

## A CIDER CALLED SPARTACUS

*'Most of the missing are republicans captured or detained during the civil war, but there are also many cases of people being summarily executed in the years immediately after the war'. Guardian, August 23, 2002.*

THE MODERN reader needs fewer words, it says so in the newspapers, something to do with the ubiquity of the visual image though that's funny, take words away from the visual image, the moving one anyway, and what are you left with but pictures and any fool can make them up for themselves, can't they? So a man, yes, and a woman too, yes, no story without people, it's an old convention. And a town too, oh yes, location just as important as people, sometimes more, sometimes less, depends on the nature of the story, of course: whatever story is.

In this town is a harbour for yachts and their occupants and other such birds of inconsequent passage as might there from time to time alight: and then move on. To the west of the harbour is a beach, mainly for bathing in the small breakers that roll onto it when the breeze is sharp from the proper quarter. Directly to the east of the harbour is a peninsula with an old-town of charming squares and tilting balconies, and at its seaward end a modest headland topped with a sculpture, in concrete, of the sort which magnifies within its arches the sound of the sea below. And to the the east again of this peninsula is a seafront and another beach where boldly-striped bathing tents huddle and stilt, as if a saracen raiding party had recently arrived by sea.

Around the harbour there is a promenade, for people to walk on: quite often when in love, but not, of course, invariably so. And at

the head of the harbour is a bar called Habana, from which a sound-system pounds rock music all the long noons and late into the nights, and does not tire of its sport until the final hour or so before the dawn.

By sunrise, however, all is quiet: and the front remains quiet until something around eight in the morning, when the distant drum of traffic is heard, and rolling students blade past in a rush, and the broad promenade glisters if there has been a spot of rain across the night. Outside the simple restaurant just two doors along from the bar called Habana, a blackboard announces the faded delights of yesterday: the board's smeared chalk proof-positive of that overnight rain.

It was later that morning - an hour or so later, perhaps more, for the waiters in the little restaurant had by now arrived and the doors gaped and the blackboard was mysteriously emptied of old delights - when the small boat appeared from the direction of the west and crept slowly into harbour, its sole occupant blasted with sun and wind and weather, as if he had spent more time at sea than ashore for a long time past. The boat had a similar long-distance style about her: a two-stick gaffer with ratlines and tilting stovepipe, heavy oars lashed in the rigging, an outdated vane-gear on the stern, an antique paraffin lamp strung on a backstay: and all the less readily identifiable signs of the single-handed distant-water cruiser - anchors, grapples, heaving-lines, and oversize fenders, all ready for rapid use.

This little ship approached the harbour entrance with great caution and, still under sail, came alongside a pontoon below a painted sign which said 'arrivals' (there was no sign for departures). To this pontoon her crewman tied her with great economy of

movement, looked round the harbour wearily, and retired below. But soon he came on deck again, vaulted to the pontoon, and made his way to the marina office, where helpful words were exchanged with the portly manager. Then he moved to the callbox at the head of the pier. He made one call; then another; left the box; and spent the rest of the afternoon strolling on the promenade and consulting a wrist-watch, which was suspended from a neatly longspliced line around his neck.

And later that day, he met her - she him, they each other, once again after so many years: they met each other once more, in that bar called Habana.

There was about this meeting a spirit of shyness and great pleasure; and why not, friendship is fair enough among friends and adults, isn't it? So they had a drink and smiled and agreed that it was how many years, or something like that, since they last had seen each other: and things most vengefully move on. But still. Or something like that, anyway.

A girl in blue shorts and a stylish yellow rucksack roller-bladed with polite caution through the bar and disappeared by way of its front door, out onto the promenade.

'So why are you here?'

'The wind blew me here. So I decided to look for you before I left'.

'How, exactly?'

'I guessed where I might find you. So I phoned the press-office and they gave me your office number'.

'I suppose that was lucky'.

'I think it was'.

