

Gringa Morisca

by

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When I was fifteen I could still surrender myself, in the way of a child, to pure magic. I went to a place in Spain where I found the palace of the Nasrid sultans riding on a hill like a great ship, high above the plain and beneath the snow-laden Sierra Nevada. Around it, across the low slopes and valleys, lay the city of Granada. The whitewashed walls of the ancient Arab quarter crowded the nearest hillside, and behind that rose the hill called Sacramonte, pockmarked with caves where Gypsies lived.

I wandered the palace for hours and hours that seemed like days out of time. In trying to describe it since, even to myself, I have had to fall back on poor analogies—a fantastic wedding cake, a Disneyland—because there are no other analogies, no frame of reference. This high flowering of Islamic art in Spain, the last glorious sigh of the Moors' eight-hundred-year reign—the Alhambra—was an alien aesthetic for an American girl like me. It was so completely alien that I was left, inevitably, with another sorry analogy but one that accurately reflected the experience: I floated around in that place like a visitor from another planet, amazed, uncomprehending, delighted to tears.

And so, twenty-five years later, I went back to see if it would be the same.

In the center of a marble floored room, a low fountain bubbles in a small round pool. Its overflow is taken away in a narrow channel along the floor to mingle with other waters in an adjoining courtyard. The fountain is the only movement in the room. The walls breathe deep silence, which is strange to contemplate since every inch of surface on those walls, and up to the ceiling, and overhead, is filled with a chaos of decoration—up to about chest-height the walls are covered with geometric knots worked in colorful tile, and above this there is an abrupt transition to pale sculpted stucco, which lofts upward in dense, delicate interweavings of Arabic script and flowers and vines and pomegranates and stars. The eye wanders over this, into this, led by curling lines to other curling lines, bumping suddenly into hard geometric shapes, because the whole system, it turns out, is based on contrasts. It also becomes clear, on dizzy examination, that there is, everywhere, both infinite variety and rhythmic repetition.

It is seductive to stare into it, and yet it is quite possible to look at it and simply feel soothed; as busy as it is, it makes a gentle music. You can imagine a sultana reclining on pillows on the floor: she is daydreaming and the walls are the soft background of her dreams, and then for no clear reason she notes a certain pattern in the lines, arches enclosing a stylized trefoil of leaves, and her memories sharpen (a remembered look, a word, and what she said in answer), and then she bites a fig and breaks the spell.

The *h* is silent in *Alhambra*; this place holds silence within itself. Luxurious quiet is its essence, in rooms like these, and in the small courtyard nearby with its ethereal, slender alabaster columns, and in the Court of the Myrtles with its long reflecting pool. And down all the shadowy walkways with their arched windows looking out over the city and the plain and the

gorge of the River Darro at the foot of the walls, far below; and in the gardens, awash in the scents of orange blossom and jasmine and the lullaby-sounds of flowing water. The quiet is so carefully cultivated that it has made me wonder, what noise were they trying to forget? I think I understand, after two visits there, some of the answer to that question. Or, at least, I understand the question.

I haven't wanted to know too much. At fifteen I simply did not know, had some romantic notions that were the product of that particular adolescent moment—just past the age of surrendering my free-spinning childhood fantasy life, and trembling on the threshold of big ideas. I was pale and skinny and not very tall, wore tomboy shirts to hide my breastiness, and had straight brown hair that was longer than it will ever be again. Twenty-five years later I had mostly grown up, but I wanted to inhabit the same kind of wonder.

There are two ways you can visit a place. One way is to learn everything you can before you go, reading up on the culture, the history, the geography, the food and the people and the politics. Or you can go in cold, and if you do, there's a lot of nuance you won't catch. Chances are, unless you stay a long time, you'll never reach that next level of understanding that would have been your reward had you gone in educated. But if you do your homework first, you lose your chance to be utterly, head-scratchingly amazed. You'll have amazement, probably plenty, but it won't be in the same class, can't be.

There are practical reasons for learning the lay of the land before setting foot on it; depending on the destination, it could be foolish, even dangerous, not to know enough going in. But I'm not talking about going somewhere completely uninformed, I guess I'm thinking about the possibility of isolating some aspect of a place, say, the legacy of the Moors in the south of

Spain, and encountering it in my own way, without becoming *familiar*, without learning the language that people use to talk about it.

