

Sample Translation

A Spanish Dog

(Een Spaans hondje)

by Rascha Peper

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Translated by Paul Charters

[Chapter X, pp 253 – 274]

The cathedral was seven minutes walk away. Knak went ahead as usual; he preferred the building to being at home for all was not well between Knak and Señora Cortadez. Their landlady had strong views about dogs. Dogs always stayed outside, chased away bad folk and strange cats, dared not come within a yard of anyone and were grateful for all leftovers. A dog that as much as set one foot inside the house; went and lay on a chair if you did not keep an eye open; trotted up to visitors tail wagging; flew barking at cats, recoiling if they lifted so much as one claw; a dog which frightened the chickens to death time and time again by chasing them around the run until the cock flew straight into the wire in fury - such a dog had her totally bewildered. She had only agreed to Knak's sleeping on an old rug in Victor's room after a night in the shed when he chewed her late husband's leather boots to pieces; and that was on condition that he set not one paw in the rest of the house - to which end the dog was gathered up under Victor's arm each evening, taken up to the bedroom and in the mornings, in like manner, brought down and placed in the yard.

As for the rest he had little to complain about with regards to his landlady.

For the first months in Spain he had lived in a hotel in Alhama de Granada, about an hour's bus ride away. Not only was there no hotel in Guada Oriva or its wider vicinity, but he did not *want* to become part of the village community. He was an outsider and wanted to stay so; and his stay, alone with the dog in a bare hotel room in Alhama provided the solitude which he had sought. When it turned out, however, that the bus from Alhama to Guada Oriva hardly ran from the end of November to the beginning of March he had to look around for lodgings in the village.

Pilar Cortadez was friendly, considerate and unassuming. Stout, in a sturdy sort of way, she moved with dignity, sensually even, and although her hair was somewhat grey, her bun still summoned up in one the desire to pull out all the pins. Where that was concerned, six months would have to pass before it went that far, for she maintained strict standards of decency.

It did not concern him that his poor Spanish was adequate only to conduct the most simple of conversations. He had no absolutely no need of conversation. When Apolinar, the cafe proprietor, had come along the previous week, Pilar had spoken about her father while Apolinar translated into German. Her father had been a farmer who, in his latter years, gave up his pathetic bit of land because each time he stuck a fork or spade in the ground blood welled up from the earth. Victor had thought he had misunderstood, but Apolinar had repeated it, yes, really: *sangre, Blut*. The land was cursed and Pilar's father had sold the whole caboodle for next to nothing, moved away and died shortly after. Apolinar and Pilar had acted as though this was something that just happened - blood from out the earth; a curse, a punishment, a sinister fate, who could tell, and what could you do about it?

At the edge of the village, around the corner of the street, the cathedral rose in process of construction. Knak quickened his pace for the last stretch and flew up the steps to Chano, his idol.

Chano was seventeen and his mother had wanted him to become a cook in Alhama. To this end he had been apprenticed to his uncle who ran a restaurant there, but he was seldom present. Whether he did like the idea of being a cook, had something against his uncle, or had just become addicted to cracking stones apart and searching for shells and fragments for mosaics, was not clear. Chano was always laughing, cut capers dangerously on the hoist mechanism, rendered walls as tastefully as though he were icing a giant tart, and needled Vincente (who always complained about him but was obviously fond of him) with unintelligible Andalusian jokes. Knak was re-christened 'Pompi' by him - which was a lucky stroke because the dog answered to it immediately.

Chano was the best surprise that had come Knak's way in Spain. When Chano was hoisting bricks with the windlass Knak would leap into the basket without hesitation and then to Victor's fright walk around on a thirty foot high scaffold happily wagging his tail.

‘One enormous folly’, had been his first thought on actually seeing the building for the first time, a year previously. That thought had not persisted because the association with show, kitsch, and make-believe melted as snow in the sun when you worked with Vincente.

