

The Vine Underground

Victor and Violeta were sitting on their cots in a gymnasium 20 km from home when they got the news that everything was gone.

They had lived in that farmhouse for nearly 30 years, since the economic crisis of 2020. The mud womb of the house cocooned them from the decay that spread across civilization.

After the crisis, their friends had fled Barcelona for opportunities elsewhere, many human pawns on the chessboard of capital, hoping to catch falling crumbs of cash and make from them some kind of satisfaction. Barcelona had become too much for the couple anyway. The city fed their anxieties, as the people on the streets hunted for the next quick dopamine rush: the next touristic spectacle, the next purchase, the next digital notification. An addiction to stimulation and gratification ruined the city, like it ruined the rest of the planet, like it corrupted the very soul of humanity. Luckily, Violeta's elderly parents had a vineyard outside of Valencia, and were growing too old to keep growing wine.

The wine became their blood, the grapes swelled every spring with the promise only fruit can offer. The rising temperatures didn't make for fine wine, but it made for higher alcohol concentration in the grapes, and so much the better. Even as the Spanish economy crashed, as Catalunya seized independence via civil war, as the EU broke up, as the climate crisis brought refugees across the Mediterranean and wreaked havoc on global supply chains, people still needed to drink.

Their farmhouse was a stage on which to improvise their dance through the song of collapse. Disturbances to the electrical grid prompted them early on to invest in a wind generator, solar panels, and a wood-burning stove. They could exchange wine for the few staple foods they couldn't grow. Violeta's parents and the neighbors taught them what medicines they could make with the herbs around, how to preserve food, how to build and fix things by hand.

And they were not alone in their learning. After the crisis, rural life. Groups of young over educated and underemployed Europeans arrived to squat and fix up abandoned farmhouses in what historians would call the 'urban exodus' of the 2020s. Collectives popped up here and there, collectives of doctors, of school teachers; the farmers started tool and seed banks. Some of the farmers had the courage to bring a few children into this challenging world, and the parents divided the days of child watching and teaching at the village school. It was almost too late for Violeta to have children when the couple finally had enough faith in the future of the community. Her belly swelled like a grape in spring, and Alazne was born in 2029.

The people of the Valencian countryside trusted and supported each other, because they had to, because they couldn't do it alone. It was a great returning to the

collective way of life of the anarchist rural communities of Spain, and as their material lives became always more humble, their hands calloused, their fashions old, the people could take pride in knowing they had found the source of strength of their ancestors: the land and each other. Victor and Violeta were well loved wherever they went across the valleys around their home. "Victor i Violeta del vi!" the neighbors would greet them, as they pulled up to farms and taverns by horse drawn cart with bottles in the back.

This had not been the first time they had been evacuated. As they had left the house, all they had grabbed were the suitcases that always sat ready in the closet with documents, cash and the necessities for a few days.

A volunteer hung the map showing the path of the wildfire on the wall of the gymnasium. Violeta and Victor held hands as they watched their friends and neighbors approach the map. The people walked up all shoulders and straight backs, resilient women and men who had seen civilizations fall in their lifetimes. Violeta gasped - her neighbors' faces aged in seconds when they saw their homes were gone. She held Victor's hand, pulling him to stay seated next to her, but Victor shook with the need for certainty, and walked up to the map to confirm what he already knew. Where the sustenance of life once was, there was now an ashy vacuum.

Under the empty weight of the loss the people collapsed into each other's arms. In embracing they could remember they still had their living bodies, aging though they were, homeless and penniless though they were.

The next days in the shelter were a blur. The neighbors would gather to talk through their pain, to sing old songs. Some went back to where their houses once were to see what was left. It was mid-July, the crops had been high, but there was nothing to salvage. For most, their preparation ended with the suitcases. The unthinkable had happened. No one plan's for the end of their own world.

Within a few days, as resources at the shelter grew scarce, they began to whisper to each other of what to do next. They were split between leaving to start life anew elsewhere and returning to rebuild. Many of the younger people were leaving to stay with nearby family for the winter, planning to sell their labor at larger farms for the rest of the season, and return next year to replant. The elders were stagnating in indecision, without the energy to rebuild the homes, and without the vision of a future anywhere else.

