

## Straight from California!

“Screw it,” I said. “Give me the *sombra*.”

I reached for the red cloth—nay *snatched* for the red cloth. I wanted in. These brave guys, juvenile to grizzly, bolting into the ring, teasing and taunting this wild bull, a balancing act between valor and a gutted belly. I had scouted enough. I snatched my improvised red *sombra*. I peered up into the crowd of spectators: a gang of teenagers, some whipping their shirts in circles above their heads, a family—mom, dad, daughter—a group of ladies dressed in pink and yellow sundresses, another gang of teenagers. Seven hundred people, at least—eight hundred, more likely. I lowered myself from the support of the bleachers. I sucked in a deep breath. I strode out into the sphere of fervor. And I stood, legs braced and every muscle ready for action. Six feet away, this great hulking beast stood in a similar stance, head low, horns tilted toward my chest. He scraped the earth with one hoof, hugging and snorting like something out of a nightmare.

As a twenty-year-old in southern Spain, I traveled on the weekends with the twelve other students studying abroad from Merrimack College. We visited all the usual hotspots beyond our base of Seville: Granada, Málaga, Cadiz, Córdoba, Ronda, and Matalascañas.

One weekend we traveled to the oldest bullring in the world to witness a bullfight. At first it was gripping: the atmosphere created by a thousand voices lifted in cheer and taunting, the excitement raised by the danger of the dance. But as the event trudged along, I began to sense that it was all counterfeit, forged. The bull thunders into the ring, pissed and confused. He tosses his head, mighty horns and all, back and forth—hunting for blood. They haven’t fed him for a couple of days. No water either. Sometimes they tie string around his balls to rile him up even more. A matador taunts him with a red cape, swirling it in flourishes and then letting it hang down for the bull’s furious charge. The beast charges straight through, spinning back when he realizes it’s not a person—or anything else he can gore for that matter—and he snorts, confused and pissed again. Rinse, repeat three or four times. Toreros dance about on graceful feet, taunting the bull. They prick him with lances as the matador steps out of the arena to grab some chips and a Coke. He returns, cape in hand, for a few more passes with the bull. Finally, as the bull tires and weakens from the matador’s numerous passes and the toreros’ incessant taunting, the matador drives a sword—a barbaric move, I dare say—deep into the bull’s back, just on the other side of his neck. With an agonized bellow, the bull stumbles first to his knees and then onto his side. Dead by the hand of the matador. Often matadors aren’t able to drive the sword into the exact right place and a second sword is required. It’s a messy affair.

Then the matador circles the ring to cheers and applause. He bows, proud grin firmly in place, as he collects bouquets of roses tossed from the audience.

This is all admirable and valiant—so say southern Spaniards—but the bull never has a chance. From the beginning, you *know* that the matador carries a distinct advantage over the bull, and you *know* that the bull will die. It’s six against one. You know that the toreros stand ready to assist the matador and that if anything goes wrong, which basically never happens, the toreros will step in to save the day. The matador will return home with the prettiest girl in the land, and the bull will go home to accompany a plate of rice and veggies. There’s little room for alternate endings to this long-practiced game. It’s a good show, I suppose, but it reminds me

more of professional wrestling's folding chairs than the bare knuckles of ultimate fighting.

In Nicaragua, though, they've got it right.

After my hiccup at the border, I had a feeling that Nicaragua was going to present a rousing experience. Upon my arrival at Ometepe Island, the largest island on Central America's largest lake, Jhonas asked me whether I'd like to ride on top of the bus instead of down below, and I leapt right up there with him. And it naturally turned out to be the best bus ride of my life. At one of the stops, I tore eighty córdobas out of my pocket, and the guy in the orange hat up top with us swooped into a store. He reappeared a few moments later balancing four beers in his arms, one for each of us riding topside. I don't love beer, don't even like it really, but I'm telling you there's something liberating about riding on the roof of a bus on a sunny day, ducking under occasional tree branches and sipping a cold drink.

Jhonas: the worst trail guide in the Western Hemisphere, maybe the world, and also my most vital companion in Nicaragua. He was the guy to know in town. I met him in transition to Finca Magdalena, where I stayed for my eight days on Ometepe, and he had invited me to follow him up Volcán Maderas.

