

RENEGUENIA

# Níjar Country

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*Nijar Country*

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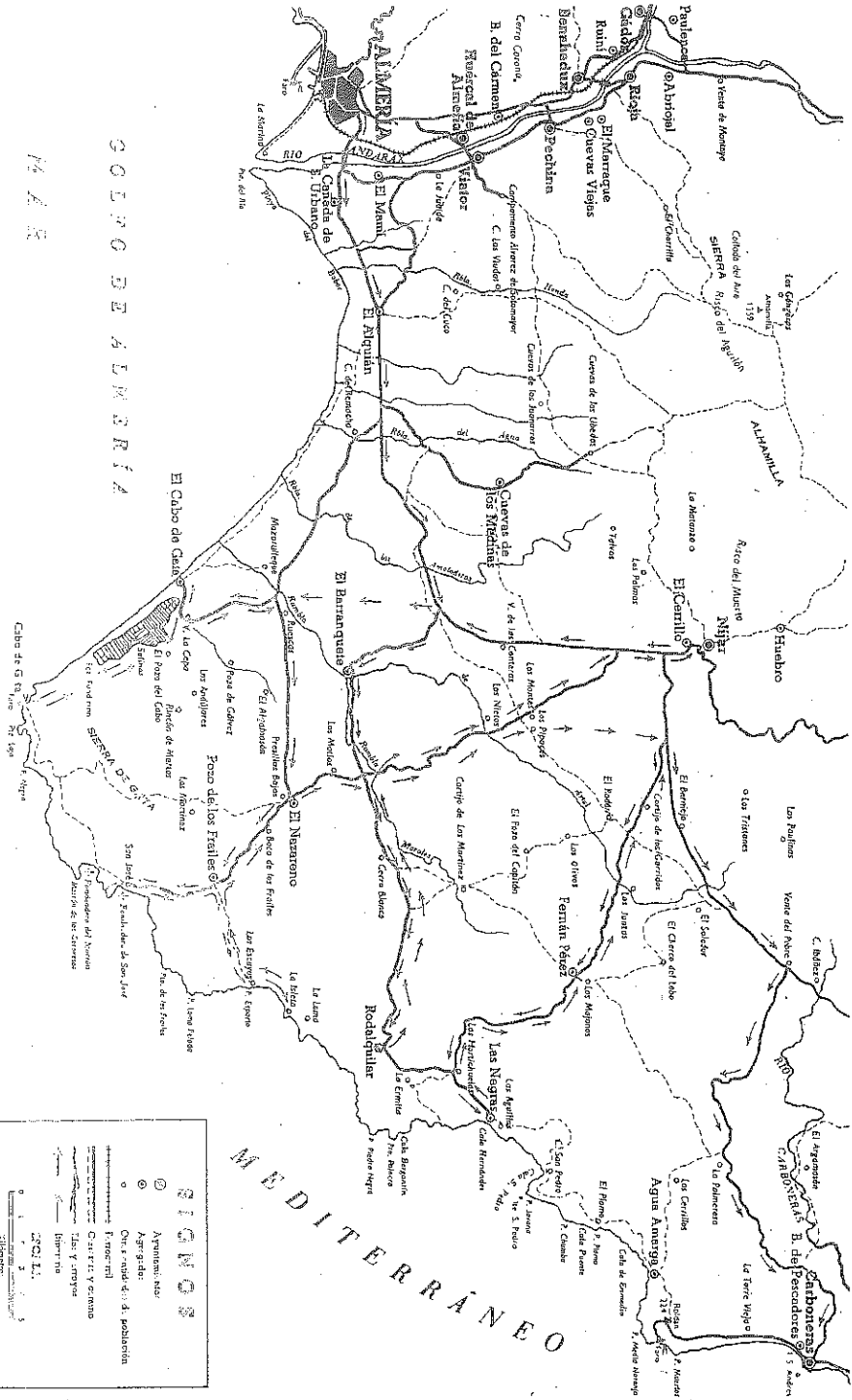
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# Nijar Country



MAR

GOBIERNO DE ALMERIA



I

I remember clearly the impression of poverty and violence provoked so dramatically by Almería when I first took route 340 into the province a few years ago. I had left behind the market stalls of Puerto Lumbreras market stalls in the middle of the dry streambed—the Almanzora Valley and Huercal Overa, Vera, Cuevas and Los Gallardos. From a roadside bend I surveyed the incredible houses suspended above the abyss in Sorbas. And the harsh, lunar sierra around Tabernas, scorched by the sun, shaped by hammer blows, and eaten by erosion. The road winds between forking streams and gullies, skirting the dry bed of a stream. I had looked in vain for shade from a tree or the trace of an agave. In that exclusively mineral universe the sea mist invented spirals of fragile cellophane. I retain a striking memory of my first descent to Rioja and Benahadux: the bright green orange groves, plumed palm trees, and miserly reserves of water. I initially thought the land was more humane in appearance and didn't realize until much later that this impression was pure self-deception. Heralded by a string of caves dug out of the mountain side—"capital of esparto, snotty noses, and bleary eyes," as inhabitants of neighboring provinces comment ironically, Almería spreads out from the foot of a sun-scorched wasteland undulating in the distance, like the waves of a white-capped, petrified sea.

The last time I was in the city it held no surprises for me, and I lingered only long enough to find out the necessary information about local bus times. I was familiar with the views from the Alcazaba, the old Moorish castle, over La Chanca: the cave dwellers modestly whitewash their entrances, and, from above, the roofs of shacks look like a line of blue, ocher, pink, yellow, and white dominos. I climbed San Cristóbal's crag and surveyed the port from the steps of the Way of the Cross: a band of ragamuffins play around the stations getting dirtier and dirtier while the breath of the city rises as if it were a panting, exhausted animal. Almería has no nightlife and, on previous

visits, I gritted my teeth and walked its streets early in the day. I don't regret that decision. The spectacle is worth the sacrifice: the Puerta Purchena market, its fawning, raucous gypsies and cheapjacks, sleepy horse-drawn carriages waiting for custom, and Moroccan migrants meditating in the shade of the ficus trees are more than worth the effort. Almería is a unique, half peninsular, half African city. I fell in love with it, before ever going there, through the men and women who came to Catalonia in search of work and were given the most backbreaking jobs, I hasten to add. One is free to choose one's homeland: after my very first visit, I have traveled every year hundreds of kilometers to pay my respects.

On the city outskirts, twisting off to the right of route 340, in the direction of Murcia, a local road runs from Almería to the desert and mountainous areas of Níjar and Sierra de Gata. On other occasions, when making brief incursions into the heart of the province, I promised myself I would go on a more leisurely tour of this forgotten corner of our land, a corner that sounded familiar to my ears thanks to the boring list of headlands I was forced to learn at school by the wave of an imperious ruler and fear of punishment:

“Sacratif, in Granada,  
Gata, in Almería.  
Palos, in Murcia.  
La Nao, San Antonio and San Martín, in Alicante . . .”

By the time I reached the bus-station, the coach had left. As there was a two-hour wait for the next, I put my suitcase in checked baggage and went for a stroll. The streets were bustling with hucksters, traveling salesmen, and ice-cream sellers hawking their goods at the tops of their voices. Others were less strident and waited patiently for their customers on the sidewalk with their baskets of sugarcane and prickly pears. The sun shone and women swept in front of their houses. The cloudless, hazy sky signaled another hot day.

After a gray winter in the north, I felt at home in that hustle. When I cross the bridge, I remember two traps passing by with girls dressed smartly like typical Spanish señoritas. Aware of the interested looks they were attracting, they did their best to display the characteristic virtues of the race: style, panache, and wit. A gravel-voiced man paid them compliments. Then other carriages paraded by, carrying frock-coated gentlemen, military, a little curly-haired boy, and a priest. Someone said they were going to a christening.

The bystanders went their way and I entered a bar, following two men who had stuck their heads out to take a look. They are etched on my memory: lean, dark-skinned individuals, wearing black waistcoats, hats on the slant, and shirts buttoned to the neck. They were like two big, wild birds and chewed on their words as they spoke.

“What women!”

“There ain't no place like Spain.”

“It ain't got the latest gadgets like other countries, but life here takes some beating . . .”

“Hell, I'd not swap it for any other.”

When I saw the glint in their eyes, I realized they were drunk. The bartender brought me my coffee and they wandered over to shoot the breeze. They wanted to know who I was, where I was from, and what I was doing in those parts. Although I answered in monosyllables, they still invited me to go drinking with them.

“I can't,” I replied. And I looked at my watch.

“You can't?”

“My bus leaves in a few minutes.”

Time had flown and I had to hurry to the bus station on the Murcia road.



The road to Nijar is flanked by State Forestry plantations of agave and hemp.

## II

Three buses a day cover the five-mile journey between Almería and El Alquíán. The road is tarmacked as far as Nijar and, as it leaves the city, a fork parallel to route 340 goes to the ruins of the spa in the Sierra Alhamilla, once a haven where the capital's idle rich would rest their weary limbs. The bus leaves behind the last hovels on the outskirts of Almería and takes the road to Nijar. The passenger next to me is a thin, swarthy man in his forties. When I offer him a cigarette, he asks me if I am a foreigner. I say I am from Barcelona and he speaks a few words in Catalan.

"I worked there almost on ten year," he says. "In Hospitalet, Barcelona, Tarrasa . . . That's what you call living." "Wish I'd never left."

His wife couldn't bear the weather and he was stupid enough to come back. Now they have four kids, another on the way, and he can't leave, on the off chance as he did before.

"Here you get old in no time, and the family ties you down . . ."

While he berates his fate, I look at the landscape through the window. An ocher plain extends down to the gulf of Almería, sparsely dotted with green fig trees. The ground is cracked and littered with small rocks. The sea glimmers in the distance.

"Take a look at that."

My neighbor points to land marked off by reed fences. Inside, carefully staked out in neat rows, are terraces of navy beans, tomatoes, bread-plants, and peppers.

"Something special, ain't they?"

I agree that they are wonderful.

"You need money to get things to grow here on this land. It's all stony so you have to bring in the whole lot: water, fertilizer, sand . . ."

"Sand?"

"To keep in the heat. The greens grow faster and git to market early. It's a system from the Canaries they use around La

Rápita. When the guy growin' the early crops used it, everyone said he was goin' to get burnt, but he's pocketed more than a quarter of a million from the first harvest."

The landscape is a real suntrap. Lots of dry watercourses cross the plain to the sea. The bus goes up and down over the shallow ditches.

"You see that enclosed land?"

My neighbor is pointing to a six-foot high, cemetery-like wall. The sun reverberates off the whitewashed wall, next to which a goat with swollen udders is chewing the pads of a prickly pear.

"It's an experimental farm. They finished it a couple of months back."

The novelty, he says, derives from the irrigation system. There's a cistern covered by a wire mesh under the land to water early crops. On top, a few inches of fertilized earth and a layer of sand. It's the best way to avoid evaporation that's so intense in that area. The plants sink their roots into the water through the wire mesh.

We reach El Alquíán. For some reason or other it reminds me of villages on the Ebro delta. The buildings straggle haphazardly and a gang of kids rushes at the bus. I say goodbye to my traveling companion and, under a blistering sun, walk along the sidewalk. Women gossip in the shade of their doorways and some youths are having fun teaching the village fool. He's a tiny bearded fellow, with drooping lips and ears like mug handles. He flourishes a switch of ash like a musket and, following instructions from the local roughs, gesticulates and sticks his tongue out.

Fortunately, trees shade the roadway. The unfinished bulk of the Union School for Fishermen's Children rises up in the middle of a eucalyptus wood where the road leaves El Alquíán. On the bus back to Almería the driver told me it has been like that more than ten years. Credit ran out halfway through and now a visitor can see the countryside through the gaping holes in the building.

A hundred or so meters farther on the farmhouses become less frequent. Fenced-off smallholdings give way to uncultivated land, sand, and desert gullies. Vegetation is minimal: prickly pears, agaves, the odd contorted, dwarf olive tree.

To my right, the flat lands descend to the dunes of the gulf, foreshortened by the mist. Shortcuts rake the stony ground and disappear into scorched, thorny brambles and thickets. Clouds wreath the peaks of the sierras of Cabo de Gata. On the horizon, the sea is a strip of molten lead.

To my left, the mountain ranges look as if they are made of cardboard. A track snakes up to the clusters of houses in Cuevas de los Úbedas and Cuevas de las Medinas. These old mining centers, survivors of the big crisis from the turn of the twentieth century, are embedded in the mountainside like two vultures' nests. Trucks load the mineral there and then transport it to Almería, where it is shipped to foundries in Germany, France, or England.

The road to Níjar is flanked by State Forestry plantations of agave and hemp. Sown in rows across great expanses of tillable land they have grown only a few inches high. The sun parches and withers. From my vantage-point under a eucalyptus tree, they look like starfish with their twisted tentacles. The National Institute for Land Settlement has encouraged their cultivation: their leaves, like prickly pear pads, are used to manufacture textile fiber.

Next to the hemp and prickly pear, the traveler discovers another plant equally suited to surviving drought conditions: rubber trees. Small and light green, their rows line up and vanish between hillocks and ploughed furrows, trapped in an undulating sea of clay. With a view to producing rubber, the Institute started to cultivate these trees some time ago in the Níjar-Rodalquilar-Gata triangle. Judging by the opinions of people I asked, their efforts have yet to be crowned by any success.

The eucalyptus trees lining the road are becoming dangerously few and far between but, before I'm forced to

walk completely exposed to the blistering sun, a truck stops in response to my waves. The driver asks me where I'm going and I ask him the same question.

"To Rodalquílá," he responds after a pause.

"Good. I'll come with you."

The driver invites me to sit next to him and the truck judders noisily off. I silently celebrate my good fortune: hitchhiking is getting less and less common in the region. Apart from the rare foreign tourist's car, drivers of trucks and cars—once proverbially welcoming—no longer stop. The Civil Guard halts any offender it spots and imposes fines of 25 or 50 pesetas for infringements of traffic regulations.

The driver taking me is a young man who readily accepts the cigarette I offer him. He tells me how the evening before, at the end of his working day, he accepted a job in Motril and hadn't slept the whole night.

"I'm afraid I'll fall asleep if I'm on my own. If I can chat with you, I'll keep awake."

He also asks where I come from and, when I mention the name of Barcelona, he licks his lips. Catalonia is the stuff of dreams for men and women of Almería, a kind of distant mythical El Dorado. My companion asks about pay and lodging conditions and names half a dozen friends who live in Barcelona, hoping I might know one of them.

"A scar-faced Paco González? Unloadin' coal in the port?"

I say I have never met Paco González and he seems disappointed.

"He married a Catalan woman. If you like I can give you his address. Tell him Sanlúcar give it you. An' he'll be on top of the world."

We drive across a barren mountain range. The road dips and swerves but is well banked. In the middle of this wasteland, a hovel's dilapidated walls display—hammering every conscience—a dramatic plea from the countryside: **MORE TREES, MORE WATER.** It is the slogan of the National

Institute for Land Settlement I see written everywhere, along tracks and paths, on barns, houses, sheds, and slopes. The trees that will bring water need water to grow. In Almería there are no trees because it doesn't rain and it doesn't rain because there are no trees. Only the vigorous efforts of skilled engineers and agronomists and a generous injection of capital could break this vicious circle and offer the unfortunate land a future with water and trees.

The truck turns off the tarmac road to Níjar and down the road to Rodalquílá: rubber trees, hemp plants, clumps of prickly pears, and patches of yellow, withered barley. The heat is oppressive and Sanlúcar is nodding over the wheel.

"I work for two different firms, you know . . ."

"When do you get any rest?"

"I snatch the odd moment. And when there's a holiday. My girlfriend hardly sees me. I snored through the whole of last Sunday afternoon."

We head across fields of oats strewn with poppies and small yellow sorrel known as "vinagreras" around here because of its bitter taste. The truck limps up the hill and two, almost North African villages come into view, separated by a dry riverbed. The one nearest is Rambla Morales. Tied to the door of the cigarette kiosk, a pig is snuffling in the earth by the roadside. We drive down the bank of the river and Sanlúcar brakes when we get to Rambla. A group of women wearing headscarves and long dresses are washing clothes in the fountain, in the shade from the eucalyptus trees. My companion walks over and gives one a letter.

