

SHORTLISTED FOR THE WHSMITH TRAVEL WRITING AWARD

PETER KERR



Mañana Mañana

ONE MALLORCAN SUMMER

summersdale travel

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Follow me to the island of calm, where men are never in a hurry, women never grow old; where words are never wasted, the sun shines all day long, and even the moon, as though caught up in its idle activity, moves more slowly.

From *L'Illa de la Calma* by Santiago Rusiñol
(Antoni López, Barcelona, 1913)



- ONE -

COCKERELS AND MUSSELS

General Franco had developed insomnia. Or maybe he just sensed the approach of spring. Whatever the reason, the diminutive cockerel with the autocratic name and a bossy attitude to match was suddenly bent upon making his early morning presence well and truly felt . . . *and* heard.

Thus the feathered *generalísimo* put paid to the soporific luxury of the long, silent nights which had become an accustomed treasure of winter at 'Ca's Mayoral', our little farm nestling among scented groves of orange, lemon and other exotic trees, in a lush valley hidden away at the foot of the towering Tramuntana Mountains of south-west Mallorca. The cocky little bantam who ruled the roost over at the *finca* of our neighbour, old Maria Bauzá, was clearly determined to ensure that, when he was awake, every living creature in the entire valley would be awake also. And just when everything about our new lifestyle seemed to be settling nicely into place at last . . .

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For it hadn't been easy developing the *tranquilo* attitude so necessary for living at the relaxed pace of the Mallorcan country folk, into whose midst we had so recently moved – an island way of life so laid-back, a Spanish temperament so enviably dilatory that we had very soon come to realise that we had put down roots in a place that deserved to be dubbed Mañana Valley. And we loved it!

Admittedly, it had been something of a shock adapting to the mainly-manual working methods of a small Mediterranean fruit farm after the highly-mechanised arable practices which we'd been used to 'back home' in Scotland, but we were getting there gradually, or *poco a poco*, as the locals put it. *Hombre*, it was the only way to go! And while our resolute struggles to communicate with our rustic new neighbours in Spanish must have raised many a hearty laugh when they talked amongst themselves about the *familia extranjera* that had come to live *and* work in their secluded, close-knit community, they showed nothing but courtesy and patience when conversing with us one-to-one.

Even my wife Ellie's penchant for ignoring small but vitally-important idiosyncrasies of their language was always politely, if sometimes mischievously, overlooked. Yet her habit of neglecting to pronounce the Spanish letter 'ñ' as though it was an ordinary 'n' with a 'y' tagged on (as in 'canyon'), almost landed her in trouble on one occasion.

It was in early January, when Ellie was making her first visit after the New Year holiday to the shops in the nearby market town of Andratx, cheerily wishing the various shopkeepers her well-rehearsed compliments

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of the season as she stocked up on depleted comestibles. Only when she returned to the car after a sojourn to the fishmonger's did I suspect that something was amiss.

'You look a bit peeved,' I remarked. 'What's up?'

'It's that fishman,' she stormed, slamming the car door. 'He's got an attitude problem, that's all!'

'How d'you mean? I've spoken to him a few times in the bar next door on market days, and he seems a genial sort of guy.'

'Well, everything was sweetness and light until I called "Happy New Year" to him on my way out of the shop.'

'Uh-huh?'

'Yes. Then his face turned puce, and all the women in the queue started to giggle.' Ellie gave an umbrage-induced snort. 'OK, I didn't understand what he shouted at me, but it certainly wasn't "Have a nice day", that's for sure!'

'Ehm, I take it you wished him Happy New Year in Spanish, then?'

'Of course. *Feliz Ano Nuevo* – what else?'

I stroked my nose, trying to hide the smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth. 'Right, so you said *ano*, pronounced 'anno' – not *año*, pronounced 'anyo?'

'Of course. Why?'

'Because the poor fellow's just been in hospital for a haemorrhoids operation, so it's no wonder he got the hump.'

Ellie's brows knotted into a puzzled frown. 'But why should having his haemorrhoids seen to make him fly off the handle at being wished a Happy New Year?'

‘Simply because you said *anno* instead of *anyo*.’

‘So what?’

‘So you didn’t actually wish him a Happy New Year, that’s what.’

‘I didn’t?’

‘Well, no. What you actually wished him,’ I spluttered, tears of hilarity welling in my eyes, ‘was a Happy New Arsehole!’

Now Ellie’s face turned puce.

No doubt we dropped piles of other such linguistic bloomers without even being aware of them. But that was to be expected. And if we did accidentally say something offensive at times, none of the local folk – with the understandable exception of that poor fishmonger – reacted in a discourteous way. The fact that at least we were trying seemed to be appreciated, and that was fine by us. After all, our priority was to restore our run-down little farm to *somewhere* approaching the state of esteem in which it had once basked, so we were content just to scale the learning curve steadily, encouraged by our apparent acceptance by our *vecinos*, our new neighbours in the valley.

