

Orlando Flores is dead

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By : Kevin Hadley

He was known as George Carpenter before he became the writer Orlando Flores

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There is a hum of bees at work in the lavender, and the sound of the neighbour's hover mower as he goes up and down his lawn. It's a hot Sunday morning in July, and I'm sitting in the garden with Emily, eating breakfast, a tray of toast, strawberry jam and coffee before us on the table. At 10, the bells of Saint Peter's start their cascading appeals, bringing me out of my reverie. It seems as good a time as any to let the wife in on what I've decided.

“Emily, I say, trying not to let my nerves get the better of me, I've been thinking, and I've made a decision.”

“Well done, I'm proud of you,” she says, without looking up from the book she's reading.

“No, I'm serious. I have made a decision. We're going back to Spain.”

That gets her attention.

“Spain?”

“Yes, Spain.”

* * *

Twenty four hours earlier, life was ticking along uneventfully. Neither of us really believed that we were living the dream, but it seemed that after many years together in an affluent corner of Berkshire, we had settled into a life that suited us. Everything began with my trip to the farmers' market in the morning. On my return, I came in the front door, kicked my sandals off, and walked barefoot into the kitchen. Emily was sitting at the table with a book in front of her.

“You've been a while Henry,” she observed.

“I know, I stopped off for a coffee on the way back,” I said, feeling the need to explain myself.

“Is that a newspaper you've got?” Emily said, looking up from her book. “You never buy newspapers. What's going on?”

“Well, when I was having my coffee, I was having a read of it, and I came across something interesting on the obituaries page. You have to see it.”

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I cleared a space on the table and opened the newspaper. 'Orlando Flores Obituary', read the headline, followed by, 'Latin American writer who became a favourite of post-feminist middle classes.'

'There, you see. Orlando Flores is dead.'

She wasn't as taken aback as I'd thought. 'I can see that. But tell me, what exactly does post-feminist middle classes mean?'

'You guess is as good as mine,' I said.

'So that's the end of George Carpenter then,' she said, a melancholy note creeping into her voice. 'It's not how I would have imagined it.'

'Me neither.' I looked at Emily's open book. 'What are you reading?'

'Snowfall in Seville.' 'I couldn't help laughing.' 'What's so funny?' she asked.

'It's one of his, isn't it? Flores's.'

We had last seen George at the dusty, shed of an airport in La Mancha, the day he set off for pastures new. Spain in those days wasn't what it is today. Then it was a heady place and there was a great optimism in the air. Franco was ailing, the tourists were starting to come to the Costas, and we were young. All in all, it had seemed a strange time for George to be packing his bags. The evening of his departure, we had gathered for a quiet farewell at 'el toreador', a restaurant in the blossom-scented streets that wind between the bullring and the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Sede. There were seven of us - me and Emily, George and his sister Ruth, two middle-aged career teachers from the British Council, and an enigmatic, bearded young student called Enrique, who seemed to have stepped off the pages of Don Quixote. Ruth had come for one final visit, arriving with an empty suitcase, with the intention of helping George get his books home to Winchester. It was a balmy evening and we sat outside eating tapas, drinking rioja, and smoking the local cigarettes. Ruth and Enrico were thick as thieves that night, but there came a point, when the others had gone to consult the wine board, when I was left alone with Ruth.

'Has he told you what his plans are?' she asked.

'No, not really. He told me he wanted to go somewhere where no one knows him.'

'That's George,' she said, with a smile that was his. 'You shouldn't believe all this romantic stuff he tells you. He lives in a dream world half the time. Do you know the story of the music camp?'

'No.'

'Well, when he was a kid, and I mean a kid - he would've been seven or eight - he went for a fortnight to a Scottish island, to learn to play the guitar.'

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â The guitar? Can he play it?â I thought of all the times we had been around people with guitars, and he had never shown the slightest interest in them, let alone picked one up and strummed it.

â He can, yes. When he came back from Scotland, heâ d become very good. In just two weeks. I asked him how heâ d done it and he told me some daft story about how heâ d changed his name. Heâ d chosen a name that he thought sounded like a guitar player. And that, he claimed, was his secret.â

â Funny,â I said, laughing. â What name did he choose?â

â Orlando something or other.â

Before she could say anything more though, the others began drifting back to the table, and Ruthâ s attention returned to Enrico.

