

# 'BEYOND AND BETWEEN THE SIERRAS'

Robert Tilleard

## PROLOGUE

It may sound callous or odd but the death of my adored mother solved a problem.

I'd been offered a job in Spain to teach art for six weeks in a private villa in Andalucia. **B**ut I can't accept because my mother is very ill and might die at any time. If I don't tell my future employers of the problem I'd be accepted under false pretences; if I do tell them they'd give the job to someone else.

Never the less I agree to an interview. It's in London – a flat in Notting Hill. Charlotte Scott, the owner of the villa, which is called Trasierra, is a woman in her mid-thirties, dark, attractive and business-like. She outlines the nature of the job and describes her home where I would work. The terms are very attractive and the house sounds exotic and unusual. She is desperate to fill the post as she has been let-down at the last moment by her resident teacher who had handed in his notice. He had resigned because the Yorks - Fergie and Andrew - were at Trasierra and had offered the teacher an exhibition in St. James's Palace. So he hurriedly left.

She offers me the job, but then says I am to start almost immediately – which is a blow as I need time to think about my sick mother. I ask for a few days to consider – she agrees.

At home I tell my mother of the job offer, and am considering it – but, of course, I don't tell her her illness poses a problem. But I think she intuits that it is.

Two days later my mother dies.

The funeral is within a week of her death. The day after, I am on my way to Spain.

All this is twenty-five years ago.

## LETTERS FROM TRASSIERRA

Every evening I write-up the day's events in the form of letters to my then-girlfriend and post them to her in England.

I get back after a day's teaching, pour myself a glass of Manzanilla, and write for an hour or so before returning to Trasierra, where each night I host the dinner for the guests. This is part of the job description badly omitted by Charlotte at the London interview. It is like 'performing' at a dinner party almost every night for six weeks.

My girlfriend keeps all the letters and returns them to me when I get back to England.

## TRASIERRA

Trasierra is Charlotte's villa. It means either 'Between the Hills' or 'Beyond the Hills'. It's in the Sierra Morena about an hour and a half north of Seville. It's more a village than a villa. It is a walled 16th-century white-washed hacienda; a compound, with the main house, a church, a tower, cellars and outbuildings which Charlotte has converted into luxury guest suites, each individually designed by her (before moving to Spain Charlotte was a professional interior designer). There are alleyways, loggias, vine-covered terraces, flowerbeds, and dozens and dozens of olive amphorae as tall as a man. There is a walled kitchen garden and an orchard, a swimming pool and a tennis court. The whole is surrounded by three thousand acres of olive and orange groves and sweet chestnut trees.

It was derelict when she and her husband bought it in 1979. After their divorce, she kept the house and estate. Here she has brought-up her four children and runs it as a private hotel. She says it is a hotel for people who don't like hotels. There are doves and an overweight dog and a pair of over-sexed turkeys constantly trying to get at the little hen chickens. The high wall is interrupted by a tall, arched entrance guarded by a giant eucalyptus tree. Trasierra is about a mile or so from the village of Cazalla de la Sierra

## CAZALLA De La SIERRA

Cazalla is a large white-washed village or small town with an imposing church. It has, over the centuries, accreted houses on a gentle hill. It is essentially a working-class village and, being dependent on agriculture, has high unemployment for a large part of the year. The men-folk spend their days standing in the streets idly chatting. Everybody is friendly and will happily talk to you at length, not caring that you don't understand a word. Except for Trasierra, there is zero tourism. The food shops are poorly stocked but - oddly - there must be about a half dozen 'white goods' shops. Who buys from them? There are many working-class bars - and one aspiring middle-class bar.

## TRASIERRA – the Dramatis Personae

CHARLOTTE – The boss and mother:

Friendly and good at her job as the chatelaine of Trasierra but stressed from being the sole decision-maker, and from bringing up her four children and managing a complex 'hotel'. She is fun, but sometimes I feel she's out of her depth. She is good-looking. Her sister is the actress Harriet Walter.

GIACONDA – Her eldest child:

The sixteen-year-old daughter. Bright and poised, and because of her age has a bit of puppy fat. Pretty but with metal teeth-braces. She wants to go to art school but today has just been rejected by the college at Seville. Charlotte, who is in London, is immediately on the phone to Seville, pulling strings, so now Giaconda *can* go. But now she *can't* go because she didn't pay, in time, a small fee of a sort of stamp duty. Was impressed by her equanimity in the face of all these vicissitudes.\*

JACKSON – Second child:

The fourteen-year-old son. Bright with an eccentric imagination. Good-looking. Mad on PG Wodehouse and Quentin Tarantino. A knowledgeable film buff. On my first evening, at dinner, he suddenly stood and acted-out the entire scene from *Brideshead Revisited* where the very camp Anthony Blanche meets Charles Ryder for the first time. Theatricality runs in the family - Christopher Lee is his great-uncle. He once held me up with a real Colt45 in his hand. Has to be educated at home

AMBER – Third child:

The twelve-year-old daughter. Bright with beautiful strawberry blonde hair and a snub-nose. She wants to be a bank robber when she grows up.

GEORGE- Fourth child:

The ten-year-old son. The quieter one. A little in the shade of his siblings. Boards at the International School at Sotogrande

NICOLA – The English governess for Jackson and helpmeet to Charlotte.

Twenty-four years old but appears younger. Graduate in anthropology from Edinburgh University and ex of Wycombe Abbey school. She tutors Jackson in the mornings and helps Charlotte in the office in the afternoons. Pretty, lovely eyebrows and with a straight and scrubbed look. Speaks very fast in a little-girl voice – swallows her words. I keep having to ask her to repeat what she has said. She says it drives her father mad. He suggested she use sign language.

STEPHEN – The unofficial manager.

A friend of Charlotte's. About thirty years old, tall, slim good-looking but going bald, has a plummy voice. He is a failed art dealer and stone-broke. I've been told he's on the run from creditors and that he's the adopted son of some aristos. He was born and brought up in Jamaica. Unsure of himself. He wants to be an actor.

MAISIE – the cook

About fifty years old. Speaks with an old-fashioned upper-class drawl. Energetic and competent. At first, fun and friendly but can suddenly turn

and be spiky. Easily upset. For a Cordon Bleu cook, she makes a turgid chocolate mousse. She has a daughter, Tiggy, who I know quite well. Tiggy was a Cranborne Chase girl – expelled.\*

Sept 1st 1995

### DAY ONE

I am met at Seville airport by Giaconda, Maisie, and Paco, the Trasierra factotum. The weather is glorious and the drive smooth. As we get nearer, I realize how remote it is. But it is magical to arrive, and see this extraordinary white-washed ‘village’ isolated in the scrubby hills except for acres and acres of old olive trees

I am shown my car – an old Skoda – it becomes one of those cars for which one develops an affection. Afterwards, I am taken to my flat in Cazalla. It’s on the first floor of an old village house belonging to Charlotte – Nicola is in the ground floor flat. You approach through a courtyard and ascend a wrought-iron staircase. The flat is in the roof and is one big minimally furnished room with a banquette, two elegant armchairs and a bamboo writing table with matching chairs. A bathroom but no kitchen. A large white bed. Clean and white-washed, it has a big window with a view over the rooftops to the Sierra and a roof terrace overlooking the cathedral which has graffiti on its ancient walls announcing ‘GUNS’n’ROSES’ and ‘NIRVANA’.

Sept2nd

Charlotte arrives back from London. I spend the morning cleaning the dirty and ill-equipped studio and the afternoon driving, with Nicola (who speaks Spanish), to Seville to buy essential art supplies. Get back at 9.30 pm and then to go straight to the salon to host the dinner for my two new pupils. Stephen does the butting like an aspiring actor.

The new pupils are Jane from Appleshaw in Hampshire. In her late sixties, friendly and very much a Hampshire ‘lady of the manor’. A beginner as a painter and needs constant attention and encouragement as she is nervous.

Philippa, of the same age as Jane and her friend and neighbour. She is still rather beautiful and has a lovely smile. She is an experienced painter. She is taught once a week by Maggie Hambling at Morley College in London, where, coincidentally, her life model is a close friend of mine.

At dinner, Jane tells us a story of her very old Hampshire neighbour and her equally ancient female companion who are burgled in the middle of the night. The burglars tie them up. They are asked if they would like a cup of tea and they both answer: "I'd rather have a gin and tonic". Two gin and tonics, with ice and lemon, duly arrive. Meanwhile, the companion has cut her bonds with a nail-file. As the burglars make to depart on motorbikes, with their swag, the freed companion leaps onto a pillion and grabs their booty, knocking a burglar off. She staggers back to the house with her winnings and the robbers flee on their bikes; presumably to lead a quieter life in another county.

