

Dispatches from Brexit-land

M.G. Sanchez

What's it like to live in a Brexit-voting stronghold when you are not 'local'? Gibraltar author M. G. Sanchez – who moved to the UK shortly after the Brexit referendum – explores the question in this autobiographical piece written in early 2017.

A woman in a Fiat asked me for directions this morning. She was about sixty years old, frumpy, fleece-jacketed, tangles of yellowy-grey hair falling in untidy clumps on her shoulders. Switching on her hazard lights, she pulled up by the side of the road and asked me if I knew where Barry Street was. 'I'm afraid I don't know,' I replied, holding on to my dog's leash. 'I've only just moved into the area.'

I've had plenty of negative reactions to my Gibraltarian accent over the years, but this woman was in a league of her own. The initial glimmer of uncertainty, the rapidly hardening sense of suspicion, the subsequent look of visceral contempt – it all played on her face like a series of gradually darkening shadows, changing

the contour of her features, leaving me in no doubt as to what she thought of me.

'I can google Barry Street on my phone for you if you want,' I added seconds later, trying to shame her with my solicitousness.

'No, no, yer awright,' the middle-aged Yorkshirewoman snarled back, already reaching for her gear stick. 'I won't keep you any longer, luv.'

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The last time I lived in this town was back in the winter of 2003. I had been finishing a PhD in English Literature at the University of Leeds and my finances were a bit stretched. My Yorkshire-born girlfriend took pity on my plight and invited me to move into a property she was renting a stone's throw away from the M62. It was a red-brick terrace house set two doors from a working man's club. Single-glazed windowpanes. Nettle-ridden back garden. Mould rupturing through layers of

peeling mauve wallpaper. In the cellar there was a mildewed stone table which my partner believed to be some kind of butcher's chopping table, but which in actual fact, thinking about it now, must have been one of those 'cold tables' which the Victorians used for storing milk, butter and other perishables. On Saturday and Sunday mornings we'd walk out into the front garden and find beer bottles and half-eaten kebabs strewn across the grass. Once – I can still picture the scene vividly in my mind – I opened the front door and discovered the garden gate hanging abjectly from one hinge, victim of some late-night drunken attack. It was a pretty depressing situation all round, but because I was focused on my postgraduate research I rarely engaged with my surroundings. Only one thing bothered me – and that was having to go to the local post office with the items I used to sell on eBay to supplement my scholarship monies. A thin, brown-haired, bony-faced woman worked in this tiny post office, and every time I'd appear before her with my carefully wrapped parcels, she would glare at me like I was the devil incarnate, no doubt having reconstructed me within her racist brain as some kind of lazy, benefit-scrouring foreigner. I will never forget the way that post office worker used to look at me – so full of animosity, *con cara de asco*. If that woman had still been around when the referendum results were announced in June 2016, she must have half-fainted with rabid delight.

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Our semi-detached house is in a small private estate surrounded by a cordon of council estates. Until a few days ago I used

to walk the dog along the road running past the top end of the estate. I didn't particularly mind doing this – like all busy roads, it has the benefit of attracting few pedestrians – but the amount of rubbish and broken glass on the ground was a bit off-putting. Now, though, I've discovered a large field around the corner from the house. Bordered on one side by a council estate and an unused rugby pitch on the other, it is fairly secluded and a good place to let the dog off the lead. Motorway traffic can be heard in the distance. Pylon lines stretch endlessly into the horizon, brutally suturing the grey sky. Today, for the very first time, a fellow dog owner stopped to chat with me. Young guy in his mid-twenties. Striped Adidas tracksuit bottoms. A dishevelled, hippyish air about him. I think he was surprised that I wasn't local, but he quickly relaxed and loosened up, happy to carry on conversing. He told me that his lurcher was called Molly and that she was eleven months old. He also said that she had been attacked last week by an out-of-control Shar Pei. I continued chatting with him for a couple of minutes, then I said goodbye and started walking across the adjacent rugby field towards the main road.

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In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell speaks about 'a cult of Northernness' and holds up Northerners as real-life embodiments of 'pluck', 'grit', 'stubbornness' and 'warm-heartedness.' This is the way that the North has been imagined by writers for decades – as an anomalous zone, both attached to its surroundings and yet peculiarly set apart, a place where people act and think differently.

