

Seth Harwood  
seth@sethharwood.com

Huesca  
or  
Vaso Frio

“Ta git it inta reverse ya’ve gut ta pull the wee ring aroond it,” the man at the Budget Rent-A-Car in Barcelona told them, explaining how they could get the little Renault into reverse. “Ya hafta joost pull up on the wee ring,” he said.

“OK,” the boy said. He had his mind full of how to get out of Barcelona, how they’d head up toward San Sebastian, and what the exchange rates meant this car was costing them for the week, and now on top of that, he was getting a lecture in deep Scottish brogue on how to get the car into reverse. It was enough, too much, just perfect. Here he was, fighting to understand and speak Spanish, and he could hardly understand this guy’s *English*.

“I’m liftin the *wee* ring,” the boy said, when they’d gotten into the car and were ready to pull out into traffic on Diagonal. She laughed. Her own accent was a variation of British that sounded slower than the average, but she was really from Germany. He’d often doubted whether anyone’d be able to place her voice to a country—he’d thought she was Scandanavian when he first met her—and though his friends at home liked her accent, they didn’t know enough about Europe to expect she’d be German.

She had the map out in front of her and was trying to piece together how they’d get to the Nacional. “We want to quickly take a left here at the next street and then turn

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around,” she advised him. He backed the car out and pulled into mid-afternoon, screaming Barcelona traffic.

The scooter drivers in Barcelona managed to smoke while they rode around the city, swerving in and out of cars, she noticed as they passed through yet another neighborhood that was supposed to lead them to the outside of town.

“There’s a sign,” he said. “Look, it’s pointing to that part of the rotary. We can just continue around like this, and…” He pointed to and she saw the sign that said N-33 San Sebastian, and she relaxed as they headed down yet another major thoroughfare, passing wonderful looking Spanish cafés, bread stores and tapas bars.

“This is such an amazing city,” she told him, thinking of the day before. It’d been a Sunday and the stores were closed, but they’d managed to find an open pharmacy to sell them sunscreen and sitting at the cafés was even nicer with the streets mostly empty. He’d showed her some Gaudi architecture and taken her to a museum in an apartment building. There they’d taken pictures of each other on the roof, next to the incredible moldings and statuesque chimneys. The weather was beautiful. In the gift shop of the museum, he’d bought her a necklace that was one of the most beautiful things she’d ever seen: it wrapped around itself and shrunk up on her neck looking crinkled, punctuated with light blue baubles; it was exquisite. The woman who’d sold it to them, yet another Spanish woman more gorgeous than you could imagine, had showed her how it could be worn as a long necklace, or as a choker, or as a medium-length. Today she wore it as a choker. It was the first really nice thing he had ever bought her.

“That’s something,” he said, pointing to a really big sculpture of what looked like a globe. “I don’t know what it is, but it’s something.”

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“Maybe we should take the Autopista,” she said. “It looks like it’ll be faster than the Nacional.”

“No,” he said. “They go right side by side. Look at it on the map. The Nacional’s better, too, because it doesn’t cost any money. That Autopista’s for suckers, I think.”

“We can try the Nacional, but it looks like it’ll take longer. It also seems to pass through a lot more towns.”

Coming out of the city, they ended up on the Autopista without having any choice and he slashed the Renault in between cars, getting to the outside lane and going over 120kmh on the huge, four-lane, divided elevated highway. “Where’s the Nacional?” he said. “This is the Autopista.”

“There should be a turn off soon to get onto the N-33.”

“Can you do me a favor and see if you can find the CD player?” he asked.

She knew where it was: in the bottom of her backpack, behind his seat, on the floor of the car. Going as fast as they were made it harder, but she angled herself back to the bag and pulled it up into the front. His aversion to the Autopista was odd, she considered, since they were on vacation and the day before he’d been absolutely lovely. Not only had he bought her the necklace, but they’d gone to one of the nicest restaurants she’d ever been to and he hadn’t complained once. But now he was worried about the tolls on the Autopista.

“What CD’s do you have there?” he asked.

He chose the Charlie Parker Favorites and lit a cigarette as they got off onto the Nacional, a two-lane two-direction *road* that passed right along the ground in the arid

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country region. Cars sped past them going the other way and trucks loomed ahead as he throttled the small stick shift up to fifth gear.

