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Opening Extract from...

The Spanish Game

Written by Charles Cumming

Published by Harper

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CHARLES CUMMING

The Spanish Game

HARPER

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Harper
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2011
1

First published in Great Britain by
Penguin Books Ltd. 2006

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-741693-6

Set in Meridien by Thomson Digital, India

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Author's Note

The Spanish Game is a work of fiction inspired by real events. With one or two obvious exceptions, the characters depicted in the novel are products of my imagination. The book has been written with respect for opinions on both sides of the Basque conflict.

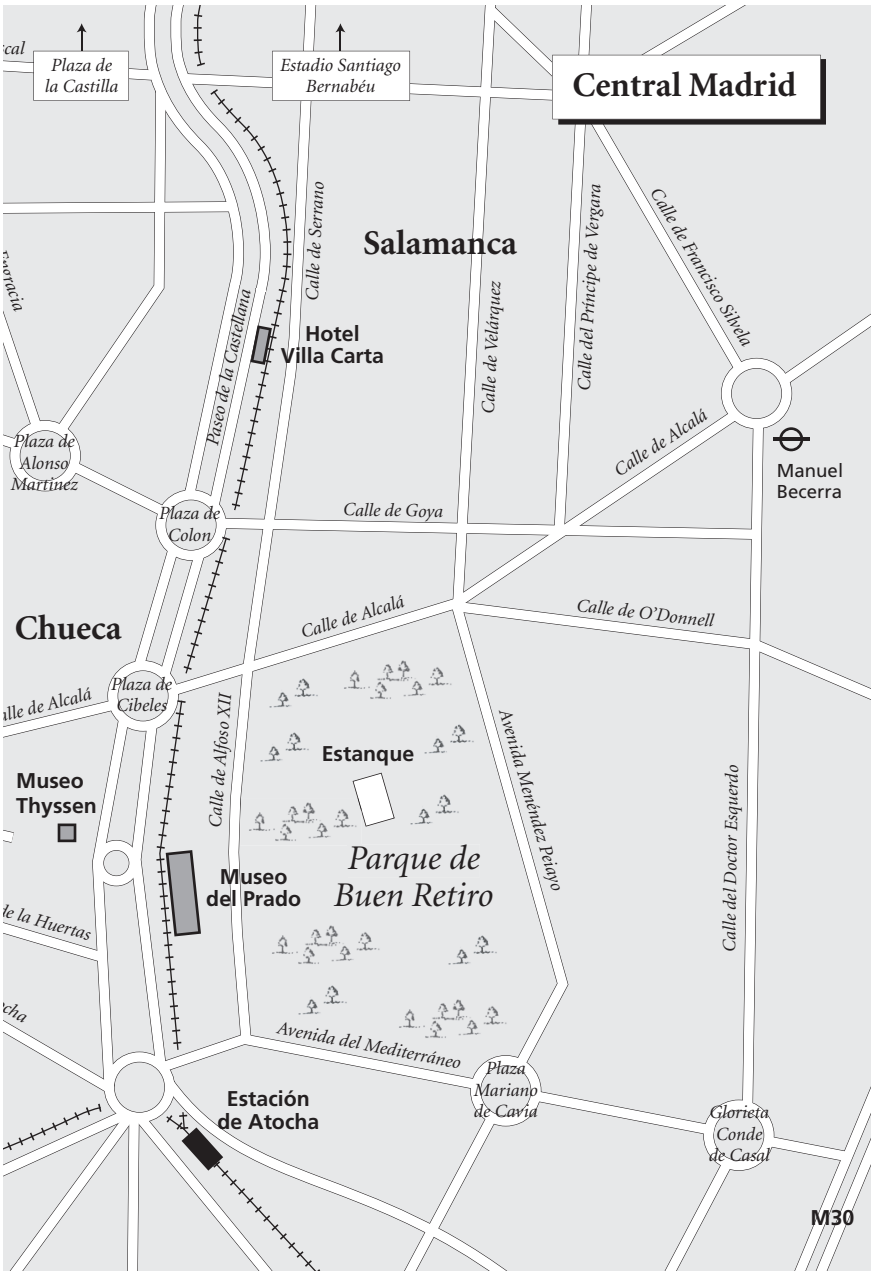
The story takes place in Madrid in the first half of 2003, many months before the events of 11 March 2004 which left 192 people dead and more than 1,700 injured. At the time of writing, no evidential link between the perpetrators of the Atocha bombings and Basque terrorist groups has ever been established.

