

Back from Nigeria, 1979 (Part #2):

This 2nd of 3 segments of this journey covers the arrival in European territory followed by an unexpected 6-week delay in Andalucía:

January 27 (*Las Palmas International Airport/ enroute to Malaga, Spain*)



Only 5 minutes after takeoff from Las Palmas, I am looking down through porthole frost at the dark brown length of Lanzarote. Damn cold out there! Most fellow passengers (still strange to be white among whites) are in thick jackets. My clothes were even too thin for Las Palmas. Won't Malaga be even colder? Just as I was immediately shorn upon arrival of the lush imagery evoked by the name "Canary Islands"—best forget about 'sunny Andalucía' and be prepared for ball-freezing rain...

As for the last few days in Las Palmas, let me splurge a few paragraphs:

Friday night (*Las Palmas, Gran Canarias*)

I was initially excited upon landing back in "white man's country" (as the Nigerians would have it) late last Friday night. In stepping through the plane hatchway, I was encouraged that the night air was only marginally cooler than that of Dakar.

On the bus from the airport, the excitement grew. The clean but empty streets offered the reassurance that back in the 'industrialized world', tidiness and order—so often glaringly absent in Africa—could be expected. Then the date palm and cacti in yellow street light seemed to promise sunny dry weather—a welcome change after the mugginess of the West African coast.

That was just before rain began spattering the bus window. 20 minutes later at the curbside of the 4-star Hotel Iberia, I stood beside my hockey bag in a cold downpour. I hailed a taxi for "*un hotel barata*", and for 100 pesetas, the sullen driver dropped me at another hotel, only marginally less expensive than the Iberia. Cursing the bastard, I dragged my hockey bag aimlessly along through the puddles. (What an asshole—never would that happen in West Africa!) Sopping wet and clammy cold, I made my way along a gaudy Corniche.

"*Hay algun hotel barata cerca aqui?*" I queried the few passing tourists under their umbrellas. While most ignored me, one tubby grease ball growled and tried to push me off the sidewalk. Another old German creep asked if was ready to share his room.

Finally one Good Samaritan pointed out the way to Hotel Cayamaya. *Dos estrellas* were a couple of cuts over my head, but for the night I had no choice.

Welcome to Europe.



Saturday (Las Palmas)

The rain did not let up until late afternoon. Still, when it eased to a drizzle around 10:00 AM, I walked along the Corniche. Passing through the maze of hotels, bars and snack shops among pale and curious European faces was at first— mildly titillating. But as with carnival fun-rides and hashish, the kick was short-lived. After an hour, I was eager to get away from the garish vulgarity as much as from the rain (“First January rain in ten years,” the boy at the Cayamaya reception desk informed).

I did manage to send a telegram to the Royal Bank in Victoria, B.C. giving instructions to send a draft for \$1000 to the Banco Americano, in Almeria. Also, I made an unexpected purchase at Bazaar Montreal—a \$45 automatic watch. It was a little rash, considering how short the funds are until the draft arrives. Still, the wrist no longer feels naked.

When the rain finally ended, I took a walk along the ‘beach’ (if such a narrow, dun strip of sand might be called such) below the boardwalk, behind hundreds of white bodies prostrated towards the wane sun, which broke only momentarily from a cloudbank. A myriad of other tourists— white legged and glum— were hunched with drinks at cafe tables. As the chill blustery wind that tore at their table umbrellas, some scowled at the grey sky—possibly feeling robbed of their expectations of a tan.

After washing clothes in the bathroom sink, around 9:00 PM I walked out again. The Corniche was now lit up like a carnival swarming with vacationers eager to make up for the lost day. Oddly alienated among the sea of white bodies, I searched out the few black faces that passed. They mostly belonged to Senegalese traders hawking wooden elephants from the sidewalk. There was one African, looking no older than 20, with hand on the waist of a grey head white woman.

I trekked yet again up the entire length (no less than 5 kilometers) of the Corniche hearing the same trashy muzac spewing from the replicate bars competing for the same would be studs, whorish girls, bored greyheads or gay honeymooners. All the while, I absorbed more furtive stares to the right side than I’d felt in years.

Amid the decadence, there came poignant flashes of Africa: The old woman talking of her son on the ferry crossing from Freetown, the little blue-scarfed schoolgirls in Dakar; or little Dube with her New Year’s Eve sparklers. In such images, a few tears welled up.



Sunday (Las Palmas)

In sheer boredom, I slept in late. Out for food around 11:00 AM, I stepped into a cold blustery wind. With thin clothes billowing like a scarecrow's, I wove through the back alleys of the claustrophobic tourist quarter that abutted the Corniche looking for a cheaper hotel. I found a room for 375 pesetas in the Hotel Catalina a few blocks outside the tourist cluster. Still, if the traveller's cheques are to last until the draft arrives from Victoria, I will need to further cut my daily budget.

Later in the afternoon I walked around the scummy docks and Santa Catalina Square. After only 36 hours, I was fidgeting to get out as soon as possible from this geriatric playpen.

I bussed out to the airport and made a booking for Wednesday. Then with stomach still churning from a vile slice of pizza (olive and anchovy) I returned to my hotel room.

I lay under the covers with a *Herald Tribune*, reading as slowly as possible to make it last. Among the slowly masticated tidbits was an article that quoted the results of a recent *Playboy* survey: *'the average American male in 1979 is a homebody chiefly entertained by electronic or printed material produced by someone else...'*

Not even back in North America yet, and here I am already unconsciously squeezing into the norm!

Monday (Las Palmas)



Still growing more stir crazy by the hour, I bussed back to the airport to forward my booking to Tuesday and then decided to save money by staying all night at the airport.

On the bus back to the hotel, I realized that the key to the lock on the hockey bag zipper was missing. It occurred that I probably left it on the hotel lobby counter when the desk clerk jarred me with the old query: *"Que pasa--un accidente?"*

Back at the Catalina hotel there was a different desk clerk, friendlier than the one earlier in the day. When he checked his drawer and told me that no key had been turned in—it seemed just one more kick in the groin. When I asked him where I could find a locksmith, he said: “*No problema. Espera uno momento.*”

In a few minutes he emerged with a pair of pliers with which he managed to spring the lock. The now useless key had been locked inside the bag. Along with profuse thanks and apologies I offered the Good Samaritan clerk 50 pesetas— which he refused to take.

I taxied back to the airport (another 100 pesetas) where I left the bag with the *consigna*. Then just to kill a couple of hours, I took the local bus to the south side of the island. Along the winding highway, under the bare brown mountains were mammoth resorts with Florida real estate inspired names (Miami’, Mirimar, Buena Vista). The only town, Maspalomas, was even uglier than Las Palmas.

After 40 years of fascism, how disappointing, it seemed, that Spaniards are increasingly becoming the maids, the bartenders, whores and gigolos of Europe. It also occurred that the locals observed on the street, on shops and in buses of Gran Canarias looked so much unhealthier than Africans. So what improvements have been wrought by the ‘rebirth of democracy’ here?



Back to the airport in late afternoon, I settled in for an all-nighter. With the saving on hotel allowing a little extra on the food budget, I splurged on the *comida del dia* at the airport restaurant. Not only was the costly meal mediocre—but there was the added hassle of having to pay with traveller’s cheques at a bad exchange rate.

After the bland food, I settled in on a lounge sofa with the Guardia Civil cop pacing on the beat behind. His babyish face looked silly matched with his capes and sinister *tricornio* hats. Therein I recalled from the fall of 1971 in my sojourn in Andalucia— the sudden silence falling upon a bar upon the fearsome entry of *un Guardia Civil*... Possibly catching my sneer, the young *Guardia* continued to eye me as he made his passes— finally stepping over to grunt and motion for me to remove my socked feet from the end table.

With no book to read, the afternoon dragged slowly into evening. Finally, halfway through the night, I struck up a conversation with the girl at the table next to me. She was French, from Bordeaux—and knew a little English. She was also a little shy, perhaps due to her acne. With goodwill and effort on both sides we managed to chat through the rest of the night. I showed her my Nigerian photos and smoked 2 of her *Gauloises*. By the time she left on her flight in early morning we’d exchanged addresses and promises to write.

January 27 (*Las Palmas-Malaga*)



Sore backed, sore bellied and crusty-eyed— I checked through the departure security gate. While this wait was nothing compared to the ordeal in the Lagos airport, by the time the Iberia flight was called, I was groggy with fatigue.

Still, with the clear sky, the view though the 2½-hour flight was spectacular. In watching the waves crawling in barely-perceptible slow motion upon the minutely wrinkled Atlantic, I was reminded of the heaving mass of maggots in the toilet of buddy Celestine’s clansman Dollars, in his squalid apartment back in Kano city. Also amazing was the view of the island of Fuerteventura—long and reddish like a *papier-mâché* model.

