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Opening Extract from...

Last Sardana

Written by Ray Harwood

Published by Matador

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LAST SARDANA

Book I

Ray Harwood

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ISBN 978-1784623-302

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall



Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd



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THE SARDANA 'INTROIT'

There must be something to be learned from the time when, sometime in the 16th century, the natural instincts of first one couple, then others, all entered into the fun and celebrations of a village festival, linking hands and forming a circle in which to express themselves in dance.

The Sardana, as it came to be called in the Catalan region of Spain, meant unity to those who were party to following the music with such certainty and daring, in response to the rhythm and interpretation of a travelling Cobla band.

Family units were often the village foundations from which to set up the circular team line and to begin, in unison, their small, concise, fairly simple formal steps. The Sardana has point and bounce, just as many families do (we hope), and the pace of the dance quickens and slows to allow emotions to spill out.

The "introit" is played by a flaviol and the dance starts with a tap on a small tambori drum. The circles then flow in traditional patterns, which it is customary for those participating to follow in a disciplined but fun way.

The Martinez family, at the beginning of the development of the Costa Brava region on the Catalan coast, were to follow that set tradition.

It was also evident that, to pen a story against such a backdrop, I too would need my chain if I were to try and follow, on my terms, uncharted and imaginary beginnings.

The support and encouragement of my wife Dean, who has been on hand to help with the spellings or to fill in the odd memory out of which to develop an original idea, have been beyond the call of any matrimonial vows. OK, so as I tend to write on vacation, which takes us worldwide, that has been some consolation. So hopefully chatting through breakfast in Jolly Harbour, Antigua, after dinner at Pelangi Beach in Langkawi, Malaysia, or over lunch in the Hotel Arts, Barcelona, has been something of a thank you and an apology for this intruding hobby.

Frequent accompaniment on rounds of golf at the Hotel Golf in Santa Ponsa, Majorca, the undisturbed peace and quiet at the poolside and the help on hand from Emma de Reus, with permission from her husband Peter, the

proprietors, for the occasional Spanish translation have surely been a plus, to add more authenticity to the storyline. Busy writing days usually terminated with dinner on the terrace or superb steaks at El Ciebo or fish at Rheno, which in a different era could well have been caught by Paco, a major influence on the creation of this storyline.

None of this, though, would have been possible without the dedication of Alison Clarke (additional help with the Spanish), and Kristina Tang (with her Malaysian homeland knowledge and UK keyboard skills), and their assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Despite the fact that they are already acquainted with him, they are all keen to once again meet Peter Martinez.

I would have been completely lost without Linda Lloyd's hugely helpful criticisms and polishing, which show up her immense editing talent.

INTRODUCTION

Who can really tell what influence there is on an unborn child by the activity of the mother prior to releasing her offspring into the hard, tough world? But there is, undoubtedly, a relationship – usually built for life.

In Rosas, on the north-eastern coast of Spain, Pedro "Peter" Martinez's lifestyle certainly replicated the passion, creativity, bonding and fun generated by his greatest fan and most severe critic, his mother Maria. Through her hereditary love of joining the swirling circles of the Sardana with her fellow Catalans at the Saints' Day celebrations in her Spanish village, Peter's roots were permanently implanted.

The reality of the life Peter was born into was taught to him not only by his mother and father, but also by all those around him as he passed through adolescence. The discovery of his manhood and natural compassion for his fellow inhabitants of the planet, and the freeing and nurturing of his super-creative talents, were part of a pedigree for success.

Peter's architectural ability removed him from his Spanish homeland and its gypsy influences, spiriting him off to career success and wealth in London and Malaysia; yet he was always magnetised back to the biggest love in his life, Maria, his doting mother… and the early promise of a young gypsy girl, and all the love and hatred she embraced.

And thereby hangs this tale.

CHAPTER 1

Perhaps it was a hangover from his parents' choice of first birthday present to him, but Pedro Martinez seemed always to have thought in shapes and dimensions. He possessed that sense to a far greater extent than those to whom he had to explain his own interpretation of design or his appreciation of music and art, or even the personal pleasure he derived from an attractive female body.

Maria and Paco Martinez had not been able to afford to buy Pedro the toys imported into Spain's various "Bravas" in the 50s and 60s. (These were seemingly just for the consumption of kids on family holidays with a bounty of grandparental pocket-money to spend.)

Their first gift to him had been a kaleidoscope, followed by a simple jigsaw, then more complex ones once he displayed a natural ability for matching shapes, not to mention pelmanism. The larger, grander puzzles helped to pass away the winter evenings while his father was at sea, as he and his mother had never been exposed to the temptation of becoming slaves to that tyrant, Television, in its early days, principally because the little family in their fisherman's cottage had no money for such new-fangled luxuries.

They had a supply of hot water that fed the kitchen, into which they had installed a sparkling new stainless steel sink. A priority on Maria's intense saving programme – into which she religiously put some of her earnings from the couple of cleaning jobs she did to supplement Paco's income from his fishing boat – was to build an extension to the cottage big enough to house a shower. Perhaps also a bath, which she always hinted would be an added bonus.

