

MALCOLM

MCGRAW

THE

PATH

# THE PATH

by

Malcolm McKay

## ***THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO***

Camino means I walk in Spanish. The Camino is the way. The Camino de Santiago is the ancient pilgrimage to the remains of Saint James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostella in the northwest of Spain. It's the site of the only known relics of an apostle of Christ.

Over the past thirteen hundred years millions of pilgrims have trod the Path, the Way of Saint James. Although the religious purpose of the camino remains a motive for many, it has evolved over the years until now in the Twenty-first century, it is undertaken by men and women of all denominations and none.

They come from all over the world to do the camino. They are of all ages, all types, all professions and occupations. It is regarded by many as a journey of a lifetime for self discovery; perhaps psychological, perhaps spiritual, or maybe purely physical. As it is said on the camino, everybody has their own question to ask.

# **PART ONE**

## ***ST JEAN PIED DE PORT***

Around eighty pilgrims had gathered that night in Saint Jean Pied de Port in the French Pyrenees in late September to begin their camino. That figure was low. In the height of summer there would have been hundreds. In addition to these there would have been many who started from Le Puy, or Lyons in France; others would have begun in Paris, Geneva or any number of European cities, towns or villages where a man or woman felt compelled to heave a pack onto their back and take to the Path. Most of these trails converged on St. Jean, the last French town before the eight hundred kilometre walk across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostella.

At the beginning of August Werner Schmidt had walked out of his home in Vienna; three weeks after that Fabian Laurent had slung his miniature guitar on his back, closed his front door behind him in Nancy, and headed south to the Pyrenees - and he intended to walk back again. Others had flown in to Biarritz, Bilbao or Pamplona and taken the train to St Jean. Rhoda and Deena Dunne had boarded a plane from Toronto, Paul Kramer and Harry Hook had started out from Minnesota, and Ingrid Sorensen had taken a flight from Copenhagen via London. They were all nervous, exhilarated and scared that they didn't have what it takes to get them over the plains, the valleys, the rolling hills and the two mountain ranges they would have to cross to reach the great city and its ancient cathedral containing the last

remains of the apostle, James. Not that they were all there for religious reasons; every one of them had their own thoughts, worries about the future, and questions to ask.

Peter Donald had taken a flight from Stansted to Biarritz. Frankly, as he'd told anyone who'd asked, he hardly knew why he was there. The most obvious reason was that his brother had told him to go. That in itself was irritating enough but he had to admit he needed time to think, or maybe not to think; either way to allow the decision as to what to do next with his life to surface and become known to him. He had to face it sometime, the future was blank. A full life, or what had seemed like a full life (although he had doubts about that too) had come to a full stop. Now what?

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was tall and his body cramped more easily and frequently than it used to – the idea that his discomfort may have been a reflection of his state of mind never occurred to him. At least, not then. He was a man unused to such considerations. The world for him was what he saw in front of him, a series of practical propositions; problems and their solutions. The unobvious, unclear, or unanswerable were left as just that. Those who knew him thought him charming, a little vain, with interested eyes, and an easy smile. They weren't deceived. These qualities were as profoundly part of him as were the unwanted thoughts, sudden insights and inexplicable feelings that would rise and be concealed again, as much from himself as from those who knew him.

He looked down through the window as the plane banked over the Atlantic coast of France and slowly began its descent into Biarritz. He remembered a camping holiday he'd had with his wife and son on the Isle de Roi not too far to the south of where he was now. That was eight years ago. He'd had a four week leave plus two weeks compassionate as his father had died. Within days of the funeral they'd gone on holiday. Gemma had said, don't you want some time? What for? Grieve? What was the point? Anyway after

his four months away in Basra Sam was showing signs of needing him. Not that the holiday had done much for that. All that Peter could remember was the kind of sulk that only a fourteen year old could deliver. It went on for days. He felt later that it was the beginning of his son's rejection of him; the awful and unconscious revenge of a teenager. He turned in his seat again. No thank you, he didn't want to think about that now. Or his father. Although he was irritated to discover that as these thoughts came, so did a tightening of his stomach and a subtle, ridiculous anxiety, as though he didn't know what he was doing for Christ's sake. He pushed his blond hair back from his forehead and sat straighter. It was done. They were divorced. The army was behind him. Sam was...? He didn't know.

The stewardess brought the scotch he'd ordered. He smiled, she smiled back. He was tempted to start the conversation. It had happened once on a flight to Bangkok and he'd met the stewardess later in a hotel. He let his mind wander for a second and had a brief image of her naked on the room's balcony. He dismissed the thought with some difficulty and looked down at the guidebook in his lap. Never in his life had he been this unprepared for anything. The thought gave him the first inclination (of many that were to come) as to how things, or at least his view of them, were beginning to shift in him. He turned to the introduction.

Santiago. San Tiago. Saint James. Apparently his relics were in the sepulchre of the Cathedral. He took a sip of the scotch and wondered what Gemma would be thinking of him doing this. She would know of course; she seemed to know everything. Not that she ever spoke to him now. But if she did? She'd smile quizzically as if he was beyond all comprehension. You, a pilgrim? He was beginning to agree with her. But if he'd known then what he knew later, he'd have told her that the pilgrimage had as many meanings as the number of people who went on it. For most, religion was hardly the heart of the matter; it was the hard road of

change they walked, and for some it revealed the darkest and most difficult challenges they'd ever faced. For now he bent his head down and forced himself to read the legend, the ancient beginning of it all.

