

FIN DEL MUNDO

by Clare Wilson

Day 1

On the Camino de Santiago you tell everyone you meet that you're going to throw your sins in the sea.

Hearing this, most people promptly power-walk up the path away from you or dawdle behind until they vanish. This is your sign they can't handle you. You're used to such snubs. Since your break-up with Ethan six weeks ago, you've resigned yourself to being alone forever. You've streamlined your life: striding through the Spanish countryside with twenty-two pounds of essential belongings strapped to your back. You won't beg for anyone's approval.

Except, that is, when a mid-twenties Italian girl stops and asks, "Your sins?"

You feel unbearable gratitude for her attention, even if tinged with resentment. Somehow, she manages to look glam even in dust and hundred-and-five-degree sunshine, while you're a sweaty mess.

Words rush out of your mouth: "Care to see them?"

The rock you're carrying creates a bulge in your pocket like a cyst or tiny tumor along the line of your hip. Hook it into your palm with your forefinger.

Of course, you're a grown woman of forty who had no intention of carrying a rock when you left Seattle for your Camino, whether or not the guidebook you scoured on the plane reported some superstition about Medieval pilgrims toting stones of different sizes for different magnitudes of guilt, and then casting them into the Atlantic after walking sixty miles without stopping, from Santiago to Fisterra on the coast. Even if you did believe in sin, which you prefer not to, you don't believe it's humanly possible to walk sixty miles without a break.

But this morning, just as you stepped through the doorway of the Pamplona albergue into the street, a stone skittered away from your brand-new hiking shoe. You bent to pick it up: a small ivory disk, freckled with black, three-quarters of an inch across, maybe a quarter-inch thick. Laughable that it might represent sin. A mere rock could never encapsulate your lifelong envy for the good fortune others enjoy but you don't.

You slipped it into your pocket.

The Italian girl bends over it. She has pale gray eyes under the brim of her ball cap. When she lifts her gaze to your face, they examine you like spotlights. "What are your sins?" she asks.

Don't be embarrassed when your mouth drops open. When you find nothing to say. When you wonder if they're the eyes of God examining you. It's been a long day. You aren't used to this much walking, and certainly not to strangers demanding your confession.

Day 2

Puerta la Reina to Estella. All day you avoid acknowledging the unmistakable hotspots on your heels and between your toes that presage blisters. Despite your nurse's training, you don't take your feet out of your shoes to air even once, as if ignoring the problem may solve it.

Day 3

Staggering out of Estella, you confirm that any pride in the resilience of your feet, purportedly gained through years of back-to-back, twelve-hour shifts in ICU units, is completely misbegotten. You hadn't counted on the constant sweat-damp held against your skin by leather hiking shoes and fitted socks in the blazing weather. While the afternoon unfurls through seven miles of sunbaked vineyards, blisters blossom across the balls of both feet like fruiting mushrooms. Other pilgrims pause out of concern for your hobbling, but you grit your teeth into a smile, declaring you are fine, just fine.

By the edge of Los Arcos, pain incinerates your phalanges and metatarsals, leaving only two balloons of fire-filled skin to walk on.

At the albergue, collapse face-first onto a bottom bunk. A long nap will provide the rest that has eluded you the previous nights. Lie motionless for five blissful minutes. Drowsiness wells like a cloud. Close your eyes, un-tense your muscles.

A long, liquid snore rattles through the air.

On the next bed, three feet away, a man of fifty, wearing red briefs and nothing else, reclines in flabby ease. He keeps snoring, peaceful and content. You have a prime view of his feet: zero blisters.

Stifle the urge to scream by smashing your face into your pillow and clenching your teeth. You recognize this kind of regular, incessant snoring; every night for the last five years, with Ethan starfished in bed beside you, you lay awake hearing it, aware it would not stop. You'd resigned yourself to enduring it forever—forever, that is, until you overheard your least favorite coworker use the word, “life-changing,” about her recent trip on the Camino.

You thought, *I need my life changed.*

A couple weeks later, you boxed all your portable belongings during a day off work, moved them into your best friend's spare bedroom, left a note on Ethan's pillow that said, “You can keep the furniture,” and bought a plane ticket from Seattle to Barcelona.

Flop on your back to the tune of crinkling plastic. The sound fills you with dread: the anti-bedbug mattress will hold your body's humidity against you all night. Wonder what's the probability of losing your mind on the Camino. Sleepless nights, endless walking, minimal company—and this despite the fact that every night the albergue beds are filled with bodies, and every day loud, cheerful groups of Europeans speed past on the path, shouting ‘Buen Camino’ and raising your hackles.

Close your burning eyes. Is transformation too much to ask? When your coworker gave you this stupid idea, you'd been reading that Japanese book about eliminating whatever doesn't spark joy. A plan had snapped into place:

dump Ethan, get rid of everything non-essential, walk the Camino de Santiago. You'd be a new person. You'd silence the ravenous desire for approval, validation, admiration that has infected your life for decades, discontent steadily transmuted into small-minded schadenfreude. You'd finally figure out how all the happy people—former dates and coworkers and classmates and acquaintances, for whose ease and confidence you've longed—manage to thrive, free from your secret, shameful need.

Finger the stone in your pocket and blame your grandmother. She raised you while your single mom worked. Even though your mom refused to have you baptized, your grandmother taught you catechism on the sly. At inopportune moments, the tenth commandment still floats in the back of your mind in a bizarre refrain:

Thou shalt not, thou shalt not, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's good!

You aren't even Catholic, yet somehow you ended up with Catholic guilt over your character flaws.

But guilt doesn't trouble you now. You're hot, sweaty, blistered, lonely, tired, bored. With only three words of Spanish, you've barely managed to ask for food in cafés; your stomach keeps up a constant grumble. Now some fat old man snores beside you, happily unconscious.

You want to kill him.

Even as you realize that this wish outstrips any other sin on your list, you reassure yourself: *Everyone in this dorm would thank me.*

Who are you becoming?

Day 4

Logroño is seventeen miles away. Teetering on swollen, blistered soles, you wonder if you're still trapped in a bad dream. If you make it to Logroño at all, it will be long after five. All the albergue beds will be taken. You'll be reduced to sleeping on a bench like a beggar. No one back home will ever see you again. Not that anyone will care. Certainly not Ethan, who seemed relieved when you called him before you started packing to say you'd be gone by evening.

“Do you need help moving things out?” he'd asked.

You hadn't expected remonstrances or begging. You had hoped he might muster a little regret. But you were only his comfortable habit. Five years ago he'd been charmed by your admittedly great legs in the tiny sequined dress that your best friend made you wear to a Seattle party where everyone else was an artist or author—or sports journalist in Ethan's case—and by the awkward observations you lapsed into when out of your element. Within a few dates, he'd also discovered your encyclopedic knowledge of medical terminology. His admiration for your intelligence intoxicated you—a vast improvement to the reactions (a spectrum of indifference to intimidation) encountered in past, short-lived boyfriends. A man who valued your knowledge and required no prompting to bring up words like ‘marriage,’ and ‘maybe three kids,’ and ‘love’ was a treasure you'd cling to any cost.

