

They do fireworks, don't they?

Every stone in Tordera's church is lifted and shaken before falling, astonished, more or less back into the places they have occupied for hundreds of years. The crowd, thronging at the foot of the huge church steps, jump together in collective surprise, gasping in the night air, like a giant set of bellows, before exhaling in a universal 'aaaah' as fireworks take flight from every available launch pad on the old church. A family of birds, propelled out of their bijou belfries, flutter furiously out, up and away into the night sky.

The Fiesta Major has begun.

My grandparents, 'Avi' and 'Avia', knew precisely when to arrive at this tiny cafe, tucked into a corner of the square, in order to be certain of getting a good seat for this remarkable display. They are masters of this space, their space, for their lives have been played out around its solidity. Baptisms, marriages, funerals, civil war, peace, the market. Oh yes, and flirtations.

I turn to look at 'Avia', or Lola, to her friends, short for Dolores. Her quick and animated face rewards me, sometimes softly illuminated by the fireworks, other times lit to every line and crack of her life experience. This has been the visit when I have finally begun to know my grandparents, armed for the first time with the past, present and future tenses of their mother tongue, Catalan. We have talked and talked and talked. Of how they first met, at village dances on the Cami Ral. 'She had many admirers, you know'; 'He had many conquests before me'. And of the civil war... The heart-pulling pangs of anxiety that I have felt for years, the fear that I might never really know my grandparents, have, at last, begun to recede.

Our smiling eyes meet and we both look to 'Avi', or Pere, the rock of the family, who, deaf to everything but the most explosive of sounds surrounding us, is watching the display, cocooned from its bangs, whistles and crackles, with an expression of interested indulgence.

Earlier today he outwitted my grandmother, much to his satisfaction and our mirth. It is something that I suspect he rarely manages to do – nothing gets past her – and he looks like he is still savouring the moment. We had gone to mass together, Avia because she always does, me because, this time on this visit, I really wanted to see what her Sundays looked like so that I could picture her when I was back in England. And Avi, well, he, like me, doesn't normally go to church at all, so it felt like a special occasion for us all. Together we had strolled to the church, in our Sunday best, at a

gentle pace for my grandfather who walks with a stick, and pausing from time to time so that my grandmother could catch her breath.

It was a cool, sombre, slow, sobering mass – just what I expected. But with the closing Amen, any solemnity evaporated. Avia shot off to intercept friends who she quickly engaged in fiery conversation, her body language speaking of gossip, intrigue, speculation, tragedy and setting the world to rights. Having had our fill of 'missa' and savouring an affectionate, companionable silence, Avi and I ambled towards the big wooden doors of the church, emerging together from its bare, dark space into bright, white sunshine and surveying the scene of the Sunday market below us at the foot of the huge church steps. He turned to me, with one finger pressed vertically across his lips and pointed to the bag he was holding, Avia's bag, the bag she has completely forgotten about, left discarded in the pew at the end of the service as she shot off to catch up with her cronies. Avi has seized it. "Let's see how long before she notices it has gone", he says. With renewed purpose, we watch and wait, in delicious suspense.

And the memory of our laughter when she realised what he had done, still fills my heart with joy.

Quite simply, because my beautiful grandparents, so very different to each other in many, many ways, were actually the most perfect of matches.

Because, after seventy years of marriage, and both well into their nineties, they were still playing.