

## **DAY 1: Madrid to St. Jean Pied de Port- Fear and Self-Loathing on the Camino.**

I gazed over the side of the cliff with tears in my eyes, considering whether the fall would kill me or just leave me with a few broken bones and yet another reason to hate my sorry ass and what my life had become. A fucked-up divorce, emotional abuse, an estranged daughter, and dreams of blood running down my arm from a severed artery had led me here to chew over this dubious exit strategy.

Instead, I lumbered on. It was my first day walking an ancient pilgrimage route called the Camino de Santiago after being dumped by the woman who'd helped me forget my feelings of worthlessness caused by my ex-wife's emotional abuse. I thought stumbling sunburnt and broken-hearted through a sweaty Spain summer would somehow change her mind, reconcile me with my daughter, help me forgive my ex-wife, and put an end to my dreams of suicide.

Add to that a gnawing feeling that after more than half a century on this earth, I'd probably check out with no more of an idea as to why I'm here than when I took my first steps into my mother's waiting arms in a suburb of Los Angeles over fifty years ago. So, it seemed logical to book a flight halfway around the world and stumble across a country I'd never been within five thousand miles of.

I was hoping that somehow taking a million steps down a path across Northern Spain in the middle of a blistering hot summer to find some dead saint buried at a church in a city named Santiago de Compostela would help me lose sight of some of the things I needed to rid myself of. I'd leave those things behind with each boot print I made in the dirt, see the path in front of me more clearly, and figure out how to walk it with the time I had left before shuffling off this mortal coil.

So, when I hit rock bottom, a conversation I'd had in a bar about walking the Camino barged into my psyche like a bull running through the streets of Pamplona looking to gore a drunken tourist, and it wouldn't let go. I'd never even been to Europe, but I didn't have to think twice with everything I knew and loved tumbling down around me.

*"Thus, conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pith and moment with this regard their currents turn awry and lose the name of action." -Hamlet.*

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I stood outside St. Jean Pied de Port, France (the traditional starting point of the Camino), looking up a road that disappeared into the clouds. Lao Tzu said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Yeah, well, I'll bet Lao Tzu's first steps didn't take him 25 kilometers over the Pyrenees with a 30-pound pack on his back, rain-soaked, suffering from a bad attitude and two-day hangover due to a "miscalculated cultural experience" in Madrid.

That momentary lapse of good judgment had compromised my level-headedness and sense of direction two days prior when I'd set out to take a train from my hotel to the central station and board a bus to transport me to St. Jean. Not that my judgment had been stellar lately. In fact, due to the shit-bag of chaos my life had become over the previous year, my decision-making was pretty much on the level of the dude who decided there should be 16 lifeboats on the Titanic.

After agonizing over the signs at the train station, I ended up heading in the wrong direction. When I realized this, I guessed I'd probably end up at the gates of Hell, or the very least, a Justin Bieber concert. I figured I deserved it, at least according to the hungover voice in the back of my head who, in his best mood, thinks I'm as worthless as a screen door on a submarine. He went on to question how in the hell I would be able to hoof it across an entire country when I couldn't even navigate the Madrid train station.

I turned myself around with the help of an older dude who spoke English. Finally, after arriving at the central bus terminal, I found that the last bus to Pamplona wouldn't make the connection to St. Jean. I got out of line and kicked myself for the hangover, what an asshole I was, and for the gnawing feeling that this whole misadventure may be a colossal mistake.

While wallowing in self-pity followed by a chaser of self-loathing, somehow, I spied a window for another bus company and saw they, too, had tickets to Pamplona, and their bus would get me there in time to make the connection to St. Jean. There's a saying that the Camino provides. Yeah, well, that kind of magic didn't exist in my fucked-up world at the time, but I took the ticket anyway and ran to catch my bus.

I sat down next to a lithe, twenty-something Canadian named Erin, and we talked all the way to Pamplona. She'd been traveling for a few months and thinking about opening a hostel in some small town outside of Calgary like the ones on the Camino. Maybe a place where Neil Young and K.D. Lange could hole up and bang out a few hemlocky songs about life, death, and saving the manatee.

