

My
friend Pepe
tells me that,
in Montril,
he found out
to his surprise
that he had
Andalusian
blood in him.

But his Argentine wife, Silvia, assures me that the surprise did not last for more than ten minutes. After all, all of us have some.

Whenever he returns home to Barcelona, Pepe has to make a public statement about his passionate love for the city. Pepe is the actor Pepe Martin, travelling through Barcelona by taxi on a Saturday night. He is quite overcome by the illuminated Gothic city walls and goes ooh. His wife laughs out loud but feels envious of her husband's nostalgia. People from Buenos Aires are like that.

And Silvia cannot hold back her laughter because Pepe goes around gaping at everything as though he were seeing Barcelona by night for the first time. I suggest that perhaps his being born near the Pedro district is significant. Pedro was full to overflowing with open-mouthed children in the post-Civil War years. They were the sons and daughters of the defeated Republicans, who never lost their ability to be surprised. That is why they later became writers.

Among them I list the following: Victor Mora who in one novel describes Saint Eulalia being carried off from Pedro Square. Perhaps that's why they invented Captain Trueno, superhero, protector of women and the first Spaniard on record to fall in love with a Swedish girl. The list goes on: Ana-Maria and Terenci Moix were also born in Pedro, I tell Silvia and Pepe. Their father was a painter and decorator and their aunt, old Florenci, the woman who swore never to set foot outside her front door after her husband-to-be had left her standing at the altar. Later old Florencia communicated with the hereafter in some very heavy Spiritualist sessions, for the Civil War had carried off quite a number who did not have time to say goodbye to their nearest and dearest. You cannot feel comfortable, says Pepe, until you know that your lost loved ones are not angry. Then there is Vasquez Montalban who reckons you can travel the length and breadth of the district from above street level, without once coming down from the flat roofs.

Silvia raises an objection: Pepe's an actor not a writer. But we both know full well that actors, just like writers, are always trying to escape from themselves.

Pepe has still not closed his mouth after seeing the illuminated city walls and after noting that Count Ramon

Bergenguer III is still on horseback and as immortal as all knights cast in bronze. He almost imagines he can see the Archangel St Michael himself who appeared one fine day back in the Middle Ages just where our taxi stops at the traffic lights. Now the taxi crosses Sant Jaume Square where the City Hall and the Palace of the Generalitat face each other. The juxtaposition of the buildings gives occupants a perfect opportunity to keep a watchful eye on each other from balconies which at this hour are closed. There is something of the parish-pump about politics here; it is always gossipy.

I am about to tell them that just before Layetana Avenue we passed Boria Street. Up to the beginning of the last century, as a warning to unmarried girls, they used to force women caught in adultery to walk down that street for people to mock them. They were made to walk with their heads erect, so that passers-by could shout at them "T'hauria de caure la cara de vergonya" "You should hang your head in shame" an expression we still use today. But I contain myself because in our party there is Sonia, the daughter of a Catalan businessman who once upon a time committed an indiscretion with a Russian lady exiled in Paris. With a mix like that you have to be careful.

Sonia does not believe a word of what I say about Barcelona and reckons that the city is not as special as I make out. So, to annoy her, I remind her that in the Middle Ages the city had slaves and the most sought-after slaves were... Russian. As our car makes its way down Fernando St, I tell them the story of the slave Catharine, a woman as Russian as they come. She caught the eye of a Cistercian monk who carried her off on the very night that the Catalans arrived at Timbuktu.

But our half-Russian is just not listening because of late her feet have been quite off the ground. For she has a young lover in Barcelona believing he was introducing her to the depths of iniquity and depravity. But no matter what bar they go into Sonia lights up her low tar cigarette and remarks with a yawn that she has been visiting bars like that since before he was born; which is not true because though there have always

been grotty bars in Barcelona, fashion changes.

The taxi drops us off in Avinyo (Avignon) St, which supplied the name to Picasso's famous demoiselles, and we go into Pitarra Restaurant, which is where the famous, obscene, foul-mouthed and sentimental dramatist of the same name used to repair watches. Pepe now closes his mouth to be able to chew and promptly becomes moist-eyed at the dishes with Catalan names, only too aware that sentiment always begins in the stomach.

Girgole mushrooms from the Pyrenees take him back to the innocent days of his childhood—if they ever were that—and baked hare with oranges makes him so sentimental that Sonia all but breaks into a tango, something quite out of character for the Argentinian girl who is not one to go in for self-indulgence but always displays a sophisticated and shrewd notion of the practical things of life. Sonia listens with feigned modesty to lines from Pitarra about King Jaume, not realising that the Joglars and the Trinca group are direct descendants of his humour.

With our hearts awash with warm feelings and our stomachs with Catalan champagne, we emerge into a narrow street recently declared extremely dangerous. At least that is the opinion of the people who now live in the upper part of the city and spend their nights in designer bars of the kind that can chill your soul. The street which follows the line of the Roman wall smells of salt water and spiced octopus. Mariana, who has said nothing so far, recalls the bars of her native Galicia and youth when, between one student meeting and another she would feast on pork and cabbage washed down by the best wine of the area. The bars now spew out a different kind of younger generation: heavy metal fans and punks, a little worse for wear, brush past us alongside young people with vacant looks, forsaken by God and left to their own devices.

Sonia asks Pepe to teach us how to laugh, to laugh as only he can, with a laugh which, starting from nothing, reaches the heights of an operatic aria by Verdi. So timidly, Pepe embarks on the theory and practice of laughter. You start by tensing your diaphragm and feeling it as separate from the

rest of your body. Then, concentrating on the breathing, you launch a gentle guffaw without too much air pressure, allowing it to grow bit by bit until it reaches ineffable heights and it becomes measured, harmonious and musical with a perfect balance between voice and breath. We follow his instructions though feel ourselves to be talentless students of the art. Soon Mohican hair styles and metal-studded belts take up the cue and launch their own sudden urgent laughter.

The whole of Avignon Street fills with the sound of different laughs, both high-pitched and low, like a mixture of cackling hens, frightened birds and the dull thudding of horses trotting on a nudist beach as in the advertisement. Sometimes laughter is a prelude to despair.

And then the miracle occurred. First a couple of Moroccans stopped, the resentment of the downtrodden dissolved by the actor's laughter. They pointed heavenwards and exclaimed: *la Allah illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah* (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of the One God). Barcelona had not heard a cry like it for centuries. A couple of black Africans, almost invisible in the shadows, and various punks with Mohican hair cuts, were stopped in their tracks like barbarians interrupted in mid-ritual. For a moment the skinheads, infected by so much laughter, were content to leave off their metallic jangling and discard their so-called fierceness in those so-called quiet hours of Barcelona's nights. And drug addicts injecting themselves in the doorways of venerable houses underneath wrought iron balconies threw aside their syringes and joined in. All the different, mingling strands of laughter united like the mighty pulse of a single heart, filling the street, the district, the city. This decrepit, sensual city; sometimes haughty, sometimes welcoming, and unbeknown to itself, desperately cosmopolitan.

This city which was once described by a Moor as the last haven in Europe, the tired mother of the Mediterranean.



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