

## Linus Reichlin - Señor Herrera's Blossoming Intuition

Sample translation Shaun Whiteside 11.11.2021

Do you know it?, I asked. Santa María de Bonval, nope, never heard of it, the taxi driver said. It's near Hornachuelos, I said. That's going to cost you, he said, that's a two-hour journey, do you want a hire car, my brother-in-law can do you a good price. I said, a hire car's no use to me in the monastery, I'm going to be there for three weeks. Ah, the driver said, three weeks, now I get it, you want a bit of peace, stress at work, burn-out. No, I thought, not stress at work, nice quiet work, work like watching birds on a warm summer afternoon. Yes, peace, I said, nothing but the sound of twittering birds all day, I'm ready to go, what about you? *Tómalo con calma!*, the driver said. Once we were on the expressway he asked me if I was from *the other side*. I said, no, but my mother was from Chile. You can hear that, he said, bloody idiot. He meant the motorcyclist who had just pulled out in front of him.

Málaga drifted past the car window. Before we got married Liliane had been with a *Málagaño*. First time here?, the driver asked, I said, mine yes, but my wife was in love with one of yours, before we got married, obviously, have you found it on your satnav? The monastery, he said, no, it's not on it, but don't worry, I've found a bunch of different addresses. So she married you and not the Málagaño? She's a yoga teacher and he was a wine merchant, I said. Ah, yoga, very healthy, the taxi driver said, children? A daughter, I said. An athletic wife, the taxi driver said, a daughter and then you've got a lot of work going on at your job all the time, these days the boss rings people up on their wedding night, you've always got to be available, no wonder the old ticker packs in eventually. I see you're wearing a smartwatch, it just struck me, does it measure your blood pressure too? No!, I said. What else did he want to know, how many leucocytes I had at the moment? No, it just measured the pulse, and mine was too high, and that was why I was on my way to the monastery, to bring my resting pulse down, *we've got to bring your resting pulse back down to earth*, my cardiologist said.

That watch even counts the steps you take, doesn't it?, the driver said and squinted curiously at my fitness tracker in the rear-view mirror. I'm interested in digital technology as a matter of fact, he said. I pressed the side button on the tracker, and the number 95 appeared on the display. My first pulse measurement in Andalusia, I dedicated the measurement to Liliane, the tracker was *my gift to your health*. For somebody sitting in a taxi and whose only

exertion was talking with a Chilean accent, it was a remarkably high resting pulse. My cardiologist would have slapped me.

Then two hours' drive through the region of Andalusian, which wasn't as I'd imagined it, older, wilder, but everything freshly painted. Weren't the Winnetou films shot in Andalusia? Where had the endless stony deserts gone since then? No, Winnetou was filmed in Yugoslavia, the driver said, I expect you mean *Game of Thrones*, they filmed that in Seville. But as we approached the Sierra Norte I got the kind of region I'd been longing for, the landscape here let you imagine yourself getting hopelessly lost and having to lick dew off the rocks in an emergency.

The taxi driver stopped on an unpaved road near the house of a farmer who was leaning against a dust-encrusted pick-up. Stretched out on the bed of the vehicle, sawn-off holm oak trunks extended their branches into the air as if calling for help. The taxi driver lowered the window and asked the farmer the way to the *monastério*. You've come the wrong way, the farmer said, there's no *ministério* here, it's in Seville, you'll recognise it by all the empty wine bottles in the bin. Not *ministério*, the taxi driver said, *monastério*, Santa María de Bonval. Oh that, the farmer said. Then he didn't say another word. Yes, that, the taxi driver said, it must be somewhere nearby. No, the farmer said, it isn't nearby. It is, it's nearby, the taxi driver said, the farmer asked, who was born here, you or me? While they were arguing about the relative merits of being born here or in Málaga, I got out and inhaled the warm, damp evening air. I rested my left leg on the bonnet and leaned forward until my finger-tips touched my ankle. I couldn't get all the way to my toes, but Liliane could. She had taught me that yoga exercise, which is normally performed without a car. Even amateur yoga stretches a muscle or two, that's the good thing about it, and the farmer and the taxi driver staring at me blankly is something I'm used to from giving readings, I stopped worrying about baffling audiences a long time ago. What I was doing was *purvottanasana* for the arms, although this time I managed a passable backward bend, I could see behind me with my head upside down and in the distance I saw an upside-down building on a cliff that looked as if somebody had bitten a chunk out of it.

