

# DESTINY'S JOURNEY

(Working title)

Non-fiction/Memoire



Photo: Santiago El Grande (1957) Salvador Dali © Beaverbrook Art Gallery

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[renee@reneemorel.ca](mailto:renee@reneemorel.ca)

# PART 1: The Outer Journey

## PROLOGUE

### **Beaverbrook Art Gallery — Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada**

Sitting on a bench, I contemplate the monolithic masterpiece looming above me. I close my eyes. Inhale ... deeply. Exhale ... slowly.

#### *Santiago El Grande*

The apostle straddling a majestic rearing white stallion, its hind legs resting on a calm blue sea, a swirling white cloud veiling its phallus. Saint James looking up at the sword in his left hand. Standing on the cross guard, an illuminated Christ-figure with arms wide open and head thrown back, as if ascending. In the background, a legion of ghostly stone angels floating upward, fading into a dimension beyond sky and clouds breaching a cathedral-like vaulted grid adorned with scallop shells.

At the bottom of the frame, directly in front of me: a coastal landscape. In the distance, a lone figure reclining on a rock contemplating a book. A Camino pilgrim reading about Santiago and imagining this surreal scene looming above him, I wonder?

To the far right corner, a mysterious woman draped in grey from head to foot is watching me. I move slightly to my left to avert her penetrating gaze. Eerily her eyes still seem to be following me.

It doesn't matter how many times I make the pilgrimage to see Salvador Dalí's three-metre by four-metre masterpiece, I'm always in awe. Not only by the painting itself, but because its home is here, in one of Canada's smallest provinces. Borne of a friendship between the eccentric Catalan artist and the province's foremost patrons of the arts, *Santiago El Grande* has been the centrepiece of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery's permanent collection since it opened in 1959.

Although my fascination was piqued when I lived in Fredericton in my early thirties, I had no idea that Dalí's symbolic and surrealistic themes would soon become part of an equally symbolic and surrealistic quest on the canvas of my life.

## Part 1: The Outer Journey

"You've got to jump off cliffs everyday  
and build your wings on the way down."  
~ Ray Bradbury

### Chapter: THE FOOL (0)

#### SAINT-JEAN-PIED-DE-PORT, FRANCE

Tuesday, April 30, 2002

I lead a small group of pilgrims up the dark and narrow cobblestone streets. I haven't even set foot on the Camino and my body aches all over. After thirty-six hours of travelling and with little sleep, I'm looking forward to a bed, any bed. It's 10:45 p.m. and the village is deserted. I was here as a tourist last July, so I have a rough idea of where I'm going. *La rue de la Citadelle* is dimly lit, but up ahead I can see the sign for the welcoming centre: *Accueil des pèlerins, Association des amis de St-Jacques*. The lights are still on and I silently give thanks. They must know the train was late.

I open the door and the six of us walk in. Two volunteers are sitting at the registration table. An older woman with small round glasses gives us a tired smile. Speaking in her native tongue, she introduces herself as Jeanne. She also informs us that all the pilgrim hostels in the village are full, but she'll see what she can do. I take a deep breath. The very beginning of my journey to Santiago de Compostela is NOT the best time to start freaking out. Jeanne invites us to take off our backpacks. She says they've already processed 154 pilgrims today, forty percent more than on this day last year. She seems a little overwhelmed by the Camino's swift gain in popularity.

I turn to translate for the three in our group who don't understand French. Realizing this, Jeanne apologizes for not being able to get her tongue around *la langue de Shakespeare*. The other volunteer, a kindly gentleman with white hair, teases me about my French Canadian accent. With a friendly smile, I tell him he's the one with the accent. That makes him laugh. Then, with a mischievous grin, he proceeds to officially anoint me: *chef du groupe*. Turning to Lise and Melissa, my two French Canadian travelling companions, I roll my eyes.

"What's up with that?" quips Lise in English, and the three of us burst out laughing. We're tired and jet-lagged, but we also know it must be another one of those pesky Camino sign.

Lise is one of my closest friends. We've known each other since seventh grade. We grew up in a mainly French-speaking part of northern New Brunswick, and attended the same English university in Montréal. I now live in Moncton, in the southern part of our home province. Lise lives in Mont Sainte-Anne, near Quebec City. Although she'd been contemplating joining me since the beginning of February, she only decided a few weeks ago. On April Fool's day, actually; which is also, as you'll see, probably a Camino sign. We also figure we're here together for a reason—we're just not sure why, yet.

Melissa lives down the street from me. She's my massage therapist. Yes, you read that right. I thought it would be a good idea to bring my massage therapist along. But seriously, Mel had been planning this trip for a couple of years, even before we met. When I told her sometime in March that I was leaving on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April, she decided to book the same flight. There was synchronicity around that date too. Unbeknownst to her, her mother, who was going on a tour of France with two of her friends, was also booked on the same flight!

So, anyway, we all burst out laughing because Lise and Melissa are both aware that the main reasons I'm doing the Camino are: to transcend my control issues, to embrace

synchronicity, and to trust the Universe. So what happens? The train is late, there's no room at the inn, and I'm appointed "leader and chief" of a group of pilgrims. Great.

Next, the gentleman explains to me in French how to fill out the *carnet*—the official credential. It's like a passport, giving us access to the pilgrim hostels along the way. And so, being the chief translator, I explain all this to our three companions, Gunther a German gentleman who doesn't speak much English, George a Scotsman who lives in Toronto, and Tom a young Irishman who can't wait to find out tonight's football scores. We all fill out our passports and pay the 2-euro fee. Jeanne then reminds us that we mustn't forget to get them stamped and dated every day. Without the stamps—if we make it all the way to *St-Jacques-de-Compostelle*—we won't be issued a certificate. Oh ... and in Spain, she reminds us, the hostels are called *refugios* or *albergues*.

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### Jumping Off Cliffs

The idea of walking from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago de Compostela across northern Spain—or embarking on any kind of gruelling physical and spiritual journey—was something I would never have imagined doing. Walking twenty-five to thirty kilometres a day, trekking across mountain ranges and desert-like plains, carrying a minimum of supplies on my back, sleeping in open dormitories—not to mention sharing washrooms and shower stalls with snoring strangers—was completely foreign to my bourgeois lifestyle.