Maria and Paco's first source of joy in married life had in fact been the use of the shower on their wedding night in Paco's brother's small guest-house further south on the Costa Brava, as it was then being commonly called.

Their second joy was the birth of their son and heir Pedro in 1937, 40 weeks to the day after they had worked out there was just about room in the mosaic faced cubicle in the corner of the bedroom in the little cottage Marco had built in the grounds of his property for the two of them to shower together.

Maria's attention to the cleanliness of her young husband's body was in itself fun, and a revelation, after the solemnity of the wedding service, which Maria had meticulously planned, despite a fairly passive bridegroom. To be fair, Paco was mainly charged with organising the festive side of the event. The pride and excitement of taking his beautiful bride into the open courtyard, which was part of the original Martinez family house, was the centrepiece of the Catalan celebrations, from which to launch the young couple's future together.

The overture to the fiesta had started in a dignified manner: Maria in her white silk dress and simple veil and Paco in his pristine white shirt, black trousers and slim black tie. The young couple first invited their respective parents, then bridesmaid attendants, the groom's close friends, the aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, neighbours and the other villagers interested in the free-flowing availability of sangria, to join their Sardana circle in the traditional Catalan formation.

With linked hands, the human circle perambulated, moving to the left in the precise step sequences that had been the format through centuries of performance. In time, the call of the flute and the faster beat of the drum encouraged more frenzied leaping and stepping in time with the small but specialist orchestra. That was the downside, where Paco was concerned, as the heat generated and the sweat expelled flushed out the smell of his years at sea and the handling and cleaning of fish.

In the overall gathering, Paco's body odour was not conspicuous; but later, alone with his young bride, it certainly was. Hence the shower had been most essential to their first Catholic coupling, and through that experience Maria developed a strong enthusiasm for cleanliness, to complement the passion she'd had for her husband since their teenage years.

The beauty of those moments was to stay with Maria for a lifetime. Cleanliness became her fetish. She washed and re-washed Pedro as a baby, initially using a plastic container that was one of a number Paco had bought to put his catch of sardines and ice into, for daily presentation at the fish market. Of course, it had never been used for fish and it was to be many years later that Pedro, as a maturing young man, learnt the origins of his very first bath. It had been a better alternative than the original ceramic sink which she had ruled not to be good enough as the daily font for her joyous child.

Maria's voice was very much the foundation of Pedro's early years, and that was to stick through a lifetime. Paco was not the disciplinarian in the family. In some respects, his teachings to his son from a young age were restricted to the university of life. True, he taught Pedro rules and conventions to train him for a later life based on inheriting his father's trade of fishing and hunting.

But it was to his mother's commands that Pedro most reacted. It was clear

that it was her clamouring for knowledge that had entered Peter's genes, and her inner instinct that a healthy body would produce a healthy mind backed up her demands that she firmly implanted for his personal hygiene.

It was only later in life, when Peter was near to death, that the gentle hands of Gina Faro were to remind him that the daubing of a soft sponge worked the same wonders his mother had promised him at the age of three. As the enforced sedation wore off, his awakening brain opened the memory bank of his mother supervising his ablutions: prior to going to school for the first time, getting muddy playing football at the age of seven.

By eight and nine he had been left more to his own devices.

"Lavate bien," was the repetitive maternal command.

"Si, mama," was the least contentious response.

However, Pedro's developing analytical mind could not reason why the hell she would not let go for just one morning. A growing kid, even one of just nine years old, could tell that if he didn't break the mould soon, he was under the thumb for life.

Why was washing his neck more important to his mother's day than making sure the sun would rise and warm the air, and bring healthy fruit to the vines and olive trees, which supplemented Papa's fishing livelihood?

Why re-visit that same neck before going to his extremely firm bed, which consisted of a cut-down barn door and a couple of blankets handed down from relatives who had saved up for a modern replacement? (They had bought a divan base with spring mattress, which, with a headboard carved out in the original joiner's shop in downtown Gerona, was an early sign of becoming middle class in any village in northeast Spain, long before the desire to replace the larder and its fly-deterrent netting with a fridge.)

Why the obsession with cleaning up part of his body which, in any event, didn't get that dirty during the day and which certainly was unlikely to be scrutinised by the school inspector in the middle of the night?

His mother always seemed to want to quash Pedro's natural desire to rebel. If he didn't finish the plate of food put in front of him, the threat was that the school inspector would be called and he would get a thorough ticking off. If his school shoes were dirty, that same ogre would have something to say about that. He was bright enough to wonder how the priest had got away with his lack of attention to his own foot attire. Pedro was not to know his mother was sowing foundations from which he would reap rewards in the future, if God and luck happened to come together on a sufficient number of days.

He had to be tough to deal with the new routine his mother had now dreamt up to wash below his armpits.

