

# *Second Wind*

*on the Way of Saint James*

*A NOVEL*



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# *Second Wind on the Way of St. James*

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## Episode 4





## The Brothers

Burgos to Hornillos

Monday, May 30

In contrast to the miles of neighborhoods on the east side, walking out of Burgos to the west was a piece of cake – a pleasant surprise. Many of the dwellings were single-family homes or expensive-looking garden-style apartment buildings. Abundant red, pink, and orange roses graced most yards. The Camino left the city streets and trailed through a park. The trail was wide, flat, clay, and reserved for pedestrians, bicycles, and baby strollers. Helen and Bert cleared the city and were in the countryside before Bert expected it. Mounds of white rocks lined the trail occasionally, as if dumped by a glacier or by a god, he thought. Brilliant red poppies scattered themselves in the rocks, inviting many tries for the perfect photograph.

Six and a half hours after leaving the outskirts of Burgos, they walked into the town of Hornillos. All the accommodations there were filled to capacity. Bert surprised himself by not feeling immediately panicked, even though arriving to a *completo* sign had been one of his biggest fears.

Helen's guidebook suggested there might be a shortage of accommodations. It recommended another inn in a nearby town, providing a phone number and the

information that the proprietors of the Casa Rural El Molino would pick up hikers and return them to the Camino in Hornillos the following morning.

Helen had committed to memory a few Spanish words and phrases useful for arranging accommodations, so Bert gave her his Blackberry and read off the number from the guidebook while she keyed it in. Having had good coverage most places along the trail, here the Blackberry appeared to have a weak signal. Even when it seemed she might have been able to make a connection with the inn, the phone rang and rang with no one answering.

They were sitting on the stone steps of the church above the small town square, which was crowded with people apparently staying in the filled *albergues*. The sun was blazing down on them. The weather had been good. Now they were hot, tired, discouraged, but not yet in a dither. There was nothing to do except sit next to their packs and keep trying to reach the *casa rural*. They had no Plan B, and Bert couldn't imagine how they might come up with one. This was one of those situations where the conventional advice was "just call a taxi." He wondered how they would go about getting one, especially given the problem they were having with the phone. And where would they tell the cab driver to take them? Finally on the fourth or fifth attempt someone did answer, but with the weak signal and Helen's inability to follow the rapid-fire

Spanish of the woman on the other end, no arrangement could be made before the call was dropped.

Helen's shoulders were tense. She got up, paced into the square and looked around. She paced back. Bert thought she was getting desperate. He couldn't imagine any way to help and knew that saying something like "things will work out somehow" would be worthy only of a nighttime TV comedy routine. He doubted she'd laugh.

She headed down a narrow side street off the square, saying she was going in search of a better signal. Bert stayed behind on the steps to look after their gear. He wished he knew how she was managing. He thought that Hornillos was small, but did it have a maze of streets where one could get lost?

When she finally returned he learned that it had been her good fortune to find a kind Spanish man who offered to help her with the call. Somehow through the teamwork of Helen and her helper, the call was made, the message was delivered, and the information conveyed that someone from the *casa rural* would be picking them up in thirty minutes.

"Wow, it's lucky you met that man; we have perhaps encountered our first Camino angel," Bert said. "After hearing so much about how the Camino will provide an angel when you need one, I was beginning to wonder if

we were scaring angels away. But he appeared, right when we were getting desperate.”

Helen laughed, greatly relieved things seemed to have gotten sorted out.

“Now that our lodgings are settled, I am reminded that in addition to being tired and hot, I’m hungry too,” she said.

They had found no place along the way to get lunch, and dinner was nowhere in sight. Bert decided to go back to a *tienda*—they had passed it just as they got to town—to get them some basic supplies to assuage their crying bellies. He liked their ‘*tienda picnics*’ with cheese, bread, chorizo, wine, and when they could get them, little plastic packages of green olives too. The packages read *aceitunas con huesos* or *aceitunas sin huesos*—literally olives with or without bones. While some American olives have pits, it appeared that in Spain they have bones.

Bert congratulated himself for having thought to bring along a fishing knife superbly adapted to preparing little feasts, with a minimum of cleanup required. Of course they never would have left home without a corkscrew.

He easily found everything he wanted in the tiny store, with one exception. He noted that the only loaf of bread visible was far too big. Not only was it too much for

them to eat in a day or two, but it was too long to fit in his pack. Thinking the store might have some supply of bread out of sight, he asked the woman behind the counter if she had a small loaf of bread – *tiene una pequeña pan?* She shook her head, and Bert worried that she had not understood him. But unruffled, and undaunted by Bert's poor Spanish, she took down the loaf, ripped off one end, and handed it to Bert. Apparently he was the one who didn't understand. He paid and hurried out, not wanting to miss the promised ride to the other town and its inn.

When he got back to the square, the vehicle from the *casa rural* had not yet arrived. Helen was chatting with some other people and told him a French couple they had met before were also waiting for a lift to El Molino. They leaned their packs against the front of an *albergue* and waited next to them in the thin band of shade cast by the building. Too weary, they made no attempt to strike up further conversations with the other hikers crowding the little square. The time for socializing might come later, when and if they had rested a while.

From the number of people lounging in the hot square, Bert concluded that the local *albergues* were not only full, but were probably lacking in indoor seating. Why else would so many people be spending the afternoon draped on steps in the sun-drenched village square? They had passed other *albergues* where people were hanging around, often in uninviting, starkly basic

courtyards. Other times when it was raining they had passed *albergues* where, peering inside, they saw people sitting on bunks in dark, dank-looking rooms. The image of what might lie ahead was troubling, but there seemed to be no other choices.

He was only too aware that they were at the mercy of the Camino when it came to getting someplace to stay for the night. Earlier a pilgrim had told them that giving yourself up to the Camino and learning to joyfully take what it offers you is one of its greatest gifts. Waiting for a ride that might or might not show up didn't seem like a gift just then. On the other hand, what Bert had seen in Hornillos was unappealing, and he was not altogether unhappy that the town was unable to accommodate them. He hoped they would do better by getting a second chance.

In the promised thirty-minute waiting period a few vehicles – one car, two small delivery trucks, and a farm tractor to be exact – entered the square, and kept going. Perhaps forty-five minutes had elapsed when a car stopped in the small square. Getting out, the young man said, “El Molino?”

Bert, Helen, the French couple, and two other people stepped forward. This was clearly a problem; there were too many of them. The small car could only barely accommodate four extra people with their packs and other gear, and fitting in six was beyond imagination. The man

said something in Spanish about expecting to pick up four people. He was obviously agitated, trying hard not to make eye contact with any of them, probably fearing that might indicate they should climb in.

Getting out his cell phone to call the inn, he apparently experienced the same problems Helen had encountered with the Blackberry – first no answer, and then twice his calls were dropped before he had gotten the needed information. The French couple, clearly impatient, put their backpacks in the open trunk, apparently expecting this to make a difference in their priority for transport.

Bert and Helen held back, however. It seemed clear that the man was not going to act without further instructions. Finally he got through and learned the names of the people he was to pick up. He asked Bert and Helen and the French couple – the man and woman – to get in the car. The others – two French women – were out of luck, but apparently in the queue and would be picked up later.

The trip to the Casa Rural El Molino convinced Bert that the guidebook had been guilty of a double exaggeration in reporting that it was in a nearby village. He guessed they must have traveled at least twenty miles over a patchwork of rural roads to reach their destination. Moreover, the place was far out in the countryside, with no village anywhere nearby. Even if they had gotten

directions and could have found their way, it would have taken them a very long day to walk from Hornillos to El Molino.

Once out of the car, they discovered that the place was crowded. Following some initial confusion about what to do with them, a young woman who Bert never saw again led the two couples to their rooms. It soon became clear why they had had such difficulty in getting through and then getting there. El Molino was hosting a huge family reunion with at least fifty attendees, and the staff was obviously overwhelmed. The driver who had picked them up, they learned, was a volunteer pressed into service when no one else was available. So they had a reasonable explanation for the difficulties they had encountered, and these were soon forgotten when they took measure of the inn.

Living up to its name, it was obviously an old mill, with a stream and a millrace running under the building. Ducks and geese stood on the banks. Bert imagined that the grounds must have been beautiful at a different time of the year, but right now they were covered by great accumulation of the cottony seeds from the nearby grove of poplar trees. The messy debris looked like snow. It was on the patio, the tables, the chairs, the lawns, and driveways. The waterways were clogged with several inches of soapy-looking foam.

The inside of the old mill had been extensively remodeled. Their room had all modern conveniences and was uncommonly large for a European lodging. They had a pleasant sitting room shared with several other rooms and access to a keg dispensing free beer. This they guessed was at the beneficence of the family reunion, rather than the inn. Spanish and French were mostly spoken, but they did get to listen to some painful English.

They were sitting in the large common room with the impatient souls who had thrown their packs into the open trunk in Hornillos. The man was on his cell phone trying to make room reservations for the next day. He obviously spoke no Spanish and apparently the innkeeper on the line spoke no French. English was the possible second choice for each. The Frenchman's was the most atrocious English Bert had ever heard. Somehow he seemed to have gotten the notion that it was appropriate to insert a "hello" after every second or third word. Bert thought the man might have confused the word "hello" with "okay."

