

Paco and Bethina

Simultaneously, Joe and our next door neighbour gripped the handrail and peered down over the balcony. There were clear black scuff marks on the white wall below. Someone had scaled the side of the building in the night, using the balcony railings to hold onto.

Joe and the man stared at the shoe scuff marks, then at each other.

“Was your sliding door open this morning?” asked the man.

“It was,” said Joe. “I think we’ve been burgled.”

And so we had. My handbag containing mobile phone and camera were stolen. My purse had gone. Joe went and had a look outside and made a discovery. The thieves, probably kids, had hung the looted handbag on some railings outside, along with our neighbour’s bag. I suppose we were lucky; they hadn’t taken my address book, passport or return airline tickets, but it was still a blow. And such a waste of time as we had to wait for fingerprints to be taken from our room, and give statements down at the Police Station. Time much better spent clearing the house.

“So much for Spain having less crime,” grunted Joe as we left the Police Station. Of course the burglars were never found.

Every day we drove up the mountain to our new house. It smelled damp and neglected. House martins had built nests in the porch above the front door. Inside, cockroaches scuttled back into dark corners. Cobwebs draped from the ceiling. Each room was still stuffed with Alonso’s abandoned clutter. The weeds in the garden, celebrating Alonso’s absence, had grown to waist level. Like explorers in an Amazon jungle, we hacked a path through the garden from the back gate to the future kitchen door.

The wheelbarrow was well used. We crammed it full of clutter from the house: old pictures, rotten cupboards, wasps’ nests, weird tools, cages, mildewed mattresses and a chipped china statue of the Last Supper. We transported the junk to the orchard above. Then came the bigger furniture pieces. Dismantling the rusty iron beds wasn’t too bad, neither was shifting the broken tables and chairs. (The promised German television was nowhere to be seen - probably snaffled by the son-in-law.) But the yellow vinyl sofa was another matter.



The ‘orchard’

The only way to dispose of it was to lug it out of the front door, along the street, up into the next street, and so to the orchard. The sun was hot, the sofa heavy and the street uphill. Sweating and panting, we rested halfway. Joe returned to the house and brought back drinks. Sitting on the sofa in the middle of the street, we refreshed ourselves with cans of Coke. Leaning back, we slowly regained our breath and admired the view. I fiddled with a decrepit transistor radio we were also dumping and, surprisingly, it crackled into life. Tinny music filled the air.

“This is the life!” said Joe, basking in the sun, sipping from his can.

I nodded, eyes closed, enjoying the break and the sun’s warm rays. I swung my legs off the ground and put my feet in Joe’s lap, stretching luxuriously, wriggling my toes.

And that was how we met Paco.

About our age, short, dressed in working clothes, Paco rounded the corner and stopped in astonishment. Then his swarthy face split into a huge grin. We jumped up off the sofa, silenced the radio and shook hands.

“*Los Ingleses!*” he shouted, pumping our hands, slapping us on the backs and roaring with

laughter. Next around the corner came his wife, apron-clad, round as a Teletubby, rosy-cheeked and smiling. More handshaking and Spanish kisses.

“*Soy Paco,*” he announced, pointing at himself with a horny finger. Then, poking his wife, “*Bethina!*”

We introduced ourselves likewise.

“Ah, Joe and Vecky,” repeated Paco.

In case he thought English people usually relaxed on sofas in the middle of the street listening to music, we explained using a mixture of bad Spanish and hand signals. Our Spanish lessons hadn’t prepared us for situations like this. Paco seemed to grasp that we were carrying the sofa to the orchard to be dumped. He nodded but cut us short.

“Come with me,” he said, and dismissed Alonso’s sofa with a wave of his hand.

The sofa was abandoned in the middle of the road. Joe was frog-marched back down the street while Bethina and I followed, my arm clamped in a vice-like grip.

Just before we reached our house, they stopped and pushed open the front door beside ours. It became clear that these were our next door neighbours, and we were herded into their little house. What a contrast! Where our house was dusty and damp, their house smelled of herbs and the white walls gleamed. Framed family photographs hung in neat rows and a vase of wild flowers stood on the table.

