

ARANJUEZ



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JUST AS A SUDDEN FRAGRANCE CAN TAKE US BACK—the scent of freesias on the evening air, for example, or the first thick drops of rain on a dusty road—certain sounds can sweep us away. Rhythms and melodies can transport us to other moods, other moments, sometimes to places we’ve never even been. That’s how it was the first time I heard the *Concierto de Aranjuez*.

It was easy to stay up all night in Madrid in those days. After the final curtain call we wiped the greasepaint from our faces, turned off the lights in the theater, and walked down to *El Taburete*. The bar gradually filled up as the after-hours crowd arrived: musicians from the clubs, dancing girls from the Calderón, guitarists and singers from the flamenco taverns near the Plaza Mayor. Everyone came there to unwind. That night the talk turned to travel, and when Jaime spoke of Morocco I mentioned that I’d never been to North Africa. He squinted at me through the cigarette smoke and said, “Perhaps we could go there tonight, if you like.” Who could refuse an invitation like that?

Jaime lived in a nearby apartment, just a couple of rooms perched on the roof of a five-story building. “Down there is the Manzanares,” he said, pointing towards the south. I could see the river, glinting in the light of the crescent moon. “And beyond, just over the horizon, is the town of Aranjuez. The inspiration for Rodrigo’s masterpiece. Come, we’ll listen to it, and maybe you’ll see what I

mean.” He put the record on the turntable and placed the needle in the first groove.

I closed my eyes as the deep, leathery guitar notes of the first movement of Joaquín Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* filled the room and flooded my mind. The music had a rhythmic urgency that commanded my full attention. Suddenly, I felt the cool night air of the desert on my face, and saw a band of horses cantering towards me, shimmering out of a distant mirage, coming closer, their steady hoof beats muffled in the sand. When the violins joined the guitar, I joined the horses, riding one of them across the dunes, my white robes flowing behind me, ghostly in the moonlight.

As the second movement began, the mournful lament of the *cor anglais* found me alone in a small oasis settlement. I sat cross-legged on a rooftop in the pale light, the desert spread out around me like an ocean. Behind me the tall palms stood silhouetted against the blue-black sky. The music was clear and haunting, and filled me with nostalgia for a land I’d never known. Looking up, I wondered at the infinity of stars disappearing into the vastness of the heavens, so brilliant

here above the darkened earth. The guitar played on, now blending with the orchestra, now standing alone, echoing across this muted landscape, this desert, this timeless Sahara. Centuries ago Moorish caravans traveled through here on their way north, bringing their language, their architecture, and their music to the Iberian Peninsula. The tides of history have turned and turned again, many times since then, but the sound of the desert has never varied.

As the music ended I opened my eyes. The moon was gone and the stars were fading over the city. Jaime stood in the doorway, his face in shadow. He answered my question before I had a chance to speak: “When people asked Rodrigo what the *Concierto de Aranjuez* represented, he said it meant whatever each of us wanted it to mean.” We stepped out onto the roof. A cool breeze ruffled my hair and I turned my face to the sky. Jaime looked at me intently in the half-light of dawn, then smiled and said, “How did you like North Africa?” ★

