

Andalusian Journal

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An extract

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January 2016

The new year is seen in with grape swallowing. Twelve in total. *Las uvas de la suerte*. The grapes of fortune, one for each month of the new year. One at each stroke of midnight. A national tradition dating back to over a century. The large clock of the old post office on the Puerta del Sol in Madrid marks time. On all the television channels, the camera focuses in on the clock tower for those final moments. The clock takes thirty-seven seconds to chime twelve times. Thirty-seven seconds to knock back twelve grapes.

In the shops, the grapes have been pre-packed by the dozen. One and a half to two million are rung through the tills in the days running up to New Year's Eve. Most of the grapes come from Alicante. *La uva del Vinalopó*. They are small and easy to swallow, though it can be made even easier. Specially for the occasion, peeled grapes of a seedless variety are on sale. You can't take any chances. Each grape that isn't swallowed in time brings a month's bad luck in the new year. There isn't a Spaniard in the country who would even consider not joining in. A year of disaster and misfortune would result.

Despite this, all these grapes have not brought much luck to Spain, and in particular Andalusia, over the past years. The severe financial crisis has plagued the country and even though there's talk of recovery for the first time, unemployment remains high and many families still suffer from poverty. When I commented on this to Pedro who had come to prune the olive trees having lost his job as a council worker the year before, he said that it surely would have been much worse if he hadn't swallowed the grapes. He could have got ill, his mother could have died, or one of his children. If you foresee enough calamity, your year can only be better than expected.

He'd predicted he would lose his job at the beginning of the previous year. There were council elections coming up and the mayor had invested in a lot of improvements to his village the months

before that, as happened elsewhere in Spain. Local people were usually taken on for these *obras* so that they could discreetly vote for the mayor in return.

Pedro had been given a contract of indefinite duration. You'll see, he said in April, as soon as the elections have passed, I'll lose my job.

The elections were in May; in June he was indeed made redundant.

I asked whether he'd voted.

Naturally – he voted every time. But I always hand in a blank ballot sheet, he added.

Why did he vote then?

Oh, so the mayor would see me and give me work again someday because he thought I'd voted for him or his party.

It was a small act of resistance that allowed him to retain his dignity. I asked him when he thought he'd be given work again. In a couple of years I guess, he replied, as soon as the next elections approach. And so there is always hope here. *Esperanza*. Derived from *esperar*, which besides to hope, also means to wait.

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Even the local undertaker keeps hope alive. His company is called *La Esperanza*.

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The winter is too mild. The past summer was too hot. And the last three years have been too dry. In Spanish, the word 'too' – a word to indicate a surplus of something – is befittingly much longer, it has five syllables: *demasiado*.

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When I looked out of the window this morning I spotted dozens of tufts of pink wool in the valley. For a moment I wondered whether the shepherd had dyed his sheep in a burst of good cheer, then I realized that the almond trees were in bloom.

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The burst of happiness of a blossoming almond tree stands in stark contrast to the sadness of a dead one. A tree reduced to its skeleton. The crooked trunk is blackened like charcoal, the branches are skinny and bare, often broken, the few buds still attached are grey and empty. But very occasionally – it's quite strange – there's a tree where a solitary flower has blossomed right at the tip of its furthest branch, like a last sigh.

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When I set off in the car down in Vélez-Málaga at sea level, the Zafarraya Pass is a horseshoe-shaped hollow in the mountains that I could fill with my thumb. But when, after an uninterrupted climb to a thousand metres, I finally drive through it and see a steep cliff face towering above me to my left, I myself am no larger than a thumb. Signs along the road tell me that I am crossing the border between the provinces of Malaga and Granada: a paper border, respected by the landscape. The hills and mountains of La Axarquía disappear from one moment to the next, and before me the ethereal expanses of the interior open up. I hurry through a village that seems as disconsolate as its unending ploughed fields charged with producing food for the whole of Spain and far beyond. The road, as straight as an arrow, helps me gain speed. I drive for miles before taking a sharp bend to the left, after which the landscape changes again and I drive through a fairytale forest where trolls, hobgoblins and elves have disguised themselves as holly oaks. In the background, the landscape slopes again, a chequered pattern becomes visible, not a house, not a person to be seen. Until suddenly, directly below me in a valley, at the top of a cliff, a village appears with a church at its centre like a giant enclosed shrine. What I don't know yet is that beneath that church's roof, heavy and solid as a stone lid, genuine treasures are stored. Treasures that can rarely be seen; one of which, a unique painting, that has hung in the shadows for centuries. This is Alhama de Granada, known for the natural warm water springs which give the place its name. Erected on the edge of a deep gorge and therefore sometimes known as Ronda *chica*, little Ronda, a name that Alhama has apparently reconciled herself to, since in everything she is modest, humble, honest and therefore blind to her own beauty and charms, which surpass those of her big sister.