For God's sake, was nothing to be private from now on? He knew he was

growing hair under his arms, but how would that get dirty? The only time it would be exposed was when he went swimming. The seawater was always clear and fresh on the little beach just outside Rosas, at the end of the track that dissected the grapevines and the olive trees, and which flooded in winter when the storms over-spilled from up in the backcloth of mountains.

His mother would never give up on finding a new fetish, or so it seemed.

"Y usas jabon en tus axilas… si… non…"

"Si, mama."

That was his easy way out; if he didn't confirm he had, he was definitely under threat of the penalty of not being allowed to go to the jetty to welcome back the boats and, in particular, the one captained by his wonderful father.

Papa never seemed the slightest bit concerned about Pedro's washing ability or state of cleanliness. He oozed love and affection for his growing son and the grubbier the boy got, the more pleased Paco seemed to be.

Pedro never, ever forgot the day his father had taken him into the hills to shoot a boar for the Santa Maria Fiesta. They'd had a lean day until about 3.30pm, when suddenly they'd come across a suitable prospect for the intended communal table – two boars and their offspring.

Pedro's father put a finger to his mouth: not a sound, he indicated, or the boars would flee and there would be no festive meal.

Pedro's natural instinct was to hope that his father would have spared the animal threesome by firing into the air and scaring them back up into the hills; then, perhaps, explaining that there is sometimes greater joy to be experienced in saving a life and losing the hunt. Pedro felt he personally would glean more joy from that result than from being on the winning end of a killing.

The sounds of the shots from both barrels of the family shotgun rang out. One was aimed at the father, another at the mother. Hopefully the time delay for reloading would allow the piglet to get the hell out of there, Pedro thought. But like a lamb, or a child in need of parental guidance so as to not miss washing his neck, the instinct of the dependent boar was to just sit and stare at the blood flowing from its parents' bodies. It was not conscious of the threat in the bushes from Pedro's father and the lethal weapon he had now recharged.

Pedro thought the echoes of the third shot would never stop reverberating in his ears. Transfixed by a sudden deafness, he watched as the piglet's legs buckled, as if in silent slow motion in one of his grandfather's films, which before his death he had proudly shown on the day of the birth of Christ each year. The young boar's eyes had glazed over. Its body was no longer nubile as it joined its parents, who by then were each transformed by an instant rigor mortis.

"I'll carry the two," came his father's voice. "I'll lift the piglet onto your

shoulders, my son. This will be a feast beyond the expectations of our family. The village will celebrate with us on our lucky day."

As they made their way back through what must have been ten or 12 kilometres of rough terrain, Pedro felt the first sense of moisture running down his back. His own sweat he would comfortably have tolerated, but it was mixed with the weeping blood from the young boar.

It was Maria who greeted the hunters on their return, scolding her husband for allowing their son to be tainted by the trickles of blood that had effused from the piglet's wounds on the victory march home. Despite a kiss on each of her husband's cheeks for the joy he would bring to the village fiesta, she stepped back and said, "It is too early for our son to learn.

"Now go and fill the galvanized zinc bath in the garden and ensure you scrub your whole body, dear little Pedro," she ruled. "If you're not clean, you won't go to the fiesta."

It was from that day on that Pedro's father encouraged time to be put into the boy's education beyond his learning about history at school. Being taught to count fascinated the young lad particularly, and whilst the other boys in his class seemed content to live with the relativity of mathematics – that given three baskets of grapes, one may contain more by visual arrangement than the other two, which appeared to be the same – Pedro was only satisfied when able to assess positively the weight of each basket so that, at the age of nine, he was able to make a scientifically based analysis of the situation.

His father's approach went beyond that. He taught Pedro logic, and about natural phenomena. They practised reading cloud formations and interpreting the winds over the terrain. He explained that if the wind blew from the sea, his return from the essential fishing trips would be faster than if the wind held the fleet off the land.

"When your mother allows you to meet me at the jetty, be sure to study the way the pines are leaning. If they arch to the hills, run to the quay – we may be home early. If they bow to the waves, walk while we toil to get home. When we hunt boar, as we did on the day of Santa Maria, be sure always to have the wind blowing into your face. That way, you'll smell the boar, rather than the prey discovering your presence and avoiding capture."

Pedro learnt that his father was receptive to his desire to learn and welcomed his son's questions.

"Papa," Pedro plucked up courage to ask one day, "you remember the day you shot the two parent boars and you had no more cartridges loaded? You re-loaded and killed the young boar. Why didn't you satisfy yourself with the two and let the baby go free?"

"If the baby had gone free, it would have had no protection and would have fallen prey to other animals in the great food chain. Kill the whale when you can, as long as you follow behind with a net to gather the small fish, of which the whale would have deprived you. So the sacrifice of that one extra shot served a dual purpose: ensuring that it was we who killed that boar, rather than the animals lurking in the shadows; and our friends in the village gained respect for our hunting skills and, in their turn, will owe our family a favour."

Pedro couldn't help but think that if they had not shot the third defenceless animal, he would have had an easier journey home and would have been saved the discomfort of a cold bath in the back yard. But maybe his father was right.

