



**A ROSE FOR
WINTER
LAURIE LEE**

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Laurie Lee was born in Stroud, Gloucestershire, in 1914, and was educated at Slad village school and Stroud Central School. At the age of nineteen he walked to London and then travelled on foot through Spain, as described in his book *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*. In 1950 he married Catherine Polge and they had one daughter. His bestselling *Cider with Rosie* (1959) has sold over six million copies worldwide, and was followed by two other volumes of autobiography: *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* (1969) and *A Moment of War* (1991). Laurie Lee also published four collections of poems, *The Sun My Monument* (1944), *The Bloom of Candles* (1947), *My Many-Coated Man* (1955) and *Pocket Poems* (1960) as well as *The Voyage of Magellan* (1948), a verse play for radio, *A Rose for Winter* (1955), *The Firstborn* (1964), *I Can't Stay Long* (1975), a collection of his writing, and *Two Women* (1983). Laurie Lee died in May 1997.

ALSO BY LAURIE LEE
AVAILABLE IN VINTAGE

Cider with Rosie

To Cathy and the Benefactor

A ROSE FOR WINTER

Travels in Andalusia

Laurie Lee

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1. Los Especiales - Algeciras

A brilliant November morning with a sky of diamond blue above the bay and the red flowers of a long summer still glowing darkly on the Rock. The intense blackness of the lampless night had rolled away to reveal, incandescent on the northern horizon, the country we had come to seek. It crouched before us in a great ring of lion-coloured mountains, raw, sleeping and savage. There were the scarred and crumpled valleys, the sharp peaks wreathed in their dusty fires, and below them the white towns piled high on their little hills and the empty roads running crimson along the faces of the cliffs. Already, across the water, one heard, or fancied one heard, the sobbing of asses, the cries and salty voices cutting through the thin gold air. And from a steep hillside rose a column of smoke, cool as marble, pungent as pine, which hung like a signal over the landscape, obscure, imperative and motionless.

So we left Gibraltar to its trim English streets, to its Genoese money-changers, Maltese tobacconists, Hindu silk-merchants and crook-boned Cockney soldiers, and we went down to the quay and gathered our bags and boarded the ferry for Spain.

The ferry flew the Spanish flag, had paddle-wheels, and was old, black-funnelled and squat as a duck. It was the type one might have seen, a hundred years ago, running missionaries up the Congo, loaded with whips and bibles. But today, being Saturday, it was packed to the rails with smugglers. As we moved across the oil-blue waters, innocent in the naked sun, they disposed their Gibraltar loot about them. Strapped to their limbs, under their clothes, went cigarettes, soap, sweets, tinned milk, coffee, corned beef and jars of jam. Then the port of Algeciras drew near,

and fishermen cried to us from their boats, and we bounced off a yacht, bumped heavily against the quay, and tied up in a tangle, and landed.

The acid-yellow stones, the quay littered with straw and palms, the green-cloaked policemen carrying pistols, the lax and amiable formalities of passports and customs; then we stood free at last upon the ground, surrounded by Spain and the smell of fish-boxes. I turned then and spoke, after many years, my first words of Spanish, to a porter, and we understood each other. We bargained, our baggage was loaded on to a hand-cart, and we entered the town.

And here was the scene so long remembered: the bright façades still crumbling in the sun; the beggars crowding the quaysides, picking up heads of fish; the vivid shapely girls with hair shining like pitch; the tiny, delicate-stepping donkeys; and the barefoot children scrambling around our legs. Here were the black signs charcoaled starkly on the walls: 'Pension La Africana'; 'Vinos y Comestibles', 'España Libre', 'Amor! Amor!' Here were the bars and the talking men, the smell of sweet coñac and old dry sherries. A clear cold air, churches and oranges, and a lean-faced generation moving against white walls in sharp silhouettes of scarlet and black. It did not take more than five minutes to wipe out fifteen years and to return me whole to this thorn-cruel, threadbare world, sombre with dead and dying Christs, brassy with glittering Virgins.

We took a room in a hotel which stood close to the harbour's edge, high above the masts of the fishing boats. It was called 'The Queen of the Sea', and its walls were faced with the wave-blue tiles of Seville. Its dining-room was a patio of pillars standing under a green-glass roof, and its green furniture was hand-painted with roses, hunting dogs and bulls. The proprietor was a swarthy Moor, morose, fat-necked, with a Farouk-like paunch. He spent his days chewing cold fat pork and playing glum games with the cash register. Ramón, the manager, who was quiet and courtly,

had a long dark face of extreme nobility and torment. The rest of the staff included six chambermaids, four waiters, three kitchen-maids, two washer women, a clerk, a cook, a pageboy, a night-watchman and a turnkey. Yet this hotel was one of the cheapest in the town.

We soon settled in and the place served us well. It was an active, busy inn. The rooms were full of coughs, groans, cries and laughter; the stairways full of the songs of chambermaids, and the beds full of fleas – the progenitors of long exhausted dreams. But the food was plentiful. Our first meal, served at half-past two that afternoon, offered us olives, sardines, shellfish, prawns, a large dish of rice served with meat and saffron, flan and fruit, and a bottle of wine fetched in for a shilling.

After such a meal, drenched in the green, brutish, stimulating oils of the hills, there was nothing one could do. So we climbed to our room overlooking the bay and lay in a lethargy till five o'clock while the girls in the sewing-room above sat singing the languorous songs of their villages.

