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A Bargain Struck in Malaga

by Perle Besserman

There were gaily-colored horse-drawn buggies lined up at the entrance to the Malaga station when Peter and Simone got off the train. The horses reared and snorted, grinning as if mocking the tourists who were climbing over their luggage into the buggies. Yellow and purple and green bunting, much of it already hanging in shreds where the traffic was heaviest, clung to the dull stucco walls of the station. One buggy driver had tucked a yellow cockade between his pony's ears; another, a grizzled old man with a stunning Appaloosa mare, had placed a bunch of paper primroses into his black iron fare box; two of the newly arrived couples were already arguing about who had hired him first. The driver sat impassively with the switch in his lap and the reins loose in his hands, waiting for the tourists to battle it out among themselves. He spat once to the left while they weren't looking.

"Fiesta," Peter said, "I told you it would be great."

"The home of Picasso," Simone, as always, seemed to be involved in the tail end of a conversation with herself.

"Let's take a ride in one of those buggies," Peter suggested impulsively; then remembering how strapped he was for cash, regretted it.

"But we don't have a room yet; I need a shower. There's a taxi stand across the street."

"Yeah, you're right," Peter said, relieved that she'd turned down his offer. For a flake, Simone could be surprisingly practical at times. After all, she *had* walked out of the conservatory with him on a dare and a half-serious promise of finding herself in a new country when she woke up the next morning. There was no telling what she would do.

Adjusting her backpack, Simone walked up to a driver leaning against the hood of an ancient taxi parked under an acacia tree. The driver had a cigarette dangling from his lips. Peter watched him mentally undress Simone as she crossed the street. Remembering the incident in Madrid a week ago, he felt his face flush.

They had stored their backpacks in a locker at the train station. Arguing that his guitar was too valuable to store, Simone had convinced him to take turns carrying it. They were walking down a narrow street lined with basement night clubs; Simone was carrying the guitar, and Peter was asking if the case was too heavy for her when she stopped suddenly and put her finger to her lips.

"Shh."

"What?"

"Listen, guitar . . . flamenco . . . let's go in."

"We'd better not, if we want to make the Number One train for Malaga

tonight.”

Like the taxi driver now, the man in Madrid too had been standing in the shadows. Peter had caught sight only of his excruciatingly pointed shiny black shoes—enough to remind him of being kicked from behind by just such a pair of shoes while walking home along the docks the summer before. The kick had sent him reeling and he'd fallen into a crate of stinking fish and was lying face down on a mound of ice, waiting for another blow when a man coming down the gangplank of a yacht had shouted and sent Peter's assailant running. After helping him up, the man, who was red-headed and stocky, had introduced himself as Guy Bridges, an entrepreneur from the UK. Following a cinematic series of life-changing events culminating in an invitation to play the guitar in his Tangier night club, Guy Bridges was the reason Peter had left Sydney for Spain.

But no stocky, red-haired British Samaritan had intervened that night last week with Simone in Madrid. There'd been only that pair of black pointed shoes belonging, as it turned out, to a bony-faced Arab, or dark-skinned Spaniard, Peter couldn't tell which—who'd stepped out of the shadows and followed them through the streets crooning what sounded like obscenities at Simone, first in a low voice, and gradually building as Peter hurried her forward onto one of the boulevards hoping that their stalker would be swallowed up by the crowds.

“Why don't you belt him one?” Simone had demanded unreasonably.

“Because he probably has a knife and if he kills me where does that leave you?”

She grunted, tossing her long switch of blond hair in what was by now a familiar gesture of contempt.

Though Peter was no coward, what he feared most, carried around inside him like a tumor, was the intuition that he would someday be killed in a fight. Raised on the tough pre-gentrified streets bordering the Sydney docks, he had somehow managed to dodge the violence. Anger, yes, most certainly he was capable of intense, ferocious rage. But he was no fighter, either by instinct or adaptation. A creature of the streets nonetheless, Peter knew a real threat when faced with one, and that night in Madrid he'd been determined to avoid the sure knife in his back, even at the cost of his pride.

“Let's get married tonight,” he'd joked when, breathless from running, they'd finally lost the stalker and flopped down at a table in a coffee bar.

“I'm not Catholic, you'll be excommunicated. Besides, don't feel obliged to protect me. I took a karate class. *Hneh! Hwah!*” swinging her arms and leaping up from her chair to demonstrate a punch, Simone had nearly hit an elderly man reading a newspaper at the next table.

