

## **TERRORISTS TAKE MANY HOSTAGES RAISE FLAG OVER SPANISH TOWER**

**CORDOBA, SPAIN**—An armed group of terrorists today seized control of the ancient Calahorra tower on the South Bank of the Guadalquivir River, took an undisclosed number of hostages, and raised an Islamic flag over the Spanish city of Cordoba for the first time in over seven hundred years.

Police who were called to the scene backed off when they were met by men with automatic weapons. “We withdrew rather than start a fire fight,” said Captain Julio Montero. “This is a situation which clearly must be handled at the national level. We immediately contacted the office of the Guardia Civil and Prime Minister Jose Aznar.”

According to one officer, the men shouted the police away in two different languages. A policeman of Moroccan descent said that one of them was Arabic but he did not understand the other language.

News of the seizure brought crowds of locals and tourists out from the old center of the city. When some started to cross the Roman Bridge to reach the tower, they were turned back the Cordoba police and the Guardia Civil. Authorities set up a perimeter some 250 meters from the tower and evacuated hundreds of people from hotels and apartment buildings within that area.

The reasons for the seizure, the number of hostages, and the demands of the militants are not yet known. Captain Montero told the press that he understands that officials from the government are assembling a delegation to negotiate with those who are holding the tower. The office of the Prime Minister had no comment other than to say that the cabinet was in session to decide what to do about the situation.

Local residents at first did not pay much attention to the crescent moon flag on top of the tower. Juan Gomez, an insurance salesman, says that when he first saw it he thought it was “part of some public performance like a play or a pageant.” Maria Theresa Hernandez, a maid in one of the nearby hotels, was happy to see the flag for she believed it signaled the beginning of a holiday.

Built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to protect the Roman bridge which then led to the main entrance to Cordoba, the tower has in recent years housed a museum devoted to the three religions that flourished in Spain from the eighth to the twelfth century, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. It seems likely that the hostages include a number of tourists who were in the tower when it was seized. Three empty tour buses are parked in the lot close to its entrance.

In the tenth century, Al Andalus, as the peninsula was called in Arabic, was declared a Caliphate of Cordoba. The ruler of the time claimed to be the true successor to the prophet Mohammed. The great Muslim thinker Averroes and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, both from Cordoba, are depicted in exhibits in the tower, along with 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish King Pedro the Wise.

# *Benjamin*



Were I making a film and not writing a memoir, you would see a black Mercedes pull up in front of the stone bulk of a medieval tower as words on the lower right hand of the screen read: Cordoba, Spain. Five men wearing ski masks and carrying assault weapons burst out of the vehicle and race up its front steps two at a time, guns at the ready. Roughly they disarm the two uniformed guards at the entrance, then push them inside the building while their colleagues round up a bunch of cowering tourists, men with gray hair sticking out beneath baseball caps, bellies hanging over their belts, women in shorts, sandals, and straw hats, and herd them all into a cement basement room crammed with cardboard cartons, wooden crates, empty glass fronted display cases, stacks of posters advertising art works, ethnographic shows, tourist sites in Andalucia. Two of the masked men hurry up the winding staircase to the roof, haul down the red and gold Spanish flag, and run up a white banner with a green crescent moon in the upper left hand corner. As it flaps above them in the breeze, they pull off the masks, give each other high fives, and turn to gaze across the Guadalquivir River towards the bulk of the Grand Mosque and its soaring bell tower that once upon a time was a minaret

In this ancient medium of words, we have to make do with a headline, a newspaper story, and your imagination. On screen a director might fade to a slow panning shot across the expanse of a large European square surrounded by elegant, historic buildings. Again words tell us where we are: Plaza Mayor, Madrid. A late afternoon sun slips behind the rooftops in a blaze of digitally enhanced color, providing more than enough light to show it's the end of a warm day, the men in short sleeve shirts, jackets over their arms, the women who aren't wearing jeans clad in light skirts and blouses. The camera comes to rest on your narrator, wearing a wrinkled, khaki summer suit, leaning back against one of the plaza's four circular stone benches. Don't expect me to describe myself. I'll leave that daunting task to others. What I do know is that a camera eye view doesn't provide full disclosure. My face may be slack and my eyes glazed but that wouldn't let you see how full of thanks is my heart to all the gods in whom I don't believe. Sixteen hours from LAX to Heathrow to Barajas, and the stuffed head and slight

cough which follow any long flight do nothing to lower my spirits during these first hours back in my favorite country, where the Megastar known as TJ—"The Most Beautiful Man in Hollywood!"— is directing his first film, the script based upon my book, written two decades earlier in another life. I had a hand in the screenplay and have been officially hired to serve as historical consultant on the shoot.

