Tread Softly because you tread on my Dreams



M L Rooksby



Maureen was born in 1957 in Woolwich, South London. Second eldest of five children. By the age of three she had learnt to knit. At sixteen she had left school to find a job where she could explore her creativity. This led to working in Community Arts, first with Inter-action, then in 1988 as the first Associate Director of the West Yorkshire Playhouse, in Leeds. Over the thirteen years she was there, she created many innovative community arts projects, some of which have been copied around the world.

In 2000, aged 43, she decided to give up work and concentrate on making her own beautiful things, along with finding a way to live close to and in tune with nature.

This is the story of how she and her partner Phil made that happen.

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This is the story of a couple from London who decided to find more meaning and creativity in their lives.

They started by making a smallholding in Yorkshire. Then when that wasn't enough, set off in a converted van to search for a place where they could live more in tune with nature and less dependent on money.

The journey took them to remote, rural communities in Spain, Portugal and Canada, where they encountered a way of living which disappeared from the UK some time ago, and enabled them to achieve their dreams.

Cats feature a lot too, intertwined within the story.

In essence this is a book about learning how to live a more sustainable, healthier and happier way of life.

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Happy Cat Books

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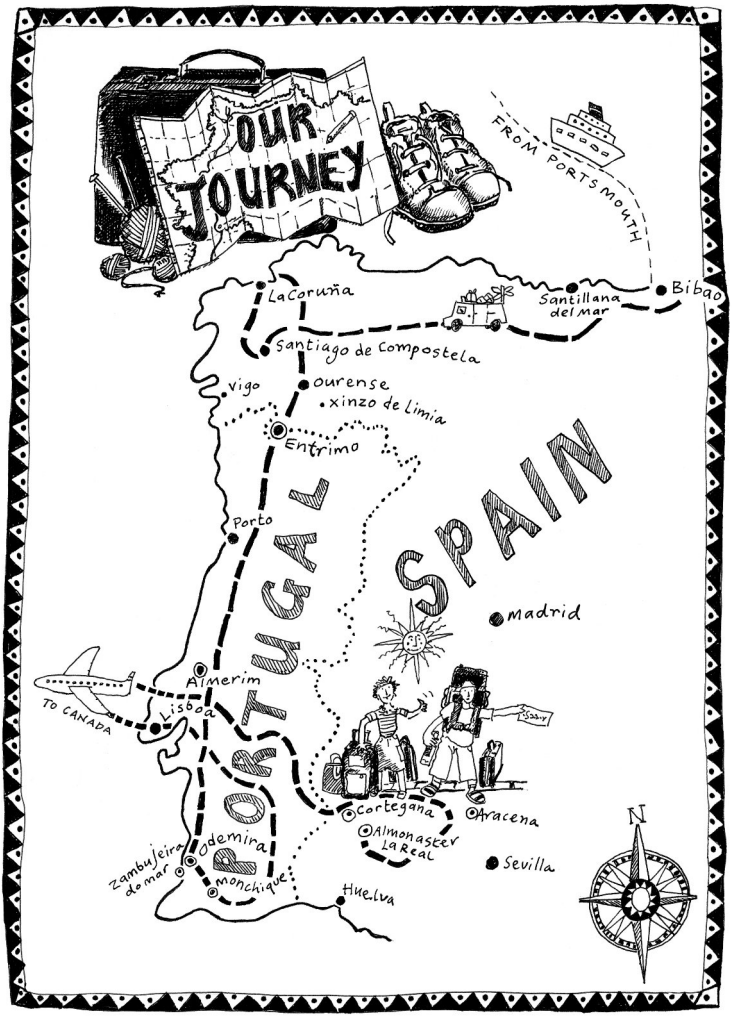
Dedicated to

Tim Manderson

friend and editor


OUR TOURNEY
FROM PORTSMOUTH
LaCoruña
Santillana del mar
Bibao
Santiago de Compostela
Vigo
ourense
xinzo de limia
Entrimo
Porto
PORTUGAL
SPAIN
madrid
Almerim
TO CANADA
Lisboa
Cartegana
Aracena
Almonaster La Real
Sevilla
Zambujeira do mar
Odemira
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The beginning of the plan

Imagine. A biscuit tin, without biscuits inside, but with a handful of dried beans. Now imagine the tin being shaken up and down, that was the exact sound of the rain hitting the roof of the van. We'd parked up under a huge eucalyptus tree, thinking it might shelter us a bit, but we'd been wrong about that, the tree just added to our problems. As well as normal rain, we had great plops of it hitting the roof too. Added to that the wind was whipping the branches of the tree so that as well as the pounding there was harsh slapping as the branches hit the metal of the van. Perfect, it was like being inside a large drum.

Lying awake I wondered what I could do to stop the noise, maybe a big towel or blanket thrown over the roof would deaden it a bit, or maybe I could let the handbrake off and the van could just roll away from the tree. No that wouldn't work, we'd parked the van on this little ledge in pouring rain earlier on and I remembered there was no space to roll to. Anyway, rolling would make us fall over the edge of the terrace we were on, and

while that might solve some problems I felt sure it would make others. Well, I'd just have to get back under the covers and try to block out all the noise and the thoughts whirring in my head.

It was bad enough in the daytime, worrying about whether we'd made the biggest mistake of our lives, but at 3.00am everything in the world looked like a big mistake. The worst of it was that we were supposed to be having an adventure, it was supposed to be exciting and different in a lovely way. But this wasn't that adventure, this one was a scary, ugly, wet and frightening one. Lying there in the dark, I was starting to understand what people had meant about us being brave. I thought they'd meant brave to be leaving everything we knew; work, friends, family and stuff, and at the time I didn't see why that would require bravery. Yes it would be a different life, but imagine just how wonderful it was going to be, and of course, we would still have those friends, just not nearby. Now I thought they might have meant we were being brave to live in a van, perched on a narrow shelf high above Santiago de Compostela, worrying about landslides and torrential rain. Maybe that's what they'd meant. I could see that now.

I was so stiff from lying really still with my toes clenched to make sure the van didn't slip down the hillside. It was just my toes that were stopping us from slipping. I couldn't go to sleep because I would definitely unclench my toes and then we would slip off. Down we'd go, hundreds of muddy metres from the campsite, slipping and bumping towards the road, gathering speed all the time and finally landing with a huge explosion on top of the houses below. We would certainly die and so would the family currently asleep in their beds when we landed on top of them. Yes, the campsite was really high up and to make matters worse Mr Campsite had told us to park right up here on

this little ledge. The van is long, and it had been really hard to manoeuvre it on the slippery mud last night. Tomorrow after even more rain, we would try to leave if we hadn't sunk too deep into the mud. We'd have to go out backwards, moving really carefully so that we didn't accidentally slip over the edge of the terrace and tip over, the van ending up on its side with all our stuff falling out of its boxes and cupboards, broken crockery, scattered belongings. Awful, terrible. Now that was something else to worry about. Plainly if we made it through the night we would meet our end just trying to get out of this awful place. Yes, our friends had been right about leaving our home and going off to live in an old van, this had definitely been a huge mistake.

Phil was asleep with his hat pulled right down over his eyes and ears. He probably couldn't even hear the rain so he wouldn't know that we were about to slip off into oblivion. Maybe I should lie still and listen for any sign of the van lurching or slipping, then I could wake him and we could jump out before the van fell over the edge. Lying really still and straining to listen would normally have been enough to make me fall asleep, but with the huge range of things to worry about I could just swap one thing for another. Now the painkillers had stopped working on my recently extracted wisdom tooth and the throbbing and thudding was starting up again. This was turning into a night I'd never forget. I would have to try and lean over silently to reach the packet of painkillers without waking Phil. If I managed to take one that would doubtless put me to sleep and even though it would mean unclenching my toes, and that we would certainly meet our end, I was starting to wonder if it would matter.

I succeeded in silently getting the packet and a water bottle

then lay back down, trying to make myself think only lovely thoughts. Even thinking of our life just ten days ago was relaxing. That was when we had been living comfortably with Chris and Sue in their house and where we'd prepared for our journey and had such a lovely send off party. Where were all our friends now? Snug in their comfy homes with their central heating turned up to maximum and wood-burning stoves roaring. Here were we, watching the steam come out of our mouths and the condensation run down the windows as fast as the rain outside while shivering under our blankets. It really was not supposed to be like this. Our vision of the van was a cosy nest with perfect décor and as many of our treasures with us as we could squeeze inside, while outside a perfect sunny vista of Spain would unroll beneath our wheels. Little rustic villages, old folks sitting outside in the sun, masses of orange trees, lazy dogs and all wrapped up in an amazing landscape. Even allowing that we had set off in December and maybe it wouldn't have been the sunniest time of the year, those apartment blocks, dual carriageways and ugly industrial areas were not supposed to be there. Santiago de Compostela, where we had been heading, was supposed to be the place we were going to settle down and make our new life. How? It was not as we imagined, even as we approached it on the road we could see that. Beautiful Don Quixote type of towns do not surround themselves with urban sprawl, blocks and blocks of flats, industrial zones and a complete knot of major roads, do they?

Best not to think about it all now. Something would have to be done tomorrow, but right now it was all too disturbing. Our journey was supposed to end here, but we had just discovered that it wasn't the place. The problem was, we didn't have another plan. Maybe it was a sign that we should stop the whole

thing right now, turn round and go back. Yes, certainly it would be embarrassing, and no, we didn't have a house to go back to or a job, but we knew lots of people, and I felt sure we could stay with someone until we had got our old life back. In a way it was good we hadn't gone too far. We'd discovered early on that Spain was an ugly disaster and at this rate we could be back home in a week. Now that was a relaxing thought.

The rain still fell and the wind was now actually rocking the van back and forth and the low branches of the eucalyptus were still flapping their leaves against the van roof. Too noisy to sleep and the calming thoughts of going home were being interrupted by thinking about the cats. Finbar, Ollie and Poo, who were living with their new families now. We had planned to bring them with us and actually would have done if we hadn't missed the last ferry of the year that would allow animals. It would have been wonderful having them snuggled up on the bed, purring and kneading the blankets. I would be asleep now if the cats had been with us, although the mental picture of the cats at other stages of our journey was not so restful. Imagining them on board the ferry or howling as we drove along motorways, either shut inside their boxes or loose in the back of the van and trying to escape each time we opened the door. That didn't seem so nice, they would have hated being stuck in a vehicle all day and night. We couldn't have let them out in a place they didn't know and hope they'd come back, they'd have been scared by the strangeness of it all. No, the only way that bringing the cats would have been a possibility was if we'd known where we were going and had somewhere to stay when we got there. As it was, we didn't know where we were going and neither did we have somewhere to stay.

The cats. Furry memories floated into my mind, all those

silly, funny things, which come so naturally to cats. Finbar, our crazy ginger cat, so keen to catch himself a bird he thought waiting inside the bird table was the best thing to do, wedging himself under the little wooden roof, his bright ginger fur squishing through the sides. Ollie, pleased to share his early morning stalking with us, bringing home indignant flapping pigeons to fly around the sitting room. Or the excitable and annoyed squirrel who, having been pushed through the cat door and liberated in the hall, set about scrambling up hanging coats and curtains, knocking off pictures and ornaments in his search for the door. I came downstairs thinking we had a burglar, to discover Ollie looking impressed at the squirrel's antics, he'd lost all interest in catching or eating it, he was just sitting watching it almost flying around. Ollie thought nature was something he needed to experience close up and was always, always bringing in bodies, dead and alive to share with us, and always to be seen digging things out of the compost heap and chewing heartily. On one occasion the something was obviously not in good health because afterwards Ollie laid low under the stove looking pathetic, un-eating for what seemed like days. At the vet's he was put on a drip to re-hydrate him and dosed with liquid paraffin, then he was fine.

Poo was so much like a little dog we mostly called him Puppy. No one could arrive at our door without Poo rushing to greet them and always accompanying us around the garden. Very early one morning Ray the photographer arrived at the gate and was met by Poo, who jumped in the back of his big car hoping to be adored while Ray was busy unloading equipment. Phil was far down the garden and as Ray set off to find him, Poo jumped on his shoulder and enjoyed the walk at human height, eventually seeing Phil and jumping down to run ahead.

Those warm cat memories were more upsetting than relaxing, how could we have left those creatures behind, blithely skipping off in our van thinking it would be so easy to find new cats, new friends? This adventure wasn't supposed to be like this, no one warned us it would be possible to feel this bad, surely we weren't doing something so outlandish, were we? It seemed that people left home and went to live abroad everyday, if all those TV programmes could be believed. And yes, it was true that even those people had problems with their dreams; arriving in the cute little French village or Tuscan hillside, they'd had their glitches. But theirs had been sweet glitches, like little problems with plumbing or goats, and some nice rustic local person always came to the rescue. But we seemed so far from our French village or Tuscan hillside, we had no idea how we would even find our tumbledown house, even if Santago de Compostela had turned out to be a nice place. Other people it seemed, had got themselves organised before they'd sold up. They had been to the place they were hoping to move to. We hadn't. They had found a place to buy, got themselves estate agents. We hadn't, our funds didn't extend to that kind of organisation. We didn't even know how we were going to support ourselves in this amazing new life. That was something to sort out later. Of course, all the serious 'move-abroad' types of people had worked everything out. All they had to do was get their idyllic place into shape, which would obviously take at least one whole weekend. I could see it now, all those crowds of extremely jolly friends helping out. Gangs of happy folks carrying ladders, and big cans of paint, some woman with a jaunty scarf tied round her head scrubbing floors with a bucket of soapy water. In no time there would be beautiful gauzy curtains fluttering at wooden shuttered windows, sweet little

bathrooms filled with baskets of lavender and of course, out on the incredibly lovely terrace, massive wooden tables groaning with food, under impossibly blue skies. Well, lucky for them.

Meanwhile here on planet Impossible, at 3.30am, we seemed to have done the most stupid thing imaginable. Why, when there were so many examples around us of how it was supposed to be done? Typically, we thought we knew best, we had to do it our own way. I suppose I could accept that the root of this was the fact that we didn't really have the money to do it in any other way. We couldn't keep jetting off searching for the place, and anyway it just wasn't that easy. We were looking for something very specific and we'd only know it when we found it. Not having an endless supply of money, or actually any supply of money now, might have been reason enough for normal people to come to the conclusion that it just couldn't be done. Great dream, but that's all it could be. Not us though, not having enough money had never stood in our way.

Before we'd started on this disastrous plan we'd had a perfect life, or it certainly seemed that way now. Living in a little cottage on the edge of a village in North Yorkshire, with a huge garden, fields all around and total quietness. We'd been there for thirteen years, which makes us sound settled and happy. Certainly there had been moments, and looking back there seemed to have been more than there actually were, in fact we had been trying to move for about nine of those years. What was the matter with us? Why couldn't we just enjoy being somewhere, be satisfied with all we'd achieved? Plainly, we weren't normal.

The house in Yorkshire had been the perfect house when we saw it. Small, brick built, 200 years old, solid, dependable with a good sized garden. At that point we'd

wanted a bit of space because we'd just got interested in growing vegetables and fancied ourselves a bit as Tom and Barbara Good, from the Good Life. When we moved in the garden was really just a gigantic lawn interrupted by half-hearted flowerbeds and an ugly rockery. We arrived in July and had a few days to wait for our furniture to catch up with us. Our cats at the time, Gus, Irma, Alice and Harry, were still adjusting to rural life after living in a terraced street in a town, and were cautiously edging further away from the house, sniffing and looking around before turning and running back inside again. Phil was adjusting to rural life too. One afternoon while I went inside to make a pot of tea, he had got the spade out of the shed and by the time I'd come back out there was a huge ugly scar all the way from the front gate, across the lawn, to the back hedge.

'Thought I'd make a start getting some beds dug', he'd said while I stood stunned, tea tray in hand. We'd been there just 5 minutes and already we'd started to make a mess, unpicking things in a dramatic way. No nibbling around the edges, no cautious drawings and advice sought. No, the spade. The garden had seemed huge to us, a piece of land where we could really try out the idea of growing our own food. Planting seeds, maybe get a greenhouse, dig a pond, put into place all the things we'd read about in gardening books. We'd always been interested in environmental issues and gardening organically seemed to connect with us. Now we had our garden we would start to work with nature, make a huge compost heap, maybe get some hens. There seemed so many possibilities.

I suppose looking back, even getting that house had been risky. I'd had a good, safe job working for the local authority in Milton Keynes before we started to feel restless again. We had

friends in York and one visit to them was enough to make us hanker after living near a 'proper' city again, so I began looking for a new job and in just three months I'd got one. We'd sold our little house and had moved. My new job was on a temporary 18-month contract and Phil didn't have a job to move to, but we felt sure he'd find something. That was the first time friends had asked us why we were doing it? Jobs weren't that easy to come by, certainly jobs with security and a pension scheme, why risk it? I couldn't see why in our twenties we needed to be worried by such dreary things. Pensions? Security? Surely being young meant taking a few risks, living by your wits and also sticking by your principles? Well that was us and we'd been lucky enough to get a mortgage to buy our cottage.

And we really got the most we could out of the place. The garden seemed to pull us towards it and we continued to make dramatic changes all round. Getting rid of that rockery, moving the sad little fruit bushes into a nice deep, well-mulched bed, building a fabulous double compost heap and a pond for all the frogs, and widening the perennial border into a wild celebration of summer plants. In a few years, it really did look great and we had plenty of vegetables to eat. We'd been vegetarian for a couple of years and growing our own food fitted with the healthy living thing. We had our hens and they worked hard scratting up the soil, pulling up weeds and generally tidying bits of garden. We'd got a good system of moving them around each weekend so they'd have a new job to do. They didn't seem to mind all the work, I think they liked a change.

The Good Life suited us, we liked the idea of recycling, mending, repairing, scrimping. None of it seemed a substitute for being able to buy new, it just made sense and it was

wonderful finding old objects and making them work again. My knitting also fitted this scheme of things, making stuff from unpicked jumble sale jumpers or Oxfam finds. I found some wonderful items, including a spectacular hand knitted cardigan in soft blue, lovingly made by someone and totally perfect for me. It was a real triumph to find something that no one else wanted and have just the right use for it. The house itself welcomed the style of what we found or made. Old lamps, furniture re-painted, big old eiderdowns on the sofa, knitted blankets, finding creative ways of using old stuff was great.

Life at the cottage was always engrossing and even in the summer my holidays from work meant more time at home, which was just as well, as there was always masses to do. All the vegetables to pick, freeze, bottle, all the cooking. Beans, tomatoes, courgettes everywhere. Whenever we went out we went armed with bagfuls of marrows, plums, and broad beans to give to people. There was no way we could go and lie on a beach with all that going on. Living in Yorkshire was great, we'd got to know people and even though I was working miles away by then, we still had time for our local friends. People who kept bees, grew vegetables, enjoyed the things we enjoyed, like the jumble sales and making things. Yes, there had been plenty of friendly people.

Looking back the years were a bit of a blur, but there were good memories. Days in the summer when we'd had barbecues with friends, sitting outside until it got dark. Even in the winter with heavy snowfall the garden still looked amazing, completely white with all the branches looking like 3D versions of themselves, perfectly outlined in white. One Christmas our friend Mo said she'd call round on Christmas Eve, and with Mo that could mean anytime. It was snowing heavily by nightfall,

but we knew this wouldn't stop her when she was on a mission. She arrived at 7.30pm, our house was in darkness, because the power had gone out and we were trying to cook supper on our wood burning stove, all very Boy Scout. Mo whirled in with armfuls of bags, pulled off her wet boots and coat, all the while saying she wasn't stopping, just calling in on her way to her daughter's house which was about 40 miles away across the moors. It was so cold, just the night to stay inside, pull the curtains against the cold outdoors and stoke up the fire. We'd tried to persuade her to stay, the roads were bad, it was freezing, but after an hour Mo set off again, sure she'd get across the snowy roads by some magical power, even though pulling away outside our house hadn't been easy. We spent the rest of the evening worrying that she was in a ditch somewhere. Next morning she called to say, yes she'd made it, but she couldn't believe how difficult it had been. How bad the roads were, there was snow everywhere, it had taken her hours crawling along, and at one point she thought she'd have to get out and walk. She told us this in amazement, as if there hadn't been snow when she'd left us, it was so typically Mo. Remembering that cold night and our cosy stove was another warm memory.

So when was it we began thinking of leaving all this? Hard to say really, although I suppose there had been the moment when we began to feel a bit, well, limited. It was after we'd had the garden for a few years and managed to get some idea of how the seasons worked, what to plant and when. We'd got our beds established and compost heap going, we'd sown seeds and watched them grown into plants. At first the garden had seemed huge and actually getting going with our ambitious scheme of planting had been confusing, we didn't know where to start. In those days there had been lots of possibilities, but

after a few years we'd used up all the lawn and there was no more space to nibble at with new schemes. We wanted to grow more, different types of vegetables, maybe get a polytunnel to extend the growing season, a cold frame and greenhouse.

Even when we began thinking about all our new schemes, we weren't actually thinking of moving house, not then. Our attempts at self-sufficiency were still teaching us a lot, like how much space we needed to grow stuff, and how to give the soil a chance to recover at the same time. But our appetite for growing things had developed massively. Also the garden had been the start but now we could see how all the other things we had got interested in, like the scrimping and recycling, had somehow come from the garden. Just as we began to feel conscious of our restlessness, a new possibility hoved into view.

Right next to our garden was a piece of land, about 3/4 of an acre, totally overgrown and neglected. There were fallen trees, scraggy hedges, brambles, elder and nettles, so dense it wasn't possible to see past the sagging wire fence dividing us. It was a wild place, which made our garden seem even more secluded. Just at the moment when we began to feel the need for more space and challenges, this little piece of land came up for sale. It was obviously meant to be. Meant to be ours. So we had to buy it. The process however was tense, there were sealed bids, lots of waiting and stress, worrying about what would happen if we didn't get it. How many houses would the other potential bidders want to build there? Would they get planning permission, what would we do if they got it and we didn't? So it was a huge relief when our bid was finally accepted. Wonderful news in fact, all that space which we'd already got so many plans for. Polytunnels, fruit cages, greenhouses and huge ponds, the scope was endless, even if at

the time it hadn't yet been possible to get over the fence to see what we'd bought, the jungle was too intense.

Hardly had we managed to digest the idea of becoming 'land owners' and enjoy the moment when Phil lost his job. Yes, the timing of this couldn't have been worse since we'd just doubled our mortgage. Now what would we do? Well, after a bit of panic, hysteria and general gloom we remembered we were made of strong-ish stuff, it wasn't the first time one or both of us had lost jobs. It was hard not having financial security, but either we could sit and worry or we could decide that it would all be OK and try to remain positive. We'd manage until he got a new job, things would work out.

Well, they did work out, but not as we'd thought. Phil finding a new job proved more difficult than we imagined, and really depressing as anyone who has been unemployed knows. It's a horrible, degrading and negative experience. Your life seems to be on hold as you wait for someone else to say whether you can rejoin the rest of society or not. It was a miserable time, even though we were still amongst the lucky people, we had one job between us because I was still working.

One day, after yet another 'sorry but' letter had arrived and we were feeling despondent, we got thinking about the whole thing. We hated the feeling that our life was in someone else's hands, some stranger. We wanted to be the ones in charge of how our life developed, but was that only to do with a job and money? Certainly the money was important, and maybe the status of a good job, but what did that mean in the giant scheme of things? If we could manage to pay our bills with my salary, then what else did we need? Now we began to see the possibilities. Going to work actually cost us money. There was the travelling which was always expensive; a car, petrol,

insurance, parking costs. The clothes, lunches and countless other things which made the whole going to work thing more palatable. Once we'd looked at all those things, the actual money the job brought in suddenly wasn't that significant. Obviously we would have to be careful, there wouldn't be any spare cash, but weirdly, there never seemed to be any spare cash when we were both working anyway. We decided to step up our self-sufficiency and celebrate the new 50% of freedom in our life. 50% because I would still be going to work everyday. There would be more of all the things we loved and didn't have time for, more gardening, more making things. And with Phil at home doing the chores, I'd get more time at weekends for everything I liked to do. Oh yes, this was exciting.

And our plan had worked, we'd actually managed much more than just keeping afloat. Phil was suddenly super-charged, and almost immediately turned the garage into a place to work, no more space for the van which had to live outside. The 'workshop' began to fill with tools, from car boot sales, salvaged wood and tins of nails and screws. It began to remind me of my favourite TV cartoon, Rhubarb and Custard. Custard, the yellow cat and Rhubarb, the red dog. Rhubarb was always coming up with schemes, which required long nights spent in the shed making loud hammering noises, then the sun would come up, the door would burst open and there was this incredible thing, like a swimming pool for birds or a doughnut making machine. Phil was Rhubarb! He made everything. Bookshelves, cupboards, kitchen units, tables, hen houses, beehives, storage boxes, framed mirrors, even a lighthouse with alarm clock, really! In fact, whatever we needed, or whatever I fancied, he made. The house looked wonderful. It was so impressive, original, everything Phil made was of his own

design. He'd never learned carpentry so he just made it up as he went along, the wood was scrounged or given so it didn't matter if things went wrong, it was great. Phil's carpentry really was fabulous and it was even more wonderful realising that if he'd been successful at getting a job, he'd never have found out he could do it.

Now we had a focus for our life, our self-sufficiency stepped up a notch. The vegetable growing was one important part, but now we had other parts too, one of which was all the creative things. Phil's carpentry, and my knitting and sewing, were also part of the mix. Initially we made things for the house since there were no more trips to Habitat now. Whenever we wanted new curtains, cushions, sofa covers, I hunted out the fabric at jumble sales, markets or charity shops, and got out the sewing machine. It was an ancient old thing, which was at the right level of sophistication for my sewing. Eventually we had time to make all sorts of other things too. Presents for friends, cards, toys, little books, all sorts of stuff. One evening we were sitting on the latest recycled sofa in front of the stove, listening to the old valve radio, and we got talking about things from our childhood that had been memorable. Phil talked of his Nan's house, her cooking, his Granddad bringing things home from the local auction room, boxes of junk to play with and make things out of. I remembered the thrill of queuing up with my Mum and sister to go into the Christmas Bazaar at our local church hall. It was an annual event which was an all important part in our build up to Christmas. The whole thing was thrilling, all that anticipation, other people trying to push in instead of taking their place at the back of the queue. Honestly, people were jostling. Then, once the door opened and we filed in, paying our admission fee, we were only allowed to look. No

one could buy anything until the bazaar was officially opened, at 3.00pm by the vicar. Everyone squashed into the hall, pushing towards the little stalls, the noise was tremendous. It was hot and the smell of all those heavy winter coats at my nose level will stay with me always. There were so many cute things. Lavender bags, little dolls dressed in knitted outfits, felt mice, knitted rabbits, pretty aprons, embroidered tray mats, and each stall festooned in crepe paper. Not just on a table top either, but with a kind of awning over them, covered in paper decorations. Trying to see inside every stall was like peeping into a little woolly, lavender scented paradise. The ladies behind each stall were already looking harassed and frantic as people tried to persuade them to 'put things on one side', which was strictly forbidden. Just looking was like torture, because if you did see something you really wanted there was the risk that someone would beat you to it. The need to have it intensified and the competition was fierce. Although it was most keenly felt at the cake stall and my interest was always in the knitted toys area. Finally, when the atmosphere in the room had reached meltdown, silence fell. Everyone was then supposed to stand still and listen, while the vicar told us how the money raised would be spent, praised the incredible standard of the handicrafts, and said how delicious the cakes looked, then thank all those who had decorated the hall. Until finally, after a little prayer, he declared the bazaar open. At which point the hall exploded as people tried to shove through the crowd. Of course there were those of us clever enough to have used the vicar's speech as an opportunity to creep closer to the stall we wanted to buy from. Though standing upright was difficult, what with the pressure of the crowd on our backs, but our arms were outstretched, hovering above the chosen item, ready to

snatch it up as soon as the vicar's words were over. What excitement, how thrilling it was and how happy we were to have succeeded in getting what we'd so badly wanted. We walked home in December's chilly twilight and the excitement of Christmas had begun.

Now, sitting in the quiet of our little house, we wondered about those rich warm memories. Wasn't there something of what we were doing in our self-sufficiency that reached right back to those times? Making simple things and enjoying the process as well as actually having the finished item? Definitely. Being in charge of our own life meant working out what were the important things, not just having enough food to eat, or having shelter and warmth, but those special, brilliant, lovely moments too. Maybe we could do something like the church bazaar or think of something that involved all our crafts in making a special thing. We couldn't imagine what it might be, but there was definitely an exciting feeling just trying to work it out.

We worked hard towards that first event. 'Pedlars Market' we called it, and it was a Christmas Bazaar right in our own home. Obviously it does sound mad, having a bazaar in a two-up two-down cottage, but we weren't thinking of it being a big thing, just a few friends and neighbours. And since we weren't planning a big thing, there was no point having it in the village hall, just a nice small event that brought a few people into our newly created world.

Well, it was great. The house looked festive, the stove was burning bright, the Christmas lights were everywhere and the house was full of folks drinking hot spicy apple juice and eating mince pies. The atmosphere was just as we'd hoped and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves, buying lots of the little

Christmas treasures we'd made. We couldn't have asked for more. Looking back it was that event which started us on reaching out, letting others know more about our home-made life and also meeting like-minded souls who lived their own version of it. It's possible that event could also have been the start of us becoming strange or sort of eccentric. Although I daresay there were plenty of those who'd known us who probably thought we'd been going that way for years! Who cares? Life's for living, not worrying about what others think. We just got on and did whatever meant something to us and that seemed to lead on to other new things, like the Open Garden. Many of the villages in North Yorkshire had Open Garden events in the summer. It's when people let total strangers come and wander round their gardens, to look at the plants and talk to each other about the plants. It's usually done as a local fundraiser and it's most often for the church roof. So when the church in our village needed a new roof it was obvious that we were all going to be asked to open our gardens. The first Sunday in July was chosen as the day. We spent ages tidying up the whole place. Cutting things back, trimming, pulling up weeds, stacking things tidily and making the place look perfect. We weren't alone, everyone in the place was going crazy morning till night, folks fretting over their already perfect lawns. In the week before the event it was actually impossible to go along the village without sunglasses on because the dazzling colour of all bedding plants actually hurt your eyes.

Our garden, with the new piece of land, was one of the biggest in the village, and the only organic one, which meant we'd probably have lots of questions to answer. Visitors went to the village hall first, to pay and collect a map of all the participating gardens, then they would begin walking from one

garden to another. We were the last on the route. No one knew how many people would come, but other villages had crowds, so we prepared ourselves. Phil had drawn a map of our garden, which we'd photocopied, so that people could show themselves around, just in case we got busy. Typically, he spent ages designing it and the finished thing went way beyond being just a map. It was full of information about the plants and trees, the herbs and their medicinal uses, the ponds and what lived in them, the reasons for making compost etc., etc. Complete with little drawings and diagrams. It was a beautiful thing which people could take away with them as a little memento. The day itself was perfect. Hot and sunny, which made people from the whole region want to go out and look around gardens. The village street was crowded with people and cars crawling along. Down at the village hall there were strawberry teas and home-made lemonade and cakes. Cars were parked along the side of the road as far as we could see and people roamed in packs from garden to garden. It was a bit scary actually, seeing all those crowds, but we did have friends helping us, which was just as well because there were so many people swarming into the garden it was all a bit mad. Fabulous though, brilliant, marvellous. So many people had come and everyone had said what a good job we'd done, how they were interested in self-sufficiency and loved how the garden looked. Older people had given us tips on various things, like making jam, chitting potatoes, saving seeds and their own personal recipes for good compost. Others had felt at home enough to sit under the old fruit trees and kick off their shoes for a while. There were people literally everywhere, we could see heads bobbing along behind hedges, hear people talking about the plants and vegetables, there were children playing in the spiral garden,

others squatting down by the pond. By the time the last visitor left at 7.00pm we felt as if a whirlwind had hit us. All the hard work and preparation had paid off, as we flopped down in the deckchairs, our turn at last for tea and cakes, with our friends. We knew that Open Gardens had definitely added something to our life.

And just as with Pedlars Market, the Open Garden thing seemed to lead us on to our next idea. It was Phil's little map that sparked it, with all the information and drawings of the garden. It was so beautiful and full of information, couldn't there be a way of turning it into a little pamphlet, something for those who hadn't been to the garden to enjoy? Maybe with more information about being self-sufficient, and some ideas and thoughts about living differently. It was a great idea for Phil as it brought together all the things he enjoyed doing. Writing, drawing, graphic design, and of course his favourite subject, gardening. It kept him busy all the next winter.

And it did turn out to be another idea as good as Pedlars Market had been. From the map he'd made for Open Gardens, Phil made his first pamphlet. We ran off 300 copies on a photocopier and sold them and it felt really satisfying. Of course, as soon as the first one was written Phil was planning the next with more information, ideas, diagrams and all sorts. That one was a lot more ambitious, with lots more pages, and this time a handmade recycled paper cover. I'd agreed to make the covers, thinking we were talking about 100 sheets of paper. I would never forget the chilly winter weekends spent in the outhouse making not 100 but 1,000 sheets in cold water, it was freezing. The house was festooned in limp paper, the kitchen, the sitting room, even the stairs and hallway, there was hardly a place left to stand without running into it. We hadn't realised

there would be such a demand, but after a little feature in a newspaper, requests had flooded in and we needed to make more copies and get them in the post as quickly as we could. We didn't want to disappoint anyone. Phil laboured in the workroom upstairs, collating pages, folding them in their speckly handmade covers, bending over the old sewing machine stitching down the spine of each copy, as the letters poured in. It was great though, in the same way that we had enjoyed Open Gardens. It was especially brilliant getting letters from other people. Growing vegetables was mostly a solitary activity, but hearing from folk all over the country and beyond, made us feel connected to a much bigger world. All gardeners love sharing their ideas, organic and environmentally conscious gardeners were no different. They encouraged us and supported our ideas, wanted more copies of the book, then continued to write afterwards. Long, interesting letters full of thoughts and ideas. They sent newspaper cuttings, addresses of interesting organisations, seeds, all sorts of things. Suddenly, we had new friends from all over the place. I think we realised then we had a bit of a magical garden.

Now where were we? In the middle of nowhere, no garden, no home and no friends. So much for hoping nice happy memories were going to soothe me to sleep. It was incredible that we had so carelessly tossed our life away. The thing we had so carefully created over years, not just the garden, but our whole way of life had been crumpled up and dropped in a bin. We'd managed to survive on one salary, not only survive, but had a great time of it. The garden had become beautiful. Only last month it had been featured in Gardens Illustrated magazine. With photographs of the arched willow pathway, all the buddleias with their different coloured flowers thick with

butterflies, the huge pond full of frogs and newts, the perfect circular beds of pumpkins, broccoli, beans and tomatoes, potatoes, and carrots, a veritable world of vegetables. The fruit bushes, and the extremely stylish spiral garden outside the sitting room window, full of foxgloves, delphinium, phlox, marigolds, the blue sea holly and all the different daisies I'd collected; bright orange, gold and red. Really. When people had asked us why we were leaving they'd looked totally shocked, disbelieving even, and they worried for us. And we'd been so flippant. Now I could understand. Those people had seen it, we hadn't and we'd let it go so easily.

I suppose we'd had our reasons and it hadn't been that easy to disentangle ourselves from our old life and it hadn't happened overnight, even though it felt like that now. It went back to when we started to get that feeling again, the restlessness, the need for new challenges and stuff. We had to accept that we weren't the kind of people to live in the same house forever, have the same jobs throughout our lives, and while we were also not reckless or feckless we did need a challenge. At that moment, in Santiago de Compostela, I worried that we were not the kind of people we needed to be right now. Resilient, strong, unemotional. We definitely were not those people. We weren't the kind of people who 'go travelling' either. You know, those who spend months with Buddhists in Tibet or trekking across the outback in Australia or living with nomads or digging wells in Africa. No definitely, we weren't that type of person. But we'd had our reasons for being where we were at that moment, attempting to live in a converted van in Spain.

Our life in Yorkshire had been punctuated with moments of change and it definitely seemed as if we had unconsciously

needed those to spur us on. The garden, the crafts, the books and all the other things, they were all great. But at some point, that feeling always came back, the 'Was this it?' thing. Was this all there was going to be? When the moment came for us to depart this life, would we be able to look back and think, yes we did everything we wanted to do, our lives had been full and most importantly we had done it all ourselves? Well, faced with that moment of reckoning, there would certainly be some room for doubt. Surely we should have been able to do more? Was having a wonderful garden and managing to survive on one salary that heroic? We'd managed, so it couldn't be that impressive. And at that moment we had started to see the end in sight, the end of the possibilities of living where we were. It felt as if time was moving more quickly now, the years beginning to blur into one. Was it last year or the year before when we cleaned the pond out? Was it really five years since we got the polytunnel? Six since we'd started all this? We couldn't seem to feel it. Was this what happened as time passed? You suddenly looked around and twenty years had gone by and you were suddenly a pensioner, wondering what it was all about? Well, not us. We had to think about what we wanted next, and that definitely didn't mean material things, we needed new experiences, we wanted to learn new things. But we'd always have a garden, that was central to our life, we'd always have a garden.



Our old life is over

We made the decision to sell the house and move to somewhere bigger. Not house bigger, garden bigger. That's when we realised it would have to be in another country because houses with big gardens in Britain were way beyond our price range. Maybe moving abroad would be cheaper, we'd have more space, a better climate and it would be altogether more exciting. We could plan a new version of our garden, on a much bigger scale and with maybe mountains and incredible views thrown in. Once we'd had that idea, the possibilities seemed endless. People could come and visit us, we could spend time making things and try to encourage other people to do the same. Phil reached for our School Boy Atlas, another jumble sale find, and started looking at the map of Europe. Maybe we could go somewhere environmentally cleaner, which would mean on the south-west coast of Europe, and where there were a lot less people. The whole thing sounded great, and I liked the idea of learning a new language, living in a different culture. That should keep us busy for a bit. Yes, this was shaping up into one of our better ideas. Although actually, we'd never really been

abroad, apart from school trips years ago, a quick trip to south-west Ireland, and a few days in Amsterdam where the highlight was taking photos of vegetables at the weekly organic produce market. I'd never forget those pictures or showing them to friends at work, laughing about how, with all the art and culture Amsterdam had to offer, I'd spent my time taking photos of pumpkins. Other country's vegetables definitely held a certain appeal.

We started to think about being in a warmer climate, the potential for a garden in the sun, and it did seem marvellous. We didn't have a clue about how we'd do it but we decided to keep it as simple as possible. Sell the house and all our stuff then set off in a converted van. Then we'd have somewhere to live while we drove around looking for the perfect spot. Sounded good. Plus, with the money from the house sale in the bank, we could live off the interest until we found a place and by that time, maybe 3 months, we'd have worked out how we'd support ourselves. After all, we were resourceful, adaptable people, surely we'd be able to work that one out? So we took a deep breath and put the house up for sale and started panicking. Though we needn't have worried, because at exactly the same time the property market slumped, and no-one who was in a position to buy wanted a tiny house with a massive garden. I say luckily because although our plan was flawless and totally perfect, we weren't really ready to let everything go that quickly. No, it really was good, because now we had our lovely scheme we could just fantasise about it, wander though our imaginary garden in the sun without having to leave our old life, it couldn't have been better.

In fact, several happy years passed before any buyers showed up and even then we thought it would come to nothing.

People looked around, said nice things and we never saw them again. But one Saturday things were different. These people had come back a second time, they liked the place, they had cash and then suddenly they had bought it. Just like that. We were really excited, our long incubated scheme was in place. We knew what we were going to do next and now it was just a matter of carrying out each step. Yes, our friends were mostly aghast, how could we do it? How could we bear to leave our garden? How brave we were and so on. We could hear what they were saying, but it didn't make any difference, we were going to Spain. Yes, Spain. Finally we had decided where we were going. How? Phil had just been on a computer course and got chatting to some man there who had told him the name of a fantastic and wonderful place in the region of Galicia. Santiago de Compostela. Perfect climate, not too hot, inexpensive old stone houses ready to buy, and the soil was perfect for gardening. We took it as a sign and decided to go there.

At this point we just wanted to pack a suitcase and leave. However, reality was littered with big decisions and jobs to do first. As well as moving out, we had to get rid of all our earthly clutter, find the old van we would live in, and then look for somewhere to stay while Phil created a thing of beauty out of it. We didn't know where to start, but we thought trying to find the van would be good, especially since we had someone who could help us with that.

Mick, from the garage in Leeds, had never failed us, and only a few days later I was driving across the city centre to have a look at an ugly white monster, which he said was just what we needed to make our dream home on wheels. Apparently it had the right type of engine, and everything else under the bonnet

was sound. The fact that the bodywork was all dented, so much so the rear doors wouldn't open any more, and inside the dashboard had been mysteriously replaced with a new one, showing zero miles on the clock, seemed to have passed Mick by. Everything was filthy, with torn seats and an overwhelming smell of something nasty. Surely, a good session with a bucket of hot soapy water would sort out the inside and I could always make seat covers and lay a carpet. I squinted hard and tried to create a cosy cabin on wheels in my mind. Phil was going to make the vision real with all his woodworking ingenuity. Surely it would work? I told Mick we'd take it.

I felt relieved that I'd managed to make such a big decision so lightly, maybe that was how I should approach all the decisions we made like this from now on. And on that philosophical note I drove the van to its next home, another garage in some far flung corner of Leeds, where it would have some alterations done to repair the bodywork.

Next job, move out of the house. But not before we had sold everything in it. We'd decided to make a clean break with our old life and head off in our van unencumbered by our previous existence. So we put up ads in shop windows and then we held a kind of sale, inviting everyone we knew to come and pick through our stuff while drinking tea and eating cake. It was fun really. Things were moving along nicely, although neither of us could have guessed that we would get so lucky at finding somewhere to stay, a place where Phil could work on the van. Chris and Sue Bond were members of the local York Organic Gardeners Group and had been to our Open Garden event. They also lived in an old mill building in nearby Pocklington, which they had renovated to include rented accommodation. It was the quiet season and they had a flat

empty we could stay in, set in their beautiful rambling organic garden, plus the use of the workshop for Phil to transform the Monster. It was all too good to be true.

Now all that remained was to actually move out of our house and take the stuff we needed over to Pocklington. Easy. Well, it should have been, but if it hadn't been for Catherine, the nanny to our neighbour, we could have still been there. I suppose it was because there had been so much to sort out, and I had thought the actual packing up and leaving was going to be a small thing. It wasn't though. There was furniture some friends were having, but not calling for until we'd left, so needed a temporary home. There was stuff to go to the tip. Drawers and cupboards to empty. Five gigantic houseplants with no home to go to. Black plastic bags of clothes and piles of blankets, and so on. I had been gaily predicting that I'd just take two days off from work, one to pack and one to move. Very slick, very easy. My friends at work thought otherwise, and urged me to take a couple more days off before the move. I couldn't see a problem, well, not until I was at home and realised. Disaster! Added to that we needed a van. Oh yes. We, the owners of the Monster, needed a van to move with, because ours was still with the garage. Where was that ugly great thing when we needed it? While Phil phoned around trying to locate one, I started to organise the jumble of our remaining belongings. That was when it all started to look impossible, until Catherine showed up. And in true Nanny style got things sorted. All those years dealing with posh children had given her very sharp organisational skills. Plants and uncollected furniture went to her house, sacks for the charity shop in the porch, things for Pocklington in the hall. Oh yes, it all came together, with a lot of physical effort on both our parts.

By the time Catherine nipped off to sort out her charges with their tea, things were looking good. There was just one snag remaining. Well two really. The van Phil had located was on the other side of York, so he had already gone off to collect it. And then it would need petrol, but there was a lorry driver's strike on, something we had been trying to ignore. Phil would end up having to scour the whole region looking for the only garage that still had some, then queue up for it. He would be gone hours and then still maybe not have any or enough. Did we need this at this stage?

I made some tea and sat watching our two remaining cats trying to pack themselves in half filled boxes. The third, Finbar, had been adopted by friends who had come to our grand rummage sale. This had been a blessing, because Fin, like all ginger cats, seemed to have a touch of quirky madness about him and how he would have coped with moving, let alone travelling was anyone's guess. He was a real softie though, one of those cats that start dribbling when they clamp eyes on you and don't stop until they're sat on your lap and have made your knees all damp. Ollie and Poo were coming with us to Pocklington, then Ollie was going to live with Kat and Joe. They'd just bought their first house and were moving on the same day as us, as well as having loads of our furniture and all the plants, which were now stashed at Catherine's, so it seemed right that they adopt Ollie too. For Kat, seeing Ollie was like love at first sight, she worshipped him and he could tell he'd landed on his feet. He was definitely a 'one cat in a house' type and he would flourish with Kat's undivided attention. He'd been trying for years to get our other two to leave, now he'd have Kat all to himself. Poo? Well, we hadn't found anyone to adopt him yet and secretly I was pleased, I was still hoping we'd

find a way around the ferry company's no pets rule, and besides we still had three months and that was ages.

We celebrated our last evening in the house when Phil returned triumphant, with hire van and petrol, the latter by nefarious means. Seconds later Catherine reappeared, clutching bulky white paper carrier bags full of Indian takeaway. We flopped on folding chairs, surrounded by boxes and bare walls. It didn't look like home any more, no furniture, curtains, pictures or stuff, but it still looked good. The beautiful wooden parquet floor, even without rugs, was golden and warm. The sight of the moonlit garden creeping through the windows was perfect. It seemed the garden would always be number one in this house.

Moving day arrived, and with Ollie and Poo in their baskets, safely stashed in the cab, we made a million dashes up and down the path in the rain to load the van. All the overhanging buddleias dripping on us as well, so we were soaked through in just a few minutes. Then finally the last boxes were squeezed in and we leaned hard against the doors until they clicked shut. It was over. We no longer lived in the little house, our home for 13 years. There was no more waiting, the planning and thinking was finished. Although in all the pictures in my mind this was supposed to be a beautiful and sunny moment, but what can you do about English weather?

In all honesty we didn't spend much time after that thinking about the old place because it was great living with Chris and Sue. The flat was perfect, and on that first night they cooked us a wonderful supper while we dried out in front of their stove. Poo and Ollie weren't so sure, they spent it hiding behind their washing machine, as cats will do. Next day Kat & Joe arrived, en-route to their new home in a re-run of what we'd been doing

the day before. Big van, lots of stuff squashed in. And behind that their car, equally full, but with enough space in the back for Ollie. Poor boy, he couldn't believe he was in transit again, sticking all his legs out to make himself too big to go in the basket, and still howling and trying escape as Kat carefully strapped him in. We shed a few tears as he left us for his new home, feeling more emotional about Ollie than we had about leaving our house. Although Kat phoned later to let us hear Ollie purring while he sat on her knee. Turncoat!

After that I was still going to work every day. Enjoying, as everyone does who has handed in their notice, that wonderful feeling of imminent liberation. It was then that people started talking about bravery and stuff like that. Even if I'd understood what they were saying I'm sure I would have decided that it was too late for worry. Now we had no home and soon no salary, we truly would be self-sufficient, no more 50% for us, we were going the whole hog, 100%, proud and rebellious. It was good that we had so much to do or we might have had time to think and succumb to panic. Now that everyone was saying how brave we were, we could hardly burst into tears and say it was all a mistake, could we?

We took our minds off any lingering anxiety by focusing all our energy on the ugly van. Making endless piles of drawings, trying to work out what it would all look like. How would the bed fit in? Cooking? We'd heard that vegetarian food in Spain was pretty well non-existent so we'd certainly need space to cook. Storage, we'd need plenty of that too. My huge stash of craft materials was definitely coming with us. In times of crisis, making things always made life feel better. Our plans were very creative, however it was only with the return of the van that we began to realise that we had to get realistic. We slid open the

side door and peered in at the filthy floor with water swilling around inside. It was also not as big as it looked on the outside. But, it had to be said, the bodyshop had done a fantastic job. The dents were all gone, rear doors replaced by a single panel with a window. There were little sliding windows along one side that gave it the debonair flavour of a campervan, and the roof was totally amazing. Two pop-up skylights had been added, complete with little mosquito net screens, which would keep us cool and bug free in the summer. There was also a light grey coloured carpet material covering the ceiling for insulation. It was perfect, so neat and professional. Now it was almost possible to see the van as I'd imagined it. I squinted harder, enjoying what I was seeing, until Phil shouted something about getting back to work. All that greasy filth inside, and the dirty water on the floor, wasn't going to clean itself.

All I saw of Phil after that were the soles of his boots as he wriggled his long body around inside the van. It was physical work, made worse since the weather had turned bitterly cold. Phil was swathed in thermal vest, layers of jumpers and fleeces, all tucked inside his boiler suit. His woolly hat clamped on his head and a permanent drip on the end of his nose. All day every day, whatever the weather, he was out there, sawing wood, drilling holes, bolting things together. And in the evenings scribbling frantically, possessed, on bits of paper. He was also full of unanswerable questions, like how much worktop space did I need? How could he make a wooden bed that turned into a sofa? Would it be possible to sleep with our knees bent up? He felt seriously out of his depth, and I couldn't help, I just didn't know any of those things.

While Phil chewed over endless conundrums about the van, I set off to work every morning. I loved living at the Mill and it

was fun at work with my friends. The flat was comfortable, we cooked lovely meals and we could even hire DVDs in Pocklington. We loved watching films, it was the one time in the day when we could truly relax and wind down. Poo had worked out his own ways of relaxing too, like climbing up onto the high beams of the ceiling, then howling and pretending he was stuck 20 feet above us, or hunting for mice in the garden. He was used to having a cat door, but he wasn't going to let the absence of one change his life, especially since he'd got us trained to get up and down all night long letting him in and out. He had learned quickly how to find his way out of the flat, down our staircase, across the next landing, down the next flight of stairs to the hall, then out though a window. He was clever, and in payment for his cleverness he expected to be let in and out whenever he fancied. We tried making him a bed on the landing, but that was no good. He was indignant, he wanted to be inside our bed when he'd got all cold and wet, so he scratched at the door and howled to come in, waking us up anyway. Our bed was on the mezzanine above the kitchen in the flat. Letting Poo in or out meant negotiating the little wooden staircase down to floor level in the dark, while still in the haze of sleep, then continuing round the banister to the next flight of stairs, down to the door. Poo was always ecstatic at being let in, whatever the hour. Meowing, twirling around our legs, tripping us up, then running around for a bit, followed by eating crunchy biscuits from his bowl downstairs, just below our heads. Then he chased back up the wooden stairs to our bed, jumped on top and nosed his way beneath the covers, where he stayed purring away until he got the urge to go out again. We carried on like this for three months, getting up and down every night, grumbling about our broken nights of sleep, because we

felt so guilty. We had discovered that unless we wanted to drive all the way through France, which we didn't, we couldn't take Poo with us on the ferry to Bilbao. The ferry to Santander which did take pets had stopped for the winter. It was a blow, I had been clinging on to the hope of having Poo with us, even though the sensible thing would be to find him a new home, I couldn't bear it. So we let him in and out all night, we let him snuggle up damply under the bedclothes, and sneeze his snotty sneeze on our faces. We even had to take him to the vet after he and one of Sue's cats got into a territorial scrap. Having limped into the flat the victor, his leg then proceeded to swell up to the size of a big matted football sock, and we had to stretcher him off to the surgery. Honestly, Poo was as much effort as three cats, but what could we do?

Time skipped on and the van interior was taking shape. Behind the driver's seat, all the way to the back of the van and under our new sliding windows, was a long smooth work surface. Under that were masses of cupboards with shelves inside, and clever little concertina doors, so they didn't need much space to open. They had little wire panels too, so that you could see inside. It was all the work of a genius. Directly behind the driver's seat was a gap for the cooker. A sweet little gas cooker with two rings, an oven and even a grill. We'd ordered it from a company that made things for boats and it was very stylish and stainless steel. The cooker and connecting it to the gas supply was Phil's latest anxiety. Apparently there were rules and regulations about gas bottles, but we didn't know what they were, apart from having to store them outside the living space. This sounded mad to me. How could you have a bottle of gas outside when you were driving along? It wasn't as if we could have it in a shed, unless we considered towing one behind

us. Phil had managed to track down someone in York who knew about these things and was going to take the van and cooker there to have it fitted safely. Meanwhile, the walls inside were now snugly insulated behind slatted pine panelling, the whole space looking like the Scandinavian log cabin I'd imagined, and I could even see the bed taking shape. We'd decided on a full-length bed, rather than a short one across the back of the van, because sleeping with permanently bent legs might become irritating. So the bed, or sofa as it would be during the day, ran from the sliding side door right to the back. There was a narrow walkway between it and the worktop. The sofa would be transformed into a bed by an ingenious flap, which was hinged all the way along the front of the sofa. At night all we had to do was lift the flap, pop the wooden legs under to keep it up, and pull the futon down from sofa position, to make a mattress. All very simple. Phil had also managed to design in little bits of storage everywhere, even under the back window. He'd made a narrow ledge like a windowsill and added a panel on the front to stop things falling off. In each back corner there was a square shelf for the CD player speakers. We'd put strong Velcro on the bottom of each speaker to make sure they stayed in place. Yes, we'd definitely thought of everything to make the van a home from home. The CD player itself would be inside one of the concertina- fronted cupboards. Above the bed, all along its length, was a stylish wooden pocket for books and stuff, which could be tucked in there and not fall out when we were moving. I could see plenty of things that would be great stored in there. Above the cab there was a big space too, as the roof of the van was so high. Phil attached battens a few inches above the driver's head height and laid a big sheet of plywood across. This made a wonderful space to

squash in all our clothes. Hanging from this shelf and going right down to the floor would be a curtain, separating the living quarters from the cab. I thought it all looked marvellous. A complete transformation from when I'd first seen it, and even with all the things built in, there still seemed plenty of room. Phil thought otherwise. We now spent each evening 'discussing' what we could fit in. Phil would point at something, like the big woven cardboard basket a friend had made years before, and say 'what are you going to do with that?' And I would say 'I'm taking it with me'. Then he would say 'where is it going to fit?' And I would say 'just on the floor by the door'. Then Phil would quiz me about how many other things were going to fit on this miraculous piece of floor, one metre by one metre. Hadn't I already said the stylish blue plastic bucket and the nice wicker basket were going there? And I would say he didn't have to worry, packing the van was my area. And he would say he thought I was being overly optimistic, and I would say…… Well, that's how it went on, every evening. It couldn't be resolved until the big day and I felt sure it would all shake down.

Now the woodwork was almost done there were things I could start work on. The interesting things, like a nicer cover for the driver's seat, to hide it's previous history, lots of curtains, plenty of cushions, as well as something to go over the futon bed/sofa. Fabric was required and it was sale time. I had great fun with friends from work looking for bargains and finding some great stuff. Obviously, since the van was going to be a stylish haven, there had to be some sort of colour scheme and I'd decided to follow the colour from the cab, while ignoring the ravaged and filthy seats. The dashboard and doors had lots of grey or blue, and since that had a nice Scandinavian feel about it, I went for those. I found some nice big pieces for curtains, a

fabulous piece of stripy stuff for the futon cover, and then I came across a real treasure. It had a nice light blue background, so fitted my colour scheme, but wonderfully had orange and lime green dogs driving little cars too. It had to be incorporated, those dogs were so sweet. Actually I turned that piece of fabric into pillowcases as well, which did look good, although I was starting to wonder if it was those dogs, racing around in my mind, which were keeping me awake all night.

On and on we went, turning the van into the wonderful home we had imagined. All the while I was still going to work. Eventually though the end of my notice arrived and it was time for me to stop. Crunch time. No longer could I have both lives. The adventurous person driving off to foreign lands, who talked about our new self-sufficient life, while still at work every day. It was going to be a wrench, another part of our old life falling away. I felt really sad knowing I wouldn't be with my friends any more, but it was exciting too. Saying goodbye was going to be emotional, but in the end we managed to have lots of goodbye coffees and lunches, finishing off with a meal in our favourite bar. Optimistically booking a table for thirty, then having far more turning up on the night. There were lots of presents too, lots of tears, and masses of photos, as another part of our old life closed.

In our final week at the Mill, we were galvanised into finishing everything in time to leave for the ferry. Hunting out carpet for the floor, finding bits of tubing to be curtain poles, and finally working out why the rubber floor of the cab was always wet, no matter how many times I mopped it out. The rain was getting in somewhere around the windscreen, but we never did find out where. At this stage radical measures were called for, the last thing we needed was water seeping into the

back and spoiling our luxurious abode. The rubber matting would have to come up. I got a Stanley knife and screwdriver and began undoing the bits of plastic on the cab steps. Then worked around the footwells, lying on the floor under the dashboard levering out screws, cutting around the gear stick, then finally around the pedals. Eventually the whole thing came away in a big soggy stinky mess, and I wrestled the nasty rubbery thing out onto the driveway. That was where all the fetid water had been lurking, the matting had been like a sponge, holding back all the dirty black liquid that had squirted out of the gear stick hole whenever I stood there. But now the cab looked odd with nothing on the floor, and we didn't know if it would matter. Maybe the engine would be too noisy, or vibrate though our shoes. Maybe there was some other technical reason for having the matting, but surely it couldn't be that serious. However, there were so many other things we needed to worry about it soon got forgotten. Until the next time it rained, and once again the cab floor was awash with water. No kind of carpet could cope with that, another good reason for not having one. But we still had the problem of how to stop water coming in. And in the end we solved that by coming at it from a different perspective. If we couldn't stop it from coming in, why not make sure it could escape just as quickly? By drilling two small holes in the floor. Problem solved.

With just days to go now, time for another farewell, a meal at a friend's house. Which turned into a night of massively long drives, because finally after lots and lots of phone calls Mo had managed to find someone to adopt Poo, a friend of hers in Thirsk. Wonderful, the only snag was that we were miles away in Pocklington and the farewell meal we were going to was over near Ripon, three sides of a triangle. But we couldn't worry

about that now, we were just so glad to have found a home for Poo, even if it meant a marathon drive. He howled the entire trip and we were feeling both sympathetic and terrible, knowing we probably wouldn't see him again. The person who had agreed to take him looked very hesitant too, she hadn't had a cat for many years and wasn't sure Poo could actually come and live inside their pristine house, perhaps just in the porch. This didn't seem good at all. Poo was used to a certain lifestyle, one where people did exactly what he wanted. But to give him credit, he came calmly out of his basket like no other cat I've ever known, and quickly worked out the situation. He hopped up onto a shelf and looked around happily, his new owner instinctively stepping forward to remove him. But at that moment I saw their eyes meet, and she reached out and stroked him instead. That was it. Poo switched on his whole personality and gave his new owner one of his winning looks. The battle was won before he'd even had to start the fight. He purred, he leaned against her, she said things about him perhaps coming in and living in the kitchen instead, and we already knew that was all nonsense. He followed her around the kitchen, giving her the full treatment, and in about five minutes she had him in her arms.

Next morning Mo rang. She'd phoned Poo's new home, to see how things were going. The husband had answered. The woman was still in bed with Poo, while he himself was just taking them both breakfast. Poo as ever, got everything he wanted.

We still had masses to do, and tomorrow, Sunday, was our final day. It seemed unthinkable to miss yet another opportunity for a farewell gathering, so we'd planned a nice little pre-Christmas mulled wine and mince pie affair at the Mill.

Mo arrived, and while we went off shopping, Phil as ever was last seen on his back in the van finishing off wiring the inside lighting. The electrics were his latest nightmare, now that the woodwork had been finished. He and Mick, our electrically minded friend, had spent an entire day outside in the freezing wind, trying to solder one bit of cable to another. There were so many wires in the special cupboard it looked as if a multicoloured bird had been trying to build a nest in there. All this so that the wind turbine, attached to the back of the van on a high pole, would whirl round and bring power into a big battery to make the lights and CD player work. I could understand nothing of this, but it didn't stop Phil quizzing me about how many watts made an amp, or was it the other way round?

Finally the moment came when it was time to load our possessions. Up and down, up and down, up and down. From our flat on the second floor, down two flights of stairs, out the back door, along the whole length of the Mill, and back again. With boxes, bags, baskets, and arms full of all kinds of stuff. Until finally even the much disputed area inside the sliding door was covered, by the big woven cardboard basket, the blue bucket and the little wicker basket. They all fitted, but it was tight, you could just about stand there, nothing else. The van, which had been a Monster until now, seemed to have taken a deep breath and slowly sunk down, settling on it's wheel arches. We stood for a moment looking at everything, it really did look exactly like the picture I'd had in my mind, even down to the fairy lights hooked along the curtain rail. It was cosy and looked like our home, wonderful. But how the van would cope with all this added weight we had no idea. All we knew for a fact was, we wouldn't be going anywhere very fast.

Our last day at the Mill arrived and whirled past in a blur of mince pies, mulled wine, lots of visitors, more farewells and tears. People had been, we'd eaten together, they'd seen the van, we'd all hugged each other and cried. Then we were alone. Everyone had gone. We walked back up to the flat a bit dazed and definitely tired, as we began washing glasses. Sue then popped up from downstairs, did we want to come down and eat supper with them? Definitely.

So that had been our last night. Very early next morning, before Chris and Sue were awake, we quietly left the Mill and set off for the ferry in Portsmouth. The rain was still pouring down, as it had every day for the last three months, and everywhere was flooded. All the little roads were underwater and closed off with flood signs. The fields were under water. We passed York Racecourse and saw people rowing across it, in front of the spectators stand. All that remained of a football pitch was where the crossbars of the goals poked through the lake of water. Queues of traffic waited to get off the dual carriageway and crawl into town along a much narrower one. The windscreen wipers squeaked back and forth, as water trickled in and down onto the floor then out through the two little holes. How grey and miserable it was in December in England, and how we were looking forward to seeing the blue skies of Spain.

It rained and rained all the way to Portsmouth. But we finally got there and followed the signs for the ferry, threading around yet another anonymous ring road. The ferry terminal was familiar, we'd been to Holland from Hull before, but this time I was expecting something a bit different. I suppose a bit more ceremonial or final, about leaving the country forever. There should have been a sign saying something like,

'emigrating? This way', something like that, and then all of us 'leavers' could have had our own queue where we could speak of our foreign plans and huddle together like outsiders. It didn't seem right to be lining up beside folks who were obviously going on holiday.

We passed the little booths of officialdom, then drove down to take our place in line and turned off the engine. It was dark and wet, but by now it wasn't actually raining any more. We got out and watched the other vehicles arriving. Our Monster, that wasn't a Monster any more, was neither one thing nor another. Too big to be in with the cars and too small to be a real campervan. The vehicle pulling up behind us demonstrating that perfectly. It was a camper too, but not a camper 'van'. It was an actual coach, and massive beyond massive. All paintwork and chrome, air brakes wheezing, and complete with dangling mascots. The driver, a little man, hopped out of the cab and came round to chat. 'Bloody awful weather! Hope they get this little lot sorted before it pours down again. Hi there, I'm Alan, this is June'. The little man introduced his wife who was struggling into a jacket. He stood shoulders hunched, rubbing his hands together. This was our first encounter with a seasoned campervan-ner and their huge coach dazzled us. I could see Phil was looking at all the electrical sockets on the outside, let alone what treats lay inside, itching to start quizzing Alan about it all. Since I wasn't able to divert the conversation quickly enough, he and Alan were soon deep into the grizzly subjects of batteries and inverters. Really, after all the hassle of getting everything installed, there still seemed to be plenty of technical, Boys Own stuff to discuss. June suggested we all retire to their 'van' rather than stand outside in the cold. We climbed up its high steps, really keen to

see inside, fascinated by the sheer scale of the thing, and were not disappointed. It was pure luxury throughout. There were things in that van even our house hadn't had, like a dishwasher, a shower, spotlights in the ceiling, frosted glass cabinets in the kitchen, heated towel rails. It was just like a house, well, probably just like June and Alan's house, while our van was just like our house, except much, much smaller. Alan and June, it turned out, were part of a large community of campervan-ners getting the ferry that night, all going to spend the winter in the south of Spain. Chatting to them we got a vivid picture of a life we knew nothing about. A fraternity of English people, in purpose-built campervans, heading off to the sun where they would spend winter together. Often 'wild camping', which meant not using campsites but finding other places to park up where it was free. In supermarket car parks at night, or under motorway flyovers. Refilling their water tanks from the easily found springs and fountains all around Spain. Only booking into campsites when they needed to recharge their huge batteries or empty out. The best bit was that they were never alone. As they drove from town to town along the coast, they always found each other, more English people to park up with and feel safe. Language was never a problem, the south of Spain was full of English people, on holiday or running shops and cafes there. In fact Alan and June had never spoken Spanish on any of their trips, never had to. We were relieved at that really, not being able to speak a word ourselves. Like most English people we were still of the opinion that everyone in the world spoke our language so it wouldn't be a problem. We also had the english presumption that it would be easy to 'pick up' Spanish once we got to wherever we were going. We were looking forward to that, we thought part of the fun of being in

a foreign country was going to be learning a new language. Eventually it would become one of those things we'd feel proud of achieving, when we could hold a conversation in our new tongue.