But now General Franco was spoiling everything by putting the mockers on my much-needed beauty sleep for the third night in a row. All right, it wasn’t as if I hadn’t been brought up with the morning crowing of a family rooster in my ears, but the encircling proximity of the craggy Mallorcan mountains seemed to amplify such commonplace country sounds to a nerve-jarring level. And to make matters worse, Franco wasn’t even good at the job. His early morning efforts sounded more like the wobbly vocal acrobatics of an adolescent Swiss

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folk singer than the macho call of a strutting chicken-coop supremo.

The little general yodelled up another of his broken-voiced reveilles.

‘What in God’s name has got into that deranged bird?’ I groaned, squinting at the bedside clock through the shuttered darkness. ‘Hell’s bells, it’s not even five o’clock yet! He’s getting earlier every bloody morning!’

Ellie curved herself into a foetal ball and pulled the duvet over her ears. ‘Shut up and go back to sleep,’ she mumbled. ‘It’s the middle of the night.’

‘Tell me about it!’

My wife’s annoying talent of being able to sleep through just about anything short of a Richter Eight earthquake had been inherited by our two sons, eighteen-year-old Sandy and his twelve-year-old brother Charlie, whose muffled snores I could hear penetrating the thick bedroom walls of the old farmhouse.

Then came another warbled clarion call from the bantam *generalísimo* in the little farmyard up the lane. And now his grating outbursts were being echoed by a bestirring legion of other territorial cockerels, all crowing in tip-toed, wing-flapping anticipation of the new day about to dawn on their individual poultry provinces – the rickety hen runs on a score of little *fincas* scattered around the pine-clad slopes of the previously silent mountains.

Ellie started to snore too.

I lay there, staring blindly into the dark void of the ceiling, wishing for sleep, while a growing choir of waking birds began to twitter in the nearby orange

groves as enthusiastically as if auditioning for the chorus line of Brer Rabbit's 'Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah'. And still the cosy sounds of family slumber surrounded me. It seemed that I was the lone wakeful human soul in the valley, doomed to lie there listening to Mrs Van Winkle & Sons snoring away blissfully in a blacked-out nightmare aviary.

Then old Pep's dim-witted dog Perro barked in the little higgledy-piggledy farmstead across the lane. He barked again, yelped as if in pain – a pain induced, no doubt, by a timely kick in the *cojones* from his under-slept master – then fell silent once more. But the damage was done. Perro had succeeded in launching the entire canine population of the valley into confused, contagious yapping and baying, each chained-up mutt dutifully warning off the packs of wolves, bandits and bogeymen that they imagined were skulking in the wooded darkness around their isolated farms.

Well done, Perro! At a stroke, he had developed plumate bedlam into total pandemonium. Nature's quietly passing night-train had gone right off the rails.

Ellie and the boys snored on regardless.

I sighed in despair. 'Ah well, if you can't beat 'em,' I muttered, hauling my reluctant body out of bed and pulling on my clothes. 'I'm going for a walk!'

Outside, the musky scents of the Mediterranean night were still lingering intoxicatingly in the damp early morning air. There was a dream-like quality about the view from beneath the beamed, open *porche* at the front of the house. The ancient almond trees that stood in the nearest field were only just visible in the dim half-light, their twisted black branches rising through a

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gossamer lake of mist like the distorted arms and spidery fingers of sad, silent ghosts.

I shivered, pulling the collar of my jacket round my ears, and wandered almost hypnotically towards the sleeping orchards beyond. Here in the open, the sounds of waking animal life seemed somehow less irksome, totally at one with the surroundings, in fact, and gradually becoming less frenzied, too. At length, I found myself standing by the old rubble-stone well in the corner of our farthest field, and I turned to look back over the gently-rising terraces of orchards towards the house, its ochre-tiled roof just perceptible through the lifting gloom, its shutters still securely closed against the fading night. Everything was silent now, a total stillness having descended on the valley, enveloping it in the grey-shadowed hush that precedes the magic moment of dawn.

A southerly breeze whispered through the fruit trees, carrying on its balmy breath the fragrance of wild myrtle and thyme from the green hills rolling gently away towards the coast, and I half imagined, half scented the faint, hot aromas of Africa, lying dark and mysterious far over the horizon on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. I no longer envied Ellie and the boys their undisturbed sleep. General Franco had done me a favour.

My gaze was drawn upward to the high mass of the Sierra Garrafa, where a lone star still glowed in the inky emptiness above the peaks, their serrated outline silhouetted now against a spreading ribbon of light. This was Mallorca as I had never seen it before, awakening in all its serene magnificence. And I was witness not

just to the birth of another day, but also the beginnings of a new season.

