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CHAPTER ONE

Siestas

SEARCHING *for a* BREAKTHROUGH



One foot off the plane in Madrid and assaulted by a cloud of cigarette smoke, I knew things were going to be different. In the States, people didn't stand in circles arbitrarily dubbed "smoking zones" and exhale carbon monoxide in innocent strangers' faces. Coughing while I passed such a circle, it dawned on me that I was going to be learning a lot more than Spanish that semester.

A two-hour layover, then we were on to our final destination: Seville.

After arriving in the city with fifty travel companions, I boarded a charter bus full of fellow wide-eyed American college students. As we drove around, gawking at palm trees and olive-skinned commuters, we migrated to our host homes.

Dropped off two-by-two, we settled into the places where we'd be living.

Upon arriving at Asturias Street, the bus was half empty. My heart beginning to thump, I readied myself to meet the people who would be my family for the next three and a half months.

Greeted at the door by a smiling four-foot-something woman, I felt warm lips pressed against both cheeks. My ears were overwhelmed by phrases I barely discerned to be Spanish. Her name was Loli, and she spoke so quickly and with such a thick accent that five and a half years of studying the language were instantly rendered useless.

Crossing cultures should have been easy. Having spent the previous summer in Texas away from my native Illinois, I figured an overseas jaunt would be a piece of cake. How different could another few months in a foreign place be? But despite the similarities in weather, Spain was no Texas. So far, nobody spoke a lick of English, and the people were far less friendly than those in the Southwestern United States.

A few months before going to Europe, my friend Dustin and I hopped into his Chevy pickup to drive sixteen hours from Springfield, Illinois, to Austin, Texas. That first night at the camp we'd be working at for the summer, we slept outside beneath the stars. That summer was full of adventure: we got into the best shape of our lives, grew out our hair, and learned to seize every day for what it had to offer. Dustin started swimming, and I fell in love with running. We were both obsessed with doing as much as we could so we would later have great stories to tell. Racing from one event to the next, never bothering to catch our breath or ask for directions, we refused to miss a thing.

I thought my time in Spain would be similar to my summer in Texas.

I was wrong.

My roommate, Daniel, arrived at Loli's home the day after I did. At first, Daniel and I didn't talk. Unlike my fast-paced summer camp mindset, he had a slower philosophy of life. Having grown up in Idaho, he spent his free time relaxing—and snowboarding. Maybe it was his upbringing or personality, but Daniel didn't seem to be bothered by much. Nothing ever stressed him out or caused him to rush. And frankly, this bugged me. I was in a hurry to do *everything*: to travel the world, meet new people, and begin my adventure. After we said our pleasantries, my roommate and I fell into our respective routines, which had little to do with each other.

A group of students from my study abroad program investigated some exchange opportunities that allowed us to teach Spaniards English while we learned Spanish from them. The practice was great, but the point was to build real relationships, to make lasting connections with locals. Simply learning and living in another city wasn't enough for me; I wanted more. It was a pride

issue. I wanted an impressive story to tell, something more than the typical “I went to Spain, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.”

Halfway through the semester, one of the guys in our program started dating a Spanish woman, and that made me jealous. Not because I wanted to date her, but because I wanted the story. A Spanish girlfriend? Can you imagine what people would say? Back home, I had a girlfriend, but she was just an ordinary American girl. Her skin was slightly tanner than my pasty variety, but she didn’t speak any foreign language fluently. And I was pretty sure she wasn’t of gypsy descent—which equated to “boring” in my book. Truthfully, my girlfriend was prettier than my friend’s Mediterranean beauty, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was he’d done something nobody else did. And it drove me nuts.

I had to find a better story.

Packing my schedule with every activity I could find, I attended church events, frequented flamenco bars, and connected with university students for free language lessons.

Mornings in Spain ran on routine. Getting up around seven, I would jump into the shower to quickly bathe myself before the hot water ran out. Next was Daniel, who always maximized his sleeping time and took his time with everything else. Then, we’d arrive at the breakfast table only before we needed to rush out the door for school. In typical college-student fashion, we often procrastinated, trying to fit as much as we could into as little time as possible.