When I knew I was going back to the Alhambra, I decided to resist too much study. I wouldn't completely avoid what the scholars had to say—I am not so proud as to think I can learn without learning—but I wanted to be careful what I sought out, what I read, so I would not expose myself to the point that I was talking their talk.

What I decided I was after was the best kind of naïveté. In my information-saturated world it would be a treat to have one object of attention that I approached this way.

An unmediated experience. Immersion in a language, without an interpreter. The essence of childhood discovery: encountering wonders without preconceptions, without preparation, without a lot of ideas of self getting in the way. Like an infant seeing colors and shapes, before there are words or even ideas for them.

I was the same and different person, back again, in the Alhambra.

Another small room, the walls too close for echoes. Close enough together that two people hand-in-hand with arms outstretched could reach across, fingertip to fingertip, and touch them. But the ceiling lofts high above, a grand feeling for such a sheltering, intimate space—a paradox, like that other paradox, the deep silence that contrasts with the intense visual music of every surface. And it *is* music—the Arabic script weaving through it like musical notation, the tiny leaves and loops and petals dancing, like grace notes, around the larger motifs. And every surface is, indeed, involved, with the exception of the floors, which are mostly plain tile or stone; not just walls and ceilings, but every archway between rooms, every filigreed lattice gracing a

window, every door—of which there are few, all of them tall, ceremonial, inlaid with fine woods worked in complex geometric designs.

This room is different in one way: it has a window. Its shape is a simple, small arch, set in the middle of a wall of that gossamery stucco-relief the color of sand. I stand before the window, and what I see framed there are the pretty houses of the *Albaicín*, the old Arab quarter, gleaming white in the sun, and other hills in the distance, green and brown, with grids of dots that are olive groves. I am struck by the balance between the interior view, of wall and window, and the view outward. The idea is not simply about looking out, as it usually is with windows; I am held within the room, even as I am invited to see outward. There is a point on the floor that is perfect for this balanced view, and if I move too close to the window I lose the equilibrium, step back too far and the world outside recedes too much.

But there is something else, I realize. Something wrong with what I'm looking at, how I'm looking. It comes to me all at once, as I'm standing there contemplating the view while other visitors come and go—they stay a minute, walk up to the window, look out and move on, it's a small room, after all, and a lot like all the other rooms. I see how they stand around, how they lean on one leg, then the other. I think about the people who lived here, how they sat on their pillows and carpets, their portable furnishings, the legacy of their nomadic culture. They sat on the floor. I wait for the room to empty—it takes a few minutes, because these two are leaving but now another is drifting in—he has that blank tourist-stare from too much looking—but now he is gone, and I sit down on the cool plaster floor and look up to the window, and I see: blue sky.

It is hard, as a westerner, to imagine people actually living here, within these walls, beneath these ceilings—as I sit there I look up and lose myself in the intricate, dense stucco of

the corners, which drips down from the ceiling like swarming bees clinging to branches. I close my eyes and see lines and vines curling and leafing outward, around delicate starbursts and flowing Arabic cursive, all of this quivering against the background music of trickling water, always nearby, and I simply cannot picture people living here, it is my favorite man-made place on earth but I can't picture it as anyone's *home*.

For a moment I try to imagine a table or chairs in this room, but there were none, there were divans in the alcoves, carpets and pillows on the floor—the Spanish word for pillow, *almohada*, is, like many Spanish words, from Arabic. It is a stretch for me, I find, to conceive of domestic comfort without a lot of furniture. This is my problem, of course, not theirs. It occurs to me that the restraint of their furnishings, the lightness of their physical presence, explains how they got away with the overwhelming decoration of their walls and ceilings.

I wonder if their fascination with walls came from a cultural memory of not having them: tents do not have walls. As if they built this place convinced that, now that they had them, they would have the ultimate walls, no part undecorated, not even the tiniest pinpoint place. The essence of a wall is its static quality, and these walls are extraordinarily static, yet light. And the Alhambra, with all its fragile stucco relief, is the ultimate non-portable building—a statement about what constituted the aesthetic and concrete opposite of a nomadic life.