But the first encounter was highly amusing. The whole way in which the construction poked up suddenly on leaving the dull, shabby village made you rub your eyes with amazement. You were the Sultan in the tale of Aladdin, who, on waking in the morning, observed that overnight the genie of the lamp had caused a palace to rise in your back garden. This surprising and elegant location, on a bend and on top of a hill had to be Vincente’s *coup de théâtre*. Once the cathedral’s undeniable presence had permeated you, the eye sought recognition, of a style of building, a basic principle, a ‘school’ - but found none. The construction displayed a disconcerting mixture of styles forming its own school. The layout was that of an old Romanesque church, in the form of a Latin cross, with a choir gallery, niche chapels and vaulting with diagonal arches, but the pair of lower towers which were already finished carried clearly Moorish features. The door and especially the colossal rose window above were Gothic just as were the gargoyles which, here and there, had already been set into the roof.

The ‘fantasy style’ dominated the whole line, which, as far as Victor was concerned, began with the steps. The steps were of sandstone and looked so deceptively like those he knew from sandcastles that he was tempted to kick a dent in them with the toe of his shoe.

It was true that as you ascended the steps and looked on the cathedral from close by the building lost much of its majesty - then the clumsiness, the amateurism and the lack of proper materials struck the eye quite clearly. But it was precisely because of its clumsiness and its ‘make-do-and-mend’ that the building also acquired a certain imperturbability, grandeur even. As you walked around it you really could not but wonder at the ingenuity and refinement of the architect. The eight towers, for example, which sprang from halfway up the side

walls - four left and four right, ornamental spires so narrow that even a thin person could only turn round inside with difficulty - had been rendered with a thick layer of cement, after which, before the cement had dried, little dints had been made with a trowel. Bites taken out with the point of a giant dessert spoon, as it were. The effect produced displayed a remarkable affinity with the slender fretwork towers of Gaudí's *Templo de la Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona, but then reduced in size and executed in an amazingly simpler manner. The similarity was so clear that Victor had once dropped the names 'Gaudí' and 'Sagrada Familia' but Vincente had just reacted as though he were stupid and pretended not to know what he was on about.

The fact that Gaudí, however, had been an important source of inspiration for this particular builder and that Vincente had not gone round with blinkered eyes during his down-and-out period was apparent from other things - from the exuberant flowing mosaic festoons, for example, which had been worked into pretty well all the gables. They wound themselves cheerfully around the front entrance and ran inside the building as far as the choir gallery. Anyone who took the trouble to examine the mosaics carefully, saw not only bathroom tiles, bottle glass, shells, Portuguese *azulejo* tiles, broken paving stones, tops, beads, jar lids, mica, fragments of plastic, pebbles... but also lipstick cases, scent bottles, and whole whisky glasses! In the south wall even a Swatch wristwatch, its hands at a quarter past six, had been inset. The colourfulness of these mosaics, the variety of form and splendour, the inventive whimsicality with which the banderols threw themselves around windows and corners, Gaudí could not have but taken his hat off to.

The showpiece was truly a semi-circular wrought iron railing that enclosed the 'balcony' above the front portico. This was a splendid heavy hand-made affair, asymmetrical, with undulating contours at its top. Two reclining figures were incorporated, a sort of satyr with a fishtail and a mermaid, both fairly voluptuous, if not debauched, who reached out their hands to each other over the flowers and seaweed. Not quite the appropriate creatures to adorn the entrance of a place of

worship, you might think, but in such things Vincente was unconventional. The railing looked indeed as though it came out of the school of Gaudí; who knows for what pre-war Spanish villa it was once designed. Vincente was not clear about that, but he was certainly proud of it - a rare smile would appear around his mouth if anyone praised the fence.

Some feet above the railing the great rose window began and within the foreseeable future would be filled with stained glass. That work had been contracted out to a glazier in Loja who would probably also make the windows for the triforium later - jobs which the master himself dared not tackle.

The reason for Vincente's contracting out just then was that the building fund was flourishing. Since articles about the cathedral had appeared in a number of Spanish newspapers and in foreign ones too, more money had come in than previously. There was no predicting. Sometimes two legacies of a few hundred thousand pesetas would come in the space of one month, and sometimes he got nothing for six months. On the one hand, you saw no-one the whole day long, and then find a substantial contribution in the wooden money box that hung in front of the cathedral; on the other, a surprise coachload of tourists would come gaping noisily at the building and later on appear only to have donated a handful of coppers. Once an elderly foreigner on a racing cycle had come through the village, a man of at least seventy. He had stood looking at the cathedral for a while even calling out something to Vincente who was hanging high up in the trapeze against a wall. The latter had not understood it and the cyclist gave a sort of grumpy 'doesn't matter' gesture of the hand. But in the evening a gift of fifty thousand pesetas was lying in the poorbox.