"Hello, hello. Je veux . . . une chamber, hello. Avec toilet, hello. Tomorrow, deux persons, hello? Je ne comprends pas, hello! Pour two . . . two personnes . . . Hello!!"

It was ludicrous, amusing, and horrifying. Bert looked at Helen. She looked away so she wouldn't start to laugh out loud.

Toward evening the wind picked up and a thunderstorm appeared to be rolling in. The dozens of participants in the family reunion had been seated at outdoor tables and chairs in the grove of poplars not far from the building. Some left well before the storm hit, while others waited until the last minute. When the rain did begin to come down hard, the few holdouts fled. The family reunion was over, and the inn began to return to normal.

Dinner wasn't until nine o'clock, so they read for a while, trying to pick up the plots of the paperbacks that had languished in their backpacks for days.

When the dinner hour finally arrived, with other guests they filed into a large dining room with a long table. It ultimately seated the two of them and thirteen other guests. The French couple and the two French women who had to wait in Hornillos for the second shuttle sat at one end. Helen was able to speak with them with her passable French, but was unable to keep up with their conversation. She knew better than to try to talk to the man in English!

At the other end of the table were five Germans, including a man they had chatted with earlier. He spoke English, but it was clear that he enjoyed talking with the other German speakers more than working to converse with the two of them. They were near the middle of the table, as were two Spanish couples. It appeared to Bert

that this evening they would need to rely on each other for conversation.

He soon discovered otherwise. The man who sat across from Bert and Helen introduced himself as Oscar. His English did not come easily to him, and his three companions apparently did not speak it at all. Obviously friendly, outgoing, and energetic, Oscar was not to be deterred from making new friends by something as trivial as a language barrier. Using his limited English and patient Spanish that Bert found relatively easy to follow, he told them his story.

The other Spanish man, who sat next to Bert, was his brother Ernesto, he said. They were from Sevilla. They were walking the Camino from Burgos to Santiago together with their wives, who had never met before two days ago, when their adventure had begun. The brothers looked very much alike. They had close-cropped hair, round faces, and bushy black eyebrows. But what made them so resemble each other was their round, sparkling, brown eyes. Flashing eyes seemed to Bert a funny feature to note in two grown men, but there they were, undeniably calling attention to themselves.

Ernesto may have gotten a wordless cue from his brother, or perhaps understood more English than he let on, because he turned, gave a big smile, and shook hands with Bert, finishing with a pantomime introduction of his wife. Oscar belatedly introduced his wife also. She

reached out to shake hands and seemed as eager to be friendly as her husband, but she gave no indication of understanding the first word of English. She remained on the fringes of the conversation. Oscar patiently kept her informed of the drift of the conversation.

As they chatted, the first offerings of what was to be a multicourse meal were served, beginning with bread and olive oil. Immediately Bert understood that this was not to be the typical dinner. Instead, it was a real Spanish meal – the kind of meal the locals enjoyed while eating and talking long into the evening. An early course included fried strips of pork that the Spanish called *pancetta*. He recognized it as only a distant relative of the famous Italian bacon of the same name. Instead it was “side pork,” “sow belly,” or “white bacon,” a staple of country cooking in America, long in disfavor because of its artery-clogging qualities.

Ernesto was gray-headed and looked older than Oscar, and Helen asked whether he was Oscar’s big brother.

“*Once años,*” said Oscar.

“Eleven years,” said Helen.

Oscar nodded. In a remarkable combination of languages and gestures, he made known that he and his brother had not seen each other for almost twenty years.

He had been a teenager when his brother joined the army, and after the army Ernesto had gone to live in Venezuela. He had returned to live in Spain recently, and through relatives the brothers had gotten in touch. Realizing that they had been separated for almost their entire lifetimes, they felt they had much to catch up on. They decided to walk the Camino together to get reacquainted. So far they had already discovered they had much in common and were obviously enjoying each other's company.

Their wives weren't sure that the Camino was for them. Indeed, the brothers were walking and planning to continue all the way to Santiago, but the wives were traveling by car. It wasn't clear to Bert whether they would be following their husbands along the way and joining them from time to time or whether they were just dropping them off. He did pick up that the intention was that the wives would be getting to know one another also.

Perhaps they are, thought Bert, but it is clear that they are not enjoying the experience nearly as much as were their husbands.

Oscar pointed out a framed poster on the wall behind Bert and Helen that they hadn't noticed. It was an advertisement for an American movie about the Camino called *The Way*. They had heard of it and had even seen a trailer. They didn't know until Oscar told them, however, that the cast and crew had stayed in this very inn during filming. Bert resolved to see the film when it was released

in the United States, hoping to catch scenes of El Molino and possibly other familiar sights from the Camino.

Oscar wasn't finished. They had remarked about the food, and he had some dining suggestions for them. Most of his suggestions seemed to be local specialties, and neither Bert nor Helen could understand what he meant. He asked whether they had paper with them, and Helen took out a small notebook she carried. He got his wife to produce a pen, and he wrote down some things they should ask for when the opportunity arose. When Bert asked for the meaning of one word, he drew a little picture of a goat, and said *joven*, indicating that the meat in the dish was from a young goat.

The food and wine kept coming, then cheeses, and then a sampler of aperitifs. Just after eleven the meal was declared to be finished, and everyone got up to leave.

Thinking about the chaotic arrangements that had gotten them to El Molino, Bert was a bit concerned about the following morning and how they would get back on the Camino. Helen had overheard a discussion between one of the French women and the owner's wife concerning arrangements for the morning. She said that from what she could make of the exchange, it appeared that the French couple wanted to be delivered to Hornillos at seven, and the other woman was offering them transport at nine. Helen hadn't heard the resolution of this apparent conflict, but she told Bert she doubted that the French

woman would be leaving at seven. Bert would also have preferred seven, but decided that eight would be fine. If they didn't leave until after nine, however, they might have trouble making it to Castrojeriz in good time. They discussed it and decided they would be ready to depart at eight, but at the same time be ready to go with the flow. They surely wouldn't be walking back to Hornillos.

As things developed the next morning, they had finished breakfast, paid their remarkably inexpensive bill, and were ready to leave for Hornillos at ten before eight. They waited only a few minutes before the owner showed up in an ancient and obviously much used Range Rover and sped them off to Hornillos.

Despite the lateness of the night before, Bert felt refreshed. They were ready to begin walking as soon as they were discharged into the same square where they had been picked up a scant seventeen hours before.

Bert began the conversation once they were out on the open road.

"Meeting Oscar and Ernesto for some reason reminded me of my own family. It struck me that I know my brother and sister about as well as the Spanish brothers knew each other. I haven't exactly lost track of them. I think I could get in touch with them if necessary. But I haven't seen either of them in years. I can't imagine we would have much in common. On the other hand,

who's to say? Oscar and Ernesto seem to be getting along all right, despite the significant age difference. I know a reunion of that kind with my siblings will never happen, but the brothers did make me think about them."

"Maureen, Donna, and I were quite close when we were growing up, even though I am a couple of years older and only a half-sister. We're in touch mainly by e-mail. I think we have a good relationship, but we aren't all that close any more. Their lives have been different from mine. They've had long marriages and children. Both of them went to work when their kids started school. They have good jobs, but you wouldn't really say they have careers like ours. I like both of them, but we haven't had many shared experiences since our childhood days. I was a little surprised that they seemed to be interested in our Camino."

"Do you see them often?" Bert said, finding many things having to do with family dynamics unfamiliar, and therefore mildly interesting.

"I see each of them maybe once a year, on average. Weddings, funerals, graduations usually provide the reason. Lacking one of those events, I try to make an effort to visit. It's been a bit harder since I've been at the refuge than when I had an eight to five job. I'm both tied down and far from the main travel hubs. You've touched a tender spot here. I wish I could be a better sister to them. I

may be wrong, but I think if I tried harder I might still be helpful to them, like when I was their big sister.”

“Well, maybe you can feel better now that you’ve discovered someone who is far worse at holding up his end of sister- and brotherhood than you are,” said Bert, hoping to end the discussion on a lighthearted note.

Helen seemed to want to move on to another topic also.

“I’m glad that all the *albergues*, *hostals*, hotels, and the like in Hornillos were *completo*,” she said. “El Molino was a real experience.”

“I agree. We saw the old mill, had a real Spanish meal, met the brothers, slept in nice beds, and we got to speed at a hundred kilometers an hour over crumbling Spanish country roads in a rickety Range Rover. We enjoyed the first several of our experiences and survived the last.”

“I really liked Oscar. Both brothers. I liked them both. They seemed so happy to have rediscovered each other. Maybe I should get my sisters to come on the Camino with me sometime. Silly thought! They’re much too busy, I doubt they enjoy walking, and what would we talk about?”

Bert looked over at her, curious about her unusual mention of her sisters. But she was looking off to the side and he didn't catch her eye.

"Back to my first thought," she said. "After meeting Oscar, I don't think I'll ever again be reluctant to talk with somebody just because I'm not good at their language. If there had been other English speakers, we would have had to talk with them, and that probably wouldn't have been any fun at all."