The apostle, James, son of Zebedee and Salome, brother of John, was a fisherman who'd left Galilee on hearing the call of the Lord. He'd been a faithful follower throughout the three years of Christ's public life, had witnessed the crucifixion, been present at the resurrection, on the day of the Pentecost had received the holy spirit and been commanded by the Holy Ghost to travel the known world and teach the one true gospel. He was known as the Son of Thunder, apparently, because of his zeal. Peter smiled. Sam would have liked that. At least the old Sam would have done.

James had preached first in Judea and afterwards sailed to Spain. He'd landed on the Atlantic coast and had only been saved from the tumultuous seas by the intervention of the Virgin Mary who had sent a stone barque to rescue him. He'd come ashore in Muxia - good for the tourist trade, thought Peter - and from there travelled all over northern Spain proselytising as he went, and experienced another vision of the Blessed Virgin in Zarragossa. She appeared on a marble pillar and commanded him to build a church on the spot, which he'd done. Peter wondered how long that took. Then James and his, by then, band of disciples had returned to Jerusalem.

Peter sipped his drink. His father had been an absolute unbeliever and, although it would have been different if his mother had been strong enough to have her way, neither he nor his brother had ever been christened. It had caused a raised eyebrow when he'd put down *atheist* under religion on his entrance to Sandhurst. 'Why don't you put down C of E?' barked a sergeant. 'Makes things fucking easier on a Sunday, don't it?' He could easily have changed it. But maybe he didn't want to reveal the vacuum he felt, so he'd

stuck with atheist; at least it had the advantage of being set, done, and he wouldn't have to think about it again. Not that different from his father, he thought. He read on.

James was nothing if not fervent and, having returned to the Holy Land, continued as an uncompromising and passionate advocate of the teachings of his Master. In 44 AD within months of his arrival in Jerusalem Herod Agrippa had him beheaded as a revolutionary and threat to the state; the first of the twelve apostles to be publicly martyred. His disciples managed to retrieve both his torso and head, and decided to return them to Spain for burial. They found a ship, crossed the Mediterranean and according to the legend reached Spain at Iria Flavia on the mouth of the River Ulla. The idea was to bury him at Finnis Terre, world's end, but the great Queen Lupa conspiring with the Roman Legate based nearby tried to seize the body and destroy it. The disciples escaped over a bridge on the River Tambre which collapsed as soon as they'd crossed it, cutting off the pursuing Romans and the frustrated Queen gave up the chase. A few days later at Libredon the wild bulls pulling the cart stopped of their own accord and the disciples decided to lay James to rest where they'd halted. The Celtic Druids of the surrounding district had other ideas and attacked them, killing several. The remaining two buried James before they too were slaughtered and interred either side of him, although by whom wasn't made clear as all the disciples were by now dead or fled. And there the body or bodies lay undisturbed for eight hundred years.

He skipped over the fall of the Roman Empire and the establishment of Western Islamic rule - although it did occur to him how indebted the present Spanish character must be to Moorish genes. In 813 an old shepherd called Pelagius saw a bright star in the sky and lights flickering around an oak tree. (At this point Peter nearly gave up.) The shepherd immediately reported this to the local bishop, Theodonis. And lo and behold the bodies of James and his disciples

were discovered in this field under the stars - the compostella. A church was built to house the remains, was destroyed, a replacement erected, was destroyed again - he passed over another page of medieval brutality and vandalism including the establishment and dissolution of the Grand Inquisition - until finally the present cathedral began to slowly take shape. It took a thousand years to become what it is today, which even he had to admit was impressive. He studied the aerial photograph. The great entrance, the dome, and the hulk of the cathedral itself, with its two defending towers, was a mass of baroque stone standing solid and inviolable against a smoky sky; the whole edifice surrounded and further guarded by the ancient, and then modern, city of Santiago de Compostella.

He finished his scotch. The stewardess smiled as she took his glass. He looked down at the picture again. Even if the beginnings of this history had been little more than the fevered imaginings of the medieval mind, and the legend created more by desire than fact - Peter's brother in his student philosophy days had labelled him empiricist down to his cadet boot straps - the enduring bulk and permanence of the cathedral were real enough. All that sheer effort, stubbornness, invention, heaving the stone, the intricacy of the design, the argument, the politics, the amount of time it had taken, the blood in the walls, it must all mean - he hesitated to continue - it must all mean something. He glanced down through the window. He could see Biarritz to his left, and beyond it the Pyrenees. Tomorrow he'd be walking across them.

\*

Bayonne was quiet and almost deserted in the afternoon sun. The train to Saint Jean standing in the station consisted of only three carriages, so it didn't take long for Ingrid Sorensen to walk the length of the platform peering in

through all the windows. She wasn't looking for anyone she knew. She'd travelled alone from Copenhagen, and unknowingly taken the same plane from Stansted as Peter, and then a taxi from Biarritz airport, whereas he'd caught the bus. What she was looking for was a companion. To look at Ingrid you wouldn't guess that she had such a need. She was a lithe and strong woman in her early forties, (although she looked younger), with a good figure, brown bobbed hair, a round, faintly freckled face, full pink lips and hooded pale blue eyes that could be fascinated by you, or nervous, depending on her mood. She carried her pack comfortably and walked down the platform with a natural physical confidence that masked her unease.

