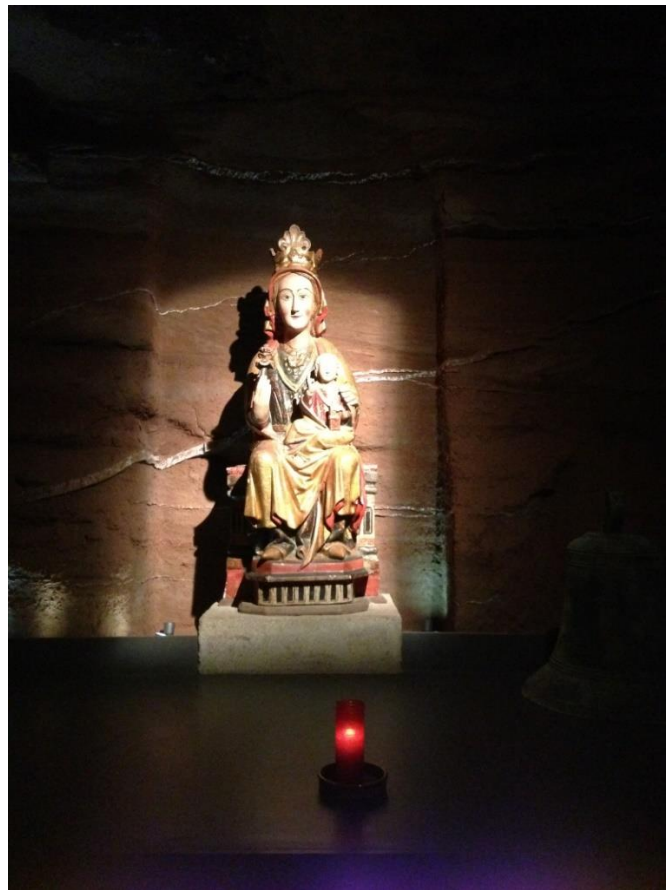


LOST and FOUND:

A Magical Journey on the Camino de Santiago



Barb Morris

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Author's Note

This is not a guidebook. Towns and landmarks aren't necessarily in order. Transportation is not rational.

This novel is imperfect. I believe its potential to bless its readers outweighs its imperfections. If you find that its imperfections outweigh its blessings for you, you have my permission to stop reading. Not that you need it.

Some of the imperfections include

- A few long conversations.
- Wobbly tenses.
- Wonky timelines.
- Fuzzy geography, especially on the Meseta. Again, not a guidebook.
- Wandering point of view. I might not have caught them all.
- Sometimes thoughts are in italics and sometimes they're not.
- I've almost certainly made mistakes with the Spanish dialogue.
- Voice/God/Camino? Who knows?

This novel is autobiographical in places. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of loved ones.

Why birth Martha's story into the world, flaws and all? I walked the Camino Francés with my husband in 2014. It was hard for me, and for us. The dream of the small door within the large door, the seed which grew into *Lost and Found*, surfaced in 2017. This novel followed, in bits and pieces. For three years Martha and I have been collaborating, then editing and revising, in an attempt to make a coherent narrative. It's time to let Martha out, flaws and all. She's given me no other choice, really.

I'd love to know what you think, especially what confuses you and what intrigues you. More of Martha's story is waiting to be told. She is every woman. May her story bless you as it has blessed me.

~Barb Morris

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Glossary and Resources

acequia – irrigation ditch

albergue – a cheap place for pilgrims to sleep. Run by confraternities, private citizens, churches, religious orders... Also called a *refugio*.

bar – primary source of restaurant meals along the Camino, not just for alcoholic beverages. Bars serve food and are open all day.

bocadillo – Spanish sandwich. Usually heavy on bread and light on filling.

Brierley – *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago*, a very popular guide book written by John Brierley, carried by many pilgrims. Thankfully, there are more competitors to Brierley in recent years.

café con leche – coffee with milk

Cola Cao – a Spanish hot chocolate powder

completo – full, so no room for you!

Compostela – a document issued to pilgrims who walk at least the last 100 kilometers to Santiago. Many pilgrims, like Martha, walk more than 100 kilometers.

Credential – a document carried by pilgrims, stamped at stops along the Way. Used as proof of pilgrim status for albergues and occasional reduced admissions, and to document your journey when you reach Santiago and request your Compostela.

Cruz de Ferro – Cross of Iron, located approximately 350 miles into the 500 miles from SJPP to Santiago. For several decades the “tradition” has been to carry a stone to the foot of the cross and leave it. The stone often symbolizes a burden or sin the pilgrim wants to release.

donativo – by donation

ensalada mixta – a salad composed of shredded lettuce, shredded carrots, garbanzo beans, hard boiled egg, and tuna, sometimes gussied up with pickled beets. A Camino staple, often the only vegetable available.

farmacia – pharmacy. Pharmacists in Spain can prescribe and dispense stronger drugs than in the United States.

hija – daughter

hospitalera/o – innkeeper, host

kilometer – there are approximately 1.6 kilometers in a mile. A quick trick to convert kilometers to miles is to multiply kilometers by .6 (six tenths). For example, 5 kilometers x .6 k/mi = 3 miles. To convert miles to kilometers, multiply by 1.6.

La Madre – The Mother

menú del día – menu of the day, a cheap pilgrim meal consisting of three courses – a starter, a main dish, and dessert – accompanied by bread and wine. Usually costing around €10

meseta – the vast plateau that covers much of Spain’s interior. It’s relatively flat and dry, and a major wheat-producing region of Spain.

m’ija – contraction of *mi hija*, my daughter

oración – prayer service

padre – father

peregrina/o – pilgrim

puente – bridge

retablo – the wall space behind the altar in a Spanish church, filled with statuary and scroll work.

Senda – mostly found in Castilla y León, where the authorities have straightened and paved the Camino path. Often runs next to the highway. Unpleasant but efficient.

siesta – nap. Seriously, the time, usually between 2:00 and 5:00 in the afternoon, when everything you want to see and do is unavailable because shops and churches are closed.

SJPP – St. Jean Pied de Port. A French Basque town at the foot of the Pyrenees, now considered the beginning of the Camino Francés. Sometimes “SJPdP.”

Templar – The Knights Templar. Look ‘em up: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knights_Templar

The Way – 2011 film by Evilio Estevez starring his father, Martin Sheen, as a berieved peregrino.

tienda – store

tortilla – In Spain, *tortilla* is an egg and potato dish, sometimes with ham or cheese or some other filling. A staple on the Camino.

turismo – tourist office

vino tinto – red wine

A few helpful links:

Camino de Santiago wiki with map: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camino_de_Santiago

American Pilgrims on the Camino: <https://americanpilgrims.org/>

Confraternity of St. James: <https://www.csj.org.uk/>

Camino resources on my website: <http://www.barbmorris.com/bio/camino-de-santiago/>

Lost and Found: A Magical Journey on the Camino de Santiago

“The only way to get rid of a real dream is to deprive it of light and warmth until it freezes, then stuff it into the coldest corner of your soul. Unlived dreams don’t hurt much as long as they stay frozen. But when they start to thaw – oh, baby. All the pain of that frigid exile comes rushing back. I can tell you from observation, as well as experience, that people don’t cry when they lose their hope. They cry when they get it back.” ~Martha Beck, *Finding Your Own North Star*

The Meseta Mid-June

Two massive wooden doors, each at least twenty feet high and ten feet wide, fill the cathedral entrance. The doors are slabs of oak six inches thick, joined together, carved with birds and flowers and creatures and scenes from the lives of the saints. Enormous metal latches and locks hold them tightly closed. Martha knows she doesn’t have a prayer of opening these doors. Then she notices, in the bottom right corner of the right-hand door, a little door. It’s about five feet tall and two feet wide, carved to blend in with the massive cathedral door of which it is a part. She tries the human-sized handle. The door creaks on its hinges. Martha pulls the small door toward her and steps onto the bottom piece of oak over which the door swings. She perfectly fits the little door. She stands on the threshold and peers into the darkness beyond. She stops.

After several deep breaths, Martha slowly places one foot on the stone floor of the cathedral. She feels the cold, hard, rough stone through the sole of her shoe. She sets her backpack down on one of a hundred rush-seated wooden chairs, takes off her shoes and socks, and begins to walk, barefoot, through the murky cathedral. She feels every hill and valley of the cold, hard floor with her aching, blistered feet. One foot in front of the other, one step at a time, arms outstretched, hands wide open, she walks, looking up and around as the dark begins to be cut by dust-filled shafts of light from clerestory windows so high she can’t see them, only the sunlight they admit into this filmy cavernous space. She breathes the old, cold air stirred by the scent of incense and lilies, solid as water. She finds, in the north transept, an altar to St. Agatha, proudly holding her platter of breasts. One solitary candle burns at the saint’s feet.

Martha sits on the wooden pew in front of the altar. A hymn tune wafts through her mind: *“Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes. Un-something, unchanging, the ancient of days la la la la la thy great name we praise.”* She hears those words as if for the first time. *How rude, she thinks. If God doesn’t change, and being unchanging is the ideal, how can little always-in-process me ever hope to be holy?*

Martha sits, and she waits, inside this Spanish church. She’s become better at waiting for the next step to show up. She’s learning not to rush. It’s taking time to learn not to rush. Some days she’s only walked ten kilometers. At this rate it will take her three months to get to Santiago. Or longer. But she’s so tired of going in a straight line from point A to point B, never deviating, focused on the goal, covering the material with greater than or equal to 80% success as determined by weekly benchmarks, quarterly

testing, and annual achievement scores. She simply wants to sit and wait and be a human woman who sits and waits when waiting is called for, and who moves with purpose and strength when it's time to move.

She knows these moments, this hour in this dark church, is a time for waiting. She's surrendering more and more to her unpredictable and strange impulses. She's becoming an instinctual being – following a deeper, more rooted guidance system than the map in her backpack and her frenzied brain. She's becoming feral – a creature following her heart and her nose, rather than Brierley's stages. She's becoming fluent in her soul's language.

Martha's been seeing drawings and paintings in her mind for days. She sees the ink and watercolors she'd use to paint this place. The clerestories far above, where the sun shines in, illuminating the swirling dust – those windows would be ink drawn in strong lines. The shaft of sun is pale yellow watercolor. The stone of the church is blueblackgrey wash. The dust is droplets of some dusky paint, splattered over it all with a toothbrush's fine spray.

And what does the shaft of sunlight illumine? For while Martha has been waiting, the sun has climbed higher in the sky and the shaft of light now reaches farther down into the sanctuary, the heart of this dark cavernous space. Martha sits and watches the sunlight as it moves lower and deeper into the darkness—slowly, inexorably illuminating a gilded altar upon which stand two shiny bronze vases of pink plastic flowers, two unlit candles, and a gold crucifix on a white linen cloth.

Martha is disappointed. She'd hoped for a sign, a symbol, a portent. Some reason for spending the better part of an afternoon, when she should be walking, in this cold, dark church. Instead, what she receives is more of the same. More guilt. More plastic. More glorification of suffering.

She wonders if the waiting is the point.

Martha heaves herself up onto her hurting feet, feeling the stiffness and the cold that's seeped into her bones from this tired, cold place, and walks back through the dark church to where her shoes and backpack wait beside the little door inside the big door. She gathers her things, pushes open the door, and steps over the threshold into the dazzling Riojan sun.

Martha walks to the bar across the plaza from the church. She hadn't noticed it earlier when she'd surrendered to the urge and crossed this plaza on her way to the huge cathedral doors, yearning to know what was on the other side of them. Now, sitting in the sun with a cup of hot milk, a packet of Cola Cao, and a slice of tortilla, she rests her feet on the red plastic chair opposite her and looks critically at the church. Templar architecture, she now sees. All thick walls and fortress lines. It fairly bristles with animosity – full of the self-righteousness of those men who built her a thousand years ago.

Of course there was nothing there for her. Why had she expected otherwise?

Suburban Chicago
Late May

Martha handed in her keys for the last time and went home to empty her closet and dresser. She took all the sensible clothes, the khakis and cardigans and school spirit t-shirts and sturdy shoes, to Goodwill that afternoon. She kept only a few pairs of jeans and two t-shirts for gardening.

A bright yellow t-shirt and lime green skirt were hanging in the Goodwill window. They went fabulously with the flamingo-pink plastic flip flops in the shoe section. Martha bought them all.

The next day she packed up her books. The self-help, the novels, the history, the writing manuals. She'd left her classroom library and best practice books for the bright shiny teacher taking her place. She expected her replacement to throw the texts away, but held out hope that some kid someday would fall in love with *Wizard of Earthsea*. Her bookshelves now held only a few volumes of poetry, her field guides, and her college art history textbooks.

Two days after her final day as a sixth-grade teacher, Martha walked out the front door of her almost empty house and climbed into the waiting cab. She carried a backpack holding two changes of clothes, a few basic toiletries, her Goodwill purchases, and her trekking poles. Inside the backpack was a smaller bag with a paperback, passport and credit cards, and 300 Euros donated by her former colleagues at her retirement party. She hadn't wanted a party at all, so it had been a small gathering of team teachers and two principals. She was the last of the group that had started teaching together 25 years before.

She was flying United to La Guardia, then on Iberia to Madrid. From Madrid she'd take a train to León and a bus to Pamplona, where she'd start walking the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. Santiago de Compostela, the terminus of many Caminos – routes came from all over Spain, a few cities in France, and Portugal. Even from England, although that route was mostly the ferry from Portsmouth, with only three days of walking in Spain.

Martha thought, not for the first time and probably not for the last, that she was crazy to be doing this. She was 62 years old, healthy but not in peak physical condition for walking almost 500 miles, with rusty Spanish. And, craziest of all, she was alone.

And yet. What better way to mark the end of an era? What better way to tend the ending of her working life and to invite in whatever was next? You see, she didn't know what came next. When her retirement had become public knowledge, the Camino was a handy answer for the inevitable question at staff meetings and in the teacher's lounge, a place she usually avoided. Martha had asked her principal not to tell anyone until the new teachers for the coming year had been hired. She didn't want her retirement to be a distraction for the last couple of months of school. She just wanted to teach – to pay attention to this ending as fully as she could.

The questions. Oh, the questions. "So, Martha, what are you going to do next year when we're all back in school? Do you have plans? Are you going to get another dog? It'll be nice to spend more time with your kids, won't it?"

She'd answer, "Actually, I'm spending the summer in Spain, walking the Camino de Santiago." She liked the surprised look on their faces. She'd enjoyed surprising someone for a change.

After a pause, the seemingly inevitable "Who's going with you?"

“No one,” she’d answer. “I’m going by myself.”

“Is that safe?” they’d ask.

“A lot of people do it, so I hope so. It’s fine. Joy is meeting me in León for a few days in the middle to check on me. I’ll email the kids when I have WiFi.”

She would see the doubt cross their face and find it mirrored in her own thoughts. *What the hell am I doing?*

Yet there Martha was, at Chicago O’Hare, checking her backpack through to Madrid, carrying only a book and the small bag. The ticket agent wished her a good flight as he handed over her boarding passes. She went through security to the waiting area, sat down, and fought the rising panic that had become her constant companion. Fear’s voice with its predictable litany once more took a run through her head: *This is a batshit crazy idea. I don’t know why I’m doing this. I don’t have to do this. I could walk right through that door there and catch a cab back home. I could be in my house tidying up and tending my garden. I could start the kitchen remodel. I could be picking out bathroom tile. I could be painting the study. I could wake up in my own bed. I could get in shape for this. Train for it. Do it next fall when it’s cooler. What the hell am I thinking?*

Somehow, she kept her seat. She let the voice yammer on, and sat. She stayed in her seat until her flight was called, when she stood up and walked down the jetway and onto the plane. She found her seat and, once again, she sat. She didn’t speak. She didn’t trust herself to speak. If she talked, she’s not sure she’d ever shut up. *I’m alone on this fool’s pilgrimage*, she thought. *No conversation with strangers will change that.* She pondered taking a vow of silence for the duration of this journey. She could hang a sign around her neck that said, “In Silence.” Tempting.

She didn’t stand up until the plane landed at La Guardia. Her flight to Madrid didn’t leave for three hours. Three hours. Three hours to change her mind. To come to her senses. Her backpack would go to Spain without her. Then she remembered the empty closet. The empty bookshelves. The almost-empty house. Her empty former life.

What had she done?

Her phone rang. Her son.

“Hi, Nate.” So much for the vow of silence.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry I didn’t call. So much to do. You know. Yes, I’m in New York between flights. The Madrid flight will be boarding any minute. You got the itinerary I sent you, right? I’ll check in when I have WiFi. Yes, sweetie. I promise. Give Flora a kiss for me. Spain is a first world country, dear. Thank you for taking care of her. I’ll miss you. Not going to back out now, dear. I’ll be fine. I love you, too. Yes, you can update your dad if he asks. Bye, sweetie.”

Martha turned off her phone and put it away in her bag. She sat, unmoving, until her row was called. She got up and walked to the gate and down the jetway, onto the big plane that flies across oceans. She found her seat, shoved her little bag under the seat in front, buckled her seatbelt, looked out the window, and smiled.

All I have to do is put one foot in front of the other, and walk. Babies do that. I can do that.

She'd had so many ideas about this Camino. So many theories. So many thoughts. Now it was here. She was suddenly aware that she didn't know anything anymore. And that she didn't need to know anything. All she had to do was walk. All she had to do was follow the arrows and walk to Santiago.

But first, she had to get to Pamplona.

Madrid to Pamplona
Late May

Getting to Pamplona from Madrid isn't as easy as you'd expect.

To start, this is Spain, so hardly anything is straightforward. First a taxi from the airport to her hotel. She shows the driver the name of the hotel in the guidebook, rather than trusting her Spanish. One night in Madrid to catch up with herself. Her first taste of the wonder that is Spanish toast, with café con leche, for breakfast. Another taxi to the train station, the train to León, a bus to Logroño and another bus to Pamplona. Between León and Pamplona, she begins to see pilgrims. Peregrinos y peregrinas, walking beside the highway, going in the opposite direction.

The buses cover in five hours what will take her ten days to walk.

She had decided to start in Pamplona to avoid the notoriously difficult first day out of St. Jean Pied de Port in France. The traditional first day is a fifteen-mile, 5000 vertical foot hike that goes up and over the Pyrenees. Many pilgrims don't recover from that ridiculous beginning, and they end up quitting soon after. She wanted to be reasonable and avoid that, hence Pamplona. Although Martha knew she would miss starting in France, this seemed like a good compromise. Starting in Roncesvalles, the Spanish town closest to the French border, nestled at the foot of the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, was an option, but why not just start in Pamplona? The town of Hemingway and the running of the bulls. Her dad had been a Hemingway fan. Pamplona was a perfectly respectable choice, and she was content with it.

After all, she'd reasoned, a lot of Europeans do the Camino in stages, spreading it over three, four, or even five years, and thought those who did it all in one go were a little loco. Most Spanish wouldn't dream of walking more than the last 100 kilometers from Sarría. Some hard core peregrinos thought the only truly valid starting point was Paris. Where you started was arbitrary. In the Middle Ages, the golden age of pilgrimage, when the only way to get to Santiago was to walk to Santiago, pilgrims simply stepped out their front door. And when they got to Santiago, they turned around and walked back home. You began where you were. This modern version of the ancient pilgrimage was completely fabricated. About the only remnant of the historical medieval pilgrimage was the road and the walking of it.

In Pamplona, following Brierley's map, she eventually finds her way through the narrow, cobbled streets to the pilgrim office next to the cathedral. She needs a pilgrim credential to stay in an albergue that night. Lucky Martha. She gets there ten minutes before it closes for siesta.

Martha feels the tightness in her chest. She reminds herself that she's choosing to do this. It's all optional. She can catch the bus back to Logroño, the train to León, the train to Madrid, and fly back home. It would be cheaper than walking the Camino. She's planned on 50 Euro each day of walking. Ten

euro for a bed every night. Ten euro for a basic dinner. Another 20 euro for breakfast, lunch, and incidentals, at a minimum. It's 450 miles from Pamplona to Santiago. If she covers an average of 12 miles each day and takes two rest days, that's 40 days. The Camino should cost her around 2,000 euro, if she sleeps and eats cheaply and keeps a good pace. She'd found in her research that many pilgrims walked 15 to 18 to 20 miles daily. She didn't want to go that fast or put her body through that punishment.

The attendant praises her at the Pilgrim office when he realizes she intends to start walking the next day. "Está bien, señora. That's good. It's really hard to walk over the Pyrenees. St. Jean to Roncesvalles is long. Steep up and really steep down. Many beginner peregrinos get hurt and never recover. We wish more pilgrims were like you and had the sense to start here in Pamplona. ¡Buen Camino!"

He issues her credential with a list of albergues and an elevation map for the entire Camino. Martha sees in Spanish black and white that the 80 kilometers between St. Jean and Pamplona involves much climbing and going back down, and there are two more mountain ranges in the last 120 miles of the Camino. She isn't slacking. She's being smart.

Her second task at the pilgrim office is to pick out a scallop shell from the large basket on the counter. She takes her time choosing, and finally settles on an ordinary cream-colored shell about three inches across. There are bigger ones and smaller ones. She'd seen the shells in the souvenir stores with the red painted-on, dagger-like cross of St. James, and shied away from the implied violence of that symbol. Christianity as a weapon might be historically appropriate, but she didn't want to be reminded of it every time she looked at her shell.

Credential in hand, shell in her backpack to be attached later that night, she goes to find an albergue. Her first albergue. She'd considered making a hotel reservation – a private room with bath for one last shampoo and leg shave in solitude, but had decided that once in Pamplona she was on the Camino and it would be time to act like it.

It's mid-afternoon. Siesta. Martha is standing in Pamplona's large central plaza, cross referencing her new albergue list with Brierley, deciding which albergue to try first, when she sees them. Pilgrims. Walking in twos and threes mostly, many of them tired and slow, looking around them for directions. These peregrinos had started in St. Jean, or farther away in France.

One couple sees her standing there. "¡Buen Camino! Are you looking for an albergue? Come with us!" Martha goes with them.

"Where did you start today?" asks the woman.

"I just got to Pamplona. I'm starting tomorrow."

"We have reservations at the Hemingway. You're welcome to come see if they have a bed." Their accent sounds English.

She thinks how kind it is of them to see a woman alone and take her under their protective wing. Perhaps loneliness won't be a problem after all.

"Did you start in St. Jean?" she asks. "I'm Martha, by the way."

“Yes, we did, and my knees are still aching,” says the man. “I’m Douglas and this is Clarice.”

They consult their Brierley, take a few twists and turns, and end up in front of a stone house with a blue bench on the sidewalk and a pot of geraniums next to the propped open wooden door. There are no separate houses on the street. One long wall of various configurations of stonework goes on unbroken until it turns a corner, interspersed with more colorful doors and signs for lodging, restaurants, bars, and tiendas. Wrought iron balconies bedecked with more flowers hang off the second and third story balconies.

It’s beautiful. And decidedly not Chicago anymore. Martha is relieved to see that they are at one of the albergues she’d marked ahead of time.

Douglas and Clarice usher her in first. “We have a reservation,” they remind her. Martha is relieved to hear that pilgrims can make reservations.

The albergue does indeed have a few available beds, and she could have one for ten euro. The hospitalero stamps her credential and takes her money. Her first stamp. She looks at all the empty pages in her credential and tries to imagine them full.

Clarice and Douglas find their names on two beds in a large room lined with bunk beds. They immediately take off their boots and lie down with a groan. Martha claims a bed on the other side of the room and puts down her backpack.

She still needs to buy her Altus poncho and lunch for tomorrow. She tells Clarice she’ll be back in a little while. “Wait an hour and we’ll go with you,” Clarice says. “Caminoteca is right next to the cathedral. The stores are all closed right now anyway. Siesta.”

Martha doesn’t want to wait for them. The thought of twiddling her thumbs while they showered and did laundry was suddenly unbearable. She tells them she’ll meet them later, grabs her bag and her Brierley, and goes in search of Caminoteca. She wants to spend some time in the cathedral she’d passed earlier.

Maybe she’ll meet them later, and maybe she won’t.

Martha finds Caminoteca, an obligatory pilgrim stop, run by an expat who’d fallen in love with the Camino ten years or more ago and found a way to stay in Spain. It’s full of necessities, including the Altus poncho she’d seen touted in a Facebook group as the best rain gear available. The Altus has a built-in pouch to cover a backpack and is long enough to keep one’s upper legs dry. They have small sizes in red and blue. She chooses blue. Red seems too attention-getting.

“Did you already get wet crossing the Pyrenees?” asks the clerk, in excellent English. Is he the owner? “It can be brutal up there, especially in the rain and wind. And the weather’s been pretty wet.”

“No, I’m starting tomorrow,” says Martha.

“From Pamplona?”

“That’s the plan,” she answers.

“Good for you,” he says. “So many pilgrims think the only real (he puts “real” in air quotes) Camino begins in St. Jean, so they climb those mountains their very first day and they hurt their knees and their feet and they never really recover. It’s ridiculous. Don’t tell them I said that, though. It would be bad for business.”

“Thanks,” Martha says. “I’ve been a little worried that I would be sorry I didn’t start in St. Jean.”
 “In the Middle Ages, pilgrims started all over Europe. You’re American, right? So, your pilgrimage started when you left home. Where you actually start walking doesn’t matter. The English pilgrims, a thousand years ago, their pilgrimage was mostly by boat. You’re still a legit pilgrim when you start in Pamplona. You get to pick. And you’re alone, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good for you, again. That means you get to choose whatever works for you. Do it your way.”

“Gracias, señor. Thank you for the pep talk.”

“Buen Camino, peregrina,” he replies.

Martha stuffs her new poncho in her bag and walks out into waning light and the crooked cobbled street that, she now sees, leads directly up the hill to the steps of the cathedral.

The Catedral de Santa María la Real is immense and beautifully Gothic. Martha pays her money, investigates the chapels, the tombs, and all the gilded ostentatious sculpture, then walks toward the cloisters. She has a special fondness for the cloisters in English cathedrals, and wonders if Spanish ones will have the same appeal. She likes to imagine the monks and nuns seven hundred years ago finding quiet and solace in these simple, protected, interior spaces.

Walking around a corner, she sees them. A wall of Madonnas. There are twenty-four Madonnas in a grid, stacked six across, four rows high. They take her breath away. Wooden statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary with Jesus on her lap, in niches on the wall. Each statue three or four feet tall. Each in her own niche. What are they doing here? All these Marys, baby Jesuses and toddler Jesuses, no longer doing the job for which they were intended. No longer a focus of devotion and a conduit of God’s power. No one laying a flower at their feet and asking for healing. Not at the center of masses and festivals and celebrations. Now they’re just relics locked up here, behind glass.

Martha doesn’t understand why all these Marys are here. She needs to understand. She walks as close as she can get to the glass and looks for an explanation. Finding none, she sits on the floor in front of them.

She feels it before she hears it: A low murmuring, a swish of breath like wind in pines, a tapping on invisible glass. The sound coalesces into one word. “Yes,” she hears them say. “Yes. Say yes.”

She stands and looks around to see if anyone else is hearing this. She’s alone. She stays until the Marys are quiet again.

Say yes to what, exactly?

The next morning, very early, Martha is the first one up and out of the albergue. She takes a taxi to the bus station, and, instead of walking west from Pamplona, buys a ticket to the French town of St. Jean Pied de Port. The bus takes the rational route to St. Jean and skirts the Pyrenees, rather than going up and over as the Camino does. She knows that later today, if the weather is at all sketchy, she'll be walking the same rational route in reverse – the route that takes an hour to drive and four days to walk. If the weather is clear, up and over she'll go, God willing.

St. Jean Pied de Port, France to Roncesvalles, Spain
Late May

St. Jean Pied de Port. SJPP. A picture postcard of a French town at the feet of the Pyrenees. Saint John's town at the foot of a pass that makes the upward climb over the mountains into Spain a little more manageable. Because that first day's walk, as long and steep as it is, crosses a low point of the Pyrenees.

Martha steps from the bus and looks up at the mountains looming to the west. Then she starts walking. Her first steps on the Camino are not ceremonial. She remembers her mantra from the flight over the Atlantic: *Just keep walking. Even babies can walk.*

The first day of the official Camino Francés, the most famous and popular route to Santiago, is eleven miles of paved road interspersed with rocky trail that climbs a vertical mile to the top of the Pyrenees, then a steep four miles down the other side into Roncesvalles. The Way climbs up and up, first through wet, green pastures with sheep and cows, and past quaint French farmhouses. "Bonjour, happy cow," says Martha. Chickens cluck and scratch in farmyards. The fences are covered in yellow honeysuckle. The air is moist and gray.

She wants to know what the trees are – maybe beeches? Up and up to Orisson, her first stop. Some pilgrims stop here for the night, making the trek over the Pyrenees more manageable. Martha stops only for café con leche and tortilla. Pilgrims sit at the tables around her, looking up the road to where they're going and back down the road to where they've been. She's barely begun but already St. Jean is far below in the valley, held in the cupped hands of the mountains. So beautiful. So far to go. Feet okay, for now. She's worried about her feet. Once she leaves Orisson, she's committed to walking twelve more miles to Roncesvalles. Okay, then. She hoists her backpack and starts walking again.

"How you do anything is how you do everything," she remembers. She's seen the Camino version: "As on the Camino, so in Life." She wonders what she'll learn about herself, about other people, and about life on this long walk.

Several more hours of hard walking bring her to a mountain top meadow with small ponies grazing. They have bells around their necks and foals nestled beside them. Over on a ridge to the east Martha sees a Madonna. She's about three feet tall, and in what Martha thinks of as typical tacky Roman Catholic fashion, she's festooned with brocade and lace, beads and a crown, and plastic flowers. Martha wonders if this is what she has to look forward to for six weeks: tawdry saints and gaudy churches. She walks to the base of the statue and sits on the granite rocks, willing to give the Virgin a chance. Unlike the Marys in Pamplona, this Virgin seems to be silent.

Martha stops in the shelter of a large rock at what appears to be the top of the pass, out of the wind, and takes out the lunch ingredients she bought the day before in Pamplona – crusty bread, cheese, pate, and macaroons. She spreads her bubble wrap on the ground and sits down, lunch supplies at hand. As she's spreading pate on bread and slicing cheese, along comes a small shepherd mix dog with a collar. Martha reaches out her hand and calls the dog. The dog is more interested in the cheese than in Martha's hand, but submits to being petted. Then here comes a person, evidently belonging to the dog judging by the sack of dogfood hanging from her backpack. The dog turns and wags her tail. "Loli!" calls the woman in some sort of accent. German? Swiss? Austrian? She brought a dog on Camino? Martha misses Flora.

After climbing up and over the Pyrenees (Martha likes the sound of that, although her knees do not), Martha arrives in Roncesvalles, where she spends the night in the modern albergue attached to the church. She's disappointed not to be sleeping in the huge room filled with bunkbeds depicted in *The Way*. It's the first time she's been disappointed by *The Way*, and it won't be the last. After dinner, where she's forced to sit at a common table and chat, she attends her first pilgrim mass and takes communion even though she's technically not allowed to, not being Roman Catholic.

She sits in the dark church and listens to the priest intone the familiar words in Spanish. Martha feels both proud of herself and more than a little terrified. If the next 485 miles are anything like today's fifteen, she's in deep shit. Thank God for Brierley, she thinks. She realizes she's crying and decides it's because she's so very tired. When the priest raises his hands and says, "Esta noche, España es el mundo," she looks around and realizes, yes, tonight, Spain is the world. All these pilgrims, sore and tired and proud, are just like her. All of them not knowing what the next 500 miles would bring and hoping they're up to the challenge, just like her. She knows that a large chunk of the people in that church will not in fact make it to Santiago on their own two legs. She wants very badly to be one of the ones who does.

In spite of her tiredness, sleep does not come easily tonight. Martha lies awake listening to the night noises of the pilgrims bedded around all around her. She can only see the three other people sleeping in her cubicle. One of them, a woman, is also awake. She and Martha catch each other's eye before Martha finally falls asleep.

The sound of Danish hospitaleros singing wakes her much too early. She quickly pulls on the clothes she'd wadded up in the bottom of her sleeping bag last night. They're warm, at least. She dresses inside her bag. A quick brush of her teeth and she's out the door, in search of breakfast.

Roncesvalles to Cizur Menor Early June

Breakfast is café con leche and toast, after which Martha continues down the path toward Larrasoaña, 27 km away. She stops for a selfie in front of the famous sign by the side of the highway that says ""Santiago de Compostela 790", for café and tortilla in Espinal, and for picnic lunch supplies in Viskarret. She eats her bread, tuna, and an apple by the side of the Camino.

Martha arrives in Larrasoaña, 27 kilometers down the Way, around 4:00, noting with some irony Brierley's instruction to "Take care not to overextend yourself on these first days of your journey." Thirty kilometers is about 17 miles. She's never walked 17 miles in one day in her entire life. How is this not

overextending yourself? At least it's been mostly downhill. She's tired and sore, and the municipal albergue is a welcome sight. She snags a bed, showers, does her laundry, and goes down the street for dinner alone. She's too tired to make small talk.

The next morning, when the lights are turned on in the albergue, she's already awake. She's been lying in her sleeping bag giving herself a pep talk: "All you have to do is put one step in front of another. Just one more step. Even babies do that. You got this." Clothes pulled on in her sleeping bag, a quick brush of her teeth, and out the door she goes. The Way today follows the Río Arga. A beautiful, tree-lined path for a long way over a couple of big hills, then down into Pamplona.

Martha hobbles into Pamplona and thinks back to three days earlier, when she was standing in the plaza watching peregrinos hobble into Pamplona. She's one of those pilgrims now. She continues walking, past the cathedral where she heard the Marys' direction to go to St. Jean and walk over the Pyrenees. She wonders what these last three days of suffering were for. Why did she have that strange and compelling feeling that she needed to – was supposed to – start in France? It's unlike her to take such an irrational risk. Well. Enough of that. All she has to show for her impulsiveness is sore knees and feet, as predicted. She resolves to stay on the Way all the way to Santiago – the Way with rational stages and well-marked roads. No more risks. Walking the Camino is crazy enough without being all woo woo about it. Martha sees that she was nuts to take a bus to St. Jean and start walking the same day. She could have been lost in the dark on the top of the Col de Lepoeder and fallen over a cliff. She got lucky, that's all. She got very, very lucky.

Martha marches determinedly through the city of Pamplona. She finds that Brierley's right. Even though she's only been on the Way for three days, the hustle and bustle of Pamplona is a shock. There's so much going on, so many signs, so much noise, so many people, it's hard to see the yellow arrows. Besides, she's been here already. She's visited the Cathedral, and she has no interest in the San Fermín, Running of the Bulls, masculinist Hemingway crap. She sets her face toward Cizur Menor, Brierley's next suggested stop, five kilometers outside the city.

Because Brierley expects his devotees to spend time in Pamplona, this is a short day. Martha is relieved. She's early enough to get a bottom bunk in the albergue run by the woman who tends to pilgrims' feet. After shower and laundry, Martha sits in the courtyard next to the turtle pond and watches Maribel minister to the line of peregrinos seeking her care. Maribel takes the right foot of a man with blisters between his toes. She washes his foot, drains the blisters with a syringe, dresses them, and shows him a better way to tie his shoes. He carefully puts on his flip flops and limps away.

Martha notices that Maribel will not be hurried. She gives each pilgrim the same tender attention. Martha suspects Maribel might actually work more slowly when she perceives impatience.

Martha's fellow pilgrims are stressed. There's a little jostling in that line – a little making sure no one else gets in front and gets taken care of before they're supposed to be. Faded are the rosy countenances of St. Jean Pied de Port. Forgotten are the smiling selfies at Roncesvalles. These peregrinos are worried. Shit's getting real now. Knees hurt. Legs are tired. Blisters are popping up. Some are wondering if they've made the right shoe choice. Some are wondering if they'd be better off going back down to Pamplona tonight and going home. Martha's confident her trail runners are going to see her through, and her blisters aren't near as bulbous as some she's seeing in Maribel's lap. She decides not to stand in line for Maribel's ministrations. In the back of her mind she's worried, too, and wondering if she's made the right choice to go on Camino. How will she know, she wonders. How will she know if she made the

right choice? There's no test for this. No benchmark. Is it possible there's no right or wrong answer? She pushes that thought down and watches Maribel take care of the foot in front of her, and the next, and the next.

As early as she can, Martha goes for dinner. No pilgrim mass in these little towns. The churches have been closed when she's walked through. No priests to serve them, and hardly any people live there anyway. She lies in her bunk and reads for a little while, takes her nightly ibuprofen, puts in her earplugs, and goes to sleep.

Eunate
Early June

It's uphill from Cizur Menor to El Alto del Perdón, the Hill of Forgiveness, where a hermitage, a church, and a pilgrim hospice operated in medieval times. Brierley says that pilgrims who made it this far were assured of forgiveness for their sins. So, if they died before they got to Santiago, they'd still go to heaven. Martha thinks this is a little odd – the system whereby the church decides what a sin is, who can be forgiven, and what exactly the sinner needs to do to be forgiven. Any trace of the medieval complex has been obliterated by the huge wind turbines all along the ridge. She's gratified to see the iron sculptures on the hill but surprised they're this close to Pamplona. She thought from "The Way" that they were farther along the Camino.

After the obligatory photo of herself with an iron pilgrim cutout, Martha goes down the other side. Soon she sees the turnoff to Eunate, a detour she'd read about yesterday and had decided not to take. Adding another two miles to her day does not seem like a rational and necessary thing to do. Her feet are hurting and her knees are sore, so she resolves again to go straight to Puente la Reina.

And then. Despite her resolution, Martha finds the deep urge to turn left toward Eunate too strong for her rational mind to resist. She somehow knows if she overrides her deep desire to see this place, she will regret it. She would always wonder what she was supposed to find there. So turn left she does, and walks through rocky, dusty vineyards along a scantily marked path toward the tiny church she can now see in the distance.

The church at Eunate is much smaller than she expected, and is exquisitely set in its meadow. Eunate was built in the 12th century and is likely Templar, according to Brierley. From the distance the buff-colored, octagonal stone church is plain. As she gets closer, she sees that the arch over the doorway and the corbels on the capitals are carved with figures – spirals, dragons, naked humans in odd positions, serpents and monsters, as well as the expected plant motifs. An wall of airy arches surrounds the church.

Martha enters the cool, dark space and sits on a wooden pew. Eunate's interior is so small she can see everything without standing up, for which her feet are extremely grateful. She's been inside only ten minutes when she's politely asked to leave by Eunate's guardians, who lock the door for siesta just as several groups of peregrinos are arriving. The new arrivals are not happy about this, but are nevertheless cheerfully told to return at 5:00, after siesta. They reply that they can't wait that long, which is unimportant to the keepers of this sanctuary.