“Hey, cut it out!”

“I was just showing you my karate moves.” She pulled a stray strand of hair from her mouth, then sat down and drank all her coffee in one gulp. Wearing the briefest of mini-dresses and rings on every finger of both hands, Simone had struck an odd chord among the expensively tailored matrons strolling

along the boulevard.

“Nobody looking at you would ever dream you’re a rich and famous man’s daughter.”

“Yeah,” she lowered her eyes, “but you’d make sure to remind them, wouldn’t you, Pete?”

Ignoring her sarcasm, he said, “Do you think your parents will announce our marriage to their set?”

“What? I didn’t hear you.”

“Our marriage, do you think your parents will announce it to their friends?”

“Sure,” she said, looking up at him, her eyes glittering so that he couldn’t tell whether they were laughing or smoldering. “Can’t you see it? Mr. and Mrs. William Prentiss delightedly announce the marriage of their daughter Simone to Mr. Peter Nobody, son of Mr. and Mrs. Nil Nobody. . . . The bride’s father is the famous Australian composer . . .”stopping to acknowledge Peter’s sour grin with one of her own, Simone went on, “Mr. Nobody, whose father, the prominent stevedore and alcoholic, is a classical guitarist and scholarship student at Sydney University. . . Sorry, was a scholarship student . . . before abruptly interrupting his career for reasons unknown—even to the bride.”

“Okay, Simone . . .”

“Their best man was a derelict in torn black chinos and matching black pointed shoes. The bride carried a bouquet of—”

“I said OKAY!”

“Where will we find a priest—or whatever? It’s eleven thirty. Maybe we can get the metro conductor to marry us after he’s closed down the last train for the night.”

“There ought to be churches open all night. This is a seriously Catholic country.”

“Not now that the Socialists are in power.”

“You know everything, don’t you?”

Seeing that she was clearly in one of her manic phases, Peter had decided to humor her by pretending to look for a priest to marry them. Fortunately, Simone had quickly lost her enthusiasm for getting married once they’d found an open church. Thoroughly exhausted, they’d boarded the early morning train for Malaga the next day.

Now that they were here Peter was starting to worry. Hadn’t Guy told him to be sure to come alone to Tangier, if he was really serious about the job he’d offered him? The Englishman had taken care of the necessary employment documents and sent him a single ticket for the trip to Morocco. Peter wondered how he was going to explain Simone away when they got there.

“The taxi driver says there are no rooms in all of Malaga—just like with Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem,” Simone called loudly from across the street, “but he’ll drive us around anyway and help us try to find a place to sleep.”

All the horse-drawn buggies had gone. In the overhead glare of a street lamp, a minstrel was playing a waltz. Picking up his guitar case, Peter made his way toward Simone and the taxi. Once inside, huddled against the hard, stale-smelling leather of the back seat, he stopped worrying about her. Then, as he watched the meter click away, he started worrying again—this time about money—or, rather, about his persistent lack of it. Here he was with his arm around the shoulder of a woman with a few million dollars’ worth of inheritance money coming, worrying about a few pesos on a taxi meter. Well, he had good reason to worry. Though she’d bought her own plane ticket, Simone hadn’t offered to pay for a thing since they’d landed in Spain. For all he knew, she might not even have bothered to bring any money with her. Peter, who’d paid for everything, had already spent too much on her whims—the latest, a grotesquely overpriced dinner she’d ordered on the train.

Buying first-class tickets on the *Numero Uno* express had turned out to be an unwise luxury even without the dinner; he should have insisted on taking the third-class special with its wooden seats and sleepy-eyed peasants. But again Simone had prevailed. Now she was in one of her full-blown manic phases. And Peter was starting to wonder why he’d taken her with him.

“Those two guys were really a scream,” Simone giggled.

A scream. Why did such a brainy woman talk like such a dope sometimes? Why had she made him spend his money on that stupid dinner? And why hadn’t he refused?

“What two guys?”

“You know—the funny ones on the train . . . those two guys who were looking for girls.” Her eyes were glassy, as always when she hadn’t taken her pills.

Peter had no idea what she was talking about and let her babble on.

“No fun. You’re no fun . . . always so serious.”

If he knew she’d be such a burden, why had he asked her to come along? Was it for regular safe sex? Except for being bi-polar, Simone harbored no other diseases he knew of.

“How do you know this Brit bloke isn’t lying? How do you know there’ll be a job there when you arrive?” Seeing he wasn’t responding, Simone had directed her attention to a topic she knew would interest him.

