

Judith, Mother and Kurt

We swung round, just as the owner of the voice found her keys and rattled them in the air triumphantly. She finished her good-byes to her drinking companions in perfect Spanish, loud and fluent.

This opportunity was just too good to pass. As she strode past our table, I smiled and said, "Hello, you're English, aren't you?" Unoriginal, I admit, but it had the desired affect. She applied the brakes.

"I'm Vicky, and this is Joe," I said. "We just love this area. Have you lived here long?"

Judith was unique. Stout, in her sixties, she had a thick plait snaking down her back. She was dressed in English country tweeds and sensible walking shoes.

We shook hands and she sank heavily into the chair Joe pulled out for her.

"Twenty-five years," she said. "Good Lord, where does the time go?"

"Well, you're obviously very settled here," said Joe.

"Bloody nice place to be," she said, leaning forward, knees apart, hands toying with her bunch of keys. "Climate's much kinder to Mother's rheumatism, don't you know?"

Judith's voice was cultured although often punctuated by colourful expletives. Although looking and behaving like an eccentric English aristocrat, she seemed entirely at home in this remote corner of Spain. And judging by her interaction with the people at the bar, she was accepted and respected by the villagers. To us, she was friendly and informative, answering all our tentative questions in her strident voice.

"Awfully laid back, the Spanish," she said. "Our cleaner, Ana, needs a stick of dynamite under her before she gets going."

"Do you ever think of going back to England?" I asked, feeling rather sorry for poor Ana.

"Good heavens, dear!" she said, eyes bulging. "Not on your Nellie! Don't miss old Blighty one bit!"

Eventually, she looked at the man's watch on her wrist.

"Bloody hell!" she said. "Look at the time! Mother will be wondering where I am. Come back to my house, why don't you, and meet Mother?" Joe and I agreed, hastily paid Grumpy and followed her out into the bright sunlight.

"Where are you, you little bastards?" she called when we were outside. Joe looked shocked and I froze on the spot. Several dogs slid out of the shadows and loped towards her, and we realised that it was not us she was addressing.

"How many dogs do you have?" I asked, knee deep in panting canines.

"Nine," Judith replied shortly. "And that one over there is called 'Half'."

I must have looked blank.

"He's the latest. We always said we'd never have ten dogs so when he joined us, we called him 'Half'. So now we only have nine and a Half. Bloody Spaniards, don't know how to look after animals!"

Judith's house was just down the street from Grumpy's. Huge double doors were unlocked by an outsize key and we were ushered into the darkness beyond. Our eyes adjusted and we saw we were standing in an Aladdin's cave. The living room was crammed with huge solid pieces of antique English furniture, gleaming with age and history. Vast mirrors hung on the walls. Every surface was cluttered with knick-knacks and valuable bric-a-brac. Looking closer, the enormous sideboard and mahogany table legs were pale and splintered in places where the dogs had chewed them.

Shelves bowed with dusty figurines and piles of books. Occasionally, dark shapes shifted and we could distinguish cats sleeping at every level. One cat draped itself along the mantelpiece, another on the grand piano. A shaft of light sliced through a crack in the wooden shutter, spotlighting dancing motes of dust and cat fur.

"Let me introduce you to Mother," shouted Judith, clicking on a Tiffany table lamp. A figure uncoiled itself from the ornate chaise longue, dislodging an orange cat that spilled to the floor. "Then we'll have a little drinky-poo."

We were mesmerised by Mother. She must have been eighty-five years of age but was draped in a lacy, diaphanous dress, low cut to reveal maximum cleavage and totally transparent against the light. She lay poised like a sex kitten, exuding glamour and wafting Chanel No.5.

"Pleased to meet you," said the old lady, extending manicured fingers for us to shake.

Joe and I spent a wine soaked hour or so with these welcoming ladies, perched on the antique sofa, wedged between cats and dogs.

"Got a dispensation from my Bishop in England," boomed Judith. "Have to attend their church here, don't you know. Bloody Catholics couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery. Soon put the priest right, didn't I, Mother?"

The village church-bells rang on cue, as if in agreement. Mother was admiring her nails and not listening. A small hairy dog resembling a floor mop began humping a cushion on the floor.

"If you're serious about moving here, you should talk to Kurt," said Judith, scribbling a telephone number on the back of a church newsletter. "Don't go to any of the bloody estate agents in town. Crooks, all of 'em. Let me know how you get on."

Eventually, we thanked Judith and said good-bye to Mother. We staggered out into the street plastered, both by red wine and pet hair, clutching Kurt's telephone number.



With Judith's voice ringing in our ears, "*Straight as a bloody die, don't you know,*" we contacted Kurt the next day. He was an unofficial estate agent to foreigners and very German. He spoke excellent Spanish, rather quaint English and was married to Paula, a Spanish solicitor. Also, his business partner, Marco, was on the local council. An irresistible package. We were confident he was the right person to help us find The House.

