

A Galician Summer Eva Roa White

I see the pharmacy at the next corner, I know that this is the street. After 30 years of absence, it is my heart rather than the map in my hand that guides me. Yes, this is it: Calle del Arenal. I walk up the street slowly, taking in step by step the street of my childhood and adolescence. It seems much smaller. I remember playing some version of dodgeball in the middle of this street. We paused our game to give way to cars, but only reluctantly. Sometimes not until one of the drivers threatened to take away our ball. I loved dodgeball. I would brace myself and welcome the full impact of the ball, the stinging pain in my arms and the shock of the hard ball against my chest as proof of my strength and endurance.

Today, with all these parked cars on both sides of the street, it seems impossible that there would be enough room to play anything at all on this street. I have to squeeze myself between the tightly parked cars as I cross the street to the curb in front of my grandmother's house. This is where I used to sit and eat freshly roasted sunflower seeds, spitting the shells as far as I could on the pavement, while I waited for the other children to come out and play. The modest size and ordinary style of the apartment buildings that take up both sides of the street reveal this is a working class neighborhood. Most of my childhood landmarks are still here. The same buildings are now occupied by different businesses, though some of the old ones still remain, like the little neighborhood shop up the street from my grandmother's house and the kiosk further up that still sells newspapers and magazines and candy. Like me, my street has changed, though it has stayed the same.

My grandmother's house has had a make-over. A warm but light yellow, like the beaten eggs and milk mixture of my grandmother's flan, is now covering its three-story walls. The door has changed too. It is no longer dark green and its hallway is no longer open to visitors. Now it sports a buzzer system with numbers, rather than names, for each of the three flats. My grandmother used to live on the ground floor. I remember playing in that hallway, sliding down a well by the stairs coming down from the first floor where a boy I liked lived for a time. On the second floor, my brother lived for a few years with a neighbour while my parents worked in Switzerland to build a life for themselves. We all were reunited in the summers when my sister and I would come back with my parents to visit my brother and my two other sisters who lived with yet another neighbour one street over. The windows too are different. What strikes me most is their new black iron bars. I can still see my grandmother leaning over her bedroom's window-sill in the late evening. This was her favourite time of day. Her chores all done, she enjoyed breathing in the ocean's fresh salty breeze and feeling it whisper away the miasma of the day. There she would stay for hours, with the lights out, until she saw me walk up the empty street with my girlfriends from two doors down, back from a night of dancing.

The house next door to my grandmother's house is gone now. A large hole is left in its place, like a tooth missing from an otherwise well-maintained smile. I take pictures and walk around the periphery of the world of my childhood, taking in the large and small changes. Life here seems to move faster now, though it takes longer to

cross the street. I walk straddling the past and the present effortlessly, without the nostalgia and tears my friends and I were dreading. No, this is a happy homecoming, a visit that acknowledges the past lovingly and without regrets. Walking back to my hotel, I let myself travel back in time to my Swiss adolescence and my Galician summers.

Growing up in Switzerland, I cultivated a strong sense of identity as a Spaniard. But this was out of necessity. Faced with a xenophobic culture, the national pride I summoned when attacked with ethnic slurs helped me keep my head high. The fights in the schoolyard were inevitably to uphold the dignity of my country: a windy, sunny, at times rainy place mainly inhabited by my grandmother, my dog 'Paco', and my many cousins. When things got bad at home or at school, I thought of the beaches and food of home. I lived for the summers in Galicia. The rest of my life was a grey dream that was forgotten as soon as I boarded the train which, every year, took me from Lausanne to La Coruña. In those days, it was not yet known by its Galician name, 'A Coruña'.

The voyage by train was long and tiring because it took two days to cross all of France and all of Spain. It was also tiring because the train was always full of immigrants going back to Galicia for the summer. That and the lack of funds to buy sleeping berths. We were all stacked together, human paying cargo that stretched the metal walls and pneumatic doors between cars. The bathrooms were always occupied and their reek would follow the last occupant all the way down the corridors, slapping full in the face the unfortunate ones who had found no seats and had to crouch in the aisles.