“Because I’ve already worked for him, and I know I can trust him.”

“What did you do?”

“I was a steward on his yacht last summer. I brought food and ship-to-shore messages and drinks up to his room, and he tipped me in ten-dollar bills. Then we started talking. He liked me. I played the guitar for him, and he

offered me a job. It's as simple as that."

"I'll bet he's a dope pusher."

The streets were dark beyond the streaked windows of the taxi, but there were still fiesta noises coming from the center of town.

"Senor . . ." Peter leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder. "You speak English, right?"

"Sí."

"Where are we going?"

"I tell the lady, no rooms close to town, all booked in advance. I take you further . . . cheaper . . . maybe more rooms."

Simone was asleep. Peter looked out the window up at the hard cold stars piercing the night. The thud of surf against an invisible beach grew louder as the taxi sped still further away from the fading lights and dying noises of the fiesta. The sand will be warm tomorrow, he promised himself. We'll go swimming, and I'll play the guitar. Leaning up against Simone, Peter let himself doze.

He was dreaming of the last master class he'd taken when the taxi stopped abruptly and jolted him awake. The driver got out and strode off in the dark before Peter could ask him where they were.

"Shit!"

Simone woke up and yawned.

"Where's he going?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'm ready to stay right here in this taxi and sleep, the whole night, if I have to."

"On what money? Anyway, he'd better have found us a place. I don't have more than a couple of dollars' worth of pesos beside the fifty I saved for bus fare, and we're a hell of a way out of range of an ATM from the look of it."

The driver was now coming toward them signaling for them to get out of the taxi and follow him.

"That's us." Simone scrambled out first.

The cold night air slapped Peter in the face. Standing out on a deserted foreign street so far from town, it seemed a bad idea to have trusted the driver.

"Here, one room left, maybe if you want . . . if they like you . . . maybe . . .

you come.”

Peter glimpsed the squat row of white stucco buildings toward which the driver was leading them. He thought he heard music. He did. Where? Over there, across the street. Entering a courtyard, Peter saw light spilling from the open door of a bodega. Inside, behind a zinc counter sat a heavyset middle-aged woman in black with an upswept mass of silver hair. On her feet (which were visible under the counter) she was wearing a pair of Ked high tops. The driver walked up to the counter and started talking to her in Spanish. Simone walked up and stood alongside him. As Peter joined them he noticed a silent baby no more than a year old propped on a heap of pillows on a Coca Cola crate behind the woman. A coffee pot stood brewing on a hotplate dangerously near the baby.

“*Sí, sí, sí, sí . . .*” the woman’s voluptuous silver pompadour bobbed as she nodded.

Simone lit a cigarette.

The woman frowned.

“Please *senorita*, no the cigar . . .” the driver chided.

“It’s not a cigar,” Simone muttered, tossing her cigarette out the open door.

“She say you go look upstairs,” said the driver. “I wait here.”

The woman led them across the courtyard into a hallway, up a short wooden flight of stairs smelling oddly of fresh tar, into a slope-roofed attic room. Dimly lit by a naked bulb in the ceiling, the room was bare except for a double bed with clean white sheets and a pair of neatly folded white hand towels on the pillows. The woman gestured toward the bed and smiled, suddenly reminding Peter of his mother though they weren’t at all alike, not even their smiles.

“Sparse but clean,” Simone whispered.

“*Quantos?*”

“*Diez pesos.*” The woman had a blue-colored mole like a star on her cheek. “*Por dos . . .*”

A brown curtain Peter hadn’t noticed before was strung across the room at the far side of the bed.

“Might as well,” Simone said. “It’s cheap enough. I’ll pay for the room and the taxi, and you can take care of the bus to Algeciras.”

Peter was on the verge of assenting, was in fact about to throw himself down on the bed with relief at Simone’s offer to pay, when something rustled behind the curtain.

“What’s that?” he pointed at the curtain.

“*Estudiantes,*” the woman nodded reassuringly. “*Estudiantes tambien.*”

“That lets this place out,” Peter turned and walked out into the hallway.

“Why? They can’t see us.”

“So, you’re in favor of getting your throat slit in your sleep? Well I’m not.”

“Paranoid. You heard what she said; they’re just students—like us.”

“Sure, everybody’s a student. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“You are a huge pain in the butt, did you know that?” Drawing her index finger knife-like across her throat, Simone rolled her eyes at the woman before following her downstairs.