Later in the evening, I asked George if the story his sister had told me was true. He laughed it off, but when I mentioned the name Orlando, he got up and walked over to the bar. He whispered something to the barman, who went into the back of the restaurant, returning a minute later with a guitar. George checked that it was tuned and then started to play Concierto De Aranjuez, his fingers picking with increasing agility at the strings. He finished with a virtuosos flourish and everyone in the restaurant stood up and cheered. George handed the guitar back to the barman, received a brandy from him for his troubles, and returned to our table.

Emily and I went to the airport to wave George and Ruth off the following day. After theyâ d checked in, Emily gave George a lapel badge in the form of an ibis as a present, and he pinned it to his shirt, saying that it would always remind him of his two years in Spain. Then, accompanied by Emily, he went to the kiosk outside the building for something to read on the flight.

â Why do you really think heâ s leaving?â Ruth asked, returning to the subject of the previous evening.

â Itchy feet, I suppose. He told me his work hereâ s done.â

â Has he ever mentioned a woman to you Henry?â

â Plenty,â I said. â Youâ re his sister, you must know what heâ s like by now.â

â So you know about Elena then?â

â It doesnâ t ring any bells with me,â I said. â Who is she?â

â Itâ s someone he met here I suppose. He told me this morning that thatâ s why heâ s off. He has to find her.â

â Why, where is she?â

â He didnâ t say. Or rather he wouldnâ t say.â At that point, George and Emily came back from the kiosk. â Listen, donâ t mention it to him Henry.â

I did as I was instructed. It was like reading the first few, tantalising, sentences of a story and then losing the book. At various points thereafter, you feel sure you will find the book and satisfy your curiosity as to how it continues. But you never do, the prospect of satisfying your curiosity grows more remote, until you are eventually left to invent the rest of the story yourself.

* * *

Emily returned from her afternoon yoga class, made herself a cress and ricotta sandwich, and sat down at the kitchen table.

“What shall we do with that,” she said, pointing at the newspaper with the obituary in it.

“I thought I might nip up into the loft and get the Spain photo album down. Then we can stick Orlando’s obituary in with the photos we have of him when he was plain old George.”

I left Emily with her sandwich and headed upstairs, intending to be back before she finished it. Once in the loft though, I lost track of time. Suddenly, I heard Emily’s voice down below. “What on earth are you doing Henry? You’ve been up there half an hour.” I returned the photo album that I had been looking at to the crumpled cardboard box, and pulled out “Spain 1972-1973”. Back downstairs, the sandwich was long gone, Emily had cut out the obituary, and on the table was a freshly uncorked rioja and two full glasses. I put the album on the table and sat down.

“Forty years,” said Emily, looking at the dates on the album. “It makes me feel positively ancient. I’m almost afraid to look at the photos.”

I opened the album at the first page. “There we are. Ragged and young. A pair of tearaways on a foreign adventure. It’s just like I remembered.”

“And look at George,” Emily said. “He was just like one of us then. Kids on the verge of the rest of their lives, having a bit of fun before the serious business begins.”

“Well, that about sums it up. Funny how we ended up back here, doing thirty years each in the teaching business.”

“You make it sound like a prison sentence.”

“I meant to. But it hasn’t been so bad has it?” I said.

“I suppose not. But when you think of George! Back then we seemed to be destined for similar things. Similarly great things. There wasn’t much difference between us and him was there?”

“No, you’re right. But it all comes down to our decisions,” I said, warming to one of my favourite themes. Emily had heard it all before though, and wasn’t about to sit through another diatribe against missed opportunity.

“Yes, yes. I know how it goes. We can become anyone we want if we make the right decisions. Just one small step following one small step.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“It’s not that simple though, is it. We can’t become anyone we want. You wanted to be a writer, didn’t you. And me a painter,” Emily said somewhat ruefully.

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“ Maybe it wasn’t what we really wanted.”