“You will have something to eat and drink, *no?*” said Paco and pressed us into chairs. “Here, I have something for you to try.”

“Thank you...” we said, watching him wrestle with an unlabelled bottle. He puffed and blew until the cork surrendered with a satisfying pop.

“Home-made,” he said, smacking his lips. “Taste the Andalucían grapes, taste the sun!”

“*Delicioso,*” I said, taking a sip. “This is delicious!” And it was.

“Last year was a very good year. Plenty of rain in spring, then a long hot summer. In September, I will show you how we make the wine, *no?* You will come with us to my *cortijo*, you will see how wine *should* be made.”

“Thank you, that will be lovely.”

“And now you must try this one, too.” His face turned red from the effort as he uncorked bottle Number Two. “This is from the year before, also a very good year.”

We quickly drained our glasses and held them out to be refilled. I couldn’t taste the difference, but it was very nice.

“Aha! Now you must taste this one! Tell me what you think...”

He battled with a third bottle and finally won. Joe and I obediently drained our second glass and waited. Paco, still breathless from effort, splashed the red wine into our glasses. We tasted it and nodded at Paco.

“*Delicioso,*” I said again. It tasted the same as the other two.

“*¿Delicioso?*” said Paco, outraged. “*¿Delicioso?* This is the wine of my friend, Juan Pedro. It is rubbish wine! See how clear my wine is, then look at Juan Pedro’s wine! His wine is cloudy, *no?*”

Alarmed, Joe and I stared at the three bottles, comparing them. They all looked identical.

“Pah!” His fist slammed down on the table making me jump and the glasses rattle. “That Juan Pedro has no idea! He should take a lesson from me! I try to teach him how to make good wine, but does he listen? No!”

“Yes, I can see the difference,” said Joe, betraying me utterly. “Your wine is much clearer, and tastes much better.”

Paco beamed again, his outrage forgotten.

“Women!” he said, putting his arm round Joe’s shoulders. “What do they know about good wine?”

Bethina clattered around her tiny kitchen while the red wine flowed freely. She put plates of smoked ham, tomato, cheese and bread on the plastic tablecloth then joined us to sit at the table. A goodly amount of her body spilled over the edges of her seat.

And so our first serious Spanish lesson began. Although we understood most of what was being said to us, it was hard constructing sentences ourselves. I was grateful that the burglars had left me my Spanish/English dictionary, now ever present in my pocket.

Bethina's Ham, Tomato and Garlic Toasts
Jamón, tomate y ajo con pan

Slices of bread (baguette, cut diagonally)
1 clove garlic, cut in half
1 very ripe tomato
Slices of jamon serrano or ham of your choice
Extra virgin olive oil

Preheat the grill.
Toast the bread and, while still warm, rub with the halved garlic to flavour the slices.
Then rub the bread with the halved tomato.
Squeeze in as much of the flesh as you can.
Sprinkle with a pinch of salt and some freshly-ground pepper.
Drizzle with some extra virgin olive oil and top it off with the ham.

Paco and Bethina were fascinated by us. They asked about our jobs in England, why we were moving to Spain and about our children.

"*Nuestros niños*," said Bethina, "these are *our* children." Dimples appeared in her round cheeks. She was pointing to three framed photos on the wall. "This one is Diego, he is thirty-two. He grows tomatoes, the best in Andalucía! Diego's tomatoes are sent all over the world, even England! These tomatoes we are eating now were grown by my son, Diego."

"They're very good," I said.

Joe and Paco were talking about cars. I heard them discussing Range Rovers, both nodding and agreeing that Range Rovers were excellent cars.

"And this photo is Sofia," continued Bethina. She paused and shook her head sadly. "Sofia is twenty-eight, and does not have a husband."

Sofia's face smiled down at us from the wall. She was very beautiful. High cheek bones, big expressive eyes and glossy dark hair.

"She's not married?" I asked, surprised.

