

GAME

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*To those who play—even without knowing the rules.
To those who enter the room not knowing if they're being
filmed.
To those who say “I love you” afraid they're quoting a script.*

*To those who let themselves be crossed by cities
as if they were slow daggers.*

*To those who loved someone who turned out to be a character.
To those who heard a “be right back” and stayed living inside
a sentence.*

*To those who doubted memory, the tape, the body and
the tongue.*

To those who don't seek the truth—but what's left after it.

*This book is not a map, nor a compass, nor an explanation.
It's an open wound. It's a poorly disguised trick. It's an embrace after the escape.*

Stay.
Be disguise.
Be code.
Be the false name no one wants to change anymore.
Be the scar that laughs at the scalpel.

*Because those who truly love, deceive.
And those who deceive well, love better.*

*For you, who played without warning.
For you, who were pawns and kings on the same board.*

*I was.
I was me.
And I was someone else.
I PLAYED.*

Prologue

Cádiz, before the rest.
May 6, 2025.

I landed in Seville early, too early, with the bitter taste of short hours of sleep and the numbed flavor of badly drunk coffee at the airport. Picked up the rental car at the rent-a-car counter—I repeat this gesture so often, maybe I already deserve to buy a car of my own, even if it's old, like a comfortable shoe that's molded to crooked feet.

The road to Chiclana was a dry artery slashing into Andalusia, flanked by disheveled cork oaks and yellow fields, almost hostile under the white light that announced a timid summer. I felt worn out, exhausted like someone who's worn the same clothes too long, and realized I'd brought with me only a small suitcase, light, with underwear, almost devoid of any past I'd want to remember.

I arrived at the house—a frugal, silent refuge, at the end of a dirt road that chokes before the beach—already past Spanish lunchtime. An hour stolen from the Portuguese clock, a small betrayal I never get used to, as if time could have nationality or sorrow. I tossed the luggage into the corner of the room, without opening it and without undoing the sad order of clothes packed by habit. I didn't sit down. The space didn't ask me to stay.

I went back to the car. Drove off to Cádiz without hunger, feeling that, in that moment, I needed the city like an oxygen lung in the middle of asphyxiation. I stopped by La Caleta Beach, in some spot

without a sign or marked line, which could have been parking or abandonment. In the distance, Santa Catalina Castle looked ancient... it was ancient... and impassive. Around me, tourists spun in flocks, blurting out overlapping phrases, phones in hand and google maps as if the place could be understood by lines and symbols.

I walked to La Viña, to the café that's already mine by distant complicity, La Clandestina. The owner recognized me with that brief lift of the chin—a sober, dry greeting to the Portuguese, me, born of customer respect, not closeness.

Inside, mismatched furniture and aged books fought for space with slow bodies, speech dragging in Spanish or badly pronounced English. I sat, as almost always, on the terrace. There were crossed scents in the air: the sea soaked into clothes and skin, the sweet and vinegary fat of *cazónen adobo* and the salty crumbs of *tortillitas*. The neighborhood pulsed in a controlled noise—the pitch of bare-foot children running over hot stones, women laughing in windows open to the light breeze, and old people whispering words that no longer have translation.

I ordered scrambled eggs, with a cold *caña* in a bottle, though I hate beer. I always do it in Cádiz. I drink only the first sip, bitter and unpleasant, like penance or memory, and leave the rest to the heat and dead foam.

I opened the laptop. The hinge creaked, still new and barely used, as if it were protesting against yet another attempt to write what never gets reached. I wrote to you then, Cádiz, before the rest.

I write to you now like someone speaking to a clandestine love, impossible but inevitable. Ambiguous city, chosen among others by my whim of the moment or memory—Portugal when silence weighs on me, Italy when I need the cruel beauty that punishes, France when luxury and noise numb me. But I always come back here, to you, for new beginnings, because you have something that almost belongs to me, though I can never take it with me.

Tonight, I'll sleep alone. It doesn't bother me—I'm made of that comfortable emptiness, that silence that asks for no explanations. But tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow... Cádiz, maybe your sea will give me back the salt I'm missing, maybe a warm mouth against

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mine will warm me, maybe the hands of someone I wait for will draw a map of pleasure on my skin. That's when this book begins.

