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Spanish Lessons

Derek Lambert

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*For Ray and Julie Livett
and their daughters, Zoe and Maria,
who came, saw, and conquered*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Spanish village in this book is based on La Jara (the J is pronounced *ha*) or, in Valenciano, the regional language, much more distinctive than a dialect, La Xara (the closest I can get to the X is *zh*). It lies about two miles inland from Denia, a vibrant town on the stretch of Mediterranean coastline known as the Costa Blanca. In the interests of personal privacy and the narrative flow, I have changed some locations and names of establishments and people.

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SPANISH LESSONS

BEGINNING A NEW LIFE IN SPAIN

Derek Lambert



ONE

A Taste of Oranges

The two civil guards wore black tricorne hats, capes, and olive-green uniforms. And although mounted on angular bicycles, they looked as sinister as their predecessors had in the civil war that tore Spain apart in the 1930s.

It was late December, and the citrus trees that covered most of the plain separating the Mediterranean from the mountains on the Costa Blanca of Spain were heavy with oranges, lemons, and grapefruit. The trees looked so beguiling that Diane and I stole a couple of oranges. We were eating them, juice trickling down our chins, in our venerable, chocolate-brown Jaguar, when the two *Guardia Civil* stopped beside us.

Maybe pinching oranges was a heinous crime in Spain. Tales were still rife after the death of the dictator General Francisco Franco of foreigners being imprisoned for years without trial for unspecified offenses. I imagined us lying on straw mattresses in fetid cells miles apart, while rats snatched food from our eating bowls.

Or perhaps we would be deported and declared *persona non grata*, a preferable scenario but nonetheless depressing, because it would mean that the vision we had shared when we first met in Africa would be aborted before it even got off the ground.

Diane, a Canadian airline stewardess with blond hair and eyes the color of the sea before a storm, had told me on our

first date in Nairobi that having experienced a couple of scary landings, she wanted to quit flying and start a new life. So did I. I was a journalist in my forties, a foreign correspondent, and I wanted to become a novelist: our meeting was convened by the gods.

But supposing the gods had now turned against us, snitched on us to the *Guardia* . . .

Diane offered the two of them a brilliant, please-fasten-your-seatbelt smile while I stuffed incriminating orange peel into a plastic bag. “What can we do for you?” she asked. She had been brought up in Paris and Rome, had studied Spanish, and in any case picked up languages as easily as children catch measles.

One of the *Guardia*, young with a downy mustache, dismounted. “Are you lost?” he asked in English, peering into the aristocratic but doddering old Jaguar as I tried to back-heel the plastic bag under the driver’s seat.

“No,” Diane said, “we’re just admiring the view.”

It was worth admiring. Lizard-gray mountains on one side of the citrus plantations, the sea beckoning in the cold sunlight on the other. Here and there a field of leafless grapevines; almond and olive trees and carobs with trunks like fairytale witches.

The *Guardia*, who seemed to have exhausted his English, produced a creased booklet from beneath his cape and read from it: “I am so pleased you are admiring our territory.”

Diane tried a few phrases in Valenciano, the regional language that confuses tourists who have studied orthodox Spanish, but he held up one hand and again consulted his phrase book. “Please, I do not understand, I am from the north.” His colleague, a sad-looking *cabo*, a corporal, who looked like a long-ago Hollywood actor, Adolph Menjou, joined him.

“Do you have any papers?” he asked—“papers,” a disturbingly general term that could embrace anything from a visa to a last will and testament.

Diane told him in English: "We might settle in the area."

True enough—we were looking for a village so ordinary that it would bring us into contact with people remote from the clichés of Spain—flamenco, sangria, and bullfights—and would define the changes that had taken place since Franco's death in 1975, so that I could write about them one day.

Her statement perturbed the *cabo*. He spoke with one hand, flapping and clenching it. Endless complications, his hand said. Bureaucracy, papers . . .

Diane searched for some sort of ID in the chaotic contents of her purse. Ballpoint pens, lipsticks, coins, a comb, a chocolate bar . . . The *cabo* suggested that we get out of the car. A preliminary to being frisked, handcuffed?

Diane found her passport and handed it to him. Fishing rights in international waters hadn't yet exacerbated relations between the two countries, and a Canadian passport still commanded respect. He flicked through it, handed it back, and saluted.

He stabbed a finger toward me. "Your husband does not speak too much."

Conceding that Diane was better at placating irate policemen, I had kept out of it. Not only that; she was much more fluent in Spanish than I was, and although I was studying manfully I preferred to converse in English even with any Spaniards who spoke only on the level of "Me Tarzan, you Jane."