“Yeah,” he said, as he jumped out into the opposite lane and made an end-run around a truck. “This is *European driving!*” They were going unbelievably fast along the small road, and she could feel the rush of the wind as they got around the truck and slid back into their lane not fifty feet away from an oncoming car. He hooted and hit his hand on the steering wheel. “This’s what I’m talking about! *European Driving!*”

She hadn’t even known him to smoke cigarettes in the past, but now that they “were on vacation” (as he put it) he said he was entitled. This was part of the speech he’d given her that morning when they got lost looking for a metro to take them to the Budget Rental. Other parts of the speech included, “process oriented travel” which he explained to mean that they should enjoy how they got places, not just where they arrived. Hence the Nacional and this screaming blast through the farmland.

Twenty minutes later they still had the windows down and he couldn’t get around a truck and the two cars that trailed it. They’d slowed to 80kmh and they were passing farms in the distance, the close terrain was all empty, rolling hills. Charlie Parker still blew faster than she would have liked, driving tempos as fast as their car had previously been going.

“This is beautiful,” she said.

“Yeah, you’ve got to love how old everything is over here. These hills haven’t changed forever, that’s not so big, but the buildings you see, those have been around for centuries. I love to see the old-style buildings.”

“Where I’m from we have the same: buildings as old as these.”

“What’s the deal with this truck though? We can’t get by it.”

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“It’s nice just driving though.”

“But I’m talking European Driving! Let’s get around this thing!” With a rush of air he jumped into the oncoming lane and then fell back to allow a passing car. He jumped out again and this time got around both cars; he squeezed in behind the truck as a passing car came at them. “Ready?” he said.

This business was starting to make her crazy, but she hung onto the handle above her door and *held on* as he jumped out, shifted down, and ran around the truck and back into their lane just before they started into another turn. He lit another cigarette.

The first town they came to had an old castle above the Nacional, up on a hill. He pointed to it and she tried to find something about it in their guidebook, but they didn’t stop or get off the road. The longest they stopped was when they came to a red light in the center of town and here he remarked that it looked like this place actually had people in it that lived their lives. She wasn’t sure about what he meant by this, but left it alone.

As the afternoon went on, the weather became incredibly hot. Having left the city and the coast, they were making their way through the rolling hills and into the mountains of Catalonia where the air was more humid because clouds got caught up in the hills.

Though he complained about the gas it’d take and the power it could draw from the engine, they put the air conditioner on when they got back on the road again and she got him to change the CD to something more relaxing. Now they rolled through the countryside more peacefully, and even when he did his end-runs around the trucks, it didn’t bother her as much because the wind didn’t alarm her and she could actually put it out of her mind that they were facing the oncoming traffic for moments at a time; she closed her eyes when she saw the cars rushing toward her and held to the handle above her head.

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“Is this how they drive on the Autobahn?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “It most certainly is not.”

After several hours of the Nacional, he admitted he was ready for her to take over the driving. She was frazzled too, and more than a bit tired, but she consented, mostly because she wanted to pull her share and didn’t want to let him down. When she got behind the wheel, he put on his Charlie Parker CD again. “To get you in the mood,” he said.

As soon as she began, he coached her about when to pass, though from where he sat she doubted that he could see the oncoming lane; she wasn’t fast enough for him. “You got to get around this one,” he told her, pointing to a big white truck in front of them. “This thing’s going to kill our time.”

She tried to dart into the oncoming lane as he had, but every time she did there seemed a car coming too close for her to make her end-run.

“You could have had it that time,” he assured her. After an attempt where she was certain the white car coming toward them had flashed its lights in warning, he said, “That one was yours without a doubt. You *had* that one.” When the white car had passed, “OK. Now let’s get ready and take a look.” She poked into the oncoming lane just enough to see there were no cars coming. “You’re OK,” he said. “Go! Go! Go!”

She kept going: pushing the pedal down she extended herself further into the oncoming lane and started to pass the truck. She had it up to 110kmh, then 120, then 130. When she got to the cab of the truck, she thought he sped up—the idea of hitting the brakes and going back to her old position behind him crossed her mind—and she pushed the pedal down harder to get by him.

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“*European Driving!*” the boy in the seat next to her very nearly screamed.

Up ahead a green minivan came around a turn in her lane, not more than 200 feet off. “Oooh!” she said, pressing the gas down and checking to see if she could see the front of the truck in her side mirror. “Aaah!” She wanted to close her eyes, get it all over with, and stop this—her heart was racing and she could see her knuckles gripped too tightly on the wheel—and the green van was coming.

“*European—*”

“Shut up!” she yelled. “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” She jumped the Renault back into the right-side lane and kept the needle rising past 140kmh to get the truck as far away from her as possible. She wanted to appologize to the green minivan as it sped past, but before she completed the thought it was gone.