Outside in the sun, Martha removes her shoes and lies on the wall beneath one of the arches. Her head is on the warm stone, her legs propped on her backpack. Taking off her shoes is always risky, and getting

them back on will hurt. She feels the heat of the sun on her skin and hears the wind in the trees surrounding this ancient place, a burial place for medieval pilgrims. The carvings in the stones here remind her of motifs in Celtic churches and on Irish high crosses. After half an hour or so, aware that she now has farther to walk than she had planned this morning, Martha reluctantly sits up, puts on her shoes, dons her backpack, and walks past orchards and vineyards to Puente la Reina. She still has no idea why she needed to detour to Eunate, and she's very glad she did.

Puente la Reina to Nájera
Early June

Martha's next four days pass in a blur.

Like bright fantasies embedded in everyday reality, poppies glow incandescent red in the spring green wheat fields on the Way from Puente la Reina to Estella. Cirauqui, high on its hill, charms her. The Roman Road is hard on her feet and she thrills at its age. She's amazed and gratified that something so ancient and beautiful is functional almost two thousand years later.

Walking from Estella to Los Arcos, she stops at the famous wine fountain, which praises have been sung by many pilgrims before her. The scene cheapens her Camino. The wine is cheap, too, and she pours it out at her next stop. She takes the alternate path high along the side of the mountain and sees the conical peak of Monjardín across the valley. The Way is bordered by green wheat waving in the wind, vineyards, and more poppies. The church in Los Arcos is the most ornamented building she's ever been inside, but the cloisters are a peaceful and simple refuge. Sun shines through the carved filigree within the top of the cloister arches, spreading a shadow of tracery on the opposite wall. She spends a quiet hour there, soaking in the solitude and silence.

The weather so far has been dry and clear. She's begun each morning wearing her fleece and long pants and has zipped off the bottoms of her pants each afternoon. Her legs are getting tanned above her sock line. She doesn't want to look at her feet. Sunglasses have come in handy, as have her mittens. She's now heading relentlessly west, and the sun is falling mostly on her left side. She's getting a little lopsided – brown legs and white feet, sunburned on the left and paler on the right.

The blisters on Martha's heels are growing. She'd bought a syringe, betadine, gauze, and tape from a farmacia in Estella, and drains them each night as she saw Maribel do in Cizur Menor. But they just grow back the next day. They hurt. Brierley's pace is a little aggressive, maybe, but she feels better when she's following his stages. Less crazy and alone.

Between Los Arcos and Logroño, Martha begins to acknowledge that she will need to slow down. She simply cannot continue walking 12, 14, 17 miles each day. The pace is just too fast. If she wants to stay with Brierley's schedule, she will need to take alternate forms of transportation occasionally. Out here in the country that means a taxi or a bus. This idea deeply offends her, but she thinks it's a better choice than striking out on her own.

She sees the same people along the road – many pilgrims are following Brierley's suggested stages, it seems. She knows he didn't intend his book to become such a stringent thing. As another peregrino said, only half-jokingly, "Brierley says it, I believe it, and that settles it." It's comforting to have such clear

directions on this crazy pilgrimage. The popularity of his guide means that pilgrims are clumping up and albergues are getting full earlier – a downside to following Brierley. The upside is that she’s beginning to make Camino friends. She’s had dinner with the same group three nights in a row now, and she’s grateful for the consistent company.

One of her new friends, an Irishman called Kieran, gave her a piece of wisdom she’s struggling to follow. He’d told her at dinner the night before, “You’re a pilgrim, not a martyr.” He told her that it’s her pilgrimage, and she gets to make the rules. If she wants to stay two nights in a town, she can. If she wants to take a bus or a taxi, she can. If she wants to {gasp} stay somewhere other than the town Brierley suggests, she can. Martha thinks he has a solid point, but a piece of her stubbornly resists taking his advice.

The road between Los Arcos and Logroño is beautiful. Martha stops to sit in the Torres del Río octagonal church. It touches her as Eunate had, not surprising given its similar construction – a simple stone octagon, its only decoration a 13th century crucifix carved of wood. She walks through a herd of sheep with their shepherd, past rose-buttressed vineyards, along empty roads. She would like to stay in Viana with its view over this western edge of Navarre, but Logroño is her next scheduled stop.

Navarre has been gorgeous, full of lush rivers, wild poppies, waving wheat, and quaint Basque villages. Logroño marks the boundary between Navarre and the wine country of La Rioja. Martha is sad to leave Navarre behind, and glad to be making progress toward Santiago.

She slowly hobbles into Logroño’s municipal albergue, takes a shower and does her laundry, and goes in search of the cathedral. Logroño is the largest city since Pamplona, and the capital of La Rioja. Despite her sore feet, Martha is determined to visit the highlights. Evidently every gram of New World gold that Spain brought home from the Americas has found a home in the magnificent retablo behind the high altar. It’s full of statues and coats of arms and filigree of all sorts. The contrast between the gilded cathedral and the simple stone chapel of Torres del Río is stark. The contrast between the wooden crucifix of this morning and the gold crucifix of this afternoon is striking. She’s not sure what to make of it. She’s aware that the contrast is meaningful, but what does it mean?

Atop the magnificent retablo Martha sees Mary, Queen of Heaven, cast in bronze and shining like the sun. Down below at the side of the high altar, at eye level, is another Madonna. This carved wooden Mary holds a crowned toddler Jesus on her lap. Her expression seems serious and sad, which mirrors Martha’s mood. Martha feels wooden Mary’s eyes on her, but she turns away.

Dinner again with the lads from Ireland, an American Franciscan priest, two doctors from Oregon, and two pilgrims she hasn’t met before – a German woman and the woman’s Camino friend from Slovakia. Again, Martha is struck by Europeans’ awareness of and interest in American politics and culture. She vows to be a better world citizen when she gets home. The wine is better than she had when she was sticking to the menú del día, but eating with these big spenders has been stretching her €50 per day limit.

Martha drifts to sleep in her bunk under an open window, the full moon shining in. Outside her window, bathed in moonlight, two church tower storks nestled in their stick beds.

The next morning, Martha endures the agony of putting on her shoes and limps toward Nájera. The first mile is always the most painful. After half an hour or so, the pain from her blisters usually recedes from

a shriek to a muffled background moan. The Camino this morning consists of sheep, vineyards, churches atop distant hills, and more vineyards. She talks to her fellow peregrinos as she walks in an attempt to distract herself from her pain. The conversations are comfotingly consistent: “¡Buen Camino! Where are you from? How’s it going? Where did you start? How long have you been walking? Where did you stay last night? How was it? Are you alone? How far are you planning to walk today? Following Brierley? Me, too!”

In Navarette, Martha surrenders. It’s 18 miles from Logroño to Nájera. She’s walked less than half of that and is finally unable, or unwilling, to endure the agony of walking the rest of the way to Nájera, but she’s also unwilling to deviate from her plan to reach Nájera today. Martha shares a taxi with a woman from South Korea who has also given up.

The Korean woman, whose English Martha struggles to understand, haltingly explains that the friend she’s walking with wants to stay in Nájera, so they will meet there. Martha has no such constraints. She’s not meeting any friends. She’s completely alone. She could simply slow down. Step off the prescribed stages. Brierley himself says it: “If nerves become frayed, you can always take refuge in the beautifully renovated intermediate albergues in Navarette or Ventosa.” It’s the word *intermediate* that stops her. She doesn’t want to do anything halfway. She also doesn’t want to be someone who needs to *take refuge*. She’s never taken refuge in her life, and she doesn’t intend to start now.

She’s surprised, and a little disheartened, to see how quickly the taxi covers the remaining ten miles to Nájera. Martha thinks back to the bus ride from Pamplona to St. Jean – the two hours it took to drive what she would take three days to walk. She wonders again what’s possessed her to do this crazy thing. Peregrinos are nuts. But she’s in it now, and she’ll get it done, come hell or high water. The taxi drops her at the turismo, where, because it’s cheating to stay at an albergue, she makes hotel arrangements.

Surrendering has its advantages. A shower to herself, and laundry in the bathroom sink she’s not sharing with anyone. The orange she eats while sitting on the riverbank watching the pilgrims cross the bridge. The sweetest, juiciest, most fragrant orange she’s ever eaten. She wonders if this is how Survivor contestants voted off the island feel. Sure, you didn’t win a million dollars, but at least you get a steaming shower, a cheeseburger, and clean sheets.

Nájera

Nájera feels bigger than it is, perhaps because of its historical importance, the magnificent Monasterio Santa María del Real, and the Río Najerilla running through the center of the town. Martha finds that she loves Nájera. She’s grateful to have time to go deeper into its mysteries.

After tapas, beer, and a nap, Martha walks up to the church. She shows her credential for the pilgrim discount on the entrance fee and enters the cloisters. She loves cloisters. The late afternoon sun streams through the delicate tracery in the apex of each cloister arch. Every arch is different. The shadows cast on the cloister wall, the wind rattling the fronds of palm trees in its center, and the silence of this space sooth her. As has become her custom, she settles on the low wall of the cloister beneath an arch and sits in silence. She can almost feel the presence of the monks who lived here – the orderliness and deep rootedness of their days. She could sit there all afternoon, but she wants to see the Monasterio before it closes.

The entrance to the nave is guarded by two enormous carved wooden doors. Within one of those doors is a smaller door, perfectly Martha-sized. She supposes it's also monk-who-lived-a-thousand-years-ago size, and steps through it. The first thing she sees in the gloom is another magnificent retablo. It's huge, it's gold, and it's glowing, reflecting the candlelight, weak incandescent lamps, and the sun entering through high clerestory windows. In the retablo's center is a wooden Madonna holding a toddler Jesus on her lap. She is supposedly the same Madonna found in this cave by a Navarran king in 1044 – a king who fought to vanquish the Moors from Spain, and who interpreted this Madonna as approval for his bloody crusade. This Mary is also the cathedral's namesake, Santa María del Real. Saint Mary of Royalty. The retablo is so cluttered with statues of saints, Martha can't concentrate on any one in particular.

Her eyes tired of gold and gilt, Martha threads her way through the tombs to the softly glowing cave in the back of the nave. The cave's red sandstone walls are cut through with zigzags of bright white crystals. She's wondering about the geology of this area when she hears a woman say her name.

"Martha. Come closer, Martha. Chica. Ven aquí."

She looks around for the source of the voice. It's coming from deep within the quartz-veined cave. Martha inches closer on her sore, blistered feet and sees another Madonna, behind plexiglass, a candle burning at her feet.

It seems to Martha that Mary is speaking. Martha's tired eyes see the Virgin leaning forward, beckoning, focused on her and her alone. This Mary, a replica of the real one stuck on the golden wall behind her, has an impish grin on her face. This Mary appears to be very much alive, and she's clearly not a rule-follower.

"I'm 'a tell you something, Martha. Come closer, sweetie. Sit down and listen." Martha sits.

Mary continues, "Here's the thing – those guys think I won those battles for them. But I didn't." Mary puts her hand beside her mouth and looks from side to side, checking for anyone watching. The coast is clear, evidently. She continues. "That story is bullshit, sweetheart. Utter crap. Men. Amiright?" She shakes her head and tsks. "Oy veh."

Martha, confused, looks at the pamphlet in her hand. "Read it later, honey," says Mary. "We don't have much time. I know I'm not the first one of me to talk to you. You have the look. Listen, sweetheart. Strange things are going to happen to you on this Camino. You'll hear voices, but you knew that already, right? That'll be the easy part. Now, I love the irony of this. Listen to me. You are carrying the child of God. You'll know what to do when the time comes. You are a strong supple woman. You can do this."

Martha sits, speechless.

"Here's what I want you to do," continues Mary. "I want you to go buy a sketch pad. Or a blank notebook. Paper without lines, stitched together in some way. Whatever. I want you to walk your Camino. Taste your food and drink. Feel the sun on your skin and the dirt under your feet. And I want you to write about what you see and taste and touch and hear and smell. Write what you know without knowing how you know it, too. And draw something. At least once a day. It can just be a continuous line drawing. A contour drawing. You don't have to even look at the paper if you're too freaked out. And be with people. Eat with people, walk with people, at least some of the time. Get a private room when you

want to. But ask people questions, and answer theirs. Share your beautiful soul with those who walk with you. Notice how your body feels.

“You can get a private room when you need a cocoon, sweetheart.

“Now, let me tell you a little-known fact about being Jesus’s mother. You ALL are Jesus’s mother. All you women. I love you so much. You ALL give birth to holiness. I am not the only one, chica! Every now and then I reach out to someone from behind this plexiglass. Almost always they ignore me. They simply don’t hear me, or if they do, they pretend they didn’t and walk away really fast. But you. You stopped and looked and listened. You let me speak to you, and you’re listening to me. That takes huge courage. Thank you.”

Martha thinks that hearing Mary speak maybe doesn’t take courage as much as it takes crazy.

Martha is a product of a fairly conventional spiritual upbringing. She’d been raised in mainline Protestantism and had had some Baptist, Mormon, and Roman Catholic friends. She’d gotten married in the church. She’d raised her kids in the church for years. Then, like most Americans, she’d stopped going to church. Their busy lives had begun to interfere. Sundays, when the kids didn’t have soccer, were blessedly unscheduled. Her Sabbath began to be church-free. She found she didn’t miss it, and church didn’t seem to miss her, either. The stress of translating the words of worship into what she could actually stomach was a stress she didn’t miss. They still gone on Christmas Eve and Easter for a while, but slowly, over the years, even that desultory connection withered. Easter went before Christmas. Somehow Christmas wasn’t Christmas without the story of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi, Jesus in the manger with the farm animals. Those stories were a necessary part of the season. She missed Advent. She didn’t particularly miss Lent. And Spring was miracle enough without throwing resurrection into the mix.

This whole “talking Mary” thing was a total shock. Martha wasn’t even Catholic. She was just an ordinary pagan Protestant girl. Who was she to receive communiques from the Blessed Virgin? Who was she to carry God’s child?

Mary has gone silent. Martha gets up off the cold, hard, stone floor. She stands in front of the Madonna and Child for a moment as her blood flows back into her legs and warms her. The sun, which had been streaming through the high clerestory windows, has lowered. The nave of the cathedral behind her is in shadow. She is all alone in the ancient stone space, except for the attendant who’s come to shepherd any stragglers out for the night. Martha wonders how long she’s been there, so quiet.

“Hola, Señora,” Martha says.

“Hola, peregrina.”

Martha sees that this woman is very old – one of the tiny Spanish women who seem to be everywhere. The woman watches her for a moment, then says, “Tell me. Did she talk to you?”

Martha nods in surprise.

“Tell me, what did she say?”

“She told me what the men say about her isn’t true. She told me I’m strong. And that I’m pregnant with the child of God.”

“Oh, peregrina, I can tell just by looking at you that you’re strong. Only the strong ones listen to her.”

“Does she talk a lot?” Martha asks. “Has she spoken to you?”

“Yes, many times,” replies the woman. “Soy fuerte, like you. Now it’s time for you to go. You will be okay. You go with God. Vaya con Dios.”

Martha notices what she’d failed to see before – this tiny old woman is wearing a habit. She’s a nun, who’s now ushering Martha through the darkening cathedral to the little door in the big door and back into the cloisters, where a ray of sun is still illuminating the palm trees, then back through the museum through which she’d entered two hours earlier. At the door, Sister reaches up to Martha’s head, gently lays hands on her, and says a prayer of blessing. The door closes behind her. Martha walks out into the Nájera evening.

Following Mary’s Advice

Compelled to follow Mary’s orders, Martha goes in search of pilgrims to have dinner with. As she walks along the row of restaurants, bars, and tiendas lining the Río Najarilla, she sees Clarice and Douglas sitting at a black wrought iron table. The obligatory basket of bread and bottle of vino tinto sits in front of them. They excitedly wave her over and ask her to join them. She does, and a waiter brings another glass.

Martha asks, “What happened to you two? I thought you’d be days ahead of me!”

Clarice says, “What happened to us? What happened to you! We looked for you that morning, and then we’ve kept an eye out for you since we left Pamplona. We figured as slow as you were planning to go, we’d eventually catch up with you, but we never did.”

Martha replies, “I took the bus to SJPP that morning. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I thought you wouldn’t approve, and I was afraid you’d try to talk me out of it. I needed all the courage I had, because I knew it was crazy. I got to St. Jean and then over to Roncesvalles that day. What happened to you two?”

“We spent two more nights in Pamplona,” says Douglas. “Clarice’s knee was really bothering her that morning. We knew we needed to be in a decent-sized city to get it taken care of, and we needed to be there when the bloody pharmacies weren’t closed for the bloody siesta. We found a hotel, took care of her knee, and saw the San Fermín stuff. We’ve been taking it a little easier since. Brierley can go fuck himself. We’re off those stages.”

Douglas smiles, raises his glass, and continues, “Here’s to us. Pilgrims walking our own walk.” Clarice and Martha clink glasses with him and with each other, and take deep swallows of the rich red Riojan wine. Martha reaches for a hunk of bread and asks, “Have you ordered yet? May I join you?”

“Oh, please do!” said Clarice. “We’d be delighted. Everyone assumes couples want to be alone. But we don’t. We love the company. Getting to know people from all over the world is becoming the best part of the Camino.”

Martha asks their waiter for the pilgrim menu. He hands her the options for the three courses that traditionally make up the Spanish *menú del día*. The meal comes with bread, wine, and water (“with or without gas”), and usually costs about €10. She’s heard that the Spanish government subsidizes these meals all over Spain, which explains their relative affordability, and that they’re a vestige of the medieval custom of feeding pilgrims.

Martha almost always chooses *ensalada mixta* for her first course. She’s found it to be the only reliable fresh vegetative matter on Spanish menus. Luckily, she loves it. Clarice also requests the salad. Douglas, as most men Martha’s dined with, chooses the pasta. They seem to relish being able to eat all the pasta they want on the Camino. No wonder they’re not losing weight, as so many profess wanting to do.

She tends to stick with eggs or chicken for the main course, and she asks for *cuajada* when it’s available. She’d first had *cuajada*, fermented sheep’s milk drizzled with honey, in Pamplona. She would come to realize that *cuajada* was a Basque regional specialty as it began to disappear from menus the closer she got to Santiago, where *flan* or *tarta Santiago* would become ubiquitous. This restaurant, because it’s on the river, is pricier. The wine is better. The main dishes are more haute cuisine. She sees braised lamb on the menu and immediately orders it. She loves lamb, both on the hoof and on her plate. It’s drenched in rich red wine sauce, with potatoes and carrots and onions.

They ask each other the usual questions as they eat. “I know where you started your Camino, so I won’t ask you that,” says Martha. “Why are you here, on the Camino, right now?” This question was remarkably personal, and she’d yet to meet a pilgrim who hadn’t answered it willingly. The answers she’d gotten were often quite personal, too. She was finding the instant intimacy of the Camino both beautiful and occasionally oppressive. Good thing Mary had given her the option of paying for a private room when she needed her cocoon. Silence and privacy for metamorphosis.

“I’ve wanted to do this for years,” answered Douglas. “Clarice, not so much. She’s only here because she didn’t want to be left behind. She might quit soon, though. She’s in quite a bit of pain. Sort of a wait and see thing, right now.”

“What about the Camino attracted you, Douglas? Why have you wanted to do it for so long?”

“I’m not sure, really,” he replies. “The idea of pilgrimage is woven into the history of Britain. There were the Crusades, for a start. And the Celtic Christians were big on wandering around for years. Looking for the place of their resurrection, they called it. Plus, there’s the Canterbury Tales and the pilgrimage to the tomb of Thomas á Becket. It’s quite a tradition, really. We English are big walkers.”

“So, that’s it? It’s a very British thing to do, so you’re doing it? You’re walking 500 miles across Spain because you’re English?”

“Well, partly. It doesn’t seem odd to us. Plus, I guess, if I’m being honest, at this point in my life I’m looking for meaning. That sounds corny, doesn’t it? It’s just that as you get older, death begins to loom, and time seems less disposable. I knew if I was going to do it, I’d better get cracking.”

Clarice says, “I was tired of hearing him talk about it all the time and then not do it. So when he retired, I said, ‘That’s it. Stop just talking about it and do it.’ And the more he started to plan, the more interested I became. I’m an art teacher. Used to be, anyway. The art in Spain is everywhere. That was really enough for me.”

“And you might quit? Would you go home if you did?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think I’ll go ahead of Douglas and spend a few days in the bigger towns and cities. Burgos. León. Astorga. Ponferrada. Places I can get a hotel room and sketch and go to museums and churches. You can’t do that when you’re walking every step, because everything’s closed for siesta when you want to visit. Douglas will walk twice as far without me, and this way he can have his space and solitude, and I can take care of my knee. We can have time together every few days. Conjugal visits.” She winks.

“And, Martha? Why are you here on the Camino?” asks Douglas. Turnabout is fair play.

“Well, pretty much the same reasons, I guess. Like most of us, I saw ‘The Way’ and got hooked by the idea of walking the Camino. I’m at a crossroads. Just retired and not sure what’s next for me, and all that. Such a cliché. Oh, my gosh. This lamb is delicious. I might never be able to eat regular food again.”

“You’re deflecting, Martha. I know it when I see it,” says Douglas.

“He’s a psychiatrist,” says Clarice.

“Retired from what?” asks Douglas.

“Teaching school. Sixth grade most recently. Eleven years old when they finish the year, usually.”

“Did you enjoy teaching?” asks Clarice. “I like that age.”

“Me, too,” says Martha. “They’re old enough to sharpen their own pencils and think about stuff, and young enough to not be too disdainful. I like how they’re always changing, too. They can be very serious about things, then turn right around and make a potty joke. They’re awesome. I treasure my years teaching them. I’ll miss them.”

She begins to cry. “Sorry. It’s been a really long, very weird day. I’m very tired.”

“Oh, love,” says Clarice. “It’s okay. I’ve cried so many times these last ten days it’s a wonder I’m not an empty sack.”

Martha dabs her eyes with her napkin. She’s grateful for these new friends, people she avoided when she first met them. That’s what the Camino does, she realizes. It scrapes off the facades and reveals the real, raw person underneath. And if that true person is a jackass, then that’s what’s there for everyone to see. There’s simply not the energy to hide one’s true self on the Camino.

Nájera to Burgos Mid-June

The next morning Martha makes her way out of Nájera. The Way today is wheat fields and vineyards and red dirt. She catches up to and walks with Clarice and Douglas for most of the morning, then spends the afternoon walking by herself. In Santo Domingo de la Calzada, she visits the Parador, the cathedral, and a store catering to pilgrims. She is charmed by the chickens in the cathedral and by the stories about the saint himself.

The English translation of the legend of the chickens she finds the most charming thing of all:

“Willing to rest of the fatigue of the road, a marriage with their son stopped in a house of Santo Domingo de la Calzada. The owner of the house had a daughter and she falls in love of the youth boy.

But the boy didn't correspond her, so she got revenge and she accuses him of robbery. Quickly the justice caught the youth, after they found him with a glass that the girl did put inside his clothes, so he was hung. (Martha hopes to find a man who corresponds her, too.)

"Their parents felt, continue their trip to Compostela when they came back for the same place the mother stopped for cry on the locus in quo he still continued hung. When suddenly she listened the youth's voice saying him that he continue with live thanks to that Santiago and the Virgin sustain him. Quickly their parents will see the judge. He was eating, when he heard the woman's story, the judge answers her that if their son was as alive as the rooster and the roasted that he prepared to eat. In that moment, the birds returned suddenly to the life and they left flying of the table.

Astonished, the judge went where the boy was and checking that he was alive, they returned him to his family then they took the birds to the church like test of the miracle."

She's not sure about the veracity of the resuscitated chickens, and she's comforted that there evidently really was a Saint Dominic of the Causeway, who did so much to make the Camino safer for medieval pilgrims. She's also comforted that, before he was a saint, Domingo washed out of two monastic formation programs. He was forced to live out his vocation by becoming a hermit in the woods, protecting pilgrims and cutting trees to make the Way easier for others. God makes a way. And a Way?

As Nájera Mary directed, Martha buys an unlined notebook at the Camino store.

The Parador, built on the ruins of a hospice founded by Santo Domingo, is stunningly opulent. How creative of the Spanish government, she thinks, to save these old ruins and make of them something both beautiful and revenue-producing. She's heard that the paradors reserve a few low-cost rooms for pilgrims but doesn't take the time to check today.

At dinner with Clarice and Douglas, she toasts Santo Domingo with a glass of Rioja red wine.

Santo Domingo to Belorado. The relief Martha felt after her shortened day to Nájera is starting to wear off. The blister on her right heel is still quite a presence. She's begun to refer to it as Max. She drains it and dresses it each night, and every day it grows back. Clarice is also feeling the strain. Douglas keeps the conversation going with them both, and the miles go by. They cross from La Rioja into the province of Castilla y León, and nothing changes. Still wheat fields and vineyards and rolling hills. And poppies. They pass a young man with pants rolled up to his knees, sunburned calves, and trail runners hanging off his backpack next to his pilgrim shell. She looks down at his feet, is surprised to see flip flops, and then notices the Band-Aids on each heel. He's wearing headphones and doesn't respond to her "¡Buen Camino!"

The geology of Belorado is interesting – swaths of pebbles embedded in sandstone or limestone. She wishes she understood it. Everything is pale tan, including the stone of the church snug up against the cliff. Inside the surprisingly large church are some startling examples of Spanish piety. There's a statue of San Juan Bautista carrying his own head on a platter, and a saint she's never heard of, Santa Agueda, St. Agatha, who proffers her two breasts on a platter. Martha hurriedly leaves the church for the relative clarity of the storks living on the church bell tower. Those storks she understands. Again following Nájera Mary's orders, she finds a place to sit and draw them.

The next day is not a good day at all. Up and up El Monte de Ocas, topped with a monument to the dead of the Spanish Civil War, which Martha also doesn't understand. Then mile after mile of tree-lined flatness – the road that never ends, it seems. She stops to draw and to rest her feet, then continues down the other side of the mountain to San Juan de Ortega. The albergue looks pretty brutal, so she

girds her loins for the remaining four kilometers to Agés. Before long she's wishing she'd stopped. Her feet are agony. She's walking as though she could walk without actually putting her feet down, which isn't working so well. Her knees and hips are starting to feel the strain of this new gait. Nevertheless, she keeps walking. Clarice surrendered this morning and is on her way to Burgos on a bus, which has been easy to catch since this portion of the Camino parallels the main highway to Burgos. Unencumbered, Douglas has surged ahead. He'll meet Clarice in Burgos tonight.

In Agés, she finds that the Franciscan priest she'd last seen in Logroño is there and saying mass at the parish church. She attends her first pilgrim mass since Roncesvalles. At the end of mass, a village crone, the keeper of the church keys, stooped and wrinkled, begins to sing. Martha learns that old women can sound like angels.

The next day Martha walks toward Burgos. She longs to take the detour to Atapuerca, the site of the "earliest human remains ever discovered in Europe," according to Brierley. He also gleefully announces that "... oh, yes, they were also cannibals ..." and Martha wonders what's so awesome about that. The remains are over 900,000 years old, but when she reads that she can see them in the Burgos museum and save herself some miles, she continues on.

Martha gets a bed at the albergue next to the cathedral and performs her post-road rituals of shower and laundry, then heads to the museum. The cathedral will have to wait. She needs to understand something, anything really, and the cathedral will be the opposite of understandable, she's fairly sure. But when she passes the doors of the cathedral, she feels the pull. The same feeling she had in front of the Pamplona Mary wall, and on the turn off to Eunate. The deep knowing that she must deviate from the plan in her head. Her heart has other ideas, and this time she doesn't even consider resisting.

Burgos
Mid-June

If Martha's heart, or her soul, or whatever the place in her who's directing her at these moments is, wants her to have yet another conversation with yet another Mary, It's brought her to the right place. Martha has never seen anything like this Burgos cathedral. There's a Blessed Virgin Mary on every wall, it seems, and around every corner. You couldn't swing a dead cat in here without hitting a damn statue of Mary. The place is packed with tourists, not all of them peregrinos.

Martha wanders, getting the lay of the land, ignoring the pamphlet that came with her ticket. Every surface is ornamented. There are fifteen chapels, for crying out loud. Plus the cloisters. The nave. The paintings. Tombs of Castillian royalty, along with El Cid. She thinks it's all a little much. A little over the top. She feels completely overwhelmed. Removed and distant. How do you even take in all this splendor? All this human-made – make that "man-made" – response to what used to be holy. She sees only ornamentation and ostentation. Martha can appreciate everything around her as art. She cannot experience these objects as worship, no matter how hard she tries. These things are not icons of the holy. Not for her, anyway.

She's beginning to suspect that the very premise of religion is the problem. Man's impulse to respond to experiences of the holy by building edifices and structures and institutions is the problem. What would Jesus, a Jewish itinerant peasant preacher who rebelled against empire and religious exclusion, think about the gilded churches, the opulent monasteries, and the kings who claimed to rule in his name? And what would he think about this Camino, which functioned, in medieval times, to enrich the church and help kick the Moors out of Spain?

Martha is feeling fairly jaundiced, wondering why in God's name she's here and also relieved that the crowds have evidently kept any of the multitude of Marys from speaking, when she spots it. High on a capital in the nave of this gothic cathedral is a cherub. This cherub is not frolicking in heavenly heights, fluttering among the clouds. No. This cherub is clearly male, and he's cradling a human skull almost as big as he is. He takes her breath away. In a flash she understands that all of this opulence and magnificence, all this ornamentation and art, the institution of the church, all the rules and structure, are a response to this ultimate reality: We are all going to die. All of this is a monument to men's deep desire that this not be true. They want to badly to live on after they die. Death, to them, is losing and failing.

Martha sits where she can see the cherub and his tenderly held skull. He's looking right at her. Following Nájera Mary's orders, she takes out her sketchbook and draws him, oblivious to the crowd milling around her. Then she goes to meet Clarice and Douglas for dinner at a restaurant on the plaza beside the cathedral. Martha is pleased to see that they've been joined by a few additional pilgrims, including her Franciscan friend. And Sheela, a peregrina Martha had met at mass in Agés.

She lets the others carry the conversational load at dinner. Martha's mind is still on that cherub, and she's yet not ready to talk about him. Sheela is thoughtful and careful with those around her, and includes Martha in the dinner conversation.

The next morning, walking out of Burgos, she sees Sheela again and greets her. As is the way on the Camino, Martha launches right into what's on her heart.

"I feel really frustrated, Sheela. I don't have a good name for God anymore. How do I pray if I don't know how to start the prayer? *Dear God* doesn't work anymore. *Holy One* feels too vague. Too clinical. *Beloved* is cheesy. So, I get stopped before I can even start, these days. Maybe I don't need a name? I feel like I need a name. I want a name to use when I talk to God. Which I've been doing a lot more these last two weeks than in the last twenty years.

Sheela asks, "When you picture God, Martha, what do you picture?"

Martha says, "I don't know that I do picture God anymore. He's more of a feeling, I guess."

"He? That's interesting. I'm surprised you called God a man. Why do you think that is?" asks Sheela.

"Habit? Deep conditioning? Preverbal conditioning? I guess I maybe really do believe that the Divine is male. Ick."

"I have a suggestion, if you're open to it," says Sheela. She waits for Martha's permission before continuing. "Try praying *with*, instead of *to*. We were taught to pray to God as something outside of us that's in charge of the world, who might or might not answer. I find it more helpful to pray with the god energy – whatever it is that keeps us all connected and growing. That means it's with me – inside me – wanting the same things as me – alive in my soul – and my soul is the place in me where I connect to that Force."

"Here's another thing for you to think about, if you want to," continues Sheela. "You don't have to believe in God. You were taught to believe in God by people who may or may not have actually believed. If you just don't believe, does that make the world better or worse? If things ... life ... the world was just what it is – no ultimate meaning, nothing to figure out, nothing to get right but kindness and respect for

all beings, no energy expended trying to reconcile your experiences and knowledge with the idea of God – would you be better off or worse off, do you think?”

Martha thinks for a few minutes as they climb up and up onto the Meseta. She eventually replies, “I don’t know. I don’t even know how to run that experiment. I feel like the need to believe in God is so deep in me – so intertwined in all the sinews and cells of my body and my mind that I could never get it out. Like a cancer.”

Martha regrets opening this can of worms. She feels so messy in comparison with Sheela. Sheela seems very calm and very strong to Martha – strong, present, and kind. Martha doesn’t feel any of those things. She feels unraveled, at the end of her rope. She wants to know if Sheela is for real. If she is, Martha wants some of what Sheela has. But this conversation is more than she bargained for. She’s tempted to make an excuse, to abort and ditch Sheela at the next stop. And then she remembers Nájera Mary’s instructions to be open – to give and to receive.

Then Sheela continues. “Here’s what I believe, Martha. What I know to be true for me. Believing in God is just a thought. That’s all it is. It’s a thought that’s in there so deep it feels like something that’s true, but it’s not. It’s just neurons in your brain. And if a thought causes you to suffer, it isn’t true. You can unravel the neural web that is your belief in God. I think it’s already unraveling, sweetheart. My guess is you’ve been trying to hold it together with duct tape and willpower because you don’t know who you are without it. You’re afraid of feeling completely at sea. Groundless.”

“But what if groundlessness is the truth? What if it’s okay that there’s no ground? Can it be okay that you’re falling, because there’s no ground? Do you know that quote?” Martha shakes her head. Sheela continues, “It goes like this. ‘The bad news is you’re falling through the air, no parachute, nothing to hang on to. The good news is, there’s no ground.’ It’s Buddhist.”

“Holy shit, Sheela,” says Martha. “When you’ve lived your whole life hiding to stay safe, putting on the camouflage armor disguise given you so you look like everyone else and you fit in and you meet expectations and stay out of trouble, out of the firing line of authority anger, it’s a hard habit to break.”

She wonders what it would be like to be free. To know in her deepest center that she’s okay. That she could be completely herself in the world and she would be safe. That she could say what she thinks and share how she feels and still have family and friends who love her. That the real Martha could belong to a community.

She sees that hiding, not sharing herself, is actually what creates loneliness and division. If you believe your true self is too outrageous and loud and brash, or too quiet and sensitive, if you reject your true nature and judge yourself as unacceptable and wrong, then no external healing in the world can touch that inner disconnect.

Sheela, that bitch, continues, “If there was ever a more perfect time than the Camino to try something new, I don’t know when it could be. Look around you. Every day is a tabula rasa. Every day is a new beginning. Always we begin again. St. Benedict. On the Camino it’s so easy. Don’t like who you were today? Want a fresh start? Leave a little late the next day. Put on headphones and be in silence. Shorten or lengthen your day and you’re with a whole new group of people. Or just stay put for a day. Or just be who you are with the current flow. Be someone different with the same people. It’s easy to course

correct out here. Nothing is irrevocable. No contracts. No vows. No commitments, except the ones you make to yourself.”

“So, if you want to try out being authentically yourself,” Sheela says, “let yourself be the girl who knows things. Be the woman who’s unraveling. Deconstructing her camo armor and coming out of hiding. This is the perfect opportunity. You can run the experiment and never see any of these people again if you don’t like the results.”

Martha replies, “You make a solid point. I can be anyone I want out here. It’s so much easier than at home in my old life, where the ruts are deep, and the roles are so ingrained.”

“I’m starting right now,” she continues. Martha spreads her arms and twirls in the morning light, then gives Sheela a hug. “Thank you, friend,” she says. “Now I’m going to tell you about the Marys. Because if I’m sorry I did, I’ll just ditch you tomorrow.” She grins. “Oh, this feels so good!”

“I can see how this happened,” Martha says, after a few minutes. “I was born whole, but I was taught that I’m not ... that I needed ... Oh! Well, of course I learned that I wasn’t okay. I depended on other people to keep me alive, and they were going through their own stuff, their own woundedness and lack of love for themselves. Of course they’d teach that to me. Of course they would! They wouldn’t know what they were doing. They wouldn’t do it deliberately. It would just be in the air. Like fish in water. ‘We’re not okay. We need to earn our value. That’s just how it is.’ It’s not personal. It wasn’t personal. It wasn’t about me at all!”

“The Marys?” Sheela asks. “Martha. Tell me about the Marys.”

“Let’s see. The first ones were in the cathedral in Pamplona. They told me to go to France, to SJPP, and start there. Do you know them? There are like 24 of them, all in one room, stacked up like blocks behind plexiglass. I know it sounds crazy, but I heard them tell me to go all in on the Camino. Not to look for shortcuts, but to lean into it. To commit. I was going to start the next day from Pamplona, but instead, the next morning, I took the first bus to St. Jean and started walking.”

Martha continues, “Then there were Marys all along the Way. You know how there’s at least one in every church? Sometimes more? Plus the one at the top of the Pyrenees? Most of them haven’t been very verbal. They just seem to be saying I’m strong, I’m doing fine, and I’ll be okay whatever happens. But in Nájera she really talked. I mean talked. Did you go into the cathedral in Nájera and see her in the back, in that cave? I did. She sat me down and she told me exactly what to do. She told me to seek out other pilgrims – to be open to friendship and affection. To touch and be touched by my fellow pilgrims. To be open, period. And to help me get out of my head, she told me to start drawing a little, every day. To just sit in front of something, to really see it, and to draw it.

“Sheela, do you think I’m crazy? Talking Marys? Really? And there was a nun in the church in Nájera who seemed to know what had happened with that Mary and me. She wasn’t surprised at all.”

Sheela takes her time before responding. “First of all, Martha, thank you for telling me this. I’m honored by your trust.”

She continues, “Martha, women have been having visions for thousands of years. It used to be that the women who had the visions were revered. They were honored and nurtured. Treasured. Above all, they

were listened to. Carefully listened to. Once upon a time, these experiences of yours would have been cherished, not labeled crazy. You could choose to see them that way, too. It's only the men who've made it seem crazy that women have visions."

"Patriarchy," says Martha. "Again."

"Right?" says Sheela. "It's the patriarchy that got scared of women's power. They needed to shut us up any way they could. So they made us evil. They made us property. They figured out how to own our wombs. They tried to cut off our direct line to wisdom. They called us witches and burned us. They raped us and then held up virginity as a virtue. They bought and sold us like cattle. They carried us away in raids. They made God – holy generativity, the ability to bring forth life and nurture it – a man. It would be laughable if it wasn't so dangerous. They're so scared of us, but they need us still. Well, not you and me. We're too old to be useful to the patriarchy except as cooks and babysitters. We're mostly just annoying. They'd get rid of us if they could. Instead, they try to keep us quiet and compliant with the insidious message that old women are ugly and weak and useless, and that our time is best spent worrying about wrinkled skin, sagging breasts, and jowly jawlines. What bullshit. But we're on to them, aren't we, Martie? Look at us, out here, walking miles a day by ourselves in a foreign country. But we're not alone. No. Not alone at all."

This was the longest speech Martha had heard Sheela utter. She knew they would be friends for life. She stops, turns to Sheela, and hugs the older woman, tears in her eyes. "I love you, Sheels. I love you, and I just met you."

