

## San Sebastian

In February of 1994 I was traveling by bus from Spain to London with a group of forty students from a Discipleship Training School of Missions. We had spent two months in southern Spain working with churches and doing street ministry, and now we were returning to school to finish the semester. From our outreach cities, it was a four day bus ride back to England. Traffic laws required us to stop and park each night for ten hours since we only had one commercial-licensed driver. Being missionaries, we did not have an extra budget for motel rooms. The bus became our sleeping accommodations, confining us to its stuffy uncomfortable bowels like so many Jonahs in a large metal whale. Needless to say, I took every opportunity possible to step out and stretch my wiry teenage legs.

On the second night of our hellishly long, four-day trek back to England, we stopped in San Sebastian, a bayside city with a huge statue of Saint Sebastian overlooking the bay from a nearby hill. It was clearly a smaller, Spanish version of Rio de Janeiro. This statue was huge, and lit from underneath so that even from the furthest side of the city, he stared ominously upon you, threatening to step down off the hill and thump you with a giant metal thumb.

After the bus parked, we were free to roam around the city, sightsee, and get dinner. It was almost eleven o'clock as Clay and I made a bee-line for the giant statue, walking around the bay for about a mile, then up through some small, sparsely lit neighborhoods. At the foot of Saint Sebastian's hill, the woody, suburban road ended with a cul-de-sac, the driveway up to the statue closed off by a gate that was chained and locked. A gentle drizzle fell, spreading an intense silence through the trees. Our heads glowed with haloes under a solitary street light.

"Are we going to climb over?" I eagerly whispered as quietly as the thick moist fog would allow. Standing here at the end of the road we couldn't have appeared more conspicuous. We were lingering in a doorway, and needed fast to proceed or turn back.

"You bet we are," Clay had already handed me his knapsack and was finding a foothold against the lock and chain. "Do you think you can make it?" he asked, once on the other side. This question was steeped with challenge, not concern.

Instead of answering, I tossed our backpacks to him. Swiftly I pulled myself up over the gate and hopped down, careful not to wince as my cushionless Chuck Taylors hit the ground. The sting disappeared within a matter of steps. The lonely orange streetlight refused to trespass with us, abandoning us to the shadows beyond the gate. Without a word, we began our ascent up the unlit driveway to the statue, walking briskly, but careful enough to stifle each step from making much sound on the gravel and twigs. The bushes held little regard for the driveway, and low-hanging limbs reached out, straining to block our way. I couldn't imagine how a car was supposed to reach the top without being scratched and scraped to ruin. Twice we had to climb around fallen trees, creating the façade of a dead end. But we knew where this driveway led; we needed only to look up to remind ourselves. There against the sky the Saint peered down at us through the thick tree limbs, his giant, illuminated face fraught with disapproval, daring us to approach him. Clay let out a low whistle at the horrific sight.

My words barely issued any sound at all, "It's like he's looking right at us."

"Maybe we shouldn't look up until we reach the top," he observed wisely, staring defiantly back at Saint Sebastian.

The driveway zigzagged for about a mile up the thickly wooded hillside, finally opening up at the top. A poorly lit sign explained in five different languages that the statue was constructed atop a fort originally erected by Napoleon. The huge lights illuminating the statue were mounted on top of

the fort as well, so the ground, where Clay and I stood, was mostly dark. The pea-gravel here had been poured thick, and we couldn't help making noise as we trudged our way around the front of the stone building. Clay stopped fast, grabbing my shoulder to silence my steps. He held his hand up and tried to pierce the shadows with his sharp, green eyes. We stood motionless for over three minutes.

"Did you hear someone?" I asked, in my faintest whisper.

He shook his head and dared to break the silence with a fresh new step in the pea gravel. "It was too quick to be human."

I pulled my dad's army coat tight around my chest, suddenly wondering what kind of wildlife might inhabit the winding mile of woods we had just forged through. "What did it sound like?"

Clay offered little explanation, "A rustle in the bushes. Maybe a dog. It was probably nothing." We had just walked up to a little area in front of the statue. If I'd brought my camera with me from the bus, I'd have taken a picture. The Saint loomed overhead. A single step off of his pedestal would have crushed us. Fortified with silence and suspense, it made an awesome sight.

The drizzle was turning into a thin fog now, as low-hanging clouds crept in from the sea. We soaked in the view with the thick wet air, and looking back down, right in front of us, was a stairway leading up to a large wooden door. We climbed the stairs, slowly realizing that our ascension lifted us out of the safety of some of the thicker shadows. At the top, we hesitated, uncertain whether or not to try the door, and wondering what might be on the other side if it was unlocked. I reached up to grab the handle, determined to show Clay how unaffected I was by all this suspense. Before I even made contact, though, an indescribable howling noise shattered the air around us, beginning low and going immediately high pitch before quickly fading back to the creepy silence. Without breathing, we scurried back down to the bottom of the steps and as close to the base of the fort as we could get, back to the shadows, and with a better view of the hillside, should something approach. With our backs to the wall we stood guard, afraid to make a sound, bracing ourselves for a re-issue of that terrible noise. After several minutes passed, we regained our wits, neither of us able to guess what had made such a sound, or where it had come from. It was not an alarm, we determined, nor had it come from within the fort. After quiet debate, we concluded it was probably some kind of bird, or perhaps some noise from a ship in the bay. Either way, we felt secure enough to continue our trespassing, as we still had only seen the front side of this monument.

Cautiously we ventured around to the far side that overlooked the mouth of the bay. As we rounded the corner, we left the lit sides of the statue behind; this side and the back were completely engulfed by shadows, only misted with light from a distant lighthouse every fifteen seconds or so. We took careful steps as our eyes adjusted, finding a little wing of earth jutting out over the sea. Here was a graveyard of sorts: a single gravestone stood in the center of eight life-size white stone statues. By some cruel act of vandalism, they had all been decapitated. And yet they remained, gathered in a ring to mourn the loss of some war hero or religious dignitary, each headlessly facing the center.

In the quiet and dark side of the statue it was oddly peaceful, despite the ghostly headless band. They surrounded us while we looked out across the bay over the lights of the city and marveled at its charm. This was Europe. We'd been here for months, but burdened with street ministries and Bible studies, we had somehow missed the majestic sights like this. The sea beneath us teased the bay, and the rhythmic roar of waves soared up the cliff, circling us and the statues, eventually finding its way into Saint Sebastian's cavernous ears. The lonely lighthouse gently flickered at us, sparking the peripheral illusion that this coven of eight cold creatures might be dancing through the fog. Somewhere, lost heads chanted and sang, daring this grave to release its prisoner. Clanging bells rang out from cathedrals all over the town, announcing that midnight had arrived. Their chorus echoed softly even after they ceased to chime.

Of everyone I knew, there was no one I would rather have been there with, than Clay. Upon confessing this to him, however, the spell was broken. The heads stopped singing and the dancing figures returned to stone. The waves far below continued to call out, now mocking me for my vulnerable honesty. Clay politely offered an awkward thanks. I could tell now that he was aware of my still-denied homosexuality. Ashamed, I sucked my emotions back into myself like sucking an oyster off of its shell. Clay was generous to placate me with friendship; but it was obviously nothing more.

We left without hearing the shrieking noise again. Back in the city we passed American-themed nightclubs, sex shops, and an entire block of guards, casually armed with machine guns. Europe could tell that I was sadly in love, although I wouldn't realize it for another year or two, still spinning in the confused eddy of hormones and religion. Even as time passes, I have anchored myself to San Sebastian. My dreams often find me there beneath the saint, in the graveyard above the bay.