Two days of purgatory marked my passage from hell to heaven. On the trips when we were too poor to buy reserved seats, we would wind up occupying whatever floor space we could find in the aisles of the train. At times, this meant having to stand for most of the trip. When we were too tired to stand or walk the interminable carriages of the train, my sister and I would collapse in a corner, with my parents standing around us, giving us precious inches in which to stretch our sore limbs. I also remember sleeping on blankets on the floor, stretched out while my parents sat next to us, having to move every time passengers had to make their way to the bathroom. No one got angry at the extra obstacles, because most of them had to at a time or another employ the same strategy to capture a few moments of sleep. There was a lot of laughter and drinking and card playing and singing on the train to Galicia. Many of its travellers came from the same region of Galicia and it was a wonder that we didn't all know each other. The tchakatcha-tchakatcha sound of the train gave me a sense of peace and promise. I knew that this was the sound of getting closer to my grandmother and my friends. It was the sound that announced the beach and my dog. My brain seemed to empty as I looked into the dark night pinpointed by fairy-like lights in the countryside. As the train passed some of these lights more closely, I often thought about the little girls inside those houses who were sleeping safe and warm in their comfortable beds while their parents read or watched television. Yes, but they weren't going to Galicia. I was!

The times we were able to afford reserved tickets, things were better. We would happily occupy our seats and hoist our overstuffed suitcases on the overhead racks, next to others similarly bulging baggage. Soon the adults would be swapping stories of home and laughing at the prospect of eating chorizo, fresh seafood, 'jamon

serrano', good olives, and 'turrón'. Everybody shared the food they had brought so that soon there was a banquet taking place in the stuffy, overpopulated compartment. The door to the compartment would remain partially open so that parents could keep an eye on their restless children playing tag in the corridor. The sense of community was thick and strong at those times. But it was not always so. There were times when there were no reserved seats, which meant that the little square wire window that held the reservation number was empty. This was our signal to try and secure the compartment by making it look like all the seats were already taken, so that we could have the compartment all to ourselves. Comradeship then was forgotten for the sake of securing enough space to stretch legs, and maybe even steal a few hours of sleep. We all knew these unspoken rules, and though fights did erupt, most resigned themselves to a sleepless trip, while keeping close to those passengers whose destination was closer than theirs.

When tired of running around the train with as many other children as we could find in our car, my sister and I often played cards, the Spanish baraja, with its beautiful, colorful cards. Mostly, though, I read. These trips confirmed my love affair with books. In Lausanne I would buy three Agatha Christie mysteries in French, which I would read on the way to Spain. For the return trip I would buy three more, this time in Spanish. I also spent a good deal of time looking out of the large panoramic windows, counting the poles the train passed and reading the Italian instructions on the window not to pull it open. 'Non tirare,' which to a Spaniard sounded like 'do not throw away'. Of course my sister and I opened the window. We couldn't resist the exhilaration of sticking our heads out of the window so we could feel the wind on our faces.

I loved it when our train would be briefly or not so briefly immobilised while we had to wait for our train to change tracks. If we were lucky, this left us face-to-face with the occupants of another waiting train. I was curious about those people going into another direction, another place, another life. Sometimes they would wave at us children, sometimes, if they were in first class, they would not; some even pulled the shades down, or closed the little snaps in the curtains to keep them closed. I thought I could hear those little snaps shutting me out of that remote and exotic life of comfort. While those around me slept, I often looked into the night wondering about the people I saw who were living a different life from mine. I watched processions of pilgrims climbing their way to Lourdes, and wondered what was wrong with them. Who was sick? Those lights in the night made me want to jump out of the train and walk with them, sing with them and be a part of the velvety blue night.

All of the Galicians in the train were immigrants going home to visit families many of them hadn't seen in years. They would sacrifice themselves working double shifts and moonlighting, depriving themselves of the most basic comforts, so they could send most of their money back home and help bring another a family member to Switzerland. When they did go back for a holiday, they went loaded with gifts for family and neighbors. They had planned and planned to make sure the visit was perfect. These men and women counted on the memories of these holidays to provide them with emotional sustenance until their next visit. Their dream was to save enough money so that they could go back home and use their training working in Swiss hotels and restaurants to open their own business. The collective dream was to buy a house back home. Many reached this goal though their return was bittersweet. What they

hadn't counted on was that many of their children who were born or raised in Switzerland would choose to make their life in the host country, which for them was home. This was not my case. I always felt like an unwanted guest in Switzerland.

What my grandmother and our Galician friends and neighbors saw was a family who traveled back home once a year, and brought back gifts and the exoticism of living in another land. They called us 'las suizas'. I lived for these trips. My life in Switzerland was a purgatory I must endure for the sake of these two months of bliss, when I could take my Swiss life off like a malodorous garment. In Galicia, everything was shiny and brilliant and more alive. The way of life of Spaniards is very different to that of the Swiss, or at least it was when I grew up. In Spain, one worked in order to be able to eat, drink, and have fun. In Switzerland, one worked because it was the right thing to do. Almost a moral imperative. The work ethic was paramount. In my view, this resulted in very bored and repressed young adolescents. Of course, to be fair, I was only in Spain for the summers; my view might have changed if I actually had had to live there year round.

