Tread Softly because you tread on my Dreams

ML Rooksby
Tread Softly,
because you tread on my Dreams

M L Rooksby
Dedicated to
Tim Manderson,
friend and editor,
in his memory.

© Maureen & Phil Rooksby 2015

Permission must be granted to reproduce any part of this publication.

News about what’s happening at El Pocito can be found at:
http://elpocito.wordpress.com

Maureen’s crafts and blogs can be found at:
http://monkeyandsofia.wordpress.com

Phil Rooksby
monkeyandsofia@yahoo.co.uk
0034 633 731 906 (SMS)
Oficina de Correos
Almonaster la Real
21350
Huelva
SPAIN
CHAPTER ONE

The beginning of the plan
Imagine. A biscuit tin, without biscuits inside, but with a handful of dried beans. Now imagine the tin being shaken up and down, that was the exact sound of the rain hitting the roof of the van. We’d parked up under a huge eucalyptus tree, thinking it might shelter us a bit, but we’d been wrong about that, the tree just added to our problems. As well as normal rain, we had great plops hitting the roof too. Added to that the wind was whipping the branches of the tree so that as well as the pounding there was harsh slapping as the branches hit the metal of the van, perfect. It was like being inside a drum.

Lying awake I wondered what I could do to stop the noise, maybe a big towel or blanket thrown over the roof would deaden it a bit, or maybe I could let the handbrake off and the van could just roll away from the tree. No that wouldn’t work, we’d parked the van on this little ledge in pouring rain earlier on and I remembered there was no space to roll to. Anyway, rolling would make us fall over the edge of the terrace we were on and while that might solve some problems, I felt sure it would make others. Well, I’d just have to get back under the covers and try and block out all the noise and the thoughts whirring in my head.

It was bad enough in the daytime, worrying about whether we’d made the biggest mistake of our lives, but at 3.00am everything in the world looked like a big mistake. The worst of it was that we were supposed to be having an adventure, it was supposed to be exciting and different, in a lovely way. But this wasn’t that adventure, this one was a scary, ugly, wet and frightening one. Lying there in the dark, I was starting to understand what people had meant about us being brave, I thought they’d meant brave to be leaving everything we knew; work, friends, family and stuff, but at the time I didn’t see why that would require bravery. Yes it would be a different life, but imagine just how wonderful it was going to be and of course, we would still have those friends, just not nearby. Now I thought they might have meant we were being brave to live in a van, perched on a narrow shelf high above Santiago de Compostela, worrying about landslides and torrential rain. Maybe that’s what they’d meant. I could see that now.
I was so stiff from lying really still with my toes clenched to make sure the van didn’t slip down the hillside. It was just my toes that were stopping us slipping. I couldn’t go to sleep because I would definitely unclench my toes and then we would slip off. Down we’d go, hundreds of muddy metres from the campsite, slipping and bumping towards the road, gathering speed all the time and finally landing with a huge explosion on top of the houses below. We would certainly die and so would the family currently asleep in their beds when we landed on top of them. Yes, the campsite was really high up and to make matters worse Mr Campsite had told us to park right up here on this little ledge. The van is long, and it had been really hard to manoeuvre it on the slippery mud last night. Tomorrow after even more rain, we would try to leave if we hadn’t sunken deeply into the mud. We’d have to go out backwards, moving really carefully so that we didn’t accidentally slip over the edge of the terrace and tip over. The van would be on its side with all our stuff falling out of its boxes and cupboards, broken crockery, scattered belongings. Awful, terrible. Now that was something else to worry about. Plainly if we made it through the night we would meet our end just trying to get out of this awful place. Yes, our friends had been right about leaving our home and going off to live in an old van, this had definitely been a huge mistake.

Phil was asleep with his hat pulled right down over his eyes and ears. He probably couldn’t even hear the rain so he wouldn’t know that we were about to slip off into oblivion. Maybe I should lie still and listen for any sign of the van lurching or slipping, then I could wake him up and we could jump out before the van fell over the edge. Lying really still and straining to listen would normally have been enough to make me fall asleep, but with the huge range of things to worry about I could just swap from one thing for another. Now the painkillers had stopped working on my recently extracted wisdom tooth and the throbbing and thudding was starting up again. This was turning into a night I’d never forget. I would have to try and lean over silently to the packet of painkillers without waking Phil. If I managed to take one that would doubtless put me to sleep and even though it would mean unclenching my toes and that we would certainly meet our end I was starting to wonder if it would matter.
I succeeded in silently getting the packet and a water bottle then lie back down, trying to make myself think only lovely thoughts. Even thinking of our life just ten days ago was relaxing. That was when we had been living comfortably with Chris and Sue in their house and where we’d prepared for our journey and had such a lovely send off party. Where were all our friends now? Snug in their comfy homes with their central heating turned up to maximum and wood-burning stoves roaring. Here were we, watching the steam come out of our mouths and the condensation run down the windows as fast as the rain outside while shivering under our blankets. It really was not supposed to be like this. Our vision of the van was a cosy nest with perfect décor and as many of our treasures with us as we could squeeze inside, while outside a perfect sunny vista of Spain would unroll beneath our wheels. Little rustic villages, old folks sitting outside in the sun, masses of orange trees, lazy dogs and all wrapped up in an amazing landscape. Even allowing that we had set off in December and maybe it wouldn’t have been the sunniest time of the year, those apartment blocks, duel carriageways and ugly industrial areas were not suppose to be there. Santiago de Compostela, where we had been heading, was supposed to be the end of our long drive, the place we were going to settle down and make our new life. How? It was not as it was supposed to be, even as we approached it on the road we could see that. Beautiful Don Quixote type of towns do not surround themselves with urban sprawl, blocks and blocks of flats, industrial zones and a complete knot of major roads, do they?

Best not to think about it all now. Something would have to be done tomorrow, but right now it was all too disturbing. Our journey was supposed to stop here but we had just discovered that it wasn’t the place. The problem was, we didn’t have another plan. Maybe it was a sign that we should stop the whole thing right now, turn round and go back. Yes, certainly it would be embarrassing, and no we didn’t have a house to go back to or a job but we knew lots of people, and I felt sure we could stay with someone until we had got our old life back. In a way it was good we hadn’t gone too far. We’d discovered early on that Spain
was an ugly disaster and at this rate we could be back home in a week. Now that was a relaxing thought.

The rain still fell and the wind was now actually rocking the van back and forth and the low branches of the eucalyptus were still flapping their leaves against the van roof. Too noisy to sleep and the calming thoughts of going home were being interrupted by thinking about the cats. Finbar, Ollie and Poo, who were living with their new families now. We had planned to bring them with us and actually would have done if we hadn’t missed the last ferry of the year that would allow animals. It would have been wonderful having them snuggled up on the bed, purring and kneading the blankets. I would be asleep now if the cats had been with us, although the mental picture of the cats at other stages of our journey was not so restful. Imagining them on board the ferry or howling as we drove along motorways either shut inside their boxes or loose in the back of the van and trying to escape each time we opened the door. That didn’t seem so nice, they would have hated being stuck in a vehicle all day and night. We couldn’t have let them out in a place they didn’t know and hope they’d come back, they’d have been scared by the strangeness of it all. No, the only way that bringing the cats would have been a possibility was if we’d known where we were going and had somewhere to stay when we got there. As it was, we didn’t know where we were going and neither did we have somewhere to stay.

The cats. Furry memories floated into my mind, all those silly funny things, which come so naturally to cats. Finbar, our crazy ginger cat, so keen to catch himself a bird he thought waiting inside the bird table was the best thing to do, wedging himself under the little wooden roof, his bright ginger fur squishing through the sides. Ollie, pleased to share his early morning stalking with us, bringing home indignant, flapping pigeons to fly around the sitting room. Or the excitable and annoyed squirrel who, having been pushed through the cat door and liberated in the hall, set about scrambling up hanging coats and curtains, knocking off pictures and ornaments in his search for the door. I came downstairs thinking
we had a burglar, to discover Ollie looking impressed at the squirrel's antics, he'd lost interest in catching or eating it, he was just sitting watching it almost flying around. Ollie thought nature was something he needed to experience close up and was always, always bringing in bodies, dead and alive to share with us and always to be seen digging things out of the compost heap and chewing heartily. On one occasion the something was obviously not in good health because Ollie laid low under the stove, looking pathetic, un-eating for what seemed like days. At the vet's he was put on a drip to re-hydrate him and dosed with liquid paraffin, then he was fine.

Poo was so much like a little dog we mostly called him Puppy. No one could arrive at our door without Poo rushing to greet them and always accompanying us around the garden. Very early one morning Ray the photographer arrived at the gate and was met by Poo, who jumped in the back of the big car hoping to be adored while Ray was busy unloading equipment. Phil was far down the garden and as Ray set off in search Poo jumped on his shoulder and enjoyed the walk at human height, eventually seeing Phil and jumping down to run ahead.

Those warm cat memories were more upsetting than relaxing, how could we have left those creatures behind, blithely skipping off in our van thinking it would be so easy to find new cats, new friends? This adventure wasn’t supposed to be like this, no one warned us it would be possible to feel this badly, surely we weren’t doing something so outlandish, were we? It seemed that people left home and went to live abroad every day, if all those TV programmes could be believed. And yes, it was true that even those people had problems with their dreams; arriving in the cute little French village or Tuscan hillside, they’d had their glitches. But theirs had been sweet glitches, like little problems with plumbing or goats and some nice rustic local person always came to the rescue. But we seemed so far from our French village or Tuscan hillside, we had no idea how we would even find our tumble-down house, even if Santiago de Compostela had turned out to be a nice place. Other people it seemed, had got
themselves organised before they’d sold up. They had been to the place they were hoping to move to, we hadn’t. They had found a place to buy, got themselves estate agents, we hadn’t, our funds didn’t extend to that kind of organisation. We didn’t even know how we were going to support ourselves in this amazing new life. That was something to sort out later. Of course, all the serious ‘move-abroad’ types of people had worked everything out. All they had to do was get their idyllic place into shape, which would obviously take at least one whole weekend. I could see it now, all those crowds of extremely jolly friends helping out. Gangs of happy folks carrying ladders, and big cans of paint, some woman with a jaunty scarf tied round her head, scrubbing floors with a bucket of soapy water. In no time there would be beautiful gauzy curtains fluttering at wooden shuttered windows, sweet little bathrooms filled with baskets of lavender and of course, out on the incredibly lovely terrace, massive wooden tables groaning with food, under impossibly blue skies. Well, lucky for them.

Meanwhile here on planet Impossible, at 3:30am we seemed to have done the most stupid thing imaginable. Why, when there were so many examples around us of how it was supposed to be done? Typically, we thought we knew best, we had to do it our own way. I suppose I could accept that the root of this was the fact that we didn’t really have the money to do it in any other way. We couldn’t keep jetting off, searching for the place, and anyway, it just wasn’t that easy. We were looking for a special place and we’d know it when we found it. Not having an endless supply of money, or actually any supply of money now might have been reason enough for normal people to come to the conclusion that it just couldn’t be done. Great dream, but that’s all it could be. Not us though, not having enough money had never stood in our way.

Before we’d started on this disastrous plan we’d had a perfect life, or it certainly seemed that way now. Living in a little cottage on the edge of a village in North Yorkshire with a huge garden, fields all around and total quietness. We’d been there for twelve years, which makes us sound settled and happy. Certainly there had been moments and looking back
seemed to have been more than there actually were, in fact we had been trying to move for about nine of those years. What was the matter with us? Why couldn’t we just enjoy being somewhere, be satisfied with all we’d achieved? Plainly, we weren’t normal.

The house in Yorkshire had been perfect house when we saw it. Small, brick built, 200 years old, solid, dependable with a good sized garden. At that point 12 years ago we’d wanted a bit of space because we’d just got interested in growing vegetables and fancied ourselves a bit as Tom and Barbara Good, from the Good life. When we moved in the garden was really just a gigantic lawn interrupted by half-hearted flowerbeds and an ugly rockery. We arrived in July and had a few days to wait for our furniture to catch up with us. Our cats at the time, Gus, Irma, Alice and Harry were still adjusting to rural life after living in a terraced street and were cautiously edging further away from the house, sniffing and looking around before turning and running back inside again. Phil was adjusting to rural life too. One afternoon while I went inside to make a pot of tea, he had got the spade out of the shed and by the time I’d come back out there was a huge ugly scar all the way from the gate across the lawn, down the side of the house to the back hedge.

‘Thought I’d make a start getting some beds dug’, he’d said while I stood stunned, tea tray in hand. We’d been there just 5 minutes and already we’d started to make a mess, unpicking things in a dramatic way. No nibbling around the edges, no cautious drawings and advice sought. No, the spade. The garden had seemed huge to us, a piece of land where we could really try out the idea of growing our own food. Planting seeds, maybe get a greenhouse, dig a pond, put into place all the things we’d read about in gardening books. We’d always been interested in environmental issues and gardening organically seemed to connect with us. Now we had our garden we would start to work with nature, make a huge compost heap, maybe get some hens. There seemed so many possibilities.
I suppose looking back, even getting that house had been risky. I’d had a good, safe job working for the local authority in Milton Keynes before we started to feel restless that time. We had friends in York and one visit was enough to make us hanker after living near a ‘proper’ city again, so I began looking for a new job and in just three months, I’d got one. We’d sold our little house and had moved. My new job was on a temporary 18-month contract and Phil didn’t have a job to move to, but we felt sure he’d find something. That was the first time friends had asked us why we were doing it? Jobs weren’t that easy to come by, certainly jobs with security and a pension scheme, why risk it? I couldn’t see why as people in our twenties we needed to be worried by such dreary things. Pensions? Security? Surely being young meant taking a few risks, living by your wits and also sticking by your principles? Well that was us and we’d been lucky enough to get a mortgage to buy our cottage.

And we really got the most we could out of the place. The garden seemed to pull us towards it and we continued to make dramatic changes all round. Getting rid of that rockery, moving the sad little fruit bushes into a nice deep well-mulched bed, building a fabulous double compost heap, a pond for all the frogs, and widening the perennial border into a wild celebration of summer plants. In a few years it really did look great and we had plenty of vegetables to eat. We’d been vegetarian for a couple of years and growing our own food fitted with the healthy living thing. We had our hens and they worked hard scratting up the soil, pulling up weeds and generally tidying bits of garden. We’d got a good system of moving them around each weekend so they’d have a new job to do. They didn’t seem to mind all the work, I think they liked a change.

The Good Life suited us, we liked the idea of recycling things, mending, repairing, scrimping, none of it seemed a substitute for being able to buy new things, it just made sense and it was wonderful finding old things and making them work again. My knitting also fitted this scheme of things, making things from unpicked jumble sale jumpers or Oxfam finds. I found
some wonderful things, including a spectacular hand knitted cardigan in soft blue, lovingly made by someone and totally perfect for me. It was a real triumph to find something that no one else wanted and have the just the right use for it. The house itself welcomed the style of all the things we found or made. Old lamps, furniture re-painted, big old eiderdowns on the sofa, knitted blankets, finding creative ways of using old stuff was great.

Life at the cottage was always engrossing and even in the summer my holidays from work meant more time at home, which was just as well, there was masses to do. All the vegetables to pick, freeze, bottle, all the cooking, beans, tomatoes, courgettes everywhere. If we went anywhere we were armed with bagfuls of marrows, plums, and broad beans to give people. There was no way we could go and lie on a beach with all that going on. Living in Yorkshire was great, we’d got to know people and even though I was working miles away by then, we still had time for our local friends. People who kept bees, grew vegetables, enjoyed the things we enjoyed, like the jumble sales and making things. Yes, there had been plenty of friendly people.

Looking back the years were a bit of a blur, but there were good memories. Days in the summer when we’d had barbecues with friends, sitting outside until it got dark and even the winters with heavy snowfall, how amazing the garden looked completely white with all the branches looking like 3D versions of themselves, all perfectly outlined in white. One Christmas our friend Mo said she’d call round on Christmas Eve and with Mo that could mean anytime. It was snowing heavily by the time it got dark but we knew this wouldn’t stop her when she was on a mission. She arrived at about 7.30, our house was in darkness because the power had gone out and we were trying to cook supper on our wood-burning stove, all very boy scout. Mo whirled in with armfuls of bags, pulled off her wet boots and coat all the while saying she wasn’t stopping, just calling in on her way to her daughter’s house which was about 40 miles away across the moors. It was freezing, just the night to stay inside, pull the curtains on the cold and stoke up the fire. We’d tried to persuade her to
stay, the roads were bad, it was freezing, but in an hour Mo set off again, sure she’d get across the snowy roads by some magical power, even though pulling away outside our house hadn’t been easy. We spent the evening worrying that she was in a ditch somewhere. Next morning she called, yes she’d made it, but she couldn’t believe how difficult it had been, how bad the roads were, there was snow everywhere, it had taken her hours to crawl through the narrow roads and a one point she thought she’d have to get out and walk. She told us this in amazement, as if there hadn’t been snow when she’d left us, it was so typically Mo, remembering that cold night and our cosy stove was another warm memory.

So when was it we began thinking of leaving all this? Hard to say really, although I suppose there had been the moment when we began to feel a bit, well, limited, when we’d had the garden for a few years. After we’d managed to get some idea of how the seasons worked and what to plant when, we’d got our beds and compost heap going, we’d sown seeds and little plants. At first the garden had seemed huge and actually getting going on our ambitious scheme of planting had been confusing, we didn’t know where to start. In those days there had been lots of possibilities but after a few years there weren’t. We’d used up all the lawn, there was no more to nibble away at with new schemes, these days we seemed to have more schemes than space. We wanted to grow different types of vegetables, maybe get a polytunnel to extend the growing season, a cold frame and greenhouse.

Even when we began thinking about all our new schemes, we weren’t actually thinking of moving house, not then. Our attempts at self-sufficiency were teaching us a lot about how much space we needed to grow stuff and to give the soil a chance to recover at the same time, our appetite for growing things had developed massively. The garden had been the start but now we could see how all the other things we had got interested in, like the scrimping and recycling had somehow come from the garden. And just as we began to feel conscious of our restlessness a new possibility hoved into view.
Right next to our garden was a piece of land, about 3/4 of an acre, totally overgrown and neglected. There were fallen trees, scrappy hedges, brambles, elder and nettles so dense it wasn’t possible to see past the sagging wire fence. It was wild place which made our garden even more secluded. Just at the moment when we began to feel the need for more space, the little piece of land came up for sale. It was obviously meant to be. Meant to be ours. So we had to buy it. The process was tense, there were sealed bids, lots of waiting and stress, worrying about what would happen if we didn’t get it, just how many houses would the other potential bidders want to build there? Would they get planning permission, what would we do if they got it and we didn’t? So it was a huge relief when our bid was accepted. Wonderful news, all that space we’d already got so many plans for. Polytunnels, fruit cages, greenhouses and huge ponds, the scope was endless even if at the time it hadn’t been possible to get over the fence to see what we’d bought. The jungle was too intense.

Hardly had we managed to digest the idea of becoming ‘landowners’ and enjoy the moment when Phil lost his job. Yes, the timing of this couldn’t have been worse since we’d just doubled our mortgage. Now what would we do? Well, after a bit of panic, hysteria and general gloom we remembered we were made of strong-ish stuff, it wasn’t the first time one or both of us had lost jobs. It was hard, not having financial security but either we could sit and worry or we could decide that it would all be OK and try to remain positive, we’d manage until he got a new job, things would work out.

Well, they did work out, but not as we’d thought. Phil finding a new job proved more difficult than we imagined and really depressing as anyone who has been unemployed knows, it’s a horrible, degrading and negative experience. Your life seems to be on hold as you wait for someone else to say whether you can join the rest of society or not. It was a miserable time, even though we were still amongst the lucky people, we had one job between us because I was still working.
One day after yet another ‘sorry but’ letter had arrived and we were feeling despondent, we got thinking about the whole thing. We hated the feeling that our life was in someone else’s hands, some stranger. We wanted to be the ones in charge of how our life developed but was that only to do with a job and money? Certainly the money was important and maybe the status of a good job, but what did that mean in the giant scheme of things? If we could manage to pay our bills with my salary, then what else did we need? Now we began to see the possibilities. Going to work actually cost us money. There was the travelling which was always expensive, a car, petrol, insurance, parking costs, the clothes, lunches and countless other things which made the whole going to work thing more palatable. Once we’d looked at all those things, the actual money the job brought wasn’t that significant. Obviously we would have to be careful, there wouldn’t be any spare cash, but weirdly, there never seemed to be any spare cash when we were both working anyway. We decided to step up our self-sufficiency and celebrate the 50% of freedom in our life. 50% because I would still be going to work every day. There would be more of all the things we loved and didn’t have time for, more gardening, more making things and with Phil at home doing the chores, I’d get more time at weekends for everything I liked to do. Oh yes, this was exciting.

And our plan had worked and we’d actually managed much more than just keeping afloat. Phil was suddenly super-charged and almost immediately turned the garage into a place to work, no more space for the van which had to live outside. The ‘workshop’ began to fill with tools, from car boot sales, salvaged wood and tins of nails and screws. It began to remind me of my favourite TV cartoon, Rhubarb and Custard. Custard the yellow cat, and Rhubarb the red dog. Rhubarb was always coming up with schemes, which required long nights spent in the shed making loud hammering noises, then the sun would come up, the door would burst open and there was some incredible thing, like a swimming pool for birds or a doughnut making machine. Phil was Rhubarb! He made everything. Bookshelves, cupboards, kitchen units, tables, hen houses, storage boxes, framed mirrors, a lighthouse with alarm clock, really! In fact, whatever we needed, or whatever I fancied, he made. The house looked
wonderful. It was impressive, original, everything Phil made was of his own design. He’d never learned carpentry so he just made it up as he went along, the wood was scrounged or given so it didn’t matter if things went wrong, it was great. Phil’s carpentry really was fabulous and it was even more wonderful realising that if he’d been successful at getting a job, he’d never have found out he could do it.

Now we had a focus for our life, our self-sufficiency had stepped up a notch. The vegetable growing was one important part but now we had the other part, which were all the creative things. Phil’s carpentry and my knitting and sewing were also part of the mix. Initially we made things for the house since there were no trips to Habitat now. Whenever we wanted new curtains, cushions, sofa covers I hunted out the fabric either at jumble sales, markets or charity shops and got out the sewing machine. It was an ancient old thing, which was at the right level of sophistication for my sewing. Eventually we had time to make all sorts of other things. Presents for friends, cards, toys, little books, all sorts of stuff. One evening we were sitting on the latest recycled sofa in front of the stove, listening to the old valve radio and we got talking about things from our childhood that had been memorable. Phil talked of his Nan’s house, her cooking, his Granddad bringing things home from the local auction room, boxes of junk to play with and make things out of. I remembered the thrill of queuing up with my Mum and sister to go into the Christmas Bazaar at our local church hall. It was an annual event which was an all important part in our build up to Christmas. The whole thing was thrilling, all that anticipation, other people trying to push in and not take their place at the back of the queue. Honestly, people were jostling. Then, once the door opened and we filed in, paying our admission we were only allowed to look. No one could buy anything until the bazaar was officially opened, at 3.00pm by the vicar. Everyone squashed into the hall, pushing towards the little stalls, the noise was tremendous, it was hot and the smell of all the heavy winter coats at my nose level will stay with me always. There were so many cute things. Lavender bags, little dolls dressed in knitted outfits, felt mice, knitted rabbits, pretty aprons, embroidered tray mats, and each stall was festooned in crepe paper, not just a table
top, but with a kind of awning, covered in paper decorations. Trying to see inside every stall was like peeping into a little woolly, lavender scented paradise. The ladies behind each stall were already looking harassed and frantic as people tried to persuade them to ‘put things on one side’, which was strictly forbidden. Just looking was like torture because if you did see something you really wanted there was the risk that someone would beat you to it, the need to have it intensified and the competition was fierce. Although it was most keenly felt at the cake stall and my interest was always in the knitted toys area. Finally, when the atmosphere in the room reached melt down, silence fell. Everyone was supposed to stand still and listen, while the vicar told us how the money raised would be spent and while he praised the incredible standard of the handicrafts and said how delicious the cakes looked and then while thanks were heaped on those who had decorated the hall. Finally, after a little prayer the bazaar was declared open. The hall exploded as people tried to shove through the crowd. Of course, there were those of us clever enough to have used the vicar’s speech as an opportunity to creep closer to the stall we wanted to buy from, who were already there. Standing was difficult with the pressure of the crowd on our backs, but our arms were outstretched, hovering above the chosen item, ready to snatch it up as soon as the vicar’s words were over. What excitement, how thrilling it was and how happy we were to have succeeded in getting what we’d so badly wanted. We walked home in December’s chilly twilight and the excitement of Christmas had begun.

Now, sitting in the quiet of our little house we wondered about those rich, warm memories. Wasn’t there something of what we were doing in our self-sufficiency that reached right back to those times? Making simple things and enjoying the process as well as actually having the finished item. Definitely, being in charge of our own life meant working out what were the important things, not just having enough food to eat, or having shelter and warmth, but those special, brilliant, lovely moments too. Maybe we could do something like the church bazaar or think of something that involved all our crafts in making a special thing. We
couldn’t imagine what it might be, but there was definitely an exciting feeling just trying to work it out.

We worked hard towards our first event. Peddlers Market we called it and it was a Christmas Bazaar right in our own home. Obviously it does sound mad, having a bazaar in a two-up, two-down cottage, but we weren’t thinking of it being a big thing, just a few friends and neighbours. And since we weren’t planning a big thing, there was no point having it in the village hall, a nice small event that brought people into our newly created world.

Well, it was great. The house looked festive, the stove was burning bright, the Christmas lights were everywhere and the house was full of folks drinking hot, spicy, apple juice and eating mince pies. The atmosphere was just as we’d hoped and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves, buying lots of the little Christmas treasures we’d made. We couldn’t have asked for more. Looking back it was that event that sort of started our reaching out, letting others know more about our home-made life and also meeting other people who lived their own version of it. It’s possible that event could have been the start of us becoming strange or sort of eccentric. Although I daresay there were plenty of people who’d known us who probably thought we’d been going that way for years! Who cares? Life’s for living, not worrying about what others think. We just got on and did things that meant something to us and those things seemed to lead us to new things all the time. Like the open garden thing. Many of the villages in North Yorkshire had Open Garden events in the summer. It’s when people let total strangers come and wander round their gardens to look at the plants and talk to each other about the plants. It’s usually a local fundraiser and it’s most often for the church roof. So when the church in our village needed a new roof it was obvious that we should all be asked to open our gardens and the first Sunday in July was the chosen day. We spent ages tidying up the whole place. Cutting things back, trimming, pulling up weeds, stacking things tidily and making the place look perfect. We weren’t alone, everyone in the place was going crazy morning till night, folks were outside fretting over their already perfect lawns. In the
week before the event it was actually impossible to go along the village without sunglasses because the dazzling colour of all bedding plants actually hurt your eyes.

Our garden with the new piece of land was one of the biggest in the village and the only organic one which meant we’d probably have lots of questions to answer. Visitors went to the village hall first to collect the map of all the participating gardens then they would begin walking from one garden to another. No one knew how many people would come but other villages had crowds, so we prepared ourselves. Phil had drawn a map of our garden which we’d photocopied so that people could show themselves around, just in case we got busy. Typically he spent ages designing it and the finished thing went way beyond being just a map. It was full of information about the plants and trees, the herbs and their medicinal uses, the ponds and what lived in them, the reasons for making compost etc. etc. And little drawings and diagrams, it was a beautiful thing which people could take it away with them as a little memento. The day itself was perfect. Hot and sunny which made people from the whole region want to go out and look around gardens. The village street was crowded with people and cars crawling along. Down at the village hall there were strawberry teas and home-made lemonade and cakes, cars were parked along the side of the road as far as we could see and people roamed in packs from garden to garden. It was a bit scary actually seeing all those crowds but we did have friends helping us, which was just as well because there we so many people swarming into the garden it was all a bit mad. Fabulous though, brilliant, marvellous. So many people had come and everyone had said what a good job we’d done, how they were interested in self-sufficiency and loved how the garden looked. Older people had given us tips on various things, like making jam, chitting potatoes, saving seeds and their own person recipes for good compost. Other people had sat under the old fruit trees and kicked their shoes off for a while. There had been people literally everywhere, we could see heads bobbing along behind hedges and hear people along the paths, bunches of people talking about the vegetables and there were children in the spiral garden and others squatting down by the pond. By the time the last visitor left at 7.00 we felt as if a whirlwind
had hit us. All the hard work and preparation had paid off, we flopped down in the deckchairs, our turn for tea and cakes with our friends. We knew that open gardens had definitely added something to our life.

And just as with Peddlers Market, the open garden thing seemed to lead us on to our next idea. It was Phil’s little map, with all the information and drawings of the garden that seemed to have something about it. It was so beautiful and full of information couldn’t there be a way of turning it into a little pamphlet, something those people who hadn’t been to the garden could enjoy? Maybe with more information about being self-sufficient, some ideas and thoughts about living differently. It was a great idea for Phil because it brought together all the things he enjoyed doing. Writing, drawing, graphic design and of course his favourite subject, gardening. It kept him busy all the next winter.

And it did turn out to be another idea as good as Peddlers Market had been. From the map Phil made his first little pamphlet based on the Open Gardens leaflet. We ran off 300 copies on a photocopier and sold them and it felt really satisfying. Of course as soon as the first one was written Phil was planning the next with more information, ideas, diagrams and all sorts. That one had been more ambitious, with lots more pages and this time a handmade, recycled paper cover. I’d agreed to make the covers, thinking we were talking about 100 sheets of paper. How I would never forget the chilly winter weekends in the outhouse making 1,000 sheets in cold water, freezing. The house was festooned in limp paper, the kitchen, the sitting room, even the stairs and hallway, there was hardly a place to stand. We hadn’t realised there would be such a demand but after a little feature in a newspaper requests had flooded in and we needed to make copies to get them in the post as quickly as we could, we didn’t wasn’t to disappoint anyone. Phil laboured in the workroom upstairs, collating pages, folding them in their speckly, hand-made covers, bending over the old sewing machine, stitching down the spine of each copy as the letters poured in. It was great though. In the same way that we had enjoyed open gardens, it was brilliant getting letters from people.
Growing vegetables was mostly a solitary activity, but hearing from people all over the country and beyond made us feel connected to a much bigger world, all gardeners seemed to love sharing their ideas and organic, environmentally conscious gardeners were no different. They encouraged us and supported our ideas, wanted copies of the book then continued to write afterwards. Long, interesting letters full of thoughts and ideas, they sent newspaper cuttings, addresses of interesting organisations, seeds, all sorts of things. Suddenly, we had new friends from all over the place. I think we realised then we had a bit of a magical garden.

Now where were we? In the middle of nowhere, no garden, no home and no friends. So much for hoping nice happy memories were going to soothe me to sleep. It was incredible that we had so carelessly tossed our life away. The thing we had so carefully created over years, not just the garden, but our whole way of life had been crumpled up and dropped in a bin. We’d survived on one salary, not only survived, but we’d had a great time of it. The garden had become beautiful. Only last month it had been in *Gardens Illustrated*. It’s arched willow pathway, all the buddleias with their different coloured flowers thick with butterflies, the huge pond full of frogs and newts, the perfect circular beds of pumpkins, broccoli, beans and tomatoes, potatoes, carrots a world of vegetables. The fruit bushes, and the extremely stylish spiral garden outside the sitting room window full of foxgloves, delphinium, phlox, marigolds, the blue sea holly and all the different daisies I’d collected; bright orange, gold and red. Really. When people had asked us why we were doing it, they’d looked totally shocked, disbelieving and worried for us. And we’d been so flippant. Now I could understand. Those people had seen it, we hadn’t and we’d let it go so easily.

I suppose we’d had our reasons and it hadn’t been that easy to disentangle ourselves from our old life, it hadn’t happened overnight, even though it felt like that now. It went back to when we started to get that feeling again, the restlessness, the need for new challenges and stuff. We had to accept that we weren’t the kind of people to live in the same house for ever,
to have the same jobs throughout our lives and while we were also not reckless and feckless
we did need a challenge. At that moment, in Santiago, I worried that we were not the kind of
people we needed to be right now. Resilient, strong, unemotional. We definitely were not
those people. We weren’t the kind of people who ‘go travelling’, you know, those who spend
months with Buddhists in Tibet or trekking across the outback in Australia or living with
nomads or digging wells in Africa. No definitely, we weren’t that type of person. But we’d
had our reasons for being where we were at that moment, attempting to live in a converted
van in Spain.

Our life in Yorkshire had been punctuated with moments of change and it definitely seemed
as if we had unconsciously needed those to spur us on. The garden, the crafts, the books and
all the other things, they were all great. Then at some point, that feeling came back again, it
was the ‘Was this it?’ thing. Was this all there was going to be? When the moment came for
us to depart this life, would we be able to look back and think, yes, we did everything we
wanted to do, our lives had been full and importantly we had done it all ourselves. Well,
faced with that moment of reckoning, the doubt would certainly come. Surely we should
have done more? Really, having a wonderful garden and managing to survive on one salary
was that so heroic? We’d managed to do it, so it couldn’t be that impressive. And at that
moment we had started to see the end in sight, the end of the possibilities of living where we
were. It felt as if time was moving more quickly, the years beginning to blur into one. Was it
last year or the year before when we cleaned the pond out? Was it really five years since we
got the polytunnel? Six since we’d started all this? We couldn’t seem to feel it. Was this
what happened as time passed? You suddenly looked around and twenty years had gone and
you were suddenly a pensioner, wondering what it was all about? Well, not us. We had to
think about what we wanted next, and that definitely didn’t mean material things, we needed
new experiences, we wanted to learn new things but we’d always have a garden, that was
central to our life, we’d always have a garden.
CHAPTER TWO

Our old life is over
We made the decision to sell the house and move to somewhere bigger. Not house bigger, garden bigger. That’s when we realised it would have to be in another country because houses with big gardens were way beyond our price range in Britain. Maybe moving abroad it would be cheaper, we’d have more space, a better climate and it would be exciting. We could plan a new version of our garden, in a much bigger and sunnier place with maybe mountains and incredible views. Once we’d had that idea the possibilities seemed endless. People could come and visit us, we could make spend time making things and try to encourage other people to do the same. Phil reached for our schoolboy atlas, a jumble sale find, and started looking at the map of Europe, maybe we could go somewhere environmentally cleaner, somewhere with a south-west wind and lots of space. The whole thing sounded great and I liked the idea of learning a new language, living in a different culture. That should keep us busy for a bit. Yes, this was shaping up into one of our better ideas. Although actually, we’d never really been abroad, apart from school trips years ago, a trip to Ireland, and a few days in Amsterdam where I took photos of vegetables at the weekly organic produce market. I’d never forget those pictures or showing them to friends at work, laughing with them about how, with all the art and culture Amsterdam had to offer, I’d spent my time taking photos of pumpkins. Other country’s vegetables definitely held a certain appeal.

We started to think about being in a warmer climate, the potential for a garden in the sun, and it did seem marvellous. We didn’t have a clue about how we’d do it but we decided to keep it as simple as possible. Sell the house and all our stuff then set off in a converted van. Then we’d have somewhere to live while we drove around looking for the perfect spot. Sounded good. Plus, with the money from the house sale in the bank, we could live off the interest until we found a place and by that time, maybe 6 months, we’d have worked out how we’d support ourselves. After all, we were resourceful, adaptable people surely we’d be able to work that one out. So we took a deep breath and put the house up for sale and panicked. We needn’t have worried though because luckily we had chosen a time of slump in the
housing market and no one wanted a tiny house with a massive garden. I say luckily because although our plan was flawless and totally perfect, we weren’t really ready to let everything go that quickly. No, it really was good, because now we had our lovely scheme we could just fanaticise about it, wander though our imaginary garden in the sun without having to leave our old life, it couldn’t have been better.

In fact, several happy years passed before any buyers showed up and even then we thought it would come to nothing. People looked around, said nice things and we never saw them again. But one Saturday things were different. These people had come back a second time, they liked the place, they had cash and they bought it. Just like that. We were really excited, our long incubated scheme was in place. We knew what we were going to do and it was just a matter of carrying out each step. Yes, our friends were mostly aghast, how could we do it? How could we bear to leave our garden, how brave we were and so on. We could hear what they were saying, but it didn’t make any difference, we were going to Spain. Yes, Spain actually. Finally we knew where we were going and that was because Phil had just been on a computer course and got chatting to some man who had told him the name of a fantastic and wonderful place in the region of Galicia. Santiago de Compostela. Perfect climate, not too hot, inexpensive old stone houses ready to be done up and the soil was perfect for gardening. We took it as a sign and decided to go there.

At this point we just wanted to pack a suitcase and leave, however reality was littered with decisions and big jobs to do. As well as moving out, we had to get rid of all our earthly clutter, find the van we would live in and then look for somewhere to stay while Phil created a thing of beauty out of some old parcel van. We didn’t know where to start but we thought trying to find the van would be good, especially since we had someone who could help us with that.
Mick, from the garage in Leeds had never failed us and only a few days later I was driving across the city centre to have a look at an ugly white monster, which he said was what we needed to make our dream home on wheels. Apparently it had the right type of engine and everything else under the bonnet was sound. The fact that inside the van was beyond filthy with biro scribbled across the sun visors, torn seats and smelt like the ashtray of a chain smoker had all passed Mick by. But surely, a good session with a bucket of hot soapy water would sort out the cab and I could always make seat covers and wash the carpets. Having decided that I would take Mick’s word that the engine was sound I squinted hard at the horribly ugly van and tried to create a cosy cabin on wheels in my mind. Phil was going to make the vision real with all his woodworking ingenuity. Surely it would work? I told Mick I’d take it.

I felt relieved that I’d managed to such a big decision so lightly, maybe that was how I should approach all the decisions we now had to make. On that philosophical note I drove the van to its next home, another garage in some far flung corner of Leeds where it would have some alterations to the bodywork done.

Next job, move out of the house. But not before we had sold everything. We’d decided to make a clean break with our old life and head off in our van unconnected to our previous existence. We put up ads in shop windows and then we held a kind of garage sale, inviting everyone we knew to come and pick through our stuff while drinking tea and eating cake, it was fun really. Things were moving along nicely, although neither of us could have guessed that we would get so lucky with finding somewhere to stay where Phil could work on the van. Chris and Sue were members of York Organic Gardeners Group and lived in an old watermill in Pocklington (Devonshire Mill), which they had renovated. Where they had a flat for us to stay in, a beautiful rambling organic garden, and a workshop for Phil to transform the monster of a van. It was all too good to be true.
Now all that remained was to actually move out of our house, taking the stuff we had left over to Pocklington. Easy. Well, it should have been but if it hadn’t been for Catherine, our neighbour, we could still have been there. I suppose it was because there had been so many other things to sort out, that actually packing up our stuff and leaving had seemed a small thing. It wasn’t though. There was furniture some friends were having, but not calling for until we’d left, there was stuff to go to the tip, drawers and cupboards to empty, five gigantic houseplants with no home to go to, rubbish sacks of clothes and piles of blankets, and so on. I had gaily been predicting that I’d just take two days off from work, one to pack and one to move, very slick, easy even. My friends at work thought otherwise and urged me to take a couple of days before the move, but I couldn’t see the problem, well, not until I was at home and saw all the stuff everywhere. Disaster! Added to that we needed a van. Yes. We, the owners of the monster, needed a van to move with. Where was that ugly great thing when we needed it? Phil phoned around trying to locate a van while I started to organise the jumble of our remaining belongings. It all looked impossible, until Catherine showed up and had things jumping to shape under her command, all those years nanny-ing children had given her very sharp organisational skills. Plants and uncollected furniture to her house, sacks for the charity shop in the porch, things to go to Pocklington in the hall. Oh yes, it all came together with a lot of physical effort on both our parts. By the time Catherine nipped off to sort out the children’s tea, things were looking good. Now there was actually only one snag remaining. Well two snags really, one: the van Phil had located was on the other side of York, so he had to leave right then to collect it. And two: the hire van would need petrol and there was a petrol strike on, something we had been trying to ignore, Phil would have to scour the whole zone between the van rental place and home, looking for petrol and then queue up for it. He could be gone hours and still maybe not have any petrol, did we need this at this stage?

After he’d gone I made some tea and sat watched our two remaining cats trying to pack themselves in half filled boxes, the third, Finbar had been adopted by friends who had come
to our grand rummage sale. This had been a blessing because Fin, like all ginger cats seemed to have a touch of quirky madness about him and how he would have coped with moving, let alone travelling was anyone’s guess. He was a real softie though, one of those cats that start dribbling when they clamp eyes on you and don’t stop until they’re sat on your lap and have made your knees all damp. Ollie and Poo were coming to Pocklington, then Ollie was going to live with Kat and Joe. They’d just bought their first house and were having loads of our furniture and the plants, which were now stashed at Catherine’s so it seemed right that they adopt Ollie. For Kat, seeing Ollie was like love at first sight, she worshipped him and he could tell he’d landed on his feet. He was definitely a ‘one cat in a house’ type of individual and he would flourish with Kat’s undivided attention. He’d been trying for years to get our other two to leave, now he’d have Kat all to himself. Poo, well, we hadn’t found anyone to adopt him yet and secretly I was pleased, I was still hoping we’d find a way around the ferry company’s no pets rule and besides, we still had two months and that was ages.

We celebrated our last evening in the house when Phil returned triumphantly with the hire van and petrol. Catherine returned her hands full of bulky white paper carrier bags of Indian takeaway. We flopped on folding chairs, surrounded by boxes and bare walls, it didn’t look like home any more, no furniture, curtains, pictures or stuff, but it still looked good. The beautiful wooden floor, even without rugs was golden and warm, the sight of the moonlit garden creeping through the windows was perfect. It seemed the garden would always be number one in this house.

Moving day arrived, Ollie and Poo in their baskets, safely stashed in the cab while we made a million dashes up and down the path to load the van in the rain. All the overhanging buddleias dripped on us and we were wet in just a few minutes. Finally the last boxes were squeezed in and we leaned hard against the doors until they clicked shut. It was over. We no longer lived in our little house, our home for 13 years. There was no more waiting, all the
planning and thinking was over, although in all the pictures in my mind this day was supposed to be a beautiful sunny day, but what can you do about the weather?

In honesty we didn’t spend much time thinking about the old place because it was great living with Chris and Sue. The flat was perfect and on that first night they had cooked us a wonderful supper and we managed to dry out in front of their stove. Poo and Ollie weren’t so sure, they spent the night hiding behind the washing machine, as cats do. Next day Kat and Joe arrived en route to their new home in a re-run of what we’d been doing the day before. Big van, lots of stuff squashed in, Kat in their car equally stuffed to the roof, but with a space in the back for Ollie. Poor boy, he couldn’t believe he was in transit again, he stuck all his legs out to make himself too big to go in the basket and was still howling and trying escape as Kat carefully strapped his basket into the back seat of the car. We shed a few tears as he left us for his new home, feeling more emotional about Ollie than we had about leaving our house. Although Kat phoned later to let us hear Ollie purring while he sat on her knee. Turncoat!

I was still going to work every day, enjoying, as everyone does who has handed in their notice, that wonderful feeling of imminent liberation. It was then that people started talking about bravery and stuff like that. Even if I’d understood what they were saying I’m sure I would have decided that it was too late for worry. Now we had no home and soon no salary, we truly would be self-sufficient, no more 50% for us, we were 100%, proud and rebellious. It was good that we had so much to do or we might have had time to think and succumb to panic. Now that everyone was saying how brave we were, we could hardly burst into tears and say it was all a mistake could we?

We took our minds off any lingering anxiety by focussing all our energy on the ugly van. We made endless piles of drawings, trying to work out what it would all look like. How would the bed fit in? Cooking? Very important, we’d heard that vegetarian food in Spain was
pretty well non-existent so we’d certainly need to cook. Storage, we needed plenty. My huge stash of craft materials needed space because it was definitely coming with us, in times of crisis, making things always made life feel better. Our plans for the van were very creative, however it was only with its return that we began to realise that we had to get realistic. We slid open the side door and peered in at the filthy floor with water swilling around, it was definitely not as big on the inside as it looked on the outside. But, it had to be said, the specialist garage had done a fantastic job. The little windows gave it the debonair flavour of campervan and the roof was totally amazing. Two little pop-up skylights with little mosquito net screens, meant for hot foreign places like where we were going. Then there was the light grey coloured insulation carpet which covered the whole ceiling and curved a little way down the walls. It was perfect, so neat and professional. Now it was almost possible to see the van as I’d imagined it. I squinted hard through that imaginary lens, enjoying what I was seeing, trying to make it stay but suddenly it clicked shut when Phil shouted something about getting to work on all the greasy filth and fag ends drifting around in puddles on the floor.

All I saw of Phil for days were the soles of his boots as he wriggled around inside the van. It was physical work, writhing about in a limited space and worse since the weather had turned bitterly cold to add to the discomfort. Phil was swathed in thermal vest, layers of jumpers and fleeces all tucked inside his boiler suit. His woolly hat clamped on his head and a permanent drip on the end of his nose. All day, every day he was outside, sawing wood, drilling holes, bolting things together and all evening he scribbled on bits of paper. He was full of unanswerable questions like, how much worktop space did I need? How could he make a wooden bed that turned into a sofa? Would it be possible to sleep with our knees bent up? He felt out of his depth and I couldn’t help, I just didn’t know those things.

While Phil chewed over endless conundrums about the van while I set off to work every morning. I loved living at the Mill and it was fun at work with my friends. The flat was comfortable, we cooked lovely meals and we could even hire DVDs in Pocklington. We loved
watching films, we could relax and wind down. Poo had worked out his ways of relaxing too, like climbing high in the open beamed ceiling, then howling and pretending he was stuck 20 feet above us or hunting for mice in the garden. He was used to having a cat door but he wasn’t going to let the absence of one change his life, especially since he’d got us trained to get up and down all night long, letting him in and out. He had learned quickly how to find his way out of the flat, down our staircase, across the next landing, down the next flight of stairs to the hall, then out though a window. He was clever, he worked it all out and in payment for his cleverness he expected to be let in and out whenever he fancied. We tried making him a bed on the landing but that was no good. He was indignant, he wanted to be inside our bed when he’d got all cold and wet so he scratched at the door and howled to come in, waking us up anyway. Our bed was on the mezzanine above the kitchen in the flat.

Letting Poo in or out meant negotiating the little wooden staircase down to floor level while still in the haze of sleep, then continuing round the banister to the next flight of stairs down to the door. Poo was always ecstatic at being let in whatever the hour, meowing, twirling around our legs, tripping us up, then running around for a bit, followed by eating crunchy biscuits from his bowl downstairs, just below our heads. Then he chased back up the wooden stairs to our bed, jumped on top and nosed his way beneath the covers, until he got the urge to go out again. We carried on for two months getting up and down, grumbling about our broken nights of sleep because we felt so guilty. We had discovered that unless we wanted to drive all the way through France, which we didn’t, we couldn’t take Poo with us on the ferry to Bilbao. The ferry to Santander which did take pets had stopped for the winter. It was a blow, I had been clinging on to the hope of having Poo with us, even though the sensible thing would be to find him a new home, I couldn’t bear it. So we let him in and out all night, we let him snuggle up damply under the bedclothes and sneeze his snotty sneeze on our faces. We even had to take him to the vet after he and one of Sue’s cats got into a territorial scrap. From having limped into the flat the victor, his leg swelled to the size of a big matted football sock and we had to stretcher him off to the surgery, honestly Poo was as much effort as three cats, but what could we do?
Time skipped on and the van interior was taking shape. Behind the driver's seat, all the way to the back of the van and under our new sliding windows was a long, smooth work surface. Under that were masses of cupboards with shelves inside and clever little concertina doors, so they didn’t need much space to open. They had little wire panels too, so that you could see inside. It was all the work of a genius. Directly behind the driver's seat was a gap for the cooker. A sweet little gas cooker with two rings, an oven and even a grill. We’d ordered it from a company that made things for boats and it was very stylish and stainless steel. The cooker and the gas was Phil’s latest anxiety. Apparently there were rules and regulations about gas bottles but we didn’t know what they were, apart from having to store the bottle outside the van. This sounded mad to me. How could you have a bottle of gas outside when you were driving along? It wasn’t as if we could have a shed, unless we considered towing one behind us. Phil had managed to track down someone in York who knew about such things and was going to take the van and the cooker there to have it fitted safely. Meanwhile inside the van the walls were snugly insulated behind slatted pine panelling, the whole space looked like the Scandinavian log cabin I’d imagined and I could even see the bed taking shape. We’d decided on a full-length bed rather than a short one across the back of the van because sleeping with permanently bent legs might become irritating. So the bed or sofa as it was during the day, ran from the sliding side door right to the back. There was a narrow walkway between it and the worktop. The sofa would be transformed into a bed by an ingenious flap, which was hinged all the way along the front of the sofa. At night all we had to do was lift the flap, pop the wooden legs under to keep it up, and pull the futon down from sofa position, to bed position. All very simple. Phil had managed to design in little bits of storage everywhere, even under the back window. He’d made a narrow ledge like a windowsill and added a panel on the front to stop things falling off. In each back corner there was a square shelf for the CD player speakers. We’d put strong Velcro on the bottom of each speaker to make sure they stayed in place. Yes, we’d definitely thought of everything to make the van a home from home. The CD player itself would be inside one of the concertina-fronted cupboards. Above the bed, all along its length, was a stylish wooden pocket for books
and stuff, things could be tucked in there and not fall out when we were moving. I could see plenty of things that would be great stored in there. Above the cab there was a big space as the roof of the van was so high. Phil attached battens a few inches above the drivers head height and laid a big sheet of plywood. This made a wonderful space to squash all of our clothes. Hanging from this shelf and going right down to the floor would be a curtain, separating the living quarters from the cab. I thought it all looked marvellous. A complete transformation from when I’d first seen it, and even with all the things built is there still seemed plenty of room. Phil thought otherwise. Each evening now was not spent trying to answer impossible questions about construction, but with us ‘discussing’ what we would be able to fit in the van. Phil would point at something, like the big woven cardboard basket a friend had made years before, and say, ‘what are you going to do with that?’ And I would say, ‘I’m taking it with me’. Then he would say; ‘where is it going to fit?’ and I would say; ‘just on the floor by the door’. Then Phil would quiz me about how many other things were going to fit on this miraculous piece of floor, one metre by one metre. Hadn’t I already said the stylish blue plastic bucket and the nice wicker basket were going there? And I would say he didn’t have to worry, packing the van was my area. And he would say he thought I was being overly optimistic, and I would say...... Well, that’s how it went on. It couldn’t be resolved until the big day and I felt sure it would all shake down.

Now the woodwork was almost done there were things I could start work on. The interesting things like a stylish cover for the driver’s seat to hide its previous history, lots of curtains, plenty of cushions as well as something for the futon, bed/sofa. Fabric was required and it was sale time, I had a great time with friends from work, looking for bargains and finding some great stuff. Obviously since the van was going to be a stylish haven, there had to be some sort of colour scheme and I’d decided to pick up the motif of colour from the cab, while ignoring the ravaged and filthy seats. The dashboard and doors had lots of grey or blue and since that had a nice Scandinavian feel about it, I went for those colours. I found some nice big pieces for curtains, a fabulous piece of stripy stuff for the futon cover and then I came
across a real treasure. It had a nice light blue background, so fitted my colour scheme, but wonderfully it had orange and lime green dogs driving little cars. It had to be part of the scheme, those dogs were so sweet. Actually I turned that piece of fabric into pillowcases, which did look good although I was starting to wonder if it was those dogs, racing around in my mind, keeping me awake all night.

On and on we went, turning the van into the wonderful home we had imagined. All the while I was going to work each day until eventually I got to the end of my notice and it was time for me to stop. It was crunch time, I could no longer have both lives, the adventurous person driving off to foreign lands, the one who talked about our self-sufficient life, while still at work every day. It was going to be a wrench, another part of our old life was falling away. I felt really sad knowing I wouldn’t be with my friends’ everyday but it was exciting. It was lovely but emotional finally saying goodbye to everyone. Actually, we had lots of goodbye coffees and lunches at work, then at the end a meal in our favourite bar. We booked a table for thirty people, but there were more people than that on the night. There were lots of presents, lots of tears and masses of photos as another part of our old life closed.

In our final week at the Mill, we were galvanised into finishing everything in the van. Hunting out carpet for the floor, finding bits of tubing to be curtain poles, driving over to York to get the cooker fitted and finally working our why the floor of the cab, and its carpet were always wet, however many times I mopped it out. The rain was getting in somewhere around the windscreen and we just couldn’t find where. At this stage radical measures were called for, if the water wasn’t going to seep into the back and spoil our luxurious abode. The carpet would have to go. I got a Stanley knife and a screwdriver and began undoing the bits of plastic on the cab steps. Then worked around the footwells, lying on the floor under the dashboard, levering out screws, cutting round the gear stick and finally around the pedals. Eventually the whole thing came away in a big, soggy stinky way and I wrestled it out and flung the nasty rubbery thing on the driveway. That was where all the fetid water had been
lurking, the carpet had been like a sponge holding dirty black liquid that had squirted out of the gear lever hole on the floor whenever I stood on the floor. That was a big problem solved, but now the cab looked odd with nothing on the floor and we didn’t know if it would matter. Maybe the engine would be too noisy or vibrate though our shoes, maybe there was some other technical reason for having carpet, surely it couldn’t be that serious. There were so many other things we could spend time worrying about, we forgot about the cab until the next time it rained and the cab floor was an inch deep in water, no carpet could cope with that, another good the reason for having one. Looking at the deep puddles we knew we still had the problem but we couldn’t stop the water coming in. However, being seasoned problem solvers we worked it out. We might not have been able to stop the rain coming in, but there was a way of letting it out. By drilling two small holes in the floor. Problem solved, dry floor.

Days to go now, though still time for another farewell, a farewell meal at a friend’s house. As it worked out it was a night of massively long drives because finally after lots of phone calls with no luck, Mo had managed to find someone to adopt Poo, a friend in Thirsk. Wonderful, the only snag was that we were miles away in Pocklington and the farewell meal was over near Ripon. We couldn’t worry about that now, we were just so glad to have found a home for Poo, even if it meant a marathon drive. He howled in his basket and we were sympathetic and felt terrible, knowing we probably wouldn’t see him again. We arrived at the friend’s house who looked hesitant, she hadn’t had a cat for many years and wasn’t sure Poo could actually come inside the house, well maybe just the kitchen. This didn’t seem too good, Poo was used to a certain lifestyle, one where people did exactly what he wanted. But to give him credit, he came calmly out of his basket like no other cat I’ve ever known, and quickly worked out the situation. He hopped up on the worktop and looked around happily. His new owner stepped forward to remove him but I saw their eyes meet, she reached out and stroked him. That was it. Poo switched on his whole personality and gave his new owner one of his winning looks. The battle was won before he’d even had to start the fight. He purred, he
leaned against her, she said things about him living in the kitchen and stuff but we all knew that was nonsense. He followed her around the kitchen, giving her the full treatment and in about five minutes she had him in her arms.

Next morning Mo rang to say she’d phoned Poo’s new home to see how things were going. The husband had answered. The friend was still in bed with the cat, while he himself was just taking them both breakfasts. Poo as ever, got everything he wanted.

We still had masses to do and tomorrow, Sunday, was our final day. It seemed unthinkable to miss yet another opportunity for a farewell gathering so we’d planned a nice little pre-Christmas mulled wine and mince pie affair at the Mill.

Mo arrived and while we went shopping Phil, as ever feet sticking out of the van door, finished wiring the lights. The electrics were his latest nightmare now that the woodwork had been finished. He and Mick, our electrically minded friend, had spent an entire day outside in the freezing wind, trying to solder one bit of cable to another. There were so many wires in the special cupboard it looked as if a multicoloured bird had been trying to build a nest in there. All this so that the wind turbine, attached to the back of the van on a high pole, would whirl round and bring power into a big battery and make the lights and CD player work. I could understand nothing of this, but it didn’t stop Phil quizzing me about how many watts made an amp, or was it the other way round?

Finally the moment came when it was time to load the van. Up and down, up and down, up and down all the way from the van outside the Mill, down the side of the house, through the back door, across the hall, up the stairs, across the landing, though our door, up our stairs to collect things, and then back down again with boxes, bags, baskets, arms full of things. Finally the much disputed area inside the sliding door was covered by the big woven cardboard basket, the blue bucket, and the little wicker basket. It fitted, but it was tight, you
could just stand there that’s all. The van, which had been a monster, seemed to have taken a deep breath and slowly sunk down, settling on its wheel arches. We stood for a moment looking at everything, it really did look exactly like the picture I’d had in my mind. Even down to the fairy lights hooked along the curtain rail, it was cosy and it looked like our home. It looked wonderful, but how the van would cope with all this weight we had no idea. All we knew for a fact was, we wouldn’t be going anywhere very fast.

Our last day in England and at the Mill arrived and whirled past in a blur of mince pies, mulled wine, lots of visitors, more farewells and tears. People had been, we’d eaten together, they’d seen the van, we’d all hugged each other and cried, then we were alone, everyone had gone. We walked back up to the flat a bit dazed and definitely tired as we began washing glasses. Sue popped up from downstairs, did we want to come down and eat supper with them? Definitely.

So that had been our last night, next morning, after Chris and Sue had gone to work, we quietly left the Mill and set off for the ferry in Portsmouth. The rain was pouring down, as it had every day for the last two months, everywhere was flooded. All the little roads were underwater and had flood signs blocking the way, the fields were under water. We passed York Racecourse and saw people rowing along, in front of the stand, a football pitch, where only the goal crossbars were visible above the water. Queues of traffic waited to get off the main road and crawl into town. The windscreen wipers squeaked back and forth and water trickled down under the dashboard onto the floor and out through the little holes. How grey and miserable it was December in England and how we were looking forward to seeing the blue skies of Spain.

It rained and rained all the way to Portsmouth but we finally got there and followed the signs for the ferry, threading around yet another anonymous ring road. The ferry terminal was familiar, we’d been to Holland from Hull before, but this time I was expecting something a
bit different. I suppose a bit more ceremonial or final about leaving the country. There
should have been a sign saying something like, emigrating, leaving for good, no return,
something like that and all of us leavers could have had our own queue where we spoke of
our foreign plans and huddled together like outsiders. It didn’t seem right to be lining up
beside folks who were obviously going on holiday.

We passed the little booths of officiandom then drove down and took our place in line and
turned off the engine. It was dark and wet, but it wasn’t actually raining. We got out and
watched other vehicles arriving. Our monster, that wasn’t any more, was neither one thing
or another. Too big to be in with the cars and too small to be a real campervan. The vehicle
pulling up behind us demonstrated that really well. It was a camper, but not a van, an actual
coach, it was massive beyond massive, all paintwork and chrome, puffing air brakes and
dangling mascots. The driver, a little man, hopped out of the cab and came round to chat.
‘Bloody awful weather! Hope they get this little lot sorted before it pours down again. Hi
there, I’m Alan, this is June’. The little man introduced his wife who was struggling into a
jacket. He stood shoulders hunched, rubbing his hands together. This was our first
encounter with a seasoned campervanner and the huge coach dazzled us. I could see Phil
was looking at the electrical appliances dripping off the outside, let alone the inside of the big
van and he was itching to start quizzing Alan about cabling and sockets. Since I wasn’t able
to divert the conversation quickly enough he and Alan were deep in the grizzly subjects of
batteries and inverters. Really, after all the hassle of getting everything installed there still
seemed to be plenty of technical, boys own stuff to discuss. June suggested we all retire to
their ‘van’ rather than stand outside in the cold. We climbed up the high steps up, really
keen to see inside, fascinated by the scale of the thing and inside was not a disappointment.
It was luxury, total luxury. There were things in that van even our house didn’t have, like a
dishwasher, a shower, spotlights in the ceiling, frosted glass cabinets in the kitchen, heated
towel rails. It was just like a house, well, probably just like June and Alan’s house. Our van
was just like our house except in our case, much, much smaller. Alan and June, it turned
out, were part of the community of campervanners getting the ferry that night and going to spend the winter in the south of Spain, there were lots. Chatting to them we got a vivid picture of this life we knew nothing about. A fraternity of English people, all in purpose-built campervans, heading off to the sun where they would spend winter together. Often they would ‘wild camp’ which meant not using campsites, but finding places to park up together, in supermarket car parks at night, or under motorway flyovers. Refilling their water tanks from easily found taps and fountains all around Spain, then booking into campsites to recharge their huge batteries and empty out. The best bit was that they were never alone. As they drove from town to town along the coast, they always found each other, more English people to park up with and feel safe. Language was never a problem, the south of Spain was full of English people, running shops and cafes there, in fact Alan and June had never spoken Spanish on any of their trips, never had to. We were relieved at that really, not being able to speak a word ourselves. Like all English people we knew that everyone in the world spoke our language so it wouldn’t be a problem for people to understand us. Again, like all English people, we had the idea that it would be easy to ‘pick up’ Spanish once we got to wherever we were going. We were looking forward to that, we thought part of the fun of being in a foreign country was going to be learning a new language. Eventually it would become one of those things we’d feel proud of achieving when we could hold a conversation in our new tongue.

As June proudly showed us around their home, opening little doors to reveal virtually additional rooms and swivelling chairs to turn them into sofas and spare beds. We spoke of our plan to leave England for good, of going to Galicia and looking for somewhere to buy. At the mention of the word Galicia, June’s expression clouded, ‘where was that, in Spain?’ Alan had heard of it. ‘Banana republic’, he pronounced, ‘too much weather up there, wet, cold, humid in the summer, no, we should go south that’s where the sun was’. I think we’d realised when the massive van pulled up that we were witnessing a parallel universe and speaking to Alan and June made us realise the truth of that.
The life we had made in Yorkshire had been deliberately small, we’d had no urge to expand or accumulate, we wanted to feel close to nature, listen to its rhythms. Our moving to Spain had more to do with a nice slow, breathing out than building a villa in the sun. We wanted to have nature all around us and a little bit more land to grow our garden. The house we hoped for would probably fit in the boot of June and Alan’s van. More a shed really, but one which kept us warm in the winter and provided us with a place where we had more time to use on the things that mattered in life. While it went without saying that it would also be the most stylish shed in the world. We didn’t know how we would find it but it seemed a modest enough goal to achieve given a bit of time. Alan and June clearly thought we were bonkers. They went to Spain for the warm winter weather but would definitely be returning to Blighty in the spring. Our moving to Galicia seemed crazy to them and once they’d looked inside our van they knew we weren’t quite normal. They’d showed us theirs so we showed them ours and I could see June looking puzzled as she squinted into the dark interior and saw something more like a wooden cabin than the Caravan Club would ever think reasonable. Phil was showing Alan the wind turbine and they were talking about watts and amps again and the merits of buying your gas bottles once you arrived in Spain. Luckily though it was time to back into our respective vans because the queues were starting to move.
CHAPTER THREE

How will we begin again?
Thirty odd hours later we arrived in Spain and drove slowly over the metal ramps, bumping over the gaps until finally our wheels were on tarmac. Phil drove, he felt the need to maintain contact with the engine at this early stage just in case it tried to communicate. I was map reading and the first challenge was to circumnavigate Bilbao, having decided to keep away from all the potential danger of town traffic while we adjusted to being on the wrong side of the road. I was just hoping we would find somewhere to stop before too long because the desperate need for coffee was increasing. Phil hunched forward, gripping the steering wheel whilst trying to read the road signs as they appeared. We managed to find our way across roundabouts the wrong way round and out on to smaller roads. The huge big open fields of brown and white cows with distant mountain backdrop was all that it should have been. Here was foreign nature. A while later although it felt like an eternity we rumbled into a small village with roads wide enough for Phil to feel calm about parking and there was a bar. This was to be our first encounter with Spanish culture, how difficult could it be? We wandered in looking every bit as dazed and crumpled as we felt and approached the teenage boy at the counter. I think both Phil and I opened our mouths to speak but then remembered we didn’t know any Spanish words. What could we say? Surely coffee would be easily understood? Yes, coffee was fine, but then what sort? Oh dear. The boy resorted to showing us cups of different sizes and then a carton of milk, easy, we got our coffee. Very good. No breakfast though, no cakes or signs of anything edible. It seemed that Spanish people weren’t morning coffee and cake kind of people, in fact they didn’t seem to be morning people at all we hadn’t seen anyone and it was about 10.30.