He was short, trim, and agile—three quality traits in a hiking guide—and cordial as anyone I'd encountered in Nicaragua. "Tomorrow, we go. You and me," he said, in English, smiling. "I have man from England and German, also. It be fun."

I wanted to relax, but I needed a workout, so I casually agreed to climb. For the next forty-eight hours, I stood just behind his right shoulder as we skipped from one adventure to the next. We rifled through town to find a replacement for my broken bag just in time to catch the bus to Balgüe. After relinquishing our throne at the top of the bus and dropping my things in my room, we walked twenty minutes to the Festival del Niño de Dios. As I've said before, Christmastime is one long party in Central America. Many workers get an extra month's paycheck in December as an end-of-year bonus, and nearly every man in rural Nicaragua starts drinking on December 1 and doesn't stop until a final weekend in January when everything is laid on the table for one ultimate weekend fiesta, an unadulterated blowout: fireworks, food, booze, dancing, games.

And bullfighting.

"Ah," I remarked to Jhonas as we watched the first few cycles of bulls, "this is the right kind of bullfighting." He tilted his head at me, not understanding. He didn't know any different. This was the only bullfighting he knew. In Spain, *matador* translates literally as *killer*. In Nicaragua, *torero* means *I can't afford a shiny sword and that tight matador's uniform, nor do I really want to deal with the messy cleanup of dragging a slain bull out of the ring, so I'm just going to stand here and flirt with him a little with this red cloth*. Nicaraguans choose simplicity over grandeur. One of the toreros wore sandals. And this makes for a more authentic experience. Fewer rules, less restraint. More recklessness, less certainty. Exactly how it should be: a bull and a dude with a section of red cloth. Fate hangs in the balance. *No, no. Just wait. Let's see what happens here. This is going to get good.*

Out back and out of sight of the audience, cowboys infuriate the bull before his entrance to the ring. "Bravo," they say, as in, "Hey there, buddy. You might want to wait for the next one. This bull is too bravo for you." So, after the bull has been transformed into a stubborn, angry whirlwind of hooves and horns, it takes three horsemen to drag him into the ring by three ropes tied around his neck. As you can imagine, this upsets him even more. He

digs his hooves into the soft soil, creating deep ruts as the mounted cowboys drag him forward. He thrashes his horns against the side of the gate, a rattling sound that echoes up into the stands where the audience sits almost breathless. In the ring now, the bull's black eyes roll left to right in confusion. He wants blood. To show the crowd that they're really going to piss him off, the cowboys tie the bull taut to a post—by his neck again—so they can saddle him up.

By this time, the bull is raging. He bucks furiously, trying anything to break free from restraint. Laughing, the cowboys dodge his flailing hooves. The post groans as the bull throws his weight away from it again and again. I begin to wonder how long that piece of wood can withstand the bull's assault before it cracks and lets the beast loose. The anticipation thickens among the audience. I feel it passing through me, contagious.

Every bull is new, after all, and anything can happen. If you go skydiving, you'll scream and plummet thousands of feet, but nothing bad is really going to happen. The parachute is one pull away, so enjoy your flight. Bungee jumping? Same thing: accidents are rare. So you just enjoy the view. And the whiplash. And on and on, from rafting to skiing to paragliding to wakeboarding to any other leisure activity through the wilderness where you're trying to become more skillful with each Saturday afternoon.

But bullfighting on Ometepe Island? Those guys got it right. Put it down with BASE jumping and free-climbing, although short of Philippe Petit pacing a tightrope from the roof of one Twin Tower to the other without a safety harness. Excitement correlates with increased negligence and lack of regulation, as anything can—and inevitably does—happen. In that world, only three things exist: a bull, a ring, and you. And you don't want to be the one-in-single-digit statistic being dragged out of the arena, serenaded by a gasping crowd.

So some ballsy Nicaraguan guy crawls out of a bottle of rum, throws a few prayers at the sky, and clumsily scrambles onto the bull's back. The cowboys pull their knots free and scatter. The bull tears away from the post, off on an eight- or ten- or twenty- or thirty-second rampage. He bucks wildly, this way and that. His hooves tear up the earth around him. He spins left then right. Saliva flies from his mouth. Still kicking savagely with the power of a thousand pounds of muscle—making every attempt to dispatch this strange creature on his back. Eventually, he tires, the speed of his bucking cyclone lessens. The rodeo rider dismounts to the crowd's screaming ovation, and then the real fun begins.