Months went by. You began to wonder when that early, enthusiastic version of him had vanished. He'd call you from arenas or playing fields, requesting precise language for injuries he was seeing. You realized he was consulting you like a reference book. Sexy, you thought.

But still, those early conversations over second- and third-date dinners, promising everything you'd ever hoped for, kept you waiting. You remembered them. Surely he did too. For years, you sat on the opposite end of the couch while he typed and requested information. You supplied terms like 'comminuted fracture' and 'dementia pugilistica' in a detached voice, meant to silence your inward panic. Would he ever say anything that mattered again?

Finger the rock in your pocket. Was disappointment a just punishment for stupid choices? You had only hoped someone—anyone, really—might finally offer you the expected milestones of happiness, so that no one else could feel sorry for you anymore. Even if that someone had to be Ethan, who is four years younger and an inch shorter and not as successful, and who let you pay most of the bills. Granted, he did have great hair. At intervals during the last five years, when you envisioned leaving and felt a maw of loneliness open to devour you, his hair alone seemed enough of an excuse to stay.

To your surprise and despite your pessimism, you reach Logroño just before four, in time to claim the last bed in the diocesan albergue. Seminarians from Kenya and Sri Lanka serve a free dinner, which constitutes the first time you've felt full since beginning to walk. At the opposite end of the table, you see the Italian girl. Her gray eyes lock onto yours. "The woman with the sins!" she shouts. Your face flushes.

She insists everyone switch places so you can sit beside her. "I never told my name." She offers her slim, tanned fingers. "Elena."

Take her hand reluctantly and announce: "Sara."

Later the seminarians teach everyone an ancient pilgrim song. When you try to slip away, her hand encircles your wrist. “Stay,” she says. “Sing!”

Ultreia, Suseia, the refrain urges—further! higher!

Mouth the words. You are not inspired.

Day 5

It’s a relief when Elena has already vanished, doubtless two hours gone by the time you make it out the door at seven a.m. She reminds you of the young nurses who keep getting hired into your current ICU. Especially the coworker who went on the Camino—Kelly, at least a decade younger than you, recently promoted to charge nurse, even though you have seniority. You suspect this is because she knows how to laugh over her superiors’ jokes, not to mention protect the doctors’ egos, supplementing their lacking bedside manner with smiles, their hasty diagnoses with advice. You’ve never had that knack. When you see mistakes, instinct kicks in; you correct them aloud, earning a certain respect but no warmth. The only person you couldn’t correct was Ethan. You were afraid of him for years. Or not of him, perhaps—you were afraid of his rejection. If he broke up with you, somehow it would prove you deserved it. You doubt that Kelly suffers such fears.

Safe on the endless ribbon of the Camino, admit two things: one, you hate her; two, you hate yourself for wanting everything she has, including her position, her boyfriend who stops by the nurses’ station with coffees and flowers, her tiny body, her wardrobe. Even her scrubs come across as chic. You’ve speculated she has them tailored. Nobody should look that good in

scrubs. Every time you saw her, she reminded you of your own discontent. That's why you're here, shuffling through long stretches of Logroño's parks, outpaced even by strolling dog-walkers.

Eventually, the path dives into treeless countryside. As your dusty shoes swing across pale gravel, you're amazed at how they keep going, apparently without your volition. Today's stage of the Camino will be even longer than yesterday's: nineteen miles to Najera. When the path veers steeply uphill, you bend, gasping under your pack. "Shit, shit, shit," you whisper, like a marching beat.

A brilliant idea materializes: unsnap all the buckles on the impossibly heavy backpack, drop it behind without looking back, and run away. Or hobble, since your feet are too swollen and tender for running.

The path ahead levels and bends past a stand of scrubby olives. Gulp in deep breaths. Resettle the backpack. Another hill will inevitably lie in wait around the corner, steeper than the one you've already climbed. Close your eyes, fumble at the straps constricting your chest. Decree: *No more*. You'll head back to Logroño and catch the next train Barcelona, not embarrass yourself any longer.

A gravelly voice inserts itself: "Perdón, Señora. Me estas estorbando."

Open your eyes and turn to see who addresses you.

A man of sixty-five or so stands behind you, peering under grizzled eyebrows. A good four inches shorter than you, long gray hair and beard, a leather vest, loose cotton pants, lace-up leather boots. He wears no shirt under the vest and his skin is tanned the color of caramel and heavily lined. Ropy

muscles in his neck and arms. Behind him two donkeys swish their tails at flies. A border collie mutt waits beside him, looking into the distance with the polite disinterest that has characterized all European dogs you've passed so far.

How did this entire caravan come upon you without your hearing a thing?

Repeat your most frequent sentence from the Camino: "No habla Español." Occasionally this prompts other pilgrims to switch to English, but mostly they shrug and move on.

This time the apparition sticks around. "English?" he asks

Say, "Sí," and flush at your mistake. "I mean, yes. Do you speak English?"

"Yes," he says. "I said you are in the way."

Glance around. Realize you're standing in the middle of the path, blocking anyone from passing. Mumble, "I'm so sorry," while you stagger toward the roadside, trying to avoid jagged stones. The pain of stepping on them makes your knees buckle.

"Señora," the man says. "Your bag is too heavy."

Acknowledge this, conceptually. After Kelly first mentioned the Camino, you began to research it at night while Ethan slept—keeping you awake with his snores. You lay in bed, reading posts on forums dedicated to the Camino. Universal consensus: carry ten percent of your body weight. In your case, this clocks in at fifteen pounds.

After an eighteen-year nursing career and a life-long tendency to hoard money against disaster, you could afford the highest-end, lightest-weight, most

multi-functional hiking gear, so the day after you moved out from Ethan's, you headed straight to REI and came home with what you considered the bare minimum for life on the trail. You packed your new backpack, strapped it on, stepped on the scale, not a little proud of your ability to reduce. You were sure the weight would register at fifteen pounds—fourteen, even.

The bag weighed twenty. Three changes of clothes, pajamas, skincare (a woman of forty can't afford to abandon that), sunscreen, toiletries, first aid, bedding, rain gear, flip-flops, an extra outfit to wear after reaching Santiago. You removed everything and tried again, looking without success for items you could eliminate.

You've added water and food since you started walking. A small part of your mind has calculated the true weight at twenty-five pounds, but that's too much to admit. You round down to twenty-two. "There's nothing I can get rid of."

The man doesn't answer. He stares. His lips, which press together, and his brows, which lift, and his eyes, which narrow, all declare more eloquently than words that you labor under many delusions.