"He's very shy," Diane said, and burst into helpless laughter. Reticence had never been my strong suit.

The younger officer, thinking perhaps that she was weeping, laid a hand on her shoulder. The *cabo*, suspecting that he was in the presence of an unstable neurotic woman and a deaf-mute, took a step back.

"In the orchards," he said in English, "one person one orange is allowed. More"—he cut across his throat with one finger. "If you want to eat a good meal this place is very

pleasing.” He handed Diane a grubby visiting card and both men pedaled away, capes flowing behind them.

We embraced, our visions of a home here still intact. We drove to a village perched in the hills and gazed beyond the citrus trees to the sea, fishing boats perched on its rim. The church clock tolled and the chimes rang through narrow streets that smelled of whitewash and grilling sardines. Hunger stirred. We each drank a glass of rough wine in a bar so dark that I couldn’t tell whether I was being served by a man or a woman—at five pesetas a glass, who cared?—and headed for the restaurant recommended by the *cabo*. In my experience, policemen anywhere in the world knew the best establishments in which to take on ballast.

When we reached the address on the card, a shack with a cane roof beside a sandy beach ankle deep in seaweed, it was shut. We decided to hang around. After a while a door opened, a bead curtain parted, and a woman in black, wearing slippers, bunched cheeks squeezing her eyes, confronted us.

What did we want? She had already paid her rent and she didn’t want to buy a carpet or an encyclopedia from traveling salesmen, her tone implied.

“We’re very hungry,” Diane said in English.

The woman’s face softened. The period after the Civil War and World War II, when Spain was ostracized by much of the world because it was ruled by Fascists, was known as the Years of Hunger.

“Are you American?” she asked Diane. So many families had fled to the United States and Britain after the Civil War ended in 1939 that, happily for me, a grasp of English was not uncommon.

“Canadian.”

The woman shrugged. What mattered was that we were foreigners and could not be turned away. “The restaurant is closed for the winter,” she said. “But I can give you lamb chops and rice.” My stomach whined.

After she had poured us a pitcher of beer at the bar, she rolled up the slatted blinds. Sunshine lit a faded photograph of a football team and a statue of a madonna with a chipped face. A skinny black cat wrapped itself around my legs. White plastic tables and chairs covered with a patina of dust stood where they had been abandoned at the end of summer.

As the smell of the chops grilling reached us, an orchestra played in my stomach and I drowned it with beer.

Watched through slitted yellow eyes by the cat, a canary sang in a cage.

The woman placed hunks of toasted bread on the table and we fell on them, spreading them with *alioli*, a thick sauce made from pounded garlic cloves, egg yolks, olive oil, and lemon juice.

Faintly we heard the swish of modest waves unfurling on the seaweed.

After we had wolfed the chops and saffron-yellow rice, she served coffee and walnut cake.

Then a middle-aged man appeared in the kitchen doorway behind the bar. He looked familiar. "It was good?" he asked.

His voice sounded familiar, too.

As we nodded vigorously, the woman said: "This is my husband, Pepe. He is a *cabo* in the *Guardia*."

And suddenly I realized that the corporal who had stopped us was a man of parts. Policeman, tout for his own restaurant, and chef.

I peered into the kitchen: the *Guardia* with the downy mustache was peeling potatoes, presumably for a private meal.

Pepe winked and began to clear our table. Diane and I exchanged glances. Such devious charm was difficult to resist.

We paid the bill, linked hands, and walked toward the Jaguar. An old man wearing a hat with spaniel ears was collecting firewood on the beach; gulls floated on the milky

sea; behind us the mountains were beginning to retreat into the winter night.

We found the rest of the walnut cake on a paper plate in the front of the car. I squeezed Diane's hand. She squeezed back. Without speaking, we knew we were in the area to stay.



We found the sort of unassuming village we were looking for inland from the apartment blocks, hotels, and beaches of the Costa Blanca, the White Coast. It didn't possess any historic landmarks, unless you counted the bubble-blowing public wash house; no castanets clicking, not a pitcher of sangria in sight.

Located at sea level deep inside the citrus groves halfway down the Mediterranean coast, La Jara was equidistant from the cities of Valencia to the north and Alicante to the south, sixty miles or so either way.

We came across it by chance when our decrepit car broke down with a sigh and a hiss on the road skirting its boundaries. It had transported us in its dotage across France from England and limped around Spain for five days while we inspected prospective homes.

While a mechanic in a small garage coated with black grease examined its engine, we wandered around streets lined with nondescript terraces of whitewashed cottages and hole-in-the-wall stores. The streets were flat and paved, and yet I imagined them in a turn-of-the-century painting, rutted with mud. Perhaps it was because the people seemed still to be lodged in that epoch, scowling women in darned black dresses, men wearing collarless shirts and tight jackets, faces engraved by sun and wind.