No matter when we sat down for breakfast, we’d always find Loli already there. It didn’t matter how hurried we seemed, she always took her time. Each morning, she’d greet us with a smile and hot plate full of food, telling us to take our time as we scarfed down our toast. You have to understand something: Spanish *tostado* is nothing like a slice of crusty American carbohydrates pulled from

a plastic bag and burnt beyond freshness. *Tostado*—at least in Loli’s house—was a huge hunk of freshly baked bread, lightly toasted to perfection and smothered with whole-fruit *mermelada* that made store-bought jams and jellies back home seem flavorless. It took minutes just to apply the spread. Despite the deliciousness of the experience, I always tried to rush it.

When we finished eating, Loli would pull out a small Bible study booklet that Daniel and I took turns reading from every morning. Even when we were in a hurry, she insisted on our spiritual nourishment before beginning our busy days. As sweet as this was, I initially found it frustrating. Didn’t she understand we had somewhere to be? Or at least, I did. Instead of bustling around to accommodate our hurry, Loli would simply sit still, waiting as we gobbled our toast and gulped our juice. Then she’d ask one of us to read.

When it was Daniel’s turn, we were in trouble. He joined the program with no previous education in Spanish, so it took him a long time to stumble through a five-hundred-word religious reading in a nonnative tongue. As my terrible luck would have it, those were the days we were running the latest.

After finishing the reading, we’d both spring out the door, jogging part of the mile-long jaunt to school.

The first part of the semester was full of frustration at moments that took longer than they “should” have. At Loli for holding us up. At Daniel for not knowing Spanish. At an entire culture for taking so much time to do, well, everything. For months, I blamed others for making me wait, for not conforming to my expectations. But eventually, I began to see the opportunity this afforded me.

About a month into the semester, Loli asked if I wanted to go on a church retreat with her. Daniel and I had been attending

the church where Loli's older son, Juan, was the preacher. Each week, we left exhausted by the long services and hard-to-follow preaching. Learning Spanish in Seville was like learning English in the Deep South of the US: accents are thick and loose, and slang runs rampant. For a textbook learner, following a Spanish-speaking preacher from Seville can be confusing, if not completely disorienting. Despite this, I decided to go on the retreat. *It'll be good for me*, I thought, *to get out of the city and see a slower side of life.*

At the time, I'd been going out nearly every night for the past three weeks, staying up till three in the morning, sleeping a few hours, and then getting up for school the next morning only to doze off in class. It had started to wear on me. Maybe this retreat would be just that: a chance to recoil from my self-imposed busyness and reboot. I hoped so.

The weekend began as expected: long services with passionate preaching that sent me straight to sleep. I wanted to follow along, but regardless of how hard I tried, I couldn't keep up. Which is why this was the weekend I began drinking coffee. Never having the stomach for it, I was desperate for something to keep me awake during the drawn-out prayers and extended worship times. I had no choice.

Scooping a few heaps of *Cola Cao* into my espresso, I took my first sip of the drink and winced. Too strong. A few more scoops of the cocoa drink, add some more milk, and *there*—it tasted nothing like coffee. Perfect. I guzzled down the caffeinated beverage as if it were the elixir of life. And to me, it was. By the end of the weekend, I was a full-fledged *café con leche* addict.

Despite the coffee in my system, I still found the services hard to follow. The preacher, who was a guest of the church, spoke quickly and excitedly—so much that I couldn't keep track of whether we were talking about Moses or John the Baptist. The

vocabulary words and expressions he was using confused me even further. As I flipped through my dictionary in a fury and failing to find the word before he was on to another subject, I decided it was no use. He might as well have been speaking Yiddish.

