

# TEX HAS HORSES AND PLENTY OF AIR

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## ABSTRACT

### TEX HAS HORSES AND PLENTY OF AIR

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*Tex Has Horses and Plenty of Air* is a selection of a larger work of memoir, based on my experience on the Camino de Santiago in the fall of 2011. Making up approximately the first half of the memoir, these chapters track the narrator from his arrival in Paris, across the French Pyrenees and west through northern Spain. As the narrator navigates internal and external challenges, driven by his need to rid himself of a panic disorder, he questions the relationship between actual identity and performance. To distance himself from his panic, his problems, his past and present, the narrator invents a series of new identities to try out along the busy pilgrimage route and in the process comes to appreciate his experience and the anxiety he carries.

The earliest version of this memoir took shape in 2012, shortly after I returned to the US. It then continued to crop up here and there, in disjointed flashes and drafts, for the next five years. Finally, after two years in the MFA program writing almost exclusively memoir, in August of 2017, I decided to shelve the thesis I'd written about my teenage misadventures and focus instead on putting together a definitive, novel-length Camino saga. I'm relieved and pleased things took this turn. Spain was a far nicer place to revisit than R. L. Paschal High School.

The trick with committing those blurry months of wandering to paper was finding ways to integrate what I'd learned about fiction in the program— the necessary beats, the classic archetypes, the shifting fortunes— with my actual experiences. Through revision, stakes had to be emphasized and characters needed further explanation. A phrase I heard in my first workshop that I've held onto since suggests itself: “the truth is never enough”. The greatest challenge of this project was attempting to integrate the expectations of a novel-reader with those of a memoir-reader, making a true account come to life like fiction. This can be especially difficult when dealing with innately repetitive subject matter, like relationship dysfunction and panic attacks. As a result, this project proved an essential bit of practice in finding creative ways to maintain momentum through a series of seemingly similar crises.

I am highly influenced (though no longer quite consciously) by the works of Hemingway, as is made pretty obvious in the text. Though his terse, matter-of-fact style jars somewhat with my slightly headier, Dickensian clause-stacking, his talent for effective simplicity, for summing up people and places in single sentences, has always impressed me. On top of that, there's always a little Wodehouse in my writing, regardless of subject matter. Funny things could be funnier and serious things need that relief, those moments of absurdity.

As a memoir, this piece is built on truth. Like most truths, it's been partially rearranged.

This project has allowed me to relive what was one of the most important, challenging, and rewarding experiences of my life. That alone was enough fun, for me, to justify the effort. I hope I have been successful in capturing that moment in time, that journey, in pushing past the travelogue to something more immersive. I hope I have managed to reproduce a fraction of the mad whirl of faces, conversations, highs, lows, cities and villages I found along the Way.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

I stretched out on a point of high ground, soaked and staring at my naked feet as the rainwater rushed past me down the Pyrenees in dark, muddy rivers. Ten blisters. Ten. Four for each set of toes and one for each heel. How could anyone do so much damage in three days?

I was a little over halfway up the mountain, stuck and indecisive. The storm surged, and my feet ached and stung more by the minute. The rain and silt were getting into the wounds, but wet socks and stiff boots were no better. With France behind me and Spain ahead, I was left with only two options: crawl back the way I'd come and try finagling another night, sans-reservation, at the refuge in Orisson, or push on toward Roncesvalles, risking the possibility of being forced to sleep rough in the forest along the border later, if the weather deteriorated or my strength finally gave out. Struggling to keep calm, I watched lightning streak and splinter out over the valleys below, frozen between fear and exhilaration.

When school let out after my sophomore year, I decided to hang back in Georgetown after most everyone else had gone home to soak up the quiet and look for a job. I took an economics class and moved into a bare, two-bedroom apartment on campus where I lived like a squatter, never fully unpacking. The warmth and stillness of the town were hypnotic together, disassociating, sedating. Kate went home to Houston and the distance between us unsettled her.

I could tell we were starting to resent each other, but chose to ignore it, to postpone the discussion, focusing instead on my books and beers and walks by the lake. Summer stretched on and I felt I could handle everything, that I had plenty of time to figure out Kate and what the hell I was doing with my life, later. Rather than worrying, a foreign concept to me at the time, I did nothing. Literally nothing. For weeks.

Then, one innocuous, sunny afternoon in early June, Kate came up from Houston to visit me. In preparation for her arrival, I called together what few associates I could find still lurking around town to meet us for lunch. A few hours later I was lounging with Kate and two friends at an almost empty Thai restaurant on the town square, leaning back in my chair after an average meal, when it hit me, horns blaring, like a bus.

In an instant, with no warning, my heart skipped painfully, its rhythm suddenly rough and uneven, like a rattletrap car thundering into high gear for the last time, rusty death spasms of my own inner machinery. I wanted to scream, to call for help, but my lungs would not inflate. No air was getting to my brain. I watched my smiling, oblivious companions examine the bill the waitress had just left on the table from miles away. I saw the elderly couple who looked asleep at the two-top by the door. I tracked locals walking dogs on the sidewalk outside and listened to the servers chattering in the kitchen, unable to speak, unable to move. This, I was convinced, was how it was all going to end. It had to be. I'd done too many stupid things since middle school, treated my body as if it were disposable, replaceable, and now it was too late to do anything about it. Time's up. Game over. Nice try. Dead in a deserted Thai restaurant in central Texas. I was blacking out.



Someone must have noticed, must have pulled me out of there, because the next thing I remember I was sitting on the curb outside, my head hanging over the asphalt, forcing quick, scalpel-sharp breaths as deep into my lungs as I could manage at a rate of about three a second. Kate was talking to me, patting my back, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. Next, cut to me lying fully clothed in an empty bathtub calling the family doctor I'd begrudgingly seen once or twice throughout high school, listening to the ringing echo across the tile and clutching a plastic glass of vodka in a shaky, white-knuckled deathgrip.

"Don't worry, pal, I don't think it's a heart attack," the man said with a trademark, condescending southern lilt. "A trip to the hospital probably won't be necessary today."

I told him again about the feeling, like an elephant sitting on my chest, about my skipping heartbeat still booming in my ears, relentless, overwhelming, like an off-kilter double kick-drum, about the vomiting, the fainting, the numbness. He prescribed me a handful of Valium over the phone and told me to drive back to Fort Worth to see him.

I met with him two days later. By that time, I'd gone from never having this problem in my life to more or less having it every waking hour.

I had, apparently, managed to develop out of nowhere, at the height of my misguided semi-contentedness, one of those rare, debilitating disorders doctors know almost nothing about. Not only had I definitely now developed said disorder, but my particular case also happened to be, apparently, of the prize-winning variety. The worst he'd ever heard of, much less treated, Doc F. Leghorn told me, failing to totally suppress his medical excitement. My guy gave me a variety of benzodiazepines and a pamphlet of childish-sounding coping strategies. (Make a fist and *squeeze* all of that bad adrenaline out. Right.) Neither did me much good. Something in my

chemistry had shifted and after that moment nothing was the same. After that moment I was either coping or waiting.

As months dragged by, Kate and I fought more frequently. Our arguments, once rare and quickly resolved spats, now a near nightly, compounding ritual, grew increasingly cutting. After my diagnosis, I missed her birthday while trying to distract myself, traveling with my family. She called it a betrayal—evidence of my total narcissism and disdain for her feelings. For weeks after that, a simmering subterranean lake of past mistakes, a meticulously updated catalogue of everything I'd ever done wrong, came bubbling to the surface with little or no provocation. Scores of searing texts swung abruptly between wide-ranging personal attacks, declarations of undying adoration and bitter bouts of self-hatred. Anxiety was no excuse. My behavior had, apparently, hit the limit. The birthday fiasco was the final straw. There was no convincing Kate of my innocence. There would be no honest apologies for her retaliation.

Kate was intelligent and ambitious, but given, especially when we were apart, to spells of intense depression. Over the past year, she'd declared herself ugly and useless with increasing regularity and lashed out at me for trying to persuade her otherwise. It was inevitable, she said in the depths of those episodes, that I'd leave her eventually, so there was no point in waiting. She wanted me to to reciprocate, to tear her apart, to prove her theory. The problem was, despite my better judgment, I still cared about her. A sharper, more realistic me would have taken the hint, but instead her self-destructive skirmishes had historically filled me with a perverse, pseudo-altruism, a desire to hold her even tighter. I knew she needed help and I thought I was the one to give it to her. In the fallout of the birthday incident, though, whatever hope I had was fraying. Too much had been said that wasn't so easily forgotten. I was busy enough trying to save myself.

As summer drew to a close and another school year loomed larger on the horizon, I began desperately searching for a way out, a way to escape not just the panic, not just that place, but Kate, myself, my friends, my responsibilities and the crumbling, constricting life that had grown up around me all those years I wasn't looking. I was on the edge, cracking up, day by day.

Then, no doubt identifying me as the short-circuiting tangle of neuroses I was, my parents made a suggestion: don't go back to school. Go to Spain. Take a pilgrimage. Walk the disorder away on the Camino de Santiago. Unsure of myself and the strategy, but petrified at the thought of returning to a normal life, another semester dense with Kate, classes and social expectation, I arranged for a leave of absence and began researching backpacks, routes and hiking boots.

One month later, I woke up with a start on my second morning in Paris, already locked in the claws of a monstrous panic attack, to the shrill, steady tone of an alarm clock bleating through the wall. I lay twitching in an unfamiliar bed, blinking at the darkness and groggily trying to work out where it was that my body would be discovered after this obviously real heart attack whose coming I'd long suspected was finished with me. How long would it take the news to cross the ocean? My recollection of the last few hours before I'd gone to sleep was slow to surface. Gradually, I came to remember myself and why I was in a strange room, choking and wondering through the night instead of back in Texas, stowed safely away in some cramped dorm. This was it. The start. The first real day of travel on my own steam, unaided by my parents' careful set of instructions. Their last gifts, a train ticket on crisp printer paper and a confirmation slip for a single bed in St. Jean Pied de Port lay folded on the nightstand. Cool air and the sound of traffic blew urgently in through an open window.

It felt appropriate that anxiety should strike then. It was no stranger to me and called often, but this particular visit felt unique, more pronounced, pointed, personal. Its hands were around my throat, its knee on my heart, like it knew I'd left in an attempt to escape it. It had figured out my plan, tracked me down, and wanted to remind me that it wasn't going anywhere.

My eyes adjusting, I fumbled around in the dim, red light from the ancient alarm clock on my bedside table for the bottle where I kept what was left of my medicine. My arms shook the little cylinder involuntarily as I picked it up and I noted the sound. My doctor had given me only four Clonazepam for the trip to aid me in my plan to come off the stuff on the road, where I'd be theoretically focused only on getting where I was going. One was lost already to the claustrophobic journey from DFW to Heathrow. There were now three left, not enough to gamble. Not with the future so uncertain. I set the bottle down and sat up, inhaling sharply, arching my back and hanging my head to ease the passage of air. Breath came to me as if I was pulling it through a cocktail straw.

The alarm in the room next door was still going off and now I could hear voices in other directions growling sleepy, muffled threats in two or three languages. The walls seemed paper thin. Thankfully, I hadn't noticed that when I'd come in after my first night of legal drinking in a big city. I was out like a light. Europe was a tolerable place to be nineteen.

The initial roar of anxiety was fading to a throbbing hum in my ears, lurching down to an almost bearable level. Somewhat relieved, I began to string together my first coherent thoughts of the day. This respite must have lasted a little under five seconds. Just long enough for me to wipe my eyes, turn my head and decipher those little red numerals that hung in the air beside me. One Mississippi, two, three.

It was 5:40 AM. The wakeup call I'd arranged but forgotten until that moment had never come and I was left with twenty minutes to make my train or the scaffolding for the whole day, those reservations, those charms, those pre-purchased passes, would collapse.

Breathless and stammering curses at myself, the hotel, and life in general, I flew from the bed, dragging a tangled parachute of sheets behind me, misbalancing, and colliding with the wall. This drew more angry knocking and German cursing from my nearest neighbors, who now sounded as if they were fully awake and preparing to dismember the owner of the still-ringing alarm next door as well as anyone else who might cross them.

Pickled though I was upon returning the previous evening, I'd remembered to put everything away in my big, blue Osprey backpack before passing out. The bag bulged with two button-up shirts, two pairs of pants and a pair of shorts (all swishy, quick-dry travel fabric) along with four pairs of socks, an oversized old sweater, a jacket, four pairs of underwear, two T-shirts, two maps, a guidebook, a small journal I'd picked up at Heathrow to fill with an account of my travels, a pack of pens, a tablet, a charger, an electrical conversion kit, two water bottles, a pair of sandals, a towel, some soap, a hairbrush, a sleeping bag, a small pillow, a rolled sleeping pad and a collection of additional shifting and clanging miscellany which I felt but couldn't remember to identify. Additionally, I carried one extra outfit that I'd slept in, which did, I noted proudly, save me a moment or two. Only my toothbrush and toothpaste remained on the bathroom counter.

In another fifty seconds I'd scoured my wine-reddened teeth, stared reprovingly at my puffy, ragged reflection in the mirror, zipped up, hoisted my pack and barreled out the door. I reached the stairs just in time to turn and see a collection of disgruntled guests in their underwear and robes converging at the entrance to the room beside the one I'd just left. The muffled sound

of the alarm and their mingled voices mixed with the cracking and creaking of the dusty, wooden floor as I hurried down to the lobby, past the attendant asleep at the desk, out the door, and onto the cool, silvery street.

Tripping down the uneven cobblestones, veering haphazardly under the weight of my pack, I checked the time on my phone. I had five unread texts from Kate, five I'd chosen to ignore the night before around the time I was handed my second pint (but before I stopped at a convenience store for wine and a corkscrew.) I put reading them off, picking my way through a jumble of still streets in the direction of traffic noise. I had a vague idea of where I was going from yesterday's ramble. I remembered finding myself outside the Montparnasse train station by accident around 11 AM after a couple of hours spent bemusedly lost in adjoining neighborhoods. There, I ordered a grilled cheese and, after reasoning with myself that I'd been up long enough (my plane landed hours before sunrise, which meant it was nearly five to me, really, when you thought about it), decided to initiate the zigzagging, instinct-driven pub crawl that would take up the rest of my day. All I had to do now was work backwards.

Using half-remembered storefronts, cafes and bars like breadcrumbs, I picked my way back through the city. The hurry of it, the energy required to maintain that power-stagger, sapped my otherwise useless, anxious adrenaline, gave it something to do, someplace to go. In semi-sprint, I felt oddly equalized. Still, the sour, leftover liquor sloshing in my stomach was creating new issues of its own. I checked my phone again. Fourteen minutes until I'd ruined everything, already, before the sun had risen on my second day abroad.

And Kate. Classic Kate. She had picked another fight with me over text, had, through an impressive, reality-bending blend of self-loathing, obsession and routine combativeness, twisted

an offhand comment I'd made about Diane Keaton into a series of cruel, sprouting metaphors about her appearance, the state of our relationship and something to do with her father. She went fishing for a fight and, as usual, wrestled up something monumental from nothing. It didn't matter that I was thousands of miles away on a mission of self-preservation, in fact, that was most likely the root of the problem.

From my bedroom in Fort Worth, thirty six hours earlier, I'd pleaded with her not to say an angry goodbye. For weeks, I'd been trying to convince her how important taking the trip would be to me. I told her I didn't want to leave her behind. I even invited her and two of my friends along. None of that worked. She found the idea of leaving the university both ridiculous and offensive. My friends couldn't get away. I shrugged and counted the days until my flight.

"I guess you're really leaving." she said, eyes red and reflecting a dozen pin-prick lights, arms crossed over a gray cardigan. "The first semester of our junior year apart." She was already completely moved into her dorm. She'd only gotten back to Georgetown and picked up her keys five hours earlier. She had her laptop propped on books on her desk so she wouldn't have to look down into the webcam. Behind her, her room was immaculately arranged— a twin sleigh bed, a plush, lace-lined powder blue duvet, a few white and red pillows, a weathered print of Monet's *Water Lillies* pinned up by the shuttered window, a packed bookcase by the bed with Sylvia Plath's *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* prominently displayed, cover out— all this surrounded by hundreds of mementos, pictures and color-coded sticky-notes covering over the egg-white, painted cinder-block walls in measured rows. The whole room flickered, lit from above by strings of tangled silver, dollar store holiday lights.

“I’m trying to solve a problem. It’s not meant to be a vacation. You know that,” I said, doing my best to sound reasonable and calm. I could barely get the words out, working through the last, broken-down stages of an all-day panic attack. The waning adrenaline left me so tired I could barely keep my eyes open.

“Right. You said that. And I said I think you’re a liar.”

“It isn’t about you, or us. I mean, obviously, I don’t mean to—”

She sniffed, wiped her eyes and set her jaw. “We haven’t been apart for more than a few weeks in two years. You’re my only friend here. I don’t— I won’t know how to talk to anyone else. Meanwhile, you’re flitting around Europe. Girls from all over the world will talk to you and I’ll be here, only leaving my apartment to go to class. Sick of everyone and stranded.”

“None of that is necessarily true. I don’t understand why you—” I said, then quieted down, seeing her expression shift. She tilted her head forward at the chin and scowled, hitting me with the full force of her smudged, glittering eyes.

“Ok,” I said, “even so, it’ll only be a few more weeks than usual. Semesters aren’t—”

She hung up on me and I tried to finish packing and get to sleep.

Eighteen hours later, as I wandered the streets of Paris, I reached out to Kate to tell her I’d arrived. A sandwich and a beer after that, she was talking about the two of us moving to England together to be teachers and live in a cottage by the sea. Another beer and a change of location further and she was explaining to me at length why certain elements of the American *Office* were clearly intended to reaffirm a few of her theories about the nonexistence of love and the pointlessness of life. I tried to persuade her no one at NBC could be so openly heartless, but



only succeeded in irritating her. She turned her attention on me. A little while later, mid-way through another strained conversation, an attempt at subject-changing, she started to let loose.

I put my phone away once I could tell she was dropping down into one of her spirals, the sort she never emerged from until she had time to sleep it off. That was the point of this trip, after all— unplugging, clearing the mind, letting go. She couldn't fault me for that. Still, those unread messages haunted me. What fresh hell, and so forth.

Miraculously, I found myself outside the Montparnasse station with a little over four minutes left to get checked in and board the train to St. Jean. I caught my breath for a moment, leaning heavily against a lamppost, my throat and lungs cracked and stinging. It was early September and already as cold in Paris as fall before the sun rose. I savored the cool breeze for another fifteen seconds, hoping it would quiet the nausea that had developed during the sprint. It didn't. Or, at least, not quickly enough. I had to keep moving.

Since I had a ticket already printed I was mercifully spared the queue in the first bright and yawning room, where three dozen assorted, bedraggled travelers clustered muttering and looking from their phones to the time-board and back. I was allowed to proceed right down the stairs to the gum-stained platforms. Now I had less than one minute. I was going to make it without a second to spare. I'd almost done it! Anxiety, exhilaration, fatigue, urgency and an upset stomach whipped together into a disorienting cocktail as I searched the signs for my platform.

Montparnasse does not have the sort of sleepy train station where one or two trains arrive every half hour. Their station is an enormous enterprise which at that moment was doing an amount of business that boggled my lagging mind. There were numerous platforms allowing the

arrival and departure of nearly twenty trains. I was dashing, spinning in circles, swimming in signs, my backpack dipping, my possessions clattering. I was going to be sick.

At last, I spotted it: “St Jean” in flashing yellow font against a black background. My train hadn’t left! With the last of my energy I dragged myself in the direction of that sign.

The blue-jacketed station employee in charge of directing passengers on and off the train had the uninviting look, the stringy dimensions, of a long legged, ill-tempered, droopily browed and mustachioed old spider. He watched me struggle over to him with a bored, distasteful expression. He sized me up and before I got close enough to choke down enough air to address him was already locked and loaded with a subtly insulting “Amereecain?” I could tell he enjoyed my presence about as much as I felt comforted by his.

“*Oui*, err, yes,” I said, panting, “St. Jean?” I gestured over at the train, where the ride-along conductor fellow stood in the doorway, checking his watch.

“Yeh-uss,” he said somewhat dismissively, turning away from me, sighing, and pointing. “St. Jean, *continue*.”

I paused for a second, looking at my ticket. Something was off. The destination was right, but the platform number didn’t match.

“Wait, but, uhm, well, I— hold on,” I was turning around in circles again, searching for a sign with the right numbers.

The ride-along man was shouting something to the blue-breasted blighter.

“*St. Jean*,” the thing said again, this time with pronounced annoyance. He grabbed me by the backpack and put a stop to my spinning, rotating me a little in the other direction until I was

facing the train. “Leaving. *Hurry.*” He gave me a little push toward the waiting conductor who leaned forward with one arm outstretched. Worn out and confused, I shrugged and boarded.

Mine was an aisle seat near the back of the line, where I settled after helping a wispy old woman in the seat adjacent wedge her suitcase in the overhead bin. My pack had to go in a closet between compartments. The train was moving before I’d even sat down. Three hours passed as I tried, fitfully, to get some rest. It was six hours before the conductor fellow started making his rounds and checking tickets, before I awoke and knew for certain I was on the wrong train.

I’d left my ticket out on the fold-away dining tray before putting my head down to sleep, which meant that by the time I was prodded by an angry conductor everyone in the vicinity knew much more about my situation than I did.

I sat up and blinked, bringing the man into focus, hyperventilating. He was leaning down, unloading a barrage of quick, unintelligible French admonitions right on top of me.

“He says you’re in the wrong place,” said the elderly woman at my elbow in a crystalline, aristocratic British accent.

“This is my seat number,” I said in a choked whisper, barely audible even to myself. I pointed at my ticket. I couldn’t breathe. I’d gone from unconscious nothing to screaming panic in seconds. The scene was bleeding color and receding.

“Not the wrong seat, dear,” the woman said gently, deciphering my feeble mixed media presentation, “the wrong train,”

“Oh.” We were slowing down. I looked hopelessly out the window in time to see a large white billboard slip past with the words “St. Jean de Luz.”

“Oh,” I said again, my stomach turning.

The conductor was still chattering above me, looking fat and irate, like a territorial squirrel, flinging inscrutable insults from a high tree branch.

“He says you’ll have to get off here,” the woman translated.

“Thanks,” I said, making a series of awkward hand signals in an effort to communicate my apologies and understanding of the scenario to the ruffled conductor. The effort nearly knocked me out. “So,” I said when I’d summoned the necessary O, “where exactly is this place?”

St Jean de Luz, a map of France I purchased at the nearest shop outside the train station told me, is about 65 km northwest of St. Jean Pied de Port, on the coast. This made sense. I could taste the sea air. This was not such an insurmountable distance on paper. The problem was, as the lazy-eyed, sweater-draped woman behind the ticketing counter on the de Luz platform had informed me, only two trains connected the Saints daily. One left early in the morning. One was among the last trains out of the station at night.

“You pilgrim? Camino?” the woman at the counter asked me without looking up.

“Yes,” I admitted, amused, never having been identified as such before. “A stupid, lost pilgrim.” She told me I better get comfortable.

So, I considered over a pint at a restaurant across the street, the late train problem begets another problem. The bed I’d rented in the right St. Jean was in a hostel at the crest of the hill of the old town, at the foot of the Pyrenees. As is the case, according to a guidebook my parents had picked up for me, with most such institutions, municipal or private, my destination stuck rigidly to its hours of operation. This was due to the high volume of people with which they were expected to deal, day in and day out. People were discharged at a specific time, beds were

available at a specific time and, after the nuns or attendants had closed shop for the night, no one else was allowed in, reservation or no reservation. Therefore, a late train could be the difference between being warm in bed or out on the chilly, September streets of a French mountain town come nightfall. I shook my head and took another restorative swallow of beer, closing my eyes. That blue bastard. That lanky, sneering, platform-pushing sonofabitch.

When I opened my eyes again, the elderly woman from the train had taken the seat next to mine. She smiled, missing entirely the overwrought, poisonous state in which she'd found me.

"My name's Claire," she said, reaching out a hand to shake and heaving a relaxed sigh. "Isn't it beautiful here?"