Three or four guys swoop into the middle of the circle with red capes in their hands, enticing the bull with a little game of Catch Me If You Can. They brace themselves, feet planted wide in front of the bull with their red sombras, hoping the beast will charge. When he does, they leap or twist away, scrambling around and sometimes over one another to dodge his horns. Sometimes, these toreros don't even wait for the bull to charge. They lurch at *him*. I don't even know the goal. Not die, probably. Entertain the masses and don't die. Because if a dude gets gored out there on Ometepe, the primitive care at the "hospital" might keep him alive long enough to transfer him somewhere that can offer the care he really needs. Or it might not. So yeah, the goal for these guys is to tap the bull's head with their cloths, slap him on his backside maybe. And not die.

Bulls are violent animals, and they aren't very bright. A perilous combination. They rush hard, heads ducked down, and in one rapid-fire spasm of muscles, ram their heads upward in an attempt to gut stomachs and spill intestines. If their horns don't meet flesh after four or five yards, they seem to forget where they are. They stop, raise their heads, and turn to find the

next potential victim. The bull is confused, and he's infuriated, sides heaving as he struggles to orient himself to the toreros' changing positions. "Who are all these people?" he's asking himself. "Where am I?" He lowers his head and charges, and then does it all over again. Exhaustion begins to slow him, and he stalks around for three seconds, shaking his massive head and spewing foamy drool in a five-foot radius. He looks to the left and to the right. Four, five seconds. Then he gets another wind—you can see it in the way he raises his head again, the way he trots back into the game—and resets for another pass.

The fans can't keep themselves seated, hyped with anticipation, bellowing with delight, poised for electrifying moments. It's easy to be caught in their midst, completely overtaken by the insanity and the heart-pounding near misses of the bull's sweeping horns.

And it's every man for himself, as it should be. *We aren't a team. Tonight, we drink and dance, but right now, in this ring, I don't know you. You want to be in here, fine, but you're on your own. I got my back, and you got your back.*

On bull number three of our first day, I spotted a drunk guy dancing in the corner of the ring. A lot of drunk guys filled the ring, but this was the babbling guy you see downtown on Friday night, shirt unbuttoned, chest and stomach exposed—the guy who wakes up the next morning with a neck tattoo of Mr. Rogers.

He danced for two or three minutes while the cowboys were out back readying the bull. They brought the beast in and secured his neck to the post, as before. The rider mounted him. They let the bull loose. And don't you know, the drunk dancer stumbled over to the bull to say, "Hi, how are ya, amigo?" No sombra, no protection, no athletic ability or sharp instinct to aid him when the bull charged.

And charge the bull did; stuck his head down, bolted forward, found the drunk guy, wrapped his horns around him, lifted up, and hurled him 360 degrees over his back like a rag doll.

What happened next is what makes bullfighting in Nicaragua bullfighting in Nicaragua: one of the toreros raced over to the drunk's side and dragged him by the arm away from the bull. Three other guys rushed over, each to a limb, and they tossed him facedown under the stands—out of the ring and into infamy. There, they left the drunk guy, static, limp and motionless, and returned to the action—out of sight and out of mind. *Maybe he's alive, maybe not; but he's not our problem.*

"That is what I like to see!" Jhonas beamed as he called out to me over the gasps of the crowd. "That is bullfighting!"

I was equal parts horrified and emboldened. I wanted to give it a go. I could pay a tour company to take me on a plethora of great adventures, but how often does one find an opportunity to step inside a bullring? A *real* bullring.

I remember a story my pops told me years ago of the early days of his marriage to my mom. He, my mom, and their dog Gypsy were coming south from West Yellowstone, Montana, into Yellowstone National Park and had stopped near a lake to let Gypsy run. It was the only time on the trip that Gypsy didn't come right back. So when she returned about five minutes later, Pops was impatient to get started. Just as they got loaded up and started the car, Ma said "Stop! I want to take a picture of that moose!" Pops told her the moose had been relocated all over the park. "You'll get a dozen better shots," he said. And they never saw another one.