Wasn't that the monastery? I pointed it out to the taxi driver, who said he was short-sighted. The farmer said, that's Santa María de Bonval, a monastery. That's what we asked you!, I said, the farmer said, no, you asked me if there was a monastery nearby, and Santa María de Bonval isn't nearby. You can't get there on this road, you'll have to turn around and take the CP-002 to Hornachuelos, not the A-3151. It's over an hour's drive from here, and you city people call that *nearby*?

They stop at sunset, the taxi driver shouted, he heaved my suitcase out of the boot and set it down on the dusty courtyard of the monastery. That's how it is in the country, he said, cicadas all day, you can't hear a word you're saying. Sometimes that's not a bad thing!, I shouted. When thousands of cicadas set your eardrums vibrating and imitate the sound of a circular saw, at least not every word has to be weighed.

They should have filmed this monastery in *Game of Thrones* as well, the taxi driver said, it must be a hundred years old. A thousand, I said, he said, yes, you can see that, it needs renovating, but the Church has no money left, it used to be rich, but now it's bringing priests in from Morocco because they're cheaper. We were standing by the monastery wall, which had sunk into the ground beneath its own weight over time, and developed a bulge. Some of the battlements were still in place, the buildings with the Romanesque window arches lurked behind them so that they were protected if they were fired on; the concerns of the 10th century were still on display here. A low, deep archway, for the small people and small horses of those times, ended in a door made of thick, cracked wood, its planks held together with rusty iron fittings. I took a quick photograph of the monastery and sent it to Liliane with a text message: *Take a look at this! It's prettier than in the photograph on the internet, they've understated it out of Christian modesty. PS the tracker works!*

I watched the cloud of dust as the taxi driver headed back in the direction of Málaga. I wanted to be let in now, I wanted to have a shower, they mentioned a shower on the internet, *Guest rooms with modern shower and en-suite toilet*. I couldn't find either a bell or a lion's-head knocker on the monastery gate, how on earth did you get in? The cicadas were starting to get on my nerves after all, the noise was an outrage perpetrated by nature. I called the contact number for 'guest administration' that I'd stored on my phone before setting off – no answer. I awarded minus points to the guest administrator. I already had a more critical view of the monastery too. It was romantic, no question, but precisely because it was dilapidated. Nobody seemed to care about the painted lead-glass windows that were set into the semi-circular window arches, with spider's-web cracks in places, and a tower with a now indecipherable coat of arms protruded from the wall like a rotten tooth.

I sat down on my suitcase and called Liliane. She said, well, how's my hermit, looks lovely, your monastery, what's the food like? Is that the noise of a building site? Are doing some building work? I said, no, it's the cicadas, but they'll stop in two hours' time, as soon as

the sun goes down. Liliane, can you hear me? Liliane!, I shouted – suddenly I felt the weight of a hand on my shoulder. A man had put it there, he said: don't try to be louder than the cicadas, it'll get you nowhere. You have to be quieter than they are, like me, you can hear that, I'm speaking quietly, and yet you can hear me very distinctly.

He introduced himself: Juan Carlos Herrera. Cook and guest administrator. Liliane, I said, I've got to go, the cook and guest administrator is here, I love you, and hung up. The guest administrator's face looked familiar, he said, yes, I know, I look like Fernandel, the French actor, a lot of older people say that. People who aren't so old, like me, say it too, I said, I saw the films about Don Camillo and Peppone when I was little, Fernandel played Don Camillo. I'll have to see the films one day, Señor Herrera said, by the time *I* was little they'd stopped showing them. He really did look very like Fernandel, the wiry black hair, the peasant face, thick-set, exactly the sort of face you want to see if your car breaks down at night and you need someone to help.

Señor Herrera carried my suitcase along the monastery wall, from which another, lower wall branched off. Through the narrow gate in this one we entered a garden with lemon trees and an old well turned with a crank. The garden led to a cloister. The Ionic columns, some of them supported by steel rods, were *original*, as Señor Herrera put it. I ran my hand over one of the columns, which had become greasy over the centuries from all the hands like mine that had inevitably wanted to touch them. The cloister led to a secular annex of bare concrete, added on lovelessly in more recent times, with iron reinforcing rods sticking out of the flat roof: the guest wing.