"I love you right back, Martie," says Sheela. They walk into the next town holding hands, find an albergue with two beds, go to oración together, and share dinner with other peregrinos. The next day Martha tells Sheela a little bit about home, and Sheela tells Martha a little about her life in Ireland. They stop for soup and tortilla at the next town. Sheela announces her decision to stay there that night, so she can visit the church before siesta and go to the tienda after. Sheela often walks only half the day. It'll take her twice as long to get to Santiago. She's okay with that, and she never has to worry about getting a bed. Although it's hard to leave Sheela, Martha isn't ready to stop. She knows she'll see Sheela again.

The Meseta
Mid-June

The Little Door

Martha's been checking in with Nate every few days, when her albergue has Wi-Fi. Twice she's emailed Joy, her teacher friend who insisted on regular updates. Martha resents these tethers. She feels pulled between making sure her people don't worry more than necessary, and her soul's desire to be completely free of the life she left behind. She's slowing down and doing her best to stay present. She's writing in the journal Mary told her to get. She's drawing, at least a little, every day.

Martha is now on the vast plateau called the Meseta. The Meseta, the middle stretch of the Camino Francés, goes on for many days. Conventional Camino wisdom says the Meseta is where the magic happens. That the unchanging landscape and vast distances, wheat fields and red dirt for a hundred miles, is where true pilgrims find what they came for. It's not uncommon for peregrinos to skip the Meseta, taking a train from Burgos to León. She's glad she's here. Although her feet hurt, she's glad she's here.

Martha is walking past another Meseta town when she sees a massive church on a hill. She's now in the province of Castilla y León, where the authorities have modernized the Camino. This modern Camino, the "senda," is a straight gravel path that runs alongside major highways and bypasses smaller towns. The only thing the senda has going for it is that it's very thoroughly arrowed, so losing one's way is exceedingly difficult.

Martha feels the by now familiar urge to investigate the church, so she leaves the arrow-marked route and walks up a cobbled street and across the plaza to the base of the stairs.

She looks up.

Two massive wooden doors, each at least twenty feet high and ten feet wide, fill the cathedral entrance. The doors are slabs of oak six inches thick, joined together, carved with birds and flowers and creatures and scenes from the lives of the saints. Enormous metal latches and locks hold them tightly closed. Martha knows she doesn't have a prayer of opening these doors. Then she notices, in the bottom right corner of the right-hand door, a little door. It's about five feet tall and two feet wide, carved to blend in with the massive cathedral door of which it is a part. She tries the human-sized handle. The door creaks on its hinges. Martha pulls the small door toward her and steps onto the bottom piece of oak over which the door swings. She perfectly fits the little door. She stands on the threshold and peers into the darkness beyond. She stops.

After several deep breaths, Martha slowly places one foot on the stone floor of the cathedral. She feels the cold, hard, rough stone through the sole of her shoe. She sets her backpack down on one of a hundred rush-seated wooden chairs, takes off her shoes and socks, and begins to walk, barefoot, through the murky cathedral. She feels every hill and valley of the cold, hard floor with her aching, blistered feet. One foot in front of the other, one step at a time, arms outstretched, hands wide open, she walks, looking up and around as the dark begins to be cut by dust-filled shafts of light from clerestory windows so high she can't see them, only the sunlight they admit into this filmy cavernous space. She breathes the old, cold air stirred by the scent of incense and lilies, solid as water. She finds, in the north transept, an altar to St. Agatha, proudly holding her platter of breasts. One solitary candle burns at the saint's feet.

Martha sits on the wooden pew in front of the altar. A hymn tune wafts through her mind: *"Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes. Un-something, unchanging, the ancient of days la la la la la thy great name we praise."* She hears those words as if for the first time. *How rude,* she thinks. *If God doesn't change, and being unchanging is the ideal, now can little always in process me ever hope to be holy?*

Martha sits and she waits inside this Spanish church. She's become better at waiting for the next step to show up. She's beginning to learn not to rush. It's taking time to learn not to rush. Some days she's only walked ten kilometers. At this rate it will take her three months to get to Santiago. Or longer. But she's so tired of going in a straight line from point A to point B, never deviating, focused on the goal, covering the material with greater than or equal to 80% success as determined by weekly benchmarks, quarterly testing, and annual achievement scores. She simply wants to sit and wait and be a human woman who sits and waits when waiting is called for, and who moves with purpose and strength when it's time to move.

These moments, this hour in this dark church, is a time for waiting. She's surrendering more and more to her unpredictable and strange impulses. She's becoming an instinctual being – following a deeper, more rooted guidance system than the map in her backpack and her frenzied brain. She's becoming feral – a creature following her heart and her nose, rather than Brierley's stages. She's becoming fluent in her soul's language.

Martha's been seeing drawings and paintings in her mind for days. She sees the ink and watercolors she'd use to paint this place. The clerestories far above, where the sun shines in, illuminating the swirling dust – those windows would be ink drawn in strong lines. The shaft of sun is pale yellow watercolor. The stone of the church is blueblackgrey wash. The dust is droplets of some dusky paint, splattered over it all with a toothbrush's fine spray.

And what does the shaft of sunlight illumine? For while Martha has been waiting, the sun has climbed higher in the sky and the shaft of light now reaches farther down into the sanctuary, the heart of this dark cavernous space. Martha sits and watches the sunlight as it moves lower and deeper into the darkness—slowly, inexorably illuminating a gilded altar upon which are two shiny bronze vases of pink plastic flowers, two unlit candles, and a gold crucifix, all on a white linen cloth.

Martha is disappointed. She'd hoped for a sign, a symbol, a portent. Some reason for spending the better part of an afternoon, when she should be walking, in this cold, dark church. Instead, what she receives is more of the same. More guilt. More plastic. More glorification of suffering.

She wonders if the waiting is the point.

Martha heaves herself up onto her hurting feet, feeling the stiffness and the cold that has seeped into her bones from this tired, cold place, and walks back through the dark church to where her shoes and backpack wait beside the little door inside the big door. She gathers her things, pushes open the door, and steps over the threshold into the dazzling Riojan sun.

Martha walks to the bar across the plaza from the church. She hadn't noticed it earlier when she'd surrendered to the urge and crossed this plaza on her way to the huge cathedral doors, yearning to know what was on the other side of them. Now, sitting in the sun with a cup of hot milk, a packet of Cola Cao, and a slice of tortilla, she rests her feet on the red plastic chair opposite her and looks critically at the church. Templar architecture, she now sees. All thick walls and fortress lines. It fairly bristles with animosity – full of the self-righteousness of those men who built her a thousand years ago.

Of course there was nothing there for her. Why had she expected otherwise?

The Camino is like this Templar church. Or could be, depending on how a peregrina walked it. It could be a straight line from Point A (SJPP) to Point B (Santiago), walked with focus and no tolerance for deviation from the goal, following Brierley's stages religiously. One could learn something about one's self that way, she supposed – that's how education is set up, after all. A linear progression from Point A (preschool) to Point B (grad school). Or, she thinks, the Camino could be a jumping-off point for exploration and return. A pilgrim could use the Camino for general direction, swirling away and coming back as inspiration and yearning struck. The Camino could work like a river, with side creeks and sandbars for following and exploring, yet always, always, flowing toward Santiago.

She wonders why no one walks it that way. Could she walk the Camino that way? Could she make of the Camino an organic flow, rather than creating an experience as rigid and unyielding as this Templar church? Instead of joining the crowds of pilgrims doing the Camino as they've been told it should be done, could she trust her heart to guide her feet to Santiago on the Way of St. James?

Martha takes out her journal and begins to write.

Walking

The next town is coming closer. Martha doesn't want to be with people tonight. She wants to sit with this new possibility. To enter it and not be distracted. To not have to interact. She understands now those peregrinos who have passed her, unspeaking, earbuds in, no eye contact. They were simply finding solitude. Time and space and silence for birthing new possibilities.

The gravel Camino becomes a cobbled street as Martha enters the town. She looks for an albergue with a bench and flowers out front – it's her rule to look for flowers. Three doors up on the right – geraniums – Las Aquedas. The door is open. The hospitalero is seated behind a flimsy blue table covered with paper, his guest register open on top of the pile.

"Hola, señor. ¿Tiene una cama?"

He looks up, taking her in kindly. "Sí, señora. Tengo una cama para usted. Bienvenidos. Pasaporte y credential, por favor."

Martha shrugs off her backpack and digs out her American passport and pilgrim credential. The hospitalero writes her name, passport number, and nationality in his register. Solemnly he inks his albergue stamp, presses the stamp carefully into her credential, and dates the stamp. In this way, she'll prove her journey to the volunteers at the pilgrim office in Santiago to receive her compostela at the end of this ridiculous walk. "¿Cuanto cuasta la cama?" she belatedly asks.

"Seven euro," he answers. "If you want breakfast it will be ten."

"Breakfast, please. Gracias, señor." She hands him a €10 note, picks up her backpack, and goes to find an unclaimed bed. As late as she is, it'll almost certainly be a top bunk. Which makes the inevitable peeing in the middle of the night an unwanted adventure, but so far so good. She hasn't killed herself yet. All the bunks along the walls are claimed, top and bottom. This albergue, like many others, has crammed in more beds to take advantage of the increased pilgrim traffic since Americans and Koreans have discovered the Camino.

Damn Martin Sheen. And, also, bless him, Lord. That, too. Martha is here because of him. And so are all these other people. She spots a bottom bunk in the middle of the big room full of bunk beds – almost all with backpacks propped beside them and a few clothes – shirts, pants, socks – strewn on them.

Several beds have clotheslines strung in front, with towels draped on them for a little privacy. She puts down her backpack, sits on the bed, and carefully takes off her shoes and socks. Then, slowly, she removes the betadine-soaked gauze from Max to see how he's grown. He's thriving. Tonight, she'll try

the needle and thread technique. (When a peregrina is desperate because a blister keeps reforming, she pushes a threaded needle, well-soaked in betadine, into and back out of the blister, pulling until the thread hangs out on either side of the blister. She cuts the thread, leaving it hanging. She then soaks the blister with enough betadine to sterilize a horse and covers it with a bandage. The theory is that the thread acts like a wick, draining the blister so it can heal. The thread is also, of course, a wick for bacteria. Hence all the betadine.) Enough is enough.

Crocs on, she gathers her albergue clothes, towel, washcloth, and Dr. Bronner's lavender castile soap (the all-purpose Camino cleaner), being careful to remember her Ziploc-bagged passport, money, and credit cards, and goes in search of the showers.

Will these be co-ed? Will the hot water last? Will there be adequate water pressure? Will there even *be* hot water and water pressure? How long will it take to figure out the controls? Can she keep her clothes and valuables dry? Will the lights go out mid-shower? Will the shower have a door? There wasn't, always. So many unknowns, every night. And every night, it seems, she learns another thing she's taken for granted that is evidently up for grabs in a Spanish albergue.

After the blessedly warm shower, she washes her other pair of underwear, her socks, and her t-shirt. Everything else could wait a few more days. Out comes the all-purpose Dr. Bronner's lavender castile soap again – lavender to repel bed bugs, an occasional problem on the Camino. Some peregrinos wash their clothes in the shower, frowned upon by hospitaleros and other pilgrims.

Supper, as she promised herself, Martha eats alone.

The next day, as has become her habit, she's one of the first ones out the albergue door. Even though she paid for breakfast the night before, she leaves at the crack of dawn. Not before the crack of dawn, like some annoying peregrinos who strap on their headlamps when it's still dark and rustle their belongings into their packs and creep, they think quietly, from the albergue while the stars are still out. She's not that driven.

The brightest stars are still shining in the lightening sky. Martha walks through a mostly quiet village, mostly alone. The only sounds are the crunch of her shoes, the tap of her poles, early birdsong, and awakening roosters. She loves this time of day, when rural Spain smells like wood smoke and sheep shit. She'll stop for breakfast – toast and café con leche – at the next village. For now, it's simply good to walk. Hospitalero coffee is never as good as the café con leche she'll get in the bars. Toast is better in the bars, too.

What is it about Spanish toast anyway? Who knew a 62-year-old American woman could walk for miles fueled only by toast? Martha is surprised by this – she who spent decades as a carbophobe. She lives for Spanish bread. With jam and lots of butter, at breakfast. And a chocolate croissant for a snack. And tortilla. Ensalada mixta for second lunch or for supper, because it's probably the only vegetables she'll get all day. Fresh-squeezed orange juice. She remembers the Nájera orange, the one she ate on the bank of the river, watching the pilgrims from Logroño cross the bridge into town.

As she walks in the early morning quiet, Martha's mind turns to the future. The empty, wide-open future. What will she do when she's done with the Camino?

I want to travel, Martha thinks. I want to live in Spain for a while. I want to really BE here. Maybe a volunteer hospitalera? I will not let myself be tethered. I will not let myself be caged. What's an Airbnb cost in Madrid in July and August? Or Glasgow? Or Belfast? Or London? Or Galway? It's so easy to get tied down. No. No. No.

Maybe writing and art and living really cheaply. What do I need, after all? Some clothes, a place to sleep, food to eat, a way to keep clean, a way to make a living ... I don't need so much. I don't need a car. I don't need a wardrobe. I'd like a little dirt...

She realizes it's going to be one of those Shirley MacLaine days on the Camino, the sort of day she's having more and more often. She hears a voice beneath the panic, beneath the fear, that seems to come from the ground. She hears it say one word. She hears it say, "Artist."

There's magic in walking a path that hundreds of thousands of people have walked, for a thousand years, surrounded by people doing the same irrational thing embedded in an infrastructure that supports your craziness. Magic that's conducive to talking to God and listening to one's heart, which turn out to be the same thing.

Going Wild

This is an inconvenient time for going wild. I have responsibilities. And it's cold outside.

I watch my hand that holds the hammer that pounds me into a shape that fits the proper hole. I pound and pound myself, but I don't quite fit. I squeeze a bulge in here, shave off a sharp edge there, and pound and pound and pound. I try to whittle myself down to nothing so I can disappear. Bang bang bang on my head hits the hammer. Square peg in round hole. Redwood into toothpick. I cut the inconvenient pieces off. I limb myself so I slide smoothly into the mill.

Limbs are where the wild things live – where birds make their nests.

Limbs are an impediment to masts and poles. I will wield the ax for you. Let me cut off my limbs to make myself suitable for industry. I will make myself straight and rigid and useful to you powers. Let me read your mind and do what you want before you ask it, so you are blameless.

Behold the limbless handmaid of the Lord.

I will stop pounding myself into a hole that will never ever fit. I will regrow my limbs and branches so wild things have a place to live. I will nourish my roots and reach for the roots of others.

I am no longer espaliered.

I am a redwood. I am an old ponderosa.

I am a woman following a carnivorous cat across a narrow ridgeling, an arête, on a dark night, with only my senses to help me follow her. I smell her, I feel her warmth, I taste her wild scent in my mouth. I hear her breathing and the soft sound of her paws hitting the ground with each step. I catch a glimpse of her every now and then, in the starshine. Her eyes glow when she turns to make sure I'm following her.

*I am regrowing myself. I am undebecoming.
 Deep kindness. Compassionate heart.
 Put down the hammer and the axe.
 Let go. Free fall. Trust.
 Allow yourself to be who you are.
 Completely here.*

*I am giving birth to myself. I am gestating myself. I am both mother and child. I am womb and embryo.
 It's not rational, yet it's completely true.*

We are not a fiber farm. We are not a monocultured industrial forest. We are old growth. We are many-layered, and we harbor secrets. Sasquatch lives within us. We hold stories upon stories. Our usefulness is not immediately apparent. Tiny communities of uncommon organisms live only in us. We are interwoven and interdependent. We contain entire ecosystems in our crowns. Marbled Murrelets nest in our upper limbs, bathed in Pacific fog. A thousand feet above the ground, seedlings sprout from leaf duff six feet deep.

We are the old ones. The living ones.

You fear our fertile, fecund, wild darkness. You want to cut us down. We are at your mercy.

I am a seed on the wind.

I am an embryo in my own womb.

What do new babies need? Nourishment. Rest. Love. Patience. Strength. Peace. Vigilance and fierce protection.

*You are deeply loved.
 Growing is your job.
 Be who you are.
 Exform your Self into the world.*

Prepare.

The Messies

Walking and walking, alone on the Meseta, Martha is alone with her thoughts.

I am a mess, Martha thinks. I am just a mess. Maybe I'll always be a mess. Maybe being messy is just how I am. What do I do with all my messiness?

I really am going a little crazy. I seem to have a jar in my chest, and it's full of my messiness. Day after day of walking has jostled the lid loose. Day after day of being a stranger in a strange land has jostled the lid loose, and the messies have taken their chance. They've rushed up and out. There are so many of them! They are vaguely malevolent. They're wild and angry, exulting in their newfound freedom and room to roam. They surge out of the jar and crawl all over my insides. I can feel them clinging to my

chest wall and hanging on my heart. They're crawling all around inside me. They crawl up into my arms and down to my hands. They gleefully grab my organs and skitter down my legs. They like my bones for traction.

The messies are so glad to be free! They're blue and black and red and green, with wild fur and eight legs and googly eyes and fangs. They're a little crazed, a little frantic. I'm afraid of them.

Then Martha becomes aware that it feels good to have the lid off. It's taken energy and effort to keep them caged and hidden, and she's relieved to have given up the fight.

The messies are different things, it seems. Some of them are dreams. Many of them are emotions. Some of them are memories. Some of them are joy, too.

Martha has kept her messies hidden in many ways: other-focus, codependence, addiction, busyness, distraction, rule-following, being nice, staying quiet.

She must loosen the lid every time she needs to stuff another messie into the jar. They resist, and they try to escape whenever she opens it. She's exceptionally good at keeping her messies contained. But now, here on the Camino, as she walks mile after mile, the lid has wobbled loose, they messies have popped it off, and they've escaped.

The jar is very old. It was given to Martha when she was a little girl. The givers told her, "Here's your jar. Please put into it everything about you that we don't like. Don't ask questions. Just do it. No messies allowed. Or aloud. Either one. Your job is to sequester your messies so they don't bother us. We only want to see the smart, pretty, nice bits. Thank you in advance for your cooperation in this matter. We'll teach you how to identify, capture, and contain said messies, since you're just a girl. Before you know it, you'll be so good at it you can do it without thinking. Expect to feel listless and depressed at times. That just means you're doing it right. Anytime you want to do something irrational or have a feeling we don't like – catch that messy and STUFF IT INTO YOUR JAR. And NEVER let them out.

"Oh, and by the way, a little joy goes into the jar with each messy. That's normal. Pay no attention. Not a cause for concern."

It takes a lot of energy to keep the lid on. That's why I don't commit to anything. I must hold back some energy at all times so I can contain the messies. Don't ask too much of me. I must keep the messies in. "Don't let loose, don't let down your guard, or the messies will get out." So no going flat out and giving something all I've got. Never let myself get too hungry or tired or enthusiastic or passionate, or carried away. If I do, the messies will erupt.

Martha walks, smiling and weeping. She's accepting that there will be many tears on this Camino. Every pilgrim she meets, she will see their jar of messies. We all have them. We all have our sequestered messies.

Tonight, in the albergue, someone will say, "Hola, Martha! How was your Way today?"

Martha's answer, if she wants to tell the truth, will be, "Today on the Camino I discovered that in my heart I keep a jar full of everything I don't want to know – the messy things – the inconvenient truths of my life. The sadness I don't want to feel. The unkept promises and failures. The losses and the rage. The

dreams I've let languish. The pain and the betrayals I didn't want to see. All the stuff I didn't want to do but I did anyway. All the pieces of me that didn't fit with being perfect. And the joy it wasn't safe to express. Now they're out. They're crawling all over me, inside and out. And I can't put them back in. And it feels good."

Tom

The next day, still walking across the Meseta, through green wheat and oat fields polka-dotted with red poppies under a blue sky streaked with white clouds, Martha ponders the Camino's similarity to teaching. And writing. And life. Miracles happen within structure and discipline. On the Camino, that means starting wherever you start, St. Jean or Paris or Le Puy or wherever, heading toward Santiago, along a defined way-marked route with established cities and towns and landmarks. Building a container of structure and discipline for the miraculous means having a plan and a timetable, then walking out the door each day with a willing heart for whatever happens that day. Openness to the weather and the people and the road – openness to what her body needs – pain, hunger, fatigue, but also all the ways Earth speaks to her through her body.

On the Camino, as in life, pilgrims are only alone if they choose solitude. Martha is tired of being alone with her thoughts, and promises herself to speak to the next person she encounters. Because she's not the fastest walker on the Way, she's overtaken more than she overtakes. Soon she hears the sound of feet and click click click of poles on the rocky track behind her. Then "¡Buen Camino!" comes the typical pilgrim greeting.

She turns to see a man, about her age, American judging by his gear. "¡Buen Camino!" she answers. They walk together in silence for a few minutes. Martha appreciates that he's waiting for her to initiate conversation. This is very unusual for a man, especially an American man.

"Hola. I'm Martha. Are you American?"

"Yes, I am. I'm Tom."

A few more minutes of silent walking. Martha has a chance to study Tom. He's tall, gray-haired, alone. Cute. She can see other pilgrims far ahead of them, she's reasonably confident there are more coming along behind, and there's not a tree or a hedge in sight. She takes the risk, keeping her promise to Mary and herself while taking precautions suitable for a woman alone on the Camino.

"So, Tom, what do you do? Why are you out here doing this crazy thing?"

"Oh, well. If I tell you my profession, will you promise to give me a chance to make it up to you?"

"Hmmm. I'll give you five minutes. And now you have to tell me."

"I'm an Episcopal priest. I'm on sabbatical. I walked the last 100k with a youth group ten years ago and I've always wanted to come back and do it my way." Martha knows he's said these same exact words to a hundred pilgrims before saying them to her.

"Why would that make me not want to talk to you? Is that a common reaction?"

“Well, what usually happens is that people talk differently after they find out what I do. They wall off parts of themselves – the parts they think I’ll judge and they don’t want me to see. It usually takes a while to recover. For some reason it matters to people.”

Martha thinks, and again decides to take a risk. She tells Tom, “Well, that’s silly. If I decide I’ve said too much to you, I’ll just walk a little further today, or stop early, or spend an extra day somewhere, so I don’t have to see you again. Or, here’s a notion – I could invoke priestly confidentiality and not tell you anything else.”

She continues, “And let me tell you, I’m glad to have someone to talk to who will maybe have some insight into the crazy shit that’s been happening to me. Are you up for that?”

“Sure. As long as you don’t tell me about hurting yourself or someone else, consider my lips sealed.”

Martha wonders if he’s bracing himself for the ravings of a lunatic, resenting that even out here on the Camino he has to be pastoral. She tells him, “Listen. If you decide you’re done, please just tell me. Please don’t be nice.”

Tom says, “Okay. You have my word. I’ll stop you if you’re too much for me.”

Martha tells him about retiring from teaching and walking the Camino while she figures out what’s next. How she wanted to do it alone, so she only had herself to manage and take care of. How she left her dog with her son, cleared out her house, and flew to Madrid within the week after her retirement. How she’d planned to start in Pamplona, but in the cathedral she had the feeling that would be a mistake. So, she’d bussed to St. Jean and started from there. About the feeling at the turnoff to Eunate. About finally needing to take a cab to Nájera. Tom just walks and listens, asks an occasional question, and does a lot of “umhum”ing and nodding. Martha can see he’s had a lot of practice listening.

She pauses to take a breath, and Tom says, “None of that sounds especially crazy. It sounds pretty typical, actually. I think you’ve been holding back. Lay the crazy on me, Martha.”

So Martha does. She tells him about seeing the ugly roots of patriarchal religion in the Burgos cathedral, and how she thinks she quit being even a nominal Christian in the Templar church. She tells him about her old growth epiphany and about the messies. She tells him that sometimes she hears the Camino speak. She leaves out the talking Madonnas. She tells him she feels like she’s falling apart. Like there’s no solid ground anywhere. She doesn’t know who she is anymore. She used to be rational. She used to have a clear sense of who she was and her place in the world. All of that’s gone. Evaporated on the Camino. Scraped off, like the skin on her feet.

“Thank you,” Tom says. “Thank you for trusting me with this. Is there more?”

Martha continues. “I think all this stuff we invent – marriage and jobs and religions and institutions – It’s all a container for wild mystery. Wild mystery can be pretty scary. Life is so full, so holy, we need to dilute it and contain it, or we’ll become unsuited for this world. We need to put on sunglasses and turn away or we’ll go crazy. Or go sane, maybe.

“Why is the world set up this way. *Is* the world set up this way? Is this how the old ones lived? The Celts on the Outer Hebrides? The Ancient Ones in their red rock canyons? Why do we believe in our inherent untrustworthiness? Why do we build cages for our wildness? Why do we tame ourselves? What’s going on here? Is it true that if I go wild I’ll be unsuited for this world? That in order to live in this world happily I must contain myself? What would happen if I let my messies out? Oh, wait. They’re already out. What would I do with the energy I expend looking presentable? What would it look like to be outside the lines? To completely let go of believing in the lines as real? To see the lines as arbitrary marks of ink, put there by someone else who *did* believe in them, maybe? Or maybe they don’t but it serves them if I *do* believe in them.

“I thought this day after day walking eating drinking sleeping walking again thing would be a way for me to decide what to do for the next twenty years. It’s actually just making me wild. It’s giving me back my body and my wild heart. I’m being be-wild-ered!

“I just want to be whole. I’m done with anything that doesn’t help me be whole.

“Tom, what do you think about God and Jesus? Are they containers or cages?”

They walk in silence. As the silence continues, Martha begins to wonder what he makes of her outburst.

Tom’s been thinking about her question. He asks her, “What do you believe about God and Jesus? I mean really believe. Down underneath all the stuff you’ve been taught.”

Martha answers, “I think God and Jesus are made up. I think they’re men’s explanations for something they can’t understand or control. I think religions are containers for wild love at the heart of the world. But laws and judgment have nothing to do with wild love. They’re ways to corral the Force. To make it less powerful and scary. But the Force doesn’t care. It’s out there on the sage sea, swirling around in the purple twilight as the brightest stars begin to show through the darkening sky – sure, it’s in the corral where the people have put it for safekeeping – but only because it’s *everywhere*. The mighty wind swirls around the people gathered inside the corral – oh my God, it’s like church on a Sunday set in a forest of green trees – stained glass and rows of hard pews and songs of sin – while outside the Spirit swirls and plays.

“The Spirit fills the church, sure, but only because it fills *everything*. And it’s a wee bit frustrated with the hardness of the people inside the church. She has a hard time getting inside them, singing to them. Singing *in* them. They’re rigid and afraid, almost impermeable. It’s easier to sing inside the people on the mountain and the people on the river, even the people still in bed or the ones reading the Sunday paper at their kitchen table. And the DOGS. Don’t get the Force started on the dogs. Cats have a quieter type of joy. But dogs! Dogs live out *loud*. Dogs laugh and love with all their selves. Their doggy selves.”

“God bless dogs,” she says. “God blesses dogs. And dogs bless God.” She wonders why, if she doesn’t believe in God, she’s asking God to bless dogs.

“I miss my dog, Tom.”

“I miss mine, too, Martha.”

Martha and Tom are walking and telling each other about their dogs, while Martha ponders what just happened. Tom's quiet, receptive presence has given her space to articulate some ideas she didn't know she had. As she'd spoken them aloud, they'd sounded familiar. She'd stuffed them in the jar of messies, because thinking those thoughts would just cause chaos. She hadn't wanted to admit they were there. Tom's listening had invited them to emerge. Emerge they had, like exuberant dogs released from confinement when their owners come home from work. For the first time in a week, Martha doesn't feel afraid for her sanity. Tom's easy acceptance allows her to hear herself, and to be healed.

They spend the night in the next village, have dinner with Douglas, and wake up to rain. Douglas is meeting Clarice in Frómista, so he has a timetable and doesn't choose to linger in the rain. Tom and Martha take it slow through the Meseta mud, looking for a bar for first breakfast.

A Rainy Day on the Way

A cold rainy day on the Way is a perfect day for pondering discomfort. Rain on the Camino means you walk in the rain. Unless you stayed the night in a hotel and you can book another night, you must leave. You could go find a bar and sit there until the albergues open at 2:00, but, really, what's the point of that? You might as well walk.

One of the best pieces of advice Martha gleaned from the American Pilgrims on the Camino Facebook group was to buy that Altus poncho in Pamplona. She's grateful for it today. It has a pouch that snaps in and out to fit over her backpack, and it goes to her knees. She loves it.

The downside of not using a backpack cover is that if Martha needs something in her pack she has to somehow get under the poncho, which is hard to do while walking. The upside of the Altus covering her pack is that her pack stays dry, unlike the packs of the people she sees around her that are covered only with the backpack cover. The rain, especially this windy rain, will find its way in and around the cover. She'd rather have a wet body and a dry backpack.

Fortunately, along most of the Camino there are frequent bars for getting warm, or at least warmer. This morning they're packed full of wet walkers. Martha and Tom wedge their way through the pilgrims congregating in the main room jostling for the barkeep's attention. They find a place for their backpacks, poles, and ponchos where they can drip a little, hopefully not on someone else's stuff. It's dark in this bar – nooks and crannies all packed with pilgrims seeking refuge from the deluge outside. It's an incessant rain. A thoroughly wet rain. *Not* liquid sunshine.

Feeling inside her layers for her passport and money, Martha pulls out a few Euro and joins the throng of peregrinos waiting for coffee. Some of them are impatient. They want this process to be efficient and orderly, but this is Spain, the land of six-hour workdays and afternoon siestas. Spaniards don't rush, and they don't like loud, pushy Americans and driven Germans.

She waits, drifting along with the tide of people toward her turn to order. "Café con leche, por favor, señor," she says. "Y tiene tortilla? No? Pan tostada? Bien, gracias." Toast it is. She ponders, again, the wonder that is Spanish toast. This is breakfast. Perhaps she'll find tortilla further along the Way – or perhaps this toast will have to do until lunch. She's already hoping for soup to go with her bocadillo. Bread, bread, bread. All this lovely bread. It would be hard to be gluten-free on the Camino. Being a

vegetarian would be far easier. On her way back to a table in the corner, squeezing between dripping peregrinos, carrying her coffee and toast, she sees out the open door that it's still raining.

Martha rejoins Tom. Without preamble, she says, "They say everything on the Camino is a metaphor. How you do anything is how you do everything. Take my students, for example. Some of them were so open to screwing up, and some were incredibly resistant to that. It's about how well you tolerate discomfort, partly. My first instinct when I'm uncomfortable is to go back to where I feel safe and warm and dry and unthreatened. It's taken a long time to notice my brain's craving for safety, let alone train myself out of that. I realized I couldn't teach kids to explore and be messy if I always had to be good at something right out of the gate. And I still, in unfamiliar situations, have to work at being okay with mistakes. Evidently, I think other people get to be messy, but I don't. Huh."

She continues. "There they are again! Messies are part of learning. Being okay with messies – seeing messes as compost rather than mistakes – I wish that was easy for me. Maybe I'm here to get really good at messes. To take my best shot, to leave before I'm ready, to follow my gut and listen to my heart. To see the messes as holy – sacred – inevitable precursors of and byproducts of growth. Necessary for growth."

Tom, as is his habit, sits and listens to her. Listening is Tom's superpower.

"Maybe messy isn't even the right word!" she says. "Maybe it's like the furrows left by the moles – or pencil shavings – or a snake's skin, or dead leaves and shed branches or a beetle's carapace after metamorphosis. Do beetles shed their shells? Like the chrysalis a butterfly leaves behind. Every process requires a mess if it's deep enough, maybe?"

Martha goes on. "Is my former life a chrysalis hanging on last year's yarrow? I kept thinking the chrysalis was my forever home. Every metamorphosis, every turn of the wheel, every ride around the change cycle, leaves pieces behind. Every death and resurrection leaves a trail – a bundle of clothes inside a tomb."

"I am so fucking wise," she says. "When did I get so smart?! But it's *true*. We all have these cycles. Cycles within cycles within cycles. And even though the Camino is a line from point A to point B, it has cycles within it. There's the overarching beginning-middle-end-beginning again one from SJPP or wherever, walking for thirty or forty days, ending in Santiago, then going home. Within the big one, which is ALSO embedded in the larger cycle of my life, there are smaller cycles. There's the cycle of each day, and the meeting/walking/parting cycle of ephemeral Camino relationships, the cycle of each mile, the cycle of each step, even the cycle of each breath. There might be an accumulation and letting go cycle, too. Breathing is like that. Eating is like that. We breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. We eat food and let go of pee and poop."

Tom sits and listens as Martha talks.

"So maybe messes aren't negative at all – maybe they're inevitable byproducts of changing and growing. They're our shed skins and chrysalises and fallen leaves and husks of seeds. We are designed to grow and change. Learning is our job. And the only way to learn something new is to do something new. And the only way to do something new is to *do* it. And the only way to do something new is to accept the feelings that go with not knowing how to do something and doing it anyway. Some of us are better at that than others, but *all* of us can learn it. Or relearn it, actually. We all used to know it, when we were

babies and we didn't know about mistakes. Then school got hold of us, and parents who needed us to be certain ways – to be competent so they felt competent, maybe, and we learned that learning was supposed to be seamless or we weren't doing it right. And if we couldn't do it right, we probably shouldn't be doing it at all. If we couldn't get it right pretty quick, then it wasn't what we should be doing and we needed to go find the thing we *could* get right really fast, because *that* was our calling. And then we needed to keep doing that one thing over and over for the rest of our lives.

“Does anyone do the Camino perfectly, Tom?” Martha asks. “What would that even look like? Let's see. You buy all the right gear the first time. You always walk as far as you intend to walk, and you always find a bed in your preferred albergue. Or, if you don't, some lovely local gives you her spare room and you become friends for life. You never pee behind a tree or take a shit in the bushes. No blisters and no injuries. You always have exactly what you need and are able to give to less-prepared peregrinos from your excess.”

Tom says, “Yuck. That sounds awful, doesn't it? That sounds so dry and sterile and dead.”

He goes on: “How about *this* for perfection: you do enough research and then you go, and you survive. A lot of stuff goes wrong or doesn't go the way you planned. There are times you're uncomfortable – tired, cold, hungry, confused, sore, scared – and yet here you are. You get through it, increasing your tolerance for feeling tired, cold, hungry, confused, sore, and scared. You roll with it. You surf the waves, rather than having a really expensive boat. You're inside the Camino, not on its surface. And there are moments, even hours and days, of bliss and joy and exultation and warm happiness and simple true connection – of feet on the ground, breathing and walking and listening and seeing and smelling and tasting – feeling how strong your body is and how big your heart is.”

Martha adds, “And how *delicioso* it feels to be wild.”

The rain continues to fall steadily on Martha and Tom as they leave the warm, dark bar still crowded with damp pilgrims. She peers out from beneath the already-dripping hood of her Altus poncho and finds the arrow embedded in the rain-slicked cobbled street. They follow the arrow. Martha's hoping to get another twenty kilometers under her belt before stopping for the night.

They walk in silence for half an hour or more, Martha pondering what it would mean to do the Camino perfectly. “Tom, are you tired of listening yet?” she asks.

“Nope,” he answers, walking through the rain.

“Okay, then. I'm still thinking about the perfect Camino. Would perfect mean it matched the pilgrim's expectations exactly?”

“What if my expectations were to take things as they come and to meet every moment with love? What if I forgave myself for all the shit? All the stuff I'd do over if I could? I can't ever change the events and choices of my life. There's nothing I can do about where I was born and the family I was born into. The adults in my life about whom I had no choice, and their choices that impacted me. The choices I've made, often from misguided beliefs like that I needed to earn love and I needed to do something profoundly important and I needed to follow the rules to stay safe.”

“Sometimes my tries were outside the li-i-ines...” she sings. “But they never were. I was *always* inbounds. And yet I never felt safe there, either. Safe, maybe – but dissatisfied. I was taught a set of rules. Number one: Don’t think too highly of yourself. Number two: Don’t make us mad or uncomfortable. Use your messy jar. Number three: Your job is to do what we need you to do and be what we need you to be, and don’t make us tell you what that is. Number four: Your choices are extremely limited. Number five: You need our approval because you can’t make it on your own.”

Martha continues. “What would I do differently? I’d find a way to work in the mountains for a couple of summers. I’d take a gap year, or two, and work overseas. I’d study history and literature and ecology in college. I’d figure out where I wanted to live and how I wanted to live before getting married. I’d be with kids before deciding to *have* them. I would have done my teens and 20s very differently, which would have set my life on a vastly different course. I’d be someone else now. I’d probably be a goat- and chicken-raising gardening writer and academic still living in the Midwest because the dirt’s better there. I might or might not be married. I’d sure as hell be a painter and a sculptor. My house would be sustainable, and my garden would be permacultured.”

“Can I forgive myself for giving myself away? It’s easy to say that it’s all okay – I did the best I could have at the time, given my training and circumstances and inherited pathology. I need to love the girl I was, not hate her and resist her. There I was, a sensitive artistic kid with her head in the clouds, talking to the pines and the crows and the creek and the clouds, loving the wild world out her back door – and it’s lost. My dad hurts my brother, yells at my mom, ignores me, and leaves. With him go the dog and the horses, and the house in the pines has to be sold and we move into town. My life completely falls apart. No wonder I hate conflict.

“My brother goes to live with my dad. Then my sister leaves. It’s just my mom and me, and it’s okay. I’m finding some equilibrium. Finding what I’m good at. Going into my head, finding writing and science. Not so good at doing hard things, like calculus and physics. I want to stay comfortable and safe. Then my mom remarries, an abuser who denigrates learning. *Now* what? I’m getting smaller and smaller – getting shapeless and harder – eating less and less – nothing sticking out and easily displaced. He says and does things to me and she marries him. His message is that my only worth is sexual.”

“I’ve detested myself for the mistakes I made – for the ways I gave myself away. And I can rationalize all that, find reasons for it that take myself off the hook. But what I learned was that what I loved and wanted wasn’t important enough to my parents that they’d sacrifice for it. That I wasn’t deserving of time, attention, and sacrifice. That what I loved and wanted wasn’t important. It, and I, didn’t count. Some people counted, and some didn’t. You could be mad about that and believe it wasn’t fair, but that didn’t change the reality.

“So, I got out of there the day after high school graduation, and it got okay again. I was in camouflage in college, like I was in high school, but the expectations were clear, and I knew how to be a student. And Hugh came along, and it was going to stay okay. And then my dad died. From twelve to twenty-two it was just one fucking wallop after another, with no help. *None*. Every choice I’ve made since I was a toddler, probably, was finding a way to sneak a little of myself but hoping no one would notice. Fitting a little of myself in around the edges of other people’s more important lives – finding something to do that was useful to others and met their needs and expectations while still doing maybe a little of what I wanted to do. That’s how I ended up leaving my mountains for the Midwest. Anesthetizing the yearning I was ignoring with food and alcohol and fiction and depression. But never to excess. Never to the point of needing to ask for help.”

