

'BEYOND AND BETWEEN THE SIERRAS'

PROLOGUE

It may sound callous or odd but the death of my adored mother solved a problem. I'd been offered a much-needed job in Spain to teach art in a private villa in Andalucia, but I can't accept it because my mother is very ill and might die at any moment. 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.

Nevertheless, I agree to an interview. It's in London – in 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 and the studio where I would work. The terms are very attractive and the house sounds exotic and unusual. She is desperate to fill the post as her resident teacher has abruptly resigned. The Duke and Duchess of York - Fergie and Andrew – had been staying at Trasierra and admired the tutor's paintings. They offered him an exhibition in St. James's Palace; he couldn't refuse, so resigned.

She offers me the job, but then says I am to start almost immediately – which poses a problem 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 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.

TRASIERRA

Trasierra is a large white-washed villa in the Sierra Morena about two hours north of Seville. It's more a village than a villa. It's a walled hacienda within which is the main house, a church, a tower, an orchard with a kitchen garden; there are alleyways and loggias, vine-covered terraces and flower beds, a swimming pool and a tennis court, and outbuildings once used for the production of olive oil. Charlotte, who was an interior designer, has converted them into luxury guest rooms. There are dozens of olive amphorae as tall as a man. There are doves and an overweight dog and a pair of randy turkeys constantly worrying the chickens. The high wall is interrupted by a tall, arched entrance overlooked by a tall eucalyptus tree. 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's a hotel for people who don't like hotels.

Trasierra means either 'Between the Hills' or 'Beyond the Hills' and 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 which is grandly denominated a cathedral. It has, over the centuries, accreted houses on a gentle hill. It's 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 no tourism. The food shops are poorly stocked but, inexplicably, there are about a half dozen 'white goods' shops. There are many working-class bars – and one 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 managing a complex hotel and four children. She is fun, but sometimes I feel she's out of her depth. She is good-looking. Her sister is the actress Harriet Walter.

GIOCONDA – The eldest child:

Sixteen years old, bright, poised and pretty; because of her age has a bit of puppy fat and metal teeth-braces. She wants to go to Seville art school but has just been rejected. Charlotte, who is well connected, pulls strings and gets her accepted. 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 these vicissitudes.

JACKSON – Second child:

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

AMBER – Third child:

Twelve years old, bright with beautiful strawberry blonde hair and a snub-nose. She wants to be a bank robber when she grows up.

GEORGE- Fourth child:

Ten years old. The quiet one. A little in the shade of his siblings. Boards at the International School at Sotogrande

NICOLA – The English governess to Jackson and helpmeet to Charlotte:

Twenty-four years old, but appears younger. Graduate in anthropology from Edinburgh University and an old girl of Wycombe Abbey. She tutors Jackson in the mornings and helps Charlotte in the office in the afternoons. Slim and pretty, lovely eyebrows but with a straight and scrubbed appearance. Speaks very fast in a little girl voice – swallows her words. I often have to ask her to repeat what she's said. She says it drives her father mad who has suggested she use sign language.

She comes from an old Norfolk family where they have what Nancy Mitford called the perfect address: the name of their house and their village is their surname.

STEPHEN – The unofficial manager.

A friend of Charlotte's. About thirty years old, tall, slim, good-looking but going bald, has a plummy voice. A failed art dealer. Apparently, 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 is easily upset. A Cordon Bleu cook who makes a turgid chocolate mousse.

The following is an account based on my diary written at the time.

Sept 1st 1995

DAY ONE

I'm met at Seville airport by Giaconda, Maisie, and Paco, the Trasierra factotum. The weather is glorious on the drive north on a ridiculously smooth blacktop leading to nowhere. Eventually, Trasierra appears as a magical white-washed 'village' isolated in the scrubby hills except for hundreds of ancient olive trees

I'm shown my car – an old dusty 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. You approach through a courtyard and ascend a wrought-iron staircase. The flat is in the roof with a large sitting room with a banquette, two elegant armchairs and a bamboo writing table with matching chairs; it has a big window with a view over the rooftops to the sierra; a bathroom but no kitchen; a bedroom with a large white bed. Clean and white-washed, it has a roof terrace overlooking the cathedral emblazoned with graffiti on its ancient walls announcing 'GUNS'n'ROSES' and 'NIRVANA'. Nicola is underneath in the ground floor flat.

