

A Pilgrim's Journal II



A Pilgrim's Journal II
Walking La Vía de la Plata

Sophronia Camp

Illustrations by Henry McMahon

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*"When you walk with others on the camino you are always alone.
When you walk alone on the camino you are always accompanied."
—Pilgrim Saying*

For Julius, Henry, Ada, and Margot—
my intrepid and delightful companions

For past companions who continue to travel with me in spirit

In Loving Memory of
Marie Stackpole-Hayes
June 6, 1946–March 30, 2008
(aka "Rosie")

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PREFACE

The *camino de Santiago* refers to a web of spidery paths across Europe, all leading to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, in the northwest corner of Spain, where the relics of St. James the Apostle lie in the crypt of the cathedral. The reasons why anyone makes a pilgrimage, and what it means, are as numerous as the individuals who undertake it. Some of our reasons are known to us before we set out, others emerge in the walking.

When I first walked five hundred miles along the French Route in 2001, I met many pilgrims along the way who were making repeat pilgrimages. My pilgrim partner, Rosie, and I thought these people were crazy. Why would anyone subject themselves more than once to the punishment of walking twelve to twenty miles, day after day, for six weeks? It is one thing to take up the challenge and complete it as a one-shot experience. But more than once?

Since that first walk, I've returned to Spain five times; I've repeated familiar two-week segments of the French Route, and twice I've set out on different routes: one, a six-hundred-mile trek from Seville to Santiago de Compostela; the other, a two-week walk of less than a hundred and fifty miles from Madrid to Sahagún. When I return from the *camino*, I don't have the express intention of walking again, nor do I have the intention of *not* walking; it's just that the journey is over, it's been fulfilling, and I'm ready to be back to my everyday life. But several months after my homecoming, a funny thing happens: I start daydreaming about my next jaunt. I remember the freedom, the encounters with other pilgrims met along the way, the beauty of the landscape, the solitude, and the physical invigoration and good health. It's no longer a question of whether I'll get out there again, but simply of *when*. I've discovered that the *camino* has a powerful pull.

I keep journals of my walks, and when I return I type them up and fill in the details out of a desire to retain as much of this marvelous but

transitory and elusive experience as I can. The first journal became a book: *A Pilgrim's Journal: Walking El Camino de Santiago*. I never intended to turn another journal into a second book. I had the sense that it would be more “same-old, same-old” for a reader—a new time frame, landscape, and cast of characters—but otherwise an entirely familiar experience. However, after being asked recently to preach at a Friends Meeting, I pulled out one of my journals to look for a particular day that I wanted to refer to between Seville and Santiago. Thumbing through it, I was surprised to find that this journal had a different flavor from the first. I thought maybe there would be a different kind of food for thought for the reader, related to the nature of our encounters with God.

This book records a more solitary pilgrimage along the *vía de la plata*, undertaken in 2003. In a month of walking (before intersecting with the well-populated French Route again), I saw a total of twenty pilgrims, an entirely different experience from my first walk, which had included meeting a wonderful, quirky assortment of folk on a daily basis. Consequently, this book reflects a deeper interior journey, I think, and for this reason I decided to print it. I had more time alone, longer walking days, fewer amusements and diversions, and I was now somewhat of a veteran. In succumbing once again to the lure of the *camino*, I uncovered more ways in which I experience God in my life, and became increasingly curious about the experience of others. The process of walking, praying, musing, singing, crying, laughing, resting, emptying, and replenishing offers the pilgrim a particular context in which to explore one's relationship with God, with very few distractions. I'm interested in the elemental rather than the intellectual, the experienced rather than the reasoned-out—how one comes to recognize God, rather than how one interprets a Bible story. When is God with us when we are not in church praying scripted prayers, following a well-known ritual, listening for lessons from a pastoral authority? Where is God? What do we dream and muse and think about God? When and how do we know God is God, rather than some construct of our desiring? So I hope this journal will speak to the seeker in the reader.

When I was first asked to preach, I declined. When asked again, I said I'd think about it. Then I *did* think about it, and realized with a surge of anticipatory pleasure, “Yes, of course I will.” The only way I'll

know about how others experience God is to talk about how *I* experience God, and invite response. Who will tell me about God unless I tell others about God? So I put forward this second journal, almost five years after the fact, in hopes that the reader will go with me and be prompted to share his or her story of God with others. In this way we take God out of dark, secret, quiet, safe spaces and make God manifest in the world.

Sophronia Camp
Cambridge, MA
January 2008

Saturday, April 26

Florence to Seville

The streets of Seville are a maze of narrow, twisting one-ways, and after stopping to consult his book of maps, my taxi driver makes a few more turns, pulls over, and says it would be cheaper and easier for me to walk to the *Convento Santa Rosalia*, where I hope to spend a few nights. He signals the way with a series of fluid hand motions to the left and the right, as if charting the movements of a school of fish, and plunks my nylon duffel on the sidewalk.

I unzip the duffel and pull out my backpack and trekking poles, stowed for the series of flights from Florence to Seville to protect loose straps and buckles from the baggage handlers and conveyor belts. Earlier in the day I stood waiting for an airport bus and watched as a convoy of baggage carts took a sharp turn, dropping three or four pieces of luggage on the tarmac, and thanked the cautious skepticism that had prompted me to find a lightweight bag that could hold all my gear.

