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Julian Garcia Gutierrez, eighty-four years and forty days old by his own reckoning, being as he was very conscious of the significance of every day, just as those are at the other end of life's course; native of nearby Aldenueva de la Vera, sits in the watery afternoon sun at the gate to the German Military Cemetery of Cuacos de Yuste, close by to the Monasterio de San Jeronimo de Yuste, final resting place of King-Emperor Charles the First and Fifth. This is commemorated by an imposing statue of Charles at the outskirts of the town, down the mountainside from the monastery, where he majestically poses clothed symbolically in the vestiges of his mighty Empire, like some frozen giant swarmed over and overcome by midgets.

Indeed, it was literally Charles' last resting place, rather than the usual connotation as place of burial, since it was here he chose to rest during his final years after a life of dedication to others, those final years being all too brief. His bones were much later then

exhumed and taken to Madrid for entombment by his son Philip, three hundred and forty-seven years before Senyor Gutierrez's first birthday. Here, now, Senyor Gutierrez sits selling his dried fruits and herbs, locally grown and collected. He has done this for many years, observing very much and very little, though he talks now more than he listens, and so observes even less, nor wishing any longer to observe much more.

Senyor Gutierrez speaks only the most meagre amount of German and English, which he has picked up inevitably and reluctantly from visitors to the cemetery through osmosis, rather than any effort on his part. He generally ignores any language barrier by rabbiting away indifferently in his native Spanish, or Castilian as some insist it be called in order that it not be considered the only language that represents, or has always represented, the voice of Spain. He uses the Castuo patois of the region, heavily accented, as a result of which almost nobody understands much of what he is saying, even the Spanish tourists. Yet he holds their attention, and thereby communicates his message, by the twinkle in his eye, the lean of his body towards them in secret brotherhood, his lilting inflection heavy in sibilants, the passion and enthusiasm of his continuous prattling, his liveliness despite his age, his local colour, their misplaced guilt

at being so rich and free while he appears so needy and confined, the appeal of his products combined with his persistent refusal to answer any questions about their cost, or the added fascination, once having noticed it, of deformed legs giving him a dwarfish stature. This notwithstanding the competing pull of the wonderfully peaceful, intriguing and historically diverse, foresty mountain environment, currently denuded for winter.

He sits on the opened tray at the rear of his little hatchback vehicle, short, crooked legs swinging free. He has turned his bright blue baseball cap sideways to the right to keep the sun out of his eyes from the west in its low trajectory at this solstitial time of year, like some young rap artist gone to seed, his goods arrayed around him, some packaged in plastic, others displayed in small open hessian bags begging to be tasted or smelt, and in buckets on the ground in front of him, near where he has thrown his aluminium elbow crutches, easily overlooked.

Shrivalled apricots, figs and sultanas, dusted white with their sugary remains; almonds, walnuts and chestnuts with their russet shades redolent of autumn when they were gathered; desiccated rosemary and oregano, chamomile and a herbal mixture for tisanes, some seasonal apples for freshness, none with tags or

prices, all beckoning for attention, while he draws it away from them to himself by his mesmeric jabbering, the waving about of his arms, the wagging of his legs, like a baby propped up on its father's lap, nodding his head now towards the monastery up the hill, now to the gates of the cemetery to his left, now skywards.

His face carries some of the characteristics of his products: tanned, leathery skin, dried, shrivelled and wrinkled by age and sun, eyes squinting and hardened by what they have seen yet still lively, mouth thin and tense with a slight ironic, larrikin twist, his neck wizened and reptilian.

In fact, for the few who might understand his babbling, he is telling stories: stories about the cemetery, stories of the men buried in the cemetery, stories of the visitors to the men buried in the cemetery; stories of the monastery, of the monastery's garden, of the giant exotic trees in its garden, of its construction, decline and renovation, of its destruction, rescue and restoration, of its inhabitants, original, past and present. It is never quite clear, especially to any listeners with the linguistic skills to understand the stories, whether they are true, totally fabricated, or a bewitching concoction brewed from any number of those observations he has made over the years, something akin to one of his mixed herbal blends.

