

Just Another Wacky Corey Adventure...or...How I Thwarted a Robbery, Got Punched in the Process, and Ended Up in a Portuguese Hospital
February 22, 2012

It happened thirty minutes after we landed. Clara and I were spending the weekend in Porto, a small, seaside town in Portugal, and were on the metro from the airport to our hotel. The doors had just opened when suddenly, I heard a loud punch, a muffled yell, and out of the corner of my eye saw a man fall and two guys run off with a bag. I knew it was a punch & run before I even turned my head, so of course, as a good New Yorker, I jumped up to chase after them (“They can’t get away with that!” I remember my mind screaming). As I was about to leave the train, my common sense got the better of me. I turned to Clara: “Can you watch my stuff?” I asked hurriedly. “Can you make sure the train doesn’t leave?” “Claro,” she replied, partly in shock. *Of course.*

With that, I step out of the train and sprint toward the guys, who I quickly realize are stupid for a few reasons: 1) For being thieves, these guys are really slow. You’d think that if your system of larceny involves only two things—punching and running—you’d take the time to practice both; 2) They chose a train stop right by a hill. Runners like me relish hills; 3) They grabbed a heavy bag, so it’s quite amusing—even in my adrenaline-filled state—to watch them try to both carry it at the same time.

In any case, I catch up to them within twenty seconds. Now, I hadn’t really thought this out: I kinda assumed that if I just caught up to them, they’d quickly drop the bag and run...or that I’d be able to use my assertive teacher voice to get them to stand down, since it always worked in New York when I confronted aggressive perverts on the subway or teenage taggers in my neighborhood. Now here’s where I was stupid: 1) These guys punch people for a living, so there’s no reason they’d be scared of a 150-pound guy in a preppy-looking sweater; 2) Oh yeah, I’m in Portugal; English doesn’t work.

So when the smaller of the two comes back, I’m not expecting anything more than some words in Portuguese—maybe a push—since that’s how aggressive my world ever gets. Instead, I get a strong kick to the chest—and instead of dodging it, deflecting it or grabbing his leg, I simply get a flashback to my karate teacher telling us, “Kicks go farther than punches.”

I fall hard on the cobblestone ground, my breathing a bit off because of the blow, but I still jump up and run after them, keeping my distance to about ten meters this time. Then the bigger guy—who has at least 100 pounds on me—turns around, comes up to me, lets out a “Que?” and smashes his fist into the side of my head. Again, I’m so idiotically unprepared—even after the kick, I’m expecting no more than a shove and/or a conversation—that I fall to the ground again, feeling the pain reverberate in my jaw and the blood stream down my ear. But again, I get up, still follow, but with a new tactic.

“Ladrones!” I scream. “Ladrones!”, somehow hoping that the Spanish word for “robbers” that I learned in 7th grade from a story about a stolen rooster was the same in Portuguese. Then, realizing there was a word more likely to be universal, I screamed out, “Policia! Policia!” With that, people start coming out of the restaurant. I point to the guys carrying the bag: “Ladrones!”

The guys in the restaurant are old, but the sight of half a dozen new witnesses makes the thieves drop the bag and run off, still slow as ever.

I get excited 'cause I see the bag lying there now, but the restaurant patrons are confused. I must look a vicious sight, 'cause my ear is covered in blood and I'm panting out in broken Spanish**, "Gracias, gracias. Esta—esta no es mi maleta—es de—de un hombre in el—el tren. Ellos lo pegan." *Thank you, thank you. This isn't my bag—it's a guy from the train's. They punch him.*

Now that I have the bag, my first thought is I have to get back down to the train before it leaves with my own backpack, so I put the bag on its wheels and start running back, hoping my broken explanation will make clear to the patrons that *I'm* not stealing it now. Racing down a cobblestone hill with a heavy bag isn't easy, though, and I end up having to just carry it.