'How long do you have?'

'Two days. Maybe three'.

They left the bar and walked on the promenade and the seawall that followed it, and which guarded the marina from the sea.

'There's coffee for you on the boat'.

They went to the boat. Outside the marina office, the portly manager was loafing. He greeted her with thin warmth. At the edge of the pier they stood looking down on the boat. It was low water and they negotiated with care the steeply sloping bridge which led down to the pontoon. Directly below them, on a sliver of sludge before the water deepened, sand crabs lounged in the sun, and darted when shadows fell. At the far end of the sludge, in the shade of the quay wall, a man with a child's butterfly net was crouched motionless, as if he were hunting the miniature crabs. Or he may, of course, have been an illusion, no more than a passing trick of light.

'It's been boiling for ages'.

'It must be very unusual coffee'.

And they sat in the little saloon with its oil lamps and carved goddess of good luck; all the way from China, he said, their eastern patron of the sea.

'For luck', he said.

'From a woman', she said; but he did not hear this.

'Where is the engine?'

'There isn't one'.

'Isn't that dangerous?'

She was not used to the movement of a boat. She had never been on a boat, she said, here in her own harbour, her own town - in their own land a people exiled for so long - on whose quays and promenades she had played as a young girl and dreamed as an older one. She sat on the corner of the settee-berth like a small

bird, compact, still, alert: the stillness of an athlete at rest, beside the carved goddess on her lotus leaf: both of them at rest. Though the water was smooth, there was a little movement in the boat, and each time it moved, she flinched. He thought she was afraid; he understood nothing. To shield her from this fear he suggested that they walk on the promenade for a time. This is what they did.

It was late afternoon now, and the promenade was busy. A pair of splendidly-groomed setters cantered in diagonals across the paving and between the lush municipal flower-beds. The girl in the blue shorts and yellow rucksack glided past, her hands clamped on her walkmanned ears, her eyes half-closed in some approximation of ecstasy. On the decks of the two sardine-boats that lay to the seawall, men slept under shading tarpaulins. A dozen teenage girls, dressed alike in football colours of red and yellow and purple, shrieked past on roller-blades, the setters briefly striding in their wakes. On municipal benches rows of people faced the sun; but carefully protected their faces with fans and newspapers and handkerchiefs. A man pushed a pram ever so slowly, its empty seat shaded by a cool parasol set on a plastic universal joint. A young girl chased a weary pigeon. She wore a pink skirt and a white blouse, and carried in her right hand a scarlet cardigan. Suddenly she wheeled, slinging a gallant leg across a bollard, and slumped. A voice of authority called a name - again, the child wheeled, and ran.

‘How come you know the manager?’

‘He is - he knows who I am’.

‘Can you come back?’

‘Not to the boat. I mean, it’s a small place’.

‘For misunderstanding’.

‘Yes, I am afraid so’.

‘Well, it doesn’t matter, you’ve been’.

‘Yes. I’ve been’.

They wandered in the afternoon crowds, and strolled in silence to the western end of the promenade, to a point where the bathing beach began and a geometric sculpture of stainless poles arranged in multiple triangles mocked a meeting-point for star-crossed lovers. On the far sea-wall, dogs on long leashes sprinted in silhouette. A father was shamelessly helping a young girl take a drink from a water fountain; at a second fountain, a lady was helping a dog take a drink too. A young girl with a red lolly fled along the pavement, pursued by a butterfly. On the beach, joggers in groups plashed the robotic tideline, earnestly consulting watches; on the horizon beyond, ships softly tilted. Between the groups of joggers, children shrieked and dared wavelets. When they tired of the sport they were replaced by tiny grey seabirds which dashed in the foam. On a clean patch of concrete wall, in careful script, someone had written in very black paint the legend:

defeat is temporary, vengeance lives forever

They reversed direction and walked back as they had come, still in silence. At the base of a black statue on a column they stopped.