"Victor, I want to be with Alazne. We've lost everything. She's the only thing in this world we haven't lost." said Violeta through a throat tight with longing for her daughter in the south of France.

"You know how far that journey is. We know this land, these people. Next year we will plant again and rebuild," Victor thought himself the voice of reason.

“She’s written us that life is good there. It rains often enough. She found a good house with other young people. We can be of use to them, we can work for our keep.”

“We will be nothing but a burden to her. Let’s at least write her first, to ask if they will take us.”

“It will take months for a letter to come back. What are we to do in the meantime? We will burn through our savings every day we wait for a reply.”

“And the borders?” Victor said it like he was asking, but he was really stating the situation.

Border policy between the ex-EU countries changed often, and was subjectively enforced. The Spanish-French border required a visa, which could take years to grant, and the older the applicant, the less likely they would be granted a visa. Every country in Europe had too many old people, and not enough youth. Human labor was needed everywhere, now that fossil fuels were banned and the capacities of renewables had failed to meet the energy demand. When Alazne was 18 years old with the happy feet and horizon gaze of every youth, her parents greatest concern was that she wouldn’t come back.

“We can try our luck through Catalunya. We must.” Violeta said. Catalunya issued temporary visas at the border for visiting Spaniards. They could apply at the border.

“Victor, everything is gone. It’s gone. I just want to be with her. Next year we can come back with her and she can help us rebuild.”

Victor knew the tone of voice his wife was using. When she was this sure, it was like she had a compass in her gut, directing every atom in her body. She would go, with or without him. The next morning they said goodbye to their friends of 30 years and got on a train to Fraga, a small town on the Spanish border with Catalunya.

“Documents?” The clerk at the customs desk not look up as he asked.

Victor and Violeta handed over their Spanish passports. The clerk shifted his eyes to their birthdays.

“What is the nature of your visit to Catalunya?”

“We’re visiting my sister, near Leida.” Said Violeta. Victor turned to her incredulously. Violeta’s sister was near Leida, but she was buried there.

“Can I see your proof of residency in Spain, and please write here your sister’s full name and address.” the clerk asked. Violeta presented the deed to the vineyard first, as Victor began to write the information on the form they were given.

The clerk looked at the deed, and he gave them a sad smile. “Senyores, I’m sorry, but I can’t help you, we are no longer issuing travel visas for residents of this region of Spain over 50.”

“What, why?” Violeta spat.

“Do you want to see the decree?”

“No, I want to know why! Do you know my sister died so you can have this border?” Victor put his hand on her back. “Ungrateful little machine cog, do you know what’s happened to us?” she spat.

“Yes, and I’m sorry.”

“Oh, yes, very sorry.” She picked up their suitcases and walked out, Victor trailing behind her.

By the train station there was an inn. The patio had plastic chairs that looked like they were from before the collapse of the EU. They ordered red wine. When they looked up, they saw a familiar face staring down at them.

“How do I know you?” Violeta asked. It was a face she remembered from before Alazne was born, a foreign face.

“Oh senyora Violeta, hello, I’m Sayed. When I arrived to Europe I was a teenager then. You were very patient with me. Without you I would not have learned Spanish.”

The surreal spiral of old memories brought a hesitant affirmation to her. She remembered the flags they waved from the farmhouses that read “Volem Acollir” - we want to welcome - to signal to the climate refugees that the farms offered shelter and work. She didn’t quite remember this youth, but he remembered her.

“Did I then? I taught you Spanish?”

“But yes! I even speak Catalan now.” She smiled as he switched languages to show off. He was right to be proud. He was one little human of 7 billion, and he had crossed the vast distance of cultures over the bridge of language.

“Is this your inn?” She asked.

“Si, senyora. I fought in the civil war. ”

“You fought for the independence of Catalunya?” she asked with a disbelieving smile.

“No.” Sayed looked down. He mumbled it, seeming nervous anticipating their reaction, but it was Violeta who was embarrassed. She had forgotten how the Spanish government had suddenly reversed its policy on refugees when Catalunya took up arms for independence. They promised refugees citizenship after a certain number of years of military service, offering a decent life to the desperate if they agreed to kill in the crown’s favor. Now she’d gone and forced this poor man to remember his war trauma.