"Yeah, it was a good time," said Bert. *La Noche Blanca* and then El Molino – both had been special, almost magical experiences. Maybe the Camino was being kind to them, and maybe more good things awaited them.

"And the idea," said Helen, interrupting his thoughts. "Imagine the idea of using a walk on the Camino as a way of reconnecting with somebody you haven't seen in a long time. I wonder . . . how could anybody ever come up with a preposterous idea like that?"

This time she looked toward him just as he was looking to her.

"I wonder," said Bert, noting the teasing in her eye.

# The Seeker

Castrojeriz to Fromista

Wednesday, June 1

Bert was feeling good as they left Castrojeriz and headed toward Fromista. Helen was still fussing with her pack from time to time. But he felt his body getting almost used to the walking. They stopped a couple of times for coffee and to rest, arriving on the outskirts of Fromista weary, but not distressed. They had first climbed, and then descended a steep hill. It had been a long walk – nearly sixteen miles – but the last stretch had been easy, along a canal.

Two features struck Bert about today's walk: the beauty of the wide vistas on the Meseta, and the strength of the wind that relentlessly blew across them. The scrubby elm trees planted along the canal permanently leaned to the south. Bert thought he might lean permanently to the left too if he had to walk with the wind against him like this for many days in a row.

Still, the sky was dramatic. Clouds, some of them ominously dark, rushed across the bright blue background, pushed by the powerful air. Something about today's sky looked Spanish to him, probably because El Greco might have painted it. Perhaps for the first time, Bert thought that maybe he could really walk five

hundred miles. The notion surprised him when it crept into his consciousness.

Helen interrupted his thoughts. “There’s an eleventh century church in Fromista that has been restored to its pure Romanesque roots, simple and unadorned. Also, my guidebook mentions another church it says is worth a visit.” She was consulting the book as they walked, well attuned to sights along the way.

Bert could not be less enthusiastic about visiting another church. He was ready for a break after all these miles, and one that involved a large beer appealed to him much more than a church visit. His feet and legs might be getting used to walking, but nevertheless they were tired – no blisters, but plenty of soreness. He hoped she would forget any church visits by the time they got to town, but doubted she would.

Coming to the end of the canal, they walked on a concrete catwalk over a spillway. Descending a short hill, they entered the town. When the first church appeared in the middle of a small square, Bert noted that it was not topped as most seemed to be, by at least one large stork nest. He knew they would be visiting it.

Being in churches – not the museum-like cathedrals, but those in everyday use – continued to afflict him with a strong sense of unease. It made him feel like an imposter. Churches are meant for people who use them for worship,

he thought, and not as tourist attractions. What if some true believer challenged him in a church and asked him what he was doing there? The challenger might identify the intruder – him – as someone looking for a freak show, and that might not be far from the truth. Why would he be there if not to gawk at curious objects related to strange rituals? Even worse, oftentimes there were people in the churches who were praying or in some kind of spiritual reverie, and observing them made him feel like a voyeur – looking in on something intensely private and not meant for the sightseer.

Helen liked visiting churches. He knew she would take her time, squinting in the dim light at the guidebook and learning of the significance of the special features, often statues or paintings, and occasionally the resting places of notable personages. He thought she was no more a churchgoer than him, but she seemed immune to the kind of sensitivities that caused his extreme discomfort.

Suddenly it hit him. He felt like an imposter and a voyeur much of the time on this whole trip. Despite his having read that pilgrims were originally thought of as foreigners or wanderers, he couldn't shake the sense that the Camino was a pilgrimage trail. Nor the feeling that a pilgrimage is primarily a religious experience.

Even thinking of himself as a wanderer rather than a pilgrim, Bert continued to be put off by all the religious touchstones. To him even the concept of spirituality was

outside the realm of reason, and was to be classified with sorcery, witchcraft, and other remnants of the Dark Ages.

Nothing along the Camino so far had diminished his puzzlement; he felt surrounded by ideas and concepts that strayed over the edge of rationality. Helen seemed untroubled by the strangeness. She told him his sensitivity was misplaced but hadn't been able to explain this in terms he could accept. Communication between them had never been flawless, and this was another disconnect. How could she be so accepting of something she couldn't adequately explain?

Outside the church, Bert steeled himself for the awkward moments inside. Trying not to be obvious to the point of rudeness, he would look for the earliest opportunity to leave the stuffy surroundings and regain the freedom of the open air.

The restored church was small. His mind was eased somewhat by the fact that this wasn't one of those great gaudy Gothic or Baroque edifices with rich trappings and ornate treatments that he found off-putting, even as he admired the art of a place like the Burgos cathedral. This was part of his confusion. He had a gut feeling that whatever spirituality was about, it had little to do with the jewels, gold leaf, and over-the-top ornamentation, the kinds of material riches he had seen in abundance in churches. But obviously there were many who felt differently; otherwise why would they have stocked their

churches with works of art? And why would churchgoers be so captivated by them?

As they stood by the entrance, Helen was again reading. "Though relatively small, this church has three aisles. Most notable of its parts is the right or south apse, which was remodeled in the Baroque style in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its claim to fame is the highly regarded and hauntingly lifelike statue of Santiago Matamoros, rendered in the eighteenth century by Brother Marcello of the nearby Monastery of Saint Julien. The remainder of the church is unremarkable, although it has been heralded by a few purists as an outstanding example of the Romanesque architectural tradition. It contains no artwork or other features of particular note."

Bert had seen the statue of Santiago Matamoros above the entrance to the cathedral in Logroño. The name, he learned, translates in English as Saint James the Moorslayer. The statue showed the saint as he was reported to have miraculously appeared on several battlefields in the protracted war against the Moors. Decked out in a suit of armor, and mounted on a large horse, he was in the act of swinging a huge sword. Beneath the horse's hooves were the headless bodies and severed heads of the unfortunate Moors. Perhaps Saint James in the statue in this church would be lifelike, but what impressed Bert in the other statue he had seen were

the lifelike – or perhaps deathlike was a more apt description – expressions on the severed heads. The effect was disturbing and in a way, he thought, almost obscene.

Not wishing to experience this Moorslayer up close, Bert resolved to stay in the back of the church, hoping to find a place in the shadows where he could wait for Helen to finish her self-guided tour. It turned out that the door they entered through was at the side of the building, so once inside, Bert departed from Helen and quickly made his way toward the back, trying his best to be invisible to the two people he saw sitting in the pews. Of course, he stubbed his toe on a kneeler, making a noise that echoed through the church, and causing at least one of the apparent worshipers to look his way. Grateful that he hadn't reflexively let out a real swear word, he managed to keep the "damn" he nearly uttered under his breath.

When he reached the rear of the church, he was pleased to discover that it was quite dark, as he had hoped. This church was almost intimate, and he at first thought he might feel more like an intruder here than in one of the big, museum-like churches. Somehow he felt unaccountably comfortable here in the shadows, however.

He took measure of the structure. He found the front of the church attracting his attention. Most of the light was coming from tall, clear windows at the front. They bathed the interior in soft white.

The statue of the Moorslayer and the remodeled part of the church that the guidebook had cited were out of sight, and Bert realized that it was the unspoiled, but “unremarkable” Romanesque part that he was viewing. Keying on the word “unremarkable,” he was bemused. Something was wrong with the guidebook or with him, because to his mind this was clearly the most remarkable church he had ever visited. They had seen several scenic vistas in the Spanish countryside. But setting them aside, in some inexplicable way this was the most remarkable place and remarkable scene he’d experienced on the trip so far. How could that be?

Almost free of adornment, the building itself spoke eloquently to him of its purpose; the tall rounded arches enclosing the space. Yes, that was it, the space. It was a space lofty enough and beautiful enough to accommodate something. He supposed that something must be the towering faith of its builders, or maybe of the faithful it was intended to serve.

Bert had a strange desire to talk to these men who almost a thousand years before had built the church. Was he right in guessing their intention? But of course they were long gone, and he doubted he would ever be able even to find out who they were, because it seemed likely that their handiwork was the only trace left of them. Unquestionably lacking their faith, he still felt that whoever they were, they had somehow found a way to

speak to him, to deliver a millennium later – a remarkable forty or fifty generations later – the precise message they must have intended – hoped, perhaps – to convey. He understood nothing about what they knew and of course did not and would not share their faith, but they had told him eloquently of their devotion!

Bert didn't move, and he realized he was no longer in any hurry to get outside. He had encountered something unexpected and wasn't quite ready to let go of it, at least until he knew what it was. He thought he understood better, but his experience was not the satisfied "ah ha" reaction one gets upon having found the answer to a vexing question. Indeed, this wasn't something he could readily explain. This instead was something different, almost disturbing.

Helen was apparently still in the other part of the church. But he saw movement. His eyes followed an old woman who had been sitting in a pew when he came in. She got up as if to leave and knelt briefly, but didn't go directly to the door as he expected. She instead went to an iron rack in which perhaps twenty candles in little glass cups were arrayed. Taking an object from beneath the rack, she used it to light one of the candles, adding its light to that of two already burning. Then she left, pausing by the door to do something. Bert's mind was in overdrive. He returned his gaze to the church. Yes, it had a strange allure; most certainly a strangeness.