Protest his judgment: "I tried! I repacked my bag three times. I never found anything to take out."

"Sí, sí, Señora," he says. "But on the Camino you throw away everything. Adios a todo! It is necessary." He assesses you with narrowed eyes. "But for now, I have special offer. You pay one euro. I put your bag on my donkey and deliver to Najera."

Glance over his head. Confirm that the second donkey is laden with a heap of backpacks, tell-tale pilgrim shells dangling this way and that. Decide: *not some sort of con*. Maybe you can trust this stranger. Unbuckle your pack. He helps slide it down your arms and slings it on top of the other purple and orange and aqua bags roped across the donkey's back.

Suck air through your nose and uncurl your spine. Take a step, expecting the throb of your blisters to evaporate. Instead it multiplies, as if the reduction in pressure has let your swelling assert itself. An embarrassing whimper escapes your lips. You fall hard onto your hands and knees.

The man's boots appear, crunching in the gravel. "Ay, pobrecita," he says. His hand scoops your elbow, hauls you to your feet, slings your weight across his shoulders. Next thing you know, you've been dumped unceremoniously across the first donkey's saddle.

Don't waste time with the protests flickering through your brain. Let your body take care of itself. As soon as you're seated, slump across the animal's long, brown neck, cheek to fur, and crash into sleep.

Day 6

Wake to find the albergue around you abandoned. It's almost eight o'clock, unspeakably late on the Camino, where everyone except you starts at six or earlier to avoid the sweltering afternoon heat. Jump out of bed, relieved when your sore feet let you stand.

While brushing your teeth, wonder if you really need toothpaste on the Camino. No one will care if you have halitosis. You check the tube: three ounces. Not enough to decrease the weight of your bag.

A few minutes later, pause in your packing with a wad of turquoise t-shirt and matching flowered shorts in your hand. Realize you can easily sleep each night in the next day's outfit. Walk to the trashcan, overflowing with disposable sheets stripped from the plastic mattresses. Gulp. Drop your pajamas on the white wads. Consider the bright colors for a second, then shove them deep into the pile, where you can no longer see them.

Shoulder your pack, disappointed it is not perceptibly lighter. You must haul its weight another fifteen miles today. You consider reclaiming the small comfort of your pajamas. To avoid the temptation, run out of the room, snatching your shoes off the rack outside the door.

The stranger from the day before sits in the courtyard, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette and squinting into the morning sunlight while he scratches the collie's ears. His donkeys' reins are looped to the gate which opens onto the Camino.

"You sleep late," he says.

Gape at him. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugs. "I wait for you. Your bag still heavy. You pay one euro and walk to San Domingo. Better without it."

Day 7

Trail behind the stranger and his donkeys again, this time from San Domingo to Belorado. Information dribbles out of him slowly. His name is Rafa—short for Rafael, you suppose. He lives on the Camino. Has for years. Survives by transporting clueless pilgrims' bags between towns, earning maybe twenty euros a day (enough for groceries and a bed if he cares for it, though usually he camps in orchards or gardens while the donkeys graze).

He'll travel the Camino Francés for a month, then switch to the Via de La Plata or the Camino del Norte, or trek down the coastal Camino in Portugal and back up the more ancient path in the center of the country. Sometimes he crosses into France and travels the pilgrim routes to Le Puy or Belgium. Besides English, he's picked up French on the way, and Italian, a smattering of German. In winter, he barter for room and board at private albergues in townspeople's homes, chopping wood and clearing snow and otherwise performing odd jobs to make it worth his hosts' while.

Time your steps to the clop of the donkeys' hooves. Picture a life like Rafa's. The thought makes you anxious. Even the few things in your backpack, heavy though they are, seem too narrow a buffer between yourself and a world fraught with disappointments.

Day 8

In Atapuerca, Rafa informs you, there will be no shops, no cafés. If you want to eat, you will have to cook.

In Agés, a few miles before your stop, scour a tiny grocery tucked inside a café. What can you possibly make with Tetra Paks of tomato puree, jarred

chickpeas, rice, an assortment of canned fruits and vegetables, nothing fresh to speak of? Rafa raises an eyebrow at your complaints, selects randomly from the shelves, and somehow serves up a light, delicately seasoned, summer vegetable soup that evening in the Atapuerca albergue. Other pilgrims crowd around, eager to share, contributing fresh fruit and bread and chorizo.

Ashamed of your failure at resourcefulness, hunch on a bench in the corner with a mug of soup. You're not sure whether you feel excluded from the impromptu feast because you can't join the table's cheerful Spanish babble or because, just like at home, you simply don't belong.

Day 9

Burgos heaves into sight in the late morning, the first large city since you started from Pamplona. The thought of civilization is comforting. Maybe tonight you'll splurge on a hotel room, instead of a bunk in a crowded, humid, snore-rattled albergue.

Don't be surprised when Rafa foils your plan. Instead of circling the city, as he usually does to avoid entanglements between the donkeys and traffic, he follows you downtown. Keep glancing over your shoulder, expecting him to peel off in his own direction at any moment, but he and his menagerie tag along doggedly.

Finally, you have to ask: "Why are you following me?"

He jabs a thumb at his chest. "Yo? Dios mío, I do not follow you. I go to the cathedral. Is Sunday. Peregrinos must attend Mass on Sunday—every day is best, but always Sunday."

As if announced by his dictum, the flamboyant spires of a huge, pristine, Gothic pile erupt above the narrow, cobbled streets. Deafening bells peal above your head, enveloping you in sound like a liquid that vibrates your bones. The flood of music sweeps you into the vast cathedral after Rafa. You find yourself in a side chapel with a tribe of worshippers, some bedecked for Sunday, some sweaty and begrimed from the Camino.

Follow along adeptly enough, memories of Masses with your grandmother excavated by the hymns and rubrics. At the kiss of peace, Rafa turns with a determined expression on his face, grabs your shoulder and pulls you close so that he can plant besos on your cheeks. Then he shakes hands with all the men within reach and bestows more kisses on the women.

Touch your cheek while he's busy. Remember your grandmother's soft, wrinkled lips pressing your skin at long-ago Masses. Remember how grim she looked in her coffin at the wake. You felt relieved she would never meet Ethan. By then you'd been dating him for six months; already you refused to admit to yourself that you were settling. She would have sensed that instantly. You couldn't have borne her disapproval—not of the choice itself, but that you'd made it for all the wrong reasons.

Finger the stone in your pocket.

Day 10

The Meseta begins. Arrowing from Tardajos into acres of alternating sunflowers and wheat, fading into a perfectly flat distance, the path is white and dusty, edged in places with blackberry brambles, never shade trees.