We sat. We celebrated our little success. We had arrived, we had escaped the potential road hazards of Bilbao and we had managed to get ourselves coffee. Honestly, could we have expected more from ourselves? We thought not and feeling buoyed up with confidence and strong black coffee we returned to the van. Next stop, the campsite. Being timid by nature we thought we wouldn’t be too daring on our first day and had decided on Santillana del Mar which was just along the coast. We planned to find the town, head for the campsite, check-in
and the go foraging for food, a simple strategy. Actually we found the campsite easily, if we overlook all the wrong tunings we took actually getting through town, the map was definitely faulty, missing roads, that sort of thing but there was still muttering from the driver.

Santillana del Mar looked like a tourist authority’s dream of ‘Ye Olde Spanish Village’. The whole place was built from huge slabs of yellow stone, including the pavements. Narrow streets lead to a square where little shops were tucked under old buildings, hiding in their shadows. We drove to the campsite and went into the office, Mr Campsite was exactly the kind of man I could have picked out of an identity parade as ‘the Spanish Man’. Medium height, brown hair, brown eyes, very neat and tidy appearance with a long dark cardigan that British men would never wear and a rather haughty demeanour, not actually like anyone who has ever spent a night in a caravan or, heaven forbid, a tent. All was fine though, we could park where we wanted but not on the grass because it was too muddy. He looked like the kind of man who would send the cleaner out to wash off our muddy tyre marks from his clean cement driveway.

Our first mission having parked up was to find ourselves a gas bottle for our lovely little cooker and then buy food. Anyone who has ever been to Spain would know that between 2.00pm and 5.00pm everywhere is closed for lunch. We’d never been to Spain before so this was news to us. Returning to the narrow streets where we had seen all those shops on our way to the campsite we now found the place deserted. A quick inspection of the ‘horarios’ on various shop doors revealed the length of the lunch break. Well, there was nothing that could be done now but to sit in the sun and have some lunch while we waited for the shops to open. A wander around the place revealed a big hotel with flags and at least two museums one of which appeared to be dedicated to the instruments of torture. Original. Maybe all Spanish towns are competing for tourists and originality was called for. While we considered its touristic merits we came across a shop window display of Oscar winning standards. The whole window had been turned into a mammoth nativity scene, no, nativity world. Mary,
Joseph and the baby Jesus were there, but their stable was now part of an entire village. The shepherds were there augmented by modern houses, shops, a working railway, all kinds of animals, little figures doing all sorts of things, driving cattle, washing clothes in streams, driving trucks, waiting at the station. There were angels in the sky, people skiing down mountains at the backdrop of the scene and there were the kings, trotting along on their camels. In fact there was everything a fertile imagination could think of and more and the whole window glittered with twinkling Christmas lights. It was spectacular and it wasn’t the only shop with a display either, there must have been a competition because there were more nativity scenes in that town than I’d seen in a lifetime. Santillana was big on Christmas but not on supermarkets, we couldn’t find a single one, in fact we hadn’t found a single food shop. Maybe mundane things like food were too basic for a town with higher things to consider like museums of torture. Anyway, we had plenty of time to find shops later for now we found a bar and I sat down to write Mo a postcard.

The shops did eventually reopen and we spent more time than we really needed in a hardware shop which had everything and most of it on display either piled high on shelves or dangling from the ceiling. I was particularly taken with their wrapping material. Anything bought in this little jewel of a shop was carefully wrapped in brown paper which was mounted in three sizes on a metal dispenser with a fierce set of teeth for tearing it to the right size. I wondered if it was destined for the museum of torture after its paper tearing days were done.

After a thorough tour of the town revealed no gas bottles we repaired to the campsite to see if Mr Campsite could offer any advice, he would be the one to know about camping stuff surely and he could speak English which made him something of a rarity in Santillana. Yes, Mr Campsite said he did sell gas, usually. But this was not the season so he couldn’t sell us any. The campsite shop was closed. He explained all this as if we were a bit stupid not to have known about camping shop seasons. But he did say there was somewhere in the next town
but we’d have to go tomorrow because it was only open until three in the afternoon. The gas thing was frustrating and the opening hours thing. We really wanted to cook something to eat and make a nice cup of tea, settle into our home and relax. Well, it wasn’t going to happen today so the only thing we could do was go to bed and start again tomorrow.

We really were showing ourselves as the complete novice campers that we were. No gas and now it was dark and we hadn’t even made the bed up. There was stuff all over which needed moving into the cab, the wooden flap which turned the sofa into a bed needed to be flapped up and its legs put in position. If only we’d practiced beforehand or had done it daylight. What seemed an ingenious solution to the leg problem turned into a frustrating and annoying game of putting one leg in place only to make it drop out when we tried to put in the next one. One leg in place, two, three, first one dropped out. Eventually we abandoned the idea of putting the legs in from above and I wriggled along under the flap to hold them all until the last one was in place. You can only imagine the atmosphere in the van after the sort of day we’d had being completed by the bed leg game. Finally we got to bed and even though we were in a strange country, a strange campsite with no other campers and a strange van we slept.

Next morning began without cups of tea or any toast and we grumpily dismantled the nightmarish bed legs, packed things away so that nothing fell while we were driving and set off out of the campsite towards the place Mr Campsite had assured us we would find gas. We weren’t sure how we would find it and in truth we were beginning to find the incessant foreign-ness a little bit irritating. How could we ask anyone a simple question when no one understood us? Was it not true that Spanish children began learning English when they were seven years old? If that was the case, how could it be that no one spoke English? Eventually once we had arrived in the next town and shouted ‘gas!’ loudly enough at various people we had arrived at a huge compound selling nothing but gas. Although it didn’t seem to be in the little blue containers we’d been expecting, just monstrously large orange things,
why was that? Who would use such great big things? And why were there hundreds of them? We stood at the gate wondering and were still doing it when a man came out of the little office cabin and effortlessly grabbed one of the orange monsters and swung it easily by his side as he walked towards us. ‘Buenos dias!’ he said, and waited presumably for us to pay for the gas. After all he probably wasn’t expecting any questions, he only had orange gas monsters for sale. We managed Buenos dias and then were stumped. We started to say it was too big, we needed a smaller bottle but he didn’t understand. Beckoning him the van Phil pointed at the gas cupboard saying ‘too small, too small’ and gesturing with his hands ‘big’ ‘small’. The man shook his head and sucked his teeth, then he pointed to the gas bottle and wagged his finger and then nodded his head, it was as if he was saying ‘do you want it or don’t you?’ No, we didn’t want it. Phil continued to demonstrate the size we were after, pointing at the cupboard and saying ‘camping’. The man returned his gas bottle to the compound, leaving us at the van, we weren’t sure what to do, had he decided to leave us there? We waited for what seemed like a very long time and then the man reappeared and beckoned us to the office. Inside on a desk, bare except for a pile of scrap paper from which he pulled a piece and wrote ‘ferreteria’ and handed it to Phil. He pointed to the town, then made a right turn with his hand flapping to the right then with his index finger he pointed under his eye and then upwards. We weren’t sure about all of this but he kept repeating the same actions so we nodded, thanked him and left.

I held the scrap of paper, the only clue we had on our trail. Ferreteria, someone’s name? A type of gas? Who knew? We set off in the van back into town remembering the gas man’s flapping hand we turned right and parked. Now what? The pointing to the eye, the pointing upwards what was all that? What were we looking for? We left the van and wandered around getting frustrated and cross. How could we find what we were looking for when we didn’t know what it was? None of the shops looked right and nowhere could we see Ferreteria. Finally I approached a group of old men who were leaning against some railings watching some other men dig a hole. Wondering why road works were such a popular
spectator sport I took the piece of paper to the men and showed it to them. Each looked at it and repeated the word, ferretería. Then one of them pointed up the road and they all joined in, yes, just up there, up there! We were so thrilled that someone knew what it meant that we virtually ran up the road but with no idea what we were looking for. I glanced back at the men and they were excitedly waving and shouting. Why? We stopped and looked around us and even looked upwards where we saw a huge sign reading ‘ferretería’. So we had arrived. The pointing to the eye thing must have been have meant look up. Honestly, how were we going to get anywhere when we hadn’t even understood that or that ferretería meant hardware shop. A hardware shop which was now sadly, closed for lunch. This was how it was going to be, one step forward, miss a turn, throw a six to start again. We looked through the window. Might they have gas in there? We were going to have to wait until five o’clock to find out.

We waited in the van, marvelling at our stupidity and how the simplest tasks seemed to take an entire day. At this rate we would drive ourselves crazy. And why hadn’t we thought to look in a dictionary to see if ferretería was in it, then we would have known what we were looking for. Yes, maybe we should buy a dictionary.

After lunch we returned to the ferretería and it was open, Phil approached the counter. There was a parting of the sea of small old people who stood back and prepared themselves to be entertained. Luckily the man behind the counter was calm and kindly, ‘buenas tardes’. Phil began by sketching a gas bottle on a page of his notebook then passed it across the counter, the man nodded and disappeared behind a spinning display of paintbrushes. Seconds later he reappeared with a perfect sized gas bottle. Triumph! I was ready to run back up the hill and put the kettle on but was slowed by Phil picking up his pencil again. Another drawing, a length of hose and some sort of connector above the gas bottle. Again the man disappeared and returned with a coil of orange rubber pipe and a little cardboard box. There was gesturing about the how long a piece of pipe Phil wanted, then it was cut,
coiled up, wrapped in paper and stuck with tape. Now the box, inside which was a strange metal thing with a sort of switch on top and the man chatted away and demonstrated the joining of the pipe and the flicking of the switch. Phil seemed to understand and it did all seem quite straightforward, too straightforward really after what we had been through to get it. Anyway, we had succeeded. We paid and left before moving on to our next challenge, food shopping.

Back at the campsite all we had to do was assemble the pipe, the connector, the gas bottle and then we could make tea. Phil squatted at the gas cupboard outside and lay his equipment out on the ground, now all that was required was some boiling water to soften the rubber pipe so that it would slip onto the connector, that was all. Boiling water, from a kettle, which had been boiled on the little stove, the little stove powered by gas. This gas bottle saga was actually going to kill us! Plainly, until we could light the stove there could be no hot water. I felt a little bit like crying. However, Phil was not going to be thwarted at this stage and after rummaging in a cupboard in the van produced a thermos flask and marched off to the campsite café. Back he came with the thermos full of boiling water, the pipe was made soft and ten minutes later the kettle was boiling.

This was the first of so very many little challenges which produced a disproportionate celebration when completed. It was just so exhausting.

We managed to cook that night, our first meal in our new home, unearthing carefully packed pans and dishes, finding forks and plates. It was a bit over crowded but we could bundle lots of things into the front, filling up the seats with bedding and clothes so that we could sit comfortably on the sofa. It was a little bit like home but it was impossible to relax as we would have done in our little house in Yorkshire. We were realising that simple, everyday tasks were going to be promoted to major events for as long as it took us to understand things better. We couldn’t start to imagine how long that would take. And then there was
the whole point of the journey, finding a new home, buying a piece of land maybe even building a house. In the interests of curbing an early onset of sickening anxiety we decided to save that sort of worry for another day.

Over the next few days we drove along the north coast, heading towards our goal of Santiago de Compostela. The weather had been perfect for the first few days, just as we had expected Spanish weather to be, sunny days with a little chill at night time. Somewhere along the way it had started to change into ferocious winds and heavy rain.

We saw repeated scenes as we passed through villages, beautiful green places with only older people in evidence, women dressed in dark clothes covered with an overall such as women in Yorkshire no longer wore, with a scarf or shawl over the top. Often these women were pushing wheelbarrows full of fresh looking weeds and grass along the side of the road or balancing giant buckets full of the stuff on their heads. What was it for? Where were they going? We didn’t know enough words to ask. Despite it being winter everywhere did look very lush and green, there were more types of wild flower along the roadside than I’d ever known existed, it was all so foreign, as was the seriously bad weather. After our first days of sun and sights of rural life we were plunged into mist, fog and heavy rain. The huge, sad, grey rock that appeared everywhere didn’t help to cheer us. The roads were edged by either high grey rocks or swirling clouds, awfully deep valleys appeared and disappeared below as the clouds swirled around us. It was quite frightening, there was definitely something menacing about the rock.

Finally Santiago was in sight. We wanted to get there, to arrive and begin our new life. We battled on through a bleak landscape which could have been the film set for a particularly dark Armageddon, end of the world type film. There were mountainous black slag heaps and dirty rain fell from the sky on to the forgotten streets. It was a nightmarish place where wolves or vampires would be roaming at night. It felt hopeless and terrible, not unlike how
we were beginning to feel. How could Santiago possibly be wonderful enough after this awful place? The weather was awful, we felt displaced and so far we hadn’t seen anywhere which had come near to our expectations for the beautiful little home of our dreams.

We got closer to Santiago, driving on a wide, busy road. The rain continued to fall but the people plodding along the hard shoulder didn’t seem to care. They seemed strange, clinging to wooden staffs and purposely walking with their heads down against the rain. Some of these odd people had a scallop shell dangling around their necks. Something sparked deep in my memory, something about those shells, what was it? Yes, pilgrims, I’d read about them somewhere, ‘El Camino’, people walking to Santiago along old routes, although this part of the route was along a dual carriageway. I wondered if they were thinking how it all seemed such a good idea when they were at home. A good long walk, possibly encountering some sort of revelation or discovering new meaning to their lives. There was something a little too close to home in all this, maybe our friends in Yorkshire had thought about us in same way that I was thinking about these pilgrims. Like, why on earth do this? Maybe. But at least our friends wouldn’t know about the terrible weather, they thought we had gone to the Spain they knew with blue skies and sun, neither we nor they knew the truth. Spain has winter too.

We reached the outskirts of Santiago and I tried to concentrate on map reading. Phil was scanning the horizon, looking for confirmation of his vision of a beautiful little medieval city, although the bleak grey clouds scooting swiftly across the sky made it difficult for the city to chime with his ancient, golden, picture. Castles, windmills, donkeys? We didn’t need to get too close to realise that his picture had long been painted over. Wide, busy roads, ugly blocks of flats, concrete, asphalt everywhere. What had happened to the big church all those romantic pilgrims were heading for? How could Spain’s most historic monument be buried in such awfulness? Silently we both decided to keep our disappointment to ourselves, concentrating instead on finding the campsite, which as with all campsites, was out of the
centre and up a steep hill. It was also virtually underwater and possibly on its way to the bottom of the hill. Water flowed steadily down each side of the track anywhere that wasn’t on a slope was submerged. We crawled into the site, trying not to slip backwards and turned on to the first piece of flattish land we could see in the direction this Mr Campsite had waved us towards. It was too narrow but reversing and looking for somewhere else would make the wheels spin so Phil just turned the engine off. We looked out of the windscreen into nothingness, there was grey cloud in front of us and below that, a very steep drop, lucky we had stopped when we did or we would have gone over and stopped until we reached the bottom a very long way below.

We sat silently in our seats and watched the rain coursing down the windscreen, wishing the incessant drumming on the roof would stop. Everything was wrong. Maybe later we would be able to rationalise our disappointment with thoughts about how nowhere could have been equal to the visions created by our imaginations. We would understand that having put so much emotion into an idea, then selling our home and leaving our friends there would have been nowhere in December which would have set our hearts leaping with joy. But at that moment the anticlimax was suffocating, the grey clouds were sucking the life out of us. We had got it wrong and all the unspoken worry which had been submerged under the hectic preparations was now becoming visible. Secretly, deep inside we had always wondered how we were going to make all our big talk become real, now we could see it for what we had been afraid it could be, just hot air. We felt sick.

Eventually we realised we had to get out of the cab and however hopeless it all seemed we had to try and keep things normal, whatever that was. We walked down into the town and the heavy rain soaked us in seconds. We found the centre of the old town and the huge cathedral although we were too depressed to go inside. There were no pavements or gutters in the streets so the rain shot off the roofs above us without hindrance and landed heavily on the umbrellas below. How could a place which had so much rain be seemingly so ill
prepared? No drains in the street, no pavements, no gutters. But there were women without coats holding umbrellas and walking on tiptoe on high heels, immaculately turned out with matching shoes, handbag and scarf. I wanted to stamp in puddles and splash mud on them. How could they think they’d got it right? Someone had buried the sweet little place Santiago once was, buried it under concrete without the slightest regard for the history of the place and without realising what they had done to our dream.

We struggled back to the van with our shopping, fighting against the strong wind which had joined forces with the rain, making our slog back up the hill almost impossible. I was trying not to think of warm sitting rooms and wood burning stoves just trying to focus on getting back to the van as speeding cars passed and soaked us as they splashed though the huge puddles. We were past caring, we were so wet anyway. The only people wetter than us were the other people on their spiritual journey, the pilgrims. I bet they felt they’d get extra points for having got so wet. We were too angry with everything to worry about points.

The van was festooned with wet clothes and the steam from the cooker was making all the dry things damp. We ate supper and got into bed to try and get warm. We lie there talking, mostly complaining and grumbling about everything. We hated Spain and everyone who lived there. We ranted on about the weather, the plan, campsites and the wrongness of the world in general and then we tried to sleep. Phil pulled his woolly hat right down over his ears and eyes and was asleep in seconds. I lie with my toes clenched trying to make sure the van didn’t slip over the edge.

We woke in daylight and it was quiet, the rain had stopped and the wind blown on to somewhere else. Amazingly we were still parked on the ledge although peeping out through the door revealed the van to be sitting in water half way up its hubcaps. Looking at the grass I wondered why we hadn’t thought to bring wellies with us. We’d thought to bring five bags
of raffia in different colours, two tins of wax crayons, fat and thin ones, and our lovely knitted giraffe rescued from the tip in Thirsk, but boots would have been useful.

We decided to leave Santiago as soon as we could, we didn’t really need to keep looking at our mistake any longer. I wished we could have left the campsite by revving the engine and spitting a rainbow of mud over the whole place but it wasn’t possible, we might have slipped over the edge. But the emotion of churned mud was there as we rumbled out leaving a thick trail behind us.

We put a few kilometres between us and the doomed city and stopped at a roadside bar for breakfast. The only thing we had found to eat in bars at this time of day were croissants painted with a thin coat of something sticky on their outside. They weren’t that nice but in the absence of anything else we’d eaten quite a few on the journey. While we tried to revive ourselves with coffee and the croissants we managed to pull ourselves back together a bit. I was secretly hoping that Phil would have come around to the same conclusion as me and pointed the van back towards Blighty but he didn’t. He suggested we head for La Coruna to visit some friends who lived there, Ines and Julio. They knew we were heading their way and we really we needed to talk. Some poor souls were going to have to listen to all our frustration and Ines and Julio were those people.

It didn’t take us long to arrive at the coast where we found La Coruna bright and bustling. It was wonderful to be able to ask Ines and Julio all the questions about things we’d seen and not understood, we gabbled on until we ran out of things to ask. Ines and Julio must have realised we were mad but were too polite to say so. We told them how we felt about Santiago and about the terrible rain and how sad we were about the old city being swamped with modern buildings and they were kind enough not to say, what did you expect? Or, what do historic British cities look like?
Julio explained that the rain in Santiago is actually considered as artform, as it does it with such passion, but that it was a beautiful place in the summer. We weren’t convinced but out of politeness we said we believed him. He listened when we said that the landscape we had seen so far hadn’t inspired us to stop and of course our arrival in Santiago had sent us into a decline. Julio asked us if we had considered any other areas of Galicia, like perhaps Ourense, which was further south and more lush, there were vineyards and the landscape was beautiful with mountains and green valleys, maybe it would be more the kind of place for us. We didn’t say that we had no idea about the other regions of Galicia or even that the place was divided into them, we felt we had demonstrated our stupidity quite vividly enough. But we felt our tension and anxiety lift slightly and a parting in the grey clouds of depression. Any sort of plan was distinctly better than the panic of having none. Later that afternoon we reluctantly left the relaxing warmth of Ines and Julio’s flat and returned to our journey. We’d been able to get just a tiny bit of perspective from talking to Ines and Julio and that had helped pull us round. Now we had to get on with our journey and the first step was to return to the cold, damp van and drive to the nearest campsite.

The nearest site was about forty minutes from La Coruna, in good weather. On a dark, rainy night it was more than an hour and a half before we reached what was possibly the worst site we had ever seen. Driving down an unmade road absolutely littered with potholes, lake sized puddles and wild scrubland on either side we felt certain we’d take a wrong turning and were now completely lost. Finally we saw some lights ahead, caravans and mobile homes began to appear under a swinging length of light bulbs. There was a wire netting fence topped with barbed wire, a pack of mud splattered dogs playing with what had once been a football and a few wheel-less old cars propped up on bricks. A skinny boy of about ten appeared from a sort of cabin and began dragging the high metal gates open. We drove slowly to where the boy had pointed and passed a crowd of teenage boys gathered around a motorbike, its engine at screaming pitch. A gaggle of little children, tangle haired, squatted at the edge of a huge puddle with a heap of plastic toys. The caravan doors were open and the brightly lit interiors
revealed families watching television or eating. Everything looked too settled, as if the
caravans had been there so long they could no longer move, festooned with cables, awnings,
washing lines, television aerials, satellite dishes. By the time we saw a space further up we
noticed that we were being trailed by some of the mangy dogs from the entrance and a few
children. Pulling in to the space our windscreen brought us to the very edge of a table full of
people in the caravan behind. They didn’t seem to mind having their meal disturbed by two
extra people suddenly appearing at their table, they were busy shouting, eating or waving
their knives and forks. Phil turned the engine off, we looked around and noticed there were
people everywhere including another crowd of teenage boys in the shadows eyeing us with
interest. Music from the television blared and the dogs barked wildly.

Gypsies. We realised at the same moment, no one else could possibly look as if they enjoyed
camping in this weather and no one else would be living so wholeheartedly in this bleak
environment. Our mental state being what it was we didn’t feel ready for integration into a
minority culture while we were still struggling with ordinary Spanish life. Phil turned the
key in the ignition and we tried to creep out on our four mud encrusted wheels.

The problem or one of the problems with our journey was that we never seemed to have time
to recover from each of our new experiences before we met another. We were collecting a
rich tapestry of experiences which we might recall with amazement at some future time, but
while it was happening it was not a relaxing tapestry it was far from being any type of
needlework, it was mostly tiring and scary in equal portions. I really did hope that all of this
would become background to our new life and that we would stumble over some happy
moments before too long. Later that night we did find another campsite with a bar, the
inevitable huge television was balanced on top of the freezer in the corner and a few men
were sitting at the bar watching ‘The Killer Bees’ dubbed into Spanish. We ordered pizzas
and settled down next to them.
That winter the rain was everywhere, it wasn’t personal although much of the time it truly felt as if it was. It rained and rained and rained. We drove, we camped, we got soaked. While we were driving at least it was warm because the van’s heater was working which was about the only electrical thing that was. The wind turbine didn’t work and the special lead from the van engine didn’t seem to work either. We had to cook supper before it got dark, chopping vegetables and boiling water by candlelight was tricky but at least the place filled with steam and kept us warm even if the smart grey carpet on the roof was coming unstuck.

We spent a lot of time remembering things people had suggested. Helpful, practical things which we had completely ignored. Now we thought about how clever and perceptive everyone had been. We thought about our plan a lot too, about what we’d expected of Santiago and exactly why we’d disliked it so much. I really hoped we weren’t so shallow that we’d been thrown off course by some heavy rain and a few ugly modern buildings. Maybe it had been the weather, on a sunny day it would have been different and maybe we would have stayed there and found our place. I doubted it though.

Phil was feeling impatient, he wanted to find the place and get on with life. Make a garden, get his roots down. For him being away from his everyday life of the garden and his workshop was making him miserable and anxious. He was a home-body, not a traveller, not even a holidaymaker and certainly not someone to take off into the unknown. Actually we hadn’t set out to be travellers in the modern sense of the word, like looking for meaning or a purpose, we knew what we wanted. Arriving, wandering around, getting back in the van. Nowhere looked lovely at this time of year, all the pretty places were hibernating.

We arrived in Ourense where the landscape was definitely different, much more dramatic with deep, lush valleys just as Julio had said, although after all this rain what wouldn’t look lush? There were actually real mountains, driving near them was scary they were bigger than anything we’d ever seen and there was a sort of menacing, threatening quality about them which made them seem almost alive. The weather had saved its worse stuff for around
these creatures. Sometimes there were clouds hanging below us and above bigger, grey
ghosts moving more quickly. Nature could be much bigger than we had realised. Eventually
we arrived in a little place called Celanova, it was exactly as small towns should look. The old
buildings were not surrounded by ugly new developments and it was market day, which this
time was a good omen, plus it wasn’t actually raining. A perfect opportunity to wander and
rummage. Phil wasn’t so sure, never a fan of the street market he tried quickly to think of a
reason what we shouldn’t stop, but he couldn’t. We needed to shop for food, so I won.

Celanova was more the type of place we had hoped to find in Santiago. It was small and the
countryside lapped around its edges. The narrow streets were full of everyday life,
ferreterias, grocers, sweet shops, bakers, all tiny places without huge plate glass windows.
These were definitely shops to visit when you actually needed something. Browsing would
have been difficult after all, they were no bigger than the front room of a house and the
person behind the counter was right there, waiting to serve. Weird to go shopping and have
to ask for everything, not something I was used to. On one side of the square there were big
buildings with flags outside, surely the local council offices, the pavement big stone slabs.
The tiny side streets were choked with old cars and little white vans. We had been amazed at
the number of battered old Renault 4 cars we’d seen, it must have been twenty years since
they’d been on the road in Yorkshire. We eventually found somewhere to park and I was
itching to get out and soak it all up.

The first stall was ironmongery, tools, household stuff, but all weird things like a gigantic
frying pans full of holes, for what sort of eggs? Baskets woven from thick flat stuff, like palm
tree leaves, giant scissors with flat ends, grates, grills, hammers, weird gardening tools or
just the top parts without handles. Bells, lots and lots of bells made from brass or some
orangey yellow type of metal and that looked as if they’d been crushed by some giant into a
flat sided rather than round bell. Some were massive about a foot high, with the ding-ey
thing inside made from wood, other were teeny little things, maybe for hamsters? There
were stalls selling plants, vegetables, clothes and one with cages and cages of poultry. This was where the action was, people were pushing to get closed to the cages, prodding the birds that were in prodding distance through their wire cages, shouting and pointing at those displayed on the open sided wagon behind the stall, it was all very serious and brisk. The stallholders were expertly grabbing the birds by their legs and with their free hand, opening a cardboard box, pushing the birds inside, closing the flaps and tying the box with baler bind all in one movement. Then with a huge knife the baler bind was cut and three stabs to the box, breathing holes we decided, not kebabs.

Most people at the market were older, retired people, not surprising since it was a week day, there were some gipsy children roaming around trying to interest people in buying strips of sticking plaster, plastic combs, boxes of matches. I didn’t see anyone buy anything but the couple of women begging for money with small babies in their arms had a bit more luck. The atmosphere was noisy and purposeful, most people were intent on getting what it was they needed rather than just browsing. At one end of the market we came across a huge marquee where all the men were hanging around as is universally the case, the women were doing the shopping. There were women wrapped in huge aprons, stirring vats of something very steamy. A closer look revealed a very nasty, oily liquid, of a terrible colour with grey scum floating on top. The sight was definitely not appetising and the smell was stomach churning, it was hard to imagine what it was, but there were people waiting around for the first platefuls to be ready. I peered closer and one of the apron-clad women lifted her ladle from the scum for me to see. What a vision of awfulness, the thing lurking beneath the grey water wad actually more revolting than I could have imagined. Octopus tentacles! Ugly grey suckers along curly, twirly lengths of grey flesh. The woman grabbed into the liquid with a pair of the flat-ended scissors we’d seen earlier and dropped a length of sucker covered flesh on to a wooden plate, then began cutting it into bite-sized chunks with some zigzag scissors, it was gruesome. She offered us the first plate but it was impossible, even in the interests of entente cordial for me to accept it. I smiled and shook my head, but thanked her. We’d
realised many weeks before that there was no point in saying we were vegetarian, we could have said we were from Pluto and got the same response. However, everyone else in the queue were very keen to have their plate of the disgusting, grey rubbery stuff, ‘pulpo’.

We left the market then and walked out into the town, joining the many other people, burdened down with clucking cardboard boxes and masses of plastic carrier bags. The small older people were gathering at the bus stop, everyone was the same height, much smaller than us and all dressed in dark clothes, old people clothes. They looked not just foreign, but from another era, not like retired people in Britain who pretty much wear the same as everyone else, jeans, t shirts, trainers, hoodies, and at this time of year, fleeces. These people were wearing my Nan’s clothes and she died more than twenty years ago. Proper coats, court shoes, headscarves, big vinyl shopping bags. In fact in all the kilometres we’d travelled, in all the cold wet weather we had yet to see anyone wearing a fleece. How odd was that? But just another difference, another piece of foreign-ness for us to understand, along with all the other pieces helping us see how different life was in this country. This was a nice piece though, unlike the nasty, wet confusing and scary pieces we’d got already. Our plan for making a garden in a foreign country had come about for lots of practical reasons although living in a different culture was also part of it. The question we kept coming back to was how could we become part of a place, like say, Celanova and not just visitors?

Back at the van we set about making lunch, boiling the kettle on the little stove, unwrapping the cartwheel of cheese I’d bought at the market, wrapped in a strip of cotton fabric, sawing off hunks of bread from the baseball bat sized loaf we’d got at the bakers. It was cosy in the van, we’d got, or Phil had got, that completely right, it did feel like our old home, a bit. The main problems were the weather, the lack of electricity and the incessant moving on. Would it ever be possible for us to know when we’d found the right place? Would it be obvious just by turning up? I had the feeling that getting to know somewhere would be the key and that took time. We were beginning to tire of packing the van up every day or so. Maybe we
should try something different, find a place to base ourselves, somewhere we could park up and get to know. Celanova could be the right sort of place to try out the idea. It was a nice town and having completed our long drive around the whole of the Ourense region this was about the nicest place we’d seen. How relaxing would it be to stay in the same place for a while. Calm down a bit and see what it felt like to be actually here in Spain, rather than rushing on and on. Phil wasn’t sure, there was his schedule, he’d decided that three months would be more than enough time to track down the elusive place. If we stopped somewhere we might lose the urge to carry on looking for it and then, inevitably doom and depression would follow. We had to keep looking although having been defeated by Santiago and now having been around Ourense we were still no nearer. What to do? I was all in favour of stopping for a bit, I hoped we could get some sort of normal life going rather than continuing this rather uncomfortable and miserable holiday we seemed to be on. After a serious amount of cartwheel cheese and a shared bar of chocolate we decided that we would stop, just for a while.

There was a campsite not far from Celanova and apart from the extremely steep, almost vertical driveway and all the sand it wasn’t too bad. The sand. There was no soil at all and no concrete to park on just wet sand and in the two minutes between parking up and getting in to the back of the van about half a ton of the stuff had managed to work its way inside. There was a river just in front of us which, at a different time of year, would have been a lovely feature however right now it was a raging torrent, sloshing over its banks and rushing noisily past, taking branches, small trees and other things it had gathered on its way. There were no other campers as usual so it was just us and the river. We settled down for the night, not feeling quite as confident with our idea as we had in daylight. We rumbled on about the great plan and inevitable got sucked into thinking about the good old times of our previous life. We could certainly wallow when we put our hearts into it. We’d had a good life in Yorkshire, blah, blah, blah. We knew, or we sort of knew because we’d been in this state so many times now, that we had taken on more than our experience had prepared us for. We’d
wanted to live in a different place but were beginning to see just how different that was, we
couldn’t have dreamed how different. So either we had to ignore all of what we were
beginning to see, the foreign-ness which was sneaking in through the sliding door of the van
and trying to rock our foundations, and try and press on with our original, english-based
idea, or we had to accept there was the possibility of doing something different. To spend
more time feeling the differences and enjoy the experience. We silently mulled all this over,
lying in bed in the dark. The river continued to roar and the wind rocked the van as it gusted
past. Looking back on this moment I’m pretty sure that even if the right piece of land had
presented itself right then, we wouldn’t have felt ready to buy it. Nothing felt right, we
weren’t ourselves and we were realising more each day that we didn’t understand enough
about Spain to get involved with pieces of land or large sums of money. Despite all our big
talk of a three month plan, we had realised that we weren’t going to be ready in six months
either. We couldn’t admit that to ourselves then, so we just went to sleep.

We did settle in for a bit. We pottered, we shopped and we got to know more about both
Celanova and Allariz because the campsite was between the two towns. Some days it didn’t
even rain. It was about this time, when we it was almost possible to consider spring was
coming, that we made contact with Ramon. Phil had stacks of papers, magazines, lists and
contacts to do with gardening and on one of these lists was the name of the only person in
the entire Ourense region area who was practicing biodynamic agriculture. This rather
strange practice is a form of growing things in relation to the phases of the moon. It does
sound a bit weird but it is a well established theory used by growers all over the world. Each
year a special calendar is produced in masses of different languages which identifies the best
planting days for each type of plant, depending on whether is it to produce roots, leaves or
fruits. Discovering we weren’t far from Ramon was very interesting. Maybe he was the
person who could give us advice about how to find our place. And apart from that, we were
desperate to see a real garden and talk plants with someone. The list only gave Ramon’s
address so we decided to send him a note, in English and hope for the best.
We had found people to chat to now we were based in one place and a couple of these people could speak a bit of English, which was marvellous. We had quite a backlog of questions and they all came rushing out as soon as we found an unsuspecting soul to listen to. One of our questions was where are all the estate agents? We had yet to see a single one and had begun to realise that the buying and selling of property must happen in some other way, but how? Each person we asked said the same thing, that you had to ask people, apparently everyone bought from neighbours, friends or family or through some sort of contact. They said it was ‘muy difícil’, very difficult to find somewhere without contacts. This was not something we were pleased to hear, we didn’t know anyone or have any family or friends here. But we were realising that on our journey we couldn’t accept ‘muy difícil’ was anything other than a bit tough, hard going or just not straight forward. It had to be possible. And anyway, what did these people know of British grit and determination? We would prevail. Plus, we were looking forward to hearing from Ramon, maybe he could show us the ‘alternative’ way of finding a place.

About a week later we got a reply from Ramon, in Spanish, but it was nice and basic so we could understand. He could speak English, but not write it. He would love to meet us, come on Sunday. The address of Ramon’s house was Casa Reitoral, which appeared to mean something like a rectory or at least somewhere church related. Maybe Ramon had a walled garden in some sort of monastery? Not that we’d seen anywhere remotely like that on our travels, we had to accept our imaginations couldn’t stretch far enough into the unknown to even begin imagining what we were going to see. That Sunday we left the main road and drove into Santa Maria Laroa, the pueblo where Ramon lived. We didn’t get far, the van was too big for the narrow streets, so we parked and set out on foot. It was a really small place with little houses that looked mostly empty and abandoned. There didn’t seem to be anywhere that fitted our image of a rectory although we did see the church. There was no house nearby that looked right so we walked on until we found a man leading a donkey. ‘Ramon?’ Yes of course he knew where Ramon lived, with a population of about twelve
people obviously he knew Ramon. The man decided to take us to the house since explanations proved difficult. By the time we got to Ramon’s place we had acquired a little entourage with two women carrying the huge buckets of grass and weeds falling into step alongside the donkey man. They told us that Ramon worked too hard and that he needed a woman in his life. He needed someone to help him, no one could be expected to work all the hours he did in the garden and then cook for himself, wash clothes, clean the house. Poor guy, we felt sorry for Ramon, his life and marital status being a topic of local discussion, although he didn’t appear to mind, he laughed and joked with the donkey man and the women before they continued on down the track.

Ramon’s house was incredible and truly something we could never have imagined. We came through a huge and heavy wooden door which let us, not to the inside of the house, but into an open courtyard. The house and its out-buildings created a completely closed square. Three sides were old barns with hens picking about outside and there were bits of roof, propped up on pillars covering the other side. It was strange to be inside a place which hid it from any of the other houses nearby, appearing anonymous from the outside, but absolutely full of life on the inside. There were ducks and geese flapping in two gigantic washing up bowls, the geese were honking and the arguing with the ducks. Pigeons were sitting on the broken gutters of the barns and swooped down to raid the food the hens were pecking at. There were cats lying in patches of sunlight and a distant bleat of goats from one of the barns. A huge dog came flying towards us, unsure whether to eat us or just lick us to death. He was big enough standing on all his feet but when he attempted to rest his front paws on my shoulders I stumbled backwards into a pile of rakes and spades. There was stuff everywhere, tools, a rotavator and its various attachments, a trailer, bales of straw, a bicycle, a washing machine, hosepipes trailing like luminous green or yellow snakes, plastic netting in bundles, coils of wire, crates, boxes, sacks, piles of bricks, planks of wood, logs. In short it was paradise. Ramon persuaded Asterix the dog to stop leaning against us and guided us to a little wooden gate at the bottom of a flight of stone step. He lifted the loop of string which
held the gate closed and we filed up the steps leaving an agitated Asterix behind. We had got used to the typical Gallego house where the living area was upstairs and the animal’s stable underneath. Apparently this was an early form of central heating, the warmth from the animals rising through the wooden floor. Personally, I felt that if winters here were as cold and wet as the one we’d just lived through I’d have invited any animal with its heat to come upstairs and lie down on the bed. Up the stone steps we passed seed trays, sacks of maize, piles of wood, old boots, plastic crates. Something different on each step, then we arrived at the balcony or porch of the house. In the corner was an old kitchen table with a group of mismatched chairs and a wooden bench. The table was spread with a pretty tablecloth and in the middle was a jug of wild flowers. It was so homely and perfect I felt like crying, although I did manage to pull myself together and sit down while Ramon disappeared under the washing line to put the kettle on.

It was a bright afternoon underscored by the chill of early spring. From the balcony we could see out over the roof of the courtyard and across the flat plains of Xinzo to distant mountains which had snowy peaks. Maybe it was only early spring and we did have our jackets and scarves on but it felt good to be sitting at Ramon’s table enjoying the bit of sun trapped in the corner of the balcony. As soon as we’d sat down a little black and white cat appeared, she crept along under the bench and considered us for about two seconds before jumping up and settling on Phil’s lap. It couldn’t have been more perfect, the cat squinted at the sun and started purring loudly. We looked around the balcony, our eyes gobbling up everything was could see as if they’d been starved. A big box of firewood, plastic crates, a netting sack of corn cobs, several pairs of boots caked in mud, scattered odd socks. Tea towels dangled over the balcony rail which had been made from a scaffolding tube cemented into a stack of bricks at each end. The place was a testament to industry. Everything had a use, a purpose unlike the chic marble-clad homes we had glimpsed so far on our journey. Across the courtyard, level with us pigeons came and went through gaps in the roof tiles and the cat, snoozing on Phil’s knee couldn’t have been less interested. Ramon returned with a little saucepan, well, a
sort of saucepan, one whose handle had broken off and Ramon was gripping it in a tea towel. It was both kettle and teapot, boiling water with stems of plants floating in the water. Ramon pointed at the cat and said she never failed to find someone to make a fuss of her, she knew exactly what she wanted, even last year when she had arrived outside the door as a small kitten on a cold dark night she had made such a noise that he had come out to see what was happening. He’d opened the door and she ran in, that was that. Even now she was always hungry. He said that he fed her every other day, that was enough, he needed a cat that caught mice and rats, he thought that if he fed her too much she would get lazy. Ramon waggled his finger at the cat and said something about getting off Phil’s lap but she just closed her eyes. We couldn’t imagine feeding any of our cats only once every other day, ours had always been twice a day creatures. Ramon continued back to the kitchen, returning with three little glasses for the tea in one hand and a homemade apple cake in the other.

We sat around the table together sharing our stories and discovering how Ramon had arrived there. He wasn’t local, he’d come from the coast where he had grown up and worked at the port, where just about everyone else in town had worked. But he’d always wanted to live in a rural place, somewhere he could live as his grandparents had because all of his happy memories were of helping them grow food for the family and of being with them in the countryside. At some point, while he was still working at the port he came across the biodynamic movement and had been fascinated. He’d read that it had its roots in Germany so he decided to go there and find out more. Somehow he found a contact at a biodynamic farm where he could both live and work which made moving to Germany much more possible. He’d left Galicia and gone there for two years during which time he had learned a lot and saved enough money to come back and set himself up in a basic way. He’d decided to leave the coast and move somewhere where the rents were lower so he arrived in Xinzo and quickly discovered that the church had many old, empty houses, presumably because there were fewer priest nowadays. The church hadn’t decided what to do about all those old buildings which were mostly derelict. Through various contacts Ramon had managed to get
his old house rent free. And although it really was extremely basic and tumbledown Ramon
was happy because now he could put into practice all the things he’d learned in Germany and
start his own business. It was definitely a small enterprise requiring masses of physical
labour, but each Monday Ramon filled his old Renault 4 to bursting point with his own
produce and drove the forty kilometres into Ourense where he sold everything he could grow
to the whole food shops there. He also supplied restaurants in other towns by taking the
produce, packed in boxes to his local bus station where the buses also delivered things. All
Ramon did was tell the restaurant people the time the bus would arrive and they went to
their bus station to pick up their delivery. Ingenious.

We drank our tea, ate cake and went for a walk to visit all the pieces of land Ramon was
using to grow his produce, which were dotted all around the pueblo. The best patch was
nearest the house where there was a poly tunnel full of seed trays overflowing with seedlings.
The garden around the tunnel was a tangle of marigolds and nasturtiums, wild flowers all
lush and vibrant in stark contrast to the pieces of land all around which were belonged to
Ramon’s neighbours. They were ploughed precisely, the bare earth showing just a regiment
of seedlings while others were just bare earth. Herbicide, said Ramon. Apparently it was a
problem, the neighbours were all older people and until recently they had grown all their
own food in a natural way but now they had begun buying chemicals which to Ramon’s mind
was bad enough but also they didn’t understand how to use them. Many older people
couldn’t read the instructions so either they diluted the products too much to make them go
further or they overdid the dose because the packets seemed too little. Either way, it was a
hazard and a shame particularly since many older people were just using the products to
keep the land ‘clean’, weed-free. Many of his neighbours were now too old to grow things but
rather than returning the land to nature they either used weed killer or set fire to it. Ramon
shrugged and said it was a sign of the times, not that long ago the place would have been full
of people growing food for their families but now younger people had gone to the cities and
only the older people were left. It felt sad but at least for the people in this pueblo they had
Ramon, the youngest person by about twenty years. He was a willing worker, taking on various pieces of land from his elderly neighbours, growing food and saving them the worry of their uncultivated plots. He was also there when trees blew down in winter or when they needed help to understand official letters or paperwork. Ramon hoped to change their minds about using chemicals especially since they all knew about the quality of home produced food and there was an increasing awareness about ecological food, thanks to local television programmes. We walked back to the house and returned to the balcony while Ramon closed the doors on the various buildings below, with the animals safely inside for the night then came back upstairs and went to put the kettle on again.

It had been really good to meet Ramon, he completely understood what we wanted to do even if we didn’t speak each other’s language that well we felt a true connection. We knew we could learn masses from him not just about growing things in this climate but he was also involved with various local initiatives which had been set up to encourage young people back to the land. We sat talking and Ramon tried to think of other people we should meet who might be able to help us and gave us some contact numbers, this felt great, like it was possible for us to become part of something and reconnect to the world. Obviously we told Ramon about our grand plan and asked his advice about finding a piece of land and the absence of estate agents. Yes, it was true that buying and selling happened locally, amongst neighbours and family. It would be much easier for us if we were living in a pueblo, we would soon get to know everyone and then be better able to hear about places people wanted to sell. Had we considered trying to rent somewhere? In fact, said Ramon suddenly becoming animated, he had thought of someone whom might be able to help us, he’d remembered a woman he’d met called Ana, who worked for a project which existed to encourage new rural enterprises, she was very interested in organic gardening and was actually based in a small pueblo in the south of the Ourense region, a beautiful and mountainous area. Ramon felt certain we would love it and suggested we ring Ana and maybe arrange to meet her. We all thought this was a marvellous idea, at last we felt as if we
were making a start and Ramon was pleased to have been able to help us. Now as the sun was beginning to sink behind the courtyard roof and the temperature was dropping we realised it reluctantly that it was time for us to go. It was a wrench to move the cat from my lap but we walked down the stone step together, Ramon went ahead, switching on a light before disappearing into the barn under the house. He reappeared almost at once with a cardboard box of produce, carrots, potatoes, cabbage, onions and a jar of honey which he presented to Phil. A gift he said, welcome to Galicia!
CHAPTER FOUR

Settling down
The arrival of spring and our visit to Ramon signalled a new phase on our journey. We felt our plan was still alive after months of hibernation. Now we weren’t alone we knew there was someone with the same ideas as us and right nearby. We started thinking about Ramon’s suggestion of renting somewhere, maybe he was right and maybe we’d been right too in understanding that staying put in one place was the thing to do. And now, the idea of moving out of the van into a house seemed a logical progression. We pondered and we enjoyed the sudden arrival of the spring, in Celanova and in Allariz the sun was working its magic and drawing people outside the place was coming alive. Children dived in and out of the libreria, the stationers which also sold sweets, trying to decide on which sugary things to choose; sherbert straws, bubble gum, red liquorice shoe laces, sticky lollies, tough choices and then returning out to the ‘passeo’ clutching their little plastic bags of bright colours to run around with their friends. The passeo. It was two things in Spanish, a place and the idea of a stroll or walk. In Allariz the passeo near the libreria was a big open space enclosed by huge plane trees, newly decked out in fresh green leaves. Parents sat on benches talking to each other and looking after their younger children in buggies, happy to be outside at last after the long wet winter. We realised that for most people the passeo was their garden, the narrow streets and tightly packed houses didn’t leave room for even a backyard between them.

One afternoon we were enjoying our passeo, a walk through the streets, cutting across from one narrow alley to another so that we could walk past our favourite shop, the florist. It was a tiny little place, with my favourite shade of blue paint around its big window and it had a rough old wooden door. Peeking through the door we could see masses of terracotta pots and old baskets packed with primulas and bulbs. There were delicate glass vases of freesias whose scent I could imagine and lush ferns in glazed pots. It was like the potting shed of the Secret Garden, there was the smell of moss, damp earth and flowers. Outside in the street was a low bench where the bigger plants sat in huge pots, there were bunches of tulips and daffodils arranged in galvanised buckets and tiny little pots which belonged in a dolls house.
garden, packed with moss and a single bulb. It was all so lovely. Roots, roots. The shop owner was enjoying one of the perks of her job, sitting outside in the street, reading on a garden chair which was positioned to catch the sun peeping between the narrow buildings. Her cat was sunbathing in the same sunlight, stretched out amongst the pots. We stopped, as we had begun doing, to chat. It was too intimate a street to pass without speaking. I knelt down to stroke the cat who was a perfect silver tabby with huge green eyes. She lay back and let me rub her ears, blissfully content in the sun. The cat’s name was Ruth, pronounced ‘root’ in Spanish which sounded right in a gardening shop. Apparently she was pregnant, usually she produces two litters a year, the florist explained, thanks to a big black and white tom cat who was always around. Finding homes for the kittens wasn’t too difficult, neutering? No, it didn’t seem right to go against nature. Ruth got up and strolled back into the shop, her big fluffy belly swaying from side to side. We both knew we were going to ask about those kittens, we needed a cat and frankly, one from a florist shop? It was definitely a sign that things were looking up.

We thought a lot about Ramon’s suggestion of finding somewhere to rent and eventually, buoyed up by the weather and our first bits of good fortune, we rang Ana, the woman Ramon had suggested we speak to. The following week we were going to meet her in Entrimo at the most southern tip of Galicia, a small pueblo right on the frontier with Portugal. It was seventy kilometres away from where we were had based ourselves. Not far really but it was like entering an entirely different world. The mountains grew at either side of a narrow valley, the road was so steep that the van developed a cough each time Phil changed gear, slowly it hauled itself upwards until recovering its health to speed down the other side. We swayed around curves, clung to edges of roads with nothing beneath us and still the mountains were with us. Our trip was not helped by the old familiar rain lashing hard against the windscreen and the wiper blades moaning back and forth. Spring had retreated and winter was with us again. Eventually the road ahead began disappearing in mist and in seconds we were engulfed in greyness and could see nothing. Phil slowed to a crawl which
was really lucky because pieces of rock had started to appear on the road in front of us, odd
bits to begin with and then small piles until we had to stop because it looked as if the hillside
had given up the battle and just slipped down onto the road, blocking it completely. Phil
turned off the ignition and we sat, slightly shocked watching the whiteness swirl past outside
the windows. Now and then a gap in the mist appeared and we saw the mud and rocks on
the road, it was all very, very quiet. We sat wondering if this kind of thing really did happen,
did roads really disappear under rocks? Then we began trying to think practically, what
could we do? Please, don’t let it mean we have to turn around. We were on a very narrow
road where the possibility of a three or even twenty-three point turn was unimaginable, there
was nothing below us just a deep valley somewhere down there hidden under the mist. We
couldn’t see anything behind us, so reversing would be very slow, besides, reverse to where?
This was the road, the only road as far as our map said. I was starting to think the van was
jinxed or at the very least harboured some very negative energy. I hated the van.
The windows were beginning to steam up, probably with the heat from our brains trying to
work out what to do. Phil absently wiped the windscreen with his hand and outside we
definitely saw a shape coming towards us. We weren’t alone. There was someone out there.
A few seconds later we could see it was a tiny woman leading a donkey. We weren’t in the
middle of nowhere, just because all we could see was mist and rock it didn’t mean that we
weren’t somewhere and we knew now that people with donkeys meant we were near a
village. We opened the doors and jumped out as the woman arrived, ‘Buenos dias’ she
pointed at the rocks, wasn’t it terrible? Too much rain this year. Just then we heard a car
horn and a little van arrived behind us, it was turning out to be quite a busy road in the
middle of nowhere, the bread van. The driver hopped out and came round to look at the
road, ‘oh well, it looks as if I’ll have to go around the top,’ he said, and walked to the back of
his van with the donkey woman. He opened the back doors of the van for her to select a
dozen long loaves, slipping them into the donkey’s panniers, then he turned to us. Where
were we going? Entrimo? He was going there next, it wasn’t far but we would have to
reverse, past the turning uphill and then we could follow him up. He jumped back in his van
and reversed at speed, we followed carefully with the bulky van crawling along until we saw the turning and the little van rising steeply on the right. We heard the bread man toot his horn and saw him shoot off, his little van a mountain goat compared to ours which then chugged thoughtfully upwards. We arrived in Entrimo ten minutes later and stumbled out of the van for coffee.

We had arranged to meet Ana in the little bar opposite her office and had no problem finding that, it had the familiar vinyl interior, marble and smoked glass interior of so many little bars. At the high counter there were six older men, leaning, smoking, drinking aguardiente, the local firewater and generally getting ready to start their daily schedule of hanging around and sitting about. Ana arrived a little while later. It wasn’t until we’d been in Spain a while longer that we realised no one here ever arrived early. They were only ever late. A little bit late, quite late, very late or not turning up at all late. Ana was friendly if a bit nervous of meeting real live English people. She said her English wasn’t fluent but it was definitely good enough for us, I’d be totally impressed with myself if I could speak Spanish that badly!

She told us about her work for the rural development agency which received European Union funding to support local initiatives. She had explained that she had hoped Ramon might have been interested in applying for some money to help his business but he seemed reluctant to spend time filling in forms. I couldn’t help thinking that Ramon was even wiser than we’d thought.

We talked about our idea of finding a place to live and that everyone we’d met had suggested we should try and rent somewhere first in order to make local contacts, did Ana think this was a good idea? Yes, she admitted, it was true estate agents were only found in towns and then they mostly sold apartments or houses in the towns. Then we told Ana all about our plan and she thought it sounded wonderful. Of course, she said, many local people grew vegetables, kept pigs, made wine but they didn’t make gardens as English people knew them, with permanent plants. Making a special place which also celebrated nature and looked
beautiful would be very unusual here. Who knows, she said, if we managed to find a place maybe we could consider applying for funding. However, in the first instant perhaps we would consider coming to live in Entrimo, her office was there and she would be able to help us find a house to rent. This would definitely help us get to know people and then we’d find out if there was anywhere to buy. This all sounded very helpful and really amazing. Who’d have thought we’d have come across such a helpful person? Maybe this was the sign we’d been waiting for, where we’d begin our new life. If we liked the idea, Ana said, she would put up some notices in the local shops to see if anyone had a house to rent. Obviously it was a very small place, with a small population but there was always something, maybe not in the best condition, did we mind what it was like? Frankly after living in the van for months on end anywhere would seem like a mansion, no we didn’t mind at all. Well, said Ana, why don’t you go for a walk around the town and we could meet up again at lunch time, she wanted us to meet Augustin and Pilar who ran a rural hotel in Entrimo. Pilar was a wonderful cook and would make us a special vegetarian lunch, which Ana was looking forward to tasting. We were stunned. Entrimo might have been at the edge of Galicia, buried in the mountains but it would be here that we tasted our first Spanish, vegetarian meal. What a very interesting place it was turning out to be.

As we began our walk it was obvious to see that Entrimo was completely dominated by nature. Big, huge, gigantic nature in the shape of the mountains which could be seen everywhere, even in the misty rain they were a silent presence appearing between passing grey clouds. The street where Ana had her office and we’d drank coffee was the main street of the town, well, the only street. Beginning with a supermarket and a large ugly cement block called Hotel Don Pepe. In the couple of hundred yards which was the length of the street there was an electrical shop with bright lights and modern appliances next to a musty looking shop selling clothes which had been completely overshadowed by the brashness of modern electrical goods. It had faded bits of wrapping paper draped over the display of clothes from another era, the paper was probably there to protect the clothes from any stray
rays of sunlight trying to sneak in. Then there was another supermarket, a pharmacy, obviously no Spanish pueblo, however remote could do without its glossy, modern chemist. There was a bakers, plenty of stick loaves, cakes on Saturday only, another café and a fruteria, the vegetable shop. Outside the fruteria was a little park with swings and a slide under tall trees, we could imagine what it looked like on a sunny day after school. Across the road was a neat stone building, almost like a child’s drawing of a house, although this was bigger than a house and it had limp flags on poles outside, the local council office.

Walking back along the other side of the road we passed a horribly dull looking building which we discovered was the library, open three days a week from 3.30pm until 5.30pm. Then a sign pointing down a flight of steps to the post office. We suddenly realised that renting a house would mean we could have post. A really exciting thought, so exciting that we felt the urge to move into any tumble down wreck on offer. We’d definitely ask Ana to help us. The post office was tucked under the back of the library, one subterranean room with a counter and a man, opening hours, 8.30am – 11.00am.

The rest of downtown Entrimo consisted of yet another supermarket, a bank, a builder’s yard and nothing else. It definitely wasn’t a touristy place, it was a frontier post just 3 kilometres to the border with Portugal. It felt like a cowboy town, necessities catered for and nothing else. But Entrimo wasn’t about shops and definitely not pretty little houses as there weren’t any, it was about being tolerated by big raw nature. Massive faces of grey rock with dark trees were what really made the place. Behind one side of the street the mountains loomed, making the shops look like part of a toy village and on the other side the land behind the main street sloped away down towards more distant mountains. These looked like lighter colours rock, pale, sharp looking and they appeared at the end of alleys and narrow side streets. We could see that these mountains were further away because they were having weather we weren’t. They had a yellowy light, like the sun on their surfaces and bits of cloud drifted by. What a strange and amazing place this was.
Lunch was a wonderful affair at the rural hotel of Augustin and Pilar. We had gone in Ana’s car leaving the main street and driving a couple of kilometres back up the hill. Vila Asperelo was an impressive old building hidden behind high stone walls in the secretive way of all old Gallego buildings. Since we’d visited Ramon we knew that doors in walls could hide unknown things and through this door was a lush garden with bushes, trees, ferns, shrubs and a narrow stone path, taking us to the restaurant part of the hotel. Two cats were waiting for us on the patio in front of the glass door and they rushed ahead of us and waited at the door to be let in. Inside it was beautiful, all stone and chestnut woodwork, a low ceiling, wooden beams, heavy wooden furniture and old gardening tools everywhere. Wooden rakes, pitch forks, spades and masses of fascinating things we had never seen before. The centre piece of the restaurant was an absolutely enormous fireplace. So big it had benches and a table inside it. The actual fire was to one side, roaring with logs the size of small trees, how lovely it was to feel warm and to sit in the flickering light which reached all over the restaurant. Ana introduced us to Pilar and Augustin, they didn’t speak any English but we were beginning to discover that with some people it didn’t matter. Communication had more to do with the combined wills to connect with each other and certainly it worked that way with Augustin and Pilar. We wanted to know everything about their restaurant, hotel, the food, the old building and they wanted to know how on earth we had arrived at their door. There was plenty of empathy and appreciation of the same things, especially very good vegetarian food. And it really was the best. The best vegetarian food we had ever eaten, anywhere. Things made from pumpkin, little soufflés in tiny dishes, roasted marinated vegetables, local cheese, desserts to die for. Apparently Pilar had given the traditional Gallego cuisine a vegetarian twist, and succeeded magnificently. Ana explained that the hotel had received some European Union funding and that Augustin was now part of the local management of the programme which she worked for. When international delegations came to visit Pilar did all the catering. I wondered what those delegates thought of Entrimo, the cowboy town with the incredible cuisine.
After lunch we talked to Ana about the possibility of finding somewhere to rent. She planned to get some notices printed off and put up in the shop windows and as soon as she heard anything she would email us. We drove back to base and got ready to feel impatient at once. We couldn’t wait to get to Entrimo and to know that we’d taken our first tentative steps towards realising our plan. However, we at least had a reason to wait because there was the kitten to think about, certainly we couldn’t set off to our first real foreign home without him.

We had walked through the town near the campsite often enough and had seen the florist plenty of times when she had no news to tell us, but today was different. She popped out of the dark interior to call us in. Behind the beaded curtain at the back of the shop, where it was dark and smelled of damp soil, we saw under an old wicker basket under a table where Ruth was lying on her side, half buried under a heap of tiny velvety bodies snuggled up against her stomach. The florist knelt down to speak to the cat who immediately stood up and stepped over the pile of wriggling bodies to get out of the basket. She walked across to lean against our legs. It was just as if she was expecting to be congratulated, she looked so proud of her babies. She walked back to the basket and dangled her head over the side, listening to their funny squeaks and leaned over to lick their furry skin. The florist picked up one of the kittens, the fattest of all and handed him to me. His fur, a picture of miniature tabby markings, felt warm and soft, his eyes still closed and ears folded down like origami triangles. His short, soft worm of a tail curved around my hand. This was our kitten, he was the strongest, said the florist. His warm little body fitted into my palm, his flat kitten face, so beautiful. When he realised he wasn’t in the basket anymore, he started to squeak, I quickly put him back with the others. Ruth was in her place again and the little creatures were scrambling blindly over each other to get near the food. They were all lovely, but obviously ours was the loveliest and we noticed that he’d managed to work his way to the front of the food line, drinking and kneading his paws on Ruth’s body. The kittens fed for a little while and then fell asleep in a heap. Only six weeks to wait before we’d be taking our kitten to Entrimo with us. Surely in six weeks Ana would have found us somewhere to move to. In
fact it was only four weeks later when Ana emailed to say that she and Sandra her colleague had three possible places for us to see. Three. Surely one of these would turn out to be the one.

Again we set of for Entrimo, this time in watery sunlight, not a brilliantly sunny day but anything was an improvement on rain. We wove through the mountains again, crawling up the long, steep roads and swooping down the other side. We came into ‘landslide village’ which was all cleared away now and didn’t look half as menacing as it did last time. It was just a small cluster of houses, although it did have an odd feeling about it even without the mist and low cloud. The place was just about clinging to the side of the mountain with nothing below, almost as if it had grown out of the rock. It was hard to imagine any world event having the slightest repercussions here, it’s pace and purpose etched into the rock, everyday life so natural. Now we had begun to see real places where life was lived rather than the images in our imaginations of slightly foreign versions of where we had come from in Yorkshire we were beginning adjust our vision, foreign-ness had started to colour our ideas, just as we had thought it might.

Maybe one of our reasons for wanting to come to Spain in the first place wasn’t just about swapping one kind of self sufficiency for another but more to do with finding a connection to the passing of time related to nature rather than clocks, timetables, diaries, calendars. We had, after all started to wonder where our life had gone in Yorkshire, not being able to keep track of the years as they passed. Maybe this was it, time related to nature and the seasons. Also, this little pueblo was real, actually quite a harsh version of life, not a postcard image. Here there was rain and mud. It could be cold too, although there would be donkeys of course. Now we were glimpsing it we were beginning to see the gap between our old life and what it might be like to live here. Neither of us had realised it could be so different, now that we were involved in a much bigger adventure than our plan had allowed. In fact, just adapting to this different way of life, living and surviving here was going to be an
achievement. Realising all this as we drove into Entrimo wasn’t exactly frightening, perhaps a bit daunting knowing that some of the experiences of our previous life were starting to peel away, as if they didn’t actually mean anything here. It felt a bit like losing our stabilisers, we felt wobbly but excited. However, suppose we couldn’t cope with this? Suppose, as I had already suspected, we weren’t made of the right material for this adventure and we didn’t have whatever was required to make it work? What could we do? Go back to Yorkshire, pick up the remains of our old life? Yes, of course we could. But even as we realised our plan was starting to slip out of our hands we were so engrossed in trying to make it work we didn’t look back.