Although at least five years older than me, my Galician friends took me with them everywhere. I would arrive from Switzerland, usually unannounced, and there they would be: knocking on my door, engulfing me in hugs and kisses and asking what I had brought them. The custom then, and probably still now, is that whenever you went back home, you brought back gifts for everyone. In their eyes, my family had made it: we were living in Switzerland, the land of opportunity; if the streets weren't necessarily paved with gold, in their eyes, they were certainly paved with silver. Like other emigrants – be they Irish, Italian or Spanish – my parents, especially my mother, were not about to let their friends and neighbours know the reality of our circumstances. Yes, my parents made more money abroad, but the sacrifices were great. For years, three of my siblings lived with neighbours in Galicia while the sister who comes after me and I grew up in Switzerland with my parents. The price of this familial fragmentation was an emotional disconnect that to this day has kept us alienated and divided. The rampant xenophobia that we had to face at work and at school was also a price too dear to pay for the little financial security it afforded us.

My mother had been perfectly brainwashed to despise her own kind, her culture and her language. Who can blame her? One needs to mimic those in power in order to survive and climb the ladder to success. She understood the necessities of life and the laws of survival early in life, when she and her mother had to walk for miles from the countryside carrying heavy baskets of food on their heads, her little eight-year-old body trembling from the effort. They sold the food to the soldiers garrisoned in the city at the end of the Spanish Civil War. She also learned to keep quiet and look over her shoulder when neighbours would disappear in the middle of the night and no one would ever mention their names again. With such a childhood, her general paranoia seems less symptomatic of mental illness than of shell shock. Even I can remember the feeling of anxious expectation, when, standing on the side of the road in A Coruña, I was urged to wave at the motorcade of dark cars with flags announcing Francisco Franco's visit to his native Galicia. No wonder that in my house there wasn't much Gallego spoken. Only Castilian and a smattering of French at first, as both my parents and I were learning our new language. Although our mode of learning was different, the motivation itself was the same: my parents learned what they needed to survive, and in a way, so did I. They learned French to be able to put

food on the table, me to come to grips with this new world where I didn't fit and where I was always cold.

In Galicia, my summer day would begin with getting up and talking to my grandmother for a bit, maybe doing a chore or two for her. Then I was free to come and go as I pleased. I would go down to one of the city beaches and meet with a set of friends my own age. We would sit on huge rocks that flanked the sea and when we got too hot, we would jump in the water below and then stretch back on the hot rocks to dry and talk for hours. By two o'clock or so, I would go home and eat lunch and meet up with my older friends who worked and discuss what we wanted to do that night. They had two hours for lunch, which let them have a chance to eat and take a nap before showering and going back to work. I would usually walk them to their jobs downtown. On the way, we would stop at a coffee house. After I dropped them off, I would either walk around town for a while or meet my other friends or a date. At the end of their work day, usually at about eight, my friends and I and I would walk down the streets lined with bars and stop in, here and there, for a glass of 'ribeiro' and 'tapas'. Each bar had a specialty of wine and tapas. We had our favorites and met our other friends there. We would eat, then go to a movie, or a concert, or even a play and then dancing. Most of the 'in' discos were out of town in very small villages. We had to take buses to get there. I lost myself in dancing. It was as if this reprieve from my 'Swiss' life needed to be filled with action, with everything that I couldn't do in Switzerland. Here in Spain, I was attractive, exotic, popular. Boys lined up on the dance floor to dance with me. I seldom danced with one more than once. I was giddy with my new freedom. I wanted it to last forever. This was my deliverance, this was my drug.

Not that I didn't have access to drugs in Switzerland. In fact, there was a strong drug culture there. Once, my sister brought a friend of hers on acid home one night that my mother was away on a long weekend with her boyfriend. The boy, also the son of Spanish immigrants, was convinced that his neck was the size of a straw and that he was going to die. The only thing that would calm him down was valium and me holding his hand. After that episode, he decided that I was the girl for him and I decided that I wanted nothing to do with that scene. I had already been to a couple of parties with my sister where kids sniffed glue and passed out. Drugs seemed to be just one more dark place in the world. Another prison. As for me, I was looking for light and space. The two did not go together. Instead, I danced my way through the summers, acquiring summer romances each year.

