



# 1819 NEWS

## Allen Mendenhall: Children between Portugal and Spain

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 06.01.26



*(iStock)*

Portugal was not my idea.

Early this year, my ex-wife informed me that she intended to take our children, Noah and Gabriela, on a trip to Lisbon. Her brother lives there. Her mother would be joining for a spell. She is Brazilian, fluent in Portuguese, and as confident as someone who has always known precisely where she belongs.

I do not possess this quality. I am American and once spent 20 minutes in a Paris boulangerie attempting to mime the word “mille-feuille” with the mounting desperation of a hostage negotiating his release.

So, we struck a deal, as divorced people do: not warmly, not coldly, but with the practiced efficiency of two people who have learned to negotiate the geography of their children’s lives. I would fly over as well. I would stay in a

hotel near her brother's apartment, join the family touring expeditions, and make myself scarce at intervals, like a diplomat from a country no longer recognized.

The arrangement sufficed.

I arrived on a red-eye, that species of flight designed to ensure you reach your destination looking like something a cat has worried under a radiator. I unpacked, splashed water on my face, and descended to the hotel lobby, where I beheld a congress of fat European tourists, all over 70, draped across the barstools and poolside loungers with the sovereign ease of retirees with nowhere else to be.

Jet-lagged, I returned to my room and collapsed for several hours. By evening, I had showered, shaved, and dressed with what I believed was a certain negligent elegance before heading downstairs for dinner.

The lobby had been replaced! Where the pensioners had lounged, there now materialized – and I can find no other noun – *models*. Dozens of them. Beautiful women of every description, occupying every available surface, eating lightly, speaking various languages.

At the table beside me sat two brunette twins with the absolute stillness of people long accustomed to being observed. Through careful eavesdropping, which remains one of the few genuinely democratic pleasures left to mankind, I gathered that some manner of international competition was being held nearby and that the contestants were all staying at the hotel.

I went to bed rather reluctantly.

By breakfast the following morning, the models had vanished, replaced by Chinese tourists. I felt, not unpleasantly, like a minor character in a film whose director had not bothered to brief me on the plot.

A short taxi ride later, I arrived at the reunion, which is a sentence that could only belong to the modern divorce.

They were gathered inside her brother's condo – my ex-wife, her brother and his wife, my former mother-in-law, and Noah and Gabriela – and greeted my arrival as Brazilians greet most things: with loud volume and immediate physical enthusiasm. There were embraces, exclamations, gesticulations, hugs. My former mother-in-law held my face in both hands as though checking whether I remained properly assembled, which, after the transatlantic flight, was still very much an open question.

We toured Lisbon together: the Jerónimos Monastery, the Tower of Belém, the Castle of São Jorge, the Time Out Market, the hills, the trams, the ocean. The food was extraordinary. I purchased an irresponsibly expensive Ronaldo jersey for each child.

My ex-wife and her family slipped effortlessly between Portuguese and English, while Noah and Gabriela – who understand Portuguese well but speak it reluctantly – nodded along, their solemn expressions matching those of junior diplomats trapped at a summit they never requested.

Then someone recommended Seville.

So, the next morning, we piled into a car and drove to Andalusia, which is Spain's way of showing off. We saw the Cathedral, the Alcázar, the ancient streets and shaded plazas.

At some point, through a series of miscalculations I prefer not to reconstruct, we found ourselves driving through what was not, strictly speaking, a street. It was a narrow pedestrian passage between buildings, flanked by walls close enough to touch from either window, while several Sevillanos, with considerable alarm and colorful vocabulary, expressed strong opinions about our navigation.

We eventually emerged onto actual pavement, unharmed, and observed a moment of silence like those usually reserved for funerals and near-plane crashes.

After tapas, we found a rooftop bar overlooking the city at dusk, the adults with cocktails and the children with Coca-Colas, the cathedral magnificent against the darkening sky.

I used to think of divorce as I thought of weather damage: something that happened to a structure, that left it fundamentally altered, that no amount of repair could make quite whole again. I was angry about it for years.

But standing on that rooftop in Seville, watching my children sip their Coca-Colas against the enormous fact of that cathedral, I felt something loosen in me that had been wound tight for a long time.

The cathedral had taken centuries, raised by men who knew they would never live to see it finished, who laid their stones anyway in faith that the thing itself mattered more than their own small part in it.

Parenthood, I realized, possesses something of that same surrender.

My children move now between their mother's world and mine with a fluency I can never fully share – between languages, households, customs, temperaments. Yet that movement has not broken them.

Not because divorce is constructive – it is not – but because Noah and Gabriela possess a sad but admirable instinct to gather scattered things and try, stubbornly, to make them whole again. They have made, in their own way, a cathedral.

Despite all our grievances, accommodations, resentments, negotiations, and hard-won civilities, their mother and I kept laying stones as we could.

Divorce is a wound. I will not prettify it into something fashionable or therapeutic. Some losses remain losses forever. The best you can do is refuse to let them become the only story your children inherit.

My children will carry this life we made with them – the Lisbon light, the rooftop in Seville, the car wedged improbably between ancient walls while strangers cursed us in beautiful Spanish – and they will carry it forward whole, though not entirely unscarred.

That may not be redemption. But it is, at the very least, a form of grace.

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