As we descended towards the Malaga airport, the snow peaks of the Sierra Nevada loomed above the city. I anxiously noted that even as the tires hit the runway, the frost on the rim of the porthole did not melt. Fortunately, in coming down the plane ramp, the air didn’t seem much colder than that felt going up the ramp in Las Palmas.

We were met on the soil of Europe by a little unfolding drama. An ambulance howled up and loaded from our plane what appeared to be an incubator. As the ambulance roared off, the attendant on the tarmac jerked up his thumb and smiled. So the ‘preemie’, rushed to the Malaga hospital, would have every chance to live.

What chance would an infant like that have back in Nigeria? There, only the luckiest maternity emergency cases get to be treated—even in the unsanitary clinics in Hadejia Emirate. I then recalled Tamar O.’s horror tales of infant mortality (“*Always one twin dies here—I don’t know why! These young girls in the bush who need caesarians—kai, they suffer before they die!*”)

A half-hour after stepping off the bus at *El Centro*, I was too tired to resist following the first old tout who approached me. He led me to a claustrophobic building a few blocks away, up 3 flights of rickety stairs and down a narrow hallway—rather like the entrance to a backstreet abortion parlour. The black-shawled old Senora at the door demanded 325 pesetas (as much at the 2 star Cayamaya!) When I protested – she held her ground wheedling that she was poor. In no mood to lug my bag a block further, I paid up: half the cash no doubt going into the pocket of the rubby-tout.

While la Senora’s old husband (no wonder she dressed in black!) thick-handedly scrawled information from my passport into the government form, I looked up to the top of the TV stand where yellow lottery tickets were tucked under the bust of a grotesquely bleeding Christ.

With the burden of the hockey bag dropped on the creaky cubbyhole bed, I headed out for a little nourishment. Warmed a little by the “atmosphere” of a tapas bar, I headed back out into the chilly air for a brisk walk above the town to the castle, which commanded a view of the harbor. With the feeble sun and cold rain threatening— there was no mistaking that I had left the tropics behind (*‘O, for a beaker of the warm south!’*)

But the gloom was momentarily lifted in seeing grandparents lifting their grandchildren onto swings and wooden ponies. This Spanish adoration of children is definitely a saving grace. Still, what of the whining brat on the airport bus? That was behavior that no mother in Africa would have tolerated....

January 28 (Malaga-Almeria)



Up at 5: 30 AM, I splashed numbingly cold water on my face and headed out into a black freezing morning. Maybe I should buy a warmer jacket or another sweater. (But can I manage any more weight?)

I got the first bus to Almeria—a 2½-hour winding ride along the Mediterranean with only occasional winks of sun as we wound among the rocks and cliffs. Hardly an acre of arable lands was wasted with orange and olive groves— even bananas under plastic tarpaulins hugging the cliffs to the sea’s edge. It is just the latest iteration of the imprint of 2,000 years of unbroken ‘civilization’... Such a contrast, it seemed, from the stretches of ‘unexploited’ agricultural potential in over-peopled Nigeria...

I got to Almeria around 11:00 AM. Across from the bus station I immediately recognized the same tequila bar from 8 years ago. What other mundane memories will be rustled in the next few days?

I checked into the same Hotel Embajador, where my village mate and I, craving hot baths, ‘cheated’ our budget on the morning after landing back from Melilla in October, 1971. Despite the pleasures of *calefaccion y agua caliente*, the lumpy bed smelled moldy. It was definitely a lousy deal for 500 pesetas.

After dropping the bag, I went to Banco Hispano Americano. I did not expect, of course, that the draft could possibly have arrived yet but just to introduce my face, I cashed a Traveller’s cheque.

Back at the hotel, I washed clothes in the sink, unpacked and combed the streets for an English newspaper. Hopefully, I will not have to wait longer than 4-5 days for the draft to arrive. After just a few ‘nostalgic’ hours in Almeria, I was already bored.

January 30 (*Almeria*)

Relentless rain...

Hoping in vain for the downpour to abate, I waited by the window while the maid (with a sighing glance at my sleeve) swabbed down the toilet.

Beyond the window, an old woman was taking clothes from her balcony and in the filthy alley an old man in beret was puffing a cigarette. It occurred that unlike me, the old fellow had earned his right to take it easy. Yet there I was pissing away my time.

When the maid left, I tried in vain to get back to sleep. Finally without hope of a let up of the deluge, I headed out holding *el Diario de Almeria* over my head. In a shop off Calle Belen, the main drag, I bought a cheap umbrella.

In the meantime, I have decided to stay one more night in the Embajador and take an excursion on the morrow to Granada. I can even indulge in a little nostalgia with a stopover in Mojacar. When I get back from Granada— with any luck— the draft from Victoria will have arrived.

I am evermore determined to get moving as soon as I get the draft— even if that should entail cutting short this boring trip and getting back Vancouver. Even in a northwest winter, the prospect of spending a couple of months holed up in a modest room with my trunk of books and electric typewriter, is far more appealing than 2 months of European hotels.

January 31 (*Almeria- Hotel Pariso, Garrucha, Almeria Province*)



Still raining!

Shaking off a bizarre dream (mocked by a circle of dwarves with bobbing strapped on phalli?) I climbed up to the roof patio to remove my clothes, I had hung out to 'dry' overnight. While there were still sopping wet, there was no choice but to pack them.

I waited at the hotel until the noon check out time upon which I dragged my bag to the bus station. In waiting for the 1:30 PM bus to Garrucha, I read a *Blanco y Negro* article on Spanish Neo-Nazism.

When we set off, I glanced up from my *Blanco y Negro* for glimpses through the dirty window of the reddish brown moonscape, remembered from the 1971 travels. By 2:45

PM, the bus was winding out of the mountains through orange groves along the coastal plain towards Mojacar.

The town of Mojacar itself, with its distinct sugar-cube stacks of villas, first appeared in the distance as we wound north along the coast highway.

As the bus drew closer, I tried to evoke memories of the sojourn there, 7½ years ago. Yet was I really in the mood for nostalgia? In winding through the groves after the hamlet of Turre, I began to feel as self-conscious as Orwell's George Smiley (*Coming up For Air*) having his second thoughts about coming back to his boyhood village.



I got out at the foot of the Mojacar hill with the heavy blue bag on my shoulder and started hoofing up the familiar road. A couple of young Germans who had also got off the bus were walking ahead. Momentarily catching up, I asked a blonde fellow, in Spanish, if he could suggest the name of a *pension* where I might stay. He looked at me blankly. I asked him in English—then in Bad French—but he continued staring with a smirk. Tsking, I fell back and continued up the hill—past unfamiliar luxury hotels, new villas and an underground parking level dug into the hillside. Familiarity only leapt forth in emerging at the top of the hill into the town plaza— and seeing across the square, the Indalio Hotel.

I walked across the cobblestone into the Indalio bar. The first impression was that it was shabbier than 8 years ago. After using the *aseos*, I asked the boy at the bar if there were rooms. His negative grunt suggested that “my type” (whatever may have been communicated by my appearance) was not welcome thereabouts.

I looked around at the pair of French girls at the window table, swooped up my blue bag and walked out. Although it was plain that I had better get down the hill to find accommodation before dusk, I had to check out the old flat where my village buddy and I rented for 2 months in the fall of 1971.

In trudging up the main street, I noted that the unfamiliar row of tacky gift shops. Then halfway up the hill was the church and the school, as remembered.

A half block further up, I stooped up beside the familiar 2 story white-washed building—also unchanged. There was even the same street level bedroom window where the thief had jumped in, got into my closet, and stole my funds—which forced me prematurely back into a claustrophobic Canadian winter.

Yet the greatest curiosity lay to the right at the end of the alley. There it was—unchanged— *El Sarten* Bar (same frying pan sign), where our British flat mates, Chip and his beautiful wife, Eileen, worked. *El Sarten* was also where my buddy and I ended up drunk and stoned at least 3 nights a week. After glancing down the street to the left and noting that “Sammie’s Bar” (eponymously hosted by the flamboyantly gay American) had become “Frank’s Place” (“*El Famoso Frankburger*”) I’d seen enough...

Before leaving the near empty village, I dropped by the grocery store across from the village square where chocolates bars had been the highlight of so many bored afternoons. The girl at the counter (perhaps in noting that I had no intention to stick around) was friendlier than the boy at the Indalio bar. She told me where to catch the bus to the nearby market town of Vera. I glanced towards the mountains and the village of Turre, to the north, then turned on my heel. Thus, within 20 minutes of the bus drop, I was heading back down the hill.

The lesson?

Just as Orwell’s George Smiley learned—best steer clear of nostalgia! Old memories dredged forth, invariably putrefy. Leave them where they belong— deep in the Dreamtime recesses.



For upwards of 45 minutes, I stood hitchhiking on the beach before a pair of young Englishmen in a Renault picked me up and dropped me in Garrucha. Hoping to get to Vera before nightfall, I waited in vain by the roadside until dusk and then reluctantly headed back into Garrucha where the girl in the tourist office suggested El Paraiso Hotel a couple of hundred meters over the hill on the edge of town.