I heft the pack and feel the first thrill of beginning the *camino*. This is the moment. I spent the previous ten days in Italy with family, visiting my son Henry, who is on a semester abroad program; they have returned to the States while I have come to Spain. Each of the three flights taking me away from them and toward the *camino* was an exercise in disengagement, including uncertainty about where I am to sleep, if I will find my walking partners as planned, if I can get my *credencial* stamped at the cathedral on a Sunday, and even if I can begin walking this afternoon. Moving from the familiar cushion of family, in which my husband makes all the travel arrangements and does the concomi-

tant worrying, to independent operation where I have to fend once again for myself, is both welcome and a little nerve-wracking. Once I get going, I know from past experience, I will rejoice in the independence. Feeling the weight of the pack as I shimmy and bend forward a little to get it to settle just right on my back and hips, and buckling on the waist strap, gives me the sense of stepping into the adventure once and for all. I replace one load with another, and in that shift start looking forward rather than backward.

I follow the dubious directions of my driver and find the convent easily enough, but it is shut up tight for *siesta*, and I instantly revert from pilgrim to tourist and head for a livelier part of town and a hotel. I pass a number of nondescript *hostales*, very cheap and simple Spanish hotels, but keep on walking. This is the end of a week of *feria*, a holiday after Holy Week and Easter, which are famously observed in Seville. The *feria* (festival) has no religious significance and seems to be a time of general fun and letting off steam after the more somber and arduous celebrations of Holy Week. These two weeks make for a packed city, and I was warned to get a hotel reservation well in advance.

Over the winter I took a beginner Spanish class for three months, followed by an extra month of private lessons. I am planning to walk the *vía de la plata*, a strand of the *camino de Santiago*, a medieval pilgrimage route leading from various points in Europe through Spain, all ending at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, where the relics of St. James the Apostle lie. I walked the most traveled route, the *camino francés*, from St-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the French side of the Pyrenees to Santiago two years ago. There I got by easily on my rusty but fairly fluent French. The route itself is full of pilgrims of many nationalities, and the towns and villages that accommodate them are used to the influx, so there is a very international flavor to the whole experience. It's a perfect place to be for the celebration of Pentecost—a host of speakers of many tongues, all fired by the Holy Spirit (or some driving force that spurs us to walk a long pilgrimage), all managing to communicate remarkably smoothly.

But the *vía de la plata* will be different. It is a much less traveled route, running from Seville north to Astorga for 740 kilometers (440 miles), there joining with the *camino francés* to Santiago for another 260

kilometers (160 miles). It's more remote, passing through fewer villages, and only a comparative trickle of pilgrims walk it, so it seemed advisable to learn as much Spanish as I could in a short time.

I was very proud of myself when a month earlier I had made a reservation in Spanish over the phone for a hotel room in Seville. I followed up with a fax and then a few e-mails for a confirmation that never came. I wasn't too concerned, until one more e-mail message came in from a pilgrim friend reminding me of the importance of having a reservation. I called the hotel again and learned there was no reservation and no room available. I discovered quickly how a little ire spruces up one's fluency when I fired off an e-mail berating the hotel for not answering my messages and alerting me that I would have to look elsewhere. After trying a handful of other hotels to no avail, I decided that it was all part of the pilgrim experience to trust in God and live in the moment. I would work it out once I arrived.

Now, as I pass by several *hostales*, I realize that I am not quite as ready for the pilgrimage as I had thought a few moments before. I want a nice room in a central spot, with my own bathroom. When I come to the big Plaza del Duque, I walk into the first hotel I see, the América, and promptly secure a tiny room for two nights.

By the time I emerge, Seville is teeming with people flowing down three parallel pedestrian streets leading to the cathedral. There are masses of tourists, but I hear no English as I walk along, a decided change from Florence. The crowds remind me of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, with its hordes of pushing folks funneling onto a narrow bridge to cross the Arno and look at the shops along the way. But right away the languid pace of Spain makes itself felt and marks another change from Florence. Here people stroll and amble, no one rushes or pushes past anyone else. Children hop around, musicians sit along the sides of the street playing for change.

I feel myself adjusting, shifting internally—"tranquila, tranquila. What's the hurry?" The city is beautiful. I take in the amazing shop windows, full of fabulous wedding dresses in one, flamenco costumes in another—an ancient clock maker with a wooden storefront façade from the nineteenth century—cafés and ice cream parlors, *pastelerías* and pharmacies, with their signature green crosses flashing, full of the scent

of soaps, liniments, powders. I notice the prevalence of tile-work decoration around doors and windows—something I didn't see in the north of Spain—and whitewashed stucco rather than bare stone. Orange trees are bearing fruit, rose petals are strewn along the streets—part of the *feria* festivities? A wedding procession? I feel in a daze—foggy, tentative, slightly fearful, but of nothing in particular. Just as I need to get my legs for walking, I need to get into my *camino* head as well.

