

Got lucky on the sixth of July and I boarded the last seat on a Pamplona-bound bus. As we entered Navarra a police roadblock halted us. A cop with a black M16 hanging from his neck boarded the bus. Everybody had been singing before and now they fell silent. The cop walked slowly down the aisle in his blue uniform, eyeballing everybody behind his dark glasses. All the passengers looked down and away. He had the face of a sadist. I decided to stare him down. He walked right up to me and asked for my passport. I felt around for it and realized it was in my bag stored underneath the bus. Somebody asked him something and he turned. I went to tell him about my passport and a Spanish guy hushed me urgently. The officer walked off the bus. The ETA, an acronym roughly translated to Basque Homeland and Freedom, is still very active in Navarra. This Basque separatist militant movement believes Navarra is a sovereign nation. The ETA has a long history of terrorist activity and are firmly aligned with other separatist militants like the Irish Republican Army and the Zapatistas. The ETA historically uses the fiesta de San Fermin as a staging ground for small revolts, none more infamous than the riots in 1979 that put an end to fiesta that year. The singing kicked back up as the bus eased out of the roadblock. Everybody cheered as we rolled into the old Pamplona bus station.

The entire city was electric. It was a few hours after the Chupinazo, the fiesta's raucous opening ceremony. I wandered the narrow cobblestone streets. Balconies rose up five and six stories on either side. I'd been to Mardi Gras in New Orleans a few times. Pamplona during fiesta is ten times wilder than Mardi Gras and the old section is five times bigger, older, and more beautiful than the French

Quarter. There's much less of the stale "been there done that" spring break vibe. There's also a tenth of the violence. Fiesta is a peaceful insanity. There's a sense that the culture of this ancient city is alive and intact. Impromptu Pena marching bands parade down busy streets. They don't expect you to step aside and observe; they want to encompass you and swallow you into them. They will feast on you and you become one with them, marching and dancing through the garbage-strewn streets.

Searched the town for a place to stay, which is hopeless. Every room in the city is booked six months in advance, unless you know people. I didn't know a soul in the entire country.

I found out about a college that would lock and store your bag for five euros. I chose to keep all my cash on me, figuring that the guys checking the bags might rob me. I took to the street and immersed. Bought a plastic jug of sangria and I wandered the avenues. The epically beautiful northern Spanish women dumbfounded me—their porcelain skin and dark eyes floated through the madness like crystalline ghosts. Pushed and squeezed my way through a tight-packed street that opened onto the immense courtyard called Plaza de Castillo. It was filled with thousands of revelers clad in sharp-red scarves and waist sashes. Hazy sangria-red clouds soaked into their bright white shirts and pants from the raucous Chupinazo.

I got lost—like you should in fiesta that first time. Sink into that dark circular maze of streets. Let the music carry you. Follow it and bright eyes and laughter. Enjoy the splash of sangria on your drunken head. Take drinks from anyone who's giving. Kiss and dance with any girl who's willing. Don't fear loud booms and glass bursts; they

are not sounds of violence. Here they are background noise pollution, punctuations on joyful sentences. The only foul you can commit at fiesta is to get angry for any reason, and the only repercussion is shameful *ohhhhs* and being ignored and left behind. But it's only momentary 'cause when you smile you are welcomed back into fiesta without hesitation. Over the years I'd learn that you must give and give and give to fiesta and that it will never take from you. But that would be later. Then, I drank for ten hours straight. I realized I should sleep for a while so I could run, but I was afraid of pickpockets so I tried to sleep up in a tree and was woken by a scuffle. I met an American who was going to school in Pamplona. He told me he'd help me get to the run. We walked across the city to the *ayuntamiento* (town hall). They were just setting up the barricades. I tried to help them. Hoisted up a plank but a cop ran me off. Then I waited on the street, wobbly and dreary. Someone said it was two hours until the run. I took a nap.

Fell asleep on the side of the building and I didn't wake up for a very long time. I arose to an enormous cheer and three guys pissing on the wall way too close to me. It was morning and I ran toward the packed barricades, knifed through the people, and climbed them in time to see four sweeper steers thrust past. I remember saying "those are just cows" disgustedly as I tried to climb over the top plank. A female police officer reeled back and rapped her nightstick with all her might an inch from my where my hand gripped the plank.

I froze. The animals vanished and the run was over.

I'd failed to run and that misery is something I hope to never feel again.