C.C.
London, October 2005

'Madrid is a strange place anyway. I do not believe anyone likes it much when he first goes there. It has none of the look that you expect of Spain . . . Yet when you get to know it, it is the most Spanish of all cities, the best to live in, the finest people, and month in and month out the finest climate. While other big cities are all very representative of the province they are in, they are either Andalucian, Catalan, Basque, Aragonese, or otherwise provincial. It is in Madrid only that you get the essence . . . It makes you feel very badly, all question of immortality aside, to know that you will have to die and never see it again.'

Ernest Hemingway


Av. Arco Victoria
Av. de Los Reyes Catolicos
Calle de Cea Bermúdez
Calle de Bravo Murillo
Calle de Jose Abas
Calle de
Glorieta de Quevedo
Argüelles
Calle de Martin de los Heros
Paseo del Pintor Rosales
Calle Alberto Aguilera
Glorieta Ruiz Jiménez
Glorieta de Bilbao
Calle de la Princesa
Calle de Conde Duque
Cafe Commercial
Malasaña
Rio Manzanares
Plaza de España
C. de Ventura Rodriguez
Calle de Fuencarral
Gran Via
Cuesta de San Vicente
Glorieta de San Vicente
M30
Museo Chicote
Plaza de Oriente
Palacio Real
Sol
Puerta del Sol
Calle Mayor
Virgen del Puerto
Calle de Segovia
Plaza Mayor
Plaza de Santa Ana
Huertas
Puente de Segovia
Paseo de la
Ronda Segovia
Hotel Reina Victoria
Calle de Ato
Casa de Campo/Lago
La Latina
Calle de Toledo
Lavapiés
Ronda Segovia
Glorieta Puerto de Toledo
Ronda de Toledo


Central Madrid
Plaza de la Castilla
Estadio Santiago Bernabéu
Salamanca
Calle de Serrano
Calle de Velázquez
Calle del Príncipe de Vergara
Calle de Francisco Silvela
Paseo de la Castellana
Hotel Villa Carta
Calle de Alcalá
Manuel Becerra
Plaza de Alonso Martínez
Plaza de Colón
Calle de Goya
Calle de O'Donnell
Chueca
Calle de Alcalá
Plaza de Cibeles
Calle de Alfonso XII
Estanque
Avenida Menéndez Pelayo
Calle del Doctor Esquerdo
Museo Thyssen
Museo del Prado
Parque de Buen Retiro
Avenida del Mediterráneo
Plaza Mariano de Cavia
Glorieta Conde de Casal
Estación de Atocha
M30

ONE

Exile

The door leading into the hotel is already open and I walk through it into a low, wide lobby. Two South American teenagers are playing Gameboys on a sofa near reception, kicking back in hundred-dollar trainers while Daddy picks up the bill. The older of them swears loudly in Spanish and then catches his brother square on the knot of his shoulder with a dead arm that makes him wince in pain. A passing waiter looks down, shrugs and empties an ashtray at their table. There's a general atmosphere of listless indifference, of time passing by to no end, the pre-rush lull of late afternoons.

'*Buenas tardes, señor.*'

The receptionist is wide shouldered and artificially blonde and I play the part of a tourist, making no effort to speak to her in Spanish.

'Good afternoon. I have a reservation here today.'

'The name, sir?'

'Alec Milius.'

'Yes, sir.'

She ducks down and taps something into a computer. Then there's a smile, a little nod of recognition and she writes down my details on a small piece of card.

'The reservation was made over the internet?'

'That's right.'

'Could I see your passport please, sir?'

Five years ago, almost to the day, I spent my first night in Madrid at this same hotel; a 28-year-old industrial spy on the run from the UK with $189,000 lodged in five separate bank accounts, using three passports and a forged British driving licence for ID. On that occasion I handed a Lithuanian passport issued to me in Paris in August 1997 to the clerk behind the desk. The hotel may have a record of this on their system, so I'm using it again.

'You are from Vilnius?' the receptionist asks.

'My grandfather was born there.'

'Well, breakfast is between seven thirty and eleven o'clock and you have it included as part of your rate.' It is as if she has no recollection of having asked the question. 'Is it just yourself staying with us?'

'Just myself.'

My luggage consists of a suitcase filled with old newspapers and a leather briefcase containing some toiletries, a laptop computer and two of my three mobile phones. We're not planning to stay in the room for more than a few hours. A porter is summoned from across the lobby and he escorts me to the lifts at the back of the hotel. He's short and tanned and genial in the manner of low-salaried employees badly in need of a tip. His English is rudimentary, and it's tempting to break into Spanish just to make the conversation more lively.

