Jamón and Halal

Civantos, Christina

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Preface: My Family Narrative

My great-grandfather left a small village in the Alpujarra region of Andalucía to fulfill his military service. Since those were the days of the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98), Cuba’s final push for independence from Spain, he was deployed to Cuba. He returned to the Alpujarra to marry, but soon went back to Cuba with his bride. The next two generations of the family crisscrossed the Atlantic, with some being born in the Alpujarran town of Órgiva and some in Havana, until the time of the Spanish Civil War, during which my family definitively left Spain. However, my grandparents and their children maintained contact with relatives in Órgiva and Granada through letters, phone calls, and visits. Due to these family ties, I have visited Órgiva regularly, staying with second cousins there, for more than 30 years, often spending several weeks there during successive summers.

During my childhood, my paternal grandparents, who were both raised in Órgiva, would travel there whenever they could to see their siblings and then my parents started to visit to see my father’s only aunts, uncles, and first cousins. As a result, I grew up seeing photos of orgiveño relatives and hearing stories about the town, many of which highlighted the ways in which it seemed to be frozen in time and cut off from modernity: that my father as a baby there had been fed by a wet nurse while his mother was ill, that through the 1970s the only bathroom at my great aunt’s large house was an outhouse, and that she and her family had to go to a store on the town plaza if they wanted to use a telephone. My grandfather built two identical rabbit hutchest, one at his sister’s house in Órgiva and one at our house in Miami, but
the similarities were superficial. We were the only people I knew in Miami who kept rabbits outdoors. For my siblings and me they were pets, but for my grandparents they were livestock. I cried when my grandfather prepared some of them for dinner in a moment of culture clash that intensified the sense that we were more “modern” and “civilized” than those “backward” orgiveños. At the same time, though, my grandparents’ sweet affection and their amusing stories about life in Órgiva—like the local priest who made the rounds among Alpujarran villages on his motorcycle, or the former wet nurse who greeted my awkwardly shy father with effusive affection in the middle of the town plaza when he returned to the town for the first time in decades—endeared the town to me.

When I first visited Órgiva as an 18-year-old, there were no traffic lights in the town and every afternoon herds of goats filled the side streets as they returned from the day’s grazing. I started to visit regularly in search of the slow pace and natural beauty that the town offered: an ancient whitewashed house full of photos of my father and two generations of paternal ancestors, a tranquil garden behind the house with a grapevine trellis, laundry drying on the line, and a spectacular view of the mountains, as well as walks between and up those mountains. The first few times that I visited the town, my grandfather’s sister, Tía Paca, was still alive. Tía Paca was a wisp of a woman, but astonishingly spry. One day, as I sat reading in the backyard orchard, or huerto, I witnessed this tiny octogenarian, eternally clad in a black dress and apron, pop out of the kitchen door and into the animal pen. She delivered a solid thwack with the edge of her hand to the scruff of a rabbit that she was holding by its ears and then hung the rabbit by its hind legs from the low branch of an orange tree, as the first step toward that day’s lunch. It was probably that morning, as I read, looking up occasionally to catch the incongruous sight of what appeared to be a rabbit bounding down from an orange tree, that my ideas about pets and food preparation expanded.

Cousins my age also lived in the same ancient house with thick, cool walls and rustic wooden doors and shutters, and I set out with them on many adventures: Vespa rides around town, cookouts at a
friend’s farmhouse, and the open-air summer discotheques. My or-
giveño relatives had started a business in town, but they still kept
working their small plots of land on the side. Depending on the time
of year, during some visits I was able to help with the olive, orange,
or almond harvests. In the huerto, sitting in a circle of local women
hulling and shelling almonds, or in the kitchen brimming with blue
and green accented ceramics, cooking with my father’s cousin, Tía
Paca’s daughter whom I refer to as Tía Conchita, I took in many sto-
ries. There was the latest town gossip—Manuel up the street has ac-
cused another neighbor of stealing water by not following the rotation
of water rights from the acequia, the community-operated irrigation
channels—and there were tales about my father’s early childhood—
one time at the beginning of the Civil War he was out playing in the
street with other children when a bomber flew overhead and though
he hid quickly the explosion sprayed shattered glass, a piece of which
cut his leg. This explained why, as I had heard in Miami, while he was

![Figure 1: One of the roads heading out of town between farmhouses, with olive groves ahead.](image)
a 4- and 5-year-old in Havana he would hide anxiously whenever he heard a plane fly overhead. Tía Conchita also showed me the wood and leather trunk that my great-grandfather José had used to carry his belongings across the Atlantic. His wife, my great-grandmother Nieves, developed a mysterious ailment which she insisted required that she stay in Órgiva with their children while José returned to Havana to work. Nieves had found a crafty way to put an ocean between her and José, whose overbearing personality was legendary. But then again, perhaps my back troubles were related to the ailment that led to Nieves spending so many hours in a rocking chair that she left the impression of the foot that she pushed off of in one of the terracotta floor tiles, where it can still be seen to this day. The experiences and bits of family lore that I gathered in Órgiva built new narratives that added facets to my identity.

Considering that my parents had only been in the US for a decade when I was born, and that I grew up in a very new city as part of a community of immigrants who rarely visited their island of origin (first because it was prohibited and later because of logistical and ideological barriers), Órgiva offered a sense of history and rootedness (and an escape from Cold War politics) that I enjoyed. Later, I brought my children there to extend that family connection, to enjoy the mountains, and to boost their proficiency in Spanish. But with time, along with the installation of a few traffic lights and a reduction in goat sightings, English began to be heard in Órgiva with increasing regularity and a Sufi center was established near my orgiveño cousins’ home. When I visited with my children, I realized that I was wary of the amount of English spoken in the town and I was faced with my own intolerance toward a process that could be understood as a loss of cultural authenticity, or as an organic shift that is part of long unfolding changes—changes that are sometimes only visible over a millennium, sometimes readily apparent over only a few generations. What follows is my attempt to carry out a compassionate critique of a place that is close to my heart.