When Victor was up above, Knak would stand on the cathedral square growling, tearing at an old piece of cloth firmly held between his paws, which Chano, leaping to and fro like a ballet dancer held tightly at the other end.

'The maestro is in the crypt,' said Chano. Victor walked to the door and went down into the crypt. Vincente sat between the concrete pillars on an upturned

barrel, looking upward, hands tapping his knees. He's reprogramming his computer, thought Victor. He's modifying the blueprint kept in his head with mathematical precision for years - and for him modifications are more difficult than designing the original. What he's already imprinted on his mind has become his virtual reality, he cannot so easily get rid of it. That requires time. Vincente had indeed noticed his arrival but said nothing. Victor remained silent as well. He leaned backwards against a pillar and looked upwards with him. His relationship with the master of the Cathedral of the Miraculous Annunciation had entered a new phase.

For the first few weeks in Guada Oriva he had been pretty well ignored by Vincente Arduro. It was high summer and a theology student from Madrid and a teacher from Málaga were already working on the building and Chano was there too. Vincente, insular as he was, and probably wiser too from the past twenty-five years, paid no heed to half-baked foreigners who suddenly popped up and just *had* to help, only to come to the conclusion after a short while that this was no work for their delicate hands. Moreover, he spoke a particular lisping and mumbled Spanish, which did not assist communication with foreigners.

Under the wing of the theology student, who spoke French, Victor had, for the first weeks, humped and hewn stones, operated the concrete mixer, cut iron rods and taken turns in the treadwheel. When he sat in the bus to Alhama in the evening, burned and with blisters on his hands, he'd fall asleep from fatigue. In the first weeks contact with the master had been restricted to instructions or when an occasional meal pulled his almost toothless mouth into an approving grin.

Victor had his finger on the pulse of everything that was happening with the building, but nowhere was there to be seen anything so much as a drawing, a sketch, a diagram or even just a scrap of paper with calculations. Evidently, there was nothing on paper. The whole design for the cathedral existed only in Vincente's head. If a problem arose he took a few steps backwards, sometimes climbed up to the cathedral square, peered a while at the building work, hand on

chin, and then issued instructions as to how to proceed. Practical instructions - there was no denying builder's blood flowed in his veins.

When towards the end of the summer the student and the teacher had disappeared, but Victor still got off the bus and reported daily at the building, Vincente's attitude slowly changed. He became more responsive and began to involve Victor with the building plans, in the sense that he not only indicated more firmly or demonstrated what had to be done, but that he would sometimes, right there and then, make a little drawing for him of a wall, an arch, or a pillar they were talking about. They were clumsy drawings from a man whose hands were made for working and not for handling pencils. Sometimes Victor changed something on such a sketch, or, drawing an alternative, gave it to Vincente with a gesture meaning 'it's just an idea - but it could go something like this.' Vincente would examine the suggestion in bewilderment and remain for some considerable time sitting with it in his hands.

There were times when he went along with Victor. That weather-beaten head with beady black eyes mulling over an alteration to his layout, or rather, getting to grips with the idea that another had been thinking about *his* cathedral and could propose changes just like that.

The first time he had given the paper back brusquely shaking his head. No, exactly as he'd specified... that's how it had to be done. The second time, when it was about the finishing of the barrel vaulting over the choir gallery and Victor proposed narrow lancet windows in the arches of this vaulting, for a more whimsical play of light - the gallery would otherwise be very dark - Vincente, after staring long at the drawing, thought that that would indeed be better. And it was done that way. In such cases they managed to reach a decision by means of key words, pointing, and signs. Real discussion was only possible when Apolinar came up to see the building.

Apolinar spoke good German as a result of working for several years in a steel factory in the Ruhr. About six years previously he had returned to Spain with the money earned to open up a bar in the village of his birth. Why on earth someone

who had travelled the world would want to pass his remaining days in Guada Oriva was not clear. The only pretty thing about the village was its name; otherwise it was a shabby, dusty blot on the landscape, an old-fashioned village where nothing happened, where young people left and those remaining gave the impression that they did not want anything to happen. Apolinar thought so too, but he declared that such things were ‘affairs of the heart’ and homesickness was an irrational feeling.