Suddenly it was spring, and the signs of its arrival were everywhere. Green and petalled things were popping joyously all around me. And there, on the exposed limb of a nearby pine tree, a young cock sparrow was practising his juvenile copulative technique on a consenting fir cone; while over there by the adobe wall of the old water *cisterna*, a pubescent male hedgehog was trembling with myopic ardour while passionately sniffing the blunt end of an upturned scrubbing brush. Oh yes, it was spring all right!

I don't know how long I stood there, leaning against the parapet of the well, my senses delighting in the subtle charms of the nascent day, but by the time I started to wander back towards the house, warm sunlight was already flooding the valley floor, filtering through the lush foliage of the citrus trees, fragrant with *azahar* blossoms, and humming with honeybee melodies.

'Bees are the cupids of the orchard,' old Maria Bauzá had told me, shortly after our arrival in the valley. 'Without them, the act of love between trees, the *matrimonio* which leads to the birth of the fruit, would not take place.'

I remember marvelling at such a poetic description of what, to most people, is just an accepted, if not totally taken-for-granted, detail of nature's ways.

'You need a beehive,' Maria added while I was still silently pondering this unexpectedly romantic turn of phrase from our feisty neighbour.

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She had already told me that I needed a pig, some hens and a donkey. The pig and hens had certainly been added to our shopping list, albeit a tad half-heartedly, but a donkey – to old Maria's utter dismay – would never replace a tractor in my league table of essential farming aids. And I was quietly of a mind that the beehive would be joining the donkey in the rejected ideas bin. God knows, I had enough to learn about the complexities of Mediterranean fruit growing, without further complicating my life by plunging my over-taxed brain into the mysteries of the ancient apian arts. No, our lover-boy trees would have to rely on the little arrows of someone else's winged cupids.

It was nice to hear them buzzing away in the blossoms, though, and comforting to know that their dedicated labours were sowing the seeds, so to speak, of our next harvest. The bees were obviously happy with the arrangement, and their owner (if indeed they had one) could look forward to a supply of citrus-blossom honey gleaned for free from somebody else's trees. It was an 'everybody wins' situation, and I savoured the notion of it as I continued my stroll back towards the house.

Although it was still barely seven o'clock, workaday mechanical sounds were already beginning to echo round the valley – another sign of spring and the advent of warmer weather. And, with the lengthening days, we would drift soon enough into the stifling heat of summer, when the work of the countryside, by necessity, would be undertaken in the relative coolness of early morning, late afternoon and evening.

Down the lane towards the village I could hear the two-stroke rattle of the baker's little Citroën 2CV (Juan the *pan* man's van, we called it) starting out on the day's deliveries, while the nasal rasp of a Mobylette moped announced the first of the village-domiciled *campesinos* making his daily journey from house to *finca* somewhere higher up the valley. No doubt he would already have 'breakfasted' on a couple of *coñac*-laced coffees with a few *amigos* in one of the village bars, and he exchanged a cheery '*Weh-ep!*' greeting with old Pep as he scooted past our neighbour's farm across the way. Although hidden behind the ancient wall running along the lane-side boundary of Ca's Mayoral, the sound of Pep roaring obscenities at his dog, and the tinkling of a score of tinny bells told me that he was already setting off, with his little herd of sheep, for one of the many 'meadows' of weeds on the high *bancales* where he enjoyed grazing rights.

Then the hollow 'chug' of a diesel tractor started up, unseen among the trees of a distant field.

Morning had broken.

Ellie and the boys had their backs to me as I entered the kitchen – Ellie at the hob making coffee, the boys at the table wolfing down bacon and eggs worthy of the name, courtesy of old Maria's fig-fed pigs and orchard-pecking hens.

'Morning, Dad. Been having a lie-in, have you?' Sandy enquired, glancing up momentarily from his matinal feast. 'Didn't think you'd be needing it, judging by the snores coming out of your room all night.'

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'Yeah,' Charlie agreed without interrupting his food-shovelling. 'I'm bushed. Hardly got a wink's sleep because of all that racket you were making.'

Saying nothing, I stood there, slowly nodding my head while I awaited Ellie's inevitable clincher.

'The boys are right, dear,' she eventually confirmed, not a trace of remorse in her look as she turned to bring me my coffee. 'You really will have to get yourself seen to, you know.'

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Being a Wednesday, it was market day in Andratx.

Sandy had volunteered to do this morning's 'brat run' – his term for driving his younger brother the seventeen miles or so to school, along with three even younger kids whom he'd pick up en route. Not that he particularly enjoyed acting as chauffeur to four bum-scratching little slugs, as he described them with the lofty disdain of the 'mature' eighteen-year-old, rather that he'd do almost anything to postpone embarking on the day's field work with our tiny Barbieri tractor. In comparison to the mighty four-wheel drive beasts he'd been used to driving, he somewhat cruelly regarded our dinky diesel as a motorised donkey . . . without a saddle. And, in truth, that's almost all it was: a little two-wheeled workhorse which you walked behind, as you would a donkey, and controlled with handlebars instead of reins. But it was a machine ideally suited to working in the tight confines of those tree-crowded little fields, nonetheless. And, on the plus side, as Jaume, another of our venerable neighbours, had so eloquently put it

when first recommending that I purchase such a tractor, ‘Unlike a donkey, Don Pedro, it will not shit on your boots.’