We arrived outside Ana’s office just as her car drew up. Time for a coffee? Obviously. We all trotted across the road to Hotel Don Pepe this time, Ana, Phil, Sandra and me. This was another of Ana’s ‘offices’ where she brought visitors to meet and talk. Cristina, the owner appeared, ‘Hola, Buenos dias!’ Cristina left a plate of Tarta de Santiago on our table and went off to get coffee. Tarta de Santiago in our opinion was the only decent thing to come out of Santiago, a crumbly almond cake decorated with a powdery icing sugar sword on top. As we drank our coffee Ana’s assistant, Sandra explained about the three places we were going to visit. The first was outside the pueblo, about two kilometres away, it was an old house without furniture, a bit rundown but it wasn’t very expensive, we could see what we thought. The second was just behind the main street, a really tiny place, the cheapest but it was very small. The third, to Sandra’s mind was the best, it had more space, a piece of land and it was furnished. We would have to visit that one later because she had arranged with the owner of the first house that we’d be there at 10.30.

Back in Ana’s car we drove up the hill to the junction where a little cluster of houses had their own name, Fiera Vella, the home of the wood oven where the bread for the pueblo was baked. We left the tarmac road and turned down to a track with open grass land on either side, there was another cluster of houses in front of us and a bald piece of ground for
parking. Ana turned off the engine and we heard barking coming closer. As we got out of the car, a huge furry body came bounding towards us, part Alsatian part sofa. This was a very large, excited dog and he was running towards at such a speed he was finding it difficult to stop. He managed to bounce to a halt a little way from us, barring our way, barking, panting and wagging his tail. Ana looked a bit worried and wondered what we should do. None of us wanted to get bitten but surely any dog with violence on its mind wouldn’t be wagging its tail. We all took a step towards the dog and it happily turned and ran a little way back towards the house, turning to see if we were following, plainly it had come to show us the way.

We arrived at a gap in a stone wall and the dog dashed through and immediately disappeared. Typical, he leaves us when we need to know where to go. We were on a narrow path where the wall continued on either side. Over one side was a world of hens and ducks, clucking, fluttering, diving in their big bowls of water, pecking, digging and sitting. Was there someone to ask? A man appeared from a low building with a red plastic bucket over one arm. Ana called to him, did he know of the house for rent? The man realised that his morning’s entertainment had arrived and slowly he began sprinkling the contents of the bucket amongst the birds. As they erupted around him the man waded towards us and arrived where we were leaning over the wall. Yes, he knew the place, he walked along on the inside of the hen run until he reached a wire netting gate where he squeezed out and hooked the string back over the gate post. He shook hands with us all whilst Ana began explaining who she was and then turned to us. The man nodded at us when Ana told him that we were English and were looking for somewhere to rent. Ah, so the place was for us? English? Well, fancy that, married couple you say? Any children? The man turned and began walking down the path, beckoning us to follow. We walked along in single file until the man stopped outside some metal gates. Was this the house? No, not the house to rent but the man’s house. Opening the gate he sent us up the steps to the front door where a woman in a pinny peered out. He shouted something over our heads which made the woman smile and pull the door wide open. She waved us in and showed us along a chilly corridor to a sitting room.
where she clicked on the light since the shutters were down. There was a flowery suite covered in plastic, very sensible given that when the man appeared he plopped down on one of the armchairs and a cloud of feathers and dust erupted around him. His boots were clogged with mud and straw which began shedding on the floor. There were several religious pictures on the walls including a 3D rendition of the Last Supper. The room was glacial, the man pointed to the sofa and we all sat. The woman reappeared and opened the sideboard under the shuttered window, ‘aguardiente?’ No, no thank you we all chorused. The man passed around the drinks.

We found out more about aguardiente in time, that it was made from the remains of the grapes after they had been turned into wine. Fermenting and distilling were involved and flavourings of either coffee or herbs. It appeared that everyone made their own, from their own special recipe and everyone, including children in the winter, drank it to get the blood warmed up. To us it tasted as if it might burn our internal organs it was so awful and very strongly alcoholic. Saying no to aguardiente we also discovered had no effect. You were being polite, obviously you would like some and anyway, this aguardiente was far superior in every way to any other we’d tasted, he’d made it himself, so here you are, what do you think? Another glass? On this our first encounter with the elixir of mountain life we were drinking the coffee flavoured version. It tasted like something burnt and I was glad when a box of biscuits started circulating even if the best ones had gone, at least they would take the flavour away. I put my glass on the edge of the table, having taken the only sip I thought I could possible take. Phil took a different approach, tipping the contents of the little glass down his throat as quickly as he could so as not to taste it. The man looked at Phil, nodded approvingly and reached for the bottle. At this rate we’d be too drunk to look at any houses and it wasn’t even eleven o’clock. The man and his wife were enjoying the company, where was Ana from? Santiago! Well, that was a long way to come. Was she married? Did she have children? Ana, we could see, was used to this and we could tell was working at extricating us although, even as a professional it wasn’t easy. Eventually there was a little
break in the stream of questions and Ana managed to press the man about the house. Had he spoken to Sandra? Yes, and he had the key.

Outside again we walked further up the narrow path until we arrived at a door in a high wall. Inside was a bare yard and steps to a shuttered house. It was dark inside with the shutters down and there was a strange musty dampness in the air. Just inside was the kitchen with a black mouldy wall and the remains of a cooker. Next to that the bathroom with an echoing dripping sound, a pink bath and no window. Further along the dark corridor a curtain on the right revealed a bedroom with an old bed frame and a mattress leaning against the wall. The corridor led onto a lounge, it was dark but the wooden wall units were there and religious pictures on the walls.

I think we all agreed this was not the best start, but it was a house. Definitely we would need imagination to make it homey. I was thinking colourful throws, cushions and disinfectant while Phil was thinking that he needed to get out of there and quickly, partly to do with how sick he was feeling but also he hated it and under no circumstances would he be using his imagination on living there. Outside Ana explained to the man that we had other places to see and that Sandra would ring him. We thanked him and said how lovely it had been to meet him and the house? Yes indeed the house was ‘bonita’. Finally we wrenched ourselves free and got back to the car. We asked Ana about the aguardiente. She nodded knowingly and said with a grimace that in rural areas the men always offered it and sadly so far she hadn’t managed to find a way of refusing which they understood.

House number two was back in town, just behind the last few houses in the main street. The tiny road was almost too narrow for Ana’s car, we would definitely have to park the van somewhere else. This time Ana had the key and there were no doggy escorts. We managed alone and were soon inside the smallest house ever. It was really cute. Just one room with table, chairs and a sofa then an alcove for cooking and a little bedroom. There was a
staircase at the end of the room going down. Maybe the toilet, Ana thought. Something we hadn’t noticed was missing. Downstairs was actually a garage with an old pair of wooden doors and an earth floor. There was no car in the garage, if there had been, it would have needed to be a sports car because nothing else would have fitted through the doors they were so low. Opposite the staircase in the far wall were two doors one for the toilet and the other for the shower. I was imagining the chilly trip across the garage floor in the middle of the night, but I did like the place, especially the crocheted blanket on the sofa, so homely. Phil rolled his eyes, he was not taken with the blanket and was feeling like a giant, the ceiling was low and he was walking around with a stoop. Spanish people were small, well, maybe he could sit down a lot? I thought there was definitely potential here.

We set off for house number three, leaving the main street and turning down towards the pale distant mountains. We drove along a road with houses on either side, the sun was trying to break through and everything suddenly looked different as if the black and white version of Entrimo was now in colour, even the stone walls of the houses looked softer, warmer than their sad, wet weather selves. Ana turned the car into another narrow side street with stone walls on either side. There were ferns poking through the gaps in the stone and moss clinging on, tiny green leaves and petals. For a moment we were in Cornwall, the lush dampness, the rock.

There were eight houses wedged next to each other, the narrow road went in but it didn’t come out, it turned into a narrow grassy track. There were people around, they called Buenos días and didn’t feel the need to ask about our families. Ana explained that these little clusters of houses in Entrimo were called pueblos, even though they were really part of the Entrimo pueblo. Confusing. People in each pueblo were like a family, looking after each other and being more than just neighbours in the way we understood it. In cities it wasn’t like this but here in rural areas neighbours were very important. We reached a green painted metal gate which stood opposite most of the other houses. There were some stone steps up
from the yard to a glass front door. Underneath the house looked as it must have done for a very long time, huge blocks of stone, a thick wooden door, no windows. Where the central heating animals had lived. We peeped in through the cracks in the wood. There was still straw in there, a wooden rail dividing the living quarters and the troughs for feed. We imagined the animals outside in their fields. Upstairs had the look of the seventies, a metal framed window and the glass door with a curly wrought iron pattern behind it. From the top of the steps we had a view of the pale mountains. They had better sun than we had and their grey surface looked warmer and yellow. Down below us was a little garden belonging to the house opposite. Fruit trees, vines with bright new leaves, hens quietly working under the trees. A huge fig tree started with the hens and reached over the rail around the balcony where we stood, its new leathery leaves making shade below. Ana let us into the house which was the biggest we’d seen. It wasn’t beautiful, cute or rustic, it was cold, it had a tiled floor and window shutters that rolled up into a box when you pulled a cord. There was a small room with dark furniture, a table with matching chairs, a wall unit with glass doors and cupboards and a big chandelier. A bathroom with a washing machine, a kitchen with a cooker and fridge. There were three bedrooms all with wooden floors and clean beds. It looked fine, Sandra was right it was the best, even though I was still drawn to the tiny house with the crochet blanket.

It had been a chilly house and dark with all the shutters closed but outside on the patio the sun was stronger now, almost hot. Ana said this was what the weather should have been like for the last month, it hadn’t been a normal winter or spring, it had been the wettest anyone could remember. Now though we should finally see the sun shining. Phil was leaning on the patio rail looking towards the pale mountains, I looked too, we couldn’t believe we had arrived and that this would be where we lived, Entrimo, Galicia.
Sandra told us that the owner of the house was pleased that we wanted it, and asked if we would mind waiting a few days, until next week because she wanted to come and clean properly.

Next day we were walking to the bakers in Allariz, hoping we weren’t too late for one of their special wagon wheels of bread when we saw the florist getting her bread. Hola!, she said, she was hoping she would see us, the kittens were ready, would we like to come and get ours? Ah yes, in our clever plan of relocation the kitten appeared on page two, when we were installed in Entrimo not while we were living in the van. Never mind, we were beginning to realise that it wasn’t always possible to put the imaginary and real worlds together. The florist was very keen for us to come back to the shop with her and when we reached the backroom behind the shop we could see why. The kittens were just as the florist had described, strong, naughty and too much. They had begun climbing up things and knocking things off shelves, they chased around, getting under feet as they scaled the stairs and the florist was worried that they would escape into the street. Were there really only five of them?

It was a new experience for all of us living in such close proximity in the van. The litter tray took up half the floor space once the bed was down, luckily Sardina, the kitten’s fishy name, was very happy and spent his first couple of hours in a tiny space under the bed checking the contents of every box, appearing inside cupboards and popping out of drawers. Should we be worrying about him getting behind the panelling? It seemed not, he soon learned the sound of dry cat food tinkling into his bowl and came creeping out from under the bed. He found the duvet and settled down, very cosy. He was enthusiastic about the knitted gold fish I’d made his too. He was a very easy kitten to please. He could have been bred for a life on wheels, he didn’t mind at all when we left the campsite, standing on my lap looking out of the windscreen. The day came when we left the campsite for the last time, waving goodbye to Isabel the wonderfully helpful campsite lady.
Inside our new home there were two rooms, apart from the bedrooms. The kitchen and the room with all the serious dark furniture and the chandelier. Transformation was needed. Heaving the shutter up into its box and taking down the heavy net curtain brought in the daylight. We took out the six dining room chairs, pushed the table under the window, added Mo’s folding chairs and our nice cushions from the van. Sari fabric for the window and another heavy piece of fabric from my stash as table cloth and the rag rug for the floor, Sardina threw himself down and rolled about, he loved that rug.

All the art and craft materials went in the far bedroom with the French windows and the little balcony. We pushed the bed over to the far wall and made it look like a sort of sofa and a little table from one of the other rooms made an excellent sewing machine table. Sardina thought this room had potential, he squeezed between the sad pots of weather-beaten geraniums and dangled through the railings. After that he re-materialised in a box of fabric and then he was stretched out in a patch of sunlight on the wooden floor. Yes, this was much better than being van dwellers.

Settling into life in the pueblo didn’t take too long, our neighbours were keen to know us and we wanted to know everything, but how with our limited vocabulary? I was struggling to learn every word I came in contact with while Phil was in favour of short circuiting all the verbal stuff for other methods of communication. He was becoming an accomplished mime artist. His performance of ‘fabric conditioner’ will go down in the history books of the pueblo while his skill in drawing things was far more entertaining in shops than a straightforward question. ‘CD player to laptop extension lead?’ No problem. Thick rubber gardening gloves?’ What size? Phil really had started to believe there was no need to learn Spanish when things went so well with pictures. But words began lodging themselves in our heads now that we were surrounded by interesting neighbours, words flew through the air between us and we caught them by accident.
Our closest neighbours were Benita and her husband, confusingly called Benito. They lived literally outside our kitchen window, all of us on the first floor. If we leaned out at the same time we could have held hands, we hadn’t done it yet rather we had contented ourselves with waving. Benita and Benito were both in their eighties and their daughter and son-in-law, Luiza and Santiago and their son Sante lived there too. It took us a while to understand that all the people that went through the green garage door were all going to the same house and were one family. We didn’t like to ask, being English and reserved and obviously, no one thought it necessary to give us the low down on their family members. Actually, until we got to know a few neighbours we couldn’t understand why everyone we met thought that English people were polite. Why would they think that? I couldn’t understand why, not until we were confronted regularly by the full on attack of Spanish people, then it became clear. Benita was the first and she had absolutely no qualms about asking any question she could think of. Too personal? What was that? Our first session included: why were we there, how old were we, what jobs did we do, had we got children, why not, why was Phil so thin, where were our parents? And this was a few days after we arrived. We were really shocked but gradually we began to realise it was normal, or at least normal in those parts. So it followed that if this was normal, English people were reserved and polite.

Benita was tiny, like a bird in neat navy clothes and with weenie little feet. She looked very sweet and kindly but she was also really sharp and full of opinions on everything and about everyone. I really liked her even if she had decided that we were simpletons who needed every aspect of life explaining. To Benita and many others our inability to speak Spanish fluently meant that we were stupid or possibly had the mental ability of five year olds. We sort of got used to it, but at least with Benita we did actually learn things. Like when pegging up washing, turn things inside out, they dry quicker and the sun doesn’t fade the colours. Not that I’d had to worry about the strength of the sun in Yorkshire. Sometimes too she would call me over to the dividing wire fence to give me fresh eggs from the apron she was holding up in her hand, passing them through the gaps in the wire one at a time.
Benito was older and didn’t have much to do with the running of the house. He had his daily timetable and that didn’t leave much room for chitchat or washing clothes. He was up early for breakfast in front of the television. Then he left the house for a slow walk up to the main street for coffee and a chat with all his pals. He strolled back to the pueblo for an early lunch, siesta until about four o’clock then off to the bar again where he would stay until early evening when he returned for supper, television and an early night. He had pace, perfect pace, always walking at the same speed, arriving and departing from each place at the right time. While he was on his schedule Benita apparently ran the house, washing clothes, pegging them out scientifically, cooking lunch, cleaning. That was the morning, the afternoons were nicer for her, they were a social thing. Often we saw bird-like Benita leaving the pueblo to visit cousins, nieces, nephews and friends, people she had known for her entire life. It was a while later when I was working outside on our vegetable plot when Benita picked her way over the uneven ground with another bird-like woman, introducing her friend to me Benita explained that their grandmothers had been friends. An unbroken line. No one I knew had a friendship built on such history, one that started before they were even born. I felt a bit sad when Benita and her friend left. They’d got something I would never have, that sort of relationship wasn’t something you could even work hard at having, it existed or it didn’t. Coming from the sophisticated metropolis of London now didn’t seem so great.

Benita’s daughter Luiza was a lively, friendly woman and her husband, the kindly Santiago took charge of all the vegetable growing and wine making for the family. Over time we learned lots from them about watering our plot from the communal watering system, saving and growing seeds and the strangeness of landownership in Galicia which led people to say ‘muy difícil’ very difficult, whenever we spoke about our plan. We’d noticed that there seemed to be communal vegetable plots, like allotments down the track from our house. We’d wondered about those plots and the people who passed under our window with wheelbarrows laden with tools to return with massive quantities of produce. The houses
were all huddled together, no one, apart from Benita and Luiza and their neighbour Ines, had a garden next to their house. Maybe the allotments were because no one had a garden. The house we were renting had two little allotments, one down the grassy track near the end house and another in a wild bit of land under some chestnut trees. When we discovered why this was, we began to understand the difficulty with land ownership in Galicia. Inheritance. Parents died, their children divided the inherited land between them all, everyone getting a little bit each. Then that generation died their children inherited and divided the land up again. What with all the marriages the various bits of land people inherited from other branches of their family the whole of Entrimo and Galicia, was one giant patchwork with individuals owning tiny strips of land dotted around all over the pueblo and beyond. Some families realised this was crazy, after all what good was a strip of land five metres long by two metres wide? Some families came to an agreement with each other, with maybe one buying the others out. Another problem was that some owners had left their home to work abroad, they could have been gone years maybe never to return, but their bits of land waited for them or their children. That was one of the reasons why there were so many wild and over grown pieces of land and why there appeared to be communal gardens. Now we were beginning to understand the difficulty we were facing. How could we possibly find a couple of acres of land to buy in amongst all these tiny bits and pieces? This was a worry but there was so much to learn we didn't spend time getting hysterical about land problems. In many ways our two little plots were just like having allotments. We trundled the old wheelbarrow to and from our plots and enjoyed meeting other people trundling to their bits of land. But it was strange for us, we were used to the privacy of our garden where we could potter, do what we wanted unobserved, to have our successes and failures in private. It couldn't be like that here, people trudged along the edge of your plot on the way to their own, others came to find out what we were doing, give advice, bring plants. No one passed without stopping to make some comment or to have a chat, then plainly, they went and gossiped about what a hash you were making of things.
Our next-door-but-one neighbours, Manolo and Candita were Olympic Gold medal holders for vegetable growing. When they brought us vegetables it was by the bucket load, a bucket of lettuce, of beans, of tomatoes. It was the buckets of things that alerted us to the scale of the growing. Candita was a marvel, we didn’t know how old she or Manolo were but probably into their seventies. Candita was as strong as a horse and never appeared to tire. She was outside at six-thirty in the morning, in her wellies and off down to one of her plots. Back again at about eight o’clock to dash up to the corner of the pueblo to wait for Juan the bread man. After breakfast she transformed from her pinnie and wellies into her smart going shopping clothes. Then back home to cook lunch after that we caught glimpses of her pegging out washing, flicking a duster out of windows or sweeping steps. At four o’clock she was back in her gardening outfit and setting off again down to her plots, cotton hat and heavy satcho, the Spanish spade, in her hand until the sun began to set. If she was bored or frustrated it was never possible to tell, she was always exactly the same, happy and busy, even more so when her son or daughter and their families came for a weekend. Manolo too had his jobs but his main responsibility was for the wine making and this obviously require a lot of brain work because he was never outside as much as Candita.

Then there was Luiz and Ines, neighbours of Benita and family. Like many men Luiz had left Galicia during the 1960’s to find work abroad and as we were discover, many of Entrimo’s sons were destined for a career in the restaurant trade, mostly as waiters, in all parts of the world. Luiz had had served drinks and waited tables from England to Argentina. He spoke a little English and welcomed us into his home, he was genuinely pleased to have real, live English people to speak to. We discovered that there were many retired waiters in town, old guys now who perched along the low wall outside the library to tease and hurl abuse at their friends. When they saw us coming past, a ripple of excitement spread along the wall followed by a chorus of, ‘good morning!’ ‘Lovely day!’ ‘Beautiful weather!’ Perfect holiday greetings. We longed to chat but none of them knew any other English words.
The other family in our little corner of Entrimo was that of the policeman. Unlike our other neighbours, who were all retired, the policeman and his wife went to work. Also, unlike the other homes their house we had noticed as soon as we arrived, was always busy and noisy. The television was on at full volume all day long, there were children, babies, dogs, teenagers and older people sitting on kitchen chairs under our window. People hung around smoking or leaning under the bonnet of cars which were parked nose to tail often with their engines and radios blaring for more than an hour at a time. Other than this family our pueblo was like a retirement village, with a bit more gardening activity. We realised that the policeman’s family adhered to their own timetable which reached its zenith at about midnight. After a feverish afternoon and evening of dog barking, children screaming, car revving, radio and television blaring and people having shouted conversations at each other a frenzy of car door banging would herald the exit of the whole family in various cars. Blissful silence would follow until four or five in the morning when the cars would return with squealing breaks, banging doors, shouting, crying, screaming of children would break everyone’s sleep until after a few minutes the policeman’s family would slam their front door and retire to bed.

Was this normal Spanish life but being surrounded by older people we hadn’t realised? We were desperate to know what was going on and what all our other neighbours thought. It was too frustrating. Finally one weekend, Marta, the daughter of Ines and Luiz came for the weekend with her husband and daughter. Marta was virtually fluent in English and was very happy to chat. She liked the practise and enjoyed hearing our impressions of life in her home village. We sat in the garden drinking coffee with Marta, Ines, Benita and Luiza. Marta asked us how we were enjoying Entrimo, Benita, Ines and Luiza were all listening. For the first time, they had someone to translate for them too, they could ask us things we hadn’t been able to understand and we got to find out more about everyone, especially our mutual neighbours. We could see that they were all wondering about our reaction and everyone’s eyes darting towards each other, as they tried not to laugh, but they couldn’t help it. Benita started first, laughing as Marta translated our questions, then everyone was laughing, joining in and telling us everything, it like a dam burst, our first gossipy Spanish session.
It turned out that the Policeman’s family enjoyed night life and through the summer that was every, single night. There were fiestas in all the tiny mountain villages and they went to every one, hence they departed at midnight which was when most fiestas got going. These events seemed to involve drinking, live music and various elements of the fairground, Entrimo would have its own one in August, and then we would see what it was like.

We discovered who all the characters were in the policeman’s family and were relieved to discover that only the policeman, his wife and their little girl lived in one of the houses all the time. The others all came at weekends and holidays. Everyone agreed that they were a noisy crowd but there didn’t seem to be a way of changing that. All the other neighbours we’d got to know seemed like one big family. In and out of each other’s houses, wandering about in their pyjamas outside, cooking for each other, all very close and friendly. The policeman’s family weren’t part of that, possibly to do with their different take on life, but mainly, we discovered, it was because they had come from another pueblo. They may have made up for lost time by buying two houses and installing three generations of people, but everyone else’s family had lived there for more than 100 years and that really counted.

This discovery made us wonder how we would ever come to belong here. Perhaps the best we could hope for was that we became good neighbours wherever we settled and we could see how important that was.

Since our arrival in Entrimo the weather had changed to hot sunny days overnight. We were amazed at how quickly we had blocked out all memories of torrential downpours, wild winds and landslides. We were too busy to worry about what was past because now we had vegetable plots and we worked on them each morning and in the evening, just like our neighbours, avoiding the hottest part of the day. One evening after a session outside I got back home to discover the fridge wasn’t working. Very strange. The cooker? I switched on
the oven. Nothing. An electrical problem? Phil checked fuses and pulled out the cooker and the fridge but could see nothing.

Next day we spoke to Sandra who said she would find an electrician. Meanwhile we took advantage of our cooker-less state and went to the hotel Don Pepe for jam-painted croissants and coffee. Sandra joined us, the electrician in the next pueblo would come across and have a look later. Later didn’t mean that morning or afternoon we discovered but word was out amongst our neighbours that we were without cooker and offers of food poured in, most deliciously a huge platter of tortilla from Ines. Replete, we settled down to watch one of our small collection of DVDs on the laptop. It was our way of relaxing, touching base with a familiar culture and escaping from the perpetual Spanish-ness around us. Sitting on Mo’s folding chairs with Sardina, flopped out on one of our laps, we almost felt like ourselves. By 10.30 the film had just finished and we were beginning to think of going to bed, when we heard noises in the yard below. The metal gate clanked open and there were voices and footsteps coming up the stairs. Opening the door we met Candita followed by an entourage of a woman in pinny, a well-built man in overalls with a big bag and the policeman’s seven-year-old daughter, Cynthia. Candita introduced us all and explained that this was the electrician and Candita had met him and his wife on the way into the pueblo. Why Candita had escorted the plumber we didn’t know, or why he had brought his wife, we could only guess. But it seemed possible there could have been an element of shyness on behalf of the electrician, maybe he was worried we wouldn’t be able to understand what he was saying, with us being foreign and strange. His wife had come to help out, then Candita had joined in, because she knew us and obviously would be much more able to communicate than the electrician or his wife. And Cynthia? Well, it was too early for her and her family to have gone to that evening’s fiesta, so hanging around outside she had attached herself to the end of the entourage, tagging along for entertainment, why not? I’m sure if Benita had been outside, she would have come along too.
Everyone squeezed into the kitchen where Cynthia was immediately distracted by the arrival of Sardina, who thought he’d have a look at what was going on. Both disappeared under the table. Phil began explaining the problem to the electrician, which wasn’t too complex given the good visual clue of the dysfunctional cooker and fridge. The electrician’s wife, leaving Candita to help Phil, cornered me with a pile of questions. All the usual stuff, how old were we, where had we come from, why were we there, did we have children, why not? Etc. The children question I always found a bit tricky. We didn’t have children, by choice, our choice. I found it hard to say in such a child-fanatical country, that we didn’t have kids because we didn’t want them. We realised this would seem freakish and make us seem even more peculiar, as if being English wasn’t weird enough. So I had got used to saying that we’d both been teachers and it was enough to work with children all day long, then laugh about how nice it was to come home to peace and quiet. That usually lightened the mood and gave me the chance to steer the conversation onto more simple topics. But the electrician’s wife was having none of it. Didn’t we like children? She asked bluntly, while I mumbled something like yes, of course, but who would look after the children when we were working all day? I had the uncomfortable feeling that feeling I was getting in too deep, especially when Mrs Electrician countered with how plenty of women worked and had their own kids. She herself had done that, surely, one of our parents would have helped out look after them? And, by the way, with no children of our own who was going to look after the children when we got old? Had we thought of that? How old was I? That wasn’t too old, women these days had children until quite late on, there was still time and quite honestly, we should consider it. I was beginning to feel a bit dizzy, wondering how to get myself out of all this when Cynthia’s mother, of all people, saved me. Being a warm evening, our kitchen window was open and a loud bellow echoed up from below, ‘CYNthia! ‘CYNthia!’ Cynthia wriggled reluctantly out from under the kitchen table and went to the window. She leaned out, bending almost double, her top half disappearing over the sill. ‘Que?’ She yelled back, ‘what?’ A loud conversation followed with shouts from below and shouts from the kitchen, until Cynthia
submitted and tore herself away from the excitement in our house to go and get ready for the fiesta.

Meanwhile the electrician had dragged the fridge and cooker further into the room, there were bits of ill-fitting kitchen unit all over the place and he himself had disappeared into the space where the fridge usually lived. His head emerged, covered in cobwebs. No, he couldn’t find anything wrong. He stood looking hot and sticky, hands on hips, pondering. Then he seemed to have a brain wave and climbed out of the hole in the worktop. Beckoning Phil to go with him, they both set off down the steps into the yard. Mrs Electrician was deep in conversation with Candita and the odd word I could follow included, ninos, (children) and bebes, honestly, I felt like throttling Mrs Electrician, what was she doing here anyway? Actually I had the feeling that Candita wasn’t in the mood for Mrs Electrician either and was trying to damp down her fervour with words about different countries and how things were different these days. Finally Candita managed to pry herself away and said ‘buenos noches’ before nipping off downstairs and out of the gate. I followed, thanking her saying good night, anything to escape Mrs Electrician. Then I noticed Phil and the electrician were in the barn under the house. The lights were on and their voices low inside. I went to investigate. “Ratonitas’ the Electrician was explaining, smiling and wiping his hot face with a hanky. It seemed that mice had eaten through the cable, which ran along the roof of the barn, bringing power to the kitchen appliances. He waved a frayed cable at us and it certainly looked as if something had enjoyed a good meal. Maybe it’s last supper?

Now the problem was solved the electrician looked happy, he said he would be back first thing in the morning to fix it. Not a big job, he just didn’t have what he needed with him. Well, it was far too late to be wondering about cables and fuses at almost midnight, I felt we had packed more than enough new experiences into one day. Mrs Electrician had appeared in the barn to get the low-down on the problem and we took that opportunity to start edging up the steps. Both Mr and Mrs Electrician emerged and said their ‘buenos noches’ and left.
Finally, having checked that there were no other neighbours lurking in our kitchen, we went to bed. Even Sardina was exhausted, he flopped like a piece of sweaty fur fabric on the end of the bed. Clearly hoping for a rematch with Cynthia before too long.

Next morning, barely had we got out of bed when the electrician arrived, fortunately alone this time. He disappeared beneath the house with a bag of tools and some cable. Phil went down to investigate while I waited for life to spring back into the cooker. Hooray, finally about 20 minutes later power was restored, the kettle was on and porridge simmering. Candita called round with her daily bucket of lettuce and a washing up bowl of green beans. Was everything OK now? Fridge, freezer, cooker working? Great. Incidentally, had we been to our plot yet, the one along by the forest edge? No, not yet, why? Well, apparently there was a lot of dog barking last night and that usually meant there were wild pigs around, maybe we should go and see if our vegetables were OK, pigs could do a lot of damage. Phil was already struggling into his boots to get out there and see how all our precious plants were. Candita and he left to go along the track to the plot. Sardina couldn’t have been less interested in wild pig damage, what he wanted was his second breakfast. How this had become part of our morning routine I couldn’t quite remember, but he was a sturdy kitten and seemed to need regular meals, regular meaning frequent. He was always really hungry when we woke up, and so persistent was he that I had to go to the kitchen and get his breakfast before doing anything else. Then once he’d eaten, being something of a creature of habit, he liked to go out on the patio and wander about, have a look down at Benita and generally check out his territory. By the time I’d been in the bathroom, got dressed, and made our breakfast, he was ready for a little snack. So we were conferring about what he fancied in the kitchen when the gate clanked open and Phil returned with Candita.

‘No sweet corn left!’ Phil said, amazed ‘forty plants, trampled and all the green cobs gone, they didn’t even wait until they were ripe, you should see the devastation!’ Candita was explaining that the pigs were a real problem that was why people had dogs, although this
piece of information didn’t seem to have any logic. The dogs were fenced in near the house or were on long lengths of chain making it impossible for them to chase any wild animals. And when dog owners, like Candita, heard barking they didn’t jump out of bed to go and see what was happening or rush outside with a shotgun. I couldn’t understand what good the dogs did. Anyway, pig damage happened to everyone and on our plot near the forest, which was a bit further away from the houses, it was more possible that the pigs would go there. Don’t worry, said Candita, she would tell Jose, his land was next to our garden and he would be very keen to shoot the pig rather than have it come near his plot, just think of all that meat! With that Candita set off to speak to Jose, leaving us to ponder the rights and wrongs of shooting pigs, and to commiserate over our lack of sweet corn that year, forty plants, just like that.

Shooting wild pigs was a bit of an issue in Entrimo and other mountain villages we discovered. In the past there had been no problem, most men hunted anyway and if a pig strolled on to your land for a midnight feast, he was fair game. Nowadays things were different, areas including Entrimo and its neighbouring village, Lovios, were part of the Parque Natural, not quite a national park, but the next best thing and killing animals like wild pigs or deer was now forbidden without a special licence. If your crops were eaten or your livestock killed, you could go to the Parque office and fill in a million forms and try to get compensation for your loss. Also, you could contact the local hunters, who were allowed to hunt from Thursday to Sunday between October and March, and they would come and have a go at tracking the offending pig and bumping him off. The reason for all this was the dwindling numbers of wild pigs and other animals. We’d not seen any big animals yet, but we had heard many terrible tales of woe, like the stripping whole fields of corn bare, attacks on lambs and things. What pigs looked like, we didn’t really know either, but plenty of people had described them to us as being big, huge even, like the size of a sofa, with gigantic teeth and tusks sticking out of their mouths. They were covered in dark bristly hair and Sandra had said if we ever saw one, we shouldn’t stop and say ‘Hola’ we should run!
Word was soon around the pueblo about our sweet corn attack and of course, that inspired many tales of other people’s encounters. It was sad to have lost our sweet corn and all the work we’d put in getting it planted and keeping it watered, but really having it attacked in such a tremendously dramatic way, by a real wild animal had some sort of cache, especially with our neighbours. Now we had bonded over our common foe.

Was everyday was going to full of weirdness now? Yesterday electrical failures and mice chewing cables, today wild pigs eating sweet corn, and then out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sardina chase across the yard below with something big in his mouth. Sardina? Our kitten? Killing things? Surely not? Sardina was hunched over something in the corner. As I walked towards him, he looked up over his shoulder and growled. What was that? I didn’t have to get much closer before I could see a huge, ugly brown thing, no feathers or fur, just a nasty looking mound of something. I crept closer. Sardina, sensing it was time to get going, dashed under the steps, dragging with him the biggest, ugliest, warty toad I had ever seen. Really, it was almost the same size as a slightly deflated football. It was beyond horrific, like something out of a science fiction film, just too gross and ugly to be believed. Maybe it was an alien and could suddenly swell and turn into something monstrous that could come and get us, it was so revolting. But I was worried about Sardina, supposing he got bitten by the toad? Yes, it was actually looking the other way round at the moment, but it was a big toad, maybe it would turn, maybe I should try and get Sardina? One step towards him and I could see there was nothing I was going to be able to do, in fact it looked as if I’d made it worse because Sardina growled and sunk his teeth into the creature’s horny leg, ugh! Too revolting. This time I did run up stairs and shut the door. The porridge was cold and set now, but it didn’t matter, I had gone off the whole idea of eating, that ‘thing’ had turned my stomach.

What was it with everything here? Why wasn’t anything normal?

It was definitely a distraction, living in the pueblo. A distraction from ‘our plan’, learning how different life was. But then when we were in the house alone, we returned to the worry
about whether we were going to be able to make it happen. I comforted myself with the fact that it wouldn’t be normal to attempt this and not have days of anxiety and doubt. But that didn’t help when the big grey cloud descended on us both and there were so many things for us to worry about that we could glide from one anxiety to another. For instance, what had happened to the plan? Our original idea of taking three months to look around then buying somewhere and making a garden? Well, arriving in Entrimo had taken all of our attention, we were still new to our chosen country and coming to live here was going to take some adapting to. What else could we have done? We needed time to understand things and to make contacts, wasn’t that what everyone had told us we needed to do? Well, yes, all that sounded exactly right. But now that we had the anxiety ‘bit’ between our teeth, we could seamlessly move from one worry to another. The plan seemed to have stalled, we hadn’t discovered how we were ever going to find land, well, apart from making friends all around town and asking them to help us. But there was more worry than just that, there was the whole question of pieces of land. Everyone we had spoken to about the possibility of buying a few acres to make a garden sucked on their teeth and said, ‘dificil’. They didn’t say it was impossible, just difficult and that difference was enough to keep us going. Difficult was OK. After all we were British, we reminded ourselves, brimming with grit and determination, we could overcome difficult. Also, we thought perhaps local people were just not used to anyone wanting to buy pieces of land, we hadn’t come across anyone who had ever bought land in Entrimo. Everyone had inherited it in little pieces, we could see with our own eyes, we were surrounded by a patchwork of crazy little plots. Everyone used all the centimetres they had, jealously guarding all their little pieces, having arguments with people who they thought were using more than was theirs. In honesty, we hadn’t actually seen any big pieces of land at all, well apart from that owned by Jose the potential wild pig killer. But he was different, he was a serious businessman with a big flock of sheep, some real-sized fields and on top of all that, he was the owner of the local fereteria. Now, maybe he was the man we needed to speak to. And having thought of something practical to do about this worry we roved on to the other big worry, money.
This was a real horror, because neither of us liked to even think about it. Before we’d left our old life, we’d deliberately avoided the detail of how we would survive, knowing it would make us too frightened and how easy it would have been to talk ourselves out of it all. And anyway, we knew from experience it wasn’t possible to know all the answers. Things happened, you could never plan for everything although we did still have our original plan. The only problem was that it was a bit old and rickety now. We’d come up with it all those years ago when we’d originally had the grand scheme and it had seemed so perfect. Sell the house, put the money in the bank, live on the interest and by then we would have worked it all out, things would have become clear.

We knew we were setting great store in our ingenuity to come up with ways to support ourselves, and why not? Hadn’t we managed in our life so far? Well, maybe things would work out but there was no denying there were a couple of errors in our plan. The first was that the interest rate had fallen like a big heavy rock since the heady days when we’d come up with the plan. Instead of a lovely fat gush of income each year, there was now a miserly little dribble. And, we wouldn’t even see any of that dribble until we’d been doing this thing for a year, discovering that had been a bit of a blow. At times we felt alone with our plan, remembering all the anxieties of the friends we’d left behind and knowing that if just one of them had been there with us we’d have been weeping and sobbing with sadness for our old selves. Luckily, they weren’t there. Did we, at this stage consider giving it all up and heading back to the old country? Well, yes, I did. But not Phil. He might have been as scared of the whole thing as me, but he had a will of iron and to him, the next part of our life depended on the plan working. He was utterly committed to it and he wasn’t going to give up that easily, no sir. And I admired that. I loved that he was so strong about it, even if I wished he’d change his mind. However, being the kind of person who likes to get behind a scheme, it was fine with me. Later I did wonder what might have happened if I hadn’t been so, well, weak, pathetic, weedy and had put up a stronger argument, would we have gone back home?
Some nights though we really needed that DVD player, it was the only thing which stopped
the endless whirring of our brains. Settling down in the darkness with Sardina, cups of
coffee and bars of chocolate sent to us by kindly friends. We shut the door and Spain
disappeared for ninety minutes, we could relax.

On more positive days we were able to look at what we had managed to achieve and feel sort
of proud of how far we’d come. The little gardens were something. The house owner had
planted masses of beans in the bigger plot and we had cleared another patch and planted
aubergines, chillies, tomatoes, peppers and plenty of basil. The smaller plot had onions and
peas, everything there was looking good. I was especially pleased to see the peas coming
along because they were my favourite vegetable. Other people were growing vast quantities
of stuff though, it was amazing to see it and equally amazing to see how much of it people
ate. Like peppers. We’d grown them in Yorkshire, it wasn’t as if they were exotic or unusual,
we grew lots, but in cooking I would maybe use one or maybe two in a meal. Here, people
picked a bucketful of them for lunch. True, there were more people in a family, but still, to
my way of thinking a family of four would be hard pressed to eat a bucket of peppers. Not
here though, those peppers were cut into big thick strips and fried until they were sweet and
brown, then they were sprinkled with sugar, who could resist a few of those? And tomatoes,
we were well aware of what a bumper crop of tomatoes looked like, we’d had a few of those in
Yorkshire and had been saved from actually disappearing under tomatoes by a neighbour
making tomato ketchup. But here the volume was massive. I reckoned our neighbours were
glad to have us there to help them out with their over production, everywhere we looked
people were dragging buckets of tomatoes around, and not just normal sized one either.
People in Entrimo seemed to favour those tomatoes the size of footballs. Big ugly things, in
fact four of those tomatoes and you were looking at generous bowls of tomato soup. People
here also liked their tomatoes a bit green. I’d told Luiza I liked the very red ones and she was
pleased because they had lots of those which they hadn’t got round to eating, and now they
were going to waste. Her family preferred the greener ones. Luiza brought me bucket loads
of big, red tomatoes and I made tomato soup, pizza topping and pasta sauce, I even made stuff for the freezer, it was quite like old times.

We might have been living in a strange land where vegetables were produced in industrial quantities but we were starting to get used to things and we were beginning to make our new life. We had our plots, we were learning things about the climate and of course, we had Sardina. Although he was such a native he didn’t need to adapt to a new life.

Arriving back home with my shopping one lunchtime I quickly let myself in, dropped the bags in the hall and dashed to the bathroom. Seconds later the door gently pushed open and there was Sardina. Apparently I couldn’t even go to the bathroom without him. His mouth looked odd though and as he came closer I could see legs waggling. Spider hairy legs! What to do? Fear! I hated spiders and I was trapped. Sardina was still in the flush of a successful mission and happily dropped the creature on the floor, patted it encouragingly to make it run. Awful. Supposing it disappeared under the bath? A disappeared spider was far worse, than a spider visibly running around, who could tell when it might reappear and where? I finished with the toilet as quickly as possible at which point Sardina snatched up the creature and jumped into the empty bath tub. I decided a quick exit was my best option and left, closing the door behind me. As any cat owner will know, the shutting of a cat in anywhere is a feline crime and the cat must stop any activity, even playing with a caught creature and try desperately to open the closed door and get out, even if it is just to return straight away, it’s a matter of honour, no cat will be confined. Inevitably Sardina was scratching at the bathroom door in less than twenty seconds. I opened it and out he dashed as if he’d been deprived of oxygen, straight for the kitchen. Peering into the bathroom I could see his pet was safely in the bath although I did take the precaution of shutting the door to be on the safe side.

Sardina, having finished what was left in his bowl wandered out on to the patio to watch Benita through the railings, spider quite forgotten.
At lunchtime I told Phil about the drama and he went to the bathroom to have a look. He didn’t think it was that big, it was just a curled up bunch of legs, he thought it had died in the struggle. I peered in, certainly it looked shrivelled up, but I’d seen ‘spider acting’ before, they did this, they pretended to be dead until you got near them and they suddenly sprang back to life. No, Phil was convinced it was dead.

That afternoon I heard strange sounds coming from the bathroom, like a tap was running or something, tink, tink, tink. I went to investigate, pushing open the door to see Sardina in there again, what was this sudden fascination with the bathroom? He wasn’t in the bath this time, but sitting in the sink, playing with plug on its chain, making the little tinkling sound by hitting the metal chain against the sink, seeing me coming he did his cute, falling over thing, where he collapsed on his side, slipping down in the sink, wanting me to come and tickle his tummy. I walked over to him and as I did, I saw out of the corner of my eye a dark shape moving in the bath. Yes, as predicted the ‘thing’ had come back to life and was marching indignantly around the tub. Thank you Sardina. Was this how it was going to be all summer? The house full of every giant creepy crawly he discovered, I didn’t want to think about it.

The arrival of summer meant the end of school for our youngest neighbour, Cynthia. Since her nocturnal visit to our kitchen with the electrician and his wife, she had begun popping in to see us quite a bit. At first she was a little shy and quiet, but that didn’t last. As she got used to us she relaxed and we got to know the real Cynthia, the perfect cultural attaché who helped us understand life in Spain. From her perspective, she had never come across anyone like us. She was just seven years old and had never been anywhere apart from a rare visit to Ourense and had never been on holiday or spent a night away from the pueblo. She had never met a foreign person or anyone who wasn’t family, neighbours or other children from school. She didn’t know what to think of us. We were adults, but we didn’t have children, we couldn’t speak her language, which made us seem a bit stupid, and everything inside our
house was different and fascinating. All the wool and fabric, our treasures and books, I think she decided we were like big children, people who she could have as friends on an equal footing. We definitely weren’t adults to her. It was OK that we were English, she’d heard of that on television and was soon to start lessons at school, so that was sort of cool. She seemed to enjoy knowing us and in a short time we became an extension of Cynthia’s world.

Once she overcame her shyness, Cynthia began giving us advice on things and she was a font of knowledge on everything, language especially. She was wonderful at explaining words, acting things out and writing things for us. Ever since we arrived in Spain, I’d been scribbling new words on bits of paper and sticking then on the wall with bits of tape. The kitchen had become festooned with words, as well as the living room. It seemed to help me learn, when I wanted to use a word in conversation very often the scrap of paper and where it was on the door would come to mind and I could see the word. When Cynthia first saw all of this she definitely thought it was odd. Nowhere in her house were there scraps of paper stuck to the walls. But once I had explained and showed her how I wrote new words and stuck them up, she completely understood and started helping to make new ones. Every time she was around and a new word came up, she would offer to cut out a scrap of paper and write it for me. The more time we spent together the more our common pool of words and understanding grew. One afternoon I asked her what ‘puedes’ meant. Cynthia thought for a bit and then asked me if I remembered when the electricity broke, and I had asked Candita to look after Sardina’s fish? Yes, I remembered that. Cynthia said it was like that and then she acted out giving me something and saying ‘puedes guarda esta para mi?’ I got it. Could you? Puedes meant ‘could you’. This was typical of Cynthia’s explanations, she thought about how she could tell you and used some shared situation to explain, she really was very clever. Obviously it didn’t always work, sometimes she wasn’t in the mood for extended explanations and would just shrug her shoulders and repeat the word as if it was so simple she couldn’t believe I didn’t know it. Who could blame her she was only seven.
Cynthia loved to join me in making things. If I was knitting she wanted to learn how to do it, if I was sorting out a basket of tangled yarn, she would help. She enjoyed pairing up all the knitting needles and putting rubber bands around them. She loved Sardina and he had got used to her. If he came into the house and heard her in the workroom, he came trotting along to see what was happening. He let her cover him up with his blanket, make little beds for him in boxes, he really liked that. We spent many a happy afternoon doing things together, like drawing, painting, colouring pictures in her summer holiday project book from school or making things from Papier Mache, which was one of Cynthia’s favourite things. We made little boxes from cardboard, covered them with gluey paper and then once they were dry, having spent a while on the balcony in the sun, we painted them. All the things I liked to do, she did too, we had a lovely time. I showed her how to make little bracelets from wool, using the first stitch of crochet and she made loads for her friends. Sometimes she wanted to use our collection of rubber stamps, stamping pictures of rabbits, frogs, birds, horses on scraps of paper and then gluing them on to bits of card. We made pom-poms, felt toys, origami books and little gifts for birthdays, mothers and fathers days. It was sweet to see the little felt hearts Cynthia had made for her father, dangling off the mirror in his car.

Sometimes it wasn’t just Cynthia and me, sometimes Cynthia’s friends or family joined us. Alex, who was her sister’s son, came. He was a year older than Cynthia but she was his aunt, something she never let him forget. Luiz-Jose, her cousin came. He was a couple of years older but still enjoyed bracelet making, instructed by Cynthia. It was funny, listening to them discussing the coloured yarn they were going to use, or who they were making things for, often the list of recipients was longer than their interest and they disappeared outside to chase around long before they’d finished.

Cynthia was a mine of information on health issues, which seemed odd for a seven-year-old. Maybe she just soaked up the conversations of her older relatives, but she was full of advice. Black coffee was bad for your heart, especially if you drank more than one cup a day and if
you didn’t drink a glass of water with it, you might die. The dying part was acted out superbly, with Cynthia slipping from her chair, eyes rolling, head flopping until she landed lifeless on the floor. Lemons were the cure for sore throats and colds, drinking honey in hot water was good if you had the flu. Sugar, however was fine. Three spoons in her small cup of tea at our house was quite normal. As were chocolate biscuits, she loved those and was not very happy if we’d run out of her favourites when she called round.

She worried about our eating. We had explained about being vegetarians, something she was completely unfamiliar with. What did we eat then? Didn’t we like chorizos? What about rabbit or chicken? Well, it didn’t seem right, we’d get ill if we didn’t eat meat, our blood would get thin and we’d become weak. Cynthia mimed fainting and fell to the floor. She worried too that we didn’t understand the proper times of the day for eating. We had our supper at what she thought was mid afternoon. Given that she didn’t get up until midday it wasn’t surprising that seven thirty in the evening was still early to her. As for my cooking, it was confusing to her, but she liked to help in the kitchen. She loved washing vegetables, stirring saucepans and she definitely liked the smell and look of everything especially pasta or pizza but without meat? It was all wrong. Potatoes in their jackets were completely unknown phenomena, a definite sign of our madness. Didn’t we understand that you were supposed to peel potatoes? Or that they were cooked in water in a saucepan? And eating the skins? Well, we would probably die, potato skins were given to the hens or the pigs, they weren’t for people to eat. To give her credit though, she did try them. The next time I did jacket potatoes, I baked her a little one. Cutting it open I added butter, salt, pepper, a little grated cheese and offered it to Cynthia. She was suspicious, but she tried it and loved it. A small triumph for us.

She was very concerned that we didn’t have a television, why didn’t we get one? We tried explaining that we didn’t want one, but this was incomprehensible to her. In her house there were two blaring out all day. Cynthia was so used to the racket she probably thought our
house was weirdly quiet. We tried to explain that we were happy with the radio, with CDs and our films. But Cynthia thought we should be able to watch cartoons and MTV Latino. Didn’t we want to see Jennifer Lopez? At this point in the conversation about the merits of TV ownership, there was an interlude while Cynthia performed her favourite Jennifer Lopez number. She had seen it so often she could do all the moves and sang the song, which was in English. She sang all the words with exactly the same intonation as Jennifer Lopez, but with no idea what any of them meant. It was perfect and hilarious. Cynthia loved an audience and her dancing and singing was amazing, she was a star performer. We had hoped that had thrown her off the TV question, but she said that if we enjoyed music and dancing we definitely needed a television.

That was the end of the discussion about televisions for that day, but somehow I knew it would resurface regularly. The next time was when we were making some woolly dolls a few days later. Maybe we were too poor to buy a television, Cynthia suggested. But she had an idea, maybe if we got a stall at the monthly market or even at the fiesta we could sell all the lovely things we’d made and then buy a television. I was more interested in the stall idea than buying a television with any proceeds and asked if Cynthia if she thought people would like our things. She was adamant, people would defiantly buy them because they were ‘muy bonita’, very pretty.

One afternoon, when the raucous cacophony of lunchtime in Cynthia’s house had calmed down slightly, her Dad and big brother struggled out of their shed with a massive paddling pool. The huge expanse of plastic, hung over a metal frame was wrestled up the road to a patch of ground right under our window. The dogs were going wild, barking and running around, doing their best to trip someone over, while Cynthia dashed about, excitedly giving directions to her father, who was walking up the road backwards. They struggled up the steps of the half-built house between Candita’s and ours, setting the pool on the ground amongst piles of sand, blocks, planks of wood and other building materials. The hose, used
daily for car washing, was dragged up the steps and left running to fill the pool. Cynthia was
dancing around, already in her tiny bikini, desperate to plunge into the cold water. Her
grandmother came out and gave advice about waiting for the water to warm up, or she’d get
pneumonia. On this occasion Cynthia was oblivious to health risks and was in the pool
before a couple of centimetres had trickled in. That afternoon was filled with the shrieks of
Cynthia, Alex, Luiz-Jose, Cynthia’s friend, Lucia and her little brother, Pedro from the next
pueblo. Great to know they were having a good time, but just too ear splitting after an hour.
Time for us to visit Ines in her quiet garden, safely cushioned from all the yelps and squeals.

We found Ines on her lawn, making lace. She had one of those giant cushions, propped up
on a chair and covered in masses of pins which marked out the pattern for all the
complicated twisting and tiny knots that formed the lace. Ines was a marvel at this intricate
work as well as extremely fine crochet too. She had showed me some of the things she’d
made and quite honestly they looked as if they’d been made by ants. It was all so incredibly
fine. Each piece of work must have taken months, if not years to complete and Ines had
trunk loads of things she, her mother and grandmother had made. Bedspreads, tablecloths,
shawls, christening gowns, even curtains, masses of things being kept as heirlooms. Her
daughter Marta already had a house full of the stuff but still Ines continued making them. I
wondered why she never branched out into other things, like rug making or tapestry. But as
soon as I’d had that thought, I realised it was the sort of thinking that made people ask me
why I didn’t set up in business. Why didn’t I get other people to make up my designs for toys
and things, make some money. The reason was that it just didn’t interest me. I made things
because I loved doing it. I couldn’t imagine setting up a production line or making anything
I didn’t love and want to keep myself. And Ines was obviously the same. If you really love
the process of making things, you lose yourself in it, enjoying the skill you develop. The final
piece isn’t really the important thing. True, it’s wonderful when things work out, but really
it’s the process of making that counts.
Ines enjoyed her quiet time after lunch when Luiz was busy at the café, meeting friends, playing Escopa, the traditional Spanish card game and gossiping. Ines thought that was very important for men to get out of the house, to be amongst other men. She was probably right, all the groups of men we’d seen in Spain hung out with each other, whatever age they were. Little boys going crazy after school, teenage boys gathered around motor scooters, young men in cafes and bars. And the older ones playing Escopa and dominoes, or sitting on the wall outside the library, doubtless feeling the same as they did when they were ten years old, hanging around with their friends, gossiping about everyone. The men in Galicia did their male bonding thing whenever they got the chance. The women were slightly different. They visited each other in their homes or met at the café later in the afternoon, dressed in their going-for-coffee clothes. The women did their thing, the men did theirs, life was regular, even, and things were never much different. It was like a well-oiled machine, people did what they did, every day, every week and throughout their lives. Maybe the only time things went wild was at the fiesta, the rhythm of the town was lifted and tossed about before it settled back down again. It was going to be interesting for us to see what that was like.
CHAPTER FIVE

The quest for land
Ines was a lovely person, and incredibly kind to us. She seemed to understand how weird it felt for us being there amongst people who were born in Entrimo and were surrounded by their families and friends. She always welcomed us and asked how we were and wanted to know what we were up to, or if we needed anything. While she didn’t speak English, Ines, like several people we had met, was truly empathetic. She seemed to tune into us, she could see things from our perspective and understand our feelings without having to struggle through a complex conversation. Mostly we talked about life in Entrimo, things we’d seen and didn’t understand or people we had met. That was always fascinating because Ines knew everyone and could tell us who was related to whom, little stories from the past, funny, romantic or tragic, always really interesting tales. Then very often we’d get round to talking about our plan and how we might ever find somewhere to live.

Knowing that we needed local people to help, we always talked to whoever would listen to us. We were discovering that our magical place was a bit difficult to describe and very difficult for local people to understand. In Entrimo people lived in the pueblo, bunched together, virtually inside each other's pockets, while the land they used was spotted about all over the place. This wasn’t what we were after. We wanted to make a real garden, one with perennial plants and trees, a special place, our own environment, here everyone here had their weird bits of land and only grew seasonal vegetables. They had spectacular vegetable plots, they just weren’t gardens. If we were going to be able to make our garden, we definitely needed a reasonably sized piece of land and that was indeed, ‘dificil’.

At least Ines seemed to understand what we were after, she had travelled a bit and had even been to Argentina to visit Luiz, which I thought was amazing just thinking how long that had taken by boat. Ines had seen gardens and was a keen rose grower herself plus, she and Luiz were about the only people in town to have a garden around their house. This was because Luiz had sorted it all out when Ines’s mother died. She had owned the house and the land around it, so when she died the land was supposed to have been divided between Ines, her
sisters and her brother. Luiz had spoken to them all and got agreement to keep all the land together to make the garden. Since none of the family was interested in the land, Ines and Luiz got their garden and even let Luiza and Santiago have long slice down one side to make a nice vegetable plot right outside their house. It seemed that even for Ines and Luiz, getting their garden had been a bit ‘dificil’ and they already owned the house. Obviously it wasn’t going to be easy for us and at times we got a bit depressed about it all. We talked it through with Ines, who said we shouldn’t worry, certainly we’d be able to find somewhere, so what if it was ‘dificil’, it wasn’t impossible.

That afternoon, we were sitting with Ines under one of her fruit trees, surrounded by Zinnias and we talked about all the other pueblos that made up Entrimo. Phil was interested in knowing more about some of the places high above town, as if being where we were wasn’t high enough. There were little pueblos like Queguas, which was perched high on the grey rocks behind the main street. Ines knew the place although she said that Luiz knew it better, he had a friend living there. Pausing to think for a moment, Ines then suggested we should all maybe go up and have a look around, go for a walk, a ‘passeo’ with Luiz, what did we think? Passeo, the Spanish word for going for a walk, sounded great to us, in fact just what we needed, the chance to see other pueblos and get some idea of the possibilities, dust off the plan and get ourselves back on track. Fine, Ines said she would speak to Luiz when he came back, and we would go to Queguas the next day.

We were still finding it weird that every morning the sun was shining. Our plans with Ines for going to Queguas had not been prefixed with ‘if the weather’s nice’, summer in Entrimo meant sun every day. I got up as usual and got the morning routine underway, giving Sardina his first breakfast and then making our own. Getting on with our day, washing clothes, shopping for food and things. Today though, something was odd. Sardina wasn’t sticking to his usual routine. He didn’t finish his breakfast and strangely didn’t come back for his usual top-up of a second helping. He was in his usual spot on the patio but he didn’t
seem himself. Maybe he’d eaten something horrible, well facing facts he almost certainly had eaten something horrible. We’d had plenty of cats and sometimes they were a bit off colour, usually when they’d eaten something bad. They got over it though, once they’d been sick somewhere unhelpful, like inside a shoe or behind a sofa. I felt sure Sardina would be fine, it was just the first time he hadn’t felt well. At lunchtime he’d decided to take himself off to the bedroom to sleep on the bed. It was a hot day and the bedroom was the coolest place, he’d probably been sick and just wanted to sleep now.

We walked round to meet Ines at four o’clock, knowing Luiz would be back from the café by then. He was in high spirits enjoying the idea of a passeo, waving to Benita, telling her there was room in the boot if she fancied coming along. She gave him a withering look and waved him away. Ines had asked Luiza to come with us and she appeared at her kitchen door carrying a little bag. She came over to the car and conspiratorially showed us inside the bag where a packet of biscuits lie, Ines laughed and pulled open her own bag to reveal some little coffee cups and a bar of chocolate. Maybe there was going to be a strange little picnic on our passeo. Getting into Luiz’s sweet little car was a tight squeeze, it was one of the tiniest vehicles I’d ever seen, a bit like an ancient fiat 125, but this was more shapely. It was a 1964 Seat in dove grey, which Luiz had bought brand new. Now it smelled of old car, all vinyl and hot oil. On the outside it looked like a cartoon car, straight out of Top Cat, or exactly like a children’s drawing of a car. A little bonnet then a miniature windscreen, a tiny roof and then the boot, exactly same shape as the bonnet. The wings either side of the boot came to sharp points, the lights in them were surrounded by shiny chrome, making them look as if they were spares for a 1960’s rocket. Inside it was a basic metal box with bench seats covered with brown imitation leather, the odd metal spring protruding. There were just rubber mats on the metal floor and strange little plastic door handles sticking out of the greenish cardboard which covered the inside of the doors, in all it was the cutest car I’d ever seen.
Luiz started the engine and the car crawled out of the pueblo and on to the road where it suddenly perked up and lurched forward achieving almost normal speed and giving us all a shock as we shot off towards town. Plainly the car was fine on the flat and seemed to love going downhill, but how would it cope getting up the mountain? Luiz had no worries, to him the little car was invincible and he didn’t doubt for a minute that we’d make it up to Queguas, it was all a great adventure. The little cartoon car definitely had the right driver in Luiz, he looked hilarious behind the wheel, too big and full of character and as ever, on the lookout for entertainment. With his little car full to bursting point, it was a gift for all his cronies and he loved a joke at his own expense. We approached the library wall which was crowded as usual with old men. Luiz careered towards them, making them cheer and shout. Then he saw the priest up ahead, too good an opportunity to miss. He shot forward and swerved towards him, making all of his friends on the wall howl with laughter. Ines, being very devout was horrified, but the priest hadn’t noticed Luiz’s swerve and just waved cheerily as he carried on along the road. Ines breathed a sigh of relief and Luiz gave him a cheery wave then muttered rude things about the church, making Ines and Luiza wince. With the vision of all the old men on the wall making crude gestures at Luiz in the back window and their rowdy comic abuse fading we turned from the main street to begin our near vertical journey up to Queguas.

The little car chugged upwards almost pausing for breath as Luiz tried to change gears, dealing with the incredibly steepness and the twists and turns of the narrow road as it wound up and up. After about ten minutes the road flattened a bit and we saw a sign of a pair of binoculars in a sort of lay-by, a place for tourists to get a good view of the town. Luiz swerved over and stopped the car, let’s look at the view he said, flinging open his door so that it stood open on its little leather strap hinges. We all burst out of the car, grateful of the opportunity to stretch our folded limbs and walked over to the rocky edge. Below us was the most incredible view Entrimo. At this height it was just a toy village. The sun was bright and clear so we could see everything really clearly. It was strange seeing a view and actually
knowing the place. We could see all the shops and houses along the liquorice strip of road. We could make out the park with the swings outside the fruit shop and there, the huge slab of concrete that was the hotel Don Pepe. Our eyes picked out the stacks of brightly coloured plastic chairs behind Bar Estrella and we could see the bright yellow sign above Paquita’s supermarket. Behind the main street were the houses we all knew so well. Those near the main street and others, like our pueblo. After much arguing with Ines about which roof was which, Luiz pointed to their house and Benita and Luiza’s next door. We could see even further, beyond the houses to the big reservoir in the flooded river valley as it headed towards the hydroelectric plant on the border with Portugal. The view was amazing, everything was there and the little toy-town of Entrimo looked just as if it was sitting in the folds of fabric of a skirt on the lap of the gigantic mountains across the valley.

Back in the car we continued to climb, the gears wheezing and gasping, but luckily each really steep bit of road was followed by a short stretch on the flat, which gave the car a chance to recover. We were almost in Queguas when a flock of goats appeared on the road, their bells jingle, jingle, jingling. Luiz slowed as the goats fanned out around the front of the car and their sweet smell filled the car. The goat man walked towards us like someone from another era wearing dark clothes and a piece of black, whiskery fabric draped around his shoulders like a cape and tied at the neck with lengths of string. He stopped to speak to Luiz, although it didn’t sound as if he was one of Luiz’s friends, far too sombre for that. But he was interested to know what we were doing near his pueblo and Luiz explained that he was going for a walk in Queguas, with his foreign neighbours. This seemed to satisfy Mr Goat and he bid us ‘buenos tardes’ and wandered past the car to catch up with his goats.

We rounded the last bend and saw the pueblo ahead of us, and as so often seemed to be the way, there was a pile of old household rubbish just tipped on the side of the road, rusty fridges, cookers and dirty mattresses, in amongst the tress and wild flowers. How could people do that? All this wonderful scenery, spectacular nature and local people just dumped
their rubbish on it. Recently we’d asked Sandra about it, having seen piles of rubbish in pueblos so often and she had shaken her head and explained that there was no need for people to do it, anyone could ring the council and have anything taken away, it didn’t cost anything. They could even leave it by the big rubbish bins and it would be collected. But old people were stuck in their ways and didn’t think to contact anyone. The Parque Natural wasn’t happy about it either, the whole of Entrimo and Lobios was actually in the Parque and since there was a system for dealing with rubbish, they were thinking of prosecuting people. But since the main culprits were older people, the situation was ‘dificil’.