She stopped opposite a window and then walked back away from it. She saw Peter down the quickly emptying platform behind her pick up his rucksack and get onto the train through the first door he came to. She immediately weighed him up, as was her habit with men. (She prided herself on her accuracy.) His fair hair made her guess he was either English or German; he was good-looking, confident, carried himself well, and had an air of certainty about him. She was surprised that a man like this should be a pilgrim. She'd envisaged pilgrims to be at least a version of the ancients; bearded men with rough cloaks and wide-brimmed hats, carrying crucifixes.

She turned again and looked through the windows. She caught sight of her own reflection. She was in quarter profile and it seemed as if she was looking over her shoulder to see who was following her. Do I do that all the time? she thought. Well not anymore. The Path was going to change all that. She glanced through the window again and saw a woman sitting on the other side of the train. She seemed about the right age and type. Ingrid decided she'd sit close to her; not next to her, but close enough to start a conversation and find out if she was the companion she was

looking for. She moved down the platform and stepped up into the carriage.

The woman Ingrid had seen was Eva Protin a corporate lawyer from Geneva. Her straight blond hair was pulled tightly back from her oval face. Her eyes were so dark, they seemed black; her lips, though not thin, were tightly compressed. She looked small and very neat, sitting by the window, holding herself erect, and looking forward as if trying to see something in the back of the seat ahead. Her telltale backpack and walking sticks were on the seat next to her.

Ingrid sat across the aisle. She'd left her pack in the rack by the door. She took a camino guide book from her pocket and began to read. After a minute she turned and glanced at Eva who hadn't moved. The train started. There was an announcement in French listing the stations the train would stop at. The last was St Jean de Pied Port. She turned towards Eva.

“Do you speak English?”

Eva smiled.

Ingrid smiled back. “Are you going on the Path?”

By the time the train had climbed the heavily wooded slopes and reached St Jean in the heart of the Pyrenees about an hour later, they'd become friends. As she looked out of the window and marvelled at what seemed the impossibly angled forests of fir, Ingrid talked well and listened carefully. She had a talent for both, especially with women. She opened up easily, wasn't afraid of letting slip slight confidences about herself and was receptive to, and non-judgemental about, anything the other might offer. There was also an air of vulnerability about her. She could seem like a little girl looking for a big sister, or sometimes, paradoxically, an equally naive, young protector looking for a child of her own to look after. She had a wonderfully forgiving smile.

Eva, nervous as she was, slowly unwound as they ascended into the higher cooler air of the mountains. Impossible thoughts had been going round in her mind for weeks and the questions, or more exactly question, that those thoughts were returning to, as if by the minute, as if by the second, was becoming so tight and unanswerable that it was becoming a throbbing pain at the back of her head. But now at least she was here, actually on the train to St Jean with her pack by her side. She arched back in her seat and smiled at Ingrid. One relief at least was to talk; talk about nothing, say nothing and give nothing away, at least until she'd decided on the answer to her question.

Not that Ingrid knew anything about this, and wouldn't until much later on the Path. What she saw next to her (after ten minutes they'd moved Eva's pack to the rack and Ingrid had taken the seat by her) was a charming, intelligent, to be sure watchful, but giving woman who seemed happy to chat. In the absence of anything much more than professional and domestic fact coming from Eva - she was thirty-eight, well-paid (unbelievably well-paid compared to Ingrid), lived alone, visited her parents once a month, had several good friends, liked to read psychology (but had given it up), and the great love of her life was her cat, at present being looked after by her mother - Ingrid did what she did best and talked about herself as the train pulled slowly up towards St Jean.

She told Eva about her daughter who was studying fashion at university. She said she was also alone and it was such a relief not to have *him* all over the house, making too much noise, watching football on TV, and leaving his clothes everywhere. Of course Eva was astute enough to realise that this somewhat stereotyped man that Ingrid was describing was probably a long way from the actual relationship or relationships that Ingrid was - Eva paused in her mind before she allowed the thought - running away from. The phrase remained a smile on her lips as Ingrid

went happily on. She was the manager of a small chain of hairdressing salons. Her job was to make everything run smoothly, keep it all in its rightful place and everyone content. She even cleaned the windows because the cleaners they had were inefficient and she preferred to do it herself. The owner of the chain was very pleased with her.

“I like them all to be happy,” she said. “And then no-one gets angry and the atmosphere is good.” She shifted slightly in her seat as she said as if comforting herself.

Although Ingrid spoke ten words to Eva’s one, it became slowly clear to the latter that Ingrid was giving away hardly more than she was. Eva thought of veils and masks and hooded cloaks as Ingrid regarded her with her opaque blue eyes. Eva decided that Ingrid was obviously a pleasant enough woman who had a talent for closeness (if not intimacy), and certainly loyalty, which in itself could be worrying as it might turn into need. But Eva decided to put her doubts aside. What she wanted to do was relax and let the Path unfold, and maybe this question in her mind would resolve itself and her headache would go.

They arrived in St Jean at dusk, climbed down from the train, and stood on the asphalt platform, their packs by their feet. Eva turned slowly, looking round. She could just see, caught in the last light of the sun, the snowcapped peaks further south and west. She breathed in deeply, allowing the cool air to calm her nerves.

Ingrid felt confident enough to ask – she wouldn’t have done if instinctively she didn’t already know the answer. “Shall we walk together?”

“You mean the Path?”

Ingrid shrugged, offering her most vulnerable smile.