Sept 2nd

I spend the morning cleaning the dirty and ill-equipped studio and the afternoon driving, with Nicola - who speaks Spanish - to Seville to buy art supplies. I get back at 9.30 pm and have to go straight to the salon to host the dinner for my two new pupils. Stephen does the butting like an aspiring actor. Charlotte has sprung on me something she failed to mention at the interview: that a part of my job is hosting at all the guests' meals.

The new pupils are Jane from Appleshaw in Hampshire. She's in her late sixties, friendly and very much a Hampshire 'lady of the manor'. A beginner as a painter she needs constant attention and encouragement as she is nervous. The other pupil is Philippa. She's the same age as Jane and her friend and neighbour. She's still rather beautiful with a lovely smile. She's 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 is 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 say they'd rather have a gin and tonic. Two gin and tonics, with ice and lemon, are brought to them. The companion manages to cut her bonds with a nail file and, as the burglars make to depart on motorbikes with their swag, the freed companion leaps onto the 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 leisurely lunch; two hours sitting in the shade on a veranda. Good food and wine. Jane has had a little too much wine and becomes loquacious, complaining about 'girls nowadays' whose skirts are too short thus indicating that they are clearly 'asking for it'. New guests from the States arrive tomorrow – from Hollywood.

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

Stephen drives in Charlotte's car the four hours to Sotogrande to pick up George from the International School where he boards. On the way back the car breaks down and has to be towed to a garage. The taxi back costs Charlotte the equivalent of £130. The insurance company is refusing to pay up.

George is refusing to back to school, where he is homesick. He threatens to run away if he is returned. Charlotte gives in, and now George spends his days tearing about the olive groves on a

motorbike – he’s ten years old.

In the evening two of her horses become seriously ill. The vet is still there when I leave at midnight and vets aren’t cheap. However, Giaconda is thrilled as she’s in love with the vet.

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.

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 comes over to me, shaking. She gets into the car. and tells me of all her troubles – which seem to increase with 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 a lot of stress that she has to talk to someone she hardly knows. 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 - and that Stephen has been sacked.

Maisie, who has been very snappy with me, comes to apologise and to explain her changes of mood. She says it’s the stress of work but judging by her age I think I can guess what is the cause. 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 lives. Jane says she was married at nineteen (her husband became chairman of Morgan Grenfell bank). They were married for forty years and eight years ago her husband left her for another woman. Jane is still smarting at the betrayal. No wonder she appears nervous.

Philippa tells me her grandmother was the mistress of King Leopold of the Belgians. He put her in a gilded cage in a flat in Monaco.

We lunch in a restaurant in a remote village in the sierra. Being a Sunday it’s packed with families straight from church. All the ages are there – 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 earrings in pierced ears.

A large group of women is at the next table. All are wearing the same spectacles; all have the same hairstyle and are dressed immaculately; all are exuberant, and all are fascinated by a lone man lunching with four women. They all turn to 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. The English women are not amused – they have a collective disapproving look – like a gaggle of Jean Brodies.

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 as if by talking to him I’m betraying Charlotte. All I can say is that between him and Charlotte there will always be a clash of personalities and that it’s probably be for the best if he resigns. He doesn't know I know he’s been sacked. He starts to assassinate Charlotte’s character. I have seen memos written by him to Charlotte where he refers 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? She said: ‘I smoked a joint and made some beaded necklaces’.

Charlotte has told Stephen to pack and go. She says to me: “Now I can relax”. She then gets the ‘flu.

The night before he leaves 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 lit a fire that gets out of control. Luckily we find a hosepipe which eventually dowses the flames, but it hasn’t rained here for a year and a few more minutes and it would have been a major problem. Needless to say, we don’t tell Charlotte.

The new guests are the Hollywoods – as I’ve christened 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.

Initially, Gene Wilder is a bit detached, he isn’t joining in and seems uninterested in Trasierra and its people. But, as the days pass he relaxes and is charming and cheerful. He adored his wife, Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer only five years ago, and he still has a grieving demeanour.

Karen 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 plays a deaf man, and Karen was his lip-reading coach. She is a bit mousey and initially spikey and protective of him. Also, she looks like Gilda. They hold hands a lot.

