

Nerja. It is early March, midday, a wrought iron balcony infested with light. Remote from neighboring rooftops, projected above flowering rocks which guard the sea, Sally sits in the sun thinking nothing, feeling only the heat, penetrating, comforting, all abuses wiped clean. Beneath her nothing but crumpled brown rock hung with spring flowers and crushed silver nests of leaves. Over her right shoulder, between the sea

and the vertical bony peaks high up the Sierra de Almijara, here lie rows of tiled red roofs, inert in the sun, blotched with a green or yellow fungus painted in by the careless hand of time. The topmost peak of the mountains like the curved beak of an eagle soaring to the sun is white with a ring of snow, while down below they say snow never falls. The austerity at those distant peaks aloof in the silence is new, breaking open imperishable places in the heart until now sealed tight like the halves of a walnut. The shells lie scattered about, the afterbirth of awareness when the earth comes home. Understanding which strains towards those peaks opens in spiraling breaths, spurting uncontrollably on a dazzling plain, unencumbered by past, by recollection, by comparison. What will happen next is history, and in between each passage through the heart bubbles, chaotically here, slowly, gently there. The landscape is bombarded, altered by wave after wave of blows to the heart. And the mystery does not end with mountains, beyond Sally lies the sea, the flat blue surface unchanging, a constant flux, moving in and out with her breathing, lungs, her own, a mirror. It is more than she can resist. The mountains and sea fuse somewhere beyond perception, beyond understanding, her body loses weight, substance, an outline alone persisting, expanding until the dimension resembles the towering mountain and bottomless sea. At the centre a translucent bubble captures the whole, annihilating the separation between out and in. Confronted now by the outline of the universe in her limitless body she begins to ascend, to disappear, conscious only that the corporeal disintegration must not be interrupted. 'Please don't make me come back, let this be without end, let

me go.' The bubble rises, rises, drifting endlessly and away, carrying her from the latitudes of longing and the fixities of earth, desire and death. At a point which comprehension negates the purity is transformed, light descends in a refined shower carrying her back, returning. She must descend. The horizon shrinks and glows, the sea whispers sweetly offering its peace, its comfort. Far away two black spots, toy ships of the microcosm, play out some nameless drama in the blazing noon. 'Like us,' she thinks, 'Two strangers who pass back to back in this disquieting light.'

After a time in solitude she emerged from the cocoon, the web of days she had wound around herself, restless, curious at last about the little town sitting like a jewel on the cliffs above the sea. She stood at the end of the *paseo* which was laid out on top of a high, very narrow fortress jutting into the bay, and listened to the slap, slap, slap of the water slamming beneath her feet on the rock wilderness below. A voice whose thin English twang surprised her as it drifted closer came within hearing, 'The Phoenician traders made that fortification down there I'm told, three thousand years ago, then stayed on for five hundred years until the Greeks and Carthaginians drove them out. When the Romans came they finished off the Carthaginians and what was left of the Greeks. The Romans themselves lasted hundreds of years until barbarians in the fifth century, Visigoths, pushed them out. The greatest, the most civilized invaders were the Islamic people who came from North Africa in the eighth century, remaining on the peninsula for centuries, spreading light and the glory of a golden age

wherever they stayed. Their very Christian majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, had the ferocious satisfaction of driving these distinguished inhabitants from Granada, the last stronghold, in the same year their hireling Christopher Columbus made his way to the new world.' Grateful for the information Sally glanced sideways at the historian, observing a stooped and white haired woman whose stabbing gestures with a heavy cane seemed as inappropriate as the moldering blue polka dot dress. The lady smiled politely at Sally, sweeping her guest up the *paseo* towards the kiosk. She found out later the Englishwoman had lived there for years, somehow surviving on a meagre pension and the occasional sale of sketches and miniatures. Sally sat down at the Marisol, a café on the *paseo* west of the kiosk which was a marker dividing any rare traffic venturing onto the promenade. The sun had not yet emerged from the heavy dark sky that day, a damp cold wind made Sally shrink deep into her coat. If you sat directly in the sun you were warm, too warm, but without it you were treated to the remnants of semitropical winter. There were few people about at that hour, before ten in the morning, and Sally's first excursions into her new life were carried out in the cold obscurity of these early strolls. She ordered *café con leche* which had a slightly randy taste, the flavor of goat's milk. Studying the snow speckled mountain surging up behind the town, north of the *carretera*, north of the *campiña*, Sally was not lonely, she had brought a suitcase full of books, hadn't the slightest desire to speak to anyone. When she realized the polite voice with the clipped accent was addressing its amused comments to her she was startled. 'Good day to you, thought