I get out and scrutinize the second village from the sandbank. The houses in El Barranquete are rectangular, with small square windows and domes. They remind me of the conical dry-stone trulli of Ostuni and Martina-Franca in southern Italy, but these skullcap roofs are unique. Between the agave plants and prickly pears, the whitewashed walls gleam in the sun. A few half-naked kids play in the sand and a little girl rides a donkey over the bank. Sanlúcar has returned to his truck, stops





A group of women wearing headscarves and long dresses are washing clothes in the fountain, in the shade from the eucalyptus trees.

next to me and looks at the whitewashed hovels.

“You’d think it was Africa, right?” he says, reading my thoughts.

We climb back in the cab and, without another word, he starts the engine. The sun burns down and discourages further chat. I feel like stretching out in the shade and having a nap.

The truck judders up the slope. The sides of the radiators are steaming. The earth changes from ochre to red. A road-repairer is brushing sand away and Sanlúcar sticks his head out of the window and waves him goodbye.

“That’s El Tigre. He’s a drinkin’ pal of mine; stuck here workin’ from dawn to dusk for fifteen pesetas a day.”

I look at the road that is in a good state, flat and slightly banked on the curves. Agave plants alternate with prickly pears. The dry-stone walls and walls of ruined hovels are painted or tarred with the motto that has accompanied me from Almería,

FRANCO

FRANCO

FRANCO

As I don’t say a word, Sanlúcar is quick to tell me that His Excellency the Head of State visited the goldmine in Rodalquilar on his triumphant tour of the province.

“The goldmine?”

“You’ll soon get a look if they let us through. It’s the only one in Spain.”

Farmsteads and their wells pass by. In the countryside around Nijar the wells are covered by white domes with windows. A woman draws water from one and bolts the door.

The truck drives past Los Nietos and Albaricoques. These are settlements of a dozen isolated hovels. I see goats, chickens, donkeys, and pigs. The land is now almost entirely red. Barley thrives here and the landscape takes on different hues: fig-green, almond-green, silvery grey, and dark chestnut.

Sanlúcar suddenly tugs my sleeve and says: “Git down.”

I obey him, not understanding what’s happening, put my head next to the gear lever and stare at the colored ties of his

rope sandals. After half a minute he signals for me to sit up.

“What’s wrong?”

“The Civil Guard. I don’t think they saw you.”

I risk a glance through the rear window and see them receding in a cloud of dust, three-cornered, shiny leather helmets on their heads, and guns slung over their shoulders.

This incident has put Sanlúcar in a good mood and he smiles and rubs his hands together.

“We’ll soon be at the mine. If the guard on duty is my pal from Lucainena, he’ll let us through. If not, we’ll have to go the long way round’.”

He says there are two roads to Rodalquilar: one is the property of ADARO, the mining company, and the other is a local road used by the buses that go to the town. I ask him which is the best.

“The one to the mine,” he replies. “By a long shot!” The truck turns down a narrow path. We pass an expensive sedan, and Sanlúcar swerves to avoid a collision. The blasts from the horns echo round the mountains. The sun doesn’t reach us here but I can see it shining between the high crags.

The road divides and we take the fork to ADARO. A barrier blocks our way like a frontier post or level crossing. A fair-haired man, in a check-shirt, emerges from his sentry box. We brake.

“Hey, how you gittin on?”

The man from Lucainena perches on the running board and shakes Sanlúcar’s hand. They look at each other and say nothing for a few seconds.

“You see. Workin’.”

“We’s always workin’.”

“That’s life.”

“Yep, some life.”

My companion asks after his brother-in-law. His friend says he’s getting better.

“Did he git any compensation?”

“Next month, so they say.”

The man from Lucainena’s face is big and wild with sparkling blue eyes.

He waves us goodbye and raises the barrier.

“Bye. See you.”

The road runs downhill. It’s wide, carefully steamrolled so that three trucks can easily overtake each other without bumping. The traveler feels as if he’s crossing a desert region like those you see in Wild West films. Someone has scrawled on a rocky outcrop by the side of the road: HOLIVUD ONE KILOMETER. A truck approaches, raising clouds of dust. The silence is excruciating. I contemplate the gray, barren mountains. Here and there yellowish stains mark the entrances to the mine. In the valley there are ruined shacks and a round, abandoned water tank.

The road skirts the edge of a ravine and, past a bend, looks down over the company’s panning-sites and the town of Rodalquilar. Several bright red tanks shine in the sun at intervals up the mountainside. They are used for sifting and washing the gold-bearing quartz the trucks load in the mine before taking it to the drying sheds. The waste has invaded the valley beyond the ponds and created a vast, cracked yellow sea of mud. Rodalquilar sits to the right, comfortably established on the plain.

It’s a small, asymmetrical town that at first sight seems to have no centre of gravity. The streets are unpaved and the truck jolts and bumps along. The houses are ugly and squat. Sanlúcar brakes in front of one and says: “Right. Here we are.”

It must be about two o’clock and my stomach’s started to rumble. I invite Sanlúcar to eat in the inn, but he doesn’t accept my offer.

“No, you go. I got work to do. I’ll drop in for a drink later.”

I thank him for his innovation.

“The inn’s the other side of the stream. Where you can see the eucalyptus.”

The town is deserted because of the sun. The church, school, and barracks-cum-house of the Civil Guard are new,

jerrybuilt, and nondescript. I walk across the dry bed of the stream and immediately find the inn on the other side.

Coming in from the outside, my eyes struggle to adapt to the half-dark. Shutters are down over windows and doors and, out of the sun, the temperature's pleasant enough.

The newcomer sits down at one end of the single dining table and greets the other diners, three men in blue overalls and two plumpish, good-looking young women who don't look like locals. There's an exchange of greetings and a young lad appears to take my order.

While he's setting the table, I look around the dining room: it's large and shabby, with bare peeling walls and a sagging tiled floor. The youth brings the women's coffee and one of the men goes as if to grab the cups from his hands. The girls laugh, and their laughter puts me in a good mood. The short one gets two dimples in her cheeks and her eyes twinkle mischievously. The other is paler-skinned and, with her hair in a bun, she looks like someone out of the Falla Fiestas in Valencia.

The waiter brings me a dish of cod and chickpeas and half a liter of wine. Unlike men from Cádiz or Málaga, Almerians aren't big drinkers. I put it down to the wines of the region, which are generally mediocre—though the claret from Albuñol, on the borders of the province of Granada, is a wonderful exception. The one I'm drinking now is sour and past its best, very similar to the lifeless dregs of wine from Garrucha. I can't stop myself nostalgically recalling the Jumilla wine you get sixty-five miles north of here—light, dry, and deliciously sharp.

"Goodbye. Enjoy your meal."

The girls get up and walk toward the door. I wonder, since they are dressed city style, if they are just passing through, like me, or are related to some engineer or other. The man next to me—one of the three in blue overalls—has followed my look and clears up my doubts.

"They're school teachers."

I want to know how long they've been here and whether

they have family . . .

"Haven't you just seen them eat here? They live by themselves. We're all hobos and don't dare talk to them. Poor girls."

His colleagues join in the conversation. Schoolmistresses are forced to spend time in small towns before they are allowed to go to the capital. Rich teachers get round that by paying for a replacement, but others are buried in the outback for years on a pittance.

"Before they realize it, they're spinsters an' nobody's goin' to come to their rescue."

"And you needn't think they'll give just anyone the job. You have to study no end to git the right bits of paper."

"The littl'un said it took her six years."

The waiter serves me a couple of fried eggs swimming in oil. The men are now on to their coffees. My neighbor sips his slowly and asks, "Are you a textiles rep?"

He doesn't give me time to answer: "'Scuse my bein' nosy, but I heard one got here from Almería this mornin'."

"No, that's not me."

"But you're not from these parts, are you?"

"No."

"Right. I knew I'd not see you before. There isn't many of us, so we all know each other like the backs of our hands."

"Did you come in the bus?"

"No, in a truck."

"Well, you were lucky. Not many'll take that risk. With the fines they dole out . . ."

I agree I've been lucky and the three men forget all about me and start whispering to each other confidentially: Edelberto's silicosis, work in the mine, what happened to Emiliano. The youngster brings me my coffee, time passes by, and I can still hear them talking about Cándido, José, Vitorino . . .

"An' we can't complain really."

"No, too true . . . Because the part timers . . ."

"Because the ones breaking stone . . ."



Rodalquilar

I savor the bitter liquid in my cup as they carry on whispering. Occasionally they fall silent and their eyes glint. The one wearing a beret mumbles something in my neighbor's ear.

"At the end of the day . . ."

"Ah, at the end . . ."

Then they get up and pay the young lad. As they leave, they nod goodbye in my direction. The one in the beret holds out a hand.

"Goodbye. Have a good trip."

When they've gone, I ask for my bill. I reckon it must be after three o'clock and light a cigarette on the previous butt. I look at the empty chairs where the men and girls sat and tell myself it's time I got back on the road. Someone is pushing at the shutter over the door, but it's not Sanlúcar.

The boy comes back from the kitchen: "That'll be sixteen pesetas."

### III

Outside, the sun is still burning down and I head for the local road. The town is waking up after a drowsy siesta. I bump into women, old men, little kids. The priest is chatting with the Civil Guards. Children are chorusing a prayer in the school.

"Scuse me. Are you Catalan?"

The man asking me this is tall, black-haired, and in his forties.

"Yes, I am."

"I'm a friend of Sanlúcar's. He tol' me you was in the inn."

"I just left."

"I saw you was walkin' past the church an' reckoned it must be you."

The man has a genuine, open smile. His shirtsleeves are rolled up to his elbows and he folds his arms over his chest.

"Traveling aroun'?"

"That's right."

"Sanlúcar told me you was goin' to Níjar."

"That was the general idea."

"Well, if you wait 'alf an 'our we'll tek you."

He points to the gold-panning sites and says, "We finish early on a Saturday."

"You work in the mine?"

"Not down the mine itself: I work for the company. I drive one of their trucks."

He takes me along a cart track. A hundred or so yards from us, at the top of the bend, a group of men is sitting by the roadside.

"You can go with them in the back."

"Are they going to Níjar?"

"No. Most of them live in Agua Amarga and Fernan Pérez. But we make a stop in Los Pipaces."

"Where's that exactly?"

"Very close . . . four kilometers from the town."

We reach the men and join the circle. There are eight or nine of them, dirty and badly shaven, in threadbare shirts and patched trousers. One points his toes out the end of his sandals; another uses a rope for a belt. The sun is still blistering and their straw hats are pulled down over their brows. Almost all have a backpack or bag. My neighbor has a basket covered by a bright red handkerchief.

The driver tells them I'm from Barcelona and I feel their eyes staring at me. We Catalans are rather like South Americans in this region. Everybody in Almería has a relative or acquaintance in Badalona or Terrassa.

"Do you work there?" asks one.

I say I do, to avoid making life complicated.

"You must have family here, I suppose?" asks one.

"No, I left them in Catalonia."

"Don't tell me you came here on pleasure?"

I tell him I had ten days free and decided to take a holiday.

"You're kiddin'!" says the guy with the rope round his waist. "Fancy leavin' Barcelona to come here!"

His comrades are equally astonished and laugh and hit each other like young kids.

"You're crazy clearin' off from Barcelona... I wish I lived there."

"Wish I was in your shoes . . ."

"If I lived in Catalonia, you wouldn't see me in Almería, not even feet first..."

One with a big mustache licks his lips.

"I was there one year after I done my military service," he says.

"Never forgotten the dames!"

He wants to recount his adventures, but my neighbor interjects.

"Come off it. The monkeys in the park won't give you the time of day."

"You reckon?"

"That's right. Not with your looks . . . Straight out of the

jungle . . ."

I hand my pack of Ideales round and they all laugh at the banter. The men have fine expressions. Dignity lurks beneath the two-day stubble and ragged clothes.

"Look. There they come."

Five workers clamber down the hillside. The driver stands up and shouts:

"Git a move on, the lot of you! You're goin' to make me late for the movie..."

"A movie in your village?"

"Some people have come from Murcia with a travelin' cinema."

"What are they showing?"

"I dunno... They're all the same to me."

The man with the mustache says they got really good movies before the war.

"I saw one in Valencia, now that was a real movie. There's no tellin' them apart now."

The truck has reached the bottom of the incline and we jump in the back. I crouch down in the middle, but the one with the rope-belt has kept a space for me next to him.

"Sit here. It's not so windy."

The driver starts the engine and the landscape slips by at our feet. We're packed in like sardines and, braving the dust and the heat, two of the latecomers start singing soleares.

On the road we pass workers with their meal-bags and straw hats. The country road is full of potholes and the truck lurches. I point to the men and ask the man with the rope-belt how many people work in the mine.

"Lots," he replies. "At least five hundred."

When the sun hides behind high peaks, it seems easier to breathe for a moment. The jostling in the back of the lorry and the hubbub of voices and songs create an infernal din. You have to gesticulate to make yourself understood or turn your hands into an ear trumpet.

"What?"

"You gittin' out in Los Pipaces?"

"Yes."

"Them three in the corner as well."

The truck isn't as old as Sanlúcar's. Within minutes we've left behind the ADARO holding and drive over the plain at a good speed. I recognize the barley fields and farmsteads I passed before, but the colors have changed.

We take a sudden right turn. The man with the rope-belt shouts at me that we're taking a shortcut via Los Nietos rather than the main Níjar road. It's bad and bumpy, but takes a good slice off our journey.

The truck drives across a stream of stones. We climb up the slope and at the top is a lunar landscape. Whitish earth, barren wastes and rocky ground alternate before disappearing from sight over the horizon. Shards of stone litter the land. In summer, the stones retain the heat and cook until they crack. Not a single tree to be seen for several miles around.

"Look!"

The man with the rope-belt points at a lizard that's half a meter long or more. It lies still by the side of the road and seems unperturbed by our presence.

"If we stopped for a second, he'd catch it. People around here eat them."

I tell him that in a few Catalan villages in Catalonia the farm-workers like them roasted.

"We cook them with tomato and a spot of garlic and parsley. They're very tasty."

The road curls between the spurs of the mountain range and the driver hoots his horn. The joy that it's now Saturday is contagious and most of the men are singing. Their tunes, however, are quite unlike the ones you hear in other parts of Andalusia. They have a melancholy lilt, a miner's lament like the taranta from Cartagena. The one I'm listening to now speaks of loneliness and being forsaken, evokes sad loves and bitter farewells, is tart and depressing.

Gradually the voice of a fair-haired youth rises above the

others. Despite the racket made by the truck, I can make out the words. When he finishes, I ask my neighbor where he's from.

"From near here. I think he gets out in Agua Amarga."

"He's got a very good voice."

"You should have heard a young kid who worked with us, one we called Lucas. He was a flamenco champion. Fandangos, serranas, tientos, you name it. I've never heard nothin' like him."

"Where's he now?"

"He left for France but was unlucky. When he had his check-up, they saw he had silicosis and sent him back here. And as he'd left the mine, the company refused him compensation. I don't know where he's got to . . . I heard he just cleared off for good."

As the sun reaches the tops of the mountains, the landscape takes on a blond hue. The truck goes up and down slopes and occasionally peeps over the cusp, down to the plain. We cross another stony riverbed. There is scant vegetation: dwarf fig trees, brambles and the odd agave plant. The sky remains blue and unchanging above our heads.

Half a mile on and we're in Níjar country. It is a broad open plain. Common lands alternate with fallow. The furrowed hills disappear dry and cracked into the distance. There are early crops surrounded by reed fences and clumps of wild almond and olive trees.

"Those farmsteads belong to Los Pipaces," says my neighbor.

The truck slows and stops at the crossroads. I bid everybody a good evening and jump out with the three from Níjar. The driver sticks his head out of the cab window.

"Hope all goes well."

"Thanks."

I watch him disappear out of sight over the dry watercourses. The men from Níjar walk silently at my side. The fields are planted with vines whose branches spread over a complicated network of wire. They must be two or three years

old and some are already sprouting small shoots and bunches of grapes.

"The owner planted several thousand," one of the men comments.

"We call them the 'riverside'"

"These flat lands was a desert not so long ago."

"Now there's at least seventy acres been planted. In a few years all this will be vineyards."

I remember the vineyards in the Almanzora valley, on the road between Albox and Purchena, and ask where they get their water.

"Wells. They've dug a few. Forty-eight and even fifty-six meters deep. We'll show you one in a minute."