Rafa waits on the edge of town, hand outstretched to take your bag as if you've established a contract. During the day while you trudge alone or pair up with another pilgrim for halting conversation about distances covered and homes left behind, he falls back to make deals with stragglers, or leaps ahead, slowly amassing a neon collection of travelers' belongings. Somehow, he beats you to the next stop—Castrojeriz, twenty-two miles away—where he sits at the shell-marked fountain with your pack propped against his calf. His dog laps noisily at the puddled spillover from countless pilgrims' water bottles and sports bladders.

Day 11

Don't be surprised when the situation finally gets to you.

Demand to know: "So what's all this about? Why are you sticking around? You aren't interested in me, are you?" Immediately regret the question. It hangs in the air between you like the fine grit raised by your shoes to coat your throat and skin.

The edge of Castrojeriz lies behind. The gravel pathway with its yellow shell way-marker opens at your feet. "You mean what?" Rafa asks. "I have interest for everyone."

Realize you've gotten in over your head when it comes to translating the nuances of English. "I mean—well, do you like me?"

Rafa's eyebrows climb his forehead. "Sí, amiga. You think I don't?"

Get even more flustered. Wave your hands to clear the misunderstanding. "No, no. I'm asking what this is. Is it romantic? You don't want to sleep with me or anything, do you?"

Rafa stops dead, as do the donkeys and dog, as if all four are shocked. Watch his nose wrinkle and his eyes squint. He appears to have been accosted by the world's worst odor.

Take the hint. "Okay, I get it. You're not interested. Sorry I asked."

He shakes his head and tugs on the donkeys' reins. The caravan starts forward.

Follow a few steps behind, trying to contain your embarrassment. It gets the better of you. "But seriously, why are you taking care of me?"

He doesn't answer at once. Stew in shame while you wait. Try to distract yourself with the landscape, even though the Meseta hasn't changed in three days of trekking. Still, the sun has barely crested the distant horizon, issuing a wash of deep pink into the sky. The flush slowly lightens to an orange ribbon, and beyond to a blue so pale as to be almost white. Not a single cloud lingers. By now you're familiar with the temperatures this foreshadows. Within an hour, sweat will bead your face and trickle from the crooks of your elbows and knees. Rafa, as always, will seem unaffected.

"Because you are—," he pauses for a beat, "estúpida."

Caught off guard, exclaim, "What?"

Rafa shrugs. “Your bag is too heavy, you do not like being alone but bring no friend, you have no Spanish, you throw away nothing to make your Camino easier. You are turistigrina, not peregrina. You fall apart and go home if I no help you.”

Gape at him, then shut your mouth tightly. Mutter through clenched teeth, “I’m not a tourist.” Recollect uncomfortably your resolution to abandon the Camino the very morning Rafa appeared.

“Then why you come? Probably no one loves you, so you think the Camino provides a boyfriend.” He sniffs. “That’s why you think stupid things like I fall in love with you.”

“That’s not—.” You can think of nothing to add.

Admit to yourself that Rafa is half right. The Camino presented itself like a last-ditch chance to claim a new lease on life. Who knew what might happen: you might strike up a rapport with a man based on something other than your breadwinner capacities; you might find companions who acknowledged you as part of their group and invited you to socialize at day’s end; you might earn satisfaction beyond the meager knowledge of being an effective nurse; you might do something to make your grandmother proud; you might do something to make yourself proud.

Yet here you are, walking with an old man, two donkeys, a dog, and a pile of pilgrim backpacks, down a narrow path hedged with thorns and drowned in a sea of sunflowers, soon to be baked under a relentless sun. No friends, no intriguing European romance, no change, no transformation, no

freedom. Just the prospect of walking and walking, twenty miles a day, every day, for three more weeks.

Day 12

Somehow you survive another twenty-three miles to Villamentero de Campos. As you walk, disappointment spreads in your body like sepsis. Not even sitting outside the albergue after your shower to watch lambs and geese cavort in the gardens relieves the feeling that you are failing at the Camino. Around you, other pilgrims approach each other, introduce themselves, make new friends. You can't think of a single way to strike up conversation.

Pull your stone out of your pocket and stare at it with loathing, as if it's to blame for your failure to escape your limitations. Stone or not, you feel exactly the same as you ever did.

Day 13

At four p.m., after another identical day of walking, Terradillos pops out of the landscape like a collection of dusty mushrooms. Snatch your bag from Rafa's hand, trudge to the albergue, immediately shower, and crawl into bed.

Examine your feet to find them still swollen. New blisters are forming in the beds of the old ones. You are too discouraged to get up and look for food. You just want to sleep.

Day 14

Four a.m. You pop four ibuprofens. You've been consuming double doses every three hours for the past three days. You're definitely exceeding the maximum daily dose of 12,000 mg, but you've got to do something to keep going on your throbbing feet. There's not enough time to wait for the swelling to subside.

Rafa has huffed his disapproval more than once when he's caught you tossing back your head to force the pills down your throat. You've stopped caring. His feet aren't ringed in layers of blisters. You can have your kidney function tested when you get home. The Camino won't kill you—probably.

With your cellphone for a flashlight, ghost out of town at a quarter to five. Today you need to carry your own backpack, find your own company.

A memory of Elena's transparent gray eyes pops up. Push it down. You haven't seen her in more than a week. Besides, her presence only exacerbated your familiar, nagging conviction that you've lost a contest which no one bothered to tell you was happening.

At noon, Rafa catches up to find you almost in tears. Hand over your backpack without looking at him. He doesn't ask for his euro, a tiny courtesy that makes you finally cry for real, surreptitiously snuffling and smearing dust across your face.

Day 15

Wake with unexpected energy. Jump up, throw on your clothes, strap on your bag. Put in earbuds, swallow your pills. Music and ibuprofen carry you twenty-four miles to Léon—the longest distance you've yet walked.

When you arrive in the city in the early afternoon, still toting your own belongings, enjoy the wash of confidence. Maybe you'll get the hang of this craziness after all.

Day 16

Beyond León, the landscape climbs. Don't be alarmed when your euphoria immediately evaporates. The incline drains your energy in a steady leak. You only manage sixteen miles. It doesn't occur to you until you're lying in bed in San Martín that two weeks ago, that distance seemed impossibly far.

Day 17

You've lost Rafa. Either you've left him behind, or he's disappeared ahead. You trudge toward Santa Catalina, uncertain whether you miss him. Ask yourself:
Am I pitiful if I do?

Wonder next whether you miss Ethan. He called a few days before your trip and gushed about how exciting it would be. "Let's get coffee when you're back," he proposed, to which you only managed a faint, "Maybe." The word feels like a manacle.

The landscape closes in and fills with the scraggly pines that herald dry mountains. Decide you do not miss Ethan. Even ibuprofen-fueled, pain-laced trekking in solitude and relentless heat is better than living alone beside another person.