And so, on this crisp, sunny, winter's day, he tells the story of the eucalypt trees in the monastery garden, the only trees there now with any foliage, having easily recognised that near-universal word eucalyptus in the otherwise incomprehensible question, to a young Australian from Warrnambool on that continent's southern coast. He has asked about them, in English, as any Australian would naturally ask about them having seen them in that alien environment, before they might ask why there would be a German War Cemetery just here in the middle of a Spanish nowhere, if they asked anything at all.

He has chosen the word eucalyptus carefully and avoided using the homespun term, gumtree, for reasonable fear of it being incomprehensible to anyone but Australians.

The young man from Warrnambool had just been to the monastery. He is interested in the history of those times of Hispanic glory, and, having noticed the gate and wall to the cemetery on his way up there from his hotel down the mountainside in the town of Cuacos, made a mental note to pull in and investigate it on his way back.

While at the monastery he had been struck by the massive trees native to and emblematic of his country, here in this isolated place on the other side of the

world. He had questioned staff about the trees' history and significance, as best he could for nobody spoke a word of English at this major tourist attraction, but all he received were shrugs and shaking of heads.

So now he listened, transfixed, as Senyor Gutierrez began to tell him the tale, unable to disengage himself from the narrative's spell as it unfolded, beholden to him in the knowledge that the old man was telling this story especially for him, or at least so it appeared, and was clearly responding to his question, the import of which he had recognised only by that key word the young man had used, eucalyptus, the same in Spanish and English from its Greek origin meaning "well-covered", referring to its flowers' little cap, weaving it back again and again into his otherwise almost unfathomable text.

The young man comprehended as much as his imagination could construct, with the bare essentials of that compelling word, eucalyptus, along with others like Terra Incognita, Terra Australis, some terms common to most European languages, and some basic Spanish he had studied before coming on his personal study tour of Iberian churches and monasteries.

Well then, Emperor Charles the Fifth of the Holy Roman Empire, and King Charles the First of Spain (indeed, he was also Charles the Second, the Third,

and the Fourth, plus Duke, Archduke, Count and Margrave of various other territorial concepts), maintained his rule for forty years in the first half of the sixteenth century, Senyor Gutierrez began, settling quickly into a rhythmic tempo which discouraged any interruption. He was a keen gardener and avid botanist, in addition to being lord of an empire where two temperate seasons, along with a tropical climate, as well as any hour of the day or night, prevailed somewhere on earth at any one time, as indeed on which, equally, the sun was always shining. Charles was Belgian, son of Philip the Handsome, also a Belgian and so-called for no apparent reason judging from extant portraits, and grew up in Ghent, whose inhabitants are known as “noose-bearers” because of Charles’ harsh treatment of them, a city with a very chequered history to this day. He lived his early life surrounded by perfectly ordered and maintained gardens of exquisite design which were not only beautiful but utilitarian, providing luscious taste sensations for the picking, something Charles liked to do as he walked around enjoying the ambience, learning, and making suggestions for improvements.

When it came time for Charles, or Carlos of course, here in Spain, to retire, it seemed reasonable that not only should he spend his time in prayer making peace

with his God who had given him constant guidance through his momentous life, but that he should also allow himself some indulgence in his lifetime interests, interests which his duties had precluded him from fully enjoying as much as he would have liked to, at least at a level which permitted patient and practical participation.

The monastery at Yuste had been built by local artisans for the Jeronimite order over one hundred years previously. The area was well known to be particularly enchanting, as well as fertile and bountiful. Its climate also allowed for a greater range of horticultural produce to thrive than was the case further north. It was a perfect choice, and Don Carlos gave orders for the monastery to be refurbished, extended and generally upgraded for his occupancy, to include a chapel, his personal apartment, rooms for staff and extensive gardens.

He had always delighted in having botanists bring him exotic specimens from the many corners of his far-flung dominion and seeing them flourish on one of his estates. The orchard at the monastery, which lay just below his new apartment, had been generously – if it is possible to be said to be generous with regard to the request of an Emperor – given over to him by the monks so that he could easily wander down there

whenever he desired.