What we didn't yet know was that on the outside, Spanish villages smile only in the mornings and evenings and we

had arrived just before lunch. Inside, they laugh most of the time.

We found seven bars, a church with a spire like a space rocket, an open-air cinema, four groceries, a bank, three hairdressing salons, a school, and a combined newsstand and tobacco shop becalmed in eternal dusk. All this for a population of one thousand.

But the village possessed a few delicate attributes as well, brass door knockers polished wafer thin, courtyards where old ladies in the ubiquitous black weaved lampshades, roses painted on ceramic tiles outside doorways to keep summer a prisoner of winter.

Finally we adjourned to the Bar Paraiso into a wall of noise—the steamy roar of a coffee machine, the bark of impassioned debate over coffees and brandy, tobacco coughs, the smack of dominoes on plastic tabletops.

A dusting of last night's cigarette ash lay on the pool table, which bore a stain the shape of Australia. A diminutive barman was fanning a smoldering vine root in the grate. The hands of a wall clock that, we discovered later, occasionally went backward, stuttered erratically.

We ordered a couple of beers and sat at a table. We were joined by a balding priest, his soutane hemmed with dust, and a carpenter who said: "My name is Emilio."

Emilio had arms as thick as most people's thighs, curly hair threaded with silver, and a voice as rough as the rasp of a saw. Like many Spaniards whose families had fled to the United States in 1939—he had been born there and didn't need any prompting to volunteer his family history—he spoke English with an American accent.

His father had reopened the family's toy factory in the nearby town of Denia when he came back from New York, but the market for wooden toys had declined and he had retired. Emilio had been left to make doors, window frames, and coffins in an annex here in the village.

“Are you going to settle here?” he asked. When we said we might, he thumped the table with a mallet fist. “Let me be the first to congratulate you. I know just the place for you to buy.”

I assessed him cautiously: in my experience, back-slapping extroverts were often con men, and I’d learned to be wary of the twinkling gaze, the knuckle-crunching handshake. But Emilio’s hustling was so outrageously transparent that it was disarming.

“First,” I told him, “we’ll look around by ourselves.”

He nodded understandingly. “In your position I’d do the same. But it doesn’t matter, because nothing you’ll see will compare with the property I will show you. It only came on the market this morning, God must have guided you to me.”

We adjourned with Emilio to the garage to find out what was happening to the Jaguar. Its body was raised on a ramp; parts of its engine lay on the greasy floor like the components of a stripped gun.

A voice issued from the pit. We were lucky: the fault had been located. “When will it be ready?” I asked.

“*Mañana*”—tomorrow. A bowlegged mechanic, his cherubic face daubed with oil, climbed out of the pit. Meanwhile, he could lend us a Seat 600, Spain’s ubiquitous little workhorse in the 1970s.

We left Emilio behind and drove the car, little more than a battered toy, to the village bakery, where we bought four big crusty rolls for *bocadillos*, jaw-straining sandwiches stuffed with fillings such as tuna, cheese, *chorizo* (a relative of salami), or ham. In a grocery we bought Manchego cheese, strong as saddle soap, smoked ham, tomatoes and olive oil, plastic knives, forks, and cups, and a bottle of red wine from Navarra.

The purchase of these small items made us feel proprietorial toward the village, like pioneers in an undiscovered outpost.

We drove along a dirt road to a clearing in a citrus grove where orange pickers had left the remains of a fire, the hub of their *almuerzo*, their mid-morning snack. We stirred the still-hot ash and pale flames danced in the embers. Diane slit open the rolls, spread them with olive oil, and crammed them with cheese and sliced tomatoes.

On one side of us, grapefruit lay rotting on the red earth beneath the trees, no longer a fashionable fruit, we had been told.

A herd of munching goats passed by, accompanied by an ancient shepherd with a gooseberry chin and cloudy eyes. A burst of what sounded like machine-gun fire threw us into a panic while on our second cup of wine—merely fireworks marking a private fiesta.

When we got back to the garage to check out the car again, Emilio was waiting for us. The number of engine parts on the floor had multiplied, and the mechanic was standing in the pit staring gloomily at the chassis.

Emilio said he had taken the liberty of booking us into a hotel on the main Valencia-Alicante road, but now there was just time before it got dark to take a look at the property he had set aside for us. He would take us there in the Seat.

Why not? We were free spirits.

I thought I caught a flicker of clandestine understanding between the mechanic and Emilio. Were they in cahoots?

