

## Mora de Ebro

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*(an excerpt)*

HE SHOULD BE PACKING, but there he sat staring at the map wondering why after all these years he had opened this Pandora's box? He was sixty-six, married to the same woman for forty-five years and he had never told her, never once been inclined to reveal what he had found in Spain. And now they were going, leaving tomorrow for Barcelona. There, in the Spanish countryside, he would show her his father's grave, but what would he tell her?

The letters were in another box, a safety deposit box under his name only. The letters from Luz and his father's Communist Party card. It wasn't guilt that kept him silent all these years. He had met and married Nancy more than a year after he had returned home to Calgary from Spain. He saw no reason to stop writing to a friend simply because he had married. Yes, the friend was a woman, an ex-lover, but her life was elsewhere, as was his. In all, he had 342 letters from Luz, the first in November of 1951 and the most recent, yesterday, May 19, 1998, his birthday.

In his hand was the Suunto Global Compass Nancy had given him tucked inside the folds of a map of the world. Her birthday present, with a card that read, "For a man who never asks directions!" Love, Nan. With the straight edge of the compass case he drew a line from the village of Mora de Ebro in northeastern Spain, a Colombian line across the Atlantic to Havana, Cuba, then another dark, thin score from Havana to Calgary, Alberta, Canada. What remained unfinished was the opposite side of a strange triangle. He couldn't bring himself to draw the closing line.

Under the map was a letter from Cuba inside a handmade card. The card, a piece of heavy artist's drawing paper folded in four. When opened it was a single drawing, a sketch really, of the porter's lodge in Barcelona's Parque Güell. It was signed and dated, "Luz Fernández, September 1951."



S H E had gone up on top of the platform overlooking the Parque Güell's plaza to capture the detail on the rooftop pavilion of the porter's lodge across the way. The young man she sat beside watched her work for some time before he spoke, in English.

This caused her to look up and take him in more fully. Young, yes, at the most twenty, perhaps less, hair that brownish red called auburn, blue eyes, lean and tall. Ordinary except for the set of his mouth—determined, angry, sad—only his words, if he had any beyond the niceties of the classroom Spanish he had switched to, would tell her which of these traits belonged to him.

His name was Stephen, Stephen La Croix from Canada. He'd come to find his father's grave.

They talked as she worked.

"I've followed him through Spain," Stephen said in English. They had discovered that Luz's English was far superior to his Spanish.

"How?" Luz gazed at the lodge roof, trying to separate the patterns made by the *trencadis*, the broken ceramic tiling.

"From his letters mostly . . . my mother kept them. And some newspaper clippings." Stephen seemed as absorbed in the Hansel and Gretel fancy as she was.

"What about your government?" Luz sketched the undulating profile of the roof where it met the brown flagstone walls.

"They were no help to him and even less help to me." Stephen looked away from the sketch, away from the gingerbread house to the pure sky.

"But how can that be?"

"The Canadian government didn't want him to come here, but he came anyway."

"Oh, the International Brigades."

"Yes, he joined in 1937."

"You remember?"

"Vaguely. I was only five. I remember there were lots of arguments."

"Your mother and father?"

"No, my uncles mostly and my father's friends. It was like there were two camps and my mother and I were in no man's land."

There was silence.

Luz's sketches were always painstaking. Unlike many artists, she could not work in rapid strokes. From the outset she had to get it right, and this

required concentration. The roof had many peaks that looked like those formed in stiffly beaten egg whites. A kind of white foam with bits of coloured candy sticking to it.

After a time, Stephen said to the sky, “I have his letters. My mother let me take them. It’s all she’s got and she still let me take them. But they’re not much, really. All he wrote about was ideas. Not even the war so much, or the people here. No, everything was popular fronts, solidarity, *la causa*, fascism. The only person he referred to more than once was someone called La Pasionaria, a woman . . .”

“Dolores Ibarri, the Spanish Communist Party leader?” Luz had heard something in Stephen’s voice.

“Yeah, her. He would write things she said. How she called the international soldiers ‘crusaders for freedom,’ ‘heroes of progressive mankind’ . . . stuff like that.”

“It must have been a difficult time for your mother.”

“You said it. No money, no work. We went to the weekly Communist Party meetings. Mom took Dad’s place. But for all that, I think she went because it meant we got a cup of tea and a sandwich.”

At last Luz was completing the crown of the roof with its blue cupola. She squinted, blocking out the glare of the sun off the tiles while trying to separate shape from detail. What was this thing surging up at the very apex of this unimaginable house? Her mind’s eye imposed an answer on the blur. This tower, pavilion, cupola, call it what you will, resembled an erect penis, the circumcised glans surrounded by frothy semen.

Luz made a note in a corner of the sketch and then remembered Stephen. She looked up to find him watching her. Did he read Spanish? Would the word “pene” register in his English-speaking brain? She was too much the modern woman to be coy. Her university classes in anatomy and life drawing had given her access to the human body and its language. Nevertheless, Stephen was a stranger despite what she knew of him. Intimacy requires much more. A journey.