This is our moment, right now. Our identities are the sum of the little pieces we gather

along the course of our lives, of experiences either chosen or bestowed upon us by force. Some call it destiny. Others, hubris.

“Why couldn’t I have met Ivana today?” I mumbled. I started scheming. “I want to go in there,” I yelled to Jhonas over the roar of the crowd. “Inside the ring.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I’m telling you, I do.”

“No, I’m telling you, you do not.” I could see the mirth slipping off his face as he realized I was serious.

“I do.”

“You don’t.”

We were reliving Tom Sawyer’s first encounter with a stranger in the street, the fledgling newcomer to the neighborhood, as they childishly and eternally argued about who could lick whom.

I let the matter rest for a spell. I bought dinner and numerous beers for Jhonas. I retired for the night, still scheming. I woke up and climbed Volcán Maderas with our group of four, the whole time slyly mentioning to Jhonas that we should go in the ring that afternoon, that Sunday afternoon, the last day of the last party of the season. He started to cave.

“This dangerous,” he explained. “This serious. Dangerous and serious. I do not understand why you want to do this.”

“I don’t either, man, but you’ve got to understand that I don’t get an opportunity to do this very often. Step in the ring with a bull? This will be great!”

He squinted at me and returned to talking about the girl from the night before, the one he was trying to have a go with.

I informed him that he was making dangerous pursuits himself. “You talking about that French girl?” I asked him as we settled next to a tree for a moment’s rest. “The one in that pink dress?”

“Yes.”

“The big one?”

“Yes.”

“Bro, you’re five-two, a hundred and forty pounds, maybe,” I told him. “She is five-eleven, ’bout two twenty. She will crush you, homes. Absolutely devour you. You wouldn’t know where to start. I favor my odds in the ring with a bull.” Besides, ninety minutes from home, he was spending his nights in a hammock strung up between two trees. What was his plan of action exactly? A romp on the hammock? Her place, in the dorm with five other people?

I could see that he was already relenting on my quest to get in the ring. We finished the climb, that long, miserable, satisfying climb, and descended into town. I continued to ply him with beers—a couple tall, two-liter bottles all to himself. I pumped him full of chicken and rice and fries. I slipped him a handful of córdobas so he could buy a ride home if the buses were no longer running. We brainstormed ideas for a sombra.

“A towel?” he asked, leaning back in his chair. “A shirt? A blanket?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I replied. These were good ideas, but where could we find a red towel or shirt or blanket? It was a Sunday afternoon in a village on Ometepe Island—all the city’s

inhabitants had shut their lives down to come watch the bullfight.

“We can ask one of the toreros in the ring to use theirs,” he said after shoveling in another mouthful of chicken.

“That’s your idea?” I inquired. “Just ask nicely, ‘Hey, man, could I pretty please borrow your sombra for a minute to go screw with that bull?’ Borrow a sombra? That’s your idea? Really?”

I spotted a red tablecloth at one of the tables behind me.

“One question,” I muttered in Spanish to the lady running the restaurant. “I would like to buy that red tablecloth. How much is it?” Whatever number came out of her mouth next was soon going to be hers. Expenses mustn’t be spared for once-in-a-lifetime experiences. She could have named my watch and my left shoe as her price, and I would have pretended to think about it two seconds before handing them over.

She didn’t understand. “The tablecloth?” she asked.

“Yes. How much?”

“*Veinte*,” she said. “*Veinte córdobas*.”

I paid her and tipped her. I made Jhonas fat and happy for ten dollars, and for less than a dollar, I’d secured my red sombra. We finished eating and mustering courage as the four o’clock start time neared. We headed over to the ring, the longest seventy-meter walk of my life. The sun blazed above us as I poised myself to forget how worn-down my body was from the volcano climb. Jhonas followed sluggishly behind me, full of food and beer. When we reached the ring, he started talking to his buddy at the gate to the corral.

“*Veinte córdobas para el gringo*,” they commanded.

Another ninety American cents to enter the ring, fifty cents cheaper than it cost to sit in the stands as a spectator. *Suckers*.

But that is why I needed Jhonas on my side. He was absolutely a horrible trail guide. Horrible, I’m telling you. For the first hour up Maderas—a straight hour as we began our ascent—he babbled on and on about that French girl as we passed petroglyphs and monkeys and cool-looking plants without a word of explanation. “Tell me one thing about this mountain,” I wanted to say. “*One* thing.” But I kept my mouth shut, succumbing to my fate.