We draw close to the farmsteads. The nearest look newly built and there's another being built and several bricklayers are at work. Tomatoes and eggplants grow on the terraces. The breeze blows up puffs of dust.

"Hey, you!" shouts one of my companions. "Where's Juan?"

The bricklayer stops mixing cement and turns to the others:

"Where's Juan?"

"He went off with the young lad."

"Look, there they are . . ."

"Juan!"

"What!"

"Some friends are lookin' for you."

Juan ambles along. He's a thin gangling man, in black corduroy trousers and check shirt. He's wearing calfskin boots and a broad-brimmed farmworker's hat.

"What's up . . . ? Goin' to town . . . ?"

"Yeah, home."

"I was walking round the vines. Those we planted first have taken."

"Yes, so we saw."

"If they go on like this, we'll have a harvest next year."

"Grapes?"

"Sour juice, at any rate"

Silence follows and we roll a cigarette. My friends tell him that I'm visiting and would like to see the wells.

"Come with me. I'll show you the one closest."

He walks on in front and one of the men from Níjar whispers in my ear that he is in charge of the site.

"He's not local. He lives in Almería and drives here everyday on his motorbike."

The well is covered by a brick tower and the charge-hand slides the bolt back. An engine chugs inside. Wood scaffolding has been erected by the entrance to the well and I risk a climb to get a better view down.

"Boy!"

"What?"

"Switch the light on."

The kid accompanying us obeys orders, and a bulb lights up at the bottom.

"Is there a good flow?"

"Take a look. That's where it comes out."

We leave, and he smiles contentedly. He guarantees that in ten years all the estate will be cultivated and invites me to come back another day for a more leisurely visit.

When we walk off, he goes to talk to the building workers, and I hear him give orders to the young boy again.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Just an acquaintance."

"He's somebody you can get on with."

"He's friendly enough. But a sharp operator."

The shortest of the trio says all men are the same when they get their hands on a bit of power.

"Not everybody."

The one who interrupts him mentions a Gabriel who's different.

"Gabrié is different," the short one replies, "an' look what happened to him."

“Forget it.”

“Tell that to his wife, and see what she says.”

We return to the crossroads and take the right turn. You can make out the houses of Níjar, chiseled out of the side of the mountain. The roadway seems to trail through an expanse of uncultivated land. The town is four kilometers away and my companions walk quickly along.

The short one carries his bag over his shoulder and tells me he’s been walking the same path for ten years, morning and evening, without fail.

“They say the world’s changin’ and we’ll soon be on the moon, but day in day out it’s the same for us.”

His colleagues are silent and, as we’ve dropped behind, he hurries along. We talk about the weather in Níjar.

Land settlement has problems here. The dearth of trees brings intense soil erosion, and he explains that the rainfall level in the region is one of the lowest in Spain. Apart from the drought and stony ground, the wind blows and blows. Farmers cover their barns over to protect themselves. The grit thrown up by the wind causes continual dust storms that are largely responsible for the high percentage of trachoma and eye diseases that sadly made the province famous. And when a storm turns into one of those violent downpours—like the one I had occasion to see some days later—the dust that gathers in the atmosphere is such that it colors the water and transforms the longed-for rain into a strange, disheartening mud shower.

“All the same, around here, the land produces,” exclaims Shorty.

“You cross the mountains and go to Carboneras . . .”

“What do you find?”

“Stones and lizards. It’s the poorest part of Spain.”

While we shoot the breeze, the path cuts through olive groves. The terraces are drawn in neat lines, separated by half-meter high dry-stone walls, and the owner has sown chickpeas between the trees. The landscape reminds me of the countryside around Tarragona. We’re getting near to the town and, a hundred

meters on, come to the local road.

The others are waiting for us by the kilometer stone. I’m rather exhausted after the long walk and hand round my pack of Ideales. The houses of Níjar loom over the hill. The sky is a mass of chattering birds and we start walking again.





There is scant vegetation . . . brambles and the odd agave plant.

#### IV

The first—wild, rather inhospitable—impression Níjar arouses in a traveler approaching along the path from Los Pipaces soon fades. The outskirts are off-putting but human endeavor has transformed the countryside into something harmonious. The hillside is terraced. Fruit and almond trees alternate between other stone walls, and olive groves hurtle down the steep slopes like crazy sheep.

Níjar is embedded in the foothills of the sierra and its houses seem to retain the sunlight. Traveling salesmen trot along the road on their nags. There is a service station at the entrance to the town and, when we get there, a pair of Civil Guards is walking in the direction of Carboneras, guns slung over their backs.

“It’s market day,” says one of my companions. “All these people have come in from the farms.”

“What do they sell?”

“Whatever they got. Pigs, chickens, eggs . . . With what they get they buy bread an’ oil for the rest of the week. They live in the middle of nowhere and only come to town on a Saturday.”

Women in black and a gypsy astride a donkey come down the street. The houses in Níjar are single-story with whitewashed façades but, unlike those in El Barranquete or Los Nietos, they don’t look at all North African and recall instead small towns in northern Andalusia and Extremadura. The roofs are usually whitewashed tiles and you get a glimpse of hallways through front doors that are always open: family photos, religious prints, small tables, flower vases, and earthenware pitchers.

The short man suddenly grabs my arm and pulls me inside one.

“Come in. I’ll introduce you to my wife an’ kids.”

His friends follow on behind. It’s a small square room. The furniture comprises a single wooden bench. A sticky flycatcher hangs from the ceiling and there’s a Walt Disney

drawing on the wall.

"Modesta!"

His wife bustles in carrying a baby and, when she sees me, she gives me a welcoming smile. Although her face is blank and her belly misshapen, motherhood still makes her pretty.

"Our friend is a Catalan gent who's visitin' town," her husband explains.

"Pleased to meet you."

I say that the pleasure is mine.

"Won' you sit down for a moment?"

"Thank you very much."

"Bring him the chair, dear."

"Wait. Take the kid."

Modesta disappears behind the esparto grass curtain and comes back right away with a chair and two more kids clinging to her skirts.

"Here you are, take a seat."

"No, you sit down."

"Go on," her husband insists. "We all fit on the bench."

I have no choice but to obey, and Modesta and the three men settle down opposite me. Silence falls. The children are still clinging to their mother's skirts.

"How old are they?"

"He's three an' that one's four. Come on, say good evenin' to the gent."

When they hear they're being spoken to, the children go shy and put their hands over their faces.

"And what about that one?"

"He was eighteen months in April."

His father sits him on his knees and kisses him all over his face.

"Lovely, ain't he?"

The baby does seem to be sturdier than his brothers, but I look at his squinting, apparently lifeless eyes, and Modesta anticipates my question:

"It's a pity he's blind."

"He don't see a thing," the man adds. "Bin like that ever since he was born."

I ask them if a doctor's ever looked at him.

"They took him to Almería once. They said they'd have to operate on him."

"There?"

"No. In Barcelona."

"They say there's a very good doctor in Barcelona."

"It's all the same to us, whether he's good or bad."

"I don' know why you say that," his wife complains.

"Because it's true. We won't find a soul to pay the fare . . ."

The father cradles the baby in a strange, loving way. He occasionally swipes out at the flies.

"The poor kid's bein' eaten alive . . ."

"Give him to me, José," says his wife. "When he hears voices he don' know, he gits frightened."

Another boy, a seven- or eight-year-old, runs in from the street. His eyes are green and almond shaped, his hair black and wavy.

"He's my oldest," José explains.

"Say good evenin' to the gentleman."

"Good evenin'."

Encouraged by their brother's effort, the little ones also wish me good evening.

"You've finally remembered," Modesta exclaims.

"What's this gent goin' to think?"

The children hide back under her skirts and laugh excitedly.

"Four an' another in the oven," explains José.

"Women are always pregnant here," says one of his colleagues.

"Every family has four, five, or six kids."

"There's one woman at the end of the street who's had thirteen."

"The night is long and people don' have the entertainment you get in the big cities . . ."

The three men express their opinions under Modesta's submissive gaze. The kids who live out on the street are starting to crowd around the doorway and stare at us, standing there and slavering

"Clear off, the lot of you," José shouts.

I grasp the opportunity to get up.

"Much as I like being with you, it's getting dark, and I'd like to walk round the town."

"What do you wanna see?"

"Nothing in particular. The streets."

"Ave you seen the Paseo?" asks Modesta.

"No, señora."

"Well, my son'll go with you. Antofñico, take the gent to the Paseo."

The boy with the green eyes takes my hand as if he knows me.

"Come on."

I say goodbye to Modesta and her husband and thank them for their hospitality.

"How many days you stayin' in Níjar?"

"I'm off tomorrow."

"Have a good trip then . . ."

The group walks into the street to say goodbye to me and Antofñico and I go off, followed by a band of street urchins.

"Don' worry about them," the boy tells me. "When they see a stranger, they go all silly."

The procession gradually attracts all the inquisitive kids from the doorways. There are twenty-five or thirty in no time. They're poorly dressed in pants inherited from their fathers or brothers but, instead of shouting and creating a din like the ones in Cuevas, they walk behind us in silence, and at a respectful distance.

We turn the corner down a dusty alley and come out on the Paseo. It is a grand avenue some hundred meters long, asphalted, with flowerbeds. As if to emphasize its unusual nature, Antofñico points out the line of silvery streetlights

crowned with neon tubes. The visitor rubs his eyes and thinks he must be dreaming. The whole lot looks as if it has been transplanted straight out of Sitges or another fashionable beach resort. A fashion house in the middle of the desert couldn't have been more of a surprise.

"It was inaugurated last year," says Antofñico. "What do you reckon?"

The kids are hanging on my words and I say I think it's fine.

"At night it's all lit up."

"It must look very pretty."

"It does. Come here in a couple of hours an' see for yourself."

While the Paseo awaits the appointed hour to show off its night-time finery, it exercises more modest functions. When we are leaving, a man wearing a hat and sheepskin jacket crosses in front of us with a drove of pigs.

"What else do you want me to see?"

I thank Antofñico for being so kind and tell him I'm off to the tavern. The boy believes me and walks off with the others. Once I'm by myself in the street, I go back up the street we came down and wander along the sidestreets, searching for pottery workshops.

Níjar pottery is famous throughout the south and, with Bailén's, among the most important in Spain. Glazed and hand-painted in bright colors, its pots and plates are sold in Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia for prices that would surprise their humble creators.

In Níjar one can fill a car full of pots for a few pesetas. Recently, some locals seem to have realized there is money to be made and, with foreign tourists in mind, they cover their jugs in naïf folkloric motifs and sell them to passing motorists along the highways that pass through Lorca, Totana, and Puerto Lumbreras.

I walk along a steep street divided down the middle by a running sewer of mud and filth. Dusk is falling, and people peer

out of the doors of their hovels. A radio blares out a song by Juan de Valderrama.

I ask where the pottery workshops are and am pointed to one. It's a low-roofed, windowless shed, where four men are working. The master potters shape pots on their wheels while an apprentice turns clay into dough by slapping it against a stone slab. At the back, there is an expanse of open ground where several lines of bowls are drying.

The men seem used to inquisitive onlookers. The wheels are set up in such a way that the top wheel is at ground level, and they pedal, buried up to their waists, at a magical speed. In their hands, the clay takes on the shape of a bowl in a few seconds. When they finish, they put it on a wooden board and start another.

"First time?" says one of the masters after a while.

"Yes, sir."

"A German came to see us the other afternoon with his family."

The vessels quickly take shape between his fingers, and are always alike.

"How many do you make in a day?"

"I don't know, we never count them."

The man seems quite taciturn. His bowls soon fill almost the whole of the board and the apprentice takes them to dry in the yard. From the doorway I see him going from bowl to bowl with a white milky liquid.

"What's that?"

"Kaolin. It's for the glaze."

When he's finished, I hand him my pack of Ideales and we smoke a cigarette. While the others get out from behind their wheels and remove the clay from their hands, he tells me there are more than twelve workshops in the town, but that they all do badly.

"It's all very labor-intensive and you can't make much. And to become a potter you have to learn as a child, and there are always people out to exploit you."

"If you worked for yourself, you could make money," adds one of the masters. "But the way we do it, the boy's right."

"In other places, the wheel's driven by a motor and you don't have to pedal all the time."

"Well, you know what I think?" shouts another. "I'd rather be workin' in here for ten hours for fifty pesetas than a hundred yards underground like a rat."

"Here, the work's tirin' but you aren't tied down, don't get old before your time, and don't get sick..."

The man who spoke first says he wouldn't change his trade for anything in the world and, as it's time to close and getting dark, we go out into the street. The sun has crossed over the sierra but its light still glows on the peaks. After the oppressive heat, the cool temperature is a relief.

There is a bar on the corner and we go in for a drink. After all the talk about their trade, the master potters have gone silent. The apprentice asks if I'm staying at the tavern and I say I've yet to find one.

"I know two or three. The one on the square is very cheap."

When they've gone, I meander through the town, going nowhere in particular. The front doors to the houses are open and the family scenes follow on drearily, one after another. I see a bicycle repair shop and a store selling seed. Young kids are playing knuckles and the priest is conversing with the Civil Guard brigadier. There are three bars, the parish church, and a cinema. The bars are packed, the cinema is advertising a Vicente Escrivá film and, when I'm near the church, I read a faded poster: HAPPILY INTO THE PRIESTHOOD. HELP THE SEMINARY. I try to go in but the doors are bolted and barred. Two women ride by down the stream on donkeys. They've just done their shopping; I decide to climb the slope. The sidestreet is lined with stalls selling food and I soon reach the market square. When I get there, the last remaining salesmen are putting their merchandise in big panniers. Their donkeys bray impatiently.

"Buy some of my prickly pears, señor?"

The old man's eyes implore me, but by the time I fathom this I've already said no and it's too late. I walk up the slope, pledging to buy something when I come back. The town is bigger than it seems at first sight and I don't know how to get back to the square. I have to ask a young girl and, when I get there, the old man has vanished.

At night, while the innkeeper is preparing dinner in the kitchen, I remember that Ortega y Gasset mentions what happened in Níjar on 13 September 1759—when Carlos III proclaimed himself king—in order to illustrate his renowned theory about the rebellion of the masses. According to papers of the time, in the possession of one Sánchez de Toca, quoted in *The Kingdom of Carlos III* by Don Manuel Dávila and paraphrased by the philosopher:

afterward they ordered drink be brought for that great assembly of people, who consumed eight hundred liters of wine and four wineskins of brandy. Their spirits were fired up to such an extent that, shouting 'Victory,' they headed for the warehouse and threw from its windows all the corn that was there and 900 reales from its coffers. Then they charged on to the Tobacco Store and ordered the tobacco to be thrown out along with the money from monthly tax payments. They acted similarly with the other shops, to give their behavior more authority, and ordered all the liquid and food stocks to be thrown on the street. The ecclesiastical estate joined in equally efficiently and persuaded wives to throw out everything from their houses, orders they carried out without a thought for themselves, because they were left without bread, corn, flour, barley, plates, cooking pots, mortars, and pestles and chairs, and the whole town was thus destroyed.

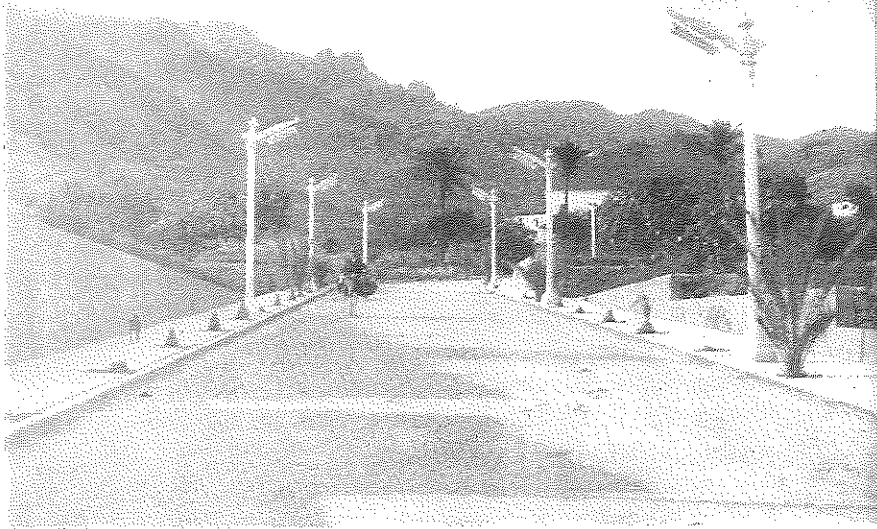
"Wonderful Níjar!" adds Ortega, "The future belongs to you!"