“That will be OK.”

“Good.”

Ingrid had found her companion. She felt happy as she lifted her pack onto her shoulders and they followed Peter Donald up the road into St Jean.

\*

It was getting quite dark as Peter passed through the ramparts into the old town. The street was narrow and cobbled. To his right was a bar, empty in the early evening, but welcoming nevertheless. He thought about a drink but decided against it. That was something else he was going to have to deal with. In the past six months since leaving the army with time weighing heavily on his hands he'd spent most evenings in the pub. He'd told himself he needed to think, as if thinking could only be done leaning against the bar in the Duke. Why couldn't he work things out lying on the bed in that wonderfully dreary flat he called home? He'd convinced himself he needed people; their energy, laughter, inane chat and ridiculous opinions; maudlin men and flirty women. Somehow all this propped him up, and he had to admit it, stopped him thinking. Having been in the army helped. 'Served in Iraq mate, have one on me.' Even the occasional, 'Don't know why we went,' was useful. But best of all, 'Bet you looked nice in uniform. Still wear it sometimes, do you?' And Peter knew exactly when she wanted it on him, and off him. He'd known that all his life. It was his greatest talent. The thought made him smile, then for some reason he felt angry. He looked down the street to the bar and heard the pain and rage in Gemma's voice again. Half the time what she thought wasn't true anyway. Half the time? So the other half...? Stop right there. Another thought (another life) rammed back down. Must be like a pot of snakes in there. Stop. Back on track please. At least in the army you knew who was who, what was what, and when to do it. As for the rest, cram a life (and a wife) into a four week leave, flowers for her, pay the bills, take the boy out, no time for thinking. Time. That was the real problem. What do you do with it? Go on a bloody walk for a month. He looked down at the cobbles shining in the lamplight. Is that what he thought? Go on a *bloody walk*? Waste some time?

Six months in Basra, couple of weeks in Winchester, short tour in Dubai, Christmas at home, a course in London, quick holiday in France, back to Winchester, *a bloody walk?* Life in bits? Live in pieces? Someone was coming up the street behind him. He looked round as Ingrid and Eva passed him. He clocked Ingrid, no doubt about it, couldn't help it. Then he turned and went back down to the bar. A quick one wouldn't hurt.

\*

The two women continued up to the intersection. Ingrid looked at the map in her guidebook under the light of a street lamp. "I think it's here." She pointed left up the long narrow street cut by yellow shafts of light from windows either side piercing the early evening mist. They continued up the hill towards the pilgrim's office, past shadowy, dark beamed houses crowding and overhanging the street. The town smelt of age and evening. There was something welcoming about it which relaxed them both.

They were chatting easily now. Eva had begun to laugh and the tension in the back of her head was easing. Ingrid would have been surprised to know that Eva had decided to walk with her on the train, ten minutes before she'd asked. It was a foretaste of what was to come. Ingrid would talk, suggest, organise, and on the face of it control what they did, but Eva had already decided what they would do. Already she could feel herself slipping back to that place she disliked; the analysis of the fine print, detecting the holes in the argument, and with deadly accuracy redrafting the contract. That's why they paid her so much. This was the real mountain Eva had to climb, the hard rock face of her own intellectual capacity which seemed to mock and flatten all other responses. Maybe she needed to let herself lose for once - and be happy as she did so.

“There it is,” Ingrid was looking ahead of them towards the light coming from the pilgrim’s office window.

They moved up the street passing the bright display of a small shop on their right. Eva noticed a large rubber bucket containing five foot high, wooden, pilgrim’s staffs, their tops tied loosely to the wall by the shop doorway. On the other side of the door was a rack of scallop shells, the sign of the pilgrim, each with a small, ornate, red sword painted in the centre. These, as Eva knew, were the marks of the ancient order of the Knights Templar, the traditional protectors of the pilgrim. She’d read that everyone wore them tied to the back of their packs.

“I’d like to buy a shell.” She stopped.

“Maybe we should later,” said Ingrid, as always, worried about what was to come. “I don’t know what time the office is closed.”

Eva let it go. It was only seven o’clock and she’d read that the office stayed open late, and so therefore would the shop, to pick up the trade from the pilgrims. She glanced in through the doorway as they passed.

\*

Inside Llewellyn Lewis was, as usual, dithering, although you wouldn’t have known it. He stood perfectly still with his feet connected at the heels and splayed outwards like a ballet dancer. His hands were held flat together and steepled as he pressed them lightly against the half smile of his lips. He was small, wiry, fair haired, and had managed to arrive at his thirty-ninth year without ever having held down a full time job for longer than two months. It wasn’t that he was lazy. More disengaged. He certainly wasn’t rebellious either; softly anarchic maybe, but with a demeanour that was always accommodating. It was Llewellyn’s way, he liked to be liked, and usually was. If Peter was a drinker, he had nothing on Llewellyn, who was a heavy smoker too, forever

stopping on the trail for a fag break. As a matter of fact that's how he met Werner Schmidt later, over a shared roll-up in Pamplona, and how he began to lose all sense of himself on the Path.

Even now he wasn't entirely sure of what was happening. On the face of it he was buying a T shirt. His collection of gear for the expedition, as he called it, was not yet complete. Not that it ever would be, because he would never have any real idea of what he needed until he noticed it wasn't there, and stood frozen on the plain, or wet in the hills, or without a cigarette paper outside a closed shop in siesta Spain in the afternoon sun.