Sept 3rd

A good leisurely lunch; two hours sitting in the shade on a veranda. Good food and wine. Jane has had a little too much wine, becomes loquacious and bangs on about 'girls nowadays'. Their skirts are too short and this is an indication that they are clearly 'asking for it'. Guests from the States arrive tomorrow – from Hollywood.

The beginning of experiencing the almost continuous calamities that befall Charlotte:

Problem One: Stephen drives in Charlotte's car to Sotogrande, which is four hours away, to pick up George from the International School where he boards. The car breaks down and has to be towed to a garage. There is no alternative but to take a taxi for the remaining three-hour journey. It costs Charlotte the equivalent of £130. And now she is fighting the insurance company.

Problem Two: George refuses to back to school, when he is there he is homesick. He threatens to runaway if he is forcibly returned. Charlotte gives in and now George spends his days tearing about the olive groves on a motorbike. He's ten years old.

Problem Three: In the evening two of her horses become seriously ill. The vet is still there when I leave at midnight. Vets aren't cheap. However, Giaconda is thrilled – she's in love with the vet so now will see more of him.

Problem Four: Charlotte learns that sixteen members of an American religious cult and their guru have booked in for all of November; they want to be in the dark for the first two weeks.

Problem Five: After dinner, at about midnight as I am going home, I hear loud voices in the dark. I recognize them as Stephen and Charlotte's. Stephen is very angry and abusive. To avoid appearing like an eavesdropper, I slip noiselessly to my car - but I have to turn on the lights. On seeing the lights Charlotte detaches herself from the row with Stephen and comes over to me, shaking. She gets into the car. I don't ask what the row is about, and I still don't know. Charlotte stays and pours out her heart to me about all her troubles – which seem to increase by each passing day. After a while Giaconda joins us – she continues to show her level-headedness. A daughter advising her mother.

This goes on for an hour and a half. Charlotte must be under so much stress that she has to talk to someone she hardly knows. Or maybe spilling out your troubles to strangers is therapeutic? Anyway, it looks as if Stephen is sacked. I get to bed at two o'clock in the morning.

I've been here two days.

Sept 4th or later that morning.

I oversleep. Rush into Trasierra late, only to be told the clocks have gone back. ( Looking at the date they must do things differently in Spain, for the next six weeks only we are on GMT).

Maisie comes to me to explain her changes of mood – she has been very snappy with me. Judging by her age I think I can guess what is the cause. *She* says it's the stress of work. It was a kind of apology. It's her day off and she suggests she drives me and Jane and Philippa to paint in the Sierra. Nicola joins us.

Walking through the Sierra I ask Jane and Philippa about their histories. Jane says she was married at nineteen (her husband became chairman of Morgan Grenfell bank). They were married for forty years when, eight years ago, her husband left her for another woman. Jane is still smarting at the betrayal. No wonder she appears nervous.

On a lighter note. Philippa tells us that her grandmother was the mistress of King Leopold of the Belgians. He put her in a gilded cage in a flat in Monaco. Philippa paints as if she is on acid. Jane is getting calmer and each day gets better.

We lunch in a restaurant in a remote village. Being a Sunday it is packed with village families straight from church. All the ages are represented – from babies to ancient grandparents, everyone is dressed in their church-going best. One girl of about three is in a white dress, as if for a first-communion - but with pierced ears and earrings.

A large group of women (they auto-segregate the sexes here) is at our next table. All are wearing the same spectacles; all have the same hairstyle; all are dressed immaculately; all are exuberant, and all are fascinated by a lone man lunching with four women. They all turn to face me and start to clap out a rhythm and begin singing in that distinctive flamenco style – I'd love to know what it is they are singing. I notice my English women are not amused – imagine a collective disapproving look – like Maggie Smith in 'A Room with a View'.

In the evening I am cornered in my flat by Stephen. He wants to talk and seems very disturbed. He is trembling. I presume he doesn't know of my late-night conversation with Charlotte, but I feel uncomfortable, knowing that I have inside information about their row. All I can say to him is that between him and Charlotte there will always be a clash of personalities and that it is probably best for the best if he resigns. He doesn't know I know he has been sacked. He then says he will resign and starts to assassinate Charlotte's character. I have seen memos written by him to Charlotte which refer to himself in the third-person – a well-known indicator of a personality disorder. All this while I am changing for dinner, which I must now go to - so I send him downstairs to poor Nicola.

Earlier I had asked Nicola - who has the manner of a primary school teacher - what she did last night? 'I smoked a joint and made some beaded necklaces'. I thought I was back at art school in 1967.

Charlotte has told Stephen to pack and go. And he's gone. She says to me: "Now I can relax". She then gets the 'flu.

The last thing that happens with Stephen is he and I put out a fire in an olive grove started by Jackson. He's made a mould in my studio and wants to make an ingot of lead ( by melting air-gun pellets). He lights a fire which immediately goes out of control - it hasn't rained here for a year. A few more minutes and it would have been a major conflagration. We find a hosepipe, which helps do the job. Needless to say, we don't tell Charlotte.

There are four 'Hollywoods' - as I describe them as a short-hand. They are the actor Gene Wilder and his wife Karen, and their friends Terry Marsh and his wife Sandra, who are both English.

Gene Wilder is a bit detached, he isn't joining in and seems uninterested in Trasierra and its people. But gradually he relaxes and is charming and cheerful. Probably he is initially wary of us. He adored his wife, Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer only five years ago, and he still has a grieving demeanour.

Karen Wilder is his fourth wife whom he married three years ago. They met on the set of the film 'See No Evil, Hear No Evil' in which he played a deaf man, and Karen was his lip-reading coach. She is protective of him. She is a bit mousey and spiky and reminds me of Carla, the waitress in 'Cheers' - also, she looks like Gilda. They hold hands a lot. Gene gets on very well with the children.

Terry Marsh is an art director/production designer. He has two Oscars - for Dr Zhivago and Oliver! Among many other films, he designed Lawrence of Arabia, The Shawshank Redemption, and Basic Instinct. He is a delight and fun- still a bit of a Londoner; went to Hornsey College of Art. And is very modest despite his success. Someone asked him, rather patronizingly, what he did on 'Lawrence of Arabia'? 'I bloody-well built Aqaba!', he replied.\*

Sandra Marsh is in her late forties, a little younger than her husband. She is small, pretty with big eyes, and quite sharp. Probably has to be as she is a top Hollywood agent representing all the film technicians from writers to cinematographers.

Terry's delightful daughter is on holiday in Spain and pops in for lunch. She makes documentaries for British television and was at Seville University. She gives me the low-down on Sevillano bars.

Jane and Philippa are leaving tomorrow they take Nicola and me to lunch in a restaurant in Cazalla. They don't live far from me in Wiltshire so we hope to a meet-up when I'm back. And Jane has enquired about a portrait commission.

I learn from Charlotte that her mother, who has just returned from staying with a friend in Majorca, tells her that the friend says she has a niece who lives with an artist in Wiltshire and that he out in Spain teaching. friend tells her that her niece shares a house in Wiltshire with a painter who is in Andulucia teaching art. That'll be my lovely friend Suki and her eccentric Aunt Mimi.

At dinner, there is a discussion about comic actors. Gene says the greatest living comic actor is Ronnie Barker. I am surprised as I would have thought that Gene would not even have heard of him, let alone rate him highly. He's right, though. Then Terry and I discover we know, between us, lots of Tommy Cooper jokes. Gene, who doesn't know the jokes, is highly amused. After dinner Jackson, who is our waiter, sits down next to Gene and quizzes him about films and filming. Gene is so enamoured of Jackson's desire to learn that he puts his arm around him like a fond father - and keeps it there until the party breaks up. Also, Jackson quotes at length chunks of Tony Hancock.

The Hollywoods are health fanatics - no smoking in their presence; no caffeine. But lots of vitamin pills and constant worrying about weight. I'm getting a cold and they very kindly force-feed me with copious amounts of vitamin C pills.

Charlotte is to grace us with her presence at dinner. Maisie is in a panic as she wants to do a pudding with caramelized fruit but the fruit here, because of the drought, is withered and tasteless. So I've been searching the village for a bought pudding.

I ask Charlotte for one night's break from hosting the dinners — although they can be fun, and I'm lucky I'm a social being, it can be exhausting. And I could do with an early night. When I tell the Hollywoods I won't be there for dinner Gene is crestfallen and puts his arm around my shoulder and says: "We shall miss you".