“Well, come now, Sayed.” Victor offered. “Tell us where you get your wine.”

The three of them talked into the night of their families, of the war, of how they’d gotten by these years, of the situation at the border. Victor and Violeta told Sayed why they were there.

“You lost your home to a wildfire?” Sayed repeated the thought to himself, mulling it over.

Victor and Violeta held hands under the table. “Yes.” she said. It was there turn to remember trauma. Violeta breathed deeply. The summer night air was heavy and humid. She imagined the crickets sounded the same as they had one thousand years ago.

“There is a path across the borders and even through France, a safe path, but it’s secret. My brother took it to meet family in Marseille.”

Violeta must have had a look of doubt on her face. Sayed went on, “It’s only for people like us, people who are on the move because of the heat.”

“They only help climate refugees cross?” Victor clarified.

Sayed nodded, he looked pensive.

“How will they believe us, that we are what we say we are?” Victor asked.

“It doesn’t work like that. They will trust you. They trust those who know of the path to only share it with others like them. It’s like... they call it an underground railroad.”

Los Del Vi smiled.

“But it’s not a train, ah. You will have to walk very far.”

“We aren’t as old and useless as the border guards think.” Victor said.

A few hours later, Victor and Violeta stood by the Ebro river in the dawn light, squinting through sleepy eyelids at the water. A boat pulled up. They gave a final hug to Sayed, wishing him well, and got on board.

The fisherman that took them along explained the path. “You’re lucky. They’re people just like you, people who took to the countryside after the crash. Are you Catalans?”

“We’re Valencian.” Violeta said. “But my sister died fighting for Catalunya.”

“Ah you’re fine then. They wouldn’t care if you were bullfighters, but some of the safe houses don’t take in neo-fascists.”

Violeta laughed, a dry dark laugh. “Just some of them?”

“Some of them will take pity on anybody. Some don’t tolerate intolerance. Don’t worry about it. The point is that you will be expected to stick around a bit, stay a few days at each house to help out, pay you’re way for food and shelter, fix things, pick herbs. If you had a farm you must be good at some of that?” They nodded.

While the fisherman navigated, their two grey heads hovered over a map of the paths between the safe houses. Some of the houses were two days walk from each other. Some were just a few hours. “How much do you think you can walk per day?” the fisherman sized them up with a look.

“Five hours but not going too fast. Not up and down hills.” Violeta said. The fisherman paddled forward, looking into the water like it was infinite. “You’ll have two options, to try to cross the border into the Spanish enclave at Llívia, or closer to the coast, towards Perpignan. It should take you 6-8 weeks. Depending on the conditions at the border, they’ll give you advice once you get here.” He set down the oar to point to a house marked in the middle of some lakes west of Vic.

“It will help keep you covered that you speak Catalan. They aren’t patrolling for migrants really. It’s the French border that will be trickiest. Just don’t walk through fields in harvest, especially at night. Some farmers will shoot if they think you’re stealing food.”

The boat finally arrived at a humanless stretch along the river shore, no houses, just trees. The river itself marked the border here. Once it pulled up to the eastern side, they stepped onto Catalan territory.

“This is what we could get ya. You’re lucky you’re fleeing in summer.” From under a seat of the boat the fisherman pulled a big hiking backpack. Inside it was a tent and two sleeping bags, empty canteens, a compass, and several lighters. The camping material looked very old and cheap to begin with. “It’s what we had last minute.” Violeta saw a mild embarrassment on the fisherman’s face that he couldn’t offer them something better. “Gracies.” She said. She could say no more. She took his weathered hand with both of hers and kissed it. Her throat was hot and itchy. They had nothing in the world but a suitcase, and a stranger who’s name they didn’t even know had just given them a place to sleep. The humble fisherman glanced at her husband and got red in the face, shifting awkwardly as if to dodge the attention. Victor hugged the man, speechless as well. “But of course, but of course. There’s nothing to thank,” mumbled the fisherman into Victor’s shoulder. He got back on his boat, and waved to them as he paddled off.

There was only one overgrown path from this spot on the river shore, stomped and cleared before by people like them. Violeta imagined Alazne walking just in front, calling her parents along into the unknown land. The water behind them, there was no turning back.