‘That’s the man who led the Reconquest. If you believe that sort of thing’.

‘Don’t you?’

‘I gave up believing that sort of thing a long time ago’.

‘Do you believe anything now?’

‘Do you?’

They stood on the edge of the pier and looked down at the sardine boats. As the heat of the afternoon ebbed, the crewmen

who had been sleeping in the shade were now moving around the decks, preparing for their night's fishing. A square church tower squatted on the town's skyline.

At the end of the promenade they found some steps which led upwards to the top of the seawall. Between its inner end and the hill beyond was a recreational yard in which pensioners were playing some sort of local bowls. They were watched intently by a misshapen and very damaged giant of a man of indeterminate age. He wore a white lace sunhat which would have been thought a little out of place by the softest and kindest heart in all creation. In his shadow sat a tiny and elderly lady of all-surpassing serenity. She too wore a white lace sunhat.

Outside the mail-fenced yard a horde of small boys was playing noisy football. To the left of this yard, a finger of concrete, without apparent purpose, jutted out over the water. On its seaward tip, two motionless lovers, or suicides, embraced with great passion. The tide was low and the small rollers disintegrated in foam as they dashed over the rocks and rushed through languid seaweeds for the rejection of the sea-wall. When the smashed water retreated, angry crabs popped from cracks in the wall to swiftly scan the horizon, and little grey seabirds darted from the upper rocks, knee-high in the foam.

They walked west on the sea-wall, to the very end of it. Here, heroic cubes of concrete made a playground for feral cats, stalking gracious pigeons among the old painted slogans: honour to the heroes who gave their lives for liberty! long live the Second Republic! and - once again -

defeat is temporary, vengeance lives for ever

Above one eye, she had a tiny tilted scar, the result of a childhood fall.

It was getting dark by the time they returned to the promenade. Taped music was pouring from a bar called Habana: at one point the Pogues, and then someone else's version of Loch Lomond - or maybe it was the same band. In the background, on the skyline of the town, the square tower of the church was hideous in spotlights.

He put an arm round her and kissed the side of her head in a very gentle way: perhaps it was an impulse. She pushed him away, gently too.

They climbed to the darkening and deserted sea-wall. The tide was full by now, and sizeable rollers ran-in to smash and surge on the face of the wall. In the lights from the town and the marina, the seas could be seen to strike the wall obliquely, and run back at a tangent across the incoming swells. When they met, these seas, they exploded in tumult.

'When you have gone I will come here. They will remind me of you'.

'You won't'.

'I will'.

After a long silence, during which they leaned on the wall in thought, they turned to face each other, without any hurry, and embraced.

'It is quite cold', one of them said, at length.

And the other agreed, 'yes, it is suddenly quite cold'.

There was a roar of water as an especially big roller came in and disintegrated on the sea-wall. From beyond the darkened

promenade, taped music was booming more lustily than ever from the altar in Bar Habana. The Pogues once more.

They walked to her car and stopped abruptly: there really wasn't much time left now.

They embraced, no more than a kindly hug among friends. She suddenly stood on tip-toe and stole a kiss, which went on for a surprising amount of time. And then they stopped: everyone has a perfectly decorous sense of timing when it comes to these sort of things, after all. And especially adults, of course; all adults have a notoriously developed sense of the decorous - and the possible.

So they kissed once more, longer this time, and closer, somehow; and then, with a peculiar style of immobility, he raised an arm in salute and watched her tail lights leer and swing: and she was gone.

Three balls of fire on the hill to the west of the town announced the rising of the sun. And then the angle of the fierce light altered, and three plain butane storage tanks stood perfectly white on the edge of the morning. Shortly afterwards, the radio gave notice of a sudden storm somewhere far to the north; but in the harbour, all was very still. Nothing moved but a couple of men needlessly hosing the flagstones on the promenade.

