

Second Wind

on the Way of Saint James

A NOVEL



Russell J Hall & Peg Rooney Hall

Second Wind on the Way of St. James

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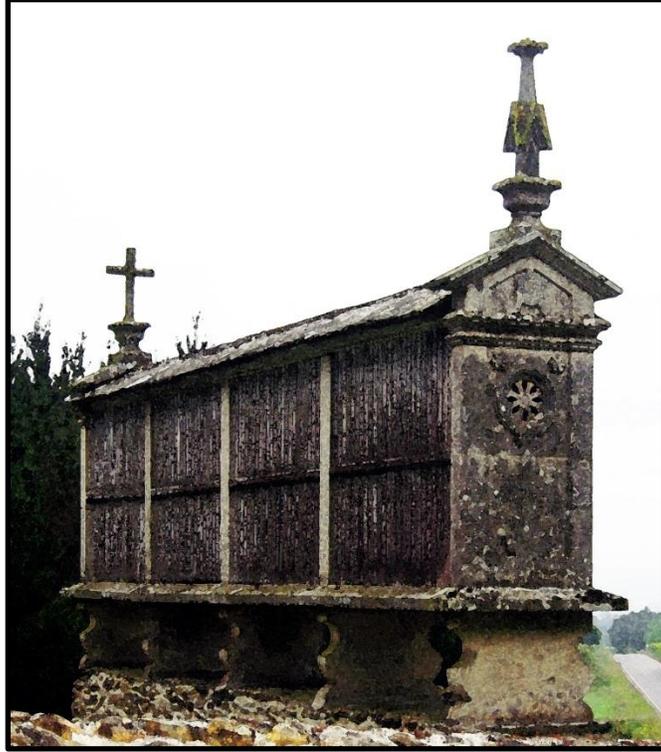
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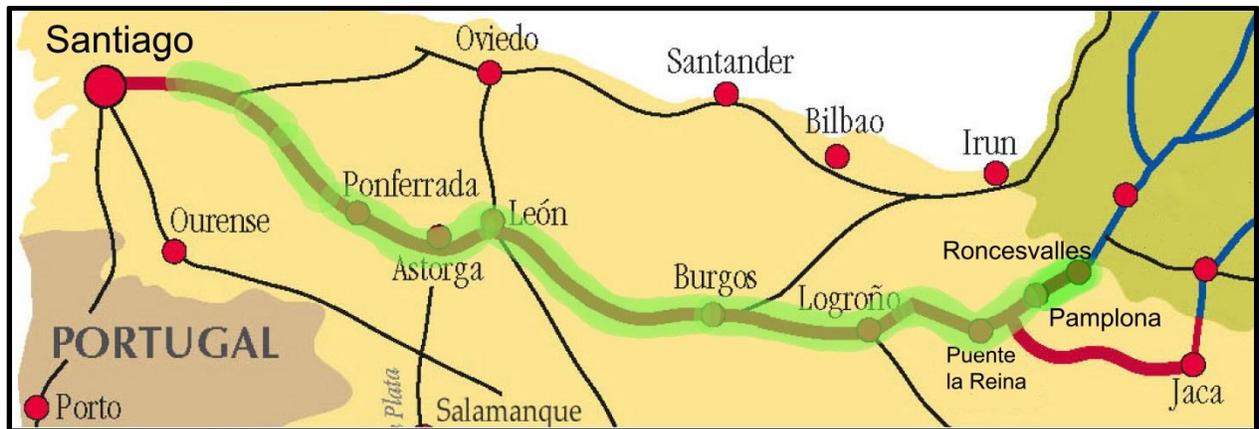
Episode 7



Stage Seven: The Magic of the Camino

Portomarin to Arca

Tuesday, June 21 to Sunday, June 26



Tuesday, June 21, 4:49 PM

To: task_force_alpha@doe.gov

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

From: bert_task_force_alpha@doe.gov

Subject: Camino Report #8

Dear Task Force Friends, and Donna & Maureen too (future friends, I hope),

I know these reports have been getting shorter and less frequent. Maybe that's because I'm getting lazy, or maybe it's hopeless trying to sort out all our experiences and figure out which to report, and maybe something else is at work.

We're now in Sarria and have a bit more than a hundred kilometers (62 miles for those of you who aren't old Camino hands) to go to Santiago. There are very few rules on the Camino; in fact, the only real rule seems to be that to get an official certificate for completing the Camino (you know it is official because it's in Latin) you must walk the last one hundred kilometers. As a result, many people on short timelines, or less ambitious journeys, start here. The trail becomes almost crowded after Sarria, we hear. We react with excitement, seeing so many enjoying the trail, and horror, having to compete with all of them for a restroom or a cup of coffee in the cafes.

The scenery in Galicia is nice—low mountains, small farms, occasional woods—but it doesn't grab one like some of the other vistas we've seen along the way.

We know we're getting close now and Santiago pulls us forward. Of course we want to get there, but we don't want our Camino to end.

Reporting with mixed feelings, Bert

Tuesday, June 21, 5:10 PM

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

From: Helen.morgia@southnet.com

Subject: Seeing Things Differently

Sisters,

Bert and I are sharing a computer and I read his report over his shoulder as he wrote to you. He is right that we both have mixed feelings at this point. We are eager to earn our bragging rights for completing the Camino. And, we have come to actually enjoy being on the trail every day. Not that it has become easy to walk the distance daily. In some ways it is harder now than at the beginning, although I hesitate to say that since it was really very hard those first few days. Definitely it is different now from how it was in the beginning. The accumulated wear and tear on our bodies from the hundreds of miles keeps us from recovering fully before the next day begins. It is all part of the journey. At first your head resists the walking. "What am I doing? Have I lost my mind?" By this point, your bones do too. "Better stop soon before one of us gives up on you."

Other things seem different too. I am not yet able to put a finger on what, but maybe I will by the time we get to Santiago. Hope all is well with you two and your families.

Helen, your hiker sister

Evangelists and Pilgrims

Portomarin to Palas de Rei

Thursday, June 23

For the past few days as they walked through the Galician countryside, they had followed quiet roads that led through a succession of tiny towns. Quite unlike the Meseta, where vast acreages were covered with almost unbroken expanses of grain, here the rolling hills were divided into many small farms.

Bert could see why the guidebooks compared the landscapes and the culture in this part of Spain to those of Ireland. Men and women were working in the fields. And, of course, they were leading their sheep or cattle from one pasture to another, with their lazy dogs along just for the walk. The smell of manure was pervasive.

Small granaries similar to what in the United States would be called corncribs graced nearly every farm, and they ranged from the simple and utilitarian to obviously embellished and decorated, making these *hórreos* (he had gone on the web and found their Spanish name) expressions of a local art form. Looking like miniature barns on concrete pillars, what appeared to be the oldest had crude lumber lattice frames and shingle roofs. Newer ones were built of perforated terracotta tiles, had tile or bright green metal roofs, and often had decorative doors and crosses or fanciful little statues at the gable ends.

As he walked along a few paces behind her, something reminded Bert, definitely not for the first time, of Helen's amazing and apparently off-hand comment when she was encouraging him to come about wanting "to take on this adventure, and to take it on with him." Her exact words rang clear and bright in his memory. He was again warmed by the absolutely unexpected statement. He remembered her enthusiasm, right from the beginning, at wanting to take on the Camino. He was never surprised at all by that. But the way she'd framed the part about her wanting him to be with her on her adventure had caught him fully by surprise.

Two other times had brought him near to this place in his heart. The first was the weekend together after their divorces. That hadn't worked out as planned, and would be better never to have been planned. Then there was the time at her cottage in the Adirondacks. He was feeling enthusiasm for taking on the challenges of being side by side. But she wasn't going where his thoughts were taking them. He had backed away from it too. But here on the Camino, the almost forgotten warmth of something more than friendship was not unwelcome. Now she had reached out to him, if only by letting herself be so unhappy in his presence. Just maybe he might be able to help her. It made him feel closer to her than he had in years.

About midmorning they reached the village of Ligonde. Bert was ready to rest and have some coffee, and Helen said she wished a restroom would appear. He was on the lookout for the bright plastic decor of a café-bar. Seeing none, he was disappointed. Then, some activity ahead of them attracted his attention as they approached the far end of town. A small gathering of people clustered around two wooden tables in the street.

The tables were tended by a short woman about fifty with a round, open face. Several young people, probably older teens, in tee-shirts, sweats, and sandals stood nearby looking purposeful. One had a mop and bucket, another a push broom and a big cardboard box. A couple of them were putting out plates of cookies and piles of brochures, evidently free for the taking.

As Bert and Helen reached the tables, they were greeted by the woman, who asked if they were Americans. She said the people in their group were Americans also, explaining they were all members of an evangelical Christian congregation in Ohio. This was the third summer they had been operating the *albergue* here in Ligonde. With her plain features, her tightly curled hair, her wire-frame glasses, and her dark blue dress, she created in Bert an instant image of what a church lady should look like.

He hadn't noticed the *albergue* across the road from the table, and when the woman pointed it out, Bert was

sure he never would have recognized it for what it was. Part of the structure was barnlike, and indeed may have once been an attached barn. The remainder of the complex was a centuries-old stone house that showed few signs of having been restored. He noticed a sign on the corner of the building advertising “free hugs.”

