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Lord of the Fries Daniel Bandini

Madrid during the summertime is a beautiful place filled with life, sunshine, and people from all over. The dry hot air fills the streets of downtown Gran Via, keeping people rooted to the local bars desperately seeking to quench their thirst. One can witness the relaxed energy of the city in every street corner, as people converse in plazas enjoying their cold beers under the sun, and kids play chaotic football against the neighborhood walls. The whole city seems to double its population during summertime, as everyone seeks the streets to experience the fragrance of life. Everyone knows that anything goes in Madrid, and me and my rascals lived up to it. We would bounce back and forth between friends' houses and local parks as if it were a daily routine, immersing ourselves in whatever we felt like doing. A youthful freedom I cherished and hoped to never lose as the years pass. There was a lot of empty time placed on my hands during those months of the year, which led me to become familiar with boredom. Being bored is seen by society as a negative state of mind, however I felt boredom was the gateway to something different, something thrilling. The fear behind boredom is rooted to the constant need for instant gratification. Being part of a generation that has been bombarded with constant instant gratification, we have become dependent of the man and his fancy technologies. We are forgetting what it is to be human! So, I say, throw away your television straight out the window and dive straight into boredom and its mysteries. For all we know, the first cave man probably discovered fire as he wasted his precious time throwing stones at nothing. Nevertheless, boredom became my ally during summertime, as it drove me into thinking. I would think about my life, my unattended heart, and my memories which I so dearly nurtured. Maybe that's why the man didn't want us to be bored after all.

I had just returned from my first year abroad in America, and all I had in mind was to meet up with my lifelong friends and roam carelessly around the city. I missed the feeling of being seen as an outlaw, even though I was a professional coward by nature. Growing up in a city can be a hard task for many. The concrete jungles vicious charm will bite you and spit you right back out naked, onto a racetrack with one ultimate finish, that being death. However, survival boils down to the individual's ability to maneuver around the bullshit and not lose his mind while doing so.

It had been a hard year for me overseas, as I felt my own mind was begging to slip off course in this strange storm, we call society. While I was away working in America, I felt surrounded by such unhappiness. My big leap across the pond proved my naïve ass I was just a punk inner-city kid hypnotized by false expectations. I was so puzzled. Its lands were filled with amazing potential and great natural beauty, but the ugliness laid within its people. It was a society engulfed in greed and envy, while masking it with a face of joy and achievement. Now as I look back with hindsight, I feel like I blindly sold off my future to some street gypsy that taunted me into believing the great lie. As time passed over there, I needed a change of scenery, I needed to return home.

As the plane landed in Barajas, my heart rushed with joy. I felt like a little kid running back to mama's arms. Once I glided past all the airport bureaucracy, I began to make my way into the city by metro. Exhausted, sweaty, and moody, I was in the desperate need for a shower and smoke. The innocent passengers that sat next to me on the train must have been on the verge of passing out. My natural scent was a wide variety of exotic smells that I picked up from all my travelling, I probably smelled quiet badly judging by the passengers looks. Nevertheless, I couldn't care, the bus didn't smell like flowers either. Once off the train in Atocha, I made my way up to my barrio, where nothing had changed in years. The same old streets had the same old activity, were vendors and costumers played cat and mouse. As I trekked up the seventy-six stairs that lead to my mother's apartment on the fourth floor, the dry Madrid summer air began choking my lungs. As made my way to the front door, grasping for as much air as I could, I was ambushed by my family in the main hallway. It was a great surprise to finally see some familiar faces. After we all dined together, I left the scene discreetly with a couple beers and headed straight to my room. My old cave, were I loved, laughed, cried, and slept. It was like any other man's sanctuary, a small quiet space filled with music records, trinkets, and good books. I dropped my body into my chair in relief, as I lit myself a cigarette and opened myself a beer. While Les Mccans "Live Swiss Movement" record from 1967 played in the background, my imagination ran wild thinking of all the endless possibilities that laid before me. Being young and curious, there was something good was bound to happen eventually. I was once again a free man. There was no specific agenda to follow, just the necessity to enjoy life in whatever shape or form it presented itself as.

