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Red Earth, Golden Sky

by Stephen Graf

Narrow slivers of light bounced off the wing of the plane and seeped through the cracks of the shade, gently awakening me. Rubbing my eyes, I turned to look outside. Morning's first golden rays had transformed the indistinct, gray mass beneath me into a rich, burnt red. It looked like a clay pot just after it's been removed from the kiln. I had never seen earth quite like it--it was parched and scorched, but it had life in it yet. I sensed there were many stories it could tell me, if only I could learn to listen.

But listening never was my strong suit; Sandra always told me that. Sandra was my ex-girlfriend. It was my break-up with her that brought about this trip. I slid the blind up and dazzling sunshine streamed in. The last solid ground I remembered seeing was the perfectly manicured and watered grass of a baseball diamond. That was an entire ocean away now. I squinted to make out the ground below, there were no baseball fields down there; that was for sure. The guy beside me was just coming to also. He stretched, peered out the window and said something to me in Swedish. I nodded and gazed back out the window.

There's nothing daring or romantic about entering a country by plane unless your name is Lindbergh. Or the Beatles. With a brand new millennium having begun, 21st century humankind lives in the ever-growing shadow of our past. Except for the very depths of the sea, the entire planet has been picked over and scoured. Most of the sensational arrivals that could be made have been. The comings and goings of modern man are like a shadow passing over a bridge.

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For some reason, I kept thinking of Ferdinand Magellan. Magellan was the Portuguese explorer commissioned by King Charles V to find a new route to the rich trading ports of the Indies. Though he succeeded in circumnavigating the globe, he never made it back to Spain. He was killed in the Philippines leading a band of sixty sailors into battle against two thousand native warriors. Juan Sebastian del Cano, who had earlier spearheaded a failed mutiny attempt in hopes of aborting the expedition before they'd even made it halfway, was the only one of Magellan's captains to survive the journey. He led the half-starved crew of his ship, the Victoria, triumphantly into port at Seville. Only the Victoria, out of the five ships that set to, returned. Of the two hundred and sixty-five seamen who began the voyage, eighteen survived. With Magellan not around to reveal him for the irresolute mutineer he was, Del Cano and his crew received a hero's welcome.

In Madrid, I took a room in a hostel on a narrow alley off of the Puerta Del Sol. Directly across the street was a run-down coin laundry. Next-door was a fruiteria whose produce was mostly over-ripe. On the front wall of the hostel was a bronze plaque that announced to the handful of people who found their way down the alley that this was the abode where the famous author Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra spent the last years of his life. Someone once told me that Cervantes was the Shakespeare of Spain. The two great writers actually passed away within a month of each other. Shakespeare wouldn't have been caught dead in this dump.

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Spain was the most powerful country on Earth for nearly a century. Her armada of battleships was considered invincible. During that period, Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand V funded the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus in his quest for the new world. Columbus succeeded beyond anyone's wildest imaginings. The man after whom cities and countries were named, and for whom statues and monuments without number have been erected, was later jailed on a trumped-up charge that amounted to mismanagement.

In El Parque de Buen Retiro, I met a girl with deep brown eyes and full, sensuous lips that reminded me of Sandra. She invited me to the bullfights, but I declined. It didn't sound like such a fair fight.

After a month in Madrid, I decided to head south. During the bus ride to Granada, one of our tires blew. We pulled to the side of an open stretch of highway. It was blazing hot. I sat on the dusty ground against a chain link fence and let the sun beat down on my face. It felt good.

The driver--a flabby, middle-aged man--was unperturbed by the turn of events. He opened a compartment on the side of the bus and pulled out a spare tire, some tools, and a canvas bag. In front of everyone--young, old, women, and children--he stripped down to his gray, blotchy boxer shorts. He removed a pair of khaki, oil-stained coveralls from the bag and stepped into them. Then he systematically went to work on the tire.

After about five minutes, a heavy-set, elderly woman in a brown smock and black shawl came over and asked me in Spanish to help the driver. I pretended I didn't understand.

Isabella and Ferdinand were interred in Granada. It was a political decision. She was from Castile and he hailed from Aragon. Their marriage merged the two kingdoms and enabled them to drive the Moors from Granada, not to mention the Jews and pretty much everyone else who didn't share their Theological beliefs. When they died, their home states wanted each of them buried in their native soil. They had wed to unite the country; their deaths nearly tore it apart.