When I was fifteen years old I wasn't doing this sort of analysis. I'm not sure what I was doing. I wasn't seeing people in those rooms, I wasn't even thinking of people. I saw the Alhambra in its glorious emptiness and imagined that's what it had been made for.

I get up when I hear people coming in, and prepare to move on. I stay long enough to watch a Japanese family arrange themselves in front of the window for a picture. I don't know much about Japanese culture, but I am sure that this Moorish palace is as alien for them as it is

for me, though in different ways perhaps. I see, in the walls around me, the contrast with everything that is my legacy as a westerner—from Elizabethan gardens to chamber music to Frank Lloyd Wright to Gertrude Stein—but I have no way of knowing, can't get under that skin to know, how this all looks to someone whose cultural heritage includes tea ceremonies, haiku, samurai, Zen.

They are smiling for the camera. Except for one pale, quiet girl maybe fifteen years old, who, just as I'm slipping away, turns her head to look out the window. I think, again, of the Moors, and what they saw and how they lived. They did not see what we see out the window. They did not live as we live. They are not us. They saw the sky, because they were sitting on the floor.

Who were they?

The south of Spain was first inhabited by Iron Age and Bronze Age people, and then by a tribe called the Turduli, who were followed in turn by the Romans, who built bridges, roads, and fortifications in the place they called *Illiberi*, later Granada. When Rome fell, the Visigoths conquered Spain, and the city continued to grow, important for its strategic location between the mountains and the sea. In the year 711, the Muslim invaders came, mainly Berbers from North Africa, and the Visigoths were history.

In the eight centuries that followed, the Moors would conquer much of Spain, and lose it again to the Christians. Their control lasted the longest in the south, though much of that time was marked by violent strife and uneasy truces between different kingdoms. The Berber dynasty of Zawi ben Ziri established Granada as its capital in the eleventh century, and improved the

fortifications on the hill called Sabika, the future site of the Alhambra, and built a complex there on top of the old Roman fort.

The story of the Alhambra as we know it dates to 1238 when Banu 'l-Ahmar led his army to the top of Sabika, where he found the old fortress in ruins. He overthrew the Berber dynasty and established himself as the first of the Nasrids, a pure-blooded Arab family who would spend two hundred years, under twenty different kings, building their great palace.

Two of the later kings, Yusef I and Mohammed V, would be the most important builders—Yusef responsible for constructing many of the rooms and towers, while Mohammed saw the great project to its completion. But Banu 'l Ahmar had the original vision, which guided the work for two centuries. He was the one who ordered the construction of the watercourse called the *Acequia Real* which brought the water of the Darro into the Alhambra, and which still flows today, pool to pool, through the rooms and gardens. The Nasrids were infatuated with water, coming as they did from a hot desert land, and were fascinated with everything they could make the water do, using the technology bequeathed to them by the Romans and taking it to a breathtaking new level.

The historical moment that gave birth to the Alhambra, however, is about more than a visionary conqueror's rich dream. Before Banu 'l Ahmar even began construction, he was forced to a grim reckoning with the Christian monarchy who by then had retaken most of Spain. He rode secretly to a Nasrid town under siege by the Christians, and met with their king, proclaiming himself the monarch of Granada but also the vassal of his Christian rival. Thus began a couple of hundred years of tolerant truce, which allowed Granada to flower, growing wealthier from trade and culturally richer from contact with the Christian world, but touched always by uncertainty, by the knowledge that the dream was ending.

The Alhambra wouldn't have been the same place if Granada had been blossoming during the rise and consolidation of the Spanish Islamic empire; instead, it came into being in the wake of all that, in a time of decline, of slow territorial, religious, and political disintegration. The warlike Moors had lost their confidence, their conviction, but there were things they knew, about beauty, about the contemplative life, that they hadn't known before, hadn't had time for before. There had to have been melancholy there, bittersweetness. I think of them watching their own decline, seeing the inevitability of it, even as they were soothed by the gentle bubbling of their fountains and the hypnotic rhythms of the exquisite *attawriq* stucco all around them.