Oh, I'd jumped (or had been pushed) off a few cliffs in the last few years, but walking the Camino? That was too far off my radar to even consider. I didn't always want to jump off cliffs. I'd spent much of my life being afraid: afraid of dying, afraid of being myself, afraid of what others might think. I had so much fear programmed into my life that I had forgotten how to live!

In my twenties and early thirties, I had a high-stress job as a television news and current affairs producer. I was a workaholic. I had high expectations of others and myself. I was a perfectionist, and I thought that was a good thing. I was constantly stressed out. I couldn't understand why everything was so complicated and why I had to work so hard to get the things I thought I needed. I was constantly running like a rat in a wheel. I had few creative outlets. I needed to let go ... but I didn't know how. After a near burnout in 1996, I started looking for a better way. I read a few self-help books, leaped off a few high boulders, and timidly embarked upon my soul's path, until...

On April 20, 1999, I was violently thrust into a new phase of my life's journey, pushed off a cliff and into an abyss. Out of the blue, with no signs or warning—my husband and partner of thirteen years ... committed suicide. I tried hard to stay in control. I threw myself obsessively into work, but couldn't keep it up for long. I was 35 years old. I needed to fully embrace who I was now and what I wanted to do next. I also desperately needed to understand how I'd gotten here. I had to face his death. I had to face my life. I needed to build my wings.

I had two choices: either "Know thyself" or "Feel sorry for thyself". I was far enough along on my spiritual journey to know that I wasn't going to play the role of victim. I knew it was also time to step away from who I thought I was. I needed to view my life from a different perspective.

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### Beds!

The white-haired gentleman hangs up the phone and gives us a triumphant smile. He's found six beds at a private hostel down the street. Jean, the owner, will meet us on the other side of the bridge. Relieved, we strap on our packs and gratefully thank the two volunteers for their help. We head out the way we came, down the dark and narrow *rue de la Citadelle*. As we reach the stone archway under the bell tower of the aptly named Notre-Dame-Du-Bout-Du-Pont church, we see Jean waiting under a lamppost at the other end of the bridge. He greets us warmly and leads us to his hostel a few buildings away.

As he unlatches the door, he tells us we need to be very quiet. There's a 10 p.m. curfew, and everyone is already tucked in. Inside, a dim light reveals a staircase to our right. Before we walk up, Jean points to a door at the far end of the hallway. It is one of two bathrooms we can use, he whispers. Careful not to hit our packs against the wall or to clank our boots, we make our way up the first flight of stairs squeezing to the right in order to make room for a young woman on her way down—toothbrush in hand.

Once we get to the third floor, Jean unlocks a door and flicks the light-switch, revealing a small room with four beds and a foam mattress on the floor. He then points to a darkened room down the hall. Still whispering, he says it's a women's dorm where Lise, Melissa or I can have the last bed. He then shows us the second washroom and the kitchen. Breakfast is included, and we have to be out by 7:30 a.m., but because of the late hour he says we can pay him in the morning.

Lise and I hang out in the kitchen for a few minutes to discuss our plans for tomorrow. At the Charles de Gaulle Airport this morning—which now feels like ages ago—we met a Canadian pilgrim who was hoping to catch a last minute flight back to Montreal. He suggested we might want to take it easy on the first day, and told us about a private hostel in Honto an hour's walk from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. Our Camino guidebook didn't mention the place, but when Jeanne at the Welcoming Centre gave us an updated photocopied list of hostels and refugios, she'd also suggested that we might want to stop in Honto. Lise and I had exchanged glances. Now, in hushed voices, we decide it might be a good idea to take it easy tomorrow, and not walking 23 km across the Pyrenees all the way to Roncesvalles.

Lise offers to take the bed in the women's dorm. We say good-night, and I open the door to the small room assigned to the rest of our group. Melissa, Gunther, Tom and George have rolled out their sleeping bags on the beds. Last in, I get the mattress on the floor. I quickly fish out my toiletries out of the top of my knapsack—I'll be damned if I have to wait in line to brush my teeth—and leave the rest of the unpacking for after. I'm glad to finally be here, but I know myself well enough to recognize that this communal living thing is going to take some getting used to.

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## Synchronicity

In my quest to understand my life after my husband's death, I'd spent thousands of dollars on all kinds of books—from self-help, to religion and spirituality, all the way to quantum physics and the string theory. Uncannily, each book was leading me to the next. Although I'd always prided myself for being analytical and rational, my favourite saying has always been, "There's a reason for everything". Through my eclectic readings, it became clear to me that what Carl Jung called synchronicity (a meaningful coincidence or an unseen force connecting everything together) did exist, and it had always been available to me—if and when I paid attention to the signs. And so, paying attention to the signs and bridging the gap between my rational and spiritual aspects became the focus of my life.

About eight months after my husband's funeral, I went to visit my brother and his wife who were living in the Cayman Islands. My sister-in-law is an artist, and she brought me to a local gallery to see a travelling display of Salvador Dalí's work. I'd always admired the eccentric Catalan's surrealistic pieces, especially his famous melting watches. I also new and admired one of his biggest works, *Santiago El Grande*, hanging in my province's capital.

I walked in with high expectations, but this particular exhibit featured minor works, photographs, and *objets d'art* from a private collection. I was a little disappointed until I came to a room filled with sketches, drawings and reproductions of a series he'd done based on the major arcana of the Tarot. I didn't know much about Tarot cards, but I was captivated by Dalí's unusual interpretation of the images. My sister-in-law had trouble dragging me out of there—until she told me she had a Tarot deck at home and would read my cards for fun.

