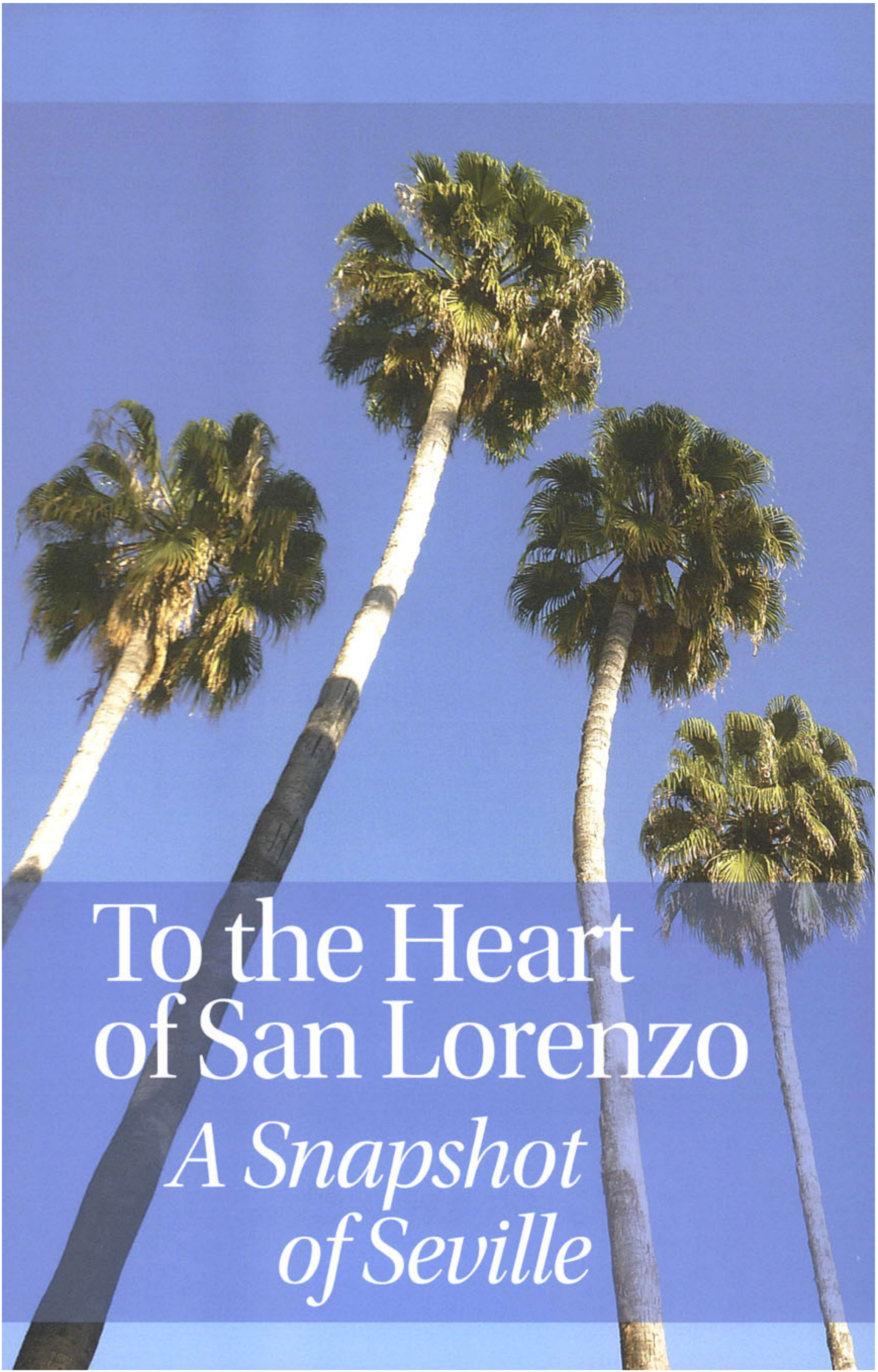


To the Heart of San Lorenzo

A Snapshot of Seville

I walk through the twin-columned portico of the School of Spanish American Studies and down the steps into the garden. Beds of roses flower beneath tall, stately palms, swaying in the breeze. Rafael, a retired concierge, once showed me a photograph of himself when he started working there. He stands, more a boy than a man, among the palm trees, which rise above him, but not by much. Now they soar into the sky, towering higher than the building itself and the adjoining church. The school's marble fence posts, a row of nine, used to be linked by thick iron chains, which children swung on before they were chased off. Word has it that those marble fence posts once were pillars lifted from the ruins of Itálica, the city that the Romans built not far away.