Gene, who knows all about bad backs, having had sciatica, offers to give me a massage and to teach me exercises for the back. And Karen is very solicitous, being concerned about my cold and my back. She has a record of compassion as she worked in a hospital for people with brain damage caused by accidents.

The Hollywoods love it here and are so relaxed. Sandra tells me of how she started in the film business. Her first job was as a secretary at Pinewood studios where she met Vanessa Redgrave who was so impressed by Sandra she asked her to be her agent. Sandra, of course, knew nothing about contracts and suchlike but was so successful she now has the top agency in Hollywood. There's a film there somewhere.

It's very hot, in the mid-90s. I swim alone in the pool. The Hollywoods won't swim - the pool's not heated.

I see Amber sitting under a palm tree wearing a cardboard box and with a dozen clothes pegs clipped to her hair. I ask her what she is doing: "I'm a musical Instrument," she says. She starts to slap the side of the box to a flamenco rhythm, then begins clapping to the same rhythm and shaking her head violently so the pegs rattle noisily.

Jackson was to do an apprenticeship as a carpenter but failed the entrance exam so he is at home all day and is now Gene's shadow - but Gene doesn't seem to mind.

Giaconda has decided to start spelling, and pronouncing her name, 'Jaconda'.

She is still pining for the vet.

Charlotte is relaxing, despite all. She joins us for dinner and drinks a bit too much and enjoys herself - today she has a hangover.

Maisie pops in after dinner to make sure it went well. She too joins in with the wine. Today she too has a hangover.

No dinner tonight as everybody has gone to a restaurant in Cazalla. So Nicola and I go round some bars instead. She is - for a girl who could be mistaken for a girl guide - a bit of a dope-head.

In our last bar, we are approached by a rather handsome young man who we recognize as the dashing rider on the grey mare who rides through the streets in the warm evenings with a foal tagging along behind. He joins us and sits in his riding boots and tight jodhpurs with his legs spread wide. Nicola is flustered. He plies us with Manzanilla and offers to take Nicola riding. He pays for the drinks and leaves. Nicola is blushing. Perhaps it is the dope and the Manzanilla, but she confesses she'd love to date a matador because they have such strong bodies and tight bottoms.

Sept 30th

My birthday and the Hollywoods fly back tomorrow so Charlotte is throwing a party for us tonight.

It is in her private quarters, in her salon grande. We are honoured for it is only used once a year at Christmas. It's a huge room with an enormous carved stone fireplace and giant chandeliers with giant candles. Amber is in a glamorous black and white flamenco dress with her mother's much-too-big flamenco shoes with over-large black and white bows. Jackson is dressed at the beginning of the evening as an IRA terrorist in beret and dark glasses, then he changes and is Michael Jackson, then he is Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*. With Paco and George - he is our waiter.

Amber gives me a birthday present of a pair of socks and a knee-high blue painted concrete capital letter R for Robert which she has found half-buried in the garden. It was the remains of a Trasierra sign. Charlotte gives me a hollowed out tooled-leather book for hiding secret papers.

Before dinner, we have Champagne and quails eggs. Giaconda and Amber dance an enchanting flamenco\*. After dinner, the girls dance again, with Charlotte on castanets. Then, dressed in her flamenco dress and shoes, she tap dances. Giaconda does a soft-shoe shuffle to Fats Waller – in flamenco shoes. Gene tries a wild flamenco with poor Amber. And Jackson tries an uncoordinated dance display of – something.

The party finishes at about one o'clock so Giaconda, Nicola and I go to a bar in the village. At that time of night, the streets are packed with dozens of teenagers milling about or sitting outside bars in the warm night. As usual, every other girl is beautiful. I begin to feel very old so take make my excuses to the girls and go home; leaving them to seek out Giaconda's friends.

In the morning the family and staff gather to say goodbye to the Hollywoods. There is the usual exchange of addresses and invitations to stay. I think they had a happy and memorable time.

Afterwards, Nicola and I track down Maisie at Mass in the cathedral. We repair to a bar and enter into the *mañana* way of life, which consists of eating tapas, drinking and talking idly for the next four hours.

Oct 2nd

Dinner tonight with the new contingent; because of the numbers we are in the guests' salon grande, They are a mixture of those who have opted for the painting and those who are doing a writing course tutored by Angela Huth, mostly famed for her novel 'Land Girls'.

They are: (this is *not* the *dramatis personae* for an Agatha Christie novel).

Amy Ludlow– A New Yorker in her twenties – painting.

Nalia – An academic from London in her early thirties– painting.

Lord John Mexborough - a middle-aged landowner from Yorkshire – not painting.

Lady Catherine Mexborough – his wife in her early forties ( but going on twelve) and from the same county – painting.

Caroline Hobhouse – in her late thirties from London. Escaping from her husband – not painting.

Barbara Buxton – Nicola's mum from Norfolk – painting.

Rosie Tufnell – Nicola's aunt, and sister to Barbara – painting.

Six woman one man – and me.

After dinner, Nicola plays the piano for us – beautiful renditions of Beethoven and Chopin. Her mother must be proud.

Already Amy, a canny New Yorker, has the measure of all these upper-class Brits, and Nalia, a highly educated Bangladeshi and a little aloof, probably thinks they are all stupid.

Amy, the most easy-going of the group, is quite pretty but a bit chubby. She has her own business producing brochures for car manufacturers. Her distant family emigrated to the States from Ludlow, Shropshire in the 17th century – hence her surname.

Nalia is small and delicate and a little chippy. She speaks with a colonial upper-class drawl. She's meant to be painting but spends her time writing memos for the Department of Overseas Development. She is a researcher and lecturer at Sussex University.

John Mexborough is tall and thin, diffident, shy and a bit feminine – speaks in a clipped mumble. He collects old Ferraris and Porsches. Reads John Grisham novels all day long. His first wife killed herself.

Catherine Mexborough is John's second wife. She is petite and pretty with perfect teeth. She speaks very precisely without opening her mouth. She chews her food in the same manner. She's prim and bird-like – all her movements are in miniature. She hates the fact that her husband collects cars. She says John won't talk about his cars because he thinks it would be 'swanky'. Their daughter died of a heroin overdose.

Caroline Hobhouse is about fifty, well-dressed and a bit 'Bloomsbury'. She's friendly but unemotional, appears stressed; probably from her husband problem. Her mother-in-law is the formidable Penelope Hobhouse of

garden design fame. Suffers from migraines. Can be pretty when she smiles – which is rare, and not very pretty when she doesn't – which is often. Paints well and is keen. She told me she has a house on an Inner Hebridean isle and that her mother too has a house on an isle – Easedale the smallest of the Hebridean isles. Fifteen years ago I spent a bleak week in January on Easedale, in a croft bought by a friend from an ad in Exchange and Mart.

Barbara Buxton is married to a Norfolk landowner but originally of Yorkshire gentry. She and Nicola are so alike; both are scatty, forgetful and a little sad but empathetic. For instance today Nicola lost her house keys and then ran out of petrol in the Jeep. It could easily have been her mother.

Rosie Tufnell is tall and gangly and seems incapable of coherent thought. She wears pancake make-up. A couple of months ago her husband died – she insists on describing to me, in detail, his stroke and death. Her goddaughter was a close friend of mine, but many years ago. Both she and Barbara are very sweet.

Charlotte has gone away for a few days and I am left to shepherd this disparate flock. They make the eccentric Scott children look sane and straight.

However, Jackson has just appeared standing on a home-made pair of stilts but wearing roller-skates.

Rosie is so exasperatingly clueless - I had to show her how to put in a drawing-pin. Both Charlotte and Maisie agree Rosie and Barbara are the last of their generation and class who never had to shift for themselves. They have had a life of nannies ( who, I presume, put in the drawing- pins for her) and governesses and husbands who provided. Both Charlotte and Maisie - of the same class - had to shift for themselves. Their naivety can be endearing - they love it when I tease them. But Caroline Hobhouse thinks they are silly aliens. I think I prefer Rosie and Barbara's hopelessness to Caroline's cool superiority.

After dinner, when the others had gone to bed, Nicola and Amy play piano duets for me.

Oct 3rd

After dinner, Catherine Mexborough surprises us by singing a selection of songs from Oklahoma and Carousel in a pure sweet voice. When she finishes she and husband get the giggles as they talk to each other about porn films they have seen. Caroline sits there with a seraphic expression that indicates she thinks all this silliness is beneath her.

Oct 4th

This morning Caroline asks me for a lift into Cazalla. During the journey she sits in silence, gazing out of the passenger window and ignoring me. Maybe she is shy?

