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**The Five Year Plan**

"Hello?"

"This is Kurt."

"Oh! Hello, Kurt. How are you?"

"I am vell. The papers you vill sign now. I haf made an appointment with the Notary for you May 23rd, 12 o'clock."

"Right, I'll check the flights and..." but he had already hung up.

Kurt, our German estate agent, was the type of person one obeyed without question. So, on May 23rd, we found ourselves back in Spain, seated round a huge polished table in the Notary's office. Beside us sat our bank manager holding a briefcase stuffed with bank notes.



Nine months earlier, we had never met Kurt. Nine months earlier, Joe and I lived in an ordinary house, in an ordinary Sussex town. Nine months earlier we had ordinary jobs and expected an ordinary future.

Then, one dismal Sunday, I decided to change all that.

***"...heavy showers are expected to last through the Bank Holiday weekend and into next week. Temperatures are struggling to reach 14 degrees..."***

August, and the weather-girl was wearing a coat, sheltering under an umbrella. June had been wet, July wetter. I sighed, stabbing the 'off' button on the remote control before she could depress me further. Agh! Typical British weather.

My depression changed to frustration. The private thoughts that had been tormenting me so long returned. Why should we put up with it? Why not move? Why not live in my beloved Spain where the sun always shines?

I walked to the window. Raindrops like slug trails trickled down the windowpane. Steely clouds hung low, heavy with more rain, smothering the town. Sodden litter sat drowning in the gutter.

"Joe?" He was dozing, stretched out on the sofa, mouth slightly open. "Joe, I want to talk to you about something."

Poor Joe, my long-suffering husband. His gangly frame was sprawled out, newspaper slipping from his fingers. He was utterly relaxed, blissfully unaware that our lives were about to change course.

How different he looked in scruffy jeans compared with his usual crisp uniform. But to me, whatever he wore, he was always the same, an officer and a gentleman. Nearing retirement from the Forces, I knew he was looking forward to a tension-free future, but the television weather-girl had galvanised me into action. The metaphorical bee in my bonnet would not be stilled. It buzzed and grew until it became a hornet demanding attention.

"Huh? What's the matter?" His words were blurred with sleep, his eyes still closed. Rain beat a tattoo on the window pane.

"Joe? Are you listening?"

"Uhuh..."

"When you retire, I want us to sell up and buy a house in Spain." Deep breath.

There. The bomb was dropped. I had finally admitted my longing. I wanted to abandon



*House in England*

England with its ceaseless rain. I wanted to move permanently to Spain.

Sleep forgotten, Joe pulled himself upright, confusion in his blue eyes as he tried to read my expression.

“Vicky, what did you say just then?” he asked, squinting at me.

“I want to go and live in Spain.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Yes, I am.”

Of course it wasn’t just the rain. I had plenty of reasons, some vague, some more solid.

I presented my pitch carefully. Our children, adults now, were scattered round the world; Scotland, Australia and London. No grandchildren yet on the horizon and Joe only had a year before he retired. Then we would be free as birds to nest where we pleased.

And the cost of living in Spain would be so much lower. Council tax a fraction of what we usually paid, cheaper food, cheaper houses... The list went on.

Joe listened closely and I watched his reactions. Usually, he is the impetuous one, not me. But I was well aware that his retirement fantasy was being threatened. His dream of lounging all day in his dressing-gown, writing his book and diverting himself with the odd mathematical problem was being exploded.

“Hang on, Vicky, I thought we had it all planned? I thought you would do a few days of supply teaching if you wanted, while I start writing my book.” Joe absentmindedly scratched his nether regions. For once I ignored his infuriating habit; I was in full flow.

“But imagine writing in Spain! Imagine sitting outside in the shade of a grapevine and writing your masterpiece.”

Outside, windscreen wipers slapped as cars swept past, tyres sending up plumes of filthy water. Joe glanced out of the window at the driving rain and I sensed I had scored an important point.

“Why don’t you write one of your famous lists?” he suggested, only half joking.