He'd decided barely twenty-four hours ago to come on the Path. In the same way as he'd decided a week before that to walk out of his sister, Cindy's, house in Swansea, where he'd been staying for the previous month in his latest period of homelessness. The thought that Cindy still didn't know where he was, or why he'd left, still bothered him, but he put it aside, as he put everything else aside, and looked up at the T shirts displayed on the wall. Anyone else buying clothing for a five week walk might have considered its warmth, weight, or proof against the weather. Llewellyn was only really interested in its colour. He quite liked the various camino designs, but wasn't too keen on the cartoon characters with bandaged feet and stupid grins, mouthing in bubbles, *no pain, no gain!* He decided on a black T shirt with a bold, yellow arrow camino waymark across the chest. It would remind him of where he was going.

He was still half drunk from the wine he'd bought on the train. He'd sat with a couple of French blokes as far as - he couldn't remember where they'd got off - and they'd had a great old time despite one or two language difficulties. Llewellyn's life may well have stumbled from one disaster to another, but no-one could ever accuse him of lacking congeniality. As the wine went down, so would he, into a gentle, smiling, welcoming stupor, punctuated only by roll-

ups and a light ripple of a laugh that made you feel protective towards him.

He'd walked out of Cindy's house at four in the morning - even now he wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe it was the finally overpowering feeling of dissatisfaction with the suffocating, jammed-in pettiness and chip shop stink of a terraced Welsh side-street, or perhaps it was the Guinness in the crowded old pub; that night mixed with port, cigarette smoke and too much rubbish chat, too loud too; he remembered being confused by the looming faces and what felt like their overlarge mouths laughing and chomping at him. Or maybe it was the fact that he'd started to pack his bag anyway to go and spend a few days with Robert in boring-as-hell Caerphilly for more alcohol, Chinese takeaways, and unwanted psychoanalysis from the no-hope brigade; or ultimately perhaps it was no more than he'd heard the shed door banging in the wind and decided to go down to the yard and shut it. Whatever it was, two hours later he'd found himself on the early train to London. On arrival, he'd walked from Paddington, wandered aimlessly for a few hours, and ended up in the Grays Inn Road, where he'd quite by chance discovered the Welsh club. Where else? Obviously he went in for a drink, obviously he was confused, and equally obviously someone had felt sorry for him and had offered him a sofabed for the night. This was the way of Llewellyn's life. More booze followed. He wasn't broke; his stash, still recently acquired, was holding up, and he was generous with it.

He spent four days in London, most of it draped over an old armchair in the Welsh club surrounded by the like-minded, with a continually replenished glass of beer and a sad but satisfied smile. He was vaguely aware of being propositioned by the owner of the sofabed, but such was his Llewellyn innocence projected, that he'd come through unscathed and the next morning on a whim had walked through the Covent Garden tourist market to Waterloo

where he'd taken the Eurotunnel to Paris. Now he knew why he'd taken his passport with him when he'd left Cindy's house. Or maybe it was because he'd taken his passport with him that he'd left the country. Cause and effect in Llewellyn's life were never quite clear as separate entities and therefore easily and continually reversible. He followed his nose and somehow the world always seemed to provide. This time his nose led him straight out of the Gare du Nord and into a tobacco-stained bar where there was an Irishman sitting on a shiny stool at a strange angle, drinking a beer with a backpack by his chair. One thing led to another, more drinks were bought, laughs were laughed, Llewellyn adopted the reverse angle, and the Irishman, called Stephen, told him an incredible tale of the wonderful trek he'd just completed called the Camino de Santiago.

"It's a spiritual journey," said Stephen, "You'll discover yourself."

Which didn't seem like a bad idea to Llewellyn.

"And the craic is just something else."

Llewellyn unwound his money belt in the toilet, consulted his stash and estimated he still had plenty. Following the Irishman's directions he negotiated the metro with an instinct that always seemed faultless in times like these, and bought himself a ticket to St Jean Pied de Port. Having a couple of hours to spare, he went for a walk, dropped carelessly into another bar, then on the way back to the station found himself staring into the window of a magazin de sports. He went in and came out twenty blurred minutes later with a rucksack, a bright red walking jacket and a pair of trekking trainers. He stuffed the rest of his possessions into the rucksack and threw his old bag away. He heaved the pack onto his back. Something felt very right about it.

On his way back to the station he passed a milliners and saw in the window a wide-brimmed straw hat. Although the summer was over, it somehow fitted his mood. The stash

was once again referred to. It was looking a little pilfered, but to hell with it, the Irishman had said the camino was cheap, and so with hat perched gloriously on head, and pack weighing not too heavily on back, Llewellyn had taken his seat on the train to the south of France and the Pyrenees. He'd negotiated two changes of trains, vaguely remembered drinking with the two Frenchmen (one was called Alphonse), and there he was in the Rue de Citadelle in St Jean buying a T shirt. As he came out of the shop he saw the knotted and whittled pilgrim staffs and had no doubt he should have one of those too. He picked a sturdy example, tried it out by leaning on it and thought he would decorate the bare wood sometime. Peter passed on the street and Llewellyn said, "Pardon, vous parlez...?"

"I'm English."

"Oh hullo, do you know where...?"

"Bureau de pelerins? I understand it's up there on the left."

Llewellyn went back into the shop to pay for his staff.