The Arabic writing on the walls of the Alhambra repeats, everywhere, the phrase *Wa al-Ghalib bi 'llah*, 'There is no conqueror but God.' It must have offered solace, and sadness. It would have reminded them at every turn of the transience of all this beauty they had created, of the faintness of their own imprint on the earth.

If you go up to the ramparts of the *Alcázar*, you can see, far away on the misty horizon, the mountain pass called the Moor's Sigh, where the last king of Granada, Boabdil, took his final look back at the Alhambra as he fled into exile in 1491, surrendering it to Ferdinand and Isabella who would take it once and for all for Christendom.

When I was fifteen years old and knew very little of all this, I felt something akin to the melancholy the Nasrids felt—felt it but didn't know it, only understood it later, on my second visit. Like them, I was witnessing the end of something, and the feeling of waking, really waking, from childhood was a revelation to me, nothing I would ever want to give up, but it came, I knew even then, at a cost. I had a longing for a time that was pre-intellectual, pre-analytic, for a time before I knew my limitations, just as they must have longed for a time before they *knew*. I dealt with this feeling by standing still before those walls, just trying to soak them

up. Thinking to myself how I'd never comprehend this place, and being glad of it. Studying those cursive lines of Arabic prayers though unable to read them, following where they blended into placid abstraction.

One last place, the Patio of the Lions, perhaps the most perfect, the most beautiful human-made space on earth. The scale is intimate. The color of everything—more accurately, the color that results from the coming together of all the colors, paler and darker—is almond. The space is rectangular, with a central fountain featuring eight lions—small panthers, really—in a circle facing outward. Around the courtyard's perimeter, a shady walkway behind slender alabaster columns invites the visitor to make a circuit. The columns are not much bigger in diameter than a wine bottle; some of them stand alone but others are grouped in twos or threes as if to accentuate their individual slightness. They have delicate floral-motif capitals, and above these the filigree-stucco takes over, flowing up into arches between the columns. The construction, in actuality, is simple post-and-lintel, and the arches are just for looks, non-structural, a visual trick. These pseudo-arches should look impossibly heavy in contrast to the narrow columns, but they don't; they have the lightness of lace, which is what they most resemble—dense, delicate threads netted with air. The illusion of lightness is an ingredient in the larger, structural illusion, the illusion that there is no lintel above the post. Everywhere in the Alhambra, there is this passion for surface and contempt for structure, perhaps, again, related to the Moors' nomadic legacy—hungry for beauty and ornament but not interested in buildings for their own sake—though I didn't see it at fifteen. But I saw the magic just as well, may have grasped that magic more purely, with nothing in the way of it.

There was one thing about that small courtyard that I did get when I was fifteen and still

got at forty. I learned that it was made for walking, not for sitting. I had the fun of discovering, not once but twice, how to walk around the perimeter, slowly, and watch the columns beside me cross in front of the columns across the way, making lovely, shifting, rhythmic geometries before my eyes. A pair of two would pass before a group of three, and then as I turned a corner, three groups might converge, cross, separate, the near columns, of course, always moving at a quicker speed past my eyes than the ones on the other side. This walking, and watching, were hypnotic, and it was easy for me, both times I did it, to imagine a contemplative Moor, taking his slow turns around and around. My imaginary Moor was experiencing exactly what I was—falling in love with the grace of those columns, with their stillness even in motion.

My first visit came at a particular, extraordinary moment. Twenty-five years later I was able to dwell in a rich nostalgia for that moment which was the same, in its essence, as the nostalgia the Nasrid sultans felt—indeed, were drenched in—in their Alhambra. I was there in search of the fifteen-year-old I had once been, but I didn't find her, not exactly; what I found was my memory of her. It's a fine distinction, and indeed the distance between us was, at times, so slight, so slippery, that as I passed a certain reflecting pool, I thought, for an instant, I saw her mirrored there.

She is as ethereal as the tint of almond in the Patio of the Lions. And maybe my present self is, too, so that I may need to go back one more time, in another twenty-five years, see how the place feels, how I feel, inside a new skin unimaginable to me now. I will pass the happy hours, walking in the Alhambra, conjuring communion with the past. I will make my way to a certain room, and sit down on the floor, and find the blue sky out the window.