

Ultreya
by Abigail Seymour

A man sleeping in the cot next to mine was snoring. He had a kerchief over his face that flapped each time he let out a breath. It was 2:30 in the morning. The other 50 or so people in the musty room of the monastery were sound asleep. I felt pale and soft and timid, among people who seemed to sleep the sound sleep of certainty.

Roncesvalles, the monastery where we were all staying in the Pyrenees, is the gateway into Spain from France on the Camino de Santiago. It was my first night on the pilgrimage; I was the only American and one of the few women in the group, as far as I could tell. Most of the people were traveling in groups of three or four, some were couples. I was alone.

Sleepless, I walked down the three flights of wooden stairs, worn in a rut down the middle. They led me to a stone entryway, the spot that in a few hours would be the start of my walk to Santiago de Compostela, 500 miles away. There was a ring around the moon. The road faded into a gray, gauzy haze.

“Lord, hear my prayer.”

The sound of my own voice, hollow and thin, startled me. I had long ago given up the idea that anyone or anything could hear me. Feeling chilled, I went back inside.

When I awoke the next morning, most of the beds were empty. My fellow pilgrims had already set out before 5:00, before it was even light. I left two and a half hours later than they did and had the path to myself, sure that I had beaten the system. But by noon I was caught in the blazing sun with four more miles to the next refuge.

As I clumped down the mountain, trying to gauge how much my legs hurt, I came upon Burguete, a tiny whitewashed town where Hemingway stayed during the bullfight season. No sign of any fiestas, just windows shuttered against the heat and a lone bar open. Just outside of town was a series of wooden signs with just one word:

¡Ultreya! My guidebook told me that it was a cognate of the Latin “ulter,” the same root as the English “ultra.” It was the ancient greeting exchanged by medieval pilgrims. “Beyond!” they cried to one another. “Go beyond!”

Their destination, and mine, was the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Inside is a marble pillar carved into a Jesse Tree, the depiction of the prophecy of Jesus’ birth from the book of Isaiah: “A shoot

shall come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.” The marble tree’s trunk bears an indentation in the shape of a human hand that has been worn over a millennium by millions of pilgrims. Legend says that if you put your right hand against the pillar and touch your forehead three times to the statue just below it, you will be blessed.

This act of faith is the culmination of a 500-mile walk from the Spanish border with France to the spot where the remains of Apostle James were said to have been unearthed. The story goes that Saint James was beheaded in Jerusalem and his body was carried in a divinely guided boat to the western coast of Spain, where he lay undiscovered for 750 years. One night, an old hermit named Pelayo saw a series of bright lights floating in the sky above a field. He began digging on the spot and discovered a well-preserved body and a note identifying the remains as Santiago—Saint James himself.

Soon after Pelayo’s revelation, people began walking across Europe to venerate Saint James. At the height of the shrine’s popularity in the eleventh century, more than half a million people a year walked to Santiago de Compostela. The route, which crosses the Pyrenean mountains, Navarre, the plains of Castile, and ends in the lush hills of Galicia, became an important trade road. Merchants set up shop to cater to the crowds of people pouring in, and churches and monasteries were erected to house them. “Santiago,” wrote Goethe, the German philosopher, “built Europe.”

The pilgrimage never died out; in fact, its popularity has surged since the Camino was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985. It remains largely unchanged since the Middle Ages, with the exception of a long, ugly stretch along a busy highway in the middle of the country. Friends of the Camino associations across Spain are working hard to divert the footpath in a safer direction without losing any of its authenticity. Pilgrim refuges have been built for modern-day seekers, providing bunk beds, cold showers, and kitchens, all staffed by former-pilgrim volunteers. During the most recent Holy Year in 1993 (when the Feast of St. James, July 25, fell on a Sunday), 100,000 people walked, bicycled, or rode horseback the length of the Camino.

I never thought I would be one of them. I am not Spanish. I was raised a Protestant. And I am not hardy by nature. I was the sort of timid child who kept her white Keds on throughout the summer for fear of stepping on a bee. I honestly can’t say for what or for whom I decided to walk to Santiago myself. All I know is that I did walk it, all the way, and that it changed me.

I was 28 years old and had just gone through a divorce. I had left Manhattan with the notion of shedding my possessions and disappearing overseas. Maybe I could create myself anew,

I thought, become someone more varied and textured. I came to Europe with a list of all the cities I planned to visit: Paris, Moscow, Munich, Prague, Barcelona, Athens—I never wanted to stop moving. I got a job in Madrid teaching English to businesspeople and lived in a small apartment in the center of the city. After a few months there, a creeping loneliness had tracked me down again and it was time to start moving, but I didn't know where.

I spent my first Spanish Thanksgiving dinner sitting across the table from a clean-cut young American student in a bowtie. He was thin and eager and soft around the edges. I forgot his name before the end of the evening, and then forgot about him entirely. Six months later I was introduced at a party to an earthy, handsome man in faded jeans and sandals. He had long hair, an earring, and a scallop shell pendant around his neck. It took me a few minutes to recognize him without his bowtie—it was my Thanksgiving dinner companion, utterly transformed.