He saw Helen at the front of the church. She must have examined the art objects, and was now making a more cursory observation of the other features of the church. It would soon be time to leave. Perhaps his autopilot kicked in. Without really thinking about it, Bert moved to the candle rack where he had seen the woman. He took a taper from underneath and lit another candle, taking a light from the flame of the one the woman had lit. He noted a coin slot on the front of the metal rack and, fishing in his pocket, found a brass half-euro coin. Dropping it in the slot, his contribution was recorded by a loud clanking sound that reverberated through the emptiness of the church.

Ignoring the disturbance he had caused, he made his way outside. He had no logical narrative for what he'd just done.

Helen came out a few minutes later. "I saw you lighting a candle in there," she said.

Bert acknowledged with a nod that he had indeed done so, but offered no explanation.

"Why did you do that?" She said this impatiently, as if she believed he had a ready answer but was holding out in order to vex her.

"I don't know," Bert said, wishing he had an answer for his own bewildering, but still intriguing, experience.

Could Helen see the confusion that must be registering on his face? He could read nothing from the look on hers. The moment was short-lived, because three noisy teenage boys came bounding up.

*“¿Aleman?”* said the apparent leader.

*“No. Norteamericanos,”* replied Bert.

“Have a nice day,” the spokesman called after them as they started down the trail.

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Sunday, June 5 9:22 PM

To: task\_force\_alpha@doe.gov

Cc: Maureen327@midnet.net, Donna121@midnet.net

From: bert\_task\_force\_alpha@doe.gov

Subject: Camino Report #4

Now we're in the mid-sized town of Sahagún. We took a rest day in Burgos, as Helen reported. Burgos is a beautiful city. After 14 days of walking, my body felt deserving of the luxury. I would have been sending more updates, but we haven't been near a computer, and I haven't had the energy to go out looking for one. Anyway, it's been a while, so I'll try to rattle off the highlights.

After Burgos we had generally pleasant walking, still on the Meseta and still liking it. At one point we passed the impressive ruins of the fifteenth century convent of San Anton. Tall ruins of the convent walls remained standing and we rested in their shade. There were large openings high above us where windows would have been on a second story of the building. Clouds floating in a rich blue sky were framed in

the window spaces. The Camino was along a country road at that point and the road ran right through the ruins.

Not long after that we were walking under the ruins of a hilltop castle near the town of Castrojeriz. The guidebook said the hill had been fortified since pre-Roman times, but the present castle dates from the ninth century. We were too tired to walk up the hill to get a better look, and from the ground it looked like little more than crumbling walls.

We had more walking through picturesque countryside, often enjoying vistas where we could see the gravel road snake ahead of us for miles. That was especially true just after Castrojeriz. We climbed a steep hill coming out of there. When we crested the hill, the vista was spectacular, consisting of many rolling miles bathed in the greenest wheat. The steep downslope was a real challenge. We passed a huge monastery turned into a luxury hotel. Wheat fields dotted with occasional bright red poppies were almost always with us as we walked, as were cordial hikers at our overnight stops.

Sahagún is an interesting town with more ruins of monasteries. One surprise it has given us is a look into family life that we never would have imagined. Sitting around the plaza mayor, the main square, we saw the open part of the square filled with young children, running, screaming, and propelling wheeled vehicles ranging from tricycles to skateboards. Their parents were sitting at tables in sidewalk cafés around the square, chatting and sipping on drinks. At nine o'clock, more or less, with daylight still abundant, all cleared out, presumably heading home for the evening meal. So in Sahagún, at least, the village square combines as a playground and meeting place for young parents. We noticed it too in Burgos, but thought it might have been that many people were in town for the festival. Now we think plazas are probably always community gathering-places.

Today the center of Sahagún filled up with vendors. At first we thought it was a farmers' market, but most of the stalls were selling ordinary merchandise like handbags and tee shirts. Despite all the people around, for some reason we haven't discovered, we have not had good luck finding our evening meal. Helen thinks this town may not be one of the major stops on the Camino, and indeed, we have seen relatively few hikers here. We couldn't find a peregrino meal tonight, but got sandwiches—thickly piled slices of Iberian ham encased in crusty bread—in a bar. They were good, and a nice break from the routine.

In addition to Internet access, one of the amenities here in Sahagún is a pharmacy, where we loaded up on remedies. Helen got two kinds of patches useful in treating or preventing blisters. Neither of us has gotten a blister yet, but we are both suffering from non-blistersore spots on our overstressed feet. I got some 300-milligram ibuprofen capsules. They help to dull the pain in my left knee. Also, the knee gave out yesterday, and they take care of the couple of bruises I got in the fall.

I expect we'll be off to an early start on the trail tomorrow.

By the way, I've noticed a big falloff in the Task Force's e-mail traffic lately. Can it be that now that I'm on leave, everybody else has given themselves permission to enjoy a bit of down time?

Bert

P.S. Regarding the late timing of the festival of lights in Burgos and dinner time in Sahagún: Most of Spain is at the same longitudinal zone as Great Britain, and on that basis should be in the Greenwich (GMT) Time Zone. It is, however, officially in the Central European Time Zone (GMT+1), presumably to be more in sync with its continental neighbors. As a result, at this time of the year darkness doesn't fall until nearly 10 o'clock. Maybe that's why they eat dinner so late.

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Sunday, June 5 9:23PM

To: Maureen327@midnet.net, Donna121@midnet.net

From: Helen.morgia@southnet.com

Subject: People on the Camino

Maureen and Donna,

Bert and I each snagged a computer tonight in this Internet café. In the past we have been lucky to get one, rather than two at one time. I am sure he will be giving the description of the trail and the towns. I thought you might like to know a bit about some of the people we have met. He is more into the environment than the people, so I doubt he will mention any of them. But to me there have been many interesting folks. We met a young woman, in her thirties I'd guess, who told us that last year she'd walked the whole Camino, alone, in the winter. She loved the quiet of the snow-covered trail and the fact that she was usually the only one in the albergue at night. It made her feel she could commune with the pilgrims of medieval times.

While Bert washed clothes outside an albergue one afternoon, I chatted with a French woman who seemed about my age. I was doing pretty well with my French. She had gotten tired along the trail and caught a bus from the last town before that one, but her husband had decided to walk the distance. He arrived after we'd been talking for thirty minutes or so. In French she told him that I spoke French but not very well, so he should speak slowly. Of course, I understood every word she said and when we all realized it, the three of us had a great laugh. I explained the joke to Bert when he saw the scene and came to investigate. We have seen that couple twice since and become pretty good friends. Their English is about on the level of my French, so we switch back and forth, especially when Bert's with us.

One final couple to share, for now—bikers! I suppose I should call them “cyclists,” because they drive bicycles, not Harleys. As much as we have come to fear people on bikes, we ended up at a dinner table with a couple from England who started their Camino in Rome! I had asked where they stayed the night before, just as small talk. But the town they mentioned was about fifty miles behind us. I think they enjoyed springing surprises like that on hikers because just as I was about to say “Where?” they laughed and told us they were riding bikes. They mentioned how hard it is to find routes that are not along the highways and how hard they try not to scare hikers. It gave us a new perspective, although did not lessen my fear of their bikes very much.

We have to feed a euro coin into these computers every fifteen minutes. My time and euro coins are used up, so I’ll close for now. Hasta pronto.

Helen the Hiker

## Stories

El Burgo Ranero

Monday, June 6

Helen and Bert were enjoying an afternoon beer at an outdoor table at the café-bar, El Peregrino, in El Burgo Ranero, the town of frogs. Resting after their walk from Sahagún, they were sitting at a sidewalk table across the street from their *albergue*. Afternoon rest and recuperation had been the norm for them as they seemed to be for most other hikers. Like them, many walked twelve to sixteen miles each day, at a two- to three-miles-per-hour pace, and arrived at their destinations by early afternoon. Since dinners were rarely available before seven-thirty or eight, the downtime was a constant feature of their days.

Bert had said he was curious about the town's name, and Helen had done some research. The guidebook noted that opinions varied on the source. One story suggested that it had been a commercial center – a marketplace specializing in buying and selling frogs for the dinner table. The other cited the frogs inhabiting the abundant wetlands in the area. This explanation seemed adequate to Helen. A nearby wetland resonated with the croaking of frogs, and one could not be in town for long without noticing them. Of course, neither explanation excluded the other one. Earlier they had visited the Laguna Manzana, a one- to two-acre wetland and taken note of the descendants of the frogs that might long ago have given

the place its name. Storyboards in kiosks around the wetland featured frogs and other wildlife.

As befits afternoon hours given to relaxation, their talk was mostly about small things they had observed along the way.

“This is another area where suitable building stones must be in short supply because almost all the older buildings are made of adobe.” Helen was reading her guidebook and occasionally paraphrased what she had learned for Bert’s benefit. In this case, the guidebook had pointed out the prevalence of adobe construction in a town they had passed through earlier.

“The ones we saw earlier were mainly half-timbered, but these seem to be made entirely of pale yellow mud bricks,” Bert said. “Perhaps timber was hard to come by here as well as stones. The problem with adobe is that the walls need to be protected from water, or the bricks will eventually turn back into mud and wash away.”