The plan seemed a little whimsical to a cynical, hard-boiled 'Merican like me, but I refrained from infecting her with my nihilistic disposition, the seeds of which were planted not too long after the 2008 recession. The seeds that grew into divorce, my daughter's hatred for me, dreams of suicide, and eventually, my forlorn carcass sitting on a bus on the way to Pamplona, looking for some sort of redemption.

When we reached Pamplona, Erin and I parted ways—she was joining friends gathering for the Running of the Bulls. I found my way to the bus for St. Jean—at least where I thought it should be. My hangover-infused insecurity was still questioning every thought that crossed my half-pickled brain. Fortunately, I spied two pilgrims sitting on a bench (my critical eye noticing the humungous backpacks sitting next to them), so I approached them in the spirit of pilgrimic kinship.

Kento was a short Japanese guy in his mid-thirties with a perpetual grin. He spoke little English but made up for it with his exuberant nature. He continually bounced up off the bench to make a point, although I was never sure what the point was. I couldn't help but crack a half-bent smile at his spirited enthusiasm.

Asia was a different story. She was a beautiful brunette, probably in her mid-thirties, who spoke three languages fluently, including English. We boarded the half-full bus and rolled away to St. Jean. Asia and I talked for a while, but she seemed guarded. It may have been the half-crazed, emotionally bankrupt American with the scent of two-dollar-a-bottle Rioja oozing out of his pores sitting next to her.

She said she was staying with an acquaintance in St Jean for a while, so she wouldn't be setting out on her pilgrimage the following day like the rest of us fools, so I reasoned I'd probably never see her again. After an hour and a half on a winding road through the Pyrenees, the bus pulled up to St Jean in a drizzle. Asia and I hugged (she told me she was a big hugger) and said our goodbyes as Kento corralled his backpack and returned, looking at me like I knew what the hell I was doing.

I'd said a lot of goodbyes over the previous year or so- friends, the life I'd known, and most recently to Amanda, the woman I'd met after separating from my wife, the woman who put an end to my gauzy, nocturnal reveries of hara-kiri, the woman who saved my life. We met at a party and became inseparable but soon found out we had the fallout from our marriages to contend with- both in the throes of our dragged-out divorces and reeling from abusive spouses, haunted pasts, and kids not knowing where to turn.

Looking back, neither of us made the best decisions at the time, but we both needed one thing: to have someone else love us so we could begin to learn to love ourselves again. Unfortunately, when you're both carrying enough baggage to fill up the Beverly Hillbillies' jalopy, something's gotta give. When she said she didn't love me anymore, a conversation I'd had at a bar called The Poopdeck about the Camino roared back to me through a whiskey and cigarette-smoke haze. It planted itself firmly next to my bruised heart, resulting in me standing drenched on a cobblestoned street in bumfuck France with an Asian dude named Kento in the rain.

Kento had volunteered to see if there was an available room at his auberge (the name used for many of the hostels along the Camino catering to pilgrims), so I followed him past the center of town, walking on cobblestones up a winding, fairy tale street that crossed a river.

The auberge was full, but Kento offered me further assistance (I think). I shook my head no and offered him my hand, muttering the pilgrim's salutation of "Buen Camino." It was time for me to begin my pilgrimage and experience one of the primary reasons I'd traveled halfway around the world- to be alone with the pathetic creature that'd started to crawl out of the primordial ooze of its soul over the last year.

The man whose self-esteem had been whittled down to a toothpick by an emotionally abusive marriage. The man whose guts had been eviscerated by a beautiful Swedish woman who'd made him feel worthwhile until she told him she no longer loved him. The man who secretly hoped he'd find a cliff somewhere along The Camino that would make a fall seem like an accident.