In the cathedral at Granada I caught a street urchin trying to pick my pocket. He was tall and skinny with a long, hooked nose. His dark features made me think he was one of the gypsies that lived in the caves across from the Alhambra. Feeling a slight tug at my hip pocket, I slapped his hand away and spun around to face him.

Seeing that the jig was up, he feigned imbecility, shouting: "Soy loco, soy loco!"

I thought about bashing his skull in against Isabella's sarcophagus. Instead, I pulled a one thousand peseta note from my wallet and handed it to him. He accepted it in perplexed silence. Behind him was an el Greco version of *La Piedad*. In it, the Virgin Mary was crying.

At my pension in Granada I met an Australian girl who was backpacking her way across Europe. She wore a deep sorrow just beneath her smile, the way Sandra had toward the end. I'd crossed an ocean to get away from her, but everywhere I looked, she was there. The Australian girl, who couldn't have been more than twenty, had spent the winter cleaning rooms at a ski resort in Switzerland. There she'd fallen deeply in love with a boy from Prague who also worked at the hotel as a bellhop. She told me she had to return to Australia in a few weeks and she was worried she might never see her young man again. I had no response. I told her that I'd heard that the southern half of Spain would be completely desert within fifty years.

When I returned to Madrid, I fell ill. I curled up in a fetal position on my narrow, single bed. My head throbbed and waves of nausea rolled over me. After three days without eating, I gathered my strength and headed downstairs. I asked the senora--a stout, graying woman who was by turns impatient and irritable, and then sweet and motherly--where I could find a doctor. She knew I had a lot of things and that they were all in my room upstairs, so she must have been afraid I might die before settling my bill because she asked me to pay the balance before leaving. Then she directed me to the nearest hospital.

At the hospital, a chubby, effete man who worked the reception desk explained that they couldn't treat me until I had handed over thirty-five thousand pesetas in cash. I didn't have that kind of money. I wondered if I were to drop dead right then and there, would they have left my body in the lobby to rot or would they at least drag me around back and throw me into a dumpster?

I staggered outside and caught a cab back to my hostel.

The fourth day, I was lying naked on top of rumpled, sweat-soaked sheets. Half delirious from fever and lack of food, I was convinced I could see Cervantes' long, lean body seated at the small writing table against the opposite wall. His narrow back, the back that had been whipped as a galley slave in his youth, was hunched forward and his crippled and withered left arm had been placed delicately atop the table. He was writing something. A new wave of nausea gripped me and my head began to throb as I propped myself up on my elbows for a better look. Turning to me, a wan smile spread across his gaunt, deeply lined face. Though the smile was sad, infinitely sad, it lacked all bitterness or contempt. I blinked to make sure I wasn't hallucinating and he was gone.

The fifth day, I still hadn't eaten and the fever continued to rage. The prospect of dying in a tiny room, thousands of miles from home became alarmingly real. By that time, it wasn't even the idea of dying that bothered me. What I found I couldn't understand was why it had to take so long.

The next day, the fever broke.

I decided right then to write it all down--every detail. That way I wouldn't forget anything, like the way I'd already begun to forget Sandra. The smell of her perfume, the taste of her lips, the feel of her skin; it had all slipped away from me, bit by bit, in less than one year. This time I wanted to save it, all of it, the bad and the good. I tried. But when I put the pen to paper, all that would come out was: "Red earth,

Stephen Graf is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he currently resides, teaching English literature at Robert Morris University. He spent a year in Madrid, Spain (the setting for his current story) working for the public relations firm SEIS. He holds Masters Degrees from Duquesne University and Trinity College, Dublin, and a Ph.D. in British Literature from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in England. He has had short fiction published in literary journals and magazines such as *Cicada*, *AIM Magazine*, *The Southern Review*, *Mobius Fiction*, *The Chrysalis Reader*, as well as *The Black Mountain Review* in Ireland. He has been published online in the *New Works Review* and the *Dana Literary Society Online Journal*. He was awarded an honorable mention in the *Byline* Flash Fiction contest and was a finalist in the *Glimmer Train* Fiction Open. Most recently, his short story "Hadamard's Billiards" won the editor's choice award in the Spring, 2010 issue of *The Minnetonka Review* and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

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