But are Northerners that dissimilar from their southern compatriots? Is there really such a pronounced North-South personality divide? Part of me wants to believe that Orwell was wrong and that people are the same all over the UK – but I would be lying if I said that I hadn't detected certain differences between living here and living 'down South'. Primarily, these revolve around interpersonal relationships and the way folk hold themselves before strangers. There seems to be more solidarity between individuals here, a greater supply of empathy. It might take the form of a nurse postponing her lunch break to spend some additional time with a frightened patient. A taxi-driver carrying an old woman's shopping bags all the way up the steeply inclined steps of her Victorian mid-terrace. The flat-capped pensioner who will put down his bag of groceries and, panting asthmatically, without thinking about his own safety, position himself between a teenager who is being bullied and those bullying him. The best explanation for this type of behaviour is that provided by the York-born novelist Andrew Martin, who sees this spirit of confraternity as a direct legacy of the region's industrial past, when there was a strong sense among the overworked and the underpaid classes that they were 'all in it together.' And yet, hand in hand with all this affinity, there is also a deep-rooted streak of bigotry and intolerance, an almost pathological fear of 'difference.' I think this is the other main inheritance that has survived from Yorkshire's proletarian past: a tendency to close ranks against outsiders, to bristle at the merest suggestion of foreignness...

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Another dog walker approached me today. Elderly guy. Old-fashioned wire-framed spectacles. Greying hair swept back along the sides, but combed on top into a billowing 'Elvis Presley' quiff. Coughing apologetically, looking rather pained, he told me that he'd left his poo bags in his other jacket, after which he asked me whether I could lend him a couple of my own. 'Sure,' I replied, pulling out a handful of bags. 'Here, help yourself.'

'So where's you from, then?' he asked, noticing my accent.

'I'm from Gibraltar.'

'Ah, Gibraltar,' he said, stuffing the bags into the pockets of his padded jacket. 'Been plenty of times to Gibraltar in me time with t'Royal Navy, me. Love it there. Monkey and t'dockyard and tha' pub near t'Governor's place – what's it called again?'

'You mean The Angry Friar?'

He nodded and without further ado began telling me about his Royal Navy days. It was a tale that must have been sprung on many an unsuspecting listener – judging from how adroitly he switched from one exotic location to the other. I listened to him with a polite smile on my face, conscious that I needed to be at the station in less than half an hour to pick up my partner. Finally – realising that I was in serious danger of having my neck wrung if I didn't get to my destination in time – I beat a hasty retreat with the pensioner's phlegmy, saliva-drenched

voice trailing genially behind me:

‘Ta-ra, then, matey. It were really nice talking to you. Makes a change from t’usual conversations what one usually has in this type o’ place.’

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My partner says that I have two accents when I speak in English. The first is what she calls my ‘place of comfort’ accent, which is the way I talk at home or when I am with friends. This accent is so unremarkable and English-sounding, she claims, that it is easy to forget that I haven’t been born in the UK. The second accent is the accent that I put on when I interact with strangers – my so-called ‘place of discomfort accent.’ When I speak in this manner, the opposite happens: my accent thickens and it becomes evident that I’m not originally from the UK. ‘It is like you are trying *too hard* to sound English,’ she says, her own voice imbued with only the subtlest hint of a Yorkshire accent. ‘I don’t know how to explain it. It just sounds stilted and forced.’ Lately, I have noticed another embarrassing development when talking to strangers – I am now slipping into spoonerisms and metathetic substitutions. ‘Do you sell any Lockett’s loney and lemon lozenges?’ I might say to a shop attendant. ‘Or yes, please,’ I will reply to a poker-faced post office counter clerk. ‘I’d like to send it first-flass recorded, please.’ I have tried to analyse why this is happening and I can only conclude that I must be wary of how people will react to my Gibraltarian accent. In general, too, you could say there are three types of reaction up here to a foreign accent. There are those, first of all, who don’t give a damn.

Those who initially look at you with suspicion, but rapidly relax once they realise that you are fluent in English. And, finally, those who will keep looking at you suspiciously no matter what comes out of your mouth. Prognosticating when and where you will encounter these three different responses is no easy task, but observation and day-to-day experience always give you a decent idea. Drive into a roadside car wash manned by Eastern Europeans, for instance, and the likelihood is that there won’t be much of a reaction. Stumble into a regulars’ pub in one of the rougher suburbs, by contrast, and you’ll stand a good chance of getting heckled on account of your ‘foreignness.’ These ‘statistical probabilities’ condition your behaviour, shape the way you interact with your environs. You will soon learn to divide your surroundings into ‘safe zones’ and ‘no-go zones’, to stop yourself from entering certain pubs and shops, to keep quiet at bus stops and at late-night taxi ranks, to whisper into your phone if someone calls you while you are on a packed bus or train, to swiftly press the cancel button if you’re shopping in Poundland and your Gibraltarian mother’s number flashes up on your mobile phone. Individually, these little acts may not add up to much, but cumulatively they can be very disempowering. Without realising it, you are practising a form of daily self-censorship, placing limits on your own volition, continually being forced to adapt and modify your behaviour. You are, some might say, trying to camouflage who you really are.