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. Aqaba being a whole coastal town.

Sandra Marsh is in her late forties, a little younger than her husband. She is small, pretty with big eyes, and a no-nonsense manner. She’s a Hollywood agent representing film technicians, from writers to cinematographers.

Terry's 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.

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 shares a house with an artist in Wiltshire and that he’s out in Spain teaching. That’ll be my friend Suki and her 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 wouldn’t have thought Gene would have heard of him, let alone rate him highly. 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, joins us and quizzes Gene 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. Jackson can quote 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 a bad back, they kindly force-feed me with copious amounts of vitamin C pills and Gene, who knows all about bad backs, having had sciatica, offers to give me a massage and to teach me exercises.

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. She, of course, knew nothing about contracts and suchlike but was so successful she now has a top agency in Hollywood. There's a film there somewhere.

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

I see Amber sitting under a palm tree dressed in a large 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 slaps the side of the box to a flamenco rhythm, then claps to the same rhythm while shaking her head violently so the pegs rattle.

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 her name with a 'J'. She is still pining for the vet.

Charlotte is to join us 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.

Charlotte is relaxing, despite all. She drinks a bit too much and enjoys herself – today, she has a hangover. Maisie had popped in after dinner to make sure it went well. She too joined in with the wine - today, she too has a hangover.

I ask Charlotte for a night's break from hosting the dinners — although they can be fun, and I'm lucky I like people, 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 me saying: "We shall miss you".

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 handsome young man whom 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's 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 by the family at Christmas. It's a tall, spacious room with a large carved stone fireplace and outsize chandeliers with outsize candles. Amber wears a glamorous black and white flamenco dress with her mother's much-too-big flamenco shoes with over-large black and white bows. Jackson, who is to be a waiter, is dressed at the beginning of the evening as an IRA terrorist in beret and dark glasses, he then changes and is Michael Jackson, finally, he is Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*.

Amber gives me a birthday present of a pair of socks and a knee-high blue painted concrete capital letter R which she has found half-buried in the garden. It was the remains of a Trasierra sign.

Before dinner, we have Champagne and quails eggs. Giaconda and Amber dance a flamenco. After dinner, the girls dance again, with Charlotte on castanets, and afterwards, in a full flamenco dress and shoes, she tap dances. Giaconda does a soft-shoe shuffle in flamenco shoes to Fats Waller. Gene tries an embarrassing flamenco with poor, embarrassed Amber. And Jackson tries an

uncoordinated dance display at which St Vitus would have blushed

The party finishes at about one o'clock so Giaconda, Nicola and I go to a bar in the village. The streets are full of teenagers strolling 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. 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, 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.

The Dramatis Personae:

Lord John Mexborough - a middle-aged landowner from Yorkshire. He's 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. He's not painting

Lady Catherine Mexborough - John's second wife, in her early forties (but going on twelve) She's prim, bird-like and pretty with perfect teeth. She speaks very precisely without opening her mouth. She chews her food in the same manner - all her movements are in miniature. She hates the fact that her husband collects cars. Their daughter died of a heroin overdose.

Caroline Hobhouse – about fifty, from London. Escaping from her husband. Well-dressed, intelligent, friendly but unemotional – probably stressed from her husband problems. 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. Her mother-in-law is the formidable Penelope Hobhouse of garden design fame.

Barbara Buxton – Nicola's mother from Norfolk. A friendly, kindly woman in her late forties. The Buxtons have a house they occasionally open to the public where she serves cream teas. She and Nicola are alike: both are scatty and forgetful. Today, Nicola lost her house keys and then ran out of petrol in the Jeep. It could easily have been her mother. She's painting.

Rosie Tufnell – Nicola's aunt, and sister to Barbara. She's tall and gangly, harmless and seems incapable of coherent thought. She wears pancake make-up. A couple of months ago her husband died and describes to me in detail his stroke and subsequent death. She's painting

Amy Ludlow – A canny New Yorker in her twenties; she's quite plain. She's easy-going and quickly gets the measure of all these upper-class Brits. She has her own business producing brochures for car manufacturers. Her forebears emigrated to the States from Ludlow, Shropshire in the 17th century – hence her surname. She's painting.