In between services, I stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. *Going for a walk will do me some good.* Circling around the retreat center, I prayed for a miracle. I started to feel it was a mistake to have come here. Maybe to have come to Spain at all. As I thought this, a voice called out to me. For a second, I thought it was the Almighty calling back in response to my prayer. But then I heard it clearer the second time; it was a child's voice.

"*Pepe!*" came the voice from behind one of the brick buildings of which there was an abundance here.

A young boy appeared from behind the building and walked toward me.

"*Soy Pablo,*" he said.

Ah, yes. The pastor's kid. As he approached, Pablo grabbed my hand and tugged at it. Curious, I let him lead me to a small, hut-like concrete house where he and the other children were playing.

Pablo introduced me to the group—there were six or seven of them, all gathered together. He pushed me to the front of the group and scooted a lectern in front of me. Yes, a lectern. And then he said the most bizarre thing I thought a kid could say: "*Predica.*"

Preach.

As in, deliver a sermon. A message. A homily.

My jaw dropped. This was a joke, right? But it wasn't. The kids, as if on cue, all took a seat, their eyes fixed on me, some with Bibles open in their laps.

This is their idea of fun? Doing a pretend church service? I secretly wondered if this might be a cult.

But when I realized they weren't going to let me go until they heard some kind of message, I did what they asked: I preached. In Spanish, with my bilingual Bible open to help me cheat, I did the best I could, improvising in places when possible. It wasn't eloquent, but the kids didn't mind, nor did they notice I was plagiarizing the entire commentary section from my Spanish New Testament. Throughout the course of my "message," the little ones occasionally emitted tiny "Amens" and spontaneously erupted in worshipful applause. "Alleluia!" one said when I stumbled over a word that was hard to pronounce.

The sermon concluded, and they all stood in unison to sing a song. Not knowing the words, I joined them, anyway. Their passion was contagious. They piously passed an offering plate and even dropped a few euro coins into it.

As the service came to an end, I glanced around, watching these kids emulate what they'd seen their parents do a thousand times.

Maybe, I thought, they aren't pretending at all.

At the end of the service, a little girl, not quite nine years old, approached me with her hand extended. Confused, I shook it.

"*Gracias, pastor,*" she said. *Thank you, pastor.* But it was more than gratitude; it was a reminder. Literally, the word can be translated, "graces." Watching the little ones linger in this ramshackle sanctuary, shaking each other's hands, I smiled—struck by the beauty of the moment. After a month of trying not to fall asleep on Sunday mornings, I'd finally found a church service I could connect with. "Let the little children come to me," Jesus told the religious leaders (Matthew 19:14). Indeed, they did come, and they were generous enough to bring me along with them.

After the retreat, I returned to the city and to my routine—but not as it once was. The fast pace of life I'd been experiencing

began to feel empty. Of course, the experiences were the same, but I was different.

One evening, though, everything started to slow down.

On my way to meet some friends, I met a man named Micah. A beggar and a drifter, he was from Germany and had run into some hard luck. Having lost his immigration papers, Micah was unable to find work. He needed help. But I was busy and had plans.

After ignoring and then flat-out refusing him, I walked away, trying to create some distance between myself and the man. Getting only about a hundred yards away, I heard a voice tell me to turn around, to stop rushing and running and give in to the mystery of the moment—regardless of how busy I thought I was.

Or maybe it was Micah's voice, screaming, "For the love of Jesus Christ, help me!" That could have been what made me turn around, too.

I took Micah to McDonald's, where he told me his story. He came to Spain in search of work, but after losing his papers, his life became hard. He'd been living on the streets for years now, unable to return to his native Germany and unable to find work in Seville. He was stuck.

For an hour, Micah and I got to know each other. Hearing his story of how he ended up on the streets, I began to care, to actually listen. And then he told me something I'd never considered—and would never forget.

"You are the only one." The only one? The only one to what? Listen? Buy him a meal?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"To stop," he said, pausing to lift a handful of fries to his mouth. "I've been standing on that street corner for months. And you were the only one who stopped. . . . Why?"