## The Tarot Journey

When I got back to Canada, I'd forgotten all about the Tarot until references to the cards and images kept popping up unexpectedly: in conversations, on the radio, in magazines, in music. I started doing research and discovered that each Tarot card could be used as a meditation tool. I felt a bit silly about buying my own deck, but the signs were strong. I'd read that you just don't buy any old deck; one has to speak to you. So I procrastinated until one day, I spotted a new deck at my local bookstore: The Renaissance Tarot. The title caught my attention, it means reborn, just like my name, Renée. On the cover was *The Star*, the card that also represents my zodiac sign, Aquarius. I almost laughed aloud at the synchronicities, so I bought the deck and started using the cards to gain insight into human archetypes and my own life challenges.

As I have come to understand, *The Fool* represents the soul disguised as a human. It is numbered 0 or 22—depending on the deck—for either the end or the beginning of the full cycle of an incarnation from birth to death on the karmic wheel of life. The figure (whether male or female) is often represented with head tilted skywards and oblivious to a nearby cliff or abyss, a small dog barking at its heels. Despite the animal's warning, the soul throws all caution to the wind as it embarks on its next incarnation.

*The Fool* (the soul disguised as a human) forgets where it came from as it encounters various challenges (the 56 minor Arcana cards) and meets different characters along its journey (the 21 other trump cards of the major Arcana). It accumulates many experiences, but a thick veil makes its human ego forget the rules of the game. One can easily get caught up in the game of life, as peer pressure, social or religious upbringing, often cloud discernment and free will. Striving, to discern between wants and needs, becomes a challenge; and this creates unbalance. The signs from beyond the veil are always there, but the human ego doubts. For a while, we may analyze our life to death, forgetting to live our life, forgetting to listen to the wise guidance of our soul.

I have come to realize that the Tarot journey offers me an opportunity to acknowledge the effects of my choices; to get off the stage, to take a seat in the balcony and to look at the drama (or the absurdity in the world and in my life) from a different perspective. Each one of us is truly the producer, director, writer and main character of the story of our lives.

Shakespeare may well have been making a veiled reference to the Tarot journey when he wrote:

*"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages."*

Like The Bard's protagonists—we too can get so involved with our personas, secondary characters and the drama around us—we end up losing ourselves in our own creations. Stuck behind masks and costumes, scenes, props and old scripts ... we need to let go of stuff, because it just doesn't jive with who we really are.

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## Out of Time

A few minutes later—teeth brushed and still half-dressed—I slip into my sleeping bag. I look at my watch. It's 11:45 p.m. I can hardly believe it. Yesterday afternoon, I was boarding a plane in Moncton; thankful I wouldn't be missing my Montreal connection to Paris despite a late

April snowstorm. Now, on my first night in a Camino hostel, I manage to write a few quick lines in my pilgrim's journal: "*Tired. Wired. I've been up since forever. I feel like I've been travelling for weeks. More in the morning.*" There are a few 'good nights' as everyone finally settles in, and someone shuts off the light.

My eyes are wide open, but I see nothing. There are no windows; it's pitch-black. I prop myself on my elbows, take a few deep breaths and close my eyes. It's the same pitch-black nothingness. It feels weird. I hear the others fidgeting, turning; a throat clearing. I push in my earplugs and a strange, unfamiliar, empty hum fills my head. I scrunch down into my sleeping cocoon, and it feels like I've just stepped out of time. Still wired from the umpteen cups of coffee that kept me going all day, it takes me a while to fall asleep. As I lie in this overcrowded pilgrim's hostel on the eve of the first day of my Camino journey, the synchronicity and the signs that led me here have the rat in my mind running around its wheel. I am certain that whatever happens on this 800 kilometres trek, I am somehow responsible for creating it. I do not doubt that it has the power to change my life in many profound ways; and, I take full responsibility for consciously choosing to jump off this cliff, to build my wings on an adventure I would have never imagined. Because, as my maternal grandmother used to say, *Un fou qui sait qu'il est fou, est moins fou qu'un fou qui ne sait pas qu'il est fou*. Or, as Shakespeare might have written: "A fool, who knows he is a fool, is less of a fool than the fool who doesn't know he is a fool."

## **St-JEAN-PIED-DE-PORT to HONTO Wednesday, May 1<sup>st</sup>**

## **Walking Day 1**

Something has fallen with a thud on the floor next to me. It seems like I'd just finally gotten to sleep, and suddenly, I'm awake. It's still pitch-dark, but I know where I am. The thud, I deduce, must be a backpack hitting the floor. Light floods in for a moment as the door opens, and I see one of the guys quietly shut it behind him. I realize that I'm the only one left in the room. That's strange. I didn't even hear the others get up. I guess the snoring blockers really work!

I have a vague sensation of a dream, a misty far away feeling of being watched over, protected... Suddenly, I remember we have to be out of the hostel by seven-thirty. I hit the light button on my watch. I have a half hour to get my act together. I zip out of my sleeping bag, turn on the light, grab my towel and toiletries, and head for the bathroom. It's unoccupied. There's no toilet paper. No shower, either. I splash water on my face and make the best of it.

I find Lise in the kitchen, chatting with a half dozen other pilgrims crowded around the small table. I join them, but don't feel like socializing. Still groggy, I smile a lot as I gratefully sip my steaming mug of tea. I'm also famished, and the baguette and jam are delicious.

After packing, Lise and I head downstairs. Melissa is sitting outside waiting for Tom and George. She usually has a healthy glow about her, but the dark circles under her blue-grey eyes betray exhaustion and stress. We tell her about our plan to take it easy today, but Mel is determined to start her Camino full throttle. She says she's walking 23 kilometres to Roncesvalles today and nothing is going to stop her. Not the jet lag, not even the fact that she didn't sleep very well last night.

"After all..." she reminds us with a grin. "I'm ten years younger than you!"

"You never know," I answer with a wink. "These two old gals might catch up with you, we're only thirty-eight."

I feel a sharp pain in my ribs. Lise corrects me. "I'm ah ... still thirty-seven."