Whenever Apolinar appeared at the building - often he came on his moped, sometimes bringing bottles of beer or sickly sweet lemonade - Victor, as well as Vincente, seized the opportunity to let him translate questions which sign language alone could not solve; a role which Apolinar enjoyed and fulfilled with verve. When Vincente, who was irritated by unnecessary questions, was not with them, Apolinar also interpreted the whole village’s curiosity about Victor, for Victor’s benefit. What had he come here to do and how long would he be staying? Didn’t he have to earn a living and what did his family think about it? He surely couldn’t be married? Or perhaps he believed that Vincente was a saint and he’d come because of that? At one of these opportunities Victor had let slip that he was an architect by profession.

By that same afternoon it was clear that Vincente knew too.

‘*Architecto... tu?*’ he asked, while they stood either end of a two-man saw with an oak beam between them. Victor had confirmed it, whereupon Vincente had nodded curtly and not brought it up again for the rest of the week.

Did he feel he was being watched? Did he mistrust this northern stranger who had appeared so suddenly? Was he afraid that he’d want to run the show and he’d then be inundated with rules and regulations which he’d managed to avoid for the last twenty years? Victor thought it better to act as if he did not notice the old man’s discomposure and worked precisely according to Vincente’s instructions - no more no less. Apart from that he acted as normal.

After a little while Vincente’s suspicion subsided, perhaps realizing that up to then the architect had not adopted any smart-Alec attitude, and that this could be

a coup for him. Perhaps he believed that it was not for nothing Providence had dropped an architect into his lap, and that he should use this to his advantage. In any case he had surprised Victor one day with a well-executed drawing of the cathedral which he had in mind for the completed state. A robust dome covered the nave, two tall Moorish-decorated towers rose on both sides of the main door, two lower ones at the back of the north and south transepts, and the choir with gallery and niche chapels was likewise crowned with a dome, smaller than over the nave but nevertheless substantial.

It seemed that the design had been shown with a particular intention - and that *was* the case. After Victor had examined it Vincente tapped the drawing with his calloused hand and said simply with a soft sigh, '*El fundamento.*' Victor understood it immediately. The foundations were the weak spot of the construction. That had already been clear to him from the beginning, irrespective of what the plans for roof and towers might have been. Now it turned out that a forty-five foot high dome had to cover the nave and a pair of sixty-foot high towers at the crossing were planned. It was as clear as daylight that this weight would bear too heavily on the side walls and piers of the nave walls, all the more because Vincente had, in the past, dug the crypt much too far.

The crypt was a problem in itself. It would have been better not to have dug a crypt at all or to have had a very small one, for then the matter would have been simpler. Of course, working on the crypt in times when funds were short had been a solution for Vincente - digging cost nothing and it kept you nicely busy, but in his zeal the old monk had really gone too far. The subterranean vaulting ran too far, both north and south, under the transept crossing, to within six feet of the most important load-bearing piers, which because of that, offered far too little resistance in order to carry a heavy lead roof plus towers. Moreover, such a large crypt weakened the floor of the nave. When you looked from underneath at the thin metal joists that that floor rested on, a shiver went down your spine. Could it ever be that in some distant future hundreds of people would stand there packed together?

All this had already been made clear to Vicente years previously by the local authority's building inspectors, who every now and again presented themselves unannounced at the building, probably without knowing what on earth they were to make of this creation. Since then, Vicente had excavated the foundations of the side walls and strengthened them with concrete, and introduced additional buttresses, but it was not enough, a far more rigorous approach was needed.

The same day that Vicente gave him the drawing, Apolinar had come over and the three had gone into the crypt. Victor set out clearly and concisely what, in his view, had to be done. The best solution was also the simplest; both side wings of the crypt had to be filled in with concrete, and the concrete blocks so obtained could serve as supports for the heavy metal joists which in turn would have to support the floor of the nave. All other solutions would be dearer, more difficult and more time-consuming, though not impossible. When Apolinar had translated everything to his best ability Vicente strode indignantly out the crypt and for the rest of the day sat hammering up in the roof of the choir chancel. Years of excavations - and, note, the ground here was hard - fill in with concrete! It made you want to smash it all up in anger.