Señor Herrera shoved the plywood door open with his foot and set my suitcase down by the bed. It was a room that you didn't want to look at too closely. The only window was practically walled shut, since the cloister wall was right in front of it. The window opens inward, Herrera said, and showed me how it opened inward. All windows open inwards, I said, but this one couldn't open outwards because the wall's so close. You are quite right, Herrera said, do you like the room? I said, how many nuns actually live in the monastery/ I would say four, he said, I always cook for four if there are no guests, so it must be four, unless the abbess gets two portions, no idea. Shouldn't you know, I asked, after all you live here with the sisters? He laughed. It's a Trappist monastery, he said, I don't live with the sisters. I work in the kitchen, and the sisters live in the monastery, there's no contact, I'm not Jesus. They talk to him, but even the Pope wouldn't get a word out of them, they don't even speak to each other, they have taken a vow of silence. No, I have no contact with them, I deal with the professional side of things, paying the wages, the whole organisation, with the office

in Madrid. I understand, I said, the office talks to you. Yes, Madrid talks to me, Herrera said, the brothers in Madrid aren't Trappists, they're relaxed Cistercians. Relaxed?, I asked. Among the Cistercians there are some who live according to relaxed rules, Herrera said, and some of the *Strict Observance*, as they call it. The Trappists here in Santa María de Bonval are of the Strict Observance, I would even say very strict observance, they're actually hermits.

Does that mean I can't participate in monastery life?, I asked, in shared meals, in regular prayers? Herrera said, didn't you read the small print? It's on the website, it says: *Food and accommodation, not: eating and chatting and sitting around in the kitchen with Cistercian nuns of the Strict Observance*. No, I said, it didn't say that, it said: *Experience the authentic monastery atmosphere, participate in monastery life*. This is the monastery atmosphere!, Herrera said, pointing at the narrow bed, the small table, the even smaller chair and, by way of compensation, the very large crucifix over the bed, you *are* in a monastery or at least *near* a monastery, and if you want to take part in monastery life then don't say another word for three weeks starting now, do me that favour. Instead of complaining to me as soon as you've got here! Dinner's in an hour, served in the garden, you get the same as the nuns, except with fish, is that all right for you?

He left and I thought, he's right, it's my fault, I should have taken a closer look, I never look closely enough, the rubbish hotels I've ended up in because I was too lazy to look at the pictures of the rooms, now I'm stuck in a monastery with hermit nuns! How was I supposed to do research into monastery life if I wasn't allowed to set foot in the monastery? That had been one of the two aims of my journey: first to research monastery life, second to find out why my peaceful life stressed me out just as much as a life under constant time pressure would have done. As regards my research, it was about Lena Seidel, the character I had spent months thinking about in connection with the concept for my new novel. She was forced to hide in a monastery, disguised as a nun. I had come here to learn how she lived in the monastery, and now the monastery was closed to me because I hadn't spotted the bit about *Strict Observance*. On the other hand: vow of silence. Wasn't that a good idea? Lena Seidel, has to hide, far from Germany, in Spain. But she speaks no Spanish. In any monastery other than a Trappist one she would immediately be unmasked as a foreigner. But here, among nuns that not even the Pope would be able to get a word out of, she is safe. Very good. Wonderful coincidence. True, the problem of not being able to research monastery life from inside persisted, but the idea of using the vow of silence to remain unnoticed as a foreigner was entirely worth it. So I was in the right place, thanks to my failure to read the small print

on the monastery website. When it came to making productive mistakes, I could rely on myself completely.

The garden with the lemon trees dozed in the evening light, a lizard wriggled up the side of the well, but insects were active too. A bluish beetle crawled over the circular marble table that I was sitting at. Luckily for it, I knew Bertrand Russell's definition of evil: *Going out of one's way to crush a beetle*. The warmth of the evening air, the silence, at long last, of the cicadas, the scents, rosemary, pine resin, thyme, but where did that strong smell of herbs come from? The monastery garden? I wrote Liliane a message: *The warmth, the silence of the cicadas, my darling, the peace, all for my contentment, and where does this strong smell of herbs come from?* I wrote that I missed her, and certainly, yes, I did miss her, but in a pleasurable way. I deleted *all for my contentment*.