“ Maybe. So we became what we are. And George became what he was. Do you think you could have been a writer Henry?” Emily asked.

“ I’d like to think so.”

She laughed. “ You and George had one important difference though.”

“ What was that?” I asked, curious to know how Emily would answer.

“ You were always ambitious and he wasn’t. He didn’t seem to worry about the future like we did. Did he ever mention his writing to you?”

“ No. I was always showing him things I’d written, but he never once showed me anything he’d done. It was just like with the guitar. He didn’t say anything about that either, did he.”

“ No, he didn’t. He was a dark horse.”

Emily topped up our glasses and we raised a toast to George, before looking through the rest of the photos. At 9:00, there was an arts program on BBC2 that we always watched. Much to our delight, there was a ten minute spot devoted to Orlando Flores. They began with a potted biography. Orlando Flores was a writer from Lima, Peru. He published his first book at the age of 43. Not much was known about his life before that. No early work had ever emerged, and he always refused to talk about his past in interviews, saying it was unimportant. At the age of 47, having established himself in Latin America and Iberia, he came to the attention of the English speaking world, with the publication of, “ Snow in Seville”, the translation of which he had done himself. After that, he very quickly gained a large following in the Anglophone world, particularly among young and middle-aged women, who were touched by the spirituality and mysticism that his work contained. After the biography, there was an interview with him from the 90s, just after “ Snow in Seville” had been published. Before us was a man we barely recognised - a bearded, bespectacled, Renaissance figure, playing the part of a serious literary figure perfectly. We watched in rapt silence, until Emily suddenly stood up.

“ Look Henry. look!” she said, pointing at something on the screen.

“ What? What is it?”

“ The lapel badge.” If there were any doubts that George and Orlando were one and the same, they were now dispelled. In his jacket lapel was the ibis badge.

Once the interview had finished, The Guardian’s literary critic appeared, discussing Orlando’s work.

“ Turn it off,” I said.

“ No, wait, it’s interesting.”

When the critic had said his piece, Emily turned off the TV.

“ How many of his books have you read?” I asked.

“ All of them.”

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“All of them,” I said, unable to stifle the note of surprise in my voice. “Have you been keeping it a secret?”

“Yes. I know you read one of them and didn’t like it, so I didn’t want to say anything.”

We sat in silence for a moment with our memories of George. Presently, my thoughts drifted back to the airport all those years ago. “Have you come across a character called Elena anywhere in his books?”

“There was something, yes. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just something his sister said to me just before they left. Well, actually, she didn’t say much. Just asked if I knew someone called Elena. Who was she in the book?”

“She wasn’t anybody. It was the name he gave to the life force in a couple of the books.”

“The life force?” I asked, suddenly remembering why I hadn’t been tempted to read any more of Orlando’s books after the first one.

“Yes. The thing that drives us all forward. That keeps us going.”

“I see.”

“The thing that guides us in our decisions, as you might say,” she said, smiling warmly.

“Listen, it’s sticky in here, why don’t we retire to the garden.”

“Okay. You go out and I’ll nip upstairs and get Orlando’s books, the ones where it says about Elena.”

In the garden the air was hot and fragrant. The moment I turned on the lamp I’d brought out, insects began circling the light. Emily came bearing three books and began to show me some of the passages where Elena was mentioned. I’d expected that they would put me off reading anymore of Orlando’s spiritual offerings, but was surprised to find that they had quite the opposite effect. I began leafing through the books myself, looking for clues or signs that Elena was a real woman. After a while though, it became clear that it was entirely possible that Elena was nothing more than the life force Emily had suggested. The deeper I went, the more engrossed I became.

“Henry!”

I looked up. Emily was standing in front of me with the wine bottle and empty glasses in her hand.

“I’m off to bed. Are you coming?”

“No, I might stay here a while longer.”

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Very much so. I wish you’d given me these to read before.”

“Well, don’t stay out here too long.”

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It was long after midnight when I went up to bed. Emily was already sound asleep and I slipped in beside her and soon nodded off. I was awakened by a noise outside. I lay awake in the darkness, listening. It sounded like the gate creaking to and fro. When it didn't stop, I went down to investigate. I opened the French windows, went outside, and there, sitting at the table, was George, as we had known him in his Spanish days.