That was good enough for me, but all purely academic as far as Sandy was concerned. The demeaning image of trudging over the land behind this putt-putting Mickey Mouse contraption was clearly not one that he fancied nurturing. Or so he liked to imply . . .

In any case, our sons set off in the relative comfort of our ‘family’ Ford Fiesta, while Ellie and I dropped the back seat of the ‘farm’ Seat Panda and loaded it to the roof with crates of oranges, today’s order for Señor Jeronimo – not the Apache chief reincarnated, as Charlie had originally hoped, but merely our friendly fruit wholesaler along the coast in Peguera.

‘Handy having the two cars,’ Ellie stoically puffed, doing her best to make herself comfortable in the Panda’s pushed-fully-forward passenger seat, with a plastic crate thumping into the back of her head and several plump Valencias landing on her lap every time I braked on the twisty *camino* that led through Sa Coma village to Andratx town.

‘Mmm, I’d still be happier if we had the reg. papers, though,’ I muttered, retrieving a flying mandarin from the dashboard. I recalled our friend Jock Burns’ assurances when he’d nodded us in the direction of his second-hand car dealing *contacto* up the island.

‘Dead leery, Enrique is,’ Jock had confided as he winked me one of his keep-it-shtum winks. ‘Gets the best deals ye could imagine outa the big car-hire companies, see. Year-old motors, mint, low mileage, been serviced every week, fifty per cent off the new

price. Magic. Cannae whack it, son.’ Another wink, verging on the Masonic this time. ‘Contacts, know what I mean? Contacts – that’s how ye survive on this island, by the way.’

However, fully three months had now elapsed since we’d taken Jock’s advice and become the proud, though somewhat anxious owners of our mint, low mileage Fiesta and Panda cars. And still the registration documents hadn’t turned up.

‘*No problema,*’ Enrique had assured me at the time, giving my back a series of confidence-inducing pats with one hand, while stuffing my eagerly-accepted roll of *dinero* into his breast pocket with the other. I was not to concern myself with such a trifling detail as the absent papers for these *coches estupendos*. *Coño*, this was Spain and these things took time. He lowered an ear towards a raised shoulder and dropped the corners of his mouth into a what’s-the-big-deal? facial shrug. ‘You know what these big car-hire companies are like, *amigo*. A law unto themselves, no?’ I should just relax, be *tranquilo*. The *documentos* would be in the post soon enough. Probably even *mañana*. ‘*Ay-y-y, no problema, eh!*’

Jock, a fellow Scot who had worked as a schoolteacher on the island for many years (as well as being a popular hotel entertainer and well-known Mr Fixit in his spare time), had reiterated Enrique’s philosophy on the several occasions I’d mentioned my concerns to him during the ensuing weeks.

‘Dinnae get yer breeks in a fankle, son,’ he’d said. ‘Look at it this way – as long as ye’ve no got the papers, ye cannae register the cars in your name, right?’

‘Right, but that’s what’s bothering me. I mean, I can’t tax them either and –’

Jock raised a silencing hand, an enquiring look on his face. ‘And as long as the cars are no registered in your name . . .?’

I looked at Jock blankly as he awaited my answer in true schoolmasterly fashion.

‘Ye don’t get ma drift, do ye, son?’

I shook my head.

Jock shook his head too, tutting in exasperation. ‘Have ye ever tried parkin’ in Palma city centre when Ellie’s dragged ye off tae the shops on a Saturday mornin’?’

I nodded my head.

Jock nodded his head too, smirking smugly this time. ‘It’s a buggger, intit? Cars everywhere. The polis dishin’ out parkin’ tickets hoalis-boalis, right?’

‘Yeah, but I don’t see what . . .’ Then it dawned on me. ‘Aw, wait a minute – what you’re saying is that I can park wherever I want, because the previous owners of the cars will be –’

‘Sent *your* parking tickets,’ Jock grinned, delighting in the sweetness of the scam.

‘Hmm, but –’

‘Hmm, but nothin’! Listen, what d’ye think these car-hire companies do wi’ the dozens o’ parkin’ tickets they’re sent every day on a holiday island like this? Forward them tae their long-gone, never-tae-be-seen-again clients in Britain, Germany, Scandinavia or wherever? Fat chance! Nah, they bin them, pal – straight intae the old shredder. And that’s what’ll happen tae yours an’ all, so park on in immunity while the goin’s