After a couple days of family acquaintances and unwanted lectures about my future, I decided it was time to give my friends a call. As I roamed around the neighborhood looking for some amusement, I rang Miguel and Xavi, who lived close by and decided to link up at the local plaza. The two fools made their way down Cervantes street waving their hands and goofing around high out of their minds, making sure their presence was known.

“Eyy, que pasa hermano! “It has been a long minute without seeing your face around here, Dfunk,” chuckled Xavi with a sluggish smile.

“Yes it has my man, too long for my taste. It was all one big fu-gazzi” I responded.

“Yeah, its just shit we all have to do sometimes, for the greater future”. He responded as he patted me on the back, as if absolving me of my sins.

“You need the lows for the highs man, that’s the key”. Miguel emphasized. “And when you find that thing that makes you wake up every morning, drive straight at it in fifth gear” he added

“Oh, look at you two drunks. The two wise men filled with inspiration and knowledge of the world.” I responded jokingly.

“Im filled with the smokey smokeyy brothaa”. Xavi responded as he laughed.

We began strolling around the city like hooligans in search for some action. We grouped up with Magno and Mell at a park towards the west of Madrid, were we used to meet up after school and fry our brains as we overlooked the city skyline. There was a little spot further in the bush we used to call the safari, as it resonated the African savanna. It was our jungle and we were its kings. It was special being all together at the safari again after being away for so long. As our shindig began building up its intensity, Magno went down to the corner store to pick up some beers and munchies to keep the troops fed. Sun and beer is a deadly combo for the human organism. One begins to speak about all kinds of nonsensical drunk knowledge about experiences and crazy stories that should remain hidden from the public. The five of us were scattered around the grass as we passed the liter around, reliving the old days. We were all trying to find some meaning in this strange mass of water that floats through space. We wanted some peace of mind, some reassurance that we were all on the right path. The warmth of the sun gave reassurance that we were definitely in the right spot doing the right thing. Mel approached me while he tied

his shirt on his head like Lawrence of Arabia. With the sunglasses and the joint, he looked like some guerilla warrior from the bush. He walked around as he looked for a comfortable patch of grass and dropped straight on to his back. The beers were having their effect, and it was now very visible to any innocent bystander.

“What a big city ey? So much going on at the same time, but we cant see it happening... We cant even really hear from here either, but you know its there. The chaos is still there you know?”

I laughed and looked at him in disbelief. “Since when are you this philosophical Mel? That was a deep one.”, I asked.

“I just think it’s time for me to leave Madrid, go somewhere a bit smaller. Somewhere I can work on my architecture and still have an active live without all the chaos.” Mel continued.

“Seems like everyone is constantly on the move now, doesn’t really feel like anyone has found solid ground yet”, I responded as I smiled at Mel.

“At this age and at this point in life, I feel the ground is always going to be moving. Its beyond our control really. You are just given a chance to take the ride or not. And believe me man, I’m definitely on a major ride right now”, Mel said as he laid back on the grass again.

“You really represent the art of sudapollismo, man,” I pointed out. “At the end, you should do whatever suits you, because you are the only one that has to live with yourself.”

“Amen brother, so excuse me while I kiss the sky yeh?” Mel asked.

“Let me know what it tastes like, you fool.” I added.

Xavi began insisting we should cruise over to a new artsy venue that was a major attraction for art enthusiast in the area. He began describing this venue as a new mecca for us to hangout in. It was a space for free thinkers, outcasts, artist, and musicians to relax and find some peace of mind within the noisy city. The venue was called the Tabacalera, as it was an old tobacco factory that was shut down decades ago. It became a refuge for many street artists to share their art and do as they please without police knocking on their door. Between the city’s finances and the artists, they restored the building and declared it an open space for anyone to enjoy, unless you were a cop. The men in blue were not allowed inside, so one can imagine what goes on in there. Definitely not an ideal place for your average law-abiding citizen. Xavi had us sold within seconds.