"Sure," I said, returning the shake.

"Did you get another ticket? To St. Jean Pied de Port?"

Yes, I indicated, pulling the scrap of paper from my jacket pocket.

"And you're joining the way of Saint James?" she asked. I nodded. Five hundred miles of interconnected trails, roadside footpaths and sidewalks stretching from the base of the French Pyrenees to the western coast of Spain, the Way of Saint James, or the Camino Frances, was easily the most famous route. There were few other reasons to descend upon the sleepy St. Jean Pied de Port lugging so much gear. Outside the commotion of Paris, everyone who saw me knew exactly what I was up to.

"I am," I said. Then, seeing she was still waiting for some kind of follow-up, I decided to throw her a social bone. "By the way, thanks for your help back there. I'm no good in a crisis. I might've caused a serious—"

"My daughter just loves the Camino. She's done it twice!"

“Oh, that’s cool. It’s actually my first—”

“She’s always going on about it, showing us pictures. It must be such a peaceful, pretty walk. Such a wonderful experience, when you’re young.”

At the mention of peace, panic leapt mockingly back to life inside me.

“She went for the first time back in ’97 and then again in ’06 with her husband.”

“I’d be interested to hear what the route was like back—”

“And she’s always saying I have to go, I have to go and see it for myself, but I keep telling her, my knees just aren’t what they used to be, dear. I’m just as happy meeting you in San Sebastian when it’s all over. They’ve such a lovely boardwalk, such a picturesque coastline, in San Sebastian. And such shops. Really, it’s—”

Claire was proving herself to be a little too chatty for reciprocal conversation, a real steamroller. Somewhat too amiable, too loquacious, for the current crisis. I decided to stop trying, to sit back and let her tire herself out. Meanwhile, my mind was a tornado, a vortex of circular thought, touring endlessly the possible repercussions of my lost time— a collection of worst-case scenarios I was powerless to do anything about. The whirl of it made me dizzy. Claire continued to tell me about her daughter and her knees while I rummaged in my pack, looking for my medicine. The sum of it all, problems present and future, was worth at least half a Clonazepam. I had to come up for air.

Claire ordered food and a glass of Riesling and kept on talking. Nearly an hour passed. I chewed my half-pill up and washed away the foul, industrial taste with a Kronenbourg. Her words washed over me like waves. Finally, I was called away from my worried daymares by an expectant silence. She was staring right at me. She must have asked a question.

“Oh! Huh? What? Sorry, I--”

“What’s your name?” She smiled sweetly.

What’s my name? She’d been talking at a stranger in a strange land for this long, following him around from station to cafe without bothering to ask?

What the hell, I hadn’t bothered to notice.

I thought about the question for a while, basking in the brief moment of silence. Then an idea occurred to me. I decided to try out a new tactic. Considering she’d glommed on so readily without so much as an introduction, I was inspired to test how much she was willing to believe. If she saw through me, she’d likely be put off and find a less distraught and distracted audience for her musings on her daughter’s financial stability. (We’d moved from relevant travel tips and memories into the realm of family gossip just before I lost my grip on the conversation.) For me, the gamble could only enliven things.

“I’s Tex. Tex Magillicuttys of the San Antonio Magillicuttys.”

She paused for a moment, gears turning, then lit up.

“Of Scottish extraction?”

“Indeed,” I said, raising a hand to the bartender to indicate that I’d be needing another beer. He paid me no attention. A man missing several teeth at the bar lifted a grubby hand back, mistaking the gesture for a wave. “But my family’s been in Texas since the Alamo. My great, great grandfather used to drive cattle with Sam Houston.” (The math here was doubtless a little off, but I trusted Claire not to have the resources on hand to work that out.)

“Well, isn’t that something?” Claire said, not the least bit fazed. “My Bernard used to love Texas. All the cowboys, the western films. Those were his favorite.”

“Your Bernard?”

“My husband, of course. Remember, he always—” Ah, yes, I thought. She must have mentioned him about a half hour earlier when my mind was on walkabout.

“Tell me,” she said, sitting up straighter and fixing me with an excited look, “do you still keep horses in Texas? I remember reading several years back that it was common for Texans to ride their horses to school. Is that still the case?”

She remembered reading? Where? On some Welsh shut-in's two-bit blog about their illuminating week of American adventure? One of those comically misleading, quaint misrepresentations that painted the state the way television always seemed to, filming a lonely farm road then packaging it as one of Texas's busiest highways? Why did she, like everyone else, so readily swallow this idea of Texas as an honest, simple place, frozen in time, where children wore spurs and pop cost a nickel? Screw it. I couldn't see the fun in disappointing her.

“That's absolutely right,” I said, leaning forward and returning her smile. “We use them for almost everything. I've got three horses myself on my home pasture. Stinky, Santa Anna, and Trigger. Trigger's my favorite, though.”

She processed this information without blinking, nodding her head in amazement. “Such a unique, pastoral way of life,” she said, eyes distant, with reverence.

“Oh yes. True. Deep in the heart of Texas,” I said, deciding to leave it at that. I got to my feet. Just as I was lifting my backpack another voice joined the conversation.

“Tex!” said the voice, belonging to an amply bearded, wide-brimmed hat and backpack wearing, REI-outfitted sportsman as he appeared beside our table. “There you are!” I tried to bring his face into focus, feeling the half-pill begin to take effect.



He bent down, propped himself up with both arms on the table and turned to Claire. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I’ve been looking for Tex here for the last hour. Would you mind if I stole him away? It’s just that all our friends are over in the next cafe and they’ll be so happy to see him. Everyone’s been worried sick.”

Claire smiled, waving us away with a bony, blue hand. “Certainly, certainly. Thank you. It was so nice to meet you, Tex! Have a safe journey to Santiago! *Buen Camino!*”

Shrugging, I followed the newcomer away, confused by the interchange but glad of the getaway. We walked out that cafe, across the street and took a table on the back patio of the next one, facing the train station.

“Nice,” the man said after a few minutes. “Nice.”

“What?” I braced myself for the next stage of another bothersome interaction.

“I mean where did that come from?” He motioned for the server, never breaking eye contact with me, a huge, knowing grin splitting his bushy, sun-baked face.

“What do you mean?” I asked, a little defensively. The snake had been eavesdropping. I fought to stay sharp, narrowing my eyes.

“You’re telling me you’re Tex? That’s your name? McGillin-whatever?”

“Magillicutty.”

He nodded, picking up a menu. “Nice.”

I chose my words carefully. I was feeling a little thick-tongued from the beer and oddly caught out. “I wasn’t trying to be believable. You misunderstand me.”

He laughed in the shade of his hat.

“You’re American?” I asked. He nodded.

“On the Camino, too,” he said, jerking a thumb at a scallop shell that was lashed to the netting on the top of his backpack—the emblem of the pilgrimage, its fanned channels all converging on one point like paths. “By way of Paris.”

“So why are you here? On the coast?”

“I’m taking my time,” he said and laughed again, settling his boots on an empty chair. “No point hurrying. I wanted good seafood and I didn’t want to wait until Finisterre to get it. Why are *you* here? You go to the wrong St. Jean?”

The guy had me. He read my embarrassed silence. He dropped the grin and tried to look earnest. “Hey, man, no big deal. I mean, check this place out. Smell the salt. You’d never have seen it otherwise. Seems like that was a mistake worth making.”

“We’re gonna have a great walk.” He stared off down the train tracks. “If you’re going to St. Jean Pied de Port, you’ll have a few days’ head start, but maybe I’ll catch up to you down the line, in Pamplona or Leon.”

This seemed a little forward to me. We weren’t yet friends.

“That shouldn’t be difficult,” I said, gesturing at my huge pack, my rigid boots, not yet broken in and my general unhealthiness. (Figuring out liquor and benzodiazepines were the only things that really worked at quelling my worst panic attacks made for a calorically unbalanced, physically deteriorating summer.) “I expect it’ll be a while before I’m acclimated.”

“You’ll get there,” he said, finally getting the server’s attention and ordering two more drinks and a bottle of sparkling water. “There’s time. But you probably ought to be careful with those fake names. There are hundreds of people on the road, but they’re all going the same place. This trip’s funny that way.”

The train rattled to a stop at last in St. Jean Pied de Port just as the sun was setting. I'd pushed onto the thing, out an extra forty euro, a little tight, an hour previous, after spending the afternoon in conversation with Jake, the man in the big hat. Jake had been down the whole of the Camino Francés twice before, starting as I would on the French side of the Pyrenees and had a few tips to give me about places to stay and rules to follow. I tried to listen as best I could, though the beers he kept ordering did me no favors. Stepping out of the station at the right St. Jean, I tried to draw up a list of his advice in my head with little success. At that moment, distracted as I was with getting out onto the street and finding my lodging before the doors locked, I could only make out six complete items of wisdom:

1. Stay in places the guidebooks ignore often. They'll be gladder to have you.
2. Don't expect the nuns to make exceptions for you. They usually won't.
3. Don't get too drunk. People will steal your shit.
4. Wash your socks more often than you think is necessary, like every day. You'll understand why soon.
5. Leave the *alburgues* early. Waiting around could cost you a bed at the next stop.
6. DO party with the Basques. DON'T party with Australians.

I knew there'd been more, but there was no getting at them, not then.

St Jean Pied de Port is many centuries old, medieval, built along the edge of the Pyrenees mountains, beside a river. The oldest parts of it, where I was going, sit on the highest points of the hills, so walking, or in my case running, up to the top is like going back in time. The old

town is even walled in with fifteen or twenty feet of stone— a postcard citadel. It was this place, bristling with cathedral steeples, six kilometers from the train station, that I had to reach in just over twenty minutes. I felt like I'd been running all day. My feet and my back were killing me. My pack was starting to rub blisters on both my shoulders with its bulky, ceaseless swaying. Still, I had no choice. As I climbed, I saw alleyways and overhangs populated with tents and sleeping bags, urban campgrounds for pilgrims who'd arrived and found no place to stay. They worried me. Ghosts of a fate that could easily be mine in another minute. The more pragmatic side of my pessimism began to make note of potential nooks I might well take advantage of if/when things didn't work out at the top of the hill.

I did, however, arrive at my destination, an intimidating stone building with the legend "Refuge de Pèlerin" over the door, just in time to skate in and up to the desk before last call. The woman in charge, a tidy creature built like a field mouse, cheerfully closed and locked the door after me. She ordered me to remove my boots and leave them in an antechamber stacked on a rack with dozens of others before I could go any further, "for the smell." She then waited patiently for a good minute and a half while I caught my breath.

"Deener is over," she said, leading me down a hallway and up a flight of stairs, "but you may have some leftover bread and wine after I've shown you your bed."

She led me to the top mattress on the furthest bunk of about twelve. The room was packed so tightly with beds I could hardly move between them, much less navigate the space with a pack roughly the size of a Citroen strapped to my back. On the bunk beneath mine a bald, mostly naked man, probably about sixty, in a Speedo was sprawled out examining a map by the glow of a clip-on light. I resolved not to focus my eyes too closely on anyone.

“Fantastic,” I said, thanking the woman who’d shown me in and dropping my pack at the foot of the bed. “And the leftovers?”

Crunching bread, sipping wine and reading one of the dozens of novels I’d brought via tablet, I stayed awake for a while by myself in the dimly lit dining room. My anxiety always struck worse at night and I had no intention of jerking awake every other hour, rousing my twenty-odd roommates with involuntary, choking gasps. (People tended to think they meant I needed attention, medical or otherwise.) They were leaving the same day as me. Unless I did something about it, I’d be seeing them again and again along the route to Santiago. It’d be no good concerning them before I’d even spoken to them. No, I’d write up the day in my notebook as best I could remember it, first. (This was both practice for the travel-writing career I often imagined for myself and my only outlet, at the time, for honest communication.) Then, I’d read and have a bit more wine until alcohol and utter exhaustion spirited me straight on to morning. In another seven hours, I’d be hiking across the Pyrenees. In another night, I’d be in Spain.

I checked my phone again one last time before I climbed back up the stairs to the dormitory. I still had to read Kate’s messages. Sometime. They, like everything else I’d ignored or left behind, were still waiting for me. Feeling panic well up in me at the thought of accidentally landing myself in the middle of another sterile, digital smackdown, however, I concluded they could wait a little longer. They had to. I needed the rest.

I couldn’t sleep, but at last I was comfortable. The world fell still. In bed, I drifted, waiting for my heartbeat to slow. Every muscle was shot, useless, but my pulse raced on into the deep, unfamiliar night.

## CHAPTER 2

It felt like no time had passed at all, like I'd only just gotten comfortable.

Someone was shaking me awake. A glowing, disembodied gray face loomed in the dark, bent toward me, eyes icy and unblinking, glittering black stone. The dormitory was full of dozens of snoring voices, which together sounded almost like a sawmill or some proto-industrial factory packed with razor-toothed, sloppily heaving machinery. My tablet lay face up on the bed beside me, lighting the creature from below like one of those fluorescent, Dr. Seuss-looking, deep water monsters. I must have rolled over onto it. The creature, who I gradually came to recognize as the Speedo-wearing gentleman from a few hours earlier, gave me a forceful poke.

“Put this out,” the fellow said in a raspy whisper, raising himself on tip-toes to stab with his other finger at my tablet. “This is not what we are here for. This is a disgrace.” Embarrassed and not yet altogether awake, I powered the machine down.

“Humph,” He raised himself up on his toes one last time to fix me with a withering, righteous stare, then dropped heavily down onto his mattress and out of sight. The snoring chorus went right on, harmonizing strangely like trains braking, vibrating, swelling, overlapping, hanging in the air like the voices of bowed instruments.

I was lonely when I climbed carefully, shakily into that bunk around midnight. I'd been reading eBooks for hours and my eyes hurt too much to stare any longer at the little white screen, but I wasn't calm enough to sleep. After an hour, awake with my thoughts in that impenetrably

black room full of sleeping strangers, with panic waiting, pacing, just outside, I wanted to hear familiar voices. Accustomed generally in this state of mind to free access to a TV or laptop, and finding everyone in the dormitory asleep, I slipped from my bunk and retrieved my tablet. After discovering Netflix was locked to Spanish IP addresses, I put earbuds in and settled for blurry clips of comforting old sitcoms on Youtube. Then, after about another hour of deep breathing exercises, I fell asleep without shutting the machine off. My panic generally worked like that. One minute it led an all-out assault, then, the moment it was gone, it left me so exhausted I could hardly keep my eyes open.

It was a classless move, bringing technology and my compulsion to seek out digital, fictional company into such an ancient place. Dreadfully American. The guy had succeeded in shaming me. I lay awake for a while, torturing myself, before I heard footsteps in the hall. The staff was stirring, preparing to eject their current clientele. Unable to get back to sleep anyway, I decided to get clear of the dormitory before they arrived. Silently, an inch at a time, I lowered myself from the teetering bunk. I hoisted up my backpack and crept across the freezing tiles in my sock feet out the door and down the creaking stairs.

“Breakfast is not ready,” the mousey attendant told me when she encountered me on the steps. “We are only just going for the bread. It will be served in an hour, at six, with coffee and jam.” The mention of bread, no doubt fresh from some nearby bakery, stopped me cold for a moment, forcing me to consider my plan. This sounded awfully good to pass up, but on the other hand, I didn’t want lock eyes with my new nemesis, the dreaded anglerfish, across the breakfast table. I didn’t want to be there, just in case he decided to bring up the whole shameful episode to the others; just in case we awkwardly, accidentally reached for a Nutella packet at the same time;

just in case the others were all actually awake the whole night, fake snoring, and planned to gang up on me, to take revenge for their lost sleep.

I thanked the woman, but explained I had no appetite. With a nod and a salute, I padded down the stairs to the boot room in the front foyer. There, at a bench, I gingerly set about easing my feet into my stiff boots. Pain shot through me, lighting up my synapses, finishing the job of waking me up. I'd beaten the hell out of myself since getting on that airplane two days back. I had a blister on the pinky toe, heel and the ball of each foot. I needed a pharmacy, some moleskin, gauze and a pair of scissors or a knife, but it would be hours before any such place would open, if they even existed in this, the oldest part of town. I didn't have time to go backwards. I wanted to make good my escape. When I finally managed to work my boots on past the blisters I cinched them up tight so they couldn't slip another millimeter.

Before I could leave, I had to stop at the check-in desk to ask the woman just settling there, her shift not yet started, after a pilgrim's stamp booklet. I'd arrived too late to secure one the night before, but needed it pre-departure if I meant to be able to prove every mile I'd walked. Every official pilgrim traveling the Camino had to register themselves in the town where they started walked in order to receive their booklet with spaces for official stamps to be collected along the route at certain key destinations. Most cathedrals, museums, *alburgues*, historic gift shops and the like had their own stamps. At the end of the journey, in Santiago, these booklets were to be turned in and reviewed by officials of the Camino who checked to be sure everyone who claimed to have walked the whole route had actually collected the stamps to prove it. Upon approval, pilgrims with thoroughly stamped booklets were then awarded a certificate, proclaiming their success and participation in this ancient tradition with their names in Latin.



This was evidence for the more Catholic-leaning pilgrims to take home that they'd made the journey, seen the relics of St. James housed in the *Catedral de Santiago de Compostela*, and that their sins were therefore forgiven, or something. For the rest of us, it just meant we'd officially completed the pilgrimage the Right Way. The woman at the desk, luckily, was very friendly and outfitted me with a booklet even though this was not generally allowed until after 10 AM. Then, an official pilgrim, I said my thanks to the kind, mostly asleep attendant and crept out the heavy front door. It wasn't yet 5:30 AM. I walked briskly out of town, toward the shape, like rippled bolts of rich purple fabric against the black-red skyline, of the Pyrenees.

The way out and up, a zigzagging, rocky jumble of switch-backs, was marked here and there with old stone or wood signs with yellow painted arrows and conch shells. These, it turns out, were not so organized a guidance system. As I made my way out of the citadel I began to notice contradictory instructions, signs left over from older versions of the route or possibly rearranged by local teenagers with cruel senses of humor. Spray-painted yellow arrows on walls and pavement pointed up, down and back every hundred yards, with labels half-finished or worn out over time. I quickly learned not to be overly trusting of the yellow directions, that nearly every one of them deserved scrutiny, though not before taking the wrong route for about three kilometers down an overgrown farm road. I was corrected eventually by a kindly, grizzled old man enjoying a glass of breakfast wine in the company of a handful of sleepy-eyed cattle at the crook of a barbed wire fence. They must have been eating back at the hostel, too, by the time I was back en route and climbing. I'd squandered my head start.

I hadn't outrun my anxiety. Not for a moment.

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The blisters on my feet had gone numb under the pressure inside my boots, but the ones on my shoulders were just waking up. The path up the foothills was already inclining so sharply that I had to bend forward forty-five degrees at the waist just to right the balance and keep myself from tumbling backward. Every aching step so early in the day reminded me just how out of shape I'd allowed myself to become over the past few years in college. What had I been doing? I'd felt too debilitated to follow my parents' advice in the months leading up to my departure by putting in at least 20 miles of walking with gear per week. My boots were not broken in. I was not sufficiently physically fit. I was not sufficiently mentally fit. My pack was surely much heavier than the guidebooks advised. I had not gotten a good night's sleep.

The air was thin and cool and dried my throat and lungs. It was gorgeous, the farmlands streaking with first light, the smell of the river, the grass and pine, the lush, daybreak quiet, but I had a difficult time giving it the appreciation it deserved. I was forced to stop often on the side of the path, calming down, reminding myself I wasn't actually suffocating.

Three kilometers up, where the path crossed a street, there was a small, white building with lit, steam-streaked windows and black shutters, a house with a cafe built into the side. I knew I had not walked far, but the sun was up and my guidebook told me it was the last place to get something to eat for another six K. I was starving and already so tired my limbs shook, so I struggled in. I dropped my pack against the wall by a table in the corner below a buzzing, wall-mounted TV playing glitched-out snatches of a news story about protests in Madrid. I ordered a cold, cling-wrapped salami and cheese sandwich and a bottle of water which I consumed very slowly, careful to take long, steady breaths between each bite. Pilgrims were now on the path outside, passing the window every few minutes.

I dug my guidebook out of my pack and studied it for about a half hour, reading up on the route ahead, planning. There were beds at the next stop, a place called Orisson, midway up the mountain. It was supposed to be beautiful, yet the guidebooks and websites wanted you to keep going up, up, over the Pyrenees and back down, across the border into Spain. I wasn't in a hurry. I had no pressing engagements, no jobs or responsibilities to get back to. Wasn't I supposed to be relaxing, sort of? What was the good of killing myself trying to make it all the way over in one day when I had no place to be, nothing else to do, but exist on this path? After all, my feet, my back, my shoulders, would require longer to recover later if I pushed myself too hard today. I would pay for it, sometime, if I didn't make allowances now. What if I made it past the hostel, then fell apart and wound up getting myself stranded out on the top of the mountains overnight? That was certainly a possibility. And anyway, staying in a Between Town fit my unwritten itinerary: I'd be following one of Jake of the Big Hat's rules by bucking the guidebook and I'd likely be saving myself from the possibility of rubbing elbows with the Speedo guy at dinner. Orisson was the place to be.

By the time I was done with breakfast I'd completely convinced myself. Spain would have to wait until tomorrow.

I ordered a decaf coffee and went outside to revel in the secondhand smoke of a delivery guy in a driver cap, leaning against the wall by the parking lot. I'd been off cigarettes, for the most part, since the panic had arrived, hoping that'd help me to get more air into my lungs, but the concentration of smokers abroad was already starting to crack my resolve.

A red-faced man in a goatee and Spandex cycling attire came rolling into the lot on a road bike. He chained his skimpy contraption to the stem of a table on the patio and walked straight

over to me, smiling and panting. He smelled of alcohol even from a distance, through high altitude wind. It was barely nine in the morning. I sized him up with some interest as he approached, wondering how he'd managed it. Had he just woken up, still drunk from last night, and decided on a whim to scale a mountain? Was this training for some drunken cross country bike race? Was he that old farmer's boozing buddy?

"Chee-ers," he said, wobbling a little on his clompy cycling shoes. "Ciao. Err—*Gut, Guten morgen.*" He wore a small hip pack, stitched with a golden conch.

"Good morning," I said. I suppose I looked pretty Aryan— blonde, pale.

"Ah, English," he said, putting an arm out to lean against the wall of the cafe, misjudging the distance and nearly toppling into a trio of garbage and recycling bins. "Whooo! These hills are death on my legs."

I nodded, amused.

"I am Marco," he said after he'd taken a few moments to catch his breath and stabilize. "I am from Naples. You are on the Camino as well?"

Again, I nodded. These sorts of obvious interviews were apparently going to be a daily occurrence. I'm a pilgrim. You're a pilgrim. So are the rest of the two hundred or so of us dumb or stubborn enough to be hauling ourselves along this remote, otherwise irrelevant stretch of path on any given day.

"John Wayne," I said, extending a hand to shake. "American."

He took my hand eagerly, not acknowledging the obvious untruth.

"And you did not mind missing your country's celebration of nine-eleven?"

I snorted, searching his face for a trace of a joke. He was still smiling, genuine.

“Nope,” I said, sighing, “I decided to skip the parade this year.”

“Ah, but it is worth it to be here on the Camino, is it not? We are lucky to be here. We are real pilgrims today!” He slapped me on the back, sending shockwaves across my blistered, irritated shoulders.

“That’s right,” I said, edging out of reach.

“Have a drink with me, John,” Marco said, rosy face now pointed toward the back of the cafe, heavy-lidded eyes scrunched up, trying, apparently, to make out what sort of beverages they had lined up along the bar. “We should be festive!”

I checked the time on my phone.

“Too early for me, friend,” I said in my best deep, Duke drawl. “I try not to get festive before lunch. Nothing’ll get done.”

“Pffft,” he said, waving his arms, “There is *nothing* better than beer for keeping up strength. For the healthy circulation. It is never early.”

I laughed and began to limp toward the path, away from the cafe.

Watching me go, the man called after me. “John, you don’t look so good!”

I looked back at him, nodded and smiled a little coldly. If I looked anything like I felt I must have been an absolute spectacle.

“Keep to the street, with the bikes! It is a shorter route!”

I paused again with one foot back on the rocky path.

“How much shorter?”

Marco was disappearing into the cafe, making a beeline for the bar. “2 kilometers!” he shouted as the door closed behind him with clang.

Perhaps it *was* a shorter route along the side of the street. I couldn't tell. It certainly didn't seem like it. Not at my rate of half a kilometer an hour. Not with cars whipping past me down narrow mountain roads at breakneck speed. Not with the wind and the dizzying, railless drops, the headlong cliffs, bordering my every step. A comparison far more important, far more relevant, I soon discovered, was relative incline. This way, this stupid little trail hardly wide enough for a mountain goat I'd so foolishly chosen, was nearly twice as steep as the already punishing path I'd been wheezing my way up in the first place.

It was two in the afternoon by the time I'd crawled up to the halfway point hostel, practically on my hands and knees. I had nothing left, not an ounce of energy, barely enough wherewithal to raise my water bottle to my mouth. I collapsed in a heap at a picnic table on the patio outside. Kids who'd arrived with parents by car debated whether to poke me with a stick.

I stayed paralyzed there, recuperating, drinking endless tiny sips of water, rationing it like a dehydrated pack animal at a watering hole so my stomach wouldn't burst. I was made of endlessly wobbling jelly.

The view was from the Refuge Orisson was incredible: a wide, wrap-around patio allowed for a sweeping vantage of the mountain range that surrounded the little hostel, plunging down for miles toward valleys obscured in drifting veils of cloud and shadow. People were gathered at every table, lounging, sipping beers and water and wolfing down salads and plates of thin beef steaks and fries. A storm was rolling gradually toward us across the open sky, rumbling

like furniture scraping across stone floor, drawing closer and closer. Distant thunder punctuated waves of conversation.

“*Nada*, sorry amigo.” The manager of the Refuge wiped hands wet from rinsing wine glasses across a soiled apron, then held still-dripping forearms up, shrugging. “Our thirty beds fill months in advance and you just missed the last tent. It would be safer if you leave now. You have only five hours to cross into Spain.”

I looked out the window of the bar, out at the gray sky and the place where the path bowed up and out of sight. “The sun sets at seven?”

“A quarter to six.”

I’d spent too much time recovering my shape on the deck outside. Sixteen mountainous kilometers was a sizeable chunk of terrain to expect to cover in five hours, even for the fitness freaks, the vascular creeps taking the Pyrenees at a jog. Less and less of them, these seasoned backpackers, were passing the outpost. They knew better. They were staying in Orisson or long gone. The only people who seemed to be left struggling by looked confused and out of their element. Theirs would not be pleasant trips across the border. I swallowed, my throat dry.

“What if I slept on the porch, under the covering by the tables? I’m sorry to ask, but my feet are totally messed up and I don’t think there’s much chance I’ll—”

“Everybody’s feet are *messed up*,” the manager said, gesturing, “look!” He had a point. At any given moment there were at least two or three people in any direction sitting cross legged, closely inspecting their lower extremities amid halos of brightly packaged medical supplies. Like

me, very few people had actually put in the dozens of necessary hours of callus-building, bootleather-breaking activity in preparation for the Walk. The Refuge was half bar, half sick-bay.

The manager wouldn't budge. If he let me sleep on the floor in the restaurant or on the patio, soon he'd have to do that for everyone and cleanup would become intolerable. I left him be, but I was only halfway up the mountain range and I had no intention of navigating the crossing in the dark. I walked out behind the Refuge, through a field, past rows of ragged, army surplus tents as rain began to fall. The sound of the water against the canvas was sharp, like tight, rolling drums, metal brushes on skin.

I tried to get some rest on a concrete picnic table, freezing cold, listening to water dripping on all sides, feeling it against my face when the wind picked up. Well past the tents, at the edge of the tree-line, I'd found a disused sort of gazebo. There was only the table, overtaken at the legs by grass two-feet high, and an ominously cracked and slumping roof, but it had to do. For the first time, I felt glad of all the fabric and gear I was schlepping. I put on every last layer of clothing and arranged what junk remained in a pile on top of myself. Exhausted and out of options, I tried unsuccessfully to find a position that kept my hips and spine from digging into the concrete.

Panic came again with the night, combining unsettlingly with my constant shivering. The two worked in league to rattle the air out of me from the moment I made camp until the sky began to grow light again.

I lay awake, wondering what was going on at home, regularly, mechanically checking my phone, reminding myself there was no service up in that place between places. Kate was surely



sending me sweet or poisonous texts that were piling up, ready to drop on me all at once when I'd descended back into civilization. I was still avoiding the ones she'd sent back when I was in Paris. They had to wait until I was more comfortable, someplace secure, where taking pill fragments was not a potentially fatal mistake. (Picturing myself woozily climbing from my gear nest to pee, losing my footing on the damp grass beneath the table and careening unchecked down the side of the mountain range was enough to help me decide against taking that risk.) After hours spent thinking about not thinking, I greeted another morning bitterly, still feeling as if I hadn't properly slept since leaving Texas.

There were eight more kilometers to go before I'd reach the top of the mountain, and another eight still to come on the way back down into Spain. I saddled up that morning quickly and quietly, grabbing a piece of bread from the cafe on my way out, turning up the hill an hour before dawn. This time other travelers had the same idea and I was not alone on the path.

Within a half hour, everyone I'd departed with was nearly out of sight ahead of me, and people who hadn't yet been shuffling around the dining area when I'd set out were beginning to pass me. Already, I was as weak as I'd been after hours of walking the day before. I stopped, worn out and dejected, on the side of the road, still within sight of the spot where I'd slept. There I paused for a long while, looking up and counting the pulses of pain radiating out from my many blisters in time with the beat of my heart. I'd absolutely destroyed myself over the last few days— always frantic, always late.

Orisson, just a kilometer or so below me, was situated on the edge of the tree-line, at the point where the process of crossing the mountain turned from a hike to a climb. What lay ahead

now was hours and hours of slow, strenuous going, with no more places to stop for food or shelter until Roncesvalles across the Spanish border. Normally, for someone better prepared, less historically sedentary, and with working feet, this would not have seemed so daunting an undertaking. For me, though, at that moment, I felt as if I was taking my life into my hands going forward. Even with the whole day ahead of me, I wondered if I'd make it. As I watched smiling pilgrims pass me easily, expertly, I was very tempted to turn back and spend another night in that leaky tent. Or, perhaps if I made it back quickly enough I'd get the jump on everyone still pushing up from St. Jean and wrangle myself an actual, indoor bed.

The sun was up, but it was still teeth-rattlingly cold up there above the clouds as I mulled the situation over for what felt like an hour.

All at once, though, I came out of it, briefly. I was fed up with feeling pitiful. Driven by embarrassment and a desire to do things the Right Way, I got back on track, forcing myself onward, focusing all my attention on my surroundings. I tried treating the process like a movie, consciously detaching as best I could from myself. I was the camera, capturing a long, panning shot, inanimate, only seeing, taking it all in, moving steadily above the clouds. I had no blisters, burdens, thoughts, or memories.

Hours passed in this way before I could no longer ignore the reality of my aches and pains. I fell to a sitting position in the dirt, facing backward down the mountain, to see what could be done.

I had nearly reached the very top of the Pyrenees. Enormous, odd-shaped boulders the size of elephants dotted the hillside and the path had given way from dry grass to precipitous

hills of mud and sleek, loose pebbles. It was beginning to rain again. Fat, sporadic drops were slapping my neck and running down my back. Ten yards away a huddle of cows with brightly colored symbols spray-painted on their sides as brands watched me, bemusedly chewing. A long, wide shadow spread across the mountaintop.

It must have been around lunchtime back at the Refuge Orisson, because I hadn't shared the view with anyone but the technicolor cattle in ages. Those pilgrims that had slept where I had slept had long since passed and the newer group that had departed from the base of the mountain were likely hoisting beers and *bocadillos* five kilometers below. Half wouldn't try for the pass until tomorrow. The other half wouldn't set out until just after they'd eaten, after they'd had an hour to recharge. I might easily, I thought, staring up into the quickening rain, be alone for hours before the lunchers caught up. I could get stuck someplace, developing hypothermia, unable to move enough to keep my blood flowing. If that happened, if I did fall completely apart, there was no getting me down, no feasible avenue of rescue, short of calling in a helicopter. Did they even have a helicopter in St. Jean? It seemed unlikely.

Delicately, with glacial pace, I removed my boots one by one.

Things under my SmartWool socks had gotten much worse since morning. The damp and the friction had weakened then wrecked what was left of the skin where my blisters had once been. Now all that was left were a dozen torn, bleeding patches of flesh where layer after layer of callus had been ripped and worn away to reveal puckered, mud-caked craters of angry, exposed meat. The wind and the falling water smarted sharply in every wound.

I was totally screwed. Seven solid kilometers, the last of the climb and the steep descent down the other side of the mountain remained before there could be any hope of relief or shelter. Panic surged.

Feeling wretched and weak, my heart pounding with familiar, painful intensity, my stomach churning, I lay back in the mud. I couldn't plan. My thoughts raced after one another too quickly for me to grab ahold, for me to start to find a way out. The wind howled across the barren peaks. The water pooled around me. In that frantic daze I watched the storm swirl, crest, then break apart and drift dying down and out of sight. Gradually, the sun came back. I felt it before I saw it. Soaked and chilled to my marrow, trying like a shrub to stay alive, to drink in the last light and photosynthesize on the brink of winter, I fell into a disorienting state of half-consciousness. Dreams and dread chased each other through my fevered, pounding brain--infinite mistakes, a stopped heart, an aneurysm and eternity pressing down like an empty sky.

It was there, lying on my back in the brush, staring at the sky, feeling abstractly sorry for myself and wondering how in the world I'd ever make it another 500 miles, that a gaggle of late middle-aged, shamefully sure-footed German women discovered me.

They gathered around me, clucking, before I knew what was happening, scratching about on the ground with their heavily booted toes. Their heads bowed toward me appraisingly, a confusing blend of gravity and amusement across their tanned, leathery faces. They exchanged these looks, making little indecipherable, solemn noises under their breath, grunts and coos peppered with snippets of phrases I could not recognize from my years of helping Kate flash card her way through German 1-3. One of them, the first to arrive, presumably their leader, held up

one sinewy arm, motioning for the group to halt and drop their gear. They each obliged, as the leader rummaged through her knapsack.

“Blusters,” the leader said, pointing down at the gruesome scene at the end of my legs, having at last drawn a medical-crossed satchel from the depths of her pack.

“See?” she said, looking around at her flock for confirmation.

“*Ja, ja*. Blusters. Blusters,” they each said, craning their necks for a better look.

“You have moleskin?” the leader asked again, kneeling down and reaching out to grab my closest foot. I jerked reflexively away, shaking my head, trying to look both grateful and unavailable.

“No, no. Hush. Sh. Let me look,” she said, moving too quickly for me, catching me by the ankle. “We have medicine.” Despite her no nonsense, slightly off conversation, I got the impression she might know her way around this sort of offhand field dressing. I submitted.

“Too late for moleskin,” said another woman, leaning in and pointing at the bare, red patches of post-blister flesh that dotted my toes, heels, and arches. “Gauze is better.” Another chorus of *ja*. More tutting.

The leader opened the satchel and withdrew a roll of off-white tape and a small bottle of unflavored Schnapps.

“For the blusters and the boots,” she said matter-of-factly, looking first at my feet, then back up at me. Then she offered me the bottle. “Would you like, first?” Fully expecting the next minute or so to hurt like hell, I shrugged and accepted the gift. I’d never tried Schnapps before. I took a gulp and sputtered, the heat of the liquor dropped like a coal into my stomach. The taste

was clean and medicinal and cut into me. The group of women watched my reaction intently, cackling at the shock on my face as I struggled to catch breath. It wasn't so bad after a second.

“*Gut,*” the leader said, taking the bottle. “And now, the feet.”

With a Schnapps-soaked piece of cotton, my healer set about cleaning the mud and grit from my sores. I bit my lip. Each touch sent more pain screaming up my spine.

“These are very serious blusters. Too deep,” she said, working the Schnapps into the torn skin. “How long have you walked?”

“This is my second day,” I said, too at a loss to lie. It was the newcomers’ turn to look shocked. They tutted and shook their heads.

“Your boots must be much too hard. The leather needs to break, to soften.”

“Oh, I know it,” I said, nodding, shooting a nasty glance at the vindictive bastards standing laces akimbo, a few feet away where I'd dropped them.

“We will put on Schnapps,” the leader said, finishing up with my second foot and stooping over to pick up one of my shoes.

“It softens the leather,” said another woman, picking up the other shoe.

Again, I didn't protest. I was prepared to try anything. I gave them the thumbs up and lay back down as a third member of the gang began busily wrapping my feet up in gauzy little cocoons. The sky had almost entirely cleared, a featureless blue.

Like ants, they worked studiously as a team, passing the bottle of Schnapps around, dampening my boots with a liquor-moistened sock, trading supplies and advice. In about a minute they were finished and helping me back onto my feet.

“Rest,” the leader said once they’d gotten my boots back on. “In Roncesvalles, stop and rest. Let your feet heal. Do not let this happen again. If you walk on wet feet you will only get worse. They must dry and heal, or you will become infected.”

“Take your socks off, rest and dry twice a day,” said the woman who’d bandaged me.  
“Stop and have a drink,”

“Schnapps?” I said, wincing as I took a few practice paces.

The Germans laughed. “Or water.”

I thanked my rescuers as they turned to continue up the mountain. The leader paused one last time to look back and offer me the bottle again.

“You’ll need this?” she asked, holding it out to me. It was about half full.

I considered for a second, then smiled and declined. There was still a chance I might not make it to shelter by nightfall, and if that happened, if I did find myself sleeping in the French/Spanish wilderness, the least I could do was approach the situation sober.

With that the group was gone as quickly as they’d arrived. Their conversation echoed across the mountaintop even after they’d disappeared, carried on the wind.

I was still a severely handicapped hiker, but I could hobble— so hobble I did.

Before I knew it I had crested the mountain range.

It was evening, and the path was finally curving downward. Then I was back under the tree-line. Then I was picking my way once again through a forest of pine trees. I could feel myself getting closer to civilization. I expected to see it around every corner. Hope was in sight.

I arrived at a fork in the road just as the sun was beginning to set through the branches. One path continued at about the rate of decline I was used to, while the other sloped abruptly straight down the hillside and out of sight like the track of a roller coaster in a drop. Both were marked with little yellow arrows. Both were, apparently, if the signs were to be believed, legs of the camino which would eventually converge in Roncesvalles. I stood there, smelling the lingering damp and the coming night, scratching my head. There was no room for error. Once again, night was getting closer and my time was slipping away. A wrong turn down another hilariously mislabeled route might mean I'd have to burrow into a hay bale later, if I meant to sleep someplace warm. The crickets were starting to creak.

Frustrated and exhausted, calculating wildly, I did not notice the sound of another person on the trail creeping up behind me. I heard nothing at all over the voices of the forest, my analysis and the noise of my heartbeat. Then I felt a hand lightly brushing the back of my arm.

I whirled around, nearly crying out, expecting what, I didn't know.

I found a woman at my elbow. She was younger, like me, perhaps sixteen, short and unassuming, gaunt and dressed in a lavender blue hoodie with a shaved head and quick, perceptive eyes. She took a step back, raising a palm to show she meant no harm. She carried under her other arm an easel and a thick book of sketching paper. Her fingers were darkly stained with smudged graphite. I must have wandered right across one of her scenes, not recognizing her camouflaged in the leaves and purple evening light.

"*Dinero?*" she asked, upturning her hand into a little bowl. "*Tengo hambre,*" she patted her shriveled little stomach. She looked brittle, yet uniquely alive, her expression electric and defiant. Maybe she suckered dozens of pilgrims a day in this way, waiting in the trees with her



art supplies, collecting a tidy tax. Maybe her boyfriend was a little way down one of the paths, ready to jump those that were unwilling to pay. I decided to risk being swindled. I had a little money to give. Perhaps she knew the way.

*Dinero*, I thought, abruptly recognizing the significance of her language, patting my pocket for my wallet. I must have crossed the border.

“This is Spain?” I asked, fishing for the euros I’d been given the day before as change after my sandwich and coffee. “España?” Had there been a sign? A marker I’d missed?

The girl rolled her eyes and half smiled, “*Si, España,*” she said. She took the change and turned quickly away, pulling the hood of her jacket over her sharp-edged skull. She loped a few steps down the steeper of the two paths, choosing her footing easily. She wasn’t lost. She moved like vapor through the trees.

“Wait,” I called after her, starting to follow. “Is that the way to Roncesvalles?”

She stopped and looked back at me. I could tell she was toying with the idea of brushing off my question and leaving me to figure things out myself. She looked at me, then back down the trail ahead of her. Then mercy or gratitude won out. She nodded and motioned for me to follow. Fighting the aches and sting of my various injuries waking up while I’d been standing still, I staggered on, trying hard to regain lost momentum.

The path, a reversal of the one I’d taken along the street up to Orisson, curved almost straight down. It was not so well travelled, no so beaten by countless feet into submission, as the other route I’d grown used to in my descent from the peaks. I trailed the bright color of my guide’s jacket, slipping all the time, clutching at branches and bramble for balance, always managing to choose the wrong rock on which to situate my weight, always inches away from a

somersaulting tumble. Now and then I'd save myself at the last moment, cursing and kicking up a cloud of dust that would drift lazily through the air, marking my mistake. My hooded guide only laughed, never stopping, never looking back, leaving me no time to recover, spurring me on and on. The sun disappeared as we went.

When I arrived at the base of the hill the girl had finally lost me, but it did not matter. I could see the regular lines of far off buildings, dozens of windows lit, dotting the horizon. As I drew closer I could make out the shape of the monastery-turned-pilgrim refuge, a high, C-shaped building with three stories, an atrium, a chapel and a bell tower. My guidebook said it slept one hundred and eighty people. Shambling brokenly into the check-in area, I was met by a stoney faced man who gave me a ticket for bunk one-hundred and seventy six. I nearly fainted. After my night under a pile of gear on a concrete picnic table in the rain, the drafty monastery was Nirvana. I floated to my bunk through an immense, open room, loud and teeming like a zoo, thankful beyond expression.

Free of my gear, with freshly washed, still dreadfully disfigured feet in a pair of cheap flip-flops, I went out into the night to choose which of the two restaurants in town looked more worth my time. Both were packed with all manner of travelers in various age brackets and states of consciousness, but only one had a cigarette vending machine and an open table outside where I could put my feet up. I made camp and ordered a steak and the tallest beer available. I watched the other pilgrims interacting in a detached state, feeling more utterly, almost narcotically relaxed than I thought I could ever remember feeling. Panic, for a time, didn't even enter my mind. I had

no energy for fear. That was the trick, it seemed, beating myself half to death, giving my brain plenty of real pain to focus on.

A rotund American woman by the name of Barb was at the next table telling a group of women she'd apparently just met about her views on spirituality. They nodded a thousand nods, careful to look polite and interested, drinking copious amounts of wine, trying and failing at intervals to redirect the conversation or at least secure a few lines for themselves. This provided me with just the sort of entertainment I was looking for in the place of my usual dinnertime television. Her banter was both grating and strangely enthralling.

"I've always been a *very* spiritual person," Barb was saying as her unfortunate companions nodded and wandered the porch with their eyes, looking for distraction.

"Really, I've always thought of nature as a very spiritual place. I've always believed in a sun god, and a moon goddess, and— you know— things like that,"

I got out my little notebook and began to take notes. Barb was solid gold. Something told me she was making it all up, almost everything that came out of her mouth. There was a certain quality to her delivery, hard to pin down, but vaguely overzealous, like an actor trying to get noticed. With subtle desperation, she worked through her lines, resolved to hold her audience, to tell her stories. It was of little use that night, though. No one but me seemed in the mood to listen to her blustering. Despite her attempts to introduce new and bizarre hooks, to hold her public's attention, her table was emptying.

At the bar inside I spotted the Germans who had patched me up that morning settling in to order drinks. I caught one's eye, waving, raising my glass in a toast. She grinned, returning the gesture with a glass of white wine, bowing a little and turning back to face her friends.

“So that makes six blessings I’ve received since leaving Tallahassee and only two of them were in churches! Honestly, you just have to know where to look. The Way is full of every kind of spiritual energy. I told my girlfriends, I said, I’m going to be so enlightened, so connected to the energies of the universe by the time I get home, like, seriously, y’all aren’t gonna even recognize me,” Barb said, having scared away all of her audience but for one twitchy-looking, rabbit-faced man in a white mustache and spectacles. He nodded gravely.

There was a strange peace about the scene, a perfect tranquility I’d already almost forgotten was possible.

“My medium really believes I’m close to a breakthrough. She thinks it’ll happen sometime this year, what with Mercury in retrograde. Then, maybe I can finally quit the dentist’s. That Dr. Kopeland. He just doesn’t understand how *deeply* important it is to me that we—”

I bought a pack of cigarettes at a machine, and lighting one let go and listened.

After a while, as the restaurant began to empty, as I found myself nearly alone with the staff while they ambled about clearing tables, I sighed, straightening up. It was time. There would be no better. I downed a half Clonazepam with the last of my beer and lit a second cigarette, gingerly putting my weight back on my feet.

With one final thankful sweep, I took in the scene trying hard to commit every detail to memory, the low, happy conversation, the smell of the food and meadow and the wind, the warm numbness of my tired limbs, the rich, navy sky, the stars. Then, my heart thumping in my throat, I reached for my phone.

### CHAPTER 3

“You’ll see. You’re wrong. Pam is cheating on Jim and they’ll have four kids before he even figures it out. It’s right there in front of you. You just have to look for the signs. And don’t talk to me like I’m a child. NBC isn’t being heartless, they’re being realistic. I’m a fucking realist. I can tell you’re just trying to cheer me up. Stop.”

“Pretending to be a writer doesn’t make you perceptive. You’re not always right. And stop comparing people to animals. Mary agrees with me. That’s what matters. Subjective appearance doesn’t affect credibility and anyway, I thought you only did that when you’re anxious. Aw. Did I make you anxious? You must know I’m right.”

“How are the girls in Spain? I guess you’ve made a few new friends by now.”

“I’m so sick of fighting with you. ”

“Thanks for ruining another night.”

“I hope you’re having a good time over there. I hope you’re happy.”

“Hey! How are you? I’m so sorry about last night. I was in a bad mood. I woke up missing you this morning, remembering last semester. Even though they’re so small, these dorms can feel so empty when you’re by yourself. Also, now I have to make my own breakfast? Unacceptable! Anyway, I hope everything is going well! Have fun and text me when you’re somewhere with wifi again. Love you!”

“Are you in Spain yet? Let me know where you are! Is it pretty there?”

“I don’t want to go out tonight. My mom gave me some wine to take with me from Houston. I think I’m just going to try the Pinot Noir and watch Say Yes to the Dress :) (Remember when I made you watch a whole season of Sister Wives and then you made me watch that seven-hour Mormon documentary on PBS? I guess that was almost two years ago. I’d never been to a party and you still had to ask your brother to buy you cigarettes. Sorry to ramble. Hope you’re doing OK!”

“I miss you so much. I really wish you were here with me. This wine is great!”

“There’s nothing to do here without you. There’s no one left for me to talk to.”

“Do you miss me?”

“This horrible woman thinks she’s so pretty and important, it’s hilarious. All her friends are trying to talk her down, but she’s insisting on these RIDICULOUS, tight, mermaid-looking dresses with diamonds. You’re going to have to see this, sometime.”

“I hate this stupid school. I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Why did you have to do this now? I mean, I know you have panic attacks, but the pills are working, right? Couldn’t you just stick with traditional medicine and wait to try experimental cures until we’re not in school? Maybe I could’ve come with you. I’ve never been to Spain.”

“So, what? You’re just going to ignore me?”

“You don’t even have the decency to respond? Do you even care about me?”

“Hello?”

“Are you mad at me? What did I do?”

“Fine, just ignore me. Like you always do.”

“You’re a selfish asshole.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean that.”

“There’s no such thing as love. Everyone knows it. People just get in trouble for saying it. People pretend to care when it’s convenient.”

“I’m out of wine.”

“Goodnight.”

“Sorry for texting so much. Please let me know you’re alright.”

Twenty-seven texts and counting.

When the bells rang and the lights went on at half past 5 AM the next morning, I gathered up my gear and shuffled out with the other one hundred and eighty-odd bedraggled pilgrims into the dining area. There, for the first time, I picked at my breakfast in the company of my fellow travelers. I got a chance to look around. There were dozens of tables packed with people of every description. I could hear Korean, Japanese, German, Italian, English, Spanish, French, and another language or two I couldn’t identify echoing up, bouncing around the rafters. The room was enormous and cold, with wet, cave-like acoustics. It had, according to my guidebook, been around since before the year 1127, and had, back then, been part of one of the wealthiest Augustin monasteries in Europe. Monks, priests and pilgrims had eaten in that hall for close to a thousand years. Now I had to stew there in the company of their ghosts, obsessed with my own cosmically frivolous, still agonizingly unsolvable problems.

I did not speak to anyone. Finally checking my phone and confirming my worst suspicions the night before had left me embittered, lost in restless thought. Should I respond? Is

that the *decent* thing to do? (“The decency to respond.” You could just *tell* she did drama in high school.) If I acknowledged the situation, the way she’d so obviously gotten drunk and depressed on her own then decided to take it out on me, if I rehashed the conversation or demanded an apology, wouldn’t I only be starting the whole awful fight up again? Was an apology even enough? Did I forgive her? Should *I* apologize? Could I really be blamed for not texting from the top of the Pyrenees where such luxuries were impossible? Then, if I didn’t ask for an apology, was I enabling her behavior? Would that just ensure she’d have no problem doing the same thing again tomorrow night, and the next, and the next? Would that send her the message that I didn’t mind the fighting? Now that I did have access to Wi-Fi, shouldn’t I send something so she knows I’m OK? Did I even want to talk to her? Wouldn’t that guarantee fresh panic, a confrontation? Wasn’t agonizing over hypotheticals like this exactly the kind of anxiety-inducing crap I was trying to escape by coming here? What was the point of taking this trip if I was just going to be miserable? Then again, wouldn’t explaining myself become more difficult the longer I left it? Wouldn’t my silence, in a way, just prove her right? *Was* I a selfish asshole? Wouldn’t she get madder, more impossible to talk down, every night? Wouldn’t the backlog of texts become more insurmountable every day? On and on.

I hadn’t come up with any answers by the time everyone had filed out of the dining room, leaving me alone with the cold coffee and crumbs. The toast on my plate was still untouched, but I had no appetite. I forced myself to take a couple of bites so as not to appear ungrateful and threw the rest out, slamming the remainder of my water in a single sip. I was still dehydrated from crossing the border. I limped away after the disappearing pilgrims and out of the room. When I reached the front double doors by which everyone else was exiting, I lingered for a



while, trying to look like I was tying my boots (though I wasn't wearing any) until the others all had gone and I was alone with the woman behind the front desk. She had her eyes down, busily scribbling away in some wide, dusty logbook. She startled when I stood up to full height.

"Yes?" she said slowly, sounding busy and a little suspicious.

"I'd like to book another bed," I said, stepping forward and leaning on the counter.

"Another bed?" she asked, confused.

"Yes," I said, "Another bed. I'd like to stay an additional night, please."

"But, we do not, you see, it is not permitted—"

I could tell which way our conversation was headed. I had no option but to try the foot gambit again. This time, however, I was prepared to back it up.

I cut her off by hoisting my foot up onto one of the benches on the wall where pilgrims were made to sit and take off their boots upon arrival. Moments earlier, when other pilgrims were retrieving and putting back on those boots, I'd elected to stick with my flip-flops, just in case. My feet were clearly visible, disfigured and disgusting. I made my point easily.

"I need to rest my feet," I said, knowing from the look on the woman's face that the battle was already won. "Please, I just need to stay one more night."

"Ugh," she grunted, a little pale. She must have seen plenty of gross feet working in that *alburgue*, but perhaps none so early in the morning. She shrugged and nodded.

"One more night only," she said, scribbling again in her book. "You may have bunk number one." She handed me a little voucher. "Please wait until the afternoon to claim it. We will be washing the sheets and cleaning the dormitory until one or two."

I thanked her and lugged my pack out the door. The town was already empty but for its thirty or so regular residents. I went back to the restaurant I'd eaten at the night before and, finding the place still closed, set up on the deserted patio. There I tried focusing on fiction for a few hours, giving myself a break from the Kate-based controversy still banging around in my head. I read four short stories and the first half of a novel before I was allowed to go back to the refuge and leave my backpack at the foot of my bunk. After that, I wrote in my journal a while before calling my parents. Talking to them, like reading, gave me a short break from my worries, but they were seven hours behind in Texas and just starting their day. They couldn't talk long and soon I was back where I started. Alone again, when the man came by with a rustic decanter of wine, I motioned him over and flipped my glass.

The rest of the day passed by quickly, in a blur. Wary of making a spectacle of myself in a quiet, new place, of drifting off to sleep on a bench in a sunbeam and waking to find my phone or sandals stolen, I didn't drink much. I resolved to stay right on the edge. I was numb but aware, wandering the little town, exploring ruins, poking around for stone monuments, trying distractedly to understand the place's history, then ducking back into one restaurant or the other to think and top off. There were relics in the church having to do with some fellow named Roland who'd met his end in the vicinity in the year 778. There were cracked stone plaques commemorating another battle that had occurred in that narrow valley in 1813. There was also one fine, stately hotel, looking sleek and out of place in its antique surroundings. It was here, of course, that I gravitated that evening, suddenly fixated on the idea of ordering myself an equally sleek mixed drink— a martini, or maybe an old-fashioned. This was a luxury on my budget that

was neither practical nor advisable, but I went looking for it anyway. I never had a chance to do anything of the kind back home and wanted to pretend for a few hours like such extravagance was normal for me, like I was the kind of person who went to fancy foreign hotels and sipped small, expensive drinks.

Nobody that saw me in that hotel bought my act for a minute.

I settled myself at a low table in the bar near a window that looked out onto the undeveloped side of the valley. The seat, a couch rather than a chair, was built for two and it faced into the dimly lit lounge. Beside me was an empty fireplace through which I could hear the wind whistling. Ahead of me in the corner sat an elegantly polished piano with an empty, antique bench. Somber classical music was playing through clusters of speakers set into the ceiling. No one else seemed to be in the place but me, not even a host or waiter. I sat there for twenty minutes, waiting to see what would happen, wondering if the place was even open. Time dragged, but I couldn't leave yet. I didn't wish to appear uncertain, not if I intended to look like I belonged. I stayed right on that couch, hardly moving but for an occasional drowsy wobble. I was just beginning to nod off when a man called to me from behind the long, shining bar on the other side of the room.

*“Hola,”* he said, *“como estas?”*

*“Muy bien, muy bien, señor,”* I said, getting to my feet and attempting to cross the room in a graceful yet purposeful stride. My legs, which I'd kept neatly crossed (looking very sophisticated, indeed) for nearly half an hour, had seized upon the first opportunity to go immediately to sleep. They were suddenly, irritatingly useless. They rebelled against my

directions. This caught me by surprise, rendering my calculated stride into more of a scrambling stagger. The muscles, tired too from the previous few days' work, simply refused to hold me up. The force of standing tipped my balance forward and I didn't regain control until my ribs had collided a little too loudly with the marble outcropping of bar-top across the room. I came to rest bent awkwardly over the bar, bracing myself with the heels of my hands as if that was my plan all along, just feet away from the newcomer. He blinked at me, cautiously confused and clearly a little annoyed.

“American?” he asked, polishing a wine glass with white cloth.

“Canadian,” I said, rasping, the wind knocked out of me. My entrance was bad enough.

“Ah, OK,” he said, giving me another vaguely censorious look. “May I see your ID?”

I must have blanched. This was a first. No one abroad had yet asked for any identification before serving me, not in France, not in Spain. He'd caught me out in a pointless lie. He was the first to do it. And all because I'd been careless enough to put my feet up. I didn't blame him, of course. I had to acknowledge how ridiculous I must have looked, ricocheting across his polished workplace.

I dug out my driver's license and forked it over, hastily muttering something about having moved to Texas. He nodded, hardly registering, unconcerned. He looked the license over and handed it back, unsmiling but asking no extra questions.

“What would you like?” he said, not making eye contact, glancing over his shoulder at a clock on the wall. He didn't care where I was from, or at least that wasn't high on his list of concerns. He would serve me, but he drew the line at acting pleased about it. He was waiting for

the other, better customers to arrive. Again, he had a point. I couldn't afford to stick around for long. No bottle service was planned.

"Gin and tonic, please," I said, shirking my plans in favor of a more nostalgic drink that reminded me of summer evenings at home with my parents. My parents. They'd know what to do about this ever-spiraling, time-sensitive Kate mess. But I couldn't ask them, didn't know where to begin, couldn't describe what a horror-show the whole thing had become.

The bartender said nothing, turning sharply to pull a bottle from a low shelf. He hadn't asked me what sort of gin I wanted. He either assumed I was after the cheap stuff, or only had one brand at his disposal. It didn't matter. I didn't want to discuss the issue with him further.

Then I had my drink, paid, and returned carefully to my couch to sip and forget about the whole embarrassing encounter. As I began to get comfortable again people started to float in from outside and elsewhere in the hotel, all sweaters and scarves, neatly styled hair and flashing jewelry. Sunburned, disheveled and dressed in flip-flops and the wrinkled rest-day clothes I kept knotted away at the bottom of my pack, I felt more and more out of place as the light faded.

Again, I couldn't avoid the circular thinking. I was overrun by the Kate conundrum. From another world, another life, she had stormed my brain, taken it over completely. Drinking and exploring in the daylight had distracted me for a time, but now, alone with my worries in the night, in a strange and foreign place, I could defend myself no longer. I could look out the window, think of places ahead, only for a minute or two at a time before visions of an increasingly venomous, inconsolable Kate pushed into my imagination. I wondered if seeing me, knowing my nausea, my panic, would please her. Was this a planned side effect of her so-called concern, her "love?" Was I overthinking? Was that cruel? The possibilities, the threat, the weight

of both engagement or silence finally settling on my shoulders left me a physical wreck. I twitched and groaned in my seat like a patient in quarantine, noting as if in a dream my sour, turned stomach, racing heart and closing throat. Sharp, icy wind blew in through the open flue of the fireplace in the wall. The temperature outside had dropped thirty, maybe forty degrees.

My meditations, a twisting circuit through tangled contradictions, were interrupted by a young couple who suddenly appeared in the high-backed, two-seat couch opposite me. Terrible and adrift as I felt, I was uncharacteristically gratified to see them.

“Hello!” the woman nearly shouted, out of breath and rosy from the cold, taking off her jacket. “My name’s Jen, and this is Brian,” she waved a hand at her companion who smiled, somewhat abashed. He gave her a look, likely signaling for her to lower the volume, but she forged ahead just as she’d started.

“Are you on the Camino?! We’re on the Camino! It’s our honeymoon.” She paused for a second to take a deep breath and glance gleefully at her husband. He nodded in acknowledgment and gave her a squeeze around the waist, raising a finger to his lips. This message she received. I let the moment land, then picked the conversation back up.

“Y-yep,” I stuttered, reminded again of my anxiety. I would have to take special care to breathe between sentences if I didn’t want to make a scene or invite unwelcome questions. Time sputtered, like the second of a skipped heartbeat, like a moment of free-fall, as I pulled in as much air as I could, as quickly and as quietly as I could.

I gestured in a direction that may well have been the way I’d come, though I could no longer quite picture the layout of the town beyond the walls of the hotel. “I’m at the m-municipal *alburgue* in the monastery. You?” My tongue was asleep, too.

They took the slur in stride, nodding. Jen assessed me brightly.

“Long day, huh?” she asked, now putting on a show of sympathy, flashing a look at her husband like she’d found an injured bird. “Did you just get in?”

“Those mountains wrecked us, man,” said Brian, breaking his tactful quiet.

I considered my answer for a moment. Did I feel like letting them in on my two-night loophole? Was I up for another discussion about my feet?

What did it matter? In the end, I didn’t care enough to avoid it.

“Nope,” I said, finishing my drink. “No, I got in last night. They’re-- they’re letting me stick around for a while to recover.”

“That bad?” Jen asked, looking me over for obvious injuries.

“Yeah,” I said, warming up to the task of pronunciation, pointing at my feet but keeping them well hidden under the table. “About a dozen blisters. These nice German ladies bandaged me up a few kilometers above Orisson and told me I might get infected and put myself out of commission if I didn’t stop for a while and let them heal.”

“That sucks, dude,” Jen said, transitioning from nods to solemn shakes. “Boots?”

“Must be,” said Brian. “Bummer.”

“You’re American?” I asked, beginning to consider the idea of another prohibitively priced drink. Why not? I had company.

“That’s right,” Jen said, returning Brian’s one-armed hug, “We’re from Pittsburg. We both just quit our jobs, so we have about a month before we’re due back in the real world. We thought, why not do the Camino? Right, Bri Boo?!” Brian recoiled. In addition to dropping a slur like Bri Boo, Jen was apparently unable to maintain her inside voice.

This seemed a radical decision, like mine but magnified. Leaving stable, apparently tolerably well paying jobs, a probably comfortable life, to make a pilgrimage. I was intrigued.

“You quit your jobs? Why? What do you do?”

“Law,” they said in unison, having practiced answering this question before.

“Like, Brian’s an attorney,” Jen said, tussling his hair, “and I’m a paralegal.”

“At the same firm?” I asked.

“No,” they both said, perfectly synchronized again.

“We worked at different firms,” Brian said, “but we both hated our jobs,”

“Hated!” Jen said, screwing her face into a dramatic grimace.

This was an odd coincidence, but it sounded preferable to the alternative. I couldn’t imagine working in the same place as someone who was liable to sidle up to me at any moment, squeezing, tussling, and shouting out awful pet names across a crowded office. And anyway, if that were your situation where would you be, professionally, if and when things went south? Utterly screwed.

“OK, fair enough,” I said, “but why come here? Why the Camino? Isn’t this sort of an effort-intensive trip for a honeymoon? The beaches of Costa Rica weren’t cutting it?”

They laughed.

“Well, we’d just watched that movie, you know, with Charlie Sheen’s dad,” Jen said.

“Martin,” Brian said, helpfully.

“Martin Sheen. You know, where his son dies and he goes on the Camino to retrace his steps? Did you see it? Is that why you’re here, too?”



I shook my head. I had not seen it, but had heard snippets of conversation describing it in the restaurant the night before. Barb had seen it. Barb was also so inspired. In my book this was not the best reason they could have provided. Barb's was never a good camp to find oneself in. Barb's motivations had little to do with logic. I let it slide. My reasons weren't so logical either. Still, inwardly I took pride in not having been spurred on my cross-country journey by what I could only assume was a Hallmarkian, tear-jerking B-film. At least I had come by my idea honestly— at my dad's suggestion, attempting to outrun a serious mental illness. I had to laugh at myself. No sense in judging.

“Nope, I missed that one.”

“Oh,” Jen said, disappointed. “We've been talking to a bunch of people since we got to France. It seems like that's why there are more Americans here this year. It, like, just came out.” I continued to bite my tongue. The thought of the road to Santiago crowded with Barb-like Americans, Barbarians, was not appealing.

“So, why are *you* here?” she asked.

I took another deep breath. “I love Spain,” I said slowly, deciding to be honest about the matter for the first time since I'd spoken to my talkative pal, Claire, before we got onto the subject of horses. I was worn out and couldn't think of anything more creative to say. “I'm drawn to it, partially because of Hemingway, and I wanted to get away. Things were starting to be a little much back home and my parents knew the Camino. I was glad to take the leave of absence— hard reset, y'know? Plus, it's Spain.”

“Where's home?” Jen asked, politely skirting the subject of what exactly I meant by “a little much” for the time being. I hadn't yet had much call to explain my actual self.

More honesty: “Fort Worth, Texas,” I said.

“You’re into Hemingway?” Brian asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said, wishing for a second I’d brought my tablet to show all the ebooks of his I carried. If I’d elected to go analogue, to pack real books, I’d have dozens of them, the man’s entire catalogue and several other authors’ beside. There’d probably be half my weight in books spanning most of the last century, a semi-immovable mini-library. That tablet was a lifesaver.

“Are you gonna go to a bullfight?” he asked, leaning forward, interested.

“If I get the chance.”

Jen frowned for a second, then livened up with an idea.

“Do you guys want a beer?” she asked, standing.

Brian and I shrugged and agreed.

“She’s been trying to get into beer for me,” Brian said, watching her leave for the bar.

The both of them seemed happy enough.

“Awfully nice of her.”

Two hours, four beers and a meal passed.

We were back at my usual restaurant, posted around my usual table. There had been a storm on the mountain causing many of the pilgrims expected in Roncesvalles that night to stay behind in St. Jean or Orisson. The place was nearly empty, and all three of us were fairly drunk. I’d managed to keep my anxiety at bay, scaring it off every hour with another drink. Still, I could tell it was only getting stronger, waiting in the corner to catch me before I could sleep. I didn’t mean to give it the chance.

“One more round?” I asked, sensing a lull in conversation. I could tell my companions had had about enough, but held on to the last shreds of the night as best I could. I would not go quietly. I knew how quickly things would devolve again once I was on my own.

“One mo’, one— one more round,” said Brian, scraping his chair back and plotting his loopy course inside. Jen gave him a frosty look, tugging on his sleeve and muttering something about acting his age.

“Small, small one,” he mumbled, already leaving.

Jen and I made awkward small talk, dancing around the elephant in the room. She was ready for bed but put on a brave face, determined to remain pleasant. She’d gotten her point across. Reluctantly, I would release them after one last nightcap. I tried, though, to keep things moving for the time being by asking her about Pittsburg and the job she’d quit.

Brian returned on the scene, tripping loudly over the legs of his chair, nearly spilling all three drinks he had locked under his arm on himself.

“You guy-guys talking about work?” he asked, dabbing his clothes with a napkin. Through some fancy improvised footwork he’d managed only to spill about a quarter of each beer down his shirt. Estrella pooled beneath his chair.

“Yeah, babe,” Jen said, handing him another napkin, “I was just telling him about Mr. Schroeder.”

“Guy’s a prick,” Brian said, his usually professional vocabulary having dropped off steeply during the past hour.

“You haven’t told us what you want to do, after you’re finished with school, I mean,” Jen said, pivoting away from a raw subject.

I picked up a sticky pint, wading through inches of foam for a sip.

“Right, uh, true. Up in the air, I guess,” I said after finally hitting pay-dirt.

“Between what and wh—at?” Brian asked, hiccuping.

“Well,” I said, still feeling truthful, “I want, I mean, I wanted to be a writer.”

“Like, of books?” asked Brian, butting in.

“Something like that,” I said with what I hoped was a wry rather than condescending smile. “But recently I’ve been thinking about law school—”

“No!” they both shouted, getting back in step with one another.

“Well,” I said, a little rattled, “it’s in the family. In the blood, you know. Writing’s on the wall. I just figure, how likely is it that I’ll make enough money, be able to do stuff like this, stuff I’d like to do, like travel, if—”

“Don’t do it,” Brian gurgled, looking further gone by the minute.

“He’s right, though,” Jen said, patting her husband on the back. “Don’t do something that won’t make you happy just for the money. I mean, look at us.” She gestured at herself and her semi-unconscious partner with an exaggerated sweep of the arm, nearly clipping my beer with her elbow.

“Yes,” I said slowly, “there’s that.”

“Don’t do what you think you’re supposed to do. Do what you love,” she said, obviously pleased at the opportunity to rattle off such a sappy, throw-pillow cliché.

“Maybe so,” I said, “maybe so.”

“You just, you write your, uh, uhm— books,” Brian said, half in a dream.

I thanked them for their personal and financial support and sent them on their way, promising to look for them in the towns to come. A formality. I doubted Jen would sign on to this sort of evening twice. It was late. Once again, I was among the last customers left on the patio.

The encounter had cheered me up, but it was over all too quickly and my troubles didn't take long to find me. The debate was already starting back up in my head.

I wasn't ready to give in yet, though, electing instead to drift inside to talk to whoever I might find there. Two employees remained, one counting the money in the register, the other cleaning glasses, closing the bar.

I settled myself on a barstool.

"You have ten minutes," said the barkeep, a curly haired man with a Roman nose and a thick accent. He checked his watch. "Would you like something first?"

Ten minutes. Not much of an escape, but one more glass of something or other might knock me out before I had a chance to wake myself back up with thoughts of the situation brewing on the home-front. An idea occurred to me.

"*Orujo*," I said, taking care to roll the R. On a previous, more carefree trip across Spain with my family years back, I remembered my dad ordering orujo. It was, as I understood it, the Spanish version of grappa, an Italian clear liquor, rather like moonshine, made from fermented grape stems. I had tried it at the time and not particularly enjoyed it, but it was authentic, and looked quite clean and refreshing. I wanted to take one last swing at appearing as if I knew something about my surroundings, as if I belonged.

"*Orujo*?" the man asked incredulously, making eye contact to be sure I was serious.

“Yes, please,” I said, doubtless damaging my credibility with an excess of politeness.

He shrugged and got an unlabeled bottle down from a high shelf. It looked as if it had been finished and refilled regularly for half a century.

“House *orujo*,” he said proudly, pouring an ounce or two into a small tumbler.

“Cheers,” I said, knocking back half of it.

Fire raced through my veins, chasing away any trace of cold that lingered from my time outside. It was actually quite nice. Apparently I’d been stress-testing my tastebuds for years in preparation for that exact moment.

The bartender watched me, waiting for me to double over, to spit the stuff back up.

“It’s good?” he asked me a moment later, tired of waiting.

“Very good,” I said, finishing the glass.

The man looked stunned, then ecstatic, calling his coworker over to see.

“The *niño* likes our *orujo*!” he said, looking so proud and taken aback he might burst.

“We make it ourselves,” said his friend, pulling up the barstool next to mine. “Family recipe.” He picked up the bottle to show me. “A thousand years— no change.”

I felt glad to be included. It was remarkable the way they’d warmed to me based entirely on drink choice. I’d been in and out of their establishment half a dozen times since I’d arrived and until that moment had exchanged only the odd smile and thanks with either of them. In a matter of seconds we’d become fast friends. This was useful information.

“Another?” the bartender asked, reaching for the bottle.

“Aren’t you closing?” I asked, glancing uncertainly around. Now I was truly the only non-employee in the joint. “I don’t want to hold you up, if you want to go home—”

“Not at all,” the money-counter said, ambling across the room and closing the door. “We stay as long as we want,”

“It is a small place,” the bartender said, filling my glass. “We live very close by,”

“But doesn’t the *alburgue* close soon?” I asked, not yet convinced. “Will I get in?”

The pair grinned at each other. “We’ll get you in,” the money-counter said, laughing.

“My wife works there. She has a key.”

“Works for me,” I said, holding my hand up to stop him at a half pour. I didn’t want to be completely off my head later when it came time to creep through the *alburgue* past hundreds of sleeping pilgrims to find my bunk.

Once the door was closed and our negotiations were concluded, the men set about digging out packs of cigarettes.

“Smoke?” the bartender said, offering me one from a crushed soft pack of Marlboros he kept in his front pocket.

“It’s not illegal here? Inside?” I asked, remembering well having come across an article to that effect detailing the recent change in Spanish policy weeks before my departure. When I’d visited as a kid and been unable to appreciate it, everyone in Spain smoked indoors, but just as I was about to set off and get a chance to take advantage, they’d passed a new law prohibiting the practice. I’d been pretty pissed about it, even though I wasn’t smoking at the time. It was like the bastards knew I was coming.

The men laughed.

“It’s our place, see? Look. Do you see any police here? Any tourists? Any *peregrinos*? No,” the bartender said, pouring another two glasses of orujo for himself and his friend.

“When the doors are locked, we are alone. So we can smoke, yes? No one complains,” said the other man, lighting up.

“Works for me,” I said again, accepting a cigarette and following suit.

We talked for another hour, about what, I cannot recall. Orujo mostly, I assume. Some politics. Texas. The Camino. The remainder of my time at that bar exists in still-frames, scrambled, like someone else’s slideshow, the photos all shuffled and out of order. Soon, however, I found myself back outside, feeling the wind on my face but not registering a bit of cold, stumbling along the dark path back to the towering monastery behind one of my new friends. True to his word, the money-counter knocked on the door of a house along the way and did all the talking, convincing his somewhat incensed other to cough up keys to a back door.

On my bunk at the far side of an immense, cavernous dormitory, surrounded again by the sound of every type of snoring imaginable, the warmth of the *orujo* left me. As if on cue, my panic returned, regaining its throne just as the alcohol abdicated it.

There was Wi-Fi in the building. A weak signal, but enough to send and receive messages. Kate had not texted since the previous night. Her silence was ominous. I imagined her stewing, drunk and alone in her dorm, steadily boiling over. I knew that the peace could not last. She was not finished with me, only regrouping, preparing a fresh volley of vitriol to launch across the Atlantic. I decided to beat her to it. Exhaustion, apprehension, lingering inebriation and adrenaline fought inside me, pushing for territory, overlapping. I got out my phone and woke it up, blinking in the glaring blue light.



I typed out several drafts before I was satisfied, starting and stopping, deleting and revising. Every single word was paramount. Even the slightest misstep would be leapt upon, teased out, distorted into something malicious. Nothing, or at least as little as humanly possible, could be left open to her interpretation.

I had to walk it back, to cover for myself. This was no time and place to be having intense discussions, to call her on her bullshit. I couldn't have it out with her, demand an apology, or break things off. Not yet, anyway. She'd struggle. She'd kick. She'd haunt me. I couldn't stand under the threat of a record-breaking fight, an axe swinging just over my head. The stress I'd been chasing away all day, the way the last few hours had already played out, was evidence of that. If I kept running, drowning myself slowly for want of distraction, I'd be useless. I wouldn't make it. No, I'd have to swallow my ill will, to shove it right down. I had to apologize, if only to postpone the inevitable. In a way I'd still be running, but at least if I didn't have to live in dread I'd be able to handle the situation sober. Maybe. For a time.

I sent two texts. The first explaining my radio silence, the Pyrenees, the tent, the rain, the crossing, and asking for forgiveness. That last part made me sick. The second text, more cordial, less mechanical, described Roncesvalles, my blistered feet, my night with Brian and Jen, and my plans for the route ahead. I closed my communication by turning the focus back to her, how she'd been, sympathizing with her situation, consoling, lying. Cautiously satisfied, I put my cellphone away and wrapped myself in my travel blanket, shivering. The stone fossil of a building was not particularly well insulated. Little jets of biting wind swept in through cracks in the windows and howled across the room.

In the dark, the place felt more like an airplane hangar than an ancient dormitory. Watching clouds of condensation from my still-panicked breathing drift up like sheep and disperse in shadows across the room, the anxiety took over completely. Soon the sound of my suffocation, the high wheezing and sudden exhalations, overtook the snoring. The situation worsened as I began to notice the voices of several adjacent sleepers go silent. People were waking up. Soon someone would be standing beside me, angry or attentive, trying to work out what was wrong with me. I held my breath like a kid playing hide and seek, waiting for the snoring to return. Sparks of neon light flashed across my vision, the sound of silence like a physical presence the size of the monastery, pressing down. Being the one doing the suffocating gave me a strange sense of agency. I kept it up, allowing myself a partial breath only at ten second intervals. If I blacked out, I figured, that'd work just as well as consciously keeping quiet. Eventually, one way or another, I escaped for a few hours.

My phone buzzed twice in the small hours of the morning. I heard a few people wake up again in the bunks nearest me, groan, grunt, mutter. One middle-aged woman sat bolt upright in bed and stared around in all directions, hungry for the slightest movement, searching for a place to pin the blame. I stayed absolutely still, wide-eyed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

I didn't sleep another second that night. I saw the red sunrise bleeding across the sky and into the room once again, thinking.

I had my response, but I couldn't bring myself to check it until breakfast.

## CHAPTER 4

She sent two paragraph-length texts. Reading them was like downing a tall, bitter coffee in one gulp. In seconds all traces of rest or peace were gone.

Her messages weren't angry or cruel, not obstinate or morose— and that got me thinking. Something about them seemed off.

Sick as usual with morning revelations, my last breakfast in Roncesvalles went quickly.

Immediately after checking my phone, my mood was odd— confused, slightly sour, unsure of how I ought to react. Kate had breezed past her last outburst with a collection of the most casual, supportive sentences she'd sent me in months. Had I not practically memorized the progression of her last days' communiques, I might have believed everything was normal. She acknowledged my previous night's reports, engaging with my little stories, inserting innocuous questions here and there about the landscape, the food, the people—bait she knew I'd be tempted to take—reminding me of how much she and our friends on campus missed me. She even asked me if I'd been writing, telling me how excited she'd be to read whatever I was working on. She neither mentioned my weak attempts at atonement and explanation, nor offered any of her own. She wanted me to Skype with her when I got to Pamplona. Again, she wished she were with me. I wondered if she could even remember lashing out. Was she purposefully withholding an apology, coolly redirecting the conversation, or had she genuinely forgotten? Did she expect me to move on without an explanation? Could any of this affection be trusted?

I spent my first ten minutes of consciousness that morning at the long table in the dining hall picking at toast and butter, staring off into space, and trying to make sense of the situation. Again unable to stomach much food, I soon gave up and wrapped what I couldn't eat in a napkin to take with me. I thanked the woman who'd let me stay the extra night, saddled up and set out. As I left the building, I noticed Barb making her way from the dormitories to the dining room. She must have convinced someone to let her stay an additional night, too. I had not escaped her. The knowledge of her breakfasting, preparing to follow me down the road, gave me added incentive to hurry out the door and out of town as fast as my stiff legs would carry me.

It was still dark outside, and the whole valley was covered in a dense, swirling fog with fingers that curled around me like vines, catching around my ankles. Passing, I split the haze and left a wake behind me like a ship. I was alone on the road. My short breakfast had left me with a head start on the other pilgrims of about twenty minutes, which I sought to widen. I found myself often looking over my shoulder and quickening my already frenetic pace, as if I was being chased. I didn't want to speak to anyone, nor did I want to devote any more time to thinking about Kate. Instead, I tried refocusing myself on the purpose of my journey: I tried to empty my mind, watched my feet and the farmlands and forest slipping by. I counted my steps and timed my breathing. A few kilometers passed. The cold kept me always in motion, always occupied.

After a little over a half hour, the path curved left, and following it through the fog I suddenly became aware of buildings looming up close at hand. I could not see them until I was right on top of them. The route cut through the middle of them, through a small farming outpost with barbed wire fences, no hostels and what sounded like dozens of rabid guard dogs. I could

not see them, low to the ground and camouflaged by morning gloom, but they had no problem tracking my movements, raising the alarm, baying to their neighbors to warn them of my approach. I heard them straining against chains, shifting in the underbrush, barking and cackling like hyenas. I needed no further evidence: this was not a place for stopping.

On the far side of the community, I ran into my first visible, untethered mutt, hackles raised, in the middle of the road. I paused, sizing it up, caught off guard. The creature, a large mishmash of breeds, mostly German shepherd, eyed me keenly, getting to its feet, growling. I was cautious but unwilling to compromise my progress for much longer. Stooping, I grasped in the mist at my feet for a hefty stick.

“Well?” I said aloud, finding a suitable branch and raising it to point at the creature.

“What’s your plan? What’s your strategy, here?”

The dog took a few tentative steps toward me, lifting its nose, smelling.

It was an enormous, grim specimen, built like the Hound of Baskerville. It wouldn’t have much trouble overpowering me.

“I am the Keymaster, are you the Gatekeeper?” I went looking in my subconscious for fight or flight instincts, but fragmented, fearful thought amused itself instead by sending me only pop culture references.

I was having a panic attack, the first of the morning, but for the second time since my sprint to the Montparnasse station, I felt like the adrenaline was called for. This was, probably, a crisis that might soon call for superhuman energy reserves. I scanned the horizons before and behind me, looking for help or a feasible escape route.

The dog came slowly closer, moving in short bursts of a few steps at a time. In seconds it was close enough to sniff the end of the branch I still held pointed defensively in his direction. It looked from me, to the stick, then back at me, curling its lip to expose a row of long, yellowed teeth. Its initially low, rumbling growl grew louder, oscillating, verging on shrill.

“Uhhh, OK,” I said, taking a step to the side, testing his resolve. “OK buddy, I’m just passing through.” I raised my other hand between us like Gandalf. The dog kept coming, its nostrils working furiously.

“*Bueno, err— buen perro?*” I said, trying another tactic, lowering my hand a little so it could smell me better. It pushed its great head forward until its nose almost touched my knuckles, stretching its long neck.

The dog took three deep last sniffs, sneezed, then jumped at me, burying its face in my shirt. I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes, tensing up for the mauling, then relaxed, surprised to find it nuzzling, wagging its huge tail. I sat down on a log beside the path and scratched it behind the ears, finally getting a better look. It was an old dog, collarless, with a graying face and a matted, lion-like mane. Its eyes were deep brown and silvery reflective. It knocked its head against my hand, bounding clumsily back and forth and stumbling over my legs. The poor fellow seemed to be almost entirely blind, but as friendly as I could have hoped for. Its eyes were no match for the fog. I must have frightened it with my jumpy behavior. I gave it the leftover toast from my pocket in restitution. I made a new friend.

Once I’d sat still and at ease with the old dog for a few minutes, gradually my thoughts turned back to the path and the scores of travelers gaining on me while I rested. The air was

beginning to clear, and I felt sure that in another minute I'd be able to see the first of them hove into view behind me.

“Buddy?” I said, “Buddy?” trying to pull my hands away as the dog chased after them with its wide, purplish tongue. “I've got to get going, bud. I've gotta—”

I got up and started walking.

The dog stayed motionless for a while by the side of the path, hesitated, then began to follow me, hurrying to catch up. It had no collar, no master was on the scene, but I felt sure it belonged to someone close by. It kept pace with me, trotting along at my side, looking up at me, waiting patiently for my attention. For the first few minutes or so I gave it no encouragement, but eventually it broke my resolve, whining, staring expectantly up at me with its sweet, murky eyes.

“Alright,” I said, pausing and leaning down to scratch it behind its ears again, “if you're sure, then— I guess we can go for a walk.” It brightened as if it understood, shaking all over and panting, whipping its tail against the backs of my legs. We walked together all day (though I often stopped and tried unsuccessfully to convince it to go home) for almost twenty kilometers. We were together most of that leg of the journey, through a half dozen small settlements, until we arrived outside the town of Zubiri.

The dog, I'd determined, was a he. I continued to refer to him, rather lamely, as Buddy. He served as a silent, supportive sounding board as we walked, listening curiously as I ranted about the various things that were troubling me.

“Sure, being a writer *sounds* nice,” I said as the dog looked on, “but it's not exactly Hemingway's world anymore, you know?” Buddy grinned. “People aren't just interested in

writing. Successful writers have to have internet followers, Twitters, blogs, gimmicks. That's what they say, anyway, the professors. That's what the damn school therapist even told me. Not that I asked him. They have to pander and stick to bullshit genres, stuff that's marketable to high-schoolers and halfwits. They need connections, luck, experience. And where do you get experience when you're required to have it before you can land the jobs where you might get it? Hemingway was a journalist, but newspapers are dying. He went to war, wrangled himself some credibility there, fine, but that's right out, obviously. I mean, I'd panic. You've seen it. Are soldiers allowed to pop benzos? Can an army ambulance driver down a Xanax in a crisis? And even if that's alright, if I did take one, what if afterward I couldn't summon up the energy to give a shit when the bullets started flying? Anyway, it doesn't seem like anyone reads anymore."

I took a deep, deliberate, still anxious breath. The panic I'd felt mistaking Buddy as the enemy hadn't ever quite left. The bastard reflex, disorder, or whatever it was didn't even have to make sense. It saw an in and then held on, often in seemingly calculated spite of the circumstances. Buddy, a pleasant, undeniably unthreatening travel companion, was the proof. Already short on oxygen, I'd overextended myself, rambling and walking— talking to a dog. Speedy, meandering conversation, sometimes a useful distraction, had failed to heal me.

Floundering a little, I spotted a bench beneath a cluster of trees overlooking a downward sloping hillside. I lurched over to it, hyperventilating, ears ringing, and planted myself awkwardly across it. I lay there, longways, propped up on my pack and facing the sky for a few minutes before the sudden swell had passed. When I recovered and was able to notice things again, I spotted Buddy, who I'd briefly forgotten about, sitting near my feet. He was well taller than me as I lay on the bench, and looked down at me with his massive head cocked to one side,



unmoving. I almost apologized aloud to him. Then I thought better of it and saved my breath. I patted him on the head and nodded, sitting up.

From the bench perched at the edge of the hilltop, I could see the path zigzagging all the way down into the valley, a crooked cable of muddy gray parting a sweeping sea of green. Far in the distance, down below, I could make out Zubiri, a cluster of white buildings with red roofs built closely together—an island of sleepy civilization, adrift. It looked like about an hours' worth of walking. I had picked up a salami sandwich several hours earlier in Burguete after running into Buddy, but evening was fast approaching and my stomach was beginning to grumble. Free of the forest but still on the highlands, the wind howled across the bluffs.

Fifty yards from the bench, the path split in two directions. Both new paths curved down the hill and disappeared from sight. I could not tell, tracing the correct route from Zubiri backward, which of the two paths connected. Their respective courses were obscured in the folds of the slopes below, lost in long patches of what appeared to be dark, loose shale. Neither way was marked with yellow arrows or spray-painted rocks. I stood up to get a better look, taking a few steps forward. Still not feeling my best, I had no intention of stumbling down a steep hill in the wrong direction for a kilometer before stopping short at a dead-end drop-off, forced to turn around and climb back up on my hands and knees. Buddy went to the edge, too, and gazed down, his matted dreadlocks whipping in the wind.

To our right, set back from the decline, I noticed a tall board with the Camino's conch emblem and golden lettering. Beside the board, inspecting it and scratching her head, stood a dark-haired young woman in a red fleece pullover. She must have left before the lights had even come on at Roncesvalles, before six, or slept in one of the tiny towns beyond. Hoping for a clue

to my current conundrum, I picked up my things and walked over. I held my own flapping jacket tightly to myself against the gale and the cold.

“*Qué*— uh,” she said, catching sight of me and calling out over the wind, “*Que significa eso?*” I wasn’t well practiced in Spanish accents, but I felt confident in my ability to spot someone rooting around in their memories for the right words and conjugations. Her routine reminded me of students I’d watched in the Spanish 1 course I’d taken the year before, where I’d half-learned the handful of phrases I’d been stammering to employ since arriving. She was no native speaker. I’d save her the trouble.

“I really have no clue,” I said, close enough to speak almost conversationally.

She smiled, clearly relieved, and turned back to the board. It was covered in very worn out paper notices, bulletins, and maps, partially protected by sheets of plastic covering. The covering, however, was not airtight, and years of moisture had found its way in, distorting and rotting the text and images. Only a handful of words, “*¡Atención!*” and “*peregrinos*” among them, were recognizable in the runny font river, the alphabet soup. Minimal sense could be made of it. One easily got the impression that it was somehow important and intended for our perusal, but learned little.

“I get the feeling they’re trying to communicate with us,” I said, trying to decipher a sentence on a dry patch of the third notice. “Dinner is at... eight!”

She laughed. “What dinner? Where?”

“Unclear,” I said, tracing the lines of the text with an index finger toward a dark, greenish sideways puddle. “One, or possibly ten kilometers away, at the, uhm— nope, it’s gone. Zubiri, probably. That-a-way.” I pointed off down the hill. “You can see it when you get a little closer,”

“I know,” she said, still squinting at the board, “but which path is the Camino?”

“Now, there you have me.”

At this point, Buddy, who’d been keeping a respectful distance, appeared suddenly among us, panting. He knocked against the back of one of the woman’s knees with his snout, causing her to lose balance. She slipped forward and braced herself against the board, giving a little startled shout.

“Right, yeah, whoops. Sorry about that. This is Buddy,” I said, pushing him into a sitting position. Buddy plopped down and gave a breathy sigh.

“You brought your dog on the Camino?” she asked, regaining her composure.

“No, not really. I mean, kind of. He’s following me, but he’s not mine.”

She was dubious, reluctant. “He’s... friendly?”

“Definitely,” I said, thumping him on the back. “He’s a good fella. He belongs to somebody, I’m sure. He just started following me a little after Roncesvalles. I kept trying to send him home, but he’s stubborn. Shouldn’t have fed him, probably. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time. Don’t you like him?” Buddy grinned up at her on cue, still sitting.

“Sure,” she said reaching out her hand slowly for him to sniff, “I like dogs,”

“Well, anyway,” I said as the two of them got acquainted, “it looks like we’re going to have to just pick a path. This map isn’t gonna be much help.”

Her name was Mara, and we walked together for hours. She was twenty-five, an American. She was taking time off from a Master’s in history at the University of Oregon, walking alone like me. She was also only the fourth person who spoke fluent, flawless English

I'd spent any time with on purpose over the five days since arriving in Europe— after Jake, the wide-hatted, Brian, and Jen. (Being conversationally steamrolled by Claire and overhearing and making studious note of Barb's deranged oration two nights previous obviously didn't count.)

Less than one complete, unhindered conversation a day was an average I could deal with. I found satisfaction in the feeling of isolation, fenced off behind the language barrier. The infrequency of these interchanges made me feel monastic. It depressed me, but it somehow felt like depression I deserved. Still, this was a welcome distraction from the anxiety I'd been battling minutes before.

With no local artist/con-woman available to sherpa us down the correct path, we chose the less steep-looking of the two. It veered widely to the left, and appeared likely to be a good deal longer than the other route, but also significantly safer. It took us deep into the ridges of the foothills through a series of scenic switchbacks.

By this point in the day, my aches and pains returned in full force. I limped along, trying to keep step with my companions. Buddy, always sympathetic, paused often to look after me and give me time to catch up. Mara, of course, was in much better shape than I was. She reminded me often that she walked everywhere in Eugene, and that I oughtn't to be bothered. She'd stop, backtrack to Buddy, call something encouraging to me, and dig granola bars and water out of her pack for my arrival. It was an embarrassing, albeit pleasant afternoon.

Mara was genuinely friendly— the first person I'd felt fairly at ease with since my parents saw me off at DFW airport. There were no little annoying habits, no hoops to jump through. We talked easily of this and that for two hours, trading book suggestions, reviewing movies, sharing stories. I hadn't had a positive, inconsequential conversation with an attractive woman for over a year. Not one that wasn't angrily protested shortly thereafter. I had forgotten

how nice it could be. My skills of normal interaction had atrophied somewhat, granted, but I wasn't yet utterly hopeless. Our time together was reassuring. It struck a stark contrast with my recent experiences with Kate, who, I was forced to remind myself, was still expecting a Skype session with me in the near future. The unavoidable comparison made me feel guilty, like the very thought was somehow cheating. Her voice was in my head, though I tried to ignore it, accusing, spinning the story, shifting the narrative. There *had* been good times, though they were getting harder to remember. She said she *was* trying to change. Maybe I was giving up on her too soon. Maybe I was the jerk, the narcissist all along, the root of the problem, as she increasingly claimed. I multitasked, arguing with Kate silently as Mara and I chatted our way toward town.

When we finally arrived in the streets of Zubiri, I reached a familiar state of near total physical shutdown. I hadn't given the blisters long enough to heal. They were back and had multiplied. My shoulders were raw. I hobbled on throbbing legs like a person more than three times my age. I felt worn away and ridiculous.

"Let's stop for a coffee," I said as we passed the first cafe on the outskirts of town. I bent and fumbled with my boots, loosening the laces to give the blisters some space. "I need a break."

Mara and Buddy settled around a little round table outside the building while I went in to get the drinks to make up for the series of snacks she'd offered me that afternoon. The place was very warm, with another small television mounted high on the wall like you'd see in a hospital—apparently a local custom. Soccer was playing on the TV, interspersed with news reports covering a statement from the Basque separatist group, ETA, and more unemployment protests in major cities. I watched the screen, freezing on one image, jumping forward, sloppily crosscutting, malfunctioning, as I waited for the coffee. The Camino ahead winded its way

through at least three major cities before Santiago: Pamplona, Leon, and Burgos. I hadn't seen any of them yet connected with reports of protests and riots, but remained wary. How welcoming could thousands of disaffected, rightly frustrated and jobless young Spanish men and women be to an American, touring their troubles? I'd rather not come across them, just in case.

The man behind the counter, an elderly fellow with a white mustache and a gray driver's cap, handed me my coffee with a wink, waved away a tip (tipping was still in my muscle memory, though no one around accepted it) and wished me *buen Camino*. When I arrived outside, Mara was checking her watch, gazing around. The sky had turned plum purple in the two or three minutes I'd been inside and the shadow from the cafe had crept across the street. It was a little past five in the evening and light was fading fast.

"Do you think you can make it to Larrasoña?" she asked, pointing at a spot on the guidebook she had open on the table. "Looks like it'll be about another 5 kilometers. A little over." She gave me an appraising, not altogether hopeful look. She could guess my answer.

"I'd rather not," I said, sitting down and ruffling Buddy's ears. "It's getting dark and I'm not really in a hurry. I don't want to slow you down. I'm probably going to call it good here—rest up. Seems a nice enough place. I take it you're going to push on? Got a schedule to keep?"

She frowned, then sighed and brightened slightly. "Yeah, unfortunately. I've only got three weeks for this trip. I've got to follow the itinerary, or I'll fall behind and then I might not have the time to actually make it to Santiago, which would really suck."

"I get it, totally. Gotta get that certificate." Mara, a responsible official pilgrim, kept up with her booklet of stamps with careful, nearly obsessive attention. She hadn't missed a valid stamp since departing from St. Jean Pied-de-Port.

Mara laughed. “That’s right. Can’t go home with nothing.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come along?” she asked. “We could keep each other company.” Dozens of other travelers, the people I’d left behind in Roncesvalles, had overtaken us. They began to lope into town from the wilderness, crowding the streets, pushing on toward Zubiri and beyond. I saw Barb waddling past with a group of thirty-somethings, having apparently ensnared a new batch of saps to abuse with her insight and history. I shivered. With any luck she’d be following the guidebook on to Larrasoaña.

“It’ll be dark soon,” I said. “The beds might all be taken by the time we get to the next place if you keep having to wait up for me.”

We sat in silence for a time while our coffee cooled. I didn’t want to part ways, but also didn’t want to screw up Mara’s tight schedule. Nor did I want to force myself to limp further than was necessary, compounding my injuries. It would be a pity to miss even a short part of the trip, distracted and put out by my aching, blistered feet, and a shame to darken her day with one of my trademark crises. And anyway, I wanted to go slowly, to take it all in and follow Jake’s directive of staying often in in-between towns. I wanted more time to heal and enjoy myself—time Mara didn’t have.

We knew our stint together was at an end, so we talked of other things until the coffee was gone: what we wanted to do in Pamplona, in Santiago, what food we were looking forward to finding in the coming cities. Then, after a few minutes, she rose to leave. She hugged me and gave me a card for the pensión where she was planning to stay in Pamplona. We said our goodbyes and she turned to leave. Buddy got up to follow her, then, seeing that I wasn’t behind him, came trotting back looking perplexed.

When I'd finished my coffee and contented myself that most of the throng of pilgrims had passed through the town, I got to my feet, strapped my pack on tightly and began the final part of my days' journey, wandering to the center of Zubiri in search of lodging.

Buddy grew hesitant as we entered the town proper. He began looking back the way we'd come, his steps halting. Presently, he sat down beside the road and would go no further. This was something I'd been expecting all day: he had reached his personal limit, gone further from home than he could stand. I just wished it had happened sooner, before he was hours away from familiar territory. I'd led him to a place he likely had never been, and now he was stuck there, confused. Night was only an hour or less away.

I knelt down beside the old, half-blind dog, sorry. We sat there for a while as the moon appeared faintly over the horizon of the valley and began to rise. I felt responsible for him, and stupider by the minute for giving him bread in the first place. I hadn't meant to adopt or kidnap him. Goaded him to go further would only make matters worse, make it less and less likely for him to ever find his way back. Then he'd really be my responsibility.

I was freaking out a bit, wondering if I'd need to walk him back to where I'd found him to feel absolved, when I noticed a pair of travelers making their way out of town up the path toward me. They were joking in a language I couldn't make out and kicking up dust by the light of a pair of shaky blue-bulbed headlamps. They were tall and fit, a man and woman, and carrying packs larger even than my own, each with a generous variety of camping essentials lashed on and attached with carabiners. They were prepared for anything, with a tent, rolled sleeping bags, rolled sleeping pads, a pair of folded camp-chairs, rain gear, and assorted extra shoes tied to their



packs by the laces. They walked with high end, telescopic staffs. Carrying all this weight, so thoroughly outfitted, they departed at night in the wrong direction.

I halloood as they drew closer, walking briskly ahead to meet them, leaving Buddy at his post. Their chatter stopped, and one head dipped sideways under its headlamp as they stopped in the road to recognize me. They talked under their breath until I got close enough to be seen properly, then smiled, clearing me. I was no imminent threat.

“*Bonjour, como estas?* Good evening,” I said, stopping just ahead of them. “You don’t happen to have any food, do you? Any snacks?” They looked taken aback and suspicious again. The center of Zubiri was less than a half kilometer away, restaurants and hearty pilgrim meals only minutes further. I was quick to clarify.

“Not for me, no,” I said, pointing back at the hulking shadow beside the path behind me. “For the dog.”

They looked at each other questioningly for a moment. There was some recognition there, some character to their confusion. They didn’t have the pure blank looks of people who didn’t speak my language and therefore simply understood nothing. They were lost in nuance. As I took another breath, preparing to explain the root of my plan, the woman beat me to it. She summed their collective misgivings neatly, in one syllable.

“Why?” Her accent was Dutch, drawing out the Y to highlight her skepticism.

I hadn’t given them much to work with. “Because,” I said, wondering if this whole thing was going to come off as weird— if they hated dogs, never carried snacks, or had an aversion to being hurried up to by strangers on dark paths.

“Because there’s a big, very friendly dog back there that’s been following me all day. I gave him some bread this morning outside Roncesvalles. Anyway, I don’t want to lead him any further away, and I thought that maybe, since you’re going back, maybe if you feed him he’ll want to follow you? Why *are* you going back?”

“We are going home,” said the man, smiling. “We walked out our front door, and we will walk straight back to Belgium.” He dropped his pack on the ground and leaned forward to shake my hand before bending down to scavenge in one of its outer pockets. “Liam— and my wife, Elise.” The woman, stealing a swig of water from one of her many bottles cut her eyes at me, nodding. He came back up holding a sandwich bag with a few white wedges. “Do you think the dog likes cheese?”

“Oh, I’ll bet he does,” I said, casting another look back. The dog hadn’t moved. “You won’t mind if he follows you?”

“Not at all,” Elise said, finishing her drink and resheathing the bottle. “Not if he’s friendly. Big dogs are good protection, walking at night. We’ll only go as far as Alto de Erro, but perhaps he can find his way from there.”

“Alto de Erro,” I said, looking out into the darkness beyond the light of their lamps. “Is that the signpost thing, the bulletin board at the top of the hill?”

“Yes,” Liam said, putting the cheese in his jacket pocket and heaving his pack back on. “The overlook, about five kilometers up.”

“Why there?” I asked, noting that the sun was now almost entirely set. It was against everything I’d read or been told to walk at night. That was how you got lost, got mugged.

“There’s no town up there, no *alburgue*.”

“We want to camp,” Elise said, tapping the tent tied to her husband’s pack. “We want to be there when the sun comes up.”

We said our goodbyes and good lucks, shook hands again, and I watched as they approached Buddy, cheese aloft. He must have smelled the food, as they didn’t appear to receive anything like the anxiety-inducing reception Buddy had given me that morning. He went right to them, tail high and wagging. He scarfed the gift down, gave one last glance in my direction, then loped after them through the shadows, back, past the outskirt cafe and up the hill.

I was lonely, but relieved.

Barb did not make it to Larrasoña that night. Instead, I found her seated at the far end of the banquet table at the first restaurant I entered. I took a seat at the opposite end, separated from her by about six other pilgrims. Her younger companions had moved on, but she had elected to stay behind, claiming a bad knee. When I entered the place, after booking a bed for myself at the adjoining *alburgue*, I found her telling a new set of companions all about it. These newcomers were, by their accents, Australian, and seemed unusually engaged in Barb’s posturing.

“Gammy knee, eh, Barb? Woof, fair dinkum.” She was pleased at the fresh audience, and launched into a matinee performance, showcasing her deep connection with nature and her reasons for believing in a sun god. (This time she included a tidbit about her being 1/16th Native American as evidence of her convictions.) It occurred to me that she might be doing all of this on purpose— staying an extra night or stopping off in a town not indicated in the guidebook itineraries in order to clear the slate and ensure herself new ears and eyes on which to practice her routine. Each night, as another herd of pilgrims trooped in, she got a new gallery of

unsuspecting onlookers, and here she was, on the third night, delivering nearly the same, purportedly spontaneous conversation I'd heard when first I saw her. She was, it was worth noting, trying out new dialogue. Bit by bit, she was sprinkling it in with other lines that must have worked best at the last table read. She was bullshitting these people to an extent I hadn't yet figured out, and no one but me had any idea. I wondered if I was paranoid, letting my imagination get the better of me. How much sleep had I lost over the last few days?

I listened in, of course, enthralled by the whole thing. What was her game? If she was indeed up to something, what could be gained from her strategy? Ears straining to make out her voice over the din of the restaurant, I tried putting myself in her shoes. Ruling out plain entertainment, it seemed as though she was running her personality through a series of focus groups, trying to suss out what elements of her identity people most responded to. Like she was learning, line by line, how to make herself appear most interesting—a basically harmless pursuit, probably, but a little strange. Though her execution irritated me, the boldness of it impressed me. She had picked the perfect time, the perfect place to get her kicks again and again, whatever those might be, and pass by unnoticed.

She moved on to trying out some material I'd never heard before as the entrees arrived.

“You know, I read that if you go like this— go like *this*.” She paused, directing her table-mates to jut out their chins as far as they could. “You can make your chin bigger, like, over time.” Her pronunciation here was comically dampened through clenched teeth. The Australians at her table gamely set about straining their chins, too, their faces flushing from the effort, nodding, happy to try anything.

“If you go like this, see, you can burn the fat off your neck. They say it really helps define your jawline,” Who “they” were, she never elaborated, but no one in her party seemed concerned with source material. Nor was Barb the poster child of slim, athletic necks and pronounced jawlines. Still, everyone at the table went silent for a while as they tried see who could stick their chin out the furthest. I watched them from a few tables away, once again unable to resist the temptation to transcribe the scene in my notebook.

Barb called for another flagon of wine and kept talking steadily of herself, her philosophies and other things she’d learned on the internet. She was an odd sort, but I was bored, and glad of the fresh perspective observing her a second time had given me for analysis.

“I’m actually a sound healer,” she said, after generously allowing a man at her table to talk for a minute about being an estate agent in Brisbane. “I also do massage, guided meditation, and chakra cleansing.” This was an interesting development. I felt convinced that I’d heard her tell her last audience she was a dental hygienist. She had diversified her credentials dramatically almost overnight, and no one blinked. She might be head of a thriving nonprofit by tomorrow.

It all comes down to delivery, I decided, watching the Australians eat it up. No one has any reason to disbelieve anything you tell them, not so long as your delivery is sound. That’s one of the funny things about interaction, really. There’s this trust that comes automatically with new relationships. People take almost anything said during that stage at face value. They either want to digest your information, your backstory, quickly, and get back to talking about themselves, or they want to appear politely interested in you, asking the obligatory questions, to dance the dance of niceness. Neither camp wants to make waves. Either will accept the easiest, most reasonable option: what you’re telling them is unrehearsed, unaltered fact. Why would anyone present

themselves as anything other than what they are, especially when there's practically no profit to be had from the ruse? Why would anyone go to that trouble, risk tripping themselves up, caught in a lie, for nothing? Barb's graceless testing of the limits of this theory said it all. She'd hit upon the ideal venue for this type of game. People arrived by the truckload every day, hungrily making conversation with every stranger they saw, playing interesting person bingo. Then, they disappeared, to be replaced by a new cast every day. All you had to do was sit someplace with a bottle of wine and wait. You could have hundreds of constantly refreshing blank canvases to work, to experiment with, if only you took advantage of the situation. And if Barb could do it, babbling on about water goddesses and chakra emergencies, anyone could.

Casually, half-heartedly, I'd already been playing the game. Barb's aggressive approach inspired me: I could go further. I could get away with more.

My day with Buddy and Mara was nice, I thought, as I settled into bed that night, but fleeting. Ultimately, it had served to remind me of how disconnected I felt. I'd grown apart from my friends during my time with Kate, and having her no longer felt like company. I was cut off and a little tired of myself. Next time I felt down, I'd try an escape within an escape. Next time, I'd throw myself into the role. No one would doubt me, I just had to work on my delivery.

I began sleepily assembling a cast of characters in my head, trying out accents in a careful whisper under the cover of the usual multi-language hum in the dormitory.

Barb snored as theatrically as she lived, soaring highs, whistles, key changes and grunts.

## CHAPTER 5

They knew their market, those companies buying up billboards along the road to Pamplona. Five or six times a mile, I saw towering advertisements urging me to stop in the city for foot massages, pedicures, something involving precarious stacks of smooth rocks, steam, and even acupuncture. They knew that most of us were still new to the route, only just starting out. They knew we were weak. More than a half dozen companies vied for our attention, each with two or three messages repeating every fifteen minutes. Their campaigns mingled as I passed them by, like a constant, slow-motion argument unfolding in the air. Every sign seemed to struggle to outperform, out-offer the next, slashing prices, adding exclamation points, color.

Feet, damaged feet in nearly every frame. Some with red-glowing blisters and fire to indicate pain. Feet and X-ray illustrations of bent and apparently splintering spines. These were interspersed with a generous variety of faded, half-naked women, lengthwise and partly obscured by fluffy towels, smiling sleepy bliss. Last, and most interesting to me, were the not-so-subtly suggestive commercials for taxi companies. These were generally shoddier, cobbled together, sometimes even spray-painted over other signs or on the sides of crumbling stables and farmhouses. Hailing taxis and taking buses or trains was looked upon by the vast majority of pilgrims as treason. That's why they had the stamp system, to catch anyone trying to pass themselves off as a full-fledged pilgrim in Santiago who had covered large, unaccountable distances in short bursts. The idea of getting on a bus, of taking the easy way out, covering

several days' worth of walking in a matter of hours, was at times pretty attractive. Like the feet on the signs, mine were mangled and angry. They needed the rest. Still, I couldn't help weighing that with the scorn I knew I'd get from anyone who happened to see me piling in or out of the thing. I didn't want to do it badly enough to cheat.

Vandalism aside, I thought, it was pretty shrewd business, hitting us outside of major cities, where the Camino was often at its ugliest, most dangerous and slow going. They had everything covered. Every weakness a worn out pilgrim might possibly be hiding was exploited. We, often clueless and cash-carrying, starry-eyed, experience-seeking tourists were a source of revenue no one was prepared to let get by without a fight.

I did my best to ignore the temptations. My funding, generously donated at intervals by my parents, was sufficient but not extravagant. As much as my feet still smarted, I had no plans to spend money forcing poor unsuspecting Pamplonan townspeople to rub them for me. I couldn't live with it. And anyway, I wondered, how much space was even left between all the blisters to massage? Neither of us, not me nor the masseuse, underpaid for such a distasteful procedure, would get our money's worth. I didn't care how excited about it she looked in every fifth billboard, inviting me with open arms and a vaguely medical smock. Instead, I dreamed about private hostels and pensions, like the one Mara was headed for, with single rooms. I wasn't planning on taking that step, on spending that kind of cash yet, but the idea of doing it sometime gave me strength.

Eventually, probably in a smaller, cheaper town than Pamplona, I wanted a good soak in hot water. This was something I hadn't had since Paris. (I had tried, of course, in Roncesvalles, but found little relief. The water was ice cold and worked only at the press of a slippery button—



one good press got you about three seconds of use. An environmentally-conscious system, perhaps, but it made for a uniquely frustrating experience, even before factoring in the doorless stalls where this was all expected to take place. Freezing and fumbling, I gave the process up after the meanest rinse.) The thought of a book, a long bath and a night's sleep, with four walls between me and the snoring outside world kept me limping forward through scorching sunlight.

We'd lost a good deal of altitude and the bracing chill that came with it had evaporated. Coming down off the foothills and onto the plains, I no longer needed a jacket after breakfast and by lunch was sweating through my T-shirt. At 3 PM, I was out of water. This was a first for the journey. Bundled up against the cold in the mountains, I'd never dehydrated so quickly. In a single day, I'd crossed from one weather extreme to another and I was entirely unprepared for the whiplash. By the time I was within 10 kilometers of Pamplona, I was sunburned, soaked, and scanning around each curve of the path into the distance for a store, a gas station, anything, anyplace that might be persuaded to fork over something potable.

It took me a little over an hour to make it from Zubiri to Larrasoaña. I hoped I might find Mara there, lingering over a coffee at a cafe near the path, but saw no sign of her anywhere. She was likely out with the sun, already halfway down into the valley. Walking on, I made peace with the knowledge that she and Buddy had been one-offs— temporary diversions. There were other people everywhere. If I could only persuade myself to talk to them, I could run through the whole thing again. I could give no false names, no doctored stories. A few more trials, a few more testimonials, and I might be forced to admit I wasn't a broken, wholly unlikeable lost cause. Perhaps then I could put a stop to Kate's ceaseless commentary running through my head,

and all the doubt and loathing that came with it. It would be sort of like Barb's display the night before, but without the chakras and posturing. Piece by piece, I could work out whether Kate was right about me, about anything. This brand of experiment would only work if I told the truth. Perhaps there could be more gained from these endless new acquaintances than escape, risk and ego-stroking. Perhaps, in addition to playing the system like Barb, now and then I could use interaction to rehabilitate my self-perception.

I wasn't ready yet, though, and found myself shying away from travelers who seemed about to talk to me. Thinking about Mara had brought Kate to the surface of my subconscious, and with Kate, that morning, came the panic. I realized how long it had been since I'd had a real, earth-shaking, demobilizing attack. A dog, a friend, and a mystery had kept me almost entirely occupied. Thoughts of home but for a few vague, downtime moments of missing family, had hardly entered my mind for an entire day. Even when Kate had worked her way in to harass me as I walked and talked, I hadn't succumbed, there had been no crisis. I'd argued with her calmly, collectedly, having a measured if painful discussion.

Then, when something inside me decided I'd walked an hour and was good and awake, the anxiety came flooding back. At the worst possible moment, just outside a small, quiet town, where they'd be sure to notice me falling apart. I was right back in that Thai restaurant. I walked carefully, putting one foot in front of the other, trying not to focus on the faces on the street and in the windows of picturesque, red-tiled chalets. I had to find a place to hide.

Panic, especially as it gained momentum, always screwed up my thought process. Panicked thoughts are not linear. They don't always fade away as they're supposed to, one following the next. Instead, they stick around, like an idea caught in an echo chamber, like a

word cloud with just one phrase. Generalized panic doesn't have to follow any traceable logic, either. It can come from anywhere, be attached to anything, however small, however insignificant. Logic, therefore, does not deprive it of any power. No matter how aware I was that obsessing over Kate's words did me no good, gave her too much power over me, I couldn't defuse the attack. The symptoms, the frenzied thoughts, ear-ringing and palpitations made me feel all the more powerless. I could not fathom how I'd gotten that way, how I'd missed my chance to rid myself of such a potent source of that terrible feeling. The anxiety followed me, pressing in on me, all the way through Larrasoaña.

"I'm feeling smaller and smaller," she said quietly, a record skipping, warping with my irregular heartbeat, inescapable. "Everyone disgusts me and I disgust myself. I wonder where you are all the time. I can't wait to hear how things are going. Please, let me know when you're able to Skype with me. I want to see you."

"I hate you," she said. "Please don't leave."

In a park near the center of the town, I wandered off the path until I found a deserted-looking municipal building, a court or something, with shuttered windows and empty stone steps. I set my things down shakily, breathing hard. After an age of breathless rummaging through the contents of my pack, I found my guidebook. With it, I tried to look as if I was doing something, not having a breakdown in public. I opened it on my lap and flipped the pages now and then between ragged, heaving gasps. After fifteen minutes or so, when I was content that the worst of the episode had passed, I got myself together and started again through streets. I wasn't fully functional yet, but I'd calmed down enough for my thoughts to start appearing in order again.

Breathing deeply, I timed my pulse. Presently, I was able to appreciate the little community, the narrow streets, red roofs and matching geraniums.

Barb and other pilgrims who'd stayed in Zubiri had caught up to me during the incident. They broke away from the streets and filtered into restaurants, settling on patios and window-seats with drinks, little *bocadillos* and slices of Spanish potato and egg *tortilla*. I cautiously increased my pace, timing my breathing. This was an opportunity to get ahead again.

I waved as I passed Barb, sitting for the first time alone at a four-seat table, probably using the intermission to revise for her next act. For a minute she looked at me blankly, then waved back with a minimal wobble of a thick wrist. She recognized me, but only just. She narrowed her eyes, her head turning to follow me as I drifted by, struggling to remember if we'd ever spoken. We hadn't. Not yet. I'd resisted the urge the night before, even when she came stumbling into the dormitory just before lights out, attempting small talk with everyone in her path on the way to her bunk (which turned out to be right beside mine.) Something told me I'd get my chance sometime in the days to come. In some new town, with a new cast of characters, all oblivious to their roles. I was still planning a walk-on performance on Barb's show if I ever got the chance, but I'd wait for a better moment.

I stopped on the far side of Larrasoña for a hunk of bread and an orange. Carrying them with me, I left the shop and continued out of town, happy to be alone again for a while on the path. A sign informed me it would be another sixteen and a half kilometers before I'd hit Pamplona. Though I'd never given myself a long enough rest to rebuild a little of the torn, swollen skin on my feet, I planned on pushing straight to the city. There, I figured, hopefully in

some quiet quarters, I'd finally give myself more than a day's rest. There, with a sprawling city to wander, I'd catch my breath, a few nice meals, and confront Kate.

Beyond Larrasoaña, there is one last steep climb before the descent into Pamplona and its surrounding suburbs. It was there, just as the sun was climbing high, that I realized I'd forgotten to load up on water when I'd bought my breakfast. Panic had carried me right through a pleasant village full of supplies. The temperature rose noticeably, almost ten degrees each hour.

In the afternoon, once I'd depleted each of my half-empty bottles, Pamplona was so close I could see it—the regular lines, the boxes and towers spread across the clean yellow flesh of the valley floor in distant, discolored patches of silver-brown. Unable to make out the beauty and architecture from such a distance, the great, ancient city looked more like an infection to me. I felt nauseated. I stared hard, stopped by the side of the winding path down. I shielded my eyes with a hand, blinking through a steady stream of sweat. The tiny shadow of a society flickered like a mirage in the rising heat. Pamplona would have restaurants, traffic, hotels, hundreds of thousands of people, pharmacies, bars, cigarette machines, policemen— every fixture of urban life I found both comforting and unnerving. I was about to be smack in the middle of it. The place promised civilization and amenities on a scale I hadn't seen since the last satellites of Paris gave way to farmland outside my train window. I could have all the medical supplies, the moleskin, the Schnapps, the time to recuperate I needed in Pamplona, so long as I didn't give myself a heatstroke getting there.

The road grew more urban by the minute, packed dirt giving way to cracked concrete. Continuing down toward the city, I began to pass sprawling, anonymous industrial buildings. I

walked along long, windowless structures, like sealed up skyscrapers turned on their side. Large compounds of various off-white painted metal buildings, fenced in with barbed wire and guarded by jumping, chained and mangy German shepherd mixes. This, I thought, watching them strain at their tethers, is probably the sort of guard dog Buddy had been destined to be, had he not turned out too friendly for the job. Enormous, matted mutts that looked just like him were all over the place, though there were none I felt tempted to introduce myself to.

After carrying me past a magnesium plant, the concrete path dropped steeply into the outskirts of the city, crossing under bridges, often running parallel to streets. Still, there hadn't been any storefronts to buy supplies. The sun was at its hottest and I was weak. As I dragged myself through a tunnel, past a collection of empty liter-sized beer bottles, I saw a yellow arrow painted carefully on the wall. Four kilometers to Pamplona, it said. Four K. I had run a few 5 K's in a Jog for Fitness class, back at college. I wasn't any good at it, but I'd managed it in about thirty minutes. Trudging along at this rate, I calculated, I ought to be in the city in about an hour, give or take. More if I kept slowing down, trying to decide whether or not to vomit in the underbrush off the path. Where were the convenience stores? There were billboards everywhere, posters pasted to walls, little cards and coupons littering the ground, going on and on about all the city had to offer, but nobody ever thought to take advantage of supplying this desolate, dry stretch of road with water?

Ten minutes later, just as I was starting to get serious about finding a place to get sick, roll over, and dry out like a raisin, I saw the truck. A wise businessman, the very miracle I'd been hoping for, had pulled his vehicle over on the grass a few hundred yards of curving sidewalk past the tunnel. He'd set up camp at a place where a road which ran parallel to the Camino route

curved down the hill, positioning himself just beside a striking overlook. There, he'd set up a couple of plastic tables and fold-away chairs in the shade of a single tree. From his camp, visitors could see the whole of Pamplona stretching out across the valley floor. I was finally close enough to grasp the detail, the artistry and intricacy, the blend of ancient and modern styles.

The man, wearing a baseball cap and an undershirt, absorbed by a crinkled newspaper, didn't look up as I came stumbling toward him. He was framed in a little window on the side of his vehicle, which was opened out like a garage door, propped up for shade. It appeared to be an old ice-cream truck, long since retired and repurposed. Several of the vehicle's components had been altered, taken from other cars and added throughout years and various repairs. His passenger door, a mossy, pristine green, clashed with the scratched and dented white of the cab. A red bumper, duct-taped in places, tied it all together.

He'd attempted to make up for the disheveled appearance of his business with special touches added to the seating area. His plastic tables were draped in little blue and white checked tablecloths held down against the wind by collections of scallop shells and a few small glass jars that contained drooping wildflowers. Hanging below his open window, the man had placed a little dry-erase board with a menu in blue, handwritten text. He had water, coffee, soda, beer, chips, and two kinds of sandwiches. He was just the sort of god-sent, observant, enterprising salesman I felt the landscape called for, and he had no customers. That was all I needed, I'd give him every bit of patronage I could afford. I was about sick with thirst and any energy I'd collected from my morning bread and orange had been gone for hours. He didn't know it, but he had saved me from another stupid crisis— another easily avoidable close call. I had to start taking better care of myself.

“*Buenos días!*” I said, probably a little loudly, setting my pack down with a thud. “You have no idea how happy I am to see you.”

The fellow just grinned, folding away his paper, and tipping his cap. He didn’t appear to speak English, but he understood. He leaned down out of view, then began pulling ice cold drinks out of a hidden cooler, setting them down, sweating, one by one on the sill.

“*Que necesitas?*”

I bought two liter bottles of water, a can of beer, and a bag of chips. I was groggy, but I watched him methodically retrieving my items with laser focus. I tried paying him extra, leaving every spare euro I had jingling in my pocket on the sill, but he called me back, pushing the coins back into my hand.

“No, *bueno*. It’s good, it’s good,” he said.

I ate my chips, drank my beer, and downed nearly half a liter of water in silence before I could get a grip. Things had started to spin a little there at that last desperate moment, and I was still dizzy. I sat limp in one of the plastic chairs facing down the hill, watching the cars roll in and out of the city. Though it had only been four days ago that I’d walked alongside traffic up the mountains outside St. Jean Pied de Port, it felt like ages since I’d seen anything move so quickly. For an indeterminate time, I was hypnotized. Bursting full, settled and content.

“*Señor?*” I asked, waiting for him to come to a stopping point with his newspaper once I’d finished with my trance. “*Quantos*, uh, kilometers to Pamplona?” I gestured toward the skyline as spoke. *Quantos?* Quantify. Quantity. It was probably close enough.

“*Quatro*,” he said, raising four hairy fingers. “*Buen Camino.*”



...

Four kilometers takes about the length of an album to walk. Feeling bloated after my roadside feast, round, like a grape, I rolled downhill listening to music. My feet and my back were the only parts of me not feeling rejuvenated, so I tried concentrating my attention elsewhere. The billboards, with their smiling masseuses and satisfied customers mocked and called after me. It was 4 PM. I had a plan and I wouldn't rest until I'd completed it.

The municipal *Alburgue de Peregrinos* in Pamplona is situated in the center of town. Follow metal conch shells fixed in the concrete, my guidebook said, and they'll take you right to it. This turned my hurried trek into the city into a game, a kind of treasure hunt. The shells were darkened with the rubber of countless pacing shoes and placed somewhat far apart. It was often difficult to spot them against the grey of the sidewalk, and even when you happened upon one, finding the next tended to come down to guesswork. My route involved a good deal of trial and error, walking blocks in wrong directions and retracing steps. I had to stop a half dozen times, stumped, at dead ends.

The city itself, especially a few kilometers in, as I approached the old town, was stunning. The old town, rather like in St. Jean Pied de Port, but on a much larger scale, comes across as fortress on a hill. Long paths took me gradually up stairs and inclines alongside manicured gardens until I passed through high gates in massive stone walls. Once inside the old town, I was overwhelmed by the density of it, the narrow, curving streets, the old buildings, stores, hotels, and housing packed and stacked so tightly together. Moving through, claustrophobia mixed immediately with a new sense of adventure. The centuries of experience,

the sheer history, was a palpable presence in the air, condensed there in such a tight, haphazard space. It excited me, wrestling my stupid, nagging anxiety.

I walked through crowds of people of all sorts, going every direction, in a daze. The reality of where I was, what I was being allowed to do, finally set in. I was really there, walking through Spain on my own. A jolt of freedom and possibility lit my synapses. The feeling had eluded me until that moment and was too strong, too overtly optimistic to stick around for long, but for a while I felt completely present, happy— even normal. The warmth, the electricity was so strong it pushed every trace of panic right out of me.

Pausing in my ecstatic exploration for a second once the thrill had died down enough for me to approach the situation more sensibly, I wished for a camera or someone to talk to. I wanted to document it, to remember every detail, or at the very least share the experience with a similarly stunned traveler. Looking, though, I could no longer spot a single backpacked soul out on the street. Coming up the hill, into the heart of the Pamplona, I'd walked with dozens of them, but they'd all disappeared while my attention was fixed on the city. I'd been walking, looking from the shells in the sidewalk, to the shops, the tops of the buildings and back, greedily reveling in the details, for nearly twenty minutes.

I peered down toward my feet again. Had I wandered off course? No. There was a shell a few feet away, on the street corner a few feet beyond the place where I'd come to a stop. I was on the Camino still. I hadn't seen the *alburgue* yet. Surely I wouldn't have missed it.

I kept walking, picking up speed a little. The sun, as usual, was setting a little early for my liking. I could breathe in the city later. Getting a bed had to be my first priority.

I must have missed the trees for the forest. Another rookie mistake. Somewhere back there, when I'd been bumbling around feeling so gratified, engaged and at peace with the world, I must have skipped right past the refuge. It was no wonder the streets were suddenly so free of pilgrims. They, no doubt, arrived in a cooler, more practical headspace. They probably dove right into the shelter, then watched me bouncing by, scratching their heads, wondering where I was off to looking so pop-eyed and exuberant.

"That's what you get for letting your guard down," my anxiety said.

"You don't want to see me," Kate said. "By the time you get anywhere it'll be too late to Skype. If there's even any room."

I bit my lip, feeling the optimism all but disappear, swapped for anger and reproach.

I, after about forty-five minutes, in my quest for sidewalk shells, keeping a wary eye out for signs of the municipal *alburgue*, found myself leaving Pamplona. The old town was behind me. My surroundings were no longer ancient, scrunched and stately. Modern buildings had taken over the landscape, and the space between each of them had grown steadily. These were clearly, in the big picture, fairly recent additions to the city. They weren't all trying so fiercely to fit into a confined space. They had room to breathe. This all amounted gradually in my subconscious (losing buoyancy with each block) to a bad sign. The street lined with polished structures, skyscrapers, bus stops, continued down a hill. At the base of it, I could make out no other older neighborhoods, just shopping and office spaces stretching out of sight. I *had* missed it. I must have. But how far back was it? Why hadn't I turned back when the other pilgrims disappeared? Where *was* I?

Thankfully, Pamplona is the type of city where you can find a kiosk with newspapers, maps, cigarettes, and other essentials. After about a minute, nervously frozen, trying to work out a plan, I noticed one a couple of blocks off course. Taking careful note of the intersection where I'd been standing, I hurried over, picking up a map of the city and a pack of Lucky Strikes. (One can't usually find these in the states, but in Spain, somehow, they're still going strong. For irrational and silly reasons, this gives them a certain exotic, yet old-Americana appeal.)

The map, of course, did not have markers for any *alburgues*. It was large, complex, and hard to get a handle on. Meanwhile, by comparison, the square of map in my guidebook explaining where I'd find the *Alburgue de Peregrinos* was a tiny thumbnail. In the evening, by the light of a fizzling electric lamppost, I was having the damndest time trying to match the two. I gave up. There weren't minutes to burn poring over maps. It was getting darker. Not only would the *alburgue* soon be booked up or closed, but reading maps, obviously lost on a bench, had me feeling like a target. I couldn't be a more obvious out-of-towner. I had to get back on the Camino and retrace my steps quickly.

The voice of optimism and encouragement that sprang to life in order to protect me against the complimentary forces of Kate and my anxiety was wrong about this one. My mistakes were finally about to incur some consequence.

The municipal *alburgue* was just past the gates into the old town, near the top of the hill. I had breezed right past it, more concerned with getting through the thickest part of the crowd at the gates into open air. Enthralled with the city and strangling my claustrophobia, I hadn't noticed, had just kept exploring.

The *alburgue* is situated in an old cathedral, *la Iglesia de Jesús y María*. It is tall, gorgeous, weathered, and imposing. It is also, due to its location on the route, and attractive, historic nature, a hot spot for pilgrims. Its limited quarters don't take long to fill.

I was turned away for the first time. I didn't try the foot gambit. I saw the place. It was teeming. People who looked like they'd had a rougher time than me, elderly and young alike, were stretched out everywhere, digging through first aid kits and applying bandages. The guidebooks urged readers to continue straight from Roncesvalles to Larrasoña, which meant that most of those people had arrived a few hours earlier than me and were finally getting a rest after three days of hard going from St. Jean Pied de Port. Had I been following the itinerary in my book, I might be installed someplace, too, but 40 K further along, probably a hell of a lot more deserving of shelter than I was at that moment. The nuns, also, looked particularly severe. I didn't fancy getting into it with them. They had enough on their hands already.

I came to these conclusions while waiting in line for a chance to speak to the nun in charge, listening to her turn away the people in front of me one by one. By the time it was my turn, I was wheeling around to leave. I smiled, waved and shook my head. The nun smiled back, just slightly, then moved on to her next task.

I was out on the street, but at least in the valley it was not cold.

I had no plans anymore, no clear destination. It was almost entirely dark, and the people, tourists and locals alike, were meandering toward bars and restaurants, secure. I lit a cigarette, at last no longer in a hurry. It was likely that I was screwed already, I could take a moment to analyze the situation sensibly.

The next *alburgue* wasn't for at least a half day's walk. That'd put me in at about midnight. Even if I made it without getting lost in the dark, the likelihood of my being able to persuade the proprietors to open their doors for me at that hour was slim to none. I'd end up in the same situation, miles away from any other options.

There were hotels. Every big city has them. I'd passed several of them back at the edge of the old town, noticed multiple neon signs down the hill in the modern districts. That was a possibility, but it wouldn't come cheap. Was this crisis serious enough to merit such emergency funds and extravagance? Probably not. Not yet, anyway.

What else could be done? I had no access to the internet, no way of researching the cheapest rates, the closest places. My maps did me no good. They were intended for tourists that already had rooms somewhere, pointing them toward museums, parks and markers.

I went diving in my pack for my wallet, which I'd taken to keeping zipped up in an interior pocket with my passport and Camino stamp booklet. I'd find a bank and check my account balance.

In the process of digging out my debit card, though, I was struck with inspiration. There, in the cash pocket of my wallet, was the card for the Pensión Iscoray, the private hostel where Mara was staying. It was somewhere nearby, she'd told me, in the old town and easily accessible to the Camino route. That's why she'd chosen it.

I had to grit my teeth and talk to some people. I accosted and blathered semi-Spanish at four of them, handing them the card and mispronouncing the street name before a nice old man in a striped sweater and a mustache pointed me in the right direction. Finally on the right block, it took me another twenty minutes to track down the right building number. The pensión was

hidden behind a wall of dusty, paint can covered, tarp-strewn scaffolding several stories high. I never would've known there was an operating business under there if I hadn't stood there watching the spot where the address should have been, totally perplexed, for ten minutes. Eventually, a fellow walked up the street, right past me, under the scaffolding, then up to the tarp. Bending over, he lifted a corner of the cloth and disappeared into a dark hallway beyond.

Cursing, I followed him into the building, my pack catching on the tarp, nearly bringing the whole skeletal structure down on top of me.

The hallway, a long, maroon and gold stretch, dead-ended at a little desk between doors on each perpendicular wall. At the desk sat a little man in a bowtie. The man I'd followed into the building had disappeared.

I wiped my boots thoroughly on a rubber welcome mat before continuing. The carpet was already stained over with mud, paint and plaster from whatever construction was going on outside, but I didn't want to contribute to its ruin. The little man watched me, waiting to speak up until I was satisfied and approaching.

*"Guten abend!"* he called. There was that German thing again.

"Good evening," I said. I didn't know nearly enough German to play along.

"Ah, hello, hello." He flashed a close-lipped smile. "Do you have a reservation?"

The question took the wind from my sails a bit.

"I do not," I said, bracing for disappointment, keeping my gear on in case his next words would send me packing. "Do I need one?"

"In summer, I would say yes," he said, opening a log book and tracing lines back and forth with a knobby finger, "but in September, I think you are in luck."

“Perfect,” I said, relaxing. “How much for three nights?”

“Three?” the man asked, pen poised. “You are a *peregrino*?”

“Yes, three,” I said. “I am. I want to see more of the city and get out of these boots.”

“OK,” he said, shrugging and marking boxes. “A nice, long stay. That will be forty-eight euros. I am Mateo.” He finished up with his book, clapped it closed and stood, offering his hand.

“We provide clean, private accommodation for the global traveler,” Matteo said, leading me through the door to his left and up a flight of creaky stairs. “We offer free weefee, private rooms with en suite baths, and television.” At the top of the stairs we arrived at another long hallway, this one with tall wooden doors running parallel down each side, eight in total. Though it had a window, this hallway was just as dark as the first, all light blocked out by the tarp hanging outside. Two small, flickering fixtures dangled from the ceiling, giving us just enough visibility to make out the numbers of each room. “Please, do not mind the construction,” Mateo said, watching me. “They do not begin work until 10 AM.”

The lights were on in almost all the rooms, but the place was silent. No guests were out, wandering the halls. My heavy boots scraped, clunked, and scuffed with every step across the tired floorboards no matter how carefully I moved.

I didn’t want to ask about Mara right away. She might have been in any of the rooms, able to easily overhear me inquiring. It might seem odd, like I was following her. I didn’t want her to get the wrong impression. This was plan B. I wasn’t a stalker, but a victim of circumstance. *She’d* given me the card. Then again, if she wasn’t staying an extra night, which she most likely wasn’t, she’d be gone in the morning before I’d even woken up. It was a puzzler.



“This is your room,” Mateo said, pulling from his pocket a jangling, old-school key chained to a piece of carved wood. “Number four. I have given you our last room with a window. You will find the weefee code on the card by the television. Have a good stay.” He unlocked the door and flipped on the light.

“Thank you, thank you—wait,” I said, catching him as he was turning. I lowered my voice. “Is there an American girl staying here on her own? Another pilgrim?”

Mateo thought for a moment. “There are two American couples at the end of the hall, and a single woman from England in four. But no, no *señor*, no American woman. Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you.” He left me, blinking in the sudden light, taking the space in. The room had a twin bed on a burnished bronze frame, a small lamp and overhead light, a boxy, ten-inch TV, a wardrobe, and a small window which opened directly onto the brick wall of the next building. Still, it was private. To me, after several nights in shared dormitories, it was perfect. I went straight for the shower.

Where could Mara be, I wondered, reveling in the steam and white noise. Was it any of my business? We’d only walked together for a few hours. We hardly knew each other. Still, I was hoping to see her again, to tell her the story of my misadventures, to get her opinion on Barb’s bar games. She’d left me with that card, told me this was where she’d be. Had that been a mistake on her part? Had she thought better of it after the fact, changed her plans to avoid risking running into me? Though I was getting that private room, en-suite experience I wanted, expecting to see her then learning she was nowhere to be found detracted from my triumph. I was keyed up for nothing and the realization that I’d allowed myself to get a little excited left me feeling foolish.

No matter, I thought, drying off. Can't be helped. On to the next thing.

Free Wi-Fi meant I had no excuse not to Skype with Kate. Nothing but my own aversion to the idea. I could lie about it, send more messages complaining about the lack of internet to shore my defenses, but eventually I'd end up stretching that line too thin. Eventually, in a big city, someone would have to have Wi-Fi. Then, it'd be clear that she was right. I was ignoring her. How she'd love proving that.

I was struck again with the thought of just breaking it off with her, of ending things there and then. She kept saying she knew I wanted out, would she be so surprised? I was thousands of miles away. What could she do once I'd turned off my phone? But how cruel could I get? We'd been seeing each other for two years. I'd even had the chance to finish with her before I left Texas and passed it by, choosing to reassure her instead. She'd trapped me, somehow. Or I'd trapped myself. Where had I picked up this pointless sense of duty? How could she possibly deserve it? Why would she even want to stick around with me, if I drove her so crazy?

Ruminating so, I got dressed again and left the room. Out on the streets, now with the knowledge of a narrow but serviceable bed waiting for me, I felt the warm sense of possibility again. My urge to walk up and down every street, watch all the people and read all the menus was renewed. I was terrifically hungry and set about ambling past every restaurant and cafe, following my nose. I decided I'd choose where to eat that night by smell alone.

In a modest tapas bar with row upon row of beautiful dishes encased in glass, I picked up a small plate of crispy suckling pig, a dish of olives and a glass of red Rioja. I was inspired to write again, sitting at a little table facing out through bay windows onto the street. I decided I

couldn't break up with Kate after she'd left our conversation on a friendly note. I wouldn't do it without cause. I'd wait until she lost control again. It couldn't be long.

Scores of people passed by outside, smiling, chatting, leading one another along through the lamplight. I watched them go, wistful. I had decided. Soon I would join them in the land of the unfettered, the casual, the functional.

I just needed a reason— one timely excuse.

When I finished eating, I walked up and down through the old town, thinking.

There was no curfew at the pensión to worry with, so I could stay out as long as I wanted. Eventually, I was drawn into a dark pub by an ad for cheap Guinness. There, I sat alone at a booth, watching a guitarist on a stage by the bar. By last call I was collected.

Getting into my bed that night, my slim, ancient, creaking bed, was well worth the money — a near perfect experience. After showering again for the warmth and novelty of it, I slept like a tired child. I lingered over nothing, so utterly unaware that I never thought to be amazed at how little I was thinking.

Undisturbed by snoring, hours stretched. After a string of halting, nervous nights of nothing, long blank spaces between fevered thoughts, I dreamed a little.

## CHAPTER 6

Outside Pamplona, I felt invigorated. Two full days of laziness, of restful exploration and thrice daily sessions writing in my notebook with my feet up in cafes and bars had done their work. Physically, I was back in form. I no longer hobbled. My muscles were quiet and my blisters had turned almost entirely to callus. Mentally, I felt more lucid and awake than I had in months. The deep sleep deficit I'd worked up since leaving Texas (and probably even in the months before) was at last at least partially paid. I was so desperately tired upon arriving in the city that when I finally found myself warm in a real bed, in a private room, even my panic was no match. I slept nearly twelve hours each night. As a result, I left town almost fit, despite having failed once again to get free of Kate. The defeat nagged at me now and then as I walked, but I shoved it down until around lunchtime. I was too rested, too healthy, to let it darken my mood so soon. The day was clear and hot, but striking. Long white wisps of cloud, like lace, moved steadily across the sky, curling in the driving wind.

The way over the hills beyond Pamplona is steep and slow going. It took me four hours of steady walking from the door of my pensión, through the streets, past the city limits, and up, before I rested, panting at the top. All along the crest of the range of hills that encircles the valley, there are dozens, possibly hundreds, of towering modern windmills. Climbing up to them, I felt like Don Quixote, advancing on an army of immense, upgraded super giants.

I paused for a while, close enough to the mills that they stretched out above me, blocking the sun like skyscrapers. There, on a heavily graffitied bench, I knocked back half a liter of water and gazed down into the valley. I allowed myself to think about Kate. Clouds sped silently above my head, an endless, soothing progression.

On the third evening in Pamplona, after forty-eight hours of intermittent worrying, recovering, and strategy development sessions, I returned to my room early. I took a full Clonazepam in preparation (I now had only one left) and positioned my tablet against a pillow on the desk, propping it upright and settling myself in the chair directly opposite. I waited half an hour, until the pill had taken effect, before calling. I looked from the little box with my pale reflection to the black space where she'd soon appear and back, counting the cutesy electronic rings. I'd texted her to let her know I'd soon be in touch, but she was slow to pick up, trying, I figured, to appear aloof. Skype, whether through glitch or by design, didn't seem to have a ring quota before labeling a call missed. Instead, it rang and rang infinitely until someone answered or the caller gave up. I was stuck stewing in panicky video-conference purgatory for a good two minutes before another face appeared on the screen beside mine.

"Hello!" she said loudly with her little voice, drawing out the O. The sound crackled and reverberated, crushed and digitized by the tinny tablet speakers. She had cut her hair, and wore a cute, loose, vaguely Scandinavian-looking shirt with red and blue threaded patterns around the chest and shoulders. She had on a subtle amount of makeup, lightly defined eyelids, brows, and lips, and had pinned her hair with a round clip made from fanned layers of brownish, sunburst-

colored feathers. She looked carefully put together, precise and misleadingly delicate. She did her best to seem sweet and happy to see me, smiling and wrinkling her nose.

“Hey, there!” I said, not sure what tone to strike. The last time we had spoken, actually had a conversation with our voices rather than our thumbs, was the night before my flights to London and Paris, that night she’d hung up on me. I’d tried explaining to her one last time why it was for the best that I was leaving, why I needed the time away, what it was like living in a constant panic attack, how both our lives might improve if I could sort myself out. She’d been inconsolable, brushing off my reasoning, insisting I was lying. She was certain I was just trying to go off on my own, to get away from her. Stuck with the fallout of her searing, mood-swing texts in the days that followed, I’d come to realize she may have been at least partially right. She and my anxiety were a package deal. I couldn’t outrun one without doing my best to avoid the other. Now here she was, expecting a healthy conversation, mutual affection and story trading. I didn’t want to hear it or participate. I hadn’t the slightest idea of what to say to her.

“How are you?” I asked after a few seconds of awkward silence.

“Oh, I’m OK,” she said, smoothing her shirt and leaning forward in her desk chair. “I’ve just been working on an essay for Art History. I’m about halfway done!”

“When’s it due?” I asked, robotic, a computerized boyfriend taking conversational cues from a template, following the flowchart of generic conversation.

“Friday,” she said with similar wooden niceness.

“Good. Good. That’s plenty of time.”

According to the plan I’d hatched the night I arrived in Pamplona, I was looking for an opportunity to get free of her. I was relying on her to be as erratic, as emotional and abusive as

usual, but she was doing me no favors. Like in her last series of texts, she wanted to steer me right past the dysfunction, to behave as if nothing was wrong between us. Her every move, every word and facial expression, seemed vetted, filtered. All theater.

We exchanged pleasantries for another twenty minutes, talked about our days, our experiences, both on our best behavior. There seemed to be a mutual understanding between us of the significance, the implications, of the conversation. I was making every effort to do or say nothing that might give her a reason to lash out, so that when she inevitably turned nasty she could have no excuse for her behavior. She, seeming to sense my strategy, remained as pointedly reasonable as possible, giving me no ammunition with which to retaliate. We were locked in a standoff, a stalemate disguised as a long-awaited catch-up, each likely as paranoid as the other. It wasn't until just before we shrugged and signed off that she made a definitive move.

She used a reference I made to writing in my journal to segue into a conversation about the future. She knew I wanted to write and was always quick to counter my interest with talk of money, of marketability. This was a tactic her father used on her, to shame her for spending her time and his resources analyzing art. "I hear museum curator is one of the fastest growing careers in the U.S. again this year," he joked humorlessly from his base of operations, spread across the living room couch in front of Fox News. "And the best part is the economy needs so many. Positions opening up so fast they don't know how to fill them. Hell, *somebody's* gotta give those tours, teach kids about the difference between Monet and Manet. Did I get that right?" She internalized those arguments, then spat them out at me a few times a month, apparently unaware of the irony of putting fire to a bridge she herself was attempting to cross.

"But you're still planning on taking the LSAT in the spring, right?" she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said, remembering Brian and Jen’s warning. “Maybe.”

“Well, if you don’t, what are you going to do after you graduate? What are you going to do for money? For food?”

This is it, I thought— a fight on the horizon. We’d been down that road before. Soon she’d be lashing me for my reckless irresponsibility. She’d be telling me how selfish, how childish I was being, gambling everything on a hobby. Just dig in and wait for the fireworks.

“Maybe I’ll write. People do that, you know, sometimes. Maybe I’ll get another degree. Do it professionally, somehow.”

I could see it in her face, the irritation, her father’s fixations.

“And then what?” she asked.

“And then, I dunno. Teach? Teach until someone buys my books?”

She paused for a second, compressing, planning her attack. For a moment she looked tensed to spring, then she relaxed, putting on that same sweet face she was wearing when she’d answered my call. This time, though, there was a steely confidence about her expression.

“That could work.” She took a breath, then softened further on cue. Her tone shifted completely without her speaking a word. She smiled at me in a simple way I hadn’t seen since our first year together. I felt suddenly unsure of myself—disarmed.

“You know, I’m your biggest supporter,” she said.

The windmills along the hilltops turned silently overhead. I had rested long enough, I needed to keep moving. I sheathed my water bottle in a side pocket of my pack and got back on the path. Sweat ran down my back.



Continuing along the Alto del Perdon, the name my guidebook gave for those steep, sun-baked hilltops, soon the Camino sloped jaggedly back downward. Uneven patches of gravel and stone made for a treacherous descent. Bent double, taking the decline like a skier breaking momentum through doglegging diagonals, I was reminded of just how absurdly heavy my backpack was. How many of the items I'd so naively stuffed it with just over a week ago did I actually need? How much of it could I safely jettison without screwing myself somewhere down the line when the requirements of the journey, the landscape, the weather, changed? I didn't know, and I didn't feel confident enough to gamble. Not knowing what I was getting into was what had caused me to overpack in the first place. Now that same ignorance had me stuck that way, fearful to cut anything, any dead weight, loose. As I picked my way slowly back down the opposite sides of hills it had taken me so long to climb, I passed several statues— monuments to pilgrims past and a handful of ominous crosses. People had died there, apparently, exhausted, over-laden, or unable to navigate the sheer angle of the path.