At the kiosk at the far end of the harbour, he bought a newspaper and a packet of cigarettes. Then he crossed the road, passed the tourist office and a short queue of cars at the taxi-rank, and found himself a seat in the cafe at whose door a red and yellow toy car lurched in immobile silence: it might, from its attitude, have crashed there from an extreme height. Over a large coffee and two sticky cakes, he studied his newspaper. Just as he was leaving the

cafe, the toy motor by its doorway burst with a startling shriek to life and began to plunge and tilt with furious energy.

In the supermarket, at the end of a side-street between a bookshop and a cafe called Alba, he bought three large bags of food and drink. He took a direct route back to the boat, and found himself outside the front of the church whose spotlit tower dominated the night-time skyline of the town. An ancient lady, hunched on a stool in the corner of its mighty, studded doors, watched him without expression, with indeterminate and infinitely silent loyalty. For a second he caught the eye of the ancient: but she was giving nothing away. Forty names were chiselled in the pious stone: capucins, lawyers, and their kind.

One of the mighty doors was open, and he entered the still and empty tomb. Here, among the painted angels, where they kept republicans in chains - and shot them later. In the first few weeks of defeat, twelve hundred chained under the angels, and never seen again. Forty years of it to follow. Three students shot dead while performing the airborne miracle of unpowered flight. And a hundred whores contesting the succession. The streets are mine!

In a triangular intersection, rampant fountains danced, watched over by an optician's window decorated with two beige parasols of understated elegance: and then he was back on the promenade.

At the marina office, he consulted with the portly manager, who gave him copies of the latest weather-maps from the facsimile machine. They showed a deep low-pressure system spinning very quickly out of the area, with a steady, moderate and fair air-stream set to replace it. Conditions would be perfect by tomorrow: and would remain so for at least three days.

The porly manager asked, 'You will go tomorrow?'

'Yes, tomorrow', he said; and meant it.

He made the boat ready for sea. Then he strolled on the promenade, bought a newspaper, and stopped for a while to listen to a student protest outside a dull government office beside a bar called Habana. The students were extraordinarily well behaved, despite the rhetoric of the speaker. The subject was the prison rights of young people who had refused military conscription and had been gaoled as a result. Three policemen looked on, without any threat of violence.

He took a leaflet from a girl on roller-blades, and made his way to the little restaurant on the front, sat at his usual table, and ordered a bottle of wine, fish soup, cheap stew, a sweet of some sticky sort, coffee, and a liqueur. He read the paper slowly, slugging wine, and absent-mindedly checking the sky outside. As the tide rose, so did the boat. By the time the waiter brought another liqueur the boat had lifted, and the flags in her rigging were extending themselves lazily in the first stirrings of a breeze.

A waiter cast a glance at the harbour. An eloquent shrug asked, or suggested: Time to go?

And then he heard a voice, and it was saying that this was the last place she had intended to look for him; and she sat down across the table, waving to a waiter for a coke and ice.

'How long do you have?'

'Till the evening. I have the car'.

'I was going after this'.

'I thought we might go somewhere together. Before you leave'.

'Where?'

‘There is a fishing village down the coast a few miles’.

She had parked her car in the root of the sea-wall, under the coastguard building, as if it had hoped to be concealed there. She drove cautiously down the promenade, past a bar called Habana, past the statue of the man who led the Reconquest, if you believed that sort of thing, and down a linking back-street where someone had spray-painted slogans about love on a 12-bill hoarding advertising whisky. Then they moved through a square where fountains danced, passed in front of a railway station, found a main road, and drove into the countryside.

An hour later, they found their fishing village. It was a settlement grim and picturesque in equal parts, which seemed to have been tipped over the edge of a cliff to rest on a narrow strip of land beside the shore. They parked beyond the village, again at the root of a sea-wall, and walked back towards the centre of the place. Between them and the sea, within the concrete walls protecting the modern harbour, was a fleet of brightly-coloured and sweepingly-sheered boats. The houses, one piled on the next, struggled up the steep cliff at their back; at the fronts of them, little balconies teetered on stilts hewn roughly from driftwood. Now the original harbour was visible, and it was tiny: at its head, a wide slipway led directly into the village square.