Three weeks had gone by before Vicente suddenly pulled the drawing which Victor had made from his overall pocket, tapped it lightly with his chisel and said: '*De acuerdo...*' - agreed.

The fact that this introverted and taciturn man gave him his hand touched Victor. He did not take the handshake as thanks for his 'expert' contribution, for you did not have to be much of an expert for that simple plan. It was inconceivable for someone with such a good knowledge of building as this contractor's son not to have known all along that infilling was the only solution. The question of advice on the foundations he saw more as Vicente's method of allowing an independent expert to cut the Gordian knot, and Vicente's temper he considered as anger over his own stupidity in having dug the crypt so far - perhaps mixed with disappointment that, up till then, no unexpected solution had come up.

No, the handshake was for Victor a seal, a confirmation of a decision taken in common, a shared responsibility - partnership, trust. A handshake from such a man as Vicente meant ‘welcome’.

All this had taken place around Christmas, but the execution of the remedial plan had to wait a bit. The huge quantity of concrete they would need was not so much the problem, but the heavy girders which had to carry the floor would cost a fortune, let alone the transport. To get information they’d driven together in Apolinar’s delivery van three days before to an industrial area at Málaga, to a manufacturing company whose owner would produce the metal joists at cost price. With himself at the wheel and Vicente, who could not drive, beside him in a somewhat threadbare black suit reeking of mothballs, his builder’s hands in his lap - an old farmer going to town in his Sunday best - they had spent most of the journey in the primitive cab behind the noisy, throbbing engine, in silence. A conversation produced ever more complications and neither of them was much of a talker. At the factory they had walked around in a group - Vicente speaking to the manager and Victor pointing out the appropriate metal joists. If funds allowed, they would be able to begin the job the following spring.

Towards six Apolinar came along with lemonade and a dish of meatballs that his wife had cooked. They broke off from work for the snack and went and sat on some boxes in the nave. Apolinar who had newspapers available in his bar had also brought along a spare copy of the previous day’s paper especially for Chano who could then cut out the football photos. After Chano had eagerly inspected the sports section and provided a commentary, he leafed through the rest of the paper, stopping at a photo of a sandcastle.

‘*¡Que maravilloso...!*’ he cried.

Bending over the paper the others looked at the photo of a three-foot high sculpture of entwined mythical beings gazing horizonward. That must be Ostend, thought Victor immediately, but that’s not the SandArt style. He tried to decipher the words underneath. ‘*Oostende, costa Belga*’, sure enough, ‘*Primer premio*

para el Irlandés Brian O'Donully.' Jasper sat next to him! Never heard of the Irishman - must be a newcomer - and to win Ostend straightaway!

'*Increíble...*' said Apolinar in admiration.

'Do you see that, maestro...', said Chano, '...sand!'

Vincente looked at the photo thoughtfully, his head with his grey spiky hair leaning over the paper. His black eyes pierced the paper seeming to take in every detail of the sand sculpture.

For a moment Victor saw before him the quiet office of SandArt... and himself staring at a newspaper photo of a bizarre cathedral under construction. '*Muy bonito,*' said Vincente, '*muy ingenioso...*'

Chano intimated he would like to help with something like that, and Vincente agreed - he'd really like that too - if he were young, he said. 'Isn't it beautiful?' Chano asked Victor.

He nodded, very beautiful, and took another meatball.

It was silly how much pleasure it gave him... reflecting on the life that he had turned his back upon.

The rest of the time the three worked on fixing the roof tiles over the rose window. About thirty feet above the door a temporary scaffolding had been erected, on which work was being done to the connecting roof to the future great dome. Making the trusses and rafters had taken weeks, because Vincente still worked with his medieval peg joints whereby each hole had to be bored through with a large auger and each peg knocked in absolutely securely by hand; nails were used only to fix the battens to the rafters. The installation of the trusses and fitting the rafters also cost a great deal of time. A few days previously they had put a supporting joist in place, on which three trusses had to fit, but twice the whole thing had come apart again because nothing went together properly. When, for the third time, Vincente turned up with spirit level and plumb line, Chano had, in comic despair, threatened to throw himself below.