Herrera brought the food and a carafe of wine on an olive-wood tray. He apologised for his earlier reproach to me for complaining, and said he was having pains in his leg today. Only now did I notice that he was standing at an angle to take the weight off his painful leg. He said that when his leg hurt he sometimes became a little *peppery*. I said that was fine, it was my mistake, I should have read the small print. He said there were lovely hiking paths in the Sierra Norte, he would be happy to recommend some hikes for me. But eat! Eat before it gets cold.

On my plate a slice of fish lay on some vegetable purée. Was it vegetable purée? The fish tasted of absolutely nothing, not even of cardboard. The vegetable purée, in turn, was a complex culinary composition in which the tastes of the individual ingredients completely neutralized one another. There had to be a knack to that. Even in very badly cooked dishes, one particular flavour is generally detectable: not here. Yes, I'd love that, I said, I would really love you to recommend some nice hikes for me. As long, I thought, as the route leads past a restaurant.

Down in the village, Herrera said, Holy Mass is read on Wednesdays, Fridays and of course on Sundays. But you can also pray at all other times in the village church. It's an hour on foot to the village, two hours, I don't know, I never go down there on foot. Or you can order a taxi, it will come from Hornachuelos. But I can also take you there by car, if you let me know in advance. Then you can pray in the church, I'll do the shopping, and after that I can drive you back. I thought, he thinks I want to take part in monastery life because I'm a believer, careful what you say now! I said, that's very kind of you, but I would like to relax here, at work, that is, I had hoped to be able to do some research into monastery life. A monastery plays a major role in the concept of my new novel. Ah, I understand, Herrera said,

a novel! You're a writer! Yes, exactly, I said. Like Miguel de Cervantes, Herrera said. Well yes, I said, perhaps the comparison isn't entirely appropriate. Like Gabriel García Márquez then, Herrera said, I said, in principle, theoretically, I do the same thing as he does, I write, yes. And what, Herrera asked, is your novel about, if you don't mind me asking? It isn't yet a novel, I said, I'm still only working on the concept. Eat, Herrera said, eat, it won't taste nice when it's cold. Yes of course, I said.

The novel, I said, rinsing my mouth out with wine, is about a woman by the name of Lena Seidel. She's a fabric designer and commutes between Milan, London and Berlin; her life is based entirely around the frantic accumulation of money and success. But then by chance she witnesses a murder committed by the head of a Lebanese mafia clan, he shoots his brother, jealousy. Lena Seidel testifies against the clan boss in the trial, and when he swears to have her killed she is put on a witness protection programme. After an unsuccessful attempt on her life she is hidden abroad by the police, in a Cistercian monastery, in fact, where she must live disguised as a nun, living a life that is utterly alien to her. It sounds like a thriller but it isn't, I say, not at all, it's a study of a woman who finds herself living a completely different life from one day to the next, you see? Oh yes, Herrera said, I see, I see very clearly, I only ask how you could know that? How I could know what?, I asked, and he sat down at my table.

So this woman is hiding in a monastery?, he asked, I said, yes, that's the idea, why? Did you really know?, he asked, or is it a coincidence, forgive me for asking you so directly, but as you can imagine, I'm a little bit thrown right now. I myself didn't know at first, alright, let's not exaggerate: I didn't know, but I guessed. I suspected from the outset that something wasn't right about her, and now you turn up and tell me the same thing. You, a foreigner, setting foot in this beautiful monastery for the first time. I said, Señor Herrera, I don't know what you're talking about, there's something not right about who?, I asked. About Sister Ana María, he said, who else. Who is that, I asked, one of the sisters? A nun, Herrera said, he looked around the garden and said, I'm not sure if it's a good idea for us to talk about it here, because if what you've just told me is true, the lemon trees may have ears. I waited for a laugh from him, but none came. I can't, he said, take you into the kitchen, guests are only allowed in the guest section, orders of the provincialate. Madrid, I said. Yes, Madrid, he said, we could take a walk, no one can listen to us in the mountains, but I have no time to go for walks. So we have to discuss it here. What do we have to discuss, Señor Herrera?, I said.

