

# The Institute of Cold

*Ben Curtis, notesfromspain.com, April 2008*

I wondered for a long time about publishing this piece. The death of a friend is a very private matter. What's more, it's felt even more acutely when you live abroad, when, even after 10 years, close friends are a very precious commodity. If a good Madrid friend moves on to another country, or heads back to where they came from, it leaves a significant hole, but at least they are on the other end of a phone and might, perhaps, come back one day. Death is another matter altogether, and no one expected Paul to go anywhere.

He'd been here 10 years before I even stepped foot in the country. He had a steady Spanish girlfriend, one of Madrid's few very well paid teaching jobs, and no desire to live anywhere other than Madrid.

Paul was at least 20 years older than me, though he never revealed his age. And apart from his day job, he was a novelist, a philosopher, an avid reader of classic literature, and a pretty good psychologist. He knew his Chopin, and the lyrics to all the classy Bob Dylan songs. He could out drink most of us, despite our age advantage, and had traveled with us (Alistair, Mike, Stephen and I) as far a field as Andalusia. It was on one such trip to Cordoba, in the hottest part of an Andalusian June, that I discovered his inquisitive streak.

We were all staying in the city's cheapest hostel, in the whitewashed backstreets of the Jewish quarter. Turning left out of the hostel led towards the famous Mezquita, the vast mosque with a mesmerizing forest of arch-topped marble columns, and a bloody ridiculous Cathedral dumped unceremoniously in the middle. Turning right out of the hostel led very quickly to a series of small brothels, marked only by the one or two women permanently lounging in easy chairs just inside the cool shade of the doorway.

I'd been past these places a couple of times since we arrived, my curiosity wildly piqued as to just what the set up looked like if you stepped inside. But as usual the only option available to me was to let my imagination run wild. There was no way I was going through the doorway to see what lay beyond. In fact, whenever I passed the 'come on in' stares of the women in the doorway, I doubled my pace and hurried on down the street as fast as possible.

Paul, however, immediately went where I refused to go. On the second evening in Cordoba he turned up to meet us all at a bar not far from the Mosque.

"Have you seen all those houses full of *putas* near our hostel?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, "I'd love to know what was inside."

"Yes yes," he said, "well I can tell you, I went into one of them."

"What?" we said.

"Well, you know, I got talking to one of the ladies on the door and I just had to know what was going on, so I just asked if I could have a look. And you know, they just took me in and showed me around. There was just a sort of typical living room and some doors leading off to what were probably bedrooms I suppose..."

"My god," I said, "I could never have done that."

"Yes yes," he replied, "I just have to explore these sorts of places because it's just such invaluable research, I never know when I might need something like this for my next book."

And so it was. Paul went places that ordinary mortals feared to tread. He was insatiably curious, be it exploring the ins and outs of his own psyche, or the insides

of a *puti-club* in the backest of back streets of Cordoba. He thought life was there to be explored, and then possibly written about, which is why I'm certain he wouldn't mind me talking about this now. I'm pretty sure he'd be delighted to think of himself as being worth writing about.

At eight o'clock one Tuesday morning in January, earlier this year, I got a call from my friend Alistair.

"Paul's dead," he said.

"What?!"

He hadn't turned up for work on Monday afternoon, and having never missed a class without telling anyone in the previous 20 years, friends at work began to worry. By midnight that night they had found his landlord, gained entry to the flat, and found Paul dead in his bed.

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If you are unfortunate enough to die here in Madrid in such a way that the police have to become involved, you are likely to end up in the city's *Instituto Anatomico Forense*: the city morgue.

Two days after his death, Marina and I went with Paul's family to this non-descript, stone-clad building, a few stories high, in the center of the *Complutense* university complex in the North-West of the city.

It is almost impossible to find in the labyrinth system of one-way streets that weave in and out of University's 70's style faculty buildings, biology, chemistry , *matematicas....*

Difficult to locate as it may be (even for the city's taxi drivers), there are plenty of people waiting to find *you*, once you do finally get there. First of all there are the black guys, dressed in jeans and thick woolen checked shirts against the cold, who help you to find the very few parking spots left at 9 am. They hover anxiously by vehicle-length gaps between cars, and wave frantically at anything approaching on four wheels.