His loving mother's voice was the first thing he heard that day after the fiesta in 1949. A day to change his life.

"You're dreaming, Pedro!" his mother shrieked. "If you're going to meet your father's boat, you'd best hurry. You need breakfast."

The sun was rising as Pedro sat down at the kitchen table, which was covered by an oil cloth. His mother had prepared a plate of fresh figs from the tree in the yard and a stick of bread she had collected from the patisserie before Pedro woke up.

"Did you hear the storm last night?" she asked Pedro. "The rain was torrential and the sheet lightning lit up the whole sky. The animals were screeching."

Pedro had been too exhausted to have been disturbed. The night before had been the celebration of Thanksgiving to God for the harvest – the one night of the year when the whole village, children as well, ate communally in the village square and then danced in ever-entwining circles of linked arms and flailing feet in non-stop celebratory Sardanas.

The lecture continued.

"The cobbles will be slippery. Mind how you go. Help Papa with the fish, but be sure you're back to school for nine o'clock. Otherwise I'll have the school inspector here asking why I've kept you away."

Pedro hugged his mother's waist. Said thank you for breakfast. Slipped on his flip-flops and ran off down the cobblestone pathway to the jetty.

The wind was still blowing hard across the groves. Some of the trees bent inland, others out to sea. It was all confused. Pedro knew his Papa would have some real sailing to do. He'd be tacking all the way back to harbour. Pedro settled on the rocks beneath the beacon where he always squatted to get first sight of the fleet coming round the promontory. With the wind blowing in the direction it was that day, he'd probably hear the sound of the deep throbbing piston engines even before the three or four fishing boats came into sight.

The sun was higher than usual and the boats had still not come into view.

Pedro thought for a while about the God his parents so fervently believed in and upon whom their life was so modelled. As the gulls hovered above the choppy sea in anticipation of the scraps they would be thrown as the nets were emptied and cleaned, Pedro questioned why God would have created such a storm after the celebrations of the night before. It had, after all, been a Sunday of Thanksgiving. The priest certainly seemed to have acknowledged that by the fact he had cleaned his shoes and joined the village in drinking sangria after evening mass. He had even joined in the Sardanas and surprised Pedro with his nimbleness of foot, which he noticed as their respective circular chains passed.

After one gyrating carousel, where Pedro had to reach up high to link his hands with his mother on the one side and her lazy cousin on the other, as the Catalan pipes and flutes reached a crescendo and brought that set to a halt, the circle he was in stopped immediately behind the one the priest had linked into.

Father Amadis had turned and, recognising Pedro, and probably due to the fact that he'd had a jug of sangria too many, said, "Now there is another great judgement of our God. He has halted me into the arms of his disciple, Peter." He leant forward and pulled Pedro's head into his own chest. He kissed the thick black hair and said, "So bless you, Peter."

Pedro looked up and said, "But Father, I am Pedro."

The priest roared with laughter and, pulling the boy's ear, said that Jesus's disciples had only covered a limited area of the earth, and numerically they had remained as the twelve. But it was he, Pedro, and others who were now the generation of disciples and when in Rome they would take an Italian name, in France, his Pedro would be a Pierre, in the English-speaking nations he would be Peter. "So, young man, be ready to spread your wings and answer your calls. Be Pedro for as long as you can, because that will mean you are within our shores. But never shirk the opportunity to travel. It will always be your good self you'll see in the mirror, but as I see you as a traveller, I'll call you Peter. Just at the fiesta, anyway."

Pedro wasn't sure he had understood that and was still puzzling as to why God had whipped up such an angry storm after such a night of celebration. Especially as Pedro had rarely seen his parents happier together.

His mother and father made a majestic pair. Maria had made herself a new black dress. She had apparently seen a photograph of Audrey Hepburn in a newspaper left in the local bar she cleaned on a Thursday night for her cousin's husband. Pedro thought that the skirt was rather short, but who was he to judge? It just looked short compared with all the other women's skirts and

Sunday best frocks. There were no sleeves to the dress, allowing her shapely arms to be seen. She had pinned her hair high, showing her angular cheeks, high forehead and long neck to the full. Pedro always liked her hair that way. She had worn her one pair of high heels, so Pedro knew it was a real celebration.

His father wore black, crisply creased trousers and a white shirt. To be fair, so did all the other men, but somehow Paco Martinez stood statuesque among them. There was not a ripple of fat on his body. Where he had rolled up his cuffs, his arms were chestnut coloured and his hands were huge and rough to the touch. He was clean shaven and more than Pedro's eyes followed his bouncy Sardana steps with his strong arms and hands held aloft.

They had eaten well. The fish, which Pedro was sure could only have been caught by his father, was fresh and grilled on the open-topped, cleaned-out oil barrels, once used to carry fuel for the fishing boats, now cut virtually into two. There was lamb and pork and beef with salads and vegetables. The flans and apple tarts seemed to just keep coming. Pedro was sneaked a glass of white wine and was told not to let anybody know it was other than apple juice.