So, this will be a book about those journeys where I WAS (and stayed), where staying was a voluntary act and not a painful one, a gesture of courage and not surrender. Because traveling is letting yourself be robbed a little, it's consenting that something of what we are stays behind, stuck to the ground or to memory, even if later, inevitably, we have to leave.

1

She Arrived

Chiclana de la Frontera, May 7, 2025

I woke before the sun. Still dark. The air smelled of cold stone and damp sea spray. The sound of the sea, far off, lightly scraped at the silence.

I'd slept well. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept like that—whole, dreamless, uninterrupted, with my body sunk into the sheets as if they were warm sand.

I got up without hurry. Moved through the house in silence, my body still half-folded by sleep, letting the cold floor bite my feet before turning on any light. In the bathroom mirror, I saw myself with a rare lightness—eyes clean, alive, their brown no longer rusted, almost antique gold, almost glass. It was me. Or something close.

I showered slowly—hot water, really hot, steady hands, soap scraping against skin. I scrubbed the night's smell from my armpits, my balls, my ears, my nape. Dried off with the towel she always said smelled of mildew. Fuck it. Let it smell. Put on the beige linen trousers, the ones with the short hem, tight at the crotch, abandoned for months on a chair in the bedroom. The clay-colored shirt, buttoned wrong—her favorite, or at least the one she'd point to with her eyes when I wasn't making a fool of myself. I dressed like someone

getting ready to be seen. By her. Only by her. Didn't even comb my hair.

The house was still breathing slow, but I could already feel the morning pressing against my body. The sky was starting to lighten behind the orange trees, and a thin breeze slipped through the open windows, bringing the scent of lemon and dry salt.

I left. The road to the market was short, but enough to wake me up. The tires crackled on the gravel like old popcorn. Parked badly, as always. The fish arrived early and I wanted the best—not the most expensive, the most alive. Tense sea bream, gilt-heads with tough skin, bulging eyes still reflecting the light that was starting to take over. There was a skinny octopus, its suckers still damp. I bought what I needed without haggling. The fishmonger tossed me a “buenos días, guapo” without conviction. I nodded and moved on.

In the bakery, the smell of bread was almost pornographic. I picked a crusty roll, irregular crust, moist crumb, still warm. Bit off a corner in the car, no ceremony. Then the vegetables—onions, peppers, green beans still with dirt. Stuffed everything into a clean bag, sturdy cloth, with a pretty jazz festival logo: dark blue, elegant letters, a saxophone figure in negative. I kept it for the aesthetics, not the memory.

I was back before eight. The house waited for me like a loyal dog. The white façade, rough, touched by salt, still looked like a ruin—but it was my ruin, chosen. And the terrace... the terrace was the heart. Wide, shameless, with a view of the distant sea and a sky that wanted to be whole.

That morning there were three oranges on the ground. I only pick them up after they fall. Never pick them from the tree. I like to see them up there, in the branches—the bright orange against the wet green of the leaves. That's why I let them be. When the tree lets them go, then yes, they're mine. Until then, they don't belong to me.

The gas stove was in the corner, wide-mouthed and with a raw flame. The pailleira, black and broad, was already waiting in its place, old cooking marks etched into the metal. In that outdoor kitchen, where the air brought the sea spray of low tide and a trace of dried fish somewhere in the joints of the beach, I started to

prepare everything calmly. The white wine rested in the fridge, wrapped in a wet cloth.

She was arriving that day. I was going to pick her up in Seville. Still had time.

I went to get her without hurry. The morning hadn't fully broken when I set off toward Seville. The road, dry and straight, seemed stretched by force, no patience for curves. Put on music—something old, instrumental, just as background—and let the steering wheel guide me like leading a tamed animal.

The airport was almost empty. She appeared at the arrivals door with the same huge suitcase as always, as if she was moving inside me for a few days. Wore sunglasses, loose hair, a light dress brushing her legs like short waves. Didn't need to say anything. She smiled and that smile was everything, more than any word. I kissed her on the cheek. Then on the lips. Said something neutral, she replied in a slow, soft tone—both of us avoiding the weight of first sentences.