Day 18

In pre-dawn gloom, while you pack, mumble halfhearted reassurances to yourself that you're resigned to solitude for the rest of the Camino. Exit your albergue onto Santa Catalina's single thoroughfare.

At your first step, stumble across a pair of outstretched legs. Peer suspiciously into the shadows, snuffing up the smell of cigarette smoke. With a shock, you recognize Rafa, lounging on a bench by the door. Is he stalking you after all?

He acts like there's nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe he really is innocently waiting for any pilgrim from Santa Catalina who needs a bag carried.

"High mountain today," he observes. "Cruz de Ferro."

You've stopped using your guidebook; Rafa's knowledge has put its authors to shame. Repeat, "Cruz de Ferro?" Feel like an idiot for hardly knowing where you're going.

Rafa flicks down his cigarette, extinguishing it with his toe. "At the top of the mountain, a tall iron cross. There peregrinos leave a rock for sin."

Frown. Pull out your rock and look at it. You've ended up equating its scattering of black freckles to the envy and pettiness and insecurity it must absorb every time you rub or squeeze it. You've wondered if the marks have increased, indicating the Camino's failure to transform you into the woman you want to be—someone like Kelly, or Elena. "Aren't you supposed to throw it into the sea at Fisterra? My guidebook told me."

Rafa's eyes narrow. "Show this book."

Fish in the top pouch of your pack and hand him the small red volume. He takes it in his worn hands and flips through. Then he sniffs.

He throws it into the trashcan beside the albergue door.

A protest bursts from your mouth. “Wait, what?” Dive to retrieve it.

Rafa stops you with an upheld hand.

“This book knows nothing. Peregrinos carry a stone, sí. But they leave it at Cruz de Ferro and come to Santiago clean. At Fisterra, is different. You burn something—maybe everything. Leave behind old Camino at el fin del mundo. Start new Camino.” He stares at you impassively, then winks. “Is now a crime to burn at Fisterra lighthouse, but you will do it anyway.”

Blink at this news, then drop your eyes to the rock in your palm. You feel attached to its small weight; you’ve carried it this far, safeguarded it among so many other deprivations on the Camino. “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Rafa leans in to look. “Your stone? Demasiado pequeña.”

After three weeks immersed in Spanish, you can guess his meaning. Mutter, “It’s not too small.” Swing your bag over your shoulders. When Rafa raises his eyebrows, raise yours back. Announce: “I can carry my own backpack. I’ve done just fine the past few days.”

He shrugs, turns, leads the donkeys into the street.

Hold the rock in your hand. Think: *It isn’t too small*. Days of walking on gravel paths have given you intimate knowledge of how painful even a miniscule stone inside a shoe can be. Still, worry simmers deep down. Maybe Rafa’s right. You’ve been afraid for years that everyone’s too polite or too intimidated to tell you how unlikable you really are. Not Rafa, though.

But he's also stuck around. Somehow the thought warms your heart, despite his inexhaustible rudeness. Despite the fact that you've been paying him to stick around.

Around eleven, round a curve in the mountain pathway. In the distance a bustling crowd of small figures surrounds a narrow spike with a cross at the top. Cruz de Ferro.

Squeeze your hand over your rock, massaging it between your fingers. Admit: *I'm afraid to lay this down*. Is it a sin to want to keep your sins? At least they're familiar.

At the base of the stone heap which rings Cruz de Ferro, higher than your head, swallow the lump in your throat. Lift the stone and stare at it. Maybe you should ask its permission to throw it away. Are you betraying a part of yourself? Are you seriously asking yourself this question?

A voice bursts into your ear: "Just do it. Close your eyes, deep breath, and throw."

Jerk away from the intruder and whisk your head around to find out why you recognize this light accent. As if your brief memory of her this morning has summoned her, Elena peers at you under her ball cap, eyes huge and shining.

Your instinctual irritation with women more confident than yourself leaps to your mouth, makes you stubborn, argumentative. "I can't. I'm carrying it to Fisterra."

She folds her palm and fingers over the small rock. “You can.” She squeezes her hand against yours, stares into your eyes. Smiles. Yanks the rock from your fingertips.

Your mouth drops open as she winds up like a baseball pitcher. The rock sails into the air. The sun blinds you as your sins arc away, a small flash disappearing into the brilliance of the whitewashed noon sky. You don’t see or hear it land. It may as well have vanished.

Slack-jawed, you turn to face Elena. She still smiles at you, teeth glittering.

Whisper, “What did you just do?” You feel violated, as if she reached into your soul and exposed your every failing.

She shrugs. “Sometimes we must take away someone else’s burden.”

Stare at her. Hatred for her sureness, no, her smugness, flashes over you, leaving you sweating. It almost pushes you forward, drags your hands toward her face. This is the closest you’ve ever come to hitting anyone. Not the nightly snorers on the Camino, not Ethan, not your coworkers—this girl, who might be right.

Spin on your toes, hoist your bag higher on your back, and run away. A need to leave, to escape, to never see her again, drives your legs. She calls after you, “Sara, wait,” but you can’t bear to stop and listen to her reasons, her excuses. In a few seconds, you hear only your breath, laboring along with your footfalls.

A mile onward, in front of a sprawling shack that proclaims itself home to the world’s last Templar, Rafa perches on a boulder, smoking as always,

while the donkeys graze among the rocks, and the dog suns itself on an asphalt road intersecting the pilgrim route. He climbs down when he sees you, lifting a hand in welcome.

To your shame, you discover that you are weeping, disgustingly, as you crash into him and fling your arms around his shoulders.

“Peregrina,” he says. He pats the back of your head. “Don’t cry. Tonight, we stop in El Acebo. Hospitaleros americanos at the albergue. You’ll be happy.”

Day 19

Jerk awake from a dream in which you dangled over a fire pit. Flames just barely singed your toes.

Realize that something is in fact wrong with your left foot. Using the beam of your phone’s flashlight, you discover that the nailbed of the third toe has been swallowed by a huge blister. You must have missed its formation yesterday while you picked your way behind Rafa down the rocky switchback to El Acebo. The steep descent had crunched your toes against the front of your shoes.

Prod the blister gently with your thumb. The skin around it is inflamed. At the slightest pressure, blood-tinged pus seeps from under the nail, already detached and killed by the blister serum. Close your eyes. You recognize an infection when you see one. The wound needs to be lanced and cleaned immediately, the dead nail removed, but the thought makes nausea clutch your

belly. This blister seems a hundred times worse than any trauma you've seen in eighteen years of intensive care. You can't bear to look again.

Hobble out of bed, dress, pack, eat breakfast, vaguely hope that ignoring the problem will solve it.

When you pull on your left shoe, the tongue snags on your toe. Hiss involuntarily at the queasy pain. Rafa stands a few feet away, watching. "Algo está mal," he mutters.