We passed the illegal rubbish heap and trundled on towards the pueblo where a row of maybe six houses, stood by the side of the road. Then the road stopped. It just ran out and there was nothing in front of us apart from green hillside. The six houses looked sort of newish, maybe twenty years old and were exactly like all other houses we’d seen of the same era. Modelled on the traditional houses with the living space upstairs and instead of animal accommodation, there was now a garage underneath. Unlike the traditional stone houses these newer ones were made from concrete and block, then painted white or clad in marble. They were charmless, bulky big places at the stage in their lives when they really needed a bit of a do-over. But the feeling they gave off was that no one cared enough to do that, they were sad and neglected, not really rooted in the history of the place. An odd start to our visit, but Luiz drove past the sad houses and turned off the engine, the car coasted to a halt by bumping into the kerb at the end of the road. Surely Queguas couldn’t consist of six houses, could it? We were wondering about this as Luiz levered himself out of the driving seat and immediately disappeared up the side of the last house. As we got out, Ines explained that this was the ‘new’ part of the pueblo and that the real Queguas was behind these houses, further up the mountain.

We followed Luiz and rounded the last of the sad houses where we saw a cobbled track rising steadily with old stone houses on one side. There was Luiz, leaning against the third house,
already chatting to an old man who was sitting on a kitchen chair outside his front door.

Luiz introduced us and we all shook hands, we tried to understand what Luiz was saying as he explained about the passeo and told the man that we were foreign, English even! That we had the idea of maybe buying some land, renovating an old house, the old man nodded, and began telling Luiz about the patches of land he owned and saying it was what Queguas needed, new people, the place was almost empty now. Luiz and the man chatted on and it was a little while before he felt he could leave and start our walk. Finally, we set off and he explained what the old man had been saying, telling us that most of the conversation had been about his health, how he was quite ill and seemed to spend a lot of time at the hospital in Ourense. They had spoken of how sad it was these days in Queguas, with hardly anyone living there, maybe only three or four families. Obviously in the summer it would be different when everyone came home, but through the year the place was virtually abandoned. Younger people had left to go to work in the cities and older people, needing someone around to help them, had mostly gone to Ourense, to be near family and of course, the hospital.

There was definitely an air of sadness about the place as if its best days had gone and certainly as we walked past the first few houses we started to get a feeling for the past. The cobbled track was the first sign, Ines pointed out the deep grooves at the sides where the stones were worn lower. These grooves had been made by the wheels of donkey carts, going back and forth from the village to the hillside, with straw and hay for the animals and food from the vegetable plots. Queguas, like all of the mountain pueblos always had lots of goats, the land being rocky and not the best for growing crops, goats liked that kind of place. With animals there was inevitably lots of coming and going, taking the animals up to new pastures, bringing them back down again. Although maybe we would see some of the animal shelters where the goats were herded to at night. The goatherds slept there too, especially through the summer when the days were longer, the animals spent all their time out on the hillside. People in the mountain pueblos had to make the most of the good weather, they had
to wait the longest for the spring to arrive, but winter came to them first. Ines laughed, she said it was always easy to spot the cars belonging to the mountain people in the winter. Theirs were the ones outside the Estrella, covered in snow first thing in the morning, when down in town there hadn’t been even a flake. It was hard for us to imagine any sort of cold weather as we walked on under the hot sun. We arrived at the last building in the pueblo and it was wonderful. It was the most perfect example of the traditional rural house. Well, if you closed one eye. It was falling down now, its wooden doors hanging off their hinges, no glass in the windows. Everything seemed to be sagging, sinking into the ground. But it was amazing, it looked like it was squatting low behind the enclosing stone wall. Crouching closest to the ground was animal housing and above, the living space. There were the remains of a straw roof, the first one we’d ever seen. The wooden balcony was rotten and hanging down in the middle. The straw was slipping off the roof, making the house look as if it was having a bad hair day, its fringe out of control and dangling in its window eyes. Unlike a thatched roof, this appeared to be simple lengths of straw laid on top of each other, held in place now by planks of wood and rocks. Luiz told us that in the past there was some sort of weaving of the straw which was then pinned together but neither he nor Luiza or Ines could remember how this had worked, while they all agreed there had been plenty of straw roofs. Luiz pointed to something else made of straw in a corner of the yard, it looked like a little hat, straw stalks gathered together and fanned out over something. We walked round to where Luiz was pointing and saw that it was a beehive. A hollowed out tree stump with the straw-hat thing on top and bees buzzing all around. Luiz pointed to a hole in the tree stump where the bees were coming and going. ‘Corcho’, cork, he said, the stump wasn’t a tree stump, just the cork, peeled from the outside of the tree. Well, that was amazing, so beautifully simple and so part of the place. Ines was reminiscing over honey combs that she’d seen her aunts pull out of similar hives, yes, this was the way honey was produced in the past, everyone had a couple these on their land, people depended on it.
The old house was the last building in the village, but that didn’t seem to be the reason for
the faraway feeling about it. Unlike the other houses which were all modernised to greater or
lesser extents, this one was completely untouched, as if the owners had popped out thirty
years ago and no one was sure when they’d be back. The atmosphere around the place was
affected by it, there was stillness and preoccupation that seemed to hang in the air, it wasn’t
a sad place it was just as if the house was fading into the past. It was fascinating for us to see
it, a little window on what had been because there was nothing like it around our pueblo or
in downtown Entrimo. This was the first time we had seen somewhere which showed us
what the past had looked like.

Luiz had walked on and called us to catch up. Ines, Luiza, Phil and I had been busy in our
own worlds, standing with our arms resting on top of the stone wall around the old house,
looking into the yard. Having been suddenly woken from our dreams we hurried on to where
Luiz was standing further up the track with water rushing around is feet. Once we were all
there, Ines began undoing the flap on her bag and dug out the little cups. Luiz pointed to the
rocks at the side of the track from where water was gushing. There had been a little gully for
it to run into, but it was full of grass now, making the water pour onto the track. This
had been the source of water for the whole village, Ines explained, people would be up and down
to this spring all day long with their water jugs. Now, people had mains water from the
reservoir in their houses, making washing and cooking so much easier. But no one would
drink that water, those who still lived in the pueblo would drink only this because mountain
spring water was the best water to drink. Actually, in all the heat we were feeling thirsty and
the little cups of ice cold water were just what we needed, we all stood gulping it down. Luiz
was talking and laughing with Ines, pointing to an old shed just below us. He explained to us
that when he was a young man he and some friends had been in a band, he played the
clarinet while his friends played accordion, trumpet and drums. Throughout the summer
they had a marvellous time, going to different pueblos, like Queguas and play for the fiesta.
Being only about fourteen or fifteen at the time, they didn’t mind the all walking. They had
no vehicle and there were no roads, just tracks so they walked everywhere to play, enjoy the fiesta and earn some money. Queguas wasn’t so far away from their home pueblo of Grou, just across the valley, and they had walked here one summer evening all the way down on their side of the valley, then across the river because it was low in the summer, then they climbed up this side. They had played outside the big shed, which, for some reason we couldn’t fathom, had been at the centre of the pueblo. It was so hard to imagine what everyday life must have been like back then and on the special night of the fiesta, with all the noise and people. We tried hard to picture Luiz and friends with their musical instruments amongst the crowds of people, intent on a good night out. The wine flowing, were people dancing? Luiz and Ines said of course, everyone was there, dancing and having fun. The fiesta was the most exciting time of the year when all the young people got to meet others from different pueblos. Ines reminded Luiz that it wasn’t just a big party, however much he liked to think so, there was the church procession too. Of course, the reason for the fiesta was to celebrate the saint of the pueblo, thinking of this we looked around but couldn’t see a church. Luiz pointed up the track, the church in Queguas was shared with the next pueblo so was sort of half way between both, that was where we were going, along the track to the church. With that Luiz set off, leaving us to drain our cups.

He may have been seventy years old and the heat of late afternoon was still quite intense but Luiz was way out in front of us all the way up the next part of the track. Luiza and Ines were behind us, keeping each other company and walking at a steady pace. Luiz called out to us to come and see the river, so we quickened our pace and arrived at where he was standing just beyond a bit of hedge jutting out onto the track. The track, no longer cobbles, but rocks with clumps of grass, wasn’t as clear as it had been when we set out. Maybe not many people used it now so the bushes had grown across and the water from the river had washed away some of the soil, leaving the rocks of the path sticking up. We walked on while Luiz talked about the little church we were going to see, he said it was the smallest in the whole of Entrimo but that while it was definitely small, it was in the most beautiful setting. I wondered about all
the people who used to go to the church every Sunday and maybe more often, if Luiza and
Ines were typical churchgoers, sometimes Luiza went to the church in town more than once a
day. I was trying to imagine people coming along this track that often, but couldn’t. Life
would have been tough enough in those days, without walking all this way everyday too. We
continued steadily up the track with Luiz, then stopped for a rest and to wait for Ines and
Luiza to catch up. Leaning on the stone wall at one side of the track, Luiz asked us about
living in Queguas, what did we think?

Phil was the one who had begun compiling the list of requirements for our perfect spot,
everything from the size of the plot and the type of soil to where the sun rose, spring water,
distance from the town, and so on. There were many things in Queguas favour, although the
ideal place for us to live would have been outside the pueblo itself, somewhere along the
track where there was land, but we hadn’t seen any houses yet. It was interesting, thinking
about living along the track, especially since the only access was on foot. Getting to the little
church or anywhere beyond where Luiz had parked the car, meant walking because there
was no road. An odd thought, quite interesting in many ways, if there had been a house, we
would have found it easier to imagine. Ines and Luiza arrived, joining in our discussions,
Luiza was wondering who owned the land around the track. It looked different from what we
were used to in our pueblo, with much bigger pieces, divided by stone walls. At that moment
there was the clumping of hooves and the dull clanking of bells from up ahead and slowly
three big brown cows lumbered into view, their hooves clattering on the rocky path, and the
gigantic metal bells around their necks jingling in a deep resonant way as they slowly came
towards us. They had very long horns, beautiful brown eyes and their afternoon passeo had
just become much more interesting.

The cows weren’t alone, there was a man who was moving them to a different field, but he
was as interested in seeing our little group as the cows were and stopped briefly to speak with
Luiz. The cows took advantage of this moment and came close to have a look at us, their
dribbley muzzles working their way over our outstretched hands. Cows are always so smooth 
and soft, and these ones didn’t mind us stroking them. They wagged their heads to keep the 
flies away and their big horns twisted from right to left and their bells jangled. Soon the man 
finished chatting to Luiz and was ready to go so he gave a little shout and tapped one of the 
cows on the rump to get it moving. The cows clattered away moving back to the track and 
continuing on their way down while we set off again up the track. How much further could it 
be? We walked up and up before we finally reached the top of the track and were very 
pleased to see it start sloping downwards towards the little church below us, sitting on its 
own in a quiet grassy field.

The church really was tiny and only a little bit wider than its front door. We couldn’t go 
inside because it was locked but we could see through the little windows. Three rows of 
pews, a simple altar and the statue of the Madonna. It looked very cool and peaceful inside, 
actually it was nice outside too, the sun had moved round slightly and the low wall either side 
of the footpath to the church door was in shade as we all sat down for a rest. Luiza produced 
her biscuits and Ines her chocolate, it was picnic time and a chance to recover from the long 
haul up from the pueblo. We couldn’t see any other buildings or hear anyone, the land 
behind the church sloped down towards the valley bottom and we could see the other side 
where Luiz’s home pueblo of Grou began. But there were no houses or roads, we were the 
only people around, although it was possible to hear a distant dog barking somewhere along 
the valley. Nowhere in Galicia were you so far away from civilisation that you couldn’t hear a 
dog barking.

There were some tall chestnut trees about fifty metres from the front of the church and once 
we’d all eaten squares of slightly melted chocolate, held between two of Luiza’s biscuits. Ines 
rummaged in her bag and pulled out the little cups again and getting up, she beckoned us to 
follow her towards the trees where we began to hear water trickling over rock. Looking 
around we knew there was another spring somewhere. Ines pointed to a clump of bushes
and there it was. Fresh, cold water pouring out of the rock. We drank and then filled the cups to take back to Luiza and Luiz who were still sitting on the wall. We’d see so much and the experience had helped us imagine what living in a pueblo high above town would be like, although we hadn’t seen the right kind of spot for us. Queguas, might be the highest pueblo, said Luiz, but the pueblo of Olelas was high too and the most distant. It was almost twelve kilometres from the centre of town, right on the edge of Spain looking over at Portugal. Ines shivered at the mention of Olelas, ‘El fin de mundo’ she said. The end of the world. We made a mental note of the name Olelas and immediately knew it was somewhere we had to visit. The end of the world, it sounded fascinating already.

Luiz was ready to walk back down now that he had refuelled on chocolate. He leapt up from the low wall and laughed at us as we dragged ourselves upright. At least it was all downhill to the car he said, and set off at his usual cracking speed while we all got into our stride behind him, it was comfortably cooler now. The sun had moved lower in the early evening sky, making the colour of stone walls and houses softer and more mellow. Even the ugly houses at the beginning part of the pueblo looked almost acceptable in this light as we arrived back and set off back down to the pueblo. The car managed to stick to the road, even though it seemed as if we might shoot over the side on some of the sharper bends. We came down the final stretch of road behind the church and football pitch, waited at the junction with the main road then Luiz shot across, turned left and headed towards the little open-air café at the top of the market square. He switched the engine off, slowed down and drove towards the kerb where the car bumped to a stop. ‘Ice cream!’ Luiz shouted and scrambled out of the car. Ines and Luiza were smiling at the sight of Luiz trotting towards the café, we all squeezed out of the car and followed him over to the tables under the huge plane trees.

This was definitely the life. A warm evening at the outdoor café, sitting under the trees hung with coloured lights, just the kind of image we had conjured up when we were waiting to sell our house in Yorkshire. A place where people sat outside through the evening and enjoyed
the good weather while drinking coffee, eating ice cream chatting with friends, and here we were doing just that. We’d come a long way since setting off in the rain last winter, now we had the sense that we had reached a new stage in our journey, we had settled into life in the pueblo and were beginning to feel we could become a part of the place. Whether it was the heat, the tiredness after the long walk or that fact that we had been up a mountain in Luiz’s crazy little car and survived, we didn’t know but it certainly felt good.

Arriving back home we were tired and hungry, I went straight to the kitchen to get supper started, maybe pasta with some of Luiza’s tomato sauce when I realised something wasn’t right. Sardina hadn’t come to meet us when we came in. I suddenly remembered that he hadn’t been looking well before we left and hurried to the bedroom to see him looking floppy and dejected. He looked up at us with big sad eyes, not raising his head. He looked hot and nothing like his usual self. Phil went to get some water and a plastic syringe from the kitchen, Sardina definitely looked a bit dehydrated, his fur was all flat and greasy. I sat stroking him, waiting for Phil to come back. Sardina didn’t seem to mind Phil squirting water into his mouth, perhaps he’d felt thirsty but didn’t want to get up and go to the kitchen. At least he was drinking and that was good. We knew that cats could last a day or two without food, but not without water. I stroked Sardina and wondering what to do. There was a vet in the next small town, Bande, which was about thirty kilometres away but it would probably be closed by the time we got there. We’d have to wait until the morning, at least Sardina had drunk water, if we could make sure we gave him more through the evening he’d be OK and we could go to Bande in the morning. Phil sat, stroking and talking to Sardina while I went to the kitchen to make our supper. We offered Sardina some food, but he wasn’t interested, he just wanted to lie on the bed. After we’d eaten our supper and cleared away, it was film time so Phil got out the laptop and began plugging it in and connecting it to the speakers of the CD player. It was dark outside now and since we were going to be watching a film in the living room and didn’t want to leave Sardina alone in the bedroom, I made him a cosy bed on one of the folding chairs then went and to fetch him. He
seemed to like being on the chair, he snuggled down when the film started, understanding this ritual. I’d made us our usual pot of tea and brought it into the living room on a tray then popped back to the kitchen to get a bar of chocolate, returning to sit down as the film began. Phil unwrapped the chocolate and we noticed a change in Sardina, he lifted his head and began sniffing the air, he sniffed harder and stood up on his bed. Once he’d located where the chocolaty smell was coming from he launched himself onto Phil’s lap and tried to help himself to the bar of chocolate. This, from the cat who had been lying like a limp piece of fur fabric all day. Now he was brought back from the brink by chocolate. Phil broke off a square and then nibbled a small piece off for Sardina, offering it to him on his hand. Sardina was ecstatic and wolfed down the little piece, vigorously licking Phil’s palm for all traces before crazily scrabbling about for more. We’d never seen anything like it, we’d had cats who were wild about eggs or cheese but not crazy like this, there was no stopping him, he really wanted that chocolate. We gave him a few more little pieces, not sure if it was wise to give him much, but since he was so keen and he had looked so sad, we didn’t think it could do much harm. After he’d had about a square, he seemed to be happy and began washing himself, another good sign, then, when he’d had a thorough clean up, he jumped down off the chair and squeezed out through the living room door into the hallway. I followed, maybe Sardina was thinking about going outside, but instead of going towards the door, he trotted to the kitchen. He went straight over to the water bowl and had a long drink then to his food bowl where he crouched down and tucked in to the dried food as if he hadn’t been sad and ill all day long. He was his usual self, scoffing down the food, concentrating hard on emptying the bowl. Then he stood up, stretched and came across to me for a little cuddle. He looked completely normal, just like his usual self. Maybe he’d want to go out now. I stood up and put him down on the kitchen floor. I expected him to trot towards the front door, but he didn’t. He ran towards the fridge and looked back at me, then at the fridge. His usual way of saying ‘have a look and see if there’s any fish in there would you?’ It was wonderful that Sardina had recovered so quickly, even though we couldn’t understand why. But, maybe keeping a bar of emergency chocolate was something to add to our cat first aid box.
Next day Ramon called, we had been meeting up regularly since our first get together and even though we lived some distance apart we still managed. Would we like to come over for lunch the following day? He had some new organic produce we might be interested in, olive oil, dried figs, oats and honey. All morning Sardina was his usual self, scoffing down two breakfasts and excitedly trotting in with Cynthia when she called round to show us a drawing she’d done and to tell us she had seen some big lorries arriving in the market square. She thought maybe the fiesta was starting to arrive, but since we had no idea what the arrival of the fiesta would look like, we could only guess. I told her I’d have a look when I went up to the supermarket later and see if there was anything happening. Phil went round to the garden to have a look at the vegetables and see if he could find Luiza to ask her about watering. We were starting to understand that having a garden in a hot climate was a complex matter, especially when the garden was far away from the house. Watering the Spanish way, was a completely new experience for us.

Phil had found Luiza and apparently she was going to be watering that day from the big tank about four kilometres away, we could go with her after lunch to see how it all worked. Meanwhile I prepared to scoot up to the supermarket and inspect what was going on in the Market Square. I walked up from our pueblo and along the lower road to town where I noticed even more houses open now and lots more cars with number plates which indicated they were from faraway places, like Barcelona or Madrid. In fact the quiet little road I had got used to walking along was completely changed. I didn’t see any of my usual friends, the older people who were like clockwork, going shopping or to the doctor, walking up to the pharmacy or coming back from feeding their hens. The newly opened houses seemed bulging with life, the windows were open and I could hear people talking loudly, babies crying, doors were flung open, the contents of car boots being relayed into houses there were children skipping about. Entrimo had swung into holiday mood. I arrived at the market square and crossed to the post office and saw the trucks Cynthia had seen. They certainly were big and nothing like anything I’d seen before. I’d asked Pedro in the post office about
them and he said yes, they were for the fiesta. Later that afternoon or maybe tomorrow the men would begin setting up the stage and all their technical equipment like the lighting and sound stuff was inside. It was all very organised these days he said.

So Cynthia had been right. The fiesta was arriving and other things fiesta related had begun too. I came out of the post office to see the two men who usually spent most of the day sweeping up stray leaves, trying to hang bunting. They were under the big trees near the open-air café, dragging stepladders around while holding on to the end of the bunting, hoping to tie it around a tree. The bunting drooped across the tables and chairs of the café, refusing to be pulled up. The men were being a bit half-hearted about the job, cigarettes dangled from their lips while they tried to fend off unhelpful comments from all the old men who were sitting like birds along the wall outside the library. Even the numbers of old men had grown, could it be that they came back to Entrimo for their holidays and spent their time sitting on the wall with their old friends. Yes, I thought that sounded about right.

I left the scene of bunting confusion and headed to Paquita’s supermarket, usually an oasis of calm. Not today, there were shoppers all over the place, there were even queues at the cheese and cooked meat counter, shocking. Honestly, it had been so long since I’d been in a crowded shop it seemed bizarre having to share Paquita’s attention with others. There were people blocking up the little aisles, cluttering up the vegetable section and deliberating at the freezers. Paquita herself looked flustered at the checkout, while Ceferino was dashing about behind the cigarette counter. I quickly found Sardina’s food and the one or two other things I needed and paid Paquita. She smiled and rolled her eyes, the fiesta! But it would be fine later, Muncho, her son was coming after lunch and he’d be staying to help out, thank goodness. I left the supermarket and set off back home, full of information for Cynthia.

After lunch we met Luiza to discover more about this weird watering thing that fascinated us, we’d seen the gullies which looked like deep gutters running into our pueblo and alongside
the street in town. We’d also seen the water when it was running which was spectacular, it came like a torrent. We couldn’t imagine the power of that water being let loose on anyone’s vegetable plot, surely there was a way to slow it down. There definitely had to be a technique to all this. We set off with Luiz and she began explaining about how the water was shared out amongst the local growers. There were complex arrangements made in each pueblo about who could use it when, and each year someone was in charge of co-ordinating it all. This year it was Rosa, the mother of Mrs Electrician, I made a mental note to stay well clear of her, just in case she was anything like her daughter. Yesterday Luiza had spoken to Rosa and arranged a time for when she could use the water and that turned out to be this evening. What she had to do now was walk the route of the water, making sure that all the gullies were clear and that any forks, which diverted the water to someone else, were closed off. This was done with either a shovelful of earth, or for bigger gaps, some bits of rag and rocks.

We crossed the next road and Luiza pointed to the deep gully running alongside the road. This was where the water would run, so we followed it through the next pueblo, a place we hadn’t been before so inevitably everyone we met asked Luiza who we were. Once we were out of earshot Luiza gave us the low-down on everyone. Who they were related to, where they lived and things. On we went, following the gully and walking up to the top of this pueblo and into a small forest. We walked through the trees and across some open grassland. Finally, we came to a huge concrete tank like a big, mossy swimming pool, which appeared to have been built in the middle of nowhere. How odd was that? We all looked over the side at the slimy green walls and the metre deep level of the water in the bottom. Luiza explained that someone else had used it this morning and that now it was filling from the river, further up. She pointed to a stone bung in the wall of the tank, near our feet. Pulling it out would let the water run into the gully, which at this point just looked like a natural stream trickling into the trees. Luiza picked a bunch of the reeds, which were growing all around and put them on the wall of the tank under a heavy stone to stop them blowing away. She explained that if anyone came along and thought they’d just use the
water, they would know that someone else had been here and was filling the tank for themselves, so they shouldn’t use it. Did that happen we asked? Wasn’t Rosa in charge of who used it when? Well, yes she was, but sometimes people didn’t use it when they had arranged to, or didn’t need a whole tank so let a neighbour have it or sometimes the older people just used it when they felt like it. There could be confusion. That seemed an understatement. I was pondering the empty tank when I heard Phil suggesting to Luiza that he and I came back later to un-bung the tank for her. I just knew his fascination with water would be too strong to miss pulling the bung out of several thousands of litres of water.

Later that afternoon, Cynthia popped round with a packet of little croissants her Mum had given her and being our chum, she thought she’d bring them round to share. I made some tea and carried it on a tray to the living room, where we opened the packet of little croissants and tipped them onto a plate. Sardina, who had arrived having heard Cynthia’s voice, was suddenly very attentive, sniffing the air, his sugar antenna on high alert as he started moving towards the plate of croissants on the table. Cynthia thought it was hilarious and broke a little croissant in half, offering Sardina a piece. He fiercely pulled it away from her and quickly gobbled it down, before immediately looking around for more.

We drank our tea and enjoyed the little croissants and asked Cynthia about the fiesta. She told us about the music and said that some people danced. There were other things too, which we pressed her to explain but she couldn’t, she just said there were things, toys and stuff. We’d have to wait and see. Tomorrow was the first of the three-day event, which began at nine o’clock in the evening with folk dancing from various countries. Then there was music from what the posters described as ‘orchestras’, but judging by their publicity shots, looked rather more like Eurovision song contest bands than classical musicians. It was strange not understanding anything about the fiesta and it being such a big part of the summer in Entrimo. But, once this week was over, we’d know as much about it as everyone else.
That evening at about seven o’clock we checked with Luiza that she was ready for watering and then set off on our walk. We left the pueblo and crossed the road, to begin following the gully. On our walk through the other pueblos we saw all the summer families enjoying their holidays in the mountains. Some people were preparing barbecues in their gardens, there were children still playing in the big plastic swimming pool and other families, sitting outside under parasols it all looked like the perfect stuff of holidays. We called ‘buenos tardes’ to everyone we passed and they called back to us.

Soon we were there up in the quiet of the forest and approaching the tank. The sun was lower now and the air was filled with the sweet, damp smell of earthy. There were lots of little insects flying around, I just hoped none of them were mosquitoes waiting just for me. We reached the wall of the tank and peered over, this time the water was really high, maybe only a metre from the top. There must have been gallons and gallons of water there. Phil looked down at the bung and prepared to pull it out, having no idea if the water would trickle or gush out. He pulled, the bung popped out and the water came splashing out at a tremendous rate. It rushed through the first section of gully and ran into the forest. We imagined at that speed it would be with Luiza in a few seconds. Phil suggested I go straight back and let her know it was coming, while he walked the route, making sure it didn’t stop or divert off anywhere. I set off along the quicker route going straight down to the last pueblo. I looked in the gullies as I passed them, but there was no water. I couldn’t understand why.

I dashed back to find Luiza, who was calmly drying dishes in the kitchen, and told her that the bung was out and the water was coming, she said fine, it wouldn’t arrive for about ten minutes yet. I was so amazed, how could it take that long? The speed of the water pouring out of the tank and into the first gully was like a torrent. I just couldn’t imagine it taking so long to get to the pueblo. I hung around waiting, looking at all the prepared beds in Luiza’s garden where she had dug troughs for the water to run into. It was definitely an art form, working out how to get the speeding water to all parts of the plot before it ran out. Luiza
and Santiago were ready. Wellies on and satchos in hands, just as the gurgling of water could be heard coming down the road into the pueblo. Suddenly the water burst through the pipe at the top of the plot and Santiago got going straight away, steering the water to the furthest side to slow it down, while letting trickles run on to some of the beds. Once the water arrived at the far end, Luiza steered it up and down the potato beds, along by the beans and peas, then across to the onions. A nice big soaking for the pumpkins and tomatoes, Luiza made little dams of soil to make the water linger around the plants that needed the most. The evening air was full of the sounds water splashing and the scrap of the satchos on the ground, blocking and moving the water around. Phil arrived, back from the tank in time to see the water flowing around the plots and was amazed to hear I’d got back ten minutes before the water. Soon, Santiago set off back up to the tank to put the bung back in and let the tank fill over night. It was dark now and the air held one of the best scents in the world. Warm, damp soil, we could almost hear the plants drinking up the water, restoring themselves after a day in the scorching sun. We said 'buenos noches' to Luiza and walked back round the corner to our house. The quietness of Luiza’s garden began slipping away as we approached Cynthia’s house. Here the night was but young, the noise of the television and the bright light of the kitchen spilled out on to the little road, voices of Cynthia’s family and the smell of cooking drifted out of the open door. We passed by and happily arrived at our gate. There was Sardina, lying on the wall. He got up, stretched his legs and jumped down ready for his supper. Or was it his second supper now?

Next day we were on our way to visit Ramon for lunch, it was a different route going to his house from Entrimo rather than the one we’d got used to from Allariz, much more mountainous and round incredible bends. We were relived to arrive and see Asterix, bounding towards us, barking crazily. As usual he nearly knocked us off our feet by jumping up with excitement and Ramon appeared and called Asterix, trying to get him to calm down. Eventually, by the time Ramon was almost hoarse with shouting, Asterix gave in. He stopped jumping up at us and reluctantly turned his attention to chasing the innocent
pigeons that had gathered nearby. We squeezed through the little wooden gate at the bottom of the steps and walked to the balcony. Ramon greeted us and told us to have a seat at the table while he just dashed back to the kitchen. He disappeared just at the same time as his lovely black and white cat appeared. She looked as thin as before, but this time not just because Ramon didn’t give her enough food, she meowed and walked towards us, ready to jump up onto a lap for some attention, then behind her came her new family, four black and white kittens. They were incredibly sweet, tumbling over each other, playing with anything they came across, bits of string, the netting of the bags of corncobs, Ramon’s bootlaces. Then they began squeaking for their mother. She couldn’t have been less interested, having launched herself on to Phil’s knee for a bit of ‘me time’.

Ramon reappeared and looked and the cat, his hands on his hips. ‘Look after your babies’ he told the cat, but she just rolled over, ready for Phil to tickle her tummy. Ramon shook his head, now the kittens were a bit bigger she had lost interest in them, she didn’t want to lie around feeding them, she wanted to get back to her usual life. Uncharacteristically Ramon went and brought a plate of food for the cat and she, obviously surprised at this, leapt down before he changed his mind. The kittens followed her, eating a little themselves but really hoping their mother would lie down somewhere so that they could have a feed. It was lovely and sunny on the balcony and so different from when we were there the first time in the chilly spring sunshine. The cat finished the plate of food and was settling down for a wash on a sack in the corner of the balcony, the kittens seizing their moment clambered over their mother and settled down to their lunch. They all looked so sweet, Ramon’s cat dozing in the heat and the kittens, fast asleep, draped over their mother’s tummy. Ramon returned from the kitchen, saying lunch was almost ready. He spread a bright tablecloth over the table then disappeared back to the kitchen to bring things through to the table, first a big jug of flowers for the centre of the table and another of spring water for us to drink. Then a huge vegetable crumble, bubbling and golden with lots of nuts and seeds on the top. There was a massive bowl of leafy salad from his garden, which was full of lettuce, rocket, endives and purple
salad leaves with borage and nasturtium flowers. As a side dish there was potato salad with chives and parsley as well as a big plate of sliced tomatoes with onion rings, drizzled in olive oil. As if this wasn’t feast enough, Ramon then produced a wonderful, crispy loaf, telling us he’d baked the bread but he wasn’t sure how it had turned out.

We chatted with Ramon about his work and he asked us how we were getting on in Entrimo. We told him some of our stories about life in the pueblo and of our walk to Queguas with Luiz, Ines and Luiza. Ramon thought it was funny, us going out with our older neighbours but it seemed quite normal to us, after all, they’d become our friends. Ramon said he couldn’t imagine going anywhere with his neighbours, he preferred to stay out of their way since they were always trying to tell him what to do and didn’t understand about organic gardening. Phil asked Ramon about the communal watering system, to which Ramon rolled his eyes. It was a nightmare, there was no end of arguments each year, someone always took more than their share, other people felt they missed out and were always upset and it took all winter for tempers to cool and for people to become friends again. Just in time for it to start all over again. Phil said he’s already added to his list of ‘perfect house’ criteria, no shared water.

After yet more home cooking from Ramon’s kitchen and cups of tea, we got ready to leave. Phil was kneeling next to the kittens, obviously worrying about what was to become of them under Ramon’s feeding regime. Maybe we should take one, it could be a friend for Sardina, what did I think? Plainly I didn’t need to be asked twice about adopting a kitten, the question was, which one? All four looked cute, but one of them had a funny expression, his eyes and ears seemed too big for his head and he wasn’t the strongest of the litter, maybe we should have him because he looked a bit weedy, that way he’d definitely survive. Ramon thought we were mad, but went downstairs to find a box to put the kitten in. Since we were the only English people he’d ever met, he was getting the impression that all English people were a bit mad about animals, especially cats.
Sardina was waiting as ever when we arrived, where had we been all day? Didn’t we know he was a growing kitten and needed his five or six square meals a day? Thinking about the volume of food Sardina ate, I wondered what Ramon would have to say, probably that we were spoiling him or ruining a good mouser by giving him too much affection and food. Well, Sardina was the boss, if he wanted food, he knew he’d get it and if he killed things, which he did far too regularly for our tastes, he always brought whatever it was to show us. Whatever. His diet didn’t seem to deter his natural instincts. He galloped up the steps and as usual, raced us to the top so that he could be first to squeeze through the door and rush to the kitchen. Phil took the kitten in his box to the workroom, where he could adjust to being in one quiet space, without Sardina’s help, while I gave our lad his much-needed supper. He was such a funny cat, everything he did seem to be full of his own personality, even eating. No cat-like nibbling for him, he opened his mouth wide and bit great mouthfuls of food, and then just gulped them down, sometimes he even bit the side of the bowl, I could hear the sound of teeth on earthenware. And he never left his bowl until it was completely empty, he licked it thoroughly, making sure he hadn’t left the tiniest little bit of food anywhere, pushing it around the floor, looking for stray bits. Even then he hung around to see if there was anything else coming his way. I’m sure he could have wolfed down another dish straight away, but I thought it was best to let one lot go down first, just to make sure he wasn’t going to be sick.

Once Sardina was occupied, I went and found his little blanket and took it, along with a bowl of food and some water, to the workroom. I opened the door slowly and saw Phil lying on his stomach half under the bed and guessed where the kitten was. We put the food down near the empty box, the little blanket inside and looked under the bed. There were the huge eyes and the big ears, in the far corner. If this kitten was anything like his mother, he wouldn’t be able to resist the smell of food. I leaned under the bed and spoke quietly to the kitten who just sat there, blinking. He was frightened so we’d leave him to settle down and eat his food by himself, I was sure he’d be fine later. We came out of the workroom and closed the door,
it was almost time for us to leave for the fiesta so we dashed about getting ready and wondered about leaving Sardina inside or letting him go out, since there were going to be fireworks at the fiesta. While we were deliberating Sardina ran outside, making his own decision, he was in high spirits, maybe he’d got caught up in fiesta fever. Anyway, we weren’t so near town that the fireworks would be too frightening. Sardina jumped up onto the wall, between us and Benita’s garden-next-door then disappeared under her trees.

We arrived at the market place where we could see a total transformation had taken place. Not only were there people absolutely everywhere, but the strange, semicircular steps near the post office were packed with people sitting on them, making the place into an amphitheatre, facing a newly erected stage. The huge truck was still there but now its side was open up to reveal a huge generator and masses of complicated technical stuff. There were tall towers of stage lighting, busy people rushing around and another bunch sitting behind a computer desk out in front, controlling the sound and lights. We were gazing around, trying to take everything in when we saw Ines and Luiz waving and calling us to come over, they were pointing to a little gap nearby. Luiz was in high spirits, calling out to his cronies and it seemed everyone was waving to each other and pointing out friends and neighbours in the audience. The evening light was fading quickly now, the sun sinking behind the white mountains of Portugal. The stage, the people and everything had its own majestic backdrop of the silent, spectacular mountains. The absolute constant to life in Entrimo, those huge pieces of nature. They were our reference point. We were tiny and they were huge, a perfect illustration of the true relationship between humans to the natural world whatever else we liked to think.

The sun slowly slipped down behind the peaks and the silhouette of the mountains lingered for just a moment then disappeared as the sun faded completely. Suddenly the lights dimmed and left just a spotlight on the speaker as she welcomed everyone and said lots of stuff we couldn’t understand about dancers from many different countries and that the
evening would begin with the Gaitas band of Entrimo. The crowd erupted, everyone was so proud of the local band, Luiz leaned over and told us they were the youngest group in the region but they were amongst the best. The woman left the lectern and the spotlight faded as the sound of pipes could be heard in the darkness. Silence fell over the audience, the curtain at the back of the stage parted and lifted to reveal about twenty silhouettes of the gaitas, standing completely still as the haunting sound of a lone piper echoed out over the audience. This was stunning, we’d heard the gaitas practising, because they rehearsed in the school nearby on Saturday afternoons, but we hadn’t seen them in costume, actually performing before. It was magical. The lone piper stopped, the audience cheering and clapping as the stage was suddenly bathed in brilliant light, revealing the gaitas in all their glory. The sound from all the pipes, drums and tambourines seemed like a burst of colour in the darkness. The musicians walked slowly forward to the front of the stage. They were dressed in historical costumes, the girls in big heavy woollen dresses, tight bodices, blouses with big sleeves, and woollen bonnets, all with lots of Celtic designs sew into them. The boys in black tasselled caps, long sleeved white shirts, long black waistcoats, black breeches and white leggings. At a guess they looked to be aged between fourteen and early twenties, with the younger ones, mainly girls, played tambourines. The older ones, the little bagpipes or gaitas and the drum like the Irish bodrum. There was one boy playing a big bass drum, which was hanging from his shoulders, like you see in military bands. He was the key, setting the rhythm under all the pipes and other drums. The music was great, very like traditional Irish music but with the pipes giving it a different flavour, like the Northumberland pipes. It could have been Scottish, but there was definitely a flavour of the orient in their sound. As well as playing their instruments the performers moved slowly around the stage, doing what looked like slow country-dance moves. Making lines, following each other forward, parting, and pealing down each side and circling the stage. They played so well, the sound was crisp and clear. Haunting and rhythmic, the sound was somehow so Gallego. The pipes and drums were the symbol of Galicia and here, where the essence of the region seemed so strong, the sound fitted perfectly with the mountains and the old-worldliness of the place.
The gaitas played about six different pieces and then ended with their signature tune, which even we recognised from the rehearsals. The audience were delighted and joined in the rhythm of the piece, stamping their feet and clapping until it ended and the performers filed back behind the curtain. Then the audience broke from their rhythmic stamping and clapping and cheered and whistled their approval. Everyone was justifiably proud of the gaitas.

The other performances were lovely, lots of colourful, twirling and whirling, and lots of accordion and violin music. There were even more people in the audience now, the seats were full, there were crowds standing all around the edge of the seating area and behind, near the open air café, people were leaning over the wall, everyone having a good time. The folk dance performances continued until about eleven o’clock, but this being Spain, the night was still young. After they had left the stage, there was about an hour before the first orchestra of the fiesta were scheduled to play and a massive burst of activity began on stage. Things were being dismantled and very quickly and in seconds everything looked totally different. Another truck was being manoeuvred into position and inside was a new stage. The side had been opened to reveal a wooden floor and it was already set with lights and backdrop, all the technicians had to do was position the truck, sideways on to the audience and then connect all the plugs. It sounded easy, but there were masses leads and plugs to be dealt with. Before Phil got too engrossed with the stage and its wires I dragged him away to have a look around at all the ‘things’ Cynthia had told us there would be.

Leaving the seats along with everyone else was a squeeze, but eventually we arrived at the open-air café, which was now thronging with people. All around there were stalls, a bit like those at a fairground. There were people selling popcorn and wonderful, long, warm donuts covered in sugar and cinnamon, stalls selling a colourful array of plastic toys, there were metallic gas filled balloons and people selling Celtic jewellery, lots of necklaces, bracelets, rings with curling, looping designs. I could see now why Cynthia had found it difficult to
explain there were so many different things to see. We walked through the gap in the wall, outside the library and left the open-air café with all the stalls and crossed the road to café Estrella. It was thick with people and Pepe, behind the counter with several additional members of staff, was dashing about wildly. We decided to walk further along the road to the Hotel Don Pepe, where it was slightly less frenetic although still very busy. We managed to get coffee and went to sit outside, watching the throngs of people in the street. So this is what a fiesta was all about, the centrepiece to the summer and the event local people planned their holiday around.

There was more music through the evening, lots of colour and lights but the best bit was when some of the older people took to the dance floor or rather, the patch of ground. Men and women and sometimes, women with women if there weren’t enough men to go around. They were great, so quick and stylish, they knew the steps and concentrated hard as they passed by turning and gliding along. I really wished I knew how to dance like that, their feet so quickly, skilfully stepping around those of their partners, as if they did it every day, it was really impressive, proper dancing, not just shuffling from one foot to the other. We couldn’t help thinking about the fiestas of the past, as Ines had described them, here under the same big old trees, with maybe coloured light bulbs swinging from their branches. Paper decorations strung beneath and a band, like Luiz’s, a bunch of local men playing instruments at one end of the square. There would have been tables spread with tablecloths so that people could sit drinking and enjoying the atmosphere. Maybe this was where they had met their husband or wife, and each year they had come to the fiesta and remembered that. Later, they had brought their children and now, their grandchildren. I envied their feeling of belonging somewhere.

After the orchestra had played for a couple of hours the final event of the evening was scheduled. Fireworks. This was going to be fun, we didn’t know where we should go to see them, there didn’t seem to be a big empty space anywhere nearby to set them off. Yet again
we were thinking like English people. Who needs a big open space for fireworks, when you can just set them off at the side of the road right in amongst all the people? The crowd moved from the market square up to the road, just past the turning for the council building. We weren’t sure what to expect and couldn’t see any sort of firework display stuff anywhere. When suddenly there was a massive blast just a few feet away as a rocket shot up in the air and exploded into a burst of colour, then another and another. There must have been people scurrying around in the darkness behind a low wall, just a few feet away, setting off the fireworks one after another. We had never heard such noisy fireworks, could be because we had never been this close to them. There was explosion after explosion for about fifteen minutes when everyone cheered and whistled, clapped and stamped their feet. That was the end of the performances on first night of the fiesta, it was about half past two in the morning. People began leaving the square, many of them heading to the cafes or walking along the road to the Don Pepe, still time to sit and drink with friends. We walked down the road away from the crowds and into the familiar quietness of our pueblo. Manolo and Candita were already at their gate, quietly wishing us ‘buenos noches’ as they went inside for a few hours sleep. We arrived at our gate and there was Sardina, sitting on the old chair outside the door to the barn under the house.

Once the fiesta was over, August seemed to fade slowly away towards September. The families of the local people began to disappear back to their lives in other places. There were still some visitors around, mostly the retired people who were able to stay and get the most of the late summer sun before going back to France or Madrid for the winter. The change in the season made us start worrying about our plan again. We had been getting the most out of the summer, adjusting to our new life, but had we found some land or a house? Well, no, we hadn’t. It wasn’t that we hadn’t thought about it constantly, we had. But we hadn’t seen anywhere that we could imagine becoming our home. The land was a problem, maybe even more than just ‘dificil’, not only were there no houses with their own garden around them, there were no pieces of land that were even as big as the garden we’d left behind. It could
have felt hopeless, but there was still one place left that we hadn’t visited and that was the pueblo Luiz had mentioned on our passeo to Queguas. Twelve kilometres from the centre of Entrimo, round the other side of the mountains was Olelas and while there was Olelas, there was still hope.

We decided to speak to Ines about it and see what advice she had for us. That almost perked us up, although once we had started on worrying about the house thing, we moved seamlessly onto to worrying about our financial situation. So far we had not become the skilful money-makers we needed to be, so much for our plan of finding a house and working out how to support ourselves in six months. If it hadn’t have been for the house money in the bank and the tiny drip of interest it gave us, we wouldn’t have had any income at all. So logically, if we had found a house and bought it, what would we do for money? Thinking about our financial situation only made us anxious and worried and that always led to panic and nothing constructive ever came from that. We never wanted to think about the house/money conundrum, we didn’t know what the answer was, but we had to keep thinking that it would work itself out. Something would come to us, we weren’t stupid, a bit slow when it came to financial acumen, but that was because we had no real interest in it. We just wanted to live our life and even though what we were doing was scary and frightening on a scale we could never have imagined before we left Yorkshire, we mostly didn’t feel that we should give it up. Actually, after that first summer, I’m sure most people would have said they could see why. A wonderful, sunny, extended holiday with days spent growing vegetables and wandering about having picnics, it all sounded perfect. And it was in many ways. We had needed to feel part of the place, to understand what it was like to live in such a different way, but we did need to be making a life for ourselves. We needed our own home and it was worrying and frustrating to feel that after more than a year since we’d left our house in Yorkshire, we still were no nearer to that. We hadn’t even found anywhere in Entrimo we could imagine living, but we clung on to the one pueblo that gave us hope, even though we hadn’t seen yet. We would go and see Ines, ask her advice and pull ourselves
together. Yes, this whole summer thing had thrown us off track, more effort was needed and we had to get on with it, decide whether we were going to find somewhere or we had to seriously consider getting back in the van again. Not a prospect either of us fancied considering, especially after last winter. We weren’t travellers and the experience of living in the van was not one we wanted to repeat. No, we really had to get on with our search and Olelas had to be it.

Meanwhile the new kitten, who we’d named Lucio, was completely wonderful and Sardina loved him. At first I thought Sardina was bit too enthusiastic about his new friend, especially since he was about six times the size of Lucio, but even if he was the one being chased most of the time, Lucio never seemed to mind. There was never any fighting or even growling. When he saw Lucio for the first time, Sardina was wary and kept his distance for about five whole minutes, and then he crept closer and closer to get a better look. Lucio hissed and spiked up his fur in a show of bravery, but Sardina seemed impressed with Lucio’s display of pointed fur and decided this was a sign that he wanted to play. He swiftly dashed under the table, a move which had Lucio’s big eyes even wider than usual and crouched in his pile of battered cardboard boxes, wiggling, like he had seen something to pounce on. I just hoped it wasn’t the kitten. But it seemed that Sardina was demonstrating just how much fun could be had, rolling around under the table in the old boxes and wanted Lucio to join him.

Seeing this performance obviously convinced Lucio because he shot under the table too and the breakfast session of hiding inside boxes and pawing each other through the gaps was established. It was a ritual, along with all the others they so quickly invented. Like the way they always rushed into the kitchen together at meal times, barging past each other to be the first one through the door. Then how they settled down to eat but kept looking at each other’s bowls of food. They seemed so convinced the other had something better, that after they’d eaten a few mouthfuls of food they had to switch bowls, every time. Once they’d finished eating it was time for chasing along the hallway, preferably with a little plastic ball
so they could hurtle along and play football at the same time, they even slept together on one of the folding armchairs.

A few days after our 'let's get this show back on the road' discussion we were sitting talking to Ines and Luiza about all our worries. They never seemed to mind us unburdening ourselves to them and were always full of helpful suggestions about everything. On this occasion we even got talking about our money worries, honestly, there seemed nothing we wouldn't talk to our neighbours about, was our innate Englishness wearing thin? Ines had wondered if I had thought of teaching English, not in school but offering classes to individual teenagers who needed help. Apparently it was something that happened in bigger towns and seemed popular. Maybe Ines had something there, after all, I'd been a teacher, not an English teacher, but still, teaching individual children or teenagers wasn't going to involve the usual nightmare of keeping a class of thirty under control. Ines said I should make a little flyer and put it up in the shops in town and then people could contact me. That all sounded simple enough, maybe I would give it a try.

Since Ines seemed to be on an advice-giving roll, we got talking about Olelas, asking both Ines and Luiza if they had any information about the place. Luiza, amazingly, had never been there. It was only twelve kilometres away but since she had no family contacts in that area there’d never been a reason to go. Ines had been, although just to a funeral some time ago, but she didn’t know anything about the pueblo, apart from its being distant and that hardly anyone lived there now. She said she wouldn’t like to live there, Entrimo itself was far enough away from the hospital but at least there was a doctor and pharmacy. In Olelas the doctor went once a week to take a clinic, that didn’t seem good enough, really, especially since almost everyone who lived in Olelas was old. Well, apart from Cynthia’s cousin, Luiz-Jose, and his parents. At the mention of Cynthia’s family, Luiza and Ines were smiling. I reckoned they were thinking it would be ironic for us to go and live right out in the wilds only to find ourselves living next door to another branch of Cynthia’s rowdy family. Phil
suggested we all go on a passeo to Olelas, we could take the van this time and all go walking in the mountains. Luiza and Ines were game, Ines would ask Luiz if he wanted to come, certainly it sounded a good idea, we would feel as if we’d got our plan rolling again.

Next day we were ready for passeo, number two. No Luiz this time, he had other commitments, taking a relative to a hospital appointment in Ourense. We drove out of the end of Entrimo towards Portugal, which was only four kilometres away. Ines pointed out the old bakery where her mother used to bake their bread. The squat building was in ruins now and totally covered in brambles, it was almost impossible to see any a building there. A bit further we saw water pouring out of a huge rock and Luiza and Ines began discussing the merits of this spring water over the other ‘fuente’ in town. On we went, listening to more little stories as we left the part of Entrimo we knew and began dropping down away from the town.

Olelas was so far away because it was on the other side of the huge mountain, we had to drive around the bottom then start climbing up and up on the other side. When people had said the pueblo was too far away, we couldn’t really understand why people thought twelve kilometres was far. Now we were beginning to understand. Twelve kilometres on a good, straight road would take twelve minutes to travel. Twelve kilometres on a road full of hairpin bends and switchbacks were more like half an hour and not the best road for those of us who felt travel sick just looking at bends. We drove up steep stretches of road, around tight bends and sped down to open rocky bits of pasture. At one point we rounded a bend and came face to face with what looked like the lunar surface. We were right against the foot of a mountain, it was grey and pale and strewn all around were bits of rock which must have fallen from the mountain over years and years. There was so much rock and so little soil the whole area looked barren, like a rocky dessert. Going to Olelas really did seem far away, everything about the place was so different, maybe we were crazy to even think about living
there, I was trying to imagine popping to Paquita’s for a bit of shopping from up here, I’d have to be desperate.

We came round yet another hairpin bend, luckily, very slowly because as soon as we straightened out, we saw some of the biggest cows I have ever seen, standing in the middle of the road. Even Ines and Luiza were stunned, not by the look of the cows, but the fact they were right in our path, looking big and hairy. Apparently these were the very special cattle that only lived here in these mountains. They roamed free and grazed on the wild plants, which was why their meat tasted so good, it had a wonderful flavour and was really lean, because the cattle wandered all they wanted. We didn’t really want to know about that bit, we preferred just thinking about their happily roaming the mountainside. They actually looked just like Highland cattle, those creatures with long hairy coats, huge big twisty horns and fringes that need a trim. After having encountered the weird lunar landscape, we now had the strange, otherworldly beasts to contend with, perhaps we were going to have to accept that Olelas was turning out to be the weird place local people always seemed to be hinting it might be.

At this stage I didn’t care how weird it was, I just needed to get out of the van. I was feeling really ill now, waves of sickness swept over me, how I hated mountain driving. I was almost at the stage of making Phil stop the van to let me out when the first houses of the pueblo came into sight. I decided to try and hang on to my lunch a bit longer until finally the van stopped and I flung myself out of the side door. Phew, what a relief that was, Phil was trying to find somewhere to park, which was tricky since the road was so extremely narrow. Leaving the van anywhere was going to stop any other vehicle from coming or going. And added to the width problem was the, ‘if we accidentally put one wheel too far over this verge then we’ll be tumbling to the river bottom’ parking anxiety. I couldn’t even watch as Phil carefully backed the van on to the verge, pulling two wheels off the road to leave enough space for other cars to pass. I’d had enough of sheer drops and tight curves, my stomach
needed to settle, not to be attached to my tonsils as it felt it was. At last, Phil was out of the van alongside us and we set off into the pueblo, passing the obligatory tumbling heap of old fridges, cookers, mattresses and other rubbish as it worked its way down the side of the mountain.

Olelas lost points in every category of the ‘Beautiful Spanish Pueblos’ competition. Aside from the rubbish, which was a massive vote looser, the first houses we came across were shocking. They’d obviously been built by someone with either something to prove, or a debilitating mental disorder. Pitting himself against the vertical drop he had made several absolutely massive concrete edifices, literally dangling over the edge of the mountain. One of them was finished in a wild array of orange and pink bathroom tiles, which crept all around the lower storey and sort of petered out at the back. While the others had yet to be finished and were still massive ugly towers of dull grey concrete. Maybe he was still considering finishes? Who knew? But it looked as if he’d been considering for a long while because these were not recent developments, the concrete was going green, there were old ladders and rubbish strewn around adding to the air of neglect. I reckoned the best thing would be to put a giant lever under them and prise them off the mountain and send them tumbling the thousand feet to the river. Although I had to accept that while that visually, the pueblo would improve dramatically, the effect on the wildlife below would be bad, or even fatal with the sudden influx of great lumps of concrete.

Ines and Luiza weren’t impressed but they didn’t say anything, they just raised an eyebrow as we passed from the first part of the pueblo into a narrow road. Here at least the old buildings were still intact, many were empty but there were some with their windows open and the curtains blowing and it wasn’t long before we met some people to talk to. A group of older women sat on a low wall, backs to the tumbling mountainside enjoying a post-lunch chat. They were very pleased to see a bunch of strangers and immediately got into conversation with Ines and Luiza. As ever the preliminaries of introduction took place. Who
was everyone, where did we come from and had anyone ever met or even seen each other before. Those facts established, then the second round could start and that was when everyone involved tried to think of possible familiar connections. It never took long for someone to work out there was a second cousin or a brother-in-law’s sister or someone, which seemed to make everyone happy. The more connections revealed and unravelled the longer the second round took and the more relaxed and talkative everyone became. On this occasion there were some connections for Ines. She had met one of the women before somewhere and that woman was almost a friend of Ines’s sister who ran the vegetable shop, so it was quite a successful session. Then everyone wanted to know why we were there, and Ines explained about us being her neighbours, and just how foreign we were and that we had wanted to see Olelas. All the women nodded and started getting romantic about the place, how natural and beautiful it was and the word ‘esmerelda’ kept coming up, we didn’t understand why. They spoke about the mountain water, which was all they drank. It was piped into their homes now, but there was still the ‘fuente’ or spring apparently, just a bit further along the track.

After about fifteen minutes we managed to prise ourselves away from the group of women and continue walking through the pueblo. It was a very small place and the houses were barely modernised, not like in our pueblo where everyone lived in a completely renovated, marble edifice. Here the tiny houses were made from dark stone, clinging on to each other, perched along a ledge with the mountain rising behind and falling away in front of them. The narrow cobbled road had completely stopped any pretence of being a road. Now there were big rounded rocks that stood proud of the soil around them, we all found ourselves walking on stepping-stones. We passed several houses where animals were still living underneath. Hens, wandering about on straw, rabbits in cages, some cattle and a donkey. Their accommodation was spacious and shady, at the entrance the wide doors stood open, sometimes with a wire-covered screen in its place to stop the animals from escaping. All along the pueblo, houses were tucked into the side of the mountain with just the narrow
track and a low wall before the land slipped abruptly away. The cobbles of the track were becoming scarce now, it was more tufty grass and soil as it curved slightly away from the edge of the mountain and opened into a little yard, with a house set back. This was a really old place, not modernised at all, just dark old stone covered with moss. There were steps leading up to the house part and a big heavy door open beneath. Luiza, who was slightly ahead of us, stopped in front of the open door and smiled, when we reached her we could see why. Two huge cows with big, fancy collars on, just standing there chewing hay. There were clumps of it sticking out of their mouths as they chewed and shook their heads to try and keep the flies away. Luiza explained that these cattle were used for ploughing, that was why they were wearing collars, they must have just come in from working. The collars were like the bridles we’d seen on shire horses, big padded things where all the reigns and leads were connected, they didn’t have them on all the time, just for working. We’d never seen cattle that pulled a plough though and we wondered what it looked like. Was it a big thing? We’d seen the ones used with tractors in Yorkshire and couldn’t imagine how this worked. Did the ploughman have to steer the cattle or were they expert enough to know what to do. For Ines and Luiza it was a memory, like when we sometimes saw old toys in junk shops. That weird, warm feeling of the familiar which stirs something in our memories before we are conscious of what it is. They remembered the days when cattle were all anyone had to work the land, now so much of the land was left wild and those that were growing things used little tractors. Ines beckoned us to look over the wall down to the valley below. One glimpse was enough to realise it wouldn’t be possible to use a tractor here. It looked like a colour print from a book about the Andes. The land sloped gently down and down in terraces with every level divided into a massive patchwork of plots, each one a different shade of green outlined with a grey stone wall. From where we were standing all we could see were masses and masses of little plots, we must have been looking across a huge area, but it was so difficult to tell what the scale was, each plot could have been ten feet long or an acre. But the amazing thing was that people from this pueblo, right up here, were working those plots, all the way down below. To
get to their piece of land it seemed as if they would almost have to bungee jump off the wall and drop vertically about a hundred feet, how did they do it?

We were all dangling over the wall looking at the view, when I caught sight of something moving far below. A dark shape, I couldn’t tell what it was, I pointed it out to the others, then Phil saw it too and we both watched carefully for some hint of what we were seeing. After a couple of minutes we realised we were seeing a person, a woman with one of the huge plastic buckets people here used for everything. It was balanced on her head and she was coming up from her plot. She was so far below us that she was just a tiny speck. How long was it going to take for her to get back up? Imagine getting all the way down there to work at planting or weeding or watering then realising, as I so often did in our plots, that I’d forgotten something vital. In Olelas it would have to stay forgotten, going down to the plots from here would be a once a day activity. I was pondering just how fit these old mountain folk must be with all that climbing to do. We watched for a while as the woman wove back and forth, gradually coming in to view but still very far below, we were mesmerised we just watched and watched. The masses of green plots covered the whole side of the valley, all the way down to the river below. It was stunning, absolutely stunning. We couldn’t see the river, but Ines said that according to the women she had spoken to when we first arrived, we would be able to if we walked further on. Across the deep valley from Olelas was Portugal. It seemed so strange to be looking at another country, imagining the people in the little pueblo we could see just across there, speaking a different language and living in a different culture, so strange to us British people, used to living on our island.

We reluctantly tore ourselves away and joined Ines and Luiza who were already back on the track. Ines said that we had to keep on this track until we arrived at a spot where we would be able to see the river. That would be something, we didn’t know if we would see it splashing from rocks high above us or running silkily as a distant ribbon far below. We walked on along the grassy track between the stone wall and the sloping mountain leaving
the pueblo behind us. It was so peaceful walking along in the sun there were no buildings, just mountain and pasture. We could hear the tinkle of goat bells above us and all stood looking to see where they were. After a bit we saw them, crossing behind some trees higher up, jumping across rocks and keeping up with each other. Further on the track curved and dropped down, maybe we were near the river now. There was no river but as we rounded another bend we saw a solitary house at the side of the track. It seemed to be set into the mountain, almost growing out of it, made from the same rock and aged with moss and plants. It sat at the side of the track watching over the green pasture in front. It was like a child’s drawing of a house, square with a pitched roof and two little square windows upstairs. There was a yard to the side of the house, with a heavy wooden door that was held closed by a plank of wood wedged between two stone pillars. We all stopped to look at the place, it was old and empty, but not quite as dilapidated as other abandoned houses, it still had a roof and window frames. Since the house stood alone and the mountainside sloped down on each side Phil walked up to see if he could get closer to the house from behind. It wasn’t difficult and in a minute Phil was standing at the back of the house, calling us to come up.

Ines, Luiza and I walked up the rocky slope and found a little step which let us climb over the low wall and stand outside the back door of the house. It was strange, the mountain came down to the house, but somehow there had been a flat path cut out to make this little ledge, it was like a patio at first floor level. The house was very sweet with just the second floor built straight above the sloping mountain. It looked tiny, Phil’s head was almost scraping the roof tiles. There were no windows on this side but there was a door with a big rusty looking lock, which had its giant key resting in the keyhole. All very Alice in Wonderland, all it needed was a label saying ‘come in’.

Ines, Luiza and I were itching to look inside and since the giant key was still in the lock, it wouldn’t be as if we were breaking in. Ines put her hand out and turned the key, the door creaked open and we all peered inside. It was dark, but we could make out there was a
window with shutters opposite. I was desperate to see inside so I gingerly walked across the wooden floorboards to open the shutters. There was a little bolt, which I tried to pull back and despite all the rust, I managed to waggle it free. The shutters were hanging on ancient hinges, so I gently pulled them open, half expecting them to fall off, but they creaked open and suddenly we could see.

This was the living area of the house and it was sort of divided by a weird little wooden partition which didn’t go up to the rafters but stopped just above our heads. We were standing in what Ines and Luiza thought would have been the kitchen, there was a stone slab on the floor for a fire and Ines pointed to the rafters above, all blackened from smoke. She could so easily have been a house detective. Under the window, where I’d opened the shutter, was a big wooden chest, apparently this was another clue that this part of the house had been the kitchen. This was a typical piece of kitchen furniture, used for storing bowls and plates and stuff. The kitchen, which ran from the front door, across to the window, took up the whole width of the house and about a third of the length. The weird partition ran across the room and had two doors in it. We all wanted to see what was behind those doors but the floorboards looked scarily damp and rotten. Still, we had to see. We couldn’t possibly leave now without knowing what the rest of the house looked like. I decided that it was worth my creeping across the floor alongside the partition, the floor wasn’t too bad there and maybe I could get to the door, open it and see what the floor was like in there. Ines, Luiza and Phil weren’t so sure, even though everyone wanted to see inside, but I crept anyway. Putting one foot gingerly on the floor, then testing it before stepping forward, I worked my way to the first door. I didn’t plummet to the donkey stall below, I grasped the doorknob, turned, and pushed the door open. Phil, Luiza and Ines were all craning their necks to see what was there and since the floor seemed safe, they all carefully walked across and followed me into what was obviously a bedroom. There was an old bed frame with a shredded straw mattress, another wooden trunk and another window. Despite the house being so old and obviously uninhabited for so long it was surprisingly dry and clean, it
smelled dusty but not mouldy or damp. Ines was busy working the bolt on the shutter back from its rusty keep. It squeak, squeak, squeaked open and the shutters flopped back to reveal an absolutely breath-taking view.

Just that tiny bit further along from the first window made a huge difference. Now we could see the pueblo almost hanging out over the steep mountainside, which fell away to the valley below. There was the view of the Andes, the patchwork of green plots, but from this window we could also see the little stone houses of the pueblo stacked in a pile at the top of the slope. They were squatting there, facing away from the sun so they were in shadow, while the land down below was still in sun, sloping down and down and down. We could almost see where we’d left the van. The track, rather than being the straight line we thought we’d walked along, was actually always curving, following the side of the mountain. It was the most beautiful view we had ever seen, a complete little world, enclosed by the huge dark stone of the mountain on this side of the valley and the white stone of the Portuguese mountains on the other side. Imagine, I said to Luiza, waking up in this bedroom and looking out at that view. Yes, she said, it looked wonderful now, but would it look so nice in the winter, when the clouds were hanging down in the valley and there was ice on the track? Ines nodded, agreeing, not easily impressed with the beauty of the view, she was happy with her feet on the ground, thank you very much. Honestly, where was their romance? Ines, laughed at our enthusiasm for the place and then said we hadn’t seen the best thing about Olelas yet, and that was the river. She closed the shutter and we edged out of the bedroom, closing the other shutter in the kitchen as we let ourselves out of the door and back on to the mountain.