â Don't worry Henry. It's just a dream. Come on sit down.â

I saw that he had a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table. It was the same wine we were drinking the night before he had left Spain.

â Want a glass?â he said.

â Why not. Listen, what are you doing here?â

â I thought I'd come and explain a few things.â

â About Elena?â

â No, there is no Elena. You're entitled to your story of course. But in mine, Elena is what she is, the life force.â

â But Ruth?â

â I know. But there never was a woman. That was all wishful thinking on Ruth's part.â

â Okay. So what have you come to explain to me?â

â Why you're there and I'm here. We weren't so different you know, you and me. The only real difference was I told the story and you didn't. That night before I left Spain, after I played the guitar, I went back to the apartment with Ruth. We had a drink and she went to bed. And do you know what I did?â

â No, what?â

â I went into the kitchen, took a few sheets of paper and began to write. I didn't really know what I was doing. I wasn't a writer. I wasn't hiding anything. But it all begins somewhere. So I sat down and I imagined what it would be like when we were older. After thinking a bit, I decided that you and Emily would quite like to return to England at some point and that you'd be perfectly happy living a good life there, knowing that you'd had some adventures in the past. That was, I have to say, the easy part. I put down the pen and turned my thoughts to myself. What would I like to be? And suddenly, there it was, the spark, dimly lighting the way ahead. I picked up the pen and started to write again. I went off to South America to immerse myself in the culture and become fluent in Spanish. When I was satisfied I knew the language well enough to write in it, I became Orlando Flores. The rest, I think, you know.â

â But there was never any hint of this when we were in Spain.â

â Because I didn't know myself.â

We sat in silence for a while, but I noticed George looking at me from time to time.

â Have you got something else to say to me?â I eventually asked.

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â Such as?â

â I donâ t know. A message, perhaps. Some inspiration.â

â No.â

I was a little disappointed.

â But, hang on. Maybe there is something.â

â What?â I asked eagerly.

â Itâ s late.â

â It is,â I said, looking at my watch. â Itâ s very late.â

â But maybe itâ s not too late Henry. Look, go back inside, have a lie down, and think about what Iâ ve said.â

â Okay. But first tell me one thing. How did the story end that you wrote that night in Spain?â

â You know how it ends. Orlando Flores dies.â

â And what about me?â

â Well, letâ s see. Weâ ve all gone home from â el toreadorâ , leaving you sitting at the table, finishing your drink. You said youâ d follow, but instead you find yourself sitting on the steps of the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Sede. Youâ ve nodded off, and youâ re dreaming all of this,â he said with a twinkle in his eye, pausing for me to take the rather Byzantine idea in.

â Are you serious,â I said after a while.

â No,â he said, smiling. â You are where you are. Youâ re here, sitting in a garden thirty miles from London, on a warm summer evening, having fallen asleep after drinking too much wine. Now, get yourself off to bed.â

I did as he said, stopping only to take one last look at my friend as I went inside. When I got to the bedroom and looked out of the window, the garden was empty, and the creaking of the gate had stopped. I slipped quietly into bed beside Emily, and lay in the darkness fighting sleep, thinking over what George had said.

* * *

â Spain?â

â Yes, Spain.â

â Are you serious?â Emily asks.

â Iâ ve never been so serious in my life,â I say.

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The bells fall silent, and again there is only the hum of bees at work in the lavender and the sound of the neighbour's hover mower as he goes up and down his lawn.

â Is this a result of yesterday? Is it Orlando Flores doing?â

â You could say that.â

â And what are we going to do when we get to Spain?â

â I'd like to have a go at writing, before it's too late. Maybe you fancy becoming a painter,â I say nervously.

â Maybe I do,â she says, taking hold of my hand.

â And Emily's?