Luckily, they had a room: 210 Pesetas. I shelled out 70 extra for the hot shower I didn’t use... I took supper alone in the dank and cold *comedor* and afterwards nursed a brandy while watching Loony Tunes in Spanish on the black and white TV over the bar. At the table beside, a group of middle aged Englishmen took their brandies and coffees—seemingly charmed by Spanish ambiance.

So this is an *adventure*?

February 1 (*Vera- Granada*)



I was out at dawn, with an awkward thumb out for Vera. After half an hour without luck, I hailed a bus, which luckily made an unscheduled stop. I got off in front of the same gas-station café, where 8 years earlier, waiting to head north to Barcelona, I read Dostoyevsky's *'The Idiot'*. Apart from the microwave oven on the counter, the bar hadn't much changed.

In a brisk walk around the unimpressive market, I recalled the Sunday morning 8 years ago, I'd slept in and missed market day. After the 1½-hour wait, the bus arrived which delivered passengers (50 pesetas for barely 15 minutes) to the tiny train station at Zurgena. Under a birdcage and beside a batty old beggar, I waited for the train to Granada.

When the train pulled in at 1:00 PM, I found a nearly empty compartment. I stared out the window through 6 hours of rocky desolation, waning sky and increasing cold of the Sierra Nevadas. Late in the afternoon, we passed through the famous cave city of Guadix. Like swallow nests in a gravel pit, the hillsides were honeycombed with caves—many with brightly painted wooden doors, chimneys— even TV antennae.

After Guadix, the mountain scape grew more wind-swept and desolate. As we pulled into Granada just after dusk, the rain changed to sleet. Freezing (colder than Vancouver mid-winter rain) in my thin corduroy jacket, just a block from the station I took a chance on the Hotel Terminus: another dim room with a musty smell and another squeaky bed. As the graffiti scrawled on the wall proclaimed, it was: *'Muy frio—muy, muy frio!'*

I had a *café con leche* in a bar down the street, where a fish-mouthed teenager grotesquely mimed a pop-song blaring from the café jukebox. Back in the icy chamber, I shut off the light (the wattage to dim for reading) and listened to the footsteps and sighs of a black-shawled old lady limping back and forth outside the door.

February 2 (*Granada*)



Buttoned into my 2 shirts and pullover, I headed out to look for a cup of coffee and a better hotel. Numbed to the bone by icy rain, I took cover under the dripping canopy of a bar. The sight of scrawny orange trees made the cold penetrate even deeper. And worse—

there were the taunting images of just 2 Sundays ago— swimming in the aquamarine of Lumley Beach in Sierra Leone. If I hadn't been in such a headless chicken rush, I could have spent a couple of weeks upcountry in Sierra Leone. I could also have spent some time in Ghana or Liberia. Instead I was eager to rush north to this!

By noon, buoyed slightly by a cleaner room with *calefaccion* and a brightening sky, I headed out in blustery wind towards the Alhambra.

In no mood for inspiration, I saw only a manicured cactus garden surrounding a cold heap of muddy rubble. So that was apparently the site of Christianity's most important political victory after the conversion of the emperor, Constantine? Saving the 25 peseta admission fee to "*El Museo de Reyes Catolicos*" for a bottle of Coke, I did poke—along with a sprinkling of fellow tourist stoics—through the *Generalife*. I plucked a wizened orange from the courtyard amused that a few centuries ago, I would have lost a hand for filching it.

There was some amusement in watching Japanese tourists playing with their costly camera gear. If this be the stuff of travel—cameras, hotels, banks, restaurants, and traveller's cheques— my heart is just not into it...

Still, a glance up into the snowline of the Sierra Nevada reminded that there were at least 2 months to kill before heading back to Canada.

February 3 (*Granada- Motril*)



I took the bus out of Granada at 10:00 AM. We followed the route due south—a dangerous scenic twist down through the mountains to Motril, on the Mediterranean.

Pleasantly relieved to feel warmer air, I decided to stop for the night. After finding my latest cheerless cubicle, I killed time staring glumly towards the greyish Mediterranean from a church step on the hill.

Below me kids were playing. I watched intently, trying to guess whether their game was of spies, cowboys or soldiers—and who were the bad guys. Seeing one kid dodge his friends, run behind a tree and carve his initials—for a moment I recalled the very different landscape of another boyhood: the caw of a crow, the whine of a chainsaw; snow spitting from a grey sky onto a hillside of bare poplars. Yet our games were probably very similar...

By 2:45 PM, I was back in my cubicle. Before scrawling the latest installment of my 'prison notes', I took down the lithograph from above the dresser (A Sevilla Senorita)

and with a dash of spite, scrawled on the back, similar graffiti to that seen on the wall of the Hotel Terminus in Granada: '*Frio frio— intolerable!*'

February 4 (Motril- Almeria)



I got the 9:00 AM bus back to Almeria, slightly cheered by milder temperature and sunshine. From the bus station I walked immediately up to Banco Hispano Americano. The scrawny foreign exchange clerk leafed through his papers. As expected—there was nothing yet for me.

After looking for cheaper accommodation should I need to stay another (dreaded) week, I checked into the cavernous Hotel Andalucia (*una estrella*) soon to discover to my horror, that I was the only person in residence under the age of 70. There were more shudders in the cavernous *comedor* when I was seated among ancient Spaniards labourously lifting forks to twitching maws. Meanwhile, the sighing octogenarian at my table, ignored her soup while tugging plastic baggies of pills from her dusty purse.

I was ready to bolt up and flee just as two younger men, possibly nurses' aides, sat down across from me. Just seeing darker hair, and ruddier faces seemed reassuring! I was heartened by the coquettish smile of one old lady who, with her fresh make-up and bright blue dress, refused to count herself among the dead (Bless her!). As I stomached through the bland soup and dry *chuleta cerdo*, I vowed that as long as I maintained a claim on this life I would regard its enjoyment as duty...

Later in the afternoon, sitting on the park bench by the ferry dock, I talked with an old soldier. He said he fought for Franco during la Guerra Civil, yet claimed now to be a socialist:

"Porque el P.S.O.E. [the socialist party] estan de nuestro lado— del lado de los trabajadores. Y el lado de personas como nosotros—los discapaciados." [The handicapped].

As he touched his own paralyzed arm, he nodded to my empty sleeve.

Only then I realized why this old Spaniard was the first in the last week to engage me in a chat. At that moment, it seemed bitterly appropriate that I should find such solicitude in Andalucía only among the old and *discapaciado*.

February 5 (Almeria)



Out at 9:00 AM, I cautiously (or pessimistically?) carried my umbrella despite the fluffy clouds. Fortunately, the sky did clear by late morning and the rest of the day was sunny and mild.

I spent the afternoon in El Castillo Alcazaba, overlooking the city. After 10 days of chill and damp, how sweet it was to absorb first hints of an Andalusian spring. I sat on the back wall in the sunshine reading Conrad's (rather disappointing) "*Under Western Eyes*."

Yet there was a panic when I missed the *siesta* front gate closure and was locked inside the stone walls. At 3:00 PM, just before I was ready to make a risky clamber over an adjoining rock ledge, the gates reopened.

Hiking back down towards the harbour, I stopped in a bar crowded with Yankee sailors. Overheard therein, one of Brzezinski's pimply sailor boys boasted of his adventure in one of the pig-snorting back alleys I'd overlooked from the castle wall: "*Lotza cunt up there on whore hill. It'll cost ya 250 to get yer dick sucked and just 200 for a jack off!*"

As crudely as the sailor put it, I couldn't help wondering whether the 210 pesetas spent on my mediocre novel might have been better invested.

Back to the cubicle before dusk, I crawled into the sleeping bag. Determined to get every peseta's worth—I pushed further on into Conrad's murky world of 19th century espionage.

February 6 (Almeria)



Upon awakening I was shocked by the face in the dresser mirror. What is aging me more here—the freak stares in the streets or the torment of waiting?

Unable to sleep past 8:00 AM, I tried to avoid looking at my watch all morning, hoping that the hand would jolt quickly forward to 11:30 AM—the opening time of the Banco

Hispano Americano. Coming in the doors precisely as the Guardia unlocked, I headed straight for the foreign Exchange counter but got slapped by the goggle-eyed clerk's curt answer: '*No hay aqui!*'"

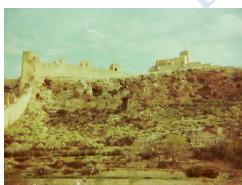
Half in panic— half in a daze— I stumbled back into the street. Something was dreadfully wrong. And whatever it was—my patience was being tested—to the limits.