After traveling to some parts of the peninsula, one concludes that what happened two centuries ago in Níjar is common currency nowadays and that Ortega was being

frivolous when he ironically attacked its inhabitants. It is the select minorities and not the ordinary people who are throwing money out of the window—and there are lots of ways they do so. Ordinary people have no choice but to resign themselves, and even when they cheerfully supported such madness as the town of Níjar did, according to the papers in the possession of Sánchez de Toca, a man of good faith can distinguish, beyond mere anecdote, the victims and the blameworthy.

You tell yourself all this and lots more besides, but then the inn-keeper brings the pepper and almond sauce she was crushing at the sink. As you surrender to the sharp wine and your need for food, you so completely forget what's happening in the world outside that you later feel ashamed.

Bed is a boon if you've a full stomach and know that you'll have all you need the next day, are able to go from one place to the next and not be a slave in either, observing from the outside, like a spectator uninvolved in the drama. You know this only too well and, when you switch off the light, you think of the others. Hour after hour ticks by on the clock and you can't get to sleep.



We turn the corner down a dusty alley and come out on the Paseo. It is a grand avenue some hundred meters long, asphalted, with flowerbeds.

V

I had told the innkeeper to wake me up at daybreak as I'd every good intention of seeing the sun come up over the mountains, but I was far too comfy between the sheets. We happy few who work at home have abandoned the habit of early rising to earn our crust, and the writer of these lines gets up when the young lad is taking the reapers in the field their midmorning rolls.

"You missed your bus," the woman says, somewhat taken aback. "It left a long time ago and there ain't one now till tomorrow."

The lazy hiker pays for his bed and dinner, fields her disapproving look and, once in the street, goes into the first barbershop he sees. If he had to sum up the South in three words, he'd surely choose barbershops, kids, and flies. The small towns of Murcia and Andalusia compete for the highest number and, if my experience is anything to go by, their opening hours are very flexible. One night I counted sixteen and entered the seventeenth when it was almost eleven. This Nijar exemplar is even dingier

than the ones in Guadix and while the barber soaps my face, I entertain myself by looking at the flytrap, empty bottles, and a fan that looks splendid in the corner though it's purely for show.

"How far is it to Lucainena?"

"About ten kilometers . . ."

"And Carboneras?"

"A good twenty-seven. You don't have a car so . . ."

I tell him I'm walking and the barber tells me Lucainena, Carboneras, and Turrillas are boring villages not worth a visit.

"What's more you won't find a soul there. Better go back roun' towards Cabo de Gata."

"That's a long way too."

"Yeah, it's a long walk but more to see than in Carboneras and you'll git a lift quick."

The barber speaks with that lilt men in the provinces often have and, when he finishes cutting, he puts some talcum powder on my chin.

"How much is that?"

"It'll be six reales, sir."

The sun is punishing at this time of day and there are no lorries or cars, as it is Sunday. I follow my barber's advice and start walking towards Gata.

It is the same path I took to get there but, instead of following the road to the service station and continuing along the local road, I turn left through the old entrance to the town and twist and turn between dry-stone walls to the cemetery gate.

To my right, the mountains merge and disappear over the horizon. To my left, are the whitish lands of the partly cultivated plain, foreshortened by mist. In the west, small clouds float by like tufts of cotton. Cicadas buzz among the olive groves. High in the sky, the sun shines down on the Nijar countryside.

The road clings to the capricious shape of the fields and when it reaches the crossroads, climbs the slope, leaves the gas station behind, and meets the plain. The pair of Civil Guards on duty at the top of the slope stare at me as I move away from the oasis of green that several centuries of silent, anonymous graft

have created next to the town and enter the surrounding desert through a bleak landscape without men, trees, or water.

It's a straight, seemingly endless path. Trees get few and far between. The last olive trees are small and stunted and, when they disappear, I am alone in the midst of a sea of clay, and my only compass is the blinding sunlight reverberating off the road.

After half an hour the heat is intolerable. The flatlands fry under spiraling mist. Cicadas buzz drowsily. Faltering and withering like plants deprived of light, soaking up the sun, the northern hiker feels oppressed by his journey and starts looking for a patch of shade where he can lie down.

He finds none and walks on for a good stretch. In the distance he spots the shiny chassis of a car parked by the edge of the road. It must be less than a kilometer away and its driver is pacing the tarmac.

The prickly pears give way to hemp plants on the gray earth. A long snake peers slyly from the brambles and slithers from view. On the left there is a roofless farmhouse with the Instituto's slogan, MORE TREES, MORE WATER, written in tar on the wall.

The car is now three hundred meters away; the man sits on a mudguard and looks as if he's waiting for me. I soon see he's not alone and that there is another man sitting at the foot of the incline. In the hemp field a youth breaks clods of earth with a hoe. A red-winged thrush settles on the clump of prickly pears by the roadside. Small clouds converge over the mountain range in a mottled effect. The hill undulates over the plain.

The car is a Peugeot 403 and carries a Paris license. The driver—fair-haired and in his forties—is dressed like an explorer out of a movie, in khaki shorts and white shirt. He only lacks a pith helmet.

"Pardon, señor, est-ce que vous savez donde agua," he asks when I get close to him.

"Je ne sais pas, c'est la première fois que je prends cette route."

The man screws his eyes up in surprise. Sweat pours

down his face.

"J'ai oublié de mettre de l'eau dans le réservoir et je suis en panne," he adds a few seconds later. "Il n'y a aucune fontaine aux environs?"

"Je ne sais pas mais ça me paraît un peu difficile. De l'eau ici . . ."

"C'est embêtant. Voilà plus d'une heure qu'on attend et encore on n'a pas vu de bagnole."

An angry woman sticks her face and flaking nose out of the car.

"Je te l'avais dit quarante fois. Toute cette région-là c'est le désert. Maintenant essaie de trouver de l'eau. Cela t'apprendra à m'emmener dans des pays pauvres."

"Veux-tu la fermer?" rasps the man, irritated.

An old man in a threadbare jacket sits next to the slope and, when I hear him, my heart leaps. Although the brim of his hat hides half his face, I guess that he's the one who offered me the prickly pears in the market the night before.

"Tell him there's a well about two kilometers on."

"De quel côté?"

"Which way?"

The old man stands up and I look into his tired blue eyes. They are the same as yesterday but now beg for nothing.

"You see that crag behind the prickly pears?"

"Yes."

"There's a farmhouse past that where you'll find water."

I translate the old man's directions and the tourist opens the car-door.

"Il paraît qu'il y a un puits là-bas."

The woman acts as if she'd not heard him and fans herself frantically with the newspaper.

"Au revoir," the man bids us. "Thank you very much."

The old man and I walk on along the road. The sun burns down and my companion is carrying a huge basket on his arm.

"You speak very good Spanish," he says after a while.

"I am Spanish."

"You is?"

The old man looks at me as if I were talking nonsense.

"No, you're not."

"I'm not?"

"No, you is French."

"I speak French, but I'm Spanish."

The old man looks at me incredulously. As far as southerners are concerned, culture is the exclusive preserve of foreigners. A Frenchman who speaks ten languages perfectly is less of a shock than a Spaniard speaking garbled French.

"Look," I say putting my hand into my pocket. "Here's my passport. Read here. Nationality: Spanish."

The old man gives it a glance and hands it back to me.

"Where do you say you live?"

"Paris."

"You see then," he exclaims triumphantly. "You is French."

"Spanish."

"Right. A Spaniard from Paris."

His conclusion is irrefutable and I decide not to argue. We walk on in silence for a few minutes. The road seems to stretch out indefinitely before us. The old man has covered the basket with a bit of sacking and I ask if he's any prickly pears left.

"Why?"

"Weren't you in Nijar yesterday evening?"

"Yes, I was."

"I thought I saw you in the market."

"And you askin' me if I've any pears left?"

The old man stops and looks at me almost in a rage.

"Take all you want. Go on. A present from me."

"I didn't mean..."

"Well, I did. Go on. And if you don' like them, spit them out. I won' be offended."

He removes the sacking and shows me his basket full to the brim with prickly pears.

"Fifteen dozen. You can have them for nothin'."

"Thanks very much but . . ."

"No need to thank me. Nobody wants them. The wife's in bed with a temperature. I need to earn money, and what do I do? Take pears by the dozen to market. I'm stupid. People would rather you just begged."

The old man speaks slowly, hoarsely, and turns to me.

"You know how to cut them?"

"Yes."

"Come on then. I'll give you a knife an' fork."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now. They'll be a bit hot, but so what. Nobody wants them if they're cold."

There's a yellow, spindly fig tree at the side of the road and it gives a little shade. We sit on the ground and the old man hands me his knife and fork.

"Eat as many as you want. I'll only have to throw them away."

I say they taste differently in Catalonia and the old man goes quiet and looks at his hands.

"I prefer these. They're much tastier."

"You's just saying that to be nice. Thank you."

"No. It's true."

I top and tail the pear with the knife and score the skin down the middle. I only had a cup of watery coffee when I got up and now realize that I'm hungry.

"When I was a kid, at home, we'd eat them by the dozen."

The old man looks at me while I eat and doesn't say a word.

"My father told us not to mix them with grapes because, he said, the seeds didn' go down well together and gave you the cramps."

The old man was now staring into his hands carefully.

"I've got two sons who live in Catalonia," he says.

The monotone buzz of the cicadas drowns his voice. The



sun shines over the plain like fiery tumor.

"When I was young, my wife wanted us to have lots of kids. The poor woman thought we'd have company when we got old. And look at us now. It's as if we'd not had any at all."

"Where are they?"

"All gone. To Barcelona, America, France . . . Not one returned from the army. At the start, they wrote, sent photos. Some money. Then they got married and forgot all about us."

The old man gives a tired smile. His blue eyes seem faded.

"The oldest weren't like them."

"Wasn't he?"

"Even when he was little kid, he thought about everyone else. Not just his mother, father, or brothers and sisters, but the poor people like us. Here people are born, live and die an' never think. Not him. He had an idea about what life should be like. His mother an' I understood that an' we loved him more than the others, you understand?"

"Yes."

"When the war came, he enlisted straightaway because of that idea he had. He volunteered. He wasn't dragged in like so many of them were. That's why we don't cry for him."

"Did he die?"

"A mortar killed him in Gandesa."

A moment's silence follows and the old man looks at me with a blank expression. The wind blows up flurries of dust over the plain.

"It must rain in your country. I always wanted to go to a country where it rains but never did an' now . . . I'm too old for such adventurin' . . ."

The words don't slip easily from his lips and he looks around deep in thought.

"Years and years have gone by without a single drop of rain, an' my wife an' I scattering barley seed like idiots, hoping for a miracle . . . One summer nothin' grew at all an' we had to sacrifice our animals. A donkey I bought at the end of the war

also died. You can't imagine what it was like . . ."

The plain steams around us. A flock of crows croaks as it flies toward Nijar. The sky is imperturbably blue. The song of the cicadas rises from the ground in mute protest.

"We live on prickly pears. The land won't grow anythin' else. When we're hungry, we fill our bellies until they're stuffed. How many did you say you used to eat?"

"I don't know. Dozens."

"We've eaten hundreds. Last year, before my wife fell ill, I told her: 'Eat the same as me and see if we cock our toes up', but we poor 'uns have got tough skins."

The old man looks in despair and, as he gestures as if to get up and move on, I stand up as well.

"What do you want them?"

The old man tips the pears on the ground and looks at his rope sandals.

"I've not sold them to you. They're a present."

I take a note from my wallet awkwardly.

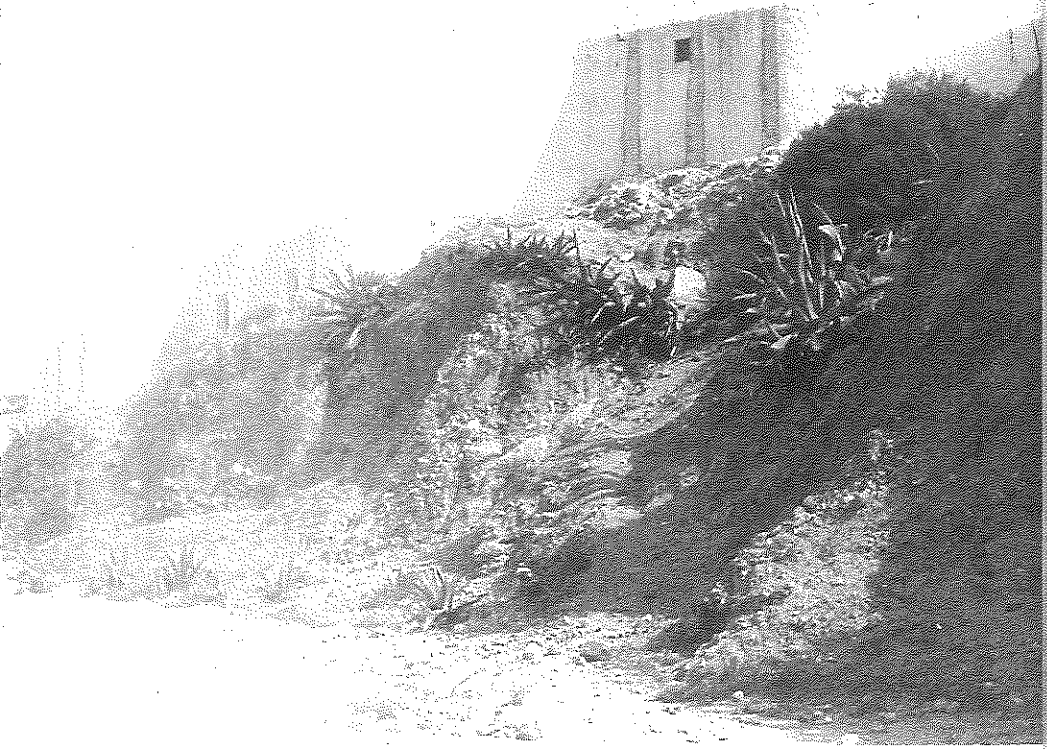
"That's charity," he says going red. "You's givin' me alms."

"It's for the prickly pears."

"They're not worth a thing. Let me ask you, like the others do."

A man on motorbike drives by, making a big din. The old man holds a hand out and says: "Charity, for the love of God."

By the time I react he has taken the note and walks off stiffly, and doesn't give me a single backward glance.



Houses are rectangular and white; almost like small fortresses. The wind lashes the beaches of the Gulf of Almería, and prickly pears stabilize the sand dunes, forming a protective barrier.

## VI

Past Venta de las Canteras, the road skirts a bare, mountainous zone. The undulating Alhama sierra disappears over the horizon, like a sea. A hare rushes across the road and vanishes among brambles, as if a greyhound were on its trail. It is a magnificent spot from which to survey the scene and I spy a hunters' hideout embedded in the rock, hanging above the ravine.

When I reach the Rodalquilar crossroads—where I rode in Sanlúcar's lorry the previous evening—the territory turns African: rocky ground, ocher-hued dry water courses and, occasionally, as if created by a violent stroke of a paint-brush, the yellow glare from a field of sorrel. After walking for an hour and half, I begin to feel tired. There's not a soul to be seen on the road. The wind blows and a harvesters' song seems to rise up from the untilled land, but it is my wishful thinking: when I stop and listen carefully, I hear nothing.

The road to Gata leaves from the outskirts of El Alquíán and I cut across country. You can feel the sea is to the south, behind the sandbanks. The ground is full of tracks that fade like false trails. I follow one, abandon another, and re-trace my steps. Finally I find a railway track and head for a dry river course, strewn with pebbles.

When I get there, a flock of carrion flies up squawking. A carcass is rotting on the banks and the stench is intolerable. I try to hurry but the stones slow me down. The dry course is confined between two walls. Not a single tree, prickly pear, or agave plant to be seen. Only the sky, the stubbornly blue sky, and a luxuriant sun on the attack, like a wild bull.

A hundred meters on, I climb the slope. From up there, your eyes freely survey the plain and the air seems cooler. The ground is still stony and I give a number of snakes a shock. My feet ache and, as I walk along, I glimpse the distant sea in Gata.