“Turn this off!” she said, then, though its knobs were still foreign to her, she clicked off the radio on her first try. “Stop it! We’ve got to calm this down. Stop it! I don’t like this!”

“You mean you don’t love the adrenaline, the—”

“No,” she said. “No and no. This isn’t fun. It makes me crazy out here in the heat and with the wind and passing these big cars on these little roads.”

“It’s crazy,” he said. “But that’s the fun of it. That’s all the fun. Look, see this truck here?” Already they were coming up on another, a big grain truck with long mud-flaps.

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” She came up behind the truck and held her speed.

“We’re not passing—“

“Shhh,” she said. “I’m going as fast as I want to.”

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“You don’t like the *European* driving?”

“No. I don’t like it. I want to relax and stop this craziness. It’s too much for me. The next town we come to, that’s going to be the one where we stop, and in the morning we look for the Autopista and get onto that.” A small white car pulled around them and sped on. “Enough of this!”

The next town they came to was called Huesca. There were still a few hours to sundown, but he had never seen her go into such an outburst and he was willing to concede this battle to her—they were on a vacation and deserved a rest. The crowded streets frazzled her to the point where she pulled over and asked him to park the car. “We need to find a hotel and just check in and relax,” she told him. “You park the car and I’m going to find something for us in the guidebook.”

Driving the narrow streets was not a problem for him; he found a parking space on the first street he drove and pulled in. “How do the hotels look?” he asked.

“They look affordable,” she said. “There are three hotels that look worth checking. I even think I can find them.”

“It’s a small town. How hard can it be?”

The summer air was still hot when they got out of the car. Spoiled by the air conditioning, he was reluctant to take their bags with them on their first excursion into the city and he left them, knowing he might regret it later. Though it was after 5pm, the streets were busy with pedestrians. The shops were still open: a shoestore, what looked like an underwear store, a store that sold hats, finally he saw a panaderia with long fresh-looking breads and a café that looked like it served tapas and beer. He thought he might have a chance of finding churros and chocolate in a town like this, an item that had

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graced his ninth-grade Spanish textbook and intrigued him ever since. They followed the main street into the town center.

“This street is supposed to come into Calle Ainsa and then we take that,” she said, consulting the map in the guidebook.

He hated to be the American tourists with the big guidebook, but that was what they were—even if she wasn’t American. None of the villagers seemed to notice it here though, as if they weren’t used to having visitors. He felt as invisible as he would in any American city, or even more so, given what it was like to travel in some parts of the Northwest.

They came into a large plaza where the second stories of the buildings stretched out over the sidewalks to the road and cafés lined the streets. Each of them had tables set up under the overhang: rows of metal chairs and collapsible tables filled the plaza with lounging after-siesta Spaniards enjoying cigarettes and beer.

“This looks like a pretty good place to hang out,” he said.

“Sure. As soon as we find our hotel.”

After the plaza they came to Ainsa, which led to a pedestrian thoroughfare. They followed one corridor to another and came to the street that was to have the hotel. At the number listed in the guidebook, the hotel appeared to occupy the second floor. They buzzed up and were told to come in. The building wasn’t air conditioned but it had an elevator that took them up to the lobby of the pension, which was as cool as they could ask for.

“Ask them what the rooms cost,” she said, not speaking any Spanish herself.

He inquired and found that a room for the two of them came to just under sixty dollars. “Fine,” she said. “Isn’t that fine?”

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It did seem good; not too long ago they'd spent over a hundred dollars for a room together in New York City when they went to visit some friends. Plus, this room had a bathroom, they were ready to relax, shower, and lay down, and the place was close to the Plaza with the tables.

"We'll take it," he said, forgetting himself and using English. He finished the negotiations in Spanish.

The room was small, but clean, with a balcony that overlooked the pedestrian alley, and a small bathroom with a shower. The landlady gave them an old skeleton key to open and close the lock on the door, showed them where the light was in the hall. She said the lobby would be open all night and that she could recommend a restaurant for them to try.

"This is good enough," he said, flopping down on the bed. He hadn't realized how tired he was, but when he got his shoes off and she mentioned going back to get the bags, he realized that he was exhausted. Still, they found their way back to the car quickly, using a map from the hotel they saw a much easier route, and collected only enough of their luggage for one night. They consolidated it all into her bag and were able to leave the bulk of their things in the car. She was careful to take her valuables with them, though, and especially careful to make sure that she had the necklace he'd bought her.

They turned the air conditioner up full blast in the room and he looked out the balcony doors to the street below them. "You can have the first shower," she told him.