\*

Rhoda and Deena Dunne were already in the cluttered, dimly lit, pilgrim's office when Ingrid and Eva came in. They'd been there for twenty minutes sitting on two of the chairs that lined the left-hand wall under a series of topographical maps of each stage of the Path, and staring at the long and vacant desks that ran along the other side of the room. Behind them were large colour posters of the snowcapped Pyrenees.

"It's not snowing up there, is it?" Rhoda, a sprightly, thin woman, full of her own energy and opinion, spoke too loudly as usual, embarrassing her daughter.

"No, Ma, it's still only the fall," Deena smiled at Ingrid who was dumping her pack by Eva's. "Hi," she said, trying to be friendly, and half apologising, as usual, for her mother.

Big boned, like the father she couldn't remember, Deena was clumsy in both manner and form, and her big honk didn't help matters much either. She existed in a world of apology and retreat, and ended up being so nice to everybody that her saving grace, a considered and intelligent compassion, went unnoticed - except maybe by her mother who wasn't going to thank her for it.

"What's the point of the place being open if there's no-one here to serve you?" said Rhoda.

Deena knew that her mother was setting the tone for the weeks to come. First she'd be sceptical of the French, then critical of the Spanish and probably downright rude to any other nationality she met on the way. Anyone she liked would have the benefit of her life story in detail. 'I lived in five countries...' Deena could hear it already. Why she'd agreed to this, God alone knew. Rhoda had heard about the Path from Edwina Matthews on the green at the bowls club, who had boasted that her niece, Scarlett, had done it, and do you know, it changed her, changed her from top to bottom. Rhoda had quite liked the idea of being different (for a while), and having questioned her friend and rival intently over a tomato juice on the sun terrace outside the bar, had deduced that she was more than a little reluctant, if not nervous, of undertaking this process of change personally. As night follows day it became apparent to Rhoda that here was a heaven sent opportunity to get one up on Edwina.

'Ma, you're seventy-two years old, you do not need to be a different person, you're quite good enough...well, you're who you are anyway,' Deena had told her, then wished she'd kept her mouth shut. Any argument with her mother always and absolutely reinforced her position.

'Don't you want me to go? Why not? I'm going.'

Within an hour Rhoda was on the internet; by the end of the evening she'd read everything there was to read and forgotten most of it, the next day she'd ordered five guide

books from Amazon (two of them in German; she'd realised another one was in Korean just in time), and was starting the campaign to get Deena to go with her. 'Come on, you don't know who you'll meet,' she'd said with her usual deadly talent for saying exactly what the person she was talking to didn't want to hear.

'Ma, I'm very happy, thank you.'

'No, you're not, you don't have a career and you don't have a man. And you're thirty-five years old.' She said it as she'd been saying it for the past four months since Deena's birthday. 'Time's running out, honey.'

Deena had retreated to her room and cried, just as she'd been doing for what seemed like most of her existence on this earth. She was the youngest of Rhoda's five children by three husbands, or more exactly two, the last being not so hot in that department. Nevertheless Deena had got his name, Dunne. And how she cursed her mother for the Deena. Dunne was bad enough but the alliteration somehow increased the possibility of ridicule. 'Hey Deena, you done it?' Or at school, 'Yes, sir, Deena done it.' Had her mother named her with intent? She'd humiliated her from cradle to thirty-five anyway, so what was wrong with encouraging a few hundred schoolgirls, shop managers and gas station attendants to do it in her absence?

It's fate, let it happen, thought Deena in the pilgrim's office, as she lent her head back against the outline of the mountain she was going to have to climb the next day. It's a foreign country, new people, new everything. She turned to see Eva and Ingrid, a few feet along from her, talking seriously, heads bowed over a guidebook. Already a couple of interesting looking women. The door opened and Peter came in. She gave him a cursory glance. Too old. She looked away. Face it, Deena, you had no choice. How could you let your seventy year old mother do this on her own? This was a point Rhoda had made several times, once even with a hint of a tear, and again when she'd groaned getting out of

an armchair. Deena leaned back on her own hard seat in the pilgrim's office. She knew why she was there, guilt; age-old, primitive, damn forever, infantile guilt. And gratitude. All I done for you! How many times had she heard that as Rhoda's campaign intensified, each dart spreading its poison in Deena's sentimental underside. She'd known from the moment the subject had come up that she wouldn't be able to withstand the assault. Her mother had become too big, too important, too all-consuming; a whole universe of Ma enveloping her child. What would she feel if Rhoda had died on some hillside, falling flat on her pack, legs in the air like a helpless beetle with her new extendable walking sticks clattering to the ground, while her daughter was sitting in some warm coffee house in Toronto jawing with Samantha - who, by the way, had warned her in some detail of what was to come. 'You're going to get so pissed off you'll never want to talk to her again. So go. Maybe it's the only way you'll ever find what it takes to move out of her house.'

But there was another thing buried even deeper than guilt or gratitude, or even her romantic dreams. It was this stuff about God and fate. Even Rhoda had targeted the mystical element, as she'd called it. 'There are things down there in the spirit, Deena, that are just swirling around waiting to come out, not that Edwina Matthews knows anything about it, but you just got to give them time to reveal themselves.' As usual Rhoda struck a nerve.