As June proudly showed us around their home, opening doors to reveal additional rooms, swivelling chairs that turned into sofas and spare beds, we spoke of our plan to leave England for good, of going to Galicia and looking for somewhere to buy. At the mention of the word Galicia, June's expression clouded, 'where was that in Spain?' Alan had heard of it though. 'Banana republic', he pronounced, 'too much weather up there, wet, cold, humid in the summer, no, we should go south that's where the sun was'. I think we'd already realised, when their massive coach pulled up, that we were witnessing a parallel universe, and speaking to Alan and June simply confirmed it.

The home we had made in Yorkshire had been deliberately small, we'd had no urge to expand or accumulate, we wanted to feel close to nature, listen to its rhythms. Our moving to Spain had more to do with a nice slow breathing out than building a villa in the sun. We wanted to have nature all around us and a little bit more land to grow our garden. The house we hoped for would probably fit in the boot of June and Alan's van. More a shed really, but one which kept us warm in the winter and provided us with a place where we had more time to do the things that mattered in life. While it went without saying that it would also be the most stylish shed in the world. We didn't know how we would find it but it seemed a modest enough goal to achieve given a bit of time. Alan and June clearly thought we were bonkers. They went to Spain for the warm winter weather but would definitely be returning to Blighty in the spring. Our

moving to Galicia seemed crazy to them and once they'd looked inside our van they knew we weren't quite normal. They'd showed us theirs so we showed them ours, and I could see June looking puzzled as she squinted into the dark interior and saw something the Caravan Club would never think permissible. Meanwhile Phil was showing Alan the wind turbine and they were talking about watts and amps again, as well as the merits of buying your gas bottles once you arrived in Spain. Luckily it was also time to go back to our respective vans because the queues were starting to move.



How will we begin again?

Thirty very long seasick hours later the ferry arrived in Spain, and we drove gingerly over the metal ramps, until finally all our wheels were back on firm tarmac again. Phil was driving, although totally washed out from the terrible crossing, he felt the need to maintain contact with the engine at this early stage, just in case it tried to communicate. I was map reading, our first challenge being to get away from Bilbao as quickly as possible, having decided we didn't need all the potential dangers of town traffic while we adjusted to being on the wrong side of the road. I was also hoping we would find somewhere to stop before too long, because the desperate need for strong black coffee was getting increasingly urgent. Phil hunched forward, gripping the steering wheel tightly as he tried to keep the van on the road, negotiate roundabouts the wrong way round, and read the signs as they appeared far too quickly. Somehow though we managed to find our way. Then we were out onto much smaller quieter

roads, and the city had given way to huge big open fields on either side. Brown and white cows grazed against a backdrop of snow capped mountains. This was the Asturias. Here was the foreign nature we had hoped for. A while later, although it felt like an eternity, we rumbled into a small village with roads wide enough for Phil to feel calm about parking the van, and finally there was a bar. This was to be our first encounter with Spanish culture, how difficult could it be? We wandered in looking every bit as dazed and crumpled as we felt and approached the teenage boy at the counter. I think both Phil and I opened our mouths to speak at the same time, but then remembered we didn't know any Spanish words. What could we say? Surely coffee would be easily understood? Yes, coffee was fine, but then what sort? Oh dear. The boy resorted to showing us cups of different sizes, and then a carton of milk. Easy, we got our coffee. Very good it was too. No breakfast though, no cakes or signs of anything edible. It seemed that Spanish people weren't the morning coffee and cake kind of people, in fact they didn't seem to be morning people at all, we hadn't seen anyone and it was now about 10.30am.

We sat in the empty bar, with what would become the mandatory blaring tv, celebrating our little success. We had arrived. We had survived one of the worst sea crossings in the world, escaped the potential road hazards of Bilbao, and managed to get ourselves coffee. Honestly, could we have expected more from ourselves? We thought not, and feeling buoyed up with confidence and caffeine returned to the van. Next stop, a campsite. Being timid by nature we thought we wouldn't be too daring on our first day, and had decided on a site in Santillana del Mar, which was just along the coast. We planned to find the town, head for the campsite, check in, then

go foraging for food, a simple strategy. Actually we found the campsite very easily, if we overlook all the wrong turnings getting through the town. The map was definitely faulty, missing roads that sort of thing, but there was still a lot of muttering coming from the driver.

Santillana del Mar looked like a tourist authority's dream of 'Ye Olde Medieval Spanish Village'. The whole place was ancient, not a sign of the modern world. Built entirely from huge slabs of yellow stone, including the pavements, narrow streets led to a public square in the centre, where little shops were tucked under the old buildings, hidden by their shadows. The campsite was at the top of one of these narrow streets. Presided over by Mr Campsite, who was the kind of man I would have picked out of an identity parade as the typical Spanish male. Medium height, brown hair, brown eyes, very neat and tidy appearance. Sporting a long dark cardigan that British men would never wear, and affecting a rather haughty demeanour. Not remotely like anyone who has ever spent, or would ever want to spend, a night in a caravan or heaven forbid, a tent. All was fine though, we could park anywhere we wanted, as we were the only people staying there, but not on the grass please because it was too muddy. He looked like the kind of man who would send the cleaner out to wash our muddy tyre marks from his clean cement driveway.

Our first mission, having parked up, was to find ourselves a gas bottle for our lovely little cooker and then buy food. Anyone who has ever been to Spain will already know that between 2.00pm and 5.00pm everywhere is closed for lunch. We'd never been to Spain before so this was news to us. Heading down the narrow streets to where we had seen all those shops earlier we now found the place totally deserted. A quick

inspection of the 'horarios' on various shop doors revealed why. Which meant there was nothing more we could do but find something else to pass the time while waiting for the shops to reopen. A wander around revealed very little. Just one large hotel with flags outside, and at least two museums. Both closed for lunch, one of which appeared to be dedicated solely to instruments of torture. Original. Maybe the competition for tourists in these parts had required them to resort to extreme measures. While we were considering this we came across a shop window display of Oscar winning standards. The whole window had been turned into a mammoth nativity scene, no, nativity world. Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus were there, but their stable was now just a tiny part of an entire valley. Even the shepherds in the fields were vastly overshadowed by their far more modern surroundings. Houses, shops, a working railway, all kinds of animals, little figures doing all sorts of things, including driving cattle, washing clothes in streams, plus cars and trucks. The angels completely lost by the hoardes skiing down mountains and riding back up on cable cars. The three kings, trotting along on their camels, were almost invisible. In fact, there was everything a fertile and unfettered imagination could think of and more, all framed by twinkling Christmas lights. It was spectacular, and it wasn't the only shop with a display like it. There must have been a competition running, because there were more nativity scenes in that town than I'd seen in a lifetime. No supermarkets though, we couldn't find a single one, in fact we still hadn't found a food shop. Maybe mundane things like food were too basic for a town with higher things to consider, like museums of torture and posh hotels. Anyway, we had plenty of time to find out, in the meantime we had found a bar that was still open and I sat down to write Mo a

postcard.

The shops did eventually reopen, and we spent more time than we really needed in a hardware shop. It was incredible, there wasn't an inch of space wasted or anything it didn't have, either on display piled high on the shelves behind the counter, or dangling from hooks in the ceiling. I was particularly taken with their wrapping material. Anything bought in this little jewel of a shop was carefully wrapped in brown paper, which was stored on massive rolls in three widths on a metal dispenser, complete with a fierce set of teeth for tearing it to the right size. I wondered if it was destined for the museum of torture after it's paper tearing days were over.

After a thorough tour of the town revealed no gas bottles, we repaired back to the campsite to see if Mr Campsite could offer any advice. Surely he would be the one to know about these things, being a campsite, and being able to speak English, which made him something of a rarity in Santillana del Mar. Yes, Mr Campsite said, he did have gas. But this was not the official camping 'season', so he couldn't sell us any. The campsite shop was closed. He explained all this as if we were a bit stupid not to have known about camping shop seasons. He did say there was somewhere in the next town, but we'd have to go tomorrow because it was only open until three in the afternoon. This gas thing was getting to be frustrating, as were the opening hours. What we really wanted right then was to cook something to eat, make a nice cup of tea, and settle into our home and relax. Well, it wasn't going to happen today, so the only thing we could do was go to bed and start again tomorrow.

We really were showing ourselves as the complete novice campers that we were. End of day one and no gas, and now it

was dark and we hadn't even made the bed up. There was stuff all over which needed moving into the cab, and the wooden flap which turned the sofa into a bed needed to be flapped up and it's legs put in position. If only we'd practised all this beforehand or had done it in daylight. What had seemed an ingenious solution to the bed leg problem now turned into a frustrating and annoying game of putting one leg in place only to have it drop out when we tried to put in the next one. Eventually we abandoned the whole idea of doing it from above and I wriggled underneath to hold them all in place until the last one was done. You can only imagine the atmosphere in the van after the sort of day we'd had, rounded off by the bed leg game. Finally we got to bed and even though we were in a strange country, a strange campsite with no other campers and in a strange van, we slept.

Next morning began without cups of tea or any toast, so we grumpily dismantled the nightmarish bed legs, packed things away so that nothing fell while we were driving, and set off towards the nearby town where Mr Campsite had assured us we would find gas. We weren't sure how we would find it and in truth we were beginning to find the incessant foreign-ness a little bit irritating. How could we ask anyone a simple question when no one understood us? Was it not true that Spanish children began learning English when they were seven years old? If that was the case, how could it be that no one spoke English? In the end it wasn't too hard to find, we simply shouted 'gas!' at everyone we came across and eventually one of them pointed down a road that led out of the town. It seemed like the wrong direction to be heading, but with no other suggestions we followed it, and in no time came across a fenced off compound containing nothing but hundreds, possibly thousands, of

identical gas bottles. Talk about overkill, who needs that much gas? What we couldn't see though was any of the little blue containers we were after, just this infinite amount of monstrously large orange ones. We stood outside wondering what to do next, and were still wondering, when a man appeared from a little office/ shed inside and effortlessly grabbed one of the orange monsters then walked towards us. 'Buenos dias!' he said, putting the bottle down and presumably waiting for us to pay for it. After all, he probably wasn't expecting any questions, he only had these orange type for sale. We managed to reply Buenos dias, and then we were stumped. We wanted to say it was too big, we needed a smaller blue bottle, but he obviously didn't understand. Beckoning him towards the van Phil opened the special gas cupboard and then gestured with his hands at the orange gas bottle, saying the word 'big'. Then inside the cupboard, with the word 'small'. Repeating this performance several times. To which the man simply shook his head, sucked on his teeth, and pointed to the gas bottle waggling his finger, as if to say 'do you want it or not?' No, we didn't want it. Phil continued to try and demonstrate the size we were after, pointing at the van and saying 'camping'. To which his response was to pick up the gas bottle and return to the compound, leaving us even more confused than before. The bottle he was offering was not only about five times bigger than the space in our purpose-built gas cupboard, it must have weighed about 30kg. No way did either of us fancy hefting that around each time we wanted to use the cooker, and there was nowhere inside the van to lash it to when we were travelling. No, it had to be a smaller 'camping' sized bottle or nothing. What we needed now was coffee and to come up with a new plan. At that moment the man reappeared, and beckoned us over to his 'office'. Inside

which was nothing but a desk, on which was a small cash box and a pile of scrap paper, and a chair. Taking a sheet of paper from the pile he wrote the word 'feretaria' and handed it to Phil. Then taking us to the door he pointed back towards to the town, followed by a right-turn gesture, finishing off with his index finger under his eye pointing up to the sky. All totally meaningless, but as he kept repeating the same actions we felt it was best to nod, thank him, and leave.

I held on to the scrap of paper, it was the only clue we had. Feretaria? Someone's name? A type of gas? Who knew? We set off and when we reached the town, took the first right. Now what? The pointing to the eye, then upwards, what was that all about? What were we looking for? We got out of the van and started walking, looking for streets which might have shops in, getting more and more frustrated. How could we find what we were looking for when we didn't know what it was? None of the shops looked right and nowhere could we see the word Feretaria. Finally I approached a group of old men who were leaning against some railings watching some other men dig a hole. Why are road works such a popular spectator sport? Each looked at the piece of paper, and for emphasis I repeated the word, feretaria. Then one of them suddenly seem to get it and pointed up the road. At which they all joined in, saying yes, just up there, up there! We were so thrilled that someone knew what it meant that we virtually ran up that road, but still with no idea what we were looking for. Glancing back at the men, they were still watching us and excitedly waving and shouting. Why? We stopped and looked around us, nothing. Then turning our heads upwards we finally saw it, the huge sign spelling 'feretaria'. So we had arrived. The pointing to the eye thing must have meant 'look up'. Honestly, how were we going to get anywhere

when we hadn't even understood that, or that feretaria meant hardware shop. A hardware shop which was now sadly, closed for lunch. Was this was how it was going to be? One step forward, miss a turn, throw a six to start again? We looked through the window. Might they have gas in there? We were going to have to wait until five o'clock to find out.

We spent the time in the van marvelling at our stupidity, and how the simplest tasks seemed to take an entire day. At this rate we would drive ourselves crazy. And why hadn't we thought to look in a dictionary to see if feretaria was in it, then we would have known what we were looking for. Yes, maybe we should buy a dictionary.

When we returned it was open, but obviously very popular, as it was already packed with lots of small old people waiting to be served. This was going to take forever. Then, as the crowd became aware of the tall strangers who'd just entered, a ripple of excitement spread through the room and a path opened up, inviting us to go first, obviously hoping for some kind of entertainment. Luckily the shopkeeper was totally unfazed, taking this all in his stride. 'Buenas tardes' he said. To which Phil pointed at his notebook, and began sketching a gas bottle, using his hands to show the size. The man simply nodded, disappeared behind a spinning display of paintbrushes, and returned seconds later with the perfect sized blue gas bottle. Result! Now let's get out of here and back to the van to put the kettle on. But Phil hadn't finished. Picking up his pencil again he made another drawing, this time of a length of hose and some sort of connector, with a gas bottle underneath. Again the man bobbed out of sight, this time to return with a large coil of orange rubber pipe and a little cardboard box. Uncoiling the pipe he gestured to Phil 'how much did he want?' This was

then cut and coiled and wrapped in paper, stuck down with tape. By now I was desperate to get out of there, but the ordeal still wasn't over. He then opened the small cardboard box and took out a strange metal thing with a sort of switch on top. Demonstrating joining the pipe to this and flicking the switch. Phil seemed to understand, and it did all seem quite straightforward, too straightforward really after what we had been through. Anyway, finally we had succeeded. We paid and left, moving on to our next challenge, shopping for food.

Back at the campsite all we had to do then was assemble all the bits. Phil squatted outside the van with everything laid out on the ground. The only thing missing was some boiling water, to soften the rubber pipe so that it would slip onto the connector. Boiling water. Which you get from a kettle, which had been boiled on the little stove, the little stove which was powered by gas. This gas bottle saga was actually going to kill us! Plainly, until we could light the stove there could be no hot water, cups of tea or cooked food. I felt like crying. However, Phil was not going to be thwarted at this stage, and after rummaging in a cupboard in the van produced a thermos flask and marched off to the campsite café. Back he came with the thermos full of boiling water, the pipe was made soft and ten minutes later the kettle was boiling.

This was the first of so very many little challenges which produced a disproportionate amount of celebration when completed. It was just so exhausting.

We managed to cook our first meal in our new home that night, unearthing carefully packed pans and dishes, finding forks and plates. It was a bit tight on space, but once we'd bundled things into the front, we could sit comfortably on the sofa. It was homey, but not like our little house in Yorkshire. We were

quickly realising that simple, everyday tasks were going to be promoted to major events for as long as it took us to understand things better. We couldn't start to imagine how long that would take. And then there was the whole point of the journey, finding a new home, buying a piece of land, maybe even building a house. In the interests of curbing an early onset of sickening anxiety we decided to save that sort of worry for another time.

Over the next few days we drove along the north coast, heading towards our goal of Santiago de Compostela. The weather had been perfect for the first few days, just as we had expected Spanish weather to be, sunny and warm, with a little chill in the air at night. Then somewhere along the way it had started to change, and now we were into ferocious winds and heavy rain.

We had decided to travel only on the small local roads, and as we passed through villages we saw the same scene each time, beautiful old buildings with only older people in evidence. The women dressed in dark clothes covered by an overall, the likes of which women in Yorkshire no longer wore, finished off with a scarf or shawl over the top. Often these women were also pushing wheelbarrows full of fresh looking weeds or grass, or balancing giant buckets full of the same stuff on their heads. What was this for? Where were they going? We couldn't imagine and didn't know enough words to ask. Despite it being December it was still very lush and green. There were more types of wild flower along the roadside than I'd ever known existed. Everything so different. As was the seriously changeable weather. After our first days of sun and warmth, we were now being plunged into mist, fog and heavy rain. The towering, sad, grey rocks that had begun to appear on either side

didn't help to cheer us either. The roads were now edged by this or completely enveloped in a swirling mist. Awfully deep valleys would suddenly appear below, then disappear in the cloud. It was quite frightening, there was definitely something menacing about the place.

Finally, after several days travelling, including a detour to find a dentist and have a wisdom tooth removed, Santiago de Compostela was close, and by now we just wanted to arrive and begin our new life as soon as possible. We'd just driven through a particularly bleak area, one which could easily have been the set for a rather dark Armageddon, end of the world type of film. Mountainous black slag heaps littered the entire landscape and dirty rain fell on deserted forgotten streets, where it looked like people had left in a hurry a very long time ago. It was a nightmarish place, one where wolves or vampires would definitely roam at night. Hopeless and terrible, not unlike how we were beginning to feel. How could Santiago de Compostela possibly be wonderful enough after all this? Not only was the place and the weather awful, we also felt truly displaced, we hadn't seen anywhere yet which had come remotely close to our expectations.

As we got closer to Santiago de Compostela, the narrow country road we'd been following since Bilbao suddenly changed. A whole new landscape opened up. The towering gothic hills now bore the scars of having been recently gouged by a massive machine to make way for a brand new motorway. The rain had got a lot harder too. But the constant stream of sodden walkers who had just joined us on the hard shoulder didn't seem to care. Clinging to their wooden staffs, some with a scallop shell dangling around from their necks, they carried on walking purposefully, heads down against the rain, totally

oblivious to their new surroundings. There was something about those shells that seemed familiar, what was it? Ah yes, they were pilgrims. I'd read about this, the 'El Camino'. Where people walked to Santiago de Compostela, from as far away as France, along the ancient drovers paths, to find themselves. Well this part was going to give them a bit of a jolt, nothing ancient or spiritual about being constantly sprayed by traffic doing 100km/hour just feet away. I wondered if they were thinking how it had all seemed such a good idea when they set off. A good long walk through the countryside, a chance to make new friends along the way, and at the same time hopefully discovering new meaning to their lives. There was something a little too close to home in all this. Maybe our friends in Yorkshire had thought about us in the same way. Like, why on earth do this? Maybe. But at least our friends wouldn't know about the terrible weather. They thought we had gone to a Spain where the sky was always blue and sunny. Wrong. Spain has a cruel winter too.

By dusk we had reached what the motorway signs were telling us were the outskirts of the ancient city. We'd just passed a turn-off for Santiago de Compostela International Airport, so the omens didn't look good. Why was everything so new and modern? Phil, scanning the rain-soaked horizon, was frantic. This had to be aberration, any minute now we would turn a corner and there in the distance there would be the remote hilltop, and on top of that a beautiful medieval walled city. All framed by a perfect sunset, not lashing rain. We didn't need to get any closer to realise that we were too late, this picture had long been painted over. All you could see now were the ugly scars of new roads, and up ahead a landscape of ugly blocks of high rise flats. Anything natural was now covered by either

concrete, tarmac or satellite dishes. What had happened to all the history and romance of this ancient cathedral city, the dream those weary pilgrims had spent so many weeks looking forward to? How could Spain's most revered monument be literally buried under such mindless consumerism? We both decided to keep our disappointment to ourselves, concentrating instead on finding the campsite. Which as with all campsites, was located way out of the centre. It was also inexplicably perched on the top of a very steep hill, so the only camping was on terraces, all of which were now empty and virtually underwater as the rain made its relentless way down to the bottom. As instructed by Mr Campsite, we drove along one of the narrow paths, slowly so not to slip sideways down to the next terrace, to the nearest muddy plot. It was so tight there wasn't the possibility of doing any manoeuvring, that would have just made the wheels spin deeper into all the mud, so Phil stopped as soon as we were clear of the path and turned off the engine. We stared at the nightscape of a modern city, far below.

And we continued sitting there, silently, watching the rain, wishing the incessant drumming on the roof would stop. Everything was wrong. Maybe later we would be able to rationalise our disappointment, realise how nowhere could have been equal to the visions created by our imaginations. That having put so much emotion into an idea, then selling our home and leaving our friends, there wouldn't have been anywhere in the world at this time of year which would have set our hearts leaping with joy. But right then the anticlimax was suffocating. The rain and darkness and sheer awfulness of the place were sucking the life out of us. We had got it so wrong, and now all the unspoken worry which had been kept submerged under the hectic preparations, was rising up into the open. Secretly, deep

inside, we had always wondered how we were going to make all our big talk become real, now we could see it for what we had been afraid of, it was just hot air. We felt sick.

Eventually we realised we had to get out of the van, and however hopeless it seemed, try and keep things normal, whatever that was. Walk into town and find the old part. Rain soaked us in seconds. Roads packed with speeding traffic criss-crossed everywhere, making it difficult to walk, let alone find what we were looking for, hidden by all this new development. We found it eventually though. The huge cathedral was exactly as we'd imagined, but we were by now too wet and cold and depressed to go inside. In this part of the city there were no pavements or gutters or drains, so the rain just shot off the roofs and hurtled down, flooding the streets as it made its way down the hill. How could a place which had so much rain be seemingly so ill prepared? How come there were women out in all this, without coats, holding umbrellas and walking tiptoe on high heels, immaculately turned out in matching shoes, handbags and scarves? What was the matter with these people? I just wanted to stamp in the puddles and splash mud on them. How could they think all this was right? They had buried Santiago de Compostela, without the slightest regard for what it once represented, and at the same time destroyed everything we had ever dreamed of.

We struggled back to the van with our shopping, fighting now against a strong wind which had joined forces with the rain, making our slog back up the hill almost impossible. I was trying not to think of warm sitting rooms and wood burning stoves, just trying to focus on getting back to the van as the speeding cars soaked us even more. We were past caring, we couldn't get any wetter or more miserable. The only people worse off than

us were those pilgrims. Where were they headed tonight? Though I guess they felt they'd get extra points for having done it and got so wet. But we were too angry with everything to worry about points.

The inside of the van was festooned with wet clothes, and the steam from the cooker was making all the dry things damp too. We ate supper and got into bed to try and get warmer. And laying there we talked, mostly complaining and grumbling about everything. We hated Spain and everyone who lived there. We ranted on about the weather, the plan, campsites and the wrongness of the world in general, then tried to sleep. Phil pulled his woolly hat right down over his ears and eyes and was away in seconds. I lay with my toes clenched trying to make sure the van didn't slip over the edge.

We woke in daylight and for once it was quiet, the rain had stopped and the wind blown on to somewhere else. Amazingly we were still parked on the ledge, although peeping out through the door revealed the van to be sitting in water halfway up it's hubcaps. Looking at the grass I wondered why we hadn't thought to bring wellies with us. We'd thought to bring five bags of raffia in different colours, two tins of wax crayons, fat and thin ones, and our lovely knitted giraffe rescued from the tip in Thirsk. But boots would have been useful too.

Tidying up the van, then thinking about where to get breakfast, made us realise we didn't need to waste any more time looking at our mistake, it was time to move on. I wished we could have done that by revving the engine really hard and spitting a rainbow of mud over the whole place, but it wasn't possible, we might have slipped over the edge. Though the emotion of churned mud was definitely there as we rumbled out leaving a thick trail of it behind us.

We put a few kilometres between us and the doomed city then stopped at a roadside bar. The only thing we had found to eat in these places at this time of day were croissants, painted with a thin coat of something sweet and sticky on their outside. They weren't that nice, but in the absence of anything else we'd eaten quite a few on the journey. While we tried to revive ourselves with those and strong coffee, we managed to pull ourselves together a bit. I was secretly hoping that Phil would have come around to the same conclusion as me, and pointed the van back towards Blighty, but he didn't. He suggested we head for La Coruña instead. Because that was where two Spanish friends of Mo lived, and right now we really needed to talk to someone and vent our frustration. Inés and Julio were going to be those lucky people.

It didn't take us long to arrive at the coast, where we found La Coruña bathed in a bright blue sky and bustling. Finding where Inés and Julio lived wasn't that hard either. And once they'd got over the shock of us turning up so suddenly, it was wonderful to be able to ask them all the questions we had about things we'd seen and not understood. We gabbled on and on until we ran out of things to say. Inés and Julio must have realised we were totally mad but were too polite to say so. We told them how we felt about Santiago de Compostela, and about the terrible rain, and how sad we were about the old city being swamped by modern buildings. And they were kind enough not to say, what did you expect? Or, what do historic northern cities in England look like, especially in the middle of winter?

Julio explained that the rain in Santiago de Compostela is actually considered an art form in Spain, as it does it with such passion. But for the rest of the year it really was a beautiful place. We weren't convinced, but out of politeness said we

believed him. He listened when we said that the landscape we had seen so far on our journey hadn't inspired us, and our arrival in Santiago de Compostela had sent us straight into a terminal decline. Julio asked us if we had considered any other areas of Galicia, like perhaps Ourense, which was further south and more lush. There were vineyards there and the landscape of mountains and deep green valleys was completely different. Maybe it would be more the kind of place for us. We didn't say that we had no idea there were any other regions of Galicia, we felt we had demonstrated our stupidity quite vividly enough. But we had felt our tension and anxiety lift slightly, along with a parting in the grey clouds of depression. Any sort of plan was distinctly better than the panic of having none. Later that afternoon we reluctantly left the relaxing warmth of their flat and returned to our journey. We'd been able to get just a tiny bit of perspective from talking to Inés and Julio and that had helped pull us round. Now we had to get back on track, and the first step on that was to return to the cold, damp van and drive to the nearest campsite.

According to Julio's directions that was about forty minutes away. Maybe it was, in daylight and good weather, but in the pitch black and driving rain more like an hour and a half before we reached what was possibly the worst campsite we could imagine. We'd been driving for what seemed ages in the middle of nowhere, along an unmade unlit road littered with perilous potholes hiding beneath lake-sized puddles, nothing on either side but wild scrubland. Certainly no other signs of life. And feeling more and more certain that we'd not only taken a wrong turning but something terrible was about to happen. Then finally up ahead we saw a light. A tall wire fence topped with barbed wire came next, behind which were a motley assembly

of caravans and vans, illuminated by hundreds of light-bulbs on lengths of cable strung between them. It looked more like a scrapyard than a campsite. Indeed, inside the gate there was a pack of large mud splattered dog playing with what once had been a football, next to a few wheel-less old cars propped up on bricks. There was also a makeshift shed, from which a skinny ragged boy of about ten emerged and began to drag the high metal gates open for us. This was a campsite? Yes it was apparently, and the boy pointed to where we could park. Past a crowd of teenage boys gathered around a motorbike, it's engine screaming. Next to them a gaggle of little children, tangle haired, squatting at the edge of a huge puddle playing in the rain with a heap of plastic toys. Despite the time of year and weather all the caravans and vans were fully occupied, they even had their doors open, their brightly lit interiors revealing large multi-generational families watching television or eating. At the same time groups of teenagers hung around bonfires. Everything looked far too settled, as if they'd been there so long they could no longer move. The vehicles were also festooned in a whole host of cables, awnings, washing lines, television aerials, and satellite dishes. As we made our way around this strange 'other world', we were being trailed by some of the mangy dogs and a few of the children, who obviously knew where we were headed, because literally it was the only space left. That was when we began to realise just how close we were to all these other caravans and people. It was very intimate, too much really. Even if the other occupants didn't seem to mind, too busy shouting at each other, eating and waving their knives and forks. Phil turned off the engine, and we tried to take it all in. There were a lot of people here, far too many, why?

The answer dawned on us almost immediately. Romany.

Who else could possibly look as if they enjoyed camping in this weather, live so wholeheartedly in this bleak environment? It was yet another new experience to add to all the other unexpectedness and strangeness of Spanish life we'd encountered since arriving. But right then, our mental state being as frail as it was, we simply didn't feel we could cope with any more weirdness, so to our eternal shame Phil turned the key in the ignition and slowly we made our way back out.

The problem, or one of the problems, with our journey so far was that we never seemed to have time to recover from each new experience before we ran into another. We were collecting a rich tapestry of them now, which we might recall with amusement at some point in the future, but while it was happening was not a relaxing one. Mostly tiring and scary in equal portions. I really did hope that all of this would soon recede into the background of our new life and that we would start to stumble over some happy moments. Later that night, much later, we did find another campsite, probably the one Julio had meant all along. It was just as decrepit and run down, but at least there were no other guests. There was also a bar across the road. Where a few locals were sitting at the counter watching 'Killer Bees' on a massive television, balanced on an old fridge/freezer, dubbed into Spanish. The setting couldn't have been more apt. We ordered microwaved pizzas and beers and settled down to decompress.

That winter the rain followed us everywhere. It probably wasn't personal, but much of the time it truly felt as if it was. It rained and rained and rained. We drove, we camped, we got soaked. At least while we were driving it was warm, because the van's heater was still working, which was about the only electrical thing on the van that was. The wind turbine most

certainly didn't work, and the special charging lead from the van engine to the extra battery didn't work either. So we had to cook supper before it got dark. Chopping vegetables and boiling water by candlelight was particularly tricky, but at least the place filled with steam and kept us warm, even if the grey fabric insulating the ceiling was now coming unstuck. We spent a lot of time remembering things people had suggested. Helpful, practical things which we had completely ignored. Now we thought about how clever and perceptive everyone had been. We thought about our plan a lot too, about what we'd expected of Santiago de Compostela, and exactly why we'd disliked it so much. I really hoped we weren't so shallow that we'd been thrown off course just by some heavy rain and a few ugly modern buildings. Maybe it had been the weather, perhaps on a sunny day it would be different and maybe then we would have stayed and found our place. I doubted it though.

Phil was feeling impatient, he wanted to find the place and get on with life. Make a garden, feel rooted to a spot. For him, being away from his everyday routine of the garden and his workshop, was making him miserable and anxious. He was a home-body, not a traveller, not even a holidaymaker, and certainly not someone to take off into the unknown. Actually we hadn't set out to be travellers in the modern sense of the word, like looking for meaning or a purpose, we already knew what we wanted. Arriving somewhere, wandering around, then getting back in the van and heading off somewhere else, was definitely not us. And nowhere looked lovely at this time of year, all the pretty places were either hibernating or somewhere else.

In Ourense the landscape was definitely different, much more dramatic. With lush deep valleys just as Julio had said,

although after all this rain what wouldn't look lush? There were actually real mountains now too, and driving near them was scary, they were a lot bigger than anything we'd ever seen. There was a sort of menacing quality about their size, which made them seem almost alive. Often we were so high up that the clouds were below us. nature could be so much bigger than we had ever realised. Eventually we arrived in a little place called Celanova, which was exactly as we imagined small old Spanish towns should look. The buildings were not surrounded by ugly new developments, and it was market day, which to me was a good omen, plus it wasn't actually raining. A perfect opportunity to wander and rummage. Phil wasn't so sure, never a fan of markets he tried quickly to think of a reason why we shouldn't stop, but he couldn't. We needed to shop for food, so I won.

Celanova was more the type of place we had hoped to find in Santiago de Compostela, but on a tiny scale. It was actually very small, and the mountains that surrounded it very large. The narrow streets however were full of life. People going about their everyday tasks. There were feretarias, grocers, sweet shops, bakers, all definitely shops to visit when you actually needed something. Though not for browsing, as they were tiny, no bigger than the front room of someone's house, and the owner was there waiting, ready to take your order. Weird to go shopping and have to ask for everything, not something I was used to. In the centre of the town was a 'plaza', a square of stone slabs, where a much grander old building stood festooned with flags, surely the local council office. Leading off that were tiny side streets choked with old cars and little white vans. We had been amazed at the number of battered old Renault 4s we'd seen, it must have been twenty years since they'd been on the

road in Yorkshire. And then at the end of one there was the market. Outdoors and with lots of stalls.

The first one was ironmongery. Tools and the usual household stuff. But with unusual things too, like a gigantic frying pan full of holes. For what sort of eggs? Baskets woven from thick flat stuff, like palm tree leaves. Giant scissors with flat ends, grates, grills, hammers, odd looking gardening tools, or just the top parts without their handles. Also there were bells, lots and lots of bells. These were made from brass or some orangey yellow type of metal, and looked as if they'd been crushed by a giant hand, because instead of being round they were flat-sided. Some of these were massive, about a foot tall, with the ding-ey thing inside made of wood. Others were teeny, for hamsters maybe? Then there were stalls selling plants, ranging from freshly cut flowers and vegetables plants, right up to trees. After those came selections of fresh fruit and vegetables from local plots, herbs, nuts, honey, meat, and dried fish. Clothes of every description, including an entire stall dedicated to pinnys. Furniture. Even copper stills and stainless steel vats to make alcohol with. But most popular by far was the one with cages and cages of poultry. This was where all the action was. Folk were literally pushing each other to get up close and prod the birds that were in prodding distance, shouting and pointing at even more on display behind the stall up on an open-sided wagon. It was all very serious and brisk. The stallholders taking orders. Then expertly grabbing birds from the cages by their legs, while their free hand opened a fresh cardboard box to push them inside, then closing the flaps and tying the box with baler bind. All in one flowing movement. Topped off with a large knife to cut the baler bind and make three quick stabs in the box. Breathing holes we

decided, not kebabs.

Most people at the market were older, not surprising since it was a weekday. There were some Romany children roaming around trying to interest people in buying strips of sticking plaster, plastic combs, boxes of matches. I didn't see anyone buy from them, but a couple of Romany women who were begging with small babies in their arms had a bit more luck. The atmosphere was noisy and purposeful, most people intent on getting what it was they needed rather than just browsing. At the far end of the market we came across a large marquee, outside which all the men were congregating, as seems to be universal, while their womenfolk do all the shopping. Inside, behind a long trestle table, women wrapped in huge aprons were stirring vats of something very steamy. A closer look revealed a very nasty oily liquid, of terrible colour, with grey scum floating on the top. Definitely not appetising. It smelt bad, really bad, stomach churning bad. Yet there was already a queue waiting patiently for the first platefuls to be ready. As I was taking all this in, one of the apron-clad women lifted her ladle out of the scum and beckoned me to come and see what lay below. It was awful. It was actually more revolting than I could have imagined. Octopus tentacles! Ugly grey suckers on twirly lengths of grey flesh. Then grabbing a pair of flat-ended scissors the woman pulled out a length, and began cutting it into bite-sized chunks onto a wooden plate. It was gruesome. She even offered us some, but it was impossible to accept, even in the interests of entente cordial. I just smiled and shook my head, saying thank you. We'd already realised that in Spain there was no point in explaining we were vegetarian, we could have said we were from Pluto and got the same response. However, everyone else in the queue was very keen to have their plate of

the disgusting grey rubbery stuff, 'pulpo'.

We left the market and walked back into town, along with all the other people burdened down with their clucking cardboard boxes and masses of plastic carrier bags. The oldest were heading for the bus stop. They were all more or less the same height, but much smaller than us, and all dressed in dark clothes, old people clothes. They looked not just foreign, but from another era. Certainly nothing like retired people in England, who these days wear pretty much the same as everyone else, jeans, t-shirts, trainers, hoodies and at this time of the year fleeces. These people were wearing my Nan's clothes, and she died more than twenty years ago. Proper coats, court shoes, headscarves, and big vinyl shopping bags. In all the kilometres we'd travelled, in all the cold wet weather, we had yet to see anyone wearing a fleece. How odd was that? But just another difference, another piece of foreign-ness for us to understand, along with all the other pieces, helping us see how different life was in this country. This was a nice one though, unlike the nasty, wet, confusing and scary experiences we'd had so far. Our plan to make a garden in a foreign country had come about for lots of practical reasons, and living in a different culture was also part of it. The question we kept coming back to though, was how could we become part of a place like Celanova for example, and not just visitors?

Back at the van we set about making lunch, boiling the kettle on the little stove, unwrapping the cartwheel of cheese I'd bought at the market wrapped in its strip of cotton fabric, sawing off hunks of bread from the baseball bat sized loaf we'd got at the bakers. It was cosy in the van now. We'd got, or Phil had, that bit completely right. It felt like our old home, sort of. The main problems were the weather, lack of electricity and the

incessant moving on. Would it ever be possible for us to know when we'd found the right place? Would it be obvious just by turning up? I had the feeling that getting to know somewhere would be the key, and that took time. We were beginning to tire of packing the van up every day or so. Maybe we should try something different, find a place to base ourselves, somewhere we could park up and get to know properly. Celanova could be the right sort of place to try out the idea. It was a nice town, and having by now completed our long circumnavigation around the whole of the Ourense region, admittedly in driving rain and low visibility, this was about the best we'd seen. How relaxing it would be to stay somewhere for a while. Calm down a bit and see what it felt like to be actually here in Spain, rather than rushing on and on. Phil wasn't so sure. To him we were on a tight schedule, he'd decided that three months would be more than enough time to track down the elusive place, and if we stopped we might loose the urge to carry on looking, then inevitably doom and depression would follow. We had to keep moving. Who was right? I was all in favour of stopping for a bit. I was hoping that way we could get some sort of normal life going, rather than continuing this rather uncomfortable and miserable holiday we seemed to be trapped in. After a serious amount of cartwheel cheese and a shared bar of chocolate we decided that we would stop, but just for a while.

The nearest campsite was about 20km away. And apart from the extremely steep, almost vertical driveway down into it, and all the sand instead of grass, it wasn't too bad. The sand was everywhere. In between parking up and getting into the back about half a ton of the stuff had managed to work its way inside. The reason why there was so much was because the campsite was on a beach, albeit to a river. At any other time of

year this would have been a lovely feature. However right now the river was a raging torrent, sloshing over it's banks and rushing noisily past, taking branches, small trees and other things it had gathered on its way. Not surprisingly there were no other campers either, so it was just us. Which was fine. That is, until we settled down for the night, and the darkness brought on more ruminating about our great plan, which inevitable got us sucked into thinking about the good old times of our previous life. We could certainly wallow when we put our hearts into it. We'd had a good life in Yorkshire, blah, blah, blah. We knew, or we sort of knew, because we'd been in this state so many times now, that we had taken on more than our experience had prepared us for. We'd wanted to live in a different place, but were beginning to see just how different that was. So either we had to ignore all of what we were beginning to see, the foreign-ness which was sneaking in through the sliding door of the van, trying to rock our foundations, and try and press on with our original English-based idea. Or we accept there was the possibility of doing something different, spend more time feeling the differences and enjoying the experience. We silently mulled this over, lying in bed in the dark. The river continuing to roar and the wind rocking the van as it gusted past. Looking back on this moment I'm pretty sure that even if the right piece of land had presented itself right then, we still wouldn't have felt ready to buy it. Nothing felt right. We weren't ourselves. We were also realising more each day that we didn't understand enough about Spain to get involved with pieces of land or large sums of money. Despite all our big talk of a three-month plan, we had realised that we weren't going to be ready in six months either. But we couldn't admit that yet, so we just went to sleep.

We did settle down for a bit. We pottered, we shopped, and we got to know more about the area. The campsite was located a couple of hundred metres from another town, Allariz, so we spent most of our time there. Some days it didn't even rain. It was while we were there, when it was almost possible to consider spring was on its way, that we made contact with Ramon. Phil had brought with him stacks of papers, magazines, lists, and contacts all to do with gardening, and on one of these was the name of the only person in the entire Ourense region area who was practising biodynamic agriculture. This rather strange form of growing things is based on the phases of the moon. It does sound a bit weird, but is a well established theory used by many growers all over the world for over half a century. Each year a special calendar is produced, in masses of different languages, which identifies the best planting days for each type of plant, depending on whether it is to produce roots, leaves or fruits. Discovering we weren't far from Ramon was very interesting. Maybe he was the person who could give us advice about how to find our place. We were also desperate to see a real garden and talk plants with someone. The list only gave Ramon's address so we decided to send him a letter, in English obviously, and hope for the best.

Now we were based in one place we had found people to chat to, and a couple of these could speak a bit of English, which was marvellous. We had quite a backlog of questions and they all came rushing out as soon as we found an unsuspecting soul to listen to us. One of our questions was, where were all the estate agents? We had yet to see a single one and had begun to realise that the buying and selling of property must happen in some other way, but how? Each person we asked said the same thing, that you had to ask people. Apparently everyone bought

from neighbours, friends, family or through some sort of contact like that. They said it was 'muy dificil', very difficult, to find somewhere without contacts. This was not something we were pleased to hear, we didn't know anyone or have any family or friends here. But we were realising that on our journey we couldn't let 'muy dificil' stand in our way. It had to be possible. And anyway, what did these people know about British grit and determination? We would prevail. Plus, we were looking forward to hearing from Ramon, maybe he could show us an 'alternative' way of finding a place.

About a week later we got a reply, in Spanish, but it was nice and basic so we could sort of understand the gist. He could speak English, but not write it. He would love to meet us, please come on Sunday. The address was the 'Casa Reitoral', which appeared to mean something like a rectory or at least church related. Maybe Ramon was a priest, and his walled garden was in some sort of monastery? Not that we'd seen anywhere remotely like that on our travels, though by now our imaginations could no longer stretch far enough into the unknown to even begin imagining what we were going to see next. That Sunday we headed off towards Xinzo de Limia, about an hour away, then turned off the main road and continued south until we reached Santa Maria Laroa, the 'aldea', or hamlet, where Ramon lived. We couldn't drive any further then, the van was too long/ wide for the narrow 'designed only for donkey' streets, so we parked up and set off on foot. It was a really small place, only a handful of little houses clustered together on a steep hill, church at the top. Most of it looked empty and abandoned, and there didn't seem to be anywhere near the church that fitted our image of a rectory, so we carried on walking around until we found someone. In this case an old

man leading a donkey. 'Ramon?' Yes of course he knew Ramon. But then, with a population of about twelve people, who wouldn't? He could also see that any kind of explanation as to where he lived would be too difficult, so he led the way, instantly acquiring an entourage, two women carrying huge buckets of grass and weeds, who fell into step alongside. They told us that Ramon worked too hard, and that he needed a woman in his life. He needed someone to help him. No one could be expected to work all the hours he did in the garden and then cook for himself, wash clothes, clean the house. Poor guy, we felt sorry his life and marital status were such a popular topic of local discussion. Then, as if having heard all this commotion, Ramon himself appeared, to lead us the rest of the way, while the others continued on down the track.

Ramon's house was incredible, beyond anything we could have ever imagined. Entering through a huge and heavy wooden door, the first thing we saw was that we were still outside, albeit in a courtyard. We had passed through a stone wall which was one side of an enclosed farmyard, comprising the house and various outbuildings. It was so strange to be inside a place which hid itself so absolutely, thus appearing anonymous from the outside, but absolutely full of life on the inside. There were hens scratting about in the straw. Ducks and geese flapping and honking at each other in two gigantic washing-up bowls. Pigeons sitting in the broken gutters of the barns, occasionally swooping down to raid the food the hens were pecking at. There were cats lying in patches of sunlight. Goats bleating from inside one of the barns. Even a huge dog, who suddenly appeared from inside the top of the house, obviously very excited, not sure whether to bark or lick us to death. He was lovely, but extremely large, so much so that when

he attempted to stand up and rest his front paws on my shoulders I stumbled backwards into a pile of rakes and spades. There was stuff everywhere. Tools, a rotavator with all its various attachments, a trailer, bales of straw, a bicycle, a washing machine, hosepipes trailing like luminous green or yellow snakes, plastic netting in bundles, coils of wire, crates, boxes, sacks, piles of bricks, planks of wood and logs. In short, it was our idea of paradise. Ramon eventually persuaded 'Asterix', his dog, to stop pinning us down, and guided us to a little wooden gate at the bottom of a flight of stone steps. Lifting the loop of string which held the gate closed we filed up leaving an agitated Asterix behind. We had already begun to get used to seeing this typical kind of traditional Gallego house, where the living area was upstairs and the animals quarters were underneath. A design which was an early form of central heating, the warmth from the animals rising up through gaps in the wooden ceiling to the floor above. Personally, I felt that if winters here were as cold and wet as the one we'd just lived through then I'd have invited the animals to come and live upstairs, even lie on the bed. On each of these steps was more stuff, seed trays, sacks of maize, piles of wood, old boots, plastic crates, something different on each one. At the top of which was the balcony or porch of the house. Here was set an old kitchen table, around which was a group of mismatched chairs and a wooden bench. The table was covered with a pretty tablecloth, on top of which was a jug of wild flowers. It was all so homely and perfect I felt like crying. Although I did manage to pull myself together and sit down, while Ramon disappeared under a washing line full of clothes to put the kettle on.

It was a bright afternoon underscored by the chill of an early spring. From the balcony we could look out over the roof

of the courtyard and across the flat plains of Xinzo de Limia, where in the distance there were mountains which had snowy peaks. Maybe it was still only early spring, and we did have our jackets and scarves on, but it felt good to be sitting here at Ramon's table enjoying the little bit of sun there was, protected from any wind by walls and the overhanging roof. Then to add to the scene a little black and white cat appeared. She crept along under the bench and considered us for about two seconds, before jumping up and settling on Phil's lap. It couldn't have been more perfect. The cat squinting at the sun and purring loudly. We then looked around the rest of the balcony, our eyes gobbling up every detail as if they'd been starved of stimulation. A big box of firewood, plastic crates, a netting sack full of dried corn cobs, several pairs of boots caked in mud, scattered odd socks. Tea towels dangled over the balcony rail, which had been made from a scaffolding pole cemented into a stack of bricks at each end. This place was a testament to industry, everything had a use, a purpose. Totally unlike the chic marble-clad homes which had been the norm for most of our journey. Pigeons came and went through gaps in the roof tiles, and the cat, now snoozing on Phil's knee, couldn't have been less interested. Ramon finally returned with a little old saucepan. Well, a sort of saucepan. One of its handles had broken off so Ramon was gripping it with a tea towel. This was his kettle. It also served as a teapot it seemed, as stems of freshly picked herbs were floating in the boiling water. Ramon pointed at the cat and said she never failed to find someone to make a fuss of her, she knew exactly how to get what she wanted. Last year, when she first turned up as a small kitten, on a freezing cold night, she had made such a noise that he had to come out and see what was happening. He'd opened the door and in she ran, and that

was that. Even now she was always hungry. He said that he fed her every other day, that was enough, he needed a cat that caught mice and rats. He thought that if he fed her too much she would get lazy. Ramon waggled his finger at the cat and said something in Spanish about getting off Phil's lap, but she just closed her eyes. We couldn't imagine feeding any of our cats only once every other day, ours had always been twice a day creatures. Ramon returned again to the kitchen, this time bringing back three little glasses for the tea in one hand and a home-made apple cake in the other.

We sat around the table together sharing our stories and discovering how Ramon had arrived there. He wasn't local, he'd come from the coast, the port of Vigo, where he had grown up and got a job in ship building as a welder, along with just about everyone else there. But he'd always wanted to live in a rural place, somewhere like his grandparents had, because all of his happy memories were of helping them grow food for the family and of being with them in the countryside. At some point, while he was still working as a welder, he came across the biodynamic movement and had been fascinated. He'd read that it had its roots in Germany so he decided to go there and find out more. Somehow finding a contact for a biodynamic farm where he could both live and work which made moving to Germany possible. He'd left Galicia and gone there for two years, during which time he had learned a lot and saved enough money to come back and set himself up in a basic way. He'd found Xinzo de Limia after discovering that the church had many old, empty houses, presumably because there were fewer priest nowadays. The church hadn't decided what to do about all these old buildings yet, which were mostly derelict. Through various contacts Ramon had managed to get this one rent free.

And although it really was extremely basic and tumbledown, Ramon was happy because now he could put into practice all the things he'd learned in Germany and start his own business. It was definitely a small enterprise, just him, but requiring a lot of physical labour. Each Monday he'd fill his old Renault 4 to bursting point with produce and drive the forty kilometres into Ourense, where he sold everything he could grow to the wholefood shops there. He also supplied restaurants in other towns, further afield, including Santiago de Compostela. By ingeniously using the bus service. The produce, packed in boxes, was taken to the local bus station where it was accepted as luggage. All Ramon had to do was tell the restaurant people what time their bus would arrive and they collected it. Incredible, why hadn't it caught on in the UK?

We drank our tea and ate the delicious cake, then went for a walk to see all the pieces of land Ramon was using to grow his produce, which were dotted around the aldea. The best patch was nearest the house, where there was a polytunnel full of seed trays overflowing with seedlings. The garden here was a glorious, vibrant tangle of marigolds, nasturtiums and other herbs growing wild and lush. In stark contrast to the pieces of land all around, which belonged to Ramon's neighbours. Those were ploughed precisely, the bare earth showing just a regiment of seedlings, while others were just bare earth. Herbicide, said Ramon, it was a big problem. His neighbours were all older people, and until recently they had grown their food in a natural way, but now they had begun buying chemicals. Which to Ramon's mind was bad enough, but they didn't understand how to use them properly. Many older people couldn't read (or write), so either they diluted the products too much to make them go further or they overdid the dose because the packets

seemed too little. Either way, it was a hazard and a shame, particularly since many older people were just using the products to keep the land 'clean', weed-free. It was either that or they set fire to it to achieve the same result, the idea of letting nature take over was totally alien. Ramon shrugged and said it was a sign of the times. Not that long ago the place would have been full of people growing food for their families, but now younger ones had left, gone to the cities, and only the older people were left. It felt sad, but at least for the people in this aldea they had Ramon, the youngest person by about twenty years. He was a willing worker, taking on various pieces of land from his elderly neighbours, growing food and saving them the worry of their uncultivated plots. He was also there when trees blew down in winter, or when they needed help to understand official letters or paperwork. Ramon hoped to change their minds about using chemicals, especially since they all knew about the quality of home produced food, and there was an increasing awareness about ecology and organic food thanks to local television programmes. We walked back to the house and returned to the balcony, Ramon meanwhile went off to close all the doors on the various buildings below. With the animals safely inside for the night he then came back upstairs and went to put the kettle on again.

It had been really good to come and meet Ramon, we felt he completely understood what we wanted to do, even if we didn't speak each other's language that well, there was a real connection. We also knew we could learn masses from him, not just about growing things in this climate, but because he was also involved with various local initiatives which had been set up to encourage young people back to the land. We sat talking and Ramon tried to think of people we should meet next who might

be able to help us, and gave us some contact numbers. This felt great, like it was possible for us to become part of something and reconnect to the world. Obviously we told Ramon about our grand plan and asked his advice about finding a piece of land, as well as the absence of estate agents. Yes, it was true that buying and selling happened locally, amongst neighbours and family. It would be much easier for us if we were living in an aldea, we would then get to know everyone and be able to hear about places people wanted to sell. Had we considered trying to rent somewhere? In fact, said Ramon suddenly becoming animated, he had just thought of someone who might be able to help, a woman he'd met called Ana, who worked for a project which existed to encourage new rural enterprises. She was very interested in organic gardening and was actually based in a small pueblo right down at the bottom of the Ourense region, a particularly beautiful and mountainous area, on the border with Portugal. Ramon felt certain we would love it and suggested we ring Ana and arrange to meet her. We thought this was a marvellous idea. At last we felt as if we were making a start, and Ramon was obviously pleased to have been able to help us. Now as the sun was beginning to sink behind the courtyard roof, the temperature dropping, we realised reluctantly that it was time for us to go. It was a wrench to move the cat from my lap, but we got up and walked down the stone steps together, Ramon going on ahead, switching on a light before disappearing into the barn under the house. Reappearing almost at once with a cardboard box of produce, which he presented to Phil. Carrots, potatoes, cabbage, onions and a jar of honey. A gift he said, Welcome to Galicia!



Settling down

The arrival of spring and our visit to Ramon signalled a new phase on our journey. We felt our plan was still alive after months of hibernation. Now we weren't alone, we knew there was someone with the same ideas as us and living nearby. We started thinking about Ramon's suggestion of renting somewhere, maybe he was right, that staying put for a while was the thing to do. The idea of moving out of the van into a house now seemed a logical progression. We pondered and savoured the sudden arrival of the spring. In Allariz the sun was working its magic and drawing people outside, the place was coming alive. Children dived in and out of the 'libraria', the bookshop/ stationery supplies, which also sold sweets, trying to decide which sugary things to choose. Sherbert straws, bubble gum, red liquorice shoe laces, or sticky lollies. Tough choices. Then running back to the 'passeo', clutching their little plastic

bags of bright colours, to run around with their friends. The passeo. It meant two things in Spanish, a meeting place and the act of strolling or walking. In Allariz the passeo near the libreria was a big open space enclosed by huge plane trees, newly decked out with fresh green leaves. Parents sat on benches talking to each other and looking after their younger children in buggies, happy to be outside at last after the long wet winter. We realised that for most people the passeo was their garden, the narrow streets and tightly packed houses didn't leave room for even a backyard between them.

Our chosen passeo was a walk through the narrow ancient winding streets, cutting across from one narrow alley to another, so that we could walk past our favourite shop, the florist. It was a tiny little place, with my favourite shade of blue paint around its big window, and it had a rough old wooden door. Peeking inside we could see masses of terracotta pots and old baskets packed with primulas and bulbs. There were delicate glass vases of freesias in there too, whose scent I instantly recognised, as well as lush ferns in glazed pots. It was like the potting shed of a Secret Garden, heady with the aroma of moss, damp earth and flowers. Outside in the street was a low bench where the bigger plants sat in huge pots. There were also bunches of tulips and daffodils arranged in galvanised buckets, and tiny little pots which belonged in a dolls house garden, packed with moss and a single bulb. It was all so lovely. Roots, roots, roots. The shop owner was enjoying one of the perks of her job, sitting outside on a garden chair, reading, positioned to catch the sun peeping through between the narrow buildings. Her cat was sunbathing in the same spot, stretched out amongst the pots. We stopped, as we had begun doing, to chat. It was too intimate a street to pass without speaking. I knelt down to stroke the cat who was a

perfect silver tabby, with huge green eyes. She lay back and let me rub her ears, blissfully content in the warmth. The cat's name was Ruth, pronounced 'root' in Spanish, which sounded just right in a gardening shop. Apparently she was pregnant, usually she produced two litters a year, the florist explained, thanks to a big black and white tom cat who was always around. Wasn't finding homes for all the kittens difficult, I asked, and what about neutering? No, she said, and also it didn't seem right to go against nature. Ruth got up and strolled back into the shop, her big fluffy belly swaying from side to side. We both knew we were going to ask about those kittens, we needed a cat, and one from a florist shop? It was definitely a sign that things were looking up.

We thought a lot about Ramon's suggestion of finding somewhere to rent, and eventually, buoyed up by the improving weather and our first bits of good fortune, we rang Ana. She was pleased to hear from us and suggested we meet the following week in Entrimo, the most southern pueblo in Galicia, just 3km from the frontier with Portugal. It was seventy kilometres away, not far really, but the journey was like travelling to an entirely different world. The mountains grew in size with each kilometre, until the road was so steep the van started to develop a cough each time Phil changed gear, as it struggled to haul itself upwards, only recovering as it sped down the other side. We swayed around tight curves, sheer rock face on one side, sheer drop on the other, all the time gradually ascending higher and higher. And then the rain returned, lashing hard against the windscreen, making the wiper blades moan as they struggled back and forth. Until eventually it turned into a thick mist, engulfing us in an eerie silence in which we could see nothing ahead. Phil slowed right down to a crawl, which was

lucky because we were now beginning to encounter pieces of debris on the road, odd bits to begin with, then small piles of rocks, until eventually we had to stop completely because it looked as if the entire hillside had just slid down onto the road, blocking it completely. Phil turned off the ignition and we sat, slightly shocked, watching the white mist swirl past the windows. Now and then a gap appeared, but there was nothing, only the mud and rocks on the road. The silence was absolute, it absorbed everything. We sat wondering if this kind of thing really did happen, did roads really disappear like this? Then we began to think what to do now. We had no idea where we were, apart from being stuck very high up on a ledge of a very steep mountain. We hadn't seen a single house for ages, let alone another person or vehicle. The map hadn't shown any other route. And we couldn't even turn round. The road was so narrow, the possibility of a three or even twenty-three point turn was unimaginable, we'd end up going over the side. I was starting to think the van was jinxed or at the very least harboured some very negative energy. I hated the van.

The windows were beginning to steam up, probably with all the heat from our brains, and Phil was absently wiping the windscreen with his hand to clear it, when a shape appeared through the mist. We weren't alone. There was someone out there. A few seconds later we could see it was a tiny woman leading a donkey. We weren't lost, or in the middle of nowhere, because we knew that people with donkeys meant we were near a village. Opening the doors we jumped out just as the woman arrived. 'Buenos dias', she said, pointing at the rocks, wasn't it terrible? Too much rain this year. At the same moment there was the sound of a car horn, and out of the mist a little van pulled up behind us. It was turning out to be quite a busy road,

this middle of nowhere. It was the bread van. The driver hopped out and came round to look at what was happening. 'Oh well, it looks as if I'll have to go around the other way, over the top of the mountain,' he said, and walked to the back of his van with the donkey woman, opening its doors for her to select a dozen long loaves, slipping them into the donkey's panniers. Then he turned to us. Where were we heading? Entrimo? He was going there next, it wasn't far but we would have to reverse all the way back to the last turning, then we could follow him up and over the mountain that way. Jumping back in his van he then shot backwards at alarming speed, us more slowly and carefully, until eventually we reached the turning. At which he tooted his horn and shot off again, with us trying to keep up as his little van climbed like a mountain goat. We arrived in Entrimo ten minutes later and stumbled out of the van to find the bar and order coffee.

We had arranged to meet Ana in the one opposite her office, and had no problem finding it. Inside were all the now familiar features, vinyl seats, marble and smoked glass everywhere. At the high counter the now usual grouping of old men were sat, smoking. Nursing glasses of 'aguardiente', the local fire-water, to get them ready to start their day of hanging around places. Ana arrived just after we'd had finished our first coffee. It wasn't until we'd been in Spain a bit longer that we realised no one here ever arrived early. They were only ever late. A little bit late, quite late, very late, or not-turning-up-at-all late. However, to compensate Ana was very friendly, if a bit nervous at meeting real live English people. She said her English wasn't fluent, but it was definitely good enough for us. I'd be totally impressed if I could speak Spanish that badly! She told us about her work for the rural development agency, which

received European union funding to support local initiatives. She explained that she had hoped Ramon might have been interested in applying for some money to help his business, but he seemed reluctant to spend time filling in the necessary paperwork. I couldn't help thinking that Ramon was even wiser than we'd thought.

We talked about our idea of finding a place to live, and that everyone we'd met had suggested we should try and rent somewhere first in order to make local contacts. Did Ana think this was a good idea? Yes, she admitted, it was true estate agents were only found in large towns and cities, and then they mostly sold apartments or houses in those places, not the countryside. We told Ana all about our plan and she thought it sounded wonderful. Of course, she said, many local people grew vegetables, kept pigs, made wine. But they didn't normally make gardens, as English people knew them, with permanent plants. Making a special place which also celebrated nature and looked beautiful would be very unusual here. Who knows, she said, if we managed to find a place maybe we could consider applying for funding. However, in the first instance, perhaps we would consider coming to live in Entrimo. Her office was there and she would be able to help us find a house to rent. This would definitely help us get to know people and then we'd find out if there was anywhere to buy. This all sounded very helpful and really amazing. Who'd have thought we'd have come across such a supportive person? Maybe this was the sign we'd been waiting for, where we'd begin our new life. If we liked the idea, Ana said, she would put up some notices in the local shops to see if anyone had a house to rent. Obviously it was a very small place, with a small population, but there was always something. Maybe not in the best condition, did we mind what it was like?

Frankly, after living in the van for months on end, anywhere would seem like a mansion now, no we didn't mind at all. Well, said Ana, why don't you go for a walk, have a look around the town, and come back at lunchtime. She wanted us to meet Agostin and Pilar, who ran a rural hotel in Entrimo. Pilar was a wonderful cook and would make us a special vegetarian lunch, which Ana was looking forward to tasting. We were stunned. Entrimo might have been at the very edge of Galicia, of Spain even, and far from anywhere, but it would be here that we tasted our first Spanish vegetarian meal. What a very interesting place it was turning out to be.

As we began our walk, it was obvious that Entrimo was completely dominated by nature. Huge mountains dwarfed everything. Even hidden in the misty rain they were a silent presence, as they appeared and disappeared between the passing grey clouds. The street where Ana had her office and we'd had coffee was the main street, well, the only street really. Beginning with a large ugly cement edifice called Hotel Don Pepe, which was a bar/ restaurant/ hotel. Next to which was a tiny supermarket. Then an electrical shop with bright lights and modern appliances. After that a musty looking place selling clothes from another era. It had faded bits of wrapping paper draped over its window display, the paper was probably there to protect the clothes from any stray rays of sunlight trying to sneak in. Then there was another bar. Followed by a pharmacy, no Spanish pueblo however remote could do without it's glossy modern chemist. A bakers, with plenty of stick loaves, cakes only on Saturdays. Another bar. And finally a 'frutaria', the fruit and vegetable shop. After that, across the road, was a little park, with swings and a slide under tall palm trees. No doubt a popular spot on a sunny day after school. On the other side of

the park, through the trees, was a neat stone building, almost like a child's drawing of a house but bigger, and it had flags on tall poles outside. The Town Hall.

Walking back, this time on the other side of the road, we passed a horribly dull looking building which we discovered was the library, open three days a week from 3.30pm until 5.30pm. And down the side of this, via steep stone steps, was the Post Office. We suddenly realised that renting a house would mean we could have post. A really exciting thought, so exciting that we felt the urge to move into any tumbledown wreck on offer. We'd definitely ask Ana to help us. The office was tucked literally underneath the library. One bare subterranean room, with a counter, opening hours, 8.30am – 11.00am.

The rest of downtown Entrimo consisted of yet another bar, a bank and a builders merchant, nothing else. Definitely not the kind of place that tourists would be thronging to, especially as most of the buildings had that look of being horribly refaced in the 1960s. It was more like a frontier post. A cowboy town, where just the necessities were catered for and nothing else. Merely tolerated by the vast nature that surrounded it, the massive faces of grey rock and endless forests of dark trees. Behind one side of the main street the mountains loomed up immediately, making the shops look like part of a toy village. And behind the other, the land sloped away dramatically, revealing a massive sky and even larger vista of the distant mountains and forests in Portugal. So far away they that weren't even having the same weather. Over there the bright sun was breaking through the clouds as they rushed past, striking their wet surfaces, bathing it in a warm yellow glow. What a strange and amazing place this was.