We met at the appointed time in the square of Judith's village, outside the Town Hall. Several elderly Spanish men sat on benches and ceased their conversations to eye us. A group of women, all dressed in black, inspected us like curious crows. When we introduced ourselves, Kurt's handshake exuded efficiency. Tall, fit and utterly Teutonic, his curly blond hair flopped when he talked as though punctuating his sentences.

"I haf three houses for you to look," he said. "So I hope you are full of the beans." He marched off down the street.

His muscular legs covered distances in long, swinging strides while we panted pathetically behind him. Desperately trying to anticipate his next move, we concentrated on his retreating back. Frequently he made unexpected left or right turns, resulting in Joe and me crashing heavily into each other in the frantic effort to keep up. It must have looked like some silly Laurel and Hardy scene.

The first house had no roof. Kurt ignored our dismayed expressions and unlocked the front door.

"This is a good house," he said. "All the rooms are very big."

Well, that was true. All the rooms were light and airy, too, as expected from a house with no roof. In the kitchen, clumps of weeds sprouted from between the cracked floor tiles. We halted in a

bedroom and looked up at the sky above.

"It's very nice," I said, "but I think we might prefer a house with a roof."

Kurt's flaxen eyebrows arched in surprise, as though we had asked for an indoor sauna, or home cinema.

"*Ja*, but I think you will like the next house. It has a roof."

Relieved, we were taken over the mountain to the next house. It stood alone in scrub land, a single ragged palm tree standing guard.

"This is also a good house. It has a roof and a palm tree." Kurt's blue eyes challenged us to find fault.

The front of the house looked fairly impressive, but neglected. Joe disappeared around the corner of the building while Kurt fumbled the key into the lock.

Yes, it had a roof. And a palm tree. I couldn't help feeling quite excited. Kurt finally unlocked the door and tried to push it open. The door resisted, so he shouldered it. Still it stood firm, forcing him to give it a hefty Germanic kick. Success. The door swung open and Kurt and I both jumped in surprise. There, in the middle of the room in front of us, stood Joe.

"How did you get in?" I asked, astonished.

"It's got no walls at the back. Or down one side."

"No walls, but this is a good house. It has a roof and a palm tree," said Kurt, recovering, confident that we could overlook this minor flaw. Was there a glimmer of humour in those blue eyes?

We continued the tour. Joe was right, several walls had caved in, rocks lying where they had fallen. Birds flew out shrieking as we disturbed them in the kitchen. Soft rabbit and goat droppings squelched underfoot. Two feral cats burst out from a corner and slunk away over the hillside. A cold wind blew more debris into the house, depositing it on the mound that had already accumulated over time.

"I think we need a house that has a roof and walls," said Joe firmly, and I nodded.

Kurt did not seem discouraged. We exited and he locked the door behind us again.

"What's the point of locking the door when the house has no walls?" I asked.

"Insurance," he said, flicking the forelock from his eyes. "Now, I have one house more. It is a very good house. It has walls, and a roof, but no palm tree. You will follow me." We climbed back into the car.

Perhaps just a kilometre away as the quail flies, but a good eight kilometres by road, was the next village, El Hoyo. The road was empty as Kurt steered the car up, ever up and crested the mountain. Without warning, he swung off onto a single track road that threatened to drop off the edge of a precipice. Fir trees clung to the mountainsides in deep green knots. Olive trees were planted in military rows on terraces excavated by farmers generations ago. Almond trees displayed their white blossoms.

Kurt slowed the car so we could take in the scene below. We peered down and were rewarded with our first glimpse of El Hoyo. That day it was shrouded in mist which cleared as the wind chased the wispy clouds away. A typical Moorish whitewashed village, El Hoyo was much smaller than Judith's village. Deep in the fold of the valley, the village houses huddled together, protected on all sides by the ancient slopes. It was just a cluster of houses, most very old, many derelict. Narrow streets separated the rows of houses. In the centre was the square, boasting shade-trees, seats and a fountain. The church was imposing and astonishingly pink. On the outskirts stood a few modern houses.

I found I was holding my breath, captivated by the painting below. Kurt revved the car up and



'No walls, but a palm tree'

we started to descend in a white-knuckle ride of twists and turns.

He parked the car by the square and we all got out. There was no sign of life apart from a couple of bored dogs and a feather of smoke curling from one chimney.

"It's so quiet," I breathed. A cock crowed somewhere.

"*Ja*, you haf plenty of quiet and peace. No person vill molest you." He turned up a side street with Joe and me close on his heels, then halted suddenly causing us to crash into him from behind.

Alonso, the owner of the house for sale, stood beaming on the doorstep. Small of stature but strong and gnarled as an olive log, he greeted us. Joe and Kurt shook his proffered hand but I was seized and kissed on the cheeks, one, two, Spanish style.

Squeezed in the middle of a row of terraced houses, this house appeared unpromising from the outside. It looked tiny and cramped, as though it was trying to shoulder its neighbours aside for more space. The frontage was only as wide as the front door and a small window. Alonso and Kurt stepped aside and we entered.