But when it came to getting in the ring, he was the man I needed. On day one, he’d plucked me out of a crowd, the outlander whom he could easily convince to climb the mountain, and now he served as my ticket into the ring. Everything may be for sale in Central America, but this was unique: on that day, I couldn’t just start asking favors from any guy. I couldn’t sneak into the ring from the bleachers. I couldn’t bribe the gatekeeper, and I most certainly couldn’t petition for my own entrance into the arena. Can you imagine that conversation?

“Hey . . . uh . . . hi, there, I’m Adam Shepard. I’m not one of your kind of people, that’s true, but . . . uh . . . and y’know . . . hm . . . I would like to—y’know—well . . . see, I just bought this red tablecloth, and . . . ” It would be like asking to play Augusta National because I brought my own clubs.

Jhonas was the guy to know, my ticket in, just as I was his ticket to an afternoon of food and drink. I think we made a fair trade.

We slowly, steadfastly walked through the corral (it’s amazing how calm a bull can be one minute and how irritated the next) and into the ring just in time for the first bull of the day

to be lassoed and dragged back out of the ring. The announcer shouted across the rickety wooden arena in Spanish: “Yes, ladies and gentleman! Yes, yes, yes! Hey, hey, hey! Watch out! The next bull is fiercer than the first! More powerful! More angry! More dangerous! Yes! Yes! Yes! And admission is cheap! Yes, ladies and gentlemen! Thirty córdobas for adults, twenty for children! Yes! Yes! Yes! Hey! Hey! Hey!” Moments later and repeatedly throughout the evening: “Don’t go anywhere, ladies and gentleman! That’s right! Stay in your seats! The last bull of the evening comes from San Francisco! It cost us millions of dollars to bring him here! Millions of dollars! Hey! Hey! Hey! Yes! Yes! Yes! Millions of dollars!”

The whole time, nonstop, this announcer chattered on. Fireworks boomed and sizzled outside the stadium, their brilliant colors lost to the blue of the late afternoon’s sky. The crowd *oo*hed and *ah*hed, an obnoxious out-of-tune band screeched through its cacophonous sets, and the announcer blared in my ear. Then, a bull readied to clear his way through the ring. It was a lot. Tension and excitement boiled in my stomach. My head started to vibrate. I gripped my red *sombra* with shaking fingers.

They let the second bull loose.

Now, you’ve got to understand what was going on in my head at this point. I’m not tough. I know I’m not. And everybody around me is constantly reminding me that I’m not tough:

“Shep!” my college basketball coach would yell across the court, many, many times, red-faced and veins bulging. “Didn’t I tell you to trade your lingerie in for some real drawers! Softie! That kid is soft,” he’d mumble to no one in particular, storming away. “Softie.” So many times.

When assembling backup for a fight, my friends always said, “Naw, I got this one, man.”

Beautiful, wonderful women look at me in moments of turmoil and say things like, “I think I better go get John.”

So I’m not tough. And it bothers me. I want to be tough. I want to be respected on the basketball court. I want somebody to back down when I tell them, “That was my seat, and I’ll excuse you to go find another one.” I want to get into a fight (once!) and win.

Okay, no I don’t. I’m not a fighter. Let’s be friends and try to talk it out over a plate of cheese fries. I really am sorry; you can have the seat. But hell, it would be nice for just one girl to ask me to kill that evil-looking spider in the corner rather than just assuming I’m not macho enough for the task.

So there I stood in the ring that Sunday afternoon in Nicaragua, ready to prove to myself and to every critic I’d come across that I was no wuss after all. I didn’t need to fight six bulls or three. I didn’t even need to fight two. One. I wanted one pass. I needed one bull to charge, and I needed to square off with him. And then all would be right in my world; I’d never have to do it again. Just one time.

In the ring, Jhonas shook hands with one of his comrades. “I was in prison with this guy!” he yelled at me with a smile. “For being drunk and rowdy!”

