

**The Road to Enlightenment Is Poorly Marked**  
A Pilgrim's Guide to Blisters, Bad Decisions, and the Meaning of Life

**Grace, Blisters, And Other Things I Didn't Ask For**  
One Man's Journey from Brokedown to Slightly Less Broken

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Now if you make a pilgrimage, I hope you find your grail  
Be loyal to the ones you leave with even if you fail  
Be chivalrous to strangers you meet along the road  
As you take that holy ride yourselves to know

-Warren Zevon

After a split second, it was over, and I was tasting linoleum. Turns out my wife had a mean left hook. I briefly saw God- or at least a ceiling fan that looked like Him, spinning slowly above me like it had all the answers, but no interest in my situation at the moment.

A little while later, haunted by emotional abuse, steamrolled by divorce, a daughter I could no longer reach, and dumped by the woman who'd saved me before she'd decided she'd had enough, I was running low on options.

To add to the fun, I was being entertained nightly by recurring dreams of blood running down my arm from a severed artery and worn down daily by the low-grade hum of despair that plays in the background of modern American life like a busted refrigerator.

So, I went looking for answers.

I ended up at the edge of a cliff in the Pyrenees with tears in my eyes, calmly wondering whether the fall would kill me outright or just leave me broken- yet another fine chapter in the long and unimpressive story of my life.

The wind moved through the canyon like it didn't particularly care what I decided as I quietly weighed the pros and cons of this deeply flawed exit strategy. Either way, it felt consistent with the general trajectory of things.

I kept walking. Gravel crunched under my boots as the trail wound ever upward.

A few weeks earlier, due to a drunken conversation at a beachside bar called the Poopdeck (which should have been my first clue), I'd bought a plane ticket to Spain, packed a backpack with a bunch of crap from Amazon, borrowed a pair of boots from my brother, and decided to walk across Spain on a

thousand-year-old pilgrimage route called the Camino de Santiago.

At the time, it seemed like as good a plan as any. For over a thousand years, people had walked this road looking for forgiveness, miracles, or at the very least a decent glass of wine and a place to sleep- saints, sinners, kings, thieves, and, more recently, confused middle-aged Americans with questionable coping strategies.

At the time, I suspected I belonged firmly in the last category.

As I stumbled along, several young pilgrims breezed past with the buoyant enthusiasm of youth, their strides long and effortless in the way they tend to be when your joints are still fresh out of the box. I tried to keep up for a few minutes before my knees reminded me that my extended warranty had expired somewhere around the Reagan administration.

This was my first day on the Camino, and I'd decided to walk until something inside me either snapped or softened. That was the plan. Or at least something vaguely resembling a plan, which says a lot about how spectacularly low the bar had dropped.

I was banking on the idea that stumbling sunburned and half-sane through a sweaty Spanish summer might help me find a way back to my daughter, teach me how to forgive my ex, and maybe convince the woman who'd saved me for awhile- before she'd decided she'd had enough- that I might still be worth the trouble.

And, if possible, help me resist the persistent urge to vanish completely.

With any luck, I might even rediscover the radical notion that life wasn't just a long, mean-spirited practical joke played by an indifferent god with a questionable sense of humor.

Adding to the charm of the moment was the realization that after fifty-something years on this planet, I still had no idea why I was here- other than to pay taxes, accumulate emotional scars, and occasionally lose my keys.

For all I knew, I'd leave the world with roughly the same level of insight I'd arrived with as a drooling infant in suburban Los Angeles. Which, when you think about it, made perfect sense as a reason to buy a one-way ticket halfway across the world and stagger across a country I'd never been anywhere near.

My hope- thin, but stubborn- was that taking a million steps along a dusty path in blistering heat to visit a dead saint whose greatest accomplishment was staying dead long enough to become famous might help me shed a few things I'd been carrying for far too long.

Regret. Anger. Self-pity. That background static that's always there, just loud enough to remind you that something isn't right.

I didn't know if walking across Spain would fix anything. In fact, based on my track record with life decisions, there was a reasonable chance it would make things worse.

The Camino leveled out for a moment as I walked along, feeling the warmth of sun on skin, and I thought about an old pilgrim I'd met at dinner the night before. He told me that the Camino had been here for a thousand years, quietly letting people drag their broken hearts across it in search of answers.

I figured the least I could do was keep walking long enough to see if it had one for 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.*

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

I stood just outside of St. Jean Pied de Port (the traditional starting point of the Camino), staring at a road that vanished into clouds like it was ashamed to have met my acquaintance. I wasn't too happy with our relationship at the moment either.

Lao Tzu said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." I'm guessing he wasn't taking that step over a mountain range with a 30-pound pack, rain slapping him in the face, and a hangover earned through a wildly overconfident attempt to "immerse myself in local culture" in Madrid.

That miscalculated cultural experience had compromised any level-headedness and sense of direction I may have still had two days earlier, when I'd set out to take a train from my hotel to the central station and board a bus to St. Jean.

Not that my judgment had been stellar lately. In fact, due to the veritable smorgasbord of chaos my life had become over the previous year, my decision-making had lately resembled the dude who thought 16 lifeboats on the Titanic was a solid plan.

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 at 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, even 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'd be able to hoof it across an entire country when I couldn't even navigate the Madrid train station.

But then, courtesy of some cosmic misfire, I was rescued by an older gentleman who spoke English and had the decency not to

laugh while steering me away from whatever fresh disaster I might be stumbling toward.