In between Sardanas, his parents sat holding hands. His father occasionally brushed the back of his mother's neck. Although Pedro hated to see it, he knew that they touched lips from time to time and he did hope that nobody else had seen them.

"Do you have to fish?" he heard his mother say.

"My darling, how will we buy food and renovate the house, provide Pedro with school clothes if we have no fish to sell?"

"I'll do some more cleaning for my cousin's husband. Don't go to work, we're having such fun. The tide will take you away from me before midnight. It'll be like the fairytale of Cinderella, except I won't lose my shoe at midnight, I'll temporarily lose my love."

"But like a princely frog, I'll be hopping at your door in the morning with a few peseta notes in my hip pocket."

They pushed Pedro into a children's Sardana ring and as he whirled around in the image of his father, he glimpsed his mother and father holding hands, silhouetted by the full moon as they knelt amidst the pines at the edge of the vineyard.

Pedro had kissed his father fondly and watched him walking down the cobble path towards the harbour at about 11.30pm, which was late for him to be allowed up. Paco turned and waved once, but did not look back again and so missed the second sweeping movement of his son's hand, as if it was a flag at the end of his outstretched arm. Maria put her arm around Pedro's shoulder, which she noticed was considerably higher now since a youthful

growth spurt, and ushered him into the house. She reassured Pedro that his father would have received his second wave in spirit, if not in fact.

"Lavate bien, Pedro. No te olvides tu cuello, y usas jabon…"

Before she could finish, Pedro pleaded, "Not tonight." His mother looked up at the clouds racing across the moon and said, "OK, chiquito."

CHAPTER 2

He wasn't very good at judging time. He knew roughly how long a class was at school, but he could tell the fleet was getting very late. From where he was sitting on the rocks he could see that a number of people from the village were gathering on the harbour wall. The gulls seemed impatient. Pedro's lips were getting a bit sore. It wouldn't be long before he needed to spend a penny.

At first he thought it was a gull squawking. Then he was sure he heard his name. That is, Pedro, he thought to himself, not that stupid foreign name the priest was going on about. "Pedro, come here quickly."

He heard his mother's voice, turned and saw her part-walking quickly and part-running towards him. Gone was her pinned up hair and new dress. She was wearing denims and a thick cream knitted sweater she had made through last winter.

She hugged Pedro as they met. There was a desperation about her breathing. "No sign of papa, eh?" she said, trying to be reassuring.

"Papa's very late, isn't he?"

"Don't worry, dear, there are the four boats together. They've all got radios so they can talk to each other. Cousin Pablito has been to the coastguards and they haven't received any contact, which is a good sign. I expect they sheltered from the storm in one of the bays. But listen, you should be at school. We'll have the…" She saw the look of anguish on his face. "OK, we'll give it half an hour. We'll go and wait on the harbour wall together."

Paco Martinez had his own boat. He was the second most experienced of the five captains who made up their little fleet, intending to trawl as many sardines out of the local waters as possible. Their bonus would be the odd catch of John Dory, which always got a good price from the hotel industry developing on the coast of Spain, north of Barcelona and up to the foothills of the Pyrenees. In the season they used to drop a few lobster nets as well, to pick up on the way back in the shallower water when they hugged the coastline nearer their home harbour.

They were not rich, but it was a living.

Paco was the younger of the two Martinez brothers who originated from

down the coast just outside Palafrugell. Elder brothers always seemed to have the perks and Marco had been left the family land in his parents' will with an additional note, by way of an expression of a wish, that Marco should do all necessary to support his younger brother in making a living either on the land or in another way.

Paco had met Maria at school, sparking something of a family feud, as Marco too had declared a soft spot for her. The young stags had almost come to blows until Maria made her choice. She and Paco thought it best to distance themselves from the family silver and exited up the coast to Rosas.

Marco abided by his father's wishes and gave his brother sufficient to buy the fishing boat so he could make a living and support his bride.

Paco was certainly the better sailor, although the Martinez family had taken to the sea for years. Originally, they had a couple of two-man rowing boats which they took out two or three kilometres or so around the headland, where the fish used to be fooled by the shaft of light emitted from the large oil hurricane lamps mounted on the stern, believing it to be the moon's rays.

The Martinez patriarch then graduated to a long boat with a 250 cc diesel outboard with an investment in nets. Paco sold that and now had a naval destroyer by comparison. It was a tug to the uneducated observer, part of a fleet of a dozen or so believed to have been "acquired" by a fairly dodgy German entrepreneur who had managed to finesse a deal with the original owners in Singapore. Doubtless, they had originally been painstakingly constructed in the manner passed down by generation to generation by local Malaysian labour on the Malaccan coast. They were made from trees logged and crafted into seaworthy, deep-water hulls.

Paco always sailed in the same fleet of five, sometimes four if sickness struck one of the other captains, or in the more likely event that, just as he was ready to leave home to sail, his wife, or the infamous village hooker, had enticed him into bed for a bit of trawling of a more intimate nature, and made him miss the tide.