"Pah!" yelled Paco, thumping his fist on the table again. Range Rovers were forgotten as he fumed over his wayward daughter. "She should be married by now! But always there is something wrong with every boy she meets."

"*Claro*," nodded Bethina, "that's true."

"The boy is too thin, or too fat, or wears the wrong clothes... No boy is good enough!" Paco clearly felt strongly about this subject. "Many times she meets a nice boy, but never does she want him for a husband."

Bethina inclined her head. "*Claro*," she said.

"And the third photo?" I asked, trying to change the subject. "The little boy?"

"Ah," said Bethina, softening. She stopped herself and giggled coyly, stealing a look at her husband. Paco's black mood instantly fell away. He beamed proudly and puffed out his chest.

"Our little surprise, our gift from God," he said. "That's Little Paco, he's only eight."

On cue, Little Paco came hurtling into the house. Dark skinned, dark haired, he had the same mischievous eyes as his father. Scarcely noticing us, he excitedly plonked his latest treasure on the tablecloth.

"Mama! Papa! See what I caught!"

It was a large, juicy green cricket. For just a moment, everyone stopped and stared, including the cricket. Then the poor creature sensed freedom, gathered itself and hopped sideways onto a plate of sliced ham. Bethina squealed in fright and leaped to her feet, knocking her chair backwards. The cricket glared balefully at us and tensed for its next launch.

Paco moved like lightening, seizing the cricket in one capable hand and his son's ear in the

other.

“*Pacito!* What do you think you are doing? We have visitors!” Both cricket and small boy were evicted, protesting, from the house and into the street.

Bethina was not pleased with her son. She followed, standing in the doorway, blocking the light and scolding her son outside. Our grasp of the language was weak, but Bethina’s meaning was clear. No entry. Small boys with crickets not welcome.

We learned much that day. We learned that most of the houses were only occupied at weekends and in the heat of the summer. That Paco was a lorry driver and related to most of the villagers in some way. That there were only three telephones in the village - luckily we had one. That the village Fiesta every October was unmissable.

Another fact that became obvious was that Paco's wine glasses possessed magical properties. As fast as we drank, they were mysteriously refilled. Never did the level drop more than a centimetre from the top. This may explain why I didn’t remember the drive back down the mountain. I did remember the hugs and Spanish kisses when we left. I vaguely remembered dumping the yellow sofa in the orchard as planned. But the journey back to the hotel remains a blur.



And so back again to England for the very last time. Two frantic months of teaching, packing, arranging the removals, selling unwanted stuff on eBay. For me, it was rather like being pregnant, when outwardly you carry on with normal life but are secretly obsessed with that new life inside. I could think of nothing but our new life in Spain.

Crispy Potatoes in Spicy Tomato Sauce

Patatas Bravas

Serves 4

1 kg (2 lb) potatoes, peeled, and cut into 2cm (1in) inch cubes
1 small onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, crushed
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
500g (1lb) tomatoes
3 teaspoons (paprika)
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1/4 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme
1 teaspoon tomato puree
Olive oil, for frying
Chopped parsley to garnish

Par-boil the potatoes for 5 to 10 minutes. Drain the water. Let the steam evaporate for a minute or so and then give the pan a good shake. This roughs up the outsides nicely. Set aside.

Prepare the tomatoes by cutting a cross in the base and plunging them into boiling water for 10 to 15 seconds. Plunge into cold water and the skin should peel away easily. Chop the tomatoes.

Fry the onion until soft. Add the garlic, paprika, thyme and cayenne pepper, then cook for another couple of minutes.

Add the chopped tomato and puree and cook, uncovered, until the sauce thickens, about 20 minutes. During cooking, add the salt and pepper to taste. If the sauce seems too dry, add a little water.

Meanwhile, re-heat the frying oil and fry the potatoes until golden brown. This gives them a crisp coating and prevents the sauce from soaking in too much. They should be beautifully crisp outside and soft and fluffy inside.

To serve, place the potatoes in a serving bowl, then cover with the spicy sauce. Sprinkle with chopped parsley.