My first summer romance, my first love, was a young boy from central Spain, I want to say Madrid, but I'm not sure. We met in Muxia, a little town near Finisterre, my father's hometown, during my one and only visit there. I was thirteen. My parents had divorced years ago, but my father's fight with cancer had effected a reconciliation of sorts, which brought us all back together under the same roof and together on this holiday. My father's hometown was a beautiful fishing village where 'la costa da morte' took the lives of many fishermen hunting edible barnacles, 'percebes', that grew on rocks buffeted by strong winds and even stronger waves. It was also the home of 'a Virxen da Barca' and of 'a Pedra de Abalar'. This is all recounted in a famous Galician song 'Virxen da Barca'. Back in Switzerland, I would sing along to this song, trying to recapture some of the magic of that time in this Celtic enclave. The legend of the sons of Míl situates Ith, their grandfather, here in Galicia.

According to legend, La Torre de Hércules, a Roman lighthouse, in nearby A Coruña is thought to have been built on the remains of an older lighthouse from where Ith saw the emerald isle where the sons of Míl eventually settled. I like that the name of one of my relatives is Diz (pronounced 'dith') meaning 'of Ith'.

My father's family consisted of a long line of fishermen. According to my father, his father actually died on his fishing boat. I wasn't told of what. Just that he asked his sailors to clean him up so that he could maintain his dignity to the end. My grandfather was a violent man who abused my father mercilessly. In comparison, my father beat me gently. My father seemed to be related to just about everybody in town. I suppose that this is common in small towns, especially in a culture where family equates to 'clan'. The faces are blurry. What I do remember is how we ate pounds of fresh seafood. All sorts: giant crabs, clams, giant lobsters, and shrimp and creatures I have not seen since. And of course the fabled 'percebes'. We must have eaten a fortune's worth there at the simple wooden table of one of my father's relatives. The women spent most of the time cooking and serving us and then scrubbed the raw wooden floors on their hands and knees. Everything was delicious. We didn't stay with our relatives, but at the local inn – no doubt at my mother's request. The innkeeper's daughter quickly became my best friend as she was everything I was not: outgoing, natural and fun. I have to explain here that in a way I felt like two people: Secure of myself and fun and gregarious in A Coruña and then reserved, and shy anywhere else. A little like a turtle that comes out to sun itself when peace reigns, only to retreat at the first cloud or sign of danger. I don't remember her name, but my new friend shocked and delighted me all at once. One day she stole two cigarettes from her father and took me to a basement where there was a toilet and lit up and savoured her cigarette while she moved her bowels. All of this in front of me. Privacy is something I had very little of at the time: living with six other people in three bedrooms meant that any private business had to be taken care of quickly. To relish company in a toilet is not something that had ever entered my mind. I was appalled and emancipated, all at once. My mind stretched a little that day. But not enough for me to participate, just to witness and record the apparition.

It is also at this time that I met 'Lalo'. This was his nickname. I never found out his real name. He was tan, tall and thin, with green eyes and light brown hair. He too seemed a little shy and for the first few days we walked along the beach mainly in silence. He took me to a quartz mine and together we dug around for crystals. He was there when my sister cut herself badly when a bottle full of sea water exploded in her hands. We all raced to the doctor who sewed her up, badly enough for her to still carry an uneven scar on one of her hands to this day. The day before I left to go back to A Coruña, Lalo and I went to a little cave by the sea and conducted our own engagement ceremony: Looking deeply into my eyes, he slowly removed the shark tooth he wore around his neck and placed it delicately around mine, and told me solemnly that I was to wear it always until I returned it to him on our wedding day. I promised him I would. I did wear that shark tooth faithfully until a few years later, when vacationing in the southeast of Spain, I saw him, or thought I recognized him, and he didn't give me a second glance. But the day I left Muxia turning back to look from the rear window of the bus that was taking us back to my grandmother's house, my heart was breaking. It was the first time I cried for a man. I thought I would die from the magnitude of the pain. In the middle of the street, Lalo too was having his

heart broken.

The walk back from my grandmother's house to my hotel in A Coruña confirms for me that this city, so familiar and yet so remote in many ways, is one of the places in the world where I can belong. I love the wind-swept streets and waves and the fluidity of my identity when I am here. I feel this parallel walk through my city and my memories is much like an archeological dig. By unearthing the artifacts of my past and gathering the different shards of my self, I am able to glue together the jagged fragments of my memory. In my room, it is time to slowly assume my American persona as I carefully pack up my clothes and my memories.