

In A Strange Land

If you walk down through the Old Town towards the harbour you will come to the church of Our Lady of Carmen. Outside, there is a board giving notice of services, protestant and catholic, for Germans and English and Norwegians as well as the native Spanish. They run at hourly intervals on Sundays, confusing visitors who often get up and walk out half way through the droning priest, as if it is a play they are bored with. They have realised they are at the wrong service, the wrong denomination, the wrong language. The church is very cool inside and if it is empty I often sit for a while on my way home from the shops.

The town is so large and noisy nowadays, it is hard to realise that there was something else here once, before the tourists came. After all, there have only been tourists here for twenty? thirty? years, and there is a people and a history before all that. You can see it sometimes in the faces of the old men who grew up here when it was a tiny fishing village. They sit on benches around the harbour and stare out to sea. The old women are nowhere to be seen, they are shuttered away indoors.

But today, as I walked back to my apartment up the steep hill, carrying bags of shopping and bottles of water, I saw an old woman sitting on a stool behind a narrow open door between two shops. She sat like a statue, immobile, looking out across the street, her hair grey and stringy on her shoulders, and her hands folded in the lap of her printed dress. Her eyes were so still I turned to see what it could be that she kept them fixed on, here in the noisy tourist crowded street of restaurants and money changers, and for a second I saw what she saw, in a narrow passageway between two blocks, a strip of sea and beyond that, on the tip of the island, the mountains they call Los Ajaches.

I have become quite friendly with the priest here, the English Protestant priest, who leads the services most familiar to me in my long exile, though sometimes for a

change I go to a Spanish Catholic mass, or the noisy Evangelical service. But most Sundays I attend regularly, though not religiously, for I am not religious, the English Church service and murmur my way through the Eucharist at quarter past twelve and Evensong at half past five. There is so little else of substance here for me. The priest is tall and stooped and his skin is pale as paper. I wonder how he has avoided the tanned skin everyone else is so proud of. I have been once to his house for tea, after evensong, invited it seemed, on the spur of the moment, together with a retired couple from Kent, who were having their first holiday out here. Over cups of Twinings Queen Mary tea and Mr. Kipling's Old-fashioned English fruit cake (from the Spar supermarket, which can supply most English groceries if that's what you want) they expressed their dislike of the island in general, and the town in particular. It seemed their doctor had advised a winter break and so they had gone to a travel agent in Faversham and booked up a bargain package holiday for three weeks. Three weeks! They had arrived on Thursday and this was Sunday, and now, still another two and a half weeks to go. In all their married life they had never ventured further than the Scottish Highlands, sticking to a relatively undiscovered part of the Lake District most years. They thought they would rather suffer their arthritic pains in the damp English climate, than come here and be kept awake all night by disco music and suffocated in the daytime by the unnatural heat.

I saw my priest smile a little as he raised his flowery bone china cup to his lips. I wondered if he thought, as I did, whether they'd considered what it was like to be here always, for years on end, bored with the endless summer and the blue sea and sky, and to long for English things. Bluebells, autumn in the forest, snow, teashops - at least, those are the things I long for most of all. I wonder what he longs for.

When I first knew I had to come here to stay, perhaps for ever, I brought three bulbs of narcissus. "Paper White", they are called; the kind which scent a whole room, but close up smell too bitter to be pleasant. I planted them in a pot of picon, the black grit which piles up in the hollow dead volcanoes and is spread on the fields to trap the only moisture there is, the morning dew. My narcissus grew tall green spikes, and I

waited for the beautiful heads to open. They formed as I had seen them form at home each year for Christmas, but where I expected delicate creamy white blossoms to open, there were only dried husks. It was too hot, and the heat killed the flowers before they ever lived.

We have both been sent out here, I and my priest. It is illness which has sent me, an illness which is somewhat abated in this dry hot place, and it is his God which has sent him. His God, of whom he speaks every Sunday in the most dry and unimpassioned way. But he is a dry and unimpassioned man, that is his nature, and perhaps his bishop considered the consequential loss of souls the lesser out here where nearly everyone, anyway, is just passing through.