The days already spent hunching back in dingy alcoves itchy haired, chewing slowly every word of *Herald Tribunes* (or any printed matter in English) have already left me tormented with the obscene waste of time. But without funds—what choice was there? What if I were to die here and now? What accomplishments could I claim? How could I account for the last 28 years—let alone the last 2 weeks?

Surely, a letter sent from Canada can't take longer than 2 weeks! To confirm that it was sent at all— I decided to phone the bank in Victoria again tonight.

I spent the rest of the morning climbing around the Virgin's pedestal (today windier and cooler). In that walk I decided that instead of making the call at a cost of no less than 1000 pesetas, instead I could check into the *dos estrellas* Hotel Fatima for one night. Even in one night in a room with a comfortable bed and hot water to bathe and wash my clothes— the spirit might be lifted. With the draft cashed, even tomorrow I might be back to a *dos estrellas* budget.

February 7 (Almeria)



It was no easier to kill the time before bank opening this morning than it was yesterday. First in the door again after the 11:30 AM *en punto* opening, the gut-punch from the same goggle-eyed clerk hit even harder the one delivered yesterday.

"*No ha venido nada!*" he snapped, looking past me to the next customer.

Nerves twitching, I paced the streets until noon checkout time and then moved into the cheaper *Pension Universal*. I got through the afternoon with my *Time* magazine savouring every page as one shipwrecked might chew rations. All the while I sneaked peeks at the minute hand that crawled teasingly towards 5:30 PM.

At 5:20 PM, I walked slowly as I could to the telephone office. By 6:10 PM, I had the bank in Victoria on the line. The draft, they said had been sent on the 22nd of January (yes!) Although overcharged by 2 minutes (100 pesetas/minute), I gladly paid the 1200 pesetas and walked into the wind grinning. Within 47 seconds—the grin vanished. January 22nd? That was more than 2 weeks ago!

The certified cheque *must* have arrived: Senor Ichabod must have it. He already has my signature, passport number and ID. He could steal it! How could I have been so fucking stupid?

Even with a bottle of cider, the evening passed no less painfully than did the afternoon. Added to the torment was the rumour heard in the lobby that that there may be a bank strike tomorrow. With that— I could have at least 48 hours to wait.

February 8 (*Almeria*)



Stark awake by 5:00 AM, I was convinced of foul play with the money draft. I agonized through the minutes before 8:30 AM, then passed awkwardly before Banco Hispano Americano until 8:59 AM. When I tried to open the door, the security guard waved me away.

“Huelga! Hay un huelga!”

Christ yes— there was a strike. So I would have to wait at least until Monday? Fucking impossible!

Almost beside myself with anxiety, I strode for the park. Zombied, I hiked through the dreary circuit— to the end of the park, along the harbour, then up the hillside to the pedestal of mother Mary. So it was by speed walking, I was able to burn off the panic. Back in the dreary room at dusk, I crawled into the bed and reread the *Time*. Mercifully, consciousness was lost by 8:00 PM— jumping the clock forward a few more hours.

Ad. Note: There was an unexpected discovery today in walked through an alley El Castillo Alcazaba. In front of a row of shacks was a row of stacked cages of shivering monkeys. Were they smuggled up from Africa? What a miserable existence—caged in a shabby private zoo. I shivered for the fate of fellow creatures...

February 9 (*Almeria*)



I was out at 9:00 AM in a spurt of hope—maybe this will be my last day to kill. Maybe after today, I will learn again to relish every hour. It was cloudy, with rain threatening. After coffee, I walked to the park and for a change of scenery— straight out along the

Malaga road. I climbed up the cliff to the lighthouse. On the scramble back down the rocks, I was yanked out of my daze by a jolt of pain. Twisted ankle!

I sank to the ground and spat. After a few minutes of massage, the throbbing subsided. I cursed the fucking Batta sandals bought in Kano. Straight into the trash they will go!

Back to the harbor front park, I rocked on my gimpy foot and had a rare chuckle before the bumper cars in reading the gateway sign: '*ninguina baja ocho anos*': no one under 8 years old. In that I recalled the frustration standing before the same sign at Old Orchard Beach, Maine, one month before my 8th birthday...

At 1:00 PM, in hopes of better news on the morrow, I treated myself to a '*dos tenedores*' lunch at the Imperial restaurant. As soon as I sat down, the foot began to throb. Twenty minutes later, I had to hobble out in pain.

Though it was only mid-afternoon, I had nothing to do but sleep. Yet even with the throbbing foot and aching back, there was the sense of approaching closure—that tomorrow afternoon this time I might—just might—have the keys to escape this cell.

February 10 (Almeria)

The draft has arrived!

In first hearing that from Ichabod, the bank clerk—I was overjoyed. But even as sat grinning in anticipation of the doling out of large bills, he frowned.

"La firma! Hay una problema poco con la firma. La firma!" he repeated as he mimed a scribble. So it's the signature. It seems that he is not sure that the signature on the certified draft is legitimate. He said he needed to check "*el libro*" with the authorizing signatures of all the international banks. He said he would consult his Madrid headquarters for advice.

"Necessita esperar un poco mas," he said looking beyond me to the next customer.

Despite the snag, I left the bank deeply relieved. At least I know now that that the draft has not been lost or stolen. I can certainly manage to wait another day or 2.

As I limped around town on my sore foot, I decided to ditch the earlier plan of taking the night ferry across to Morocco. Instead, as soon as I get the \$990 (I'll ask for traveller's cheques in U.S. dollars) I will go directly to the train station and book a ticket for Barcelona. With luck, I should be on my way by noon tomorrow.

February 11 (Almeria)



Sometime during the night, I changed my mind and decided to take the Almeria-Melilla ferry after all. By heading down to Marrakesh for a couple of weeks I could stay south until the weather begins to warm. There would also be something of restitution by completing the journey aborted in the timid retreat from the Moroccan border town in Oct. 1971. Around the beginning of March I could swing back north though Ceuta and then Portugal.

At 9:30 AM I was eagerly back on the wooden chair before Senor Ichabod's desk. As he grunted, shuffled papers and looked down at me over his spectacles, the familiar icicle tip of despair jabbed into the stomach.

'No podremos cobrarlo!' Scowling, he held the draft before me like a piece of toilet paper. *"Tenemos que saber que la firma es valida."*

Looking closer, I could see typed-over blotches on the paper. Jesus! A wallop of rage surged through me. So am I suffering for the incompetence of some little shit in the Royal Bank in Victoria, B.C.?

While I waited, Ichabod called his *jefe*.

El Jefe, motioned over to the desk, was beefy and bespectacled with an iron-grey crew cut. So he was to be the arbitrator. He looked me over like he was the principal of a reform school. He clearly didn't like the shabby jacket and the unshaven face.

With a shrug, he pushed the draft at me. *"Prueba con otro banco... Le diran lo mismo."*

Try another bank? What was the point when the draft was addressed to Hispano Americano?

"Adalante!" he said, shooing me off.

Stunned, I left with the cheque pinched between thumb and forefinger.

When I duly showed it before the wickets of 2 other banks, I not the least surprised when told to go back to Hispano Americano (*"No es nuestro problema!"*)

So within 20 minutes I was back at Hispano Americano begging with the righteous *jefe*. He and Ichabod grew increasingly prickly. Before stepped away to deal with worthier customers, *El Jefe* said he could send a telex to the New York Clearinghouse asking to

verify the draft. I would have to pay and there was no certainly as to how long I would have to wait for *la contesta*.

Meantime, Ichabod informed (with touch of sadistic glee?) that *la huelga* was on again for tomorrow. The bank would not reopen until Thursday.

“*Hasta viernes*”, he said, waving me away.

3 days to wait! As if kicked in the head, I staggered out. At the nearest kiosk I bought a pack of black cigarettes, stepped into the nearest bar and ordered a brandy.



A half hour later, fueled by brandy fumes, I struck up a conversation in the harbour front park with a pair of aging British freaks. They told me their plans to get work as orange pickers had been dashed by CIA money paid to local farmers to keep the oranges rotting on the trees— a covert operation, they claimed, designed to prevent the Russians from buying the crop.

Though flat broke, they pulled bread, cheese-spread and onions from their knapsack and made us each a sandwich. It seemed that travelling rough had nurtured their generosity.

As we munched, a sickly looking German freak wandered across from the harbour and informed that he had just got off the ferry from Melilla after 3 months in a Moroccan jail. The friendly Brits offered him an old *Frankfurter Allemeiner* (“Toilet paper!” he sneered, waving it away). A moment later, a wild-eyed *borrocho* stopped and bummed some tobacco. *El Borrocho* wandered off as the discussion turned to blood banks. Seems that 1400 pesetas (200 more than the cost of my phone call to Victoria) could be had for a liter of blood plasma.

The more wizened of the two Brits explained the process: “They just take the plasma out, man. They put the blood right back into ya. The doctors say it only takes just 2 days to come back.”

He went on to say that this cash-for-blood business was a social welfare program, Spanish-style. It keeps *borrochos* and riffraff from dying on the streets.