Now the joist was finally laying properly they had to position its companion immediately adjacent. It was already getting towards eight but if it were brought

up then they would be able to begin fitting the rafters first thing the following morning. Down below they secured the beam to the hoist rope and then someone had to climb up to the top of the building in order to man the treadwheel which had been mounted at the highest point. Vincente was already looking at Chano for, in their father-son-grandson relationship, the youngest was usually detailed to do the donkey work.

‘Ah, the poor little shrimp!’ exclaimed Victor and leapt into the church *himself*. Of course, it was silly - the oiled rope on the wheel ran so smoothly over the pulleys that it scarcely made any difference whether there was a heavy man or a skinny one in the wheel, at least, not with one beam, but this was one job he just would not willingly deny himself.

The treadwheel had been the first thing he had noticed when he arrived at the building the previous year. He had not been able to believe his own eyes. He had only seen such gigantic man-powered windlasses in books entitled ‘building in the twelfth century’ or suchlike. But it was typical of Vincente to solve the problems of hoisting materials this way - cheap, ingenious, and dependent only upon manpower. Even the great cathedral builders of yore occasionally had hydraulic cranes at their disposal, hadn’t they? He had assembled the wheel in his workshop at home during a cold winter when no other work could be done and it was a masterly example of the carpenter’s art, thought Victor, of which the old Arduro, the builder, would have been proud. He must have been sick to his stomach to have seen this son, of all people, go into a monastery.

He had now reached the uppermost scaffold platform where the wheel stood. He released the leather belt which kept the machine on the brake, gave a signal below to where the other two stood either side of the beam looking up, and stepped into the wheel. Vincente called out that he could start, but very slowly, so that the beam would not begin to swing. He set off and got the wheel moving.

The wood and ropes always creaked violently to begin with. From the slatted framework of the treadwheel he could not properly observe the lifting operation himself but could hear by the comments below that everything was going well.

When the beam, suspended in the air, was evidently quite stable he heard nothing more because Vincente and Chano had to hurry up to the staging on the scaffolding in order to pull it in when it reached the right level; that's what you had to do when there were only three of you.

Slowly and steadily, Victor walked the wheel step by step. It stood some forty-five feet above the hilltop; through the spokes at the side you could see the road, the scenery and roofs of houses. The Andalusian light, often pitilessly hard at this time of year, had become softer because the sun was already low and, moreover, kept hiding off and on behind cumulus clouds. A donkey cart came along the road, riding into the village; the farmer on the donkey was talking to a man on a moped who rode so slowly alongside that he kept swerving. From the other direction came a child, riding a shiny purple bicycle in the rapt and careful way that children ride when they have no bike of their own but have to try out a friend's new one. The farmer and moped rider both turned their heads to watch him. The wheel creaked rhythmically under his footsteps. In the trees around the cathedral an army of crickets sat chirruping. He heard Knak's bark, who at the sound of donkey hoofs always ran outside and stood at the top of the steps trying to agitate the beast... beneath, the footsteps of Vincente and Chano on the scaffold platform... he caught snatches of the laughter of young people and the deeper buzz of old men, and it all flowed together into a harmonious background sound.

In this wheel you felt like a galley slave, or a white mouse which, tired of running round in its toy wheel, had changed to walking pace - but he could happily keep this going for hours. He liked the privacy of the softly creaking circle, which was like a sort of cage, a cage with a grand view of the world beneath- It was a pity that it always lasted such a sort time: a beam, a set of stones, a gargoyle... they were up in a trice. Plain brute force was all that was needed - a bear, or a gorilla, if you like, could have been doing this; but at that moment he was enjoying it. He felt useful in the wheel; more useful to Vincente and the cathedral than when he was giving 'architectural' advice. As he walked along in this medieval lifting contraption, slowly and lumberingly, but steadily

with arms hanging apelike to the fore, each step seemed like a conquest, a small but clear pace forward in the monk's laborious work being accomplished there. He had, of his own volition, become a humble cogwheel in the ingenious machinery of Vincente's imagination.