Anyone wanting to get to know her must tolerate a chaperone at their side, a guide. Today it is a young man who persists in calling all of us – seven adult Spaniards and myself - *niños*, children, and getting caught up in anecdotes and pointless facts. After half an hour, I know that squirrels come to quench their thirst at the ancient fountains every day, that the food for prisoners in the underground silos is lowered down on a rope, and why the houses in the village are painted white and the walls of the old fort red. I will still have to look up the history of that fort since the guide takes us to a studio for an exhibition of etchings and lithos by a girl wearing dungarees in whose pretty eyes he loses track of time. Ten minutes pass, fifteen, but I am the only one to look at my watch, the others continue to stare ahead or look around. The Spanish are a patient folk, I know that by now, long queues wherever you go, at the bank, the butcher, the register office, not a single person getting upset, nor in the traffic when the road is blocked for a while or a little longer, no tooting to be heard. Time is an elastic concept in the south and so more than an hour has passed before the guide looks at his watch and leads his children onwards through the old Moorish district with its narrow pebbled streets, streets along which I'd like to saunter but all of a sudden we have to hurry and are pushed into the Hospital de la Reina, the queen's hospital. Do we *niños* know why there are bars in front of the windows on the street side? No one? A steamy story follows, recounted in lurid detail by the guide. The whole time everyone stares at the bars in fascination, and no one at the magnificent wooden *mudejar* ceiling above our heads, copied from the Moors. It has still remained unnoticed when the door is locked for another indeterminate period of time. Onwards, some of us must be hungry, it is almost lunchtime. Do we still want to see the churches? Quickly then.

At last La Iglesia de la Encarnación, the shrine, opens up. Two doors, one after the other, barely a metre between them, like narrow sluiceways. The classical and unremarkable eighteenth-century door on the outside conceals the original door from two centuries earlier, a gem of late gothic art, designed by Enrique Egas who also carved the sophisticated frieze on the stone archway. The mastery of this builder, architect, artist can be seen in cathedrals and buildings from Toledo to Granada, from Santiago de Compostela to Plasencia. In Alhama de Granada, a veil of stone and woodwork has been hung before his work.

Inside, the church is a model of sobriety. Gothic stripped back to its most elementary form. In the rear, the chancel with lower and raised sections, at the front the altar, and between them, the nave, an enormous, rectangular open space with a ceiling made of three parts with ribs that resembled the veins of a leaf. The walls are virtually bare, the windows small, not much light, lots of air though, a building that is magnificent in its simplicity and offers church-goers breathing space and peace.

Sssh, niños, sssh, listen...

We are sitting on the back row of pews, our backs to the choir pit, our guide standing in the aisle. He massages his Adam's apple, clears his throat, turns his back to us, his face to the altar. Is he going to sing? He's going to sing.

Salve, Regina, mater misericordiae, vita dulcedo...

His tenor voice is carried into the nave, the sounds multiply, taking possession of the whole church and then slowly dying away. There is a moment of magic; for a second I almost expect a polyphonic choir to join in, then the guide stops abruptly. He has a cold, he says, it doesn't sound good today, but at least we have an idea of the church's acoustics, special, unique – and now we must move on. Perhaps just a glance back at the painting there, *Christ on the Cross* by Alonso Cano.

He says the name casually as though speaking of a village painter, while I have pricked up my ears. Alonso Cano, here in Alhama? I'd seen his work in the Prado in Madrid, in Malaga's cathedral and in Granada's. A renowned architect, sculptor, painter and contemporary of Velázquez and Zurbarán, who have always overshadowed him, just as this painting had now largely disappeared into the shadow of the presbytery. But out of the darkness, the chalk-white, elongated body of Christ lights up as though a lantern is being shone onto it. I am captivated, I can only look, stare; in the canvas' background, the threatening glow of a storm above the mountains which I recognize as typically Spanish.

If you look carefully, I hear the guide say, you can see that the head has been painted over, by Cano himself, a black spot, I will briefly tell you the story, a myth, true or not, who is to say...

I listen breathlessly as I try to locate the spot in the shadows, but the space is literally too dark.

The painting was commissioned by the prior of the Carmelite monastery, presumably late in Cano's life when he was living in Granada. It was destined for the chancel that was being renovated. When the painter visited the monastery some time after completing the painting, he saw that the new prior had touched up Christ's face – perhaps he found him too pale or the expression wasn't to his liking. 'My face or no face,' or something similar was what Cano cried and in his anger, he painted over the face in black. No one dared touch it after that.