I walk through the cathedral, not looking at it closely, feeling a little resistant to the cavernous dark space, and eager to be off. So I start out, using my guidebook for direction as I haven't yet found any yellow arrows (the familiar hand-painted mark that pilgrims use to follow the *camino*). I head across the Guadalquivir River toward Camas and Santiponce, through an old neighborhood known for its tile making, and onto instantly quieter streets, allowing me to lengthen my stride and feel as if I am really walking with a purpose. How quickly the sense of adventure and delight in being on the *camino* come back to me in looking for arrows on street lights, on the sides of buildings, or along curbs. With surprising frequency my eye catches sight of bright red gowns in shop windows, accenting the more sedate navy blue dresses with white piping, black and white polka dots, pale greens, lemon yellows. I pass shop after shop of these elegant creations, marveling that there is a market for so many fancy clothes.

With the fashion antennae still bristling, I note a crowd of people milling about outside a church and assume it's a wedding party. On closer inspection I see that most of the young men are in military dress and there is no sign of bridesmaids—all the young women wear bright, clingy dresses in vivid colors and bold patterns. Soon after I pass through the festive group I lose my way, and this, too, is a signal that I am on the *camino* again, as being lost is an all-too-common experience.

My plan is to walk the urban six miles to Santiponce and then return to Seville by bus. I will spend tomorrow as a tourist and the following day meet two pilgrim friends from a previous walk—Duncan and his girlfriend, Marta. They have agreed to walk with me for two weeks before they return to work, in England for Duncan and Germany for Marta. We can hop the bus to Santiponce and begin our *camino* walk together in the countryside.

I retrace my steps, cross over a highway and a canal, and scramble down an embankment in search of a riverside walking path. Instead, I come upon a barking dog protecting his homeless master's encampment under a bridge. I decide I'll try again tomorrow—there's no need to feel afraid or to put myself in danger. I think of my friend Rosie, who walked with me on my first *camino*, and how amused she would be to see me lost on the very first day! We had our share of wrong turns, missteps, and backtrackings.

Once back in the city, I return for a longer look at the cathedral and find a wedding in progress in a splendid gold chapel, with an organ playing and tourists gawking around the edges. Back at the hotel I climb out of my window onto a little parapet to hang my washing, another mark of being on the road again—the daily laundry ritual. After a bath and change of clothes, I feel completely revived from the frustration of an unsuccessful walk and set out to e-mail Duncan and Marta. I sit at an outdoor café, sipping vermouth, eating calamari and olives, people-watching, and continue to feel my way into solo travel. I don't care for dining alone and feel vulnerable and exposed in the evenings, especially in Spain, where one doesn't see many women out alone at night. So I linger deliberately, forcing myself to adjust, thinking about the long days and weeks ahead, feeling just on the edge of a great adventure.

As I drift in and out of sleep during the night, the noise from the plaza reminds me where I am, and that social life is lived after midnight in Spain. Finally, at five in the morning, the city goes dead silent.

Sunday, April 27

Seville

I am up and out into a still-sleeping city by nine. After a morning coffee and an attempt to draw “*la Giralda*,” the square, ornate tower attached to the cathedral, I head into the cathedral and wander around the beautiful and huge Gothic interior before the ten o’clock Mass. There are six priests at the service, although there are only about sixty congregants, many of whom are tourists who come and sit for a few moments and then wander off. An ancient cleric stands at the top of the steps leading to the chancel and conducts the congregational singing with gusto. There is a good leaflet to follow—the first I’ve seen in Spain. I am used to recognizing where I am in a service only by the familiarity of the pattern of readings and liturgy, so the written bulletin is a bonus. I like the sermon—as much of it as I can follow—based on the gospel passage about Doubting Thomas, on the nature of faith and waking up to new possibilities, rebirth, every day. It seems a perfect sendoff message for the *camino*. I am pleased at how much I can understand. I find that if I don’t try too hard to catch each word, but just listen almost lazily, enough words come through to create a whole that makes sense to me.

My *credencial*, a pilgrim passport, arrived from Spain before I left the States, but I want it stamped and dated from the cathedral to mark my official start of the pilgrimage. The *credencial* permits access for the walking, cycling, or horseback-riding pilgrim to *refugios* or *albergues*. These are simple dormitory accommodations along the *camino* provided for pilgrims for many centuries by churches, monasteries, towns, and private owners. Pilgrims traveling with four-wheeled assistance walk during the day,

but often skip long stretches and are driven for part of the way. They are expected to stay in hotels, *hostales* (simple hotels, usually with no food), or rooms offered in private homes, also a staple along the *camino*.

I have a confusing time of it between talking with a young monk and several guards as to exactly where I go to get a stamp and whom to get it from. I decide to tackle it the next morning before I meet Duncan and Marta.

On my way out, I see a bishop, surrounded by his henchmen, being interviewed for television, and then a procession across the plaza of a group called "*La pastora divina*," that I take to be a women's auxiliary guild, celebrating their three-hundred-year anniversary. The crowd is moving from the cathedral to a nearby exhibition hall, bearing banners. I follow the swarm into the building, where the walls are covered with more elaborately stitched and decorated banners. I guess that these are all the parochial banners that the women's sodality makes for religious processions, and that when saints' statues are carried through the streets, these banners accompany them. The crowd is excitedly chattering away and it seems more like a private reception than an actual exhibit, so I beat a hasty retreat after a brief look.

