

Torre vieja

International Story Writing Competition in English

Worth its salt by Joy Lennick 1st Prize

Ah, Torre vieja... Where to start? Less fortunate mortals than myself are asking themselves that very question as I write. As for me, being older than the famous Methuselah, and a time traveller to boot (invisible though we may be, there are - surprisingly - still a few of us around) I daily count my lucky stars. The drawbacks are unimportant here and don't affect my present quest, which is to take you on a journey backwards and forwards in time. So, gird your loins, or fasten your seat-belts, and come with me, back to the year 218 B.C.... Unfortunate timing, I'm afraid ... for we arrive in the middle of a storm, and there's a small portion of the Sahara Desert covering the land where Torre vieja will one day stand! A column of foot-weary, and dusty soldiers and their pack horses approach. At their head is Centurion Marcus. (I'd clean forgotten how handsome he is). Ah, the sun is gradually breaking through. See how Marcus's body armour reflects the fiery sun-rays as he rides his Barbary horse towards the Salinas, a scarlet and gold cloak - a vivid gash against the blue sky - billowing behind him. He is off to claim his salary of salt: sal, a common, if precious, payment for work well done, and conquerors... Before they leave, one of the Romans will fall in love with a Spanish girl and, until now, only she knew that the child she bore had Roman blood in his veins.

It is common knowledge to historians and scholars, that Spain - after much barbarism under the influence of the Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans - (I will spare you the bloody details) finally emerges to be recognised as the most advanced of the provinces under the Romans. I became a time traveller just before the Visigothic kings succeeded Rome's domination, so witnessed far too many tragedies. Understandably, I did much century hopping when the Vandals were around... for much of the future was more palatable. Not all though. Men seem to have a penchant for war. But, although the colour red dominates time, I choose to look to the sky. More centuries than I care to remember, pass. I even hibernated through one ... And then Spain attains her most triumphant success -- that of expelling the Moors at the end of the 15th century. Although, at times, very bloodthirsty, that period was exciting, I can tell you, and the Moors left behind them an admirable legacy of some wonderful architecture, intricate wood carvings, colourful textile designs, outstanding tiles and other objects d'art. And now, in modern language, fast-forwarding a few centuries, I again reveal the past for you and present a very different, peaceful, scene... The year is 1767 and we find ourselves in a tiny fishing village called Torre vieja (Old Tower). Seagulls scream and fight overhead under a Madonna blue sky, while jealous cats skulk in the shadows, as brothers Jose and Manuel Rodriguez, olive-skinned and tanned by a merciless sun, haul in their morning's catch. 'Hola! Que tal?' they greet their fellow fishermen. Those ozone-fishy odours are surely there to confuse our noses..

How shimmering-silvered is the Mediterranean sea! Many of the fishermen's relatives amongst the 106 families recorded, are connected, in one way or another, with the Salinas: the salt lagoon - previously known as the Salinas of Orihuela. Jose and Manuel's nephew, Carlos - his Roman blood now well diluted can be found caring for his goats near an olive grove a mile away - the metallic clang of their neck-bells unmistakeable in the unsullied air. He is happy enough for now, but ambition stirs within him. All would, doubtless, be speechless with wonder, if they could see the Torre vieja of today. A more affluent populace, variously sipping Cafe con leche, or something more potent, on the forecourt of the Casino, watching a more cosmopolitan scene unfold before them; working in gleaming, glass-fronted, high-rise offices. sun-bathing on state of the art yachts; or still harvesting and shipping the salt they were familiar with. How magical the festoons of street-lights they would think, how splendid the magnificent fiestas! How novel the motor car; how richer the

cuisine. How their ears would be confused with so many different languages..

But I move too quickly ... Let's again hover in the past. Ten years after Jose and Manuel first fished the sea, work begins on a small wharf and salt storehouse near Torrevieja (Eras de la Sal). Segregated from Orihuela by royal decree, there are around 400 souls living in a separate municipal district. But populations tend to grow, and Torrevieja's is no exception. At the end of the eighteenth century, King Carlos IV decrees that the Salinas salt works offices move from La Mata to Torrevieja, and plans are later drawn up for the building of a new town, next to the existing one. Many new homes are needed, for the town's population has swollen to 1,500. Torrevieja is buzzing with industry, so much so that the first commercial wharf is constructed.

It has two names: "Minguez" and "Turbio". Modest fishing boats and majestic sailing ships, jostling for space, are a familiar sight to Torreviejans, and pungent aromas drift up from the holds of many vessels as exotic spices are unloaded onto the quayside. Important, too, for providing work for some of the town's citizens, is the building of around 250 ships, in sight of the Casino. You may find it interesting to know that two of the ships are to be used in forthcoming films: 'The Onedin Line' and 'Treasure Island' This period in our local history is quite pleasing, for there is much optimism in the air. And now I must rest, for the weight of the centuries is bearing down on me. Sometimes, so many years' odours, sights and sounds mingle and become suffocating, almost overwhelming.

I am refreshed, so let's pay another visit to Jose and Manuel ... Now relatively old by the day's standards, they are able to work less hours, while their sons fish in better built boats. Playing cards in the shade of an aged fig tree, they slake their thirsts and wash down their tapas with tankards of amber cerveza and watch, approvingly, as their well-fed grand-children play in dappled sunlight. Nephew Carlos has said adios to his goat-herd, is now attired in a becoming suit, and adjusting to working in an office. In later years, proud, neat and tidy, Jose and Manuel's descendants would regularly promenade in sight of the sea every Sunday, after Mass, at the church of the Inmaculada Concepcion, and celebrate fiestas with enthusiasm.