Martha wants to sit down and let this sink in. She still doesn't know who she is and what exactly she's cut off and left behind her. What she resolves to do right now, right this minute, at kilometer 278, is to stop beating herself up for it. She sees that she's, in fact, so *strong*. And so sad. She wants to weep for the little girl she was.

"Tom, do you think we're recoverable – that the pieces of me I cut off and left behind are recoverable? Are they in the jar of messies? Are they lying beside the road? Are they like a lizard's tail and can be regrown? Are they just retracted, and they'll pop back out given permission and safety, like a turtle's head or a cat's claws? Are they like Mariposa Lily seeds, waiting for the right combination of water and temperature to emerge?"

"If they are gone, there's nothing I can do about it. All I can do is invite, seek and bring back, what's truly me. All of me is in my DNA, in every cell. Therefore, although it will have been altered over the course of 62 years, *it's still there.*"

Tom's been listening. He asks, "Martha, what did you love to do when you were little?"

Martha says, "Hmmm. Let's see. I spent a lot of time designing houses and decorating them. I loved wading in creeks. I still love to put my feet in water and swim in lakes and river. I loved mountains. I used to wish I was small enough to live in the houses I built from rocks behind Grandma and Grandpa's house on the desert. I read a lot, too. Big books. *Anna Karenina*. *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Great Gatsby*, *Kim* and *Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Dumas and his Musketeers. *Shoes of the Fisherman* and *The Crystal Cave*. *Katherine*.

"I think my love of science is genuine – the science of real things. Bodies and landscapes and space and how they work. Birds and water and trees and rocks and brains. I'm more interested in where a story takes me and what I learn than in analyzing the author's tactics and strategies. I'm more interested in what a painting shows me than in the artist's technique. I crave understanding of how stuff works, including God stuff. I want to be able to pin things down and comprehend them. I want to know where I want to go and how to get there. I love maps. Systems and structures and processes. And that's okay. It's a perfectly legitimate way to be. I like things straight and orderly with lots of white space. I don't like clutter and chaos. I like plans, even if it's 'let's figure it out when we get there.' I love birds and cats and dogs and wild things, flowers and herbs and dirt. I like green and I like oatmeal cookies. I don't like slippery fabrics and I'm not a fan of glitter and shine. I like quiet and I also enjoy the occasional dance party. I want to believe in elves and fairies and Sasquatch. I like fantasy and allegory. Science Fiction not quite as much. Stoneware bowls, spicy food, hearty bread, woven cloth, a chair covered in damask rose print. Wind in the pines and the smell of wet granite send me into spasms of delight. I like to pour water on desiccated moss and watch it green up. I am empathic. Sensitive. I pay attention. I miss my dad. And my mom.

"I truly love sitting on rocks in the sun, Tom. And gardens. And when the ground thaws in the springtime.

"Sometimes I wonder if there was something else I was supposed to be. Some job I was called to do or some role I was designed to play that I lost track of. Some big thing I was put here to do that I didn't do because I let myself get derailed."

“Say more about letting yourself get derailed,” says Tom.

“Well, sometimes I think that a stronger, more dedicated person would have stayed the course. Like Jesus did. I shouldn’t have given up who I was and what I wanted so easily. I should have stuck with it even though people wouldn’t have liked it and they’d have tried to stop me. Which is ridiculous. I was just a little girl when I got knocked off my rails. I wasn’t big enough to fight that.”

“So, you think you let yourself down and you beat yourself up for it?” asks Tom.

“When I let myself think about it at all,” Martha says.

They walk in silence up the next Meseta rise and down the other side. The rain is beginning to let up.

“Has anybody ever told you that you’re too hard on yourself?” asks Tom. “Would you like my response to some of what you’ve said? You don’t have to say yes.”

“Um, okay? I guess so. I can’t imagine that you’ve kept coherent track of my incoherent ramblings, though.”

“Okay. Here goes. Stop me if you need to. Really.”

Tom continues, “I do think you’re being really hard on yourself. What I hear is the story of a little girl who got her world yanked out from underneath her in a really crazy way. A little girl who learned she didn’t matter, which is a common lesson for kids in dysfunctional families to learn, by the way. I hear the story of a little girl who got really strong and did her best to love the people around her and keep them safe. Who did her best to figure out where danger would come from. There was no room for your wants and choices in your family. It hurt too much to have desires when you couldn’t follow them, so you made them go away as a way to cope in a crazy, hurtful world.”

Silence from Martha. After a few minutes, Tom asks, “What’s up, Martha?”

“I’m not sure, Tom. You can keep talking, though.”

He says, “And another thing. You’re a woman living in a patriarchy. That makes all this not just a little girl coping with a screwed-up family system. That little girl grew up, and still lives, in a world where men run the show. Men define what’s important. Men decide what and who counts. Have you thought about that?”

Martha ponders and then replies, “I’ve been a feminist for decades. But I didn’t really go deep with it. I kept my name when I got married and I worked diligently to treat my girl students equally. The last couple of weeks I’ve been really aware of the misogyny in Christianity. The poison which is masculinist religion. Male-normative spirituality.” She decides again not to tell him about her burgeoning relationship with the Marys of the Way.

Martha continues, “Oh, geez. I’m seeing the fingerprints of the patriarchy all over my life. It wasn’t that I was weak – it’s that a deeply patriarchal culture didn’t take me seriously. Add on addiction and other pathologies, and there you have it. So what do I do with this? Maybe all I need to do is call it out when I see it and refuse to participate in it. I don’t know.

“Here’s what I do know. I want to do my heart’s work, whatever that is. I want to stop worrying about what’s next, at least until 24 hours after I get to Santiago, and just enjoy what’s here in front of me. And in order to do that, I’m going to stay in the next town, whatever it is, and let you go on ahead of me. But will you give me your phone number and email address so we can reconnect?”

“Of course,” says Tom. “I’d like to see you again. I want to hear how all this shakes out.”

Hope

The next day Martha is walking. She feels like she’s always walking. Although she feels the bright sun’s warmth on her bare head, yesterday’s rain is still very much present in the deep Meseta mud and lingering puddles. Her shoes are muddy. The hems of her pants are muddy. Her mood is muddy. She’s wondering why she sent Tom away. He’d given her his contact info and hadn’t asked for hers in return. An unusual man.

What the hell am I doing out here? Martha wonders, not for the first time and almost certainly not for the last time.

“You’re here to heal,” says the Camino.

Oh, hello. What is healing, really?

“Healing is holiness, and wholeness, and health. Holiness means you know who you are – that you know you live and move and have your being in a deeper reality, your source and destination. Wholeness means you welcome all of you – the joy and the pain. You can’t have one without the other. You’re rooted in Love, and you can handle what comes as long as you don’t try to cling to it or control it. Health is everything you do to stay connected to who you really are, and to flow with what wants to come through you.”

The Camino continues, “Holiness underlies wholeness. Holiness is the foundation of wholeness. Wholeness is holy. Wholeness without holiness is struggle.”

Martha says, “Oh. It’s knowing that I’m held in Love that makes wholeness possible. Faith in ultimate okay-ness is what would allow me to invite the memories and the old feelings back into the light. The submerged and frozen feelings – the loss and pain and invisibility of my dad moving out, losing my brother and my sister and my house in the woods, my dog and horses, and finally my mom, are stored inside me. They’re like a chest freezer in my chest. All those awful childhood feelings I’ve resisted all these years – I can let them out. It’s safe. I can handle it because I’m holy, and so are they.”

Again she feels afraid of her post-Camino life. Eventually she’ll have to stop walking. Eventually she’ll walk to Santiago, or Finisterre, or run out of money, or her body will give out somehow, and she’ll have to face her future. A wave of panic sweeps through her – heart racing, breath shaky, hands quivering, skin sweating – what will she do with herself when this is over? How will she know what the right thing to do even is?

The Camino asks, “Sweetheart, what do you *want* to do?”

Martha’s panic is rooted in the old tension between doing what she thought she should do and what she wanted to do. It’s been a long time since she’s known what she really, truly, deep in the core of her being, wanted. A very long time.

Martha accepts that her job is to attend to her heart and its desires. That when she’s rooted in love, she can trust her desires. That the parts of her she split off – the messiness, the girl with the sadness, the girl who loved mountains and wading in creeks – have wisdom for her. The girl who knows what she wanted got left behind – frozen in the chest freezer – for safekeeping, it turns out. She’s there, along with powerlessness, invisibility, anger, and deep hurt. She’s so sad and wounded. She’s lying in there, all curled up, covered in frost, eyes closed.

If I thaw her out, I’ll be a crazy person. But she knows what I really, truly want deep down in the core of my being. She knows. Did I put her in the freezer? No, I did not. I didn’t know she was there. I didn’t know I was there. She’s a part of me.

Okay, then.

Martha walks off the gravel path and sits on a sunny rock in the middle of a field. She reaches down into her chest freezer, cradles her hands under the little body, and picks up the frozen girl child. The child is solid, sturdy, and cold. So cold.

Martha cradles this girl to her body, gently stroking her, putting her warm cheek against the child’s frozen face, and waits. An hour passes, then another. She notices, for the first time, that she’s surrounded by bright red poppies. Poppies everywhere, white daisies and sky-blue cornflowers mixed in. The Meseta breeze blows. The flowers sway. The trees in the distance move, too, and she feels the warm air on her skin.

Martha sits in a field of poppies with a frozen child in her lap. Although the poppies in stories are soporific, on the Camino she hears them say “Wake up!” She continues to croon to the child and stroke her, keeps her cheek to the little girl’s cold face, listens to the Meseta wind, and watches the poppies sway. Gently and fiercely holding this frozen girl, waiting for signs of life.

She sees peregrinos walking in the distance. They’re far enough away that she can’t tell them apart. Occasionally one will notice her and wave, and Martha waves back so they know she’s okay. Then a woman leaves the road and walks through the poppies toward them. Martha watches expressions cross the woman’s face as she gets nearer: surprise, concern, comprehension, and finally immense kindness.

“Hola,” she says. “How can I help?” They recognize each other’s American-ness by all the nonverbal cues – North Face and Osprey, smiles and eye contact.

“She’s frozen. I’m thawing her.”

“You look tired. Let me take a turn.” Martha realizes that, yes, she is indeed tired. The woman takes her towel from her backpack and spreads it on the ground, then sits on it and reaches her arms to Martha. Martha gently hands her the curled-up girl child.

The woman asks, "Where did you find her?"

"In my chest," says Martha.

"Ah," says the woman, and she looks at Martha with deep brown eyes. "I understand."

Martha knows those eyes. They are her mother's eyes. Their eyes fill with tears, and the girl child stirs. Martha reaches out a hand to the little girl's face. Her skin is warm, and Martha catches a tear softly falling down the girl's cheek. Thawing is happening rapidly now. The little girl is breathing and stretching, making little noises as she wakes up. This child is younger than Martha thought, four or five years old, with red rubber-toed sneakers, little jeans, a pink shirt, fine brown hair cut in a bowl shape reminiscent of the early Beatles, and deep brown eyes now looking up at her and her mom.

"Hello, sweetheart," says Martha.

This is weird, she thinks. I'm sitting in a field of Spanish poppies with my mom, who's been dead for twenty years, and a little girl I found in a freezer in my chest. Okay, then.

Martha lies down in the sun in the poppies, looks at her mom cradling her child, and closes her eyes. She feels the rocks beneath her and knows she's getting dirty and damp, and she doesn't care. Dirt and damp are a small price to pay for the feeling of Earth along her entire body. Ground below, air and sky above. Poppies all around. She reaches her hand to the woman sitting next to her, places it on the woman's nylon-clad leg, and relaxes. As Martha falls asleep, she wonders – will they be here when I wake up?

They are. They're deeper in the poppies, holding hands, the little girl bending to smell each flower and laughing as they sway in the breeze. The sun is halfway between noon and the horizon. Martha is hungry. She sits there watching the two dear creatures, listening to her daughter's tinkling laughter that sounds like a summer creek and her mother's low murmurs in response.

Martha stands up, brushes the dirt off her legs with a swish, and says, "Hey, you two. Let's go find supper and a bed."

They turn and walk toward her. Her daughter lets go of the older woman's hand and runs toward Martha. "Mommy! You're awake! Grandma and I were looking at the pretty flowers. She says they're poppies! I love poppies! Let's go to that town over there!"

She points toward the town just visible beyond the trees – a large church and monastery at the base of a terraced hill with a ruined castle plopped on top. Who does that? wonders Martha. Who's designing these quintessential Camino vistas?

She shoulders her backpack and takes her daughter's hand. Her mom folds up the towel, wipes off Martha's pants with it to get the last of the dirt, stows it in her backpack and puts it on, straps on her poles, and heads through the poppies back to the road. There are only a few pilgrims still walking as Martha and her girl follow the older woman to the road, holding hands.

Martha's Way just got more companionable, and more complicated.

I don't know how long I'll have my mom with me, and my daughter probably isn't real either, she thinks. This is so interesting, and I'll ride this wave as long as it lasts.

An hour later they walk up the cobbled street through the old gate into Castrojeriz. Martha and her mom have taken turns carrying their little girl, whose name it turns out is Esperanza, almost always called "Hope," most of the way. As Hope explained, "I'm tired. After all, I'm a little girl, and I just woke up after being frozen for a really long time." Martha suspects she also wanted to feel her mothers' arms around her, holding her, singing to her, telling her how glad they were that she woke up.

It was like that, that this one peregrina, now three, arrived at the door of El Hospital del Alma. And how it is that they are the fortunate pilgrims who find themselves sitting in front of a warm wood stove, drinking chamomile tea with honey, eating cookies and chocolate-covered strawberries off of flowered china plates, asking the hospitalera where to stay, and are invited to stay in her one guest room that just happens to be empty that night.

"I will cook for you dinner," says María, "and you will tell to me your story."

El Hospital del Alma

So here our three travelers are – Hope on the floor, Martha and her mom on the couch – in the heart of El Hospital del Alma. Hope is happily eating sugar cookies off of flowered china and chattering away. She licks the sugar and crumbs from her fingers with gusto and relish, then swipes the crumbs off her plate with her finger. She's content, and so is Martha as she watches Hope be content. She's aware in a corner of her mind how truly bizarre this is – she's sitting in the warm sunroom of a house in the middle of Spain called El Hospital del Alma with her dead mother and her little daughter who until just a few hours ago was curled up in a chest freezer nestled in her chest, naturally, right beside her heart.

Martha's heart has been keeping Hope alive all these years, and the Hospital of the Soul is the perfect place for the three of them to be. She wonders if others can see all three of them, or if she just looks crazy and alone to people outside her inner reality. She chooses to believe the evidence of her senses. Here these two are. Hope is contentedly eating cookies. Her mom is beside her, drinking chamomile tea with honey. She feels the wood stove's warmth, she sees and hears María outside, building a mosaic in the patio's east wall. A conifer she doesn't know the name of overhangs the glass ceiling of the room.

Martha is simply grateful to be here. She loves this space – the earthiness, the color, the constant surprise. The simple hospitality. Not Parker House hospitality, but hospitality of heart and home. This place on the Camino is designed for one purpose only – to be a refuge for peregrinas' souls. A Hospital of the Soul. She soaks in the complete lack of expectations and judgment. "Come in and sit." That's all. Warmth, nourishment, comfort, and welcome. All it needs is cats.

Martha see kittens in the back, on the patio. She could sit here forever.

This magical child who's evidently not an apparition will need some clothes. Are those rubber-toed red sneakers adequate to the task of walking at least a little way every day? They're from a time when support in kids' shoes was nonexistent. Martha is worrying about Hope's shoes, because she has no idea what she's going to say to María at dinner when she asks for their story.

She'll start at the beginning and tell María how she retired from her teaching job, a job she loved for many years and was good at, because it was time. Class sizes were growing, the kids were getting harder to reach, and she had less time and creativity because of mandated curriculum and tests every other week, it seemed. So, it was time. She would have lasted a few more years, but she jumped ship when the district sweetened the retirement deal for older teachers.

Her adult children didn't need her, she'd seen *The Way* and done a little research, and she knew she needed a Thing to Do right after retirement. An intentional journey seemed like the thing to do, and the Camino met that need – cheap, flexible, set up for solitary walkers. Three days after she turned in her school keys she was on a plane to Madrid, then a train to León, a bus to Pamplona, and another bus to SJPP.

Everything had been fairly normal for the context of doing this crazy thing of walking 500 miles to Santiago, not counting the Pamplona Marys, for the first week or so. Little stuff had started happening around then. She'd found herself taking unplanned side excursions and detours, sitting by the side of the track for a few hours, walking by herself a lot. These things just seemed to happen. But once on the Meseta, they'd come fast and furious, getting odder and odder all the time. The Templar church. The Old Growth vision. The cougar. The jar of messies. She was getting used to it. Retrieving her daughter from a freezer in her chest and having her mom come along to help thaw her out was only the latest. It was also, Martha knew, a completely different order of magnitude of crazy. These two seemed to be real people. Her mom she could explain, sort of. This little girl dressed in clothes from a half century ago, not so much. What will they tell María?

Just then Hope stands up, wipes her hands on her 1960s trousers, and climbs into Martha's lap. She puts her arms around her mom's neck, says in a muffled voice, "Thank you for unfreezing me," and falls asleep. Martha glances at her mom and finds her mom looking at her. They shake their heads, smile, and return to silent fire-watching. El Hospital del Alma, indeed.

Eventually they hear the back door opening and María making noise in the kitchen. "I'll go see what I can do," says Martha's mom. She hears her mom ask in Spanish how she can help. María evidently found her something to do, since the next sound Martha hears is voices and occasional laughter. The sounds of wine glasses being filled, along with cooking noises and smells, come from the kitchen. Her mom brings her a glass of red wine.

Martha takes it. "Mom, I'm so glad you're here with me."

"You're wondering how long I'll be here, aren't you, Martie?"

"Sure. And I'm also trying to just be here now and enjoy this gift."

Her mom kisses the top of her head and returns to the kitchen. Martha sits, a daughter she didn't have this morning on her lap, and sips her wine. I'll take it, she thinks. I'll take it. I won't get to keep it, I sure as hell don't understand it, but I'll take it. I'll enjoy every minute I get with these two, and I won't mourn them before they're gone.

Supper is a salad of baby greens and peas, because it's June in Spain and María's garden has just started producing. The flowers and tomatoes will come later, in a month or so. Chicken and rice, and quejada for dessert. Hope has been pulled up to the table on a stool. She's digging into her chicken, cut up for

her by María, and her rice. She eats the peas with her fingers, eschewing the lettuce. It's her first real meal in decades – she's been kept alive by Martha's heart but she's hungry for real food.

This meal is delicious. "Gracias, María. Es delicioso," Martha says. María responds, "Y gracias para ustedes. I am happy you are here." Hope keeps shoveling it in, humming happily. Then she looks up and says to María, "I've been frozen next to my mommy's heart for a long time. Today she found me and unfroze me, and here I am!" Martha's mom adds, "And I was walking along and saw Martie sitting on a rock in a field of poppies, this one on her lap, and I thought they might need help so I went to see what was up. As I got closer, I could see that they were familiar. Then I saw that they were Martha and Hope, both of whom I was surprised to see. Martie because I'm dead and she's alive, and Hope because I hadn't seen her since she was a little girl."

Okay then, thinks Martha. She won't be any help explaining this to me, or anyone else. Maybe when you're dead you just take weird shit for granted.

María simply nods. "There are angels all round you three," she says. "You were glowing when you entered my house. It's called El Hospital del Alma for a *reason*."

My post-Camino life has something to do with this place, our heroine thinks, as she drifts to sleep, arms around her sleeping child, mom on a pallet on the floor. I could go home now and be perfectly content. I've found a place and two people I didn't know were lost. What else have I lost that I won't know I've lost until it shows back up? This little girl will show me the way. And a little child shall lead them.

It's the smells that wake her the next morning: coffee, toast, something that's maybe cinnamon? And then yesterday's events come flooding back. How had that happened, and was it real? She reaches out her hand and feels the firm, warm, sleeping little body that rolls over and scooches into Martha's arms, says "Good morning, Mommy," nestles in firmly and promptly goes back to sleep. Martha strokes her daughter's hair and cries. Tears flow down her cheeks and pool in her ears.

The sun shines into this small room with two deep green walls and one teal wall, wooden floors and an old desk and chair in the corner. She notices its funky loveliness through her tears, listening to her daughter's breathing, her mom's light snoring, and María's kitchen noises. This is a miracle, she thinks. What the fuck is going on? For a moment, panic. Then some deep breathing and acceptance that yes, indeed, these two sleeping beauties are real. If they aren't real, then she's crazy and so is María. Martha believes that's a real possibility.

Martha carefully disentangles Hope's surprisingly strong arms from around her and gets out of bed, washes her face and dresses quietly, and goes downstairs. María has a cup of café con leche waiting on the table, with a plate of cinnamon croissants and a bowl of strawberries. "Buenos días, mi amiga," says María.

Martha looks at María over her steaming coffee. María is smiling. "Do you want to stay another day? Get clothes for that child? Catch up with yourselves, perhaps? I think the nuns have clothes, maybe."

Martha realizes now who María is. She's not a hostess, a hospitalero, or an owner. None of those labels are accurate. She's the keeper of the shrine, a shaman of place who holds space for the people who

arrive at her door. She provides hospitality for a few minutes, an hour, or even, in the case of our three peregrinas, overnight. She's a believer in what she can't prove. She sees angels. She knows things that others don't know. It doesn't matter to María if Martha is crazy or not. She simply sees people as they truly are.

"Soy loco, María? Am I crazy? What is going on?"

"You don't seem loco to me," says María. "The Camino provides, you peregrinas say. I think the Camino gave to you a tremendous gift – a gift that will disrupt and inconvenience. Someone knew it was time for you to slow down and listen to your heart, and so they gave you a team. I think maybe your days of not knowing what you know are over."

"You could leave them," she continues. "You could walk out right now, and they'd still be sleeping. I'll take care of them. I take care of aunties and sisters and grannies and daughters and mothers left behind. You think you're the first one to acquire a daughter and a mother out there on the Meseta? No. And you have a choice, just like you've had all these years. The only difference is that right now, today, you *know* you have a choice. Your mother and your little daughter are real. Tell me, why did you come on Camino?"

Martha, startled by the conversational pivot, tries to remember. Why did she come on Camino? It's been so long, it seems, since she had a reason. Now she's just walking. Any reason she'd had before St. Jean has long since erased by the dust on her feet. Reasons have become as irrelevant as the results of a standardized test or the objectives in her lesson planner to what truly happened when a child learned.

The Camino is a container. It's an alchemist's lab. The conditions and ingredients are nothing without the miracle that happens out of sight. "I came because I knew I'd regret it if I didn't, once I knew about it," she tells María.

"Exactly," María responds. Exactly what? wonders Martha.

They hear steps on the stairs, the trill of a girl child's voice and the low murmur of her grandmother's answer. "Too late," says María. "Too late to slip away." Martha knows that she wouldn't have, even if she could. The next 500 kilometers are going to be quite different than she'd planned.

"What do you guys think?" she asked the two solid figments of her imagination. "María says we can stay another day if we want, and you need some clothes, kiddo."

"And a backpack," says Hope. Martha sees that she's already bigger. Her big strong girl. "I want to *walk*," she says. "I want to see the cows and the flowers. I'll be fine. But what's for breakfast? I love food."

María brings her the warm milk she's had ready on the stove, with a packet of Cola Cao, while Martha helps Hope into her stool. All three women watch as she digs into a cinnamon croissant with gusto and relish.

Through some Camino miracle, Martha now has the chance, a chance she thought she'd never have, to get questions answered. She wonders if she'll have the courage to ask them.

"So, what do we do?" asks Martha. "María, where can we get this one some more clothes and a backpack?"

“The sisters at the bottom of the hill have a room full of clothes for anyone who needs them,” María says. “And the hiking store on the plaza might have a small backpack.”

Martha doesn't want Hope to carry very much, and she know she needs to carry something. Hope needs to do her job.

“Is it okay if we leave our things here while we go see what we can find?” She didn't want to pack up, and then not be able to leave early enough to make it worthwhile. They'll need to carry their little one. She's grown during the night, but she's still only about five or six years old. Those legs won't last for fifteen miles.

“Por supuesto,” says María. “Of course. If you can't find what you need, I'll ask around and see what I can do.”

Martha feels both exhilarated and frustrated by this development. She's ecstatic to have her daughter back, even though she didn't know she'd lost her. But the Camino was easier on her own. She could just get up and go. Yet, without Hope, she wouldn't have had the night in this special place with this special woman.

She suspects that traveling with her daughter and mother will deliver more gifts like María. Slower progress and deeper connection. Unknown adventures and unforeseen challenges. The next step is the only one she needs to know. And the next step, right this moment, is to find this girl some clothes, and a satchel of some sort. With food and water, so Hope can eat and drink when she needs to. And a change of clothes. And a hat. And sunscreen.

“Gracias, María. When you two are done, we'll go see what we can find.”

“I'll stay here and help with dishes,” says Mom.

Hope finishes her breakfast, wipes her satisfied mouth with the back of her hand, and climbs off her stool. She'll need a toothbrush, too.

Martha brushes her teeth and pulls her hair into some sort of coherence, then off they go, back down the hill to the convent, hand in hand. It's a beautiful Spanish morning. The sun is shining through a break in the rain-filled gray clouds, illuminating the cobbles below their feet and the ruined castle at the top of the hill. And a poncho, Martha thinks. They may need to investigate one of the services that take backpacks from place to place. Or just go really slow.

Maybe, Martha thinks, we need a cart? Or a donkey? Oh, god no. Not another being to take care of. No. She decides to walk until it's time to not walk anymore. And then they'll go home, or they'll take a train to Santiago.

Then it hits Martha. Hope doesn't have a passport. No documents of any sort. Martha can't prove she's hers at all.

At that moment Martha feels tempted to stuff Hope right back in that freezer until they get home. Complete this Camino on her own terms, get home, then open herself back up and take Hope out again.

Her heart sinks. Life is so much easier without one's inner child outside one's body, walking around and needing care and feeding. This is why people avoid doing their inner work.

Martha needs a distraction from her worries. "Hope, tell me about your name."

Hope stops and sits on a bench outside another albergue. She strokes the gold kitty who sits in the fleeting morning sun. She pulls Martha down beside her and says, "Esperanza means both hope and waiting. I was waiting a long time, and I think I'm your hope." She's clearly wise beyond her years.

"Esperanza. I love it. Thank you." They continue down the hill to the convent. Castrojeriz is a hilly town. The convent, just off the Way, is old. Roses climb and twine on its dusty rose adobe walls. It's beautiful. Outside the door is another statue of Mary. Another Madonna. Martha hopes that this mother will be welcoming to her new motherhood. They pull open the heavy wooden door and enter the dim entry hall. Sitting at a table in a large room lit by the transient sun coming through dusty windows is a young woman in a black habit. She's draped in veil and wimple and the whole nine yards of black fabric. She's smiling.

"Bienvenidas," she says. Welcome. She beckons Hope and Martha closer. Her eyes light up at the sight of Esperanza. Still smiling, she says, "Hola, Esperanza. Hola, mi corazón." Hello, my heart.

"I don't understand," says Martha. "I don't understand any of this."

"Do you think you're the first one to walk in here with a girl child who needs clothes?" asks Sister.

Her question sounds like the question María asked her this morning: "Do you think you're the first one to acquire a daughter and a mother out there on the Meseta?"

What is Martha to make of this? It doesn't matter. Esperanza needs clothes, and evidently this sister has them. "Come with me," she says, and leads them into an adjoining storage room that appears to be full of items pilgrims might need. They pick two pairs of pants and a couple of shirts for Esperanza. Also a couple of pairs of panties, some socks, a jacket, and a flowered backpack. And a large Oregon Ducks t-shirt for sleeping. Sister has it all. As they go, she gives them each a Tao cross and a cookie. What more do we need, Martha thinks. What more do we need?

Back up the hill Martha and Hope walk, to El Hospital del Alma, where María and La Madre are sitting in the sun waiting for us. "You knew, didn't you?" Martha asks María.

She nods. "I thought probably."

"Thank you," says Martha.

"De nada, Marta. De nada."

Martha, Hope, and Martha's mother pack their backpacks with most of Hope's gear. After hugs, goodbyes, and promises to keep in touch, they step onto the Camino heading to Santiago.

Martha's Camino has become a Camino of the Heart. She has a daughter and a mother that she didn't have twenty-four hours ago. Esperanza walks between them, holding their hands. Martha doesn't know

how far she can go like this. She will have to find another way of being in the world. She will have to pay more attention to what's below her and beside her, and less attention to where she thinks she should be going. Brierley is out the window.

It's not long before Esperanza wants to stop and eat Sister's cookies. Our trio sits at a table on top of the hill overlooking Castrojeriz and its ruined castle behind them, under the gathering gray clouds. As they eat and Esperanza wanders around talking to poppies, Martha takes the plunge.

"I don't know how long I'll have you," she says, "so I want to ask you something. It's not something I want to ask you. I want everything to be sunlight and roses and always happy, but something happened back there in the past and I don't understand it. And it causes me pain." Martha's mom is paying close attention to Martha's words. "Can you explain Esperanza to me?"

Martha feels tears well up. She continues, "Why did I put her in the freezer? How did that happen? What was going on in our family that I froze a part of myself? How was that okay with you?"

Martha's tears fall freely now. "I don't want to be mad, because when I'm mad things go bad. Mad is bad. I've gone from confused to pissed as hell in ten seconds. This is why I should never open the door to the icky stuff."

They're sitting side by side. La Madre reaches an arm around Martha, which Martha angrily shrugs off.

Martha continues while her mom silently listens. "What do you know? Please tell me what you know. I'm not sure I can get this child to Santiago. I'm not sure I want to. I was perfectly happy being by myself, walking fifteen miles a day, day after day, making a few friends and having a few hallucinations. Now I've got this kid and she's my responsibility. She's going to slow me down and make life hard. Oh, shit. She's going to make me vulnerable. I hate vulnerable. She's going to want to stop and talk to flowers. She'll need to be protected. How the fuck am I supposed to take a shower? How am I supposed to pee? How will I get this thing done? And are you even fucking *real*?? Either one of you?"

"What the *hell* is going on?"

Her mom answers, "Honey, here's what I know. You wouldn't have pulled Esperanza out of the freezer if you weren't ready. You kept her alive all those years because you wanted this day to come, eventually. You didn't want to lose her forever. You just didn't know she was there. When you found her, you pulled her out of there."

"Why are *you* here?"

"I don't know, sweetie. What I told María is all I know. I was walking along, watching the wind blow the poppies and the trees, and there you two were. I wanted to help. I didn't know it was you until I got close enough to really see you."

Martha asks, "Do you suppose men ever find little boys on the Meseta? Maybe they dig them up or find them fishing alone." Martha and her mom continue to sit at a table on top of their hill, looking back toward Castrojeriz and its castle-topped hill. Rain clouds are building. It's going to be a wet day. Thankfully, the day before had been dry because it made thawing Esperanza much easier.

“Good question,” replies her mom.

“Who are you really?” Martha asks her mom.

“Well, honey, I don’t really know. I don’t remember my name. I think although Hope’s real, I might not be, in the same way that she is. Maybe we need to walk to find out. *Solvitur ambulando*. It is solved by walking. I think I’m your mom, and I’m also not your mom, if that makes sense.”

“Which it doesn’t,” Martha says.

“Martie, here’s what I know. I’m here to help. Maybe I’m here to heal something, too. Like you’re healing something with *Esperanza*. I know there were times I let you down when I was alive. Maybe I’m being given a second chance to be a better mother. I don’t know. None of this makes any sense, even to me. And I’m dead.”

Esperanza comes skipping over, poppies in her hand and dirt on her face. “What have you been doing, girl?” asks Martha.

“Smelling flowers and eating dirt,” she says. “It’s all so pretty!!”

“Let’s go, girls.” Martha reaches out her hands to them. “My turn to be in the middle now.” And off they go, down the hill and across the valley and up the next hill, step by step by step.

A couple of miles later, they stop and check Brierley for the upcoming *albergues*. It’s as good a place as any for the lunch *María* packed – *bocadillos*, some strawberries, and cookies. Martha sees that there’s a town not too far ahead for something warm to drink, and then, she hopes they can get to *Boadilla del Camino* and stay in the famous artist’s *albergue*. That might be a stretch, having left late and with this short-legged one along for the walk. She’s extremely reluctant to be caught outside with a tired child and no place to sleep, but our trio will have to cross that *puente* when they come to it. Traveling with Hope will be different from walking alone, and she needs to accept the situation once and for all. The only way they’ll get stuck outside with a tired child and no beds in sight is if she doesn’t pay attention and put Hope’s needs first. This *Camino* is now about nurturing Hope, not about walking every step to *Santiago* in seven weeks or less. She thinks she has no idea how to do that. Not the foggiest idea.

For now, they walk. She will pay attention to what her daughter needs. She will ask for help. She will take grace where she finds it. She will redefine success as being present rather than achieving a goal. She planned to think deep thoughts about religion and God and what comes next in her life. Instead, here she is on the *Meseta* with a little girl and a ghost. Martha capitulates. It is what it is, whether or not it’s a figment of her unhinged mind.

So down they go into the next town to find a bar for *café con leche* and hot chocolate. Martha’s mom is mostly silent. Martha takes a good look at her and sees that she’s beautiful. Tanned skin, dark brown eyes with crinkles around them, thick gray hair in a ponytail. Convertible pants, New Balance shoes, and a red *Altus* poncho, dripping wet, over her backpack. For rain had begun to fall, finally, after threatening for hours. She’s wearing a plaid shirt over her t-shirt. She’s not fat, but she’s not skinny. She’s exactly right. Shorter than Martha, and strong. *La Madre* sees Martha looking at her and reaches over to tuck a strand of wet hair behind Martha’s ear.

The bar is dark and full of people queueing up for warm liquid – some of them drinking orujo and other alcoholic beverages with their café. Esperanza sits, swinging her legs, slurping her Cola Cao. Martha feels warm, satisfied, and completely mystified.

“So, what do you ladies think?” Martha asks. “There are a couple of albergues in this town. Should we stop, or should we keep going the eight K to Boadilla?”

“Walk,” says Esperanza.

“Walk,” says Mom.

“Heck yeah,” says Martha.

Shouldering their backpacks and donning their ponchos, out they go into the rain. Down the cobbled main street of this little Meseta town, past the shops and the houses with their huge wooden doors and the albergues and the church. Out into the fields that go forever on the Meseta. The rain is seriously coming down now, and Martha thinks this is going to be miserable. Esperanza is twirling, face up, eyes closed and mouth open, arms out to her sides. The girl is a dancer. Maybe it won't be so miserable after all.

Eight kilometers later, our trio enters Boadilla. Hope has not uttered one word of complaint. She's twirled her way through the rain all afternoon, only stopping for a bite of banana and a pee behind a bush. They find the famous albergue with the art and ask the man behind the desk if he has any beds. “Hola, señor. Tienes camas para tres mujeres?”

“Si, peregrinas. Bienvenidas. Ten euro for you two, five for la muchacha. Passports and credentials, please. Will you be wanting dinner? That's another ten euro each for you two, and five para la muchacha.” They pay, get their credentials stamped, wait for their names to be written painstakingly in the hospitalero's big book, and go find beds in the room filled with bunkbeds.

“I want to sleep on the top, Mama,” says Hope.

Oh, no. Martha doesn't want to sleep on the top. She doesn't want Hope to sleep on the top, either. Her habit has been to take the quietest bottom bunk, period. Top bunks are only for when there's no bottom one, in Martha's pre-Hope worldview. This girl has other ideas.

“Let's see what's left, baby,” answers Martha. And there they are: a top and bottom bunk with a free bottom bunk right next to it. The bed is against the wall, so maybe if Martha lets her sleep up there, she won't fall to her death.

Our trio settles in – Hope and Martha shower first while her mom watches their valuables. This, at least, has gotten easier: no more taking passport, money, and credit cards into the shower. The hot water feels so good on Martha's cold body. Hope likes it, too. Lavender Dr. Bronner's soap on their skin, in their hair, and on their underwear which they wash in the shower with their feet. Martha's body is growing firmer. Her hair is becoming dried out and brittle, and her skin is getting weird rough patches on it. And her feet. Don't even get her started on her feet. Calluses, blisters on her heels, and bruises in odd places. So, she's surprised to realize that she feels healthy and strong. This slower pace will undoubtedly be easier on her body than the fifteen miles per day she's been doing. We'll be done when we're done,

she thinks. Maybe that will be Santiago, maybe León, maybe Astorga, maybe somewhere else. We could do the Camino as the Europeans do, breaking the walk into four or more sections over as many years.

They dry off, Hope using the wee towel first, put on dry clothes, and go find Martha's mom. It's her turn to shower while they do the laundry, which Esperanza loves, it turns out. Martha wonders if she'll love it when she's twelve.

Hope digs out a coloring book and crayons from her grandmother's backpack. When Martha asks her where she got them, Hope tells her María gave them to her. The rain has stopped. The sun is out. Hope and Martha hang the laundry in the sunny albergue garden.

Martha journals while Hope colors. First the fear comes spilling out, like a flood from behind a burst dam.

Oh, fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. I have to let go of so much to mother this child. I didn't set out to walk the Camino with a little girl, no matter how dear to me. I don't want the vulnerability and uncertainty she brings to my life. I want to be in charge and only have myself to worry about. I don't want to have to negotiate and capitulate and compromise. I want to do what I want to do. There goes all my free time. There goes all my freedom, period. I'll be tied down. Freedom to do what, exactly? Freedom to do whatever I want to do – go out dancing. Hah! Lie in bed and read. Stay home and watch clouds. Walk my dog. Live in a cabin in the woods by myself and just be quiet. Sit in the sun or in the rain on my zafu and just be quiet. Listen to myself for a change, rather than all the other people who demand my attention. I'm afraid I'll never do the things I want to do. I'm afraid that I'll spend my whole life taking care of other people. I'm afraid I'll never get to travel and really know what I want to do. I'm afraid I'll never get down to what the purpose of my life is. I'm afraid I'm going to die not having really lived. That sounds like such a cliché, but there it is. I'm afraid she'll be noisy and demanding – that when I want to sit on a rock with my feet in the water for an hour, she'll get bored and start talking or wandering off and I'll have to go after her. She'll disrupt my peace and quiet with cartoons and Barbie dolls. I am so fucking sick and tired of taking responsibility for other people's feelings. Of being the one that manages other people's emotions.

I won't be able to love her, and I'll hurt her. This sentence she circles three times.

A glimmer of understanding follows.

I see some of what happened. I put Hope away because I couldn't take care of her. I could see that having her around would require strength I didn't think I had. I'd have to do what she wanted to do and say what she knew was true, and that would make people mad. That would cause bad feelings and stress an already stressed system. My family couldn't handle me being really me. There just wasn't enough bandwidth for that. I put her away so I could take care of my family. So I could love them. The only way I could carry other's feelings for them was to get rid of my own. There was no other choice I could make.

I feel so sad for us. And afraid for our future.