'This is being your first time in Madrid, yes?'

'Second, actually. I visited two years ago.'

'For the bullfights?'

'On business.'

'You don't like the *corrida*?'

'It's not that. I just didn't have the time.'

The room is situated halfway down a long, Barton Fink corridor on the third floor. The porter uses a credit-card sized pass key to open the door and places my suitcase on the ground. The lights are operated by inserting the key in a narrow horizontal slot outside the bathroom door, although I know from experience that a credit card works just as well; anything narrow enough to trigger the switch will do the trick. The room is a reasonable size, perfect for our needs, but as soon as I am inside I frown and make a show of looking disappointed and the porter duly asks if everything is all right.

'It's just that I asked for a room with a view over the square. Could you see at the desk if it would be possible to change?'

Back in 1998, as an overt target conscious of being watched by both American and British intelligence, I ran basic counter-surveillance measures as soon as I arrived at the hotel, searching for microphones and hidden cameras. Five years later, I am either wiser or lazier; the simple, last-minute switch of room negates any need to sweep. The porter has no choice but to return to reception and within ten minutes I have been assigned a new room on the fourth floor with a clear view over Plaza de Santa Ana. After a quick shower I put on a dressing gown, turn down the air conditioning and try to make the room look less functional by folding up the bedspread, placing it in a cupboard and opening the net curtains so that the decent February light can flood in. It's cold outside, but I stand briefly on the balcony looking out over the square. A neat line of chestnut trees runs east towards the Teatro de España where a young African man is selling counterfeit CDs from a white sheet spread out on the pavement. In the distance I can see the edge of the Parque Retiro and the roofs of the taller buildings on Calle de Alcalá. It's a typical midwinter afternoon in Madrid: high blue skies, a brisk wind whipping across the square, sunlight on my face.

Turning back into the room I pick up one of the mobiles and dial her number from memory.

'Sofía?'

'*Hola,* Alec.'

'I'm in.'

'What is the number of the room?'

'*Cuatrocientos ocho.* Just walk straight through the lobby. There's nobody there and they won't stop you or ask any questions. Keep to the left. The elevators are at the back. Fourth floor.'

'Is everything OK?'

'Everything's OK.'

'*Vale,*' she says. Fine. 'I'll be there in an hour.'

TWO

Baggage

Sofía is the wife of another man. We have been seeing each other now for over a year. She is thirty years old, has no children and has been married, unhappily, since 1999. To meet in the Reina Victoria hotel is something that she has always wanted us to do, and with her husband due back in Madrid on an 8 a.m. flight tomorrow, we can stay here until the early hours of the morning.

Sofía knows nothing about Alec Milius, or at least nothing of any hard fact or consequence. She does not know that at the age of twenty-four I was talent-spotted by MI6 in London and placed inside a British oil company with the purpose of befriending two employees of a rival American firm and selling them doctored research data on an oilfield in the Caspian Sea. Katharine and Fortner Simms, both of whom worked for the CIA, became my close friends over a two-year period, a relationship which ended when they discovered that I was working for British intelligence. Sofía is not aware that in the aftermath of the operation my former girlfriend, Kate Allardyce, was murdered in a car accident engineered by the CIA, alongside another man, her new boyfriend, Will Griffin. Nor does she know that in the summer of 1997 I was

dismissed by MI5 and MI6 and threatened with prosecution if I revealed anything about my work for the government.

As far as Sofía is concerned, Alec Milius is a typical footloose Englishman who turned up in Madrid in the spring of 1998 after working as a financial correspondent for Reuters in London and, latterly, St Petersburg. He has lost touch with the friends he knew from school and university, and both his parents died when he was a teenager. The money they left him allows him to live in an expensive two-bedroom flat in downtown Madrid and drive an Audi A6 for work. The fact that my mother is still alive and that the last five years of my life have been largely funded by the proceeds of industrial espionage is not something that Sofía and I have ever discussed.

What is the truth? That I have blood on my hands? That I walk the streets with knowledge of a British plot against American business concerns that would blow George and Tony's special relationship out of the water? Sofía does not need to know about that. She has her own lies, her own secrets to conceal. What did Katharine say to me all those years ago? 'The first thing you should know about people is that you don't know the first thing about them.' So we leave it at that. That way we keep things simple.