I recognize the tenor of the story. It was probably true. Cano had other such tendencies. Known for his talent, notorious because of his temperament. A life of scandal and debt. Accused of killing his second wife, but there wasn't enough evidence and he didn't confess. Banished from Madrid all the same, his honour was later restored. He demanded from Zurbarán a masterpiece in exchange for membership of the gild, long after the artist had already painted some of his most beautiful works. There is also a well-known story that he destroyed his statue of Saint Antonius in Granada. The judge for whom it was made claimed that he was asking too much for it – it had only taken him twenty-five days to make. 'But it took me fifty years of studying to be able to make it in that time,' Cano replied, after which he pushed the statue from its base.

The story of Cano and Alhama de Granada hasn't made it into the history books. It wouldn't be out of place though. I get up to look at the painting from close up, to study the black patches and brushstrokes of this *Cristo sin cara*, Christ without face, but there are other secrets in this church and if I want to discover them too, I will have to follow the guide to the sacristy, he is already making his way there and so I hurry after him into a small room which contains a world-class museum. I don't know where to look first. Golden bowls, silver monstrances and thuribles, antique chasubles made of velvet, silk, brocade in all the liturgical colours: white, green, purple, black and a red that had been embroidered by Queen Isabella the first of Castile herself. On the wall there is a simple carving of Christ on the cross; it looks like it is made of ivory, a modest and because of this an impressive work of art, like the church itself. Who had crafted this dying Jesus? In which century? I don't get the chance to ask because we have to leave again, the door is closed, on to the next stop, hurry, hurry, the guide says.

El Convento del Carmen. This is where we go next. The Carmelite monastery has been converted into the town hall. The church is still a church. Our guide pauses on the doorstep. He lets us glance inside. A peek is allowed, but I walk on. A newer church, late sixteenth century, the baroque style had come into fashion, here still hesitantly, the nave had pillared aisles down the sides, no copious decorations yet. I carry on into the centre of the nave which is spanned by a dome that has been richly painted, only the paint has faded and large chunks have been lost along with the flaking plaster.

Behind me the rest of the group approaches. Now we have all entered anyway the guide wants to show us something, more things leading a secret life. The recess behind the altar, containing a statue of the Holy Virgin, turns out to be a small, inaccessible chapel – a *camarín*, literally a dressing room – only visible behind Mary's shoulders. If you turn into a contortionist you can make out a stony explosion of fiddly bits, curls, wreaths, flowers, leaves, floating and hanging angels...

There are two more chapels like this in the side walls, the guide explains, there and there, but now the time's really up, quarter past two, *no te preocupes*, don't worry, the restaurants are still open.

And I find myself outside again, on my own, this beauty too has retreated behind the anonymity of its sun-bleached walls.

Why such timidity? Such modesty? Such reluctance? A village with so much history. The Romans loved Alhama. It was worshipped by the Moors, to such an extent that when it fell into Christian hands, the Sultan of Granada let out a cry of pain that has lived on in the Spanish language: *¡Ay de mi Alhama!*

A long ballad about that loss has also withstood the tests of time and seduced Lord Byron into making a translation of it:

And from the windows o'er the walls

The sable web of mourning falls!

The King weeps as a woman o'er

His loss, for it is much and sore.

Woe is me, Alhama!

I find the answer to my question when I look into Alhama's recent history. In later times, things happened that wounded the small village community deeply. The guide made a passing mention of this a few times as though referring to irrelevant details, but they aren't. The French, Napoleon's troops, stormed the village on 2nd February 1810, Candlemas, an attack that I read was accompanied *con sangre, con mucha sangre* – with blood, much blood – more than would flow in any other village in Andalusia, in all of Spain, even, during those six years of French occupation.

Then there was the earthquake in 1884, on Christmas day at that, twenty seconds of the ground shifting, along with all of the houses built on it and the people in those houses. It was just after nine in the evening. In the newspaper a day later there was already mention of 463 dead and they were still searching the fissure in which many had found their grave.

And there's that other painful chapter, the civil war, whose traces are still visible eighty years later: in the ruins of the burned Iglesia de las Angustias, in the patched-up statue of Maria Immaculata whose head and hands were recovered from the rubble of La Iglesia de Carmen and – I didn't get the chance to check this – in Alonso Cano's painting that was said to be full of bullet holes. Christ crucified and then shot. And as it did all over Spain, blood flowed in Alhama. Again. The entire village swept clean by Franco's Nationalist troops between 22nd and 26th January 1937. The villagers had held out for more than half a year but in just 72 hours they were beaten. Looking at the figures, I found out that almost two hundred died on the Republican side alone, in just three days, and only according to official sources, the actual figures are much higher.

All these wounds haven't healed with the years, it takes generations. This is why Alhama de Granada is so reticent. It's the only conclusion I can come to. The town wants to keep and cherish the treasures still in its possession like the beads of a broken necklace, and so it tends to redirect tourists to other riches: the old Roman and Moorish baths on the outskirts.