Shadows ease across cobblestones. A hush falls over the great square. Or is that only a trick of memory, the product of an imagination attempting to make the entrance of our heroine seem more dramatic? I can say the following without fear of contradiction. The day tourists are drifting away, the night trippers have yet to come, and the indigenous hustlers who swarm the southeast corner day and night, peddling flags, maps, postcards, key chains; the bongo players who keep getting into arguments with the guitarists of long sideburns who fake flamenco riffs; the artists who draw charcoal portraits that make everyone look vaguely like a descendant of the Hapsburgs, with large and prominent jaws; the drug dealers who lurk in the surrounding arcades, wearing jeans with American advertising slogans stenciled on them, ready to sell you buds from the finest hemp plantations of the Rif Mountains – all those who normally make the plaza bustle are taking a break. Groups of them cluster in the far corners, passing around bottles of wine to prepare for the evening onslaught of tourists, teenagers, drunks, and druggies.

Like a character in a science fiction film, she materializes as if out of nowhere, beamed down from some sleek space craft hovering far above the planet. Or perhaps she slips through one of those worm holes in space, enters our world as the representative of a civilization centered in some far off galaxy in another dimension which we humans are incapable of perceiving. I don't see her approach the bench, do not become aware of her until she eases onto it a few feet to my left, just beyond two young mothers who hold squirming babies in their arms. Next to her an elderly man, black beret on his head and blacker cigarette in his right hand, sits erect in a military posture. The left sleeve of his jacket is neatly pinned to his shoulder.

Her face doesn't belong here.

That's my first thought.

It belongs in a tale told by Scheherazade.

That's my second.

I know what you're thinking. These sound like lines written later, agonized over for months or perhaps jotted down just now. But they're not. I can show them to you in a file created that very evening, May 15, 1996, composed on my Toshiba laptop in room 736 of the Palace Hotel.

Putting his cigarette on the edge of the bench, the smoker touches his beret with his one hand in a gesture left over from an age more gallant than ours.

Sorry, I don't speak Spanish.

I think that's what I hear. Her voice is so soft I can barely make out the words but the intonations are those of English.

The two mothers wrestle their kids into strollers and push off while I feverishly search my jet lagged brain for an opener less worn than Haven't we? What's a? Can you? Nothing occurs before a young man arrives to help me out. Even in the fading light you can see the signs of addiction—the bad skin, shifty eyes, erratic stride, shirt sleeves buttoned to the wrist when other youngsters stroll about in tee shirts and tank tops. He stops in front of her and begins a story that, as my father would have said, is as old as the hills. Maybe older. She has such a kind face. Someone has stolen the backpack with his wallet. He's from Holland. A college graduate. Trying to get in touch with his parents to bail him out, but they're on vacation in Italy and he hasn't yet been able to reach them. If she could lend him some pesetas he'll pay them back as soon as the money arrives. Tomorrow. The next day at the latest. He takes an oath. He puts his hand on his heart.

Excuse me, I find myself saying. That's the oldest con in the world.

She glances my way. Dark eyes make me aware of the movement of my heart. She opens her purse.

If his story is true I'm the king of Spain.

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*Aisha*

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You can't imagine what a pleasure it was to be in Spain, a country where I didn't have to worry about my name, where I didn't have to pretend and hide or get annoyed or angry at all the stupid questions Americans are always asking. Where are you from, with a big smile, as if it's their business. People you meet on the street or in a supermarket or the new teller in the bank or hiking on a trail in the hills or even in an editing room or on

location and even if you're the one in charge, everyone has the right to ask just because they are a blonde: where are you from? And if you answer Los Angeles they laugh or look at you funny and shake their heads and say No where are you really from, where are you originally from, where were you born, where did you grow up, where did your grandparents live, and their grandparents, and all I am hearing is What are you a brown person doing here when you should be somewhere else maybe in a jungle or a desert or on a bare mountain top because this is a country where only blondes belong, even if they aren't blonde, even if they are Chinese or Jewish and darker than me. It's no better with Latinos. They come up thinking I am one of them and speaking to me as if I am a sister, asking questions or saying something habla this and habla that, and I answer in perfect English, well, almost perfect, I'm sorry I don't speak Spanish, and they look at me as if I am betraying our mutual heritage, pretending to be Anglo when I am really one of them, and it doesn't help one bit if I answer in Dari or Arabic or Urdu, they just turn away babbling in Spanish. I am studying the language now and it's a nice language that I like very much, it's sweet and musical. But not in Madrid. Here the hotel clerks spit words at you as if they are firing machine guns. It makes you wonder about the reputation of Spanish lovers, Don Juans, but that's probably another cliché in a world full of clichés. You certainly wouldn't want someone to sound that way in bed, but that's something I will never get to find out.