We had been at the safari for a while and needed a change of scenery. The whole thing seemed like a very amusing idea for some teenagers simply wanting to waste some time in peace under the warm sun.

As we made our way down calle Atocha, into Embajadores, we saw the old Tabacalera from the distance. I was shocked how bad it looked from the exterior. A big dark structure that seemed to be ready to fall apart, with large broken windows along the whole second floor. A big fence barricaded the whole venue, blocking any view of the inside. I was completely drawn by this place as it seemed so mysterious and spooky. We approached the main gate and knocked hoping some magic dwarf would open and lead us to some kind of heaven. Nevertheless, some grumpy painter splashed with paints all over his hands from his current project, opened the door and scanned us briefly and then shut the door. The painter made himself clear and didn't want us to disturb whatever was going on inside. In major disbelief, we turned around to make our way back to my neighborhood, but we startled upon a group of boys who were heading towards the Tabacalera.

They were an interesting set of individuals at first sight. One of them was rocking long dreadlocks with a Lion of Judah shirt, and his buddy next to him was wearing bright flashy clothing with rings on every single finger. It was like seeing Bob Marley hanging out with some midtown Legazpi hustler. They both approached us while the rest of their friends waited at the gate and asked if we had any tobacco for their spliff. This completely took us by surprise, but it led to a friendly conversation in English. As we began to chat, the natty dread introduced himself as Tobo and his flashy friend was Bryant. Bryant insisted on being called that name even though we understood this to be some kind of joke, judging how his friends were laughing behind him. Bryant seemed to be the joker of the group, as he was constantly fooling around with his clothing and trying to make jokes. As Tobo finished rolling up his spliff, he asked us if we wanted to come in with them into the Tabacalera and kill some time together. We explained our situation to him, but he just told us to quit the whining and get in. One of Tobo's friends opened the door from the inside and greeted every single one of his friends in their local language. I was completely intrigued about the scene in there and who these kids were, but as soon as we got inside, they vanished into one of the many hallways of the old factory.

We began to explore the inside of this mysterious venue, and our

minds were blown away by the vast amounts of art everywhere. There were half sculpted molds laying around the floor carelessly. Paints of doodles and more complex elaborate graffiti's filled every inch of the main hall. Everything was disorganized yet the beautiful colors filled the corridors with life. The bottom corridors lead to rooms filled with bright graffiti with strong political messages. One of the murals had Spike Lee's face drawn on it with shades of black and white, and he was holding up a sign that said, "This is Legazpi". I could tell this was the ideal refuge for many artists, who simply wanted to express their ideas in peace. The whole place seemed like a guerrilla bunker for anarchists. However, the real thrill waited for us outside in the main patio. We needed a break from the art inside, so we headed outside to the patio for some fresh air and a couple cigarettes. Our friends Tobo and Bryant were hanging out with ten other guys on top of a hand-built quarter pipe against the main fence. They had their spot all built up for their summer experience, with a crusty looking plastic chair holding up the big stereo that was blasting French rap. We became the center of attention as we were the only white boys in the whole yard, roaming around clueless. We were unsure whether to approach them and join their shindig or just keep minding our own business, until Bryant spilled out a great performance for our introduction. He slid down the quarter pipe with his half-torn Ipanema flip-flops and called us in with a friendly whistle. As we made our way towards the group, we heard the older members of Bryant's and Tobo's group discuss this invitation while they gave us cautious looks. Bryant chased us with his spliff and wrapped his arm around Mell inviting him to take a hit at the quarter pipe. After some brief introductions, we felt it was a nice gesture to invite them all for a smoke as they were already in the process of their second spliff. The energy suddenly became smooth, and all the uncertainty from before disappeared. Miguel, Magno and I split up and began our own individual conversations with the guys we sat next to. The kid next to me was a 19-year-old young man called Mbaye, from Ghana. I had never met a person from Ghana before as their country is 4 thousand kilometers away from Madrid. We began chatting in English as his Spanish was still in its initial stages, nevertheless his English was better than many Spaniards. We discussed about football, and how football was his passion and his sole reason for being in Madrid. He told me he played semi-professional football back in Ghana and wanted to try out for a lower division team in Spain. He seemed like some big hot shot from his hometown, who crossed