Apologizing for having to return the taxi to the garage before heading to his second job as a ticket-taker at a fiesta lottery stand, the driver offered to bring them back to town. Dropping them off at the train station and refusing a tip, he only charged them half the fare. Angry at Peter for not taking the room, Simone reneged on her offer to pay and forced him to part with twenty five dollars’ worth of pesos he could ill afford. It was after midnight when they got out of the taxi, but the fiesta, an all-nighter, was still going strong. Tourists and drunken sailors wandered aimlessly through the streets. The horse and buggies were back, music poured out of loudspeakers on every corner lamp post, and the ocean incessantly thundered on.

“Let’s sleep on the beach,” Simone said as they skirted the fiesta and walked toward the pier.

“No, not the beach. Is that a building on the pier behind those shrubs?”

“Yes, it looks like some sort of building, locked up for the night.”

Simone was tall, but the shadow she cast under the street lamp made her look even taller, and she loomed over him like a threat. What had possessed him to get involved with this manic depressive snob in the first place? Not to speak of inviting her to Tangier. Annoyed with himself—first for bringing her and then for lacking the nerve to get rid of her—Peter stretched out his hand to help Simone over the guardrail around the shrubbery fronting the building.

“No thanks. Just catch my backpack.”

He missed, and her cigarettes went flying.

“Well, there goes the last of them Pity, I had a joint saved in that pack for later.”

“God, you’re crazy. Do you know what they do to foreigners carrying dope?”

“Stop chastising me!”

“I’m not chastising you. I’m just telling you that you’re crazy to be carrying joints around Spain, that’s all.”

Leaning his backpack and guitar case against the building, Peter sat down

between them. "Let's just sleep, now, okay?"

Reluctantly removing her backpack, Simone sat down and nestled against him.

Someone was nudging him in the side.

"Stop it . . ." Peter rolled away. Again, the blunt nudge, rougher this time.

"Pete!"

A flashlight was aimed at his face, blinding him.

"You, get up . . . there no sleeping here . . . UP!"

Two uniformed policemen with guns in their holsters were standing over him. Simone was sitting in the doorway of the building with her chin on her knees and her backpack alongside her. It had grown colder; an arch breeze was blowing up from the water. Peter's socks felt damp and he had a headache.

"Okay. Okay."

One of the policemen informed him in English that he was trespassing on public property.

"You carrying drugs?" asked the second, also in English.

"We're going, we're going." Picking up his guitar case and hoisting his backpack over his shoulders, Peter pulled Simone to her feet and lurched away from the two men.

The shorter man, the one with the ominous smile who'd asked if they were carrying drugs, hesitated to let them go and tried to convince his partner that it would be a good idea to search their bags. Peter offered a silent prayer of thanks to Saint Jude for the loss of Simone's joint.

"You scam," said the first policeman, warning Peter with his eyes to do so quickly before his partner could get the upper hand.

And scam quickly they did, not stopping until they reached a tree-bordered plaza with a fountain about a mile away from the pier.

"What now?" Peter asked after they'd sat down on a bench facing the fountain.

"We sit here all night, I guess. You heard what the taxi driver said; there's no bus to Algeciras until seven in the morning."

"I have a headache. I can't possibly sleep here."

"I can." Simone cupped her hands behind her on the bench and leaned back.

"I can sleep anywhere, anytime, even standing up."

"Well, I can't. It must be another luxury of the rich."

"It's genetic, dummy." Gently pulling him toward her, she began brushing her fingers across his forehead. "I'm passing you my *chi* energy; it'll cure your headache."

"Not there . . . here, between the eyes."

"Ah . . . it's tension."

Peter was on the verge of closing his eyes when an Arab boy of about twelve walked up to them and sat down on the bench beside Simone. This one wasn't wearing cheap pointed shoes, but the finest soft Italian leather moccasins. He seemed to have a problem keeping up his head, though, for it kept lolling uncontrollably to one side. His eyes were half closed, and he was drooling and smelled like he'd shit himself.

Peter jumped up from the bench. "Do you believe this?" he screamed.

"What?"

"It's like that bastard . . . from Madrid! It's as if he's still following us!"

"You're losing your mind. He looks nothing like the other one. He's only a kid."

Peter pulled Simone off the bench, and the boy slithered backwards and hit his head.

"Oh, he hurt himself."

"Fuck him!"

Sweeping up his backpack and guitar case, Peter hurried away, Simone following behind him. They walked single file in silence until they found another plaza with another fountain and another bench.