I roll my eyes and make a face, but I can tell Lise is relieved. She and Mel didn't really hit it off when they met for the first time at the airport in Montreal. Lise was in a brooding mood and Mel was hyped and chatty. They're both fire signs. Lise's birthday is in December; she's a Sagittarian. Mel's birthday was a couple of weeks ago, and despite those dark circles I can still see the Aries fire in her eyes. I see they're burning with purpose, so I remind her about the card

she picked yesterday. No, I didn't bring Tarot cards on the Camino—they'd take up too much space, but I did bring *Angel Cards*. Small and rectangular, they have little angel images with inspirational words. At the airport, killing time waiting for our train, we each randomly picked a card to help set the tone for our journeys. Mel picked PURPOSE. Lise, ABUNDANCE, the lack of which made her hesitant about coming here in the first place. And I got PATIENCE, of which I have little. As an Aquarian, I often live in the future, and idealize people and situations. I sometimes feel that I'm many leagues ahead or either disconnected from everyone and everything around me, but I'm aware that my greatest challenge is learning to accept and to live in the here and now. In a way, the Camino is the quintessential place for me to learn to enjoy the present moment. My plan is not to fret nor fantasize about how, or if, I'll get to Santiago.

Tom and George arrive, and we say our goodbyes. Lise and I offer them all our best wishes on their Camino journeys, and I give Mel a big hug. She promises to leave messages in the hostel guest books and to let us know about how she's doing. We watch them walk away. You can tell Mel is Canadian. Her chestnut-brown ponytail is sticking out of her *Tilley* hat and she has a big red maple leaf sewn onto her backpack. Lise and I also have the Canadian-made travel hats and a red and white flag on our packs.

"I guess Canucks are easy to spot on the Camino, eh?" I say to Lise, deliberately emphasizing our country's trademark suffix, "eh".

Mel turns to wave at us, and I realize that this might be the last I see of her. Her return flight is one week before ours, and she won't be slowing down unless she physically has to.

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## Camino Seeds

I met Melissa a year ago, in April of 2001. I'd decided to take better care of my body, including treating myself to monthly therapeutic massages. A mutual friend suggested I book an appointment with Mel. I didn't know her and hadn't gotten around to getting her number, when only a few days later, someone else introduced us at a party. I loved the synchronicity.

My new professional relationship with Mel also coincided with my friend Jean-Guy telling me he wanted to walk the *Camino de Santiago* in the fall. "The Camino de what?" I asked. A few days later, browsing in a local bookstore, I chanced upon *The Pilgrimage* by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, a fictionalized version of his journey on the Camino. I'd really enjoyed *The Alchemist*, so I bought this one, read it in a couple of days and then passed it on to Jean-Guy. Coelho walked the Camino in the late 1980s when it wasn't widely known. *The Pilgrimage* was originally published in Portuguese. Translated into more than 35 languages, it greatly contributed to the increase in the Camino's popularity.

At that time I had no inclination whatsoever to walk it myself. But after the many emotional ups and downs I'd been through since my husband's death two years before, Coelho's book did inspire me to go on some sort of adventure. So at the end of June 2001, following my passion for medieval Templar and Cathar history, I took myself on a trip to the south of France. Although it wasn't on my itinerary, a series of quirky synchronicities brought me to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port—which is why I knew where to find the pilgrim's welcoming centre when I led our small group of pilgrims up from the train station.

A few days after I got home from France, I had a massage appointment with Mel. As she worked out the kinks in my back, she asked about my trip. I don't know why, but of all the places I visited I told her about Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. She freaked out.

"Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port! Are you kidding me? It's another sign!" she exclaimed.

I was taken aback. I had no idea Mel knew anything about the Camino de Santiago. She went on and on about how she'd been toying with the idea of walking it. And then she explained about the signs; and that if you're supposed to walk it, you'll start hearing about it.

“The Camino just keeps popping up! It starts with small insignificant signs in the beginning, but gets more intense as *your time* approaches,” she added.

I told her about my friend Jean-Guy, who was planning to start walking it in October. So, during the next few months of massage sessions, Mel kept talking about her Camino dream and I kept her posted on Jean-Guy's preparations. This was all part of Mel's string of Camino signs. For me too as it turns out. It didn't interest me at all at the time, but as I soon learned, the Camino doesn't give up easily.

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### **The Church at the End of the Bridge**

We find out that the hostel in Honto only opens at 1 p.m., so we're in no rush to get there. Leaving our backpacks at the hostel, Lise and I decide to spend time exploring the village. We stop for a moment on the medieval bridge and look down on the river Nive. We then make our way towards the archway we passed under last night, which is part of the unusual clock tower steeple of the *Notre-Dame-du-Bout-du-Pont* church. I've long been fascinated with medieval and gothic architecture, especially since I read Ken Follet's historical novel, *Pillars of the Earth*. Lise shares my interest, so we're both looking forward to exploring churches and old buildings.

The weathered heavy wooden door is slightly ajar, so we enter. The placards in the vestibule explain the church's history. It was built in the Gothic style during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. As we enter the nave, I get a whiff of musty air and feel the cool dampness coming off the walls. We walk around admiring the beautiful stained-glass windows. The diffused light from the cloudy sky seems to deepen the colours. Red, blue and gold are predominant; and the design of the images is simple, reminiscent of the cards from the Tarot de Marseille.

Whispering, Lise confides that she'd once considered becoming a stained-glass artist. I'm surprised. She's never mentioned this before.

“Maybe it's something I did in another life?” she suggests, as we both believe in reincarnation.

“Or maybe it's a sign! Want to pick an angel card?” I add, with a huge grin on my face, just to annoy her.

She decides to humour me. “Yeah right,” she smirks. “Maybe ... it's a sign. Maybe... I designed these very windows. Maybe... I'm about to have a flash from a past life experience on the Camino—just like Shirley MacLaine.”

We both stifle a giggle. MacLaine's book was a major Camino sign for Lise.

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### **The MacLaine Sign**

Shortly after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Lise came to visit me in Moncton. We were both disillusioned and shaken, questioning the world and our place in it. Lise was also going through a major career crisis. As synchronicity would have it walking down Main Street, we met my friends Jean-Guy and his wife Monique. I introduced Lise, and we all went for coffee.