I swallowed hard, unsure of how to explain myself.

“Well,” I said. “I guess . . . it’s because of what you said about Jesus. I believe in Him, and I think it’s what He’d want me to do. To stop and help you, I mean.” I hung my head in shame. What a pitiful theological explanation.

Micah glared at me for a moment, as if suspicious of what I was saying, and I didn’t blame him. I thought it sounded crazy, too. Then he cracked a small smile, which slowly grew into a full grin. And he plunged another handful of fries into his mouth, saying, “I love God.”

And that was it.

Walking home that night, I couldn’t stop smiling, recalling that pre-fry-plunge face. Later, I wrote in my journal that I’d never felt so alive. The next day, I asked Loli to pack an extra sandwich for me. I no longer avoided interruptions; I planned for them.

But making connections with strangers was difficult. As the semester went on, I became even busier, which made it hard to do those things that had made my experience stand out. What’s more, Spanish people did not seem to keep appointments as well as Americans — another complication that made it difficult to pack as much activity as possible into a few short months.

This was part of my problem. I was always moving on to another experience, never patient enough to stick with my current commitments and instead, rushing on to the next thing. But in Spain, this was hard to do.

Sevillians aren’t quite so concerned with punctuality. They have a phrase — *no pasa nada* — which literally means, “nothing happens.” It’s similar to the American phrase, “no big deal.” Late for a meeting? *No pasa nada*. Need to skip class today to take care of a personal issue? *No pasa nada*. Such a cultural mindset was freeing; and the more of it I experienced, the more I wanted. And although it took months of rebellion before I could succumb to this

laid-back way of life, that little expression eventually saved me. There was a power to the words that transcended shame, a potency in embracing the unexpected. That simple, carefree phrase taught me to let go of my little plans in exchange for a bigger picture. It meant being able to laugh at myself at times and accept when things didn't turn out the way I'd hoped. That semester was full of *no pasa nada* moments in which I was stirred awake, realizing I was rushing when I should have been resting.

One night after supper, I did something different: I stayed home. Sitting with Loli in the living room where the TV provided the after-dinner entertainment, I didn't do my normal evening custom. Instead of excusing myself and heading out for the night, I stayed put. Every night, Loli did this; she sat in front of the television, often accompanied by Daniel. This always baffled me. Why wouldn't he join me in taking advantage of every moment we had here? It seemed lazy, like he was squandering a great opportunity. But night after night of going out had worn me down to exhaustion. Anything, I guess—even flamenco clubs in Seville—can start to feel old. The sense of adventure had faded, and I was searching again for what was really missing.

Daniel, Loli, and I watched TV that night. And we laughed for hours. When Loli would laugh hysterically at something we didn't quite understand, we'd fake a few chuckles, anyway. The moment was entirely mundane, but nonetheless magical.

Around midnight, we said good night and went to bed. And that was all there was to it. No stunning breakthroughs or grand experiences. Just a night with the woman who made our meals and loved us better than we deserved. I had traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to run away from the ordinariness of life, to find an adventure. I never expected much from my host family; they were just the launching pad for my adventurous exploits.

But in my striving to feed homeless people and build cross-cultural relationships and take on the nightlife of Seville, I found myself tired. A life filled with movement, with constant motion and no rest stops, isn't a life at all. It's tourism. Life's mundane moments—ordinary times of TV-watching and breakfast-eating—can be embraced as a slow, deliberate, beautiful way of life if we pay attention and see what's really there.

After that night, I gave up on the constant outings, weekends away, and began to look for a simpler, slower kind of life. I found it at “home” with Loli, around the dinner table and the TV. I started going to bed earlier, waking up at a decent hour, and getting to the table before she did. Instead of rushing through a delicious meal, I took my time with the toast. The breakfast and Bible study and moments of conversation before the day started were simple graces, gentle reminders that I was going too fast. I finally stopped fighting them and took my time, allowing myself to enjoy the simple events preceding my big plans for the day.