I walked up the old street in a steady drizzle alone, wallowing in my bath of self-pity, my stupor broken by loud hustle-bustle coming through an open doorway. It wasn't an auberge as I'd hoped, but a place to obtain a "pilgrims' passport"- like a real passport, with pages to get stamped in towns along the way. I'd ordered one online but never received it- details are easily forgotten when emotions crowd one's thoughts.

The woman who issued my passport directed me down the street to one of the newest auberges in St. Jean. When I got there, I was glad to see they had beds. Due to the constant drizzle, I'd become soaked and imagined myself having to sleep outside, spending the subsequent few days coughing up phlegm and blowing snot onto the Camino. Not the best behavior for a pilgrim on some sort of spiritual quest, I surmised.

The proprietor, Maria Estelle, welcomed me out of the rain and into the anteroom of her auberge. This ancient stone structure was probably older than even my 7th-grade homeroom teacher, Mrs. Beyenburg, who seemed older than dirt at the time. She could only talk about her Shih Tzus and how she was allergic to everything, including grass, sunlight, and, most likely, 7th graders. And apparently, she didn't realize how the words "Shih Tzus" could be used to comic effect by her incurious wards.

I opted to pay an extra euro and sleep in a smaller room with only four beds. Soon, I was joined by two Koreans- Park and Hyun. I'm not sure why I opted for more intimate sleeping quarters. Maybe I felt I needed a slow immersion into the pilgrim life instead of being woken up to the sound of snoring and farting as a hundred other pilgrims in bunk beds crammed into one cavernous room tried to sleep and ignore the fact that they were one of a hundred pilgrims packed into a room of snoring, farting pilgrims.

I walked into town, and the cafes were abuzz- fellow pilgrims excited about their impending journey. I sat silently as I wolfed down some Spaghetti Bolognese with a glass of two-buck Bordeaux and returned to the auberge. Maria Estelle offered me a French beer, and we chit-chatted about St Jean and the Camino as her husband watched TV. After she joined him, I wrote in her guest book "Thanks for opening up your place and your heart to me," sentiments not easy for a man whose heart had a fissure the size of the San Andreas Fault running through it.

But at least the next day would prove that a few blisters, constant drizzle, and 20 kilometers of road that seemed like it went straight up (it got me thinking that somebody screwed up on the directions to Hell) would at least help me begin to forget the sadness and pain that had sent me there in the first place.

*I have a friend, he's mostly made of pain  
He wakes up, drives to work and straight back home again  
He once cut one of my nightmares out of paper  
I thought it was beautiful, I put it on a record cover.*

*And I tried to tell him that he had a sense  
Of color and composition so magnificent*

*And he said thank you, please, but your flattery  
It is truly not becoming me.*

*Your eyes are poor, you're blind, you see  
No beauty ever could have come from me  
I'm a waste  
Of breath, of space, of time -Bright Eyes*

## **DAY 2: St. Jean to Roncesvalles- Gorillas, John Varvatos, and The Fabric of Life.**

My phone alarm went off around six, so I groggily stumbled out of bed like a bleary-eyed drunken wildebeest and wrested it from the charging station between Park and Hyun's beds. I returned to lie down and collect my thoughts, comforted by the absolute silence of our quaint little room at this ancient stone inn nestled amongst trees, streams, and mountains.

That is until a memory from the previous night crept in- my phone's cheery whistle ripping through that beautiful and profound silence throughout the night. Since the phone was at the charging station across the room, I wanted to avoid getting up and further disturbing my fellow pilgrims as they tried to sleep, so each time it whistled, I hoped and prayed it would be the last time. My prayers went unanswered that night.

After 17 whistles over an hour or two, I'd finally fallen into a restless sleep with the help of a few anti-anxiety pills. A few friends I'd told about the Camino had neglected the time difference and chosen these opportune hours to text me suggestions for places to stay and eat in Spain. I'd neglected to tell them I was on a spiritual quest of dubious merit and wouldn't be partaking in such trifling enterprises that might detract from my sacred mission, short of some sacramental wine from time to time. I lay there trying to figure out how I could slip out the door unnoticed as everyone stirred, groggy from their interrupted slumber, ready to wring the neck of anyone who dared purse their lips and let out a whistle.