Jean-Guy mentioned his upcoming journey to Spain, and to my astonishment Lise knew exactly what he was talking about! As a long-time Shirley MacLaine fan, she was currently in the middle of reading her latest book—which was about the Camino. My childhood friend was even toying with the idea of walking it! I was flabbergasted: Lise's Camino seed had already been planted, and so Jean-Guy became her second sign. For me, this was another sign, but I was still in denial.

Later, two days before he was leaving for Spain in October, I dropped by Jean-Guy's house to give him a scallop shell for him to take on his trip. When Monique answered the door, I realized the house was full of people. There was a workshop going on, and she invited me to

join in. I declined because I had other plans. A few days later, I found out Mel had attended the workshop with a friend, and there ... she had finally met Jean-Guy! Good old synchronicity! For her, it was the ultimate sign. So she started planning her trip for the following spring. For me, well ... with Mel, Jean-Guy and Lise on the Camino bandwagon, I did start considering it. But I was far from any real commitment.

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### Back to the Camino

Standing under one of the stained-glassed windows, still whispering with Lise, I suggest that stained-glass making might be a new creative outlet for her. She gives me an undecided look and starts walking towards a rack of candles. Rummaging in her waist pack to find a few coins, she drops them into the donation box. Lighting a votive, she stands there for a while, watching the flames dance. Like me, Lise is not religious, but we believe that we are guided by Spirit.

I turn and decide to sit in a pew and take in the silence, to enjoy the present moment. I give thanks to Spirit for Lise's company on this journey. We've had our ups and downs over the last twenty-five years, but for some reason, our friendship has survived. I rarely visit churches, but I am reminded of the fateful day last March when I was drawn to enter the cathedral in Moncton. Sitting there in the front pew—as I am here—I asked Spirit for a sign. After a short moment, a date suddenly popped into my consciousness, and I knew it was the day I needed to start walking. That date was today, May 1<sup>st</sup>.

After a fifteen-minute visit, Lise and I leave the Church at the End of the Bridge. We make our way up the narrow and steep cobblestoned *rue de la Citadelle*, past the pilgrim's Welcoming Centre. At the end, we find the *Porte Saint-Jacques*, the northern gateway of the town's medieval wall, and decide to climb up to the top of the old fortress. Out of breath, we sit on a bench to admire the snow-capped Pyrenees before us. It's almost incredible that in just a few hours we will be starting the 1000-metre climb up those mountains into Spain!

An old woman walking her dog walks by and politely inquires, "*Vous-êtes pèlerines?*"  
 "Oui, du Canada," Lise replies.

The woman seems pleased that we speak French. She points to the mountains, and tells us we need to be careful. Although it can be sunny and clear here in the village, it's still spring. Unpredictable weather can materialize half-way up the pass. She confides that a few weeks ago, an older gentleman got lost in a blizzard and died of exposure. And last week, a young man from Brazil fell to his death. The authorities believe he inadvertently walked off a cliff because of poor visibility. Apparently, his wife is on her way to retrieve his remains. I'm thinking this woman is really up on the local gossip.

I catch Lise giving me a quick side-ways glance. I know what she's thinking: "Great! Just what we need to hear!" To me, the image of potentially walking off a cliff is powerful, not only in relation to *The Fool* from the Tarot cards, but also because of my favourite quote by Ray Bradbury: "You've got to jump off cliffs everyday and build your wings on the way down."

I believe the message is about paying attention—and to not fall off the cliff (literally or figuratively). Not paying attention happens when we aren't fully present, so it's important to make choices consciously; and to not be afraid and dare to try something new. So if meeting this old woman is a sign, at least I don't feel it's an omen. Still, I make a mental note to myself about being extra vigilant and to be as mindful as possible in every moment of my Camino journey.

The woman entertains us for a little while with local gossip and stories about pilgrims until the wind picks up suddenly, and ominous rain clouds start rolling in. "*Vous-voyez. Il faut faire attention, la météo peut changer comme ça!*" she says, reminding us to be careful because the weather can change at the drop of a hat! She puts up the hood of her jacket to stop her hair from getting mussed up by the wind. Wishing us a safe Camino, she walks briskly away along the narrow path at the edge of the fortress with her little dog barking at her heels. Um—I muse silently—another image from The Fool Tarot card.

Lise and I need to find shelter from the coming rain, and buy a few food supplies. We make our way down to the village, but soon discover that most of the stores are closed. We find out that the first of May is a holiday in France, but come upon one small shop where we can buy some nuts and granola bars. As a fine mist starts to fall, we find shelter in a café. We pour over our guidebook maps, sipping on steaming bowls of *café au lait* and munching on deliciously sinful *pains au chocolat*.

### **La porte d'Espagne**

The rain lets up a bit, and around 11 o'clock Lise and I retrieve our backpacks at the hostel. We head south down the *rue d'Espagne* towards *La porte d'Espagne*, another stone archway in the village's medieval wall. This is the official starting point of the *Camino francés*, the Spanish name to what the French call le *Chemin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*. *Camino* in Spanish means "way" or "road".

For the next month or so, Lise and I will be walking more than 800 km across northern Spain—along rural routes, secondary roads, footpaths, old roman trading routes, busy modern boulevards and narrow cobblestone streets, on our way to Santiago de Compostela, where the city's impressive Gothic cathedral claims to house the remains of James the Apostle or *Santiago*, as he is known in Spanish. Some pilgrims make it all the way to Finisterra, a small cape on the Atlantic Coast; an extra 100 km or a three-day walk from Santiago. Finisterra in Spanish means: where the earth ends. It is the most western tip of the continent, and literally was where the Earth ended for the Europeans before Columbus set sail for the Americas.

We ask a passer-by to take our picture. This is the second time I've posed for the camera under the arch of *La porte d'Espagne*. When I was here last July, I had my picture taken, because I wanted to show my friend Jean-Guy where he would be starting his pilgrimage. Little did I know that in less than a year's time, I'd be back, embarking on my own Camino!