In this my second try at walking to Santiponce, frustrations abound because on a Sunday I can't find an open tourist information booth or a street map of the outlying neighborhoods to help me navigate out of the maze of Seville.

I set out mapless and think I might be able to find my route by going along the river and crossing at a different point. First I pass the *plaza de toros*, a little round stadium spotlessly whitewashed, with ochre trim, then a series of outdoor restaurants with family parties that include young women wearing huge combs and cream-colored mantillas. Little boys, looking like tiny extras in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, wear miniature admiral's uniforms, with gold braid swinging from their shoulders. The little girls wear pouffy pastel calf-length dresses, with matching shoes, ankle socks, and hair ribbons bigger than their heads. One young woman passes by on the arm of her boyfriend—something out of a film—both olive-skinned, dark-haired, perfectly matched in beauty and form. She is very slender and wears a white sleeveless blouse with stiff beaded shoulder caps, a little fillip of the toreador. They wear

expressions of calm indifference as they weave through the crowd, well aware of the impact of their languorous passage. From the rose petals crushed underfoot, to the oranges peeking out from lush green leaves overhead, and the families dressed in their Sunday best, Seville presents an altogether lovely and sensuous picture.

But soon I am walking away from the center along the banks of the Guadalquivir. It is a hot, breezeless afternoon, in full sun. I didn't think to bring a hat or water bottle, since it was to be a short go-and-return venture. I miss them the longer I walk in the dead of the afternoon. Now there are very few people about as it's *siesta* time; it feels strange not to follow any arrows or guide, and to rely on guesswork in this no-man's land of cement walkways and dusty grass and trees.

As I walk along, trying to talk myself into a positive attitude, I wrestle with dispiritedness. I do not like being alone at all and have mixed feelings about embarking once again on the *camino*. I am eager to get on the "real" *camino* to dispel the mood, but realize that a bleak mood, too, is part of the total experience. One of the basic truths of walking the *camino* is that each aspect of it is "true"—one can't pick and choose, identifying any piece as being more real than any other—this is one experience that really *is* the sum of its parts. One learns to pay attention to each moment rather than controlling or dismissing or editing as one goes along. I am quickly lifted out of my low spirits by two children, fishing from the banks with their little dog, who hail me for a chat.

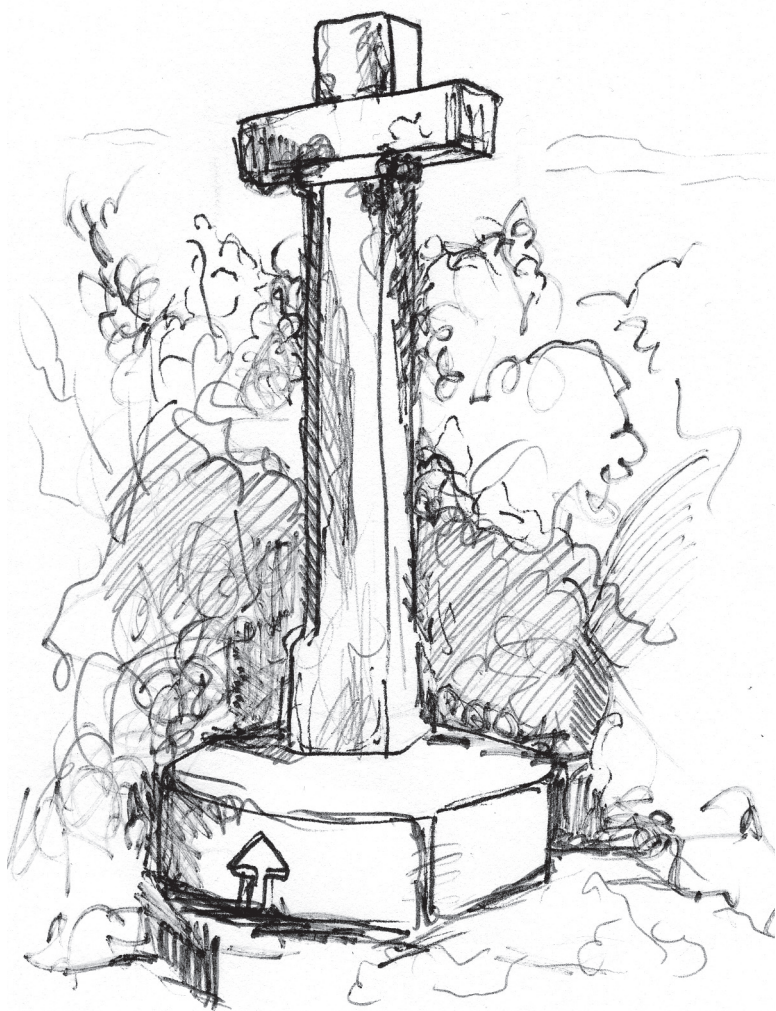
Ahead are two marvelous bridges, both bright white, slim and elegant against the blue sky. The farther of the two, El Alamillo, is asymmetrical, with one long arm, or wing, stretching up and back diagonally, attached to the deck by cables, suggesting a huge sail or a giant harp. A pedestrian walkway runs down the center of the bridge, directly underneath the cables and toward the arm. A few boys are scrambling up the first hundred feet of the arm with their skateboards, sitting and careening back down at a terrific speed.