Bert pointed down the street in the direction of the lagoon and gestured to the left.

“Did you notice a ways back that there was an adobe wall surrounding a courtyard or corral, and it had a little roof along all its length?”

Helen looked where he indicated and nodded. She had indeed seen one like that, and mentioned another

where the roofing had been damaged and the wall was eroding away. She said the guidebook indicated that the new *albergue* where they were staying had been built by using the traditional adobe construction technique, which in modern times had fallen into almost complete disuse.

Their discussion was interrupted by a man in a tan short-sleeved camp shirt and dark gray convertible pants who came over to their table, trailed several feet behind by a woman with short auburn curls with gray streaks. Her skin was also sort of auburn; the sun and wind of the trail showed in her face. It was wrinkled in a healthy-looking way, if that's not an oxymoron, thought Helen.

"May we join you?" The man said. "I heard you speaking English."

"Please do," said Bert, and Helen nodded in agreement.

"We're from Ireland. My name is Jack, and this is my wife Emma – Jack and Emma Rattigan. Where might the two of you be from?"

Perhaps a few years older than the Americans, Jack and Emma were trim and fit-looking. Their bodies moved in a manner that was almost spritely. They made Helen want to sit up straighter. Reposing as they were, she and Bert must look out of shape and lethargic by comparison.

They introduced themselves, offering only their first names. When these preliminaries were complete and beers sat in front of everyone, it became evident that the Rattigans had an agenda. They were tellers, listeners, and collectors of stories. They indicated that, as purveyors and consumers of stories, they wanted to tell their own tale, and they hoped they would be rewarded by hearing Bert and Helen's as well.

"I'm retired," said Jack, not for the first time tugging on his goatee. "I worked as an engineer with the national gas company in Dublin. A few years ago I became redundant, was considered expendable. I was offered the delightful opportunity of an early retirement. Emma was a nurse working irregular hours, and she decided to retire too."

"We've always been outdoors people," added Emma. "We've hiked all over Ireland and a good part of England, too, so the opportunity for early retirement was just right for us. Hiking is not an expensive pastime, so we don't need a lot of money to pursue our passion. Of course we do need a good deal of time, so early retirement was exactly what we wanted."

"And luckily for the Irish consumers, the gas company so far has managed to keep people's furnaces and cooking fires going even without the considerable skills of this particular engineer," said Jack.

The couple looked at each other and smiled slightly. It was clear to Helen neither of them was in any measure distressed by Jack's having become redundant.

"What brought you to the Camino?" Helen asked, hoping that Bert was keeping some kind of file of the answers she'd received to that question.

"This is our fourth Camino, but there is more to the story. We heard about it some years ago – five or six it was – and it seemed a natural for two confirmed walkers like us. Our first time was five years ago. We walked the whole thing. The French route, that is, beginning in Le Puy, in France, and continuing to Santiago. It was like a dream come true for us. We wondered why it had taken us so long to discover it."

Emma picked up the narrative, her face showing obvious pleasure as she recounted happy experiences. "We liked it so much that we decided to do it again, and the second time we did the La Plata route, beginning in Seville in southern Spain. We were hooked on the walking."

They continued their story in tag-team fashion.

"From there we headed to Santiago. As you may know, one branch of the Via de la Plata – the La Plata route – joins the French route in Astorga. We walked from Astorga to Rabanal, and I remember that walk well. At

one point, we were set upon by hundreds of flies. Looking like house flies, but a bit smaller, they swarmed all around us. They didn't seem to want to bite, or if they did, they weren't very good at it. They did seem to want to land on us and they were highly distracting. They were worst when we walked through a pine forest, but mostly thinned out by the time we got to Rabanal and made our way up the steep street to our *albergue*. We knew it well and having stayed there the first year, we quickly forgot about the flies. It is the Albergue Guacelmo, operated by the British Confraternity of Saint James."

They related how they learned there that the *albergue* is run by volunteers from the Confraternity, that there are many eager volunteers, and that members have to qualify and sometimes must wait years for the opening of a volunteer slot. Here was a new challenge, and one that combined their love of the Camino with the opportunity to meet people and learn of their stories. Eager to try it, they had joined the Confraternity, attended a short training session, and put their names in a queue as a couple of would-be volunteer workers. They were told that the waiting list was quite long, and that their chances of early acceptance might not be helped by that fact that slots at the same time would have to be found for both of them.

They had settled in for a long wait, planning to enjoy other adventures before they heard from the Confraternity.

They had almost forgotten about their request when they were surprised and delighted the very next year to hear that their names had come up. There had been a cancellation owing to health, others who were higher on the list couldn't reschedule, and they got the opportunity to go to Rabanal for two weeks of midsummer volunteering. They quickly cancelled their other plans and began to prepare. Time was short before their assignment was to begin, and checking the routes and schedules, they decided to take a train to Burgos, after a quick flight into Madrid, and to walk from there, arriving in Rabanal the day before they were to begin work.

"It was the experience of a lifetime," said Emma. "Our relatively short walk was filled with anticipation, and once we arrived we soon knew we wouldn't be disappointed. We knew – or at least thought we knew – all about the Camino, and we had expected to spend many enjoyable hours with the pilgrims. We completely underestimated what a great joy it would be to be providing service to other people. One can disparage mopping up sleeping chambers, doing laundry, cleaning out the loo, washing dishes, buying groceries, and cooking basic meals for crowds, but all of those activities take on a completely new aspect when you are doing them in the

spirit of love for your fellow pilgrims. We were exhausted most of the time, but the experience was well worth it.”

With a nod to Emma, Jack took over the story. “Were there difficult people to deal with? Of course there were, but in most instances the difficulties were not of the people’s making. I remember only two instances where I felt real concern. One was the arrival of a pilgrim whose style I’ve decided to call ‘grunge.’ You’re Americans, so you’ve probably heard that word before. This chap wanted a space in one of the dormitories. Together with a few other individuals we have seen on the Camino, this young man was wearing tattered clothes and boots with no laces, carrying what gear he had in an old blanket, and he was exceptionally dirty. He was the kind of person you would not want inflict on other pilgrims. Think of what it would be like if someone that dirty and smelly were in the bunk above yours.”

“Or the one next to it,” Emma added.

“What did you do?” Helen said. “We’ve endured most of the hardships and annoyances of sharing cramped spaces with other walkers, but we’ve been spared that one. So far.”

“Well, I didn’t know what I was going to do. I was glad it wasn’t Emma dealing with him. I did need to do something, and the only reasonable thing I could think of was to bring the whole thing out into the light of day. I

told him that we could not offer him a space because we had standards of hygiene that he didn't meet. Other lodgings were available in Rabanal, I said, and he should try his luck in one of them. He went away without a word, which was a good thing because if he had asked for documentation of our standards of hygiene, I would have had nothing to show him. I suspect he may have gotten similar treatment in other *albergues*."

"We saw one of your grunge pilgrims a couple of days ago," said Bert. "It didn't occur to me until just now, but at the time Helen mentioned how awful it would be to find oneself in close quarters with someone like that. As we all know, even some quite clean-looking people exude unpleasant aromas."

Bert's nose wrinkled up, as if he could still smell one of them.

Jack continued. "The other difficult, and vaguely related, situation had to do with bedbugs. Concerns about them, often exaggerated but not wholly unwarranted, have been on the increase in all parts of the Camino in recent years. It would be hard to imagine anything more conducive to the spread of bedbugs than the Camino, with its crowded conditions, rare laundry facilities, and frequent travel from lodging to lodging. Could you as a *hospitalero* — that's what we volunteers call ourselves — offer accommodations to someone who you believed had been exposed and was possibly carrying bedbugs into

your *albergue*? Fortunately this problem never came up when we were *hospitaleros*. I think most *albergues* deal with the problem not on the people end of it, but instead on the other end, by careful sanitation of their facilities. I've heard that a good clothes dryer may be the most effective treatment of possibly infested bedclothes."

"Jack has talked about difficult situations, but most of the difficulties we encountered had to do with people who needed help, and it was a great feeling for us when we were able to offer help to them. Someone might have lost important medications, and we could offer assistance in getting replacements. More often than you would think, pilgrims and some or all of their gear get separated, and we were able sometimes to solve the problems for them. We needed to arrange travel into Astorga frequently to get food and other supplies, and often we could transport pilgrims, too, to deal with some kind of problem. One young man had run out of cash. We couldn't bankroll the rest of his Camino, but we could see to it that he got to a bank. Other people ran out of other things, and we were able to tide them over until they could get to a bigger town."

Looking at Emma, dressed pretty much like every other woman along the route, Helen thought how even if she were rich enough to bankroll someone's Camino, you'd never be able to guess by how she looked. On the Camino it would be really hard to guess who has deep

pockets. On the other hand, Emma's kindness and interest in people were clear in the open way she looked at you and smiled. This is someone you would know you could rely on for a kindness when you needed it.