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Every morning on my way to drop off my partner at the train station, I see groups of

schoolkids trudging up the hill towards the local academy. A large percentage of them are sipping Monster, Relentless, Rockstar and other energy drinks. Many are also wearing hoodies. It's a little disconcerting, actually, the number of people who wear hoods in this town. Kids making their way to school, construction workers on a fag-break, homeless people selling the *Big Issue*, middle-aged men walking their dogs, students travelling in buses. Only last week when I was at the dentist there was a guy sitting beside me in the waiting room with his hood on. He must have been thirty or thirty-five, a brawny, freckly, ginger-haired knucklehead who sat there staring dumbly at his mud-caked boots, seemingly unaware of how uncomfortable he was making everyone else feel. Why are hoods so popular in this part of the country, I wonder? Is it because of fashion reasons? Because they've replaced the baseball cap as the ultimate symbol of urban hardness? Because they open up miniature 'no-go' zones around their wearer? Actually, that could be it, couldn't it? The moment you slip up your hood you are in effect turning inwards, isolating yourself from your surroundings, voluntarily renouncing everything around you. I am reminded of those Japanese who wear disposable face masks not because of hygiene reasons, but simply because they don't want anybody coming near them and bothering them. In the language of semiotics, both hood and mask serve as non-verbal pointers helping to demarcate proxemic space, silently but effectively transmitting the message 'fuck off and stay away.'

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I am in bed with the flu. I have caught it off my partner, who appears to have caught it off her mother, who caught it from her other daughter, who in turn must have caught it off somebody else. Never ceases to amaze me how a single strain of the influenza virus can zigzag its way like this across a city, dexterously hurdling over barriers of class and culture, infecting people regardless of race, nationality or creed...

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It is 17 January 2017. On the front cover of today's *Daily Mail* there is a cartoon of a 'Thatcheresque' Theresa May, tweed-suited and handbag in hand, standing on the white cliffs of Dover while trampling on an EU flag. The accompanying text focuses on the speech which May delivered yesterday, in which she made clear that Britain would be pulling out from the EU on all fronts, while still expecting to preserve strong trading rights with the Union. Translated into layman's terms, this means that May wants to retain all the positive elements associated with EU membership while ditching what she sees as all the negatives (freedom of movement, adherence to the European Convention on Human Rights, having to pay regular membership dues). I'm not sure what your average *Mail* reader thinks about all this, but it seems to me highly unlikely that the EU will agree to a deal which, in the words of Guy Verhofstadt, Chair of the EU's Brexit Steering Group, will ensure that it 'is better to be outside the single market than be a member of the European Union.' My worry is that when the rebuff comes (for it is bound to come *sooner or later*) the right-wing press will deviously

repackage it as an out-and-out attack on British interests, furiously harping on about European treachery and the duplicity of foreigners. In turn, this will create a xenophobic mindset among some sectors of the population, who will conveniently forget that it was they themselves who originally repudiated the EU. Hate crime levels will once again rise. Right-wing politicians will trumpet out increasingly radical proposals. And through it all the pusillanimous Tory administration will watch limply from the sidelines, too scared to intervene in case they are perceived to be soft on migrants and foreigners....

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It is half past three and my partner still hasn't returned from walking the dog. The first lights are switching on in the street, casting jittery reflections on car windscreens and rain puddles. Police sirens can be heard somewhere in the distance. I am pacing up and down the corridor in my dressing gown, glancing repeatedly in the direction of the window, pausing every few seconds to check my mobile phone. Then, lo and behold, the door swings open and there she is stamping her boots on the thickly bristled doormat.

'I was trying to call you,' I say, putting my phone back into my dressing gown pocket. 'I was worried that something had happened to you.'

'I must have had my phone on silent,' she replies, taking off her wellies and placing them on the boot tray. 'I'm half-frozen. Why don't you go and make us a cup of tea?'

'You're not annoyed with me because I'm still too unwell to walk the dog, are you?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then why do you look so angry?'

'Do I? Must be because of that silly old berk on the rugby pitch.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I was walking through the rugby field when I bumped into this old man walking a fat staffy. Real friendly bloke. The sort that will stay there gabbing forever if you give them half a chance. Anyway, there we are, me and this old guy, talking about dogs and how cold it is and other silly stuff like that, when we reach the part of the field near the main road – you know where I mean, don't you, that part where there's plastic bags and beer cans and broken bottles and all other kinds of rubbish. "Shame about that," I say to the man entirely innocently. "It never used to be like that," he says, a strange look suddenly coming into his eye. "What do you mean?" I ask. "Well, it's them Poles, in't it, luv?" he says, nodding as he speaks, as if he were agreeing with himself. "They are t'ones who are always coming here at night and dumping all this rubbish." "Have you actually seen any Polish people do this?" I ask, drawing back. "Not I meself, luv, but I know plenty of people what have. It's common knowledge round here, in't it, luv?"