Nalia – A Bangladeshi academic in her early thirties; she's small and delicate and a little chippy. She speaks with a colonial upper-class drawl. ; a bit aloof and probably thinks the upper-class Brits are stupid. She's meant to be painting but spends her time writing memos to the Department of Overseas Development. She is a researcher and lecturer at Sussex University.

Six women, one man – and me.

After dinner, Nicola plays the piano for us –Beethoven and Chopin.

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 ordinary. However, Jackson has just appeared standing on a homemade pair of stilts whilst wearing roller-skates.

Rosie is exasperatingly clueless: I had to show her how to put in a drawing pin. Both Charlotte and Maisie agree with me that Rosie and Barbara are the last of the 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 and they love it when I tease them. 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 have 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 her husband get the giggles talking to each other about porn films they have seen. Caroline sits there with a cool 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?

Today Rosie paints quietly and conscientiously. She tells me she thinks I've been saintly. And I get a compliment from Charlotte who tells me she thinks I am 'superb'. Sometimes, though, I wish I could have a break from having to perform, provoke and be amusing.

Oct 7th

This evening Nicola, Maisie and I went to the local bullfight. On the whole a gruesome display of barbaric nonsense. The Cazalla bullring is so small one is too close to the gore and deaths. Five young bulls are dispatched – the last of which is lame and bemused. 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 that strikes up at strategic moments and there is a team of tough mules which 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 five years old. The crowd of about two hundred wave white handkerchiefs as the Presidente hands out the severed bulls' ears to the matadors. We are the only foreigners.

It's colourful and local but basically, it's nasty. The girls agree with me. However, there is a 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 slags off Nicola for giving him the wrong directions, little knowing Nicola would be incapable of giving the right ones. He's a squash player and tall and handsome causing the cool Caroline to become over-attentive and simpering.

Amber issues me with an invitation to her ballet for this evening – her version of the Nutcracker Suite. The guest list is exclusive: she's honouring me, Nicola and her mum, and Maisie and Amy. The others are snubbed. I have just seen Jackson rehearsing his part: he's 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 VIDEO CAMERAS
ALLOWED ONLY
CAMERAS. NO
LAUGHING OR TALKING
DURING THE PERFORMANCE
EXCEPT EMERGENCY.**

The ballet, written by Giaconda, lasts ten minutes. It mostly consists of Amber swooning, or sleeping, or dying. And Jackson as the big, bad wolf on stilts and roller-skates.

Oct 10th

Everybody, except Naila and Chris, is leaving today. A new group is arriving for a creative writing course tutored by the novelist Angela Huth famous mostly for her novel *Land Girls*. And a husband and wife team from the Sunday Times is coming to write an article for the Travel section. I've three new 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 hosting the dinner; the journos are understandably too important to be left to me. So instead I cook dinner 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.

Today Amber asks me to play 'Beggar My Neighbour' with her, at a hundred pesetas a hand. Amber, when she loses, refuses to pay up, Charlotte admonishes her, saying her grandfather, who was a gambler, would have been horrified that a granddaughter of his should renege on her debts.

Some vignettes of life in Cazalla:

Nicola and I are at a bar, sitting outside drinking beer and eating skewers of swordfish and pork. The locals are eating bowls of a mutton stew. The patron, unasked, brings us two complimentary bowls of the stew with bread and two beers.

The Socialist bar 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 say I can pay any time.

Oct 15th

Today I am free and cadge a lift off Maisie to go to Seville for the day. She's driving the seven-hour round trip to Sotogrande to have her hair done. The two-lane blacktop to Seville is brand new – care of the EU. Charlotte's four children were born in Seville after a two and half hour taxi drive on the pot-holed old road. She tells me the Cazalla taxi drivers are all adept at delivering babies, and most of the children in Cazalla are named after villages on the way, or after a taxi driver. Going north from Seville the road leads nowhere, finally petering out just before Cazalla. There are few cars on the new road, there are, however, lots of donkey carts and herds of goats.

On the outskirts of Seville is a corrugated-roofed shanty town with what I hope is just water staining the main street. I am told almost half the men are unemployed. Ten minutes later I pass the Hotel Alfonso XIII. This is the Wikipedia entry:

It officially opened on April 28, 1929, with a sumptuous banquet attended by King [Alfonso XIII](#) and Queen [Victoria Eugenie of Battenberg](#). The hotel is owned by the City of Seville.