He makes you sit on a bench so he can inspect your foot under the courtyard's harsh electric lights. Bats swoop over your heads in the morning dark. He mumbles Spanish reproaches under his breath, but commands one of the hospitaleros to boil water in the kitchen. He sterilizes your cuticle clippers, then cuts open the wound and snips off the toenail. You hand down antibiotic ointment and bandages as ordered, feeling strange to act as nurse for your own surgery.

Once he's pulled your shoe carefully over his handiwork, he sits beside you and lights a cigarette. From the corner of your eye, watch the rhythmic flare and fade of the cherry.

Gear yourself up to ask: "What did you do before becoming a professional pilgrim?"

He shrugs. "Work in hospital."

"You're a doctor?" You realize it's small-minded that you can't believe this.

"No, no, how you say it—un portero." He squints. "Ah sí, a janitor." He shakes his head. "I work in Madrid, twenty years. Everyone's favorite."

Everyone greet me: Hola, Rafa, buen día! I tell jokes all day long. Nurses laugh, patients. But always I feel darkness and take many pills to kill my sadness. Finally, twelve, thirteen years ago, I find a therapist, tell her I only want to die. She orders me: stop work, take vacation, walk el Camino de Santiago. It heals me, she thinks.”

“You never went back?”

“Why should I?” He breathes a cloud of smoke. “El Camino is reality. I am peregrino. You are peregrina. Everyone peregrinos. Why not live truth?”

Visualize Rafa, traversing the Camino for years with his menagerie, living the simplest version of life, taking people’s burdens off their backs for a day or several so their bodies can heal for walking. Maybe he’s found the remedy for existential angst. Maybe you should imitate him.

Smile at the ludicrous idea.

It’s strangely tempting.

Scramble down the rest of the mountain below El Acebo, limping at first, favoring your left foot until you notice that Rafa’s treatment has succeeded in abolishing your pain. Relief lets you gather speed.

Imagine yourself in a new life: traveling nurse on the Camino, loping across miles of rolling hills and flat farmland and rugged mountains, perhaps your own dog trotting behind, saddled with medical supplies like mutts you’ve seen with their masters. You’ll tend other pilgrims’ blistered feet and strained tendons and overextended joints and sunburned skins.

Reach the plains and picture Ethan—or your coworkers and acquaintances, whose pity you fear—eventually traveling the Camino and

stumbling across you: you'll be tanned and fit and content, even well into your forties, even lacking anything you ever expected to make you happy. You'll help them without complaint, magnanimous at last.

Really ludicrous, you tell yourself that night, as you curl up in Pieros's single albergue—a hippy place covered in Hindu symbols and built like an elaborate treehouse. For the first time on the Camino, you sleep through the night to your alarm.

Day 20

Climb toward the Camino's final mountain range. You lean into it, panting as gravity tugs at your pack, tipping you backwards, compressing your spine. The path winds along a highway, pavement the whole way. By late afternoon when you reach La Faba, you feel half-baked by sunlight reflected for hours off asphalt. Rafa has disappeared. You recognize no one at the parochial albergue. Optimism abandons your dreams.

Day 21

After a final scramble through fog towards O Cebreiro, everything is downhill. From the summit, watch the sun rise over oceanic clouds that lap in currents around you. Then descend from the mountaintop. Your swelling has subsided, and this time gravity is your friend, pushing you forward, lengthening your stride.

Lope over the miles. Walk and walk and forget to stop for food and walk some more, until you check the distance to the next albergue and discover

that you're already at Sarria's door. From La Faba, alone and unaided, you've covered thirty miles in a single day. Pause a moment to suck in deep breaths. Laugh out loud like a maniac. Your head spins with exhaustion and elation.

Thoroughly worn out, stagger from albergue to albergue until you find the last empty bed in Sarria; clean out abandoned leftovers from the refrigerator, as if two hardboiled eggs, half a cucumber, pasta with butter, pepper, and heavy cream, and piles of Spanish sausage in paper-thin slices constitutes the best feast imaginable; crawl into your bunk to sleep like a corpse.

Day 22

Sarria lies 111 kilometers from Santiago: the last city from which a pilgrim can start and claim the certificate of completion. Days before, Rafa warned you of the crowds, but you're still taken aback. At the mouth of the city, where the Camino dives under a train trestle into a streambed before climbing into an endless patchwork of tiny towns, rank dairies, and cow paddocks, a vast stream of jaunty new walkers gluts the flow of pilgrims.

Dodge the meandering, chattering clumps of people, resenting the extra steps you're forced to take to circle them. Resist the urge to shout obscenities when they stop without warning for selfies. Your bag still weighs twenty pounds. Your muscles still ache. You have no patience for these spotless, untested tourists.

Glimpse Rafa in the distance and call his name. He's too far to hear. His donkeys are already laden with small, bright bags from the tourist swarm. Square your shoulders under your own pack; now that you're carrying it every

day, you've lost your reason for walking with him. Repeat the pilgrimage refrain you keep hearing: *The Camino provides*. If Rafa drifts away, you must no longer need him.

Feel the regret anyway.

Day 23

By tacking on three extra miles the day before to reach Gonzar, you leapfrogged the bulk of the tourists. Leave the tiny town in the dark, utterly alone. The Camino meanders through eucalyptus forests. A thick fog coaxes out their scent. It reaches the ends of your alveoli, expanding your lungs like balloons.

Stride along until you glimpse someone sitting path-side ahead.

Lingering shreds of mist make it hard to identify anything, but the person's despondent head droops against drawn-up knees. Draw closer, slowing your steps and squinting to determine there's no danger. You recognize the ball cap on the pilgrim's head. Elena. A shiver electrifies your nerves.

Set each foot carefully on the path, grateful it's paved here, not crunchy gravel that can give you away. You pass in silence, hardly breathing

For the next half-mile, you berate yourself: Remember Rafa, slinging you onto his donkey. Remember your grandmother, baking cookies with you at six or seven and making you recite the golden rule back to her while you stirred the thick dough.

Though long since buried in a sediment of need for just one person—any person, really—to confirm you've done a good job with your life, maybe that lesson prompted you into nursing. An image of your grandmother's

wrinkled face resting in its white satin casket, lips pinched, floats up like a ghost. Certainly, you can count on her disapproval from the afterlife for abandoning Elena.

At the next café, sit outside in a cloud of fog so you can watch for Elena. Minutes limp past. Check your watch repeatedly. A half hour passes. Should you go? Should you stay?

Bargain with yourself: if she shows up in the next three minutes, it's your duty to help her. If she doesn't, you can hold yourself absolved.

But of course, she heaves into sight at that moment, weaving down the lane out of the mist as if your just-completed thought summoned her. Now you're stuck. Perhaps the Camino has provided even her. Forced her on you, more like.