Slowly, Martha begins to unearth the wants and desires buried under the fear and memories.

What am I going to do? I could ask them to go away. I could ditch them. I didn't ask for the responsibility of Hope. I just wanted to walk the damn Camino. I've opened this Pandora's box and I don't see how in

good conscience I can stuff her back in there. Having a child to take care of means I won't have the freedom I was craving at this point in my life – the freedom to spend my days as I choose, not to spend them catering to the whims of a kid. But what do I want to do that she won't want to do? I don't even know her. Maybe she'll be happy spending hours gardening and drawing and reading about tide pools and identifying mushrooms, which is all I really want to do. That's all I really want to do. I want to be places. Really be there. I want to see deeply what's truly before me. I want to fully inhabit my body. I want to sew her a dress?!

I do not want to continue the pattern of putting my own desires to the side in order to meet others' needs. That's something I'm so good at I don't even know I do it, and I'm sick to death of it. Sick unto death of it. That's what this Camino was supposed to be about. I didn't come to Spain with the goal of picking up yet another dependent. Yet another impediment to my freedom. Freedom evidently means that I don't have anyone I'm responsible for. And not only do I have her, I have my mom looking over my shoulder making sure I do it right. How do I heal that?? How the fuck do I heal that gaping wound in my psyche?? One would think that I'd be overjoyed to be reunited with a part of myself that I didn't even know I'd lost, and with my dead mother. Doesn't that sound amazing? Doesn't that sound fantastic? Doesn't that sound miraculous and like the angels should be singing?

And now I feel angry. I've done sad, mad, and afraid. The only feeling left is glad.

Angels are always saying "Fear not" when they talk to humans. There's a reason for that. Did Mary want to have a baby out of wedlock who would turn out to be such a source of pain? No. She did not. It's fitting that we honor her for taking such a huge risk. Such a crazy risk. I'm so over being in charge of other people's feelings. So how do I love this child without being responsible for her feelings? How do I do that? Can I do that?

Maybe that's why my mom is here – to help me. Can I trust her? I hope so, because she and Hope have gone off together while I've been writing.

This isn't what I want to be happening. This isn't how I wanted guidance to come. I pictured walking along peacefully, through gorgeous Spanish countryside, or praying in a thousand-year-old church, and having a voice from heaven clearly say something like, "I call you to drop everything and go to seminary." Or, "I call you to be an artist." Or, "When you get home, I want you to move to the San Juan Islands, buy a little house with a big garden, raise chickens, and write essays." And following the clear direction would be the guarantee that it would be struggle-free. Or, if not struggle-free, at least an attractive sort of struggle that would make me feel noble and true. Not this messy sort of struggle. Oh, the messies again! And that I would never have to feel incompetent or make a mistake. It would all be easy and clean.

And finally, resolution.

Really. There's no choice. I'm not putting her back in. She's out and all I can do is the best I can. I'm not five anymore. I have the resources to care for her. I've raised two good kids of my own. I've been a good teacher to hundreds more kids. My job is to be here now and do what needs to be done. My job is to stay over my feet. My job is to know what I know, feel what I feel, ask for help (that's a hard one!), find a community to be a part of, and to do my best. My job is to show up for her – to tell her the truth and to be fiercely in her corner. My job is simply to love her and to get support when I need it. And that's so fucking hard for me.

So, God sent me this child as an answer to my prayer for direction. I'm pretty sure that's true. I made the decision to take her out of my chest, and I'm not putting her back in. Having her with me will probably mean that I don't walk to Santiago in the way I thought I would. Almost certainly. We could catch a bus tomorrow to León, and then a flight home. Is that what I want to do? Or do I want to walk until I know it's time to stop walking and go on to the next thing? We might need to stay in Spain until I can get her paperwork sorted out. Right now, it looks like I kidnapped her. If she's going to stay outside my body, she'll need identification. And how do I do that?

Maybe my angelic mom can help me.

Martha looks up to see her mom and Hope coming toward her. They're holding hands. They have the coloring book and crayons. "Mama! Can we sit here and color with you?"

"I'd love that, sweetheart. I'd love that." Hope colors. Martha and her mom sit in sunny Spanish silence. When the sun is behind the garden wall and siesta is over, they walk to the tienda for tomorrow's lunch. Supper is at 7:00, in the albergue. This hospitalero is famous for his Castilian food, and they're starving.

The lights go out at 10:00 pm. Hope is asleep in the bunk above Martha, and La Madre is nestled in a few feet away. Martha, worried that Hope will fall out of bed, can't sleep. She straps on her headlamp and reads what she wrote in her journal that afternoon. She takes out her pen and writes a little more.

Rereading this, I see that I put Hope away for safe keeping. I wasn't big enough to keep her safe, and I knew I needed to be strong enough to defend her if she was going to be out and about. I wasn't big enough. It wasn't that I was weak or scared – I was wise, and I did what I had to do. I fed her and kept her alive all these years out of love. Now, I'm a grown-ass woman and I can keep her safe. Things are different now. I'm not a messed-up piece of shit. I've just been following rules that aren't real, rules I learned as a child – that I need to be perfect, that my job is to keep people happy, that I'm inherently unworthy of grace and love, I always need to have a plan and a clear way forward.

Okay, God. You sent me Hope. Now help me to take care of her, please.

The next day on the Meseta dawns bright and sunny – washed clean by yesterday's rain. The lightening sky is brushed by high clouds, lit by the rising sun. A symphony of purples and yellows. Beautiful.

Our trio of peregrinas leaves the albergue around 7:00 – not the first pilgrims out the door, by a long shot, but not the last, either. They've found an open bar and gotten their toast by 7:30 or so. Spanish toast. Martha could wax rhapsodic about Spanish toast for at least an hour. What is it about Spanish toast that's so amazing?

Martha's desire to do the Camino right is hard to shake, and she's just not sure how to do the Camino right with Hope along. She had a vision of what rightness was, and now that's unattainable without damaging this child. It's now officially impossible to get from point A (SJPP) to point B (Santiago de Compostela) in six weeks, walking every step. So, what to do about that? She either puts the kid back into frozen stasis, she abandons her, she whips her into submission by making her toe the line of rightness as Martha envisions it, or she simply loves Hope and goes along for the ride. That's the decision she made yesterday, so why does her brain keep wanting her to remake it?

Called by Whom? Called by What? Who does she think is in charge of all this? Who is doing the calling and the coaxing and the leading? What does she really believe about the nature of the universe? In what or whom does she have faith?

As you can see, our Martha is a thinker. Oh my, can she ever think!

You've probably figured out that Martha's living an allegory of a mid-life awakening. She's spent her adult life – probably most of her childhood, too, judging from the age of this companion who's joined her – trying to Get It Right. Trying to figure out what the people in charge of dispensing self-worth expected from her, preferably without asking them, and doing her best to meet those expectations. Then, she's walking the Camino for ten days or so, doing okay but not great but with lots of time to think, and wham! Along come these visions and voices: cougars, Mothers speaking in cathedrals, the unloosed messies, and this frozen girlchild emerging from a freezer in her chest. And her mom. She's so not sure what to do about her mom. Esperanza is much easier than her mom. The Whatever It Is who's doing this calling thing is telling her she's supposed to heal her relationship with her mom in order to mother Hope. There's some deep archetypal stuff at work here – maiden/mother/crone and the patriarchal wound. The only way to deal with all this, to heal and to be healed, to make whole and to be whole, is to give up trying to control any of it. Just walk and talk. Walk, talk, and be. Walk, talk, and be here now. The only way to heal and be healed is to commit and to let go.

Martha, now bathed in feminine energy, sees how patriarchy has shaped her. She's realizing more and more how trained she is to approach her life in the masculine model. She's been trained, at least since she started school, to treat her life as a project with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Make decisions and set goals. Implement the decisions with linear steps until the goal is reached. Do not consult your heart.

Living a human life in a woman's body is a cycle. All those methods she's used over the years, Steven Covey's quadrants and Warren Buffett's twenty-five things and David Allen's getting things done, setting priorities and managing time and bullet journaling, have been useful. She's here, a functioning adult. But she's completely lost track of her heart. Those methods should always be in service to the mystery of who we are and where we're called to become. They should always be embedded within the desires we're born with and the things, people, and places we love that aren't rational at all. It's about putting the heart first and the mind second. And the heart doesn't *do* linear. The heart recognizes identity and yearning and connection. The heart knows things the mind can barely recognize, let alone comprehend.

Our trio sits in a Spanish bar and eats Spanish toast. Oh, my God. Spanish toast. Does Hope like it as much as she does? And the first café con leche of the day. Next stop, for second breakfast, will include something with a little protein. But first breakfast of Spanish toast will see her through the first 10 K, no problem. This is their first full day of walking as a threesome.

Let's see how we do, Martha thinks. If we need to, we can take a bus or a train and leapfrog sections. If we need to, we can go really slowly. If we need to, we can start again in Sarria, so we get our Compostela. Or we could do the European model and do sections spread out over several years. Do I have to get to Santiago in a month? Or do I just think I do? I think I need to redefine success as being here now, being in perpetual creative response to the present moment. I think I'm being called (by Whom???) to let go of my masculine linear model of success.

I am an animal. A really fancy animal, true. Where did this idea that the goal of life is to have goals and achieve them come from? Animals don't have goals. Animals just do what's in front of them. Really, who decided that the point of living was to follow the rules until you die? That the whole point was accumulation of resources and safety? Maybe I don't need to have a goal. Maybe I just have to take the next right step. And that means "right" according to my heart, not my head. If I center myself in my animalness, rather than in this idea of surmounting death and resurrection and extracting myself from the cycle, it all gets much easier. More confusing, too. But only if I try to understand it with my mind.

Martha sits in a Spanish bar eating Spanish toast with Hope, her newly unfrozen girl child who calls her "Mama," and her dead mother. She's wanted so badly just to be normal. She wanted to follow the program as set before her: grow up in a healthy intact family, choose a career that's fulfilling and pays well enough to get by, fall in love and get married and have babies, raise those babies to adulthood, where they're happily following the same program and getting on with their lives. When the babies are old enough, resume her career (teaching was great for this!) and then retire to go on with the next thing, probably volunteering in pretty much the same capacity as she taught. Working with kids, quietly gardening and painting and knitting, generally making herself useful as an elder. Grandmothering and mentoring. Not making waves. Definitely not going crazy. How can she possibly be happy if there are no rules? How can she possibly be happy if she's making this up as she goes along? How can she possibly be happy if she's nuts? She feels her cheese falling off her cracker, and she doesn't like it at all. Martha wants to be happy doing what the patriarchy expects of her – obedient and useful wife, mother, and worker. That's all she ever wanted.

Well, happiness does not lie on the road of wishing things were different. Martha knows this.

"Mom," Martha says. "Mom, can you listen to me and tell me what you think?"

"Of course, Martie," says her mom.

"The fact of the matter is, and I feel like I've said this twenty times in the last forty-eight hours, the fact of the matter is that I have this child, however she came to be in my possession, and I want to do right by her. What was it Maui said to Moana? "Muscle up, Buttercup." This is my reality now, and that's just how it is. We're clearly not in the realm of rational reality. It's like somewhere around the Alto del Perdón, maybe in front of that giant wall of Madonnas in Pamplona, I slipped through a door I didn't even see and now I'm in another country – a country where doors call to me and the dirt speaks. A country where cougars walk beside me and a jar of messies empties into my chest. A country where I can see the girl that lies frozen next to my heart, and I gently remove her from her capsule. A country where, as I'm sitting in a field full of Spanish poppies, soaking in the sun, listening to the wind, thawing out this frozen girl, my dead mother walks up to me and asks how she can help."

"This is the country where I'm evidently now living. Maybe, just maybe, in this country, little girls who've emerged can get proper documentation to stay with those who've unknowingly carried them for decades. Maybe, just maybe, in this country, I can find the healing that I can now see I need. Maybe, just maybe, in this country, I can learn to take things as they come. Maybe, just maybe, in this country, having a linear plan imposed from without is the dysfunctional way to live. Maybe, just maybe, in this country, my job is to live from my heart. Maybe this is the real country, and the other one is the shadow one that's actually unsubstantial, and I'm waking from a dream into reality, not the other way around.

And all the ways that I've learned to live in that other country, the one of getting from point A to point B along the most direct route, with the least muss, fuss, and messiness, is now my task to unlearn. Maybe, just maybe, in this country, the crazy ones are finally sane, and the rational ones are batshit crazy."

Martha continues, "I've always had a foot in this other country, I know. The part of me that's alert to mystery knows this country well. It's like another language I knew in childhood and then forgot. When I hear it again in adulthood, I can pick it up more easily and it reignites a part of me that's been lying dormant, in waiting. It's just that my rational mind is going insane, right now. It's looking at Hope and at you, screaming at the top of its lungs, 'This is not okay. This is insane. Get rid of them RIGHT NOW. Get rid of them so we can keep WALKING like we're supposed to. Get rid of them so we can do this thing RIGHT. Get rid of them. Get rid of them. Get rid of them. PLEASE make them go away so we can feel okay again.' And she's right. I most decidedly do not feel okay. I feel worried and tense and unsure of my next move. I'm not on autopilot anymore. I'm uncomfortable and terrified to the soles of my blistered feet."

La Madre and Esperanza are sitting contentedly. They've finished their toast and their coffee and chocolate. They've pulled the coloring book and crayons out and are peacefully coloring while Martha talks quietly. Her mom reaches over and takes Martha's hand.

The pain of having her dead mother here now takes center stage. Martha had been distracted by the sheer volume of tasks required to take care of Hope's sudden arrival, but, now that Hope's settled, she feels how much it hurts to have her here. How much pain she feels, to have her dead mom alive again, helping her keep this little girl alive. Helping her get Hope to Santiago.

Martha is aware that they've already sat in this bar far longer than is ideal if they're going to get a decent day's walk under their feet. Oh, well. Maybe this is all they'll do today – sit in this bar while Martha talks to her mom and Hope colors.

Martha's pain has multiple strands. There's grief for her mom's death. There's how much Martha's missed her. There's her wish that things had been different, that her mom hadn't married that asshole. There's Martha's wish that her mother had protected her from him. There's how betrayed Martha feels, and how Martha never admitted the extent of that betrayal until after her mom died. Yesterday she'd told her mom how much that hurt. She'd never really admitted to herself how much that hurt. She'd felt a lot of the sadness, a little of the anger, and even less of the pain. Martha feels like a part of her is waking up, like a limb that's gone to sleep. When blood starts to flow again, it hurts.

Martha says, "And now, here I am, on the Camino de Santiago with a little girl, and here you are, too. I feel too raw and undefended to pretend that I'm not hurt and angry by what you did. I thought I could go through the rest of my life and never have to do this shit. I thought I'd done it well enough to get by. And that was good enough."

She continues. "It's about commitment, I think. It's about committing to my own healing, which evidently means feeling all the feelings I've been choosing not to feel. Hope carries all the inspiration and desires and dreams. You are my pain. They're two sides of the same coin. I can't have one without the other. You needed to come along to balance out Hope's emergence. I don't understand it, and I believe it's true. What did Kahlil Gibran say? Joy sits at your table and sorrow is asleep upstairs in your bed. Or something like that.

“As soon as I made the decision to come on Camino by myself, I opened the door for you two to find me. As soon as I stepped outside the container of normal life, I made it possible for you to join me on my journey. And I don’t understand this at all.”

Martha’s mom listens carefully to every word.

“Maybe the door I walked through, that I didn’t know I was walking through, is the door into the country of healing. And the instruments of healing will be me, who’s flesh and blood and real, this child and woman who aren’t real, and grace which is in this country’s air. I don’t know. Maybe this is a country where not knowing is how it’s supposed to be. I just have to learn the language of not knowing and being okay with that. Doing the next thing, without knowing what the thing after that is.

“So, what’s the next thing?” Martha asks. “The next thing is to pack up and start walking. It’s about six kilometers to Frómista, with albergues about every four or five K all the way to Carrión de los Condes. We should be able to find something.”

Pack up they do, stowing coloring book and crayons in Granny’s backpack and some cookies in Martha’s, and begin walking again. The day has become cool, the sky streaked with high clouds. They walk in silence, Hope and her grandmother holding hands, Martha walking just a little way behind. Every now and then, Hope turns to check that she’s still behind them. Martha’s there, unsettled, with a glimmer of hope. Maybe that’s a good way to think of this. Maybe this *is* another country, and right now is just about figuring out how to be here. One thing we do know, for the twenty-first time, is that resistance is futile. Martha’s not going to put Hope back in her chest. She doesn’t know how to do it if she could. She’s not going to send her mom away. And she’s not done walking. So, let’s walk and talk.

“Mom,” says Martha. “Mom?” Martha has moved up alongside Hope and her mom. Here, the Way is wide enough for three to walk side by side. “Mom, can I ask you some questions? These are questions I didn’t think I’d ever be able to ask you. Some of them I didn’t know I had until after you died, and some of them I just never could find the words for when you were alive. Mostly, I’m realizing, I didn’t want to take the chance of you getting mad at me. I don’t think I could have managed it if you’d gotten mad at me for asking questions that made you uncomfortable. Or that sounded like criticizing you. I couldn’t risk that.

“But, since we’re evidently in a country where magical things happen, and who knows how long I’ll have you, here goes. But first, I just want you to know how very much I’ve missed you. I’ve missed you so much. I was so sad for so long after you died. My kids missed you so much. Nate used to talk to the willow in our back yard as a stand-in for you. Amy just quit eating for a while. So sad. My heart was broken. Everything felt so wrong.

“And when I think about how that must have been like for you, my heart breaks again. How awful that must have been – to know you were dying and the pain your death would cause all of us. And everything you would miss. Your grandkids growing up. The places you’d never see. The places you loved that you’d never see again. *That* was a country you didn’t choose to visit, right? That must have been awful. And you felt like crap, too. You couldn’t breathe and you pretended you were feeling better than you were. I’m so sorry for that. I’m also angry that we never had the conversations we could have had, because you didn’t want to talk. And, now, here you are. And I can tell you how I get it now. I get how awful that summer must have been, and I understand why you chose not to talk about how sick you were and

about how it felt to be dying. I'm sad for how alone you must have felt, too. I'm sad for all of that. For you, for us, for the future we had without you in it.

"Maybe that's enough for now. But I don't know how long we have. I don't know when you're going to disappear on me – go poof in a puff of smoke, or however you'll go again. And I don't want to get too attached to having you here, because I don't trust you to stay. I don't trust you, period.

"I lost my innocence, big time, didn't I? Maybe we all do, but boy howdy did that suck, when you and Dad split, and then Mike left to go live with him, and then Jesse left to go live with him, and it was just you and me and we found our equilibrium, I thought. I remember being really happy. I remember talking to you like a creek flows. We were good.

"Then along came the asshole. Who, in front of you for God's sake, would say those things to me and do those things to me. Once or twice you told him it was inappropriate, and he blew you off. That was the last time you tried to stop him. Evidently, it was more important to you that you have him than that I was safe. And that sucked. That really truly sucked. That betrayal was huge, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it except pretend it didn't exist. I didn't have anywhere to go. I couldn't go live with Dad. I couldn't leave yet. I couldn't fight back, because all the fight was taken out of me. I didn't think I had any choice. And look where that's gotten me. That time was awful. Truly awful.

"Did you ever wonder why I left home the day after I graduated from high school? I don't think you ever asked me. I don't think I mattered much at all, then. You two go off to Vegas to get married, and don't even think to include me except to tell me you were going. Maybe you never thought you'd find love again. I know he took care of you, and it was hard to take care of yourself alone. Maybe the sex was just too good to pass up. You two certainly didn't try to hide your sex lives, as would have been appropriate for parents of teenage children. No boundaries. You participated in the abuse, didn't you? Oh, shit. I never knew that. Oh. My. God. How could you treat me like that?"

Martha walks and cries and quietly wails. Hope holds her grandma's hand, swinging her arm and singing. Martha continues, "How can I miss someone so much and still be so angry with them? No wonder I hold back. No wonder I don't commit. No wonder I keep myself just a little barricaded. And, mostly, no wonder I eat too much and drink too much. No wonder I have to keep myself in the lines. This was a crazy-making adolescence. And no help. Not a scintilla of help. 'Suck it up, Martha. Don't be so sensitive. Don't take everything so seriously.'"

La Madre is silent. She just keeps walking, at Martha's side. "How am I going to solve this?" Martha cries. "How in God's name is this going to work out? I have no way of knowing. None. This is a country I'm unfamiliar with – this wilderness of the heart. It looks tame, with the roads and the cafés and the yellow arrows. But it's not. It's wild as fuck, and here I am, going roadless on the Camino de Santiago."

This day is truly glorious. Occasional high clouds and sunshine. Fields of lavender flowers interspersed with wheat. The Way is slightly muddy from yesterday's rain. There are regular clumps of pilgrims behind and ahead, along with some solitary peregrinos. No one Martha recognizes, since her progress has been substantially slowed these last two days. Tom and Douglas are ahead of her now, Sheela is behind, and Martha has no idea about Clarice.

The cast of characters has ebbed and flowed – familiar faces and stories, with new voices intermixed. The people and their stories have been one of the most precious gifts of the Camino. Martha is grateful

to Nájera Mary for her advice to be open to her fellow pilgrims. To share her gifts with others, and to receive their warmth in return. The instant intimacy of the Camino was priceless. And the ability to always begin again. If you didn't like who you'd been the day before – judgy or cranky or whiny – you could simply start over being a person you liked better. If you'd been a cold and cloudy version of yourself, you could, the next day, be with people who hadn't seen that person. All that was required was to slow down or speed up and, voilà, you could reinvent yourself. Every day a tabula rasa, except for how you'd been changed by the Camino, your feet, and your strength.

Mom remains silent. She's holding Esperanza's hand. Esperanza is walking steadily, swinging her arms and her grandma's, and humming. Martha is relieved to see that La Madre isn't angry. She seems to be thinking. She finally says, "I lost track of you, didn't I? I knew that things had changed, and I couldn't figure out how to keep hold of you and find my own happiness. And you seemed to be doing okay."

Esperanza says, "Mama. Mama. You don't need to be worried about any of this. When the time comes, you can carry me in your heart anywhere you want to go. I really like being outside. I love the birds and the sun and the breeze and Cola Cao and coloring, but I can go inside anytime that's where you need me to be. I'm part of you, Mama. I'm part of you. I'm not in your normal life, like I am here. OOOhhhhh, I hope I get to meet Nate and Amy! That'll be fun!"

And from her mother she hears, "Martie. I love you. It's all good. Maybe I'll go back where I came from when we're done here. I don't know. And that's how it's supposed to be. I think you've found the key to finding peace in all of this. I agree with you. Let's stop trying to control what we can't control, and let's be here now."

Okay," Martha says. "Okay. Since we're being here now and all, here's more. Why do I feel bad about the bad things people did to me? *There's* a topic worth thinking about. I know it's not uncommon for kids to blame themselves, but it makes absolutely no sense. Lots of bad shit went down there in the space of a few years. You two fought, then you divorced, and I lost so much. Then you married that asshole and Dad was marrying lots of women. And then he gets sober and hits that goddamn tree. I was just a kid. I wasn't responsible. Why do I feel bad about it? Why do I feel guilty about it? Why do I feel like I screwed up? What's up with that?"

Martha continues, "Because I was taught that I shouldn't ever have uncomfortable feelings. Because I was taught that anger is bad. Sadness is bad. Fear is bad. And none of it was true. God, you know what I want to do now? I want to dress in pink flowers and dance in a poppy field. Oh, there's one right over there!"

Martha feels like the wool has been pulled from her eyes. Before this moment she was seeing things through a veil, through a slot in a door and thinking that was the whole thing.

"There's absolutely no rational reason why I would continue to keep myself in the tight role that you all cast me in. As a kid, it makes sense that I'd blame myself for the bad shit. I couldn't blame my parents, or who could I possibly trust? They needed me to be a certain way – small, unaware, a sponge for their feelings. If something bad happened because of their choices, it must have been because I deserved it. So, for the rest of my life I needed to watch myself – to stay small and stay weak so I wouldn't cause any more bad shit. And I sure as hell couldn't do what I wanted to do, because that really would cause all hell to break loose. Actually, what's true, I think, is that you just didn't think about me much at all.

“Okay. If I stop believing the stuff I was taught about myself, what do I believe? I’m in charge of that, aren’t I? I’m in charge of constructing my life, finding my life, making my life. I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Well, Martie,” says her mom. “Here’s a thought, if you want it.” She waits for Martha’s agreement before continuing. “You could ask yourself these questions: Does this belief make me more myself? Does this rule help me do my job in the world, which is to be the beautiful, brave, shining, unique creation that I am? If not, then it goes.”

Martha says, “So, if it doesn’t help me care for my cells and organs, then it goes. If it doesn’t help me take my place in things coming into being that are bigger than me, it goes. It really should be that simple, right?”

She continues, “The fear that I learned about talking about the important stuff, the stuff I seemed to know that others didn’t, isn’t real. I can do anything I want to do. I can get tattoos all over my body. I can buy a little farm on Orcas Island and never leave it again. I could stay in Spain and live on my paintings and my pension. That could happen. If I wanted it to. It could. It absolutely could.”

Our trio stops in the next town for second breakfast – coffee, Cola Cao, and tortilla. They eat their lunch on the banks of the Río Ucieza because it’s so much better to walk along the river than along the senda next to the highway. Lunch is bread and tuna and cheese, with an apple for each of them.

A couple passes their lunch spot. A man and a woman. American. She’s crying and he looks stricken. La Madre asks, “¡Buen Camino! Are you okay?” He says, “Buen Camino.” She says, “Buen Camino. I’m fine. Thank you for asking. Well not fine, actually, obviously. This hurts like hell. But fundamentally okay. How are you? You sound American.”

La Madre says, “Yes, we’re American, walking slowly but surely to Santiago, for now.” Our trio will see them again, later, at the big Templar church in Villalcazar. She will still be sad and in pain. He will still look stricken.

There’s a little door set within the huge wooden doors of this massive fortress of a church in Villalcazar. This is by now a familiar sight. Martha feels the familiar urge to open that little door within the big door and see what’s inside this church. Unlike the church a few days ago, this one is well-lit within. It’s mostly empty and unornamented, unlike most Spanish churches.

The church is light and plain and clearly old. Twelfth century, about the time that the Knights Templar were moving in and building fortress churches. Or, given the name of this town, taking over Moorish fortress churches to make them Christian strongholds for both the faith and the state. It’s very solid. Huge columns hold up the ceiling. Stone walls several feet thick. Clerestory windows directly beneath the roofline admit a stunning light. One massive rose window over the altar sprays colored shards of light all over the floor of tan stone. Eight narrow windows of clear glass are inset deeply into the stone walls.

Martha likes stone walls. She likes living in rock. She suddenly knows one thing she wants: a plain room for yoga and meditation and sitting. She wants stone walls, wooden floors, pretty rugs, a flowered upholstered armchair, a stool for her feet, some green plants, and a lot of sunlight. A spare and pretty space, with a few books, a little art. An altar. A little chapel, sort of.

And a place for meeting clients? Clients for what, she wonders. What will they do together? She can see, in her soul's eye, another room adjoining this spare and pretty room. It's a study, lined with books and looking out onto trees and birds and a creek or a pond. Two comfortable chairs with a table between them. A desk. The main color is deep rose, which is a surprise to Martha, who's avoided pink for most of her life as too girly.

In this old, old, mostly empty church, more becomes clear to Martha. She knows she wants to honor her body more profoundly. She wants to be settled in her body so this information can flow through her. She wants to be bedrock for this river of healing water. She wants to choose ways of living that support this process of cleansing and flowing. She wants to listen to her body's knowledge. She wants to tell the truth. She wants to "understand and share," as the Voice told her all those years ago.

Wait. What? The Voice? It's been talking to her for years, she realizes, just not so loudly or so often as on the Camino.

Martha wants to learn to be peaceful with this thing that's happening to her. Something not her is moving through her, like water through an acequia, and she wants to learn to be okay with it. Not only okay, but supportive and fostering of it. She wants to do what is needed to let this "not me and not not me" being flow. It needs her to let it move through. It needs her in order to be made real on Earth.

Perhaps all this painful self-knowledge is cleaning Martha out so "something not her" can flow through her and become real on Earth. That feels right. That feels accurate. As it flows, it knocks some stuff loose and wears away what impedes the flow. Martha doesn't need to know what It is, even though she wants desperately to label It. Getting a handle on what it is, when it's so much bigger than her, is impossible. Needing to hold on to It and name It is a way to block the flow and keep herself in control. Martha's quite terrified, actually. She's terrified of what it might ask her to do. She's terrified of where it might take her – what it might turn her into. She's fairly terrified of going crazy.

Martha sits on a pew in the sun and asks it questions. "What, oh flowing otherness, do you want of me? You want me to show up, strip down, and stay put? Is that right? You want me to let go of old beliefs that impede your flowing through me. You want me to let you move through me. You want me to let you use my hands and my feet, my mouth and my mind, to make something new."

"That's all creativity is," the Voice replies. "It's you letting me use your body to make something new. It's you giving me access to your abilities and your muscles – to your bones and your mind – so that together we can form something that didn't exist before. Without you, I can't do diddly squat. I'm just floating around in airy nothingness, looking for someone to cooperate with." The Voice sighs. "It's quite frustrating, really, to be full of things that want to happen, and not to have a way to make it real. I'm a flower that wants to bloom, but I can't find a place in which to be rooted. I'm full to bursting with potential, and there's nothing I can do without the ground."

Martha replies, "This is fucking scary. This is nuts. This looks nuts. Is this why creative people have to all band together? So they're with other people who don't think they're nuts for feeling crazy and out of control?"

"You don't have to control anything," It tells Martha. "You only have to embody Me. When you were a little girl and your life went careening out of control and you lost yourself, you lost touch with Me but I

never lost touch with you. I'm talking about the real Me, not the God of your religious upbringing. If you let me flow in you, I will heal you from the inside out. Your mind cannot do this for you. You cannot think your way through this to the other side. Only Me, working with you, and on you, and in you, can heal you. Let me wash away the stuff that's keeping you from shining. Let me knock loose what's weighing you down and keeping you from flying. Let me blow down the walls that keep you caged.

"And what would that look like?" asks Martha. "Will I be okay when you're done? Why should I trust you?"

Well," responds the Voice. "How's the thought 'I have to always be in control, look competent, never make a mistake, always have a plan, and always know what's going to happen next' working for you?"

Martha tells God how much those thoughts – a clusterfuck of gnarly beliefs, God calls them, for the Voice is God – have cost her. "Add to the ones already mentioned that I have to earn love, I can't make anyone mad, I'm responsible for the feelings of everyone around me, and I have to always be nice. Wow. And you're telling me that none of that's true?"

God answers, "How about letting go of them and seeing what happens. Are you willing to let go of that gnarly cluster and see how that feels?"

"Oh, God, yes," Martha says. "I'm not sure I can, though."

"That's why you need my help," says God. "That's pretty much my goal in life, to get humans to let loose of the stuff that keeps Me out. I have methods," God continues. "I have methods."

God says, "If you're willing, Martha, imagine yourself as a toddler."

That's easy. Martha simply pictures Esperanza.

"Now," continues God, "Take her up on your lap and hold her. Make her as little as she needs to be. Is there anything about that child that's wrong? That needs to be fixed? That needs to be better than it is?"

"No," responds Martha. "She's perfect."

"Okay, then. Please climb into that child and let me hold you. Remember how it feels to be perfect, just as you are. Do you feel my arms around you? Do you feel how safe you are?"

Martha nods. God continues. "All those thoughts are – I'd say bullshit, but bullshit is actually pretty fertile – all those thoughts are pieces of that awful orange plastic rope, binding you in place and fouling the landscape. They are *not* your fault. They are *not* who you are. They're pieces of plastic – dirty disposable diapers, Dasani bottles, six-pack holders, yogurt cartons – thrown into a beautiful spring-fed pond, put there by people who didn't want to pack out their own damn trash. Let me deal with them. And let me help you get rid of what keeps you from flowing. Okay? The belief that you need to know what's going to happen isn't true. You can never know what's going to happen. I don't even know what's going to happen, and I'm Infinitely bigger and older than you. If you never grow and flow because you need to know how it's going to turn out, you will never do anything because you can never know. You're a dam holding the water back. The water gets stagnant and dead behind the dam. You feel sluggish and

dead. And ashamed. I know it's such an old dam that it feels like it's supposed to be there, but it's not. Without that dam, you're a beautiful creek, flowing and babbling, with birds singing above you, dippers and fishies swimming within you, reeds and flowers and bushes growing on your banks and over your flow, dropping their petals and leaves into you and watching you carry them along to where you flow into the bigger creek, then the river, then the next river, then the ocean. But what happens beyond your creek is not yours to worry about. You're just a sweet little creek in a sweet little canyon, doing your creeky job. And right now, over there in that shaft of sunlight, keeping a watchful eye on you, are your mom and that sweet little girl called Hope.

"You see, my dear, you don't have to know how this is going to turn out. You just have to go with the flow, trusting Me Who's deeper and wilder and older than any linear success system, to carry you."

"Wow," says Martha. "I should never pass up a chance to go into a Templar church."

"Heck yeah," God replies.

"So, I *am* a creek? I love creeks," she tells God. "So, this being a creek thing means I don't have to worry about what isn't mine to worry about, right?"

"No one has to worry about what isn't theirs to worry about," replies God. "It's all okay. But the corollary is that you *do* have to take responsibility for doing what's yours to do."

"And how do I figure that out?" asks Martha. "How do I figure out what's mine to do? Can I do it by scrunching up my face and trying really hard? Can I do it by thinking about things really hard?"

"You know the answer to that," says God. "Why do you think that things are coming so clear these days, to the point that pieces of you that you didn't know you had are showing up in bodily form? Why do you think that's happening?"

"Because I'm doing things. Because I'm using my body. Because I'm fully, deeply present in myself – in my body and in the silence."

"Right on," says God. "And why do you think you can hear Me so well in this space?"

"Because it's old and stony and spare. It's elemental. It's open. There's a lot of room in here, and not a lot of stuff. Oh, God. I just want to be a creek and flow, and be part of the give and take, dying and rising, of metamorphosis and evolution. What do I do about all my things? How do I get out from under all the stuff I've accumulated over these six decades?"

Martha continues, "Another reason that things are coming clear is that I'm listening to what I want to do. I'm building the skill of following hunches and nudges. I'm going through small doors into big spaces and seeing what's there. I'm taking my time – I'm sitting in churches and at tables in the sun. I'm giving myself time. I'm taking myself off the treadmill – the hamster wheel. I have this image, God, of a sandpiper on the edge of the surf. As the waves come in, she retreats up the beach. And as the waves recede, she follows the retreating edge of the water down the beach, to see what the ocean delivered to her."

“I want to write poetry. How is this going to work? God, *how is this going to work?*” Martha is panicking again.

God patiently replies, “Sweetie, you’re a creek. Remember that you’re a creek. You’re just flowing along with the sun shining on you and fish swimming in you and it’s all okay. You do your part – flowing – and let Me do my part, which is being the healing matrix in which you’re flowing. Matrix means “mother.” Did you know that? Your job is to flow so all the life that depends on your flowing can thrive. There are things you can’t control: you can’t control some asshole driving his ATV across you and tearing up your streambed and your banks. You can’t control some jerk throwing his jerky wrapper and his antifreeze bottle into you. You can’t control the total dickheads who dump their industrial waste into you. That’s completely out of your control. You can’t control the rancher who lets his cattle break down your fences and tromp all over you. You have no say. A lot of my favorite creations can’t control what happens to them – even redwoods can be felled, and giant rivers dammed.”

“I need to cry about that,” says Martha.

“I know,” says God. “I do, too. Martha, is it possible that you can be the world for me? That’s what I need from you – I need for you to give the dipper a voice.”

“Oh, shit. Is that all?” Martha asks. “That scares me so much. That’s love for a little fragile thing that only will exist if we big powerful things take care of it. It’s like loving a tree or a piece of dirt – they’re so vulnerable. I don’t want to love anything so vulnerable and so dependent on me for protection.”

Martha sees it now. She continues. “*I’m* vulnerable, which is one of the reasons I struggle to love myself. I don’t want to give myself to anything fragile. I don’t want to care for anything that could be destroyed so easily. And that includes me.” After a pause: “And, we’re back to Hope in my chest, aren’t we?”

“Yes, we are,” says God. “You put her there to keep her safe, and because you didn’t want to feel so much love for her. You think that something needs to be strong and perfect and intact to be lovable – which you don’t think she is. Here’s the thing, though. Let’s look at her. She’s perfect. She’s intact. And I would argue to you that she’s incredibly tough. She survived being in there for decades. She’s forgiven you. She’s remarkably resilient. And she’s got some legs on her – see how far she can walk in a day, and how flexible she is? She’s not so easily destroyed.”

“But, God – the redwoods?! How can people do that to them? How can men go in and just cut them down?”

“Because they didn’t have any champions and guardians,” says God. “And because the men who did that didn’t know any better. They didn’t know how old they were. They didn’t know how long it would take them to regrow. They didn’t understand the complex nature of the old-growth ecosystem,” God continues, in an ironic professorial tone. Then She gets serious again. “Mostly it’s because they forgot reverence. They forgot how to be connected, because connection makes them vulnerable and they hate that feeling. They absolutely hate feeling vulnerable. So much of what humans do is about feeling safe. But you’re going to get beyond that, right? You can’t be responsible for everything. You can only be responsible for you. All those other poopy heads can learn to take care of their own feelings.”

“Okay, then,” says Martha. “But why can’t I be something strong and impervious? Like granite? I don’t want to be fragile and available for shitheads to abuse. I hate that. I don’t want to be weak and

defenseless. This whole woman thing is to be defenseless and available for exploitation. Rape me and then sell the babies. Oh my God, God. Such pain. Such betrayal. I needed a guardian and I didn't have one, so I became my own guardian. I put myself away for safekeeping until I could be my own guardian again. I learned to live with the weight in my chest, the frozen sequestered part of myself that I spent so much of my energy keeping alive. I lived with her for so long that I forgot she was there."

Martha goes on. "This pain is so strong. The pain of the Earth – to be abused and exploited without reverence. I feel afraid to commit to guarding the... Oh! We're talking about the creative and generative parts of me and of the world. We're talking about the dirt and the water and the biofilm and the wombs upon which life depends. Men can't create life, only women can do that. Men are necessary in the process, but they can't give birth. And patriarchal religion is one big co-optation of women's generative capacity. It's womb-ownership under the guise of God as Father. So it's my creative capacity and my caring that feels so vulnerable and fragile and ripe for exploitation if I let it be seen. But if I pretend that I'm strictly a head, strictly a thinker, then I'm safe. I'm one of them, and I don't have anything they'd want to hurt me to get. Because they all have heads, too. That's all they have, is heads. They don't got no bellies for growing babies.

"If I commit to guarding the defenseless living things, I'll make them visible. And that's pretty much the only defense I know how to mount. Invisibility. Camouflage."