Soon, I learned that few other students in our program ate freshly baked bread for breakfast each morning, and that nobody's *señora* sat around waiting to read the Bible with them. I was lucky and didn't even know it. That's often the case with busyness: it robs us of the gifts right in front of us.

As these changes began to take place, I found myself changing, too. Each morning, I would try to beat Daniel to be the first to volunteer to read from Loli's Bible study booklet. Instead of avoiding this chance to practice my Spanish, I embraced it. Not to mention, it made my host mom happy.

After class, we'd return home around half past three for lunch, the biggest meal of the day. At the end of the meal, Loli would ask, “*Postre?*” which is Spanish for “Dessert?” And we would always shrug, feigning indifference. Then she'd smile knowingly and list

what she had, which usually included some fresh fruit, yogurt, and the Spanish dessert staple: *flan*. We always chose flan—so much that this became a running joke. Daniel and I would pretend to sincerely struggle over what we wanted for dessert each day and then consent to flan. Loli eventually wised up and stopped buying yogurt and fruit and, well, anything but lots and lots of flan.

In my mind, there is a clear distinction between what Spain was like before that night of TV-watching with Loli and what it was like after. Although I went out less for the second half of the semester, I still enjoyed a few big events, including some travel to places like Portugal and Italy. And it was in Italy where I once again heard the call to slow down and appreciate what was in front of me.

Later in the semester, I was traveling with a few friends for vacation. We set out to see it all. First, France: a midnight stop in Nice. Then an afternoon cappuccino in Genoa before arriving in Rome. We stood in the mile-long line to see the Vatican, reenacted scenes from *Gladiator* outside the Colosseum, and visited just about every gelato joint we could find. But by the third day, we were wiped, completely exhausted.

One afternoon, we decided to take a nap. Just a short one, we told ourselves. We had been running so hard, we thought it was the least we deserved. So we retreated to our hostel, took showers, set an alarm clock, and went to bed. The next thing we knew, we awoke, well rested and ready to spend the rest of the day sight-seeing. There was just one problem: it was dark outside! We had overslept by four hours, wasting our afternoon and snoozing well into the evening. After an epic-length nap, we'd be lucky to find a restaurant still serving supper. But the funny thing was, we weren't mad; we laughed about the experience. Why were we trying so

hard? What was there to prove? Were we just trying to impress our friends, to fill up our photo albums? After that, we gave up on seeing everything. Instead of adding blips to a radar screen of tourist checkpoints, we decided to create a few lasting memories.

One afternoon, Dustin and I borrowed a couple of guitars from some street musicians and performed Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" for a crowd of a hundred. Another time, we ended up on *Piazza Grande*, an Italian TV game show, in front of three million daytime viewers.

But nothing would compare to what we found in Florence.

We spent three days in Rome and then another three in Florence, home of the Renaissance. Our stay there was much different from Rome: We started out with the intention of taking it slow and embracing opportunities to wait. We bought leather goods, took our time eating pizza and pasta, and Dustin even got a date with an Italian woman. After a couple days of doing nothing particularly touristy, we decided to see *David*, Michelangelo's most famous sculpture. It was such an iconic piece; we had to go. Having spent most of the day on our feet, we arrived at the Accademia Gallery, the museum that holds *David*. We joined an endless conga line of tourists, all pushing their way forward to see the monolith. My three friends and I removed ourselves from the line and stood in the back of the room, then we gradually grew tired of standing and sank to the cold stone floor. As crowds came and left, we just sat, staring at the larger-than-life statue of the man who killed the giant.

Sitting and staring in awestruck silence, we beheld *David*. The details were so intricate; the more you looked at it, the more you saw. Piercing eyes and looping curls created movement and texture out of the same marble that formed arm muscles, tendons, even veins running over the backs of the man's hands and knuckles.

I'm not an art critic, but I recognize beauty when I see it. And this was beauty.