Further along the track, which was just grass now, the stone wall we’d been following ended in a wire fence which ran along the side of the field. We walked right down the slight slope, away from the narrow path to a little open valley where there were young trees planted and plenty of grass, it seemed odd that there was green grass here, when everywhere else in Entrimo it was dry and brown. In front of us the track almost disappeared under hanging
branches and bushes, but we managed to push through to where the track ended with a massive pile of boulders. Ines pointed to a little gap, where she and Luiza would squeeze through, but said we could probably get up on one of the boulders and have a better view from there. We scrambled inelegantly up, leaving Ines and Luiza, pushing between some rocks and then we came to the treasure of Olelas, the view of the river, hundreds of feet below. Suddenly, we reached the top of the boulder and just casually looked over the edge. We couldn’t have been less prepared for the dizzying effect of the height and what we could see. The river, far, far below was literally emerald green. Not green or blue. Really, it was nothing like those colours, this was a sparkling, luminous jewel of a colour, like a beautiful piece of satin ribbon lying between the rocky banks, one side Spain, the other, Portugal. I called to Ines, could they see the river? “Si! Esmerelda, esmerelda!” That word again. We had to sit down, it made us too dizzy standing and looking down at such a drop, but the river was mesmerising. We actually lie on our stomachs, and looked silently looking over the edge and just watched and watched.

Back down on the track we were all talking about the amazing river, how far below it was and how crystal clear it had seemed and the colour, the amazing colour. ‘Si’, said Ines, ‘Esmerelda’ which we discovered later was the much prettier Spanish word for emerald. We were almost back in the pueblo now, where we stopped at the ‘fuente’ the spring. We all gathered round to cool our hands under the running water and to scoop some into our mouths, it was freezing cold after all the heat. The people of the pueblo were busy again now with the chores of late afternoon, feeding the animals, watering the plots and getting clean washing off the washing lines. It was comforting to imagine living this closely to other people, like being in a big family, in and out of each other’s houses, working alongside each other on the plots. Everyone part of everyone else’s life. Would it be comforting to live here? Really? Or did it just seem that way because we felt out of place and wanted to belong somewhere? It would be like living in our pueblo, but more so, more intense. Could we take any more intensity from neighbours like Benita or Cynthia’s family? It was tough, trying to
get to grips with the fact that we were looking at a very different way of life trying to imagine we’d ever find a house where we could make the garden we had in our minds. Olelas was spectacular, well, apart from the first part with all the rubbish and the hideous concrete monsters. This was the closest thing we had seen to our ideal place. But we could tell there was a huge gap between our old life and the way people lived here, would we be able to adapt?

All the way back in the van our minds were whirring with Olelas. The views, the river and of course, the old house. Would it be worth bending our plan slightly to make it fit with living there, might it be possible to buy a piece of land nearby? In between these thoughts I asked Ines and Luiz what they thought of the place, wasn’t it beautiful? Yes, they admitted it was indeed beautiful, but they were practical people and said that for them, it was too far away. There was no doctor, supposing there was an emergency? Yes, the practical issues were important, but now we had seen the house in Olelas, it was tantalising to think of the possibilities. What a place, a truly hidden part of Entrimo. We arrived back in our pueblo, leaving Ines and Luiza at their gates. Walking to our house while our brains were still full of Olelas, even with the long list of impractical reasons for not living there. We needed time to think about it but our thoughts were broken by the sound of Benita ‘yoo-hooing’, through the fence and interrupted our reverie. She waved us over, pointing and beckoning to the little stone shed in the garden. We clanked through the heavy, green metal gate into Benita’s garden and walked to the shed where there was a fire blazing with Ines and Luiza studying a pan of roasted chestnuts to see if they were done. Were they done? Picking them up in a tea towel they tested them with a knife while trying to avoid burning their fingers, yes, the first lot were ready. I couldn't remember ever having tasted chestnuts, but surely if they’d been this good, I would have. Benita pulled up one of the tiny chairs, which was exactly the right size for her, and sat between Ines and Luiza. All of our feet stretched out towards the fire, listening to the conversation about the quality of the chestnuts this year. We studied the inside of the shed, flickering pictures in the firelight, Benita explained that this had been
their winter kitchen. In the past families spent most of the day outdoors and the fire was used for cooking, no one went indoors before bed time. Now the house had been transformed with a modern kitchen and a pristine white shower room. The past had been cleared away indoors, but the connection was still alive for Benita while the shed was there.
CHAPTER SIX

Pulling up roots
We tried to think logically about Olelas and to keep our imaginations under some sort of control, it wouldn’t do to be rash. Even though we knew whatever place we found was never going to be conventional by the standards of our previous life. But, that didn’t mean throwing away any sense of precaution. Or did it? There were no answers and there was no one we could talk to, even our lovely neighbours could only advise us from their perspective and they were cautious people who worried about doctors and being near relatives which made us respond by mentally shrugging our shoulders and saying ‘who cares?’ like stroppy teenagers, determined to the opposite.

Luckily we did realise that we had to keep everyday life trotting along to stop us from going mad, although Ines always wanted to hear our latest deliberations about Olelas. Our inability to decide what to do didn’t make her think we were cautious dimwits. It was a big decision involving large sums of money therefore time should be taken. Also we knew that if there had been other possible places around Entrimo we might not have become so obsessed. Yes, she agreed it was a special place, that she could understand. Maybe we should speak to Jose from the fereteria, he was from Olelas so he would be able to advise us. This was interesting news, someone else who we could bore to life’s end with our madness. Yes, this fantasy was set to run for a while yet.

Next day it poured with heavy miserable rain all day long, it was too wet for gardening or even leaving the house. By early evening when the sun had set and the few street lights were glowing our attack of cabin fever reached such a peak that we decided to walk up to the Don Pepe for coffee, even if it meant getting soaked. And, we could pop into the fereteria on the way and see if Jose was there, after all, it wouldn’t do any harm to find out a bit more, it wasn’t as if we were committing ourselves to anything was it? We waded through the rushing water to the top of the pueblo and into the road huddled under the faded and useless umbrellas. We weren’t completely soaked through when we arrived at the luminously bright shop but we left a decent sized puddle on the floor. Pilar, Jose’s daughter always smiled
when she saw us, not an ordinary friendly, welcoming smile more the ‘just how silly and embarrassing for me is this conversation going to be before I can understand what you want’ smile. Luckily for Pilar we only wanted to know if her dad was there and as he appeared at that moment Pilar could stand down. Jose was lovely, always calm and quietly spoken. He had a way of concentrating carefully as we tried to make sentences with our basic Spanish. He stood still, thinking, waiting for us to finish then he’d blink and repeat what we’d said in correct Spanish, checking that was what we had said before replying. He was one of the people who always understood us so it wasn’t difficult to ask him about Olelas. Yes, it was true, he did come from Olelas and he would certainly help us if he could. The house? Yes, he thought he knew which one but maybe it would be best if we went there together and then he would be sure. He went everyday to see his mother, he explained so maybe we could go with him, how about tomorrow?

We felt we’d achieved, inched our plan forward a tiny bit so we could feel entitled to the celebratory coffee we were heading to Don Pepe for anyhow. We paddled on up to the main street and the welcome fluorescent yellow sign announcing that we had arrived. Entrimo was a very different place now that the summer and the joyful nights of the fiesta were over. Only the stalwarts of the community were left to see the mountains through the winter and this year that included us. We did feel a certain belonging, staying behind while all the bright butterflies of summer had left. We lived here, we didn’t have a house or a home somewhere else. We were committed if that was the right word. We were thankful for the warm, brightness of the Don Pepe, the giant television mounted on the wall and the heaps of glossy gossip magazines on the bar, we settled in to forget about the rain in the comradely comfort with the other customers.

Next morning the sun shone as if yesterday hadn’t happened. Sardina was in happy mood chasing around inside and then revisiting his kitten hood with a session playing with the laces on Phil’s boots in the hallway. There was something odd though, maybe the game was
going on too long or there was just too much enthusiasm. I walked along to see what was happening and Sardina snatched something up and ran outside. Definitely he was up to something, what was that in his mouth? A bit of bootlace? It was long, thin, black but strangely shiny and smooth. No it wasn’t a bootlace it was a little snake impersonating a bootlace. It was clever of Sardina to find such a good match and to bring it to the boot but I reckoned the poor limp creature needed liberating.

We set off to Olelas in Jose’s car, me in front this time to keep the travel sickness at bay. Really, wouldn’t it be very unfortunate to buy a house and feel sick every time I went shopping? Luckily though Jose drove like…..Jose. Calmly and smoothly and that was with explaining various places of interest on our way, like the fuente, spring, where he got water every day because the water was the best, really pure and full of minerals. We were still finding this water thing a bit odd, coming from a country where water fell out of the tap in the kitchen. We knew that everyone here had tap water but we were discovering that no one drank that. It was fine for cooking or washing but no one considered putting chemically treated water in their bodies. Spring water was drinking water. There was the place Jose used to go swimming in the river, here was the short cut back to his pueblo, this was one of the places the goats liked to graze. He told us about his mother and how he brought her shopping and came to visit each day. This was very interesting information for us since we had only heard how far away Olelas was. Plainly not for Jose. We arrived at the entrance to the pueblo and Jose parked easily, it was much easier with a car than a van although we thought Jose could have parked a lorry without worry he was so used to the narrow road and the vertical drop. We started out on foot down the narrow street following a trail of fresh cow manure past the first few houses. At the first bend we heard the clatter and scrap of hooves on cobbles and a well-laden donkey appeared, being led on a slack length of rope by an old man. Nothing coming round that corner could have looked as right as the man and the donkey. ‘Ah Jose! No work this morning, out for a bit of a stroll in your old pueblo?’ The old man grinned and Jose and smiled and joked with Mr Donkey and explained where
we were going and of course who we were. Mr Donkey shook Phil’s hand and kissed me on both cheeks. The donkey stood patiently, twitching its ears while Jose helped unload the sacks off the panniers on its back. Once they were empty Mr Donkey flapped the wooden shelves of the contraption closed and then lifted it off the donkey’s back. Jose and Mr Donkey chatted while a nice stripy blanket was spread across the donkey’s back and then said goodbye. A few yards later we came across a group of older women who squealed delightedly at seeing Jose. How was Lourdes, Jose’s wife, and Pilar? The grandchildren? Again Jose explained who we were and where we were going. I was beginning to feel glad there was such a small population in Olelas because as this rate we’d be lucky to get to the house before lunchtime. The women were really friendly and interested, amazed that there could be people in the world considering coming to Olelas rather than leaving. We stood back whilst Jose chatted and looked down below. Everything in the valley below was so bright and fresh after the rain of the day before. The pale mountains of Portugal were white in the sun. The women were talking to Jose about someone who was in hospital in Ourense, everyone nodding adding comments when another older woman came through the wooden gate with a huge bucket of green stuff balanced on her head, although even with the bucket she only reached Phil’s shoulder. One of the woman called out, ‘Maria, look who’s here, it’s Jose!’ The tiny woman smiled broadly and looked up with cloudy eyes at the group of us. She put the bucket down and reached out towards Jose who took both of her hands in his and bent to kiss her on both cheeks. He spoke quietly to her, continuing to hold her hands all the while, she smiled and joked with him. She was smaller than the other women and her clothes hung slightly from her shoulders, her eyes didn’t focus on Jose but on some place in the distance, she looked really frail but she was obviously strong enough to scale the terraces and cut green stuff for the rabbits and hens. Jose and Maria finished speaking and he kissed her cheeks again before we continued down the track. Maria was one of his aunts Jose explained, she was ninety three years old and apart from her failing sight she was still quite well and enjoyed helping with the chores each day. We were amazed, ninety three and really she didn’t look so old, maybe there was something to be said for the mountain water.
We walked in single file along the narrow part of the track out of the pueblo while I tried to imagine what it felt like to belong somewhere so completely and a place as small as this one. Things must have changed, although it was difficult to see what, apart from the arrival of electricity and cars. Ines had said that the road linking Entrimo to Ourense had only been built some twenty years ago so the road from Olelas to Entrimo must have been even more recent. Jose reckoned less than ten years although people had still gone into Entrimo, they’d had to, to sell things at the market and buy supplies but they’d gone by horse and taken a wagon full of produce and stuff. The biggest change in the pueblo for Jose’s aunt we thought was the shrinking population, how many people used to live here? Jose thought about two hundred, including all the children. Listening to how quiet it was now, imagining the difference, the place would have been buzzing, the houses full of families, masses of children filling the abandoned school, people fetching water, looking after animals, collecting firewood, the narrow street jammed with carts, donkeys, horses, cattle. A hard life no doubt in the mountains but what a place and a time to have lived. Today twenty-eight people lived in Olelas.

We managed to walk together as the path widened and Jose talked about his life growing up in Olelas, how there were few families and so everyone was somehow related to each other, although there had been several Portuguese people who had married into the pueblo, there were fiestas in the summer just across the border, a hard walk but definitely worth it for the girls. Life had been hard for everyone and the children were expected to help. He had stopped going to school when he was eleven, his father and grandfather needed him to help with the goats. Each day Jose’s job was to take them out to graze on the mountain, finding fresh places with grass and wild plants for them to eat. In the spring this was easy but in the cold of winter and the heat of summer it was difficult to find good places and the goats were fussy. They don’t like extreme temperatures or rain and they are awkward animals, they wouldn’t go where he wanted them to go or stay together, they’d get lost and sometimes he’d
find them stuck somewhere difficult to reach. He vowed he’s never have goats when he grew up. And he hadn’t. He got sheep instead.

We had almost reached the house now, walking along the uneven and rocky part of the track which curved away from the pueblo and led to the top of the bigger fields. It was really wet and muddy under foot where water coursed through the long grass. Jose shook his head, no one uses the watering system now and the channels and gullies aren’t being maintained. In the past every piece of land was cultivated but now, he tailed off. The gullies looked just like the ones Luiza used for her garden but here they were so choked with grass and weeds that the water couldn’t run down them, it backed up and overflowed, gushing and spilling across the plots and over the track. Still, Jose reckoned it wouldn’t take long to dig it out and get the water back under control. We walked along next to the stone wall until finally we arrived at the house. Jose smiled and nodded, yes, this was the house of his cousin Antonio who now lived in France. Antonio’s father had built it Jose explained as he lifted the plank from across a wooden door, opening it into a sort of yard. We hadn’t seen this before, we had gone around the other side when we’d been with Luiza and Ines. The yard began flat next to the house but then rose steeply on to a bank and continued rising until it reached a low stone wall which ran all the way round from the track. It made an impressive piece of land, much bigger than any of the little bits we’d got used to seeing and it was all around the house. In the corner of the yard, close to the house was a weird dome-shaped thing made from blocks of stone with a little gap in one side. We noticed that the stone above the opening was blackened, Jose explained that it was the bread oven and that all the families had one, after all, where would they have got bread if they hadn’t baked it themselves? In those days when there were no freezers bread had to be baked twice a week, although some families shared the job amongst grandmothers and aunts. It was beginning to sound as if the women had rather a lot of the responsibilities for mountain living what with vegetable growing, washing clothes by hand and baking bread in a wood oven. I wondered what the men were doing?
Looking towards the back of the house from the yard we saw a flight of stone steps leading to the door where we had been with Luiza and Ines. The steps were incredibly mossy with only a tiny bit of rock showing at the front. The underneath part of the house, where the animals had slept, was behind a pair of heavy wooden doors which Jose managed to persuade open by lifting each one off the ground and walking backwards. Inside there was still straw in bales on the ground and although it was possible to see through the gaps in the boards above our heads the wood was in a good condition. As well as the bales of straw there were bits of harness, rope, old metal buckets and some tools, Jose pulled a couple of bales down from the stack to show more of the back wall of the house. ‘Look’ he said pointing into the darkness. We walked closed to see and when we’d adjusted our eyes we could see what Jose was pointing at. The back wall was actually one monstrously big smooth rock, not pieces of stone piled on top of each other to make a wall, this was one huge big rock, as we’d suspected the house was built into the mountain, accommodating the immovable object, making it serve as one of the walls, it was a wonderful thing. I thought it would be great to know it was crouching in the basement. Jose was really impressed that his uncle hadn’t been defeated by the challenge of the mountainside, instead he’d turned it to his advantage, the back wall of the house was already finished when he began building. Jose was enjoying showing us the house and started to suggest ways we could modernise the place. He had designed his shop and the renovations of his mother’s house, he said that of course nearly all of the houses back in Entrimo had been modernised to include a garage underneath instead of the stable but obviously since no car could get to the house we could maybe turn the area into a kitchen and have a living room upstairs. It wouldn’t be difficult to replace the big doors with a smaller one and a window. It appeared that Jose needed no encouragement and we didn’t either. Instead of having Ines and Luiza to temper our madness we now had Jose seemingly even more enthusiastic than we were. Was this a good thing? It wasn’t a big house Jose was saying but definitely big enough for two. Then he laughed and said how easily he and others forgot how they had lived, this house had five people on one floor, the animals underneath. It was crazy that everyone wanted so many square metres of space these days and what for?
The big houses were freezing cold, no one could afford central heating. If only people had stuck with their animals downstairs. We pondered this, Jose’s feretería was a mausoleum, it was so freezing cold in there that Pilar wore her coat all day and gloves over her chilblains during the winter and upstairs where Jose and Lourdes lived they doubtless gathered around their brasero as the concrete walls blackened with mould each winter. I wondered if he regretted his move down into town but guessed he probably didn’t, after all he was one of the more wealthy people in the pueblo, he’d got his shop and his house plus he’s been buying bits of land to make a field sized piece opposite his shop for the sheep. He definitely couldn’t have done that in Olelas. So, what would become of us if we came to live here? How would we survive? We had found it impossible to think of the two parts of our plan at the same time, the finding of the place and the working out of how we would support ourselves. Our feeble brains weren’t able to come up with clever strategies, we were too emotional and at this point we just wanted a home, we’d worry about the rest later. Surely we weren’t entirely stupid. Or were we? We certainly appeared to be cautious, indecisive worriers, certainly not the kind of people whose experiences we had read about or seen in films. Those were impulsive, courageous, romantic people, buying heaps of rocks which weren’t even houses in foreign lands and turning them overnight into fantastic rustic hotels or chateau dripping with vines with interiors we could but dream of. Why weren’t we those people? In fact how could we have set off from Yorkshire in such a show of bravado while under that we were pathetically weedy? We really did have to stop all this stupid worrying, of course we couldn’t know how it would work out, that was the whole point wasn’t it? Making a new life using only our wits and skills? Either we had to get on with it, or go back to England.

Ah yes, we were good at all the big talk when roused. We got back to town and thanked Jose for his time, he must have had a million other things to do with his morning, but as ever, he was calm and smiled saying it was nothing and that we should let him know if we wanted him to speak to his cousin in France, it would be easy because they spoke most weekends.
Later Cynthia came skipping across, where had we been? She’d been to the house twice and we hadn’t been home. Before I could say anything Cynthia eyed me with suspicion, Luiz Jose’s aunt had seen us in Olelas, why had we been there? Honestly, was there nowhere we could go without someone seeing us and reporting to someone else? I explained that yes, we had been to Olelas, we had been for a passeo, it was a pueblo ‘muy bonito’, very pretty. Cynthia gave me a pitying look and shook her head, no it wasn’t bonita it was ‘feo’ and ‘sucio’ ugly and dirty. The streets were full of straw and animal poo, it could get on your shoes and it wasn’t hygienic. We weren’t thinking of moving there were we? How quick this child was, she knew that unlike her house ours belonged to someone else. I said that we had been visiting Olelas, nothing else. Cynthia, concerned that we might be considering moving out of her orbit added that Olelas was too far away, Luiz Jose always wished he lived here in the pueblo because he didn’t like having to get up early for the school bus and if we lived up there, how would we get our shopping? And it was really cold there in the winter, Sardina and Lucio would hate it and she had seen snow there once which had been pretty but way too cold for us. No, we should definitely stay where we were, it was better for us. Cynthia was very wise for a seven year old, if a little self interested in her reasoning. However I realised that probably she was the one made of the right material for undertaking our journey. Unlike us she saw the problems and worked out how to solve them while we emoted and thought in circles. Now we were being shown up by a seven year old, it really was pathetic.

We saw Ines and Luiza, who, as ever, were keen to hear of our thoughts about Olelas, I told them how Jose had talked about the place and how he really seemed to love it. There was a pause before Ines pointed out the obvious, ‘yes, but he lives down here doesn’t he?’ Then she held her hand out, closed it like a fist and brought it to her chest, saying something like ‘keep your money safe’ or ‘save your money’ something like that. Whatever she was saying Ines was definitely trying to save us from ourselves. We were probably the only people who would ever consider living in Olelas and we could forget ever being able to sell it, there were only very few mad people in the world and Ines obviously felt she’d met them.
To put Olelas out of our minds we decided to concentrate on our vegetable plots and just get on with life. How lovely those ordinary tasks seemed when they were a refuge from the pressure of awful decision making. We both knew what it meant if we gave up on Olelas, it meant leaving Entrimo. We had visited every corner of the place and Olelas had it all but also had some serious drawbacks. We loved the mountains we loved the place but wasn’t it odd that we couldn’t just agree to live there and work out all the problems later. Did our inability to just buy Olelas mean that we didn’t really, really want to live there? We didn’t want to face it but eventually the leaving of Entrimo and the return to the van began to grow in our minds. It was horrible. Really horrible, I didn’t want to dismantle what we had put together. After leaving Yorkshire and skipping off so blithely, selling everything and leaving with nothing, I had realised I wasn’t one of those people who didn’t need a nest. It hurt not to have our stuff around us. Photos, books, pictures, mementoes. Yes, I accepted it, I was a shallow individual and my inner world was a desert. I wanted my stuff and I needed a house to put it in. But. Phil felt the same but he wouldn’t let his nesting instincts get in the way of finding ‘the’ place first. In many ways he was feeling it worse than me, he physically needed a quiet eerie away from people and noise, he needed that more than he needed a pinboard for all his postcards and photos. We tried not to think about it until eventually we stopped panicking and conceded that Olelas wasn’t the place. We’d made our decision and for five minutes felt wonderful. Relief. And then. Yes, and then. What were we going to do now? Well, we might have been dim but we had noticed that Portugal loomed right next to us, only three kilometres up the road. We could just cross the border, surely it was meant to be? We got out the road map of Portugal, pinned it on the wall and plotted our route, it was that easy, on paper.

The practicalities were different. Now we had Lucio and Sardina to think about. Obviously we couldn’t leave them behind, they were family but how would they cope with living in the van? It could be weeks or worse, months before we found anywhere we liked enough to stop travelling. We knew that but surely it wouldn’t be impossible, there had to be a way. So sure
were we that something would resolve the cat question that we decided to consign any cat worries to a later date. Once we had decided to pack our van Phil thought he had noticed there was something wrong with it. It hadn’t been its usual courageous self when we drove over the hills to see Ramon, maybe we should ask Entrimo’s mechanic to have a look at it. Instinctively I felt that this was just ‘pre-match nerves’, there was nothing wrong with the van, just Phil’s anxiety finding an outlet. I was so convinced that I refused to believe it even when the mechanic said we needed to replace of the head gasket. It was just too bizarre that at the very time we planned to go back on the road, the van developed some ailment. Maybe it was a sign, I suggested, a sign that we shouldn’t leave Entrimo? No, Phil said, it was a sign that he was a genius.

We felt bad about leaving Entrimo, and said so to Ines and Louisa, but they and everyone else thought we were right. Entrimo was a beautiful place and for them it was where they belonged, they’d been born there, their grandparents were born there, where else would they feel at home? These were lucky people whose whole being was etched in the fabric of the community. They thought we should go and find somewhere with more life, more possibilities and eventually we would find a home.

Gradually we cut our ties, bit by bit we were gathering our skirts and getting ready to run. We packed and tried to find places for all the extra stuff we had accumulated. Stuff and cats. There was Lucio and Sardina to think about and we still hadn’t worked out how they would manage to become travelling cats. However, as well as Lucio and Sardina there was also the little black kitten to worry about. It was the terrible howling which disturbed my box packing and took me outside. There was a heart wrenching sound and I was ready to see some terrible dog fight or warring cats but when I looked from the patio there was nothing to see. The noise was still there though, coming from the little road outside. Outside the gate I looked up and down the track, again nothing. Then as I turned to come back inside I saw something against the wall opposite the gate. Hiding in a clump of dead grass was the
tiniest, ugliest kitten ever, its mouth wide open and the terrible sound coming out. It was an awful sight, eyes gummed shut, hardly a scrap of fur covering its little bony body, its back legs like bits of wire with no fur at all and front legs covered in sticky stuff. I hardly liked to touch him because he looked so germy, I didn’t want to pass anything on to Lucio or Sardina. But hell, the creature was suffering, I had to comfort him so I bent down and picked it up and felt the little body stiffen. I tried stroking what little there was of it to stroke and tried to speak reassuringly as I made my way back up the steps to the house. Phil called out from one of the rooms, had I found out what all the noise was about? I showed him and he rolled his eyes. ‘What is that?’ I knew that having picked it up and now by taking it to the house it was now ours, but what could we do? We couldn’t leave the poor creature in the state it was in, how could it feed itself, it couldn’t even see? It would definitely die in the next day or so. We were its only hope of survival and, I pointed out, it was black and that was lucky, wasn’t that a sign? Well I thought so, although Spanish people thought black cats were unlucky. So much for signs. Poor kitten. Phil gave its face a wash and un-gooed its eyes then washed its sticky front legs too. Then we gave it some food and it purred like a motor, gobbling and purring until all the food was gone and its little furless belly was stretched tight over its ribs and the giant fleas ran up and down the furless hill. I found a shoebox and settle it down in put in Sardina’s little woolly blanket and it was asleep seconds. Well whatever, two cats, three cats, what difference would it make? We got on with the packing.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Another wonderful beginning
By the end of September we were ready to go. Packed, cleaned and detached. We’d had a goodbye lunch with Ramon and we’d said goodbye to Ines and Luiz, Luiza and Cynthia who had spent the last week or so giving us dire warnings about Portugal, how strange the people were and how odd and difficult the language was, we said goodbye to Luiza but not to Benita. She said she couldn’t face it and neither could I so we just agreed to say ‘Buenos noches’ the night before we left.

At the crack of dawn we loaded the last stuff into the van and then went back to bring the cats. The kitten who we’d called Monkey since he looked more like a monkey than a kitten with his black leathery, furless skin, was easy. I put his shoebox on the front seat and pushed the litter tray on the floor. Lucio and Sardina were a different matter. We’d decided not to squash them into a cat box, the van would be our home and hopefully it wouldn’t take them long to realise. I was worried about Lucio because he was nervous of everything so he would undoubtedly go a bit crazy. But Sardina was always relaxed so we thought he’d be fine. Wrong. We brought one cat each in our arms and put them in the back, I stayed inside and slid the door closed. Lucio immediately dived under the bed but Sardina let out the most blood curdling howl and literally threw himself around the van, hitting all of the walls. I just couldn’t believe it, I’d never seen anything like it, he was hysterical before we’d even driven the fifty yards from the pueblo to the road. We decided that he would calm down, he had to, he couldn’t possibly have the energy to keep up those gymnastics all the way to the south of Portugal. It wasn’t the best start to the journey, neither of us liked the thought of Sardina suffering but we couldn’t think what to do. Lucio meanwhile settled quickly and was sitting on the worktop in the back, hiding under the curtain and watching the passing scenery out of the window. Monkey started off well, sleeping on my lap and waking every hour or so for food and water.

Where were we going? After deciding on Portugal we had deliberated and studied the map, looking for somewhere which resembled Entrimo. Somewhere high and rocky but not in the
north where it would still be cold and where the pueblos were crowded together on the map.

We looked south of the river Tejo where the land opened out and the population more sparse but if we went too far we’d arrive at the Algarve and that would be crowded and expensive. 

So we settled for the Alentejo region while we also fancied an area in the north of the Algarve called Monchique, but there were no campsites there, so we settled for an area called Odemira where we could start our search and manage to visit Monchique and see what it was like. That was our plan, we’d see how far we got before it started to change.

We drove and drove that first day, too nervous to stop even for coffee before Sardina had settled and we felt as if we wanted to put some kilometres between us and Entrimo just so that we’d feel we really had left. The early morning weather in Entrimo had been grey and drizzly but the further south we drove the brighter the sky became. Sitting in the van as it cruised along, happy with its new gasket, the sky turned bluer and bluer by the minute.

Galicia had been wonderful and amazing in an immensely rocky way and I knew that we would never forget the mountains and what it had been like to live there but the weather was grey, like it could be in England and while the summer had been hot it had also been short. September in Entrimo had a sadness to it, a knowing that the summer had gone and there was only sad rain and windy weather to come. Portugal was having none of that, September was still the summer.

We stopped eventually, the need for the toilet and a coffee became too great. I checked in the back, Lucio was dozing on the worktop and there was no sign of Sardina so we’d managed to sneak out. In the bar we felt a little as we had when we’d first arrived in Spain on our first morning off the ferry, trying to buy coffee. But it wasn’t so bad this time, we’d heard Portuguese quite often in Entrimo, people came across the mountains on market day or to buy things from Jose’s fereteria so it wasn’t completely new to us. But hearing everyone speaking Portuguese plus the television blaring was a real assault on our Spanish tuned ears. Portuguese sounds like an old cassette tape playing backwards. Missing letters, weird nasal
sounds and lots and lots of words starting with ‘ssshhhhh’. How would we ever master this? Spanish in Galicia was so lovely and clear, each letter pronounced in exactly the same way, whatever the word. It had been relatively easy to hear words in the street or in the supermarket and then find them in the dictionary when we got home, adding to our vocabulary. Here it was going to require a different way of learning and plainly, a lot more time.

Portuguese bars, even in rural areas were a great improvement on Spanish ones. The coffee was stronger, the atmosphere more lively and the cakes, well, there were cakes and there were sandwiches, two things which had been missing in Galicia. That first bar, in the mountains of Portugal made us feel curiously as if we’d come home. Odd that Portugal should somehow feel less foreign, we could never work out why that was. Maybe because the people were different, more friendly and relaxed and the country felt more open more welcoming to different nationalities and more embracing of different cultures. It felt more connected to the modern world. Or maybe it was simply their love of sandwiches and cakes with their coffee, yes, maybe it was simply that.

We knew that we’d have to stop overnight somewhere on our journey and had decided on a campsite in Almarim not too far south of Lisbon. It was a long, long way from Entrimo but the weather had been good and the roads had just unfurled under the van’s wheels. We arrived at the big campsite before dark and saw that it was full of caravans wrapped up for winter and one other camper in his van. It was sort of like our other camping experience but the weather was warmer and the presence of the caravans made it feel less desolate. We parked and went through the ancient ritual of moving all the stuff off the bed into the cab and prepared to cook supper before the light was gone. We moved around inside the van without opening the sliding door and hoped that now we’d stopped moving Lucio and Sardina would feel happier. Meanwhile it appeared that Monkey had developed an illness. He looked floppy and hot, his eyes were still gooey and now he needed to pee almost every
minute he was awake. Luckily he had slept a lot, as soon as he tried to open his gooey eyes he had to get down off my lap and into the litter tray, then he’d eat and have to go again, then drink and go again, up and down, up and down. It was awful, poor little creature. We’d have to find a vet as soon as we could the next day.

Lucio sat calmly on the sofa now and watched while I made supper Phil started searching for Sardina. It was only a van, where could he have hidden that we couldn’t find him and why hadn’t he come out? Phil soon discovered the reason. Sardina had so desperately searched for a way out of the van that he had got his head stuck between one of the bed legs and the wall of the van. Poor Sardina, poor boy! We pulled the bed out and Sardina was released. He was so happy to see us and to be cuddled and made a fuss of. Luckily he didn’t seem to be hurt from his gymnastics earlier in the day or from being wedged under the bed. He was hungry and thirsty and soon located his bowl, next to Lucio’s. After that he was happy to sit on the sofa and have a wash and minutes later he was asleep, curled up on the furry blanket.

Lucio too settled next to him and Monkey was a small sweaty ball in his box. We managed to slip out for a walk. We’d got as far as the shower block when the only other camper appeared, towel and sponge bag in hand. ‘Hi!’ Amazing to us who had lived amongst Spanish people for so long, someone who wasn’t Spanish, but Dutch. And why would a Dutch man be living in a campervan, seemingly alone, in this part of Portugal? Not on holiday, but working. Piet explained that he was the owner of a flower producing empire back in Holland and he was in Portugal for a season, the length of time it took to grow miniature sunflowers and fly them back to the massive flower markets in Amsterdam. Would we like to see the flowers? Absolutely. Minutes later we were being driven out of Almarim, a few kilometres and then off the road on to dirt tracks through fields and fields of sunflowers. Piet explained that he had planned for the flowers to be ready to pick in successive weeks, pointing out to us the plants which were just coming into bud and then each field with larger and larger blooms and the last ones which were just coming into
flower, these were the ones to be picked tomorrow. Then he showed us how they were cut, all exactly the same length and stacked in special crates before being loaded in to a waiting truck ready to go to the airport in Lisbon. We couldn’t imagine how anyone had got the idea of coming to Portugal, renting some land, buying all the necessary equipment and then getting the whole enterprise up and running. Really impressive, Piet explained that the climate was perfect, the airport was nearby and there were people willing to do the work, mostly women. It was seasonal and soon it would be over for this year, then he’d be going home for three months before coming back for planting time again. Piet picked three sunflowers, they had those small heads with dark orange and yellow petals and gave them to me. I remembered how often I’d seen these flowers in Leeds market, little knowing where they must have come from.

We slept well that night, Sardina and Lucio were on the worktop on their furry blanket and Monkey, who was supposed to be on the seat in the cab near his litter tray came spidering up the bedclothes and tucked himself in next to us. I woke up through the night to the sound of digging in the litter tray and various cats paid visits. We hadn’t slept in such close proximity to a litter tray before and noted that it really wasn’t conducive to a good night’s sleep. At about six o’clock in the morning Sardina came over to snuggle down under the duvet, purring and kneading with his paws, he was recovered and happy. After breakfast I took the washing up along to the sinks and we decided to let Lucio and Sardina out for a wander. They were timid at first, looking round out of the sliding door, sniffing the air. Then they came and followed me to the sinks. They looked at everything and checked under the covered caravans but they didn’t go far from where I was washing up. When I’d finished they came straight back to the van with me and looked around underneath. They were fine about getting back in, until I slid the door shut and Sardina went crazy again. This time I made sure he wasn’t trapped anywhere, just squeezed between two boxes. On we went.
The scenery changed completely. We’d read that Portugal was like two countries, the one north of the river Tejo and the other to the south and it certainly looked to be true. After the crowded north we drove for ages and ages seeing only cork trees. The soil was orange, the sky impossibly, endlessly blue. We hardly saw a pueblo let alone a town, the road just rolled on.

We reckoned we’d get to Odemira by about six in the evening but we wanted to find a vet for poor little Monkey. We stopped in Santiago do Cacem but the vet wasn’t open until the evening so we continued to Cercal where the vet also only had morning surgeries but a friendly woman in a craft shop told us to head for Vila Nova de Milfontes, there was a nice vet there and she would be open at four o’clock. We arrived just before the vet arrived and found a place to park right outside, poor Monkey was still looking sickly and tired from all the getting up and down to the litter tray. The vet was a nice smiley, friendly Portuguese woman who spoke excellent English, she talked to Monkey, stroked his furless back while we told her all about him. She rubbed some special cream into his sticky eyes, and gave him an antibiotic injection and a tube of vitamin stuff to help build him up. She explained that he’d got a urinary infection, quite common in kittens who’d had a difficult start in life. No problem though, he’d be fine after a course of antibiotics. She gave us the tablets for later and some weird sheets of babies nappy material. ‘He’ll probably have diarrhoea once the tablets begin to work but he’ll be fine in four or five days. She charged us five Euros and we were on our way, relieved to have solved Monkey’s problems although a little concerned about cat diarrhoea in a van.

Half an hour later we pulled into the campsite at Zambujeira do Mar. It was lovely, the sun on the sea at the end of the road gave the whole place the most incredible light, it was golden, warm and alive. Nothing at all like Entrimo which was a whole world away. We drove into a spot under some eucalyptus trees and carefully got out of the van. ‘Hello! Come over and have a drink!’ We didn’t even stop to unpack things, we walked over to the encampment of a
couple of professional campers who had the whole set-up, awning, picnic table and chairs, lamps, comfy campervan plus bowls of crisps, peanuts, bread and cheese and bottles of wine. We needed no encouragement, we sat on the plastic chairs and decompessed.

Was this how it was going to be, we wondered. Sunny weather, lots of other campers and plenty of interesting people to talk to. The contrast between this and the first leg of our journey along the north coast of Spain couldn’t have been more stark. This was how it was supposed to have been, we’d just gone to the wrong country. That first evening began so well, we weren’t to know of the tragedy that would visit us later. We chatted with the Dutch couple who were interesting, kind and welcoming until we realised that the sun was sinking and we needed to make supper. Lucio and Monkey were waiting for us and I gave them their food in the cab. Monkey was already looking a lot better, the antibiotic injection was starting to work. Sardina was still hiding but now we knew that he would probably appear once he heard us and knew that the van had stopped moving. Sure enough, as soon as I started cooking Sardina’s sweet little tabby face appeared from under the bed. We ate our supper watching Lucio and Sardina appear and disappear under the bed, behind the cupboards and in the cab, it was all very calm. We felt sorry that it was too late now to let Lucio and Sardina outside as we had done that morning in Almarim, it was too dark, and we wouldn’t be able to see them. We finished eating and Phil stacked the plates and pans in a washing up bowl ready to go across to the sinks to wash up. It was my fault and I’ll never forget it or forgive myself. Phil said to be careful, to open the door quickly so that he could get out but I didn’t do it quickly enough. Sardina saw his chance and he took it, he was far quicker than me, he jumped out the door into the darkness and we never saw him again.

The agony of sadness, the tears and the guilt dragged our insides out. We were sad beyond sadness; we couldn’t believe our lovely Sardina had gone. We took torches and we looked and looked. We walked miles, we called his name and over the next few days we asked everyone we saw if they’d seen him. We made flyers and handed them to everybody and put
them up in shops. Sometimes people said they’d seen a cat, but to most people cats were just cats, tabby, ginger, black and white, they couldn’t say. We began to wonder if he was making his way back to Entrimo, cats can do incredible things. The only comfort we could find in those dark days was that nobody had seen a dead cat. Sardina had run but he was probably safe somewhere. He was friendly and if he’d come across some nice people, who gave him food, he would have stayed there.

Meanwhile we nursed our sadness and worried obsessively about losing Lucio. We couldn’t let him out, supposing he ran away too? That was too awful a thought to bear. But Lucio really wanted to get out, by now we’d been at the campsite for days and he’d had enough. One night, while we were asleep Lucio managed to squeeze himself through the tiny opening we’d left in one of the cab windows for ventilation. We woke up to find him gone too. Obviously we blamed ourselves, it had been wrong to bring them, but what would have happened to them in Entrimo? Neither Luiza, Ines or Candita wanted a cat, no one had cats in their houses even if we had found someone to have them, they’d have had to live outside.

We were raw with sadness about Sardina we couldn’t feel any worse over Lucio. Our misery was one bottomless pit in our chests. Losing the cats was sad enough but it brought to our consciousness the things which were making life possible at that time were so fleeting, so intangible. No home, no friends and no real certainty of where we were going or what we were looking for. Our shaky world was swaying on its way to collapse. We did have Monkey though, Monkey and his diarrhoea which had arrived just as the vet had predicted. Off came the duvet cover for the third time in as many days and bottles of disinfectant were many. But he was happy though and growing. The magic eye cream had sorted out his gummy eyes and he was ready for anything. He thought the van was great, it was his home he didn’t mind if we were parked or if we were driving it was all the same to him. He’d wander through from the cab to the back whilst we were on the road, eat from his bowl, have a drink and then come back through to sit on my lap. At the campsite he was everyone’s friend, sneaking into
tents, climbing into caravans, sitting under awnings, sharing other people’s food. We asked all the other campers if they’d seen Lucio or Sardina but no one had. Eventually we’d been there longer than anyone else, people came on their holidays and then went home. We drove out to look at different pueblos, trying to work out how we’d find somewhere to rent without any help from someone like Ana. It was a lovely area though and we were pleased that we’d made the break with Galicia. Not only had we found a place where we felt we could settle, but the climate was really good. We’d gone to Galicia mainly because we knew it had a climate like Britain. That and the man Phil had met on his computer course. We thought we wouldn’t like the hotter temperatures of the south, now though we were changed people, we’d seen the sun and the incredible light, surely we’d find a way to deal with the heat when it came.

We decided to spend three or four days a week driving around looking for somewhere to rent, we thought we could manage that and use the other days for washing duvet covers, shopping and generally trying to keep life together. We left the campsite after breakfast on each of the days we went searching and in the late afternoon we would return to our spot under the eucalyptus trees, guarded by our folding chairs and washing line. Each day other campers came and went, the day before a German couple with a big dog had arrived and parked next to us. The woman was very fond of Monkey and despite the big dog he had been able to sneak under their caravan and get inside to sit on Mrs German lady’s lap. This evening we stood and chatted and she asked if we had any other cats. She explained that early that morning, when her husband had taken the dog for a walk he had seen a black and white cat in the eucalyptus tree next to our van and wondered if it was ours too. We were too stunned to imagine that it could have been Lucio. Might it be possible that he had come back? We so wanted it to be true but if he had come and not found us maybe he’d gone away again. Supposing he’d come looking for us in the day time and we were out, he wouldn’t know that we’d be back. We walked around the campsite fence calling Lucio’s name but he
didn’t come. Eventually we decided that it was just too incredible to think that he could still be around.

That night as we turned the sofa into the bed for about the four hundredth time we heard a noise, Monkey heard it too, a bump on the roof. Phil took the torch to scan around outside maybe a branch had fallen on the van. He slid open the side door and we both heard excited meowing from the roof. Lucio was back! It was absolutely amazing. Lucio who had always been so timid and scared of everything. He had been away for three weeks but managed to find his way back to us by knowing the van and where we parked it. How could he have known? We just couldn’t imagine, but we were so thrilled to see him and he was ecstatic to be home. He was uncharacteristically friendly and silly, purring as loudly as he could manage, which was quiet really and rolling over and over on the bed. He looked a bit thin but otherwise fine and was very happy to see his bowl full of food. After he’d crunched his was through about half of it he jumped back up onto the bed and settled down, not even having a wash first before sinking into a deep sleep.

After that he came and went as he pleased. When we went out in the van during the day, he stayed behind, preferring to skip away to the trees and wild land outside the campsite fence. But when we drove back into our spot at the end of the afternoon, he was always, always waiting for us on one of the folding chairs under the eucalyptus tree. We parked, opened the side door and in he jumped ready for his tea. Lucio was our hero. Now he was back our heartache was soothed slightly and he was so happy. He sat in the van each evening watching DVDs with us. Now Phil had given up any hope of generating our own electricity he had bought a simple extension lead and we plugged it into the campsite hook up and life was as good as it could be, living in a van. We sat cosily on the sofa with Lucio and Monkey snuggled up on their furry blanket next to us and the fairy lights twinkled along the curtain rail. We were at home, sort of, relaxing and watching our favourite films.
It was fun being at the campsite, apart from the raw sadness we felt everyday for Sardina.

After almost two years in Galicia it was amazing to find that the world was still there. We met lots of interesting people and had intense, short friendships with them all, knowing, like all holiday romances, they had to end. We met other people who were hoping to find a house to buy, sensible people who still had a home to go back to in Germany when things didn’t work out. We sat and talked and ate with lots of different people. A cycling couple from Holland who were starting a new life. They’d been hairdressers in Amsterdam before he became ill and they had sold up and bought a piece of land in a rural area of Holland where they planned to spend the summers. The winters they were going to cycle and camp in a tent around Europe and even visit India. It was a great evening, we traded haircuts for a hot meal in the van. Then there was a young couple from Berlin, he an architect from Sweden and she a writer who had been working for a modern dance company in her home city. We sat on the grass near the van, lighting candles as it got dark, eating and drinking wine while Monkey did the rounds for scraps.

We really did feel as if we’d come back from some distant planet and we weren’t sad about leaving Entrimo. We missed all our neighbours, Ines, Benita, Candita and Luiza. And were so grateful for all of the kindness they had shown us as we groped our way to understanding more about life in Spain. Now we were back to learning again, about life in another country and obviously we knew that as well as having a lovely time on the campsite we were still working towards our dream and we still had the plan.

Our three months of camping at Zambujeira eventually came to an end when, after a really hard search, we finally found a house to rent. Luckily just at the right time because the campsite was closing for the winter. Our efforts to find somewhere cheap to rent had included putting up flyers and asking everyone we met if they knew of anywhere and in the end we got lucky. We had gone to the library in Odemira to use the internet and a wonderfully friendly woman who worked at the local library, Luz, called us over. She said
she’d heard of a little house just out of town and explained where we could find the owner who actually lived right near the library.

We met Senhor Antonio in the square outside the local council offices. He was as shy as anyone might be of meeting strange foreign people with virtually non-existent Portuguese, but he was friendly and polite and said that he’d take us to see the house. His car was ancient and still sporting an expo sticker for when it took place in Lisbon countless years before. We settled in to the hot vinyl interior as the car sweated its way out of town and over the bridge. We began the steep climb up the winding road on the road south. Minutes later we were creeping along a narrow, bumpy track which led to the tiniest house ever. Like all traditional houses it was made from rammed earth, or taipa as it was called locally, and was like an old bungalow crouching below the level of the land around it. The outside walls were white with a yellow band painted around the windows. All the houses everywhere had either blue or yellow stripes, it was the rule. The house was 25 square metres; a living space about four paces long and one and a bit wide, a kitchen with a fireplace taking up virtually half the room, a tiny bedroom and, by comparison, a rather spacious bathroom. It was damp and grubby but more importantly, cheap. We agreed to move in after the weekend. Senhor Antonio patiently explained how the gas water heater worked, hooked on the wall in the kitchen and said he would take out all the old bits of furniture and the broken cooker. He was obviously excited by the idea of tenants and said that he and his friend would come and give the place a coat of paint over the weekend.

As ever, I was enthusiastic about leaving the van. The wet weather was bringing back too many memories of a previous winter which we were eager to forget. Phil, also, as ever, didn’t like the house, it was too near the busy road, it looked damp and miserable, it wasn’t going to help us keep the plan on track. But what else could we do? We’d found nowhere else, added to which the campsite we had all got used to was closing for the winter. The house wasn’t great but surely it would do? We both also knew that by leaving the campsite we were saying
goodbye to ever seeing Sardina again, even if there were a chance. We were leaving and tried not to think of his little face searching for us at the closed and deserted campsite.

Feeling sad all over again we left the campsite and moved into Senhor Antonio’s house. The only furniture in the place was a hefty three-seater sofa and an old table with legs which had been partially eaten away by either mice or incredibly aggressive insects. There was a folding picnic table in the kitchen and a sink unit for the smallest woman in the world, the edge of it came to just above my knees. Washing up would mean bending virtually in half. The last piece of furniture was a little single bed. We unloaded our stuff from the van and this time dismantled the bed and brought it inside then unscrewed the cooker from its place in the van’s worktop. We found some bricks outside and stacked them on top of each other as a base for the cooker in the corner of the kitchen. We managed to get all the boxes of stuff out of the van, and then they were everywhere. We closed the door as the rain poured down.

Phil was tetchy, in his usual ‘I hate moving’ mood, when a little woman appeared at the door wearing wellies and sheltering under a huge umbrella. She introduced herself as our neighbour from across the piece of land behind the house, her name was Maria she and her husband Agosto, had seven acres of land all around their house and they grew everything. Clearly houses with land were not ‘muy dificil’ to come across here. It was however sort of difficult to understand what she was saying. She was much better at understanding our Spanish. Portuguese was hard to decipher, the words ran into each other in a nasal, slurring, singsong sort of way. We would have been worried about this at the beginning of our journey when we’d first arrived in Spain but now we knew that we would understand things in time. Maria was friendly and pleased to have new neighbours, she made us come with her to the end of the little strip of cement in front of our house so that she could point out where she lived, which was about 100 metres away, and told us to come over if we needed anything. Nice, we thought, it was good to know someone and we began to relax about our new surroundings.
We couldn’t see very much out of the windows because there was only one tiny one at the back which over-looked part of Maria’s empire and the bedroom and bathroom had even smaller windows, about a foot by eighteen inches at most and they didn’t fully open. For modesty reasons they were glazed in frosted glass and just sort of flapped downwards a little way before resting on some metal brackets. It wasn’t possible to see even if you tried to wedge your head sideways and peep out. The only door in the place was half glazed also with frosted glass but we could see the world from there when it was open. There was a flat piece of weed-strewn soil outside the door, edged by agricultural land that sloped up all around. There were orange and lemon trees, owned by Senhor Antonio and once we’d got to know each other better he said we could pick what we wanted. The walls of the house were about 2 feet thick, the ceiling was also the roof. Inside it was slatted pine up to the eaves and there were old tiles above. Lucio discovered early on that it was easy to get up on to the roof by scaling the tumble down walls at the side of the shed. We nearly died of fright the first night he got up there and ran about clattering the tiles.

The rain rained for the first week we were in the house and it felt damp and cold. We dragged out the electric radiator and were sorry that Senhor Antonio had said we shouldn’t light a fire in the fireplace, there was some problem with the chimney and he was worried that we might burn the house down. We huddled around the little heater. One day during our first week at the little house we set out to go shopping, driving the van slowly up the narrow track, one wheel each side of the strip of grass and weeds growing down the middle. Phil drove carefully, the track was only just wide enough for the van. Well, it would have been had the grass on each side of the track hadn’t been disguising the absence of track. As Phil drove forward one of the back wheels slipped off the track and dangled over the ploughed field a couple of feet below the track. We were stuck. Trying to drive forward had the effect of slewing the van further round, the front wheels were spinning and sinking into the soft surface of the track and the back of the van was trying to follow the dangling wheel over the edge. Now what? We had discovered that awkward and difficult things requiring
help only seemed to happen to us when we were somewhere weird and didn’t know anyone
to ask. Senhor Antonio lived in Odemira, Maria probably wouldn’t be able to drag the van
back onto the track, we had to find someone else. I was volunteered to go and find help on
the grounds that my non-existent Portuguese was better than Phil’s non-existent Portuguese.
I left the van and walked up the soggy track, the grey clouds were heavy with more rain.
There was a house a few hundred metres away near the main road and we had seen the man
who lived there driving a little tractor and luckily he was at home. But my luck didn’t extend
to the tractor being able to pull the van. Manuel, the tractor owner tried but the van was too
heavy, the little tractor was almost standing up on its little back wheels with the effort.
Manuel apologised for not being able to help but suggested I go in search of Agosto Gaspare
who lived further on in the pueblo, about ten houses away he said. Phil and I both walked
and counted the houses as we went, until we arrived at a house with a bigger tractor parked
at the side, cosseted with blankets over its engine and a plastic tablecloth tied over the seat.
Agosto Gaspare and his wife were cheery folk and against the odds managed to understand
what I was saying. I really couldn’t work out how. Minutes later, blanket and tablecloth
removed and Phil leading the way, walking along in front of the chugging tractor and I was
sitting up on top, next to Agosto, perched on one of the giant mud guards. I’d often
wondered what it felt like to sit on a tractor, although I hadn’t imagined sitting on the
mudguard.

It was an easy job for the tractor once the rope had been tied to the towing point. Slowly the
rope became taut and the van rose and settled perfectly on the track. Luckily the back axle
hadn’t broken or any other nightmarish thing. Agosto was pleased the task had been so easy
and came to coil up his rope. He waved as he turned the tractor towards his house and we
set off once again for shopping in Odemira.

Pueblos in Portugal were entirely different from those we’d got used to in Galicia. Here
people lived in houses next to the land they used for their garden or vegetable plot, no
 trailing around with wheelbarrow loads of tools from one tiny strip of land to another and amazingly they seemed to grow even more produce. We weren’t sure whether we had arrived in the vegetable garden of Odemira or if everywhere was like this. Every piece of land was cultivated, even the smallest plots like front gardens had rows of lettuces under trees, parsley and coriander bushing out of window boxes, broad beans and peas already marching in lines despite it only being December. There were orange and lemon trees everywhere laden with ripening fruit, we hadn’t know when they were in season but it appeared that December would be the start. All houses here were like ours, some modernised but others just the same, single story, thick walls, tiny windows. Everyone had plants growing near their door. Any little path or patio was covered by rampaging climbers, trees and masses of plants growing in any sort of container that came to hand; old plastic buckets, empty olive oil cans, paint tins. It was testament to the climate or the green fingers of the Portuguese, everything was growing in such profusion. Any structures supporting all this growth were makeshift, cobbled together confections of bits of metal pipe and wooden poles propped up on a brick, stray bits of wire netting, anything which helped the plants scramble on their way. There were so many strange plants we didn’t recognise, so exotic and lush. There was a particularly strange climber we saw in many places with feathery, fern-like leaves and masses of orange or white trumpets in clusters. It must have been a fast grower because every time we saw it, it was rampant and the structure supporting it had long since disappeared under the growth with poles and sticks propping it up as trumpets scampered across garage roofs and along fences. I couldn’t wait to find our own place and make a living porch with all these plants.

Maria’s house, a little way back beyond ours, had all these plants and more. She and Agosto had a weekly market stall in Odemira and grew vegetables and flowers to sell there. We hadn’t been in our house very long before we were given a tour of their empire, it was really impressive. Maria was in her late sixties and Agosto was seventy two and they could work outside in a way we could only ever wish to. It wasn’t that they worked quickly or vigorously,
it was that everything they did was achieved by steady daily dedication. Agosto had a small tractor which he used to prepare the larger areas of soil but everything else was done by hand. Planting, weeding, organising the rushing water into the little canals which watered each bed, pruning vines, picking oranges. Their days were endless and we learned masses from them. Not just about agriculture but pace and attitude to life.

In those first few months Maria and I got to know each other. She showed me her collection of crocheted items and photos of her daughter and grandchildren who lived in Holland, old photos of her and Agosto’s families who had all lived there. The photos, while not being that old showed how quickly Portugal had become a modern country. In the 1970’s and 80’s the pictures showed life more like the 1950’s in Britain, ancient cars, strange clothes, a rural life from another era. Now Portugal had leapfrogged the gradual modernisation of other countries and while we did see donkeys working the land in some places, younger people were gliding about in big 4x4 cars and endlessly chatting into their mobile phones. In fact there were plenty of older people with mobile phones too and these people had never actually had a phone in their homes, it all seemed so strange to us.

While our arrival in Portugal wasn’t as traumatic as when we had driven off the ferry in Bilbao we still felt a bit disorientated. Our camping in Portugal had been a happy experience, apart from loosing Sardina and despite the rain the climate was different. When the rain stopped the skies were so intensely blue, clear and bright. It wasn’t so cold either, well, not outside anyway. It was freezing indoors, as everyone else testified. Here was another nation of people gritting their teeth and pretending cold weather didn’t exist. I wondered if it was because traditionally, people had worked outside all day long. On all but the rainiest days of the winter it was possible to be more comfortable outside than indoors. The storks and egrets thought so, they were always outside and not in some hotter country. The egrets following Agosto’s tractor or just picked through the soil and the storks glided down to haughtily stand or lower their necks to find things in the soil. There were two storks
nests near the house and we loved to hear the clacking sound they made to greet each other. Yes, this was indeed a very foreign place. And we somehow felt different. More confident than we had been in Galicia and even though we still had no idea how we would find our place, we felt even more committed to the journey as much as ‘the plan’. Long gone was the idea of a three month search and then settling in to our new home. We had realised when we had arrived in Galicia that things were way too different for that sort of decision. Also our experience in Entrimo had taught us that there were many important things to understand and learn before feeling comfortable enough to make any big financial decision. That sounded like a reasonable explanation for our delay, but was it really that? Or was it simply that we hadn’t really found the right place? Who knew? All we could say was that everything we had done so far, while not being what we’d set out to do, did actually feel right. Now we were trying to understand our new patch and we had our previous experiences to guide us.

We needed to meet people to understand how buying land happened here. Also, did it come in big or small pieces? We had seen an estate agent’s office in the next town with pictures of the sort of place we were hoping to find, so did people use estate agents here or did people still sell to each other as they had in Galicia? Happily alongside all these confusing things there was real, everyday life to enjoy and it was so different from Entrimo. Odemira was a small town but it had lots of things going on. There was the lovely library and an even more lovely cinema, which was run by the local council. There were festivals, or ‘festas’ to celebrate all sorts of things from the harvest of the sweet potato to the anniversary of the revolution, it was all very exciting. Settling into Odemira wasn’t half as difficult as settling into Entrimo had been. Maybe because there was so much more life in Odemira or maybe we had just adapted to being in strange places and this experience was another for our growing collection.
Our house was really, really tiny, a bit like being in the van but with our own bathroom and kitchen. We didn’t mind though, we didn’t aim to be there for long, it was just more comfortable than the van and it allowed us to feel more as if we lived somewhere. It felt different, living in a place where our three neighbours were all growing food around their houses instead of disappearing from the pueblo as they had in Entrimo, people here were just outside. Our house has a hectare of land with it but nearly all of that was being used by Agosto. However, we had been allowed to use a little corner which was shady and had a spring. No one had used it for years and the brambles, bindweed and awful canna lilies were rampant. However it didn’t take us long to clear it and once we’d started to make a garden our neighbours came by and brought us seedlings or little plants and gave us advice on planting. It was really friendly, like belonging to a gardening club.

We discovered that growing food and baking were closely linked to the ‘festas’, local festivals, in fact the festas marked the year more profoundly than any calendar. Pricking out chrysanthemum plants was done with ‘Todos los Santos’ in mind, the celebration of All Souls, or Halloween on 31st of October. The planting of potatoes in December was done so that the first new potatoes would be ready for Easter. As to the celebratory baking, Folars, the Easter cake was a small, sweet loaf made using soft cheese and sugar with an egg, still in its shell, pushed into the top and covered with a dough cross. The folar was delicious as were the ‘sonhos da abobra’ one of many fried delights. These were made from batter using cooked sweet pumpkin which was dropped into hot fat in little ball shapes, we loved these Christmas specialities, as did Agosto, so Maria made them at other times too. She also made another fried delight called fios, which we called ‘sweaty things’. At first we were unsure about fried things eaten cold because they looked cold and sweaty. Maria would bring us one of her tiny plastic washing up bowls full of these flat fried things which were about 6 inches across. They were a bit like fried Yorkshire puddings, if it’s possible to imagine a fried Yorkshire pudding, the same ingredients, but with sugar on top and obviously, fried. After we got used to the strangeness of cold fat they were delicious.
Bread was another matter. After our time in Entrimo where the only bread available was the French stick, quite tasty when bought from Juan the bread man on his morning rounds but hard as a baseball bat by afternoon. We were quite keen to try Portuguese bread and it was a real treat, baked in wood ovens in the traditional way, big flattened rounds weighing up to a kilo each and with a strong malty flavour. There were countless little bakers in various pueblos and each took to the road in the morning in their little white vans, although many people still baked their own, including our neighbours who had their own in wood ovens outside their houses.

Monkey and Lucio were happily settled now, Lucio roaming into the more wild edges of hamlet and Monkey growing bigger and getting more daring. Monkey and Lucio weren’t the only cats around we discovered after living in Senhor Antonio’s house for just a few days. A huge, long-haired tortoiseshell cat came calling and realised just how easy it was going to be to boss us all around. In no time she was sneaking in and raiding the bowls of cat food in the kitchen and then stretching out on the sofa. It was hard to discourage her since the door was open all day long and she just barged in with plenty of attitude. Maria saw her pushing through the door curtain on one occasion and asked if we had fed her, then rolled her eyes at our sheepish expressions. What could we do? Lady, as we christened her, was top cat and we, as well as Lucio and Monkey knew it. She was tough and a bully and by their reckoning best left to do as she pleased. She didn’t actually move in because she had her own home plus all the other neighbours she had intimidated, but she did call on us every day for food and a snooze. That was until spring came. She had been wobbling around with a massively pregnant stomach, getting bigger each day then one afternoon we arrived back home to discover that Lady had managed to get through the small back window and was in the throes of delivering a heap of kittens on the sofa. Being the old hand she obviously was, she was completely relaxed about the whole thing, washing the latest arrival and then producing another until there were five kittens of assorted colours around her on her sofa. Heartlessly we gave Lady a couple of days to recover then packed her and her kittens into a box and
took them home, although we had the distinct feeling though that it wouldn’t be the last time we saw lady and her family.

Life was becoming settled, however our relaxation was never complete because we knew that we had to start thinking about finding our real home. We definitely felt a bit better about it all than we had in Entrimo, although feeling better didn’t mean it was any easier. Definitely there were places for sale here and there were estate agents, although we quickly realised that people selling their own pieces of land or tumbledown homes were offering them at much lower prices than through the estate agents. It seemed hopeful, although Odemira was much more expensive than Entrimo, there was the beach and it wasn’t too far for weekenders from Lisbon to buy places and prices reflected that. There were some cheaper areas which were further away inland but these places were also too far from everything else too, like shops and life in general. Tied up with all our house hunting was still the issue of how we would afford to live, something which still reduced us to sickness. But surely, there were more possibilities in such a touristy area? Maybe we could start by making crafts to sell. This sounded a reasonable idea, but could it possibly work? We agonised as we always did over our unknown future and how we would survive financially. Around us we saw other strangers arriving and plunging into buying their new homes. Countless times we saw obviously ‘foreign’ people with their estate agents, being shepherded around or sitting in bars with folders full of papers. The foreign people always looked just like we felt, nervous to the point of hysteria. Well, we almost felt like that, but at least we hadn’t committed ourselves yet and could feel the relief of being able to take things slowly while we lived at Senhor Antonio’s house. So far our house buying research kept revealing new stuff for us to worry about, like places with a lack of water supply, bad neighbours, potential motorway building schemes. So many things to add to our list of worries, but we did go and see quite a few places. Once Maria had told everyone that she knew about our quest the track was kept weed free by a more or less constant stream of people with old houses they had inherited, scrubby bits of land and remote bits of hillside they were hoping to turn into ready cash. It
was all good experience and we began to know what questions we should ask and to sort of understand how to discover if what we were being shown was really what it seemed or tied up with all sorts of legal problems as so many places were. But even though we had plenty of adventures and set off on many missions to see ‘casas bonitas’ or beautiful houses we never saw THE place or if we did see somewhere like it, the price was way out of our orbit. However, while we were on with our mission impossible, we did at least feel that we were making a life for ourselves.