“If you sign a release form, man, you can get 5,000 pesetas from fresh blood drawn straight from your jugular.”

I smiled, embarrassed to have whined about difficulties with cashing a bank draft.

Meanwhile, another German wandered along. He said he was from the crew of a shipful of juvenile delinquents sailing the Mediterranean as wards of a social program for wayward German youth. The youth worker reported that the supervisors were having a hell of a time keeping the kids on board—they were jumping ship, running off with girlfriends; stealing cars...

After the Germans wandered off, my British acquaintances invited me to join them at a cheap *bodega*, a short walk away. Starved for company and already primed with the brandy, I heartily accepted. We spent the afternoon, tipping back cloudy *tinto* wine and huffing Ducado black cigarettes. The old British freaks listened and chuckled while I blabbered away shamelessly about Nigeria. I even showed them a few photographs. After 3 weeks alone, I had finally found an audience.

When the last bottle was empty, I took my new friends back to my *pension* to give away my magazines and the cursed pair of sandals. As soon as I entered the room I flopped down on the bed, head spinning.

“Can I piss in the sink?” asked the one with grey in his straggly beard.

“Be my guest,” I muttered before spinning down oblivion’s drain hole.

I bobbed up at dusk, rolled out of the cot and vomited in the sink. Head spinning, I tugged at my neck pouch. Mercifully, it was still there. Even the watch was on the floor at the bedside. So I did not misjudge friendliness—but still, how could I have left myself so vulnerable? Parched and nauseous, I twisted on the bed until dawn.

February 12 (*Almeria*)



Worse than the temple-screwing hangover, was the anticipation of killing the hours of another empty day.

The only escape of the dim cubicle was the same 2-hour circuit: from park to castle, monkey zoo back to castle, back to park; repeat zoo, castle, and park. I must be a regular fixture now—the empty-sleeved scarecrow hunched forward on his twice daily treadmill around the city. Christ, with another day of this I’d go mad!

In a stab for variety—I threw away 100 pesetas on the cinema. Judging by the posters and the lineup, the hottest movie here is “*Saturday Night Fever*.” I swore I’d avoid it since first hearing of the popularity of ‘disco’ in a *Newsweek* article. In the extremity of boredom this evening, I relented. With the Spanish listening practice and the mildly titillating amorous scenes it was amusing enough. Still, as a pop cultural phenomenon—

it seemed even tawdrier than “*Deep Throat*” seen 5 years ago with a similar rationale in San Francisco.

Back in the cubicle in late afternoon, with nothing to read I replayed memory tapes of the previous 2 years. Most poignantly, I recalled Christmas Day last year, the day before I departed Hadejia:



After packing my hockey bag, I steeled myself to dispatch my last 2 chickens: the brown mother hen and her pullet. The mother hen had been with me more than 6 months and had grown almost tame. She always clucked softly and came almost to my hand when I spilled out the feed.

Joe Kotoye, the science teacher neighbour, came over to help. I pulled her from the cage and held her feet while Kotoye gripped the knife. First we slaughtered the pullet. She had been injured two days earlier by curs nipping though the cage wire. She expired with hardly a shudder. But that mother hen squawked and screamed—more it seemed with fear for her pullet than with her own terror. With those screams still echoing in ear, strange it was a few minutes later to scrape my thumbnail along her rib cage, and pull out the warm viscerals. In that moment I recalled from ‘*Grapes of Wrath*’, Steinback’s description of the Joads’ killing chickens before their exodus.

That afternoon, I went with Celestine to the room of his Igbo brother, ‘Medicine Mike’, for a bottle of Crown Lager. I sat with Celestine on the bed while the ex-Biafran soldiers sipped Old Smuggler’s Whiskey and rambled on about their lost cause.

After leaving Medicine Mike’s, Celestine took me on the back of his Suzuki to the compound across from the hospital to say goodbye to Ngozi, Mike’s ‘nursing sister’ girlfriend. Ngozi’s younger sister from Kano was visiting for Christmas Day. Ngozi, in a bathing wrapper and plastic thongs, flapped in from the inner room smiling and holding out a bowl of Christmas cookies and menthol candies. When Celestine mentioned that tomorrow I was leaving “finally”, her face fell.

Later, Celestine and I headed back to Joe Kotoye’s for supper—*jollof* rice with my dear stuffed chickens. No matter how hard I tried to ignore him—Balingo, the mutt I’d ‘adopted’ 8 months ago wouldn’t leave my feet under the table. Again steeling myself, I resisted patting him.

Later lying in the bed on that last night, in the cold bare bedroom (even the curtains sold) I tried not to listen to the sound of Balingo on the outside step, whining and scratching at the door. When I looked outside into the greyish dust of that last harmattan dawn—he was gone.

At 7:00 AM, Mr. Beg, the Indian Maths teacher neighbour pulled up under the canopy and honked on schedule to give me a lift to the motor-park. It might have been any other Sunday morning in the 2 years past—any other of his regular lifts to the market. Only this time as I went around shutting off lights before the final departure, he fidgeted. On the way to pick up Celestine we spoke in the same polite formality as always—but this time, he blinked and daubed his eyes in a most touching way.

Again—I had to steel myself.

Nightmare Image: The old cold house in my native village is under renovations: the north wall is knocked out and a 4-foot wide concrete foundation is coming up. Inside the bare foundation is my senile paternal grandfather with tubes in wrists. The tubes lead beneath him to a strapped up but twitching dog with a metal cap sparking with electrodes riveted on its skull. Balingo?

February 13 (Almeria)



In the last few days, I've been haunted by a strange notion: that this entire trip, beginning from the harrowing ride to Mutala Mohammed Airport, had been a delirium: that after a crack up with a taxi, I have been lying in a coma in a filthy Nigerian hospital, suffering the torments of this 'vacation' trapped in the Twilight Zone.

Still, hardly less chilling is the near certainly that these misfortunes, mundane in themselves, cannot be ascribed to bad luck alone. Given a few more ounces of shrewdness would I be in this mess?

Tonight I am confined to the cheapest *pension* I could find: *Camas Virtudes*, seemingly a rest home for dying widows. I spent the morning trying to steel myself for yet another week in Almeria. Even if I had books, I could scarcely read under this 20-watt light bulb. Even with the sleeping bag, I can't avoid the itchy pillow and the *imagenes corazones sagradas*, barb-wired sacred hearts, above the doorway. At least my shelter cost is down to 160 pesetas a night. I might well have stayed on at *pension* El Universal, had I not been informed that the prices were raised 35% effective that day my rent was due. Probably just a nudge to move me on lest I get any notions of staying the winter—the reputation of *pensiones*, no doubt determined by the quality of their guests...

Today I had to change the very last \$20 bill squirrelled at the bottom on my bag. Unless I want to join *los borachos* in the blood bank queue sooner than I care to—I'm down to a budget now of 400 pesetas a day maximum. The only extra I dare allow myself henceforward is a *Herald Tribune* every 4 days. It seems that I'm either at the mercy of the whims of the telex reader in the Williams St., New York City, clearinghouse (can he

read Spanish?) or the bastards in Banco Hispano Americano, Almeria are lying about having bothered to send the telex message at all.

Saturday morning, I walked to Hispano Americano, prepared for the worst, yet tantalized by that irrepressible flicker of hope. The manager took one glance at me, puffed his cheeks and expelled a big “No!”

I was stunned. What the fuck was going on? So now with the rotating strikes expanding to a national-wide bank strike starting on Monday—apparently the first in 40 years—I am truly screwed.

So again: is this just bad luck—or is there something of a blind will to self-defeat?

It is not that I am without practical judgment. It seems rather than in critical moments, I ignore it. If I’d followed my better judgment, I would never have taken my return journey through West Africa. With Nigerian funds (which I ended up exchanging for 20% of value in Togo) I could have bought a ticket to India with a stopover in Cairo or Nairobi.

Even given the itinerary through West Africa—I could well have planned it to avoid sending money to Spain (Still, how in hell was I to know about the rotating strikes?)

I did not have to rush to Europe before the end of January. I could I could toured upcountry in Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire or Senegal. I might have visited towns much cheaper than the capitals or even taken advantage of the ‘volunteer’ network for a few nights accommodation. (No question that connections— wherever they can be found— always ease the way). I might have even made use of the CUSO connection in Freetown and asked for help in getting U.S. dollars wired. (Or stopped over in Liberia which uses the greenback as local currency).

Even given the folly of ending up here in Almeria—I might still have found someone whose English was better than my Spanish. If I’d been accompanied to the bank by a local *padre*, for example, the draft would have been cashed *en seguida* with a smile. Yet in my stubbornness to skitter nervously about *soltero*— no surprise that suspicions were raised.

Still, I have no choice but to make the best of the fix I’m in. At the very least—I need to calm down. With no fewer than 3 empty days ahead, I either have to do something worthwhile—even if that is just learning not to panic over that which is beyond control...