As people continued to trudge down the hall, entering and leaving the room, we stayed to soak in the view. There were other notable pieces to see, but we refused to leave that room for over three hours. Like many others, we had rushed past other works of art to see this one piece. And frankly, at first we had been ready to rush up close, check it out, and head right back out—until we stepped out of the fidgety long line and stopped for a moment. Until we sat down and noticed the beauty that others were missing. Until we waited.

None of us discussed whether or not to stay; we just sat down, as if immobilized. Other than the occasional whispered observation, not many words were spoken. Hours later, without cue we stood up and looked at each other and left. No one said a thing until we went to lunch, and the first word to escape any of our mouths was “Wow.”

In Florence, we finally understood the lesson we had only flirted with in Rome. When we began our trip, we were obsessed with *more*—more sights, more experiences, more stories. But now we realized *more* wasn't better. Slower was better—fewer thrills, less hype, more memories.

I've come to realize I want to live a life like that. One that takes time to notice the things that other people are overlooking. One that slows down to sit and soak up the beauty. One that creates space for the “wow” moments. I want the kind of life that makes room for the art in all our lives. As Charles Whiston writes:

No passing and hurried glance at a great painting as we stroll down the corridors of an art gallery will ever suffice to reveal to us its richness and significance. If we sit down in a quiet gallery and limit our attention to a single picture, then it will act upon us. For a great painting is an active agent and can affect us. We

need therefore to sit receptive, open-minded, alert, quiet, before it. Furthermore, no single introspection is sufficient. Many repeated visits to the same painting are required before we begin to grasp its significance. We know that we must wait patiently until, in its own way and time, it discloses its meanings. The truth in the painting must find and fit the need that is in us.³

The statue captivated and continued to teach us long after we saw it. *David* taught us to slow down, to do less, and to pay attention to the intricacies—the art—all around us. And we almost missed that moment, almost rushed right past the statue on our way to the next thing on our schedule. But instead, we sacrificed the opportunity to do more and decided to focus, to be present in the moment. And as a result, we had a “wow” moment.

“Hurry up and wait,” said the man in the customs line behind me at the airport. We were in Detroit, the first of a few stops during this long travel day. It was December, and we fifty students were now headed home for Christmas. After months of learning and longing, of getting frustrated and growing, I was returning home. Back to the States. Back to Illinois cornfields. Back to bonfires and snow-covered highways and a girlfriend I’d grown apart from.

Catching a glimpse of myself in a piece of reflective glass, I barely recognized the person I saw. He was wearing slacks and a sweater; he had long sideburns and short hair and carried a brown, leather satchel. He looked, frankly, a little European.

As the months after studying abroad went by, I realized how much I’d changed. I would never be able to choke down gas station cappuccino again. I would correct my Spanish professor’s grammar. I would look with derision on any piece of architecture less than five hundred years old. Those were the surface things,

though. Most of all, I'd take time in the moments that I would normally rush through.

I relish the big stories from Europe—those major moments—but the memories that remain fixed in my mind are the small ones. The daily walk home from class with Daniel. Sermons with six-year-olds. Late nights of laughing with Loli. Taking in the beauty of a statue. Quiet mornings of reading. And of course, the flan.

In music, this type of passing moment has a name: a grace note. And that's just what these moments of waiting and walking and wondering were: grace notes that added a touch of beauty to the bolder moments making up the music of my days.

Hurry up and wait, indeed.

IN-BETWEEN GLIMPSES

I used to push it to the last minute every morning—calculating how long my routine took to the minute. Then I had three kids. Soon I realized there was no calculating anything. As my children became toddlers, I would get that retched impatient feeling like I was about to explode trying to rush them through simple things like getting dressed and tying their shoes. The mornings would be full of stress and yelling. I felt like a horrible mom.

So one day I woke up an hour early and decided no matter what, I would be patient and let them go at their own pace—this time allotting plenty of time to be flexible. Granted, I still have my moments and am far from a perfect mom, but learning to let go of my sense of urgency has made everyone's morning a little bit better.

—Julia