Chano called out from below that it had gone too far. He came to a halt very gently, not too suddenly, leaned backwards smoothly and took a few cautious steps backwards until they called that it was enough. Afterwards he again waited, hands on the spokes, and saw between the slats how a few feet below him the ropes were attached. Now came the most delicate work: inch by inch he again walked forwards to give the two men below the opportunity to pull in the beam and position it. When that was done, Chano called out not to fasten the wheel yet. While they were there they hooked on a tub of wood offcuts which had to go down below and began to cram the tub as full as possible with wood, rubble and other rubbish which was taking up space on the platform.

Victor was standing still and thinking of Felix. He always thought of Felix when he was in the wheel. How often had Felix disappeared suddenly into the revolving door of a hotel or department store when you were out walking with him, or shot through the turnstile of a park or theatre? Once they had come across a building site where a giant wooden cable drum with steel wire was standing and Felix was keen on staying to watch. The site had been fenced off so he could not get near but had stuck his umbrella through the bars and tried to get at the drum by rolling it, much to the surprise of the building workers, who had shouted that he could also come inside and play in the sandpit! At which Felix would have gone in had he not pulled him away.

Actually, he felt that he was walking the wheel 'in Felix's name', as if he were, for the time being, observing his brother's fascination for rotating objects. Even when he looked at the wheel from the ground, he did it, as it were, with Felix's eyes and he felt his legs itch to get in and run round.

One night he dreamed that he was recovering from a serious eye operation, so had to spend a long time lying in the dark. Not a glimmer of light was allowed to penetrate the bedroom. It caused him no suffering, on the contrary, the darkness which enveloped him was like sweet sleep. At one point, someone had come into the room and said, 'We're going to put a light on.' He was terribly frightened. No, not a light! He need fear nothing, he was told, his eyes were heavily bandaged. It was just so his family could see him.

He had awoken in panic.

From the day that he had arrived in Spain he had wanted to let Felix know - just to say that there was no need to be worried. In the first few days, a telephone call would have been best as Felix would not have had a chance to have become worried. However, he had put off making the call. Then a letter or card perhaps.

During the time he was still in Alhama de Granada he had bought a misleading postcard of Madrid from the local bookshop with the intention of giving it to someone who had to go to Madrid to post there, but the card remained unwritten. Sometimes he saw it lying on the table when he came into his hotel room, tired, burned and with blisters on his hands, then the thought struck him that his family must be worried, but the thought was a casual one like reading in the newspaper about a disappearance and thinking - lousy for the family - and forgetting it as soon you turned the page. He simply could not think about them. He wanted to be free of everything in his former life and writing a card, however short and businesslike, would bind him to them in an unbearable manner.

Just after he had moved in with Pilar, he had sat down one evening to write a letter to Felix, but that got even less near to posting. In this respect he seemed to be held back by some unseen hand from giving away any token of his existence.

This had lasted a few months. Thereafter, however much he thought about Felix he came to the conclusion that he did not want to put his brother at ease. Felix's uncertainty, his despair, possibly about whether he was alive or dead deepened his solitude. It was as if that solitude, would not be complete enough if Felix were to be put at his ease. Not that he wanted his brother to suffer, he

wanted that least of all, but he had the feeling of forming with Felix an invisible balance. Felix's uncertainty formed a counterbalance for his catharsis. How precisely that worked he did not understand well himself, but the work at Vincente's cathedral became more significant through the counterweight of Felix's uncertainty.

Sometimes his cruelty tormented him. I'm living on the sadness of my brother like a vampire on another man's blood, he'd think - and then in order to ease his conscience he'd call up the face of Pleuntje in his imagination. He'd then think: it'll not come to that, there was a strong woman watching over him.

Chano gave a sign. Victor felt the weight of the tub pulling on the rope, and walked backwards at his ease, holding back the slats under his feet - because the tub was wanting to descend fast - and delivered his load to the bottom.

The sun had disappeared behind the clouds. The air was full of swallows which in gliding, acrobatic flight dived on mosquitoes, while high in the air their cries faded away. Why in heaven's name then did he suddenly have to go and think of Bregstein - and he laughed at the thought of his face if he could have seen him there, in that shabby Spanish village walking the tread wheel belonging to a religious dreamer.

Far below he heard the sound of the rubbish tub landing on the stone terrace. The rope slackened. He stopped and remained standing idly in the wheel.