And then, without warning, without preamble, I kissed her again. Grabbed her face with both hands, no ceremony, and kissed her like I was giving her soul back through her mouth. A whole kiss, deep, shameless. No prior agreement. A kiss you just give, and that's it. She didn't pull away. Leaned in. The suitcase fell. A dry sound on the floor. Her hands climbed my back like someone pulling a sheet over their body. The kiss lasted too long. Went past the point. Someone coughed behind us. I didn't stop.

On the way back, she spoke little. Just rested her head against the window, like someone watching the world without wanting to enter it. I let her be. I like her silence when she doesn't use it to push me away.

When we got to the house, she entered as if she'd never left. Took off her shoes, left the suitcase by the wall, and went straight to the shower. Always did that: land, drop her things, undress, and disappear under hot water as if she needed to wash away the flight. I stayed on the terrace, stirring the rice, adjusting the flame, savoring the smell of the broth thickening. My way of praying.

When she came back, she was barefoot, still damp, in a light blue dress she hadn't worn in ages. Her skin was tanned, taut, and her

eyes rested. She smiled when she saw the table set. Said it looked nice. Then corrected herself: "It's perfect." Touched my shoulder as she passed. Her hand lingered a second longer, enough to say: I'm here.

I served her wine. White, dry, with an almost imperceptible acidity. She drank slowly. So did I. The sun was already beating down on the terrace, and the sound of seagulls was just background noise.

— "Smells like home," she said. And then fell silent.

After lunch, we left the dishes unwashed. The table stayed there, messy. The heat didn't press, it settled in. About 20 degrees—temperature of warm blood and unguarded skin. We stretched out on the canvas and dry acacia loungers, already cracked, under the shade of the raw cloth I'd stretched over the wooden frame myself, with boat ropes and two fisherman's hooks. The wind came in short, warm bursts, smelling of the distant sea.

She took off her dress in a single motion. Did it with the ease of someone who doesn't need to seduce—but always does, even just breathing. Lay on her side, in black panties, her bare back drinking in the filtered light. Looked at me over her shoulder, as if surrendering just to provoke.

— "Will you put sunscreen on me?"

She said it without a voice. Almost just with her lips.

I grabbed the half-crushed bottle and squeezed a thick line into my hands. Applied it slowly, starting with her shoulders, then the shoulder blades, then down the curve of her spine. Her skin reacted as if it were thirsty. She didn't speak. When I touched her hips, she arched slightly, just enough to make room.

I leaned in. Kissed the base of her back and then went lower. My mouth, wet and slow, traced paths between her muscles. Opened, took in salt, took in scent... took in everything. I felt her vibrate inside. A brief sound escaped her teeth. It wasn't a moan—it was something else. A request.

She turned over. The glass resting on the arm of the lounge fell and shattered on the tile floor, but neither of us reacted. The world could have burned and it wouldn't have pulled us from there. Her legs opened as if they'd been waiting forever. I brought my mouth to her center. Slowly. A slowness both provocative and almost

sacred. She grabbed my hair, then let go. She was panting. Said my name like it was almost a scream.

She rose in a rush, pushed plates and glasses to the floor in a single gesture, and lay down on the lunch table. The wood was still warm, with traces of rice and wine. I entered her hard. She dug her nails into the edge of the table, bit her forearm to keep from screaming—though she could have. The seagulls went silent. The sea stayed outside.

In the end, we stayed there. Naked, pressed together, the marks of cutlery on our thighs and the smell of our sweaty bodies still in the air. She turned on her side, eyes half-open.

— “It’s been a long time since it was like this,” she said.

But didn’t specify what. And I didn’t ask.

The afternoon passed over us like an old dog crossing the street: slow, resigned, and in no hurry to end—like all good afternoons. We dozed on the terrace, naked, covered only by shifting shadows and the sweet scent of oranges. The wine ran out slowly. The sun dropped behind the white wall of the house, where the swallows scratched tired spirals in the sky.

She went inside. I stayed. Only lifted myself when the phone vibrated in the corner of the table, between an empty bottle and the remains of a crumpled napkin. The screen lit up with a name I hadn’t seen in months. A name that still tasted of fake laughter and little scandals.

— “I miss you. Do you still think of me?” it said.