Helen asked whether they had a restroom, and the young woman carrying the mop took her inside to show her the way. The older woman was friendly and outgoing, and made no attempt to force one of the pamphlets next to the cookies – clearly religious tracts – on Bert. She did tell him a bit about what she called their Camino project as he munched on a cookie.

She said that the *albergue* had spaces for twelve pilgrims. In nearly the same breath she indicated that various people from their church in Ohio came for intervals, and right now nine of them were there. Bert wondered whether there was really only space remaining for three hikers. Another glance at the *albergue* made that seem likely, since he could barely imagine twelve crowding into it. She said that they were operating the *albergue* as a service to pilgrims, and it was also an excellent opportunity to expose the young members of their church to the concept and practice of Christian charity. Her husband was involved too, but wasn't there at the moment because he had taken their truck to a nearby town to buy groceries. He spent much of his time

foraging in this way, she said, as pickings were fairly slim in the area.

Just then some other people came along and were greeted by the woman, and Bert sat on a narrow wooden bench while he waited for Helen.

She came out soon and said that after visiting the restroom she had gotten a brief tour of the funky *albergue*. They thanked their benefactors and were again on their way.

“You know, I’m usually suspicious of evangelical Christians,” said Bert. “I always think they set their sights on me. I feel like a zebra with a lame leg being eyed by a lion. They never seem to be content unless they have gotten everyone else to buy into to their beliefs. Even though they make me nervous, I kind of liked these people. I wish them well—not, of course, in converting people, just in finding their work personally rewarding.”

“I’m not nearly as suspicious as you are, I guess, because I would never give them the first chance to get their hooks into me. But I liked those people, too. If they treat everybody the way they treated us, they’re doing some good in the world,” she said.

Still assuming their ultimate goal was to make converts, Bert wondered, as he and Helen walked along side by side on a paved road with little traffic, what kind

of success, if any, they were having. On the face of it, their prospects should have been excellent. Streams of people came by daily, and surely many of them were in search of some spiritual goal. He mentioned his thought to Helen and this led to a continuation of some long discussions in which they had tried to get to the bottom of a question that had plagued them from the beginning. How many walkers, like them, were secular pilgrims variously in search of challenge, adventure, exercise, self-awareness, companionship, cultural understanding, or some combination of these, and how many were motivated to walk the Camino by religious beliefs?

“Watch it!” Bert exclaimed, pointing just ahead. They each took a small detour to the opposite edges of the road to avoid a cluster of cow pies blocking the center.

“Someone told me it’s taboo to talk about your religious beliefs on the Camino. So far, that seems true,” Helen said. “There were those people in Carrión who left dinner early to attend a mass. But most of the people we’ve met haven’t brought up anything about religion or faith.”

“We never really talked about her back when we met her, but don’t forget that crazy lady from New Jersey we saw a couple of weeks ago, Colleen. She could hardly say a word that wasn’t somehow about her faith and devotion. She was obviously seeing the Camino as nothing more than a form of penance. What a way to live,

and what a way to waste what could be such a joyful experience!" Bert couldn't believe he had just said that, because he had not yet consciously admitted connecting the concepts of Camino and joy in his own mind.

"I was afraid you would mention her. I really tried to be friendly, but I felt like my being nice threatened her. She was all about telling me of her hardships. It was like she had an agenda of mortification and sacrifice. And you're right, she did ask me outright if I was on the Camino for religious purposes. My shocked 'Not-at-all' response was the end of our conversation."

"Did you notice her outfit? She looked like a wannabe nun, European style."

"Yeah, maybe even an ex-nun. Maybe she is an ex-nun who quit because life in her convent was too cushy. Anyway, I don't want to talk about her anymore."

There was a steady stream of hikers ahead of them and behind along the trail. Bert guessed many had started a few miles back in Sarria. They seemed fresh and buoyant, probably not walking on legs as weary as his, not having covered a few hundred miles since Roncesvalles. He returned to the conversation.

"Thinking of Colleen, I am reminded of our encounter with Arturo," said Bert.

They'd met Arturo over a glass – or rather several glasses on his part – of wine. He was younger than most people they'd met. His tall body was well muscled and looked like he could be a marathon runner when he wasn't on the Camino. He had joined them, in the way typical of the Camino, at their table on the *plaza mayor* in Sahagún.

Obviously an educated and thoughtful man, Bert remembered for some reason feeling Arturo might have had nothing to do with them at all, had it not been for the wine. Bert and Helen had ordered a half carafe. Arturo had at least that much in him already, and the stage was set for long and heartfelt comments about the world and its mysterious ways. The carafe was passed around, emptied, another was ordered in its place. Careless talk of matters large and small had been interrupted by the mention of religious faith.

“What brings you on the Camino?” Bert asked conversationally.

“Well, it's religious – entirely religious. I hope that isn't off-putting. I sense you're more of a seeker than a pray-er, if I have my bearings right.”

“You've pegged me there,” Bert had replied. “I'm not exactly sure why I am here, but I am certain that my goal is not to build up brownie points in heaven. Nor am I

trying to reconnect with the lost faith of some long-ago grandparent.”

“Well, you have unwittingly come close to nailing why I am here,” said Arturo.

That was the end of it. Neither one seemed to know what to say next. Helen had rescued them by pointing out a child pedaling across the plaza on a tricycle.

“That was one of our stranger pilgrim encounters,” Helen said as they left the road and started along a narrow dirt path edged on one side by a low stone wall and on the other by shoulder-high wildflowers and other weeds in an overgrown pasture. “I sure was glad he didn’t elaborate. I was afraid he was going to tell us about his previous incarnation or something.”

She paused, apparently pondering.

“I’m listening to myself saying that meeting him was a pilgrim encounter. Despite all that we have heard about how the word ‘pilgrim’ as used here on the Camino is not religious, I still feel like it doesn’t really apply to me.”

“Exactly my feeling; I mark a mental asterisk next to it every time I hear the word applied to me. Somehow it doesn’t relate in the least to what I’m doing here,” Bert said. “I’m quite content being a *peregrino*.”

A mile or so farther along, the trail had joined a clay farm road. The stone fence was still with them on their left but the pasture on the right was fenced and in use. They came upon a man resting on the stones. Rising, he asked if he could walk with them for a while. He fell in step with them when Bert welcomed him. His name was Raymond. He was a big, husky man, probably pushing two hundred and fifty pounds. He wore a bucket hat and it looked a bit too small for his large head. Bert guessed there probably wasn't much hair under that hat but where it showed, it was a sandy color, not the gray that seemed almost omnipresent on the Camino.

He spoke slowly, and it seemed to Bert that his words were coming not from his mouth but from somewhere deep inside his body. He was a Belgian, apparently walking alone, and obviously fluent in English. He asked how their day had been going. Bert replied that they were finding it enjoyable and remarked on their surprise at finding the *albergue* run by American evangelicals.

"I was warned about it," Raymond said, "but it was nothing like I had been led to expect."

"It turned out to be just what we were looking for," said Helen, not offering any explanation about the distended bladder that had put her on an urgent mission or the calorie craving that Bert sought to fix.

“I found it kind of strange,” said Bert, “but I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that the large numbers of faithful people on the Camino seem to have attracted those church people. They must see it as a very fertile field for their evangelism.”

“Our people are doing something very similar.”

Raymond’s earlier statement about being warned and the reference to “our people” posed some questions in Bert’s mind, and he must have looked perplexed, because Raymond immediately offered an explanation.

“It’s no secret, but I don’t tell everybody I meet. I’m a former Dominican. I resigned fifteen years ago, but I still stay in touch, and every now and then I catch myself thinking or saying something as if I were still part of the congregation.”

“Okay,” Bert said. He could think of no other response, and Helen apparently couldn’t either because she said nothing. He was not aware of ever having met another Dominican, and he doubted that Helen had either.

He felt no need to comment, because Raymond went on with his explanation.

“Monasteries in most parts of the western world are clearing out, and I guess men like me are part of the problem. At any rate, there are fewer and fewer priests and monks, and many of the things that used to keep

them occupied – like running schools, missions, and conducting retreats – have been drying up also. This is particularly true in Europe. The Camino is an exception in that it is attracting more and more people every year – and it seems that many of them might be people who want to be more active with the church. There are vacant places in monasteries here along the Camino, and even vacant monasteries available for purchase. Dominicans from all over Europe, and even a few from the States and South America, are coming to the Camino to find new missions and roles among the pilgrims. From what I understand, this is true of some other religious orders also.”

“How is it working?” Helen said. “Are your old colleagues finding that people out here are responding to their presence? Is it really a fertile field for evangelism, as Bert speculated, for the Catholic variety of evangelism, that is?”

They’d passed so many ruined hulks of village churches, Bert wondered what it would take to reverse the evident erosion of the church’s influence in Spain.

“You know, I can’t tell you how it is working. It’s probably too early to get a true indication. Based on what I have read, I am not very optimistic about the fortunes of the Dominicans or about those of the evangelical Protestants back in Ligonde.” He hesitated as if about to deliver a long dissertation on his readings.