In that thought, I considered the *Herald Tribune* photo of Ayatollah Komeini holding prayer beads and looking out the porthole on the plane back to Iran after his years of exile in France. I considered the serenity and self-possession in his eyes. Indeed, perhaps all things truly do come to those who know how to wait.

Ad note: 'The lizard's tail still twitches under the claw after the lizard scurries free': A possible image for a poem?

February 14 (Almeria)



What can be more comfortable than the feeling of being safe and warm in the dark—shivering in sensations almost as sweet as sex? Thus, before dawn this morning, in a thunder and lightning storm with lashing rain—I drifted blissfully between sleep and waking.

In the steady rain, I slept in to 9:30 AM. With no sign of clearing, by late morning I pushed up the umbrella and headed straight out into the gusty wind. I was barely around the corner before my umbrella blew inside out. Cursing out loud, more carelessly than usual, I turned the heads of a few Americans as I stepped into a cheap bar for a coffee and cigarette (Yes, back into the nasty habit—although limiting the intake to no more than 3 a day). I lingered at the bar rail until the rain stopped, then slogged to the bus station to check out the schedules. Even within this bare-bones budget, perhaps I could have a change of scene in a nearby village.

Around noon, the skies cleared although the wind continued gusting. As I stood by the harbour watching the whitecaps combing in over the grey Mediterranean, the same wild-eyed rubby who by now knew me as a regular—tugged my sleeve for alms. I dashed him the usual few pesetas before heading out again along the breakwater to the lighthouse. North, south. east, west—I'd slogged the same dreary circuit dozens of times already. Tramping along in the cold bluster, I was unsettled by a darker thought: Suppose this isn't yet the nadir? Suppose things are to get even worse?

Walking along past the yachts—reading the exotic names like Blue Eagle, Grand Cayman Princess—I could for once understand the pursuit of wealth. In having swallowed whole the 'moral' view that wealth invariably corrupts—perhaps I was only being a compliant peasant, conveniently satisfied with a hopeless lot. My eyes watered in the blustery wind.

Maybe I should have stayed longer in Nigeria. Perhaps I could have even considered betrothal there. I thought of the one night that 'nursing sister' T.O. played housewife—serving drinks to the visiting Vice-Principal. I remembered her playfully putting on my glasses and squinting: *"In ten years time you'll be so blind I'll have to lead you around by the shoulder!"* No, the worst fate was still not to be poor or even to be stuck in bleakness and grey: the worst fate is to grow old *soltero*.

February 15 (*Nijar, Almeria province*)



I am enjoying a change in environs— if only for a couple of nights. As a reward for holding the line on my 500 pesetas a day budget, I have taken an excursion out of Almeria until the banks reopen on Wednesday.

From the map on the bus station wall, I first decided upon San Jose, a *pueblito* 40 kilometers up the coast. With nowhere to go after checking out of my room at 10:30 AM, I hung out at the bus station until the bus departure at 1:30 PM. Fidgeting, close to despondency on the trip out— I was jolted up from unpeeling the latest disturbing dream images to the cries of the little girl, huddled in her mother's arms looking fearfully from the seat across at the scarecrow in rumpled clothes.

By 2:30 PM we were in San Jose, a seaside summer resort, spectacularly set behind a horseshoe beach and overhung with cliffs with a Moorish watchtower shadowing down from the highest promontory. As in Mojacar, there were the clusters of villas, cold as ice-cubes stacked halfway up the slopes. Yet apart from the shopkeeper of a tiny grocery store, his daughter, two dogs and yet one more suspicious Guardia Civil, the village seemed as if it were razed by a pestilence. At the near-empty bar above the beach, the red-haired bartender gruffly shook his head when I asked about *pensiones*. Nope, there were there were definitely no *habitacions* here, no *pensiones*, no *heuspedes*—at least none on offer to scarecrows.

Moments after my arrival, the wind was howling from the north and the rain splattering. Still I was determined not to waste my 75 pesetas in bus fare, determined to stay out of Almeria if only for one night. For an hour, I waited in front of the bar for the bus back to km #13, the Capo de Gata cut-off. It was a 60 pesetas fare to gamble on, but Nijar was supposedly a bigger village—surely there was a cheap bed to be had there. In the midst of driving rain, I was let off the bus in the middle of a desolate plain, where the wind screamed as if funneled through a wind tunnel.

With my black umbrella flapping, I took refuge behind a wall of a construction site about 100 meters behind a gas station. After 20 minutes when the rain slackened (the wind still furiously howling) I stepped out only to be nearly eaten alive by a pair of killer Alsatis, chained to a dump truck. I barely jumped beyond the reach of their chains before their jaws snapped.

Numb with cold, I waited under the gas station canopy for the Nijar bus. To keep my mind off the cold, I wound through more old memory tapes—this time rolling back to the summer of 1959—remembering a 3 day cub-scout camp at Yoho Lake, New Brunswick.

Then came a bit of luck. In an unexpected act of kindness, the gas station attendant let me sit inside on the bench. Instead of having to wait until nearly dusk for the Nijar bus, at around 3:00 PM, the attendant even arranged a ride for me to Nijar with a friendly transport truck driver.

So within minutes of having my ass chewed off by killer dogs, I was sitting high in the cab of a transport balling the jack through the rocky desert. What a relief it is to be to Nijar before dark.

Nijar was an authentic village (*i.e.*, no tourist villas) perched on the side of a mountain. After 25 minutes weaving through the narrow streets, I found a cheap *habitacion* (175 pesetas) bought some bread and bologna and locked myself into my room. However dim the light bulb—it was immeasurably brighter than that of *Las Camas Virtudes*.

February 16 (*Nijar*)



I woke to the sound a coke commercial-type jingle blaring from a megaphone on the back of a truck plastered with posters of the *Partida Comunista de Espana*.

With the not unpleasant prospect of killing a day in new territory—I was out at 9:30 AM. First, I walked back along the Almeria road a mile or so to check out a Quixote-like windmill, which turned out to be ‘*El Molina Discoteca*.’ Come spring no doubt, it would be livelier thereabouts.

Undaunted by snarling dogs (seems every second villa is chained to a canine killing machine) I continued trekking across country and dropped into a ravine out of the wind to consume my bologna and tomato sandwich lunch. Afterwards, I hiked to the top of a windy bluff for a spectacular view of the town and surrounding countryside. Treading carefully in my slick-soled street shoes, I edged down past bell-tinkling sheep, maneuvered past the chain radii of more killer hounds then joined another road back to Nijar.

After picking up yogurt and bananas in Almacen Spar, I was off again—clambouring up to the *torre moro* directly over the town (recall the kid shouting “*arriba, arriba!*” into the wind behind me) On the lee side was soft green grass and spring-like growth.

As I rambled along a goat path into the narrowing upland valley, the feast of subtler colours evoked old Keatsean images. After nearly 4 kilometers of trekking, I reached the mountain hamlet of Huebro, where I stopped to take photos of a grazing black goats and

a curious little grotto shrine. Apart from a farmer pruning almond trees, a shepherd and another pair of nasty dogs— I met no one.

With the light fading, I headed back down the trail, getting back to the *pension* around 6:00 PM. Taking a chance on going 10 pesetas into the hole on my budget; I gave in to the stomach groan and took supper in the Restaurant Monte (175 pesetas).

It was a fine day—an interlude most welcome.

February 17 (*Nijar-Almeria*)



Pulling the drape cord on the window to behold a wonderful mountain rainbow— it seemed an auspicious sign. Still, out in the open the wind was stiff and cold— and rain was again menacing.

The bus back to Almeria wasn't until 3:00 PM and there was no shelter. Damning the bluster, I upped umbrella, and started down the road. It was 25 kilometers to Almeria— too far to walk—but I was ready to walk half of it just to save a few pesetas on bus fare.

Another spot of luck (another nickel spit from the slot machine) the Montes restaurant proprietor was heading into Almeria for supplies and recognized me from last night in the dining room. Thus, I was back in Almeria by 10:00 AM. I stepped out of the car to find the streets glistening and the gutters roaring. Again, I was lucky to have missed this drenching by 15 minutes (Pop! A dime spits out...) Back to the same room in the widow's rest home, I snuggled into bed and 'studied' the latest *Herald Tribune* until 5:30 PM before heading out for a coffee.

Leaning over the bar, I could hardly help but smile. I'd kept to my budget—managed since Saturday on less than 500 pesetas a day—and I had kept sane...

The strike was over. Tomorrow the bank would reopen. The telex message may or may not have arrived. I had less than \$15 left. If it was "*no contesta*" again—I'd have no choice but to take the cheque and demand from the manager a letter stating why he refused to cash it. I'd have no choice then but to head for the British Embassy in Barcelona or Malaga. On the collateral of the cheque, I could ask for a tide-over loan. At worst, I might have to get all the way to London to have the legitimacy of the "English" draft accepted. Any way I look at it—I have to be prepared for the worst.