Lunch was a wonderful affair at the rural hotel of Agostin

and Pilar. We had gone in Ana's car, leaving the main street then driving a couple of kilometres back down the mountain, after which we took a narrow winding road to a small and what appeared to be, abandoned aldea. Vila Asperelo. However, since we'd visited Ramon we knew that doors in walls could hide all sorts of secrets, and this one was no exception. It turned out to be an impressive collection of very old but now fully restored rural buildings, each celebrating a particular craft from the past. There was a lush tropical garden too, with bushes, trees, ferns and shrubs. Through which a narrow stone path led us to the restaurant, where two cats were waiting at the door to be let in. Inside was even more beautiful. A large open room, with bare stone walls and flagstone floors, huge wooden beams, heavy wooden furniture, and a massive collection of old gardening tools. Wooden rakes, pitchforks, spades and many other objects we had never seen before. The most impressive feature though was an absolutely enormous fireplace, so big it had benches and a table inside it, the actual fire off to one side, roaring with logs the size of small trees. How lovely it was to feel warm again and sit in its flickering light. Ana introduced us to Pilar and Agostin. They didn't speak any English, but we were beginning to discover that with some people it didn't matter, communication had more to do with the combined wills to connect with each other, and certainly it worked that way with Agostin and Pilar. We wanted to know everything about their restaurant, the hotel, the food, the old buildings, and the garden. They in turn wanted to know how on earth we had arrived in Entrimo, of all places. There was plenty of empathy and appreciation of the same things, especially the very good vegetarian food. And it really was the best. The tastiest we had ever eaten, anywhere. Dishes made from pumpkin, little

soufflés, roasted and marinated vegetables, local cheese, and desserts to die for. Apparently Pilar had never cooked for vegetarians before, and this was her attempt to give traditional Gallego cuisine a vegetarian twist. She had succeeded, magnificently. Ana explained that the hotel had received some European Union funding, and that Agostin was now part of the local management of the programme which she worked for. When international delegations came to visit, Pilar did all the catering. I wondered what those delegates thought of Entrimo, the cowboy frontier town with incredible cuisine.

After lunch we talked to Ana about the possibility of finding somewhere to rent. She planned to get some notices printed off and put them up in shop windows. As soon as she heard anything, she would email us. We drove back to base and got ready to feel impatient again. We couldn't wait to get to Entrimo and take our first tentative steps towards realising our plan. First however, there was the kitten to think about. We couldn't set off to our first real foreign home without him.

We had walked through Allariz often enough by now, and had seen the florist plenty of times without hearing any news, but today was different. As we approached she popped out of the dark interior to call us in. At the back, behind a beaded curtain, where it was even darker and smelled more intensely of earthiness, was an old wicker basket. In which was Ruth, lying on her side and half buried under a heap of tiny velvety bodies, all snuggled up against her stomach. The florist knelt down to speak to her and she immediately stood up and stepped over her brood to get out of the basket. Walking across to lean against our legs. It was just as if she was expecting to be congratulated, she looked so proud of her babies. Then she walked back to the basket and dangled her head over the side, listening to their

funny squeaks, leaning down to lick their furry skin. The florist picked one up, the fattest of all, and handed him to me. His fur, a picture of miniature tabby markings, felt warm and soft. Eyes still closed and ears folded like origami triangles. His short, soft, worm of a tail, curved around my hand. This was our kitten, he was the strongest, said the florist. His warm little body fitted into my palm, his flat kitten face so beautiful. When he realised he wasn't in the basket any more, he started to squeak, so I quickly put him back with the others. Ruth was in her place again and the little creatures were scrambling blindly over each other to get near the food. They were all lovely, but obviously ours was the loveliest and we noticed that he'd managed to work his way to the front of the food line, drinking and kneading his paws on Ruth's body. The kittens fed for a little while and then fell asleep in a heap. Only six weeks to wait before we'd be taking him to Entrimo with us. Surely by then Ana would have found us somewhere to move to.

It was actually only four weeks we had to wait before Ana emailed to say that she and her colleague Sandra had found three possible places for us to go and see. Three. One of these had to be the one.

Once again we set off for Entrimo. This time in watery sunlight. Not a brilliantly sunny day, but anything was an improvement on rain. We wove up into the mountains, crawling along the long steep roads, then swooped down the other side. We came to 'landslide village' again, which was all cleared away now, and didn't look half as menacing as it did last time. It was just a small cluster of houses, although it did have an odd feeling about it, even without the mist and low cloud. This place was just about clinging to the side of a mountain, with nothing below, almost as if it had grown out of the rock. It was

hard to imagine any world event having the slightest repercussions here, it's pace and purpose defined solely by the raw nature it stood in. These were the real places, where life was lived to the full. We were beginning to adjust our vision. Foreign-ness had started to colour our ideas. Just as we had thought it might.

Maybe one of our reasons for wanting to come to Spain in the first place wasn't just about swapping one kind of self sufficiency for another, but more to do with finding a connection to the passing of time related to nature, rather than clocks, timetables, diaries and calendars. We had, after all, started to wonder where our life had gone in Yorkshire, not being able to keep track of the years as they passed. Maybe this was it, time related to nature and the seasons.

Also, this little aldea was real, actually quite a harsh version of real life, certainly not the postcard image. Here there was rain and mud. It could be cold too, and of course there were donkeys instead of cars. Now we were glimpsing it, we were beginning to see the gap between our old life and what it might be like to live in a place like this. Neither of us had realised it could be so different. Now we were involved in a much bigger adventure than our plan had allowed. Just adapting to this different way of life, living and surviving here, was going to be an achievement. Realising all this, as we carried on to Entrimo, wasn't exactly frightening, perhaps a bit daunting, knowing that some of the experiences of our previous life were starting to peel away, as if they didn't actually mean anything here. It felt a bit like loosing our stabilisers, we felt wobbly but excited. However, suppose we couldn't cope with this? Suppose, as I had already suspected, we weren't made of the right material for this adventure and we didn't have whatever was required to

make it work? What could we do? Go back to Yorkshire, pick up the remains of our old life? Yes, of course we could. But even as we realised our plan was starting to slip out of our hands, we were so engrossed in trying to make it work, we didn't look back.

We arrived outside Ana's office just as her car drew up. Time for a coffee? Obviously. This time we all trotted across the road to Hotel Don Pepe, Ana, Phil, Sandra and me. This was another of Ana's 'offices', where she brought her visitors, and it was the owner Cristina, who came over to take our order. Bringing with her a plate of Tarta de Santiago. 'Hola, Buenos dias'. Then disappeared to get our coffee. Tarta de Santiago in our opinion was the only decent thing to come out of Santiago de Compostela, a crumbly almond cake decorated with a powdery icing sugar on top in the shape of a sword. As we drank our coffee and attacked the cake, Ana's assistant explained about the three places we were going to visit. The first was outside the pueblo, about two kilometres away. It was an old house without any furniture, a bit rundown, but not very expensive, so we could see what we thought. The second was just behind the main street, a really tiny place, the cheapest, but was very small. The third, to Sandra's mind was the best, it had more space, as well as some land and came furnished. We would have to visit that one last because she had arranged with the owner of the first house that we'd be there at 11.30am.

Phil and I got in Ana's car and she drove down the hill to where a tiny cluster of houses had their own name, Fiera Bella. This was the home of the wood oven where the bread for Entrimo was baked. Then leaving the tarmac road we turned down a track with open grassland on either side, until we eventually arrived at another cluster of houses and the road

ended. Ana turned off the engine and suddenly we could hear the sound of barking approaching. It turned out to be a huge furry part-Alsatian part-sofa. And he was very large and very excited, running towards us at such a speed he was finding it difficult to stop. Thankfully, at the very last minute, he managed to bounce to a halt, just a little way off. But now our way was blocked and it wasn't just Ana who was worried about this. None of us wanted to get bitten, but surely any dog with violence on it's mind wouldn't be wagging it's tail? We all took a tentative step forwards, and as we did he happily turned and ran a little way back towards the house, turning to see if we were following. Plainly he had come to show us the way.

We arrived at a gap in a stone wall and the dog dashed through, immediately disappearing. Typical, he leaves us when we need to know where to go. We were on a narrow path with a high stone wall on either side. Over one was a world of hens and ducks. The hens pecking and digging, the ducks clucking, fluttering, and diving into big bowls of water. But no sign of anyone to ask directions. Then from the adjacent building a man appeared, with a red plastic bucket over one arm. Ana called to him, did he know of the house for rent? He smiled, no doubt thinking this was going to be interesting, and slowly waded towards us sprinkling the contents of the bucket amongst the birds. Yes, he knew the place, walking along to a wire netting gate in the wall, through which he squeezed, hooking the string back over the gate post. He shook hands with us all, and Ana began explaining who she was, then turned to us. The man nodded when Ana told him that we were English and were looking for somewhere to rent. Ah, so the place was for us? English? Well fancy that, married couple you say? Any children? The man turned and began walking along

the path, beckoning us to follow. We walked along in single file until he stopped outside some metal gates. Was this the house? No, not the house to rent, his house. Opening the gate he directed us up the steps to the front door where a woman in a pinny peered out. He shouted something over our heads which made the woman smile, and pull the door wide open, waving us in. Ushering us down a dark chilly corridor to what was probably the sitting room, it was too dark to tell at first the shutters were still down. Instead of opening them the man switched on a light. This room was obviously only used on special occasions. There was a flowery three-piece suite, still covered in plastic, very sensible given that the man was still in his work clothes and his boots, both covered in mud and straw. On the walls were several religious pictures, including an incredibly kitsch 3D rendition of the Last Supper. A cheap veneer sideboard. That was it. The temperature in the room was glacial. Indicating the sofa he motioned us to sit, while he plopped down on an armchair, a cloud of dust and feathers erupting from his boiler suit. His wife then reappeared and opened the sideboard. 'Aguardiente?' No, no thank you, we all chorused. The man passed around the drinks.

We found out more about aguardiente much later. How it was made from the remains of the grapes after they had been turned into wine. Fermenting and distilling were involved, as was the flavouring with either coffee or herbs. It appeared that everyone made their own, even though it was illegal, and from their own special recipe. And everyone, including children in the winter, drank it to get the blood warmed up. To us it tasted as if it might burn our internal organs it was so awful. We also discovered that saying no to aguardiente had no effect. You were being polite, obviously you would like some, and anyway

this aguardiente was far superior in every way to any other you will have tasted. This one he'd made himself, so here you are, what do you think? Another glass? On this our first encounter with the elixir of mountain life, we were drinking the coffee flavoured version. It tasted like something burnt, and I was glad when a box of biscuits started circulating, even if the best ones had gone, at least they would help take the nasty taste away. I put my glass on the edge of the table, having taken the only sip I thought I could possible take, while Phil took a different approach, tipping the entire contents of the little glass down his throat in one go so as not to taste it. The man looked at Phil, nodded approvingly, and reached for the bottle again. At this rate we'd be too drunk to look at any houses and it wasn't even ten o'clock. Meanwhile the man and his wife were obviously enjoying the company. Where was Ana from? Santiago de Compostela! Well, that was a long way to come. Was she married? Did she have children? Ana, we could see, was used to this and we could tell she was working at extricating us, although it wasn't easy. Eventually there was a short break in the stream of questions and Ana managed to press the man about the house. Had he spoken to Sandra? Yes, and he had the key.

Outside again, we walked further up the narrow path until we arrived at another door in the stone wall. Through that was a bare yard, and stone steps at the far end leading to a house. Inside was dark too, with a strange musty dampness in the air. The tiny kitchen had a black mouldy wall and the remains of a cooker. Next to that was the bathroom, echoing with the sound of dripping somewhere, a pink bath and no window. Further along the dark corridor a curtain revealed a bedroom with an old bed frame, its mattress leaning against the wall. Then a

lounge, which was also dark, but we could just make out similar veneer wall units and yet more religious pictures on the walls.

We all agreed that perhaps this was not the best start, but it was a house. Definitely we would need imagination to make it homey. I was thinking colourful throws, cushions and disinfectant, while Phil was thinking he needed to get out of there and quickly, partly to do with how sick he was feeling from all the aguardiente, but mainly because he hated it and under no circumstances would he be using his imagination to live there. Ana explained to the man that we had other places to see and that Sandra would ring him. We thanked him and said how lovely it had been to meet him and see the house. Yes indeed the house was 'bonita', lovely. And finally, wrenching ourselves free, we got back in the car. The first thing we asked Ana about was the aguardiente. She nodded knowingly, and said with a grimace that in rural areas the men always offered it, and sadly so far she hadn't managed to find a way of refusing.

House number two was back in town, just behind the main street, tucked in between the mountain and the back of the shops. The tiny road to it was almost too narrow for Ana's car, so if we liked it we would definitely have to park the van somewhere else. This time Ana had the key and there were no owners, no drinks, or doggy escorts. It was the smallest house ever, and really cute. Just one room, about four metres wide and long. Big enough for a small table and chairs, a small sofa, an alcove for cooking, and another for the bed. There was also a trapdoor in one corner, with a steep set of stairs leading down. Ana thought maybe for a toilet, which was something we hadn't noticed was missing. Actually it was a garage, with an old pair of wooden doors and an earth floor. There was no car in there, and if there had been it would have needed to be very

small, because nothing else would have fitted through those doors they were so low. Opposite the staircase, in the far wall, were two doors, one for the toilet and the other for the shower. I was imagining the chilly trip down those steps and across the garage floor in the middle of the night. But I did like the place, especially the crocheted blanket on the sofa, so homely. Phil rolled his eyes at hearing this, he was not taken in by such things, and anyway he was feeling like a giant, the ceiling was so low he was having to walk around stooping. Spanish people were much smaller, well maybe he could sit down a lot? I thought there was definitely potential here.

We set off for house number three by leaving the main street and turning down a road we'd not been down before, towards the pale distant mountains of Portugal. A very narrow road, with a few big houses on either side, surrounded by mature gardens. The sun was trying to break through and suddenly everything was looking different, as if the previous black & white version of Entrimo had now become full of colour. Even the stone walls of the houses looked softer, warmer than their usual sad, wet weather selves. Ana then turned the car into an even narrower track, only just wider than a laden donkey, high stone walls on either side. Here lush ferns poked through the gaps in the stones, mosses thrived alongside tiny green leaves and petals. For a moment we were transported back to Cornwall, all that warm dampness, all that rock.

There were eight houses in 'Pielas', the name of this aldea, all wedged next to each other. The narrow track that went in ended with the houses. There were people around too, who all called out 'Buenos días' as we passed, though thankfully didn't feel the need to ask about our families. Ana explained that these little clusters of houses in Entrimo were called aldeas even

though they were really part of the larger Entrimo pueblo. Confusing. People in each aldea were like a family, looking after each other and being more than just neighbours in the way we understood it. In cities it wasn't like this, but here in the rural areas neighbours were very important. We reached a green painted metal gate which stood opposite most of the other houses, inside which was a small yard. In the far corner there were stone steps leading up to the front door. The underneath of the house looked as it must have done whenever it was built, a very long time ago, huge blocks of stone, a thick wooden door, no windows. This is where the central heating animals would have lived. We peeped in through the cracks in the wood. There was still straw in there, a wooden rail dividing the living quarters and the troughs for feed. Upstairs, while still the same ancient house, had suffered the same 1960s make-over the rest of Entrimo was blighted with. The windows now metal framed, the front door glazed with a curly wrought iron pattern behind it. However, standing here on the first floor patio there was a stunning panoramic view of the mountains in Portugal, where once again they were enjoying better sun than us. And directly below a neighbour's garden, with fruit trees, vines, each with bright new leaves, hens quietly working under the trees. A huge fig reached up and over to where we stood, its new leathery leaves making shade below. Ana let us into the house, which immediately we could see was the biggest of the three. The 1960s revamp continued indoors, little of the old rustic features remained. The original wooden floor had mainly been replaced by ugly ceramic tile. Instead of wooden shutters on the windows there were now plastic ones, which rolled up into a box when you pulled a cord. There was a small sitting room, furnished with a cheap dark veneer wall unit, a table with

matching chairs, and a big hideous chandelier. The bathroom was tiny, but at least had a window. The kitchen resembled an abattoir, tiled in white right up to the ceiling, with a cooker and fridge. There were three bedrooms and clean beds, but all the floors in them were riddled with woodworm. It wasn't going to feature in Country Living magazine, but compared to the others it was the best. Sandra was right, even though I was still drawn to the tiny house with the crochet blanket.

It had been chilly and dark inside with all the shutters closed, but back outside on the balcony the sun was stronger now, almost hot. Ana said this was what the weather should have been like last month, it hadn't been a normal winter or spring, it had been the wettest anyone could remember. Now though we should finally see the sun shining. Phil was leaning on the patio rail looking towards the pale mountains, I looked too, we couldn't believe we had arrived and that this would be where we lived. Number 8, Pielas, Entrimo, Galicia, España.

Sandra told us that the owner of the house was pleased that we wanted it, and asked if we would mind waiting a few days, until next week, because she wanted to come and clean properly.

Next day we were walking to the bakers in Allariz, hoping we weren't too late for one of their special wagon wheels of bread, when we saw the florist getting her bread. Hola! she said. She was hoping she would see us, the kittens were ready, would we like to come and get ours? Ah yes, in our clever plan of relocation the kitten appeared on page two, when we were installed in Entrimo, not while we were still living in the van. Never mind, we were beginning to realise that it wasn't always possible to put the imaginary and real worlds together. The florist was very keen for us to come back to the shop with her, and when we reached the backroom we could see why. The

kittens were just as she had described, strong, naughty and far too much for the tiny space. They had begun climbing up and knocking things off shelves, chasing around getting under people's feet, and the florist was worried that they would escape into the street. Were there really only five of them?

It was a new experience for all of us living in such close proximity in the van. The litter tray took up half the remaining floor space once the bed was down. Luckily Sardina, the kitten's fishy name, was very happy and spent his first couple of hours in a tiny corner under the bed, checking the contents of every box, appearing inside cupboards, and popping out of drawers. Should we be worrying about him getting stuck behind something? It seemed not, because at the sound of dry cat food tinkling into his bowl he immediately came creeping out. He then found the duvet and settled down properly, very cosy. He was also very enthusiastic about the knitted goldfish I'd made him. He was a very easy kitten to please. He could have been bred for a life on wheels, he didn't mind at all when we left the campsite, standing on my lap looking out of the windscreen. Then the day came when we left for the last time, waving goodbye to Isobel, the wonderfully helpful campsite lady.

Inside our new home there were two rooms where we would spend most of our time, as well as the bedrooms. The kitchen, and the one with all the seriously dark furniture and chandelier. Transformation of the latter was urgently needed. Heaving the shutter up into it's box and taking down the heavy net curtain brought in the daylight. We then took out the six dining room chairs, pushed the table under the window, and added Mo's folding chairs with the nice cushions from the van. Sari fabric was draped around the window, and another heavy piece of fabric from my stash became a tablecloth. The rag rug

went down on the floor, followed by Sardina rolling himself about on it, he loved that rug.

All the art and craft materials went in the far bedroom, the one with French windows and tiny balcony. We pushed the bed over to the far wall and made it look like a sort of sofa, and a little table from one of the other rooms made an excellent sewing machine surface. Sardina thought this room had potential, as he squeezed between the sad pots of weather-beaten geraniums and dangled through the railings. After that he re-materialised in a box of fabric, and then he was stretched out in a patch of sunlight on the floor. Yes, this was much better than being van dwellers.

Settling into life in the aldea didn't take too long, our neighbours were eager to know all about us and we wanted to know everything too, but how with our limited vocabulary? I was struggling to learn every word I came in contact with, while Phil was in favour of short circuiting all the verbal stuff using other methods of communication. He was becoming an accomplished mime artist. His performance of fabric conditioner, 'suavizante', will go down in the annals of Ourense, while his skill at drawing things was far more entertaining than a straightforward question. 'CD player to laptop extension lead?' No problem, scribble scribble. 'Thick rubber gardening gloves?' What size? Phil really had started to believe there was no need to learn Spanish when things went so well with pictures or gestures. But words did begin lodging themselves in our heads, now that we were surrounded by interesting neighbours, and as they flew through the air between us we caught them by accident.

Our closest neighbours were Benita and her husband, who was confusingly called Benito. They lived literally outside our

kitchen window, all of us being on the first floor. If we leaned out at the same time we could have touched hands, the houses were so close. We hadn't done it yet, contenting ourselves with waving instead. Benita and Benito were both in their eighties, and their daughter and son-in-law, Luisa and Santiago, along with their son Sante, lived there too. It took us a while to understand that all the people that went through the garage door below were all going to the same house and were one family. We didn't like to ask, being English and reserved, and obviously no one thought it necessary to give us the low-down on their family members. Actually, until we got to know a few neighbours, we couldn't understand why everyone we met thought that English people were polite. Why would they think that? Then it became clear, this was just the settling-in period. Benita was the first to break the ranks, and she had absolutely no qualms about asking any question she could think of. Too personal? What was that? Our first session included, 'Why were we there', 'how old were we', 'what jobs did we do', 'had we got children', 'why not', 'why was Phil so thin', 'where were our parents'. And this was just a few days after we arrived. We were really shocked, but gradually began to realise this was normal, or at least normal in those parts. So it followed that if this was normal, then English people were reserved and polite.

Benita was tiny, like a bird in neat navy clothes and with really weenie feet. She looked very sweet and kindly, but she was also incredibly sharp and full of opinions, on everything and about everyone. I really liked her, even if she had decided that we were simpletons who needed every aspect of life explaining. To Benita and many others, our inability to speak Spanish fluently meant that we were stupid or possibly had the mental ability of five year-olds. We sort of got used to it, but at

least with Benita we did actually learn things. Like when pegging out washing to turn things inside out, then they dry quicker and the sun doesn't fade the colours. Not that I'd had to worry about the strength of the sun in Yorkshire. Sometimes too, she would call me over to the dividing wire fence to give me fresh eggs from the apron she was holding up in her hand, passing them through the gaps in the wire one at a time.

Benito was older and didn't have much to do with the running of the house. He had his daily timetable and that didn't leave much room for chitchat, cooking, cleaning or washing clothes. He was up early for breakfast, spent in front of the television. Then he left the house for a slow walk up to the main street, to the bar for coffee and a chat with all his pals. After which he strolled back to the aldea for an early lunch. Siesta until about four o'clock, then off to the bar again where he would stay until early evening, returning for supper, television and an early night. He had pace, perfect pace, always walking at the same speed, arriving and departing from each place at the right time. While he was on his schedule Benita apparently ran the house, doing everything for all of them. That was in the morning, the afternoons were nicer, they were her social time. Often we saw Benita leaving the pueblo to visit with cousins, nieces, nephews and friends, people she had known for her entire life. It was a while later, when I was working outside on our vegetable plot, when Benita picked her way over the uneven ground with another bird-like woman, to introduce her friend to me, explaining that their grandmothers had been friends. An unbroken line. No one I knew had a friendship built on such history, one that started before they were even born. I felt a bit sad when Benita and her friend left. They'd got something I would never have, that sort of relationship wasn't something

you could even work hard at having, it existed or it didn't. Coming from the sophisticated metropolis of London no longer seemed so great.

Benita's daughter Luisa was a lively, friendly woman whose husband, the kindly Santiago, took charge of all the vegetable growing and wine making for the family. Over time we learned lots from them about watering our plot from the communal watering system, saving and growing seeds, and the strangeness of landownership in Galicia which led people to say 'muy dificil', 'very difficult', whenever we spoke about our plan. We'd noticed that there seemed to be communal vegetable plots, like allotments, down the track from our house. We'd wondered about those plots, and the people who passed under our window each day to tend them. Pushing wheelbarrows with tools one way, then returning later fully laden with produce. The houses were so huddled together, no one apart from Benita and Luisa and their neighbour Ines, had a garden next to their house. Maybe the allotments were because the others didn't have a garden. The house we were renting had two little pieces of land with it, one was down a grassy track near the last house and the other was in a wild bit of forest further away. Eventually the mystery was solved. Inheritance. Parents died, their children divided the inherited land between them, everyone getting a little bit each. Then when that generation died their children did the same. Add in all the marriages, and in a very short time the whole of Entrimo and Galicia had become one giant patchwork of land ownership, with individuals owning tiny strips not only dotted all around the aldea, but often far beyond. Some families realised this was crazy, after all what good was a strip of land only five metres long by two metres wide? They came to an agreement with each other, with maybe one buying

all the others out. Another problem was that many owners had left their home to work abroad, and they could be away for years or never return, while their bits of land waited for them or their children. That was one of the reasons why there were so many wild and overgrown pieces and why there appeared to be communal gardens. Now we were beginning to understand the difficulty we were facing. How could we possibly find a couple of acres to buy in amongst all these tiny bits and pieces? A worry, but right then there were so many other things to learn we didn't dwell on it. The important thing was at least we had our two little plots right now. We found an old wheelbarrow in one the sheds and trundled it to and fro like everyone else, enjoying meeting people on the way. But it was still strange for us. We were so used to the privacy of our garden where we could potter and do what we wanted unobserved, have our successes and failures in private. It couldn't be like that here, people were always about, either trudging past on the way to their own plots, or simply to find out what we were doing, give advice, bring plants. No one passed without stopping to make some comment or have a chat. Then plainly, they went away and gossiped about what a hash we were making.

Our next-door-but-one neighbours, Manolo and Candita, were Olympic Gold medal holders in vegetable growing. When they brought us vegetables it was by the bucket-load, a bucket of lettuce, a bucket of beans, a bucket of tomatoes. It was the sheer quantity, all these buckets, that alerted us to the scale of their growing. Candita was a marvel, we didn't know how old she or Manolo were, but probably well into their seventies. Candita was as strong as a horse and never appeared to tire. She was outside at six-thirty in the morning every day, in her wellies, and off down to one of her plots. Then back again at about

eight o'clock to dash up to the corner of the aldea to wait for Juan the bread man. After breakfast she transformed from her pinnie and wellies, into her smart going shopping clothes. Then back home to cook lunch. After that we caught glimpses of her pegging out washing, flicking a duster out of windows, or sweeping steps. At four o'clock she was back in her gardening outfit again and setting off down to her plots, wearing a cotton hat and wielding a heavy 'satcho', the Spanish equivalent of a spade, until the sun began to set. If she was bored or frustrated it was never possible to tell, she was always exactly the same, happy and busy, even more so when her son or daughter and their families came for a weekend. Manolo too had his jobs, but his main responsibility was the wine and aguardiente making and this obviously required a lot of brain work because he was never outside as much as Candita.

Then there was Luis and Ines, neighbours of Benita and family. Like many men in Galicia in the 1960s, Luis had left Spain to find work abroad, mainly in the restaurant trade. Luis had been lucky, he had travelled a lot and did well, ending up as the maître de of the best restaurant in Buenos Aires. We were particularly drawn to getting to know him because every morning he would open a window and out would come this wonderful music, original 78rpm recordings of tango from his days in Argentina. He spoke a little English and made us welcome in his home, genuinely pleased to have real live English people to speak to. We later discovered there were many retired men like him in town, most of the old guys who occupied the low wall outside the library, who loved nothing better than to tease and hurl abuse at each other, as well as passer-bys. When they saw us coming, a ripple of excitement would spread among them, followed by a chorus of 'Good morning!' 'Lovely day!'

'Beautiful weather!' All perfect greetings and we longed to respond, but none of them knew any other English words.

The other family in our little corner of Entrimo was that of the policeman. Unlike all our other neighbours, who were retired, the policeman and his wife still went out to work. Also, unlike the other homes, their house was always busy and noisy. The television was always on at full volume, all day and night long. There were always children, babies, dogs, teenagers and older people sitting out on the narrow path directly under our window. They also parked their cars, nose to tail, under our window, often leaving the engines running and radios blaring, while they smoked and chatted, or leaned under the bonnet trying to keep them going a bit longer. Other than for this family our aldea was like a retirement village, with a bit more gardening activity. The policeman's family also adhered to their own timetable, which reached its zenith at about midnight. After a feverish afternoon and evening of dog barking, children screaming, car revving, radio and television blaring, and people shouting conversations at each other, this would all end in a frenzy of car doors banging, reversing, then blissful silence. Until around four or five in the morning, when they'd all return, accompanied by squealing brakes, banging doors, shouting, crying and screaming children. By the time they had slammed the front door for the very last time, and all retired to bed, everyone else was wide awake. Was this normal? We were desperate to know what was going on, and particularly what all our other neighbours thought. It was all too frustrating. Then finally one weekend, Marta, the daughter of Ines and Luis, came over for the weekend with her husband and daughter. Marta was virtually fluent in English and very happy to chat. She liked the practise and enjoyed hearing our impressions of life in her

home village. We sat in their garden drinking coffee, with Marta, Ines, Benita and Luisa, while Marta asked us how we were enjoying Entrimo. Benita, Ines and Luisa listening intently. For the first time they had someone to translate for them too, so they could ask us things we hadn't been able to understand. We also got to find out more about everyone, especially our mutual neighbours. We could see that they were all wondering about our reaction, everyone's eyes darting towards each other as they tried not to laugh, but they couldn't help it. Benita started first, laughing as Marta translated our questions. Then everyone was laughing, joining in and telling us everything. It was like a dam had burst, our first gossipy Spanish session.

It turned out that the Policeman's family enjoyed the night-life, and through the summer that was going to be every single night. There were fiestas in all the surrounding mountain villages, and they went to every single one, hence their departure at midnight which was when most fiestas got going. These events seemed to involve drinking, live music and various elements of the fairground. Entrimo would have its own one in August, and then we would see what it was like.

We eventually discovered who all the various characters in the policeman's family were, and were relieved to discover that only the policeman, his wife and their little girl, actually lived in the house opposite all the time. Though next-door to them was the policeman's father and mother-in-law. All the others came only at weekends and holidays. Everyone agreed that they were a noisy crowd, but there didn't seem to be any way of changing that. The rest of our neighbours seemed like one big family. In and out of each other's houses, wandering about in their pyjamas outside, cooking for each other, all very close and friendly. The policeman's family weren't part of that, possibly to

do with their different take on life, but mainly, we discovered, because they had come from another aldea. They may have made up for lost time by buying two houses and installing in them three generations of family, but everyone else's had lived there for more than 100 years and that was what really counted.

This discovery made us wonder how we would ever come to belong here. Perhaps the best we could hope for was that we became good neighbours wherever we settled, we could see how important that was.

Since our arrival in Entrimo the weather had changed now to hot sunny days. We were amazed at how quickly we had blocked out all memory of torrential downpours, wild winds and landslides. We were too busy to worry about what had passed because now we had vegetable plots, and we worked on them every morning and evening, just like our neighbours, avoiding the hottest part of the day. One evening, after a session outside, I got back home to discover the fridge wasn't working. Very strange. The cooker? I switched on the oven, nothing. An electrical problem? Phil checked the fuses and pulled out the cooker and the fridge, but could see nothing.

Next day we visited Sandra in her office who said she would find an electrician. Then headed across the road to Don Pepe for breakfast of jam-painted croissants and coffee. Sandra joined us later, with news that the electrician in the next aldea would come across and have a look later. Later turned out to be a rather ambiguous expression, it certainly didn't mean that morning or afternoon. But in the interim word had gone out amongst our neighbours that we were without a cooker and offers of food poured in, most deliciously a huge platter of tortilla from Ines. Replete from that we then settled down to an evening watching one of our small collection of DVDs on the

laptop. It was our way of relaxing, touching base with a familiar culture and escaping from the perpetual Spanish-ness around us. Sat on Mo's folding chairs, with Sardina flopped out on one of our laps, we almost felt like ourselves. And by 10.30pm, the film finished, we were ready for bed. It was then we heard noises in the yard below. The metal gate had clanked open, and there were voices and footsteps coming up the stairs, followed by a knock at the door. Outside was a deputation. There was Candita, another woman in a pinnie we didn't know, a well-built portly man in overalls with a big bag, and the policeman's seven-year-old daughter Cynthia. Candita did the introductions, explaining that this was the electrician and she had met him and his wife on their way into the aldea. Why Candita had escorted the electrician we didn't know, or why he had brought his wife, we could only guess. But it seemed possible there could have been an element of shyness on behalf of the electrician, maybe he was worried we wouldn't be able to understand what he was saying, with us being foreign and strange. His wife had obviously come to help out, then Candita had joined in, because she knew us and obviously would be much more able to communicate than the electrician or his wife. And Cynthia? Well, it was too early for her and her family to have gone out to the evening's fiesta, so as she was already hanging around outside she had attached herself, tagging along for the entertainment. Why not? I'm sure if Benita had been outside, she would have come along too.

Everyone squeezed into the kitchen, where Cynthia was immediately distracted by the arrival of Sardina, who thought he'd have a look at what was going on too. Both disappearing under the table. Phil began explaining the problem to the electrician, which wasn't too complex given the good visual clue

of the dysfunctional cooker and fridge. The electrician's wife meanwhile, leaving Candita to help Phil, cornered me with a pile of questions. All the usual stuff, 'how old were we', 'where had we come from', 'why were we there', 'did we have children', 'why not?', etc. The children question I always found a bit tricky. We didn't have children by choice, our choice. But I found it hard to say that in such a child-fanatical country. We had realised this would seem freakish and make us seem even more peculiar, as if being English wasn't weird enough. So I had got used to saying that we'd both been teachers and it was enough to work with children all day long, then laugh about how nice it was to come home to peace and quiet. That usually lightened the mood and gave me the chance to steer the conversation onto more simple topics. But the electrician's wife was having none of that. 'Didn't we like children?' She asked bluntly, while I mumbled something like yes, of course, but who would look after the children when we were working all day? I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was getting in too deep, especially when Mrs Electrician countered with how plenty of women worked and had their own kids. She herself had done that, surely one of our parents would have helped to look after them? And by the way, with no children of our own who was going to look after us when we got old? Had we thought of that? How old was I? That wasn't too old, women these days had children until quite late on, there was still time and quite honestly, we should consider it. I was beginning to feel a bit dizzy, wondering how to get myself out of all this when Cynthia's mother, of all people, saved me. Being a warm evening, our kitchen window was still open and a loud bellow echoed up from below, 'CYNthia! 'CYNthia!' Cynthia wriggled reluctantly out from under the kitchen table and went to the

window. She leaned out, bending almost double, her top half disappearing over the sill. 'Que?' She yelled back, 'what?' A loud conversation followed with shouts from below and shouts from our kitchen, until Cynthia submitted and tore herself away from the excitement in our house to go and get ready for the fiesta.

Meanwhile the electrician had dragged the fridge and cooker further out into the room, then dismantled various parts of the ill-fitting kitchen unit, so he could squeeze himself into the tiny space behind where the fridge usually lived. Where, lots of puffing and panting later, he re-emerged further along the worktop, his head covered in cobwebs. No, he couldn't find anything wrong there. He was now looking very hot, sweaty and confused. Then he seemed to have a brainwave. Beckoning Phil to go with him, they both set off outside and down the steps into the yard. Mrs Electrician meanwhile was deep in conversation with Candita. The odd word I could follow included niños, (children) and bebés. Honestly, I felt like throttling Mrs Electrician, what was she doing here anyway? Actually I had the feeling that Candita wasn't in the mood for Mrs Electrician either, and was trying to damp down her fervour with words about different countries and how things were different these days. Finally Candita managed to pry herself away and said 'buenos noches', before nipping off downstairs and out of the gate. I followed, thanking her and saying good night, anything to escape Mrs Electrician. Then I noticed Phil and the electrician were in the barn under the house. The lights were on and their voices low inside. I went in to investigate. 'Ratonitas' the electrician was explaining, smiling and wiping his now ruby face with a hanky. It seemed that mice had eaten through the cable, which ran along the ceiling of the barn,

bringing power to the kitchen appliances. He waved a frayed cable at us, and it certainly looked as if something had enjoyed a good meal. Maybe it's last supper?

Now the problem was solved the electrician looked happy, he said he would be back first thing in the morning to fix it. Not a big job, he just didn't have what he needed with him. Well, it was far too late now to be wondering about cables and fuses at almost midnight, I felt we had packed in more than enough new experiences for one day. Mrs Electrician had by now appeared in the barn too, to get the low-down on the problem, and we took that opportunity to start edging up the steps. Both Mr and Mrs Electrician emerged and said their 'buenos noches' and left.

Finally, having checked that there were no other neighbours lurking in our kitchen, we went to bed. Even Sardina was exhausted, he flopped like a piece of sweaty fur fabric on the end of the bed. Clearly hoping for a rematch with Cynthia before too long.

Next morning, barely had we got out of bed when the electrician arrived, fortunately alone this time. He disappeared beneath the house with a bag of tools and some cable. Phil went down to investigate while I waited for life to spring back into the cooker. And hooray, finally about 20 minutes later power was restored, the kettle was on and porridge simmering. Candita called round later with her daily bucket of lettuce and a washing-up bowl of green beans. Was everything OK now? Fridge, freezer, cooker working? Great. Incidentally, had we been to our plot yet, the one in the forest? No, not yet, why? Well, apparently there was a lot of dog barking last night and that usually meant there were wild pigs around, maybe we should go and see if our vegetables were okay, pigs can do a lot

of damage. Phil was already struggling into his boots to get out and see how all our precious plants were. Candita and he left to go along the track to the plot. Sardina couldn't have been less interested in wild pig damage, what he wanted was his second breakfast. How this had become part of our morning routine I couldn't quite remember, but he was a sturdy kitten now and seemed to need regular meals, regular meaning frequent. He was always really hungry when we woke up and so persistent that I had to go to the kitchen and get his breakfast before doing anything else. Then once he'd eaten, being something of a creature of habit, he liked to go out onto the patio and wander about, have a look down at Benita working in her garden, and generally check out his territory. By the time I'd been in the bathroom, got dressed, and made our breakfast, he was ready for another little snack. So we were in the kitchen conferring about what he fancied when the gate clanked open and Phil returned with Candita.

'No sweetcorn left!' Phil said, amazed. 'Forty plants trampled and all the green cobs gone, they didn't even wait until they were ripe, you should see the devastation!' Candita was explaining that the pigs were a real problem, that was why people had dogs, although this piece of information didn't seem to have any logic. The dogs were fenced in near the house, or were on long lengths of chain making it impossible for them to chase any wild animals. And when dog owners, like Candita, heard barking they didn't jump out of bed to go and see what was happening or rush outside with a shotgun. I couldn't understand what good the dogs did. Anyway, pig damage happened to everyone. Because our plot was a bit further away from the houses it was more likely the pigs would go there. Don't worry, said Candita, she would tell Jose, his land was

adjacent and he would be very keen to shoot the pig rather than have it come near his plants, just think of all that meat! With that Candita set off to speak to Jose, leaving us to ponder the rights and wrongs of shooting pigs, and to commiserate over our lack of sweetcorn that year. Forty plants, just like that.

Shooting wild pigs was a bit of an issue in Entrimo, along with all the other mountain villages, we discovered. In the past there had been no problem, most men hunted anyway and if a pig strolled on to your land for a midnight feast, they were fair game. Nowadays things were different. Areas including Entrimo, and its neighbouring village Lovios, were part of the Parque Natural. Not quite a national park, but the next best thing, and killing animals like wild pigs or deer was now forbidden without a special licence. If your crops were eaten or your livestock killed, you could go to the Parque office and fill in a million forms and try to get compensation for your loss. Also, you could contact the local hunters, who were allowed to hunt from Thursday to Sunday between October and March, and they would come and have a go at tracking the offending pig and bumping them off. The reason for all this was the dwindling numbers of wild pigs and other animals. We'd not seen any big animals yet, but we had heard many terrible tales of woe, like the stripping whole fields of corn bare, attacks on lambs and things. What these wild pigs really looked like we didn't know, but plenty of people had described them to us as being big, huge even, with gigantic teeth and tusks sticking out of their mouths. They were covered in dark bristly hair, and Sandra had said if we ever saw one we shouldn't stop and say 'Hola', we should run!

Word was soon around the pueblo about our sweetcorn attack, and of course that inspired many other people's tales of

their encounters. It was sad to have lost all our crop and the hard work we'd put in getting it planted, keeping it watered. But having it attacked in such a tremendously dramatic way, by a real wild animal, had bequeathed us with some sort of cache, especially with our neighbours. Now we had bonded over a common foe.

Was everyday going to be full of weirdness now? Yesterday it was electrical failures and mice chewing cables, today wild pigs eating sweetcorn. What next? Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sardina chase across the yard below with something big in his mouth. Sardina? Our kitten killing things? Surely not? Sardina was hunched over it in a corner. As I walked towards him he looked up over his shoulder and growled. What was that about? I didn't have to get much closer before I could see a huge ugly brown thing, no feathers or fur, just a nasty looking mound of something. I crept closer. Sardina, sensing it was time to get going, dashed under the steps, dragging with him the biggest, ugliest, warty toad I had ever seen. Really, it was almost the same size as a slightly deflated football. It was beyond horrific, like something alien out of a science fiction film, just too gross and ugly to be believed. I was particularly worried for Sardina, supposing he got bitten by the toad? Okay, it was actually looking the other way round at the moment, but it was a big toad, maybe it would turn, maybe I should try and get Sardina away from it? But even making one step towards him I could see there was nothing I was going to be able to do. In fact it looked as if I'd made it worse, because then Sardina growled again and proceeded to sink his teeth into the creature's horny leg. Ugh! Too revolting. I ran upstairs and shut the door on them. My porridge was cold and set hard by now, but it didn't matter, I had gone off the

whole idea of eating, that 'thing' had turned my stomach. What was it with everything here? Why wasn't anything normal?

It was definitely a distraction, living in the aldea, learning how different life was. But when we were alone, we returned to the worry about our 'plan' and whether we were going to be able to make it happen. I comforted myself with the fact that it wouldn't be normal to attempt this and not have days of anxiety and doubt. But that didn't help when the big grey cloud descended on us both and there were so many things for us to worry about that we could glide effortlessly from one anxiety to another. For instance, what had happened to spending three months, then six to look around before buying somewhere? Well, arriving in Entrimo had taken all of our attention, we were still new to our chosen country, and coming to live here was going to take a lot more adapting to. What else could we have done? We needed time to understand things and to make contacts, wasn't that what everyone had told us we needed to do? Well, yes, all that sounded exactly right. But the plan seemed to have stalled now. We hadn't discovered how we were going to find land, well, apart from making friends all around town and asking them to help us. But there was more to worry about than just that, there was now the whole question of multiple pieces of land. Everyone we had spoken to about the possibility of buying a few acres had immediately sucked on their teeth and said, 'muy dificil'. They didn't say it was impossible, just difficult, and that difference until now had been enough to keep us going. Difficult was okay. After all we were made of stronger stuff, we could overcome difficult. Also, we thought perhaps local people were just not used to anyone wanting to buy larger pieces of land. Actually, we hadn't come across anyone who had ever bought land in Entrimo, they'd all

inherited it in these little pieces. We could see that with our own eyes, we were surrounded by a patchwork of crazy little plots. As well as that, everyone was jealously guarding all their little pieces, having arguments with people who they thought were using more than was theirs. In all honesty, we hadn't actually seen any big pieces of land at all, well apart from those owned by Jose the potential wild pig killer. But he was different, he was a serious businessman with a big flock of sheep, some real-sized fields, and on top of all that he was the owner of the local feretaria. Maybe then he was the man we needed to speak to. And having thought of something practical to do about this particular worry we moved on to another. Money.

This was our worst nightmare and because of that neither of us even liked to think about it. Before we'd left our old life we'd deliberately avoided any detail on how we would survive, knowing it would make us too frightened, and how easy it would have been then to talk ourselves out of it. And anyway, we knew from experience that it wasn't possible to know all the answers. Things happened, you could never plan for everything, although we did still have our original plan. The only problem was that it was a bit old and rickety now. We'd come up with it all those years ago when we'd originally had the grand scheme, and it had seemed so perfect. Sell the house, put the money in the bank, live on the interest, and by then we would have worked it all out, things would have become clear.

We knew we were setting great store in our ingenuity to come up with ways to support ourselves, and why not? Hadn't we managed in our life so far? Well, maybe things would work out but there was no denying there were a couple of errors in our plan. The first was that the interest rate had fallen like a big heavy rock since the heady days when we'd initially come up

with the plan. Instead of a lovely fat gush of income each year, there was now a miserable little dribble. And, we wouldn't even see any of that dribble until we'd been doing this thing for a year. Discovering that had been a big blow. At times we felt so alone, especially remembering all the anxieties of the friends we'd left behind. If just one of them had been there with us now we'd have been weeping and sobbing with sadness for our old selves. Luckily, they weren't. Did we ever consider giving it all up and heading back to the old country? Well, yes, I did. But not Phil. He might have been as scared of the whole thing as me, but he had a will of iron, and to him the next part of our life depended on the plan working. He was utterly committed to it and he wasn't going to give up that easily, No sir. And I admired that. I loved that he was so strong about it, even if I wished he'd change his mind. However, being the kind of person who likes to get behind a scheme, it was fine with me. Later I did wonder what might have happened if I hadn't been so, well, weak, pathetic, weedy, and had put up a stronger argument. Would we have gone back home?

Some nights we really needed that DVD player, it was the only thing which stopped the endless whirring of our brains. Settling down in the darkness with Sardina, cups of coffee, and bars of chocolate (sent to us by kindly friends) we shut the door on Spain and for ninety minutes could relax.

On more positive days we were able to look at what we had achieved and feel sort of proud of how far we'd come. The little gardens we'd made were something. The owner of the house had previously planted masses of beans in the bigger plot and we had cleared another patch and planted aubergines, chillies, tomatoes, peppers and plenty of basil. The smaller plot had onions and peas. Everything was looking good. I was

especially pleased to see the peas coming along because they were my favourite vegetable. Other people were growing much larger quantities of stuff though, it was amazing to see and equally amazing how much of it they ate. Like peppers. We'd grown them in Yorkshire, it wasn't as if they were exotic or unusual, we grew lots, but in cooking I would maybe use one or two in a meal. Here, people picked a bucketful just for lunch. True, there were more people in a family, but to my way of thinking a family of four would be hard pressed to eat a whole bucket of peppers. That was until we discovered they cut them into big thick strips, fried them until they were sweet and brown, then sprinkled them with sugar, who could resist a few of those? And tomatoes, we were well aware of what a bumper crop looked like, we'd had a few of those in Yorkshire and had only been saved by a neighbour wanting to make tons of tomato ketchup. But here the volume was massive. I reckoned our neighbours were glad to have us there to help them out, everywhere we looked people were dragging buckets of the things around. And not just normal sized ones either. In Entrimo people seemed to favour a variety the size of melons, big ugly things. In fact four of those and you were looking at several generous bowls of tomato soup. People here also liked their tomatoes a bit green. I'd told Luisa I preferred the very red ones and she was pleased because they had lots of those which they hadn't got round to eating, and now they were going to waste. She brought me bucket-loads, and from them I made tomato soup, pizza topping and pasta sauce. I even made stuff for the tiny freezer, it was quite like old times.

We might have been living in a strange land where vegetables were produced in industrial quantities but we were starting to get used to things and beginning to make our new

life. We had our plots, we were learning things about the climate, and of course we had Sardina. Although he was such a native he didn't need to adapt to a new life.

Arriving back home with the shopping one lunchtime, I quickly let myself in, dropped the bags in the hall and dashed to the bathroom. Seconds later the door gently pushed open and there was Sardina. Apparently I couldn't even go to the bathroom without him. His mouth looked odd though, and as he came closer I could see legs waggling from it. Hairy spider legs! What to do? I hated spiders and I was trapped. Sardina, still in the flush of a successful mission, happily dropped the creature on the floor, then patted it encouragingly to make it run. Awful. Supposing it disappeared under the bath? A disappeared spider was far worse than a spider visibly running around, who could tell when it might reappear and where? I finished with the toilet as quickly as possible at which point Sardina snatched up the creature and jumped into the empty bath tub. I decided a quick exit was my best option and left, closing the door behind me. As any cat owner will know, the act of shutting of a cat in anywhere is a feline crime whereupon the cat must stop any activity, even playing with a caught creature, and try desperately to open the closed door, even if it is just to return straight away. It's a matter of honour, no cat will be confined. Inevitably Sardina was scratching at the bathroom door in less than twenty seconds. I opened it and out he dashed as if he'd been deprived of oxygen, straight for the kitchen. Peering into the bathroom I could see his pet was safely in the bath, although I did take the precaution of shutting the door to be on the safe side. Sardina, having finished what was left in his bowl wandered out on to the patio to watch Benita through the railings, spider quite forgotten.

At lunchtime I told Phil about the drama and he went to the bathroom to have a look. He didn't think it was that big, it was just a curled up bunch of legs. He thought it had probably died in the struggle. I peered in, certainly it looked shrivelled up, but I'd seen 'spider acting' before, they did this, they pretend to be dead until you got near them and then they suddenly spring back to life. No, Phil was convinced it was dead.

That afternoon I heard strange sounds coming from the bathroom, like a tap was running or something. Tink, tink, tink. Opening the door I found Sardina in there again. What was this sudden fascination with the bathroom? He wasn't in the bath this time, but sitting in the sink, playing with the plug on its chain, making the little tinking sound by hitting the metal chain against the sink. Seeing me he did his cute falling over thing, where he collapses on his side, this time slipping down into the sink and waiting for me to tickle his tummy. I walked over, and as I did, out of the corner of my eye, saw a dark shape moving in the bath. Yes, as predicted, the 'thing' had come back to life and was marching indignantly around the tub. Thank you Sardina. Was this how it was going to be all summer? The house full of every giant creepy crawly he discovered. I didn't want to think about it.

The arrival of summer meant the end of school for our youngest neighbour, Cynthia. Since her nocturnal visit to our kitchen with the electrician and his wife, she had begun popping in to see us quite a bit. At first she was a little shy and quiet, but that didn't last. As she got used to us she relaxed and we got to know the real Cynthia. She was the perfect cultural attaché, whose job it was to help us understand life in Spain. From her perspective. She had never come across anyone like us. She was just seven years old, and had never been anywhere apart from a

rare visit to Ourense. Never been on holiday or spent a night away from the aldea. She had never met a foreign person either, or anyone who wasn't family, neighbour or from her school. She didn't know what to think of us. We were adults, but we didn't have children. We couldn't speak her language, which made us seem a bit stupid. And everything inside our house was different and fascinating. All the wool and fabric, our treasures and books. I think she decided we were like big children, people who she could have as friends on an equal footing. We definitely weren't adults to her. It was okay that we were English, she'd heard of that on television and was soon to start lessons at school, so that was sort of cool. She seemed to enjoy knowing us and in a short time we became an extension of Cynthia's world.

Once she overcame her shyness Cynthia began giving us advice, and she was a font of knowledge on everything, language especially. She was wonderful at explaining words, acting things out and writing things for us. Ever since we arrived in Spain I'd been scribbling new words on bits of paper and sticking them on the wall with bits of tape. The kitchen had become festooned with words, as well as the living room. It seemed to help me learn. When I wanted to use a word in conversation very often the scrap of paper and where it was on the door would come to mind and I could see the word. When Cynthia first saw all of this she definitely thought it was odd. Nowhere in her house were there scraps of paper stuck to the walls. But once I had explained and showed her how I wrote new words and stuck them up, she completely understood and started helping to make new ones. Every time she was around and a new word came up, she would offer to cut out a scrap of paper and write it for me. The more time we spent together the

more our common pool of words and understanding grew. One afternoon I asked her what 'puedes' meant. Cynthia thought for a bit and then asked me if I remembered when the electricity broke and I had asked Candita to look after Sardina's frozen fish? Yes, I remembered that. Cynthia said it was like that and then she acted out giving me something and saying 'puedes guarda esta para mi?' I got it. 'Could you?' Puedes meant 'could you'. This was typical of Cynthia's explanations, she thought about how she could tell you and used some shared situation to explain, she really was very clever. Obviously it didn't always work, sometimes she wasn't in the mood for extended explanations and would just shrug her shoulders and repeat the word as if it was so simple she couldn't believe I didn't know it. Who could blame her, she was only seven.

Cynthia loved to join me in making things. If I was knitting she wanted to learn how to do it, if I was sorting out a basket of tangled yarn, she would help. She enjoyed pairing up all the knitting needles and putting rubber bands around them. She loved Sardina and he had got used to her. If he came into the house and heard her in the workroom, he came trotting along to see what was happening. He let her cover him up with his blanket, make little beds for him in boxes, he really liked that. We spent many a happy afternoon doing things together, like drawing, painting, colouring pictures in her summer holiday project book from school, or making things from papier mache, which was one of Cynthia's favourite things. We made little boxes from cardboard, covered them with gluey paper and then once they were dry, having spent a while on the balcony in the sun, we painted them. All the things I liked to do, she did too, we had a lovely time. I showed her how to make little bracelets from wool, using the first stitch of crochet and she made loads

for her friends. Sometimes she wanted to use our collection of rubber stamps, stamping pictures of rabbits, frogs, birds, and horses on scraps of paper, then gluing them on to bits of card. We made pom-poms, felt toys, origami books and little gifts for birthdays, mothers and fathers days. It was sweet to see the little felt hearts Cynthia had made for her father, dangling off the mirror in his car.

Sometimes it wasn't just Cynthia and me, sometimes Cynthia's friends or family joined us. Alex, who was her sister's son, came. He was a year older than Cynthia but she was his aunt, something she never let him forget. Luiz-Jose, her cousin came. He was a couple of years older but still enjoyed bracelet making, instructed by Cynthia. It was funny, listening to them discussing the coloured yarn they were going to use, or who they were making things for, often the list of recipients was longer than their interest and they disappeared outside to chase around long before they'd finished.

Cynthia was a mine of information on health issues, which seemed odd for a seven-year-old. Maybe she just soaked up the conversations of her older relatives, but she was full of advice. Black coffee was bad for your heart, especially if you drank more than one cup a day and if you didn't drink a glass of water with it, you might die. The dying part was acted out superbly, with Cynthia slipping from her chair, eyes rolling, head flopping until she landed lifeless on the floor. Lemons were the cure for sore throats and colds. Drinking honey in hot water was good if you had the flu. Sugar, however was fine. Three spoons in her small cup of tea at our house was quite normal. As were chocolate biscuits, she loved those and was not very happy if we'd run out of her favourites when she called round.

She worried about our eating. We had explained about

being vegetarians, something she was completely unfamiliar with. What did we eat then? Didn't we like chorizo? What about rabbit or chicken? Well, it didn't seem right, we'd get ill if we didn't eat meat, our blood would get thin and we'd become weak. Cynthia mimed fainting and fell to the floor. She worried too that we didn't understand the proper times of the day for eating. We had our supper at what she thought was mid afternoon. Given that she didn't get up until midday it wasn't surprising that seven-thirty in the evening was still early to her. As for my cooking, it was confusing to her, but she liked to help in the kitchen. She loved washing vegetables, stirring saucepans and she definitely liked the smell and look of everything, especially pasta or pizza. But without meat? It was all wrong. Potatoes in their jackets were a completely unknown phenomena, a definite sign of our madness. Didn't we understand that you were supposed to peel potatoes? Or that they were cooked in water in a saucepan? And eating the skins? Well, we would probably die, potato skins were given to the hens or the pigs, they weren't for people to eat. To give her credit though, she did try them. The next time I did jacket potatoes, I baked her a little one. Cutting it open I added butter, salt, pepper, a little grated cheese and offered it to Cynthia. She was suspicious, but she tried it and loved it. A small triumph for us.

She was very concerned that we didn't have a television, why didn't we get one? We tried explaining that we didn't want one, but this was incomprehensible to her. In her house there were two blaring out all day. Cynthia was so used to the racket she probably thought our house was unnaturally quiet. We tried to explain that we were happy with the radio, with CDs and our films. But Cynthia thought we should be able to watch cartoons

and MTV Latino. Didn't we want to see Jennifer Lopez? At this point in the conversation about the merits of TV ownership, there was an interlude while Cynthia performed her favourite Jennifer Lopez number. She had seen it so often she could do all the moves and sing the song, which was in English. She sang all the words with exactly the same intonation as Jennifer Lopez, but with no idea what any of them meant. It was perfect and hilarious. Cynthia loved an audience, and her dancing and singing was amazing, she was a star performer. We hoped that this had thrown her off the TV question, but she said that if we enjoyed music and dancing we definitely needed a television.

That was the end of the discussion about televisions for that day, but somehow I knew it would resurface regularly. The next time was when we were making some woolly dolls a few days later. Maybe we were too poor to buy a television, Cynthia suggested. But she had an idea, maybe if we got a stall at the monthly market or even at the fiesta we could sell all the lovely things we'd made and then buy a television. I was more interested in the stall idea than buying a television with any proceeds and asked Cynthia if she thought people would like our things. She was adamant, people would defiantly buy them because they were 'muy bonita', very pretty.

One afternoon, when the raucous cacophony of lunchtime in Cynthia's house had calmed down slightly, her Dad and big brother struggled out of their shed with a massive paddling pool. The huge expanse of plastic, hung over a metal frame, was wrestled up the road to a patch of ground right under our window. The dogs were going wild, barking and running around, doing their best to trip someone over, while Cynthia dashed about excitedly giving directions to her father, who was

trying to walk it up the road backwards. They struggled up the steps of the half-built house between Candita's and ours, setting the pool on the ground amongst piles of sand, blocks, planks of wood and other building materials. Then the hose, used daily for car washing, was dragged up the steps and left running to fill the pool. Cynthia was dancing around, already in her tiny bikini, desperate to plunge into the cold water. Her grandmother came out and gave her advice about waiting for the water to warm up, or she'd get pneumonia. But on this occasion Cynthia was oblivious to all health risks and was in the pool before a couple of centimetres had trickled in. That afternoon was filled with the shrieks of Cynthia, Alex, Luis-Jose, Cynthia's friend Lucia, and her little brother Pedro from the next aldea. Great to know they were having a good time, but just too ear splitting after a while. Time for us to go and visit Ines, in her quiet garden, safely cushioned from all the yelps and squeals.

We found Ines on her lawn, making lace. She had one of those giant cushions, propped up on a chair and covered in masses of pins, which marked out the pattern for all the complicated twisting and tiny knots that formed the lace. Ines was a marvel at this intricate work as well as extremely fine crochet. She had showed me some of the things she'd made, and quite honestly they looked as if they'd been made by ants. It was all so incredibly fine. Each piece of work must have taken her months, if not years to complete, and Ines had trunks full of the things she, her mother and grandmother had made. Bedspreads, tablecloths, shawls, christening gowns, even curtains, masses of things being kept as heirlooms. Her daughter Marta already had a house full of the stuff, but still Ines continued making them. I wondered why she never branched out into something else, like rug making or tapestry.

But as soon as I'd had that thought, I realised it was the sort of thinking that made people ask me why I didn't set up in business? Why didn't I get other people to make up my designs for toys and things, make some money? The reason was that it just didn't interest me. I made them because I loved doing it. I couldn't imagine setting up a production line or making anything I didn't love and want to keep myself. And Ines was obviously the same. If you really love the process of making, you loose yourself in it, enjoying the skill you develop. The final piece isn't really important. True, it's wonderful when things work out, but really it's the process of making that counts.

Ines enjoyed her quiet time after lunch. Louis at the bar with his friends, playing Escopa, the traditional Spanish card game, and gossiping. Ines thought that it was very important for men to get out of the house, to be amongst other men. She was probably right, all the groups of men we'd seen in Spain so far hung out with each other, whatever age they were. Starting with the little boys going crazy after school, to teenage boys gathered around motor scooters, then as young men in bars. Until finally as old men playing Escopa and dominoes, or sitting on the wall outside the library. Doubtless feeling the same as they always had, hanging around with their friends, gossiping about everyone. The men in Galicia did their male bonding thing whenever they got the chance. The women were slightly different. They visited each other in their homes or met at the café later in the afternoon, dressed in their going-for-coffee clothes. The women did their thing, the men did theirs, life was regular, even, and things were never very different. It was like a well-oiled machine, people did what they did, every day, every week and throughout their lives. Maybe the only time things went wild was at the fiesta, when the rhythm of the town was

lifted and tossed about for a couple of days. It was going to be interesting for us to see what that was like.



The quest for land

Ines was a lovely person, and incredibly kind to us. She seemed to understand how strange it felt for us being there amongst people who were born in Entrimo and surrounded by their families and friends. She always welcomed us and asked how we were, and wanted to know what we were up to, or if we needed anything. While she didn't speak English, Ines, like several people we had met, was truly empathetic. She seemed to tune into us, she could see things from our perspective and understand our feelings without having to struggle through a complex conversation. Mostly we talked about life in Entrimo, things we'd seen and didn't understand or people we had met. That was always fascinating because Ines knew everyone and could tell us who was related to whom, little stories from the past, funny, romantic or tragic, always really interesting tales. Then, very often, we'd get round to talking about our plan and how we might ever find somewhere to live.

Knowing that we needed local people to help, we always talked to whoever would listen to us. We were discovering that

our magical place was a bit difficult to describe and very difficult for local people to understand. In Entrimo people lived in the pueblo or surrounding aldeas, bunched together, virtually inside each other's pockets, while the land they used was spotted about all over the place. This wasn't what we were after. We wanted to make a real garden, one with perennial plants and trees, a special place, our own environment. Everyone here just had their bits of land and only grew seasonal vegetables on them. They had spectacular vegetable plots, they just weren't gardens. If we were going to be able to make our garden, we definitely needed a reasonably sized piece of land and that was indeed, 'dificil'.

At least Ines seemed to understand what we were after, she had travelled a bit and had even been to Argentina to visit Luis, which I thought was amazing just thinking how long that must have taken by boat. Ines had seen gardens there and was a keen rose grower herself, plus she and Luis were about the only people in town to have a garden around their house. This was because Luiz had sorted it all out when Ines's mother died. She had owned the house and the land around it, so when she died the land was supposed to have been divided between Ines, her sisters and her brother. Luiz had spoken to them all and got agreement to keep all the land together to make the garden. Since none of the family was interested, Ines and Luiz got their garden, and even let Luisa and Santiago have a long slice down one side to make a nice vegetable plot right outside their house. It seemed that even for Ines and Luiz, getting their garden had been a bit 'dificil' and they already owned the house. Obviously it wasn't going to be easy for us either and at times we got a bit depressed about it all. We talked it through with Ines, who said we shouldn't worry, certainly we'd be able to find somewhere, so

what if it was 'dificil', it wasn't impossible.

That afternoon, we were sitting with Ines under one of her fruit trees, surrounded by zinnias, and we talked about all the other aldeas that made up Entrimo. Phil was interested in knowing more about some of the places higher above the town, as if being where we were, at 600m (2,000ft), wasn't high enough. Like Queguas, which was perched somewhere above the main street, further up the mountain. Ines knew the place, although she said that Luiz knew it better as he had a friend living there. Pausing to think for a moment she then suggested we should all go and have a look, go for a walk, a 'passeo' with Luiz, what did we think? Passeo, the Spanish word for going for a walk, sounded great to us, in fact just what we needed, the chance to see other aldeas and get some idea of the possibilities, dust off the plan and get ourselves back on track. Fine, said Ines, she would speak to Luiz when he came back from the bar, and we would go to Queguas the next day.