Getting ready took forever. I hadn't thought about preparing the night before- maybe organizing my backpack and lying out some clothes. At this point in my journey, it made perfect sense- the shit-bag of chaos that my life had become reared its ugly head and proceeded with the reckless whim and abandon I'd gotten used to over the previous year or two.

I finally finished packing and headed downstairs to the front door, saying goodbye to Maria Estelle as she hugged and kissed me on both cheeks. Park and Hyun were lingering in the lobby, so we headed off together down the perfect dewy streets of St. Jean in a steady sprinkle. In just a few minutes, we were on a steep, paved road heading into the Pyrenees. This was Basque country, which straddles the border between northeastern Spain and southwestern France.

The Basque have always been a curious breed since, until recently, no one was sure where they came from. The natural assumption would be they're a blend of northwestern Spanish and southwestern French folks, like a Rhone blend with some Tempranillo thrown in. But the thing is, they have unique customs and a language unrelated to any other culture. I naturally assumed they were aliens or possibly sired by Sasquatch. But recent studies suggest they're descendants of early farmers who mixed with local hunters before becoming isolated for millennia.

So I figured I'd feel right at home, isolation being one of the reasons I traveled to Spain. Since I'd blown off my friends to be with Amanda as much as possible and my ex-wife and daughter wanted nothing to do with me, I was utterly alone after Amanda's sudden decampment. I didn't know what to do with the empty minutes, hours, and days parading before me like an old three-legged blind dog named "Lucky" trying to find his way home. If it wasn't enough to try and heal from my wife's emotional abuse and get my daughter not to hate me, I now had to try and mend my broken heart.

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As I lumbered uphill through the steep foothills of the Pyrenees surrounded by green fields that rolled down to the valley floor, it began to drizzle. I had no rain gear, so I just had to grin and bear it. "What's a little discomfort?" I thought. It seemed my life had become an uncomfortable hairshirt over the last year. Once light and relaxed, it had become wet, mildewed and smelled like shit, reminding me of what I'd become, at least in the eyes of my wife, daughter, and the rest of the world.

Being uncomfortable is psychological—a reaction, an emotional response we learn. It seems most of our emotions are habitual responses to things that hold us in their grip and keep us from being happy. But changing habits is as tricky as teaching my mom how to navigate the internet over the phone.

As I navigated the constant 30% grade up the Pyrenees, I wondered if the other Pilgrims were as ill-prepared as I was. Most likely they weren't dickheaded enough to trudge 25 kilometers over a mountain range with a 30-pound backpack, no training, and a heavy sack of disillusionment, despair, and pieces of their heart in tow. I'd heard it was all about the journey, but the saying "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" seemed more appropriate at the moment.

Maybe every pilgrimage starts off in hell, figuratively at least, and the point is to move toward heaven or some sort of redemption. Unfortunately, the constant bitching from my shoulders and every muscle below my waist made it hard to consider any spiritual significance of my dubious quest.

After about two and a half hours walking uphill, I came upon Refuge Orisson, a lonely Inn and cafe overlooking the beautiful viridescent valley I'd just clomped out of. It was my last chance to have a warm meal until Roncesvalles, the ancient monastery where I hoped to find a cot to rest my wet and weary bones. Pigs the size of Mini-Coopers grazed out front, so I got a chorizo baguette, for irony's sake, along with an espresso chaser.

I was soon joined by a young, good-looking Italian dude from Milan and his friend. It was Antonio's second Camino. We discussed our countries, our lives, and what had brought us to walk the Camino. I told him I'd come to Spain because of a woman. Surely it wasn't the first time those words had been uttered by some piteous fuckbucket like me. After thinking about it, I realized I was there because of several women. I wasn't sure what the universe was trying to tell me, but it felt like she was poking me in the eye with a stick. That was burning. While shoving another one up my ass.