Time passed quickly in Monte da Horta, maybe because the cold, wet, winter weather soon disappeared and the sight of tourists in their campervans made the spring arrive early. The growing year never had a fallow period, there was always something to be planted. Maria arrived at our door almost every day with a bucket load of something to either eat or plant. One of the loveliest things was watercress. Behind our house on Maria’s land there was a spring and watercress needs running water. There was a variety already growing with abandon but Maria wasn’t happy with this variety and sowed more seed, the plants went wild. She said we could pick whatever we wanted but more often than not she brought us bucket-loads of the stuff whenever she was passing on her way to visit neighbours or friends or even to catch the bus. Maria always left her muddy shoes outside our door and changed into her ‘going out’ shoes, rushing off, late as usual, to catch the bus or for the once-monthly mass at the tiny church in Sao Pedro.

Friday’s were Maria’s busiest day of the week, no visiting anyone or trips to town, the whole day was dedicated to preparations for her market stall. Each season had its own crops which needed picking and preparing in accordance to her custom. Oranges were picked and wiped with a cloth, then packed into crates by size. Not too many crates, she liked to sell all that she had took and knew well just how much her customers were buying. Nabo, turnips, were dug up and taken to the huge water tank which was almost Maria’s height. Here she would dunk the nabos and tie them into neat bundles. Watercress too was picked deftly with a
penknife and tied with a reed in a thick bundle. Broad beans were easier, although picking took ages. Huge bucket upon huge bucket was filled and Maria never came home from the market with a single bean left over. Peas. Peas were always difficult to cultivate and however many rows she and Agosto planted they never seemed to get any more than a plentiful harvest for friends and family. Spinach, beetroot radishes, pumpkin, chou-chou (a strange tiny pear-shaped pumpkin that scrambled over trees and sheds). Beans, the entire summer long was dominated by beans which were planted and picked and planted and picked. Endless, endless beans. Coriander and parsley in little bouquets, tomatoes, peppers, little fat cucumber (the pepino). Flowers in bunches were Maria’s favourite job, the thing she left until last so that she could enjoy doing it. She loved to pick whatever flowers she had in bloom and arrange them with greenery into the perfect bunch, tying them with reeds. By the time night fell across Monte da Horta Maria was just about ready, everything stacked in the lean-to garage ready for loading into Agosto’s old van the next morning. The only thing in Maria’s garden which needed her attention before setting off to market at eight in the morning was the killing of hens or rabbits which people had ordered through the week. Occasionally the buyer was happy to buy the creature alive but mostly Maria did the killing, skinning or plucking early in the morning. This was something I could never get used to.

At one point Agosto’s old Renault Express broke down and the diagnosis was serious, it needed a new engine. Agosto was beyond depressed, he was actually in bed for two days at the thought of having to spend out so much money. In reality Agosto never went anywhere in the van, except to the market on Saturday with Maria and that was only three kilometres away. No his real anguish was about going to the bar in Sao Pedro, just one kilometre away. It was part of the daily life to hear Agosto’s van throatily chug up the track and between our two neighbour’s houses and then reappear a couple of seconds later at the top of our track. He trundled past Manuel’s tractor and then out onto the main road, past Maria da Horta’s house and then into Sao Pedro, coasting to a halt outside the grubby bar about one hundred metres later. Agosto could easily have walked to the bar and we had actually seen him do it.
when he’d hurt his shoulder and couldn’t drive, but the thought of having no van was too awful. Aside from the bar business, how would he get Maria to market? After the couple of days of sadness in bed and a conversation with his son, Agosto rang the mechanic and ordered the new engine. As he said, he was already seventy so the new engine would probably outlive him. Decision made all Agosto had to do was now wait for the mechanic to get the engine and fit it, which would all take a couple of weeks. In the meantime, I volunteered to drive Maria to market in our van. She had so many customers it was impossible to think of there being no Maria at the market, although taking her turned out to be an experience which required greater reserves of patience than I knew I had. Everything had to be done in precisely the way it had always been done. Luckily Agosto helped load up the van and as ever Maria was never happy with how he’d done it and the traditional grousing continued as he loaded our van. Then Maria disappeared into the house to get changed or put the final touches to the bags of ‘sweaty things’ she’d made to share out amongst fellow stall holders and friends or she had to wrap up dead animals or worse, push some huge, unhappy cockerel into a sack ready for its journey to a customer. I felt the moral compromise of helping deliver a bird to its death I really did. Should I open the sack and let it out? Should I say I wouldn’t take it? In the end I did neither, I was chicken when it came to it.

When we arrived at the market Maria’s customers were already waiting, gathered around the entrance the building. They couldn’t wait for her to unload her things and set out her stall they launched into her as soon as we heaved the heavily laden trolley into the market hall. How she could remain so calm amazed me. Maybe her berating Agosto about loading up badly or worrying about whether she had enough time to collect a few more eggs, flowers, beans or whatever was her anxiety bubbling out so that by the time we arrived she was calm and completely unflappable. Sometimes I got to look after the stall when things calmed down a bit and Maria went roving to the butchers for some bones for Chico her dog or to chat with friends. When she returned she always brought us bread rolls to have with some coffee.
from the little café and every time she’d ask me what I thought of the rolls. I was so hungry by this point anything would have been delicious. And I always said they were lovely but Maria always screwed up her nose and said 'too much yeast’

Maria couldn’t drive so having me around with the van was a real bonus. A woman willing to take her places. I enjoyed our trips and Maria only ever wanted to go places when she really needed to, like to the Pharmacy or to deliver, well, yes, deliver a chicken. But after we’d been living near each other for a while, like more than a year or two, and I’d got as enthusiastic as she was about the delights of local seasonal food, there were even more possibilities. Like the autumn harvest of peanuts and sweet potatoes. In fact the area between where we lived and the sea, which was about 4 kilometres wide, was the sweet potato and peanut capital of the country. Maybe it was the soft, sandy soil, the right amount of rainfall and the bright sunlight, whatever, it was this was the place for the best and Maria and I had been planning a trip. One sunny Sunday afternoon we decided to set off to find ourselves some sacks of both things.

I told Phil of our trip and he rolled his eyes and said he’d happily stay behind, who knew where we’d end up or what time we’d be back on one of Maria’s missions. So Maria and I set off alone at about three o’clock in the afternoon, Agosto was at the bar, Maria’s washing up from lunch was done and the autumn sun was at its very best. We left Monte da Horta and drove the short distance along the main road before turning left towards the coast. The fields on either side of the road were planted up with young orange trees and a complicated watering system. Acres and acres of oranges, Maria was impressed and said she thought the owners had to be foreign people, no one in Portugal had that sort of money. I tried to imagine how different the fields would look in a few years time when the trees were grown and the fruit was ready to be picked. A big change from the scrubby abandoned land that was here before the fruit tree magnet started his empire.
We stopped at the first bar we came to, we both liked to make the most of our trips out and coffee was important. Plainly in such a small community everyone knows everyone and certainly everyone always knew Maria. This bar was at the edge of a tiny hamlet with open fields all around, one of those landscapes where the huge blue sky touched the soil in every direction. Maria was greeted by all the people in the bar and she fell into explaining who I was, as they expected her to. It was something like, ‘this is my neighbour, she’s English, lives in the house owned by Senhor Antonio, you know, Senhor Antonio, his wife cooked lunches at the secondary school, yes, that’s her, yes, their daughter works in the bank, that’s right. Yes, English, yes she’s married, her husband’s at home. No, no children, but such good people, I can ask them to take me places when I need to, they’re really good neighbours, etc. etc. I just hoped that Maria wouldn’t have to tell this story too many times that afternoon or we’d never find the sweet potatoes or ever get home.

After coffee we set off again towards the cluster of houses up ahead where Maria thought she could see someone she knew, maybe we could ask them about the sweet potatoes. Obviously, we could go straight to Fataca, the village where we knew there were plenty of both peanuts and potatoes but she’d heard there was a man who had particularly good ones who had a place just outside the pueblo somewhere. This didn’t sound good, Maria was notoriously bad at directions. Anyway I pulled up abruptly as Maria leaned out of the window to shout at a woman in her garden. ‘Ola Maria!’ The woman came across, peering at the van before yelling with laughter at realising it was Maria in a strange vehicle. They exchanged news about each other’s families before our Maria launched into an abridged version of who I was. Finally we got to the question of where the man Manuel’s fields were. ‘No, no, not along this road,’ she said, tutting and wagging a finger, we had to turn round go back to the main road, take the next left and we’d see the place.

I was really looking forward to the sweet potatoes which I roasted in the oven. They were delicious although Maria did them better in her wood oven after she’d made bread, sweet
potatoes in their soft jackets, wonderful. And the peanuts. Until you’ve tasted the king of peanuts roasted in a wood oven, you haven’t tasted peanuts. The scheme that Maria and I had hatched was for each of us to buy peanuts but for Maria to keep them so that she could roast some each time she baked bread. I was ruined now for ordinary bought peanuts, they were just tasteless. So despite the challenging nature of our tour of the district, it would be worth it in the end if we could find our man Manuel or the people in Fataca, or both. Shortly after our conversation with the other Maria we arrived outside a house on the correct road. There was a huge yard to one side full of tractors and sack and sacks of sweet potatoes. This had to be the place, but where was Manuel? Out of the van Maria struggled and then marched up to the front door where she pounded with her fist and when there was no answer she shouted. Not like ordinary shouting, this was outdoor bringing the sheep down from the hills shouting, guaranteed to be heard in the nearest three pueblos. Inevitably Manuel, who was out somewhere heard the racket and shortly afterwards rumbled into the yard on a tractor. ‘Ola Maria!’

Manuel was pleased to see Maria and they chatted on about family, friends, gossiped about local characters then, at length the door of the house opened and out popped Mrs Manuel who had been oblivious to all of Maria’s shouting and banging. More gossip followed for about forty minutes before the subject of sweet potatoes was broached. Eventually we followed Manuel to the big shed while he talked as if the treasure we were searching for was extremely rare, this from the man who was standing in front of about 400 sacks of the beauties. There was earnest discussion, Maria paying Manuel huge compliments and suggesting numbers of sacks she was keen to buy and that of course, if he didn’t have any right now maybe he could deliver some to her house during the week. Well, maybe he could find some, he said weakening slightly and Maria sensed things were going her way and repeated how she had heard that his crop was better than anyone else’s. Finally he said he’d go and see what he’d got.
What was this all about? Surely we were surrounded by sacks of sweet potatoes what was the problem? Maria explained that all the potatoes around us in sacks were already sold, sweet potatoes don’t store well so they were dug up when the buyer made an order. It’s all very difficult, she said. An order comes in the potatoes had to be dug and delivered quickly, the season is short and best before the rain starts. All very complex. Maybe we’d be going home empty handed, I hadn’t realised there were such technical problems to growing sweet potatoes.

Manuel appeared again with one of his workers and ten sacks of potatoes in the scoop of a digger. They weren’t huge sacks, more like ten kilo bags but there were plenty of potatoes in ten sacks. Maria daringly pointed out that I had been hoping for a couple of bags too and Manuel didn’t look too pained before dragging a couple of bags out of the boot of his car. Our mission was half complete now although Maria was still hankering after a few more bags, hoping that Manuel could be persuaded to deliver them during the week. Finally I managed to herd her back to the van while she valiantly extended her wheedling with Manuel until finally he relented, yes, he’d bring ten more sacks over next week. Result.

Back in the van we set off for the little huddle of houses called Fataca, too small in my mind to be a real pueblo it only consisted of a tiny bar at the junction of the only road into the pueblo with the main road and just six houses. There could have been more to it, maybe more houses somewhere but I’d never seen them. The place we were looking for was the home of the King of peanuts, he had specialised in growing them for years and years. Now everyone who wanted to either grow their own or buy a couple of sacks for roasting knew where to come.

There was some local familial connection between the peanut family and our locale, Maria da Horta’s son Fernando had married Mr Peanut’s daughter, so that was going to help oil the wheels of commerce this afternoon. Peanut headquarters were two undistinguished houses crouching beside a very narrow track. Past the houses was a yard wide enough for a tractor
and a barn which was more like a series of sheds leaning against each other. The last shed had a hen house with a little hen run tacked on to it, made from bits of corrugated iron offering a bit of shade for the birds who were sitting companionably fluffed out in the dusty soil.

Everything around the house looked extremely orderly and unnaturally clean as if someone was in that yard sweeping the cement day and night. I drove in and Maria was enthusiastically out of the van before I’d put on the brake. The place was totally deserted, just as it had been at Manuel’s. However, Maria nodded knowingly and set off at almost trotting speed out of the yard and turned left, heading further along the track as it disappeared into a narrow footpath, then she began shouting. This time an echo of Maria’s yelling went up from somewhere below the horizon in the field opposite the house. I caught up with Maria and we walked towards the sound, eventually seeing a tractor with some figures behind it, we waded towards them through the peanut plants.

It’s strange but Portuguese people always appeared rather sheepish or reticent when first greeted. No one ever said, ‘Yes, here we are! We’re digging up peanuts!’ or ‘Over here, come and give us a hand!’ or ‘You’ve come to see how the other half works, ha ha!’ Nothing jokey and the peanut family were exactly like this. They mumbled ‘Ola’ to Maria who greeted Mr and Mrs Peanut and their remaining unmarried daughter while they all looked at their feet and shrugged as if they’d been caught stealing peanuts or sheep rustling or something. Maria gamely ploughed on, determined to get conversation going while Mr Peanut twiddled the key in the tractor’s ignition and the female peanut people stuffed their hands in the pockets of their house coats and looked uncomfortable. Even people like Manuel had needed encouragement to admit he’d even got any sweet potatoes. After a while Maria managed to get a flicker of conversation started with old Mrs Peanut and eventually it was enough to lever the family back to the yard for the bargaining to begin. Plainly Maria had stamina for this type of quest while I was beginning to wilt. In the yard there was a repeat of Manuel’s’
reticence about the availability of peanuts despite us being surrounded by field upon field of the things. Eventually old Mr Peanut got off his tractor and wandered half-heartedly over to the house while the women folk kept an eye on us. He returned with a big black key and walked to the doors of the first leaning shed. Inside there were sacks and sacks of peanuts and sweet potatoes nestling in the darkness. Now the Peanut people began to warm up, a sack was dragged towards a strange old set of scales, the base a big metal plate near the floor and a sliding gauge thing on a metal pole about a metre off the ground. How many kilos did we want? Would we like to see the peanuts for planting? How about peanuts which had already been roasted? Now the salesman part of Mr Peanut was coming out it was hard to keep him focussed on what we wanted. He started telling Maria about his sweet potatoes, how they were second to none in the district and how she should get at least one sack just to see. Then he suggested we come and look at the patch where he had his sweet potato clamp, a sandy hill where he was storing his already dug up potatoes. Maria didn’t say we’d just bought a couple of hundredweight but showed a polite interest and wandered out to look at the clamp as if they could look different from the ones we’d just got. Mr Peanut dug in the sand and eventually leaned down and scraped off a couple of red-skinned beauties. Maria sucked her teeth and looked while Mr Peanut went into ecstasies about the perfection of his crop. Would we ever leave?

About twenty minutes later we were back in the shed while the peanut family weighed sacks and tied their tops. Maria had succumbed to a couple of sacks of potatoes as well as the peanuts. Prices per kilo were talked over while Maria squeezed and patted the sacks until the price was agreed. I swooped in and began gathering sacks and packing our haul into the van, hoping to get Maria rounded up and ready to head off. Sadly the Peanut people were warmed up now and wanted to gossip about everyone and make an afternoon of it, showing us their shed of peanuts for next year’s planting.
After about another half an hour we were back in the van and more than ready to set off home, the sun was already sinking as we left the yard and pulled out onto the road. Maria seemed slightly worried about being out on the road in the evening and was keen to be back on our own patch before it got dark. We passed the bar on the corner of the main road and Maria suggested we take a short cut, turning left instead of right. At this point anything that got us home quicker was a good idea, even if I didn’t know the roads around Fataca very well. After I’d been driving around for about half an hour I realised Maria didn’t know them either. Monte da Horta was at most, ten or fifteen minutes from Fataca but could we find our way home? Amazingly in a place where the land was totally flat it seemed impossible to see where we were going. Endless fields, straight narrow tracks and a complete lack of landmarks or human life. Once or twice we took dead ends and were surrounded by cows. We saw a huge grain silo that neither of us had ever seen before so that was no help. Maria, increasingly anxious now, asked a group of old people, the only people we saw at the side of the road and none of them had ever heard of Monte da Horta, adding to Maria’s alarm that we had truly were lost forever. Finally we saw a water tower and Maria declared firmly that we were almost in Sao Teotonio, a small town about 14 kilometres from our home. She was really worried now.

Suddenly I remembered that I had seen this tower before and despite Maria’s protests that I was definitely going the wrong way, I headed towards the tower and the main road. Finally we were back on track and only five minutes from home. Somehow we had gone round in a big circle and come out on the main road further up. If I was relieved, Maria was ecstatic, she was so happy that she would once again see her beloved home, certain that it had been touch and go for the last hour. She was all but weeping as we drove down her track to unload the stash. When I finally rumbled down our track in the dark I could see the light shining through the open door as Phil appeared. ‘I was just about ready to call out the guarda! What happened?’ And at my sheepishly climbing out of the van he called, ‘You didn’t follow Maria’s directions did you?’
Lady and her kittens had never really disappeared from our house. Well, Lady hadn’t, she was the most persistent cat I’d ever come across and never, ever, left before she had raided Lucio and Monkey’s dishes. We’d made half-hearted attempts at trying to chase her away or keeping the dishes off the floor but it was hopeless. The door was open all day long and Lady was excellent at sneaking in and cruising by the dishes then installing herself on the sofa. Monkey and Lucio didn’t seem concerned, especially after Lady had beaten them into her way of thinking. Her kittens turned up when they were about eight weeks old. Maria and Agosto’s beans were scaling their bamboo poles outside and the kittens appeared from under the lush green leaves. They were incredibly sweet and Lady wasted no time in showing her offspring how to fill their stomachs at our house. We realised just how feeble we’d been at dissuading Lady when the heap of five kittens, plus Lady were all flopped out on the sofa.

We did our best not to let them feel that this was their home but what could we do, other than buy 25 kilo sacks of cat food from the animal feed place. Eight hungry cats was a lot. More than enough really, although when we saw the little grey kitten hiding under a car in Odemira common sense didn’t come into it. She was just the most gorgeous little creature, tabby but grey, soft, smoky all over, beautiful almond shaped eyes with Sofia Loren black eyeliner and an elegant pointy face. She was really hungry and desperately eating some cooked green beans out of a rubbish bin. She was nervous although her need to find food made her bold. Having stroked her and seen how lovely she was we couldn’t leave her in Odemira. A cardboard box was quickly found from a nearby shop and the beautiful little grey cat was on her way to cat headquarters. After all, we told ourselves, what was one more cat, in a household that already had eight hanging around.

We tried to choose a name for her. All of Lady’s kittens had nicknames mostly relating to what they looked like, Snowy, obviously the big white one with blue eyes, Minnie, well she was just Minnie, Pandy with the black eye patch like a panda, Gingey the ginger one and Thompson, one of a pair of black and white kittens named after the Thompson Twins from Tintin. One of them had disappeared leaving just Thompson. The new kitten, who we
regarded as ours, like Monkey and Lucio was eventually named Sofia after a character in a book I was reading at the time. Having suggested it, I thought it sounded a bit too girly but it stuck, it suited her because she was girly. Actually more than girly, she was a princess and she knew it too. She walked slightly oddly, her back feet turned inwards in a cute way and her strange tail which looked as if it had a pompom near the end. This was caused by the bone inside twirling round, corkscrew fashion and the fur followed suit giving her a little bobble before the bone and the fur straightened out again. Sofia was really, really intelligent and completely her own cat. In a matter of days she had chosen her bed on one of the comfy folding armchairs and whenever she was chased by one of the others she retreated there. To see her running was one of the most amazing sights, it was as if she was a piece of the landscape she was running across, it was impossible to see her feet or legs or to understand how she could move so quickly. Maybe she was flying or was caught in the air but she was a total part of nature. Agosto’s field of maize was down to dried stumps now that all the corn was picked and the stalks had been carted back and dumped in the hen run to keep their feet dry in the winter. Sofia set off across the field of soil, stray weeds and bits of dried corn stalk and she was the same colour as her surroundings. She appeared and disappeared then appeared more than a hundred metres away, she was absolutely beautiful.

Snowy and Minnie, the biggest of Lady’s kittens were not so enamoured. They realised they had slipped down the rankings and became very territorial about our house. In their minds Monkey and Lucio belonged, Lady was top cat and the kittens were next, Sofia was not one of them nor had she been there before them so the battle began.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Stormy weather
We often wondered, looking back, why we stayed in Senhor Antonio’s house for so long. After all, we were supposed to be finding our own place, keeping to our plan and there had been all the panic and urgency in Galicia. It was true that we had definitely changed as people in the time we were in Odemira, which we felt was all to the good. After all, what would have been the point in moving to a new country not to be influenced by the experience? All the worry we’d felt in Entrimo had been, we realised later, to do with not understanding anything. Panic at unfamiliar surrounds and culture, well, that and the money obviously. But we didn’t realise that in order to understand a place we needed to become a part of it. That happened without us noticing. Eventually we belonged. Like when we had coffee in our favourite bar in Odemira on shopping days along with all the mums taking their children to school and Council workers, who had been to clock on and then come and get themselves coffee-ed up to start the day. Or when we waited for the bread van at the end of the track or watched for the postman’s van to stop at our post box at the end of the track. This was our life and it was just like everyone else’s. Comparing the flavour of neighbour’s homemade bread with Maria or deciding who was best at roasting peanuts. These were all important parts of life. We hadn’t found our own home but we had the beginnings of a life coming together.

As the seasons passed we became as aware of the festivals and the local traditions as Maria. And before we noticed it, we’d been living in the tiny house for four years. It’s true that we had kept up the search and that the little house, despite it being really uncomfortable was still exceptionally cheap. So despite the dung beetles dropping through the ceiling because the gaps in the wooden slats had got so wide and the rain pouring through to be caught in an assortment of buckets and that we had to take showers in the public baths in Odemira we were mostly happy in ‘the hovel’ as we called it. We never felt the urge to pile back into the van and look for somewhere else, even as time passed and still the right place hadn’t turned up. We wondered sometimes where we could go next if we didn’t find anywhere locally and we considered masses of places from Sardinia to New Zealand but the logistics of heading off
to these places was often stalled by the discovery of the many of their short-comings. Thank
goodness for the internet, our missions were now restricted to a few sessions on the
computers at the library before we discovered the flaws of the various places and moved on
to our next big idea. All this was good because our journey was entering its fifth year and our
financial situation, our dependence on the interest from our savings and a healthy exchange
rate, was somewhat battered as the interest rate and exchange rate plummeted at the same
time. We couldn’t afford another road trip. Endless driving was expensive, as was staying at
campsites, so staying at Senhor Antonio’s hovel was financially necessary. Sometimes we did
feel trapped, thinking that our lovely vision of our new home and fantastic garden were just
that, a dream. Had we really been the owners of a cosy home and beautiful garden? It was
hard to think that had been us. However we knew we had changed because even if someone
had come along with a magic wand to take us back to Yorkshire we wouldn’t have wanted to
go. We’d come so far now that the thought of going back no longer provided us with the safe
and secure feeling it used to. So strange, after remembering how much I’d longed to go
home at the beginning. Now we both felt we were in for the long haul and however worried
or depressed we got, we never lost sight of what we’d gained through all of this, there was
something to make us marvel at how far we’d come.

Living as neighbours to Maria and Agosto confirmed every day how far away we were from
our old life. If she wasn’t involved in her usual task of planting out the next lot of vegetable
plants or visiting neighbours she was involved in something. Her weekly session at the
sports centre in Odemira with other ‘retired’ woman where the lure of regular trips, picnics
and special activities was enough to make her and her pals endure an hour of keep fit each
week, or signing up for coach trips to some distant tourist spot which left town at 5.30am,
returning home at gone 1.00am the following day. On one such morning Maria passed our
tiny bedroom window at 5.00am and beat loudly on the glass to let us know she was leaving
a bag of ‘sweaty things’ at the front door. Having woken us in fright we had to make tea and
eat sweaty things to calm our nerves.
Eventually if I hadn’t seen Maria for twenty four hours I’d start to worry that something might have happened to her and I would pop across the field to make sure everything was all right. Often my visit would reveal that Maria was involved in some extracurricular duty such as re-painting parts of the house in readiness for her daughter and her family’s visit from Holland, for the whole summer. Fighting through a washing line festooned in acres of net curtain I would discover Maria with a bucket of whitewash in one hand and a broom with a long handle in the other as she set off to repaint bedrooms. This fiesta of renovation became an annual event beginning a couple of weeks before the family arrived and every year we would become embroiled in drilling new holes for curtain poles at bedroom windows, taking up lengths of fabric to make fresh curtains or helping shift furniture around.

One afternoon we were in our house when Maria’s tick-infested hound, Chico appeared at the door. Our inability to fend off any creature in need of a plate of food even extended to Chico who had discovered what pushovers we were, although he never came to the door unless Maria had gone out and forgotten to feed him or, if she was working nearby. I looked out and saw Maria’s red sweater and cotton hat bobbing along behind the rows of beans at the side of our house. It was mid-afternoon and the autumnal sky was deep grey with the threat of a storm coming our way. As I looked to see where Maria was a throaty rumble dropped from the sky. In two seconds Chico, who had never set foot inside our house before, had dived inside and hidden himself under the floor length table cloth which covered the worst ravages of woodworm in Senhor Antonio’s table. Almost immediately Maria scuttled round the corner, bucket of plants in one hand and a short branch off an olive tree in the other. Wailing slightly she stepped inside the house just as the first massive spots of rain began to fall. It had suddenly got really dark outside, the sky intensely dark grey blue and the storm arrived right over our rather ramshackle roof. Thunder boomed overhead, rapidly followed by the incredible electrical crackle of the lightening. I pointed out that Chico was under the table and Maria nodded and said that he was as scared of storms as she was. It was funny to see Chico cowering under the tablecloth, making no sound even when the
thunder vibrated the walls of the house. Maria however was not quiet because she was working her way through her rosary, swaying back and forth slightly as she perched on one of the uncomfortably hard kitchen chairs. I noticed that while the bucket of plants stood outside the door the branch from the olive tree was under Maria’s feet. What was that about? Apparently Maria’s mother had said that to protect yourself from being struck by lightning you should stand on olive wood. I wondered about the scientific explanation for this or maybe it was something pagan related which Maria clung to as firmly as she did her rosary. Anyhow she was convinced and it seemed to have a soothing effect. After about fifteen minutes of thunder, lightning and pretty heavy rain all was quiet outside. We emptied the three buckets which had been doing service under the three separate leaks in the roof and waited for the sky to clear. We’d left the door open to watch the storm as it hadn’t been at all cold, just incredibly dark and wet, now it was turning a strange colour out there. The sky was absolutely navy blue but strangely lit by sunlight we couldn’t see, making it luminous somehow and really dramatic. Maria opened her eyes and began wondering if she would make it back across the field to the safety of her kitchen before those dark clouds emptied more rain on us. After a minute or two of speculating we became aware of a strange drumming noise outside but before we’d had an entertaining minute of two trying to guess what it was we suddenly saw gigantic chunks of ice landing on the ground outside. The pounding on the roof was deafening, it was so loud we couldn’t hear each other speak. Maria leapt from her olive branch to look outside and immediately her fear of being struck by lightning was extinguished by the rage at what those lumps of ice were going to do to her lettuces and cabbages. The leaves would be devastated, beaten to the ground, all that work for nothing, everything would be ruined she ranted. I was worrying about the possible dents in the roof of the van and just how painful it would be for anyone caught outdoors, those weren’t hailstones they were like small pieces of rock and they were settling like gravel outside. However after ten minutes the sky returned to its usual shade of bright blue and the sun reappeared as if nothing had happened. Maria and Chico emerged to survey the damage. As predicted some of the newly planted seedlings looked a bit sad, sprawling flatly
on the soil, limp and weedy but I felt sure they’d perk up over the next day or so. As I was looking at these waifs Maria was pointing at some spinach plants a bit further away, riven rather comically with large round holes in their leaves, the equivalent of Emmenthal cheese. Incredibly nothing else was damaged. The hailstones melted away and Maria and Chico went back to work.

Periodically we were overtaken by anxiety about our house hunting situation. Surely other people weren’t as hopeless as we were, we had to be the world’s worst when it came to any sort of decision making. We couldn’t decide whether the threat of upheaval from our current carefully constructed life or the spending of all our money was the greater worry. That was quite apart from not actually having seen anywhere that matched our idea of a new home. Surely we hadn’t got so fanciful with the passing of time that nowhere normal would now do. Usually our sessions of worry began when Phil calmly started the ball rolling by wondering out loud what we were going to do about the house situation. Doubtless he was hoping that I had some clue. Then having aired the thought, all his anxiety, worry and depression came roaring out. I, who periodically gave the subject some though but to no useful end, was plunged into panic at having to quickly think of something reassuring to try and appease Phil’s state of mind. This time though I really outdid myself. I suggested that we take a trip to Monchique, check out the area outside the town and see if it was the place we’d hoped it might be. Then if it was, we could maybe make some flyers and put them up in shops and bars to try and raw people who had land for sale. This was a very thorough idea, so thorough that all we needed to do was to get ourselves moving. We always felt better about ideas which didn’t depend on anyone else’s resources, like an estate agent. We’d do this ourselves. Somehow we always thought that the effort we put in would balance with the positive result we so badly wanted.

Monchique was a nice little place and the thing I liked most about it most was it greenness. The hills were lush, there were all sorts of trees and the vegetable plots along the side of the
road into town which made us feel like weeping for one of our own. Obviously it was no Odemira, which we now thought of as our home but it definitely had the type of geography we were looking for. We drove around and were excited by how different it was. The views of the coast twenty five kilometres away were across prehistoric landscapes with lumpy hills completely uninterrupted by houses or signs of human life. Yes, this was the place. After a day driving around and walking up tracks we stopped at a bar and began drafting our flyer. Now we were ‘on task’ nothing would slow us down. We decided to return to Monchique the following week, when we’d photocopied our flyer and start getting them up everywhere. We were certain that we’d have to fight back the offers.

We came back home to Odemira somewhat sadly at leaving our potential new home, turning up the track to the house we were met, as usual, by the seven cats circling for their supper. What a sight, seven cats. How could we have let this happen? Sofia was on the windowsill out of Snowy’s way, Minnie was lying like an external draught excluder along the bottom of the door, only she would think of tripping us up as we fought our way inside. Pandy and Gingey were in a little heap together on the narrow path and Monkey and Lucio were running around on the roof. It had been so easy to be taken over by cats, now we wondered what would happen in the spring. Not that it took a genius to work out that if Lady, Minnie and Pandy all had five kittens each when they came into season we’d have fifteen new mouths to feed. Fifteen plus nine just didn’t bear thinking about. Luckily Sofia had already been to the vet, being one of ‘our’ cats. Lady’s owner, when asked whether she had considered taking Lady to the vets had been non-committal, muttering things about expensive and it being unnatural, but she did think that more kittens would be a disaster, although obviously not for her, since all the kittens now thought they lived with us. However, something had to be done and I planned to sort it out. I’d noticed at the vets there were often people bringing stray dogs to be castrated; maybe there was some sort of scheme or cheap deal for a job lot going on. On investigation I discovered that there was indeed a scheme, run by the local council to check the prolific cat population and to educate people
about having their cat neutered. The vet said she would neuter all five cats, Lady and all her kittens for free. I was relieved; the thought of fifteen new kittens was starting to pray on my mind. All we needed to do was the get the cat into boxes and take them. Since they nearly always hung around together and were mostly at our house I didn’t think it would be too difficult to round them all up.

The vet wanted us to be at her surgery at half past four, preferably without the cats having eaten anything all day. That was impossible; they roamed around killing things and rummaging in compost heaps for scraps so we had to overlook that part. I’d got some nice strong boxes from the supermarket and a big roll of parcel tape; I was poised for when the crowd rolled up. Lady and Snowy were the most difficult, Lady because she was vicious and lithe and Snowy because of his huge bulk. But we managed to wrestle everyone into their boxes and taped them down before anyone escaped.

Unlike cats that are neutered in Britain, cats in Spain and Portugal are returned to their owners in an unconscious state and seem to weigh at least double what they did when they were awake. Five unconscious cats weighed the same as five unconscious Alsatians. We heaved those boxes back into the van three hours later and set of back home. Just as we left the surgery the vet called out, ‘don’t let them sleep outside tonight, just in case’. We waved goodbye, got into the van and wondered where in our twenty five metres of house we were going to find room for five unconscious cats to spread out. Usually Lady and her family disappeared in the evening, probably to sleep in a shed at their own home or to hunt the night away. Obviously Monkey, Lucio and Sofia slept on our bed.

We unloaded the boxes of sleeping Alsatians and spent the rest of the evening climbing over their boxes. At about ten thirty there were stirrings in the boxes and we unstuck the lids. Snowy, impervious to most things tumbled out of his box, sprawled on the floor before dragging himself to the nearest bowl of cat food. Lady got half out of her box and was sick
over the side. Minnie scrambled out and began trying to get into the litter tray but missed and deposited a huge and nasty mess on the floor. The rest of the evening continued in this fashion, there was cat poo and vomit everywhere, we had got to the end of a bottle of disinfectant, there was a bin bag full of crumpled and soiled newspaper, sodden cardboard boxes were tossed outside and we waded about with buckets and mops until we felt sure those creatures were utterly empty. The house smelled pungently of pine, the floor was wet and ravaged cats were stacked up and flopped out all over the sofa, apart from Snowy, who looked cross-eyed all the time anyway. He staggered to the door and howled until we let him out. Now that he’d been sick and made a huge mess on the floor he was feeling a lot better.

Later we retreated to the bedroom and for once, closed the door on the living room. One thing we didn’t need was more cats on the bed. Lucio was already tucked up there but Sofia and Monkey had kept their distance from the devastation of the evening. Monkey was now clomping about on the roof, his usual way of letting us know he wanted to come in. I flipped open the tiny bathroom window, called his name and waited, listening to him clattering across the tiles, jumping down on the tumbledown bit of house next to the shed then appear at the window. Two down, still Sofia to come. Seconds later there she was at the bathroom window meowing to be let in. We’d brought cat food, bowls of water and a litter tray into the bedroom, it was quite like old times when we lived in the van having cats crunching food and digging in the tray next to the bed, thankfully this time it was only for one night.

It was strange but it seemed that as soon as we started on some major effort to find a new home then other things that we’d been trying to resolve often came to a head. Having decided that Portugal would eventually yield and provide us with our place we had been trying, without success, to sell our huge great van. It was too big for the tiny streets of Portugal and with its advancing age, finding parts for it was almost impossible plus, by now it wasn’t entirely legal, three months was the limit for owning a foreign registered vehicle and driving it in Portugal. We had advertised it all over the place but recognised that only a
British person would want it. So far we hadn’t had anyone interested. But that was before we’d put our minds to other things, like house-hunting campaigns and cat neutering missions. Suddenly, from nowhere someone wanted to buy the van. We felt certain it would come to nothing, or we sort of hoped it would since I was using the back as a sort of studio space for making things and storing all my materials. But no, it was the real thing, a real buyer who came, saw, and fell in love. He came back the next morning with cash, while we had to spend the whole evening outside, by torchlight, heaving boxes and bags of stuff out of the van and into Senhor Antonio’s shed. The next day we watched the van lumber slowly up the track for the last time and disappear onto the main road. Our bridges were burnt, it was Portugal or bust. In no time we’d found a cute little white van from the second-hand car place in Odemira and had a van just like everyone else, we were real locals.

We set off for Monchique to put up our flyers. By the end of the morning we’d covered the whole area, asking in bars, shops and anywhere else that had a window, if we could put up our bits of paper. When we felt we’d done all we could we stopped for coffee and decided that fate would now take over. Either Monchique was the place for us or it wasn’t and setting ourselves the time limit of a month we’d find out the answer pretty soon. I didn’t want to think about what we’d do if it wasn’t the place so I decided to think positive, that Monchique it would definitely be. In fact we didn’t have to wait long before we got our first and only phone call. It was from a man who had a piece of land about four kilometres out of town, it had a small house and two and a half hectares of land, when did we want to come and see it?

I was really excited, maybe this was it. Finally, after all this time we were going to see our new home. Phil thought otherwise, after all we’d been on enough of these treasure hunts, with all sorts of people none of which had turned out to be what we wanted however ‘bonita’ the owners thought they were. No, it would definitely be some awful, rough place and the owner would doubtless be asking a fortune. Phil was definitely a ‘glass is half empty’ kind of person when it came to house hunting.
We arranged to meet Senhor Albarno, the owner, at his house which was on one of the main roads leading into town. He lived above a huge garage space that wasn't just garage, it doubled as his fruit and veg shop, as well as sitting room. It had a weird brown plastic looking television set balanced on top of a rusty chest freezer and a strange collection of sad armchairs gathered round a low, glass coffee table. There was a car in there too so it was an actual garage. When we arrived Senhor Albarno wasn’t there, he was out somewhere picking beans but he’d be back in ten minutes an older woman told us. She was sitting in one of the armchairs with a bucket between her ankles, peeling potatoes which dropped from her hands and plopped into the water. She said we could sit and wait so we settled down on the other armchairs and joined her in watching some televised mass from somewhere and listened to the potatoes plopping. I supposed this was how house hunting went in Portugal.

Eventually Senhor Albarno arrived in an old cream coloured jeep. He was the picture of every man of his age and occupation, flat cap, check shirt, weather beaten skin, missing teeth and dusty boots. We stood chatting for a moment before he suggested we go and look at the land. We could follow him in our little van. It was only two or three minutes away, up narrow roads then out on to a slightly wider road with the view of the Algarve coast about twenty five kilometres away. After a short drive on this road the jeep turned off to the right and onto a dirt track where, after a couple of hundred yards it stopped. We could walk from here because the next bit of track was maybe too rough for our van, suggested Senhor Albano. We walked up the track which rose slightly and passed under some trees then we could see the house. It looked as if someone, probably Senhor Albano, had turned a little stone barn into this vision of a tiny house. The front was painted white and there was a nice wooden door and one window with a yellow band painted around it. It looked like a toy house and looked odd sitting there in the middle of nowhere, it looked as if it really belonged in town next to other houses like itself. Here it was surrounded by deep terraces which looked like wide shelves of half cultivated land. Senhor Albano produced a key and opened the door to show us inside and now we could see what the building had been like before
Senhor Albano’s fanciful vision took hold. It was a shed. Outside all that was required were pots of geraniums to make it look perfect, inside was just one space, no rooms, kitchen or bathroom, a soil floor and sacks of potatoes, tools, lengths of rope, buckets and above us the remains of a hay loft. Senhor Albano waved his arms around and talked of his plans to convert the hayloft into two bedrooms, he then beckoned us outside and paced around at the side of the house, spreading his arms wide and describing his vision of a bathroom and toilet built on the scrubby piece of land which was currently home to an army of giant ants. He pointed to a huge concrete tank and explained about how it could be filled with spring water, how long that took to happen and how it was the tank for watering the crops as well as the water supply for the house. We looked around us and saw the flat terraces, two above and one below, it looked a bit unloved but undoubtedly it was in a great position, the view was fantastic. We wandered with Senhor Albano and looked at the land, although none of us felt equal to climbing to the bit which was steep and covered with the burnt remains of eucalyptus trees, the result of the massive forest fire two years before. We saw where the spring came from and all the pipes that had been installed to carry the water to each terrace, we looked at the wild oregano and inspected the few fruit trees. Then we talked about the price. This was difficult because we could see that Senhor Albano was weighing his chances of how much he could ask against losing potential buyers. It was difficult for us too because everyone had told us that it was imperative to haggle. We should not, under any circumstances look interested or enthusiastic. We should only make negative comments and definitely not agree to any price Senhor Albano might ask. All very easy in theory but in practice it was different. He did everything he could to prevent standing still and talking face to face about money. He came close then tacked away, moving a sack or restacking some wood. We waited until he came past again and hovered to point out some chestnut trees. He seemed more anxious about the whole thing than we were. Finally he mumbled that he wanted one hundred thousand Euros, which even as he said it made him flinch with the boldness of such a price. Phil immediately said no, very firmly. No, it was too much. Senhor Albano sidled past to attend to something else which had caught his eye and I began to
wonder how we had begun bartering when we hadn’t even decided to buy the place. Silence was all around us, Senhor Albano didn’t offer another price. Phil repeated that it was more money we had but thanked his for showing us his place. When there was no response to this we wondered if he really meant it. Well, if he did that was it. We definitely couldn’t afford it at one hundred thousand euros so we began slowly edging towards the track. Suddenly Senhor Albano stepped in our path and began talking about the papers, the deeds of the property. He explained that he had bought the place a few years ago, that he’d paid the previous owner who had signed the back of the deeds saying the transaction had taken place, so it was all legal. But. But they hadn’t bothered to change the deeds into Senhor Albano’s name because that cost money. However, it was no problem, it could easily be sorted. The only snag was that it would take about six months. We were mystified about all this, had we not just said we couldn’t afford the place? Phil thought he’d mention it again, maybe something had been lost in translation. Phil said the most we could afford was seventy thousand Euros, no more. Senhor Albano stood for a moment and then said something else about the papers, that we should all go back to his house (the garage) and he’d show them to us.

An hour later we returned to town and collapsed in a café. Senhor Albano had taken us back to his garage-cum-veg shop and had rummaged in the drawer of an ex-kitchen cabinet which appeared to double as his desk, perched on bricks with a peeling Formica front. He dragged out some scruffy bits of paper which he smoothed flat along the back of the sofa and showed us that it confirmed him as the owner of the land and he pointed out the signatures on the back which was the ‘promissory agreement’ that he’d made with the former owner and said we could make photocopies if we’d like to. How had we got to this stage so early on? Had we agreed to buy the place? It was all rather confusing to say the least. We both agreed that it was the place we were looking for. It had the right amount of land, it had water, good soil and a marvellous view plus the makings of some sort of home and we liked it. After such a long time searching neither of us could actually believe we’d found somewhere. It was six
years since we’d left Yorkshire and yes, time had passed quickly but the lack of a real home had weighed heavily on us. Could this really be the end of our search? Neither of us had imagined what it might be like to finally encounter the real thing, certainly it was all very strange. However, we thought it was really important to try and keep our excitement at bay until things were clearer with Senhor Albano, particularly about the money.

We drank our coffee, tucked away our photocopies and set off to take the original papers back. Maybe now we could try again to clarify things. Back at the garage we found Senhor Albano where we’d left him, rummaging in his drawer. We gave him his papers back and said we were off, which drew him outside to shake hands. We said yes indeed it was a ‘bonita’ place and again we said that we could only pay him seventy thousand Euros, and no more. Yes, he nodded, he understood. He would sort out the papers, we should come back in a couple of months and he’d tell us how it was going. We all shook hands and said goodbye then we set off back to Odemira in a state of severe shock. It appeared that we had agreed to buy a piece of land.

It was difficult not to be excited. To be thrilled and amazed that finally we had actually found somewhere. Maybe we didn’t want to jinx things by falling in love with the place too soon. We had become so superstitious that life had become entirely governed by things that were ‘meant to be’ or ‘not’ and the whole house hunting thing was submerged under possible ‘signs’. In many ways having six months to wait was probably the best thing for us, our anxiety and stress level about the it all would surely have dropped a bit in that time. And as we had discovered, we were excellent at burying our heads in the sand where difficult decisions needed making so six months, after all the years of searching, was actually nothing. We decided to carry on as normal and began digging new beds in our garden to take advantage of the shade under the big kumquat tree. The soil was damp and dark, perfect for parsley and broccoli plants. Maria and Agosto were in full scale late spring production, and their produce was as bountiful as ever. This year there were peas and broad beans at the side.
of the house and almost every day Maria came to see if we wanted to pick either for lunch. Fresh peas are one of the most delicious vegetables and I never needed any persuasion to get out there with my bucket.

One morning Maria appeared outside at about ten o’clock, rather early for our usual pea-picking sessions. Had we heard any sounds outside our bedroom during the night she wanted to know. Had we heard Chico barking? Actually, now she mentioned it, I had heard a dog barking. I’d forgotten that Chico had the complete responsibility for guarding the plots during the night. Had something happened? Maria, who had been standing with her arms folded, nodded like a detective at having her suspicions confirmed about the barking and beckoned me round to the side of the house and out to the rows of pea. We arrived at a patch which looked as if it had been ravaged by something. The plants had been tugged down and pea pods stripped from plants. In a few cases I could see claw marks on the discarded pods. It was incredible, what had done this? Maria explained about the creature that had stalked through the horta and how Chico would have to be stationed, on a length of chain in the pea area to prevent further attacks. Poor Chico. But what was this creature? What did it look like? Maria described an animal which, by her reckoning, was bigger than a cat and some dogs, it had dark fur, along tail and paws with something like fingers with claws. Its favourite food was, obviously, peas but it was also fond of water melon in season. What kind of epicurean beast was this, some sort of mythical creature? Something no one had ever actually seen but imagined? I returned to the hovel to check our book on local wildlife and after much searching came across a picture of a mongoose. Yes, said Maria, that was it, although there was no mention of its diet in the book.

A couple of days later we were returning from a session in the garden when we saw Agosto trailing across the plot of burgeoning maize plants with a rusty lump of metal on a length of chain dangling from his hand. He looked furtive as he disappeared down the slope to where the brambles rampaged up from the stream below. What was he up to? On his return he
stopped to ask if we’d seen any signs of creatures in our garden, wild boar maybe or, after a lot of describing, badgers even. No we hadn’t seen either. Ah well, it was early in the season, but these creatures could strip a garden in one night. It was best to be prepared he said darkly. I assumed he meant that poor Chico was in for a few weeks of over-time watching the maize plants but Phil realised he meant something else and went down the slope to see if his theory was correct. After carefully rummaging in the undergrowth he came across what he was looking for, a trap. The old rusty metal thing we’d seen Agosto carrying was an evil looking gadget, something the Museum of Torture might have been glad of, all rusty teeth and a nasty, powerful spring. Phil didn’t think twice, he poked a thick stick between the teeth and bang, it snapped shut, the teeth gripping the branch tightly. He pushed it back into the undergrowth, safely disabled.

We didn’t want Agosto to lose all his crops but equally we couldn’t imagine the horror of losing one of the cats to a trap like that one. We knew quite well that for all Portuguese people cats figured at the same place in the pecking order of animals as dogs, the bottom. They were useful for keeping vermin down but their health and well-being meant nothing. Especially since they could easily be replaced and even Maria and Agosto thought that was true. They thought it was one of the strangeness’s of foreigners, to be sentimental about animals. Obviously it was something we would never agree on, so disabling the trap was all we could do. However, we doubted that it was only one. If Agosto’s mission was to succeed he’d need more than just that one and we couldn’t know where all the others were or hope to get around them all on a regular basis. We just had to hope that the cats stayed lucky.

Trying to keep our minds tethered from straying into a whole sack full of house-buying related anxiety we buried ourselves in more creative activities I had decided that we could possibly make our fortune or at least support ourselves in a meagre fashion by making and selling knitted toys. Farfetched I realised, but being a firm believer in total commitment to your passions bringing results, this was going to be it for me. Really, the locating of the ideal
place to live was the main part of our plan but there had to be content to this new life I reasoned. Vegetable growing would be absolutely central to it all but what about our creative life? Surely knitted toys belonged there somewhere?

I began by knitting cats and became absorbed in working out my own patterns, locating local sources for wool and using up all of my oddments. I didn’t really worry about how the cats would be sold, at that early stage making them seemed to be the most important thing. As time went by though and my supply of cats and other things began to grow Maria suggested I take a stall at the market in Odemira on Saturdays. Certainly I’d got enough stuff but what would local people think of knitted cats? Maria had no doubt that everyone would love them and the summer was a good time to try things out, there were tourists, maybe not that many in the market but still, it would be a good start and then by Christmas when everyone was looking for presents I’d sell loads of things. I wasn’t sure about this idea, after all, everyone else who had a stall was selling food. Vegetables, fish, bread, how could knitted cats feature in amongst all this produce? Maria didn’t consider this a problem. People sold whatever they produced, what was the difference, tomatoes or knitted toys? I supposed she had a point and if, for some reason toys were outlawed there was only one way to find out.

I’d already decided to call my enterprise ‘Monkey and Sofia’, which made it feel as if I was starting a business, sort of. I’d never had had a stall by myself, but this way Maria had earmarked a vacant stall opposite her own so she could step in if I got into any sort of difficulty. The market hall was a big space divided up by tiled, sloping market stalls and everyone who sold things regularly had their own place and arranged their wares in the conventional market stall fashion. I of course could display my things as I wanted and it was a bit nerve wracking, arranging things in full view of all the other stall holders who were very curious about what I was up to. But they were all really nice and encouraging, gathering round to look at things and ask about them. As it worked out, Maria might have been in charge of my stall, she was great even though she was inundated with her own customers. In
between her busy moments she came across to give my potential customers a complete resume on each item, explaining all the little details and of course, all about where I lived, marital status and everything else. Surprisingly, despite what appeared to me to be a bit like a hard sell on Maria’s part, people did buy things. It was a great experience and exactly what I needed having been sitting in the house making things without any feedback at all. Now people had seen my things they began asking if I could make a particular for them like baby jumpers, cushions, bags and bigger things. After my first Saturday I’d go into town each Saturday with Maria and set up my display while she set up hers and I brought the things people had ordered from the previous Saturday. Now I’d got the idea of having a stall I discovered other places I could go and sell things, like at one of the beaches on a Saturday night. This sounded like fun, a totally different experience, night time at the beach. This time I needed my own stall and Phil set about making one from bamboo, the thick stalks which grew like weeds all around the garden. Finally we had discovered a use for this incredibly invasive stuff. Cutting thick pieces to length then drilling holes through it, near the top and bottom Phil began threading all the poles together with wire, just like the traditional Portuguese way of making the ceilings in the old houses. With a couple of trestle legs, courtesy of Maria and our roll of bamboo poles we were ready. Weird how finding our own place and studiously trying to keep our minds busy on other things had produced such a storm of ideas.

The beach at Zambujeira do Mar was only about ten minutes away so we were there and setting up before the sun set over the horizon. Honestly, Zambujeira is the perfect Portuguese picture postcard seaside resort. The beach is in a cove with high rocky cliffs all around, the sea is a bit wild so full of surfers and cool-looking people from all over Europe as well as plenty of Portuguese families. It had a family feel because there weren’t any hotels for people to stay in, just lots of little houses and flats to let. Every evening the sunset was incredible, it was unbelievably and absolutely bright orange. The sea becomes orange and the horizon and it’s all so dramatic, made more so by this event happening and finishing so
quickly. It was gone in less than ten minutes. We managed to set up our stall outside one of the many bars in the little main street. There were two or three other stalls already and we quickly became a fraternity, the other stallholders who were much more experienced, shared tips about attracting potential customers and when the busy times were and things. When people came and lingered at the stall it was nice. We enjoyed meeting people and talking to them about the toys and it felt special to be a part of people’s holidays. The atmosphere of the pueblo was friendly, like a big extended family with many people grilling sardines on little barbeques outside the tiny houses they were renting in the narrow streets. The smell of fish was everywhere, voices, music, lights, food. With no cars permitted in the centre there was just the sound of people’s voices all around. The bars had tables outside and those people not grilling their own fish were sitting outside in the warm air, eating fish at tables. This was exactly how summer holidays were supposed to be.

We were doing well at ignoring the house thing in Monchique and getting our craft idea off the ground. Inevitably amongst all of this there had to be something which wasn’t such good news and that something was cat related. We still had Lady’s kittens around the house, although Lady herself had got tired of her family and had decided to stay away, feeling, no doubt, that she had done the best for her offspring by bringing them to us. One afternoon little Gingey had been sleeping on the sofa and I noticed that as he got up he couldn’t seem to balance, he stumbled and looked dizzy. Surely that wasn’t right? But he wandered outside and seemed ok. Next day he had stopped eating and was curled tightly in a ball at the far end of the sofa, away from his family. That afternoon we took him to the vet who thought that maybe he had caught an infection, but she also said that it might be serious. Many cats in Portugal were suffering from cat AIDS, her own cat included. It was very difficult because it was so contagious but it was possible to keep cats alive for a longer period if the disease had been diagnosed and strong antibiotics were used as soon as any illness started. However, Gingey could well be fine, it might be that he’d eaten something bad and it was working its way through his system, we’d know more in a couple of days. Cat AIDS. We couldn’t help
imagining what that would do to our cat family, but we tried to be hopeful, Gingey could well recover and everything would be fine again.

By the end of the week Gingey hadn’t responded to the antibiotics, he’d got a bit better one morning and walked around normally and ate some food, but by the afternoon he couldn’t stand and was lying on the sofa again. He stopped eating, we called the vet and she said to continue giving him water and bring him to her that afternoon. We gave him water through a syringe and took him to see Ana, the vet, who gave him an aids test. At first it looked negative but we had to wait overnight for the full result. We were so relieved and happy that at first the test was negative and really hoped that Gingey would get better if Ana gave him something stronger. But overnight, while the test developed fully it shifted to positive, Gingey had got AIDS. Ana said we should carry on trying sometimes cats could recover. She gave Gingey more antibiotics and eventually putting him on a drip to keep him hydrated but after a week even Ana, who was reluctant to admit defeat, agreed the time had come to put Gingey to sleep. Poor little lad, he had been the cutest of kittens, full of fun, a keen footballer and always with the worried face that the dark ginger markings on his forehead gave him. We were terribly upset, inevitably wondering what we could have done differently and worse, what did it mean for the other cats? Maybe ‘our’ cats would be ok, they had no contact with Lady or her kittens. Ana suggested bringing Monkey and Sofia for a test at some stage although we weren’t sure it would help. Knowing a cat had AIDS was one thing but that there was no cure made the testing pointless. Anyway, Monkey, Sofia and Lucio were fine. We tried not to dwell on the potential devastation, losing Gingey was bad enough.

As the summer wore on we decided that we might pull our heads out of the sand and take a trip across to Monchique. Maybe there was some news on the house front that would cheer us along. Why we set off with such trepidation we weren’t sure, probably because our wonderful plan for a life on our own piece of land was in the hands of a man who had seemed so hard to pin down. Yes, we had felt that we’d managed to get some sense out of him by the
time we’d come away from Monchique but it certainly hadn’t been easy. What if he’d forgotten us? Sold the land to someone else? Wanted more money? There were so many potential problems that we had to make ourselves think positively as we made our way through the centre of Monchique and out to Senhor Albano’s place.

The women folk of the Albano homestead were upstairs in the real part of the house when we arrived and rang the bell. We heard a window slide open above our heads after we’d rung the bell. Yes, Senhor Albano was home but he was eating his lunch, he’d be down shortly. With that the window slid shut and we waited on the concrete outside the closed garage doors. Half an hour later Senhor Albano appeared, looking his usual shifty self. He came across to shake hands but then immediately began tacking away towards his jeep. It took a concerted effort on our part to get him to tell us how things were going. In a few seconds we discovered that all of our worries about what might or might not have been going on were not far off the mark. No he hadn’t sold it to someone else neither did he ask for more money. Something slightly worse had happened. The original owner, the one who had received Senhor Albano’s money, but not had not signed any new deeds, had become very ill and had died. Disaster. Senhor Albano couldn’t take the deeds to the solicitor because the previous owner had to go and sign things as well. Now he had to deal with the man’s descendants, those who would, theoretically, now inherit the land. There were four daughters all of whom had to sign the papers. But, Senhor Albano assured us, it would all be fine although obviously, he couldn’t ask the family about signing papers right now, the man had only just died. No, he’d leave it for a few weeks then he’d go and speak to the man’s wife and they would sort it out. No, no we shouldn’t worry, the place was ours but it would take a little longer than he’d originally said. Looking relieved to have got that little bombshell off his chest he successfully reached his jeep and jumped inside before waving to us and speeding away up the road.

Having had the feeling that something might have gone wrong in Monchique didn’t make us feel any better when we discovered that it had. What could we do? On the positive side we
knew that the place was exactly what we wanted and that Senhor Albano had, in the first place, actually contacted us, so he was obviously keen to sell. Plus, he hadn’t told us anything really terrible, like he’d sold it to someone else or that he wanted twice the amount of money. No. Patience was all that was required and anyway, we hadn’t had any other calls in response to our flyer so there wasn’t much else we could do, except maybe try and think of other places just in case there were more problems with this one. While at the same time, keep everything crossed that it would all resolve itself. As ever, we unburdened ourselves to anyone who would listen, asking their advice and checking there was nothing else we could be doing. But everyone said the same thing, it was typical Algarvian behaviour to be so slow and not explain things, that the paperwork would have been just as difficult with anywhere we’d found there. We shouldn’t worry at this stage. Good. We didn’t want to worry, we wanted everyone to say positive things which would let us get back on with our life without the high levels of anxiety house hunting always produced in us.

It was weird though, something had definitely shifted in our ordinary life. It was as if by changing our focus, just a tiny bit from our life in Monte da Horta, it had begun to unpeel. I wondered if subconsciously we’d known this might happen and that was what we’d been trying to avoid. Our steady little life had given us a place where we felt safe and worries were beaten back to a place where we could keep them at a distance. Now they had begun creeping towards us and life felt a little destabilised. The cats became the focus for all of these strange feelings. First Gingey and now Pandy, Gingey’s sister began her decline. She had always been a funny little creature and the markings on her face had made her appear sad or grumpy. Now we realised that her greasy looking coat and skinny frame were the sign that perhaps she had been suffering from aids all along. Poor little creature, she tried valiantly to be positive for us, struggling to her feet to come and see us when she really wanted to curl up in a tiny ball and give up on life. We took her to see Ana but after a couple of weeks the antibiotics had done nothing to stop her slipping away from us.
Barely had we begun to recover from this blow when Sofia, our gorgeous Sofia, disappeared. What was happening? Why was our little community of cats being decimated like this? The worst part was not knowing what had happened to her. We looked everywhere. We walked into the bramble covered valley and through the eucalyptus trees at the bottom of Maria and Agosto’s land and all the way to Sao Pedro. We didn’t find her or anyone who had seen her. It was difficult not to think the worst, that she had somehow found her way on to the main road and been run over or that one of the nocturnal beasts had attacked and killed her. But we knew she was fast, much faster than big, dangerous animals and she could climb a tree out of their reach. Plus, no one had seen her or even heard of a cat being run over or seen a dead cat, so we decide that no news was good news. After all, plenty of people had told us of cats disappearing and re appearing, although that tended to be the cats of people who had moved here from other places, cats who had tried to go back home. Time passed, days, weeks. It became impossible not to think that something terrible must have happened to her, but we didn’t want to imagine what. We still had Monkey and Lucio and as ever, Minnie and Snowy were staking us out so we were hardly without feline company.

One Saturday we’d eaten lunch and were sitting with the door open, letting the autumn sun try and warm the place up when a moment of magic lifted our preoccupation with cat-related sadness. A little grey shadow slipped through the open door and flopped down in a patch of sunlight on the tiled floor. Sofia was back! We were absolutely stunned, could it really be her? With her distinctive bobble tail it was definitely her and despite being a bit thin she was perfectly well and really, really happy to see us. Using all her vocal skills she produced all sorts of sounds as if she was trying to explain where she’d been. She purred and ate, not knowing which to do first, leaving her bowl every few seconds to come and see us before returning to eat. Where had she been? It was so unbelievable and so lovely to have her back, especially when she snuggled up on the bed with us that night and slept soundly until morning. Well, something had gone right, maybe we were imagining the impact finding our
place in Monchique was having on our life in Odemira, maybe things would settle down again while the Monchique ‘thing’ as we referred to it, trundled on in the background.

Winter came and yet again we were not in the comfy, warm home of our imaginations but in Senhor Antonio’s hovel. We comforted ourselves with the fact that none of our neighbours had life much better, although most did have open fireplaces full of blazing logs while we only had our electric radiator. Everyone had walls black with damp unless washed regularly and everyone had wardrobes full of damp clothes. It was as if people remained focussed on the return of the warm weather and didn’t worry about the minor interruption of a few cold, damp months. We were old hands at making the hovel as comfy as we could, hanging an extra thick curtain at the door to keep out draughts and more blankets of the bed.

One Friday morning as I prepared my boxes of toys for market the next day, Maria called by. Senhor Antonio had died. It wasn’t a huge shock because he had been ill for some time but it was very sad and we felt sorry for his family and for Maria and Agosto who had known and liked him. This was our first encounter with death in a foreign culture, we knew things were done differently here, most specifically that people were buried the day after they died. Now we learned that a night long vigil was held, either at home or in the church where the body lie and people came to pay their respects to the family and to bring flowers. We set off with Maria for the church in Odemira that evening. The family, Senhor Antonio’s wife, daughter, son in law and granddaughters were there and various friends and other relatives sat in the pews for a while. The coffin was at the front near the altar and a garden of flowers began to grow all around the coffin as bouquets and wreaths were brought and left by the visitors. The family would be there all night, although I hoped they took it in shifts, it was bitterly cold in that church.

Next day after being at the market we returned to the church for the funeral. It appeared that the women went inside and listened to the service while the men waited outside for it to
be over. They hung around in little groups, smoking and chatting until the hearse appeared. Then the pall bearers carried the coffin out and slid it into the back of the hearse as the men gathered with the women and began to walk behind the hearse which was moving at walking pace to the cemetery. It wasn’t far but it seemed miles walking so slowly. There wasn’t any music, even in the church there hadn’t been any singing, and now with the traffic halted the only sound was the murmur of voices and people’s feet on the cobbled road. Inside the cemetery people packed around the graves as the coffin was lowered into the ground. The family looked exhausted after the night long vigil and the funeral, they were sad but calm and quiet. I know that our neighbours thought that the British custom of funerals taking place so long after a death was odd and rather gruesome, they didn’t like the idea of having a body hanging around for ages. We had thought the twenty four hour rush to the grave improperly hasty. But after our experience we could see that each custom had its place.

As the year turned we began to realise that the ‘thing’ with the house in Monchique had been going on for almost a year and that felt bad. We’d been to see Senhor Albano and went through the usual performance of trying to have a conversation with him. He had at least managed to speak to the wife of the previous owner and yes, it was all straightforward. At least the wife hadn’t claimed it was all a mistake or knew nothing of her husband selling the place. However, the daughters would have to sign the papers when they were back in Portugal. Back in Portugal? Yes. The daughters all lived in France. Well, obviously. And they’d be back at Easter. No worries, just a few more months and it would all be sorted out.