At the same time, I resolved that the assholes in Hispano Americano will not get another ounce of my blood.

February 18 (*Almeria- Madrid*)



Though I was prepared for the worst— yet again— Banco Hispano Americano delivered beyond expectations.

“Impossible!” I said to another clerk, a softer eyed man, summoned by the iron *el jefe* to translate what I had already understood all too well.

“It is possible. It is so!” said the translating clerk whose English was scarcely better than my Spanish.

I pleaded with the English-speaking clerk who told me to come back at 10:00 AM after the manager phoned Madrid. On the way out, he said with a touch of sadness:

“Honestly, if I had the power, I would give you the money. These people here are like machines. No human touch.”

At 10:00 AM, the gruff *jefe* informed me that Hispano Americano in Madrid had received nothing on their telex.

Then after nearly 3 weeks of stalling, the cowardly *jefe* finally disclosed what I should have known from the beginning— that he had no intention of cashing the draft. It matters not whether he thought me a con artist or whether he was just exercising his power in setting obstacles before a ‘type’ of *extranjero* he would rather his country would ban outright.

Yet in his final declaration of refusal— *El jefe* added injury to insult. Although when the draft first arrived, he had practically thrown it in my face to take round to other banks— this morning he refused to release it to me. Yet rather than fight to at least get possession of the draft (I might well have threatened to go to the police) I stood there stunned.

“You’d better go to Madrid,” said the human clerk.

I opened my wallet and showed him the 400 pesetas I had left.

“If you like—I can lend you money.”

“I’d appreciate that, “ I said, “Otherwise I’ll have to sell blood.”

Pulling out a crisp 1000-peseta note, he glared over at *el jefe*.

The manager just shrugged, patted his iron-grey crew cut and walked away. No skin off his ass.

Cowed by defeat, I took the proffered bill. “Thank you for showing humanity,” I said in English.

“A human touch,” he intoned, proud of his generosity on behalf of the bank.

Most sickening was the thought that after being subjected to such humiliation, I had allowed *el jefe* to believe his bank was being charitable... Indeed, if I had any self respect, like the British hippies, I would have refused the loan and sold a pint of blood—if necessary, straight from the jugular.



Still stunned, I rushed to the train station and picked up a ticket—1,200 pesetas for the Expresso train to Madrid departing at 1:30 PM.

At the station were the same pair of Saskatchewan nurses, briefly met last week and seen a few times afterwards gloomily circuiting the streets. Maneuvering their aluminum backpacks sideways aboard the Barcelona train, they returned my wave. Their looks of distress suggested that their European tour was turning out as disappointing as mine (Still, as a fellow Canuck, I could have been friendlier).

At 1:15 PM, I stretched back and propped feet on the opposite cushion. Sore throat, hungry and weak with only 100 pesetas, I was headed north into the dead of winter... For a couple of hours, I almost managed to doze...

9 ½ hours later, still stunned, I stepped out under the vast canopy of the Madrid train station. At first the air was not quite as sharp as braced for but I immediately saw that no one passing was as thinly dressed as me. Everyone who zigzagged past—including the beggars—was swaddled up. The idea of spending the night in the unheated station vanished as the cold gradually penetrated my tatty sweater. Even if it meant starving—shelter had to be the priority. But what could I get for 300 pesetas?

A grizzled night porter approaching seemed to be reading my thoughts.

“*Habitacion barata?*” he obviously knew to emphasize ‘*barata*.’

I attempted to bargain but a 250 pesetas rate was the lowest he would go. Sighing, I followed him outside the station and down a stairwell into the warmish diesel-tainted air of the Madrid Metro. What a sordid scene it was: Dickensian beggars receiving coppers in handkerchiefs spread before them. Some has infants laid on mats, inches from the

stampede with scrawled placards ('*No trabaja*' ... '*tengo hambre*') propped against the grimy wall behind. There were all manner of cripples, too—along with a line of *ciegos*, whining against the hollow thunder of the trains with lottery tickets pinned to their chests. Then of course were scores of *borrachos* in all stages of inebriation.

The night porter guided me through the Felliniesque labyrinth of tunnels and up stairs again to the now-searing cold outside the entrance of El Sol Station. Up an alley about a block away was the *Pension Soledada*. We ascended two flights of rough wooden steps and a claustrophobic wooden ladder. Down a narrow hall and in a windowless closet was my 250 peseta bed.

February 19 (*Madrid*)



Up at 7:00 AM, I emerged from sleeping bag into stinging cold. After numbing my face and hand in the communal sink, I clamoured down the spiral ladder and tapped the knocker for *la senora*. She emerged sleepily from the toilet yet brought me, as requested, *los paginas amarillos* where I looked up the address of the Canadian embassy.

Outside, the snapping cold almost immediately numbed my hand and nose. In front of the Metro wicket my wrist was almost too stiff to open my wallet. With a few questions, I got the Velaquez Station, and found the Canadian Embassy a few blocks away.

In the vestibule, I stammered out my request through the lady behind the Plexi-glass. Through the speaker she advised me to go first to Hispano Americano's central office and only return to the embassy under the most dire circumstances. Even if an emergency loan was approved I should be cautioned that it involved a lot of paperwork and would not exceed \$10.00 (Canadian) a day.

An hour later, at the head of the foreign exchange queue at Hispano Americano, I was promised in English by the sharp *senorita* with heavy breasts that she would phone Almeria.

While I waited for her to get through, I chatted with an American English teacher trying to cash his \$2500 certified cheque from Iran and a Canadian lady flogging a \$50 personal cheque. Both eventually got their money. Fidgeting on the edge of madness—I had the terrible urge to smoke—to suck in deep drags of unfiltered black tobacco.

Finally, the woman got Almeria on the line. Overhearing the conversation, my blood boiled to hear the fucking *el jeje* claim that it was actually he who had lent me the money to get to Madrid (Christ, how sweet it would be to get a claw around his throat!) The girl told me again that she'd have to send another telex to Victoria. It would cost 100 pesetas.

I showed her my remaining funds— a 50 peseta coin. She agreed to waive the fee until the money came through. How accommodating!

Thus, in the meantime I had no choice but to crawl back to the Canadian embassy and throw myself on their meager mercy. This time, I confronted a sharper, colder lady who knit-picked every detail about my problem.

“Under these circumstances”, she informed “we usually wire money from parents.”

When I insisted that at my age that was certainly not an option, she sighed and dug out the multiple forms by which I could start the process of borrowing petty cash from the government of Canada.

She also warned that she needed the vice-counsel’s approval. After 5 minutes back from behind her magi-lock door, she emerged nodding primly: “The vice-counsel says it’s OK.”

I handed over my passport, all my ID and carbons of my telegrams to Hispano Americano for photocopying. I then filled out a two page legal-sized form (which included 3 references) in quintuplicate as well as a promissory affidavit in mere triplicate. After I waited for another 30 minutes by the brochure rack, the lady reappeared with yet another piece of paper. Behind her stepped a bearded young man, French Canadian, barely a year or two older than me.

“I’m the Vice-counsel,” he smiled limply extending his hand.

I jacked up and grabbed it, stuttering forth a summary of my situation.

He steered the talk round to Nigeria. With growing confidence I steered him towards Spanish politics. After a few minutes, the lady brought the cheque along with another form to sign.

“Really, I wish it wasn’t necessary for me to come here,” I apologized yet again as I bent for *la firma*. I just had no alternative.”

“O, that’s what we’re here for,” he chirped, “To help Canadians in distress.” I resisted the urge to say that given the paperwork, selling blood could have been a less humiliating option.

The cheque was for 1700 pesetas— less than \$30 Canadian. Still, back on the street the air seemed less frigid than it did with only 50 pesetas in pocket.

I bought milk, hazelnuts and yogurt and then stopped in a cheap restaurant just outside the *pension*. For 125 pesetas, I splurged on a packet of fish and chips, recalling Orwell’s observation about the urge of the poor and hopeless to gorge on greasy treats...

Back in La Pension Soledada, I moved into a slightly bigger room (350 pesetas) with my own sink. For 50 pesetas more, I bought a hot shower (“*todo la agua caliente tu quera*,” promised *la senora*).

After a Scandinavian-style steam-to-ice thrill, I crawled into my sleeping bag, blessedly clean for the first time in 3 weeks. Reading the “*Directions in Development*” paper snatched from the embassy, I munched salted nuts, momentarily snug as a cockroach.

February 20 (*Madrid*)



This, by God’s grave, this will be the last weekend in Spain to kill. With the room even too cold to pull out my hand to write, I had no choice but to spend 4:00 PM to 7:00 AM wrapped in my sleeping bag. With every cough, there issued forth a jet of steam.