At the sublime Alcazar, there is not so much a contradiction as a synthesis of opposites. It is both Muslim and Catholic and simultaneously an interior and an exterior where the symmetrical and ornate gardens merge seamlessly with the symmetrical and ornate rooms.

I'm outside a restaurant in the barrio Santa Cruz perusing its menu when John Mexborough appears and asks me to join them for lunch. Amy Ludlow is with them. In Europe one often sees the American and the English aristocrat seeking each other out. Perhaps they each think of the other as outsiders, so have a mutual attraction?

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 us supplied with wine till three in the morning – I have the keys to the cellar.

Valerie is in her forties and fun and friendly. She 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 which she does, the accent contradicting her metropolitan appearance.

Trevor is now a freelance journalist but was once the editor of the Weekend section of the Telegraph and the Sunday colour supplement. About two years ago Conrad Black sacked him. He's writing the article on Trasierra He's 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 Edna, or Martin, or Julian etc. She’s polite but uninterested in us painters.

The creative writing guests course are:

Freddie Vasquez - a Gibraltarian 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 Sloaney. She’s a flirt but Freddie doesn’t seem to care. She was the head of twentieth-century paintings at Bonhams. They live on Gibraltar but she yearns for London.

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.

Simone Warner (not doing the writing course) - a psychotherapist friend of Charlotte’s. She is here as Charlotte’s guest as her husband has recently died. He was Sir Freddie Warner the British ambassador to Japan. 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 us; I think, in grief, she finds our presence intrusive.

The new guests doing the painting are:

Warwick Robinson – he’s in his mid-thirties, tall and gangly with shorn hair. Originally from Sheffield is 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 - a Swede now living in London. She is about sixty, but is still beautiful and looks a lot younger. I mention this to her - she was very pleased but said I can’t be English as no Englishman would say such a thing. She is an optimist and enthuser, she does everything at speed - including talking. Paints manically, producing works from an over-heated imagination.

After dinner in the salon grande Charlotte has organised entertainment, to which, in the end, everyone joins in and does a ‘turn’:

Giaconda and Amber do their flamenco, afterwards, Giaconda plays her Spanish guitar; Charlotte sings; Nicola plays the adagio from Beethoven’s ‘Pathetique’; Angela plays bar-room tunes; Simone sings some negro spirituals; Valerie recites from memory the whole of ‘There’s a one-eyed idol to the north of Katmandu’; Trevor makes a drunken hash of an attempt at flamenco a la Gene Wilder – which again infuriates Amber; Eva importunes handsome Chris to do a ‘turn’, but he demures, she 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 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 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 – he now has to wait for days while it's 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 practising Catholic and does 'good works' such as taking the sick and crippled to Lourdes. Tonight she goes on strike, refusing to cook for just us four, so Warwick, Jo, Chris and I go to a tapas bar.

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 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 has 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. My back is feeling better.

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, 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, undemonstrative and scatty. She is unselfconscious which gives her a degree of endearing self-confidence. She speaks good Spanish so is happy to do all the enquiring about hotel rooms.

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

It is nearly ten o'clock before we settle on a 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, instead, we have to knock up, at any time of the night, her concierge, a skinny, greasy-haired, cove in a filthy Panama hat who sleeps on a palette in a little room by the front door.

It's a warm evening so Nicola and I stroll 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 which has a ghostly floodlit church. Despite 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. As usual, every other girl is beautiful, but not - as Nicola points out, and later confirmed by Belle – the boys.

At about midnight we find the bar I had been told about by TerryMarsh's daughter. It's in an old 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. We find a little room off the main one which has a small group of Sevillanos. An old man is playing his guitar, the women are clapping a slow flamenco rhythm. One by one the women rise and dance a flamenco, slowly building to a climax. This continues until five in the morning when we reluctantly leave.