â Yes?â

â You've read all of Orlando's books. How do you think he would have ended this story?â

â I've no idea,â she says. â You're the one who's going to be the writer, you tell me.â

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There is a hum of bees at work in the lavender, and the sound of the neighbour's hover mower as he goes up and down his lawn. It's a hot Sunday morning in July, and I'm sitting in the garden with Emily, eating breakfast, a tray of toast, strawberry jam and coffee before us on the table. At 10, the bells of Saint Peter's start their cascading appeals, bringing me out of my reverie. It seems as good a time as any to let the wife in on what I've decided.

â Emily,â I say, trying not to let my nerves get the better of me, â I've been thinking, and I've made a decision.â

â Well done, I'm proud of you,â she says, without looking up from the book she's reading.

â No, I'm serious. I have made a decision. We're going back to Spain.â

That gets her attention.

â Spain?â

â Yes, Spain.â

* * *

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Twenty four hours earlier, life was ticking along uneventfully. Neither of us really believed that we were living the dream, but it seemed that after many years together in an affluent corner of Berkshire, we had settled into a life that suited us. Everything began with my trip to the farmers' market in the morning. On my return, I came in the front door, kicked my sandals off, and walked barefoot into the kitchen. Emily was sitting at the table with a book in front of her.

“You've been a while Henry,” she observed.

“I know, I stopped off for a coffee on the way back,” I said, feeling the need to explain myself.

“Is that a newspaper you've got?” Emily said, looking up from her book. “You never buy newspapers. What's going on?”

“Well, when I was having my coffee, I was having a read of it, and I came across something interesting on the obituaries page. You have to see it.”

I cleared a space on the table and opened the newspaper. “Orlando Flores Obituary”, read the headline, followed by, “Latin American writer who became a favourite of post-feminist middle classes.”

“There, you see. Orlando Flores is dead.”

She wasn't as taken aback as I'd thought. “I can see that. But tell me, what exactly does post-feminist middle classes mean?”

“You guess is as good as mine,” I said.

“So that's the end of George Carpenter then,” she said, a melancholy note creeping into her voice.

“It's not how I would have imagined it.”

“Me neither.” I looked at Emily's open book. “What are you reading?”

“Snowfall in Seville.” I couldn't help laughing. “What's so funny?” she asked.

“It's one of his, isn't it? Flores'”

* * *

We had last seen George at the dusty, shed of an airport in La Mancha, the day he set off for pastures new. Spain in those days wasn't what it is today. Then it was a heady place and there was a great optimism in the air. Franco was ailing, the tourists were starting to come to the Costas, and we were young. All in all, it had seemed a strange time for George to be packing his bags. The evening of his departure, we had gathered for a quiet farewell at “el toreador”, a restaurant in the blossom-scented streets that wind between the bullring and the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Sede. There were seven of us – me and Emily, George and his sister Ruth, two middle-aged career teachers from the British Council, and an enigmatic, bearded young student called Enrique, who seemed to have stepped off the pages of Don Quixote. Ruth had come for one final visit, arriving with an empty suitcase, with the intention of helping George get his books home to Winchester. It was a balmy evening and we sat outside eating tapas, drinking rioja, and smoking the local

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cigarettes. Ruth and Enrico were thick as thieves that night, but there came a point, when the others had gone to consult the wine board, when I was left alone with Ruth.

â Has he told you what his plans are?â she asked.

â No, not really. He told me he wanted to go somewhere where no one knows him.â

â Thatâ s George,â she said, with a smile that was his. â You shouldnâ t believe all this romantic stuff he tells you. He lives in a dream world half the time. Do you know the story of the music camp?â

â No.â

â Well, when he was a kid, and I mean a kidâ l he wouldâ ve been seven or eightâ l he went for a fortnight to a Scottish island, to learn to play the guitar.â

â The guitar? Can he play it?â I thought of all the times we had been around people with guitars, and he had never shown the slightest interest in them, let alone picked one up and strummed it.

â He can, yes. When he came back from Scotland, heâ d become very good. In just two weeks. I asked him how heâ d done it and he told me some daft story about how heâ d changed his name. Heâ d chosen a name that he thought sounded like a guitar player. And that, he claimed, was his secret.â

â Funny,â I said, laughing. â What name did he choose?â

â Orlando something or other.â

Before she could say anything more though, the others began drifting back to the table, and Ruthâ s attention returned to Enrico.