He is not married and seems quite content with his life on the island, the round of services, the attendance at fund-raising events and bazaars that the expatriate, and largely non church going English put on. His house is fashioned in common with theirs, Spanish architecture overlaid with a kind of stuffy, mock Home Counties chintziness. I do not care for this, and the Spanish maid who cleans for me once a week is wide-eyed at my choosing to live amongst a mixture of found objects and Spanish antiques, which are expensive enough considering no-one else wants them. I imagine they mostly go for export. But I am here, it is no use pretending I am home, it does not seem appropriate, and so I use the things they do, and dress the way they do, in plain black dresses and straw hats, my only concession a pair of comfortable German sandals. And I eat the food they eat, buying fish at the harbour, and rabbits at the market, and vegetables; pumpkins, small wrinkled potatoes, tomatoes, and a small fleshy kind of spinach that grows here, and I even eat Gofio, the ancient island food of roasted ground barley. I cannot bring myself to go into the supermarkets and see the rows of English food and toiletries, but on my rare trips back home, in the week or so before the coughing and the pain begins, I buy bags of tea, for I cannot lose that, the ritual of afternoon tea, which I do take every day, sitting in my high dark wood sixteenth century chair, my only chair, in my closed in apartment in the Old Town. I sit there with the tea, so fragrant before me, Oolong or Keemun, or Ceylon

perhaps, and I let my mind drift back through all the afternoons of my life, when I sat and drank tea in just this way, but in another place, the place I would rather be. I do not ever let myself imagine that I am there, I keep my memories where they belong, in the past, and live only in the present, for otherwise I fear madness or depression.

There is a woman I have met at the church. She seems to be a kind of helper but how and where she fits in I have no idea. She is German and works in a shop where they sell jewellery and black ceramics. I imagine she is about fifty, but she looks much younger; it is only when I am very close to her and not in the dimness of the church that I can see the age beneath her tanned skin. I know she believes I am odd and lonely, for she invites me to her tiny apartment where we drink coffee on her balcony and she gives me her worn out copies of sophisticated magazines, which she buys for some reason in English. Vogue, Harpers Bazaar; they are, of course, of interest to me as I scan the society pages for a glimpse or news of some old school friend or other. She does not know I do this and I would not tell her, for if I did she would talk of nothing else. As it is, she is a great gossip and because of her I know everything that is going on here in the town. She seems to know my priest very well, though I have never seen her at any service. In the afternoons when the jewellery shop is closed, she goes to sunbathe in a little place to the south of the town, where a ravine meets the sea and a sort of rocky ledge provides an easy route to the deep warm waters. On occasions, when I am out walking that way on a cool day, I join her and wonder at the even goldenness of her naked body and the smoothness of her breasts which are shaped like two long melons. I sit in the shade of a rock and she lies in the sun and chatters away, sometimes in German, forgetting I am English. Most of what she says is inconsequential, but she told me one story about a year ago that has stayed lodged in my mind ever since, though I would prefer to forget it since it seems of inestimable sadness to me.

She tells me that before our priest came to the island, there had been another priest whose ill health forced his retirement and so his bishop allowed him home. I wondered what illness it could have been, so opposite in its needs to mine, that would

take him away from here, back to the foibles of the English weather. But he is dead now, and has been so for fifteen years. I do not know how my German friend could ever have known this story; perhaps she has elaborated whatever she was told. And whoever would have told her? She said that a woman from the other little island came here, fell in love with the priest and he married her and took her back to England, where he died, and she was left to live on the charity of the church commissioners.

This is what I was told, and it seemed so empty and sad, that the whole day became colder, as if the ghost of the woman was sitting between us on the black rocks.

There is an island to the north of this one whose name means "the Graceful". It is a dot on the map, the tiny place you can see from the plane as you circle in, nothing but four black volcanoes and a ring of golden sand. And two villages; one hardly visible from the plane, the other only just. I have been to this island and it is like stepping onto a promised land. For the first time ever I wanted to feel the sun full on my skin, on the whole of me, so I walked for a mile or two along the empty beach and took off all of my clothes and lay, as if with a lover, on the hot cradling sand. It was only a week or so after I had heard the story of Maria Perez and the priest, and I could not imagine what it was like for a woman born here, in a place where the passage of time changes little, to find herself alone and despised in a cold lonely England.