The sun appeared above a heavy cloud and threw a long golden ray across the grey. The heavens opened and laid down heavenly pathway to the earth. 'Hail Mary, full of grace..., ' he said to himself - for you cannot go a year in Spain unpunished. 'See how your commission prospers. The second girder is already in position above the doorway. Your elect monk works himself into a sweat together with a failed architect and an apprentice cook. For you, Most Exalted One, just for you.'

He looked out across the road leading out of the village, but there was nothing more to be seen now. Yes there was, the child appeared again in his field of

vision; he was putting a spurt on, riding back into the village standing on the pedals, hot with hair streaming. It was a fantastic bicycle.

* * *

While Pilar was putting the finishing touches to a salad of meat and beans left over from the midday meal, the dog stuck its cheeky head round the corner of the kitchen. She chased him away, but decided a little while later to give him his dinner right away then she would have no more trouble with him. She put some raw meat into his bowl - stomach, heart, butcher's offcuts - and took it to where Victor, wine glass in hand, sat gazing.

'*Para el señor...*,' she said and put the bowl down for the dog which gobbled up the contents in ten seconds, watched by an amused Victor who always liked to watch the animal eat. She could take the bowl back immediately and wash it.

The dog was the only point over which she and Victor had ever had a difference of opinion. When he had moved in to Pilar's they had come to an arrangement about the rent, a small amount of which was to be for 'fresh meat for the dog'. But besides that he had once driven to Alhama in Apolinar's van to stock up with tinned food and dog biscuits which were not available in the village. In practice it came down to her giving the dog tinned food mixed up with stale bread, potatoes, left over vegetables and chicken bones. Those latter, however, Victor would not have. The animal had to have fresh meat.

She could scarcely bring herself to pay out good money for such things for a dog. The absurd waste in buying meat from the butcher for a dog which already had a whole shelf of luxury tinned food in the cupboard! Eventually, Victor had said that he would the dog's meat himself and therefore he would not need to give her money for dogsmeat. That would have wounded her pride for sure. The very idea! - her lodger *himself* going to the butcher! Ever since then, she had provided fresh meat and at that moment the butcher was helping her out by keeping back all the offcuts for the *Hollandés* pampered dog.

She put the bean salad, with bread, tomatoes and fish on the table and a little later the three of them ate together. Already, for weeks on end they had been able to eat out in the courtyard, so long and cool were the evenings. Manolito told a drawn-out incomprehensible tale in which there may have lurked a joke, probably told that afternoon by someone in Serafina's shop. Victor listened silently and let out a powerful '*magnifico*' to which Manolito gave a side-splitting laugh. Her son had been more talkative recently. He found it wonderful that he spoke better Spanish than the foreign lodger.

It was a beautiful evening and already it was beginning to grow dark. At the end of the courtyard and in the pear trees doves were cooing. Neighbouring children were singing a counting game and jumping around in clattering wooden sandals. The canaries were giving a last little trill before going to sleep.

They cut more bread and poured some wine to go with it, then Pilar stood up to go and get the flan.

Because there was little of the midday meal left over and also not much left in the house to add to the evening meal, she had made a caramel flan. She seldom cooked a flan - she was not so keen on it herself - but it was her experience that men liked it. Her Justo - for example - you could give him no greater pleasure than a caramel flan on a Sunday.

In the kitchen she turned the flan out of its baking tin on to a plate, poured the thick caramelised sauce over it and returned.

'Hmmm...' cried Manolito instantly.

Pilar set the plate on the table and glanced at Victor. Victor looked at the flan but said nothing. He stared at the pudding as though he was seeing something unusual.

'Caramel flan!' said Pilar. '*¿Te gusta?*'

He did not answer. His sunburnt face - he had got very brown at the building in the last few months - looked withdrawn, with pensive eyes, so that Pilar was reminded of her husband for a moment - the last weeks of Justo's life, when he had been able only occasionally to sit at the window - when he had been often\

so deep in thought that he had not heard her come in. Thoughts she had never been able to share. Thoughts of death, she had assumed, although the only time she had asked about it, Justo had said - ‘No, of life.’

‘*¿No te gusta?*’ she asked.

He looked at her and she saw that he had needed a few seconds to return to reality.

I don’t know him, she thought. What do I know of him? What a strange man he is, for sure.

‘*Sí, sí...*’ he said with a smile, ‘*muy bien.*’