“I have walked across Spain,” Jamie told me, “along the Camino de Santiago.” In those words I found what I had been looking for—whatever had changed him could change me, too.

So I set out that August for the monastery of Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees, the beginning of the walk on Spanish soil. The Camino appealed to me because I would never have to stop moving—I even thought maybe I would just stay on it forever, live on it, walking back and forth, becoming one of its eccentric fixtures, another character people would meet along the way.

That was how I ended up sleepless that first night among strangers near the border of France, ready to walk through the wilderness—Spain's and my own.

The Camino is as varied as the people who travel it. It is moody and changeable, sometimes a dripping forest path of overhanging trees and not a soul in sight, other times an exhaust-filled highway with semis whizzing by and crowds of people clogging the way. It has bridges and hills and rivers—things to cross and climb and navigate. After about a week of walking alone, I fell in with a group of people who, although we never actually declared our allegiance, remained more or less together for the rest of the trip. There were about 20 of us disbanding and reforming each night and morning. They included Manuel, a big, lumbering, mustachioed man who worked as a cobbler in Valencia and laughed so hard at his own jokes that he would have to stop walking. He warned us that sometimes he talked and sang in his sleep, and indeed a few nights later he sat bolt upright shouting, “Chickens for sale! Chickens for sale!”

His constant companion was Sergio, a quiet vending machine salesman from the south of Spain, who revealed one night after dinner that he had been diagnosed with cancer two years before at age 32. When his cancer went into remission, Sergio made a vow to walk the Camino in thanksgiving—and there he was. “A Santiago nunca se llega, solo se va,” he said. “You never get to Santiago, you only set out for it.” Then there was Geert, a Dutch busdriver with no front teeth, who enjoyed a breakfast each morning of two yogurts and a Heineken. Christine was a doctoral candidate from Switzerland who wrote in her journal every night by flashlight.

We compared blisters and bandaged joints, pored over each other’s maps, and listened wide-eyed to Camino veterans tell of what lay in store for us. We were advised to ask for Pablo in a village up ahead. The old man, they said, would give us each a perfectly whittled walking stick. I heard about Tomás, a self-proclaimed Knight of the Templar who lived in the mountains, carrying on the tradition of his defunct monastic order to protect the pilgrims. I heard about a fountain that spouted wine instead of water, and about a stained glass window, made of every color in the rainbow, where the light nonetheless shone through white instead of tinted. I was urged to stop in at Molinaseca, a town so inviting that swimming pool ladders were installed on its riverbanks. I was given a scallop shell, the traditional symbol of the Camino, to wear around my neck. Its magical properties would protect me from evil.

I happened to be walking alone on the fourth day when I entered the little village of Zariquiegui, near Pamplona. Every window and door was shuttered against the mid-afternoon heat, but three backpacks were propped against the wall of the village church. I peered inside toward the darkened nave and all was quiet. Light angled down through a window near the ceiling in dusty rays and I stood with the cool wood of the door against my back as it closed. It was completely quiet—and then I heard someone take a breath. Out of the darkness near the altar came three voices singing in a cappella harmony. The hair stood up on the back of my sweaty arms. I crept into the last pew and listened. As my eyes came into focus I saw that the singers were fellow pilgrims: two men and a woman in their 20s, wearing hiking boots, T-shirts, and shells around their necks. When they finished, I followed them back outside. They were German students who were walking to Santiago in segments, one week each year. They stopped in at every unlocked church along the way to sing.

“Why do you sing when no one else will hear you?”

I asked.

“God can hear us,” the woman said.

I found Pablo the whittler in the village of Ázqueta. He shyly handed me a walking stick and wouldn't take any money. The river in Molinaseca also lived up to its reputation—the water was cool and sweet, and I lingered during the hottest part of the afternoon. In the little town of Irache I actually found the fountain of wine. It turned out to be a marketing ploy on the part of a local vintner, who hooked up a tap to barrels of his house red. I never did find the miraculous stained glass window.

In the tenth-century village of Manjarín I found Tomás the Templar. He was the only dweller left in that ghost town, living in a chaotic camp in an old, partly roofed stone house. Tomás blessed me with a steel sword on both shoulders: “El Camino es un río,” he said. “The Camino is a river—just ride it.”

I found it easier to ride as I went. Even my nationality started to fade from me like something left in the sun too long. I got browner and my Spanish improved. If anything, people thought maybe I was British or German—never American, never me.

I walked for 28 days in all, from one full moon to the next, starting out with a backpack full of prissy toiletries, trendy halter tops, Band-Aids, and traveler's checks. By the time I wriggled out of my dinged-up pack for the last time, I had pared down to one change of clothes and a toothbrush.