We were still finding it odd that every morning the sun was shining. Our plans with Ines for going to Queguas had not been prefixed with 'if the weather's nice'. Summer in Entrimo meant sun every day. I got up as usual and got the morning routine underway, giving Sardina his first breakfast and then making our own. Getting on with our day, washing clothes, shopping for food and things. Today though, something was odd. Sardina wasn't sticking to his usual routine. He didn't finish his breakfast, and uncharacteristically didn't come back for his usual top-up of a second helping. He was in his usual spot on the patio but he didn't seem himself. Maybe he'd eaten something horrible, well chances were he had eaten something horrible. We'd had plenty of cats and sometimes they were a bit off colour, usually when they'd eaten something bad. They got

over it though, once they'd been sick, somewhere unhelpful like inside a shoe or behind the sofa. I felt sure Sardina would be fine, it was just the first time he hadn't felt well. At lunchtime he'd decided to take himself off to the bedroom to sleep on the bed. It was a hot day and the bedroom was the coolest place, he'd probably been sick and just wanted to sleep now.

We walked round to meet Ines at four o'clock, knowing Luiz would be back from the café by then. He was in high spirits, enjoying the idea of a passeo, waving to Benita as we walked through the aldea, telling her there was room in the boot if she fancied coming along. She gave him a withering look and waved him away. Ines had also asked Luisa to come with us, and as we passed her house she appeared at her kitchen door carrying a little bag. As we walked to the car she conspiratorially showed us inside the bag where a packet of biscuits lay. Ines laughing and pulling open her own bag to reveal some little coffee cups and a bar of chocolate. Maybe there was going to be a strange little picnic on our passeo. Getting into Luiz's sweet little car was a tight squeeze, it was one of the tiniest vehicles I'd ever seen. A bit like an ancient fiat 125, but far more shapely. It was in fact a 1964 Seat, in dove grey, which Luiz had bought brand new. Now it smelled of old car, vinyl and hot oil. On the outside it looked straight out of a cartoon, Top Cat sprung to mind, or exactly like a child's drawing of a car. It had a little bonnet, then a miniature windscreen, a tiny roof, then the boot, which was exactly the same shape as the bonnet. The wings either side of the boot came to sharp points, and the lights in them were surrounded by shiny chrome, making them look as if they were spares for a 1960's rocket. Inside it was just a basic metal box, with bench seats covered in brown imitation leather, the odd metal spring protruding. There

were just rubber mats on the metal floor, and strange little plastic door handles sticking out of the greenish cardboard which covered the inside of the doors. All in all it was the cutest car I'd ever seen.

Luiz started the engine and the car crawled slowly out of the aldea, no doubt struggling with the combined weight of five adults. I was concerned about how it was going to cope, especially up the steep mountain. But Luiz had no worries, to him his little car was invincible, and he didn't doubt for a minute that we'd make it up to Queguas. For him it was all a great adventure. The little cartoon car definitely had the right driver in Luiz, he looked hilarious behind the wheel, far too big and full of character. With his little car full to bursting point, it was also a gift for all his cronies. As we approached the library, where the wall was crowded as usual with old men, Luiz careered the car towards them, making them cheer and shout. Then he saw the priest up ahead, which was far too good an opportunity to miss, and shooting forward swerved towards him, making all of his friends howl again. Ines, being very devout, was horror-struck, but the priest hadn't noticed and just waved cheerily as we passed by. Ines heaved a sigh of relief, while Luiz gave him a cheery wave then muttered rude things about the church, making both Ines and Luisa wince. We left the old men on the wall still making crude gestures, and turned off the main street to begin our near vertical ascent to Queguas.

The little car chugged upwards, almost pausing for breath as Luiz tried to change gears dealing with the incredible steepness and the twists and turns of the narrow road, as it wound up and up. After about ten minutes the road flattened out a bit and we saw a road sign with a pair of binoculars, in a sort of lay-by, a place for tourists to stop and get a good view of the

surrounding area. Luiz swerved in and stopped the car. 'Lets look at the view' he said, flinging open his door, which was held on just by its little leather strap hinges. We followed, grateful of the opportunity to stretch our folded limbs, and walked over to the rocky edge. Below us Entrimo was now just a toy village. The sun was so bright we could see everything really clearly. It was strange seeing this and actually knowing the place. We could pick out all the shops and houses along the liquorice strip of main road. We could see the park with the swings across from the fruit shop. And over there the slab of concrete that was Don Pepe. Our eyes picked out the stacks of brightly coloured plastic chairs behind Bar Estrella, we could also see the bright yellow sign above Paquita's supermarket. Off the main street were all the houses we knew so well. Those near the pueblo, and others further away in the aldeas. After much arguing with Ines about which roof was which, Luiz pointed to their house, and Benita and Luisa's next door. We could see even further too, as far as the big reservoir in the flooded river valley as it headed towards the hydroelectric plant on the border with Portugal. The view was amazing, everything was there, and Entrimo looked as if it was just sitting there in the folds of this giant skirt on the lap of two vast mountain ranges.

Back in the car we continued to climb, gears wheezing and gasping, but luckily each steep bit was followed by a short stretch on the flat, which gave the car a chance to recover. At one point a flock of goats appeared and we had to slow down to a crawl. Their bells jingle, jingle, jingling as they fanned out around the car, their sweet smell filling the air. Followed by their owner, like someone from another era, his strange dark clothes and a piece of black whiskery fabric draped around his shoulders like a cape, tied at the neck with lengths of string. As

we passed he stopped to speak to Luiz, although it didn't sound as if he was one of Luiz's friends, far too sombre for that. But he was interested to know what we were doing near his aldea, and Luiz explained that they were going for a walk in Queguas, with their foreign neighbours. This seemed to satisfy Mr Goat and he bid us 'buenos tardes', then carried on to catch up with his goats.

We rounded the last bend and finally saw the aldea ahead of us. And as so often seemed to be the way in Spain, there was a pile of old household rubbish just tipped on the side of the road. Rusty fridges, old cookers and dirty mattresses, in amongst the trees and wild flowers. How could people do that? All this wonderful scenery, spectacular nature, and local people just dumped their rubbish on it. Recently we'd asked Sandra about it, having seen piles of rubbish like this everywhere, and she had shook her head explaining that there was no need for people to do it, anyone could ring the council and have anything taken away, it didn't cost them anything. They could even leave it out by the big rubbish bins and it would be collected. But old people were stuck in their ways and didn't think to contact anyone. The Parque Natural wasn't happy about it either, the whole of Entrimo and its surrounding aldeas were in the Parque, and since there was a system for dealing with rubbish they were thinking of prosecuting people. But as the main culprits were older people, the situation was 'dificil'.

We passed the illegal rubbish heap and trundled on towards the aldea, where a row of maybe six houses stood by the side of the road. Then the road stopped. It just ran out. After that there was nothing in front of us apart from green hillside. The six houses looked sort of newish, maybe twenty years old, and were exactly like all others we'd seen of the same era. Modelled

on the traditional layout, with the living space upstairs, but instead of animal accommodation underneath there was now a massive garage. However, unlike the traditional stone houses these were made from concrete and block, then painted white or clad in marble. They were charmless, ugly places at the stage in their lives when they really needed to be finished or demolished. Here the overwhelming feeling was that no one cared enough to do either. They were sad and neglected, not really rooted in the history of this place, and made an odd start to our visit. Luiz saw none of this as he turned off the engine, allowing the car to coast gently to a halt by bumping into the kerb. Surely Queguas couldn't consist of just six houses, could it? We were wondering about this as Luiz levered himself out of the driving seat and immediately set off, disappearing past the last one. As we got out Ines explained that this was the 'new' part of the aldea, and that the real Queguas lay behind these, further up the mountain.

We followed where Luiz had gone, and as we rounded the end of the last house saw an ancient cobbled track rising steeply uphill with a row of old stone houses climbing along one side. Luiz was leaning against the third one, already chatting to an old man who was sitting on a kitchen chair outside his front door. When we caught up Luiz introduced us and we all shook hands. We tried to understand what Luiz was saying, as he explained about the passeo and that we were foreign, English even! That we had the idea of maybe buying some land, renovating an old house. The old man nodded and began telling Luiz about the patches of land he owned and saying it was what Queguas needed, new people, the place was almost empty now. Luiz and the man chatted on and it was a little while before we could leave. Finally though we set off again and he explained what the old man had been saying, telling us that most of the

conversation had been about his health, how he was quite ill and seemed to spend a lot of time at the hospital in Ourense. They had spoken of how sad it was these days in Queguas, with hardly anyone living there, maybe only three or four families. Obviously in the summer it would be different, when everyone came home, but through the rest of the year the place was virtually abandoned. Younger people had left to go to work in the cities and older people, needing someone around to help them, had mostly gone to Ourense to be near family, and of course the hospital.

There was definitely an air of sadness about the place, as if it's best days had gone, and as we walked past the first few houses we also started to get a strong feeling for the past. The cobbled track was the first sign. Ines pointed out the deep grooves at the sides where the stones were worn lower. These had been made by the wheels of donkey carts, going back and forth from the village to the hillside, carrying straw and hay for the animals and food back from the vegetable plots. Queguas, like all of the mountain aldeas, also had lots of goats, the land being rocky and not the best for growing crops, the kind of place goats liked. With animals there was inevitably lots of coming and going, taking the animals up to new pastures, bringing them back down again. Maybe we would see some of the animal shelters where the goats were herded to at night. The goatherder slept there too, especially through the summer when the days were longer and the animals spent all their time out on the hillside. People in the mountain aldeas had to make the most of the good weather, they had to wait the longest for the spring to arrive, then winter came to them first. Ines laughed, she said it was always easy to spot the cars belonging to the mountain people in the winter. Theirs were the ones outside

the bar Estrella covered in snow first thing in the morning, when down in the town there hadn't been even a flake. It was hard for us to imagine any sort of cold weather as we walked on under the hot sun.

The last building in the pueblo was wonderful. It was the most perfect example of the traditional rural house imaginable. Well, if you closed one eye. It was falling down now, it's wooden doors hanging off their hinges, no glass in the windows. Everything seemed to be sagging, sinking into the ground. But it was amazing, it looked like it was squatting low behind the enclosing stone wall. Crouching closest to the ground was the animal housing, and above that the living space. There were the remains of a straw roof, the first one we'd ever seen. The wooden balcony was rotten and hanging down in the middle. The straw was slipping off the roof, making the house look as if it was having a bad hair day, it's fringe out of control dangling over its window eyes. Unlike a thatched roof, this appeared to be simply lengths of straw laid on top of each other, held in place now by planks of wood and rocks. Luiz told us that in the past there was some sort of weaving of the straw, which was then pinned together, but neither he nor Luisa nor Ines could remember how this had worked, but they all agreed there had been plenty of straw roofs. Luiz pointed to something else made of straw in a corner of the yard, it looked like a little hat, straw stalks gathered together and fanned out over something. We walked round to where Luiz was pointing and saw that it was a beehive. A hollowed out tree stump with the straw-hat thing on top and bees buzzing all around. Luiz pointed to a hole where the bees were coming and going. 'Corcho', cork, he said. The stump wasn't a tree, just the cork outer bark, peeled from the tree. Well, that was amazing, so

beautifully simple and so part of the place. Ines was reminiscing over honeycombs that she'd seen her aunts pull out of similar hives, yes this was the way honey was produced in the past, everyone had a couple of these on their land, people depended on it.

The old house was the last building in the village, but that didn't seem to be the reason for the faraway feeling about it. Unlike the other houses, which were all modernised to greater or lesser extents, this one was completely untouched, as if the owners had just popped out thirty years ago and no one was sure when they'd be back. The atmosphere around the place was affected by it too, there was stillness and preoccupation that seemed to hang in the air. It wasn't a sad feeling, it was just as if the house was fading into the past. It was fascinating for us to see, a little window on what had been, because there was nothing like it around our aldea or in downtown Entrimo. This was the first time we had seen somewhere which showed us what the past had looked like.

Luiz had walked on again and now called for us to catch up. Ines, Luisa, Phil and I had been busy in our own worlds, standing with our arms resting on top of the stone wall around the old house, looking into the yard. Having been suddenly woken from our dreams we hurried on to where Luiz was standing further up the track, water rushing around his feet. Once we were all there, Ines began undoing the flap on her bag and dug out the little cups. Luiz pointed to some rocks at the side of the track, out of which the water was gushing, 'the spring', he said. It had originally run along a little gully, but this was now choked with grass so it was spilling out over the track. This had been the source of water for the whole village, Ines explained, people would be up and down to this spring all day

long with their water jugs. Now, people had mains water in their houses from the reservoir, making washing and cooking so much easier. But no one who still lived in the aldea would drink that, only the mountain spring water, because it was the best. It was certainly just what we needed in this heat, as we gulped it down. Luiz then pointed to an old shed just below us. He explained that when he was a young man, he and some friends had been in a band. He played the clarinet while his friends played accordion, trumpet and drums. Throughout the summer they had a marvellous time going to all the different aldeas, like Queguas, and playing for their fiestas. Being only about fourteen or fifteen at the time, they didn't mind the walking. They had no vehicle and there were no roads, just tracks, so they walked everywhere to play and enjoy the fiesta and earn some money. Queguas was just across the valley from where Luiz had been born, in the aldea of Grou, and they had walked here one summer evening all the way down their side of the valley, then across the river which was low in the summer, and climbed up this side. It had taken them hours. Then they had played outside this big shed, which for some reason we couldn't fathom, had been the centre of the life in the aldea. It was so hard to imagine what it must have been like living here then, especially on the special night of the fiesta, with all its noise and people. We tried hard to picture Luiz and friends with their musical instruments, in front of the crowds of people all intent on a good night out, the wine flowing. Were people dancing? Luiz and Ines said 'of course', everyone was there to dance and have fun. The fiesta was the most exciting time of the year, when all the young people got to meet others from different aldeas. Ines reminded Luiz that it wasn't just a big party though, however much he liked to think so, there was the church

procession too. Of course, the reason for the fiesta was to celebrate the saint of the aldea. Thinking of this we looked around but couldn't see a church. Luiz pointed up the track, the church in Queguas was shared with the next aldea, so was sort of half way between both. That was where we were going, along the track to the church. With that Luiz set off once more, leaving us to drain our cups.

He may have been seventy years old and the heat of late afternoon was still quite intense, but Luiz was way out in front of us all the way up the next part of the track. Luisa and Ines were behind, keeping each other company and walking at a steady pace. Luiz called out to us to come and see the river, so we quickened our pace and arrived at where he was standing, just beyond a bit of hedge jutting out across the track. The track, no longer cobbles, but rocks with clumps of grass, wasn't as clear as it had been when we set out. Maybe not many people used it now, so the bushes had grown across, and the water from the river had washed away some of the soil, leaving the rocks of the path sticking up. We walked on while Luiz talked about the little church we were going to see, he said it was the smallest in the whole of Entrimo, but while it was definitely small it was in the most beautiful setting. I wondered about all the people who used to go to the church every Sunday, and maybe more often if Luisa and Ines were typical churchgoers, sometimes Luisa went to the church in town more than once a day. I was trying to imagine people coming along this track that often, but couldn't. Life would have been tough enough in those days, without walking all this way every day too. We continued steadily up the track with Luiz, then stopped for a rest and to wait for Ines and Luisa to catch up. Leaning on the stone wall at one side of the track, Luiz asked us about living in Queguas, what did we think?

Phil was the one who had begun compiling the list of requirements for our perfect spot, everything from the size of the plot and the type of soil, to where the sun rose, spring water, distance from the town and so on. There were many things in Queguas favour, although the ideal place for us to live would have been outside the aldea itself, somewhere along the track where there was land and a house, but we hadn't seen any other houses yet. It was interesting, thinking about living along a track, especially since the only access was on foot. Getting to the little church or anywhere beyond where Luiz had parked the car, meant walking. Were we ready for that kind of life? If there had been a house, we would have probably found it easier to imagine. Ines and Luisa then arrived, joining in our discussions. Luisa was wondering who owned the land around the track. It looked different from what we were used to in our aldea, with much bigger pieces, divided by stone walls. At which point there was a clumping of hooves and the dull clanking of bells from up ahead, and slowly three big brown cows lumbered into view, their hooves clattering on the rocky path, the gigantic metal bells around their necks jingling in a deep resonant way. They had very long horns, beautiful brown eyes, and our afternoon passeo had just become much more interesting.

The cows weren't alone, there was a man who was moving them to a different field, and he was as interested in seeing our little group as the cows were, stopping briefly to speak with Luiz. The cows taking advantage of this moment to come closer and have a look at us, their dribbley muzzles working their way over our outstretched hands. Cows are always so smooth and soft, and these ones didn't mind us stroking them at all. They wagged their heads to keep the flies away, their big horns twisting from right to left, jangling their bells. Then as

the man finished chatting to Luiz he gave a little shout, tapping one of the cows on the rump to get it moving, and they clattered away down the track, while we set off again forever upwards. How much further could it be? On and on we walked until finally we reached the top of the track, pleased to see it start sloping downwards now, towards the little church below us, sitting on its own in a quiet grassy field.

The church really was tiny and only a little bit wider than its front door. We couldn't go in because it was locked but we could see through the little windows. Three rows of pews, a simple altar and the statue of the Madonna. It looked very cool and peaceful inside. Actually it was very nice outside too, the low walls either side of the footpath were in shade, so we sat down for a rest. Luisa produced her biscuits and Ines her chocolate, it was picnic time and a chance to recover from the long haul up from the aldea. The perfect spot. Sitting here we could see for miles in either direction, the land below dropping sharply for a thousand metres before it rose again on the other side of the river. There were no buildings or roads. No sounds of people or cars. Only nature and the bark of a dog somewhere far away further along the valley.

There were some tall chestnut trees about fifty metres from the front of the church, and once we'd all eaten squares of slightly melted chocolate, held between two of Luisa's biscuits, Ines rummaged in her bag and pulled out her little cups again. Getting up, she beckoned us to follow her towards the trees, where we soon began to hear the sound of water trickling. Looking around we knew there was another spring somewhere. Ines pointed to a clump of bushes and there it was. Fresh, cold water pouring out of the rock. We drank, then refilled the cups to take back to Luisa and Luiz who were still sitting on the wall.

We'd seen so much today, and the experience had helped us imagine what living in an aldea high above town would be like, it was just a shame we hadn't seen the right kind of spot for us. Luiz must have realised this because he then told us that while Queguas might be the highest aldea, Olelas was high too, and the most distant. It was almost twelve kilometres from the centre of town, right on the edge of Spain looking over at Portugal. Ines shivered at the mention of Olelas, 'El fin de mundo' she said, The end of the world. We made a mental note of the name and that we had to visit. The end of the world, it sounded fascinating already.

Luiz was ready to walk back down now that he had refuelled on chocolate. He leapt up from the low wall and laughed at us as we dragged ourselves upright. At least it was all downhill to the car he said, and set off at his usual cracking pace while we all got into our stride behind him. It was comfortably cooler now, the sun had moved lower in the early evening sky, making the colour of stone walls and houses softer and more mellow. Even the ugly ones at the entrance to the aldea looked almost acceptable now as we finally reached the car. This time the journey was effortless, even though it seemed as if we might shoot over the side on some of the sharper bends. We arrived back in Entrimo, Luiz paused the car for a second at the junction, then headed off towards the little open-air café at the top of the park. Once again cutting the engine and letting the car coast to a stop at the kerb. 'Ice cream!' he shouted, and scrambled out. Ines and Luisa smiling at the sight of Luiz trotting off towards the café. We all squeezed out too and followed him over to the tables set out under the huge plane trees.

This was definitely the life. A warm evening at the outdoor

café, sitting under the trees, surrounded by mountains. Just the kind of image we had imagined while we were waiting to sell our house in Yorkshire. A place where people gravitated to in the evenings to enjoy the good weather, while drinking coffee, eating ice cream and chatting with friends. And here we were doing just that. We'd come a long way since setting off in the rain last winter. Now we had the sense that we had reached a new stage in our journey. We had settled into life in the aldea and were beginning to feel we could become a part of the place. Whether it was the heat, the tiredness after the long walk, or that fact that we had been up a mountain in Luiz's crazy little car and survived, we didn't know but it certainly felt good.

Arriving back home we were tired and hungry, so I went straight to the kitchen to get supper started, maybe pasta with some of Luisa's tomato sauce. Then suddenly realised something wasn't right, Sardina hadn't come to meet us when we came back. He hadn't been looking well before we left so I hurried to the bedroom to see if he was still there. He was, looking floppy and dejected, his big eyes sad, not even able to raise his head, nothing like his usual self. Phil went to get some water and a plastic syringe from the kitchen. Sardina definitely looked a bit dehydrated, his fur was all flat and greasy. I sat stroking him, waiting for Phil to come back. Sardina didn't seem to mind Phil squirting water into his mouth, perhaps he'd felt thirsty but didn't want to get up and go to the kitchen. At least he was drinking and that was good. We knew that cats could last a day or two without food, but not without water. I stroked Sardina and wondered what to do. There was a vet in the next small town, Bande, which was about thirty kilometres away, but it would probably be closed by the time we got there. We'd have to wait until the morning. At least Sardina had drunk

water, so if we could make sure we gave him more through the evening he'd be okay and we could go to Bande tomorrow. Phil sat, stroking and talking to him while I went to the kitchen to make our supper. We offered Sardina some food, but he wasn't interested, he just wanted to lie on the bed. After we'd eaten our supper and cleared away it was film time, so Phil got out the laptop and began plugging it in and connecting the sound to the speakers of the CD player. It was dark outside now and since we were going to be watching a film in the living room and didn't want to leave Sardina alone in the bedroom, I made him a cosy bed on one of the folding chairs then went to fetch him. He seemed to like being on the chair, he snuggled down when the film started, understanding this ritual. I'd made us our usual pot of tea and brought it into the living room on a tray, then popped back to the kitchen to get a bar of chocolate, returning to sit down as the film began. As Phil unwrapped the chocolate we noticed a slight change in Sardina, he lifted his head and began sniffing the air, then sniffed harder and stood up on his bed. Once he'd located where the chocolaty smell was coming from he launched himself onto Phil's lap and tried to help himself. This, from the cat who had been lying like a limp piece of fur fabric all day. Now he was brought back from the brink by chocolate. Phil broke off a square and then nibbled a small piece for Sardina, offering it to him on his hand. Sardina was ecstatic and wolfed down the little piece, vigorously licking Phil's palm for any traces before crazily scrabbling about for more. We'd never seen anything like it. We'd had cats who were wild about eggs or cheese but not crazy like this, there was no stopping him, he really wanted that chocolate. We gave him a few more little pieces, not sure if it was wise to give him much, but since he was so keen and he had looked so sad, we didn't

think it could do much harm. After he'd had about a square, he seemed to be happy enough and began washing himself, another good sign. Then, when he'd had a thorough clean up, he jumped down off the chair and squeezed out through the living room door into the hallway. I followed, maybe Sardina was thinking about going outside. But instead of going towards the door, he trotted to the kitchen. He went straight over to the water bowl and had a long drink, then to his food bowl where he crouched down and tucked in to the dried food as if he hadn't been sad and ill all day long. He was back to his usual self, scoffing down the food, concentrating hard on emptying the bowl. Then he stood up, stretched and came across to me for a little cuddle. He looked completely normal, just like his usual self. Maybe he'd want to go out now. I stood up and put him down on the kitchen floor, expecting him to trot towards the front door, but he didn't. He ran towards the fridge and looked back at me, then at the fridge. His usual way of saying 'have a look and see if there's any fish in there would you?' It was wonderful that Sardina had recovered so quickly, even though we couldn't understand why. But, maybe keeping a bar of emergency chocolate was something to add to our cat first aid box *.

Next day Ramon called, we had been meeting up regularly since our first get together, even though we lived some distance apart. Would we like to come over for lunch the following day? He had some new organic produce we might be interested in, olive oil, dried figs, oats and honey. All morning Sardina had been his usual self again, scoffing down two breakfasts and excitedly trotting in with Cynthia when she called round to show us a drawing she'd done, and to tell us she had seen some big lorries arriving in the market square. She thought maybe the

* We later discovered that chocolate can be fatal for cats

fiesta was starting to arrive, but since we had no idea what the arrival of the fiesta would look like, we could only guess. I told her I'd have a look when I went up to the supermarket later and see if there was anything happening. Phil went round to the garden to have a look at the vegetables and see if he could find Luisa to ask her about watering. We were starting to understand that having a garden in a hot climate was a complex matter, especially when the garden was far away from the house. Watering the Spanish way, was a completely new experience for us.

Phil had found Luisa and apparently she was going to be watering that evening from the big tank about four kilometres away, so we could go with her after lunch to see how it all worked. Meanwhile I prepared to scoot up to the supermarket and inspect what was going on in the place where the monthly market was held. Along the road to town I noticed there were even more houses open now, and lots more cars with number plates which indicated they were from far away places, like Barcelona or Madrid. In fact the quiet little road I had got used to walking along was completely changed. I didn't see any of my usual friends, the older people who were usually like clockwork as they went shopping or to the doctor, walking up to the pharmacy or coming back from feeding their hens. The newly opened houses seemed to be bulging with life, with their windows open I could hear people talking loudly, babies crying. The contents of cars were being relayed into houses, everywhere children were skipping about. Entrimo had swung into holiday mood. I arrived at the pueblo and crossed to the post office, where I saw the trucks Cynthia had seen. They were certainly big and nothing like anything I'd seen before. I asked Pedro in the post office about them, and he said yes, they were

for the fiesta, that later that afternoon, or maybe tomorrow, the men would begin setting up the stage. All their technical equipment, like the lighting and sound stuff, was inside those trucks too. It was all very organised these days, he said.

So Cynthia had been right. The fiesta was arriving and other things fiesta related had begun too. I came out of the post office to see the two men from the council who usually spent most of the day sweeping up stray leaves, trying to hang strings of coloured lights. They were under the big trees near the open-air café, dragging stepladders around while holding on to one of the ends, hoping to tie it around a tree. The lights drooped across the tables and chairs of the café, refusing to be pulled up. They were being a bit half-hearted about the job, cigarettes dangling from their lips while they tried to fend off unhelpful comments from all the old men who were sitting like birds along the wall outside the library. Even the numbers of old men had grown, could it be that they came back to Entrimo for their holidays and spent their time sitting on the wall with their old friends? Yes, I thought that sounded about right.

I left the scene of bunting confusion and headed to Paquita's supermarket, usually an oasis of calm. Not today, there were shoppers all over the place, there were even queues at the cheese and cooked meat counter, shocking. Honestly, it had been so long since I'd been in a crowded shop it seemed bizarre having to share Paquita's attention with others. There were people blocking up the little aisles, cluttering up the vegetable section, and deliberating at the freezers. Paquita herself looked flustered at the checkout, while Ceferino, her husband was dashing about behind the cigarette counter. I quickly found Sardina's food and the one or two other things I needed and paid Paquita. She smiled and rolled her eyes, the fiesta! But it

would be fine later, her son Muncho was coming after lunch and he'd be staying to help out, thank goodness. I left the supermarket and set off back home, full of information for Cynthia.

After lunch we met Luisa to discover more about this bizarre watering thing that fascinated us. We'd already seen the canals, which looked like deep gutters, running into our aldea and alongside the streets in town. We'd also seen the water when it was running, which was spectacular, it came along like a torrent. What we couldn't imagine though was the power of all that water being let loose on anyone's vegetable plot, surely there was a way to slow it down? There definitely had to be a technique to all this. We set off with Luisa and she began explaining about how the water was shared out amongst all the local growers. There were complex arrangements made in each aldea about who could use it and when. And each year someone was in overall charge of co-ordinating things. This year it was Rosa's turn, the mother of Mrs Electrician. I made a mental note to stay well clear of her, just in case she was anything like her daughter. Yesterday Luisa had spoken to Rosa and arranged a time for when she could use the water and that turned out to be this evening. What she had to do now was walk the route of the water, making sure that all the canals were clear and that any forks, which diverted the water to someone else, were closed off. This was done with either a shovelful of earth, or for bigger gaps, some bits of rag and rocks.

We crossed the next road and Luisa pointed to the canal running alongside. This was where the water would run, so we followed it through to the next aldea, a place we hadn't been before, where inevitably everyone we met asked Luisa who we were. Once we were out of earshot Luisa gave us the low-down

on everyone. Who they were related to, where they lived and things. On we went, following the canal through the aldeas, and all the while walking steadily uphill, until at last we reached a small forest. Here, deep inside all the trees was a huge concrete tank. Like a massive but mossy covered swimming pool, except in the middle of nowhere. How odd was that? It was also empty. Luisa explained that this was because someone else had used it this morning, and now it needed to fill up, from the river further up. She pointed to a stone bung in the wall of the tank, near our feet. Pulling this out would let the water run into the canal. Luisa picked a bunch of the reeds, which were growing all around, and put them on the wall of the tank, held down with a heavy stone to stop them blowing away. She explained that if anyone came along and thought they'd just use the water, they would see that and know that someone else had been here and was filling the tank for themselves, so they shouldn't use it. 'Did that happen?' we asked. Wasn't Rosa in charge of who used it and when? Well, yes she was, but sometimes people didn't take it when they had arranged to, or didn't need a whole tank so they let a neighbour use it, or sometimes the older people just took water when they felt like it. There could be confusion. That seemed an understatement. I was pondering the empty tank when I heard Phil suggesting to Luisa that he and I came back later to un-bung it for her. I just knew his fascination with water would be too strong to miss this, pulling the bung out of several thousands of litres of water.

Later that afternoon, Cynthia popped round with a packet of mini croissants her Mum had given her, and being our chum she thought she'd bring them round to share. I made some tea and carried it on a tray to the living room, where we opened the packet and tipped them onto a plate. Sardina, who had arrived

having heard Cynthia's voice, was suddenly very attentive, sniffing the air, his sugar antenna always on a state of high alert, and started moving towards the plate on the table. Cynthia thought it was hilarious and broke a little croissant in half, offering Sardina a piece. He fiercely pulled it away from her and quickly gobbled it down, before immediately looking around for more.

We drank our tea and enjoyed the little croissants while quizzing Cynthia about the fiesta. She told us about the music and said that some people danced. There were other things too, which we pressed her to explain but she couldn't, she just said there were 'things', toys and stuff, we'd just have to wait and see, tomorrow we'd find out. That was when the three-day fiesta would begin, at nine o'clock in the evening, starting with a show of folk dancing from various countries. Afterwards there would be music from what the posters were describing as 'orchestras', but judging by their publicity shots looked rather more like Eurovision bands than classical musicians. It was strange not understanding anything about this fiesta and it being such a big part of the summer in Entrimo. But once this week was over, we'd know as much about it as everyone else.

That evening at about seven o'clock we checked with Luisa that she was ready for watering and then set off on our walk. We left the aldea and followed the route of canals to make one last check on all the dams. On our walk we saw all the summer families enjoying their holiday in the mountains. Some were preparing barbecues in their gardens, there were children playing in big plastic swimming pools, and other families were sitting outside under parasols. It all looked like the perfect stuff of holidays. We called 'buenos tardes' to everyone as we passed and they called back to us.

Soon we were there, up in the quiet of the forest and approaching the tank. The sun was lower now and the air was filled with a sweet damp earthy smell. There were lots of little insects flying around, I just hoped none of them were mosquitoes, waiting for me. We reached the wall of the tank and peered over, this time the water was really high. There must have been thousands of gallons of water in there. Phil looked down at the bung and prepared to pull it out, having no idea if the water would trickle or gush out. He pulled, the bung popped like a champagne cork, and the water came hurtling at a tremendous rate. Rushing along the first section and off through the forest. We imagined at that speed it would be with Luisa in a few seconds. Phil suggested I run straight back and let her know it was coming, while he walked the route, making sure it didn't stop or divert off anywhere. I set off along a quicker route, directly to Pielas, looking into any canals as I passed them, but there was no water. I couldn't understand why.

Louisa was not at her plot when I got back, she was calmly drying dishes in her kitchen. I told her that the bung was out and the water was coming. She said fine, it wouldn't arrive for another ten minutes yet. I was amazed, how could it take that long? The speed of the water pouring into the canal had been like a torrent. I just couldn't imagine it taking so long to get to the aldea. Waiting in her garden I looked at all the beds, and where she had now dug troughs for the water to run into, it was definitely an art form. Then her and Santiago arrived, wellies on and satchos in readiness, just as gurgling could be heard from the roadside coming into the aldea. In no time it had burst through at the top of the plot, and Santiago immediately swung into action, steering the flow to the furthest side to slow it down, while letting trickles run on to some of the beds. Once

the water reached the other end, Luisa steered it up and down the potato beds, along the beans and peas, then across to the onions, with a nice big soaking for the pumpkins and tomatoes. Making little dams of soil to ensure the water lingered around the plants that needed it the most. The evening air was full of the sounds of water splashing and the scraping of the satchos, as they blocked and moved the water around. Phil finally arrived just in time to see the last of the water flowing around the plots, amazed to hear how long it had taken to reach Pielas. Then just as quickly it was all over. Santiago set off up to put the bung back in and let the tank fill overnight. By now it was dark and the air held one of the best scents in the world. Warm, damp soil. We could almost hear the plants drinking up the water, restoring themselves after a day in the scorching sun. We said 'buenos noches' to Luisa and walked back to our house. The calmness of Luisa's garden slipping away as we approached Cynthia's house. Here the night was but young, the noise of the televisions and the bright light of the kitchen spilling out on to the little road. Voices of Cynthia's family and the smell of cooking drifted out of the open door. We passed by and happily arrived at our gate. There was Sardina, lying on the wall. He got up, stretched his legs and jumped down ready for his supper. Or was it his second supper now?

The next day we were on our way to visit Ramon for lunch. It was by a different route this time, going from Entrimo rather than the one we'd got used to from Allariz, much further and more mountainous as well as incredibly tight bends. It was a relief to finally arrive. Asterix was pleased to see us too, barking crazily until we opened the outer door. Then as usual, nearly knocking us off our feet by jumping up with excitement. Ramon appeared at the balcony and tried to get him to calm

down, but it wasn't until he was almost hoarse with shouting that Asterix reluctantly turned his attention to chasing the innocent pigeons that had gathered nearby. We squeezed through the little wooden gate at the bottom of the steps and climbed the steps. Ramon greeted us and told us to have a seat at the table while he just dashed back to the kitchen. At the same time his lovely black and white cat appeared. She looked as thin as before, but this time it wasn't because Ramon didn't give her enough food. Meowing and walking towards us, ready to jump up onto a lap for some attention, she was accompanied by her new family, four black and white kittens. They were incredibly sweet, tumbling over each other, playing with anything they came across, bits of string, the netting of the bags of corncobs, Ramon's bootlaces. Then they began squeaking for their mother. She couldn't have been less interested, having launched herself on to Phil's knee for a bit of 'me time'.

Ramon reappeared and looked at the cat, his hands on his hips. 'Look after your babies' he told the cat. But she just rolled over, ready for Phil to tickle her tummy. Ramon shook his head. Now the kittens were a bit bigger she had lost interest in them, she didn't want to lie around feeding them, she wanted to get back to her usual life. Uncharacteristically, Ramon went and brought a plate of food for the cat, and she, obviously surprised at this, leapt down before he changed his mind. The kittens followed her, eating a little for themselves but really hoping their mother would lie down somewhere so that they could have a proper feed. It was lovely and sunny on the balcony and so different from first time we were here. The cat finished her plate of food, settled down for a wash on a sack in the sun in a corner of the balcony, and the kittens seized their moment and clambered over their mother to settle down to

their lunch. They all looked so sweet. Ramon's cat dozing in the heat and the kittens fast asleep, draped over their mother's tummy. Ramon returned from the kitchen saying lunch was almost ready and begun by spreading a bright tablecloth over the table, then disappeared back to the kitchen to bring things through. First was a big jug of flowers for the centre of the table, then another of spring water for us to drink. Followed by a huge vegetable crumble, bubbling and golden with lots of nuts and seeds on the top. Then there was a massive bowl of leafy salad freshly picked from his garden, which was full of lettuce, rocket, endives and purple salad leaves with borage and nasturtium flowers. And as a side dish, potato salad with chives and parsley, as well as a big plate of sliced tomatoes with onion rings, drizzled in olive oil. As if this wasn't feast enough, Ramon rounded this all off by producing a wonderful crispy warm loaf, telling us he'd baked the bread but he wasn't sure how it had turned out.

We chatted with Ramon about his work, and he asked us how we were getting on in Entrimo. We told him some of our stories about life in the aldea, and of our walk to Queguas with Luiz, Ines and Luisa. Ramon thought it was funny, us going out with our older neighbours, but it seemed quite normal to us, after all, they'd become our friends. Ramon said he couldn't imagine going anywhere with his neighbours. He preferred to stay out of their way, since they were always trying to tell him what to do and didn't understand about organic gardening. Phil asked Ramon about the communal watering system, to which Ramon rolled his eyes. It was a nightmare, he said, there were no end of arguments each year, someone always took more than their share, other people felt they missed out and were always upset, and it took all winter for tempers to cool and for people

to become friends again. Just in time for it to start all over again. Phil said he'd already added to his list of 'perfect house' criteria, no shared water.

After yet more home cooking from Ramon's kitchen, and cups of tea, we got ready to leave. Phil was kneeling next to the kittens, obviously worrying about what was to become of them under Ramon's feeding regime. Maybe we should take one, it could be a friend for Sardina, what did I think? Plainly I didn't need to be asked twice about adopting a kitten, the question was, which one? All four looked cute, but one of them had a funny expression, his eyes and ears seemed too big for his head and he wasn't the strongest of the litter. Maybe we should have him because he looked a bit weedy, that way he'd definitely survive. Ramon thought we were mad, but went downstairs to find a box to put the kitten in. Since we were the only English people he'd ever met, he was getting the impression that all English people were a bit mad about animals, especially cats.

Sardina was waiting as ever when we arrived, where had we been all day? Didn't we know he was a growing kitten and needed his five or six square meals a day? Thinking about the volume of food Sardina ate, I wondered what Ramon would have to say. Probably that we were spoiling him, or ruining a good mouser by giving him too much affection and food. Well, Sardina was the boss, if he wanted food he knew he'd get it, and if he killed things, which he did far too regularly for our tastes, he always brought whatever it was to show us. His diet didn't seem to deter his natural instincts. He galloped up the steps, and as usual raced us to the top so that he could be first to squeeze through the door and rush to the kitchen. Phil took the kitten in his box to the workroom, where he could adjust to being in one quiet space, without Sardina's help, while I gave our

lad his much-needed supper. He was such a funny cat, everything he did seemed to be full of his own personality, even eating. No cat-like nibbling for him, he opened his mouth wide and bit great mouthfuls of food, and then just gulped them down, sometimes he even bit the side of the bowl, I could hear the sound of teeth on earthenware. And he never left his bowl until it was completely empty, he licked it thoroughly, making sure he hadn't left the tiniest little bit of food anywhere, pushing it around the floor, looking for stray bits. Even then, he hung around to see if there was anything else coming his way. I'm sure he could have wolfed down another dish straight away, but I thought it was best to let one lot go down first, just to make sure he wasn't going to be sick.

Once Sardina was occupied, I went and found his little blanket and took it, along with a bowl of food and some water, to the workroom. I opened the door slowly and saw Phil lying on his stomach, half under the bed, and guessed where the kitten was. I put the food down near the empty box, a little blanket inside, and looked underneath. There were the huge eyes and the big ears, in the far corner. If this kitten was anything like his mother he wouldn't be able to resist the smell of food. I spoke quietly to the kitten, who just sat there blinking. He was frightened, so we left him to settle down and eat his food by himself, I was sure he'd be fine later. By now it was almost time for us to leave for the fiesta, so we dashed about getting ready and wondered about leaving Sardina inside or letting him go out, since there were going to be fireworks later. While we were deliberating, Sardina ran outside, making his own decision. He was in high spirits, maybe he'd got caught up in fiesta fever too. Anyway, we weren't so near the town that the fireworks would be too frightening. Sardina jumped up onto

the wall, between us and Benita's garden next door, then disappeared under her trees.

We arrived at the park and a total transformation had taken place. Not only were there people absolutely everywhere, but the strange amphitheatre of semicircular stone steps that had always puzzled us, was packed too. A stage had been set up in front, and nearby one of the huge trucks was parked, with its side open to reveal a huge generator and masses of cables snaking out. Either side of the stage and over the top was scaffolding to hold the giant speakers and lighting, with people rushing around attending to those. Another bunch sitting behind a computer desk out front, no doubt controlling it all. We were gazing around, trying to take everything in, when we saw Ines and Luiz waving and calling us to come over, pointing to a little gap they had saved for us on the steps. Luiz was in high spirits, calling out to all his cronies, and it seemed everyone was waving to each other and pointing out friends and neighbours in the audience. By now the evening light was fading quickly and the sun directly in front of us began to sink. Just before it disappeared completely came a brief moment when it seemed to shine brighter, illuminating everything and everyone, including the incredible natural backdrop, the silent spectacular mountains of Portugal. Reminding us all of that absolute constant to life in Entrimo, nature. In which we were tiny and it was huge. A perfect illustration of the true relationship between humans and the natural world, whatever else people preferred to think.

Then the sun slipped behind the peaks, their silhouette lingering for just the briefest moment, and the park was plunged into night. At exactly the same moment a spotlight came on, illuminating a figure on the stage, welcoming everyone to the

fiesta. Her introduction was lengthy, much of it we couldn't understand, but it seemed like there were going to be dance troupes from several countries appearing each night. First on though, would be the Gaitas band of Entrimo. At hearing this the crowd erupted, everyone was so proud of their local pipe & drum band. Luiz leaned over and told us they were the youngest group in the region, and they were also amongst the best. With her introduction over the woman then left the stage and the spotlight faded. What happened next made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. In the total darkness a single piper started, and immediately everyone fell silent, which made it even more haunting, as if the whole valley was hearing this melody. At the same time, very slowly, a feint glimmer at the back of the stage began to reveal about twenty silhouettes, all standing completely still. I have never experienced anything so beautiful. We'd heard the gaitas before, they rehearsed in the school playground on Saturday afternoons, but we hadn't seen them actually performing. It was beyond magical. The lone piper then stopped, at which the audience broke out into loud cheering and clapping, followed by the stage being bathed in brilliant light as all the gaitas begun to play. The sound coming from all those pipes, drums and tambourines seemed like a rainbow burst of colour in the darkness. Walking slowly forward to the front of the stage we could then see they were dressed in historical costumes. The girls in big heavy black woollen dresses, black tight bodices, white blouses with big sleeves, and woollen bonnets, all with lots of Celtic designs sewn into them. The boys in black tasselled caps, long sleeved white shirts, long black waistcoats, black breeches and white leggings. At a guess they looked to be aged between fourteen and in their early twenties, with the younger ones, mainly girls,

playing the tambourine. The older ones were playing the bagpipes, 'gaitas', or drums. There was one boy playing a big bass drum, which was hanging from his shoulders, like you see in military bands. He was the key, setting the rhythm, underscoring all the pipes and other drums. The music was great, very like traditional Irish music but with the pipes giving it a different flavour, like Northumberland pipes. It could have been Scottish too, but there was also definitely a flavour of the orient in their sound. As well as playing their instruments, the performers moved slowly around the stage, doing what looked like slow country-dance moves. Making lines, following each other forward, parting, and pealing down each side and circling the stage. They played so well. The sound so crisp and clear. Haunting and rhythmic, yet somehow so Gallego, of this place, Galician. And their sound fitted in perfectly with the mountains and the old-worldliness of this region. They played about six different pieces and then ended with their signature tune, which even we recognised from the rehearsals. The audience were delighted and joined in the rhythm of the piece, stamping their feet and clapping until it ended and the performers filed back behind the curtain. Everyone was justifiably proud of their gaitas.

The other performances were lovely too, lots of colourful twirling and whirling, and lots of accordion and violin music. There were even more people in the audience now, with crowds standing all around the edge and behind. Even at the open air café people were leaning over the wall watching, everyone having a good time. The folk dancing continued until about eleven o'clock. Then, this being Spain, the night yet young, there was a 'short break' of about an hour before the first 'orchestra' of the fiesta were scheduled to play. Getting that

ready involved yet another massive burst of activity, this time on the other side of the park. A truck was manoeuvred into position, its side opened, and a complete stage set gradually emerged, including lights and backdrop. All the technicians had to do then was connect up the spaghetti of cables and go through the ubiquitous soundchecks. Before Phil got too engrossed with this I dragged him away to have a look at the 'things' Cynthia had told us about.

Attempting to leave our seats, along with everyone else, was a crush. But eventually we managed to reach the open-air café, which was now thronging with people. All around this stalls had been set up, a bit like those at a fairground. One was selling popcorn, another had the wonderful long warm doughnuts we liked covered in sugar and cinnamon, others colourful arrays of plastic toys. There were metallic gas-filled balloons, and people selling Celtic jewellery, lots of necklaces, bracelets, rings with curling, looping designs. I could see why Cynthia had found it difficult to explain, there were so many different things to see. After that we walked through the gap in the wall, past the library, and crossed the road to bar Estrella. It was packed with people, and Pepe behind the counter, along with several additional members of staff, was dashing about wildly. Too crowded we decided, so headed for Don Pepe instead, where it was slightly less frenetic although still very busy. We managed to get a coffee and went to sit outside, watching the throngs of people in the street. So this is what a fiesta was all about, the centrepiece to the summer, and the event local people planned their holiday around.

The 'orchestra' turned out to be exactly as we imagined, not our kind of thing. But much later the mood changed, to a more classical ballroom kind of music, and some of the older people

took to the dance floor, or rather the patch of ground under the trees. Men and women in couples, or women with women, if there weren't enough men to go round. They were great, so quick and stylish, they knew all the steps and concentrated hard as they passed by turning and gliding along. I really wished I knew how to dance like that, their feet so quick, skilfully stepping around those of their partners, as if they did it every day. It was really impressive, proper dancing, not just shuffling from one foot to the other. We couldn't help thinking about the fiestas of the past, as Ines had described them, here under the same big old trees, festooned with not just coloured light bulbs swinging from their branches but paper decorations too. And a band, like Luiz's. A bunch of local men playing their instruments at one end of the park. There would have been tables spread with tablecloths so that people could sit drinking and eating and enjoying the atmosphere. Maybe this was where they had met their husband or wife, and each year they had come back and remembered that. Later they had brought their children, and now their grandchildren. I envied their feeling of belonging somewhere.

After the orchestra had played for a couple of hours it was time for the final event of the night. The fireworks. This was going to be fun, but we didn't know where we should go to get the best view, there didn't seem to be anywhere big enough nearby, or anywhere to set them off. Yet again we were thinking like English people. Who needs space for fireworks, when you can just set them off in amongst all the people? The crowd instinctively were heading for the main road, so we followed them. We weren't sure what to expect and couldn't see any sort of firework display stuff anywhere. Then suddenly there was a massive whoosh, just a few feet away, as a rocket shot up in the

air, exploding directly above us in a burst of colour. Followed by another and another. There must have been people scurrying around in the darkness just behind the low wall, setting them off. We had never heard such noise, probably because we had never been this close to fireworks before, it was literally like being in the middle of a war zone, it was so loud. And continuous, deafening explosion after explosion, for about fifteen minutes. After which everyone cheered and whistled, clapped and stamped their feet. That was the end of the performances for the first night of the fiesta. It was now about half-past two in the morning and still early. People drifted off to the various bars to sit and drink with friends. We meanwhile headed back home, to the familiar quietness of our aldea. Manolo and Candita were already there at their gate, quietly wishing us 'buenos noches', as they went inside for a few hours sleep. We arrived at our gate and there was Sardina sitting on the old chair outside the door to the barn under the house.

Once the fiesta was over, August seemed to fade slowly away towards September. The families of the local people began to return to their lives in other places. There were still some visitors around, mostly the retired people who were able to stay and get the most out of the late summer sun, before going back to France or Madrid for the winter. The change in the season made us start worrying about our plan again. We had been adjusting to our new life, but had we found some land or a house? Well, no, we hadn't. It wasn't that we hadn't thought about it constantly, we had. But we hadn't seen anywhere that we could imagine becoming our home. The land was the problem, maybe even more than just 'dificil'. Not only were there no houses for sale with their own garden around them, there were no pieces of land that were even as big as the

garden we'd left behind. It could have felt hopeless, but there was still one place left that we hadn't visited and that was the aldea Luiz had mentioned on our passeo to Queguas. Twelve kilometres from the centre of Entrimo, round the other side of the mountain was Olelas, and while there was Olelas there was still hope.

We decided to speak to Ines about it and see what advice she had for us. Although once we had started on worrying about the house thing, we moved seamlessly onto worrying about our financial situation. So far we had not become the skillful money-makers we needed to be, so much for our plan of finding a house and working out how to support ourselves in three then six months. It was now nine months, and if it hadn't have been for the house money in the bank and the tiny drip of interest it was going to give us eventually, we wouldn't have had any income at all. So logically, if we had found a house and bought it, what would we do for money then? Thinking about our financial situation only made us more anxious, and that always led to panic, and nothing constructive ever came from that. We never wanted to think about the house/money conundrum, we didn't know what the answer was, but we had to keep thinking that it would work itself out. Something would come to us, we weren't stupid. A bit slow maybe when it came to financial acumen, but that was because we had no real interest in it. We just wanted to live our life, and even though what we were doing was scary and frightening on a scale we could never have imagined before we left Yorkshire, we mostly didn't feel that we should give it up. Actually, after that first summer, I'm sure most people would have said they could see why. A wonderful sunny extended holiday, with days spent growing vegetables and wandering about having picnics and

fiestas, it all sounded perfect. And so it was in many ways. We had needed to feel part of the place, to understand what it was like to live in such a different way, but we also needed to be making a life for ourselves. We needed our own home, and it was worrying and frustrating to feel that after all this time since we'd left our house in Yorkshire, we still were no nearer to that. We hadn't even found anywhere in Entrimo we could remotely imagine living. But we clung on to the one aldea that gave us hope, even though we hadn't seen it yet. We would go and see Ines, ask her advice and pull ourselves together. Yes, this whole summer thing had thrown us off track, more effort was needed, and we had to get on with it, decide whether we were going to find somewhere or seriously consider getting back in the van again. Not a prospect either of us fancied, especially after the last winter. We weren't travellers and the experience of living in the van was not one we wanted to repeat. No, we really had to get on with our search and Olelas had to be it.

Meanwhile the new kitten, who we'd named Lucio, was completely wonderful, and Sardina loved him. At first I thought Sardina was a bit too enthusiastic about his new friend, especially since he was about six times the size of Lucio, but even if he was the one being chased most of the time, Lucio never seemed to mind. There was never any fighting or even growling. When he saw Lucio for the first time, Sardina was wary and kept his distance for about five whole minutes, and then he crept closer and closer to get a better look. Lucio hissed and spiked up his fur in a show of bravery, but Sardina seemed impressed with Lucio's display of pointed fur and decided this was a sign that he wanted to play. He swiftly dashed under the table, a move which had Lucio's big eyes even wider than usual, and crouched in his pile of battered cardboard

boxes, wiggling, like he had seen something to pounce on. I just hoped it wasn't the kitten. But it seemed that Sardina was demonstrating just how much fun could be had rolling around under the table in the old boxes, and wanted Lucio to join him.

Seeing this performance obviously convinced Lucio, because he shot under the table too and the breakfast session of hiding inside boxes and pawing each other through the gaps was established. It was a ritual, along with all the others they so quickly invented. Like the way they always rushed into the kitchen together at meal times, barging past each other to be the first one through the door. Then how they settled down to eat, but kept looking at each other's bowls of food. They seemed so convinced the other had something better, that after they'd eaten a few mouthfuls of food they had to switch bowls, every time. Once they'd finished eating it was time for chasing along the hallway, preferably with a little plastic ball so they could hurtle along and play football at the same time. They even slept together on one of the folding armchairs.

A few days after our 'lets get this show back on the road' discussion we were sitting talking to Ines and Luisa about all our worries. They never seemed to mind us unburdening ourselves to them and were always full of helpful suggestions about everything. On this occasion we even got talking about our money worries. Honestly, there seemed nothing we wouldn't talk to our neighbours about, was our innate Englishness wearing thin? Ines had wondered if I had thought of teaching English, not in school but offering classes to individual teenagers who needed help. Apparently it was something that happened in bigger towns and seemed popular. Maybe Ines had something there, after all I'd been a teacher, not in English, but still, teaching individual children or teenagers wasn't going to

involve the usual nightmare of keeping a class of thirty under control. Ines said I should make a little flyer and put it up in the shops in town and then people could contact me. That all sounded simple enough, maybe I would give it a try.

Since Ines seemed to be on an advice-giving roll, we got talking about Olelas, asking both Ines and Luisa if they had any information about the place. Luisa, amazingly, had never been there. It was only twelve kilometres away, but since she had no family contacts in that area there'd never been a reason to go. Ines had been, although just to a funeral some time ago, but she didn't know anything about the aldea, apart from its being distant and that hardly anyone lived there now. She said she wouldn't like to live there, Entrimo itself was far enough away from the hospital but at least there was a doctor and pharmacy. In Olelas the doctor was only there once a week to take a clinic, that didn't seem good enough really, especially since almost everyone who lived there was old. Well, apart from Cynthia's cousin, Luiz-Jose, and his parents. At the mention of Cynthia's family, Luisa and Ines were smiling. I reckoned they were thinking it would be ironic for us to go and live right out in the wilds only to find ourselves living next door to another branch of Cynthia's rowdy family. Phil suggested we all go on a passeo to Olelas, we could take the van this time and go walking in the mountains. Luisa and Ines were game, Ines would ask Luiz if he wanted to come, certainly it sounded a good idea, we would feel as if we'd got our plan rolling again.

Next day we were ready for passeo, number two. No Luiz this time, he had other commitments, taking a relative to a hospital appointment in Ourense. We drove out of Entrimo, and on the way Ines pointed out the old bakery where her mother used to bake their bread. The squat building was in

ruins now and totally covered in brambles, it was almost impossible to see anything of a building there. A bit further on we saw water pouring out of a huge rock and Luisa and Ines began discussing the merits of this spring over the other 'fuente' in town. On we went, listening to more little stories as we left the part of Entrimo we knew and began dropping down away from the town.

Olelas was so far away because it was on the other side of a huge mountain, and to get there we had to drive round it. When people had said the aldea was too far away, we couldn't really understand why. Now we were beginning to see what they meant. Twelve kilometres on a good straight road would take about twelve minutes to travel. Twelve kilometres on endless hairpin bends, switchbacks, descending 1000m then ascending it again, was more like half an hour. It was also all single track, and definitely not the best road for those of us who felt travel sick or were afraid of heights. We crawled up the extreme steep inclines, inched around perilously tight bends, and sped down the hills. At one point we rounded a corner and came face to face with what looked like a lunar landscape. We were wedged right against the foot of a mountain, it was grey and pale, and strewn around were bits of rock which must have fallen over years and years. There was so much rock, and so little soil, the whole area looked totally barren, like a rocky desert. Going to Olelas really did seem far away, like going back in time to the prehistoric Age. Everything about the place was so different. Maybe we were crazy to even think about living there. I tried to imagine popping out to Paquita's for a bit of shopping from up here, I'd have to be desperate.

As we came round yet another hairpin, standing in the middle of the road were some of the biggest cows I have ever

seen. Even Ines and Luisa were stunned, though not by how big and hairy they looked, but the fact they were right there blocking our path, any faster and we would definitely have hit one. Apparently these were very special cattle, that only lived here in these mountains. They roamed free and grazed on the wild plants, which was why their meat tasted so good, it had a wonderful flavour and was really lean. We didn't really want to know about that bit, we preferred just thinking about them happily roaming the mountainside. They actually looked just like Highland cattle, those creatures with long hairy coats, huge big twisty horns and fringes that needed a trim. Now, having encountered the weird lunar landscape, we had these strange otherworldly beasts to contend with too, perhaps we were going to have to accept that Olelas was indeed turning out to be the weird place local people always seemed to be hinting it might be.

However, at that particular moment I didn't care, I just needed to get out of the van. I was feeling really ill, waves of sickness kept sweeping over me, oh how I hated mountain driving. I was almost at the stage of making Phil stop when the first houses of the aldea came into sight, and decided to try and hang on to my lunch a bit longer. Then as soon as the van stopped I flung myself out of the side door. Phew, what a relief that was. Phil meanwhile was trying to find somewhere to park, which was tricky since the road was extremely narrow. We couldn't just leave it anywhere, or there wouldn't be any room for any other vehicles to pass. It was the campsite at Santiago de Compostela all over again, 'if we accidentally put one wheel too far over then we'll be tumbling down to the river bottom'. I couldn't even watch as Phil carefully inched the van back and forth, turning its vast length to rest on the verge, until there was enough space for another car to pass. Then we set off on foot

into the pueblo, passing the now obligatory tumbling heap of old fridges, cookers, mattresses and other rubbish, as it slowly worked its way down the side of the mountain.

Olelas lost points in every category of the 'most beautiful village in Spain' competition. Aside from the rubbish, which was a massive vote looser, the first houses we came across were shocking. They'd obviously been built by someone with either something to prove, or a debilitating mental disorder. Pitting themself against a vertical drop they had made several absolutely massive concrete edifices, that literally dangled over the edge of the mountain. Only one of them was finished, although it had been faced in an extremely wild array of orange and pink bathroom tiles. Why? The others were just ugly concrete shells, a scar on the mountainside. Maybe the builder was still considering appropriate finishes? Who knew? But it looked as if they'd been considering for a very long time, because these were not recent developments. The concrete was going green, the metal reinforcing rods sticking out all over were rusty, and there were old ladders and rubbish strewn everywhere, adding to the air of neglect. I reckoned the best thing would be to put a giant lever under them all and prise them off the mountain, send them tumbling down to the river. However, while that would dramatically improve the aldea visually, the effect on the wildlife would be even worse.

Ines and Luisa weren't impressed either, but they didn't say anything, just raised an eyebrow as we passed. Beyond them lay a narrow track leading into the 'old' part. From here the buildings did at least look in keeping with their surroundings. They were very ancient but still intact. Many were obviously empty, but some had their windows open, curtains blowing, and it wasn't long before we met some of the residents. A group of

older women were sat out on a low wall, backs to the tumbling mountainside, enjoying a post-lunch chat in the sun. They were very pleased to see a bunch of strangers and immediately got into conversation with Ines and Luisa. As ever the preliminaries of introductions took place. Who was everyone? Where did we come from? And had anyone ever met or even seen each other before? Then with those facts established, the second round could start, and that was when everyone involved tried to think of possible family connections. It never took long for someone to work out there was a second cousin or a brother-in-law's sister or someone, which seemed to make everyone happy. The more connections that were revealed and unravelled, the longer the second round took, and the more relaxed and talkative everyone became. On this occasion there were some connections for Ines. She had met one of the women before somewhere, and that woman was almost a friend of Ines's sister, who ran the vegetable shop, so it was quite a successful session. Then everyone wanted to know why we were there. Ines explained about us being her neighbours, that we were foreign, and that we had wanted to see Olelas. All the women nodded and started getting romantic about the place, how natural and beautiful it was. During this the word 'esmarelda' kept coming up, but we had no idea what they were talking about. They also mentioned the mountain water, which was all they drank, apart from the wine and aguardiente obviously. The spring water was piped into their homes now, but you could still see the original 'fuente', just a bit further along the track.

After about fifteen minutes we managed to prise ourselves away and continue walking through the aldea. It was a very small place and the houses were barely modernised, not like in ours where everyone lived in a completely renovated, marble

inside and out, edifice. Here they still looked like they fitted in. The first row had been built into the edge of the hillside, so to reach the animal part you had to walk down a steep stone staircase to the terrace below. And then at that level there were more houses in front. Everything was built higgledy piggledy, and as we weaved between them it felt more like they were caves dug out of the hillside, everything clung so tightly to the mountain. We passed several houses where animals were still being kept underneath. Hens were wandering about, there were rabbits in cages, some cattle, and a donkey. At the entrance to these the wide heavy wooden doors stood open, sometimes with a wire-covered screen in its place to stop the animals from escaping. At one of the oldest and biggest houses, the old stone covered with moss, Luisa, who was slightly ahead of us, stopped in front of the open barn door and smiled. When we reached her we could see why. Inside were two immense cows, with big fancy collars, just standing there chewing hay. There were clumps of it sticking out of their mouths, as they chewed and shook their heads to try and keep the flies away. Luisa explained that these cattle were used for ploughing, that was why they were wearing collars, they must have just come in from working. The collars were like the bridles we'd seen on shire horses, big padded things, with rings where all the reigns and leads were connected. They didn't have them on all the time, she said, just for working. We'd never seen a plough that was pulled by cattle. Was it a big thing? We'd seen the ones used by tractors in Yorkshire, but couldn't imagine how this would work with an animal. Did the ploughman have to steer the cattle, or were they expert enough to know what to do? For Ines and Luisa it was part of their childhood, just like when we sometimes saw the toys we'd had as children on sale as vintage. That warm

feeling of the familiar, which stirs something in our memories before we are conscious of what it is. They still remembered the days when cattle were all anyone had to work the land. Now so much of it was left uncultivated, wild. Those who were still growing generally used little tractors. Ines beckoned us to look over the wall down to the valley below. One glimpse was enough to realise it wouldn't be possible to use a tractor here. It looked like a photo from a children's encyclopedia about the Andes. The mountain was both vast and steep, and in order to grow food in these conditions the people over the centuries had built terraces, each one divided into a massive patchwork of plots, each of those a different shade of green, outlined by a grey stone wall. There were masses and masses of them, over a vast area, but it was impossible to tell from this distance what the scale of them was, each plot could have been ten feet long or an acre. The most amazing part though was that the people from this aldea, the old people, were still working those plots, all the way down below. To get to their piece of land they would have to almost bungee jump down, how did they do it?

We were all dangling over the wall looking at the view, when I caught sight of something moving far below. A dark shape, but I couldn't tell exactly what it was. I pointed it out to the others, then Phil saw it too, and we all watched for some hint of what we were looking at. After a couple of minutes we realised what we were seeing was a person, a woman. With something large on her head, and she was coming back up from her plot. She was so far away she was still just a tiny speck. How long was it going to take for her? Imagine getting all the way down, ready to work at planting or weeding or watering, then realising, as I so often did in our plots, that I'd forgotten something vital. In Olelas it would have to stay forgotten, going up and down to

those plots would be a once a day activity. It would certainly keep you fit though. We watched mesmerised as the woman weaved back and forth, gradually ascending but still very far away. The masses of green plots covered the whole side of this part of the valley, all the way down to the river below. It was stunning, absolutely stunning. We couldn't see the river, but Ines said that according to the women she had just spoken to we would be able to if we walked further on. Across the deep valley was Portugal, the river being the frontier. It seemed so strange to be looking at another country, imagining the people in the little aldeas over there, speaking a different language, living a different culture. So strange to us British people, used to living on our island.

Eventually the woman was close enough for us to see her more clearly. She was carrying a sheep on her shoulders. She also didn't look a day less than ninety. Reluctantly, we tore ourselves away and set off away from the aldea, along an old track the women had told us about. It was so peaceful, walking along in the sun. There were no other buildings, just this vast wild mountain and pasture. Somewhere above we could just about hear the tinkle of goat bells, and for a moment we all stopped to search the horizon for them. Eventually spotting them very high up, jumping across the massive rocks, keeping up with each other. Further on, the track began to curve as it went round the mountain, and the aldea disappeared completely. Maybe we would be able to see the river now. No, not yet. But what we could see, up ahead, was what looked like a house. It was difficult to tell from this distance, it appeared to be part of the mountain, as if growing out of it. Made from the same rock and covered in the same moss. The only clue was the roof and two little windows upstairs. It was very old, but not dilapidated,

the roof was still intact as were the two window frames and their shutters. Since it was obviously uninhabited Phil climbed up the side of the mountain to see if he could find an entrance on the upper floor, and in a minute was calling us to come up.

Ines, Luisa and I took the longer route, traversing the rocky hillside, until we finally came across a low stone wall and climbed over. At the back of the house a flatish area had been carved out of the mountain, to make a small patio area at first floor level. From this side the house looked tiny, and Phil's head was almost scraping the overhanging roof tiles. There were no windows here, only a door with a big rusty looking lock, its giant key still in the keyhole. All very Alice in Wonderland, as if all it needed was a label saying 'ENTER'.