Emilio squeezed his bulk behind the wheel of the little car and we took off.

“Is the mechanic a friend of yours?” I asked.

“The house is just around the corner,” he said, overtaking a motorcyclist who wobbled to a stop and raised one finger at him.

“I asked you if you were friendly with the mechanic.”

“He is not just a friend.” The Seat skidded to a halt outside a pair of wrought-iron gates. “He is my sister’s husband.”

At the end of a short driveway stood a white *casita*, a small house, with barred windows, moldering roof tiles, and

an exterior circular staircase with a rope handrail leading up to a terrace. The garden was hedged by tall cypress; a dozen or so citrus trees grew on one side of the driveway which continued down the opposite flank of the building, presumably to land hidden from sight at the rear. A single chimney rose like an imperious finger from the roof—incongruous on such a self-effacing building—and creeper covered the wall facing us.

We waited for Emilio to unlock the gates.

"We will approach from the rear," he said.

"Why not the front?"

"I haven't got the keys—I left them in my house." He slapped the pockets of his blue dungarees.

"Well, let's go and get them."

"By the time we get back it will be too dark to see the place."

"So we'll come back in the morning," I said.

"By then it might be sold."

"Overnight? Don't push your luck, Emilio."

"This property is very special."

Special? In the fading light, the house looked more apologetic than prepossessing. And yet it beckoned as though it contained small mysteries that might one day become familiar to us.

I shook off such fancies. Why had Emilio chosen this predusk hour to show the place to us? Was he a charlatan preying on vulnerable foreigners, or was he motivated by genuine pride in his adopted village? After all, he was a relative newcomer too. Maybe he longed to share it with other dewy-eyed newcomers.

As the air turned colder and the outline of the house sharpened against the darkening sky, his voice grew conspiratorial, and an alarming possibility occurred to me: maybe he was crazy, armed with a hammer or a screwdriver sharpened to a point.

He shepherded us to the Seat, drove a few hundred yards and parked on the roadside. Then he led us through a grove of neglected lemon trees, creepers entwined in their ragged branches. A couple of stars sparkled frostily, bats flitted overhead.

He stopped at the foot of a drystone wall about eight feet high shoring up one of the former agricultural terraces built centuries ago by the Moors to retain the soil. He pointed at the top of it. "There is the end of your garden."

Diane said: "You mean we've got to climb the wall?"

"Paradise lies up there," Emilio told her.

"Paradise lost, if the *Guardia* see us," Diane murmured.

Some prescient instinct told me that this moment could decide our future lives. It might be no more than the ignominious ascent of a crumbling wall; but surely fate, a geriatric Jaguar, and a Falstaffian carpenter had combined to offer us something more grandiose than the humble edifice we had seen through the wrought-iron gates.

"Okay, let's go," I said to Diane.

"Are you sure?" she asked. A rat or lizard scuttled along the wall. "We don't want to make any decisions we'll regret—we've got all the time in the world."

But Emilio was already climbing. Stones tumbled around us. A car stopped nearby for a moment or two, its engine idling, but then it took off again.

Diane, who was wearing jeans, shrugged and found a foothold. I steadied her, she found a second ledge, and grasped Emilio's down-stretched hand.

I followed, and rolled onto the grass at their feet.

Ahead stood fifty or so citrus trees. Beyond them, water glinted in the first light of the rising moon.

We approached stealthily, snail shells crunching under our feet. The water turned out to be a swimming pool, a breeze shaving the moonlight on its surface into pieces of silver. Beyond that a lawn and a *naya*, an arched terrace. The

arches were framed with bougainvillea; a tiny extension with a sloping roof stood to one side of the main building.

Emilio flung wide one meaty arm. "Well?"

The house looked mysterious, enchanted, in the moonlight. But it was small and we had our son, Jonathan, and friends from long ago who would probably resurrect our friendship when they heard we had bought a place in the sun. I almost hoped that the interior would be dripping with beards of moss, because there is nothing like rampant damp rot to put paid to an infatuation with a house.

"It looks interesting," I told Emilio, "but we would like to see inside."

"Of course." He mounted the steps to the arched terrace and pointed through a barred window. "There!"

I pointed at a massive wooden door. "Haven't you got the key to that, either?"

"Keys, you are always talking about keys. What you need is heart."

"For God's sake, Emilio," I said. "We've got to have a look around. Maybe it's rotten inside. Maybe there are squatters in there. A body, a skeleton . . ."

And maybe you are a fraud.

Peering through the windows I could just make out an open grate beneath a copper hood and the charred remains of a fire. The floor was covered with ceramic tiles. No beards of moss.