It is Rosie's first break since the sudden death of her husband. Nicola thinks her aunt is still in shock. She says that her aunt is usually 'well-organized'. Perhaps Nicola has a different understanding of the meaning of the term. Today Rosie paints quietly and conscientiously. She tells me she thinks I've been saintly. And I get, too, a compliment from Charlotte who tells me she thinks I am 'superb'. Sometimes, though, I wish I could have a break from what all teachers have to do: perform, provoke and be amusing.

Oct 7th

This evening Nicola, Maisie and I went the local bullfight. On the whole a gruesome display of barbaric nonsense. The Cazalla bullring is so small one is very close to all the blood, and the deaths. Five young bulls are dispatched - the last of which is lame and bemused. Its slaughter is upsetting. One of the matadors is a fifteen-year-old apprentice who, on his victory tour and being so young, is showered with sweets.

There is a six-piece silver band which strikes-up at strategic moments, like in a film score; there is a team of tough mules to haul away the cadavers; to tidy-up the blood and gore is a team of cleaners in white uniforms with red sashes and grey caps - one of them is about four years old; there is a crowd of about two hundred waving white handkerchiefs; there is a Presidente who hands out the severed bulls' ears. We are the only foreigners.

It is all very colourful and local and rural, but pretty nasty. The girls agree. However, there is a telling moment when a bull is about to receive the *coup*

*de grace* just below us -but our view is obscured - the two girls leap to their feet in a desperate attempt to see the death.

Oct 8th

Naila's boyfriend, Chris, is visiting for a few days. I thought he was South African but he's from Yorkshire and affects a SA accent. He's rather arrogant - slagging off Nicola for giving him the wrong directions - little knowing Nicola would be incapable of giving right ones. He's a squash player and tall and handsome, which, surprisingly, causes the cool Caroline to become over-attentive to his every remark and to adopt a simpering manner.

Amber issues me with an invitation to her ballet for this evening - it's her version of the Nutcracker Suite. The guest list is very exclusive. She is honouring me, Nicola and her mum, and Maisie and Amy. The others are snubbed. I have just seen Jackson rehearsing his part. He is on his stilts wearing a black sheet and a papier-mache wolf's head.

The programme notes say:

**AMBERINA'S BALLET**

7:00 p.m. IN THE QUEEN  
CHARLOTTE BALLET  
HOUSE. ANYONE WHO  
REQUESTS TO GO  
BACKSTAGE TO SEE  
WHAT HAPPENS WILL  
PAY 25ptas. THE  
REFRESHMENTS ARE  
45ptas EACH AND THE  
PROGRAMMES FOR  
TONIGHT ARE 10ptas.  
NO VIDEOCAMERAS  
ALLOWED ONLY  
CAMERAS. NO  
LAUGHING OR TALKING  
DURING PERFORMANCE  
EXCEPT EMERGENCY.

The ballet, written by Giaconda, lasts ten minutes. It mostly consists of Amber swooning, or sleeping, or dying. Jackson, of course, is the big, bad wolf on stilts. It is a delight to be with the children – they so adore each other.

Oct 10th

Everybody left today. A brief resumé of each of the art group would be:

Naila although a little serious was more relaxed. Catherine M better but was still clueless, Rosie was adorable. Amy was liked by all. Caroline was an atmosphere-hoover.

A different group is arriving for a creative writing course tutored by the novelist Angela Huth. A husband and wife team from the Sunday Times is coming to research an article for the Travel section. And someone from Associated Press is also coming to write an article. I've only two painters, both from London.

Oct 12th

Angela Huth comes to look around my studio. She glances at a painting and says (not knowing it was one of mine): 'How very sub-Pissarro'; which is pretty ignorant as it's nothing like a Pissarro – neither Camille nor any of his four painter children. I feel like asking if she suffers from similar crass remarks about her writing?

Charlotte is to take over the dinner. The guest journos are understandably too important to be left to me. So instead I cook for Nicola and Giaconda in Nicola's flat while they make beaded jewellery. Afterwards, now that the nights are getting autumnal, we sit around her flickering log fire. A very welcome moment of peace. They smoke a joint.

The next day Amber asks me to play 'Beggar My Neighbour' with her, at a hundred pesetas a hand (peanuts). But Amber never pays up when she loses. Charlotte admonishes her, saying her grandfather, who was a gambler, would have been horrified that a granddaughter of his could renege on her debts. Another grandfather, a great, great, great one, was the founder of The Times.

Nicola and I are at a bar, sitting outside drinking beer and eating skewers of swordfish and pork. We are noticed looking enviously at bowls of a mutton stew being consumed by the locals when, without asking, and for free, the patron brings us two bowls of the stew with bread and two beers.

I often frequent the Socialist bar – Cazalla being a Republican area. It is decorated with ancient posters of Republican heroes of the civil war. The men play cards and whittle olive sticks. The tapas is unidentifiable so I ask the patron what it is? He pulls a face and goes ‘oink, oink’ and points at his lips and nose. At the tabaqueros I ask for a packet of cigarettes but have forgotten to bring money – they just indicate that I can pay another time.

Oct 15th

Today I am free and cadge a lift off Maisie to go to Seville for the day. She is driving, via Seville and back, the seven hour round trip to Sotogrande to have her hair done. Are there no hairdressers in Seville? The two-lane blacktop to Seville is brand new – care of the EU. Charlottes four children were all born in Seville after a two and half hour hair-raising drive on the heavily pot-holed old road –more a track. She tells me the Cazalla taxi drivers are all adept at delivering babies, and most of the babies are named after villages on the way, that, or the name of their driver. There are few cars on the new road – from Seville it leads nowhere, except its final village, Cazalla. Instead, there are lots of donkey carts and herds of goats with their goatherds.

Seville is a rich/poor contradiction. It has one of the most exclusive hotels in Europe - the Alfonso XIII –yet, on the outskirts, one passes a corrugated-roofed shanty town with what I hope is just water staining the main street. I am told its unemployment is 40%.

At the sublime Alcazar, there is not so much a contradiction, as a synthesis of opposites. It is both Muslim and Catholic ( Islam and Christianity ) and is, all at the same moment, both an interior and an exterior: where the symmetrical and ornate gardens merge seamlessly with the symmetrical and ornate rooms.

I go for lunch in the old barrio Santa Cruz, where Murillo once lived. It has pretty narrow lanes and small plazas. I am outside a restaurant perusing its

menu when John Mexborough appears and asks me to join them for lunch. One often sees the American, and the English aristocrat seeking each other out. Perhaps they each think of themselves as outsiders, so have a mutual attraction? I feel I'm in a scene written by Henry James.

Oct 16th

My back has gone again – bad spasms but I keep going. A lot of wine at dinner helps. The journos, Valerie and Trevor, stay on after the others have gone to bed so I keep them supplied with wine (I have the keys to the cellar) till three in the morning.

Valerie is fun and friendly. She's in her forties, has very dark hair, is pretty, but with slightly heavy features. She loves her job and talks of nothing else. She was brought up in South Shields so I ask her to talk in her original Geordie accent.

Trevor is now a freelance journalist but was once the editor of the Weekend section of the Telegraph, and afterwards the Sunday colour supplement. About two years ago Conrad Black sent men in grey suits to sack him. He's the one writing the article on Trasierra, so my supplying him with copious amounts of wine will, I trust, be good PR. He is modest and friendly. Originally from Argentina.

Angela Huth looks like what she is: a middle-aged, middle-class writer. An accomplished name-dropper – one overhears her talking of Rachel, or Edna, or Martin, or Julian etc. She's polite but disengaged; uninterested in us painters.

The guests who are doing the creative writing course are:

Freddie Vasquez, a Gibraltar MP. He's chubby, cheerful, friendly and untrustworthy. I don't believe much of what he says.

Claudia Vasquez his new wife. She's pretty and doll-like, slim, blonde and a little steely. She's flirty with other men, but Freddie doesn't seem to care. She was the head of Twentieth-century paintings at Bonham's – and very Sloaney. Lives on Gibraltar with Freddie but yearns for London.

Simone Warner, a psychotherapist friend of Charlotte's. She is here as Charlotte's guest. Her husband, Sir Freddie Warner, who was Our Man in Japan, died recently and Charlotte has invited her for a bit of respite. She is about sixty, short, plump and pretty, always in widow's weeds. She spends all day wearing earplugs and writing letters in an elegant script. She doesn't connect with the rest of us; I think, in grief, she finds our presence intrusive.

Nina Drummond. She is in her late thirties speaks with a strong posh accent and is rather unkempt. I can see her in later years as an eccentric grande dame.