For this official Camino starting photo, my auburn dyed hair, which is hiding my prematurely grey widow's peak, is bound in a ponytail under my light-beige classic *Tilley Hat*. My new 20-litre backpack is dark blue. My waterproof wind jacket is purple. My zip-off pants are navy-blue, and I'm sporting a black waist pack.

Lise is standing to my right, wearing a *Tilley* hat as well. Hers is grey-beige, in an Australian outback style. She's about my height, five-foot seven. Her eyes, like mine, are brown. Her curly sand-coloured hair is shoulder length. She kind of reminds me of Sarah Jessica Parker, the American actress from the TV show, *Sex in the City*. Yes, she's gorgeous, but don't tell her that. She won't believe you. She's wearing a black and turquoise polar fleece, a black waist pack and kaki zip-off pants. This is pretty much what we'll be wearing for the next month or so. Travelling light doesn't give us many Camino fashion options!

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### **Deciding to Jump**

Last fall, I'd kept both Lise and Mel posted on Jean-Guy's trip by forwarding to them his Camino email updates. Lise had lent me her copy of MacLaine's Camino book, and I was right in the middle of it when he got back. It was only then that the idea of walking the Camino started to creep into my consciousness. It actually started in the form of a challenge. If Shirley did it at 60, and Jean-Guy was able to walk it in 28 days pushing 50—then why not me? I was 37 and in good shape. My husband's suicide had changed my outlook on life, and I was starting to get used to the cliff jumping.

The other incentive was my career. A difficult documentary contract with a private production company had left me disillusioned and disappointed with the whole business. I decided that maybe cashing-in some retirement savings, taking some time off and walking the Camino would be akin to an investment in myself.

Christmas came and went, and almost everything in my life (my career, my purpose, what to do next) was getting foggier and foggier. But like the rotating flash of a lighthouse in the distance, the Camino signs consistently kept popping in and out of my life.

Jean-Guy's 15-year-old son, Rémi, asked me to chaperon him on a ski trip to Switzerland for 10 days at the end of January. With no new work contracts and time on my hands, I thought it would be fun. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February—Groundhog Day—which also happens to be my birthday, Rémi and I were sitting in the Zurich airport lounge waiting for our flight home. The non-stop announcements over the intercom system had become a constant drone, until... "Attention, last call for flight xxx to Santiago de Compostela."

Our heads jerked up and we looked at each other, not sure we'd heard right. They called it again a few moments later and we burst out laughing. What were the odds? How many flights could there be from Zurich to Santiago in the dead of winter? Once a week? And what were the odds of us hearing it? And on my birthday (02-02-2002)! To me, it was the defining sign. This groundhog decided then and there, to stop being afraid of her shadow. It was time to jump off a cliff!

By mid-February, I'd bought most of my equipment. Still unsure what date I should start, I hadn't yet booked my flight. One day at the end of the month, walking down the street in front of the *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de l'Assomption* in Moncton I got the uncommon urge to go in. I walk or drive by it almost every day, hardly paying any mind to it at all. But that day I followed my urge. That's where, sitting quietly in a pew, suddenly and loudly from somewhere deep inside I felt these words: *le premier mai*. May 1<sup>st</sup>.

As I emerged out into the crisp February air, I was in a bit of a daze. I crossed the street and started walking home. On the corner was a travel agency. I stopped, opened the door, walked in, sat down and booked a flight for April 29<sup>th</sup>.

Later that day, I called Mel to let her know my departure date. We chatted awhile, and she decided to book the same flight. We agreed that if we ended up walking together fine, if not—that was OK too. We both wanted to follow our own pace.

I emailed Lise in Quebec, but she still wasn't committed. Out of a job since the end of the summer, she was surviving on her severance package. Her parents and I offered to help pay for the trip, but still she was hesitant. By the end of March, I still hadn't heard from her and had accepted that she wasn't coming. She called me on Easter Monday, which also happened to be April Fool's Day. At first I thought it was a joke, but she was serious and one hundred percent committed. She accepted my offer of a loan for the airfare, and we agreed to start our walk together and see where the Camino would lead us.

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### **And We're Off!**

A sign across the street points the way up into the Pyrenees towards the Spanish border. Two other pilgrims are walking about 100 metres ahead of us. We follow them up the narrow asphalt road. It's cloudy and quite cool. We stop once to take off our hats and then later to catch our breath. It's a steady climb, and I feel my heart pumping and the sweat pearling on my skin. We stop again to remove our jackets. My body is not used to inclines—where I live, the terrain is mostly flat.

Our destination, the new hostel in Honto, is only an hour or so away. We continue slowly, getting used to the weight of our packs. We nod to other pilgrims as they pass us, and chat idly between us as we walk by houses and farms. Lise stops, picks a buttercup and puts it in her hair. I choose a violet. The sheep and cows lazily lift their heads and gaze at us. I smile to myself, wondering how these farm animals see this daily parade of pilgrims.

**HONTO, FRANCE****4:30 PM****Walking Day 1 (6 km)**

Showered. Shampooed. I feel restored. One pair of liner socks, one pair of wool socks, one pair of underwear, one yellow t-shirt, a navy-blue camisole and a purple towel are drying on the porch tethered to a string of bungee cords. Not that I've really dirtied anything yet. I've done my first Camino wash because God knows when we'll be able to do laundry again. I'm sitting in bed on a lower bunk with my journal. I start to doodle a sketch of my surroundings: the wooden door, the floor length flowered curtain drawn halfway across the eight panes of glass, the edge of another bunk where Lise is napping. Her water bottle and journal on the floor.

We've been here for three and a half hours. *Le Gîte d'étape Mme Ourtiague* is a privately run hostel. Our semi-private room is clean and bright. It sleeps six, with three bunks, a washroom with a shower and very hot water. For 26 euros each, it includes supper and breakfast. OK. We're not exactly roughing it, but we want to be fully rested from the jet lag. Our only other roommate arrived a little while ago. She's from Holland and doesn't speak much English. I figure she's fifty-something. Her mobile phone is recharging in the outlet next to her bunk. She's out on the porch, smoking a cigarette. Cigarettes and cell phones on the Camino? Um... I ponder on this for a moment, and concede that everyone is entitled to his or her personal story and script. Still, it's hard not to judge. At least she's not blowing smoke in my face, but I make a note to let it go and focus on my own Camino journey.