I left Antonio and the warmth of the cafe in Orisson and trudged on ever upward towards Roncesvalles. Our conversation reminded me that not too long ago, I'd been drowning in a sea of self-loathing and contempt for the world that, as far as I was concerned, had dealt me a losing hand after I'd separated from my wife and was relegated to living in a crappy old studio apartment with no money and no job feeling sorry for myself. And I certainly couldn't fathom how or why Amanda had come into my life under those conditions and begun to heal the open wounds that were deep and festering.

The drizzle continued, mixed with light fog and low-hanging clouds. I had short conversations with folks from Norway, Poland, Italy, and other countries. Never having been to Europe, it amazed me to experience such a diverse mix of people on my first day walking the Camino. In addition, everyone was friendly and giving, in contrast to how I felt about myself- an inconsequential, selfish American prick feeling sorry for himself on some sort of "Eat, Pray, Love" journey into his self-absorbed core.

At least meeting this diverse range of pilgrims while slogging up the slippery slopes of the Pyrenees gave me a modicum of hope for humankind. It reminded me that despite our differences, there's a common bond between us, although sometimes it's hidden underneath the wounds inflicted by others, by life. Still, I had trouble finding many similarities between their journeys of spiritual significance and my questionable crusade.

In the end, though, I guess my rationale for walking the Camino doesn't differ all that much. Even the devoutly religious were here for the same reasons- their lives are a little fucked-up and need recentering, which is not much different from me and the others I've met- they all seem to be here to get away from daily life, re-connect, and reflect on their place in the clown car we call life, where it seems everyone wants to be in the driver's seat, or at least ride shotgun.

I guess I'm here to give myself time to think, enabling me to begin to heal the wounds I've been ignoring, unfettered by the Sturm und Drang of everyday life. The difference is, I have no idea how I ever allowed myself to look past the worthless pile of shit I'd convinced myself I was to be deserving enough to take a month and flit off to Spain on what seemed like a whim.

As the herd thinned and I distanced myself from my fellow pilgrims, I walked alone and saw Amanda's eyes in the clouds. At that moment, I began to understand that pretty much all the valuable lessons I'd learned about life had come from women, many even from my ex-wife. As the lonely path wound its way up the Pyrenees and into the fog, I trundled on, wondering what other thoughts would wander through my befuddled and tempestuous brain, courtesy of the Camino.

After a kilometer or two, I came upon an old farmer walking his cows up the mountain. He had a sparkle in his eyes and those wild, unkempt eyebrows, hairs shooting off in all directions like sparks from a Roman candle. He told me in broken English he was born in these hills and had lived there for 70 years. I imagined he'd probably never traveled far from this place. I thought about Americans and our incessant wanderlust, our urge to see other parts of the world, even if it's a family from Busted Whistle, Arkansas, traveling to the Grand Canyon.

I felt more akin to the old farmer than the mostly younger pilgrims I'd been walking with. Unlike the old farmer, though, I felt like a man without a home, caught between some ancient, traditional world mired in the lessons the past had taught me and a new world order that was imbued in the younger, idealistic kids I'd been walking with. Only time would tell if I'd continue to lean on my old ways or let go of the past and open my eyes to the crazy, rapturous dance it seems life can be.

I left the old guy behind and continued to shamle uphill in the rain and fog, where I came upon a welcome site- a jolly chap wearing a beret next to a white van parked off the side of the road selling fruit, hot chocolate, candy bars- sustenance for the hungry pilgrim. I took off my pack and spoke with Joan, a woman from London in her fifties who'd just completed her first year of schooling to be a family therapist, a conversation that left me with feelings of unworthiness and general malaise towards myself. But at least the hot chocolate was therapy for a cold body.

Like others I'd spoken to, I was buoyed by Joan's passion for helping those in need. It seemed the whole world was on board with this program but for one country. Don't get me wrong. America has given me a wonderful life. Unfortunately, it seems we're becoming victims of our own success, resulting in a country of isolated, self-absorbed TikTok-obsessed adolescents.