This island was not inhabited till the late nineteenth century. They say an entrepreneur built a fish factory on the island and persuaded several families that life would be better there. So some came, I imagine Maria's great grandparents among them, and houses were built and little streets made in the white sand, the same houses and streets that I have walked amongst. I have seen children there playing in the afternoon, carefree and laughing, their hair blown by the wind and I think of Maria at three, and four, and five, growing up there. What took her family back to their original home? What tempted them away from that simple, beautiful life of the sea and the

sand and the sun? The same which tempted those original settlers; money, security, a better life for their children? That which tempts us all.

So Maria's family returned. Maria was twenty, an only child. Plain, and lonely, and hard working - for my friend said she never had a boy-friend, though how could she know? The young men fish and some die; perhaps Maria had a lover, perhaps she was not plain and lonely after all, and maybe there were plans and a drawer full of embroidered sheets and then one afternoon, when she walked to the harbour to meet a boat, no-one came and she returned home weeping and empty. Did she then spend more time in the church, praying to the Madonna for peace? I think about her life then and how it went on for twenty more years. She never married. Her parents grew old and Maria worked in a bar. I know that much.

What did she think about the tourists, who have changed everywhere so much, and have made the town into what it is now, a great wide strip of white blocks stacked on each other beside the sea? What did she think when her church became a kind of time-share? There are so many different Marias living through those twenty years in my mind and sometimes it seems to me that they are different faces of my own self.

Let us say Maria is forty. Let us say she *is* plain and lonely, and hard-working. Her day begins at six-thirty when she rises, and she eats breakfast and brushes her hair and gets dressed, and she goes to work. She is there by eight. By nine she is serving breakfast to the tourists. They want an English breakfast and now, every bar and restaurant in the town sells real English breakfast. There is bacon and egg and baked beans and sausages and tomatoes and fried bread. And tea. Maria has learnt how to make all this and she watches them eat and wonders why they need so much.

Each afternoon Maria has a break of four hours. Sometimes she sleeps. Or she sits in her room and looks out of the window. She dusts her room. She washes her clothes and hangs them up on the roof. She prays. And then she returns to work at five and

works again till ten. Cooking and serving and washing up. She does all this. At night she sleeps deeply. She works hard.

One Sunday, she passes the church at mid-day and sees a priest standing on the steps, holding a Bible and he looks anxiously up and down the street. As she comes by, he murmurs,

"Buenos dias, senora."

She turns to look at him and sees for a second his eyes and recognises loneliness as if she is looking into a mirror.

"Buenos dias, senior." she replies.

So that is how it began. It must have done. What took her past the church that Sunday? Whatever it was, has changed her life forever. Now she walks past every week. Sometimes he is there, sometimes not. One Sunday she realises he has not been there for a month. She creeps by the door and looks into the gloom and then she sees there are people sitting in the pews, maybe six, or eight, and the priest is standing before them. And he looks up, and seeing her, does he recognise her? He smiles. She is shocked and embarrassed and turns away and leaves and does not go by for another month.

Maria has learnt some English from the tourists. She has sometimes found their discarded newspapers and she has painstakingly read whole paragraphs. So she knows how to greet the priest when, one Sunday, she cannot any longer resist walking by the church. And there he is outside, scanning the street. He sees Maria and hears her say

"Good morning, sir."

And though he is surprised, he greets her the same, and says,

"I never know whether anyone will come or not. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't."

And he smiles at Maria and she smiles back and then she walks in, past him, and goes to the front and sits down. That morning, another four English tourists come, and the priest solemnly carries out the service of Holy Eucharist and Maria follows it all in the little green book she has found in front of her and when she has finished a sen-

tence she looks up and the priest intones the next sentence and so it goes on. And then it is over.

"You'll come again?" he says to her at the door.

Now, my friend tells me - now - they become lovers. When? A week later? A month? A year? Does he find out where she works?