“I’ll bet right now one of you has not too far out of your reach the guidebook to the Camino by the Englishman John Brierley.

“Yep, it’s right here in the side pocket of my pack,” Helen said.

“I use a guidebook in French, but someone loaned me Brierley’s and directed me to a few passages toward the end of the Introduction. Basically he posed the question of how one reconciles the explosive growth of interest and participation in the Camino with the well-known abandonment of churches and religious observance all across Europe. About the only western nation in which the influence of churches has not been declining precipitously is the United States, and as you know, there is only an insignificant American presence on the Camino.

“So we have this apparent paradox. Europeans are much less religiously inclined than at any time in the past, but at the same time many more of them are walking the Camino – a practice with religious origins and, for many people, religious significance. Brierley speculates that the churches are no longer fulfilling the spiritual needs of the people. Those who have left the churches, and lost whatever degree of spiritual sustenance they might have expected from them, are seeking new forms of spirituality. Becoming pilgrims on the Camino may be a part of this quest. I suppose as people are becoming more sophisticated, the old formulas and rituals that were so

important in the Middle Ages have lost their hold, and many of our fellow walkers are looking for something to fill the void.”

“It’s kind of surprising that the major religious movements of the present, all of which had tribal origins in ancient times, are still influential today,” offered Bert, wondering why nothing comparable to them had taken root in the last thousand years.

“So, getting back to your question about the success of modern-day Christians in winning souls or winning them back, I do not see the prospects as promising. Churches are in every town and neighborhood, and anybody who wants to join one can do so easily without walking hundreds of miles in northern Spain. Oh, it is possible that the Camino will influence a few people who might have drifted away from the church and could be encouraged to come back by a kind of nostalgia or a rekindling of their faith. But I don’t see droves of them flocking back to parish churches in Europe or setting up flourishing branches of the American evangelical groups here in Spain.”

“That’s a good explanation,” said Helen. “I think I understand something about spirituality. I knew that some people walk the Camino because they are looking for something. I never guessed that they might be looking to replace something that’s been lost or has become irrelevant to their lives.”

Not quite ready to be finished, Raymond went on. “I have one example I think is a rather good one, and that example is myself. I am a deeply spiritual and religious man, and I accept some, but not all, of the teachings of what Bert characterized as the outgrowth of an old tribal religion. As a Dominican I was channeled into a strict system of beliefs and practices that were to serve my spiritual and physical life in this world and the next. As time went on I gradually came to believe that I could do more for my spiritual life if I had the freedom to live it, not as dictated by others, but instead as best fits me as a person.

“So I resigned, and I have lived my life not according to a formula, but by responding to life’s challenges and opportunities as directed by my will. I had and I still have great respect and love for the Dominicans and what they do, but I was unable to fit my spirit into the bottle they had prepared for it. So in that one sense I am very like those pilgrims who are on a quest, but don’t know exactly what they will be finding at the end of it. They do know that no one can tell them what it is or how to get there, and they must find it themselves.”

Raymond shook his head slowly, getting pensive. “I am on the Camino in order to become a better Christian—albeit according to my own lights. But I recognize that many, if not most, of my fellow pilgrims are looking for something else—something beyond being a Christian. I

can accept that and can honor their sincerity and courage.”

“Raymond, thank you! In a few sentences you have made me feel for the first time like a pilgrim.” Helen was clearly exuberant. “Sometimes we’ve seemed to fit in, but I have continued to think that we are outliers – basically different from most of the ‘real’ pilgrims. Now I can see that we aren’t.

“Some people know exactly what they are looking for, but lots more of them are probably like us. We didn’t start out looking for anything, but as our Camino has progressed we’ve begun to feel it has something to show us. I think now I am indeed looking for something, I just don’t know what it is, and I hope I’ll find it. And, of course, have the good sense to know it when it’s in front of me.”

Less sanguine than Helen, Bert nevertheless felt that he learned something from Raymond. There is no real Camino. Colleen and Arturo and Raymond obviously had different Caminos, even though they walked the same trails. And, of course, there were the evangelicals who have their own quirky Camino, but nevertheless might have more in common with Colleen and Raymond than either of them would recognize. He and Helen, he now felt certain, were also walking quite different Caminos, although the longer they had walked together the closer he felt their Caminos had come.

The conversation seemed to have put Raymond into a mood. Bert thought it just didn't feel right to invite him to share beers and small talk with them when they arrived at their destination. On the other hand, he didn't want to abandon him. But the conflict never materialized because Raymond quickened his pace after telling them that he needed to speed up. He planned to go on to Leboreiro, several miles beyond where the two of them had decided to stay.

Bert returned to his thoughts. He didn't have beliefs in the sense that the evangelicals or Raymond did. He remembered his mother being contemptuous and dismissive of those with no beliefs. She collected them up in the category of "heathens," who for the most part she saw as persons whose savagery had kept them from hearing the eternal word. Maybe he was still a heathen, but now he felt that he just might be a pilgrim. He might even be with the majority—unsure of what they would find at the end of their pilgrimage.

He knew that Helen wasn't a church goer, although he couldn't be sure that she hadn't succumbed to the temptation to join a church. In a place like Sandpine Key, the southern tradition of the church being the center of society in small communities still held sway. He was confident that they didn't have a major divergence of beliefs, but if perchance she were to be preparing a nest

for an anticipated world yet to come, he wasn't sure they could engage in joint nest-building.

They arrived in Palas de Rei. From the cosmic to the trivial, the transition was almost jarring. At the *albergue*, they paid out twelve euros each and settled their belongings into their room. The momentous question of the moment was which one of them would wash clothes first. By now they were down to only one container of laundry soap and didn't feel like passing it back and forth between laundry tubs. With a minimum of discussion they agreed on Bert being first. It was breezy but cool, and he was hoping his clothes all would dry quickly and tomorrow they wouldn't need to dangle, still-damp, pinned to his backpack. He hung his things on one of the several lines in the courtyard, using the absolute minimum number of the scarce clothespins. A few minutes later when Helen took over the laundry tub, he sat at a nearby picnic table drinking from a tall fifty-centiliter can of Estrella Galicia beer.

He thought he understood something that had been puzzling him for weeks, and he wanted to tell Helen about it. When she returned he began.

"Okay, Helen, I think I'm beginning to get to the bottom of that business with the nun, you know The Last Nun. I think now I know why I had to imagine a different future for her. She fascinated me. But I realized I probably

couldn't have a coherent conversation with her; it would be like you talking to your dogs."

"I'm glad I didn't say that. But go on, pray tell."

"Well, I couldn't understand her and her world, so I had to imagine a new one for her, one I could understand, even though I'm not the entrepreneur type. What if, when she looked at me, she imagined I was a hermit or mystic so she could understand my life?

"You're losing me, Bert."

"Okay, the greatest part of my life is invisible to that nun, even though she is of my same species, and not one of your dogs."

"Spaniels, dachshunds, nuns, what next? Go on, Bert."

"Okay, it's clear that most of my life is invisible and unknowable to her, and vice versa. So if we're living in parallel universes, each of us must be denying ourselves different and probably important parts of our lives."

"I'm following you now, I think."

"Suppose I can pity that nun for missing out on what I consider essential and rewarding parts of life. Then she can also be pitying me for missing out on the ones she holds dear. So maybe I should try to be more spiritual. I

still don't know what that means, and a lot of what they call spiritual is sappy. But maybe I ought to be open to new experiences – ones that don't necessarily jibe with the values that have guided me for the past fifty years."

"The Camino has taught me something new about you, my friend. You analyze everything, but beneath all of it, you're a closet romantic, Bert. Maybe you're a hopeless romantic. Anyway, that's part of you that I really like."

A romantic? Bert had never thought of himself as anything other than objective, rational, and well-grounded. Then he recalled a conversation he'd had with Helen the day before. He had mentioned the energy he felt when they were alone on the trail, the feeling that they were one with the earth and the heavens. She had remarked that walking works for some people like meditation, and that it opens the door to spiritual experiences. He wasn't about to conclude that was what had happened to him, but the idea seemed to fit, just a bit.

The *albergue* had an enjoyable and abundant communal dinner. At the end of the table, across from each other, sat an Italian man with a blue bandana around the neck of his red sleeveless shirt and a matching blue bandana tightly tied around his left knee (had he fallen and scraped it bloody maybe?) and a Spaniard who'd been on the trail long enough for his thin hair to get too

long and his pants to get too big. They appeared to be poorly fluent, or at least uncomfortable in English. They ate and left the table early.

Two Dutch women, on the other hand, had no hesitation to speak in English, and they engaged Bert and Helen eagerly. They were mother and daughter, walking the Camino together to celebrate the daughter's twenty-first birthday. Bert was intrigued by them. Both were trim, fit, and strong. They had the same slight frame. The mother had so much hair it hung down to her neck and puffed out all around her head. It was wiry and uncontrolled. He kept sneaking looks at it. He didn't think a comb, regardless of how big-toothed, would ever untangle it.

