

Living My Dream

PART ONE

By Emily Feinstein

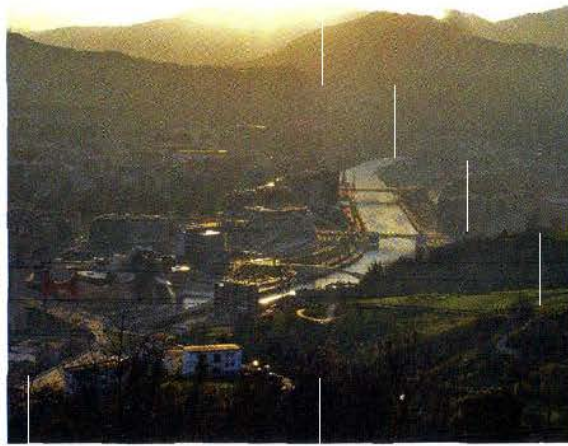
One sentence. That's all it took to change my life. It was April 2007 and I was sitting in my childhood bedroom sorting through papers from my old desk. My mom had asked me to do some organizing while I was home nursing a broken heart. My relationship of three and a half years had just ended and I turned to the comfort of my parents' arms.

Before returning home, I was living with him in a suburb of Dallas and working as a reporter for a community newspaper. I thought I had everything; a career that kept me challenged and a man I planned to marry. Little did I know my world was about to turn upside down.

One night I came home after covering a city council meeting to find him sitting on our bed with a look of shame in his eyes. He broke the news that he had cheated on me with an old girlfriend the week before and that he was no longer happy in our relationship. It was the classic *it's not you, it's me* spiel and in seconds, my happy life was shattered.

After a few days of picking up the broken pieces, I decided to quit my job and move back to Houston where I had a strong support system and could take my time figuring out my next step.

There I was, sitting on the floor of my childhood room when I came across a letter I had written to myself during my senior year in high school. It was an assignment my English teacher had given, instructing the class to write down where we hoped to be in 10 years.



"The sky looked glorious as the sun rose over the lush green hills and darted into the valley."

Reading through it caused me to smile for the first time in several weeks. It was more of a sarcastic grin, really. *How could I be so naïve?* I thought. The content was probably identical to every other girl's in my class. I hoped I would be married and have at least one child; I hoped to be successful in my career, etc.

And here I was, so far from marriage it seemed it would never happen; no children; and I had voluntarily ended my career because I couldn't face staying in a town where I felt so alone.

But wait. There was another goal written in the letter that wasn't so clichéd. It said, *Live in Spain to become fluent in the Spanish language.*

"What?" I said out loud. "I don't remember writing this."

I had always wanted to study abroad while I was in school, but I decided to double-major in two different colleges, which meant no idle time to go frolicking around another country. I minored in Spanish because I had been studying the language since the seventh grade and it made sense to continue.

As I was contemplating this long-forgotten sentence I had jotted down seven years prior to this moment, I had an

epiphany that maybe I could make this dream a reality.

Despite my current state of depression and fear that I would never figure out what I wanted to do with my life, I had one positive feeling: that I was free. I was a blank slate and I could paint my life however I wanted — an opportunity that is unheard of for most 24-year-olds who have been trying to prove themselves in the real world since graduating college.

I went to my computer, where I proceeded to type *Work-study programs in Spain* in the Internet search engine. Several results popped up and my sarcastic grin from earlier grew into a genuine smile.

One of the first results read: *Instituto Hemingway*. Since I was fan of the author, I decided to click on the link. The institute was established to help foreigners improve their Spanish speaking skills. It advertised a package complete with Spanish courses, housing, and employment opportunities. It sounded perfect. I immediately sent an e-mail to the director of the institute. Several exchanges later, I was convinced I was supposed to go to Spain.

After running the idea by my parents, who both thought it was a great plan, I booked a one-way flight to Bilbao, Spain. The irony was not lost on me that the funds came from my "wedding account" my mom had been saving since I was a little girl.

It's funny how much we romanticize concepts such as living abroad. Despite the fact that a wonderful adventure awaits you, there are hardships usually hanging in the balance. I didn't stop once (until I was on the plane jetting out of the United States) to think that going to Spain on my own might be a horrible idea.