And yet, and yet . . . five years of evasion and lies have taken their toll. At a time when my contemporaries are settling down, making their mark, breeding like locusts, I live alone in a foreign city, a man of thirty-three with no friends or roots, drifting, time-biding, waiting for something to happen. I came here exhausted by secrecy, desperate to wipe the slate clean, to be rid of all the half-truths and deceptions that had become the common currency of my life. And now what is left? An adultery. A part-time job working due diligence for a British private bank. A stained conscience. Even a young man lives with the mistakes of his past and regret clings to me like a sweat which I cannot shift.

Above all, there is paranoia: the threat of vengeance, of payback. To escape Katharine and the CIA I have no Spanish bank accounts, no landline phone number at the apartment, two PO boxes, a Frankfurt-registered car, five email addresses, timetables of every airline flying out of Madrid, the numbers of the four phone boxes thirty metres up my street, a rented bedsit in the village of Alcalá de los Gazules within a forty-minute drive of the boat to Tangier. I have moved apartment four times in five years. When I see a tourist's camera pointed at me outside the Palacio Real, I fear that I am being photographed by an agent of SIS. And when the genial Segovian comes to my flat every three months to read the water meter, I follow him at a distance of no less than two metres to ensure that he has no opportunity to plant a bug. This is a tiring existence. It consumes me.

So there is booze, and a lot of it. Booze to alleviate the guilt, booze to soften the suspicion. Madrid is built for late nights, for bar-crawling into the small hours, and four mornings out of five I wake with a hangover and then drink again to cure it. It was booze that brought Sofía and me together last year, a long evening of *caipirinhas* at a bar on Calle Moratín and then falling into bed together at 6 a.m. The sex we have is like the sex that everybody has, only heightened by the added frisson of adultery and ultimately rendered meaningless by an absence of love. Ours is not, in other words, a relationship to compare with the one that I had with Kate – and it is probably all the better for that. We know where we stand. We know that one of us is married, and that the other never confides. Try as she might, Sofía will never succeed in drawing me out of my shell. 'You are closed, Alec,' she says. '*Eres muy tuyo*.' An amateur Freudian would say that I have had no serious relationship in eight years as a consequence of my guilt over Kate's death. We are all amateur Freudians now. And there is perhaps some truth in that. The reality is

more mundane; it is simply that I have never met anyone to whom I have wanted to entrust my tawdry secrets, never met anyone whose life was worth destroying for the sake of my security and peace of mind.

Far below, in the square, a busker has started playing alto sax, a tone-deaf cover version of 'Roxanne', loud enough for me to have to close the doors of the balcony and switch on the hotel TV. Here's what's on: a dubbed Brazilian soap opera starring a middle-aged actress with a bad nose job; a press conference with the government's interior minister, Félix Maldonado; a Spanish version of the British show *Trisha,* in which an audience of Franco-era *madrileños* are staring open-mouthed at a quartet of transvestite strippers lined up on stools along a bright orange stage; a re-run on Eurosport of Germany winning the 1990 World Cup; Christina Aguilera saying that she 'really, *really'* respects one of her colleagues 'as an artist' and is 'just waiting for the right script to come along'; a CNN reporter standing on a balcony in Kuwait City being patronizing about 'ordinary Iraqis'; and BBC World, where the anchorman looks about twenty-five and never fluffs a line. I stick with that, if only for a glimpse of the old country, for low grey skies and the stiff upper lip. At the same time I boot up the laptop and download some emails. There are seventeen in all, spread over four accounts, but only two that are of interest.

From: julianchurch@bankendiom.es
To: alecm@bankendiom.es

Subject: Basque visit

Dear Alec

Re: our conversation the other day. If any situation encapsulates the petty small-mindedness of the Basque

problem, it's the controversy surrounding poor Ainhoa Cantalapiedra, the rather pretty pizza waitress who has won Operación Triunfo. Have you been watching it? Spain's answer to Fame Academy. The wife and I were addicted.

As you may or may not know, Miss Cantalapiedra is a Basque, which has led to accusations that the result was fixed. The (ex) leader of Batasuna has accused Aznar's lot of rigging the vote so that a Basque would represent Spain at the Eurovision Song Contest. Have you ever *heard* such nonsense? There's a rather good piece about it in today's El Mundo.

Speaking of the Basque country, would you be available to go to San Sebastián early next week to meet officials in various guises with a view to firming up the current state of affairs? Endiom have a new client, Spanish-based, looking into viability of a car operation, but rather cold feet politically.

Will explain more when I get back this w/e.