I TURN RIGHT as I exit on Alfonso XII, and right again at the corner where Santa Vicenta María begins, named after the founder of an order of nuns. My morning's work in the Archive of the Indies fruitfully concluded, I'm heading off for lunch. Three narrow streets and the edge of a plaza take me in a near-straight line to the heart of San Lorenzo, the neighbourhood in Seville where I spend the winter.

Nothing in my Scottish roots – I was born and raised in Glasgow – would appear to connect the two cities, separated by language and myriad expressions of culture. Yet the street I grew up on in Govan, where my father's grocery store linked us to families and livelihoods, attitudes and circumstances different than our own, is never far away when I stroll through this barrio of Seville. The trick is to relish the so-called small things in life for the great gifts they are, the mini-marvels of human interaction foremost of all, what can transpire in a snip of conversation, an offhand remark, a curious look, a fleeting observation or a passing thought. Spaniards know how to live in the mode of a moment, none more so than the people of Seville.

Manolo, an authentic Barber of Seville, regrets that he cannot work miracles for the author, "... but I can make you look less ugly."

FIRST ON MY LEFT is Eladio's Peluquería, a salon with a sign advertising its services in English as "Heir Dresser." Manolo, my barber in Seville, scribbles the appointment that I make with him, one Saturday each month for the four I am usually here, on a scrap of paper, recording it as "Operación Menos Feo." He refers to me as *El Guiri*, the foreigner. "I can't make you look handsome," Manolo declares, "but I can make you look less ugly." No miracles, not even on this holy street.

Bar Granado, which I hear being opened at 6 a.m. sharp, lies opposite. I greet Oscar whenever I see him closing it down, eighteen hours later. Next in line is Bar Er Pepe, whose eponymous owner calls me "Jordi." His daughter, Paula, a growing girl, eats more *jamón serrano*, keenly sliced

Iberian ham, than her father sells. I catch the sound of a whistle, and turn to greet the man whose job it is to sharpen knives. He's just pulled up at the bar called Los Niños de Flor, and having three clients in close proximity makes this a strategic site. The back wheel of his bicycle is deployed to turn a grinder, whose sparks draw an audience of inquisitive children. Other youngsters play in an alley while their parents and grandparents sit in the sun, discussing family matters or reading the newspapers. Eugenio of Los Niños de Flor has nicknamed me "Steven" – on account, so he alleges, of my striking resemblance to Steven Seagal, his hero of action-movie fame.

My surname is what Eduardo, Julio, and Luis address me by. Their bookstore, Céfiro, has one display window on Santa Vicenta María and another (surely only in Seville) on a street named La Virgen de los Buenos Libros, "The Virgin of Good Books." I've seen titles of mine featured on the Virgin side of Céfiro, but not on the Santa Vicenta María side. Eugenio, in whose droopy moustache birds could nest, keeps a watchful eye, and would alert me of any such sighting.

Eduardo, Julio, and Luis surely have the world's best address for a bookstore, on a street named "The Virgin of Good Books."

Crossing the Virgen de los Buenos Libros I enter the Calle San Juan de Ávila, home of the Colegio Sagrado Corazón. I notice Mónica at the stand where pupils hover to buy candy and soft drinks. She's the daughter of Marina, who runs the residence where I stay. "Hola," Mónica shouts, and skips up to greet me, the braces on her teeth unable to clamp a glorious smile. The classroom windows of Sagrado Corazón are sometimes ajar, allowing me to eavesdrop on a lesson being taught. A teacher asks a question; her charges chant a response in unison.

