

Sunset in Spain

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Chapter 1

The Stuff of Dreams

We've done it! We've surprised ourselves actually – we're really doing this big thing. We've left behind bushfires and droughts and are on our way to the lush valleys of the Rio Duero in Spain. I've dreamed about Spain so very often since leaving her behind four decades ago, a dream akin to a longing to finally be reunited with a lost lover. Always, when I wake up, I promise myself I will live there again – one day. Today is that 'one day'.

I wake up in Madrid, slightly groggy after a deep jetlag-induced sleep, the first day of our new lives on Iberian soil. I turn over to find Alex still fast asleep. My love for Spain never diminished after living here in my teens and early twenties, and neither has my love for this man, sleeping beside me. For many years I did not think I could have both, but I'm starting to wonder: maybe I can?

Lying as still as I can so that Alex can sleep some more, I close my eyes again and relive my very first glimpses of Spain on a sunny spring day in the 1970s. An eighteen-year-old on her first holiday without parents. It was also my first time on a plane and my first trip to Europe's south, as opposed to the usual family outings to the Alps or the Black Forest. I recall my excitement as the plane banked steeply, heading for the runway: the panorama below

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coming into focus, the sky the bluest of blue and the water below shimmering and sparkling. The view from that plane window was a world away from the cold and grey Dutch village where I grew up. On leaving Amsterdam earlier that morning the world looked small, cloud covered and dark. On landing I saw a curtain of cream-coloured mountains running parallel with the blue of the sea, clumps of green pine trees starkly outlined against white rocks and pink almond blossom lining the valley in orderly rows. This exotic country promised palm-fringed beaches, endless sun, music and fun, everything I'd fantasised about. My love affair with Spain began the moment that charter flight landed at the small airport of Alicante on the Costa Blanca. I stayed for seven years until an Aussie backpacker swept me off my feet and I followed him to the other end of the world. Love will do that.

Alex, the Aussie backpacker, and my 'other' love, stirs and wakes up, which brings me back to the here and now. Soon we'll be on our way to start our new life in Castilla y Leon.



Only a few short months ago we celebrated our retirement with a trip to Europe and paid a brief visit to my nephew Josh and his Spanish wife, Maya. Josh recently moved from the coast to the province of Soria, north of Madrid, a scarcely populated district of Spain. Soria is not on the coast, which is probably the reason it's still so authentically Spanish, with little or no outside influence from tourists seeking sun and sea.

As we sip coffee on a terrace in the centre of town, the tableau has all the flavour of my fondest memories of Spain. Old buildings surround a cobblestoned square; trees in autumn colours cast a shade over benches where people sit and chat. Then the church bells ring, triggering a visceral emotion.

This moment, this scene and the sound of the bells takes my breath away. It is as if my simmering passion for Spain has suddenly become a giant bonfire consuming all my oxygen. My love for this country comes rushing out, refusing to go back in the box where it's been kept, dark and silent.

'I want to live here,' I say a little breathlessly to a surprised-looking Josh and Maya. I think I've just surprised myself!

I look at Alex next. He returns my gaze with raised eyebrows and a bemused smile. I'm on a roll.

'I want to shop in the markets, see the red poppies in the fields. I want to sit in a bar somewhere and join the locals discussing the latest events.'

All of a sudden I know exactly what I want to do with my life. When I lived in Spain all those years ago I felt I was where I was meant to be. Being in this square now with the church bells ringing recaptures that feeling of being exactly where I'm supposed to be. What does this mean? Why are these feelings so strong? Is it because we've recently retired? I've struggled with the idea of retirement, but we wanted more time for travel, to experience more of the world. We do travel, but eventually we always come home again to find ourselves on the northern beaches of Sydney living a pleasant enough life. But I feel unsatisfied, unfulfilled. Something is missing.

These are feelings no doubt related to giving up a job I loved, leaving behind the animals and the workmates I cared about. When I first became a zookeeper more than thirty years ago, I knew I'd found my tribe in Australia. My job became my identity. Now in retirement I feel a bit lost. I have to create a completely new life. At the same time, I'm seized with a kind of indefinable nostalgia for Spain, the last place, before the zoo, where I felt I knew who I was. Maybe it's time to go back there? But would Alex be happy? Can I have both the country I love and the man I love?



As soon as we're alone Alex wants to know what's going on in my head and in my heart.

'I don't think we are living the life we could or should be living,' I say tentatively. I'm still trying to find the words to articulate that rush of emotion I felt in the square.

I don't miss working, the deadlines or the report writing. At the same time, I feel guilty. We have so much more than most people on the planet. Privileged and spoiled for choice. We're so lucky already. We have a nice life, but I keep thinking there could be more.

