

Introduction

During the 1930s Laurie Lee travelled from Gloucestershire in England to Spain. He spent the winter of 1935 in the village of Almuñécar and found himself witness to the outbreak of war. El Gato is the leader of the village's militia group.

As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning

by Laurie Lee

Early next morning, four truckloads of militia drove off to Altofaro to attack the rebels. They swung singing through the streets in their bright blue shirts, waving their caps as though going to a fair. El Gato was in charge, dynamite strapped to his body; the others shared a musket between three. Once they were over the hill, we expected to hear the sounds of war break out, but the morning passed in silence.

About noon, a white aircraft swinging low from the sea, circled the village, and flew away again – leaving the clear blue sky scarred with a new foreboding above a mass of upturned faces. Many felt, till that moment, their village to be secure and forgotten; now the eye of war had spied them out.

Throughout the afternoon nothing happened. Families ate their meals in the street, seeking the assurance of one another's company. Once again the fierce sunlight obliterated everything it fell on, burning all colours to an ashen glare. When people stepped out of their houses they seemed to evaporate for a moment, as if the light had turned them to vapour; and when they passed into shadow they disappeared again, like stepping into a hole in the ground. That afternoon of waiting was the hottest I've known. Fear lay panting in the street like a dog. It was as though El Gato and his men had been swallowed up in silence, or had followed the war to another country.

But war was not far away, and after nightfall, unexpectedly, it paid its first mad call on Almuñécar. A destroyer crept into the bay, unseen by anyone, and suddenly began probing the shore with its searchlight. The beam swept over the hills, up and down the coast, and finally picked out the village and pinned it against the darkness. Held by the blazing eye, opening so ominously from the sea, the people experienced a moment of naked panic. There seemed nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide, so they hurried down to the beach, and stood motionless in the glare, facing the invisible warship and raising their arms in a kind of massed entreaty. As the searchlight played over them they remained stiffly at attention, just letting themselves be seen. In the face of the unknown, all they could do was offer themselves in this posture of speechless acquiescence. Such pitiless brightness had never lit up their night before: friend or foe, it was a light of terror.

For a while nothing happened. The warship just sat in the darkness stroking its searchlight up and down the shore. To get a better view, I joined a group of boys who'd already climbed on to the castle wall. We could see the whole of Almuñécar below us – the crowds on the beach and the spoke of light turning on its invisible hub. As we watched, it began to play over the nearby hills and move again along the coastal road. Suddenly it picked out a lorry heading towards the village, then three more, all packed with men. The beam lazily followed them, as though escorting them home, lighting up their rifles like little thorns. One could hear distant shouting above the sound of the engines – it was El Gato's militia coming back at last.

The trucks roared into a village, horns stridently blowing, and pulled up in the warship's pool of light. The beam was abruptly switched off, followed by a moment of absolute darkness. Then there came a blinding flash from the sea. Silence. It was as though a great fuse had blown. Then the mountains behind us thundered, a thunder that boomed and cannoned from peak to peak and tumbled in the valleys like showers of stones. There was another flash, another explosion, another hot blast of air. For a moment we imagined it might be some kind of salute to the militia. Then we heard the tearing scream of a shell.

The searchlight came on again. We could see the crowds on the beaches surging inland like 12

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a muddy wave. The destroyer fired once more, misting its searchlight with smoke, and we were no longer in doubt about its intentions. A house on our right suddenly shuddered, rose a foot in the air, and slowly collapsed like a puff-ball. A bundle of stones and trees leapt up by the river. A pall of dust drifted over the village.

After half a dozen more salvos, the firing broke off; inexplicably, since we seemed to be at their mercy. Then the shocked silence in the village began to fill with a curious whispering and rustling, the sound of a multitude on the move. In the naked beam of the searchlight we saw them come stumbling up the streets, bent double, crying and moaning, mothers and fathers dragging their children behind them, old folk tottering and falling down.

As the village ran for the hills, looking for patches of darkness, we saw a small boat put out from the shore, with two squat figures inside it sitting hunched at their oars and rowing frantically towards the ship.

And that was the end of the bombardment. The destroyer was found to be friendly. It had been an unfortunate error of war. A case of mistaken identity; the captain sent his apologies, slipped anchor, and sailed quietly away – leaving a few gaps in the houses, a few dead in the streets, and most of the population scattered across the hillsides