

Freefalling in the Pyrenees

by Blythe Lawrence

You're sitting alone outside the desolate train station of a sleepy Spanish border town high in the Pyrenees and it dawns on you that you don't have to go back.

That's when the Holden Caulfield moment — one of those moments you didn't know you've been waiting for until it happens — arrives.

You read *The Catcher in the Rye* only once, in high school. You must read it before you're 20, someone insisted.

So you read it one Saturday and put it down uninspired. Later you have to write an essay about the things you have in common with Holden Caulfield. Aside from the sporadic desire to stand up and yell "So long folks, I'm getting the hell out of here," in the middle of class, you can't think of any.

Four years and many books later, you shut your eyes on a train in Paris. When you open them, you're in Toulouse.

For eighty American dollars you can go to sleep in Paris and wake up a thousand kilometers away in Madrid, the longest train de nuit on the continent. For twenty you can fall asleep in Paris and wake up in southwestern France, then catch a train bound for the border station La Tour de Carol and wait. A journey that starts at 10 p.m. ends at 4 the next afternoon.

It's not convenient, but it's cheap, you think. Frugality wins the day.

It was still dark when you jump unsteadily onto the train platform in Toulouse, hauling a small rolling suitcase down after you. Ten minutes later you're sitting on an orange seat on another train, legs hanging over your suitcase, watching the sun rise over the Pyrenees.

Fresh, cool air blows through the open windows. It is summer air that teases you with its coolness and promises to become hot and dry within a matter of hours. Everything looks orange and brown and it's pleasant in the early morning light.

The train shifts gears and foothills become mountains. Their

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early morning purity is somehow more intoxicating than Spanish wine. There are nothing but colors and textures — green leaves, brown earth and blue sky. Shadows passed over your face and arms, light and dark. Smooth and turbulent.

The engine rumbles as the train shifts into a lower gear and bursts into a wide open space, a thin lip of track and man-made bridge. You can see nothing but brown mountain peaks and sky.

You look down and realize there is nothing but a thin plate of glass between yourself and a sheer drop of several hundred feet. What it would be like to fall freely from the train down into that gully, unencumbered by baggage and gravity? You shiver and feel your mortality.

A woman swathed in beautiful bright scarves and an armful of gold bracelets is sitting opposite you. She has black skin and hair, and is wearing blue eye shadow. She sits up very straight, regal as a queen. After awhile she looks at you, says something in Spanish, or maybe Catalan.

Her eyes are dark and expressive. Where are you going? they ask. Perhaps we are going to the same place. Perhaps we will become friends.

You say, “Barcelona.” She nods.

The queen gets off at the next stop. You think about climbing down after her and disrupting your carefully laid plans. After all, they haven’t been carefully laid. Once in Barcelona you’ll walk up and down La Rambla bumping your suitcase over the cobblestones looking for a cheap hotel and admiring the street performers.

As the train pulls out of the mountain station, you see the queen in the middle of a group of similarly dressed people in front of a bus. “Andorra” is painted on the side. You’ve never been to Andorra. You continue to La Tour de Carol.

La Tour de Carol looks and feels like an outpost of civilization.

From the front, the station is white, surrounded by mountains and nothing else. From the back, you can see it’s located at the bottom of a brown gully. Squinting at the line where blue sky blends into brown mountain, outlines of houses appear.

The station is painted white. A two-story rectangular building with a newly painted sign that reads “Hostel” and a faded one — “Ristorante” — is attached.

The morning sun is out and there is a mountain breeze. You feel alone but not uncomfortable. The feeling of having reached a corner of the earth is strong.

You go into the ristorante for a cup of chocolate and a croissant. It has a tile floor and three patrons, all sitting at different tables smoking cigarettes. A fly or two buzzes in and out, landing momentarily on the croissants and taking off again to look for something better. The proprietor, who pours coffee and fetches croissants, buzzes around also.

In one corner of the station there are two benches a kiosk where you can buy maps, guidebooks and snacks. You look at the French newspaper, because you speak French, and see “La Nouvelle Orleans evacuee par Katrina” is the top story. It’s August. Who is this Katrina, you wonder, and how the hell did she manage to single-handedly evacuate a city?

You leave the station and walk up a hill until you can’t see it anymore and there are only hills and mountains. There is a picnic table in the middle of a patch of grass set back a little from the road, near a cluster of houses. You sit on top of the picnic table and stream your consciousness onto a yellow legal pad.

Then a man pulls up in a small truck and delivers a package to one of the houses. He looks like Hemingway at 50 — deep Spanish tan and white beard. He asks where you’re going in Spanish.

“I am waiting for the train,” you say in French.

“When is that?” He speaks French with a heavy Spanish accent.

“One o’clock.” It is 10:30. Hemingway takes a timetable out of his khaki-colored shirt pocket and unfolds it on the hood of the truck. He moved his tanned, wrinkled finger down a list of numbers.

He has packages to deliver in five towns in these mountains, he says, and offers to drive you around the mountainside to a town where a train for Barcelona comes at noon. He unfolds another map of the towns, and enthusiastically points to this and that, saying there is a very nice church here and also a nice museum there.

Hemingway’s little delivery truck with the wagon in back look like no match for the mountains. It’s gray like the rocks and if they wanted, the mountains could swallow it like a Venus Fly-Trap closing in around a tiny insect.

For a moment you’re tempted. It smells of adventure. You’ll see places you’ve never seen before and never will again.

That’s when the Holden thing explodes in your brain, or maybe it’s your heart. Screw everything, it says. Screw your hopes and dreams and career plans. What a nasty word, career. Who wants one when you can travel the world, meet interesting people and possibly be kidnapped by them?

“Do you feel that you could be a tour guide and be happy for the rest of your life?” you asked your friend Alicia some months ago as the two of you strolled the streets of Rome.

“Yes,” she said. There was no surprise. She had been thinking about it too. You had both been thinking about it.

You think about it again that day in La Tour. You don’t go with Hemingway. The Hemingway would have gone. Holden Caulfield would too. But this was another era, and you are another person. So you say no thank you, you are very content to sit here in the mountain sun and write. Hemingway looks doubtful, but he leaves.

He must be driving in circles because every 10 minutes for the next hour

the little truck pulls up and stops several feet away. Hemingway sticks his head out the window and invites you along in poor French. You say no, thank you. He says are you sure and you say yes, thank you. Then he drives away again.

You walk back down the hill to the station.

You sit outside on a small loading dock. The sun is getting higher in the sky and it warms your skin. You're writing when he drives by. He stops and yells out the window if you're sure you don't want to come, it is the last chance.

You put down the yellow pad and squint at him. "Please monsieur," you say in pleasant, smiling French, "for the last time, leave me alone." He shrugs and drives off., down the thin lip of road and out of your life. You watch the car kick up a cloud of red-brown dust behind it as it gets farther away.

You keep writing. You write about New York and World War II and other times and places too far away for you to reach. You realize you want to know, to know everything, to soak up places until you could breathe them.

The hours pass and you get on the train to Barcelona. When you get there the sun will be low in the sky and hazy evening will begin to creep over the city. Another day, another city. You don't know how long you'll stay there or where you'll go next. But that's OK. Because you're free.

Is there a word for this feeling? Oh, yes: Living. That's it.