Later in the evening, I asked George if the story his sister had told me was true. He laughed it off, but when I mentioned the name Orlando, he got up and walked over to the bar. He whispered something to the barman, who went into the back of the restaurant, returning a minute later with a guitar. George checked that it was tuned and then started to play Concierto De Aranjuez, his fingers picking with increasing agility at the strings. He finished with a virtuosos flourish and everyone in the restaurant stood up and cheered. George handed the guitar back to the barman, received a brandy from him for his troubles, and returned to our table.

Emily and I went to the airport to wave George and Ruth off the following day. After theyâ d checked in, Emily gave George a lapel badge in the form of an ibis as a present, and he pinned it to his shirt, saying that it would always remind him of his two years in Spain. Then, accompanied by Emily, he went to the kiosk outside the building for something to read on the flight.

â Why do you really think heâ s leaving?â Ruth asked, returning to the subject of the previous evening.

â Itchy feet, I suppose. He told me his work hereâ s done.â

â Has he ever mentioned a woman to you Henry?â

â Plenty,â I said. â Youâ re his sister, you must know what heâ s like by now.â

â So you know about Elena then?â

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â It doesnâ t ring any bells with me,â I said. â Who is she?â

â Itâ s someone he met here I suppose. He told me this morning that thatâ s why heâ s off. He has to find her.â

â Why, where is she?â

â He didnâ t say. Or rather he wouldnâ t say.â At that point, George and Emily came back from the kiosk. â Listen, donâ t mention it to him Henry.â

I did as I was instructed. It was like reading the first few, tantalising, sentences of a story and then losing the book. At various points thereafter, you feel sure you will find the book and satisfy your curiosity as to how it continues. But you never do, the prospect of satisfying your curiosity grows more remote, until you are eventually left to invent the rest of the story yourself.

* * *

Emily returned from her afternoon yoga class, made herself a cress and ricotta sandwich, and sat down at the kitchen table.

â What shall we do with that,â she said, pointing at the newspaper with the obituary in it.

â I thought I might nip up into the loft and get the Spain photo album down. Then we can stick Orlandoâ s obituary in with the photos we have of him when he was plain old George.â

I left Emily with her sandwich and headed upstairs, intending to be back before she finished it. Once in the loft though, I lost track of time. Suddenly, I heard Emilyâ s voice down below. â What on earth are you doing Henry? Youâ ve been up there half an hour.â I returned the photo album that I had been looking at to the crumpled cardboard box, and pulled out â Spain 1972-1973â . Back downstairs, the sandwich was long gone, Emily had cut out the obituary, and on the table was a freshly uncorked rioja and two full glasses. I put the album on the table and sat down.

â Forty years,â said Emily, looking at the dates on the album. â It makes me feel positively ancient. Iâ m almost afraid to look at the photos.â

I opened the album at the first page. â There we are. Ragged and young. A pair of tearaways on a foreign adventure. Itâ s just like I remembered.â

â And look at George,â Emily said. â He was just like one of us then. Kids on the verge of the rest of their lives, having a bit of fun before the serious business begins.â

â Well, that about sums it up. Funny how we ended up back here, doing thirty years each in the teaching business.â

â You make it sound like a prison sentence.â

â I meant to. But it hasnâ t been so bad has it?â I said.

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â I suppose not. But when you think of Georgeâ | Back then we seemed to be destined for similar things. Similarly great things. There wasnâ t much difference between us and him was there?â

â No, youâ re right. But it all comes down to our decisions,â I said, warming to one of my favourite themes. Emily had heard it all before though, and wasnâ t about to sit through another diatribe against missed opportunity.

â Yes, yes. I know how it goes. We can become anyone we want if we make the right decisions. Just one small step following one small step.â

â Exactly,â I said.

â Itâ s not that simple though, is it. We canâ t become anyone we want. You wanted to be a writer, didnâ t you. And me a painter,â Emily said somewhat ruefully.

â Maybe it wasnâ t what we really wanted.â

â Maybe. So we became what we are. And George became what he was. Do you think you could have been a writer Henry?â Emily asked.