We retired early so we'd be fit enough to do the kind of adventurous travel we like to do. Travelling has been fun, but as a traveller you're observing the world, moving through it without being part of anything significant. Life on the northern beaches of Sydney is perfect in many respects but it has few challenges, if any. I want to live more deliberately, more connected, or challenged, whatever that means. We have an entire future to invent.

'I've been thinking about that too,' Alex confides. 'How to make the most of that one precious life and not waste any of it. Not quietly sitting by and letting the years roll into another.'

Fortunately, Alex also loves the country where we first met all those years ago. We quickly agree that Spain would be the place to find that different, more stimulating life we both want. I may get to explore those ill-defined feelings of identity and being in the right place. As an immigrant, the subliminal search to find 'your special place in the world' is ever-present. Not only longing for pretty places and great food, but for that sense of belonging. A couple of months after this epiphany, we packed up, left our house in the care of a stranger and hopped on a plane.



A day and a half of travel gets us to Madrid to pick up the leased car. We're on our way to the house we found online. It will be our home for the next few months as we sort ourselves out and decide where we want to settle more permanently. Our wish list was for a modest house, with two bedrooms, no further than fifty kilometres from the capital of Soria province (unimaginatively also called Soria). In Australia, we scanned the internet for places while Josh and Maya had some leads on places through word of mouth. If you want to know anything about any topic, ask in the bar. Everybody will get involved. Everybody will have an opinion, often conflicting, but you do find a happy medium eventually.

We got lucky and found a very appealing house in a small provincial town of about 5000 inhabitants called Almazán. It's a couple of hours north-east of Madrid and only half an hour to where Josh lives. Not too close – we don't want to smother him – but close enough to share an occasional meal. Maya drove over to inspect the place on our behalf. She was let in by Maite, an Almazán resident and a friend of the absent owner. '*Precioso*' (gorgeous), Maya reported on the phone the next day. Turns out the owner is a Dutch woman called Renske. She rents out her cottage when she is in the Netherlands for half of the year. Enough time for us to have a roof over our heads while we look around to find the perfect spot to put down roots. However much I had anticipated this moment, there's some trepidation. I am nervous about what may come next.



After an hour, we pull up on the outskirts of a small town. Renske recommended a quick stop in a village called Torija along the way.

It boasts the first castle on the way from Madrid to Almazán. We're now in Castilla y Leon, the old kingdoms that joined to form part of modern Spain. It is here that the most authentic, beautiful Spanish is spoken – Castilian. This is of course debated by every Spaniard who is not from Castilla! Castilla y Leon is the biggest region in Spain, while also having the lowest population density. According to the travel guide, there are more castles here than anywhere else in Spain. Even the name of this district, Castilla, comes from the word 'castle'.

We park the spanking new car on a bit of dirt on the outskirts of the village and stroll to the nearest cafe. Everyone stares at us with intense interest. It is around ten on a Tuesday morning and the place is already packed with locals. We take the free table in the corner by the door. We soon realise the table is free because the door opens every now and then to let patrons in or out while bringing in a blast of cold air straight off the nearby snow-capped mountains. We order some coffee and a slice of Tortilla Española, the celebrated Spanish potato omelette. Alex relishes his first bite of tortilla as he envisions the culinary delights he's yet to discover.

'Maybe we could explore the entire peninsula to find the best Tortilla Española, and then move there,' he suggests.

'Or maybe the best Ensaladilla Rusa,' I add. It's one of my favourites, a wicked potato salad served in nearly all bars.

After the coffee, a short walk further into town takes us to the jumble of turrets and towers that is the castle. The cobbled streets lead to the Plaza Mayor, the main square in the village, where another couple of bars also look inviting. All cafes are called 'bars' in Spain. All sell alcohol, but also coffee, breakfast, tapas and main meals. The Plaza Mayor is lined with stately London plane trees, branches intertwined and joining the neighbouring tree, like garlands festooning the plaza. Benches in the square are an important aspect of a town's social network. This is where the old

people meet to sit and chat about the time when they had things to do other than sit and chat, where mothers with prams gather as children play. Even now in the meagre winter sun a few brave geriatrics congregate. In summer, these majestic trees shade the benches from the hot Castilian sun. I love how good urban design in these old towns contributes to maintaining social networks. Old folks here are not short of other folks to talk to. They come to the Plaza Mayor and sit on a bench, and someone will inevitably join them for a chinwag.