The guests doing the painting are:

Warwick Robinson. He is in his mid-thirties, tall and gangly with shorn hair. Originally from Sheffield and now a Futures dealer in the City. He has a touch of arrogance, is a bit vulgar and a philistine, but has a wicked sense of humour.

Jo Robinson, Warwick's wife. She is small, chubby with black cropped hair. She is the head of the BBC publicity department for science programmes. They don't fit in, and the others don't know how to take them. Very much beginners at painting, but being intelligent and conscientious quickly improve.

Eva Ahnell. Is Swedish now living in London. She is about sixty, but is so beautiful she looks a lot younger ( I said this to her - she was very pleased and flattered, and said I can't be English as no Englishman would say such a thing). She is a non- stop optimist and enthuser. She does everything at speed - including talking. Paints like a whirling dervish, producing works from an over-heated imagination.

After dinner in the salon grande there is a spontaneous, extempore entertainment, to which, in the end, everyone joins and does a 'turn'. I think initially it is a set-up job to give Trevor something to write about in his Trasierra article.

Giaconda and Amber do their flamenco and then Giaconda plays her Spanish guitar; Charlotte sings; Nicola plays the adagio from Beethoven's

Pathetique sonata; Angela plays bar-room tunes; Simone sings, movingly, some negro spirituals; Valerie recites from memory the whole of 'There's a one-eyed idol to the north of Katmandu/ There's a broken-hearted woman tends the grave of Mad Carew'; Trevor makes a drunken hash of an attempt at flamenco – which infuriates Amber; Eva importunes handsome Chris to do a 'turn', but he demures. Eva exclaims: ' "But you could do a strip-tease, dahlink!"

The next day Eva is nosing through the portfolio of photos of my work that I'd brought with me. She suddenly exclaims: "That's the Dineleys! ( a big painting of mine of a family called Dineley) I was having dinner with them only the other night, dahlink!"

Every afternoon after a lunch not short of wine everyone goes for a siesta, leaving me to paint. Naila has just bought one of my paintings. I get free food and drink; I get paid; I get to paint; I meet interesting people; I get to sell the paintings and all in gorgeous weather in beautiful surroundings.

Oct 17th

Today is a big departure day, everybody is going, except for Warwick and Jo. And now Chris, who went, but limps back in his crooked car -which is now being repaired in a local garage.

Maisie has had a tough life and has had to get by on her wits and determination, but she expects everyone else to be as resilient, so she can be tough on those she perceives as weak. Yet she's a good practising Catholic and does 'good works' such as taking the sick and crippled to Lourdes. Tonight she goes on strike again – refuses to cook just for us four, so Warwick, Jo, Chris and I go to a tapas bar.

Talking of cripples, my back has gone yet again. It's breathtakingly painful. Nicola kindly helps me to the Health Centre where the doctor is very kind and concerned. He gives me strong painkillers and a ten-day course of anti-inflammatory injections. He recommends I lie-down for a week. If only...

All the guests have now gone; which is lucky because there is no water. The artesian well is broken – so no showers and no loo flushing. Charlotte has

to solve the problem before the next set of guests arrive in five days. And her ex-husband is coming to stay to discuss finances.

So Nicola and I have five days off and are deserting the sinking ship – with no water – and are off to Seville for a long weekend. Nicola's friend from England, Belle, is to join us in a few days. We take the old Lada Jeep, which makes my old Skoda feel like a Porsche.

Nicola is an interesting paradox of contradictions. She appears diffident and undemonstrative and scatty. She is unselfconscious which gives her a degree of rather endearing self-confidence. She speaks good Spanish so is very happy to do all the enquiring about hotel rooms – and to happily nose around the various hotels we try.

All the cheap hotels are clean and whitewashed and shaded from the relentless heat. They all have flower-bedecked inner courtyard patios above which, on all four sides, are serried balconies rising to an open blue sky.

It is nearly ten o'clock before we settle on a perfect and simple room in a small hotel in an alleyway off an alleyway in the Barrio Santa Cruz. The patrona is a sixty-odd-year-old picture of misery, put on this earth to be a hotelier. She refuses to supply us with a front door key. She says we have to knock-up, at any time of the night, her concierge, a skinny, greasy-haired, dodgy-looking cove in a filthy Panama hat who sleeps on a palette in a little room by the front door.

Later Nicola and I stroll in the warm night through the narrow streets of the barrio. All is a delight except for an ugly department store called the Corte Inglese. We emerge into the Plaza San Salvador with its ghostly floodlit church. Despite there being hundreds of young Sevillanos standing in groups chatting and drinking, there is only a murmur, a hush. The soft limestone of the buildings is acting as an aural blotting-paper. It reminds me of the Campo in Siena where, despite the hundreds of tourists, there is almost a silence. As usual, every other girl is beautiful; but not - as Nicola points out, and later confirmed by Belle – the boys.

At about one in the morning, we find the bar I had been told about by Terry Marsh's daughter. It's in an old converted coal merchant's store. It has one

big room with a huge fireplace topped with an elaborate carved wooden mantle that stretches up to the high ceiling. It has a glass outhouse and a garden. We find a little room off the main one in which there is a small group of Sevillanos. An old man is playing his guitar. The women begin clapping a flamenco rhythm. As the wine flows, one by one the women rise and dance a flamenco\*, slowly building to a climax. This continues until five in the morning. We reluctantly leave.

At the hotel, there seems little point in sleeping - it is the noisiest room in Seville. Outside our window in the narrow alleyway people walk and talk - they might as well be in the room. A man stands outside whistling, of all things, the tune from *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*. Somebody rolls beer barrels over the cobbles. A terrier yaps and stops, and yaps again - and again. A helicopter, of all things, flies over low - twice. I give in and go for a coffee leaving Nicola who is trying to sleep. The barista, in the only cafe that is open this Saturday morning, is in a filthy mood. Most of Seville seems to be shut - I think the city has a collective hangover.

We, of course, have to find another hotel, especially as Belle is to join us this evening. Nicola goes off on a search for a new room. I stay behind.

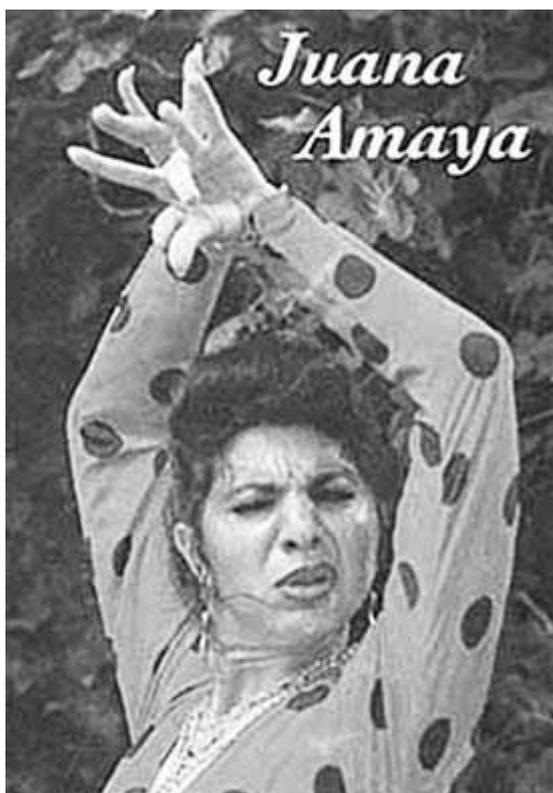
In the next-door room to ours, I hear clapping and stamping of feet. I go into the patio and see, through an open door, a lovely Spanish girl practising flamenco in front of a tall mirror. Her severe teacher, who we later learn, is not much older than her pupil, claps out a rhythm, making her repeat, over and over, every dance step.

Nicola returns to say she has found a perfect room nearby. On our way to the new hotel, we happen into a sort of antiques' shop where a grey-haired professorial-looking man is at a desk copying out, in a perfect hand, an ancient Arab manuscript. He is editing a 9th-century book on geography. He is called Paul and is an American/Norwegian, born in the Middle East and who studied at the School of African and Oriental Studies ( SOAS ) in London, and used to live in Rome. He has a certain shyness so I am reluctant to probe more into his history. We tell him about our noisy hotel and the flamenco lesson.

On the wall is a large dramatic poster of a female flamenco dancer. I ask Paul who she is. He says she is called Juana Amaya and is the greatest

flamenco dancer in Spain. And by the way, she lives at your noisy hotel. I ask if she is the teacher? “Yes, that would be her – and the greasy-haired concierge is her uncle who has just been released from jail after serving a long sentence for the murder of his wife. And the miserable patrona is her mother. Juana’s grandmother also lives at the hotel and she too was a great dancer and was once one of the most sort-after and beautiful women in Spain.”