On the right, looming above cars parked with tight precision and guarded by a street hound known as The Angel, is the former police station, its crumbling edifice taking up more than half the block. The state of ruin on the side facing the Plaza de la Concordia has been covered by a massive tarpaulin, printed with lines by Manuel Chaves Nogales (1897–1944) that extol the virtues of a city as beautiful and haunted as Seville:

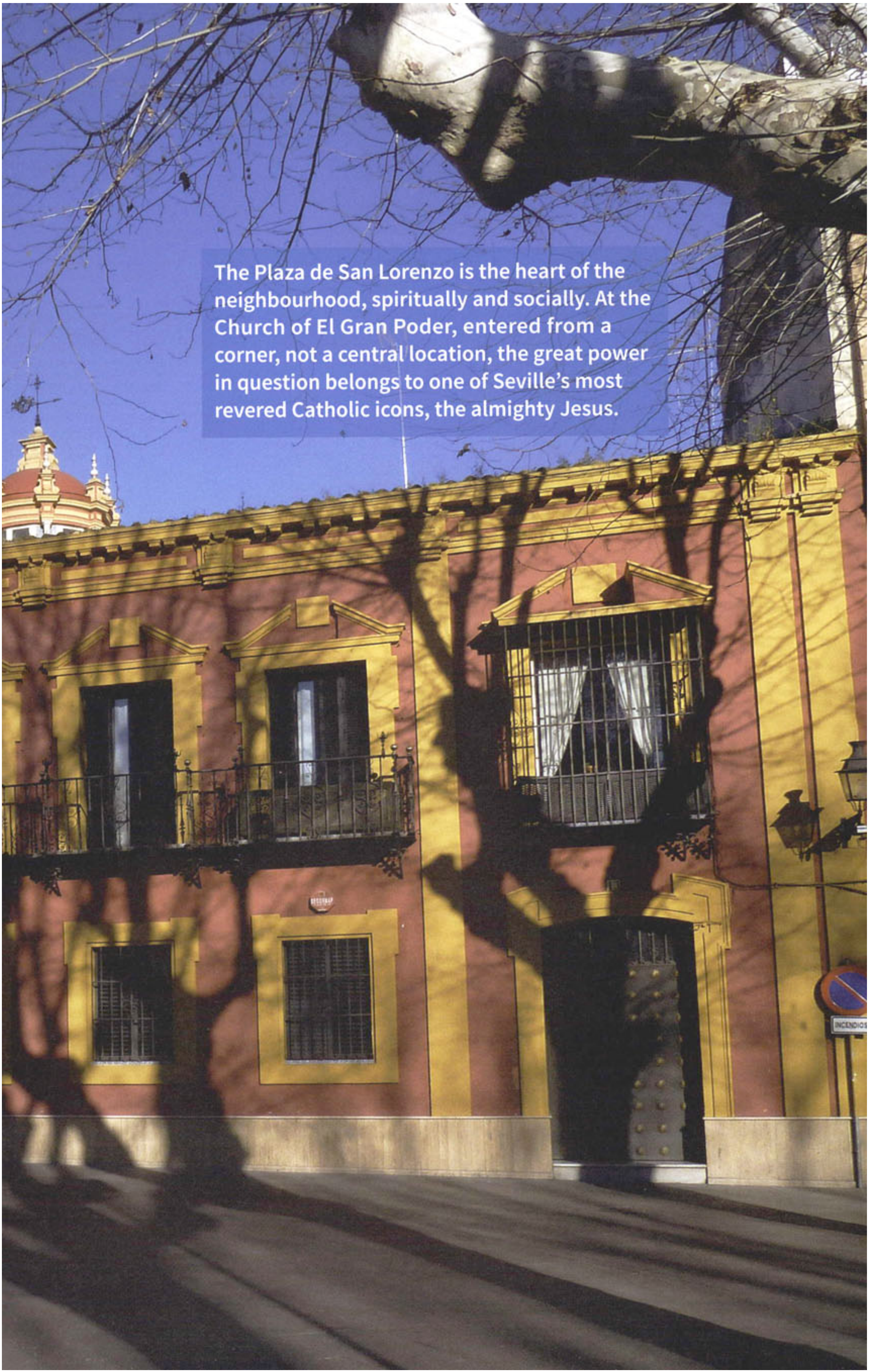
You contemplate that plaza, that square, that house, and become aware of its essence. You surrender to what you think is one final impression, unravelling it, only to find, just around the corner, a new surprise that makes you reel, and think again. From encounters like these is this place, mysterious and inscrutable, magically spun.