Deena had always had a kind of unsayable idea, that there was something ahead of her that she wasn't responsible for. Deena's destiny, she called it when it floated up just close enough to the surface to be felt if not seen. She didn't know what it was, what shape or colour, what it would entail, even whether it was good or bad, but it was there, that's for sure. And it had nothing to do with men either. One night (the seventh of Rhoda's campaign) she'd had a dream about a child, she didn't know whether it was a boy or a girl, but whichever it was, it had given her such a

warm beautiful, kind of thank you, loving smile that it seemed like an omen, her destiny calling her. When she woke up she knew she was going to walk the Path. Rhoda had punched the air, given her a hug and then said, maybe she was changing her mind and wouldn't go anyway. Deena said, she could please herself. She was going on her own if need be. Rhoda booked the flights.

\*

Llewellyn came out of the shop with his newly purchased T shirt and staff. He went downhill, and had gone fifty yards before he realised the houses either side seemed familiar. He turned round and went back up. By the time he'd got to the pilgrims office, Charles, the volunteer who was on duty that day, had appeared.

"About damn time," said Rhoda.

Deena stifled the 'Ma' and smiled at Charles, then at everyone else before looking down at her pack.

Possibly Charles, who was around the same age as Rhoda, hadn't heard her, or maybe he considered it acceptable septuagenarian behaviour, or perhaps his English wasn't good enough to understand; whatever it was he ignored it and turned with a charming smile to Llewellyn standing in the doorway and said, "Bienvenue pelerin."

"Hullo," Llewellyn came awkwardly into the room and after some indecision sat between Peter and Ingrid.

"Bienvenue a vous tous," Charles smiled again. "Qui parle Francais?"

"Un peu," said Peter.

"Je suis Suisse," said Eva.

"What?" said Rhoda.

"Ah so I will speak English. I am sorry I am late." Charles nodded towards Rhoda.

So he did hear her, thought Deena without looking up.

“It’s OK, I’ll forgive you this time,” Rhoda smirked, already charmed by this French guy with the twinkling eyes.

Oh no, she’s flirting now, thought Deena.

“This is your Carnet de Pelerin,” said Charles as he picked up a small folded card from the desk. “Or in Espana, the Credencial del Peregrino. You take this to albergues on the Camino and they put a stamp ici.” He indicated the spaces in the booklet. “Remember no carnet, no albergue.”

“What?” Rhoda hadn’t got it.

“You got to have one of those to get into the Albergs,” said Deena patiently.

“They the places that cost three bucks a night?”

“Yes.”

“Well, get one, Deena, don’t just sit there.”

“I will, Ma,” Deena looked up at Charles. “Sorry, sir.”

Charles went on as though nothing had happened. “A Carnet est two euros. If you want to stay in the refuge tonight it is eight euros with breakfast.”

“Eight? How many dollars is that?”

“Ma, can you wait, please?”

“OK, I’ll leave it to you. I got my small purse here anyway. Don’t worry.”

Charles moved towards them and pointed to the maps on the wall. “Voici le Camino,” He pointed to the diagram behind Rhoda’s head that showed a mountain with what seemed to be an almost vertical ascent. “This the first day. Very long, very high. One thousand, three hundred metres. You will see the birds under you.”

“Birds? Under? He mean, below us?”

There was such panic in Rhoda’s voice that Peter laughed out loud.

So did Charles. “Don’t worry, Madame, many people do this and when you are in Roncesvalles the other side, you know you can go all the way to Santiago.”

“If the mountain don’t kill you first?” Rhoda looked at the map with horror.

“Madame, you will go to Roncavalles, I am sure of it.”

“If you say so, mister.”

Charles went back and sat behind the desk. “Who is first?”

\*

Fifteen minutes later Rhoda and Deena were on the cobbles again and going further up the hill towards the refuge, having paid their eight euros. It was dark now and they were walking in a misty lamplight that for some reason reminded Deena of Christmas. Maybe it was the cool air.

“Well that wasn’t so bad, was it honey? What a sweet old guy. I just hope when I get to his age I can be as absolutely charming as he was.”

Deena didn’t think it necessary to comment. “Well here it is.”

They’d stopped outside the heavy wooden, black, studded door of an old and low, grey stone, terraced house. Deena knocked then pushed the door open.

“What he call it? A refuge? That make us, refugees?” Rhoda was happy again.

They went in and were greeted by the stony, unyielding face of Madame Phillippe, a short, squat woman with an almost exactly square face. She was dressed in black and standing behind a small bar. She spoke quickly in French.

“What?” Rhoda didn’t know what was going on.

Deena shrugged and looked expectantly at Madame Phillippe who said, “Door close, ten. Matin, you go, eight.”

“Did her lips move?”

“Ma, please.”

“Well thank you, Madame,” Rhoda creased her most grotesque smile. “You are most welcoming.”

There were two tables rudimentarily laid for breakfast in front of the bar.

“Petit dejeuner ici.” Madame Phillippe arched her eyebrows at the tables, and then said, “Chambre deux.” She held up two fingers and pointed to the corridor.

“I guess that means number two, honey,” Rhoda’s good humour was evaporating fast. She picked up her pack, groaning as if to say where’s the porter, and they went through the bar into a short corridor. Rhoda, no nonsense now, bumped the door open with her pack. The room was small and had once been painted pink. In it were three double bunk beds, two of them taken up, top and bottom, by four Koreans.

“Oh my God,” Rhoda dropped the pack.

“Ma, please!” Deena pushed past Rhoda and stood in the middle of the room. “Hi, everybody, I’m Deena, and this is my mother, Rhoda.” She gave her best smile.