All the very best

Julian

I click 'Reply':

From: alecm@bankendiom.es
To: julianchurch@bankendiom.es

Subject: Re: Basque visit

Dear Julian

No problem. I'll give you a call about this at the weekend. I'm off to the cinema now and then to dinner with friends.

I didn't watch Operación Triunfo. Would rather cook a five-course dinner for Osama bin Laden – with wines. But your email reminded me of a similar story, equally ridiculous in terms of the stand-off between Madrid and the separatists. Apparently there's a former ETA commander languishing in prison taking a degree in psychology to help pass the time. His exam results – and those of several of his former comrades – have been off the charts, prompting Aznar to suggest that they've either been cheating or that the examiners are too scared to give them anything less than 90%.

All the best

Alec

The second email comes through on AOL.

From: sricken 1789@hotmail.com
To: almmlalam@aol.com

Subject: Coming to Madrid

Hi –

As expected, Heloise has now kicked me out of the house. The house that I paid for. Logic?

So I'm booked on the Friday easyjet. It lands at 5.15 in Madrid and I might have to stick around for a bit. Hope that's OK. I've taken three weeks off work to clear my head. Could go to Cadiz as well to stay with a mate down there.

Don't worry about picking me up, I'll get a cab. Just tell me your address. (And don't do the seven different email/dead

drop/is this line secure?/ smoke signal bullshit.) Just hit 'Reply' and tell me where you live. NOBODY'S WATCHING, ALEC.You're not Kim Philby.

Anyway, really looking forward to seeing you.

Saul

So he's finally coming. The keeper of the secrets. After six years, my oldest friend is on his way to Spain. Saul, who married a girl he barely knew just two summers ago and already lies on the brink of divorce. Saul, who holds a signed affidavit recounting in detail my relationship with MI5 and SIS, to be released to the press in the event of any 'accident'. Saul, who was so angry with me in the aftermath of what happened that we did not speak to each other for three and a half years.

There's a knock at the door, a soft, rapid tap. I switch off the TV, close the computer, quickly check my reflection in the mirror and cross the room.

Sofía is wearing her hair up and has a sly, knowing look on her face. Giving off an air of mischief as she glances over my shoulder.

'*Hola*,' she says, touching my cheek. The tips of her fingers are soft and cold. She must have returned home after work, taken a shower and then changed into a new set of clothes; the jeans she knows I like, a black roll-neck jumper, shoes with two-inch heels. She is holding a long winter coat in her left hand and the smell of her as she passes me is intoxicating. 'What a room,' she says, dropping the coat on the bed and crossing to the balcony. 'What a view.' She turns and heads to the bathroom, mapping out the territory, touching the bottles of shower gel and tiny parcels of soap lining the sink. I come in behind her and kiss her neck. Both of us can see our

reflections in the mirror, her eyes watching mine, my hand encircling her waist.

'You look beautiful,' I tell her.

'You also.'

I suppose these first heady moments are what it's all about: skin contact, reaction. She closes her eyes and turns her body into mine, kissing me, but just as soon she is breaking off. Moving back into the room she scans the bed, the armchairs, the fake Picasso prints on the wall, and seems to frown at something in the corner.

'Why have you brought a suitcase?'

The porter had put it near the window, half-hidden by curtains and leaning up against the wall.

'Oh, that. It's just full of old newspapers.'

'Newspapers?'

'I didn't want the receptionist to think that we were renting the room by the hour. So I brought some luggage. To make things look more normal.'

Sofía's face is a picture of consternation. She is married to an Englishman, yet our behaviour continues to baffle her.

'It's so sweet,' she says, shaking her head, 'so British and polite. You are always considerate, Alec. Always thinking of other people.'

'You didn't feel awkward yourself? You didn't feel strange when you were crossing the lobby?'

The question clearly strikes her as absurd.

'Of course not. I felt wonderful.'

'*Vale*.'

Outside, in the corridor, a man shouts, *'Alejandro! Ven!'* as Sofía begins to undress. Slipping out of her shoes and coming towards me on bare feet, letting the jumper fall to the floor and nothing beneath it but the cool dark paradise of her skin. She starts to unbutton my shirt.

‘So maybe you booked the room under a false name. And maybe my uncle is staying next door. And maybe somebody will see me when I go home across the lobby at 3 a.m. tonight. And maybe I don’t care.’ She unclips her hair, letting it fall free, whispering, ‘Relax, Alec. *Tranquilo.* Nobody in the whole world cares about us. Nobody cares about us at all.’