What struck him about the daughter were her large, grey eyes, so full of drama and wonder about life. She was effusive in speaking of the visions and goals of her intended career as a medical professional. She was going to see what her future patients' needs were by looking into their hearts with those intelligent eyes. If she had her way, she would pioneer important changes to humanize the Dutch medical profession. More subdued, the mother nevertheless was caught up in the daughter's enthusiasm.

The evening had broken up when the *hospitalero* signaled the impending shutdown of the electrical power. Bert and Helen made their way back to their room, this

night shared with an overseas Chinese couple who now made their home in Canada.

They stepped out onto a small breezeway to talk for a few minutes without disturbing their roommates.

“It’s funny,” said Bert, “but we spent the better part of today talking about cosmic subjects – philosophy, spirituality, and belief systems. Later we worried over who would be the first to plunge up to elbows in the laundry tubs. Then we spent the end of the day listening to the hopes and dreams of an obviously very intelligent young person seeking to make her way in the world. Her needs and wants seemed very practical, and ours seemed almost effete and irrelevant in retrospect.”

“I take your point, I think. Tell me if I’m wrong. Here on the Camino, we have the luxury to worry about who we are and where we fit in the incredibly huge cosmic picture. People like our new Dutch friend, young Anna, have much more immediate and practical concerns to think through as they walk. We can decide that God is an old man somewhere up in the sky. Or instead is an algorithm that governs the dynamics of the universe. Or perhaps a yet-undiscovered fundamental particle or energy source at the core of being. Anna is the future of us little beings here on this rock, and I want her to succeed, and have every expectation she will. Good night, Bert, my friend.”

Visited by another one of those warm feelings, he held back, still worrying about the outbreak of tears in Samos, and not wanting to rush anything while she was vulnerable.

“Good night to you too. Tomorrow’s another day.”

“That is a happy thought. Like most days on the Camino, I never could have predicted the conversations we’ve had today or the ways those conversations have affected me. But it was another in a string of rewarding days. As it draws to its close I feel good. I am very happy to have had this day in my life. I know that is a weird thing to say, but there it is.”

Bert felt good, too. They’d gotten past the pilgrim issue, and he had ascertained at least to his satisfaction that he and Helen were true pilgrims. They had met a promising young woman, and listening to her had given them a way to see past their own idle haggles and concerns. They hadn’t solved the problems of the world – the Spanish unemployment problem, or whatever – but to have done that would have involved the intercession of Saint James and a major miracle. There was something in the future to hope for, though, whether or not Saint James would play a major role.

He wanted to give Helen a goodnight kiss, but settled for squeezing her hand.

Fluffy Towels

Palas de Rei to Melide

Friday, June 24

Walking with a smattering of other hikers, Bert and Helen were on one of the parts of the Camino that follows a narrow and little-used country road. They had left Palas de Rei a few minutes after seven. By midmorning the haze that had surrounded them earlier was burning off, it was warming rapidly, and Helen was ready to shed her jacket – never a simple operation. She was watching for a good place to set aside her walking poles; remove her backpack, belly pack, and jacket; stow the jacket in the backpack; and then redeploy the packs and poles. It shouldn't be more than a thirty-second operation now that she'd done it so many times, but the right kind of place would really help. Shallow ditches lined each side of the road, so she didn't want to go off the edge. She didn't want to stop smack in the road either and drop all her stuff in the dirt. She needed a park bench or bridge abutment – something to lean them on.

They came up on a place where a somewhat larger road crossed the one they were walking on, and there were stop signs. That would do. She would have preferred a bench, but she was beginning to sweat, and the prospects of soon finding someplace better did not seem good.

They crossed the larger road and she stopped to lean her things against the sign. She was out of her trusty green jacket and black long-sleeved shirt when she heard a vehicle approaching on the larger crossroad. A quick look revealed a huge tour bus. It barely fit on the road. Grabbing her propped up poles and pack, she quickly moved a few yards away from the intersection to wait for the bus to pass before getting back into her gear.

Bert had stopped a short distance ahead. The tour bus looked out of place on a road apparently used only occasionally, and then mostly by farm tractors. Her surprise was tempered by Bert's having noted earlier that tour buses seem to double as school buses in this part of Spain. Maybe this one would have a *Transporte de Escolares* sign showing through a window and be on the way to pick up farm children.

The bus did not pass them, but instead stopped. Helen moved farther away from the crossroad, and Bert held her poles while she stowed her stuff and got her pack back on.

"Thanks, Bert," Helen said. "That was a bit scary."

They both watched from well out of the way as the bus did a labored k-turn, backed a short distance, and stopped on the part of the road they had just covered. A few other hikers had come along the trail during all this, and they too were standing aside watching. The bus door

opened, and a group of apparent pilgrims climbed down. Helen guessed there must have been between fifteen and twenty-five of them. All wore hiking clothes, most had walking sticks, and they had backpacks, but only small day packs – too small to carry all the things needed for the Camino. Most wore lightweight hiking boots, but at least two had only tennis shoes. Whispering, Bert and Helen agreed that what most separated these bus pilgrims from other pilgrims was how clean they were. Dusty boots or muddy pant legs were not to be seen.

The scene complete, other hikers who had been watching continued along the way. Most of the bus-riding hikers seemed older than Bert and Helen, but nevertheless were able to overtake them. Not weighed down by heavy packs, not wearing heavy boots, and probably not weary from days of walking, the newcomers breezed by them while chattering away in French.

Helen had heard about tour operators that feature the Camino and make it possible for customers to get the flavor of the pilgrimage without having to endure all the hardships of the trail. For a hefty fee, one could be booked into comfortable hotels in larger towns, mostly off the route, and be brought each day to a relatively easy, interesting, or scenic section of the Camino. Discharging their passengers, the buses would drive ahead to some point a two- or three-hour walk away, where they would meet them for lunch. After lunch the motorized pilgrims

would have a choice. If they were through with walking, the bus would take them ahead to their hotel. Those who wanted to continue walking would again be met by the bus two or three hours farther down the trail.

Each had mentioned hearing in various conversations along the way that the so-called “fluffy-towel pilgrims” are an object of scorn and derision among purists. In fact, Helen had observed a seeming hierarchy among walkers, based on their perceived genuineness. If you didn’t walk with historically accurate wood walking stick, if you didn’t sleep in a bunk bed in a crowded dormitory room, or if you were so gauche as to sport the latest in hiking gear, someone would look down on you as a less-than-authentic pilgrim.

A logical conclusion of all that silliness, she thought, is that someone somewhere is probably looking down on so-called pilgrims who so little value tradition that they stoop to hiking in shoes. The hoops one might have to jump through to ensure that no one considered you less than genuine are potentially limitless.

She said to Bert, out loud now, “You know that’s one thing I can’t quite get my mind around. People decide to walk the Camino for the best of intentions. There’s no meanness to it. But then you listen to them and find that many pilgrims are critical and super judgmental of others. We’ve heard plenty of it. Anybody doing less or having

less discomfort than I endure on my Camino isn't doing the real Camino."

"I agree. It's a paradox. Wouldn't you expect pilgrims to be gushing with love, charity, and respect for all their brethren? I do have to admit that I feel a little bit of pride knowing that I'll be walking every step and carrying all my stuff for the whole distance."

"Well, me too, Bert. But we haven't gotten around to bad-mouthing and treating with scorn the ones who aren't. Even though all those extra people do tend to clog up the trail, and some of them seem to be on more of an outing than on a pilgrimage."

"Remind me to stop talking when I get around to casting asparagus."

"I'll cast carrots," she said. "I like asparagus too much."

She was about to say something about the atrocious peas she'd had with last night's dinner when they were overtaken by one of the fluffy-towel crowd. The two of them were walking at their normal pace, and although slower than most of his traveling companions, the man passing them was still a bit faster than they were.

"Hello," he said, in slightly accented English. "I overheard you talking and guessed that you might be Canadians."

Helen told him they were from south of his border and remarked it was good to hear someone speaking their shared language.

“Actually I’m French,” their fellow walker said, “but I spent most of my career – thirty-five years, in fact – working in Canada. By the way, my name is Robert, and I’m pleased to meet you.”

After they introduced themselves, Helen asked him how he gotten to Canada and, apparently, back to France.

“I was trained as an electrical engineer, and went to work for a company in France that does consulting on hydroelectric generation. In order to get a promotion, I transferred to company headquarters in Canada. I still live in Canada, but I get back to France every few years to see relatives. I had been thinking about the Camino for a long time, and this year I was able to combine my regular trip back to France with this one.”

Helen picked up on the information sharing. “We both work for the government in wildlife conservation and we’re on vacation. From what you said, I assume you’re retired. Retirement sounds good in some ways, but we’ll both probably keep working until we drop.”

“You’re both relatively young. I’m 74. I didn’t retire until my health made it impossible to work any longer. Now I advise everyone I talk with not to put it off. It’s an

important part of your life, and you might not live long enough or stay healthy enough to fully experience it.”

“I went through a difficult health problem fairly recently and I have been able to continue working,” said Bert. “Fortunately, I don’t think it has shortened my life expectancy. In fact, one of the doctors told me to get out there and enjoy the next thirty years. I mentioned to Helen at the time that his comment took me aback because I had been so focused on short-range recovery goals.”