José G, for Gonzales, had not shown up. Paco, Miguel, Juan and Manuel laughed about that as they met with their customary hugs of camaraderie on the quayside. "The randy bastard was OK at the fiesta, certainly well enough to visit our table and drink most of a jug of sangria," Miguel mused.

"I'd bet a hundred pesetas he's in the sack with his missus. You'd think she'd be satisfied with four kids and wouldn't let him miss the income it looks like we might get tonight, boys!" Paco added.

Two hours out and the radios crackled away.

"What a headwind, eh!"

"I've known this before at the full moon."

"There they are. Can you see the reflection on the surface between the rollers?"

"By the life of Mary, those stupid fish are a field of silver!"

Paco took control. They knew from experience the radios were not now for idle chat, but were the point of command and income.

"Miguel, you lay up on my port side. Juan, Manuel, go starboard. We'll line out on them."

"Lay good, full-sized nets. Throttle back onto my stern."

The radios crackled into superfluous silence.

They all knew the procedures from there on in. They would all dress in military fashion against Paco's boat as a marker and move slowly forward in a straightish line, or as straight as possible into a strong headwind with two metre high waves. Their nets would cover a good 520 metres of water. Hardly a single sardine would escape that trawl.

They would advance a couple of kilometres and would by then instinctively know their nets were brimming. They would ease off the throttle and with each of their young deckhands, apprenticed to take over when their captain had had enough, would set the deck hoist running and haul in the catch.

A second trawl was rare. Occasionally, if they felt lucky, they would roll open the nets, dumping the fish onto the deck imprisoned within the high solid surrounds and, as the catch gasped their last breaths and flipped their final triple salcos, they would clean up the nets for a second foray.

The background crackling noise of the radio gave way to a lone voice. Paco's. "Who's for another run?"

Miguel was the first to respond. "It's a hell of a force of wind. We're fairly loaded. Do you really want to?"

"Come on! We don't see fish like this every night. It's God's message for Santa Maria."

"I'm on!" Juan crackled. "Last night cost me a week's wages anyway."

"I'll go along with the crowd," came an indifferent response from Manuel.

"So three say yes. What do you think, Miguel?"

There was far too much esprit de corps for Miguel to duck out. "OK," he piped through to the others, "but we'll be loaded high going into the headwind. Let's turn about and then we'll have the wind behind us to sail back. Jesus Christ Paco, have you seen the speed of the clouds against the moon? I'd still question the need for more."

"We take when we can, my friend. I'll buy you paella for breakfast."

"You're on," Miguel replied, not for a moment wanting to think about food.

The fleet was still in close formation from the previous trawl. They had a second rehearsed routine to follow to turn about.

The port anchor boat would break left in a fairly wide 180-degree turn. Paco would do a tight turn. Number three position would wide sweep and come between the previous one and two positions. Starboard number four would tight turn. It was a 30-minute manoeuvre. The waves were undoubtedly higher and there was no sign of a cloak of silver floating around the surface.

It seemed from the silence that it was Paco's call. "OK friends," the others heard him say above mega radio interference. Heading back with a tail wind made the fleet rise and dip to a greater extent. The extra tonnage of fish already on board was there to be felt. The sky was livening up like the backcloth to an old Charlie Chaplin film. Flash lightning flickered some three miles away.

Paco had no greater idea than the others where the sheen of sardines was within the swelling water. He relied on his instinct as he used his narrow shaft of hunter's vision to pick out the spot and to choose the moment. He shuddered and momentarily felt the warmth and comfort of his marital bed.

"Nets out!" he commanded.

The captains, as one, wedged their various makeshift devices into the capstan wheels that controlled the rudders, which would enable them to go onto an effective auto-pilot, freeing them to make their way from the wheelhouse at the aft to lend an experienced hand to their one-man crews as they lay out the nets.

The quartet formation had Manuel on Paco's port side, then Juan and Miguel to his left.

The nets were hard to lay as the waves whipped up by the tail wind stopped them from trailing out behind the heaving tugs like graceful bridal veils. But soon they were all out.

In the darkness of the storm, Paco, still up front and out of radio contact, could be seen indicating with both arms aloft to push forward. The captains scurried across the lethal decks, semi-glazed with the contrasting shimmer and dullness of the previous catch, now without life. From experience, Paco had in mind to draw away from the nets, releasing them and dragging them into a more useful purpose than their current restricted position, which was being forced by the turbulent swell against the aft of each boat.

The various captains, back in their wheel houses as if released by some imaginary starting pistol at the start of an Olympic relay race, together accelerated in a combined forward move within seconds of each other. The effect was to create a balloon of nets, rather like a train behind a wedding gown, but below the surface of the sea, as they spread behind their respective brides as if held there by a ghostly throng of page boys and maids.

Paco's eyes pierced the darkness ahead. Momentarily, he thought the flash lightning must almost be directly over Rosas and his little family tucked up

in their beds. At least he had his son to take over the family boat when his own strong torso gave way to the hard life he led. He had always been sorry Maria had not been able to face a second child after the tough experience she'd endured giving birth to Pedro.