Ines, Luisa and I were itching to look inside, and since the key was there it wouldn't be as if we were breaking in. The heavy wooden door creaked open easily. It was very dark inside, but we could just make out the shutters on the window directly opposite. By now I was so desperate to see more, that even though the floorboards looked extremely dodgy, I gingerly crossed to the window. The bolt on the shutters had rusted, but eventually with some waggling it came free. I pulled more gently on the shutters, fearing the hinges would be in an even worse state, but they opened fine, and suddenly light poured in and we could see.

This level was the living part of the house, and it was just one room open to the rafters, divided by an interesting wooden partition, which was about 2m high and had two wooden doors. The bit we were standing in was what Ines and Luisa agreed would have been the kitchen. There was a stone slab in the middle of the floor for the fire, and when Ines pointed to the rafters, we could see they were blackened by all the smoke. She

could so easily have been a house detective. Under the window was a big wooden chest, apparently another clue that this part of the house had been the kitchen. It was a typical piece of kitchen furniture from the past, used for storing bowls and plates and stuff. This room took up about a third of the floor space. Behind the partition was the rest. We were all keen to know what lay behind those doors, but the floorboards in front of the doors looked scarily damp and rotten. Still, we had to see. We couldn't possibly leave now, not knowing what the rest of the house looked like. Once again it was me who decided to take the risk. Ines, Luisa and Phil weren't sure this was a good idea, even though they wanted to see what lay behind, but in the end I went anyway. Putting one foot on the floor at a time, testing whether it would take my weight, before stepping forward again. I didn't plummet to the barn below, and in a couple of steps had grasped a doorknob, turned it, and pushed the door open. Phil, Luisa and Ines were all craning their necks to see what was in there, and since the floor seemed safe, they carefully followed my route into what was obviously a bedroom. It had an old bed frame with a shredded straw mattress, another wooden trunk and another window. Despite the house being so old and obviously uninhabited for so long it was surprisingly dry and clean, it smelled dusty but not mouldy or damp. Ines worked at freeing the bolt on the shutters. Then suddenly they flopped open and she called us all over to look at what was outside.

This window was only a couple of metres away from the one in the kitchen, and on the same front wall, but somehow this made a huge difference. From here, we could see the aldea again, its terraces stacked in a precarious pile clinging to the mountainside. Right now they were in shadow, but the terraces

below were still in bright sunshine. We could almost see where we'd left the van too. It was the most beautiful view ever, breathtaking. A complete little world. All enclosed by the huge dark stone ring of mountains on this side of the valley, then dropping down infinitely, after which they rose again with the white stone of the Portuguese mountains on the other side. Imagine, I said to Luisa, waking up each morning and looking out at that view. 'Yes', she said, it looked wonderful now, but would it look so nice in the winter, when the clouds were hanging below you, hiding everything, and there was ice on the track? Ines nodded, agreeing, not easily impressed with the beauty of the view. She was happy with her feet on the ground, thank you very much. Honestly, where was their romance? Ines laughed at our enthusiasm for the place, and then said we hadn't seen the best part yet, the river. She closed the shutter and we edged out of the bedroom. The other room was similar, but without a window. Closing the shutter in the kitchen, we then let ourselves out.

Back on the track Ines then decided we should try and find the river. The edge of the mountain here was directly opposite the house, in front of which was a small field and a huge pile of boulders. From those it should be visible. When we got there Ines pointed to a gap in the rocks, saying she and Luisa would squeeze through there, but said we could probably get a better view up on top. So up we scrambled, until we were standing on what felt like the roof of the world. It was unbelievable. Not only were we precariously balanced one thousand metres above a drop straight down, but now we could see what has to be the greatest treasure of the entire region. The river. It was vast, even from this height, and it was literally emerald green. Not any other kind of green, or blue. Really, it was nothing like any

of those colours. This was a sparkling luminous jewel of a colour, like a beautiful piece of satin ribbon lying between two massive rocky banks. On one side Spain, and the other Portugal. I called to Ines, could they see the river? "Si! Esmarelda, esmarelda!' That word again. We had to sit down, it was making us too dizzy standing so high on so little, but the river was mesmerising. Then we laid down on our stomachs, to just marvel at it all.

As we walked back along the track we were all talking about the amazing river, how far below it was, how crystal clear it had seemed, and the colour, the amazing colour. 'Si', said Ines, 'Esmarelda', which we later discovered was the much prettier Spanish word for emerald. We were almost back in the aldea now, at the 'fuente', where we stopped to cool our hands under the water gushing from the rock and scoop some into our mouths. It was freezing after all the heat. The people of the aldea were busy again now, with the chores of late afternoon. Feeding the animals, watering the plots and bringing in dry clothes off the washing lines. It was comforting to imagine living this closely to other people, like being in a big family. In and out of each other's houses, working alongside each other on the plots. Everyone part of everyone else's life. Would we be able to fit in here, become accepted? Or did it just seem that way because we felt so out of place right now and desperately wanted to belong somewhere? It would be like living in Pielas, but more so, far more intense. Could we take any more of that from neighbours like Benita or Cynthia's family? It was tough, trying to get to grips with the fact that we were looking at a very different way of life, trying to imagine we'd ever find a house where we could make the garden we had in our minds. Olelas was spectacular. Well, apart from the first part with all the

rubbish and the hideous concrete houses. This was the closest thing we had seen to our ideal place. But we could tell there was a huge gap between our old life and the way people lived here, would we be able to adapt to that?

All the way back in the van our minds were whirring with Olelas. The views, the river and, of course, the house. Would it be worth bending our plan slightly, to make it fit with living there? Might it be possible to buy the land we needed nearby instead? In between these thoughts I asked Ines and Luisa what they thought of the place, wasn't it beautiful? Yes, they admitted, it was indeed beautiful, but they were practical people and for them it was too far away. There was no doctor, supposing there was an emergency? Yes, the practical issues were important, but now we had seen a house it was tantalising to think of all the possibilities. What a place, a truly hidden part of Entrimo. Arriving back in Pielas we made our way back to the house, our heads buzzing with plans for Olelas, even with the long list of impractical reasons for not living there. Then as we reached the top of our steps, the sound of Benita 'yoo-hooing' us interrupted our revelrie. She was down in her garden, next door, beckoning us to come and join her in the little stone shed they had there. Where inside was a fire blazing on the stone floor, even though there was no chimney. Ines and Luisa were there too, sat on tiny wooden chairs studying a pan of roasting chestnuts, seeing if they were done yet. Were they? Picking them up in a tea towel, they tested them with a knife, while trying to avoid burning their fingers. Yes, the first lot were ready. I couldn't remember ever having tasted chestnuts, but surely if they'd been this good I would have. Benita pulled up one of the tiny chairs, which was exactly the right size for her, and sat between Ines and Luisa. Then, with all of our feet

stretched out towards the fire, we listened to their conversation about the quality of the chestnuts this year. We also studied the inside of the shed, flickering pictures in the firelight. Benita explained that this had been their summer kitchen. In the past families spent most of the day outdoors, so this is where they did their cooking in the summer, when it was too hot in the house. Now things were different, the house and its barn underneath had been transformed to include a modern kitchen and pristine white shower room. But whilst the shed was still there, the connection with how it had used to be, was still alive for Benita.



Pulling up roots

We tried to think logically about Olelas and keep our imaginations under some sort of control, it wouldn't do to be rash. Even though we knew whatever place we found was never going to be conventional by the standards of our previous life. But that didn't mean throwing away any sense of precaution. Or did it? There were no answers, and there was no one we could talk to about it. Even our lovely neighbours could only advise us from their perspective, and they were cautious people, who worried about doctors and being near relatives. Which made us respond by mentally shrugging our shoulders and saying 'who cares?' Like stroppy teenagers, determined to do the opposite.

Luckily we did realise that we had to keep everyday life trotting along to stop us from going mad, although Ines always wanted to hear our latest deliberations about Olelas. Our inability to decide what to do didn't make her think we were cautious dimwits. It was a big decision, involving large sums of

money, therefore we should take our time. Also we knew that if there had been other possible places around Entrimo we might not have become so obsessed. Yes, she agreed, it was a special place, that she could understand. Maybe we should speak to Jose from the feretaria, he was from Olelas so he would be able to advise us. This was interesting news, someone else who we could bore to life's end with our madness. Yes, this fantasy was set to run for a while yet.

Next day it poured with heavy miserable rain all day long, it was too wet for gardening or even leaving the house. By early evening, when the sun had set and the few street lights were glowing, our attack of cabin fever had reached such a peak that we decided to walk up to Don Pepe for coffee, even if it meant getting soaked. And hey, we could also pop into the feretaria on the way, and see if Jose was there. After all, it wouldn't do any harm to find out a bit more, it wasn't as if we were committing ourselves to anything, was it? We waded through the tide of water streaming down the track to the top of the aldea, then into the proper road up to the pueblo, huddled under useless umbrellas. We weren't completely soaked when we arrived at the luminously bright shop, but we left a couple of decent sized puddles on the floor. Pilar, Jose's daughter, always smiled when she saw us coming. But this was not an ordinary friendly welcoming smile. More like a 'how silly and embarrassing is this conversation going to be, before I can understand what you want' kind of smile. Luckily for Pilar we only wanted to know if her dad was there, which he was, so Pilar could stand down. Jose was lovely, always calm and quietly spoken. He had a way of concentrating carefully as we tried to make sentences with our basic Spanish. He stood there thinking, waiting for us to finish, then he'd blink and repeat what we'd said in correct

Spanish, checking that was what we had said before replying. He was one of the people who always understood us, so it wasn't difficult to ask him about Olelas. Yes, it was true he did come from Olelas, and he would certainly help us if he could. The house? Yes, he thought he knew which one, but maybe it would be best if we went there together and then he would be sure. He visited every day to see his mother, he explained, so maybe we could go with him, how about tomorrow?

We felt we'd achieved, inched our plan forward a tiny bit, so could feel entitled to the celebratory coffee we were heading to Don Pepe for anyhow. We paddled on up to the main street, then along its length towards the welcoming beacon of its illuminated yellow sign. Entrimo was a very different place now the summer and joyful nights of the fiesta were over. Only the stalwarts were left to see the mountains through the winter, and this year that included us. We did feel a certain belonging, staying behind while all the bright butterflies of summer had left. We lived here, we didn't have a house or a home somewhere else. We were committed if that was the right word. We were thankful for the warm brightness of the Don Pepe, the giant television set mounted on the wall and the heaps of glossy gossip magazines on the bar. We settled in to forget about the rain in the comradely comfort of the other customers.

Next morning the sun shone as if yesterday hadn't happened. Sardina was in a happy mood, chasing around inside and then revisiting his kittenhood with a session playing with the laces on Phil's boots in the hallway. There was something odd about it though, maybe the game was going on too long or there was just too much enthusiasm. I walked along to see what was happening, at which Sardina snatched what he was playing with and ran outside. Definitely he was up to something, what

was that he was carrying? A bit of bootlace? It was long thin and black, but strangely shiny and smooth too. No it wasn't a bootlace, it was a little snake impersonating a bootlace. It was clever of Sardina to find such a good match and to bring it to the boot, but I reckoned the poor, limp creature needed liberating.

We set off to Olelas in Jose's car, me in front this time to keep the travel sickness at bay. Really, wouldn't it be unfortunate to buy a house and then feel sick every time I went shopping? Luckily Jose drove like….. well, Jose. Calmly and smoothly. And that was with him pointing out all the various places of interest on our way. Like the fuente, where he got his water every day, because the water from there was the best, really pure and full of minerals. We were still finding this water thing a bit odd, coming from a country where water came out of a tap in the kitchen. We knew that everyone here had tap water now, but we were discovering that no one actually drank that. It was fine for cooking or washing, they said, but no one would consider putting chemically treated water in their bodies. Spring water was the only water for drinking, and everyone had their favourite place to get it. Next he pointed out where he used to go swimming in the river. Here was the shortcut back to his aldea. This was one of the places the goats liked to graze. He told us about his mother, and how he brought her shopping and came to visit each day. This was very interesting information, since so far we had only heard how far away Olelas was. Plainly not for Jose. We arrived at the entrance to the aldea and Jose parked easily, it was much simpler with a car than a long van. Although we reckoned Jose could probably park a lorry there, he was so used to the narrow road and the vertical drop. We then started walking down the narrow street, following a trail of

fresh cow manure. At the old part we heard the clatter and scrape of hooves on cobbles, and then a well-laden donkey appeared, being led on a slack length of rope by an old man. Nothing coming round that corner could have looked as right as this man and his donkey. 'Ah Jose! no work this morning, out for a bit of a stroll in your old aldea?' said the old man grinning. Jose smiled and explained why he was there and of course who we were. Mr Donkey then shook Phil's hand and kissed me on both cheeks, while Jose started unloading the sacks off the panniers on the donkey's back. Once that was done Mr Donkey lifted the panniers off, which were very old and made of wood, replacing them with a nice stripy blanket. They chatted for a bit longer then said goodbye. A few metres later we came across a group of older women, who all squealed delightedly at seeing Jose. How was Lordes, Jose's wife? And Pilar? The grandchildren? Again Jose explained who we were and where we were going. I was beginning to feel glad there was such a small population in Olelas, because at this rate we'd be lucky to get to the house before lunchtime. The women were really friendly though, and interested, amazed that there could be people in the world considering coming to Olelas rather than leaving. We stood back whilst Jose chatted, and looked at the view instead. Everything in the valley was so bright and fresh today after all the rain of the day before. The pale mountains of Portugal were gleaming in the sun. The women were talking to Jose about someone who was in hospital in Ourense, everyone nodding and adding comments. At that moment another, even older woman came through the wooden gate, with a huge bucket of green stuff balanced on her head. Even with the bucket she still only reached up to Phil's shoulder. One of the woman called out, 'Maria, look who's here, it's Jose!' The

tiny woman smiled broadly and looked up towards us. Her eyes were cloudy. She put the bucket down and reached out towards Jose, who took both of her hands in his and bent to kiss her on both cheeks. He spoke quietly to her, continuing to hold her hands, while she smiled and joked with him. She was smaller than the other women, and her clothes hung slightly from her shoulders. Her eyes didn't focus on Jose but on some place in the distance. She looked really frail, but obviously strong enough to scale the terraces alone and cut green stuff for the rabbits and hens. Jose and Maria finished speaking and he kissed her cheeks again before we continued down the track. Maria was one of his aunts, Jose explained. She was ninety-three years old, and apart from her failing sight she was still quite well and enjoyed helping with the chores each day. We were amazed, she really didn't look so old, maybe there was something to be said for drinking the mountain water.

We walked in single file along the narrow part of the track out of the aldea, while I tried to imagine what it would have felt like to live there when those women were my age. Things must have changed obviously, although it was difficult to see what, apart from the arrival of electricity, television and the telephone, piped water and cars. Ines had said that the 60km road linking Entrimo to Ourense had only been built some twenty years ago, so the road from Olelas to Entrimo must be even more recent. Jose reckoned less than ten years, although people had still gone to Entrimo before then, they'd had to, to sell things at the market and buy supplies. By horse, and taken a wagon full of produce and stuff with them. The biggest change in the aldea for Jose's aunt, we thought, was the shrinking population. How many people used to live here? I asked. Jose thought about two hundred, including all the children. Listening to how quiet it

was now, the place would have been buzzing, the houses full of families, masses of children crowding the abandoned school, people fetching water, looking after animals, collecting firewood, the narrow street jammed with carts, donkeys, horses, cattle. A hard life no doubt in the mountains, but what a place and time to have lived there. Today there were just twenty-eight.

We managed to walk together as the path widened and Jose talked about his life growing up in Olelas. How there were few but large families, so everyone was somehow related to each other, although there had been several Portuguese people too who had married into the aldea. There were fiestas in the summer, just across the border, a long walk but definitely worth it for the girls. Life had been hard for everyone, and the children were expected to help. He had stopped going to school when he was eleven, his father and grandfather needed him to help with the goats. Each day Jose's job was to take them out to graze on the mountain, finding fresh places with grass and wild plants for them to eat. In the spring this was easy, but in the cold of winter and the heat of summer it was difficult and the goats were fussy. They don't like extreme temperatures, or rain, and they are awkward animals, they wouldn't go where he wanted or stay together, they'd get lost and sometimes he'd find them stuck somewhere difficult to reach. He vowed he'd never have goats when he grew up. And he hadn't. He'd got sheep instead.

We had almost reached the house now, at the part of the track where it curved away from the aldea. It was really wet and muddy here, the track was also more uneven and rocky. Jose shook his head, no one uses the watering system now so the canals aren't being maintained. In the past every piece of land was cultivated, but now…. The canals looked just like the ones

Luisa used for her garden, but here they were so choked with long grass and tall weeds that the water couldn't run down them, it simply overflowed, gushing and spilling over the track then down to the plots on the next terrace. Still, Jose reckoned it wouldn't take long to dig it all out and get the water back under control. We walked on until finally we arrived at the house. Jose smiled and nodded, yes, this was the house of his cousin Antonio who now lived in France. Antonio's father had built it, Jose explained, as we walked past and to where there was a door in a wall we hadn't noticed before. We had explored only the top part of the house. Here, beyond the wall, was a yard, as deep as the house and the same width. The furthest part of the wall continued up the hillside, and Jose explained that all the land inside that belonged to the house. It was an impressive garden, even if it was steep, much bigger than any of the little bits we'd got used to seeing. In one corner of the yard was an unusual dome-shaped structure, made from the same stone, with a semi-circular opening, above which the stone was blackened. Jose explained that this had been the bread oven, and that all the families had one in the past. After all, where would they have got bread if they hadn't baked it themselves? In those days, when there were no freezers, bread had to be baked twice a week, although some families shared the job amongst grandmothers and aunts. It was beginning to sound as if the women had rather a lot of the 'responsibilities' for mountain living, what with vegetable growing, washing clothes by hand and baking bread in a wood oven. I wondered what the men were doing?

Against the outside gable of the house we also saw a flight of stone steps, leading up to the door where we had been with Luisa and Ines. To the side of these were a pair of large heavy

wooden doors, the entrance to the underneath part of the house, where the animals lived. Jose opened each one by lifting it and walking backwards. Inside there was still straw on the ground, and it was dry. Looking up we could see the wooden beams were still in good condition too. We could also see the deliberate gaps in the floorboards, not only allowing heat from the animals to rise, but maintain a good circulation of air. As well as the bales of straw there were bits of harness, rope, old metal buckets and some tools. Jose pulled a couple of bales down from the stack to show more of the back wall of the house. 'Look', he said, pointing into the darkness. We walked closer, and when our eyes had adjusted could see what Jose was pointing at. The back wall was actually the face of the mountain, not pieces of stone, the builder had accommodated it to serve as one of the walls, it was a wonderful thing. Jose was really impressed that his uncle hadn't been defeated by the challenge of the mountainside, instead he'd turned it to his advantage, the back wall of the house was already finished when he began building. Jose was enjoying showing us the house and started to suggest ways we could modernise the place. He had designed his shop, and the renovations of his mother's house. He said that of course nearly all of the houses back in Entrimo had been modernised to include a garage underneath instead of the stable, but obviously since no car could get to this house, maybe we could turn this area into a bathroom and workshop. It wouldn't be difficult to replace the big doors with a smaller one and a window. It appeared that Jose needed no encouragement and we didn't either. Instead of having Ines and Luisa to temper our madness we now had Jose seemingly even more enthusiastic than we were. Was this a good thing? It wasn't a big house, Jose was saying, but definitely big enough for

two. Then he laughed and said how easily he and others forgot how they had lived, this house would have had five people in it, as well as all the animals underneath. It was crazy that everyone wanted so many square metres of space these days, and what for? The big houses were freezing cold and no one could afford central heating. If only people had stuck with their animals downstairs. We pondered this. Jose's feretaria was a mausoleum. It was so cold that Pilar had to wear her coat all day and gloves over her chilblains during the winter. And upstairs, where Jose and Lordes lived, they doubtless gathered around their 'brasero', electric heater, as the concrete walls blackened with mould each winter. I wondered if he regretted his move down into town, but guessed he probably didn't, after all he was one of the more wealthy people in the pueblo. He'd got his shop and his house, plus we recently learnt that he'd been quietly buying bits of land to make a field-sized piece opposite his shop for the sheep. He definitely couldn't have done that in Olelas. So, what would become of us if we came to live here? How would we survive? We had found it impossible to think of the two parts of our plan at the same time, the finding of the place and the working out of how we would support ourselves. Our feeble brains weren't able to come up with clever strategies, we were too emotional, and at this point we just wanted a home, we'd worry about the rest later. Surely we weren't entirely stupid. Or were we? We certainly appeared to be cautious, indecisive worriers. Certainly not the kind of people whose experiences we had read about or seen in films. Those were impulsive, courageous, romantic people. Who bought heaps of rocks which weren't even houses in foreign lands, then turned them overnight into fantastic rustic hotels or chateaus, dripping with vines, and interiors we could

but dream of. Why weren't we those kind of people? In fact, how could we have set off from Yorkshire in such a show of bravado, while underneath we were so pathetically weedy? We had to stop all this stupid worrying. Of course we couldn't know how it would work out, that was the whole point, wasn't it? Making a new life using only our wits and skills? Either we had to get on with it, or go back to England.

Ah yes, we were good at all the big talk when roused. We got back to town and thanked Jose for his time, he must have had a million other things to do with his morning. But as ever he was calm and smiled, saying it was nothing and that we should let him know if we wanted him to speak to his cousin in France, it would be easy because they were in touch most weekends.

Later Cynthia came skipping across, where had we been? She'd been to the house twice and we hadn't been home. Before I could say anything Cynthia eyed me with suspicion. Luiz Jose's aunt had seen us in Olelas, why had we been there? Honestly, was there nowhere we could go without someone seeing us and reporting to someone else? I explained that yes, we had been to Olelas, we had been for a passeo, and it was a pueblo 'muy bonita', very pretty. Cynthia gave me a pitying look and shook her head, no it wasn't bonita, it was 'feo' and 'sucio', ugly and dirty. The streets were full of straw and animal poo, it could get on your shoes and it wasn't hygienic. We weren't thinking of moving there were we? How quick this child was. She knew that unlike her house, ours belonged to someone else. I said that we had been visiting Olelas, nothing else. Cynthia, concerned that we might be considering moving out of her orbit, added that Olelas was too far away, Luiz Jose always wished he lived here in the aldea because he didn't like having to

get up early for the school bus. And if we lived up there how would we get our shopping? It was also really cold there in the winter, Sardina and Lucio would hate it, and she had seen snow there once which had been pretty, but way too cold for us. No, we should definitely stay where we were, it was better for us. Cynthia was very wise for a seven year old, if a little self interested in her reasoning. However, I also realised that she was probably right. Unlike us, she saw the problems and worked out how to solve them, while we emoted and thought in circles. Now we were being shown up by a seven year old, it really was pathetic.

We saw Ines and Luisa, who as ever were keen to hear of our thoughts about Olelas. I told them how Jose had talked about the place and how he really seemed to love it. There was a pause before Ines pointed out the obvious, 'yes, but he lives down here doesn't he?' Then she held her hand out, closed it like a fist and brought it to her chest, intimating 'keep your money safe' or 'save your money', something like that. Whatever it was, Ines was definitely trying to save us from ourselves. We were probably the only people who would ever consider living in Olelas now, and we could forget being able to sell it in the future, there were only a couple of folk as mad as this in the world, and Ines obviously felt she'd met them.

To put Olelas out of our minds we decided to concentrate on our vegetable plots and just get on with life. How lovely those ordinary tasks seemed, when they were a refuge from the pressure of awful decision making. We both knew what it meant if we gave up on Olelas, it meant leaving Entrimo. We had visited every corner of the place, and Olelas was the only one that had it all. But it also had some serious drawbacks. We loved the mountains, we loved the place, but deep down we still

didn't feel it was good enough to invest everything in then work out all the problems afterwards. Did our inability to just go and buy Olelas mean that we didn't really want to live there? The thought of eventually having to give up and leave Entrimo, return to the van, began to grow in our minds. It was a horrible thought, really horrible. I didn't want to dismantle what we had just begun to put together. After leaving Yorkshire and skipping off so blithely, after selling everything, I suddenly realised I wasn't one of those people who didn't need things. I am a nester. It hurt not to have our stuff around us, photos, books, pictures, mementoes. Yes, I was a shallow individual and my inner world was a desert. But I wanted my stuff and I needed a house to put it in. Phil felt the same, but he wouldn't let his nesting instinct get in the way of finding the right place first. In many ways he was feeling it worse than me. He physically needed a garden to be in, and as far away from other people and noise as possible. He needed that more than a pinboard for all his postcards and photos. We tried not to think about it, occupied ourselves with the everyday tasks. But in the end, when all the panic had dissipated, we were left with the realisation that Olelas wasn't the place. And for five minutes felt wonderful. Total relief. And then... Yes, what were we going to do now? Well, we might have been dim in virtually every other department, but we had noticed that Portugal was right next door, only three kilometres up the road. We could just cross the border into a completely different culture, try our luck there, surely all the signs meant it was to be? We got out the road map, pinned it on the wall and plotted a route. It was that easy, on paper.

The practicalities were different this time. Now we had Lucio and Sardina to think about. Obviously we couldn't leave

them behind, they were our family, but how would they cope with living in the van? It could be weeks, or worse, months before we found anywhere we liked enough to stop travelling. We knew that, but surely it wouldn't be impossible, there had to be a way. So sure were we that something would resolve the cat question, that we decided to consign any cat worries to a later date. And then Phil thought he had noticed something was wrong with the van. It hadn't been its usual courageous self when we drove over the hills to see Ramon, maybe we should ask Entrimo's only mechanic to have a look at it. Instinctively I felt that this was just 'pre-match nerves', there was nothing wrong with the van, just Phil's anxiety finding an outlet. I was so convinced that I refused to believe it, even when the mechanic said we needed to replace the entire head gasket, as in seriously major repairs. It was just too bizarre, the one time we plan to go back on the road and the van develops some ailment. Maybe then it was a sign, a sign that we shouldn't leave Entrimo? No, Phil said, it was a sign that he was a genius.

We felt bad about leaving Entrimo, and said so to Ines and Louisa, but they and everyone else thought we were right. Entrimo was a beautiful place, and for them it was where they belonged, they'd been born there, their grandparents were born there, where else would they feel at home? These were lucky people whose whole being was etched in the fabric of the community. They thought we should go and find somewhere with more life, more possibilities, and eventually we would find a home.

Gradually we cut our ties, bit by bit gathering our skirts and getting ready to run. We started packing and tried to work out where all the extra stuff we had accumulated was going to go, as well as Lucio and Sardina. Also, there was the new black kitten

to worry about too. It was the terrible howling that first alerted me, while in the middle of box packing. A heart wrenching sound, as if I was about to witness some terrible cat fight. But when I looked outside there was nothing to see. The noise was still there though. I went downstairs into the yard, but again there was nothing. Then as I turned back to come inside I saw movement out on the track, beyond the gate. Hiding in a clump of dead grass was the tiniest, ugliest kitten ever, his mouth wide open and the terrible sound coming out it. He was an awful sight. Eyes gummed shut, hardly a scrap of fur covering his little bony body, his back legs like bits of wire with no fur on at all, and front legs all covered in sticky stuff. I could hardly bring myself to touch him because he looked so germy, I didn't want to pass anything on to Lucio or Sardina. But hell, the creature was suffering, I had to do something. So I bent down and picked him up, his little body stiffening with fear. And tried to stroke what little there was to stroke, while speaking reassuringly, as I carried him back up to the house. Phil called from one of the rooms, had I found out what all the noise was about? I showed him, and he rolled his eyes. 'What is that?' But I think we both already knew that by picking him up and bringing him in, he was now our responsibility. What else could we do? We couldn't leave the poor creature in the state he was in. How could he feed himself, he couldn't even see? Left like that he would definitely die in the next day or two. We were his only hope of survival. And, I pointed out, he was black and that was lucky, wasn't that a sign? Well I thought so, although Spanish people thought black cats were unlucky. So much for signs. Poor kitten. Phil gave his face a wash and un-gooed his eyes, then washed his sticky front legs too. Then we gave him some food and he purred like an engine, gobbling and purring

until all the food was gone and his little fur-less belly was stretched tight over his ribs, giant fleas running up and down the fur-less hill. I found a shoebox to settle him down in, put Sardina's little woolly blanket inside, and he was asleep in seconds. Well, two cats, three cats, what difference would it make? We got on with the packing.



Another wonderful beginning

By the end of September we were ready to go. Packed, cleaned and detached. We'd had a goodbye lunch with Ramon, and said our goodbyes to Ines and Luiz, Luisa and Cynthia. Cynthia had spent the last week or so giving us dire warnings about Portugal, how strange the people were, and how odd and difficult the language was. We hadn't said goodbye to Benita. She said she couldn't face it, and neither could I, so we just agreed to say 'Buenos noches' the night before we left.

At the crack of dawn we loaded the last stuff into the van and then went back to get the cats. The kitten, who we'd named Monkey since he looked more like a monkey than a kitten, with his black leathery fur-less skin, was easy. I put his shoebox on the front seat and a litter tray on the floor. Lucio and Sardina were a different matter. We'd decided not to squash them into a cat box, the van would be our home now and hopefully it wouldn't take them long to realise that. I was worried about Lucio, because he was so nervous of everything, so he would undoubtedly go a bit crazy to begin with. But Sardina was always relaxed, so we thought he'd be fine. Wrong. We carried

one cat each in our arms and put them in the back, then I stayed inside the van and slid the side door closed. Lucio immediately dived under the bed, but Sardina let out the most blood-curdling howl I've ever heard and then literally threw himself around the van like a dervish, hitting all the walls. I couldn't believe it, and I'd certainly never seen anything like it. He was hysterical before we'd even started moving. But there was nothing we could do, eventually he would calm down, he had to, he couldn't possibly have the energy to keep up those gymnastics all the way to the south of Portugal. It wasn't the best start to our journey, neither of us liked the thought of Sardina suffering, but we couldn't think what else to do. Lucio meanwhile settled quickly, and in no time was sitting on the worktop at the back, hiding under a curtain and watching the passing scenery out of the window. Monkey started off well too, sleeping on my lap and waking every hour or so for food and water.

Where were we going? After deciding on Portugal we had deliberated and studied the map, looking for somewhere which resembled Entrimo. Somewhere high and rocky, but not in the north where it would still be cold in the winter, and where the aldeas and pueblos looked to be far too crowded together and no doubt densely populated. The central part was also too densely populated by the cities and suburbs of Porto and Lisboa. South of there, across the river Tejo, the land opened out and settlements were a lot more sparse. But if we went too far we'd end up in the Algarve, and that would be crowded again, as well as expensive. There seemed to be just two options. The Alentejo region, just below Lisboa, and an area a bit further south from there, in the mountains of the Algarve, around the town of Monchique. In the end we settled on heading for a place in-between, called Odemira. Where we

could base ourselves and search from. That was the plan.

We drove and drove that first day, too nervous to stop even for coffee with the cats as unsettled as they were. We also wanted to put as many kilometres as possible between us and Entrimo, so that we'd feel we had really left. The weather in Entrimo had been grey and drizzly, but the further south we drove the brighter the sky became. The van cruised along, happy with its new head gasket, while the sky turned bluer and bluer by the minute. Galicia had been wonderful and amazing in an immensely rocky way, and I knew that we would never forget those mountains and what it had been like to live there, but the weather. It was so grey all the time, and while the summer had been hot it had also been short. September in Entrimo had definitely had an overwhelming sadness about it, knowing that the summer had gone and now there was only rain and windy weather to come. Portugal was having none of that. September here was still the height of summer.

We stopped eventually, the need for the toilet and a coffee became too great. I checked in the back, Lucio was dozing on the worktop and there was no sign of Sardina, so we managed to sneak out. In the bar we felt a little like we had when we'd first arrived in Spain, on our first morning off the ferry and trying to buy coffee. But it wasn't so bad this time, we'd heard Portuguese spoken quite often in Entrimo, people from there came across the mountains on market day or to buy things from Jose's feretaria, so it wasn't completely new to us. But hearing everyone speaking Portuguese, plus the television in the bar blaring, was a real assault on our Spanish tuned ears. Portuguese sounds like an old cassette tape playing backwards. Missing letters, weird nasal sounds, and lots and lots of words starting with 'ssshhhhhh'. How would we ever master this?

Spanish in Galicia was so lovely and clear, each letter pronounced in exactly the same way, whatever the word. It had been relatively easy there to hear words in the street or in the supermarket and then find them in the dictionary when we got home, adding to our vocabulary. Here it was going to require a different way of learning, and plainly, a lot more time.

Portuguese bars however, even in the rural areas, were a massive improvement on Spanish ones. The coffee was stronger and better tasting, the atmosphere more lively, and they had cakes. Yes, cakes. There was also toast and toasted sandwiches, essential things which had been sorely missing in Galicia. That first bar, high up in the mountains of northern Portugal, made us feel curiously as if we'd come home. Odd that Portugal should somehow feel less foreign, we could never work out why that was. Maybe because the people were different, more friendly and relaxed, and the country felt more open and welcoming to strangers, more embracing of different cultures. It certainly felt more connected to the modern world. Or maybe it was simply their love of toast and cakes with their coffee. Yes, maybe it was simply that.

We knew that we'd have to stop overnight somewhere on our journey, and had decided on a campsite in Almarim, not too far south of Lisboa. It was a long, long way from Entrimo, but the weather had been good and the roads had just unfurled under the van's wheels. We arrived at the campsite just before dark and saw that it was full of caravans wrapped up for the winter and just one other van camping like us. It was sort of like our other camping experiences, but here the weather was warmer and the presence of the caravans made it feel less desolate. We parked and went through the ancient ritual of moving all the stuff off the bed into the cab, and prepared to

cook supper before the light was gone. Moving around without opening any of the doors or windows, and hoping now we'd stopped moving Lucio and Sardina would feel happier. Monkey in the meantime had developed an illness. He looked floppy and hot, his eyes were still gooey, and now he needed to pee almost every minute he was awake. Luckily he had slept a lot, but as soon as he tried to open his gooey eyes he had to get down off my lap and into the litter tray. Then he'd eat and have to go again, then drink and go again, up and down, up and down. It was awful, poor little creature. We'd have to find a vet as soon as we could the next day.

Lucio sat calmly on the sofa now, and watched while I made supper and Phil started searching for Sardina. It was only a van, where could he have hidden that we couldn't find him, and why hadn't he come out? Phil soon discovered the reason. Sardina had so desperately searched for a way out that he had got his head stuck under the bed, between two of the legs. Poor Sardina, poor boy! We pulled it out and released him. He was so happy to see us, to be cuddled and made a fuss of. Luckily he didn't seem to be hurt from all his gymnastics with the walls, or from being wedged in for so long. He was also very hungry and thirsty, and soon located his bowl, next to Lucio's. After that he was happy to sit on the sofa, have a wash, and minutes later was asleep, curled up on the furry blanket.

With Lucio settled next to him, and Monkey a small sweaty ball in his box, we then carefully slipped out for a walk. We'd got nearly as far as the shower block when out of it came the other visitor, towel and sponge bag in hand. 'Hi!' he said in perfect english, which was a shock. We'd lived amongst Spanish people for so long now, it was strange to meet someone who wasn't Spanish. This one was Dutch. Though why a Dutch

man would be living in a campervan, seemingly alone, in this part of Portugal, was a mystery. We didn't have to wait long to find out. He wasn't on holiday, but working, Piet explained. He was the owner of a flower producing empire back in Holland, and he was here in Portugal for as long as it took to grow miniature sunflowers, then fly them back to the massive flower markets in Amsterdam. Would we like to see them? Absolutely. Minutes later we were being driven out of Almarim in his pickup, then onto a dirt track, where on either side there were fields and fields of sunflowers. They'd been planted so the flowers were ready to pick over successive weeks. He pointed out the ones which were just coming into bud, those with larger blooms, and finally where they were just coming into flower. These would be picked tomorrow. Then he showed us how they were cut, all exactly the same length, and stacked in special crates, before being loaded into a waiting pantechnicon ready to go to the airport in Lisboa. We couldn't imagine how anyone had got the idea of coming to Portugal, renting some land, buying all the necessary equipment, hiring local workers and then getting the whole enterprise up and running. Really impressive. Piet made it sound so easy. The climate was perfect, he said, the airport was nearby, and there were plenty of people willing to do the work, mostly women. It was seasonal and soon it would be over for this year, then he'd be going home for three months before coming back to do it all over again. Piet picked three sunflowers, they had those small heads with dark orange and yellow petals, and gave them to me. I remembered how often I'd seen these flowers in Leeds market, little knowing where they must have come from.

We slept well that night. Sardina and Lucio were on the worktop on their furry blanket, and Monkey, who was supposed

to be on the seat in the cab near his litter tray, came spidering up the bedclothes and tucked himself in next to us. I woke up throughout the night to the sound of digging in the litter tray, as various cats paid a visit. We hadn't slept in such close proximity to a litter tray before, and realised now that it really wasn't conducive to a good nights sleep, especially the smell. At about six o'clock in the morning Sardina came over to snuggle down under the duvet as well, purring and kneading with his paws. He was finally recovered and happy. After breakfast I took the washing-up to the sinks and we decided to let Lucio and Sardina out for a wander. They were timid at first, looking round out of the sliding door, sniffing the air. Then they came and followed me to the sinks. They looked at everything and checked under the covered caravans, but they didn't go far from where I was washing-up. When I'd finished they came straight back to the van and stayed close, looking around underneath. They were fine about getting back in though, until I slid the door shut. Then Sardina went crazy again. This time I made sure he wasn't trapped anywhere, just squeezed between two boxes. And off we went.

The scenery changed completely after that. We'd read that Portugal was like two countries, the one north of the river Tejo and the other to the south, and it certainly looked to be true. After the crowded mountainous north we drove for ages and ages along flat empty landscapes, seeing nothing but olive trees. The soil was orange, the sky impossibly endless and blue. We hardly saw a house let alone a village, the road just rolled on and on to the horizon.

We reckoned we'd get to Odemira by about six in the evening, but first we needed to find a vet for poor little Monkey. The nearest one was in Santiago do Cacem, but when we arrived

a notice on the door said they weren't open until the evening, so we carried on to Cercal. There it was the opposite, the vet only had morning surgeries. Luckily a friendly woman in the nearby craft shop told us to head for Vila Nova de Milfontes, where she said there was a very nice vet and she would be open at four o'clock. Getting there just before and finding a place to park right outside. Poor Monkey was looking very tired and sickly now, from all the getting up and down to the litter tray. But the vet was lovely, she also spoke excellent English, and talked soothingly to Monkey while stroking his fur-less back, as we told her all about him. She rubbed some special cream into his sticky eyes, then gave him an antibiotic injection, plus fed him some vitamin paste to help build him up. Explaining that he'd got a urinary infection, quite common in kittens who'd had a difficult start in life. No problem though, he'd be fine after a course of antibiotics. She gave us tablets for later and some strange sheets of babies nappy material. 'He'll probably have diarrhoea once the tablets begin to work, but he'll be fine in 4 or 5 days. She charged us five Euros and then we were on our way again, relieved to have solved Monkey's problems although a little concerned about cat diarrhoea in a van.

Half an hour later we pulled into the campsite at Zambujeira do Mar. It was a lovely spot, just down the road from the beach. The sun was low in the sky, illuminating the sea and giving the whole place an incredible light, golden, warm, and alive. The air here was different too, not only warm but heavily scented, reminiscent of patchouli, which we later discovered was from the oil of the cistus plants that grow everywhere here. Nothing at all like Entrimo, which was now a whole world away. We parked up under some eucalyptus trees and carefully got out of the van. Almost immediately a voice

from one of the other vans called out 'Hello! Come over and have a drink!' We didn't need any further encouragement and went to join him. He was part of a small encampment, all set up for a relaxing evening. Awnings, picnic tables and chairs, lamps, plus a whole array of bowls of crisps, peanuts, bread and cheese and bottles of wine. It couldn't have been better, we sat down among them and begun the process of decompressing.

Was this how it was going to be, we wondered. Sunny weather, lots of other campers and plenty of interesting people to talk to. The contrast between this and our journey along the north coast of Spain couldn't have been more stark. This was how it was supposed to have been, we'd just gone to the wrong country. That first evening began so well. We chatted with everyone until we realised that the sun was sinking and we needed to make supper, then made our excuses and returned to the van. Lucio and Monkey were waiting for us and I gave them their food in the cab. Monkey was already looking a lot better, the antibiotic injection was starting to work. Sardina was still hiding, but we knew now that he would probably appear now that the van had stopped moving. Sure enough, as soon as I started cooking, Sardina's sweet little tabby face appeared from under the bed. We ate our supper watching Lucio and Sardina appearing and disappearing, first under the bed, then behind the cupboards, and then in the cab, it was all very calm. We felt sorry that it was too late now to let Lucio and Sardina outside again, as we had done that morning, but it was too dark and we wouldn't be able to see them. We finished eating and Phil stacked the plates and pans in a washing-up bowl ready to go across to the sinks to wash up. What happened next was entirely my fault, I'll never forget it or forgive myself. Phil clearly said to me, be careful when opening the sliding door. To

do it quickly so that he could get out and the cats stay put. But I didn't do it quickly enough, and I didn't check where they were either. Sardina saw his chance and he took it, he was far quicker than me. He jumped through the gap in the door, out into the darkness, and we never saw him again.

The agony of sadness, the tears and the guilt, dragged our insides out. We were sad beyond sadness, we couldn't believe our lovely Sardina had gone. We took torches and we looked and looked. We walked miles, we called his name, and over the next few days asked everyone we met if they'd seen him. We made flyers and handed them out and put them up in shops. Sometimes people said they'd seen a cat, but to most people cats were just cats. Whether they were tabby, ginger, or black and white, they couldn't say. We began to wonder if he was making his way back to Entrimo, cats can do incredible things. The only comfort we could find in those dark days was that nobody had seen a dead cat. Sardina had run, but he was probably safe somewhere. He was friendly, and if he'd come across some nice people who gave him food, he would have stayed there.

Meanwhile we nursed our sadness and worried obsessively about loosing Lucio. We couldn't let him out, supposing he ran away too? That was too awful a thought to bear. But Lucio really wanted to. By now we'd been at the campsite for days and he'd had enough. One night, while we were asleep, Lucio managed to squeeze himself through a tiny opening we'd left in one of the cab windows for ventilation. We woke to find him gone too. Obviously we blamed ourselves, it had been wrong to bring them, but what would have happened to them in Entrimo? Neither Luisa, Ines or Candita wanted a cat. No one had cats in their houses, and even if we had found someone to have them, they would have had to live outside.

If we were raw with sadness about Sardina, we couldn't feel any less over Lucio. Our misery was one bottomless pit in our chests. Loosing the cats was bad enough, but now it brought home how the things which had been making life possible until now were also so fleeting, so intangible. We had no home, no friends, and no real certainty of where we were going or what we were looking for. Our shaky world was swaying on its way to collapse. We did have Monkey though. Monkey and his diarrhoea, which had arrived just as the vet had predicted. Off came the duvet cover to be washed for the third time in as many days, and we were getting through bottles of disinfectant. But he was happy and growing. The magic eye cream had sorted out his gummy eyes and he was ready for anything. He thought the van was great. It was his home and he didn't mind if we were parked or if we were driving, it was all the same to him. He'd wander through from the cab to the back whilst we were on the road, eat from his bowl, have a drink and then come back through to sit on my lap. At the campsite he was everyone's friend, sneaking into their tents, climbing into their caravans, sitting under their awnings, sharing their food. We asked all the other campers if they'd seen Lucio or Sardina, but no one had. Eventually we'd been there longer than anyone else. During the day we drove out to look at different villages, trying to work out how we'd find somewhere to rent without any help from someone like Ana. It was a lovely area though and we were pleased that we'd made the break with Galicia. Not only had we found a place where we felt we could settle, but the climate was really good. We'd gone to Galicia mainly because we knew it had a climate like Britain. We thought we wouldn't like the hotter temperatures of the south. But now we thought differently, we'd seen the sun and the incredible light,

surely we'd find a way to deal with the heat when it came.

We decided to give ourselves three or four days a week driving around looking for somewhere to rent. We thought we could manage that and use the other days for washing duvet covers, shopping and generally trying to keep life together. We left the campsite after breakfast on each of those days, and in the late afternoon would return back to our spot under the eucalyptus trees, guarded by our folding chairs and washing line. Each day other campers came and went. One of them was a German couple with a big dog, who parked next to us. The woman grew very fond of Monkey, and despite their big dog he had been able to sneak under their tent and get inside to sit on Mrs German lady's lap. One evening we were chatting and she asked me if we had any other cats. She explained that early that morning, when her husband had taken the dog for a walk, he had seen a black and white cat in the eucalyptus tree next to our van and wondered if it was ours too. We were too stunned to imagine that it could have been Lucio. Might it be possible that he had come back? We so wanted it to be true. But if he had and not found us there, he wouldn't know that we'd be back, maybe he'd gone away again. We walked around the campsite fence calling Lucio's name but he didn't come. Eventually we decided that it was just too incredible to think that he could still be around.

That night as we turned the sofa into a bed for about the four-hundredth time, we heard a noise. Monkey heard it too, a definite bump on the roof. Phil took the torch to scan around outside, maybe a branch had fallen on the van. He slid open the side door and we both heard excited meowing from the roof. Lucio was back! It was absolutely amazing. Lucio who had always been so timid and scared of everything. He had been

away for three weeks, but managed to find his way back to us by knowing the van and where we had parked it. How could he have? We just couldn't imagine. But we were so thrilled to see him, and he was ecstatic to be home. Uncharacteristically friendly and silly, purring as loudly as he could manage, which was quiet really, and rolling over and over on the bed. He looked a bit thin but otherwise was fine and very happy to see his bowl full of food. After he'd crunched his way through about half of it he jumped back up onto the bed and settled down, not even having a wash first before sinking into a deep sleep.

After that he came and went as he pleased. When we went out in the van during the day, he stayed behind, preferring to skip away into the trees and play in the wild patch outside the campsite fence. But when we drove back into our spot at the end of the afternoon, he was always waiting for us on one of the folding chairs under the eucalyptus tree. We parked, opened the side door and in he jumped ready for his tea. Lucio was our hero. Now he was back our heartache was soothed slightly and he was so happy. He sat in the van each evening watching DVDs with us. By now Phil had given up any hope of generating our own electricity, so we had bought a simple extension lead to plug into the campsite hook-up. Life was as good as it could be, living in a van. We sat cosily on the sofa with Lucio and Monkey snuggled up on their furry blanket next to us, and the fairy lights twinkled along the curtain rail. We were at home, sort of, relaxing and watching our favourite films.

It was fun being at the campsite, apart from the pain we felt everyday for Sardina. After almost two years in Galicia it was amazing to find that the rest of the world was still out there. We met lots of interesting people, and had intense short

friendships with them all. Knowing, like all holiday encounters, they had to end. We met others like us, who were also hoping to find a house to buy, sensible people who still had a home to go back to in Germany or Holland when things didn't work out. We sat and talked and ate with lots of different people. A couple turned up on bicycles from Holland who were starting a new life. They'd been hairdressers in Amsterdam before he became ill, and had decided to sell up and buy a piece of land in a rural area of Holland where they planned to spend the summers. During the winters they were going to cycle and camp in a tent around Europe, and after that visit India. It was a great evening, we even managed to trade haircuts for a hot meal in our van. Then there was a young couple from Berlin, he an architect from Sweden and she a writer, who had been working for a modern dance company in her home city. We sat on the grass outside the van, lighting candles as it got dark, eating and drinking wine while Monkey did the rounds for scraps.

We really did feel as if we'd come back from some distant planet, and we weren't sad about leaving Entrimo. We missed all our neighbours, Ines, Benita, Candita Luisa and Cynthia. And were so grateful for all of the kindness they had shown us as we groped our way to understanding more about life in Spain. But now we were back to learning again, about life in another country. And obviously we were having a lovely time on the campsite, however we also knew we still had to work at finding our house.

After three months of camping at Zambujeira, and a really hard search, we finally found a place to rent. Just at the right time too, because the campsite was closing for the winter. Our efforts had included putting up flyers and asking everyone we

met if they knew of anywhere, and in the end we got lucky. We had been going regularly to the library in Odemira, to use the internet, and had got to know all the staff there. One day a wonderfully friendly woman, Luz, called us over. She said she'd just heard of a little house a couple of kilometres away, would we like her to contact the owner?

We met Senhor Antonio in the town square outside the local council offices. He was as shy as anyone might be meeting strange foreign people with virtually non-existent Portuguese, but he was also friendly and polite, and said that he'd take us to see the house. His car was like Luis's, ancient yet pristine, still sporting an Expo sticker from when it took place in Lisboa countless years before. We settled into its hot vinyl interior and the car set off, sweating its way through town, then climbing steeply up the winding main road south. Two kilometres later turning off down a narrow bumpy dirt track in the middle of the countryside. It felt like we'd been transported to a completely different place. Everywhere so lush and very few houses. At the end of another, even narrower track, we stopped outside the tiniest house ever. Like all traditional Portuguese homes it was made from rammed earth, or 'taipa' as it was called locally, and was like an old bungalow, set in a hollow with cultivated land all around it. The outside walls, which were about two foot thick, were white-washed, with a yellow band painted around the windows. All the old houses we had seen were painted the same, with either blue or yellow stripes, it seemed to be the rule. Inside, the total floorspace measured just 25 square metres. This compromised a living room, which like all the other rooms had no ceiling, just the roof tiles, running the full depth of the house (4m) by 2.5m wide. To the side of that a kitchen, half the depth (2m) and same width (2.5m),

though most of the space was taken up by a large fireplace. And on the other side a bedroom (2m x 2.5m), just big enough for a bed. Off that a bathroom extension which was far bigger than it needed to be. The house was damp and very grubby, but more importantly it was extremely cheap. We agreed to move in after the weekend. Senhor Antonio patiently explained how the gas water heater worked, and said he would take out all the old bits of furniture and the broken cooker. He was obviously excited by the idea of tenants and said that he and his friend would come and give the place a coat of paint over the weekend.

I was enthusiastic about leaving the van. The wet weather was bringing back too many memories of a previous winter which we had been eager to forget. Phil, as ever, didn't like the house. It looked damp and miserable, it was too near the road and noisy, it wasn't going to help us keep the plan on track. But what else could we do? We hadn't found anything better, added to which the campsite was closing for the winter. No, the house wasn't great, but surely it would do? Though what he really meant was that by leaving the campsite we were saying goodbye to ever seeing Sardina again.

Moving into Senhor Antonio's house was simple. The only furniture he'd left was a hefty three-seater sofa and an old table in the living room, its legs partially eaten away by either mice or incredibly aggressive insects. There was a folding picnic table in the kitchen, and a sink for the smallest person in the world, the edge of which came to just above my knees. Washing-up would mean bending virtually in half. In the bedroom was a tiny single bed. And that was it, nothing else. We unloaded our stuff from the van, this time taking out the bed too, and brought them inside. Then we went back and unbolted the cooker and

brought that in. It was too small to stand on the floor, so I went outside and found some bricks to stack on top of each other to serve as a base. And in no time we were in. Though despite how little we'd been able to bring with us, our boxes were now filling all the available floor space, so some organising was required before we could feel settled. But at least we'd missed the rain, which had now started in earnest. Shortly afterwards a tiny old woman wearing wellies and sheltering under a massive umbrella, turned up at the door, introducing herself as our neighbour, who lived behind our house. She was called Maria. She and her husband Agosto had seven hectares of land, on which they grew everything. Clearly houses with land here were not as 'muy dificiil' to come across. However, it was difficult to understand exactly what she was saying, as Portuguese was still hard to decipher, the words ran into each other in a nasal, slurring, singsong sort of way. We would have been worried about this in the past, but now we knew that we would understand things given time. Maria at least had no trouble understanding our Spanish, and was very friendly, pleased to have people living nearby again. She made us come outside so that she could point out where her house was, about 100 metres away, and told us to come over if we ever needed anything. It was good to know someone already, we could now begin to relax.

We couldn't see very much of the outside from inside our house, this was because there was only one tiny window in the main room, at the back, overlooking part of Maria's empire. The bedroom and bathroom had even smaller ones, about thirty centimetres at most, set high up in the wall and didn't fully open. For modesty reasons they were glazed in frosted glass, and just sort of flapped downwards a little way before resting

on some metal brackets. Even if you stood on a box and tried to wedge your head sideways it still wasn't possible to see out. The only way to know what was going on outside, and have sufficient daylight to see by, was to leave the front door open, which is what we ended up doing most of the time. The land out the front was owned by Senhor Antonio, but he'd rented it to Maria & Agosto. There they grew vegetables, but there were also orange and lemon trees, and once we'd got to know each other better Senhor Antonio said we could pick what we wanted from those.

It rained throughout the first week and the house felt very damp and very cold. Eventually it was so cold we brought in the tiny electric radiator we'd recently bought for the van, and huddled round that, feeling sorry that Senhor Antonio had said we shouldn't light a fire in the fireplace, as there was a problem with the chimney and he was worried that we might burn the house down. We also had our first adventure. Needing to buy food we had set out in the van to do some shopping in Odemira. The first part of that journey, from our house to the road, was never designed for cars, and certainly not vans as big as ours, so it was necessary to drive extremely carefully. The camber was rather steep too, because the field on one side was about three metres higher than the one on the other. Added to this it had been raining for a week, previously we had only driven on it dry. So as Phil drove slowly along the inevitable happened. All four back wheels began to slide sideways, and the van ended up in the ploughed field below. Well and truly stuck. With rear-wheel drive it was going to be impossible to get out. Now what? Why did awkward and difficult things requiring help, only seem to happen to us when we were somewhere strange and didn't know anyone to ask? Senhor Antonio lived in

Odemira, three kilometres away, but what would he be able to do? Maria lived next door, but there was no way she could get the van out. We had to find someone else. On the grounds that my non-existent Portuguese was better than Phil's non-existent Portuguese, I got volunteered for the job, so started walking up the soggy track, dark grey clouds promising yet more rain. The nearest other neighbour was at the junction with the main road, where we had seen a man with a tractor. His name turned out to be Manuel, and he was not only very friendly when I turned up like that, out of the blue, but keen to help. However our van proved too heavy for his tractor, it was almost standing on its back wheels with all the effort. He apologised and suggested I go in search of Agosto Gaspare instead, who lived about ten houses further on down the track. This time Phil and I both went, counting houses as we went, until finally we arrived at one with a much bigger tractor outside, its engine cosseted in blankets and a plastic tablecloth tied over the seat. Agosto Gaspare and his wife were also very cheery folk, and against all the odds managed to understand what I was saying, though I really couldn't work out how. Minutes later, blanket and tablecloth removed, we set off. Phil leading the way, me sitting up next to Agosto, perched up on one of the giant mudguards. I'd often wondered what it felt like to sit on a tractor, although I hadn't imagined it quite like this.

It turned out to be an easy job, once a rope had been tied to the van's towing point. Slowly the rope became taut, then the van began to right itself, after which it was pulled gently back onto the track. Luckily there didn't seem to be any obvious damage, the back axle hadn't broken or any other nightmarish thing. And Agosto was pleased too, that the task had been so simple. He waved as he turned the tractor back towards his

house, and we set off once again for shopping in Odemira.

Villages in Portugal were entirely different from those we'd got used to in Galicia. Here the houses were spaced far apart from each other, a hundred metres or more, the land surrounding them belonging to that house, which was used for growing fruit and vegetables. Not bunched together, so no trailing around with wheelbarrows from one tiny strip of land to another. And amazingly, they seemed to grow even more produce, over a much longer period. We weren't sure whether we had arrived in the vegetable garden of Odemira, or if everywhere was like this. Also there were no vacant plots, every piece of land was under cultivation. Even under the trees had rows of lettuces. Parsley and coriander bushed out of window boxes. Broad beans, potatoes, and peas were already marching in lines, despite it only being December. There were orange and lemon trees everywhere laden with ripening fruit. We hadn't know before when they were in season, but it appeared that it was now. All the houses here were like ours too, very old and very basic. Some modernised, but mostly exactly the same, single storey, thick walls, tiny windows. Everyone had plants growing near their door. Any little path or patio was covered by rampaging climbers. Trees and masses of plants grew in any sort of container that came to hand, old plastic buckets, empty olive oil cans, paint tins. It was testament to either the climate or green fingers of the Portuguese, but everything was growing in profusion. The structures supporting all this growth were makeshift, cobbled together from bits of metal pipe, wooden poles propped up on whatever came to hand, stray bits of wire netting, anything which helped the plants scramble on their way. There were so many strange plants we didn't recognise, all exotic and lush. There was a particularly strange climber we had seen

in many places, with feathery, fern-like leaves and masses of orange or white trumpets in clusters. It must be a fast grower because every time we saw it, it was rampant and the structure supporting it had long since disappeared under the growth, as it scampered across garage roofs and along fences. I couldn't wait to find our own place and make a living porch with all these plants.

Maria's house, behind ours, had all these plants and more. She and Agosto also had a weekly market stall in Odemira, growing vegetables and flowers to sell there as well as for themselves. We hadn't been in our house very long before we were given a tour, it was really impressive. Maria was in her late sixties and Agosto was seventy two, and they could work outside in a way we could only ever wish to. It wasn't that they worked quickly or vigorously, it was that everything they did was achieved by steady daily dedication. Agosto had a small tractor which he used to prepare the larger areas of soil, but everything else was done by hand. Planting, weeding, organising the rushing water into the little canals which watered each bed, pruning vines, picking oranges. Their days were endless and we learned masses from them. Not just about agriculture, but pace and attitude to life.

In those first few months Maria and I began to get to know each other. She showed me her collection of crocheted items, and photos of her daughter and grandchildren who now lived in Holland, as well as old photos of her and Agosto's families who had grown up here. The photos also showed how quickly Portugal had become a modern country. In the 1970's and 80's the pictures were more like the 1950's in Britain, ancient cars, strange clothes, a rural life from another era. Now Portugal had leapfrogged the gradual modernisation of other countries, and

while we did see donkeys working the land in some places, younger people were gliding about in big new 4x4 cars and endlessly chatting into the latest mobile phones. There were plenty of older people with mobile phones too, who had never had a landline phone in their homes. It all seemed so strange to us.

While our arrival in Portugal wasn't as traumatic as when we had driven off the ferry in Bilbao, we still felt a bit disorientated. Our camping in Portugal had been a happy experience, apart from loosing Sardina. The climate was much better too. When the rain stopped the skies were so intensely blue, so clear and bright. It wasn't so cold either, well, not outside anyway. It was freezing indoors, as everyone else testified. Here was another nation of people gritting their teeth and pretending that insulation and central heating didn't matter. I wondered if it was because traditionally they had worked outside, on all but the rainiest days of the winter, so it was more comfortable to be out there most of the time. The storks and egrets obviously thought so, having chosen not to go to a hotter country. There were two storks nests near the house and we loved to hear their clacking sound as they greeted each other. Yes, this was indeed a very foreign place. Somehow we felt different too. More confident than we had been in Galicia. And even though we still had no idea how we would find our place, we felt committed to the journey as much as 'the plan'. Long gone was the idea of a three month search and then settling into our new home. We had realised when we had arrived in Galicia that things here were way too different for that sort of decision. Also our experience in Entrimo had taught us that there were many important things to understand and learn first before feeling comfortable enough to make any big financial decision.

That sounded like a reasonable explanation for our delay, but was it really that? Or was it simply that we hadn't really found the right place? Who knew? All we could say was that everything we had done so far, while not being what we'd set out to do, did actually feel right. We were trying to understand our new patch and we had our previous experiences to guide us.

What we needed next was to meet people to understand how buying land happened here. Also, did it come in big or small pieces? We had seen an estate agent's office in Faro with the sort of properties we were looking for, but that was a big modern city down in the Algarve, not the kind of place we'd like to be. So did people here use estate agents or did they still sell to each other as they had in Galicia? Happily, alongside all these confusing things there was the real, everyday life to enjoy and it was so different from Entrimo. Odemira was a small town, but nonetheless it had lots of things going on. There was the lovely library, and an even more lovely cinema, which were both run by the local council. There were festivals, or 'festas', to celebrate all sorts of things, from the harvest of the sweet potato, to the anniversary of the revolution. It was all very exciting. Settling into Odemira wasn't half as difficult as settling into Entrimo had been. Maybe because there was so much more life here in Odemira, or maybe we had just adapted to being in strange places and this experience was another for our growing collection.

Our house was really, really tiny. A bit like living in the van, but with our own bathroom and a separate kitchen. We didn't mind though, we didn't aim to be there for long, it was just more comfortable and allowed us to feel more as if we lived somewhere. The location felt different too, with all our neighbours here growing food around their houses, instead of

disappearing to plots in different parts of the aldea. Even our house had a hectare of land with it, but nearly all of that was being used by Agosto. However, we were allowed a small corner, which was shady and had a spring. No one had cultivated it for years, and the brambles, bindweed and awful cana lilies were rampant. It didn't take us long to clear though, and once we'd started to make a garden our neighbours came by and brought us seedlings or little plants and gave us advice on planting. It was really friendly, like belonging to a gardening club.

We discovered that growing food and baking were closely linked to the 'festas', local festivals. The Festas marked the year more profoundly than any calendar. Pricking out chrysanthemum plants was done at 'Todos los Santos', the celebration of All Souls, or Halloween, on 31st of October. The planting of potatoes in December, was so that they would be ready for Easter, though potatoes were planted virtually every month in Portugal. As for the baking, there was 'Folar', the Easter cake. Which was a small sweet loaf made using soft cheese and sugar, with an egg still in its shell, pushed into the top and covered with a dough cross. Folar was delicious. At Christmas there were the 'sonhos da abobra', one of many fried delights, made from batter using cooked pumpkin, which was dropped into hot fat in little ball shapes. We loved these, as did Agosto, so Maria made them at other times too. She also made another fried delight called 'fios', which we renamed 'sweaty things'. At first we were unsure about them, because they looked so cold and sweaty. Maria would bring us some in one of her tiny plastic washing-up bowls. Flat fried things, which were about 6 inches across, and were a bit like fried Yorkshire puddings, if its possible to imagine frying a Yorkshire pudding.

Same ingredients, but with sugar on top and obviously, fried. After we got used to the strangeness of cold fat, they were very nice.

Bread was another matter. After our time in Entrimo, where the only bread available was a French stick, quite tasty when eaten fresh from Juan the bread man on his morning rounds, but hard as a baseball bat by the afternoon. Or in Allariz, where it was hard by the time you got it home. We were keen to try Portuguese bread. And it was a real treat. Baked in wood ovens in the traditional way, big flattened rounds weighing up to a kilo each and with a strong malty flavour. There were countless small bakers who each took to the road in the morning in their little white vans, so we were spoilt for choice. And many people still baked their own, including all our neighbours who each had their own wood oven outside their houses.

Monkey and Lucio were happily settled now, Lucio roaming out into the more wild forested edges of the land around us, and Monkey growing bigger and getting more daring. Monkey and Lucio weren't the only cats around though, as we soon discovered. One day a huge, long-haired tortoiseshell cat came to inspect us, and it didn't take her long to realise just how easy it was to boss us around. In no time she was sneaking in and raiding the bowls of cat food in the kitchen, then stretching out on the sofa. It was hard to discourage her since the door was always open and she just barged in with plenty of attitude. Maria saw her pushing through the door curtain on one occasion and asked if we had fed her, then rolled her eyes at our sheepish expressions. What could we do? 'Lady', as we christened her, was top cat and we, as well as Lucio and Monkey, knew it. She was tough and a bully and by their reckoning best

left to do as she pleased. She didn't actually move in, because she had her own home plus all the other neighbours she had intimidated, but she did call on us everyday for food and a snooze. That was until spring came. She had been wobbling around with a massively pregnant stomach for some time, then one afternoon we arrived back home to discover that Lady had managed to get in through the small back window and was in the throws of delivering a heap of kittens on the sofa. Being the old hand she obviously was, she was completely relaxed about the whole thing. Washing each new kitten on arrival, then producing another, until there were six kittens of assorted colours around her on the sofa. Heartlessly we gave Lady a couple of days to recover then packed her and her kittens into a box and took them home, although we had the distinct feeling that it wouldn't be the last time we saw her or her family.