Inhale a long breath as she reaches the little gate leading into the café. "You look like you got run over by a truck," you hear yourself saying. The words sound brutal. You try again. "Are you feeling sick?"

She raises her head to meet your eyes. Her skin is dead pale through her tan. Indigo shadows ring her eyelids and lips. Her eyes appear positively eerie. "I think I have the flu," she moans, collapsing into a seat at your table.

Automatically rise and lean across the tabletop to touch her forehead with the back of your hand. Declare, "No fever. How do you feel?"

"Like everything makes me sick. Even water. I want to throw up."

Nod over the symptoms. "A stomach bug. Gastroenteritis. Actually, maybe food poisoning. What did you eat for dinner?"

She drops her head again, muffling her voice. “Fried eggs and potatoes at the private albergue in Gonzar.”

This confirms your diagnosis. You did your research on Camino foods to avoid. Spanish preference for the runniest sunny-side-up eggs means they can be partially raw. “Mild food poisoning, for sure. Probably the eggs.” Unpack a makeshift treatment of tums and electrolyte powder to mix with her water. “Take these. I’ll stay with you until we get to the next big town.”

Proffer an arm for her to grab as she staggers to her feet. “Palas de Rei,” she whispers. “But I wanted to reach Melide.”

The nurse in you doesn’t hesitate. “No chance. You’ll need to sleep this off and stay hydrated until your system clears itself out.”

Coax her over the next six miles. Force her to drink water. Stand on the edge of the road in watery sunshine and watch cows chew their cud whenever she darts behind hedges to be sick. She thanks you for waiting every time she emerges, gasping and wiping her mouth.

“Missed something on your lip, there,” you say, not sure if you’re being considerate or petty. You don’t mention you almost didn’t help her at all.

While you take measured steps ahead of her, acknowledge the omission is probably a sign your sins still linger, invisible but real. The small, gleeful voice in the back of your head probably is too. It spends all morning musing over whether karma is real, whether Elena’s sickness is payback for her temerity in stealing your rock at Cruz de Ferro.

As penance for your mean-spiritedness, pay for her albergue bed in Palas de Rei. Leave her to sleep while you shower, bask in the afternoon sun, eat beautiful scarlet gazpacho in a tiny alleyway café.

At five-thirty, on your way back to the albergue with medicine and mild food, stop off in the parish church a few blocks away. At Mass, pilgrims rub shoulders with a crowd of elderly parishioners. Sit in the last pew with your shoes off and your tired feet pressed against the cold stone pavement. A statue of Santiago garbed as a medieval pilgrim stretches a hand over your head. He doesn't seem to care whether you belong there or not. Something about his long hair and rugged appearance reminds you of Rafa.

Day 24

Leave an offering of tums, bananas, and anise-flavored digestive biscuits at Elena's bedside. Slip out while she sleeps. Today you're aiming for Arzua, bathed in morning fog and afternoon sunshine, cooler now that you're nearing the coast in Galicia. Surprisingly few people are on the path. Have you slid into a trough between waves of pilgrims? Is it your destiny to be out of sync with the rest of the world?

Moving in easy strides across the miles, you consider the fear that has poisoned your cells since childhood. At nine years old, angry at your grandmother for making you share new toys at your birthday party, you let the secret slip: she had been trying to convert you. Your mom's face blanched, tightened. For five years, she'd been leaving you at your grandmother's, while she worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. Despite the inconvenience, she

planned new arrangements. Within a week of after-school programs, you missed your grandmother, your closest friend, now to be visited only under your mother's supervision. You knew the loss was your own fault.

Later, when you had to leave everything to attend the nursing program in Seattle; when your grandmother died in her sleep without warning; when Ethan behaved like you were a comfortable piece of furniture instead of a person; when at work you were passed over for charge nurse because Kelly knew how to network—dread stabbed you. Had you done something to deserve these new losses, too? No one could ever tell you. Even so you kept trudging, carrying everything forward.

Day 25

In the Lavacolla albergue, the hospitalero explains that the riverside town once marked the spot where pilgrims washed themselves clean of the journey's dust.

Translate this as a sign: it's time to throw away everything superfluous. Empty your pack onto your bed. Out goes the skin care, the piles of extra bandages, the third shirt and pair of socks not worn in weeks, the sleeping bag, the leftover nonperishable food you didn't know what to do with. Only a towel, soap, toothpaste and toothbrush, the clothes you have on, the ones you'll wear tomorrow, a rain jacket, sweater, flipflops, and the sundress to wear in Fisterra make the cut. When you fold the leftovers back into the pack and lift it in one hand, it springs off the ground as if weightless.

Day 26

Walk into Santiago. Don't stop or even pause until you reach the cathedral square at ten a.m. Stare at the huge, ornate towers, cluttered with likenesses of Santiago. Take selfies. Oblige other pilgrims with photographs. Wander to the pilgrim office and watch Canadians and Americans and Mexicans and Italians and Spaniards and Brazilians and Germans and Koreans and Russians and French and British and Bulgarians hug and kiss and laugh and cry in a din of languages while they wait in line for their certificates. A few even sweep you into their arms, although you are a stranger, and kiss you on both cheeks to welcome you to the end.

Emerge dazed into the sunshine. Drift back to the cathedral to attend the pilgrim Mass but find you can't sit still. While chant floods the nave like

water, join another tourist line, waiting your turn to climb behind the high altar, with its absurd canopy of baroque, pink-cheeked, gilded, trumpet-wielding angels. A cheerful sign prompts you: “Abrazar al Santo.” Just as you reach the jewel-encrusted statue of Santiago presiding over the cathedral and rest a cautious hand on his shoulder, not sure you’re ready for a full-scale embrace, a voice behind you hisses, “Sara, Sara!”

Elena waves and grins at you from the bottom of the staircase to the statue. Wait for her after you’ve climbed down. When her turn comes, she flings her arms around the statue without hesitation. Tears squeeze out of her eyes. Her cheeks are still damp when she also reaches to hug you. “I made it,” she whispers. “Because of your help.”

Stiffen at her complete disregard for your personal space, but when she holds on, decide that after all, she means well. Relax and wrap your arms around her.

She sweeps you into her wake, of course, along with a dozen other pilgrims of all nationalities whom she’s befriended, who seem to regard you as another long-lost friend. Spend the night on the town, eating tapas of octopus and clams and croquettes and crepes, drinking glass after glass of *tinto de verano*.

Feel like ten years—maybe twenty—have dropped off your life. Exchange stories of Camino hardships and revelations. Confess your joys and disappointments. While you babble, the other pilgrims listen and nod and interrupt with their own stories. Fail to recognize yourself. Who is this person who has thrown caution to the winds? Where has this journey brought you?

Day 27

At the insistence of your phone, drag yourself out of bed under a pall of throbbing headache.