I am well known for my lists and records. Inheriting the record keeping gene from my father, I can’t help myself. I make a note of the weather every day, the temperature, the first snowdrop, the day the ants fly, the exchange rate of the euro, everything. I make shopping lists, separate ones for each shop. I make To Do lists and ‘Joe, will you please’ lists. I make packing lists before holidays. I even make lists of lists. My nickname at work was Schindler.

So I set to work and composed what I considered to be a killer pitch:

- Sunny weather
- Cheap houses
- Live in the country
- Miniscule council tax
- Friendly people
- Less crime
- No heating bills
- Cheap petrol
- Wonderful Spanish food
- Cheap wine and beer
- Could get satellite TV so you won’t miss football
- Much more laid-back life style
- Could afford house big enough for family and visitors to stay
- No TV licence

- Only short flight to UK
- Might live longer because Mediterranean diet is healthiest in the world.

When I ran dry, I handed the list to Joe. He glanced at it and snorted.

“I’m going to make a coffee,” he said, but he took my list with him. He was in the kitchen a long time.

When he came out, I looked up at him expectantly. He ignored me, snatched a pen and scribbled on the bottom of the list. Satisfied, he threw it on the table and left the room. I grabbed it and read his additions. He’d pressed so hard with the pen that he’d nearly gone through the paper.

Joe had written:-

- CAN’T SPEAK SPANISH!
- TOO MANY FLIES!
- MOVING HOUSE IS THE PITS!

For weeks we debated, bouncing arguments for and against like a game of ping pong. Even when we weren’t discussing it, the subject hung in the air between us, almost tangible. Then one day, (was it a coincidence that it was raining yet again?) Joe surprised me.

“Vicky, why don’t you book us a holiday over Christmas, and we could just take a look.”

The hug I gave him nearly crushed his ribs.

“Hang on!” he said, detaching himself and holding me at arm’s length. “What I’m trying to say is - I’m willing to compromise.”

“What do you mean, ‘compromise’?”

“How about if we look on it as a five year plan? We don’t sell this house, just rent it out. Okay, we *could* move to Spain, but not necessarily for ever. At the end of five years, we can make up our minds whether to come back to England or stay out there. I’m happy to try it for five years. What do you think?”

I turned it over in my mind. Move to Spain, but look on it as a sort of project? Actually, it seemed rather a good idea. In fact, a perfect compromise.

Joe was watching me. “Well? Agreed?”

“Agreed...” It was a victory of sorts. A Five Year Plan. Yes, I saw the sense in that. Anything could happen in five years.

“Well, go on, then. Book a holiday over Christmas and we’ll take it from there.”

So I logged onto the Internet and booked a two week holiday in Almería.

Why Almería? Well, we already knew the area quite well as this would be our fourth visit. And I considered this part of Andalucía to be perfect. Only two and a half hours flight from London, guaranteed sunshine, friendly people and jaw-dropping views. It ticked all my boxes. Joe agreed cautiously that the area *could* be ideal.

So the destination was decided, but what type of home in Spain would we want? Our budget was reduced because we weren’t going to sell our English house. We’d have to find something cheap.

On previous visits, I’d hated all the houses we’d noticed in the resorts. Mass produced boxes on legoland estates, each identical, each characterless and overlooking the next. No, I knew what I really wanted: a house we could do up, with views and space, preferably in an unspoiled Spanish village.

Unlike Joe, I was always obsessed with houses. I was the driving force and it was the hard climb up the English property ladder that allowed us even to contemplate moving abroad. In the past few years, we had bought a derelict house, improved and sold it, making a good profit. So we

bought another and repeated the process. It was gruelling work. We both had other careers, but it was well worth the effort. Now we could afford to rent out our home in England and still buy a modest house in Spain.

“If we do decide to move out there,” said Joe, “and we buy an old place to do up, it's not going to be like doing up houses in England. Everything's different there.”

How right he was.