Martha continues, "This is what faith is, maybe? Trust in the bigger enfoldment that has healing at its heart? How do I learn to do that?"

She goes on. "A creek that's just flowing along carrying water that people want for recreation and crops and making energy is highly vulnerable. All the lifeforms within her and beside her are vulnerable unless she's protected and guarded. If I'm the creek, who will protect me? And if I'm the guardian, who's the creek? I'd rather be the creek than the guardian – but then I need to be able to trust the guardians."

God responds. "Let Me just interject here. In tangible, measurable so-called real life, a creek and a guardian are separate. A creek can't defend itself against littering, mudbogging, water hogging assholes. Not in the short term, anyway. The long term is maybe another story, possibly. However, we're talking about this metaphor that seems to be bringing you peace. Can you, in this magical world of metaphor, be both the creek and the creek's guardian? Can you, in real life, be both your generativity and the guardian of your generativity? Can you be both Martha and Hope? And can you be your mother, who's the guardian of both of you? Can you be all three of these things together?

"Oh!" Martha says. "I get it! I'm both! I'm the creek and the creek's guardian."

"God, I feel myself," she continues. "I'm in a desert place, with Hope sitting beside me, feet in me, smiling and singing and splashing. I'm flowing and babbling, as I am, whole and entire in one place, as this creek. I am all the creeks I have ever put my feet in. I am Wolf Creek. I am Aspen and Granite and Willow Creek. I am Sabino Creek. I am Clay Creek and Lithia Creek. I am Whychus and Tumalo Creek. I can be both. I can be the creek and the creek's guardian. I've thought of Healing Water as something deep and purposeful, like a holy well or a shrine or a cenote. But healing water could as easily be a creek that's simply flowing in a desert place, being habitat for all sorts of creatures, making cheerful sounds, being lovely in the sunlight, going to the ocean, then back to the clouds and falling as rain or snow, melting and starting the cycle all over again. Deer stick their soft downy noses into my water to drink. They teach their fawns to do the same. Cougars lap me up. Raccoons catch crayfish and wash their

hand-like paws in me. Dippers, my favorite, jump off rocks into me looking for mayflies and dragonfly larva. Salmon and steelhead rest on my rocky bottom. Snow falls and temperatures fall. Ice spreads across my surface. Below the ice I still flow, just colder. I like being a summer creek best. I like the sunlight-drenched, smooth running better than the spring floods and the winter freeze. I understand, though, that the spring floods clean me out. Rebirth cleans me out, so I'm ready for the fertility and fecundity of summer. I'm quite the erudite creek, aren't I? Martha Creek. I like it. And Martha, Creek Guardian."

Martha continues, "When we're little, we depend on big people to guard us and protect us. But when they don't protect us – when they even join the band of joy riders mud bogging through our bellies, we lose hope.

"I was still a moderately flowing semi-healthy creek – I'd been channeled and trashed but there was still some life in me. I was still identifiable as a creek. Then my primary guardian hopped on behind this asshole who thought it would be fun, thought it was his right, to rip and tear across me, tearing up my banks, ripping up my streambed, polluting me with petrochemicals and silt. And she let him. I've been looking for a guardian ever since. I forgot what I used to be – I was channelized, diverted, and denuded. My willows and alders and water-loving flowers were all gone. Instead of beavers I had irrigation weirs and canals. No dippers or flycatchers because I was dead, mostly. Just silty water and bottom feeders, invasive grasses and weeds, existing to meet the needs of others who did not have my well-being in mind."

Martha continues, "There is a sense in which I AM the land. I can feel it. It's an extension of me, and I of it. It's always been that way. The vulnerability of that connection frightens me. It terrifies me. I hate vulnerability, in myself especially. I detest that feeling of care without power to protect and defend. Powerless love.

"I can't protect beauty. I can't protect fragile beauty. The wild things I love – redwoods and wolves and bears and big trees – and the small things I love – old mosses and lichens and deer and rabbits and frogs and birds. I shut down and cut off love because I don't want to feel the vulnerability. I don't want to be anything's guardian because it's a losing battle. The powerful will always be able to destroy what I love. And all that thought does is cause anger and paralysis. I can't win for losing.

"And... that's what Jesus is all about. He chose to love in opposition to the power structure. He chose to be on the side of the defenseless in opposition to the power structure, knowing that he would die. And he did it anyway. He totally gets how awful this feels, and he's on my side in my struggle to overcome fear in defense of the powerless. He knows that the only real thing is love. We might die, as my creek might die if too much water is diverted and too many willows grazed by cattle. As the rainfall patterns change. He's trying to show me that love will always win. The long arc of the universe bends toward justice. And I don't believe it."

"Here's what I do believe, though. As I sit here in the Templar church in Villalcazar, I believe that this metaphor of me as both creek and guardian makes sense. It's my job to flow and be healthy, and it's my job to protect myself. I want to move toward what feels like a cheerful creek in the sun, and away from what feels like an unguarded creek who's overrun with mudboggers and polluters and extractors.

"This is the feeling that I want to carry onward into my post-Camino, post-retirement life. What feels like being a healthy creek in the sun? What feels like the sad, silted up creek?"

“I see my dead mother building cow-proof fencing. She might even be patrolling me with an Uzi, so that the assholes stay out. Because God knows they’ll cut the fence and tromp on in if no one’s watching. She’s the mother I should have had. I’m not ready to forgive my mom. Maybe I can’t forgive my mom until I’m able to guard myself. Maybe that’s the best reason for unforgiveness – to keep ourselves a little safer until we can protect ourselves. Maybe forgiveness comes when we feel able to keep ourselves safe. Until then, it’s not in our best interests to forgive.

“So, how *do* we protect ourselves? How are we our guardians? Well, for me it means to guard my time. And it means to guard my peacefulness. And it means to pay attention to my body’s wisdom. Which therefore means to guard my body’s connection to You, and her ability to speak to me. To engage in disciplines that help me hear the truth my body knows. To do the things that help me flow – that help me nurture and be nurtured. To do the things that keep me healthy. This creek is my creativity and generativity and capacity to love. And I need to be in charge of those disciplines and structures that keep me flowing and healthy, not give them away to some external authority.

“There’s nothing rational about any of this,” Martha says. “This is the country of myth and story. I can’t prove any of this. And I know it’s true.”

“Right on, Martha.” She feels a kiss on her forehead as God departs.

Martha gets up from the pew in the side chapel where she’s been sitting all this time and goes in search of her mother and Hope. She sees them in conversation with the caretaker of the church. He’s an old man – stooped but still strong. He’s dressed, as many Spanish town-dwelling men are dressed, in slacks, a white shirt, and a worn suit coat. As Martha approaches, he tells her mom and Hope “adios” and “buen camino.”

“What were you talking about?” Martha asks her mom as they leave the church.

“He was telling me that it’s a good time in Spain now. No civil war. No hunger. No poverty, at least along the Camino. So many of our villages are empty, he said, except for the pilgrims. There are entire villages abandoned. Some are for sale.”

“Wouldn’t that be fun?” continues La Madre. “To buy a Spanish village and turn it into a hotel and retreat center? It could be a step up from an albergue – people could stay for a few days or a week. Pilgrims could rest up. We could feed them well – soup and bread and salad. They could sit in our sunny parlor and work in the garden. We could offer programs about the Camino. And non-pilgrims could come to get a taste of rural Spain and to talk with peregrinos as they wander through. Pilgrim lunches, overnights, several nights, or a week. Very simple menu. It would have to be, to keep our costs down. Toast and tortilla and fruit in the morning. Yogurt. Soup and bread for lunch. Salad and a main with postre for dinner. We’d have to get into that Spanish subsidy for *menú del día*. I wonder how non-Spaniards get to do that? And wine. We’d have good wine. But not too much. We’d close it for a couple of months in the winter so we could go travel somewhere – maybe somewhere warm. Maybe that’s when we go back to the States. Or to Majorca. I’m liking it. What do you think, Sweetie? Would this be fun to think about?”

“It would be fun to think about,” replies Martha. “I’m not sure I want to commit to that right now, though. I just got a lot of information back there in that church, and I want to let it settle. What time is it, anyway? How long were we in there? Can we get to Carrión today?”

“We might need to catch a cab,” Mom says. And Hope, dear Hope, is walking, looking around, humming.

If our trio caught a cab, it would be the first one Martha’s taken since Logroño. Carrión is five kilometers down the road. “Hey, you two,” Martha says. “It’s only three miles to Carrión. Whadya say we go for it? Besides, there’s nothing between here and Carrión anyway. Hopie, we can carry you if you get tired. What do you think, Mom? If we need to take a taxi, we’d better do it before we leave Villalcazar, because we won’t find one later.”

Walk, they decide. As they walk, La Madre asks, “Martha, what happened back there in that church? You were so still and quiet for so long.”

“Well, Mom. I had another chat with God.”

“Would you like to tell me about it? Or do you want to keep it to yourself for now?”

“It was a long talk. Very healing. God showed me that I’m a creek whose job is simply to flow. We all are. The problem was that, in my case, I didn’t have someone guarding me when I was unable to guard myself. God showed me that I’m the creek, and that now I’m also the creek guardian. And you’re guarding my creekness now, too. You and me, we’re all mixed up somehow. It’s pretty confusing if you look at it rationally, but it makes perfect sense from my soul’s perspective.”

She continues. “It felt really peaceful to be a creek, just flowing and being creeky. I want to remember that feeling for the rest of my life.”

Martha’s mom takes this in for a few moments before responding. “I feel like your guardian. That makes total sense to me.”

They continue to walk toward Carrión. Martha asks her mom her questions, this time gently. “What happened that I needed to hide Hope? Did you know about her?”

Her mom answers, “I think ours was pretty typical parenting back in my day. I hope it’s better now. I think it is. What do you think, Martie, about Nate and Amy? Have they had to hide parts of themselves away? If they have, did you notice? The stresses in your childhood family, our family, that caused you to hide Hope would be the same stress that caused me not to notice. I’m so sorry. I wish I could change that. I think that’s why I’m here.”

Martha asks a new question. “Mom, what was it like for you in our family?”

“Well, being married and being a mom wasn’t what I thought it would be. Looking back, it felt like a role that required a lot of pretending. I was just following the cultural script. And your dad didn’t help at all. I worked full time and he did squat. By the end I was really angry. Maybe he did me a favor when he started drinking and carrying on, going to the bars instead of coming home, horn dogging around.”

She continues. "It was a small town, Martie. Everyone knew. It was awful. I was so embarrassed. I tried to keep you kids out of it. But going to your schools and telling your teachers that your dad and I were separating was really hard. I about died of shame. Everyone knew he was messing around and having affairs. Everyone knew my business. Big fish small pond and all. I felt so *conspicuous*. It was awful. I felt awful. And having to sell the house we'd built together because he couldn't keep it in his pants. I was so angry. And sad. And scared. I had to go back to work at the hospital and leave you and your sister home alone. You and Jesse didn't help at all. It was terrible.

"So, no. Getting married and having kids and building a house in the woods didn't work out so well for me. I felt trapped and like I was play acting a fair amount of the time. I knew I was supposed to be happy because I was following the script. I wasn't happy. I was keeping secrets. Your dad was an addict. An alcoholic. A boy pretending to be a man, constantly needing to be right and smart and to prove that he was good enough.

"When he moved out it was kind of a relief, actually. His shit wasn't my problem anymore. I was just left with the mess he'd made of my life. Our lives. The broken pieces had to be picked up by someone, and he wasn't going to do it. That left me. I did the best I could. I sold the house in the woods, gave away the family dog, got you both new little dogs, and moved into town. Your dad took care of the horses."

"But, Mom," says Martha. "I put Hope away years before the divorce. Things had to be going south way earlier. I don't remember much. I do remember never feeling completely relaxed at home around you two. Always just a little tense. A little braced for impact. Always on the lookout for trouble. I felt safest when you *weren't* around. That's not right."

"That time sounds awful," continues Martha. "I never thought about how it must have felt when Dad started misbehaving. Pulling shenanigans. Being an asshole. Breaking your heart. I'm so sorry, Mom."

Martha holds her arms out to her mom while Hope looks on, happy to see her mom and grandma weeping as they hug. Hope knows good tears when she sees them.

"So there was nothing that really happened to make me sequester Hope that you remember? Did you know she was there?"

"I don't think so, Martie. If I did know, I probably thought you were making a good decision. It wasn't safe for little girls in that house. I remember that you got quieter and started trying really hard to be good. You wanted to either be outside in the trees or at the creek, or in your room drawing and reading. You tried so hard to stay out of trouble."

"I'm really sorry, Martie." Mom continues, "All I can tell you is I did the best I could, trying to keep all our heads above water." After a pause, La Madre continues, "But look what you did, sweetie! You kept this little girl alive all those years. How fiercely you've protected her. How deeply you've loved her. Look what you did. You kept her alive for more than fifty years, and when you discovered her you liberated her. Strong, brave, loving Martie. I'm so proud of you. Look what you did. Look at her."

Mother and daughter turn to see Hope, who's been sitting on an arrow-inscribed rock by the side of the Way, watching this interaction. She pulls on her Hello Kitty backpack, holds out her hands, and says, "Come on, you two. We got some walkin' to do!"

As they walk, Martha asks her mom her last question. Martha is reluctant. It feels so good to be at peace with La Madre. Martha worries that this last question will be hard to recover from, if they can recover. She also knows that if she doesn't ask it, she will regret it. Martha takes the plunge. "Mom, there's one thing I still don't understand."

Her mom waits.

Martha continues, "I could never ask you while you were alive. And now you're here. So here goes. What was up with you tolerating your second husband's asshole behavior? What he did to me was molestation, and you knew. That hurts so much, how you chose him over me. That screwed up my life for decades – that you would watch him touch my breasts and hear him say he'd like to fuck me and expect me to take that as a compliment, and protest feebly at first and then not at all. That sucked. It was wrong. Why did you let it happen?"

Martha's mom sighs. She says, finally, "If there's one thing I did in my life that I could undo, that's the thing I would choose. I'm so sorry."

Our trio is walking to Carrión as La Madre chooses her words carefully and continues, "It was so hard being alone, Mart. He brought me alive in a way your father never could." A pause. "Ooof. That sounds victimy, doesn't it? Let me try again." Another pause. "With him I was more *whole*. He saw me in a way your father didn't. He made me feel attractive and sexy and he didn't treat me like I was stupid. He paid attention to the things I liked, and he gave them to me. Unfortunately, he was also deeply wounded, and he dealt with his wounds by staking his claim to me and excluding you. All that stuff he said and did was designed to put you in your place. I knew that then, but it felt so damn good to finally be wanted that I ignored his behavior. I didn't know how to fix it, and I didn't want to be alone and afraid ever again. I'm so sorry, hija. I am so sorry."

"But, Martie, please let yourself heal. I looked outside myself for someone else to make me feel okay. Culture says you find your meaning from a man, so I thought I needed a man. Culture lies, but I didn't know that. You didn't do any of that. You didn't make any of it happen, you couldn't control it, and you sure as hell didn't deserve it. Your job is to find the scar tissue and make it available for healing. I think that's why you're on Camino, really. I think that's why Hopie and I are here. For your healing. Your healing is the most important thing in the world right now."

Martha and her mom are silent as they walk. Hope has been singing since Villalcazar, and she continues to sing all the way to Carrión de los Condes.

Martha's heart has been set on the singing nuns ever since she first read about them in Brierley. Unfortunately, they're completo, with no room for three more pilgrims. Our trio finds another albergue, a former convent and school, run by nuns whose charism is hugging. They're happy to see Hope and make a big fuss over her, which she eats up with delight. The hospitalera assigns a double bed to Martha and Hope and a twin bed to her mom, in a giant room that clearly used to be a classroom. But there aren't classes here anymore. The nuns have graduated to hospitalera duties, which they fulfill quite admirably. Remnants of their teacher-training are still visible: bulletin boards with admonishments to leave boots in the hallway and to keep backpacks off the beds, all surrounded with tagboard cutouts of singing birds and spring flowers.

They're lovely and Martha loves them. She goes to prayers after her shower and laundry-doing, where she receives a charmingly translated pilgrims' prayer which she will keep forever. Here it is, exactly as received.

EXPERIENCES ON THE ROAD

The Camino de Santiago is considered a WAY INSIDE, especially those, who do it for religious reasons. For this reason there are prayers that are performed during the course of what is considered the Way of Life:

**Look hear, breathe deeply, find tracks and wonders contact with nature, the peoples and their people, art history, the other pilgrims the hospitaleros That's the beauty!, Something unique! footprints*

Creator

Enjoy the silence, solitude, seeking look

Pilgrim, Friend and Companion: Jesus walks with you He is "WAY TRUTH AND LIFE". Sit by the slowly ...

**Read his word carries inside yourself and ruminating a passage along your walk alo. Jesus offers what you get in the way, what you carry in your heart, you're looking crave, talk to your loved ones, for those who suffer ... We hear each other, share the word.*

**Eat your bread of life live the Eucharist*

**Arise with joy, pilgrim march back to "home" now begins for you the true way, the daily life, consider what you have experienced and lived in gratitude on the road ... The road has operated profound changes in you, live with the right and necessary, greets and smiles, serves shares help.*

Martha loves this prayer, especially the phrase "sit by the slowly." Clearly someone, not a native English-speaker, translated it for them, or they ran it through the Google.

It's so lovely Martha doesn't miss the singing nuns, whom they get to meet that evening at the Pilgrims' Mass at the big church on the square – Santa María del Camino. There's an old statue of Mary inside – the very María del Camino that the church is named for. Martha lights a candle and receives her pilgrim blessing along with La Madre and Hope. This is a lovely night. The priest asks where each pilgrim is from, which is lovely. And he says "peregrinas y peregrinos," which is also lovely and enlightened. All in all, a lovely night. Night three on the Camino with three companions, not just Martha flying solo.

The sisters could have crammed twice as many people in if they'd used bunk beds, which they didn't. It's very spacious. Hope goes to sleep as soon as her head hits the pillow. Martha lies awake, thinking about being a creek. Feeling into that image. She loves how peaceful she feels just lying there, being a creek in a desert canyon, able to protect herself from anyone who would harm her. Finally, she drifts off.

Martha wakes up the next morning to an empty bed. Hope and Mom are gone. There's a note on Martha's pillow, in her mom's handwriting she'd know anywhere, telling her not to worry about them,

that they've gone somewhere she can't go. In red crayon, Hope has drawn a heart with a smiley face. Martha isn't surprised. She felt last night that her work with her mom was done, but she really misses Hope. She feels lonely, and also a little relieved. Mostly lonely. Deeply lonely. She'd grown used to the company of that brave and sturdy little girl.

On the way out of town, she sees a pink flowered scarf in the window of a tienda. She buys it, wraps it around her neck, and sets off toward Terradillos de los Templarios, sixteen miles down the Way.

As Martha walks, she remembers Hope's smiley face heart and checks the chambers of her heart for occupants. She sees a cheerful, chatty desert creek with a not so small girl sitting on its banks, and a fierce woman building fence to keep the marauders out.

So, Martha is walking – taking the next step, and the step after that. Putting one foot in front of the other. She's enjoying the warmth and peace of having Hope and her mom inside her heart. She's glad to have the sweet desert creek chuckling merrily along its merry way inside her heart. She feels peaceful and free. She doesn't want to see the man she sees sitting on the wall ahead of her. She's really not ready for this again. Yet, ready or not, there he is.

Martha stops. He doesn't see her yet. He's reading a book. He seems to be waiting. What could he possibly be reading? Who would stop and read on the Camino? The job is to walk the damn thing, not to sit and read beside it. It's not too late to turn around and go back to Carrión. But, hell. In for a penny, in for a pound. Who would she be if she didn't enter into this next fantastic conversation? A quitter, that's what. And she doesn't want to be a quitter. After all, this couldn't be anywhere as weird as the last encounter, right? He's not a frozen child inside her chest, at least. He's a corporeal human, it seems, and she's in charge of whether she talks to him or not. She has the feeling that if she walked by without speaking, he'd let her go. She's not unhinged. She gets to decide whether to open this door or not.

Martha takes a deep breath and stops in front of her dad, who's been dead even longer than her mom. He died when he was fifty, shortly after getting sober. That was awful. His death had derailed her for years. Putting his death in the past tense isn't accurate. His death is still impacting her life.

He looks up and doesn't speak. He's waiting for her to say what she wants. He's waiting for her to tell him how she wants to proceed. He's waiting for her to tell him what she wants him to do.

She stands and just looks at him, tears welling up in her eyes. Although Martha had glimpses of her mom after she died, she didn't see her dad very often. She has his hands, on the ends of her mom's arms, which occasionally strikes her as odd. There are times when she's kneading bread and she looks down at her freckly arms that are so clearly maternal, connecting her body to the hands which look so much like her dad's: blunt fingers and square palms. She often wished, and still does, for long slender hands that look like girl hands. Long slender fingers and swan-like hands. But no. Instead she got his hands that are, as she reflects on them, more like cougar paws – solid, sturdy, working hands.

"Dad?" she asks. "You've been gone for so long. And I sort of expected you, and I'm not surprised after getting Hope and Mom for a couple of days, but I can't say I'm happy to see you. I really don't want to feel sad today. I don't want to feel mad. I feel pretty wiped out. It's all I want to do, today, to just walk in

peace and quiet. I just want to walk. I don't want any drama. I'm tired of drama. I just want to be me today – no dealing with trauma and loss.”

Martha walks on. Her dad falls in step beside her.

“You know, that’s all I ever wanted,” Martha says. She’s had lots of practice talking to dead people these last few days, so she just lets it rip. “That’s all I ever wanted – peace and quiet, just growing up in a safe and steady family, which I didn’t have. Because you two just couldn’t do that for us. You two just couldn’t see your way clear to love each other in good ways so that we could have a safe and steady container for growing up. I’m pissed at you both. I’m pissed at you both for how you just couldn’t bring yourselves to care about us. Did you even get counseling? Was that such an unknown to you? And what about the drinking? What about the affairs? I think you did have affairs, right? I didn’t know I was so angry about that. I just thought I was sad. I just thought I was sad at how you two tore us apart – you especially, I think. Although I think Mom was probably not easy at times. Let’s see – I was twelve, so that makes it 1970. That makes you forty-one and Mom thirty-eight when you divorced. Wow. That’s really young. You two were just babies.”

Martha continues. “And you went through three more marriages in those nine years before you died. Wow. I’m amazed doing that math. Those marriages sure didn’t last long, did they? Your life was fucking out of control, wasn’t it? No wonder you needed to stop drinking. No wonder you tried meditating. You fit a lot into those nine years. You just kept looking and looking for peace, didn’t you? And during that time, we went backpacking in the Sierras and the Grand Canyon consistently. You were searching for peace. You were searching for yourself. For who you really were under all that striving and succeeding, drinking and wenching. I’ve really wished I could talk to you. I think about you a lot, actually. I think about you when I go hiking. I’ve thought about you here – how you would love the Camino, with your love for Hemingway and Michener and Spain and walking. You would have eaten the Camino with gusto and relish. You would have spoken your Spanish and talked to all these people and really enjoyed being here.”

“And here you are. It’s been so long. I was so young when you went away. A lot of my memories of you are painful, spanking Mike with a belt and when you held my hand you squished the bones around and I didn’t like it. You didn’t do lap sitting or cuddles, did you? I think you probably didn’t like small children. No stories. No daddyness from you, that I remember. Most of my memories of you from are scary and cold. Fighting with Mom at the supper table. Requiring quiet when you got home from work. Hitting dogs. Taking cats to the shelter when you thought we had too many. Buying that glider without checking with Mom first. Boy, was she mad. I remember walking down to see it – a trailer that looked like all it had on it was wings, at the bottom of the driveway. Down by the ponderosa I fell out of and got a bloody nose.

“The memories get better after you two split, actually. Then there’s backpacking and target shooting and trips together – the Tetons, Santa Barbara, the ranch on the Nevada-Oregon border. We did have Granite Mountain hikes before you split. Those were good. Tying up dried apples in a bandana for a snack, but that was Mom.”

He’s just quietly walking beside Martha, letting her have her memories. Her truthful memories. Martha really didn’t know that she was so angry at her parents. She thought she was just sad about all the losses their divorce entailed.

“It’s like I didn’t think I could have my anger. I didn’t think I was entitled. I was so unentitled that I skipped right over anger and went to sadness, then I went right over that, pretty much, to ‘Eh, whatever. I’m fine. Well, I’m not fine, but that’s just the way it is. No one cares, so evidently this is what it’s supposed to be like, and I don’t get to ever feel better. Make the best of it, girl. Don’t go getting all dramatic and emotional.’”

He’s still just walking along beside her. He’s doing pretty well for a really old man. How old is he? Is this really her dad? Oh, sweetie, she thinks. Just go with it. You can do this. You’ve got a guardian to keep you safe. How lovely would it be to have some time with your dad?

Having time with her dad would be a gift.

“Hey, Dad,” she says.

“Hey, Marth,” he replies. “It’s good to be here. It’s beautiful. You’re looking good – strong and pink and healthy. Way to go, girl. Way to go. I’m proud of you. You know, there was so much I wanted to tell you three. As I floated away, I thought of all that I wanted to give you that I wouldn’t have a chance to give you. I never in a million years thought I’d die when I was fifty. I’m sorry to have held back. I’m sorry to have hurt you. I’m sorry I wasn’t a better father. I’m sorry for all the pain I caused you. I’m sorry for hitting that tree.

“I want you to stop trying to make everything all right. I want you to stop blaming yourself for all the shit that happened to you. We did a crappy job and you three paid the price. You’re a phenomenally strong woman. It’s okay to want what you want and be who you are, sweetheart. I’m sorry that process got derailed by our shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans?” I say. “That’s exactly the minimalizing language that I’ve been using for fifty years to describe the havoc you two wreaked in my life. There I was, a sensitive kid stuck in an imploding family with parents who didn’t give a rat’s ass about the real me. What the hell was I supposed to do?”

“And I really don’t want to spend the day yelling at you for being such a huge selfish jerk. It’s too beautiful and I’m too tired.”

“So, you think that beauty and anger can’t coexist?” he asked. “You think that you can’t enjoy these poppies and this blue sky and these rolling wheat fields and be angry? I deserve your anger. It’s not crazy and unhinged at all. It’s perfectly justified and way overdue.”

“You know why it’s overdue, right?” says Martha. “You two trained it right out of me. I was the one that if I got mad the family would break in two. My job was to sit there and soak up other people’s anger so it had somewhere to go, not to have my own. You two couldn’t handle my anger. You taught me not to feel my feelings, but to carry yours instead. What bullshit. What vile lessons to teach a little girl.”

“Let’s stop and have a café and tortilla the next place we see. I really love the toast in Spain,” he says.

Martha looks inside her heart and sees her mom still there, guarding the Martha creek. Martha likes her mom there, doing what she was supposed to do all those years ago when Martha was a little girl. If she’d done that job, so much would have been different. Who knows where Martha would have gone and who she would have been. It feels to Martha like her mom is a separate person who wants to make

amends. Mom's taking her water guardian job seriously. She's wearing a tool belt and she's packing heat so she can keep Martha safe. And Hope is there too, sitting on the grass in the sun, doing something with the wildflowers growing there. Martha thinks she might possibly be making a daisy chain, something Martha has never done in her life. Hope is singing softly. She's really peaceful, knowing that her grandmother is there. Except that Martha's mom isn't actually her grandmother, because Hope isn't actually Martha's daughter. Martha knows that Esperanza is a piece of herself. But Mom doesn't feel the same way. Maybe Esperanza/Hope can trust her mom in a way that Martha lost. It's all so confusing.

And, to top it off, here Martha is, walking along the Camino on the Meseta in northern Spain, with her dad. She feels more in control of this interaction. She could have walked right past him, but she didn't. She saw that it was him, and she stopped to talk to him. Martha startles with recognition: Wait just a cotton pickin' minute! She could have told her mom, "No, thank you, we're fine," when she offered to help thaw Hope back there in that field outside Castrojeriz, a lifetime ago. And she could have left Hope in her chest freezer. She's chosen this adventure. Martha's in control of feeling out of control. All this feeling powerless is just an old bad habit.

"I did the math a couple of days ago," she tells her dad. "I hadn't realized all the striving you put into the nine years between the divorce and when you died. Three marriages. Wow. That's pretty amazing. How did you fit that all in? How did you get those women to marry you? And I think you must have been having affairs before you two split, because you sure had a girlfriend quick. That you met at Parents Without Partners, I think. You must have been so unhappy. You must have felt so stuck with us.

"You know what's weird? I don't remember feeling *anything* at the time. I just remember accepting. And that not consciously. I don't remember feeling sad about the house or the horses or the dog. I think it was just so big of a loss and I really had no way of processing it. And I sure as hell didn't have any help. What were you guys thinking???"

Her dad says, "You know you're in charge, right? None of this needs to happen if you don't want it to. Your mom wouldn't have shown up, and Hope wouldn't have come out, if you didn't want them to. You could have backtracked all of that. You can backtrack this, sweetheart. You can backtrack me, if you want to."

Martha thinks back to what she's just said: "You must have felt so stuck with us." Her dad didn't need to stay connected. He could have left completely. He could have uprooted himself and gone completely away. She's so tired of going around and around this in her head. She just wants to walk the damn Camino and do it her way.

Does she want to spend time with her dad? Does she want to feel the pain of that loss, or does she want to keep it buried? What would happen if she let it out? What would happen if she walked with her dad for a while?

She's not only angry at her dad for dying, but for the hell he put her family through. He broke them up. He took away her home and her horses and her dog. Then he took her brother, and then her sister. He took away her life, and Martha doesn't remember him ever saying he was sorry. Did he ever take responsibility? Or did he push responsibility onto others? Martha concludes that he was incredibly selfish and, surprise, she's actually quite angry about it.

Martha honestly hadn't known that she was so angry. She's skipped over the anger to sadness for decades. And to confusion. Her mind didn't want her to know she was angry. Safer to be sad and confused. And powerless.

As she's walking, not talking to her dad, she's thinking about being a creek. And then her dad says, "I'm sorry for everything I put you through. I'm sorry for not seeing you clearly. I'm sorry for not seeing you at all, really. That was the addiction, and I'm sorry. I just kept trying to get it right, not knowing that it's not actually possible to get life right. Now I know. You know who told me that? God. God told me when I died that I'd really screwed it up. I'd really gotten the wrong end of the stick. I was beginning to get there – getting sober was huge. Being a grandpa was even bigger. I'm so sorry that I died before I could make it right with you.

"And, here's another thing. You know how you feel like you didn't want to know stuff? Like you didn't feel anything when your home and family were ripped out from under you by my selfishness? It's because we taught you not to feel. All we needed to do was show some sort of concern, and we didn't. I'm so sorry. In fairness to your mom, I left her with a real pile of shit to shovel."

"Martie," he continues, "can I give you some advice from beyond the grave?" Martha nods.

"Here's what will help. Get radically in touch with your body. Move on down in there, and really settle in. Make your brain smaller and your body bigger. Remember the good times we had in the Canyon and in the Sierras? God, I loved those. And I loved being there with you, because you loved them, too. Those trips remind me of this trip. Being outside all day, and sometimes all night, too. And walking, and seeing new things, and sometimes meeting people who are interesting. Remember that couple up high at one of those lakes in the Sierras who'd been there for a few days, and they'd paid attention to the airline schedule? They looked up and said, as a jet flew over all lit up in the evening sun, 'There's the 6:00 to San Francisco.'"

Martha says, "Oh, my God. They totally made that shit up, didn't they?! Never trust an atom. They make up everything. Joke. I remember that golden evening – the granite was glowing rosy yellow and the sun was shining, and the world was glittering like it was lit from within. It was fun to talk to people. I think there was a lake and a granite cliff behind where they were camped. It was like something out of Narnia."

Her dad continues, "Yes! Anyway, here's the deal, Mart. The way through this stuff is just to do it. You've been half asleep ever since you were a little girl. I'm so glad Esperanza's back with you. I know you thought you needed to take care of your mom, since I wasn't, and your brother and sister weren't. So, that's what you did. Then she threw you under the bus. That must have been awful, and you didn't have any options. It felt to you like you couldn't leave. You could have, but you didn't know it. You should have, but where would you have gone?"

"The way to get yourself back is to let the feelings flow. There's really no other way. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but there it is. Our bodies tell us what's true. I'm so glad you still love the woods. The trees and the dirt will keep you grounded. It's okay. Let it flow through you.

"When you're writing and it feels shitty, let it come. Then go out and take a walk in the sun. Put your bare feet on the ground. Stick them in the water. Sit on the dirt. Go outside a lot while you do this work.

And don't drink too much. We want you sober, not numb. But please don't deprive yourself. Enjoy your café con leche and toast. Isn't the toast here amazing?

"You're right that I'd love the Camino. I'm really enjoying finally being in Spain and speaking Spanish. *Iberia* is a little out of date, though. Not surprising, when you think about it, right?"

"Stuck is a good word. I just felt so stuck when I was alive, before I finally got sober and started to grow up. I felt stuck and I thought another house or family or dog or wife would solve the problem. Unfortunately, wherever you go, there you are. It didn't work. Duh, right? I'm sorry we treated you like you were disposable and invisible and completely irrelevant. I totally understand why you felt that way. I'm so sorry. It wasn't true then, and it isn't true now. I want you to be wild, Martie. I want you to do you. I want the world to see who you are, hija de mi corazón."

It's a beautiful Meseta morning. High clouds and waving poppies and true blue sky. In Spain. On the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. Martha's dead dad is walking beside her, and her dead mom is in her heart. So weird.

Martha stops, sits on the wall separating the Camino from yet another field full of poppies, and takes off her shoes. Face to the sun, she wraps her arms around her legs and stays there for a few minutes. Her dad waits. An easy silence. Mares' tails in the sky – another storm coming.

It's nice to be with him. She tells him she's going to find a carver to make him a stone, and she'll leave it alongside the Camino. He says he'd like that. He's missed having a stone, evidently, not because he needs it. He knows he's dead. But he knows that the lack of closure around all that was hard for her, and for Jesse. She's thought often of having a small stone made and leaving it at Bass Creek in the Grand Canyon, where his ashes were put long ago by her brother. But she really likes this Spain idea – she's here, he's here, and she can honor his life and her grief. A stone would fit in with all the memorials along the Way, to people who died on their journeys. No one disturbs them. They're sacred. And he died on his journey, too.

Martha slowly gets down and stands in the road, bare feet touching the ground. She's grateful for her dad's counsel to be outside as much as she can, to stay connected to the ground through her feet and her rump, and to pull back on the booze. She's actually not grateful to him for the booze advice. Especially here in Spain. What else is there to drink, really? A cold beer in the afternoon. A glass of red wine in the evening.

He, who evidently in this post-death body has the ability to read minds, says, "Okay. That's fine. It's drinking to get numb that's not okay. That clogs up the flow, Martie. That's silt in the stream. You're not as clear or as useful to yourself and to others. Flowing cleans you out and nourishes the critters. Silt and murkiness can sustain life, but they're not ideal. Dirty, stagnant water is fine for catfish and bullfrogs. Not good for stonefly larva and salmon. And we want stoneflies and salmon, sweetie. Silt and murkiness are fine for bottom feeders – for the creatures that don't change so much. Clarity and oxygenation are best for the creatures that metamorphose – frogs and salmon and insects. And humans."

Martha reflects on this whole 'being useful to others' thing as they walk along – she's quietly thinking. He's whistling and singing, as he often did. Her dad has a beautiful voice – very Frank Sinatra-ish. She's missed his whistle and his lovely tenor.

Martha had never figured out how to be useful to others without giving herself away. Maybe that's a vestige of being a girl in a boy's world, or just being female in general. It seemed like the constant message was to see what was needed and then to provide it, at the expense of herself. Maybe, she thinks, being useful to others is missing the point. It's a false dichotomy, maybe. She remembers one of the ideas of quantum entanglement – how there is really no such thing as self and other. What serves me, serves you, and vice versa. This is why healing ourselves heals the world. This is why doing what makes us happy, following the deep desires of our heart, also serves the world. And it's not just human atoms that entangle, of course. It's all atoms. This is why taking more than we give is ultimately self-defeating. So, it really is about figuring out what she wants to do, and then doing it, no matter how crazy it looks from the outside. We let ourselves be healed, then we share what we learned from as deep a place as we can reach.

Her dad actually looks younger than Martha – he's perhaps a little older than he was when he died, and he always looked young for his age when he was alive. Do they have closets and REIs in heaven? He's got the latest gear, unlike when Hope emerged wearing clothes from the 1960s. He's wearing North Face convertible pants, New Balance shoes, a Patagonia jacket, and a Columbia fleece. An Osprey backpack and Leki poles. The Europeans say they can tell Americans by their North Face gear. How does he work the money, she wonders. Do they also have ATMs and currency exchanges in heaven? Oddly, she realizes, her dad seems to have come from someplace else, somewhere “beyond.” Somewhere heavenly. But her mom came from the heart of the Earth. And Hope came from within.

Because they're on the Meseta, most of the buildings are made of adobe. There's little stone in this part of the country, so in order to find a stone for him they'll probably have to find a construction supply store. Home Depot of Spain, except not really because they won't be able to carve his name and dates. Hmmmm.... In every village there's someone who can work with stone, probably. Or there used to be.

Martha says, “I'm thinking about where to find someone to carve your stone. There's not a lot of stone on the Meseta, so I'm wondering how that will work.”

She continues, “I'm thinking about that because there are so many questions I want to ask you that I don't even know where to start. I've spent decades speculating about you – what was going on with you, what it was like to hit that tree, what you were thinking when you married all those women, whether you regretted anything, where you went after you died... So many questions. And I didn't think I'd ever get to ask them. And, honestly, it hurts to have you here. I remember what I've missed for forty years – a sober you in my life. I've remembered your birthday and your death day every year. Mom's, too. You both died too soon, and it sucked. It sucked so bad. Mike and Jesse followed your example with addiction and mate-hopping, looking for peace outside themselves. Me, too, with the looking for safety and direction outside myself. I don't see myself very clearly in all of this, probably because being vague is how I've stayed safe. Being silted and murky, hah! I didn't have a sense of what I was good at because I didn't have a mirror.

“I knew what I loved, though, so thank you for that. I'm so grateful for the Canyon and for the Sierras – for the backpacking and the shooting. I like guns. Did you know that? And thank you for the books. For caring about the life of the mind.” Martha puts “the life of the mind” in air quotes.

“Yes, it hurts to have you here. I know I should be grateful for this visitation, and I'm going to be brave and say what I want to say, after all these years. I wonder what you would have been like sober. I wonder what the next twenty years, or maybe thirty, would have been like. You were just getting your

shit together. I wonder what I missed. I'm angry at God for the way you died. I've called it 'cosmic robbery.' It's more than robbery, though. It's assault. It's battery. It's abuse.