Fell asleep in a doorway and I woke without a single penny in my pocket. I stumbled to the Plaza de Castillo and lay down in the bright afternoon light. The sound of two Spanish guys goofily heckling passersby kept waking me up. I could barely understand their commentary but something in their fluctuation reminded me of the Mexican construction workers I'd spent years with on work sites in Chicago. I was penniless in a foreign land and I had the worst hangover of my life. Still, I found myself laughing. Fiesta has a way of doing that to people, making a joke of their absolute despair. I started talking with two guys and a girl from Madrid. We fumbled our way through introductions and I told them what'd happened. They took me in and soon I was drunk again and stumbling around the city with them. They took me all over to big fields with stages set up among trees and grass in the shadow of these tall white stone fortress walls.

The next morning I woke in a strange car knifing through these epic green rounded mountain peaks. The sunlight cascaded through boulderlike clouds. The small car soared through the Pyrenees. I slowly worked out that my new friends had devised a plan that I accompany them to San Sebastian, then they would take me to their home in Madrid where I would stay until my flight left. I was overwhelmed with gratitude at this instant solution to my plight. The Spanish are a generous people. As I sobered up on the shore of the Atlantic I realized I couldn't go to Madrid. I bit the bullet and called home. My father said he'd send me money. Picked the money order up in town and I bid farewell to my dear new friends and boarded a Pamplona-bound bus.

It was my first attempt at staying sober in fiesta. It was motherfuckin' difficult. I wandered the area looking

for a quiet place to sleep. I slept in doorways, on curbs and benches. It gets chilly in Pamplona at night, even in July. I got really cold. Cops would wake me and move me along. Other times partiers would offer me a drink and try to pull me to my feet. In my tired wanderings I stumbled across the Hemingway statue outside the arena. He looked stoic, full-bearded and happy. There's a curved brick slope at the foot of the statue. It made for a comfortable bed. Surprisingly no one bothered me and I slept well there at the foot of Papa Hemingway as fiesta rambled on a half block away.

Hemingway's work, more than any other writer's, inspired me to write. There was something familiar in the characters in his stories. Literature to me was about fancy people in England in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. I never imagined that street fighters, fishermen, and common soldiers could be fodder for great Nobel Prize-winning literature. There was a sense of adventure in his work. I'd boxed and won a Chicago Golden Gloves title. They'd shipped me all over the world to fight. My father instilled a love for hunting and fishing in me as a young man. When I first read Hemingway I felt he was telling my story and the story of my family and friends. After a junior college professor inspired me to read some of Hemingway's short works, I decided to read *The Sun Also Rises*. I read it in one sitting, five or six hours in the library at Elmhurst College. Afterward I told myself I'd go to fiesta one day and live some of the things I'd read in those pages.

I woke at dawn. An officer kicked my foot and walked away laughing. Laborers finished standing and securing the barricades 50 yards away. I wandered to Telefonica. Beautiful young Spanish women swept past by the hundreds. I

stood in the center of the street as they passed. I met eyes with them, told them *bonita*. Some stopped and smiled. Others giggled. One took me by the hand and tried to lead me away, but I stayed. I waited and readied for the run. I had no idea I was standing in the wrong place. As 6 AM approached the crowds along the barricades thickened and photographers took their posts in peek holes in the boarded-up shops. I moved up Estafeta. There were hundreds of hopeful runners scattered all over the narrow passageway.

Suddenly a police line the width of the street formed. It moved toward me. They herded everyone up the street. At the first intersection on Estafeta the barricade swung open. I couldn't believe it. *Why were they pushing us off the course? I'd done everything right! I was here an hour early, sober!* Some of the would-be runners up front resisted. A tall officer with gray stubble on his cheeks cracked a runner over the head with his nightstick. The police line heaved and shoved every single one of us out onto the side street.

We all panicked. I ran down side streets asking urgently, "Where do we have to go to run?!" People pointed different directions. I ran all the way down one long street, found no entry at the barricades, and ran back. I cut down an alley praying that I would find a way in. I cut down another alley that wrapped around a tall building. Exhausted, I sat down and quit. *Maybe running with the bulls just isn't in my destiny.* My heart ached heavily and I wanted to go home. As my breathing slowed I heard a tremendous tense chatter and a voice on a loudspeaker that switched languages every few seconds.

Curious, I followed the noise and found a long barricade with many people all perched on the top row with others strung along it straining to see over. I pushed forward. A few people ducked under and onto the course—police stopped another and pushed him out. The nearest officer turned his back and I slipped through the barricades deftly, like stepping through the ropes into a boxing ring. As I passed through the second barricade I smashed into a dense mob of bodies. There was a ton of body-to-body pressure. It ebbed and swayed—at its worst I struggled to breath. Everyone was scared. The only direction you could see was up. There was the ornamental façade of an ancient building with a large clock on it. I realized it was the town hall.