The reality of the night was suddenly upon him. He was sure the last flash of lightning had reflected off the scaly backs of their unsuspecting prey. The moon broke through the racing clouds. There was a perceptible drag on the nets.

The back of his tug dipped, raising the boat's nose as though to sniff the potential success. The wind acknowledged momentarily by abating. All captains suddenly felt their stomachs churn. If they hadn't experienced that moment before, they had heard their fathers, uncles and cousins tell them about it.

"When the wind blows wildly at force from the north into Africa and the eye of the storm is south, south-west, there is some sort of demon force that holds the breath as if to turn its own head out of the force of the gale. When it looks due east, the storm changes direction and, having had its moment of respite, it turns and blows with great vengeance from the east to the west, crashing its roller coasters ahead into the rocks and the coves and the inlets in its path. You must brace yourself, stand firm, and to pray would not be a disadvantage."

The line abreast of captains knew this was one such moment.

Manuel's boat was on the exposed flank and suddenly, it was like being rammed by some torpedo on the surface of the sea. The wedge of his lucky olive branch auto-pilot device, which he had used to free him to spread out his nets, was stunned out of position, clattering onto the deck of the wheelhouse. The wheel spun freely and out of control. The rudder reacted accordingly and went into freestyle too.

Moments before, in the split seconds of the lull in the wind, Paco screeched out above the roar of the waves, "Cut the nets!" Miguel and Juan had known that was the right thing to do before Paco's command had reached them.

Manuel was stunned by the sudden broadside he had suffered, and although even he had known instinctively what to do, or had heard Paco's command, he was too out of control to react.

As if his boat was the last skater to join the spinning line at the Christmas ice show, he knew the wind was blowing his vessel through an arc too close for comfort in the configuration they had set up. He dived across the wheelhouse to take control of the rudder, but could not reach the wheel and lay helpless on the deck as his tug continued in free rein.

Paco thought his young deck hand, the son of his good friend in the boatyard, had done really well to cut the nets free. Lamentably, in a split

moment, he realised not only had his second opportunity to create a record haul slipped through his fingers, but now he had the worry of affording replacement nets.

Sensing more happening than was apparent to the aft, he turned sharply to look to his left. There, approaching at what he knew was an alarming rate, was Manuel's ghost ship, which conjured up the sight of a chariot at the end of an octopus's limb at the local touring August fair, whip-lashing towards him and his boat.

There was no momentary remedy. He prayed to God to soften the impact. The nose of his tug was still high and the bow of Manuel's boat was approaching below the waterline of Paco's floating prison. There was a dull lasting thud as the two vessels collided. Paco and his mate were thrown to the decks, sliding amongst the first successful catch.

The hull of Paco's boat was opened to the wild sea through a hole punched into the ageing Malaysian timbers, crafted to withhold the force of many a turbulent sea, but incapable of any real resistance to the force generated between the like-for-like materials.

Miguel had had perhaps 20 seconds' advance warning of the dangers passing down the line abreast. He instinctively steered to the starboard and picked up the changed direction of the tail wind. He had no time to look back, but sensed drama.

Juan had about 15 seconds to react. He too spun the wheel hard down to the right, praying as he did that the links and connections to the rudder worked positively. Paco's boat lurched down to the left as water entered the open hull. The nose started to dip as the catch of sardines all slid to the bow.

The otherwise faithful tug rolled to the left, tipping fish, captain and crew towards the protective deck's solid side rails. None of those at sea were counting but within those seconds, during which they hailed their God in prayer and mentally submitted their requests for help, the boat was sucked down into the depths.

Manuel, although still horizontal on the deck, saw this disaster in slow motion without realising his vessel too was getting lower in the water. There was a sudden sound, like water draining out of a bath. Simultaneously, the chasm, caused by the sub-oceanic vacuum when the depths dragged Paco's boat towards the seabed, caused a huge wave to wash over Manuel's vessel and the sea entered into the hatches left open to receive the catch. The nose of the boat dipped and within a minute the whole vessel dived into the cold ocean. It sank too.

The radio crackled. "Shit, Miguel," Juan almost confided and then sobbed.

"Miguel, oh my God! Have you looked back? Paco and Manuel have been sucked into the sea!"

"Oh my God, Juan! Oh my God!"

Young Carlos, Paco's deck hand's father from the boatyard, was there by now. Manuel's wife was busily chatting away to Juan's father and Miguel's other half, with their two-year-old.

Maria and Pedro were as tense as the others. There was still a stiff breeze blowing, although the tempest of a few hours earlier had died down.

A couple of local dogs started barking. The younger villagers who had gathered, with their keener senses, thought they could pick up on the *thud, thud, thud* of diesel engines, just around the headland.

"Look!" shrieked Juan's father, himself an ex-fisherman who had passed the family boat on to his son. He knew the feeling well from the reverse incoming perspective of rounding the headland to bring the harbour into view. There were always some people waiting with a welcome Thermos of coffee on a cool winter's morning, iced water in the summer.