It was Helen’s turn. “What brings you to the Camino? We have asked many people. Lots of them seem to have complex reasons and can’t come up with a short answer.”

“I’m one – or at least I was one – of those people myself,” said Bert, before Robert could answer. “Well, I’ve been saying that to people who ask, but actually I’m here because Helen is here. If I don’t get one other thing more out of the Camino experience, it will have been a success because I will have had an excellent opportunity to spend some quality time with her. We were already good friends, and we’re becoming even better friends.”

“Well, you are not the first people who have asked me that question,” Robert said. “I usually don’t say much because the real answer is intensely personal. On the other hand, this is the Camino. Maybe this is part of why I am here.”

He began. "Soon after I moved to Canada I got married, to the girl next door in fact. We had two sons who were healthy and have always done well, and they continue to do so. Fifteen years ago, long after the boys were off on their own, Melanie took ill, and a year and a half later she died. I tell you this, because I don't think that she ever heard of the Camino, but when I first heard about the Camino – that was oh, about eight years ago – I said to myself that it was something Melanie would have wanted to do. I resolved that someday I would do it for her, so to speak. In her honor, I suppose. I might even be able to imagine her walking along with me, all the way to Santiago."

"Buen Camino!" Interrupted by the familiar words, they exchanged greetings with other hikers passing them on the wide, flat dirt road the trail was following.

Robert continued. "After she died, I found myself working full time, maintaining our house, although it was much too large for a widower living alone, and getting by. In fact, I really don't know where those years went. Work filled up one large part of my life, and the rest of it was swallowed by just the everyday stuff we all do to get by – washing clothes, paying bills, cooking, buying groceries, repairing all the things that kept breaking. The part of me that had once been devoted to family when there were four of us found itself burdened by the most common and unrewarding tasks."

Helen found Robert's words to be jarring. His description fit the lives she and Bert had lived for many years.

"Five years ago I met Cindy, and things changed. The part about wanting to walk the Camino with Melanie's spirit faded, and although I still thought I might like to do it someday, Cindy was uninterested. In fact she's here in Europe right now, doing a grand tour. Her tastes run more toward Monte Carlo than Santiago. I thought that marrying a younger woman would help me to stay young, but it has seemed to do just the opposite. Actually I can't blame Cindy for that. It's nothing she has done. It's just that since my illness, the gap between our ages seems to be opening up."

Helen's wristwatch alarm binged.

"Time for a water break," she explained. "We had an early incident when I got very faint as we walked along. Since then I've been setting the alarm to remind us to drink once each hour. The practice hasn't completely spared us from dehydration, but it's kept me from suffering any more fainting spells."

The farms had become more wooded as they walked along. They stopped in the shade of a clump of poplar trees and rested against a stone fence. Having plenty of water, they offered an extra bottle to Robert, who gratefully accepted it.

“While we’re stopped, I want to comment on what you said, Robert,” Helen said. “Have you heard about Camino angels? We hear that when you most need one, the Camino will send you an angel. I’ve been struggling to know what lessons I ought to take from my Camino experience, and I think maybe Bert has also. Your story has caused me to look at my own life somewhat differently, and that may qualify you for a pair of wings.”

Bert smiled at her.

“Your story has given me something to ponder,” Helen said. “Have I allowed everyday activities to take too much space in my life and crowd out more important things? Maybe I’m being overly dramatic, and I want to hear the rest of your story. Let’s get back on the trail.”

“I certainly didn’t expect that my story would do that, Helen, but you make me eager to continue. Cindy and I have the kind of marriage that doesn’t demand us to do everything together, and it suits both of us fine because our interests overlap very little. We share family life in our big house in Canada, but when it comes to things like vacations, our likes are far different.

“I used to be an avid skier. We would go to a ski resort. I would be out on the slopes. She would be enjoying the other pleasures of resort life – all of which were indoors. At the end of the day we’d get together.

“That was a bit of a digression. What I really wanted to say is that for some reason I can’t begin to explain, my long-held notions about the Camino never really disappeared. And after a while my interests gradually morphed from something I wanted to do for my late wife to something I wanted to do for myself. I read some articles and looked at some documentary videos, and the idea appealed to me more and more. I would begin in France, near Toulouse, where my relatives live, and walk all the way to Santiago. I was still working full time, but I could save up enough holiday time to have as many as five weeks, and if I couldn’t do it in one year, I would come back the next year to finish.

“It was a grand idea, but I didn’t do it. I squandered away my holiday time. I kept my Camino dreams on the shelf. I promised myself again and again that the right time would arrive, and all would be easy. When it was the right time, I would know it. Of course I should have recognized that the tragic end of many dreams is rooted in just that thought – I will know when the time is right.”

Bert broke in. “I’m reminded of the Nike motto – ‘just do it!’ Maybe Helen’s precipitous decision to walk the Camino and drag me along was inspired subliminally by that message, in contrast to your just never finding the right time.”

“Well, if so, fate did well by you two. My story took a sadder turn. Three years ago I learned that I have

congestive heart failure. I was told that I have cardiomyopathy, a condition for which there isn't any real treatment – no operations, no pills to take, or any other ways to reverse its effects. Suffice it to say that it has a suite of symptoms that together severely limit my activity, and if and when there is any change, it will be for the worse.”

“I didn't feel lucky when I learned about my aneurism,” said Bert, “but I guess I was lucky in that they were able to fix it and get me back almost to where I was before. For a while I was quite depressed during my recovery in fact, and even though it is nearly complete, I'm not sure I've entirely gotten over the shock of realizing that I can no longer fully regard myself as a healthy person.”

“You are lucky indeed. You know it's absurd, but at one point I was told by a doctor that my heart had retained only twenty percent of normal capacity. Then another doctor told me that it was thirty percent. I hoped and prayed that the second doctor was right, but then I realized how foolish that was – it was my heart, and not the opinion of one doctor or another that was the real thing. Wishing and hoping wouldn't change that reality one way or another. The little episode did turn out to have some importance, however.

“My recuperation . . . well, understand that there really wasn't any recuperation. My condition was bad and

almost certain to get worse, perhaps slowly, but possibly rapidly. The real recuperation had to take place in my attitude. It was a shock, and that word 'cardiomyopathy' changed my life in an instant. I could no longer do the things I most liked to do. In that instant I went from being a healthy person to a sick person, and in a larger sense from someone with a life to someone with no life. I retired from my job. During my period of adjustment, I thought a few times about the Camino, and it gave me a feeling of deep regret. I had blown it by not going when I was able. And of course then the impossibility of it, the fact that it was out of reach, made it seem all the more alluring.

"I no longer had my work to keep me engaged. And, as you just said about your feelings at the time, I, too, fell into a depression. Mine was quite severe and whenever I thought of the Camino and other things I could have been doing or might have done, I sank a little deeper. In the end it was Cindy who pulled me out of it. Obviously she could do nothing about the basics, but she did a wonderful job in coaxing me back into the world of the living. She insisted that I come along with her to her social events. We went to parties, plays, and benefit concerts. She had me relearning how to play bridge. She got me to take a Spanish conversation course at the community college. And a few times we went sailing with some of her friends on their forty-foot yacht.

“I think it was the sailing that did it. Afterwards I wasn’t ready to buy a sailboat, and besides some parts of sailing are fairly strenuous. But if I could be out on Lake Erie in a sailboat, maybe I could do other things that would recapture some of my old dreams and desires. So I took some baby steps, and then some bigger steps, and I found that I didn’t have to spend the rest of my life sitting in a chair. I actually became quite a fisherman, but that’s another story.

“In the course of my rehabilitation – or the rehabilitation of my life I should say – I forgot about the Camino. I had finally given it up when it was clear that I lacked the physical strength to walk more than a few miles a day.”

Some bicycles whizzed by, and Bert engaged in a fright-induced rant. When he was finished, Robert continued. “I didn’t think about the Camino at all until a friend – actually a friend of a friend – well, I learned about someone who had gone on the Camino through arrangements with a tour company. When I looked into it, I found that this might be a way to recapture at least some of what I had lost by not following my earlier impulses. Then I was looking at some maps of the Camino, and I had a funny thought. I thought of those doctors who couldn’t decide whether I had twenty percent or thirty percent of my coronary capacity. What if I walked twenty percent of the Camino with my twenty percent heart?

Wouldn't that be almost like walking all of it with a hundred percent heart? I knew it was a silly idea, but even so it made me feel good.

"So here I am. I'll walk three or four miles this morning, and if I feel good after that I'll do the same this afternoon. The bus will spirit us ahead, but if I feel like I can keep going, I should cover almost twenty percent and possibly as much as thirty percent of our route. Of course I won't get my Compostela, but I've already got a drawer full of diplomas I never look at."

"I suppose you've heard," said Helen, "of the places along the Camino – one or two churches – the one I remember is the Church of Santiago in Villafranca – where in the Middle Ages if you got there and were too sick to go on, you could present yourself and be assured of all the spiritual benefits you would have received if you made it all the way to Santiago. Your twenty-percent tale reminded me of them, and in a similar sense, made me think that you too will have completed the Camino."