"I've believed that you dying the way you did was a wrong done to me by the universe, along with your obnoxious divorce and my molesting stepfather. The big three wounds that never should have happened and someone owes me big time. The universe owes me big time. I should never have to suffer again because I've had enough pain for a lifetime, undeserved and so deeply wounding. The universe hurt me and I'm never going to be the same again.

"And in order not to be hurt again, I have to blend in, while not actually attaching? Now I'm confused. The universe owes me, and I can't have what I want? How do those two work together? The universe owes me, but, just like my parents, it obviously doesn't give a flying fuck about me. So why even try? And for sure don't commit to anything, because it'll just be taken away. Ripped away like families and houses in the woods and horses and dogs. Gonzo. Just like that. And don't you dare express any feelings about that or act out any resistance. The system just can't handle that, Martha. What the fuck. Really. What the fucking fuck."

Not for the first time, and almost certainly not for the last on this Camino, she wonders if she's crazy. She's been punishing the universe for hurting her. Sure, she'll go through the motions of being alive – get older and go to college and get a job and get married and have kids, but she'll always keep a little of herself separate. The universe may say that it wants her to be happy and to flow with love, but she's not having any of it. Being happy and flowing with love just isn't safe, and she won't give life the satisfaction of being all in.

Martha suddenly sees the old stories for the contradictory bullshit that they are. She sees that they kept her safe once, but they've long ago outlived their usefulness. On the Camino, she's come to know the truth that's far deeper and far truer than the stories she concocted when she was a little girl to make sense of the chaos. The truer, deeper truth is that the Universe is sorry for her pain. The Universe is sorry for her suffering. The Universe is sorry for her losses. It's sorry that she didn't get what she needed from the people who should have given it to her. The Universe did the best it could with what it had, always and forever. The Universe brought her to this place at this time with this man.

The Universe feels her pain with her. The Universe was crying the moment he hit that tree. The Universe was holding her mom the day her cancer finally killed her. The Universe watched the molesting stepfather do his thing, and it watched her do her best to love her family and keep her head above water in an untenable situation. "How brave you are, Martha," it says. "How very brave and sturdy and strong and resilient. I am so proud of you. You survived, Martha. You're here, and you've given so much, even though you feel like you haven't.

"It's time, sweetie. It's time, kiddo. It's time to let go of what you think you need to do to take care of others. Thank you for that. It's time, dear heart, to relax and do what would give you the greatest joy in the world."

Her dad speaks. "Martha, look at what you've done. Look at how your wounds served your students. Look at how you loved them better because of your hurt places. Look at the lives your brother and sister have had. Look at the healing they've gotten, compared to your mom and me. You three have moved us forward."

“I don’t want to keep swimming around here in the muck,” she says. “I just want to be free.”

“How do you think you get to be free?” he asks. “You find what’s keeping you in bondage and you unbind yourself. It’s not complicated.”

“When did you get so fucking wise?”

“You know me,” he says. “You remember how I was trying to figure things out, right? Meditation, all that reading, the drinking – always trying to figure things out. Just like you.”

Martha says “I want to get to the essence of this. I want to distill this swirl of swishiness into something solid and real. I want the hard nugget of truth buried in all this garbage. I want the pearl of great price buried somewhere in this trash heap. This feels awful – this trolling through random memories. It feels awful because, I think, I feel so powerless. I’m just watching chaos and feeling completely unable to fix any of it. And worse, I’m not seen as having any power. I’m not given any power. Any power I could have had was so completely defused by your blindness. I could have at least had the power of my feelings, if you two had only been willing to see me. I needed you two to acknowledge that you’d caused pain. The fact that you never seemed to understand the damage you did was as wounding as the actual acts that caused the damage. All that sweeping under the rug and denial was as harmful as the actual breaking of my life.”

“I don’t want to go here. I don’t want to feel this wispy despair. I do have a way with words, don’t I? ‘Wispy despair.’ That’s pretty awesome. See how the *sp* repeats? That’s lovely. Wispy anguish. Airy anguish. It’s like that stuff was blowing around but it didn’t have a place to land. It’s like I didn’t matter because my feelings didn’t matter. I put my feelings away when I was so small. And that’s not okay. You get that, right? It’s not okay that you were such a crappy dad. And it’s not okay that you left Mom holding the bag. And that you both were perfectly happy to have me abdicate my life in order to fix hers. Which was not my job to do, and which didn’t work anyway, and which then left me feeling doubly wretched because not only had I given myself away, but my sacrifice wasn’t adequate. Plus, it wasn’t acknowledged. No one ever said ‘Thanks, Martha, for giving up yourself for the sake of the family that then imploded anyway.’ It didn’t actually implode. It exploded. It completely shattered. What a fucking mess you left me to try to fix. What a fucking piece of shit life you left us. Nuclear family to nothing in two years. Well done. Well done.

“And now, here I am. Walking the Camino after twenty-five years of selfless devotion to my husband, my kids, and countless other people’s kids. Not knowing who the hell I am anymore, and what the hell I want. I guess it’s an improvement to know I don’t know, instead of pretending that I do, or being so cut off from myself that I don’t have the foggiest idea that I’m pretending. Wearing other people’s skins, to use the Selkie metaphor. I’m at least aware that I’m not in my own skin, and I’m working to shed the false skin I’m in.

“And then what happens? I expect a peaceful walk of lovely self-discovery, which is what the Camino is supposed to be, and what do I get? I get fucking chaos. I get visited by cougars, hear voices in churches, open jars of messies, find a frozen child and my dead mom, and now you. I didn’t think it would be like this. And I didn’t want it to be like this. I don’t want these feelings of darkness and anger and feeling confused. I want to feel clear and peaceful and always, always, always in control. Or at least okay with not being in control.”

“I know, sweetie,” responds her dad. “I totally resonate with the control thing. But here’s the thing, Marth. You’re just a little human. How can you possibly be in control? What would that even mean, for you to be in control? How would you know you were in control?”

“I’d feel calm and okay with myself. I’d feel peaceful. I’d feel comfortable and competent.”

“Maybe you need to develop the capacity to feel calm, peaceful, comfortable, and competent in the middle of chaos, sweetie. Maybe a better goal is to feel competent that you can ride the waves that you’re not in control of. What do you think of that?”

“Oh, bite me,” she says. “Blah blah blah blah blah. That sounds like the kind of thing someone says who doesn’t want to take any responsibility.”

“Okay, then,” he says, “what are you actually responsible for?”

“Me and my impact on the world around me,” she says. “That’s what I’ve told my kids for twenty-five years.”

He says, “Does that mean that you fall in line with the expectations of those around you? Does that mean you do what you’re told? Does that mean you cut off your uniqueness to fit into spaces that aren’t yours to fill? Does that mean you don’t know things that you actually do know, so that you don’t rock the boat?”

“Preach it, brother,” she says, with as much sarcasm as she can muster. “It’s not easy being told that the way you’ve done your life for so many decades is twisted and backward, especially by the one who taught you to do it that way. You and your sidekick. You two should be ashamed of yourselves.”

“We are,” he said. “Or we were. I could tell you a story about how we met in heaven and talked it over and realized what a cluster we’d made. There we are - cue violins and angels - walking in the same field of heavenly daisies on a beautiful mountain top, both of us surrounded by the animals we’d loved over the years. We each see the other in the distance. She looks like someone I knew once, so I keep walking, closer and closer. The violins and angels are still making music. We get close enough to each other to see that yes, we used to be married. On earth we were husband and wife for ... eighteen years, maybe? I’d have to do the math. ‘You!’ I say, holding out my arms to her. ‘You!’ she says, and we hug warmly. Maybe that’s what happened – I really couldn’t say. It sounds nice. I’d like to be friends with her again. We used to like each other quite a bit. I’m not really sure what happened to that.

“There is no truthful nugget in this trash heap, sweetie. It’s just a jumble for me, too. I know I hurt her, and I know we hurt you. I’m not sure that’s avoidable, in the healthiest of families. I know that you want to understand, and you think if you can understand you’ll feel that competence and peace you want so badly. I think you might even think that if you can’t understand you’ve somehow failed. I think maybe you believe everything has to make sense, and it’s up to you to find the sense under what looks like nonsense. That it’s your job – to analyze and dissect and find the meaning – and if you can’t do that you’ve lost the right to be happy. I think you believe that if you can understand something, you can fix it and make it all okay. Find who to blame and what they did wrong, so it won’t happen again. Find the infraction and explain to the infractor what they did wrong and what the consequences are, so they won’t keep breaking things and leaving you to clean up the mess. Maybe if you can just get things

figured out and running smoothly, you'll be able to finally have your own life and follow your own path. That following your bliss needs to wait until you've got the rest of the world sorted out.

"You've said you started out on this pilgrimage to get clarity on what's next in your life. You didn't want all this weird-assed stuff to happen, because you feel crazy and out of control. You wanted to walk from St. Jean to Santiago in five weeks in order to listen to your life. Well, what if what your life wants to tell you is that there's a lot of stuff you haven't processed with your heart. You've thought about it incessantly and analyzed it and put it in notebooks up on your shelf. And now you're being called to a deeper layer. You're being called to feel it. You're being called to let it flow up and out. You're being called to fall deeply in love with yourself, sweetheart.

"The universe wants to play with you, and it can't because you're thinking all the time. That sounds like a judgment, and I don't mean it that way. It's like the world is knocking on your door asking you to come out and play, and you say you can't because you need to do your homework. You need to analyze and dissect and theorize and hypothesize because we taught you that was your job – to figure out what went wrong so it will never happen again. If you know what went wrong, you can keep everyone safe, or at least see disaster coming this time and not be blown away by it. That sounds more like it, huh? If you can figure out what happened, you'll be better able to protect yourself.

"So, don't jump in, because you can't analyze and observe from inside something. That's such an old pattern, and you don't see that it's not you, sweetie. It's not you. You're the little girl making houses out of rocks. The little girl wading in creeks. Your grandpa called you his 'Blackie.' You are lucky in your grandparents, on your mom's side. I felt lucky to know them, too. I loved your grandma and grandpa.

"There are decades of scum to skim, aren't there, m'ija? I know. I know. All this has built up in your mind. Let's just get it all out, okay? And please don't feel silly for wanting it all out. Your healing is the most important thing in the world right now.

"Your mind is like a junk drawer – there's useful stuff in there along with the old gum and the stretched-out rubber bands. Let's pull it out and see what's there. Do you know what would happen if you tried to write a novel without pulling all this junk out of the spring? You'd only have the surface stuff without the depth, and what would be the fun in that? It would be like a kid's book, or a coloring book. Okay, that makes no sense. I think maybe I need a different metaphor. This conversation, this noodling around, is cleaning out the spring that feeds the creek that is you. We're clearing up some stuff. I know that I'm only in your mind, but am I only in your mind?"

Then he asks, "What happens in your body when you hear me talk about falling deeply in love with yourself, and how the universe wants to play with you because you're its dearest friend?"

Martha says, "I feel a stiffness. I feel like I have a layer that bounces that stuff off. Believing that feels audacious to me. Way beyond what I should be thinking. There's a 'who does she think she is' quality to that feeling. Oh. It's fear. I feel afraid of the consequences of falling deeply in love with myself, and playing with the universe."

"Say more, my love."

"It has to do with the untrustworthiness of life, I think. If I fall in love with myself and play with the universe, I open myself up to being walloped again. I was in love with myself and with life once, then it

all got taken away from me. And the loss and the grief and the pain swamped me. I knew that I needed to hide my true self from love and life, because it wasn't trustworthy. It wasn't safe to be available and open to its advances and overtures. I see a little girl who was playing at the ocean's edge, making sandcastles and running in the waves, feeling safe and secure. Then a big wave came and walloped her without warning, and everything she loved was taken away. So she went and hid in the far back of a cave, where she was safe from the waves and no one could find her and hurt her again. She has sort of a spyglass that she can send out and look around, so she knows what's going on, but no one really knows where she is. It's an avatar. It's not really me. I'm only pretending to be present. I'm controlling the avatar and I'm interacting, but from a secure location at a safe distance. And falling in love with myself and playing with the universe would mean coming out of my cave. I'd rather send my avatar. And I've been in here for so long that I'm not sure of the way out and how to be in the world when I am out. I'll feel so raw and exposed."

"This is good stuff," says her dad. "You're good at this."

"Well, I've been thinking about it, as you know. None of this is new. What's new is the immediacy of it. The feeling quality of it. The bleakness of it. The wasteland quality of it. Not a very fertile place, this cave. This drought-stricken land. If getting mad and socking it to you two is the way to get the water flowing again, then I guess I'd better do it. I'm tired of pretending to be present when I'm really tucked away in my secure location at a safe distance, living my life remotely. Can I be two things at once? Can I be the little girl in the cave, and also be the creek in the desert with Hope playing in me and Mom guarding me? Because that's sort of confusing."

The Meseta is the perfect place for this conversation. Long stretches of no one and nothing that demands our attention – just a dirt track lined with a rock wall separating the Way from the fields full of poppies, all overlaid by a blue sky with high cirrus clouds. Martha's dad looks up and says, "Wind aloft."

Martha continues, "People aren't safe. Don't trust 'em. That's what I learned and how I still roll. It's necessary to camouflage and hide and throw them off your trail. Don't trust people, and don't trust life. Only trust animals and plants and rivers and mountains. They are the only entities that can be counted on."

"I understand that little me has never had her say. I've thought about this stuff and talked about it from a distance. I've let the fake me weigh in, but the little girl who lived through it has never talked about it and had anyone listen. And that little girl is Hope. That's why Hope crawled in there – because she knew the chest freezer was the safe place to be. The surface me has carried on like she knew what it felt like, and she did, but only intellectually. The me that was in touch with that pain is the me that threw things in secret, broke things in private, tried to hurt herself, and got depressed."

Martha looks into heart. Esperanza is sitting by the creek in the desert, looking up at Martha. She asks, "So, Hope, what was that like for you?"

Hope says, "It was awful. I couldn't protect Molly the dog. I couldn't protect Peanuts and Roach the horses. I was supposed to protect them, and I couldn't. I felt so guilty, especially because I didn't see things coming. I thought I should have known that when I came home from school they'd be gone." She's crying. "I knew Dad would be fine, and there was no use being mad. There were limits to my responsibilities, I knew that. I was responsible for the animals and Mom. And the trees. And the barn that Grandpa built. And the rocks. That was my place and it was just gone, and I didn't know it was going

to be taken care of. How hard would it have been for a little process, for crying out loud?? I couldn't do my job if I didn't know what was happening while I was away. It's important to understand because if I understand I can predict and keep everybody safe who needs my protection. Vigilance doesn't do any good if people are sneaky and do things like give away dogs and horses while I'm at school. I never got to say goodbye to them. They were probably so scared, and they didn't understand, and they missed me, probably. They probably thought I'd abandoned them, but there was nothing I could do. I wish I could have gone with them to help them know it was going to be all right. I wish I could have said goodbye to my trees and my rocks, too. They loved me and I didn't get to say goodbye. And the creek. And the dirt. That was my home, and you took it away from me. And if I was sad it hurt Mom. So I couldn't be sad. And you'd taken away my mad a long time ago. So, it was pretty much awful. You made it so I couldn't take care of the animals and my land, so I had to betray them. I had to abandon them. I didn't have any choice. I didn't know where you'd taken them, and I never went back to the land. Ripped away. You guys were total assholes. Completely utterly fucking assholes.

"And don't you dare patronize me by pulling me up on your lap and cuddling me. That's completely meaningless when you're committing murder on my heart at the same time. We just spun off away from that center and I've never found it again. You two demolished the center, and you seemingly didn't give a flying fuck about how anyone felt about it. Oh, I know the truth probably is that Mom was just in too much pain to deal with ours. It was too much for her to do to deal with our grief. It hurt so much already that adding three kids' pain was untenable. But, really? Y'all couldn't have done anything to help except to say, 'Suck it up, kids. I'll see you every other weekend and two weeks in the summer. And mind your mother and don't make her life any harder, because I pretty much destroyed it.' Fucking assholes. Fuckface shitheads. You should be ashamed of yourselves. That was how it felt, Mom. That was how it felt. Thank you for asking.

"And you, Mom. All those years of having vague feelings that something was wrong. Something was missing. Something wasn't right. Damn straight you've been hiding in a cave, sending out your avatar to deal with the hard stuff, only really coming out when you're alone in the trees. I totally get why you do that. But it fucking needs to stop."

It seems that Martha's daughter has grown a potty mouth.

Hope stands there in the middle of the Camino, hands on hips, and she's pissed. She's not a little girl anymore. She's fifteen and she's totally had it with this bullshit.

"Let's go," she says. She shoulders her backpack, looks over her shoulder at Martha and her dad, and starts walking to Santiago. "Fucking assholes," they hear wafting back to where they follow. "Did you think I'd be playing beside that lovely creek forever?"

Oh, God. Here we go again. Now she's got her dead dad and her unreal daughter walking with her on this Camino. Where's her dead mom? Martha does a quick check, and at least Mom is where she's supposed to be – she's packing heat and still building fence to protect the creek. She waves and hollers, "Have fun, you three!" Again, Martha wonders what the fuck is going on. But this will be easier, she thinks, to walk with a teenager and a fit middle-aged man than it was to be with a toddler. Okay, then.

"Hi, Grandpa," Hope says.

"Hey, Hopie," responds her dad. "Good to see you again."

Hope continues, incredibly, “Mom, you need a boyfriend. A sexy boyfriend. Or at least some good sex.”

“Hope, that’s so totally none of your business.”

“Uh, Mom? Are we a little confused? It’s totally my business. You know why? Because I’m the real you, sweetcakes. And, no, I don’t know how this works, either.”

“Martha, do you remember any of that quantum physics you’ve been reading?” asks my dad. “Do you remember the part about how matter is just particles that have slowed down? Or is it energy that’s slowed down? Anyway, we’re all just energy. Hardly anything is really real that we think is real, right? We arise and we fall away. I arose and I fell away that day, but I didn’t go away completely. On the surface this all looks real. You’re separate from me and death is real. But underneath the surface, it’s not like that at all. Underneath the surface we’re all connected. Because you and I were connected for 21 years, we’re still connected. That’s what quantum entanglement is. I don’t know how I coalesced today in the way I did, or how your mom did, or how Hope did. The energy that was me when I was alive is still sort of gathered together. So is your mom’s. You know how you sometimes feel us? That’s because we’re still entangled. And now we’re totally benevolent. We can’t hurt you. We can only help you. I don’t know why that’s true, but it is. Maybe because we’re completely part of the big thing now, and we know it. That whole thinking everything is separate and has to fight for its existence is a big problem. The Buddhists have this one right, I think. I like to hang out with the Buddhists in heaven. If I’d known about Buddhism when I was alive, I’d have been a saner person. It’s all a mystery and it makes no sense to the rational Newtonian mind. So just let go of needing to understand and be in this for now.”

“Easy for you to say,” replies Martha, as Hope stomps on ahead, muttering under her breath and swinging a stick at the weeds beside the Way. “Easy for you to say. You’re dead. Your work is done. I’m down here in the thick of it, down here in the mosh pit, mucking through the muck and trying to figure out what the fuck is going on. What do I do with all of this? What do I do with Hope’s pain, for example? How do I fix it for her? How do I live with that inconvenient pile of broken stuff that’s unfixable?”

“Well,” he says, “I think you accept it. How do you feel, knowing for the first time, really, how much what we did hurt her? Hurt you, so much so that you’ve crawled into a cave for fifty years. What does it feel like to know that? How does it feel to have that lovely, lively creature up there out and about in the world, engaging and saying what she thinks, and calling me an asshole?”

Martha answers, “I think I should have had this all figured out decades ago, and forgiven you two, and moved on and not have had it control me all these years. I feel stupid and weak. Have I had chances to figure this stuff out that I haven’t taken? Have I weanied out? And what fresh hell will she lead me into? What will she want me to do that will be embarrassing and scary? What will she want us to do that I’ll suck at?”

“Oh, that,” he says. “I’m really sorry for that. I’m really sorry for teaching you that you needed to never make a mistake. That was mostly me, and I’m sorry. If I could wave a magic wand and take that one away, I would. Believe me, honey, that one’s so totally ridiculously crapola. There’s no such thing as right and wrong, except on the surface world. In the deep world, the real world, the world that knows it’s connected to everything that is, the world where it’s all about learning and growing and changing and playing, there’s no such thing as a mistake. It’s really true. Please, if you input nothing from our time together, input this: Your job as a human being is to learn and grow and change and evolve and give

yourself fully to your fellow creatures. Your job is to wear pink flipflops and yellow t-shirts and flowered skirts and to twirl in poppy fields, to be strength and love for your fellow creatures, and let them be strength and love for you. Your job is to be Martha. Martha of the brown eyes and deep heart for the Earth, that got walloped back then, walloped over and over for about ten years, and still flinches from the blows.”

“Hey, Hope,” he calls. “Wait a minute.” He’s seen a clump of trees just off the Way, with a little creek flowing through it. He leads our trio off the trail over to the trees where they take off their backpacks and sit. “I know we’re not making much external progress,” he says, “but we sure are making good progress in our souls. Could we sit here in the sun next to this creek and take off our shoes and just let the beautiful Earth soak into us for a few minutes? I miss the Earth. I’m still here, of course, as wind and granite and water, but I’m sure happy to have a nose and skin and eyes and ears and feet again, for smelling and for touching and for seeing and for hearing, and this body for walking. And I’m in Spain!! I always wanted to go to Spain.”

Our merry band of travelers sits with their feet in the creek, even though Martha is chafing to get some miles under her belt. She puts a hand to the pink scarf draped around her neck. Hope notices, smiles, and reaches out to adjust her mom’s scarf and the hair peeking out under her buff.

“I felt unloved,” Martha tells her dad. “I felt unloved and like I didn’t matter. That’s the bottom line. And I didn’t get to take care of the things I loved like I should have been helped to do. You two should have been big enough and grown up enough to let us grieve. And you weren’t. And that can never be different. That can never be fixed. You should have fucking taken some responsibility. And now I’m mad all over again. Damn it. I hate feeling mad. I feel silly when I get mad. Thanks for that, too. Hope, what was the word? Oh, yeah. Fucking assholes.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?” asks my dad.

“Oh, God,” Martha says.

“Here, how’s this,” he says. “I take full responsibility for ruining your life when you were a kid through my behavior that ripped your world apart. I take full responsibility for my drinking and for its consequences. I take full responsibility for teaching you that mistakes are bad, and you always have to be perfect to be loved. I messed up, really badly. I’m so sorry that I set all that in motion, and I’m sorry for the choices you’ve made from that place of feeling unloved and unworthy that have diminished your life. I’m sorry for all of it. I’m sorry for hurting your mom so badly – for letting her down and making her suffer. I’m sorry for the losses you endured without any support. I’m sorry for being so selfish that I didn’t see what was going on.

“It doesn’t matter if you forgive me. It *does* matter if you never find a way to heal it now that you see it. That’s what this is all about – your healing. That’s why we’re all here – your mom and me and especially Hope. Hope isn’t going away. She’s part of you. And look at your mom down there in your heart, digging up invasives and building fences and keeping an eye out for assholes on ATVs. She’s guarding you like a muthah. (He laughs at his own joke.) She’s sorry, too. She was doing the best she could, just like you. She was trying to keep her head above water. It was right not to forgive until you could keep yourself safe. We need to do whatever we have to do to keep ourselves safe until we can guard ourselves – maybe that’s landmines or booby traps or Uzis. Whatever. Unforgiveness helps keep us safe until we can guard ourselves more skillfully, as the Buddhists say. So, good for you.”

Hope's been listening to all of this, chewing on a piece of grass, head cocked and watching. "I'm hungry," she says. "What's in the next town? And where's the next town?"

Martha isn't sure anymore where she is. Is she in Spain, really? Or is she in some other country where miracles happen? Or is she simply crazy? Or, perhaps, all three are true. The boundaries of reality as she's known it have crumbled.

Martha, Hope, and Martha's dad are on the Meseta, somewhere around Sahagún. Martha has been emailing her friend Joy every few days, with the agreement that if Joy doesn't hear from Martha at least weekly, Joy will alert the authorities in Spain that she's missing. Checking in is against Martha's desire to be completely untethered for a season. She doesn't want to do it, and she also understands that a few people back home are worried about her being out here alone. Several women have gone missing on the Camino in the last couple of years. One woman's body was found, and the man accused of her murder is going on trial in León this month. Martha also promised not to walk completely alone through the wooded stretches. This second promise is one she hasn't kept. It was a silly promise to have made, not knowing what it actually entailed while on the actual camino. And no one will know that she hasn't kept it but herself. She's been smart, she thinks. She hasn't been out alone after dark, and she's kept an eye out for stranger danger. But she doesn't want to feel hampered by fear of what almost certainly won't happen, either. And if it does, well, then it does.

It's been a lovely couple of days with Hope and her dad. Hope is a lively addition to the party – she's seemingly inexhaustible and provides a colorful commentary on the passing scenery, which, being the Meseta, isn't changing very much. Mostly walls and fields and rolling hills. Beautiful in its own quiet way, similar to the American Midwest, but much more arid. The long quiet middle, Martha thinks. Sort of like where she is in her life, maybe. What is it they say about the Camino? The first part is a physical challenge. The middle, on the Meseta, is a mental challenge. And the final third is spiritual. Not challenge, exactly, but more like focus. She thinks that's about right. The first couple of weeks were really hard on her physically. Walking long miles on Illinois prairie hadn't prepared her for the day-after-day beating of the Camino. And the Pyrenees – that was just ridiculous. Her feet had needed some time to adjust. It is necessary to actually walk the Camino to figure out how to walk the Camino. Again, much like life. Although the needle and thread helped, Max the Blister is still painful.

"Spain smells like wood smoke and sheep shit," says Hope.

"And it sounds like roosters and cuckoos," says Dad.

Is her dad Hope's grandpa? She called Martha's mom "Grandma," but that was when Hope was three. This Hope seems to understand that she's part of Martha.

Hope and Martha's dad are talking as they walk. Martha is pondering the revelation that she's been living her life remotely, sending out her holographic representative while her real self stays safely in a remote location. That's the solution she developed for the trauma and heartbreak of being a kid in her family. Splitting off was how she learned to protect herself. She's thinking about the concept of social self and essential self. She concludes that she's taken that concept to the edge and gone over. She's actually dissociated herself. That's why she has gaps in her memory, maybe. There are things she doesn't understand about this revelation, and a lot that it clarifies. Making art and writing fiction need to come from her true self – the kid in the cave – and that's why she hasn't done them. She wonders

how she can bring the two back together. She doesn't want to drag the kid in the cave out against her will.

And who is it, she wonders, who's noticing the two parts of herself? Who is this Martha who sees both the child in the cave and the avatar she's sending into the world? As Martha looks at them, a wave of compassion flows over her. She feels such tenderness for both of them – the hologram who's pretending to actually be real, wanting very badly to be real, and the girl curled up in the back of the cave who's cold and stiff and yearns to feel the sun but is afraid of what will happen if she's exposed. "If they can't find me, they can't hurt me." That's been her motto for decades. Martha sees the connection between Hope who used to be frozen in her chest and the girl in the cave. She knows that in some way Hope is the girl in the cave. They're two manifestations of the same reality – the little girl who believed she had no choice but to hide for a while, until the world was safe for her again.

How does the world become safe for a raw little girl? A little girl with nerve endings all over her body, so sensitive, so inconvenient, and evidently so annoying to people who were supposed to love her?

Is it possible that they just didn't know how she felt? That they just didn't understand how it felt to be her? That they were doing the best they could, with their limited information?

Martha knows that the only way forward with integrity is to bring the two together – the Martha that's been out and about, pretending and making do – and the Martha who's been hiding, yet calling the shots in some mysterious way all these decades. She knows she wants to learn how to really be present on Earth. She wonders if perhaps that's what she contributed to her marriage falling apart. Somehow Hugh knew that she wasn't really there. Maybe it wasn't all his fault. He wanted more than she was willing to give of herself. Oh. Oh, she thinks. What would it be like to be married and really present? Really there with him, instead of sending in her avatar? What would it be like to be in the world as herself, rather than being just a little, or a lot, distant?

If I were an anthropologist and I found a little girl living in a cave, how would I bring her out in a way that was healing, rather than rupturing and violent?

I'd be gentle. I'd take small steps. I'd dim the lights and I'd give her space and privacy to explore. I'd do it gradually. I'd give her lovely things to taste and smell and touch and look at and hear. I'd protect her fiercely.

Pieces of who Martha is in the world as an adult woman are that little girl. She's the one who loves the wind in the pines and her feet in the water. She's the one who loves the frogs in the spring and the feel of cats. She's the rock sitter and the lake swimmer. She's the flower lover and the mountain gazer.

To make good art, to tell true stories, and to write real poems requires the presence and contribution of the girl in the cave. The avatar can't make real work. She can only write and draw surface things. She can only have shallow relationships.

"I've been thinking, Martha. Here's what I think," says her dad, startling her. "I think maybe because people have walked this route for a thousand years as pilgrimage, with longing in their hearts and openness to spirit, that the energy of this ground is different. I think they've changed the physics of this road, so the whole thing is a really thin place, to use the Celtic label. And that's why you're having this stuff happen. That's why Hope and your mom and I have shown up. It's basically five hundred miles of

birth canal, if you want it to be. I'm sure there are people who walk the Camino and all they get out of it is a sense of accomplishment and stronger legs, and maybe a few new friends. And there are other people who, because of where they are in their life – their readiness or openness or receptivity or whatever – have irrational and other-worldly things happen to them. I think that the energy of the big thing can find us more easily because we're more permeable on the Camino. What do you think about that?"

Martha says, "I think you've got something there. And that gives me an idea. I'm going to look for a way to stay in Spain for nine months. Maybe that will be finishing the Camino and going somewhere else for a while, or maybe that will be stopping and starting a few times, or it might be not finishing at all. I don't know what that will look like.

"I've been thinking about how to practice being actually present. Nájera Mary told me to draw every day and I haven't been doing it. I'm going to begin again. You already told me that bare feet on bare ground would help, along with sitting on the dirt every day. I want to bring that little girl out of the cave into the sun. I want her to feel strong and able to be out in the light and the air – able to protect herself and keep herself safe."

He says, "I think the part of you that sees both her and the avatar can protect her. And I want to hear more about Nájera Mary."

"I don't understand any of this," Martha tells him.

"I know," he says. "It's okay. It's not really a head thing. It's a heart and soul thing."

Our trio has been three days on the road. They've walked the old Roman road, the Via Traiana, through Sahagún and Calzadilla de los Hermanillos, on to Mansilla de las Mulas, and are now climbing the hill into León.

"Martha! Martha!"

Martha looks around to see who's calling her name. She expects to see a peregrina friend or two from earlier in the Camino. She's been out of circulation friend-wise these last few days – spending evenings with her new-found family. But it's not a new friend. It's Joy, the teacher friend who insisted on her email check-ins. She's standing right in front of Martha and wraps her in a big hug. Hope and Wayne turn to see what's going on.

"What are you doing here?" Martha asks. "It's good to see you, but what are you doing here?"

"Well, just you wait until you see where we're staying, Martha. Just you wait."

"Oh, my God. You didn't," Martha says. "Did you?"

"Yup, I sure did," says Joy, gleefully. "And you could use a shower, girlfriend. Let's go. You're staying with me for two nights. Then I've got an Airbnb for a month. It's so good to see you. I'm so glad to be here."

“What are you going to do in León for a month? Oh. I’ve got people with me.”

“Really? Who?” she asks.

Hope and Dad have been standing by, watching this unexpected greeting, waiting for Martha’s cue. Martha beckons them over. “This is Hope. And this is Wayne. It’s a long story.”

Joy hugs them both. “I’m happy to meet you both,” she says. “Martha, what are we going to do? I’ve only got one room.”

“No problema,” says Dad. He turns to Hope and says, “My treat.” And just like that, they’re off to the Parador in León, made famous by Martin Sheen in ‘The Way,’ which Martha’s dad has clearly seen. How has that worked? wonders Martha, not for the last time.

Off they go through the streets of León, past the flower shops and all the lions, past the Gaudí town hall and the soaring cathedral, down more streets full of people and pilgrims, to the Parador. Past the famous statue of the tired pilgrim, through the massive doors up to the reception desk, where Martha’s dad inquires whether they have a vacancy for a tired pilgrim and his granddaughter. He’s told that, yes, they have a pilgrim’s room for only 100 euro/night. He takes it for two nights, and they arrange to meet in the lobby in an hour. Off they go, up the grand staircase, in the opposite direction from Joy and Martha.

In their room, so soft and clean and lovely, Joy says, “Okay. The full story can wait until you’ve showered. I hope you have some clean clothes in that backpack. If not, you’re borrowing something of mine.”

Martha doesn’t have to be asked twice. Into the shower she goes. It’s heavenly.

There’s so much to see in León that Martha’s glad to have an extra day. When she started walking, she thought she’d take occasional zero days, but she hasn’t. She anticipated maybe taking a day off every week or so, but she hadn’t felt like she needed to because she felt pretty strong. Plus, if you stay in an albergue you have to leave in the morning, so the only way to stay is through a special arrangement, like some of the clergy do who stay in monastic albergues. Hostals and hotels will allow multiple day stays, but albergue hospitaleros are fierce about this rule. The third reason she hadn’t taken rest days was because she got bored in Burgos, and walking just got to be a habit.

Martha’s plan before she’d accumulated companions was to get to León before noon and spend the afternoon doing tourist things – see the Cathedral, for sure, and maybe one of the museums. Joy put that idea out of her head pretty fast. Martha protested a little, but the thought of two nights in the Parador, eating well and sleeping in comfortable sheets, was too delicious. Plus, she thought maybe she wanted to talk to her friend about what had been happening.

Martha’s shower was revelatory – abundant hot water along with adequate pressure, lemon verbena goat’s milk soap, and luxuriously thick towels. She knows her skin is suffering – Dr. Bronner’s castile soap and Vaseline weren’t really doing the trick, and it was starting to show. She was already looking forward to the first facial of her return.

Then Joy says, “Martha, your emails were pretty terse. All you ever told me was that you were alive, and where you were. What’s been going on, girlfriend?”

Joy had been Martha’s confidant as her marriage began to fall apart. She knew Martha as well as anyone. They’d taught across the hall for ten years, went out for occasional drinks, sat together at faculty meetings so they could make snide remarks. Their friendship really began when Hugh started coming home late every night and Martha started feeling scared. Joy had noticed and had been there to listen and support. Martha was grateful.

Martha starts to reply, “Well, you know, lots of walking and shit,” but decides to risk telling Joy some of the truth, at least. What was the worst that could happen? Martha thinks she’s still sane, despite her own occasional doubts.

“Oh, sweetie. Such interesting stuff. It’ll take a while to debrief. And it’ll sound crazy. Are you up for that?”

“How could I not be, with that intro? What shall we do now?”

“Well,” replies Martha, “I need to get dressed.”

“Do you?” asks Joy.

“What the fuck, Joy. Are you hitting on me?”

“What would you say if I said yes?” asks Joy.

“I would say if you knew how unsexy I feel, you would know how ridiculous *any* proposition is, not the least from a woman I thought was straight. My skin is like sandpaper, I’m tired to my bones, I don’t know who I am anymore, and the last thing I want is someone else inside my body.”

“I’ll take that as a no. You have your own bed and I promise not to jump you in the night. Scout’s honor, sweetie. This is an inquiry, not a seduction. It’s just that you look so beautiful.”

“Let me get dressed and let’s go meet Wayne and Hope. They’re part of the story.”

“Roger that,” says Joy. Martha rustles around in her backpack for her city clothes, worn once in Burgos. They’re wrinkled and a little musty, but they’ll do. She pulls on the airy green skirt, yellow t-shirt, and pink Teva flip flops from the Chicago Goodwill. Not much, but enough to make her feel pretty, which is nice. And they weigh almost nothing, which is a total requirement.

Down they go, down that immense staircase, to where Hope and her dad are waiting for them. They’re playing cards. Of course he’s got cards in his backpack, thinks Martha. Of course. And he’s teaching Hope to play Con Quien, the game of Martha’s youth.

Hope looks up, sees Martha and Joy, says “Hi, M... Martha! Doesn’t it feel good to be clean? That’s a pretty skirt. It looks good on you.”

Martha realizes that it fits a little looser than it did last time she wore it, days ago in Burgos. She's getting leaner and meaner. She feels both tired and strong. She feels good.

Joy says, "I've scoped out the first restaurant. We'll go from there first, and probably the Cathedral next."

Martha, Joy, Hope, and Wayne walk out into the plaza in front of the Parador, headed to the Cathedral. They stop to admire the statue of the tired pilgrim on their way, and Martha wonders, not for the first time, why there are no statues of women pilgrims. Especially since a woman pilgrim in the Middle Ages wasn't unusual. It seems odd to her. On the modern Camino, the numbers of women pilgrims, "peregrinas," had caught up to and surpassed the number of pilgrim men. (In 2018, slightly more women than men reached Santiago.)

They retrace their steps to the center of León where the cathedral looms in all its gothic glory. The benches surrounding the plaza are crowded with locals, tourists, and pilgrims. All the tables at the bars and restaurants that circle the plaza in front of the soaring cathedral are filled. It's a magnificent sight and a beautiful sunny day, for a change.

"How long have you been in León?" Martha asks Joy.

"I got here day before yesterday," she answers. "I thought you'd be here earlier. Did you slow down?"

"Long story, again," says Martha.

"Anyway," Joy continues, "that gave me time to look around, get over my jet lag, and find a room for a month. I'm really looking forward to just being here – exploring, sitting, drawing and painting what's in front of me. I might even rent a car and go a little further afield. The history and the art are amazing. And maybe I can work on my Spanish."

Martha wonders what *she* would do with a month in León. It's a fun thought to ponder.

It's warm and sunny at Joy's restaurant on the back side of the cathedral, away from the crowded plaza. Martha orders a beer and an ensalada mixta, one of her favorite things to eat on the Camino. It's simple – shredded lettuce, sliced tomatoes, shredded carrots, sliced onions, a pile of beans, usually garbanzo but occasionally something else, a sliced hard-boiled egg, and a pile of tuna. It comes with a packet of olive oil and a packet of apple cider vinegar, with salt for sprinkling. Sometimes the salad is gussied up: the onions or the beets might be pickled, the tuna might be a cut above, the beans might be marinated, the lettuce might be actually green romaine instead of iceberg. The oil and vinegar might be in cruets, rather than plastic packets. There might be pepper to grind! It's amazing when that happens, as the Spanish aren't too interested in pepper. She wonders why, not for the first time. It's her favorite snack, always served with delicious bread and butter. It's also the only dependable vegetable on the Camino. Martha, by this time, has had her fill of the consistently carbohydrate-heavy, bland Spanish menú del día. She wants to eat well in León, before going back to the predictable menú for the rest of her pilgrimage.

Martha is brought out of her reverie when she hears Joy asks Hope and Wayne, "So, how did you two hook up with Martha? She didn't say anything about you in her 'I'm alive' emails."