"OK if I wait a minute? I'm just going to smoke one and then I'll go." She didn't answer. "Is that cool?" he asked.

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He looked in and saw her lying on the bed with her eyes closed in front of the A/C. She had her skirt pulled up to her above her knees and he could see where the soft blonde hairs started above the part that she shaved. She looked like she wouldn't mind resting a minute, so he went out onto the balcony and had a cigarette.

After taking his shower, he woke her up and told her it was her turn. "I can meet you at one of those tables by where those cafés were, if that's all right?" he said. She nodded. "Do you remember how to get back there?"

"Mmmm," she said. "I can find it."

She was slowly getting up and collecting some clothes out of her bag when he closed the door and went out.

He found his way back to the café area without too much trouble and took one of the tables in the back row, separated from the street by a row of tables and a walkway for people. He felt glad that he was on vacation, glad to be tapping out a cigarette and especially for letting himself get away with smoking like this—he'd quit a year ago, but now he reasoned that he was on vacation—and so tired from the the drive and the heat, more ready to have a beer than he'd been in as long as he could remember. Plus, she'd brought along a copy of the *New Yorker* Summer Fiction Issue, and he was glad to have that for company. That, and a bottle of beer, was more than all he needed.

When the little waiter came around wearing his black vest and bow tie, he was all smiles and asked the young man in Spanish what he'd like from the bar. "Cerveza," the young man said.

"Vaso?"

"Sí." The young man shrugged, not caring whether he got a glass with his beer or not.

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After the waiter left, he lit a cigarette. He'd wanted to wait for the beer to come, but he didn't and that wasn't something he'd worry about. Perhaps he'd get some olives to suck on if he could remember how to say it in Spanish. He looked around and noticed that the women weren't as impressive here as those in Barcelona (but which were?) and that most of the people at the café were considerably older than him. There was a piece by Tobias Wolff in his magazine and he figured that'd be worth reading: he turned to the page, but continued to look around at the other tables.

Across from him, at the closest occupied table, were two men drinking beer out of frosted, frozen glasses. Hot as it was, the young man couldn't think of anything that sounded better than that. He stared at the glasses in awe, thinking about how cool a cold beer would taste right now and how much colder it could get with a frozen glass, how much better that would feel.

When the waiter came to drop off his beer, the young man asked him for a "glass cold" please and the man smiled knowingly and pointed at the next table. The boy nodded and smiled. It was not long before the small waiter brought back the frozen glass. When the young man touched it, he left fingerprints in the frost. He tilted it to the side and poured his beer in carefully, and took his first sip: it was the coldest, more earned-feeling beer he thought he'd ever had. Ice chips floated into his mouth. He practically wanted to gasp "Aaah" after his first pull, but resisted and lit a new cigarette, noticing that his previous had burned out on its own.

He poured the glass full again and sipped the beer as if it were some exquisite prize he'd won for travelling so far and coming to such an out of the way town. It was a beautiful thing, this café: couples and business partners (or so he imagined) talked incessantly at tables around him and others lounged quietly over cigarettes as fancy cars

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pulled by slowly, waving at the drinkers and occasionally honking a horn in greeting. The people around him were dressed nicely, smartly, as the Spanish will do, and he felt glad to be wearing clean pants and a new linnen shirt he'd picked up that morning in Barcelona.

He took a drag on his cigarette, looked down at his magazine to start reading, and had to admit that it could sometimes feel great to be alive.

She finished showering and applied the lotion to all parts of her body—this was something she did every day, but today it took on a special meaning, as if she savored the touch of her own hands more than usual, was extra conscious of the softness of her skin in the cool airconditioning of the hotel room.

“Huesca,” she said out loud. It was good to just stop, really, she felt, but so far everything about the little town had been fine, wonderful even. Everything was fantastic, by comparison, after bombing on the hot little roads all afternoon in their car. She did not resent him for choosing the Nactional, but she had to admit that everything felt much much better by comparison after such an awful experience. She moved to the balcony and looked down onto the street below. Spaniards walked back and forth carrying bread for their families and sausages, vegetables, paper bags of things she couldn't see. It would be hot out there, but she looked forward to seeing him again, being with him in the café, and getting something to eat at a tapas bar if they could find a good one. She put on her backless halter top and the necklace he'd bought her at the Gaudi Museum in Barcelona.

On her way out, she asked the woman who ran the hotel if she could recommend a good restaurant for tapas. The woman didn't understand her English, but when the girl

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made a motion for food going into her mouth, the woman pointed to a stack of cards on a table. She went over to them and picked one out: El café Henri.