I introduced myself and asked for advice. He took my red tablecloth. This second bull was running wild on the other side of the ring. Jhonas’s friend tied a rock to each of the bottom corners of my *sombra*—finding a straw and a strand of plastic bag on the ground to use as string. This would weigh down the bottom and prevent the wind from snatching away my tablecloth and leaving me exposed to the bull.

The other men around us shook their heads and told me I was crazy. Six weekends a

year they hosted bullfights, culminating in this final day, and never had a foreigner stepped foot in the ring. They reiterated how dangerous this was.

“One boy broke his leg yesterday,” one of them reported.

“And did you see what happened to that drunk guy?” another one asked.

No one had died that season, but later that day, a guy would stagger down the hill to the medical clinic with a bloody, gaping hole in his stomach. These men admired that I wanted to partake in their culture, but this wasn't singing karaoke in Spanish. This wasn't a Wednesday-afternoon soccer game. This was serious, and it struck me that if something happened to me, these Latino gentlemen wouldn't know whom to contact back home. I'd signed up for a basketball league the winter before and had to fill out emergency-contact information, as if all of my teammates and I would simultaneously find ourselves unconscious and unable to provide the information. But in Nicaragua, I signed nothing. I simply walked across the field with Jhonas and into the ring.

The second bull came and went in a violent fury, while I pressed up against the rails, cowering in the corner. Like a softie. Same with the third. The fourth bull found me hanging from the support of the bleachers, heading in the wrong direction. *I came to this island to relax a little*, I thought, heart tapping much too quickly inside my chest. Six weeks of constant digging under the scalding sun lay ahead of me. *What am I doing? What am I doing taunting an angry and armed bull with a tamale-stained tablecloth when I should be lying in a hammock for a few days?*

Subconsciously, I expected Jhonas to take the *sombra*, now in his hand, and go first, inspiring me out there. But Jhonas was no hero himself and hung back with me. I watched the brave—or foolish—men dance out in front of the bull. And I hated that I couldn't bring myself to step away from the edge—that I was once again too afraid to step up to the challenge.

By the time the fifth bull burst out and into the ring, I'd had enough of the waiting. Enough of the torment I'd inflicted upon myself.

“Fuck it,” I said. *“Dame la sombra.”*

I snatched the scarlet tablecloth out of Jhonas's hands and stalked out to the center of the ring. *Take action or go take a nap.*

I can't properly explain the feeling. I was a trembling wreck. This was scary. To say that I've never been struck with so much fear in my life grossly understates the terror of the moment. A thousand things could go wrong, and in that first moment, as I stood six feet from the fuming nostrils of that bull, I was convinced that each one of them would. “Another story to tell,” I reasoned, as if “Yeah, y'know, I can't process solid foods anymore because I was gutted by a bull in Nicaragua” is a story worth its price. I imagined myself as the next casualty tossed under the bleachers. My heart raced, blood pumped furiously through each vein and vessel in my body. My breathing came ragged and short, but I was somehow able to steady my feet and hands.

I remembered that I didn't know my way around with a bull. *These guys see bulls every day*, I thought. My naïveté led me into the ring, but I wasn't sure what to count on to get me out.

A man in a white tank top in the first row to the right shot both of his arms in the air in violent thrusts, screaming.

And then my mind cleared; I focused. I'd been thinking about Ivana, that gorgeous

Slovak girl, ever since I left Honduras—and though she would be in my thoughts for the balance of my time in Nicaragua, she slipped out of my mind that moment. I stood on the free-throw line at the end of the game. I was performing onstage for a boisterous audience. I was meeting with executives to make a monumental sale.

I was in the ring with the bull. And that's all that mattered. Laser focus.

But he turned away. I tried to sneak back around to his left, but he made three or four passes at another torero before they lassoed him and dragged him back to the corral.

Sixty seconds passed.

My nerves still tense, muscles coiling painfully in my calves and thighs, readying me for what lay ahead. The next bull, a dirty brown beast, pounded the earth as he burst in, just as furious as the former. I steadied myself.

"Closer!" Jhonas yelled, and the gallery standing around him echoed his advice. "*Más cerca! Más cerca!*"

*Closer?* I thought. *Closer? You sure? Really? Hm. Closer.*

But they were right; and I edged closer. The bull's rolling black eyes met mine, and he let out a deep guttural snort. I thought my heart might shatter my sternum. At last, he charged. His powerful hindquarters propelled him toward me—fifteen hundred pounds of deadly muscle. Every nerve in my body thrummed, quivered. I made a quick move to my right and waved my *sombra* over his face as he ducked to strike my leg. He bolted past, leaving me unscathed. My first pass. Wow. The sensation was indescribable. The vulnerability. The rush of pure relief and surging adrenaline that followed.