Research indicates the more industrialized a country becomes, the more likely it'll have significant economic disparity (shrinking middle class), a lack of concern for taking care of those less fortunate ("socialistic" agendas like Obamacare), and an inability to cooperate with others (the current state of the Senate). A place where people and parties with opposing views refuse to work together to solve problems. This attitude makes it difficult to see the plights of others who are less fortunate and to self-sacrifice for the collective good. Food for thought.

Joan left as I finished my hot chocolate. I had trouble mounting my pack, and everyone had disappeared into the fog by the time I was ready. So I trudged on alone, my anxiety heightening as the mist grew thicker. I felt like I was in the middle of some Grimm's fairy tale, and the big bad wolf was creeping up on me, just beyond the fog line. All I could do was keep walking or turn around and retrace my steps back to the van. After not seeing anyone for an hour or two, and with enough uncertainty to make a hardcore gambler tremble, I turned around and retraced my steps quickly through the fog at a slow trot.

As I walked, I pummeled and belittled myself, a habit I'd gotten into at the end of my marriage. I questioned what the fuck was I doing there and how I got lost in the first few hours of this crazy, mixed-up misadventure I'd thrown myself at with little preparation and thought. What an idiot.

Exhausted from beating myself up, I stopped, hunched over, closed my eyes, and took a few deep breaths. I was in the moment, at least for a moment. I realized I wasn't giving enough consideration to the present, allowing space for my loud and unruly thoughts and emotions to barge in, demanding my ear like a boisterous middle child screaming for attention. I stumbled on.

After another kilometer or two, I found the crossroads where the van had been, all but gone now. Just beyond it, I discovered another path and crossed my fingers. I still wasn't convinced it was the correct route (the voice in the back of my head made sure to keep me doubting), but after walking a kilometer or two, I reached the top of a grassy hill and saw a sign directing me along a fence line, through a field towards Roncesvalles.

It wasn't one of the now familiar Camino signs, but at least it pointed to where I needed to go. I stopped momentarily to tighten my pack's waist belt as the light rain turned into a squall at the top of the exposed hill, and daylight faded. I was hoping my luck may have changed, but except for stumbling upon the sign to Roncesvalles, lately, my luck had been akin to a bald guy winning a comb.

I reached the sign and ran into the first pilgrims I'd seen since the food truck. They were staring at the sign, lost in their rain-drenched torpor. I nodded at them and trudged on. They followed me, perhaps assuming I knew what the fuck I was doing. Just what I needed- to be the leader of a ragtag group of pilgrims who knew even less of what the hell they were doing than me.

After following a rutted dirt road over a few hills, a break in the fence led me back to the Camino. I quietly rejoiced and trundled on through the rain and fog. Eventually, I caught up with Wim and Elsa, a mother and son from Holland, walking together. Wim told me they were walking for his dad, who'd recently succumbed to cancer, once again putting my vein whimperings in perspective.

Wim had walked the Camino twice, but it was Elsa's first time. He mentioned that he'd return to work in a week and that Elsa was a little apprehensive about continuing without him. I knew how she felt. I'd never been to Europe, didn't speak any Spanish, and my emotional state was like that last scene of "The Perfect Storm" when George Clooney is at the hatch of the Andrea Gail underwater, looking up as the boat slowly sinks, deciding whether or not to follow Markey Mark to the surface, knowing whichever choice he makes he's screwed.

My life had unraveled to the point where I was putting tinfoil over my windows to keep the light out and hide from everyone. When I ventured out, it was to go to the market or run long distances. I'm not a long-distance runner, but when I ran, my brain would switch to autopilot and forget about everything, attending only to the task at hand. It seemed anxiety was stoking my battered soul like a neurotic Forrest Gump.

When I wasn't hiding or running, I'd occupy myself with other things that helped decrease my anxiety, at least temporarily:

- Coffee
- Wine
- Cigarettes
- Sleeping
- Masturbation
- Watching Ryan Reynolds's romantic comedies

I'm not a licensed therapist and have no professionally informed opinions about how often one should masturbate or watch Ryan Reynolds romantic comedies. I'm simply passing this information along as a public service.

