

With A Rose Between Her Teeth

by

Valerie Collins

Whenever we Costa Brits became weary of sun, sea and sangria, tired of bright beach umbrellas, blue skies, palm trees, bead curtains, and dinner at midnight, we would go over to Debbie and David's. Debbie's chintzy little villa with its garden gnomes, crocheted toilet seat covers and heavy velveteen curtains was a home from home, a true haven, for the homesick.

Debbie prided herself on the little bit of England she was so adept at creating in this Mediterranean land. She gave tasteful little tea parties with neat cucumber sandwiches and Earl Grey tea. She tirelessly moved heaven and earth to provide endless supplies of Marmite, Proper Thick-Cut Marmalade, Marks and Sparks knickers, Wincyette nightgowns, Heinz Baked Beans, Coleman's Mustard, Golden Syrup, HP Sauce, Peanut Butter, Birds Custard Powder and PG Tips. She'd once saved an entire family from Horlicks withdrawal symptoms when their incoming relative's plane was delayed by fog at Gatwick.

Debbie's heavy, lumpy, tasteless cooking was a balm to us Brits. At Debbie and David's, one always ate dinner at an hour when our hosts – Debbie was far too well brought up to say the Natives or the Locals – were still recovering from their siestas. We tried to pile our peas on top of our forks, drank watery tea from Willow Pattern cups and pretended we weren't actually eating at all.

Debbie grew roses and made jam and wore shapeless clothes and sensible shoes.

David played golf and wore socks with his sandals. At Christmas he dressed up in a red suit stuffed with cushions and stomped around the British School braying 'ho ho ho' and ringing a bell. Debbie made soggy puddings and indigestible mince pies.

Neither Debbie nor David had ever mastered the language of our host country. Despite their adherence to English ways, it was a constant source of concern to them.

“Of course we don’t need to speak Spanish,” Debbie would say. “But it’s only good manners, isn’t it?”

But with the advent of the European Union, Debbie’s star began to wane. Soon anyone could buy Baked Beans at the local grocers. And then, when Marks and Spencer opened a store in the nearest city, it was not a happy day for Debbie. Now no-one needed her. Even so, it was a terrible shock when David went.

Went native, that is.

One evening Debbie phoned around asking if we’d seen him. Although she spoke in her usual modulated tones, we could tell that she was agitated, and we all promised to look out for him. But David was nowhere to be seen: neither at the Costa golf club nor the Shenanigan pub nor the Britfast cafe.

Over at Debbie’s villa, we pressed her for more details.

“I’m sure it’s just me being terribly silly, but...” Debbie perched on the edge of the sofa, her hands in her lap. “You see, David so wanted to learn Spanish properly, After all, it’s only polite, isn’t it, having lived here for so many years. But as you know, he’s just not a linguist. None of us are, of course. Anyway, when he heard about this new suggestoneuroneutics method - SNN they call it - he wanted to give it a shot. He had the first two sessions last week and -” her voice faltered “- this morning he brought up his bacon and eggs and toast and thick-cut marmalade. I haven’t seen him since.”

We promised to find David and withdrew to the Shenanigan for a confab. Later that evening, Debbie called to say David had returned. However we could tell by the slight tremor in her voice that things were not right, and back to the villa we went. Debbie sat stiffly on the sofa, an embroidered hankie on her lap. Two Horlicks mugs sat on the coffee table.

The heavy silence was suddenly broken by a loud gurgling noise. The gurgling reached a crescendo then turned into a series of splutters and Spanish expletives. Debbie briefly pressed the hankie to the corner of each eye, then crumpled it into a ball. The gurgling started again. We glanced at each other, then tiptoed across the patterned carpet in the direction of the noise. In the bathtub sat David in his vest and pants, pouring red wine in the direction of his mouth from a glass flask with a long spout. Gasping and spluttering as the wine ran down his neck, he wiped his face with the back of his hand, then threw his head back again, mouth gaping, and poured another stream of wine over himself.

In horror we returned to the sitting room to comfort Debbie with fresh Horlicks. Then David appeared in a cloud of cologne. His chest hair protruded from a too-tight shirt, and a St Christopher medal on a gold chain gleamed around his neck. He strode towards us, beaming, shook our hands and thumped us on the back. Then he went over to Debbie, arms wide open, gave her a noisy kiss on each cheek, then thumped her on the back too. “*Hombre! Qué pasa?*”

“I’m not an *hombre*, David,” said Debbie with a pained look. “Won’t you have your Horlicks?”

“*Qué?*” David looked totally bemused. “*Qué?*”

Debbie pressed the balled hankie to her eyes.

Word got round that David had Gone and that the prognosis was bleak. We went to the villa, all of us, to see what could be done to bring David back.

“What do the suggesto-thing people say?”

“That they’ve fulfilled their contract because now he speaks fluent Spanish. You see, somehow the Spanish has got out of the language part of the brain and spread into the personality part and the psychomotor reflexes and-” Debbie’s voice became choked. “At first

the neurologists thought he'd had a bilingual septum collapse. They considered doing a language duct anastomosis. But that's awfully dangerous and there's no guarantee that..." Her voice trailed off.

One of us said very carefully: "Perhaps a good... um... psychiatrist could bring back David's English personality."

The atmosphere grew thick.

Then the most adventurous of our number said with much clearing of the throat. "I wouldn't dream of interfering, but, ah, one has heard that shamans are reputed to find missing bits of people."

"That's terribly sweet of you," said Debbie. "I'm sure they're absolutely wonderful little men but..." She swallowed. "...I thought I might donate him to science."

We stared at the ceiling and fidgeted.

Then the door burst open and David barged in, jingling a set of car keys. "Coming for a spin? Or should I say a *vuelta!* Ha ha!"

Quietly, unobtrusively, we tried all sorts of subterfuges to bring David back: golf tournaments, special consignments of Gentlemen's Relish, plans for a real Christmas panto. But all in vain. David was sighted several times by those of our number brave enough to venture into our hosts' territory: in a smoke-filled bar in the old town, with a crowd of small dark men, shouting and slapping people on the back and passing a flask of red wine around, or eating dinner at midnight, a red checked napkin around his neck, prawn shells and legs piled up on his plate. Debbie grew ever paler and thinner.

One day Debbie invited us all for tea. We pretended that we could not hear the blaring TV and David singing Spanish football songs on the patio, and that Debbie's eyes were not watery and lacklustre. Little did we suspect that that was the last Chivers-raspberry-jam-filled Victoria sandwich we would ever eat in our little corner of Iberia.

“We fought it as long as we could,” said Debbie. “But I’m afraid one will just have to accept the inevitable. One tells oneself that he’s-” She struggled to stop her voice from breaking. “- he’s... *happy*.”

Soon after that, the devastating news was announced: Marks and Spencers were closing down. Now Debbie would surely come into her own again. We waited, fully expecting a tea invitation and excited plans to hire a coach to go to the city and buy up supplies for the whole community at the grand closing down sale. We waited.

Finally we heard the news. Debbie had Gone. To join David. Now we see her shimmying down the promenade, stilettos clicking, black lace mantilla fluttering, with a rose between her teeth and a gleam in her eye.

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