you might like to know this café charges exorbitant prices compared with the more modest but thoroughly decent Bar Alhambra down there,' pointing to the café closer to the sea with his neatly pointed beard, 'And Miguel who's a decent chap would put a chair out for you if you prefer to brave the out-of-doors. A *coñac* by the way, with your coffee, will take the chill from the Spanish wind. There now, two invaluable pieces of advice, must not burden you any further.' With that he nodded as he set off on a quick trot across the *paseo*. He walked right around it twice then leaned against the railing at the end, looking out to sea. Sally had seen him before, but this was the first time he had spoken to her. She was relieved by his tactfulness and attracted by the humor close to the edge of his brisk manner. While he remained with his back conveniently turned to her across the *paseo* as he contemplated the Mediterranean, she speculated on the English speaking residents in Nerja. The man who had spoken to her looked occasionally over his shoulder towards Calle Pintada, it was still called this locally despite the plaque renaming it Calle Generalissimo Franco, he looked to the place where that cobbled, winding street spread into the waiting arms of the *paseo* and the sea. 'Is he expecting someone?' she wondered, 'For a little place which is supposed to be unknown in distant lands they seem to have a lot of non-Spanish residents.' Now she realized she wouldn't mind talking to someone, if only to map out the society she found herself at the fringe of. Reluctant to risk anything, she took solace in the mountains and impenetrable sea, washing her asleep by night, lulling her restlessness by day. Still, still, something about this town

affected her, touched her as never before. Although several thousand inhabitants moved unobtrusively by each day the proximity of mountains and sea offered a sense of open countryside. Far below on the shore to the east the cries and shouts of children mingled with fishermen's voices as they mended their nets, as they overhauled the small fishing craft beached by the heavy sea. Women called to them from houses carved into the rock, below at the mouth of the sea. 'There is something here, there is something which is different, something I've not known before.' A young woman with bronze colored skin, a long Byzantine nose rising high on her face and a thick braid of honey colored hair walked onto the *paseo*, stopped at the kiosk for cigarettes which she dropped into a large straw shopping basket, then continued somewhat aimlessly until she joined the man with the beard looking out to sea. They stood side by side. Sally couldn't decide whether or not their shoulders touched. 'Is she his wife, are they friends, are they lovers? Is one of them, are they both married to someone else? No, I don't want to know, I really can't cope with a whole new cast of characters. How can I look at the seamy little dramas played out by one *dramatis personae* or another, what can it mean to me now?' And yet she was as curious about them as she was about the flowers blooming precariously down the cliff, curious enough to lean over, catch their sweet fragrance, touch the soft petals and thorny leaves. How could she let them go unnoticed? After awhile the woman with the bronze colored skin and honey colored hair walked up to her smiling, 'Hi, my name is Roberta West.' A sunny smell of New York or the Bronx emanated from her accent and

manner. 'Are you just passing through or do you plan to stay awhile?' Smiling, 'Aren't we all just passing through?' 'A good point,' laughing, 'What I meant was my husband and I have been here nearly two years, we pretty well know our way around. If you need any help let me know, I can bargain like a Spaniard and I've found a few edible goods in the impossible stores of this town.' 'That's awfully kind, I might just have to take you up on it, there are a few galling difficulties in my little *apartamento*. I don't know what to do with the *brasero* and I'm terrified of the *bombonas*. The concierge, if that's what you call him, explained it all to me, but I didn't understand more than two syllables in twenty, in spite of the glorious pantomime.' 'Where are you staying? You're not at Antonio Tercero's, are you?' 'Where's that? No, I don't think so, I'm just over the road here.' 'Ah, at Pepe Rico's. Antonio Tercero is not his real name, there are so many Antonios, Josés and Miguels we've sometimes had to resort to numbers to distinguish them. Pepe Rico's is really a nice place, hope they're not overcharging you, it's still way off-season.' She chatted on happily and cheerfully, something pleasantly vulgar in an immensely sophisticated way lacing her talk, as if she had been raised on gangster movies. Who could resist her charm, her confidence, the cheerfulness which seemed to spring spontaneously from the earth she walked upon, the unfeigned optimism which swept her universe with a broad beam of light. She said there was no time to sit down, she had to get to the market before the fish, the oranges and greens were sold out, yet she remained leaning over the chair across from Sally, her back bent at nearly a right angle to the ground, the thick blonde