After meeting Amanda, these coping mechanisms lost their luster as our lives became entwined, and we spent all our time together. Unfortunately, though, those anxieties came roaring back when Amanda left, and doing something as drastic as booking a ticket to a continent I'd never been to and attempting to walk across a country I knew nothing about seemed to be the only remedy for the dreams I'd begun having, of a warm trickle of blood rolling down my arm from a severed brachial artery.

Wim and Elsa's journey made me think of my reasons for being here. The best I could come up with was, at the time I decided to walk the Camino, I was in the middle of a shitstorm of riotous emotions, hurt, and utter confusion as to who I was and what place (if any) I had left in the life I'd come to know.

Maybe emotions are the catalysts for our extraordinary, sometimes desperate acts and most things we do. Sometimes, they slap us in the face, sometimes they burst out of our mouths and change our lives forever, but most often, they lurk underneath, quietly cajoling us, trying to remind us of what our soul is attempting to whisper in our ear.

Whatever the reason for my feckless flight of foolhardiness, there I was with just a few material possessions on my back, walking across Spain in the rain (I guess sometimes it doesn't fall mainly on the plain), as wet and miserable as Rutger Hauer at the end of Blade Runner, rambling on about Tannhauser Gate, crying teardrops in the rain.

Soon, I was jolted from my self-absorbed ponderings, tripping over a small log on a downhill slog through a forest. Fortunately, no one saw me as I lurched and pitched back and forth, careening downhill, trying to maintain my balance, like a drunken Sisyphus chasing a boulder down a hill yet again.

I caught up with Wim and Elsa as the rain subsided. The Camino flattened out and led us into a serene forest that should have calmed my nerves but instead began to stress me out about trying to get my first post up (this book started as a blog). As if walking across Spain wasn't foolhardy enough, some incomprehensible outside forces had told me to write about my journey, and for some strange reason, I was still determined to do so.

It would have been much easier to fall back on old habits once I got to Roncesvalles. Maybe seek out a bottle of \$2 Rioja from the monastery gift shop and see if any monks would give up a smoke or two. In addition, I was pretty sure there'd be no internet, assuming online porn wasn't an interest of the local friars, making uploading anything to a blog next to impossible.

Speaking with Wim, though, helped put things in perspective. He told me not too long before his dad died, he had him get a book from his library and read this quote from Hunter Thompson (like my father, cancer had stolen his eyesight): "Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming "Wow! What a Ride!"

We laughed, and I made an excuse to stop as Wim moved on. I choked back a tear and resolved to give this Camino thing my best shot. I'd been walking for less than a day, and memories from my life were already parading by and reminding me of things I needed to deal with. And I guess this is one of the reasons for walking the Camino- it distills life into a few simple things- where to get something to eat, where to stay, and simply putting one foot in front of the other, so you have time to reflect, ruminate, and slap yourself upside your head.

On the downside, you're always heading West, the long shadows of the morning in front of you, reminding you that even though some crazy whirlwind of sadness, ecstasy, and downright stupidity may have thrown you halfway around the world to stumble across a country, you've never been to, you'll at some point have to return home and consider those shadows, and your future.

I finally arrived in Roncesvalles—lifeless, shivering, and drenched. My mood wasn't lightened when I had to suffer through a slow-moving line and tedious check-in procedure (a one-monk operation) that required filling out a form about my reasons for walking the Camino. There wasn't a box to tick for "trying to lessen my self-loathing," so I checked off "spiritual reasons" instead.

I walked up to the second floor and found bunk #234, my home for the evening. My bunkmates glared at me with disdain- they looked like gnarled veterans on a mission from God and had probably walked the Camino a dozen times, gaining enlightenment or at least a few epiphanies along the way. Their contempt was perhaps less of them and more my insecurity, knowing I didn't have my shit together like they seemed to.