Nevertheless, things are starting to change. Until a couple of years there wasn't any kind of tour. The past was suppressed in the festivals that Alhama is also famous for: *El Día de la Candelaria, La*

Feria de San Juan, La Fiesta del Vino, El Festival de Música Jován, La Feria Grande de Septiembre, La Romería del Vino. Apparently music and alcohol are needed to smother the memories.

Like the memories of the old man serving at the bar I find myself in that afternoon, long after lunchtime. On the wall are black and white portraits of a flamenco singer on stage sometime in the 1970s, Paco Moyano is his name, and passion flares from every photograph.

I ask the man whether I can still eat.

He called to a young woman in the kitchen who has already taken off her apron but is willing to light the stove again for me.

Is that you, *señor*? I point at the pictures on the wall. The jawline is similar though he's lost the long dark curls covering his neck.

He glances at the photos, smiles and says, *Era yo.* That was me.

Then he takes the bottle of *vino dulce* from his table, comes to sit down with me and fills our glasses, once, twice, oh go on, another one then.

*

On my way to my letterbox, I see two hoopoes on the street, pecking around the puddles left by the recent rain. Suddenly the sun breaks through. They promptly fly up. The striking black and white pattern on their wings is like a prison outfit from a cartoon. I watch them fly off. Two rogues caught in the glare of a spotlight as they flee.

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My letterbox is a kilometre from my house. There's a small booth in the shape of a bus stop next to the road and here everyone from the hamlet's letterboxes can be found. The letterboxes were once identical, identical drawers stacked on top of one another with a slot and door with a lock and a label, but wind and weather must have frequently sheltered in the building because all the original letterboxes are dented, twisted, rusty and wrecked. Some of the doors still have names on them, though, and a few contain post, which never piles up.

Anyone moving to Loma León has to put up their own letterbox in the booth. There aren't any specifications as to size or colour, or height or whether the slot should be on the top or the front, just as long as the owner's name is clearly displayed. We don't have streets or house numbers after all; we all share the same address.

I've never seen the postman at the letterboxes. So I don't have a clue when he delivers the post, on which days or at what times. My neighbours who have been living here for half a century don't know either. They've probably never even wondered about it. At some point the post arrives, it's as simple as that.

The postman in any case comes from a different village, Benamargosa, half an hour's drive away. I know this because I have to go to *him* to collect any packages sent to me, mostly books. He'll put a yellow and blue note in my letterbox even though he could have left the parcel here instead. But it seems there's some kind of rule imposed by above forbidding that. He apologizes about it every time, he knows how far I have come and that, from his Andalusian perspective, I've had to get up at an unholy hour. His little office opens at half past eight and closes again an hour later. Weekdays only.

I love driving there. I leave around eight o'clock and at this time of the year it's still dark. After more than a year I found a short cut that takes me past deep ravines and wide valleys and has a beautiful desolateness to it. The few hamlets I pass are still asleep. Life takes a while to get going here.

I put on a piece by Manuel de Falla, *El Sombrero de Tres Picos* or *El Amor Brujo*, which lasts exactly as long as the drive if I don't go too fast. There's no better music for a person collecting the post on an Andalusian morning. Music full of mystery, playful and bewitching, adagio and allegro by turns, just like the road snaking through the mountains.

As I arrive in Benamargosa the first old men are installing themselves on the benches. The shutters of the tobacconist's are being rolled up with a clatter and the early birds buy lottery tickets that promise but never bring fortunes. One café has opened its doors. If I get there before half past eight, the postman will be sitting on the terrace drinking a coffee and we'll exchange nods. He's a friendly old man with thinning hair that is more golden blond than silvery grey. I suspect he should have retired years ago, but that letter probably got lost in the mail.

Then I begin the climb by foot. The post office is in the postman's house, somewhere halfway up the village, built into the flank of a mountain. It takes me ten minutes to get there. The streets are too narrow for my car.

In the summer a mobile of swifts hangs above the houses.

I have no idea how he does it but even if my postman is sitting on the terrace when I leave from the lower part of the village he always beats me to the top. There must be a shortcut I haven't yet found in the maze of streets.

The office itself is no larger than a broom cupboard, it probably is a broom cupboard, it's just behind the front door. If I order a lot of books in one go, the postman can hardly get into it. Whatever the case he sits there on a miniature chair, his head no higher than my hips. I no longer have to introduce myself, nor show him the yellow and blue note. He immediately begins to look for the parcel, which can take quite some time. Sometimes I try to strike up a conversation with him even though I can't understand a word. His Spanish dates back to a different époque.

His equipment does belong to modern times. I have to use a plastic stick to sign the screen of a kind of telephone to confirm receipt. And if I want stamps, they roll out of some kind of till. As long as the ink hasn't run out. And he never has any change.

After that we take leave with a minimum of words. I'm happy with my parcel, he's happy it's been collected.