Once over the bridge I am lost in a huge, dusty, dry park bordered by highway, metro tracks, vast parking lots, and a sports stadium. After asking several folks for directions and trudging about for another hour, I pack it in and take the first taxi back to town. All that slogging for hours on foot and I am back in the heart of Seville in ten minutes.

Out for a stroll later in the evening, I wander into the little *Capilla de San José*, where a Mass is starting. I push through a cluster by the door to get into the packed church—a small space dominated by a huge gold *retablo* (altarpiece), stuffed to excess with carved figures, like a cave filled with Ali Baba's treasures. At least one bird is chirping and flying around high overhead. People wander in and out, change seats, chat—in constant motion, genuflecting, making the sign of the cross. Lots of small, blocky, old people—the women severe and square in black wool suits with short hair, dyed chestnut, the men in old gray suits and vests. Younger folk push in as well. To hear people talk, religion in Spain is dead, but to be in these churches with their bustle and multiple services, and to be among the numbers of people dropping in for their almost-casual visits for a quick prayer and a dip into the holy water, makes one think otherwise.

Again, I end up at an outdoor table of a restaurant on a side street near *la Giralda*. It is nine o'clock and there is still direct sunlight on the tower. Trying to capture all its detail earlier in the day, I missed the word *FORTISSIMA* running across one of its tiers. I gaze at it now and think about signs on the *camino*, which I see at every turn. The scallop shell is St. James' symbol, referring to one of his miracles, and pilgrims often wear one attached to their backpack. I plucked a perfect little shell from my beach at home and brought it along. But I found it crushed at the bottom of my duffel bag when I first unpacked at the hotel—does this mean that something is off or wrong about my setting out on this new route? Or does it mean that I have to make a break with my past walks and set out on this one with a clean slate?

Just as I am getting my walking legs and head, feeling a little conflicted and intimidated, and after two thoroughly unsuccessful attempts to start my walk, I look up and spot this huge *FORTISSIMA*—so obvious and yet overlooked earlier—something to keep me going. I settle into my ringside seat, watch the six or seven restaurants around me fill up, the night sky fall, and swarms of little black birds swoop around the tower. There is a constant din, unlike the background hum of a city at home. Here the sounds are distinct, very particular—a backdrop of bird-song, popping and whining of motorcycles, voices reverberating against the walls along narrow stone streets, the clip-clop of horse-drawn carriages, and between all these sounds, little pockets of silence.



DAY ONE

Monday, April 28

Seville to Santiponce (10 km by bus) to Guillena

13 km • 11:00–3:00

“Flutterby”

I arrive at the cathedral at eight to get my *credencial* stamped in advance of meeting Marta and Duncan at nine. Duncan, a Scot, and I met two years ago on the *camino francés* and became friends over a period of ten days. Then Marta, a German pilgrim, and Duncan met and fell in love. Two years later they are still a couple in spite of the difficulties of conducting an international relationship. Duncan is a *camino* enthusiast and has walked the French route a number of times, and they have decided to join me for several weeks on this untried route.

I see a priest enter what looks like a glorified confessional, nestled at the base of one of the huge stone columns of the cathedral. Instead, it's a tiny office with a computer on the desk. The priest waves me in and stamps my *credencial* with barely a word. A few minutes later he scurries out again, locking the office behind him. I consider myself fortunate to have gotten my stamp, given his spotty office hours.

With various barricades making it impossible to walk an interior perimeter, I circle the outside of the cathedral, peering in at open doors. As time goes on, I imagine patrolling this enormous building for hours, missing my friends entirely. By nine-thirty I decide to set out—we will either meet en route or not, but as our plans are rather loose, there is no point in waiting around. That simple decision is another reminder of what the *camino* is all about—being on one's own and following one's own schedule—no plans, no obligations, just walk! I set out along the river again, passing the *plaza de toros* and the outdoor restaurants, not yet open for the day. All of a sudden, here are Marta and Duncan walk-

ing toward me, smiling, willing to forego a cathedral stamp, and ready to get on the road. We dash for a ten o'clock bus for Santiponce, catching up on our news and sharing our apples and biscotti as we ride through the nondescript exurbs. We get out at a gas station right on the edge of the countryside, next to some Roman ruins, and find coffee and toast in a café across the road.

By eleven o'clock we start to walk. The day is cool and gray, and after only five minutes, a man hails us from across the road and walks along with us. I have heard that the *vía de la plata* is a very isolated route and so am surprised that within minutes we have met our first pilgrim, Rudi, a trim, fit-looking man of around sixty from Cologne, with a deep tan and short whitish-blond hair.

This first day is one of working out all the kinks—which pockets for which gizmos, where the water bottle will hang, how long the walking sticks should be. It feels great to actually be walking—no longer a quasi-tourist, no more false starts, no more calls and e-mails to figure out a rendezvous, now it is just *walking*. How simple it is. We are quickly off pavement and onto dirt track through wheat fields with a light breeze. The wildflowers are abundant, and I snap photo after photo, thinking of my German pilgrim friend Hanna, who was as mad about the flowers as I am.

