

Loquo Barcelona

Sebastia is a sixty-three year old Catalan who explains that his region is not necessarily part of Spain, that states and nations are very different things, and that national borders are often not right. I got the room because I was the first one to give him the rent. He is squeaky clean and instructs me to close the windows and shutters at night because of the wind and cold. He lives at the back end of the house because it is quieter. He also tells me to always wear shoes round the house as his mother suffered a lot of pain after walking on the hard tiles all her life.

Luca was an Italian twenty something architect with a mole on his chin, stubble and a jumper like David Bain, we chatted on MSN in Span-glish before meeting. His work schedule is 8-2 and 4-7. He wants to do his masters and travel to New Zealand but now lives in an apartment on the second floor just beside the market in the middle of Gracia. I was early; he wanted to meet at 10:30 at night on a Sunday. Two clean faced forty somethings turned up who knew a little English but spoke to me in Spanish and I pretended to understand. They were very nice and explained that they were here to watch a TV program. The hall light that was on a timer kept on going off and we fumbled into each other a couple times to find it. When one of them ran to the car to get the keys Luca turned up, we kissed and I kissed a woman who followed him too. I could tell she was not Spanish, she was too tall. Luca was very animated and told me he got a good impression of me. Still in his jumper he showed me around the newly refurbished apartment he had clearly defined the space as his own, but I liked him. The room for rent was small and had an interior window with a washing line strung up outside. We talked for a while about the outdoors in my potential room-to-be and I got excited about him sharing with me his secrets about Spanish pursuits. He had just been to IKEA and bought many supplies for the home and kitchen and he expressed that he was excited about making and sharing big delicious meals.

I had bought a beer and he had a small amount left in his bottle of red wine, we poured, broke up chocolate and had a toast, then stood in the hallway with the other assembled guests. They spoke in Spanish and I pretended to understand again and I picked up that Luca was vibing and that the girl was Canadian and that he had been playing on Loquo (the Craig's List of Barcelona) at work today. Soon another Loquo-ee turned up, a short hip cat that had long lightish brown hair that suited him and a mod khaki-green jacket with some sort of scarf.

Luca wanted to create a home where people cleaned up after themselves habitually, not by a roster. It was fine to have friends over but it was not fine for them to hang out in the living room all day. He thought it important to establish these things early on. He liked the wilderness better than architecture. I liked him but he had a few more people to interview before he could offer me the room which he did but by that stage I had already taken the third floor room in the apartment with Senor Sebastia Forne.

Judith was from somewhere in England, she had a father and a brother that were artists, and we spoke for a long time.

She was weary.

She was maybe early thirties, late twenties, she wore an attractive hand knitted pink shawl that had a button catch, she had light brown hair and discretely crooked teeth. She sat on the couch and sometimes her legs did too. I found myself mirroring her movements when we talked like I'd seen in an instructional video of how to do a job interview. It was different speaking to someone in the same language and from a similar culture. She had a very close relationship with her cat and reminded me in of an old friend, Margot Didsbury, and in some ways all British people I had ever met. She has been living in Barcelona for four years now, we talked about misguided travellers, we spoke in depth on many subjects. She was very nice and told of different stages of her time here, her initial experience living in the Raval in a tiny apartment with oversized furniture where she and her brother made stuff to show in a nearby café. She now had her own massage room in her apartment, which has been a goal since she got here. She is feeling for the first time ready to move on to return to England and settle in the countryside with her high school sweetheart. She lives in Gracia like Luca, which is undeniably my favourite neighbourhood in Barcelona. The space was very feminine- pink and green with soft lighting. She talked of becoming more cynical of Barcelona and the powers that be- the real estate, the way it had tripled in price since she'd been here, and how incomes had not done the same. How when the Peseta changed to the Euro all the grandmas with stashes of cash under their mattress went out and bought property and how Catalans are known for being stingy. I think I let her down as I told her I would love to live there but when she called the next day to offer to me I was in the middle of saying yes to Senor Forne.

I did not want to live with her because she had already decorated the room, a sign that it was very much her space, and she was an English speaker. She was not having much luck finding the perfect person. She had previously had an American girl that was a bit promiscuous for her liking but she had jumped ship, as there was not air conditioning in the apartment. I liked Judith a lot but did not want to live there.

I went to the Raval to meet with Javier, I waited outside as there was no bell, just prostitutes and other things that go on in little streets like that. A German girl waited too. She was angry, Javier was fifteen minutes late and she kept on being approached by men that thought she was offering her services. It was nothing like the "The Spanish Apartment", the movie that pushed her to come here, another girl turned up. I felt very scruffy. Then Javier came out of the entranceway with another Loquo-ee. He then showed me and the two others round the buttonhole apartment. There were three German girls cooking pasta in the kitchen, he explained the particulars of the space in Spanish, again I pretended to understand. After the German peeled off into the kitchen to join the others, Javier showed us to the front door. I felt like I had just been in a police line up or a casting for an extra in a commercial, it was funny.

