



The Night Watchman

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Calle Españoleta is a very short street in the fashionable Almagro neighbourhood in Madrid. I lived there in the late 1960s, in the top floor apartment of a three-storey house that was built when that part of the city was developed, in the latter part of the previous century. The descendants of the original owners still lived in the house, but their circumstances were much reduced compared to the comfortable lifestyle they had enjoyed in days gone by. The family had once lived off its lucrative investments in Cuban sugar plantations, but that arrangement came unravelled in 1959 when Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces entered Havana, took over the country, and put an end to that sort of absentee exploitation. Blindsided by that unexpected turn of events, the family was forced to make some unpalatable changes, one of which was to rent out the top floor of their home.

Family houses in that neighbourhood, all built at roughly the same time, had large, heavy doors giving onto the street. The keys to those doors were also large and heavy, and very inconvenient to carry around. That was not a problem during daylight hours, when servants were available to admit residents and guests. But those who came home late at night had to rely on the services of a night watchman, a tradition that had been around for a couple of centuries.

Neighbourhoods were arbitrarily divided into sections, each of which spanned a few blocks. Each section had its own *sereno*, or night watchman, who carried the keys to the front doors of every house on his beat. In theory, these men were supposed to be "between twenty and forty years of age, at least five feet tall, have no police record and a loud, clear voice." They were on duty every night, no matter how cold or wet it might be, from about 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. Their job was to patrol the streets, keep an eye on things, enforce standards of "public morality," and intervene when necessary. They were equipped with a whistle to blow if they spotted any burglaries in progress or acts of violence or fires. The whistle was supposed to alert other *serenos* in

the vicinity who would rush to their colleague's assistance. The local municipality provided them with a military-style peaked cap and a heavy overcoat to wear in the winter when Madrid could be bitterly cold. They were given no salary and were expected to live off the tips they received from grateful residents whose front doors were opened for them in the middle of the night. When night owls arrived home in the wee small hours of the morning, they would clap their hands a few times and call out "*sereno!*" At that hour all was still, and voices carried far. Ideally, the man would hear them and shout back as he ran to meet them, his large keyring jangling to announce that he was on his way. On frosty winter nights things didn't always go that smoothly as *serenos* sometimes tucked themselves into a sheltered spot somewhere and residents might have to clap several times before being heard.

Serenos carried a big stick with which to threaten nocturnal miscreants and strike them if necessary. My friend Voro was once staying with me for a while and came home late one raw January night with a young lady he was dating at the time. He clapped his hands, wrapped his arms around his girlfriend, and waited for the *sereno* to arrive. They were doing their best to keep each other warm when he appeared and demanded that they stop their "outrageous behaviour" immediately. Voro asked on whose authority this demand was being made, and the man raised his stick in a most threatening manner and growled, "*This* authority!" When he told me about the incident later, Voro, who was vehemently anti-Franco, said it was a typical fascist ploy. "They offer security, and in return expect you to surrender some of your personal freedom."

But times changed. The modern world, with its emphasis on independence and mobility, and new devices like doorbell phones, gradually drove this custom into extinction, and Madrid's last *serenos* handed in their keys in the 1970s and faded into the pages of history.