Afterwards, Nicola and I return to the hotel and Juana gives us signed photos of herself, She is only in her mid-twenties but looks worn-out; probably from a childhood and adolescence of relentless practice in order to find perfection.



1.

In the evening we go to the airport to pick-up Belle. Also at the airport is Paco, the Trasierra factotum, who is collecting two new guests, Melinda and Rose from Rickmansworth. It turns out the London agency has booked them two days too early, so they are to say in Seville and we will drive them back to Trasierra in two days time. We arrange to have a drink with them the next day at their hotel.

Nicola and Belle are best friends. They were at boarding school and Edinburgh University together and shared a flat there. They did the same degree course in sociology. Being so close they share similar characteristics and habits: both mutter, 'cool', when they wish to approve of something; both still have a schoolgirl manner; both never wear make-up and both dress carelessly; both have no vanity – they have long hair never knowingly brushed; both have good figures -though Nicola is the prettier of the two and Belle the taller, and both seem to be in thrall to their successful fathers. Nicola's is in business and Belle's is the chairman of Jardine Matheson.

Belle is a lowly accounts director at Saatchi and Saatchi. The poor girl has Crohn's disease, which I know a little about as I had a girlfriend with it.

Our hotel is cheap and, most importantly, quiet. The room is on the top floor – away from street noises – with a view over the roofs to the floodlit dome of a church. In the clean bare white-washed room are two single beds and a double. It's like a convent school dormitory.

In the evening we go to the Plaza San Salvador, with its hundreds of Sevillanos youths. Belle has smuggled in some grass hidden in her knickers – somehow it tastes better. There are four gitanos\* on the church steps playing African drums. A young teenage gitano girl in a white dress, like a first communion gown, dances to the drumming in a frenzy, like a voodoo dancer. She then 'sings' a speech, asking for money. The plaza is not floodlit, instead, in the dark, are dozens of braziers cooking hot chestnuts. The braziers fill the plaza with an orange light and smoke drifts across like dry-ice. We leave about three in the morning and stroll back to our hotel through the warm night - not a little stoned and mellow.

It is now Sunday and we fully intend to explore Seville - visit the flea market and the vast Cathedral. But instead, we end-up, in true *mañana* fashion, having a long lunch in a restaurant full of families with the same idea. It is down a leafy cul de sac and has a rude, incompetent waiter. So bad he is entertaining.

In the evening we go to Melinda and Rose's hotel: the Alfonso XIII, the smartest hotel in Seville – so smart King Alfonso XIII himself opened it in 1929. Melinda and Rosie are already in the bar drinking Champagne. We order a humble bottle of beer and two teas.

Melinda is thirty-eight and nervy and fussy. She obsesses the whole time about which boarding school to send her twin boys. She speaks with an affected posh accent and holds her knife like a pen.

Rose is the same age; more enigmatic, more reserved than Melinda. She's dark with short black hair, good-looking with big round eyes. She seems to be the neurotic Melinda's minder or nurse.

The bar bill comes and they pay for their champagne, leaving me to find the money for what we discover are our very expensive half a beer and two teas.

The next day we pick them up in the Lada. The poor car doesn't like being so laden and limps back to Trasierra. With Melinda having a nervous breakdown in the back.

'Trasierra' can be anagrammed as 'Raise a Stir' and 'Art is Rare'. Often, when I think of Charlotte, I think of it as Stressierra. The following is a sample of Charlotte's troubles:

Charlotte's divorced father has Alzheimer's and lives alone in London. She had him to live at Trasierra but he kept packing his bags and disappearing saying he had important business in the City – he thought he was still in London. He was eventually found and returned, but he kept losing his possessions and insisting he'd been robbed. So now he is back in England with a nurse to look after him. Last weekend the nurse was called away on an emergency and when she returned he'd disappeared. The police found him. He had been arrested after he got into a fight with a taxi driver who he thought had overcharged. It was for £150 – the taxi had gone from London to Cambridge. He had got it into his head he had to enrol at his old college. He was once a senior British diplomat in Madrid.

Charlotte's mother, Lady Trafford, is staying here at the moment. She has a hole in her leg the size of a fist. She was diagnosed with cancer and the tumour was removed, only for it to be found that it was benign after all.

George, Charlotte's youngest, a few years ago was attacked on his bicycle by a rabid dog and severely mauled.

Giaconda was in a serious car crash and was in hospital for months – where she learned the guitar.

Jackson appears to have ADHD and can't go to a normal school.

Charlotte lives at Stressierra.

A bunch of New Yorkers has arrived: another Amy, and her friend Sheila, and Doris, who is on her own.

Amy is twenty-six and chubby with a round pretty face. She has long dyed-blond hair and wears white make-up and bright red lipstick. She has a sharp New York Jewish wit. She is a finance director for Associated Press\*. Shiela is from Boston but lives and works in New York as a marketing director for Calvin Klein. She's small and sassy, wears no make-up, has short reddish hair and is quite butch. She speaks with a Boston ( Boyston ) accent ( ak-sent ). Says 'inimal' for 'animal' and 'oyel' for 'oil'.

Both girls go once a week for psychoanalysis. Shiela's a retired alcoholic. They are a double act and make me laugh all day long.

Amy and Sheila are very keen on painting and beaver away in the studio producing bizarre works with no connection to Spain or Trasierra. Sheila decides to paint, in 'oyels', a coat of arms with a Celtic cross and a crown. Amy decorates a tray with a rebus which went: Id – 'a heart-shape' then ' a picture of a fat woman called Lucy'-then '&' – then 'a picture of a psychiatrists couch'. It translates as; "I'd love Lucian Freud". The 'id' was particularly clever. The tray was also decorated with silver rats running around the edges.

Doris is a thirty-six-year-old New Yorker, very slightly overweight and pretty, but not as pretty as she thinks she is. She's energetic, up-front and full of bullshit. She has a serious cocaine habit. Amy and Sheila can't stand her.

At dinner, Doris tells Melinda that she is a boring English housewife – then retires to her room for another line of coke. Melinda collapses in tears, with her head on the table, weeping and screaming. a heavy period.

Dinner the following night was held in the guests salon with a log fire and candlelight. Paco has a night off, so Nicola and Belle are our waitresses. Doris is flying, and off-the-wall, and out of it. I had to sit next to her as nobody else would. The gathering is just me and seven women.

At dinner, Doris's hand wanders down my thigh to my crotch, which she grabs. She tries to kiss me. I gently push her away. Doris now focuses on Belle. While Belle is serving her, Doris caresses her breasts. Next, she focuses on Nicola. Nicola is serving the person next to Doris and, when Nicola leans over to serve, Doris bites her bum.

Doris says to me in a loud stage whisper: "I wanna go to my room and fuck all night". "Who with?". "You, of course, darling". Melinda has another breakdown; Rose is cool and aloof; Amy and Shiela are pissed off; Nicola and Belle are giggling. Doris, after I refuse to walk her back to her room, leaves in a huff.

Later Melinda goes to bed and locks her door in case Doris tries to murder her.

Afterwards, Nicola plays the piano while we all sit by the fire. Amy sings to us - *a capella* in a lovely sweet voice - bits of blues and Ella Fitzgerald and Joni Mitchell's "I could drink a case of you/ And still be on my feet".

A few days later Melinda and Rose leave for the airport. Doris has the temerity to ask for a ride and to be dropped off in Seville. Rose reluctantly agrees. Melinda has her nineteenth nervous breakdown. After they leave, Sheila says in her Boston accent: "It's foyney how a car's dior can open unexpectoidly at oighty moyles an oiyer". A peaceful day without Doris. In the evening the four girls and I go to a tapas bar and have uninterrupted fun.

But there was another incident after the Doris dinner debacle. The girls and I leave at half-past two in the morning to drive the short drive to Cazalla. Nicola and I usually take it in turns each night to do the driving; tonight it's my turn. At a roundabout on the edge of the village, we are stopped by the Guarda Civil who are doing random checks because of rumours of terrorist (ETA) activity in the area (in the depths of Andalucia?). I am breathalyzed and am over the limit (poor Nicola is having to do all the translating). The

police's breathalyzer is a full-sized computer in the boot of their police car. They escort us back to my flat where they demand my passport and driving licence. I give them my passport but tell them (falsely) that I don't have my driving licence. They say there is a huge fine for non-production of a driving licence. So, with a bit of bad acting – which gives Belle nervous giggles – I remember that, after all, I do have it. I'm given papers to appear in court sometime soon.