They climbed through the narrow lanes to a prominence at the back of the town. At each open doorway, matronly wives greeted them in shy silence and with indulgent understanding, folding their arms and smiling to each other as the stranger-couple climbed onwards.

They found a bench on their prominence, and sat in silence for a while, among the birdsong and scarlet poppies of their private summit.

‘Have you been here before?’

‘Never’.

‘Will you come back again?’

‘Perhaps when you have gone’.

‘Maybe?’

‘Yes’, she said: as if she meant the maybe.

The day grew a little colder, with a breeze coming in from the sea, and they walked down to the harbour to look at the boats tugging listlessly at their moorings. The sea-wall curved ahead of them: at its end, some fishermen, their shoulders bent to the task, were cleaning and mending an orange trawl. On the wall at intervals, iron poles were affixed between the coping stones of the rim. Still, small-boy style, and despite these obstacles, he insisted on walking on that narrow rim: but she would not join him, despite an invitation. Instead she crossed her arms on her chest, and slow-marched in pace on the cart-wide track below.

Back in the village they found a cafe, and then returned to the car. They drove up over the surrounding cliff; all along the coast, and as far as the blue horizon, the sea was smooth, with just a curl of foam on the shore rocks to remind the watcher that it still breathed.

She said they would take a different road back; and they rolled through open countryside with woods in the middle distance and the foothills of mountains beyond. In an inland village, they found some sort of local fete in progress, at which farmers exhibited cattle and their wives the produce of their kitchens. In a small square

musicians entertained hordes of children: their elders packed bar-counters three deep. From one bar doorway, a blast of continuous sound poured.

They fought their way in and acquired drinks much more quickly than might have been expected, for the squalling men at the bar parted at once to make way for the visitors. They took their drinks outside to a quieter corner of the square: opposite, a sign at the door of the village hotel told all-comers and other hopefuls that of rooms, there was none.

They found a doorstep on which to sit for a time with their drinks and watch a world that was not theirs pass by. Elderly farmers knelt to caress working dogs; small boys in their best clothes rushed hand in hand; mature ladies linked arms to proceed in stately fashion.

‘Speak to me’.

‘I am. You just don’t hear me’.

He manoeuvred his way back into the bar and returned with more drinks.

‘Just one more’, he said, ‘and then we will have to be going, won’t we?’

Young lovers - some seemed startlingly young, but perhaps it was just another trick of the light - wandered aimlessly in the square, leaning into each other and sharing drinks in the way young lovers do; oblivious to everything, but most of all the march of time. Even older people - some seemed startlingly old, but again it may have been the light - patrolled at a more judicious pace, but seemed just as solicitous of each other’s company as the youngsters.

And then she said, in a weary sort of way, that they really had to go: so they found the car, and left that village, and drove back

whence they had come; down past the rail station and the dancing fountains beyond, and onto the promenade: where she swung left and parked by the beach, close to the geometric sculpture there, in whose metallic arms children were swinging and crying with wild and strange delight.

They got out of the car and walked across the paved concourse that separated the road from the beach. From somewhere, she had conjured a pair of towels and a bag of the sort of accessories appropriate to a visit to the beach.

‘What for?’

‘Because I am going for a swim’.

‘Swimming!’

‘Yes, I said I was going to the beach, you see’

And indeed, she was wearing a swimsuit beneath her clothes; and while she swam in the small rollers just off the beach, and joggers pounded the tideline, he sat hunched on the sand, and watched it all in thoughtful silence.