So many things could go wrong. My plane could crash and sink to the bottom of the ocean. The director of the institute could have been a con artist. There was also the fact that I didn't know a soul in Spain and no one would be emotionally inclined to help me if I needed it. Sitting in my plane seat, a cold sweat broke out across my face and anxiety ensued.

As the drink cart rolled through, the flight attendant offered me complimentary wine (gotta love Air France, where everyone on staff is a sommelier), which I drank to calm my nerves. I had another mini bottle with dinner and minutes later I was in the bathroom vomiting everything back up. You know you're a mess when you can't figure out if you got sick because of the altitude, the booze, or sheer anxiety. I like to think it was all of the above.

Arriving in Bilbao was unforgettable. I gazed out my window as the plane prepared for landing. It was 9 a.m. and the sky looked glorious as the sun rose over the lush green hills and darted into the valley where the entire town was getting started for a new day. *Wow*, I thought with a sigh of relief. *This is where I'm going to live.*

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PART TWO

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There I was, broken-hearted in the middle of the Basque Country, determined to make this adventure count. Adjusting to a new lifestyle is never easy. I felt the pangs of being an outsider as I drifted through foreign streets under the flow of incessant rain, walking next to people who seemed nice, yet remained uninterested in anyone who wasn't already in their exclusive circle of friends.

Everything went wrong the first week of my work-study program in Bilbao. Despite the fact that I was told I would have two female flat mates for the entire six months of my residency, the first week I had four flat mates, two of which were male. I was so jet-lagged the first day that I didn't even realize the "fib" the institute director, Jose, had made. Although all of my flat mates were only there on holiday for a week, I grew attached to them and was disappointed to see them go.

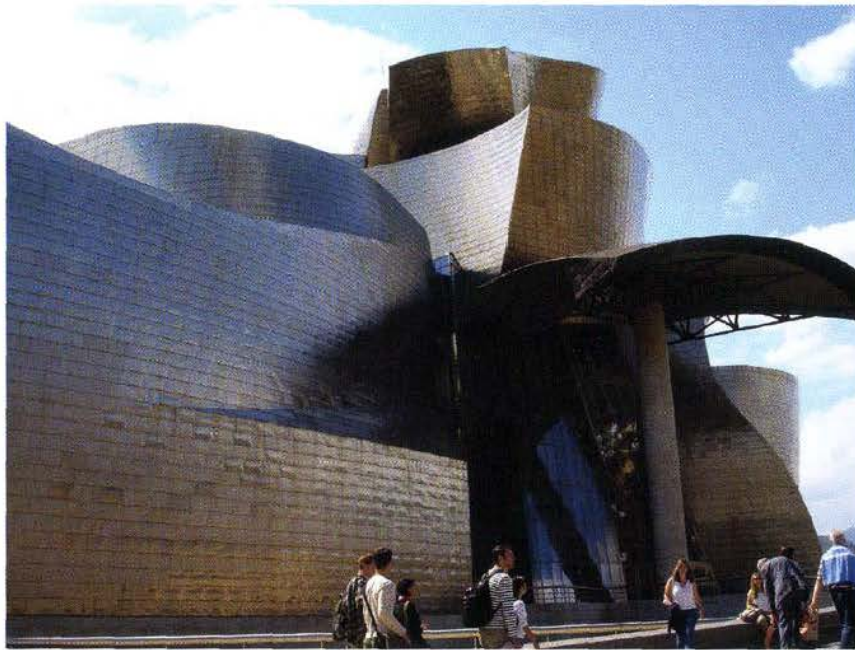
Besides the living situation, Jose had promised to set me up with a job teaching conversational English to native Spaniards "just minutes from the institute." I later discovered I would be taking a 25-minute train commute every day to a small coastal town called Portugarate, teaching in a private academy. Jose took me there on my second day in Spain and tried to leave me at the train stop by myself as the rain began to pour down.

"Are you serious?" I asked. "I don't know where to go or how I'll get back!"

As he watched my facial expression transform from disbelief to panic, he decided he would be a nice guy and take me to the academy. We hiked up one of the steepest hills I've ever seen. When we finally reached the pinnacle, drenched with a combination of sweat and rain, a strip of shops appeared – one of them was the academy. The title on the door read *Mugakoa Idiomas*. *Mugakoa* is a Basque term that means *in between*. Ironic, as I felt I was in between chapters in my own life.