"Do you speak Spanish or another language fluently?" Helen said, trying without success to picture herself as a *hospitalera*. In her imagination she wondered what she could do to comfort a sobbing young pilgrim who poured out a story that was incomprehensible to her unless it was in English. Even if it were in French, she imagined herself as catching too few of the words to be much help. She had always been the one to cheer up her sisters when things went wrong at school or a date was a disaster. But at an *albergue* she pictured herself as a willing and even eager consoler, but tragically flawed by her lack of language skills.

"Oh it's good to have a second language, and I think being fluent in another one would improve your chances of being selected as a volunteer. Emma and I have been studying Spanish for several years, although I'm sorry to say that we still aren't very good at it. We know quite a bit, but I don't think we are anywhere close to fluent. If I were staffing an *albergue*, I think I would prefer to have all the major languages represented by at least one person each, plus all of them would have English or Spanish as a second language. Of course, English is an obvious common language of members of the British

Confraternity, so that is something we share with other members. Having said that, I have to add that as repeat pilgrims and as *hospitaleros* we have had very few problems with language. Most people know enough of the important words and phrases to make themselves understood.”

“And a surprising number of them speak passable English,” added Emma.

Their Irish accent was hard to miss, but Helen was surprised that they were far easier to understand than some English people they had met.

The dark-haired, young bartender came out and offered them *bocas* – in this instance, little pastries stuffed with some kind of seafood. Bert took the opportunity to order another glass of beer.

“We’re only part way through with our story,” Emma said. “That year when we served as *hospitaleros* was our third Camino, even though we walked far less than we did the first two times. Last year we had no Camino and, as the result of a medical situation, I now have no appendix. We were making plans to do the Portuguese route and in fact were just a few days from embarking when I got a bellyache and wound up under the knife. Now I’ve had a year to recover and we are again in good health and in the midst of our fourth.”

“Where did you start?” Helen was surprised that this stock question hadn’t been answered earlier.

“Our start was different this time, but our finish will be a repeat of the past. Incidentally, we visited Santiago in each of the first two years, and neither Emma nor I feel a need to go back there. Our starting point this time was Lourdes, and we walked from there up the Pyrenees, through the Somport. We joined the French route near Puente la Reina. It was a long and fairly rigorous walk up to that point, but from there on we’ve been finding ourselves covering the same routes for as much as the third time. We’ve tried alternate routes, but we find some of them are regarded as alternates apparently because they have less to offer than the preferred routes.”

It was Emma’s turn as the storyteller. “Our destination this year is Rabanal. We will be *hospitaleros* once again, and we’re much looking forward to it. And if your plans find you in Rabanal and ready for an overnight, we would be honored if you chose to stay with us. And we’re about out of breath, so tell us. What is your story?”

What was their story? Helen wondered if they had one. Surely they must, but how to make it simple, comprehensible, and interesting? Maybe she shouldn’t try, and just stick to the facts.

“Well, we really don’t have much of a story,” she began, realizing that her statement was a bit absurd; how could they not have a story? “To begin, there are two of us and we are walking together, but we aren’t really a couple – not in the technical sense. We are long-time friends who met in the workplace. We’ve shared good times and bad times together. Walking the Camino was my idea, and I persuaded him to come along. We have differed in our levels of enthusiasm, but as we have walked more, I think he has begun to appreciate it much more than he did in the beginning.”

Bert looked at Helen and nodded, as if he was willing to take a try.

“We are definitely not storytellers, like you two,” he said. “We are scientists, and so, much more comfortable with data and objectivity than with imagination and personal tales. But, I’ll try my hand at embellishing Helen’s opening salvo.

“Like you, we’ve grown to know each other much better, too,” said Bert. “Even though we’ve known each other a long time, the Camino has taught us some things about ourselves and each other that we probably would never know otherwise. We’re alike in that we are both winners and losers,” Bert said.

She hoped he wasn’t again going to talk about her divorce. She again wondered why he would go into all

this with almost total strangers. For a panicked second she feared he might tell them the whole story.

“We are losers in the game of love; both of us were married to other people, got burned, and have been long divorced. We’re winners in our careers, both having begun as entry-level employees and now enjoying leadership positions in our organization, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“Helen is the well regarded leader of a new National Wildlife Refuge. I am technically still on medical leave, but my normal position is in the Directorate of the Office of Endangered Species and Habitat Assessment. We have shared the inevitable good and bad times in the workplace, and we’ve had some extracurricular adventures together too.

“We don’t see very much of each other, but when we do, we usually manage to hit it off. We hadn’t seen each other for something like two years before we decided to walk the Camino together, so in one sense this has been a good opportunity to renew a friendship that had been on ice.”

She hoped he was finished. Not only did the divorce thing make her angry, but she wondered how the word “ice” had gotten into his narrative. Still, if she said anything, she would only make it worse.

He said no more, and all three of them looked to Helen, apparently expecting her to pick up on the conversation.

She felt uncharacteristically flummoxed by her annoyance with him.

Swallowing, she slowly began, trying to think how to get out of this mess. “Our story – ah, wait.” A little smile grew as she thought of how to move this away from the too-personal turn it had taken. “I must begin anew. Our being here in El Burgo Ranero inspires me to tell a fairy tale.

“Once upon a time there was an old bachelor who was getting ever stranger and more set in his ways. A fair princess decided to take pity on him, leading him along a silken path to a place where he could again see the vastness of the life he had been missing because he was letting everyday things close in around him. If the two of them could approach the path with open and sincere hearts, he might once again be able to live the princely life that he had let slip away so long ago. And she had to be careful not to kiss him, because this simple act would surely turn him into a frog, and he might never leave El Burgo Ranero. How will the story end? Well, we don’t know yet, but the old bachelor is acting a little bit more like a prince. And the princess? Well her tiara is getting polished a bit also. Will they live happily ever after? No, but they may have a shot at a few good years. The End!”

She waved her hand in a flourish and affected a slight bow. The others applauded theatrically. They wanted a story. She was pleased to have given them a fantasy fit to the occasion without going off the deep end.

“And you said you didn’t have much of a story!” It was Emma, all smiles. “I think you have a lovely story, although I think you had better find a way to get your two separate chapters together. But I think it’s great regardless. Maybe I could be your story editor. How would I summarize what I’ve heard? I’ve got it. You’re on a voyage of discovery, and what you are discovering most is each other. I think it’s going to be a romance.”

She had outgrown blushing many decades before, but Helen still wondered if her face had turned a shade of pink. She could see that she surely hadn’t succeeded in getting out of the mess Bert created with his telling of their story. She had tried to pull them back from all this personal stuff. She hated having people feel like they could interpret her. She sat on the edge of her chair, looking at her beer, avoiding looking at Emma or Bert. When she took a sip of her drink, Jack caught her eye and raised his eyebrows acknowledging her discomfort. It didn’t help.

Bert’s eyes were closed. Was he thinking hard, or hiding, she wondered.

He opened them and spoke up. “Having been trained as scientists, we are not what anyone would think of as romantics. We look at facts and circumstances, and draw inferences from them. We look at our relationship – our friendship with each other – for what it is. We don’t imagine what it might be if it were in a story book. If it were it would never be a best seller. We’re enjoying this Camino together because we respect each other as we are, and not because it will make either of us into something we aren’t.”

Now where was he going with this, and what was his point? If he had a point, she couldn’t see what it was. She was embarrassed for him. Jack and Emma were probably wishing they’d picked some other table to join instead of theirs. It was time for him to stop babbling.

Charging to the rescue, Jack saved the situation. “As you have heard in exhausting detail, Emma and I are old hands at the Camino – really old hands – and of course our hands aren’t the only old things involved! We’ve learned that the Camino does strange and wonderful things to people, and it has changed us. One of the ways it changes you is to challenge and often tear down ideas you hold near and dear at the beginning. It makes a jumbled, unsightly mess of what you took for granted, and in the end it lets you fit the pieces back together.

“Along the way, on the part of your Camino where the two of you are now, you have this confused mess – the

wreckage of all those old things you are sorting out—tearing down and beginning to rebuild. Right now you are probably deep in the throes of a changing reality. You are somewhere between the basket of eggs and the delicious omelet that will eventually become of them. Confusion and disruption are to be expected. To my mind, the discomfort you feel at this very moment is proof positive that your Camino is working. It's working for you, and if you can take what it offers you, what you have at the end will be closer to where things should be as you move into the future. Let me revise that last statement. I should have said that things will be on the right track. Emma and I have learned something new about each other as people and the two of us as a couple on each of our four Caminos. The process is never ending, and the good that can come of it is without limit."

Jack and Emma took their leave. They were staying in another *albergue* and would be having dinner with other pilgrims tonight. They said goodbye knowing they might not see each other again.

Bert looked drained. This was to have been their period of relaxation. Helen too was exhausted. "Too much storytelling," she said. "That was torture. I need a before-dinner nap after all that."

"I'm with you. And, if the Camino is going to help us figure out the story of what we're doing here, I wish it would do its magic soon, before anyone else asks."

## **Time's Arrow**

Mansilla to León

Wednesday, June 8

Bert found himself walking alone. They had not bumped into Jack and Emma on the trail yesterday and he was thankful. Helen hadn't brought up the storytelling incident, and neither did he. All Jack's talk about changing reality and making omelets was too much. Bert decided that was more of a fairy tale than the one Helen made up.