The fellows who ran the fish market always set up at about 5.30am, ready to display the catch. They would service about ten boats these days. A far cry from only a decade or so before when the demands were mainly for the private family plate. Now they made additional money meeting the requirements of the hotel industry. Even the growing population of Barcelona needed more fish and was prepared to pay for the extra haulage down the coast.

Today, the managers had left their static positions behind the desks on which they would normally be preparing to deal with the sale proceeds from anxious buyers. The air all around was filled with an uneasy expectancy.

Those with a more practised ear chatted secretly between themselves. "That's not the throb of four or five boats," one said knowingly to another.

"Only four went out. José Gonzales is over there. He must have been sick."

"Well, it's still not four. Maybe three or even two."

There were gasps as the lead boat came into sight. They always returned in a follow-my-leader straight convoy. It helped with the berthing. They would usually tie up alongside each other and ferry the catch from boat to boat onto the quayside. At that distance, nobody could tell whose boat it was. So the tension mounted.

"There's another," the boatyard expectant father shouted. All heads and eyes focused on the distant vessel. Some minutes passed. The specks became blobs. The thuds became a rhythm, a mechanical sequence of pistons.

"Shit!" said one of the managers. "They wouldn't normally be that far apart. Their rule of the sea has always been to stick together. This looks bad news."

Maria had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Why had Paco gone? She had suggested he continue their family evening entwined in the matrimonial bed as so many others did. Of course, she understood Paco was the breadwinner. He'd had the misfortune of being his parents' second child. His brother never left his bed, although it was a family secret that Virginia, his wife, gave up sharing it with him when she found out he had been sleeping with one of the chambermaids from the guest-house they ran.

Pedro was gripping her hand hard and peering between the larger bodies towards the two boats now well within range. Nobody speculated which boats they were. The men had their own views. One of the managers leant across to his brother-in-law and whispered, "Miguel and Manuel."

"What, missing?"

"No, returning."

"Miguel yes. But maybe Paco or Juan."

"Shit," the manager said again, but this time with more remorse. "Either way it's bad. There are only two."

Miguel's stature became recognisable at about 200 metres out. He was half inside his wheelhouse and half out. His deckhand was standing just behind his captain. Puffs of smoke from his cigarette blew away from the boat at almost 180 degrees. There was still a steady wind coming off the sea.

All eyes were set on the second boat. Those who understood those things recognised the red painted band around the hull which Juan had painted on.

"It's Juan," the fishmonger confirmed to his brother-in-law.

Heads turned to look towards Maria. They sought out Manuel's wife too.

Miguel's deckhand threw a line onto the quay. It seemed almost a hundred hands reached out in concerted sympathy. Nobody wanted not to help. Sobbing could be heard. Some were tears of relief, while the others were of compassion as Paco's and Manuel's wives awakened to the reality of the moment.

Juan tied up alongside Miguel and stepped into the adjoining berthed boat. Miguel held his arms out to hold Juan to him. They were grown men; hard weather-beaten sailors, yet they were both crying openly. Not in pain. They were stricken by grief.

With an arm over Juan's shoulder, they walked the few metres down the gang plank. There was almost total silence, pierced only by the squawking gulls swooping down onto the decks and stealing whole fish from the catch. Nobody minded their feast on this occasion. Miguel's wife could not hold back. She ran into her husband's arms.

Juan's father stood firm. Emotionless, so it would seem, but those close enough saw the tears running down his face. Juan put his arms around his father's shoulders and sobbed into the crook of his neck.

The two loyal deckhands, both having now experienced a side to their apprenticeship they would have wanted not to, linked up with those waiting for them.

Gradually, without direction or command, the quayside was emptying, like some dramatic scene in an opera. But this was a single performance, not nightly with a couple of matinees during the season. This was a one-off, never, hopefully, to be replayed. Exits from stage left and right were being made.

Maria found herself face to face with Manuel's wife. They were two lonely women suddenly, and traumatically, confronted by the dark shadow of widowhood.

Miguel and Juan braced themselves and walked in determined military steps, almost as though they were carrying an imaginary wreath to lay on the steps of the village church on the anniversary of the Spanish Revolution. They approached Paco's and Manuel's wives.

Suddenly there was a cry of anguish. The experiencing of real pain.

Pedro screamed, "No, not my papa," and turned and ran. He was running anywhere. Running away. He needed an escape. The cobbles were like an ice-rink and the rubber soles of his flip-flops had no grip. They were like slicks on a wet day. His left ankle gave way and he fell to the ground, sliding forward.

His mother gave chase with Manuel's wife not far behind.

"Chiquito!" Maria cried. "Chiquito!"

She glanced over her left shoulder at the surviving captains, who had followed in pursuit, their mission having been interrupted by Pedro's flight of panic.

"Was there any pain?" she asked calmly.

"No," Miguel replied.

"You are both very brave, kind men, and friends too. Later I want to know. Now, I have a young man who needs me."