Life was becoming settled. However our relaxation was never complete because we knew that we had to start thinking about finding our real home. We definitely felt better about it than we had in Entrimo, although feeling better didn't mean it was any easier. Definitely there were places for sale here, and people were selling their pieces of land or tumbledown homes at much lower prices than we'd seen at the estate agents in Faro. Which made it seem hopeful, though Odemira was much more expensive than Entrimo, as there were lovely beaches nearby and it wasn't too far for weekenders from Lisboa to buy, so prices reflected that. There were some cheaper areas, which were further away inland, but these places were also too far from everything else too. Like shops and life in general. Tied up with all our house hunting was also the issue of how we would afford to live once we'd spent everything, something which still reduced us to sickness. But surely there were more

possibilities in such a touristy area? Maybe we could start by making crafts to sell? This sounded a reasonable idea, but could it possibly work? We agonised as we always did over everything to do with our unknown future and how we would survive financially. Meanwhile we watched as others like us, were picked off by seasoned expats, claiming they knew of the perfect piece of land and best builders. Easy to spot, they were the ones huddled together in bars, deep in negotiation, folders full of papers. Who always looked just like we felt, nervous to the point of hysteria. Well at least we hadn't committed ourselves yet, so could feel the relief of being able to take things slowly while we had Senhor Antonio's house. So far our house buying research kept revealing new stuff for us to worry about. Like places that weren't legal, with no water, bad neighbours, potential motorway building schemes. You name it, the more we dug the more we discovered. But we did go and see quite a few places, though not with the expat sharks. Once Maria had told everyone she knew about our quest, there were more than enough local people coming to see us with their old houses they had inherited, scrubby bits of land, and remote bits of hillside they were hoping to turn into ready cash. It was all good experience, and we soon began to know what questions we should ask, and to sort of understand how to discover if what we were being shown was really what it seemed, not tied up with all sorts of legal problems, as so many places were. But even though we had plenty of adventures and set off on many missions to see 'belas casas', beautiful houses, we never did see THE place. Or if we did the price was always way out of our orbit. However, while we were on with our mission impossible, we did at least feel that we were making a life for ourselves.

Time passed quickly in Monte da Horta. Soon the cold, wet

weather of winter disappeared, and the first sighting of tourists in their campervans heralded another spring. Unlike in Galicia, the growing year here never had a fallow period, so there was always something to be planted or picked. Maria arrived at our door almost everyday with a bucket-load of something to either eat or transplant. One of the loveliest things was watercress. Behind our house on Maria's land was a spring, and as watercress needs running water it was perfect, in fact growing with abandon. In part helped by Maria, who was always sowing different varieties to try and find one better. She said we could pick whatever we wanted, but more often than not she brought us bucket-loads of the stuff whenever she was passing, either on her way to visit neighbours or friends or even to catch the bus. At times like this she always left her muddy garden shoes outside our door, to change into her 'going out' shoes, then rush off, late as usual to catch the bus or for the once-monthly mass at the tiny church in nearby Sao Pedro.

Friday's were Maria's busiest day of the week, so no visiting or trips to town. The whole day was dedicated to preparations for her market stall. Each season had its own crops, which needed picking and preparing in accordance to her custom. Oranges were twisted off the tree in a certain way, wiped with a cloth, then packed into crates by size. Not too many crates, she liked to sell everything she took, and knew exactly how much her customers would be buying. 'Nabo', or turnips, were dug up then taken to the huge water tank, which was almost Maria's height. Here she would dunk and clean them, then tie into neat bundles. Watercress was picked deftly too, with a penknife, and tied with a reed in a thick bundle. Broad beans were easier, although picking them took ages. Huge bucket upon huge bucket were filled, but Maria never came home from the market

with a single pod left. Peas were different. Peas were always difficult to cultivate, and however many rows she and Agosto planted they never seemed to get any more than a plentiful harvest for friends and family. But there was plenty of spinach, beetroot, radishes and pumpkins, including the 'chou-chou', a strange tiny pear-shaped pumpkin that scrambled over trees and sheds. Along with every other kind of bean. The entire summer long was dominated by beans, which were planted and picked, planted and picked, endless, endless beans. Coriander and parsley were tied in little bouquets. There were tomatoes and peppers. The little fat cucumbers, 'pepinos'. But Maria's favourite job, the thing she left until last so that she could enjoy doing it, was sorting out flowers into bundles. She loved to pick whatever flowers she had in bloom, arranging them with greenery into the perfect bouquet, tied with reeds. Then by the time night fell across Monte da Horta she was just about ready, everything stacked in the lean-to garage for loading into Agosto's old van the next morning. The only thing in Maria's garden which needed her attention before setting off at eight the next morning was the killing of hens or rabbits, which people had ordered during the week. Occasionally the buyer was happy to buy the creature alive, but mostly Maria did the killing, skinning or plucking early in the morning. This was something I could never get used to.

Then came the day when Agosto's ancient Renault Express broke down, and this time the diagnosis was serious, it needed a completely new engine. Agosto was beyond depressed, he was so upset he went to bed and stayed there for two weeks. Though in reality he never really needed it to go anywhere, only to take Maria to the market on Saturday. No, his real anguish, apart from the cost, was how he was going to get to the bar

now, in Sao Pedro, just around the corner. It was part of the daily life of the 'horta', to hear Agosto's ancient van cough and splutter into life, then chug at full volume around the neighbouring plots until he reached Manuel's house and the road. Then it was just one hundred metres to Sao Pedro and his grubby little bar. He could have walked. In fact we had actually seen him do it when he'd hurt his shoulder and couldn't drive. But the thought of having no van was too awful, so he stayed in bed. Eventually his son came round to talk to him, and Agosto got up and rang the mechanic to order a replacement engine. As he said, he was already seventy so the new engine would probably outlive him. Decision made, then all Agosto had to do was wait for the mechanic to fit it, which would take another couple of weeks. In the meantime I volunteered to drive Maria in our van. She had so many customers it was impossible to think of there being no Maria at the market. Although taking her every Saturday for nearly two months turned out to be an experience which required greater reserves of patience than I knew I had. Everything had to be done in precisely the way it had always been done. First Agosto would load up, while Maria, already late, complained how badly he'd done it. Then she'd disappear back to the house to get changed, put the final touches to the bags of 'sweaty things' she'd made to share out amongst fellow stallholders and friends, wrap up dead animals or worse, and then finally push some huge unhappy cockerel into a sack ready for its journey to a customer. I really felt compromised about helping deliver a bird to its death. Should I open the sack and let it out? Should I say I wouldn't take it? In the end I did neither, I was too chicken when it came to it.

When we arrived at the market, Maria's customers were already there, gathered around the entrance to the building.

They couldn't wait for her to unload and set out her stall, they launched into her as soon as we loaded the trolley and heaved it into the market hall. How she could remain so calm amazed me. Maybe her berating Agosto about loading up badly, or worrying about whether she had enough time to collect a few more eggs, flowers, beans or whatever, was her way of letting her anxiety bubble out. But by the time we arrived she was completely unflappable. Sometimes I got to look after her stall when things calmed down a bit, so Maria could go roving to the butchers for some bones for Chico her dog or to chat with friends. When she returned she always brought bread rolls to have with some coffee from the little café, and every time she'd ask me what I thought of them. I was so hungry by this point that anything would have been delicious, and I always said they were lovely, but Maria always screwed up her nose and said 'too much yeast'

Maria couldn't drive, so having me around with the van was a real bonus. A woman willing to take her places. I enjoyed our trips and Maria only ever wanted to go when she really needed to, like to the Pharmacy or to deliver, well yes, deliver another chicken. But after a while I'd got as enthusiastic as she was about the delights of local seasonal food, and one of the things we both looked forward to was the autumn harvest of peanuts and sweet potatoes. In fact the area between where we lived and the sea, which was about 4 kilometres, was the sweet potato and peanut capital of the country. Maybe it was the soft sandy soil, the right amount of rainfall, or the bright sunlight. Whatever, this was the place for the best. Maria and I had been planning a trip to capitalise on that, so on one sunny Sunday afternoon we decided to set off to find ourselves some sack-loads of both.

I told Phil about our trip and he rolled his eyes and said he'd happily stay behind, who knew where we'd end up or what time we'd be back from one of Maria's missions. So Maria and I set off alone at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Agosto was at the bar, Maria's washing-up from lunch was done, and the autumn sun was at its very best. We left Monte da Horta and drove a short distance along the main road before turning left towards the coast. The fields on either side had just been planted with young orange trees and a complicated watering system. Hectares and hectares of oranges. Maria hadn't seen any of these before and was impressed, she said she thought the owners had to be foreign people, no one in Portugal had that sort of money. I tried to imagine how different the fields would look in a few years time, when the trees were grown and the fruit was ready to be picked. A big change from the eucalyptus plantation that had been here before.

We stopped at the first bar we came to, we both liked to make the most of our trips out and coffee was very important. Plainly in such a small community everyone knows everyone and certainly everyone always knew Maria. This bar was at the edge of a tiny hamlet with open fields all around, one of those landscapes where the huge blue sky touched the soil in every direction. Maria was greeted by all the people in the bar and then immediately she fell into explaining who I was, as they expected her to. It was something like, 'this is my neighbour, she's English, lives in the house owned by Senhor Antonio, you know Senhor Antonio, his wife cooked lunches at the secondary school, yes that's her, yes their daughter works in the bank, that's right. Yes, English, yes she's married, her husband's at home. No, no children, but such good people, I can ask them to take me places when I need to, they're really good neighbours,' etc.

etc. I just hoped that Maria wouldn't have to tell this story too many times that afternoon or we'd never find the peanuts or sweet potatoes, or ever get home.

After coffee we set off again, this time to where Maria thought she knew someone we could ask about the peanuts and sweet potatoes. Obviously, we could go straight to Fataca, the village where we knew there were plenty of both peanuts and potatoes, but she'd heard there was a man who had particularly good ones this year who had a place just outside a village somewhere. This didn't sound good, Maria was notoriously bad at directions. Luckily she was prepared to ask, and I soon found myself pulling up abruptly as Maria leant out of the window and started shouting at a woman in her garden, 'Ola Maria!' The woman came across, peering at the van, before yelling with laughter at realising it was Maria in a strange vehicle. They then exchanged news about each other's families, before our Maria launched into an abridged version of who I was. Finally we got to the question of where the man, Manuel, had his fields. 'No, no, not along this road,' she said, tutting and wagging a finger. We had to turn round and go back to the main road, then take the next left and we'd see the place.

I was really looking forward to the sweet potatoes, which I roasted in our tiny oven. They were delicious. Although Maria did them better in her outdoor wood oven after she'd made the bread. Sweet potatoes in their soft jackets, wonderful. And the peanuts. Until you've tasted the crème de la creme of peanuts, roasted in a wood oven, you haven't tasted peanuts. The scheme that Maria and I had hatched was for each of us to buy peanuts, but for Maria to keep them so that she could roast some each time she baked bread. I was ruined now for ordinary bought peanuts, they were just tasteless. So despite the challenging

nature of our tour of the district, it would be worth it in the end if we could find our man Manuel or the people in Fataca, or both. Shortly after our conversation with the other Maria we arrived outside a house on the correct road. There was a huge yard to one side, full of tractors and sacks and sacks of sweet potatoes. This had to be the place, but where was Manuel? Maria struggled out of the van and marched up to the front door where she pounded with her fist, and when there was no answer, she shouted. Not like ordinary shouting, this was outdoor bringing the sheep down from the hills shouting, guaranteed to be heard in the nearest three villages. Inevitably Manuel, who was out there somewhere, heard the racket and shortly afterwards he rumbled into the yard on a tractor. 'Ola Maria!'

Manuel was pleased to see Maria and they chatted on about family and friends, gossiped about local characters, then at length the door of the house opened and out popped Mrs Manuel, who somehow had been oblivious to all of Maria's shouting and banging. More gossip followed, for about forty minutes, until finally the subject of sweet potatoes was broached. At which point Manuel pointed to the big shed and we all headed towards it, while he talked as if the treasure we were searching for was extremely rare. Inside were at least 400 sacks of the beauties. Earnest discussion then ensued, Maria paying Manuel huge compliments and suggesting the number of sacks she was keen to buy, and that of course if he didn't have any right now maybe he could deliver some to her house later. Well, maybe he could find some, he said, weakening slightly, at which Maria sensed things were going her way, and repeated how she had heard that his crop was better than anyone else's. Finally he said he'd go and see what he'd got.

What was this all about? Surely we were surrounded by sacks of sweet potatoes, what was the problem? Maria explained that all the potatoes around us were already sold, sweet potatoes don't store well so they were dug up when the buyer made an order. Plus the season is short, best before the rain starts. It's all very difficult, she said. Maybe we'd be going home empty handed. I hadn't realised there were such technical problems to growing sweet potatoes.

Manuel appeared again, with ten sacks of potatoes in the scoop of a digger. They weren't huge sacks, more like ten kilo bags, but there were plenty of potatoes in ten sacks. Maria daringly pointed out that I had been hoping for a couple too, and Manuel tried hard not to look too pained as he dragged another couple of bags out of the boot of his car. Our mission was now half complete, although Maria was still hankering after a few more bags, hoping that Manuel could be persuaded to deliver them during the week. Finally I managed to herd her back to the van while she valiantly continued wheedling Manuel, until finally he relented. Yes, he'd bring ten more over next week. Result.

Back in the van we set off for the little huddle of houses called Fataca, too small in my mind to be a real village as it only consisted of a tiny bar and just six houses. There could have been more to it, but I couldn't see any. The place we were looking for was the home of the King of peanuts, because he had specialised in growing them for years and years. Now anyone who wanted to either grow their own, or buy a couple of sacks for roasting, came here first.

There was some local familial connection between the peanut family and our locale. Maria da Horta, our other neighbour, had a son Fernando who had married Mr Peanut's

daughter, so that was going to help oil the wheels of commerce this afternoon. Peanut headquarters turning out be two undistinguished houses crouching beside a very narrow track. Past the houses was a yard, wide enough for a tractor and a barn, the latter being more like a series of sheds leaning perilously against each other. The last shed had a hen house with a little hen run tacked on to it, made from bits of corrugated iron and offering a bit of shade for the birds who were sitting companionably fluffed out in the dusty soil.

Despite the state of the barn, everything around the house looked extremely orderly and unnaturally clean, as if someone was out there sweeping the cement day and night. I drove in and Maria was enthusiastically out of the van before I'd even put on the brake. However, the place turned out to be totally deserted, just as it had been at Manuel's. Maria didn't seem to be concerned though, and set off at almost trotting speed down the narrow track. When she got to the end she stopped and began shouting. This time an echo of Maria's yelling came back from somewhere below the horizon, way out in the fields. I caught up with Maria and we walked towards the sound, eventually seeing a tractor with some figures behind it, as we waded through fields and fields of peanut plants.

It's strange, but Portuguese people always appeared rather sheepish or reticent when we first greeted them. No one ever said, 'Yes, here we are! We're digging up peanuts!' or 'Over here, come and give us a hand!' or 'You've come to see how the other half works, ha ha!' Nothing jokey, and the peanut family were exactly like this. They simply mumbled 'Ola' back to Maria, after she greeted Mr and Mrs Peanut and their remaining unmarried daughter, while looking determinedly at their feet, shrugging as if they'd been caught stealing their own peanuts or

sheep rustling or something. Maria though gamely ploughed on, determined to get a conversation going, despite Mr Peanut up on the tractor twiddling his key in the ignition eager to escape, and the female peanut people with their hands stuffed in the pockets of their overalls looking distinctly uncomfortable. Even people like Manuel had needed encouragement to admit he'd got any sweet potatoes. After a while Maria managed to get a flicker of conversation started with old Mrs Peanut, and eventually that was enough to lever the family back to the yard for the bargaining to begin. Plainly Maria had stamina for this type of quest, while I was beginning to wilt. Once again there was a repeat of Manuel's' reticence about the availability of peanuts, despite us being surrounded by field upon field of the things. Then eventually old Mr Peanut relented and wandered half-heartedly over to the house, while the Peanut women kept a watchful eye on us. Returning with a big black key, which he used to open the door of the first leaning shed. Inside were sacks and sacks of peanuts, as well as sweet potatoes, nestling in the darkness. A sack of peanuts was then dragged onto a big metal plate near the floor, which had a sliding gauge thing on a metal pole hanging about a metre above it, some kind of old weighing scales. How many kilos did we want? Would we like to see the peanuts for planting? How about peanuts which had already been roasted? After which it was hard to get Mr Peanut to focus on what we wanted. He started telling Maria about his sweet potatoes, how they were second to none in the district, and how she should get at least one sack just to see. Then he suggested we come and look at where he had his sweet potato clamp, a mound of sand where he was storing his already dug up potatoes. Maria didn't tell him we'd already bought a couple of hundredweight, but showed a polite interest and wandered

over to look, as if these potatoes could look any different from the ones we'd just got. Mr Peanut dug in the sand and eventually leaned down and scraped off a couple of red-skinned beauties. Maria sucked on her teeth while Mr Peanut went into ecstasies about the perfection of his crop. Would we ever leave?

About twenty minutes later we were back in the shed again, while the peanut family weighed sacks and tied their tops. Maria had succumbed to a couple of sacks of potatoes as well as the peanuts. Prices per kilo were talked over while Maria squeezed and patted the sacks until the price was agreed. I swooped in and began gathering sacks and packing our haul into the van, hoping to get Maria rounded up and ready to head off. But sadly the Peanut people were warmed up now and wanted to gossip about everyone and make an afternoon of it, starting with showing us their shed of peanuts for next year's planting.

After about another half an hour, we were finally back in the van and more than ready to set off home. The sun was already sinking, and uncharacteristically Maria now seemed slightly worried about being out so late, keen to be back before it got dark. We passed the bar on the corner of the main road again and then Maria suggested we take a short cut, turning left instead of right. At this point anything that got us home quicker was a good idea, even if I didn't know the roads around here. Except after I'd been driving for about half an hour, by which time even by our original route we should have been home, I realised Maria didn't know them either. We were lost. Even though the surrounding landscape was totally flat, nothing looked familiar. In every direction there were endless fields, straight narrow tracks, and a complete lack of landmarks or human life. Once or twice we ended up at dead ends, surrounded by cows. We saw a huge grain silo that neither of us

recognised, so that was no help. Maria, becoming increasingly anxious now, eventually asked a group of old people at the side of the road, the only people we'd seen, but none of them had ever heard of Monte da Horta, adding to Maria's alarm that we were truly lost for ever. Finally a water tower appeared and Maria declared firmly that we were almost in Sao Teotonio, a small town about 14 kilometres from our home. She was really worried now.

I remembered that I'd seen this tower before too, and despite Maria's protests that I was definitely going the wrong way, headed towards it, which eventually brought us out onto the main road again. Somehow we had been going round and round in circles, then come out on the main road much further up. If I was relieved, then Maria was ecstatic, she was so happy that she would once again see her beloved home, certain that it had been touch and go for the last hour. She was all but weeping as we drove down her track to unload the stash. I was feeling mightily relieved too, finally trundling back towards our house. A light shining at the open door and Phil standing there. 'I was just about ready to call out the guarda! What happened?' My sheepishness gave it all away. 'You didn't follow Maria's directions did you?'

Lady and her kittens had never really disappeared from our house. Well, Lady hadn't. She was the most persistent cat I'd ever come across, and never left before she had raided Lucio and Monkey's dishes. We'd made half-hearted attempts at trying to chase her away or keeping the dishes off the floor, but it was hopeless. The door was open all day long and Lady was excellent at sneaking in and cruising whatever was left, before installing herself on the sofa. Monkey and Lucio didn't seem concerned, especially after Lady had beaten them into her way

of thinking. Then when her kittens were about eight weeks old they came too. By now Maria and Agosto's beans were scaling their bamboo poles outside our front door, and our first sighting was when they suddenly appeared from under their lush green leaves. They were incredibly sweet, and Lady wasted no time in showing them how to fill their stomachs at our house. We realised just how feeble we'd become when they were all flopped out on the sofa. We tried our best to let them know that this was not their real home, but what could we do? Other than buy more cat food? This time in 25 kilo sacks. Nine hungry cats was a lot. More than enough. Then we saw a tiny grey kitten in Odemira, hiding under a car. She was just the most gorgeous little creature. Tabby but smoky grey, with soft fur, beautiful almond shaped eyes highlighted by Sofia Loren black eyeliner, and an elegant pointy face. She was also really hungry, so desperate she was eating some cooked green beans out of a rubbish bin. Although very nervous, her need to find food had made her bold, and having stroked her and seen how lovely she was, we couldn't leave her in Odemira. A cardboard box was quickly found from a nearby shop and soon the beautiful little grey kitten was on her way back to cat headquarters. After all, we told ourselves, what was one more, in a household that already had so many.

We tried to choose a name for her. All of Lady's kittens had nicknames, mostly relating to what they looked like. Snowy, who obviously was the big white one with blue eyes. Minnie, well she was just Minnie. Pandy, with the black eye patch like a panda. Gingey, the ginger one. And Thompson, one of a pair of black and white kittens named after the Thompson Twins from Tintin. The other had recently disappeared, leaving just Thompson. The newcomer, who we now regarded as one of

ours, like Monkey and Lucio, was eventually named Sofia, after a character in a book I was reading at the time. Having suggested it, I thought it sounded a bit too girly but it stuck, it suited her because she was girly. Actually more than girly, she was a princess, and she knew it. She even walked regally, her back feet turned inwards in a cute way, and there was her strange tail which looked as if it had a pompom on the end. This, we found out later, was caused by the bone inside twirling round, corkscrew fashion, and the fur following suit, giving her a little bobble. Sofia was really, really intelligent and completely her own cat. In a matter of days she had chosen her bed on one of the comfy folding armchairs and whenever she was being chased by one of the others she retreated there. To see her running was one of the most amazing sights, it was as if she was travelling at the speed of light, it was impossible to see her feet or legs, or understand how she could move so quickly. Maybe she was actually flying, but whatever her secret, she was certainly totally at one with nature. When Sofia set off across Agosto's maize field, which was bare now, the corn having been picked and the stalks carted back to the hen run to keep the hens feet dry in the winter, her unique markings made her literally disappear. She was absolutely magical.

Snowy and Minnie, the biggest of Lady's kittens, were not so enamoured. They realised they had slipped down the rankings and became very territorial about the house. In their minds Monkey and Lucio belonged, Lady was top cat, and the kittens were next. Sofia was not one of them, so the battle began.



Stormy weather

We often wondered, looking back, why we stayed in Senhor Antonio's house for so long. After all, we were supposed to be finding our own place, keeping to our plan, and there had been all that panic and urgency in Galicia. It was true that we had definitely changed as people in the time we were in Odemira, which we felt was all to the good. After all, what would have been the point in moving to a new country if not to be influenced by the experience? All the worry we'd felt in Entrimo had been, we realised later, to do with not understanding anything. Panic at unfamiliar surroundings and culture, well that and the money, obviously. But we didn't realise that in order to understand a place we needed to become a part of it. That happened without us noticing. Eventually we belonged. Like when we had coffee in our favourite bar in Odemira on shopping days. Along with all the mums taking their children to school, and the Council workers who had been

to clock on and then returned to get themselves coffee-ed up to start the day. Or when we waited for the bread van, or watched to see if the postman's van was going stop at our postbox at the end of the track. This was our life and it was just like everyone else's. Comparing the flavour of neighbour's home-made bread with Maria, or deciding who was best at roasting peanuts. These were all important. We hadn't found our own home, but we had the beginnings of a life coming together.

As the seasons passed we became as aware of the festivals and local traditions as Maria. And before we noticed it, we'd been living in the tiny house for four years. It was still very uncomfortable, dung beetles continued to drop through the ceiling onto our bed at night, rain poured in and had to be caught in an assortment of buckets, and we had to take showers in the public baths in Odemira. But it was still exceptionally cheap, we were mostly happy in 'the hovel' as we now affectionately called it. We never felt the urge to pile back into the van and look for somewhere else, even as time passed and the right place still hadn't turned up. We wondered sometimes where we could go next if we didn't find anywhere, and considered masses of places from Sardinia to New Zealand, but the logistics of heading off to these was often stalled by the discovery of their many short-comings. Thank goodness for the internet. With just a few sessions on the computers at the library we could discover all the flaws of a place, then move seamlessly on to the next big idea. All this was good because our journey was entering its fifth year and by now our financial situation was dire. We couldn't afford another road trip. Endless driving was expensive, as was staying at campsites, so Senhor Antonio's hovel was financially necessary. Sometimes we did feel trapped, thinking that our lovely vision of our new

home and fantastic garden was just that, a dream. Had we really been the owners of a cosy home and beautiful garden once? It was hard to think that had been us. However we also knew that was in our past life, we had changed so much since then. So even if someone had come along with a magic wand to take us back to Yorkshire we wouldn't have wanted to go. We'd come so far now that the thought of going back no longer provided us with that safe and secure feeling it used to. So strange, after remembering how much I'd longed to go home at the beginning. Now we both felt we were in for the long haul, and however worried or depressed we got, we could always look back at how far we'd come.

Living as neighbours to Maria and Agosto confirmed all this. If she wasn't involved in her usual tasks of picking vegetables for market or planting out the next lot, or visiting neighbours, she was involved in something else. Like the weekly session at the sports centre in Odemira, with other 'retired' women, where the lure of regular outings, picnics and other special activities, was enough compensation for having to endure an hour of keep fit each week. She signed up for coach trips to far flung tourist spots, leaving town at 5.30am and returning home at gone 1.00am the following day. Her energy was endless. On one of these early morning jaunts Maria passed by our tiny bedroom window at 5.00am and rapped loudly to let us know she was leaving a bag of 'sweaty things' at the front door. Having scared the living daylights out of us we then had to get up and make tea and eat the sweaty things just to calm our nerves.

She was so much part of our lives now that if I hadn't seen her for twenty-four hours I'd start worrying that something had happened and pop across the field to make sure everything was

all right. Often this would reveal that Maria was involved in some other crazy scheme. Such as repainting parts of the house in readiness for her daughter coming to stay for the summer, along with all her family. Fighting through a washing line festooned with acres of net curtain, I would find her with a bucket of whitewash in one hand and a long-handled broom in the other, as she set off to repaint yet another room. This fiesta of renovation became an annual event, beginning a couple of weeks before, and every year we would become embroiled too. Drilling new holes for curtain poles at bedroom windows, taking up lengths of fabric to make fresh curtains, or helping shift furniture around.

One afternoon we were in our house, when Maria's tick-infested hound, Chico, appeared at the door. Our inability to fend off any creature in need of a plate of food even extended to Chico, who had discovered what pushovers we were, although he never came unless Maria had gone out and forgotten to feed him, or if she was working nearby. I looked out and could see Maria's red sweater and cotton hat bobbing behind a row of beans. It was mid-afternoon and the autumnal sky had been gradually turning a deep grey, a sign that there was a storm coming our way. Eventually a deep throaty rumble announced it's arrival. At this, Chico, who had never set foot inside our house, dived in and hid under the table. Followed swiftly by Maria, bucket of plants in one hand and a short branch of olive tree in the other, wailing slightly as the first massive spots of rain began to fall. It had got really dark now, the sky an intensely dark blue, the storm having arrived directly over our ramshackle roof. Then the lightning started, crackling around the house, followed instantly by a thunder which shook everything. I pointed to the table, and Maria nodded, saying

Chico was as scared of storms as she was. It was funny to see him cowering under the tablecloth, making no sound even when the thunder vibrated the walls of the house. Maria however, was not so quiet, because she was fully concentrating on working her way through the rosary, swaying slightly as she perched on one of the uncomfortably hard kitchen chairs. I also noticed that the branch from the olive tree was now under her feet. What was that all about? Apparently Maria's mother had told her that to protect yourself from being struck by lightning you should stand on olive wood. I wondered about the scientific explanation for this, or maybe it was something pagan related. Whatever, Maria clung to it as firmly as she did her rosary. She was convinced and it seemed to have a soothing effect. After about fifteen minutes of thunder, lightning and seriously heavy rain all was then quiet again. We emptied the three buckets which had been doing service under the three separate leaks in the roof, and waited for the sky to clear. We'd left the door open throughout the storm, as it hadn't been cold, just incredibly dark and wet, and now it was turning a very strange colour out there. The sky was absolutely navy blue. Yet lit by a sun we couldn't see, so making it luminous somehow, and really dramatic. Maria opened her eyes and began wondering if she would make it back across the field to the safety of her own kitchen before those dark clouds emptied more rain on us. While she speculated on this, a strange drumming noise started up on the roof, followed by an entertaining moment trying to guess what on earth it could be. Then gigantic balls of ice were falling out of the sky and bouncing off the ground. The pounding on the roof became deafening, it was so loud we couldn't hear each other speak. Maria leapt up from her olive branch, her fear of being struck

by lightning replaced by rage, at what all those lumps of ice were going to do to her lettuces and cabbages. The leaves would be devastated, beaten to the ground. All that work for nothing, everything would be ruined. I was more worried about the roof of our van, and just how painful it would be for anyone caught outdoors. Those weren't hailstones, they were like small pieces of rock, and they were settling like gravel outside. However, ten minutes later it was all over. The sky returned to its usual shade of bright blue and the sun reappeared as if nothing had happened. Maria and Chico went out to survey the damage. As predicted some of the newly planted seedlings looked a bit sad, sprawling flatly on the soil, limp and weedy, but I felt sure they'd perk up over the next day or so. As I was looking at these waifs, Maria was pointing at some spinach plants a bit further away, now rather comically riven with large round holes, the equivalent of Emmenthal cheese. Incredibly nothing else was damaged. The hailstones melted away and Maria and Chico went back to work.

Periodically we were overtaken by anxiety about our house hunting situation. Surely other people weren't as hopeless as we were, we had to be the world's worst when it came to any sort of decision making. We couldn't decide whether the threat of upheaval from our current carefully constructed life, or the spending of all our money, was the greater worry. That was quite apart from not actually having seen anywhere that matched our idea of a new home. Surely we hadn't got so fanciful with the passing of time that nowhere normal would do now? Usually our sessions of worry began when Phil calmly started the ball rolling by wondering out loud what we were going to do about the house situation. Doubtless he was hoping that I had some clue. Then having aired the thought, all

his anxiety, worry, and depression came roaring out. I, who periodically gave the subject some thought but to no useful end, was then plunged into panic at having to quickly think of something reassuring to try and appease his state of mind. This time though I really outdid myself. I suggested we take a trip down to Monchique and check out that area. See if it was any better. Then if it was, maybe we could make some flyers and put them up in shops and bars, draw out anyone who had land for sale. This was a very thorough idea, so thorough that all we needed to do was to get ourselves moving. We always felt better about ideas which didn't depend on anyone else's resources, like an estate agent. We'd do this ourselves. Somehow we always thought that the effort we put in, would balance out in the end by coming up with what we so badly wanted.

Monchique was a nice little coastal town high up in the mountains, and the thing I liked most about it was the lush greenness. There were far more trees here, as well as vegetable plots. It was no Odemira in terms of facilities, the place we now thought of as our home, but it definitely had the type of geography we'd been seeking. We drove around and grew more and more excited at how much better it was. For one, everywhere had these amazing sea views. The landscape felt far more remote from civilisation, its wild hillsides completely devoid of signs of human life. Yes, this was the place. After a day spent driving around and walking up tracks, we stopped at a bar and began drafting our flyer. Now we were back 'on task' nothing would slow us down. We decided to return the following week, when we'd got our photocopies done, and start getting them up everywhere. We were certain we'd have to fight back the offers.

We returned to Odemira somewhat sad at having to leave

our potential new home, but back at the house we were met by nine hungry cats circling for their supper. What a sight, nine cats. How could we have let this happen? Sofia was on the windowsill, out of Snowy's way. Minnie was lying like an external draught excluder along the bottom of the door, only she would think of tripping us up as we fought our way inside. Pandy, Gingey and Thompson were in a little heap together on the narrow path. And Monkey and Lucio were running around on the roof. It had been so easy to be taken over by so many cats, we wondered what would happen in the spring. Not that it took a genius to work out that if Lady, Minnie, and Pandy all had five kittens each when they came into season, we'd have fifteen new mouths to feed. Fifteen plus nine just didn't bear thinking about. Luckily Sofia had already been to the vet, being one of 'our' cats. Lady's owner, when we asked whether she had considered taking Lady to be spayed, had been non-committal, muttering things about expensive and being unnatural. But she did think that any more kittens would be a disaster, although obviously not for her, since all the kittens now thought they lived with us. However, something had to be done and I planned to sort it out. I'd noticed at the vets there were often people bringing stray dogs to be castrated. Maybe there was some sort of scheme or cheap deal for a job lot of cats. On further investigation I discovered that there was indeed such an initiative, run by the local council, to try and reduce the prolific feral cat population and educate people about having their cat neutered. The vet said she would neuter all six for free. I was relieved, the thought of fifteen new kittens was starting to pray on my mind. All we needed to do was get them into boxes and take them. Since they nearly always hung around together and were mostly at our house I didn't think it would be too

difficult.

The vet wanted us to be at her surgery at half-past four in the afternoon, preferably without the cats having eaten anything all day. The latter was plainly impossible, they instinctively killed things and routinely checked out the compost heap. We would just have to overlook that part. I'd got some nice strong boxes from the supermarket, and a big roll of parcel tape, poised for when the crowd rolled up. Lady and Snowy were the most difficult. Lady because she was vicious and lithe, and Snowy because of his huge bulk. But we eventually managed to wrestle everyone into their boxes and taped them down before anyone escaped.

Unlike cats that are neutered in Britain, in Spain and Portugal they are returned to their owners immediately afterwards, still in an unconscious state, and seem to weigh at least double what they did when they were awake. Carrying six unconscious cats felt like lugging six unconscious Alsatians. We heaved them all back into the van and just as we left the vet called out, 'don't let them sleep outside tonight, just in case'. We waved goodbye, got into the van and wondered where in our twenty-five square metres of house we were going to find room for six unconscious cats to spread out. Usually Lady and her family disappeared in the evening, probably to sleep in a shed at their own home or to hunt the night away. Obviously Monkey, Lucio, and Sofia slept on our bed.

We unloaded the sleeping Alsatians and spent the rest of the evening climbing over their boxes. At about ten-thirty there were stirrings, so we unstuck their lids. Snowy, impervious to most things, tumbled out of his box and dragged himself to the nearest bowl of cat food. Lady got half out of her box then was sick over the side. Minnie scrambled out and began trying

to get into the litter tray, but missed and deposited a huge and nasty mess on the floor. The rest of the evening continued in this fashion. There was cat poo and vomit everywhere. We got through a bottle of disinfectant, filled a bin bag with soiled newspaper, tossed the sodden cardboard boxes outside, and we waded about with buckets and mops until we felt sure those creatures were utterly empty. The house then reeked with the smell of pine, the floor was wet through, and ravaged cats were stacked up and flopped out all over the sofa. Apart from Snowy, who staggered to the door and howled until we let him out. Now that he'd been sick and made a huge mess on the floor he was feeling a lot better.

After that we retreated to the bedroom and closed the door. One thing we didn't need tonight was more cats on the bed. Lucio was already tucked up in there, but Sofia and Monkey had kept their distance from the devastation of the evening by staying outdoors. Monkey was now clomping about on the roof, his usual way of letting us know he wanted to come in. I flipped open the tiny bathroom window, called his name and waited, listening to him clattering across the tiles, jumping down on the tumbledown bit of house at the side, then appear at the window. Two down, still Sofia to come. Seconds later, there she was at the bathroom window, meowing to be let in. We'd brought cat food, bowls of water and a litter tray into the bedroom, it was quite like old times in the van, with cats crunching food and digging in the tray next to the bed, thankfully this time it was only for one night.

It was strange, but it seemed that as soon as we started on one major effort to find a new home then other things that we'd been trying to resolve often came to a head too. Having decided that Portugal would eventually provide us with our

place, we had been trying to sell our huge van. It was too big for the tiny streets of Portugal, and with its advancing age finding replacement parts was proving almost impossible. Plus, by now it wasn't entirely legal, six months was the limit for driving a foreign registered vehicle in Portugal. We had advertised it all over the place, but recognised that only a British person would want it. So far we hadn't had anyone interested. But that was while our minds on were on other things, like house-hunting campaigns and cat neutering missions. With those in hand, suddenly from nowhere someone did want to buy it. Though we felt certain this would also come to nothing, or rather we hoped so, since I was now using the back of the van as a sort of studio for making things and storing all my materials. But no, it was the real thing. A real buyer who came, saw and fell in love. It was all over so quickly we had to spend the entire evening outside, by torchlight, heaving boxes and bags into Senhor Antonio's shed. Then the next day watch the van lumber slowly up the track for the very last time. Our bridges were now well and truly burnt, it was Portugal or bust. And to cement that decision we went out and bought ourselves a little white van from the second-hand car dealer in Odemira. Now we had a white Portuguese van just like everyone else, we were real locals.

We set off for Monchique to put up our flyers. By the end of the morning we'd covered the whole area, in bars, shops and anywhere else that had a window. When we felt we'd done all we could, we stopped for coffee and decided that fate would now take over. Either Monchique was going to be the place for us or it wasn't. And to make sure, we set a time limit of one month. I didn't want to think about what we'd do if it didn't come up with something, so decided to approach this positively,

that Monchique would definitely be the place. In fact we didn't have to wait very long at all before we got our first and only response. It was from a man who had a piece of land, two and a half hectares, about four kilometres out of town, with a small house. When did we want to come and see it?

I was really excited, maybe this was it. Finally, after all this time we were going to see our new home. Phil thought otherwise, after all we'd been on enough of these treasure hunts before, with all sorts of people, none of which had turned out to be what we wanted, however 'bonita' the owners thought they were. No, it would definitely be some awful rough place, and the owner would doubtless be asking a fortune. Phil was definitely a 'glass is half empty' kind of person when it came to house hunting.

We arranged to meet the owner, Senhor Albarno, at his house. Which was on one of the roads leading into town. Downstairs was all garage, except it wasn't just a garage, it doubled up as his fruit & veg shop and sitting room too. Complete with an ancient television set balanced on an old chest freezer, in front of which was a strange collection of sad armchairs gathered round a glass coffee table. There was a car in there too, so it was still an actual garage. When we arrived Senhor Albarno wasn't there, he was out somewhere picking cherries, an old woman told us, but he'd be back in ten minutes. She was sitting in one of the armchairs with a bucket of water between her ankles, peeling potatoes which she then dropped into the water. She said we could sit and wait, so we settled down on the other chairs and joined her watching some televised religious mass from somewhere while listening to the potatoes plopping. I supposed this was how house hunting went in Portugal.

Eventually Senhor Albarno arrived, in a very old battered jeep. He was the picture of every man his age and occupation, flat cap, check shirt, weather beaten skin, missing teeth and dusty boots. We stood chatting for a moment then he suggested we go and have a look at the land, that we could follow him in our little van. It wasn't very far away, up a very narrow road to the top of the mountain, then down the other side along a dirt track, where eventually he stopped under some eucalyptus trees. We could walk from here, he suggested, because the next bit was maybe too rough for our van. About a hundred metres away we could see a building. It looked as if someone, probably Senhor Albarno, had turned an old stone barn into his vision of a tiny house. The front had been freshly painted white, there was a nice new wooden door, and a single window with a yellow band painted around it. It looked like a toy house, totally out of place on the side of a mountain in the middle of nowhere, as if it really belonged in town next to other houses like itself. All that was missing were some pots of geraniums to make it look perfect. The hillside on which it stood was very steep, mostly forested with eucalyptus, but around the house several wide terraces had been created. The view was out across the Algarve coastline. Senhor Albarno produced a key and opened the door to show us inside, and then we could see what the building had looked like before his fanciful vision for the outside had taken hold. It was a shed basically. Just one open space, up to the roof. No rooms, no floor, no kitchen or bathroom, no water, no electricity. Just the bare soil, the remains of a hayloft, sacks of potatoes, tools, lengths of rope, and buckets. Senhor Albarno waved his arms around and talked animatedly of his plans to convert it, including installing a mezzanine with two bedrooms. He then beckoned us outside, where he did the

same arms gesture again, describing his vision of a bathroom and toilet just here, on a scrubby piece of land which was currently home to an army of giant ants. Pointing to a huge concrete tank, explained about how it could be filled with spring water for the house, how long that took to happen, and how it was also the tank for watering the crops. We stood and looked all around us. The house came with three terraces, two above and one below. It all looked a bit unloved right now, but undoubtedly this was a great location, full of potential, and the view was fantastic. Senhor Albarno then walked us around the rest, describing everything. There were some new fruit trees he'd planted. There were the burnt remains of eucalyptus, the result of a massive forest fire in the area two years before. We saw where the spring came from, and all the pipes that had been installed to carry the water to each terrace. We looked at the wild oregano. Until all we had left was to get round to talking about the price. This was going to be difficult, because we could already sense that Senhor Albarno was weighing his chances of how much he could ask against losing possibly his only potential buyer. Because if it was that sought-after it would have sold long ago. It was also difficult for us, because everyone had told us that it was imperative to haggle. We should not, under any circumstances, look interested or enthusiastic. We should only make negative comments, and definitely not agree to any price Senhor Albarno might ask. All very easy in theory, but in practice it was going to be very difficult. First he did everything he could to avoid standing still and talking face to face, by pretending to be busy moving a sack or re-stacking some wood, generally fiddling around. So we waited, and waited. He seemed more anxious about the whole thing than we were. Finally he mumbled that he wanted one

hundred thousand Euros, which even as he said it made him flinch with the boldness of such a price. Phil immediately said No, very firmly, it was too much. Senhor Albarno then sidled past to attend to something else which had caught his eye, while I began to wonder how we had begun bartering when we hadn't even decided to buy the place. A very awkward silence descended, and in the end Phil repeated that it was more money than we had, and thanked him for showing us his place. When there was no response to that we were left wondering if that was it. We definitely couldn't afford one hundred thousand euros, so we began walking back to the van. Suddenly Senhor Albarno stepped in our path, and began talking about the papers, the deeds of the property. He explained that he had bought the place a few years ago, that he'd paid the previous owner, who had signed the back of the deeds saying the transaction had taken place, so it was all legal. But they hadn't bothered to change the deeds into Senhor Albarno's name because that cost money. However, it was no problem, it could easily be sorted. The only snag was that it would take about six months. We were mystified about all this, had we not just said we couldn't afford the place? Phil thought he'd mention it again, maybe something had been lost in translation. Phil said the most we could afford was seventy thousand Euros, no more. Senhor Albarno stood for a moment and then said something else about the papers, that we should all go back to his house and he'd show them to us.

An hour later we were back in Monchique and collapsed in a café. Senhor Albarno had taken us back to his garage-cum-veg shop-cum-sitting room, then proceeded to rummage around in the drawers of an old kitchen cabinet, peeling formica and perched up on bricks, which appeared to double as his 'office'.

Eventually locating some scruffy bits of paper, which he smoothed flat along the back of the sofa then gave to us to look at. These were the deeds. Pointing out the signatures on the back, the 'promissory agreement' he'd made with the former owner, he said we could take them and make photocopies if we'd like. How had we got to this stage so early on? Had we agreed to buy the place? It was all rather confusing to say the least. We both agreed that, amazingly, it was the place we were looking for. It had the right amount of land. It had water, good soil, and a marvellous view, plus the makings of some sort of home. And we liked it, really liked it. After such a long time searching neither of us could actually believe we'd found somewhere. It was six years since we'd left Yorkshire, and yes time had passed quickly, but the lack of a real home had weighed heavily on us. Could this really be the end of our search? Neither of us had imagined what it might be like to finally encounter the real thing, and certainly it was all very strange. However, we thought it was really important to try and keep our excitement at bay, until things were clearer with Senhor Albarno, particularly about the money.

We drank our coffee, tucked away our photocopies and set off to return the original papers to Senhor Albarno. Maybe now we could try again to clarify things. We found him where we'd left him, still rummaging in his 'office'. We gave him his papers and said we were off, which drew him outside to shake hands. We said yes indeed it was a 'bonita' place, and again that we could only pay him seventy thousand Euros and no more. Yes, he nodded, he understood. He would sort out the papers, we should come back in a couple of months and he'd tell us how it was going. We all shook hands again and said goodbye then we set off back to Odemira, in a state of severe shock. It

appeared that we had agreed to buy a piece of land.

It was difficult not to be excited. To be thrilled and amazed that finally we had actually found somewhere. Maybe we didn't want to jinx things by falling in love with the place too soon. We had already started to believe that perhaps things in life were not governed by us but by things that were 'meant to be', that the whole house hunting thing was about looking for those possible 'signs'. In many ways, having six months to wait was probably the best thing for us. Allow our anxiety and stress levels time to drop a bit. And as we had already discovered on so many occasions already, we were excellent at burying our heads in the sand when it came to making decisions. Six months, after all the years of searching, was actually nothing. We decided to carry on as normal, and began digging new beds in our garden to take advantage of the shade under the big kumquat tree. The soil was damp and dark, perfect for parsley and broccoli plants. Maria and Agosto were in full-scale, late-spring production and their produce was as bountiful as ever. This year there were peas and broad beans at the side of our house and almost every day Maria came to see if we wanted to pick either for lunch. Fresh peas are one of the most delicious vegetables and I never needed any persuasion to get out there with my bucket.

One morning Maria appeared outside at about ten o'clock, rather early for our usual pea-picking sessions. Had we heard any sounds outside our bedroom during the night? Had we heard Chico barking? Actually, now she mentioned it, I do remember a dog barking. I'd forgotten that Chico had complete responsibility for guarding the plots during the night. Had something happened? Maria, who had been standing with her arms folded, nodded like a detective at having her suspicions

confirmed, and beckoned me round the side of the house out to the rows of peas. We arrived at a patch which looked as if it had been ravaged by something. The plants had been tugged down and their pods stripped off. In a few cases I could see claw marks on the discarded pods. It was incredible, what had done this? Maria explained that a creature had stalked through the horta wreaking havoc, and from now on Chico would have to be stationed, on a length of chain, in the pea area to prevent further attacks. Poor Chico. But what was this creature? What did it look like? Maria described an animal, which by her reckoning was bigger than a cat and some dogs. It had dark fur, a long tail, and paws with something like fingers with claws. It's favourite food was obviously peas, but it was also fond of water melon in season. What kind of epicurean beast was this? Some sort of mythical creature? Something no one had ever actually seen, but imagined? I returned to the hovel to check our book on local wildlife, and after much searching came across a picture of a mongoose. Yes, said Maria, that was it, although there was no mention of its diet in the book.

A couple of days later we were returning from a session in the garden when we saw Agosto trailing across his plot of burgeoning maize plants with a rusty lump of metal on a length of chain. He looked furtive as he disappeared down the slope to where the brambles rampaged up from the stream below. What was he up to? On his return he stopped to ask if we'd seen any signs of creatures in our garden, wild boar maybe. Or, after a lot of describing, badgers even. No, we hadn't seen either. Ah well, it was early in the season, but these creatures could strip a garden in one night, it was best to be prepared, he said darkly. I assumed he meant that poor Chico was in for a few weeks of overtime watching the maize plants, but Phil

realised he was alluding to something else and went down the slope to see if his theory was correct. After carefully rummaging in the undergrowth he came across what he was looking for, a trap. The old rusty metal thing we'd seen Agosto carrying was an evil looking gadget, something the Museum of Torture might have been glad of, all rusty teeth and a nasty powerful spring. Phil didn't think twice, he poked a thick piece of wood between the jaws and it was crushed instantly. Then pushed it back into the undergrowth, safely disabled.

We didn't want Agosto to lose all his crops, but equally we couldn't imagine the horror of losing one of the cats to a trap like that either. We knew quite well that for most Portuguese people, cats figured in the same pecking order of animals as dogs, the bottom. They were useful for keeping vermin down, but their health and well-being meant nothing. Especially since they could easily be replaced, and even Maria and Agosto thought that was true. They thought it was one of the strangeness's of foreigners, to be sentimental about animals. Obviously it was something we would never agree on, so disabling the trap was all we could do. However, we doubted that it was the only one. If Agosto's mission was to succeed he'd need more, and we couldn't know where all the others were or hope to get around them all on a regular basis. We just had to hope that the cats stayed lucky.

Trying to keep our minds tethered from straying into a whole sack full of house-buying related anxiety, we buried ourselves in more creative activities. I had decided that we could possibly make our fortune or at least support ourselves in a meagre fashion, by making and selling knitted toys. Far fetched I realised, but being a firm believer in total commitment to your passion bringing results, this was going to be it for me.

The locating of the ideal place was obviously our first objective, but after that came the living bit. Growing our own food would be absolutely central to that, but what about our creative life? Surely knitted toys belonged in there somewhere?

I began by knitting cats, and became absorbed in working out my own patterns, locating local sources for wool and using up all of my oddments. I didn't really worry about how the cats would be sold, at that early stage making them seemed to be the most important thing. As time went by though, and my supply of cats and other things began to grow, Maria suggested I take a stall at the market in Odemira on Saturdays. Certainly I'd got enough stuff, but what would local people think of knitted cats? Maria had no doubt that everyone would love them, and the summer was a good time to try things out. There were tourists, maybe not that many in the market, but still it would be a good start, and then by Christmas when everyone was looking for presents I'd sell loads of things. I wasn't sure about this idea, after all, everyone else who had a stall was selling food. Vegetables, fruit, fish, meat, bread, honey, nuts and cheese. How could knitted cats feature in amongst all this? Maria didn't consider this a problem. People sold whatever they produced, what was the difference between tomatoes or knitted toys? I supposed she had a point, and if for some reason toys were outlawed there was only one way to find out.

I'd already decided to call my enterprise 'Monkey and Sofia', which made it feel as if I was starting a business, sort of. I'd never had a stall by myself, but this way Maria had earmarked me a vacant one opposite her own so she could step in if I got into any sort of difficulty. The market hall was a big space, divided up into tiled and sloping market stalls, and everyone who sold things regularly had their own place, arranging their

wares in the conventional market stall fashion. I, of course, could display my things as I wanted, though it was still a bit nerve wracking arranging things in full view of all the other stallholders, who were very curious about what I was up to. But they were all really nice and encouraging, gathering round to look at things and ask about them. As it worked out, Maria might have been in charge of my stall, she was great even though she was inundated with her own customers. In between her busy moments she came across to give my potential purchasers a complete resume on each item, explaining all the little details, and of course all about where I lived, marital status and everything else. Surprisingly, despite what appeared to me to be a bit like a hard sell on Maria's part, people did buy things. It was a great experience and exactly what I needed having been sitting in the house making for so long without any feedback at all. Now people had seen what I could do they began asking if I could make a particular item for them, like baby jumpers, cushions, bags and bigger things. After that I went every Saturday with Maria, and set up my display while she set up hers, having brought with me all the things people had ordered from the previous Saturday. Now I'd got the bug, I soon discovered other places I could go and sell at as well. Like the beach at the weekend. This sounded like fun, a totally different experience. But this time I needed my own stall, so Phil set about making one from bamboo, which grew wild all around the garden. Finally we had discovered a use for this incredibly invasive stuff. Cutting the thickest poles, Phil threaded them together with wire, just like the traditional Portuguese way of making ceilings in the old houses. With a couple of trestle legs, courtesy of Maria, and our roll of bamboo poles, we were finally ready. Weird how finding our own place and studiously trying to keep

our minds busy on other things had produced such a storm of ideas.

The beach at Zambujeira do Mar was only about ten minutes away, so we were able to set up just in time to watch the sun set over the sea. Honestly, Zambujeira is the perfect Portuguese picture postcard. The beach is in a cove, with high rocky cliffs all around, nicely sheltered from any wind. The sea beyond is a bit wild, so attracts loads of surfers and cool-looking people from all over Europe, as well as plenty of Portuguese from Lisboa. And there are no hideous apartments or hotels, just ordinary houses people can rent. So it had a real family feel. Every evening the sunset was incredible. An unbelievable and absolutely bright orange, turning the sea orange too, so dramatic. Especially as it was all over in less than ten minutes. We managed to get a pitch outside one of the many bars on the one and only main street, leading down to the beach. There were two or three other stalls there already and we quickly became part of their fraternity. Learning from them how best to attract customers and when the busy times were. When people came and lingered at the stall it was nice. We enjoyed meeting and talking with them about the toys, and it felt particularly special to be a part of people's holidays. The atmosphere was amazing too, like being part of one big extended family. People were even grilling their sardines outside, the smell of fish and charcoal was lovely. Strings of coloured lights illuminated the night. With no cars permitted, everyone was far more relaxed, strolling, shopping or spending the evening sat with friends and family outside one of the many bars. All enjoying the warm air and impromptu live music. This was exactly how summer holidays were supposed to be.

We were doing well at ignoring the house thing with the

crafts. But inevitably, amongst all of this, there had to be something which wasn't such good news, and that something was cat related. We still had Lady's kittens around the house, although Lady herself had got tired of her family and had decided to stay away, feeling no doubt that she had done the best for her offspring by bringing them to us. One afternoon little Gingey had been sleeping on the sofa and I noticed that as he got up he couldn't seem to balance, he stumbled and looked dizzy. Surely that wasn't right? But then he wandered outside and seemed okay. Next day he stopped eating and was curled up tight in a ball at the far end of the sofa, away from his family. That afternoon we took him to Ana the vet, who thought that maybe he had caught an infection, but she also said that it might be more serious. Many cats in Portugal were suffering from FIV, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, cat AIDS, her own cat included. It was very difficult because it was so contagious, but it was possible to keep cats alive for a longer period if the disease was diagnosed early and strong antibiotics given as soon as any illness started. Gingey could well be fine, it might be that he'd eaten something bad and it was working its way through his system, we'd know more in a couple of days. FIV. We couldn't help imagining what that would do to our cat family, but we tried to be hopeful, Gingey could well recover and everything would be fine again.

By the end of the week Gingey hadn't responded to the antibiotics. He'd got a bit better one morning and walked around normally and ate some food, but by the afternoon he couldn't stand and was lying on the sofa again. He stopped eating, so we called Ana and she said to continue giving him water and bring him to her that afternoon. We gave him water, through a syringe, and took him to see Ana, who gave him a

FIV test. At first it looked negative, which was a huge relief, now all he needed was stronger medication, but Ana said we had to wait until the morning to be certain. By which time it had shifted to positive, Gingey had got FIV. Ana said we should carry on trying, sometimes cats could recover. She gave Gingey more antibiotics and eventually put him on a drip to keep him hydrated. But after a week even Ana, who was reluctant to admit defeat, agreed the time had come to put Gingey to sleep. Poor little lad, he had been the cutest of kittens, full of fun, a keen footballer, and yet always looking so worried thanks to his strange dark markings. We were terribly upset, inevitably wondering what we could have done differently. Worse, what did it mean for the other cats? Maybe 'ours' would be okay, they hadn't had any contact with Lady or her kittens. Ana suggested bringing Monkey and Sofia for a test at some stage, although we weren't sure it would help. Knowing a cat had FIV was one thing but as there was no cure it made the testing pointless. Anyway, Monkey, Sofia and Lucio were fine. We tried not to dwell on the potential devastation, loosing Gingey was bad enough.

As the summer wore on we decided that we should pull our heads out of the sand and take another trip across to Monchique. Maybe there was some news on the house front that would cheer us along. Why we set off with such trepidation we weren't sure, probably because our wonderful plan for a life on our own piece of land was in the hands of a man who had seemed so hard to pin down. Yes, we had felt that we'd managed to get some sense out of him by the time we'd come away last time, but it certainly hadn't been easy. What if he'd forgotten us? Sold the land to someone else? Wanted more money? There were so many potential problems

that we had to make ourselves think positively as we made our way through the centre of Monchique and out to Senhor Albarno's place.

The womenfolk of the Albarno homestead were not in evidence this time, the garage was deserted, so we rang the bell. Eventually a window slid open upstairs and a face popped out. Yes, Senhor Albarno was home but he was eating his lunch, he'd be down shortly. With that the window slid shut and we were left waiting on the concrete forecourt outside. Half an hour passed before Senhor Albarno finally appeared, still looking his usual shifty self. He came out and immediately began heading for his jeep. It took a concerted effort on our part to get him to stop and tell us how things were going before he got in his jeep and drove away. No, he hadn't sold it to someone else, nor was he wanting any more money. Something slightly worse had happened. The original owner, the one Senhor Albarno had bought it from, had become very ill, and then died. Disaster. Because now Senhor Albarno couldn't simply take the deeds to a solicitor and get them changed to his name. Now he had to deal with the man's descendants, those who would inherit, and technically become the new owners of the land. They were the four daughters, all of whom had to sign the papers. But, Senhor Albarno assured us, it would all be fine, although obviously he couldn't ask the family right now, the man had only just died. No, he'd leave it for a few weeks then he'd go and speak to the man's wife and they would sort it out. No, no we shouldn't worry, the place was ours, but it would take a little longer than he'd originally said. Looking relieved to have got that little bombshell off his chest he successfully reached his jeep, jumped in and sped off up the road.

Having had the feeling that something might go wrong with

Monchique didn't make us feel any better when we discovered that it had. What could we do? On the positive side, we knew that the place was exactly what we wanted and that it was Senhor Albarno who had contacted us, so he was obviously still keen. Plus, he hadn't told us anything really terrible. Like he'd sold it to someone else or that he wanted twice the amount of money. No. Patience was all that was required, and anyway we hadn't had any other calls in response to our flyer so there wasn't much else we could do, except maybe try and think of other places just in case there were more problems with this one. At the same time keeping everything crossed that it would all resolve itself. As ever, we unburdened ourselves to anyone who would listen, asking their advice and checking there was nothing else we could be doing. But everyone said the same thing. It was typical Algarvian behaviour to be so slow and not explain things, that the paperwork would have been just as difficult with anywhere we'd found there. We shouldn't worry at this stage. Good, we didn't want to worry. We wanted everyone to say positive things, which would let us get on with our life, without the high levels of anxiety house hunting always produced in us.

It was weird though, something had definitely shifted in our ordinary life. It was as if by changing our focus, just a tiny bit from our life in Monte da Horta, it had begun to unpeel. I wondered if subconsciously we'd known this might happen and that was what we'd been trying to avoid. Our steady little life had given us a place where we felt safe and worries were beaten back to a place where we could keep them at a distance. Now they had begun creeping towards us again and life felt a little destabilised. The cats became the focus for all of these strange feelings. First Gingey, then his sister Pandy began her decline.

She had always been a funny little creature, with the same sad markings on her face making her appear perpetually grumpy. Now we realised that her greasy looking coat and skinny frame were the sign that perhaps she had been suffering from FIV all along. Poor little thing, she tried valiantly to be positive for us, struggling to her feet to come and see us when she really wanted to curl up in a tiny ball and give up on life. We took her to see Ana, but after a couple of weeks antibiotics had done nothing to stop her slipping away from us.

Barely had we begun to recover from this blow when Sofia, our gorgeous Sofia, disappeared. What was happening? Why was our little community of cats being decimated like this? The worst part was not knowing what had happened to her. We looked everywhere. We walked down into the bramble infested valley behind the house, and on through the eucalyptus trees at the bottom of Maria and Agosto's land, all the way to Sao Pedro. We didn't find her or anyone who had seen her. It was difficult not to think the worst, that she had somehow found her way on to the main road and been run over, or that one of the nocturnal beasts had attacked and killed her. But we knew she was fast, much faster than dangerous animals, and anyway she could climb a tree out of their reach. Plus, no one had seen her or even heard of a cat being run over, so we decided that no news was good news. After all Lucio had returned, and plenty of people had told us of cats disappearing and re appearing, although that tended to be the ones that had moved here from other places, cats who had tried to go back home. Time passed, days then weeks. It became impossible not to think that something terrible must have happened to her, but we didn't want to imagine what. We still had Monkey and Lucio, and as ever Minnie and Snowy were staking us out, so we were hardly

without feline company.

One Saturday, we'd just finished eating lunch and were sitting with the door open, letting the autumn sun try and warm the place up, when a moment of pure magic lifted our preoccupation with cat-related sadness. A little grey shadow slipped through the open door and flopped down in a patch of sunlight on the tiled floor. Sofia was back! We were absolutely stunned, could it really be her? With her distinctive bobble tail it definitely was, and despite being a bit thin she was perfectly well, and really, really happy to see us. Using all her vocal skills, she produced all sorts of sounds as if she was trying to explain where she'd been. She purred and ate, not knowing which to do first, leaving her bowl every few seconds to come and see us before returning to eat. Where had she been? It was so unbelievable and so lovely to have her back, especially when she snuggled up on the bed with us that night and slept soundly until morning. Well, something had gone right, maybe we were imagining the impact Monchique was having on our life, maybe things would settle down again after all.

Winter came, and yet again we were not in the comfy warm home of our imaginations but still in Senhor Antonio's hovel. We comforted ourselves with the fact that none of our neighbours had a life much better, although most did have open fireplaces if they wanted to use them while we only had our tiny electric radiator. Everyone still had walls black with mould though, unless washed off regularly, and everyone had wardrobes full of damp clothes. It was as if people remained focused on the return of the warm weather and didn't worry about this minor interruption of a few cold, damp months. Meanwhile we were becoming old hands at making the hovel as comfy as we could, by hanging an extra thick curtain at the door

to keep out draughts and piling more blankets on the bed.

One Friday morning, as I prepared my boxes of toys for market the next day, Maria called by. Senhor Antonio had died. It wasn't a huge shock because he had been ill for some time, but it was very sad and we felt sorry for his family, also for Maria and Agosto who had known and liked him. This was our first encounter with death in a foreign culture. We knew things were done differently here, most specifically that people were buried within 24 hours. Now we learned that a night-long vigil was also held, either at home or in the church, where the body lay and people came to pay their respects to the family and bring flowers. We set off with Maria for the church in Odemira that evening. Senhor Antonio's wife, daughter, son-in-law and granddaughters were all there, along with various friends and other relatives. The coffin was at the front near the altar, and a garden of flowers began to grow around it as bouquets and wreaths were brought in and left by the mourners. The family would be there all night, although I hoped they took it in shifts, it was bitterly cold in that church.

Next day, after doing our stalls at the market, we returned to the church for the funeral. It appeared that the women went inside and listened to the service while the men waited outside for it to be over. The latter hanging around in little groups, smoking and chatting until the hearse appeared. Then the pall bearers brought the coffin out of the church and slid it into the hearse, the mourners gathering to walk behind as it set off ever so slowly for the cemetery. It wasn't far but seemed like miles at this pace. There wasn't any music either, even in the church there hadn't been any singing. Now with the traffic halted the only sound was the hushed murmur of voices and people's feet on the cobbled road. At the cemetery people packed around the

grave as the coffin was lowered into the ground. The family looked exhausted after it all, especially their night long vigil. I know that our neighbours thought that the British custom of funerals taking place so long after a death was odd and rather gruesome, they didn't like the idea of having a body hanging around for ages, but we still thought the rush to the grave improperly hasty.

As the year turned we began to realise that the 'thing' with the house in Monchique had been going on for almost a year now, and that felt bad. We had been to see Senhor Albarno again, and gone through the usual performance of trying to have a conversation with him. He had at least managed to speak to the wife of the previous owner, and yes it was all straightforward. At least the wife hadn't claimed it was all a mistake, or knew nothing of her husband selling the place. However, the daughters would have to sign the papers when they were back in Portugal. Back in Portugal? Yes. They lived in France. Well, obviously. And they'd be back at Easter. No worries, just a few more months and it would all be sorted out.