The path runs along the edge of a field of hemp plants and, all of a sudden, I'm on the road. A small man is coming along the roadside, his saddlebags slung over his shoulder, and I



The landscape is parched again and, after half an hour of walking through marshes, San Miguel de Cabo de Gata comes into view. An image of Africa strikes the traveler again.

wait for him to get nearer before greeting him:

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“The road to Gata, please . . .”

“Easy enough. You’re on it.”

The small man observes me inquisitively. He’s got trachoma and his eyes are like two buttonholes.

“Where you from?”

“From Níjar.”

“It’s hot, ain’t it?”

“Yes, very.”

I offer him my pack of cigarettes and we resume our walk. He limps slightly.

“We’re used to the sun, but visitors . . .”

“Are you from these parts?”

“From a small village roundabout. Torre García. You know it?”

When I say I don’t, he seems rather offended.

“Well it’s very famous. The Virgin of the Sea appeared to some fishermen there a thousand years ago.”

“That’s a lot of years.”

“Yep, lots and lots. She’s Almería’s patron Virgin now and every summer thousands of people come here to celebrate her day.”

We walk down and then up another slope. The roadsides are planted and my companion points to them.

“See that?”

“Yes, the barley’s taken.”

“Why do they only plant on the sides?”

“Haven’t you seen the road to El Alquíán?”

“Yes, there was barley on the roadsides there too.”

“They leave the sides for us,” the little man explains.

“Let me introduce myself. Feliciano Gil Yagüe, road mender.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s mine.”

I remember the old man on the road to Rodalquilar and ask if he knows him.

"A fellow known as the Tiger . . ."

"You mean, el Rodegario . . . A good man. A pity he's so fond of 'is tipple."

"That's what I heard."

"Round here they call anyone who drinks no end, but what do they expect? When you's old an' alone in this world . . ."

"Yes, quite right."

Feliciano tells me he is a widower with four children.

"The eldest will soon be startin' 'is army service. He's twice as tall as me."

"Do they live with you?"

"Yep. Each has a different job, but we all sleep in El Alquíán."

"I walked that way yesterday."

"Well, if you come again, drop in to see us. My daughter's real grown up now. 'Er eyes are that big."

"Thanks, I will."

"They've all got good sight. Don't think they've all come out like their father."

"No."

"I've been like this ever since I was a kid and so 'as my brother. When we were called up, they sent us both back home as useless."

As we walk along he explains how years ago, in his village, lots youths rubbed mustard in their eyes and some powder they got from the mine and when the doctors did their check ups, they thought they had trachoma and sent them straight home.

"There was one, Eulogio, who put so much powder in his eyes he really did go blind."

"Is he still alive?"

"He's dead now. You know how?" he paused for a moment.

"A lorry knocked him over on his way into Rodalquilar.

He was in agony for nine days."

Feliciano recounts these things calmly, relishing the pleasure morbidly.

"Lots of people die from accidents 'round here."

"Really?"

"Last month, my neighbor's sow bit her baby's head off. The papers were full of it."

The little man explains what happened in grisly detail, and it's easy to imagine how black humor must give compensatory light relief to people from Almería. Some time ago, in a small provincial town, I happened to go to a show staged by comedians whose macabre irony, full of allusions to poverty and death—that would have certainly horrified audiences in any other country—was greeted with enthusiastic applause. Feliciano belongs to that grotesque Spain portrayed by Goya and Valle-Inclán and, as he recounts his stories, his mangy little eyes glint mischievously and his mouth smiles like a pale toothless scar.

"You read *El Caso*?"

"Occasionally."

"They printed a picture of the poor little thing."

The road crosses some plantations surrounded by reed fences. An irrigation channel runs down one side of the road and the terraces are still wet. We gradually get closer to the farmstead. It looks big, and the palm trees and sound of water give it the Romantic aura of an oasis stuck in the middle of the desert.

"Well," says the little man. "We've arrived."

"Where?"

"Torre Marcelo. Just go straight on an' you'll be in Cabo Gata in no time. I stop here."

I say goodbye to Feliciano, not before promising him that I'll visit El Alquíán to meet his children, and I watch him shuffle past the suntrap that is the threshing floor. A donkey also watches him from a stable-window, and dogs run around him whimpering and jumping up to lick his hands.

Torre Marcelo gives the impression that it's very wealthy. Straw piles up in the barns. Under the lean-to you can see light packsaddles for mules and a huge wooden hanger with tools for tilling the land. There are chickens, geese, ducks, pigs, and even a water tank where a boy is fishing out weed and stirring up the slime at the bottom with the end of his stick.

The road runs alongside a terrace of eucalyptus and, following the water run, cuts through an orchard of olive, palm, and fruit trees. A salty wind blows, anticipating the sea. The landscape is parched again and, after half an hour of walking through marshes, San Miguel de Cabo de Gata comes into view. An image of Africa strikes the traveler again. Houses are rectangular and white; almost like small fortresses. The wind lashes the beaches of the Gulf of Almería and prickly pears stabilize the sand dunes, forming a protective barrier.

I decide not to cross the town and make a detour through cultivated land that runs into the sand that is another real suntrap. Sandbanks conceal the sea and, when I finally do see it, after ten minutes of impatient searching, I take my clothes off and dive in. Minutes later, driven by hunger, I emerge and walk slowly toward the town. Its houses are built with their backs to the sea which must resist the onslaught of the sand. The boats washed up on the beach look like insects cast up by the storm, like gigantic, lifeless butterflies. There are dragnets, trawlers, small boats, and sweep-nets. In Cabo de Gata, as in Motril, the men use purse-nets to fish from the shore.

A hundred meters in the direction of the saltpans a graceful tower stands in ruins, no doubt built centuries ago to give forewarning of incursions by pirates. It is a long, very clean beach. A cargo boat, anchored half a kilometer from the coast, is waiting to finish loading its shipment of salt. Further away still, the horizon ends abruptly on the cliffs of the cape.

In the town the children trail after me, full of curiosity, dark, skinny, southern children, all curly hair and expressive eyes, half dwarves, half devils, with their tiny gesturing hands, sing-song voices, and adult sadness that is always transparent

under their greedy, mischievous features.

"Is you lookin' for the inn?"

"Yes."

They gather around, argue and tug at my sleeve.

"This way. This way."

"Is you French?"

"No."

"Somebody here speaks French."

"I'm Spanish."

"He's Spanish," they chorus. "Spanish, Spanish."

The most impatient rush ahead with the news and come back and pick me up when I am almost in the square.

The inn is a house like all the others, white on the outside and cool and pleasant inside, with a bar packed with crates of beer, a barrel of wine, and a colored publicity calendar.

"Here you go," the kids proclaim triumphantly.

The innkeeper is a pleasant-looking young man, wearing jeans and a linen shirt. The kids drag me towards him and then go quiet, hanging on our words.

"Can you feed me?"

"It depends what you want."

"I don't mind. Whatever you've got."

The owner puts his hands on his hips and says: "I got bread, olives, tomato, onion, fried fish . . ."

"That'll do."

"If you want tinned stuff, I got that too."

"No."

"Anything to drink?"

"Half a liter of red wine."

The owner leads me into the dining room. As in Rodalquilar, there's only one table and, when I go in, two men close on forty are tucking into a salad.

"Enjoy your meal."

"Thanks."

My companions talk a lot and immediately bring me into the conversation.

"Do you live here?"

"No."

"We don't either. We're repairing the engine of a fishing boat that broke down last month."

"Where?"

"Opposite the salt pans. But we come here to eat. There's nothing out there."

The man on my right is Vitorino Fernández. He's from Cartagena, the barrio de la Concepción, and had always been a fisherman until he started working as a boat mechanic. The other man says he lives in Alicante. I can only remember his surname: Carratalá.

"I know all the south and east of Spain," says Vitorino. "From Portugal to Cabo Creus. My father owned a trawler and that's where I learned to repair engines."

I talk to him about the towns on the coast of his province: Mazarrón, Aguilas, San Javier, Los Alcázares . . .

"You been there?"

"Just passing through."

"Nothing like the Mar Menor for tasty fish. You seen them fishing in the lagoons?"

"Yes."

"And you see the nets they use?"

"Yes."

Vitorino is a sensual man and, when he talks about food, his eyes glint and he seems to water at the mouth.

"They really know how to cook fish . . . I've always said there's nothing can beat their stew."

Carratalá curses the bad luck that has landed them in Almería.

"Go out in the street at ten and there's not a soul in the street. Everything's shut."

"Nothing like Cartagena for a bit of night life."

"Or Málaga. We were both there in April, repairing engines. You can see a bit of life there."

The innkeeper comes in with a dish of salad, onion,

tomato, and olives. He serves my companions a platter of fried fish.

"Did you hear what happened last night?" he asks. And without giving them time to reply: "Those Americans from that boat caused a scene."

"No. What did they do?"

"Three of them came from Almería in a taxi, as pissed as newts an', when they got here, they refused to pay the driver, an' said they hadn't got no money. The taxi-driver's from Garrucha an' I know him. He's like a tree trunk, a real Tarzan. When he saw them tryin' it on, he knocked the three of them flat and stripped them of their clothes, watches, everythin' they had . . ."

"What time was that?"

"I don' know. Between four and five. Julio saw them both sleepin it off on the beach. He says they were in their birthday suits. The third one swam to the boat."

The innkeeper goes off to get the bottle of wine and my fellow diners rail against the sailors.

"They come here thinking they've a right to do anything they like. In Alicante, they beat up a bootblack once real bad. The bastards!"

Vitorino asks me whether I studied at the university and, when I say I did, he clears his throat and tells me about Barcelona and Madrid and some youths who came to work in the shipyards in the summer holidays.

"Great people," he says. "They were wonderful to listen to. Perhaps you know them."

The innkeeper comes back with my fish, wine, and a small melon that he tests before slicing.

"What's it like?" asks Vitorino.

"First class."

And the four of us sit there talking about the things that are happening in the world; we get so worked up, we raise our voices, start to shout, and the innkeeper has to close the door.

When I leave, the little kids are idling their time away waiting for me in the square, and I shake hands with my three

friends and continue along the path to the lighthouse.

The road takes me through the marshland. I leave behind houses, the ruined tower, and skinny, swarthy kids. The sun isn't as punishing now and there's a cool breeze. On my left, salt marshes cover the plain. The Americans' boat waits out to sea to be loaded.

After a twenty-minute walk, you reach the settlement by the salt pans. The houses are more huddled together than in Gata. There is a recently built gray church, a solitary cross in memory of those who Died for the Fatherland, and a mountain of white salt that looks like snow. The air smells like the suburbs of a big city, and it is all strangely asymmetrical.

The road winds between the salt marshes and beach, sheltered from sun and wind. The Gata mountains loom ahead and their huge mass breaks up the landscape. At their feet, after a fifteen-minute walk, you reach a small settlement—La Fabriquilla—that is as poverty-stricken and shabby as the other two, its streets teeming with starving dogs and children, running, shouting, and wallowing in puddles of dirty water.

I'm thirsty and enter the Bar Viruta for a drink. I down a dry anisette in one gulp. Outside, the last houses straggle at the foot of the mountains. The porches are full of people peering out. There are half a dozen filthy looking cave dwellings on the mountainside and a man is climbing up with a baby in his arms.

When I walk along the path to the lighthouse, the landscape changes radically. The sierra hurtles down into the sea and the waves furiously pound the cliffs.

As the road climbs up, the horizon widens. The sun shines, but no longer gives out heat. Currents trace white stripes over the mass of still-blue sea and the headlands jut out like walrus, dripping with foam.

The sierra is ocher-colored and bare. The only vegetation is the fan palm that Almerians use to make into brooms and mats; its white, tasty palm hearts, imported from Africa, are eaten throughout Europe where they are more prized than asparagus.

After half an hour of my walking round blind bends, the

lighthouse at the head of the cape suddenly comes into view, one of the most beautiful in the world. The mountains completely cut it off from land, and it rises up, pumelled day and night by the sea, solitary and wild, surveying the Moorish coast, a now faithful look-out post for storms and shipwrecks, as once it sought out disembarking Berbers.

I think sadly how such a place should be an important tourist attraction and gloomily contemplate the narrow, dusty, winding road where hardly a car can pass, where access, in a crowning irony, is banned to private cars—as I read on a notice—that haven't secured prior permission.

These days the only inhabitants, apart from the lighthouse keeper and his wife, are the civil guards who patrol opposite the beach, a hundred meters from the lighthouse, and a couple of slovenly Swedes who fetched up there months ago in a taxi, with their blue-eyed, fair-haired son, canvas tent and sewing-machine.

"Do you speak English?"

"No."

"Parlez-vous français?"

"No."

"Parlate italiano?"

Communication is impossible and husband and wife simply smile. A civil guard who is bored stiff patrolling the beach tells me the man is a fanatical underwater fisher, and catches a lot.

On my way back to the village, I think that the Swedes must be slightly mad to leave their country with all their belongings; that night, when I mention them to the owner of inn where I ate in the morning and venture my opinion, his eyes sparkle and he says: "Yes, they're mad; and much more so than you suspect."

Almost a hundred kilometers of wild arid coast separate Cabo de Gata and Garrucha, windswept in winter and sunbaked in summer, as amazingly beautiful as it is unknown. There are cliffs, rocks, small islands, and coves. The sand runs smoothly through your fingers and the blue sea continually invites you to swim.

Solitary souls can safely camp there. The tourists who drive down route 340 never venture beyond Garrucha. There are no Spanish holidaymakers and the rare foreigners who do come are either rich or Americans who disembark from a yacht, or—like the Swedish couple I met at the lighthouse—fans of underwater fishing.

The projected coastal road stops south of Mojácar and to reach the towns on the shore—San José, Los Escuyos, La Isleta, La Ermita de Rodalquilar, Las Negras, Agua Amarga, and Carboneras—you must go inland—take the local road that joins them in a network of roads that leave the Níjar and Rodalquilar crossroads like the ribs of a fan, ever more distant from each other as they recede into the distance.

On the third day of my hike I started off after previously deciding my itinerary. The innkeeper in Cabo de Gata had pointed out a path through the mountains that linked the salt pans with San José and, since I'd got up very early to take advantage of the cool temperature, the sun had yet to reach the fields.

I've always felt that the adage "God helps the early riser" was a con and my feeling was confirmed that daybreak in Gata. Skinny, poorly dressed shadows wandered across the square, their faces tinged with despair and, as I left the town for the salt marshes, I reflected that whoever invented that saying must have been an eleven o'clock riser—a time when those the heavens shower with gifts see the sun—whoever praised early-risers did so ironically.

The innkeeper had also mentioned a cart, belonging to one Argimiro, that went to and fro every morning between the

salt pans and El Nazareno's farm.

"Tell him you're a friend of Gabrié's, from the inn, and he'll take you to Boca de los Frailes. It's five minutes from there to San José."

Argimiro lived on the way into the town and, within minutes of starting to look for him, I tracked him down. I gave him Gabriel's message, as he had told me to, and Argimiro, a man as affable as he was ugly, harnessed his mule, loaded his panniers, and asked me to climb on board.

"So you're a friend of Gabrié," he said as we set off. "How's he gettin' on?"

"I think he's fine."

"An' his wife?"

"She's all right as well."

"Was you there when there was that business over the Swedish lady?"

"No."

"There's a married couple with a kid camping near the lighthouse . . ."

"Yes, I saw them yesterday."

"You know, the Swedish woman had a fling with Gabrié an' his wife caught them at it on the beach. All hell let loose."

Argimiro smiled wryly, displaying his big rotten teeth.

"It happened just like that. And the Swede never cottoned on."

The cart in which we are traveling is small and rustic. The sideboards are two planks of wood held in place by wooden teeth. The shafts are painted red and, when the wheels stick in the ruts on the track, the mule stops and Argimiro has to flick his whip at it.

Salt-panners in broad-brimmed hats walk through the marsh with their bundles of food, like a flock of birds about to take flight. The sun shines down on them relentlessly and they seem not to know the meaning of the word exhaustion. Some wear tattered clothes and, when they walk by, they respond to my companion's greeting with an imperceptible movement of their lips.



Past the salt pans, the road negotiates the foothills of the sierra. The ground is ocher and we cut through fallow land. There is untilled land, fields of barley and wheat. To avoid exhausting the land, the farmers follow a rotation system and, after two harvests, the land is given a good rest.

"Last week a motor-bike crashed on the side of the road."