Like a child, I yearned for that Christmas to come. I couldn't wait to set foot on Spanish soil again. We arrived, and although Christmas lights decorated the airport, it was warm enough to remove our jackets. Before long, we had found our hotel and settled in.

The next morning, we hired a little car. Joe, having finally accepted the inevitable, was happy to drive into the mountains in search of The House. We had two weeks to find it.

Yet again the mountains seduced us. The endless blue sky where birds of prey wheeled lazily. The neat orchards splashed with bright oranges and lemons. The secret sleepy villages nestled into valleys. Even the roads, narrow, treacherous and winding, couldn't break the spell that Andalucía had cast over us.

Daily, we drove through whitewashed villages where little old ladies dressed in black stopped sweeping their doorsteps to watch us pass. We waved at farmers working in their fields, the dry dust swirling in irritated clouds from their labours. We paused to allow goat-herds to pass with their flocks, the lead goat's bell clanging bossily as the herd followed, snatching mouthfuls of vegetation on the run.

Although we hadn't yet found The House, we were positive we'd found the area we wanted to live in.



One day we drove into a village that clung to the steep mountainside by its fingernails. We entered a *taberna* that was buzzing with activity. The bar was busy and the air heavy with smoke. The white-aproned bartender looked us up and down and jerked his head in greeting. No smile, just a nod.

Joe found a rocky wooden table by the window with panoramic views and we settled ourselves, soaking in the atmosphere. Four old men played cards at the next table. A heated debate was taking place between another group. I caught the words 'Barcelona' and 'Real Madrid'. Most of the bar's customers were male.

Grumpy, the bartender, wiped his hands on his apron and approached our table, flicking off imaginary crumbs from the surface with the back of his hand. He had a splendid moustache which concealed any expression he may have had, and made communication difficult.

“Could we see the menu, please?” asked Joe in his best phrase book Spanish.

Grumpy shook his head and snorted. It seemed there was no menu.

“*No importa*,” said Joe. “It doesn't matter.”

Using a combination of sign language and impatient grunts, Grumpy took our order but our meal was destined to be a surprise. A basket of bread was slammed onto the table, followed by two plates of food. Garlic mushrooms - delicious. We cleaned our plates and leaned back, digesting our food and the surroundings. In typical Spanish fashion, the drinkers at the bar bellowed at each other as though every individual had profound hearing problems.

“We're running out of time,” said Joe. “We can carry on gallivanting around the countryside, but we aren't going to find anything.”

Suddenly, clear as cut crystal, the English words, "Oh, bugger! Where are my keys?" floated above the Spanish hubbub.

**Grumpy's Garlic Mushrooms Tapa**  
*Champiñones al Ajillo*

Serves 4

50ml (2 fl oz) extra virgin olive oil  
250g (8oz) fresh mushrooms (sliced)  
4-6 cloves of garlic (chopped or sliced)  
3 tablespoons dry Spanish sherry  
2 tablespoons lemon juice  
Large pinch of dried chili flakes  
Large pinch of paprika  
Salt, freshly ground pepper  
Chopped parsley to garnish

Heat the oil in a frying pan and fry the mushrooms over a high heat for 2 or 3 minutes. Stir constantly.

Lower the heat and add the garlic, lemon juice, sherry, salt and pepper.

For a milder flavour you can leave it at that if you like. But if you like a few 'fireworks', now is the time to add the dried chili and paprika as well.

Cook for another 5 minutes or so until the garlic and mushrooms have softened then remove from the heat.

Sprinkle with chopped parsley and divide up into pre-heated little dishes.

Serve with plenty of fresh, crusty bread to mop up the seriously garlicky juices.

*Note: Tapa means 'lid' or 'cover' in Spanish. It's thought that the name originally came from the practice of placing slices of meat on top of a sherry glass, to keep out flies. The meat, often ham or chorizo, were characteristically salty, inducing thirst. Bartenders saw this and began serving a variety of tapas which increased alcohol sales. Thus a new tradition was born.*