"You're a kind person, Helen," said Robert, "and I thank both of you for following along with my story. You know, if there is one lesson the events in my life have taught me it is that opportunities for happiness do not come along every day, and when you see one, you should not push it away or even set it aside temporarily."

The woods became quite thick and trees formed a canopy over the trail, which ran through a permanently wet area. A series of large flat stones formed a raised path through the wetness.

“Isn’t this beautiful!” All had noticed, but Robert was the first say it. “What a day! You two are special. I have greatly enjoyed meeting you. The Camino has been very good to me, putting you in my path, even if I am just an old fluffy towel of a guy.”

They walked along in silence for a few more minutes until they approached a large café-bar with three tour buses parked in front. Bert and Helen said goodbye to Robert, and continued on the trail. They could have used cups of coffee, but the bar was obviously crowded, and they knew the service would be slow. They let the Camino pull them forward.

“I don’t think it was the fluffy towels that attracted him to the Camino,” remarked Bert.

“No, and if we complete the whole pilgrimage route,” added Helen, “I don’t think our accomplishment will be any more than his. He will unquestionably have completed his Camino, and in fine style.”

“Somehow that makes me feel like ours is too,” Bert said. “What Robert’s story says to me is that we must be a

little braver than we have been, be willing to grab on to whatever life offers us, and to be grateful for it.”

Together

Melide to Arca

Saturday, June 25 and Sunday, June 26

On the way out of Melide, they passed several farms. Versions of the *hórreos* they'd been seeing populated almost every one of them. Some homes that weren't farms had decorative outbuildings, probably storage sheds, mimicking the look of these distinctive granaries. It was a stony region and builders took full advantage of those natural resources in their construction. Bert pointed out several more stone churches with their bell towers, like many others they'd seen, adorned by huge stork nests. They walked side by side on a wide dirt path through thin poplar woods.

If asked later how the conversation had begun, Bert wasn't sure he'd be able to give an answer. It seemed to have just crept up on them. Indeed, the past few days had made their relationship less guarded and more comfortable. Also, all the time they had spent with their own thoughts and feelings while on the trail together may have brought them to a place where they each wanted to face the thing standing between them, finally.

"What is it that has kept us coming together, year after year, when we're apart for months and months, out of touch, perhaps with scarcely a thought about each other?"

The subject had come up before. But this time it was more a comment than a real question. And as Bert said it this time, he faintly realized that the question might easily have been turned inside out. What had repeatedly caused them to leave one another for months at a time when obviously there were lingering forces at work repeatedly bringing them together? Was their natural condition apartness, to be punctuated infrequently by brief comings together? Or was it togetherness, albeit thwarted by circumstances that kept them apart?

Here the trail was shaded as they walked into a grove of eucalyptus trees, all in rows and obviously planted. Only sparse understory plants grew beneath the trees. This was not a proper woods, thought Bert, understanding why some people objected to these plantations.

“That’s an intriguing question, Bert, and I’m inclined to think it’s only one of a whole cascade of questions we have never consciously faced, let alone begun to answer.” Predictably, Helen saw the issue clearly, noted Bert. Less predictably, she seemed ready to talk about it.

Bert felt sure the Camino was at work in the background. After their recent experiences they were changing, and the adventure of discovering the changes was irresistible.

“We like being together,” Helen said. “But that can’t be what our friendship is about. Almost every day we’ve

met someone along the trail we enjoy. Why do we go out of our way to be together? We've almost overcome our reluctance, our weird fear we might get too close. We've put up with each other's quirks. Why?

"We could easily hang out with other people," she continued. "Easier people to walk with, I might add. Much as I like you, Bert, you're not anyone's ideal companion for the Camino. One of my major occupations – preoccupations – at least for the first half of the trip, was trying to help you to get with the program. To stop questioning and analyzing everything. I had to keep asking myself why you couldn't just begin enjoying the walk."

He was well aware of his uncertain and still-evolving relationship with the Camino. He knew his multitude of reservations and his doubts about it might come across as a sign of self-absorption. Undoubtedly they had annoyed her many times. Now he wanted to call a truce on that issue. And, besides, she didn't seem annoyed at the moment. She seemed just to be opening up a bit of herself to him and sharing how she felt.

"I appreciate your patience with me. I pledge to refrain from testing it any more, at least for the rest of our walk. But honestly, I've been trying. Maybe I've been trying too hard to make the most of this, to get out of the Camino as much as I can. Anyway, thanks for mostly tolerating my indecisiveness. I have to say, I think all my

trying just may have begun to work—I feel like I am getting to know what the Camino has to say to me.”

Bert had recognized the day they met lovebirds Al and Margie that he could not claim immunity from loneliness. And the conversations they’d had along the trail and during their leisurely afternoons and evenings of recuperation from walking were almost enough reason to be out here on the Camino. Talking with someone you know is much easier than striking up a relationship with a fellow walker, surely easier than with a stranger and likely one only meagerly conversant in English. All this was true, but he also knew that companionship was not what their friendship was about. There was way more to his and Helen’s relationship.

The woods had thickened, and the path paralleled a stream. Like an exaggerated version of the place they crossed with fluffy towel Robert, Helen was walking across big rocks that formed a path beside the stream. The path was dappled with patches of midmorning light filtering through the trees. She was watching carefully where she placed her feet, but looked up at Bert with a broad relaxed smile just as he took her picture.

“Good timing, my friend,” he said, smiling back at her. “You know, we’ve shared a lot over the years, although nothing before was anything like being here together.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized that their shared experiences, most of which were

from the workplace, had very little to do with the present, their Camino. They almost never reminisced about the past times in the office. Their shared past wasn't like the lovebirds' description of when they had reconnected at the high school reunion. There was no renewed first love, no wellspring of lurking teen passion that engulfed them whenever he and Helen reunited after they'd been apart.

She stepped in lightly. "We have some version of this same talk every time we're together, but maybe this time is different."

"I'm reminded of what Robert said about regretting that he put off his Camino adventure, waiting for the right time to reveal itself."

"Okay," Bert said. "We always have conflicts, or at least misunderstandings, not between us exactly, but more often between our different lives – the things we think are important to each of us – our jobs, our freedom to follow our own paths – and we end up getting snagged on practical things. It's what caused us to abort that weekend trip after our divorces and to never go there again. The conflicts have been yours as often as mine."

"Let's back up," Helen said.

He saw her shoulders tense and sensed her frustration building as she went on.

“We were talking about our relationship. What it is and what it isn’t. I don’t want to revisit any of our wranglings of the past. I want to begin with the basics, and the present. What exactly is the nature of our friendship? What do we want from it?”

Bert wasn’t ready to respond. He didn’t know how. He was fortunate the path had narrowed, and they’d begun to cross an overgrown green field where they had to walk one behind the other. He could ponder the question for a minute.

He had tilting wooden fence posts on his left holding two strings of barbed wire. The grasses were knee high. Yellow daisies – *margaritas* – sprouted among them, tall enough to catch the breeze and sway gently.

He thought about Al and Margie. Lonely, uncomfortable with the middle-age dating scene, neither was satisfied with being single again. It came to him that they might have been feeling a bit like he did when suddenly presented with the image of the thirty-year abyss.

He thought of their stories of newly built houses more than a thousand miles apart, grown children living nearby, and networks of friends and activities. All these impediments were seemingly swept aside by the intensity of their feelings for one another. “Love conquers all” was

not an adage Bert went to naturally, but its message seemed to be the lovebirds' story.

Could he and Helen ever be like that? Full speed ahead whatever the barriers? Not in the past for sure. He thought about the two times they approached the edge—their almost-weekend tryst and his aborted proposal that they change the nature of their relationship. She seemed to share his feelings, but he felt rebuffed, at least that second time. He had left Orebed Lake hoping that maybe love would ultimately overcome all obstacles, but realizing it would not be happening just then.

The path was widening. Along the fence line a cluster of wild mints appeared. The plants grew about knee high and were covered with little purple flowers. Waving above them were a few wild foxgloves with their bright pink hollyhock-like flowers—the source of the drug digitalis, he remembered. Perhaps they were fortifying his heart with their presence.

“Agreed. This is a new beginning,” he said. “And I see a real starting over as setting aside our past discussions and not stumbling over all those obstacles of the past.”

“I agree too. So what's next?”

“We're wonderful friends. We do good things for each other, but we could do more. I would like to be able

to reach out when you seem sad, like the time you hinted of your never-spoken fear that your dad might reject you if you weren't good enough. It was absolutely impulsive on my part to stop you and say what I was thinking. And . . . when you were so upset about the call from Donald . . . it felt right to have my arm around you, despite our unspoken, long-standing rules.

"I want that kind of connection to happen more, without it requiring such a dramatic moment. I'd like give you a long hug right now, but it can wait. It might be a silly thing to do here on the trail. We always stop short. It is as though, each time, one or the other of us is afraid. Afraid being closer might lead us down some path that will destroy parts of our lives we don't want to lose."

They were gradually climbing a low hill, skirting fields and looking down on a crumbling farmhouse. He was out of breath and out of words at the same time.

"If you are waiting for me to argue with you or dispute what you are saying, you're in for a long wait," she said quietly.