I walk past Duncan and Marta just as she is being pestered by some insects. I pause, but keep going when I see that Duncan is helping her get them out of her hair. Later, she catches up to me and says she “missed my compassion” when she was being attacked by the bees! I explain that I hadn’t realized they were bees, and also that I hadn’t wanted to hover when she was already being looked after. It is an odd moment—it’s so easy to misinterpret others’ behavior when you don’t know them well. I tend to like to be left alone if I’m in some sort of distress, and so I thought I was giving her space, but she felt abandoned. She says that she spoke of it right away because she didn’t want it to fester. I appreciate her forthrightness. When she and Duncan met on my first pilgrimage, they walked at a different pace from me, so I didn’t get to know Marta as well as I know Duncan. I’ve had misgivings as to whether we will get along as a threesome on this walk. I wrote to Duncan in April, “*I don’t want you and M. to feel unduly tied to me either—of course my hope is we’ll*

go at the same rate and like being together, but if it doesn't work out that way, we shouldn't let it worry us. I certainly don't want you two to feel you have to stick with the old girl! I'm assuming that we'll walk at our own rates each day, but end up together in the same villages at the end of the day (as we so often did on the French route), and so keep together that way." But Marta's ability to address a potential problem right away pleases me, and I think that I am going to like this young woman just fine.

Ahead of us is a dip in the road that creates an easy ford through a shallow pool of water. Marta finds a handwritten note in Spanish and French, left at the water's edge, warning us that the water is thigh-high. One by one we take off our boots and either walk barefoot or don sandals to cross. We sit up on a culvert, drying our feet and chatting. Rudi starts making nasty comments about French pilgrims. Then he says he thinks that it's strange for women to travel the *camino* alone, and don't we, too, find it odd? Marta and I look at each other and say, "No, we don't." He elaborates: women who travel alone on the *camino* are out there to solve their own neurotic problems and all they do is talk about them along the way. He then allows as how he can't stand to talk with anyone while walking.

As we walk on, I think about Rudi's assertiveness. I am a little stunned by it. He has very quickly imposed several of his views, all of them disagreeable, on three strangers, in a perfectly affable manner. He's almost like a big dog who has to establish his supremacy over the other dogs in the pack. The dog doesn't necessarily attack the other animals, he simply has to make it clear that he's the boss. I wonder why Rudi needs to do this. Social relationships on the *camino* are out of the ordinary in the sense that our only shared frame of reference is pilgrimage. We are disengaged from our normal lives and are simply wayfarers. The *camino* provides the opportunity for each pilgrim to present a self that is unencumbered by personal context and baggage. So what one sees of others and offers of one's self seems more open, easier, generally lighter than in our everyday lives. Marta, Duncan, and I are simply walking along, working into our pilgrim skins, reveling once again in the pleasures of walking—the pace, the wildflowers, the views, the anticipation of long days full of physical and spiritual exercise—and here is Rudi, altogether taut, wired with a different need. For a while Marta and I

walk together while Duncan ambles after us, his huge pack bobbing and swaying behind him. I point out a lovely butterfly to Marta, who claims that “flutterby” would be a more apt name for these creatures. I think it’s pretty cool that she can play around like this with English, when it’s a second language for her. I cross a stream and toss my trekking poles back to Marta to navigate the tippy, slippery rocks in the stream bed.

We enter Guillena, a little whitewashed town, and find the *Hostal Francés* along the main street, entered through a typical nondescript bar with a door leading out of it and upstairs to rooms above. It’s spotlessly clean—also typical. When I pull open the orange rayon curtains at my window I am surprised to look out on an interior corridor, and let them fall closed again. The proprietors, Sandra and Santiago, are welcoming. After a bite to eat followed by ablutions, I go out for a lengthy shopping spree up and down the long main street, returning with envelopes, toothbrush and paste, razors, picnic food, a pin to keep my wrap-around skirt closed—each purchase providing an opportunity to practice my fledgling Spanish. I am inordinately pleased with the success of these exchanges. I get one break with a French-speaking Tunisian shopkeeper.

I am sitting out in front of the bar writing in my journal, and am interrupted by Rudi, who promises to be truly tiresome after all. He is drunk, and keeps repeating, “I’m tho thtupid, I’m thtupid.” He pours out his story—he fell in love on his last *camino*, but his ladylove eventually spurned him. Walking again, he is reminded of her and feeling lonely, hence, drinking. When he adds that he has a wife and four children, any nascent sympathy toward his lovelorn state evaporates. He commandeers total attention. Partially it’s because he never stops talking, and if he sees any hint of inattention, he grabs my arm, cuffs my shoulder, or pats my hand, and barrels on. He is an expert on all things to do with the *camino*, and his chatter is full of sexual innuendo and braggadocio. How tedious it is to listen to an unfaithful husband natter on about the “butterflies in his stomach” and the wonder of it all—true love at his age! I ask him sourly how his wife feels about his ladylove, and he instantly acts wounded and misunderstood. He accuses me defensively of being his judge. I answer lightly, “not at all. I’m just wondering what your wife thinks.” I derive a bit of mali-

cious pleasure in goading him. If I have to listen to all this blather, I feel he is fair game. Anyway, it does the trick. Without receiving the expected sympathy, he leaves to buy his food for the next day.