braid hanging down in front of her, moving when she did. 'I'll come later today or tomorrow with someone to help you master the Spanish niceties of your place. It's no joke, you can de-oxygenate yourself over the *brasero* and people blow off limbs with those darn *bombonas*. Not my husband though, he's hopeless at that kind of thing, writers are notoriously incompetent to do anything except write and that's what my husband does, or at any rate what he says he's doing.' In a frank, open way Roberta continued to scrutinize Sally as she chatted on and on, 'There is a bunch of *extranjeros* here if you're looking for company, you know.' 'Actually, I haven't spoken to anyone, I've needed to be alone for awhile.' 'Do you like it here?' 'I love it, I've never been anywhere like this before. I want to spend the rest of my life here or up there perhaps, on the mountain. Does everyone fall in love with it at first sight?' 'No, not everyone. Look, I must do the shopping. We live at number twenty-four on Calle Pintada, why don't you drop by this evening and I'll introduce you to a few people. Would you like that?' 'I think so, but I'll have to brace myself for it, being with people again.' She smiled, 'I'm not sure how much I can stand.' Roberta looked at her with an inquiring light in her eye, repeating the invitation, 'Well come then, it might do you good.' Sally laughed for the first time, 'How kind of you, for some reason I've always been blessed with friends who get me to do things which are good for me, thank you for the invitation. I don't feel like such a stranger in town now, and maybe that's good.' Roberta walked off, hair swinging behind her like a metronome as her feet landed sharply and squarely, like a dancer, on each step. Sally ordered



another coffee and a little warmth from the hidden sun began to invade the *paseo*. *Solitary wave whose gradual sea I am*. The man with the beard remained staring out to sea. A youngish man, short, wearing jeans and a denim jacket, quite evidently American, sauntered slowly onto the *paseo*, hands shoved deeply into his pockets, head down. He noticed the other man when he was halfway across the *paseo* and walked towards him. They talked for awhile, turned in her direction once or twice and eventually came over. 'Now,' she thought, 'Now if I'm going to escape, this is the moment.' But she hadn't paid her bill, it would have been impolitely obvious to run. 'How do you do,' said the man who had spoken to her earlier, 'My name is Seamus Lynch and this is my friend whose closely guarded name is alleged to be Jacob von Hahn, we call him Jake.' Her solitude quietly began to dissipate. Both men held themselves slightly in check, just in case their combined boisterousness should be unacceptable. She introduced herself, invited them to join her and said to Lynch, 'Then Roberta is not your wife.' 'That has not been my good fortune, I'm afraid the lady is married to a friend, Jason West by name. Do you believe we attach too great importance to names?' Lynch was without question the most clinically Irish specimen she had ever met, including as he did, Dublin, Trinity College, insufferable reverence for James Joyce, an accutely lapsed state of Catholicism, an alienated wife and child, a terrible thirst for alcohol, exhuberant scholarship, compassion for others but no mercy for himself. Jake said little, content for the moment to wrap himself in the outpouring of Lynch's wit. Lynch respected his friend's solemn capacity to keep silent. It

should be mentioned that Sally discovered when the urge to speak came, as it did once in awhile to Jake, nothing could halt the flow. Now the three engaged in an amiable interlude of first acquaintance, during which they interrogated each other about the things they considered important, and for Lynch and Jake nothing was more important than their love of books. They were both writers, Jake who was a novice in fiction had retired from journalism to write something more lasting, Lynch was a published author held in high esteem by a few loyal connoisseurs. They shared, among other things, acquiescence in a slightly absurd poverty and ambition merged with purposefulness in pursuit of their craft. Very quickly it was a meeting of old friends trading off titles, authors, opinions, eager to recommend a favorite unknown to the others, to announce some hitherto obscure truth. Sally's blunt tongue soon absolved her companions of the restraint they had imposed upon themselves. 'Jake my good man, honest friend, speak the solemn truth now, don't we deserve a drop of something to keep off that chill, unnatural wind?' 'Couldn't agree more, nothing better than a few hits of *coñac* to keep the *levante* at bay. The prevailing wind you see, comes from the west, but when this nasty one blows out of the east, well as you might have noticed, rainy weather is the result.' 'Did you know that 'east wind — rain' was the Japanese code for the attack on Pearl Harbor?' 'No, extraordinary intelligence, do please in honor of that, permit me to buy what I take will be your first drink of *coñac*. Fundador,' Lynch said ordering, '*Tres Fundador, por favor*. I must warn you that it is not normally wise to drink this stuff before the sun begins to decline late in

the afternoon or you may find yourself subject to visions. That wind is the devil though, and this the holy water to purge him.’ They drank from small glasses, the white saucers placed beneath each glass accumulating in neat little stacks to facilitate the reckoning. The harsh liquid had a round oily edge and the pungence of apples. They took their warmth not from the reluctant sun but the small fire ignited in the pit of the stomach, fanning and spreading itself up to the lungs, the breath and the brain, down to the knees. The *tapas*, savory tidbits that came with every round, Sally found unidentifiable. ‘What is it?’ she asked finally after consuming several. ‘Goat’s meat,’ replied Lynch watching her closely. Jake sat upright in his chair, one arm flung over the back, no longer slouching to keep warm. ‘When I first arrived, in winter as luck would have it, I was cold and wet, the house I rented was so damp I was ready to call it quits and leave. Roberta came to my rescue, she found my sunny *apartamento* at the top of Calle Granada, which I have no doubt, saved my life.’ How else she might have helped him Sally could only speculate, there was something attractive about this intense, quiet man. His face unfolded in peaks, the nose craggy and slightly spatulate, the chin needle pointed, both the gift of nature; the minor displacement of the jaw however, was a surgeon’s endowment following an automobile accident. He came from a small fishing community, much smaller than this little town, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. One of his principal pleasures he took by recalling the boyhood exploits in that rural paradise, telling his stories slowly, with careful attention to detail, ornaments under no circumstances to be omitted. ‘Knocking over