â Iâ d like to think so.â

She laughed. â You and George had one important difference though.â

â What was that?â I asked, curious to know how Emily would answer.

â You were always ambitious and he wasnâ t. He didnâ t seem to worry about the future like we did. Did he ever mention his writing to you?â

â No. I was always showing him things Iâ d written, but he never once showed me anything heâ d done. It was just like with the guitar. He didnâ t say anything about that either, did he.â

â No, he didnâ t. He was a dark horse.â

Emily topped up our glasses and we raised a toast to George, before looking through the rest of the photos. At 9:00, there was an arts program on BBC2 that we always watched. Much to our delight, there was a ten minute spot devoted to Orlando Flores. They began with a potted biography. Orlando Flores was a writer from Lima, Peru. He published his first book at the age of 43. Not much was known about his life before that. No early work had ever emerged, and he always refused to talk about his past in interviews, saying it was unimportant. At the age of 47, having established himself in Latin America and Iberia, he came to the attention of the English speaking world, with the publication of, â Snow in Sevilleâ , the translation of which he had done himself. After that, he very quickly gained a large following in the Anglophone world, particularly among young and middle-aged women, who were touched by the spirituality and mysticism that his work contained. After the biography, there was an interview with him from the 90s, just after â Snow in Sevilleâ had been published. Before us was a man we barely recognised - a bearded, bespectacled, Renaissance figure, playing the part of a serious literary figure perfectly. We watched in rapt silence, until Emily suddenly stood up.

â Look Henry. look!â she said, pointing at something on the screen.

â What? What is it?â

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“The lapel badge. If there were any doubts that George and Orlando were one and the same, they were now dispelled. In his jacket lapel was the ibis badge.”

Once the interview had finished, The Guardian’s literary critic appeared, discussing Orlando’s work.

“Turn it off,” I said.

“No, wait, it’s interesting.”

When the critic had said his piece, Emily turned off the TV.

“How many of his books have you read?” I asked.

“All of them.”

“All of them,” I said, unable to stifle the note of surprise in my voice. “Have you been keeping it a secret?”

“Yes. I know you read one of them and didn’t like it, so I didn’t want to say anything.”

We sat in silence for a moment with our memories of George. Presently, my thoughts drifted back to the airport all those years ago. “Have you come across a character called Elena anywhere in his books?”

“There was something, yes. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just something his sister said to me just before they left. Well, actually, she didn’t say much. Just asked if I knew someone called Elena. Who was she in the book?”

“She wasn’t anybody. It was the name he gave to the life force in a couple of the books.”

“The life force?” I asked, suddenly remembering why I hadn’t been tempted to read any more of Orlando’s books after the first one.

“Yes. The thing that drives us all forward. That keeps us going.”

“I see.”

“The thing that guides us in our decisions, as you might say,” she said, smiling warmly.

“Listen, it’s sticky in here, why don’t we retire to the garden.”

“Okay. You go out and I’ll nip upstairs and get Orlando’s books, the ones where it says about Elena.”

In the garden the air was hot and fragrant. The moment I turned on the lamp I’d brought out, insects began circling the light. Emily came bearing three books and began to show me some of the passages where Elena was mentioned. I’d expected that they would put me off reading anymore of Orlando’s spiritual offerings, but was surprised to find that they had quite the opposite effect. I began leafing through the books myself, looking for clues or signs that Elena was a real woman. After a while though, it became clear that it was entirely possible that Elena was nothing more than the life force Emily had suggested. The deeper I went, the more engrossed I became.

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â Henry!â

I looked up. Emily was standing in front of me with the wine bottle and empty glasses in her hand.

â Iâ m off to bed. Are you coming?â

â No, I might stay here a while longer.â

â Are you enjoying yourself?â

â Very much so. I wish youâ d given me these to read before.â

â Well, donâ t stay out here too long.â

It was long after midnight when I went up to bed. Emily was already sound asleep and I slipped in beside her and soon nodded off. I was awakened by a noise outside. I lay awake in the darkness, listening. It sounded like the gate creaking to and fro. When it didnâ t stop, I went down to investigate. I opened the French windows, went outside, and there, sitting at the table, was George, as we had known him in his Spanish days.

