved by the encounter, we reached Málaga as Lent began. Rain was unrelenting as we paraded our reeking dog through the streets. We waited ten days for a change of weather, gave up and pressed on past Torremolinos, a disco- and beach-blast ghetto so repulsive that we didn’t honor every stop sign. The coast became wilder, the sky more overcast, the towns sparser, and we reached the turn-off to Gibraltar, object of our right turn in France. We pulled the other way instead, into El Camping Motel. We had seen that word *camping* often on triangular signs along the road, and our response had been, why pay when we could camp free? But our most vivid human contact since crossing the border had been two *Guardia Civil* and an ominous old man. Perhaps better company could be bought.

We got more than we paid for. Perched on a barren hilltop, with rows of windswept saplings to garnish the bleakness, stood one-room chalets, showers, johns, basins for washing clothes, and a small café full of Peace Corps volunteers returning to the States from Gibraltar. “Where are you guys headed?” asked a young woman just back from Schweitzer’s hospital in Lambaréné.

“We’re planning to drive around the Mediterranean,” said Patrick.

There was a charged silence. “Do you know what’s going on in North Africa?” she asked.

“I know there was a long war when the Algerians liberated themselves from the French,” I said. “It sounded nasty.”

“It’s *still* nasty,” she replied. “You might not want to drive into the middle of it. How about Egypt?”

“I’m sure there are tensions.” I heard myself sounding lame.

“Yes, there are tensions. How about Tunisia and Libya?”

“I’m not really up on them,” I said.

“I’m not up on them either,” she said. “But don’t you think you should be up on them before you cross their borders?”

“If you make it intact through Egypt,” said a young man stationed in Kabul, “there’s

the eastern Mediterranean up next. Had you heard that the Palestinians and Israelis don't like each other?"

"We're going peacefully, innocently," said Patrick. Patrick believed that innocence was a contagion that could reverse disease. "People will see that about us. Maybe we can even be an example of how you can go from place to place without all that negativity."

"The Holy Fool dodge?" said a Congo volunteer. She sounded half angry. "Be careful of that one. It gets people killed."

"Whatever we do, we won't do it for a while," I said, hoping to lighten the exchange. "This miserable wind starts in North Africa. We don't want to freeze on their sizzling sands."

"That makes more sense," said the Kabul volunteer. "Spring is the best time. For tourism and for troop movements."

As these voices rang in my ear when we were back under Evinrude, I was grateful as well as spooked. It stung to come off as naïfs, but people who had engaged the world had fleshed out my own alarm. I didn't want to dampen Patrick's enthusiasm, but I'd counted on time to show us the way through, or to turn us back. Time had just been heard from.

Along with a splash of reality, the overnight revealed the merits of the *camping*. For sixty pesetas a day, one dollar, we didn't have to worry about police spearing the Lung with flashlights. We could wash our clothes and ourselves. We didn't need to buy an unwanted beverage from some establishment just because we desperately needed their bathroom. For Og, there was scampering space away from traffic and a restaurant that might have scraps. Best of all, there was company, gloriously unpredictable, which we could get away from just by returning to our vehicle. According to the map on the restaurant wall, a campground awaited us along the coast to the north, in Cádiz, and another around that city's bay. We put Africa on hold.

Cádiz turned out to be a dreamlike white city, a labyrinth of sea salt riding a sand spit that hooked into the Atlantic, and its highly anticipated campground was a walled triangle of dirt, an office, a john, a pingpong table without paddles, and no clientele but ourselves. Patrick bought a cheap guitar before we proceeded to the next campground, one El Pinar, thirty kilometers around the Bay of Cádiz. We overshot it and found ourselves funneled into a one-way street through a town so packed that it generated the kind of anxiety sprung by long tunnels. We reversed direction and were shot back through a parallel nightmare running the other way. Emerging among country fields, we pulled off on a dirt track past El Pinar's roadside restaurant, climbed through its namesake pine grove, broke into an open field and parked by a small office.

We poked inside. From the ceiling hung a ham by its leg bone, along the wall stood a waist-high wine bottle encased in wicker, and an elderly man, all dignity in a beret, accepted our sixty pesetas. "*Yo soy Bernardo*," he said. "I'm afraid I must trouble you for your passports. You may reclaim them this afternoon. Come by and we'll chat for a bit." I immediately took to the clarity of his speech, the enunciation of every last letter, my own ease of comprehension.

We admired the insularity as we scouted for our site. The large open area, with room

for several dozen campers, was hemmed by trees on three sides, and sloped upward to its fourth horizon, a row of stucco showers and a row of stucco johns separated by a raised stucco pool, which stood empty. Its connection to the outside world cut off, El Pinar was a pastoral stage set awaiting its actors. A trailer next to some strung-up canvas was the only sign of occupancy, and we positioned ourselves as far from it as possible.

As soon as he was out of the Lung, Og bounded over to the trailer. A woman with a pink face and flying hair popped out, laughed her way over to us and sang out, "Popcorn at five, loves. Come on over."

Popcorn in a trailer wasn't what I came to Spain for. I left Patrick to his guitar and headed for a chat with Bernardo.

The little office was dense with cigarette smoke. "Some wine?" offered Bernardo. He bent down and tipped the huge wicker-encrusted bottle toward two tumblers. In the semi-darkness the wine looked almost black. I took a sip and felt the juices from the back of my mouth rushing to meet it. It was dry and tasted as dark as it looked. "It's good," I said, hating my primitive vocabulary.