I imagined cushions scattered in front of a blazing log fire, Diane and I lying on them gazing into its glowing caverns.

"The house is cozy," Diane said, "but far too small."

Emilio chuckled. "Small? What is size? We will build a dining hall, you and me." He gave me a rib-cracking hug. "Another fire-place, great beams, a gallery . . ."

I imagined myself smoking a churchwarden pipe in an inglenook, waited upon by a serving wench wearing a low-cut bodice, rosy nipples visible to the discerning eye.

"I'll think about it," I said.

“Think big, *hombre*,” Emilio said. “And think quickly, because tomorrow it may be gone.”

TWO

First Night, Second Thoughts

After Diane and I had decided to quit our jobs in Africa, my newspaper sent me to Moscow. And as the prospects for gathering material for thrillers were glittering, we stayed there a year. Initially, the Russian consulate in Canada had refused to grant Diane a visa, but when I announced in Moscow that her absence would blight my dispatches, a KGB contact made one midnight phone call to Ottawa and she got her papers the following day.

After a year in Russia I finally quit, and we lived in Israel, the United States, Canada, Ireland, and Gibraltar while I worked as a freelance journalist to muster funds to enable me to write THE NOVEL about the Soviet Union.

I did make one abortive start. Seduced by stereotyped visions of Ireland—soft rain, salad-green pastures, bottomless wells of Guinness, and the wayward charm of the Irish—we rented rooms over-looking the ocean in the village of Ballycotton near Cork. There Diane developed a talent for painting and her neat, resolute figure, fair hair bright in the occasional sunshine beside her easel, became a landmark on the cliffs above the pounding Atlantic surf.

We loved Ireland with unbridled passion and got married in Dublin—I had been married once before to an English girl but, like many others, the marriage had foundered on the treacherous rocks of journalism—but then our savings and

my creative inspiration ran dry and we moved to Gibraltar, the peninsula on the southern tip of Spain that was bristling with news stories waiting to be plundered.

One summer day, we crossed the border into Spain and knew that we had found our future homeland. We drove to the highlands of Galicia in the northwest and drank a firewater called *orujo*, and to the Pyrenean mountains spiking the border with France; we toured parade grounds of vines, plantations of silvery olive trees, and gasping ochre plains in the interior; swam off the shimmering beaches of the Mediterranean and skirted the wetlands of Doñana in the south-west. We stopped at cities as elegant as grandes and villages as threadbare as beggars.

But because we were still poor, we had to wait another couple of years, sojourning in Canada and the United States, before, with a publisher's advance for my still unwritten novel in my wallet, we finally drove to Spain in the 1970s in our chocolate-brown chariot, determined to put down roots. We also had a small son, Jonathan, whom we left temporarily in Montreal where he had been born, while we searched for the Elysian fields.



I was awakened at one A.M. by shouting in the hotel that Emilio had found us. I shook off dreams of the house in the moonlight and the ragged lemon trees, struggled into the molting bathrobe that had served me well in luxurious watering holes and bug-ridden flop-houses around the world, and strode out of the room. I held only a few commodities to be precious and sleep was one of them.

Down the corridor outside an open door, a naked man was slapping a fully clothed woman around the face. Remembering my headmaster's final injunction—"Always treat the fair sex chivalrously"—I grabbed him by his shoulders and shoved him through the doorway.

As he came back at me, bald and overweight but burly, I slammed the door in his face, grabbed the key from the woman, and locked it.

I handed the key back to the woman, a plump bleached blonde, one eye slitted in swelling flesh. She spat at me, stuffed a wallet down the front of her rhinestone blouse, and ran down the corridor.

Other men and women in various stages of undress appeared in doorways; a small man with strands of hair plastered from one ear to the other whom I took to be the night porter approached.

I asked if he had called the police.

"Why should I?" He looked perplexed.

"Because a woman just stole his wallet," I said, pointing toward the door the prisoner was battering from inside the room.

The porter shook his head patiently. "He *is* the police," he said.



The porter put our minds to rest marginally when we paid the bill at seven-thirty A.M. Yes, we had been staying in a brothel; no, we needn't worry about the policeman. When the hooker had realized the identity of her client from the contents of his wallet, she had returned it to the front desk.

But I had assaulted him, I pointed out. The porter shrugged. This was a macho country; no police officer would admit he had been ripped off by a prostitute and tossed, naked, into a bedroom by an *extranjero*, a foreigner. In any case, he came from far away.

The Seat was waiting for us under a stuttering neon sign CLUB. What we hadn't realized last night was that "club" was often a euphemism for brothel.

We stopped at a café for breakfast, ate toasted hunks of bread spread with olive oil, washed them down with *café*