Doris is now back from Seville. She will be leaving tomorrow. There is just me and the three girls at dinner. Doris bangs on about how important she is; how well-connected; how she leads the high-life. Sheila: "Yeh – we can tell". She tells about giving blow jobs in a ski-lift and fucking 'darky' waiters in Belize. She must have been using-up her last supply of coke before going through customs at the airport.

She is leaving early so asks me if I can find her an alarm clock. She retires to bed. I tap on Doris's window to give her the alarm clock. She opens the window and is standing there stark naked. She flings herself around my neck and tries to snog me across the sill. I disentangle myself and leave.

The next day we all see them off with the usual fond farewells, but we are all a little cool when it comes to Doris.

Oct 31st

Tomorrow is my last day. I spend this morning in Cazalla, in court.

The courthouse is a splendid baroque building. The outside is pock-marked with holes caused by shells and bullets from the civil war.

Charlotte is not happy with me as I've given Trasierra a bad name (Trasierra is important to the village, and the villagers have a reverence for its boss.) so she has sent her secretary to represent her. The first thing the secretary does is to arrange for a translator. None can be found. A court secretary speaks good English but is not allowed to be a translator - she suggests a Spanish teacher of German at the local school, who speaks English. He agrees to come but it turns out his English is very poor and certainly not up to legalese.

I am ushered into a room in which are two large flags of Andalusia and Spain, and an enormous desk and a throne-like chair. Lost in the 'throne' is, what I at first think is a boy, but who is the young judge.

He goes through all the legal procedures, which the poor translator is incapable of properly translating. It transpires that all documents will be transferred to Seville where I will be tried in my absence. These documents will also go to the embassy in Madrid. I'll be fined and banned from driving in Spain, and maybe banned in England too.

Afterwards, the English-speaking court secretary confides to me that the usual procedure is to dump all the documents in the bin and forget about it. For them, it is all too much like hard work. I hope she's right.\*

It's Halloween and my last night so Charlotte is throwing a party this evening in the salon grande in her private quarters.

Joining us and the Scotts are Amber's best friend, Cynthia and Cynthia's parents, Roberto and his wife, Carmen, who is Franco's granddaughter. Everybody dresses up in Halloween costumes: Charlotte in a beautiful black Edwardian gown and hat; Giaconda in black taffeta and red tuile; Amber is a spider in a black leotard on which is painted a white skeleton; George is Frankenstein's monster; Jackson is Dracula; Charlotte's mum in widow's weeds; Nicola is a gipsy fortune-teller, with her own homemade marionettes; I am a wizard. The salon grande has big loud-speakers playing screams, and thunder, and spooky organ music. Outside in the kitchen garden, which Jackson has turned into a Halloween graveyard, is a vast dangerous-looking bonfire. There is Champagne and Bloody Marys and fireworks and a buffet supper.

I feel a little out of it as everyone is speaking in Spanish.

## CODA

Everyone's gone. It's the end of the season. Trasierra is down to a skeleton staff kept on to serve only one guest and his wife and two of their children.

The guest has taken over, at enormous expense, the whole of Trasierra for one week. He wants privacy. I learn that this is a very private holiday in a bid to save his marriage. Charlotte tells everyone to be scarce - and almost to face the wall when the man is passing, like 19th-century servants. The wife and children mill about happily; mostly around the pool. The man is a loner, he ignores everybody, even, as far as I can tell, his wife. I bump into him only once, when he is alone in the breakfast room - almost hiding. I am fetching a beer for myself from the fridge and cheerily greet him with a 'Good morning!' All I get is a glance in my direction and a grunt.

The man's name is Bryan Ferry. An unhappy man.\*

## POSTSCRIPT

The following spring I return for another tour of duty, but only for a month. Unfortunately I didn't keep a diary or write letters home. However, I can recall well enough how, in the end, it all went wrong.

On a weekend towards the end of my teaching stint, there are no guests. Charlotte takes advantage of the lull and goes away for a long weekend. She has a friend from England helping her run Trasierra - a sort of manager. He is in his twenties and is called Simon - he is of the Astor family. He has come from England on his big motorbike. He seems at a bit of a loose end. Charlotte leaves Simon in charge. However, he goes AWOL to an important motorbike rally in Cadiz.

On the Sunday, Paco the factotum comes to me with a problem: an elderly couple has arrived unexpectedly - they are a day early. Paco wants to know what he should do, as the staff have the weekend off. I am the only one there with any sort of authority to make a decision. There is nowhere else for the elderly couple to go, as there are no hotels in Cazalla, so I make it known to Paco that the couple will have to stay and to somehow get their suite prepared. Paco goes into Cazalla and fetches the chambermaids, who are annoyed and reluctant. The couple are effusively grateful.

In the evening the Astor boy returns and I tell him what has happened. He is disconcerted because he knows he's been caught absent and will incur Charlotte's ire. On Monday Charlotte returns and is immediately confronted by Paco and the chambermaids who are complaining about me making them work on a Sunday. Charlotte is understandably concerned, as the staff are so important to her for the smooth running of Trasierra. She is furious with me, and especially with Simon.

The next evening there is a knock on my flat door and there is Simon, in a state. He tells me Charlotte has threatened him with dismissal. I try to calm him and suggest things will be fine once Charlotte has recovered from her anger. I try to explain to him the many problems that Charlotte has to cope with and how these would cause most people to be a bit neurotic... my big mistake. Simon immediately goes to Charlotte and tells her that I think she's a neurotic. I'm summoned to her presence and in icy tones told only to come to Trasierra to teach and never to attend the evening dinners. I have to eat out as there is no kitchen in my flat. Suddenly I am persona non grata, and during those last few weeks I never see Charlotte and the children again. Then I quietly leave for England, never to hear from Trasierra again.

## THE END

p4\* Giaconda does eventually get into art school.

p5\* Cranborne Chase School is a girls' boarding school. I taught etching to the sixth-form girls. Charlotte's sister, Dame Harriet Walter, was a pupil there.

p10\* The town on the coast that was 'built' for the film.

P24\* Strictly speaking flamenco in Andalucia is called the Sevillana.

p32\* Amy Selwyn is now a well-known writer and lives in Portland, Maine having forsaken New York.

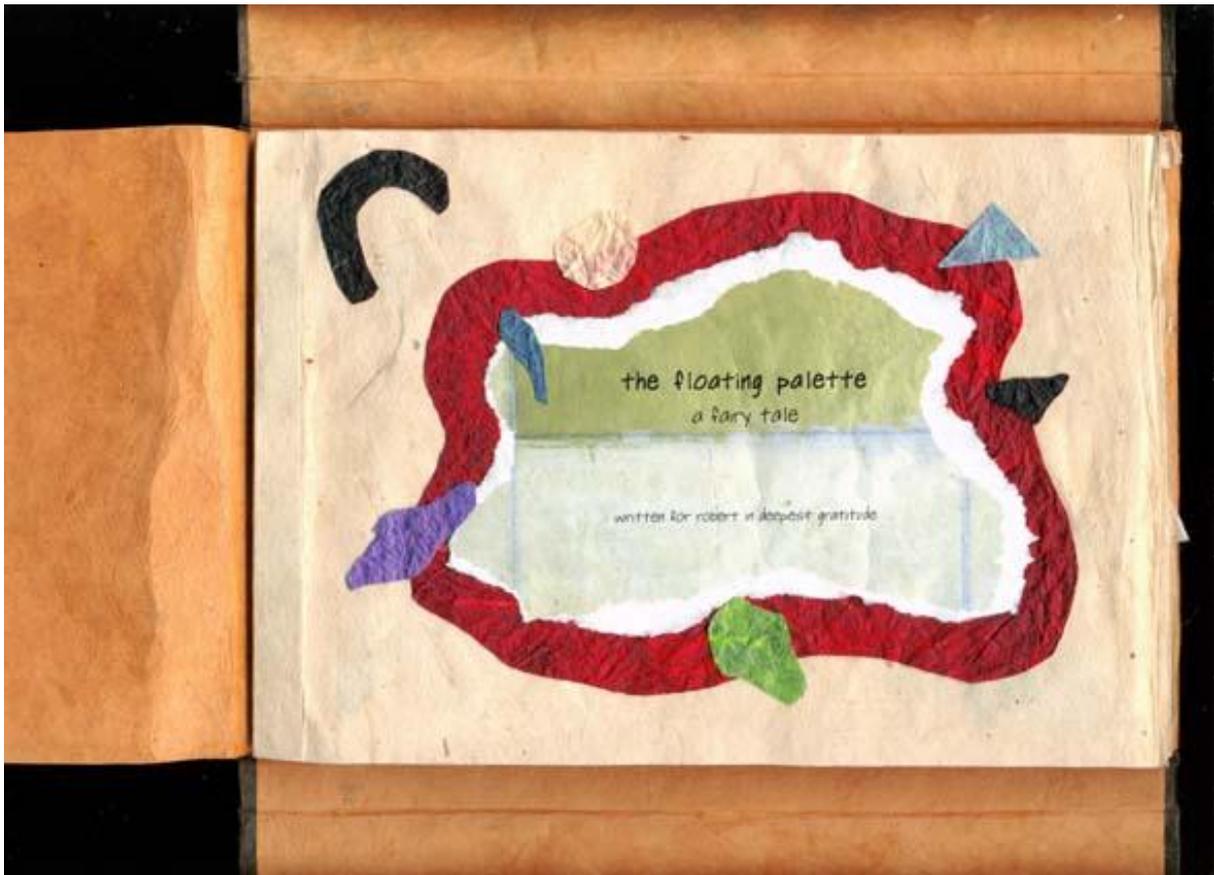
P36\* The court secretary's prediction was correct; they binned my papers, and no further steps were taken.