Now we were starting to believe the one or two people who had said that this was not normal house selling behaviour. These were the people who had all nodded and claimed they understood what we were feeling, then said that maybe it wasn't meant to be. We hadn't wanted to believe they might be right, because we were at the end of all our bright ideas for finding a place, and the thought of giving up on Senhor Albarno and starting all over again made us feel sick. But perhaps they were.

We were trying hard to keep life together. Yes, we'd done well up to this point, ignoring the house worry in the background, but now the blow of the French connection was too much. Added to this there was now another bit of carpet

being pulled from under our feet. The Senhor Antonio family had decided to try and sell the hovel. Everyone thought the likelihood of this happening was extremely remote, no one was buying houses at that moment, plus the price the family had put on it was galactic. No, everyone said it was just a bit of speculation on the part of the Antonio family. Speculation it might have been, but that didn't prevent endless carloads of Sunday afternoon house-hunters, plus families, from hoving up and wanting us to give them a guided tour.

Life really did seem to be unravelling. Nothing positive from Monchique, potential homelessness in Odemira, Pandy and Gingey dead, and now Minnie and Lucio had disappeared. Also, Sofia had not settled back in to her former life as a normal cat from a loving home. She had plainly done so well for herself on her first trip away that it was now going to be a regular pattern, a couple of weeks with us followed by three, four or even more weeks away. We had stopped worrying about her, but we did miss her, she was so beautiful and had such a spirit, it was so lovely when she was home. I had tried to entice her into staying by feeding her every delicacy I could think of, from sardines to bits of chicken, slices of ham, chorizo, eggs, cheese and cream. But nothing worked, in fact she didn't want any food from us at all. She had gobbled down food the first time she returned, but after that she developed another strange ritual. Instead of coming into the kitchen at breakfast time, like all the other cats, Sofia dashed outside and in no more than five minutes had returned with a freshly killed rat. This she then expected to be allowed to carry into the kitchen and eat. She did this and left nothing, not the tail or any fur, nothing at all. She could have killed and eaten it outside, but maybe she felt sorry for us, and was letting us see she could look after herself.

Her arrivals after her travels were still ecstatic. She mostly came back when we were asleep, to the window behind the sofa. Where she would meow her little broken meow for me to come and open the window. Then she would jump onto the bed, purring and kneading with her paws until she fell asleep. It was always so wonderful to have her back again.

Whatever had happened to Minnie and Lucio was something different. Neither of them had ever strayed far from home before, especially Minnie whose stomach almost scraped the floor as testament to her endless need to cruise the cat bowls. Whatever it was we couldn't bear the thought of it. Poor Lucio, he'd come all the way from Ramon's house in Galicia, stuck with us at the campsite, only to meet his end in some awful way. Gored by pigs, crushed by lorries on the main road, poisoned by some mad local, or a million other horrible thoughts. Yes, life really had begun to run out of control.

We tried to keep thinking positively, maybe they would appear again, just as Sofia had. We tried to look forward to the arrival of spring. The weather was warming up, the campervaners were returning again, surely good news from Monchique couldn't be long in coming. Then at last it was Easter, so we contacted Senhor Albarno. Yes, the daughters had come from France, and they had been to the solicitor and signed everything that was necessary. Now a new set of deeds could be drawn up to show Senhor Albarno as the owner. Yes, he was going to get on with that soon, no problem. Well, that was something. Not a lot admittedly, we were still at the stage we would have been the previous year had the original owner not died. Could things move any more slowly? There was some relief in that something had happened and we didn't have to try and work out a wonderful 'plan B' at this stage. I was

particularly happy because I hadn't been entirely well for a bit. Like many people who have never suffered an illness, I had refused to accept there was anything to worry about. After all, it was related to my periods and in my experience these thing just sorted themselves out. This time however it was different, they didn't, they got much worse. Until suddenly I found myself in the back of an ambulance being bumped the hundred-odd kilometres to the hospital in Beja, for an emergency blood transfusion and operation. All rather too nerve wracking. Now all the stress we had so carefully buried came rushing up to the surface. While I was recovering in hospital Phil's back seized up. He could barely stand and hardly walk. The only place he could feel comfortable was lying in bed. I came home with no strength or energy and Phil was unable to move. Perfect. For the first time in longer than we could remember we weren't thinking about Monchique. All we worried about was trying to take care of ourselves and get well again. It made us realise how lucky we'd been with our health up to that point, and that the hovel was not the best place to be ill. But all we could do was rest up, eat well, and wait to feel better. Which was going to take some time.

Maria and Agosto were wonderful, coming by and checking that we were okay and helping if we needed anything. It was a frightening and miserable time, so much for our lovely plan. Surely all our friends were right when they told us to come home, why were we still in the hovel feeling sorry for ourselves? I suppose the obvious answer was that we didn't have the energy to think of travelling anywhere, and if we had where would we have gone? We had reached the point with Monchique that giving up now would have made our long wait a waste of time, and we didn't want to face that. No, at that moment Monchique

was beginning to happen so it would be silly to give up. We needed time to recuperate and Senhor Albarno needed time to get the new deeds sorted out, so it was all fine.

Of our dwindling cat family we still had Monkey, occasionally Sofia, and Snowy. At night we could hear Snowy and Monkey clumping around on the roof like a pair of wooden shoe clad donkeys. They weren't good friends and without Lucio to protect him Snowy had started challenging Monkey for the position of top cat. Sometimes Monkey had a few scratches on his ears from their fights, but now he had a nasty wound on his back, like a bite or claw marks. I took him to see Ana, and she said it was a nasty wound which had got infected. After knocking him out she shaved all the fur off so she could clean it, and it really did look bad. But that was just the start. Over the next two weeks I was ferrying Monkey back and forwards to the surgery every day. Monkey was in a lot of pain, so Ana gave him injections to help. Sometimes he wouldn't eat or drink, and on one Sunday evening we found ourselves sitting in Ana's surgery with Monkey lying on a trolley and a drip going into his leg, while the liquid brought him back to life. We quizzed Ana constantly about whether this was the kindest thing to do. I knew what an English vet would have said, even a week before. But Ana wanted to give Monkey a chance because he seemed so keen to live. It was awful, so awful to see him suffering and not being able to do anything. The infection had spread and was now in his spine, his back was a mess. But before we were able to persuade Ana to put him to sleep Monkey died at home. The infection had spread to his brain. Ana said that Monkey must have been suffering from FIV too, because the antibiotics should have worked. Our lovely Monkey was gone.

We were now at the lowest point of the whole journey. It

had been sad when Sardina had escaped from the van, sad for us, but the likelihood was that he had found a new home and was fine. Monkey had suffered so much and he'd died. We couldn't stop thinking about what we should have done for him. I managed to dig a hole to bury him in our garden, near the marigolds where he always lay watching us working.

Gradually though we both began to recover. It had been easier for me than Phil, who had being lying flat for months and had tried both physiotherapy and acupuncture, neither of which had helped. But eventually a good friend in Scotland sent him a programme of exercises and they were starting to have an effect. Phil was just about mobile again after five months. We were ready for our shrivelled world to open up again, it really needed to. A life limited to the size of our hovel was no life at all. Senhor Albarno really did need to pull out all the stops now. Although we realised from experience that the chances of that happening were pretty well zero. Anyhow we went across to Monchique again to see how things stood. Senhor Albarno was his usual looking-cornered self, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and trying not to make eye contact. He eventually managed to explain that nothing much had happened. Yes, he had a solicitor working on it, but he was very slow and had done nothing yet. We pressed him about why he hadn't changed to another solicitor, but it seemed there was some problem. We weren't sure whether it had to do with a loss of face, or more likely, non-payment of some earlier bill. Whatever, the process had stalled. However, Senhor Albarno was his usual confident self. Yes, he would get things moving, we shouldn't worry, and definitely the house was ours. We wondered, not for the first time, if Senhor Albarno only sprung into life when we appeared. We agreed to contact him the

following week when he felt sure something would have happened.

Neither of us felt we could bear much more of the strain, time was passing and whatever Senhor Albarno said we still worried that we had nothing in writing. We hadn't paid a deposit and there was no agreement, although at this point we thought that was no bad thing. Life at the hovel felt debilitating and a waste of time, a few months or even a year ago we had been happy just knowing we'd found our place, now we needed something certain. The unravelling of life in Odemira was playing its part too, so many horrible things had happened there and especially since we'd found Monchique. Could it be some sort of sign? Everyone we knew now thought that Monchique wasn't meant to be. Maybe they were right.

As we worried endlessly about signs, yet another came along, and again it was cat related. Now that Snowy was the only cat around we soon realised something was wrong when he had been missing all day. Phil went to look for him, maybe he had got shut in somewhere, or was off hunting. However, five minutes later Phil was running back to the house shouting for me to bring the cat carrier. I struggled as quickly as I could into my wellies, grabbed the carrier, and rushed off after Phil who was disappearing behind the house with a bag of tools. I heard the horrible howling before I could see Snowy, but then there he was, caught in one of Agosto's death traps and understandably going crazy. Struggling and trying to get free from the vicious metal teeth. Phil had tried to prise the jagged jaws open with his hands, but it was locked solid, so now he was going to push two big screwdrivers in to lever the jaws apart. I had to be ready with the carrier to catch Snowy before he tried to run away. This time it worked perfectly. I snapped the door

closed and ran to the van, struggling with Snowy's weight, then we set off to Ana's at speed.

When we arrived at the surgery Ana gave Snowy a painkilling injection and an antibiotic. She explained that because Snowy was in shock it wouldn't be safe to do anything more than that and then wait until tomorrow before examining him. We should bring him back in the morning. She also said that with injuries like Snowy's, the likelihood was that he would lose his leg. She'd seen plenty of injuries like this caused by traps. However, Snowy was lucky in that it was only his ankle, rather than his neck, and that we had managed to find him in time.

We were devastated by Snowy's suffering and really hoped the painkiller would work. Next morning his leg had swelled to double its size and looked horrible. He lay on the sofa looking confused and didn't even attempt to get to the food bowl in the kitchen. At the surgery Ana gave him an anaesthetic, while we wandered out to get coffee, still feeling dazed about what had happened. Even though Agosto knew the cats were our family it still wasn't important enough for him not to set the traps. We sat there silently both slowly coming to the same conclusion. It was obvious now what had happened to Lucio and Minnie, they had been caught in one of Agosto's traps somewhere and had died. The traps had killed the cats just as we had feared.

Ana said that Snowy's leg was badly infected by the rust and filth on the trap, but the bone in his ankle wasn't broken, only chipped. The main problem was the infection, which had to be stopped from spreading. Knowing there was a high probability that Snowy had FIV too, the next few days would be crucial, so it was really important that we bring him back to the surgery every day for the rest of the week. We talked to Ana about the

trap, how angry and upset we were, and she sympathised. She saw too many wounded animals, and explained that the problem was with the older people, they still used traps, even though they were now illegal. It was difficult to change the way they treated animals, but from her perspective things were changing. Now it wasn't only the younger people bringing their animals to her, some of the old men were, who she'd felt sure would never have bothered in the past. There was a change happening, maybe a small one and it was slow, but there was a difference. She said that we should try not to feel angry with Agosto, it was a lack of education not vindictive behaviour. We said we'd try.

Snowy spent each day of the following week lying on the sofa with his gleaming white bandage. He managed to drink water and eat from the bowls of food that I brought him. Back at Ana's each day she undid the bandage and looked at the wound which looked huge and fleshy with his fur shaved. Ana explained that the infected flesh would fall away, which sounded nasty. Apparently the dead tissue would be replaced by new, which would grow when the infection had cleared up, and then the wound would heal. This was all a little bit too sciency for me, I felt happier when Snowy was covered up again in a nice clean bandage.

Later in the week Ana told me that she was going away for the weekend, so I would have to look after Snowy myself, clean and dress the wound, as well as give him his injections. Great. Anyone less like an extra from Animal Hospital didn't exist, I was far too squeamish, although Phil was actually worse. Ana showed me how to do everything and then sent us off for a weekend of DIY veterinary care. Ana's parting words were that by Monday we would know how things were going, whether the infection was being beaten or if Snowy would lose his leg. No

pressure then.

Bless Snowy, he was so good and didn't even try to scratch me as I unravelled his bandage and set to work with my little bowl of disinfectant and cotton wool. He was all neatly wrapped up again when I had to give him his injections, the worst bit. I worried that the liquid wouldn't go to the right part of his body or that I might break the needle. I braced myself for disaster but luckily Snowy's skin was so thick and hidden by his polar bear fur coat that he didn't even flinch as the needle went in. After I'd done it, I retreated to the kitchen where Phil was preparing hot black coffee, medicinal strength.

I saw Maria over that weekend and took the rusty trap to her and explained about Snowy. She knew how we felt about the cats even if she herself didn't understand, especially since technically Snowy wasn't even our cat. She said that the traps were bad, that Agosto shouldn't be using them and that she would throw it out with the rubbish. I didn't really believe her, it sounded as if she was saying what she thought I wanted to hear, so I pressed on, saying how upset we were and how many trips to the vet we'd have to make and how Snowy might lose his leg. Both Phil and I were upset and angry with Agosto but had sort of taken on Ana's comments. Also, having said everything I'd wanted to say it was enough, I didn't really want our friendship with Agosto and Maria to end. Afterwards I was sure that Maria had spoken to Agosto, because he was noticeably absent from around the hovel for a couple of weeks.

After my weekend of veterinary apprenticeship I was happy to hand Snowy back into the care of Ana. She was really surprised to see how well he looked and felt this was a good sign. Now she would give him another anaesthetic so that she could have a good look to see whether his leg could be saved or

not. As I sat nervously in the waiting room I wondered if Snowy would join the now seemingly endless list of dead cats buried in the garden at the hovel. I was glad when eventually Ana called me into the surgery, though it was to see rather too much of the inside of Snowy's leg, while he lay asleep on the shiny table. I can honestly say I had never seen anything like it, or would want to again. On view was the bone and all the workings of his ankle, sinewy things like pale smooth string. All the flesh that would normally be around these things was gone, fallen away, and I didn't ask where. Leaving a big empty hole. It looked very different from the wound I'd been dabbing with antiseptic all weekend. I tried not to imagine Ana cleaning away all that dead flesh, it was too gruesome. However, the good news was that Snowy was plainly clear of FIV, his immune system was functioning well, and the infection was being beaten, so his leg would be fine. At last, a cat on the road to recovery and he still had four legs.

Six weeks later Snowy was back to his old self. He began hopping around the house later that week and looking interested in going outside, but I was worried about dirt getting under his bandage, knowing just what wasn't under there. I made him some little socks, just like tiny cotton bags to wear over his bandage, and tied them around his knee with tape. I was sure Maria and Agosto would have seen him hopping around in his sock, and eventually Maria came past and asked how he was. We chatted and eventually things got back to normal again between us. What could we do? We couldn't change the nation's history or culture, but now Maria and Agosto knew people who wouldn't let an animal suffer and die. Maybe Agosto would think again before setting his traps. Having neighbours like Agosto and Maria was lovely in so many ways,

however it was difficult to live in another culture when sometimes our values were so different. Maybe Phil was right about adding to his list that our dream home had to be some distance from its neighbours.

I don't think we were terribly surprised to discover a week later that nothing had changed in Monchique. We sat with Senhor Albarno in his garage for the umpteenth time. Him rattling on about his solicitor and how he spent too much time on political things and not enough doing his work. But what he was really saying was he still hadn't been to see him in person to sort this out. There really was nothing else we could do, we'd reached the point where we now had to accept that this had to stop. We told Senhor Albarno that he had until the end of the month and if nothing had changed, the deal was off.

We returned to the hovel again and spent the evening alternating between rising panic because we'd wasted nearly two years, and relief that we were now virtually free of the treacle-like discussions with Senhor Albarno. We knew we'd said we'd give him until the end of the month, but we both knew really that nothing would have changed by then. We calmly tried to study our map of the world which hung on the wall of the bedroom, hiding a damp patch. Where could we go next? Corsica? Sardinia? Greece? Madeira? Everywhere sounded more exciting and exotic compared to the hovel. We also thought about South America, especially Chile, Mexico, and Peru. Then when none of those came up to our expectations we focused on Canada. How lovely it would be to go to an English speaking country, and maybe we could work out a way of being able to stay there. These thoughts helped us to stay positive and hopeful. We had now decided that if Monchique did fall through we would pack up and leave the hovel. We

could have decided to stay and try another part of Odemira, but things here felt sour now, we needed to get away, make a new start. Where, would have to be decided by the end of the month, because it was November now and we certainly couldn't face another winter in the hovel, whatever Senhor Albarno said. If he did produce a miracle then we'd move to Monchique and rent somewhere there while it all went through. If not, we were leaving anyway. Then, as was now becoming the norm, we had more bad news. Phil had got a hernia. Excellent. After all our other health problems and the devastation of the cats this really was the last straw. It was probably some sort of sign too, but we were too hysterical to concentrate on signs. Life was a mess.

At the end of the month we contacted Senhor Albarno, to discover that nothing had changed, he still hadn't retrieved his papers and the solicitor had done nothing. So we weren't going to be moving to Monchique, the perfect place that we had so longed for wasn't going to be ours. It was upsetting for it to be the end, but now we had to concentrate totally on what we were going to do next. Phil made the decision, pronouncing that if he lived through his hernia operation, and the way our luck had run recently he certainly doubted that he would, we would go to Canada. As soon as he was well enough to travel. It was a reckless, expensive decision, and just the thing we needed.

We sold our van, packed our stuff and got ready to leave. We felt terribly sad to be leaving Sofia, wherever she was. We hadn't seen her in months but that didn't mean she wasn't around somewhere. She was completely self-sufficient, but I couldn't help feeling upset at the thought of her coming home one night to meow outside the window of the now empty hovel, hoping to be let in for a cuddle. Snowy was another matter, he was completely recovered and just like his old self.

Luckily for everyone, Beatriz our lovely friend who owned the chocolateria in Odemira, and had been helping us pack up, said she would take him. He was too beautiful to leave, and if he didn't settle with her cat, she would definitely find him a new home. None of us wanted to see him abandoned in Monte da Horta.

In many ways we were going to do what all our friends had been telling us all along. Give up and come home. We were giving up on Spain and Portugal, but we weren't going home. After seven years away, England wouldn't seem like home now, we'd come too far. Canada would be wonderful and we might discover how we could stay there for ever. If not, the six months our visa allowed us would be just what we needed, a break from our journey.



Looking for signs

Going to British Columbia did turn out to be an adventure. It was scary, amazing and incredibly beautiful, in equal parts, another book in fact. But six months later we were still flying back to Lisboa. We hadn't wanted to return, resume our crazy journey, it would have been so much easier to find somewhere there to make a home and garden, but in the end we couldn't find a legal way to stay and felt too scared to hide until the next amnesty on illegal immigrants. So where to next? We had begun planning this in Canada, using the internet. Tapping in all the geographical requirements from Phil's endless list. Amazingly, this led us back to Spain again. Though not Galicia, but Andalucía, right down in the south west of Spain, close to where it joins Portugal. This way we would still be able to keep in touch with all our friends in Odemira, but giving us a whole

new place to explore.

Phil had studied the maps and tried to find out as much as he could about our latest destination. It was mountainous like Monchique, there was granite rock as in Galicia, and there were chestnut trees. It appeared that the next part of our journey would take us to a place which was a combination of both Galicia and Portugal. It seemed odd doing this when we were on the other side of the world, but the internet was turning out to be a great tool. Of course, looking for an ideal place based only on your wish list did have its drawbacks. Supposing for all its perfection it was actually too expensive for us? It was possible. So next we looked for estate agents, to get some sort of idea. See whether we had mistakenly chosen the Spanish equivalent of the Cotswolds or Biarritz. We already knew that in the kind of remote rural area we were interested in there probably weren't any estate agents, but at least it was worth a try. And there were a couple of properties, admittedly not many, at prices we might be able to stretch too, if the wind was in the right direction. Phil even sent an email about one, which we both thought perfect and I felt certain we could make it our own. How wonderful that would be, if we'd actually found our place before even getting there. The details and three hazy photos made it seem entirely possible. But having whetted our appetite the agent then pointed out that it didn't have any water. Which in my excitement at finally seeing somewhere, and one that we could afford, I felt wasn't really an insurmountable problem. But Phil couldn't match my enthusiasm. We did know now though, that there were some places we might stretch to. We weren't setting off into a total void.

The next issue was how would we be able to get there and do any exploring without a car? We'd sold our little Portuguese

van when we'd left the hovel, using the money to fly away. Which left us with public transport and hitching. As ever with our schemes, the theory was so much better than the practise. We also had a giant suitcase to lug around. The plan had been that this alone would be enough to contain all our stuff, or at least let us balance more bags on top, and we'd take turns pulling it along. Wrong. Those little wheels are designed solely for gliding over smooth floors in airports, not any other kind of terrain. Also, it was really heavy. Phil had acquired a massive rucksack too, as well as a fistful of other bags. Arriving in June was going to be another problem, it would be hot. But at least the first leg, from Lisboa to the border with Spain, could be done by air-conditioned bus. After that we had no idea what we'd do. By lunchtime on the first day we reached the frontier on the Portuguese side. From here the plan was to start hitching, but the driver obviously realised that no-one was going to pick us up there, the nearest town in Spain being three kilometres away, so he drove us. Then we were on our own. The heat was what hit us first, it was literally like being inside an oven, and no shade at the side of the road. Neither of us had ever experienced anything like it. The town, Rosal de la Frontera, was also totally deserted. Which was very strange, until we realised everyone must be at lunch. Hardly a single vehicle passed us for the next three hours. Eventually an old Renault Express rattled to a halt, and we piled in, shoving our luggage in the back.

We'd been in Spain for no time, yet Andalucía already felt very different from Portugal, despite being only a few kilometres away, even more so from Galicia. But oddly, despite loving Canada to bits, we felt we understood things here better. We'd realised in Canada that we had far more in common with

Europeans than Canadians, despite them being mostly immigrants too and speaking the same language as us, well sort of. We had missed other things about Europe too, the coffee for one, the much smaller cars, and that all-important sense of self-sufficiency and community that still exists in rural areas.

The van which had picked us contained three men, all of whom turned out to be evangelical Christians. It couldn't have been more bizarre. What are the chances of meeting one evangelical Christian in a country where everyone is catholic, even when they say they're not, particularly in such a remote part of rural Spain? Just lucky for us then that they were passing. They weren't going far though, just to Aroche the next town, but they knew someone who had a room, so thankfully our first night back was sorted.

Next morning, up early to avoid the heat, we decided to press on to either Cortegana or Aracena. Both were small towns in the mountains, with the kind of terrain we were hoping would reveal our perfect place. Dragging our bags down the steep medieval streets of Aroche we positioned ourselves at the side of the main road again. And before I'd even had the chance to wonder if this was the lowest point in our journey, with nowhere permanent to stay and no means of transport, a nice big comfy car pulled up. We got in and discovered that the driver was from Galicia. Not only that, but we didn't even have to struggle speaking spanish. She was a nurse and had worked in the same part of London that Phil came from. Incredible. We chatted about Lewisham for a bit, then got on to talking about our journey, and how our next step was to find somewhere cheap to rent, while we looked for a place to buy. Sonya was sure we'd find something. She explained she was going to Cortegana first, so we could try there, then later to

Aracena, so if nothing turned up she'd take us there. This had been an excellent start.

Sonya dropped us off in the middle of Cortegana, and the first thing we did was look for a hostel, so didn't have to struggle with the luggage any more. A quick walk round the town revealed that while it wasn't the most attractive place in the world it was small enough to get to know people quickly and hopefully in a couple of days we'd find somewhere to rent. Meanwhile, there was something very strange going on. There were men trotting about on horseback in the middle of town, and women wearing flamenco dresses on the passeo. There were also little boys dressed as miniature horsemen, wearing strange trousers with silver buttons down the outsides of their legs, short jackets, and wide brimmed hats. While the little girls had miniature flamenco dresses, and shoes in bright colours with white spots on. All very odd. Yet, thinking back, this was more like what we'd been expecting when we'd first left England, the women clacking castanets and doing their housework in wild spotty dresses. However, even though we'd encountered many other odd things on our journey, this was the most bizarre. Eventually we worked out what was happening. This wasn't normal day-wear in these parts, but the start of one of the biggest fiestas of the year, the 'Romeria'. A sort of pilgrimage, but in reality an excuse for one huge three-day party. It was held in the countryside, several kilometres away, and the whole town walked there in procession, led by a couple of men carrying a statue of the virgin from the local church. Well, most people walked, some went on horseback. Along the way the women in their flamenco dresses sang and played tambourine. This was our first impression of Cortegana. Had it not been for jet lag, combined with a stomach bug, which meant we were

confined to bed and close proximity to a toilet throughout those three days, we would have found ourselves totally alone. Instead, by the time we could safely leave the hostel, everything had returned to normal, and we took to the streets to look for a place to rent. We needed somewhere fast, not just because the price of a long stay in the hostel was steep, but we needed to be able to cook our own food before we starved or got scurvy. Being vegetarians in Spain, and more particularly now in Andalucía, the home of Jamon (air-cured ham), it was impossible to eat out.

It hardly took us any time to find somewhere. We started by asking in all the shops and stopping anyone who looked friendly. Even though our Spanish had been badly mangled by our time in Portugal it all started to come back. Then I located the wool shop, which had been a priority, in order to replenish my depleted stock. This turned out to be the mother lode of information and gossip. At the far end of the counter was a large table and chairs, where a group of women sat chatting, obviously permanently occupied. Yes, one of them said, a friend of hers had a flat in one of the little streets behind the church. Should she ring and arrange for us to go and see it? That afternoon we went, and after the Senhor Antonio's hovel this place looked like a five-star hotel. It was above a shop. Immaculately clean, recently totally renovated, and had a sparkling bathroom. The kitchen was small, but full of the necessary things, and outside at the back was the tiniest patio in the world, about two metres by two metres. It was expensive, more than three times as much as we'd paid in Odemira, but the people we'd spoken to had told us to expect that sort of figure, so we decided to take it. Then having found somewhere to live, we should have been feeling very chuffed. The opposite, as

soon as we had heaved our bags in and sat down the usual anxieties settled around us like old friends. Our favourite, 'supposing we couldn't find our real place here either', or 'this could just be yet another wrong place' was first, but quickly followed by all the others. Maybe it would be the same problem as in Galicia, it was still Spain after all, where people only lived in houses like the one we were renting, huddled together in narrow streets. If we were hoping to find a house with its own land, it wouldn't be in a pueblo, it would be outside in the countryside, how would we find somewhere like that without a car?

After that we experienced one of our worst periods of anxiety, worse even than arriving in Santiago de Compostela. Discovering that during our absence, the euro and the pound had more or less balanced out, something which had never happened before on our journey. This made the possibility of supporting ourselves solely on the interest from our savings, look catastrophic. And it also meant that maybe we no longer had enough money to buy our wonderful place, even if we did find it. After all, we knew that in England no one lingered between buying and selling their houses for fear of losing money, and here we were, way beyond lingering. Eight years had passed now, and even prices in Spain had risen in that time. We felt sick with worry, and more than a couple of times sat and cried about how stupid we were. We were adrift. Cut off from anywhere we knew, and anything familiar, and found it almost impossible to think of what could console us. If there was anywhere that we could afford, then we would have to accept it may not fit all our criteria. It was too late to go back now, or anywhere else, and frankly we had run out of energy for new ideas. Phil was particularly adamant that we couldn't let months

and years slip by this time.

We had been lucky in finding the flat so swiftly, and without really noticing it we slowly began to pull ourselves together, once again building another new life. After the Romeria the pueblo began preparing for its next jamboree, a medieval festival, 'Medievales'. The people we had got to know told us all about it, and were really excited, Cortegana would be attracting visitors from as far as Sevilla, Huelva, and Portugal for the four-day event. They said if we made anything we should definitely apply for a stall. The pueblo was going to be transformed into a medieval market place. Its narrow streets and impressive castle would be filled with things to buy, live music, food, street performers, jousting tournaments, archery, and demonstrations. The latter to include medieval stone cutting, glass blowing, wood carving and a forge. Thousands of people would be coming. It would be hard work, the hours for those taking part were certainly not for the feint-hearted, from eleven in the morning until three in the afternoon, then again from six in the evening until two in the morning. Extremely long periods outside at the hottest time of the year, although the nights would be cooler. Obviously, given our financial situation, taking part was a must, so we signed up. Set about making ourselves the obligatory medieval costumes, then started working on things to sell. As ever, life began to seem more possible once we'd got involved in something practical. Then there was a sign. One afternoon, as we were returning to the flat, we heard the unmistakable sound of a kitten meowing. We stopped and listened, bending down to look under the parked cars and scanning the cobblestones, until we finally saw it, a tiny skinny black kitten. It was Monkey all over again. The very thing we'd needed to make us feel more like ourselves, and to know that we

were starting to rebuild our life. The kitten was all skin and bone and also the noisiest cat we'd ever come across. It looked exactly like a postcard I'd picked up in Canada, of a black furry toy with big wild-looking green eyes. It was starving too, but we didn't have anything in the flat that a kitten could eat. No fish, milk, eggs, and obviously no cat food. So Phil set out on a mission to the nearest shop. I really hoped he wasn't too long because the racket the kitten was making was unbearable.

Yes, it looked as if we were really making things come together, we'd got the flat and now the cat. How lovely it felt to have that little creature with us. We called her Plush, since that was all the fur she had, a sort of haze over her skinny body. She was hungry all the time and kept an eagle-eye on all comings and goings to the kitchen, at her bowl before we'd even thought about moving, and eagerly tried everything we ate. Plush had arrived a couple of days before the start of Medievales, by which time not only were we in full production but Cortegana had been completely transformed. The streets in the centre were decorated with flags and banners, and people had made their own as well which they dangled from their balconies. Cars were banished from the pueblo, the local police towing the last ones away. Everywhere looked so different, and it was so exciting to be living in the centre of it all. Nothing like our life in Odemira, or anywhere else we'd ever lived. Having a stall would also mean long hours, but since we lived literally right in the middle of where everything was happening, coming and going would be easy. It was to be yet another experience to add to our many, selling our toys in the street, this time at a huge festival with masses of other stalls and literally thousands of people.

Cortegana in August. There was never any doubt that the

temperature would be anything other than extremely hot during the daytime, but at night it was wonderful, and Cortegana really did resemble a medieval town. The street entertainment was very atmospheric, with belly dancers, jugglers, sword swallowers and musicians, all in costume. The dark star-studded sky above us, and the silhouettes of the palm trees above the heads of the crowds, were spectacular. Our toys sold well and we had a great time talking to everyone who stopped at the stall, including many people from Cortegana who we already recognised. It felt good to belong somewhere again.

It was odd that we'd only been in Cortegana for seven weeks and had already found the flat, got Plush and taken part in a festival. Now we had to start our campaign to find the ever elusive place. We worried about the challenge, but knew that we really had to brace ourselves this time. Our usual anxiety hovered around us as we worried that we wouldn't find it, or worse, that we wouldn't recognise it if we did. This time though we knew that we had to try our hardest and to be utterly convinced that it was right. We couldn't let our anxiety get the better of us, or we'd start thinking about other places and maybe jinx the area. So, falling back on one of our tried and tested methods, we made a flyer. We weren't sure if it was the right thing to do, probably it wasn't, but we couldn't think of anything else as there weren't any estate agents in Cortegana. At least we were doing something constructive. Just like before, when Maria told everyone she knew that we were looking to buy somewhere, the narrow stairs to our first-floor flat soon became crowded with people who had bits of land and tumbledown buildings for sale. We had to go and see them all, just in case, but predictably we didn't see THE place. It might have been entertaining if we hadn't been so anxious, because literally

everyone who came to find us had something truly crazy to show us, which they'd probably inherited and now hoped to turn into ready cash. Like the man who had decided to sell off half his garden. Apart from not having planning permission, and that dividing land in Spain is mostly illegal to prevent a repeat of what happened in Galicia, this man was still very enthusiastic about his scheme. It had no papers, no electricity supply, no water, nothing really except the owner's vivid imagination. Another gave us directions to find his place, but despite searching on foot among rough hillside for about forty-five minutes, we never did find it. We squinted through the trees, looked down the valley where the house was supposed to be, but couldn't see anything. Then there was the man who went with us and he still had trouble finding his ruin, having not been there for several years. Eventually we found the right path, and arrived at a heap of rocks buried under thick brambles. Only for him then to tell us it actually belonged to his mother and he wasn't sure she wanted to sell it.

At least on these wild-house chases we were getting to see the area. It was just as the internet had described, green and mountainous, with lots of old castles and even older pueblos. The 'Sierra de Aracena', as the area is known, looked idyllic in the autumn. The chestnut trees and black poplars were changing colour, and the sunny days were now just the right temperature for walking around without fainting from heat exhaustion. We had also calmed down sufficiently to notice that, amazingly, we might still be able to afford to buy somewhere. Since we'd arrived the Spanish economy had literally just gone from boom to bust and property prices were plummeting. Aracena, from previously having thirteen estate agents, now had only three. Maybe things would finally work

out for us. 'Tranquilo' everyone told us, be patient. Anyway, they said, no one would be interested in selling in the winter, the weather was far too wet and cold for that, plus there were plenty of other things to do. There were the 'matanzas' for one thing, the pig killings, which we knew about from our time in Galicia and Portugal. Then there was Christmas, and of course New Year, followed by 'The Kings', when Spanish children receive their Christmas presents. Before we knew it, autumn had become winter and we had been in the flat for six months.

Given our track record, six months was now a relatively short period, and once we had seen what the winter weather could be like in the Sierra we realised that getting out into the 'campo', as the countryside is called, would be a very wet and difficult task. Even though Andalucía is much further south than Galicia, the rain here was just the same. It poured and poured. It was freezing too. The mist hung down over every hill, and the castles disappeared under permanent cloud. We could understand now why everyone had said we should wait. The flat, which had looked so luxurious in the summer, was now an ice box, with absolutely no heating. It was damp too, black mould growing inside the kitchen cabinets, and the ceilings had black spotty patches. We caught cold after cold, then the flu. But at least I didn't have to be stuck in there all day, I'd found plenty of students who wanted to learn English and started volunteering at a workshop for adults with mental health problems. I'd decided to improve my Spanish, and try to lose the Portuguese, by immersing myself in the local community. It was weird, in a short space of time we had managed to became more settled in Cortegana than we'd ever felt in Odemira. Maybe because we felt the urgency to make it work this time, or maybe it was just a cumulative thing. It was a new place for us

but didn't feel so alien, also we weren't the complete novices we'd been when we'd arrived in Galicia, all those experiences had actually counted for something. We comforted ourselves with the thought that maybe we hadn't wasted time in Odemira, maybe we'd been learning useful things, whatever they might be.

Along with getting to know the villages and towns of the Sierra through the winter, we gradually began to understand the differences between Andalucía and Galicia. Although the pueblos and aldeas looked very similar, there were also little houses out in the campo. People still preferred to live packed together for a sense of security, but many of them also had land away from it, often substantial in size, with a house where they could spend the weekends and fiestas with family. These campo houses were very basic, more like a cabin really, with just the essentials inside, a table and chairs and maybe beds or mattresses. However, they really loved them, and looked forward to any opportunity to go there. What they did there being dictated by the seasons. In the spring the men were responsible for sowing all the summer vegetables, tomatoes, onions, garlic, lettuce, aubergines, peppers, potatoes, pumpkins, sweetcorn, and beans. Then once the heat of summer arrived, masterminding the complicated watering systems. In the autumn everyone went mushroom hunting and oregano picking, in the surrounding forests. There was also hunting season, where some of the men would set off early in the morning, with their guns and dogs, and traipse around on the hills all day until it got too dark to see. While the women, as always, ended up with the short straw of cooking and cleaning. Through the winter the campo houses were largely left closed up, apart from the annual pig killing in December or January. This was a time when they preferred to stay huddled up together in the pueblos

and aldeas, in their chilly houses, while the wind roared and the trees were lashed by torrential rains. The revelation of these campo houses though was very exciting, maybe this was a sign that we were in the right place. Now all we needed was to find someone who had one to sell.

After a very long cold winter in the flat, spring finally began to arrive. At the sight of the bright blue skies I felt stirred into action once again and decided that we needed to buy a little van. It was impossible to get out into the campo without one. There were no buses, so we were always dependent on other people to take us anywhere, or hitching. As I pointed out to Phil, who was anti-buying any sort of vehicle, supposing we did by some miracle find somewhere to buy, how would we survive without a car? Phil wanted us to live simply, and to him that meant without a polluting car. And surely, he tried to reason, we would be over-committing ourselves by buying a van before we knew if we would be staying or not. We were heading for one of those circular discussions, full of good points but never reaching a decision. However, the timing of my suggestion was perfect, Phil was felled by yet another bout of the flu and I managed to get him to agree while he was too weak to argue.

In Spain, before any large purchase can be made, an identity card is required, and identity cards mean bureaucracy and all sorts of other paperwork. I sat in a dreary government office while copies of my birth certificate, passport, wedding certificate, and countless other bits of paper were gobbled up by an overzealous photocopier, wondering if the van idea had been such a good one. It felt as if I was becoming mummified by red tape, trapped forever in their spider's web. But then, by some amazing stroke of luck, which was definitely a sign, the official computer decided that the identity numbers we had been given

in Galicia were still valid. No more photocopying was required, we were already bona-fide Spanish residents and therefore could buy our van. After that it was truly wonderful to be mobile again. We'd been marooned in Cortegana for far too long, almost a year, with only the occasional bus trip to Aracena or Sevilla. To celebrate our new found freedom we took Plush to the vets. She had come into season and the last thing we needed was another echo from the past in the furry shape of kittens in the flat.

We were now feeling rather proud of ourselves, we'd got a van, we'd survived the winter and got to know a bit more about the area. Maybe life was back on track. Maybe. But what we really needed now was a plan for how we could find our place. The flyers hadn't done any good, we'd spent the winter hibernating, and it was time to get things moving again. Phil was adamant, there was to be no more wasting time, we'll give it a month and if there was no sign of anything we would pack up and leave. Just where we would be going next wasn't clear, but I agreed, we couldn't linger and let any more time pass, maybe this would be the last chance we'd ever have to buy somewhere. We were explaining all this to Anna, our new friend, when she asked us which estate agents we'd been to. The stock answer to this had always been 'we don't need estate agents, we do things our own way', how the place would find us and feeble stuff like that, and anyway we didn't have estate agents kind of money. But Anna just shrugged at this and said it didn't hurt to ask, and anyway the way things were going at the moment, any estate agent who wanted to stay in business would bite the hand off a real live buyer, however little money they had. We weren't convinced, but in the absence of any other ideas and not wanting to seem too idiotic, we agreed to go to Aracena and

give the estate agents there a whirl, then at least we'd know that we really had done everything we possibly could. Anna looked relieved and said that she'd come with us, for moral support.



By now, what had been a very lucrative business, selling holiday homes to foreigners, was well and truly over in the Sierra. I was sort of glad about that, at least we weren't going to feel rushed or panicked into buying any old place just because there were crowds of others with far more money than us to spend. I also didn't want to look like the hopeless ditherers that we so obviously were. So after a moral boosting coffee in one of the many bars the three of us trawled around the remaining agencies. As we had suspected, they didn't have a hidden stash of what we were looking for, nor were they impressed by how little we had to spend. But we bolstered our flagging spirit with the knowledge that we had actually seen places on the internet while we were still in Canada. Certainly a year had passed since then, but surely prices couldn't have risen that much now Spain was in a deep recession? The last agency was the biggest and probably the most expensive, so we had decided to save it until last. Located in the best spot on the plaza it looked brand new and very upmarket. I saw Phil's face drop as we stepped into

the chilly air-conditioned interior, and heard him mutter that we'd be back on the pavement in less than a minute. However, the person who came to greet us was much friendlier, as well as a lot more patient, while we explained in our minimal Spanish what we were looking for. I was still expecting him to shake his head and say they had nothing like that. But he didn't. Instead he looked thoughtful, then began tapping on his keyboard, while he asked us which parts of the Sierra we were particularly interested in. Yes, there were some places like this for sale, but generally they were still quite a lot more than we were prepared to pay. Which is not what we wanted to hear. I could feel myself deflating, any remaining nervous excitement draining away through the soles of my feet. Then Anna, who was actually enjoying this whole vicarious house-hunting experience, no doubt because she already had a nice comfy home of her own, asked if there was anything in Almonaster La Real. What? Had she'd gone totally mad? Almonaster la Real? This was the prettiest and poshest pueblo in the Sierra, possibly Andalucía. It was so lovely that the moment we came across it we instantly dismissed any possibility of ever living there, because the price would have been astronomical, far more than we could afford. It really was the Cotswolds of this whole part of Spain. Everything about it was perfect. The setting, surrounded by thousands of hectares of forest, in deep mountainous valleys, miles away from any main roads. The ancient town, nestled within it, looking like the perfect enchanted kingdom. All tiny winding streets and brightly whitewashed stone houses. It was just amazingly cute in every possible way. We visited often, just to feel the incredible strangeness of a place like this still existing, untouched by the world outside. The estate agent thought for a minute then clicked on his mouse. He had two campo houses

with pieces of land in the area around Almonaster la Real. The most expensive was way beyond our budget. The other, still expensive, far more than we had hoped to spend, with a small house (42m²) and two and a half hectares of forest. I remembered that size because Phil had it on his list as his ideal. Would we like to see some pictures? All three of us leaned over his desk, straining to get some idea of what we were looking at. There were three hazy photos. One was of a tree-covered hillside, with a tiny speck in the middle which looked like it could be a building. Another of misty hills and a faded sky. The last was an interior shot of the house, which was equally vague, apart from a crocheted blanket. Yes, embarrassing that I latched on to that when there were so many other more serious things to consider, but it was there and I silently took this as a sign, making a mental note to tell Phil later. Would we like to go and take a look? I was adamant, yes we definitely did. Phil was still reeling from the news that there was actually somewhere affordable in Almonaster la Real, and being Phil was sure there was going to be some hitch or glitch with this potential find. However, Anna looked at us encouragingly, and said Yes, of course we'd like to.

Outside the agency we decamped to the nearest bar to restore ourselves, and go over what we'd just seen. The biggest thing in its favour was that, although far more than we had hoped to spend, we could just about afford it. Thank goodness there really was somewhere. Added to that it had a good few ticks on Phil's endless list of absolute necessities. However he was not so happy, which is how any surprise takes him, switching immediately to grumpy mode, especially when Anna and I then started chatting about makeovers for the interior of the house. I also had to mention the crochet blanket, such a

colourful work of woolly art couldn't be overlooked, it had to be a sign. Anna looked at me blankly, surely the existence of the place was sign enough? She was right of course, but I couldn't ignore what I'd seen as the helping hand of some benevolent spirit somewhere. Maybe the blanket couldn't indicate all the mystifying technical things we would doubtless stumble over when we went to see the place, but to my mind it was an indicator that we had to go and find out more. Later that evening, when the little photos were fading in my mind, reality started to creep in. How could this be the place? After all the years of searching we hadn't imagined it would come to us like this. Surely an estate agent was not the person to deliver our dream. I lay in bed that night wondering about all the places we had seen on our nine-year journey, and all the people who had taken us to see them. Old men with donkeys, equally wizened women in nylon overalls, friendly neighbours, crazy characters. And as well as these, there had been the places we had stumbled on ourselves. The forgotten monastery, an entire deserted aldea, houses so small you could touch all the walls inside without moving and had to use a ladder to get to the room above, even one house that was buried inside a hill. None of those had turned out to be the place, so what did it all mean? It was hard to get to sleep that night.

We'd arranged with the estate agent to meet the next day in Almonaster la Real, and meanwhile he was going to get the key from the owners. I'd asked Anna to come along too, somehow it mattered that she stayed with us. If there was any magic dust covering us from yesterday, I didn't want it to blow away just because we weren't all there together. In the end we were quite a party. There was Phil and me, Anna and the estate agent, and now the boss of the business, who had come because he had

the 4x4, which would be needed to get there. After coffee together in Casa Garcia, one of the loveliest bars in Almonaster la Real, we set off. Navigating the town's extremely narrow streets, designed for people and donkeys not cars, then out into the countryside. The road after that wasn't much wider, but our driver obviously felt the need to put his foot down, probably so we didn't realise just how far away from Almonaster la Real the property actually was. And for me, not a good passenger at the best of times, being hurtled along a road where in order to pass anything coming the other way one of you has to pull over onto the verge and stop, was not a good experience. Especially when there's a solid wall of mountain on one side, and a vertical drop on the other. It also curved alarmingly, later we discovered that it was known locally as 'la curva del diablo', the Devil's Curve. Which meant there was absolutely no warning of anything coming the other way. Something our driver was apparently oblivious to, as he continued to hurtle along. Then eventually we turned off onto a forestry track and began climbing. It was so steep and rough going, full of massive potholes, that any further display of recklessness was impossible, giving us the chance to finally take in the view. We were in a pine forest, full of steep undulating valleys. Tracks appeared leading off in all directions. The route we were following seemed to be so random and convoluted that neither of us could imagine ever being able to find our way back. Emerging at the top we then drove along the narrow ridge between two deep valleys, and suddenly the pueblo was visible again, about 2km away as the crow flies, far below. Just like going to Olelas, we had been driving around and up a mountain. Then we turned down an even narrower track, and after several steep hairpin bends and a rapid descent, arrived at a gate. It had taken 20 minutes.

The estate agent seemed very chirpy as we climbed out of his car, despite all the potential near death experiences he'd put us through. And the reason for that was he'd spoken to the owner of the 'finca' that morning, and they had agreed that in the current house selling climate the original asking price was maybe a bit high, so now it had been reduced by ten thousand Euros. He'd thought we might like to know that before we had a look around. Anna and I couldn't believe it, maybe the magic dust was still clinging to us. Phil wasn't even listening, he was already off in list-mode, with his compass, map, big tape measure, notebook, and camera. He was more concerned to see whether this place came up to his expectations. For him, location was everything. As he was fond of telling anyone, you could build a house anywhere, but you can't change the view. Surely it was another sign, I said to Anna, a sign that we really had to take note of whilst we were here today. Anna said it was really good news, any price reduction was great. I also felt sure Phil would be thinking the opposite, worrying about why the price had been reduced. In his mind things happened for a reason, and mostly not good ones. Like the authorities were going to bury nuclear waste next door, erect hundreds of wind turbines, start open-cast mining, or build a motorway across the hills. We'd certainly seen all those and more on our journey. Nothing could have a simple explanation at this stage. The land all sloped downwards, dramatically, which meant the view was absolutely staggering, especially as we had arrived at the most perfect time to see it. Everywhere was vivid with colour, vibrant yellows, intense pinks, rich purples and deep, deep blues, against a background of every shade of green imaginable. Though this carpet of wild flowers we made our way down to the little house. From there the panorama was even more spectacular,

you could see for miles. The estate agent explained that we were facing south-west, and on a clear day it was possible to see Portugal, 60km away. And at night, he said, waving an expansive arm, all the little aldeas which nestled in the hills between.

Apart from the incredible diversity of plants, there were huge trees too, hundreds of them, mainly oak and olives. Phil was itching to get a look at every corner of the place, so he and the two estate agents set off down the hill through the trees. Anna and I had other plans, we wanted to see more of the house. It was constructed from stone, which really made it look part of the place. The front door was chestnut and ancient, with a small door inset at the top for peering through. Which was locked, so we tried to see through the front window instead. This was covered by a wooden slatted blind which rolled up, and as we moved it a lizard dashed out, its haven disturbed, scuttling up the wall to the crooked tiles above. The glass was misty and it was too dark to see anything. All very frustrating. Then the boss agent returned, his posh shoes obviously not up to the rough terrain. Bringing with him the key. Turning it in the ancient lock, the first thing we noticed was the smell of wood smoke. Then as we fumbled to open shutters, the coolness, compared to the temperature outside. Once there was enough light to see, our first impression was how cramped it felt, the ceiling was really low and this room was tiny. The far gable wall, along with a substantial part of the floor, was taken up by a massive blackened fireplace, above which were mounted an impressive set of antlers. In front of which was the sofa we'd seen in the photo, draped in its crocheted blanket. At the opposite end was a sort of kitchen space, with a table and chairs. A wooden partition ran between them, just like the

house in Olelas, with two doors. Inside which were two bedrooms, each only big enough for a single bed. Nothing else. Nevertheless it was perfect, it felt homey and loved. A simple rustic place, hunkered down on a hillside, behind which the land rose steeply through a forest of huge pine trees. It was exactly as I'd imagined our place being, well sort of. As a small child I had made a pretend house with my sister in our Dad's shed, which I still remembered as smelling intensely of the outdoors, wood, tools and turps. This felt just like that, but also different enough to imagine making a real life here, one where all our experiences would count. Emerging into the sunshine again Anna and I stood outside taking it all in, while giant ants marched along the soil. She lit a cigarette and we listened to the silence. Anna was obviously impressed with the place and asked me if I could see myself living there. I didn't even have to think about it. Yes. Yes, I really could.

We were in a daze that evening. Surely it was the place, even Phil was almost ready to concede that it was, but shouldn't we try to hold back, be sensible and check everything thoroughly before we fell too far in love with it to ever want to reject it? Yes, of course, but how likely was that? We'd been waiting for nine years for this moment and now we wanted to start our new life right away, we wanted to get excited. We hadn't felt like this about Monchique because we hadn't allowed ourselves to, but this was different, it was totally different. We talked about it almost all night and decided that the most worrying thing was the lack of water. Did it mean there wasn't any water under the ground, or just that the owner hadn't been able to afford to have a borehole dug? And how much would it cost to get one? Finally we fell asleep with images of the trees, hills and our little house circling around our heads.

The next visit was two days later, and this time we were going with the owners. Waiting in the bar for the estate agent it was hard to keep focused, not with the possibility of our own home at last. Then finally he arrived and he was grinning. Doubtless because he felt sure he was going to make a sale out of us gullible foreigners. However it wasn't that, it was because the owners had decided to reduce the price by another five thousand Euros. This was indeed good news, but what did it all mean? Since when did the haggling begin before we started talking about money? And anyway, why were these reductions so big? We both remembered very clearly the agony of trying to get a two hundred pound reduction when we'd bought our first house not so many years ago. When had these huge numbers become so ordinary?

We then walked together through the town to where the owners lived. They turned out to be the nicest couple anyone could wish to meet or buy a house from. We sat around their dining room table, while they showed us sheaves of impenetrable paperwork, flicking proudly through the pages pointing out all the rubber stamps and signatures which littered the margins. We noticed that the place was called El Pocito, and I had the distinct feeling that it meant 'little well', although I'd have to check that one out later since neither the estate agent nor this couple could speak a single word of English. Despite that we managed to get some sort of idea that the papers were in order, by asking questions in our basic Spanish. Of all the things we could have worried about at this stage we managed to settle not on the lack of water, but on whether the little house was legal or not. We had discovered that many people built themselves these little campo houses, which as we had seen were really nothing more than glorified sheds, without

permission from the council or any other statutory body. The last thing we needed was to buy the place, move in with all our stuff, and then have someone official turn up and say it was only a shed and we couldn't live there. But everyone around the table assured us that it was all above board, we shouldn't worry, it was all legal. Well, what else were they going to say? Anyway, we stored that anxiety away, knowing it would get another airing later, and set off out to the campo. This time in our van, following Daniel and Isobel, in their little Peugeot 205, so much for needing a 4x4. We went by a different route this time, which was a lot narrower, frighteningly so in parts, no turning round here, but which was much quicker, only 3km. It was afternoon and the sun was dipping slightly, giving the hillside a warm glow. Everything was just as magnificent as before, and we knew now that we were already completely and hopelessly attached to it, strangely even more than we'd ever been to the house in Monchique. Probably because this time we were dealing with a normal situation, the owners wanted to sell, they had all the necessary papers organised, and were ready to go. They had reduced the price because the property market had totally collapsed, nobody was buying anything. There was no scary reason. All we had to do now was to decide that we wanted it. We were still petrified, even though this was the very thing we'd been waiting for since the start of our journey. But this time we also felt that there was no going back, and even if there were things we discovered later on and wished were different, we were now ready to accept that everywhere had its flaws and we'd get used to living with them, whatever they were.

We decided to say yes, that we did want to buy it, with the proviso that there was water. Daniel understood, but said we shouldn't worry, he knew there was water. The only reason he

hadn't had a borehole drilled was because he couldn't afford it, but there definitely was water. And for once we felt here was someone being totally honest, after all why would fate have brought us here if only to rip our sweet little home away from us now? However, common-sense told us that we needed a bit more confirmation than just our feelings, so when we got back we decided that we'd find a 'borehole person', just to make sure. Then we started to tell everyone we knew that we'd finally found our place, which barring a disaster on the borehole front, we had agreed to buy. People had said that buying anywhere without a borehole was a gamble, possibly one not worth taking, but we had reached the stage where we were now defending our little place against anyone offering advice to the contrary. Any problems that appeared now we would deal with, because nothing was going to come between us and our home.

That night I lay in bed wondering if I could ever resuscitate myself after this, if there turned out to be no water. How many times could we get to the edge of our new life only to be wrenched back from the brink without going mad? I couldn't bear it. I remembered how we had heard that house buying and selling was the number one most stressful thing people undertook in life. We'd been living with that stress for nine years now, and it had become part of us, almost like another person living with us. We'd accommodated it, put up with it, and it had made us sad, upset, and depressed. Now that it might be over was just too overwhelming. We really did need to keep calm and wait for this last bit to fall into place, before giving ourselves over to delight. I finally managed to get to sleep by thinking positive thoughts about water and boreholes.

We discovered that there were several companies who made boreholes in the Sierra, and the next day we met with the owner

of one, from nearby Galaroza, in what was becoming our local bar in Almonaster la Real, Casa Garcia. The day was hot and bright as we left with him and drove up through the pine trees. This time arriving at the now familiar gate and getting the strange and unfamiliar feeling of being the owners of this wonderful place. No estate agents or owners this time, just us and Mr Borehole. He climbed out of his van and stood looking around. 'Muy bonita' he said, smiling and nodding, and we felt a certain proprietary glow. I wondered when he would start dragging equipment out of his van, and what sorts of technical gadgetry he would use to tell him if there was water under the ground. He reached into his car, fished behind the seat for a while, then brought out two metal rods, bent at right angles. Then he straightened up and looked around. We explained that half way down the land was a pond with water, that Daniel had dug with a JCB, maybe starting there would be best? No, that wouldn't do, he said, it would be very difficult to get his machinery right down there, it would be far better if we found water at this level. At which point he gripped the rods, one in each hand, tucked his elbows into his sides, and after checking everything felt right, set off striding away. We both stood watching, not sure whether to be amazed that things were this simple, or to be worried that such a big financial decision depended on just this. However, our ruminations and anxiety didn't have much time to gather momentum, because after only a few strides the metal bars not only crossed but virtually spun right round, and the man looked up and grinned. Pretty good, he said, looking impressed with himself. This was the perfect place, the borehole would be near the house and that would be handy both for his equipment and for us. He then wandered about a bit more, trying to pinpoint the exact place, until he was

happy, scraping his boot in the dust to make an 'X'. We couldn't believe it, surely more pain had to be involved, or at least something involving some piece of equipment? We must have looked a bit dazed, because Mr Borehole then gave Phil the rods to have a go himself, while I asked about the water. How sure could he be that there was water down there, just by the reaction of two rods? And had he ever come across pieces of land without water? He explained that in the Sierra there was never really a question of whether there would be water, it was more a question of how far down it was. The usual depth was about eighty metres, though sometimes they had to drill more than a hundred, but they always found water. Phil was striding about with the metal bars, watching them turning magically in his hands. At which point we finally allowed ourselves to let the bubble of excitement creep up inside us, definitely we had found our place.

We now felt we were entitled to a little period of glowing happiness. We had told the estate agent that yes, we did want the place, and now we just needed to know what happened next. We sat outside at a bar in Cortegana, just round the corner from our flat, and couldn't help smiling at everyone. We were sure we should have been anxious and worried about something, but at that moment we felt justified in enjoying ourselves, savouring this moment. Phil was flicking through his ever present notebook, looking for the measurements he'd made when he'd walked the perimeter, checking the figures against those on the document we'd got from the estate agent. At which point we both realised that it was almost a year to the day since we had arrived on virtually this very spot, after our return from Canada. It was like looking down the wrong end of a telescope, all the worries we'd had about coming here, how we had given

ourselves the shortest time possible to decide if this was the place or not, suddenly seemed so far away now. We had become different people from then. Different even from the people we had been only the previous week, before we had seen our place. How could we have known when we arrived here that we really would find somewhere even better than Monchique? Phil, for whom Monchique had everything, was delighted to have outmatched it. The land was more interesting, the house was much more liveable in than Senhor Albarno's shed, plus the view was breathtaking. Suddenly he stopped flicking through the pages of his notebook and looked up. 'You are not going to believe this', he said. He had just got to the bit in his notes from Canada, the ones he'd made when we had decided to come to Andalucía. In amongst them he had found all of the things he'd scribbled down about the house that he'd seen on the internet, the one that had made us relieved to discover that there really were places here which we might have been able to afford. It was the same property, the one the estate agent had emailed us about, the one without water, and there was even the name, El Pocito. It had been our house all along.

We were so surprised that we really had seen a sign while we were still in Canada, a sign which had turned into reality. The estate agent hadn't explained then about the possibility of a borehole, and that it was how everyone got their water in the campo. If he had, maybe we would have found our place sooner, just as I had fantasised when we'd been in Canada. But Phil was more philosophical, maybe we just needed the past year to understand that we were in the right place, or we might not have felt as ready to decide as we do now. He was right of course, but I still worried in retrospect that we could so easily have missed our lovely place, and even imagining that made me

feel queasy. By now we had left the bar and were walking back to the flat, when Phil pointed out that had we bought our place the previous year we would probably have had to pay the original asking price. Maybe our guardian angel of the signs really did do everything right after all.

Poised now on the edge of a magic carpet, which would eventually give us the keys to El Pocito, next we had to deal with all the different bits of paperwork, in the Spanish way. We knew that the first thing to do was pay the deposit, but even this was not the simple task we had undertaken when buying houses in England. No. This involved a serious meeting at the estate agents office. In their special boardroom, no less. Where surrounded by glass walls, subdued lighting, and the air conditioning set to chill setting, Daniel and Isobel, Phil and me, along with the two estate agents, read through, or tried to in our case, the several pages of a contract which stated that once we had paid the deposit we would lose it if we changed our minds. We already knew this, that's the point of deposits, isn't it? However there is nothing to make the stomach churn quite so much as the feeling of no return. We all looked suitably solemn, and then it was time. Each page had to be signed by all of us, so the sheets circled the table round and round. There seemed so many pages of words for just a deposit. I began to wonder about the number of pages there would be in the document for when we actually owned the place, maybe we would be signing all day long. It did seem true that paper was much treasured by officialdom here. We already had a weighty document which had been put together for the sale of the place, including a special survey of the land and its measurements. This was bound and covered in signatures and rubber stamps. Now we had this other wad, which had been complimented

with photocopies of our identity cards and passports, also all rubber stamped and signed. Afterwards, outside the estate agents, we clasped our armfuls of papers and realised that we could now relax for a couple of weeks, while the deeds were drawn up in our names. Daniel and Isobel had also said that we could borrow the key whenever we wanted. Phil was itching to go and see the solar equipment. Had I not been so happy at that moment I might have realised I was about to be revisited by the spectre of watts and volts all over again, along with Phil's endless questions. At least it didn't involve a wind turbine this time, and maybe the two solar panels that were on the roof would actually work.

A few days later Anna popped round, she'd had a call from the estate agent. Apparently there was some sort of hitch with the paperwork, it might take a little longer than a week or two to draw up the deeds. What did this mean? Surely nothing could go wrong now, that really would be the end of our world. Unable to bear not knowing, we decided to drive to Aracena and speak to the estate agent ourselves, so that he could explain it more clearly. Apparently there was a problem with the land not being registered on the special national computer property database 'Catastro', he explained. It appeared that the whole of Spain would eventually be put on this system, and there were masses of civil servants throughout the country who were slaving away, giving each plot of land a number, until the whole map of the country was filled in with numbers. However, in reality, land was really only being put on as it was sold, which was when all the paperwork was brought up to date. Our place hadn't been registered yet, and when the Catastro people had seen Daniel's papers, the civil servant dealing with it had found something that wasn't right. From their records there was only

one big piece of land in that area, covering hundreds of hectares, so our bit must have been illegally subdivided. We sat and gaped while the estate agent went on to say that Daniel was livid with the people down in Huelva, the headquarters of the region. He knew that his land was not illegal and was certain that they had made some mistake, so he was going down to see them the next morning, together with the estate agent, and between them they would sort it out. We definitely shouldn't worry, these things happened, civil servants often made mistakes with Catastro, but they were taking piles of documents with them, proof that the land had always been separate from the big piece which surrounded it. He'd let us know how they got on.

Was this going to be the end of our dream? Should we allow ourselves to be consoled by the estate agent? After all, wasn't he acting for Daniel, not us? It was a worry, but at least if there was something illegal going on someone had spotted it before we had paid all of our money and been left with nothing. Still, I couldn't believe that Daniel or Isobel would do anything illegal, they even had paperwork for their garage. No, I felt sure the thing would be sorted out, and on that positive note we decided to call in and see Mr Borehole on our way home, to find out what he needed from us and how soon he could bring his machinery.

Mr Borehole was happy to see us, and explained that he would first need a copy of the deeds, in our name, then he would set about organising the paperwork necessary to get the permission for us to have a borehole. Permission? Did that mean that there was a possibility of them not giving us permission? No, no, said Mr Borehole, the only time it would be difficult, and even then not impossible, was if your neighbour's borehole was less than one hundred metres away,

and that definitely wasn't the case for us. Everything would be fine, we should contact him as soon as we had the deeds and he would start things in motion. How long might it all take? Well, six weeks maybe. That didn't sound too bad. We knew that if everything went well we were hoping to move into our little house as soon as possible, which could be in as little as two or three week's time. Which would mean taking water to the house, since there wasn't any there. We were going to have to buy some big containers and fill them from the spring in town. By the end of this process we were going to be much wiser than we were before, despite all of our experiences, buying property was a very different thing from thinking about it.

The next day the estate agent called Anna again. He and Daniel had been to Huelva, and had managed to sort out the confusion. They had been lucky, because Daniel knew someone who worked there and had been able to talk it through with them. Together they had been able to find a satellite photo on the internet and this immediately showed that there had been a mistake. An old stone wall surrounded the whole plot, and once this had been pointed out, they agreed to allot a number to Daniel's land. Everything was fine. What a relief, hopefully things would now run smoothly. The estate agent explained that he would go round to the notary's office straight away to get the new deeds drawn up, and in the meantime we should go and open ourselves a Spanish bank account. It wouldn't be possible to buy our place with a bank transfer from a foreign bank account, because we might be terrorists or drug runners, so we had to send our money to an account in Spain first. Yes, more new things to understand.