The crowd was getting into it now, too. "Oooooohhh!" they shouted, pumping their fists in the air. The foreigner was going to give it a go after all. *Silly bull*, I thought. *Bring it on, compadre. You don't want none of this.* But he did.

The announcer shouted: "Hey! Hey! Hey! Watch out! He's dangerous! Watch out!" The brown bull stalked to the corner and looked around, confused. He turned to his left and came back at me. He pounded toward me as I stood cavalier. I didn't move in time—his bony head slammed into my side, pinning me against the wooden barricade of the arena. Flailing panic swept through me but didn't paralyze me. I swiped down with my right hand, battering his head, while dashing two quick steps to my left to free myself.

"While dashing two quick steps to my left to free myself." I'm about as quick as paint dripping down the side of a bucket.

The crowd gasped, screamed. "Ayyyyy!" They started laughing and pointing. The professionals may manage to escape injury, but odds are against the rookie, and this added an element of arousal. The crowd wanted blood, too. This bull's head was hard and solid, though his horns had been shaved to rounded tips. He charged forward to the right and hit me again. His massive head struck my thigh hard, an impact that would have knocked me off my feet if I hadn't been trapped against the boards. Nevertheless, the blow left a lingering black-blue bruise on my thigh for a week.

The cowboys lassoed him, dragged him away kicking and fighting.

Now I was ready. He was a good practice bull, the one without fully spiked horns, but the next fella didn't have nubs. He was white, slender in the relative sense, and quicker than the practice bull. His horns curved up to sharp daggerlike points, as strong as a boar's tusk. One swipe would pierce the skin, at which point he would drive his horn up and into his victim. He

wouldn't pull out right away; he would swing his head to the left and right and unwrap the stomach or leg or chest of whomever thought it would be a good idea to go for a ride on his horns.

This was the bull I'd been waiting to face. I wanted to say to Jhonas: "Here we go. Now, if I die, go to La Ceiba in Honduras. Find a Slovak girl named Ivana. Tell her that I *am* brave. That I am man."

But there was no time for conversation. Guys around me roared with advice in Spanish, but even my English wasn't firing on all cylinders. The bull, gliding lighter on his hooves than the others, dodged at the two other matadors in the ring, and then he came to me. He ducked his head, and I lowered my *sombra*, my red tablecloth. He lowered his head, horns nearly scraping the ground. I lowered my *sombra* still more, until the bottom half wrinkled against the rutted dirt. He let up, turned back to this left, posturing while he picked his next target. He paused. And then moved back to his right, toward me.

A foot away now, time slipped down a few gears into slow motion. People always say this, but I swear that's how it feels. Your mind recalls the details in slow, fragmented flashes, frames set down one after another much too slowly.

This white demon of a bull lowered his head again and came at me. I lured him in with my cloth, snapping it back and forth. A quick, taunting yelp—more noise than words—slipped from my lips. And there he stood, two—not three—inches away from me, horns poking into the redness of my cloth. I floated on my toes. I fixed my gaze on this gargantuan animal. I lowered my *sombra* back down at him. He jolted up. A quick, short move to his right, driving into my *sombra*.

I stood unharmed as he turned back to his left.

They lassoed the beast. I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd had enough. I sucked in another deep breath. And another in an attempt to calm the staccato race of my heart. I strode toward Jhonas, completely satisfied—*nay, high* from the rush of standing face-to-face with a bull.

The music played all the way through, that horrendous, tuneless music, and the announcer, the hype man, kept right on going without pause: "Hey! He's got a *sombra*! The foreigner! He's visiting from the United States! Straight from California, ladies and gentlemen! From the United States! From California! He's got a *sombra*! Representing the United States! Hey! Hey! Watch out, gentlemen! This bull is dangerous!"