Jose introduced me to Isabel, the director of the academy. She took me into a classroom and showed me the books from which I would be teaching. The plan was to teach five classes each afternoon back-to-back. I was exhausted just thinking about it.

"My one piece of advice is to never let the students know you speak Spanish," Isabel said. "If they know, they will never speak a word of English to you."



"We visited the colossal Guggenheim museum – made completely of titanium – that stands erect like a steel ship floating on the Nervion River, which runs through the heart of the city."

I thought that would be easy seeing as how I had the Spanish vernacular of a one-year-old. But as time progressed and my Spanish lessons began paying off, I understood why it was such a challenge.

The classes were based on skill level, not age. I had a beginner's class with a 55-year-old man in it, and a more advanced course with a 10-year-old. Regardless of age or skill level, all of my students wanted to know the same thing: If I had a boyfriend. It seemed hypocritical they would all ask this because when I inquired to my Spanish teacher about her love life, she replied that it was considered rude in the Spanish culture to inquire about personal matters. At that time, a boyfriend was the last thing I wanted, still reeling from the collapse of my previous relationship. I responded to each inquiry with an emphatic *no!* They usually didn't believe me and would just stare at me and grin.

Teaching was one of the most challenging jobs I've ever had. My students misbehaved often, and getting them to speak English was like pulling teeth. After my six-month stint, I decided that although there were rewarding aspects to the job, I would never teach again. I also developed a new-found respect for all teachers.

During my initial visit with Isabel, the subject of payment came up and she offered me far less than the amount Jose had promised. I tried to maintain composure, but deep down my blood began to boil. By that point, there had been one too many lies.

Confrontation is definitely not my forte. I usually end up crying in front of my opponent rather than coming off strong. Of course, that is what happened when I met with Jose privately the next day to express my disappointments.

I recounted all the issues with tears streaming down my face. He was genuinely concerned and told me he would do everything he could to ensure my satisfaction during my stay in Bilbao.

The result ended with Isabel paying me exactly what Jose promised. He also told me he would find me flat mates that planned to stay longer than a one-week holiday.

To top it all off, my inability to communicate in Bilbao, where no one spoke a word of English, made me feel handicapped and invisible. I paid Jose to take intense Spanish courses five hours per day, four days a week, for three months with the desperate hope that I could at least get by on my own in that town.

My first week of classes was a blur. I hardly understood anything my teacher was saying and none of the teachers spoke one word of English to me – just as I was instructed on the reverse spectrum when I taught.

I crashed into bed each night from utter exhaustion. For three months straight I woke up, went to my Spanish lessons, caught a train to teach English, and returned home around 9 p.m. each night with little time to eat or catch up with my flat mates.

Still, I managed to have a lot of fun when I found the time – especially on the three-day weekends and the many holy days celebrated in Spain. During my first week in Bilbao, I met some girls at the institute who would later become my family. Nikki, who was from England, moved into my flat and lived there the remainder of my stay. Hilde and Hege were from Norway, and although they lived elsewhere, they were always at our flat.

Together, we explored the beautiful

city of Bilbao. We visited the colossal Guggenheim museum – made completely of titanium – that stands erect like a steel ship floating on the Nervion River, which runs through the heart of the city. Although we had just missed bullfighting season, we visited the stadium located across the street from my flat, and learned about the tradition inside the stadium's museum. We relished the amazing Basque food, gorging on pintxos (tapas) and sipping on local tempranillo and crianza wines every chance we got. We wandered and shopped in the beautiful ancient district of Casco Viejo, and danced the nights away in local discos.

We also took adventures outside of Bilbao, traveling to places such as La Rioja – the lush and vast wine region just an hour south. Other journeys included San Sebastian, Santander, Pamplona, Madrid and Barcelona.

By the time six months had rolled around, I couldn't believe I had to say goodbye to my new family and the amazing city that I had grown to love. There were parts of me that were ready to go home. I missed my family and felt homesick many times throughout my stay. But a piece of me recognized Bilbao as my home and I felt torn. The night before I left, I stayed up all night with my friends, reflecting on all the wonderful memories we had made. After several tears and hugs, it was time to head back to Houston.

As I boarded the plane, I felt grateful things had turned out better than I could have ever expected. Bilbao would forever leave an imprint on my soul. The memories formed and the bonds forged from that experience added an exquisite chapter to my life story, and I could move forward knowing that I lived out one of my dreams.