The afternoon I meet Benjamin in the Plaza Mayor is my first time alone since arriving in Madrid the day before and being given a kind of royal treatment that one does not expect as the director of a documentary, but I was far too jagged and lagged and sleepy from the flight to appreciate it. A middle-aged woman named Immaculada who speaks English and seems to be a sort of a hostess and chaperone combined meets me at the airport by holding up a sign, Aisha Sultani, and after a warm greeting and kisses on both cheeks she takes me in her car to the Hotel Reina Victoria where I go directly to bed and sleep sixteen straight hours. Early the next day Immaculada woke me early and took me off to the screening of a film, something about lesbians and bisexuals with psychological issues, and my reaction is something like God you sometimes wonder what these Westerners these Europeans these American women are thinking with all their closeups of piercing and cutting and vomit. Don't they have anything else to make films about? I'll never understand. They're too rich and spoiled and what do they know about life? They haven't been invaded, they haven't been bombed, they haven't had their uncles pulled out of a car and shot at a roadblock, they haven't had mullahs telling them they had to hide their faces, they haven't had brothers disappear one night, never to return, they haven't seen the flares go up over the city or

the terrifying but beautiful tracer bullets fired from rooftop to rooftop or huddled in a basement waiting for the artillery explosions to stop. And they haven't had lovers either, not real lovers, haven't had sweet words whispered over a phone line in the middle of the night when everyone else is asleep, haven't strolled with girlfriends across the schoolyard and seen Him sitting in his father's car across the street, looking so proud and handsome waiting there just to see you and that feeling flies back and forth in the air, that love in his eyes meeting the love in your eyes, even though you have never been alone together, only have seen each other up close at huge holiday gatherings with all the cousins, and yet you know, both of you know that this is True Love.

Sometimes I have to wonder why we always so much admired the West. Europe. England. America. Where everything was modern and clean and up to date, like the Siemens fixtures in our bathroom and appliances in our kitchen in Kabul. In the West things worked and everyone was rich. No goats herded through the streets, no heaps of animal or human dung, no ragged peasants, no blind men with their hands out for *baksheesh*, no two wheeled carts pulled by boys, no carcasses of sheep and cows hanging in front of butcher shops, covered with flies and dripping blood into the dust, no run down stores with shop keepers sitting over tiny coal heaters, cooking soup, looking up and calling Come into my store and you'll get the best deal. Sometimes Kabul seemed horrible. I always wondered when we came back from a period abroad why my country was so poor, so dirty, so primitive. Why couldn't we be like the rest of the world, if not Europe than at least Turkey or Egypt.

Twenty years in America and I have begun to learn, begun to see the two worlds, Sharq and Gharb, East and West, as centuries apart. Yet the violence these young filmmakers show is fake because they don't know the real thing, don't have a clue. Violence is what they give you instead of love and they don't have a clue about that either. Women who don't accept the fact that men are different from us. Women who complain about men as if men were supposed to feel and act as we do. Women who have not for the life of me ever felt a tenth of what we feel with that single wave across the schoolyard or a few words whispered in a hallway during a feast like *Eid el fitr* which marks the end of Ramadan.

One of the wonderful things in Madrid is that so far nobody has asked me where I am from. They think I am an American, that's it, even if a lot of them have to know because my background has been mentioned in all the publicity — our first Afghan American director!! and almost always with the exclamation points. I am here because I have put my community on the screen and so I represent multi cultural America, where everyone always asks you where you are from. But here nobody asks not even those

who don't know. Maybe they simply aren't curious or maybe they look at my face and think the Moors are back, better not mess with her or they'll be another invasion. That much Spanish I could understand: No *que es su pais natal, senorita*. It's an easy language, a lot easier to learn than Arabic and a lot easier than English, which I learned so long ago. My father was smart. He knew even back then that English was the language of the future and so while he and mother stayed in New Delhi, they bundled us off to school in Missoura, an old British hill station, where the Nuns made us say Hail Marys before I cried myself to sleep. It was so cold, the Nuns didn't believe in heating, it made you soft they said, and that's why we had all those cold baths in the morning which were supposed to be good for you. The best part was on Saturdays when all of us in the school, marched two by two, holding hands, sandwiches and fruit in our brown bags, down the hill to the movie house to see cowboys and Indians or the real Indians from India, some jumped up version of the ones around us in the streets, only on screen they were dancing and singing, the women rolling their eyes like huge billiard balls and skipping across fields, almost but never quite kissing their handsome boy friends for just as their lips draw near and they look deep into each other's eyes another song begins and away they whirl in yet another dance, dozens of women in bright saris in vivid green fields or boulder strewn mountains or in the courtyards of marble palaces.