Argimiro explains that a dance was held on a farm, near Albaricoques and the bike-owner—a friend of his—was riding along half drunk.

"Whenever they have one of these dances, there's always some disaster or other."

"Why?"

"People aroun' here don' hold each other when they dance like they do in the big cities. They usually play fandangos on the farms and the women dance and the lads make up the words as they go along, you know, about the girl they fancy or the one who's the prettiest. All engagements started like that not that long ago. But the lads aroun' here don't bite their tongues and one 'as a couple of drinks, starts tellin' a few home truths, cursin' everyone else and, sparks off a real carry-on. He's a thief, a liar, your father missing? or is a bastard and in the end they all come to blows."

It looked as if it was going to be hot. The sun was gradually rising above the peaks and the mist was making a blur of the landscape. The hay on the roadside is blighted and, after the gusts of the previous evening, the air is quiet, as if becalmed.

"There's goin' to be drizzle," says Argimiro, screwing up his eyes and looking at the tops of the mountains. "When clouds are on those peaks, the sky soon goes black."

"You could do with it," I say. "When did it last rain?"

"I don't know, months ago. We had four drops in March, next to nothin'. The other day the mayor said that if it goes on like this, we'll have to bring the saint out."

There is a good stretch of ocher earth. Argimiro tells me the names of the mountain peaks and the shrubs growing

there. On our left are fields of corn where the stalks have been flattened. The road is full of potholes and the cart's planks groan.

"Who owns this land?"

"Don José Gonzalez Montoya. All San José and Cabo de Gata belong to him."

Argimiro goes on chatting but lowers his voice and I do likewise and, as the mule progresses painfully over the flatlands, we exchange confidences and even get hot under the collar. Our stories are always similar and we finally fall silent.

The sun has now taken full possession of the countryside and glowers high in the sky, like oil on the surface of a well. There's not a breath of air. Steam rises from the ground. The cart resonates strangely against the silent ocher. We are the only human beings for several kilometers around, and a lizard that looks as if it's made of rubber pokes its head up between crops of rock and eyes us furtively. Half an hour later, the brown of the mountainside turns yellow in patches and Argimiro says we are getting close to the mines.

"What mines?"

"Lead mines."

"Are they still being worked?"

"No, they're abandoned."

According to him, the region experienced a period of prosperity before he was born. There were half a dozen lead and manganese mines between Boca de los Frailes and San José and people didn't have to emigrate as they do now to make a living. At the turn of the century, the mines shut down one after another. The foreign companies sacked their workforces and they'd been desert towns ever since.

"If you ask old people they'll tell you. San José was double the size it is now."

I remember Garrucha, with its ruined factories and foundries, and think how the mining crisis in Almería must have been part of a general phenomenon. Every home in the province remembers it as a real catastrophe. The whole of history seems to divide into two eras, one wealthy and the other poverty-stricken,

separated by the cataclysm that struck in those years. I've heard numerous explanations of the origins and possible causes of the crisis—the government's lack of interest, refusal to adapt to modern mining methods, industrial competition from Catalonia, etc.—But none has entirely satisfied me and, while I wait for someone more qualified than myself to flesh them out, I urge researchers to visit the old mining centers in the province, their ruined houses, deserted squares, flooded galleries and pits.

"Well, you're here. Go right, past Boca de los Frailes, and you'll be in San José in less than half an hour. I'm goin' to keep on left to El Nazareno's farm."

The mule stops at the crossroads, I thank Argimiro and alight from his cart. The landscape reminds me of Albaricoques: the ground is gray, there are fields of barley and rubber trees, and the green of fig trees alternates with the green of prickly pears.

Boca de los Frailes is on the left. It is a cluster of a dozen white, rectangular houses. I can see covered wells, palm trees, and women riding on donkeys. In the foreground, a hedge of freshly pruned agaves clings to the side of the road.

It is barely nine o'clock and the sun is as hot as if it were midday. The road slopes slowly down through open land, but the shore has yet to come into sight. The mountains rise up between the plain and sea like gigantic reclining animals, and they block out the horizon with their lofty heads, round haunches, and smooth, massive backs.

After a fifteen-minute descent, a new settlement appears, on the right this time. It is Pozo de los Frailes, which has a school and looks bigger than the last one. By the side of the road a blindfolded ass is pulling on the axle of the draw-well. The wheel turns slowly, hoisting bucketsful of water from the well which are then poured into the trough.

The children crowd around to see me, and some run off to tell their mothers. "A foreigner, a foreigner," they shout. Women peer out of their hallways; there is an atmosphere of expectation. Rather intimidated, I pretend I'm looking at the cloudlets gathering over the mountains, and start my retreat.

The interiors of the houses look empty and in one I see an old man asleep on the floor. The pack of kids pursues me, watching my every gesture. On the road I walk past a man reading the newspaper and the children lower their voices to inform me he is the mayor.

"How far's San José?" I ask.

"Six hours," one answers.

But the others protest and shove him, and I can't make any sense out of the din that follows.

"Goodbye."

"Are you leavin'?"

"Yes."

"Will you come back?"

"Later on."

The kids look at me as I walk off. The youngest are completely naked, and a very good-looking, fair-haired boy wears a threadbare adult jacket, buttoned up like an overcoat.

The road still slopes down, and there are smallholdings and fields of barley on either side. Three men are putting agave leaves through a shredder and pull on the length that sticks out over the mat. As I walk by, they all chorus hello. The road turns into a narrow path. A hundred meters more and the sea suddenly appears, washing down a beach of blackish sand. The wind from the sea makes the reeds sway. San José sits on a hill, to my right. It is a sad, gale-whipped town: one half of the houses are roofless and the other has cracked walls. It was ruined by the mining crisis at the beginning of the century and has yet to recover from the blow. It lives, like so many Spanish towns, embroiled in a vacuous, sickening evocation of past glories. The traveler walking its streets is struck by a painful impression of fatalism and neglect. People seem to have lost the taste for life more than anywhere else in the province. Men and women walk almost like robots and when they bump into a stranger, they quicken their pace, eying him suspiciously. There is a school in San José, built following the same model as all the others in the region. When I walk past, I find it is empty. The church is poorly built but its

interior has its charm. A bus, now snoozing in the square, covers the thirty-six kilometers that separate the town from the capital. By following the road, over a violent rough sea, you reach the barracks of the Civil Guard, solidly built on rock.

My stroll has lasted barely twenty minutes by the time I leave the town. The walk has made the sweat stream and, before carrying on, I cross some maize fields and go for a swim.

The sea isn't as pleasant here as in the gulf of Almería. As I lie on the sand, I drowsily inspect one of those watchtowers—the one called Figuera Cove—built centuries ago to keep a watch out for the Berber invaders approaching and still seen along the whole of the Mediterranean coast, so symbolic of Spain's propensity for belated initiatives.

I then walk up the road along which I had come and, at the entrance to Pozo de los Frailes, I turn down a dry watercourse on the right. Within minutes a sedan appears behind me, I wave my arm and it brakes suddenly.

## VIII

"Where are you going?"

A lean, rather aloof, middle-aged man peers out of the back window. He is wearing a bottle green suit, striped shirt, and black tie.

"Wherever you might be heading."

"This road goes to Los Escuyos by the sea. You been there before?"

"No, sir."

"Get in then. We'll agree on a price later."

The man driving opens the side door and suggests I sit in the back next to the other passenger. We drive off.

"Your first visit?"

"Yes."

"It's a very picturesque region. You'll soon see. Last year I took some French people there who I met in Venta Eritana and they came back full of enthusiasm."

The chauffeur inspects me via the rear-view mirror. He's red-haired and freckled, his dark eyes bulging under thick eyebrows. He says nothing the whole journey.

"If there was a decent road, tourists would flock here. This is a better coast than Málaga and life's much cheaper than it is there. You can buy a fisherman's cottage here for three thousand pesetas. People are emigrating and selling up for next to nothing."

Expanses of whitish land pass by, smooth and bare. The cicadas buzz inebriated by the sun. The ground is stony and the car jolts along.

"In less than ten years I've bought a whole village. You'll soon see. It's the one past Los Escuyos."

At a bend in the road, we give way to a flock of sheep. The little boy looks like a wild pup. He's barely a meter tall and already earning his keep.

"Kids around here start working at the age of seven," my companion remarks.

"Don't they go to school?"

"Their parents don't let them and they're right, with



When we reach Los Pipaces, the driver turns across the plain and we drive through an unfamiliar landscape of white farmhouses, early crops, covered wells, and prickly pears. A gypsy on a donkey rides across the road in front of us.

good reason. Hunger's the best teacher."

As we leave behind the flock and forlorn silhouette of the little shepherd boy, my companion tells me about the backwardness in the province and rails against Andalusians.

"People in Castile and the North are better brought up and recognize the value of things. Not here. When they've got money, they spend and spend, as if it were burning their fingers. The poorer they are, the more spendthrift they become."

He asks me where I come from and, when I mention Barcelona, the expression on his face changes and his attitude is friendlier. He tells me how he once went there with his deceased wife, for the Universal Exhibition of 1929.

"What a great city! I've always wanted to go back. If it weren't for my wretched business commitments . . ."

His forehead is dripping with sweat he wipes away with a handkerchief. A warm wind wafts in through the window.

"In Andalusia they say Catalans are mean, but it's just envy. The fact is they work hard and know the value of money. The complete opposite to here. Whenever I see someone splashing money around here, I think he must be poor."

My companion looks at me and smiles; I stare back and return his smile.

"I was planning to go back for a holiday in nineteen thirty-six, but the Revolution got in my way. I'd even bought my ticket."

The heat of the sun leaps on the fields of wheat like a starving animal, and he tells me about atrocities committed by the Reds and the way he was persecuted during the war.

"You young people can't imagine what it was like. The prisons were full of property owners, priests, and pillars of society. They forced the bishop of Almería to shovel coal."

Outside, the mist blurs the fields. The earth turns ashen and clouds wreath the peaks of the mountains. The car avoids the rocks on the road and the driver brakes in order to cross a ford. We are approaching a hamlet surrounded by plots of cultivated land. Half the houses are verging on ruin, and a girl wearing a

Moorish-style headscarf looks out at us. The horn frightens the fowl. The cocks run away, tails bristling, and we almost run over some chicks.

The outlook clears past this settlement. The ground gets stonier. Crows hover above, motionless in the sky. There is an abandoned windmill on the stubble. Potholes and bumps slow the car down, and clouds of dust settle on the undergrowth and a haze hangs over the road.

In a few minutes the sea comes into view. The road cuts across low-lying, untilled land, and Los Escuyos suddenly appears on the right. It is a poverty-stricken spot, battered by gales, and the houses are strung out in no order or pattern, like mushrooms. There are no streets, or even paths that merit a name. The car hits a puddle and we get out in front of the school.

“Come on, I’ll show you the castle.”

The wind almost knocks us off our balance as we scramble over the rocks. The waves lash the beach. The sea is as choppy as a field of endives and the air reeks of pitch and putrefaction.

The castle rises up on crags by the edge of the strand. It looks like the twin of the one in Garrucha, but nobody has looked after it and it’s semiruin. The towers barely hold up and there’s only a melancholy remnant of the parapet.

“When I was a child,” my companion tells me, “I always used to come and play here. The keep was still standing and the turrets were intact.”

As we walk around the precinct he tells me how thirty years ago the owners spent their summers here and organized receptions and dances.

“I remember the day Doña Julia got married as if it were yesterday. There were more than a hundred cars on the esplanade and the chapel couldn’t take all the guests.”

Now weeds thrive in the middle of the yard and lizards sunbathe on the flagstones. The chapel is a farmyard: the door is padlocked and, inside, you can hear hens clucking. What was once the owners’ bedroom slumbers in semidarkness and, when I

try to go in, my companion stops me.

“Don’t go in there.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a breeding ground for fleas. Last year I took a look inside and was scratching myself the rest of the day.”

As we’re leaving, we bump into the local Civil Guard corporal. He’s in his forties, short, stout, and sunburned, with a pockmarked face. He must have clambered quickly up the slope because the sweat is streaming down his face.

“How are you, Don Ambrosio?”

My companion says he is very well.

“I saw your car in front of the school, and Paco told me you was up here.”

“We came up to have a look round and were about to go back down.”

“You soon got tired then, Don Ambrosio.”

“Well, there’s nothing left up here.”

“True enough.”

“I was just telling this gentleman what it was like when I was a kid. With the turrets, the keep and the chapel where Doña Julia got married . . .”

“Yes, you is quite right.”

“I’ve always thought it would have made you a splendid barracks. Instead of spending money building a new one, they could have done this place up, like they did in Garrucha . . .”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s best forgotten. It makes me angry every time I think about it.”

The castle walls shield us from the gusts of wind, and I take out my packet of cigarettes.

“Want one?”

“Thank you,” replies the corporal.

Don Ambrosio hesitates but takes one as well.

“Hell. One won’t make any difference . . .”

We walk back to the car. Don Ambrosio complains about the weather and the corporal looks furtive. I see him move his

lips two or three times as if to say something, but he then desists.

"Very well, Elpidio," says Don Ambrosio, about to bid him farewell.

The corporal undoes the strap of his three-cornered helmet and smiles.

"You remember what I told you, Don Ambrosio?" His voice sounds gruffer, rather strained.

"Yes, of course I do. I telephoned his secretary last week and he promised to call me soon."

"Thanks very much, Don Ambrosio."

"When I have some news, I'll let you know."

"Very good, Don Ambrosio."

"Be seeing you then."

"Goodbye. Have a good trip."

We drive off, and the car goes back the way we came and across the dry riverbed. The sun is still preening itself high in the sky. The palms flutter like birds stripped of their feathers. Los Escuyos, its gray hovels and ruined castle, now lie behind us and once we're over the first hill, the road plunges down.

The sierra doesn't skirt the coast as it does in San José but slopes gently and blends into the hills. The rigors of the climate reduce the undergrowth to a minimum. There are brambles, palmettos, and the odd prickly pear nibbled by goats. The peaks stretch out, bare and dry. The road occasionally looks to the sea and, for a few seconds, I get a glimpse of a yacht sailing over the horizon.

I offer round my pack of cigarettes again and Don Ambrosio protests but finally takes one. He says he'd given up the vice and that I'm dragging him down. I see a ruined farmhouse go by. The side of the hill is terraced. Stretches of dry-stone wall have collapsed and look abandoned.

After zigzagging for a few minutes, the road suddenly swerves coastward. There is a small fishing village at the foot of the crag consisting of around twenty tumbledown houses. Clouds are gathering to the south and the sky threatens to pour down.

When we get there, women are washing and filling water

pitchers at the fountain. Little kids run half-naked in the mud. The car drives round a group of hovels and the driver brakes opposite an animal pen.

The kids surround us immediately. There are fifteen or twenty, mischievous and dirty, like a herd of spirited animals. People come out into their doorways, women, men, and, especially, old people, and before they follow the kids, they look at me and ask me who I am.

"Good day, Don Ambrosio." The old man doffs his cap when he speaks and grips it nervously between his fingers.

"How's your lady mother?"

Don Ambrosio says she has got over her fever and is up and about now.

"And your brothers and sisters? Are they all right?"

Don Ambrosio says they are, thanks be to God.

"And how are you getting on?"

"Middlin', don Ambrosio."

"And your wife?"

"As healthy as usual."

"That's the main thing, Joaquín. Where there's health . . ."

"We're not gittin' any younger, Don Ambrosio. Once you is past sixty . . ."

"What choice do we have! That's life."

"That's what I tell myself."

"How's Filomena?"

"Very poorly, Don Ambrosio," interjects a woman. "Her leg's got gangrene."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He prescribed some injections, but they's made no difference. She gits worse by the day."

"What about Miguel?"

"He's at home with her. The poor fellow don' leave her side."

"I'll come and see them in a minute."

Don Ambrosio shakes the men and women's gnarled

hands and asks after their families, and one after another, those he asks say they're fine and they in turn enquire after his. The same scene is repeated for a quarter of an hour and, finally, when Don Ambrosio has paid his respects to everybody, he smiles and gives my arm a friendly tug.

"Come on, I'll show you the rock. There's a beautiful view."

People move aside to let us pass and we walk on in silence. The houses are built right by the seashore. The Cape protects the cove from the gales and the waves don't lash the beach as they did in Los Escuyos.