Although he and Helen often walked side by side on the trail, it seemed almost inevitable that they would get separated and spend parts of their time walking alone. This day on the route to León was no exception. Walking alone wasn't a problem because neither he nor Helen was inclined to spend full time in conversation. One of them would stop to take a photo, to tie a shoelace, to adjust gear, or to add or remove layers of clothing, and the other would be walking ahead. Or one of them might find a slower or faster pace to be more comfortable. Whatever caused the slower one to fall behind, they would rejoin after an interval when the one in the lead stopped to allow the other to catch up. Over their days of walking they had arrived at a tacit agreement that it was never the responsibility of the one who had fallen behind to catch up by walking faster.

By its very nature, the Camino seemed to promote solitude and opportunities for introspection. Seldom were they out of sight of other hikers, but he found the few times they were alone on the trail to be moments to savor. Particularly when long vistas lay ahead of them, he felt his spirits soar. It was as if he and Helen were the only people in the world. Far from a lonely feeling, it seemed instead as if they had become one with the earth and the air and the sky. He wondered how he could explain it. Would an actor standing alone on center stage have a feeling like this? No, that didn't capture the sensation. Maybe he felt like they were the sole proprietors of the Universe. He'd have to ask Helen. She may have felt it too.

Another advantage of walking alone was that you were more likely to meet other people, as happened this day. Walking perhaps a hundred yards behind Helen, he was overtaken by another hiker. Today's walk so far had been along a busy road or on a *senda*, a narrow pedestrian path right next to the road. The walking wasn't particularly pleasant, and Bert was ready for a distraction.

They exchanged their "*Buen Camino*" and the woman overtaking him followed up with a "Hello." Maybe she had taken a clue from the brand of backpack he wore, his haircut, or something about his clothes, or maybe it was just intuition, but she seemed to have recognized him as an American.

Responding with a “Hi,” Bert confirmed her guess. He learned that her name was Gwen, and that she was from Ohio. She had long, straight, brown hair, held back somehow off her face. She was on the small side of a normal physique. He wondered if she was really about his age as he’d guess, or if he just couldn’t tell how old people are. Her husband was walking with her, she said, but not in the literal sense, because she supposed he was half an hour ahead of her on the trail.

“How long have you been walking?” “Where did you start?” “Isn’t this fantastic weather for walking?” “And how far are you planning on walking today?”

The stock questions posed, answered, and countered, Bert learned a little more about her. This was her second Camino, and she was here on business, so to speak. She was a Spanish professor at a small college, and she was here doing research to follow up on some studies she had done earlier. Her husband had recently retired and was along for the fun of it. She had a few more years to go before retirement, and although she was enjoying almost everything about it, walking the Camino was not a vacation for her.

Bert might have replied that this wasn’t exactly a vacation for him either, but he’d had his fill of personal storytelling and he felt fortunate to have an opening to take the conversation elsewhere. The mention of research led him to guess that Gwen’s career had nothing to do

with teaching Spanish 101 to freshmen. Without asking her, he leapt to the conclusion that she was a historian. At once a dozen or more questions that had been vexing him over the past few days came to mind. They were not well formulated yet. He knew she could outpace him on the trail and he guessed she would tire of answering questions before he tired of asking them, so he decided to launch into one topic as best he could.

“Maybe you can help me answer some questions that have been bothering me. Our guidebook said that, if at a certain point along the way we looked out across a field, we would see a pile of stones that once was a huge monastery. We missed it. We surely passed it. I guess we didn’t see it because we weren’t looking across the right field at the right time.”

He realized he hadn’t come close to asking a question, but continued.

“Then we went by the ruins of the monastery of Saint Felix de Oca, and it had all but disappeared – just part of a doorway was still standing. And then there is that impressive one – the convent in San Antón. And it’s not just the structures of these church buildings that are falling down. Even the ones that are still standing – the huge intact ones that have been turned into hotels and museums.”

Bert was frustrated that he didn't have a real question, at least not an intelligent one. Nevertheless, he could almost see the wheels in her mind spinning, and she seemed to be looking for the right answer almost the way he had been groping for the right question. Then it came to him. What he wanted to ask was: What happened? Tell me about it.

"Now to answer your – to follow up on what you were saying – there are multiple things involved," she said. "It all comes down to the fact that everything changes over time. Of course the role of religion in people's lives has changed. In Europe right now participation appears to be at an all-time low. Every little town along the Camino has at least one church, and I'm sure you have noticed that most are boarded up. So it's not just the big monasteries and convents that have been disappearing, but the small churches as well."

"We stayed in a monastery in Roncesvalles that seemed to be completely converted to a hotel," said Bert, "and it seemed clear that was its best and highest use, because there aren't any more recruits to monastery life. Then we stayed in another that was still active but had only a dozen or so nuns and all but one was very, very old."

"Lack of recruits is surely one of the big problems for religious orders, but if you look back over hundreds of years, there have been some massive societal changes as

well. Reality is not the same now for a monastery as it was in the Middle Ages.

“Under the feudal system there were very few options and opportunities for most people. Wealth and the means of achieving it were highly concentrated in the hands of the nobility. Even worse, the benefits normally passed on only to eldest sons. Children of peasants could become laborers like their parents, but for sons of the well-to-do who were not first-born and not about to become field hands, the religious life might have been the only acceptable choice.

“The same goes for daughters who failed to marry first-born sons. We don’t tend to think of the church as democratic, but it did at least offer the chance for those who joined to achieve wealth and influence within its confines. A clever and resourceful person who took up the religious life could aspire to becoming an abbot, prioress, or even a bishop if his or her skills were applicable to the demands of the position.”

Bert said that he had once learned that the spectacular success of nuns in the Middle Ages was the result of nearly constant warfare; so many men were killed in battle that there was a serious shortage of them, and the excess women had to secure their futures by joining religious orders. This explanation seemed to make sense until one considered the large numbers of monks existing alongside

them, and then it tended to fall apart. So her explanation seemed to better fit the observations.

Gwen's pace had slowed appreciably as they talked, and Bert could tell that she was getting impatient to speed up and resume her normal speed.

"Thanks for answering my questions," he said, effectively giving her permission to walk on ahead.

Needing no more encouragement, she gave a little wave and pulled away from him, almost visibly kicking up her heels as she shifted into high gear.

Bert thought about the conversation. What had bothered him most about the ruins of monasteries and churches was the apparent waste. The massive investment of human and material capital needed to build the monumental structures had somehow been allowed to slip away. He could only dimly imagine what these places were like eight hundred or a thousand years ago, but he knew there must have been a powerful vitality to them considering the monuments they left behind.

He realized suddenly he had remarkably similar feelings about the abandoned mine plant in Helen's adopted hometown in the Adirondacks. The ruins of huge concrete and steel buildings there were not altogether unlike the ruins of churches he saw on the Camino. Again, massive investments had been allowed to go to waste.

Like the ruins in Spain, the mine plant represented huge expenditures in materials, labor, ingenuity, and commitment.

It made him wonder if change always resulted from failure. Maybe the monasteries failed somehow to adapt with the society around them. Maybe the mine failed to foresee globalization and adjust somehow. Helen's friend had said, and Jack and Emma seemed to imply too, that the Camino is a life-changing experience. Bert did not at all feel that his or Helen's lives were failing, like the monasteries and the mine apparently had, and needed to change.

It began to rain lightly, and he pulled on his poncho. The trail led over a rickety bridge where hikers walked mere inches from speeding trucks, then through a grimy commercial district, and then finally left the pavement and continued on a clay road through an open field. Bert hadn't walked far when he came to a low area where the road was deeply rutted, and the deepest of the ruts were filled with water. He saw Helen up ahead, clinging to the roadside in order to avoid a particularly deep puddle. There's a photo to show the folks back home, he thought, and he reached under his poncho to get his camera. He normally carried it in a cell phone pouch on his pack, but that arrangement wouldn't work with the poncho. Looking like an ungainly tightrope walker, poncho-

draped Helen tiptoed around the puddle. Bert got one good shot, then zooming in, he got another.

Fumbling under his poncho to stuff the camera and lanyard into the belly pack, and dragging his walking poles behind him, he simultaneously experienced an intense pain in his ankle and the impact of his right shoulder hitting the ground. Oh shit! He had stepped into a deep hole. The shoulder was fine, but the throbbing ankle clearly had sustained damage. Son of a bitch! God damn!

He could see Helen ahead of him on the trail. She continued to walk on. It was obvious she had not heard him scream with the shock and pain. He righted himself partially and then, with the help of his poles, managed to stand.

Despite the spasms of pain emanating from his ankle, it was capable of holding him up. He took a labored step and learned that he could manage a hobbling walk.

He had only one thought. Pleading with no one in particular, he desperately hoped that he had not suffered a Camino-ending injury. One part of him might welcome the opportunity to bring this dubious venture to an end, but he couldn't bear the thought that a stupid mistake on his part might be responsible for ending Helen's Camino. He wouldn't tell her about the ankle, and hoped she

wouldn't notice until it was clear one way or another whether he would be able to go on.

Before long he came to a park bench, and on it Helen waited for him. She was munching on a dried apricot, an *orejone*.

