

Torero

My roommate told me that every hangover day is the perfect day to do nothing, but we drank every night. Sometimes she would come with us. Most of the time, though, she moped about in her room complaining that she didn't have time to paint although she always had enough time to drink. I didn't like when she came out of her room so it was for the best she stayed put. I tried to leave her at home as much as I could. Her beautiful green eyes were set deep and sunk into her face, surrounded by black bags that made her look mad. All she would do when we went out is stare wildly at people and chain-smoke cigarettes and she never had anything good to say. I missed Jose. My old roommate moved to Madrid for work and left me struggling to make up the rent. Along comes Raquel. She told me she tried to kill her last boyfriend when she found out how many times he cheated on her with different women. They lived two floors above me, two years before I came to Spain. She moved back home to Cordoba, had a mental breakdown, and then moved back to Sevilla. That's why she still didn't seem all together, but neither did those prim, shiny turds who want you to think their new haircuts and handbags made them better than you. No one is better than the way they treated the last person.

I caught Raquel speaking to herself, working out some problems aloud. Most times she would throw herself on her bed with her arm covering her eyes in complaint. I leaned in the doorway, never wanting to go into her room. The windows were covered in a weird translucent red paper. All of her books and things were covered in an elastic mache that she had molded using her skin. It all was covered in her skin, essentially. I was glad I was out the door to work before she woke up every morning. I started leaving the nightstand drawer open with a knife sitting on top when I went to sleep at night because the lock on my door didn't work.

"Writing is useless. What's the point in it? They go to a coffee shop where the coffee smells like burnt wood and the flies dance around on the musty donuts that who-ever went to pick up from Mary-Carmen's bakery and there was an air of melancholy so drenched in anticipation...*DIOS MIO*, WHO CARES!?"

"You've obviously read some books by shitty writers," I tried to keep my cool as I labored over editing my nearly completed novel.

"It's just stupid. I understand painting. You can see the texture, the emotion, the light and how it affects the subject. I don't know why *anyone* writes. No one wants to read it anyway. It's boring," she bit into a donut and sipped loudly on a glass of milk looking at me from across the open common room of the apartment.

"Look, you don't have to understand it. I understand it. I write. That's the only thing you need to understand."

I wanted to scream at her from across the room, kick her skinny ass out of my life and my apartment, but I kept my tongue parked.

Later she took a shower and came out in just a towel. Her tits nearly popped out and she paraded over towards me. I was distracted from my editing. She put her bony hand on my shoulder.

“It’s good to know how someone acts when they are angry. In fact, I think it’s the only way to truly know someone,” she walked into the hallway to her room shaking her ass trying to make up for it. I was pissed because she was right. Everything I wrote was shit, but I wrote anyway. I could never tell if it was getting better or worse, but every time I wrote I felt alive. Writing let me believe that anything I ever did was somehow important. People like Raquel were the reason I never told people I wrote. They would ask to read something of mine and I would have to tell them it was shit. I had no confidence in it. I had no reason to be. All I know is that when the words came out easier I felt like I was doing something worthwhile. Although, even a moron knows how to string a sentence together.

When I wasn’t writing, I worked at a school twelve hours a week. I had a stipend from the government each month and that kept me poor enough to get by. Four mornings a week while the orange sun rose over top of the jagged edges of the Andalusian horizon I walked to the train station bundled in so many layers I had trouble keeping my arms at their sides. I got to watch the moon disappear as the sunlight drenched the city in gold. Early morning’s in Spain still haunt my memory.

I rode the train every day to Dos Hermanas. It was famous for having dog shit all over the sidewalks, and being the home to the guys who wrote the “Hey Macarena” song. I hopped off the train and trekked two miles to a school that people equated to the Bronx. Across the street from the school was an apartment complex where the Gypsies lived. Every day there were cock-fights, or real fights. One morning a mother and a student I recognized from the hallways screamed in each other’s faces out front, grabbed each other’s hair, and the girl cried and screamed.

“Close the door! Keep that outside,” the secretary women said to me as I walked in before the first bell rang. There was either a fight, a threat of a fight, or drugs being sold.

“I don’t like anything about them,” one of the weathered Math teachers said to me one day.