Stagger around the converted monk's cell where you slept. Eventually you find your phone in your sweater pocket. A WhatsApp voice message from Ethan lies in wait. Fling the phone on the bed like it burned you. After a moment, seat yourself at a careful distance.

Reach out a forefinger and tap the play button.

"Saw your Facebook status." His familiar voice fills the room. "Very proud of your accomplishment. Looking forward to our coffee when you get home. Miss you!"

What's that supposed to mean? Experience a vision of going home, sipping coffee, yielding to a kiss at the end of what will surely feel like a conciliatory date. Slowly you will drift back together.

Succumb to sudden nausea and jump from the bed to vomit in the sink. Even if it's only your hangover asserting itself, suck air through your nose and think, That's telling.

The message lingers in your ears, forbidding your return to sleep, chasing you out of the room. Forty-five minutes later, find yourself at the edge of the city, staring at a way-marker that declares you must now walk the sixty miles to Fisterra.

Groan at the thought. Why are you continuing? Yesterday, 440 had seemed like enough. And yet here you are. Not quite finished.

Day 28

Walk faster and faster, a habit you've perfected. You're alone again, with only texted good wishes from Elena and her friends—now apparently your friends—for company. Surprise yourself by missing this girl you regarded with suspicion, the other comparative strangers. Text back thanks, your words heartfelt.

Listen to Ethan's message several more times and then, on impulse, delete it. Decide not everything needs an answer.

Day 29

Fisterra approaches, a few hours beyond tonight's stop in Corcubion. Succumb to worry. A month on the Camino has made constant walking seem like the only possible way of life. What will you do when the ocean arrives? When you cannot go any farther?

Rafa pops into your mind, grinning, mouthing the words: "Burn something."

Frown at the memory. Now that you carry only fourteen pounds, stripped of excess, nothing remains to burn. As if leaving Ethan opened a floodgate, everything else has slipped away. The Camino claimed it, whether you were ready or not.

You should feel free but don't. Your flight home lurks four days ahead. You'll leave the Camino behind, return to work, find a new place to live, buy new furnishings, go on new dates. Start over.

Shift your shoulders under your pack. Even fourteen pounds still makes your back ache.

Day 30

Arrive at kilometer zero on the Costa da Morte at eleven a.m.—five-hundred miles. Ahead, the Fisterra lighthouse perches on the edge of a cliff over the ocean.

Unbuckle your bag and sling it against the *Km 0,000* plaque on the final waymarker. Sink down the other side and stare into the bay. Pouring sun transforms the calm water to a great pool of glowing, blue-gray metal.

Drop your face against your knees and squeeze your eyes shut. Experience a strange conviction: you've walked out of one body and into another. Maybe your blisters detached your dermis from the subcutaneous tissue. Without your noticing, it popped open, dried up and crumbled away from new skin underneath. You feel taut and tender, as if you don't quite fit.

Stand after fifteen minutes, pull your bag over your shoulders. Shuffle the mile back to town. In your albergue room, strip to your underwear and loop the small pouch for your passport and money around your neck. Pull a sheet over yourself and sleep.

Wake with the sun far on the horizon. Your watch reads almost nine p.m. Not enough time to walk back to the lighthouse for sunset. You can do that tomorrow; for now, head to the beach, find a café, find people. Too groggy to search your bag for flip-flops and the sundress you've carried all the way

from Seattle for this moment, pull on your grimy, sweat-stained pilgrim clothes and take your pack with you. Maybe you can change later.

The silver sweep of Langosteira Beach beckons. In twenty minutes, just as the sun sets, leaving a blue bowl of sky, rose-rimmed and inverted over a graying world, you're there. The temperature plunges with the oncoming dark. Climb stairs from the street down to the sand. In the distance someone has built an enormous bonfire. It tugs you closer, promising warmth.

Ten yards out, a shadow jumps from a hollow and runs at you. It materializes into a dog, sniffing your hand, wagging its tail in recognition. Rafa's collie. You ruffle its ears and ask if Rafa is here, almost expecting an answer.

Odd shapes around the bonfire resolve into the donkeys. Rafa appears, glowing in firelight, throwing more wood onto the flames. "Is not crime to burn on the beach," he says, grinning. The fire carves his face into fierce shadows, a relic resurrected.

"Rafa." He vanished days before Santiago. "Where have you been?"

He shrugs. "I come out to Fisterra. I wait for you."

"What if I'd never shown up?"

"But here you are." His face folds into a network of wrinkles around a beatific smile. "Foolish question."

Your bag slides down your back onto the sand. Announce the obvious: "I finished walking."

"Sí, sí, bueno. What you think?"

Wrap your arms around your chest. "I don't know. I've got nothing."

"Not true," he says. The toe of his boot prods your pack.

Look at it. Feel a warm flush of disgust at your inescapable companion from the past month. Salt and dirt are sunk in its fibers. Where the straps rested against your body, they emit a pungent, locker-room reek. “Yeah, this thing.” Spin away and walk ten paces to the white, curling edge of the Atlantic. A pavement of clam and mussel and oyster and conch shells crunches under each step.

Call out: “Where do I go from here?”

No answer. A sudden chemical stench mixes with the pleasant odor of burning eucalyptus. Frown and turn back. In sharp silhouette, Rafa pulls items from your bag and throws them on the fire. Rain jacket. Flip-flops. Toiletries. Clothes. Flames lick them and cough black plumes.

Goosebumps flash over your skin. A lump solidifies in your throat. What is he doing? Everything will be gone. You’ll have nothing.

Tense your legs. Picture dashing low across the sand and tackling him at the knees to stop him, then pulling whatever is left out of his hands and running back to town, catching a bus, flying home, sinking like a stone into your old life.

“What the hell!” you yell.

Yank off your sweater and shirt, hop onto your left foot to tug off one shoe, then switch to the other, shimmy out of your pants, peel off your underwear. Fling everything in a wad back toward Rafa, toss your sack of valuables on the sand.

Turn and flee naked into the freezing water.

Yelp at its frigid slap against your bare legs and belly. Dive under, gritting your teeth as your mouth fills with saltwater. Windmill your arms until your fingertips scrape bottom, pulling water and sand toward your body in a wet embrace. It's too cold to think. You must keep moving.

Swing your feet down and gain balance, then surge upright, tossing handfuls of stones and shells into the surf.

Turn in time to watch Rafa hoist your backpack over his head.

Clap your hands over your mouth to stifle a gasp. Panic tightens its fist in your chest. You stop breathing.

He crouches and shoots the bag like a basketball into the flames. Plastic catches fire with a cheerful whoosh.

Heave a sigh that unknots your muscles. Topple backwards, legs and arms opening until you bob on the cold tide. The ocean where you've arrived.

You shout to the night sky: "Do it, Rafa! Burn it—burn everything!" The words seem inevitable. You're almost singing them, not caring if he hears or answers.



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