Then, after she had finished establishing her alibi and had undressed and dressed ever-so-quickly inside a towel, they crossed over the road to a bar: a cool, dark, welcoming place where they drank rum and lemon daiquiris, and coffee and brandy carajillos. They found a corner table, and a newspaper which she could hide behind in case anyone known to her were to come into the place, and quietly moved through the drinks, pacing their progress by way of salutation to the passing of the hour.

It was already beginning to get dark. They moved outside, and found a concrete bench beside the beach. Two men, earnestly consulting wrist watches, jogged with great precision of pace on the tide line. Each wore a potholer’s lamp strapped to his forehead, as if

he planned to be there on the edge of the mesmeric tide all night long.

Without question it was growing late, and the time left to them was shrinking alarmingly.

As they walked the short distance to the car, there scarcely was time for the bare civilities of goodbye. Crossing the road, each tried and failed to catch the eye of the other.

‘We can’t even time our looks’.

‘It doesn’t matter now’.

‘No’.

At the car he said he was sorry to have kept her late; perhaps he even believed this. She said she was sorry she had to go; perhaps this was believable too. But time now was desperately short. She jumped into the car, slammed the door, threw the machine in a savage three-pointer to bring the open driver’s window beside him.

‘You must go tomorrow?’

‘Yes’.

‘I will come if I can. If you have gone, well you have gone’.

‘Maybe you can watch the waves on the seawall’.

‘I am so sorry there is no more time’.

‘I will phone your office at dawn, just before I go, and leave a message’.

‘Do that’.

They each grabbed the other and kissed with graceless, hungry violence. And then she gunned the car - which was actually quite an expensive and powerful one - gunned it down the street, squealed hard left, her leering tail light bright and swung: and she was gone.

He returned to the harbour along the promenade. Every lamp post carried a municipal banner which slashed in the stiff breeze that was coming in from the north. In the little restaurant, at the counter just inside the door, he had a drink, beside the short-order cook blast-frying shellfish on a fearsome hotplate. Two doors along, he had another drink in the bar called Habana. And then another for luck.

Afterwards, he stood on the sea-wall and the rollers rushed in and exploded below. Stars were coming into the eastern sky. It was time to go.

By sunrise everything was ready; down to the last two shore lines; sails hanked and ready to hoist. He walked to the head of the pier, to the callbox outside a bar called Habana, and phoned her office phone: one last call, as promised, once more to hear her voice and leave his for hers; and then to sea. And her message began to run; and she cut-in; she was there, she said, had been there for an hour past, waiting for his call. She had an idea, she said: if he could delay his departure. She had made an arrangement - she had the next two days free. Entirely to themselves. Please stay. She had the car. Remember once all those years ago? A promise. Someday she would take him to her mountains. Well, now she would. Look, the sun was rising. She could be with him in an hour. She would take him to her mountains.

‘Because we have a right to this’, she says.

And he says, ‘yes, we have a right to it’.

And he returns to the boat, and ties-up the little vessel properly again. Packs a tiny bag, has a tiny coffee. Sees her car swing at the head of the pier, and park outside a bar called Habana.

The headlamps glow and die, the horn blows, every so gently. He darts up the pier and joins her. They kiss: oh yes, a lovers' kiss, no doubt about that. And then they drive for the mountains under the rising sun.

As the sun rose, they moved out of the town into lush, green countryside. Then the foothills began, and the long climb into the mountains started. Red poppies lined the roadside ditches; once, they stopped and gathered a bundle; rich, red poppies. In one hill township, under the gaunt patronage of a ruined winding-gear, they stopped for a moment.

She said, 'this is where we seized the arsenal'.

She meant: this is where the people rose for justice and reason, and were drowned in savagery. From the look of the place you couldn't tell anything about its history, of course: isn't that just typical of places? The walls of the old arsenal were painted green; but you wouldn't know what it once had been.

Why, he wondered, are there no signs, no references to the past, to the history of the place? No marked graves, no memorials: how could this all be?

'I went to the church yesterday'.

