

“Lagun onekin orenak labur”

Crisp blue letters on a ceramic trivet in Amatxi's kitchen. A wide-eyed 11 year old sits at the table, slouched, bored, yet intrigued by the words after a long two weeks at summer camp. He can't understand the phrase, but is too lazy to ask, just like how he's too lazy to ask for help with his “zinta” before dances, even though it always falls off mid-performance.

One year later, a young pre-teen sits in the same seat, a little less slouched than before, with sore calves and tired from the flight home. They taught him a lot of things this summer; he feels like a sponge.

Struggling, he tries to recount the words, songs, and dance steps he practiced in the dry air of Salt Lake City not too long ago. He's starting to like dance, and he's teaching his brother little by little too. He feels proud. Proud because he finally learned where his family comes from : a little village called Bidarray which seems so far away right now. He thinks he went there when he was much younger, and even has the photos to prove it, but he barely remembers. He also won a Basque number competition at camp, counting 90 numbers higher than he could just a year ago. He can't wait to show it off to his cousins in Euskal Herria...no one understands it when he says the name in Basque, he has to say France, but it doesn't feel like France. His camp roommates would understand, 3 Basque boys of the same age, one from San Francisco, the other two from near Los Angeles. He misses them, but he'll see them next year right? He sighs, the soup looks ready, placed on the trivet, might as well start eating.

A smiling teenager sits at his seat, just one month until high school. Seems daunting, but at least he's been having fun this year. He stayed with one of the Los Angeles kids for camp and brought along his Amatxi's world famous Basque cake. Tapping his finger to a far away beat, he recalls his first experience of a Basque “besta”, a big dance party with a live band. The smell of the Chino pilota court is fresh in his mind, he remembers the slight tang of dusty sweat in the Southern California heat, and his swollen hands unceremoniously beating a leather ball. Even now, his hands are numb to the heated touch of the soup bowl in front of him; the pot still sits on the same blue and white trivet, shading the enigmatic letters from his eyes. It's already late in the summer, and he can't wait to tell all his friends about all the fun times, to "spread the love" so to speak, hoping they can somehow vicariously live the bestas and huge Basque luncheons through his excited narration. Maybe he could even teach them how to play "mus"? After all, he finally figured out the perfect bluffing strategy, honed with the experiences of the past 3 Udalekus (the Basque word for summer camp which he finally learned to pronounce correctly). He looks longingly at the living room table, a stack of new cards sits waiting for the next hand to be played. A familiar earworm comes to mind as he picks up his spoon, the quick accordion riff to the start of a fandango.

Fourteen now, with a smile brimming from ear to ear. It had been the best summer of his life despite there being over a month of summer break still left. He had learned so much, from playing songs on the txistu to not falling over during his new favorite dance, "banako". Best of all, of course, he got to spend time with a bunch of new friends from all over the U.S with whom he shared one thing in common : being Basque. His identity had developed a long way in the short span of 2 weeks, and as he remembered the inside jokes and the good times over the low gurgle of boiling soup, he couldn't help letting a giddy chuckle slip through his unwavering smile. The last besta, on the climactic final day of camp, had gone on until 3 o'clock in the morning, and though his eyelids still felt heavy from the lack of sleep, he was already eagerly awaiting the next Basque festival in September, and the chance to see his friends again.

Hamabost, that's how you say fifteen right? Musing under a bright blue sky in the village of Elizondo, an exhausted adolescent sits at a table outside his hotel with the same beaming smile reflecting in his glass of mineral water. The vacant seat across from him was about to be filled by one of his closest friends; the very same roommate he had met in Salt Lake City not three years ago was bringing tapas to the table. In a massive feat of organization, nearly 50 Basque dancers from California had flown over to the Basque Country for a big parade. Most of them already knew each other from Udaleku or local bestas, and the massive reunion had been one of the main events of the entire celebration. When he had arrived earlier that week, he weirdly felt at home, constantly running into all the friends he had made over the years of Basque-American events in the streets of the small town. Most of them were even staying in the same

hotel as him, which came equipped with a pilota court where many memorable games were had. It was a once in a lifetime experience, and he was astounded that the thrill of last year's summer had been surpassed by the single night he had spent in Elizondo. Last night's music and the sounds of 50 Basque-Americans having the time of their lives under a starlit sky wisped through his head, until the thud of a steaming plate of tapas awoke him from his stupor.

Two years later, the same kid who so long ago struggled with what it meant to be Basque, sits at his own kitchen table, typing up an essay, reflecting on how he discovered his own Basque culture and hoped to spread it. He started seriously learning Basque during the quarantine that had prevented the last two Udalekus. Now too old to be a camper, he had hoped to be a counselor in the upcoming camps, to help teach the next generation of Basque-Americans what it truly means to be Basque, just as his own camp teachers and friends had taught him. Reading over the final draft of his essay for the umpteenth time he relives every besta, every mus tournament, every pilota game, every memory of the Basque community that shaped who he is today; his Amatxi's trivet smiles warmly at him from across the table, "Lagun onekin orenak labur", "With good friends, times are short".