I sew a bead onto my hat. My daughter Ada gave me a bracelet from a trek in Tibet and said that its beads symbolize impermanence. Earlier in the day the bracelet started to come apart and I slipped it into my pocket. Another sign—a reminder that the *camino* is a fluid, ever-developing experience that can't be held onto. I think the impermanence bead will be a good reminder of this.

My hatband is ringed with little sewn-on good-luck charms. I like adding something from each year's pilgrimage, and each object has a particular meaning or memory for me. On last year's walk, I added a medallion from Lourdes, given to me by a French pilgrim. This year I added a "Peace" pin to separate myself from my president's politics and actions, and have sewn on a *camino* peseta given to me by a "guardian angel."

Two years ago, on my first pilgrimage, my friend Rosie and I saw an old gent on the *camino*. We dubbed him our "guardian angel" because he always seemed to pop up ahead of us on the way, and to beat us into every *refugio* in the evenings, in spite of the fact that he looked old and beat and very slow. He became our inspiration—if he could handle the *camino*, then so could we—and we looked out for him every day, feeling cheered if we spotted him resting by the path. We lost him after ten days or so and wondered what had become of him.

Last spring I returned to Spain for two weeks of walking along the *camino francés* with my son Henry. At the *refugio* in Larrasoaña, on the second night of our walk, I went to the mayor's office (he was also the *hospitalero*) to pay for the night. The room was in friendly chaos with Santiago, the mayor, presiding behind an enormous desk. Some pilgrims were ranged along the walls, others were in line, all were talking away, and it was hard to see if there was any order at all in this arrangement. But as I already had my bed it made no difference to me how long I had to wait to get up to the front and turn in my *credencial*. On reaching the edge of Santiago's desk, I took a closer look at an old man to my left who seemed to be a pal of the mayor. He was wearing nothing at all except droopy underdrawers, plastic flip-flops, and an old cap studded with

pins. Here was my guardian angel from last year's *camino*! I couldn't believe it, nor could I explain my excitement at seeing him again without any Spanish at my command. I managed to convey that I had seen him the year before and that was as far as I could get. It turned out that he was on his fourth *camino*.

Later that evening, as Henry and I walked back to the *refugio* from dinner, my guardian angel, obviously on the lookout, stopped us in the street and proudly handed me a sheet of paper with Xeroxes of all his *compostelas* on it. (*Compostelas* are certificates issued by the Roman Catholic Church, received in Santiago, that prove one's pilgrim status. One has to walk at least the last sixty miles of the *camino* and affirm that one has walked for religious or spiritual reasons.) These included the old man's name and address—Angelo Labordeta Fernández—close enough in my linguistic sensibilities to translate as “laboring angel” or “worker angel.” This confirmed that we must have been right as to his metaphysical qualities. He also pulled out of his pocket a few special *camino* pesetas issued just before the euro took over as currency, giving one to each of us, so I felt immediately that the second year's walk would be as blessed as the first.

Now, as I finish sewing the coin onto my hat, Marta and Duncan arrive. We stroll around town looking for an open restaurant, but are too early. Pilgrim hours are not those of Spaniards. We eat dinner around eight and are tucked into our beds by ten, the hour when many Spaniards are just deciding it's time to think about dinner. Some restaurants along the *camino* offer a pilgrim's menu at pilgrim hours for a cheaper price. We return with trepidation to our own *hostal*, hoping to avoid Rudi, but there is no sign of him. We have a delicious *menu del día*, and meet Luce, a young Italian woman with her little dog Kiki, whom she found on the *camino*. It was she who wrote the warning note about the depth of the water in the first stream we'd crossed. Luce walked the French route several years earlier and has just now walked in reverse from Mérida to Seville on the *vía de la plata*. She was so upset to be back in a city after the solitude and peace of the *camino* that she returned to Guillena to wait for her boyfriend, who is to join her in a few days. They plan to try their luck as street musicians in Seville. Having just passed through the scene in Seville, I can easily picture her there. I am delighted by the

usual *camino* vibes, the tales people have to tell, the serendipity of our encounters. The magic has begun!

The *hostal* is fitted with lights on timer switches, and I soon discover that any time another guest comes up the stairs or goes to the toilet my room is flooded with bright light unobstructed by my flimsy curtains. Flamenco dancing starts at midnight in the bar downstairs, and the last group of guests thunders up the stairs to bed at five past four in the morning! Coupled with this is the strangest dream of my life, full of menace, a kind of psychological thriller in which I am not a participant but an observer. It includes a long period of hallucinatory light-show effects during which I think I am awake, but am not, quite.

DAY TWO

Tuesday, April 29

Guillena to Castilblanco de los Arroyos

20 km • 8:15–1:30

Signs & Symbols

I am up and out by eight-fifteen, and the promised rain at noon never happens—a sunny day with high clouds, cool giving way to heat. The walking is all off-road, through olive and orange groves and wheat fields on a farm track of rich, red earth, not yet hard packed. This is gently contoured, hilly country with the usual array of splendid wildflowers, scents, birds—I watch huge hawks wheeling overhead during a long snack break.