Now we were starting to believe the one or two people who hadn’t said that this was all normal house selling behaviour. These were the people who had all nodded and understood what we were feeling and said that maybe it wasn’t meant to be. We hadn’t wanted to believe that because we were at the end of all our bright ideas for finding a place and the thought of giving up on Senhor Albano and starting all over again from scratch made us feel sick.
We were trying hard to keep life together. Yes, we’d done well to this point at keeping the	house worry in the background but now the blow of the French connection was too much.
Added to this there was now another bit of carpet being pulled from under our feet. The
Senhor Antonio family had decided to try and sell the hovel. Everyone thought the
likelihood of this was extremely doubtful, no one was buying houses at that moment plus the
price the family had put on the hovel was galactic. No, everyone said it was just a bit of
speculation on the part of the Antonio family. Speculation it might had been but that didn’t
prevent the endless car loads of Sunday afternoon house-hunting families hoving up and
wanting a guided tour.

Life really did seem to be unravelling. Nothing positive from Monchique, potential
homelessness in Odemira. Pandy and Gingey dead, and now Minnie and Lucio had
disappeared. Also, Sofia had not settled back to her former life as a normal cat from a loving
home. She had plainly done so well for herself on her first trip away that it now became a
regular pattern, a couple of weeks with us followed by three, four or even more weeks away.
We had stopped worrying about her but we did miss her, she was so beautiful and had such a
spirit it was lovely when she was home I had tried to entice her into staying by feeding her
every delicacy I could think of from sardines, bits of chicken, slices of ham, chorizos, to eggs,
cheese, cream but nothing worked, in fact she didn’t want any food from us. She gobbled
food when she first returned but after that she politely nibbled at her bowl of cat food and
then she developed another strange ritual. Instead of coming into the kitchen at breakfast
time like all the other cats Sofia dashed outside and was gone for no more than five minutes
before returning with a freshly killed rat. This she expected to be allowed to carry into the
kitchen and eat, leaving absolutely nothing, not the tail or any fur, nothing at all. She could
have killed it and eaten it outside but maybe she felt sorry for us, for all our efforts and was
letting us see she could look after herself. Her arrivals after her travels were still ecstatic.
She mostly came back at night to the back window behind the sofa. She meowed her little
broken meow for me to come and open the window. She jumped on the bed, purring and so
happy, then she’d eat but I had to bring the dish of food into the bedroom so that she could
eat and still see that I was there to pay her attention. Leaving the dish in the kitchen meant
she couldn’t settle to eat but kept coming back and forth to the bedroom. After she had eaten
for a while she jumped up on the bed and dived under the covers, purring and kneading with
her paws until she fell asleep. It was always so wonderful to have her back again.

Minnie and Lucio were something different. Neither of them were ever far from home,
especially Minnie whose stomach almost scraped the floor as testament to her endless
cruising of the cat bowls. Something had obviously happened to them both and we couldn’t
bear the thought of what. Poor Lucio, he’d come all the way from Ramon’s house in Galicia,
stuck with us at the campsite only to meet his end in some awful way. Gored by pigs,
crushed by lorries on the main road, poisoned by some mad local or a million other horrible
thoughts. Yes, life really had begun to run out of control.

We tried to keep thinking positively, maybe Lucio would appear again, just as Sofía had. We
tried to look forward to the arrival of spring. The weather was warming up, the
campervaners were returning, surely good news from Monchique couldn’t be long in coming.
At last it was Easter and we contacted Senhor Albano. Yes, the daughters had come from
France and they had been to the solicitor and signed everything that was necessary. Now a
new set of deeds would be drawn up to show Senhor Albano as the owner. Yes, he was going
to get on with that soon, no problem. Well, that was something, not a lot admittedly, we
were at the stage with the papers that we would have been the previous year had the original
owner not died. Could things move any more slowly? There was some relief that something
had happened and we didn’t have to try and work out a wonderful ‘plan B’ at this stage. I
was particularly happy because I hadn’t been entirely well for a bit. Being like many people
who have never suffered an illness, I had refused to accept there was anything to worry
about. After all it was related to my periods and in my experience these thing just sorted
themselves out. This time it was different, they didn’t, they got much worse until I suddenly
found myself in the back of an ambulance being bumped the sixty-odd kilometres to the hospital for an emergency blood transfusion and an operation. All rather too nerve wracking. Now all the stress we had so carefully buried came pushing up to the surface. While I was recovering in hospital Phil’s back seized up. He could barely stand and hardly walk. The only place he could feel comfortable was lying in bed. I came home with no strength or energy and Phil was unable to move. Perfect. For the first time in longer than we could remember we weren’t thinking about Monchique. All we worried about was trying to take care of ourselves and get well again. It made us realise how lucky we’d been with our health up to that point and that the hovel was not the best place to be ill. But all we could do was rest up, eat well and wait to feel better which was going to take some time.

Maria and Agosto were wonderful, coming by and checking that we were ok and helping if we needed anything. It was a frightening and miserable time, so much for our lovely plan that had brought us to this. Surely all our friends were right when they told us to come home, why were we still in the hovel feeling sorry for ourselves? I suppose the obvious answer was that we didn’t have the energy to think of travelling anywhere and if we had, where would we have gone? We had got to the situation with Monchique that giving up would have made our long wait a waste of time and we didn’t want to face that. No, at that moment Monchique was beginning to happen so it would have been silly to give up. We needed time to recuperate and Senhor Albano needed time to get the new deeds sorted out so it was all fine.

Of our dwindling cat family we still had Monkey, occasionally Sofia and Snowy. At night we could hear Snowy and Monkey clumping around on the roof like a pair of wooden shoe clad donkeys. They weren’t good friends and without Lucio, the oldest of the cats, Snowy had started challenging Monkey for the position of top cat. Sometimes Monkey had a few scratches on his ears from their fights but now he had a nasty wound on his back, like a bite or claw marks. I took him to see Ana, the vet and she said it was a nasty wound which had got infected. After knocking him out she shaved the fur off all around the wound so that she
could clean it, and it really did look awful. But that was the start. Over the next two weeks I ferried Monkey back and forward to the surgery without realising how dangerous the infection was. Monkey was in a lot of pain so Ana gave him injections to help. Sometimes he wouldn’t eat or drink and on one Sunday evening we found ourselves sitting in Ana’s surgery with Monkey lying on a trolley with a drip going into his leg while the liquid brought him back to life. We quizzed Ana constantly about whether this was the kindest thing to do. I knew what an English vet would have said, even a week before. But Ana was keen to give Monkey a chance because he seemed so keen to live. It was awful, so awful to see him suffering and being able to do nothing. The infection was now in his spine and his back was a mess. Before we were able to persuade Ana to put him to sleep Monkey died at home. The infection had spread to his brain, Ana said that Monkey must have been suffering from AIDS too because the antibiotics should have worked. Our lovely Monkey was gone.

We were at the lowest point of our journey. It had been sad when Sardina had escaped from the van, sad for us but the likelihood was that he had found a new home and was fine. Monkey had suffered so much and he’d died. We couldn’t stop thinking about what we should have done for him. I managed to dig a hole to bury him in our garden, near the marigolds where he always lay watching us working.

Gradually we both began to recover. It had been easier for me than Phil who had been lying flat for months and had tried physiotherapy and acupuncture, neither of which had helped but a programme of exercises were starting to have an effect. Phil was just about mobile again after five months. We were ready for our shrivelled world to open up again, it really needed to. A life shrunken to the size of the hovel was no life at all. Senhor Albano really did need to pull out the big one now, although we realised from experience that the chances of that happening were pretty well zero. Anyhow we went across to Monchique to see how things stood. Senhor Albano was cornered at his place and stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other while he explained that nothing much had happened. Yes he had a
solicitor but he was very slow and had done nothing yet. We pressed him about why he hadn’t changed to another solicitor, but it seemed there was some problem, we weren’t sure whether it had to do with loss of face or, more likely, payment of some fee. Whatever, the process had stalled. However, Senhor Albano was his usual confident self. Yes, he would get things moving, we shouldn’t worry, and definitely the house was ours. We wondered, not for the first time if Senhor Albano only sprung into life when we appeared. We agreed to contact him the following week when he felt sure something would have happened.

Neither of us felt we could bear much more of the strain, time was passing and whatever Senhor Albano said we still worried that we had nothing in writing. We hadn’t paid a deposit and there was no agreement, although at this point we thought that was no bad thing. Life at the hovel felt debilitating and a waste of time, a few months or even a year ago we had been happy just knowing we’d found our place, now we needed something certain. The unravelling of life in Odemira was playing its part, so many horrible things had happened and strangely, ever since we’d found Monchique. Could it be some sort of sign? Everyone we knew now thought that Monchique wasn’t meant to be. Maybe they were right.

As we worried endlessly about signs yet another one came along and again it was cat related. Now that Snowy was the only cat around we soon realised something was wrong when he had been missing all day. Phil went to look for him, maybe Snowy had got shut in somewhere or was hunting somewhere. However, five minutes later Phil was running back to the house shouting for me to bring the cat box. I struggled as quickly as I could into my wellies, grabbed the box and rushed off after Phil who was disappearing behind the house with a bag of tools. I heard the howling before being able to see Snowy but then there he was, caught in one of Agosto’s death traps and understandably going crazy. Struggling and trying to get free from the vicious metal teeth. Phil had tried to prise the jagged jaws apart with his hands but it was locked solid, now he pushed two big screwdrivers in to lever the jaws apart. I had to be ready with the box to catch Snowy before he tried to run away. It only
took a second for the jaws to open and for Snowy to be released and fall backwards into the open box. I snapped the door closed and ran to the van struggling with Snowy’s weight then set off to Ana’s at speed.

When we arrived at the surgery Ana gave Snowy a painkilling injection and an antibiotic. She explained that because Snowy was in shock it wouldn’t be safe to do anything other than help with the pain, start a course of antibiotics and then wait until tomorrow before examining him. We should bring him back in the morning, unfortunately with injuries like Snowy’s the likelihood was that he would lose his leg, Ana explained having seen plenty of injuries caused by traps. Snowy was lucky in that it was only his ankle, she said, rather than his neck and, that we had managed to find him in time.

We were devastated by Snowy’s suffering and really hoped the painkiller would work. Next morning Snowy’s leg had swelled to double its size and it looked horrible. He lay on the sofa looking confused and didn’t even attempt to get to the food bowl in the kitchen. At the surgery Ana gave him an anaesthetic while we wandered out to get coffee, still feeling dazed about what had happened. Even though Agosto knew the cats were our family it still wasn’t important enough to him not to set the traps. As we sat silently drinking our coffee we were both realising the same thing. It was now obvious what had happened to Lucio and Minnie, they had been caught in one of the traps somewhere and had died. The traps had killed the cats just as we had feared.

Ana said that Snowy’s leg was badly infected by the rusty, filthy trap but the bone in his ankle wasn’t broken, only chipped. The main problem was the infection which had to be stopped from spreading. Knowing there was a high probability that Snowy had AIDS, the next few days would be crucial, so it was really important that we bring him back to the surgery every day for the rest of the week. We talked to Ana about the trap, how angry and upset we were and she sympathised. She saw too many wounded animals and explained that the problem
was with the older people, they still used traps even though they were now illegal, in theory. It was difficult to change the way they treated animals but, from her perspective things were changing. Now it wasn’t only the younger people bringing their animals to her but some of the old men too, who she’d felt sure, would never have bothered in the past. There was a change happening, maybe a small one and it was slow, but there was a difference. She said that we should try not to feel angry with Agosto, it was a lack of education not vindictive behaviour. We said we’d try.

Snowy spent each day of the following week lying on the sofa with his gleaming white bandage. He managed to drink water and eat from the bowls of food that I brought him. Back at Ana’s each day she undid the bandage and looked at the wound which looked huge and fleshy with his fur cut away. Ana explained that the infected flesh would fall away, which sounded nasty. Apparently the dead tissue would be replaced by new which would grow when the infection had cleared up and then the wound would heal. This was a little bit too sciency for me, I felt happier when Snowy was all covered up again in a nice clean bandage.

Later in the week Ana told me that she was going away for the weekend so I would have to look after Snowy myself, clean and dress the wound as well as give him his injections. Great. Anyone less like an extra from Animal Hospital didn’t exist, I was far too squeamish, although Phil was actually worse. Ana showed me how to do everything and then sent us off for a weekend of DIY veterinary care. Ana’s parting words were that by Monday we would know how things were going, whether the infection was being beaten and if Snowy would lose his leg. No pressure then.

Bless Snowy, he was so good and didn’t even try to scratch me as I unravelled his bandage and set to work with my little bowl of disinfectant and cotton wool. He was all neatly wrapped up again when I had to give him his injections, the worst bit. I worried that the liquid wouldn’t go to the right part of his body or that I might break the needle. I braced
myself for disaster but luckily Snowy’s skin was so thick and hidden by his polar bear fur coat that he didn’t even flinch as the needle went in. After I’d done it, I retreated to the kitchen where Phil was preparing hot black coffee, medicinal strength.

I saw Maria over that weekend and took the rusty trap to her and explained about Snowy. She knew how we felt about the cats even if she herself didn’t understand, especially since technically Snowy wasn’t even our cat. She said that the traps were bad, that Agosto shouldn’t be using them and that she would throw it in the rubbish. I didn’t really believe her, it sounded as if she was saying what she thought I wanted to hear, so I pressed on, saying how upset we were and how many trips to the vet we’d have to make and how Snowy might lose his leg. Both Phil and I were upset and angry with Agosto but had sort of taken on Ana’s comments. Also having said everything I’d wanted to say it was enough, I didn’t really want our friendship with Agosto and Maria to end. Afterwards I was sure that Maria had spoken to Agosto because he was noticeable absent from around the hovel for a couple of weeks.

After a weekend of veterinary apprenticeship I was happy to hand Snowy back into the care of Ana. She was really surprised to see how well he looked and felt this was a good sign. Now she would give him another anaesthetic so that she could have a good look to see whether his leg could be saved or not. As I sat nervously in the waiting room I wondered if Snowy would join the now seemingly endless list of dead cats buried in the garden at the hovel. I was glad when eventually Ana called me in to the surgery to see rather too much of the inside of Snowy’s leg while he lie asleep on the shiny table. I can honestly say I had never seen anything like it, or would want to again. On view was the bone and all the workings of his ankle, sinewy things like pale, smooth string. All the flesh that would normally be all around these things was gone, fallen away and I didn’t ask where, leaving a big empty hole. It looked very different from the wound I’d been dabbing with antiseptic all weekend. I tried not to imagine Ana cleaning away all the dead flesh, it was too gruesome. However, the good
news was that Snowy was plainly clear of AIDS, his immune system was functioning well and the infection was being beaten, so his leg would be fine. At last, a cat on the road to recovery and he still had four legs.

Six weeks later Snowy was back to his old self. He began hopping around the house later that week and looking interested in going outside, but I was worried about dirt getting under his bandage, knowing just what wasn’t under there. I made him some little socks, just like tiny cotton bags to wear over his bandage and tied them sort of around his knee with tape. I was sure Maria and Agosto would have seen him hopping around in his sock and eventually Maria came past and asked how he was. We chatted and eventually things got back to normal again between us. What could we do? We couldn’t change the nation’s history or culture but now Maria and Agosto knew people who wouldn’t let an animal suffer and die. Maybe Agosto would think again before setting his traps. Having neighbours like Agosto and Maria was lovely in so many ways, however, it was difficult to live in another culture when sometimes our values were so different. Maybe Phil was right about adding to his list that our dream home had to be some distance from its neighbours.

I don’t think we were terribly surprised to discover a week later that nothing had changed in Monchique. We sat with Senhor Albano in his garage and listened for once, while he rattled on about the solicitor and how he spent too much time on political things and not enough doing his work. But still he didn’t seem to be able to go and face him. There really was nothing we could do, we’d reached the point where we now accepted that we couldn’t carry on. We told Senhor Albano that he had until the end of the month and if nothing had changed, the deal was off.

We returned to the hovel again and spent the evening alternating between the rising panic because we realised that we’d wasted nearly two years and relief that we were now virtually free of the treacle like discussions with Senhor Albano. We knew we’d said we’d give him
until the end of the month but we both knew really that nothing would have changed by then. We calmly tried to study our map of the world which hung on the wall of the bedroom, hiding a damp patch. Where could we go next? Corsica? Sardinia? Greece? Madeira? Everywhere sounded exciting, exotic and wonderfully far from the hovel. We thought about South America, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and of Canada. How lovely it would be to go to an English speaking country and, who knew maybe we could work out a way of being able to stay there. These thoughts helped us to stay positive and hopeful. We decided that if Monchique did fall through we would pack up and leave the hovel. We could have decide to stay and try another part of the area, but things felt sour now, we needed to get away and make a new start. By the end of the month we would have to decide where that might be because autumn had arrived and we certainly couldn’t face another winter in the hovel, whatever Senhor Albano said. If he did produce a miracle we’d move to Monchique and rent somewhere while it all went through, if not, we were leaving anyway. Then, as was now becoming the norm, we had more news that we could really have done without. Phil had got a hernia. Excellent. After all our other health problems and the devastation of the cats this really was the last straw. It was probably some sort of sign, but we were too hysterical to concentrate on signs. Life was a mess.

At the end of the month we contacted Senhor Albano to discover that nothing had changed, he still hadn’t retrieved his papers and the solicitor had done nothing. So we weren’t going to be moving to Monchique, the perfect place that we had so longed for wasn’t going to be ours. It was upsetting for it to be the end and now we really had to decide what we were going to do. Phil pronounced that if he lived through his operation, and the way our luck had run recently he certainly doubted that he would, we would go to Canada as soon as he was well enough to travel. It was a reckless, expensive decision and just the thing we needed to do.
We sold our van, packed our stuff and got ready to leave. We felt terribly sad to be leaving Sofia, wherever she was. We hadn’t seen her in months but that didn’t mean she wasn’t around somewhere. She was completely self-sufficient but I couldn’t help feeling upset at the thought of her coming home one night to meow outside the window of the now empty hovel, hoping to be let in for a cuddle. Snowy was another matter, he was completely recovered and just like his old self. Luckily for us all Beatriz, our lovely friend from Odemira who was helping us with everything said she would take him, he was too beautiful to leave and if he didn’t settle with her cat, she would definitely find him a new home. None of us wanted to see him abandoned in Monte da Horta.

In many ways we were going to do what all our friends had been telling us to. Give up and come home. We were giving up on Portugal but we weren’t going home. After seven years away, England wouldn’t seem like home now, we’d come too far. Canada would be wonderful and we might discover how we could stay there forever. If not, the six months our visa allowed us would be just what we needed, a break from our journey.
CHAPTER NINE

Looking for signs
Going to British Columbia did turn out to be an adventure. It had been scary, amazing and incredibly beautiful but six months later we were flying back to Lisbon. We hadn’t really wanted to come back to Portugal but we had return tickets so we resumed our journey almost where we had left off as soon as we left the airport. While we were in Canada we hadn’t felt that we had left our journey really. We had hoped we would be able to find a way of staying but when that didn’t seem possible we began planning for our return to Europe. We had spent time using the internet to help us decide exactly where we should go. Tapping in all the geographical requirements from Phil’s endless list had, amazingly, led us back to Spain. Not Galicia this time but Andalucía, the side where it joins Portugal. This at least kept us close to the country we had mostly enjoyed but gave us a whole new place to explore. Phil had studied the maps and tried to find out as much as he could about our latest destination. It had the height of Monchique and higher, there was granite rock just like in Galicia and there were chestnut trees. It appeared that the next part of our journey would take us to a place which was a combination of both Galicia and Portugal. It seemed odd thinking about such a place when we were on the other side of the world but the internet brought it closer. Of course, looking for an ideal place based on only your wish list did have its drawbacks, supposing for all its perfection it was actually too expensive for us? It was possible. We checked out estate agent sites, to get some sort of feeling for if we had chosen the Cotswolds or Biarritz area of Spain, absolutely beautiful but way out of our price range. There were photos of houses surrounded by hillside and there were, thankfully, tumbledown shacks with price tags we might be able to stretch too, if the wind was in the right direction. Phil sent emails to the agents but didn’t get much of a positive response. He even asked about one or two particular properties he had found and seen hazy photos of. How wonderful would it have been if we had actually found our place and known that we were going there, even as the plane landed. I must say I loved that idea, but the agents were noncommittal. Looking at the huge list Phil had emailed them I wasn’t surprised when none of them felt equal to saying they had anything on their books which matched up. One agent sent a photo of a place which looked lovely, so rustic and homely. Even if the image was tiny
I felt certain we could make the place our own. But having whetted our appetite the agent then pointed out that it hadn’t any running water. In my excitement at seeing somewhere we could afford and that looked liveable I tried to persuade Phil that buying the place, even without water, might work out in the end. Phil couldn’t match my enthusiasm. But we did now know that there were some places we might stretch to. We weren’t setting off into a total void.

The question was, how would we be able to do any exploring for our wonderful place without a car? We’d sold our little Portuguese van when we’d left the hovel and we’d flown away on the money. Now we’d have to take the bus from Lisbon, struggling with all of our luggage for as far as the bus would take us and then hitch to a town to find somewhere to stay. As ever with our schemes, the theory was so much better than the practise. We had a huge suitcase with wheels which I’d imagined would be able to either contain all our stuff or at least, let us balance more bags on top and be able to pull it along with ease. Wrong. Those little wheels are meant for gliding over the smooth tiles of airport lobbies not bumping over rough terrain. Phil had a massive rucksack and a fistful of other bags so the steering and cajoling of the giant suitcase was down to me. Arriving in June meant considerable heat but at least the first leg of our journey, from Lisbon to the frontier with Spain, was relaxing and comfortable especially since the driver actually took us into the first little town in Spain, Rosal de Fronteira. We’d been wondering how we’d manage that. Trundling away from the comfort of the bus we walked through the little town and found a spot to stand and stick out our thumbs. There was a long wait because it was lunchtime and the roads were deserted while everyone sat down to their three-hour break. Eventually though an old Renault Express van rattled to a halt and we piled in, shoving our luggage in the back. It was weird being in Andalucía, it was very different from Portugal and quite different from Galicia, hotter for one thing. But oddly, despite thoroughly enjoying Canada we felt we understood Spain better. We’d realised that being any sort of European was different from being Canadian, despite us speaking the same language. There were many things about being back which we were
enjoying, the coffee for one thing, the weather, the people, the small cars and life. There were three men in the little van which had picked us up and they turned out to be evangelical Christians. Really, how many of them were there in this catholic country and particularly in this sparsely populated bit of rural Spain? Just lucky for us that they were passing and kindly took us to Aroche. One of the men knew someone there who had a holiday house we could stay in, so thankfully our first night back in Spain was sorted.

Next morning we decided to press on to either Cortegana or Aracena, both were small towns with hills, the kind of terrain we were hoping would reveal our perfect place. We dragged the bags out of the centre of Aroche and positioned ourselves at the side of the main road. And before I’d had time to wonder if this was the lowest point in our journey to date, with not even a car to our names, let alone a home, a woman in a nice big comfy car pulled up. We got in, to discover not only was she was from Galicia, but while we struggled to remember any of the language after six months in an English speaking country and six years in Portugal, she was also a nurse and had worked in Lewisham hospital so could speak perfect English. Amazingly, this was Phil's part of London, so after chatting about life there we got to talking about our journey and that our next step was to find a cheap hotel in either Cortegana or Aracena. A place to base ourselves while we looked for a place to rent. Sonya was sure we’d find somewhere in either, she was going to both, first to Cortegana then an hour later to Aracena. This had been an excellent lift.

We did manage to find a cheap hotel, not too far from where Sonya had dropped us so we didn’t have to tear our limbs off dragging the luggage very far. Cortegana, we decided was small enough for us to get to know people and hopefully find somewhere to rent, although it appeared to be a very odd place. There were men trotting about on horseback and there were women wearing flamenco dresses and parading around the passeo. There were little boys dressed as miniature horsemen, wearing strange trousers with silver buttons down the outsides of the legs, short jackets and wide brimmed hats while the little girls had flamenco
dresses and shoes in bright colours with white spots on. All very odd, although it was more what we’d been expecting to see when we’d first left England, woman clacking castanets and doing their housework in wild spotty dresses. We did discover eventually that this wasn’t actually normal daywear in these parts, but preparation for one of the biggest fiestas of the year, the ‘Romeria’, a sort of pilgrimage to the shrine of the town which was reached by a procession led by men carrying a statue of the virgin from the local church. Most people walked there although some men went on horseback and the women, in their flamenco dresses sang and played the tambourine the whole way. Eating, drinking and partying appeared to be the main reason for the Romeria and it went on for three days with virtually the whole town camped out in a field. This was the backdrop to our arrival in Cortegana. Once we’d checked in to the hotel jet lag caught up with us and we slept and felt ill for a few days. Then, as quickly as we could pull ourselves together we took to the streets to find a place to rent. We needed somewhere fast, not just because the price of a long stay in the hotel was steep but also because we needed to be able to cook our own food before we starved or got scurvy. Being vegetarians in Spain and more particularly in Andalucía, the home of Jamon (ham), was impossible.

Actually it hardly took us any time to find a place. We asked in shops and talked to anyone who was friendly, even though our Spanish had been badly mangled by our time in Portugal. I asked in the wool shop where I had been replenishing my depleted stock, it looked like gossip headquarters with a little table and chairs gathered at one end of the counter and it was full of women sitting and chatting. Yes, one of them said, a friend of hers had a flat to let in one of the little streets behind the church, should she could ring her and arrange for us to go and see it? That afternoon we were there and after the hovel this place looked like a hotel. It was immaculately clean, recently renovated and had a sparkling bathroom. The kitchen was small but full of the necessary things and outside its window was the tiniest patio in the world, about two metres by two metres. It was expensive though, double the price of the hovel, but the people we’d spoken to in town had told us to expect to have to pay this sort of
price so, without any choice, we decided to take it. Relief was short lived though because no sooner had we heaved out bags in and sat down, the usual anxieties settled around us like old friends or boxes of possessions. Our old favourite, ‘supposing we couldn’t find our real place here either, this could just be yet another wrong place’ was first but quickly followed by all the others. Maybe it would be like Galicia, it was Spain after all with people living in houses like the one we were renting, huddled in narrow streets. If we were hoping to find a house in its own land, it wouldn’t be in the pueblo, it would be outside and how would we find somewhere like that without a car?

After finding the flat we experienced one of our worst periods of anxiety, worse even than arriving in Santiago de Compostela all those years before. Just to add to our growing list of worries we had discovered that during our absence, the euro and the pound had more or less balanced out, something which had never happened at any time on our journey. This news made the possibilities of supporting ourselves as we had done, with the interest from our capital look catastrophic. This really was the most frightening nightmare, the one which hovered darkest over us as we moved the giant suitcase and rucksack into the flat. Maybe we no longer had enough money to buy our wonderful place, even if we did find it. After all, we knew that in England no one lingered between buying and selling their houses for fear of losing money. But here we were, way beyond lingering. Eight years had passed and even prices in Spain had risen in that time. We felt sick with worry and more than a couple of times we sat and cried about how stupid we were. We felt adrift from anywhere we knew and anything familiar and found it almost impossible to think of anything that could console us. We were in a different situation now, we had to commit ourselves, if we found anywhere that we could afford, then we had to make it fit our criteria. This time it had to work, because we had finally run out of any other ideas. Phil was also adamant that we wouldn’t let months and years slip by either if things didn’t start to work out soon. Because firstly, we couldn’t afford to be in the flat at all, and secondly we wanted to avoid becoming so settled that it would be impossible to lever ourselves out, just as it had been in Odemira. We had to find a
way of being utterly committed to finding the place while at the same time trying to think of
where we could go next.

We had been lucky in finding the flat in only four days, and without really noticing we began
to pull ourselves together and once again build another new life for ourselves. After the
Romeria festival the pueblo then began preparing for its next jamboree, a medieval festival.
The people we had got to know told us all about it and were really excited and proud. They
told us that if we were crafts people we should definitely apply to have a stall. Apparently it
was a four day event when the major part of the pueblo was converted into a medieval
market place. The narrow streets would be full of rustic looking stalls, there would be live
music, feasts, street performers, craft demonstrations like stone masonry and glass blowing
and wood carving as well as a forge, and masses of people came from all over. The hours for
those taking part though were not for the feint-hearted, eleven in the morning until three in
the afternoon then again from six in the evening until two in the morning, extremely long
days out in the heat although the nights would be better. Obviously, given our financial
situation, taking part was a must, so we signed up and set on with making ourselves our
obligatory medieval costumes and then started making things to sell. As ever, life began to
seem more possible once we’d got involved in something practical. Then there was a sign.
One afternoon as we were returning to the flat, we heard the unmistakeable sound of a kitten
meowing. We stopped and listened, bending down to look under the parked cars, scanning
the cobblestones until we saw it, a tiny, skinny, black kitten. It was Monkey all over again.
The very thing we’d needed to make us feel more like ourselves and to know that we were
starting to rebuild our life. The kitten was skin and bone and also the noisiest cat we’d ever
come across and looked exactly like a postcard I’d picked up in Canada of a black furry toy
with big wild-looking green eyes. It was starving but we didn’t have anything in the flat that
a kitten could eat. No fish, milk, eggs and obviously no cat food so Phil set out on a mission
to the shop on the corner. I really hoped he wasn’t too long because the racket the kitten was
making was unbearable.
Yes, it looked as if we were really making things come together, we’d got the flat and now the cat. How lovely it felt to have that little creature with us, we called her Plush since that was all the fur she had, a sort of haze over her skinny body. She was hungry all the time and kept an eagle-eye on all our comings and goings to the kitchen, she was at her bowl before we’d even thought about moving and eagerly tried everything we ate. Plush had arrived a couple of days before the medieval festival by which time we were in full production. During which Cortegana had been transformed into an historic stage set. The streets in the epicentre of the festival were decorated with flags and banners, people had their own which dangled from their balconies. And when the festival began all the cars were banished from the centre of the pueblo, the local police chasing the last ones away. Everywhere looked so different and it was exciting to be living right in the heart of the festival. It was completely different from any part of our life in Odemira or anywhere else we’d ever lived. Having a stall would mean long hours but since we lived right there, coming and going would be easy. It was to be yet another experience to add to our many, selling our toys in the street and this time, at a festival with masses of other stalls and hoards of people.

Andalucia in August, there was never any doubt that the temperatures would be anything other than extremely hot during the daytime, but at night it was wonderful and Cortegana really did look like a medieval town. The street entertainment was very atmospheric with belly dancers, jugglers, sword swallowers and musicians, all in costume. The dark, starry sky above us and the silhouettes of the castle and palm trees above the heads of the crowds were spectacular. Our toys sold well and we had a great time talking to everyone who stopped at the stall, including many people from Cortegana who we already recognised. It felt good to belong somewhere again.

It was odd that we’d only been in Cortegana for seven weeks but had already found the flat, had got Plush and we’d taken part in the festival. Now we had to start our campaign to find the ever elusive place. We worried about the challenge but knew that we really had to brace
ourselves this time. Our usual anxiety hovered around us as we worried that we wouldn’t find the place, or worse, that we wouldn’t recognise it if we did. This time we knew that we absolutely had to try our hardest and to be utterly convinced that this was the right place. We couldn’t let our anxiety get the better of us or we’d start thinking about other places and maybe jinx the area. So, falling back on one of our tried and tested methods we made a flyer. We weren’t sure if it was the right thing to do, probably it wasn’t but we couldn’t think of anything else and there weren’t any estate agents in Cortegana, but at least we were doing something constructive. Just like before when Maria had told everyone she knew that we were looking to buy somewhere, the stairs to our flat became crowded with people who had bits of land and tumbledown buildings for sale. We had to go and see all of them, just in case. But predictably, we didn’t see ‘the place’. It might have been entertaining if we hadn’t been so anxious, everyone who came to find us had a crazy place which they’d probably inherited and now hoped to turn into ready currency. Like the man who had decided to divide his piece of land and sell off half of it. And despite huge enthusiasm for this scheme seemed totally unaware that any division of land was totally illegal, to prevent ever decreasing sized pieces of land like in Galicia, he had no papers at all, no permission to build another house, no connection to mains electricity and no water supply. Another man told us how to find his place, and although we walked over rough hillsides for about forty-five minutes we never actually found it. We squinted through the trees, looking down to the valley where the house was supposed to be, but could see nothing. Then there was the man who came with us and still had trouble locating his ruin, having not been there himself for several years. Eventually we found the right path and arrived at a heap of rocks, buried under thick brambles. Then he went on to explain that actually it belonged to his mother and he wasn’t sure that she wanted to sell it.

At least on these wild house chases we were getting to see the area, or the Sierra of Aracena as it is known, and it was just as the internet had described, green and high with lots of castles and pretty pueblos. And at that time of year it looked beautiful. The chestnut trees
and black poplars were changing colour, and the sunny hot days were just the right temperature for walking around without fainting from heat exhaustion. We had also calmed down sufficiently to notice that, amazingly, we might still be able to afford to buy somewhere. Prices were beginning to fall and buyers were noticeably thinner on the ground, maybe things would work out for us after all. ‘Tranquilo’ everyone told us, we had to be patient. Take our time and stay calm, because without doubt the international financial crisis would soon start to have an effect here and then prices then would begin to fall, certainly by the spring. Anyhow they said, no one would be interested in selling in the winter, the weather was far too wet and cold for one thing, plus there were other things to do, like ‘matanzas’. Pig killings, which we knew about from Galicia and Portugal. There was also Christmas, and of course New Year, and then the traditional Spanish Christmas Day, The Kings. Ah! Yes, this was how time began to slip away in Spain, fiestas are not just a part of life, they are the only important thing. Before we knew it, autumn had become winter and we had been in the flat for six months.

Given out track record, six months was a relatively short period and once we had seen what the winter weather looked like in the Sierra we could appreciate that getting out into the ‘campo’ as the countryside was called, would be a very wet and difficult task. Although Andalucia is much further south than Galicia, the rain was just the same. It poured and it poured, it was also freezing, the mist hung down over every hill, and the castles disappeared under the clouds. We could now understand why everyone had said we should wait until the spring. Indoors, the flat, which had looked perfectly lovely and like a hotel in the summer, was now an ice box with no heating. It was damp, black mould grew inside the kitchen cabinets and the ceilings had black spotty patches all over. We caught cold after cold, then the flu. But at least most of my time was spent elsewhere, either teaching English in a bar or volunteering at a local workshop for adults with mental disabilities. I’d decided to improve my Spanish and try to lose the Portuguese by immersing myself in the local community and besides, everywhere else was much warmer than the flat. It was weird, in a short space of
time we had managed to became more settled in Cortegana than we’d ever felt in Odemira. Maybe because we felt the urgency to make it work this time or maybe it was just a cumulative thing. It was a new place but it didn’t feel so alien, also we weren’t the complete novices we’d been when we’d arrived in Galicia, all those experiences had actually counted for something. We comforted ourselves with the thought that maybe we hadn’t wasted time in Odemira after all, maybe we’d been learning useful things, whatever they might be.

Along with getting to know the pueblos of the Sierra through the winter we began to understand the differences between Andalucía and Galicia. Although the pueblos looked very much alike, from where we’d lived in Entrimo, there was something different. Here there were little houses out in the campo too. And while virtually everyone still lived in a pueblo, close to each other, we discovered most of them had a piece of land in the countryside as well. Where families congregated over the weekend or for fiestas. These little places were basically furnished, like a cabin with just a table and chairs and maybe even beds. People here loved their piece of ‘campo’, and looked forward to any opportunity to leave the pueblo and go there. What they did when they got there seemed to be dictated by the seasons. In the spring the men were responsible for sowing all the summer vegetables, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, beans, and of course once the heat of summer arrived, masterminding the complicated watering system. The autumn was what the men looked forward to the most though, the hunting season. They and their friends set off out into the hills early in the morning with their guns and their dogs, while the women, always drawing the short straw, were left to cook and clean. Through the winter months the campo houses were largely left closed up, apart from the annual pig killing in December or January. People preferred to huddle in their chilly pueblo houses while the wind roared and the trees were lashed by the heavy rains. The revelation of these ‘campo’ houses was very exciting, maybe this was a sign that we were in the right place. Now all we needed was to find someone who had one to sell.
After a long cold winter in the flat, spring finally began to arrive. At the sight of the bright blue skies I felt stirred into action once again and decided that we needed to buy a little van. It was impossible to get into the campo without one, no buses went out into the hills, or even anywhere else for that matter, so we were basically stranded in Cortegana. And, as I pointed out to Phil, who was anti-buying any sort of vehicle, supposing we did by some miracle find somewhere to buy, how would survive without a car? Phil wanted us to live simply, and by that he meant without a polluting car. And surely, he tried to reason, we would be over-committing ourselves by buying a van before we knew if we would be staying or not? We were heading for one of the regular circular discussions, full of good points but not reaching any decision. However, the timing of my suggestion was perfect. Phil was then felled by another bout of the flu and I managed to get him to agree to the van while he was too weak to argue.

In Spain, before any large purchase can be made, a national identity card is required. And that means bureaucracy and all sorts of paperwork. I sat in an office while copies of my birth certificate, passport, wedding certificate and countless other bits of paper were gobbled up hungrily by a photocopier, wondering if the van idea had been such a good one. I felt as if I was becoming mummified in some spider’s web. But then by some amazing stroke of luck, which was definitely another sign, the official computer decided that the identity numbers we had got while we lived in Galicia were still valid. No more photocopying was required, we were already bona fide Spanish residents and therefore could buy our van. And it was a truly wonderful moment to be mobile again, after almost a year of being trapped in Cortegana with the occasional trip out to Aracena. We celebrated our freedom by taking Plush to the vet. She had come into season and the last thing we needed was another echo from the past in the furry shape of kittens in the flat.

We felt rather proud of ourselves, we’d got the van, we’d survived the winter, and got to know a bit more about the area. Maybe life was back on track. Maybe. But what we really
needed now was a plan for how we could find our place. The flyers hadn’t done any good, we’d spent winter hibernating and now it was time to get things moving. Phil was so desperate he said we’d give it one more month and then if there was no sign of anything we would pack up and leave. Just where we would be going next wasn’t clear but I agreed, we couldn’t linger any longer letting time pass, maybe this was the last chance we’d ever have to buy somewhere.

We then explained all this to Anna, a new friend who lived out in one of the small remote pueblos, and she looked at us as we struggled with the conundrum then simply asked which estate agents we’d been to. At which we explained our ‘we-do-things-our-own-way’ theory, our mantra of how the place would find us, and feeble stuff like that, and that we didn’t have estate agents kind of money. But Anna just shrugged and said it didn’t hurt to ask. And anyway, the way things were going with house sales at the moment, any estate agent would bite the hand off a real live buyer, however little money they had. We weren’t convinced but in the absence of any other idea, and not wanting to seem too idiotic, we thought we’d go to Aracena and give the estate agents a whirl and then at least we’d know that we really had done everything we possibly could. Anna agreed to come with us, for moral support.
CHAPTER TEN

The magic carpet
At that time the huge boom of foreign buyers had long gone, along with most of the estate agencies that had once enjoyed rich pickings in the crowded narrow streets of Aracena. I was sort of glad that we weren’t going to feel rushed or panicked into buying any old place, just because there were loads of other foreign buyers who had wads of money to spend. I didn’t want us to look like the hopeless ditherers that we so obviously were. And after a moral boosting coffee we trawled around the smaller agencies that still remained, and as suspected weren’t shown many pieces of land or little campo houses, and there was certainly no enthusiasm for our small sum of money either. We bolstered our flagging spirits with the knowledge that we had actually seen places on the internet when we were still in Canada. Certainly a year had passed but surely prices couldn’t have risen that much? We had decided to save the biggest one until last, as it was the only estate agent on the plaza and had a big, stylish office. I saw Phil’s face drop as we stepped into the air conditioned interior and heard him mutter that we’d be back on the pavement in less than a minute. However, the estate agent was friendly and asked us all to sit down, he listened while we told him what we were looking for and I waited for him to shake his head and say they had nothing like that. At least in Spain or at least in the previous estate agents offices we’d been in, they didn’t try to interest us in anything other than what we wanted. But he listened and looked thoughtful then began tapping his keyboard while he asked us which areas of the Sierra we were interested in. He looked first for the pueblos we’d asked about and although there were places for sale, they were very expensive. We felt deflated and tired, any lingering nervous excitement was draining away through the soles of our shoes. Then Anna, who was enjoying the vicarious house hunting experience having got a nice comfy home of her own, asked if there was anything in Almonaster La Real. We looked across at her as if she’d gone mad. Almonaster was, in most people’s opinion including our own, the prettiest pueblo in the Sierra. It was so lovely in fact that we had discounted it as soon as we’d seen it because it would without doubt have been outside our price range, it was the Cotswolds of the area. Everything about it was perfect, it was a tiny little place, it had ancient monuments, it was tourist heaven, and it was just cute. The estate agent thought for a minute and then clicked
on his mouse. There were two campo houses with pieces of land for sale in Almonaster. One had a slightly bigger house, an existing borehole and a smaller piece of land, while the other was cheaper, with a little house, no borehole and two and a half hectares of land. I remembered that size because Phil had it on his list as the ideal size. Would we like to see the photos? All three of us leaned over the desk, straining to get some idea of what we were seeing. There were three hazy photos, one of a tree-covered hillside with a tiny speck in the middle which looked like a building. Another of the interior of the house and another of the view which looked like misty hills and faded sky. It would have been shallow of me to have pointed out the crocheted blanket while we were in the estate agents office as there were so many more serious things to consider, but it was there and I silently took this as a sign and made a mental note to mention it to Phil later. Would we like to view? I was adamant, yes we definitely did want to view. Phil was still reeling that there was actually somewhere affordable in Almonaster, but being a ‘glass is half empty’ sort of person he was sure there was some hitch or glitch with this potential find. However, Anna was with us and looked at us encouragingly, yes she said, of course we’d like to see it.

Outside the agency we repaired to the nearest bar to restore ourselves and to go over what we’d just seen. The biggest thing in its favour was that we could afford it. Thank goodness there really was somewhere, added to that it was somewhere which had a good few ticks on Phil’s endless list of absolute necessities. He was hunched and grumpy looking, which is how surprises take him, while Anna and I got excited about makeovers of the houses’ interior. I had to mention the blanket, certainly a colourful work of woolly art couldn’t be overlooked, it had to be a sign. Anna needed to understand why a sign was necessary, surely the existence of the place was sign enough? She was right of course, but we, or I, couldn’t ignore what I’d seen as the helping hand of some benevolent spirit somewhere. Maybe the blanket couldn’t indicate all the mystifying technical things we would doubtless stumble over when we went to see the place but to my mind it was an indicator, a sign that we had to go and see the place. Later that evening, when the little photos were fading in my mind, reality started to creep
over all my excitement. How could this be the place? After all the years of searching we hadn’t imagined it would come to us like this. Surely an estate agent was not the person to deliver our dream. I lay in bed that night wondering about all places we had seen on our nine-year journey and all the many people who had taken us to see them. Old men with donkeys, equally wizened women in nylon overalls, friendly neighbours, crazy characters, and as well as all these people there had been the places we had stumbled on ourselves, with ruined bits of houses hidden under tangles of weeds and brambles. None of those had turned out to been the place, so what did it all mean? It was hard to get to sleep that night.

We’d arranged to meet the estate agent the next day in Almonaster, meanwhile he was going to get the key from the owners and tell them that we were going to their campo. Anna said she’d come and see the place too, after I’d asked her if she would. Somehow it mattered that she stayed with us, if there was any magic dust covering us from yesterday I didn’t want it to blow away just because we all three weren’t there. In the end we were quite a party, Phil and I, Anna, the original estate agent, and now his boss because he had a four-wheel drive car which was apparently needed to get us to the campo. After coffee in one of the very handsome bars in Almonaster we set off out of the pueblo leaving by a narrow road which took us out of what seemed to be the back of the pueblo, away from the main road. It was a road designed either by a madman or had been cut through the only accessible part of a steep hillside, it curved and snaked wildly one way then the other. After a couple of minutes of being swung from side to side we turned off the tarmac road and began climbing a steep forest track in the shade of tall pine trees. I’m sure the owner of the four-wheel drive car was looking forward to the opportunity for a bit of off-road driving but luckily it was a bit too steep for him to spit gravel as the track climbed up and up until we reached the top of the pine trees. We drove along the side of a narrow, deep valley and on reaching the top we could see the spire of the church in the pueblo far below and the cluster of little white house’s we’d left behind. After a gentle drive along the only flat piece of track we had seen since leaving the road, the car turned off to the left and this time we plunged down, bumping over
rocks and dropping into hollows which had us gripping the armrests on the doors of the car. This even narrower track took us down into the next valley where after a minute we were on level ground, silently gliding over a carpet of pine needles before coming to a halt outside a wire gate and the end of the track. We’d arrived.

The estate agent seemed very chirpy as we all climbed out of his car, and after we had filed through the wire gate he explained with enthusiasm that he’d spoken to the owner of the campo that morning and they had agreed that in the current house selling climate the original asking price was maybe a bit high, so now the price had been reduced by ten thousand Euros. He’d thought we might like to know before we had a look around. Anna and I looked at each other, maybe the magic dust was still clinging to us. Phil didn’t need any distractions, he had his compass, big tape measure, camera and a long list of notes. He was on a mission to see where this place came up short. Surely it was another sign, I said to Anna, a sign that we really had to take note of it all while we were here today. Anna agreed that it wasn’t just a sign, it was really good news, any price reduction was great. I felt sure Phil would be worrying about why the price had been reduced. In his mind things happened for a reason and mostly not good ones, like the authorities were going to bury nuclear waste or build a motorway across the hills, nothing could have a simple explanation at this stage. We all walked down the slope from the gate to the flat piece of land just below. We looked around us and were absolutely staggered by the place, it seemed we had arrived at the most perfect time. The land around the house and that stretching into the distance was alight with colour, vivid yellow, intense pink, rich purples and deep, deep blues all lay on a background of every shade of green imaginable. We walked though this carpet of colour and plant life towards the little house and all stood looking out at the view, it was breathtaking. The estate agent explained that we were facing south-west and that on a clear day it was possible to see for more than sixty kilometres towards Portugal, and at night, he said, waving an expansive arm, the little pueblos which nestled in the folds of the hills came to life when their lights were on.
As well as the incredible diversity of plants there were huge trees. Cork, oak, olive and the shiny leaved madronia, all around the house and running off down the steep slope towards the valley bottom. Phil was itching to get a look at every corner of the place, he was determined to stay focussed and gather as much information as he could, so he and the estate agents set off down through the trees. Anna and I had other plans, we wanted to get inside the little house. The estate agent’s photo had plainly been taken from the best angle, accentuating the stone work on the front and ignoring the fact that the end walls were just bare blocks in need of their stone facing. A small detail we decided, and tried to see under the slightly broken wooden blind that flapped over the only window on the front of the house. A lizard dashed out as we lifted it up, its little haven disturbed he scuttled off up to the crooked tiles above. We peered in through the misty glass but it was too dark to see anything, but we’d got the key given to us by the estate agent before slithering off down the slope with Phil so I turned the key in the lock. The door swung open and we stepped into the darkness. The smell of wood smoke hit us first as we fumbled to open shutters, then the coolness after the heat of the spring sunshine outside. We looked around feeling almost as if we were crouching under a low, dark wooden ceiling. The first thing we saw was the massive, blackened fireplace which was almost as wide as the house and jutted out about a yard into the room with an impressive set of antlers, proudly mounted on the chimney breast above. And of course there was the sofa, draped in its crocheted blanket. It was a homely place, somewhere that felt loved. There was a sort of kitchen space at the opposite end from the fireplace, with table and chairs. Then through two wooden doors we peered into bedrooms with just a bed in each, too small for anything else. No bathroom because, as the estate agent had pointed out, there was no water. But it was perfect. A simple rustic place, hunkered down on a hillside with the land rising behind right the way up to the huge pine trees we’d driven under and then dropping steeply away in front of the house, down to the deep valley below. It was exactly as I’d imagined our place being, well sort of. Like the house I’d made with my sister in our Dad’s shed, it smelled of the outdoors, of wood, tools and turps, a pretend house which felt familiar but different enough to imagine making a
completely new life, one where all our experiences would count. Emerging into the sunshine again Anna and I stood outside where giant ants were marching along the ground. She lit a cigarette and we looked at the view and listened to the silence. Anna was obviously impressed with the place and asked me if I could see myself living there. I didn’t even have to think about it. Yes definitely, I really could.

We were in a daze that evening. Surely it was the place, even Phil was almost ready to concede that it was, but shouldn’t we try to hold back, be sensible check everything thoroughly before we fell too far in love with the place to ever want to reject it? Yes, of course, but how likely was that? We’d been waiting nine years for our new life to begin and now we wanted it to start right away, we wanted to get excited. We hadn’t got excited about Monchique because we hadn’t allowed ourselves to, but this was different, it felt totally different. We talked about it almost all night and decided that the most worrying thing was the lack of water. Did it mean there wasn’t any water under the ground or just that the owner hadn’t been able to afford to have a borehole dug? And how much would it cost to get one? Finally we slept with images of the trees, hills and the little house there in our dreams.

The next time we saw the place was two days later and this time we were going to meet the owners. We were trying hard to keep one foot on the firm ground of reality while the other slipped off, dancing with the possibility of our own home at last. We had agreed to meet the estate agent in the bar and he came cheerfully across to us as we sat nervously in the corner. He was grinning happily, doubtless because he felt sure he was going to make a sale to us gullible foreigners, however, he said he had more news. The owners were very keen to sell, so keen in fact that they had decided to reduce the price by another five thousand Euros. He smiled broadly and we tried to smile back, while we wondered what it meant. It seemed odd that the haggling was going our way before we’d even begun talking about money. And anyway, why were these reductions so big? We both remembered very clearly the agony of
trying to get a two hundred pound reduction when we’d bought our first house not so many years ago. When had these huge numbers become so ordinary?

We met the owners who were nicest couple anyone could wish to buy a house from. We sat around the dining room table in their house in the pueblo while they produced sheaves of impenetrable paperwork and flicked proudly through pages, pointing out the rubber stamps and signatures which littered the margins. We noticed that the place was called El Pocito, and I had the distinct feeling that it meant ‘little well’, surely that was a good sign? I’d have to check that out later since neither the estate agents or the house owners could speak a single word of English. Despite the language difficulties we managed to get some sort of idea that the papers were in order by asking questions in our basic Spanish. Of all the things we could have worried about we managed to settle, not on the water at this stage but on whether the little house was legal or not. We had discovered that many people built themselves these little campo houses, which as we had seen were really nothing more than sheds, without permission from the council or any other body. The last thing we needed was to buy the place, move in with our luggage and then have someone official turn up and say it was only a shed and we couldn’t live there. But everyone around the table assured us that it was all above board, we shouldn’t worry it was all legal. Well, what else were they going to say? Anyway, we stored that anxiety, knowing it would get another airing later and set off out to the campo, this time we followed Daniel and Isobel the owners in their little Peugeot 205, so much for needing the four-wheel drive monster. We arrived at the wire gate and got out of the car, it was afternoon this time and the sun was dipping slightly, giving a warm glow to the hillside. It really was just as magnificent as we’d remembered and we knew now that we were already completely and hopelessly attached to it, strangely even more than we’d ever been to the house in Monchique. This time we were dealing with a normal situation, the owners wanted to sell, they had organised all the necessary papers and were ready to go. They had reduced the price because they wanted to sell and had good reason, not scary disastrous reasons but ordinary everyday reasons. All we had to do was to decide that we
wanted it. We were still scared, even though this was the very thing we’d been waiting for since the start of our journey all those years ago, but this time we felt more brave, as if there was no going back and even if there were things which we discovered and wished were different, we were now ready to accept that everywhere had it flaws and we’d get used to living with them, whatever they were.

We decided to say yes, that we did want to buy it, with the proviso that there was water. Daniel, the owner understood but said we shouldn’t worry, he knew there was water, he hadn’t had a borehole because he couldn’t afford it, but definitely there was water. We felt he was right, after all why would fate have brought us here if only to rip our sweet little home away from us now? However common sense told us that we needed a bit more confirmation than just our feelings and contacted a borehole company. Then we told everyone we knew that we’d finally found our place and that, barring a disaster on the borehole front, we were going to buy it. People did say that buying somewhere without a borehole was a gamble, possibly one not worth taking but we had reached the stage where we were now defending our little place against anyone offering advice to the contrary. Any problems that appeared now we would deal with, because nothing was going to come between us and our home.

There had been a point when we understood that if there was no water, there would be no house. But that moment was rapidly becoming deeply buried under the exciting knowledge that finally, we had actually found our place. We really did need to keep calm and wait for this one last thing to fall into place before giving ourselves over to delight. I lay in bed wondering if I could ever resuscitate myself after this if there turned out to be no water. How many times could we get to the edge of our new life only to be wrenched back from the brink without going mad? I couldn’t bear it. I remembered how we had heard that house buying and selling was the number one most stressful thing people undertook in life. We’d been living with that stress for nine years now and it had become part of us, almost like another person living with us. We’d accommodated it, put up with it and survived the sadness,
depression and misery it brought. Now that thing might be leaving us and that thought was just too overwhelming. I finally managed to get to sleep by thinking positive thoughts about watery things.

Next day we met the borehole man in what was becoming our local bar in Almonaster. The day was hot and bright as we left the pueblo and drove up through the pine trees. We arrived at the wire gate, this time getting the strange and unfamiliar feeling of being the owners of this wonderful place. No estate agents this time or the owners, just us and Mr Borehole. He climbed out of his van and stood looking around. ‘Muy bonita’ he said, smiling and nodding while we felt a certain proprietary glow. I wondered when he would start dragging equipment out of his van and what sorts of technical gadgetry he would use to tell him if there was water under the ground. He reached behind the driver’s seat and fished out two bent pieces of metal, like thin rods bent at right angles, then stood up and looked around. Trying to look knowledgeable we explained that on the level below us was a kind of pond, maybe starting there would be best? No, that wouldn't do he said, it would be very difficult to get his machinery down there, it would be better if we found water on this level. At this point he gripped the rods at the short end, just below the bend and tucked his elbows in to touch his body. Checking everything felt right he then set off, taking measured strides away from the house. We both stood watching, not sure whether to be amazed that things were so simple or to be worried that such a big financial decision depended on this something so simple. However, our ruminations and anxiety didn’t have much time to gather momentum because after four strides the metal rods not just crossed but virtually spun right round, the man looked up and grinned. Pretty good he said, impressed it seemed with himself, this was the perfect place he said, the borehole would be near the house which would be handy for him and for us. The man wandered about a bit more with the rods, trying to pinpoint the exact place. Finally he was happy and scraped the toe of his boot along the dusty ground, making an ‘X’ on his considered spot. We couldn’t believe it was that simple, surely more pain had to be involved or at least something more scientific, involving some piece of
technological equipment? We must have looked a bit dazed because Mr Borehole gave Phil the rods to have a go himself while I asked about the water, how sure could he be that there was water down there, surely not just by the reaction of two rods? Had he ever come across pieces of land with no water? He explained that in the Sierra there was never really a question of whether there would be water, it was more a question of how far down it was. The usual depth was around eighty metres but sometimes they made boreholes of more than one hundred metres, but they always found water. Phil was striding about with the metal rods, watching them turning magically in his hands. Finally, when he came to return them to Mr Borehole we allowed ourselves to let the bubble of excitement creep up inside us. Definitely we had found our dream home.

We felt we were entitled now to a little period of glowing happiness. We had told the estate agent that yes we did want the place, and now we were waiting to hear when we should go and pay the deposit and sign some papers. We sat at a table outside a bar in Cortegana, just round the corner from our flat and couldn’t help smiling at everyone. We were sure we should have been anxious and worried about something but at that moment we were felt justified in enjoying ourselves. We could savour this moment and really enjoy all the planning for making our home. Phil was flicking through his ever present notebook, looking for the measurements he’d written down when striding around the hillside and checking them against those on the document we’d got from the estate agent. Strangely, we realised that it was almost a year to the actual day that we had arrived on virtually this very spot in Cortegana after our return from Canada. It was strange now, like looking down the wrong end of a telescope, the worries we’d had about coming here, how we had given ourselves the shortest time possible to decide if this was the place or not and all the endless worry and anxiety. It all seemed so far away now, we had become different people. Different even from the people we had been only the previous week, before we had seen our place. How could we have known when we arrived here that we really would find somewhere even better than Monchique? Phil, for whom Monchique had everything, was delighted to have out-matched
it. The land was more interesting, the house was much more liveable than Senhor Albano’s shed plus the view was breathtaking. Suddenly he stopped flicking the pages of his notebook and looked up, saying ‘you are not going to believe this’. While looking for measurements Phil had just found his notes from Canada, the ones he’d made when we had decided to come to Andalucía, and in amongst them he had found all of the things he’d scribbled down about the house that had been for sale, the one that had made us relieved to discover there were places here which looked as if we would be able to afford to live here. There was the stuff the estate agent had emailed us about the place we had seen with the right price tag. About square metres and hectares and how there was no water, and there was the name of the place. El Pocito. It was the same house.

We were so amazed. Certainly this confirmed that we really had seen a sign while we were still in Canada, a sign which had turned out to be right. The estate agent hadn’t explained about the possibility of a borehole and that all rural houses had them. If he had, maybe we would have found our place sooner, just as I had fantasised when we’d been in Canada. But Phil was philosophical, maybe we needed the past year to understand that we were in the right place, we might not have felt ready to decide straight away. He was right of course, but still. I worried in retrospect that we could so easily have missed the place which was so obviously meant to be ours, imagining it made me feel queasy. We had left the bar now and were walking back to the flat when Phil pointed out that if we bought our place the previous year we would probably have had to pay the original asking price, so maybe our guardian angel of the signs really did do everything right after all.

Now we were on the edge of the magic carpet that would eventually give us the keys to El Pocito. All the different bits of paperwork had to be dealt with in the Spanish way. We knew that the first thing was to pay the deposit, but this was not the simple task we had undertaken when buying houses in England. No, no. This involved a serious meeting at the estate agents office, in their special boardroom in fact, where Daniel, Isobel, Phil, me and the
estate agents all sat around in the dark, air conditioned environs and read, or tried to read, the several pages of a contract which stated that once we had paid the deposit we would lose it if we changed our minds. We knew that already, that’s the point of deposits isn’t it? However there is nothing to make the stomach churn quite so much as the feeling of no return. We all looked solemnly at the papers and then it was time to sign. Each page had to be signed by all of us, so the sheets circled the table, round and round. There seemed so many pages of words for just a deposit. I began to wonder about the number of pages in the document which meant we actually owned the place, maybe we would be signing all day long. It did seem true that paper was much treasured by officialdom here. We already had a weighty document which had been put together for the sale of the place, including a special survey of the land and its measurements. This was bound and covered in signatures and rubber stamps, now we had this other wad which had been complimented with photocopies of our identity cards and passports all also rubber stamped and signed. Outside the estate agents we clasped our armfuls of papers and realised that we could relax for a couple of weeks while the deeds were drawn up in our names. Daniel and Isobel had said that we could borrow the key whenever we wanted to go and look at our little home and Phil was itching to go and look at the solar equipment. Had I not been so happy I might have realised I was now to be revisited by the spectre of watts and volts, and Phil’s endless questions, because our new home only had alternative energy, thankfully not a wind turbine, but a couple of small solar panels perched on the roof, and maybe they would actually work, unlike the wind turbine on the van.

A few days later we had a call from the estate agents, apparently there was some sort of hitch with the paperwork, it might take a little longer than a week or two to draw up the deeds. What did it mean? Surely nothing could go wrong now, that really would be the end of our world. Unable to bear not knowing we had agreed to go and see the estate agent so that he could explain it clearly. We drove to Aracena full of dread at what had gone wrong. A problem had shown up with land being registered on the special national computer
programme called Catastro, the estate agent explained. It appeared that the whole of Spain would eventually be put on this system, there was an army of civil servants throughout the country slaving away, giving each plot of land a number and eventually whole map of the country would be filled in with numbers. However, in reality, land was really only being put on as it was sold, which was when all the paperwork was brought up to date. Our place hadn’t been put on before and when the Catastro people had seen Daniel’s papers the civil servants had said that something wasn’t right because from their records there was only one big piece of land covering hundreds of hectares, so our bit must have been illegally subdivided. We sat and gaped while the estate agent went on to say that Daniel was livid with the people down in Huelva, the headquarters of the region. He knew that his land was not illegal and was certain that they had made some mistake so he was going down to see them the next morning together with the estate agent and between them they would sort it out. We definitely shouldn’t worry, these things happened, civil servants often made mistakes on Catastro, but they were taking piles of documents with them, proof that the land had always been separate from the big piece which surrounded it. He’d let us know how they got on.

Was this going to be the end of our dream? Should we allow ourselves to be consoled by the estate agent, after all, wasn’t he acting for Daniel and not us? It was a worry, but at least if there was something illegal going on, someone had spotted it before we had paid all of our money and been left with nothing. Still, I couldn’t believe that Daniel or Isobel would do anything illegal; they even had paperwork for their garage. No. I felt sure the thing would be sorted out and on that positive note we decided to call in and see Mr Borehole on our way home to find out what he needed from us and how soon he could bring his machinery. He was happy to explain that he needed a copy of the deeds of the property in our name, then he would set about organising the necessary paperwork to get the permission for us to have a borehole. Permission? Did that mean that there was a possibility of them not giving us permission? No, no said Mr Borehole, the only time it was difficult and then not impossible
was if your neighbour’s borehole was less than one hundred metres away and that definitely wasn’t the case for us. Everything would be fine, we should contact him as soon as we had our deeds and he would start things in motion. How long might it all take? Well, six weeks maybe. That didn’t sound too bad. We knew that if everything went well we were hoping to move into our little house in only two or three week’s time. That would mean taking water to the house since there wasn’t as much as a drop anywhere there. We were going to buy some big, 25 litre water containers and fill them from the spring in town. This might have sounded weird to us years before but now we knew that everyone, including those with running water in their homes drank the untreated spring water and the tap where people gathered to fill containers was quite a spot for gossip. Now we realised that those with huge containers, like the ones we planned to buy, were our brothers, people like we would be, campo owners with no borehole. Amongst our feelings of excitement and joy was mingled the certainty that through this process we were going to be much wiser than we were before, despite all of our experiences to date, the actual buying of a property was a very different thing from thinking about it.