"It's from the north. The locals drink sherry because this is where they make it. But sherry's for having one glass, not for conversation." He pulled out a pocket knife, spun the ham overhead until he reached the part that had been sliced, and shaved me a sliver. "Try this."

The leanness was wonderful but I didn't know how to say that. "It's very good too."

"It's *jamon serrano*."

"Where's *serrano*?"

He laughed. "*Serrano* isn't a place. *Serrano* means it's from the mountains. It's an adjective that derives from *sierra*."

"I love that kind of information," I said. "I'm trying to learn the language."

"You've come to the wrong place."

I was taken aback. "Why?"

"Because what people speak here is Andalusian, not Spanish. Technically it's Spanish, not a dialect, but it's such bad Spanish that it doesn't count as Castilian."

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Asturias, in the north, where the wine is from. Along with my Spanish. But who do I have here to speak correctly to, aside from Lola, my wife?"

"Me," I ventured.

He refilled my glass.

At five, Patrick and I dragged a couple of campground chairs to the Englishwoman's kitchen shelter, a canvas rigging between a tent for possessions and a tent for sleeping. Equally pink but rounder, more gelatinous, was her husband Teddy, clearly our compatriot.

“Looks like you two have been here awhile,” I said.

“It’s home number one,” said Teddy. “Pine trees, peace, Bernardo treats us right. And it’s only thirty kilometers from the PX.”

“PX of what?” asked Patrick.

Teddy squinted through his horn-rimmed glasses. “You American? Rota. It’s one of our two bases in Spain. We stable two atomic submarines there, which you should know about since your taxes are paying for them.”

“Patrick doesn’t pay taxes,” I put in.

“Rota’s where I get my cigarettes,” said Flo, taking a drag on her Winston. “And where we can get you anything you want. Last year Teddy mothballed ‘is uniform and got ‘is pension. It’s PX for life.”

“We’ve been in every campground on the Iberian peninsula twice and this place is number one, except that it’s next to Puerto Real,” said Teddy. “Other campgrounds are next to hill towns, walled cities, ports, places with cathedrals and stores and restaurants, and El Pinar is next to that piss-complected dump.”

“We drove through it and it was all so close I couldn’t see it,” I said. “It looked like there was no place to park.”

“Only thing they done right,” muttered Teddy. “Nothing to park for, so they didn’t blow space on parking.”

“What’s home number two?” I asked.

“San Roque,” said Flo, naming the first campground we’d stopped at. “It’s six *k*’s from Gib. I can shake money out of the Bank of England.”

Teddy and Flo were gone the next morning, and when they returned late afternoon, Teddy hauled a fifty-pound bag of Gravy Train to our campsite. “Thought Og could use this,” he said. “Popcorn’s almost ready.” Flo greeted us with a shopping bag full of peanut butter, Wonder Bread, strawberry jam and sixpacks of Budweiser. “Next time we’ll ask you what you’d like, but this time we thought we’d surprise you.” I tried to pay them from my traveler’s checks, which were holding steady in our low-budget existence, but they waved me off. “Some other time,” said Teddy.

After a day, Patrick and I felt so much at home that it was as if we had been there a week, and after a week it was simply routine. I typed it up on a table borrowed from the office while Bernardo wandered the grounds like a philosopher king, supervising the gardener, the old lady who cleaned the johns, the occasional maintenance man, extending a hand, bantering, dispensing wisdom. Every afternoon he paused by my typewriter and said, “*Hablamos un poco de español.*” As we sipped two or three glasses of Asturian red, he spoke a great deal of Spanish while I answered *si* or *entiendo* and slipped in nuggets I had picked up that morning from the grammar book.

And, unbelievably, Patrick and I were still shivering. The wind persisted, rain was sporadic, time wouldn’t pass; it was time to move on. Other campgrounds awaited, with significant cities attached. Sevilla to Córdoba, to Granada, and back to Málaga. There was

the campground deep in olive trees like platoons of spiders; the campground where Patrick threw a clod of earth at a cry in the night, bursting a lizard like a balloonful of water; the campground where the restaurant was labeled SNACH BAR. Back to Cádiz, back to El Pinar, back to popcorn, around the circle again. Our days on fire had become a trip on ice. Said Teddy, “Don’t miss Holy Week. It’s not worth crap in Puerto Real. Go to Seville.”

The streets were packed with worshipers in black as Lent crawled to a climax. Bearing tapers the size of rifles, figures in purple and white and black tunics filed through the night peering through the eye-slits of hoods that soared another meter over their heads. Drums and flutes made a skeletal music; horns cried in unison; crucified Jesus and the Virgin Mary, resplendent in brocade and painted flesh, tilted on a high surf of shoulders through the streets. Once when a Virgin came to rest, an old man on a balcony broke into a hoarse, melismatic chant that sent a chill through my nonbelieving self. As we were waking at the Sevillian campground after our third such evening, Patrick said, “I’m going back to Paris.”

I looked at him, stunned. “What?”

“We’re drifting, literally going in circles.”

“I thought we were doing small circles until we did the big one around the Mediterranean.” I wanted us to keep the dream as long as it didn’t come true, and resented being wakened by the dreamer.

“It’s been clear for some time that we’re not going around the Mediterranean. Now we know better. I need to work. I’m out of money and don’t want to use yours. You’ll find that people open up much more to a single person than to a twosome. You’ll make friends more easily without me, and you’re better off without someone who doesn’t want to learn the language. You’ll find your experience is just beginning and I’ll catch up on it later. I’m leaving you the guitar and the car and Og.”

I wasn’t impressed with Patrick’s ill-matched consolations. Bewildered, I drove him to the station. This was where saying yes had led.

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