Just as in Granada, I went into the street layered in every filthy article of clothing in my hockey bag—shirt, wool sweater and corduroy sports jacket. Unlike the cold of Granada where the chill rain slashed through the bitter orange trees— the sun in Madrid shone through bright icy air. I hunched along kicking filthy clods of ice, hand jammed in pocket, with exposed wrist stinging and ears twanging with the frost.

Back at the Hispano Americano Foreign Exchange counter, I took without panic the news that the telex still hadn’t arrived. Despite that slight mustering of patience, I still self-flagellated for missing the opportunity to ask the Vice Counsel to telex the bank in Victoria. Meanwhile, there were more realistic grounds for anxiety: the possibility of yet another general bank strike next Tuesday.

In a street kiosk outside Hispano Americano, I bought 2 Winston cigarettes. Too cold to smoke on the street, I waited until reaching the Metro station canopy to furiously huff on one. I then took the metro back to El Soldada, climbed the creaky firetrap stairs and asked *la senora* for a cheaper room. The 250 pesetas cubbyhole at the top of the ladder was already rented out. I still took the cheapest one left for 275 pesetas.

With the claustrophobia soon overwhelming the fear of cold, I headed out for Avenida Atocha. Even in this desperation, how could I have been in Madrid for 2 whole days without going near El Prado? I had to at least walk past the fabled museum even if I couldn’t afford to go in.

The fee, as it turned out, was only 50 pesetas—including *calefaccion* [heat]. For the once-in-a-lifetime chance of spending a few hours with El Bosco, Goya, Breugal, Velazquez, El Greco, Rubens—just 50 pesetas! I could certainly forego a meal.

Despite the decidedly unimpressive building itself—El Prado exceeded its grand billing. The misery of the weeks past was certainly not erased by the pleasure of spending 2 ½ hours shuffling before the Old Masters in an uncrowded mid-winter afternoon—yet that misery somehow made more exquisite the glories.

I was tickled most by Velazquez' *Borrochos* (I laughed out loud); enchanted by Goya's *Brujeros* (shades of Hawthornian blackness) and almost aroused by Bruegal's voluptuous vegetables. I was most awe-struck by every piece of work by the medieval schizoid visionary, Hieronymus Bosch ('*El Bosco*'). I vowed to return when the money arrives and see how these masterpieces look on a full belly.

There was one jarring moment, though. After thoughtlessly lighting my second Winston by Goya's charcoal drawings—I was immediately pounced on by the guard ("*Afuera con eso!*") and made the awkward centre of attention as a gaggle of Swedish tourists clapped hands in approval. Sheepish and guilty, I slinked away.

Back outside, I sunk into a low, trudging along Las Avenidas Grandes weak, hungry—and aching with cold. Back in the cubicle at 3:30 PM, I shivered for yet another 17 hours in the fusty sleeping bag.

February 21 (*Madrid*)



I woke to the coldest Madrid morning yet. With wrist almost too numb to button shirt, I headed out of La Soledada at 9:00 AM straight for the warmer air of el Sol subway. Just to stay warm I rode back and forth on a number of lines for upwards of an hour, before bracing myself to ascend into the icy air. I stepped back out at Plaza de Espana, and wandered shivering along the broad *avenidas* all but numbed to the aesthetics of the classical architecture. As the sun fetched a little higher and the temperature nudged slightly above freezing, the stroll became more pleasant.

Back down Avenida Prado, I happened upon Le Museo de Siglo XIX. The mere 25 peseta entrance fee—also including *califaccion*—made it a worthwhile stop. Still, *el edificio* itself was more attractive than any of the canvasses it housed. The portraits of blue-blood Spaniards struck me mainly as interior décor. In the history room though, there were a few paintings alive unto themselves—such as "*The execution of General Torrijos*".

After 2 hours lingering near the space heaters, I reluctantly headed back towards El Sol Station and into my sleeping bag in La Soledada for another 16 hours of cocooning.

February 22 (*Madrid*)

Following the advice of the Hispano Americano foreign exchange girl, I waited until 11:30 AM before making my appearance. I did my best to heel my apprehensions as I lay in bed, journal keeping (albeit with numb wrist) and munching on the last of my breadsticks. I timed my arrival at the foreign exchange counter precisely at 11:35 AM.

When my turn came, the chesty clerk, with telephone cradled against her neck, shifted to the telex desk and slipped her blood-red fingernails through the stack of messages. In 30 seconds she clunked down the phone and clicked over smartly to face me.

“No answer yet.”

“Are you open tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

There is at least the consolation that the strike was off. This time I’d make damn sure a message got through—goddam sure. With surprising calm, I headed to the Canadian Embassy and make awkward amends for Friday’s omission—the counsel’s secretary agreed to send the telex message to the Victoria bank. Could anything else conceivably go wrong here? Surely, the gods are just a little bored with me by now—surely, they are ready to turn their attention to another plaything...

After the embassy, I headed back towards pension La Soledada, and with 300 pesetas worth of groceries climbed back up the cubicle for a shivering meal. Luckily, *la senora* had not yet hit me up for rent—the Canadian government loan barely having covered yogurt, cheese and breadsticks for the last 4 days.

For a change from the normal cocooning, I headed out for a stroll at 6:00 PM. Even though I hadn’t the money for a *Herald Tribune*, I lingered by the kiosks to read the headlines about the Chinese invasion of Vietnam. Despite this alarm, I strode along with an uncharacteristic spring in my step—was there some chemical in the yogurt? More hopefully, was there an intuitive sense building that these trials had to be nearing conclusion. There was a sense that despite the horrific waste and folly of the past month—I was surely a little wiser—if not a little tougher.

With these encouraging thoughts, I gravitated towards the glitter of Madrid’s ‘*vida del noche*’. A little titillated by the glow of the neon circus, I headed back to the sleeping bag at 9:00 PM. At midnight, I woke the voices of the drunken porter and *la senora* just outside my door. I couldn’t quite catch their words—but I seemed to be the subject. Was it that I was keeping the light on—wasting electricity? Most likely, it was the unpaid rent.

Was the porter suggesting they bang on the door to demand it? Allah, I have really got myself into a tight little corner here.

February 23 (*Madrid*)



Walking slowly and carefully to the bank—I timed my appearance for 10:30 AM. Despite the effort to steel myself—the “no answer yet” came as another gut punch. Yet this morning there was a frisson of hope.

“All the messages haven’t been sorted yet,” the girl said. “Perhaps you could try again at 12:30 PM.”

At 1:45 PM, when my turn came, the girl took my passport and went to the telephone. To relieve the tension of the wait, I struck up a conversation with the Australian lad next to me. He had a similar problem as mine. Seem that he couldn’t find a single Spanish bank willing to cash his Australian dollars. Said he went without food for 2 days. Yesterday though—his number finally came up. He was here this morning to cash another cheque. Then in a most generous impulse he offered:

“Look, people have helped me all the way. I can lend you 1000 pesetas.”

However touched by his generosity, I declined. Looking over at the girl on the phone, noting her expression, I had to hope that the waiting ordeal was soon to end.

Her news that the telex had come through confirming the legitimacy of the draft was oddly anti-climactic. But then came an unexpected jolt—the cheque still wasn’t in the Madrid office. It was still, supposedly, in transit from Almeria. So I was still at the mercy of the cock-sucking *jefe* in Almeria? Hearing that, I vowed that I would gladly spend 10 years in prison for the joy of wringing his bull neck.

Why in fucking hell didn’t I *demand* to take the cheque with me from Almeria?

So it was, with one further scourge of self-castigation that I returned to another night mummified in my La Soledada cubicle. Yet the lady in the Madrid bank did assure that the draft would almost certainly arrive tomorrow. Barring disaster—or by some unforeseen ugly turn of events known only to Allah—in 18 hours I can break free...

Additional note: (Madrid to San Sabastian)



Hallelujah!

I was in near ecstasy watching the teller in Hispano Americano counting out the fresh Yankee bills... Even with the chance to go back to El Prado, I was in no mood to spend another day in Madrid... After the loan repayments (to the Canadian embassy, to the bank for telexes and to the clerk in Almeria for the “human touch” loan), I headed straight for the train station and booked the night train to San Sabastian...

Rolling through snowy fields in the dark, I stretched back in my compartment and sniffed at my novel purchased in the tony bookstore and slugged Spanish *cava* bubbly straight from the bottle. With the train half empty, I was able to stretch out on the empty seat and roll on through the dark in the soundest sleep since leaving Hadejia.

As we shuddered into San Sabastian in the grey dawn, I straightened up a little sour-mouthed with the wine. With a couple of hours before the train reached the French frontier, I strode along the seawall of the charming old Basque capital watching the icy Bay of Biscay waves crashing and spraying. There was definitely a temptation to stay a night and absorb a little of the Hemmingway spirit—yet I was eager to leave Spain behind, lest any more bad luck befall.

Continued in Part #3

From blue checkered hard-cover notebook (transcribed 2015)