'You know what it was, of course?'

'You told me once, a long time ago'.

'We don't usually talk about it'.

'How many were murdered?'

'In my litte town? Some people say twelve hundred'.

'And where are they buried?'

'We don't know'.

'What do you mean, you don't know?'

‘We couldn’t count. And they didn’t have to. Don’t you begin to understand what it was like?’

They drove on into the mountains. By the time the sides of these mountains were seriously steep, they were in a nondescript village and stopped for a coffee in a bar. At the back door, a jackhammer was roaring in occasional frenzy. Each time it stopped, a cupful of dust fell from the ceiling. They covered the coffee with their hands, to protect it. On the steep sides of the mountains, the sun was already burning hot. She looked at him, expressionless as always when the past was present: the infinite pride of the dispossessed.

‘There were partisans up here for years afterwards’.

‘It must have been terrible in the winters’.

‘Oh yes, it was’.

After the coffee, they moved on up the valley, but slowly, and stopping frequently for little reason other than to sit together in silence in banks of mountain flowers; as if, in so doing, they would stop time itself.

Then, at lunchtime, away below the road, down to their left, they spied an all-stone hamlet and drove down into it. A dozen houses and a church huddled around a baking square. There was also a bar, in whose cool vaults they found refuge. The sensitivity of their condition was apparent to all: you could tell this from the gentle formality with which the lady of the house served them a bottle of harsh wine and some sort of soup and then a simple dish of meat. A handful of idle drinkers at the bar, exiles from the noontime heat, observed them calmly: but entirely without disapproval. At length, the lady brought over a couple of complimentary brandies: he drank both, and outside the square oozed heat. They drove on.

At the top of the valley, where the air was much cooler, they paused again and walked on the open hillside. A few hundred feet above them were patches of snow; not far below, horses, each with a large bell at its neck, grazed in pairs. Again, they sat in close silence, watching down the valley - but watching what? Or did they just anticipate despair in hot pursuit? With some stones, they built a little cairn for them - should anyone ever find it, please leave it alone, it does no harm: or even add a stone to it, or two. Not that anyone ever goes there anyway - why would anyone want to? So it might well still be there: if it has survived the storms of winter that have passed since the day that it was built.

‘It is for us’.

‘Here we are together for ever and ever’.

‘Well, that is certainly a consolation’.

They drove onwards. In time, a rusted sign signified a settlement off a branch road. Shortly afterwards, they came upon it, a place not much larger than the last, but with a hotel of a very modest sort: or at least a bar, with rooms to let above and at the back. Outside, two wrought-iron tables were jammed under coloured umbrellas on a tiny terrace: across the narrow roadway, a dusty church tilted. Here, there was no further to climb. Now they were up over the edge of the mountains, up among the tops and it was quite cool except when in the shelter of a wall. They seemed closer to the sky, somehow, which was a dazzling and cloudless blue. But none of this fooled you: it was a place that would be hard and lonely in the depths of a high mountain winter.

‘I’ll get a room’.

‘Just one?’

‘One will be cheaper’.

'We do have a right to this'.

'Oh yes, I know that'.

Later, as the afternoon lengthened, they shared on the terrace a cider called Spartacus, and then gave themselves a little walk. They turned left from their inn, and then right, at an abandoned concrete hut on which a sign saying disco slanted, and thus to a vaguely metallised track which led beside a stream and grassy hedgerows towards a hamlet ringed by abrupt summits.

The place seemed to consist of nothing other than stone dwellings and farmers' outhouses. Dogs lolled in the shade and studied them without interest as they passed. The place seemed empty of humans; for at that time of the afternoon, everyone was still indoors.

They left the track, and plunged down to cross through the settlement and climb a little higher on the other side, where the sun was still bright.