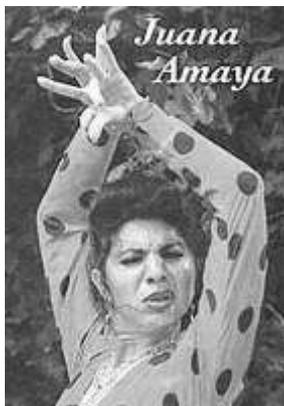
At the hotel, there seems little point in sleeping – it's the noisiest room in Seville. Outside our window, in the narrow alleyway, people walk and talk – they might as well be in the room. A man stands outside whistling, of all things, the tune from Eine Kleine Nacht Musik. Somebody rolls metal beer barrels over the cobbles. A terrier yaps and stops, and yaps again. A helicopter, of all things,

flies over low – twice. I give in and go for a coffee leaving Nicola trying to sleep. The barista, in the only cafe that's 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 have to find another hotel, especially as Belle is to join us this evening. Nicola goes off in search of a hotel. 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 young Spanish girl practising flamenco in front of a tall mirror. Her severe teacher claps out a rhythm, making her pupil repeat, over and over again, every dance step.

Nicola returns to say she has found a room nearby. On our way to the hotel, we go into a sort of antiques' shop where a grey-haired man is at a desk copying out, in a perfect hand, an ancient Arab manuscript - a 9th-century book on geography. Curious, I ask him about himself. He's called Paul and is an American-Norwegian, born in the Middle East, who studied at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London and used to live in Rome. We tell him of 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 dancer in Spain and she lives at your noisy hotel. I ask if she is the teacher? "Yes", he says, "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 a signed photo of herself. She is only in her mid-twenties but looks worn-out; probably from a childhood and adolescence of a relentless seeking after perfection.



In the evening we go to the airport to pick up Belle. 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. We offer to drive them 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 did the same degree course in sociology at Edinburgh University where they shared a flat. Being so close they share similar characteristics and habits: both mutter, 'cool' when they wish to approve of something; they still have a schoolgirl manner; they never wear make-up and they dress carelessly - they have no vanity. They both have long hair never knowingly brushed; they have good figures - Nicola is the prettier and Belle the taller. She is a lowly accounts director at Saatchi and Saatchi. She has a functioning version of Crohn's disease.

The room is on the top floor with a view over the roofs to the floodlit dome of a church. It's a clean, bare, white-washed room like a convent school dormitory with two single beds and a double.

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.

There are four Gitanos, or gypsies, on the church steps playing African drums. A teenage girl in a white dress, like a first communion gown, dances to the drumming in a voodoo frenzy. She then 'sings' a speech, asking for money. The plaza is not floodlit, but in the dark are dozens of braziers roasting chestnuts. The braziers fill the plaza with an orange light like fireflies and a dry-ice of smoke drifts across. We leave about three in the morning and stroll back to our hotel through the warm night - not a little stoned and mellow.

It's Sunday and we fully intend to explore Seville but we end up, in true *mañana* fashion, having a long lunch in a restaurant full of families with the same idea. It's at the end of a leafy cul de sac and has a rude, incompetent waiter who is so bad he is entertaining.

In the evening we go to Melinda and Rose's hotel: the Alfonso XIII. They are already in the bar drinking Champagne. We order a bottle of beer and two teas.

Melinda is thirty-eight and nervy and fussy. She obsesses 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; enigmatic and reserved. She's dark with short black hair, good-looking with big round eyes. She seems to be the neurotic Melinda's friend and minder.

The bar bill comes and they pay for their champagne, leaving us to find the money for what is a 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 in the back having a nervous breakdown.

'Trasierra' can be anagrammatized as 'Raise a Stir' and 'Art is Rare'. Often, when I think of Charlotte, I think of it as 'Stressierra'. The following are some 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 wandering in the sierra and returned. He kept losing his possessions and insisting he'd been robbed. Now he's 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'd been arrested after he got into a fight with a taxi driver who he thought had overcharged. He'd taken a taxi to Cambridge because he'd got it into his head he had to enrol at his old college.

His divorced wife, 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 has to be educated at home.

Three New Yorkers have 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-blonde hair and wears bright red lipstick. She has a sharp New York wit and is a finance director for Associated Press.

Shiela is from Boston 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 'Boyston' accent. 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.

Doris is a thirty-six-year-old New Yorker, 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.

Amy and Sheila are very keen on painting producing bizarre works with no connection to Spain or Trasierra. Sheila paints, 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, for no reason, is decorated with silver rats running around the edges.

At dinner, Doris tells Melinda that she is a boring English housewife and leaves for another line of coke. Melinda collapses in tears, weeping and screaming.