On the last day I reached the hilltop of Monte de Gozo, where pilgrims used to dance and weep and hold each other at the first glimpse of the cathedral spires. It is now a touristy park with a view of the football stadium, a superhighway, and a rest stop. I had to ask someone to point out the spires, and could barely make out three gray needles above the skyline. I wended my way through the old part of the city, still following the crude yellow arrows which had guided me that far, and suddenly rounded a corner and there it was. I looked up at the spires and the sun shone right into my eyes. I continued on through an archway and into the grand plaza that faces the astonishing, ornate facade.

Inside the cathedral, the marble Jesse Tree supports an entire carved entryway. In the middle of this tall “Doorway of Glory,” Santiago is seated peacefully. As I waited in line, leaning on the walking stick that Pablo had made me, it became clear that everyone up ahead followed exactly the same ritual, although slightly different from the version I was prepared for: They put their hand to the pillar, reached into a stone lion's mouth to the right, and then bent to tap their foreheads three times. It got to be my turn and I did the same thing. Eyes closed, lion's mouth, forehead, tap, tap, tap.

I looked up and noticed a uniformed guard standing nearby, his eyes at a bored half-mast, arms folded across his chest. "Excuse me," I said. "What is the significance of the lion's mouth?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. Some kid reached in there this morning and everybody who came after him's been doing it ever since."

And, for all I know, they still are. I like to think so, to imagine that I was another tiny thread in this rich fabric of tradition. Are the threads mere gossamer of fact? Skeptics will tell you that the scallop shell that protected me en route was the membership badge of an ancient Venus cult. Its members dwelt in the Celtic forests and practiced rituals that Christians would find shocking. Some scholars say that the divine revelation of the tomb's location was mistranscribed by a monk with poor eyesight. They say he probably looked at an early account of St. James' burial site whose Latin script said Hierosolyma, Jersusalem, and mistakenly wrote Hispania, Spain. There are those who try to explain away the hermit Pelayo's vision, pointing to current astronomical phenomena. I doubt that any of them have been pilgrims. On the Camino there is a much finer line between an astronomical phenomenon and a miracle.

If I was expecting something miraculous in myself, though, it had yet to happen. I didn't feel anything except tired, and sad that it was over. I said goodbye to Manuel, Sergio, Christine, Geert, and the singing Germans, and returned to Madrid.

I spent several weeks going over my snapshots and watching the blisters on my feet heal and disappear. My walking stick rested in the corner of the living room. I rode the subway and taught grammar classes and wrote, but I felt as though I had been separated from a loved one. I thought about the Camino all year, wondering what winter was like in the mountains of León and how they might celebrate Easter in Santiago. You might say I was homesick, if a journey can be a home.

So when it got warm again, I went back. I worked as a volunteer at one of the Camino refuges. I cleaned toilets and kept house for more than 1,000 people in two weeks. I was restless and wanted to be among them. The day before I planned to begin my second pilgrimage, I started to feel strange. I was prickly with fevered goosebumps and everything seemed too bright and too loud.

I set out at dawn with a ringing in my right ear. By nightfall it was completely deaf. I was losing sensation in my cheek and temple, but I kept walking. León, Astorga, Ponferrada, Triacastela, mile after mile. "Beyond," I told myself. "Go beyond."

I kept walking until I couldn't stand the pain and pressure in my head. My hearing was shot, and I was angry that the one thing that had ever brought me peace—the Camino—was the very thing that was hurting me now.

Eight days away from Santiago I boarded a bus for Madrid. The doctor there told me that it was a good thing I'd come to him, since I was about eight days away from being dead—a staph infection I'd caught back at the refuge had been spreading through my ear on its way to my brain and spinal cord. Although grateful to be alive, I still felt that I had failed. When I called my Camino-mates to tell them I hadn't made it the second time, Sergio just laughed: “Don't you remember? A Santiago nunca se llega.”

I thought about what he said as I tried to stitch my life back together and recover from the trip. My loss of hearing took on new meaning for me—I had always thought that nothing or no one could hear me; maybe I was the one not listening. I sat in a rocking chair near the window in my apartment on Calle Huertas and finally understood the obvious: “Beyond” isn't about distance or the capacity to endure. And so I left the Camino permanently and began an altogether different journey, the search for a real home. After three years in Spain, I accepted a job offer in the United States, where I am living now. My hearing is fully restored, and I try to be more open to what I hear. I have gone beyond.

I like to remember my last night in Santiago after I finished the Camino. I was lying on my back in the middle of the deserted Plaza Obradoiro, gazing up at the cathedral. Suddenly I heard someone chattering at me from the far side of the plaza. I couldn't quite hear what she was saying, but I assumed it was along the lines of “Get up off the street, young lady!” Instead, the woman came over and sat beside me, then spun around and gestured for me to do the same.

“¡Al revés! ¡Al revés!” she commanded. “Turn around—the view is much better the other way.”

The two of us lay back side by side and looked at the cathedral upside down. She was right: The spires of

Santiago no longer looked rooted to the earth, but seemed to rise up out of the sky.

Abigail Seymour is a writer and photographer in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she lives with her husband, their two children, 2 dogs, 5 chickens and two beehives. She hopes to return to the Camino with her family during a Jubilee year.