They had talked, gone for dinner, walked through Barcelona into the night. They argued causes and she had sided with Stephen’s father. But the son could not concede he was less important than idealism. His father’s letters had been full of ideology not love. At least his father could have loved him and his mother more for the sacrifice they made. But the crusader for freedom took their pain for granted. If this was progressive—the squandering of love—then he wanted nothing to do with ideologues and causes.

Their world views were opposed. Luz was bred to revolution. *La causa* was Cuba. Luz was Cuba. But Stephen was intelligent and obviously had thought hard about his father’s path and his own. Stephen’s arguments were emotionally sound.

Gilbert La Croix had been part of the Retreats, the Republican army's withdrawal down the valley of the Ebro River to the Mediterranean Sea. By Batea, the Mac-Paps, Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, was decimated and scattered. After Batea, Stephen's father disappeared from sight and ultimately the memory of those Canadian comrades who survived.

Stephen had searched the Republican line from Batea to Gandesa. While he was in Maella, a man had tried to tell him about a place called Mora de Ebro. A small town on the banks of the Ebro where the Republicans had established a new defensive line during the Retreats. There they had blown up the bridge and those comrades caught on the other side had to swim the river, if they could. Many died and were washed up on the banks.

But Stephen could not understand from the man what was to be found at Mora de Ebro. At this point, Stephen had come back to Barcelona in need of money, from home, if possible.

The money came, and he and Luz boarded a southbound train. Once they were settled in the car, a shyness seemed to come over Stephen. It was as if he was unsure of what Luz expected in return for her help. At first he had just been happy to have an interpreter, not to mention that this need had been met in the form of a worldly young woman. Was she expecting romance?

For her part, Luz read his shyness as introspection—after all, his search for his father might be coming to an end. Would he find what he needed?

"What will you do after?" Luz finally asked.

"After?"

"After Mora de Ebro, after Spain?"

Stephen noted she didn't say, 'After me.' "Pick fruit," he said. "For my uncle."

"This will be your job?"

What did she mean? His life's work? "Why not?" he asked.

"I didn't ask 'why.' It's a family business, that's where you belong. When I go home to Cuba, I will work in my father's cigar shop." Luz noticed that the other passengers in the cramped train car had lost interest in them. Their English, no longer a novelty, was probably more of an irritating buzz, like the flies in the window.

"But you're educated?" Stephen was still leaning toward her, trying to keep their conversation private. He had seen the man next to Luz slide a look over her when she mentioned Cuba.

"Ah, yes, but it will take time and hard work to make a place for myself. There are no women practising architecture in Cuba. I will first have to convince someone to take me on as an apprentice. That will not be easy."

"Because you're a woman?"

"Yes, Cuba is very macho, ah . . . like España." Luz was aware of her neighbour's renewed interest and gave the word "macho" a dismissive inflection.

“Macho? Male? My Spanish . . .” Stephen eyed the man across from him.

“Male pride, machismo, women are inferior, all that rubbish. But I also have a reputation . . .”

“Oh?”

The man was now watching Stephen with undisguised curiosity.

“As a political activist. Like your father, I’m prepared to fight for justice.”

“You? fight?”

“Machismo must be a germ *any* man can catch.”

Stephen was young enough to blush, especially under Luz’s censorious gaze. “My father fought in trenches full of lice and unburied dead.” He straightened in his seat and gave the man a dark look.

“It may come to that for Cubans. It has happened in the past. And women fought with rifles, just as they did here against Franco.”

“Could you?” Stephen leaned across to Luz. “I’ve tried to imagine what my father went through. The killing, seeing friends die. I don’t know . . .” Stephen had the demonstrative hands of his father’s Gallic ancestors, and in speaking his heart he had grazed Luz’s knee, disturbing her skirt.

The man took this as a sign of ownership. He opened his newspaper.

Luz moved to close the space between her and Stephen. “He fought to stay alive.” Her voice was low, her face close to his.

“But he didn’t have to be here. He wasn’t protecting his family, he gave us up. This wasn’t his home. What was the stupid bastard doing here? That’s all I want to know.”

Luz looked out the window. Could she? Could she kill another human being? In the name of justice, freedom, in the name of God?

To Stephen she said, “Some people do not value life. Some value it too much. Somewhere in between are those who must act so that life is worth living.”

“Whose life?” Stephen’s angry hiss drew quick looks from the other passengers in the compartment.

“Human life. Your life. Your father like many others knew that the fascists would not be content with Spain or Italy or Germany. Tyrants care for power, not people.”

“And what of Cuba? There are no fascists there.”

“Tyrants come in many guises.”



M O R A de Ebro caught them both deep in thought. The landscape of dry hills and *barrancas* passing outside the train window had been a plain screen on which they projected their turmoil. The olive grove before the station washed them in a green and silver relief, like shade to eyes that have stared too long into the sun.