Half a dozen trawlers sway to and fro, anchored opposite the rocks. Old men are mending nets on the ground and greet us when they see us. Pigs grunt inside their sties and bunches of sardines hang from the doorways, like lucky charms, drying in the sun.

"What do you reckon?" asks Don Ambrosio when we reach the top.

I shout—because of the wind—that it looks nice. The village irradiates a sad beauty that many wouldn't appreciate and that would no doubt disappoint collectors of romantic landscapes. Don Ambrosio rests his thumbs on his braces and contemplates his domain, smirking complacently.

"The day they build the blessed road, these houses will be worth four times more. I'll be able to rent them out to tourists in the summer."

The wind drowns his words out and, as we scramble down the hillside, he shouts to me that Joaquín went to get lunch ready and he'll come for us in half an hour.

"I'm hungry; I don't know about you."

"So am I."

We return to the village. A young man comes along the path; he's sporting two- or three-day-old stubble and a shirt that's been patched time and again. The sunlight forces him to squint and he displays his teeth in a broad smile.

"Good day, Don Ambrosio."

"Good day, Juan."

There's a moment's silence. The man sinks his hands into his pockets.

"I've come to see you about the little place you bought from Pascuá. We don't have enough room in ours, Don Ambrosio. We is five an' just one bedroom. My mother thought perhaps you could lend it us for a couple of months until my brother-in-law gets his repaired. . . . You don't have to spend nothin' and you'll be doin' us a big favor."

"If it were only going to be two months, as you say, I'd give it to you right now. But you know perfectly well it's not true. You'll settle in, and nobody will ever get you out."

"We'll leave whenever you say, Don Ambrosio. My word of honor. Just for the time it takes my brother-in-law to put a roof on his house."

"That's just what Martín said when he asked me for the house up there, and look how long he stayed. More than four years and I had to pay all the legal costs and paperwork. No, I've learned my lesson. I want to live in harmony with people and I don't want any more bother or headaches."

Don Ambrosio turns to the visitor, appealing to him as his witness.

"It's not the first or second time they've done this, you know? And apart from abusing one's good faith, they come and complain."

Juan listens, head bowed, and Don Ambrosio shakes the dust off his trousers.

"Besides, even if I'd wanted to, I can't. The house belongs to our family and, before making any decision, I must consult my sister and mama."

As we reach the village, the children follow us at a distance. Don Ambrosio takes a bag of sweets from his pocket.

"Hey, little girl, want one?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take your favorite."

The girl walks over and sinks her hand into the bag.

"Come on, you bunch, gather round," Don Ambrosio invites the others. "There's enough for everybody."

The kids form a circle around him, shoving and shouting.

"Don't push for heaven's sake. One at a time."

Juan has moved slightly away from us and silently watches the *mêlée*. People stand in their doorways. The visitor's attention centers on a plump woman, sharp-featured like Juan, who's walking towards us holding her skirt to her knees to stop the wind blowing it up. The woman cuts a path through the young kids and exchanges glances with her son.

"Hello, Ambrosio."

"Hello, María."

"Has Juan spoken to you?"

"Let's have some order. Each of you, just choose something for yourself."

"We's like sardines, Ambrosio. Five of us an' Martina's expectin' another."

"Hey, give the sweet to the littl'un... You were saying?"

"Only three months, Ambrosio. Only till the end of summer."

"Your son said it was two months, you say three, and soon it will be six, a year or fifteen centuries. You do realize that, don't you?"

The woman looks me up and down, and grips her skirt between her knees.

"Felipe will have his house ready in September. Only that long, Don Ambrosio. It won't cost you nothin'."

"I know it won't cost me anything, woman. But it's the principle of the thing. I must consult with my mama and sister to decide this kind of issue."

"Talk to them then."

"I myself count for nothing."

"Shall we come and see you on Saturday, or will you be comin' back here?"

"Here you are, the last one's for your brother."

"I asked whether you'll be back here soon or prefer me to come to Almería."

"Look, you know, these things can't be settled in a day or even in a fortnight. Let's not get impatient. When I know the state of play I'll inform you in writing."

The bag of sweets is empty. Don Ambrosio blows it up and makes it go bang between his hands. The children gradually scatter.

"Well then, the show's over."

Black threatening clouds are gathering in the direction of Cabo de Gata. The boats bob like nutshells and I remember Argimiro's forecast.

"Come on," says Don Ambrosio, "we must go to the inn."

We say goodbye to the mother and enter a house that's bigger than the others, with whitewashed walls and a stone bench next to the front door. Joaquín and his wife are busy cleaning the fish and bring us a bottle of wine. There is a yellow poster on the wall with the flags of Spain, Italy, Germany, and Portugal and colored photographs of Salazar, Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco.

When I put a pack of *Ideales* on the table, Don Ambrosio smiles and takes one.

"Right. As we're poisoning ourselves . . ."

I hold out my lighter and he shows me a glass tube he's been carrying in the top pocket of his jacket.

"I keep away from the tobacconist to avoid falling into temptation and you ruin everything. My doctor recommended some pills. Would you like one?"

"No, thank you."

"That's all right. We'll leave them to later."

And while Joaquín serves us a dish of fried breadcrumbs and liver, he tells me the village is an ideal haven for people who aren't ambitious and that its hundred plus inhabitants live happy, harmonious lives.

"Whenever I see somebody being churlish, I take him to one side and say: 'So-and-so, this isn't the place for you. This



place is fine, provided you don't set your sights high. If you want noise and the bustle of the big city, you'd better clear off to Valencia or Catalonia, because here you'll always be a misfit.' Isn't that so, Joaquín?"

"Yes, Don Ambrosio."

"Last year I paid the fares for two to go to Barcelona. A fisherman and one man who worked in the mine. It cost me the best part of two thousand pesetas."

"I heard that Heredia's got himself a fiancée. Angelita received a letter from him and he says he's getting married in the autumn."

"I'm pleased. I always thought he was a good boy. Ambitious and always answering back, but a good lad."

When we've finished, the old men outside come and chat and, so I don't look poor in Don Ambrosio's eyes, I ask Joaquín for the bill and pay.

My companion waits for me to get my change and then stands up.

"I have to go and see the wife of one of my tenants. Do you want to come with me?"

"Yes."

"The poor woman had a miscarriage last month and one of her legs has got gangrene. You're not a doctor, by any chance?"

"No."

"Her husband didn't have his Social Security papers in order. He'd left farming to go fishing and hadn't bothered to change them. I told him dozens of times, but he took no notice. If he'd listened to me, she wouldn't be in this state now . . ."

The sun disappeared while we ate and the sky has turned gray. The birds swoop close to the ground. A storm is stirring in the air.

"Come on, this way."

We walk up the slope, escorted by the local kids. Don Ambrosio pokes at his uneven teeth with a toothpick. The driver is eating a sandwich inside the car and, as I walk past, I register a

basket of vegetables and a sack of potatoes.

"Paco. Drive to Filomena's. We'll be off soon."

We turn left after the fountain. A shortcut winds up to a cluster of five or six small houses. Don Ambrosio stops in front of the last one and knocks.

"Can we come in?"

"Come in."

I follow on behind. The room is full of tearful people sitting in a circle around the sick woman. They barely turn to look at us.

"How is she?"

"In a bad way."

The man who replied is in his thirties, dark-skinned, and sinewy. He keeps the palm of his hand on the woman's forehead and caresses her mechanically as if she were a child.

"What did the doctor say?"

"He gave her some very powerful injections, but it's not made no difference. Her leg's gone all black and her temperature's not going down."

The woman looks at us and gives no indication she understands what we're saying. She's still young and the pain makes her look drawn.

"We paid for his taxi from the village, the examination, and the injections, and look at her."

"When's he coming back?"

"This evenin". The other day he said they'd operate if she didn't git any better."

Everybody stays silent. A woman is praying and telling her rosary beads. The bed and chairs are the only furniture in the room. There's a print of the Virgin on the wall lit up by a candle. Time seems to have stopped still and, while Don Ambrosio mouths words of consolation, the woman's continues to mumble prayers to Jesus, and the tears and frantic mechanical caresses continue as well.

". . . She's not slept a wink the whole night."

"She ca't hear us."

"You should tell the priest."

I'm back in the car in no time. The village has disappeared behind the peaks, and clouds darken the countryside.

"Did you say something?" I ask Don Ambrosio.

"Nothing very much. That it's going to rain."

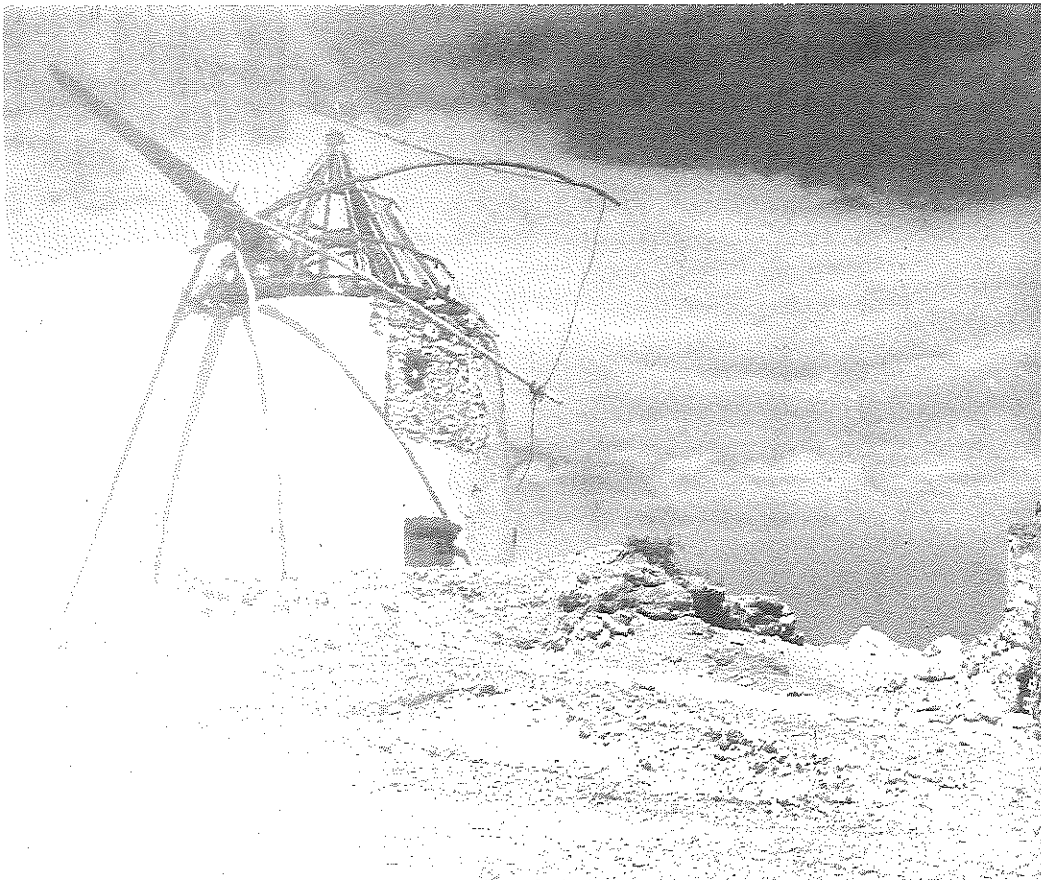
## IX

On the return journey, Don Ambrosio tells me about the distinct character traits of the people of Almería.

"They're not the same as us, believe me. In Valladolid at least, people act quite differently. When someone has got a complaint against you, they tell you straight to your face. Not around here. Lots of fawning and smiling but behind your back, they cut you to pieces. They've a real slave mentality, I tell you. They earn a few cents and go into the first bar, singing and clapping their hands. They survive on sardines and a slice of pepper and, to see them, you'd think they'd eaten chicken. Façade and appearance is all they worry about."

Don Ambrosio seems proud of his Castilian roots and, as the car leaves Los Escuyos and Pozo de los Frailes behind along the road that climbs steeply, he talks about their artists, monarchs, saints, and conquistadors.

For the first time since I started visiting the region, I realize that Almerians have never been protagonists of their own history, but always silent, resigned bit-players. Almería was occupied by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, and Visigoths and experienced a short period of splendor at the dawn of Muslim domination of the Peninsula. "When Almería was Almería" goes a proverb the old folk repeat melancholically, "Granada was its granary." After it was conquered by Ferdinand and Isabel, the region went into sustained and wretched decline. The Spanish monarchy sent its governors and mayors, but Almería was never properly integrated into Spain. The blood of Almerians was spilt defending colonial possessions in Europe, Africa, Oceania, and America, but their homeland never reaped any benefit. The cutting down of forests and emigration transformed its former landscape into a desert. Colonized by the centralizing power of the Bourbons—as it was later by Catalan or foreign industry—Almería was neglected by monarchs, ministers, reformers, and writers. Ignorance and oblivion was to leave it untouched by every reforming movement in Spain.



A windmill stands out on a ridge against the sky, like the ones that gyrate in the land around Cartagena, between La Unión and Los Alcázares. There used to be a lot in the region, but most are now falling into ruin.

By the eighteenth century it had already become the Cinderella of provinces, and, when the 1898 writers began to explore the byways of the peninsula, they halted at its frontiers and decided that their talents were above fighting its cause. It continued, as always, to surrender its offspring to its country: small, swarthy, dark-haired Almerians, eyes glinting, no doubt wearing the same clothes as worn by their present-day descendants. They were never great conquistadors like the Castilians or Extremadurans, or intrepid sailors like the Basques or Galicians, or pioneering traders like the Sevillians or Catalans. Their contribution was nearly always anonymous. They made up the silent crews of galleons, the long-suffering foot soldiers of empire, and a hidden, passive work force. And though the province appears very little in the history books, common graves throughout the world undoubtedly contain a high percentage of men from Almería.

While Don Ambrosio talks on about Castile and the loyal and noble character of its inhabitants, the car clings tightly to the twists and turns of the road past El Nazareno's farmstead. The driver smokes and stays silent and, from time to time, glances at me in the rearview mirror. Esparto fields follow cornfields on the other land. We suddenly reach Los Nietos. Don Ambrosio has a visit to make before he can return to the capital, and I take the opportunity to go on to Las Negras and Carboneras. For a few minutes we zigzag across the barren land I crossed two days earlier in the Rodalquilar miners' lorry. When we reach Los Pipaces, the driver turns across the plain and we drive through an unfamiliar landscape of white farmhouses, early crops, covered wells, and prickly pears. A gypsy on a donkey rides across the road in front of us. The driver hoots and the animal takes fright. As we move off, I see it trot into the distance in a cloud of dust. Moments later, the driver stops. A double row of eucalyptus trees leads to a farmstead some three hundred meters from the roadway. The wind rustles through the leaves, and the road surface looks to be in a good state. A tractor is working the land. We have reached the Níjar crossroads to Las Negras.

"Well," says Don Ambrosio, "here we are."

I gesture as if to take out my wallet from my pocket, but he stops me.

"No, my dear friend. You invited me to lunch, so this is on me."

"I'm really grateful."

"No need to be grateful. I'm sorry I can't take you any farther, but I must visit this friend of mine. He's from Salamanca and was regional administrator after the Crusade. He retired from business years ago after making a small fortune. He buys up land now."

Don Ambrosio shakes my hand and the car disappears down the road behind a thick curtain of trees. Electricity pylons stretch out one after another across Nijar country, receding like the spiky teeth of a comb. Farmsteads checker the plain with the inevitable backcloth of tackle, wells, agave plants, and prickly pears. There are swaths of esparto and barley, and fields of wheat that are starting to dry out. The road twists gradually up to the coastal mountains. Donkeys wend their way through the gullies at the foot of the mountain. The incline is precipitous and clouds wrap a dirty grey turban around the peaks of the sierra.

It is barely half an hour's walk to Fernán Pérez on the right of the road, on a slope divided up by dry-stone walls. Their whitewashed tops and the palm trees give it an African look. A windmill stands out on a ridge against the sky, like the ones that gyrate in the land around Cartagena, between La Unión and Los Alcázares. There used to be a lot in the region, but most are now falling into ruin. The one in Fernán Pérez still turns, creaking loudly, and from a distance it looks like a flower with huge curled petals. The local people depend on agriculture and the goldmine in Rodalquilar. By the path leading from the cluster of houses, next to a stream lined by poplar trees, a string of women with donkeys and water-carriers are taking water from the fountain.