**Journal Writing**

I was too tired to write last night, so I have some catching up to do. I sit on the edge of my bed and scribble out my first two sentences. I reread them. My words seem superficial and forced. It's like I'm trying to rationalize and think of a clever way to start a book.

"What's up with that?" I think to myself, using Lise's favourite saying.

"OK Renée," I reason. "Stop trying to control this, just enjoy the moment! Pressure off. Who am I trying to fool, anyway? I'm not here to write a book, an essay or a documentary script. This is my Camino journal. It's for writing about my experiences, and how I'm feeling. No forcing, no editing, no contriving."

I scratch out my first sentences. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and start again, allowing my stream of thought to flow through my purple pen:

"We only walked five kilometres or so today, so we got here in pretty good shape, but now, my right arm is tired. Not from writing or carrying my backpack, but from playing ping-pong! After showering and doing a bit of laundry, Lise and I spent about an hour or so batting the white ball across the net. Needless to say, we were surprised to find a ping-pong table on the Camino! We hadn't played together for at least twenty-five years—and we're both still pretty good at it too! We discussed a lot of things through the mindless ping-ponging. We walked to Honto instead of Roncesvalles—and that's OK. We'll do this at our own pace. Everyone has his own role to play, in life as well as here on The Camino. There's no need to justify anything to anyone. We are nobody's fool."

Our roommate has come back. I look up, smile, giving her a nod in greeting. She nods back, reaches into her backpack, pulls out a few things and heads for the shower. I look over at Lise. She's still asleep. I need a nap too. I get into my sleeping bag, back to the door and quickly fall asleep.

**Our First Pilgrim Meal**

It's almost 8 p.m. I'm rested and hungry. Apparently the food here is fabulous. We take our dry clothes off the line, and then head for the dining room. The long wooden table fills up

quickly. More than twenty pilgrims are staying here: Germans, Americans, French, Quebecois, and other Canadians. Conversation topics include: weight of backpacks, the pros and cons of hiking boots or walking shoes, the weather, expected time of arrival in Santiago, Camino books and maps, etc.

Lise and I are not sitting together, but we exchange knowing glances several times during the evening. We're both in a mellow mood and we don't really feel like chitchatting. Besides, we're famished. The meal lives up to its reputation. A glass of port, soup, bread, pasta and fish salad, red wine, two kinds of roast meats, peas, cheese plates, ice cream cake for dessert. It starts to rain, and by the time we finish the meal, it's falling in sheets. We're in bed by 10:15 p.m., but I don't fall asleep until after 2 a.m. It must have been the nap ... or the two roast meats.

## **HONTO to RONCESVALLES** **May 2nd—Thursday 8:00 AM**

## **Walking Day 2**

Almost all the pilgrims leave the hostel at the same time. We are back on the steep winding asphalt road, and keep passing and getting passed by the same familiar faces we saw at dinner and at breakfast. We had bread, jam, and hot tea in the communal dining room, and chatted with two other Canadian gals who are walking together, Janice from Ottawa and Maggie from Vancouver.

It's sunny and relatively warm, and we soon start taking off a few layers. About half an hour later, unsurprisingly because we were warned, big white and grey clouds start to roll in. A wooden sign leads us off the main road and onto the well-worn dirt tracks of a farm road. This is what I've been waiting for. To feel the hard earth beneath my feet! We encounter a few flatter sections, but it continues to be a hard and steady climb. The yellow blooms of the thorny broom shrubs brighten the way.

About an hour up from Honto, Lise and I stop to catch our breath. We turn to see the tiny red and white dots of the clay-roofed buildings and houses in the villages below us. The scene is amazing. The sun, the wind and the clouds have teamed up to create moving patterns of light and shadows over the valley. Lise snaps a few shots with her camera, including one of me drinking from my water bottle.

To our right is an abandoned farmer's field, strewn with piles of dead trees and branches, and Lise immediately baptizes it the "stick cemetery". We're a little less than halfway up the 1000-metre climb from the Porte d'Espagne, and decide this might be the place to find our *bastón del peregrino*. The walking stick, like the scallop shell hanging from a rope around the neck or the backpack, are part of the traditional pilgrim garb. Many modern-day pilgrims come equipped with high-tech telescopic sticks, while others wait to buy wooden ones, carved locally. Many were on display for purchase in the shop windows in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, but we both felt that finding our own walking sticks along the way would be more meaningful.

It's my turn to snap a picture of Lise, as she's rummaging around the stick cemetery. Bending down wearing our backpacks is a challenge, so we decide to take them off. After rejecting several prospective *bastones*, we finally find the ones that "talk" to us. Mine is a bit stout, but very smooth, and I like the way my hand fits in the "Y" on one end.

My right hiking boot has been rubbing against the back of my ankle. I sit on a big rock to undo the laces. Taking off my sock, I notice the skin is getting a bit red. I unzip the top of my backpack and pull out my first aid kit. I find a blister protector and apply it. Lise says her feet are OK, but she's feeling strain in her shoulders. We don our packs and continue our ascent. Stick in hand, I feel like an authentic pilgrim now. It seems to help to balance the weight of my pack, especially through the more rocky and uneven sections.

It's quite a social climb, as we chat with the other pilgrims along the way. We pass several cyclist pilgrims, offering words of encouragement as they walk besides their heavily

laden bikes up an especially steep incline. It's a tough climb for everyone, but what a thrill it must be on wheels on the way down!

As we get closer to the snow-capped peaks, we notice a gradual cooling, so we stop and put on our jackets. I realize that I need a break, so I tell Lise to go on ... that we'll catch up later. I unlace my boots, take off my socks and check my feet. The chaffing on my left ankle has stopped, but I decide to put one on the right one for good measure. A few pilgrims passing me ask if I'm OK. I wave them off, reassuringly. I sit for about 10 minutes, catching my breath and checking my map. As I resume my trek, walking by myself for a half hour or so, I realize I'd been straining to keep up with Lise. She lives next to Mont Sainte-Anne in Quebec, so she's used to walking on mountainous trails. I feel more comfortable now walking at my own pace.