From the station they made their way to the central plaza where they would find food and talk. Conversation with the locals was most often veiled, this was part of the problem Stephen had encountered in his earlier search. No matter who they talked to—survivors of the civil war, Republicans, Nationalists—now, they all lived under Franco’s thumb. Spain had been subject to the rule of an authoritarian regime since 1939.

The woman who sold them some strong homemade beer suggested they sit on the steps of a stone monument prominent in one corner of the plaza’s garden.

She directed them to a squat marble tablet not unlike those standing stones used to mark graves in Canadian cemeteries. Twice as large as most headstones, this marker was engraved with row upon row of names. Chiselled in the top of the stone was “1936–1939.” Luz read off the names: all Spanish surnames, many of which repeated themselves to encompass whole families. These were the town’s dead. To break the burden of name after name, the carver had periodically inserted a line of fancy work. Interested in the motif, her artist’s eye followed the scroll pattern of the first line. The next line was an ogee, a double-S curve. It was among the stylized olive leaves of the third line that Luz realized there was something more at work. What she thought to be the individual, rather eccentric, touch of the carver was in fact letters worked into the design. She pointed this out to Stephen. Together they examined every line of decoration. Each contained different letters, two, sometimes three, like initials.

Stephen discovered a line of “G. L.”

They asked directions to the stonecutter’s yard.

The man did not seem surprised to see them. He believed the dead also had needs that they found ways to fulfill. After speaking with Luz, he handed Stephen a fat pencil and had him print his father’s name on the smooth surface of a piece of cut stone.

Luz and Stephen waited as the stonecutter lost himself among the great slabs of rock in his yard. He returned with a yellowed card for Stephen: his father’s Communist Party card with the stamps that acknowledged he had paid the party’s monthly five cents right up until he left Canada for Spain. All his dues paid as he left them waving goodbye from the platform in the Calgary train station.

He had drowned in the Ebro. Weighted down by poverty and ideals like so many stones in his pockets. He had floated onto the bank, a wretched corpse in a tattered uniform, rotten boots, and ammunition belt with no bullets. There were no pictures in his wallet, nothing other than the card. It is possible that he had been robbed, his body looted as it lay in the sun. Anything was possible.

All this flowed through Luz from the stonecutter to Stephen. The old man directed them to a mass grave in the cemetery, marked with a single white cross dedicated to the year these nameless men ceased to struggle.

Stephen sat on the grass at the foot of the cross, staring at his father's faded Communist Party card. "You know, in Canada this card got you black-balled from relief camps, from non-union jobs. It was some cop's or union buster's ticket to beat the crap out of you. My mom wanted him to leave it at home when he went out, but he carried it in defiance of her, of the bulls and big shots. He wasn't going to be pushed around just because he was out of work and poor. My uncle told me before I left that my dad saw what so many didn't at the time. Saw through the Great Depression to the real problem. His favourite expression was 'It's not the Depression that's killing the working man, it's the repression.'"

Luz stood silently behind the cross, behind Stephen.

"You see, I understand that. I know things were bad at home, but to come here? The fight was in Canada. It was all such a waste."

"Would you say so if the Republicans had won?"

From outside Stephen's grief, Luz could see the larger struggle, the threat that ultimately pulled Canada into world conflict.

"It would have made no difference. If it hadn't been Franco, it would have been Mussolini or Hitler overrunning Spain. *La causa* was hopeless. He was here because they'd let him play soldier."

"That's pretty hard." Luz came from behind the cross.

"The truth is neither pretty nor easy to swallow."

She sat resting her head against his shoulder. "Your truth, Stephen. What did you expect to find in Spain?"

"A grave. Just a grave. He couldn't be lost in action for the rest of my life. No one can ever be lost in action."

Lost, Luz thought. Action is better than being lost. The human impulse to take control, even—or perhaps *especially*—in the face of lost causes. What else is there? Surrender?



T H E R E were photos among the letters from Cuba. Luz in uniform with a rifle, Luz with Che Guevara, Luz with Fidel Castro and his other ministers, Luz with her children. Did her husband know about the letters? Stephen has never asked. He addressed his letters to her ministry office, she to his business.

From under the world map, Stephen pulled Luz's sketch. He looked at her notes in the corner, pencilled letters smudged into what could be a grey cloud above the cupola of the porter's lodge. What had she written all those years ago? His Spanish was excellent now. He had been writing to Luz in her mother tongue for decades.

Stephen reached for the magnifying glass on his desk. A few words came out of the cloud: "verde," "azul," some word beginning "pen—" the rest

gone. Then several phrases Luz had pressed harder with her pencil to record: "Truth cannot be erased. Neither can lies. Nothing is lost."

Stephen gathered up the compass, the map, and Luz's letter and sketch. He packed it all in his travel wallet with his passport.