The Koreans all grinned back. A cheerful young man with a black crewcut and cheeky air, was perched on a top bunk. “I am Chan-ja.” He pointed to the woman on the bunk beneath him. “And this is Soon-ok.”

“How you doing?” Rhoda still hadn’t quite wiped the shock off her face. “Who are those?” She looked over at the other Koreans, an older man and another girl.

“I don’t know,” said Chan.

“Didn’t you come together?”

“No, we only just met,” Chan laughed. “Path very popular in Korea,” he added helpfully.

“I bet it is,” said Rhoda, inwardly cursing Edwina Matthews who’d let her in for all this. Was it a setup? She wouldn’t put it past Edwina.

“OK, Ma, you take the bottom, I’ll take the top, OK?” Deena was getting organised.

“You going to sleep now? It’s not even eight o’clock?”

“We just unpack a little.”

“Deena, we got to talk about his,” said Rhoda in a low voice.

Deena looked around the other bunks. They'd all rolled out their sleeping bags. "Ma, open your pack and put your sleeping bag on the bed," she said through gritted teeth.

"I'm hungry. Aren't you hungry?"

"Get your bag out." Deena gave her mother a ferocious look and then smiled up at Chan who was watching it all happily. "We're not used to this kind of thing. We're from Canada."

Rhoda unfurled her sleeping bag. "I done it. What now?"

"OK, Ma, we go out and eat."

Rhoda picked up her pack.

"It's OK, we leave it here."

"You're kidding me." Rhoda looked round the room. They were all looking at her, apart from the old man who'd fallen asleep and was snoring quietly.

"It's OK, we look for bag," said Chan.

"Well that's very kind of you," said Rhoda still holding her pack. And then in a burst of international bonhomie, "Hey, you people eat?"

"Thank you. We go to the supermarket." Chan held up a tin.

"Tuna? Well that's nice."

Deena had had enough. "Come on, mother." She went to the door.

Rhoda followed as the old man began to snore more loudly.

"I hope he isn't going to do that all night," Rhoda tried to laugh.

They went out into the corridor.

"Honey there are quite a few hotels in the town."

Deena ignored her and nodded to Ingrid and Eva as they came past them and went on into room four. They were pleased to find it empty. Eva took a bottom bunk, Ingrid the one above her.

Peter had decided not to stay at the refuge. He wanted to be alone to collect his thoughts and had seen a small hotel a few doors down from the pilgrim's office. He checked in, left his bag in the tiny room with a single bed and a shower built into the corner, and went back to the bar he'd been in before. He sat at a table, ordered a beer and decided to eat. He looked round at the well-used, dark, wooden furniture. It had obviously been a bar for a very long time; the walls, in some places rock, were extensions of the old town ramparts; where they'd been plastered they were nicotine stained and covered in faded posters for long-past local events. He could imagine soldiers congregating around the bar, laughing and singing, maybe in the second world war, including his own father perhaps. The thought caught him by surprise and he looked down at his hands, feeling for a second a powerful longing to see again an old man he'd largely ignored for the last years of his life.

The waitress brought him his drink and his first menu de pelerins. The guidebook had described these as an altruistic gesture to a shared faith, a contemporary extension of the age-old hospitality shown to the ancient pilgrim. She asked him to select one dish from the first five and another from the second; the dessert, bread and wine were all included in the fixed price, which was more than a medieval pilgrim earned in a lifetime. He sipped his beer trying to suppress his cynicism. He ordered a salad and what he knew would be a thin piece of beef and chips at tourist prices. How do you rid yourself of bile, he wondered as he pushed his knife around on the chipped table top? Push it down, let it go, pretend it isn't there? All of these he was perfectly capable of given a lifetime of English practice, but how do you not feel it in the first place? He sighed, then looked up. Ingrid and Eva had come in. They'd chatted briefly and inconsequentially in the pilgrim's office.

A problem for the well-mannered is that often they offer what they believe they should, but don't mean, and find to

their dismay that it is accepted, not because it is wanted, but in order not to cause offence. And so it was with Peter. As courteous as the officer's mess expected, he smiled and indicated that the women were welcome to join him. They hadn't expected to see him anymore than he had them. Ingrid looked at Eva. This had already become the unconscious habit of their decision making. Ingrid would sense what Eva wanted and then act on it. This time she saw Eva smile which threw her. She hadn't wanted to eat with anyone else, she needed to get to know Eva better and cement what she'd begun. She said, "Thank you," and they sat down opposite Peter.

They introduced themselves. He passed them the menu and said, "Especially for Pilgrims." He stopped himself commenting and watched them as they read it. Eva was probably the better looking, he thought, but the more reserved of the two; there was something contained about her which was always compelling. But Ingrid was the attractive one. He could see she'd rather not be sitting with him, or maybe she was just being coy. She was contained too. Or at least the surface was; beneath it he sensed something neurotic, as if she wasn't quite sure of herself and offered a facade that seemed both invitation and rejection at the same time. He noticed that neither of them had handbags. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a woman out of the army without one.

Eva ordered and then translated for Ingrid. They didn't go for the menu de pelerin - wise probably, thought Peter - and both ordered salads.

"Shall we get a bottle?" he asked. "Toast the journey?"

Eva smiled again.

He noticed it was lighter, less of a strain than before.

"Why not?" said Ingrid. Then she took a mobile phone out of her pocket. "Excuse me." She began to text. "It's my daughter," she said. "I must tell her I have arrived."