I then rode the metro with the second girl to show up- she was incredible, some kind of travel agent, my age, we spoke with words from TV and our faces.

At another prospective apartment in the Raval, I met two boys looking for a girl. They liked to party and were looking forward to the internet arriving. They said there were no problems with their 'Paki' landlord and showed me the room for rent. It had been heavily decorated with African inspired materials, carving and mobile hangings but they were leaving along with the girl on the first of February. Alexandro showed me round, he was nice I was trying to be chill and pretty.

The rooms were connected to each other by a window and there were bikes in the hall. They cooked dinners together.

He was Italian and spoke a little English.

I liked Alexandro but I did not want to live there, he never called me back.

He saw many girls and I decided that I do not do very well in line-ups.

I visited a family that lived beside the Miro Park in a well off residential district of apartments. They were nice, a mother and her mother lived in the same room and sacrificed the biggest best room in the house to rent out. We spoke very little of the same language but I did learn that her son who was not around also lived there. We communicated for a long time and with a lot of energy. They had a water filter and a balcony with a pull down plastic shade. We talked about how the plants were sleeping in this season and I tried to ask about Christmas. They had décor that I imagine one would find in deep Eastern Europe, lots of veneer wood and a TV framed by a big book case unit. She was very keen to let out the room and I told her I would phone her back. It was decorated in soft pink and my door would open out onto the family dining room. It was nice but I don't think it would have worked, more bad for them.

Before that I visited an apartment further out, the home of a carpenter that did not work due to illness, he smoked. There was also a German girl that lived there called Yohanna. He rented out three rooms of the apartment to students, the going room was decorated like an infant's room with cut out photographs of teddy bears and was small. He had lived in Sydney and gave me coffee. I asked about the change over to the Euro and if it had blurred all of Europe together, but they assured me that it still remained very tribal, I thought that was positive. We also spoke about the beach in summer and how Barcelona real estate was hard to find. The kitchen was small and the apartment dark with a hammock chair and indoor plants. I told them I would call them back which I did not do as I did not really want to live there.

In Gracia I visited an Israeli brother and sister with my two new Italian compadres, Sylvia and Federico. The siblings were quite nice, one a dentist and the other I am not quite sure but I do know that she just turned 26 the day before because I enquired about the birthday decorations she was sweeping up off the floor. The Italians told me that I should not live there because of the unbalanced dynamic you get living with a tight pair like a brother and sister. I told them I liked their confidence for making this call.

That same day I visited another apartment in Gracia with Sylvia and Federico and I again felt scruffy. It was a great apartment, near Parque Guell, full of cool Spanish youth and had a good friendly feel to it. Tamara who showed me round was not wearing a bra. They were interviewing twenty-four others and did not call me back. Sylvia and Federico live near by and on departing we discussed how they would probably see them at the market the next day, which they miraculously did. The foyer had been decorated in the seventies and it had not been changed since, there was no need to.

I visited another young persons' apartment where, along with others an Argentinean and a German lived; the room for rent was big with an exterior window. They were not incredibly enthusiastic and neither was I, but the mood was light. The German who wore red stripes was playing tunes off her laptop and I called her a DJ she said she was more like a Pirate and then I called the Smiths Morrissey. Unsurprisingly they did not call me back. I did not want to live there anyway even though it was in Gracia.

A few blocks away Anna the nurse and her flatmate who studies sound engineering live in an apartment on a pedestrian-only through fare. It had a great feel to it with a spacious living room and walk in closet. The room for rent came with a bed but you had to buy it for 60 euro. There was a quaint bag of weed on the sitting room table and silver laptops in the communal workroom. There were wee cats and the kitchen, in fact the whole place, reminded me of the way a lab technician would keep their house- sanitary and functional. It had soft lighting like Judith's place and was decorated with warm colours and comfortable furniture. Anna and the sound engineer did not buy food together but sometimes cooked together. They did not wear makeup and had a nice Spanish casual flair to their dress, warm as toast.

Anna was from Barcelona, a Catalan, and the sound engineer was from elsewhere in Spain they spoke to me in Spanish. I pretended to understand and we managed to get on really well. At an intense point of communication breakdown I tried to leave but let myself into a closet instead. When I closed its door behind me and found myself in a very dark room I pretended to be a mime and knocked pretending that it was the front door, we all laughed, exchanged numbers and I left feeling pretty giddy. They called back in a couple days and a friend translated their message that said that they wanted to offer me the room but my timing did not suit and they were sorry.

I decided to return to Senor Sebastia Forne at 27 Plaza de L'Doctore the original paper notice I saw in the University cloisters beautifully scribed on a A5 piece of paper. The room was big and sat at the other end of the apartment on the third floor to his living area, the kitchen, and bathroom. It had a balcony and sparse masculine decoration. There were paintbrushes in the dining room and a mixture of guide and art books in the library. He spoke a little English but not much and rarely uses it, and will probably never use a computer. He was a graphic designer, an artist and is very direct. I had a feeling that it would be like living in a painting: intimate in some ways, but also with a lot of unanswered questions and mystery.

- Fiona Connor