Maria serves breakfast at nine, at ten, at eleven, at twelve. There is an order for toast and coffee. She takes it over. It is him. He looks up at her and smiles.

"Good morning." he says.

She is blushing now. How has he found her here?

"Good morning, sir." she says.

He asks her when she finishes work and would she like to help him in the church, some task, let us say stamping the name of the church in each of a consignment of new hymn books. And after that perhaps they will have tea. And one day does he ask her to lunch? Does he help her carry shopping back to her room? Does he sit in her only chair and watch her boil water on her little stove and make him coffee?

He feels quite relaxed with Maria. He knows he looks forward to seeing her. He knows he has fallen in love with her. She is forty-two, he is fifty-eight. Once he was married, it seems a lifetime ago, and he had two sons and a daughter and a church in England and an absolute faith and his life was good. So how to reconcile his beliefs and the sudden wrenching away of everything he loved? The end of his life, it seemed. They had been driving home, his wife, his sons and his daughter and it had been his daughter's boyfriend's graduation day, and in a month there was to be a wedding. And then children. He'd dreamt of being a grandfather. The car was hit by a lorry, and no-one felt *anything*, they assured him, over and over, only he was left to feel everything. He supposed it was some kind of breakdown he'd had then and they'd sent him first to help out at some church in Nairobi and now this, this island outpost,

to establish an English service for the tourists. He'd done his best, but few came. But Maria had come and he had loved her. He asks her to marry him. He shows her his little house and seeing that, she decides. It is more than she has ever had, a man who is secure, a man who gives her peacefulness, and she feels herself opening out to him like some kind of flower in the sun.

And now they are married, in the church where they met, by the Spanish priest, who looks at Maria anxiously all the while, as she kneels before him in a new black dress and embroidered veil on her head. He wonders if they will be happy. He has known Maria for years.

For a while, for a few years, they are happy. But now Maria is woken night after night by her husband coughing, hoarse, gasping coughs which seem to rack him with pain. He is over sixty and has grown old in the sun, and the sun which has brought me here, is the same sun which sends him away, coughing and coughing, back to England. And Maria goes with him. She is his wife. She sits beside him in the plane and holds his hand and everything now seems like a strange dream, the journey, the noise and confusion and exhaustion and Maria can only hold on to the thin hot hand of her husband and pray. In England they are given a small bungalow to live in. I suppose there would be a garden, and Maria will have no idea what to do with everything so green, that never needs water. And there would be neighbours, who'd come by and introduce themselves and offer help if it was needed.

Only, Maria did not know what to ask for. Her husband was dreadfully ill, she could see that, but the dream that she had entered when she stepped into the plane, did not lift away when he died. Someone came and took her to the church for the funeral. She wore her wedding dress. There were people weeping at the service, but Maria did not weep. She had been his wife, yet she was as unconnected to him now as any stranger and he, back in his own land, seemed to belong to them, to his own people.

Maria came home after the service and with her came a man and woman dressed in black clothes who treated her with great kindness, and told her that she was to stay in

the bungalow, it was her home now. There was money, it would come each month. It would be enough for her needs if she was not extravagant. And please, she must come each Sunday to the church, they needed her and they would help her settle in and make her very welcome.

And did she settle in? Could she? I imagine she is as settled there as I am here, which is only a settlement of body, but not the soul or the spirit or the mind.

I said I keep my memories where they belong, in the past, but it is not entirely true. Sometimes, as infrequently as possible, I let my mind wander. And then I am walking again, as a young woman, thirty years ago, along an English country lane, going to visit my grandmother, or a friend, I don't know, it doesn't matter, it is not them I miss but the lane itself. The greenness and the dampness. The small coloured flowers. The Englishness of it all, that is what I miss so much. It eats into me.

And then I begin to think of Maria Perez. How she must feel the same, stuck there in the lanes and the greenness that I long for, she must long for these black dusty roads and this empty bright land. Someone once said to me that when a human soul is born, it has chosen the right place for itself; out of all the world, that place should remain its home. So why are we not at home, Maria and I?