"We'll take turns watching the bags," Peter said as they sat down. "You sleep first, and I'll watch. Then we'll trade places. We'll sleep in fifteen minute shifts."

Nodding, Simone sat down on the bench and promptly fell asleep.

To keep awake, Peter composed music in his head. He wasn't sitting there very long when a man approached the bench and started talking to him in a low voice.

"No place to sleep, is it?"

Looking up, Peter saw that the well-dressed man addressing him in singsong English was smiling at him with a mouthful of gold teeth.

“Would you care to make a bargain with me and my friend?”

Simone didn't stir.

A second man, smelling of heavily scented shave lotion, came up from behind and joined the first.

“No.”

“You haven't heard the terms yet,” whispered the second man.

“All I want to do is rest, is that okay with you?”

“One thousand American dollars for half an hour with the woman,” the well-dressed man said.

Did these men exist, these voices? Or was he hallucinating?

“What did you say?”

“One thousand American dollars. We will not mistreat her, I promise you.”

Peter closed his eyes and opened them again. His mouth was dry. Had Simone heard? Was she only pretending to sleep?

“Get out of here.”

The two men turned and stepped away from the bench, stopping in front of the fountain to smoke. As they stood watching him, an occasional spark from their cigarettes grazed his cheek.

Simone lifted her head just as the men returned to the bench.

“Now perhaps? Why don't you ask her?” prompted the well-dressed man.

“All right.” Simone said. She'd heard everything.

“No!” Peter cried out. “What are you doing?”

Everything was moving along too smoothly now. Simone was standing suddenly, towering over the heads of the men. Peter could only sit staring at her as she crossed the street with them and vanished behind a clump of palm trees. He did not feel his eyes or his ears. His face seemed to have withered away.

A man with a twig broom had appeared and was sweeping the bench under his feet. Over the sweeper's shoulder, beyond the palms and the waning false light of the fair, where the sky met the water, Peter could see the traveling purple, mauve, and black-fringed rose of oncoming dawn. How beautiful the beach was now, the sand glowing pink in early morning light, the gently waving palm fronds and blue-green water. He waited. He checked his watch. Exactly half an hour went by before he saw her walking toward him.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.” Simone leaned over, opened the front flap of his backpack and tucked something inside.

“What’s that?”

“A thousand dollars.”

“What did you do?”

“Don’t need to talk about it.”

“Did they . . . did they hurt you?”

“Shut up.”

“Tell me.”

Simone didn’t answer. Her long-boned face appeared even longer and bonier. The manic glitter in her eyes was gone. She looked dead.

Peter tried without success to dredge up some guilt over what he’d done—or rather hadn’t. He’d sat there and done nothing to stop her from going off with those men. And in doing nothing he’d bartered her away for a thousand dollars—less than the price of his guitar. He’d taken advantage of her need to prove to him how little she cared about money, and how much he resented her for having been born to it. The terrible thing was that she was right. All he’d ever cared about was her money. Peter hadn’t cared for Simone one bit—and if he really wanted to be honest with himself he’d have to admit that he still didn’t care for her. Even now. Yet here she was. Refusing to go away. Waiting for him to get up from this goddamned bench in Malaga.

Recipient of the Theodore Hoepfner Fiction Award and past writer-in-residence at the Mishkenot Sha’ananim Artists’ Colony in Jerusalem, Pushcart Prize-nominee **Perle Besserman** was praised by Isaac Bashevis Singer for the “clarity and feeling for mystic lore” of her writing and by *Publisher’s Weekly* for its “wisdom [that] points to a universal practice of the heart.” Her autobiographical novel *Pilgrimage* was published by Houghton Mifflin, and her short fiction has appeared in *The Southern Humanities Review*, *AGNI*, *Transatlantic Review*, *Nebraska Review*, *Southerly*, and *Bamboo Ridge*, among others. Her books have been recorded and released in both audio and e-book versions and translated into over ten languages. Her most recent book of creative non-fiction, combining memoir, storytelling, and women’s spiritual history, is *A New Zen for Women* (Palgrave Macmillan); and her story collection, *Marriage and Other Travesties of Love*, is currently available online from Cantarabooks. Her latest book, *Zen Radicals, Rebels, and Reformers*, published by Wisdom Books, was co-authored with Manfred Steger. She has lectured, toured, taught, and appeared on television, radio, and in two documentary films about her work in the US, Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, China, and the Middle East. Perle currently divides her time between Melbourne, Australia and Honolulu, Hawai’i.

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