"Okay," said Bert. "Maybe now's the time to deal with that great big gorilla that's been sitting in the room with us all these years, and even here on the Camino is setting us back every time we feel we could get closer. We've changed. I like to think we're really different

people – different from a month ago. And we’re certainly different from who we were back then.”

“If the ‘back then’ is what I think it is, I don’t know if I’m ready to go there. Not just yet.”

“Bear with me. Let’s review our story, maybe pretending it’s a plot from a bad movie.”

“Okay.” She said slowly, her hesitation signaling reluctance.

“Here goes. Two friends from work find themselves together at a professional meeting in one of those desert resorts. They like each other, they find each other attractive, and they have in common that neither one is on an even keel emotionally. Separately they’ve recently suffered the breakup of their marriages. They’re wounded and desperate to recover. He blames himself for failing to hold up his end of his marriage. She feels rejected because her ex-husband chose his work over her.

“But here they are – alone together so to speak – and they think this may be an opportunity to rebound. Maybe if they could find comfort in each other, they could look past their separate agonies. They try, but they find that they just can’t do it. The tryst they’ve planned turns out to be a miserable, humiliating, devastating failure. Far from healed, instead they’ve deepened their wounds. He has one more failure to add to a long string of them. She can

count one more rejection. Their hoped for night to remember is one to be forgotten – pushed into the farthest recesses of memory, and allowed to evaporate there.

“They remain friends, but wary friends. For years they tiptoe along a tortuous path, with strict limits on the nature of their friendship.”

“I suppose when you tell it that way . . . now that you say it . . . I suppose I wouldn’t describe it any differently.”

Bert continued. “When they planned their little fling, the characters in our story were being naïve and stupid. They weren’t themselves, so I suppose we can forgive them. But can we forgive them for the rest of it? For going through years alone because of something that happened once a long time ago, when their heads were all befuddled, and they weren’t being very smart?”

Helen seemed to indicate recognition. “Do you think that’s the cage Ilsa saw us living in?”

“I don’t know. I think there’s more to it . . . more to getting out of those cages.”

“But you think a little bit of a jail break might help?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Neither spoke for several long minutes as they continued past the farm and approached another stand of

eucalyptus trees, this one with towering, pillar-like trees. Finally it was Helen who continued.

“As we have walked along over the past several days I have had the feeling, and a growing feeling, that I may be cheating myself – needlessly denying myself part of my life – part that is just slipping away from me. It was definitely caused – at least a little bit – by the warm comfort of your impulsive reaction to things I’ve told you about my hopes and fears. I think even before that it was Al and Margie’s story that began to bring the feeling into focus.

“Maybe, despite my snarky, wine-soaked comments after dinner, my subconscious knew it was a ‘seize the moment’ call. The Lovebirds’ happiness, their willingness to leap into the unknowable scared me. What would I do that for? I like certainty. I want to control my destiny. Your out-of-character and over-the-top reaction to my comments – I mean, when you mentioned that loneliness is not beyond your experience – that somehow made a difference. It pushed me to face that lurking possibility, maybe even desire, for a change that I have been so strongly resisting.

“Ilsa, Annette, and others have said things and seen things. You haven’t told me your take on what they said. The past few days have made me see things – maybe open some doors – that have been closed for a long time. Whatever has happened, like you, I’ve come to feel that

the intimacy we have stubbornly held at bay may be exactly what we need.”

Both were silent for a long moment before she continued.

“I think I’m not sorry we’ve lived our friendship the way we have up to this point. I guess, in a way, I regret the years we may have missed in a different kind of friendship, but we wouldn’t be who we are today if we’d done it differently. And, today feels quite good to me. Tomorrow – maybe tonight – feels like it could be even better.”

“Maybe this is the magic of the Camino,” Bert said. “Out here we have space, time, the trail, and each other. All those other things, the things that guide and constrain our everyday lives are out of sight and almost out of mind. Then add in these pilgrims, perhaps for me especially fluffy-towel Robert. He seemed to read us better than we understand ourselves. It all adds up to a feeling that I know myself better than I did in Roncesvalles.”

Now they were walking along a path beside a highway, and they had to time what they said so their words wouldn’t be drowned out by the sounds of passing vehicles.

“Something funny happened on the way to Santiago,” he said. “Here’s what strikes me. You wanted me to come

on the Camino with you, and I came along grudgingly. I know I've been a burden. I've had a super dose of negativity, doubtless spoiling some of the grand adventure. The good thing is we've done our best, however imperfect, to accommodate one another. I came along on the Camino, and you tolerated my foibles.

“But suppose we had come to rely upon each other on a regular, continuing basis, and one of us got the job offer of a lifetime which, for the sake of discussion, required the lucky one to head off to Timbuktu for two years. How would we handle it?”

A line of trucks — practically a convoy — roared by, and no one spoke for several seconds.

“I don't know,” she said finally. “I do know that we are again worrying about something that hasn't happened, and almost certainly wouldn't happen the same way we imagine it. For years we've been cowering before 'what ifs' . . . cutting ourselves off from what might become rich and rewarding parts of our lives.

“You may have something there about the magic of the Camino—I also feel like I know myself a little better after all this walking. Along the way, listening to so many other people's stories, I have begun to see a part of myself I didn't know was there. I think I may have been coping with the possibility of being rejected again, like I felt my birth father had done, by never giving anyone the chance

to reject me. I don't know about that business with my ex; maybe that's part of it too. I am good at helping other people. But I've never wanted to let people help me. I may need a lot of help if I am going to break lifetime habits that are so deeply ingrained."

After a long silence, Bert spoke up. "You know, I got thinking about some graffiti I saw yesterday. It was scrawled on a fallen-down church. The words were *Fe, Esperanza, and Caridad*. I remember hearing as a child that to have a good life, you must have faith, hope, and charity. Remember my conversation with the social worker Conrad, who thought many people had too little hope? Okay, think about our lives and what's missing. You said once that I seemed to think I could never be happy. Maybe that's the problem—I don't have enough hope that I can be happy, like Conrad's clients and my Cousin Ellie. And you . . ."

"Okay, I know what you're going to say next. You're going to say I don't have enough faith, because I don't trust people and I shut myself off from them. Very good, Bert, you've figured out both of us.

"But hang on to your hat, Kimosabe — or should I say *Quien no sabe?* The translation they used in my vacation bible school was 'faith, hope, and *love*.' Now that you know that, how would you rate the quality of our lives?"

“Hmm, guess I’ll get out of the rating business for the time being,” Bert replied.

The trail moved away from the road and she was able to speak more quietly. “I actually think you’re on to something with your theologizing. We better watch out or instead of turning into Socrates when we arrive in Santiago, you might become Thomas Aquinas, and I think I recall that he was a three hundred-pound monk.”

They both laughed.

“We were talking about trusting ourselves and each other more—having more faith and hope,” said Bert. “When I started thinking about what if one of us got a job offer in Timbuktu, I think I was failing a Camino test. I was forgetting that the Camino is about the walking and not about getting anywhere. Santiago isn’t the goal, the journey is the goal. Maybe I’ll remember it from now on. Maybe that will help me to remember that you and I are about us. The present is all we have, and overthinking all the things the future might bring will keep us tied in knots.”

A sign on the right announced that they were about to cross the Rio Iso. They were in woods again, but this time it was a grove of poplars. The trail leading up to the medieval bridge over the river was paved with flat stones. On the other side was the renovated stone *albergue* where they planned to stay. They’d read that this one is among

the oldest pilgrim hospitals still in existence. Bert was happy to see the large café-bar as they crossed the bridge. For the moment, no one was at the tables. Helen went in and ordered them coffee while Bert watched their packs in the bright, warm courtyard. He was comfortable. Maybe the Camino was doing its benevolent magic in guiding their conversation.

When she returned, she was ready to take their discussion on a different tack. “Maybe if we created a vision of the future where there was an ‘us,’ maybe situations where there was ‘you’ and a ‘me’ just wouldn’t exist.”

Her words played over and over in his mind until she interrupted his thoughts.

“Until that business about faith and hope, the word ‘love’ has never come up between us. Has it?” She was pushing the envelope.

Bert needed to reply. “No, I think I’d remember *that*, if it had come up! . . . Maybe it’s because there are so many kinds of love, and we never let ourselves create one that fits us. It wouldn’t be like the love that puppies have for their masters. Neither of us would be likely to devotedly follow the other around all day. And it wouldn’t be like the love that tugs movie stars from their spouses into torrid affairs with their leading men and women. We’ve never — at least not yet — been passionately sexual. It’s

funny, but just saying that seems to set off an adrenalin rush of the kind we've been avoiding for so long. Hormones aside, love is a wide force field. Surely something pulls us together and has for a long time. I'm coming to believe we have been in love's power all along.

"Maybe we went straight to whatever the real thing is," Bert continued. "What is it that takes over after infatuation and flash have faded? Maybe it's a hundred subtle and mysterious things that together cause two people to want to become more intertwined with each other. Maybe that's where the Camino has led us."

"Despite all our philosophizing, Socrates, my friend, I think I still haven't figured love out exactly," said Helen. "For a while more you'll still be auditioning to become the love of my life, but I can say with certainty that you've been promoted to the rock of my life."

