

*Annie wrote the following story about her travels for submission to a travel magazine. She writes...*

"The time is 9:30 a.m. A boy sleeps across three seats inside the bus station. His neck is contorted at an unnatural angle so that he may enjoy some form of slumber. The station of Ciudad Rodrigo reeks like dried beer, expired cigarettes, and at least three types of vomit. Kristen, Aparna, and I inhale deeply, cough, and walk quickly to the door leading outside. We have no map. We have no plan. We search the streets for the fabled celebration of Carnaval de Toros, but all is completely quiet. I walk along the sidewalk and contemplate the strange appeal of early morning Mahou beer. I will see a Mexican student die today.

Unsure of where we're supposed to go, we wander aimlessly through the cold, wet streets. What are we doing here? We were promised parties, crowds, and bulls. All I see is trash. We climb through a locked metal fence and scale one of the city's walls. I look out over combination of beautiful countryside and a giant blow-up Bart Simpson head. The fairgrounds below the wall bare a striking similarity to the travelling carnivals that used to frequent my Ohio suburb. Where are these alleged bulls?

Walking along the path walled off for the bulls' run, we stumble across a crowd of people migrating towards some vague out-of-town locale. Following a drunken man dressed in a pink pimp costume, we quickly realize the crowd is mostly male. Since we have no desire to actually run with the bulls, we duck behind the wooden fence, climb on top, and wait for the spectacle to begin. The fence fills up quickly, and shortly before the bulls come trotting down the street an older woman wedges her head into the gap in the fence below my feet.

I watch with fascination as men come sprinting ahead of the grandiose bulls, throwing themselves over the fences whenever fear becomes too much for them. This is not the same category of extreme sport with which I am familiar with. A tangible fear of death transforms these men's faces in a way in which I have never before seen. Like a communicable contagion, I begin to feel this gnawing fear take up residence inside me.

I stare into the bulls eyes. Time stops. I am frozen. Locked in a staring contest with a two-thousand pound animal. I lose.

A bull runs slowly past my area of the fence. He bides his time, oblivious to the simultaneous panic and intrigue exuding from the people around him. Then, in slow motion, his head swings deliberately in my direction. He lunges at the fence, towards the exact spot where I am standing. People fall around me like hail, and my legs unconsciously throw my body from the top of the fence backwards to the ground. I look up, still in slow motion, in time to see two deadly horns crash through the opening in the fence where the woman's head had been wedged moments before. I stare into the bulls eyes. Time stops. I am frozen. Locked in a staring contest with a two-thousand pound animal. I lose.

After our brush with bull horns, my two friends and I spend the morning darting fearfully around the streets, as the animals are ornery and taking a long time to reach the plaza. The time has come for beer and wine in excess. After a cold morning riddled with anxiety, we find ourselves in the center of town, dancing to live band music with a crowd of people in a narrow alley. Not dancing, really, more like flailing and jumping in ecstasy along with the rest of the Spaniards. A man dressed like a woman buries his girlfriend's head in his triple-D-sized chest. I find myself bouncing between three men dressed like bumper cars. We drink more wine and wander away from the band. I ride a tandem bicycle with a man dressed like a baker, while Kristen opens her mouth as a man pours wine inside.

The temperature drops. We drift inside the bars. There is a bullfight in a few hours we should go to. First there is more wine to be drunk. As we sip contemplatively at a table, our friends, the live band, come charging through the door and bring us to the back of the bar with them. Suddenly we are dancing to our own private band. Has my Spanish always been this fluent? Where did this full glass of wine come from? Why does it taste like cigarettes?

Time. We have to go. These men are getting too close to us, anyway. We climb atop the rickety bleachers constructed in the plaza for the weekend's bullfights. It begins to rain drearily, and the bleachers become a solid sea of umbrellas. The rain doesn't bother me, but the heavy cloud of cigar smoke emanating from the men around me somewhat does. I settle into my wooden seat to take in this quintessential demonstration of Spanish culture.

Perhaps it's the wine, but I feel completely in synch with these matadors. I am closer to the ring than I had ever thought possible, and I can feel their respect for the bulls rising towards the bleachers like heat. They dance with the bulls, they stare them in the eye, they make guttural noises, speaking a language that only they and the bulls can understand. When the bulls are stabbed by the picadores, I feel a sting of betrayal for each bull, and then I shudder as the defeated bull carcasses are dragged by horses out of the ring. Somewhat gruesome, but I have endured the bull fight and even found an understanding for it. Much to my dismay, however, this bull spectacle is not over.

Men begin to climb down into the bull ring. They jump up and down, do a few jogs, prepare themselves to face the next bull. My friends and I are confused. Why are mostly drunken amateurs preparing to taunt another bull? My head begins to throb with the beginnings of a wine hangover. I cannot justify this display of men throwing themselves in the path of a bull only to jump out of the ring just in time to avoid its horns. Where is the respect that I saw in the matadors? I look at my watch and hope this part won't last very long.

The bull, clearly angry, darts around the ring as the men prove their masculinity. One young boy takes his jacket off and uses it as a matador's cape. Men run in all directions through the ring, and I find my irritation at this practice growing progressively stronger. Or maybe it's just my lack of hydration.

Suddenly, a young dark-skinned boy takes off running across the plaza. The bull lunges at him, as he has so many times before, and I expect that he will again miss him. This time is different. This time is in slow motion, like my earlier encounter with a bull's horns. This time the young boy is caught by deadly horns and thrown into the air. My eyes lock on his flailing body, and my blood freezes in my veins. I think I am screaming. Or maybe I'm only screaming inside my head.

This boy is being thrown repeatedly off the back of the bull until he finally falls to the ground. His torture is not finished, however, as he must now face being trampled by the crushing hooves of his executioner. His body rolls in the dust a few times before the other men in the ring can distract the bull's attention away from the boy. The crowd has very little reaction. I look into the boy's face and see the face of death. There is blood in his eyes, and his body is pale and limp. I am whimpering. I will never be the same.

A few men run into the ring and carry this lifeless body under the bleachers. And then, perhaps the most horrific part yet, the men resume their playing. They run around with the bull as though nothing has just happened. The crowd continues to talk and cheer. They bring more bulls into the ring. This is unfathomable, and I cannot sit on my witness' bench a minute longer. My friends and I quietly climb through the hole in the bleachers that leads away from the plaza.

During that week, I heard that the boy was a young Mexican student. He at first clung to life during a three-hour operation that attempted to salvage his shredded intestines. He then remained in a tragic state between life and death while my Communications teacher took the opportunity to write, 'un estado entre la vida y la muerte' on the chalkboard. Finally, he surrendered to his death at the horns of a bull. There was very little publicity in Salamanca, where I attended school. In fact, it was as though nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened."