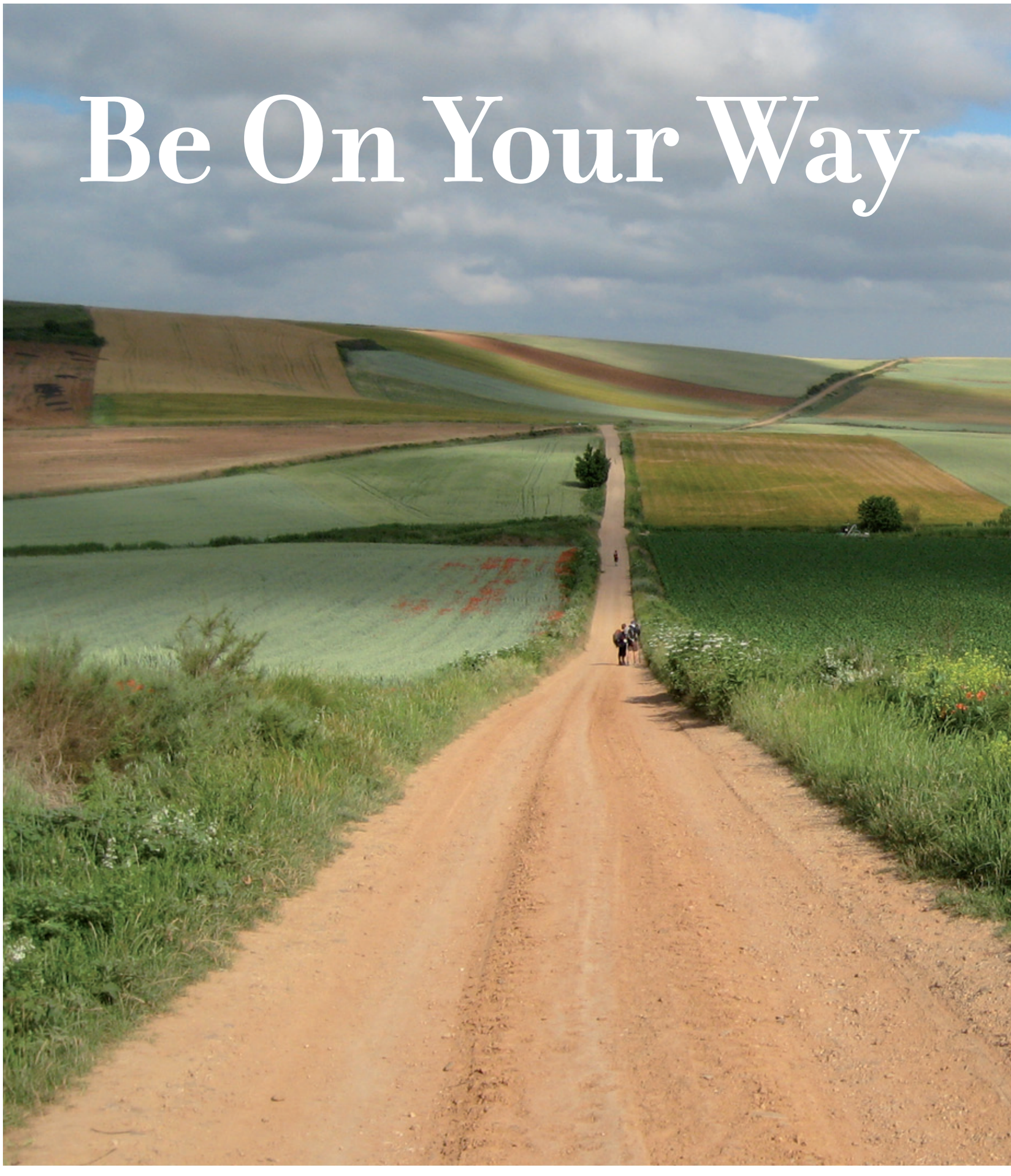
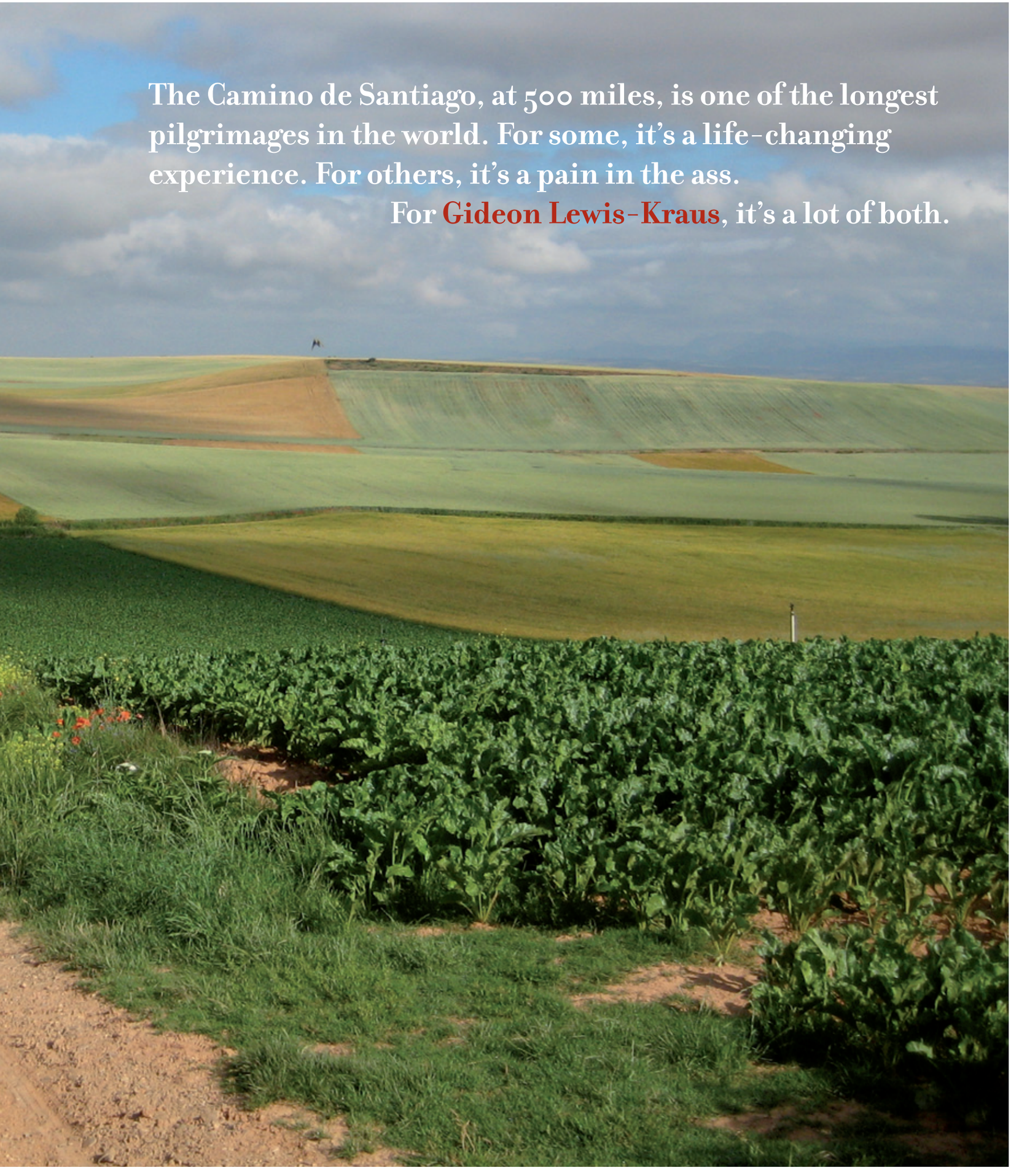
Be On Your Way





The Camino de Santiago, at 500 miles, is one of the longest pilgrimages in the world. For some, it's a life-changing experience. For others, it's a pain in the ass.

For Gideon Lewis-Kraus, it's a lot of both.

ALL PHOTOS BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

THURSDAY 11 JUNE
DEPART: St. Jean Pied de Port, France 07h10
ARRIVE: Roncesvalles, Spain 16h50
24.8 km (15.4 mi)

On the first morning of our walk across Spain we rise a few minutes after six to fog settling heavily into the valley. John Brierley's *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago: A Practical & Mystical Manual for the Modern-Day Pilgrim*, with which we would soon develop a complicated and hostile relationship, warns against what he calls the hard path in inclement weather. The hard path goes over a high pass through the Pyrenees. The easier path follows the valley, along the road to the border post. We imagine ourselves as the sort of pilgrims who take the hard path, regardless of the weather.

We look out the inn window and figure the fog will burn off. The fog will not burn off.

My pack weighs eighteen pounds; Tom's pack is twice that. He insists he has packed light: a four-quart Ziploc of individual Crystal Light packets, six books (more than one of them clothbound), and nothing but long pants. He will do the first weeks of the Camino in jeans before he rigs up some shorts with camouflage cargo pants and a steak knife. St. Jean Pied de Port is the last town in France, a kitschy village hawking shoddy walking sticks and garlands of cured meats, and it's nearly empty as we trudge through the arch of departure, off the cobbles, and straight uphill. The mist provides a visibility of fifteen to twenty feet. The difficult route is allegedly also the beautiful one, with stunning panoramas of the Pyrenees. For the rest of the walk, when we commiserate with other pilgrims about this day's difficulty, they will remind us that the climb was well rewarded by the views. We will see no views.

We've walked for five minutes and at last there's a single pilgrim a few yards ahead of us, just at the point the trail evaporates. We are encouraged that at least one other person is unafraid of the weather, the fleecy vapor, the difficult route. We suspect we will see few people today. We are gracious in our understanding of their decisions to take the easier route, or to wait out the bad weather. After ten minutes we take our first break.

A bit farther up the hill, after our second or third break, we pass an old woman. She makes her steady way up with ski poles. We pause and she passes us. We won't see her again. Over the next half hour, pilgrims begin to fall in on the trail below, which is to say they consistently and without great effort overtake us. They are overtaking us in droves. There is a great calm democracy of pilgrims passing us. There are far more people than we'd imagined and they are all passing us. If there is one thing to which we must accustom ourselves today, besides the chill and the grade and the bags, mine of appropriate weight, Tom's otherwise, it is the rhythmic buttocks of old people as they stroll out of our visibility.

We can see a narrow skirt of grass on either side of the trail, no more. Before us the path rises indefinitely. It rises indefinitely, but it definitely rises. We take a break. An ancient Irishman passes us and says, by way of sympathy, "The road, she's not your friend." We take a break, stare into the fog caping the Pyrenees. Tom says this isn't a race.

We climb what, if we could see more than seven feet ahead of us, would likely be identifiable as a sheer rock face. Now here's Fabrizio. Fabrizio is a breezily healthy Italian who's been walking for four weeks, since Le Puy, one of the major medieval pilgrim hubs. Originally the pilgrim was supposed to begin walking at his own doorstep; few people do that now. A slightly larger group starts in

Paris, or Le Puy, or Arles. Many more start where we did, just over the border. The vast majority begin somewhere farther along the line in Spain. We will spend much of our walk feeling sorry for the people of this final category, who believe they are doing the Camino de Santiago.

Tom asks Fabrizio, who seems lonely, why he's doing the Camino. I haven't yet decided if this is too forward a question. Fabrizio said he did it last year, too, and that it's good to clear the mind and cleanse the blood. He makes a squeegee motion that apparently pantomimes dialysis. He says he's going to study philosophy in Bologna in the fall. Tom laughs, then apologizes. Tom has a dim view of Italians. Just off the path there's the irregular kicking of ghosted haunches. Invisible sheep bleat. The view, on any other day, must be spectacular. Fabrizio, ruddy in the bleachy brume, is apparently not lonely enough to condescend to our pace. He says "Buen Camino" and disappears into a cloud ahead.

Tom is writing a book about the twelve apostles, and this walk will be the subject of his last chapter. In the year 813 AD the bones of someone identified as St. James the Greater were found in a village near Santiago de Compostela, and from those bones flowered this pilgrimage. Tom and I were on a four-day jag a few months back, when I visited him in Tallinn, Estonia, and I guess I agreed to come along with him across Spain. I do not recall this specifically but I take Tom's word for it. For the last four or five years Tom has been itinerant—moving from New York to Saigon to Rome to Vegas and then, for no apparent reason, to Tallinn—and he's looking at the Camino as a final jaunt before he settles into a routine and a job in the States. I've been in Berlin, on and off, for a few years, and of late have been finding life lacking in general purpose. I liked the idea of five weeks of confident direction. Tom and I have known each other for the better part of a decade but it's all been primarily epistolary. Until my trip to Tallinn, which neither of us remembers much of, we'd never spent more than a few hours together at a time.

We are being passed by people who slept until noon. We stop and eat some chorizo. The sausage is pulpy and a garish blood red. We are the wardens of a narrow interval where faster pilgrims pass through a visible space between mists. People emerge behind us, wave as they pass, say "Buen Camino," merge again into the fog in front of us. Tom has begun to develop blisters. I take his pack for a while. It is crushingly heavy. We cross the border into Spain.

We look like a staggered army in slow uphill retreat from some distant campaign. There are brief moments of real equanimity, even on this first day. More frequent are moments of pain and worry.

We achieve the top of the pass through the mountains after about nine hours. According to the

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is writing a Camino- and Tom-inspired book about purpose, restlessness, and pilgrimage.

helpful, demeaning signage, this ascent ought to have taken a little more than five. The green hills of Navarre lope below us, dotted with trees. We rest above a deep slow cascade of cloud. At first we say we're looking forward to a beer at the end of the day but then we think maybe we won't drink any alcohol during the walk. We are prepared for some privation.

On the long and shady downhill we aren't passed by anyone. It is late in the day and there is no one left to pass us. Everyone who might have passed us has already successfully done so. Roncesvalles, at the bottom of the path, is a one-monastery hill town. The *albergue* is some sort of converted chapel, a severe vessel of chill gray stone with a few hundred bunk beds in an aisled grid. We enter to sounds of soft Gregorian chant. There's a sanctimonious but not unpleasant air of reflection. We walk up to the bar across from the albergue and there's a small convention of people who've passed us. They've been here for hours, maybe days. There's a short twentysomething Irishman who looks up from his beer and asks what took us so long; he's been sitting here long enough to get drunk. We say we took a nice long break in the sun at the top of the pass. It's not strictly a lie. He sneers and right away we dislike him. Soon we will give him the cruel nickname Lucky Charms. After a few weeks we will relent and call him Tim. Ten days after the end of the Camino the three of us will be hanging out in a gay bar in Paris.

Distance walked thus far: 24.8 km; distance left to Santiago: 769.2 km.

FRIDAY 12 JUNE

DEPART: Roncesvalles 06h50
ARRIVE: Zubiri 14h20
22.2 km (13.7 mi)

At six the lights go on in the albergue and the activity is instant. Pilgrims leap from their bunk beds and begin to rustle fabric with quiet intensity. People rustle whatever fabrics are available to them: sleeping bags, towels, bandannas. We slept deeply, with strange dreams, and were woken periodically by a death-bulletin of a snore. On the trail a German couple will report that they didn't sleep at all. The woman says straight-facedly, of the snoring, that it was like being in Hell. This is the first religious reference we've heard.

There is a crowd outside the albergue; it looks as though they're holding a colloquium on passing us. Everybody seems to know each other already. We leave right away so we can do them all the favor of making it possible to overtake us. We set off past a SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA 790 KM sign (the walking path is apparently a little shorter than the road) and join a lightly wooded natural trail. We'd gone to bed wondering if we'd be able to walk at all in the morning but it's before seven and cool outside and we're both in high spirits. We achieve even better spirits when we pass an Asian trio, our first successful advance.

At a Basque village, after walking along an old road cut between the bald foothills of the Pyrenees and some lowland pastures, we sit and wait for the local panadería to open. Sturdy whitewashed houses of prim stucco block out the town. The Basques are a stupid-fonted people. There appears to be a national font, mostly distinguished by its crowned A. Tom describes it as a tiki-torch Brady-Bunch-goes-to-Hawaii end-credits font.

Pilgrims follow the trail of blue-and-yellow scallop shells set into walls and bollards. Tricky corners have spray-painted yellow arrows. Tom and I rise up out of the village and talk about an acquaintance's suicide. We argue and then talk about women. We doubt we'll ever run out of things to talk about.

Our pace is assumed by Ben, a twenty-three-year-old Belgian who's hitchhiked from a town near Ghent. It took him two days to hitchhike to St. Jean. We tell him that in America when you hitchhike you either get murdered by or end up murdering the driver; it's always a tense contest. He makes a face expressing his deep pity for Americans, who live in a land where hitchhiking and murder are two sides of a coin.

Tom asks him why he's doing the Camino and Ben says because his mom did it and his brother did it and it's cheap and you meet a lot of different people from all over the place. We walk between two fences and a little riot of newborn sheep. Ben is agreeable and stays with us despite our relaxed pace.

There are two main strategies for walking the Camino, I say. The first way is to walk quickly but take frequent or long breaks. The second way is to walk slowly but take short breaks. Our way is to walk slowly and take frequent, long breaks.

Once, I go on, I was watching a television show called *Man vs. Beast* for which they'd arranged a footrace between a man and a zebra. The first color commentator said that the man's strategy would have to be to run as fast as he possibly could. The second color commentator, Carl Lewis, responded that the zebra's strategy had to be to *realize that it was in a race.* Tom objects to this

parable. He says it's not a race. Within two weeks Tom will be repeating what we come to call the parable of the zebra to a heavyset Irishwoman. She will listen patiently and tell him it's not a race.

We descend a dirt path along a rocky hill, high above a road in a ravine on our left. The sunlight splashes cool and messy between the conifers. The trail is easier today and I'm finding more of these moments of equanimity, but otherwise the walk does feel slightly overwhelming in its pointlessness. For medieval pilgrims, the point was clear: successful completion of the pilgrimage granted a plenary indulgence, relief from temporal punishment in purgatory. But for us, and for the other secular pilgrims—which is to say almost all of them, as we'll only ever meet three or four people doing the Camino for religious reasons—there's not even a pretext of such ecclesiastical grace. We are just borrowing the purposes of the religious; we are joining a ritual absent belief. This is a journey with some historical expectation of transformation, and we vaguely hope there's some share of that for the secular. We have chosen this as an obligation.

Tom says, "Each day so far has been a different path toward extraordinary pain." Tom has three main problems. One is that he bought his boots two weeks ago and thought some sidewalk flânerie was sufficient for breaking-in purposes. The second is that his bag is probably the single heaviest one we will encounter on the entire Camino. The third is that he has spent the last five months sequestered in his home town of Escanaba, Michigan, researching and writing a book about video games, and the most convenient foodstuff nearby was the homemade sugar cookies, three for a dollar, at the gas station next door. We stop and he takes off his boots and his right upper heel is gone; in its place is a wide jagged tear of red, almost more blister than foot. I take Tom's pack. He refuses, at first, says that I'm only doing this so I can represent myself later as a hero.

We have now read enough of the guidebook to fantasize about meeting, and concussing, its author. John Brierley's book has maps and practical information for each stage—he has broken up the walk into thirty-three stages, one for every year of Jesus's life—but it's also a daily compendium of treacly, self-righteous meditations on the spiritual transformation this walk is supposed to inspire. Many of these meditations describe Brierley getting furious with someone—on the trail, in an albergue—and later weeping with regret. He brags about his weeping. One day he's drawing a picture of a stork and starts weeping. Another day he meets an incarnation of the devil and, of course, starts weeping. A third day he refuses to stay in some shepherd's hut and then finds that the albergue is full and has to walk seven more kilometers and starts weeping. We're surprised he had any time to walk, given all the weeping.

It's very hot for the first time and the long descent into Zubiri is all loose stones and no shade. Tom and Ben compare blisters competitively. We are in tremendous pain. We wonder if we are in for gradual strengthening or complete degeneration. We arrive in Zubiri, a few miles short of Brierley's recommended walk for the day, and skip the albergue in favor of a hotel.

Total distance walked: 47 km; distance left to Santiago: 747 km.

SATURDAY 13 JUNE

DEPART: Zubiri 08h00
ARRIVE: Pamplona 15h00
21.9 km (13.6 mi)

Last night Tom put the television on but nothing was in English; he settled on some Basque anime, then a Basque reality show that was either about artisanal furniture or separatist politics. We spent some time tending to his feet. I placed bandages over his toe and heel, and as I stood up from the bed I stomped on his other foot, which until then had been pretty much okay.

At some point we permanently removed a small handful of things from Tom's pack, but in the morning he has second thoughts and replaces them while I'm in the shower. It's already hot by eight and our feet hurt before we're out of tiny Zubiri. We talk about a person's potential for change.

The day passes in uneventful narrow-path walking and dull unlocalized pain. My feet hurt with the pressure of each footfall but I lack Tom's large-scale macerations. We stop along a low stone wall in the shade of a village and Tom removes his boot to find that the bandages have slipped and taken most of the skin underneath with them. His right heel looks partially digested. We eat sandwiches of local Basque duck pâté and a soft sheep cheese with tomatoes.

All the people we see on the trail today are forty-seven-year-old women. By the third day, it seems, one has fallen in with those of one's own pace, and our colleagues in pace are forty-seven-year-old women of all nationalities. Tom fears that this trip will mark the end of his youth, and our colleagues in pace seem to confirm this. I have not planned on the end of my youth arriving for some years yet.

The path curls around a hillside above a camouflage-green river and here and there we see pilgrims along its banks, soaking their feet. We cross the river and come to our first major road; the Camino follows it for about six hundred meters of awful shock. It's very hot, hotter on the asphalt. It's impossible to imagine being in a car, traveling at the speed of car toward Pamplona, the approach to which will take us most of the rest of the day. In a car it would take ten minutes. Tom tells me if I weren't around he'd take a bus. He says he's in pain and it's not a race and he's not doing this for spiritual reasons and he wouldn't feel at all bad about it.

I say that I can't imagine what I'd do in a car, how I'd relate to the landscape. Tom says that he knows what he'd do, he'd pay a lot more attention to it. We leave the road and descend into a valley and I note wheat. Tom says, "That's wheat?" We discuss strategies of flora-naming, how it's an easy way of establishing credibility; it makes you seem like the sort of ruggedly trustworthy guy who could survive in the woods. We talk about religious credibility. Tom's book about the apostles is a look at the early stories of Christianity, the stories the faith told as it was building and refining its authority.

A crowd of Basques are barbecuing kabobs and we realize it's a Saturday. How odd it is that these Basques are out grilling on a hot June Saturday and we're just walking by on our way across their country. This becomes even stranger as we recross the river into the northern suburbs of Pamplona. The Basques, of course, don't think it's all that strange; they've been barbecuing and watching pilgrims walk by for a thousand years. But what we are doing is so perpendicular to the routines and anxieties of the everyday, it's hard to feel as though we're really occupying the same plane. I am endlessly curious about what they make of us. Every time I see a window, or a porch, that looks out over the trail, I wonder what someone sitting there day after day thinks of the pilgrim's decision to abandon the errands of home.

The trail is marked by a series of graffiti'd yellow arrows, hastily painted high up on drainspouts and occasionally on the pavement itself, directing an open secret of a route through the city, a route that has nothing to do with the city's own purposes, that in fact looks at the city itself as a brief and possibly dangerous interruption of a longer way. Brierley has a sodomitical view of cities; he warns of thief warrens. We

follow the riddle of arrows through the suburbs, limping along. A man enters a florist's to buy some potting soil and there, on the sidewalk in front of him, are we, walking across his country.

Tom says he is at the edge of losing his temper. I am, too. For the first time we disobey the yellow arrows. We are borderline catatonic. It is hard to think of anything that does not ache, anything that has not had too much sun. And on top of it we abandon our pilgrims' community for the luxury of a boutique hotel, even though Tom can't get us a room with a view of the plaza. We eat Chinese food at a restaurant-cum-brothel. This walk is more difficult than either of us had anticipated.

Total distance walked: 68.9 km; distance left to Santiago: 725.1 km.

SUNDAY 14 JUNE

REST: Pamplona

We are at a loss. The idea of walking around this city, a city of no insignificant charm, where there is surely much to see and to do, is at odds with the pure idea of pointless walking. We drift into Susan, a woman from San Francisco, and join her for lunch. Tom asks how she feels about Brierley, whether she hates him. "I don't get emotionally involved with the authors of guidebooks," she says. She asks us why we're doing the Camino and we admit that the only sound reason we've come up with so far is weight loss. We check email.

Total distance walked: 68.9 km; distance left to Santiago: 725.1 km.

MONDAY 15 JUNE

DEPART: Pamplona 06h20
ARRIVE: Puente la Reina 14h45
27.1 km (16.8 mi)

We rise at five thirty with a sense of shame and urgency—we feel bad about the nice hotel when everybody else is in the albergue—and follow the arrows out of the city. A light rain is falling but it feels good to be walking again, especially in the city's dawn pallor. Tom says that if he'd lived here growing up he would've done nothing but paint fake yellow arrows. We look forward to the new cohort we'll presumably be joining today, after our day off. Given that nobody except Ben really took to us we are forced to assume we had a dud cohort. The scenery

upon leaving Pamplona, a soft winding rise to a steep windmill-sentried ridge that looks out onto a vast sub-Pyrenean plain, makes it easy to imagine we've made a break from Pamplona's restlessness and email compulsions.

There are ruins in the middle distance, light stone in a field of lime-shaded early wheat, here and there little sad vermilion bursts of poppy.

Atop the ridge we're hailed by the first Americans our age we've met, Aaron and Anna, who won't, by the end of the day, like us. We take to them in the way naive co-nationals do, and make our way down the hill in idle where-are-you-from why-are-you-doing-this exchanges.

We stop to observe a rather large beetle eating some grass in the middle of the trail. Two Spanish women stop to look. One of them blithely says "¡Tarantula!" Tom asks what the word is for the study of insects. Anna says "Entomology." Tom says, "That woman was one of the most entomologically ignorant people I've ever met." It's nice to have this audience for a while. In retrospect it will seem clear why Anna and Aaron didn't like us. We are, as far as the general tenor of the Camino goes, on the argumentative side.

Tom tells Anna and Aaron a story about the difference between St. James the Greater and St. James the Lesser, or the Younger or the Tinier, and they seem surprised by his command of apostolic legend. I'm trying not to listen, one of my goals of the Camino being to maintain my apostolic ignorance. We stop for bocadillos and Tom reads a passage out of Brierley about Christ and Mammon.

He's interrupted by a heavyset Swede who's doing the Camino for the second time and has a lot to say about spirituality and, more importantly, about weight loss. She's holding a bocadillo de jamón, Spain's signature condimentless ham sandwich, and says she lost fifteen pounds last time. Her bocadillo is the size of a cinderblock. She warns us that when you get to the end you need to say you did it for religious purposes—*not* weight loss—if you want to get the nice *compostela*, the certificate of completion. Many weeks later we will arrive in Santiago at the office and Tom will check off *sport* on the form. The man there will try to convince him to mark *religion* instead but he'll refuse, and in the end the supposedly crappy compostela will look just as nice as the fancy one. Nicole the Swede goes on to say, with the lazy geographical determinism of northern Europeans, that the last hundred miles are choked with cheating Spaniards and Italians who take a bus from village to village and get their *credencial* stamps without walking more than a few kilometers a day. (The stamps, which one is supposed to get at an albergue or bar or church at least once a day, are proof you've done the walk on foot.)

Today has become much like the agreeable stroll we'd both imagined the Camino might be: it's hot but not hallucinatorily so, at least for most of the day, and we're feeling able-bodied and full of purpose. It's not that our feet have healed—they pretty much won't, ever—but the pain feels increasingly less consequential.

Total distance walked: 96 km; distance left to Santiago: 698 km.

TUESDAY 16 JUNE

DEPART: Puente la Reina 06h40
ARRIVE: Estella 15h00
21.1 km (13.1 mi)

Dinner was a buffet. Tom had a feral oblivion in his eyes; his mouth was drawn and he was having some linguistic trouble. He confused declarative sentences with interrogative ones. Uncontroversial facts cornered him.

"The buffet will have a second course of chicken and fish," I said.

"I don't know what you want from me," said Tom.

He was in a state of rough exhaustion, ate his food like some defensive den animal. He was asleep by eight p.m. At three fifteen, he tells me the next day, he woke up to check his email—some of the albergues have coin-operated computers—and was told by the albergue's night janitor that pilgrims do not check email at three fifteen in the morning.

We pack in the dark and head out with Andy, a Mexican-American who decided to close out his college-graduation European tour by walking the Camino solo. Tom had started talking to him before bed when he saw Andy was reading *Dubliners*. He's got a round face and a long slouch and one change of clothes in an elementary-school backpack; he'll carry Tom's for a while. He's been alone for his first three or four days, and Tom says it's clear that Andy's been driven to madness by isolation. This is why he consents to accompany us. He's desperate enough to prefer our vacant banter to the windy silence, and he's also sort of an aspiring writer. He will walk with us for three days.

We make our way through Puente la Reina, an old town of soft yellow stone that doubtless has much of architectural and historical interest to recommend it. I bandage Tom's feet in the road. The first five hours pass pleasantly and quickly, as we'll find they almost always do. We're on an old dirt track and nothing much of note happens until we're exiting a small hilltop postcard of a village and we meet a young and beautiful Québécoise. She stops us and asks if we've recently seen another French Canadienne. Our questioner owes her twenty euros and is waiting here to repay the loan. She last saw her lender two days ago. It might be a long wait. We tell her that we hear there's some sort of wine fountain up ahead, and we're hoping to make it by nightfall. She says she'll try to meet us there.

We come to a fork in the road and there's no yellow arrow. We shout to the adorable Québécoise, and she says everyone has been going to the left. She shouts something about an old Roman road. Brierley has something to say about this. He asks if "the nearby N-128 will still be there in two thousand years." The cars along the nearby N-128 seem to be making good time.

We walk silently along the Roman road, which is rough and uneven and hurts our feet. Mountains threaten along the length of the horizon. On foot, there's too much time to fear mountains. They shadow our labor for hours. Periodically there's a cairn alongside the road, near or atop one of the waymarks. Tom knocks one over, wishes he hadn't. Rivulets of ants course across the stuttered rock of the path. The foliage is thick low brush with the occasional acre of stunted wint-o-green olive trees.

In a village two albergues with identical cafés face off across the main road. Tom falls upon his sandwiches. Andy has a beer. Post-prandially I lance Tom's blisters. A fine laser of pus erupts from the ball of his foot. It narrowly misses my eye. Tom says, "It's like a boutonniere." Tom thinks all boutonnieres are trick boutonnieres. I wonder what his prom was like.

Three older Spanish women we've spent a day and a half leapfrogging come over to kibitz. They seem to have something pressing to say. Andy says they are Catalonian nurses. Tom's feet are among the worst they've ever seen. One of them was almost about to cry when she saw them, and then was going to cry more when she saw how poorly I was tending to them. She says that her husband, who has been driving their baggage in a car, is coming back with first-aid kits.

They light a small bouquet of cigarettes, hand them around. The supplies arrive and the chain-smoking congress of Catalonian

nurses sets to work, rotating out only to smoke, rotating in while still smoking. They spray blood-brown iodine all over Tom's feet, confer periodically in a smoky ring, spray some more iodine over his feet, take out a needle and thread and run them through the blisters. They cut the thread to leave a length bisecting the blister. They tell me that this is what I ought to be doing. They douse his feet once more in great inaccurate sprays of iodine.

The narrow lane is filled with smoke and pus and the kind scolding of chain-smoking nurses. Pilgrims stop and offer advice and condolences in whatever language happens to occur to them at the moment. The adorable Québécoise arrives. She takes pictures. She laughs winningly. Tom is sloshed in iodine, his feet mummified in gauze, his mind unswervingly on a distant woman, and the Québécoise still can't stop smiling at him. Even under relatively normal conditions, which in his life are rare enough, Tom has an aura of a half-dangerous cuddle-bear. Drenched in iodined blood and cooed over by anxiously hypernicotined Catalonian nurses he is at his most vulnerable and sweet and deranged.

We walk more slowly now. Behind us is the Tank, Tom's nickname for the cuckoo-eyed block of androgynous Bavarian farmer who's been steadily ski-poling herself along at our rear all day. Now she's catching up, and despite our best efforts we can't ever seem to reach the Québécoise, who's darting fairylike a few dozen yards ahead of us, taking photographs of olive trees and other items that are surely of no interest to anyone but her. We're not going to make the wine fountain tonight.

The last four hours of each day are much more difficult than the first four or five. I start to laugh and Tom and Andy ask me why. I say the fact that we're walking across Spain is hysterical. There are so many other things we could be doing with our summer that don't involve walking the breadth of a country. But pilgrimage, once committed to, has its own logic. You have volunteered your obedience and now feel bound to that. We are entrants in a long slow binding procession. Tom keeps Andy's spirits up, throws the last of his resources into repartee. Andy sees something heroic in Tom, and Tom offers him warm, serious encouragement. The Tank catches up with us as we arrive in Estella.

Total distance walked: 117.1 km; distance left to Santiago: 676.9 km.

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE

DEPART: Estella 07h00
ARRIVE: Los Arcos 14h40
21.7 km (13.5 mi)

We took Tom to the Spanish Red Cross outpost near the albergue and a gruff incarnation of cosmic wisdom told Tom, through Andy, that the needle-and-thread technique was decades out of date. The man told Andy that he ought to ditch the two of us and walk alone. He said it was good for the mind and the heart and that we were distracting him. A few weeks later we'll meet a Moroccan woman who went to this man and realized she'd dreamed of him the night before. He told her some very deep emotional truths about her life.

Before bed we got into some stupid arguments. An American schoolteacher told us that she was the very first woman in America to know that George Bush was lying to the American public.

On our way out of Estella in the morning Tom reads some Brierley out loud to pass the time. It makes us angry. Brierley can't use the word *city* without using the word *Mammon*. He recommends, while along busy roads, preserving your positive pilgrim energy by singing your favorite pilgrim songs into oncoming buses and trucks. We don't know any pilgrim songs. We stop at the wine fountain, which advertises its webcam, and we have a few ceremonial sips. It's been set up as a pilgrim's gimmick to promote a local winery; they've put out some glasses between the wine and water faucets. Tom, in great pain, has many ceremonial glasses. The path up and over the hill is the sort of soft and shady dirt track that makes you feel as though you need never stop walking. On both sides are wide fields, recently plowed, and in the northern distance is a glinting uneven height of eroded granite massif. We walk with some American medical students and tell filthy jokes. Everyone feels light and companionable and the sun isn't yet obliterative.

In the day's first village Tom ails on a bench while a French pilgrim feeds some stray kittens pasta with red sauce, which seems inadvertently to wean them from their mother. Before the French woman shows up with her pasta I'm feeding the cat yogurt off my finger, figuring the cat and the yogurt will make good props for the Québécoise we're expecting to come around the bend at any moment, but just as she ski-poles into town there's the French woman and her pasta and the cats forget all about me and the yogurt, and besides all attention is going to Tom anyway, who can only think about the terrible state of his feet and a woman in America. You were a shitty prop, yogurt cat.

Later Tom's spirit breaks on a jai alai court, which in the Basque villages seem to double as town squares. Andy and I order bocadillos. We debate stopping for the day but it's only a quarter to ten. Tom's tortilla de patata bocadillo falls apart, spilling omelet and shards of stale bread into his lap, then onto the ground. Tom hits rock bottom, rebounds.

The remainder of the day is spent in shadeless stupor. We're on a gravel road through wide waving fringes of pale amber hay. Heat shimmers on the treeless plain. Heat-stroked, Tom appears to mutter something about how we very well may be walking toward our deaths. The tyrannical sun makes it hard to pay attention. The white gravel feels like hot tacks.

Tom lectures madly. He says that there are several distinct species of Camino walkers. He taps his first finger. "There's the tank." He taps his second finger. "There's the zombie—that's what I am." He goes to tap his third finger but halts in mid-air and stops enumerating. He can't think of any more types. "Tanks and zombies," he says with finality, "are the two types of Camino walkers."

The landscape is by silent consensus the most stunning we've seen so far, a soft voluptuous swell of green hill, hay fields bedded lightly on the slope. The gray gravel road cuts a lone ribbon through the panoramic undulation. I mention this. Tom is indignant. "Scenery?! I just see a bunch of shit you have to walk past."

Then the land melts into a hot blurry bath of scrub and hay and olive trees, hashed with the stark lines of the occasional vineyard. I mar my notebook with sun-stroked runes. We're all descending into delirium but it's hitting Tom the hardest. The one thing I can subsequently make out is this: *T: All I know is I fucking* minored *in meteorology.*

The day's last three kilometers count among my worst ambulatory experiences, despite, or perhaps because of, our flat path through grandeur. We try to revive ourselves by talking about women but we're just too shot. Our feet are rippling ponds of raw distraction. This is usually the time when we wonder aloud why we're walking across Spain, but this afternoon we lack the energy even for that.

At the hostel there's a new sense of collegiality. Many of the same faces have

nothing to talk about. We've all had the identical dull shadeless day of walking through astounding beauty we were barely conscious enough to notice. Anyone whom we might tell about the pasta-eating kittens was there to see them in person, or, more sanely, couldn't care less. Instead we get into the shower and stomp there on our laundry and wait for bedtime and hope nobody's going to rustle a loud blanket.

Total distance walked: 138.8 km; distance left to Santiago: 655.2 km.

THURSDAY 18 JUNE

DEPART: Los Arcos 06h50
ARRIVE: Logroño 18h00
27.8 km (17.3 mi)

We hobble out of the albergue into the empty street. I have a walking stick now, and my first blister, on my right pinkie toe. I am histrionic about this. Tom reminds me that he has eight blisters. His foot is springlike in its blistery bloom. I retreat, ashamed. We can barely walk at all; our gaits are elaborate contrivances designed to minimize pressure on the heels, arches, balls, sides, or tops of our feet. Walking this way is unworkable. We look like prancing marionettes lifting our joints in jigs of excruciation. We're not sure we can make it out of the town, much less the seventeen-plus miles Brierley proposes for the day's stage. Andy does not complain.

The day improves, as it tends to, and we proceed up and down from deep river valley to vista, views over long vineyard and low scrub. Little broken stone huts like giant beehives dot the landscape. The constant up and down, though more demanding physically, is easier psychologically than the long, unaccountable stretches of flat. The hills exercise the muscles and slow the pace and give some sense of actual progress. The long horizontals are just defeating in their invariance. We discuss what Andy might do with his life. There aren't too many other pilgrims on the road today; maybe they left earlier. Our destination is far below on a distant plain.

Tom sits in a field. We're nearing Viana, our midpoint for the day. It's terribly hot, the hottest day so far. We're walking along a hot asphalt road atop an unsheltered mesa. Viana is a charming hill town of stone in a burnt-wheat hue. We lunch in a café. Tom orders beers for himself and Andy and then more of them. Andy's two most favorite things in the world are beers and free stuff. I think the afternoon heat will make the beers look like a bad decision. I'll be wrong.

I return from dunking my head in a nearby fountain and Tom looks at me, sweeps his arms over the table of empty beer bottles, and says, "You weren't around when I was quoting myself quoting myself in the future." Tom likes to quote himself but usually in a more straightforward way. Andy tells me superfluously that Tom is drunk.

We see the schoolteacher from LA, the one who knew that Bush was lying to the American people before anyone else did, and she looks as though she's going to cry. Her face is purple and she can't stop sweating. She reassures us, and herself, that she has the whole summer to finish this, that she's not going to quit partway through like last time, but she is very upset. We feel for her. We help her find the albergue. We'll next see her in Santiago. She'll look at her feet and say she took the bus.

Tom and Andy are skipping down the path like they've just been unshackled and I'm cracking in the worst of the late-afternoon heat. It's at least ninety-five degrees. Tom struts as though he's got new prosthetic feet, though he's also describing a pretty wide slalom across the rocky path. It's hard for me, sober, to think of anything but the heat. They talk about youthful indiscretions and Chuck Klosterman and how Tom felt when he was Andy's age and what Andy might be doing when he's Tom's age, and it's a conversation that, I am certain, Andy won't soon forget. The two of them periodically solicit my opinion on some matter or another but it's too hot for me to have opinions.

We arrive at the time of day when we wonder, again, why we're doing this, and this time Andy thinks for a moment and says that we probably won't know until the end, or maybe much later, why we did this, and what it did. Tom sobers up for a minute and asks Andy why he joined our bullshit caravan into nothingness, if he's glad he hooked up with us. We are taking a day off tomorrow and Andy must continue. Andy looks at him and deadpans, "You made me feel worse about everything, myself, others, the world."

Total distance walked: 166.6 km; distance left to Santiago: 627.4 km.

FRIDAY 19 JUNE

REST: Logroño

Andy takes his leave at six. We're sure we'll see him again. We go back to sleep, wake at eight thirty, check email.

Total distance walked: 166.6 km; distance left to Santiago: 627.4 km.

SATURDAY 20 JUNE

DEPART: Logroño 05h20
ARRIVE: Nájera 14h10
29.4 km (18.3 mi)

Drunkards file into the kebab place. It is apparently an early weekend morning. The boulevards leading out of town are long and quiet, the yellow arrows easy to find despite the riot of consumerism Brierley warned us about. We get lazy and follow a lone pilgrim ahead of us, figuring we'll let arrow-tracking duty devolve upon him for the moment. We see him asking for directions and realize we've been led off course, retreat to find the yellow arrows again.

We walk through a dark municipal park, up a rise, and then along a chain-link fence threaded with thousands of bark crosses that protect us from the highway below. Brierley wonders, Tom reads aloud, if we will take the time to stop and help enforce this thin separation of the sacred and the profane. The chain-link crosses are disturbing in the red early-morning light. Tom says they make him think of the *Blair Witch Project* but my first thought was *Pet Sematary*. Tom says he's glad Jesus wasn't beheaded.

We walk along a wide red-dirt track through some vineyards, head uphill toward a small village. Tom makes an animal-fornication joke about these rural places and I remind him that we're probably ten minutes by car, at the most, from the city. Tom declares that we have retarded ourselves to the fourteenth century. There does seem to be some aspect of redress here to Marx's bit about modernity being the subjection of time to space, or space to time, or whatever he said, but then again we do have email access every other day or so, so maybe we shouldn't overly congratulate ourselves on our premodern achievements.

Our strides feel long and wonderful in the empty path. We come over a final rise and see before us half of the province of La Rioja spread out across a shallow basin, ringed with craggy recumbent mountains of an Andean green. Both of us feel full of something like grace. Secular grace. We are happy to be doing this and especially happy to be doing this together. Tom says he's as close to nonpharmacological euphoria as he's ever going to get. It's hard to say what has changed so suddenly, but with another week this sort of volatility will no longer surprise us. I feel peaceful and without regret. Low

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red-soiled cliffs slant in the distance over vast acres of vineyards, vineyards which produce the famous Rioja reds that Spaniards refrigerate. We see a traffic sign that to drivers signifies things nearby, short errands, and to us advertises destinations two or three days' walking away.

We arrive in Nájera in time for a late lunch. We go and get some donuts—the only foodstuff the Spaniards haven't yet found a way to prepare with ham—and return to the albergue with our good moods undiminished.

Total distance walked: 196 km; distance left to Santiago: 598 km.

SUNDAY 21 JUNE

DEPART: Nájera 04h55
ARRIVE: Grañón 14h45
28 km (18 mi)

At four forty-five we gather our effects after a miserable evening in the albergue—pilgrims snoring like circus bears—and walk silently out of the dorm into the dark predawn. We are the first out, not that that matters or anything, past some yokels drunk on a tractor and up over the umber cliffs behind the city. We walk an hour in the heavy blue Sunday-morning dark, watching the blue rows of vineyards under a slim rent of moonlight in the sky. The sleepy indigo sweep of dark land is a little ominous. We're mostly quiet, a little cross. Tom claims he wasn't sleeping when the alarm went off and for some reason I argue with him, insist without any real evidence that he was. I stubbornly pursue this. Around six it's finally lightening. We stop for bocadillos. Tom's feet hurt so he has a few glasses of chilled local red wine.

The next long stretch is probably the most beautiful landscape we've seen yet—indeed, we will find, the most beautiful of the entire Camino: all careful cultivation, alternating fields of grain, hay, vineyard, stubbled fallow, a counterpaned coverlet of yellowing greens and greening blues. From the low rises between fields the land before us resembles a sea of inconstant depth seen from a coastal height, a checky blur of lime and pea and mossy jade. Shadows of low clouds pool in the valleys and clefts and small depressions of the fields, deepening the greens and the blues and spreading over them a light scrim of slate beryl. For the next hour or two I regret my tendency to senseless contradiction. There's a strong, acrid scent of manure in the air. Tom quotes a line from David Foster Wallace about the "blameless" smell of the stuff.

Tom and I argue about religion for a long time. Tom is vituperatively antireligious in a way that, I tell him, recalls the boring and unimaginative tirades of people like Christopher Hitchens. Tom says nothing good has ever come from religion. I ask him why he's writing a book about it, then. He says his book is at least in part about exploding the myths that undergird Christian belief. I say I'm not sure religion is even about belief, that a definition of religion based on doctrine and supernaturalism is a pretty narrow one, one that doesn't account for a lot of religious activity. Like the ritual of this pilgrimage, I say. Our experiences of pain and privation en route to Santiago can be significant and useful even if we think the idea of divine salvation is dumb. Tom says the whole thing is built on a sham story. There's no way St. James was ever in Spain, Tom says. I say that my mom—who's a rabbi, as is my dad—probably doesn't believe the literal truth of the Exodus, but she takes great meaning from her Passover seder each year. Tom scoffs like a cold rationalist, tells me I'm reducing him to a cartoon of a cold rationalist. I say I feel like he's reducing me to some shtetl yokel.

I feel inarticulate and thick-tongued and heavy-browed, and I finally reach a truly black mood, a mood made all the blacker by the lushness of the emerald fields and the exactitude of the lined vineyards. We declare a kind of truce, but it's an uneasy one, both of us feeling wronged and disagreeable. Even though I've just defended the ritual of this walk in theory, again it feels so long and so futile. Yesterday all of its charms were apparent, its motivations obvious. Today even the prospect of weight loss has lost its luster. The feelings of high fellowship that had done so much to sustain us had dissipated so quickly in argument. We stop for lunch in a tourist town and check email and I get one that upsets me, an apology long delayed and too unspecific.

I am eager to get somewhere and stop walking, am actually not at all even eager for that, would rather just keep walking, but my feet hurt, our feet hurt, and it's very hot and there's again no shade. For much of the day we've been shadowing the plucky Irishman in his early twenties, the one with soft vocal upholstery and a bit of the twink to him, whom we'd met on the first day of the walk—he'd asked us why that first climb took us so long, so we'd mostly avoided him since—and now Tom christens him Lucky Charms, which is both a bit of a cheap nickname and a devastatingly accurate one.

Tom and I talk about some professional disappointments, the sorts of things this walk has thus far helped me feel far away from. In the context of a day of mute self-pity it's only fitting that these sorts of anxieties would return. The lightness of yesterday has dissipated so thoroughly, and so entirely, that it's almost impossible to remember a time when it felt good to be on this walk. That night the albergue is a few thin pallets on the chill floor of a church attic.

Total distance walked: 224 km; distance left to Santiago: 570 km.

MONDAY 22 JUNE

DEPART: Grañón 06h45
ARRIVE: Belorado 10h45
17 km (10.5 mi)

The church-attic albergue hosted a by-donation communal dinner. Dinner was salad and local wine, nonchilled, and enormous iron skillets of paella. An Irishwoman told Tom not to drink wine or take sleeping pills because it would cloud his pilgrim mind. Two Germans recommended Coelho.

Tom wakes up hungover and we head into the fields. We feel sick; we feel hungry; we feel tired. We discuss former friends whom we no longer talk to for one reason or another. We arrive in the suggested end-town for the day's stage. We see Lucky Charms and a crowd he's picked up somewhere. We mention Andy. Lucky Charms says he walked with Andy a day or two earlier. Andy mentioned he'd been walking with two writers. That's us, we say. Lucky Charms looks at us and says, "No, he said he was walking with two *writers*." At the hotel I fill the bidet with freezing water and sit on the toilet with my feet in the bidet until it's time for sleep.

Total distance walked: 241 km; distance left to Santiago: 553 km.

TUESDAY 23 JUNE

DEPART: Belorado 07h15
ARRIVE: Burgos 20h30
51.6 km (32 mi)

In the morning we feel better than we have in days. We're regaining our old easy camaraderie. The trail is soft soil in a valley

between stubble fields and questions of purpose are again shelved. Windmills sit on the far side of the highest hill; single blades scrape their short arcs over the ridge like giant broken metronomes. We talk about the first memories we have of having been people more or less continuous with the people we think we are today.

The Camino briefly runs along the road. Tom remembers Brierley's advice about pilgrim songs and he starts to sing into the traffic. His pilgrim songs are the words *pilgrim song* sung to the tunes of classic-rock standards. He's a good singer. I come up with a pilgrim song set to the tune of "Country Roads":

> ¡Pilgrim song!
> The trucks steal
> the energy-y-y-y of our zeal.
> Pilgrim voices,
> sing our choices—
> old and young,
> pilgrim song!

The path climbs into the Montes de Oca. They're the steepest inclines we've had in some time but pose zero problem. We charge through the heat, passing people with abandon. At the peak we eat nectarines beneath an obelisk memorial to the victims of the Spanish Civil War. We talk about nothing but how good we feel, how strong our legs seem, how depleted we aren't, how thin we must look.

We fall in with a Polish student. She's doing the Camino with three friends, but each has agreed to walk at his or her own pace. She says she's religious. She has been generally disappointed by the state of the Spanish church. There are too few priests to go around and she hasn't received very many pilgrim blessings. She says that in Poland religion offers a way of life that's different than the other options available to young people. We ask about the other options. She thinks for a moment and says, "Being an alcoholic."

She asks us about the weirdest people we've met so far. I say, "Well, there are two Asian cult members who wear chef aprons and these keffiyeh-like things and welding visors and walk in single file and are about as creepy as anyone we've seen."

She looks at me. "You mean the two Korean nuns?" she says.

She walks ahead. We arrive in Brierley's suggested end-town around twelve thirty, a tiny forest hamlet called San Juan. We eat leisurely. San Juan looks like a refugee camp, with pilgrims splayed on packs in the scant shade as they wait for the albergue to open. But we're feeling so well reconstituted, so alive and again so purposeful, that we decide to push on, down the hill toward Burgos. I wonder whether we might make Burgos in one shot. This bad suggestion becomes a real goal. The conversation is lively and fluid and the path is shaded and soft and almost empty, and neither of us can really imagine what the point of stopping would be. We can only think of the boredom and stink and forced conviviality of an albergue, the deadening routine of arriving and registering and finding a bunk and deciding if one has the energy to shower and stomp on one's dirty clothes, knowing that despite the terrible heat they won't be dry in the morning. We pass our last real chance to stay anywhere short of Burgos itself, which is still ten or twelve miles off.

The nice soft track becomes a road and the pleasant shade is replaced by an unyielding sun and instead of idyllic mountain hamlets we begin to pass through suburbs. Little houses squat behind menacing fences patrolled by bad dogs. These environs give way to an equally squalid industrial area, and then a slummy one, and by this time we're not even on roads but on sidewalks, and the sidewalks are constructed of a narrow fascist tile, the raised parts of which slam like leaden mallets into the soles of our feet.

We stop on a bench and change our socks. Our feet have red welts. As much as we dislike Brierley's anti-urban harangues, the speed and friction of the traffic and the size of the warehouses and billboards sap us. There's nothing to say. It's six p.m., then seven p.m., and our bodies are shutting down. We no longer look at each other. My neck and upper back stab with electric piston blows. Tom's knees are near collapse. A man is re-slabbing a granite side street, his sledgehammer coming down on a plank of wood atop the granite block. The pain from the bottoms of my feet flashes in long flares up the sides of my legs.

Someone says it's fifteen minutes to the cathedral and we almost take a cab. This is the point where I begin to dissociate from the pain. I find the pain almost aloofly interesting. There is no longer any human sentience in Tom's eyes; he is all howling damaged animal grudge. Today had felt so good and so fine such a short time before, and now we are close to simply sitting down in the middle of the street and having done with all this.

The receptionist tells us that more than fifty kilometers in a day is *demasiado*, too much. Tom is in bed within four minutes. I unpack my things. Tom demands to know why I am still walking around. We have perhaps really damaged ourselves. Tom makes a phone call and I run a frigid bath, can barely even feel the cold. I get out of the water and stand, hollow-eyed and riven with this otherwordly pain, and for a brief moment I notice how truly extraordinary my bronzed, chiseled calves look in the mirror. We writhe in awful waking walking dreams.

Total distance walked: 292.6 km; distance left to Santiago: 501.4 km.

WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE

REST: Burgos

We rise early and go for a long walk to look for American fast food. Burger King is closed. We stroll back and seem rather whole, all things considered, though also broken. Outside the cathedral we run into the Québécoise.

THURSDAY 25 JUNE

REST: Burgos

The Québécoise was with a German guy and they had a hotel room. We decide to stay an extra day in Burgos; there's a boutique hotel here that looks worth our time. We can't be lax in our inventory of the Camino's boutique hotels. We check email.

We go to see *Transformers 2* in Spanish, figuring that the plot can't possibly rest on the nuances of dialogue. We leave after thirty minutes. The general problem is that it was an extremely bad film and the specific one is the implausible idea that, under attack by alien Decepticons, anybody would ever trust a planetary-defense mission command staffed by Spanish speakers. We eat Chinese food. I go write some emails in which I offer forgiveness and at the same time ask for it. Tom said some helpful things last night.

FRIDAY 26 JUNE

DEPART: Burgos 05h30
ARRIVE: Hontanas 14h20
31.3 km (18.7 mi)

We pass the cathedral, a massive Gothic pile floating heavily in a ring of yellow streetlight. It takes a little while to find the yellow arrows again. After so much time off we expect to feel better than we do. The path wends between weedy compost piles and under concrete overpasses on the city's fringe.

Soon we will climb atop the meseta. A sign drawn in a clumsy hand over the last

bar advertises a ham raffle. The place has a Lynchian/frontier aspect. I repeat it to myself a few times: in the last town before the meseta they're raffling a ham. The meseta, which takes up the middle third of the Camino, is a high, hot, featureless plain. Vast seas of cereals extending indefinitely toward a desolate horizon, the sky a basic blue potted with clouds.

Brierley calls the meseta "sacred" and "otherworldly." For Brierley, ornament is crime and distraction, and only an entirely unornamented place is sufficiently "sublime" for true spiritual contemplation. Nothing in this landscape competes with contemplative errands. Blankly are you thrown back on yourself. Distance can't be gauged. Colors are pale, drained. The only things marring the featurelessness are giant cairns of rough white stone. They're humanly built. They seem thrown together in a futile attempt to improvise a feature.

We move quickly. We talk about other pilgrimages. There is a kind of atmospheric clarity up here. We feel as though we could walk for a long time today; we have conversations that push in useful directions. The heat seems honest and bearable. We begin to imagine that future days will pose fewer problems than previous ones; we wonder how many stages we could pass through right now without stopping. We do not feel like stopping.

We stop before we fade, before we begin to feel bad again. The few towns, set wide apart, sit in depressed basins with steep sides; they are huddled atop themselves, stacked and slanted in defiance of all the featurelessness that surrounds them. They are set with clay and hay-specked mud-brick and stone and look brittle in the white sun. Nothing so far has felt quite as medieval, quite so much like what this pilgrimage must have resembled when walked by Ferdinand and Isabella.

At the albergue we meet up with a pair of young Australian siblings. They're walking the Camino as a trial run for their parents, who are planning to do it later in the summer. They tell us right away that early on they took a taxi for eighteen kilometers, but they don't feel bad about it. I'm rarely enthusiastic about Australians but the sister is good-looking, charming and sarcastic with a dazzling smile.

Later Tom thinks she sort of liked me but I doubt it, especially considering what I look like at the moment, which according to Tom is somewhere in the vicinity of gay tennis-playing terrorist. I have a big black beard that prompts Tom to ask, rather unkindly, if it's going to grow up and cover my eyes. I've also got on an old pink Ocean Pacific tank top for even tanning and a white headband that Tom bought me in Pamplona. Tom shaved already but I keep saying I'm keeping the beard until we reach the ocean at Finisterre, when I will emerge a remade man.

Total distance walked: 323.9 km; distance left to Santiago: 470.1 km.

SATURDAY 27 JUNE

DEPART: Hontanas 07h00
ARRIVE: Boadilla del Camino 14h30
29.5 km (17.7 mi)

Before bed we met Román from Madrid. He took a cigarillo out of a small metal-clasped box lined with tissue paper and asked passersby for a light in Spanish, English, German, and French, and later Japanese. He's nearing seventy and has done the Camino, in sections of a few hundred kilometers, at least five times. We are just getting to the point where we can somehow imagine doing this more than once. Or at least I can; I mention this and Tom looks at me like I'm out of my mind. Román likes to just walk the villages; he takes buses through the cities. He's got thin, muscular arms and strong legs and a tremendous paunch. His right calf is tattooed with a bull silhouetted against a vivid red sunset. He covers it with the top elastic of a cut sock to protect its colors from the sun behind him. He's got a thin graphite brush of a moustache and thinning gray curls and projects an air of refined corruption, or corrupt wisdom. He told us the two things not to miss on the whole Camino are the water in the town fountain here in Hontanas and the *pulpo* in the Galician village of Melide. We forget to stop by the fountain but the *pulpo* down the road is delicious.

In the morning the Camino is almost crowded; all along the empty meseta we can see the extensive drift of pilgrims. We wonder what happens to all of these people during the day. By ten we see almost no one, but then again at the end of the day they collect themselves at the albergue. Tom is sunk in private thought. He is preoccupied, as I feel he often is, and not for bad reasons—there are things going on in his life at home that are not easy—but I feel lonely. More than anything alone in my alienation. There are times when Tom and I both feel estranged from this walk and at those times we may not be fully present but at least we are absent together. Today we are far apart. Tom seems to wish the walk were over already. He's impatient, I think, for the day we reach Santiago and can stop walking and he can go home and do things that feel more reasonable and important. I feel less and less sure that I want it to end. I tell him this. He says I am imagining his preoccupation and his absence. He says I'm being oversensitive.

If yesterday the meseta was featureless, today makes yesterday looks like a mescaline stroll through Euro Disney. Nowhere I've ever been has had less in the way of spectacle. In the distance are windmills like thin blady robots. Their slow revolutions serve to remind us that nothing is happening but the slowed passage of time. Even the plants look dejected, the little hills scraped bald. It's tempting to call it lunar, or maybe agri-lunar, but that would be an insult to the moon. There are occasional rises and for long stretches they hold out the promise of some new vista, something to fasten on, but inevitably one comes at last over the rise only to find yet more meseta. The towns are portcullised against the heat, as desiccated as their environs. Our spirits are again low.

Total distance walked: 353.4 km; distance left to Santiago: 440.6 km.

SUNDAY 28 JUNE

DEPART: Boadilla del Camino 06h30
ARRIVE: Carrión de los Condes 14h15
28 km (16.8 mi)

At dinner Tom held court about matters apostolic. For someone who claims an antagonism to religion he really does love to tell these stories—under cover of debunking them—and his command of the material, and passion for it, impressed a Canadian priest-in-training and finally won the begrudging respect of Lucky Charms, whose real name Tom will soon begin to use. I sat with a Japanese couple. The Japanese man said that, fourteen years earlier, they'd done the trip in five days by car, and when they arrived in Santiago they saw a pilgrim emerge from the cathedral there, and the man looked… impressive. Inspiring. "The man looked a way that I wanted to look one day." They came back to do it on foot.

After dinner I found Román and told him that he had a good pace today, that we couldn't keep up with him. He was checking the next few days of walking on a Camino website with an excellent user interface. He said walking alone develops a rhythm. "You go with someone else," he said, "and it's a fucking waste of your time."

In the morning we follow a swift canal's towpath. There's some traffic. Tom is stung four times on the foot by what he claims is a wasp. I say it looked like a mosquito or possibly even a fly. Tom gets annoyed.

We stop for breakfast in a village off the canal and I stand at the bar waiting for our bocadillos. Outside Tom records verbatim the rant of a hale and sunburnt Australian in scuffed desert boots. The Australian asks if anyone has seen his one-armed friend. We tell the Australian that his friend can't be more than ten minutes back.

The Australian is done, finished, he's done damage. He is going on about this. There are inflamed tendons. He can't walk. He was in the army and used to do a lot of pack-marching but hasn't ever done anything like this. He talked to the insurance company and they said he's done. Finished. His one-armed friend comes around the bend from the canal and the Australian repeats the insurance company's assessment. The guy who's done asks the one-armed guy, who's with a pretty young woman we've not seen before, where Gordon is. "I left him," says the one-armed guy. "He started drinking before noon and I *left* him."

There's a Valkyrie of Danish-German-border stock who's been a loose part of our cohort for a few days, though we've not yet introduced ourselves formally. She often walks with Lucky Charms, and she comes up and says hi in a pleased fancy-seeing-you-here voice. This is strange, given that we've been seeing her at pretty much every stop for days, and staying in the same albergues. But at the same time it really is easy to lose someone, or be lost by someone. We figure that Andy can't be more than about five or seven hours ahead of us, and he will be until we reach Santiago, but we'll never see him again.

Tom and I talk about albergues. Tom dislikes them for what he calls their "soft despotism." One is neither really alone nor with other people; you sit near people who might, at any time, without warning, strike up a conversation and decide to ask why you're doing this, if you started in St. Jean and if you're going all the way to Santiago, how much time you've been walking and how much total time you have to do it, and if you're going on to Finisterre, where the world used to end.

I've felt placid in the albergues despite the crush of people and the constant threat of these conversational iterations. I've felt less bored, generally speaking, than I have in some time. I feel some sense of end-day accomplishment—the sort of astonishingly satisfying accomplishment of having successfully walked between points—and have no real urge to do much at all until it's time to resume walking.

Tom looks dubious and asks if this walk is changing me. I don't think so, I guess I hope not, but it does seem possible that there will be some incremental differences. I feel pretty good, with the obvious exceptions of my feet, ankles, knees, hips, and sunburned calves and arms. Tom doesn't feel any of this. I'm sort of surprised myself. The emails I'd sent surprised me. The periods of regret and equanimity surprise me.

Total distance walked: 381.4 km; distance left to Santiago: 412.6 km.

MONDAY 29 JUNE

DEPART: Carrión de los Condes 06h30
ARRIVE: Terradillos de los Templarios 13h30
26.8 km (16.6 mi)

We're used to stopping every seven kilometers, every two hours or so, but today there won't be any place to stop at all until we're two thirds of the way through. We set off grumpy. We see an older French woman we've not seen before. "It's going to be a long morning," I say. "I don't even notice," she says with reproach. "I don't have anything else to do today."

The path rises gradually through fields of bland grain. Cylinders of hay loll around in the fields like scattered gamepieces. There's a thick cloak of gray cloud cover. Tom tells me the extended version of a story he's told me several times before in redacted form. I can tell he's been sort of worried about this sin of omission. A few older people pass us, which these days no longer elicits the least self-deprecation. I don't know what I'd think of an old person who didn't pass us. We don't recognize this particular group from our Camino.

"Who the hell are they?" I say. "How dare they?" says Tom.

Tom's having a rough time today; his right heel is literally coming apart. He shouldn't have worn damp socks. He has additional problems, chief among them being that he's the sort of person into whose face insects career. The road is yet another old Roman one, a pebbly mosaic of antiquated hardpan.

After what feels like about eight weeks on the Roman road we arrive in a village and stop, along with everyone else, for a late breakfast. Román speaks freely. He and I talk about books for a minute and I say I've just read Muñoz Molina's *Sepharad* and he says he hasn't read it, then asks if I'm Jewish; he's the first person on the Camino to ask. He looks over at my bocadillo de beicon and says I must not be very religious, but then again, he continues, I am on a Catholic pilgrimage. Tom is wearing a red bandanna and performing the American minstrel show he occasionally puts on and Román tells him, not unkindly, that he looks like a boy scout.

Outside Román surveys the assembled walkers and it looks like he's going to make a pronouncement about the meaning of the Camino. If anyone we've met so far is going to offer a plausible and definitive account of the point of this walk it's Román. He has a house-painting habit to support his bohemianism and is a font of dissipated occult wisdom. He lights another cigarillo and we wait.

"The best thing about the Camino," he says at last, "is the stopping. The walking is fucking bullshit. I like the drinks, the chatting, the sitting, the cigarillos. I don't care much for the walking anymore."

The Australian siblings, whom we've lost for a day or two and recently refound, show Tom the slim pamphlet they're using as a guide. It has line-drawn maps and details the locations of ATMs and is generally pretty spare. Tom throws it down on the table with a groan. "There's no spiritual advice at all in there!"

We get up and walk off with Román toward the afternoon's destination. He's a widower, has two grown kids in the States and degrees in linguistics. He seems a little melancholy and we walk slowly with him, thinking we're doing him a favor, until he complains about our pace. We arrive at the albergue and lie down to rest. A minute later we hear a loud yell and rush to the bathroom, where Román has slid on the wet tile floor and landed on his back. We help him up. He says he thinks his Camino is over.

Total distance walked: 408.2 km; distance left to Santiago: 385.8 km.

TUESDAY 30 JUNE

DEPART: Terradillos de los Templarios 07h30
ARRIVE: Sahagún 11h10
26.8 km (16.6 mi)

After dinner I sat with Román outside and he said that the special thing about the Camino is the solidarity of pain. He told me that in everyday life we know on some abstract level

that everybody around us is afflicted but on the Camino we're all in such pain, all the time, that it's impossible to forget that everyone else is, too, and a real community is forged in that shared suffering.

I had a dream where I was invited by two Berlin friends to a sex/dinner club, where you make a reservation for a nice dinner and then have group sex afterward. I was late to the reservation and worried I'd miss it. I went up to the woman at the door and said I was late to meet my friends. She looked down at me and said, "You can't come in here dressed like that." I looked down and was surprised to discover I was wearing my unwashed Camino clothes.

In the morning Román wakes us for breakfast. He wants to take a bus. But there isn't a bus, so he's going to have to walk to Sahagún, which is still a few hours away. We offer to wait and walk with him and he seems cheered up. He repeats several times that if we're ever in Chicago we should look up his son, who manages a nightclub there. We promise him we will.

The next town is probably also the last town for Karolina, a Serbo-Bavarian we'd met the day before, a big rough-and-tumble type who'd been letting Román flirt with her. She hurt herself badly over the course of the first week and a half, is going to lie up in Sahagún for a day or two and see if she might continue. Over the last day or two we're seeing the first wave of people to fall—the damaged Australian, Román, Karolina—and it's a charged experience we'll discuss later.

We watch Karolina say goodbye to a German friend she'd been walking with for a few days. They tear up. She sits down with us and says that the Camino is trying to teach her something, but she's not sure what. She also says that nobody at home understands why she's doing this. She says there are a few reasons. The death of her father, two years ago, is one. She says her sport is to ignore things and she's been ignoring his death for two years and she thought the Camino would give her time to think about it, accept it. Tom says we're doing it for weight loss and she laughs and admits she is, too. She also says she's going to write a book about the Camino. She's not the only person we meet who intends to. It seems other people have also hit upon the idea that documentation, when broader purposes feel lacking, can provide purpose enough.

We get up and walk through town looking for a place to stay and see Román for the final time; he's just had a coffee and a cigarillo and is off to the Madrid train. He looks like he's trying to restrain his sadness. We tell him to take care of himself, to write, that we'll look up his son in Chicago, and he hobbles off toward the east, the direction in which we never move.

Total distance walked: 421.8 km; distance left to Santiago: 372.2 km.

WEDNESDAY 1 JULY

DEPART: Sahagún 07h10
ARRIVE: Mansilla de las Mulas 18h30
36.9 km (22.1 mi)

In the morning we leave and Karolina stays but her foot does not improve. She'll take a bus most of the way, leaving herself a few final short days for arrival on foot. She will get to Santiago a day before us, and she will sit with us in front of the Cathedral on the night of our arrival—sit with us and with David and Tim and Alina and Nora and the others, the people who will mean the most to us on the Camino, whom we haven't yet met—and she will tell us that the next day she will go back to Bavaria and break up with her boyfriend. She will be crying and resolute. A week after the Camino she will email us to say that a doctor told her she had been walking for a month with a broken foot.

Today is the first day that we spend a substantial time walking with a group: Lucky Charms, whom, for reasons of increasing mutual trust and affection, I'm afraid even I am going to have to start calling "Tim," and his confraternity—a near-incomprehensible Welshman named Lee, a young and sort of bandy-legged Hungarian named David, and Wiebke, the German-Danish Valkyrie we'd been seeing for a few days. The day is very hot and looks to be long so it's nice to have company, at least in part because an audience shames us into complaining less.

We gain this group because at lunch Tom pays me fifty euros to eat a fly. At first I'm afraid that I'm going to get sick but then Wiebke says she's inadvertently eaten three or four over the last two days and has been fine. This whole incident elevates us in the eyes of Tim, as now, instead of thinking of us as two pretentious and sometimes swinish writers, he has the option of relating to us, respectively, as a person who would pay fifty euros to watch his friend eat a fly, and the friend who will accept fifty euros to eat a fly. Drunk in Paris a week after the end of the Camino we'll finally have the courage to tell Tim that we called him Lucky Charms, and he'll laugh and say it's okay, he didn't like us either.

The day passes in idle and occasionally vicious Camino gossip, a genre of which we'd been apparently alone in remaining unaware, much of it related by Wiebke. She's heard that Tom snores, which isn't true; that the Welshman's urine is brown, which the Welshman doesn't refute; that the efflorescent Gran Canarienne has left her own group to walk with the one-armed Australian, which is such a noncontroversial and widely observed piece of news that it barely deserves reporting; and, finally, that Tom and I had a threesome with Karolina in Sahagún, i.e. the previous evening, which is just preposterous.

The bar on the main square in Reliegos, where our friends are stopping for the evening, has a whitewashed facade covered in Camino graffiti. These tend to be watery page-a-day-calendar observations about paths and ways and journeys, unctuously dripped in twelve or fourteen languages. The waitress offers us markers such that we might join in the wall piety, and Tom writes his initials and *the caravan into nothingness…* The most overrepresented language on the wall is German and the most overrepresented sentiment an oleaginous lovey-dovey bombast, so Tom adds, in bright yellow block letters, DER IRAK KRIEG WAR RICHTIG, i.e. THE IRAQ WAR WAS RIGHT, and we fall into each other with laughter that makes the rest of the day bearable.

Tom and I continue on for six more kilometers in the alternating blaze and shade of an older-treed stretch of path. We feel buoyant despite the hour and the heat. It's getting close to the late-afternoon moment when, in the past, we've wondered aloud why we're doing this. Tom asks what I'm thinking about and I say isn't it funny that we're not right now asking why we're doing this. "Well, actually," he says, "I was about to ask us that." But he does agree that the problem of justification seems somewhat less live than it has felt in the past.

I think it has something to do with the two days of watching people drop out, that the obvious anguish and grief involved, and the sympathy, has quieted the question for the moment. We miss Román, and we miss Karolina, with whom we never had that threesome, and we would both be very sad if we had to stop now. Tom says he thinks that's true but also thinks that we've finally come to share this experience with other people—with Tim and with Wiebke and with David, the last of whom, after becoming increasingly important to us, will be the last person we see before leaving Spain—and these people may be a bunch of crackpots and buffoons, but, Tom continues, we now feel as though we belong to some larger narrative.

At the albergue there's a very old man we've seen for the last few nights; when Tom first slept in a bunk bed above him he'd wondered if the guy had fought in the Spanish Civil War. We hear he's eighty-three, his name is Santiago, and this is his tenth Camino. Tom says, "Come on, this can't be his tenth Camino."

"It's probably just his sixth or something."

Total distance walked: 458.7 km; distance left to Santiago: 335.3 km.

THURSDAY 2 JULY

DEPART: Mansilla de las Mulas 07h30
ARRIVE: León 11h30
18.6 km (11.6 mi)

The walk into León is short and uneventful. Tom and I argue but we express our differences respectfully and there's no edge of resentment. We pass Santiago, the eighty-three-year-old; frankly the guy's pretty slow. We check into a five-star hotel and go for Chinese food.

Total distance walked: 477.3 km; distance left to Santiago: 316.7 km.

FRIDAY 3 JULY

REST: León 11h30

After three weeks of mocking the ski-pole set, I buy a set of ski poles. We go to a park to meet Tim, Wiebke, Lee the Welshman, David the Hungarian, and some new French Canadiennes on the scene for a picnic. We're told the Camino takes heavy casualties friendship-wise, and everybody congratulates us for our state of being able to still talk to each other. Among the new French Canadiennes is an opaline-eyed ingénue named Rachel, whom David has immediately taken to. The Québécoises are the vixens of the Camino. Someone tells us they're actually vixens generally.

SATURDAY 4 JULY

DEPART: León 06h15
ARRIVE: Hospital de Órbigo 16h30
36.5 km (21.9 mi)

We cross the river and trudge through the seedier districts of western León toward the ring of industrial suburbs, the auto *talleres* and *ferreterías*. We cross the busy road and come to a fork. There's a sign indicating two different alternatives for the next stretch and we argue about which way to go. A woman rolls up her window's portcullis and gestures in the proper direction. We start down the road. We turn around and see David and Rachel behind us, wave. David walks his ducky gait, feet a little splayed and hips describing a loose and wide arc. They look mostly interested in walking together, so we let them pass.

We're soon set upon by trees, dense green vertical foliage the likes of which we've not seen since we ascended to the sublime meseta. We're setting a brisk pace. We stop in a drab town for a coffee and fruit, and a few minutes later David arrives, without Rachel but with a lanky Norwegian named Martin. Martin has stringy shoulder-length hair, a wide-brimmed hippie-farmer hat, filthy sandals, a shirt with a hip recycling slogan in Norwegian, and a kind of Scandinavian lope. We take to him immediately. Rachel has told David she wanted to walk on ahead at a faster pace; David seems a little dejected.

A butterfly loops into Tom's face and Tom jumps as though he's had a flaming brick tossed at him. Martin leaps to help, as yet unaware that Tom has a hard time distinguishing between bugs. The road ahead of us is flat and long and uninteresting and we pass the time in idle comparative linguistics: the longest word in Hungarian, the mutual intelligibility of Norwegian and Swedish, the mystery of Finno-Ugric isolation. David has subtitled several episodes of *Scrubs* on the internet; his English is heavily accented and he has a tendency to forget articles, but his phraseology is unusually elegant, and he has a hilarious command of outdated American idioms. He likes to say things like "Goody gumdrops!" and it's weird to hear that sort of thing without any irony. We pass some sort of fenced stork preserve; the fence appears to be doing its job.

Martin admits he started in Roncesvalles, i.e. he skipped the miserable mountain climb of day one, and we tell him he's not a true pilgrim. The rest of us are forever bonded together by the misery of the first day. He looks a little hurt and we tell him we're kidding, but that's only half-true.

It's the fourth of July. Tom sings "The Star-Spangled Banner" and makes a mere two errors; he needs prompting only three times. We do a national-anthem round. The Norwegian one is a killer track, rousing and catchy, and Martin sings it in a classy baritone as we march along. We will go on to enthusiastically recommend the Norwegian national anthem to others. David sings Hungary's with a toneless solemnity. Tom chimes in at what seems like the perfect moment with an imaginary cymbal clash. David appreciates the gesture but says the song is neither happy nor triumphant. It's about how the Hungarian people have been repeatedly fucked for more than a thousand years and please god can they have a break. He says it's the only whiny national anthem.

Later, on the same hot, straight, boring road, I ask Martin and David if they ever wonder, in an hour like this, why they're doing the Camino. David says it occurs to him now and again that this used to be punishment, not a *voluntary* thing that we maybe now think fun. We pass through some cactus-leaved corn and leafy salad crops and across a long bridge into a village.

At the albergue a young American with vacant eyes tells us that when he hit puberty he shifted rapidly from being predominantly left-brained to being predominantly right-brained and in recent years he's been discovering hemi-syncing. He cups his hands over his brow. Soon he'll be living a life of balance. Then he tells us that he's in an open marriage and that he took a bus today from León, his first bus of the Camino, that he really needed to take a day off because he has crotch rot. To the non-native English speakers he carefully explains that he has a normal foot fungus but it's on his genitals.

I talk to a Belgian malingering in the kitchen. I ask whether he's from the Flemish or the Walloon part, ordinarily a question that makes most Belgians feel thrillingly recognized and understood. He looks at me with a pointed placidity and says that he doesn't understand why the world is so quick to draw borders and boundaries. The idea of the Camino, he explains with an acid gentility, is that we are all one.

Total distance walked: 513.8 km; distance left to Santiago: 280.2 km.

SUNDAY 5 JULY

DEPART: Hospital de Órbigo 07h10
ARRIVE: Santa Catalina de Somoza 16h15
27 km (16.2 mi)

An hour into the morning walk Tom asks David how he'll feel when he gets to Santiago. David speaks very slowly and exactly all the time. "When you arrive at Santiago," he finally says, "you are supposed to ask God to forgive you, but I am thinking maybe it is I who will forgive God."

Next to a mud hut there's a Subaru and some volunteers providing drinks and snacks to pilgrims. I meet Kiyomi, a thirty-year-old Japanese woman who's doing her field-work on the Camino for her dissertation in cultural anthropology. She did the Camino once last year, and this year is doing a stretch of the Camino Francés, the route we're on (the more traveled and waymarked one), and a stretch of the more rugged Camino del Norte, which runs along the Cantabrian coast.

Kiyomi tells me about the most famous Japanese pilgrimage, a tour of eighty-eight temples on the island of Shikoku. "The Christian pilgrimage," she says, "like Camino, is straight line, but the Buddhist pilgrimage is circle." She says she wants to overturn the theories of the previous generation. I ask her what they were. She says the best-known theorist claimed that the pilgrimage is anti-modern. It is a space where hierarchies are upset and the social relations are made freer. But she says she thinks that is wrong, because now life itself is more free, life itself is less stable, and so it doesn't make sense anymore to think of pilgrimages as trips outside of modernity.

We split up for lunch and Tom and I are happy to be alone again for a while. The road runs straight up the side of a ridge and we know that the next day sees the Camino's highest point, a steep climb and one which we've anticipated with some dread for the last three weeks. Once we pass that peak we enter the final ten stages, the last third, and neither of us knows how we'll feel once we're really nearing the end.

Total distance walked: 540.8 km; distance left to Santiago: 253.2 km.

MONDAY 6 JULY

DEPART: Santa Catalina de Somoza 05h10
ARRIVE: Ponferrada 18h30
46 km (28.6 mi)

In the morning Tom gets good news over email, which makes us think that maybe we'll have the resources to do the very long day we've planned. It's six or seven kilometers uphill but the gradient is mild and we don't notice the exertion. The landscape is the low purple shrubbery of Celtic highlands, wildflowers of yellow and amethyst and violet in a low groundcover, planted in shelves of thin shale. The mountains are old slovenly humps that round out just below the heavy ceiling of mist. There are more pilgrims than we're used to, but this is a popular point to begin, just before the Cruz de Ferro, a plain iron cross set into a little hill of devotional rocks at the Camino's highest point, about fifteen hundred meters. We walk by indifferently.

We're not talking so much today and I spend a lot of time thinking about what David and Kiyomi said—about whether this is a penance or whether this is fun, about whether God will forgive us or we will forgive God, about how we ought to understand the relationship of this experience to daily lives of catching trains and answering emails and deciding where to dine. I think that what I had been trying to say to Tom, on the day we fought about religion, was that a good ritual is roomy enough to accommodate a lot of different purposes, to fulfill a host of needs—even needs that may conflict with one another. The nice thing about plodding toward the final goal of Santiago is that we feel freed up in the meantime for a surprising lot of emotional experiences. I start to bring this up but I'm afraid we'll retreat into the old rationalist/shtetl roles. And we've been getting along so well.

The last bit of the day, all along asphalt roads, is hot and long and we are in great discomfort but we manage to raise our spirits with impressions of our favorite Camino characters. We arrive at the four-star hotel without wanting to claw each other's eyes out. We Facebook-message with David and Wiebke to coordinate meeting up the next night.

Total distance walked: 586.8 km; distance left to Santiago: 207.2 km.

TUESDAY 7 JULY

REST: Ponferrada

We spend the day at the mall. In the evening we stop by the albergue to find David. Some Germans, a man and his two sons, ask me to photograph them in front of the Ponferrada waymark, 202 kilometers to Santiago. He says they've just started today, were in fact in Dortmund this very morning, and I say how nice and then suggest, helpfully, that they ought to consider walking the Camino de Santiago sometime. Tom thinks it's rude but I can tell they haven't understood, and besides, what's really rude is starting in Ponferrada and fronting like you're doing the Camino. We will see the German on and off and feel bad that his sons are always wearing headphones and walking a kilometer in front of him.

We go for pizza with David and Tim. Tim says that he's hesitated to tell us this but that the gossip about the two of us some weeks before was that we were a couple. We say that even if we were so inclined we wouldn't be each other's types, would probably want someone skinnier. I deliver my standard line about being half-gay on my father's side and it goes over huge with Tim, who has really started to like us, and we him.

WEDNESDAY 8 JULY

DEPART: Ponferrada 06h45
ARRIVE: Pereje 16h20
27.7 km (17.2 mi)

In the morning we're talking about religion again and David tells a joke involving the classic problem of the Jew who finds a big pile of money on the Sabbath. He tells it in such a rote way, so boyish and robotic and Hungarian, and he seems to have such sympathy for the plight of the Jew, who really must be vexed to have found such a great big pile of money on the Sabbath, that I don't get annoyed. Tom does, though.

We stop for breakfast and watch some coverage of Pamplona's festival of San Fermin on TV. It's hard to figure out what the five or six color commentators can possibly be saying about the strategy involved in running as fast as one possibly can away from a bunch of bulls piped narrowly at you, but apparently it's quite a lot, because they keep alternating between replays—amateur and professional clips of near- and quasi-gorings—and discussion.

We pass a standard poured-concrete waymarker with the inset yellow-and-blue scallop shell. There are, as usual, a few rocks placed on top, and David explains the meaning of the custom. He says the idea is that you're supposed to pick up a rock and carry it some distance as one carries the burden of one's sins, then put it down on a waymarker and pick up the burden someone else has placed down, knowing someone else will take up the weight of your sins for some distance in the future. Tom and David make fun of the spiritual math and general cheesiness of this sin-carrying tradition but I think it's one of the nicer Camino customs. I pick a small one up but it's oddly heavy and I put it back down.

We stop for a soda and a respite from all the new pilgrims and Tom goes into the bathroom and comes out and says he's just seen the gypsy child inside—she's maybe eight, has a beaded headscarf and dark skin and is walking with two middle-aged Spanish women who don't look at all related to her—whom we've seen on and off for the last

few days. Tom says that while they were in the bathroom the gypsy girl stole the caps from his teeth and then tried to sell them back to him in exchange for not killing her own baby. David notes that this sort of joke would get Tom elected prime minister of Hungary.

We look at the Brierley and see that we have two options running out of the next village, a difficult one up the ridge and an easy one on the road. I'm sick of the road and suggest we take the harder one and Tom says he's in a lot of pain and doesn't want to do that. He says that in the past he's consistently capitulated in this sort of situation, has gone the extra ten or twenty kilometers at the end of the day just because I've wanted to. The implication that somehow I've been getting my way all the time makes me bristle—I feel as though we've each been pretty accommodating of the other—and I suggest that maybe I'll do the hard one alone, meet him later on or tomorrow. Tom is hurt. I say fine, I won't, but then when we start walking I charge up ahead. Tom lets me walk by myself for a little while but then catches up to me and apologizes and I explain myself and apologize too, and we both feel better.

Total distance walked: 614.5 km; distance left to Santiago: 179.5 km.

THURSDAY 9 JULY

DEPART: Pereje 07h30
ARRIVE: Alto do Poio, Galicia 18h00
35.5km (22 mi)

We're in no rush to begin a hard day, the only one really at all remotely comparable to day one. We will be crossing into the hilly backwoods night-soil manufactory that is Galicia, the last province of the walk, and feel dilatory. We begin the hard asphalted assault up the road. We have a fight.

The fight's content is immaterial. Formally, both of us feel anxious about something, the same thing, and each of us feels that the anxiety of the other is just silly, that he has nothing to worry about. The very existence of Tom's anxiety, so absurd in comparison to my own legitimate anxiety, is an insult. We exchange clipped retorts. Tom says, "I'm going to drop back a bit for a while." I don't look at him and say okay and then speed up and pass two lame late-starting fakers.

The upshot of the Camino's lack of a point is its lack of distractions. Bereft of broader fixation you dwell on small things. As I think about how wounded and misunderstood I feel, I start to think—not out of any virtue, but out of pure blank boredom—that Tom really must be convinced, understandably, that his comparative problem is in fact worse, is indeed much worse, than mine. He perceives it as an insult that I've not myself recognized this. I think—again not out of introspective exertion or sympathetic imagination but entirely because I have nothing better to do than entertain myself by mulling this whole thing over from his side—that he really was pretty upstanding and exemplary in coming to me to apologize the day before. Maybe I ought to apologize, here, so now after ten or twenty or thirty minutes of walking uphill on the brutal asphalt road, I stop and wait—a pretty long time, I'll be honest, since I've made great time alone—and he comes over and before he can apologize first I blurt out, "This is stupid and I'm really sorry." He says, "Yeah, me too" and we hug in the road.

We continue uphill, proud of ourselves for this quick reconciliation, sure that we are one of the few Camino friendships with what Tom calls the "tensile strength" to last this long with so little strife. At some point we stop walking, and a minute later here's David again, duckily approaching us.

We walk with him along the valley floor toward the steepest section of the whole Camino. He tells me that after he went away to university (on the other side of Budapest), his mom freaked out with loneliness and decided to have a baby with the cable guy, who, it turns out, was also a Chippendales dancer. We clear the steep hill into Galicia. It was indeed horribly steep but we really only stopped once.

Galicia, upon initial investigation and then exhaustively confirmed, is a province of desperate dogs, thatched-roof rondavels, cow shit, and too-slanted hay fields mid-thresh. Somebody's always threshing or baling on a slope that looks dangerous. The threshing looks unsafe. The other thing about Galicia is that they waymark the Camino on the half-kilometers, so you've a much steadier idea of your own progress. I like knowing as little as possible about our progress.

We set off downhill with Tim and David but then David's gone ahead. He's always storming off. I hazard the idea that maybe he doesn't like Tim very much. Tim agrees, and then we all agree that it is possible David feels about gays what he seems to feel about gypsies and perhaps Jews. Tom asks why we don't say anything to him and I say sometimes you just like someone enough to want not to rule them out and Tim says that the problem is that you find you have to rule out an awful lot of people. Tom reports, genuinely, that he's had an important lesson in tolerance here. Later we will think that all of this speculation was nonsense, and that David is just constantly chasing girls he thinks might be a short ways ahead of us.

At the albergue there are only five beds left and this priest in training, whom I don't like but who loves Tom, makes a big passive-aggressive stink about it, so Tom lets him take our spots and checks us in to the hotel across the road.

Total distance walked: 650 km; distance left to Santiago: 144 km.

FRIDAY 10 JULY

DEPART: Alto do Poio 08h00
ARRIVE: Sarria 17h10
31 km (19.3 mi)

In the morning Tom says it's the first day that he really absolutely doesn't at all feel like walking. I feel similarly. We're only six days, at the most, from Santiago and now we've climbed the two final hills, are in the final province, and everything feels as though it's drawing toward its close.

We walk with a German student of mixed Italian and Hungarian parentage who says she feels like an Italian in Germany and a German in Italy and never really feels at home anywhere. She just started the Camino. We tell her the most important thing to know is that at any time if you're walking with someone you can say, cheerfully, "Buen Camino!" and that's the signal for them to be on their way. We get to a little café and decide to have a coffee and she says "Buen Camino" and is on her way.

We walk alone for a while along a hillside above a sink of endless fog; occasional hilltops form islands in the vast white. We come over a peak and then down along the back side of the ridge; in the valley the flat slate roofs look like collections of unfurnished patios. The sun is very strong today and the Galician hills a wild bosky green. Tom sees a small snake. He is paralytically phobic.

We walk with a cute Italian named Lisa, who works coordinating fair-trade campaigns in the UK and lived, briefly, on the Channel Island of Sark, about which I happen to know a great deal. She tells us that she's doing the Camino alone, started about a week after us. We pass Tim and Wiebke at a restaurant but keep walking. We tell Lisa that they're the people we've been walking with intermittently and she says that she's really

enjoyed not walking with anyone. She says she's tried not to get too caught up in groups and gossip. She says she likes meeting someone and talking for maybe thirty minutes. We guess we've only got ten minutes or so left. She says goodbye at an albergue.

At dinner with Tim we watch the constant news updates about the death of a twenty-seven-year-old in Pamplona, the first fatal goring in fourteen years. Spanish television aspires to snuff film. The death makes us all a bit reserved.

Tim says that there are traditional tales about the Camino's being populated with devils who try to distract pilgrims from reaching Santiago. He says he started the Camino with a bunch of really wholesome goal-seekers and look where he's ended up, with a couple of cynical devils like us. We protest, but he seems pretty resigned to this story. We stand outside the restaurant after dinner and say goodbye to him; we're taking another day off in the morning and he's carrying on and we might not see him again. It's a down moment but there doesn't seem to be too much to say. After all, we've only been walking with each other, on and off, for a week or two, and as of a week ago we hadn't even liked the guy.

Total distance walked: 681 km; distance left to Santiago: 113 km.

SATURDAY 11 JULY

REST: Sarria

It's just over a hundred kilometers from Santiago. This is the last city you can start from and still gain the plenary indulgence. From here on out the albergues will be full and the Camino will be thick with pretenders. Facebook creates a strange record of other people's progress. Andy's status says that he's within fifty kilometers. Martin's says he's also closing in. It's a funny feeling to imagine these people finishing; just a few days or weeks ago we were walking aside them and now they're about to disappear into the ether like Mayans. We might be in Santiago as soon as Wednesday, in Finisterre by the weekend, and then we, too, I guess, will disappear.

SUNDAY 12 JULY

DEPART: Sarria 05h40
ARRIVE: Gonzar 14h20
29 km (18 mi)

We can sense the new density of pilgrims even before dawn. They are spectral in the path. At breakfast we watch a bit of the old trample-and-gore at San Fermin with some posh British schoolboys doing the Camino on bikes.

The trail this morning is probably the pleasantest of the trip, with mossy dilapidated stone walls alongside and overhead a canopy of chestnut and oak. It's like an English lane with a distinct Galician smell. There's a relaxed sense of overgrowth and decay. Every now and then there's some half-assed attempt at agriculture. It has not occurred to Galicians to plant corn in rows.

We sit down against a wall with an outdoorsy Chicagoan named Bill. He's elaborately repairing his feet. He tells us about his Camino romance, a Swiss named Chantal. They walked together for ten days but then he somehow lost her, he's not sure how, and no longer knows how he might get in touch with her.

Along comes this combat-vested German. The three of us look down at the ground, hoping he'll pass. The combat-vested German is the least popular guy on the Camino. He comes over and stands in front of Bill and says hello. Bill looks up and says hi. He says to Bill that he was waiting for someone in Sarria. Bill says who? German says guess. Bill says he doesn't know. German says you. Bill says me? German fishes into one of his unused ammo pockets and pulls out a piece of paper. On the outside it says *Most Wanted Bill* and on the inside, written in a girlish hand, is Chantal's email address and phone number.

Bill continues along with us, his spirits now very high, and we meet up with Thomas, a French Canadian actor, and Nico, a German, whom Bill has been walking with for a few days. We continue on as five. Bill and I pull ahead and he tells me about his experiences with wilderness therapy and trail-side conflict resolution. I like him a lot. We all decide to stop together after about thirty kilometers; I feel as though I could keep going—my feet, I realize, no longer really hurt much—but Thomas and Tom and Bill are all spent, and there are so many pilgrims in Galicia that it becomes hard to get a place in an albergue after three o'clock. We are all in outstanding moods.

At the albergue we meet Nora and Alina, two beautiful nineteen-year-olds from Frankfurt who've just finished their schooling and are out in the world for the first time alone. We've been seeing them for a few days but haven't had the chance to meet them yet. They join us for dinner and I have my first beer in weeks. Alina has dreadlocks and poise. She takes care of Nora, who is a redhead and a little shy. By the time we go to sleep we've all decided to continue along together in the morning, and then probably go the whole way to Santiago, which is now a mere eighty kilometers distant. We are starting to feel its gravity.

Total distance walked: 710 km; distance left to Santiago: 84 km.

MONDAY 13 JULY

DEPART: Gonzar 05h20
ARRIVE: Melide 14h45
32 km (19.9 mi)

David says people call this the "Galician gallop." In the albergue people begin waking up at four thirty. We fumble outside into the thick dark. We're seven now, with Bill and Thomas and Nico and Nora and Alina, and though we've only just come together the day before, we've thrilled to a profound and spontaneous sense of collusion. We have only a few weak flashlights with which to look for yellow arrows.

These first two hours are perhaps my favorite of the entire Camino. We walk along at a brash clip in the blue-fogged night, the light rain not so much falling as purging itself from the mist. The only sounds—we're too tired to talk, too alone with our slow morning thoughts—are the plink and short drag of our tired poles against the ground. I'm keeping pace with Alina. Alina and I aren't looking at each other but we're keeping pace almost exactly. We match soft footfalls in the dirt. We cannot even see each other, couldn't if we wanted to, but it's clear we're both making an effort here.

Our figures gain some clarity in the blaze of dawn through the fog behind us. And we're really just *smoking* everybody else, passing people who've probably been walking since midnight. We all seem to feel so good, so similar in stride, so fluid and casual in conversation. We pause well together. The day passes in euphoric canopied-lane muffle. I walk in my pink tanktop and white Intersport headband and sunglasses. Nico tells Tom that he wouldn't wear my outfit alone sitting on his own sofa. All I can think about is how much I'm enjoying this, how present and content I feel on the Camino right now, how sad its end will be. We decide on an itinerary that will put us into Santiago, as a group, by noon on Wednesday, and we confirm that we'll all go along there together. It fortifies us to know we'll be arriving in this assembly.

By the time we reach the end of an easy thirty-two kilometers—the longest day the

girls have done the whole time—even Tom has decided we don't have to stay in a hotel, we can stay in the albergue with everybody else. As we walk into town we see Chantal standing there; she's been waiting for Bill. Bill looks a bit sheepish about breaking his promise to reach Santiago with us, but we nod and walk on and won't see them again until they themselves have just arrived in front of the cathedral. We lose Bill but we regain David, who's also been waiting a day in Melide. He doesn't want to finish without us.

Total distance walked: 742 km; distance left to Santiago: 52 km.

TUESDAY 14 JULY

DEPART: Melide 05h40
ARRIVE: Arco do Pino 15h00
32 km (19.9 mi)

At five a.m. we're sitting in the kitchen with a British couple who've been locked out of the albergue all night. The woman tells Tom he looks like Quentin Tarantino. Tom says, "Quentin Tarantino is sort of ugly." The woman looks hurt. "Fuck you," she says, "Quentin Tarantino is my ideal man." Her boyfriend looks away. It's an awkward way to start the penultimate day into Santiago.

We're all quiet in the dark forest. Karolina has written us a Facebook message that we ought to look for a pink shoe off the trail to Arzúa. She's left a message on it for us. But now it's too dark to see much of anything at all. Every little fork in the path brings out a battery of small flashlights looking for arrows. We stop for breakfast after a few hours and watch the final day of San Fermin. On the way out of the bar we decide that they should combine the running of the bulls with the Tour de France.

While lingering at breakfast we've squandered our early lead, and now the path is again pretty well trafficked. Thomas and David and I pull ahead of the rest and have a quiet conversation about how it feels to have the end in sight. None of us is really sure what to feel.

Time slows down as we approach the final night's rest. Alina and I escape everybody else and find each other to walk for a while ahead. She tells me about her unusual family situation and how sure she is that she won't be able to communicate this experience to anybody on her return, especially her boyfriend. She says she's been keeping a journal but everything sounds so false on paper.

Neither of us wants to stop where we've all agreed to stop. It's only twenty more kilometers to Santiago, and we know we won't sleep tonight. We wonder if we could just keep walking on, if the others wouldn't notice that we passed the albergue. We consider just telling the rest of them that we're going ahead, that we can't stop when we're so close, but she neither wants to nor can leave Nora, they are inseparable, and I neither want to nor can leave Tom, who would just take the bus. Alina and I run ahead up to the albergue, madly assured in the driving rain.

Total distance walked: 774 km; distance left to Santiago: 20 km.

WEDNESDAY 15 JULY

DEPART: Arco do Pino 05h40
ARRIVE: Santiago de Compostela 10h45
20 km (12.4 mi)

Before dinner a guy came into the albergue and asked after a Nico, then pushed through into the dorm and threw his arms around Nico. This was Sebastian. Nico had walked with him for two and a half weeks some time ago but they'd gotten separated, and Sebastian didn't want to reach Santiago by himself.

In the predawn of the day we are to arrive in Santiago, Sebastian and I walk together. He tells me that he has everything in life but that he doesn't feel happy, and that he's spent the last two weeks or so walking alone and trying to figure out why he's not. He has a girlfriend in Düsseldorf but it feels wrong. In his first week on the Camino he met a Canadian named Katy and they walked together for two weeks and they fell in love.

One day Sebastian and Katy were walking and Sebastian said he couldn't walk with her anymore. He couldn't do it to his girlfriend and himself and her, and they had to stop now. She agreed. They both cried. They moved together for another ten or twenty steps and then he just started to walk faster. He walked faster and cried and did not look back, and he neither stopped nor looked back for hours, and by the end of that long day he was far enough ahead of her that he did not see her again. He has not seen her since.

Sebastian and Katy had started a Camino gang, he tells me, called the White Snails, for the more or less dumb and obvious reasons of both being pale and slow, and now every three or four kilometers he stops and finds a large rock and draws a white snail with a paint pen. He stations these prominently. For the last two or three hundred kilometers Katy has been seeing them four or five times a day each day. As it gets light he stops and draws one.

At breakfast the café television shows the closing festivities of San Fermin, where they play a greatest-hits collection of the gorings and tramplings we've followed so closely for our final seven days of walking. It's been a nice element of continuity, these breakfast gorings, and we are somber as we watch the mayor of Pamplona conclude it. It's raining and we linger a little longer than usual. Sebastian takes out his ukulele and sings Jason Mraz's "I'm Yours." I ordinarily dislike both ukuleles and Jason Mraz, very much, but there's something so tender and unguarded about the way Sebastian plays the song that Tom and Alina and Nora and David and I can barely look at each other. I lift up my eyes to the hill that separates us from Santiago.

The emotions of this final stretch are muddled and complicated and we all keep talking around how we're feeling but nobody settles on what it is. Alina has an odd sensation in her gut, a comic warm strangeness, something a little uncanny. We're all shot through with sad exhilaration, with nervous euphoria. Over the course of the last few kilometers we circulate fussily. There are stretches where we're all alone, in a long single file, connecting our group to the dozens of people in front and behind us, and stretches where each of us makes sure to spend some time walking with everyone else.

A lot of the conversations are inane; it's difficult to say anything serious that doesn't seem trivial or overwrought. We re-collect into the whole group and talk about the differences between the English and the metric system. Tom says he doesn't get the metric system, that it never sounds right to him. It sounds too clinical. He demands, almost angrily, to know how people discuss dick size. "Do they just say, like, I have a half-meter dick?" Thomas says that would be very big. We remind each other of the comic detritus of the internet. We are two Americans, a Hungarian, a French Canadian, and four Germans, and everyone has seen "Chuck Norris Facts"—except Tom—and many of the same dumb, hilarious YouTube videos. It's as strong an argument as any for global culture.

We cross the city limits into Santiago and make our way through the usual awful car-dealership suburbs. We're walking a little more slowly than we have been, each in some private commotion. We see Martin walking back from the cathedral with his compostela and David shouts "Martin!" and we go to

hug him and knock over an older Spanish lady. In the following days walking around Santiago we will aimlessly retrace this final stretch—it's the way to the mall, where they have a McDonald's and a bowling alley—and none of us will have the faintest memory of these few minutes.

We arrive at the old city and enter its alleys. We're just around the corner from the cathedral. There are two sets of stairs that run beneath a broad stone arch down to the square on which the cathedral fronts. We stop to make sure we all go through the arch together.

I turn to Tom and say, "I was thinking about Alina and Nora, and they only started in Burgos, and Martin only started in Roncesvalles, and Karo took a bus from Sahagún to Sarria, and maybe we did start hundreds and hundreds of kilometers earlier, but I just realized that no matter where you started, right now, before you go into that square and stand in front of that cathedral, you are feeling the same sense of awe and dread and the same anxiety about what this has meant and what comes next. It really doesn't matter where you started. You still did the Camino."

Tom gives me a hug, seems proud of me for this new generosity. He and I feel very close. He says, "I know." Then he asks, "Even the people who started in Sarria?"

"No, not them," I say.

We walk down the steps past a man playing some dirge on his Galician bagpipes and come through the arch and into the square and stand before the cathedral, a looming patinaed parliament of a building. Paned windows on the façade give it the look of a baroque train station. Other pilgrims are filing in around us, their heads craned at the cathedral and their pace slow and unsteady. There are, most peculiarly, a great many people milling about who did not walk here. We drop our things in the middle of the plaza, let them splay, and embrace. We're punchy and dumbstruck. David is crying, and Alina, and everyone. We sit down on the stones of the plaza and lean against our bags and look up at the cathedral and look around at this group and feel a slow unwinding into shared numb marvel. We look back and forth, dazed. We've walked five hundred miles. It's unclear what we're supposed to do now.

THURSDAY 16– SUNDAY 19 JULY

DEPART: Finisterre 88km (52 mi)

We walked three more days to the ocean through agreeable terrain.

Finisterre is so named because medievals thought it was where the earth ended. It's not even the westernmost point in Europe. The Iberian Celtics journeyed here to watch the sun die in the ocean.

The sight of the ocean would reserve the end's true power, I thought, but that isn't the case. I'd initially imagined Santiago was the real finale only for people who expected redemption of their sins. None of us felt that way. For us, Santiago was an arbitrary place, the last big settlement before the ocean, the place where a lot of our friends stopped. The ocean did not feel arbitrary. The ocean was the incontrovertible thing that stopped you from being able to keep walking. It had the natural logic of a terminus.

But where our arrival at Santiago was exhilarated and humble, our encounter with the ocean holds no shock or alarm or reverberation. It is a vast gray impersonal reservoir. The distance to the ocean is just a long walk. Santiago is a decreed point; the distance to Santiago is a long procession. Its logic is human. The walk to Santiago was an old command we volunteered to lend new force. We had affirmed a kind of freedom in making a choice to feel obligated, in agreeing to endure through a rite endured, not for any explicit reason but for a whole secret constellation of them, by great flights of other pilgrims.

We all have walked our Camino, and have our other Caminos to walk. Tom and Alina and Nora and David and I got on the bus back to Santiago.

ALI

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47

blood, sweat, and a few teeth. He drank his honey-flavored water from his water bottle one last time, disrobed, and wearily stood up from his stool. The tenacious bugger still had legs, even as his knees had finally begun to buckle. The bell rang.

I waited a week before calling the bank's loss-mitigation department again, anticipating another spectacle of mind-numbing, head-scratching inanity and countless runarounds.

Surprisingly, the underling I reached was uncharacteristically engaging.

"Oh, we were just waiting for your profit-and-loss statements for the past three months and updated financials."

"Really? No one informed me or my clients. What exactly do you need for their profit and loss? And didn't we just send you all of the financials a week ago?"

"Well, since they're self-employed, we need some proof of income and expenses for their business. And please send us their latest pay stubs and bank-account statements."

This news was both welcoming and frustrating. Apparently Wells Fargo either really hates trees or really adores fax machines, because in my experience they repeatedly ask you for the same materials you've already sent.

It was encouraging, though, because the bank was now also asking for new information, and seemed intent on actually reviewing the financial statements instead of callously feeding them to their computer god, which would instantly condemn the family to foreclosure perdition.

Unfortunately, Natalie had not compiled a reliable profit-and-loss statement in months. Over the course of the week, though, we assembled an accurate three-month snapshot of the Lipkin family business. The family had—just barely—made a small profit, which would ensure they could afford reduced monthly payments to the bank.

I lined up the numbers properly in the Excel sheets and bolded the key information, placing everything in a strong Times New Roman, size 12 font so that even an elementary-school student would be able to find the "income," "expenses," and "profit" totals.

I topped off the package with a lengthy legal-demand letter outlining all the potential violations the bank had perpetrated with their "stated income" loan to the family, and reminded them that the house was continuing to depreciate in value and that the family would seek legal options if they were not afforded a good-faith payment plan.

Standing before the fax machine, I held in my hands what I hoped was the final loan-modification package I would have to prepare for the Lipkins. I engaged in my customary ritual: I recited a small prayer, blew it over the papers, double-checked the fax number, punched it in the machine, and sent it twice to appease my OCD.

The bear reeled against the ropes after I hit him with two uppercuts and the final knockout hook. His eyes rolled, his knees weakened, he desperately flailed against the ropes, and finally he went down, leaving a