The Gypsies were originally from India, they told me. You could tell because of their noses, their hair, and their tracksuits. They made it all the way to the Southern tip of Spain and then were barred from going into Africa. I always wondered why they didn’t let them go across the Strait of Gibraltar into Africa all those years ago if, now, all the Spanish people wanted the Gypsies to magically disappear. The entire staff kept me at bay from the Gypsy kids and constantly called them *los malos*. They looked at you like animals, ready to attack, and they were always ready to defend themselves. One wrong look, look away, or word and you found yourself on the wrong side of hell. They would never forget your face if you offended them. And they wouldn’t stop coming for you. All of the teachers called them names to each other in the teacher’s lounge. Behind their backs. Saying it to their faces would be much worse though.

We knew that if the 15 year olds were bad, their uncles, cousins, fathers, and brothers were much worse.

The school was built like a prison with bars on all the windows and metal shutters busted in in certain places where someone tried to break in. There were no glass windows on the first floor and inside there were strategic gates put into different places. The school was more like a compound as most schools look like. Outside of the teacher's lounge there was a balcony that appeared like a guard tower because one teacher, not with a class, posted up and watched the kids down in the rec area.

"Shut up!" the teacher yelled at the class. I stood off to the side. It took a few minutes for the entire class to settle down.

"Today we are going to work with Paul!" The teacher motioned to me and every head in the class turned in my direction.

"We will go over what it means to have a standard of ethics!" he boomed in English. All of the teenager's eyes popped open. Most of them turned to each other, confused. A few of the boys in the back put their heads down. Within the first fifteen seconds I could feel how defeated most of them were. They dreaded learning English.

"I don't get it!"

"What does *this* mean?"

"PAUL this is *hard*!"

"English no very good. No very."

I gave my lesson and got only blank stares and felt exhausted afterwards. They even made me begin to doubt that I knew the god-damned language myself. The bell rang and all the kids left in a swift, noisy wind. I couldn't stand their weakness. All they had to do was try. Of course it was hard. It would always be hard.

"Okay Paul," the teacher clasped me on the shoulder and smiled. "They are terrible at English," his face was grave and his eyes, leveled.

"They are okay. It takes time."

I taught two more classes and left. Leaving always felt the best. I would make it home by noon some days and have the whole rest of the day to drink. I sometimes gave private classes to my neighbor, Jose. He was the same age as my students but went to school in the center of Sevilla. On the roof where I hung my clothes to dry I often found Jose with his cape, practicing passes, imagining a bull charged past and the crowd around him chanted: "*OLE*". He had the body of a bullfighter. He was tall and slim, but seemed to lack confidence.

"Where did you get that bullfighting cape?"

"Oh...my grandma gifted it to me."

“Are you any good?”

“Well...I don't know. I'm going to the bullfighting ring next Saturday to practice with my classmates. *El Fandi* is coming to watch us!” when he spoke I saw a light in his eyes. He was young and had zest. “You know *El Fandi*?”

“No.”

“He is the best bullfighter in the world. I believe...that's what they say,” Jose stomped his leg out with his toe pointed out. He held out the cape and pulled it slowly back, pivoting away on one foot, imaging a bull had rushed by. I clipped my clothes to the wire lines. The late March sun burned into the back of my neck.

“And your parents want you to be a bullfighter?” I asked.

“No...they think I am crazy,” he put his finger to his temple and made a gesture of turning a screw.

“The bigger your dreams, the crazier people think you to be and the more they try to make you into a joke.”

Jose stopped and looked out over the rooftops towards *La Giralda*. He didn't speak for a long time while I continued to hang up my clothes, trying to get out of the sun as fast as I could. He was young and mad. Everything was his but he couldn't see it. I imagined him in the future either drinking to his success or defeat. We always needed something to drink to, especially when the madness of our youth is wrest away from us by the cynically aged men and women that raised us. Words cut through hope easily in a mad man, but that doesn't mean he always gives up. All a dreamer needs is one person to believe in them and it's always too late when they realize that one person is themselves.

“4 o'clock?” I asked before I headed towards the door.

“No, I can't today I have to study for a math exam,” he said over his shoulder.

“Very well, Jose. *Hasta luego*.”

I closed the heavy door to the roof and stood at the top of the stairs letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. He was right to stay out in the sun.