The work proceeded piecemeal as he gradually extricated himself from his responsibilities of state, though it was delayed, as such work so often is at any level of engagement, forcing Charles to lodge with other equally generous subjects along the route to Yuste once he finally set out on that journey into retirement.

The period of Charles' reign had also been one of continuing world exploration and discovery on an explosive scale. Whenever he could, Don Carlos had immersed himself in the details of these endeavours, sending ships and navigators around the world on voyages into the unknown, among other things, and making sure he was kept informed of all developments in matters of general science, cartography, astronomy, commerce, language, public administration and botany.

The fierce rivalry between the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs was restrained by marital ties and their shared Catholicism, overlorded by their common Pope to whom they deferred, though this did not mean they would refrain from attempting to sway his decisions.

From this there had emerged a division of the entire world into two parts, one half, or close to one

half, as there was some contention about it, for each side. While restrained at the higher levels, the rivalry was still cut-throat and at times erupted into outright, if somewhat controlled conflict at levels of daily engagement.

The stakes were extremely high, no less than world domination. Both sides strived for gains and were willing to take significant risks to achieve their ends. Charles knew the Portuguese were planning excursions in search of a southern Terra Incognita and considered it his duty to match their efforts, even though these adventures could bring him into conflict with Portugal and threatened dire consequences for him if his representatives strayed across the demarcation line.

This imaginary, very imaginary, line was something in our age akin to us drawing a line around the moon before we had been there or even seen its dark side. Its positioning followed detailed research and argument, ran right around the globe as a meridian, extending from the north pole south to the spice islands and into the unknown, very near to where you come from, Senyor Gutierrez, nodding his way, acknowledged to the young man, and was sanctioned by the Pope himself.

Charles therefore secretly commissioned an

experienced navigator, one, Manuel Rodriguez Garcia, in whom he had implicit confidence, originally of Plasencia, coincidentally not far from the monastery at Yuste, and from a farming family, which also therefore gave him a broad understanding of the natural world, to prepare two galleons and sail in search of Terra Incognita. The Capitan was instructed to make maps, look for commercial opportunities, collect botanical specimens, interact with native peoples in order to understand their ways and learn their languages, and naturally, to spread the gospel wherever possible, then to bring such information and specimens back to him personally. All of this would go undocumented in its preparation and would only be communicated personally to Charles himself on their return. This was crucial. Success was less central than secrecy.

At this point, with the afternoon shadows lengthening, the Australian needed to ask for a break as he had been hanging on every word that Senyor Gutierrez spoke, straining as best he could to pick up the merest understanding, and becoming totally immersed in the atmosphere being created.

He was helped in following the story more as it unfolded by the theatrical gesticulations of the old man as he rambled; that, as well as by the key words he would occasionally recognise, coupled with his

knowledge of the history of the time, especially as it applied to the explorations of the unknown southern seas around his own country.

He interrupted the flow, indicated by gesture his dry mouth, and asked in English, though it might be of little additional usefulness, for a drink. The old man reached into the back of his vehicle and pulled out a leather bota, handing it to the Australian who managed to aim a stream of the wine into his mouth long enough to slake his thirst.

His legs had become very tired having stood for so long, so he then eased himself down onto the ground and sat cross-legged to listen some more, not unlike some schoolboy before his teacher. The old man bent down and picked out some figs to give him to go with the wine, indicating in a not uncomplimentary way his recognition of the Australian's capable manipulation of the traditional drinking vessel, and then continued, eager as he was himself to get on with the story.

Capitan Garcia, a name I share not by any coincidence with him by the way, a man of solid build, great internal strength, steadfast character and considerable talents, duly set off with his ships and crew from Cadiz to find the Great South Land one day towards the end of Charles' reign.

Nothing whatsoever was heard of them, partly

because of the covert nature of the mission, but mainly because they had sailed literally into the unknown and therefore they were incommunicado, until, almost two years later, they suddenly appeared again, less one galleon and much of the crew, in Cadiz harbour, like some migrating bird which miraculously finds its way back to its nesting place.