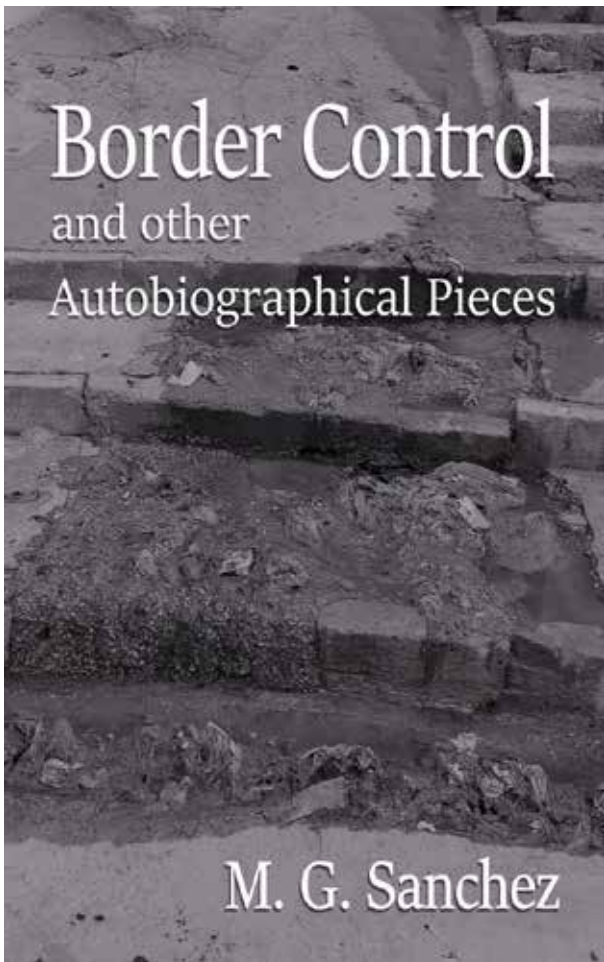
I look at my partner and then at the mud-spattered mutt standing by her side. 'This guy you're talking about – did he by any chance

have his hair combed tightly backwards and with a bouffant at the front, sort of Elvis Presley style?’

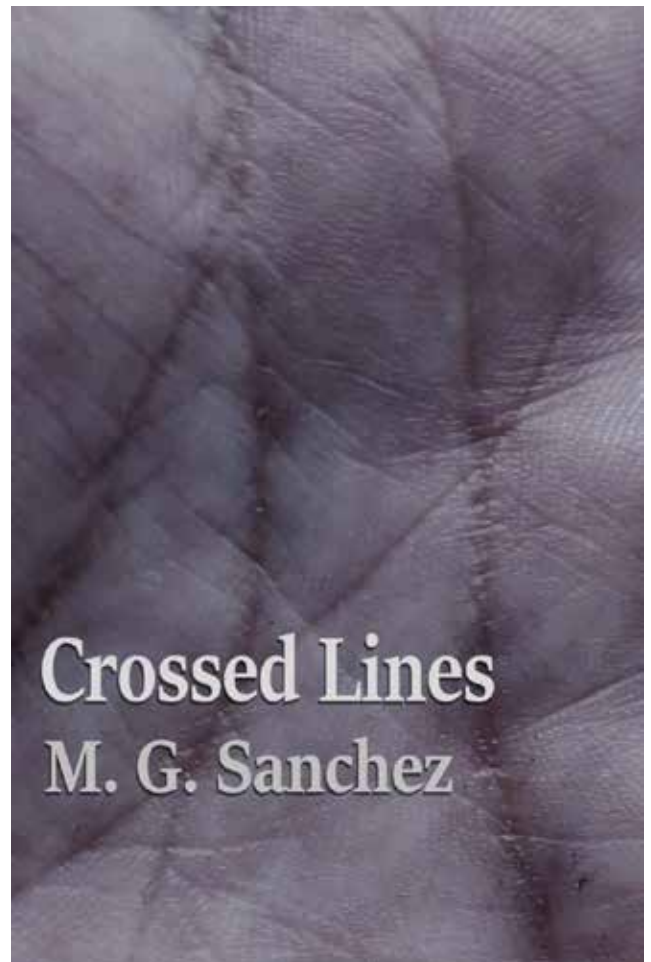
‘Yes, that’s him – how on earth did you know?’

‘You know what us dodgy foreigners are like,’ I say, tapping the side of my nose. ‘Nothing escapes our attention. Anyway, sit yourself down and I’ll bring you your tea in a sec. I’ve already got the cups and saucers ready.’

M. G. Sanchez has written various novels and books of short stories on Gibraltarian themes. More information about his writing can be found at <https://www.mgsanchez.net> and also at <https://www.facebook.com/mgsanchezwriter/>.



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