This day feels like continued shakedown. I think the distance long and hard—five hours of walking to my anticipated four. I feel real fatigue for the last hour, wondering, Will I stick it? Will it get easier? What happens when I have to do closer to thirty kilometers than twenty a day? All that self-doubt. I am aware of the physical at all times: How are my shoulders, hips, thighs? What about the damned water bottle—how do I rig it so it doesn't bounce and so that I can get to it easily?

I decide that I am not going to stay in what my guidebook calls “R&F”s (Roof and Floor) unless I'm with others. These are very simple accommodations, in a sports center or community hall. They are open to all travelers passing through, not just pilgrims, and one can ask at the local *ayuntamiento* (town hall) or the police for their whereabouts and keys. The pilgrim walking the *vía de la plata* has to rely on these much more than on *refugios* or *albergues*, which are more scarce here than they are along the *camino francés*. It occurs to me that there is a fine line between being adventurous and independent, and just plain foolish, and that as long as I can find beds in *hostales* and private houses for between ten and fifteen euros a night, I will sleep there. Am I motivated

by common sense or fear? Does it matter? It seems best to feel safe and comfortable after hard, long days.

With that in mind, I decide on a hotel and private bath for the night. However, when I arrive in Castilblanco, I find the new *refugio* on the edge of town behind the gas station and next to a little grove of eucalyptus, and get a key from Rafael, the gas station proprietor. It's clean, with four rooms, each furnished with two beds and good mattresses. The hot water is plentiful and there is a sun-baked terrace outside my bedroom with a washing sink that promises to have my laundry dry in a flash. I am thrilled, and, as usual, it is all I need. Rudi arrives and chooses the empty rooms across the hall from mine. Then come two Dutchmen, Johann and Ari, who have walked all the way from Santiponce. I already feel territorial about my little space and hope they will go over with Rudi, but they choose the room next to mine.

The bar across the street serves delicious gazpacho and ham and eggs. I am clean and comfortably achy and very relaxed. I've inaugurated a new camping towel that my husband Jeff bought—the best one I've ever tried—big enough to actually wrap up in, but light and absorbent, like a chamois, and very quick drying. I give my drawing pad and colored pencils to one of the gas station attendants to give to his kids—my attempt at drawing *la Giralda* in Seville made it clear to me that I am not going to draw another thing on the *camino*, and I prefer to lose the weight and gain the extra space in my backpack.

So . . . I am still in break-in mode. Even though pilgrimage is not a new experience for me, I am surprised anew at how emotionally up and down walking the *camino* is—how one feels full of doubts, fears, and questions one moment and how quickly one switches to feeling comfortable, easy, and reassured the next. I am still working on what it feels like to be intentionally solo. Although Marta and Duncan agreed to come along, I am not really *with* them—that is, I spent today entirely alone, leaving ahead of them in the morning. Perhaps they will stay at a *hostal* or stop earlier or walk farther. We have no formal arrangement, are not obliged to travel as a threesome, and so we might not connect again. I feel much more contained, drawn into myself as a solo traveler—friendly, but a little more aloof than is my wont. I am glad to have my sunglasses as a kind of shield.

I lost a silver earring during the day. I started with one silver and one gold scallop shell, the silver one from Henry, the gold one from a pilgrim friend—more talismans like those on my hat. Also, I have a number of little cuts—one from a sharp window latch in Seville, another from the tip of my walking stick, a third from the tap at the washing sink this afternoon. Am I moving too fast? Being careless?

I can't get the idea of signs and symbols out of my head. Is any sign negative or positive, does it have any meaning at all until we ascribe one to it? I've been thinking as I walk about layers and levels, and have the sense that this year's *camino* might be about hidden layers unfolding, revealed by signs. So far what keeps cropping up are broken things, wounds, loss. My broken scallop shell, my bandaged fingers, my lost earring, the word *fortissima* carved into the tower in Seville—what do they mean?

Lost and found . . . The Dutchmen, Marta and Duncan, and I, briefly, all lost our way during today's walk. Rudi talked about his refusal to turn back once he's made a choice of route. I've shown that same stubbornness in the past, too. What does one do when lost? Think and regroup? Retrace steps or continue? Get scared, or angry and obstinate? Remember faith, call upon it, and relax? Many opportunities to make choices arise along the *camino*, and with each point of decision there is a need to interpret the situation. How one interprets the moment influences the choice one makes. Many possibilities, sometimes opposing, collide on the *camino* as a regular occurrence, making the experience an emotional roller coaster. There is a lot of time, space, and quiet in which to reflect and perhaps choose differently than one might in more ordinary circumstances.

Today I was looking for a snack spot with shade, a view, and a flat rock for a seat. There was none to be found, and when I found myself angrily swearing because I'd dropped my guidebook, I thought, That's it. Take a break right now. Forget the perfect spot. I flopped down right where I'd dropped the guidebook in the middle of a pebbly path. I sat for half an hour, watching soaring hawks and munching on an apple, some cheese, and a carrot. I took a few homeopathic pills for sore muscles, waggled my feet and rubbed in some Tea Tree oil, and eventually moved on, entirely restored, with a clear mood and renewed vigor. Lost and