Bert felt the future leading in a new and different direction. He reached across the table to take Helen's hand, barely noticing that he nearly bumped his coffee cup. The unfamiliar feeling of her hand in his gave him a sensation that surprised him. It made him think of the feeling of that stone – or was it a rock – as he was about to place it at the foot of La Cruz de Ferro.

Things between them had been progressing, but as it turned out, there was to be no opportunity to go in any such new direction on this day. The *albergue* offered no

privacy – a cocktail of frustration and relief. They sat around satisfied with small talk for the remainder of the afternoon.

Bert's feelings were mixed, the comfort of their new relationship conveyed a serenity that blended oddly with his anxiety about what was to come next—the awkwardness that inevitably would accompany first moves. They managed an almost-embarrassing mutual hand squeezing as they slipped into their adjacent bunks that night. He relied on sweet dreams and hoped she too was looking forward to coming days that would be notably less lonely than their predecessors.

Before lights-out they consulted Helen's guidebook and found the name of a promising *hostal* in a town about fifteen kilometers – less than ten miles – away. It offered private rooms with bath and took reservations. Feeling positively ecstatic at having brought his Blackberry along, Bert called the number and reserved a room for them for the next day. Not doing too badly with his Spanish, he was concerned that he might have given the wrong answer when asked if he wanted a room with a “matrimonial” bed. He didn't know; maybe that kind of bed was just the thing they wanted, but maybe it would be rushing things.

The next morning found them walking in a mist that lent a mystical mood to the Galician countryside. They walked by one lovely pasture where a black and white

horse grazed lazily in the mist, flowing in and out of view as the clouds blew by him. They saw dozens more antique utilitarian *hórreos*, and modern decorative ones. They walked on wet, but not yet muddy dark trails when the paths went through eucalyptus groves or were bordered by ancient rock walls. The broken terrain presented them with a smorgasbord of views.

They talked easily together about what the trail presented to them. Bert felt a new electricity between them, even as they followed their now familiar routines. When they checked into the *hostal*, it was only one-thirty in the afternoon. The Camino had been good to them all day. They washed clothes and went out for something to eat on the plaza. Helen ordered a bottle of wine for them to have with lunch.

“Not a bottle of water, today, my friend? What are you thinking with a full bottle of wine at this time of day?”

She smiled. “Just thought we could celebrate being almost there – to Santiago, that is.”

“Right. Santiago. Good idea,” Bert said looking up as a couple approached. It was the Irish storytellers, Jack and Emma.

“Oh, my, what a surprise to see you again,” said Bert getting up to greet them. “How did you end up here? We

stopped and looked for you at Guacelmo, but you were shopping. How did you catch up to us? You said you weren't coming to Santiago this year."

"We had no plans to," said Jack.

"But the Camino has its own ways and its own voices, and we found ourselves wanting to come after finishing another wonderful *hospitalero* experience. So we hopped a bus and just got off thinking it would be nice to walk into the city from here," Emma continued.

"Now we know why the Camino called us here. We had to come to learn how your story is playing out!" Jack said.

"No need to ask, Jack," Emma said. "You can see the answer just looking at them. The frog and the princess are having a hell of a good Camino."

"Good thing Helen bought us this wine, you two," said Bert. "Your wild imaginations need a bit to calm them down. Sit and share our bottle."

They shared an hour or so of wine and talk about the walk and the volunteering. The Irishmen gave the teasing a rest, but it had done a job on Bert. He hoped that Helen too might be thinking that a bit of love in the afternoon would be a great idea. She was running her finger around the rim of her glass and smiling. He thought he had his answer.

Jack looked at his watch. It was time to get booked into their *albergue*. They were off. Bert looked at Helen and reached for her hand.

When they were walking back to their *hostal*, Helen gave a little laugh. "Bert, I just remembered that episode of *Murphy Brown* when she and the house painter are about to go upstairs together. She says something like, 'Wait, I have this appendicitis scar. It's going to ruin everything.' He replied something like, 'I'll take that appendicitis scar and raise you one gall bladder.' I am feeling a bit that way, right now."

"Good," said Bert. "I like the idea of your being off balance for a change, beautiful lady."

When they got to their room he still had her hand. She leaned into him. The anticipatory tension of the day might have sapped his energy but he felt great with her body weighing on his even that little bit. When he closed the door behind them, he pulled her close in a long, long hug.

"You're feeling amazingly compliant, my friend," he said.

She looked up at him with eager, smiling eyes.

"In your dreams, pilgrim. You got the wrong woman for compliant. I am about to pull off your high-tech clothes and lick your scars."

Her hands slid slowly low down his back.

He partially disengaged from Helen and locked the door, the lock a typical European affair that seemed to turn endlessly, scrolling through different levels of latches and bolts as the key twisted in the slot. The afternoon sunlight bathed the room with a warm glow that matched his mood.

“I guess we’re here,” said Bert, realizing as the words came out that they conveyed absolutely no literal meaning.

“I wouldn’t want to be any other place. Would you?”

“No, this is where I want to be, in a tiny private room somewhere on the Camino in Spain. Oh, I forgot the rest of it – with you and you alone.”

“Are you ready?”

“Oh, yes.”

When they had first seen the room, Bert realized that he had probably made a mistake in not opting for the so-called matrimonial bed; in fact at the end of the phone conversation he couldn’t have said whether he had accepted or rejected that option. The mistake, as it turned out, wasn’t important anyway. As the afternoon sun melted into soft moonbeams skipping over her skin, one

twin bed nicely accommodated their tightly entwined bodies. The backpacks slept on the other one.

In the morning they rose as if it were a normal day. Of course there was nothing normal about waking up wrapped in each other's naked bodies, but they would be back on the trail in less than an hour. Indeed, they were again walking a few minutes before eight. Nothing had changed. Everything had changed.

Bert needed to put the experience into words as a way of getting his mind around it all. The tension of the days leading up to the big night had drained away, but far more important, the tension that had for many years haunted and limited his connection to her was flushed away with it. The barrier sealing off the expression of his feelings and cloaking tenderness in shrouds of awkwardness was at least partially removed. He had faced down demons and her embrace was welcoming and eager.

On the trail he remembered an old saying that sex is ninety percent anticipation and ten percent letdown. In their case the anticipation had been simmering for years. And what about the letdown? Far from the letdown implied in that hackneyed saying, what he thought had been let down for them were the barriers that had constrained them.

“How are you this morning, Mr. Charles? Forgive me, after all your confessions I now know I should call you Doctor Charles. Are you pleased with your conquests?” Helen teased, gently, tenderly, probably expecting him to complain about distress focused on some overstressed and underused part of his anatomy.

He was playing along. “Oh, I am definitely pleased. But conquests? Ha! It is hard to conquer someone at the top of her game. And we do have a really big problem.”

“Oh?”

“We could be up a creek. Our lovely new relationship could be facing a crisis – an end-of-relationship crisis. Shit, this is a major stumbling block.”

“What problem would that be, kind sir?”

“Well, if we want *una habitación privada con baño* for tonight, you’d better get out that guidebook and get me a phone number, and I need to fire up the Blackberry *pronto, ahora mismo*, right now! Otherwise we’ll find ourselves back in the bunkhouse with the Girl Scouts. Or I suppose we could buck up and build some spiritual capital for the next life by settling for another barrack-like *albergue*, casting our lots with those ascetic pilgrims – the ones like that Colleen for whom abstinence, privation, and suffering are sought after blessings.”

“I think, over our long friendship, we banked all that kind of capital we’ll ever need.”

The guidebook came out, the phone number was duly noted, the Blackberry was put into service, and the reservation was made.

“Right now you’re wondering whether when I called I figured out the part about the matrimonial bed,” Bert said, reveling in the minor mischief he was able to foment.

Helen was up to the challenge. “Let’s not jump ahead of ourselves here. The subject of matrimony has yet to come up in our conversations, and I won’t countenance it until some dashing man shows up with a ring, and a very good story. One, incidentally I have yet to hear. First I’ll need to be swept off my feet; I may be under some temporary spell right now – a passion kind of thing – but in the light of day I’ll need some substance before I agree to discuss any permanent arrangements.”

“Oh, I thought this had to do with double or single beds. I might decide to give up on making this into something with staying power, but for now I’ll settle for another day like the yesterday, and I bet you’ll do the same.”

About to respond with a “*Si señor, d’acuerdo,*” Helen was interrupted by other pilgrims.

“*Buen Camino!*”

It was Jack and Emma. Helen greeted them with enthusiasm and Bert too was happy to walk with them. He was all but certain that his and Helen's own newfound happiness would spill over to add to Jack and Emma's intrinsic good spirits. Today Bert thought that he and Helen could shine happiness into the lives of these friends and everybody else they would meet on the Camino.

Had the Camino really ushered in new lives for them? Remain a skeptic if you will, a joyous Bert told himself, but the magic of the Camino lies just inside all of us. He had walked on the trail and it had caused him to ask what was important in his life. The Camino is not the answer, he thought. Instead it is the question, and each of us must answer its questions in order to live our lives with meaning and reward. He laughed at his grand philosophical thoughts, remembering Helen calling him "Socrates", or was he becoming "Aquinas"?