After arriving at the central bus terminal, I found that the last bus to Pamplona wouldn't make the connection to St. Jean. So, I stepped out of line and gave myself a good internal beating for the hangover, for being an absolute asshole, and the dawning fear that this "journey" was shaping up to be one long, slow sacrifice to the gods of poor life choices. Gods I knew well.

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 the Camino provides. Yeah, well, that kind of magic didn't exist in my FUBAR world at the time, but I took the ticket anyway and ran for it, because at least running feels like trying.

I sat down next to a lithe, twenty-something Canadian named Erin, who dreamed of opening a hostel north 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 touch whimsical for a cynical, hard-boiled 'Merican like me, but I spared her my nihilistic worldview- the one sown sometime after the 2008 recession and lovingly cultivated through divorce, my daughter's icy disdain, and the occasional suicidal daydream.

All of which explains why my forlorn carcass was now wedged into a bus seat bound for Pamplona next to a spiritually rebranded hippie from Canada, searching for something resembling redemption.

When we arrived in Pamplona, Erin departed to meet her friends for the Running of the Bulls, leaving me to hunt down the bus to St. Jean, armed with nothing but a flimsy sense of direction and a hangover with opinions.

Every wavering thought that passed through my half-pickled brain was immediately cross-examined by my insecurity, which had clearly conferred with my hangover and lawyered up overnight.

Fortunately, I spied two pilgrims sitting on a bench (my critical eye noticing the humungous backpacks sitting next to them), so I moseyed over in the spirit of shared suffering and whatever passes for pilgrimatic kinship.

Kento was a short Japanese guy in his mid-thirties with a perpetual grin. He didn't speak much English, but he made up for it by ricocheting off the bench every thirty seconds to make a point, although I was never quite sure what the point was. Despite myself, and the universe knows I tried, I cracked a reluctant, lopsided smile at his tireless enthusiasm.

Asia was a different story. She was polish, 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. I suspected she thought my perfume of cheap Rioja signaled both desperation and character flaws. And she was right.

She mentioned 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, proof she was smarter than the lot of us, 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. For the first

time, I realized that people sometimes hand you kindness even while your own hands are full of self-hate.

I'd said a lot of goodbyes over the previous year- friends, the life I used to recognize, and most recently, to Amanda, the woman I met after separating from my wife. The woman who single-handedly put an end to my gauzy, late-night fantasies of hara-kiri. In short, the woman who saved my life, which frankly, in retrospect, felt like a questionable investment on her part at the time.

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 was exactly making Nobel-worthy decisions, but we both wanted the same thing: someone else to love us so we could remember how to love ourselves.

Unfortunately, when you're both hauling enough emotional baggage to load up the Beverly Hillbillies' jalopy, something's bound to rattle loose and fall off.

When she told me she didn't love me anymore, a half-forgotten conversation I'd had at a bar called The Poopdeck a year earlier came roaring back through a haze of whiskey fumes and secondhand smoke like it had been waiting for this exact moment to make itself useful.

It lodged itself right next to my battered heart and, next thing I knew, I was standing soaked to the bone on a cobblestoned street in some godforsaken corner of France with an overly enthusiastic Japanese guy named Kento. Which just goes to show, God does have a sense of humor.

Kento volunteered to check for a room at his auberge (Camino code for "hostel with mattresses held together by faith and not much else"), so I followed him past the center of town, walking

on cobblestones up a winding, fairy tale street that crossed a river. All very charming, if you ignore the fact that my life felt like a Grimm Brothers outtake that ended up on the cutting room floor.

The auberge was full, because of course it was, but still, Kento offered me some kind of further assistance (I think). I shook my head 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 his 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 plodded up the old street in a steady, depressing drizzle, marinating in my own bath of self-pity, when sudden commotion from an open doorway snapped me out of my gloom.

It wasn't an auberge- naturally- but a place selling "pilgrim passports," booklets with pages you get stamped in every town that prove you've walked more than five minutes without quitting. I'd ordered one online, but it never arrived- yet another detail lost in the emotional fog bank that had become my life.

The woman who issued my pilgrim passport pointed me toward a newer auberge down the street. When I got there, I was quietly grateful to find they had beds. I was drenched from the endless drizzle and already imagining myself sleeping outdoors, coughing up lung butter and blowing snot rockets onto the Camino. Probably not the kind of thing they put in the brochure.

Maria Estelle, the proprietor, pulled me out of the rain and into the anteroom of her auberge, a stone building likely older than my 7th-grade homeroom teacher, Mrs. Beyenburg, who, even back then, gave off strong “fossil with barely a pulse” energy.

She mostly talked about her Shih Tzus and how she was allergic to everything- grass, sunlight, and, judging by her demeanor, probably 7th graders too. And somehow it never dawned on her that saying “Shih Tzus” was basically handing them a punchline and acting surprised when they used it.

I forked over an extra euro for a cozy four-bed room. Park and Hyun showed up next. I honestly don’t know why I did it. Maybe I wanted to ease into the Camino instead of being woken up to the sound of snoring and farting as a hundred other pilgrims 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.

Nothing says “spiritual quest” quite like inhaling the exhaust fumes of strangers.

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 handed me a French beer, and we chatted about St. Jean and the Camino while her husband watched TV, ignoring us both. 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, relentless drizzle, and 20 kilometers of road pitched so steeply it made me wonder if someone had misplaced the directions to

Hell- would start to help me forget the sadness and pain that had driven 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*