Of course I remember few of these outside details. I've learned the balance from an amateur video I got from an American spectator who found me afterward. When I was in the ring, I was just doing whatever I could not to get gored or go to the bathroom in my shorts. I was more or less oblivious of my surroundings. But watching the video now, I can see the anger in the bull's dilated pupils; I can see the snot slinging from his nose; I can see the focus in my movements; and I can sense the adrenaline flushing through my central nervous system.

What a rush! No feeling like it. I could have kept going for ten more bulls, thirty, fifty, a hundred, but at what point is it enough? At what point have I "been there, done that?" If I kept going, I was destined to get hurt. Carl Boenish, the father of modern BASE jumping died on a routine jump in Norway. How long until I was ready to come back down to reality, back to normal adventures like skydiving?

Three bulls, that's the answer. I got my fill with three bulls, one with ground-off nubs but a hard skull, and two with heads full of horns. Three bulls, and I'd had enough.

But something went wrong. I was walking back over to Jhonas, a proud, relieved smile plastered on my face, when the bull broke free from the cowboy's ropes. I don't know whether it was an accident or whether the cowboys got tangled and let him go on purpose in order to readjust, but there he was, barreling back at me, straight for my backside. Jhonas screamed out a warning. And I bolted forward, reflexively, without a blink of hesitancy. The bull trailed, lunging for blood and revenge. I reached up into the stands, those rickety wooden stands, grabbed onto the top of the gate, and raised myself up just as the bull arrived to try to slash my ass down the middle. I lifted myself high into the air, braced my right foot on the gate, and swept my left foot over the bull's horns. Three inches, that's what I see in the video. Three more inches, and I'd have been fitted for a colostomy pouch. Another two inches after that, and my friends back in Honduras would thereafter refer to me as *Adán sin Bola*. One lady yelped with fear above the others. Everyone hollered and clapped and pointed. This is what they came for; some displayed their throats as they cocked back to laugh. Twenty seconds later, the woman standing next to the cameraman declared, earnestly, "He's lucky."

And she was right. I was lucky.

Outside we sat down for drinks (where I scored extra points with the waitress for bringing my own tablecloth). I had to go to the bathroom—the exposed outhouse—and the German kid at the table told me to watch my head, that, for whatever reason, there was barbed wire hanging over the entrance. When I came back to the table, blood was rolling down my forehead. They laughed and pulled out their cameras.

Stephen Peele, the American sitting across the table from me, shook his head. "So, you step into the ring with the bulls, escape injury-free, and you can't go take a piss without gashing your face?"

The next morning, I rented bikes with a Polish couple, Wojtek and Kasha. Despite my stiff muscles and already purple-blue thigh, we rode for a couple of hours around the island, passing road workers and pedestrian traffic. Every five minutes, someone would nod at me and say, "*Oye, torero!*" They'd smile.

A half kilometer from our arrival back into town, we passed by three cowboys on horseback. They were leading the bulls back to their farms. The first two bulls came and went. The third, a white one, glared out of the corner of his right eye, crossed the street and charged at me. Kasha and I, riding together up front, jumped off our bikes and into the ditch. I lost my right sandal. I literally jumped out of my sandal.

The cowboy regained his grip on the rope, and the bull fell back in line, headed for home. We continued down the road amid playful chuckles. "He recognizes you from yesterday," Kasha surmised. "I've got to watch the company I keep around bulls."

Yeah, far from legendary status. But you can bet that every party I go to from now on, every gala, charity event, every social affair actually, I will find a way to work bullfighting into conversation. I'll be that guy in the corner, napkin in hand, demonstrating the proper way to make a pass at this vicious animal, likely forgetting the more humbling scenes from my bullfighting career.

"Ah, shit! No way! You climbed Mount Mitchell? Nice. Very cool, man. Sounds like fun. Hey, have you ever fought a bull?"

“You went where for your honeymoon? Ah, a Caribbean cruise? Very nice. You know a country that borders the Caribbean? Nicaragua. And do you know what I did the last time I was in Nicaragua? I fought bulls.”

“Finance, you say? Cool, man. Oh, the stock market? That’s kind of like the commodities market, right? Futures in corn and tobacco and whatnot? And livestock? Yeah, livestock, like cattle. Oh hey, that reminds me of my bullfighting days back in Nicaragua.”

“You like chicken-salad sandwiches? Well, I like to fight bulls.”