Dinner the following night is 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 off the wall with cocaine. I have to sit next to her as nobody else will. It's me and seven women.

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

She says to me in a stage whisper: "I wanna go to my room and fuck all night". Melinda has another breakdown; Rose is cool and aloof; Amy and Shiela are pissed off; Nicola and Belle giggle. Doris, after I refuse to walk her back to her room, leaves in a huff. Melinda goes to her room and locks her door in case Doris tries to murder her.

Later, Nicola plays the piano while we all sit by the fire. Amy sings Ella Fitzgerald and Joni Mitchell *a capella* in a lovely sweet voice.

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 funny how a car's dior can open unexpectedly at eighty moyles an oiyer".

But there was an incident after the Doris dinner debacle. The girls and I leave at half-past two in the morning. Usually, Nicola and I take it in turns 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 Andalusia?). I am breathalyzed and am over the limit (poor Nicola is doing all the translating). I'm given papers to appear in court on the 31st.

Doris is back from Seville but she's leaving tomorrow. At dinner with Amy and Shiela, Doris tells us how well-connected she is; 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 tomorrow.

She is leaving early so asks me if I can find her an alarm clock. I find one and tap on her window to give it to her. She opens the window, naked, and flings herself around my neck, trying to snog me across the sill. I disentangle myself and leave.

Oct 31st

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

The courthouse is a splendid baroque building pockmarked by shells and bullets from the Civil War.

Charlotte is not happy with me as I've given Trasierra a bad name so she has sent her secretary to represent her. The secretary asks for a translator. None can be found. A court secretary speaks good English but is not allowed to be a translator. It's suggested a Spanish teacher of German at the local school be sent for - he speaks English. He comes but his English is very poor and certainly not up to legalese.

I'm ushered into a room with two large flags of Andalusia and Spain and an enormous desk and a throne-like chair. Lost in the chair is, what I at first think is a boy, but who is the young judge. He goes through all the legal procedures, which the translator is incapable of properly translating. It transpires all the documents will be transferred to Seville where I will be tried in my absence. These documents must also go to the British embassy in Madrid. I'll be fined and banned from driving in Spain, and maybe, under European law, in England too. Afterwards, I speak to the court secretary who tells me the usual procedure is to dump all the documents in the bin and forget all about it. I hope she's right.

It's Halloween and my last night as a teacher, although I'm staying on before catching a flight in a few days. Charlotte is throwing a party this evening in the salon grande in her private quarters. Nicola and I are the guests, joined by 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 tulle; Amber is a spider in a black leotard on which she has painted a white skeleton; George is Frankenstein's monster; Jackson is Dracula; Charlotte's mother is in widow's weeds; Nicola is a gypsy fortune-teller; I am a wizard. The salon grande has loudspeakers playing screams, and thunder, and spooky organ music. Outside in the kitchen garden - which Jackson has turned into a Halloween graveyard - is a big dangerous-looking bonfire. There is a buffet supper with Champagne and Bloody Marys and fireworks.

POSTSCRIPT

The following spring I return for another tour of duty, but only for a month.

On a weekend towards the end of this time, there are no guests. Charlotte takes advantage of the lull and goes away for a long weekend. She has a friend from England staying who is acting as a sort of manager. He's a young man called Simon who came from England on a motorbike. Charlotte leaves Simon in charge. However, he goes AWOL to a 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 to do, as the staff have the weekend off. There is nowhere for the elderly couple to go, as there are no hotels in Cazalla, so, although I have no authority, I say 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 Simon returns and I tell him what's happened. He's disconcerted because he knows he's been caught absent and will incur Charlotte's ire. The following day 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 very important to her for the smooth running of Trasierra. She is furious with me, and especially with Simon.