Next day the estate agent called, he and Daniel had been to Huelva and had managed to sort out the confusion. They had been lucky because Daniel knew someone who worked there and had been able to talk it through with them. They had looked at satellite photos which showed the civil servants where they had made their mistake. They could see on the photos that there was an old stone wall outlining the whole plot and once this had been pointed out they allotted a number to Daniel’s land and everything was fine. Relief. We were just hoping that things would now run smoothly. The estate agent explained that he would now proceed to the notary’s office to get the new deeds drawn up and in the meantime we should go and open ourselves a Spanish bank account. It wouldn’t be possible to buy our place with money directly from a foreign bank account, we had to show that we weren’t terrorists or drug runners, the route of the money had to be visible and, he laughed, definitely no bags of used banknotes were allowed! We felt slightly weak at all the talk of large sums of money but
realised we were embarking on a whole new chapter of experiences and doubtless additions to our growing mountain of paperwork.
Heaven under our feet
Finally the hot day dawned when we would become the owners of our own dream. We arrived at the notary’s office to find Daniel and Isobel already there relaxing in the wonderful chill of the air conditioned office, it was a really hot day outside. We had already been to visit our new bank manager that morning to collect our huge cheque. It felt rather more real than buying a house with a mortgage, buying somewhere outright with a cheque. The notary’s assistant came to check on all of our documents, passports, identity cards, residency and a letter from the bank to say we weren’t money launderers. But, didn’t we have the originals of our residency documents? Yes of course, but back at the flat, surely a photocopy would do? No. Photocopies would not do. We must go and get our originals before we could proceed. Honestly, what next would come between us and our home? Poor Daniel and Isobel had to wait while the estate agent whisked us all the way back to Cortegana in his big, air conditioned car. We really were hopeless at official things. Finally, back in the notary’s office we were ushered in to the room with the big table and a stack of biros ready for the signing. The notary appeared like a magician through another door and sat at the head of the table ready to read through the stack of papers in front of him. It did indeed look like a huge document. He began and we tried to pay attention as he read through the description of the place, where it was, who it belonged to and things. Then suddenly Phil asked a question, stopping the notary’s flow. The measurement of the land? Surely the figure he had just read out wasn’t the same as on the estate agent’s document? Flurry of consultation, yes, Phil was correct, there was a mistake. The document would have to be amended, we would all have to wait. The notary and his assistant disappeared I imagined to track down the careless typist. It was a shame because all those pages were stamped and signed by the notary already. Half an hour later we started again and this time there were no hitches, the document circled the big table I can’t remember how many times but finally it was done. We all shook hands and filed out. Daniel to the cashier to pay a huge fee and us out into the street with the door key that Isobel had so thoughtfully brought to present to us. We would have to wait for our deeds to be drawn up. The document we had all signed was the sale
agreement, now we needed the one that said we owned the place. Could it be any more complex?

That was it. We had bought El Pocito and now it really was ours. All those huge trees, the hills and the little house. Two and a half hectares feels scarilly big when it's on a hill and the boundaries of your land are as far as you can see, but it was absolutely beautiful. We knew that at some point, when the enormity of what we had done sunk in we would feel shock, but not yet, it was our dream place come true. We had bought it and would be moving in just four weeks after the first time we had seen it when Anna had been with us. Somehow the stage we’d reached seemed far enough for the moment. We had so many things to think about but the feeling of achievement made us stunned and slow. We wanted to leave the flat as soon as we could in order to save money on the rent but had to pack our boxes for the ninth time since we’d left our old home in Yorkshire. It was going to be marvellous not to have our life permanently packed in boxes, to be able to find books or photos or whatever without having to rummage and unpack things. But we were getting in front of ourselves because it was going to be a while yet before we were free of boxes.

We had decided to take out the low wooden ceiling of the little house which was almost scraping Phil's head and open up the space to the eaves. Then having taken the ceiling away we would then need to insulate the roof which would mean taking the tiles off. A big job but not too awful when the roof covered such a small area. The windows also needed help, some were wooden, some metal, each one different, most of them without glass just a shutter to close them. Obviously Daniel and Isobel hadn’t stayed here in the winter. Once we’d started on this list of transformation we got carried away with plans to do away with the bedrooms. Our dream had always been to live in just one open space, with a sort of bed platform which would have storage underneath. This had mainly been as a result of too many cold damp bedrooms on our journey. We knew that we would put in a wood burning stove and it would heat the space better if it was just one open room. I liked the idea of making a sort of loft out
of the little house. We had imagined this moment for so long, deciding exactly how our perfect house would be and, just as we’d done when we fitted out the van, we had to remember how small a space we were dealing with. The whole house was only seven metres by six. Tiny by anyone’s estimations, but it was just what we’d wanted. We knew that we would be perfectly comfortable in this small space because El Pocito was really all about what we had outside, the two and a half hectares of nature. The house was a refuge from the weather and a place for us to live and work on our crafts, not a holiday home or a villa but a beautiful shed. We thoroughly enjoyed the plotting and planning of its transformation and then got down to actually moving in. Yet again I scored points for having forced Phil to buy that van. We filled it with boxes from the flat and took them to El Pocito gradually, a van load each day until the flat was empty. Then we put Plush into her cat box and we moved there together.

We were transfixed by the view through the open door, we couldn’t stop looking out. The branches of the big cork tree which grew up from the level below the house, looked like a fringe along the top of our door, under the fringe were the giant boulders which edged the path down the sloping hillside. Behind the rocks was the opposite valley full of young trees and beyond that the distant hills and the bright blue sky. The light changed all day, making different shadows and patches of light and colouring everything differently. In the mornings it was soft damp green, rich textures of leaves, and then the misty sunlight in the heat of the afternoon. On and on through the day until the colours began to fade and become dusty with the evening, until the final triumph of a day completed, the explosion of an orange sunset which seemed to be ours alone. All day the sounds of nature were all we could hear, no voices, no cars, no machinery, nothing but birds and insects their different voices and songs changing along with the light throughout the day. We watched the sun rise on the distant hills while we were still in the half-light of pre-dawn, then we watched as it spread towards us until we too were included in the sunny morning. We decided that we definitely needed a porch, somewhere we could be to enjoy all of this nature while sheltering from the heat of the
sun and maybe through the dampness of the autumn. Our shopping list of building work was growing. Now we lived at El Pocito we felt energised and ready to get started on all the tasks needed to make our little shed a proper nest. Whilst trying to find ourselves a friendly builder we also had to go and fetch water every other day. Daniel had left us the one thousand litre water tank up near the gate and now we had a pipe running from it to the house, poking through the wall into a basic sink. All we had to do was to make sure the tank had water in. We also needed drinking water which we would store inside the house in five litre bottles. It didn’t take us long to become experts at conserving water and knowing just how far one hundred litres would go. We had bought four twenty five litre containers and they took a while to fill at the spring, then we had about a dozen five litre bottles for cooking and drinking water. Water collecting could take at least half an hour, longer if there were other people also filling up for their campo. We really didn’t mind though, the important thing was that we had finally found our place and were now living there. We didn’t mind either that the solar power system was an unknown quantity. The two little panels were rusted into place and the battery wasn’t new either. But rather than get involved in buying a new battery or panels at this early stage we decided to live with what we had and see how it went. We used just one light in the evening, we had no bathroom or toilet, no running water, hot or cold, no washing machine, fridge, television or phone, but we’d never been happier.

Eventually we got our copy of the deeds of with our names on and made a copy for Mr Borehole. He explained that the next step would be for his colleague to make a document to present to the authorities, containing all the stuff they liked to see such as maps and information about the geology of the area, types of rock that kind of thing. When he had the document ready he would contact us and then we would need to pay him his seven hundred euro fee, yes seven hundred Euros for a collection of paperwork, nothing to do with drilling equipment or holes in the ground. We could understand now why many people didn’t have one. We asked when this expensive paperwork might be ready and Mr Borehole reckoned about fifteen days. In Spain and Portugal a fortnight is never a fortnight, its fifteen days.
Well, that didn’t seem too bad. I thought we could manage to continue bringing the water for that long. At least now we had begun the process so eventually running water would be ours. Having set the borehole in process we moved on trying to find a builder. Luckily we managed to find a local man who would help Phil turn his ideas into reality and realised, as we talked about all the things we planned to do, just how difficult it would be without water for cement and enough electricity to power any tools. But for builders who worked in the Sierra this was a problem they were familiar with. They came ready equipped with a petrol driven generator for the cement mixer and all the other tools. Also each morning on his way to our house the builder would stop at the spring and fill up his three twenty five litre containers and bring them with him to make the cement. Meanwhile I would save every drop I could by recycling the dirty water from washing up or washing clothes to add to the cement mixer.

We then realised that if the ceiling and the roof tiles were coming off, we would have to move out too, while the work was happening, but where to? We were trying to save all the money we could to have the work done and didn’t want to leave our nest now. Anna saved us again, by discovering an old tent in her shed, one of those with zip up rooms and a living space in the middle, it was just what we needed. For the whole of the weekend before the arrival of the builder we lugged and dragged all of our possessions out of the house to sit on wooden pallets, covered with a tarpaulin. Then we moved on to setting up the tent. Plush was very impressed with all of this and the tent in particular which presented an entirely new game, the best part being the sneaking under the flysheet. She could run around between the inner tent and the outer part and really had to be dissuaded from launching herself on to tent from the nearest tree. We just hoped the novelty would wear off before we tried to get a night’s sleep inside. Eventually we had emptied the house and everything was tucked away just as the sky turned the darkest blue. Spots of rain in the wind landed on the tarpaulin as we tied down the flapping edges with rope. Surely our luck with the weather would hold? We had already been told that starting our building work in September was too late to be living
outside and certainly too late to have the roof taken off, that we should wait until the spring. But we didn’t want to wait. They told us about the storms in September too, but we wouldn’t be dissuaded, after our long wait we wanted to get on with everything immediately. Anyway, I confidently predicted an Indian summer and refused to think otherwise.

The day came when the building work started and it was amazing to see just how quickly devastation could be wreaked by just two people. In a matter of hours the inside walls were beaten to a pile of dust and rubble. In just two days the tiles from the roof had been removed and stacked, the wooden ceiling dismantled. Now there was nothing inside the house, we could stand on the broken bits of brick and look up through the wooden beams at the sky, it was like looking through the ribs of a boat. The beams weren’t coming out, they were gnarled chestnut with their rough bark still on and were sound and strong. There was one big tree trunk in the middle of the house, which was holding the roof up, along with two chestnut beams which ran horizontally from the apex of either end wall to join the tree trunk in the middle, and were attached with metal brackets. Now the simplicity of the building was exposed, Phil looked nervously at this structure, and noticed that the two most important parts were actually resting on just two huge pieces of stone, which in turn were balanced on just a few uneven bricks. Surely gravity wouldn’t allow that, wouldn’t the roof fall in? The builder looked surprised when Phil asked him about this. What was the problem?

Throughout this stage we spent hours shovelling up the broken bricks and cement and tipping it outside. There seemed to be an endless amount of rubble from just two walls and there was masses of wood from the ceiling too. We carried this outside and stacked it ready to be covered in plastic in case the rain did come.

Living in the tent was surprisingly comfortable after managing to drag a small sofa bed inside to sit/ sleep on. The adjoining zip-up rooms were full of our clothes and bedding, while just outside we had managed to rig up a sort of field kitchen using old wooden pallets and some pieces of metal used for reinforcing concrete. Then covered it on three sides with
plastic and left an opening at the front where we could stand to cook. We stored the food and basic cooking utensils under the table in plastic crates with lids on, which I hoped would keep the insects at bay. Over the top of this weird structure we tied some green plastic shading material to keep the sun off. It worked perfectly, and took us back to our camping days in Portugal. In fact this was much better than living in the van. At night we sat outside on old chairs and marvelled at the starry sky. With no light pollution from anywhere it was as if we were seeing the sky for the first time, there were literally thousands and thousands of stars. When the moon was full it was the strangest thing to see trees and bushes so clearly, and be able to walk around without a torch, shadows without sunlight. We also set up a standpipe, having removed the water pipe from the hole through to the now devastated kitchen in the house, and Phil fitted a garden tap to this and attached it to a metal stake, around which were stacked a pile of plastic vegetable crates to support a washing up bowl, so now we had a sink too. Washing ourselves was a different matter though, it was a new science that we had been getting used to since we moved in. There was no bathroom or hot water in the house, but with water boiled on our ever useful little cooker, and with a series of large plastic bowls we managed well enough. Luckily we hadn’t been spoilt on our journey by any sort of luxury, all those years of cold water at Senhor Antonio’s house, and the freezing conditions of everywhere we rented, had made us hardy enough to survive a bit of hassle with plastic bowls and saucepans of boiling water.

My Indian summer prediction seemed to be coming true. The days were incredibly hot, too hot in fact to be able to sit in the tent, where the nylon exterior was no match for temperatures over thirty-six degrees. The builder arrived early and worked solidly through until the hottest part of the day, Spanish lunchtime at three o’clock. We were pleased when the roof started to be put on because at least we could sit inside in the afternoons, in the shade. It was a strange process, the building work, totally unlike anything we had experienced before. We were in charge of organising all the materials and had opened an account with the local builder’s yard. We ordered sand and cement, bricks and tiles, nails,
screws, insulation material and all sorts of other things. Then we had to go and buy the wood for the inside of the roof, which wasn’t like going to a DIY centre in Yorkshire. This was a timber merchant with a huge shed full of wood, in sizes and quantities we couldn’t understand. It was big, chunky stuff, mostly unplanned and stacked up to the rafters and had to be moved about by a fork lift truck. Our builder had told us what to ask for, chestnut planks for a roof. We knew we wanted chestnut because we knew very well about the insects that infested the pine in hot countries. We had lived in Senhor Antonio’s house while its pine ceiling was gradually being eaten away by bugs which crunched and munched so loudly they kept you awake at night. No, not for us the cheaper pine thank you. We identified our pallet load of wood and worked out just how many square metres we would need, well, not me, Phil did that. The wood cost eight hundred Euros, in cash, with a discount for buying so much wood. We paid shook hands and went home to wait for the lorry to bring the wood in a day or so. It seemed like a lot of money and we still had to pay for the insulation material and a strange corrugated sheeting which the tiles would lie on. Andalucia tiles were just simple things with no technical grooves to fit them together. They just lie with the bottom of the tile above overlapping the tile below. At least we had lots of tiles so we wouldn’t need too many of those, but still, the wood seemed expensive until we remembered the cost of re-roofing our house in Yorkshire, this was just a toy one by comparison.

Phil was keen to put skylights in the house, after all the winter was long, dark and rainy, we knew that. How perfect it would be to have as much light as possible through those long grey days. I went off to the glass man with the builders measurements clutched in my hand. For such a small house the materials we needed seemed endless, the lorry from the builder’s yard came every day or so, his little crane on the back swinging bricks, packets of insulation material or cement down to the ground and then tipping up the back of the lorry to pour the sand out on to the ground. Plush was not interested in building work, nothing about it held any fascination. Each morning she left the tent and disappeared into the pine trees at the sound of the builder’s van bumping down the track. She reappeared exactly as he drove
away at the end of his day. She came straight to the field kitchen for her lunch and then went into the tent for her siesta on the sofa.

It was actually very nice to be sleeping outside on the hot nights of our own personal Indian summer. It was comfy and warm enough, although it was only under a fly sheet, the sofa bed being too big to go into the zipped-up part. It didn’t seem to matter. We weren’t plagued by mosquitoes or other insects either. But there was something else. We were both woken one night by the sound of something big, snuffling around very nearby. We lie frozen to stillness, trying to work out how safe we were inside those thin nylon walls. We couldn’t imagine what it was outside but it was big because we could hear it breathing and rustling just inches away from our heads. It must have been just on the other side of the fabric so we lay totally still, not daring to whisper, listening and hoping it would just go on its way, whatever it was. Eventually, after a little snort, we heard its feet clomping away into the distance. The next day we asked the builder about it, what did he think it could have been? He reckoned either a deer or a wild boar. We preferred the thought of a deer, which didn’t seem so dangerous rather than worrying about a huge big hairy boar within inches of the tent.

I washed our clothes in buckets and hung them to dry in the sun, cooked our meals, and tried to get on with making things. This time for Almonaster’s own festival, not medieval but similar, based on its Islamic origins, and where we would once again be able to sell our things. Phil, in amongst trying to make a start on the garden was also constructing a papier mache display unit out of cardboard for our stall. Life went on despite living in the tent, although we needed to be highly organised. We had to do all our cooking before night came, when we would need torches to do anything. We had to be up early enough in the morning, when it was still dark, to be ready for the builder. Luckily the weather was perfect almost every single day. There was just one storm, and this made us realise just how lucky we were. As the clouds gathered one lunchtime, Phil and the builder climbed onto the roof and covered the bare wood with plastic sheeting. They finished pinning it down with rocks just
as the first big spots of rain began to fall. Quickly then we ran to throw another plastic sheet over the field kitchen, and I managed to cook lunch hermetically sealed inside as the rain grew heavier. Eating our lunch inside the tent with the flap zipped closed. It was cozy inside, listening to the rain as it grew louder, from pattering to pounding on the tent. After a bit it slowed to a steady downpour and Phil set off to town to collect more materials. Waiting in the tent for the rain to stop I then began to notice there were puddles creeping under the flap, inching inward towards our dry island of the bed. Pulling on a jacket I quickly unzipped the flap and slipped outside and saw a river of water rushing from the gate towards the tent. I was soaked through in about thirty seconds as I dashed towards the house, hoping to find a tool that would help me dig a soak away. Then dug a dam from the wet soil near the tent, hoping to send the rushing water past and down the hill. I managed to steer most of it away then moved up to the gate to see if I could stop the river of rain further up. The soil which had been baked hard was now at least soggy and easy to dig. I worked at making a trench across the opening of the gate and eventually managed to steer the torrent into the woods, feeling quite proud of my efforts now the water had stopped running through the gate. Back at the tent I added a bit more to the dam, standing back to admire it, only to notice that the plastic sheet over the kitchen was now hanging perilously low, weighed down by big balloons of water. These I carefully pushed up and emptied down the back of the kitchen. After which I was so wet through there wasn’t any point going back to the tent, so I set to and did the washing up instead, outside at our stand pipe sink. Letting the rain rinse the plates.

The rain was impressive though, despite the inconvenience. It was the first time we had seen what the hills around us looked like in anything other than sunny weather. In between the downpours, white clouds floated by below us like little puffs of smoke. Or in bigger clumps which made bits of the landscape disappear. The hills had changed from their soft misty shades to deep dark colours, it looked a different place now, somewhere which had a completely different personality from the place with the benign smiling warmth of the previous months. The sky blustered with changing clouds and a wind blew noisily in the
high pine trees. We were right to think that nature was bigger than we were, certainly the whole place was alive to the changes of the seasons and we only just beginning to see what they looked like.

That night the rain moved to soak somewhere else and was replaced with a fierce wind, which pushed at the tent’s flimsy fabric and plucked the tent pegs out of the ground as if they were mere toothpicks. We huddled under our blankets wondering what would be left of our shelter by the morning. It was a sorry sight, with bits of tent collapsed, a couple of broken poles, and some edges torn where the wind had snatched at the moorings. But it wasn’t irreparable. Dawn felt as if it was embarrassed at having left us to deal with such wild weather, then the sun came up and eventually the memory of the rain disappeared under its heat. Sewing the edges of the tent back on and mending the poles wasn’t difficult, but we were really glad that was the only rain we saw in the three months we lived outside.

Every week I rang Mr Borehole to see what was happening after his initial fifteen days came and went without news. Next week, next week, he always said and mostly he was convincing but by now it was October and the bringing of water was becoming more of a chilly experience. We’d taken our deeds to him in July. Then one week I rang and he said the man who was writing the document was coming to Almonaster this weekend, here was his phone number I could ring him and arrange to meet up. At last something had started to move. I rang and rang without luck then a few days later managed to get him, Miguel, the document man. Yes, he would come on Sunday, could we meet up in the bar? Well of course, everyone met in the bar. We presumed that then we would head off up together to El Pocito. At the appointed hour he was nowhere to be seen. An hour later I rang him. He was still at Mr Borehole’s house, which was about twenty minutes away, would we go there and meet him? This seemed an odd suggestion, but no doubt we would find out more when we met. Miguel was standing by his car, outside Mr Borehole’s house, but with no document. He said he needed our identity numbers and the address of the property first, before he could start to
make the application document. This was odd because he already that information on the deeds. Anyway, we gave him it all and he assured us he’d be back next weekend with the document and we’d be ready to go. Then he got into his car and left. No mention about coming to visit or any other questions, surely this was very strange? Mr Borehole meanwhile was leaning on his garage door, chatting with some locals, so we asked him about Miguel needing to come out and see the place. No, that wouldn’t be necessary, he would be able to make the document without going there, and then it wouldn’t be long before he could come with his machinery to start drilling. We left, wondering, not for the first time, why everything seemed to be so foreign. We thought we were supposed to be collecting the document this Sunday, not discovering that Miguel hadn’t even started on it yet. Neither Miguel nor Mr Borehole seemed to have any realistic idea of time, so it was hopeless to ask how or how long any part of the process might take. All we knew was that we had to wait, first for Miguel to write up the document and then to meet up and hand over large sums of money, in cash of course. Our new bank had never offered us a cheque book, but then again no one ever wanted to be paid by cheque. I was in and out of our little bank every week drawing out notes to pay the builder or for the wood or for the glass or any of the many other things. I imagined that when Mr Borehole arrived with his machinery he would expect his hefty fee in cash too. Of all the experience we had collected on our journey, the ones we were gathering now were like no others.

The building work was really coming along. The wooden roof, made of all those planks of wood we had bought at the wood yard was now in place. The big pieces of glass were resting up on the rafters, bringing large pools of sunlight through on to the floor. It was so different from the dark cave-like space it had been before. The rafters had been cleaned of all their bark and were now smooth and pale. The next job was the new windows. We hadn’t been able to decide what to do about the old windows, most had no glass and the metal one in the kitchen was broken and rusty. After lots of deliberations and financial calculations we decided to buy new, despite the extra expense. It seemed a shame, we thought, to skimp on
the windows when they needed to be weatherproof and warm, they would also look good too.

Our research revealed that windows in Andalucía, like fitted kitchens, were made by local carpenters. So all we needed to do was find one that we could afford. We asked people and eventually found a father and son business in the same pueblo as Mr Borehole. They came and measured up and wrote everything down. Asked what wood did we want, what sort of shutters, catches, hinges, glazing, and a million other decisions for just four windows. And left saying they would have a quote ready by the end of the week. Which amazingly they did.

Now we had solved the window problem we had the floor problem. The old floor had been covered in a crazy paving effect of odd tiles for different rooms and even bits of marble, and was now in a rather bad state after the demolition work. New tiles, suggested the builder. It was a mess certainly, with a lot now broken or cracked. I set off to the builder’s yard to search for cheap tiles wondering how the door would be able to open if we did what the builder suggested and laid the new tiles on top of the old ones, to save on the expense of removing them, which would raise the level of the floor by about four inches. On my return I discovered the problem had been solved, by removing the old tiles only around the door area, thus creating a step up into the room, which looked very nice.

Two more weeks passed and still no news from Miguel. I must have left him half a dozen messages, none of which he replied to, it was really frustrating. I rang Mr Borehole, who said he hadn’t heard from him either and had no idea where he might be. He didn’t say anything reassuring, probably because Miguel was always like this, and maybe because he couldn’t understand my concern. He had running water in his house. During the next week as I was really coming to the end of my patience Miguel answered his phone, all charm and happiness. Yes he was going to be in Sierra this weekend, he would come to Almonaster and we could meet in the bar. Would I bring the money, in cash, please? Finally it sounded as if Miguel had made the document and we would be on our way to running water.
Neither of us knew what the document might look like and had no idea what to expect although it had to be something special for all that money. After the now customary extra hour of waiting for Miguel to appear we were therefore somewhat stunned when he produced a huge bound volume, thicker than many telephone directories, apparently all about El Pocito and what its new borehole would be like. There were pages and pages of stuff, mostly of unintelligible technical data, about the rock formation and electrical installations, none of which we had a clue about. We did wonder how he had been able to write so much about a place he’d never visited, but at this point didn’t think it wise to say anything. Anyhow, Miguel said that he had already submitted the original copy of this tome to the water people in Seville, so all we needed now was just one more bit of paper, the permit, and we could have a legal borehole. That would arrive in a week or so, definitely, but simply a formality, because Mr Borehole could now come and make our borehole, possibly even as early as next week. Well, that really would be something. The original fifteen day estimate had turned into four long months, and throughout that we’d had to bring water up every other day, so we were really relieved to hear that would soon be a thing of the past. It was also a relief because ever since we had started this process, firstly of having bought a place without a borehole and then having to wait for the paperwork, we had met far too many people who had truly nightmarish stories to share. Either of their own experiences or of people they knew. On a par with urban myths, tales of how the authorities had come along and poured cement down one finished borehole just because the owners didn’t have the correct paperwork. Or of other people having to pay for drilling several holes and still not finding any water. Of neighbours going to war over stolen water and refused permits. We were becoming more than a little sensitive about the whole borehole question. Even the local council had something to say on the issue, although it was actually was none of their business. The planning officer at our town hall, who we had dealt with throughout the building process, had now chosen the time to say that we needed planning permission from him first. And, of course, he wasn’t going to even consider that until we had got our permit. It was all very confusing, because alongside all these scare stories there were an equal
number who had just gone ahead and had boreholes drilled without telling anyone or bothering with all this paperwork. We didn’t know what to think, but hoped Miguel knew what he was doing, and anyway, surely Mr Borehole knew the rules? He would be in big trouble if he made an illegal borehole and it was discovered, wouldn’t he?

The borehole had become the focus for all of our anxiety related to having finally committed to buying our lovely home. I had long suspected that when we did find our place our habitual worries about whether we would ever find our place, or where we should start our search next, would be replaced by worrying about whether we had done the right thing and what we would do now for money, and I was right. Though on the scale of things we hadn’t done too badly really, considering what habitual worriers we had become. We had managed to keep all preoccupations which did manage to bubble to the surface in check by the fact that we had actually succeeded. We had found the place we had originally set out to find, and that was a big thing. But obviously there had to be something to worry about and it had become the borehole. I lay awake at night sometimes wondering if we had been really stupid in deciding to buy somewhere without a borehole. All this rigmarole of getting permission to have one, surely that meant there was a possibility that they could say no? Or, supposing we got as far as having the borehole dug and only a trickle of water came out? I could imagine Mr Borehole standing there looking at the trickle and saying he only said there was water, we hadn’t asked how much. These things went round and round in my head until I fell asleep. Phil said he wasn’t really worried about it, he thought it would be fine. Or more likely he felt that since I was doing such a good job of it, he didn’t feel the need join in.

The next week I called Mr Borehole, and yes he had spoken to Miguel and yes he would be coming to do our job in a few days. I should ring back towards the end of the week and he’d tell me when exactly. I felt I should have asked if he would still come if we hadn’t got our final bit of paper, but decided that Miguel and Mr Borehole between them had to know more about what was permitted than I did and anyway, I was almost past caring about bits of
paper, it was November and I wanted water. I rang again on Thursday and Mr Borehole yelled down the phone against a background of loud drilling noises, ‘tomorrow!’ He didn’t come. I rang again on Monday and got no reply, the same on Tuesday. Then on Wednesday, up early and ready for the builder who was going to start work on the porch, we heard a loud rumbling sound coming from further up the track. We wondered what it was, some council owned vehicle or something. The noise got closer and closer until we could see some huge pieces of machinery heading right for our gate. We ran to see what was happening and saw the track beyond our entrance choked with vehicles. Pulling open the wire gate we let in the first vehicle in the entourage, Mr Borehole in his car, who swerved in, parked and jumped out to supervise the positioning of the next in line, a huge yellow digger type of thing, but without the digging part and converted into a strange form of fork lift truck. Towed behind this was a trailer full of huge pipes which were about three metres long and stacked on top of each other. And behind, all towed by the same JCB, a big square looking vehicle. This looked like a solid, square box on big heavy wheels, with no cab, and no way of driving by itself, a strange looking thing. Mr Borehole waved the entourage forward and there was a growling and rumbling, with little puffs of grey smoke, from the digger thing as it edged slowly forward and into the place Mr Borehole was happy him, at which he flapped his hand at the driver and everything was stationed feet away from the back of the house. Meanwhile, back at the gate another member of Mr Borehole’s team had arrived, a car with all the workers inside. After that you couldn’t squeeze anything else in, with our van and all the vehicles squashed next to each other on the smallest bit of flat land available for parking. But there was one more hoving into view, the builder’s van, slithering to halt when he realised what was happening, and who backed up the track to find somewhere else to park.

Mr Borehole waved a cheery hand at us then took his men over to search for the cross he had scraped on the ground months back. I couldn’t imagine it was still there, especially after the storm and all the builder’s coming and going, but the borehole men all gathered around an area under the big cork tree, scuffing their feet and looking at the ground. Shortly afterwards
starting to unload bits of equipment and opening a big flap down the side of the strange big vehicle. It appeared that it was some sort of generator, which would power the drill making the hole. This was yet another new experience to add to our many, I hadn’t had the time to consider how a machine, which could make such a deep hole, would be powered. Lucky I hadn’t or it would have been another source of sleepless nights for me.

Once Mr Borehole was happy that everything was as it should be, he prepared to leave his men to get on without him. He came over to tell us that he expected the drilling to take until the end of the following day and that he would return the day after that for his money, in cash please. Then waving cheerily he left. The borehole men set about attaching the drill bit, which was like a gigantic spinning top made from metal. The men explained that as the drill needed to go deeper they would attach the extension pipes off the trailer, screwing one to the next as the drill disappeared into the ground. They weren’t sure how long it would take, it depended on the type of rock and how deep they had to go to find water, but normally it was somewhere between six and eight hours. We left them to it and spent the rest of the morning bellowing at each other over the noise. Meanwhile the porch was taking shape. We had paced it out with the builder a day or so before and he had stuck four chestnut posts on their ends about two metres away from the house and cemented them into place. Resting on top of these four posts were two chunky beams, salvaged from an old building in the pueblo. These would support the roof and make us a nice porch running the whole length of the house. The roof of the porch was going to be made of wood just like inside the house and tiled in the same way, it was going to be a marvellous extension to our living space as well as providing us with a bit of shelter from the hot sun and protection from the rain through the winter.

The borehole machine rumbled and growled on through the morning and Phil counted the lengths of pipe which had been sent down under the ground. All around the hole that the drill was making was a growing pile of dust and fragments of rock being thrown up from
below and the air around the machine was thick with dust, we could hardly see the men who looked like grey ghosts. Everywhere, we noticed, was being coated in a film of grey dust. The roof, the ground, the trees, the building materials, the cars, the washing on the line, the tent, everything. We hadn’t imagined that making a hole could be so messy. The drill rumbled on and the men wandered back and forth from the generator wagon, checking dials inside and adding more tubes. Then, just after lunch there was a strange squealing noise and everything fell silent. It was eerily quiet after such a level of noise and we looked out of the tent to see what was happening. Had they reached water already? Phil went across to find out and stood with the men around the drill, which they had pulled out of the ground and was high in the air. One of the men had was showing Phil a piece of metal as I approached, what was it? Apparently the drill bit had shattered when it reached some particularly hard rock. What did it mean? Panic ran through me, I was ready to reinstate my borehole worries straight away. Was the rock too hard to drill through? Would the men never manage to reach water? Would the machine have to leave and go back to its garage to wait for a new drill bit? Was Mr Borehole going to come back and tell us it was all over? We asked the men what would happen and they said they would phone Mr Borehole and he’d get a new drill bit. They didn’t know how long it would take, maybe not long, maybe they would even be back tomorrow if it turned up. I offered them some of my anxieties but they just shrugged and got into their car. Was this turning into a disaster?

So near but yet so far. Half of a borehole, but surely if the men had left the machine that meant they would be back soon? I felt I should find further elements of this calamity to worry over but somehow I didn’t have the energy. This was Mr Borehole’s problem, he could sort it out, surely it couldn’t have been the first time this sort of thing had happened, maybe he even had a spare in his garage. I tried to concentrate on collecting rocks for the builder who was going to cement them to the ground under the porch the next day to make a floor, but still managed a little worry about whether Mr Borehole would come and tell us our rock
was too hard so he couldn’t make the hole. My worrying was reaching performance art levels.

The porch was looking so lovely it almost took my mind off the borehole. The stone gathering wasn’t too bad a job, even if they were heavy and the builder had started to get very specific about what size and shape he wanted. It was nice to be clearing bits of ground of all the strewn rock and stone, making it look less wild and more cared for. In the spring when we had seen the house for the first time we hadn’t been able to see the ground because it was covered in its spring carpet of flowers. However, once the heat of summer had arrived all those plants had died back, scorched to dried brown stalks, apart from the very hardy drought lovers. Then all we had been able to see was the dried soil, parched and bare, and huge rocks and big stones everywhere, as if they had been thrown there after an earthquake. I began to wonder if we would be able to make a garden in such inhospitable terrain, a bit late to be asking such questions, but I shared my worries with Phil who thought it would all be fine. He had already begun working on the land just below the house, making some sort of terracing out of the steep slope ready for the autumn when we hoped to plant our first trees. He said despite how it looked the soil was mostly light and sandy with only a few patches of clay, and under all the oak trees there was plenty of rich leaf mould. I could see that it was going to be a huge job to make a garden here, not just because we were starting from scratch but also because of the scale. It was a huge piece of land in gardening terms, a piece of wild hillside, where pigs had grazed, eating the generous harvest of acorns and churning up the soil. No one had ever made a vegetable plot here, or worked the soil or improved it with compost or mulch. However, Phil wasn’t worried about any of this, he’d got a theory and was determined to put it into practice. He wanted make a garden by introducing as many fruit trees as possible and sowing ground covering plants under them to give the soil a chance to shelter from the heat and retain water. I was glad he felt so happy about it all and thought it sounded an excellent strategy. I knew that it looked at its most
challenging at that moment, in the heat of the summer, but as time passed and the trees and plants grew it was going to look amazing.

Next day the borehole men returned and with them, miraculously, a new drill bit. We gathered round to see what it looked like and were amazed at the size of the very shiny cutting teeth, they were like diamonds they were so bright. In no time the drill bit was in place and the loud rumbling of the generator began again. Seeing it working efficiently, so soon after a near calamity I was glad I hadn’t wasted too much time on my worries. At about eleven o’clock that morning, when the dust clouds hung over the hillside and the drill had rumbled noisily on three hours, one of the men called us over. We assembled by the drill, wondering what the man wanted us to see, when suddenly there was a gurgling sound and water shot up into the air, just like on the films when they strike oil. We had water! It was thrilling, all of our unspoken worries about whether there would be any water or not and what sort of disaster we would have faced if there wasn’t any, disappeared instantly. We both felt so relieved and then happy. Apparently the drill had reached water at only forty-five metres, which didn’t sound very far compared to other people’s boreholes. I felt sure it was a good sign, finding water at only forty five metres, although I wasn’t sure why. Maybe because I imagined there was plenty lower down, but we had got a bonus of having extra water near the surface too. The borehole man said that although they had reached water at forty-five metres, they would continue to drill until sixty. He said they always drilled deeper and always to sixty metres when they found water sooner. I wondered why and asked Phil, who said it was because Mr Borehole was paid by the metre so obviously sixty was better than forty-five. The borehole men smiled but said nothing.

I felt as if we should open champagne or something, such was the relief. All the months of waiting and chasing Mr Borehole, the worry about the paperwork and then the planning man at the council, I felt so happy that I couldn’t even summon up the anxiety to worry about our lack of permit, actually having water made all those problems seem slightly less significant.
The borehole men had been able to tell us how much water there was in the hole and at what pressure it should be pumped out at, although my mind felt a bit hazy about what this all meant, time enough for the technical stuff later I thought. The drill rumbled on and the water continued to come out of the hole, running down the slope next to the house, dragging the grey gravel remains of the drilled rock with it. I watched the running water, somehow it seemed wrong to let so much run away after five months of wringing the last drop out of the containers we brought from the pueblo. The sight of the water making channels in the dry ground seemed too frivolous.

Phil had written down the technical information from the borehole men and was now hunched in the tent, scribbling in his notebook. He was working on the next stage of the process, because although we now had a borehole we still needed a pump to draw the water up. The only reason water was spilling over the ground at that moment was because the drill was forcing it up, once it was turned off, the water would stay down the hole. I realised, of course, that having the borehole was only step one in a whole range of steps we would have to climb before we had real, live water in the house. If step one was the borehole then step two was the pump and I already had that slightly queasy feeling I got when Phil was absorbed in technical things, the sense of imminent questioning.

Throughout our journey we’d come across many people who had boreholes on their land. Anyone in fact who lived outside a pueblo or a town would have needed one because there was never mains water to isolated houses. It had been a good opportunity to learn about them and find out what people thought were the problems, and to discover how they solved them. Phil had pages of notes about all aspects of living with a borehole and in particular, the all-important pump. There were two main choices, solar or generator powered. There were pros and cons for both. The generator driven pump was fast, but noisy, polluting, and required you to buy a generator and fuel. The solar option was slightly more expensive and a lot slower, but it was silent, clean, and the fuel was free. Finally, after our usual amount of
indecision we opted for the quiet solar one. And as we needed a big tank to store the water in it really didn’t matter how long it took to fill.

That evening the borehole men drove away, taking their monstrous machines with them. The only evidence of their visit was a stump of plastic pipe sticking out of the ground with a trail of wet grey gravel streaking away from it down the slope at the side of the house. We’d got our much wanted borehole and that was as far as the men went. Meanwhile we still had our containers and had to go to the pueblo every other day as usual to fill them.

The builder had just one more job to do with us and that was to help us install our wood-burning stove. This was going to be almost as big a moment as getting the borehole dug because every winter since we had left Yorkshire we had lived in icy cold, damp and bleak places. This time, after nine years, we were planning a warm, dry and cosy winter, brought to us by the joys of a stove. We had ordered it from the builder’s yard months before, back in August, we were so keen to have it. But being Spain and August being when the whole country is off on its holidays it hadn’t arrived. However, the man at the builder’s yard had assured us that it would definitely come in September without fail. And indeed it did, our builder had actually seen it in the yard, he’d also noticed it was broken. Still in the original packing case. At least he had discovered the breakage before it was brought up to us. Now the shop was trying to get us a replacement, so far without luck. November came, and however lucky we had been with our incredible autumn of Indian summer weather we knew it really couldn’t be expected to last much longer, but finally, after the builder had called in to ask about the stove every morning for a whole week, the replacement finally arrived. With a note of triumph in his voice he told us, explaining that the lorry would be bringing it that day. Then he said, in passing, how lucky we’d been with the weather because if it had started to rain, the lorry wouldn’t have been able to make any deliveries, what with our track being in the condition it was. Now that would have been worth setting aside a night of anxiety for, and I hadn’t even got that down on my list of possible worries either.
It was almost as if the mention of the state of the track was enough to hasten winter along. The wonderful sunny weather left us almost overnight, blowing away to be somewhere else’s summer and leaving us with the brooding early winter gloom. We decided therefore after the first rainy day that we would move back into the house to sleep, however basic it currently was, it would be better than lying awake waiting to be blown away inside the tent. It was getting colder now too, sleeping outside in late November was very different from those hot September nights. We spent a grey and blowy day moving our stuff from the tent into the house. And relieved to be back in the house that night with the wind gusting in the pine trees, even if the stove wasn’t in yet and there was even less in the house than there had been when we’d moved in. Plush was happy too, she came indoors in the early evening and settled herself on the bed, ready for a nice comfy night. We had no electricity either, because the solar panels were still packed away having been dismantled by the builder when he took off all the tiles. It was nice though, with candles and our little wind-up radio. We lay in bed that night looking up at the wooden ceiling, which was like lying under an upturned boat, and out through the glass roof lights at all the stars appearing and disappearing as the clouds scooted past. It was really lovely, enjoying the transformation and finally being in our little home. The new windows looked great too, very functional but with a touch of goldilocks cottage about them, with their honey brown wood finished in oil rather than varnish. The new floor was amazing, even better than we could have hoped, with the basic terracotta tiles I’d found at the builders yard instead of the jumble of crazy paving. The space definitely looked bigger, although that probably had something to do with all those boxes of stuff waiting outside.

We woke in the middle of the night to hear the wind rattling the tiles and a strange humming sound in the air. Then the rain fell, hitting the roof like clouds of gravel in strange sudden rushes as it was caught by the wind. We had never heard anything like it, even in the van when the rain had been really noisy on the metal roof. Certainly the previous days hadn’t prepared us for anything like this kind of forceful weather. Each time the wind died down and we thought the storm might be passing, it arrived again with a curious whumping noise,
bringing heavier rain and leaving the pine trees swishing. There was a whining sound in the air too as the wind rushed through the branches on the trees just outside the house, growling and moaning. We huddled lower under the blankets, glad that Plush was safely indoors, it would have been awful to have been lying in bed and wondering where she was. Suddenly the wind grew louder and we could hear the sound of things being blown about outside, clattering buckets, plastic sheeting flapping, tools crashing, loud thuds and snapping noises. We tried not to imagine what all the sounds meant. Then we heard a weird creaking sound and a heavy crash followed by the loudest rain. Something had happened but we couldn’t go outside to see, it was totally dark, the wind was howling, and the rain absolutely pouring down, even blowing under the door too. We just had to lie there in the darkness, letting our imaginations think the worst. Eventually the wind lessened and the rain just rained normally and we fell back to sleep. Waking when the daylight came through the windows in the roof, we could see that it was still windy by the clouds rushing past above us. It was less scary now that it was daylight, although the sky looked grey and fierce, as if there was definitely more weather up there and probably on its way to us. Leaving the house we walked along the almost finished porch and saw stuff littered all over the place, bits of the builders materials, paper sacks and sheets of insulation board were scattered amongst the bushes, plastic sheeting wrapped around trees, buckets half way down the hill, water everywhere. I looked towards the track, at first thinking that something didn’t look quite right and then immediately noticing there was a fallen tree, right across the wire gate. It was the young cork tree which had stood beside the water tank. Now it was up ended with its roots sticking out of the soil, somehow looking so much bigger now it was on the ground. We wouldn’t be able to get out and the builder wouldn’t be able to get in either. Phil went off to bring out his new treasure, the chainsaw.

We were so relieved that we had moved back into the house in time, we couldn’t help imagining what would have happened to the tent or to us outside in that weather. Visions of us lying on the soggy ground, while our blankets and clothes, along with the tent, flew down
to the bottom of the valley, were too horrible to contemplate. Looking at our little house it was heartening to see that our new the roof had withstood the battering, there were no missing tiles or any other damage as far as we could see. We thought this amazing having so recently seen what simple materials had been employed in making the roof.

Back inside our cosy refuge from the grim outdoors we made breakfast and listened to the weather forecast on the radio. It was littered with dire warnings of more severe weather to come, and when the builder arrived he brought tales of woe from the pueblo and beyond, of fallen trees and damaged buildings, landslips, and blocked roads. Yes, he said, winter in the sierra could be a wild affair, there was always plenty of heavy rain and strong winds and sometimes it was cold enough for snow and ice too. Even though we had lived in many different places and experienced plenty of bad winters, this seemed to be the place where nature was at its strongest, changing quickly from one extreme to another far more quickly than we would have thought possible. I wondered how many years we would have to live in the Sierra before we got used to experiencing the type of weather we’d had seen the night before. Maybe in a few years we’d be old hands and would have a stash of gas bottles for the cooker and sacks of Plush’s favourite cat food in store.

Talk of the bad winter weather and preparations had set my anxiety antennae jingling again. Certainly since we had moved into our little home I had been on the lookout for things to worry over and now we’d got the borehole what would I use all my worrying time on? I hadn’t settled on anything yet, maybe because we had been so busy with moving out of the tent and back into the house but the previous night’s weather had made me feel uneasy and sort of, ill prepared, surely there was something here which would provide a nice rich seam of possible worry? I’d got the feeling that there was something, but had forgotten what it was. The first thing which crept into my anxiety ridden mind was the state of the track. And that certainly was worry-worthy. Driving off-road during the winter was going to be a new and possibly difficult experience. The main part of the route from the road out of the pueblo
and up to the top of our stretch looked fine. It was potholed with puddles and a few loose rocks but definitely passable. The bit from the top of the hill which dropped down to our gate was quite different. We had already noticed that it was the steepest part of the journey, and its surface was more sandy and uneven, but I had refused to admit that it might not be passable throughout the winter. That would have been too frightening at this early stage of getting used to living at El Pocito. But I was satisfied that this was a valid subject to pin my worries on and decided that it would receive some decent input before too long, but the builder was ready to fit the stove and all hands were required.

The stove and the porch really made El Pocito feel like our home. All the huge piles of stone that we’d gathered were now cemented into a very nice looking stone floor, covered by the wooden roof outside the door. The builder had laid the stones perfectly and then left us to clean the excess cement. It was hard work as the cement had set hard really quickly. We scratched away with wire brushes, until the brushes were bald and the edges of the stones were visible. Suddenly it looked as if the porch had been there forever, really perfect in an old rustic way. Ever since we had begun our journey in Galicia we had felt that the porch was a really vital part of rural life. Maria’s porch in Monte da Horta had been perfect. Not a fancy, flopping on loungers kind of porch, but one where real life took place. Plants in pots, cuttings tucked into trays of compost, plastic crates of produce and a bright splash from the cut flowers sitting in buckets waiting to be tied into bunches. We’d also never forget Ramon’s porch, where we had sat eating together and sharing our idea for finding a special place, that was years ago now. But all those experiences had lodged in our memories and now, finally, we could drag them out and enjoy them. It was during this reverie that I realised there was something missing from our porch, an important feature without which ‘porch-life’ would be incomplete. The big hand-washing sink, one of those we had seen so often in Portugal and in Spain, deep affairs made from some sort of concrete with a built-in scrubbing board at one end. We would be washing our clothes by hand now, since there wouldn’t be enough power coming in from the solar panels to run a washing machine, and
slopping lots of water about indoors would make washing day a very wet affair, far better to have a nice big sink plumbed-in outdoors then it wouldn’t matter how much slopping there was, always supposing we had enough water to do that. I spoke to the builder about my idea and we paced about on the porch working out where to put it, finally settling on a spot near the door. He said he would collect a sink from the builder’s yard the following morning. Surely they weren’t still being made? I imagined having to find a second hand one from I didn’t know where. No, the builder shook his head, they were still in supply. Obviously it wasn’t just me who would be washing clothes outdoors. The sink duly arrived and was plumbed in. Well almost. Because we still had to wait for the next part of the borehole saga, the tank and the pipework to bring the water down from where it would be situated, high up on the hill to create the necessary working pressure. Plus the pump. However, this one small step in the direction of actually having running water was enough to keep me going for now. After all, the sink had a plug and the waste pipe was in place, so I could fill the sink with water from one of the big containers and pretend I’d got real running water. At least it felt as if all our efforts were coming together.

The stove though was the real thing. It looked lovely with its long shiny steel chimney rising up and through the roof, its little glass door where we would see the flames dancing, just as we had in the old days of our life in Yorkshire. We were so close now to having a cosy and comfortable home again. Which was just as well because the winter really had arrived now. The builder had taken to lighting himself a bit of a fire outside, as he finished the porch and we had gathered enough wood from fallen branches to have a good stash. The rain fell steadily and we positioned big buckets outside, along the edge of the porch to collect water as it fell off the roof. This was a real boon, especially for washing clothes. Anything that saved us from having to bring more water back from the pueblo, which had now become a real chore. Sloshing cold water about in the summer was actually nice, but now it was freezing, and our hands became red and cold holding the containers under the flow of water and the chilly wind nipped at them painfully. We had to find someone to finish off the job with the
borehole. Part of which, the solar-powered pump, was going to mean yet another encounter with the secret world of alternative energy, and after our miserable experience with the wind turbine not something we were looking forward to. Well, anything that actually worked was going to be a marvellous step in the right direction. Phil had laboured long over his plan which included buying two more solar panels, these to run the pump. He had designed a special metal frame to put the panels on, and a method of turning them to face the sun at different times of the day, all very scientific. Anyone we now met who had solar panels, a pump or a borehole, was quizzed endlessly over how it all worked.

At about this time the rain really began to fall, not in quite the spectacular way it had done at the beginning of the winter, but just your everyday kind of rain, except it didn’t stop. If anyone had said it rained this much, so far south from Britain, I would never have believed them, but apparently the Sierra has the highest rainfall in Spain. But at least we were comfortable inside our new home. However, I was starting to realise that setting aside some time to worry about the track was now becoming rather pressing. The uneven, rocky surface down to our gate was rapidly becoming very wet and in some places rather slippery for the van as it scrambled upwards, looking for solid ground to plant its wheels. One morning it was unlucky in finding that. I had set off to the pueblo to meet my friend Maria Jose. She and I were trading English and Spanish classes with each other a couple of times a week, which was actually a gossip and chat session, but in our respective languages obviously. I set off up the hill in the van, arriving just below the steep final slope which would lead me up on to the main track. I had looked carefully at the slope as I always did, having become experienced at picking a route on the drier part on the higher right hand side, but on this particular morning, after a full twenty four hours of steady rain, the whole track was like blancmange. I tried to keep on course but it was too slippery and the camber pushed me sideways where it was sticky and soft. That’s when the van’s wheels spun around without gripping and it couldn’t go upwards any further, it just sat where it was then slid a little more sideways. I decided the only thing I could do would be to roll slowly back down and have
another try. It was a good plan, but it didn’t work because one of the back wheels had already sunk into a nasty rut of sticky mud and instead of gracefully rolling backwards the van sunk down further. I was stuck. Any more wheel-spinning would have the van up to its wheel arches. It was so frustrating to be so nearly able to go somewhere, and then be thwarted. I got out and looked at the wheel sitting deeply in the mud and at the strange angle the van was crouched in, almost poised to turn over. There was nothing I could do but walk back to the house and rehearse how I would explain my adventure to Phil.

We’d tried to dig out the wheel and put some flat stones under it but without success, it seemed to be sinking lower than before. Reluctantly therefore we had to fall back on our other tried and tested method of resolving van problems, that of finding someone else to help us. Phil set off back to the house with his spade while I set off on foot for the pueblo to meet Maria Jose as planned. On the thirty minute walk I entertained myself with memories of the various other times we had got our van stuck, and had to be rescued by people like Agosto Gaspare and his big tractor in Monte da Horta. At some point in the morning there would be a solution, but first things first, a nice cup of strong black coffee in the bar.

I had been right, things were much clearer after the coffee, and even more later when Maria Jose’s dad came over from Cortegana. What a hero, he arrived like the cavalry, at the top of the track in his big four-wheel drive jeep and calmly took charge of the situation. Producing a length of strong rope he walked down the track and tied it to our van, then he hooked it on to his. Then slowly reversed, first taking up the slack in the rope and then as the rope became tight our little van began to rise majestically from its groove, back on all of its wheels and rumbled to the top of the track, a little muddy around the gills but perfectly fine. Simple. However we didn’t want to need rescuing again, so for a while so decided to park the van up at the top where it now rested, on the level ground. It really wasn’t a problem for us, just a little walk to and from the house, but there was still the problem of how to bring the water every other day. The heavy twenty-five litre containers (twenty-five litres weigh twenty-five
kilos) would have to be carried from the van to the house, or at least wheeled down in the old wheelbarrow. The inconvenience of having to walk nearly half a kilometre with shopping was nothing compared to endless trips with barrow loads of water. If only we could find someone to install our pump, then the fetching of water would stop and life would feel possible.

Whenever we encountered something new to learn, we always waited for some calamity to befall us before actually gritting our teeth and making decisions involving spending lots of money. This was how it was with the pump. Phil had been gathering all the information he could about the whole thing, even bought the solar panels, but now, spurred on by the track problem, he was ready to talk to an electrician about it all. Of all the possibilities in the Sierra (and beyond) we managed to find only three people who said they understood about solar energy. Of which the first we met with clearly didn't have a clue, another never turned up, and only the third seemed to know something. He also lived in nearby Cortegana. But wanted a vast sum of money, more than double of what it should have cost. We didn't know what to do, we looked for someone else but found no one, we haggled but that didn’t work either. The rain fell and we struggled on with our wheelbarrow, as days looked as if they would turn into weeks. Up and down, up and down. It was frustrating because we knew that our own water was just there, inside the borehole. Finally, after a particularly wet week we snapped, could bear it no longer and the man from Cortegana was summoned, even though we both felt very unhappy about the whole thing. Still, we weren’t in a position to carry on looking for someone else so had to put up with it. The day before he began Mr Grumpy Pump turned up with a length of metal tube, a bit like a scaffolding pole but only about three feet long. He bossily instructed Phil about how exactly he wanted it concreted into the ground ready to mount the panels on the following day, and left. Amid our grumbles that we were already paying him a vastly outrageous sum, now he had us running around for him buying cement, digging holes, and installing bits of pipe. Still we got it done and awaited the arrival of our own water.
Next day, Mr Pump unnecessary arrived at speed and skidded to a halt inside our gate, then leapt out of his big shiny four-wheel drive car. He was obviously one of those people that felt they had to perform. Then set about every aspect of the job at double-quick speed, with lots of flourishes, marching about purposefully and doing everything as if he was being timed. I imagined he thought he was hoping to demonstrate how professional he was. But it wasn’t having that effect. We’d both rather him pay a bit more attention for the vast amount of money we were paying, and less casual treatment of all that expensive equipment we had paid for. All this rushing about wasn’t filling us with confidence. Phil was especially worried about the mount for the solar panels, he felt sure his design would serve us better, especially in the high winds. When questioned about this Mr Pump was blasé, and waggled the pole of so everything shuddered. No, he said, it was fine.

We tried to put from our minds the piece of performance art which was taking place outside. Plush had decided that Mr Pump fell into the same category as builders and borehole diggers and had taken herself off to the forest to bide her time until he disappeared. We were of the same opinion, and had gone indoors trying to focus on the absolutely marvellous outcome of all these antics, which were going to be actual, real live running water. Well, not running yet, but real water which we’d be able to pump into buckets and use for everything. We were really looking forward to tasting genuine El Pocito water, which was being drawn up through the rocks, in the manner of historic artesian wells, and would be rich in all sorts of good things we felt sure. Mr Pump flourished his way through the morning, then disappeared at lunch time announcing that he would return the following day to finish off. And would we have his money, in cash, ready. Happily the job would be over quickly, but the huge sum we were paying seemed even worse now for such a quick job. However, by the end of the following day the new solar panels were connected up and the switch for turning the pump on and off was ready. Now all that was needed was the thirty-metre length of plastic pipe which would go down into the borehole and then into the water. At this point I didn’t know there were different qualities of plastic pipe. Who does, apart from people who install them?
Apparently the difference has to do with what you want to use the water for. If it’s for watering plants, for instance, or providing water for animals, then what is deemed ‘agricultural quality’ pipe is fine. If you want to drink the water then this is not good enough, a higher quality plastic is required. Mr Pump knew this, because he was a plumber and it was itemised on his quote, which incidentally costs almost double that of agricultural pipe. We watched the huge coil of chunky plastic pipe unwind down the hillside at the side of the house. On and on it went, disappearing down the hill. Then it had to be hauled up and fed slowly down into the borehole until finally it had all but disappeared. Phil came back muttering about green and yellow stripes, and blue stripes, then disappeared outside again to try and corner the lively and purposeful Mr Pump. He managed to capture him and they were now gathered around the borehole, Phil pointing and Mr Pump standing with his feet apart, hands on hips. Some kind of confrontation. What was happening? Phil returned to the house again, snatched Mr Pump’s quote off the table and marched back to continue the conversation, pointing at the paper. At this Mr Pump appeared to crumple slightly and there was a definite break in his springing mood from foot to foot while he appeared to be looking down the borehole and seeing the pipe for the first time. The conversation ended and Phil returned to the house muttering things about sharp practice and how you had to keep your eye on everything. Apparently Mr Pump had fed thirty odd metres of the cheap pipe down the borehole, not drinking water quality. Plainly Mr Pump had not been impressed at having his error pointed out, and was now looking grumpily at the borehole and the stubby end of pipe poking out which was now going to have to be pulled up again, taken back to Cortegana, then he would have to return to install the proper one. It was not a happy moment for Mr Pump.

Technically it was virtually done though, the pump and cable were in place, connected to the solar panels. The pipe would then bring the water up, and there was a little switch temporarily fixed to the mount for us to turn the pump on and off. I couldn’t wait. No more bumping up and down the track with the wheelbarrow, we’d have water when we wanted, at
long last, six whole months after we had moved in. The next stage would be the installation of the plumbing and tank. The water would eventually be pumped automatically up the hillside, and stored in a big water tank. From there, it would return along another pipe, to the house and then, eventually, to actual real taps. I had learned that the tank needed to be up as high as possible above the house so that there would be enough pressure to push the water out of the taps. I was also becoming far more knowledgeable about all this than I really wanted to be.

A few days later Mr Pump appeared without his previous show of exhibitionism and unravelled the new roll of pipe, with the all-important blue stripe now rather than the yellow and green. He worked quietly, feeding the pipe into the borehole and connecting everything together. Finally we were ready for the celebratory switch on, luckily there was just enough sun for the solar panels to work. I had some glasses ready for our first sample and Mr Pump flicked the switch. There was a quiet humming from below our feet and a couple of seconds later, the water spurted out into our waiting glasses. It was strange that it looked so clean and bright, no mud or earth at all, unbelievable that such pristine stuff had come up through the rock from so far below. It felt really cold as we drank it and we were amazed that water could have a flavour all of its own, not chemicals but something very unique and special.

Once Mr Pump had left, his pockets swollen with all our money, we stood around the unassuming little stub of plastic pipe and felt something like relief. We had water. All the hassle with the paperwork and Miguel, Mr Borehole, the waiting, the broken drill bit, and the still missing permit, became unimportant. We flicked the switch and had another toast. And then everyone had gone, we were alone. The builder, the borehole men and even Mr Pump. And we were living indoors again after the three months in the tent. Yes, we had actually arrived. We went inside and closed the door on everything else. Of course we had lived in the house at the beginning of the summer, before the building work had begun, but it hadn't truly felt like our home, it had been just as if we were living in someone else's house,
yet again, another rented place like one of the many. Then there was the time we’d spent in
the tent, living just outside our own front door. That had been just like another episode in
our experiences of living outside, like being van dwellers again. How easy it had been to
adapt to sleeping in the tent, cooking outdoors and washing at our stand pipe, although there
had been the lovely weather this time and we had been safely in our own garden. Meanwhile
the house, which we had yearned for so much and so long, had been silently waiting for us to
make it ours. We had our heads-full of ideas for fantastic, perfect houses, which had grown
in our imaginations throughout the journey. And now we were wrestling with how to make
the best of this our real, tiny house, based on all the vivid memories of how we planned to
live in Olelas and Monchique and all the other inspiring places we’d seen over the years of
our journey. They were such clear images, it was as if we’d only seen them days before.
Somehow time had telescoped the past and all the new and exciting things we were finally
experiencing, having found our place, really were linked to things we had seen or thought of
on our journey.

Yes, we had blithely told our friends over the years that the nine years we had spent
searching hadn’t been nine years wasted, and that we would prevail. We told them we were
learning so much, all the while hoping that they would see us as the intrepid travellers we
wished we were, gathering amazing experiences in different lands. But sometimes we hadn’t
really believed it ourselves. Sometimes, usually late at night, we had lain awake in the dark
wondering what we could possibly do next and how on earth we had managed to get things
so wrong, we thought only of those years as wasted. Wasted because we hadn’t found our
lovely place, the mythical place where we would be able to make all our dreams become real.
We felt sad especially when at times like that all we could see were more of the same. And
once we were on this sad slope to misery we tortured ourselves with the knowledge that
maybe, if or when we did find the place, we might actually have become too old to enjoy it.
That we wouldn’t have the strength to be able to do all the things we’d longed to do. The
digging of ponds, planting trees, chopping wood, building walls. So convincing were these
worries that they began to take root inside and grow, especially when we heard from friends back in the UK that they were thinking of taking early retirement to take life easy, to relax and enjoy themselves. These people never said they were thinking of starting a new life, or even considering taking on a huge project like this, transforming a vast piece of wild hillside into something else. Obviously we had got it all wrong somewhere.

In reality though, the nine years had flown by even though we dug in our heels and tried to make things slow down as we searched for our place. But the worry about time running out had been planted. In response to this we had, without really being aware, begun collecting examples of people, friends and strangers, who had started a new life for themselves at maybe fifty, sixty or seventy. People who hadn’t retired and sat at home waiting for the end, but people who had grabbed their lives in both hands and jumped, discovering in the process they were capable of flying and making wonderful and exciting new lives for themselves. These became our heroes. There were masses of them out there who were making wonderful things happen and we were going to join them. We didn’t care how old we would be when we found our place, we were still the same people after all, and would be ready to use all of our creative will to make an amazing place.

And then, when we had found it, we didn’t feel too old. We felt energised and full of enthusiasm. We knew we would be able to do all the things we wanted to. Mostly we felt thrilled, stunned, and happy that what we had looked for, after so many years, had been waiting for us.

Now, left alone at last in our new home, chaos has reigned. When all the stuff which had been stored outside, so neatly tucked up under tarpaulin throughout the building work, had been lugged back inside and was now cluttering up our lovely clean little house. There were boxes of clothes and books stacked up in perilous piles, half opened boxes of crockery, buckets, bowls, plastic crates of foodstuff, suitcases, the giant rucksack from Canada, and
endless other bags of things. It was like moving house all over again and I really hoped this time it would be the last, ever.

Apart from our little cooker, which had served us so well over the years, we had no furniture other than what Daniel the owner had left us, which was probably just as well since there was no room to swing Plush let alone have furniture. Plush however was delighted that we were moving completely back indoors, she had taken to the place immediately and although she had delighted in being a tent dweller was relieved to be sleeping in the house again. Thoroughly enjoying herself disappearing into boxes, rummaging amongst things and reappearing somewhere else. Life might still be packed in all those boxes, but we did have at last have our stove and we did have the old sofa.

The days were a lot shorter and wetter now we were heading towards Christmas. We still didn’t have any electricity because more bits of technology were needed so we tried to be as organised as we had been while we were camping, getting supper ready before it got dark and charging our wind-up torches. We could use candles now though, to boost the light so it was possible to at least read, knit, or rummage through boxes in the evenings. It was also wonderful to be receiving our first Christmas cards and presents at El Pocito. Well not at the house as such, we were too far away for a delivery, but it was just as lovely to arrive at the post office and find a bundle of cards and packets waiting. Our friends had kept us going over the years and now they were as amazed as we were that we had actually arrived. We strung up our cards, brought in a branch of pine tree and decorated it with some of our old tree ornaments, then finally felt we could relax in the warmth of the stove. Now we were at the end of our travels and it was time to put all of our experiences away where they belonged, like treasures to be brought out and looked at on cold winter nights, because now we were beginning the business of living our new life, and doubtless there would be plenty more adventures yet.