"Have some potassium," she said, reaching out to hand him one and smiling at the recollection that the man at the Zubiri *tienda* had first told them about how good they were for hikers. "I knew you were slowing down, but I couldn't believe how far ahead of you I had gotten," she said. "I hope you didn't have a mishap."

Bert said nothing about his fall, and instead delivered a brief summary of his conversation with Gwen and his thoughts about the Orebed Lake iron mine as Helen strapped on her backpack and joined him on the trail. She apparently didn't notice his limp, picking up on what he had told her about the conversation almost as if she had been a party to it.

"I got thinking about change back in Logroño when we walked by a tobacco shop," she said. "I don't know if there are any tobacco shops left in the United States, and even here where a lot of people still smoke, there must be fewer of them than in the past. Surely they must be disappearing."

“On a similar note,” said Bert, “my neighbor Eddie is an old Europe hand. His job had him traveling to France for business all the time. I asked him about telephones, and he said I shouldn’t worry about carrying a cell phone. He said you can buy a phone card and use it in pay phones. They’re all over Europe, and he was sure Spain is no exception. I was skeptical, though. Pay phones are almost non-existent at home now that everybody has a cell phone. I’ve been watching for pay phones ever since we got here. I’ve spotted exactly two of them. I’m glad I have my Blackberry.”

“One more example,” added Helen. “My deputy refuge manager, Dan, and his wife bought a video store that she ran. It thrived for several years but then was put out of business by the Internet, streaming video, Netflix, and the like.”

Thinking about his Blackberry reminded Bert that he still hadn’t gotten a real business call from any of his fellow task force members. He had all but given up. The fact continued to trouble him. He didn’t like the thought that they might really need him to do something, but would avoid bothering him. Even less did he like the possibility that they really didn’t need him.

He put the thought out of his head and tried to get a sense of where their conversation had led them.

“So, we have monasteries and convents, churches, iron mines and surely other remnants of heavy industry, tobacco shops, video stores, and phone booths, all having periods of growth, popularity, and high value to society. But they failed to adjust and adapt to changes – often subtle and indirect ones – and they plunged into irrelevance and decline. There must be lots of other examples – I suppose bookstores and even printed books may be going the way of some of the medieval and industrial age things we’ve been discussing.”

“Yeah,” said Helen, “I guess you and I need to be always ready to adjust and adapt too.”

“I don’t know about you,” said Bert, “but I feel like I’m right on the edge of being too old to change. I guess that’s why what that doctor said about the rest of my life still bothers me.”

They walked on, their conversation having played itself out. Happily, the trail had improved as it veered farther away from the road and headed to a little town where the guidebook said they’d find a café.

The pain in his ankle was a dull throb, but manageable.

Bert thought that he and Helen were some of the slowest people on the Camino; they were often passed by other walkers, and they almost never passed anyone else.

Despite their evident tortoise-like pace, they kept seeing the same people again and again. After a while he began to notice that some of the same fleet-footed walkers would pass them two or three times in a single day. He wondered where the sprinters could have been when they had fallen behind. Given how common these experiences were, he was not surprised to spot Gwen and her husband at the café in Arcahueha.

The two couples traded small talk over soft drinks, but Bert kept getting lost in his thoughts.

Certain questions were beginning to plague him. Jack's words about change, and confusion, and omelets rang in his mind. He wondered if he could fail at this undertaking. Is there something he should be getting out of the Camino experience? What should he be doing to make it happen? Unless he found out, all this walking might turn out like those fallen-down monasteries; in the end he might find himself with a fine structure with nothing inside it.

He looked up from his coffee and thoughts. Gwen and Daryl were putting on their packs. The rain had stopped and they all stowed their ponchos. By the time they were out of town, the other couple had pulled well ahead of them. The trail soon rejoined the road, becoming an even more dreary and hazardous path as it took them closer to León. He was able to walk, albeit with

considerable discomfort. He would tell Helen about his injury when they got to León.

“We’ve been saying that change is all around us, and we’ve heard that the Camino changes you. I suppose the two of us are changing too. Do you think we are? How do you feel yourself changing?” he said.

Helen wasn’t ready for this discussion with trucks and cars zooming by, and she brushed it off.

“Of course we’re changing. That is part of what the Camino is all about, right?”

Bert wondered if she believed that. He was afraid he did. He couldn’t understand how the change would work for him and he wasn’t seeing any change in her either.

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Friday, June 10 3:02 PM

To: task\_force\_alpha@doe.gov

Cc: Maureen327@midnet.net, Donna121@midnet.net

From: bert\_task\_force\_alpha@doe.gov

Subject: Camino Report #5

Dear Friends,

We experienced what appeared to be a disaster, but I’m cautiously optimistic that it was only a near-disaster. I twisted my ankle as we were walking into Leon in a light rain, about six or seven miles out. Despite a dull pain throughout my foot and ankle, to my surprise I was able to manage a limping walk. Helen was ahead of me, out of sight and

earshot. I caught up with her and managed to continue. Later I told her what had happened. You should have seen her face. From the look of shock and horror that came over her, I think she must have been imagining herself carrying me into Leon. Actually if I'd told her when it happened, she might have had a legitimate fright. We were out in an empty field on an impassable road. It wasn't clear how the rescue squad would have reached us if I had been unable to make it on my own power.

We walked, with some difficulty, to our destination, a hostel fortunately on the near side of the old town, not too far past the modern suburbs on its edge. I still had a supply of strong ibuprofen, and that made the pain tolerable. Nevertheless, by the next morning the whole right side of my right foot was ugly from swelling and discoloration. Luckily we'd planned an extra day here for rest. While Helen visited the sights, I sat on benches. Our dilemma was what to do next. We hoped the ankle would heal enough so I could walk on it today. We had planned to walk on a healthy distance after leaving Leon to a place called Mazarife, and thought perhaps we should try for it. I was able to walk with only a little pain, and we could probably hole up somewhere else if the going got too difficult. In the end we opted for this place, La Virgen del Camino. It is only a little over five miles from Leon's center, and we decided that if we could walk here without too much trouble, we might be able to get back on our planned track.

So, that's why we're here. There isn't much to do or see in this town. The big monastery here looks to be in good repair, but most of the windows seem to be boarded up with a kind of folding metal hurricane shutters one sees all over Spain. Also there's a modern church commemorating a miraculous vision in the sixteenth century. The very good thing about being here is that we can report that I was able to walk the five miles, including some pretty good uphill, with no trouble at all. My ankle lacks mobility, but I can go straight forward on relatively

flat surfaces just as well as before the injury. Walking the last couple of days into Leon wasn't particularly inspiring. Even without the mishap, the last day would have been our least favorite so far. The trail wasn't well planned or maintained, and the increasing urbanization as we got closer had us weaving around cloverleaf intersections and tiptoeing over rickety bridges. We walked next to an autopista (superhighway) for much of the way into the city, and never got a good overview of the old city center.

The cathedral in Leon is a short distance from our hostel and Helen did get to visit it. Known for its large stained glass windows, she thought it was as impressive, in its own way, as the one we visited in Burgos. On the way out of town we stopped and posed for a photo at the Parador San Marcos. Founded as a pilgrim hostel in the twelfth century, it later became a large monastery and, like some other monasteries, it has been converted to a luxury hotel. (By the way, back when these places were active, the words hostel and hospital seem to have been used interchangeably. I don't think it will happen, but if I write later and say we are staying in a hospital, don't panic on our behalf.)

It's hard to believe that we are already more than half way to Santiago. That's the encouraging thought for today. It's a welcome and much needed one.

On the mend, Bert

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Friday, June 10 3:06PM

To: Maureen327@midnet.net, Donna121@midnet.net

From: Helen.morgia@southnet.com

Subject: Adjusting and Adapting

Maureen and Donna,

I'm sure Bert will tell about his ankle injury. I still feel awful that I didn't hear him call to me when he fell. If I had fallen, I can't imagine how scary it would have been to know he wasn't going to hear me and come help. But we have adapted to the new reality of his sore ankle and foot.

I enjoyed wandering Leon on my own. We like quite different things, and there was no pressure to accommodate to each other since he really needed to sit still and rest the ankle. So I just got lost in the city and didn't worry at all about where I was or where I was going. I knew I'd find my way back to the plaza with no trouble. It was nice to not be tied to a map.

I have no real interest in the tourist attractions. It is nice just to see the buildings and architecture. There are several Gaudi buildings here. One of them, a bank building, I think, looks like a storybook castle, with conical spires and a statue of St. George slaying a dragon on the front. Of course, the cathedral is spectacular and I spent a lot of time there.

We are now more than half way through the Camino. I have become almost addicted to the walking, and surprisingly to the stories of the other walkers. I mentioned several when I wrote last, so you may have guessed that meeting people has been a bigger part of the experience than I expected. It is fascinating to hear their tales and leaves me feeling like a bogus analyst when I'm trying to figure out what their stories really mean in their lives, or to mine.

You made me promise to share everything, so now it is probably time for you to write and tell me if, between us, Bert and I are giving you a good feel for The Way of St. James!

Hasta pronto,

Helen the Hiker