The road trails across cracked desert terrain dotted with spindly, emaciated olive trees and small clumps of prickly pear. Then, as we climb, vegetation disappears entirely. Everything

is the same shade of ocher, and a harsh yellowy light filters through the clouds. A cart trundles ahead of me, and its driver has dozed off. The nag knows the journey by heart and proceeds unperturbed. All of a sudden we overlook a valley. The road zigzags down. I spot several men in jackets and hats on the bends and assume there must be a fair on the outskirts. I stride down the slope, round a bend, and glimpse a fresh village. I find its name on the map: Las Hortichuelas. It comprises some twenty white, rectangular, down-at-heel houses, and the modern school is the only building that stands out. Palm trees prosper in the cultivated valley and, beyond ruined windmills and abandoned, broken waterwheels, the sea comes into view, acting like a signpost.

There is a crossroads at the top of the slope. To the left, the road leads to Las Negras; to the right, to La Ermita and Rodalquilar. I take the right turn, following a group of men in their Sunday best, and the sea, veined with white foam, soon comes into sight. We cross a dry watercourse opposite a group of semi-derelict farmhouses. The men are walking quickly, as if they are afraid of arriving late and, next to me, one man holds his hat tight so it doesn't blow off. In next to no time, I am in the village. Las Negras sits at the center of the bay and its desolate appearance reminds me of Los Escuyos or San José. There is a bar and tobacco store on the only made-up road, pigs grunt in their styes, and waves crash on the beach. The people from Fernán Pérez all head for one doorway, and I follow suit.

"Hello."

A fair-haired lad with earthy features addresses me. He is wearing a torn shirt loose over his trousers, a cap tilted on his head and must be in his twenties.

"Is you the Catalan lad who traveled in the lorry to Los Pipaces . . . ?"

"Yes."

"Don' know if you remember me. I went on to Agua Amarga with the others. My name's Juan Gómez. Wouldya like a drink?"

"Yes, I would. Here?"

"No, across the road. It's a funeral in there. Their son died on them yesterday."

The lad takes my arm and drags me into the bar. A woman is busy clearing up the other side of the bar and, when she turns to face us, her beauty sets my pulse racing. Like many women in the province, she has jet-black hair and the whitest of complexions, an even mouth and melancholy blue eyes. She is still a young woman but something about her splendid looks hints that they are already fading. Daily chores and motherhood will transform her within a few years into one more silent, resigned Almerían woman, sitting in her hallway, watching people pass by, at once uneasy and disillusioned. Destiny is hard on them. Their beauty withers with marriage and, before they have time to understand why, they are old and in mourning like their mothers, dry, wrinkled fruit that can expect no more from life.

"What wouldya like?"

"Half a bottle of wine."

Juan and I prop up the bar, under the suspicious gaze of a small bald man and a brigadier in the Civil Guard. The woman takes no notice of us and disappears into the back.

"Do you have lots of money? I mean, have you studied?"

Juan looks me in the eye and waters at the mouth.

"Being hard up gets to us, you know? I can't read or write, but I'm as much a man as you an' I thought maybe in Catalonia . . ."

The small, bald man sitting at the table with the brigadier turns round and looks at us. After a few moments' hesitation, they ask if I come from elsewhere in Spain.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you picked a bad day to visit. If the wind doesn't change, it's going to pour down."

"It'll get busier in August," says the brigadier, sliding a white hand over the grease stains on his military jacket. "They're holding a national underwater fishing competition here and

people even come from abroad for that."

"The coastline's fantastic," the little man goes on. "It only needs a little push, a bit of advertising. If they finally get round to building the road, this place will soon be packed with French people. I'm glad to say the governor is taking the reins and we'll have electricity here too before long."

I invite them to roll a cigarette, while Juan carries on drinking and disconnects from the conversation. I pay the woman for the bottle of wine and, though I've no candle to light, as the saying goes, I decide to join the funeral party.

The house of the deceased looks bigger and wealthier than all the others. As I approach the doorway, I hear women wailing. The men sit on benches, looking very dignified and composed, and I see a few youngsters sitting legs crossed on the floor. The family is in another room, watching over the lad, and a chorus of old women's voices is trying its best to console his mother. "It's life," they say; or "We ain't nothin'"; or "We all have to kick the bucket," and they walk from one side of the room to the other, drag their skirts across the floor, writhe and scream, express their grief by dramatically flourishing their hands.

One of the visitors from Fernán Pérez tells me the youth spent five years in the Foreign Legion after a failed romance and, when he came back to live with his folk, a sudden illness put him in the grave in less than five days.

"What a terrible way to die . . . Did you know him?"

"No, I'm not from these parts."

"The man over there is his father."

I look in the direction the finger is pointing and see an elderly man dunking a chunk of bread into a dish of wine. Next to him, a girl is extracting small stones from a lap full of broad beans. Although it's still daylight, the old women are preparing the candles for nightfall.

When the priest arrives, everybody stands up and, after briefly consoling the family, the young men place the coffin on their shoulders. The moaning of women can be heard from the

street. The cortège sets off the way I came: men in black, old people, friends of the deceased, and little kids. The sky has gone sooty and a damp salty wind is blowing.

The man from Fernán Pérez is a distant family relation and, as we walk, he sketches in the biography of the deceased: "He was always the unlucky one. His parents are well off. Whoever told him to join the Legion?"

I say that one isn't always responsible for one's acts, but he gives me a look as if he's not understood: "Oh, this one was. He enlisted because he wanted to. He was on the crazy side."

As we turn down the road to La Ermita—toward the palm grove and ruins of the old castle—the first lightning flashes. The storm is almost upon us, and we all spontaneously quicken our pace, without debate. The cemetery is two hundred meters away: in the middle of wasteland, four white walls and a wrought-iron gate. It isn't beautiful like Almuñecar's—where niches are adorned with beer bottles and stones covered in inscriptions that keep to the Andalusian accent—or tragic like the one in Gérgal—where black crosses cluster under tiny whitewashed arches, as in an expressionist film. The cemetery is bare, like the surrounding country, with no flowers, crosses, or gravestones, and the graves are dug out of the ground and identified by a simple pile of stones. In Las Negras, death is also anonymous. The only remaining niche bears no name, and the stone I finally discover near a ditch dates from way back and has broken in two.

The ceremony proceeds, lit up by lightning and, when it is over, the group quickly breaks up. People run off, frightened the downpour will start, and the priest and the family are left behind, abandoned by everyone. When I cross the stream, the man from Fernán Pérez suggests I go with him on his motorbike. I agree, because I want to catch the Carboneras bus and, when I reach the village, Juan comes out of the bar and stands in my way.

"Where you off to?" he asks. "He's drunk."

"I'm leaving. My friend here has offered to take me on

his motorbike and I've got to go."

"Take me outta here."

The man from Fernán Pérez starts his engine, but Juan won't budge.

"I'll come back another time," I say. It's a horrible white lie.

"No. Now. I'm a man like you. In Barcelona . . .," he wants to go on but his tongue dries up.

"Come on, we're in a hurry," says the man on his motorbike.

Juan stares me in the face and is deaf to his words.

"I only got these hands," he says. "Look at them."

Another man peers out of the bar and pulls on his arm.

"Alright, let it be. Cain't you see you is in the way?"

"This lad is a friend of mine."

"No, he ain't," the other interrupts him. "He's leavin', and you don' even know what his name is."

"My hands."

The man from Fernán Pérez drives off. I leave Juan behind, and I turn and look back at them.

## X

The Carboneras bus leaves Almería at five p.m. The man from Fernán Pérez dropped me by the Níjar and San José crossroads, and I had almost an hour's wait by the roadside. The storm was concentrated over the peaks of the Gata mountains and, in parallel, I felt an extreme satiety—an awareness that I had reached my limit—like a rope that breaks because it's been pulled too hard. I sat and watched the dark clouds. The sky was a raging sea, and one of those expectant silences that precedes a storm descended over the countryside: flocks of birds swooped close to the ground and the air was dense and luminous. It all heralded the imminent cloudburst and, as the minutes passed, my need to let go also mounted.

I relived the incidents of my three days' hike and the thought of all I hadn't seen—or what had perhaps passed me by—overwhelmed me. I had cheerfully begun my walk down a slope and had suddenly discovered it was endless. Don Ambrosio, the old man with his prickly pears, Sanlúcar, Argimiro, the list could go on. I would find similar people in each village. Some raised their voices and others lowered them when speaking to me. The scenario would always be the same, as would be my anger and their despair.

When the bus appeared on the horizon, it started to rain. I leapt up from the side of the road, waving my arms, and the driver braked and opened the side-door.

"To Carboneras."

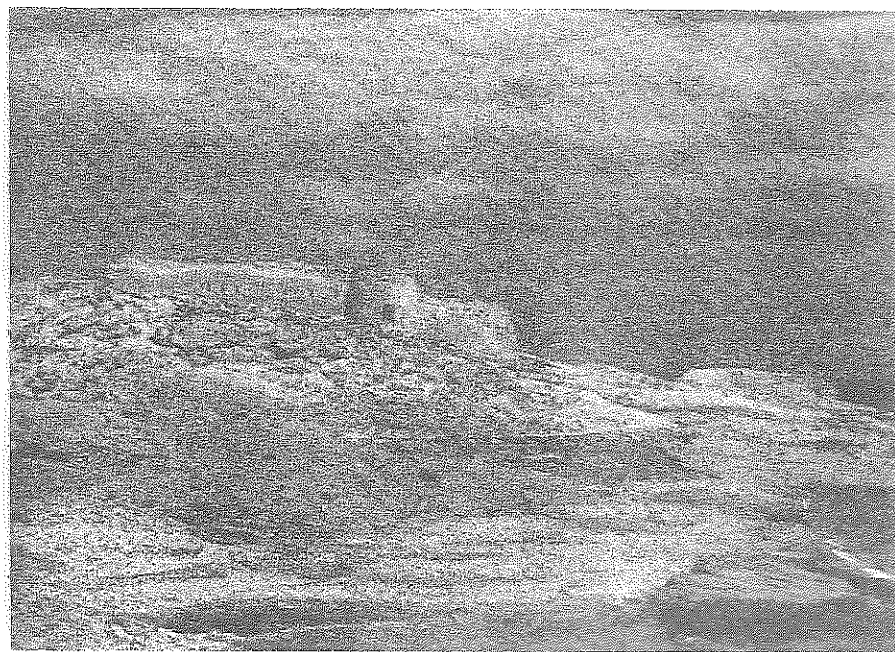
"Yes, sir. Get in."

I sat down on one of the rear seats and the bus drove off. The passengers looked at me full of curiosity. There were ten or twelve of them, and their faces seemed vaguely similar, like those I'd seen on other buses in the province, on my way to other towns.

"You had a lucky escape."

"Sorry?"

"Can't you see how it's rainin'?"



The driver stopped in the square opposite the Anti-Trachoma Clinic. I meandered round the castle walls to get a closer view of the sea. The beach was deserted, and the wind was lashing the ribbed tops of the trawlers.

The downpour was fast and furious and I watched through the mud-splattered windows. The sky had turned the color of jasper, the birds had disappeared, and the water had transformed the plain into one huge crackling weal.

"Just look at the color of that rain . . ."

"Anyone it catches is a goner."

"It's the dust it's carrying. Look at it."

I pressed my nose against the glass—I was also frightened I would cry and dirty, muddy tears would roll down my cheeks. The bus stopped at the entrance to Níjar. I had walked that road with José two days ago and it felt as if two centuries had gone by. I stared at the Civil Guards' observation post, the gas station and cornfields flatted by the storm, and I felt I'd just woken from a dream.

"Do you see that dip there?" my neighbor asked, pointing. "A few years ago the bus turned over there and lots of people were killed. They say the driver was drunk."

The bus was proceeding gingerly and the landscape slipped by sad and bare, occasionally lit up by flashes of lightning. Between Níjar and Carboneras there are several kilometers of red earth, where garnet is mined. When it is washed and filtered, the mineral is taken to open-air stores; the colors remind me of the fields in Murcia and Levante where peppers are put out to dry in the summer. The driver had stopped to take on board the mine's overseer, and my journey continued, more unreal than ever, across gray lunar mountains, barren heaths and rocky ground.

"Los Arejos!"

Nobody got out. The bus was like the Ghost Ship, a Ghost Ship floating between mountain peaks, a prisoner of the mud and clouds. The radio blared at top volume, broadcasting a strange pandemonium of sounds that finally drowned out an aria from Italian opera. Several minutes went by.

"Well, here we are."

When mention is made of Carboneras in Almería, people touch wood and cross themselves. Many superstitiously avoid

saying the name and refer to the town in a roundabout manner: "That port between Garrucha and Agua Amarga," "That place you can't say" and other such formulas.

As if wanting to lend firm support to the myth, the vista the town offered after the deluge fitted exactly the one forged by popular imagination. The majority of houses were shut up, its inhabitants scurried down streets like shadows, and a black sea furiously pounded the beach.

The bus drove past the cemetery wall and the monument to those Fallen for God and Spain. A couple of Civil Guards were patrolling, their guns slung over their shoulders. I saw a woman with a goiter, a kid with a pot-belly, and a gangly youth helping a blind man. It had stopped raining and some old folk were beginning to peer out of their doorways.

The driver stopped in the square opposite the Anti-Trachoma Clinic. I meandered round the castle walls to get a closer view of the sea. The beach was deserted and the wind was lashing the ribbed tops of the trawlers. The foreshortened coast receded toward the cliffs of the Mesaroldán lighthouse and Beach of the Dead. Toward Garrucha, stacks rose from the sea, festooned in foam. The town seemed to have folded in on itself, like a snail in its shell. On my way back to the square, I sought out a tavern and asked for a liter of wine.

"Jumilla?"

"Yes, Jumilla."

There were only two other men there, who looked middle-aged, small, and shriveled, and when they heard me talking to the owner, they rushed over to my table to introduce themselves. One was a water-seller and the other repaired carts, and they wanted to know where I was going, if I had family in those parts, and how long I was thinking of staying.

"It's a poor, but it's beautiful," said the carter.

"Spain's not as advanced as other nations, but you live a sight better," said the water-carrier."

"Foreigners come to live here as fast as their legs can carry them."



"The sun shines in Andalusia and you can get by with next to nothing . . ."

They spoke monotonously, as if intoning a litany, and I had to make a real effort to listen. I wanted to tell them that if we were poor, the best we could hope for was to be ugly to boot, that beauty was the excuse enabling us to fold our arms, and if we wanted to get out of our rut, we should resist the temptation to feel we were postcards or museum pieces.

"That's why I like Almería, because it's got no Giralda or Alhambra, because it doesn't try to dress itself up in trinkets and flashy clothes. Because it is bare land and true . . ."

But they went on talking about flamenco and bulls, sun and fried bread, and I grabbed my bottle of Jumilla. The storm had vented its anger, and I was still carrying mine; my heart raced and my throat burned with thirst. I drank a glass and yet another and another and the innkeeper looked at me and, when he came to bring me another bottle, I wiped my face and said: "It's just a drop of rain."

I wandered round the town the whole afternoon, not knowing where my steps were leading me. The sky was gray, the streets seemed empty, and I remember lying motionless on the beach for several hours.

Some children hovered nearby, at a respectful distance and, when I got up, I heard one say: "I think he's lost someone. My mother saw him crying."

## XI

Thirty-six hours later, properly washed and shaved, I retrieved my luggage and took the bus to Murcia. I'd bought *The Yoke* and a copy of Sunday's *ABC* at the newsstand in the bus station. The sun shone down on the city, and it looked as if it was going to be a hot day.

As we left the suburbs of Almería, I amused myself by skimming the headlines: "The Spanish basketball team records its seventh consecutive victory over Portugal," "First Regional Fair of Agricultural Activities in León," "The rope-sandal's losing ground . . ."

I had spent the previous day asleep and felt in good shape again and ready to get back into the swing of things. The reasonable universe of the newspapers calmed and lulled me to sleep. The photos of the Queen of the Burgos Fair and the statuesque girl in the Jantzen swimwear ads were a timely reminder that anguish is a passing illness, that a secret order reigns over things, and the world belongs and will always belong to optimists.

In next to no time, we had passed Tabernas, Sorbas, and Puerto Llumberas, and the bus was speeding to Totana, between a double row of trees. My neighbor had borrowed my copy of *The Yoke* and was asking:

"Did you see that?"

"No."

"It looks like we'll have a better olive harvest this year."