P37\* Brian and Lucy Ferry separated and were divorced in 2003.

## AFTERMATH

A month or so after I get back I receive from New York an elaborate package. Inside is a beautifully presented short story written for me by the wonderfully eccentric Amy (she of Amy and Sheila). It is in a special case each page decorated by Amy with a colourful collage, every paragraph typed onto papers of variegated colours and then torn and pasted in. Every page is of hand-made paper.

I have written it out in an approximation of the typeface she uses in the original and as close as possible to the layout of each page.



## the floating palette

a fairy tale

written for robert in deepest gratitude

In a time not too long ago, there was a young girl who wanted to become an artist. It was neither the possibility of fame nor the promise of fortune that fueled this desire. The girl sought something simpler. And also something more complex. She wanted to bring to life the dances she saw in her mind. She wanted to make

colors float in the palm of her hand. Crimson, golds, blues of aquamarine and sapphire.

Each day, the young girl would create pictures filled with all the exuberances her mind could fathom. She gave the paintings to her father, whom she loved very much and who had cared for her since her mother's death many years before. When she painted the young girl sang. And she was happy.

But when the townsfolk in her little village saw what the girl was doing, they were bewildered. Some were even angry. "This is not art," they said. "These are not pretty pictures," they said. "These are not likenesses of anything or anyone from our village," they said. "And," they said, "you have not used the right colors - a pear cannot be blue."

The townsfolk laughed at the young girl's art and at her dream of becoming an artist.

Saddened by his daughter's disappointment, the girl's father suggested that she go and seek the advice of a famous master painter who lived in a nearby village. "Go to him," he said. "Let him teach you. Let him try to show you how to produce works of beauty and promise, works that the townsfolk will appreciate. Then, perhaps, you will be an artist. Of course, he may well tell you that you are not an artist. And that is something you will need to learn to accept," said the girl's father.

And so the young girl went off on her own to study and live with the old master painter of a nearby village.

For many months, the master instructed the girl to draw objects from his studio and scenes from the local village. Bowls of fruit, tablecloths of patterned silk, the view from the tower, the hillside in spring. With each new assignment, the girl would try to tame her floating palette. She tried to create realistic images of her master's choosing.

At night, alone in her little room in the master painter's house, the girl cried before she slept. Then, in her dreams, she would once again see the lively dances of color, and she'd awake each day wanting to paint what only she had seen during the silver night.

The girl grew afraid of her dreams. She grew afraid of the silver night. She grew afraid of her own imagination. And she grew afraid of painting.

Finally, after one year had passed, the master painter entered the studio. He called the young girl to his side and said the time had come for him to look at her work. The young girl showed the master painter every painting, every sketch - the fruits, the patterns, the scenes and the landscapes the master had demanded. She awaited his reaction.

The master painter's face betrayed a deep disappointment.

"My young girl," said the old master, "you have worked hard, that I can see. You have done everything I have asked you to do. But what you have done I cannot praise. You do not paint what is truly before you. You do not create likenesses." The master painter was quiet for a moment. "My young girl, you are not an artist," said the master, and then he left the studio.

The young girl returned to her village that very same day. She resolved to keep the colors away and to never think about the dances she saw in her mind. Instead, she cared for her old and sick father. She tended her garden. Only on the rarest occasions would she now sing. When she did her tunes were low and mournful.

As the days, then weeks, then months and finally years passed, the young girl - no longer young - grew accustomed to darkness and quiet. The townsfolk praised her steady and sensible ways. And time passed.

After a time the girl's father grew very frail. As he lay dying the old man beckoned his daughter to his bedside. "My child," he whispered, "I am leaving you. My life is over and now I can see things with a clarity never presented to my eyes in all these many years. I know that I have lived a rather ordinary life, I have never chosen the difficult path when presented with a choice. And now it is too late. Daughter of mine, I know that you are not happy either, and that makes my parting even more painful. I know you have given up much. You have abandoned your dreams - I have let you do that. And now that I no longer have the time to have dreams, I realize their value. Child, what you have forsaken is precious beyond the telling"

The woman took her father's frail hand. "I promise," she said. And the old man passed into the night, though not gently.

The woman left without looking back, setting sail for new horizons in a small but sturdy boat built for one.

After a great deal of time, the woman arrived at a very remote and beautiful village, where she was told of a place where lost dreams could be found. She was told to go to a great white house high upon a hill, a house with a red tile roof and lots of flowers in splendid profusion. The woman was frightened by the prospect of the adventure ahead. But she pushed herself onward, in part because of her promise to her father and, in large measure, because of her loneliness. For the woman's travels had helped her realize that she missed her dreams and her dances terribly, and she feared a life without passion or extremes.

So the woman went to the great white house with the pretty red roof. She was asked no questions, just simply shown to a beautiful room and welcomed by the other guests she met. "I have come to paint," she said, "but I am not an artist."

"Ah, then you must meet our painter. He will help you," said one of the guests. "Is he a master painter?" the woman asked. The guest thought for a moment. "No, he is not. But you will come to find that, yes, he is, in fact, a master painter." This riddle confused the woman. "I do not understand," she began. "You will understand in time," was the response she received.

The woman was shown to the studio. After a time, the painter arrived. He was not at all like the old master painter with whom she had once studied. This painter was very simple. He did not wear velvet robes or a large gold timepiece. He did not seem convinced of his own importance. He merely welcomed the woman and told her he hoped she would be very happy in his studio.

Then the painter removed every object from the studio - the bowls, the jars, the flowers, the books. He pulled the drapes so the woman could not see the landscape in the distance. He even removed the paints themselves. "And now," said the painter, "it is time for you to paint. Please send for me if you need me."

The woman was confused. "But, what shall I paint? There is nothing in this studio for me to copy. There is not even any paper or canvas. I have no paints. How can I paint?"

The painter smiled. "My dear woman," he said, "everything you need is right here within this room. And even if you were to leave this room for another, you would carry within you everything you require. You do not need bowls of fruit or boats upon a lake. You must simply paint what you see in your mind's eye.

With that, the painter left, and the woman stood alone in the painting studio for the first time in many, many years. She was scared. She was afraid of the laughter of others and afraid that the painter would tell her she was not an artist. But most of all, the

woman was afraid that she would be unable to find a way to express what was most beautiful to her, though perhaps not to others.

It took her many days before she could even begin. But finally, the woman started to remember the dances she once held in her mind. Colors of memory began to emerge, no less brilliant for their dormancy. Though the canvas was only in her mind, it was suddenly - and almost magically - filled with passion. The colors floated in the palm of the woman's hand. Her images were the prodigies of her own wild imagination. And as she had done so long ago, the woman sang. The singing was a joyful and valedictory chorus of her youth.

"This painter is a master painter," the woman said. "Now I see. He has given me the most special gift - the gift of freedom. I have never before been given such a gift".

The woman left the studio, running to find the painter. She wanted to thank him, to share her joy. But the painter had departed from the small village, leaving no word as to his next destination.

The woman was saddened to think she would not be able to properly thank the person who had given her such a gift. But she also knew that her thanks would be contained within every brilliant and joyous canvas, every wild dance, every fusion of memory and imagination.

And the woman was very happy.

The end

Designed & written by a Selwyn nyc 1995