At five o'clock there was a new awakening. The café tables on the pavement below began to fill up with the customers of the evening. Waiters ran to and fro with prawns and manzanilla. Minstrels struck up on guitars and mandolines. There also arrived an army of touts and merchants—shoeblocks, newsboys, lottery-ticket sellers, gypsies with charms, boys with combs and postcards, women with baskets of cakes and sweets. Among the throbbing chords of the musicians arose their high-pitched cries: 'Ay, carne membrillo!', 'Ay, dulces buenas!', 'Limpia! Limpia!'; 'Africa de hoy!' It was time to be up and about.

So I went forth into the town and tried to reacquaint myself with the pattern of it. But of course it was not the same at all. My memory, over the years, had torn the old town down, rebuilt it, laid out the streets in quite different order and obliterated some of their most dominating landmarks. In that time I also had been torn down, rebuilt

and had many landmarks obliterated. The town, after all, remained the truth, and I the shifting fable.

I struck up through the narrow streets that I could not remember and that remembered me not. Yet here were the same square, gold-roofed houses with their grilled mysterious windows, the same delicate clusters of ironwork clamped to the warm white walls, the same bougainvillea and morning glory stretching forth their membranes of blue and purple over all. There was the same harsh singing in the patios, the same snap of wit in the air, the same smells of oil, of wine and charcoal, of raw fish and the raw sea.

Those years ago I had walked in from Cádiz, with my violin on my back, and lodged at the old inn of San Antonio – where I used to pay threepence a night to lie on a sack of straw in the courtyard. I went now and found the place. Mules and tasselled harness and blue-painted wagons still crowded the courtyard. Carters and their families crouched on the cobbles cooking up soup on little braziers. Wine-skins hung from the walls, and the corners groped with echoes. But the old proprietor was dead, and the hunchback porter was dead, and María the maid had flown with a Moor, and nobody would believe, looking at my English tweeds, that I had ever been there at all.

Yet this was where I met Pedro from the Asturias, and Ciego the blind globe-trotter from Lisbon, and we had gone into seedy partnership. We used to swim by night in the bay, and fill sandwiches with sea-urchins and stuff them into the pockets of sleeping policemen. Ciego was the beggar, Pedro the thief, and for myself I lived how I could. Each night we would pool our money, buy fish and wine, and then go off and serenade the nuns. After that we all slept side by side among the mules. I stood looking now at the rough cobbles where once we lay, the hollows that fitted our hips, the mangers where we hung our clothes. And the new proprietor stood looking at me, smiling his disbelief, and there was nothing to show that we had ever been there.

Pedro had died in jail. The Ciego, after living some time in happy darkness, had walked into the sea on a drunken night. And here was I in a new tweed suit.

So I left the inn of San Antonio, and went up to the plaza and sat down at a café table and put away the old town and prepared to accept the real one I saw around me. In the late afternoon sun it glowed slumberous and golden. Palm trees exploded darkly overhead, and orange trees bore fruit and blossom both together, giving out mixed odours of spring and Christmas. On the broad pavement below the palms, scarlet-skirted little girls skipped in haloes of honeyed dust. And by the fountain, posing for an old frock-coated photographer, stood several small boys in new confirmation suits, white, waxen, stiff and holy.

At the café tables around me four students, their heads together like card-players, were reciting poems to each other. At another table two girls were painfully composing a letter. At a third sat a young man all alone, weeping softly and eating nuts.

But such is the open market of Mediterranean life that I was not long left in doubt about any of them. The students, raising their voices in a climax of rhetorical extravagance, proved to be engaged in creating extemporaneous odes in honour of the local football team. The girls, catching my eye, said I looked like a scholar and would I help them with their letter, which was a declaration of love to a soldier in Morocco. And the solitary young man, looking at no one, suddenly struck the table and cried out to all the world: 'I have no taste to get married! And why should I? I promised her nothing. I only took her to a pastry shop . . .'

And he continued to weep, not hiding his grief at all.

Night in the town. The shops still glow. One walks through thick crowds which the day's end has called forth into the streets, a multitude which flows down the hill towards the harbour, giving off, as it goes, a remorseless pebbly chatter

like the drag of a stream in flood. Here, during the late hours before the evening meal, the whole town passes before one. Here, in the dim patches of light thrown forth from the doors of wine-shops, one sees the great eyes of the girls, formal as Persian paintings, and brick-red mouths and bodies loose as dancers'. And the young men, wickedly handsome, with thick greased hair and curling moustaches, each face a gypsy's warning, each jacket slung like a cape over the swaggering shoulder. These boys were made for quartered hose, for Toledo swords and quick flashing brawls of honour. But today their claws are clipped and rhetoric their only weapon.

At this time, too, pass all the other characters of the Spanish streets: the dark veiled women hurrying home from the priest; the Civil Guard whom nobody greets; gold-skinned sailors and strutting carters; goat-faced ruffians down from the hills; and old men with the hollow eyes of hermits, their skin stretched thin on chill ascetic bones. Then come the merry, dirt-grained beggar children, aping the professional whine but giggling helplessly behind it; and the cripples crawling on hands and knees; the curious idiots waltzing and singing in long tattered cloaks; and the ghostly blind, with their lottery tickets, stalking obliviously through the crowds, calling their numbers like mystic incantations, their white eyes fixed on the empty sky.

So the first night in Spain wore itself out. For hours I watched and wandered, feeling the hot ground under my feet, hearing again the broken lazy dialect of Andalusia, and seeing in the faces around me the dark, unconquered countenances of the Moors. At twopence a glass I drank white wine, sharp and strong as the cheese of a goat. Then I walked back down to the harbour, mazed and unsteady, and the lights of Gibraltar poured out of the sky like a heap of diamonds on the flat dark sea.

It was late now and the harbour was deserted. Café chairs were piled up on the pavements and a watchman slept on