his pond for a greater opportunity. We shared our views on European teams and who we thought were better. It was truly amazing how well we connected without even knowing each other. We shared such different backgrounds and cultures, yet our stoned conversation about football paved a middle ground for a great conversation.

As the spliff slowly made it our way, we both started talking about deeper topics. The laughter and the good vibes had us all talking about life and its wonders. Nevertheless, I felt Mbaye was holding back a deep secret. I could feel his inner conflict, and I couldn't help but ask what his story was. Mbaye seemed very cautious about his words. He would take long puffs and just stare around the patio aimlessly with a faint smile. "I see some shit man. My journey here has been long", Mbaye told me. I instantly could feel his distress, but my curiosity kept on pushing for answers. Mbaye then confessed he was one of the immigrants on board the Aquarius ship that just docked on the east coast of Spain two weeks prior. He even pulled out his immigration papers showing he had legal asylum in Spain for 45 days. I had been tracking the news of the Aquarius briefly on the news, but it baffled me to meet a rescued member of the voyage. He was one of the many West Africans that survived the journey across the Mediterranean from Libya seeking a better life. The Aquarius vessel carrying 629 rescued refugees was rejected from ports in Italy and France, until they reached Spain in June. The vessel carried out rescue missions all throughout summer, picking up any refugees they would find in the water. Mbaye described the voyage prior to being rescued by the Aquarius as a living hell no young man should ever live. This spun my head 360 degrees and left in a dazed state of mind. I was on the borderline of getting a yellow. I couldn't find the words to respond, all I could offer was an attentive ear to listen to his remarkable story. As Mbaye kept the spliff on rotation, he began describing his experience in Libya as a wild survival journey. He explained how one of his friends is still in Libya after the authorities raided their camp and broke both his legs. Libya to him was living hell. It was a country filled with corruption, where authorities purposely target immigrants and hunted them with violence. He later went quiet and began staring around absently again. That was my cue to stop being a drag and asking to relive such memories. I felt I owed him a positive twist to the end of his story, but he beat me to it saying how happy he was to finally be where he is. No sane mind could understand the hate towards individuals like Mbaye. We shared so many human qualities with each other except

our skin color. I couldn't understand how Mbaye and his friends were seen as a threat to European political interests. To me they just seemed like kid's eager to work and rebuild a new life a thousand miles away from home. His story resonated so much with mine, but our paths were drastically different.

Bryant skid down the quarter pipe again, showing off his amazing balancing skills while intoxicated and reached over to the music stereo. He increased the volume under the request of the general public Everyone was having a great time enjoying the peaceful afternoon sky. Tobo queued Bob Marley's Midnight Ravers track and began skanking to the beat. We were in our safe haven where no race, no war, no authority could ruin this moment. Whatever was happening in that space in time, we proved everyone that unity was possible. By now we were all high as a kite and erupting in uncontrollable laughter. Bryant was giving all of us a bit of a show with his intense West African moves while Tobo just bobbed up and down behind the stereo, enjoying every bit of the song. Miguel and Xavi alongside their new friends rushed down the quarter pipe to search for a ball around the patio. All the talk about football got everyone going for a small match. The old grumpy old painter came out with a big smile on his face carrying an old Adidas ball that had seen better days, and handed it over to Tobo. It was a scene worthy of freezing for eternity. I felt like a kid drinking from the chalice of life again. One does need the lows in order to enjoy the highs... As the warmth of the Madrid sun began to fade behind the old red walls of the Tabacalera, we all rallied down to the concrete. Tobo and I set up some goals with some bricks laying around, and the game was on.

