

In the air

Light and darkness

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The throne room of the Alhambra Palace was so arranged that foreign ambassadors coming to pay homage to the Moorish rulers were disorientated and half-blind when they were admitted into the royal presence.

Stepping out of the dazzling brightness of the Court of Myrtles, where brilliant sunlight bounces off white marble and shining water, they were plunged into the wilful semi-darkness of the Hall of the Ambassadors and had to cross its entire shadowy length in order to approach the throne. The Emir could thus observe the visitor from afar, while for his part, the visitor could make out very little as he approached the Emir, his eyes struggling to adjust to the absence of light.

A simple and effective demonstration of power: that of darkness over light, the power to withhold knowledge, to create confusion.

The Alhambra is one of the most powerful buildings I have ever seen, fascinating in its endless complexity. The omnipresent water, perpetually in motion with upflinging beads of light, or stilly reflecting stone, marble and sky. Everywhere juxtapositions of light and darkness: bright gardens and courts glimpsed like a vision at the end of dark corridors; arches full of darkness, seen from sunlight. Your perception is constantly adapting, your mood changing.

And plunging from light into darkness can suddenly throw your whole world out of joint: at the end of our visit, we stepped out of the bright Alhambra gardens straight into the numbing horror of a nightmare.

G. was tired and we left our group to return to the coach-park, a short walk from the palace grounds. The coach was due to leave at 5.30 for Motril, where our ship was waiting. From there we would sail for the next destination on our cruise, an hour or so later.

We stroll back out of the plaza, down a shady avenue and round an unfamiliar bend, unthinkingly following other departing visitors. We walk on and on down the hill, slowly realizing with mounting unease that the way up with our group had been much shorter. We pass a stone fountain, which I fancy, for two reassuring seconds, I remember, but then emerge not at the entrance to the Alhambra, where the coach is waiting, but in a steep narrow street, lined with little tourist-shops.

We are in the centre of Granada.

It is 5.30. G. now feels unwell. Unease be-

comes fear. There is no way we can climb all the way back up the steep slope in time for the coach. And if we miss the coach...

What are we to do? Taxi. A taxi back up to the palace. Maybe the coach will have waited. It's our only chance.

This is a pedestrian zone. A shop owner points down the street. *Debajo, debajo.* Taxi. We finally reach a square. Uniformed police standing around, hands on hips. A taxi rank but no taxis - no traffic at all, but a gathering press of people

We approach a young officer, he speaks only Spanish.

Alhambra, taxi, urgent!

He points to the empty taxi-rank, then shrugs: *Pascua. Procesión!* He's occupied with his own reality and turns away.

We approach another officer, an older man, try to get his attention. He points to the streets, gestures barriers: says *procesión*, and turns away.

Fear is turning to sick black panic. It is Easter Saturday and the final celebrations of Holy Week are about to close down Granada. It is 5.45: we have missed our coach, the roads are blocked, we can't get out of the city; the ship will sail without us, we will miss the cruise. Worse: we have none of G.'s vital medication, no passports, nothing. I have my mobile but no number to contact anyone who could help. Tomorrow and Monday are holidays. No pharmacy

will open until Tuesday - anyway, we have no prescriptions. We won't even find a room. We're helpless here; the Easter procession is about to begin and no one has time for the problems of two little people.

What are we to do?

A small van drives into the square and stops. I run over to the driver's window. *Por favor, Alhambra, Por favor!* He shakes his head, but frowns uneasily, hesitates. The young officer comes up and they talk briefly. It is no: *Sólo taxi Alhambra.* The officer points again to the empty rank.

But then the miracle happens. He frowns and turns back to us: we've become real for him and he has to help. He goes over and talks urgently to his colleagues and they begin looking around them. A third man points to somewhere out of sight. Then the older officer strides over to us. He indicates a side-street: *Taxi!* He holds up four fingers and starts counting them off. *No primero, no segundo,* he says slowly, *tercero. Tercero!* He stabs the air to the left. *Izquierdo, taxi!* His duty done, he turns and walks off.

We head off numbly down the narrow side-street, threading through the converging crowds. One left turn seems promising and I run on ahead into a broad surreally silent street, closed to traffic - but with a line of waiting taxis. No longer thinking clearly, we ask to be taken to the Alhambra coach-park. The driver gestures a long way round. It is long. On the way, I notice a sign to Motril: 73 km. When we arrive, none of the parked coaches is ours. Obviously: it is 6.15. *Por favor, Motril, puerto.* He nods and turns his car round. *Cuanto tiempo?* Less than an hour.

What time is the ship leaving? Was it 7 or 7.30? If it's 7.30 we have a chance. Will they wait for us?

What happens if they don't?

There is a succession of police cars, road-works and slow traffic. As if through the wrong end of a telescope, we notice the scenery is spectacularly beautiful. The minutes and the miles creep by; then we see a sign: Motril 9, Motril Puerto 7. We turn off down a scrubby reed-lined road.

Is it a large port? Will we find the ship?

A guarded barrier marks the entrance to the port. *Dónde?* asks the driver over his shoulder. We shrug, helpless: *Vistamar.*

The driver pulls over and the guard comes across. He asks questions - we show our ship passes - then gives instructions...

The ship is still there, we can see it, the companion way still down.

We go on board. It is over.

Suddenly we are out of the darkness and back in the light.



Photo: Ariel Wagner-Parker

Bright gardens glimpsed from dark rooms