Senyor Gutierrez broke off here and looked directly at the Australian, adding as an aside in a softer voice, and hinting of a great significance:

“Of course, the story of the voyage of Capitan Garcia is one of great adventure and excitement, but must wait for another opportunity before it can be told.”

Don Carlos, Senyor Gutierrez resumed in his former manner, by this time, though held in high esteem everywhere, was no longer King and only technically still Emperor, and had withdrawn and ensconced himself at Yuste, tending to his garden, his toys, his appetite and his soul. Yet, still, the Capitan, loyal to his liege and the oath he had made to him, refused to divulge any information about the voyage to others, insisting on making his way to the monastery at Yuste and presenting himself to Charles.

This he did, after a short period of recuperation in Jerez de la Frontera, travelling mainly by boat to

Sevilla, as he was still wedded to his recent life on water and needed to ease his way back into terrestrial ways, and then by horseback through Extramadura to Merida and Caceres, Plasencia and finally Cuacos de Yuste. Charles had by now been well informed of the Capitan's return and approach, and had readied his court to receive him.

The Capitan left his small retinue to remain in the town of Cuacos, not yet adorned with its monument to the King, and rode the final stage up the mountainside alone so that he would be undisturbed in his audience with Don Carlos, one that had to be kept totally and forever secret.

They met in the private apartment that Charles had had prepared for himself in the monastery. It was not large, but comfortable, with a grand fireplace making the room quite hot when lit, and accommodated the special chair with an extension at the front to support one of his gouty legs in a raised position, for Charles was certainly not an abstemious monarch.

The Capitan noticed and admired the many fine clocks on the walls, several made especially for the King by his resident Italian mechanic, Giovanni Turriano (Juanelo we called him here in Spain), and all set at different times to remind Charles, it is said, of the reach of his former empire, although it may just

as easily have been to remind him of the inexorable passing of his life, something which would have fed his tendency to melancholy. There were many rich tapestries, artworks by Titian, hand-made puppets and other toys, weapons, and a glorious sculptured falcon in solid gold given to him by the Knights of Malta, a special treasure amongst so many treasures.

Capitan Garcia could see that the once-Emperor was now seriously ailing. He had draped around his shoulders a shawl in imperial purple, perhaps as a token gesture towards his previous stature, but which only succeeded in making him appear frail. He moved slowly and painfully, had grown thin and bent, his lower torso distended, but, even so, his mind was keen and he showed a genuine enthusiasm to see his loyal servant again. Speaking, naturally, to his Spanish subject in Castilian, which he regarded in any case as the language of God despite his native French, he encouraged the Capitan to rest and eat and, only at his leisure, reveal the wonders he had encountered.

All this Capitan Garcia acceded to and they spoke casually of his family and the last part of his journey and some matters of local interest to them both. Present up to this point was Charles' chief steward, Luis de Quijada, in whom Carlos had the utmost confidence and to whom he confided some of his most

intimate secrets, even to such length as his latter-day celebration of paternity of his illegitimate youngest child – Jeronimo by name, whether by coincidence or not – entrusting the boy to his care. Nevertheless, once the Capitan indicated he was ready to proceed, eager as he was to please his king, Charles motioned to Quirada to leave them; such was the profound secrecy of the mission.

Once Quijada had removed himself, after some fussing about to show his irritation, and they were alone, Capitan Garcia began, adopting a less informal pose for his new purpose:

“Your Majesty, I can bring you wondrous tales of new lands and peoples, and information which undoubtedly will be of great value to you and all the realm, but, alas, I have been able to bring back few items of such value as I would have wished to.”

Here, Senyor Gutierrez displayed a further dimension to his discursive abilities, making great moment of throwing his arms about, and creating a powerful image of the men speaking, to the extent of adapting his voice and even his accent to the scene.

“Tell me, and show me, all, whatever it may be, for I am coming to the end of my days and am greedy for as much in the way of knowledge as I can devour before it is all over for me here in this world and I go to

meet judgment before my maker,” Charles urged him.