The clock read 20 minutes till 8. The recorded PA voice switched to English. It warned of great bodily harm; if you fall down, stay down. The crowd murmured. The murmurs twisted and lifted into a cheering roar that bellowed up then fell into laughter. Some people were drunk; others were giving obnoxious advice to an American married couple near me. I told them they were wrong but what the hell did I know? It was the blind leading the blind. At ten minutes to 8 the police line holding us back broke and the thick mob unraveled and sifted up the street.

I walked a half block and came to a sharp banking turn. A five-tiered wall of cameramen loomed behind the barricades. Photographers working for publications all over the world vie for position here, from as early as 5 AM. This was La Curva, the curve, Dead Man's Corner. I remembered seeing the ESPN series on the run in the early 2000s. They'd called it Hamburger Wall and described it as the place where the herd crashes every morning. The series

described it one of the most dangerous places to run. I figured I'd start right there.

Bravely, I held my ground at the curve—right in front of the barricades the photographers jockeyed behind. Suddenly a stick rocket screamed into the sky and burst high above the red-tiled roofs of the city. Wild panic surged up the street. Suddenly I wasn't so brave anymore. I crossed onto the inside of the curve where a bunch of runners stood (a stupid mistake—I'd soon learn why). The American couple appeared and asked me if this was a good place to run. I shrugged.

A second boom rumbled in the sky. Then a wild cheer from the balconies and barricades swung up behind it. A steady stream of runners rounded the curve and flowed past me. Some laughed; others were mortified. A low, deep rumble grew in the distance. The speed and density of runners pouring around the bend grew. There were only terror-struck faces now accompanied by a high-pitched scream. The leaden rumble twisted into a sharp crackle. The cobblestones and buildings resonated. A large black streak surged through the curve. The crackle exploded. Time froze. The lead bull bucked a runner with its forehead. The man floated on a cushion of air above the bull's snout with his arms flung out. His lips stretched in a wide-mouthed terror-grin. Bulls, steers, and man crashed into the mural of San Fermin next to the photographers' barricade with a thunderous, wooden boom. I froze and gawked. Most of the herd rose and rumbled past. One bull stayed and dug his horns into the fallen people. There was a white swirl in the corner of my periphery. A hard-panging bell flooded my eardrums. I turned. A giant steer barreled directly at me an arm's length away. I dove backward and pressed my hands into its



shoulder. The fur was taut as a drum. Somehow my legs missed its hooves. The young American couple was running ahead of me hand in hand. The steer plowed through them. Its hooves gobbled them up. Their arms and legs splayed wildly under the hooves. They screamed.

My forward momentum carried me over them. At the last second I leaped and pulled my knees way up to my chest. My feet barely cleared them. I stopped and looked down. "You OK?" They both writhed on the ground. I was going try to help them when the last bull at the curve bellowed wrathfully and raised his head. I remembered hearing that a separated bull is deadly dangerous. He broke into a gallop and I turned and ran as fast as I fucking possibly could. Luckily the final bull rocketed past me on the other side of the street. The thick stampede of people spread to allow him through. Other individuals seemed to force their way in front of him and sprint ahead for several strides before peeling to the side. I kept sprinting forward, at first in terror. As the crowd slackened I remembered that they released vaca (wild cows) into the ring after the run. I sprinted for the arena at the end of the course. As I got to the tunnel into the arena several police officers pushed the immense double doors closed. A crowd fought to get through the narrowing opening. I pressed into it as well. Then the police pulled out their batons and cracked a few of the revelers in front. I gave up. Another stick rocket burst above the arena and a joyous cheer washed over the entire city. I cheered and grasped at others nearby. "Did you see that? Did you see that?" They shrugged me off, laughing. It struck me that this was bigger than any individual experience, that all of us had shared it together. Then the joy twisted to shrieks again. A wild

ramble approached with shouts and panging bells. I had nowhere to go so climbed up on the barricades just in time. Four steers swept just under my feet. I realized they'd opened the arena doors to let the steers in and jumped down. The police struggled to shut the heavy doors. Two other runners pushed at the opening. I sprinted and drove my shoulder into the others' backs and we avalanched into the dark tunnel. The police shut the doors and we ran down the dim tunnel giggling. I stepped onto the white sand of the arena for the first time. The brilliant morning light struck me like a warm wave. The entire arena, full to the rafters, gave the hundreds of runners a standing ovation. Then the cheers fell into Spanish songs. Complete strangers embraced on the sand. Others raised their arms like victorious gladiators. I walked around dumbfounded with euphoria among the wild pandemonium.