

Don Quixote's Delusions

TRAVELS IN CASTILIAN SPAIN



Miranda France



THE OVERLOOK PRESS
WOODSTOCK & NEW YORK

CONTENTS

1	A Dead Man in Madrid	1
2	The Taxi-Driver's Cousin's Friend	17
3	Don Quixote's Delusions	30
4	Transvestites, Anarchists and a Peruvian Poet	46
5	Double Lives and Double Cheeseburgers	55
6	Is <i>Anything</i> Real?	71
7	Pastoral Scenes in Avila	91
8	Love in a Cold Climate	109
9	A Question of Faith	129
10	Is Burgos Boring?	154
11	A Little Place in La Mancha	176
12	Which Are You? Quixote or Sancho?	194
13	An Angel in Segovia	206
14	New Life in Castile	222
	Further Reading	236
	Index	238



CHAPTER ONE

A Dead Man in Madrid

This book starts with a funeral and ends with a christening, although neither of those events turned out to be quite what it seemed.

The funeral took place in a chapel in Madrid, and was presided over by a priest with a streaming cold. The chapel was inside one of the city's oldest convents, home to a declining population of elderly nuns. It was a closed order, so although the women were present, they were nowhere to be seen. Four ceremonial candles stood guard around the coffin, which was draped in purple, signifying the status of the deceased. About fifty men and women were gathered towards the front of the chapel where storage heaters had been placed to comfort the mourners.

The women were mostly stocky inside close-fitting clothes, like small pieces of upholstered furniture, and they had hairstyles that might have been made by the same, helmet-shaped mould. Some of the men had their coats draped around their shoulders as if they had never lost the medieval habit of cape-wearing. Outside it was a pleasant, spring evening, but the warmth did not penetrate the

convent's stone heart. The ancient buildings of Castile are designed to cling on to cold even in the hottest summer.

I was sitting at the front of the chapel, close to the coffin. Like most of those present, I was an admirer of the dead man, though none of us could really say we knew him. So much of his life was shrouded in mystery, and now that all of him was shrouded there were many things we would never be sure about. He had been a wanderer. For years he had drifted on the roads of central and southern Spain, taking jobs that had a habit of landing him in trouble. He had been both imprisoned and excommunicated at least twice and counted gamblers and criminals among his friends. His family life had been touched by scandal and he had an illegitimate daughter, but he was not otherwise a womaniser. Some said that he was a Jew, though he professed catholicism. Some said that he was gay, though others thought he had loved his wife, at least at the beginning. Everyone agreed that he was poor.

How much did these things matter now? He was dead, after all. Once a life is over the failures fade. The priest spoke the words of the mass quickly and in a low murmur, as if not to disturb the dead man, or some of the sleepier members of the congregation. But every so often a shrill lament disturbed his intonation. The chant seemed to rise from nowhere, as if it were drifting upwards from vents in the aisle or via the same mechanism that pipes muzak into shopping malls. At first I thought it was a recording, then I realised that the sound was being produced by the Barefoot Trinitarian Sisters, hidden from view in barred recesses behind the altar.

The nuns had been *in claustrum*, shut up and cut off for years, decades even, from the outside world. Many of them would have taken up their vocations when Spain was a dictatorship and the choices for unmarried women were limited. I wondered if they felt cheated when they saw how women today could go out to work, or raise children on their own. Perhaps the priest sensed their breath on his neck; when called to raise his eyes to God he did so

with the exasperation of one who would much rather be in bed. The air and the hush in the chapel were chilly, the congregation huddled into itself. If the nuns really were barefoot under their robes, their feet must have been cold.

The purple drape on the coffin shimmered in the candlelight. The low light and chanting, the priest's gentle sniffing created a peaceful atmosphere. The span of the dead man's life, on the other hand, showed more turbulence than calm. His failure to be recognised as a poet had always rankled with him, his attempts as a playwright were generally dismal. For twenty years he had published nothing, resigned to the fact that he would never make any money out of writing. No one knew for sure what had prompted him to take up the pen again, towards the end of his life, but a spell in prison may have been the motivation. Perhaps he felt, by then, that he had nothing left to lose. He was poor anyway, his life was wretched and all he had ever wanted to do was write.

A thin girl holding some university files arrived late and squeezed on to the end of our row, trying to muscle in on the storage heater to which she stretched out her hands. Her nose, slightly pink, seemed to pay tribute to the priest's.

But what if a life of disappointments were weighed against one, resounding success? Could it be enough to make up for the defeats and hardship? On top of the coffin there was a cushion, head-dented, as if a body had been resting there until moments ago, then moved on, heavenwards perhaps. Behind the coffin a dozen members of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language were ranged in splendid gilt chairs. They were elderly, creaking when they genuflected. The nuns were also very old, you could tell by the calibre of their trilling. Spain, which used to seem full of children, was now a country that worried about ageing. The birth rate was the lowest in Europe and the United Nations had said that twenty million immigrants would be needed to replace the

dwindling stock of workers. Historically frightened of immigrants, Spain quaked at the prospect of another Moorish invasion.

When the time came for communion, the priest rang his little bell to signify the transformation of bread to body. As he approached the cage behind the altar two figures could be seen emerging from its shadows. Two sets of hands poked through the bars to receive the holy wafer. The other nuns – and the singing suggested that there were many more than two – were nowhere to be seen. I watched the old fingers appearing through the bars and could not help thinking again about the corresponding feet, gnarled and calloused. I thought of them pounding down the corridors on that day, in 1936, when extremists had stormed Madrid's convents. The anti-clerical hatred that had been brewing in Spain for decades had erupted in a terrifying violence that saw parish priests crucified and the corpses of nuns wrenched from their coffins. Spain's Republican president, Manuel Azaña, predicted that the blood would 'drown us all'. He was right, because civil war broke out soon afterwards.

The men and women of the congregation came forward to take communion from the priest who placed the wafers directly on to each proffered tongue. Then the communicants returned quietly to their pews, carrying God's blessing and the priest's virus. Some bowed their heads to pray.

A sense of sobriety and regret hung in the air of the chapel, but there were no tears. The mourners had no great grief to battle or assuage. They came to this funeral mass every year, so they knew that the coffin was empty. The man who should have occupied it had been dead for nearly four hundred years. He was now nothing more than a heap of bones, and even the bones were no longer heaped. He had been buried in the convent in 1616, but the skeleton was disturbed and scattered when the building was rebuilt at the end of the seventeenth century. No one knew exactly where he lay now.

He had no descendants; his possessions had been pawned and