Hope looks at Martha for permission. Martha nods. Might as well. What difference would it make if Joy thought she was crazy? What's the worst that could happen?

"Well, Joy," begins Hope, "Until, I don't know, a week or so ago, I was frozen inside Martha's chest, next to her heart. She found me there, took me out, and thawed me. While we were in a field of poppies outside Castrojeriz and I was still very cold, Martha's mom came along and helped her help me to thaw. We stayed the night at the Hospital del Alma with María, who doesn't usually let people stay with her. It's a really beautiful place. And, yes, I know. Martha's mom is dead. She knows that too. What you have to remember is that the Camino is thin, and miracles happen along it. That's the best explanation I have for all this weird ass shit, which I got from Wayne here. We got me clothes in Castrojeriz at a convent that had this whole room of clothes to give away, and the sister told Martha that this isn't as unusual as you'd think, that people often arrive in Castrojeriz with kids they need to dress. So there's that. After a few days, it seemed to be time to go back into Martha's heart, so that's where me and Grandma were. It was nice in there, too. It reminded me of the picnics on the desert that I loved so much, always with creeks and grass, because they were in February. It was like that – a creek and fresh grass, and Grandma working up a sweat building walls and fences to keep the creek safe. Then, a couple of days ago, it seemed to be time for me to come out again. I think Martha needed me. She asked me a question. When I came out, she was talking to Wayne, who is her dead dad. Yup, dead people again. I know."

"Wayne?" says Joy. Martha notices that Joy seems to be taking this all in stride. "What's your story?"

"Well," he says. "Well. I've been around for quite a while. I've been wanting to clear a few things up with Martha. And then there she was, and there I was, and now here we are. I have some ideas about how this is happening. I'm not sure if they're true or not, and I don't know how long I'll get to be here, and I'm really glad to be here. Thank you for prompting us to stay in León for an extra day. I'm excited to be in Spain, in León, with these two, who are really the same person somehow. I don't have to figure it out. I just get to enjoy it. I've always wanted to go to Spain."

"Okay, then. Let's enjoy it. Done with your lunch?" Hope and Wayne had finished their paella. Joy had already finished her ensalada, along with a glass of wine. "Next stop, the Cathedral. After that, who knows. Maybe a nap." Up they get, Martha with a little difficulty, and around to the front of the cathedral they go.

The Cathedral of León is late 13th century, thoroughly Gothic. It's the most Gothic of Spain's cathedrals, and the one with the most stained glass. It reminds Martha of English cathedrals more than the Spanish cathedrals she's visited, which come to think of it is only Burgos. She's been inside lots of churches, but only two cathedrals. She finds a spot where the sun is shining through the multitude of stained-glass windows, unusual in Spain. The guidebook quotes a 17th century novelist: "I went inside, but I was sure I hadn't, and that I was still in the plaza, as the cathedral is so glassed and transparent.... You can drink from this church as from a glass cup."

Martha's 21st century experience is similar. She sits for a while, drinking in this holy space, and thinking. *Well, that cat's out of the bag now. Should I just have told Joy that Wayne and Hope are grandfather and granddaughter walking the Camino between Hope's junior and senior year of high school, as a way for her to discern what's next for her? She loves her grandpa, and he's always wanted to walk the Camino? That would have made more sense and would have looked way more normal.* What will be the fallout of telling Joy the truth? She'd have to wait and see.

The others have left her to soaking in the stained glass-colored sun. Martha wanders off to find them and comes upon a sight that stops her in her tracks. In one of the small chapels off the ambulatory surrounding the nave is a Virgin Mary statue. You know by now that sculptural depictions of the Virgin Mary aren't unusual. They're everywhere, in churches and on mountain tops, starting with the one on the pass between St. Jean Pied de Port and Roncesvalles. However, this one's remarkable for one reason. She's pregnant. That's Jesus inside her womb.

Oh my God, Martha thinks. That's amazing. Now why in hell is that so unusual? Why do we not see that more often? The stories say that Mary gave birth to Jesus. They talk about her going to Bethlehem when she was great with child. They talk about the Annunciation. But a depiction of a pregnant Mary? That's never done. Ever. Are they worried about showing Mary's power? Are they worried about proving that the womb is necessary? Does a depiction of a pregnant Mary give women too much power? Or are they just embarrassed by her? She reads the plaque and sees that the statue is called "La Virgen de la Esperanza," The Virgin of Waiting and Hoping.

Martha needs to sit down. Because, again, this Mary is talking to her. Other than Sheela, she still hasn't told anyone, alive or dead, that the Marys had begun talking in Pamplona. They haven't stopped. She's started to think twice before going into churches. But Mary is there, everywhere, all along the Way. You couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting a statue of Mary in this country.

This Mary is behind bars. The chapel doors are locked and there's nowhere to sit in the ambulatory. Martha puts her hands up to the iron bars. She rests her head on the bars, closes her eyes, and listens.

"Martha, Martha. Welcome, my sister. I'm glad you're here. Thank you for coming. This is all very weird, isn't it? You should have been there when the angel told me I was pregnant with God's son. Now THAT was weird. That looked crazy. That felt crazy. Joseph got called crazy for choosing to protect me instead of getting rid of me. He raised my son as his own. He never really knew what to make of all that stuff – me being mysteriously pregnant before we were married, the angels, the shepherds, the magicians, and his son being so committed to the things he knew that others didn't. He just wanted his son to follow in his footsteps – to have a peaceful life making the best of what he'd been given."

Martha looks up. This seems pretty orthodox for a Mary vision. She's waiting for the punch line. Mary continues.

"Oh, blah blah blah, am I right? That's the guys talking through me. The stories the guys tell about me is all about them. You kind of get the sense that if men could give birth, there wouldn't be any need for me in the story. And if men were willing to cook and clean, change diapers and anoint the dead, there wouldn't be any women at all.

"I can see that you're up for the story under that tired old story. Alrighty. Here goes. Here I am, pregnant, right? And you see that the sculptor I recruited called me "the virgin of waiting and hoping." There's this new life in my womb, and I don't have the faintest idea what will happen when he's born. I have to hope, and I have to wait. That's my job right now. It's my job to do the best I can for this baby in my womb. Day by day, moment by moment.

"You know what it's like to be pregnant. You know what it's like to commit to new life, even though you know it's going to change your existing life and you don't know what's going to happen. You might even die while having that baby. So, there's the hope – hoping to survive and hoping the baby's healthy and

hoping that he grows up to be a good man. You really don't have a choice, right? Once you're pregnant, the thing's going end one way or another. The only real choice is whether to be pregnant or not. And that's where you are, my sister.

"You're a wise woman. You can say yes or no. If you say no, all of these memories will go away. If you say no, you'll just be the other Martha who's been walking the Camino without weird stuff happening. It's possible, you know. Most people just walk. They get insights and guidance, sure, but they don't have children emerge from their chests and their dead parents don't show up. This is your choice point. This is your pivot. It's time to decide whether you want to give birth to this baby or not.

"Giving birth to babies is a big deal. And then the raising of them, the care and feeding... Oy. But, you're strong. You're up to it. You can choose to be healed, to give birth to a new you. You can give this new you the care and feeding of her spirit that you didn't have the first time around. You know it will cost you your life. You've done this before, and you can do this again. But you don't have to. It's fine if you don't. Here's what I want you to do. I want you to really think about whether you want to have this baby, and I want you to come back for mass at 5:30.

"Go take a nap. Go sit in the sun. Go decide whether or not you want to be pregnant with the holy. And come back at 5:30. And one more thing, my sister. You are so loved. It's all good."

Martha spends the few hours between lunch and mass sitting in the sun of the Parador cloisters, napping and writing in her journal, while Joy, Hope, and Wayne poke around León. They'll meet in the plaza after mass.

It seems she's made one decision. She will not be sleeping with Joy. Martha's annoyed that Joy even suggested it and resents the distraction. On her way back to the Cathedral for mass, she stops at the front desk and inquires about a small room at pilgrim rates. They do have one. She'll pack her stuff and move tonight, after dinner. If Joy's offended, that's her problem, not Martha's. Martha's usual modus operandi would be to decide that someone else's feelings are more important than her preferences, and then go along with what seems to be expected of her. She's proud of herself and only a little anxious about telling Joy.

The cathedral is cold. Martha's glad she brought her fleece, even though it detracts somewhat from the summery freshness of the skirt and flip flops. She'd rather be warm than cute. Mass is in Spanish, of course. She's wondering why she's there. What is supposed to happen? While she waits, she examines her feet. Calluses and blisters and weird bumps and bruises and tan lines. Her feet are a lot paler than her legs. Her legs are less tanned than they were a week ago, before the rain started. Thank you, God, for the sun, she thinks. It's flowing in like honey, through the stained glass, shining on the people in the pews, many pilgrims among them, scattering shards of color on the pale stone walls.

The organ starts playing loudly and she's transported back into her body – it sounds like an English cathedral organ, but more Spanish somehow. Sound vibrates in her chest. The organ music ceases. Clergy appear at the altar. Mass proceeds. The sermons she's heard are becoming gradually more intelligible. Martha wonders what would happen if she lived in Spain for a year. Would she become fluent? Would she pick it up by osmosis? She's able to communicate in Spain, but it takes a running start. She has to gird her loins and remind herself that it's okay to make mistakes when you're learning. It might actually be okay to make mistakes even when you're a supposed expert. Who wrote the rule that there's a limitation on the number of mistakes you can make, and that past a certain age and

degree of achievement the number of allowed mistakes goes to zero? Who came up with that, and why has she believed it all these decades? There's another thing to let go of at the Cruz de Ferro. Add that one to the list. It's getting to be a pretty long list. She'll have to leave a notebook at the iron cross at this rate.

The priest breaks the consecrated host and invites the people to come and eat the body of Jesus. She's been partaking of communion all along, even though she's not Catholic. She's decided that's one rule she'll break. Martha stands up and falls into line for communion, wondering why she's okay with breaking that particular rule. *Why is that a rule I don't follow? Because I don't agree with it, and there will be no repercussions, that's why. If I thought someone would catch me and punish me, I just wouldn't go to church in Spain.* She receives the wafer in her cupped hands, eats it, and returns to her bench. She's still waiting for whatever it is that's supposed to happen.

At the end of mass, the priest invites pilgrims forward for a blessing. Martha has fallen into line again when she knows. This is why she's here. She's a pilgrim. She's on a journey. The way is made by walking. *Solvitur ambulando. Walking is why she's here.* She's in León because she walked here, and she's going to walk to Santiago. She's in this thing. She's committed. *Walking is why she's here.* She's not sure how that's the answer, but it is. She thought the answer would be bigger and more obvious, like the organ music that's now pounding through the cathedral, but it's not. It's just a small certainty. Her call is to put one foot in front of the other and not to think too much about what's next. Her call is to be here now, on the Camino, walking the Way. The Way. It's small. It's simple. It's also the biggest thing in the world, to walk the Way.

The priest puts his hands on her head and prays blessing for her journey. She's crying, again, and as he wipes away a tear he says the Spanish words. Then, "Bless you, my child. May God richly bless your Way," he says in English. He holds out his hands. She places her hands in his. He folds them together and kisses them. "Vaya con Dios," he says. "Vaya con Dios."

Martha walks out into the Spanish dusk. The tops of the cathedral spires are glowing in the setting sun. The plaza is full of people – pilgrims, tourists, and locals. She sees Joy and her dad on a bench across the plaza, watching the kids playing soccer. Hope has joined the game. The sight of her strong lithe body, ponytail swinging, moving so effortlessly among the younger kids, fills Martha with happiness. The local kids are having a blast, too, she sees, playing soccer with this American teenager. Martha sits and watches, wondering when Hope learned to play soccer. Her dad reaches over and takes her hand. "We missed so much," Martha says. "So much. And here you are." Her dad squeezes her hand. "What's next?" asks Martha.

"Dinner," says Joy. "I'm starving."

At dinner, she tells them about Mass. She hadn't told them that the Marys were talking to her, and she leaves that part out. She does tell them about how touched she was by the pregnant Virgen. She tells them about the priest's blessing, and of her renewed commitment to keep walking. Her understanding that her job is to just walk, being open to what happens and who she's with. That being in perpetual creative response to the present moment is all that's required. That walking with heart and integrity is all she needs to do.

"And in that vein," says Martha, turning to Joy, "I've got my own room for tonight. Thanks so much for being here. I am so grateful. Thanks for not thinking I'm crazy, having these two with me."

“And you two,” she says to Hope and Wayne, “Do you want to stay two nights in León? Or shall we hit the road again mañana?”

“Let’s stay,” says Hope. “There’s a lot to see here, and I’m really liking the Parador. I think I might need a little more luxury in my life. I think I might be a history major in college, or Spanish maybe. Or art. Or maybe all three. Spanish art history. I only know I like it here. Thanks, Joy. Martha totally wouldn’t have stayed if you hadn’t planted the seed. Maybe interior design or architecture. So, this is research.”

Martha wonders how long Hope will stay out this time, and then remembers that it isn’t her job to try to predict the future. Her job is to put one authentic foot in front of the other, all the way to Santiago. One authentic, fully owned, aware, intentional step at a time. Martha is choosing this baby.

The next day our foursome investigates more of León’s abundance of history and culture: the Palacio, the church of San Isidoro and its museum, the museo and cloisters attached to the Parador. The breakfast buffet is bountiful, lunch is delightful, and, again, after Mass, a lovely dinner. Lamb last night, and beef tonight. With rich red wine. Tomorrow they walk to Villar de Mazarife.

After another bountiful breakfast buffet, Martha, Hope, and Wayne say goodbye to Joy, hugs all around. They have mixed feelings. It’s been nice to live in the lap of luxury for a couple of nights, but mostly they’re glad to be on the road again. They won’t stop again until they’re in Santiago. Martha hasn’t decided if she’ll invite Joy to join her in Santiago. She’ll see, and she’s told Joy that she’ll let her know with a couple of days’ notice. She’s going to continue her email check-ins, which Joy wants now more than ever because she wants to know what will happen with Hope and Wayne.

Martha would like to know what will happen with Hope and her dad, also. She’s walking, now, with no expectation that she’ll know the answer to this question, or belief that it’s even within her power to solve. If a child can emerge from her chest and grow into this beautiful young woman, then surely details such as passports and birth certificates are manageable for whatever Force is behind this. Whatever Force this is who seems to be intent on her healing. She’s been so caught between her heart’s wanting so badly to believe in all of this, and her lizard brain that seems intent on convincing her that she’s batshit crazy. The lizard thinks that if something isn’t measurable and quantifiable, it’s not real or important. That’s the same line of reasoning that relegates mystery to poetry, fantasy, and fiction. That’s the same line of reasoning that says there is no such thing as the holy and the sacred. That’s the same line of reasoning that says religion is nuts. Well, Martha thinks, religion *is* nuts. As practiced by many people, anyway.

So, if I let go of religion, Martha thinks, why not let go of everything I’ve thought? Why not examine everything I believe? Why can’t I start over from scratch? If I allowed myself to be a rank beginner, what would I do? If I really let myself start over from scratch, what would I do? If I really knew I could make it, what would I do? I’d paint with oils and acrylics. I’d make things with fabric. I’d build little chapels. (To what?) I’d have a garden. I’d get rid of so much stuff. I’d write poems. Maybe I’d write short stories and novels. I’d write essays. I’d for sure paint. I’d create retreats. I’d make beautiful spaces for women to meet themselves, like El Hospital del Alma. I am so hungry for purpose and knowing my place in the world. I desperately want to know why I’m here. What’s so special about me, and what’s my job?

Where do I think that answer will come from? And do I even deserve an answer? Who am I to think I'm worthy of answers?

Those years of brokenness and chaos in my early life have left me somehow "less than" people with more intact functional families. Bad stuff only happens to people who deserve it, because they're inferior to the ones who don't have it. People with bright shiny families are better than me.

And when Dad died the way he did, it proved I was clearly an inferior class of human. If life could do that to me, it meant I wasn't important enough to be cherished. Life could rip stuff away from me with impunity and my job was to understand that I wasn't important enough for life to care if I got hurt. Like a slave – my attachment and love was meaningless to the power in charge. My attachment and love just meant I got hurt more. That belief, that I just didn't matter as proven by all the bad things that happened, got its start in toddlerhood with a generally uncaring, insensitive family. It solidified as the violence increased and the family fractured, and then the bad stepfather's behavior and Dad's death hammered it home: "Martha, aren't you cute. If you mattered, dear, these things wouldn't happen to you. People don't care about you because you're not important. Life doesn't care about you because you're silly and inconsequential. And it really doesn't matter what you want or what you think, because no one cares. No one wants you to be original. We, the important people, just want you to meet our needs and not to ask for attention."

It's the very construct that's flawed, of course. Rationally, Martha knows it is. Trying to prove she's one of the people who matters is to give power to the construct that some do, and some don't.

Our trio are walking out of León, down the hill and then up another hill. They come to the crossroads where the senda goes straight and the old Camino goes left. The old Camino is hard to see here – the ancient way isn't as easy to find as the straight, well-signed, crowded senda. Streams of pilgrims are taking the well-signed straight way, and they have a moment of indecision. Should they follow the herd, or should they take the risk of going the way that doesn't make sense on the face of it? One way is safe and direct and well-marked. The other way is riskier and unknown. Martha, Hope, and Dad choose to take the risk of following their hearts and turn left, waiting and hoping for confirmation that they're on the old Camino. It takes a while, but in a kilometer or so they see the remnants of an old Camino marker. The concrete is crumbling and the yellow arrow is faded, but there it is. Confirmation. And this way is beautiful.

The old Camino meanders through country that reminds Martha and her dad of ranchland in central Arizona – red dirt, green grass, and what look like cottonwoods in the valley floor along the river. The sun gently illuminates it all, though storm clouds are gathering. Looks like it will be wet later today. They come to the little village of Oncina. Martha remembers her mom's idea to create a hostel where pilgrims could stay for a while, and those not up to walking could mingle with them. Oncina is the perfect place. It's peaceful, pastoral, and restful.

Reluctantly passing through Oncina without stopping, our trio arrives at a donativo. A collapsible table is covered with bananas and energy bars and other snacks. If they wanted to linger, they could even have a café con leche. It's all completely by donation, which confuses Martha, who's uncomfortable with being given things for free. Hope is not confused. She and Dad engage the proprietor in conversation. Martha quickly grabs a banana and an energy bar and scoots away to watch them. Finally, she hears Hope and her dad say, "¡Gracias, señor!" and the gentleman reply "¡Buen Camino!" They walk away, up

onto the *páramo*, the plateau above the valley, where the sun is streaming through billowing lavender clouds onto a field of wildflowers of white and blue and lavender, cut down the middle by the red-dirt Camino. They walk in beauty, full of wonder and awe, all the way to Villar de Mazarife. The rain begins to fall when they're on a concrete section of the path. That red dirt is surely a muddy morass, and Martha's thankful they're out of it. The clouds continue to bloom and blossom and the wind continues to blow. They even see a funnel cloud.

The next day it's on to Astorga. It's a rainy day. Again, our trio has choices to make: senda or ancient Camino. They take the old Camino where they can find it. Twice they end up on the senda without meaning to be and work their way back to the old Camino. About five miles outside of Astorga, in an especially muddy and rainy section, they top a rise to see a ruined farmhouse in the distance. All that's left are adobe walls. A brightly painted green cart stands in front of the ruined walls. Off to the side, a canvas-roofed bench and a stove with café con leche and a pot of soup. The cart holds a myriad of delicious things to eat, things they'd find in a health-food store at home but that are very scarce on the Camino – whole grain bread, almond milk, sunflower seed butter, pumpkin seed butter, and fresh fruit! Bananas, oranges, apples! And cookies, energy bars, nuts! It's incredible, really. The people who are providing all this bounty are called María and David. They live out here during the summer, providing the food for pilgrims.

Our trio stops and sits for a while. They watch other pilgrims walk by, almost all of whom glance skeptically at the green cart of plenty, trying to figure it out. A few ask, “¿Cuanto cuesta? How much?” When David says it's all free, they shake their heads and keep going. They chuckle, but Martha gets it. That was her yesterday, after all. If she was alone, she'd probably keep going, too.

Under the shelter, an Indian-printed bedspread propped up by shaky poles, they talk with a young man from Brazil. Matteo chose to walk the Camino when he realized that he was not taking his life seriously. He'd gotten in the habit of being lazy and hanging out with people who weren't interested in being the best version of themselves that they could be. So, he up and left and now here he is, walking the Camino. He's taken a break and left the Camino to see friends for a week, so now he's got a time crunch. He's walking fifty kilometers each day and sleeping wherever that fifty K lands him. He's got a sleeping bag, and so far, so good. Lots of farmer's fields for Matteo. Martha, Hope, Dad, and Matteo walk together the rest of the way into Astorga.

As they drop down off the rainy Meseta and into Astorga, home of the Gaudi-designed Bishop's Palace and the cathedral and Roman ruins, Martha's blister is killing her. They've walked almost twenty miles. They're doing long days again, now that Hope is a strong teenage girl rather than a newly thawed toddler. Martha would like to hang out here for a few days. She's cold, tired, and sore. Will it ever stop?

Los Montes de León and the Cordillera Cantábrica, the snow-covered mountain ranges that mark the edge of the Meseta, have been visible for a few days now. The white peaks have grown gradually taller on the red-dirt horizon and now loom over this small, cloud-shrouded city. Our trio has heard reports of snow on the Cruz de Ferro, the highest point of the Camino Francés. They'll be there tomorrow or the next day. Martha is wondering what she'll leave behind at the Cruz. She's carried a stone from the North American continent all this way, 350 miles through Spain, to add to the pile at the base of the simple iron cross.

After a good night's sleep in Astorga, a city which Martha loves even more than León because it's smaller and higher and close to the mountains, our trio is back on the Way. To leave Astorga is to walk

down officially, thoroughly, finally off the Meseta. The mountains they'll cross tomorrow are looming in front of them. Monte Irago. At the summit of Monte Irago stands La Cruz de Ferro, the Cross of Iron. She doesn't know what its history, how long it's been there or what its significance is. She knows the tradition, though. Pilgrims have, for several decades at least, left a stone at the base of the cross. The stone symbolizes a wish or a longing or a burden. Martha has carried a rock for the last month, but she hasn't been sure what burden she'll lay down at the foot of the cross. What can she give over to God? What burden will she let go?

This is a day of climbing, climbing, and climbing some more, past one abandoned Maragato village after another. Martha sees suddenly that this suffering is surface ebb and flow, like waves on the ocean. The surface is roiled and rough, but the ocean itself is calm. Perhaps her losses and the failings of others that have caused her suffering are only surface events overlying infinite grace. This sounds very Buddhist. But she doesn't have to make sense of all of this. Her job is just to live simply, give of herself where she can, and be grateful, trusting that she's held in Love. Becoming attached to the waves as separate from the ocean is to be crazy. Riding them, knowing they're part of the ocean, the place where the ocean interacts with the air and the sun but is still ocean, is to be at peace.

Her mind returns to the realization of yesterday: the core of her suffering is her belief that the bad things happened to her because she's an inferior sort of person, ontologically. She's the sort of person that life doesn't care about. She fundamentally doesn't matter and is in fact only here to be useful to the people that life does care about, the superior sort of people to whom bad things do not happen. And underlying that belief is her assumption that some things are categorically bad, and some are good. The meaning she made from the bad things is that she doesn't matter, because *she's* bad. She needs to atone for her hidden badness by being as good as she can be. That's her only hope – following rules, meeting expectations, keeping people happy, staying small, and giving herself away over and over again.

She knows that this belief isn't true. It feels true, and she's believed it for so long that she doesn't even notice it anymore. Until now, when she's given herself the gift of time and space and silence for reflection. Who knew walking the Camino would be so revelatory? She didn't know she had such depths to reveal to herself – such layers to peel away. There have been moments on this walk where she had known herself infinitely loved by God, whatever that means. She'd known herself to be connected to the deep heart of Love, part of Love and beloved of Love. Martha is learning that she doesn't need to be right. She doesn't need to be perfect. She only needs to be Martha. No more pretending. No more disguises. No more avatars.

Right and perfect are illusions. Good and bad are illusions. What's real is this body, this Earth, this heart, this love, this moment. Joy and sorrow, love and loss, growth and death – all part of being embodied on this Earth in this moment. That's all. That's enough. That's more than enough.

Martha breathes deeply of the mountain air. She marvels at the strength of her quads and the pain in her feet. She's here, now, in Spain, on the Camino, with people she loves who are on the rocky road ahead of her, talking and talking.

Painful things happen. So do joyful things. They don't mean anything about worthiness. We all matter, and we all have bad things happen. Everyone is important. She can follow her heart. She can stop trying to prove that she's worthy of good things. She can simply rest peacefully in the grace and love below the waves of surface events.

They keep walking, up and up to Rabanal. Looking at the mountains ahead. Snowy mountains. Even in June.

Martha catches up to her dad and Hope. She tells her dad some of what she's thinking about. She says, "I've realized something earthshattering. That an event could feel bad means that I cared. That I was connected. That I had hopes and dreams and that I loved someone or something. The violence felt bad because I cared about my family. The divorce felt bad because, again, I cared about my family and I didn't want to see us hurt. Mom giving away my animals felt bad because I loved them, and I feared for them. I wanted to take care of them. Having my family dissolve felt bad because I wanted us to be together and happy and loving each other. Having my mom marry a molester felt bad because I wanted to be respected – I loved myself and I wanted other people to love me, too. It didn't have to mean I didn't matter – that was childhood magical thinking that I indulged in way beyond the point of oh oh!! I didn't fight back because if I did, I was afraid I would irrevocably break the bonds between me and Mom, and I loved her too much to do that. If I'd have called him out, I would have caused an irreparable breach. I did the best I could, which was leaving home the day after I graduated from high school under cover of starting college early. That way I could get away and still be connected. That wasn't an act of cowardice. It was an act of love. I chose not to fight back because I wanted to stay connected to my mom. Yes, what she did was wrong, wrong, wrong, and it hurt me bad. I took it because I loved her. Oh, wow.

"And your death felt awful because you were so damn young, and because I loved you, and because Mike was in such pain. We were *all* in such pain after that. All these bad things prove that, in fact, I do matter. Well, not really. They don't prove I matter. They just prove that I was connected and caring and loving. That I was doing my best. They prove that I'm human, with a human heart that got broken way too often. They prove that I was doing my best to be part of the family structure and be a source of love, connection, and caring for those around me. That's pretty awesomely meaningful, if you ask me. I mean, what else can we do but share our gifts and our love with those around us? I was doing my little girl best to do that.

"The whole idea of mattering and not mattering is specious. It's ridiculous. It's just a way to make sense of random bad stuff that happens, so the world doesn't feel so chaotic and capricious. The mattering and not mattering thing is what Hitler did with the Jews and the gays and the Gypsies and the disabled. He said they were inferior and therefore they didn't matter. They were just taking up space. We know that's wrong. That every human being is equally precious. That every life form is precious. Which is why I really want to quit eating animals.

"That thing about why I didn't fight back against the bad stepfather is revelatory. I love that I didn't fight back out of love, not out of weakness and fear. I couldn't see a way to defend myself that wouldn't have hurt my mom, so I didn't defend myself. And then when I could extricate myself without hurting her, I did. And that the bad things were a result of being attached and loving and caring as best I could. They mean I was loving as best I could, not that I was bad. They mean that I was in pain and that I hurt, because I wanted the best for all of us. That I was sensitive and connected, and that I had a vision of how it could be. I was also a little small thing, and I was scared, so I needed to make sense. That's all."

Her dad responds, "I'm so very proud of you for coming on this journey, m'ija." After a pause, he continues, "Thank you for telling me this."

It's early afternoon when our trio reaches Rabanal. More decisions. Stop in Rabanal? Continue on up the mountain and reach the Cruz de Ferro at sunset? Or stop in Foncebadón, reach the Cruz at dawn, and avoid the steep downhill to Molinaseca late in the day in failing light on failing legs? They decide to go on to Foncebadon for the night.

Martha, her dad, and Hope climb and climb to Foncebadón, full of ruins, some reclaimed by religious and by Spanish hippies, whom they've begun calling "Spippies." In the albergue reception area, a sign reads "No hay wifi. Hablad entre vosotrxs": No WiFi. Talk amongst yourselves, the "x" signifying gender neutrality. These Spippie hospitaleros are lovely. They serve vegetarian paella and spicy chai. It's delightful in every way, except for the prodigiously epic snorer in the bunk below Martha. Dinner is communal. There are chickens. Not for dinner, but in the yard and the old barn.

Their table at dinner seats six people. Hope and Martha are side by side, with Dad across from them. Hope is leaning on her mom; Martha's arm is around Hope. Martha is seeing the signs of imminent departure. She's getting ready to ask her dad about his plans when he says, "Martie, it's time for me to go."

He continues, "I've decided to walk to the Cruz de Ferro tonight. Will you come with me to say goodbye, m'ija?"

Martha nods. After dinner he gathers his gear and meets Martha outside the albergue. Hope is staying behind to talk and sing with the young peregrinxs who've congregated here. Most of them are sleeping in the barn. Hope has moved her sleeping bag out there to be with them. She'll see Martha in the morning. Hope hugs Wayne and says, "Adios, mi padre. I love you."

Martha feels so light, walking through the night without a backpack. Her dad, fully loaded, walks beside her, pole tips softly clicking with each stride. The night is cold and clear, the sky filled with stars. No moon yet. Surprisingly to Martha, her eyes have adjusted to the inky blackness. The Way is smooth. Her dad is walking easily and eagerly, it seems. He's whistling. The path widens where they top out, close to the Cruz now. Martha looks up to see the tiny cross silhouetted against the starry sky. Her dad reaches for her hand and holds it as they approach the pile of stones mounded ten feet or higher at the foot of the cross. He drops his backpack and reaches into a side pocket for the stone he's been carrying. From where, Martha wonders? He holds it for a few moments, gently hefting it. Feeling its weight and solidity. Its grittiness and edges.

Martha speaks. "Thank you, mi padre, for being here. I've missed you so much, I'll miss you now, and I'll always miss you. I love you."

He replies, "I have always been with you. I am always with you. I will always be with you. We are a part of each other. We can never be separated."

He continues, "Be the strong, connected, resilient, wise woman you are. Know what you know, be who you are, and let God do the rest. All will be well. It won't be easy, m'ija, but you will be free. Let Hope help you."

Tears roll down Martha's face. Her dad kisses the stone and places it carefully on the pile. He turns to her, takes her hands, and says "Gracias, m'ija, for loving me. I love you, too. Vaya con Dios." He leans down, kisses her forehead, and walks off into the night. He's whistling.

Martha waits until his whistle fades into the silence of the night. She returns the way she's just come, through the black night blanketed by the star-filled sky, down the mountain to the Spippiers' albergue, and falls into bed. Even the prodigious snorer cannot keep her awake tonight.

Martha wakes up before sunrise in the albergue in Foncebadón, few kilometers down the mountain from La Cruz de Ferro. She lies in bed listening to the sounds of pilgrims waking up and getting on with their days – the rustling of convertible pants and water running in the communal bathroom. She's tired of writing. She's tired of thinking. Today she only wants to walk in beauty. She yearns to shed this old skin that keeps her small and tired. She feels the pinching of the chrysalis. It's time to emerge. She feels the pinching of the too-small skin. It's time to shed. The snakeskin is a more apt metaphor than the chrysalis. She feels more like a snake than a butterfly. She feels low to the ground and slithery and heavy, not light and airy and floaty. She feels powerful. And beautiful.

Last night's dream floats into Martha's awareness. In the dream, she enters a cave in search of something she's lost. In the cave is a cage full of children, all about seven years old. They're girls, and they're mangy and crazed. She's frightened and repulsed. They look up when they see her, all except one feral child who's sitting in the corner, muttering and chewing her snarled hair. Like refugees, they crowd to the chain link fence that encloses them and reach out their hands to her. Her heart sinks. She doesn't want to know this. She doesn't want to know these children are here. She doesn't want the responsibility of knowing they're here. What is she supposed to do with them? Clearly, they can't stay here, and now that she knows they're here, it's her responsibility to take care of them. Her cheese is falling off her cracker. She feels unhinged, because she knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that these girls are parts of herself.

That one's Courage and the one over there is Creativity. Those two are Imagination and Intuition. There's Playfulness. The feral one with the snarled hair, the one sitting on the dung heap in the corner, muttering and biting her fingernails, is Rage. She sees Desire and Tenderness, too.

Martha feels a hand in hers and looks down to see clean and tidy uncaged children surrounding her. These are the ones who have been with her all these years – Worry, Anxiety, and Fear, and the sturdiest of them all is Sadness. They've been faithful companions, and they tell her they've missed their sisters. They tug on her hands to show her where the gate is. They tell her that her job is to let their sisters out of the cage. She's safe and it's okay. It's time to shed the skin that keeps them in. It's time to tell the truth and to acknowledge the sadness, yes. But more than that, and even scarier, they want her to let them rest a little. Sadness, Worry, Fear, and Anxiety would like to share the burden with Play and Anger and Courage and Imagination. They understand this means Martha won't feel in control anymore. The parts of her explore and create will take her to places she didn't even know existed. They won't let her stay small and quiet and hidden. Fear says, "Martha, I'm tired of steering you and keeping you safe. How about you let me share the load with my sisters? I know you're scared. You're scared that you're going crazy. You're not crazy. You're brave. You'll be even braver when you let Courage out to play with us."

"How do I love them?" Martha asks Sadness and Worry. "How do I take care of them?"

"You know how to take care of them," says Hope. Where had she come from? "You're compassionate and strong, Martha. You only have to let yourself be reborn."

“Here,” Hope says, and unlocks the gate. “Come out,” she says to the caged girls, “And let’s take care of Martha.” The little girls come out – some with shouts of joy and some with trepidation – to join Hope around a pool. The pool is surrounded by ferns, mosses cling to the wet rocks, and steam rises from it. The girls slowly and reverently help Martha disrobe and lead her to the pool. They gently urge her to lie down in the warm water. They stroke her and rub her and sing to her. Martha realizes they’re rubbing off her old skin. They raise her up and walk her to where the sun is entering the cave. They rub her dry with soft, thick, warm towels. Her new skin is thin and porous. Martha feels both raw and incredibly strong. The girls rub her new transparent skin with oil, still singing.

Martha sits down on a granite boulder and opens her arms. One by one the little girls crawl into her chest. Martha is big enough to hold all of them now. Last to crawl back in is Hope. She reaches out and hugs her mom as she returns where she belongs. Martha looks inside her heart. Hope and the little girls are playing in the grass by the side of the desert creek, watched over by their vigilant guardian.

Martha emerges from her sleeping bag. Her dad’s bunk is empty. She wants to mark this metamorphosis. She digs out the scissors in her foot care kit and goes to the garden of the albergue. Her only companions are the chickens. With the scissors made for cutting bandages, she cuts off her hair so it’s sticking out about an inch all over her head, like a halo. A messy gray halo. Hair is all over the ground. Birds will use it for nests. In this windy place it will blow away before lunchtime.

Back inside, she sees her reflection in the albergue bathroom mirror as she dresses. She looks like a Buddhist nun and she likes that. Martha feels a fierce urge to get down to essentials. She’s a renunciate, at least for now. She’s dropping nonessentials. Getting down to the bones of things. The bones of herself. She’s had that hair for so long, it feels strange not to have it. Strange and free. She’ll look different when she sees Tom again. If she sees Tom again.

Martha packs her backpack, goes downstairs for breakfast, and heads out the albergue door up the rocky trail to the Cruz de Ferro for the second time. She might not get far today, having traveled so far before she even got out of bed. She feels new and old, simultaneously. It’s a glorious morning – frosty and clear. So beautiful it hurts her heart. Martha feels both empty and full. She simply wants to walk in beauty.

Martha’s walked over the Pyrenees, across the Meseta, and now up here to Monte Irago. She’s loosed the lid on her jar of messies, unfrozen Hope, walked with her dead mother and her dead father, followed a cougar and talked to God in Templar churches, listened to Mary’s voice many times, and more. She’s feeling buffeted and loony and loopy and unhinged, and more alive than she’s felt since childhood. Martha still wishes that her life was predictable and linear, and that she didn’t have to feel so nuts and look so flaky to feel so alive. It might always be a sticking place for her, this wanting to appear perfect. Wanting to always have her ducks in a row. She might always have to contend with not wanting to look like she’s flailing around.

Martha’s still not sure what she will do when she goes home. She’s still not sure she’s even going to *go* home.

But today, she doesn’t have to worry about what’s next. Today, her job is to walk these last five kilometers to La Cruz de Ferro, the highest point on the Camino, and to lay her burden down with a prayer. Then, she’ll walk down the other side, to Ponferrada, O Cebreiro, Sarria, and on to Santiago, and

maybe on to the end of the earth, Finisterre. That's all she has to do right now, today. That's as far as she needs to see. One foot in front of the other – one word after another – day after day. Take the next step, and then the next. Write a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, a novel. Draw a line, a form, an image, a painting, a world.

Last night, there had been only Martha and her dad, walking this Way in the dark under a sky brilliant with stars. This morning, Martha walks through the cool, sunlit air surrounded by other pilgrims, birdsong everywhere.

Then she sees it, this time in stark relief against that true blue dream of sky – La Cruz de Ferro. This place looks different in the daytime. The cross itself is so small. It's no more than two feet high, stuck on top of a thirty-foot tall pole. At the base of the pole is an immense mound of rocks, some with words written on them or notes attached to them. Most of the stones are bare, symbolizing who knows what to the people who put them there. Again, there's the incongruity of a tour bus stopped on the road leading to the cross. There are both easy ways and hard ways to get anywhere, she thinks. It's about the journey, not the destination. And the quality of the journey impacts the destination.

Benches and boulders are scattered around the field surrounding the cross. Martha sits and takes her notebook and pen from her backpack, along with the stone she brought from Lake Superior.

Martha wants to stay in the light. She wants to tell the truth. She writes:

“Here, at La Cruz de Ferro on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, I'm leaving behind my habit of unworthiness. I promise to know myself as lovely and lovable. I promise to welcome all the parts of myself – anger and sadness, imagination and creativity, courage and tenderness, desire and fear – and to walk with Hope all the rest of my days. I promise to keep shedding my skin when it gets too tight. I promise to be transparent and porous and permeable, even when I feel scared. I promise to stop hiding and to tell the truth. I promise to persist, even when living like this feels uncomfortable and I want to stop. And I promise to forgive myself when I fail at all of this, and to begin again.”

Martha wraps the paper around the stone, kisses it and drops it at the foot of the cross, then walks over Monte Irago and down the other side.

Part two (!)

“The bad news is you're falling through the air, no parachute, nothing to hang on to. The good news is, there's no ground.” ~Chögram Trungpa

Everything about my day became important, especially my body and Earth's body. This body. This daily act of living became precious. The dust of the road. Every encounter. Every tree. Every flower. My short hair. Everything I did became a prayer, and everything I saw and felt and tasted was holy.