At the place where the decline leveled off, slowing to a gentle downhill, there stood a middle-aged man in a wide, rather silly lemon-colored sunhat, like someone from another century might wear gardening. He carried a camera, a daypack, a rectangular portable cooler slung across his shoulders, and a walking stick. Slender, and hidden beneath a beard which was not thick so much as all-encompassing, he looked like a cross between Curious George and the Man in the Yellow Hat— tall, vaguely simian, but unmistakably friendly. When I got in range of him, he dropped his cooler to the ground and pulled out a water bottle to offer me. Thirsty as usual in the inescapable sun, I was happy to pay him for something cold. I had my wallet out and was opening my mouth to negotiate when he started first.

“*Gratis,*” he said, “*gratuito. Frei.*”

Dripping sweat, with an arm stained rust-brown from clouds of dust I’d kicked up on my descent, I accepted his generosity. I took a few deep, shaky sips, leaving a ring of mud around the lip of the bottle. My face must have been covered, too. It was no wonder I seemed a worthy candidate for this mysterious Samaritan’s charity. Almost everywhere I went, people were able to tell in an instant I was struggling. One way or another, I wore the proof.

When I’d caught my breath and finished the water, I thanked the fellow again and stepped off the path to talk with him for a while. His name was Graham, a retired British professor of anthropology, and this was a tradition of his. After completing the Camino six times on his own in his forties and fifties, he’d decided, upon retiring, to give back to the pilgrimage he so enjoyed. A few times a year, he said, he set up HQ at an inn on the outskirts of Pamplona, Leon, or some other Camino-adjacent city. From there, he’d buy up water and bread and things, and wander out onto the route in search of needy pilgrims.

I was fairly floored by his generosity, his fixation. He served the Camino with an almost religious fervor, paying tithes, giving himself to the community. He could hardly contain his enthusiasm when I told him it was my first time walking. A man who looked to be in his mid to late sixties, he flickered with kinetic energy like a puppy struggling to restrain itself as he told me all about what was in store. He gestured passionately up, down and back as he spoke.

“You’re coming upon *Rioja,*” he said, pointing off across the dusty valley floor, “after the plains, you’ll see the vineyards. The wine there is quite cheap and delicious, if no one’s told you. Almost everyplace you might stay in *Rioja* has its own local variety, and they’re all too happy to

share. Take your time and relax for the next 150 kilometers. Rest and fatten yourself up. Find the wine fountain. Take plenty of naps. You'll need the energy when you reach the *Meseta*."

Thanking him for the water and the advice, I left Graham and continued down the path.

Graham yelled out after me something about the Knights Templar. Not fully understanding, I smiled and waved. It was nearly noon and the sun was stronger all the time.

Santa María de Eunate is a ghostly, picturesque church, alone in the center of miles of flat grassland. It is octagonal in structure, like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Not built by the Knights Templar, as was once assumed, but by a group calling themselves the Order of Saint John, my guidebook still pegged the building as at least nine centuries old. Probably originally used, it said, as a hospital for ancient pilgrims. In the dryness of the coming winter, the church was a small, sand-colored island of antique humanity in a sea of dead and dying brush. The wind rushed through the stone arches swooping over and encircling the cloisters which surrounded the sanctuary.

I'd walked 8.5 kilometers to get there, two of those off the route. This was a side excursion, a thing many travelers passed without noticing. After my meeting with Graham, I'd ducked into a cafe in Uterga, a medieval-looking little town with red rooftops and whitewashed walls. There, I'd purchased myself a little food and taken a look at my map and guide. It hadn't taken me long to figure out what Graham had been yelling about as I walked away and on closer inspection it looked like a worthy detour. The church operated a tiny *alburgue* within those eight-hundred-year-old walls with only enough space for eight pilgrims and a rustic meal, provided presumably by monks or the like. There was no electricity. No running water. This struck me as

romantic and intriguing. I wanted to be out there, miles away from anything, taking in the evening in silence by candlelight. I wanted to sleep beside a thousand-year-old cathedral in a room with only eight other intrepid off-routers. There was no way eight people could snore like the throngs at Roncesvalles and even Zubiri. I wasn't ready to go back to the enormous, multi-hundred-sleeping dormitories. My private room in Pamplona had ruined my appetite for that.

So I went on, through a couple of other little towns whose names I learned then immediately forgot, following the signs, waiting for my turn-off. From there, the valley floor flattened entirely, now a vast, empty plain. I was reminded, oddly, of certain bleak stretches of Texas wilderness. The scene, blank, massive, and twisting in the heat, called to mind undeveloped land outside Amarillo, Grandview, and the somewhat more aptly named Plainview. It's strange, I thought, the way the earth repeats itself. Surprisingly, there are only so many combinations. One can fly halfway around the world and still find scenes right out of one's own backyard. The deceptive familiarity of the place brought with it an irrational sense of peace.

When I arrived at Santa María de Eunáte, I found just the sort of lonely, stately, mysterious hideout I was looking for. I noticed it from a half hours' walk away, and came upon it slowly as the sun dropped and drifted west into my eyes. I slowed my pace, ambling. I couldn't see anyone else ahead of or behind me. No brightly colored packs or parkas dotted the horizon. No cloister-happy pilgrims or camera-strapped tourists orbited the church. Surely, this meant they'd have room for me in their cramped quarters. Therefore, I was upon my destination, well ahead of dinner, with no further cause to hurry. I sang a little as I walked, listening to my voice as the wind tore it from me and carried it across the plain.

As I drew closer to the church, it remained still and deserted. There was a parking lot with access to a bumpy farm road that snaked off through the grey grass back toward the previous town, but no cars. Passing through the stone gate, underneath the arches, I came upon the entrance to the octagonal sanctuary. The room was airy, impressive and simple, with tall, slender windows cut into the walls in rounded, Moorish arches. It was perfectly quiet except for the sound of the wind through the open spaces. At the back of the room, behind the eight rows of old pews, there stood an altar with a solemn red-painted saint. She towered above me, ensconced at a point where the ceiling formed a dramatic dome. I walked carefully around, feeling the rough wood of the pews, listening to my footsteps echo. There was a thick layer of fine dust that had settled on the backs of the benches which I swept up inadvertently as I made my circuit around the room. I sneezed three times with enough force to rock the first pew I could brace myself against. The sound of the pew scraping, like a rifle report, reverberated back against the stone walls with the sneezes. Feeling conspicuous, like an intruder when the motion detector lights snap on, I pawed dust from my nose. The fit had left me dripping and I needed to find a tissue, but readily available there was only stone and musty wood.

I turned, still wiping at my nose, looking for a place to clean myself up, just in time to lock eyes with an elderly gentleman dressed in plain but neatly official clothes and a name tag. He had appeared silently in the doorway to the sanctuary, his eyes bulging, his neck extended, a hermit crab whose solitude was spoiled. I startled, stepping back a pace or two, colliding loudly with my backpack against more ancient furniture. Recovering, I started to extend a hand to shake, then thought better of it, withdrawing.

*“Buenos tardes,”* the man said, a little stiffly, *“soy Leonardo.”*

“*Hola*,” I said. “*Soy*... American. This is a beautiful place you’ve got here.”

“Ah,” he said, switching languages and walking along the outskirts of the seating area.

“Yes, it is. Romanesque, of the twelfth century.” He seemed to be checking the tables along the wall where little stacks of informational literature and boxes of historical artifacts were arranged, making sure I hadn’t disturbed anything important with my bumbling. While he was distracted, I seized the opportunity, swiped a pamphlet off a stack near the door and wiped my nose. It wasn’t so effective, but it had to do. This was another deeply disturbing, embarrassing encounter. I was literally, for good reason, a snot-nosed American kid to this guy. I was mortified. Hoping to brush past this, hoping that I’d improved my appearance somewhat, I followed him, asking a few polite questions. He answered in grunts, nods, and shakes, as he made his rounds.

Presently, he finished his sweep, and walked out into the sunlight with me at his heels.

“I see you are on the Camino,” he said, referencing my luggage. “Very young to be on your own, no?” (By which he meant to say, “Where are your parents? Why are you unattended, child?” I didn’t blame him. Even for me, that entrance was rough.)

“Yes, perhaps,” I said, accompanying him through the cloisters and over to the door of a slightly more modern building, perhaps only two or three-hundred years old, which stood off to the side of the church beside the bare parking lot. “I’m nineteen.”

“Humph,” he said, standing beside the door and staring off down the path back toward Pamplona, hoping someone older might soon arrive to rescue him from me.

“And do you mean to stay the night here?” he asked, narrowing his eyes and looking directly at me for the first time since ambushing me in post-sneeze confusion.

“I was hoping,” I began, losing enthusiasm for the plan even as I spoke. This crusty fellow would be no treat to spend an evening with. No pleasant, educational or philosophical chats were indicated in our future. Still, I’d walked a mile off the beaten path to get there. I wanted the night I’d been promising myself.

He cut me off. “You see, we have only eight beds for pilgrims here,” he said.

“Yes, so I read, but I thought—”

“And many of the pilgrims we receive here are elderly. They do not have the, uh, *vigor* of a young man like you.”

“Oh, I— alright. I don’t mean to—”

“They arrive in the evenings, as it takes them longer to travel from Pamplona. We like to allow room for those that cannot go further. Those that need it most, yes?”

I took a look around the place. There was still no one else in sight, no one as far as I could see across the dead grasslands, no cars chugging down the farm road. It was beautiful, austere, and empty. I still wanted to see what it was like to be there at sunset, at dark, but I could tell it wasn’t going to happen. This guy was going to do everything short of booting me off the step with one of his knobby, sandaled claws to get rid of me. Perhaps there was some validity to his reasoning, though. The place *was* once a hospital. Perhaps the weakest on the road came straggling in just before dinnertime, bruised and broken—a hoard of citizens senior enough to pass this Leonardo’s entrance exam. It didn’t matter anymore. No place was worth staying when you were not wanted.

“So it might be best for you to continue on,” Leo said, wrapping up, straightening and reaching for the knob to let himself into the out-building. “To allow room, yes?”

“Yes,” I said firmly, “You’re right. I *can* make it to the next place.”

“*Bueno*,” he said, pulling open the door and stepping over the threshold.

“One moment, please,” I said, following him in. “Before I go...” He turned to give me a academically exasperated look, impatiently adjusting the tuck of his shirt in his khakis. I heaved down my pack and withdrew my little pilgrim’s booklet. “...could I get a stamp?”

The village of Obanos sits on a hillside at a point where the flat plains beyond Pamplona break into green and brown patchwork farms and rolling bluffs. It is medieval in appearance, with gothic architecture. Not generally the town where most guidebooks would have you stay, it is also a fairly quiet spot after sundown.

Though hot in the day, by nightfall a chill had descended.

Arriving at half past five, I’d taken an open spot in the only *alburgue* in town, a private place with thirty-six beds. It looked like they were almost at capacity, but in comparison to the nearly 200 full beds in Roncesvalles, this was nothing. People were tired, for the most part, reading and murmuring quietly in close-knit groups. It was warm in the *alburgue*, and fairly cozy, stuffed in with bunks and blankets beneath a remarkably low ceiling. (I’d nabbed myself a bottom bunk for this reason. It looked like you could break a nose waking up under that thing.)

I stayed there until it was completely dark outside, reading by the blue light of my tablet. This was my new strategy for shutting out the anxiety, the Kate questions: walk briskly all day, then read every hour I wasn’t sleeping or eating. I was going to throw myself into the habit like an addict. She could come out to play with my subconscious only when I during idle hours. Perhaps then I could look at things more rationally. I’d lost my bearings.



When I reached a stopping place and saw that I was nearly the only one not yet out to dinner, I packed away my things and went out into the night. There were a couple of small cafes nearby and I walked around outside them, sizing them up. I went to the quieter of the two, and, finding no room inside, installed myself on an open patio facing the street. It was cold, so I stayed bundled up in my jacket and two layers of shirts throughout a dinner of vinegar-dressed salad and thin strips of salty beef.

“You know, I’m your biggest supporter,” Kate said, matter-of-factly like this was obvious, common knowledge. “You’re smart and talented and I’m so lucky. I’ve always been your biggest fan. If you want to be a writer, I’ll be there for you. Don’t go to law school if you don’t want to. I love you and I want you to succeed.”

It was too much. There I was, waiting for her to do what she did best, to start indiscriminately lobbing insulting/traumatic conversational explosives (aimed at herself as often as me), and she lays *that* on me. That greeting card crap. Too much. I just couldn’t buy it. Couldn’t square it with the accumulation of awful, undercutting things she’d been saying *in vino* five or six times a month for the last year. In the moment, I was stunned, mouth dry, nearly stuttering—the wind knocked out of me. Still, I couldn’t help doubting myself. Was she being genuine? Could she be? I laughed a little for lack of a better response, trying to recalibrate.

Here was that phantom issue again: Was I the problem? Had I been misreading her all along, not giving her enough slack, misinterpreting her behavior? Had I blown her contempt for me up in my imagination? Was I overreacting to understandable spikes in her behavior brought

on by the depression she'd already acknowledged, claimed she was working through? Was I, a victim myself, at least to some degree, of mental illness, not being reasonable?

“Uhm...t-thanks?” I got out, finally, after a few sputtering misfires. Had she known I was close to a breaking point? I couldn't tell paranoia from reasonable suspicion.

“I wanted you to know that I realize I've been cruel to you,” she continued, getting into the swing of things, building, gauging my reaction. “I've taken out my insecurities on you and I know that's not right. You don't deserve that and I'm sorry.”

Good lord, I thought, she's quick.

On that patio in Obanos, after my meal had come and gone and I was left alone with the wine, I couldn't help but go over the conversation in my mind. She had countered me masterfully, reset the board entirely. I was back where I started with her— stranded someplace between affection and disdain. She had taken all my ammunition, left me in a place where any offensive movement would be seen as cold and uncalled for. If I ended things after that display, it'd be all over campus what a callous bastard I was long before I ever made it back stateside. She'd have everyone that would listen poisoned against me with stories of how I'd ignored her heartfelt apology, her declaration of support, only to drop her over Skype. Not only that, but she had succeeded in sowing doubt in me. I didn't know where we stood anymore. She'd infected me, against all my logic, with a foolish, irrational thought: things *could* still improve. She'd weaponized her previous self— the one whose hooks were somehow still in me.

I didn't know if it was right to keep waiting for a chance to end things, but I did know that the thought of speaking to her, even at her most pleasant, still filled me with immutable

dread. No sudden flashes of niceness could wipe that out. Now, though, that dread seemed just as much linked to my perception of myself. If I was the bad guy after all, what legs did I have to stand on in defense of myself? Maybe I was the one who needed to change.

Maybe, whatever. I poured out the last of the wine. The debate was so muddled, so full of curves and contradictions I could no longer follow it. I would just have to wait it out. Read lots more. Do a little thinking in my downtime, and generally keep cool and on the sidelines, hoping a solution would reveal itself. It seemed very unlikely that things would stay rosy between us for long. Provided I could be my best, my most attentive and inoffensive, I would theoretically know, if problems arose, that they were rooted in something beyond my behavior. As a new plan, this seemed sound enough. I wouldn't go looking for trouble, expecting the worst. I would try to clear my mind. To reevaluate.

The restaurant was beginning to clear. All the more responsible, early-to-bed types had slipped away while I was finishing my last glass of wine, leaving only the young and the hoping to appear young. There were six men a few years older than me dressed in cycling attire crowded along the bar inside. Near them were two trios, the first made up of college-aged Germans loudly *ja*-ing about this and that around a graveyard of empty bottles, the next a cluster of scruffy, late-middle-aged men in oversized, quick-dry safari outfits. But for one of the Germans, there were no women left in the bar, all having apparently vacated to a quieter locale after the safari gentlemen ordered their eighth round of drinks. It was a sharp move on their part. The older men, all tan, vaguely reflective fabric, spittle and swishing sleeves, were raising their voices sentence by the sentence. They cackled and cursed as if challenging each other, as if testing the limits of sound itself. At first, as I entered the room, their conversation was just noise, a wheeling tide

from which I could drag no discernible words or accents, but gradually as I stood there adjusting to the light and warmth, I understood: They were Australians.

I'd been still in the doorway for too long. One of the Australians, a man sporting a Father Time white beard, a knit cap and a remarkably red nose, had spotted me. He pushed off from his place, leaning low against a wall by the corner of the room and pitched my way. As he went, his friends' heads snapped around to watch, their eyes raw and blinking.

"Hul-hullo, how ya goin', m-my young friend?" he said from the front of his throat, as if struggling to suppress acid-reflux, "Ya drinkin'?"

I looked over at the cyclists, the Germans. Either group would be preferable to the one this dribbling fellow was currently attempting to shepherd me toward by the bicep. Dinner had only just finished. These old bastards had driven most everyone out far earlier than usual, giving the place the misleading appearance of a bar at closing. That meant I had time to extricate myself a little later. Maybe there would still be people worth talking to hanging around after that. Until then, I decided, too tired to resist, I'd just observe, a studious outsider, like Jane Goodall.

"You'll drink with us, you will indeed," Outback Father Time was saying, leading me over to his friends who all waved and jeered as we approached.

"This is Keith," he said, jerking a stubby pink thumb toward a slightly younger fellow, perhaps in his mid-fifties, who sported shaggy sideburns, a pack-away fishing hat and red aviator sunglasses, worn indoors. "And this here is Kevin," he continued, jabbing at the other man, a fat, bald fellow in a khaki vest with two dozen bulging pockets. "Kevin's a sick fucker," he said, congratulatory, slapping the thick fellow on the back. "And I'm Lachlan, in the flesh."

"Tex— Tex Magillicutty. It's an honor," I said, shaking his sticky hand.

“What’ll you have?” Lachlan asked.

“Beer’ll do fine, thank you,” I said and he left me alone with his goons.

“Ow old are you, Tex, mate?” Keith asked, rocking in his chair like a transfixed cobra.

“Twenty-seven,” I said, not quite making eye contact, staring off toward the bar. I waited tensely for Lachlan to return and take the reins of the conversation while Keith analyzed me feverishly. Kevin, the sick fucker, belched in disbelief.

“You don’t, don’t look so— You’re really twenty seven? You look about half that.”

“Oh no, I’ve heard that before, believe me. All my life they’ve said that. Nelson’s Syndrome, they call it. B. F. Nelson. I always look about a decade younger than I actually am. It’s a rare medical condition and I’d thank you not to bring it up.”

The two men regarded me seriously, their mouths slightly agape. Keith helped the moment land for a second as he worked out how to proceed, adjusted his aviators, then went bravely on. “Righto, yes, no worries, mate. Didn’t mean nothin by it. We’ve all got our troubles. And anyway, you’re out here. Walking. On your own. Hang on— you fly on your own?”

“I’m 27, of course I fly on my own,” I said, arching my eyebrows and doing my best to flash my eyes angrily. “I may look like it, but I’m not just *some kid*. I fly everywhere. First class. Do walking tours on every continent. I’m writing a book.”

“Right, yeah, sorry, mate,” Keith said, raising his palms. Kevin eyed me wetly like a bullfrog. He did not look like he was buying it. He leaned across the table gathering his thoughts.

“Nelson’s Syndrome,” Keith said, ignoring my warning and continuing callously to remind me of my ailments. “But, hang on— what about when you were *ten* years ol—”

Lachlan arrived just in time. My original plan to quietly observe had fallen apart almost immediately. Those room-clearing old windbags were so soused, I couldn't help myself. They might be good practice, anyway, if I ever got a chance to mingle with Barb and her unfortunates.

“So, young fella, ow you goin’?” Lachlan asked again, setting a tall pint in front of me and taking a seat at my side. “What brings you here?” Drunk or not, this was typical pilgrim song-and-dance. The patterns were inescapable.

“E’s writing a book!” Kevin said, his speech not far removed, sonically, from his belches.

“Is that right, now?” Lachlan asked, wiping suds from his mouth and stroking them into his long white beard like soap. “And what do you know that’s worth writing about?” This was a tricky moment. It was hard to identify what the various expertises of this motley band of 8 o’clock inebriates might be. I wanted no thorough interrogation.

“Structuralist readings of twelfth century Spanish literature,” I said. If even I didn’t know what I was on about, I figured, this crowd couldn’t possibly. What the Spanish wrote about during the twelfth century, I hadn’t a notion. Regardless, my time at Santa María de Eunate had left the era on my mind. Based on limited experiences gathered that afternoon, I could only guess they might have discussed masonry, wood carving, farming, whatever passed for medicine back then and the usual local rumblings concerning the unlikely exploits of saints. What would Lévi-Strauss have to say about about all that? Then again, what did he have to say about anything?

“Eh?” Lachlan said, more beer dripping down his beard.

“Right, eh?” said Keith, fiddling with his red glasses again.

“You know, seeking to understand the ways in which the, uh, culture— affected, the um, you know, the ways in which Spaniards in that century produced their...art and things.”

“Like, how they built their structures?” asked Kevin, getting interested.

“Sort of, Kevin. Sort of. More like, say, an analysis of the influence the whole Christian/Muslim trouble they were having back then had on the shape of their...arches.”

“Oh,” they all said, looking nonplussed. That did it. The conversation soon turned to more interesting things. Lachlan, who had apparently been on the Camino twice before, began regaling us with tales from pilgrimages prior. Namely, how he’d gotten himself thrown out of a monastery in Astorga for drunkenly mistaking a confessional for a public toilet. I finished my beer quickly as he talked and excused myself during the delivery of the monk’s punchline.

“Oy, Tex, where ya headed?” Lachlan called after me as I rounded the bar.

“Cheers, folks,” I said. “Thanks for the beer. Give me a minute. I’m gonna circulate.”

The German student-types were gone, but through the door I could see the cyclists sitting around a low, wooden picnic table, laughing. They appeared to be drinking something, but I couldn’t see what it was. The urgency with which I sought to get away from the loud Australians and the drinks dampened my usual aversion to chatting up strangers. I walked right over to them.

They were Basques, I soon learned. Basques! It was just as Jake, the Prophet of the Right St. Jean had foretold: Australians and Basques, looking to party. I was living the parable. As advised by the wise man in the big hat, I avoided those Australians for the rest of the night, and celebrated with the Basques. This proved lucky, as the Australians were reportedly later ejected from the bar after Kevin, the sick fucker, allegedly spit up on the barkeep.

It was wine the Basques were drinking. Wine stored in leather skins shaped like fire bellows. They held them two feet above my head and shouted for me to drink.

After an hour and a change of location, an emissary, the tallest, quietest of the Basques was sent back to the bar to get bottles of beer to go. The rest of us talked and played music on little portable speakers in the cyclists' otherwise empty private *alburgue*— a cozy, appealing space consisting of six rickety bunks in a red brick building, wrapped around a little metal obstacle course with a fire pit and an attached kitchen. The tall fellow arrived, teetering with a dozen little bottles, ten minutes later. He hadn't seen the Australians, he said after telling us their story. They had wandered off, but the usual woman behind the bar was still in the bathroom scrubbing herself. He bought the beer off a boy who looked no older than ten who must have been the victim's son.

I stayed up talking with them, trying to fine-tune my plan for the road ahead. My hosts were full of advice, but I hadn't brought my notebook. I had to hold it all in my head— all the names of places I'd never heard in heavy accents made heavier by several gallons of alcohol. Eventually, I gave up and instead we talked without focus. I lost track of myself. Hours passed.

I stood for a moment, suddenly aware, beside the unlit fire pit, staring at my phone, hearing drowsy laughter inside. The tall fellow whispered at my elbow, slurring.

“Well, Tex? You going to do it?”

To my horror, I heard Kate's voice on the line, talking fast.

I couldn't remember what I'd said or what I'd been planning. I closed my phone and lumbered off the property, unable to speak for fear I'd lose my dinner.



I found my own *alburgue* locked tight, with every door and window latched and accounted for. I couldn't make a fuss. I'd wake everyone. By the time I returned to their little brick building, the Basques had closed their doors, too.

Half asleep, gear-less and in crisis, I wandered the empty streets of Obanos until I passed through a medieval stone gate into a small park beside a church. There, glad for the moment I was nearing the Meseta, I was tolerably warm between some bushes and a whirring electric generator. I slept sporadically for three hours until just before six.

When I saw first light, I rose to retrieve my pack and buy as much water as I could carry.