They were silent and didn't offer up a greeting, so I threw my pack on the upper bunk and rifled through it to find my one other pair of long pants, which were drenched. I'd ignored putting the rain cover over my backpack, reasoning it was relatively waterproof without it—another lousy decision among many of late.

Shivering from my wet clothes and having switched from my hiking boots to my wet flip-flops, which I'd smartly hung on the outside of my pack, I hurried over to the showers and commandeered one of the small stalls. I peeled off my wet clothes, turned on the shower, and felt the warm water run through my hair and roll down my back.

After luxuriating in the comfort only experienced in a hot shower or maybe the womb, I turned off the water and went to grab a towel to dry off. It was then I discovered auberges don't provide towels. So I used my damp shirt, which worked just fine. We get too used to our creature comforts until we're reminded we can do without many of them. Unfortunately, sometimes, these things insulate us from life and the lessons we're supposed to learn. One learns to walk by falling down and, well...forgetting to bring a towel to the shower.

I returned to my cot, dressed in my only dry clothes, and climbed up to my bunk to write. Then something came over me- I began laughing and couldn't stop. Everything I'd been through over the last few years came rushing over me, not to mention the trials of the previous few days- going the wrong way at the Madrid train station, almost not making my bus to Pamplona, being lost in the fog.

It was as if I was looking at myself from above my body, floating between the pitched, high stone ceilings and my bunk. I saw myself tapping away at my little MacBook Air and looking out the window of the thousand-year-old monastery where my wet pants and underwear were hopefully drying in the moist air, wearing a black \$150 John Varvatos button-down I'd brought to wear in Madrid over a lime green t-shirt with a picture of a gorilla riding a bike, and a pair of O'Neil board pants from Costco.

I stopped typing and sat silently for a moment as clouds floated by and hid the sun. For the first time in a while, I felt somewhat at ease. I wasn't ruminating about the past or dreading the future, although the voice in the back of my head was whispering that I was still a pile of butt fungus. But something else was making itself known, a feeling I'd dismissed long ago. It was to be the first gift I'd receive from the Camino.

I can only describe it as some sort of grace. To Christians, grace is a spontaneous gift from God- "...generous, free and totally unexpected and undeserved." I wasn't so sure about any connection to the God I grew up with, but considering my current state of self-loathing, it did seem these feelings of peace and acceptance of myself were unexpected and undeserved.

I struggled to hold back the tears as I suddenly understood that the shitty things that'd happened over the past few years were actually catalysts for growth, as long as I could get over the hurt and pain long enough to see them for what they were emotional habits I was clinging to I thought were protecting me, but that actually no longer made any sense. In the end, it seems most of us are simply coming to grips with the understanding that there's only one way to learn to love life- and that's by learning to love ourselves.

And although my shit-colored-glasses way of looking at the world had become embedded in me, and I'd turned into a man I didn't recognize, a man who was lost and who I hated, I thought about others who were much worse off than me. And I thanked whatever god might be hanging out in the rafters at the old stone monastery in Roncesvalles. Maybe this was my first epiphany.

When I finished writing, I closed my laptop, and reality stomped back in on the shoulders of the voice in my head who notified me that, for all of my lyrical ponderings, I was still looking at 500 miles of who knows what. So I fished out some anti-anxiety pills from my backpack and swallowed them with only my churned-up saliva to carry them down my dry throat and fell into a fitful sleep to the sound of a few hundred snoring and farting pilgrims.

*I sit at my table and wage war on myself.  
It seems like it's all, it's all for nothing.  
I know the barricades,  
And I know the mortar in the wall breaks.  
I recognize the weapons; I've used them well.*

*Reach out for me.  
Hold me tight.  
Hold that memory.  
Let my machine talk to me.*

*This is my world, and I am the World Leader Pretend.  
This is my life, and this is my time.  
I have been given the freedom to do as I see fit.  
It's high time I razed the walls that I've constructed...  
-REM*