Finally the day dawned when we would become the owners of our own dream. We arrived at the notary's office to find Daniel and Isobel already there, relaxing in the wonderful chill of an air-conditioned office, it was now really hot outside. We had already been to visit our new bank manager that morning to collect our huge cheque. It felt far more real than buying a house with a mortgage, this time we were buying somewhere outright, no debts. The notary's assistant started things off by checking we'd brought all the right documents, our passports, residency certificates, and a letter from the bank to say we weren't money launderers. Yes to all of them, except there was a problem with the residency certificates. They were copies. Photocopies were not acceptable in law, even certified ones, so we must go back to our flat in Cortegana and get the originals before we could proceed. Honestly, what next would come between us and our home? Poor Daniel and Isobel had to wait while the estate agent whisked us off in his car. We really were hopeless at official things. Finally, back in the notary's office again, we were ushered into a boardroom with a massive table,

on which were a stack of biros ready for the signing. Then when we were all seated, the notary appeared through another door, rather like a magician, and sat at the head of the table, ready to read out loud through the stack of papers in front of him. It did indeed look like a huge document. He began and we tried to pay attention. It was describing the place, where it was, who it belonged to, and probably a lot of other things. Phil had obviously been following more of it than me because suddenly he stopped the notary's flow by asking a question. The measurement of the land, surely the figure he had just read out wasn't the same as on the estate agent's document? Flurry of consultation. Yes, Phil was correct, there was a mistake. The document would have to be amended, we would all have to wait. The notary and his assistant then disappeared, I imagined to track down the careless typist. It was a shame because all those pages were stamped and signed by the notary already. Half an hour later we resumed and this time there were no further hitches, the document circled the big table, I can't remember how many times, but finally it was done. We all shook hands and filed out. Daniel to the cashier to pay them a huge fee, and us out into the street with the door key that Isobel had so thoughtfully brought to give us. We would still have to wait for our deeds to be drawn up. The document we had signed was the sale agreement, now we needed the one that said we owned the place. Could it be any more complex?

That was it. We had bought El Pocito and now it really was ours. All those huge trees, the hills and the little house. Two and a half hectares feels scarily big when it's on the side of a mountain, and the boundaries of your land are as far as you can see, but it was absolutely beautiful. We knew that at some point, when the enormity of what we had done had sunk in we would

feel shock, but not yet, it was our dream place come true. We had bought it and would be moving in just four weeks after the first time we had seen it. There were so many things to think about now. But after all we'd been through our only response was to feel stunned and slow. Obviously we wanted to leave the flat as soon as we could, in order to save money on the rent, but first we had to pack up all our things. This would be the ninth time we'd done this since we'd left our old home in Yorkshire. It was going to be marvellous not to have our life permanently stored away in boxes, to be able to find books or photos or whatever, without having to rummage. But we were getting in front of ourselves, because it was going to be a while yet before we were free of those darned boxes.

We had already decided to take out the low wooden ceiling in the little house, which was almost scraping Phil's head, and open the space up to the eaves. Then having done that we would need to insulate the roof, which in turn would mean taking the tiles off. A big job, but not too awful when the roof covered such a tiny area. The windows also needed help. Some were wooden, some metal, each one different and most without glass, obviously Daniel and Isobel hadn't stayed there in the winter. Once we'd started on this list we got carried away with plans to do away with the fireplace and partition too. Our dream had always been to live in just one open space, with a sort of bed platform up high, mezzanine-style, with room underneath for storage. This had mainly been as a result of too many cold damp bedrooms on our journey. We also knew that with a wood burning stove it would heat the space better if it was just one open room. I liked the idea of making a sort of loft out of the little house. We had imagined this moment for so long, deciding exactly how our perfect house would be.

Except, just as when we were fitting out the van, we also had to remember how small the space was. The entire house measured only seven metres wide by six metres deep, tiny by anyone's estimations. Still, it was just what we'd wanted. We knew that we would be perfectly comfortable in this small space, because El Pocito was really all about what we had outside. The location and the two and a half hectares of nature to enjoy and grow all our own food. The house was going to be a refuge from the weather, and a place for us to work on our crafts. Not a holiday home or a villa, but very simply a beautiful shed. We thoroughly enjoyed the plotting and planning of its transformation, then got down to the business of actually moving in. Yet again I scored points for having forced Phil to buy that van. We filled it with boxes from the flat and took them to El Pocito gradually, a van load each day until the flat was empty. Then when that was done we put Plush into her cat basket and we all moved in together.

We were transfixed by the panorama through the open door, we couldn't stop looking out. The branches of the big oak tree which grew up from the terrace below the house, looked like a fringe along the top of our door, under which were the giant boulders at the start of the path down the hill. Beyond those there was a wooded valley of the next hill, about 2km away, and beyond that more of the same all the way to Portugal. The light changed throughout the day, making different shadows and patches of light, colouring everything differently. In the mornings it was a soft damp green, rich textures of leaves. In the heat of the afternoon the sun was at its highest and everything was sharp and intense. Then in the evening the colours began to fade and become dusty, ending with a final explosion of colour, blinding orange that made everything look

as if it was aflame, sunset. All of which seemed to be ours alone. That and the soundtrack of nature. Nothing else. No people, no cars, no trains, no planes, no machinery. I heard for the first time all the very distinct and different voices and songs there are out there, that change with the light during the day, then continue changing throughout the night. We also watched each new day dawn. First illuminating Portugal and the distant hills, then gradually getting closer and closer as the sun climbed up from behind the mountain above us. We had also decided we needed somewhere to sit outside and enjoy all of this nature, while sheltering from the heat of the sun and keeping the rain off in the autumn. Our shopping list of building work was growing. Now we actually lived at El Pocito we were eager to get started on all the tasks needed to make our little shed a proper nest. The first of which was to find ourselves a friendly builder. But before that we had to sort out a temporary water supply. Daniel had left us a one thousand litre water tank up near the gate, so we rigged a pipe from that to the house, into a basic sink. Then all we had to do was to make sure the tank was always full. As well as have enough for drinking, which we could store inside the house to keep it cool. It didn't take us long to become experts at this, especially at finding new ways to minimise our need for water, as well as knowing just how far one hundred litres would go. We bought four 25 litre containers to fill the tank with, and about a dozen 5 litre ones to use in the house. Every other day driving to the fuente in town to replenish them. This would take about half an hour, or more if there were other people waiting. But we didn't mind, the most important thing was that we had finally found our place and were now living there. We didn't mind either that the solar power system we'd inherited was a completely unknown

quantity, and that it only generated a very small amount of electricity, 100w at most. Rather than get involved in buying anything at this early stage, we decided to live with what we had and learn from that. In the end it wasn't hard. We just treated it as part of the whole transformation process, our desire to become as frugal, self-sufficient and sustainable as possible. Less reliant on money. In no time one lightbulb in the whole house, no washing machine, no fridge/ freezer, no television, all became normal. In fact no other electrical appliances except for a 12v car radio/ cd player. Along with not wanting or feeling the need for a bathroom, toilet, hot water, phone, or internet. We had never felt happier.

Eventually we got our copy of the deeds with our names on, and made a copy for Mr Borehole. He then explained that the next step would be for his colleague, Manuel, who was an engineer, to produce a document to present to the authorities. This would contain all the stuff they liked to see, such as maps, information about the geology of the area, types of rock, that kind of thing. When that was ready, Manuel would contact us and we would need to pay him seven hundred Euros. In cash please. Yes, seven hundred Euros for some paperwork, nothing to do with drilling equipment or holes in the ground. We could understand now why many people didn't have one. We asked when this expensive paperwork might be ready, and Mr Borehole reckoned about fifteen days. In Spain and Portugal a fortnight is never a fortnight, it is always fifteen days. Well, that didn't seem too bad. I thought we could manage to carry on bringing the water for that long. At least we had begun the process, eventually running water would be ours. Having set that up, we then moved on to trying to find a builder. This proved surprisingly easy. We were out on a walk, exploring the

surrounding countryside, when we came across what can only be described as a 'fairy-tale' house in the middle of a forest. It was exactly how we had imagined ours would look like, as if straight out of a children's storybook. It was so beautiful we knocked on the door and got talking to the owner. Who turned out to be the person who had built it, piece by piece, one room at a time as his family grew. Instinctively we both felt this was the man to help turn our ideas into reality. Then while we were still talking with Jose, about all the things we planned to do, it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps we were being a bit previous here. How would he be able to work at El Pocito without water for cement and electricity to power his tools? But I needn't have worried, these are problems that builders in the Sierra are familiar with. He would come with a portable generator, and also stop off at the spring in town each morning and fill up his three 25 litre containers for the cement. Meanwhile I would save every other drop I could, by recycling the dirty water from washing-up or washing clothes, to add to the mix too.

Having got all that organised we then realised that if the ceiling and the roof tiles were coming off we would have to move out. But where to? We were trying to save all the money we could now, and certainly didn't want to leave our nest. Once again Anna was there to save us, discovering an old tent in her shed we could use to camp out in, one of those with zip up rooms and a living space in the middle. It was just what we needed. The whole weekend before Jose's arrival was spent sorting that out. Lugging all of our possessions, this time onto some wooden pallets outside, covered by a tarpaulin just in case it rained. Followed by setting up the tent. Plush was very impressed by all this activity, especially the tent. Which not only

presented a new challenge to explore, but an entirely new game, sneaking under the flysheet where she could then run around like a dervish between the inner and outer parts. She also had to be dissuaded from launching herself off the nearest tree, onto the top of the tent. We just hoped the novelty would wear off before we tried to get a night's sleep inside. Eventually we had the house emptied, everything safely tucked away, just as the sky turned the darkest blue. Spots of rain landing on the tarpaulin as we tied down the last flapping edges with rope. Surely our luck with the weather would hold? We'd been told that starting renovation work in September was far too late, certainly to have a roof taken off. It was the month of equinoctial storms. No, we should wait until the spring. But we didn't want to. We wanted to get on with everything now. Anyway, I confidently predicted an Indian summer and refused to think otherwise.

The next morning Jose arrived and the work began. It was amazing to see just how quickly two people could cause so much devastation. By the end of the first day the partition wall and the kitchen units were gone, along with the giant fireplace. Leaving a single open space and a large pile of dust and rubble. The following evening all the tiles from the roof had been removed and stacked, and the wooden ceiling dismantled. Now there was nothing left inside. We stood on the rubble and looked up through the wooden rafters at the sky. It was like peering through the ribs of an upturned boat. The rafters weren't coming out, they were 200 hundred year old chestnut, still with their rough bark on, and were sound and strong. There was also one very big trunk of chestnut, standing upright in the middle of the room, on top of which two chestnut beams rested, one on either side, spanning the two gable walls. On these all the rafters were being supported. Now the simplicity

of the building was exposed Phil looked nervously at this arrangement. Noticing that the two most important pieces of wood, which were holding everything up, were actually just resting on a large stone jutting out of the gable walls, not attached in any way. Surely there had to be more than that, or the roof would simply collapse? Jose couldn't understand what the problem was. We obviously still had a lot to learn about house construction. The next job was to shovel up all the broken bricks and cement, tipping them outside ready to be used as hardcore for the base of a tool shed. There seemed to be an endless amount of this, as well as masses of wood from the ceiling. The latter we stacked outside and covered in plastic, just in case the rain did come.

Living in the tent was surprisingly comfortable. We managed to borrow a tiny sofa bed to sit and sleep on. The zip-up rooms on either side were full of clothes and bedding. Outside we managed to rig up a sort of field kitchen, using old wooden pallets and some pieces of rebar that were lying around. Covering it on three sides with plastic, leaving the front open to stand and cook. The work surface was an old table we'd found, and food and basic cooking utensils were stored underneath in plastic crates with lids, which I hoped would keep the insects and other critters at bay. Over the top of this weird structure I stretched some green plastic shading material, to keep the sun off. We even managed to rig up a sort of washing facility, by re-routing the pipe from the tank to a tap by the kitchen. Our sink a pile of plastic vegetable crates assembled underneath, with a washing-up bowl on top. Though for washing ourselves, that was a slightly different matter. We'd been slowly adapting while living in the van, and now it would become refined further. Adamant on not wasting precious space in the house for a

bathroom, or the added complexity and expense of hot water on tap, we eventually found heating a litre of water on the cooker or wood stove, and using a series of bowls, created a good alternative. Once again our previous experiences had prepared us. Nine years of washing with cold water, often in freezing conditions, had made us hardy enough to survive a bit of hassle with bowls and saucepans of hot water.

It all worked perfectly and took us back to our campervanning days in Portugal. In fact this was much better than living in the van, at night here we could lay outside and stargaze. Isobel and Daniel had left some old reclining armchairs, which while not our first (or last) choice in furnishings, were perfect for this. With no light pollution anywhere, we could see the night sky in all its glory. There were literally millions of other universes out there, plus hundreds of satellites. And when the moon was full, it was bright enough to see without a torch, we could even walk through the forest to town.

My Indian summer prediction seemed to be coming true. The days were incredibly hot, too hot to sit in the tent, its nylon exterior no match for temperatures over thirty-six degrees. Jose coped by arriving at dawn and working solidly through until the hottest part of the day, Spanish lunchtime, three o'clock. After that we could sit inside the house for the rest of the afternoon. It was a strange process watching the building work, totally unlike anything we had experienced before. We were in charge of organising all the materials, and had opened an account with the local builders merchant. We ordered sand and cement, bricks and tiles, nails, screws, insulation material and all sorts of other things. Then came the day when we had to go to El Repilado to buy wood, for the underside of the roof. Which

was yet another new experience, nothing a DIY superstore in Yorkshire had prepared us for. This was a real old-fashioned timber merchant, with a shed the size of a hangar, filled to the roof with wood, in sizes and quantities we had never encountered before. It was mostly big chunky stuff, stacked on sturdy metal shelving, which had to be moved by fork lift truck. Jose had told us what to ask for, chestnut planks. We already knew about chestnut, because it is what everyone used in Galicia, and we'd seen first-hand in Senhor Antonio's house how voracious bugs could be with any cheaper alternative. By the time we left the hovel there was virtually no wood left. Their crunching and munching had been so loud it kept us awake at night. No, not for us the cheaper option thank you. Eventually we found what we wanted, then tried to work out how many square metres would be required. Well, not me, Phil did that, with the help of the owner. Which just left the bill. Eight hundred Euros, including a discount for quantity. In cash please. We even got a receipt, which I thought was generous, then he tore off the top part, with his name and address. Money was handed over, we shook hands, then went home to wait for the lorry to bring it all in a day or so. It seemed like a lot of money, and we still had to buy insulation, as well as the strange corrugated sheeting which the roof tiles would lie on. Thankfully Andalucían tiles are simple things, with no technical grooves to fit them together, no nails, they just rely on gravity and the bottom of each tile overlapping the top of the tile below. We had plenty of those, so we wouldn't need to buy many more. But the price of the wood still seemed high, until we remembered the cost of a new roof back in the 1990s, this was cheap in comparison.

Phil was also keen to use this opportunity to put skylights in the roof. After all, winters were long dark and rainy, we knew that. How perfect it would be to have as much light as possible through those grey days. I went off to the glass man in Cortegana clutching Jose's measurements in my hand. For such a small house the materials we needed seemed endless. The lorry from the builders merchant was coming every day or so, his little crane on the back swinging over the fence with yet more bricks, packets of insulation material, or cement. Tipping yet more sand. Plush meanwhile was not interested in any of this. Each morning she left the tent and disappeared into the forest at the sound of the Jose's old van bumping down the track. Reappearing exactly as he drove off at the end of his day. Coming straight to the field kitchen for her lunch and then into the tent for her siesta on the sofa.

It was actually very nice to be sleeping outside on the hot nights of our own personal Indian summer. It was comfy and warm enough on the sofa bed, although it was only a fly sheet that separated us from the outside. We had been lucky to escape the interest of mosquitoes and other biting insects. But there was another potential beastie. One night we were woken by the sound of snuffling, very close, and for the first time wondered how safe we were behind our thin nylon wall. We couldn't imagine what it was, but it was big that was certain, because we could hear it breathing and rustling just inches away from our heads. Not daring to even whisper we waited and hoped it would just go on its way, whatever it was. Eventually, after a little snort, we heard its feet clomping off into the distance. The next day we asked Jose about it, what did he think it could have been? He reckoned either a deer or a wild boar. We preferred the thought of a deer, which didn't seem so

dangerous, rather than worrying about a huge big hairy boar within inches of the tent.

I washed our clothes in buckets and hung them out to dry in the sun, cooked meals, and tried to get on with making things. This year we were going to have a stall in Almonaster la Real, at their annual 'Islamic' festival, which was their version of celebrating its historic past. Phil, in amongst trying to make a start on the garden, was constructing a display unit for me. Life went on in the tent, thanks to our experience of the van. We still had to do all our cooking before it got dark, and had to be up in the morning before it was light, for Jose. Luckily though, the weather remained perfect almost every single day. There was just one storm, which made us realise just how lucky we were. As the clouds gathered one lunchtime, Phil and Jose climbed onto the roof and covered the bare wood with plastic sheeting. They had just finished weighting it down with rocks as the first big spots of rain began to fall. Fitting another plastic sheet over the front of the field kitchen, I started lunch hermetically sealed inside, as the rain grew heavier. We ate inside the tent that day, with the flap zipped down. It was cosy in there, listening to the rain as it grew louder, from pattering to pounding on the thin nylon fabric. After a bit it slowed down to a steady downpour, so Phil decided to set off for town to collect more materials. I chose to stay put until the rain stopped completely. Then after a while I noticed puddles creeping in under the flap, inching towards our dry island of the sofa/ bed. Pulling on a jacket, I slipped outside to see what was happening. Uphill, at the gate, the track was flooded. All the rain from higher up had used the track as the quickest way down. Then when it reached the gate had nowhere else to go but straight down. Our tent was directly in line. By the time I reached the

house to find a tool that would help me dig some kind of channel to divert it, I was soaked right through. Thankfully the soil, which until then had been baked hard all summer, was now soggy and easy to work, so it was relatively easy to make new canals. I even felt quite proud of my efforts, despite being soaked through. And walking back to the tent stopped to add a bit more soil on top of my first dam. That was when I noticed the plastic sheet over the top of the kitchen sagging perilously, full of water. Thinking I could simply push it up from underneath and let the water spill out the back, it ended up emptying all over me instead. After that, getting changed seemed pointless, so I did the washing-up instead. I stood there and let the rain rinse the plates.

All that water was impressive though, despite the inconvenience. It was the first time we had seen what the hills around us looked like in anything other than sunny weather. In between downpours white clouds floated past below us like little puffs of smoke, or in bigger clumps which made bits of the landscape disappear. The hills had changed from their soft misty shades to deep, dark colours. It looked a different place now, somewhere which had a completely different personality, from the benign smiling warmth of the previous months. Above, the sky blustered with changing clouds and a wind blew noisily in the high pine trees. We were right to think that nature was bigger than we were, certainly the whole place was alive to the changes of the seasons, and we were only just discovering what they looked like.

That night the rain stopped, but the fierce wind continued, buffeting the tent's flimsy fabric and continuously plucking tent pegs out of the ground as if they were mere tooth picks. We huddled under our blankets wondering what would be left of

our shelter by the morning. And on first inspection it didn't look good. Most of the tent had collapsed, there were a couple of snapped poles, and the fly sheet was torn in several places where the wind had snatched it away from its mooring. The morning also had a touch of shyness about it, as if embarrassed at having left us to deal with such wild weather. Then the sun came up, and eventually all memory of the rain disappeared under its heat. Sewing up the edges of the tent and mending the poles wasn't difficult, but we were really glad that was the only rain we saw in the three months we lived outside.

After fifteen days had passed without news, I rang Mr Borehole. Next week, he said. And the following week it was the same, which then turned into a regular mantra. Mostly he was convincing, but by now it was October and the bringing of water was becoming more of a chilly experience. We'd taken him our deeds back in July. From then until October was a long way over fifteen days. Then one week I rang and he said Miguel was coming this weekend. He gave me his number and told me to get in touch. At last something had started to move. I rang and rang without any luck for a few days, then finally got him. Yes, he would be coming to Almonaster la Real on Sunday, could we meet in a bar? We waited at Casa Garcia for about an hour then rang to find out where he was. He was still at Mr Borehole's house in Galaroza, which was about twenty minutes away by car, could we go there instead? This seemed an odd suggestion, surely he would still need to come back here afterwards, so we could go to El Pocito? We would find out more when we met, we supposed. Miguel was standing by his car, outside Mr Borehole's house. He said he needed our identity numbers and the address of the property before he could begin the application document. This was odd because he

already had that information on the deeds. Anyway, we gave him what he needed and he assured us he'd be back next weekend with everything and we'd be ready to go. Then he got into his car and drove off. We'd only been there a matter of minutes. No mention of coming out to see the place, or any questions about anything else, surely this was odd? Mr Borehole was leaning on his garage door, chatting with neighbours, so we went over and asked about Miguel coming out to see the place. No, that wouldn't be necessary, he would be able to make the document without going there, and it wouldn't be long now before he would be across with his machinery. We left, wondering, not for the first time, why everything seemed to be so foreign. We thought we were supposed to be collecting the document, not discovering that Miguel hadn't even started it yet. Neither Miguel nor Mr Borehole seemed to have any realistic idea of time, so it was hopeless asking how long any part of the process might take. All we knew was that we had to wait, and then we would meet up and hand over large sums of money. In cash of course. Always. We had wondered why our new Spanish bank had never offered us a cheque book. What was the point? No one ever wanted to be paid legitimately. I was in and out of our little branch in town every week, drawing out untraceable notes to pay Jose, the timber merchant, the builders merchant, for the glass and all the other things. I imagined that when Mr Borehole arrived with his machinery he would be expecting his more than a thousand Euros in cash too, if you please. Ah, so this is what they mean by the 'black economy'. Of all the experiences we had collected on our journey, the ones we were gathering now were like no others.

The building work was really coming along. The roof, complete now with all those planks of wood we'd bought at the

timber yard, was now in place. So were the skylights, letting in large pools of light. It was so different from the dark, cave-like space it had been. The rafters had been cleaned of all their bark, oiled with linseed, and were now smooth with a rich honey brown sheen. The next job was the windows. We hadn't been able to decide what to do with them, we'd also had Jose knock two new holes through the walls to have even more light. After lots of deliberation and financial calculations we decided to go for all new, despite the expense. It seemed a shame to skimp on these when they needed to be as weatherproof as everything else, and with double-glazing and shutters they would be more efficient at keeping the heat in. We also decided to remove the old front door and re-use it as the door to the new tool shed, so we would need a new one of those too. Our local research, which entailed looking at what everyone else had, revealed that windows and doors in Andalucía, like fitted kitchens, were made by local carpenters. So all we needed to do was find one that we liked. That wasn't hard, we had always admired the outside of bar/ restaurante Isabel II, so we asked them who had done the work. This turned out to be a father and son business in the same pueblo as Mr Borehole, Galaroza, where it seemed every other carpenter in the Sierra had their workshop too. They came to measure up, all the way in an ancient Fiat 500, then asked us all sorts of questions. Like, what kind of wood did we want? What sort of shutters, catches, hinges, glazing? A million decisions for just six windows and a door. Then left saying they would have the quote ready by the end of the week. Not that we believed them, but surprisingly they did and it was very reasonable. So now that was in hand, next up was deciding what do to do about the floor. Daniel, who had actually built the house, had laid old reclaimed tiles. Whatever he could find,

a bit at a time, and apparently without any pattern in mind. It was a floor, but looked terrible, especially after the partition was removed. Many of the tiles had also been chipped or cracked during the demolition. New tiles, suggested Jose, and to save time and money he would lay them directly on top of the old ones. I set off to the builders merchant to search for something cheap, wondering how the door would open when the floor was much higher. On my return I discovered the problem had already been solved, Jose had simply removed the old tiles from around the door, lowering that part of the floor like a step. And it looked nice, really nice.

Two more weeks passed and still no news from Miguel. I must have left him half a dozen messages, none of which he had replied to. It was really frustrating, especially as I had to walk 3km into town to use the payphone. I then rang Mr Borehole, who said he hadn't heard from him either, and had no idea where he might be. Nor did he say anything reassuring, probably because Miguel was always like this, and probably because he couldn't understand my concern, he had mains water in his house. During the next week, just as I was really coming to the end of my patience, Miguel finally answered his phone. All charm and happiness. Yes he was going to be in Sierra this weekend, he would come to Almonaster la Real and we could meet in the bar. He would also need his money, in cash. Finally it sounded as if Miguel had made the document and we would be on our way to running water.

Neither of us knew what this kind of document would look like, although it had to be something special for all that money. After the customary wait, an hour this time, we were somewhat stunned when Miguel turned up and produced a huge bound volume, thicker than many telephone directories, all about El

Pocito and what its new borehole would be like. There were pages and pages of stuff, mostly unintelligible technical data about the rock formation and electrical installations, none of which we had a clue about. We wondered how he had been able to write so much about a place he'd never visited, but for some reason neither of us mentioned that. What mattered most was that Miguel had submitted the original of this weighty tome to the water people in Sevilla, and we had our copy. All we needed now was just one more bit of paper, the permit, and we would have a legal borehole. This ultimate bit of paper would arrive in a week or so, Miguel said, definitely. However, this was all a formality, because Mr Borehole would be able to come now and make our borehole, possibly even next week. Well, that really would be something. The original fifteen day prediction had long gone, and we had been bringing water to the house in containers for almost four months, so we were really relieved to hear that would soon be a thing of the past. It was also a relief because ever since we had started this whole process, buying a place without a borehole and then having to wait for all the paperwork, we had met a lot of people who had nightmarish stories to share with us. Either of their own experiences or of people they knew. Terrible, urban myth worthy tales of how the authorities had come and poured cement down one borehole because the owners didn't have the correct paperwork. Or of others having the drilling machine make several holes and finding no water, but they still had to pay, per metre, for all the holes dug. Of neighbours warring over stolen water supplies and refused permits. We were becoming more than a little sensitive about the whole borehole question. Even the local council had something to say on the issue, although it wasn't their jurisdiction to grant permits. The planning officer at our

local council got in touch when he heard what we were up to and said we needed planning permission from him to actually make the hole in the ground. And, of course, we weren't going to get that until we got our permit. It was all becoming rather confusing, particularly as we'd also heard of an equal number of people who had boreholes but not bothered with the paperwork, or had old bits of paperwork without the things which were currently being demanded. We didn't know what to think, but hoped that Miguel was right. Surely if we had our document and we needed one more bit of paper, which he had assured us was on its way, we would be legally allowed our borehole? At this stage I didn't feel like waiting for the permit to come through, supposing it was months? Anyway, surely Mr Borehole knew the rules? He would be in trouble if he made an illegal borehole, wouldn't he?

The borehole had now become the focus for all our anxiety. I had long suspected that when we did find our place, our habitual worries about whether we would ever find somewhere or where we should start our search next, would be replaced by worrying about something else. Like whether we had done the right thing, and what we would do for money when we had spent all ours buying the place. We had become terminal worriers, and right now it was about the borehole. I lay awake at night sometimes wondering if we had been really stupid in deciding to buy somewhere without one. All this rigmarole of getting permission, surely that meant there was a possibility that they could say no? Or, supposing we got as far as having the borehole dug and only a trickle of water came out? I could imagine Mr Borehole standing there looking at it and saying he only said there was water, we hadn't asked how much. These things went round and round in my head until I fell asleep. Phil

said he wasn't really worried about it, he thought it would be fine. Or more likely he felt that since I was doing such a good job of it, he didn't feel the need join in.

The next week I called Mr Borehole. Yes, he had spoken to Miguel, and yes he would be coming to do our job in a few days. I should ring back towards the end of the week and he'd tell me exactly when. I felt I should have asked if he would still come if we hadn't got our final bit of paper, but decided that between them, Miguel and Mr Borehole had to know more about what was permitted than I did. And anyway, I was almost past caring about bits of paper, it was November and I wanted water. I rang again on Thursday and Mr Borehole yelled back at me 'tomorrow!', against a background of loud drilling noises. But of course he didn't come. I rang again on Monday and got no reply, the same on Tuesday. On Wednesday we were up early, ready for Jose to come and start work on constructing some permanent shade at the front of the house, when we heard a loud rumbling sound from somewhere high up on the ridge. Probably something to do with the council. Then when the noise got louder and closer, we realised it was actually on our track and coming down to the house. Eventually, several extremely large vehicles appeared through the trees, moving very slowly. We ran up to see what was happening, to find the forest choked with traffic. Mr Borehole leading. I opened the gate and he immediately swerved in and jumped out of his car to supervise the rest. Next was a big yellow JCB, without its shovel, a massive fork lift device fitted on the front end instead. Followed by a similarly large vehicle carrying a massive load of pipes, all the same length, about three metres long, stacked high on top of each other. Towing another huge vehicle, rather like the military would use for communications, also on the same

large tractor wheels. As Mr Borehole waved them all through they filled the forest with a deep growling and rumbling, accompanied by little puffs of grey smoke, as they each slowly manoeuvred into position on the tiny area just behind the house. Then, as if that wasn't enough, another car drove in, with Mr Borehole's team inside. It was like the circus had arrived. When Jose's van finally chugged down the track there wasn't any room left, so he backed up and went off to find somewhere else to park.

Having assembled everyone, Mr Borehole then went to search for the cross he had scraped on the ground all those months back. I couldn't imagine it was still there, especially after the storm. But eventually they must have found it because they then proceeded to unload stuff and connect cables. The strange military looking vehicle turned out to be a massive diesel generator, and the JCB the drill. Yet another new experience to add to our collection. I hadn't considered how they would make such a deep hole. Lucky for me, or it would have been yet another source of sleepless nights.

Once Mr Borehole was happy that everything was as it should be, he prepared to leave his men to get on with it. He came over to tell us that he expected the drilling to take until the end of the following day, and that he would return the day after that for his money. In cash of course. Then waving cheerily he left. The borehole men set about attaching the drill bit, which was like a gigantic spinning top made from metal. They explained that as the drill went deeper, they would attach one of the large pipes, repeating the process until water was struck. They weren't sure how long this would take, it depended on the type of rock and how deep they had to go, but normally it was somewhere between six and eight hours. We left them to it, and

spent the rest of the morning bellowing at each other over the incredible din. Meanwhile what was going to be our new sitting out area was taking shape. We had paced it out with Jose a day or so before, and he was going to extended the line of the roof at the front by two metres, along the entire width of the house. To do this he had brought with him four chestnut beams, salvaged from an old house in the pueblo, to act as the uprights. Then on top of these two further beams would rest horizontally, spanning the width of the house. Other reclaimed beams would connect with the roof. The underneath part was going to be done in the same way as inside the house, with the chestnut planking left over. It was going to be a marvellous extension to our living space, as well as providing a bit of shelter from the hot sun and protection from the rain through the winter.

The borehole machine rumbled and growled on throughout the morning. Phil counting the lengths of pipe which had been added. Around the hole a pile of fragments of rock was growing, and the air was filled with dust, so dense we could hardly see the men, they looked like grey ghosts. The roof was covered too, as was the ground, the trees, the building materials, the cars, the washing on the line, even inside the tent, everything. We hadn't imagined that making a hole could be so messy. As this all went on the men wandered back and forth from the wagons, checking dials and adding more pipes. Then just after lunch there was a piercing squealing sound and everything fell silent. Eerily so, after all that noise. We looked out of the tent to see what was happening, had they reached water already? Phil went across to find out, and stood with the men around the drill, which they had pulled back up. One of them was showing Phil a piece of metal as I approached, what

was it? Apparently the drill bit had shattered when it reached some particularly hard rock. What did this mean? Panic began to run through me, I was ready to reinstate my borehole worries straight away. Was the rock too hard to drill through? Would the men never manage to reach water? Would the machine have to leave and go back to its garage to wait for a new drill bit? Was Mr Borehole going to come back and tell us it was all over? We asked the men what would happen, and they said they would phone Mr Borehole and he'd get a new drill bit. They didn't know how long it would take, maybe not long, maybe they would even be back tomorrow if it turned up. I offered them some of my anxieties, but they just shrugged and got into their car.

So near yet still so far. Half a borehole. But surely if the men had left the machinery that meant they would be back soon? I felt I should find further elements of this calamity to worry about, but somehow I didn't have the energy. This was Mr Borehole's problem, he could sort it out. It couldn't have been the first time this sort of thing had happened, maybe he even had a spare in his garage. I continued collecting rocks for Jose, who was going to lay them as a floor for the covered area, but still managed a little worry about whether Mr Borehole would arrive tomorrow and say our geology was too hard so he couldn't make the hole. My worrying was reaching performance art levels.

The new outdoor area was looking so lovely it almost took my mind off everything else. The gathering of all the stone wasn't too bad a job, even if they were heavy and Jose had started to get very picky about what size and shape he wanted. It also was nice to be clearing bits of ground, making it look less wild and more cared for. In the spring, when we had seen the

house for the first time, it was covered by a carpet of flowers. However, once the heat of summer had arrived they had died back, scorched to dried brown stalks, apart from the very hardy drought lovers, revealing a soil parched and bare. There were huge boulders everywhere, as if they had been thrown there after an earthquake, and I wondered if we would be able to make a garden in such inhospitable terrain. A bit late to be asking such questions, but I shared my worries with Phil who thought it would all be fine. He had already begun working on the land just below the house, making some sort of terracing out of the steep slope, ready for the following autumn when we hoped to plant our first trees. He said despite how it looked at this time of year, the soil was good. Mostly light and sandy, with only a few patches of clay, and under the oak trees there was plenty of rich leaf mold. I could see that it was going to be a huge job to make a garden here, not just because we were starting from scratch, but also because of the scale. It was a piece of hillside where wild pigs churned up the soil hunting acorns, and deer ate everything else. I couldn't imagine anyone had ever made a vegetable plot here, worked the soil, or improved it with compost or mulch. However, Phil wasn't worried about any of this, he'd got a theory and was determined to put it into practice. He wasn't going to fight nature by making it into something which couldn't exist without irrigation and inputs. He was simply going to add to what was already there. With trees that could be harvested for fruit and nuts. Then between those, ground covering plants to give the soil shelter from the heat and evaporation. I was glad he felt so happy about it all and thought it sounded an excellent strategy. I also knew that it looked at its most challenging at that

moment, in the heat of the summer, but as time passed and the trees and plants grew it was going to look amazing.

Next day the borehole men returned, bringing with them a new drill bit. We gathered round to see what it looked like, and were amazed at the size of the very shiny cutting teeth, they were like diamonds they were so bright. And in no time it was in place and the loud rumbling of the generator resumed. Seeing it working, so soon after a near calamity, I was glad I hadn't wasted too much time on my worries. At about eleven o'clock, after the drill had been rumbling away for three hours or so, dust clouds hanging in the air, one of the men called us over. Assembling us around the drill we wondered what he wanted now, when suddenly there was a gurgling sound from deep below and a jet of water shot up into the air, just like in films. We had struck water! It was so thrilling. All our unspoken worries about whether there would be any water or not, and what sort of disaster we would have faced if there wasn't any, instantly disappeared. We both felt so relieved, followed by deliriously happy. Apparently the drill had reached water at only forty-five metres, which didn't sound very far compared to other people's boreholes, but I felt was a good sign, although unsure why. Maybe because I imagined there was plenty lower down, but we had got the bonus of having extra water near the surface too. The borehole man then said that although they had reached water they would continue to drill. They always drilled deeper and almost always to sixty metres, when they found water sooner. I wondered why and asked Phil, who said it was because Mr Borehole was paid by the metre, so obviously sixty was better than forty-five. Hearing this the borehole men smiled, but said nothing.

I felt as if we should be opening champagne or something,

such was the relief. After all the months of waiting and chasing Mr Borehole, the worry about the paperwork, and then the planning man at the council. I felt so happy that I couldn't even summon up the anxiety to worry about our lack of permit. Actually having water made all those problems seem slightly less significant. The borehole men had been able to tell us how much water there was in the hole, and at what rate it should be pumped out at, although my mind felt a bit hazy about what this all meant, time enough for the technical stuff later I thought. The drill rumbled on and the water continued to come out of the hole, now running down the slope next to the house, dragging the fragment pile with it. As I watched, somehow it seemed wrong to let so much escape away after five months of wringing the last drop out of the containers we had brought from the pueblo. It seemed too frivolous.

Phil had written down all the technical information from the borehole men, and was now hunched in the tent, scribbling in his notebook. He was working on the next stage of the process. Because although we now had a borehole we still needed a pump to draw the water up. The only reason water was spilling out at that moment was because the drill was forcing it up. Once it was turned off the water would stay down in the hole. Having the borehole was only the first step of many before we had real live water in the house. Step two was the pump, and I already had that slightly queasy feeling I got when Phil was absorbed in technical things, the sense of imminent questioning.

Throughout our journey we'd come across many people who had boreholes on their land. In fact anyone who lived outside the pueblo would have needed one because there was rarely mains water in the aldeas and never to isolated houses in

the campo. It had been a good opportunity to learn about them, find out what problems people had, and to discover how they solved them. Phil had pages of notes about all aspects of living with a borehole, and in particular regarding the all-important pump. There were basically two choices. The 'submersible' solar-powered pump, or the 'above ground' mains-powered pump. Both had pros and cons. The latter was fast and cheap, but required a petrol generator to power it, which was noisy, expensive and polluting. While the solar pump was a lot more expensive, very slow and needed continuous sunshine to work. But otherwise was silent, cost nothing to run, and clean. Finally, after our usual amount of indecision we opted for the solar option. It might be slower and less convenient, but we reasoned if we had a big enough tank to pump the water into, it wouldn't matter.

That evening the borehole men drove away, taking their monstrous machines with them. The only evidence they'd been there was a short stump of plastic pipe sticking out of the ground, and the trail of wet gravel running down the hill. We'd got our much wanted borehole and that was as far as the men went. Meanwhile, we still had our containers to fill every other day.

Jose had just one more job left to do with us, and that was install our wood burning stove. This was going to be almost as big a moment as getting the borehole, because every winter since we had left Yorkshire we had lived in icy cold, damp and bleak places. Now, after nine years, we were planning a warm, dry and cosy winter, brought to us by the joys of the stove. We had ordered it from the builders merchant back in August, so keen were we to have it ready. But being Spain, August was the national summer holiday and the factory was closed. However,

the man at the builders merchant had assured us that it would definitely come in September without fail. And it did. However, when Jose went to measure it he discovered the door was broken. Another case of one step forward and two steps back. They were trying to get a replacement, but so far without luck. It was now November and however lucky we had been with our incredible autumn of Indian summer we knew it really couldn't be expected to last into the winter too. Eventually, after the builders merchant had called the manufacturer every morning for weeks, a replacement arrived. With a note of triumph in his voice he told us of the stove's arrival, explaining that the lorry would be bringing it up today. Adding, in passing, how lucky we'd been with the weather, because if it had started to rain the lorry wouldn't have been able to make any further deliveries, what with our track being in the condition it was. Now that would have been worth setting aside a night of anxiety for, and I hadn't even got that down on my list.

It was almost as if the mention of the state of the forestry track was enough to hasten winter along. The wonderful sunny weather left us almost overnight, gone to be somewhere else's summer, leaving us with a brooding early winter gloom. We decided, after a particularly rainy day, that we would move back into the house to sleep, however basic it currently was. It would be better than lying awake in the tent waiting to be blown away. It was getting colder too. Sleeping outside in late November was very different from those hot September nights. We spent a grey and blowy day moving all the stuff from the tent and field kitchen. That night the wind was gusting in the pine trees even harder. Plush was happier too, she came indoors in the early evening and settled herself on the bed, ready for a nice comfy night. We were still waiting for Jose to fit the stove, and there

was no furniture or electricity, the solar equipment still packed away when Jose started on the roof. But it was nice, with candles and our little wind-up radio. We lay in bed looking up at the wooden ceiling. Through the skylights we could see all the stars appearing and disappearing as the clouds scooted past. It was really lovely, enjoying the transformation and finally being in our little home. The new windows looked great too, very functional, yet with a touch of Goldilocks cottage about them. With their honey brown wood finished in oil rather than varnish, and solid wood shutters instead of curtains. The new floor was amazing as well, even better than we could have hoped for, with the basic terracotta tiles I'd found at the builders merchant instead of the jumble of crazy paving. The space definitely looked bigger, although that probably had something to do with all those boxes of stuff still waiting outside.

In the middle of the night we were awoken by the wind rattling the tiles and a strange humming sound in the air. Then the rain started, hitting the roof in waves, with what sounded like gravel. We had never heard anything like it, even in the van when it had been really noisy on the metal roof. Certainly the previous days hadn't prepared us for anything like this kind of weather. Each time the wind died down and we thought the storm might be passing, it returned with a curious whumping noise, bringing heavier rain, until it started to sway the pine trees and they began to hit each other. Then the wind was rushing through the branches on the trees just outside the house, growling and moaning. We huddled lower under the blankets, glad that Plush was safely indoors, it would have been awful to have been lying in bed and wondering where she was. We could hear things being blown about, tools, buckets, plastic sheeting and insulation material, water barrels, along with other

unidentifiable loud thuds and snapping. We tried not to think about what was happening, what and where all this stuff was being blown off to. Then, just as it felt like the house couldn't take any more battering, there was an even more terrible noise. A massive creaking and tearing. Followed by what felt like an earthquake. Something really big had just happened, but we couldn't go outside and see what, the rain was even blowing in under the door now. We just had to lie there, in the darkness, letting our imaginations think the worst. Eventually the wind lessened and the rain sounded more normal and we fell back to sleep. Waking when daylight streamed through the skylights. Still windy up there, clouds rushing past, but less scary now. Stepping out the sky still looked fierce, as if there was definitely more weather up there and probably on its way to us. We could also see all the stuff that had blown around. Paper cement sacks, the old sheets of roof insulation shredded into tiny pieces everywhere, plastic sheeting wrapped around trees, buckets half way down the hill, and water, so much water. Then peeking around the back of the house we saw what had caused the loud crash in the night. A large old cork oak, which had previously stood beside the water tank, had blown over and was now blocking the track. We were so lucky. If it had fallen in any other direction it could have hit the tent, the van, or even the house. Phil went off to get his new toy, a chainsaw.

We were so relieved about having decided to move back into the house, we couldn't help imagining what would have happened to us outside in all that weather. Visions of us lying on the soggy ground, while all our blankets and clothes, along with the tent, were blown down to the bottom of the valley. Or worse, crushed by the tree. They were all too horrible to contemplate. It was also heartening to see that our little house

hadn't suffered at all. The new the roof had withstood the battering, there were no fallen tiles or any other damage as far as we could see. We thought this amazing, having seen what simple design and materials held it all together.

Back inside our cosy refuge we made breakfast and listened to the weather forecast on the radio. It was full of dire warnings about more severe weather to come. Then when Jose arrived he brought further tales of woe, from the pueblo and beyond, of fallen trees and damaged buildings, landslips and blocked roads. Yes, he said, winter in the Sierra could be a wild affair, there was always plenty of heavy rain and strong winds, and sometimes it was cold enough for snow and ice too. Even though we had lived in many different places and experienced plenty of bad winters, this seemed to be the place where nature was at its most extreme, and changing more quickly than we would have thought possible. I wondered how many years we would have to live in the Sierra before we got used to experiencing the type of weather we'd had the night before. Maybe in a few years we'd be old hands and would have a stash of gas bottles for the cooker, and store cupboard full of Plush's favourite treats.

Talk of the bad winter weather had set my anxiety antennae jingling again. Certainly, since we had moved into our little home, I had been on the lookout for things to worry over, and now we'd got the borehole what would I use all my worrying time for? I hadn't settled on anything yet, maybe because we had been so busy with moving out of the tent and back into the house. But the previous night's weather had made me feel uneasy and ill prepared, surely there was something here which would provide a nice rich seam of possible worry? The first thing which crept into my anxiety ridden mind was the state of the track. And that certainly was worry-worthy. Driving on this

during the winter was going to be a new and possibly difficult experience. The main part, from the ridge to the road, about 1.5kms, looked fine. It was potholed obviously, with puddles and a few loose rocks, but definitely passable with care. However, the last 500m, from the top down to the house was quite different. Not only was it almost vertical, but the surface had a steep tilt from one side to the other. It was also more prone to wear. Phil had already spent a substantial amount of time filling in the potholes and keeping it clear of large stones and fallen branches. Until now I had refused to admit that it might not be passable in the winter, that would have been too frightening at this early stage of getting used to living at El Pocito. But now it was a valid subject to pin my worries on. First though, Jose was ready to fit the stove and all hands were required.

The stove and the new sitting outdoors area really made El Pocito feel like our home. All the rocks I'd gathered were now cemented into a very nice floor, protected by the seamlessly extended roof. Jose had laid them perfectly, although he had left us the small job of cleaning the excess cement off. Which had been hard work, as it had set hard incredibly quickly. We scratched away with wire brushes for hours, until the edges of the stones were visible and our brushes bald. Then suddenly it looked as if the porch had been there forever, old and truly rustic. Ever since we had begun our journey in Galicia we had felt that this part of the house was a really vital part of rural life. Maria's in Monte da Horta was a particularly good example. Not a fancy flopping on loungers kind, but one where real stuff took place. Plants in pots, cuttings tucked into trays of compost, plastic crates of produce, and a bright splash from the cut flowers sitting in buckets waiting to be tied into bunches.

We'd also never forget Ramon's, where we had sat outside eating together and sharing our ideas for finding a special place, so many years ago now. All those experiences had lodged in our memories, and now, finally, we could drag them out and enjoy them. It was during this reverie that I realised there was something missing from ours, an important feature without which porch or patio life would be incomplete. The big hand-washing sink of course, one of those we had seen so often in Portugal and in Spain, deep affairs made from some sort of concrete with a built in scrubbing board at one end. We would still be washing our clothes by hand, since there wouldn't be enough power coming in from the solar panels to run a washing machine. Slopping lots of water about indoors would make that a very wet affair, far better to have a nice big sink outdoors, then it wouldn't matter how much slopping there was, always supposing we had enough water to do that. I spoke to Jose about my idea and we paced about working out where to put it, finally settling on a spot near the door. He said he would collect one from the builders merchant the following morning. Surely they weren't still being made? I imagined having to find a second-hand one from I didn't know where. Yes, said Jose, they were still in supply. Obviously it wasn't just us who would be washing clothes outdoors then. This duly arrived and was plumbed in. Except we still had to wait for the water to flow from its taps. For that to happen we'd need the pump, as well as pipes to take the water up to a tank, which would be installed higher up the hill. From there more pipes would bring it down again to the house. However, this one small step towards having actual running water was enough to keep me going for now. After all, the sink had a plug and the waste pipe was in place, so I could fill it from one of the big containers and

pretend. At least it felt as if all our efforts were coming together.

The stove though, was the real thing. It looked lovely with its long shiny stainless steel flue rising up through the room and out via the roof, and glass door where we would be able to see the flames dancing, just as we had in the old days of our life in Yorkshire. We were so close now to having a cosy and comfortable home again, which was just as well because the winter had really arrived with a vengeance now. Jose had been lighting himself a little fire outside while he was doing the sink. We had also started gathering wood from fallen branches in the forest to have a good stash to see us through. The rain fell steadily, so we positioned big buckets under the guttering to collect the water as it fell off the roof. This was a real boon, especially for washing clothes, as it saved us from having to bring water from the pueblo. In summer, collecting water had been part of the fun of our great adventure, but now the water was freezing cold, and the chilly wind was making our hands painfully red and numb. Dragging water containers around was the last thing we wanted to do. We really had to find a pump and someone to install it for us soon. Even if it meant another encounter with alternative energy, which had been such a huge and costly mistake the first time round. At this stage anything that actually worked was going to be a marvellous step in the right direction. Phil had been working hard on that, absorbing all the previous lessons and labouring over a new plan, which now included buying two extra solar panels purely to run the pump, so it was totally independent from the house electrical system. He had also designed a special metal frame to put these panels on, which had a method of turning them so they always faced the sun at any time of day. All very scientific. Anyone we

now met who had solar panels, a pump, or a borehole, was quizzed endlessly over how it all worked.

At about this time the rain really began to fall, not in quite the spectacular way it had done at the beginning of the winter, but just everyday kind of rain. If anyone had ever told me just how much rain fell in Andalucía I don't think I would have believed them, after all isn't it supposed to be Britain that is renowned for being wet? Contemplating the grey skies and the endless downpour, we were at least comfortable in our new home. However, I was starting to realise that setting aside some time to worry about the track was now becoming rather pressing. The first part, from the house, was becoming very wet indeed, and in some places the van was having difficulty gripping as it scrambled upwards. Then one morning disaster struck. I had set off to the pueblo to meet my friend Maria Jose. She and I were trading English and Spanish classes with each other a couple of times a week, which was actually a gossip and chat session, but in our respective languages obviously. As usual I had paid careful attention as I ascended, having become experienced at picking the driest route, which was usually along the right-hand edge where the slope from side to side was the highest. But on this particular morning, after a full twenty-four hours of steady rain, the whole width was sticky, like blancmange. The wheels began to slip immediately, until soon it couldn't go upwards any more. I decided the only thing to do was roll back and have another go, this time with a bit more speed. A good plan in theory, but fatally flawed. Instead of hurtling upwards the camber caused the van to slide sideways. Ending up stuck in the ditch at the side. So frustrating and annoying. I got out and looked at the strange angle the van was now poised at. There was nothing I could do but walk back to

the house and rehearse how I would explain my adventure to Phil.

We tried to dig out the rear wheels and put some flat stones under them, but without success, it only made the van sink even deeper into the mud. So, reluctantly, we had to fall back on our usual tried-and-tested method of resolving van problems, that of finding someone else to help us. Phil returned to the house with his spade, while I set off on foot to meet Maria Jose as planned. On the thirty-minute walk to town I entertained myself with all the memories of the other times we had got our van stuck and had to be rescued. By people like Manuel and Agosto Gaspare in Monte da Horta, and once when it actually rolled right over onto its roof, by a breakdown service. At some point in the day there would be a solution, but first things first, a nice cup of strong black coffee in the bar.

I had been right, things were clearer after caffeine, and much clearer still when Maria Jose had rung her dad and he had agreed to come over from Cortegana. What a hero. He arrived like the cavalry, in his big 4x4 jeep, and calmly took charge of the situation. Parking at the top of the track he unravelled a long length of strong rope and tied it to our van. Then slowly began to drive backwards, taking up the slack, until the rope tightened and our little van began to rise majestically from its grave. First back on all four wheels, then under the jeep's assisted power, up to the top. A little muddy around the gills, but perfectly fine. Simple. However, we didn't want to need rescuing again, so from then on whenever it rained, we always parked the van at the top on level ground. It wasn't a big problem, just a little extra walk to and from the house. Except we still had to transport the water, now by wheelbarrow. And with 160ltr/kg of that to bring down every other day it meant a

lot more walking. If only we had found someone to install our pump, then the fetching part would stop and ordinary life would feel possible again.

As always, once we started to understand anything new, we expected some calamity to befall us at the same time, before actually getting down to gritting our teeth and making decisions involving spending lots of money. This was how it was with the pump. Phil had been gathering all the information he needed about the whole thing, but now he needed to talk it through with an electrician to make sure. We found just three people in the whole of the Sierra who claimed they understood solar energy (which is a very different kind of science to conventional electricity). The first was the owner of the biggest electrical firm in the Sierra, which gave us a lot of confidence. He was also an immigrant like us, so we immediately felt he understood what we were trying to do. Sadly he also turned out to be a chancer, knew nothing whatsoever about alternative energy, and we were so lucky to have realised this in time. The second was from Galaroza, which should have been enough of a sign. We arranged to meet him twice there and both times he never showed up. The third was an electrician in nearby Cortegana, and claimed to know everything. The only problem was he wasn't interested in sharing his knowledge. It was either we give him the job of installing it all, or nothing. To make matters worse he was also incredibly pompous and grumpy, not a nice person basically, so right from the off we really didn't want to have anything to do with him. Which left us back where we started. After that we didn't know what to do. We looked for someone else, but in vain. So in the end, regrettably, it was back to Mr Grumpy and try to haggle with him. Because Phil really wanted to do as much of this as he could himself. We tried this

approach, on several occasions, but each time it just made him more unpleasant. Meanwhile the rain carried on and we struggled with our wheelbarrow, as days looked as if they would turn into weeks. Up and down, up and down. It was so frustrating, because we knew that our own water was just there, inside the borehole. Finally, after a particularly wet week of hauling, we snapped. Unable to bear it any longer we summoned Mr Grumpy from Cortegana, even though we both felt very unhappy about it, and tried to just think about it being finished. It wasn't a big job, in all likelihood he'd have the whole thing done in a day, but that just made the size of his bill even harder to accept. A few days before he was due to start he turned up unannounced, with a length of galvanised metal tube, a bit like a scaffolding pole but a lot thinner, and bossily set about instructing Phil how he wanted this to be concreted into the ground ready for him to start work. Then he left. Leaving us to fume about not only paying him a vast fortune, but now we running around buying his cement and digging his holes.

Mr Grumpy signalled his arrival by making sure we heard his massive 4x4 skidding to a halt just outside our gate. He was obviously one of those inadequate types who feel the need to prove themselves with a performance. Then set about at double quick speed, accompanied by lots of flourishes, marching about purposefully, and doing everything as if he was being timed. I had the feeling he was hoping to demonstrate by this how professional he was. But if he was, it just made him look even more stupid. And certainly didn't inspire confidence that he was giving everything his full attention. Especially the way he handled all the expensive bits. The bits he'd left us to source and buy. Phil was particularly worried about the mount for the solar panels, it didn't look anywhere near as strong or directional

as his design. In reply Mr Grumpy grabbed hold of the flimsy fabrication he'd obviously cobbled together and the last minute and gave it a good waggling. While saying 'look, it's fine', but clearly demonstrating the opposite.

We left him to it and went indoors. Plush meanwhile had decided that Mr Grumpy came in the same category as builders and borehole diggers, and had taken herself off to the forest to bide her time until he disappeared. We were trying to focus on the positive, having real live running water. Well, not running water into the sink yet, but real water which we'd be able to pump up into buckets and use, instead of bringing it from the pueblo. We were also looking forward to tasting our own water, drawn up through the ancient rocks in the manner of historic artesian wells, and rich in all sorts of healthy minerals etc. Mr Grumpy flourished his way through the morning then disappeared at lunch-time. After announcing that he would return the following day to finish off, and would we have his money ready, in cash. By the end of the following day the new solar panels were fitted and connected up, and the switch for turning the pump on and off was ready. Now all that was needed was to fit the pump to a thirty metre length of plastic pipe which would then be lowered down into the hole. I didn't know there were different qualities of plastic pipe. Who does, apart from people who install pumps? Apparently the difference has to do with what you want to use the water for. If it's for watering plants for instance, or providing water for animals, then black agricultural pipe with a green stripe is fine. If you want to drink the water, you need a higher quality plastic, which is marked blue on black. This was all known by Mr Grumpy, who had already given us his invoice, in which he'd itemised everything including the need for high quality water

pipe, which incidentally cost almost double that of agricultural pipe. We watched him unwind the huge coil and progressively drag it down the hillside. On and on, until eventually he and it disappeared. Then fully unwound, and with all the kinks removed, he returned and attached the pump. Placing this inside the borehole he then lowered it down. At this point Phil came indoors, muttering things about having to keep an eye on everything, green stripes, blue stripes, and sharp practice. Then disappeared outside again to corner the lively and purposeful Mr Grumpy. The next thing I know they are both gathered around the borehole, Phil pointing and Mr Grumpy standing with his feet apart, hands on hips. What was happening? Phil briefly returned to the house, snatching Mr Grumpy's invoice off the table, marching out again to continue his conversation, pointing at the invoice. Mr Grumpy appeared to crumple slightly at this, and pretended to look down the borehole, as if seeing the pipe for the first time. Apparently he had done the installation with the wrong type of pipe. The cheap version. Plainly he had not been impressed at being found out either, and was now looking very grumpy indeed. Not at all the happy bunny.

Technically though, the job was virtually done. The pipe, once the right stuff was installed, would bring the water up, and there was a little switch on the solar panel mount for us to turn the pump on and off. I couldn't wait. No more bumping up and down the track with the wheelbarrow. The next stage would be the installation of the plumbing to the storage tank and back. I had learned by now that the tank, which was necessary because we would not be able to pump on demand, especially at night, needed to be located as high as possible above the house, so that there would be enough pressure when it arrived back to push the water out of the taps. I was

becoming far more knowledgeable about all this than I really wanted to be.

A few days later Mr Grumpy reappeared. This time not feeling the need for a performance, and set about unravelling a new roll of pipe with the all-important blue stripe. He worked quietly, feeding the pipe into the borehole and connecting everything together. Then finally we were ready for the celebratory switching on, and luckily there was just enough sun for the solar panels to work. I had some glasses ready for our first sample, and Mr Grumpy flicked the switch. There was a barely audible humming from below our feet, and a couple of seconds later water spurted out into our waiting glasses. It was strange that it looked so clean and bright, no mud or earth at all. Unbelievable that such pristine stuff had come up through the rock from so far below. It also felt really cold as we drank it, and we were amazed that water could have a flavour all of its own, not just chemicals.

Once Mr Grumpy had left, his pockets swollen with our money, we stood around the unassuming little stub of plastic pipe and felt something like relief. We had water. All the hassle with the paperwork, with Miguel and Mr Borehole, the waiting, the broken drill bit, and the still missing permit, became unimportant. We flicked the switch and had another toast.

And then everyone had gone. We went inside and closed the door, and for the first time it felt like our home. No longer would we have to live in a van, someone else's shed, rented house/ flat, or even a tent outside our own front door. We had come a long way to adapt to so different a life. Nine long years it had taken. And throughout, the house which we had yearned for so much, had simply been waiting for us to make it ours. During that journey we'd had so many ideas, the memories were

so clear, it was as if we'd only seen Olelas and Monchique just days before. Somehow all the new and exciting things we were now experiencing, having found our place, were inextricably linked to the things we had seen or thought of on our journey.

Yes, we had blithely told our friends over the years that those years spent searching hadn't been wasted ones, and that we would prevail. That we were learning so much. All the while hoping that they would see us as the intrepid travellers we really wished we were, gathering amazing experiences in different lands. But the truth was, that on numerous occasions, we hadn't actually believed it. Usually late at night, we had lain awake in the dark wondering what we could possibly do next, and how on earth had we managed to get things so wrong. We did think about all the years we'd wasted. Wasted because we hadn't found our lovely place, the mythical place where we would be able to make all our dreams become real. We felt sad about those missing years when all we could see were more of the same ahead. And once we were on this sad slope to misery we tortured ourselves with the knowledge that maybe, if or when we did find the place, we might actually have become too old. That we wouldn't have the strength to be able to do all the things we'd longed to do. The digging of ponds, planting trees, chopping wood, building drystone walls, repairing forestry tracks. Especially when we started to hear from friends that they were thinking of taking early retirement, to take life easy, relax and enjoy themselves. These people never talked about starting a new life, or even considering taking on a huge project like transforming a vast piece of wild hillside into something else. Obviously we had got it all wrong somewhere.

In reality though, the nine years had flown by, even though we dug our heels in and tried to make things slow down as we

searched for the place. But the worry about time running out had been planted, and in response to this, without really being aware of it, we had begun collecting examples of people our age and older who had started a new life for themselves. Who hadn't retired only to spend their days visiting National Trust properties and go on cruises until they ended up in a care home. But who had grabbed their lives in both hands and jumped, to discover they were capable of flying, and were out there making wonderful and exciting new lives for themselves. These were our heroes. There were masses of people out there who were doing this and we were going to join them. We didn't care how old we were physically, we were still the same people after all, and still ready to use all of our creative will to make an amazing place.

In the end we never did succumb to feeling old. Instead we felt constantly energised and full of enthusiasm. Knowing we would be able to do all the things we wanted to. Mostly we felt thrilled, stunned and happy that what we had looked for, after so many years, had been waiting for us.

Left alone at last in our new home, chaos reigned. All the stuff which had been stored outside on pallets was now lugged in and instantly cluttered our lovely clean little house. There were boxes of clothes and books stacked up in perilous piles, half opened boxes of crockery, buckets, bowls, plastic crates of foodstuff, suitcases, the giant rucksack from Canada, and endless other bags of things. It was like moving house all over again, and I really hoped this would be the last time. Ever.

Apart from our little cooker, which had served us so well over the years, we had no furniture other than what Daniel had left us, which was probably just as well since there was no room to sort things out let alone have furniture. Plush however was

delighted that we were moving completely back indoors, she had taken to the place immediately, and although she had been happy as a tent dweller she was relieved to be sleeping in the house again. She was thoroughly enjoying herself disappearing into boxes, rummaging amongst things, and generally reappearing somewhere else.

The days were shorter now, and wetter, as we headed towards Christmas. We still didn't have any electricity, because more bits of technology were needed, so we tried to be as organised as we had been while we were camping. Getting supper ready before it got dark and winding our torches. We could use candles too now, boosting the light, so could at least read, knit, or rummage through boxes in the evenings. It was also wonderful to be receiving our first Christmas cards and presents at El Pocito. Well not at the house as such, we were too far away from the postie's route for that, but it was just as lovely to visit the post office in town and collect a bundle of cards and packets. Our friends had truly kept us going over the years, and now they were as amazed as we were that we had actually done it and arrived. We hung our cards on a string, put up a branch of pine tree and decorated it with some of our old tree ornaments, and finally felt we could relax in the warmth of the stove. Now we had reached the end of our travels, it was time to put all of our experiences away where they belonged, like treasures to be looked at on cold nights. Because now we were beginning the business of living our new life, and doubtless there would be plenty more adventures yet.

THE END

Postscript by Phil

For the sake of brevity obviously some things had to be omitted from the book. However, I am guessing you are probably as keen as I was to find out what happened next. So we have created a website for that, which you can visit at:

https://a-simpler-life.co.uk

(please share this with your friends)

Where you will find a lot more background, photographs, videos, as well as up-to-date news.

Maureen also has her own website, for all the things she made, as well as her blogs. You can visit this at:

https://monkeyandsofia.wordpress.com

For those who don't have internet, here is a brief summary:

TREAD SOFTLY BECAUSE YOU TREAD ON MY DREAMS ends in **December 2009**. A week later the solar panel mount for the pump fell to pieces, just as Phil predicted it would, and he had one made up to his own design. It is still in daily use. A couple of months later a water storage tower was completed up on the hill, so we always had running water in the house, as well as always enough water, even during the hottest of summers.

Another kitten came to join us in **March 2010**, **Woolly**.

We worked hard on the six-acre hillside garden, growing hundreds of trees and shrubs from seed then planting them out on the terraces.

2011 brought with it another new experience to add to our growing collection. Maureen was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Her mother had died from this, and Maureen had no intention of repeating the pain and fear she suffered in the hands of the NHS. Deciding instead to be treated by homeopathy. That was another amazing time, but one which eventually wore her down. In **October 2013**, having managed to live normally for two years, she decided to stop the treatment and let nature take its course. Ten days later she had gone.

Afterwards I stayed at El Pocito, continuing with what we had set out to do. Gradually becoming more part of the pueblo, even as far as becoming the first man in their flamenco/fandango choir, and appearing on a Spanish tv documentary about the town. Eventually meeting a new partner, Pauline, who with our Spanish friend Rocio, helped change the course of history in Almonaster la Real. By setting up a cat charity (**Animales Protegidos en Almonaster la Real**), to help the 300+ feral cats living on the streets there. We also adopted two cats who just turned up at the house: **Oso** and **Noah**.

During that period we had also started to think about moving, as the summers in Almonaster la Real were getting hotter and more unbearable. Our plan was to sell up and move to the Ariege region of southern France, high up in the Pyrenees. But before that could happen BREXIT intervened, and suddenly getting residency in France was beyond our means. So in **October 2019** we headed for Shetland instead, along with our four Spanish cats. Which is where we are now, looking for a suitable property to continue the simple, off grid life.
Two more feral (Shetland) kittens have joined us in the interim, **Lola** and **Milly**, which makes us six permanent cats in all. Pauline has also helped to set-up another cat charity here (**https://shetlandcatrescue.co.uk**), and we hope to have enough space in our new place to foster feral kittens, as well as

give permanent homes to elderly cats whose owners can no longer look after them.

I have, of course, been making yet another garden, until we get a permanent one. It all helps to keep young, healthy and sane.

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If you have any questions, or simply want to get in touch, we would love to hear from you:

by message via WhatsApp: (+44) **07979 965 876**

or email: **monkeyandsofia@yahoo.co.uk**