But now it is March 21, 1829 - the beginning of the Spring equinox. Earlier, the sky was calm, the atmosphere clear. However, around lunch-time, there is a slight tremor and I again feel a great sense of foreboding, for there have been over 70 worrying days and nights of seismic activity in the area of late. Suddenly the wind drops, the sky becomes overcast and there is an uneasy calm over all. My palms are damp, my throat dry. I do not want to re-experience the inevitable.... I am fearful as the earth begins to tremble and, inside Carlos's villa, plates fall and smash on the tiled floor. Then, a huge tremor wreaks havoc where it strikes: in Torrevieja and all the towns and villages in the Vega Baja. In a little over five seconds, 32 people perish, along with 36 animals, and 67 people are injured. As in many other households, tragedy descends on the Rodriguez family, for Carlos's wife, Maria, is making paella in her kitchen when the roof collapses on her. Fortunately, Carlos is out in the open with his two sons. All three survive. Uncle Jose - by now a bent old gentleman - is still asleep when the earthquake strikes, a sleep from which he will never awake. I am again overcome with sadness, especially for Maria, who was so full of life. As most of the survivors are now homeless, the reconstruction of the decimated town is ordered by King Fernando VII

And so, after a while, life gradually returns to normal. Paco, one of Carlos's two sons, prospers. They say that his brain is 'grande'. He studies and becomes a rich lawyer, has a beautiful villa built on a small hillock near the town. (I drift through its many rooms, marvelling at its splendour). Tragically, younger son, Joaquin: winsome character and fisherman, drowns at sea during a storm.

Forgive me if I pause for a while. Even time travellers get out of breath occasionally. Think I'll have a siesta.... Goodness, 2004? It can't be. This dashing through time gets very confusing. Think I'll stay awhile and have a stroll around. What have they done to the Casino? It's had another face-lift. Very nice too. I admit to a fondness for it. It's an amazing building - incredible that it survived the earthquake. It was designed in 'Fin de Siecle' style by the architect Aznar when it was rebuilt in 1896. The "Casino Numancia" was formed some thirty years earlier, and it became the "Sociedad

Cultural Casino de Torre vieja” in 1882. What scenes have been played out in the historic building: Art Exhibitions, Concerts, Balls, et al. Once more... it’s the turn of the 19th century and I do believe that there’s a Ball in progress. See that raven-haired young lady in the beautiful scarlet taffeta crinoline waltzing with that distinguished gentlemen? That’s Inma Rodriguez - direct descendant of Manuel. Oh, a Strauss waltz - da.da.da.da.da.da.da da. How lovely. It brings a tear to my eye, which is surprising. I thought that well dry as dust.

Another heart-warming occasion - believe me, you can do without seeing the treachery, senseless killings and mayhem which have occurred down the centuries - is the inauguration of the railway line from Torre vieja to Albalera in 1882. Let’s visit... What a grand, noisy affair! Look, there’s the imposing figure of the Head of Government: Antonio Canovas de Castillo, waiting to make his speech. Those bands will have to quieten down a bit, that’s for sure. I don’t believe it ... there’s Carmen Rodriguez, another member of the ‘clan’. Doesn’t she look pretty in her white organdie dress with matching parasol! When Torre vieja’s first football ground opens in 1920, Carmen will take great delight in watching her grandson play there.

Hold tight ... forward we go ... to the year 1975. So many flags and bunting, and the sound of trumpets? Is my memory failing me? Oh, of course! General Franco has died and Juan Carlos is proclaimed King. I can again feel cautious optimism - with countless others I am sure that a democratic state will succeed.

And now - back in 2004, after hovering over ‘pineapple’ palms; admiring the colourful lantana and oleander, the ubiquitous bougainvillea... we’re in La Plaza de la Constitucion: a delightful, verdant oasis of calm (well, at present). Think I’ll linger... There’s a Welsh choir due to sing at the Palacio de la Musica (excellent acoustics), not to mention a “Habaneras”- melodious songs -competition to look forward to. (I must have some very ancient ... Welsh blood mingling with the Spanish and Portuguese in my veins, for I just adore Welsh choirs). And I’m very curious to see the new theatre when its built.

Another reason for my wanting to meander here, is the ‘new spirit’ prevailing in this bustling town . Oh, it is, thankfully, as Spanish as ever (may that never change) but, where once many people from countries afar, came with evil intent, nowadays, most foreign visitors and immigrants wish to integrate, harmonise and come in peace., many to learn our language and our ways. Being Spanish and a humanitarian, I welcome the well-meaning enthusiastically.

Also, a quick glance at the calendar, makes me realise how close we are to Christmas. This fills me with an almost childish anticipation of all its attendant pleasures, which is quite a surprise... How pretty the plaza always looks adorned with poinsettias; how heart-warming the church service, the singing, the lights; the amazing scenes in miniature from Christ’s early days, and the colourful parade of ‘The Three Wise Kings.’ Despite its many faults, I rather like this century.

Regrettably, I am unable to enlighten you as to the mysteries of being a time traveller, for they are strictly secret. Suffice it to say that, one moment - oh, so long, long ago I was bathing my feet in the warm sea, while my husband, Fernando Rodriguez, and young son, Antonio, were picnicking nearby, and the next, I was spirited away. They mourned me as drowned. They shed many tears, as did I. However, I was blessed to see my husband and son prosper. And now? I am putting in a fervent request (in triplicate) for retirement, for I feel the strong heart-beat of Torre vieja here in the plaza. It augurs well for the future. A future filled with imaginative plans, hope and optimism. Yes, I reckon Torre vieja is well worth its salt.