A stream, extremely close to its point of origin, ran through the huddle of houses. Despite the sunshine, the water was very cold. Nothing moved but the odd pullet: bursting in an explosion of feathers from under a gate, or through a rotten hole in a door-bottom, and hurling itself over the dusty cobbles into some refuge beyond. And always, hard on the heels of the pullet, a scrawny cock with spurs and a puzzled look.

They climbed some hundreds of feet above the place, and found a nook, warm despite the steady wind, in the lee of a small plantation of gorse in flower: and here they rolled and snoozed and smiled among the flowers: till the black shadow of approaching dusk began to move across the hillside: and they returned to their little inn

where they dined alone and nursed a single bottle of wine on the terrace till the sun resolutely set.

In the morning, she was first down to the narrow little bar, where breakfast was served by a maid who seemed to draw great encouragement from the arrangement she so accurately supposed her guests to enjoy.

At length the maid asked, in a spirit of the most perfect composure, 'Will your husband be joining you at breakfast?'

'Yes of course', she said. 'He will be with us shortly'.

The girl went away, uncoiling her napkin in the direction of imaginary spots of dust.

After breakfast, they had a soft drink on the terrace as a modest wedding party tumbled into cars across the road.

The maid, with wonderful prescience, asked another question, although to whom it was directed was not entirely clear.

'Would you like one bill, or two?'

'One will be perfectly adequate, thank you'.

The maid prepared a bill, and offered it to them with great and tender understanding: the bill from that remote and kindly hotel, up high in its mountain hamlet, supported by empty discoteque and tilting church.

They drove in silence into the growing heat of the morning. Quite soon, the landscape adopted as its principal colours those of the flowers which predominated there: dark blue and orange flowers on every hand. They parked the car beside the road; it was getting hotter by the moment. They climbed a little hill through the hot wind and sat close in the scrub heather among the flowers. He made a chain of these flowers for her, alternating in colour; she wore it with

an adult's kindness for a child, and smiled. It could not last, you see, none of it could last; except, perhaps, the memory.

He became aware of the singing of birds at length: millions of hedgerow birds whirring with the insistency of bees.

'They are crickets, you fool!'

'Oh', he said, 'crickets. Are you sure they are not birds?'

She twisted her body with sudden, wanton invitation, or maybe derision: they kissed with fierce energy anyway. But he wanted to learn about crickets. They drove on, the windows wide open, the hot liquid air flowing round them.

At a reservoir somewhere, under a high overpass, unlikely in such a remote part, but real enough all the same, they branched left, followed the shore for a time, and then hefted over a rise and began to follow falling loops of road over rounded green hillsides; down to a bridge over a slow river, and a place for lunch. Lunch, you see, was the formal occasion: and in times of great crisis, formality is always a great support. And lunch offered the illusion that time, just for a little time, had itself stopped rolling. Now they hardly spoke: of what was there to speak, except the inconsequent? And then, when lunch was finished, and there were no further obstacle to their parting, they drove on. At a roadside service station, a group of very high-performance motorcycles was taking petrol. Their drivers and tall blonde passenger girls wore leathers in red and yellow and purple. They drove on, leaving the bikers in the forecourt; but ten minutes later the fleet screamed past them, crested a rise, and disappeared.

They came over the summit: and began a long descent into a very steep valley which took them at length back to the narrow coastal plain beside the sea. There was nothing else to do: they drove in silence for the port and parked outside a bar called Habana.

'We did have a right to it'.

'Yes, we did'.

And so they parted. He went to his boat, and made ready at once for sea. Twenty minutes later he threw off the ropes and worked his little ship for the mouth of the harbour, past the painted sign there that welcomed arrivals and bid no farewell to departures.

There at the harbour mouth he turned. Her car was parked on the promenade, but there was no sign of her.

He waved once; her headlamps glowed briefly in reply; and then the seawall loomed between them, and each was gone from the sight of the other. Her car sat motionless for some more minutes, and then moved slowly down the promenade: and quite soon afterwards, it too was gone from sight.