Outside it was still hot in the streets, but the sun was getting close to when it might set, and she felt comfortable in clean pants and her backless top. She had polished her toenails and put on eyeliner before coming outside and she was glad it was cool enough that she wouldn't have to worry about sweating. She was glad for that.

It wasn't hard to trace her way back to the plaza of tables where she knew she would find him. He was bent over the magazine, reading intently, a glass of beer in his hand.

"Don't you look civilized?" she said, approaching. He got up and offered her a chair. "What's this?"

"Would you care to sit down madame?"

"Who *are* you?"

"Please," he said. They both sat down. "It's so nice here. I've just been reading and—Get this! You won't believe it, but they'll bring you a beer and a frozen glass to drink it from here. It's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

She couldn't help but laugh along with his enthusiasm and found it refreshing after all the times he'd been glum or less-than-ecstatic when she'd been around him.

"Do you know that I've been waiting for you?" he said. "Did you know that? There's a time when two people need some time apart on a trip like this, I'm sure you understand, but it's nice to miss someone, too. And what I'm saying is that I missed you, my dear. Did you have any trouble finding me?"

"Not at all," she said, playing along.

The waiter came over to them and interrupted, "Perdon?"

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“Dos cervezas con vasos frios,” the young man said.

“Bien.”

She liked that he could speak Spanish, that they could get by here because of him, and the feeling of having things done for her. This was new to her, and she considered it something that she'd like to see more often. “I love our vacation,” she told him.

The pack of cigarettes was on the table and she noticed him touching the cardboard. He picked up the box and then put it back down.

“Smoke if you want to,” she said.

“Yes, well. No, the thing is I'd rather wait for our beer to come before I have another.” He drained off what was left of his glass.

“You're so different on vacation,” she said. “This is first time I think I've seen you relaxed.”

“It might just be. *In fact* you may never see me as relaxed as this ever again. Or you might.”

“I hope so.”

The waiter returned with their order and set the glasses down, then poured them half-full of beer—hers first, and then his. He slid a small metal tray down onto the edge of the table with a receipt in it. The boy took it up and glanced at it for a moment, and then put it back down.

“What should we do for dinner?” she asked.

“Are you hungry?”

“A bit. I think I will be soon.”

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“Good. I’m getting pretty helmet-headed myself, so I think I’d better eat something. Did you know that these exquisite beers are only costing about one and a half dollars, each? Isn’t that magnificent?”

Her beer was cold enough going down that it did seem to make her feel really that much better, fresher. It wasn’t good beer, but the time and the day and the cold glass made it all a *good* beer. She wondered at whether she wouldn’t be happier drinking a white wine, her usual beverage, but she let the cold of her glass cool her hand and let the moment wash over her like a fine reward.

“It’s been some hot day we’ve had,” he told her. “*Some* day. I’m sorry about all that European Driving business. I understand that if that’s not you it wouldn’t be too much fun to have me goading you. I’m sorry.”

She reached to put her hand on his and he kept his hand where it’d been, on the table. With her thumb, she rubbed along the top edge of his first finger. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you about it, I just get nervous sometimes when I’m driving and you were actually making me crazy.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You were being pretty awful.”

“You think so? Me? Awful?”

“I’m sorry.” Across the street were two Spanish women sitting across from one another talking. They smoked cigarettes and pecked their heads when they talked so that the effect was that they appeared to move as small birds would; since she couldn’t hear them, or wouldn’t have understood them if she could, she could almost believe they were some form of tropical bird that she was finding only here in Spain.

“So you think I was a pain in the ass?”

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“We can drop this,” she said. “It was a hot day and now we’re done with that. Let’s enjoy our drinks.”

“Is there a place you’d like to eat?”

She showed him the card she’d picked up: El Café Henri. “I’d love to just eat tapas tonight. To try real Spanish tapas. Let’s just eat that.”

“That’s cool. Usually when you do something like that you’re ordering without knowing any of the prices and you can get burned, but everything seems to be so cheap here that it’ll probably be fine, I mean how could you go wrong in *Huesca*?”

She laughed; it was funny. He removed another cigarette from his package and lit it. He was something else entirely on this trip, someone different than the person she knew back home. All he did there, it seemed, was worry about whether he’d gotten enough done, which he never thought he had. It seemed like she could never get him to relax, though she did her best to try. She wasn’t sure if it was something wrong with her or wrong with them about why he never seemed to calm down, but she thought that if she could get him to relax and ease off, things would be so much better.

“Should we go eat after this drink?” he said, taking a big sip that left only about half of his glass full, and nothing in the bottle.