The unwritten rule is that you give them a Euro or two for performing this invaluable service, and your car won't be scratched when you get back.

But far more important are the friendly men in shirt, tie, brown leather shoes and sports jacket, waiting outside the main door of the flat-grey morgue building once you eventually end up at its door. We had barely had time to realise that we were finally in the right place, when one stepped forwards and asked, "Are you looking for the morgue?"... "What is the name of the deceased?" "Come inside with me..." and as he led us into a small waiting area, it dawned on me that he was really nothing more than a tout for one of the Funeral Services that would we would have to deal with later on.

I told Marina, knowing that she would be the best person to cut him out of the equation as soon as possible. She told him we already had contacts here from the day before, and he left us. We spoke to a young woman who took our name, or Paul's name to be precise, and asked us to sit in the waiting area until called.

We sat in rows of black plastic seats, staring at two neon-bright bottled-drinks machines, the green linoleum floor, and pastel green walls that were many years from their last paint job. Some of the Funeral Service touts, who now seemed to me more like vultures, had moved in from the pavement to keep out of the cold, resting their brochures on top of the drinks machines.

Two small groups of South American families occupied other corners of the

room. One group looked particularly tough. Even through their shocked, grieving eyes, they had an edginess about them that made you wonder whether they were here for a next of kin that had lost his life in a knife fight, some horrific act that they were determined to avenge as soon as they got back to their *barrio*. The Funeral Services vultures hovered confidently at hand, knowing that no-one gets out of the front door again without making a deal with one of them.

We were soon called back by the lady who had taken our name, and taken into a small side office. There was a brown desk, office chair, dark green filing cabinet, little more. We stayed standing. She explained that first we would see her, give some personal details about Paul (his parents' names etc), and that then she would be able to release Paul's personal effects to the family. Finally we would speak to a social worker, and then to one of the Funeral Service guys to arrange the funeral. It's the only way the deceased's body would be allowed out of the morgue, she explained. The Funeral guys have to get involved and that's that. No deal with them, and the body stays right there under lock and key.

Paul's brother verified his identity with his passport, and signed a relevant piece of paper. The lady - young, straight black hair, serious - came back in with a medium-sized, sealed brown envelope.

"The personal effects that came in with the body," she said. I had not stopped to think what these were. A wallet, some ID, perhaps a cell phone, I thought.

She put on a pair of clinical, white rubber gloves, and with a steel letter opener she quickly slit the top of the brown envelope, and onto her outstretched latex-white palm fell a single object. It was Paul's gold-faced, brown leather-strapped watch.

At the very instant that everyone in the room realised what it was, time seemed to briefly stop completely. It was as close as we could have come to hearing

Paul, then and there, actually speak his own name out loud. His sister said “Oh... his watch,” and started to cry, before taking it from the lady’s outstretched palm and quickly putting it onto her own wrist.

His brother said later, “Until that point everything had been completely abstract, but seeing the watch suddenly made everything incredibly personal and real again”.

And that’s how it was. Suddenly the dream-like abstraction of the morning was gone, and though the whole experience was still quite unreal, subsequent arrangements and events seemed suddenly so emotionally charged that it was difficult to feel in any way detached any more. Paul really had died, and we really were in a morgue sorting it all out.

With all our minds still on the watch, the young lady mortician now handed Paul’s brother a small, black plastic bin bag tied at the top with string. “The clothes he came in with,” she said, “if you want, there are wheely bins on the pavement outside...”

Later, once we’d been passed on to another office where we were interviewed, and then released, by a ghostly social worker man with a long white coat, and vast, drooping eyes, and after we had made arrangements with a fidgety Funeral Services company representative in the waiting room, Marina and I headed home. We drove out amongst the endless university departments, passing one particularly low, disheveled-looking building named the *‘Instituto del Frio’*, The Institute of Cold.

What on earth did they do in the Institute of Cold? I imagined thin Spanish scientists with bushy mustaches busying around smoky test-tubes in heavy winter coats, icicles crawling down the walls. “What a place to start a story!” I thought.

One thing's for sure though, where I let my imagination wander about what could possible go on in such a fascinating place, Paul, on a fact finding mission for a possible future novel, would have strode straight up the weedy path that led to the building, to find out exactly what lay beyond those frosty doors.