I get back to the train, unsure at first who to give the bag to, then find a man in his late 30's with a large gash over his left eye. He thanks me, but he's in so much pain—I can still hear the crack when they punched him—that the poor guy can't manage a smile. I hop back on the train, where Clara has faithfully stood by the door, screamed to the conductor that "We're not going anywhere!" and even managed to get a brag in: "That's *my boyfriend* chasing after them!" I assume I'll just be able to ride the train back to the hotel, but when I start dripping blood on the floor, I realize I should probably at least wait for the bleeding to stop before getting on another train.

When I see Clara, I hug her and apologize for "putting you through all this"—in other words, introducing her to the crazy, adventure-filled world of Corey Chapman—but she, at least in her shaken state, makes clear she's proud of me (if I may be so arrogant, being called a "hero" by your girlfriend, even if it's not true, feels pretty damn good!). Even some of the people from the restaurant came† down to see how I was and to offer congratulations. I was honestly embarrassed by all the hullabaloo, especially since the guy who had been punched clearly deserved a lot more attention than I did. Besides, I was taking the situation pretty light-heartedly, trying to keep Clara's spirits up and making light of the fact that I was wearing the coat I had been stabbed in six years before (and holding the same backpack I was stabbed over).

Clara insisted that I go to the hospital, despite my reservations: "Aw, come on—it's just bleeding a little!" I cried, disregarding all the blood on my sweater. Being an American, I was also worried about the cost of an ambulance, but Clara reassured me that "You're in Europe! It's free!" It wasn't.

Unfortunately, when I got to the hospital, I was told that the Spanish health card wouldn't work there, and I had to pay 220€. In retrospect, I could've said I couldn't pay (even the doctor was saying I should run), but I was so happy that it wasn't anywhere near American prices and so determined to get out of the hospital and start my romantic weekend that I paid it. I left the hospital with a few stitches in my ear, a swollen jaw, and a beautiful girlfriend waiting for me with a long kiss and a bottle of Port. In the end, the weekend was perfect--beyond incredible.

Still, a few things bother me:

1) The police never called me, and seeing that I got the best look at the guys, I'm assuming they're not putting forth any effort into catching them;

- 2) No one else from the train bothered to run after them, which saddens me. In New York, I would have been accompanied by half the guys on the train.
- 3) Even though I think I did what most Americans would probably do, I must admit I'm a bit peeved that I was basically charged 220€ for doing a good deed. I'll live, of course, but it's definitely a thorn in my side, especially since that's more than the flight and hotel put together.
- 4) I don't know if it's 'cause I'm a guy or 'cause I secretly believe I'm Superman, but I'm a bit annoyed with myself for not chasing after them longer, even if my entire goal was just to get the bag back and they were so much stronger than I. It's stupid, I know, but I just worry that they'll do this to someone else, especially an old woman.

Despite my adolescent complaints, though, I'm still really glad I did what I did. The guy whose bag was taken seemed fairly poor, and combined with getting punched I can't imagine what losing his bag would have been like^o. It's another good story to tell my students, even if I have to make clear they "shouldn't do this at home." Most important, though...I believe so strongly in the importance of those "everyday courtesies" I talk about—of standing up for strangers, standing up to injustice—that if I hadn't done anything, I would have regretted it for the rest of my life. I know not everyone subscribes to that belief ("Wait, you didn't know the guy?!" is a common reaction^{oo}), and I know it's dangerous (sorry, Mom), but I can't sit around when bad things are happening to innocent people around me, especially when it really took so little effort on my part. I know myself well enough to know that if I hadn't done what I did, I'd be sitting here typing about what a great time I had in Porto but all the while feeling empty inside.

** As I've discovered after my jogs, I am incapable of speaking Spanish after any type of exercise

† I know the verb tense just changed again, but the next part sounded better to me in the past

^o That's not entirely true: obviously I know what it's like to have a valuable bag stolen. Ironically, the same blue backpack I had in this story--the same one I was stabbed over--was the one that accompanied me through Europe eight years ago after losing my daypack. That probably isn't interesting to any of you, but I find the continuity amusing. "You need to throw away that coat--and that backpack--when you get out of the hospital," the ambulance driver told me.

^{oo} After calling my principal, most the school knew within 24 hours