outhouses was routine, and greasing a pig, well you did that for halloween. One time there was this mean son of a bitch name of Josiah Johnstone, everyone hated him. Didn't have kids of his own, maybe that's what made him ornery and hard to git along with.' He would pause deliberately over the country way of saying *git* instead of *get*, making sure his auditors caught the inflection. 'Now we had been aiming to pay him back for his unfriendliness; so one night, it was a Saturday and some of us was hangin' out back of the general store with a bottle of likker passin' among us fast and furious until we emptied it, clean and shiny as a whistle,' he rolled his eyes slowly in mock appreciation, 'When big Jim Scranton ups and says, "I got me a plan!" It was a few miles down the road to old man Johnstone's farm, a freezing mid-winter night. The sky was incredibly lit up with stars and a half full moon, the ground was white, crunchy under hard packed snow. It was as cold as it needs to be, only we weren't feeling a thing. We crept up to Johnstone's barn and I could hear the cattle moving, shifting about inside. He kept a big dog in the barn but we didn't see hide nor hair of him. We put his wagon on top of the barn that night. I would like to have seen his face in the morning, standing out there to have a stretch or two, his glance suddenly falling on the wagon straddling the roof.' Jake chuckled happily to himself lost in those days of wonder. 'I'm sorry,' interrupted Sally, 'I don't quite understand, how did you get it up there?' 'Easy, took it apart, passed it up, put it back together up there,' and he laughed hard and long. Lynch and Sally laughed as much at his amusement as at the story. He exhaled deeply, satisfied with the past, with his account of it.

Sally caught the stale smell of Celtas which he smoked at the rate of two packs a day; she always associated that not unpleasant smell and a residue of dampness with this droll, kind man. 'You want to be careful what you say when Lynch is around,' he said to Sally with a smile. 'He's a dangerous man, don't repeat anything you wouldn't want to find in print one day. He writes down everything we say, I've seen his notebooks, nothing escapes him. That story I told has already been recorded, this fellow had the audacity to show it to me, insisting I correct a few trifling details. Talk about nerve, he thinks he's some kind of painter and we sit for him whether we like it or not.' This was high praise from Jake. Lynch maintained strict discipline where his work was concerned, rising now to leave. 'Well Sally, I can't help but be grateful for your arrival among us,' he glanced at Jake, 'You are the missing link. Your humble servant,' and he strode away, his shoulders hunching involuntarily against the *levante*. 'How long does that wind blow?' 'Sometimes for several days in a row. I think Seamus was indulging in a little matchmaking, I hope you won't take it unkindly.' 'O of course not, can he really work after four or five glasses of *coñac*?' 'He seems to, marvellous isn't it?' She nodded, suddenly uncertain about what to do next, 'I guess I should be going, can you point me towards the market?' 'Sure, be glad to. Walk past my place with me and I can point out the post office if you haven't found it yet.' They swerved left from the *paseo* pausing to look at the simple, clean white lines of the church in Plaza de los Mártiros, 'Does every town in Spain have a Martyr's Square?' asked Sally with a rush of remembrance. 'I don't know, why?' 'I keep

thinking about political murders, assassinations, firing squads.' 'Don't have any use for politics, even less for politicians.' 'You might not feel that way if it was you lined up against the wall,' 'A good point,' said Jake politely, closing the subject. Sally remembered having heard the phrase earlier that morning. The plane trees lining the square looked naked, the small bells of fruit hanging like decorations on a Christmas tree, the polished bark peeling back in soft shadows, green, grey and yellow. 'Strange,' she said, 'How aware I am of the violence, yet at the same time, how strongly I feel the peace.' 'Ah, the mystery of Epaña,' he pronounced it in the Andalusian way, eliding the *s*. They parted company at number eighty-eight on Calle Granada, the location of his *apartamento* with its large whitewashed balcony on the third floor. He was building a fireplace in the central room at his own expense, firm in the conviction that wood heat alone would keep the cold Spanish winter nights warm. He went upstairs to work on it now, pointing out the route to the market for Sally. 'There won't be much left,' he commented. 'That's okay, at least I'll know where it is for tomorrow and the days to come.'