I read it twice. Deleted it. The gesture carried no weight. There was no guilt—just a kind of nausea. Closed my eyes. The sound of the shower echoed inside the house, then the noise of the wardrobe, a zipper running, the brief jingle of bracelets or belts. She didn’t know yet. Didn’t need to. She wasn’t that kind of woman. Nor was I that kind of man—not that day—that was perfect.

At the end of the afternoon, she pulled me to the outdoor kitchen. She had a scarf tied around her head, barely holding, blonde hair escaping her temples in loose curls. Bare feet, toenails perfectly painted bright red, and her skin still marked by the table. She was beautiful. Not in an obvious way, but with that invisible radiance certain women give off when they stop watching themselves.

She started slicing onions with a small knife, unhurried. The white apron, pristine, tied at her waist, a half-full glass of wine beside her, and some song coming from her phone—slow jazz, husky voice and discreet beat. The light was low. The smell of garlic was starting to rise.

I grabbed the laptop. The same as always. The hinge creaked.

— “You working?” she asked, without turning.

— “No,” I replied. “I’m immortalizing.”

She smiled. Kept slicing.

And I wrote. Wrote this chapter.

2

The Mission

Tangier, May 8, 2025

We arrived early. Narrow streets, crumbling walls, stones worn down by centuries of soles and wheels, slipping underfoot as if testing your resolve to stay. Parked badly, again. In a forbidden spot, at the elbow of a dead-end cobblestone, between two overflowing dumpsters. The air smelled of heat and shit. One wall was tagged with Arabic slogans and scratched-out dates. “حرية، عيش، كرامة إنسانية,” one of them read. Seemed fair enough. Bread, Freedom, Human Dignity—that’s what it meant, the motto of the Arab Spring.

A skinny cat peeked out from behind a crate of rotting fruit. Licked its paws like the world was none of its business. Looked at me. Then ignored me.

She was still half-drowned in sleep, head slumped against the window, eyes not yet open, mouth slightly parted like she was still savoring an unfinished dream. She’d fallen asleep as soon as the ferry left port, as if the sea itself rocked her exhaustion. Only woke when I rolled off the ramp, already on land, with a dry jolt, and looked around, not sure if we were in a new country or just some interval between origin and destination.

I told her:

— “We’re here.”

But she didn’t answer. Opened the door slowly. Then stepped out. Stood there, the wind tugging at her light dress, sniffing the air as if searching for something she couldn’t quite name. I didn’t say anything else either. Grabbed the backpacks from the trunk, mismatched bags with clothes, envelopes, and a small unopened box. The city ahead of us didn’t ask for words. It asked for courage. Or escape.

We entered an alley that wasn’t on the map. No map shows what’s hidden. Looked like just a shortcut between two hollow buildings, but it was already Tangier spreading its legs. A kid appeared out of nowhere, barefoot, wild-eyed, selling candy or begging for coins—impossible to tell. Said “*bonjour, monsieur*,” as if misery had manners. I ignored him. She reached into her pocket, pulled out a white coin, handed it to him. He smiled with half his teeth and vanished.

We climbed the street, laundry strung between windows trembling like flags of failed nations. A woman peeked from behind a yellowed lace curtain. Saw us. Pretended not to. We kept going. On the right, a butcher shop. Meat hanging from hooks, flies dancing in circles. Dried blood on the floor. A fat man chopping bones with a blade that looked like it had seen wars. He greeted me with a look—the kind that doesn’t ask for an answer, just sizes you up.

We reached the blue door. No. 17. There it was, as promised. No doorbell. I knocked with my knuckles. Once, twice, three times. Silence. Then a bolt snapping. The door cracked open. An eye. A second of hesitation. Then the whole face—dark, lined, ageless. The man nodded, curt. We went in.

The hallway smelled of mold, shadows pooling at the far end, the ceiling cracked like an old skull. We climbed slowly. Stone stairs, uneven steps, a door halfway up leaking Arabic music. Someone laughed. A woman’s laugh. We kept going. The room we entered had no windows. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling, trembling slightly. A grimy rug on the floor, two vinyl sofas peeling, a coffee table scarred with cup rings and cigarettes stubbed out in a hurry. The man pointed at the sofa. We sat. She crossed her legs. I leaned back. He left without a word.