Herrera took a swig from my glass, he apologised and said he was very worked up, he needed a swig of wine and he didn't want to drink from the bottle. A year ago, he said, a new

nun had joined the monastery. Sister Ana María. About thirty years old, perhaps a little older, I have only seen her from a distance. And you know, he asked, how she arrived here? By car?, I said. By taxi, Herrera said. By taxi from Hornachuelos, but the driver wasn't Ramón. Not Ramón, I said, I see, and what's unusual about that? Do you take a taxi to your wedding?, Herrera asked. I haven't done so far, I said. A Cistercian, he said, doesn't take a taxi to the monastery where she is going to spend the rest of her life. She comes on foot, because she has first travelled by train, then by bus to our village, and from there she carries her suitcase with her few possessions on foot all the way here, to the monastery. But all right, Herrera said, it isn't completely unthinkable for a nun to come by taxi, I don't deny that. But then the driver should have been Ramón. There is no taxi in the village, only in Hornachuelos, they have only one car, and the driver is Ramón, that's how it's been for thirty years. But that day a tall, powerfully-built, shaven-headed fellow was driving the taxi, the sort of person you see in one of those films that start with an explosion. He wore sunglasses like the ones that only tourists wear, at any rate a local wouldn't, what do you think? I can't judge, I said, I didn't see him, and I don't know anything about films that start with an explosion. You shouldn't play down your merits, Señor Renz, Herrera said. You even know a great deal about this matter, otherwise you wouldn't have known that Sister Ana María was hiding here.

Just a moment, I said, I never claimed any such thing! Lena Seidel hides in a monastery, but she's a character in a novel, like Don Quixote, although not nearly as legendary. She only exists here. I tapped my forehead. My friend, Herrera said, draining my glass, I don't wish to argue about your talent. I'm just saying that Sister Ana María was brought here by a foreign taxi driver, and that wasn't the only thing that made me uncomfortable. There was something else. Something much more important.

Herrera fell silent, a dramatic pause, I said, all right then, tell me.

She doesn't look like a Spanish woman, he said. That needn't be a drawback, I said. That's not what I mean, Herrera said, but it's odd, you must admit, a foreigner joining this monastery? Foreigner, I said, how do you know that, or have you had some kind of contact with her? You said contact with the nuns was forbidden, and you'd only seen this Ana María from a distance. What a strange person; by now I had a strong wish to confront him with his contradictions. Herrera raised his hands, dropped them on to his massive thighs, raised them again. You know what it's like, he said. You're a writer, you know that people are curious by nature. Yes, I saw her from a distance when she arrived here. After that, though, a few times from far away, but the binoculars shortened the distance. The binoculars?, I asked, he said,

I'd really rather not talk about that, you see, I'm ashamed of it. But I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I only observed her two or three times, I say *observed* but it was more *seeing* really, I saw her, in the monastery garden. Sister Ana María struck me as a little curious, that's all, I had this suspicion that something wasn't quite right about her, and I'm in good company there, because you think exactly the same.

No!, I said. I don't think exactly the same. I don't know that sister at all. Neither do I, Herrera said, I just know that she isn't Spanish, I say *know*, but it's more than knowing: it's a clear feeling. Señor Herrera, I said, when I published my first novel, I had the feeling that no human being had ever written anything as good, but the reaction of the literary critics taught me not to equate feelings with knowledge. Yeah, Herrera said, whatever. I think we can agree that if a foreigner had to hide somewhere, the best possible place would be here with us in Andalusia, in a monastery that imposed a vow of silence. Among the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. She doesn't speak Spanish, but who would notice that here, the sisters don't even tell each other to enjoy their meal, that's how silent they are. But why am I telling you this, it's all in your novel. Not novel, I said, it's only a concept for a novel, and I don't plan for it to be prophetic. As you wish, then, concept it is, Herrera said, and clapped me on the shoulder, but right now it's time for me to do the washing up, by hand, the monastery can't afford a dishwasher, which is why the sisters are happy with any paying guest they can get. Let's just let everything sink in for now, buenas noches.