I catch up with my friend near a stream, where a group of about twenty pilgrims have stopped for lunch. There are neither villages nor stores along the Camino across the Pyrenees, so most of the pilgrims we met at Mme Ourtiague's are eating the ham and cheese baguette sandwiches we bought from her this morning. I can hardly believe how cold it got in such a short time. The sun is completely gone now and the wind is bitter cold, so I'm eating my baguette wearing gloves!

Before we resume our journey up towards the famous Roncesvalles Pass, I tend to my feet again. The protectors on my ankles seem to be working, but now the little toe on my right foot is developing a blister. I'm not surprised that my shoulders are sore, but I had been breaking-in my boots for weeks now, and hoped to avoid foot problems ... but as I mentioned, it was mainly on flat terrain, and I wasn't carrying nine kilos on my back. I rummage around my First Aid kit for another blister protector, and decide to slip a few extra ones in my jacket pocket.

Lise and I start off together again. We're in a quieter mood this afternoon and feeling a bit anti-social. We keep to ourselves and avoid the pilgrims who want to chat. Because we stopped, we see some new faces in the pilgrim procession. They must have left this morning from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. I wonder how Mel is doing, who like them, made it all the way to Roncesvalles in one day.

It is a truly difficult climb, and the bitter-cold wind isn't helping. Now my back is getting sore, but I try to ignore the aches and pains. Despite the protector, the blister on my right toe is now excruciating. It prompts me into a walking meditation, and I spend some time visualizing healing light around my feet. The rat in the wheel must have decided to take a break, as I gradually become aware of a certain mental calmness. I've lost all sense of time, when a snowflake hits my nose and brings me back to my physical surroundings. As suddenly as the white stuff starts falling, the stories the old woman told us about the men who died or got lost crossing the Roncesvalles Pass, pop into my mind. I tell myself there's no reason to panic or to fall into fear. It's important to be aware, but I can't control the weather nor the timing of my demise. All I can do is to let go, and concentrate on enjoying the moment.

### **The Roncesvalles Pass**

As we come across the first milestone on our journey, the snowflakes are floating down thick and wet. Lise and I take pictures of each other standing in front of a grey stone monument embedded with a carved scallop shell. We probably haven't crossed the border into Spain yet, because the inscription is in French, informing us that we're 765 km from *Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*. We don't tarry long and continue along the narrow path. Strewn with boulders and grassy patches, the steep bare flank of the mountain towers above us to our left. On our right is a steep drop, where at eye level we see the top of the trees rising up from the forest floor covered with last fall's musty brown leaves.

This is the famous Roncesvalles Pass, the place where Charlemagne's captain, Roland, was defeated by the Basques in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century. The battle was romanticized and made famous in the *Chanson de Roland*, one of the oldest and best-known pieces of French literature from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This is also an infamous section of the Camino because of the

unpredictable weather and the treacherous terrain. The snow starts falling more steadily, and as we carefully make our way along the narrow path just above the tree line, it's not a big leap to imagine how in low visibility, a wrong step on an icy patch could send us spiralling down to the end of our life's journey.

As we round a bend, we happen upon a ceremony with about a half-dozen people. A woman leaves the group and approaches; she's speaking Spanish really fast. I took two semesters of Spanish in university twenty years ago, and started brushing up again a few months before this trip. I find my words, and ask her to slow down. I ask her to repeat again; and with her gestures, I finally figure out that she's inviting us to join them in prayer. Lise and I move closer to the group and stand in silence for a few minutes. I send out vibes of peace and love, although I don't know what I'm praying for. We find out later that the ceremony was for the Brazilian pilgrim who'd died a few days ago. The one, the old woman had told us about. More Camino synchronicity!

### **More bizarre weather**

Our impromptu stop has us walking just a few metres behind Bruce, a pilgrim from Western Canada. He slows down when he notices us, and we resign ourselves to some small talk. It's snowing even harder as we keep trudging uphill, and we figure we must be close to the peak. Suddenly as we round the next bend: FOG! It isn't too thick, but combined with the steady snowfall we can hardly see our hands in front of our faces. Bruce decides to stop for a break. Despite our wanting to avoid the small talk, Lise and I wonder if we should stop as well, as it might be wise to stick together; but we keep moving.

Not long after, as if the fog and the snow weren't enough, it starts to HAIL! Not huge pellets, but a constant stream of tiny glass-like balls clicking off our hats, jackets and packs. We round the last bend and finally start our descent! I'm surprised to find my walking stick more useful going downhill than going up. My boots are rubbing against the back of my ankles, more so now than before, and my toes are pushing up into the front. I guess walking 23 km across the Pyrenees with 11 kilos on your back is the real test for hiking boots! A pilgrim from Chicago, who walks with us for a little while, suggests I tighten my laces. He says it will stop my feet from sliding forwards in my boots.

### **España!**

Through all the weird weather along the narrow pass, we hadn't noticed any markers or signs for quite a while. In France, three lines mark the Camino: two red and a white one in between. Just after an intersection with another mountain trail, the way is marked with yellow arrows, and we realize we have finally crossed the border into Spain.

The fog is still thick, and the hail starts coming down ever harder. I pull the hood of my jacket over my *Tilley* hat to stop the pellets from going down the back of my neck. Despite the elements, we really need to stop for a pee break. We find a spot a few metres away from the path, well away from the edge of the cliff. No danger of falling off, or anyone seeing us in this foggy mess!

Our business done, we resume our steady journey downwards. The hail turns to light snow and the fog starts to lift. At one point, we stop and turn to look behind us, realizing that the fog isn't lifting at all. We've just been walking down out of the clouds! Far below to our left, we can make out a church and a few other buildings. Lise snaps a picture of the small village. Tired and achy, we are nearing our goal and it gives us hope. What we don't realize is that Roncesvalles is still more than an hour's walk away.