The Plaza de la Gavidia is a lively, welcoming square, wide and airy after the tight passage of San Juan de Ávila. Lying kitty-corner to one another are the Amarillo Albero and the Dos de Mayo. Thursday in the former tapas bar is Antonio's day off. A fellow waiter of his, Federico, maintains that a day off for Antonio is also a day off for anyone else still working. The owner, Manuel, smiles and nods his agreement. Paco and the staff at Dos de Mayo take turns bolting from its habitual mayhem to have a quick smoke and tipple in a nearby establishment seldom as thronged as their own.

Sevilla Musical marks the beginning of the Calle Cardenal Spínola. Guitars of all sorts are its chief stock-in-trade, but the store also retails clarinets, trumpets, drums, and scores of other instruments. Music on this corner is always in the air. An accordionist plays for alms outside the gates of Santa Rosalía, a convent whose patron saint, a plaque tells us, was "Abogada para los enfermos," attendant to the sick. Confined inside, Capuchin sisters elaborate sweets and pastas for take-away sale, inspired no doubt by the wondrous smells of the bakery across the street. Their artisanal ways are matched by the family of Francisco J. García, three generations of whom have crafted and repaired chairs, sofas, and all manner of furniture, specializing in items of lattice, reed, and wicker. Past the fishmonger and greengrocer, a Moorish minaret long part of a

Statue dedicated to Juan de Mesa (1583–1627) in the Plaza de San Lorenzo.


SEL GRAN PODER



The Plaza de San Lorenzo is the heart of the neighbourhood, spiritually and socially. At the Church of El Gran Poder, entered from a corner, not a central location, the great power in question belongs to one of Seville's most revered Catholic icons, the almighty Jesus.

Above: Manuel, "a su servicio," at Amarillo Albero.
Opposite: Pepe, Joaquín, and Sixto, standing guard at Bar Eslava.

Christian complex comes into view. The clock at the top is visible until the arrival of spring, when plane trees burst in green splendour and floppy leaves obscure the trace of time.

The Plaza de San Lorenzo is the heart of the neighbourhood, spiritually and socially. At the Church of El Gran Poder, entered from a corner, not a central location, the great power in question belongs to one of Seville's most revered Catholic icons, the almighty Jesus. Faithful by the thousands pay him homage during Easter, when the cult of El Gran Poder culminates in the small hours of Good Friday: the image of Jesus carved by Juan de Mesa (1583–1627) is taken from church and paraded through the streets of San Lorenzo before being carried, in candlelit procession, to the city cathedral and back again. A multitude throngs the plaza, the verandas of apartments on three of its sides packed with people who toss flowers onto the passing float and sing *saetas* of devotion.

MY MEANDER ENDS at Bar Eslava. Boards at each end of the tunnel-like space have the day's tapas chalked, top to bottom, in mouth-watering script. Sixto, the proud owner, points to a framed award on the gantry, celebrating Bar Eslava's gold-medal finish in a city-wide tapas competition. "But I want you to try something else today, George,

and to enjoy it the way my grandmother used to." He disappears into the kitchen and comes out a few minutes later.

Placing a bowl of gazpacho on the counter along with a plate of sardines, Sixto leans toward me, a grin on his face. "What you do," he whispers, "is debone the sardines, put them in the gazpacho one at a time, chop them up, and then eat." He runs off to attend to another customer, leaving me, much to the curiosity of the couple next to me, to follow his instructions. The outcome is delicious, especially when accompanied by a glass of manzanilla sherry, chilled to perfection.

Bar Eslava is something of a minimalist's delight, a visual relief from its competitors, whose interiors are gloomy if not forlorn, gaudy and oppressive, stuffed with religious or bullfighting paraphernalia. A long horizontal mirror is all that hangs on one wall, on another an antique clock with hands fixed at five minutes to twelve, high noon and midnight. Pause for reflection.

Time does not stand still, here or anywhere, but the feel of it in Seville is like no place else I know.

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