“Your Majesty,” the Capitan resumed, “there is indeed a Great South Land, a Terra Australis, no longer Incognita, so extensive that it rivals the Americas. But it is an inhospitable place, dry, hot, sparse and empty in parts, beaten by constant tempests in others, devoid of any riches such as gold and silver or spices or edible fruits or grains, peopled by savages as black as any Kaffir, but without signs of ordered society either present or past, with no dwellings of any substance, nor with a tongue that would allow any civilised man to ever understand them, and therefore sadly beyond the reach of attempts we might make to bring them into the Lord’s flock; inhabited by strange animals, some with deer-heads and withered front legs, which bound in great leaps upright on their tails and whose offspring can return to their mother’s womb and be born again any time they choose, but nevertheless which have no potential for any kind of human use, not even by the natives, being so wild and so poorly formed, save to be eaten, and then even with a harsh flavour and dry texture.”

Capitan Garcia at this point leant forward a little.

“And there also,” the Capitan whispered, “I was confronted by ships of the King of Portugal.”

The Emperor frowned, leaned back and remained

silent for some time.

“Tell me what then occurred,” finally he uttered.

“We engaged with two caravelhos, sire, but the weather conditions did not allow us to approach them closely enough and they fled westwards. We did not want to pursue them in that direction for fear of violating the antimeridian and risking the consequences.”

Charles nodded and listened intently while the Capitan gave more details of his expedition, the latter expressing apologetically his disappointment and shame with the little he could offer. Eventually, once he had described all he could, he paused and spoke in a different, lower, conspiratorial tone:

“Your Majesty, there are just two things of value I can humbly present you with, as a consequence of all my endeavours. The first are these maps, roughly drawn no doubt, but I believe forming the basis for any further exploration that may be carried out in the future, however unlikely and unprofitable that may be, for the benefit of the realm and to the glory of God.”

The Capitan unfolded several parchment-like sheets and the two men spent some time then poring over and discussing with great interest and concentration these separate pieces of cartography which had been created on board ship purely by eye

and judgement while sailing in all conditions, and were consequently of a rough style.

After some time Charles collected them together and passed them to one of his courtiers, summoned by him in German for this purpose, as Charles believed it to be the language of command, telling Capitan Garcia that they would be copied and reconstructed by the King's personal French cartographers and then be the subject of much more study later, and thanking him profusely. The Capitan then returned to his presentation.

“And second ...”

Here, he paused and reached into his apparel to pull out a large leather purse, untying its thonging and bringing out a few small, rough-shaped and knobby objects, each about the size of a pebble. Some, which were waxy, in a turquoise colour with a bulbous cap on their tops, not unlike the skullcap or zucchetto of a priest or cardinal, could almost have been opals fashioned into brooches or some kind of bauble or button; others were a flakey, dark, woody brown without the cap, some of these with the shape of a cross on their flat tops, apparently created by some cracking of the indented surface.

“... in contrast to all the other plants and flora which we observed which were clearly of little value,

but which I have brought back samples of and will provide you with nevertheless, in one particular place where we landed and explored a little, we came across some magnificent trees, giants in a forest of giants, taller than anything we had ever before seen in all our life or travels, straight as a galleon's main mast, hard and strong, and with enough timber in each of them to build one hundred ships. All around the base of those leviathans we found and gathered these nuts," (and at this point, holding them out for Don Carlos to look at, the Capitan used the Spanish word bellota for acorn, and not the word nuez for nut, or sencilla for seed – and indeed, these strange objects, though they were themselves whole, looked as if they could be the rough top half of some bizarre acorn) "which we have brought back so that, we believe, we can germinate and reproduce those great structures here, to the glory of God and the benefit of the realm, Your Majesty."

Don Carlos took the objects – which were in fact gumnuts, as I have heard others from Australia like yourself call them, Senyor Gutierrez said more quietly to the young man, he in turn astonished at catching that word, mangled but still recognisable, coming so unexpectedly from the mouth of the old man – turning them around in his fingers, squeezing and shaking them next to his ear, and finally sniffing them.