â Donâ t worry Henry. Itâ s just a dream. Come on sit down.â

I saw that he had a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table. It was the same wine we were drinking the night before he had left Spain.

â Want a glass?â he said.

â Why not. Listen, what are you doing here?â

â I thought Iâ d come and explain a few things.â

â About Elena?â

â No, there is no Elena. Youâ re entitled to your story of course. But in mine, Elena is what she is, the life force.â

â But Ruthâ lâ

â I know. But there never was a woman. That was all wishful thinking on Ruthâ s part.â

â Okay. So what have you come to explain to me?â

â Why youâ re there and Iâ m here. We werenâ t so different you know, you and me. The only real difference was I told the story and you didnâ t. That night before I left Spain, after I played the guitar, I went back to the apartment with Ruth. We had a drink and she went to bed. And do you know what I did?â

â No, what?â

â I went into the kitchen, took a few sheets of paper and began to write. I didnâ t really know what I was doing. I wasnâ t a writer. I wasnâ t hiding anything. But it all begins somewhere. So I sat down and I imagined what it would be like when we were older. After thinking a bit, I decided that you and Emily would

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quite like to return to England at some point and that youâd be perfectly happy living a good life there, knowing that youâd had some adventures in the past. That was, I have to say, the easy part. I put down the pen and turned my thoughts to myself. What would I like to be? And suddenly, there it was, the spark, dimly lighting the way ahead. I picked up the pen and started to write again. I went off to South America to immerse myself in the culture and become fluent in Spanish. When I was satisfied I knew the language well enough to write in it, I became Orlando Flores. The rest, I think, you know.â

â But there was never any hint of this when we were in Spain.â

â Because I didnât know myself.â

We sat in silence for a while, but I noticed George looking at me from time to time.

â Have you got something else to say to me?â I eventually asked.

â Such as?â

â I donât know. A message, perhaps. Some inspiration.â

â No.â

I was a little disappointed.

â But, hang on. Maybe there is something.â

â What?â I asked eagerly.

â Itâs late.â

â It is,â I said, looking at my watch. â Itâs very late.â

â But maybe itâs not too late Henry. Look, go back inside, have a lie down, and think about what Iâve said.â

â Okay. But first tell me one thing. How did the story end that you wrote that night in Spain?â

â You know how it ends. Orlando Flores dies.â

â And what about me?â

â Well, letâs see. Weâve all gone home from âel toreadorâ, leaving you sitting at the table, finishing your drink. You said youâd follow, but instead you find yourself sitting on the steps of the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Sede. Youâve nodded off, and youâre dreaming all of this,â he said with a twinkle in his eye, pausing for me to take the rather Byzantine idea in.

â Are you serious,â I said after a while.

â No,â he said, smiling. â You are where you are. Youâre here, sitting in a garden thirty miles from London, on a warm summer evening, having fallen asleep after drinking too much wine. Now, get yourself off to bed.â

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I did as he said, stopping only to take one last look at my friend as I went inside. When I got to the bedroom and looked out of the window, the garden was empty, and the creaking of the gate had stopped. I slipped quietly into bed beside Emily, and lay in the darkness fighting sleep, thinking over what George had said.

* * *

â Spain?â

â Yes, Spain.â

â Are you serious?â Emily asks.

â Iâ ve never been so serious in my life,â I say.

The bells fall silent, and again there is only the hum of bees at work in the lavender and the sound of the neighbourâ s hover mower as he goes up and down his lawn.

â Is this a result of yesterday? Is it Orlando Floresâ doing?â

â You could say that.â

â And what are we going to do when we get to Spain?â

â Iâ d like to have a go at writing, before itâ s too late. Maybe you fancy becoming a painter,â I say nervously.

â Maybe I do,â she says, taking hold of my hand.

â And Emilyâ lâ

â Yes?â

â Youâ ve read all of Orlandoâ s books. How do you think he would have ended this story?â

â Iâ ve no idea,â she says. â Youâ re the one whoâ s going to be the writerâ lyou tell me.â

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