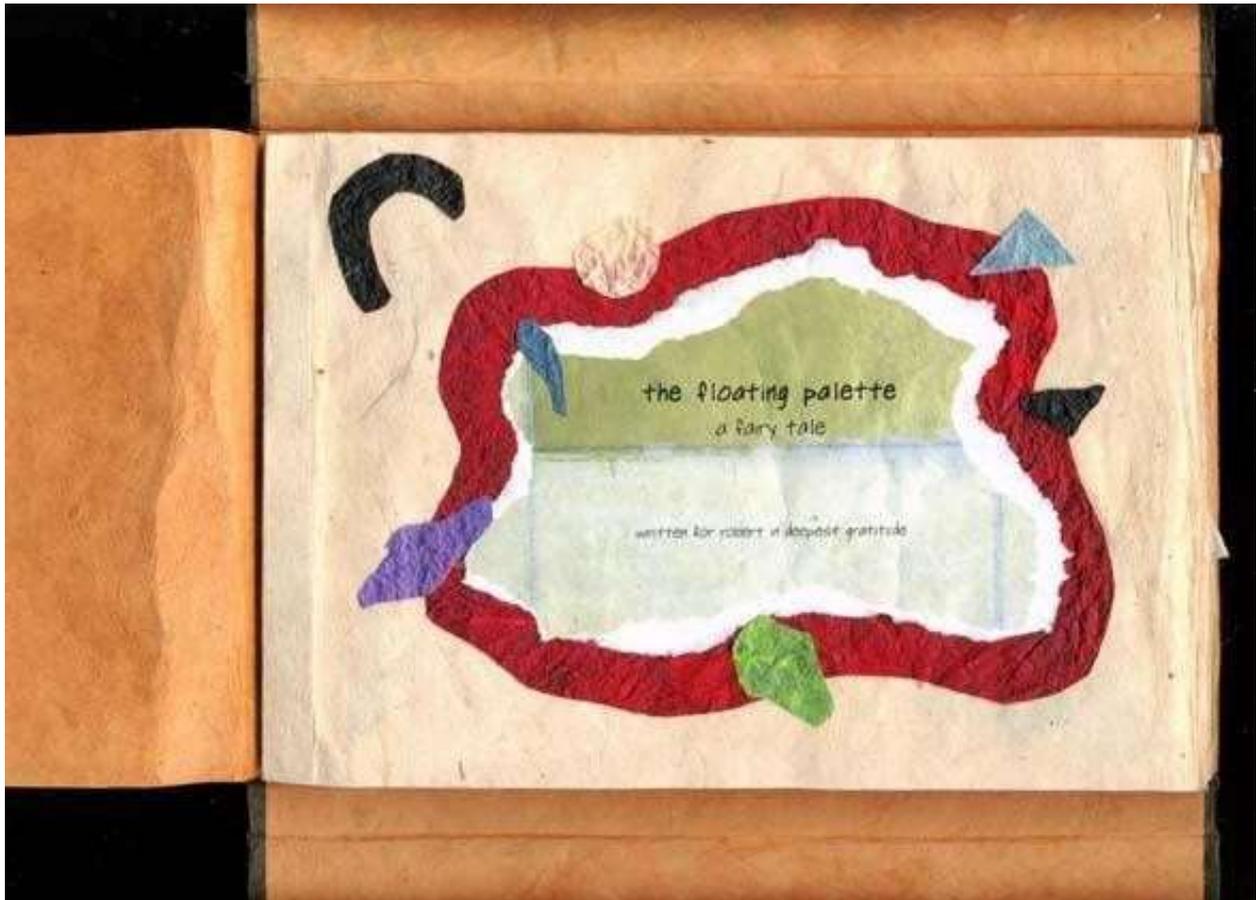
The next evening Simon comes to me in an agitated state. He tells me Charlotte has threatened him with dismissal. I try to calm him and suggest things will be fine once Charlotte has recovered from her anger. I say that Charlotte has to cope with so many problems it would make most people be a bit stressed. Simon goes to Charlotte and tells her that I think she's a neurotic. I'm summoned and, in icy tones, told to come to Trasierra only when teaching and never to attend the evening dinners. I am persona non grata. I have to eat out as there is no kitchen in my flat. During those last few weeks, I never see Charlotte or the children again - even Nicola is absent. Then I quietly leave for England, never to hear from Trasierra again.

AFTERWORD

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

A month or so after I got back from my first tour of duty I receive from New York an elaborate package. Inside is a beautifully presented short story written for me by Amy (she of Amy and Sheila). It's 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 reproduce it here in an approximation of the typeface she uses in the original and as close as possible to the layout of each page. Incidentally, Amy Selwyn gave up her New York job and is now a well-known writer.



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. Crimsons, 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