Another hour along the freeway gets us into Almazán, a medium-sized town on the banks of the Rio Duero. As we get close the car's GPS sends us up a steep road next to massive ancient town walls. The dirt track up to the cemetery is a shortcut to one of the town gates. Calle Junto al Campanillo (the Street Next to the Church Bell – I love the pragmatic street naming in Spain) is inside this town gate called Puerta del Mercado (Market Gate), a short street with houses on one side and an empty field on the other. The house we're heading for is a modest place painted pink and blue, with a great double barn door.

The bell brings Renske to the door, who welcomes us with a hug. Well, she has no choice. I forget the Dutch three kisses and the Spanish two kisses and I clasp her in an Australian embrace with a squeeze. Never mind. I don't think she is concerned about the lack of cultural appropriateness in my greeting. Renske, about my age, is a recently retired academic. A tall, slim woman in stylish jeans and a colourful jacket I secretly covet. Perhaps she'll forget to take it with her? (She doesn't, unfortunately.)

We're enchanted as she shows us around. The house is even cuter than we gathered from the photos online. We truly did luck

out stumbling onto this delightful place. A mixture of traditional Spanish design with Dutch styling creates a warm, cosy and extremely comfortable home.

‘The pigs used to run in from the street, along the corridor through the middle of the house and up the steps, through the garden and to the pigsty,’ Renske explains.

I imagine the stink they must have endured just after the pigs came home for winter. Urine and faeces of scared beasts would have wafted in from the corridor to the kitchen and beyond.

From the converted sty there’s a door to another terrace, right on top of the medieval ramparts. The old defensive stone wall around the town overlooks the cemetery first, then the Rio Duero and fields beyond. The fields we can see from the terrace are surprisingly small, handkerchief-sized, in different coloured soils, looking like a mosaic in the landscape. This terrace is a delightful addition to the house. Perfect for a glass of wine at sunset or a bit of birdwatching during the day.

‘Let me show you around the old part of town before I go,’ Renske offers.

The house is in the *casco antiguo* (the old town). We walk through narrow cobbled streets lined with old houses and very few new buildings. After a few minutes we get to the Plaza Mayor, where one side of the square is taken up by a palace. Our landlady, quite the historian, has an astonishing amount of local knowledge.

‘Almazán’s most prosperous era was in the sixteenth century, by then under the control of the Mendoza family who built this palace.’ She points to the *palacio* on the left of the square.

‘It’s also where Queen Juana la Loca (Joanna the Mad) lived for some time, the daughter of Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon. Together those two were known as Los Reyes Católicos, the Catholic Kings.’

Alex asks, ‘How did they get the lofty title of Catholic King and Queen?’

‘It was bestowed on them by Pope Alexander in 1494. Their reward for being quite helpful to the Church during the Spanish Inquisition!’

Renske enjoys her role as our tourist guide, adding, ‘The unification of Spain as we know it is traced to the marriage of these two second cousins. Their marriage brought together the most powerful kingdoms in the peninsula at the time.’

At the bar, we order a couple of beers, a wine for me and some *torreznos* to nibble on, a type of pork crackling, a snack for which this province is known. It’s crunchy, chewy and meltingly soft at the same time. Vegetarians would have a bit of trouble in this nation. Fat dribbles down my chin. I can feel my veins clogging with every bite, but it’s worth it.

Enjoying our drinks as much as the tapas, we chat about history and why poor Juana was known as ‘la Loca’. Perhaps the repeated marriage of royal cousins throughout the previous generations did not help her genes. I remember there’s always been some debate about how mad Juana really was. Maybe she did suffer from mental illness, as she lost her mother, her siblings and her husband in short succession and was probably not a happy little royal. Some histories tell the story differently. The alternative version says she inherited her mother’s titles, but her father, Ferdinand, sent her to a convent so that he could keep calling the shots a little longer. So, the question still remains, was Juana really mad or was she the victim of ruthless men meddling in her life? Renske further tells us that Isabella and Ferdinand were also the ones who commissioned Columbus to go and ‘discover’ America.

These buildings drip with history, adding to the excitement of being here. Our first day in Spain, sitting in a bar, looking at a palace and talking about Juana la Loca, I feel a lightness and

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excitement I've not felt for a while. I'm filled with joy ... unless it's the wine before lunch. Whatever it is, I am relishing this, being here, as well as the fat-dripping *torreznos*.

After our drinks Renske is off to catch a bus to Madrid. She's kindly made up all the beds before she left. Our body clocks are still trying to tell us it's four in the morning rather than two in the afternoon. Alex suggests a little nap and I'm all for it. Time for a jetlag-induced siesta in our new home.

'Thank you,' I whisper into my pillow.